

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

8

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet

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Prologue

Somewhere in the wasteland lying between Bardland and Heim, Ishtarica's bravest had decided to take a break from their march. Despite the nippy winter winds, these warriors were more likely to kick up a cloud of dust than see any snow fall. However, the breeze that ran through their camp was quite toasty.

"I never once dreamed that the *Leviathan* would be deployed under these circumstances," Lloyd said. The Ishtarican marshal has just lost his left eye, a casualty of his clash with the red fox Edward. Sitting by the campfire, Lloyd watched the meat cooking over the pit as he closely listened to his crown prince's words.

As Lloyd settled in at the fire, so did his knights. Their cheery voices boomed out into the air as they dug into their rations. The marshal sat conveniently close to Ein, with the latter's royal tent set up behind them. Despite the revelry, the campsite wasn't actually all that noisy.

"The *Leviathan* isn't fully completed, but you know what they say about 'desperate times,'" Ein explained.

"I've heard that it's currently on its way to Roundheart's port," Lloyd replied.

"We're aiming to rendezvous with Chris and the *Princess Olivia*."

"That's an effective plan. With the Heims now on the back foot, it shouldn't be as risky to invade their port. Especially when one considers their lack of defensive walls. But having said that, are you sure about this, Your Highness? I understand that you have a thorny past with it, but Roundheart used to be..."

Lloyd's words trailed off as he struggled to respectfully express his consideration for the prince's feelings. Despite everything that had happened, Ein had still been born and raised in Roundheart. Even with Ishtarica's ongoing operation to occupy the city, Ein surely had lingering feelings about what was once his hometown.

"Don't worry," Ein assured him with a smile. "It doesn't bother me at all."

Lloyd drew his chin back. “I apologize for my display of insolence.”

A few moments later, Majorica arrived to join the pair. “Just as requested, I’ve finished my inspection of our magical tools, Your Highness.”

“Thank you,” Ein replied. “How are they holding up?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say they’re in tip-top shape anymore, especially after all the miasma damage, but they should be totally fine to keep using. I assume you brought these tools along with the intention of using them until they break, so I’ve only made a few light repairs. Also...” Majorica added, shifting his gaze to Lloyd, “Little Miss Bara told me that she’d like to take another look at your wound, my dear. She asked that you visit her later on.”

“Very well,” Lloyd replied. “Sir Ein, I’m off to see Miss Bara. I’d prefer it if my wound was checked again before we march into the next of what I’m sure will be many battles.”

“Make sure to let her know if it’s bothering you at all,” Ein replied. “There’s no way you can hide it or even try to tough it out.”

“Ha ha ha! I’ve already lost an eye, so this wound can’t get any worse! I hope that fact might put your mind at ease.”

Despite the marshal’s guffawing, his current predicament was clearly not a laughing matter. With one great stride of his long legs, Lloyd left his prince’s side. But as he walked away, the marshal took a few opportunities to shower his knights with praise, leading both Ein and Majorica to give forced smiles.

“Looks like it’s done,” Ein said, turning his attention back to the skewered meat.

He grabbed one of the sticks and stuffed it right into his mouth, savoring every juicy, succulent bite of meat. If someone had asked Ein if there was a greater joy in the world, he wouldn’t have been able to think of anything else at that moment.

“Uhhh... Ah, Majorica... Do you happen to have any extra stones on hand?” he asked.

“Why do you ask?” Majorica inquired. “You’re already wolfing down all that

meat in front of you. Don't tell me that you also want to gnaw on a few magic stones."

"It's embarrassing to admit, but..."

"My, oh my... Well, you *did* give it your all the other day. Perhaps literally, even."

There was a touch of weariness in Majorica's voice, but he handed a stone to Ein anyway. Since Majorica casually tossed the stone around with his bare hands, it wasn't likely to be anything all that expensive. However, Ein felt more satisfied after absorbing the stone than he did from chomping down on that hunk of meat. A familiar face then emerged from the prince's periphery.

"Oh? I would've expected my father to be here..." Dill said, scanning his surroundings.

"He went off to see Bara," Ein replied. "Did you need anything from him?"

"I wanted to confirm a few things about the march, but it looks like I just missed him."

"He'll be back in a bit if you want to wait here. In fact, why don't you have a bite to eat with us? Majorica's here too."

"Well, since you so kindly offered..." Majorica said. "I'd love to break bread with you."

"I understand that it's audacious of me, but I'd like to join you as well," Dill replied.

The pair nodded and immediately reached out for their own skewers.

"Are you around, Bara?" Ein called.

After polishing off his dinner, Ein had stepped away from his tent to say hello. Her tent currently functioned as a nurse's station—a fact made quite evident by the rows of injured knights being treated. Bara wove in and out of the crowd, checking in on each of her patients.

"Here I am!" she replied. "Did you need anything, Your Highness?" Bara

proceeded to ask another nurse to take her place before she approached the prince.

“I’d like to talk to you for a little while,” Ein said. “Is that all right with you?”

“Certainly. Why don’t we walk over to the back of the tent? I wouldn’t want you to speak with me in the middle of all this commotion.”

At Bara’s insistence, Ein accompanied her over to the tent’s stockpile of first aid supplies. She knew that the medical tent was no place for a prince, but the young nurse had trouble finding another quiet place to chat. There was Ein’s tent, but she wasn’t keen on suggesting that location—for obvious reasons.

“Does this concern the marshal’s current condition?” she inquired.

“No, that’s something I’ll ask him about directly,” Ein replied. “Actually, I wanted to talk about the past a bit.”

When Ein spoke of “the past,” he was trying to point the conversation towards Edward. During his bout with the red fox, the prince vowed to spare Bara and May the truth. But as he marched along afterwards, Ein had started to reconsider. No matter what *he* thought of the man, Edward was still Bara’s biological father. It didn’t sit well with Ein for him to remain silent on the issue while pursuing the fox.

“You’ve heard about my father, haven’t you?” Ein inquired.

“I have,” Bara replied. “He’s the commander in chief of Heim’s army.”

“Correct. I bring him up because I believe you and I share a few commonalities in this department.”

Both children disapproved of their fathers’ actions, and Ein was curious to hear Bara’s side of things. After a moment, she realized what he was getting at and solemnly nodded in response.

“Quite frankly, I’ve left no room for my father in my head or my heart,” she said. “What room have you left for yours, Your Highness? Do you perhaps resent him and—”

“Wait a moment. I’m sorry, but you don’t even have the slightest feeling for him?” Ein asked, wide-eyed. He hadn’t expected this sort of response.

“No, I do not. It’s a challenge for me to put it into words, but if I were to try... I’d say that I wouldn’t want him involved in our lives ever again. That’s the best I can muster.”

“Even if you had the chance to see him one more time?”

“Even so. I can confidently say that he’s no longer my father. May might see things quite differently, but she’s living a much happier life in the castle now.”

If these words truly came from the bottom of Bara’s heart, Ein felt it best to keep Edward’s whereabouts a secret. The prince believed he could settle the score while remaining mum on the truth.

“But... If I *were* to see him again, I’d like to slap him as hard as I can,” Bara added.

Her smile made it clear that wasn’t holding on to any sort of sorrow, convincing Ein that she truly meant what she said. After the pair shared a bit of further small talk, the prince turned to leave.

“You made me feel a whole lot better,” he said.

Chapter One: On the Royal Capital's Outskirts

Things are going smoothly, oddly so, was the thought on Ein's mind when he saddled up in the morning. The Ishtaricans marched towards Heim unimpeded, without a chimera or Heim soldier to be seen along the way. This strange phenomenon led the prince to furrow his brows cautiously.

"This march is going well, too well," Dill muttered as he rode his steed, trotting only a few paces behind the prince. The knight's words made it sound like he'd just read Ein's mind.

Considering that he was galloping alongside the knight, Majorica could easily overhear Dill's grumbling. "Well, Heim did just suffer a fatal blow to their manpower," the eccentric replied before he continued, "Perhaps they're mounting a defense of Roundheart's port? After all, we *did* blow them away with the ship's cannons upon our arrival."

The cannons were first fired in Rockdam, then again in Bardland. Needless to say, those devastating blasts had ripped through the kingdom's soldiers. Then, as Ishtarica continued its push, Heim had been undoubtedly put on the back foot.

In other words, Heim was running out of options to fall back on. Even with chimeras at their disposal, no one could deny that the kingdom's resources had been pushed to their limits.

"Oh dear, it seems the expression on your face says otherwise," Majorica said.

"Ah, it's nothing like that, Master Majorica," Dill replied. "Your theory is sound, but there's something that still bothers me. You know as well as I do that we can't get a read on the red foxes' motives. I can't help but try to decipher their actions."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"We don't know *why* the red foxes are acting this way," Ein chimed in. "What's the reason behind it all?"

“But if we were to look at the foxes’ base nature, Your Highness, are they not creatures who simply take pleasure in war and chaos?”

“I don’t think you’re wrong. That tome—Aunt Katima’s book—did mention that red foxes are a hedonistic people. If we can trust what’s written, it wouldn’t be out of the question to say that these foxes just love living in the eye of the storm.”

But if one shifted their focus from the theoretical to reality, they’d find that Heim currently fought at an overwhelming disadvantage. If the foxes were genuinely taking pleasure from the situation’s tension, anguish, and danger, there was nothing to fret over. But if this torrid state of affairs was their doing, Ein could only put his hands up in defeat. *Heim has no chance of clinching a victory here.* Ultimately, the deaths of Edward and Shannon had been practically set in stone.

Even if the red foxes let their hedonistic urges take the reins, reveling in the danger facing them and savoring the thrill of war, their moves were still far too cryptic to decipher. It seemed as if the foxes were on a suicide mission.

“It feels as if they’re trying to claim supremacy over the continent... But if that were really the case, they shouldn’t have attacked Euro,” Ein concluded. “A strike on the principality would make our involvement virtually guaranteed.”

“Which means that they must have other motives in mind. I wonder...” Majorica murmured, tilting his head to one side.

Ein shrugged. “Honestly, I haven’t a clue. Regardless, all their attempts thus far have been half-baked.”

Or perhaps... *If they have me in their crosshairs, it’ll become an entirely different matter.* Marco once said that the foxes were waiting for Ein. Not to mention that Jayle’s diary from the villa claimed that the foxes would never forget their grudge against him. When one put two and two together, it was reasonable to assume that Ein, a member of the Ishtarican royal family, was their target. Without question, they were trying to drag the crown prince out and onto the battlefield.

“Indeed... There’s nothing indicating that they’ve tried to launch an attack on Ishtarica...” Majorica went on. “But you know... I have a feeling that they hadn’t

accounted for Rayfon's death either."

"Huh? Why's that?" Ein asked.

"I've *never* seen a human emit miasma. Not once. While it's not *impossible* to find miasma capable of penetrating our gear, you'd have to crawl into a deep, almost subterranean cave thick with the stuff to do it. Miasma like that doesn't just pop out of nowhere, nor would it be a coincidence. And despite all of those very specific conditions, Heim's first prince was emitting a dense haze of it. Am I correct?" Majorica skillfully wriggled around in his saddle while Ein and Dill listened intently. "If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it's extremely difficult to mass-produce entities capable of emitting miasma. If they could've done it, they should've had two or three emitters prepared for us. But if they had, I doubt the marshal would be here with us today."

When one considered Rayfon's lack of a skill or special talents, it became difficult to assume that *only* he could be modified in such a way.

"And it's all because of you, Your Highness. No one can accurately gauge just how mighty you are," Majorica said. "I'm sure that they've lost almost all of their chimeras."

For many, the nauseating number of chimera corpses littering the outskirts of Bardland had become a vivid memory, fresh in their minds.

"Nothing would make me happier than to never see a troublesome chimera again," Ein said.

"Still, there's no guarantee that the surviving chimeras *won't* attack," Majorica reasoned. "But I seriously doubt there will be as many of them next time. After all, they lost most of their strength during the last battle."

"I know. Let's remain vigilant." Still, there were many questions that remained unanswered. "The more I think about it, the more puzzling the red foxes' motives become."

"I agree... Their actions are just too cryptic."

"Sir Ein, the Demon Lord's Great War is just as mysterious," Dill said. "What did they want after taking control of her? How did allowing her to run wild play into their endgame? I'm not sure we can simply say, 'Don't worry, they're just

hedonists.”

“You’re right,” Ein replied. He sighed and added, “I guess we can only say this for sure: they wish nothing but harm upon Ishtarica.”

“But perhaps knowing that is good enough,” Majorica said. “If they really do wish harm upon us, we won’t hold back. Simple, lovely, and directly to the point.”

Once the trio’s discussion concluded, they reoriented their focus on marching onward, towards Heim.

It’d been two days since the Ishtaricans left Bardland, and they’d already reached the outskirts of Heim’s royal capital. As they marched over a hill, the kingdom’s flourishing capital city slowly crept into view. It was only now that Ein found himself struck with pangs of the past—the view causing a series of bitter childhood memories to flash across his mind.

“Sir Ein, I understand that this may trigger some conflicting emotions,” Lloyd said. “Please don’t push yourself, and leave it to me to—”

“No, I’m fine,” Ein assured him. “I’d just fallen silent thinking of back then.”

Oddly enough, the marshal’s new eye patch suited him quite well. In fact, he now appeared as if he were an elderly war veteran who’d fought his way through more than a few wars. Lloyd was enthusiastic about the style shake-up, yammering on about how he’d commission a hand-embroidered, custom eye patch upon his return home. Despite losing an eye, his morale hadn’t dropped an ounce—far from it. Lloyd found himself eager to grasp victory and return home. Considering the situation, it was a good sign for the marshal.

“‘Back then...’ Before you came to Ishtarica, perhaps?” Lloyd inquired.

“That’s right,” Ein replied. “You know about that time in my life, don’t you?”

“You mean...”

“When I was living in Roundheart.”

The marshal quickly turned pensive and started to carefully choose his next words, but Ein replied with a smile as though to imply that there was nothing to

worry about.

“I heard that you were never allowed to leave the manor, nor were you treated all that well,” Lloyd admitted. “I used to remember His Majesty jumping for joy whenever one of Lady Olivia’s letters arrived... But once he started reading, that joy would turn to sorrow in a matter of seconds.”

“Yep,” Ein replied. “Unlike me, my younger brother, Glint, was allowed to leave the estate quite frequently. When my fath—Rogas started looking after Glint, he was allowed to leave the city.”

“I see...” Lloyd nodded solemnly.

“But you see, even I was allowed to go on a trip. My first one, actually. Do you know what day that was?”

“H-Hmm... Your first trip... I apologize, but I haven’t a clue.”

Ein hadn’t talked about it before, and Lloyd was curious to learn more about his prince’s past.

“My first trip out was during my social debut party,” Ein revealed.

“Ah! The one that was held in the royal capital... At Grand Duke August’s manor if I recall correctly!” Lloyd said.

“You do. But when I arrived, a trick was played on me. I was told I wasn’t allowed to attend the party or even walk into the venue. At the time, I wondered what I should do.”

Lloyd and the rest of Ein’s subjects were undoubtedly infuriated to hear of the tale, despite the smile on their prince’s face. A seemingly disgruntled Lloyd tightened his grip on his reins while Dill’s face contorted in rage. Even so, the crown prince smiled as though he were taking a walk down memory lane—it was all so nostalgic to him.

“And so, since I wasn’t allowed to join, I decided to enjoy a stroll through their flower garden,” Ein continued. He was describing his first encounter with Krone.

“The Blue Fire Rose,” Lloyd said.

“Yep. I transformed it into a star crystal. Back then, I didn’t know that presenting someone with a star crystal carries quite a bit of meaning behind it. I

was shocked when I found out.”

After Rogas left them behind to attend an after-party, Olivia finally reached her breaking point and used a message bird to contact Ishtarica. Upon receiving that message, Chris had Olivia board the *Princess Olivia* and set sail from Roundheart.

“I know I’ve been talking for a while, but the path we’re on feels familiar,” Ein said. “It reminds me of that day; the day my mother and I took a carriage to the royal capital.”

From a profile view, the prince looked significantly more mature than usual, and it wasn’t a result of the growth spurt following his Demon Lord transformation either. With a great sense of dignity washing over his visage, Ein emanated a kingly elegance—an aura that would one day deem him to be a fitting successor to his grandfather.

“Please don’t push yourself,” Lloyd said.

“I know. Thank you,” Ein replied, smiling in response to the marshal’s consideration for his feelings.

As the prince continued to gaze over the hill, a scout came rushing back to rejoin the party. “Please forgive me for reporting on horseback!”

“Very well. Proceed,” Lloyd ordered.

“Yes, sir!” The scout took a minute to catch their breath before they continued with their report. “A ways away from this hill, you’ll be able to clearly see the royal capital. Along with the city, Heim’s massive army will also come into view. I’ve also managed to spot Rogas, their commander in chief.”

If the scout was to be believed, a calamitous battlefield was waiting just around the corner. A different sort of tension hung in the air and something about the enemy’s presence had changed. Once they finished, the scout fell in line with their comrades, and Lloyd finally addressed the troops.

“Sir Ein, should the worst-case scenario become a reality, please leave us behind and fulfill the wishes of our people,” he said.

“Lloyd...” Ein murmured.

“I’ve no doubt that the enemy will be throwing miasma at us again. If that’s the case, I doubt we’ll be able to approach them. However, we can at least offer ourselves up as meat shields. Once you’ve slain Shannon and Edward, a safe return home should be your only priority.”

“There’s no way I can just leave you all out there.”

“You must, Your Highness. It is our duty to be your shield, and as the crown prince, you are bound by your own set of duties.” Speaking firmly, Lloyd attempted to free Ein of any hesitation. He raised his voice. “Dill! Come here!”

“Yes, sir!” Dill shouted.

“There’s no need for you to act as a commander. Is that clear? No matter what, you *must* remain by Sir Ein’s side. Don’t you *ever* misplace your priorities.”

“Most certainly. I shall put everything on the line to protect him.”

Seemingly satisfied by the response he received, Lloyd placed a warm hand atop his son’s head. He cared not about the knights around him and tousled his boy’s hair.

“Hey! F-Father!” Dill stammered.

“You dare call me father in public?” Lloyd inquired.

“Oh come on, Lloyd,” Ein chimed in. “It’s a bit late for that, I think. He called out to you back in Bardland.”

“Ha ha ha!” the marshal laughed jovially. “That was so long ago, I’ve already forgotten about it!”

“And didn’t you instigate this interaction—no, never mind.”

As the marshal’s boisterous laughter danced through the air, the understandably nervous knights started to smile and chuckle along with their superior. After another good laugh, Lloyd’s demeanor turned serious once more.

“I shall face Edward,” he said.

“But...” Ein started.

“As I am now, I might remind you of the sad sack who lost in that last clash, but please be at ease. I don’t think I’ll have an easy time taking care of him, so I have a plan. I’m reluctant to go ahead with it, but I suppose it can’t be helped.”

The meaningful string of words caused Ein and Dill to stare back blankly at the marshal. They hadn’t heard his thoughts on the whole thing before.

“I see...” Ein said as he nodded.

And so, he started to reconsider what he’d said earlier.

Roundheart and the royal capital were close neighbors, with a carriage ride between cities only taking a few hours. However, a well-trained horse could cut that travel time down to less than an hour. As the salty sea breeze of Roundheart wafted by Ein’s nose, he felt an uneasy sense of nostalgia wash over him. While his birthplace was a port city similar to Magna, the prince realized those two places couldn’t be any more different.

As the breeze continued to brush against him, Ein felt a strange collection of emotions well up within him—diametrically opposed to what he’d feel on a visit to Magna. He gazed at the throng of Heim soldiers stretched out before him and shook his head. The prince hoped he could push these thoughts out of his mind.

“It’s a massive army” were the words that tumbled out of Ein’s mouth as he attempted to quickly comprehend the sheer size of the army Heim had assembled. They all stood on the royal capital’s outskirts, their formation as wide as it was long. The virtual sea of soldiers had left Ein to wonder just where the kingdom had been hiding such might. If the prince’s eyes were to be believed, it seemed that Heim still had a little life left in it.

Beyond this human ocean lay the kingdom’s royal capital, with its beloved castle reflected in Ein’s eyes. Despite the beautiful weather that surrounded him, the prince couldn’t help but notice the dark clouds that hung over the entire city—he was sure that he wasn’t just seeing things. The once proud and flourishing nation had crumbled, leaving behind a ruined kingdom in its place. All that remained was the malevolent cloud of evil that hung over the remains—on display for the entire world to see.

The vast majority of the capital's citizens had apparently already fled, afraid they'd be caught in the cross fire.

"Sir Ein! Sir Ein!" Lloyd called out as he galloped up on the prince's left side. "Forgive me for speaking while I'm on my horse! We have confirmed sightings of a Heim battalion commanded by Edward, coming up on the left wing from Port Roundheart! Once the fighting starts, I shall ride that way!"

That's weird... Ein thought. He knew the fox had an elevated impression of himself, and that he'd proven himself as a calculating foe. Yet, the spearman had chosen to leave the royal capital for the front lines of Roundheart. Was there some sort of method behind his madness?

"It might be a trap," Ein warned. "Why wouldn't he protect the capital?"

"I'd guess that he plans to hold off our forces approaching Roundheart," Lloyd replied.

"Father, I don't see it that way," Dill said with a fearless smile on his face. He'd been riding next to Ein until this point, but he spurred his horse forward. "Perhaps we should assume that he's looking to avoid Sir Ein. Sharing that among our forces will undoubtedly increase their morale."

"How about that! I'd never thought I'd see the day where I'd be schooled by my own flesh and blood!" Lloyd responded. "But you could be right. This is the perfect opportunity to spread the word and psych up our men!"

Lloyd flashed a smile of his own, similar to his son's. *No, I'd say it's quite the opposite. Dill might end up taking after his old man. After all, they're almost the spitting image of each other with those resolute looks on their faces.*

"Sir Ein, I shall return to the left wing," Lloyd reported.

"Mm, got it," Ein replied. "But don't push yourself either."

"Ha ha ha ha! Apologies, but that might be the one order I simply cannot follow!"

The addition of an eye patch made Lloyd's jaunty laughter even more befitting of him. As the marshal continued to proudly chuckle, even his knights couldn't help but smile.

“*Someone* seems to be in a good mood,” Majorica said, also approaching the party on horseback. Lloyd’s laughter had ended up echoing for miles. “Now then, why don’t I leave you with a parting gift?”

He removed a gunnysack from his chest pocket and threw it at the marshal.

“What might this be?” Lloyd inquired.

“The green beads are used to restrain, and the blue orbs are processed Healbird stones,” Majorica replied.

“Splendid! These kinds of magical tools are always a pain to craft, and I’m not getting my hands on any of them unless a skilled hand assembles them. Like someone of your caliber, Master Majorica. I shall gratefully accept these gifts!” Lloyd gushed before turning to the crown prince. “Sir Ein, may we bring glory to Ishtarica!”

Then with a loud roar, Lloyd spurred his horse onward and gallantly galloped away. Ein, Dill, and Majorica seemingly flashed forced smiles, but seeing the marshal act with the same bravado he had back home filled them with courage.

“I apologize for my father’s enthusiasm despite the situation,” Dill said.

“I think it helps, actually,” Ein replied. “We don’t want to be all doom and gloom, do we?”

“That’s right,” Majorica added. “It’s better for a commander to act with gusto, don’t you think? I believe the knights would rather follow someone like that. Now then, my dears. I shall be off.”

As Majorica turned to leave, one couldn’t help but notice the suspicious glint of the brass knuckles he wore while grasping his reins. The sight made it clear that he wasn’t about to peacefully settle things with a nice little chat.

“I’ll be looking forward to your war of words as well, Your Highness,” Majorica said before he tried to leave.

Ein knew that he wasn’t getting out of it, but he couldn’t help but grimace at the thought of one. “You think we’d actually have a little chat beforehand?”

“But of course. It’s one of the highlights in the run-up to a war. And, well... I’m sure you’ll be up against someone who you share a bit of bad blood with.”

Ein could barely bring himself to smile. He knew that this forced grin was probably more awkward than any other that had ever appeared on his face. Looking a touch exasperated, he started scratching at his temple. Ein was well aware that every war started with a verbal clash, but he never thought that he'd do it himself.

"I feel the pressure already..." Ein muttered.

"But I understand where Master Majorica is coming from," Dill replied. "Again, the verbal battle is a highlight in war's run-up, and it will affect the morale of our troops greatly."

"Ugh, not you too, Dill."

"I beg for your leniency. Heightened morale will bring us one step closer to victory, and it will decrease your odds of injury, Sir Ein."

The knight smiled while displaying a more stubborn side of himself. Despite Ein's complaint, he seemed to be slightly excited too.

"Ah, Sir Ein, I caught wind of an interesting fact while we were in Bardland," Dill said.

"And what would that be?" Ein asked. "And you're telling me this just as we're about to start a war? I hope it isn't anything dangerous."

"Not at all, Your Highness." Dill looked to be in high spirits, pausing for a moment before speaking once more. "I've heard that General Rogas has never once bested Edward in battle. There's not a victory to his name." As Dill continued on, the pair found themselves thinking about how Ein fared against Edward the other day. "In other words, when you beat Edward, you also surpassed General Rogas."

"Ha ha..." Ein chuckled. "It makes me feel a little weird when you say it like that."

"'Weird,' you say?"

"Very much so. Back when I was little, he was the strongest man I ever knew...and the most powerful warrior I'd seen. But when I arrived in Ishtarica, I met so many people... My horizons broadened, and my feelings changed. Still, I

couldn't forget the bad taste he'd left in my mouth. Honestly, I've never thought of myself as stronger than him until you said it just now."

Dill listened quietly as his prince spoke. Perhaps Ein had become a touch too emotional on the eve of war, but he couldn't stop the feelings that bubbled within him from spilling out of his mouth. But despite it all, one could clearly hear confidence in the prince's voice. The powerful glimmer he saw in his master's eyes reminded Dill of Ein's speech from just days ago—there was no doubt in the knight's mind that His Highness was more than suited to take the throne.

"Dill," Ein said.

"Yes, Your Highness?" Dill replied.

Ein had made a resolution. Once he suppressed his lingering nerves, the prince had fully steeled himself.

"I have no way of knowing how this war will end, but I'm not allowed to avoid one of this battle's inevitabilities," the crown prince said.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"I shall face General Rogas."

This was the very man who'd taught Ein the art of swordsmanship as a child. As the prince further steeled himself, he cast a sweeping glance at the sea of Heims splayed out before him.

The land surrounding Heim's royal capital could once be called anything but a barren wasteland. Its fertile soil was covered in lush greenery, and the occasional tree provided spots of shade that dotted the plains. Back when the region's natural beauty and a series of old traditions coexisted in harmony, the surrounding scenery was splendiferous. Unfortunately, Heim's soldiers trampled it, caking every bit of green in a thick layer of mud. At one time, the royal castle dazzled gloriously under the kingdom's sunny skies, but now, a malevolent cloud of gloom loomed over the city.

"Dill, you can stop here," Ein said.

“I mustn’t,” the knight insisted. “If necessary, I shall become your shield.”

The Heim troops were right in front of them, and Dill couldn’t hide the worry he felt. Just like last time, the opposing soldiers looked as though they’d lost their minds. However, they stood tall and refined as they loyally followed General Rogas’s orders. Every soldier had seemingly lost their free will, resembling an army of marionettes under the control of a skilled puppeteer.

“Don’t worry,” Ein assured him. “If it gets dangerous, I’ll retreat immediately. And while we’re a good ways away, I can’t guarantee that we won’t be hit. But I am confident I’ll be able to dodge their attacks, though.”

“Even if you’re lying, I wish you’d just say that they won’t hit us,” Dill replied.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m just joking.”

“Good grief... I believe this is neither the time nor the place to crack a joke. What do you think?”

“Ugh... You got me there...”

The knight might have looked exasperated, but he was relieved to see Ein acting like himself. Dill felt his nerves ease, and the grip on his reins loosen up as well.

“I’m just gonna have a bit of a verbal kerfuffle first, right?” Ein asked.

“It’s on a slightly grander scale, what with the war and all, but you’re not too off the mark, I believe,” Dill replied.

“Uh... Have I ever *actually* been in a verbal dispute before?”

Dill remained silent for a few moments as he jogged his memory before he answered, “I wonder. I admit that nothing comes to mind. But I believe you’ve made your case to Chancellor Warren and His Majesty in the past.”

“That’s different, isn’t it? That’s less of a fight and more of a clash of opinions.”

Ein recalled the time he’d tried to negotiate during the Sea Dragon incident and when he pleaded for Chris to return to her duties as his personal knight. However, neither situation could really be called a “fight.”

“But I guess it’s all the same anyway,” Ein concluded. “I’ll do my best, then. I’ll come back here once it’s over, so wait for me.”

“You seem to be awfully nonchalant about this, but I understand,” Dill replied. “I shall wait here for you.”

Despite nagging his master right up until the end, Dill trusted his master from the bottom of his heart. It was time. Ein parted ways with his knight and trotted ahead on his horse. The crown prince had tried his best to avert his gaze until now, but he spotted General Rogas standing at the vanguard of the Heim troops. His massive body towered over his comrades as he sat atop his equally burly steed, boasting the strongest power Heim had on offer. As Ein approached, Rogas stared quietly in his direction.

“I didn’t think our next conversation would happen quite like this,” Ein muttered.

As the crown prince drew near, the Heims’ horses started to neigh and whinny. The animals had instinctively trembled at the emergence of a powerful foe. Considering that Ein’s presence was enough to make Sage’s wyvern shudder, these horses stood no chance against him.

Several moments passed as Ein spurred his horse onward. The prince had reached the battlefield’s midway point, an area controlled by neither force. He remained in place as he watched the man he once called “father” slowly ride up to join him. The man was touted to be the core, if not the heart of Heim, and had once taught a young Ein how to use a sword. Rogas had suffered a humiliating defeat to Lloyd a few days ago, but the general still had a fiery rage in his eyes.

“You’re finally here,” Rogas said.

He stopped his horse, had his steed face to the side, and gazed at Ishtarica’s crown prince. It was clear that Rogas was hostile yet troubled; Ein wasn’t the only one who’d been overcome with a myriad of emotions. Rogas said not a word more and only shifted his gaze several times as the silence between them continued. Some time later, he broke the ice.

“You forgot the words of your valiant ancestors, you foolish commoner! And you have transformed into one of Ishtarica’s barbaric royals!” Rogas roared.

“What business do you have here, on our blessed land?!”

What a way to insult me. Ein was tempted to let out a weary chuckle, but he managed to stop himself. The wave of Heim soldiers standing behind their general let out a hearty roar.

“You chose to respect our mortal enemies and stooped to the level of being a beast like the rest of them,” Ein retorted. “I need not describe the brutish nature of a barbarian such as yourself. Foolishly, you’ve even dared to invade the domains of our allies. We have no intention of forgiving your foul acts.”

The crown prince chose his words carefully, firing back with the same “barbarian” and “foolish” insults that had already been hurled at him.

“You’ve kidnapped not only our precious royals, but you dare mock our beliefs as well!” Rogas growled. “A crown prince who lacks subtlety only displays how lacking his nation is! You lot have plunged to the depths and have become nothing more than pitiful invaders!” Before Ein could reply, Rogas added, “Your ancient collection of ‘Unified Nations’ stands at death’s door! The fools who face my men are nothing more than living corpses who refuse to fall!”

Heim soldiers continued to bellow and shout, proudly chanting their nation’s name while attempting to overwhelm the Ishtaricans.

“Living corpses, huh?” Ein murmured.

I think those words would be more accurate in describing you. The crown prince could only look upon his father with pity as his lips stretched wide into a fearless smile. Ein stared at the Heims as his knights eagerly awaited his next retort.

“All those living shall one day die,” Ein said. “And we are no exception to this fate. However, my time is not now, and I assure you that we will not become living corpses today. Perish the thought!”

Rogas unconsciously found himself overwhelmed by the royal’s gaze. This feeling was completely different from their last meeting, when he’d reunited with his son for the first time in years. The general believed he’d then been shocked by the boy’s transformation. But in reality, Rogas now felt as if he were

being sliced to bits by the prince's piercing gaze and aura. He felt himself gulp nervously and large beads of sweat started to form on his brow.

"We shall strike down those who have wronged us, and we will become heroes in the process," Ein declared.

In response, Ishtarica's front line started to slam the butts of their spears on the stone beneath them. The dull sound gradually multiplied, forming an orchestra of praise for the royal. The prince's army had unified and roared like a large beast—the tables had turned. The knights' morale had never been higher, their cheers rivaling their cries of glee when Ein had first crossed the seas to aid them. Rogas, who had fallen silent in the face of Ein's overwhelming presence, allowed the Ishtaricans to bask in their triumph for a moment. The general discovered a simmering rage creeping into his heart once he saw the look on his son's face and heard the enemy chant his name. Even Heim's most indifferent soldiers looked worried.

"Don't make me laugh," Rogas spat, ending the cheers. "No man who betrays his homeland can ever become a hero. And knights under the command of such a man will never find themselves on the side of justice."

Ein remained silent for a moment before he asked, "What are you trying to say?"

"Is it not as plain as the outcome of this war? You betrayed Heim, the kingdom where you were born and raised. And what of your advisor? She's no different from you, abandoning her home as well!"

Ein was confused for a moment, but lowered his gaze after quickly realizing that both he and Krone had been insulted. Rogas had touched upon information he'd gathered at that fateful meeting, implying that he knew Krone had fled to Ishtarica of her own accord.

"You Ishtaricans are nothing but bigoted oppressors!" Rogas roared.

The Heims cheered with gusto, feeling triumphant in light of the crown prince's silence. However, Ein was anything but discouraged—he was actually disappointed. Rogas's words felt rather out of place in this situation—his comments coming from the wrong place at the wrong time. If anything, he was a wet blanket. This wasn't the first time that Ein had been disappointed in his

father, but the crown prince felt equally disillusioned by how Rogas commanded his men.

“Really? Is that all you’re going to say now?” Ein asked.

How pitiful. How pathetic, Ein thought.

“Ishtaricans are nothing but—” the general started.

“Just shut up already, Rogas,” Ein spat.

“What?! You...”

This was no longer a verbal battle between the crown prince and the general. The conversation had brought forth inexplicable feelings dwelling within Ein. *Father, had you not been under the red foxes’ spell, would you have still disparaged Krone and me?* He gathered his thoughts and held himself steady as he finally managed to glare at Rogas.

“I suppose even a traitor like yourself has learned a thing or two when it comes to intimidating and silencing your foes,” the general spat.

Traitor? Ein was now at a loss for words. *Am I really? Was Heim truly my home?* He took a few moments to think, and his mind had soon been made up. *I don’t have to think too hard about this. I already have my answer. I was only born in Heim, that’s all.* As this thought filled his head, his chest felt lighter as though a weight had been lifted. *I don’t have to overthink this.*

Ein regarded Ishtarica as his home—nowhere else. Upon recalling his loyalty to his true homeland, he felt a newfound determination in his resolve. He gazed up at the sky and raised a hand at Rogas before flashing a carefree smile, one that made even the Heim general inch back in fear. The overwhelming pressure that Ein emanated was terrifying.

“You don’t have to put on a brave face anymore,” Ein said.

He didn’t raise his voice, yet it rang out so clearly that it reached Lloyd’s ears. Had the wind carried Ein’s voice, or was it some other supernatural element at play? This mystery would never be solved, but it was true that everyone nearby could hear Ein’s voice.

“I’ve heard that cornered beasts will often continue with intimidation tactics

when faced with a powerful foe,” Ein said. “Thus, I will not stand here and try to convince you to stop.”

His piercing gaze, coupled with the most provoking remark of the day caused Rogas to briefly waver in astonishment. The Heim couldn’t utter a single remark in retaliation.

“You went so far as to make assumptions regarding the character of myself and my citizens. And so, I shall tell you of it,” Ein continued, emanating a kingly aura. “Our character is one that envelops the entire valiant continent of Ishtarica.”

Rogas tried to retort, but Ein’s mysterious and overwhelming aura kept him silent.

“Be it the blood we shed, the sweat that pours from our brows, or the bones in our bodies, they all prove that we are children of Ishtarica,” Ein went on. “All of us, without exception, are heroes born under the beloved silver our first king treasured.”

“Then you must show me the caliber of you barbarians,” Rogas replied.

“Certainly. I shall do so, as much as you wish. Ah, and...”

At that moment, it was as though the air had split, and the space between the two had yawned open, sucking Rogas in towards Ein. This wasn’t a trick of the light—the general was clearly being dragged towards the crown prince. A crack ran through the ground, and the clouds above them dispersed. A torrent of power unknown to Rogas appeared from behind Ein, causing the very air around the boy to waver.

“I don’t fault you for knowing nothing about *her*,” Ein said. “You beasts will never be able to accurately assess her caliber.”

He was referring to the insults that Rogas had hurled at Krone. For the first time, Ein directly smiled at Heim’s general before turning to the sky above, in the direction of his distant homeland.

“Krone’s caliber rivals her beauty, you see,” Ein said softly. His voice was so faint that only Rogas was able to make out those words.

With that, Ein turned on his heels and returned to his troops with a sunny disposition.

Chapter Two: Defeating Heim

When Ein galloped away to rejoin his men, Rogas followed suit, quickly returning to his own soldiers. As both leaders returned to their respective sides, they were each welcomed by a lively eruption of applause. For a brief moment, it sounded as if this war zone were hosting a celebration. In the midst of the rabble-rousing, the Ishtaricans slowly pushed a large ballista onto the battlefield—Heim’s royal capital positioned squarely in its crosshairs.

“Sir Ein!” Dill cried as he rode towards his prince. The knight looked rather pleased with himself, but tried to hide the cheeky smirk on his face.

“What’s with that look? Is something up?” Ein asked in surprise. It was rare to see Dill grinning so broadly.

The knight replied, “You spoke splendidly. As you can see, our troops’ morale has never been higher!” That cheeky smirk remained plastered on his face, but Dill refused to elaborate any further.

“Uh, yeah. Happy to hear it, but why are you grinning like that? What’s wrong?”

After hearing his prince’s second question, Dill’s grin softened into a gentle smile. At the same time, the surrounding knights let out a hearty series of chuckles.

“Oh, nothing at all,” Dill replied. “It was just truly beautiful how you expressed your feelings for Lady Krone.”



“Uh, what?” Ein asked.

“Now, then! It’s time we press on! Cavalry, advance!”

Suddenly, Dill’s demeanor took a serious turn as he ordered his men to prepare for their attack on the royal capital. Still atop his steed, Ein crossed his arms and nodded.

“Ah, I get it now,” he muttered.

Yeah, he must’ve heard what I said, Ein thought. He’d intended those final words to be heard by Rogas’s ears only, but it seemed that wind had worked in mysterious ways—carrying the crown prince’s voice to his troops. *I never thought I’d be feeling so frazzled on a battlefield.* He looked up at the sky once more, slapped his cheeks, and shifted his gaze to Dill, who was giving out orders nearby.

“When this is all over, I have to make sure he doesn’t say a word of this to anyone,” Ein said.

From an outsider’s perspective, Ein had spoken so magnificently. Surely, this was the sort of scene legends were made of—a tale to be told for generations to come. However, the prince wouldn’t have been able to weather the storm of embarrassment that came with that. For the umpteenth time today, he let out a sigh and switched gears. The time for rest was now over—from here on out, the Ishtaricans would be fighting for their lives in the middle of a gruesome war. With a renewed resolve, Ein firmly grasped his sword, but he quickly noticed a looming shadow in the corner of his eye. As the shadow neared Roundheart, the prince found himself reminded of the night he left the continent. He could faintly hear it, but the *Princess Olivia’s* whistle went off as if to imitate a battle cry.

“Chris?!” Ein gasped.

Without warning, the boom of an explosion cut through the air and shook the battlefield like an earthquake. For a brief moment, the Heims froze, trapped in a state of utter disbelief.

“What an incredible impact,” Dill noted. “Dame Chris must’ve fired the *Princess Olivia’s* main cannon.”

Acting on her own discretion, Chris commanded the *Princess Olivia* as it launched an assault on Heim. As part of this plan, Ein had sailed ahead on the *Leviathan*. Despite the smoke billowing from Roundheart, a rainbow pierced the sky—a sign that magic stone power had been utilized. Even Ein was unable to hide his shock upon witnessing the sheer destructive power unleashed by the next fired round. Just like the last blast, another thunderous boom was accompanied by a rumbling shock wave as it quaked across the battlefield. *She isn't planning on ending this with a single shot. She's firing multiple rounds!*

Each of Ishtarica's warships possessed a main cannon that far outclassed any ballista carried by troops on the ground. A vessel of that size was capable of carrying equally awe-inspiring artillery.

"We can't lose. It's our turn now," Ein murmured.

Dill nodded in agreement. While the Heims found themselves discombobulated, the Ishtaricans were presented with an opportunity they couldn't afford to let slip through their fingers. Ein clenched his reins, unsheathed his blade, and ordered his troops to advance.

Even before Ein and Rogas's little war of words, the Ishtarican fleet had already reached Roundheart. The awaiting Heims were now face-to-face with the *Princess Olivia*, the *Leviathan*, and a pair of vessels that secured the flank of each royal ship.

"We can breathe a sigh of relief, there are no civilians to be seen," a Knights Guard member reported as he gazed at the city. "Like those from the royal capital, I believe they've fled elsewhere."

"Very well," Chris replied.

The pair stood on the *Olivia's* deck as they surveyed the situation. Chris couldn't help but find this turn of events to be a touch ironic.

"Sir Ein, I didn't think I'd be here again...and on the exact same ship no less," the elf muttered to herself after the Knights Guard member left. Her golden locks flowed in the ocean breeze. "I'd never once hoped to be part of a twist of fate as weird as this."

She stared down the city's main road, catching a glimpse of the manor within its depths. Once known as "Roundheart Manor," Rogas had lost the property as punishment for breaking Heim's secret deal with Ishtarica. Even so, it was Ein's childhood home, and a source of hatred for Chris. Even this scant glimpse was enough to send the knight into a rage, her heart thumping in displeasure. Despite her strong feelings, Chris desperately scolded herself in an attempt to calm down.

"How are the knights on the other vessels faring?" Chris asked.

"No problems to report," a knight replied. "They're all ready to dock at the port on your command."

Then surely I can act now, Chris thought. Her eyes were now fixated on Ein's childhood home, her voice taking an icy tone as she spoke with a knight.

"Good, then let's create our own road to the royal capital."

"What do you mean?" a knight inquired.

"If we take the city's main road, that eyesore of a manor will block our path. With it gone, we can head directly to Sir Ein's position."

The knight followed Chris's gaze and noticed the manor that she was staring at.

"Ready the Mercy of the Saint. We shall fire it at this city," Chris ordered.

"Ah, so we *will* start with the main cannon," the knight replied.

"That's right. The *Princess Olivia*'s main cannon may not be effective from long range, but the blast's sheer power and its accompanying shock wave surpasses even the *White King*'s main cannon. Since we simply need to fire in a straight line, there isn't a better vessel suited for the job."

Not only could she level that dreadful manor, but she could create a direct path to Ein. In her mind, there was no better option.

"Some of the enemy's soldiers might be worth taking prisoner," the knight said. "Are we still going ahead with this plan of attack?"

"We came here to settle a score, not to take prisoners. In fact, if there are any worth capturing, I ask that you swiftly cut them down."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Once the *Princess Olivia* fires, our other ships must immediately commence their attack.”

“Noted. I shall make the preparations posthaste.”

As the knight left for the control room, Chris turned to look beyond that ominous manor, towards the battlefield just outside the royal capital. Surely, Ein and his men would be clashing with Heim’s forces there.

“Hrmm...” Chris groaned.

I have many concerns surrounding this operation. Many, many concerns. As an elf, her vision was much better than normal humans, but even she could only make out two opposing forces in the distance. Her crown prince was nowhere to be seen.

“I can neither see nor hear him.”

Despite standing in the middle of a war zone, Chris pouted over not being at the master’s side as he fought his way to the royal capital. No doubt a verbal battle must’ve been occurring by now, but try as she might, she couldn’t see Ein; no matter how much she strained her ears, she couldn’t hear a single sound.

“Ugh,” Chris sighed. “I can’t see, hear, or even be present for Sir Ein’s verbal battle...”

And yet, she couldn’t give up. She continued to hone all five of her senses, hoping for something, anything. Then suddenly, Chris gasped in surprise. Trembling with excitement, she sensed Ein’s presence—his commanding aura making it clear that he would hear no other opinions. She almost found herself bowing to him right on the spot. For a moment, she wondered if Ein was by her side and hastily looked around, but the crown prince was nowhere to be seen. Somehow, his powerful presence had been briefly carried to her by the wind. The knights surrounding her looked equally confused as they began to murmur, perplexed.

“What was that?”

“Did I just hear the crown prince’s voice?”

Moments later, a thunderous roar like never before arose from the Ishtarican side. That odd feeling only lasted seconds, and Chris knew that this was no time to remain dazed.

“All right,” she said. She was sure that the verbal battle had ended. “It’s high time we acted as well.”

With that, she raised her right arm in the air, sending a signal to those stationed in the control room. The beautiful, magnificent *Princess Olivia* began to gather an intense amount of magic stone energy within its main cannon. The purple crackles of lightning coursing through the boat caused it to violently rock in the water.

Over time, the condensed energy manifested itself in a light not too dissimilar from the flash that erupted from the Tower of Wisdom. The blinding light silenced the city, all the while whipping up a quiet breeze over the sea. Chris drew her rapier and thrust it into the ship’s deck to steady herself. Even she had rarely experienced the Mercy of the Saint’s full power. She’d taken part in a few training exercises, but each shot was so costly that it simply wasn’t realistic to regularly train with it.

“Send the signal,” she ordered.

Immediately after she gave the word, the ship let out a shrill whistle. Then slowly but steadily, the gentle ringing of a bell reverberated in the air—its calm, regular ringing reaching the heavens. The sound was so pure and saintly that those who heard it felt their hearts being cleansed. However, this ringing wasn’t the only reason behind the cannon’s name. It also described Olivia—a princess renowned for her saintly benevolence.

“Now,” Chris said. The ringing stopped and the ships fell silent, awaiting the elf’s signal. “Show the world your might!”

The moment those words left her lips, the air around the cannon’s tip started wavering. Compared to the blast that leveled Euro, the Mercy of the Saint was awfully quiet. It wasn’t created with the intention of causing as much damage as possible, instead, it fired in a simple line that would pierce open a path for Ishtarica’s allies. The cannon rudely fired a ray of light without uttering a sound,

reminiscent of Olivia's gentle nature. On the other hand, the destruction it wrought was nothing short of horrifying.

The beam decimated everything in its path, sucking in every building it grazed. The resultant debris was atomized as a pillar of light shot into the sky. A deafening rumble echoed throughout the city and the ground quaked. Anything touched by this fiery light instantly vanished into thin air as though it never existed in the first place. Indeed, not much remained after that blast other than clouds of dust. Naturally, some enemy soldiers managed to escape the initial attack. In response, the other warships fired their cannons, heartlessly eviscerating the survivors.

"And now we have a path forward," Chris said.

She walked ahead before jumping off the ship and onto the ground below. Carried by the ocean breeze, the scent of burning rubble reached the knight's nose—she didn't mind it. Galloping away from the ships, a massive throng of knights on horseback flooded into the city. A member of the Knights Guard provided Chris with an ivory steed, which she proceeded to mount. She removed her rapier once more, pointing it towards the freshly opened path that lay before her.

"I'll be there soon, Sir Ein," she said. She placed a hand over her magic stone, which she'd offered to her crown prince all those moons ago, before she gripped her reins. "Besides, even if this is a good plan, it's odd that your personal guard isn't by your side! I absolutely guarantee that I'll be making a selfish request or two in the future!"

As she continued to grumble, her gaze shifted to the enemy forces stationed just outside of Roundheart. Not even a moment later, she'd already spurred her horse ahead.

The knight quickly moved along the street leading to the royal capital, galloping through the city as if she owned it. In hopes of building morale, Heim's soldiers shouted with desperate bravado.

"Kill the Ishtarican barbarians!"

"Don't let them sully our sacred land! Slaughter as many Ishtaricans as you can!"

Even though they'd scattered like flies in the face of such a mighty cannon, these soldiers had realized they were now out of firing range. They now lay in wait, planning to ambush the Ishtaricans. For her part, Chris pointed a sharp gaze at her enemies while placing a hand over her equally sharp rapier.

"Dame Christina!" a voice rang out from a distance.

A Knights Guard member skillfully wove his way through the Heims and appeared before the elf.

"I don't believe I saw you aboard the *Princess Olivia*," Chris said to the knight, her eyes filled with confusion. "Why are you here?"

The knight looked familiar, but he hadn't been assigned to Chris's mission.

"I'm here to deliver a message from the marshal, ma'am!" the knight reported.

"From Sir Lloyd?" Chris inquired.

"Yes, ma'am! Please excuse me for remaining on my horse, but time is of the essence right now! Marshal Lloyd had said that..."

Lloyd's plan was revealed as such: he wanted Chris and her men to join him in battle against Edward. Chris couldn't hide the shock on her face.

"So you're saying that we'd be up against someone that even Sir Lloyd couldn't leave a scratch on?" she murmured.

Lloyd had long been hailed as Ishtarica's strongest warrior, and his claim to fame had never been questioned before. And yet, this champion couldn't land a single finger on his opponent and lost an eye in the process. No one could be blamed for doubting their ears upon hearing the news. However, Chris feigned composure—she knew that panicking now would do her nation no good.

"Very well. I shall head there immediately," Chris declared.

This new obstacle would bar her from reuniting with Ein right away. Normally, she would've been greatly annoyed by this, but she had no time for such feelings. Especially if she were to face an opponent that even Lloyd struggled against.

The troops under Chris's command moved as if they were a living wall. The

difference in power was crystal clear even to a child, and much like Ein, the elf couldn't even begin to understand what the red foxes were after. Heim's forces were so thoroughly trampled, they couldn't even be seen as enemies in the eyes of the Ishtaricans. The difference was simply too vast. Heim was inferior in every way—neither their maneuvers nor their artillery could hold a candle to Ishtarica.

“Found them!” Chris shouted.

Amid the buzzing battlefield of clashing Heims and Ishtaricans, the elf managed to make out Ein's forces and another figure. She couldn't see everyone, but she managed to spot a man resembling Lloyd in the mix.

“We will hereby support our marshal!” Chris bellowed. “Line our ballistae on the side! Use them to wipe out the enemy and advance from there!”

After being ordered to assume a wide range of formations, her troops seemingly transformed. They acted like a single organism, chasing after Chris as she galloped towards Lloyd and his men.

“Ah, you again,” a voice said.

A pair of men stood in the exact spot Chris was headed for—right at the front line of the military clash. However, no soldier dared to approach the area surrounding this duo, as if it were a sacred plot of land. It appeared as though this clearing served as the stage for an elaborate play—Edward calmly inviting the marshal to join him with one hand while holding a spear in the other. The soldiers around them fought for their lives, but none of them dared to step on Edward and Lloyd's stage. Only dust and sand could be seen fluttering in the air between them.

“Were you hoping that I was Sir Ein?” Lloyd asked. The marshal leaped off his horse, proceeding to stand before his opponent as he removed the greatsword slung across his back. He then thrust the mighty slab of metal into the ground.

“Indeed,” Edward replied. “Unfortunately, I believe that he's the only one with the power to stand a chance against me.”

“Hmm, you're not wrong.”

“Oh?”

Edward couldn't hide his surprise. His words were meant to rile up the marshal, but Lloyd had ended up agreeing with him. Had the man finally grasped his role? Edward closely inspected Lloyd, but the burly Ishtarican maintained a sunny disposition.

“But I think *we're* the perfect match for you,” Lloyd added.

“Pardon? I don't understand at all,” Edward replied.

“Oh, it's very simple, I'd think. For a guy who fled from Sir Ein, we lowly warriors should be more than enough.”

For a split moment, Edward's gentlemanly veneer cracked as his cheek twitched with anger. But his pride soon pushed him to keep his cool as he bowed his head, much like a butler would. Vulgarity flickered in between his elegant movements.

“That was quite the retort,” Edward replied. “These sort of exchanges make my heart dance.”

“Do you hate me more than ever now?” Lloyd asked.

“How clever you are. You're all talk. The simple thought of trash, such as yourself, writhing in the dirt makes me tremble in ecstasy. Have you never had the same thoughts?”

“I wonder. But I do admit that I'd like to see your face down in the mud.”

Silence and serenity filled the air for just a moment.

“And why are you here?” Edward asked. “I do feel bad considering you came all this way, but someone like you would hardly be an obstacle for me.” As he repeated the question and placed a pensive hand over his lips, he seemed genuinely perplexed by his situation. “If you came to fight me, you've made a severe miscalculation. Do you really intend to humiliate yourself once again? Just like last time?”

“Ha ha ha!” Lloyd chuckled. “You've hit a sore spot. Indeed, my previous performance definitely calls for a punishment upon my return home.”

“Indeed. That blunder almost cost you the lives of your entire force. Ah! Did

your master request that you sacrifice your life on the battlefield?! It all makes sense now.” Edward joyfully swung his spear around to ready it. “I may not be of much help, but I shall *gladly* assist you in that endeavor.”

“If, by some sort of miracle, Sir Ein *ever* makes such a request, I shall happily march to my death. But I don’t plan on dying today.”

Lloyd removed his blade from the ground and pointed it at Edward’s eyes. Despite having lost an eye, the marshal became even more terrifying still. Upon sensing this aura, Edward spoke with a joyful smile on his face.

“We foxes wish for nothing but excruciating pleasure,” he said. As Edward swung his spear around, he licked his lips as if he were preparing for a feast. “We dream of a never-ending climax.”

His words carried a singsong quality, masking his sudden movements. The skill with which he moved his legs could be seen as impressive, artistic, even. Just after closing the gap between himself and his foe, the fox attempted to skewer Lloyd in one graceful motion.

“I’m sorry to say, but that’s not how I like to fight. I simply can’t put you down while you have this honorable act up,” Lloyd said.

After reaching into one of his pockets, the marshal held the very same magical tool given to him by Majorica. A split second later, he threw the tool at the red fox’s feet. The tool exploded between them, creating the smallest of openings.

“You and your petty tricks,” Edward growled. Thanks to his constant vigilance, he’d managed to take a few steps back, but he wasn’t fast enough to dodge the explosion. The red fox coughed, having received the brunt of the blast. “This is...”

As the tool burst, it scattered a translucent powder all over. Carried by the wind, the powder’s granules coated Edward’s face, neck, and any other patches of bare skin on his body.

“Crow Butterfly Powder?!” he coughed.

This powder had come from the very same monsters that had plagued Ein during his first-year field trip. Crow Butterflies were known to paralyze their

victims before laying their eggs inside them. Majorica's magical tool took these dangerous traits and weaponized them. While caked in the powder, Edward's gaze quickly locked on the slight trembling of his fingertips. He removed a knife from his pocket and slashed himself.

"Pain will make this numbness go away," Edward said. "Your little tricks are useless."

He flashed a triumphant grin at the marshal, but Lloyd just smiled back.

"Oh, I'm acutely aware of that," Lloyd replied. "But it wasn't useless, I assure you."

Has he gone mad? Edward wondered. He shot a weary look at the man, but Lloyd didn't appear to be disheartened in the slightest.

"I believe it's a little early for you to be running off on a suicide mission," the red fox said. "But in any case, there'll be no change to the result of this clash."

Just as Edward attempted to skewer Lloyd through the neck again, he noticed a sliver of silver light approaching from his blind spot—a blade heading right for his side.

"A surprise attack," he grunted.

He twisted his body around and just barely managed to defend himself with a swing of his spear. Confused by the sudden turn of events, Edward turned around to discover an elf with dazzling, golden locks flowing behind her.

"I thought I'd attacked from your blind spot," Chris remarked. "I'm surprised that you managed to block that."

Unable to hide her shock, she took a few steps back. There was no use hiding now. She sighed and turned to the marshal.

"I apologize for the delay, Sir Lloyd," she said.

"Not at all," Lloyd replied. "In fact, your timing was perfect."

The two smiled at each other like war buddies and flanked Edward with delight.

"You're..." Edward trailed off before realizing just whom he was talking to.

“Ah, we’ve met before in Euro, haven’t we?”

“It’s been a while,” Chris replied. “If I’d known this would happen, I would’ve cut you down as soon as we met. Not a day goes by that I don’t regret that inaction on my part.”

She glanced at the composed Edward before turning to the eye-patched Lloyd. Seeing his injury pained her. The marshal noticed her concerned gaze and spoke to the elf politely.

“Looks like it was smooth sailing through Roundheart,” he commented.

“Y-Yes, indeed,” Chris stammered. “It was a straight path to here, so there were no noteworthy obstacles in my way.”

“Is it? I believe there were a few twists and turns...”

“No, it was a straight path,” Chris repeated firmly.

Lloyd could’ve been misremembering, but he was dead sure that there was no such thing as a “straight path” through Roundheart. However, he did remember that the *Princess Olivia* had the Mercy of the Saint at its disposal.

“Good grief, I simply don’t understand,” Edward sighed. “Just because there are two of you now, why do you look so confident?”

“Hah!” Lloyd laughed. “What are you on about?!”

The marshal raised his greatsword and leaped forward as he spoke.

“As I said, just because there are two of you now, it makes no difference,” Edward replied with a wave of his hand. Just then, a cut appeared on his cheek. “Oh?”

Half smiling, the red fox placed a hand over his cheek and felt the warm blood soaking his fingertips. He played with the blood using his thumb and middle fingertip while looking back up at Lloyd.

“Don’t misunderstand me, red fox,” Lloyd growled.

Chris followed suit, lowering her posture while tightening the grip on her rapier. Her godlike speed made her the fastest in Ishtarica, surpassing even the marshal’s swiftness.

The elf wasn't responsible for that earlier attack, Edward thought. *Then who was?* Still confused, he found this whole situation to be rather troublesome. Lloyd was the power and Chris was the speed—they made a perfect pair. They were stronger together, and it wasn't due to a simple increase in manpower. Edward was tempted to click his tongue in annoyance. After several clashes, someone hit him with the same attack from before.

"I see now," he said. "*You* threw this dagger at me."

Another cut appeared on his cheek as he plucked the still-flying dagger from thin air. He quickly jumped back, letting out a sigh as he glanced at yet another newcomer to the fray.

"I'm not half bad, am I? You see, I'm actually aiming to be Ishtarica's best knife thrower!" She spoke in a friendly manner and stepped lightly as she approached the group. The woman flashed a captivating smile and proceeded to shove a hand into her ample bosom. From her cleavage, she brandished a pair of daggers that she proceeded to skillfully fiddle with.

"I never said that there were only two of us, did I?" Lloyd asked.

"Indeed, you didn't, Sir Lloyd," Chris added.

Edward was annoyed by the smug duo, but he feigned composure and turned to the approaching woman.

"And you are?" he asked.

He kept a smile plastered on his face, but even he couldn't hide the irritation that was apparent in his tone. This fact was evident by the haste with which he spoke.

"My name is Lily. Charmed, I'm sure. I'm not a fan of fighting in open spaces like these, but I'll do my best." She huffed proudly and produced several more daggers. "I believe we all stand our ground in Ishtarica, and you get to experience all three of us at once. If you can enjoy this battle to the death, please do so to your heart's content! Personally, I'm looking forward to the moment that fake smile leaves your lips, grandpa."



The battlefield had changed from a two-against-one to a three-against-one. Even so, the red fox looked undaunted.

“Have you no dignity?” he wondered aloud. He stared at Lloyd with disdain.

“I feel a little sorry for leaning on the strength of my subordinates,” Lloyd confessed. “But you surely don’t find this to be *unfair*, do you? If you do, I suggest that you reflect on your previous actions.”

“Ugh... I see.” Edward gave a dispirited sigh that sounded like everything was far too troublesome for him. “Good grief. Is it not enough that I’m annoyed by that nuisance of a fiancé? My mental burden is only increasing by the day.”

“You don’t like that your chief is taken by another man?” Lloyd asked.

“Of course I don’t. I feel awful. I’d give anything to skewer Glint—I believe that is his name—and rip him into shreds.”

“Go right ahead. But from an outsider’s perspective, you sound like a child who’s upset that his mother has stepped out.”

“You’re not totally wrong. She *is* our progenitor, after all. Technically, she could be my mother. Ah... I want my love to seep into her body. To do that, I need *him* to die. Then, I can return with excellent news in hand.”

Chris instinctively took a step back upon hearing of Edward’s love for Shannon. Lily pinched her nose and fanned the air before her like she was waving away a putrid stench. No doubt these ladies found his overly twisted love to be creepy, and nothing else. Even Lloyd couldn’t help but feel repulsed.

“Besides, I don’t understand it a bit,” Edward grumbled. “What’s so good about *him*? Sure, he might be blessed with a decent appearance, but that’s all he has.”

“Are you sure you should keep talking?” Lloyd asked. “You know, I’m sure she’d scold you if she heard about all of this whining.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. She simply doesn’t need to hear it, is all. And of course, dead men tell no tales. Now that you’ve heard me air my grievances, well...”

“Ah, that’s simple and easy to understand.”

“Isn’t it? Even a foolish wartime washout such as yourself should understand what I mean.”

There was no specific trigger. If pressed to find one, it may have been the arrow that whizzed through the air and sank into the ground beside them. Lloyd gave it his all in front of Edward, who had displayed his overwhelming power in the previous battle, but the marshal furrowed his brow. The red fox wasn’t acting like his usual self. Lloyd soon found out why.

“Your wounds from your battle with Sir Ein haven’t fully healed, have they?” Lloyd asked.

Edward grunted in reply.

“Looks like I’ve hit the nail on the head. You’re a horrible actor,” Lloyd said.

“Huh. So Sir Ein really *did* beat you to a pulp,” Lily chimed in. “I mean, totally clobbered.”

Even if this remark was meant to elicit a reaction, her words were far too childish and carefree. And yet, Edward was unable to hide his rage as he directed a seething glare at her. Lily tried to smile back, but the next moment, Edward disappeared. Dirt from the ground danced in the air, and he was suddenly in front of her.

“Lily!” Chris shouted. She twisted her arm between the two and managed to thrust her rapier forward.

“Wow, he’s fast!” Lily gasped. “Thank you! You saved my life!”

“You moved after I did, and yet you still managed to match my speed. I’m surprised,” Edward said.

Chris had twisted her body in such a fashion that she managed to dodge Edward’s thrust. She was almost skewered, but had locked on to the spear’s movements, shocking an overly confident Edward in the process. The next moment, the red fox whirled around and swung his spear, parrying the daggers thrown at his face. The blades fell to the ground with a clatter.

“Your reaction speed is impressive!” Lily exclaimed.

“I’m honored to receive your praise, but I really don’t like you,” Edward spat.

“You’re beyond insolent.”

He leaped forward swiftly, hoping to pierce this cheeky lady with his spear.

“Sorry, Edward, but I’m today’s meat shield,” a gruff voice said.

Lloyd closed the gap between himself and the fox, jumping forward with astonishing speed despite his burly physique. Edward had been caught by surprise. He turned around and pointed his spear at Lloyd, but he was unable to brace himself.

“Gaaah!” Edward screamed.

The greatsword swung down, and the fox lost his grip on the spear.

“Aghhh! Troublesome! Troublesome! Troublesome! It’s all such a pain!” Edward shouted.

He acted nothing like he had during that previous encounter—his composure had completely vanished. Just the other day, he’d dodged Lloyd’s attacks with ease while countering with a few kicks of his own. But this time around, Edward had no choice but to brace himself and take the marshal’s swings head-on. As Lloyd had pointed out, the fox’s wounds from his clash with Ein had yet to heal.

“What’s wrong, Edward?” Lloyd shouted. “You don’t seem so scary today!”

“That’s rich,” Edward replied. “You dare act mighty despite turning to a pair of wenches for help? How audacious of you!”

“Hah! Keep yapping! I’d rather win and be called audacious than lose as a humble man!”

“Your passion is annoying.” Edward proceeded to skillfully slither out of Lloyd’s grasp.

“At least you still have your skills,” the marshal muttered.

While still exhausted from his fight with Ein, the fox demonstrated his prowess as a master spearman. The almost enchanting nature with which he’d gracefully twisted his body was proof of this. However, this didn’t change the fact that he was vastly outnumbered. Just after dodging one attack, a dagger immediately flew, aimed between his eyes.

“You really are troublesome!” Edward spat. He bent his neck to dodge the blade.

“Ugh,” Lily groaned. “How in the world did you react to that?”

She was sure that she’d attacked from his blind spot, and any normal person would’ve died there, thus completing her mission.

“Don’t forget that I’m here too,” Chris said.

Quick as the wind, she shot her rapier forward. Edward regarded himself as a seasoned fighter, and seemingly dodged her slashes with ease, but his clothes were ripped to shreds. His toned body became exposed, and a faint cut appeared on his skin.

“Huff... Huff...” Edward panted, his breath becoming haggard. Small beads of sweat formed on his face and his composure continued to crumble. “I’ve already told you before. It doesn’t matter how many of you creatures band together. You’re hardly an obstacle for me.”

“Then what if we continue attacking?” Lloyd replied. “I’d imagine that you’ll only have more wounds to tend to.”

“You think these mere scratches are enough to give you an edge? I just hate any sort of labor.” A sudden smile appeared on the red fox’s lips. “That’s specifically why I became the Black Knight’s third-in-command. I was decently ranked and didn’t have to work too terribly hard. While my superiors were troublesome, it wasn’t too much to endure. Going all out in this fight would cause me a headache. That’s all there is to it.”

“Hah! Now you’re regaling me with personal anecdotes?” Lloyd shouted. “What’s gotten into you?!”

“As I said, I don’t like troublesome affairs, nor do I like to make an effort. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Edward’s words sounded fearless, but one could sense tender undertones to everything he said. There was no way he could hide his rage, sighing as he responded to each and every one of Lloyd’s annoying retorts. Realizing that Edward was on the back foot, Lloyd and Chris decided to keep striking with even harder blows, tightening the grips on their respective blades.

“Hey, I just noticed something!” Lily suddenly said. She clapped her hands together as though she’d had an epiphany.

“Noticed something?” Edward asked.

“Mhm. That’s right. I think I just realized something very interesting!” She flashed an icy, derisive smile while fiddling with her daggers. “I know it’s rude to say this to someone that I’ve just met. I was actually hesitating if I could touch upon this topic, you know? Kidding! Kidding. I’m the type to casually mention whatever is on my mind.”

“Go right ahead. Do as you like.”

While it was true that Edward’s composure had been diminishing at a shocking rate, it wasn’t completely gone. It never had been. He was confident in his skills and power. Even if he was up against three people and was at a disadvantage, he refused to admit defeat and stubbornly fought his way through. In a way, he was showing his willpower, and had managed to act as gracefully as he could. But that would soon come to an end.

“Grandpa, I’m starting to get a sneaky suspicion that your third-in-command position wasn’t something you actually chose,” Lily continued. “I know nothing of the Black Knights, but I get the feeling that decision was out of your hands.”

“You seem to like sticking your nose in other people’s business for no reason,” Edward replied in a monotone. His voice was chilled to the core.

Lily looked unfazed as she maintained a carefree smile on her face. “Heh heh heh! I suppose it’s a bad habit of mine! But did you really become third-in-command just because you felt like it? I’m only speaking from experience, but people with excessive pride and confidence have a tendency to lie in tense moments like this. I know you’re strong, but...yeah, I think you’re lying your butt off here.”

Perhaps some might find these sorts of remarks to be childish, but she’d pointed out more than enough specific things that would get under Edward’s skin. The red fox kept a smile plastered on his face, but a vein popped out angrily.

“Spreading lowly rumors like this only hints at your caliber and character as a

person,” Edward said.

“Oh, I don’t care about any of that,” Lily replied. “Besides, I’ve spent my life acting behind the scenes. You think I’m cheating? You think I’m being unfair? Fine by me. So I’m not a person of high moral character. All right? At least I haven’t lost. And to me, that’s all that matters.”

“I see. So, *you* were the most troublesome one all along.”

At a glance, Lloyd commanded the most power. When he paired with Chris to make a fantastic combo, their might knew no limits. While the highly ranked Lily had a few impressive skills of her own, she paled in comparison to her two comrades. And yet, she had earned the greatest ire from Edward and proven herself to be his greatest opponent. Needless to say, Lily was also sharp and witty. She might have been an enemy, but Edward highly respected her.

But at the same time, Edward found himself infuriated by his current predicament. He had no choice but to accept his disadvantageous position and reassess the situation. With his wounds still on the mend, he wouldn’t be able to escape at this rate—let alone emerge victorious.

“It seems as if I must view each and every one of you as an obstacle,” Edward grumbled begrudgingly.

If he held back now, there’d be no future for him. He took out a small, dark stone from his pocket. As though he were an actor in a play, he gave it a kiss and gently cupped it in his palm.

“Red foxes share many similarities to nonhumans,” Edward prattled. “Like your elf friend over there, we have cores and magic stones burning in our chests.”

“I’m shocked that you’d tell us the location of your stone,” Lloyd replied.

“Every humanoid has a stone in approximately the same place. Now then, what if I were to artificially redirect the energy from my magic stone into my core? What do you think would happen?”

Chris raised her head with a gasp. She was familiar with this process. The ancient research records excavated in Ist filled her mind like a flashback.

“Huh?! Chris!” Lloyd yelled, shocked that the elf had abruptly leaped forward.

“Destroy that stone! Hurry!” Chris shouted.

Lloyd and Lily responded to her call, following behind as Chris rushed ahead like the wind.

“It makes you much stronger,” Edward explained.

Chris was just a step away, right in front of the red fox. The next thing she saw was Edward shoving the stone in his mouth, like he was swallowing a pill. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, implying that he’d swallowed it, and a pale light emanated from his throat.

“I can still make it in time!” Chris shouted.

In utter desperation, she thrust her arm forward, the tip of her rapier aimed for Edward’s throat.

“Unfortunately, it’s too late for you,” Edward said.

There was no warning shot. The three Ishtaricans felt like they were floating in water before a sudden shock wave blew them all away.

“It’s a common story, isn’t it?” Edward happily said. “The main character realizes his true power and defeats the villain.” He gazed up at the sky. “Well, that’s exactly what’s happening to me!”

He looked younger, and the muscles on his arms were bulging with vigor. Even his voice sounded more energetic, and it looked like he was reborn. A flickering, crimson aura surrounded his body, and the ground beneath his feet rotted away and dissolved.

“And now, I could stand toe-to-toe with Demon Lord Arshay herself,” Edward said.

His voice was filled with glee as he whipped around the spear that he was so proud of. He didn’t even try to hide the joy dripping from his face.

“Toe-to-toe...with Demon Lord Arshay?” Lloyd murmured.

“I knew it... Edward! You’re the artificial Demon Lord that was created in Ist!” Chris shouted.

No one present even wanted to consider that possibility, but Chris's words were convincing. Lily and Lloyd grimaced.

"That man has his uses after all," Edward continued. "I was infuriated when he said he wasn't going to cross the ocean with her, and I vowed to end him. But with results like this, I have no choice but to forgive that fool."

"I knew it! Your comrades were lurking somewhere in Ishtarica!" Lloyd yelled.

"Comrades? Well, not precisely. He never acted with us. He seemed to be pursuing his own goals, after all. But of course, I know not what he actually wants to achieve. Ah, now, now. No need to be so feisty. I'm not going anywhere." Lily had taken the chance to throw a volley of daggers, but they melted away before they could ever reach Edward's arm. "In any case, I won't be sparing *you*, young lady. After I cut your limbs off, I'll give you to the exhausted Heim soldiers."

His speed was unlike anything he'd shown before. He approached Lily in a flash. The assassin couldn't hide her shock, but she still managed to throw a few more blades while leaping back.

"Oh, I'd love to decline that offer!" she replied. "The mere thought of it is so disgusting that it gives me goose bumps!"

"Lily! Retreat! I'll be the vanguard!" Lloyd shouted.

"Move. You'll be dealt with later," Edward said. He swung his spear so fast that it sounded as if the sky were being split in two.

"Gaaah! What is this power?!" Lloyd gasped.

He managed to hold back the spear's powerful blow with his greatsword. Despite not wanting to continue this clash, Lloyd found the attack to be far too overwhelming. The marshal felt his arms tremble with numbness from the impact. Furthermore, Edward's ominous, scarlet aura burned away at his flesh.

"I'm quite confident in my speed!" Chris yelled. Her golden hair soared through the air as she rushed at her foe.

"How shall I say this..." Edward muttered. "Certainly, you've put in a lot of effort into your craft, but you're like a fly...annoyingly buzzing about."

There was no display of skill, only overwhelming power. Edward didn't even turn around as he swung his spear to the side of Chris's rapier. It was an effortless movement, and nothing else.

"Eek?!" Chris cried.

The Ishtarican trio managed to cling onto consciousness, but a sharp pain ran through each of their backs as they used their weapons to support themselves.

"Indeed, I feel like the main character of this story," Edward crowed. "My awakened self had prepared this role for me. Are you all listening?"

His newfound power was simply a display of brute strength and violent force—there was no other way to describe it. If that had been one of his lazy swings, it was terrifying to think what he could do if he were actually trying.

"This scarlet is simply stunning," he murmured. "It's a color that makes me worthy of standing by my beloved's side."

The Ishtaricans wiped away the sweat and blood on their faces as they watched that fiery red aura grow brighter still. The feeling that quickly emerged within their collective consciousness caused the trio to recoil.

"'The Demon Lord Edward,' eh?" the fox said. "I must admit, there's a nice ring to that title. Indeed, I'm the one who should be standing by *her* side. I must quickly do away with that runt, then I can create a paradise just for the two of us..." The confidence in his voice quivered more and more as he kept speaking. "But I wonder... Perhaps she is obsessed with the boy? Is she really?"

Engulfed by his crimson aura and a cloud of dust, Edward seemed to be frozen in place as his eyes started to erratically dart around. Unable to center his emotions, the fox ended up vomiting a nonsensical storm of statements. He eventually plunged his spear into the ground and started staring at the palms of his hands. The red fox had been thrown into a frenzied panic.

"Replaced with a shallow imitation?! Right under my nose? Impossible!" he mumbled. "Her beauty and scent are both unmistakable! I'm sure she is the genuine article! Then why...why is she in love with that lonesome piece of gutter trash...and not me? Why does she allow that rubbish to ravish her? Permitting her body to be so..."

“What the hell’s wrong with him?” Lloyd muttered, watching on as Edward continued with his deranged monologue.

“I’m not sure, but he doesn’t exactly appear to be acting...” Chris replied.

“I-I agree!” Lily added.

The assassin wiped the sweat off her brow as she approached her comrades. However, she felt as if her body were made of a heavy lump of lead. Upon seeing her struggle to walk, Lloyd gently stepped forward to lend her his shoulder.

“I’m not that badly injured...but a good-sized rock hit me after he sent me flying earlier... Ouch!” Lily said.

She gestured towards her knee—her armor had been seriously dented. One of Majorica’s tools could easily deal with Lily’s pain, but the trio still found themselves knee-deep in a bizarre situation. While watching Edward seemingly lose his mind, Chris suddenly gasped—she’d just realized something.

“Wait a moment... Is Edward trying to follow in Arshay’s footsteps?” she wondered.

“Follow in her footsteps?! Would you mind elaborating on that, Dame Chris?” Lily replied.

“I’m not fully certain of this, but if this truly is one way of becoming a Demon Lord... Then Edward might be on the verge of going berserk. Once he does...a rampage will follow.”

“I see, that makes sense! After all, he’s losing his mind as we speak!” Lloyd replied.

“I still have a few questions though,” Lily said. “Is he actually becoming a Demon Lord? And let’s say that he is, we wouldn’t stand a chance...even if we ganged up against him.”

“Maybe he’s evolving so fast that his body can’t keep up with the changes,” Chris explained. “And if that’s really the case, we can’t afford to miss this opportunity.”

As Chris leaped ahead to lead her allies, one could feel a regal aura emanating

from her—a presence reminiscent of Silverd. Lily and Lloyd were in such disbelief that they forgot to breathe for a brief moment. While the elf commanded an air of awe and nobility, she was reliable above all else. Her actions practically screamed “royal.” Lloyd looked on at Chris and he intently listened to her words.

“Edward is still evolving,” Chris said. “As long as his mind and body are still growing, his Demon Lord metamorphosis remains incomplete.”

But was this enough to create an opening to strike? Or was it an opening act for a wave of despair? No one held the answer to these questions. However, Chris and her allies knew one thing for sure—they’d have no chance of winning if Edward completed his transformation. If they wanted to end this battle here and now, they didn’t have another second to spare.

“I still have a few healing items on hand,” Lloyd said, gazing at Edward. The marshal’s palms grew sweaty as his focus shifted to the battle about to begin. “I’ve got a tool made by Master Majorica. It’s rare, so there aren’t many of them, but I’m sure we can push it past its limits a little.”

Chris and Lily nervously looked at Lloyd. They had a feeling as to what he was about to say, and found themselves reflexively gulping.

“I’ll be your meat shield, even if I have to do it *forcefully*,” he said. “I’ll leave the rest up to you. If I can’t move after this, you must leave me behind.”

“Let’s do our best to avoid the worst,” Chris replied.

“Agreed. It is my earnest hope that the three of us will survive this battle. Let’s go!”

Lloyd swiftly assumed the vanguard and raced ahead. The marshal exchanged glances with Edward, who’d just managed to regain his lost composure. As the fox elegantly twirled his spear in the air, a crimson afterimage was left behind by his every twitchy movement.

“If you really *are* the Demon Lord, then it must be my lucky day!” Lloyd roared.

He swung with all his might, dishing out his most powerful strike yet. Giving no thought to his future, the marshal pushed every fiber of his being into this

attack—the consequences be damned. Edward inched back slightly as he blocked the blow, but he seemed undaunted. It was as if he'd purposely welcomed the attack.

"We've been blessed with the privilege of following in the first king's footsteps!" Lloyd bellowed. "Nothing would make me happier than crossing blades with you!"

"Ha ha ha!" Edward laughed. "I always found it funny that you people like to worship that man! And now you want to 'follow in his footsteps'?! The footsteps of a man who slaughtered his own family? Ha ha ha, you truly are barbarians!"

"The first king did what to his family?!"

"Oh dear, it seems as if this story hasn't passed down through the ages!"

Edward swung his spear down, blowing back Lloyd's burly body. Compared to just a few minutes ago, the fox's speed and power had grown exponentially. In response, each and every one of Lloyd's muscles was working at full capacity. While still in the air, the marshal adjusted his positioning and attempted to tackle the red fox once more.

"My crimson!" Edward shrieked.

His scarlet aura quickly shrunk, and the tip of his spear started to quiver. In fact, his hands had also started shaking, with the tremors growing more intense by the moment. The fox dropped his spear to the ground, feeling the strength in his legs evaporating at the same time. Lloyd and company didn't have a clue what was going on, but this was the opportunity they'd been looking for.

"Chris! Lily!" Lloyd shouted.

The attack went through so easily that it was shocking. Lily's dagger pierced Edward's shoulder while Chris's rapier viciously danced across his back. Be it the fresh spray of blood or the fox's crimson aura, red was thick in the air. As the ladies continued their attack, they paid no heed to the fiery aura burning away at their skin. Shortly after, Lloyd leaped in with a mighty downward swing of his greatsword.

"How annoying," Edward seethed.

A crimson shock wave burst out of his body, forcing Lloyd to use his blade as a makeshift shield. Thoroughly perplexed, the Ishtarican trio could only gaze at their enemy. The fox had suddenly fallen to his knees, his arms limply dangling by his side. He looked as though he'd completely given up. The crimson aura had lost its initial energy and flickered weakly. Edward's young appearance soon became wrinkled, and it looked as though his muscles had deflated as well.

"I'm not sure if it's due to a half-baked evolution, but it's clear that he doesn't have full control over his magical power," Chris commented. "All he can do is let it flow out of him. A wasted treasure, indeed."

Perhaps the outcome would've been different if Edward had been in prime condition. Still injured from his battle with Ein, the fox had burned through most of his stamina while fighting off the Ishtarican trio. As Chris had hypothesized, Edward's body couldn't keep up with his abrupt transformation.

"I see... It's like trying to force a sickly person to eat!" Lily said. "In that case, shall we try to wait it out and buy ourselves some time?"

Lloyd quietly shook his head. "No. There's no way he isn't aware of his current predicament."

"I'm terribly sorry, but I have some business to attend to," Edward said. "I'm afraid it's time that we drop the curtain on this act."

"See? That's how it is."

With bloodshot eyes and haggard breath, Edward weakly stood up. The thick vein popping up on his neck pulsated grotesquely, occasionally flickering with a pale glow like that of a firefly's.

"Huff... Huff..." Edward panted. "But... I'm slowly becoming accustomed to this body!"

"Huh?! He's fast!" Lloyd yelled.

Unable to reach his greatsword in time, the marshal had no choice but to block Edward's spear with his right arm. Lucky for Lloyd, he hadn't been nicked by the spear's tip, but the fox's strike had way too much strength behind it. Immediately after, the marshal felt as if he'd been hit with the force of a stone

dropped from a skyscraper.

The pain was so intense that Lloyd couldn't even manage to utter a sound. He'd never felt such a powerful impact before. As the marshal fell to his knees, Edward kicked him like a rock on the side of the road. The red fox's bulging eyes turned to Chris.

"You won't be spared either," Edward said.

He looked as though he was wielding his newfound power skillfully, but he didn't have much energy or time to spare either. His crimson aura continued to flicker feebly, and it appeared as if his power were running off of sheer pride and willpower alone. While he was indeed moving with more grace than before, he, too, was reaching his limit.

"With that man gone, you're no longer that much of a threat," Edward growled. As the sound of his steps echoed throughout the battlefield, Chris could hear haggard breathing coming from behind.

"Huh?" the elf gasped.

She froze at the sight of the spear tip that had appeared before her, the blood-covered tip sprouting from a seemingly impossible location. As drops of blood splashed on the ground, the sounds of metal being sliced rang through the air—the melancholic tones of Chris's armor falling to pieces.

"Ugh... Huff... Huff..." Chris panted. "Edward!"

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd be able to put on a brave face with a wound like that."

The elf continued to breathe haggardly while falling to the ground, but managed to shoot a nasty glare at Edward in the process. However, the fox didn't seem to care much about this slight. Instead, his wicked interest had been refocused on Lily, whom he intended to unleash his utmost wrath upon.

"You'll die in a flash," he said. "So do yourself a favor, don't think about it too hard. Just be a good little girl and say goodnight."

At the moment he tried to strike her, a greatsword suddenly appeared to stop him.

“Raaaaah!” Lloyd bellowed.

The marshal had definitely tended to his wounds with a Healbird tool, but it wasn’t enough to completely mend his shattered arm. Sweating buckets, Lloyd looked to be deathly pale. His voice trembled occasionally, attesting to the excruciating pain that he was enduring to swing his sword.

“You just don’t know when to quit...do you?” Edward said.

The red fox whirled around and attempted to skewer Lloyd in the neck, but the marshal had taken note of a critical detail—Edward’s arm now appeared to be nothing more than skin and bone. In the next moment, the fox’s aura dissipated and he used his other shriveled arm to clutch his throat. He gasped for air and his eyes widened as he proceeded to step away.

“I’m already at my limit?” Edward cried. “I won’t allow it! I won’t!” He pressed his fist against his chest, attempting to endure the pain. “*That* stone must return to the castle... And I need more magic stones to absorb more energy. Ugh... But...”

As he continued to prattle away, Lloyd and Lily assumed that he’d go after Chris’s stone for sustenance, but he was working with far less power than they’d imagined. Considering that he only had enough power left to flee, Edward would have a greater likelihood of losing to the pair if he were to attack Chris.

“Let’s resume this battle on another day,” Edward suggested.

Begrudgingly, he prepared to retreat. Seeing this as an opportunity to end this here and now, Lloyd leaped forward, but the heaviness of his body and the pain coursing through his mangled arm stopped him in his tracks. Aside from the marshal’s injuries, another factor made the idea of a pursuit foolish.

“Chris! Answer me! Chris!” Lloyd shouted.

The elf was lying face down on the ground, and though she was sat up, she didn’t reply. Lily hastily approached the elf, but soon breathed a sigh of relief.

“She’s passed out from the blood loss,” Lily said. “She’ll be fine if she’s treated soon.”

However, they stood in a war zone, not the countryside of Ishtarica. Without the proper equipment, it'd be difficult to tend to Chris's wounds. Such a setback would usually lead to death. Fortunately, the party wasn't too far away from Roundheart, where their nation's greatest vessel, the *Leviathan*, awaited them.

"I take that you're not able to fight as you'd like either. Right, Lily?" Lloyd inquired.

She paused for a moment before answering, "Oh no, I'm totally fine!"

"No need to put on a brave face here. Even you're aware that you'd be holding everyone back in your current state."

"Right back at you, marshal."

Lloyd had lost control over his right arm, but at least the last bit of his tool's power was able to dull the pain a little.

"Don't worry about me," Lloyd replied before he turned to his troops. "Someone bring me a horse!"

In response to the marshal's loud command, a knight galloped up to the trio.

"I'll borrow a horse," Lloyd said.

He took a horse from one of the cavalrymen and used his good arm to hoist up both Lily and the unconscious Chris.

"Huh? Uh? H-Hey!" Lily hastily shouted. "Sir Lloyd!"

"Head for the *Leviathan* and see to it that Chris is treated as soon as possible. The latest in magical tools and additional equipment should be on board."

"But what about you?!"

"I'll chase after Edward and join the march on Heim's royal capital!"

Located just on the outskirts of the royal capital, the battlefield had changed considerably while Lloyd and his party were squaring off with Edward. The Ishtaricans were prevailing, and the Heims left in their wake were now in pieces. Even if he couldn't pursue the fox, retreat was not an option for Lloyd.

"Sir Lloyd! I've brought a horse!" a member of the Knights Guard said several moments later.

The marshal quickly mounted his steed, enduring the pain as he climbed onto the saddle.

“In regards to the current situation,” the knight started.

“You can fill me in along the way. We ride for the royal capital!” Lloyd ordered.

“Sir Lloyd!” Lily called. “Please wait! You’re in no condition to fight! Sir Lloyd!”

“We *must* kill that man now, or he’ll be nothing but an obstacle for us in the future!” Lloyd bellowed. “I cannot show any weakness here, for the sake of Sir Ein! It is my duty to see that man’s death to the end! If I don’t chase after him, who will?!”

Lloyd took his knights and left, his reliability plain for the world to see. Even though he was covered in wounds, the marshal hadn’t lost an ounce of his gusto.

“I wish you luck,” Lily muttered under her breath.

She watched him ride away before galloping away to the *Leviathan* on her own steed, hoping that Chris’s wounds could be treated.

Chapter Three: Rogas Roundheart

While Lily rushed back to Roundheart, Ein stood on the royal capital's outskirts as he assessed the unfolding battle before him. According to the prince's observations, Heim had been reduced to less than half of its prior manpower. The enemy had not only run out of steam, but morale as well. As for the kingdom's great commander, Rogas stood at the helm, hurling himself into the heat of battle against Ishtarica. With a clear picture of this war painted within his mind's eye, it was about time for Ein to take action. *I don't see anything that seems to be spewing miasma either*, the crown prince thought.

Per Majorica's earlier hypothesis, the creation of such a horrific contraption might have been difficult. Not once had Ein seen such a carriage since he reached the royal capital's outskirts. Now that the Heims had been overwhelmingly set on the back foot, it was difficult to imagine the weapon's use at this point. *All right then*.

Back when he was a young boy, Ein could barely keep up with Chris's speed when they sparred. In each encounter, the boy desperately tried to match her pace. When he faced Lloyd, the crown prince agonized over how he should react in the face of such overwhelming might. After a few years and growing a few centimeters taller, Ein went toe to toe with the Dullahan, Ramza, and the loyal Black Knight, Marco. It was then that the crown prince had managed to awaken the true power that slumbered within him. Today, he had nothing to fear. He simply needed to display the power that he had cultivated until this moment.

"You'll be going, won't you?" Dill asked, quietly riding next to his prince. Any fool could predict what Ein was about to do.

"It's not exactly praiseworthy for a pair of opposing commanders to cross swords, is it?" Ein replied.

"Well, if you prevail, the enemy's morale is sure to hit rock bottom. I don't believe we can totally dismiss the plan you've presented." Dill's stiff words

implied that Ein had finally come across the opportunity he'd been keeping an eye out for.

"I see. I'm glad to hear it."

The time was ripe. In order to fulfill one of Ishtarica's earnest wishes, Ein made the trip here to do one thing and one thing only—defeat Rogas.

"Dill, I'll defeat Rogas, the commander in chief, and then storm the royal capital," Ein said. "I'm curious to see what has happened to Heim's king, but we should focus on the red fox, Shannon, first."

The knight gave a firm nod in response. "If we defeated the red foxes today, I'm sure that Sir Marco would be overjoyed by the news."

"I agree."

"Perhaps he's watching all of this unfold through your eyes, Sir Ein. Much like how the Dullahan lives within you following the absorption of his stone."

"Now that you mention it, I have a feeling he'll ride in to assist me."

"Absolutely. A knight of Sir Marco's caliber would probably be awaiting his call to action."

After hearing Dill's words, Ein placed a hand over his chest as he thought of Marco. The prince felt as if he could draw upon the courage of those who dwelled within him. *Then maybe I'll call out to him in my time of need.* Following his half-joking thought, Ein continued to scan the battlefield. He could see a clearing amid the chaos, and the bodies of countless soldiers lying on the ground. Not many of these fallen warriors were Ishtarican, but the knights who did fall made it clear that this battle was an atrocity. *There mustn't be another sacrifice made; it's time I settled things with my father... Actually, I suppose he's a father in name only.*

Ein had been indebted to his father as a child, but it seemed as if Heim's commander in chief held no fond feelings for his son—the Ishtarican crown prince. For his part, Ein felt exactly the same. *In fact, Ramza has felt more like a father to me.* The Dullahan's warmth had somehow remained within Ein's heart. It was only for a short time, but their training session in the spiritual realm had lingered in Ein's mind for far longer than anything he'd ever done

with Rogas. The crown prince now felt hesitant to even imagine a time when Rogas had ever been his father.

“You’re finally here, Ein,” Rogas called. He was already waiting for the crown prince. “Perhaps there’s no need for introductions once more, but I shall still do so.”

Ein didn’t expect Rogas to respect formalities here, but the crown prince listened carefully anyway.

“I am Rogas, the mighty lord of the proud House Roundheart, and the commander in chief of this prosperous kingdom’s army! I challenge you, Ishtarica’s crown prince, to a duel! Do you have the guts to face this greatsword, the blade bestowed upon me by His Majesty himself?”

Ein wasn’t sure if this duel carried any value just yet. As Dill pointed out earlier, the prince’s victory would raise the knights’ morale to new heights. However, was Ein’s personal involvement in this match truly necessary? If he were to find any value in this clash, it would be as a satisfying ending to this long-standing state of affairs.

“I accept,” Ein replied. “I—no, we have no intention of forgiving that beast.”

“I see that you never learn,” Rogas said. “You dare mock our kingdom’s religion once more.”

“Oh no, I say that precisely *because* I’ve learned of this heresy while I’ve been here.”

“Hmph, you spout nonsense.”

Rogas exerted his power, the thick veins popping up on his arms and accentuating his beefy muscles.

“For the glory of Heim, I must offer your head to His Majesty,” the Heim general said enthusiastically.

Rogas gazed at his royal capital, the cloud enveloping the city now much darker than when Ein had first arrived. The prince’s thoughts wandered to the August Estate, located in the city’s center. Ein’s heart ached looking back at the memories he made at the grand duke’s residence. *I’ll finish this feud in a flash.*

And so, the prince dismounted his horse and walked to his enemy.

“Oho? You chose to step off your horse,” Rogas commented.

“I fight better on foot,” Ein confessed. “And I must end this right away.”

“How convenient. I’m not fond of horseback battles either.”

The two walked ahead, closing the distance between each other. Not a single person dared to come between the men. Soldiers watched on from a distance, bracing themselves out of sheer nerves. For a few moments, both sides froze in place as they gazed at their respective commanders.

“For Heim!” Rogas roared.

He suddenly leaped forward to close the gap and proudly raised his sword to the heavens. This man was known as the continent’s best commander in chief. Without this famed warrior, there would be no Heim. And now, all of his rage was directed at Ein.

“When I was a child, I would never have dreamed of this day,” Ein said.

Rogas swung his blade down.

“What?!” he gasped.

The commander’s blow had been easily swept aside by a horizontal parry from Ein’s black sword. For his part, Ein’s gaze remained locked on the ground.

“But I can beat you as I am now!” Ein roared.

The prince looked up from the ground, his jade eyes piercing straight through his father. A loud clang rang out from the clash of cold steel, creating a circular shock wave around them which blew into the faces of the surrounding soldiers.

The boy was like a boulder, one so tough that it would never shatter. Rogas wasn’t budging, but his expression did. He couldn’t believe that Ein had so easily blocked his attack.

“You talk a good game for a man who couldn’t strike first!” Rogas bellowed.

“Don’t misunderstand,” Ein replied. “I didn’t fail to strike first. I *allowed* you to strike first!”

With shocking ease, the prince pushed back the greatsword and the burly

arms swinging it about.

“Try blocking my sword!” Ein roared.

According to Ramza, only the strongest were allowed to use this blade. The power of each blow was immense, its heavy strikes too much for a normal fighter to bear.

“Are you really Ein?!” Rogas shouted.

“I am!” Ein replied. “As the once-eldest son of House Roundheart, I was taught the way of the sword by your hand! Then you decided that my skills were inferior to those of my brother!”

With each successive attack, Ein swung with more and more power—the flurry of his swordsmanship reminiscent of crashing waves during a storm. Each swing was quiet and serene like a limpid stream. It was such dignified and majestic swordplay, Rogas couldn’t believe his eyes.

“What is this transformation?” he wondered.

But Ein paid no heed to Rogas’s thoughts and continued his barrage. The crown prince thought only of defeating Heim’s general, and marched forward to clear a path to the victory that he envisioned. *I can’t believe my blade can’t shatter his! That greatsword must be a fabled weapon as well!*

The black sword was sharp enough to easily slice through Sea Dragon material, but it couldn’t slice through or shatter Rogas’s blade. The greatsword could only be chipped away. This wasn’t much of a problem, and Ein hardly gave it a second thought. As long as Rogas could be defeated here, that was more than enough. Suddenly, Ein’s calm sea of strikes transformed into a hurricane that knew no serenity.

“Raaaaah!” Ein shouted.

Rogas couldn’t defend himself against the barrage, leaving his chest wide open for a full frontal assault. The black sword didn’t miss its opportunity.

“G-Gah...” Rogas grunted.

Blood spewed onto the spotless earth as the black sword drew back. The Heim general immediately pressed his hand against his chest, but the bleeding

wouldn't stop. He felt something cold rush past his body, and a shadow loomed over him.

"You bas...tard..." Rogas spat.

"Huff... Huff..." Ein panted. His haggard breathing wasn't the result of physical exertion but of mental exhaustion. "I won't say that I'm better than you or anything of the sort. But I have no intention of losing to someone who believes that a person's future rides on the skills they're born with!"

While remaining wary of the ominous presence standing over him, Rogas gritted his teeth as he tried to endure the pain coursing through his body. In comparison to the general, the boy had hardly broken a sweat and apparently had energy to spare. Rogas suddenly felt himself overcome with a torrent of mixed emotions.

"I didn't think you'd get this far... Gah!" Rogas coughed.

He spat a wad of blood onto the ground, likely due to the destruction of one of his organs. The greasy sweat pouring from his pores signaled that he was in immense pain. But despite all that, the powerful glimmer in Rogas's eyes remained.

"Know this, Ein: you speak falsehoods!" Rogas growled. "Then who else will gauge your abilities? If not those around you, do you mean to say that *you'll* determine the worth of another's talents?" He glared with overwhelming intimidation, fitting for a general. "That's nothing but overconfidence! It's beyond foolish!"

But Ein felt no despair. He responded firmly, not at all embarrassed by the thoughts he held in his heart.

"Talent is a horribly vague concept," the crown prince declared. "And so, I believe that it's wrong to base a decision on that so easily. That's all I'm saying."

For generations, the head of House Roundheart had been bestowed the title of "commander in chief." Known as a prestigious military household, the famed family had even been blessed with the status of a count. Ein knew that the Roundhearts held steadfast to their beliefs, but even so, they were something he couldn't agree with.

“Father, you should’ve considered talents that would lead to a better future as well.”

Ein didn’t resort to name-calling. He specifically called Rogas his “father” as a parting gift. The crown prince spoke politely, reminiscent of his childhood days, his cheeks twitching as he thought about the painful future that was yet to come. He pretended that he didn’t notice his fingertips trembling ever so slightly.

“Hearing you call me ‘father’ is repulsive!” Rogas shouted with vitriol. This exchange allowed him to catch his breath. “I shall take your head and bring it to His Majesty!”

“Try it if you can,” Ein replied. “The man who stands in front of you is a hero who’s slain the Sea Dragon. If you think a mere beast such as yourself stands a chance, I shall swiftly put an end to your delusions.”

The crown prince took an arrogant attitude. Upon hearing those words, Rogas bellowed and ran forward.

“Graaaaah!” he shouted.

The aura surrounding Rogas was unbelievable. Even the Ishtarican knights felt overwhelmed, bracing themselves for impact. How in the world was Rogas able to emit such a terrifying air despite being so severely wounded?

“Receive my blow!” Rogas bellowed. “Without my lauded greatsword, there would be no Heim!”

The greatsword was dragged along the ground, shaving pebbles away and carving out the dirt as it aimed for the opposing nation’s royal. Upon finally reaching Ein, the thin blade came crashing down upon the black sword. Even Rogas couldn’t have predicted what happened next.

“What?! My sword...” Rogas gasped.

It was a miracle that the greatsword had lasted this long. Crafted using a chunk of armor from Marco’s undead flesh, the black sword was a fabled blade that knew no equal within Ishtarica’s border. The exceedingly sharp blade had been forged by Mouton, resulting in a sword that was second to none. In fact, the greatsword should’ve been given a round of applause for putting up such a

fight, but it was fated to shatter. The fragments of steel danced in the air, but Rogas wasn't one to give up. He grabbed a sword that lay on the ground by his feet.

"The commander in chief shall not die! I'm still on this battlefield!" he roared. In an impressive display of might, he showed that his heart hadn't shattered—even if his blade had.

"Rogas Roundheart," Ein said.

As the words left the crown prince's lips, the two drew close. The Heim soldiers hollered with joy, assuming that Rogas had clinched the victory. But they spotted a blade sticking out from Rogas's back, causing some men to fall to their knees while others froze at a loss for words.

"This is my win," Ein said.

Rogas's arms fell limply at his sides, and what remained of his greatsword fell to the ground with a deafening clang. His breathing grew feeble, and after he leaned onto the Ishtarican royal, he slumped lifelessly to the ground, face down.

"You...vile Ishtarican...crown...prince," Rogas croaked.

As his final words left his lips and he drew his last breath, a pool of blood painted the ground below him. Ein stood there for a few seconds without uttering a single word. An inexplicable sense of pain gnawed away at his heart, but he couldn't stop there. *I've killed my own father.* The words flashed across his mind and pained his chest, but he soon gathered himself. He soon raised his sword above his head, the tip pointing to the skies.

"I, Crown Prince Ein, have defeated commander in chief Rogas!"

His victorious cry echoed throughout the battlefield.

Chapter Four: Heading for the Blackened Throne

Silence settled in the war zone as Ein cried out. The world seemingly froze for a moment before the greatest clamor of the day rang out. Some excitedly shouted, rejoicing their royal's victory while others cried at the loss of their commander in chief. Voices of delight and despair echoed throughout the area.

"Sir Ein!" Dill shouted, approaching the royal with his horse in tow.

The knight noticed his prince looking far more exhausted than he should be and quickly ran to his side. Dill hesitated for a moment, intuiting the complicated emotions that most certainly swirled within Ein.

"Sir Ein, let's go," Dill said. He grabbed his master's hand and pulled him to the horse without waiting for a response.

"H-Hey! Dill!" Ein stammered. "I can walk on my own!"

Astonished by his knight's actions, Ein allowed himself to be tugged along and pushed onto his steed. Still without a moment to catch his breath, the crown prince turned to his knight.

"That was sudden," Ein remarked.

"You haven't settled the score with the red foxes just yet," Dill replied. His words encouraged Ein's wavering heart. "Master Majorica has gone ahead, opting to storm the castle alongside a handful of knights. Now that their general is gone, Heim has lost the last of their will to fight. This is our chance to do away with them once and for all."

Long before Ein had squared off with Rogas, the war had been heavily weighted in Ishtarica's favor. With the remaining Heim soldiers abandoning their royal capital, the scales were only more in favor of Ishtarica. It was clear that Rayfon's miasma had been the major factor in their previous clash, causing most of Heim's soldiers to either lose their minds or become living corpses. The Heims of today were nothing like that. And now, Heim had only one stronghold remaining.

“We must invade the royal capital and take down their castle,” Dill said.

“Yeah, I know,” Ein replied.

He had his horse trot a few paces forward before he pointed his black sword at the royal castle. Rogas was rolled on the ground nearby, but Ein couldn't bring himself to turn back—the feelings of guilt and hatred were too strong. Another glance at his father might create a new, firm tumor in his heart.

“Let's go. This really will be our final battle!” Ein declared.

The Ishtarican forces followed closely behind, ready to invade the city.

Ein had set foot in Heim's royal capital only one time before—for a night he'd never forget. The once flourishing city had been transformed into a wretched site of tragedy—the center stage of a raging war. A carriage ride down the city's main street and through its gleaming scenery had captured the heart of a young Ein, but today...only rubble remained. The stench of blood and burning debris hit his nose.

“Your Highness! Are you all right?!” Majorica called. He approached the crown prince after learning of his arrival.

“Hey, Majorica,” Ein replied.

“Don't be all casual with me! I was worried sick, I'll have you know!”

Majorica immediately cupped Ein's face with his powerful hands, checking every part of Ein's body to ensure that he wasn't severely injured anywhere. After ensuring the crown prince's safety, Majorica let out a loud, impressive sigh.

“Did you settle things with Rogas, dear?” he asked.

“Yeah. I managed to,” Ein replied with a forced smile.

Majorica responded with an awkward nod before he remembered another tidbit. “Oh, and I've heard that the marshal is on his way here. I think he should be here shortly.”

Ein assumed that this meant that the marshal had won out against Edward.

The crown prince was relieved, but he soon realized that only Lloyd was headed this way. Majorica hadn't mentioned Chris or Lily at all.

"Where's Chris?" Ein asked. Majorica fell silent, prompting another inquiry from the royal. "Majorica! Where is she?!"

"I'm sorry," Majorica replied. "I'm afraid I don't know either. All I know is that she's not with the marshal. Perhaps she's acting separately."

The crown prince was stunned, but he was soon snapped back to his senses by a shake of his shoulder from his trusty knight.

"Sir Ein, this doesn't mean that Dame Chris has fallen!" Dill said. "If we're to find out what's become of her, we must capture the capital as soon as possible."

"Right, sorry," Ein replied. He slapped himself on the cheeks, knowing that there was no use in being so worried. He proceeded to clench his reins so hard that his nails dug into his palms. The pain helped to keep his mind off needless worrying. "Then I'll..."

Ein trailed off as he gazed at the castle district. *There aren't many of their commanders remaining.* The members of the Knight Guards were skilled enough to take command, with some of Ishtarica's elite soldiers on par with that of a Heim captain or general. Still, the more the better during times like these, and Ein knew that.

"I'll take charge of the knights in the castle district," Dill said. "Sir Ein, please head to the royal castle with Master Majorica."

"Oh my," Majorica replied. "Are you really going to entrust *me* with such an important duty?"

"I'm more suited to commanding the knights. And I think they'll have an easier time listening to my orders." Dill bowed in front of his master. "Please forgive me for stepping away from your side for a short while. I shall swiftly deal with this situation, then I'll rush to your side a few moments later."

"All right. I'll finish things up on my end before you arrive," Ein replied.

"Ha ha, that would be splendid. Then I shall create a path for you to return

once you're done."

They exchanged a smile, and Ein turned his horse. Before he galloped ahead, he remembered something very important.

"Majorica, do you have a few magic stones to spare?" the royal requested. "I'm hungry."

"Oh dear, you're quite the glutton, Your Highness," Majorica said.

Ein flashed a strained smile as Majorica whipped out a bag of stones from one of his pockets. The prince proceeded to place the stones in the palm of his hands and absorbed their powers. With his hunger sated, Ein spurred his horse ahead.

Having chosen to remain in the city, Dill was knee-deep in commanding ballista squadrons and sweeping up the remaining Heim soldiers. He soon spotted an ally approaching from beyond the castle's gates.

"Is that..." Dill murmured, turning to the gates. "Father! You're finally here!"

Commanding his men from the vanguard, Lloyd emerged with the troops following closely behind. At first, Dill waved excitedly at his father, but soon furrowed his brows upon noticing the fresh wounds that covered him. As the young knight awaited his father, a member of the Knights Guard approached him.

"Officer Dill, I have received information about House Agustos's family," the Knights Guard member reported.

"House Agustos... Ah, Grand Duke August's family, you mean," Dill replied.

"Precisely. Heim's soldiers have closed off the route to Grand Duke August's residence. We believe the Augusts are currently trapped inside, under house arrest."

"Then we should rescue them. Take a few other Knights Guard members with you, and head that way. I'll inform the marshal."

"Yes, sir!"

“I believe we can spare Lady Krone from grief... Now then, I should report back to my father.”

As Dill tried to close the gap with his approaching father, he heard voices.

“Found him! Found...him! Found! Him!”

Three figures in robes emerged from a nearby roof and dropped down. Their raspy voices made it impossible to discern whether they were men or women. Dill whirled around when he heard the creepy voices behind him, and saw the trio pounce at him with rusty swords in their hands. The mouths that peeked out from under their hoods were of a grotesque pale blue.

“Found...you! Found! Found!”

“Hah!”

Dill unsheathed his sword and easily parried the trio’s attacks, but their unusual tone coupled with their chilling words caused his hair to stand on end. Luckily, these three figures weren’t at all strong. He took care of two in a flash, cutting the cheek of one, and slicing off the legs of another.

“O-Ow! Ouch! The pain!” One of the hooded figures started to writhe in pain in an exaggerated manner, despite only being hit with a shallow wound.

“My legs! Those are my legs!” another cried. They crawled onto the ground and happily clutched their dismembered legs, stroking them dearly.

Goose bumps covered Dill’s body in response to this horrifying sight, but he refused to let his guard down as he pointed his sword at the trio.

“Found you. Found! Found!” the third cried.

Dill easily cut through the last figure, leaving the entire trio to lie lifeless on the ground. *What in the world had just happened?* Dill wondered. The knight was confused and wondered if he’d just fought actual people. He approached the figures to remove their hoods.

“Dill! Dill!” his father’s voice echoed off in the distance.

Lloyd and other members of the Knights Guard shouted at the top of their lungs, as if they were trying to warn the young knight. *Why are they panicking?* At this moment, Dill truly had no idea what was going on. He failed to notice

Glint behind him, who had already drawn his sword.

“I swore that I’d be the one to end you,” Glint said.

A spray of warm blood rushed up through Dill’s throat. As the blood hung in the air, so did the strong stench of iron.

“G...ah...” Dill gasped.

He had no idea what happened. He glanced down at the area of his body that had grown hot. A glimmer of cold steel had pierced through the middle of his toned physique, and was now dripping with his blood.

“W-Was I just skewered by...a sword?” Dill wondered aloud.

He felt his knees buckle as a kick was delivered to his back, causing him to fall to the ground with a thud. Scarlet blood soaked the stone tiles. Dill pressed his hand against the wound, but the blood wouldn’t stop flowing.

“That man’s next,” Glint spat. “I’ll plunge my sword into the man who killed my father.”

He mounted his horse and rode away as Dill was left sprawled out on the ground. The knight weakly reached out in the hope of stopping the Heim.

“W-Wait...” he murmured.

Glint nimbly chased off the Ishtarican knights that approached him and quickly fled the scene.

“Dill! Dill!” Lloyd howled. His shouting morphed into a horrified scream as he rushed to his son’s side. Nothing else mattered to the marshal now.

The stench of blood wasn’t out of place on the battlefield, but it was especially dense around the boy’s body. Lloyd felt so nauseated that the idea of sawing his own nose off entered his mind.

“Gah... Ah...” Dill struggled to breathe, trying not to choke on the fresh blood he kept coughing up.

His head lay on his father’s lap for a few moments before a familiar voice rang out.

“What’s going on?!” Bara shouted from a short way away—she’d just caught

wind of the commotion.

Once the young nurse spotted Lloyd, on his knees and surrounded by knights, her white coat fluttered behind her as she rushed over to his side. Bara rolled up her sleeves before starting her examination of Dill's wound. After removing his equipment and taking a close look at the injury, she turned to Lloyd with a grim look on her face.

"B-Bara, he'll be okay, won't he? Dill will be fine, right?" Lloyd pleaded.

Instead of answering him, she removed a glass vial from her pocket and poured its contents over the wound's entirety. She then proceeded to inject a syringe into Dill's neck. After a few moments, the knight's breathing steadied and he fell unconscious.

"That is all I can do for now," Bara said solemnly. "My actions merely prolonged his life for a few moments more. If we quickly get him aboard the *Leviathan* and back home for additional treatment, he may make it out of this alive."

More bluntly, Dill was now hanging on by a thread. Regardless of the current situation, Lloyd was relieved to know that they'd avoided the worst possible outcome. Grateful for Bara's assistance, the marshal grasped the girl's hands.

"Marshal Lloyd! Miss Bara!" a nearby Knights Guard member called out, much to Lloyd's shock. "We've found an empty carriage! Please hurry, we must immediately carry Officer Dill inside!"

"I'll accompany him as well!" Bara shouted. "Marshal Lloyd, please assist me with the transport!"

"Absolutely, thank you!" Lloyd said with tears in his eyes.

Within a few minutes, the marshal and the Knights Guard member had managed to gingerly load Dill onto the carriage. A handful of knights stood guard as the carriage clattered along the road. Keenly aware that he'd no time to dawdle, Lloyd hastily scanned the crowd for any signs of Edward.

"Sir Lloyd, I've arrived with a report," another Knights Guard member said.

"Go on," Lloyd urged.

“I’ve already informed Officer Dill of this development, but we’ve learned that Lady Krone’s remaining family members have been trapped within the August estate. We mounted a rescue attempt under the officer’s orders, but the abundance of enemy soldiers has turned this into an uphill battle.”

“Your report has been heard. Thank you.” Lloyd paused. He had another question to ask before proceeding to the August Estate. “How is Sir Ein fairing? Has he already set off for the royal castle?”

“He has, sir!”

“Then perhaps I should go to Sir Ein’s side... No, but...”

The marshal hesitated. Should anything happen at Grand Duke August’s manor, he knew that Ein would be devastated. However, Silverd was Lloyd’s master and the royal family was his north star—his duty was to protect the crown prince. He was just about to reluctantly declare that he’d be marching for the castle, but those words never left his lips.

“Marshal Lloyd!” another knight called. “Heim soldiers have gathered at Grand Duke August’s manor!”

Lloyd made up his mind. He remembered the exchange he had with Ein before the war and realized what he had to do.

“We’ll rescue the August family immediately!” he bellowed. “We’ll end this struggle in a flash!”

He’d made this agonizing decision after calculating what he could manage with a single arm. He didn’t dare say it out loud, but Lloyd knew that he’d struggle to go against even a few of his own men. The marshal was aware that he wouldn’t be much help. He thought about the best decision for Ein’s sake and finally chose to head over to the manor of Grand Duke August.

Ein and Majorica were followed by several members of the Knights Guard as they set foot into the royal castle.

“Raaaah!”

“Hmph! Hyaaah!”

The valiant roaring of the Knights Guard echoed throughout the castle as they cut down the enemy soldiers who stood in their way.

“Hiyaaaaah!” Majorica shouted, doling out some pain with his prized brass knuckles. “Come on! We’re done here!”

For the umpteenth time, they’d easily taken down the Heims lurking around them. Majorica looked over to Ein, who was swinging his sword nearby.

“Yeah, no problems here either,” Ein said coolly.

Single-handedly, he’d managed to cut down more Heims than Majorica and his knights combined. In fact, the actual number was at least double that amount. For his part, the royal didn’t even let out the slightest yawn.

“What’s going on within you, Your Highness?” Majorica asked.

“What do you mean?” Ein inquired.

“I’m talking about that power of yours. You’re way too strong!”

“It’s a bit lame if the crown prince is frail, isn’t it?”

While poorly hiding his Demon Lord transformation, Ein cast a sweeping gaze around the castle’s interior. They currently stood in a hallway that led straight to the audience room. Lavish carpets, glistening chandeliers, glittering ornaments, and copious pieces of art had combined to create a fabulous display of opulence. It wasn’t to Ein’s taste, but it was definitely appealing to Heim’s royal family. They weren’t ones to spare any expense in the arena of luxury.

“That should be the audience room,” Ein remarked. “I’m certain that Garland and his entourage will be waiting for us within.”

“Why would you think that?” Majorica asked. “Perhaps the royals already fled.”

“Hmm, well I don’t think they’d be waiting around in rooms of their own or anything like that. For some reason, the audience room just feels...right, I guess.”

“Oh? Then in other words, you’re going by intuition.”

“You’ve caught me there.”

Ein awkwardly froze in place, leading Majorica and the knights to burst out into a fit of laughter. Perhaps it was a touch careless for them to be yucking it up behind enemy lines, but this was their way of cutting through the nerves and tension. Before moving on, the party took a moment to stretch and breathe so they wouldn't feel overwhelmed going forward.

"But you saved us, Your Highness," Majorica pointed out.

"I did? How?" Ein asked.

"Well, you know your way around this castle. If none of us had a sense of direction, I'm sure we would've gotten lost. Regardless of its loathsome shape, a castle is still a castle."

"Huh?"

"What?"

A befuddled Ein stared right into Majorica's eyes. "This is the first time I've been here."

"Pardon me? Then why did you march inside so confidently?"

"W-Well, you know, I just thought we'd get to the audience room if we went straight to the back of the castle."

Once again, everyone froze in astonishment for a moment before the knights laughed harder than before.

"Ha ha ha ha! Did you hear that, Master Majorica?!" a knight asked.

"Our crown prince truly is a man of great caliber!" another added.

Majorica started laughing, a tear glistening in the corner of his eye. "Good grief, you've got no plan at all!"

"Ha ha ha," Ein chuckled. "Sorry. But I actually have another reason in mind."

He walked a few steps in front of the group, emanating an aura that shocked everyone. Had First King Jayle been here, would he have commanded his troops exactly like Ein had?

"The blood of the Ishtarican royal family is guiding the way for me," Ein said. "Beyond here is where my final enemy lies."

A few minutes later, the group reached a set of massive double doors. They didn't just look sturdy—they were etched with splendid engravings and adorned with expensive ornaments. A pair of knights walked forward to place a hand on each door.

“Your Highness,” the knights said.

They were ready to open the door at Ein's command. Majorica placed a hand on the crown prince's shoulder, and Ein took a deep breath before he gave his regal order.

“Open the doors.”



He spoke as the crown prince, the one who stood above his men. The room was extravagant, far more luxurious than the corridors and the tall ceilings that had led them here. And yet, it didn't hold a candle to Ishtarica's audience room. In the depths was a throne, and a man resembling Garland was seated, facing the ground.

The knights that stood in front of Ein gingerly walked ahead, watching out for any threat that could arise. Walking along the carpet leading to the throne, Ein and Majorica slowly followed the knights' lead.

"It reeks in here," Majorica observed. "I ran into this stench many times during my days as an adventurer."

"I want everyone to stand behind me for a moment," Ein ordered.

Though visibly frustrated, the knights knew what their prince was about to do and obediently took their places behind him.

"You look pale, Heim King," Ein said.

Garland's flesh hadn't rotted away, but his skin carried a grotesque purple tinge, and his eyes bulged out of their sockets as they darted around the room. It was hard to still refer to the king as "human." While he couldn't focus his eyes on a single object to save his life, the king had managed to bring himself to his feet. A smirk curled up his lips as he pointed directly at Ein.

"Oho?" the king said. "I don't remember inviting you over."

The man spoke more eloquently than Rayfon, but the tone of his voice occasionally sounded uncanny and bizarre.

"Yeah, I didn't want to visit you either," Ein replied.

The crown prince wasn't sure if Garland still had the mental wherewithal to comprehend what he was saying. The king might have been manipulated like Arshay had, but Ein had no means of confirming his suspicions.

"I'm looking for a few people. I've found one of them, but the other's still missing," Ein said, approaching the king. "Do you know a woman by the name of Shannon?"

Silence filled the audience room as Ein stared straight at Garland. The crown

prince heard Majorica and the knights gulp nervously behind him.

“Don’t you *dare* speak her name!” Garland shrieked with fury. He tried to take large strides towards the crown prince but was suddenly stopped.

A young girl popped out from behind the throne. “Your Majesty, I don’t mind. You don’t have to become so angry.”

“But he spoke your name without minding his manners...”

“I don’t mind. Now then, please return to your throne, Your Majesty.”

It’d been nearly a decade since Ein last saw this girl. And yet, he recognized her almost immediately as he turned to her. *She must be Shannon*, he thought. A beautiful girl, she had commanded the boys’ attention at the debut party. While she carried an angelic beauty, the bewitching air she commanded was far too mature for her age. *She seems so laid-back. Is she not vigilant?* Ein couldn’t hide his confusion and suspiciously squinted at her—he hadn’t expected to encounter her so abruptly.

“Ah! Well, if you say so, then I shall sit back down!” Garland exclaimed.

A twitchy smile danced upon his lips as he returned to his throne. The king’s demeanor had seemingly shifted to that of a friendly old man. Perhaps too friendly as he appeared to be indulging in the fleeting pleasure of nuzzling one of Shannon’s hands. Without saying another word, Shannon stood in front of the throne and stared straight into Ein’s eyes. Her irises started shimmering a bright gold, and a sharp snap rang out in everyone’s ears.

Nothing happened, but the entire room would’ve been in for a bad time if Ein hadn’t been around.

“It’s not working?” Shannon murmured.

The diary Jayle kept at the villa had mentioned something called the “Curse of Solitude.” *Did my Toxin Decomposition EX skill counteract the curse?* Ein didn’t know much when it came to curses, but he knew he wasn’t dealing with poison or a bacterial infection.

“I see,” Shannon said. “So my charm fails to work on you.”

“Charm?” Ein asked. “Don’t you mean the Curse of Solitu...”

The crown prince trailed off midsentence. If Shannon had the ability to charm others, how did it differ from the Curse of Solitude—a power that turned its victims into her toys? *She must have a reason for using this ability here. Perhaps her curse wouldn't work without the charm?*

“Aren’t you going to curse me?” Ein asked.

“Oh?” Shannon replied. “Would you like me to? I’d be more than happy to do it if that’s your wish, but I’m afraid that would make your little trip meaningless.”

“What are you saying? Were you waiting for me to arrive?”

Even now, Ein couldn’t get a grasp on her goals. There were a few moments of silence where it seemed like Shannon hesitated in her response. She gazed at Ein, her eyes twitching several times, before she pursed her lips.

“I wonder,” she finally replied feebly.

As Ein thought back to Marco’s words, she certainly must’ve been awaiting the crown prince. The tone of Shannon’s response made that point clear. *But why? I don’t believe that Shannon and I were engaged in any sort of feud.* After racking his brain for a few moments, Ein found himself even more confused—he simply couldn’t think of a reason behind it all. If the red foxes had the Ishtarican royal family in their crosshairs, they could’ve easily targeted Silverd or another royal. Why did it have to be Ein?

“If you don’t want to answer, I don’t mind,” Ein said.

His primary objective remained unshaken. Even if Shannon had waited for him with some sort of motive in mind, Ein didn’t care.

“Oh, you’re so cold,” Shannon said. “Your precious friends are standing at death’s door, and yet...”

“What are you talking about?” Ein asked.

“Oh, didn’t you know? That’s what Edward had just told me. He wasn’t able to kill them, but he said that it would only be a matter of time.”

“Who are you referring to?”

“I’m not too sure of the details myself. But if I’m correct, they were both very

close to you. One of them was a burly gentleman, while the other was a beautiful elf, I believe.”

Ein found himself thrown into a panic. He pressed his hands against his thudding heart, but his breath slowly grew haggard. He wasn’t in the best headspace, but he still managed to glare sharply at Shannon.

“I refuse to believe you,” he declared. “I’ll end you in a snap, then go to them.”

“Oh, that’ll be impossible,” Shannon replied.

“It won’t be. I just need to end you, and that’ll be that.”

“Speaking of which, may I ask a question?” Shannon inquired with great interest. “How in the world did you manage to deal with Rayfon back in Bardland?”

She’d referred to the first prince in such a casual manner, but Garland seemed to be pleased as punch. He tried to grab her hand and nuzzle it again, but Shannon gently pushed him aside.

“I was under the impression that even an Ishtarican couldn’t stand a chance against such miasma,” she continued. “That child—Edward—rushed back to me, all beaten up. I was rather surprised.”

Shannon sounded genuinely puzzled—Rayfon must’ve been one of the aces up her sleeve. The pieces were finally starting to click into place within Ein’s mind.

“You’re engaged to my younger brother, and yet you don’t know about the curious skill that I was born with?” Ein asked.

“As I’ve said before, I do,” Shannon replied. “But miasma isn’t a toxin, per se. It’s more akin to the energy that lies within magic stones.”

“Magic stones and miasma are all the same to my Toxin Decomposition EX skill.”

“Even magic stones, I see...”

Intrigued, Shannon widened her eyes just a hair. The mention of magic stones had piqued her interest to the point she couldn’t stop repeating those words

under her breath.

“I’d like to ask something as well,” Ein replied. “When Edward returned from Bardland, did he report on anything other than Rayfon’s death?”

“He filled me in on a few other things...like your use of an ancient power,” Shannon replied, referring to the Dullahan’s Phantom Hands.

“And why is your loyal Edward nowhere to be seen?”

“Well, his work left much to be desired. So I sent him off to take care of your many subordinates crawling around the capital. I’m sure he’s hot on the trail of your knights...and about to take their lives.”

She appeared to be deeply vexed by the whole affair and truly unconcerned about Edward’s well-being—he meant nothing to her. *Why did she send him away if she knew I was coming?* Shannon smiled at the obviously vigilant crown prince.

“Edward is not the one to defeat you,” she said. The audience room’s doors swung open. “*He* is the holy sword that shall cut you down.”

Without sparing a passing glance for Ein or Majorica, this man quickly took his place next to Shannon. She gently pecked this newcomer on the cheek before yielding the spotlight to him. The man unsheathed his sword while staring daggers at Ein. From the moment Shannon had kissed him, his body had been enveloped in a blinding white light.

“You toyed with our country, and you even killed my valiant father, you parricide,” Glint said. After receiving another kiss, the upstart continued to hurl insults at his brother. “I can’t believe that you came all the way here just for you. My holy power will not be the end of you alone, but the downfall of Ishtarica itself.”

The gleaming light spewed from his entire body, flowing into the blade in his hand.

“Sir Glint, please refrain from pushing yourself past your limits,” Shannon called out.

“I’m sorry, Shannon,” Glint replied. “But that, I cannot promise.”

Something must've caught her eye; she hastily reached out to clasp Glint's shoulder upon hearing his response. He hugged her tightly and whispered in her ear to pacify her—Ein couldn't make out what he said. *Is Glint acting of his own free will? How did he manage to tell her no? Forget it, now's not the time to worry about that.*

With Chris's condition weighing on his mind, Ein wasn't about to hold back either. A sextet of Phantom Hands emerged from the prince's back as he drew his blade. Right after stepping forward, Ein launched a barrage of Phantom Handed punches at his brother.

"You weren't satisfied with killing your own father, were you?" Glint asked. "You've sunken to the state of a lowly monster!"

Ein's jaw dropped—his tendrils had suddenly fizzled away into particles of light. Glint had sliced through every one of them. The younger Roundheart spoke, a mixture of extreme hate and pride in his words.

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Brother! Ein!" Glint crowed. "You just saw it for yourself! This is a glorious holy power that no Ishtarican would know of!"

A moment later, Ein felt the blinding aura that surrounded Glint. It was like he'd been left out in the sun without a bit of shade to be seen. Over time, the prince's skin started stinging as though he'd been severely sunburnt.

"Are you all..." Ein started, worried about those behind him.

"We're fine!" Majorica called back. "You're protecting us, Your Highness!"

How? Glint's aura should've reached them. Ein hadn't purified a single thing, and yet Majorica and the knights weren't writhing in pain.

"I see, so it only works against me," Ein muttered. He'd transformed into a Demon Lord, after all. "Man, I really feel like the bad guy now."

With the parricide remark still fresh on his mind, Ein mocked himself while toughing out the pain from Glint's glow. He gathered himself and faced his younger brother.

"Glint, where did you get that power?" Ein asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Glint replied. "Shannon bestowed me with a blessing,

allowing me to ascend to the status of Heavenly Knight!”

“A blessing, huh?”

No wonder. Glint’s Heavenly Knight powers must’ve been counteracting Ein’s own Demon Lord abilities. This was no longer about some glistening aura—the boy had become the crown prince’s natural enemy. *It’s been a while since I’ve heard the words “Heavenly Knight” thrown around. It’s the next rank above Holy Knight, right?* Ein couldn’t speak on the legitimacy of Shannon’s Blessing skill, but Glint’s new special advantage had become cause for concern.

“I must defeat you first, I see,” Ein muttered.

He’d never once thought of cutting down his little brother, making him hesitant to brandish his blade. However...

“It’s so infuriating to see you playing it so cool now that you know I’m a Heavenly Knight. It doesn’t matter now; I’ll deal with you exactly how I dealt with *him*,” Glint said.

“*Him?*” Ein pointed his sharp gaze at Glint. The Heim knight almost inched back in response to the overwhelming pressure. Even the man of his love and admiration, Rogas, had never looked at Glint with such fury. But instead of cowering, the boy remained at his beloved’s side while the corners of his mouth curled into a triumphant smile.

“I speak of the man who was guarding you.” Glint elucidated.

“What have you done to Dill?!” Ein roared.

“Nothing much. He’d humiliated me this one time, so I just decided I would get my revenge.” The air around Ein started to tremble, leading Majorica and the other knights to recoil in shock.

“I killed him with this Holy Sword of mine, Ein. Now, you’re all that remains,” Glint said.

Glint’s “Holy Sword” looked to be nothing more than a simple longsword at a glance, but its power was most likely tied to its wielder. While he knew nothing more of the blade, Ein could feel its glimmer gnawing away at him—like his skin was slowly being grated. However, that wasn’t the most pressing matter on his

mind.

“You...killed Dill?” Ein asked.

In a state of shock, the prince could only stare at his brother, reaching out as if he were trying to find something to steady himself on. The younger Roundheart couldn't do anything but gloat at his grieving brother.

“Ha ha ha,” he chuckled. “If this is causing you this much pain, then I'm sure your anguish soothes father. He must feel properly avenged now.”

He's lying. He must be. Ein desperately pleaded in his heart as he took another step forward. His heart thudded with dread while his body yearned for magic—he now felt absolutely famished.

“Enough. Shut your filthy mouth,” Ein said.

“What did you say?” Glint replied.

“I'm not going to waste my time fighting you. I have people to return to...and quickly.”

Ein had never once felt an ounce of murderous intent towards his brother, but he hadn't expected to feel such inexplicable rage either. The prince summoned his Phantom Hands once more and gripped his black sword. With his tendrils burlier than before and splayed out behind him, it was clear that Ein had poured even more magic into them.

“My father was right to cast you aside,” Glint spat. “You've become such a heinous beast!”

“Sir Glint! Take care not to overuse your power!” Shannon cried worriedly behind him. “While it purifies evil, only you are permitted to use that ability! If you push yourself too hard, it'll put an immense strain on your body!”

“I'll be fine. You know the legends after all. The Heavenly Knight will never struggle against the likes of a monster.”

“I-I'm aware of them! However, I've seen such power before and I know it very well! Again, I beg that you don't overexert yourself!”

“Hmm? You've seen this power before?” Glint cast a quizzical glance her way.

“I’m starting now, Glint,” Ein said. He walked forward, his aura both overwhelming Glint and stealing his attention away.

“Go ahead,” the Heavenly Knight replied. “I’ll avenge my father.”

The following clash of cold steel reverberated throughout the audience room so intensely that a few Ishtarican knights let out an audible gulp. As some of these knights had accompanied the prince while he served as the king’s proxy in Euro, they’d thought they had a solid understanding of Glint’s abilities. However, the Heavenly Knight’s power was now incomparable to that of the boy they had seen trounced by Dill. At the very least, Glint would be seen as a famed swordsman, even within Ishtarica’s borders.

“Ha ha ha! What’s going on, huh?!” Glint shouted. After several more clashes, he arched his eyebrows proudly. “Your attacks are nothing against me!”

“You seem rather proud of yourself, Glint.”

And indeed he was. He was able to parry each and every one of Ein’s attacks without even breaking a sweat.

“Of course!” Glint shouted. “Now... I can finally end you! You’ve been a thorn in my side for as long as I can remember. This has also provided me with the perfect opportunity to avenge father! I’ve never felt more refreshed in my entire life!”

Ein took a few steps back to put some distance between himself and his brother. As Majorica and the others watched on nervously, the crown prince pondered Glint’s power. *His technique isn’t all that impressive. He might win against your standard member of the Knights Guard, but he can’t hold a candle to Lloyd, Chris, Edward, or even Rogas.* If Ein’s hunch were to be true, why was Glint holding his own against him so superbly?

“Hyaaaaah! Don’t you think for a moment that I’ll let you run away!” Glint shouted.

He unleashed an overpowering blow that just grazed Ein’s cheek. *This is the one. That strike defies logic!* The crown prince proceeded to click his tongue as a stinging sensation settled into his wound. Simply being near Glint’s aura was tough enough for Ein.

“What’s wrong?” Glint bellowed. “Are you really the one who killed father?!”

His swings were impressive, but nothing outstanding. *I knew it. Glint’s strength is abnormal.* Ein wasn’t being cocky, rather, he’d learned a thing or two after his duel with Marco and evolution into a Demon Lord. It was strange to see Glint command this much power so suddenly.

“It makes no sense,” Ein muttered. “The aura around you gives off the impression that you’re a different person now.”

“Of course!” Glint shouted back. “I’m the chosen one, the Heavenly Knight who has received her blessing!”

“And I’m saying that that’s weird!”

All the while, Ein continued to endure this pesky pain while parrying Glint’s relentless strikes! Each of the Heavenly Knight’s swings came down harder and faster than the last. *But if this is all he has...* Ein could hold his own. Not only could he keep up with Glint’s speed, the prince’s current power was more than up to the task. Had the young knight fought with fantastic finesse, Ein might have had a problem—luckily, that wasn’t the case.

His movements look kind of familiar now that I think about it... This wasn’t the first time Ein had seen Glint’s silver aura before. Actually, he’d seen it quite recently. As the prince continued to dodge the young knight’s attacks, he thought back to his visit to Syth Mill and its holy grounds. Specifically, flashes of Jayle’s specter and the silvery glow that surrounded him came to mind. As this epiphany dropped upon Ein, he turned to Shannon. *She’s seen this power before.* A moment later, Glint noticed his wicked brother just standing there, staring at his beloved.

Glint roared with rage. “You bastard! Don’t you dare look at Shannon with those—”

“Have you seen this sword before?” Ein asked the girl.

“Shannon! You don’t need to lend an ear to this *creature’s* words!”

However, she’d just got a good look at the blade. Shannon hadn’t been bothered by the black sword’s presence before, but now her entire body quivered as she gasped and placed a hand over her mouth.

“Why do you have that?” she whispered. “You must be...”

“I see now,” Ein replied.

There's no doubt about it. Shannon had been referring to Jayle when she mentioned that she'd seen a similar power before. *But if that's the case, why is she pleading with Glint to take it easy? Why all the nerves? Is this a power that only the first king can wield? But wait a minute... Shannon said that Glint and Jayle were using different powers. Then why can Glint use his Heavenly Knight skill all of a sudden?* The answer was obvious: Shannon had prevented Glint from tapping into his abilities until this very moment. Perhaps the skill's use came with some nasty side effects.

“No!” Shannon screamed as she fell to her knees, hugging herself. “Sir Glint, you must shatter that sword posthaste! Please, kill the one who wields it!”

Clearly, she had some history with Jayle. The first king's diary had no information regarding it, but he'd stated that Shannon would never forgive him.

“Shannon, what happened between you and the first king?” Ein asked.

“Shut up!” Shannon shrieked.

“And why did you continue to target me?”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! I don't want to talk about the man who didn't save me!”

Her cries were akin to roars as she finally looked up to face him. Tears of blood ran down her face. She continued to tremble as Glint rushed to her aid, supporting her body.

“Shannon! What's wrong?” Glint asked.

Shannon didn't respond to her fiancé's questions, proceeding to only coldly stare at him. “I told you to kill him posthaste. Why did you rush to my side?”

“I-I was worried about you!”

“Shut up.”

She suddenly stood up and shook herself free from Glint's arms. The bloody tears continued to run as she flashed a dry smile at him.

“There’s no need for us to hold back any longer,” Shannon said. “So please, tell me. Sir Glint, will you kill that man as soon as you can, for my sake?”

“O-Of course! I will!” Glint replied earnestly.

For the first time in a while, Shannon’s voice took on a kinder tone. “Then this is farewell.”

She dramatically kissed him on the lips. Glint was surprised by the suddenness of it all, but he quickly took her in his arms. Majorica looked equal parts astonished and exasperated. Ein, however, took on a stern demeanor and ran ahead.

“Wait, Shannon!” Ein roared.

His godlike speed trumped even Chris’s swiftness, but the next moment, there was a deafening rumble as though lightning had struck. Glint had absorbed the harsh, silver light and its power into his body. *Damn it!*

Ein immediately whirled around to summon his roots in an effort to protect Majorica and the knights behind him.

“Your Highness!” Majorica shouted hastily.

“Just stand back!” Ein ordered. “Don’t you dare come out!”

The crown prince was pushed back by the shock wave, and even his roots had been blown away. The sheer impact had knocked the wind out of him, but he slowly but surely managed to take shallow breaths. A moment later, Ein turned to face Glint, who stood at the shock wave’s epicenter. The prince gritted his teeth upon taking note of Shannon’s presence next to Glint, who was now enveloped in a blinding light.

“What is this...Shannon?” Glint asked.

“There’s no need to hold back now, Sir Glint,” Shannon replied. “Please use everything available to you in order to kill that man.”

An almost lightning-like crackling sound rang out in the air. As the light died down to make way for Glint, his body started to transform. It appeared as if he were being covered in plaster as his eyes took on a silver hue. The residual magic burned his clothing away while simultaneously weaving a set of new

attire in its place. A glowing, golden etching cracked open from his skin as a pair of magnificent, diamond-like wings sprouted from his back. Glint's blade, now filled with magical energy, grew to new heights. But one of the more notable changes was his voice.

"This...is amazing," Glint murmured. His tone had been imbued with a robotic quality of sorts—lacking any kind of infection or humanity within its timbre.

"Majorica," Ein called softly to the man encased in roots. "What exactly *is* a Heavenly Knight?"

"We don't know much, as there have only been a few recorded instances of those who could use the power," Majorica replied. "But... I've heard that they initially appeared following the first king's death! The power is said to be too much for a normal person, gradually eating away at their body!"

"Noted."

If I'd known this would happen, I would've asked Lloyd and Chris more questions about Heavenly Knights. He felt bitter about this oversight on his part, but Dill's words flashed across his mind.

"Being a Heavenly Knight comes with some fairly self-destructive caveats. Perhaps you can ask my father about it."

Perhaps this was the reason that Shannon had told Glint not push himself past his limit. But as a result of the ever-changing situation, the Heavenly Knight was now treated as a disposable pawn. *Of course, she knows more about this than I do.*

Shannon must've been more familiar with First King Jayle's power than anyone else still alive. Once she saw the black sword's resemblance to Jayle's own blade, she'd made the decision to cut Glint off. *All to kill me... Treating the entire Kingdom of Heim as disposable in her quest to take my life.*

Ein fell silent and deeply exhaled. In his current form, Glint resembled an angel—his clothing, aura, and even his wings giving off a divine appearance.

"So Shannon... Did you level Magna just because you didn't want me flicking through the first king's diary?" Ein asked.

“I wonder... I haven’t the faintest clue what you’re talking about,” Shannon replied.

“Don’t play dumb.”

“But I truly don’t know. I’m not the slightest bit interested in that city. I’m sure that the children I left behind did the deed. However, it has nothing to do with me presently.”

At that moment, Ein remembered hearing that red foxes didn’t act as a unified species. His questions to her ceased, and he turned to his younger brother.

“You look like a completely different person, Glint,” Ein remarked.

After hearing Glint’s brazen claims of murdering Dill, Ein had no reason to sympathize with his younger brother. However, he couldn’t help but pity him. The young Heim no longer resembled the boy he was just mere minutes ago. There was nothing more miserable than being betrayed by the woman he loved, only to be used as a weapon. *That silver light is still stinging my skin, though.*

“I’ll stop holding back,” Ein said as the Dullahan’s black armor slowly formed around his fingers. “Before this, I’ve only ever summoned a gauntlet. At the time, I felt like I didn’t have it in me to create much more than that. You know, I might’ve unconsciously avoided summoning the rest of it because I sensed something dangerous.”

Glint pounced. With every step the prince took, a new piece of armor appeared on Ein’s body. *Ugh, I’m hungry. Damn. I should’ve loaded up on more stones before this.* He felt himself overwhelmed by hunger as he continued to use this power, but the weary Ein remained focused on his goal. He stepped away from his roots and walked to the center of the audience room.

“I gave it my all when I fought the Sea Dragon and crossed blades with Marco,” Ein said. “But this is my first time doing it as a Demon Lord.”

His gauntlet spread farther up his arm, and a dark aura enveloped his shoulder. Shannon had seen it before—the image of Ramza von Ishtarica, history’s strongest warrior, suddenly flashed across her mind. She trembled in

fear and gazed at Glint, who had seemingly lost his sense of self.

“Kill him! Hurry!” she screamed.

“Aaaah! For...Shannon!” Glint howled.

A series of void tendrils emerged from her shadow, dripping with a black substance as they merged into a gaping maw. A lithe, snakelike abomination writhed as it leaped straight at Ein.

“AAAAA!” Glint let out a bloodcurdling roar.

He ran faster than ever—Majorica and the other knights couldn’t possibly keep up with his speed. Now able to keep pace with Chris, Glint outstretched his wings and almost instantly closed the gap with his brother. He swung his sword down and sliced the carpet to shreds, completely demolishing the stone tiles beneath it. Paired with Shannon’s mysterious summoned maw, this deadly duo were faster than the wind as they approached Ein.

“Glint, this is where I go all out,” Ein said.

The dignity—no, the overwhelming aura that filled the audience room was coupled with the voice of the Demon Lord. He raised his sword, his entire body enveloped in jet-black armor. Suddenly, the void maw had been sliced into pieces, and Glint was sent flying. The Heim was still alive, but had been left in a state of utter shock.

When? When did Ein swing his sword? No one held the answer to that, and only Shannon’s trembling voice could be heard echoing about.

“The ancient Undead that even a Named will flee from...was killed in an instant...” she murmured.

Ein’s armor trembled ever so slightly as sweat appeared on his brow. He was clearly reaching his limit as well.

“Majorica, I want you to take the Knights Guard members and flee,” Ein said.

“What?! Your Highness!” Majorica protested.

“I order you as the crown prince. Leave at once!”

“But...” Majorica didn’t budge.

“Then think of my words as a royal edict.”

The Knights Guard members stood around dumbfounded. They fought to stay with their prince, but Majorica gave a begrudging reply.

“Fine. But I’ll be waiting a little ways away. I’ll send the other knights on the hunt for Chris and Dill.”

This was Majorica’s compromise. Even with an edict issued, he couldn’t leave Ein by himself. The crown prince nodded; he didn’t have time to spare right now. He wanted to send the knights off, but he couldn’t even do that at the moment. *Yeah, I can’t hold back. This power is in a whole other league.* It was more like Ein had no idea what to do with this power. He was unable to suppress the energy overflowing from his body—a surge of power that had honed his five senses to the sharpest point imaginable. He knew that if Majorica and other knights remained, they’d be caught up in the collateral damage.

Chapter Five: At the Blackened Throne

After the issuing of a royal edict, only four people remained in the audience room: Ein, Glint, Shannon, and Garland.

“With this...power...you don’t stand a chance!” Glint roared. “Let’s start this battle...again...monster!”

An enormous amount of power surged through the young Roundheart’s enhanced physique. Glint indulged in newfound feelings of omnipotence as he raised his blade to the heavens. Then, with a single flap of his wings, he’d appeared directly behind Ein. Luckily for the prince, he didn’t need to turn around and gracefully blocked Glint’s attack with his sword. Ein hadn’t budged an inch.

“I told you. I’m going all out,” Ein said.

“You!” Glint spat.

“Let’s end this, Glint.”

The audience room’s flooring started cracking and its walls gave way as they crumbled. A loud shriek rang out, as if the air itself were crying for help. Ein swung his blade and knocked Glint away. Able to take advantage of even the smallest opening, the prince used this opportunity to hold his black blade up high. As he did so, the surrounding magical energy caused the air around him to waver—bowing to a weapon darker than the night itself.

“Glint.”

Then instantly, the intense pressure let off. It was as if Ein had absorbed every ounce of it. For a fleeting moment, the audience room became tranquil and serene.

Clearly perplexed by the situation, Glint stood there at a loss for words.

“Try and receive this blow if you dare,” the Demon Lord declared. “If you feel so bold, just try to avoid this attack. But if you resign yourself to your fate, then

pray to your god!”

Glint saw the black death looming in front of him.

“Wha... Gh... Gah...?!” he cried.

He thought he defended himself perfectly, but the pressure and weight of the black blade didn’t let up. His vision was sliced in two as though the weapon cut through space itself.

“No... It can’t be happening...” Shannon gasped.

These abnormalities were crystal clear from the sidelines. The blinding power that once surrounded Glint had been shaved away—plucking his glittering wings and revealing the flesh that resided behind his ceramic skin. With every burst of light that erupted from his body, Glint felt his newfound strength leave little by little.

“I don’t believe it,” Shannon murmured. “Even with the Dullahan’s power, how could he tear through the might of a Heavenly Knight?”

Ein wasn’t done just yet. The aftereffects of his attack still lingered.

“Nghhh... Aghhh!” Glint cried. With his last bit of willpower and what remained of his wings, the knight gave a grand flap and unleashed a ray of light.

“Ugh!” Ein grunted. Even he flinched and stepped back.

Glint would pay dearly for that counterattack. “Agh... Ahhh! You!”

With his former glory almost completely gone, the Heavenly Knight had been reduced to a loathsome sight. The body he was so proud of had crumbled away, and his sorry excuse for wings no longer held that blinding glow.

“Ugh... Blegh...” Glint groaned as he coughed up blood.

Bits of his ceramic skin fell away, revealing an old, shriveled form underneath—far older than Glint ever was. But Shannon remained calm—she must’ve expected it. *Which means the caveat of using the Heavenly Knight’s power is...its user’s life force. It must eat away at their lifespan or something to that effect. Just like Dill said, it is indeed self-destructive.* The instantaneous burst of power would force even the Demon Lord Ein to use his full power, but the price to pay was much more costly than he expected. Ein could only stare as his

younger brother continued to cough up blood and fall to his knees.

“I won’t...lose...you monster!” Glint spat.

When his entire outer layer crumbled away, what would remain of this boy?

“The least...” Ein muttered to himself.

The least I can do is end this quickly. Ein gripped his sword and stepped forward. *My body feels light.* Glint wasn’t the only one who felt a surge in power—Ein did as well. When he stepped in and raised his sword, he felt nimbler than ever—overflowing with energy.

“Y-You...dropout! Failure!” Glint roared.

The crumbling knight flapped his wings again, blowing the stray feathers that fluttered about at his brother. Ein didn’t have much of a problem defending himself, but the feathers themselves proved highly effective against his Demon Lord physiology.

“Ugh...” Ein grunted.

He was in so much pain he could cry, but his thirst for victory was even greater. *I have to win.* This was how he would end this feud. That was the only thought on Ein’s mind as he sliced through his brother’s harsh winds. “You!” Glint shouted.

He flapped his wings even harder, causing the wind to practically suffocate Ein as he gasped for air. *I’m okay. It’s painful, but I won’t lose.* The crown prince stabbed the attacking pair of wings and proceeded to cut down everything in his way. He then leaped above Glint’s head.

“Fall!” the Heavenly Knight bellowed.

Glint quickly flipped himself over with his wings and sent another salvo of feathers at his brother. As each feather brushed against him, Ein could feel their holy glow trying to chip away at his life force. These mystifying powers were truly fitting for a Heavenly Knight. *Damn it!* Despite the pain and his temptation to flee, Ein braved the agonizing blows. The events of the holy grounds filled his mind’s eye, providing him courage.

“I was entrusted with this duty...” Ein said. Jayle hadn’t revealed much, but

Ein knew what he had to do. “The duty to defeat you!”

The Demon Lord raised his blade high in the air. No one expected the phenomenon that followed. The same silver snow that rained down on Bardland appeared within Heim’s audience room. The moment the feathers touched this snow, they vanished into thin air. The snowfall came much faster than a swing of the black sword, coating Glint’s glimmering wings and forming even more cracks in his ceramic skin.

“Glliiint!” Ein shouted, swinging his blade and severing his brother’s wings in the process.

While Glint’s ceramic skin was slowly starting to regenerate, he’d have no such luck with his wings. As the silver snow continued to coat his wounds, there were no signs that the knight’s wings would return anytime soon.

“Gah... Agh... You monster!” Glint roared.

He unconsciously took a step back and tried to retreat as Ein prepared to attack once more.

“I see. So you’ll be repeating history, Ishtarica’s crown prince,” Shannon said. “Or shall I call you the new Demon Lord?”

Ein froze in place. Shannon’s eyes emitted a golden glow, her voice clearly reverberating throughout the room. Both Ein and Glint were taken aback as they turned to her. Glint looked shocked by the mention of a “Demon Lord,” but he quickly focused on catching his breath.

“Repeating history? What do you mean?” Ein asked.

“Don’t rely on it,” a voice echoed within Ein’s head.

It was clearly his voice, but the unfriendly tone made it seem like not his own.

“Jayle killed his entire family,” Shannon elucidated. “Did you know that?”

“Wait...Shannon!” Glint shouted. “We’re...still...fighting!”

Shannon ignored him completely. Ein knew that he shouldn’t listen to her words—no good would come from hearing out a red fox. He knew that he had to end this battle as soon as possible but an invisible force made his body feel like a lump of lead. Had he used too much energy in his fight? Had he made him

vulnerable to her attacks?

“Surely, a Dryad such as yourself is well aware of what it means to take root,” Shannon went on. “It’s a type of curse, you see. And some were able to use it to their advantage. Elder Lich Misty was one such person. The curse she brought upon her family ultimately killed them all.”

“That’s enough,” Ein growled. He no longer wanted to hear the rest of this story.

Shannon smiled at him. “Jayle landed the final blow on Arshay. And what do you know? Ramza and Misty died along with her. So as you can see, Jayle murdered his entire family.”

Ein’s vision wavered and his heart thudded with dread. His breathing grew haggard and the emotions that swirled within him turned dark—he’d completely lost his cool.

“That’s because you—” Ein started.

“Are you saying that I’m the cause of it all?” Shannon interjected. She giggled, her eyes turning brighter still. “Arshay’s the one who killed all those people. And Jayle killed her. These facts won’t change. Ultimately, he killed the rest of his family, and you’re that murderer’s descendant. What’s more, you ended up killing Rogas with your own hands.”

“You’re the cause of it all! How dare you act so high and mighty!”

Only then did Ein notice an abnormality. Ever so slowly, his Dryad roots had sprouted around his feet and slowly started to eat away at the Dullahan’s armor. The roots soon wilted and died by his feet, but he still found it to be cause for concern.

“Don’t act tough because you managed to entice a Demon Lord once,” Ein said.

But he couldn’t deny the confusion that raged within his heart. *It’s all my fault. I did something evil.* As he kept telling himself so, his feelings of regret grew stronger. His heart started pounding even faster.

“You’re so...mentally...weak!” Glint shouted.

Still in a state of shock, Ein failed to react, allowing Glint to land a strike. The crown prince had tried to defend himself using his armor, but...

“Hah! Look at you!” Glint yelled with glee. “You’re reaching...your limits...too!”

The armor enveloping Ein’s hand shattered away. Glint’s cracking skin regenerated in a flash as he let out a triumphant cry. But a sliver of blood trickled down his chin as he gripped his blade. Ein was able to easily parry the second attack, but a worry plagued his mind. *My armor cracked away... Why? How?*

Something just felt...off. Ever since Ein had heard Shannon’s words, he couldn’t shake this odd feeling that washed over him. He felt like he was no longer in command of his own body—his five senses didn’t feel as sharp.

“Don’t rely on it.”

He felt his own words echo within his mind. *What does that even mean?* He shook his head and tried to focus, but the voice continued.

“Don’t rely on it.”

The sentence continued to reverberate within his skull as a splitting headache assaulted him.

“Stop! No! Shut up! No!” Ein cried.

He swung his sword around wildly, failing to notice that Glint was gravely injured. No other thought entered Ein’s mind as his armor cruelly crumbled away.

“Don’t rely on it.”

The crown prince still held the advantage in this battle, but he was no longer calm. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Shannon’s pupils flicker mysteriously. He intuitively avoided meeting her gaze, but even the faintest of glimmers turned his mind a muddled mess. Only that befuddling line continued to echo in his head, imploring him to not rely on *it*.

“Parricide!” Glint shouted. “You...still have...power left, I see!”

“No, Sir Glint,” Shannon replied. “I think he’s at his end.”

Two flashes of light reflected against the window.

“Please cast judgment upon the one who killed his parents,” Shannon said.

The window reflected her gaze—Ein had seen her eyes, clear as day. He squeezed his eyes shut instantly, but her golden gaze and alluring smile had been seared into his mind. His heart thumped.

“I don’t intend to lose,” Ein eked out.

He used his sword to pierce through his thigh, the pain drowning out his internal voice. He raised his head and saw Glint right in front of him. The feathers dancing in the air surrounded the Demon Lord, backing him into a corner.

“You’re finished, Ein!” Glint roared.

Something, anything! What power can I use to fight back? Ein racked his brain before settling on using his Ice Dragon skill to immobilize Glint.

“I keep telling you to stop relying on it,” his internal voice shouted at him.

He couldn’t understand what was going on as he tried to use his skill.

“Yeah, I won’t rely on it.”

Ein’s voice was layered with his own as it echoed clearly within the audience room. The moment the words left his lips, a thick vine appeared by his feet. A gaping maw lined with sharp fangs sprouted from the vine’s tip. It bared its teeth, sticky saliva dripping from its jaws as it moved in on Glint’s arm.

“Gah! Ahhhh!” the knight shrieked.

The monstrous vine shot into the air, spreading across the walls and ceiling before sinking its teeth into the Heavenly Knight’s flesh. A series of grotesque squelches rang out as the vine gnawed off his arm. With fresh blood dripping from its maw, the satisfied creature returned to Ein’s side.

“What just... Why did that appear from my feet?” Ein wondered before being blindsided by another headache. He clutched his head as he went on his knees. “Agh! Ugh!”

Glint had lost an arm, but he endured the pain—he wasn’t about to let this

opening slip by. He wasn't as agile as before, but he made his way to Ein. And just like that, he'd managed to skewer Ein through the chest.

"I won," Glint murmured.

He was certain that he'd finished Ein off, especially when the Demon Lord proceeded to slump over on the blade. Glint had just proven his superiority over his brother and managed to avenge his father in the process. Moments later, Ein's earring let off a red glimmer before the jewel by his earlobe shattered.

"What...is that stone?" Glint murmured.

"That's..." Shannon gasped. She knew what it was—a ruby of the earth, courtesy of Silverd.

"Shannon? What's...wrong?" He whirled around when he heard footsteps behind him. "You're...a stubborn m—"

Glint never got to finish his insult. Before he completed his sentence, he was sliced in two. His eyes tried to say something more, but he closed them. The moment he fell onto the floor, his body turned into sand.

"Heh heh," Shannon chuckled. A huge smile stretched across her face. "Ah ha ha! I see! First, you killed your father, and now you've killed your brother!"

"Huff... Huff... So what?" Ein panted.

"Oh? Is that all you have to say? You're just another monster now. Every last drop of humanity in your system is gone now." She stared at the wriggling maw by Ein's feet.

"Don't screw with me. You've toyed with everyone and now *you're* acting like the victim here?!"

Ein had seemingly regained some of his composure. No one was sure if he was unaware or if he simply didn't seem to care, but he refused to acknowledge the vicious vines at his feet. Instead, he shouted furiously at Shannon.

"Toyed with you?" Shannon repeated, lifelessly staring back. "Who toyed with whom first? I was treated like an object and defiled to no end! Not one...not even one of your lot came to save me!"

Though a repulsive memory, Ein remembered that horrific, cursed room in the Demon Castle. Was that room created from her memories? Was Shannon referring to that room?

“I know nothing of your past,” Ein replied. “Perhaps it was so sorrowful that you could only wish for someone to save you. But even so, I cannot allow your actions to slide. I can’t forgive you and turn the other way.”

He pointed his sword at the red fox. A look into her past might have provided an explanation for her actions, but they couldn’t be excused. Even Ein, someone who was fully aware of his naive tendencies to let others off easy, couldn’t pretend Shannon was free of sin.

“Oh, what a pitiful person you are,” Shannon said. “You killed not only your father, but your little brother too. How did it feel when you ended their lives? Was it warm? Was it relieving? Did it feel nice? Ah, won’t you tell me?”

“Enough,” Ein replied. “Let’s end this already.”

“You won’t tell me how it felt? Please, spare no detail.”

She smiled, flashing her pearly whites as she gazed at the crown prince with her puffy eyes, red from crying. The red fox approached him with graceful steps.

“Come on, tell me,” she said.

Ein pointed his blade straight at her, ready to pierce through the red fox should she step any closer. But the red fox paid no heed and clung to him. In the process, the black sword sunk deep into her body. And yet, she didn’t cry out, instead choosing to embrace Ein.

“Come on. Do tell,” Shannon said forcefully. Even Ein couldn’t predict her movements, but before he knew it, they’d locked lips. “Mm... Ah...”



The crown prince froze in utter shock, unable to process what had just occurred. He instantly pushed Shannon's chest away and leaped back.

"What the?! What'd you just do?!" Ein shouted, wiping his lips. He pierced his blade through Shannon, who was lying on the ground.

"You're at your limit, aren't you?" she asked. "I can tell. You don't have much strength left in that form...and I know that you're mentally...a mess. I know it all... I can see right through you!" She spoke clumsily while pausing, enduring the pain. "If only my Blessing...was effective. Even a Demon Lord like you would..."

"Blessing? What you've got is a curse. Your skill is nothing, it isn't even close to the greatness of blessings."

"Hee hee... No, my blessing is my love, you see... In exchange for...people loving me...I provide them with power... I can enhance one's true essence...that slumbers deep within them... Misunderstanding the nature of my powers...is but a trivial matter!"

The "Blessing" that she referred to was indeed the Curse of Solitude. As Ein continued to listen to her words, he stabbed her again and again. A warm, crimson substance gushed out, dyeing the ground she lay on.

"I wonder...why...you weren't charmed," Shannon murmured. "You're just...like those two... Misty and...Ramza..."

"I'll never be charmed by my enemy," Ein declared. "I just need to fulfill my duties."

"I see... I don't...care anymore. Nothing...matters. When I...reunited with you...I thought...I could finally kill you this time...around."

Her words gradually lost their vigor. Ein had no idea what she was talking about, but he didn't particularly care to decipher her ramblings either.

"I *hate*...this...world..." Shannon muttered.

Her voice carried a tone of melancholy—a downhearted timbre conveying that she'd simply resigned herself to her fate. Her final words left her lips and she lay lifelessly on the ground. Ein wasn't finished just yet.

“You’re next, Garland,” the crown prince growled.

“Ah? Oho... Ah ha ha! You dare say my name so casually? Insolence!” the king shouted.

Garland had remained quiet until now. While no one was sure if he had just completely lost his mind, he sounded unfazed by Shannon’s death and only laughed jovially. Ein sighed and dragged his heavy body to the throne.

“This is truly the end,” Ein muttered.

All he needed to do was stab Garland through the chest, and the war would be over...or would it?

“But first, I’m hungry.”

The strange aural phenomenon struck once again—two Eins could be heard speaking. Then a trio of the monstrous vines shot out from the prince’s back and proceeded to maul Shannon’s remains.

Only able to gasp in shock, Ein found himself unable to stop the vines from burrowing into her fresh chest wound. After wriggling inside around for a moment, they began to crunch on her magic stone. A horrifying orchestra of mastication reached the prince’s ears almost immediately. Seemingly satisfied with the stone they’d devoured, the vines slowly slithered back into Ein and vanished as though they’d never sprouted to begin with.

The crown prince still couldn’t wrap his mind around what had just happened. He gazed down at his palms without uttering another word. It felt like he no longer had control of his own body. He couldn’t summon vines at will and he couldn’t make them disappear when he wished. In exchange, every time the vines consumed something, he felt his body brimming with energy. He stood before Garland’s carefree smile, and Shannon’s words filled the crown prince’s mind.

““One’s true essence,’ huh,” Ein muttered.

That was one of Shannon’s final words, in reference to the effects of her curse. *But she mentioned that she was providing it in exchange for people loving her.* In other words, the Curse of Solitude wouldn’t activate unless one viewed Shannon favorably. This implied that at some point in time, Demon Lord Arshay

had favored Shannon, but that feeling surely hadn't been present from the start. *Which means... She did seem puzzled that I wasn't charmed by her.* Charms and curses were different powers. The pieces started to click within Ein's mind.

"So my charm fails to work on you."

"Would you like me to? I'd be more than happy to do it if that's your wish, but I'm afraid that would make your little trip meaningless."

Ein could only point to his Toxin Decomposition EX skill to explain his resistance to her charm. If charms worked similarly to toxins, it would explain Ein's immunity. *Then why is my body...* Then how odd this was. He held no favorable feelings towards Shannon, much less felt charmed by her. *No, I get it now.*

There was another reason for his body's current abnormalities. Ein shook his head and pierced Garland's body with his sword. There was no hesitation in his swing.

"A... Aghhhhhhhh!" Garland screamed in agony.

The king shriveled up as his soul seemingly escaped his body. He lay on the ground with a wide smile on his face, reeking of rotten flesh. The vines returned to consume him and disappeared afterwards. This was the end. Ein was victorious. Oh, how happy he could've been if this truly ended it all.

"Even I think I'm stupid," Ein said, mocking himself. "It's probably because I'm too naive... If I'd known this would happen, I would've accepted Krone's reward before I left"

He felt no joy in this victory, only bothered by whatever was wriggling within his body. Ein walked on, sluggishly shambling out of the audience room.

"Your Highness! Is it all over?!" Majorica cried.

He'd been waiting for the crown prince in the depths of the corridor that led to the audience room. Upon noticing Ein's emergence, Majorica hastily rushed to his side.

“I’m back,” Ein replied.

“Oh dear... I expected as much, but you seem tired,” Majorica noted.

“Tired... Yeah. I think I am.”

There was something else plaguing Ein’s mind, but he wasn’t eager to point it out. Knowing he sounded a touch cold and indifferent, he changed topics.

“Sorry, but could you run around and tell everyone that the war is over?” Ein requested. “And I want you to order the Ishtarican forces to retreat to Roundheart.”

“Are you telling me to leave you behind?” Majorica asked. “I’m sorry, but as I said earlier, I can’t do that.”

“Ah ha ha... I’ll slowly make my way back, so don’t worry. As you can see, I’m exhausted. And I know that Warren’s subordinates are lurking around nearby, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Ein was lying through his teeth, of course. *I’m sorry for lying*. But Majorica was being unusually obedient and believed his prince. From his point of view, there was no need for Ein to lie here, and thus he discounted that possibility.

“All right then,” Majorica said. “I humbly accept your request, Your Highness!”

And so, Ein had Majorica leave by himself. The crown prince dreaded the future that was to come and had everyone flee before matters became worse.

“I have to go too,” Ein said.

He walked forward as though some mysterious force were dragging him in. There was one last place he wanted to visit within Heim’s royal capital.

Ein quietly and covertly walked ahead to his destination. Even though he hadn’t been in the city for roughly a decade, he still knew his way around it quite well. Proud of his memory, he finally opened the gates of his goal—the residence of Grand Duke August. He set foot onto the estate once more—the very place where his wheels of fate had started to turn.

“Pardon my intrusion...” Ein said. “Whoa, has there been a fight here or

something? It's a mess."

Much to Ein's astonishment, the main hall had been destroyed, stripping it of its prized glimmering appearance. But he was delighted to find the path leading to the garden in pristine condition. He elegantly walked along, his heart thudding with dread. House August was a memorable palace for Ein, but it was now enveloped in a kind of serenity due to the manor's vacation. Still, he remembered the luxurious parties that it had once held and the lavish appearance that it was capable of—his debut had been one such occasion. Back then, countless guests had bustled around in the most glamorous attire.

"This is where I met Krone, and I accidentally ended up proposing to both her and my mother..." Ein murmured. "From there, I returned to Roundheart and met Chris."

He reminisced about the past as he strolled through the beautiful garden. A few minutes later, he'd arrived at his chosen resting place.

"It's been a while."

He gently touched a nearby blue fire rose and swiftly transformed it into a star crystal. Ein was trying to relive his past, but doing it alone proved to be a lonely endeavor. He was annoyed by how quickly his heart pounded, praying that he'd only have to endure it for a few moments more.

"I'm a little tired."

Overcome with exhaustion, he sat in a nearby seat out on the terrace. He'd once enjoyed a private tea party with Krone and his mother here.

"Shannon, you might think that you lost, but this is probably a tie." The moment Ein sat down, numerous roots sprouted around his feet. "I never liked you, and I could never imagine liking you in the future. Your charm didn't work on me, but I gave you an opening at the very end."

His feelings hadn't changed, but Ein had definitely felt that something was off about his body. In other words, he'd been affected by her curse, despite not ever liking her. Then what happened? As Ein had mentioned, it was because he'd allowed the slightest of openings, no doubt due to his naivety.

"I didn't think I'd be affected simply by sympathizing with you."

Ein did feel something towards Shannon—sympathy. While he wasn't sure of the details, it was clear that she had a dark, traumatic past. Feeling the slightest bit of sympathy for her had somehow made him susceptible to the curse. It was the only practical conclusion he could come to. Ever since Ein had killed Glint, his body had acted on its own. It was practically a miracle that the crown prince managed to make it to the terrace, but he'd already lost control of his body.

"I never *did* get to ask why both the first king and I were her targets... But it's too late for that now, I guess."

He was eager to switch topics as he continued to mumble to himself.

"You know, I'm starting to feel like you shouldn't have held on to that reward, Krone. In fact, if you'd kissed me right then and there, I would've been amazed. I might've even had enough strength to end this silly feud and return back to Kingsland in a few days." He maintained a lighthearted tone. "I admit that I was being shy and timid too. Do you know that I have a hard time holding back when I feel your touch or catch your scent on the wind? I wish you understood that. Truth be told, mother's kiss was also a bit much. And that ritual thing I did with Chris before I left for the Demon Castle too. I can still feel her—ugh. What am I even saying? Now's not the time for that, is it?"

The thudding in his heart grew louder. He tried to get lost in his happy memories, but his body forced him to notice the horrid feeling. The roots running along the ground had breached the August Estate's gates and were now trying to develop the entire city. They were growing abnormally fast. Perhaps the roots were out there somewhere, trying to absorb anything they could find. Ironically, Ein felt more satisfied and fulfilled than ever. He had already lost control of his body completely.

"What else have I missed? Ah, despite everything, I think I'm indebted to Aunt Katima too. Even if I've been the one watching her back more often than not. But, I'll let that slide."

Just then, he noticed several star crystals fall to the ground. The blue fire roses naturally transformed into priceless jewels and rolled across the ground. No longer in control of his absorption skill, he continued to draw in power from everything that surrounded him.

“Yeah, everyone’s taken great care of me. Especially grandfather. Yeah, I do feel bad for making him worry so much about me all the time.” He kept a gentle smile plastered on his face. “I don’t think I’ve got much time left.”

He could’ve slit his own throat, and regretted not doing it sooner, but he still had something he could do. He had a precious skill that he’d received from a certain loyal knight.

“I feel like I can use it now.”

He focused and thought of the three special people in his heart. As he concentrated, he felt magical energy being sapped from his body.

“Gotta clean up my own mess. Jeez, I really grew up to be a good kid.”

He no longer had the energy left to stand.

“I thought that the red fox was the final boss. And if my theory was right, I expected Glint to get in my way. Wait, isn’t ‘final boss’ video game slang? I’m surprised I still remember terms from my past life. That’s awesome.”

He gripped the star crystal that he had made and smiled gently.

“Since Arshay was called the Nightmare of Envy, I want a cool nickname too. Something that sounds vicious.”

He thought of the name rather quickly. It was a pleasant surprise. When Ein had struggled with his monsterification, Majorica had mentioned a certain species that now filled the crown prince’s head. All he had to do now was copy the format of Arshay’s nickname.

“World Tree of Gluttony.”

How does that sound? Not too bad, if I may say so myself. Moments after he chuckled to himself, he felt like he was losing himself entirely.

“I’m leaving the rest to you three.”

He’d reached his limit. Three orbs of light appeared in front of him, flickering sorrowfully. The lights shot out, aiming for the royal capital and Roundheart. *I’m sure it’ll all be okay now.* Ein fully believed that he could entrust everything to the trio, and finally, his eyelids too heavy to keep open, he closed his eyes.

“I’m so hungry...”

These were Ein’s final words as his consciousness finally faded. His body became enveloped in a tree which grew at an astonishing rate. It dwarfed the August estate, and grew farther out than the half-destroyed royal castle. There was no sign that its growth would stop anytime soon.

Ein von Ishtarica

[Job] World Tree of Gluttony

[Stamina] 9999 + α

[Magical Power] 9999 + α

[Attack] – + α

[Defense] – + α

[Agility] – + α

[Skills] World Tree of Gluttony, Poisonous Charm, Curse of Solitude

Chapter Six: The Three Heroes

“Hmm? What was that rumble just now?” Lloyd wondered aloud.

He was walking through the district that many of Heim’s nobles had called home. Still wary of the missing Edward, the marshal was accompanied by members of the Knights Guard. Their ranks included a pair they’d rescued along the way.

“Marshal Gracier,” a boy said, walking behind the Ishtarican. The boy’s name was Riel August—Krone’s younger brother.

“Stop that, Riel!” Harley harshly scolded the boy. The lord of House August, he was the other family member who’d been rescued. “They’re in the middle of work. You mustn’t speak to them so casually. I told you so before, didn’t I?!”

“Ha ha ha!” Lloyd laughed. “I don’t mind at all. Now then, what’s on your mind, Master Riel?”

“May I ask about my mother and grandfather?” Riel inquired.

“Riel!” Harley scolded again.

“Master Harley, there’s no need for you to scold the boy,” Lloyd assured him. “I already mentioned this when we stormed your home, but they both live in Ishtarica. Your grandfather is quite renowned for his superb experience with trade.”

Riel’s question might have been a touch careless, but Lloyd sympathized with the boy and treated the child warmly. Harley breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the marshal’s calm tones.

“May I ask why you never asked about Lady Krone?” the marshal inquired.

“I don’t think I need to worry about my older sister,” Riel replied.

Lloyd fell silent, along with the other knights. After a few moments, they all burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha ha!” Lloyd guffawed.

The knights followed suit.

“Heh heh... Her family knows her best, it seems, sir,” a knight chuckled.

“Indeed,” Lloyd agreed brightly. “I suppose there *is* no need for you to worry about her.”

The jovial atmosphere soon faded when one of the Knights Guard members spotted the royal capital in the middle of a metamorphosis. The knight’s smile faded away as his focus was taken away by the shifting castle.

“Marshal Lloyd!” the knight cried. “The royal castle is crumbling away!”

Slowly but surely, the castle was falling to the ground. Naturally, Lloyd’s worries shifted immediately to his prince’s safety.

“Take the Augusts to safety!” he ordered. “I shall head to Sir Ein’s—”

Lloyd was determined to save the crown prince, even if it meant sacrificing his own life. While there were still surely enemies lurking about, it was a good time to start acting. As the marshal turned on his heels, a familiar voice echoed in the air.

“I won’t let you go. It’s fated for you barbarians to fall here as well. And even if you try to return to the ship, *her* trump card is still present.”

“E-Edward!” Lloyd shouted.

The red fox was enveloped in the same dark, flickering, crimson aura he’d displayed in their previous clash. He had seemingly regained control of himself.

“But we didn’t plan for the curtain to fall on that stage...” Edward muttered. “I must go there and see what exactly happened.”

He had no reason to hold back. His spear wavered quietly in front of him as Lloyd expelled a sharp breath. This was the worst situation he could find himself in. The marshal was ready to bury his head in his hands, but resignation wasn’t an option.

“Sir Lloyd, I ask that you and everyone else flee,” Harley said. He stepped forward, his legs trembling. “This is something that the Heim nobility must take responsibility for.”

“Ah ha... How moving!” Edward said joyfully. “What a perfect performance.”

The red fox chuckled as he saw Harley’s trembling legs. Even Riel, who looked fearful in the face of death, only served to enhance Edward’s excitement. But the red fox wasn’t satisfied—he wanted more.

“This isn’t enough, you see,” Edward said.

The red fox vanished from sight. A moment later, he reappeared, his spear piercing the throat of one of the Knights Guard members.

“M-Marshal...Lloyd...” the knight coughed, his eyes growing wide and bulging with shock. A spray of blood emerged from his neck, and the poor soul died there on the spot.

Impossible! He’s stronger than the last time we fought! Lloyd thought. Unfortunately, he hadn’t the slightest moment to fully comprehend this scene—Edward was already staring daggers at him. The red fox’s current appearance was a far cry from his previously sorry state.

“You’re neeext!” Edward roared.

Like a demented pretzel, the fox twisted his body and kicked Lloyd right in the bad arm. At the same time, Edward rammed the butt of his spear into the marshal’s stomach, sending him flying.

“You bastard!” a knight shouted.

“We must protect Marshal Gracier at all costs!” another added.

“Gah... N-No!” Lloyd ordered. “You...you must shield the Augusts...”

As he staggered to his feet, Lloyd managed to keep his men from entering the fray.

“I am Lloyd Gracier! I offer up my flesh and my steel in service of Ishtarica and its glory! Just slay me if you dare, you mongrel!”

In sharp contrast to this show of bravado, Lloyd could barely keep himself standing. A combination of throbbing pain and immense exhaustion had made his footing unsteady. At this point, he’d practically drawn his final line in the sand.

“That’s precisely what pisses me off, you inferior creature!” Edward bellowed. “You’ve lost an arm, an eye, and you’re covered in wounds! And yet, you dare to believe you can still prevail against me?! Such persistence is so infuriating!”

The sounds of Edward kicking the ground and whipping through the air were almost indistinguishable. Lloyd suddenly heard a frenzied breathing next to his ear, and the fox’s spear came flying right at his face.

“Don’t underestimate meee!” the red fox shrieked.

Edward was certain that he could lop Lloyd’s head off here and now. After that, all he’d have to do was quickly mop up the knights and the Augusts. That would be the end of it. Unfortunately, Edward’s predictions ended up being woefully inaccurate.

“Y-You still can fight back?!” Edward gasped.

A metallic clang rang out as Lloyd’s new blade clashed with the fox’s spear. Needless to say, the marshal’s reflexes were nothing short of astonishing. He’d managed to defend himself against the blow while flashing a triumphant grin.

“Ugh... I’m not going down here!” Lloyd shouted.

Despite his bravado, the marshal wasn’t able to absorb the full brunt of Edward’s attack and was blown back. After taking on another pair of heavy blows, Lloyd found himself on the verge of reaching his limit.

“Marshal Lloyd!”

“M-Marshal!”

The knights’ worried cries reached his ears, but he no longer had the strength to acknowledge them. But just then...

“Huh? What...is that?” Edward murmured.

He stayed his blade and turned to face the nobles district—something sprouting from the Grand Duke’s manor loomed large over the city.

“That’s...a massive tree,” the red fox said.

Lloyd’s eyes darted from Edward to the tree. For the next few minutes, the pair stood in a state of stunned silence. The stillness continued until the fox

howled in a fit of delightful laughter.

“Ah ha ha ha! We won!” the red fox crowed. “This must mean that your crown prince has fallen to *her* hands!”

“Don’t be foolish!” Lloyd barked.

“Foolish? How so? My claims aren’t anything out of the ordinary, are they? I mean, *she* ensnared the likes of Demon Lord Arshay. A nonhuman crown prince should be easy pickings.”

The fox’s reasoning was convincing. As the thought settled in, Lloyd felt his strength evaporate and despair fill his mind.

“Did you finally break?” Edward asked. “Hee hee. *That’s* the expression that I’ve been waiting for!”

With an ominous grin on his face, the fox slowly stepped forward to end his opponent once and for all. On his knees and his will to fight now gone, Lloyd took a deep breath as he closed his heavy eyelids. *Sir Ein...* His body trembled in frustration as his thoughts carried him home and to his prince—there was nothing more he could do. There was no feeling of accomplishment to be had, but this was the end of the road for the marshal. All he could do now was silently wait for the fox’s spear to pierce his body.

Suddenly, he heard Edward’s voice ring out from a completely different location. “Are you giving up?”

His clear and powerful timbre carried hints of an elderly kindness—the sort of warmth that made one want to cling onto him.

“I am,” Lloyd confessed. “My body will no longer move.”

Not a sound reached his ears. Whether it was the castle crumbling or the battle cries of his knights, it all faded away into the distance. He’d been left in an atmosphere of absolute silence.

“I see. Then you’ve failed your duty as a loyal retainer. At the moment you give up, your master finds himself a step closer to death,” Edward replied.

“Ha ha ha... You’ve hit a sore spot,” Lloyd replied.

“Instead of confirming a single detail for yourself, you chose to blindly believe

your enemy's every word. That's a recipe for despair. Truly, this is a level of folly that knows no equal. But if you can regret your actions while claiming that I've 'hit a sore spot,' I suppose your loyalty isn't dead just yet."

Lloyd found himself tempted to cling onto his enemy. The fox's soothing voice accompanied a shocking level of benevolence that somehow comforted the marshal's soul. Lloyd continued to stare at the ground while listening intently to Edward's words. Oddly, the marshal had received the encouragement to fight one last time.

"Why don't I leave you with a final piece of advice? One from a man many years your senior?" Edward said. "As long as you still breathe, cling to your enemy. Even if your limbs are shredded, bite down on them and don't let go; lean on them. If you can help your master live for even a second longer, it'll only attest to your loyalty."

"You're right," Lloyd agreed. "I'm relieved to hear such advice before I die."

But as the last syllable left Lloyd's mouth, a loud metallic clang rang throughout the city. In the moments that followed, a series of rattles and clinking heralded the approach of a living suit of armor. At first, Lloyd assumed the armor was another enemy, but it quickly stood before him—as if to protect the marshal, his knights, and the Augusts.

"Do you know what the Land of Eternity is like?" the armor asked kindly.

"No," Lloyd replied. "But I imagine it's a realm of regret, pain, and sorrow."

"You seem to misunderstand. Why don't I show you the truth?"

Edward couldn't hide his astonishment upon hearing that voice. "No... Why are you... Why are you here?!" He unconsciously stepped back, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"The Land of Eternity is overflowing with warmth," the armor explained. "My time drifting around it was blissful, but it was also my demise. I once believed that it would be my resting place upon the completion of my centuries-long mission."

"Don't screw with me! I didn't call for you! You're not worthy to share the stage with me!"

The loyal knight ignored Edward's cries and continued, "And yet, you wished for me. After the conclusion of such a long-held duty, I was blessed with a new task. Truly, there's no greater joy nor honor."

Long, deep veins appeared throughout his body. The reddish black vessels pulsed as they stretched throughout his metallic form, his armor trembling with renewed energy.

"And to heed that call is my show of loyalty!" the armor bellowed. "My path of chivalry!"

The armor punched the empty air and the surrounding scenery shattered like glass. A large sword appeared in front of him, and he gripped his trusty weapon and outstretched his arm.

"I shall offer my aged body!" the armor declared proudly. "Until my fingertips crumble, my entire body shall become an honorable blade for your use!"

"Marshal Lloyd! Use our shoulders!" a knight offered.

"Hurry!" another added.

Lloyd, supported by the shoulders of the Knights Guard members, raised his head to look at the man who stood in front. The marshal had accompanied Ein to the Demon Castle before, but he hadn't yet glimpsed the loyal suit of armor. Despite that, Lloyd immediately recognized this stalwart knight.

"You must be..." Lloyd gasped, finally able to see his savior clearly.

This was his first meeting with the Living Armor, but Lloyd could easily name him. *Th-This man's name is...*

"I am Marco, the Vice Captain of the Black Knights. I've arrived by the order of my master."

The Living Armor took a step forward, and Edward took a step back.

"What a strange power you possess," Marco said with a hint of delight. "But I find it would be gauche to fathom it at the present moment. I suppose I shall temporarily indulge in the absolute joy of displaying my loyalty."

His valiant strides brimmed with energy, forcing even the enhanced Edward to retreat pathetically. Marco gripped his large sword and placed it in front of

him as he made his declaration. The veins coursing through his metallic body glowed the darkest of crimson as he spoke loudly and majestically.

“You vile beast that dares to wish ill upon my master!” Marco roared. “Vanish like the mist! The blade of the royal family shall pass judgment on you!”

“Marco... No, you armored bastard!” Edward murmured. “You armored bastard!”

He turned his spear sideways and blocked Marco’s attack, but the stone tiles shattered beneath his feet as he sank deeper into the ground. The fox’s grin from mere moments ago had vanished, leaving a ghastly, sweat-covered face in its place.

“Why are you here?!” Edward shouted. “Why?!”

“What knight ignores his master’s call?” Marco replied. “My body is bursting with energy, for I finally get to defeat a foul beast!”

Complete domination—there was no other way to describe this clash. The speed and power with which Marco swung his blade completely surpassed anything Edward could’ve done—the fox was outclassed in every way. The Demon Castle’s knight was simply that powerful. Lloyd could only blink in shock as Marco’s might completely exceeded his wildest dreams.

“Are you Sir Marco, the knight that Sir Ein claimed to meet in the Demon Castle?!” Lloyd asked.

“This isn’t the time for idle chatter!” Marco replied. “You have people you must protect, do you not? Head to the port city immediately!”

“B-But Sir Ein is...”

“Leave him in our hands. You must flee at once! Retreat with your allies to the port city!”

Is he referring to the knights? Lloyd wondered.

“I also told the flashy gentleman to leave everything to us and flee!” Marco added.

There was no doubt in Lloyd’s mind that the armor was referring to Majorica. Relieved to hear that his old friend was safe, the marshal stood up and turned

to his knights.

“Don’t let this opportunity slip through our fingers!” he yelled. “We’ll retreat to Roundheart!”

“Yes, sir!” the knights replied.

“Your wish is our command!”

“Augusts! Follow me!” Lloyd added.

With Roundheart set as their destination, the marshal and his party had decided to leave the royal capital to Marco. As they ran off with the Augusts, each knight left the Living Armor with a deep bow of gratitude.

“I can only find more things to be grateful about,” Marco said. “I’ve been given the opportunity to end the feud between us as well. Hmm? What’s wrong, beast? Your pompous attitude has vanished.”

“And who’s to blame for that?!” Edward screamed. “You armored bastard!”

“You still choose to cry. You only seem like a toddler to me.”

“Shut up. Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up already! Shut up!”

The self-proclaimed Demon Lord unleashed a wild flurry of blows, each strike taking advantage of his enhanced physique’s full power. In fact, Edward’s face looked less foxy and more demonic as he continued his attempts to skewer Marco. The Living Armor, however, received these attacks calmly.

“Do you not recall?” Marco asked. “You could barely stand in front of us without that vixen by your side. Surely, you should remember why.”

“Silence!” Edward shrieked. “A loser like you has no right to act so proud!”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. I didn’t lose to you lot. I’ve lost to one person, and one person only—Sir Ein.”

Marco changed his stance. His swordsmanship far exceeded that of any human, and he parried Edward’s spear as though he were swatting a fly.

“Think back,” Marco said. “We’ve faced off many times in the past, and not once have you won. You may have done your best to find new power, but you still don’t stand a chance against me, much less the Demon Lord!”

Edward staggered, his spear parried so easily.

“Siiiilence!” Edward shouted.

His final moments came almost instantly. It was simply the harsh reality of their difference in power. Marco raised his sword in the air and swung down—Edward didn’t even notice when he’d been sliced. His chest had been gouged out. Fresh blood gushed out like a geyser.

“Gah... Agh...” Edward gasped.

“You’re faced with the sword of the royal family,” Marco said. “A beast has no chance against it.”

“Gh... Agh... You’re nothing but a defect... You lack even the tears of a being...” All Edward could do was insult the suit of armor.

“Oh, but this body isn’t all that bad. It’s a blessing that I can’t cry—I won’t need to act so pathetic in front of my dear master,” Marco retorted. “Ah, but perhaps it’s a touch unfortunate that I don’t get to cry *for* my master.”

He rested his massive sword on his shoulder, ready to end the bestial pawn that had plagued Heim.

Back on the Leviathan, Lily looked rather grim as she listened to a status update.

“Dame Christina has managed to hang on to her life. She’ll awaken in a few hours, I’m sure,” one of the physicians said, their expression still dark.

“However, I cannot say the same for Officer Dill. We can keep him alive for a few more days, but...”

“But what about after that?” Lily asked.

“Once we return to Ishtarica, we can ask the guild to put out a call for those adept with healing magic. But currently, I can make no guarantees.”

“So you’re telling me to pray?”

The physician nodded. An absent-minded Lily sank back in her chair, thanking the physician as she faced the ground. Empathizing with her feelings, the

physician quietly left. Lily was left to her own devices as tears welled up in her eyes, her frustration all too apparent.

“This is war,” she mumbled to herself. “I knew that we all have to make sacrifices, but it doesn’t mean that I can just take this news apathetically.”

It was then that she noticed the noise coming from outside of the room.

“Is there an emergency going on?”

The people on board were indeed working hastily, and they didn’t sound merry either. Lily gritted her teeth at the pain as she forced her body to stand up, and she made her way out to the corridor. She quickly walked down and headed for the control room.

“What’s going on?!” she asked sharply.

“Thank goodness!” one of the people inside said. “I was just about to call for you!”

“What’s going on? Tell me immediately!”

“We’re not quite sure! We believe that a colossal monster has suddenly appeared in the ocean. It seems to be trying to intimidate us from its current faraway position!”

“A colossal monster?”

She approached a window, violently opened it, and jumped out onto the streamlined deck of the ship.

“Did you contact the *Princess Olivia* and the other warships?” she asked a nearby Knights Guard member. The ocean breeze brushed against her body.

“All warships are at the ready,” the knight reported. “The moment it appears, we’ll be prepared to attack.”

However, the ships couldn’t reach the monster—it was lying in wait under the ocean’s surface. As Lily was trying to think of a plan, an earsplitting cry snapped her from her train of thought.

“AAAAA!”

The monster suddenly emerged from the sea, as if it were mocking Lily and

her comrades. The beast sprayed a blast of seawater high into the air. At the same time, its maw yawned wide as it tried to intimidate the Ishtarican's with its giant body. With its long, thick limbs fully outstretched, the beast narrowed its gaze upon the *Leviathan*.

"A-A Kraken?" Lily gasped. "B-But that size..."

Her jaw dropped at the abnormally abominable size of the Kraken. Its thick, grotesque tentacles were long enough to envelop even the *Leviathan*. In fact, its head alone was big enough to dwarf anything Lily had ever seen before. The Kraken's presence was overwhelming, striking fear into the hearts of many.

"The *Leviathan* can take on a Sea Dragon, and we've even got the *Princess Olivia* here," Lily murmured. "But it's so big..."

She knew that this would be no easy battle; the Kraken had somehow managed to even outclass the size of the terrifying Sea Dragons that had attacked Magna. At the very least, this Kraken was twice as large as a single ruler of the sea, and twice as horrifying.

"Lady Lily!" a knight cried. "We must deal with it quickly, or our allies fighting on land will..."

"I know!" Lily roared back. "I'm thinking right now!"

Due to their near-endless stamina, colossal monsters were notoriously difficult to deal with. If one were to consider their vigor and vitality, these sturdy beasts could tank an entire barrage of attacks. Lily racked her brain to think of a plan when she heard a set of footsteps approaching.

"A cigar, huh? I'll take one, thanks."

A man appeared out of the blue, without any sort of warning at all. He took a cigar from the pocket of a perplexed Knights Guard member and snapped his fingers to light it. A burning aroma wafted from his fingertips; he'd used friction to light the cigar. The man was stunningly beautiful, possessing a feminine quality to his appearance—the silver hair that fluttered behind him glimmered like a strand of diamonds.



“Wh-Who are...” Lily started. While bearing the pain coursing through her body, she tried to remove a dagger from one of her pockets.

But before she could even move a muscle, the man calmly vanished and reappeared behind Lily. He moved faster than she could blink and gently pushed down on her hand, preventing her from moving. The words that left his lips were completely unexpected.

“It’s the weakness of assassins,” he said. “When you feel even the slightest bit of unease in your body, your movements grow incredibly sluggish, like a child’s. I suppose it proves honing only one trait will do you no good.”

The man, unbothered by the current situation, had the gall to provide a piece of logical advice. Cold sweat ran down Lily’s back as the man glanced at her and stepped forward.

“Sorry about this,” he said. “I made my own assessment of the situation on my way here, but I hear your marshal is hurrying back here as we speak. Leave this octopus and the evil hanging over this city to *us*. I suggest you prepare to head home, back to your country.”

“A-As I said, who are you?!” Lily shouted back.

“I’m the Captain of the Black Knights, and the father of the king that you all revere.”

“Pardon?”

Neither Lily nor the knights could make heads or tails of the statement, but the mysterious man proudly walked towards the Kraken.

“Go on, now. Why don’t you be good little Ishtaricans and listen to your ancestors?” another voice rang out.

Everyone turned around to discover a beautiful woman standing behind them. Her dark hair flowed behind her as she flashed a blinding, dazzling smile. She was dressed in a robe the same color as her hair, and it was difficult to find men who weren’t charmed by her curves. But who in the world was she? Lily and the knights tried to ask, but...

“I just want you all to quietly wait here,” the bewitching lady said.

Suddenly, everyone was locked in place. It wasn't that they felt too sluggish to move; it was as though their legs were glued to the ground. Their brains were telling them not to raise their feet.

Upon confirming that Lily and her comrades were frozen in place, the lady walked forward to approach the man.

"How is it going?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" the mysterious man called Ramza replied.

"You know what I'm talking about. We don't have much time right now, do we?"

"It's very out of character for you, Misty. Sure, a Sea Dragon of that size may have been a small nuisance, but that right there? That's just an octopus." Ramza shook his head. "I've got nothing to report. It's all over."

Misty gazed up at the sky and noticed that a cloud had been sliced. "You should've told me that to begin with."

The Kraken was cleanly split in two, with each side falling right into the ocean. Lily and the knight couldn't believe their eyes—the colossal beast had just been slain.

"Hey," Ramza said gruffly to the astonished Lily.

"Y-Yes?!" Lily yelped.

"Leave the rest to us. We'll jump off the ship and take care of the rest."

"Take care of the rest'?! How? H-Hey!"

The two newcomers didn't wait for Lily's response, choosing to jump off the deck and into the sea. They vanished in an instant, but they didn't appear to have drowned.

Roundheart's streets were littered with what remained of Heim's once proud army. Some of these soldiers were still willing to put up a good fight, their hearts filled with love and devotion for their kingdom—determined to fight until their last breath. Now commanded by a single general, this small army chased after the Ishtaricans who were retreating to their ships.

The Heims tried to flood into the city, but the general riding at the vanguard was brought to an abrupt stop.

“Sorry, but you won’t be getting through here,” Ramza said. “Whenever it comes to close combat, I’ve never lost. Even to Arshay.”

A mountain of corpses were piled high by him—they were all Heims that had been sent ahead on horseback. Ramza was seated beside this hill of flesh, his beautiful body wrapped in jet-black armor. He raised his mighty blade to the sky.

“I’m from the honorable Kingdom of Heim—” the general started.

“Oh, no need for you to name yourself,” Ramza interjected. “If you’d like to fight, draw your sword. But if you do so, do so with resolve. I’ll take that act as my cue and strike you down.”

“Such insolence! How dare you interrupt my introduction!”

“Don’t get too angry. The lot of you are wholly imps. It makes no difference if I’m up against one or one million of you mongrels. You’ll all meet the same fate.”

Ramza insulted the entirety of the Heim army and stood languidly. He glared sharply at the Heim soldiers—they knew they faced a powerful foe, but these soldiers had all decided to fight until the very end. The general spearheaded the movement and unsheathed his sword before anyone else.

“Huh...?” he gasped.

At the very moment steel was flashed, Ramza suddenly appeared behind the general. Without hesitation, the Dullahan cleaved the Heim in twain.

“Pay close attention,” Ramza said. “I’m the King of Swords... I know no equal.”

The remaining soldiers felt as if more and more weight were thrust upon their shoulders with every word that left Ramza’s lips. They could feel their hearts drop out of sheer panic. Sweat dripped from their pores as their arms and legs quietly trembled. Ramza opened his mouth once more.

“Pay close attention. I permit no one to stand in front of me.”

Was it pure instinct? Even soldiers who’d received Shannon’s “Blessing” had

started to quiver with fear. As they made a hasty attempt to draw their blades, Ramza raised his sword to the heavens before bringing it down once more.

“What you see before you is the world’s strongest swordsman. Joyfully cry out without restraint, and use that to pay your fare as you cross the River Styx.”

A powerful swing that could obliterate even a Sea Dragon rained down upon Heim’s massive army. A pillar of light fell upon the cloudy skies that loomed over Roundheart. Truly, it was a blow that went beyond anything a human could ever wish to do. One could devote their entire life to the sword and never hope to approach the sheer might on display. Even with centuries of technological advancements on Ishtarica’s side, facing Ramza would be the epitome of folly.

Misty gazed in the direction of the still-growing World Tree of Gluttony. It bore its roots deep within the royal capital, its vines entangling anything in its path. At the same time, it emitted a sweet, savory aroma mixed with bitter undertones. All who caught a whiff of it had their mouths watering.

“Hurry! Retreat to our warships!” Lloyd roared.

“Uh, marshal?” Majorica shouted back. “I know we just reunited, but these Heims are totally in the way!”

This pair rode at the vanguard of Ishtarica’s forces as they fled the royal capital. Spurring their horses like madmen, they had rounded up every surviving knight they could find. Unfortunately, the Heims weren’t about to let them leave so easily. They’d managed to block the Ishtaricans’ escape route.

“I must protect those children, must I not?” Misty murmured.

She produced a lavish staff out of nowhere and gently waved it in front of her. A powerful gust of wind blew out from where she was standing, causing the Heims to notice her presence.

“Who is she?” one asked.

“Heh heh. Finders keepers!” another cackled with glee.

Like a pack of hyenas, the Heims turned to Misty, but she seemed completely

undaunted. It looked like she was used to attracting gawking men.

“Who is she?” Lloyd asked. He stormed ahead with his retreat as he spotted Misty, and urged his horse to gallop faster. “Hurry! We should rescue her!”

“Ah, that child must be the marshal,” Misty said. “Why don’t I lend him a helping hand?”

Clouds of dust were kicked up throughout the battlefield; however, her surroundings remained tranquil. She acted with grace and elegance as though she were in the midst of a tea ceremony. But vulgar men were everywhere; enticed by Misty’s voluptuous body, the Heims made their disgusting lust apparent.

“Come on! Her body’s mine!” one shouted.

But their lustful desires would never be fulfilled. As they raised their burly arms in the air, they lost feeling in them before they were able to move another finger. Their fingertips had turned into sand, the tiny, silky granules glittering like glass as their fingers crumbled away. The sand reached their elbows, and then their shoulders, slowly creeping upwards to swallow their entire body.

“Huh?! B-Back off! Step away!” a Heim cried.

“I won’t step near you. I’m not interested in you in the slightest,” Misty retorted.

These soldiers’ final moments were difficult to describe. Their trembling bodies had been completely turned to sand before being blown away by the wind—vanishing forever, never to be seen again. The sight of these fluttering sands had left an immense impact. In fact, it almost looked like freshly fallen snow as it reflected the sunlight.

“Hurry, now. Go on,” Misty urged.

Lloyd had no idea if she was friend or foe, but he nodded immediately.

“Make haste,” he ordered. “We’ll run to our ships.”

“M-Marshal Lloyd?! Are you sure about this?!” a knight asked.

“I don’t know. I truly don’t, but that lady gave off an air of benevolence, reminiscent of my late mother.”

The Knights Guard members knew they were being rude, but they wondered if the war had gotten to Lloyd's head. Perhaps the marshal had lost his mind? However, he maintained a stern and firm demeanor.

With the Augusts in tow, the Ishtaricans rushed through Roundheart and onto their boats. Along the way, Lloyd had only spared a passing glance at the King of Swords and the stack of corpses at his feet.

Despite almost dying mere moments ago, Lloyd dug his spurs into his steed as they rushed forward. Regardless, the loyal marshal was about to reach his limit. However, he had no time to rest, opting to take large strides towards the *Leviathan's* control room.

"Marshal Lloyd has just returned," he reported.

He first spotted Lily, who was pensively standing by the window with a hand over her chin. She hastily looked up and saw him upon hearing his words.

"Marshal Lloyd! You're safe! I'm so glad..." Lily said.

"I'm only safe because I'd been spared," Lloyd replied. "Now then, I'd like to ask what's been going on here. I met a bewitching lady on the way back, but I wonder... Just who *is* that furiously fighting knight over there?" He pointed in the direction of Roundheart.

"Honestly? We're not quite sure either."

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure how to explain, but I'll do my best and briefly bring you up to speed."

Lily spoke of the massive Kraken that had appeared and what had occurred after.

"The silver-haired man sliced the Kraken in two then leaped into the city," she said. "It would be an understatement to say that I'm confused."

"Got it. I take it that this is beyond our understanding," Lloyd replied.

Lily flashed a wry smile. "And uh, the red fox..."

“Master Majorica has told me that she was defeated.”

“Does that mean we’ve won?!”

Lily and the rest of those on board let out cheers of joy upon hearing that their fated enemy had been defeated. But then why wasn’t the most important person present?

“Where is Sir Ein?” Lily asked, her voice turning stiff.

Lloyd looked grim as he faced the ground, perhaps on the verge of tears. The other knights also looked down.

“I don’t know,” the marshal finally confessed. “All I’ve heard is that he’s still alive. I know of nothing else.”

“Marshal Lloyd!” Lily cried.

She approached the marshal, placed her hands on his shoulders, and started to shake him back and forth. Her actions were insolent if one were to consider their respective ranks, but no one could blame her.

“Oh dear, you look terrifying,” Misty said. She appeared and entered the room as if it were her own. “I know you have quite a few things you’re worried about, but aren’t you injured? Let’s simmer down for a moment.”

Her words were like a drug—they seeped into everyone’s brains, and those who heard her felt compelled to listen to her request.

“D-Don’t touch me so suddenly!” Lily stammered. “Who are you, anyway?!”

“I am Misty. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ah, thank you. The pleasure is all mine—no, that’s not the point!”

The introduction didn’t help to ease Lily’s suspicions, but Misty looked completely unbothered. She turned to the ship’s crew.

“I’ve received an order from your crown prince,” Misty said. “Once the knights and the crew are ready to depart, you *must* leave Heim immediately. Retreat to Kingsland as fast as you can. Go on, heed my order.”

“Most certainly!” a crew member replied.

“Your wish is my command,” another answered.

She then turned back to Lloyd. It was certainly odd that the crew members were acting so obediently.

“What are you ordering them around for?!” Lily demanded. “Sir Ein isn’t back yet! And you’ve got no right to command us! Marshal Lloyd, why do you remain silent?! Even if Sir Ein gave Master Majorica his orders, there’s no reason for us to leave our *crown prince* behind!”

It was unusual for Lily to be this stern and sharp with her words.

“Ein has turned into something that you have no hope of possibly handling,” Misty explained. “Which is why we’re trying to keep you away from Heim’s royal capital.”

“H-Huh?!” Lily yelped. “What do you mean by that?!”

“And as Marco has told your marshal, Ein is still alive.”

With that reassurance, Lily’s thorny tone changed. “But I still cannot understand what’s going on. We’re not so naive as to trust the words of a person we’ve never seen before.”

Lily furrowed her brows, her vigilance still apparent. Lloyd, on the other hand, remained calm. While everyone was shocked to see the crew following this mysterious woman’s orders, he was recalling an old memory—the Sea Dragon debacle.

“That day, when Sir Ein tried to leave the castle, he restrained the knights and me,” Lloyd murmured. “Your spell is a lot gentler than the one I experienced back then, but I feel a similar kind of power from your voice.”

“Hee hee,” Misty chuckled.

“I feel like I’ve seen you in a divination book.”

“Then I can get straight to the point. Would you kindly lend me a quiet room for us to converse?”

“Lily,” Lloyd said, turning to the assassin. “Let’s switch places. It seems this woman will provide us with a few explanations.”

“Not you too, marshal!” Lily cried. “Ugh... I won’t take any responsibility for this!”

Lily frowned and took large strides as she guided the pair out of the control room. After she saw that the *Leviathan* had set sail, she noticed someone missing.

“Is that silver-haired person not with you?” Lily asked innocently. “He stated that he’d come with us, but if we’re sailing away, then...”

“Don’t worry,” Misty replied kindly. “He said that he’d swim over or catch up on fishback.”

Lily and Lloyd couldn’t hide their shock, but they immediately gathered themselves and led Misty to another room.

“Marshal Lloyd, I’m happily surprised to see that you’ve returned,” Lily said. “Didn’t you run into Edward during your retreat?”

“I did,” Lloyd replied.

“Huh?! I-I’m so glad that you’re back and safe and sound!”

“I told you that my life has been spared, didn’t I?”

And so, the marshal told his tale of what had exactly occurred on the battlefield. He spoke of how he’d stood at death’s door, and of his savior, who had allowed him to live and see another day.

Chapter Seven: The Undesirable End to the War

It was almost dinnertime—Kingsland’s busiest hour as many were out and about. With only an urgent message sent ahead of it, the *Leviathan* finally made its return to the capital. Many Ishtaricans and members of the castle’s staff had arrived to welcome the troops’ triumphant return. It deeply pained Lloyd to see the hope that glistened within the citizens’ eyes. In contrast to the clear sunset, the knights looked dreary and dismal.

“Come on! Make way! We’ve got an injured person here! We’ll talk later!” Lily shouted.

As demonstrated by Ein’s departure, the *Leviathan* was too large to dock at Kingsland’s port. The assassin hastily stepped off the dinghy and created a path to quickly transport the injured into a carriage. Chris and Dill were the most gravely wounded and had the greatest influence among their people. Lily shielded the injured from view, hoping to prevent any widespread panic. Meanwhile, the citizens rejoiced at Lloyd’s return.

“Marshal! Welcome home!”

“Huh, seems like our heroes have made it home to— Marshal?! Your eye!”

The initially joking citizens couldn’t hide their confusion, but Lloyd flashed a dazzling smile as he took Misty and quickly boarded a carriage. The Elder Lich stared at the pair of still-unconscious knights.

“The child with golden hair will awake soon,” Misty remarked.

This was excellent news, but to Lloyd, his son’s well-being was equally important.

“What about Dill...my child?” the marshal inquired worriedly.

“I suppose it all depends on his vitality and will to live,” Misty replied. “That’s really all that I can say.”

Lloyd had prepared for the worst, but he was relieved to hear that there was

still a sliver of hope. That was all that mattered.

“Marshal Lloyd, our castle is equipped with top-of-the-line, cutting-edge technology!” Lily encouraged him. “I’m sure that we can save him!”

“Sorry, you’re right. I trust you,” Lloyd said, receiving her courage.

The marshal slapped his cheeks so hard that he left behind handprints, filling his eyes with newfound energy.

“We must report back to His Majesty first,” he declared.

An inexplicable air hung over the castle. It was eerily quiet, but every now and then, the staff’s angered roaring could be heard echoing throughout the halls. If White Night Castle were to be personified, it would best be described as someone having a very bad day. The carriages rushed forth to the castle’s entrance, the injured being quickly moved from the lead vehicle and carried inside.

“Hurry!” Lily ordered the knights who came out to greet her. “And be careful with them!”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Most certainly!”

The castle’s knights and servants had been left to tend to the injured. Additionally, they were given strict orders to treat Chris and Dill with extreme care. Lloyd and Misty stepped off the carriage next, proceeding to take a moment to gaze at the castle in front of them. The petite Martha approached the marshal.

“Darling...” she said.

“Yeah,” Lloyd replied.

The anxiety that gripped her husband had been all too apparent, not to mention that she’d managed to catch a glimpse of Dill being carried away. The maid pursed her lips worriedly and saw that her husband was different from before—he’d lost an eye. She immediately pulled her husband in for a tight embrace, and for a short while, her body quivered ever so slightly.

“His Majesty is waiting for you,” she said. “Make haste.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lloyd replied. “Why don’t you go to Dill’s side? I’m sorry, I can’t be with him right now.”

What exactly went through Martha’s mind at this moment? What condition had she believed her son to be in? She gasped in response to her husband’s words and left his side.

“I also must do what I must,” Lloyd muttered.

As he proceeded deeper within the castle, he realized that it’d been a while since he walked across the plush carpets. With Lily and Misty in tow, he reached the audience room quickly. He hadn’t been told of Silverd’s location, but the marshal was certain that the king would be awaiting him in this room.

“I’ve returned, Your Majesty.” Lloyd’s voice boomed in front of the double doors.

He could feel the presence of someone inside, but no reply came. He knocked on the doors several times before placing his hands on the knobs. The wooden doors creaked as they opened to reveal those waiting inside. Silverd was seated on his throne, his overwhelming aura apparent as he gazed down. Lalalua and Krone stood a short distance away while Katima was on the opposite end.

“Come forth,” Silverd commanded.

Lloyd obediently did so and took the lead, approaching his master.

“I must ask you,” Silverd said.

“Sire,” Lloyd replied.

“You understand what I’m getting at, don’t you? I’m referring to the crown prince. Why is Ein not here with you?!” The sorrowful king unleashed his powerful aura as he finally raised his head. “Y-Your eye...”

Lalalua and Krone couldn’t hide their grief upon hearing those words, choosing to place their hands over their mouths. It was clear that the marshal had gone through his fair share of suffering. Lloyd took gallant strides and took a knee before his king, bracing him for the words to come.

“Your Majesty, my eye is but a trivial matter. I would like to report on Sir Ein

first,” the marshal started.

“I refuse to hear it!” Silverd cried. “I don’t want to hear a thing!”

The king, despite having just posed his question moments before, now changed his tune. He seemed pained by Lloyd’s injuries, but cowered from the idea of hearing what happened to his grandson. He refused to meet the marshal’s gaze. Lalalua and Krone looked stricken with grief. Amid the misery that permeated the audience room, Misty opened her mouth.

“Descendants of my child’s bloodline must never act in such a way,” she said.

Everyone gasped as their attention was ensnared by Misty. She had been outside of the audience room and now stepped inside. Every time her staff struck the ground, a shock wave of mysterious power shot out.

“Now then. Ye of my child’s bloodline, raise your head and heed my words,” she said.

Silverd felt compelled to do so—he was being *ordered* by a mysterious force. The king obeyed the command and he saw a woman enveloped in a black robe.

“Who...” the king murmured.

Silverd wasn’t the only one perplexed by this newcomer. Both Lalalua and Krone were confused by the being in front of them. On the other hand, Katima recognized her instantly.

“Mrow?! Wh-Why is the Elder Lich in front of us?!” the first princess yelped.

The first princess’s utter shock somehow rippled throughout the audience room. Given that she’d meticulously combed through Wilfried Wernstein’s books, Katima could recognize the Elder Lich all too easily. Looking as if she’d walked right off the page, Misty commanded an inexplicable force—one that compelled those around her to obey. But more than anything else, the lavish staff she held was the most convincing proof of her identity.

“The Elder Lich?!” Silverd cried. “Wait, then that means...” When Misty had referred to her “child,” she was implying one man only.

“I shall tell you of Crown Prince Ein’s current condition,” Misty said. “I’ve already informed your marshal and the girl called ‘Lily,’ but I’ll share what I

know with you all as well.”



“S-So Ein *didn't* fall in the battle?!” Silverd asked, a sliver of hope in his voice.

“He’s still alive,” the Elder Lich replied. “He’s taken root in Heim’s royal capital, absorbing every creature around him. He continues to grow and live there.”

“I don’t understand. What does that mean?”

“He has defeated the red fox chieftain, but he showed the slightest opening at the last moment. As a result, he has lost to the Demon Lord power swirling within him.”

Everyone gasped at Misty’s mention of the Demon Lord...except for Silverd, who’d just started to piece it all together. “Like Demon Lord Arshay.”

“Precisely. Ein used what was left of his power to activate the skill he’d received from Marco’s stone, Follower. His final act summoned Ramza, Marco, and myself.”

While Silverd grew more and more confused by the minute, the queen broke her silence to steer the conversation along.

“I apologize for butting in, Your Majesty and...” Lalalua trailed off.

“My name is Misty.”

“Forgive me. Lady Misty, I apologize, but neither Krone nor I can keep up with this conversation. Although, it does appear that Katima is aware of your identity.”

Needless to say, Katima had no one to turn to, leaving her to draw her own conclusions.

“I’d like to inquire about the Demon Lord, and your mention of ‘descendants of your child’s bloodline,’” Lalalua said.

The queen stood resolutely in place, as though she were the embodiment of the power wielded by Ishtarican royals of the fairer sex. Krone took her place beside the queen and nodded quietly, looking just as stern.

“Current king, may I enlighten them on the situation?” Misty inquired.

Silverd nodded immediately. At this point, the king had no chance of

upholding the secret he and Ein had vowed to keep.

Lalalua and Krone were slack-jawed as Misty explained all that had happened. Lloyd and Lily already knew of the truth—the specifics of Ein’s Demon Lord transformation, and the true identities of Ishtarica’s first royal family. In reality, Demon Lord Arshay was Ishtarica’s founder. “I am Misty von Ishtarica. My husband is Ramza von Ishtarica, and we had a son named Jayle.”

Every word that left the Elder Lich’s mouth stunned those who heard it. Now that she knew the truth for herself, Lalalua remained silent as her glare occasionally wandered over to Silverd—the king who’d sought to keep this all under wraps until this very moment. She managed to stop herself from tearing into her husband, empathizing with his thought process and how he felt about such an earth-shattering revelation.

“Only when I heard her story did I finally understand why Sir Ein went through such a drastic growth spurt,” Lloyd added. “His swordsmanship and power were unlike anything he’d ever displayed until that point. If this Demon Lord transformation is the cause, I may be able to finally wrap my mind around it.”

“Agreed,” Lily said. “I feel exactly the same. And for your edification, knowledge of Sir Ein’s metamorphosis hasn’t changed how either of us feel about him. Demon Lord or not, we still greatly respect him.”

Relieved to hear those words, Lalalua said, “Lady Misty, that makes you King Jayle’s mother, correct?”

She sighed, stood straight up, and walked ahead. The queen finally stepped in front of her husband, approached Misty, and knelt.

“Please excuse my insolence up until this moment,” Lalalua apologized.

It was practically unheard of for the current queen to bow her head towards anyone. But if the subject of rank entered the conversation, it was only natural for the queen to pay homage to the previous king or his wife. In fact, there wasn’t an Ishtarican out there who would’ve refused to bow before the mother of their beloved first king.

“Your Majesty,” Lalalua said. “I believe you should lower your head as well.”

“Hmm? I-Indeed. You’re right,” Silverd agreed.

Once Lalalua bowed, Katima and Krone followed suit as they stood near the throne.

“Don’t worry about it,” Misty replied. “It’ll be a problem if you’re far *too* rude, but I won’t demand you lower your heads before me. In any case, are you sure you can so easily believe my words?”

“I have no room nor reason to doubt you,” Silverd replied. “Everything you’ve said lines up with the crown prince’s reporting, and I dearly trust him. However, that is not all. I have testimony from the elven chief of Syth Mill and I know that a tombstone within the Demon Castle is engraved with the names of the first king’s parents: Queen Misty and King Ramza.”

The royals had already concluded their investigation into Jayle’s lineage. Ein and Silverd had heard it all from the elf chief herself. There was no need to further confirm Misty’s identity.

“Why don’t we get to the meat of the issue?” Misty suggested. “I came here for no other reason than to discuss Ein’s current condition.”

“Can Ein’s rampage be stopped?!” Silverd asked.

“Indeed, I *can* stop his rampage.”

Lalalua and Katima lowered their heads, offering their gratitude. Only Krone kept her head held up high as she stared intently at the Elder Lich. The young advisor said not a word, but her eyes bore holes into Misty.

It was only then that Lloyd realized a royal was missing and he quickly turned to his king. “Your Majesty, where is Princess Olivia?”

“She fell ill in the afternoon and has been in bed,” Silverd replied. “According to Martha, she suddenly fainted and hasn’t woken up since then.”

“M-My deepest condolences... Perhaps the stress has gotten to her.”

“Probably taking root,” Misty chimed in casually. The phrase was a bad omen, referring to the ability possessed by Dryads such as Ein and Olivia. To them, this was a matter of life or death.

“Taking root... You mean with Sir Rogas?!” Lloyd gasped.

“Oh no, nothing like that.”

“I haven’t the faintest clue either! Then who?”

“The characteristics of Dryads are a mystery, so we don’t know much about them,” Misty confessed. “But my guess is Ein. He must’ve been nursed on her breast milk when he was a toddler, and she took root in him unconsciously.”

This statement was incredibly convincing. Olivia had recently kissed Ein’s cheek as he went off to fight on the battlefield, and she had always showered her son with love. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility for her to have unconsciously taken root in him. In fact, he’d been born using the Dryad’s special ability. Olivia was likely affected by Ein’s rampage.

“Which means Olivia will be in danger for as long as Ein’s rampage continues,” Silverd concluded.

“That’s what I believe,” Misty replied. “If we’re able to stop Ein, her condition should stabilize as well.”

There it was again—something just felt off. Krone couldn’t help but feel as if Misty wasn’t entirely telling the truth.

“Lloyd, contact Ist immediately!” Silverd ordered. “We must call Oz!”

“Your Majesty?!” Lloyd yelped. “Why is Professor Oz in Ist? He was injured in the same attack that Sir Warren fell victim to. Isn’t he still being treated?”

“No. He sprang to his feet yesterday and immediately left for Ist, claiming that he had business to tend to!”

“What an incredible man... Always reliable, that one. I feel bad for bringing him back to Kingsland so quickly, but Sir Ein is in danger. We must call upon the professor’s expertise as soon as we can.”

Krone, upon receiving Lalalua’s permission, finally spoke. “Lady Misty, I ask that you stay in our castle for a while.”

“And you are?” Misty asked.

“I apologize for my belated introduction. My name is Krone, and I serve as the crown prince’s advisor.”

“Do you, now?” The Elder Lich sized up the advisor.

It might have sounded a touch rude, but Misty's gaze made it seem like she was carefully determining the quality of a product. Krone remained composed and undaunted in the face of such intimidation. She had no idea why she was on the receiving end of such a testing glare, but she endured it all for her beloved while trying to figure out the truth hidden behind Misty's words.

Krone was walking around the castle at night. Her lone, quiet footsteps didn't at all show the panic that ate away at her heart.

"Oh, Ein..." she murmured.

What could she do now? How could she bring him back to normal? Krone hadn't the faintest clue. Misty had mentioned that she was here precisely to offer her aid, but Krone simply couldn't trust the Elder Lich so easily. The advisor couldn't give an exact reason behind her distrust, but she just had a feeling that Misty was purposefully hiding something.

"She'd chosen her words carefully."

No one else seemed bothered by it, but it just didn't sit right with Krone. Was she allowed to frankly address her worries or not? As she agonized over a decision, she passed by Warren's room.

"Ah," a voice said from behind. Misty had just stepped out of the chancellor's room. "Good evening, Miss Krone."

Following her friendly greeting, Ramza also emerged from the room. Krone had no idea when Ramza had arrived, but Lloyd had stated that the Dullahan would swim over. Perhaps he'd truly swam across the sea.

"What's wrong, Mist— Ah, I see now," Ramza said.

"Can you wait here, dear?" Misty replied. "I'd like to have a little chat with her."

Krone was puzzled. What did the two need to talk about? The advisor took a deep breath before she turned around.

"He's my husband," Misty explained.

"I'm well aware," Krone replied. "He's the Dullahan. His name is—"

“Ramza,” the Dullahan finished for her.

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Krone Agustos.”

After the brief introduction, Ramza leaned against the wall while Misty approached Krone.

“Did you have some business in Sir Warren’s room?” Krone asked.

“We did. The both of us spoke with the child you know as Belia,” Misty replied. “My child was deeply indebted to them, and I’ve been especially worried about Warren’s condition. I transferred some of my magical energy into his stone, so I’m sure he’ll awaken soon.”

Glad to hear this excellent news, Krone breathed a sigh of relief.

“You left a lasting impression on me in the audience room,” Misty said with a smile.

“Did I, now?” Krone asked, looking down at herself.

She was dressed in her usual attire, and her makeup had been done well. At the very least, it wasn’t her appearance that had left a lasting impression.

“If you don’t mind, would you please tell me what exactly about me left an impression on you?” Krone asked. She couldn’t help but ask.

“You were the only one who seemed cautious about my words,” Misty replied in a testing manner. “And now, you’re wondering whether or not you should pose your questions to me.”

Krone gasped in astonishment.

“You don’t have to tell me everything. I know he’s very important to you,” Misty continued.

If she saw through everything, Krone found no need to hold back any longer.

“Lady Misty, you seemed to purposefully avoid answering the true intentions that were hidden behind His Majesty’s words,” the advisor said. She decided to drop the act completely and approached the Elder Lich. “In fact, you seemed to play dumb. If that isn’t odd, I don’t know what is.”

“Ah, so you ask for an answer,” Misty replied, refusing to provide the truth.

“Then you can pay the price for such knowledge, I take it?”

“If there’s anything you desire, I shall provide it for you.”

“And what if I ask for your life?”

“Will you promise to save Ein’s life, then?”

“And if I do?”

“I shall happily hand over my life to you. You must guarantee his safety first, however.”

The ease of Krone’s reply had surprised even Misty, an Elder Lich who’d lived for centuries. The advisor wasn’t joking around, her expression making it clear that she was more than willing to sacrifice her life at a moment’s notice. Even Ramza, leaning against the wall, looked surprised as he gazed at Krone.

“I’d love to promise you that, but I can’t right now,” Misty said. It was clear that she was hiding something.

“Lady Misty, you mentioned that you were here to stop Ein’s rampage,” Krone replied. She was reaching her own conclusion. “But you claim that you cannot assure us of his safety. In other words, you have no plan to return Ein back to his original state.”

Misty fell silent.

“By ‘stopping his rampage,’ do you mean to kill Ein?! If you do that, Princess Olivia will also...” Krone trailed off, her voice trembling and her lips quivering.

Still, she did her best to put on a brave face and hold back the stray tear about to roll down her cheek. She was terrified to hear Misty’s response, but she was even more afraid of fleeing without knowing the truth.

“At this rate, I’d have no choice but to do just that,” Misty said, revealing her reluctance. “We are not strong enough to save him.”

“In exchange, if the two of us were to give it our all and fall together, we might just have a chance,” Ramza added. “Naturally, this isn’t a guarantee either.”

Could they use the warships’ main cannons? The problem was not only range,

but power as well. The cannons couldn't possibly stand a chance.

"We also thought of using Arshay's magic stone," Misty said.

"But that probably isn't enough either," Ramza said. "Arshay's magic stone is rich with magical energy, but Ein's power surpasses even that."

"That can't be..." Krone murmured.

Did they have no choice but to surrender? Krone felt like this was the end for her. Her vision grew dark, and she felt like her knees would buckle, but she managed to keep herself together. She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up at the pair, much to the shock of Misty and Ramza.

"I knew it. You're..." Misty murmured faintly.

"I'll think of a plan," Krone said. She turned around and ran ahead.

"Huh?! Hey!" Misty called.

"There might be a way he can survive! He crossed the sea to risk his life! I can't give up here!"

As Misty watched the girl leave, the couple exchanged a melancholic, self-deprecating glance.

"Did you test her?" Ramza asked.

"No, I relied on her," Misty replied. "It's true that we aren't enough."

"Even if we do, there's no other possible way. To grant Ein's final wish, we have to risk our lives and fight to the death!"

"I know. I know that."

Misty placed a hand over her heart as her gaze drifted to the ground. Noticing this, Ramza walked over and placed his arm around her shoulders.

"If Arshay were with us, maybe things would've turned out differently," he muttered.

They were pleading for the impossible, but they knew that her revival wasn't going to happen. As the word "miracle" filled their minds, the pair couldn't bear to be apart from each other.

The knights hadn't been notified that the massive tree that had suddenly appeared was Ein, but many had guessed as much. While they had no idea why and how, they all knew that Ein was a Dryad. The battle on Heim's outskirts was still fresh in the minds of many—especially the fact that the crown prince was nowhere to be seen afterwards. With that in mind, Silverd had determined that it was impossible to keep everything under wraps. He refused to give any firm word on Ein's current status and had gone around to collect information. There was no way he could remain silent and leave everything else up to Misty and Ramza.

But despite all the people who visited the castle and the hours ticking by, no one had been able to formulate a plan. There was no chance—not even in the slightest—of an ideal plan coming to fruition. The clock's hour hand slowly turned as a state of panic started to nestle within Krone's mind. The advisor had holed herself up in her office, and Martha had arrived. One look at Krone's face was all that the maid needed to see.

"Lady Krone, I ask that you rest," Martha said.

Krone hadn't been able to sleep well recently, and her body was reaching its limit. Her eyelids were heavy, and she would undoubtedly fall asleep if she relaxed for even a moment.

"I'll try thinking for a bit longer," Krone replied firmly before burying her nose back in the book that she'd been reading.

For a split second, she'd caught a glimpse of Martha's red eyes, causing Krone's heart to pound even faster. The maid was just as desperate—her son's life currently hung in the balance.

"Then why don't you head to Princess Olivia's room?" Martha suggested. "Perhaps you can have a little chat with her and take a short break."

"Did she wake up?!" Krone cried.

"Yes, she awoke a few moments ago. When she was told of Sir Ein's condition by His Majesty, she was unexpectedly calm and had a meal. Perhaps she expected as much when she suddenly fainted."

“I...see.” With a grim reply, Krone stood up from her seat. “I shall speak with her for a few moments.”

“Of course. I shall be in the infirmary. If you require anything, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

Needless to say, there was no way that Krone would dare to call for Martha during such a precarious situation. The maid was likely called for when Olivia had finally opened her eyes, but Krone didn’t want to steal Martha away from her time with her son.

Krone left the room and raced up the steps. By a force of habit, she had almost turned to head for Ein’s room. Grief washed over her as she was forced to change her route, but she quickly shook her head and switched gears as she stood in front of Olivia’s room. She gave a few knocks and was greeted by the second princess’s permission.

“I’ve come here because I’ve heard that you awoke—Princess Katima?” Krone said.

“Nya ha ha! You were a paw too late!” Katima laughed.

“Hee hee,” Olivia giggled. “Welcome, Krone.”

Olivia sat up on her bed while Katima was seated on a chair nearby. Krone approached the royals and stopped just short of the bed. Olivia still looked pale.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” Olivia said. “Krone, your pretty face is wasted if you make such a melancholic expression. Please, will you give me an adorable smile as you always do?”



“Princess Olivia...” Krone murmured.

“It’ll be fine. Please, there’s no need to worry.”

Where did this firm confidence come from? Was Olivia trying to feign her energy, or was she trying to be considerate towards Krone? In any case, the advisor knew that she had no time to act weak in the face of such strength.

“Is something the matter?” Olivia asked.

Should Krone keep quiet about the truth? Misty hadn’t spoken her mind to Silverd precisely because she was worried about his mental state. No doubt the same courtesy should be offered to Olivia. Krone decided to keep her mouth shut and toil away all by herself.

“Welcome, Krone,” Olivia said.

Despite Krone’s resolve, when she was embraced by Olivia’s slender arms, it was as though her nerves had snapped. All at once, tears streamed down the advisor’s cheek, and she could no longer keep herself together.

“Ein... Ein will die,” Krone sobbed.

The two royals responded with a hint of resignation.

“Both my sister and I are aware of that,” Olivia said. “We’ve been talking in hopes of finding a way to save him.”

“Y-You knew?!” Krone gasped.

“Of course we did! Who do mew think we are?!” Katima replied.

“You didn’t know yourself,” Olivia pointed out. “You only realized it when I claimed that something was odd, remember?”

“Mrow?! Don’t sweat the small stuff!”

A smile appeared on Krone lips. Her face was damp from her tears, but she’d regained her usual charm.

“So? What did mew hear about, Krone?” Katima asked.

“I-I’d been told that even if those two worked together, it still wouldn’t be enough,” Krone replied.

“I guessed as much. Sure, the Elder Lich and the Dullahan might possess legendary power, but if they could stop a rampaging Demon Lord, we wouldn’t be in this mess. And they would’ve been able to save Demon Lord Arshay too.”

Which brought them back to square one.

“Krone, what did those two say about saving Ein?” Olivia asked.

“They claimed that it’d be difficult, even if they weaponized Demon Lord Arshay’s magic stone,” Krone replied.

“*At this rate*, I’d have no choice but to do just that,” Misty had said. In other words, if there was a different factor at play, perhaps the outcome would change.

“I’ve just told my sister this, but it might depend on how it’s used,” Olivia said.

“What do you mean, Your Highness?” Krone asked.

“If we can’t weaponize it directly, why not use it as ammunition?”

“Let’s load it onto our magic stone cannon, if mew catch our drift,” Katima added.

Instead of simply causing the magic stone’s power to explode, firing it from a cannon would exponentially increase the destruction that the stone could cause. While it was still unclear just how Misty planned to use Arshay’s magic stone, Ishtarica had been blessed by an immeasurable amount of technological advancements over the years. Krone had thought that there was a ray of hope, but she soon turned glum once more.

“Even I know that we don’t have a magical tool that could control that stone’s powerful energy,” she said. “Even if we could use something installed aboard the *Leviathan*, we would have no means of controlling it.”

She managed to keep her voice from trembling as she noticed her hands balling into fists.

“Oh, but there is,” Olivia replied calmly.

“While I was talking it over with Olivia we remembered the purrfect device that could possibly control it, mew see,” Katima added.

“Quite right. As you mentioned, Krone, the power contained in Demon Lord Arshay’s stone is immense. However, there is *one* tool in Ishtarica that could handle it.”

Krone couldn’t find the words to provide a response. She blinked quizzically, in stunned astonishment.

“We’ll be using an item in the Tower of Wisdom,” Olivia said.

“I’d furrgetten about it for a while too. Normally, no purrson would ever dream of using that tool, mrow...”

“I don’t blame you. Within our nation’s long history, not once has it ever been removed, I believe.”

“L-Lady Olivia! Lady Katima! Please tell me!” Krone cried. “Just what is in the Tower of Wisdom?!”

“There’s no need for mew to be so hasty. I’ll tell mew. Take a good look at this furrst.”

From her lab coat, Katima took out an old, neatly folded parchment. Krone swiftly opened it up to discover an illustration of the Tower of Wisdom. It looked like a diagram of the magic stone pool located in the tower’s basement.

“We can use the device that regulates the magic stone pool,” Katima said.

This specific tool could limit the energy output of the liquefied stones contained within the pool. Within Ishtarica’s borders, the tool’s abilities knew no equal. The princesses theorized that they could use it to control the power contained within Arshay’s stone.

“However, this tool is actually one part of a two-part set. Its other half is kept on the roof, mew see. We just need to take both.”

“Exactly, As she says we—” Olivia cut herself off as she erupted into a coughing fit. Her eyes turned vacant as she gently shook her head from side to side.

“Lady Olivia!” Krone cried.

“Calm down. Olivia’s just a teensy bit sick, that’s all. She isn’t in purrfect condition yet,” Katima said. “Rest up. Leave the rest to meow.”

“But I...” Olivia started.

“Go on, take a catnap. No need for mew to worry.”

Olivia probably had more to say, but she once again lost consciousness. She wasn’t fully recovered just yet. Krone remained quiet, still looking grim. Despite this new ray of hope shining upon them, she couldn’t feel any sense of relief.

“Can you please tell me what will happen when this device is removed?” Krone inquired. “What will happen to Ist? It’s still in the middle of its restoration effort.”

“Why, I can tell that mew aren’t the crown prince’s advisor for nothing! As mew can imagine, every device that relies on the tower’s power will shut down. At that point, the pipes around town will be reduced to additional metal debris.”

Clearly, this was a matter that couldn’t be decided by the three of them alone.

“Luckily, no one’s living there right meow while the efforts are underway. So I don’t think that we’d be causing *too* much trouble for Ist’s people.”

The true problem lay in the days that would follow. The newly restored city would be left without the tower’s power, leading to even more widespread damage. Despite that, the trio’s priorities hadn’t changed.

“Very well,” Krone said. “Then I shall head to Ist.”

There was no need to hesitate.

“We also don’t have time to host a meeting. Every second is of the utmost importance,” she added.

Even if a meeting were held, she was certain that no one would try to prevent Ein from being spared. However, she didn’t want to waste time with formalities.

“Are mew not afurraid of being punished?”

“Of course not. There’s nothing more terrifying to me than living in a world without Ein.”

As the advisor locked eyes with the princess, Katima didn’t know what to say.

Krone didn't mind casting aside her life if it meant saving her beloved. The first princess steeled her resolve as she received the feelings of the advisor.

"Then Krone, mew must also know that mew require an engineer to remove that device from the Tower of Wisdom. Even within Ishtarica, there are only a few who pawsess that sort of knowledge."

Krone's face fell; she'd thought that she'd cause trouble for no one if she acted by herself.

"Now, don't look so glum. There's no need for mew to throw in the towel."

Katima wasn't done. The princess looked solemn like never before, her whiskers fluttering by her face as she stared straight at the crown prince's advisor. The princess paused for a moment before she gave her command.

"Krone, I shall issue a royal edict. Let's make a deal, shall we?"

Late in the night, Krone sneaked around, making sure that she wasn't seen. She secretly prepared for departure as she headed to the back of the castle. She managed to evade the knights patrolling the area, and slipped out.

"Ah, there mew are."

Krone met up with Katima, who was already waiting for her, and the two ladies headed for White Rose Station.

"Are you sure about this?" Krone asked.

"Hey, mew're acting under my royal edict. That's all there is to it."

The royal edict was simple and as follows: Krone must tag along with Katima, and she must act in secret. That was all.

"There aren't many engineers skilled enough to remove the tool in the Tower of Wisdom. But mew see, I can. But I can't imagine father purrmitting me to leave in this situation, and yet, Ein doesn't seem to have much time left."

Thus, Katima had issued her royal edict. Krone was forced to go along with this plan, ensuring that the two could act in secret. But Katima had another goal in mind as well.

“Mrow! Let’s go over the plan one last time! Once I finish my work at the tower, I’ll be heading inside to find the healing tool. I’ve heard that the tower has some impurressive gear.”

“For Officer Dill,” Krone guessed.

“Nya ha ha...”

Katima’s other goal was to save Dill. As the tower was home to cutting-edge technology, this naturally included the latest in medical equipment. The castle had called for healers across the nation to use their magic on Dill, but to no avail.

“It’ll be a trial to handle both with meow.”

Perhaps a skilled engineer could be sent to the Tower of Wisdom if that was all that was needed. But Dill was also fighting for his life—just like his master. There was no time to sit still and make requests.

“Healing magic won’t be enough to save that dogged fool meow. We *need* those magical tools to pawform the best treatment that we can purrovide.”

Katima had probably favored Dill far more than Krone had anticipated. It may have been crass to ask her, but Krone couldn’t help herself.

“Shouldn’t we ask Sir Lloyd for his assistance?”

“While we’re heading into danger? No, I know Lloyd would try to stop us if we asked. Martha would probably have the same reaction. There’s no way that they’d let a princess run into the belly of the beast.”

These two wouldn’t allow it, even if their son’s life was on the line.

“No need to worry, Krone. I’ll take full responsibility. I forced you to come along with meow to Ist.”

“No, I should be punished for not stopping you, Your Highness,” Krone replied.

“Hah! Yeah right! Mew think you can go against the word of a royal? I’d like to see mew try!”

Katima was going to shoulder all the risks to shield Krone—the princess didn’t

mind if she was cast out of the royal family. She was betting it all and had chosen to steel her resolve.

“All right! Come on! Let’s hurry, mrow!”

The two ladies didn’t want to be caught now. They swiftly made their way to White Rose Station, as they quietly raced through the deserted streets. However...

“Where are you two headed?” A voice echoed from the top of walls behind the castle. An elf was sitting there, her golden hair fluttering in the ocean breeze.



“Ch-Chris?! Why are mew here?!”

“I woke up a little while ago. I heard everything, and I was certain that if you were to act, it’d be around now, Princess Katima.”

The elf’s intuition was astonishing, but certainly not out of the norm for her.

“Dame Chris, how are your injuries?” Krone asked.

“Painful. Excruciating,” Chris replied. “I’d like to lie down in bed right now and close my eyes, but I’ll endure it for now.” Her eyes were red and swollen, but she hadn’t been crying from the pain. Had she let her tears flow upon hearing of Ein’s predicament?

“Meow isn’t the time for this! Chris, mew can’t raise a paw against us! I issued a royal edict to Krone, and she’s working under *my* command! We’re headed for Ist, and mew can’t stop us!”

“I believe you’re absolutely right, Your Highness.”

“Mrow? Of course I am! To weaponize Demon Lord Arshay’s magic stone, we must fetch a device kept in the Tower of Wisdom! Mew heard meow!”

Katima had been convinced that she could stop Chris from acting with this explanation.

“I knew it,” Chris said. “I knew you were acting for Sir Ein’s sake.” She jumped off the wall, stunning the other two ladies with her words. “Please take me with you. If you don’t, I shall restrain both of you at once.”

The elf was dazzling under the moonlight. During that momentous night in the audience room, Ein had seen her as the goddess of the moon. No one could refute these words, with her otherworldly beauty being further amplified by her dignity. Her unwavering eyes were pointed straight at Katima.

“Are mew telling me to bring an injured person along?” the Cait-Sìth inquired.

“I may be injured, but I’m still far stronger than the both of you,” Chris replied.

“That really isn’t the point here... Mrow... But mew’ll restrain us if we don’t bring mew along, huh?”

“Of course I will. And I won’t listen to your royal edict either.”

Chris didn’t mind casting everything away if it meant that she could save Ein. This was also why she didn’t try to stop Katima. And so, the first princess had to make her resolution. She had no time to hesitate—every second was precious.

“Let’s go, mew two,” she said, racing ahead. The two followed her.

“Princess Katima!” Chris called. “Will you be using a royal edict to move the royal water train?”

“Of course I am! Do mew have another plan up your sleeve, Chris?!”

“I-I do not!”

“Then that’s that! We’re gonna ride those rails hard! So hard that I don’t care if we run this train into the ground! My meowster plan is to return to Kingsland in a jiff!” Katima let out a jovial laugh. “Nya ha ha ha! Our castle’s women are nothing but stalwart and powerful!”

The three rushed through the royal capital in the dead of night. None of them said it, but they were all relying on each other for what was about to come.

Chapter Eight: The Master of the Tower Who Bows to the Ancient King

The royal edict was very convenient, and especially so during moments like these, when time was of the absolute essence. In a flash, the train was ready to depart Kingsland. Krone sat by the window when she noticed another person approach her.

“Lady Misty?” Krone murmured.

Beyond the glass window of the train stood the Elder Lich, and Krone opened her window.

“I thought it was best to entrust it to you,” Misty said, handing over a leather pouch that fit snugly in the palm of her hand.

Krone tried to open it up and check what was inside, but she was stopped.

“Don’t open it,” Misty said. “This is more like a good luck charm.”

“A charm?” Krone repeated.

“That’s right. And I’m sure that child will be truly happy to be entrusted with you.”

Misty spoke the second sentence so faintly that Krone couldn’t hear it, but the advisor clutched the pouch close to her chest like she had been handed a priceless item. Krone was overcome with emotions, but she found herself believing Misty’s words—this pouch was surely a good luck charm for her quest.

“You didn’t come to stop us,” Krone said.

“Hee hee,” Misty chuckled. “I haven’t the faintest clue what you and your friends are up to, but I can tell that you’re doing all you can for the one you love. Would you like me to come along with you?”

Internally, Krone gave an immediate response. Of course she wanted Misty to come along. But the advisor knew best that this wasn’t ideal.

“Ein’s condition could change at any moment,” Krone said. “I would like you to stay in Kingsland.”

“I see...” Misty said, understanding that Krone wanted her available to act on a moment’s notice. “All right. Then Ramza and I will be waiting here. If anything happens to Ein, we’ll stop it immediately.”

The sound of the whistle echoed through the platform, even louder than the station’s busy hours.

“Now then, go on,” Misty said.

Krone closed the window and prepared for departure. The royal water train accelerated in seconds and rushed out of Kingsland, racing through the city’s outer walls and directly for Ist. The train shot out like a bullet, carrying the hopes of everyone onboard, who were giving their all to save a boy by the name of Ein.

Krone and Chris hadn’t expected to visit Ist again so quickly. The two stared at the windows that were turning into frosted glass from the cold. They stepped off the water train and gazed up at the Tower of Wisdom. This was an especially memorable place for Chris, her memories of sneaking inside with Ein still fresh in her mind.

“What are mew guys standing around for? Come on! Let’s go!”

“Ah! Right!” Chris replied.

This was no time to be feeling nostalgic as the trio headed for the colossal tower that loomed over the city. The magic pollution had already been dealt with, and they had nothing to fear. There likely weren’t any workers around precisely because they had finished the job. Ist had turned into a ghost town, deathly quiet in complete contrast to its usual hustle and bustle. Chris stopped in place.

“Chris! What are mew doing?! We should—” Katima started.

“Please wait. Something’s not right,” Chris replied.

“M-Mrow?”

The elf froze in place and closed her eyes, trying to listen to the air around her. She paid no heed to her company as she suddenly snapped her eyes open and braced herself.

“We should flee! Something is headed our way!” the elf shouted.

“F-Flee where?!” Katima stammered.

“Anywhere will do! We just need to leave this place right now!”

Chris’s fears quickly crept into view—monsters emerging from the shadows of the abandoned building around her. The ground bubbled up and ruptured, making way for beasts that dwelled underground. Before they knew it, more ominous creatures were glaring down at them from the sky. The three ladies were completely surrounded, and all eyes were focused on them. But where could they flee? Chris desperately searched her surroundings for a way out.

“W-We’ve got no choice!” Katima declared. “Make haste! Follow me-ow! We’ll flee into the tower!”

“Your Highness?!” Chris cried. “But these monsters will...”

“The safety device is still in the basement! It makes a lot more sense for us to head that way. Way more than going back to the train while you defend the two of us!”

Chris wasn’t sure if that was truly their only way out. Amid the danger and the lack of time, Krone was the one to rid the elf of all her doubts.

“Let’s go, Dame Chris,” Krone said.

Her calm and composure was almost shocking. Was this girl not afraid? Chris could hardly believe it, but when she took a closer look at the advisor, she noticed Krone’s lips quivering ever so slightly. The young lady was obviously scared, but she was more terrified of returning to Kingsland without having done a single thing.

“I can’t guarantee you’ll be left unscathed!” Chris yelled.

She steeled her resolve as she cut down the monsters that pounced upon her. The elf looked up at the tower before another wave of monsters emerged.

“Run! Go!” Chris urged. “I’ll defend you two from these beasts to the best of

my ability!”

As the trio rushed ahead, they were surrounded by insectoids, reptilians, and vaguely bestial creatures. While running for her life, Katima thought the whole situation to be quite odd—monsters weren’t common in these parts. Was it due to the magic pollution? Or perhaps they were lured by the presence of magical energy? Unable to come to a conclusion, the princess immediately shifted her focus to her flailing legs. She hoped that her paws could help her quickly escape the present situation. But not long after this, the trio started gasping for air—they were running out of breath.

“Hmph! Hah!” Chris grunted with every swing.

The knight’s companions took notice of her fighting spirit and the heroic gusto she spoke with. Her bravery had ended up rubbing off on the pair, even as they desperately ran for their lives.

“Gah...” Chris groaned.

“Chris?! Are mew okay?!” Katima shouted.

“I-I’m fine. My wounds...just opened back up a little. But don’t worry about me! You two just think about running!”

The monsters showed no signs of slowing down; in fact, their numbers appeared to grow with every passing moment. The trio’s only saving grace existed in their increasing proximity to the tower’s entrance.

Upon reaching the tower’s campus, they spotted the small door that led inside.

“Hurry!” Chris pleaded desperately.

She ran close behind Krone and Katima as they rushed inside. Once they were all inside, Chris slammed the door shut. The main doors activated a moment later, isolating the tower from the outside world. This phenomena wasn’t far off from how the castle’s treasury doors operated.

“Huff... Huff... A-Ah ha ha! We made it!” Chris triumphantly proclaimed as she struggled to catch her breath.

Before her companions could voice their concerns, the elf had already

removed her bloodstained jacket and undone her shirt's buttons. With her delicate skin bare for all to see, Chris tightened the bloodied bandages that concealed her wound, hoping it would stop the bleeding.

"Allow me," Krone said.

"Huh? No really, I'm fine," Chris replied.

"Let me see your wound. I'll retie your bandages."

The young lady's medical finesse blew Chris away. The application of first aid was part of the elf's knightly training, but even she was impressed by Krone's swift and skillful movements. By the time she was done, Krone had expertly retied the knight's bandages.

"Mrow, why not use this too?" Katima said, producing a small magic stone from her pouch. "It's a Healbird stone."

While it couldn't completely heal her wound, Chris felt the pain subside. After thanking the princess, the knight threw her jacket back on and refastened her buttons.

"There's no way that we'll find a monster lurking around down here. It's absolutely impawssible. With all the damage to the upper floors, they could probably sneak in there. But the basement? I'm one hundred percent pawstitive that we're safe here. We don't have to prowl around with our guard up."

Upon regaining her composure, Krone asked, "I wonder if the water train will be all right."

"Nothing to worry about there either. So mew see, I set off an emergency smoke signal and sent an SOS along with it. Everything should be fine. I'd bet one of my nine lives on it."

Katima punctuated her statement with a proud huff, providing Chris and Krone with a sense of relief. While the princess walked ahead, the elf quickly surveyed her surroundings. She was actually quite familiar with their location—it was strikingly similar to the floor that Graff had smuggled Ein and herself onto. Like her previous entry point, the floor was made of grated metal and featured iron stairs. The trio's footsteps could soon be heard clacking against the grating as they descended the stairs. Chris had entered the tower at a

higher point than she had with Ein, but she quickly took notice of the magic stone pool beneath her.

“I should probably take the lead,” Chris said. She stepped in front of the other two ladies and headed for the lower floors.

Unlike that day, there was no need for them to sneak in. However, the severity of Chris’s wound forced her to take sluggish steps.

“Dame Chris, please don’t push yourself...” Krone said.

“A-Ah ha ha... Please allow me to, just for today. We’re acting for Sir Ein’s sake, are we not?” Chris replied.

“Mrow... Good grief. Go ahead and push your luck, but just don’t faint on us, all right?”

“Do you have the right to say that, Your Highness? I believe you’re the one who cooked up this entire plot.”

“Of course I do. This purrfect plan was created by none other than yours truly, an unmatched Cait-Sìth genius! My work has zero flaws!”

Her logic never made much sense, but it had its uses from time to time. In this case: breaking the tension of a dreary situation with a little laughter.

“What should Lady Krone and I do?” Chris asked.

“Krone will be helping meow. Chris, remain on high alert and act as our guard. An hour will provide us with enough time to remove the device, and it’s not too big either. Once I’ve swiped the basement’s half of the device, I’ll need to scurry off to the roof and nab the other half.”

“I’ll do my best to protect both of you as we head to the upper floors, but we need to prioritize hiding from monsters as much as possible.”

“Mhm! Which also means that that’s really the only real purroblem!”

The two ladies nodded and prepared themselves. Going up to the roof would’ve been a breeze without any monsters around, but there was no one to blame for how things had turned out.

And so, the trio descended many staircases before finally reaching the magic

stone pool.

“That reminds meow... Didn’t Ein stop the pool with his Ocean Current skill?”

“Ah, I remember it clearly,” Krone added. “Both you and Ein recklessly went ahead with that plan.”

“A-Ahem!” Chris said, clearing her throat. “I can tell you all about it later! We should focus on removing this device first!”

“Mew’ve got a point. All right then... Ah, found it.”

An additional set of stairs stood on the pool’s edge, leading to a pipe that ran to the tower’s upper floors. Katima located the device underneath the pipe. It resembled a jewel, and Chris felt like she could carry it with both hands. This stone floated between two pipes.

“Huh, I had no idea...” Chris muttered. “When I was here with Sir Ein, I didn’t have the time to worry about these sorts of things.”

“Mweh heh heh,” Katima chuckled. “Mew can refurr to this as the Tower of Wisdom’s center.”

The princess gracefully walked to the pool’s edge and climbed up the steps. She stood in front of the device.

“It gets a bit tricky from here,” she said. Her casual attitude melted away to reveal a stern expression. “From here on out, don’t talk to meow unless I’m speaking to mew.”

“Your Highness, Princess Katima,” Chris started. “You’re making Lady Krone and I worry now.”

“I-Indeed...” Krone stammered. “I had no idea. Is it rather dangerous?”

“Mrow? Well, no, not really,” Katima assured them before she added, “The solidified magical energy is going to go berserk— Pawse for a meowment! Mrooow?! We might die, mightn’t we?!”

Katima’s whiskers started to tremble as she spoke weakly. If they were headed straight for danger, the princess should’ve said as much. It felt foolish to scold the royal—this was par for the course for her anyway—and there was a good chance that Katima had actually hidden the truth from them. Had she not,

the ladies would've undoubtedly been against it. Katima stared at her companions.

"If mew want to stop meow, now's your chance," Katima said, worried about their safety. "In truth, I planned for mew two to wait outside, but with the monsters lurking about, I guess that's not an option."

Even when faced with a princess in a precarious position, about to risk their lives, neither Chris nor Krone flinched.

"I shall go and patrol the area," Chris said.

"Of course," Krone replied. "I shall be near Princess Katima. Please call for me should you need any assistance."

"M-Mroooow?! Are mew two not afraid?!" Katima cried.

"Okay, okay, good speech. What are you on about?" Chris replied.

"Hee hee, I agree with the knight over here," Krone giggled.

This pair of ladies weren't to be underestimated—if it was for Ein's sake, they wouldn't hesitate to risk their lives. In fact, they were most afraid of being unable to do a thing.

"Good grief... I've got no other way to describe it," Katima sighed. Slightly weary but grateful for the support, she started rummaging through her coat and removing a handful of tools. "Nya ha ha! I might've been the one to push you around with a royal edict, but I'm sure that we'll all deserve a good scolding when we get home."

The princess joked around, hoping to ease the last bit of the nerves. She gripped her tools firmly, her paws filled with confidence as she got to work.

Several minutes later, Katima sat down for a short break. Krone leaned in to wipe away the sweat that had formed on the princess's brow.

"I'm sure it would've been easier if Professor Oz was here but... I'm hesitant to drag him into this pawsitively dangerous mess."

"Your Highness, why did you mention the professor?" Chris asked.

“Mrow? Did mew not hear? He woke up while Ein was off fighting, left the hospital, and ran back to Ist in a hurry.”

“I had no idea.”

“Thinking back to it, did we become indebted to him when we were last here? His idea of creating an artificial Demon Lord made my fur stand up on end... But on second thought, it is an interesting topic.”

“I agree. It really takes me back...”

By sheer coincidence, Chris had heard talk of an “artificial Demon Lord” in a quite recent battle.

“It...takes me back...” Chris murmured.

She’d said it herself in the past.

“I knew it... Edward! You’re the artificial Demon Lord that was created in Ist!”

“That man has his uses after all,” Edward had said. “I was infuriated when he said he wasn’t going to cross the ocean with her, and I vowed to end him. But with results like this, I have no choice but to forgive that fool.”

“I knew it! Your comrades were lurking somewhere in Ishtarica!” Lloyd had yelled.

“Comrades? Well, not precisely. He never acted with us. He seemed to be pursuing his own goals, after all. But of course, I know not what he actually wants to achieve. Ah, now, now. No need to be so feisty. I’m not going anywhere.”

As Chris thought back to this exchange, she was perplexed as to why she was recalling this series of events. Did the words, “artificial Demon Lord” jog her memory? Or was it because she heard that Oz had returned to Ist?

Chris was frighteningly calm as she posed a question. “Um, and where is Professor Oz? With all the monsters flooding into this city, he might be under attack.”

“M-Mew’re right! He’s in danger!”

Despite Chris’s thoughtful words, she knew that there was no need to worry

—she'd started to put two and two together. If possible, she wanted to leave this place at once and confirm for herself, but she thought about the horde of monsters. *What if that was all also part of his plan?* She wondered.

"Dame Chris? Is something the matter?" Krone asked.

"N-Nothing much. I was just thinking..." Chris trailed off.

The realization made the elf shudder as the worst-case scenario filled her mind. *Not only will we be unable to stop Sir Ein's rampage, but Katima and Krone will also be in danger.* A cold sweat ran down her neck as Katima stood back up.

"This is my final spurt! Let's mew this!" the princess said confidently as she got back to work.

After a handful of minutes ticked by, Katima managed to fully dismantle the jewellike device. She'd successfully removed the contraption, but her furrowed brows seemed to imply that she was less than happy about it.

"I'm fairly certain that the Tower of Wisdom didn't go berserk by itself the other day; *someone* did it on purrpose," Katima muttered, pointing at the device. "Something felt strange while I was finishing this up. A tube had been left disconnected and it shouldn't have been... Not to mention that there are signs that the other tube has been oddly rearranged. Mrow..."

"Are the red foxes involved?" Krone guessed.

"Meow. That was my thought as well."

The exchange with Edward flashed across Chris's mind once more.

"I think I'll head to the roof alone," the elf said.

There were more than a few serious questions that required answers. The mention of an "artificial Demon Lord" had aroused her suspicions, but now, the tower's malfunction could've been an equally dubious subject. Chris had only become more convinced of her horrific epiphany.

"How do I remove the device on the roof?" Chris inquired.

"Mew simply need to cut the tube it's connected to," Katima replied. "But there's no need to rush there. We should wait for a short while."

“Is it because it’s dangerous?”

“Purrecisely. I have a feeling that those monsters outside were meant to drive us into the tower.”

“I thought the same as well, Your Highness. But is there any chance of our situation becoming safer if we wait it out?”

“Meow...”

“I don’t think so. We’re out of options that’ll let us save Sir Ein, so we have to remove the device and rush back to Kingsland.”

“Dame Chris,” Krone started.

“I’ll be fine!” the elf assured her. “I’ll take it in a flash and be back before you know it!”

She turned her back to her company and proudly walked ahead. Chris slapped her cheeks and glared at the space in front of her.

“Professor Oz,” she muttered under her breath, “just what *is* your goal?”

With the elevator out of service, Chris had no choice but to race up the stairs. Along the way, she ran into the stairs she’d climbed while outrunning Viscount Sage’s wyvern. She smiled upon realizing the wall had been repaired since then. An odd, fuzzy feeling washed over Chris as her memories drifted back to her adventures with Ein. However, she immediately shuddered when she saw a massive hole that led all the way to the bottom. Considering that it had been created by a recent shock wave, the sight of a crumbling floor wasn’t reassuring in the slightest.

“Just a bit more. I’m almost there,” she mumbled to herself.

Despite feeling like a lump of lead, Chris had managed to drag herself up the tower for several minutes. When she reached the flight of stairs leading to the roof, she finally caught her breath. *Okay, let’s go*, she told herself.

She placed a hand over her magic stone and recalled the voice of the crown prince she had once offered it to. Beyond the dilapidated door lay hazy skies, and a strong gust of wind sent her hair fluttering. She stood beside the massive

hole she'd just taken notice of and saw a device wrapped around a still-standing pillar. She walked ahead before she was stopped by a voice.

"Shall I help you?" Oz asked. He stood a short distance away, with a wide smile on his face as his white coat flapped in the wind. "How are your wounds?"

"I'm good as new, thanks to you," Chris replied. "His Majesty saw to it that I received the best care possible."

"Wonderful." Oz noticed that Chris had drawn her rapier and aimed it at him. "Why have you brandished your weapon at me?"

"I think you know why."

The professor was silent.

"I only just became certain, thanks to Princess Katima's words," Chris continued.

"I don't quite understand. Do you care to enlighten me?" Oz requested. "I feel as though you've misunderstood me. Perhaps a small chat would allow me to clear things up and smooth them over."

He was eerily composed as that smile remained plastered on his face. Despite the rapier in his face, he managed to fire back with a few questions of his own. His attitude was clearly abnormal.

"Thinking back, there were a few things that bothered me," Chris explained. "Even my colleagues weren't aware of the ship that Sir Warren was on, but someone notified me that he called for you, Professor Oz."

"He did indeed," Oz replied. "The chancellor asked me for my aid, and I secretly boarded his vessel."

"You were called for immediately after the tower went out of control."

The professor's cheek twitched for a moment when this knowing remark met his ears.

"My guess is, Professor Oz, you have some sort of goal in mind, and Sir Ein was in the way of that," Chris said. "You also feared Sir Ein's powers. And so, you forced the tower to go wild, in hopes that you could draw him out of Kingsland."

Oz fell completely silent.

“After all, you know Sir Ein’s power *very* well, don’t you?”

“Well, of course,” Oz replied. “I heard all about it when he was last here.”

“Indeed, he went as far as to save the orphans we ran into. Surely, you could’ve predicted that Sir Ein would’ve personally purified the air, luring him away from Kingsland. Now, I have a few theories as to why you targeted our chancellor, but I’m not certain.”

Chris paused; she realized that her entire body was tense and nervous. She might have been up against a researcher, but he also happened to be a red fox. She was most certainly vigilant and alert.

“My other clue was Edward’s words,” the elf said. Oz flinched, and she wasn’t one to miss it. “You reacted just now. But Edward didn’t seem at all apologetic for letting it slip. It seems he once wished to kill you. Ah, but he mentioned receiving your assistance in this war, and for that, he displayed his gratitude.”

Oz fell silent. While Chris’s logic made sense, she still didn’t have concrete proof that pinned the professor as a red fox. Of course, if this was all coupled with the fact that he’d been left unscathed by the monster invasion, Chris’s suspicions were practically confirmed, but there was no evidence.

“Speaking of,” Chris said, deciding to spring a trap of her own, “that black stone you gave to Shannon and Edward is very curious. What is it made from?”

Oz sighed. “Good grief, this is why I abandoned them.” The professor knew that it was a trick question, but he saw no need to play dumb. He became defiant as he prattled away. “That man is nothing but prideful. And our chief is impulsive—she’s spent the last several centuries yearning only for revenge. There really is no advantage for me to constantly be with them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, it’s nothing at all. About that black stone, unfortunately, even I’m not quite sure what it’s made from. Hmm? I suppose that might cause even more misunderstandings. I was the one who found the raw material. There’s no doubt about that. But I’m not quite sure what monster the material is from. I just know that it’s splendidly unusual and very useful, so I’ve been utilizing it as I

wish.”

Oz chattered away while adjusting his glasses. He cast aside his fluttering coat and started to undo the buttons on his white shirt.

“Oz... What exactly is your goal?” Chris asked.

The professor looked elated by the question, resembling a child who had been given a new toy. His face was filled with delight.

“I just want to be at the pinnacle of evolution!” he shouted, causing Chris to turn quiet in confusion. “Monsters, nonhumans, and even the Demon Lord—among all the living creatures, they’re the most greatly affected by the concept of evolution! Now, where is the epitome of that? The apex? Where, oh where is the final stage of evolution?! I simply want to find the answer to that!”

“Then why did you attack Sir Warren?”

“Because he was in the way, of course! It was only in my final moments with him did I realize that he’s a red fox as well! He was a simple nuisance until then! It’s as clear as day! With him in the picture, the crown prince’s evolution was stunted!”

“For such a goal, you...”

“Pardon? ‘Such a goal,’ you say? Don’t be so foolish. There’s no better historical specimen than your crown prince! His abilities surpass those of even *the* Demon Lord Arshay! Don’t you know that?! You should take a good look at him! He’s spread his roots all over Heim’s royal capital! I’ve never seen anything more divine! He simply tickles my urge to research him further!” Oz paused before he proudly went on, “I remember falling for the crown prince the moment I met him. It’s why I provided him with one of my species’s precious magic stones. Ah, that reminds me, that stone has quite the special effect.”

Oz claimed that at his signal, the stone was designed to spew a thick miasma fog. The mist’s density was on par with the miasma that had poured from Rayfon’s pores in Bardland. It could cause chaos within the castle in moments.

“The first princess had apparently stored it away, but I wonder if it was destroyed,” Oz wondered. “Well, it’s a trivial matter; my plan is going smoothly.”

Chris felt her blood boiling in response to Oz's confession.

"I won't forgive you," she growled. "We lost countless lives to the war *you* started! Do you even know just how many people died?! And even Sir Ein is..."

"What piffle. Our chief started that war." He chuckled as though to correct Chris. "She was gripped with the lust for revenge. I've no idea why she wanted it or whom she despised, but I'd imagine it had something to do with Ishtarica. I'm not directly involved, so I really am not sure."

Despite strongly denying any responsibility, the professor looked more delighted than he'd ever been before. His talkative behavior only served to prove it. He made a grand gesture and stared up at the heavens.

"All I did was use that!" Oz bellowed. "The chief's personal pursuit of the crown prince was only a convenient coincidence! And so, I contacted *him* after a long while and lent him my aid! I made it so that the crown prince could unleash his true powers!"

Oz's goal was very straightforward. He wanted Ein to encounter Shannon, fall to her spell, and run wild just as Demon Lord Arshay had many centuries ago. When the war broke out, Oz had simply utilized it for his benefit. By handing Edward the black stone, he only sought to fan the flames of war with the fruits of his research. The professor would do anything to realize his goals.

"All because of you, Oz...we've been gravely injured," the elf said coldly.

In a flash, she vanished from view, and reappeared behind the professor. However, the master of the tower grinned broadly, maintaining his cool.

"It pains me to make such precious sacrifices, but thus is life. That's all I can say," he replied.

"Oz, you're insane!" Chris declared.

A single researcher should've been no match for the knight, so Chris was certain that he'd arrived with some sort of plan. As doubt filled her mind, she pointed her rapier squarely at Oz's chest, hoping to end him in a flash. But oddly enough, she froze in place, stopping just short.

"This tower, you see, was completed around two hundred years ago," Oz said.

“Back then, there was a researcher who was called a genius of the millennia. He provided his full support in the development of this structure.”

As his words hit her ears, Chris realized that her arms and legs were now encased in white ice. *Is this some sort of magic?* It was shocking to think that he could use such a powerful spell in an instant.

“Needless to say, I was that researcher,” Oz finished.

A familiar black stone was embedded in each of the professor’s dorsums. Reminiscent of jet-black diamonds, these stones were much darker than the one Edward had used. Chris gasped in surprise.

“*These* are the finished products,” Oz explained. “These are not the failed prototypes I sent across the sea to those two. My stones are the only ones that exist in the entire world. With these, I’d like to polish the crown prince’s potential even further.”

The ice started to swallow Chris’s body whole. Unable to even step forward, she hastily retreated while clicking her tongue in annoyance. Her wind magic was enough to shatter the ice that had encased her limbs. However, her supple skin had been hit with a rash of frostbite, creating a pain that surged throughout her body.

“I’ll be frank,” Oz said. “You cannot kill me in this tower.”

“I won’t know if I don’t try,” Chris replied through gritted teeth.

He placed his hands over his eyes and guffawed while facing the sky. “Ah ha ha ha ha! But I’m telling you that it’s impossible! As long as you don’t stand a chance against the primordial monster, your rapier will never reach me!”

“Oz, just because you can use powerful spells—”

“Spells? Unfortunately, it seems like you’re mistaken.”

“Don’t give me that! If that wasn’t magic, then what is it?”

“There’s only one answer, isn’t there?” He lovingly stroked his dorsum stones. “It’s my skill,” he whispered, his voice carried by the wind.

Chris could hardly process her situation as a gust of powder rained over her. She felt her body grow numb, and she stared at the powder on her palms,

aghast.

“This powder is from the Crow Butterflies... But why?” she murmured.

“I’m proving to you that I’m not using magic, but my skills,” Oz replied.

Tree roots emerged from the massive hole, trying to restrain Chris. She managed to dodge them and climbed up the roots while slicing them with her rapier.

“No... I don’t believe it,” Chris said.

Oz used both hands to create a gun barrel, gathering fire at his fingertips. Unlike fire magic, his flames were slightly purple—reminiscent of the Breath used by powerful wyverns to attack. Chris had fought these monsters before, and she could hardly believe her eyes. It was foolish to face his attacks head-on. She used her wind magic to propel her body, just barely managing to dodge Oz’s Breath. However, the flames had managed to graze her skin.

“You’ll need a little ice to cool off those burns,” Oz said.

The same chilly air that Chris had felt earlier enveloped her. *It’s similar to Sir Ein’s Ice Dragon.* As blades of ice attacked her, she swung her rapier around to defend herself, but she couldn’t handle them all. A blade pierced her thigh as she leaped to evade the rest. As she landed on the ground, Oz’s mention of skills echoed in her mind.

“It looks like you finally understand me,” Oz said.

While Chris was still left confused, she was now certain that Oz wasn’t using magic—they were monster and nonhuman skills. She hadn’t recovered from her previous injuries, and yet she had been thrust into the heat of battle. While catching her breath, Chris wiped the sweat that dripped down her neck and tried her best to wrap her mind around her situation.

“The stones have two abilities,” Oz explained. “The first one enhances and increases your body’s power. And the second one is...absorption. You store and obtain magical energy just by consuming it, just like a delicious meal. I’m terribly interested to know where these stones originate from, but I haven’t the time to find out. My research took priority.”

“Oz, you...” Chris said.

“Heh heh. I doubt you’d understand even if I explained the technology behind it, but I’ll leave you with just this tidbit: my research culminated in my ascension to this domain.”

“That’s impossible!”

“How can you be so sure? Your beloved crown prince could do the same, I’ll have you know. Although, the results of my research don’t require magic stones. Bones, hair, anything will do. As long as I can understand the monster’s characteristics, I can make the necessary adjustments to utilize their skills.”

Oz claimed to be an upgraded Ein. If his words were to be believed, this was likely true, for he had no need for magic stones to utilize another’s skills. Oz gloated upon realizing that Chris had been left unable to refute his claims.

“I’ve gathered data on monsters for centuries and I could easily use over a thousand skills,” the professor said. “What do you think? Do you still believe that I shouldn’t be feared?”

“Over a thousand?”

“Ah, that’s the face! Oh, how delightful! Heh heh. I was about to lose my mind when you tried to maintain your composure in the face of the fruits of my wonderful research!”

Though Chris was shocked, she hadn’t lost her will to fight. “A mere researcher like you, given power, is akin to a child given a proper sword. That’s all there is to it.”

“Ha ha! That, I cannot deny. But you *will* bow to the sheer difference in power. I even have Upaskamuy’s skills at my disposal. I told you before: if you cannot win against a primordial monster, you have no chance of defeating me.”

The only shame was that Chris’s wounds hadn’t fully healed. At the very least, Oz couldn’t hold a candle to Edward in close combat. Chris’s speed could trump even Lloyd’s, and under normal circumstances, she was confident that she wouldn’t lose to the professor.

“I’ve actually given an apt name to my research,” Oz said.

His shoes clacked against the ground and reverberated in the air as he walked forward, finally revealing the name.

“Omnipotence.”

The name wasn't a lie or an exaggeration. If all one needed was Oz's compiled data and a monster's genetic material to use their skills, this name was rather fitting.

“The only issue is the depletion of magical energy,” Oz confessed. “It uses quite a bit, and so, I must be at the Tower of Wisdom to use it.”

The man was certain that he'd won. He was acutely aware of Chris's exhaustion and knew that she was standing on willpower alone.

“I will go and take the power of the rampaging crown prince as well,” Oz said.

Oz froze Chris's limbs once again, but he also used his roots to firmly lock her into place. She wasn't going anywhere.

“I'm doing it all, just to catch a glimpse of evolution's apex,” Oz replied.

“I won't...let you!” Chris shouted.

“And what can you possibly do to stop me? You're in shambles and I have omnipotent power. How in the world can you win against me?” Chris had no reply as Oz went on, “This is all going according to my plan. Truly, there is nothing left that you can do.”

He grabbed a blade of ice and walked forward.

“Do you remember my research on a man-made Demon Lord? By directly pouring magical energy into one's core, the test subject was encouraged to evolve. With my current form, and in this place, overflowing with magic, I can only think that I'd succeed.”

“Oz!” Chris roared. “I definitely won't let you!”

“Definitely what now? I don't need your permission to do as I please.”

He stood in front of the restrained elf, chuckling at her limbs that had gone red from frostbite. She tried her best to struggle, but she didn't have nearly enough power left to flee, much to her apparent chagrin. His smile grew

broader still.

“Once I take the crown prince’s magic stone, I shall bring it back to this tower,” Oz said. “I’ll find a random nonhuman’s core and use my power to pour the magical energy into it.”

He glanced at the other half of the device that Chris had gone to fetch. His goal was the entire reason for the tower’s existence—a goal that had been kept secret until now.

“I plan on using that to suppress and limit the crown prince’s magic stone,” he explained. His research had completely shot past the realm of normalcy. “As long as the magic stone doesn’t reject its new core, it can be connected and unleash its magical energy. The stone will have as much energy as when its original owner was still alive. The only issue, really, is the person’s body. However...”

Oz paused before he continued proudly, “By pouring enough magical energy in both the core and the magic stone, they will enter an almost critical state. The core, now filled to the brim with magical energy, will start trying to form a body for almost an eternity. From there, the life-form it’s given birth to can live like a normal person.”

He continued further, “In my attempts to create a Demon Lord, I’d noticed that the core would never endure all the magical energy it received from the stone. It always led to a pitiful end. But as long as I have enough power, I can manage this very well with my current physique. In fact, I can probably control even the crown prince. Now, all I have to do is eagerly wait to witness the pinnacle of evolution.”

He laughed happily as he pointed his icy blade at the elf’s chest. “Dame Christina, I shall transfer all the energy in your magic stone into the crown prince’s.”

He was implying that she could now die without any regrets. The blade approached the elf as she squeezed her eyes shut. But the pain never came. *What’s going on?* She slowly tried to open her eyes.

“Let go of Chris!” Krone’s voice echoed from the stairs below.

“Oh my, what a very *unusual* guest,” Oz replied.

Krone tried her best to hide her trembling body. She wasn't capable of fighting, and perhaps it was best for her to remain hidden, but she couldn't just watch Chris die.

“Get away from her, Oz!” Krone shouted.

She threw a leather pouch between the elf and the professor—the very thing that Krone had received as a good luck charm. The moment it fell in front of Oz, the pouch emitted magical energy of a purple hue, causing him to flinch.

“What?! This magic...” he gasped.

“Chris!” Krone yelled as she rushed to the elf's side.

Oz was still trying to skewer Chris, but he found himself unable to do so.

“This power that pushes me back... There's no doubt about it,” Oz said. “Gah, I suppose I've got no choice.”

He switched gears and kicked Chris's body, trying to push her into the massive hole behind her. As the knight had discovered on her way up, the hole was the result of an enormous shock wave and led all the way down to the tower's bottom floor.

“Rot in the basement!” Oz declared.

Freed of her restraints, Chris had no power to fight back, and she couldn't even grab the hole's rim. Her body soared in the air before gravity did the rest, pulling her down below.

“No! Chris!” Krone yelled.

She rushed to the elf's side and threw her body past the edge, grabbing Chris's hand. But the advisor wasn't strong enough to keep the two afloat.

“Ah... Gh...” Krone grunted.

“Let go of me! You'll fall too!” Chris cried.

“No! We're...going to save Ein together!”

Krone's hand was trembling—she only had a few seconds of strength left in her. The elf tried to get the advisor to release her, but Chris's battered body

stood no chance against Krone's determination. The two wouldn't last long. Oz slowly approached them.

"Then fall together!" Oz screeched.

He took his freezing blade and slashed it across Krone's back before he kicked into the hole, sending the ladies flying. Chris, however, wasn't going down without a fight and mustered enough strength to fling her rapier at the man.

"Aghhhh! M-My arm?!" Oz cried.

The professor indeed wasn't used to close combat. The thrown rapier sliced off his arm before falling into the hole as well. Oz writhed in pain as he kicked the leather pouch towards the pit. The pouch plummeted along with the two ladies, and they instinctively reached out to grab it.

I couldn't protect a thing, Chris thought. Frustrated by her lack of power, she blamed herself for causing Krone's death as well. Tears filled the elf's eyes as she averted her gaze from the advisor's face. But Krone approached Chris and embraced her tightly, using her final moments to care for the elf's frostbitten hands.



“I forced Princess Katima to allow me to come here, but I...wasn’t enough, I guess,” Krone said, defeated.

She hid the wound on her back from Chris—the pain was unbearable and her vision was growing dim from blood loss. And yet, Krone managed to muster a bright smile. There was no meaning to her last act of courage; all that was left was for them to fall to their deaths.

“You’ll be fine.”

A voice came from nowhere—it didn’t sound like Chris or Krone. The two quickly looked around, but they only saw the metal pipes around them. There was no way that another voice could’ve reached them.

“Chris? Chris!” Krone shouted.

The elf had reached her limit; her heavy eyelids slowly closed. She felt her strength leave her body as her previous wound gaped open, spraying blood everywhere. Krone hugged Chris as tightly as she could, hoping to apply some pressure and prevent more blood from spilling.

“Please...” Krone begged.

Help. She’d take it from anyone that would offer it.

“Okay.”

The wind howled past Krone’s ears, but this enigmatic voice rang out clearly. It carried the tones of a gentle young lady.

“Who’s speaking to us?” Krone wondered aloud.

She was on the verge of losing consciousness herself as she fought against the pain, her blood gushing out from her back. Her eyelids started to droop as she also felt her vision fading away. She continued to think about the elf in her embrace, until the absolute final seconds of her consciousness. Krone had failed to notice the leather pouch had started glowing nor had she realized that they were no longer falling, but gently floating down.

“I’ll save you.”

The voice reverberated from the pouch as Krone heard those words before

finally blacking out. She wasn't able to see that the air around her had transformed completely. The Tower of Wisdom and the skies of Magic City Ist were dyed in a vibrant shade of purple, turning into a city of amethyst. The magic gem pool at the bottom of the tower sent out a shock wave, surrounding the two ladies in blinding light. It gently floated up to the tower's roof, enveloping the unconscious elf and advisor in a veil of warm wind.

"What?!" Oz gasped. "Why did the tower's magic..."

The professor couldn't hide his shock, his eyes glued to the wave of magical energy that erupted from the pit. The two ladies had made their return while still floating in the air, their wounds completely healed.

"Impossible!" Oz shrieked. "I don't believe it!"

Purple lightning crackled around as though the thick magical energy couldn't be contained. The tower shook viciously, jogging an old memory of Oz. Long ago, he'd seen a young girl who'd emanated such a power—a resident of the Demon Castle.

"It can't be! It's not possible! *She* can't be back?!" Oz screamed.

And yet, she was. It was very possible for her to return. The black stone that was embedded in the back of his severed limb floated in the air, absorbing the power contained within the leather pouch. The other half of the restraining device that was still on the roof controlled the power. Oz had said it himself—he'd planned on using the tower's power to limit and control Ein's magic stone.

"Even if I made all the preparations, if there isn't a core, she can't revive!" Oz screeched. "Wait, is my finished product—that material—actually the core of a monster?! How interesting! How very interesting!"

All the while, the shock wave tore open the pouch, revealing the magic stone nestled inside.

"I must start over my research from scratch!" Oz shouted. "I don't require the core of a nonhuman! If cores from certain monsters could be used instead, then...then... Agh! I'm just dying to find out! I must!"

The black stone floated in the air, absorbing magical energy. The device on the roof was controlling the power. Even if the black stone was a core of some

kind, the most eye-catching sight was the magic stone that had emerged from the leather bag. According to Oz's calculations, the stage was set to reconstruct a new body—however, this was completely outside the scope of his expectations. He had no idea what monster he was using as his material, much less what part of it he was using. These conditions had been met purely by coincidence—this was a miracle.

Aside from the curious professor's loud and uncontrollable theory crafting, no one uttered a single word. Within the waves of magic, what appeared to be a small girl was forming before the pair of unconscious ladies. As her creation continued, the girl absorbed every ounce of magical energy to be found within the pool of liquefied magic stones. However, Oz's black stone played no role in this phenomenon. No, she was simply feasting on the pool to restore more of her magical energy.

With more and more energy being sucked out of the tower, the girl's body started to properly materialize and come into focus. She finally opened her eyes.

At that very moment, Oz could only gasp in response. Both his core and stone beat wildly as he felt the sudden compulsion to take a knee. Before he knew it, he was bowing before her. Just meeting her gaze made his breath grow ragged, somehow stripping him of his ability to speak. However, the girl quickly turned away from him.

"Death isn't in the cards for the truly beautiful," she said.

Without even touching the pair, the girl raised her arms and gently levitated them over to a safe spot on the ground. As the waves of energy died down, she finally appeared for all the world to see. Clad in a gothic dress, the slender girl was taller than Katima but still rather petite. Her glossy, silver hair flowed over her attire like fine silk, going down to her waist. The evanescent expression on her face could compel one to protect this adorable creature to the death. Yet, she emanated an aura that couldn't belong to anyone but the Demon Lord.

"Yeah. I'm back," she said.

The hazy sky turned purple, dyeing the scenery beyond what the eye could see. In contrast to her gentle voice, the pressure she emitted was

overwhelming. In response, Oz prepared to pounce.

“Demon Lord Arshay!” he roared.

After her “breakfast” of sorts, only a tiny fraction of the tower’s once grand amount of energy remained. Oz knew that he could only fight for a few minutes, but that didn’t sway him.

“This isn’t a problem. My current form can trump even the likes of you!” he said. He referred to the raw power of what he’d dubbed “omnipotence”—it mattered not if one of his black stones had gone missing. “That power! That magical energy! I’ll take it all!”

Utilizing every scrap of data he’d compiled over the years, Oz unleashed a terrifying series of skills at her. These attacks were exponentially stronger than anything he’d used against Chris. There was no need for him to hold back. While he could draw upon a staggering collection of monster skills, the shock factor was all the professor had.

“Are you stronger than Jayle?” Arshay asked.

Even Oz hadn’t expected all of his attacks to instantly fizzle out. Arshay hadn’t done anything special—these horrifying strikes, which might not have seemed so scary to her, were wiped away by the single sigh that escaped her lips.

“A-All you did was breathe on my attacks?! My omnipotence!” Oz cried. “That’s impossible! How can centuries’ worth of research be destroyed by a single sigh?! I must be dreaming!”

“Oh? Do you like dreams?” Arshay asked.

She proceeded to outstretch one of her arms and ball her fingers into a fist. Suddenly, a hand forged of magical energy grabbed Oz by the neck and hoisted him into the air.

“Gah... Wh-What...” he gasped.

“If you like dreams, I’ll let you see one. It’s my only forte.”

Oz felt his vision dimming as he stepped closer to darkness. He found himself surrounded by a countless collection of eyeballs—all staring directly at him as the laughter of men, women, and children rang in his ears. He broke out in a

cold sweat, frozen in place as a result of this eerie scene. Thoroughly unsettled, he could only tremble in discomfort. And so finally, he...

“Huh?! What?! Why has a blade pierced my chest?!” Oz cried. “Why am I stabbing myself?”

He had unconsciously stabbed himself with his icy blade. The professor stood there, slack-jawed as blood trickled from his mouth and the wound in his chest. It was with this that he snapped back to reality.

“It’s just like waking up from a bad dream,” Arshay explained.

“N-No! Stop!” Oz screamed.

“Nightmares are also dreams, you know. You’ll just be dreaming away. There’s nothing to worry about.”

His vision had started to fade—he’d been pulled back into the same frightening nightmare.

“No! Nooooooooo!” Oz shrieked.

His final screams pierced the air, followed by the eerily quiet and sorrowful sounds of the professor’s blade entering his flesh. Only Oz knew what he saw in his last moments. However, it was clear that he’d been gripped with a terror so severe, he looked to death as his escape. The nightmare itself was anyone’s guess.

“I don’t know this place,” Arshay murmured.

She caught a glimpse of the two ladies at her feet as she observed her surroundings. Back in her heyday, a tower of this magnitude had yet to be built. The scenery was splendid, but she felt a twinge of loneliness while standing by herself in an unknown land. Suddenly, hasty footsteps reached her ears.

“Huff... Huff... Are mew two okay?! Answer meow! M-Mroooow?!”

While Katima was shocked by the scene she’d discovered, she was all the more astonished when coming face-to-face with the Demon Lord herself. Arshay didn’t appear to be an enemy, considering that Oz had seemingly ended his own life. That much could be surmised from Ishtarica’s true history and the legends surrounding her. The only real problem lay on the ground—the

unconscious Krone and Chris. As the princess rushed to her friends' side, Arshay found an opportunity to speak up.

“Where am I?”

The forlorn tones of her voice made Arshay sound like a lost child. Once again, Katima had a dumbfounded look on her face as her coat fluttered in the wind.

Chapter Nine: With the Royals

On a late afternoon in Kingsland, the city's citizens were astounded by the collection of mighty Ishtarican warships gathering at the port. However, tensions remained high as everyone's focus was locked on the looming threat slowly approaching their city.

"Perhaps it saw the Leviathan heading in this direction and figured it was chock-full of nutrients," Misty surmised.

Slowly inching their way towards Ishtarica, a series of roots had left Heim's shore and scattered themselves throughout the ocean.

"The roots crossed such a great distance...just to come here?" Lloyd muttered, his eye widening with astonishment. While standing on the Leviathan's deck, the marshal proceeded to deliver his orders. "Prepare for an attack! It's a threat devised by the—Heim's ominous machinations!"

Lloyd's heart panged with guilt. He despised himself for referring to his prince as a Heim-created threat, but it was his duty to stop those roots.

"Don't worry. Even if you hit him with a full-scale attack, it'll be but a mere scratch to Ein," Misty assured him.

"Then that means we have no hope of stopping the roots, right?" Lloyd inquired.

"I didn't say that. That's what Ramza and I are here for."

The Dullahan and the Elder Lich had proven themselves to be reliable allies. While nothing was for certain, Misty had claimed that the tree roots could be stopped, though she mentioned that they were running short on time. To stop Ein's rampage, they had to prevent him from going even a second longer. *At this rate... We won't be able to stop Ein's rampage,* Misty thought. They had to act now and stop those roots, or they wouldn't make it in time. She couldn't wait for Katima and their allies in Ist. With that in mind, she felt the hand gripping her staff starting to tremble.

“Lady Misty!” Lloyd called.

She spotted the large, growing roots trying to swallow an entire warship whole and drag it down to the depths of the ocean. But just as she firmly grasped her staff and Ramza raised his sword, the unexpected happened. The skies and the ocean rippled; it felt like the entire world shook for a moment as a lone girl gently landed on the *Leviathan’s* deck.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said.

Both Misty and Ramza were familiar with this voice. The last time they’d heard her tones was just before she’d gone on a rampage.

The girl raised an arm over the roots. “Sleep just a little while longer,” she said kindly. “We’ll come and save you in a flash.”

Amethyst lightning rained from the heavens—a torrent of power that triumphed over all. Even if the royal warships were to fire their main cannons all at the same time, they wouldn’t have stood a chance against this majestic display of power.

Following her hasty return, Katima found herself standing before her father and a handful of others in White Night Castle’s audience room. Before Silverd could punish her for her actions, she was asked to explain what she’d seen at the Tower of Wisdom. The princess left no detail out, adding that her unconscious companions were in stable condition. A few sailors had stopped by to share their stories as well, but no one had the time to process what they’d heard—Misty declared she’d be leaving as soon as possible to end Ein’s rampage.

“Don’t punish them,” she said. “I asked them to do this for me.”

“I simply do not understand,” Silverd replied. “Lady Misty, why did you entrust them with your request?”

“Because I believed that they could resurrect Arshay. The chances were slim, but I thought that they could do it. Additionally, the researcher’s true identity as a red fox was well within my calculations.”

She discreetly glanced at Katima—the Elder Lich was lying. There was no way that she could've predicted both outcomes, but Misty planned to protect Katima and her companions. That much was crystal clear, but even Silverd couldn't argue with the first king's mother. He didn't pursue the subject.

"At this point, nothing you say can surprise me," the king sighed.

The recent onslaught of stunning acts and revelations had turned the king numb. However, he wasn't all that shocked that Oz ended up being a red fox.

"And there's no need to worry about those ladies," Misty reassured him. "Though she is heavily injured, the elf is of Jayle and Laviola's blood. She should awaken in the near future."

"M-Mrow? Mrooow?" Katima asked, tilting her head. "Lady Misty, mew make it sound like Chris is a part of the royal family."

"Oh, how smart you are. That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Mroooooow?!"

Among those present, only Silverd knew of the Wernsteins' direct blood ties to the first king. Fresh off the warship, Lloyd hadn't heard a lick of this, nor had Lalalua—the queen herself. It was difficult to *not* be taken aback by this revelation.

"I'd love to fill you in, but as you can see, we're running short on time," Misty said. "Why don't you gather everyone at a later date? Perhaps take some time to hear the truth as told by your father?"

"Mrow... I understand."

Unlike the casual Misty, who'd seemingly dropped a bombshell, Silverd had buried his face in his hands. He didn't want the truth to come out so suddenly. He'd been meaning to tell everyone one day, of course.

"I'll tell you everything once this is all over, Katima," Silverd said. The king didn't have time to spare either. "And Lloyd, needless to say, you must keep it a secret."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Ramza," Arshay said to the man she regarded as her older brother.

Unbefitting of her title, the Demon Lord carried herself quite casually. However, this did allow her company to calm their nerves. “Did you swim all the way over here?”

“I did,” Ramza replied. “I ran into a large fish on the way here, so I stabbed it with my Phantom Hands and made it listen to me.”

“You’re a meanie.”

“That really is rather cruel, dear,” Misty chimed in.

“You’re both unreasonable,” Ramza replied.

The Demon Lord trio were very calm. Perhaps they were overjoyed by their reunion, but they didn’t seem at all nervous. Even Silverd and the others started to ease up upon witnessing their wholesome family interactions.

“Your Majesty Arshay, may I?” Silverd asked.

“Mmm, I don’t like the sound of that,” Arshay replied.

“Pardon me. Lady Arshay, I’m rather perplexed. You were once a Demon Lord, feared as the Nightmare of Envy.”

“Mmm...”

“How are you maintaining your composure? Would you kindly enlighten me?”

Despite his status as his nation’s king, Silverd couldn’t deny that he was afraid to ask this question. But when he thought back to the newcomers’ claims to protect Kingsland and Ein’s previous report, the king had no choice but to confirm his suspicions one last time.

“That’s easy to explain,” Arshay replied. She approached Silverd, turned around, and undid the top buttons on her dress. “Hup. It’s all thanks to this, right here.”

On her bare back lay a large scar—the remnant of a deep and painful gouge to her body. Even Misty and Ramza looked surprised as they intently stared at her wound.

“This is the scar from Jayle’s killing blow,” Arshay said. Her death had allowed all her dark emotions to spill out and disappear. “That kid was kind to me until

the very end. He aimed precisely for the spot between my core and my magic stone, taking extra care not to damage my stone.”

Only Arshay and Jayle knew of the tale that was born between them. Silverd was moved by the fleeting smile that the girl had flashed in front of him. She was aware of her position as a monarch, much like him.

“So, now it’s my turn to stop this,” Arshay said.

She looked undaunted, her amethyst eyes twinkling with ferocity, using the power coursing through her body to silence those around her. Even Ramza, the world’s strongest swordsman, fell silent as he started to wrap his mind around the powerful resolution that she’d made.

“That woman might’ve sent me into a rage, but I caused the Great War,” Arshay said. Her tone was benevolent and sincere. “I know a simple apology won’t cut it. When this is over, I’ll accept any punishment I’m sentenced to, and I’ll atone for my sins to the best of my ability.”

She tacitly requested just a bit more time as she buttoned her dress, hiding the wound.

Krone was the first to awaken. With the time already well into the evening, everyone in the castle was busily bustling about. She’d been out cold until now, but she was aware that she had somehow been spared. Not to mention that she was overjoyed to learn that Chris was also safe and sound. However, the advisor couldn’t understand a lick of what had happened. The one to enlighten her was Misty, who dropped by just before she left.

“I thought we could have a little chat too,” Misty said.

“I don’t mind—Lady Misty?!” Krone gasped. “You’re a bit too close!”

The Elder Lich had sat right next to Krone, who sat up in bed.

“This will allow me to take a better look at you,” Misty explained.

“I see. In any case, how are Princess Katima and Chris?”

“The Cait-Sìth is in her underground laboratory. And the elf is in her room, it seems. She’ll wake up with plenty of rest, so you don’t need to worry.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” Krone breathed a sigh of relief before recalling the facts Misty had shared with her. “Is it true that the Wernsteins share the first king’s blood?”

“It is.”

Misty’s reply was simple and easy to understand, making Krone’s life easier. The advisor sighed and looked up at the ceiling. She’d learned too many things in quick succession: the Ishtarican royal family’s secret, the Demon Lord’s revival, and the Wernsteins’s true lineage.

“I’m shocked, but for some odd reason, a part of me can easily believe it,” Krone confessed. “It doesn’t feel too odd to assume that Chris is a part of the royal family.”

She truly had no clue why, but it was the only response she could provide. But despite everything that had occurred, Ein was always her priority.

“May I ask one more thing? Has the situation changed?” Krone asked.

She recalled Misty implying that the situation would be dire *at this rate*. Krone had traveled to Ist, hoping to use a device from the tower to increase the cannon’s power in a bid to stop Ein. Arshay’s revival, however, had changed their plans quite a bit.

“Arshay’s return has been quite fortuitous,” Misty replied. “Thanks to that, we have another option available to us.”

“You mean...” Krone started.

“Needless to say, it’s far more beneficial for us to actually have Arshay back, not just her magic stone.” Upon witnessing the young advisor’s eyes brim with vigor and joy, Misty giggled. “Hee hee, you really do like Ein, I see.”

“I don’t *like* him.”

“O-Oh?” As Misty looked a touch troubled, Krone was more relaxed and at ease.

“I love him. The word ‘like’ can’t even begin to describe my affection for him, and I’m only fixated on Ein. There’s no one else for me.”

Krone made her straightforward confession of love, revealing emotions that

she'd built up throughout the years. She spoke boldly to the first king's mother.

"I knew it. I think you're..." Misty murmured.

Krone had no idea what the Elder Lich was referring to, looking only more puzzled as Misty removed another leather pouch from her robe.

"Here's a new good luck charm for you," Misty said. "I was in Ein's room before I came here and— Whoops. Forget what I said."

"I heard you mention Ein's room," Krone replied.

"Oh, it's nothing, really. Don't you worry about it."

The Elder Lich had no intention of answering her, and Krone decided to give in. She stared at the leather pouch that was apparently a good luck charm. Since the advisor had received Arshay's magic stone before she left for Ist, perhaps another stone was inside this bag.

"I find it odd that I wasn't affected by Lady Arshay's magic stone when I touched it," Krone said.

"Ah, well that's because I made this bag," Misty replied. "And I used my magic, ensuring that you'd be safe even if you touched the stone."

Normally, powerful magic stones required seals or enclosures of similar power.

"But if you personally made it, it all makes sense to me, Lady Misty," Krone said.

"That's how it is. Now, will you close your eyes, Krone?"

The advisor predicted that the Elder Lich would reveal a magic stone and do something to her, making Krone feel a touch anxious.

"I just want to check something," Misty assured her. "Could you close your eyes and make a cup with your hands? All I need now is a little bit of your time."

Krone was curious, but there was no benefit in angering the woman who was about to save Ein. The advisor concluded that she truly had nothing to fear and obediently followed the instructions.

"Just stay still," Misty said.

Krone had her eyes closed and couldn't see a thing, but as she'd predicted, Misty had taken out a magic stone. She placed it in Krone's hands and watched intently. The orange light that spilled in from the window bounced off the pale, blue magic stone.

"It feels like a magic stone," Krone said. "But why did you place it in my hands?"

"That's a secret," Misty replied. "You mustn't open your eyes, all right?"

Misty closely observed Krone's hands and face. She occasionally furrowed her brow, but the advisor would never know that. The girl simply kept her eyes shut.

"How do you feel?" Misty asked.

"Well, I am feeling curious about the magic stone you placed in my hands," Krone replied.

"Do you feel nauseous? Does your body feel heavy?"

"Not at all."

Krone had no idea what the intent was behind these questions, but she answered them earnestly.

"Thank you," Misty said. "You can open your eyes now."

Her words alone were dull, but the Elder Lich sounded happier than ever and a broad smile stretched across her face. She took the stone out of Krone's hands and placed it back in the leather pouch before handing it to the advisor.

"This is a stone that *you* should be holding on to, Krone. No one else," Misty said. "But you must never take it out recklessly. It's a good luck charm, so keep it close and store it away carefully."

"W-Wait!" Krone called. "What does that mean?!"

"Hee hee. That's also a secret."

The Elder Lich stood up and walked to the door. She didn't look back as she gracefully placed her hand on the knob, answered Krone's question, and exited the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said to Ramza, who was waiting outside. “I had her hold on to a magic stone that I hadn’t cast a spell upon. The stone had no seal, yet she was able to hold it without a care. Krone seemed completely fine.”

“I see,” Ramza replied.

Misty said not a word as she nodded in response.

Epilogue

While sitting upon wooden boxes in a corner of Kingsland's port, Ein and Krone enjoyed a leisurely conversation. From this location, only distant echoes of the city's hustle and bustle could be heard. Instead, the calm ocean breeze washed over them. Krone had a joyous smile on her face as she gazed at Ein's profile.

"Honestly, I think Aunt Katima is to blame," Ein grumbled. In between complaints, he munched on a hunk of bread he'd bought at a nearby stall.

"But you had a hand in that bit of the mischief, didn't you, Ein?" Krone replied, a touch weary. "I heard all about it from Martha."

"Sorry to change the subject, but this bread is delicious."

"I agree. And Ein, you *did* go along with Her Highness's schemes, didn't you?"

"Guess there's no fooling you... Yeah, I did go along with it, but it was because I was dragged into her cunning trap. I'm more of a victim..."

The crown prince refused to shoulder the blame as he shifted his legs atop the wooden box. The two were seated together on the same box, and even the most minute of movements caused them to brush against each other. Their hips were practically touching, and they could see each other very well. With his elbow resting on his thigh, Ein rested his face on his hand as he gazed into the vast ocean. He fell silent with resignation.

"Hee hee," Krone chuckled. "You're pouting."

That alone put her in a better mood as she gently swung her feet over the side of the box. She bent down and lowered her posture to stare up at Ein's profile while giggling.

"Hey," she said.

"Hmm? What's up?" Ein replied.

"I'll make a note in my report that you're not at fault, so you've no need to

worry.”

“Really?!” Ein gasped and faced Krone, his eyes filled with hope.

“I’m sorry for teasing you. I actually was watching from afar, and I know that you were dragged into that mess. And though you *did* seem into it at the end, I’ll turn the other way.”

“W-Wait, then there was no reason for me to sneak out of the castle.”

“You’re right. There was no need for you to rush past me, grab my hand, and flee.”

The pair had been becoming increasingly busy with their work, but Krone hoped she’d have a little time alone with Ein. And so, she went along with the panicking crown prince and fled from the castle, heading all the way to the port. Naturally, she was aware of their schedules as well. She knew that they both had the afternoon free, and so, she’d instinctively held her tongue until now.

“Why did I even grab your hand and flee anyway?” Ein wondered.

“Don’t ask me,” Krone replied. “I only ran with you because you suddenly grabbed my hand.”

“I don’t really understand myself sometimes, to be honest. But it doesn’t hurt to live like this every now and then. Recently, we haven’t been able to relax together, and this is the perfect opportunity.”

Krone was overjoyed to hear him speak so casually and felt her cheeks turn beet red. Luckily for her, Ein turned back to gaze at the sea.

“Good grief,” Krone said.

She noticed that he was blushing too. It seemed that they were both still embarrassed and couldn’t be honest with themselves. In any case, it was clear that they were both happy with how things turned out.

“How should we spend the afternoon?” Ein asked.

“Huh?” Krone replied.

“I’m starting to feel like we don’t need to return until sunset, at this point.”

Krone’s body trembled with glee, but she managed to calm herself down and

blinked back innocently. She placed a hand on his knee and leaned forward.

“There’s actually a store I wanted to visit with you,” Krone said.

“All right, then let’s go,” Ein replied.

He stood up and offered her a hand—as if he were asking her for a dance. Krone took his hand and stepped off the box, but they knew that they couldn’t be so public with their affection while strolling through the castle district. She reluctantly released him from her grip and gave a melancholic smile. Ein, however, grasped her hand once more.

“I don’t think anyone will see us until we’re out on the main road,” he said. As his beloved fell silent, he called out to her. “Krone?”

“It’s nothing. I think I was just in a daze because I’m just so happy.”

He acted like his usual, casual self and turned away. Krone found his subtle, considerate acts so endearing and drew close to her beloved.

And so, the two walked towards the main road, as slowly as possible.

When Krone woke up, she realized that she was still in her office. It was the middle of the night, and her room was shrouded in darkness. *Why am I here?* Krone wondered as she rubbed her sleepy eyes and slowly remembered that she’d returned from a journey to the Tower of Wisdom. *I was filled in on the details before I sent off Lady Misty and the others.*

But Krone found it foolish to leave everything in the hands of Misty and her family. While the castle bustled with the footsteps of those coming and going, the young advisor was quite the busy bee herself—waist-deep in her own research. She’d found herself sleeping on her desk. She hadn’t fully recovered her stamina just yet and had ended up conking out as a result of pushing herself too hard.

“That...was all a dream,” she murmured.

She thought back to those joyous halcyon days with her beloved in the castle district. Tears welled up in her eyes as she reminisced about those days—a far cry from the present. The young advisor wiped them away and slapped her

cheeks.

“Now isn’t the time for this.”

She looked at the clock and nodded before she stood up for a change of pace. Her body felt heavier than usual as she headed outside. Krone had only just left her hospital bed, but she walked around with a dignified gait. Her first stop was Katima’s room, where she planned to check up on the still-unconscious Chris. Afterwards, she maintained that confident stride as she diligently moved about the castle, taking care of any business hurled at her.

“Advisor Krone! Here are the documents you asked for!”

“Pardon me during this busy time! The researcher we called for is at the castle gates, but what shall we do?”

Her usual workload couldn’t even compare to the mountain of work that she was currently taking care of. Yet, Krone didn’t seem to panic. On the contrary, she handled it all with ease, taking care of matters as she continued to walk along. *I must work harder.* She swiftly stepped into a hall near the castle entrance. The busy employees all at once turned to her—she hadn’t done a thing, but she commanded the attention of the room with her dignified stature.

“In lieu of the chancellor, I shall be the one to handle all of his administrative duties,” she declared.

Her eyes were unyielding and regal. She cast a sweeping glance at the employees, and they all unconsciously felt compelled to bow to her.

A certain royal pair watched this scene from the floors above.

“How odd,” Silverd muttered.

Lalalua couldn’t hide her shock as well; for a split second, it seemed like the king was about to bow to this young advisor as well.

“As she is now, Krone reminds me very much of Ein on that fateful night,” Silverd said.

He referred to Ein’s first party in Ishtarica. That night, the prince had defended Krone’s honor and forced the nation’s nobles into respecting their abilities.

“Everyone almost tried to bow to her, as the nobles did that night,” Silverd said.

“Indeed. And you almost did so yourself,” Lalalua pointed out.

“Quite right. I didn’t even question it. It only seemed natural to kneel before her, and I didn’t hesitate to do so.”

However, there was a crucial difference between Krone and Ein. That night, the crown prince’s speech greatly mirrored First King Jayle’s words. The inexplicable, overwhelming aura that oozed from the boy could only be interpreted as the pressure occasionally commanded by the royal family. Krone indeed had a similar aura about her, but in her case...

“She acts like a queen protecting the absence of the king,” Lalalua noted.

There was no other way to describe it. Krone commanded awe and exuded purity.

“And I ask you all to lend me your aid,” Krone said.

She was noble and benevolent, her kindness attracting those around her.

It’d been a while since the *Leviathan* had left Kingsland’s port. The trio stood out on the deck, straining their eyes to see Heim.

“That’s amazing,” Arshay said. “There’s an absolute monster in that direction. If you told me that we’d be up against a god, I’d believe it.”

Despite her relaxed attitude, she was serious. A fierce flame suddenly flickered within her eyes, reigniting her ambient Demon Lord energy. While acutely aware of the powerful entity that awaited them in Heim, she couldn’t help but wince at just how far the roots had already spread.

“I think I’m being targeted,” Arshay said. “The roots are stretching towards me like a starving beast licking their lips.”

“Which makes you a feast,” Ramza said.

“When you put it that way... I don’t feel too bad about it.” This was nothing to be happy about, but Arshay was delighted to learn that her strength was seen

as a gorgeous feast.

“Good grief. You never change, even with those relaxed replies.”

“What?! Then *you’re* still a nitpicky contrarian. And Misty’s still a big meanie!”

“Oh? And what do you mean by that?” Misty asked.

“You were being mean to that girl, weren’t you?” Arshay replied.

“If I’ve got a good read on her, what I did hardly counts as being mean.”

The conversation died down and Arshay, for the first time, turned stiff. She pursed her lips and fully opened her eyes as she unleashed a burst of energy. Her surroundings glittered purple like the evening sky, clashing with the ominous presence beyond the sea.

“This is dangerous,” she said. “If we don’t hurry, it’ll take him only a few hours to evolve into something we won’t have a prayer against. Even with our combined might.”

As she currently stood, Arshay had enough power—perfectly fitting for her sobriquet, the Nightmare of Envy. However, she still claimed that her strength alone might not be enough. Realizing they hadn’t a second to lose, Ramza and Misty found themselves unable to mask their stunned reactions. They hastened the vessel, forcing it to go as fast as it could.

As the *Leviathan* finally reached Roundheart, Arshay turned to Lloyd in the control room.

“Keep the ship a short distance away from the port,” she said. “Or else, the vessel will be crushed.”

Lloyd was gobsmacked as Misty added, “It seems Ein has become far more powerful than we anticipated.”

“She’s right,” Ramza agreed. “I’ve felt as if someone’s been glaring at me for the past half hour now...”

“Yup,” Arshay said. “Ramza, Misty, do you have a plan?”

“None,” the Dullahan responded. “I guess we should put everything we have into an all-out attack, but that’s all I’ve got. If the going gets tough, we should

fall back, chomp on a few stones, and build our energy back up.”

“You never think ahead.”

“If you’ve got a complaint, go ahead and think of your own plan. But take a look around; these idiotically immense roots are out to get us. Do you have a plan to cut them down?”

“We take some weapons with us! I hear technology has advanced quite a bit since our day.”

“Don’t be silly. Weapons that couldn’t hope to scratch the three of us could hardly be referred to as a fighting force.”

Arshay frowned and pouted at her big brother’s words. She placed a hand on the window, her breath causing the glass to fog up. From the sea, Heim appeared to be eerily quiet, but the tree’s striking presence had almost taken the Ishtaricans’ attention away from the silence. There it was—the World Tree of Gluttony in all its glory.

“Look at that awesome light, Misty,” Arshay said.

An unnatural starry sky covered the skies of Heim’s royal capital. It looked as if *several* galaxies had overlapped, and the stars themselves twinkled a little *too* brightly. It was the dead of night, but the starlight had illuminated the city quite clearly.

“What *is* that light?” Lloyd murmured. The question had tumbled out of his mouth just as he’d finished delivering a series of commands.

“That’s a crystal made up of incredibly condensed magical energy,” Ramza replied. “Simply being near it will kill you before you have the chance to think.”

“It’s splendid,” Misty added. “The World Tree lives up to its name. I can see why the elves revere it as their god. Not to forget that it surpasses the Demon Lord as well.”

This “starry night” was created by the World Tree, the massive foliage rich with bushels of twinkling fruit—more manifestations of condensed magical energy. The fruits glimmered with flashes of blue, green, purple, and white, enamoring those who had the chance to see them. One could only describe it as

mystical, but these fruits were more terrifying than any weapon known to man.

“Arshay, you went wild once. You two are like birds of a feather,” Ramza said. “Can’t you become friends or something?”

“If I approach it carelessly, I’ll probably have everything sapped away from me,” Arshay replied. “You think I can be friends with someone like that?”

“Hey, who knows? I don’t think it’s wise to give up before you’ve even tried.”

“All right, all right. Enough, you two. Let’s stop joking around; it’s time to get serious,” Misty said before she imparted some of her wisdom. “We’ll take advantage of a plant’s tendency to enter a dormant state. It’s their instinct to defend themselves should they take root in an unfortunate environment that’s unsuited to their needs. The tree’s impulse would be to protect itself. Let’s use that to stop Ein first.”

It was a tall order to create an inhospitable environment for the World Tree of Gluttony, but they had no other choice.

“Then you’ll work on the roots while Arshay and I attack the main body,” Ramza guessed.

“Exactly,” Misty replied.

“Sorry to interject on this conversation, but may I?” Lloyd asked. “And what will you do if the tree doesn’t have the ability to enter a dormant state?” He wasn’t certain if common sense applied to abnormal entities such as World Trees and Demon Lords.

“We’ll think about it then,” Misty replied. “Just pray that that won’t be the case.”

If dormancy wasn’t an option, the only other method left was to brute-force it—an option they knew to be extremely difficult to pull off. The moment those words of despair left Misty’s lips, the ship shook violently. They’d clashed against the roots.

“This is as far as we can go, I guess,” Ramza said. “We’ll borrow a dinghy.”

“And once we’re off, I suggest you sail a little farther back,” Misty added. “Or else, I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“Mhm! We’ll do our best!” Arshay said.

The Ishtarican crew could only rely on these three now. Lloyd saw them off and lowered his head—he maintained his posture until the trio were out of sight.

The trio boarded a dinghy and made their way through the treacherous waters.

“This takes me back,” Ramza said coolly with a look of nostalgia.

“Dear?” Misty asked.

“Doesn’t it remind you of those days? The ones in which you saved me, we met Arshay, and we traveled all around the world.”

“Mhm. We fought a lot,” Arshay said.

This was all before the birth of the former royal capital and the Demon Lord’s territory. “Yeah. I feel prideful knowing that the three of us can fight together again,” Ramza said.

The Dullahan, the Elder Lich, and the Demon Lord stood together. As the strongest force in history, they knew no equal.



“Let’s go,” Misty said. “We must put an end to what we left behind: the calamity’s final source.”

“I’ll give it my all too,” Arshay said.

Not once did Ramza turn back as he spoke once more. “It’s been a while since we fought together. Let’s not hold back.”

He looked up at the World Tree of Gluttony towering above him.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Ryou Yuuki, the author. Thank you for tagging along with the eighth volume. How was it? I'd be happy if you enjoyed the story!

I planned on ending Ein's childhood here so that we could head into his adolescent days, but this volume turned out to be bigger than I expected. His childhood will end in the ninth volume for sure.

The three strongest people in history have gone to stop Ein, who has now turned into the World Tree of Gluttony. As Demon Lords clash, Ein's beloved is also on the move. And the true story of the boy who admires the first king will be revealed. I'm sorry to have pushed back another volume of this climax that's assembled the whole cast.

I'm currently revising the installments I've published online, so you can enjoy the differences from the physical book as well as some additional content! I hope that you'll continue to tag along with Ein's journey.

Lastly, I'd like to add that this volume was no exception in receiving everyone's constant support. Thank you to Chisato Naruse for their superb illustrations, to everyone else involved in the making of this book, and of course, to my readers who decided to pick up this volume.

I hope that I can meet everyone in the ninth volume at the conclusion of Ein's childhood in late spring—when the hydrangeas bloom.



On the battlefield,
in the outskirts of Heim's royal capital

He had his horse trot a few
paces forward before he
pointed his black sword at
the royal castle.

*Let's go.
This really will be
our final battle!*


**MAGIC
STONE**
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!


8

I refuse to believe you. I'll end you in a snap, then go to them.

Ein

Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill *Toxin Decomposition EX* who later evolved into a Demon Lord.

Lloyd

Ishtarica's marshal.

Shannon

Fiancée of Clint, Ein's younger brother. But her true identity is...

Lily

An assassin who excels at stealthy missions.

Chris

A beautiful young elf who serves as the personal knight to Ishtarica's royal family.

Oh, you're so cold. Your precious friends are standing at death's door, and yet...



*Yeah.
I'm back.*

As the waves of energy died down, she finally appeared for all the world to see. Clad in a gothic dress, the slender girl was taller than Katima, but still rather petite. The evanescent expression on her face could compel one to protect this adorable creature to the death. Yet, she emanated an aura that couldn't belong to anyone but the Demon Lord.

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

8

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE Me THE
STRONGEST!

MAGIC
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Gourmet



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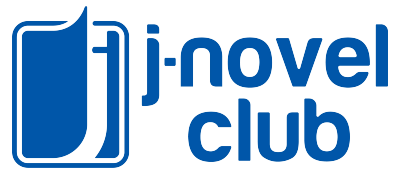
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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume
8

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo Edited by Coop Bicknell

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