
Dawn of the Mapmaker
The Surveyor Girl and the Forbidden Knowledge
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Akira Nashiki
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MonoKubo

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Dawn of the Mapmaker: The Surveyor Girl and the Forbidden Knowledge, Volume 1

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Dawn of the Mapmaker

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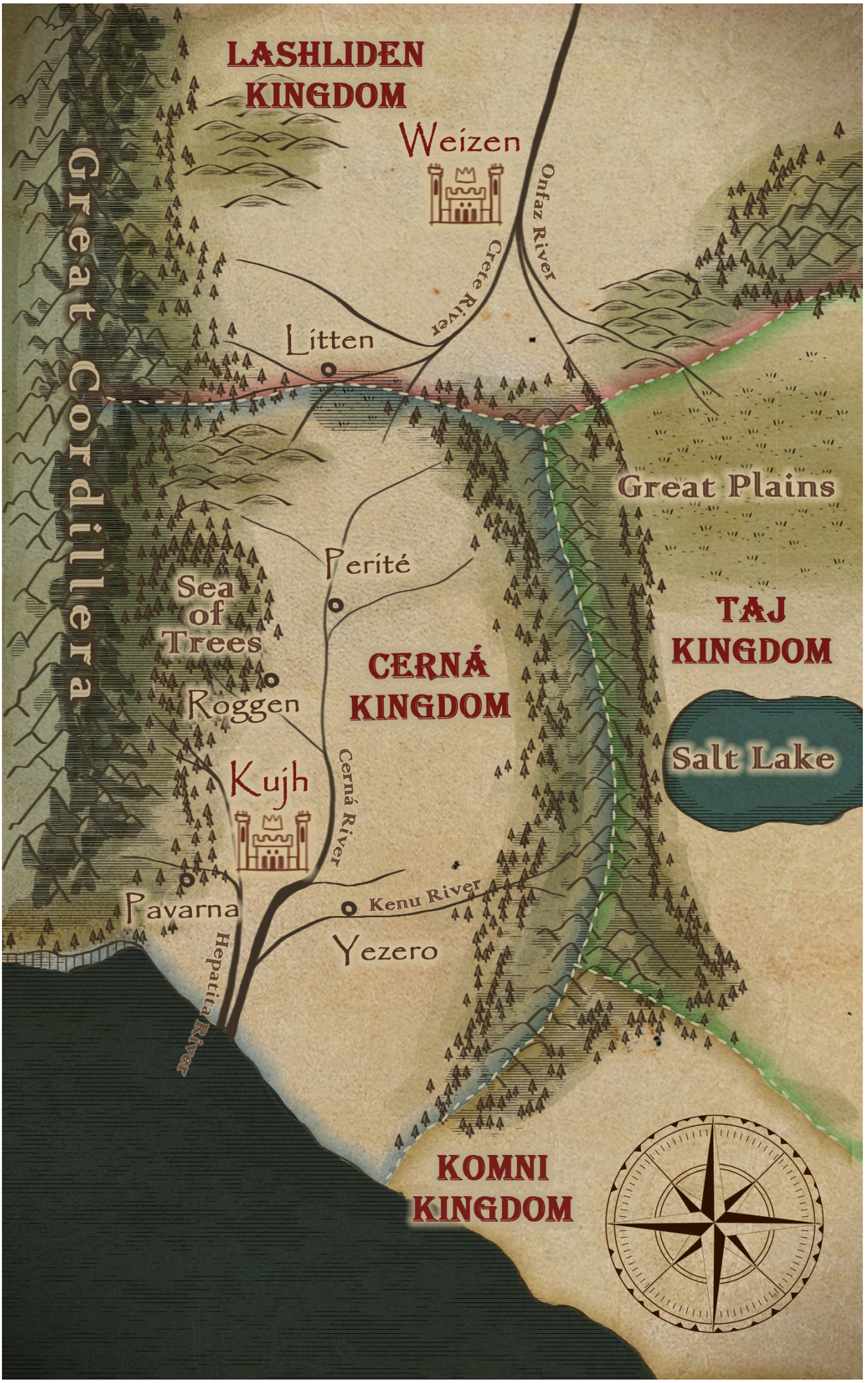
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UNEN
ŌRI
MOURU
IRENA


LASHLIDEN KINGDOM
Weizen
Onfaz River
Crete River
Great Cordillera
Litten
Great Plains
Perité
Sea of Trees
TAJ KINGDOM
CERNÁ KINGDOM
Roggen
Salt Lake
Kujh
Cerná River
Kenu River
Pavarna
Yezero
Hepatita River
KOMNI KINGDOM

Arc 1: Sparrow Eyes

Chapter 1: Inexplicable Murmurs

“PLEASE take the job!” Unen pleaded in the loudest voice she could muster so as not to lose out to the noisy chatter of the cheap saloon. She anchored her gaze on a man in his prime who was throwing back his ale alone at a table beside the bar counter.

He looked up at her with irritation. “Look here, Short Stuff, can’t ya ask somebody else to do the job? Why does it hafta be me?”

Unen unconsciously bit the inside of her cheek at being called “Short Stuff”. She was about to argue her name wasn’t “Short Stuff” or “Shorty” or “Tiny”, but she swallowed back her complaints right as she was about to lash out at him. With her matchstick legs, not growing any taller in over three years, and her unruly short hair, Unen certainly didn’t look anywhere close to fifteen years of age. She couldn’t fault him for her looks.

“She’s asking you because she needs to, otherwise she would ask someone else.” Standing beside Unen with her hands at her hips and a frown on her lips was Irena, a friend who was two years older. Her glamorous auburn hair flicked quickly from side to side as if animating her annoyance with him.

They were inside the Scarecrow Nose, the biggest saloon in the region renowned for travelers congregating within its walls the instant they entered the town of Yezero due to its convenient location. As evening drew near, townspeople who had finished their work in the fields for the day flocked through the door one after another to let loose for the night. Though it was only the first week of June, the overcrowded saloon felt like a boiling hot attic on a midsummer day.

“And I’m supposed to care…? Why not just suck it up and ask the captain to __”

“Ask my dad? Are you seriously suggesting that?”

“Just kidding.” The man heartily laughed at the enraged Irena, whose eyes

sharply narrowed on him. “Cap’ is strongly opposed to his little girl entering the Vigilante Corps after all.”

“That’s why we’re stuck asking you for help. Getting a request from his lordship to survey his land is an incredibly important job. How could we ask anyone other than Yezero’s best swordsman to be our guard?”

Last week, the town mayor had received a single letter from the lord of the Baborak territory, which Yezero belonged to. According to the mayor, the letter had read, “I’ve heard your town is in possession of a skilled mapmaker. Would it be possible to have them fashion a map of my territory?”

There was no one who fell under or went by the trade of mapmaker. But there *was* an apprentice transcriber who accepted requests to draw up maps of towns and fields. Thus, the mayor had given the lord’s letter to Unen, and with the help of her reliable friend, she was presently attempting to hire a guard to protect her while she took measurements and surveyed the lord’s land.

“You’re just going to survey the plains to the west, right? Then the young lady right here should be more than enough protection.”

“How could you be so optimistic? Baborak and the neighboring Chelveny have never been on good terms. It’s even more of an issue because this time she’s going to survey the border between the two territories. I can’t protect Unen alone if trouble finds us.”

“But you said it’s for three days, yeah? Like I said before, the pay’s a bit too cheap, don’t’cha think?”

Having the harsh reality thrust in her face once more, Unen chewed her lower lip in irritation.

They had been paid a very modest sum for the job upfront, which wouldn’t be enough to hire two guards. Lord Baborak’s excuse had been his choice to assign the job in parts. “Use this money to make a map of the grasslands at the western edge of my territory. We can decide where to go from there,” he had said.

Desperately reminding herself to hold her head high and her eyes off the ground, Unen continued trying to convince the man. “The job this time is a trial

run. His lordship said that if this map fits what he wants, he'll hire me to make a map of his entire territory afterwards. I'm pretty sure I can pay you more once that happens…"

"Ah, sorry, it's not like I'm trying to squeeze more money outta ya, Short Stuff." The man's expression suddenly soured as he scratched his head. "You see, word is that a duo of extraordinarily skilled mercenaries known as the Two-headed Griffin has been stayin' in the town two towns over since last month. They've been snatching up every single beast extermination and guard job in the area, putting my pitiful coin pouch in a sorry state…"

"The Two-headed…Griffin?" Unen and Irena's voices perfectly synchronized.

"Rumors say one half of the duo is a frightening man of colossal size who has easily lopped off a brown bear's head with a swing of his sword. The other half is a mage born from darkness or somethin' like that. He's said to have erased a gang of burglars from the face of the planet when they attacked a wagon train."

Unen narrowly stopped herself from snorting. "The rumors are…fitting of a legendary monster," she replied, trying to be as inoffensive as possible in case the man by chance actually believed the made-up stories.

Like Unen, Irena clearly thought the rumors sounded fishy. Right after flashing a devilish grin, she taunted him with a straight face. "In that case, I guess we'll go hire that extraordinarily skilled Griffin duo."

"Word is that they won't accept jobs for a pittance." Lightly shrugging, the man brought his cup of malt liquor to his lips. He must have wanted to end the conversation, because he casually turned away from the girls.

Regardless, Irena hadn't given up hope yet. She circled around to lean in toward his face. "Why not take our job, since you're so troubled with the lack of work?"

"How can I make a living if I occupy my time with crummy jobs and lose out when a good one comes in?"

From all appearances, Unen and Irena would be better off giving up on hiring him. Unen dropped her gaze to her feet with a sigh. Her depression was short-lived when she began to notice the smell, or rather the lack of smells. The heavy

stench of sweaty bodies mixed with the heady smells of cooked food and liquor permeating the space around her had all but vanished.

In their place, an onslaught of dense and chokingly thick forest smells slammed against her body like raging billows.

Startled, Unen lifted her head—or tried to. Just as she was about to look up, she caught wind of a voice. She focused her complete attention on straining her ears to pick up on it.

<<…the…one…who…us…>>

The voices faded into a sudden gust of wind that took away the forest's presence and the distinct smell.

When Unen returned to her senses, she found herself amid the ruckus of the cheap saloon that hadn't changed one bit in the moments she had zoned out. Once more the aroma of cut-rate food and human bodies crammed into a room far too small returned.

"It can't be…" she muttered, "has Hereh…?" She frantically glanced around the saloon.

Up until three years ago, Unen occasionally heard a voice unheard by others. It was a mysterious voice whose age and gender were indistinct. In fact, she wasn't sure if the voiceless murmurs even made a sound. The inexplicable murmur tickling Unen's ears moments ago held the same feeling as the one she heard three years ago. But the dense redolence of the sea of trees that engulfed her this time was a completely new experience.

And now the person who took her seriously whenever she told him her nonsensical experiences of hearing voiceless murmurs—who smiled while he patted her on the head with his warm hand—had become nothing more than a faint memory.

"What's wrong, Unen? Did you say something just now?"

"No, it's nothing."

Unen gave Irena a reassuring smile, then slowly took a deep breath. *Right, there's no way he would be here.* Lightly shaking her head to drive the nostalgic

memories back into the recesses of her mind, she returned her attention to the scene in front of her.

An unusual commotion had started up near the saloon entrance while she was distracted. The raucous voices spread to the corners of the building like ripples on a pond before giving way to the silence of a placid lake.

A tall young man stood in the entrance, his back framed by the setting sunlight. He was an unfamiliar face to the crowd. A long sword hung at his waist.

The young man headed straight for the bar counter inside the still-as-death saloon. He didn't seem the least bit perturbed by all the eyes burrowing into him.

From his appearance, he looked to be around his early twenties. Ashen hair cut close to his head swayed over his brow, which was darkly tanned by the sun. Blue eyes gleamed from their sockets with a sharpness reminiscent of birds of prey. His tightly pressed together lips made his hardened countenance appear all the more valiant.

Leaving absolute silence trailing behind him, the young man stood before the counter.

"W-Welcome. What will you have?" the old barkeep nervously asked the unfamiliar customer.

Without easing a muscle in his stiff face, the young man answered back with a curt, "I'm searching for *Sparrow Eyes*."

It felt like fingers made of ice crawled along Unen's spine the moment he uttered that name.

The man who kept refusing their job offer looked up at Unen and Irena, cupped his hand around his mouth, and whispered, "Hey, did you hear that? Sparrow Eyes has gotten surprisingly famous. Isn't that a customer?"

In spite of the fact that he was whispering, his voice hung loudly in the air of the silent saloon.

Sure enough, the young man in question turned his head toward the girls.

In that exact moment, Unen's ears caught the faint murmur again—sounding slightly clearer this time than before.

<<…the one who protects…the one…who…us…>>

At the same time, the scarcely audible, voiceless murmur resounded in her chest. The trees then shot up around her, blotting out the sky. What in the world *was* it that she glimpsed in the shadow of the evergreen needles?

<<Unen…Ende…Baina>>

Reality snapped back into focus just as the quiet yet powerful ownerless voice rushed at Unen's face.

Her eyes traced the shape of the muscular body towering over her until they met the falcon-like gaze piercing through her.

Unen carefully stared back at the young man.

Is the sudden return of the Murmur and this man related? What in the world is that Murmur anyway? I haven't felt that voiceless Murmur even once since that warm hand was lost to me…

"Are you the one called Sparrow Eyes?" he asked Irena, after comparing her to Unen.

"Wrong person." Broadcasting her displeasure, Irena tilted her chin upward.

The man who had instigated this uncomfortable confrontation shook with laughter. "Wrong one, mister. Sparrow Eyes ain't the pretty little lady but the shorty there. See how Short Stuff's hair is the color of a sparrow?"

The young man's eyes widened in surprise, as if to protest, "But this one doesn't look any older than a small child."

His reaction wasn't uncommon by any means. That didn't lessen Unen's displeasure, however, and she snorted loudly. "I know there are people who call me Sparrow Eyes. But I have no idea if the 'Sparrow Eyes' you're looking for is me."

"…It can't be—did he have…a child?"

Unen blinked several times. She didn't have a jot about what he was going on

about. But before she had the chance to ask him what he meant, the young man pulled a rolled-up sheepskin parchment from his chest pocket and showed the familiar map to her.

“Are you the one who made this map?”

The neighboring town’s mayor hired Unen to make that map last spring.

“I am?”

Menace immediately filled his gaze. “Who taught you surveying and mapmaking?”

It was then that Unen guessed what he was after.

Three years ago, and the last time Unen had heard the Murmur, outsiders appeared before her. They had been a duo of churlish men from a faraway land who angrily interrogated her in harsh shouts, then left after intimidating her with a parting threat. There was no question in her mind that the young man in front of her was searching for the same person as the men from three years ago.

Unen quietly swallowed back the saliva filling her mouth as she cautiously sorted out what she needed to keep hidden and what she should tell him to skirt further trouble.

Irena stepped between the young man and Unen. “Hey, you, did you come here to hire Sparrow Eyes or not?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then there’s no need for you to waste your time on him, Unen.” Irena grabbed her hand. “The sun’s going to set soon too. Let’s hurry home.”

Slow to react to her friend’s unexpected action, Unen was pulled in front of the young man toward the exit before she could form an opinion.

“Ah, hey, wait! I’m not done talking—” The man grabbed Unen’s other arm as Irena dragged her forward.



The excessive force pulling her in the opposite direction further destabilized her already unstable stance, causing her to lurch backward. Irena looked over her shoulder as soon as she felt the jerk on her hand. Upon seeing his tight grip on Unen's arm, she slid her left leg across the floor in one fluid movement.

Drunks escaped with their chairs in hand at exactly the same moment Irena's sweeping kick knocked the young man's legs out from under him.

"Let's go! Unen!" Irena yanked on Unen's hand without even glimpsing where the young man landed on the floor. He jerkily sat up in the direction Unen was being pulled toward, right in the path of her feet.

"Ah! Hey, Irena! Wai—"

At the rate they were going, Unen was about to land a kick to his face. Using all her strength, she tried to pull back her foot.

Similarly sensing the imminent danger, the young man lowered himself to the ground with remarkable reflexes.

Still, Unen felt an indescribable sensation through the sole of her boot as her foot came down. Wooden floorboards didn't squish like that.

"Irena! Wait! I stepped on him! I just stepped on that man!"

The saloon exploded in an uproar. Influenced by their drunkenness, the majority of customers blithely cheered the girls on while mocking the young man, the few sober ones taking the time to ask him, "You okay, young man?"

Unen tried her hardest to put as little weight into the foot that stepped on him, but it was impossible to make the impact completely painless. She was flustered with guilt and a desire to go back and apologize, but Irena mercilessly dragged her away. With Unen's small size, there was no way she could win against her sword-trained friend.

"Umm, err, sorry!" she called out nervously behind her.

Barely getting in her apology, Unen exited the Scarecrow Nose. The sound of jeering laughter filled the previous silence as the saloon patrons returned to merrymaking.

Chapter 2: Book of Secrets

IRENA broadcast her confidence in her physical prowess by dragging Unen more than half the distance to the town square, without losing speed. She paused to shoot a wry grin at Unen who was left gasping for air on the ground behind her.

“Unen, I think you should work out a little more.”

“Irena…I think…you should…be more aware…that…your stamina…is outside the…norm…” Unen got out between haggard breaths.

Irena puffed out her cheeks as if she found what Unen said rather upsetting.

Irena’s father was a master swordsman who had been skilled enough to once serve as a guard at Lord Baborak’s castle. He took an arrow to the knee during a skirmish with Chelveny twenty years ago and retired. He lived out his retirement tilling the farmland in Yezero bequeathed to him by Lord Baborak for his years of service. Though he had retired from his work as a castle guard, his skill with the sword remained leaps and bounds beyond the average townsperson’s, and so he took it upon himself to become the valiant swordsman who singlehandedly created and commanded Yezero’s Vigilante Corps.

Having learned the basics from her father since she could walk, Irena became a skilled swordswoman and strong enough to contend for first or second place as the mightiest sword wielder in town. Even if Irena didn’t have the advantage of standing a good two heads taller, it was evident Unen had no chance of beating her friend at anything physical.

“But if you want to travel around the world making maps in the future, you’ll need to get stronger. Otherwise you’ll become an easy snack for wild animals and robbers.”

“I’ll just hire a strong bodyguard when that time comes.”

“…Aren’t you struggling to do that very thing right now…?” Irena sighed.

Unable to find a good comeback, Unen humbly lowered her head and

apologized, “Sorry for dragging you into this.”

***

JUST over the bridge spanning the Kenu River, to the east of the town square, was a two-story building with a red-tiled roof that Unen called home. Though dusk was already setting in, there were still several people waiting in line for medical care in front of its first-story, where a sign that read “Clinic” hung from the eaves.

From the building a man with a bandaged hand shouted over his shoulder as he exited, “Thank you!”

After which, a blond young man in an apron poked his face out from the door and called, “Will the next person please come in?” to the small crowd.

Yet, upon noticing Unen and Irena, he went outside to meet them, passing right by the next patient who entered as he left. Cane in hand, he jerkily dragged his right leg behind him as he made his way over to the girls.

“Sorry for always leaving everything to you, Irena,” he said, “You wouldn’t have to go through all this trouble if I wasn’t in this state.”

“Why are you acting like we aren’t close, Simon? I’m just doing whatever it is I can do, just like you and Unen. And don’t say stuff like, ‘in this state.’ I’ll hit you.”

“If I thank you now, it’ll feel like I’m asking you to hit me anyway.” The young man, Simon, brought his left hand to his mouth and softly chuckled. Illuminated by the sunset’s afterglow, his untanned cheeks were dyed red.

“By the way, did you find a guard?” He watched Unen and Irena exchange looks, a frown creasing his brow. “Something go wrong?”

“Simon!” A gravelly voice rang from inside the clinic, spilling beyond its walls. It was his father and the clinic’s owner, Doctor Milosh. “Why’re you playing around, boy?! Get your butt back in here already! Help me out!”

“I’m going to go use the privy for a bit!” Simon shouted back at the doorway with an indifferent face. Then he invited the girls to follow him to the back of the building.

Irena settled in the quiet shadows of the outhouse with an unusually grim expression that had nothing to do with the heavy stench of the outhouse itself. “Some suspicious guy was searching for Sparrow Eyes,” she started.

“He wasn’t there with a job?”

Unen gave a big nod in response to Simon’s question. “Yeah. He clearly said he didn’t come to hire Sparrow Eyes when Irena asked him upfront.”

The girls took turns narrating the events that took place in the saloon to Simon.

“When it comes down to it, if you want to ask somebody something, you should start by introducing yourself!” Irena complained in exasperation. “And then the guy had the nerve to seize Unen’s arm! He yanked on Unen like a mutt with a piece of meat! How dare he knock her over like that?! What right did he have to touch Unen?!”

After ranting on and on for a good few minutes, Irena’s expression grew significantly more cheerful than before, evidently satisfied to get that off her chest. However, Simon took up her anger instead, and he began to curse the rude stranger he had yet to meet.

“What a violent man! What he did is inexcusable!”

Irena agreed. “His outrageous rudeness made me kick his legs out from under him, but I never would’ve thought Unen would be the one to land the finishing blow.”

“I didn’t land any blow on him!” Unen protested.

“Didn’t you say you stepped on him?”

“…Yes, ma’am.”

Recalling the questionably soft-yet-firm sensation under her boot, Unen hung her head with a bothered face. In the rush of being dragged away from the stranger, she had been scared and closed her eyes, so she didn’t know exactly where her foot had landed, but she prayed it wasn’t anywhere that caused him intense pain.

“Don’t sweat it! That guy looked as sturdy as a rock! Someone with your

weight wouldn't leave a dent in him!" Irena laughed, before suddenly turning grim. "Still, he bothered us about surveying and mapmaking… It makes me wonder what he wanted when he demanded to know who taught Unen how to make maps."

Unen silently stared at Irena's furrowed brow, then observed Simon's reaction. Simon leveled Unen with an equally serious gaze in return.

"I mean, sure, Unen's maps are incredible, but there's not much of a need for such precision in reality. It might be a different story for somebody who owns land—a lot of land at that—but those families are few and far between. Not only is mapmaking a hassle, but it comes with a total lack of work too—"

"Not everyone who commissions a map has it made for their own lands." Irena's rambling on the pointlessness of mapmaking was interrupted by a familiar male voice. "Some have a map commissioned in order to *make* the land theirs."

Stepping out of the outhouse's shadow was none other than the young man Unen had stepped on in the saloon. Taken by complete surprise, Irena froze, her mouth and eyes opened wide. Unsure of how to react, Unen stood there stupidly staring at him.

Simon took a step toward the young man to shield the girls. "To make the land yours? Are you planning to start a war?"

"I was speaking in general terms." Smoothly evading Simon's thorny gaze, the young man glared at Unen, then Irena, then…surprisingly, apologized. "My actions earlier were rude and inappropriate. My name is Ori. I asked about the map because I'm searching for someone."

"You're searching for someone? Someone other than Sparrow Eyes then?" Simon demanded.

The young man—Ori—turned to face him. "I am. I don't know what name he goes by now, but the name my employer said was *Hereh*."

Sweat drenched Unen's hands. *Aah, I knew it.*

Ori proceeded to explain the details of the wanted person with matter-of-fact precision. "Age forty, blue eyes, hair the color of hay, his height is…" He cut his

hand through the air to compare Hereh's height to Simon. "About the same as you."

Simon wasn't short by any means, but Ori stood a good ten centimeters taller than him.

Simon didn't even try to hide his irritation as he asked, "Why are you after that person?"

He'll probably just deflect the answer again, Unen thought—

"He's a thief."

—she gasped loudly at his unimaginable reply. He quickly revealed the reason, completely unlike the men three years ago.

Simon was equally stunned. Unen heard him mutter, "You've gotta be kidding."

But… Unen bit down on the inside of her cheek. *Taking only one side of the story as the whole truth is the manner of fools.* Determined to ascertain the truth, Unen turned a powerful gaze on Ori.

Noticing her stare, Ori directed his attention away from Simon. "I've been told he stole a troublesome Book of Secrets from a certain high-ranked mage's library fifteen years ago," he told Unen. "It's a treasured book that was never meant to be removed because it's filled with mysterious knowledge the rest of the world doesn't know."

He spoke with indifference as he took Unen's map out from his pocket once again. "This map that you supposedly made reproduces geographical features to an unbelievably accurate degree. It's as if you borrowed the eyes of a bird to scope out the lands." He eyed her. "My employer confirmed that Hereh was in this town three years ago. Is it possible you learned surveying from him?"

The question she had been dreading ever since he asked her about mapmaking in the saloon slammed directly into her gut. Shaken, she tightly pressed her lips together as she prepared herself for what she would have to say next.

But before she could say anything, Simon slipped in front of her. "It's true a

person by the name of Hereh was here for a short time.”

“For a short time? He’s not here now?”

“He’s been missing for three years,” Simon said, pointing to the east submerged in the heavy shadows of dusk. “The person by that name moved to the middle of the eastern forest nearly ten years ago. He lived quietly with his child there without ever getting involved with the town, aside from when he came to sell my dad, who’s a doctor, some medicines we’d never heard of before. But when his child died in the major earthquake three years ago, he left this town for good…”

“So he did have a child…” Ori spat out in a hoarse voice, then sighed. He dropped his gaze for a moment before refocusing his attention sharply on Simon. “How old was the child? Who was the mother? Was he married?”

“I’m not sure about the age, but I think the child was around ten when the earthquake hit. Of course there was no mother around; I don’t even know if he was ever married. He was almost always alone when he came to town, and he always left right after he finished his business here.”

“Is that so?” Ori muttered, dejected.

Simon quietly continued, “He helped my dad out during all the chaos after the earthquake. During that time, he took more care of us than we did him. We were more than saved by him. So all the unimaginable medicine and healing knowledge he had was thanks to that Book of Secrets, huh?”

“What it means,” Ori frostily enunciated, “is that he should’ve never been in possession of that knowledge.”

Hostility flared in Simon’s eyes at Ori’s tone. “She and I only survived thanks to him,” he growled in a low voice. He lightly tapped his right leg with his cane, making a dull thud that only comes from wood hitting wood. “If he hadn’t possessed that knowledge, we wouldn’t be alive right now.”

Inside, Unen strongly agreed with Simon. Hereh had saved her from the isolated, dreary world she had experienced as she slowly approached death. The only reason she lived surrounded by caring people while working as a transcriber was because of what he did for her.

Ori fidgeted uncomfortably, though his expression remained unmoved. His gaze shifted from Simon while his right hand scratched at his head like he wasn't sure what to do with himself.

Then, as if finally registering what he had just heard, Ori turned once more toward Simon. "She…?"

"Yeah, she." This time Simon gestured to Unen with not just his eyes but his hand.

Chapter 3: Contract

ORI stared dumbfounded at Unen. “A…girl?”

Unen let loose the loudest, most exaggerated sigh, causing all the color to drain from Ori’s face. He continued to stand there like a stick in the mud, surprised at the sudden reveal, before recomposing himself and snapping to attention like a soldier in front of Unen. His gaze matched hers.

“I’m sorry.” For all the distress in his voice, his expression hadn’t changed much.

Why does he try so hard to keep his expression neutral? Unen found his expressionlessness curious, but accepted his apology.

“It’s fine, really. I’m used to it,” she admitted.

“Sorry,” Ori immediately apologized again.

“I said it’s fine.”

“Sorr—” He fumbled for words. “A-Ah, sorry. Err, not that, umm…”

Maintaining a controlled expression plays a large part in keeping a calm façade, along with curbing one’s gestures and tone of voice. Ori’s wild hand gestures and the panic evident in his flustered voice ruined the entire act.

Maybe he isn’t trying to keep his expression neutral to remain in control of the situation? Several people I know in Yezero are bad at expressing themselves. Mayhap Ori is like them and this rigid countenance of his is already unfiltered.

While Unen ruminated over the inconsequential details, Ori finally calmed down. Sucking in a deep breath, he exhaled and cleared his throat once.

“So I take it you learned mapmaking and surveying techniques from Hereh during his stay at the clinic?”

Unen replied cautiously, “I think you can say that was the case…indirectly.”

“Indirectly?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Simon cut in. “He only stayed at the clinic right after the major earthquake hit. Do you seriously think there was time to teach or be taught mapmaking? Just so you know, everyone was working nonstop to tend to the mountain of patients, which increased ten times over with every passing day!” He stopped and clenched his fists. “But I was stuck in bed the whole time.” Simon bit his lip.

Irena smacked him in the back of the head. Simon shot her a bitter smile in return before turning back to Ori. “Three months after the earthquake, the man you’re looking for suddenly disappeared without a word. Nobody’s seen him since. At least not in the town of Yezero.”

“Then how did this map come to be…? What does she mean by indirectly?”

Simon sighed irritably at Ori’s rapid-fire questions. “Unen’s dad and my dad are old friends. That’s why we took Unen in when her parents died in the earthquake.” Simon stopped talking again and this time looked pointedly at Unen.

Unen gave him a small nod and squared her shoulders as she looked up at Ori. “Hereh disappeared and I was given his suddenly unoccupied room. After some time there, I ended up finding a folded book that had fallen into a crack between the bed and wall.”

Fire lit Ori’s eyes. “You learned from that book?” He expectantly leaned forward.

She nodded slowly. “Yeah. Surveying methods were written inside.”

“Where is that book now?”

“Milosh burned it, saying we had to get rid of it before it brought trouble.”

Just what kind of reaction was Ori going to have after learning what he was searching for had been burned? Unen answered his question while internally dreading his reaction, but the man himself simply said, “I see,” in response.

Simon took over the explanation again. “This suspicious duo barged into our home as soon as he had disappeared, threatening us with, ‘Where’s Hereh? No

good will come to you or your family if you hide him.' Maybe they're in the same line of work as you? Due to that incident, Dad quickly destroyed the book to keep us from getting into any further trouble." He paused to catch his breath and dropped his tone authoritatively. Then, emphasizing each of his next words as he locked eyes with Ori, he firmly summarized, "In other words, there isn't anyone who matches the 'Hereh' you're looking for here. Nor do we have anything to do with him."

"That's the end of this conversation," Simon's glare implied. The two young men silently held each other's gaze without so much as a twitch.

Ori was the first to avert his eyes. He turned toward Unen, as if there hadn't just been a confrontation, and asked yet another question. "Was there anything else written in that folded book?"

"Nothing aside from the stuff on maps."

"Are you the only one who read it?"

"That's right."

Simon's exasperated voice cut through Unen's answer, "You've gotten more than enough out of us, haven't you? Hereh isn't here anymore. So, what now? Don't tell me you're going to lay into Unen next with something like, 'You were never meant to possess that knowledge.'"

Ori said nothing. He merely stared silently at Unen.

"Who the *hell* do you think you are?" Simon bluntly asked, venom lacing his voice.

A deep sigh spilled from Ori's lips. "Knowledge is power. And great, unnecessary power draws equally great disaster to it. Besides—"

"Oh, I know! I just got a great idea!" Irena interrupted, cheerfully clapping her hands together.

She had remained quietly listening until now, so her abrupt interruption startled Ori—and even Unen and Simon. Now the center of everyone's attention, Irena sheepishly addressed Ori, "Listen, won't you join me as Unen's bodyguard? We just need you for three days."

“Why the heck are you bringing that up now?!” Simon immediately shouted, before Ori could even react.

“Sorry, but he did just bring up how disaster follows talented people, so… Look, Simon, weren’t you the one who suggested that we find a guard in case we ran into a disaster?”

“This isn’t the time to be playing memory games!”

“I’m not playing around. Anyway, *Ori*, was it?” Irena pressed on with a storm-like fervor. “That sword at your waist isn’t just for decoration, right? You hid your presence completely when you eavesdropped on us. You’re no ordinary swordsman to be able to get this close without me noticing.”

Completely taken aback, Ori was rendered speechless. *So his face muscles can move in surprise*, Unen mentally noted.

“How long do you plan on skipping out on work, Simon?!” Milosh’s angry voice shot out from the clinic with impeccable timing.

Irena raised her eyebrows. “Did you hear that? Do you think you can just walk away after using up Simon’s precious time with your questions?” she charged, “Besides, if they hadn’t cooperated with you, you would’ve wasted days asking around town about the person you’re after. You finished your work in the shortest amount of time possible thanks to them, so don’t you think you should reward us for it?”

Simon was still against it. “Hang on there. Are you going to entrust your life to this suspicious guy? I’m against it.”

“Oh, but he can properly apologize when the time comes. That makes him a good man. And you can see for yourself how devoted he is to his work.”

Switching straight from surprise to exasperation, Ori knit his brow. Well, they were saying whatever they pleased about him right in front of his face, so it was no wonder that his expression would morph into a frown.

“Anyway, it’s just for three days.”

“It’s for three WHOLE days! You’ll be with this fishy man for three whole days…”

Unen sensed a change in the conversation's trajectory and quietly sighed to herself. Inhaling until her lungs were full of air, she stepped aside to address Ori directly, as her friends were on the verge of launching into another of their lovers' spats.

"Would you mind helping out if you're free? I can't pay much, but as you can see, I'm very small and powerless, and I can't put the entire burden of guarding me on Irena."

Plus, I might be able to hear the Murmurs if I'm with Ori.

The first time Unen had ever sensed the Murmurs was when she met Hereh. Murmurs only brushed against her ears when she was with him. After he disappeared, she heard the Murmurs faintly once again when the people who came searching for him stood in the clinic doorway.

And now, the voiceless voice she hadn't heard once in the three years since had resurfaced with Ori's appearance.

Unen fixed an imploring gaze on him, pleading silently. As things stood, he was her sole lead on Hereh. She hoped unraveling the puzzle around the Murmurs would give her an idea of where Hereh was.

Hereh's warm hands had saved her life. His kind voice had taught her many things in the small snatches of time he took to help her. He had given her so much, yet she hadn't even been able to tell him a basic thank you.

"…Fine. Three days, yeah? I'll take on the job as your guard." Glancing icily at Irena and Simon, who looked like they weren't doing anything other than flirting at this point, Ori nodded firmly in Unen's direction. "In return for all the time you saved me in regard to Hereh, my fee can just be the necessary expenses including food."

"Thank you!" Unen really was grateful from the bottom of her heart.

It almost looked as though the corners of his lips turned up ever so slightly.

***

THEY decided to leave early in the morning two days later for surveying the land in question. Until then, they would each handle their individual

preparations for the three-day journey. Once packed, they would gather at the clinic and take the time to readjust the size and weight of their bags.

Due to Unen's smaller size and her many crucial surveying tools, her belongings had to be split up between the other two. Naturally, neither of them found it a problem, and agreed to help her without so much as making a reluctant face. Then again, that could partially be because Ori wasn't the expressive type in the first place, but Unen decided not to mull over the insignificant details.

Ori had rented a room at the inn near the saloon. Upon hearing him mumble, "I didn't think I'd be able to leave my room in less than three days," Unen realized Irena hadn't been too outrageous by demanding his help in thanks for drastically shortening his search time.

"Oh yeah, one last thing," Simon called out to Ori just as he turned to return to the inn. "Was it 'Notsors' who hired you to look for Hereh?"

Notsors was the name of the mage who frequently appeared in legends stemming from multiple regions. In these legends, he was said to have shared fire with people shivering from the cold; to have demolished a massive mountain to fill in a deep valley; to have dropped lightning down upon a village of thieves; and to have predicted incoming storms. On the kinder, lighter side of things, he was said to have found lost children and occasionally even appeared in anecdotes as assisting the births of calves. In other words, Notsors was a keystone figure in many universal tales.

However—or rather, as Simon expected—Ori's eyes rounded the instant he heard that name. Shock written all over his face, he stared back at Simon, frozen.

"…Did Hereh say he was?"

"No." Simon paused, then pierced Ori with a provocative glare. "The men who came by three years ago said, 'Should Hereh ever come back, tell him that Notsors will never forgive him.'"

The harsh look on Ori's face doubled. Simon scowled.

"Notsors: the legendary mage who's lived for hundreds of years and has

ninety-nine forms. I thought he was nothing more than an imaginary character from fairy tales, but do you mean to say you've actually met him?" Simon demanded.

After a long pause, Ori quietly turned his back to them. "Not disclosing my employer's identity to third parties is a necessary component of my job."

Unen, Irena, and Simon watched on in silence as his broad back melted into the darkness of night.

Chapter 4: Surveying

“HERE’S some bread right out of the oven. Enjoy it with the others during dinner.”

The early morning was filled with refreshingly cool air. In front of the clinic, Zola, Simon’s mother, smiled as she handed Unen a bag of bread when she was ready to leave.

“Mom, they aren’t going on a picnic,” Simon sighed from beside her.

“That’s exactly why I made them bread. Eat this and energize yourselves so you can do a good job.” Zola embraced Unen, while her hair, the same golden shade as her son’s, swung gently behind her in the morning breeze. She moved over to hug Irena next and said, “Be careful out there.”

Finally, she came to stand before Ori and her careful gaze steadily met his blue eyes. After a brief pause, her expression softened into a smile. “Take care of my girls.”

“I will.”

Just as Ori quietly nodded to Zola, the clinic door swung open and a man in the prime of his life stepped out front with a big yawn. His brown hair stuck out in all directions, his chin was covered in unshaven stubble, and his shirttail hung out from the back of his pants, giving away the fact he’d quickly thrown on clothes to be presentable outside.

“Uncle Milosh! You could’ve kept on sleeping!” Unen said in surprise.

She had asked Zola and Simon not to wake him, knowing that he had been up late tending to an emergency patient.

“At least let me see you off,” Milosh replied. Teary-eyed from yawning several times in a row, he came to stand in front of Unen. “…Be careful and come back safe.”

“I will. I’ll be home in three days.”

Those were their special words, meant to guide her home to them.

Under the glistening sunlight, Unen, Irena, and Ori took the first step on their journey.

***

“YOU came from the west? Then you must’ve passed through Chelveny. In which case, I probably don’t have to explain this, but the town two towns over from Yezero is the start of Chelveny’s territory. Lord Chelveny and Lord Baborak have been on rocky terms for ages now. They even went to the point of fighting a skirmish during the scramble for the river twenty years ago.” Irena quickly explained the circumstances to Ori as she marched buoyantly through the overgrown grass that insisted on thriving in defiance of the sun’s harsh rays.

They had advanced straight down the main traveler’s road to the west and were now heading toward Lord Baborak’s pastures, which spread to the north of the road as they drew nearer to the border with Chelveny.

Unlike when she traveled on the carefully maintained roads in town, each step on the rough terrain took a merciless toll on Unen’s stamina and zapped away her energy. A waterfall of sweat tumbled down from her forehead, cheeks, and the nape of her neck, making a wet, slopping sound from between her back and the pack she carried. Panting heavily underneath the towel she had wrapped around her forehead to block out the glare of the sun, she silently focused on keeping her feet moving. She barely listened to the conversation as she tried to keep pace with the other two.

Irena went on, “Luckily, no lives were lost on either side, so we’ve sort of been able to keep the peace on the surface, but more trouble was brought our way this spring. At the edge of the northern border with Chelvany is their pastureland and our forest, but Lord Baborak started clearing his forest to expand his pastures. So then Chelvany’s lord came complaining for all to hear with, ‘you arbitrarily expanded your side of the border!’”

Used to Ori’s quiet one-word responses now, Irena continued chattering away without minding that he wasn’t asking many questions.

Even though both Irena and Ori carried twice the amount of weight as Unen in their packs, they were light on their feet, as if they were on an empty-handed stroll through town.

What do you have to eat to become like them? Unen wondered enviously as she watched them walk easily with their heavy loads.

“He went on to claim, ‘The border between the pastureland and the forest was supposed to be the boundary between our territories. You moved the fence farther into Chelveny, didn’t you?!’ But fortunately for us and unfortunately for them, there’s a spot where a giant flat boulder is lodged in the ground and, back when the borders were first decided, the workers had dug a hole in it to place the fencepost.

“It was clear that there wasn’t any easy way to move that post, so the whole ordeal was written off as a misunderstanding on Chelveny’s part. But they wanted to take this opportunity to make the boundary between the two territories clear once and for all, so that’s why they made a request to Unen for a map. Right?”

Unen had reached her limit and needed to stop when Irena directed the conversation toward her. She took a short break on a nearby boulder to catch her breath, quenching her thirst with the waterskin dangling from her waist, as she gathered the strength to reply.

“…The map made by the previous lord is supposedly closer to a painting of the scenery than a map, and it’s impossible to read the details of the plot of land it depicts. But if we write down where things are and what kind of geographical features and terrain is around instead of just relying on the painting, I can use the painting to create an accurate map that we can compare to past records.”

“Compare to past records?” Stopping two steps ahead, Ori sent Unen a questioning look as he drank heavily from his waterskin as well. His question went right to the heart of the matter, and Unen was a little excited for the chance to talk about it.

“Yup. I think Lord Baborak believes Lord Chelveny changed the boundary line without permission.”

People often measure others against the standard they set themselves. No sooner had Baborak begun to change the terrain by felling the trees than Lord Chelveny complained that they must have moved the border fence, a claim that had been made without an investigation. That gave rise to the possibility that Lord Chelveny himself had experience moving the fence around—such was Lord Baborak's conclusion.

"However, both sides were harshly scolded by the king for the skirmish twenty years ago," Unen explained. "So Lord Baborak didn't want to make a big public ordeal out of surveying the land out of fear of provoking Chelveny. That's why we don't have an official guard escort from Baborak. But he promised that I can use the men and resources of his castle to make a map of his entire territory once the issue over the western border line is settled. That's the gist of it."

"Talk about tossing you to the dogs for his convenience."

"You've got that right."

Gauging the amount of water she had left and where the nearest stream was in comparison to their destination, Unen put away her waterskin. She knocked the dust from her clothes and stood feeling mildly recovered from the brief stop.

"Why did you accept this job?"

"I want more achievements to my name."

The gust of wind rustling the grass slightly whisked away some of the heat building up inside Unen. Wiping the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand, she adjusted the position of the pack on her back away from where it had been cutting into her shoulders, and resumed walking.

"Though I've been making maps, the requests have never come from anyone beside town mayors and local landowners. But this job should expand my clientele by a lot. Whether there's foul play with the boundary or not, it probably won't take long before Lord Chelveny wants a map of his territory too. Then, if I keep slowly building up my name, my skills should eventually reach the king's ears."

Irena smiled at her. “Unen’s dream is to make a map of the world after all.”

“Yup. I want to travel around the world transcribing every last detail onto paper.” The nostalgic face of the man who had saved her life crossed Unen’s mind. “If the world is really open to me, there’s no reason not to leap into it. I want to see the world and learn new things, and then—”

And then it might be possible to—

“You might be able to see Hereh again.”

Unen gaped at Ori—he said the words she’d been thinking.

“Hereh was a really important person to you guys, huh?”

“Of *course* he was! Hereh was an incredibly amazing person, you know!” Irena promptly snapped. “Tons of people came from nearby towns, even Chelveny, to have him cure their injuries and illnesses. Mrs. Yoki even went as far as to say, ‘The pain went away just by Hereh coming in the room,’ and had started treating him like some kinda god. Well, even I think that was going overboard, but that doesn’t change the fact many people are grateful to Hereh. You can still hear people talking about how they hope he’ll return to Yezero someday.”

Ori gave no response even as Irena finished her rant. He kept his gaze focused on the direction they were heading and silently kept his feet moving. It was obvious that he wasn’t keen on continuing to refer to the man as a criminal after learning how much people loved Hereh, but it wasn’t as if he could back down, since he had already accepted the job of hunting him down.

They continued on for a short while with only the sound of grass crunching underfoot.

“You see, I haven’t thanked him,” Unen muttered aloud before she knew it.

“I heard he saved your life. How?” Ori asked softly.

Unen mentally prepared her story and inhaled deeply. “I was born to peddlers, and we just so happened to come to Yezero on the day the earthquake hit. My dad and mom were crushed under a collapsed building. Only I was saved.”

Seeing that Ori had stopped walking, Unen stopped too. Following suit, Irena

came to a halt directly behind them. Ori met Unen's gaze from where he stood ahead, guilt tinging the deadpan face she had grown accustomed to.

"…I'm sorry for dredging up painful memories."

Stabbing pain shot through Unen's heart, and she let her tongue slip. "I don't care that much. They weren't very good parents to me anyway."

This time, not only Ori, but even Irena gave her a startled look.

Unen instantly regretted it. Why did she have to go out of her way to say that? She bit down on her lip over her thoughtless slip.

Tearing through the heavy aura clinging to them like the grass tangled around her feet, Unen started walking again. After a moment's delay, two sets of footsteps caught up from behind. The three of them continued on in silence amid the blazing sunlight.

***

WOODEN fences stretching endlessly into the distance divided the blistering hot field, which shimmered with a haze of heat. Unen's group had finally arrived at the boundary between Baborak and Chelveny. It was early afternoon.

After establishing their campsite under the handy shade of a gigantic boulder, Unen started her work by inspecting her surveying tools. Drawing the long staff protruding from the pack on her back, she attached a fist-sized pelorus equipped with a compass to the top of it. The surface of the pelorus was always level with the horizon due to its two axes and weights. Unen had made the device herself with the scraps of a brass metal plate she had asked the ironmonger to share with her.

Next, she pulled a coil of rope from her pack. Along its twenty meters, metal hooks gleamed from set intervals for keeping the rope from getting knocked or pulled out of place when measuring lengths. This rope was another invention of Unen's, and she used it to measure the distance between two locations.

Her pack also contained a fan-shaped, weighted protractor for measuring inclines, and a semicircle pelorus she used for more accurate readings on the azimuths. After confirming each tool was undamaged, she moved them, along with a notebook for recording numbers, into the shoulder bag she brought with

her.

***

BY the time Ori returned from drawing water from the brook, they had a fire lit in the hearth Irena built. The group took a break while waiting for the water to boil and lightly grilled Zola's bread over the fire for a late lunch. Small talk had significantly decreased between them after Unen's comment about her parents, but the savory smell of baked bread gradually brought back a harmonious mood.

They set aside dinner by sticking dried meat inside the leftover bread and decided to allot the rest of the remaining daylight to surveying. They were all of the same opinion that nothing bad would come of wrapping up the work quick.

Leaving the bigger, unnecessary bags at the campsite, Unen brought her shoulder bag filled with surveying tools along with her pelorus staff, and Irena and Ori both took their swords. They set off for the boundary.

Beginning with the north bank of the brook, Irena followed the fence to the north with one end of the rope in hand. From her end, marked by where the fence turned, Unen pulled the rope taut and measured the distance between her and Irena.

Once she was finished with that, Unen let go of the rope for the time being and thrust the pelorus staff into the ground. Aiming the notch of the V standing straight from the edge of the pelorus at Irena, she measured how many degrees she was off from the north.

This was how Unen measured the distance and the azimuth at each bend in the fence. Later, she would draft a map based on those numbers. Naturally, measurement and calculation errors were bound to slip in as the distance increased, necessitating a degree of compensation and correction at every key location. Unen had decided on Mount Viera, looming in the distant east, as her point of interest. By measuring the azimuth from each point relevant to the map to the mountain's summit, the diagonal lines she would draw to the summit would notably increase the accuracy of the map once she coordinated them to overlap with other focal points.

After each measurement, Unen placed her pelorus staff on the ground so she

could promptly record the numerical value. This time however, Ori thoughtlessly called out to her just as she had pulled her notebook from her bag.

“If you tell me what to record, I’ll write it down for you.”

“You can write?”

“Yeah.”

Unen handed her notebook, portable inkwell, and quill over to Ori.

“Um, okay, ‘Starting Point: Wak River’. Next line. 17°W, 18’, 3”. Got it?”

Contrary to animal skin parchment, the paper created from ground wood pulp Unen used was coarse, and on top of the fact that it was easily ripped, ink often ran down it. Yet, despite all that, not once did the tip of the quill catch on the grainy paper as Ori smoothly danced it across the blank space.

“Is this fine?” Ori looked up at her for confirmation.

“Ah, yeah, no complaints here,” Unen said, checking over what he wrote down.

Several swordsmen who made a living guarding others and exterminating wild animals lived around Yezero, but the vast majority were unable to read or write. And those who boasted about their ability to write were nowhere near as familiar with paper as Ori was.

“Sharing the workload will increase efficiency,” Ori stated.

“That’s true,” Unen agreed.

Who in the world is Ori? While deeply perplexed on the inside, Unen externally expressed her gratitude to him.

***

THEY returned to the campsite once the sun had set. Cattle that had been grazing in the distance during the day disappeared from the pastures, and there wasn’t a sign of a single person as far as their eyes could see. The gentle breeze from the afternoon completely transformed into a howling gust that blew through the pasture with a noise akin to a lonely cry.

Stuffing their mouths with the dried meat sandwiches, the trio downed the day's fatigue with soybean tea. Tomorrow they would be surveying the field under the blazing sun all day, right from the early morning. In order to preserve their energy for the upcoming day's endeavors, they went to bed early.

Irena was assigned to night watch until the morning star that shone in the eastern sky forged a third of the way through the heavens. Ori would take the next third until the star had passed the midsky marker, then it would be Unen's turn until dawn.

Bidding goodnight to Irena, Unen and Ori each took a blanket with them and laid down where they pleased.

Chapter 5: Raid

“… …… ……..”

Someone was muttering unintelligibly in the pitch-black darkness. It came in a deep masculine voice that vibrated slightly inside of her eardrums.

And then there was someone else. No, some*thing* else? Voiceless voices—the Murmurs—slid into her ear canals, streaming through her brain to resound deep in her chest.

Unen wildly thrashed her limbs; they felt heavier than stones. Oppressive, claustrophobic darkness pounded against her surroundings like waves against the shoreline on a stormy night. Writhing in agony, she dragged herself toward the Murmurs as if she were wading through chest-deep mud.

Then, a faint light shone down on her from above. As if led by the light, Unen’s consciousness burst to the surface, out of the darkness.

Half a moon filled her vision when she opened her eyes. Hanging partially above the horizon, the incomplete moon slanted slightly to the right—it was a waning moon.

For a moment, Unen didn’t know where she was. The tepid breeze and smell of grass tickling her nose slowly helped her recollect the memories that had dissolved into the dead of night.

Shaking her hazy head, she restlessly sat up.

Light from the moon that had just risen in the eastern sky dimly illuminated the grasslands. Turning her head, Unen spotted Irena fast asleep beside her. A small distance away, she saw flames dancing in the stone hearth, and Ori’s back as he kept watch.

Was Unen still dreaming? She vaguely heard a deep voice.

But the indistinct mutters were, unmistakably, coming from Ori.

Is he talking to himself to stave off sleepiness? Just as the drowsy thought flickered in her mind, the Murmurs boomed in the depths of her heart.

A short moment later, a voice she doubted she even heard rode on the wind passing her ears. It was a distant, unfamiliar male voice different from the rumbling of Ori's deep one.

Ori looked over his shoulder at Unen. "You're up?"

Unen reflexively blinked. "…Were you speaking to someone just now?" she nervously asked.

He shook his head. "No."

The flames swayed as a log crackled and crumbled in the fire.

"Aren't you confusing the waking world with your dreams?"

He might be right, Unen thought. *Or maybe,* she considered, *this is still inside my dreams?* Perhaps it was the fault of the dazzling moonlight shining down on them that made the scene before her appear eerily surreal.

"I'll wake you when it's your shift. Get some sleep until then."

"Okay," she readily agreed and laid back down. Instantly, a sticky drowsiness came out of its hiding place and closed in on her.

Just before Unen closed her eyes, she thought she saw Ori's blue eyes glowing silver in the moonlight.

***

"FOUR degrees east, at a distance of ten meters."

Ori mechanically jotted down the numbers Unen read off. Without having to constantly switch between her staff and her quill, Unen's work sped up, and she was making better time than anticipated. At the rate they were going, it was plausible they'd finish the necessary series of measurements and return to camp before light vanished from the grassland.

Western winds began whipping through the grasslands intermittently right before noon, and dark clouds blew in without them realizing. The turn in the

weather was worrying, but the temperature had dropped as the clouds blocked the sun, making it much more comfortable for their work. Wanting to keep up the pace to quickly finish the job, the group continued measuring along Baborak's borderline without breaks, aside from a momentary pause they had taken to eat some hard-baked bread for lunch.

"4.5 degrees to the east at a distance of 20 meters."

Irena effortlessly ran to the next location with one end of the rope in hand. She was astonishingly light on her feet despite the heavy long sword and full waterskin hanging at her waist.

It was evident that her exceptional physical strength was due to her daily efforts; Unen knew Irena never missed a day of her self-imposed training. This morning Irena woke up before sunrise to practice swinging and lunging with her sword.

Unen wondered how many words of thanks would be sufficient in expressing her gratitude to her friend, someone who, despite possessing such rare abilities, freely lent her highly valued skills and time to Unen. When would the day come where Unen could repay those closest to her, starting with Irena, for all they had done for her? Unen gnawed on her bottom lip.

What can I even do for them, when I failed to say anything to the one person I should've thanked most of all?

"Next: 4.5 degrees east at a distance of 18 meters."

Unen watched Ori swiftly walk the quill across the paper. She had yet to see him swing his sword, but considering his skill with the quill, it wasn't hard to imagine he also possessed extraordinary talent with the sword. Furthermore, not only could Ori read and write, he even seemed to understand what Unen was doing and the best way to record it as he took down the survey measurements.

"5 degrees east at a distance of 10 meters."

Who in the world is Ori? The doubt that crossed her mind on countless occasions since they set off on this trip came to the forefront of her thoughts once again.

Ori was hunting down Hereh and had appeared before Unen in concert with the Murmurs. If the events of last night hadn't merely been a dream, Ori was surrounded by the Murmurs again.

Ori's muttering, which sounded like he was talking to someone, and the unfamiliar male voice that blew by on the wind were just the tip of the iceberg to the things she wanted to know more about. There were so many other things she didn't understand either. For starters, there was so much she didn't know about Hereh. Was he the man Ori was searching for or was it somebody else? Did Hereh really steal the so-called Book of Secrets? Where had he come from? And where had he gone?

Then there was the legendary mage Notsors. Unen wondered what silly fable the hunters from three years ago were raving about when they had mentioned that name. It was impossible for someone who fit the legend of Notsors to actually exist somewhere in the world…right?

"20 degrees east at a distance of 17.5 meters."

Unen spotted a boulder as flat as a table two meters past Irena. This was the boulder that had been used to prove Baborak's innocence against Chelveny's charges that Baborak had illegally moved the borderline. The job would be finished once she measured the distance and angle from where Irena stood to the boulder.

Unen was trudging through the grassland while pulling in the rope, when she suddenly heard Ori click his tongue. Wondering what was amiss, she looked behind her and found his gaze grimly glued to the other side of the border fence to the west.

Noticing Unen's stare, Ori quietly muttered, "Looks like things are gonna get messy."

"What is?"

"Let's regroup with your friend first," he directed. He handed Unen her notebook and quill, simultaneously grabbed the rope she was holding, and then took huge strides toward Irena while skillfully coiling the rope around his arm.

Unen ran to catch up with him. As they neared Irena, it was apparent that she

too was staring hard to the west with a similar grim expression tugging her lips down. Glancing once at Ori, Irena jerked her chin toward the other side of the fence.

“I count four. Same for you?”

Ori quietly nodded.

“Seems like they snuck around that hill over there. They make me sick.”

Unen strained her eyes in the direction Irena carefully watched, but she didn’t spot anything out of the ordinary, just the wind whipping around the blades of tall grass.

Then people began to rise from their hiding place in the grass where the three of them were staring. One, two, three, four. There were four total. Judging from their appearances, they were older men, somewhere between their late-twenties to mid-thirties. They slowly lumbered toward Unen’s group with swords and hatchets.

“W’at the ‘ell? I ‘eard it was supposeda be two ‘ittle girls. There’s only one.”

“The ‘ittle boy doesn’t matter, but takin’ on some full-grown bastard is gonna be a pain.”

“Well, it won’t be an issue if we take ‘em all out, yah?”

“Don’t ya forget to not kill the woman right away.”

The men said whatever they wanted with vulgar sneers plastered on their faces.

“Who are you guys? And what do you want?” Irena raised her voice as she demanded they identify themselves.

The men answered with a question instead. “Yer Yezero’s mapmaker, yah?”

“What about it?”

Smirking away, the men came even closer. They finally halted in front of the border fence and stared down Unen’s group—primarily Irena—like dogs licking their chops before a delectable prey.

“They’re hired hands from Chelveny. I saw them at the town of Harrow,” Ori

pointed out with indifference. Harrow was two towns over from Yezero, the first town on the border inside Chelveny.

“Are you sure?” Irena asked.

“I have no issue remembering faces,” Ori casually answered. He looked at each man in order and addressed them, “I take it there’s someone in Chelveny who will be put in a bad spot if a map of Baborak is made.”

“Ya’ve got that right!” one man said in a thick accent, and proceeded to hack at the wooden fence with his hatchet.

Ori grabbed Unen’s hand without a second’s delay and ran to the boulder about ten meters back from the border fence, trampling the grass underfoot.

“Stay put with your back to the boulder.”

Ori pushed Unen to the boulder that was the size of a covered wagon, turned around, and walked several steps toward the fence. Arriving right after, Irena took up her stance to his left.

Smashing their way through the fence, the men leisurely strolled into Baborak territory. Irena and Ori drew their swords at the same time. Three of the invaders went into formation in front of Ori, while the final one challenged Irena.

“What a brave ‘ittle thing ya are to brandish a sword, missie.”

What did this man do to make his voice sound so vulgar? The hair stood up on the back of Unen’s neck in disgust. Praying with her entire being for Irena to fight well, Unen cautiously removed the pelorus from her staff and held the staff protectively in front of her. She wasn’t strong and would only serve as meager resistance, but rolling over and letting them chop her to pieces didn’t fit her personality. If they brought the fight to her, she’d defend herself.

“Poor thing, are yer hands shaking, missie? Don’t do w’at ya can’t do if yer scared. I won’t treat ya badly,” the man drawled on indecently.

Mocking laughter came from the other men. They were drunk on their advantage in numbers. Swaying from side to side, they smugly flaunted the surprisingly high-quality weapons in their hand. Opposite of them, neither Ori

nor Irena twitched or moved even a centimeter.

“You’re right. I’m scared,” Irena declared confidently. “I think this might be the first time I kill someone.”

“W’at did ya say?!”

His hysteric curses were interrupted by Irena’s loud proclamation. “I’m the oldest daughter of Yezero Vigilante Corps’ Boss Wojciech, Irena!” she named herself, “Come at me if you don’t value your life!”

“W-Wench…!” her opponent turned bright-red and howled. Brandishing his sword at the same height as his face, he pointed the tip at Irena and charged straight at her like a bull.

Irena immediately took a step forward with her right foot. Parrying the incoming thrust with a thrust of her own, she twisted her sword and pushed back on his blade.

The man’s expression changed. Blood drained from his face as he swung his sword up with all his strength to shake off Irena’s powerful thrust.

He lunged at her with another thrust, but Irena defended his attack with the guard on her sword. Then, with a flash of cold steel, she used the impetus to strike.

The man dropped his sword with a howl. Fresh blood gushed from where he held his right shoulder. Another man, the one closest to Irena out of the three facing Ori, yelled, “Harlot!” His face twisted with fury.

“Who’s next?!” Irena taunted, distracting them.

Seizing the opportunity, Ori made his move. Quickly closing the distance between him and the man at the center of the group, Ori swung his sword down from overhead.

However, his enemy was also formidable. The man narrowly caught Ori’s blade with his sword, and brought the fight to a deadlock—or so it appeared, until Ori spun his sword at breakneck speed. Steel screeched as Ori’s sword slammed into the man’s sword from the side.

A flash of silver cut off the man’s wrist. Now ignoring the man moaning in

pain, Ori swung at the man charging in from the right. The man directed Ori's blade to the left, but Ori simply rotated his wrist and deftly spun his sword around, forcing the man's sword downward. Stepping past his opponent's defenses with fluid agility, he slammed his sword's pommel into the man's nose.

Shrieking like a pig, the man staggered back with blood pouring from a crushed nose. Ori promptly circled behind him and held his blade to the man's throat.

All of that had only taken him just under ten seconds. Irena whistled in awe.

"Back down from this job. Your lives will be spared if you do," Ori instructed.

The man at Ori's sword pleaded with his other intact friend, his trembling lips soaked in blood from his broken nose, "C'mon…let's quit this gig and go home… These guys are strong. We can't take 'em on…"

"Ya insane dunce. What d'ya think our lord will do if we return home empty-handed?" the other man scoffed.

"I don't wanna die," the broken nose man cried out nasally.

Ignoring him, the unscathed man pulled out a whistle and blew.

At the shrill sound of the whistle, more figures appeared from the shadows of the hill beyond the fence. Seven in total. Even Unen could tell Irena and Ori were nervous.

"Looks like it's our turn." The big man leading the new group grinned like he was about to have the time of his life.

"They'll be killed in an instant now that the Two-headed Griffin is on the case!" laughed another man wearing his greatcoat's hood low over his eyes.

Chapter 6: Two-headed Griffin

UNEN sighed internally despite the dire situation. She had sympathized with the duo when she heard their exaggerated nickname from others, but she never imagined they would step forward and actually call themselves the Two-headed Griffin.

The swordsman half of the Griffin advanced and stood before Ori. Ori pried the sword from the man with a broken nose and tossed it to Unen before letting him go.

Unable to stand, the man scrambled on all fours to his friends, only to be kicked by the Swordsman Griffin when he passed by. He tumbled and rolled around on the ground while holding his stomach, moaning.

“Don’t get in my way,” the swordsman spat on him.

The air around Ori grew dark. “…Aren’t you on the same side?” he seethed with volatile fury.

“I’m just someone who’s been hired. So, ready to die at my hand?” Swordsman Griffin taunted, the right corner of his lips twisting up. He held his sword point up and sideways from his face with both hands gripping the pommel.

Ori took the same double-handed stance. They squared off and waited for an opening in their opponent. Time passed without either of them moving.

Wind dashed against the grass, pushing it down.

They lunged with their swords at the same time. Shrieking metallically as steel clashed against steel, the swords locked. Together they held each other in place through sheer strength, both swordsmen keeping the other in check. The two pulled and pushed and pushed and pulled, probing for any chance to break their deadlock.

Swordsman Griffin took the initiative by applying his extra height and

bodyweight. He forced Ori's sword down with the full force his muscle and weight could add. Driving Ori's blade as close as he could get it to the ground, he swiftly lunged for Ori's throat all in a single fluid motion.

Ori's sword immediately followed behind the Griffin, immobilizing the attack by guiding the tip upward, the movement easily directing the muscle and weight of the Griffin away and out of position. Metal grinded as the clashing of blades echoed through the grassland. The point of Ori's sword shot out to pierce the Swordsman Griffin's chest—

But a second faster, the Swordsman Griffin utilized his height advantage and swung his sword up at a sharp angle. Realizing he needed to parry the incoming hit, Ori abandoned his lunge and promptly pushed his sword to the left, narrowly directing the other man's sword away from his chest.

As the Swordsman Griffin's sword rolled over Ori's, Ori shifted into a thrust. Attempting to regain his lost ground Ori moved forward intending to impale his opponent. But in one fluid movement, the man took a big step forward slipping past the sword's point, letting the thrust pass by his left side. Then he recklessly released his two-handed grip on his sword to use his now free left arm to trap Ori's extended sword arm and blade under his left armpit. In a single move they were now at an arm's length, except the Swordsman Griffin was now free to cut down a defenseless Ori.

Ori immediately tried to swing the sword clasped in his entrapped hand, but he couldn't regain his stance or free the arm. His opponent took the opportunity to firmly secure Ori's left hand, and the sword it was clasped around, in his hold by clamping down with flexed upper arm muscles.

Before the blade could cleave his head, Ori threw a right hook at the Griffin. While the attack failed to stun his captor, it did its job in getting the man to bring the pommel of his blade over to intercept the punch. With a jerk and twist of the blade the man forced Ori to pull back his fist or risk pointlessly hurting himself. Rolling the blade in his hand, the Swordsman Griffin brought the weapon around.

He swung his sword overhead, smiling in sheer delight at Ori's desperate struggle to free himself!

Ori's expression didn't change in the slightest. Instead of trying to pull his arm back, he stepped in closer; shoulder to shoulder he shoved his weight into his entrapped hand until his wrist came free out the other side of his opponent's hold. The struggle forced the Swordsman Griffin to catch his balance instead of finish his attack.

All the while he frantically clamped his armpit tighter, squeezing down with all his muscles to try to twist Ori's wrist and make him drop his sword.

Deep creases formed in Ori's brow. Clenching his teeth to withstand the pain, he raised his sword with the point facing away from both of them, and violently grabbed it with his bare right hand over the Griffin's left shoulder. Then, using his right foot as the pivot, Ori spun, narrowly avoiding the point of the man's desperate thrust for his chest as he used his right hand to bring his sword high. Ori brought his sword down, slamming its hilt into the lower-left back half of the Swordsman Griffin's kneecap.

The man lost his balance as his knee gave out and the tension whisked from his frame.

Forcefully, Ori yanked his left hand out of its prison, pulling the Swordsman Griffin's elbow out backwards and twisting the man's arm with his right hand. The man's shoulder made an unsettling crack.

"GUAAAAAHH! My shoulder! My SHOULDEERRR!"

The smile that had held sway over the Mage Griffin, who had been idly watching the battle, vanished. In utter panic, he took a step back.

"Master," one of the ruffians pleaded, "please take him out with magic!"

The Mage Griffin shook his head firmly. "They'll both be hit by the spell."

"No way!"

"Think about it for a second!" Mage Griffin yelled, looking over his shoulder at the group of hired scoundrels. "There's two of 'em and seven of us. Doesn't matter how skilled they are if we jump them together. Let's beat them to death together! An eye for an eye!"

The movement knocked his hood off, revealing sleek black hair.

Huh? Unen tilted her head. Everything she knew about mages was from rumors, but the Mage Griffin's appearance was vastly different from the stories she'd heard.

Neglecting the baffled Unen, the men broke into two groups of three and charged at Irena and Ori with their swords. Even with Irena and Ori's incredible skills, taking on three opponents at once would be insane. To minimize their blind spots as much as possible, the two put their backs together.

Glancing askance at the stalemate between the six-on-two sword fight, Mage Griffin drew nearer to Unen with his dagger out.

"Unen, run!" Irena shouted in horror.

Ori clicked his tongue—and in that exact moment, a sudden gust of wind whirled into a tremendous tornado around the two of them. The six hired hands circling them yelped and dropped their swords as they tried to run away. Slices ripped open the back of their hands as if cut by a blade, and their blood trickled to the ground.

Instantly, Unen smelled the aroma of dense trees all around her. This time, she didn't have to listen closely for the faint voice to tremble in her eardrums.

<<…who protects…who destroys…>>

Feeling something oppressive suffocating her, Unen doubled over. Emotions of intensely vivid regret and a strange satisfaction that things had turned out for the better materialized from nothing and surged into her, raging against each other. The two contrary emotions were going to tear her from limb to limb.

"You're late."

Unen raised her head at the note of amusement in Ori's voice. Before she realized it, the forest's presence had disappeared, and the agony that had been tormenting her thoroughly receded. But she didn't even have a moment to mull over what in the blazes happened to her, because an awfully vainglorious voice rang from a direction separate from everyone else.

"The hero is meant to arrive to the scene late, *obviously*."

Ah, this is the voice on the wind that I heard last night.

Turning toward the voice, Unen saw a young man standing nonchalantly in the middle of the grassland. In accordance with his neither short nor tall height, his physique was slightly on the delicate side for a man. His hair was flawlessly black. Jet-black in color, it didn't reflect a single ray of light, a feature commonly referred to as the "Mage's Black".

The young man thrust the wooden talisman he held in his hand in front of him as his unreflective, shadow-like hair whipped up in the wind. Instantly, flames swirled into a whirlwind and shot toward one of the Griffin's halves.



At the same time, Murmurs danced wildly within Unen's ears—Murmurs of unknown gender and age that, perhaps, were not even made by a voice at all. Nevertheless, they were an undulation that made her feel someone or something's presence.

"D-Don't tell me…y-you are…the real Two-headed Griffin?!" the fake mage cried, before frantically rolling on the ground to put out the flames billowing from his clothes.

"Can I get you to stop using that shameful moniker?" The real mage's shoulders drooped with a massive sigh. "Right then, which of you is going to surrender first? I'm holding a special," he intoned with amusement, holding up some rope, "whoever willingly gets tied up doesn't get barbecued tonight."

***

"My name is Mouru. My companion Ori has been indebted to you these past few days," the mage formally introduced himself, after they had tied up the grand total of eleven bandits with rope. He shook hands with Unen and Irena, smiling brightly.

"Show up sooner if I'm your companion." Ori made no attempt to hide his displeasure.

Mouru waved his right hand dismissively. "Nothing to be embittered about, since I made it in time. Anyhow—oh, they're here, they're here. I did think they'd show up soon."

Shading his eyes with his right hand, Mouru looked to the east. Following suit, Unen and the others turned and spotted several horses coming their way in the distance.

"It looked like things were getting messy, so I sent a message over the wind to the castle. As much as the lord doesn't want to spur dissension, there's no way he can let this level of violence go unchecked."

Sure enough, as Mouru said, people from Lord Baborak's castle arrived on the horses. They hadn't expected to find the circumstances so troubling. One of them was sent back in a hurry to call for a castle carriage to transport the eleven bandits.

Unen's group was informed they needed to go to Lord Baborak's castle with them to give an in-depth explanation of what had transpired. Hearing that Ori asked to borrow a horse to quickly gather the belongings they had left at their camp from one of the castle soldiers, Unen decided to thank him and headed over to the large boulder where the horses were tied up.

She suddenly stopped just before the boulder when she heard the same stern voice she had when she first met Ori.

"Apparently, he had a single child. Though it seems the child died in an earthquake."

They're talking about Hereh. Unen caught her breath.

"I confirmed a small grave behind the cabin where he lived."

"I see. So that's why his location was exposed." Mouru's voice was always aloof, but sometimes it seeped with a biting coldness enough to rack the listener with chills, like a frigid wind sweeping up from a deep chasm.

"There's no way those who were after him wouldn't catch wind of his whereabouts if he used suspicious spells and skills in the same place for any amount of time. And he knows that. Yet, this time he stayed put until the last possible second. Just goes to show that your theory he had something keeping him in the town of Yezero was on the mark. A brilliant guess of yours, really!" Mouru saluted Ori as if to make fun of him.

Ori's response carried a tone as sharp as knives. "But at the very end, he abandoned everything and ran—again."

There was a short pause.

"I don't think that's the case," Mouru said softly.

Though it was the height of summer, Unen felt an icy air coil around her legs. Standing rock-still, she shivered.

Arc 2: To the Capital

Chapter 7: Behind a Smile

“THANK you very much,” Unen said, as she left the shop with a massive bag stuffed full with a sheaf of parchment paper.

“That’s my line. I always look forward to your business. I’ve been worried about our future prospects because of Komni Paper, you see. Feels like I’m only still in business because people at workplaces like yours continue to use our paper.” Papermaker Sena saw Unen to the door and heaved a loud sigh.

Unen had come on an errand to pick up a large parchment order for the Manuscripts and Transcripts Atelier she was employed by. “Master said that nothing beats the durability and appearance of sheepskin parchment.”

“Well, yeah, if you compare it to your run-of-the-mill ground tree pulp paper. But didn’t you hear that Komni is investing all its resources into paper production? The quality isn’t half-bad and if the price drops, those of us in parchment will have to close our doors.”

Komni Kingdom, located to southeast of Cerná Kingdom, which Yezero belonged to, prospered in the paper manufacturing business. Apparently, the various tree species native to the region were remarkably suited for providing raw materials for paper making. The Komni Paper they had introduced into the market had completely revolutionized the belief that paper could only be made of high-quality animal skins or coarse plants and tree pulp.

Cerná currently depended on importing the Komni Paper from Komni Kingdom, but if Cerná’s own attempts at producing a paper of equal quality succeeded, then Sena’s fear that sheepskin parchment makers would be squeezed out of the market would likely come true. Then again, Komni Kingdom treated the information regarding the Komni Paper and its raw materials regulations as a national secret. They kept a tight, careful rein over everything that had to do with its production, so it wasn’t going to be easy for another country to reproduce the revolutionary paper.

Unen hit the road for home with Sena’s grievances lingering after her. She proceeded with caution, and a good amount of stress, to keep the bottom of

her large bag from dragging along the town's main street.

"I shall carry that for you, fair lady." With that overly polite line, a hand snatched Unen's bag from her.

Startled, Unen glanced up to see friendly blue eyes and raven-black hair. It was the mage, Mouru, who had immobilized the violent bandits during her surveying trip last week.

"It looked like a bag was walking itself, so I couldn't just stand by and watch. I simply need to carry this to your place of work, yes?"

His rude comment about the bag walking itself blew any guilt she felt for receiving his help out the window, and she frankly thanked him instead. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Anyway, isn't there any work I can do around here? As you know, the trail of the person we're looking for ends here, so we won't be able to leave for a while. Just lazing around costs us money for lodging, and I'm going to die of boredom at this rate. I'm really in a pinch here," Mouru complained, but in a tone that didn't sound like he was in that much of a pinch. He was the complete opposite of Ori, who only stated what was necessary.

"Isn't there a ton of work around for you? People have been complaining that the Two-headed Griffin took all the jobs."

"Enough with that moniker. Who's the idiot who stuck us with this embarrassing name?" Mouru grumbled underneath a big sigh.

"I heard you erased a gang of bandits from the face of the planet when they attacked a wagon train."

"Heh. Now that's an amazing feat. I want whoever made that up to tell me what god I have to serve to use such an awesome move."

Unen had the urge to ask him what actually happened and what could have inspired someone to exaggerate the events so drastically, but she decided to ask about something else he had said that'd caught her attention.

"Are your spells and skills determined by the god you serve?"

"That's right. Gods have things they're good and bad at too. My god governs

wind," he explained, lightly waving his index finger. A gentle breeze swayed Unen's hair as if it had been induced by that movement.

The voiceless Murmur faintly resounded inside of Unen at the same exact time.

"I unleashed those flames using a fire talisman. Basically, I borrowed another god's power for a bit."

Does this Murmur have something to do with magic? But nobody was using magic when I sensed the Murmurs three years ago. Unen dug through her memories of the past while she quietly followed behind Mouru.

"By the way," his carefree voice relentlessly broke her concentration, "have you finished that map already?"

Unen knew he was referring to the map of the western borderline that Chelveny had attacked her for while she had been taking measurements.

"I have a few more things to add before it's finished," she responded.

After the attack last week, Unen's group had been brought to Baborak Castle in a separate carriage from their assailers, and ordered to report everything that transpired directly to Lord Baborak. Each of their statements was recorded in detail by the castle scribe to be used in discussions with Chelveny. Depending on the situation, the king might take over the responsibility of passing judgment, and if it came to that, they would have to repeat their testimony at the royal capital. Lord Baborak had then formally ordered the border map from Unen and told her it had to be completed perfectly in case Chelveny decided to make things difficult.

Normally, it'd be unthinkable for a fifteen-year-old girl without a patron to receive a job request directly from a lord. Unen was tickled pink every time she recalled Lord Baborak's direct orders. She was grateful to everything that had given her this chance.

"Speaking of which, what got you into mapmaking?"

Mouru asked about exactly what she was reminiscing over, so Unen answered him naturally. "Milosh was asked to mediate a quarrel between brothers a year ago. As I understand it, their father passed away and the brothers were divvying

up the land among themselves, but they had completely different ideas about how much farmland there was to distribute. Milosh was put in a tight spot because they refused to even talk it out, so I suggested they start by making a precise map of the land first."

Stuck in a stalemate with the brothers, Milosh had requested Unen make a map as soon as possible, so she gathered whatever tools she had been able to get a hold of and commenced surveying their family's land.

They had met her finished map with skepticism at first. However, the actions of the suspicious oldest brother eventually overturned any remaining doubts. He had gone out of his way to seek a mystic's assessment, who had in turn confirmed the validity of Unen's map.

The sole mystic of Yezero could use bird familiars, and they had the mystic squealing in awe that Unen's map was "precisely" as they saw from the eyes of a falcon flying above the brothers' land.

"I have the eyes of a falcon, but the tiny one here surely has Sparrow Eyes," the mystic had declared.

Still yet to be convinced, the older brother had then measured every nook and cranny of the land from one end to the other by counting his steps, and consequently confirmed that Unen's map was truly as accurate as the mystic's evaluation of it. Jobs requesting Unen's mapmaking skills had come falling into her lap occasionally ever since.

Mouru smiled at Unen when she finished telling him her story. "All things considered, it's amazing you taught yourself how to make maps from the surveying techniques written in a folded book. Not only can you read and write, but you're good at arithmetic too. You *really* are spectacular." His eyes suddenly narrowed on her.

Unen's heart skipped a beat. *Calm down. Calm down*, she told herself as she slowly inhaled.

"Dad gave me a book he received from one of his trades and said I had to learn enough to earn my keep when I get older, so I also learned from that."

"Your dad the peddler?"

“Yup.”

“I see.” Mouru nodded, acting as though he were convinced. But then—“Milosh is pretty amazing too.” Another fake smile lit his face. “I mean, he asked a *child* like you to take on the difficult, important job of making an accurate map. That’s not something most people could do. Means he’s got an eye for talented people. Or maybe, he’s just reckless.”

It had taken until now for Unen to finally realize that the entire conversation, beginning from the moment he picked up her bag, was all a ruse to draw information out of her. Mouru had gotten her to share important details without her knowing it.

A single line of sweat trickled down her back.

“I’m not a child. I’m fifteen now.”

“You were fourteen a year ago.”

“A year doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“Really now? I was an amusing level of childish at fourteen.” He went on to add information about himself she didn’t ask for, “I’m twenty-three and Ori is twenty-two right now.”

Unen sighed as loud as she could. “I don’t think Milosh would’ve ever considered asking me to make a map if it hadn’t been Hereh’s book with the mapmaking techniques recorded in it. And it just so happened to be that only I had read it so far.”

“Heh. This Hereh guy sounds like he had a lot of trust put in him. Oh, isn’t that where you’re heading for, over there?”

Mouru pointed to a sign with an all-black drawing of a woman sitting in a chair reading a book. Plajan Manuscripts and Transcripts Atelier—Unen’s workplace.

“As you’d expect, you’ve got the Witch of the Archives on your sign.”

“She is the guardian deity of books after all.”

It was said that there were a myriad of gods in the world, who ruled over everything from wind to water, fire to earth, massive forests to a single stalk of

grass. The guardian deity of books was one of those gods, and it was frequently depicted in old stories as a woman in black clothing with black hair. The old folktales were why she was commonly referred to as Witch of the Archives instead of the Guardian Deity of Books. Every time Unen saw the sign, she felt a little proud to have been born a woman.

"Thanks for carrying my bag," she said, taking the huge bag filled with sheepskin parchment from Mouru.

"See you later." Mouru waved and turned to leave, but then spun right back around again. "Oh, right, right. I've come to expect great things of your skill and want to hire you to make a map. What do you think?"

Unen desperately wanted more achievements to her name in regard to mapmaking, so she would've normally jumped on any job opportunity. But this time she hesitated to answer because she couldn't see what lay past his ostensibly friendly smile. Much less what a mercenary would need a map for…

"What I want you to make a map of is a bit far from here, but…how about taking it on as a first step toward your world map?" Mouru tempted, unfazed by her reluctance. "It's a demesne called Roggen. It's located to the northwest of here, close to the Sea of Trees at the foot of the Great Cordillera."

Roggen.

Unen knew of that town.

Swallowing back the spit filling her mouth so that Mouru wouldn't catch on to her nervousness, Unen quietly answered, "I can't. I can't go that far away."

"Oh? You gave up fast. What happened to wanting to make a world map?"

Just what and how much does this man know? Unen felt her bag's handle grow soggy with the sweat from her hands.

"You'll be nicely rewarded. And you won't need to pay anyone because we'll guard you."

She stepped from foot to foot trying to keep herself balanced before rushing out, "My boss is waiting, so I have to go now."

Forcing an end to the conversation, Unen went through the atelier's door. She

didn’t have the courage to look behind her.

Chapter 8: Emissaries from the Capital

* * *

“I wish you’d never been born,” she breathed in a drawn-out sigh. “If you had been a boy, you would’ve had *some* value, but no, you just *had* to be a girl.”

Day in and day out she would curse me with those words. Yesterday she had spat them out, today she sighed them, and she would probably yell them tomorrow.

But it was no different from when the rain fell; when the wind blew; when you awaited another warm day.

Aah, I’m starving. I squatted down on the roadside, gripping my empty stomach.

“For heaven’s sake, there’s no saving that ma of yours.” The lady from across the field squared her shoulders and turned her scary eyes on our hut.

That’s not true. Mommy’s kind. It’s just that I make her angry because I’m slow and can’t do anything right.

“Same goes for your pa. They say he’s a peddler, yeah? What’s going through his head to neglect his family all this time? C’mon, eat this. You’ll die at this rate, child.”

An ear-piercing shriek sliced through the fields just as the lady handed me a tiny dried sweet potato. “Stop that! How dare you do something so uncalled for to my child!”

“Uncalled for? It’s your fault for neglecting the child! Take a look at her! She’s almost five and yet she’s so miserably small! Her hands and feet are thinner and shorter than twigs!”

“You say that, but you’re actually plotting to steal this adorable child from me! I just know it!”

In that moment, my heart felt warmer than the air of a sunny day. *See? Mommy really does love me.*

Mommy shooed the old lady away and pulled me to the hut.

“For crying out loud, you can never be too careful. Throw that dried potato onto the road.” Mommy’s eyelids peeled back when she heard my loud gulp. “What? Are you saying some strange old lady matters more to you than your mother?”

Mommy smiled fondly at me after I had quickly tossed away the dried sweet potato so that it rolled in the dirt. “Good, good. Don’t put some garbage potato in your mouth. Someday I’ll fill your belly with an amazing feast.”

Aaah, I’m starving…

* * *

UNEN’S eyes snapped open at the smell of roasting meat. The loud chorus sung by her gurgling stomach and the panic over realizing she had overslept immediately jolted her awake.

Rushing through her morning routine, she ran down the stairs and flew into the kitchen. “I’m so sorry!” she apologized, with a deep bow toward the back of the woman standing in front of the hearth.

Zola looked over her shoulder with a smile. “It’s fine, it’s fine. You said you were putting the finishing touches on that map last night. You worked hard all night, you deserve some rest.”

She was sautéing thin slices of meat with some carrots on the stovetop. Beside the pan was a large pot of soup and a basket of freshly baked bread. From the looks of it, Unen had lost the opportunity to help out this morning.

“I’ll draw the water—ah, looks like you did that already. Then I’ll feed the horses—”

“That’s been taken care of too,” Zola answered in a singsong voice. She was always the cheerful Clinic Mother, but she seemed to be in an especially chipper

mood today. “Forget all that work stuff and take a look at this, Unen! Isn’t it a fine slab of deer meat? Looks yummy, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, it does.”

Zola told her to forget about the chores, but Unen had a hard time getting past her failure. Ever since Milosh brought her into his home three years ago, Unen fiercely believed it was her mission in life to help Zola out around the house in Simon’s stead, as he had lost his leg. Working outside the house didn’t contribute much considering the wages of a transcriber apprentice were barely more than a pittance. Unen wanted to avoid being a burden on Milosh’s family at all costs.

Unen gnawed at her bottom lip. She had burnt the midnight oil many times before, but this was the first time it had ever impaired her ability to work the next morning.

She knew the reason for the change; that accursed nightmare was at fault. And she’d had the nightmare because—

“It’s that fishy mage’s fault.”

“Talking about me?”

When she heard the voice of the culprit coming from the dining table, Unen spun around sharply, as if she’d been slapped in the face. Too startled to find the right words, all she could do was flap her lips like a puppet while pointing at Mouru sitting on the bench at the table.

In that very moment, the kitchen door opened and Ori stepped in. “I finished feeding the horses,” he reported to Zola.



“They brought us a whole deer first thing in the morning. I shared some with the neighbors too. I invited them to eat breakfast with us since they were here, and they’ve been helping me out ever since. They’ve made life easy for me,” Zola hummed as she removed the frying pan from the stovetop.

Unen walked over to Ori and looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Mouru speedily answered in Ori’s stead, taking all of the credit.

Unen turned a frosty gaze on Mouru. “You don’t look like you’ve done anything though.”

Ori also let his irritation show on his face as he scowled at Mouru with a sidelong glance. “I’m the one who brought down the deer and cleaned it too.”

“I helped you carry it, didn’t I?”

“That’s about all you did, and don’t think I didn’t catch you slacking off when we got back to town.”

That’s all he did before kicking back and relaxing at the dining table with a smug face? Unen raised an eyebrow at Mouru. Beside her, Zola began taking the plates out of the cupboard. Unen rushed back into the kitchen to help her set the table.

“I’m still pleased,” Zola reassured, “because Mouru told me lots of fun, interesting stories while I was cooking. I had a blast getting to talk so much!”

“I should be the one thanking you for a fun morning.” Mouru replied, acting as if he were a courteous, fine young man.

Now that I think about it, Master had called him a kind, fine young man when he saw Mouru carrying my bag on the way back from my errand yesterday. Master, you’ve been tricked! Unen screamed internally, barely managing to hold herself back from yelling the same thing at Zola. She restrained herself from commenting because she didn’t want either of them to think she would badmouth someone else without good reason.

Mobilizing her self-control, Unen placed the pot of soup on the dining table. She set out enough bowls for everyone from the cupboard and began to serve

the soup.

“I’m sorry we inconvenienced you the other day because of this slowpoke,” Ori said to Unen, his tone apologetic. “I would’ve never put an employer in danger if he hadn’t shown up late.”

“That’s your fault for accepting unnecessary work at Harrow,” Mouru promptly protested.

“Your fault for collapsing over nothing.”

“Magic drains the life out of me! And hey, it’s not that I was late, but that you went on ahead without me. You’re horrible for neglecting and abandoning your bedridden partner.”

Neglecting and abandoning—those words sent shivers down Unen’s spine. She shook her head on reflex to rid it of the fresh memories left in her mind from the nightmare she had seen earlier that morning.

Ori continued to guilt-trip Mouru. He appeared to have pent-up resentment, which made him oddly talkative. “Bedridden, you say? You looked like you were having the time of your life to me.”

“That’s because, err…umm, the innkeeper’s daughter—”

“Ema.”

“Right, Ema, begged me to let her look after me.”

At least remember her name. Unen stifled her sigh.

“And who was it that said not to get in the way of his flirting?”

“Is that any reason to completely leave me behind?!”

“Hahaha! I see you’re popular with the ladies, Mouru,” Zola giggled, entertained by their argument.

Just then, there was a knock on the clinic’s front door.

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“MY sincerest apologies for visiting during the early hours of morning,” one of the men began, after they had taken a seat in a clinic chair. “I’m Sissel, and this is Turek. We both serve Cerná’s King Klinack. We are here with a letter for Lady

Unen from our king.”

The two men were young. The slender one with dark-brown hair was the king’s attendant Sissel, and the square-faced, rock-solid one was the imperial guard Turek.

Sitting on the bench across from them was Milosh, with his unruly morning hair, and Unen. Simon and Zola were standing behind them, and for some reason, Ori and Mouru had chosen to lean against the back wall of the clinic.

“What does it say, Unen?”

Unen lifted her head from the king’s letter at Simon’s restless question. “In short, it says to come to the castle.”

“Don’t make it that short! Please give a little more detail,” Milosh sighed. “Actually, just let me read it myself.”

Restless like his son, Milosh took the parchment letter from Unen. Then, after mumbling and nodding to himself, he turned around to inform everyone standing behind him of the contents.

“It sounds like he’s not summoning her to ask about the quarrel with Chelveny last week. He wants to talk about maps instead.”

Baborak and Chelveny had come to some sort of agreement about the border dispute, and King Klinack had been made aware of the entire course of events. Rather than worry about the not-so-unusual dispute between two of his lords, King Klinack had taken great interest in the “map created with sparrow eye vision” that had been the catalyst of their argument.

“He requests you visit the castle by all means to tell him about yourself and the map. If it is not too much trouble, would you care to accompany us to the royal capital?”

Unen quietly glanced up at Milosh. He gave her a firm nod. She turned back toward the king’s emissaries and took a deep breath, filling her lungs, before giving them her answer.

***

“AND *why* are you guys going with her?” The first thing out of Irena’s mouth

when she ran over to the clinic after hearing Unen was going to the capital was a complaint.

In Milosh's living room stood Unen, who had finished preparing to leave, and Ori and Mouru, who were outfitted for accompanying her.

"We're her bodyguards," Ori said simply.

"Bodyguards? Doesn't she have the king's emissaries for that?" Irena frowned and pointed at the main street outside the window. "The tall, thin guy and the buff guy in those trim and tidy uniforms, who brought some spectacular horses with them. There's even a crowd of people outside the clinic checking them out."

"There's no guarantee they'll escort her back home. For that matter, it's not an effective use of manpower to have the king's men make another roundtrip to Yezero." Mouru grinned and continued, "Besides, to be honest, I want to hire her to make a map. My plans will be ruined if something bad happens to her before that. So, since guarding her is convenient for us, she gets the special benefit of not having to pay us."

"Then I'm going too," Irena flatly declared.

Unen instantly put up both hands and waved Irena off. "You don't have to."

"Going by his logic just now, there's no guarantee they'll properly escort you back to Yezero either. It's safer to have someone from Yezero guarding you."

"Now that you mention it, that's a really good point," Unen acquiesced.

Irena noticed a slight upturn of a grim smile on Ori's face and looked at him with a hint of awkwardness. "It's not that I don't trust you, but…but…" Letting the last half of her sentence disappear into unintelligible mumbling, she shot a glance at Mouru.

Mouru pointed at himself with a broad grin. "Might sound bad for me to say this about myself, but I think I'm pretty useful."

"Well, yeah, you've earned the name Two-headed Griffin, so I'm sure you're skilled, but…"

"Like I said, drop the moniker. Please." Mouru covered his face and shook his

head.

“There’s just something shady about you,” Irena said bluntly. “Especially that smile of yours. It doesn’t reach your eyes.”

“Can’t help that.” Mouru shrugged with theatrical pomp, but it did nothing to remove the sharp glint that had been glimmering in his eyes since the start of the conversation.

“At any rate, I’m going with Unen! I’ll get ready in three minutes, so wait for me!” Faster than she could even finish her sentence, Irena flew out the door in the same whirlwind she had busted in with.

Chapter 9: Talismans and Talisman Masters

THE journey on foot from Yezero to the Royal Capital of Kujh took five days. The group of six tied their packs to Sissel and Turek's two horses and walked the distance alongside them. Ori and Mouru planned to borrow more horses at first, but since the key person—Unen—couldn't ride, they decided to travel by foot to the capital.

Golden wheat fields, close to harvest season, glistened under the sunlight. The comforting sight of abundant crops ripened by the summer sun's dazzling rays made the heat slightly more tolerable. Finding some relief from the sunlight under the roadside trees, the party crossed into the neighboring territory of Chelveny just past noon.

The sun was still too high in the sky to stop and lodge for the night, so they passed through the town of Harrow standing right on the border between the two territories, where Ori and Mouru had stayed for a month before arriving at Yezero.

I wonder which inn Mouru was left behind at for his flirting. Unen glanced around the shops lining the road.

Irena grinned at her. "You're finally back to your normal self."

"What do you mean?"

"You've had your head stuck in the clouds ever since we left your house, Unen."

I kind of knew I was out of it, but it was so bad that someone else noticed?

Embarrassed, Unen lowered her voice. "Was I acting that strange?"

"You weren't being strange. I mean, it's not normal for commoners to get invited to the castle by the king. Anyone would be in a world of their own after getting an invitation like that."

Unen felt as if she were walking on clouds for several hours after she held her head high and told Sissel and Turek that she would go to the castle with them. Even after she packed her pack again like she had for the previous week's surveying job, bid Milosh and his family goodbye, left town, and began to walk the highway under the blazing sun, she still couldn't shake the feeling that her trip to the capital was all some long dream.

Maybe, she had hoped, her name would reach the king's ears someday if she kept making maps for a long time. Perhaps he'd take an interest in her. And, if he somehow did, she could take that opportunity as her first real step into the wider world. The far-fetched dream that had been built on ifs, maybes, and somedays had suddenly fallen into her lap. Keeping her calm would've been far more unnatural than daydreaming about what was to come.

Unen slowly inhaled, and exhaled. Whatever may come of it, all she could do was give it her all. She clenched her fists tightly. *Let's do this!*

Irena playfully roughed up her hair.

***

THE sun set before they arrived at the next town, so they set up camp on the side of the road. Incidentally, it was the night of the new moon. In the darkness, it was impossible to tell where there were holes in the road, what rocks and objects had fallen off carts, and where pieces of the path might have dropped off.

After a meal of dried meat and hard biscuits that had been prepared for moments just as this, Unen laid down with her blanket wrapped around her. Both Unen and Irena had been removed from night watch due to Sissel and Turek's insistence. Irena initially argued that she didn't need special treatment, but she canned it with a sheepish expression when they told her that it was unacceptable to their code of honor as knights.

"I've set up 'traps' around the campsite so it'll be okay if someone accidentally falls asleep during their shift, but please be mindful of them. Don't walk away from the camp without letting me know," Mouru informed them, as he moved around the camp making weird rustling noises.

Silence settled in shortly after he finished.

***

A furious uproar struck after midnight.

“What the ‘ell?!”

“Damn it!”

“What’s goin’ on?!”

“Holy crap!”

Unen’s group woke to the sounds of loud cursing in the absence of light.

Murmurs brushed by Unen’s ear just as a soft glow lit Mouru’s hand. There was no mistaking the wooden tag in his hand—it was a talisman.

Then, I was right to think that the Murmurs are related to magic? Unen pondered. Meanwhile, the curses unfurled even more hatefully.

“Piece of shit!”

“Don’t screw with me!”

“Die!”

“Man, I’m *such* a lucky mage to have them fall right into my traps so perfectly.” Chuckling with pure delight, Mouru held the talisman up high. Magic light dispelled the darkness in the area, exposing struggling men, their legs caught in the ground, three meters away.

“…Were you sleeping?” Ori growled, scowling.

The mage whose night watch shift it had been made an exaggerated face of surprise as he shook his head. “*Me?* Never. I just didn’t think it warranted waking everyone up since they didn’t seem to have any projectiles. Man, they fell right into the trap one after another like a comedic act!”

“Damn you! Spineless cowards! Do something about my legs or I’ll kill ya!” barked the largest, bulkiest man. He swung his weapon around uselessly.

And it doesn’t make you a spineless coward for attacking travelers in the cover of night?

Apparently, Unen wasn’t the only person to have thought that, for Turek

retorted, “Is that something a lowlife highwayman should be saying?”

He squared his rugged shoulders and pulled rope out from his bag. With Mouru in charge of lighting the area, the remaining three men followed suit and tightly tied up the highwaymen.

Mouru’s trap was a spell that temporarily turned the ground into a bog. Once it caught prey, it reverted to its original solid composition. All eight highwaymen now had their hands bound in addition to being firmly lodged in the hard ground up to their shins.

Everything their attackers had on them was dangerous. Broadswords, short swords, hatchets, and even morning star clubs. Unen sighed at the sight of all the weapons piled together. They could practically open a weapons shop right there and then.

“Saints preserve us! No one can claim they didn’t come well-armed,” Sissel remarked disdainfully after the last weapons joined the pile. “Should we assume they come from these outskirts, considering they carry almost nothing on them aside from their gruesome weapons?”

“Probably,” Mouru replied perfunctorily. He turned to Ori. “Do you recognize any of them?”

“No,” Ori said without a moment’s delay.

Ori mentioned before that he had no issue remembering faces. But it was more like he had a talent for it.

“How do you want to deal with these men, Lord Sissel?” Turek asked.

“We can’t safely escort so many highwaymen to the appropriate authorities…” Sissel folded his arms at his chest as he contemplated further. “It would be one thing if we were in the capital, but there is not much for us to do inside another lord’s territory. Let’s leave them bound and stuck in the ground and entrust their punishment to the next town’s mayor or vigilante group,” he decided.

The highwaymen spat out even dirtier curses.

Unen shuddered at the thought of being left outdoors in the midsummer heat

with her hands tied behind her back and her shins lodged in the rock-hard ground. She felt just a tad sorry for them. Or she had, until she took another good look at the mountain of sharp weapons piled at her feet. *Well, they got what they deserved.*

***

THEY cleaned up their camp as light began to take over the eastern sky. Leaving the highwaymen's chorus that had switched tunes from curses to pleas behind, the group departed for the royal capital.

Leading his horse by its chestnut reins, Sissel formally addressed Mouru, "Master Mouru, you have my utmost gratitude for your assistance last night. We would have fallen victim to that pack of bandits had you not come with us."

Mouru waved his right hand dismissively with his usual nonchalant attitude. "Nah, I didn't do that much. Besides, if we're keeping count, the trap I set last night wasn't my own skill. It was the work of a talisman."

"A talisman?" Confusion flickered on Sissel's face.

Not wanting to let the opportunity slip by, Unen jumped into the conversation though she was walking a few steps behind the two men. "By talismans, you mean the objects you mentioned the other day that allows you to borrow power from another god?"

She wasn't aware of what went down when the highwaymen got caught in his trap because she had been sound asleep, but she had heard Murmurs every other time Mouru used magic or a talisman.

What in the world are those Murmurs? Does Mouru not hear the Murmurs? Unen had a mountain of questions she wanted answers to. Now at his side, she leveled a penetrating look at him as she awaited his answer.

Mouru flashed a wicked smile, appearing delighted to answer. "Talismans carry duplicates of a spell created by a Talisman Master."

"Talisman Master?" Irena joined them, tossing her question into the foray, "Is that like a conjuror?"

The corner of Mouru's lip curled up as if to wordlessly taunt, "You don't even

know that?”

Irena’s cheeks were rapidly dyed with her embarrassment. “Sorry for not knowing stuff! How would I know when all our town has ever had is a single mystic and no mages or Talisman Masters or whatever other terms you wanna pull out of your hat next?!”

Mouru’s mocking expression ticked Unen off as well. Needing to get in a dig back at him, she unleashed sarcasm of her own. “Don’t let it bother you, Irena. There’s no way someone who *claims* to be one of the world’s *great* and *mighty* master mages would snort in the face of those who seek his knowledge. I’m sure what you saw just now was what happens when he tries to hold back a sneeze. Twitchy, isn’t he?”

“…Looks like our shortie here has some bite to her too.” Mouru looked at Unen with a ghost of a smile.

“Mouru,” Ori quietly rebuked him with that single word.

“I know, I know. Sure, they’ve been having a go at calling me shady and fishy, but I need to be more of an adult when dealing with these children. Sorry, sorry.”

“Did you just call me a child?” Irena’s brow furrowed with irritation, to which Mouru grinned broadly.

Unen couldn’t help sighing. *I can’t believe Mouru has been holding a grudge against Irena just for calling him shady before we left. He needs to be more of an adult. Or more like he needs to be less childish.*

Looking completely refreshed, Mouru returned to the main topic at hand as if they had never digressed. “Talisman Masters duplicate magic onto wood. They observe as a mage uses magic and let the magic’s—what should I call it—surge? pass into their body and record it directly onto a long, thin, narrow piece of wood. Then they finish it off by adding a drop of the mage’s blood. The completed result is what we call a talisman.”

Mouru retrieved a thin piece of wood from his chest pocket. “This is a recording of the surging waves of magic that played the heartstrings deep within a Talisman Master’s chest, an exact representation of the sensations

they felt. Depending on the Talisman Master, the drawings of the magic can look like anything, like a squiggle left behind by a wriggling earthworm or a list of nonsense words. There are so many variations it's funny."

He was right. The wooden tag Mouru held out for them to see was marked with what looked like a child's drawing with faltering, uneven brushstrokes.

Each of these lines manage to contain the mysterious power that unleashes the spell? Unen wondered, her expression serious as she stared with intense concentration at the drawing on the piece of wood.

Sissel excitedly leaned in toward Mouru with frightening speed. "Then, can I use magic with just a talisman as well?" He accidentally yanked down on his reins with the sudden jerk of his movement, earning an angry snort from his horse.

"Hard to say until you try, but…I think it'll be a challenge if you don't have any magic training."

Mouru's answer obviously disappointed Sissel, but even Turek, who'd been restlessly glancing back at Mouru since the question had come up, seemed emotionally conflicted.

"Doesn't the king have at least one mage under him anyway?" Mouru asked. "You don't hear about stuff like this?"

"Ah, hah. Well, umm, the topic hasn't come up much…" Sissel answered ambiguously.

Mouru cocked a suspicious eyebrow, but continued talking anyway. "It takes a lot of time and effort to make a single talisman, and then it's only good for one use after all that work. There aren't many skilled Talisman Masters out there in the first place either. Hey, Ori? Do you remember the light talisman I bought last year?"

"The one that produced light dimmer than a single firefly?"

"That's the one. Can't get more of a rip-off than that one." Mouru's bitter smile shifted into a sneer in the blink of an eye. Then, with venom in his darkened voice, he said, "Talisman making is a skill for wannabe mages who failed to become a god's Compeer. They just want to find some way to still be

able to use magic after all their wasted struggling. You'll make a fool of yourself if you expect too much from it."

The tone of his voice was steeped in the same abysmal darkness that colored the hair framing his face. Though Unen instinctively flinched, she mustered her courage to look right at him. Right now, she wanted information more than anything else.

"What's a Compeer?"

And first, she was going to learn the meaning of a word she'd never heard before.

"It's an old name for mages. By forming a contract with a god, they are a close existence to them, so they became their compeer, or their human half."

"What's the contract?" Unen saw Irena's exasperation out of the corner of her eye, but pressed on with her questioning regardless.

Mouru closed his eyes partially, apparently enjoying the attention. "The mage and god share their true names."

"What's a true name?"

"A true name is the core of your existence. By allowing someone to know your true name, you are giving them life-and-death power over you."

Unen mentally took note of each new piece of knowledge about magic and began to organize it in her mind. Sifting through all the information from the events that had taken place during her surveying trip last week, to what she had heard on the road to her atelier from Mouru the day before yesterday, to last night's attack, to what she had just learned. Each piece added to her pool and she eagerly sorted the information out, connected the dots, and then—

"If you share with each other, that means you know your god's true name too?" she asked softly. It was that implication that felt most off to her.

A single eyebrow arced upward as if to say that was only obvious. "That's right. I wouldn't be able to use my god's power otherwise."

Unen dragged her gaze away from Mouru and carefully stared in the direction they were heading. "But there are other mages aside from you who can use

wind magic, right?”

“You’re right. I’ve met about three so far myself.”

“Then, that means the god of winds has the true names—weaknesses—of at least four mages. Isn’t that unfair?”

She heard Mouru gasp. Then he fell silent, bringing absolute silence to the group who waited for the mage that was the center of the conversation to speak again. For a while after, only the crunching sounds of six people and two horses walking over the dirt ground and the heat haze disrupted the air around them.

Eventually, Mouru quietly broke the silence. “You can’t speak of humans and gods as complete equals. To us humans, our true names are equivalent to our very lives, but it might not be the same for the gods.”

The unusual falters in the pace of his words evidenced his own lack of confidence in what he had said.

“Your god doesn’t tell you those things?”

“It’s a world of, ‘Don’t Think, Feel.’” Mouru lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

***

ORI slowed his gait to walk beside Mouru once the lecture on magic had stopped. Keeping his gaze straight ahead, Ori turned only his voice to Mouru. “Was your spell from last night the same one you used when we suppressed the orangutans?”

“It was.”

Creases formed in Ori’s brow. He muttered to himself, “Twenty centimeters.”

Mouru raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“They only sank twenty centimeters into the ground. Just so you know.” Ori returned to his original position in front of Mouru.

“Is there a problem with that?” Sissel asked.

“Nah, not really.” Mouru hesitated. “It’s not big enough of a deal to call it a problem, but he’s just pointing out that the last time I used the same spell, the

victims sunk quite a bit more…”

The thick crease in Mouru’s brow took a long time to go away.

Chapter 10: Royal Capital Kujh

A swift flowing river greeted the group at the bottom of the gently sloped hills they had crossed. On the opposite shore of the perpetual rush of the Cerná River that the kingdom took its name from, they could see the stone castle walls towering gallantly over shabby roofs of slipshod huts, which were built so close together as to nearly be on top of each other. The fortified city was protected by ramparts standing over five meters tall. A moat, made from the Cerná River's redirected water, encircled and passed through the entire city.

Unen's party finally arrived at the Royal Capital City of Kujh five days after they had departed from Yezero.

They crossed the bridge spanning the river, only to have their path promptly blocked by a peddler with cantaloupe dangling from the pole he carried on his shoulders.

"Aren't you thirsty, my lords?" He held out the bright-yellow fruit with a smile.

Sissel waved him off with his left hand. "We're in a hurry. Let us pass."

As he drove away the cantaloupe peddler, Turek began to forcefully push his way forward through the crowd. His fawn-colored horse shook his neck menacingly in response as he did, sending a warning to any other peddlers lying in wait for a chance to hawk their wares.

The party safely reached Kujh Gate with Turek and Ori as their stern outriders. Upon identifying Sissel's face in the river of people, the gatekeeper ran over to greet them.

Once inside the castle walls, Sissel proudly looked back at the group. "Allow me to formally welcome you to Royal Capital Kujh." He spread his free hand out to show off the magnificent townscape.

"Wow! I've never been anywhere like this before!" Irena exclaimed,

excitement glittering in her eyes.

Three-story buildings stood in rows to their left, right, and front. Signs with a variety of drawings, spanning from shoes, hammers, pigs, and flowers, hung from the eaves of the buildings on both sides of the road paved straight through the heart of the city. The number of people coming and going each and every way made it feel like a festival to Unen and Irena. Stones creating the road's surface had been placed and hardened into the dirt carefully, likely to prevent any carriages from getting their wheels stuck in sludge on a rainy day.

And then, beyond the rows of buildings, stood the stone spire of a castle turret that instantly outdid everything else in sight. Unen dreamily sighed at the imposing magnificence that signaled the status of the kingdom's master.

Yet, the sight of what she witnessed outside the castle walls lingered in her mind. The image of the rundown huts with sloppy shingle roofs that had been packed so tightly together and looked as if they could be blown away in the wind had left a deep impression on her.

"Um…" Though she was hesitant, Unen decided to ask Sissel anyway. "What's the story with those houses outside the gate…?"

"Ah, those are the homes of people from other lands who have been flocking into the royal capital these past few years. Those who were unable to find a place to live within the castle walls have been allowed by His Majesty's goodwill to build huts outside."

The current living conditions likely weren't too bad in the summer, but once winter came with its unrelenting, frigid cold, the holey huts pieced together with scrap wood wouldn't be much different from sleeping outdoors. Should a storm hit, the residents' lives could be blown away just as easily as the materials they had used to build their homes.

Irena noticed her tense expression. "What's wrong, Unen?"

"…Nothing." Unen gave Irena a smile to placate her, then quietly closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to shift gears. At long last, she was going to have an audience with the king. Now wasn't the time for mulling over unnecessary concerns.

“Shall we proceed to the castle?”

Unen slowly opened her eyes at Sissel’s question.

***

HEADING up the gentle incline that was surrounded on both sides by small stores eventually brought them to a precipitous bare-rock wall. The road that had been carved out of the bedrock ascended up the cliff from the left to the right, as if it were clinging to the face of the slope. On top of the rock wall, standing taller than the surrounding rooftops, was an even taller stonework wall which silently towered over the land below it with the blue sky as its backdrop.

Peering up from where they stood, no buildings were visible besides the towers that linked castle wall to castle wall due to the cliff’s dramatic incline.

So this is a castle? Or should I say, a fortress? Unen loudly exhaled. Compared to Kujh’s castle, Baborak’s castle was more like a big mansion surrounded by a canal and sturdy fence.

The city rapidly grew smaller below them as they made their way up the steep sloped road. It was as if Unen truly did have a bird’s view now. She found it hard to believe that the buildings she had to jerk her neck back to look up at were now suddenly far below her feet. If she continued on the present course and climbed to the top of the tower, would her hands be able to reach the birds that soared through the heavens?

Something collided with Unen’s left shoulder as she mindlessly plodded along, her attention absorbed in taking in the fascinating scenery. Loud curses rained down on her as she stumbled then caught herself on the railing.

“Watch where you’re going!”

Quickly turning her face up toward the voice, she found a man with large bags on his back glowering down at her contemptuously.

“I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t a place for little brats to casually wander—” The fuming man standing threateningly over her suddenly trailed off. “Ah, uh,” he mumbled,

then clearly restraining his angry voice, he spat, “Don’t walk with your eyes off the road,” and resumed descending the slope.

Let me guess… Unen looked behind her, and sure enough, Ori was standing there with his arms crossed in an intimidating manner.

“What the heck was with that guy?” Irena seethed indignantly. “He went out of his way to bump into Unen! The road is *more* than wide enough; he should’ve just taken that corner down!”

“Yeah,” Ori agreed.

Unen glanced from one to the other with a stiff smile that fell somewhere between strained and self-derisive. “Thank you, both of you. But it’s true that I wasn’t paying attention.”

As Irena had pointed out, the hill road was indeed wide enough for two carriages to comfortably travel side by side, but that didn’t make it okay for her to bumble along without looking where she was going. Presently, a good number of people were descending the slope and would have to wait in foot traffic even if they passed Unen’s party.

“Did something happen?” Sissel rushed back to Unen from where he had been walking at the front of the group.

Disturbed by guilt, Unen took it to heart to walk with her eyes firmly on the road ahead. All the while knowing that her determination to do so would waver soon enough.

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WITH Sissel as their guide, Unen’s group went through the castle gates without being stopped by the gatekeepers. Passing through the courtyard bustling with people, they proceeded inside another gate that led into the second set of castle walls under a portcullis and by a handful of knights covered in full plate armor.

Under the careful view of numerous towers, they were guided to the center of the castle’s structure, which culminated in the main residence.

Chilly air welcomed them into its embrace the moment they stepped inside

the building. Feeling their sweat evaporate in record time brought sighs of relief to everyone's lips. After depositing their bags in the small room adjacent to the entrance, they took to the corridors again and advanced deeper into the castle. Finally, Sissel pushed open the heavy evergreen oak double doors to invite the others inside their destination, and Turek, serving as the rear guard, respectfully closed the doors before standing at attention beside them.

Inside was a room spacious enough to comfortably fit a small house. Eight windows were cut out in the wall to the left in even horizontal intervals at a position higher than an average person's height. A large fireplace took up the inner left corner of the room. Cerná's flag decorated the center of the wall they faced. Slightly in front of it and to the right sat a marvelous cloth-covered chair pointed in the doors' direction.

"Ooh, you came?" A man in his forties standing next to the right wall gazing upon its adorned picture turned to Unen's group with a wide smile. He was a man of delicate, yet striking features whose glossy bronze hair and deep sky-blue eyes made for a profound impression.

"Lord Vrba, what, may I ask, are you doing here?" Sissel inquired.

"I had to come when I heard there would be an intriguing guest. I asked His Majesty for permission to be present for this."

Sissel turned toward Unen's group and introduced the gentle-looking man. "This is Lord Vrba, who rules over Schaehor Province which runs along the kingdom's eastern border."

"I'm his Majesty's hunting companion. About ten days ago I came to the capital to kick back and have some fun."

"You know, you don't have to deliberately act frivolous by saying you came to play."

The door to the right opened before Vrba could make a coherent reply and a new voice with a deep baritone resonated throughout the room in greeting. "Welcome!"

"Your Majesty!" Sissel immediately straightened, bringing his right hand to his chest.

“Ah, we aren’t in the public eye, you don’t need to stand on ceremony, Sissel.”

Cerná’s King Klinack strode into the spacious room with his golden blond hair swinging behind him, a jovial smile accompanying the good-natured look in his eyes. Judging from lack of wrinkles around the corner of his eyes and mouth, the king appeared close in age to Vrba, but the aura he exuded was of someone quite a bit younger.

“Your Majesty, with all due respect, should you not be equally concerned of your guests’ eyes as the public’s that you speak of?” curtly interjected the elderly man following behind Klinack, who had gray-streaked chestnut hair and wore a rather priggish expression.

“Don’t be uptight, Harabal. Our guests are not the kind of people who will lose sight of the matter by my being a tad more personable with them. Am I wrong?” he looked to his attendant and imperial guard.

“You are correct, Sire,” Sissel firmly answered. Turek gave a firm nod at the back of the room.

King Klinack then addressed Unen’s group. “First, allow me to thank you for taking the trouble to travel from afar to visit. Allow me to commence with formal introductions now. I’m Cerná’s master and king, Klinack. This gentleman here with the grim and rigid face is my distinguished aide, who also holds the position of mathematician and astronomer, as well as acting as my princess’ private tutor, Harabal.”

The man called Harabal shot a brief glance at Klinack, who piled on the titles with a roguish smile, before greeting Unen’s group with a nod.

The king continued, “Looks like Sissel has already introduced Vrba to you, but…he’s my beloved freeloader—”

“Hey now, that’s not a nice way to introduce someone, Klinack,” Vrba interrupted with an incredulous smile.

“I was only playing along with your thoughtless frivolity,” Klinack said coolly.

“Leave that role to me or you’ll ruin my plan where my frivolous behavior will lead to a fine series of events in which they will inevitably learn that I am

actually a very serious person, and their opinions will change for the better."

Theatrically shrugging his shoulders, Klinack surveyed everyone present. "This annoying and tiresome person is my dear friend, Vrba. He governs over the vital eastern territory of Schaehor. Seems like he wants to accompany me in hearing about the skills you possess."

Now having finished with basic introductions, Klinack nodded to Sissel. It was finally Sissel's turn to introduce Unen and her friends in order.

"This is Sparrow Eyes Unen, the mapmaker of Baborak Province's town of Yezero."

The king and his two men simultaneously turned their attention on Unen. As neither expressed any surprise at her appearance, they had to have obtained some information on Sparrow Eyes in advance.

Unen swallowed hard and curtsied the way Sissel taught her.

"And this young lady here is Lady Unen's friend, Lady Irena. She is the oldest daughter of the leader of Yezero's Vigilante Corps, and volunteered to accompany us as Lady Unen's guard."

Irena curtsied after Unen with a prim expression.

"Beside her is the swordsman Ori, and beside him, the mage Master Mouru. We came under attack by eight highwaymen on the road, but we safely survived without any trouble thanks to Master Mouru."

"Oh, a mage?" Curiosity twinkled in Klinack's eyes.

Right at that moment, the door behind Unen was thrown open with a loud bang.

Chapter 11: Interview

“THERE’S a wretched mage in here!” a hoarse, rasping voice came bouncing off the stone floor and walls.

An elderly, short, wrinkled man of eighty stood in the doorway wildly swinging his walking stick. Though his hairline had receded, his hair still held the magnificent jet-black of a mage.

“You’ve been sent here by those ingrates in Taj Kingdom, haven’t you?! I’ll turn you to cinders with my flames!”

“There is no mage from Taj here,” Klinack placated the old man in a gentle tone.

“*Preposterous!* The winds are murmuring to me! They affirm their Compeer is present!”

Unen studied the elderly man’s face. *The wind is murmuring to him? This person hears the Murmurs too?*

“They’re *telling* me that—HM, whazzat? …your old, old friend, is it? OH! I see, I see! The one from then! The old, old one who became your shield and—”

“Turek,” Klinack called.

Fulfilling the unspoken command, Turek went to stand before the old man, and while supporting his shoulder as if he were caring for someone ill, slowly assisted him out the doors.

“Ooh, Turek, my boy!” the old man chattered away, “Is it already time for the evening meal? What should I help with today?”

The doors shut behind them.

Klinack dropped his shoulders once the old man’s voice had disappeared beyond the closed doors. “Sorry about that. He’s a mage who has served our castle and royal family for several generations. I assume you’ve heard the name

Crimson Genga before? He was the man known as the savior of our Cerná's military force during the war seventy years ago between our kingdom and the neighboring eastern kingdom of Taj, but to our great regret, he's become less capable of holding conversations as he's passed a hundred years of age…"

Unen's group stirred at the unbelievable age.

"Are his spells not going berserk?" Mouru asked frankly, without an iota of hesitance. Everyone, from Unen to Ori, were taken aback by his bold behavior and gaped at Mouru in shock, but the man he had asked didn't seem to mind at all.

"I think he's all right in that regard. Fortunately, he seems to have forgotten every spell aside from the one that allows him to light the kitchen stove or candles. He will throw a fit, like you just witnessed, when he senses another mage, but he has never actually tried to cast a spell on them."

Klinack stared at the doors Master Genga had been whisked away through and quietly continued, "Master Genga is a man we are greatly indebted to for saving our kingdom from peril. I want to express my gratitude by seeing him off into his retirement, but…we can't get a new mage to stay because of him… Well, I do not mind too much since we are at peace with our neighboring countries, but it is still something to be mindful of."

"I'm sure he stays around because this kingdom, and especially the area around Your Highness, is peaceful and easy to live in," Mouru commented. Klinack arched a questioning eyebrow. "We mages have rather good physical strength and endurance because the gods have bestowed their blessing on us. At least, we are stronger than we were before we became mages. Yet, there aren't many elderly mages in the world. I believe it's due to how this power of ours drags us into problems. Master Genga's longevity is a testament to your magnetism, Your Highness."

"I would be very happy if that's true." Klinack's indigo eyes softened.

Aide Harabal reluctantly cleared his throat beside him. "Your Majesty, will you please get on topic?"

"Good point. You all must be tired from your long journey. Why don't we hurry and finish this?" Klinack stepped back half a step to give the center of the

room over to Harabal.

“Then allow me to emulate my king and be frank with you.” Harabal pulled out a cylindrical container for official documents from where he held it under his arm. “Lady Unen, is this your creation?”

He procured a single map depicting a demesne from the container. It brought back Unen’s memories of surveying in the frigid cold of midwinter six months ago.

Mouru immediately slipped in before Unen could move to affirm it. “Before we answer, would you mind telling us how you were able to summon her to the royal capital so soon, Your Highness?”

Unen looked at Mouru in shock.

Chelveny’s attack happened eleven days ago. It had taken five days for Unen to arrive at the royal capital. Even if Sissel and Turek had ridden their horses at full gallop to Yezero, it would’ve taken them at least two to three days. Meaning, King Klinack had learned about the quarrel and decided to summon Unen to the capital in less than four days.

Klinack smiled warmly and answered, “Good question. Chelveny and Baborak went at it hard once during my father—the former king’s—time. They must’ve gotten severely reprimanded by the former king, because this time, Chelveny sent a fast horse to us the day after the disturbance.

“According to his messenger, he’d had no intention of upsetting the kingdom’s peace. The incident was the fault of his vassals, who had gotten ahead of themselves without permission. But no one would feel pleased to have someone peer intrusively into their yard with the eyes of a bird, so Baborak is at fault too. In short, he gave a list of excuses and this map over to me.”

Klinack reached for the map and looked it over intently, as if he were scanning every detail of it.

“I can see why. This is truly detailed and elaborate. But we can’t tell whether this is simply a drawing or an accurate map. That is why we have summoned the mapmaker to hear her explanation of how she went about making it in

detail.” He turned a sharp gaze on Unen.

It pierced straight through her. Suddenly, Unen knew precisely why the king and his men had summoned her without a moment’s delay the second they had gotten their hands on her map. Hadn’t Ori mentioned why when they had first met?

“Some have a map commissioned in order to make the land theirs.”

Possessing an accurate map of another country would grant them intimate knowledge of their geography and topography, thus allowing them to strategize where to attack from and how to defend themselves all from the comfort of their castles. Presently, the neighboring countries were at peace, but the king had to be more than aware of the map’s value.

“Knowledge is power. And great, unnecessary power draws equally great disaster to it.”

The words Ori had once said to her echoed in her ears.

The shrewd, calculating man in power quietly asked again, “Are you the one who made this map?”

“I am.” Unen dragged out each sound.

“Then, will you teach us how you did it?” Harabal leaned forward, his expression earnest.

Unen prepared for the worst and said, “It’s a trade secret.” Her voice reverberated off the still room’s walls.

“I like her!” Klinacks averred, his brows rising as he clapped his hands together once. “Indeed, no good businessman would want to carelessly share trade secrets, creating more business rivals!”

“Your Majesty, this is no laughing matter. How can we discern the authenticity of this map—nay, of this mapmaker’s ability then?”

Unen frowned at Harabal’s insinuation. She wanted freedom from their ulterior motives, but it wouldn’t do to have the quality of her maps doubted.

“Then let me give you a brief explanation,” she acquiesced, then sped through an explanation, “I measured the distance and azimuth from each point on the

map.”

If knowing that was all they needed to understand how to make maps, there’d be no reason for her to hold her tongue in the first place. Otherwise, her secret would be kept if they couldn’t figure it out.

It was easy to see the flames of curiosity burning in Harabal’s eyes. “You would fail to record undulations in the ground that way.”

“I measure the horizontal angles and find it through the fineness ratio.”

Unen and Harabal defiantly stared at each other in silence.

“Uhh, can I say something?” Lord Vrba interjected, raising his slender right hand. He had quietly listened to the entire conversation thus far. “If you plan to discuss this at length, I think it would be best to let them rest for the day and continue tomorrow. I don’t think it’s wise to pile questions on right after you’ve summoned her from so far away without giving her a moment of rest.”

Klinack made a wry smile at the plainly ruffled Harabal, who’d just had cold water poured onto his interrogation. “Almost sounds like we’re the bad guys when he puts it like that.”

Harabal sighed loudly. “…He speaks the truth. Lady Unen, my heartfelt apologies, but I request your presence for more questions tomorrow.”

“Ah, all right.”

Unen felt the weight lift off her chest for the time being. Debating whether to thank him, she looked to Vrba. He smiled, as if wordlessly reassuring her. The image of his soft, sky-blue eyes overlapped with a memory of another pair of similar eyes, and Unen caught her breath at the nostalgia.

* * *

HIS hay-colored hair stuck to his sweaty forehead. The creases in his brow never softened, and his fatigue had permanently stained the area around his eyes black. But his fierce blue eyes had shone as brilliantly as augite from the dark shadows of his eyelids. He had been burning with a painful sense of duty

that he had to save as many lives as physically possible.

A sudden major earthquake had ravaged the region around Yezero, and the town had been its epicenter.

“I’ve decided not to run away any longer,” Hereh had declared to himself.

He treated the injured alongside Milosh without sleep or rest.

“Milosh, how’s his pulse?” Hereh asked in the midst of surgery, without stopping his hands for a second. His voice came out muffled through the cloth covering his mouth, but the nervousness in his voice was like a taut string.

Zola wiped away the beads of sweat trickling into his eyes with a towel.

“It’s recovered somewhat, I’d say,” Milosh answered.

“His breathing?”

“Regular.”

Placing the tool on top of the metal tray with a clink, Hereh sighed. “He’s not out of the woods yet, but it’s safe to say we got over the biggest mountain. We might be able to save him if his condition remains stable until morning.”

Zola sunk to the ground before Hereh finished speaking. She called out Simon’s name through the flood of tears streaming down her face.

Joyous cheers erupted from the line of people waiting for their turn to be treated behind Unen, who was standing in the doorway attentively watching over the surgery.

Hereh’s medicine must have been very effective, because Simon continued to sleep peacefully.

Watching Milosh take his son’s pulse while he quietly shed tears, Unen thought, *Milosh and Zola both truly care for and love Simon. What would Mom have done if I were in Simon’s position?* Seriously pondering the question, all she could come up with was, *she probably would’ve decided she had no need for a disabled daughter and would let me die in front of her.*

“Unen, it’s your turn next. You must be in so much pain. Thank you for bearing it so patiently.” Hereh came over to Unen and smiled at her. His augite

blue eyes were so kind, she almost cried.

Ahhh, if only he were my real father.

* * *

Chapter 12: Feelings for a Friend

SISSEL led Unen and the others across the gangway bridge connecting the castle's main residence to a snug and cozy annex tower. Ori and Mouru were assigned the guest room near the stairs on the second floor, while Unen and Irena were given a room on the third floor. They could relax at long last.

Their party of four ate dinner alone in the manor hall of the second floor. Apparently, Vrba had given King Klinack the idea by insisting not to "burden them with having to interact with a bunch of unfamiliar faces before they even have the chance to recover from their long journey."

"His Majesty said he would love for you to join him tomorrow, for dinner in the main building's grand dining hall. I look forward to sharing a meal with you all once more," Sissel said, smiling broadly as he swung his gaze across each of them.

Unen had reached her limit. "Excuse me, why am I being treated so kindly?" Her voice steadily fell to a whisper. "I'm merely a commoner with no social status or rank."

The corners around Sissel's eyes softened. "Because you are His Majesty's guest, Lady Unen."

While that was true, His Majesty was the *King*—the lord and master who governed over the entire kingdom. Couldn't he have forcefully summoned such a simple, rural commoner without taking the trouble of inviting her as a special guest?

As if reading the doubts in her heart, Sissel smiled generously with all the experienced composure of the king's close attendant. "Additionally, Master Harabal is always saying that knowledge is yet another form of impressive fortune. His Majesty believes respect should be paid to those with great knowledge in the same way it is paid to those with rank, land, and assets."

Unen's heart thudded loudly in her chest. She felt heat rising in her body, flushing her cheeks.

Unfortunately for her, Mouru's nonchalant voice mercilessly cut in to rain on her good cheer. "Let me guess, joining our dinner tomorrow will be that man with reddish hair from the king's office who said he uh…'came to play'? What's his name again…?"

Sissel hesitantly offered, "Lord Vrba?"

"Yup, that's the one. Will Lord Vrba be having dinner with us as well?"

"Yes," Sissel affirmed, then grinned. "He may say he's here to play, but he actually came for a different reason. One of the kingdom's gold mines is located in the Schaehor Province under Vrba's control. He came to deliver the annual report to His Majesty."

Fully regaining her calm, Unen quietly exhaled and shifted her focus to the conversation. *So that's how they know that Vrba is just **acting** like he's frivolous and thoughtless*, she concluded internally.

"All right, I will return later to remove your dishes once you have finished eating. Remember, we will be having dinner together tomorrow," Sissel reminded them once more, before disappearing out the door with the other servants and an empty pot in hand.

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IRENA exited the annex tower veiled in the darkness of night carrying her sword. She had immediately asked Sissel about whether there was any space available for sword training when he escorted her to her room that evening, but it had taken until they were finished with dinner and about to sleep before he finally answered, "Feel free to use the courtyard."

Practicing landing hits in total darkness is useless. But I'll at least get in some practice swings. Irena resigned herself to a less satisfactory training session as she walked across the gangway bridge. What she saw when she turned the corner, however, made her doubt her eyes. There were ten iron baskets with fires burning inside, providing light by encircling the courtyard where Ori was practicing agile swings with the empty air as his opponent.

Ori's sword style was slightly different from the style Irena had practiced since childhood. Naturally, the foundational moves such as thrust, cut, feint, circle parry and so on had the same base form, but Ori took a rather creative approach to them. Irena had no doubt that her father's eyelids would snap back, eye whites bulging, and his nostrils would flare the moment he witnessed the heresy of his moves. Ori's swordplay during the clash with Chelveny had been the definition of phantasmagoric.

Irena focused every fiber in her being on Ori's movement. Analyzing the rhythm of his footwork, her eyes followed his sword. She imagined moving like him in her mind while searching for openings in his defense.

Irena's feet kicked off the ground faster than any conscious thought. She launched a lunge quicker than his right leg stepped forward and attacked.

At the brink of a sword clash, they both masterfully stopped their swords a centimeter apart.

Ori's upper lip curled, his eyes challenging her. "Nice move."

"I might not look like it, but I *am* the daughter of the Vigilante Corps' leader."

Ori was already used to hearing her say that, but he cocked his eyebrow as if he had gleaned some new information from it this time. "That means you aren't a member of the Vigilante Corps yourself, then."

Irena could only return a strained smile. "It's one of those, 'It's no place for a woman' things." She sighed heavily, releasing all the air in her lungs. Then she looked up at Ori. "So I was kind of happy when you mistook me for Unen back when we first met in the saloon. Obviously, you'd have to take age into account in your search for Sparrow Eyes, but I was surprised that you didn't judge us based on gender."

"You must've been real happy; so much that you would beautifully sweep my feet out from underneath me."

Irena dramatically put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. "This and that are different issues. I have to protect Unen from shady outsiders."

They heard a third pair of feet walk into the courtyard grounds.

“Why are you so concerned with that girl anyway?” Mouru chimed in, joining them by the swaying fires. The orange lights casting a glow onto his cheeks were powerless against the darkness of his Mage’s Black hair. “I find it strange. You’re so overprotective and you aren’t even relatives.”

Irena’s brows pulled together in a disgusted scowl. “It has nothing to do with you.”

But Mouru remained unfazed by her cutting remark. Thoughtfully rubbing the bottom of his chin, he mused, “Rather than overprotective, maybe it’s better to say it feels like you’re guarding some sort of small animal you happened to picked up…? Ah, or is it one of those cases where you want her around to make you look better—”

“If you say *any more*,” Irena spat, “I’ll chop you up with this sword and feed you to the pigs.” She gripped her right hand tightly with her left to stop herself as she shook with rage.

“Mouru,” Ori warned, exasperation in his voice. “Think of a different way to phrase things if you *actually* want her to answer your question.”

Confused by what Ori was insinuating, Irena took a good look at Mouru’s face.

Fire blazed in his eyes, reflecting the cressets’ light. Like the eyes of a hunter waiting patiently for his prey to be caught in the perfect trap. Mouru was purposely agitating her to get the information he wanted.

Irena felt hopelessly stupid for taking him seriously. Letting out a deep, deep sigh, she gave up and opened her mouth to speak because she wouldn’t get anywhere with her training otherwise. “Simon—”

“Who?” Mouru interrupted right off the bat.

Ori groaned and offered a short explanation. “The son of the doctor Unen lives with. The blond boy.”

“Ahh, him.”

Does Mouru have a hard time remembering people’s names? Maybe he has no desire to even try. He’s a man who’s audacious in all respects. Irena’s shoulders slumped. *Anyway, I need to hurry and shut this guy up so I can get*

back to training. Pulling herself together, Irena lifted her head.

“He lost his right leg in the earthquake three years ago.”

Memories of the incident rushed through her mind in a flash. Simon, rescued by five people from under the debris and rubble of a collapsed building. Fresh blood pouring from him without stopping. Screams and shrieks ringing out. And just when everyone present is preparing themselves for Simon’s death, an unfamiliar man picks him up. His long, hay-colored braided hair swings as he stands up with Simon in his arms, paying no mind to the blood dirtying his clothes. The heroic determination brimming in his eyes as he utters three words, “I’ll save him.”

“Simon was a popular guy with no end in the number of women who wanted to marry him because he was smart, handsome, and had great future prospects. All of that came to an abrupt end with the earthquake.”

Irena gestured meaninglessly with her hands to shake away the memories of the past as she went on, “It was the same as sentencing Simon, who had always been popular, as a man of no use just because he didn’t have his right leg. He was thrown completely into despair and acted with self-abandonment for a time after that. I didn’t know how to comfort him either. But you know what Unen said? ‘It’s not like your value as a person was in the leg you lost, Simon. Forget those people who only loved your leg and think about the people who love you for all of you.’”

Mouru quietly raised an entertained eyebrow at the story. Irena surprisingly found herself having fun reminiscing about it too.

“And Simon’s face, when he heard her say that, I just…”

“You just what?”

“Eh? Ah, nah, um, well?”

Irena just barely realized that the rest of what she had to say, no matter how she said it, would be her fawning over him. She distracted herself from the heat rushing to her cheeks with a cough and glared at Mouru.

“A-Anyway, Unen became a very, very, very important person to us ever since. Got it?”

“I got it. You’ve more than convinced me.”

Irena felt even more embarrassed because Mouru had agreed with a dead serious face.

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RELIVING the taste of the shepherd’s pie made with an abundance of salted meat that was served for dinner, Unen exited the tower. She was a little worried—or rather lonely—because Irena hadn’t returned for quite a while since she left to train.

On her way across the gangway bridge, she happened to spot Irena and the other two illuminated by the cressets’ fire, beyond the shrubbery.

I get why the two swordsmen would be together, but why is Mouru present for their sword practice? The wind carried other voices, from the main residence, to where Unen was standing, scrunching her brow.

Curious, Unen stopped at the bend to carefully peer around it. King Klinack and Aide Harabal were standing right beside the entrance to the main residence, staring down at the courtyard.

“Training without being commanded to do so. Some dependable youths we have visiting our castle,” Klinack said sincerely, in a tone containing neither sarcasm nor flattery. “Our kingdom’s future is secure as long as we continue to have young people like them.”

“Indeed.”

Unen smiled widely to herself from the shadows of the gangway bridge’s pillars. Glancing back at the courtyard (and ignoring Mouru crouching in the corner), Irena and Ori were diligently fighting a mock battle with each other.

“By the way, Harabal, it looked like you were in a deep discussion with that mage over something.”

Surprised by what she heard them say next, Unen looked away from her friends’ battle and back to the king and his aide.

“He asked if we are going to war.”

“Unthinkable!”

“Yes, I relayed the same thing to him.” Harabal’s tone was flatter than a slab of ice. “Just goes to prove how consequential a precise map is,” he stated matter-of-factly.

The king made a big sigh. “So you say. But to be frank, I don’t believe it’s as critical as you make it out to be. Say we go to war with a neighboring kingdom; we can always just gather the necessary information even without possessing such an accurate map. No?”

“I believe if we asked our ancestors about the necessity of the alphabet before the invention of written language, they would’ve given an answer similar to what you just said, Your Majesty.”

“Geh.”

Clearly, Harabal had rendered Klinack speechless.

“The girl’s knowledge is the real thing. It will be dangerous to leave her to her own devices any longer.”

Not wanting to hear any more of what Harabal had to say, Unen quietly turned on her heel. Careful not to make any noise, she returned to the tower that housed their assigned rooms. On the gangway bridge, Unen bit down on the inside of her cheek. She was sick of hearing others suggest her skills were unsuitable for a tiny little girl.

Knowledge was wings. It gave one the power to look at the world from a height that rivaled the Falcon Eyes of the mystic in Yezero. It was a power even the poor, weak, and insubstantial human being like Unen could possess.

Balling her hands into tight fists, Unen looked up at the stars twinkling in the sky. *I’ll fly higher and farther, and someday transcribe the entire world with these hands. I’m sure when I do—*

“The world will open up before you.”

A nostalgic voice echoed in her head.

Chapter 13: Trip to the Castle City

A new day began, and following breakfast, Sissel ushered Unen's group from the tower's manor hall to the main residence. They all knew why without needing to be told—Unen had to contend with the rest of Harabal's questions that had been left over from yesterday.

They walked by the reception room where they'd had an audience with Klinack the day before, and Sissel knocked on the door just before the corridor turned. Unexpectedly, it was the freeloader's voice that answered the knock.

"Come in."

With that invitation, Sissel opened the door, and they were greeted by a room bathed in the morning light. On the wall straight ahead were four large windows that could easily be mistaken for other doors, and a neatly manicured garden that spread out beyond their sight from the diamond mullions. The windows faced north, which left the room cool—despite the abundance of sunlight filling it. Unen's chambers in the tower had also remained cool; the thick stone walls seemed to obstruct the sun's heat.

I feel like I'll forget what season it is by staying in this castle, Unen thought to herself.

"Did you sleep well?" Vrba raised his right hand in greeting from where he lounged on an ottoman. Standing at attention slightly behind him was a young man with vestiges of cherubic youth still in his handsome face.

Sissel signaled to Unen with his eyes to greet Vrba.

"Yes, thanks to you," Unen replied.

"Glad to hear it." Vrba's smile stretched sweetly, until the corner of his lips turned up in a gloating smirk. "This is my favorite guest room in the castle. I asked His Majesty for permission to use this room so you will be able to relax a little more during the continuation of your unpleasant conversation with that uptight aide. What do you think? Isn't it bright and comfy?"

Vrba proudly spread out his arms as if it was his castle and room. “It’s like heaven on earth to have such great sunshine yet remain far cooler than outside. As one would expect of our great king, even the summer sunlight submits to his might.” He shut his eyes wistfully and put his hand over his heart in a theatrical gesture. All the while allowing the morning’s sunlight to dance over his visage—in that moment he truly looked like a lord capable of commanding the very sunlight to do his bidding.

Sissel turned a carefree smile toward him. “Now that I think about it, it *is* unusual for you to spend a long time in the royal capital at this time of year, Lord Vrba.”

“My territory is ideal for summering, after all. Schaehor: the cool land surrounded by gold-filled mountains. How would you like to spend your time there? You’re all invited.”

“The winter season sounds freezing,” Mouru smoothly deflected.

Unen and the others held their breath. The remark was hard to take as a friendly reaction.

“Don’t let that stop you. You can just escape to the capital when it’s cold,” Vrba jovially replied, unaffected.

He’s not like a certain someone who held a grudge over being called shady once, Unen mused.

“I see. If you can go summering to get away from the summer heat, then you can go wintering to escape the winter chill. Makes sense,” Mouru replied ever so politely, then keenly asked, “By escaping to the capital, you mean coming here to the castle?”

“Lord Vrba owns a manor in the city,” Sissel clarified.

“I can see why you’d think that when His Majesty calls me a freeloader,” Vrba laughed. “I don’t leave many of my people in the manor during the summer. I barely brought any servants with me this time either, so it’s been inconvenient getting by. Hence why I decided to depend on His Majesty’s great kindness and hospitality.”

“What beautiful friendship you have. I aspire to have a friendship like that…

Don’t you, Ori?” Mouru looked back at his partner.

Unen and Irena shot frosty glares at him in place of Ori’s poker face. Not the least bit unnerved by their death glares, Mouru turned his debonair smile back on Vrba.

“In other words, your stay here this time was unplanned.”

“Isn’t it only natural to want to meet special guests after hearing about how amazing they are?” Vrba looked over his shoulder for agreement. His chamberlain nodded silently, upholding his reserved attitude to the end.

“An unparalleled mapmaker with the eyes of a bird, who can even capture the flow of rivers and the shape of hills and put it on paper—that’s how the messenger from Chelveny described you. How can I *not* take an interest, especially after hearing that the mapmaker is a sweet girl of not many years to boot?”

Unen stiffened under his gaze. He had called her a “sweet young girl.” Unsure of how to react, she uncomfortably stood stock-still like a tree.

“Is what you said yesterday about being able to record the undulations in the ground true?” It looked as though Vrba’s barrage of questions would continue, except Harabal came in through the corner door, putting an abrupt end to it.

“My sincerest apologies to ask this of you when you are all gathered here, but would you mind continuing the conversation in the afternoon? Some urgent business I must attend to came up, and I must take a short leave.”

His sudden announcement got confused looks from not only Unen’s group, but also Sissel, who had dutifully led them to the room.

A curious look crossed Vrba’s face as well. “Leave? Is Klinack going with you?”

“No, His Majesty will be staying in the castle. However, all discussions with Lady Unen are entrusted to me due to his lack of understanding when it comes to scholarly matters.” Harabal slowly ran his gaze over everyone present and repeated, “I apologize that this came up, but will you grace me with your presence once more when I return after lunch?”

There was only one answer Unen could give: “All right.”

“On that same note, I’m sorry, but this room is somewhat inappropriate for conducting discussions about your surveying techniques. I would like to change locations later.”

“Why’s that?” Vrba’s immaculately trimmed eyebrows knitted, but Harabal’s expression remained the same.

“Either it should be conducted in the library with a desk large enough to be suitable for mapping, or…perhaps it would be easier to figure out somewhere we can talk while gazing upon a real landscape…”

Harabal stroked his chin contemplatively, then nodded to himself and took a good look around the room. “Yes, that sounds best. Let’s hold the conversation on the turret to the north of this main residence. The rooftop is quite narrow, so I request everyone aside from Lady Unen to refrain from joining us. I will call for you once I find the time. Please spend your time as you see fit until then.”

Everyone exchanged mystified looks after Harabal left the room.

“Why don’t you take a stroll through the city now that you have some spare time?” Vrba offered modestly.

His suggestion was incredibly appealing and unrealistic at the same time. Unen didn’t think they could freely leave the castle, and she was horrified at the prospect of asking His Majesty the King if she could go out and play because she was bored.

Unen and Irena reluctantly looked at each other. Vrba thrust his jaw forward. “Don’t worry, ladies. I’ll ask Klinack on your behalf. Mind waiting here while I do?”

“Th-Thank you very much.” Their grateful voices were perfectly timed.

***

“HEY, Unen! What does that say?! What kind of store is it?!” Her eyes sparkling, Irena excitedly jabbed a finger toward a sign that had a drawing of a crab brandishing scissors.

“Archeka Barbershop,” Unen answered, reading off the shop name written

above the crab.

“Interesting. I totally thought it was a store that had something to do with crabs.”

“Like one that serves crabs as food? Or one that serves them as an ingredient?”

“Food, obviously!”

Is that obvious? Mentally cocking her head in confusion, Unen procured a map from her pocket. Sissel had written up a simple city guide map before they left.

“I can’t believe I am presenting Lady Unen with a map drawn by me,” he had said, sounding terribly reluctant. But he had drawn a very easy to follow map with the city’s highlights and the major stores clustering the main streets.

Maps didn’t have to be especially detailed to be good. Nor were they necessarily better with more items written on them. A good map came from selecting the right information to record, based on the audience and what purpose it was intended for. Even Unen’s maps left out the geological features and vegetation in order to reproduce the topography as accurately as possible on parchment. Naturally, the information was left out only because the mapmaker Unen determined it to be unnecessary; she could easily include it if she felt the need to.

Irena peered at the map in Unen’s hand. “Say, Sir Turek, is it possible to visit the square where this market is being held?” Irena asked their accompanying imperial guard, who was maintaining a reasonable distance from the girls.

Ori and Mouru had chosen to stay at the castle when the girls were on their way out for a stroll through the city. “Don’t need to go because it’s not our first time to the capital” was their reason. Turek served as their bodyguard instead. He left behind his imperial armor to prevent attracting any fuss, but he still remained a reassuring ally as they made their way through the throngs of city dwellers due to his burly physique and stern face.

Turek led Unen and Irena around a corner off the main street. The narrow road wasn’t listed on the map, but it was the best shortcut to the market.

Irena's exuberant voice echoed through the scarcely used alleyway, "What kinds of stands are set up at the market? What type of goods will be sold there? What's popular?"

Unen followed behind Irena and Turek as she debated on whether to save Turek from Irena's flood of questions.

Her face abruptly clouded as she remembered what Harabal had said in the guest room that morning. He wanted to speak with her while looking at the existing landscape from the castle turret's rooftop. And he wanted to be alone with Unen.

From what she had gleaned from overhearing Harabal's conversation with the king last night, he did acknowledge her surveying skills as genuine. Which begged the question—*what* exactly was it that he felt the need to discuss? Furthermore, climbing up to a confined turret rooftop to gaze at the land would provide absolutely no benefit to their conversation.

The quiet voice that had woven its way through the stillness of night replayed in Unen's head. *"The girl's knowledge is the real thing. It will be dangerous to leave her to her own devices any longer."*

It can't be that… Sinister thoughts sluggishly unfurled in her mind, like a snake awoken from its slumber in the sun. But the continuation of her premonition was forcefully cut off when her mouth was suddenly covered from behind.

Someone's hand had stuffed a starched cloth into Unen's mouth in a matter of seconds. She threw her hands out in a startled struggle, but the hand yanked the cloth lodged in her mouth backwards, jerking her head back with it and throwing her footing off balance. Another hand darted out to wrap around her waist, and she was dragged into a byroad.

Unen had screwed up—she'd fallen behind Irena and Turek because she had been lost in her thoughts. She tried to tear the cloth out of her mouth to let the two know of her dire predicament, but not only had her kidnappers tightly tied the cloth around the back of her head, they had wrenched both her arms down and pulled a bag over her head.

Someone lifted Unen, bag and all, off the ground.

Trying to struggle was impossible with the bag encasing her from head to toe. The best she could muster was contorting her body. And no matter how hard she tried to twist around, it was unlikely to affect the person who had lifted her off the ground with ease. The cloth gagging her mouth blocked out her screams, rendering them as nothing more than muffled moans.

Even so, Unen continued her desperate struggle and screams. She prayed that someone—it didn't have to be Irena—would realize a kidnapping was taking place.

Just as she thought they had turned a second corner, something hard slammed into her body. Had the person carrying her suddenly come to a stop? Or had he accidentally hit her against something? Before she could think further, Unen was jolted forward a second time and rolled on top of something hard.

Right away, she heard several sets of jumbled footsteps and the piercing shrieks of steel grazing steel.

Now was her only chance. Unen feverishly thrashed her legs inside the confined space like her life depended on it. Feeling the wind at her feet, she used her entire body to gradually roll the bag up toward her head. Somehow, she managed to free herself from the bag using her feet.

Loosening the gag in her mouth, Unen looked up and saw a familiar broad back. Brandishing a sword, he stood protectively in front of her.



“Ori!”

Unen’s voice briefly distracted the two masked men standing counter to Ori. Without a moment’s delay, Ori pulled something emitting a faint light from his pocket. He held it to his lips, and an alarmingly shrill sound echoed through the streets.

Ori blew on the silver whistle again, and thundering footsteps simultaneously ran to him from behind.

“Unen?! Is that you, Unen?! Where are you, Unen?!” Irena’s bloodcurdling shouts accompanied the noise.

The two masked men loudly cursed, turned around, and ran away at full speed.

Ori sighed and sheathed his sword once he confirmed the men were out of sight.

“Unen! You scared me to death because you suddenly up and vanished! What in the blazes happened?! And why are *you* here?” Irena ran over to them panting, looked from Unen to Ori, and then rained a tirade of questions on them.

In the meantime, Turek rushed down the byroad from a side alleyway and asked the same, “What happened?!” with a blue face.

Unen slowly rose to her feet, taking care to hide the dull pain screaming from all over her body. “My mouth was suddenly covered from behind and I was dragged away.”

“What?!”

Irena and Turek’s expressions instantly changed color. They hadn’t realized Unen was kidnapped after all.

“Ori saved me after they shoved me in this bag and carried me here. Right?” Unen looked up at the man beside her.

“Yeah,” he responded with indifference.

“Uh? What? Did you follow us here?” Irena pressed with a cocked eyebrow.

Ori gruffly responded with, “I just happened to be passing by.”

“HUUUUHH?!” Irena and Turek yelled in unison, their eyes bulging at the ridiculousness of his statement.

“You just *happened* to pass by? When we’re in such a huge city?!” Irena demanded.

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t it more like…you were acting on someone’s orders...?” she asked.

“It’s a coincidence.”

Faced with Ori’s perfect poker face, Irena and Turek grudgingly held their tongue as they kept their skeptical gaze trained on him. A laugh unconsciously slipped from Unen.

Once she started laughing, the wave of relief shook her with more and more laughter. Before long, she was doubled over holding her sides laughing hysterically.

“…You okay?”

She heard Ori’s worried voice, but she couldn’t reply through her laughing fit.

Even after wringing all the air out of her lungs, Unen still couldn’t stop the shaking in her stomach. Not even after her throat was whistling, dried out by the continual guttural sounds, did it stop from sucking air back down to laugh some more. Hearing the cachinnation as if it belonged to someone else, Unen’s chest swelled and deflated like a pair of bellows tied to a waterwheel. Over and over again, her body was wracked with laughter, without ceasing.

Irena’s boot appeared in Unen’s view of the ground. Pulling Unen to her chest, Irena wrapped her arms around her and patted her back.

“You must’ve been so scared. But it’s okay now. You’re okay now.”

Irena’s gentle voice fell on Unen, and with it, a sudden understanding.

Ah, so that’s it. I was scared. I was really, really scared.

When her sight and mobility had been stolen from her, and she had been on the verge of being carried off to who knows where, some part of her believed

that she'd never be able to return ever again. Unen struggled so hard because she was desperately, frantically, fighting against that dreadful fate, not just because she hoped someone would help her.

Irena's body warmth slowly melted away the tension in Unen's muscles. The traces of fear that drove her to insane laughter withdrew at last.

"I'm sorry for putting you in such a scary position," Ori muttered in a pained voice, after confirming Unen had calmed down.

Unen carefully scrutinized his face for an entire minute before she shook her head. "Don't be. I'm really grateful you saved me."

Ori winced as if he'd been smacked in the gut with something unexpected. Then, furrowing his brow, he averted his gaze away from her.

Chapter 14: Friend or Foe?

THEY gave up on visiting the market and returned to the castle, whereupon they were ushered into the main residence's reception hall. King Klinack and Vrba raced into the room with harrowed faces shortly after.

After Turek finished reporting what happened, Vrba remorsefully confessed, "Child kidnappings have been on the rise within my territory as of late too. We've been having a hard time stopping the problem because we still don't know whether they're orchestrated by a group or if each crime is unrelated to the other. I never thought it would happen in the royal capital as well."

Klinack's solemn expression was heavy with grief. "I have neither excuse nor explanation for the incident," he said slowly.

Vrba quickly came to his rescue. "It's not your fault. Bad people are everywhere in the world." He turned to assure Unen and Irena, "It was an unfortunate turn of events, but you'll be safe here. His Majesty will protect you."

"Do you want to improve my image or trample it? Decide," Klinack sighed.

Vrba stared back at him perplexed. "Your image has nothing to do with it. What happened in the city isn't your responsibility, Klinack."

Maintaining the security and safety of Yezero had long been the job of the Vigilante Corps, which was originally established by the townspeople. While the royal capital was of far grander scale than a rural town, the idea of self-protection had originated here.

Klinack sighed loudly for the second time. "Well, you have one thing right: as long as my guests are inside this castle, there is nothing for them to fear. I hope you can relax to your heart's content within these walls." Regret tinged his voice.

***

JUST as Sissel entered to inform them lunch was ready, Klinack left the room with Turek in tow. Unen expected to return to the annex tower, and was subsequently surprised when Sissel showed them to the main residence's grand dining hall.

"I was ordered to have you wait in the main residence after lunch until Lord Harabal returns to the castle, Lady Unen."

Sissel brought Unen to the second chair from the door at a long wooden table that could seat twenty. He directed Irena to the chair across from her, and placed Ori at the corner chair beside Unen.

Unen cocked her head inquisitively at the empty chair opposite of Ori. She hadn't seen Mouru once since they had returned from the city. Life was easier without him leading them by the nose with all his ill-natured insinuations, but the longer he was away, the more Unen felt needless worries pop up in her. He could be plotting something evil, unpleasant, and/or dastardly in the shadows somewhere.

Unen stifled a sigh and voiced her worries by asking Sissel, "Excuse me, is Mouru not dining with us?"

"Ah, yes…Master Mouru said he was feeling under the weather soon after you went out. He has been resting in his room."

"He is? Is he all right?" Irena asked, concerned. Then she leaned across the table to whisper to Unen, "And here I thought, with a personality as rotten as his, he wouldn't die even if you killed him."

"What a heartless fellow the Master Mage is to make a lady worry over him."

The group looked in surprise at the door. There they discovered Vrba grinning devilishly, obviously pleased with his dramatic line that sounded as if it'd come straight out of Act 1 in some play.

"How's his condition? Would you like to borrow my personal doctor?" Vrba offered.

Who would expect anything less of a lord who oversaw an entire province? He apparently brought his personal doctor on his trips to the royal capital. Despite his complaints of being inconvenienced by the shortage of servants, he

brought far more vassals with him than Unen had assumed.

“Lord Vrba’s doctor served as the instructor of our castle’s live-in doctor,” Sissel explained with a big smile. “As for Master Mouru’s condition,” he said to Vrba, “he took some medicine earlier and was sound asleep when I went to call him on him for lunch. May I approach you later about your offer once he has awakened, Lord Vrba?”

Vrba gracefully brought his hand to his chest in mock modesty. “I don’t mind. I’d be delighted to be of any assistance.” He had a strange way of making theatrical gestures appear natural.

“By the way, why might you be here, Lord Vrba…?” Sissel dubiously prompted.

The question caught Vrba off guard. “Ah, err, I thought it’d be fun to join in the merrymaking.”

“Shall I request a server to bring a meal here for just you, Lord Vrba? Or will Sir Jalt be joining us as well?”

“No need. I just came to take a peek at how you were all getting along. With that said, I should be taking my leave now. I hope you all enjoy your meal.” Vrba exited the room, leaving only the lingering image of his incandescent smile.

“Is Jalt his doctor?” Unen hadn’t heard the name before.

“No,” Sissel responded in good humor. “His doctor’s name is Dzui. Sir Jalt is Lord Vrba’s chamberlain. He was the gentleman you saw standing behind Lord Vrba in the guest room this morning. His Majesty wants to introduce you to everyone of note at the banquet tonight, so you will likely have the opportunity to meet Doctor Dzui then.”

“Ban...quet...” Irena muttered, blue in the face. “How do we handle this, Unen? I didn’t bring any clothes fit for a banquet. I don’t OWN any, for that matter.”

Sissel rushed to assure her, “Oh! Please do not fret…! This will be a private banquet, so…umm…I will also be attending in the clothes I’m wearing, if that helps!”

“Me too,” Unen said, "these are my best clothes. How about you, Ori?”

“My clothes aren’t that dirty yet, so I don’t plan to change.”

Irena looked unconvinced. “Really? But is it really all right? Will these clothes actually be fine?”

Sissel firmly nodded. “It is perfectly all right. Her Majesty the Queen and Her Royal Highness the Princess were full of praise for how dashing and stylish you looked while you were training with the sword last night, Lady Irena. If I may be so bold, I believe they will be ecstatic if you came in your normal attire.”

“They saw me?!” Red dyed Irena’s face.

Unen couldn’t suppress the urge to grin at her normally confident friend’s cute reaction.

***

HARABAL showed up at the grand dining hall while Unen, Ori, and Irena were enjoying some after-dinner tea. The aide soundlessly slipped in to the room with an austere expression after a reserved knock.

“Are you finished with your meal?” he inquired.

The relaxed mood in the room instantly turned professional.

“Lady Unen, I wish to speak with you for a bit as we agreed.”

“…All right.” Unen slowly rose to her feet and watched Ori from the corner of her eye.

He had apologized for putting her through something scary right after he saved her from an attempted kidnapping that morning. Those weren’t the words someone who just so happened to come across her being kidnapped would say. Especially not after going out of their way to rescue her. He had to have been secretly guarding her knowing there was a good chance she would be in danger.

But for what reason had someone targeted Unen? How did Ori know she was being targeted? Was Mouru truly sick in bed? And with what intentions was Harabal requesting a pointless conversation with her?

When it came down to it, were these puzzles connected or not? For that matter—

“Shall we depart then? This way, Lady Unen.”

Torn with how to answer, Unen’s glance flickered to Ori.

…For that matter, were Ori and Mouru actually on Unen’s side?

“Don’t worry,” Ori whispered in a barely audible voice. “We’ll protect you.”

His assurance was brief and concise. Then he brought the cup to his lips as if nothing had happened.

Unen quietly squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled until air filled her chest.

She still didn’t know to what degree she could trust Ori and Mouru. But she knew for the moment, at least, that she could believe in what Ori just said. After all, he was the man who bowed his head with a tormented expression to apologize, the one who had said, “I’m sorry for putting you in a scary position,” even though it could possibly expose the fact that he was secretly protecting her.

And more importantly, hadn’t he already faithfully protected Unen, just as he had said he would?

“Lady Unen?”

“Ah, okay. I’m coming.”

“Have a good chat!” Irena encouraged Unen, her tone carefree.

Unen followed Harabal out of the dining hall with the sound of Irena’s voice at her back.

***

THE turret in question was positioned on the opposite side of the main residence, across the courtyard. Built on the highest plateau of land, it loomed over the rest of the castle, and provided an unbroken view of the castle’s inner compounds in addition to the capital city.

Harabal led Unen up the dark, winding spiral steps and opened the door to the rooftop. Instantly, surging winds smacked Unen in the face. The raging wind

in her ears sounded like the howls of a carnivorous animal.

The battlement encircling the turret's rooftop had crenels at the height of an adult male's waist and merlons taller than his head. Cerná's national flag billowed proudly in the wind, framed against the blue sky, far above the base of its stand, which was fixed to the ground right beside the stairway entrance.

Unen could only see the sky beyond the merlons from beside the flag stand. Perhaps, she would've been able to see the entire horizon if she were only a little taller. She swallowed hard. *This is the closest I can get to a true bird's eye view.*

"Lady Unen, this way." Harabal beckoned her over while gazing down on the world in front of a crenel. "Take a look."

Unen stood beside Harabal, taking care to leave a slight space between them.

Small houses and buildings, appearing like pieces of wood or tiny boxes, spread out below her eyes. She directed her gaze closer to the turret's base, which brought the first castle wall that surrounded the inner compound as well as many roofs taller than she had seen in the city, into view. From there, her gaze shifted to the castle gate towers of the second wall, then to the main residence, the courtyard, and the annex towers.

"You can see the surrounding land clearly from here." Harabal's gaze slid over to Unen as he spoke slowly and deliberately, as if choosing each word very carefully, "Put another way, it also means this spot is in plain sight from its surroundings as well."

Unen's ears picked up on the sound of something slicing through the air before Harabal finished speaking.

A blast of wind slammed into her out of nowhere and shoved her to the ground. Staggering from the impact, Unen shakily crawled to brace herself against a merlon—Murmurs were mixing with the howling wind. Something hard crashed into the outer side of the merlon she was taking refuge behind.

What in the world is going on? Disoriented, Unen tried to push to her feet, only for Harabal to charge at her this time.

Diving in front of the merlon, he covered Unen with his body and knocked her

to the ground again. Instantaneously, an arrow shot through the crenel above their heads, piercing into the door leading to the stairs.

She heard the Murmurs again—clearer this time.

Mouru was standing next to the stairway door. She hadn't noticed he'd shown up. Fixing an aggressive gaze on where the arrow had shot from, he leisurely waved his right hand.



The sound of raging winds and Murmurs danced wildly in her ears, fighting against each other for supremacy. Shifting her gaze beyond the nearest crenel, Unen watched the third arrow decelerate and drop into the courtyard.

Mouru advanced to the merlon where Unen and Harabal shielded themselves and dropped his gaze below. The Murmurs promptly changed their tune.

“Ori, they’re located at the second gate; the tower to the west of the one we used.”

The wind carried away Mouru’s muttered information without delay.

Unen hurried to peek down through the crenel and spotted Ori sprinting into the tower Mouru had indicated.

A lone figure stood at the top of the other tower. They had tossed their bow on the ground and were making a mad dash for the stairs, but pulled back at the last second and instead drew their sword, flashing silver in the sunlight.

The Murmurs reverberated inside Unen slightly after the wind’s howls had ransacked her ears, screaming like nails on steal.

The man on the gate tower fell to his knees, spewing blood and an indistinct scream. Mouru used the same spell that had sliced up the highwaymen around Irena and Ori during the clash with Chelveny.

“All right, we’ve got him.”

Drawn by the sound of triumph in Mouru’s voice, Unen looked up at him in dread. There, she saw the dully glowing eyes of a hunter who had trapped his prey, directed to where Ori was restraining the archer on the roof of the gate tower.

Unen swallowed back the saliva filling her mouth. She remembered anew why exactly Mouru and Ori had appeared before her.

They were masterful hunters, dispatched by a legendary mage. It was practically impossible to imagine any prey of theirs escaping once they had set their sights on it.

* * *

THE full moon began to sink into the western sky. Before the break of dawn when white would change the colors of the night sky to that of day, three large and small shadows stood behind the clinic.

“Must you go?” Milosh wrung out in a hoarse voice. “I don’t know much about these hunters of yours, but can’t they be handled if the entire town turns them away?”

Hereh feebly shook his head. “We can’t do that. Please understand.”

After several aborted attempts for the right words to say, Milosh angrily scratched his head. “Is this where the, ‘let me leave without saying anything’ and ‘don’t ask me why’ promise comes into play? Sheesh, who’s the halfwit who sensibly offered, ‘I’ll do three favors in return for all you’ve done for me until now’?” Milosh asked then remorsefully answered his own question, “*Me*. I’m the halfwit.”

“The third favor—”

“I know. I’ll perfectly act out our little script, so go wherever the hell you want and have your damned peace of mind.” Milosh swung his gaze away from Hereh in his anguished desperation.

“Thank you, Milosh. You too, Unen.”

After patiently listening to the adults’ conversation, Unen looked up at Hereh with a gleam of hope still in her chest. “Where are you…going?”

But Hereh only smiled ambiguously and didn’t answer. “Goodbye.” He lightly lifted his right hand and turned away.

“Hereh!” Unen called out to him on the spur of the moment, but she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t want him to leave. She wanted him to stay here longer. She wanted him to teach her more things. If those things were impossible, then he should just take her with him—

Hereh looked back at Unen and held her hostage in his eyes. “Listen to me closely, Unen. The world will open before you. You must never forget that.”

He intended to leave on his own no matter what. Unen could sense that from the bottom of her heart. In which case, there was only one thing she had left to say to him. Kicking her parched, twitching throat into use, she squeezed out, “Come back safe.”

He didn’t say he’d be back. Hereh wordlessly turned his back on her.

Unen stood motionless, watching until he was out of sight. It was then, when she was still staring at the road empty of the man who had saved her life, that she finally realized she had forgotten to thank him.

* * *

Chapter 15: Lies

WITH the unheard of case of an assassin sneaking into the royal castle's inner compound temporarily resolved with his capture, the king had summoned Unen and her friends to the main residence's sunlit guest room.

King Klinack and Aide Harabal were already waiting for them inside. Yet, the man who had kicked back and boasted about the room's lavishness as if it had belonged to him was absent.

Klinack invited them to sit before speaking formally to Unen. "Lady Unen, as the lord of Kujh Castle, and as the king who rules over all Cerná Kingdom, I accept full responsibility for the danger you faced. It was a direct result of my poor judgment. I offer you my sincerest and most heartfelt apologies for all you have been put through." Fatigue stretched the crow's feet at the corner of his eyes.

Vrba's chamberlain Jalt had loosed the arrows at Unen. He was renowned as the greatest archer in all of Schaehor, and had received orders from his lord to assassinate the mapmaker Sparrow Eyes.

Gold mines belonging to Cerná Kingdom were located within Vrba's Schaehor Province. A former king once granted the mountain range to Vrba's ancestors, but ownership had been reclaimed by another king upon the discovery of a gold vein.

That was three generations ago. A hundred years had passed without much change until last year, when a new vein of gold was rumored to have been found near the summit of one of the mountains. It was merely "rumored" because Vrba had bribed the magistrate overseeing the mountain range's mines, so the new discovery was never officially been reported back to the king. In other words, Vrba had been trying to retain unlawful possession of the newfound gold.

If Klinack came to regard the mapmaker he had summoned highly, and thus

asked Unen to map his entire kingdom, then the gold-laden mountain range would inevitably be surveyed in the very near future. They had heard that the new gold vein ran so close to the surface that Vrba was already conducting open-air mining. However, even if he could buy silence from the magistrates and miners, lying about the shape of the mountain was impossible. Were Unen to make a map that faithfully reproduced the curves of the land, his crimes were destined to be revealed. Therefore, Vrba had tried to put an end to Unen's life before she could pose a threat to him.

After having explained these circumstances, Klinack covered his face with his hand and let out a loud, heavy sigh. He was clearly tormented. A close friend had attempted an assassination within his castle, and even more disturbing, he had been betrayed by a vassal he had trusted deeply as the king.

But Klinack dispelled his vulnerability with the sigh and now bore a commanding visage. Slowly running his steady gaze over each person present, he stopped on Mouru. "I've heard from Harabal that our success in apprehending the assassin owes most to you. In that regard, would you care to explain how you caught on to Vrba's treacherous plan?"

Mouru nodded eagerly and suddenly directed his gaze at Unen and Irena. "Did you notice that the highwaymen who attacked us on our way here possessed no items, such as bags or rope, for securing and transporting their spoils?"

He must have been feigning his illness after all, because he spoke with enthusiasm. Unen really hated to admit it, but she had to shake her head no at his question.

"Maybe they were thinking of stealing their victim's bag with the spoils inside, essentially removing the need for extra bags, but there's always a chance that the victims will fight back and rip the bags in the process. For those who make a living off stealing, preparing to minimize unnecessary losses is a way of life. Besides, items and horses only get you so far. For highwaymen, women and children make for excellent spoils as well. If they're lucky enough to score someone from a noble family, they could even charge a hefty ransom. Despite all that, our attackers didn't even have a single strand of rope. There's no other explanation, of course, other than that they *were planning to kill and **only** kill,*

right from the start."

Mouru paused and raked his gaze over the room. "That begs the question: *Who was the target*? Naturally, you can come up with all sorts of possible targets, but considering that they were prepared to kill at *that place and time*…"

He pointed at Unen. "**You** were the most likely candidate." The corner of his mouth drew upward. "So, temporarily setting aside the other options, I hypothesized that the 'Mapmaker summoned to the royal capital' was their target. Acting on that premise, I sought assistance from Lord Harabal last night."

Harabal took the cue to speak next. "Last night, Master Mouru came to me to inquire about whom else knew that His Majesty had summoned Lady Unen to the capital. Hence, I answered him so: His Majesty, myself, the emissaries Sir Sissel and Sir Turek, and Lord Vrba, who happened to be present when the messenger had arrived from Chelveny with a list of excuses from his lord for attacking Lady Unen."

"Ahhh," Klinack muttered. "I spoke with my queen about it as well, but certainly, I hadn't informed anyone else of the details. I didn't want to draw much attention, as it may have affected you adversely had your maps turned out to be a sham and word spread of a mapmaker being tossed out of the royal castle…"

Klinack abruptly gasped. Creases forming in his brow, he angrily placed his hands on his desk and turned to shoot daggers at Harabal standing beside him. "Did you lie to me last night? When you said that the Master Mage had asked if we were going to war?"

"No, that was not a lie. I simply left out what the rest of our conversation had been about, Your Majesty."

Klinack brought his hand to his face and groaned, but didn't press for further details.

Dismissing the king's dejection, perhaps because he was confident, or perhaps because he knew they held a bond of strong trust between them, Harabal continued explaining. "You see, I also became convinced that the attack had not been the work of typical highwaymen after Master Mouru told me of the details. I found it strange that Lord Vrba, who had not once shown an

inkling of interest in geography or mathematics, had become so invested in our talks about mapmaking—especially when it came to recording undulations in the ground. However, we did not have enough information to determine whether that was connected to the highwayman incident or not." Harabal signaled for Mouru to take over the conversation again.

Mouru addressed Klinack this time. "With that in mind, I had Lord Harabal set a trap, since we had nothing to lose either way. The plan was to incite the culprit to action by having Lord Harabal openly speak of meeting Unen alone on the turret rooftop, and to purposely leave enough time in between so they could prepare an attack. Things started to get a bit dicey when the target decided to take a detour into the city during that critical phase, but…" Mouru glanced back at Unen. "Well, I guess you can say it worked out in our favor, because we got to confirm that she was indeed the target."

"*I knew it*—you used me as bait." Even in the king's presence, Unen couldn't resist calling Mouru out. Narrowing her eyes, she glared furiously at him.

But Mouru swiftly sidestepped her fury and flashed his killer grin. "I had to. It was the fastest method."

"Why did you pretend to be sick?" Irena interrupted, disapproval knitting her brow.

"I couldn't afford to fall behind the assassin or let them get the upper hand. So, obviously, I had to lie in wait on top of the turret. But any culprit worth their salt would be wary if a mage was conspicuously absent. So we put on a little show to trick them."

So that's why Vrba stopped by the grand dining hall without staying to eat. He was trying to figure out the reason for Mouru's absence, Unen pieced together.

"Does anyone else have any questions?" Mouru asked the room.

After confirming that no one did, he bowed to Klinack and took a step back.

Klinack nodded to Mouru. "Thank you for taking the time to explain." Loosely shaking his head to clear away his doubts, he shifted eyes gleaming with determination on Unen. "First there was Chelveny, now Vrba—it appears Harabal was correct in his assessment. Your knowledge has the power to drive

people to action.”

The grief-stricken, betrayed man who had lost his best friend was nowhere to be seen. Now poised with the majestic grace of a powerful king, Klinack brought the room to respectful silence as he pondered what to do with Unen.

He turned to Harabal. “Harabal, let me confirm the situation with you. When you say her knowledge is dangerous, are you referring to the chance that other kingdoms may misuse her maps?”

“That is the general idea.”

“In that case, there is no problem if we win her over to our side first.”

At that statement, not only Unen, but Mouru froze with wide-open eyes.

Harabal was the only person completely unfazed. Switching into business mode, he commented, “Now that I think about it, I have been inconvenienced ever since my assistant was hired as a scholar for a noble family half a year ago. There is no end to the number of people who will assist with the simple work, but to my great disdain, I have had a remarkably difficult time finding anyone versed in arithmetic. I am not free to teach someone from scratch either.”

“Now, that indeed is a problem,” Klinack responded with a straight face. But it didn’t take long for him to sigh loudly, a frown muddling his brow. “…I’m going to regret asking this, but you planned this from the start, didn’t you?”

“No, sire. I merely had it as one of the cards on the table.”

Unen and her friends could only watch the banter between the king and his aide in mute astonishment.

Returning to a more official expression, Klinack came to stand in front of Unen and looked directly into her eyes. “You heard him. Lady Unen, do you have any interest in becoming Harabal’s assistant?”

Unen stared at Klinack’s face with her mouth agape.

She had a hard time suddenly accepting what His Majesty the King had offered. Had she misheard him? She replayed the memory from a moment ago. Painstakingly repeating each letter in her mind to reform the words, she reconfirmed what they meant.

“You want me to become Lord Harabal’s assistant?”

Klinack answered her with a quiet smile and a firm nod.

“Um, uh…someone like me? Err…well…” Unen couldn’t hide her flustered state of mind.

“It appears you don’t make use of trigonometry during your surveying,” Harabal pointed out.

“I, um,” Unen said, gasping her words, “know it exists…”

Harabal’s expression spread into a wide smile. “Then you will gain much by coming to work with me.”

“My castle’s libraries are stacked with books and documents passed down for generations,” Klinick offered, “The books will rejoice if you become the Witch of the Archives.”

Joy soared inside of Unen’s chest, her excitement pounding against her ribcage the instant she had heard him mention the Witch of the Archives. The waves of happiness crashed against the shores of her conscious mind again and again, until they finally spilled over the shoreline into a gigantic flood.

“Th-Thank…you…very…much! I accept!” Unen somehow mustered a reply despite her trance-like state. She felt like she was dreaming. Not knowing the proper etiquette for the situation, she let her emotion radiate from her as she returned Klinack’s gaze.

“Your Majesty, since Lady Unen has agreed to work for us, why don’t we take this opportunity to conduct an accurate survey of the entire kingdom?” Harabal promptly proposed. “I have repeatedly counseled you to do so, but you have refused to listen to me until now.”

“No, wait. We can’t do it all at once. Yes, we can’t.”

“I have no issue with conducting it territory by territory. You refuse to take action on this matter because you want to finish it all in one go,” Harabal countered.

Klinack started to mutter incoherent excuses about the logistics of budget and timing. At that moment, Mouru put his right hand on his chest and stepped

forward from where he had been waiting behind Unen.

“If I may, Your Highness?”

“What is it?” Klinack turned to Mouru with relief, grateful for being rescued from Harabal’s persistence.

“Ori and myself are charged with the duty of protecting Unen on orders from the person you might call her master. As such, won’t you please allow us the privilege of serving as her bodyguard within your presence as well, Your Highness?”

Unen’s eyes darted to Mouru in shock, just as Irena’s shout of, “WHAAAT?!” rose from behind her.

Klinack hadn’t expected this development either. He took a second to assess Mouru with calculating eyes, before breaking into a broad smile. Swinging his arms open, he cheered, “What blessing is this? Master Mage is offering to come to my castle, eh?! I wholeheartedly welcome your presence here!”

“Thank you kindly for your permission,” Mouru replied formally, before turning toward Unen. “You heard it. I look forward to spending more time with you from now on.”

He flashed the most blinding smile yet.

***

THEY were to move to the king’s office in order to discuss the many details of their new arrangement. Irena stayed behind in the bright guest room, while Unen, Ori, and Mouru were temporarily shown to the antechamber on the main residence’s second-floor. They were waiting there until the stewards, clerks, and necessary servants had been gathered.

Unen heaved a heavy sigh once the king and his aide had left the room as she scrutinized the faces of the two men accompanying her.

Ori’s expression was as unreadable as ever. He stood in silence a few steps behind her, and seemed to be examining the suit of armor decorating the wall next to the window. Was he thinking up tactics for how to confront a combatant in full plate armor?

Mouru appeared equally unaffected, traipsing around the room staring at everything with interest. He stopped in front of the large tapestry decorating the wall to their left and muttered “oohs” and “ahhs” at it.

Yet another sigh spilled from Unen’s lips.

“You look fairly unhappy.” Mouru turned toward her with his head cocked.

Reeling in her desire to jump on him and declare him to be at fault, she settled for a crack at sarcasm. “You must have *some* nerve to smoothly weave those lies about being on a mission to protect me. You’re *something else*, all right.”

“What I said isn’t necessarily a lie.”

Unen thought Mouru had to be cracking a joke or mocking her, but his eyes were dead serious.

“We were ordered to retrieve the Book of Secrets Hereh escaped with to prevent the knowledge inside from spreading across the world. In other words, not only must we keep an eye on you, but we must also protect you from those after your knowledge.”

As Unen dizzily turned over his words inside her head, she felt as though a hand of ice had taken ahold of her entrails. No matter how many times she swallowed, the taste of bitter saliva continued to fill her mouth.

Mouru watched her stand there in horrified silence with delight before going on to say, “Besides, as far as it comes to telling lies, I think you have me beat there.”

His penetrating ice-blue eyes jabbed at hers.

Unable to wrench her gaze away, she watched as he smirked in triumph.

“Unen, you’re Hereh’s child who *supposedly* died, aren’t you?”

Arc 3: The Hunted and the Hunters

Chapter 16: Amid the Owl Light

***"SHE'S** a beautiful woman"*—those were the first words everyone uttered whenever they spoke of Unen's mother. Without exception.

Then, in ten out of ten cases, they would qualify it with a contradictory conjunction in their next breath. "But you know, even the prettiest person in the world is wasted if they're like *that.*"

Unen never knew where she procured the expensive liquor from, but her mother drank often. And whenever she became drunk she would verbally assault Unen.

"I would'a never had'ta go through aaall thiz *MISERY* if I knew you'd turn out'ta be a girl. At least it would'a been a lil' more useful t'have gone on duh run if ye were a boy. 'S all *your* fault tha' I'm *SOOO miserable*, Unen."

Then she'd rant in a drunken slur, "D'ya know 'ow *much* I've sacrificed fer ya, Unen? D'ya know 'ow insanely diffi-culd it is t'care for *ya*, Unen? I would'a lived uh life o'ff luxury if it hadn' been fer ya, *Unen*."

Unen wordlessly sat on the ground, her arms wrapped around her knees, and her face buried in them while her mother sliced her open over and over again with her sharpest dagger—her words. The wounds had already gone so deep that each thrust would sink in until the entire edge of the blade was lodged in her heart so all that remained outside was the hilt. But strangely enough, the intense pain that had driven her to tears at first gradually stopped mattering as time passed.

Her mother's liquor would run out around then, and she would fly over to embrace her daughter while bawling. "I'm s'rry fer takin' it out on ya. 'S'not tha' I hate you. Y'think I'd raise sucha worth-l'ss child until now if I didn' like th'm? Aaah, my adooorable chhhild. Don'ya go anee-where on me. *Don't leave me all alone.*"

It was always very warm within her mother's arms. Feeling the heat steadily

return to her ice-cold hands and feet, Unen closed her eyes in a trance. All the while seeping blood from the deep lashes inflicted upon her heart by her very own mother.

From what she gathered, her mother had escaped from somewhere.

She once told Unen that someone had ordered her to kill the child inside her if it turned out to be a boy. A girl, they had said, could still serve *some* use in the future, but boys were bad. That they didn't have the surplus for feeding ravenous boys who wouldn't pull their own weight. Unen's mother fled in desperation to save her child because of what they had said. Yet, what had that given her? The child she had birthed turned out to be a girl who only brought hair-pulling, finger-biting work and misery. "*It wasn't supposed to be like this.*" Her mother would grimace, twisting her perfectly shaped lips.

"Sure, my work there wasn't easy, but I never had a hard time getting by. I got to wear pretty clothes, put on makeup, and have lots of people fawn over me and pamper me. I must've been completely mad to have thrown all that away."

"Then you should go back there right now," Unen had spat once, unable to take it anymore.

It earned her a bloodcurdling expression and a slap so hard that it slammed her into the wall of their hut where she slid to the ground. Unen learned never to say that again.

By the time Unen had become self-aware, her father was already long gone. Her mother went around telling others her husband was a peddler, but everyone knew that it was merely a lie to keep up appearances in her husband's perpetual absence.

Unen had once asked her mother, "What kind of man is my father?"

Her mother had answered with only two words, "Beats me."

It wasn't until Unen had been much older that she realized her mother hadn't said that to avoid the question. It was then Unen came to fully understand why

unfamiliar men started to take turns coming and leaving the small, rundown hut she shared with her mother; why her mother would always send her away, saying, “Play outside until I tell you to come back inside,” every time a man came by. Bleakly, Unen understood that poverty had dragged her mother back into the world she had barely escaped from alive.

***

THE middle-aged woman from across the field beckoned to Unen in the early afternoon at the beginning of summer, right after she had passed her fifth birthday.

“Hey, you.”

Unen had been sent outside the hut before noon that day by her mother who had said as always, “Don’t come back home till I call for you,” so Unen was sitting on the riverbank, making boats out of tree leaves and floating them down the river.

“You’ve got too much time on your hands, don’t ya? Won’t’cha help an old lady draw water from the river?”

Unen timidly accepted the bucket the old woman held out to her.

“You see, my youngest child is on an errand to the next town, so I’m short a helper right now. Come on then, carry it.”

Unen did as she was told and carried the water-filled bucket with both hands. “This way,” the woman directed, walking in front of her while carrying another water bucket in both hands. Unen felt like her bucket held considerably less water than the woman’s, but said nothing as she followed her.

Unen was completely exhausted by the time they finished hiking up the hill and arrived at the woman’s house. She weakly sunk to the ground as soon as she handed the bucket over.

The woman looked down at Unen with a complicated expression that seemed to mix anger and sadness.

“…Good job. Here’s a little something to thank you.”

Unen stared absently at the tiny roll offered to her. Some time passed before

she came to her senses with a start and shook her head back and forth in a panic.

“It’s fine. You can eat it. You must be hungry.”

Mommy will get mad again if I accept food from anyone else. Unen scooted her butt backward away from the roll like her life depended on it.

The woman sighed. “You threw out the dried potato I gave you last time, too.”

Remembering how ungratefully she had tossed the dried potato the woman had given her onto the side of the road when her mother had gotten angry, Unen threw herself down on the ground to apologize.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I won’t do it again…!”

Protecting her head with her arms, Unen curled into the tightest ball possible to prepare for the incoming impact. But nothing happened. Finding it strange, she apprehensively lifted her head from its safe position.

The woman stood there, carefully watching Unen with the same mix of anger and sadness on her face.

“I’ll forgive you if you promise you’ll no longer throw away good food ever again.” She forced Unen’s hand open and placed the bread in it. “You helped me fetch water from the river. This is payment for that. You must accept it.”

“But—”

“Your ma won’t know if you eat it right here and now.”

This auntie here will be the one to yell at me if I don’t listen to her. Unen quickly chomped on the bread, for she had no other choice.

Her first bite of bread in a long while tasted surprisingly sweet. With each bite, the savory scent filled her mouth and nose, and before she knew it, she was eating with abandon. Her mouth was watering so much that even wiping it with her hand several times wasn’t enough. Not having had anything to eat since the wild-oat rice gruel that morning, Unen devoured the bread in no time.

She licked the bread crumbs off her fingers with rapt attention, but the moment she finished, chills ran down her spine. Her eyes bulged as she realized

the crime she had committed.

Mommy must be starving too, but I went and ate all the bread myself without telling her.

Feeling crushed under her guilty conscience, Unen staggered to her feet. The woman seemed to be saying something to her, but she couldn't hear her over what felt like wind roaring in her ears.

"I'm sorry…" she somehow managed to squeeze out in a thin voice, and turned her back to the woman. Then she ran down the hill as if a wild dog was nipping at her heels.

Unen instinctively stopped just as her hut came into view past the brush. Unsure of how to proceed, she froze in place.

Eventually, the door creaked open, and a man exited the hut. With a dirty smile on his lips, he hollered back inside the hut, "Until next time!"

Unen timorously left the cover of the brush once she had confirmed that he'd disappeared, in the direction of the town.

Her mother had yet to call for her. But wanting to apologize to her mother as soon as possible, she approached the hut.

Her mother would be furious to learn Unen ate a roll of bread without her permission. But she would fare better telling her mother herself rather than have her find out later. Most of all, Unen couldn't handle the burden of her heavy feelings of regret and guilt by herself anymore.

She nervously circled around to the door and slowly took several deep breaths to calm her nerves. Just as Unen reached for the door, she heard slight slurping noises from inside.

The dilapidated door had never hung in place correctly, and it couldn't close all the way even if you kicked it. Unen cautiously brought her eyes to the crack between the door and wall.

She saw her mother's back alone inside the dimly lit hut. Her mother was stooped over, single-mindedly moving her hands and head.

Drafts blowing through the cracks in the walls and the door brought the smell

of something deliciously sweet and sour to where Unen hid. It was the scent of the juicy red fruits she had smelled from the fenced-off field across the river she was forbidden to even go near.

Smacking her lips noisily, her mother plopped red fruit after red fruit into her mouth.

“Ahhh, it’s sooo sweet. So yummy,” she moaned happily to herself.

Unen inched away from the door, careful not to make the floorboards creak below her. Realizing she had just seen something she shouldn’t have, fear slammed down on her.

Mommy can never know I peeked.

After retreating far enough from the hut so as not to be heard, Unen took off in a mad dash for the river.

The glossy, shiny red fruits looked as if they had captured the sun inside them. Such delectable, beautiful food hadn’t existed in the hut before Unen had left. The only two foods there that morning had been spoiled wild oats left on the bottom of a used-up bag and a shriveled turnip.

Unen collapsed on the grassy riverbank, having used up all her energy. Blades of grass and twigs stabbed her in the arms and cheeks, but she curled into a ball among the shadows of the tall grass without minding the pain.

How much time had passed before she heard her mother’s voice calling her name in the distance?

Unen sluggishly pushed off the bed of grass. Her mother walked over to her, the setting sun at her back.

“Oh, so this is where you were. Playing hide-and-seek? Kids get to have so much fun.”

Her mother was acting no different from usual.

“…I’m hungry.”

“I know. I’m starving since I haven’t had anything to eat since morning either.”

Unen vacantly looked up at her mother.

“What are you lazing around for?” her mother snapped, “Get to your feet. Hop to it. Guess what? I got my hands on some buckwheat flour today, so let’s have buckwheat gruel for dinner. We can splurge and plop in a turnip or two.”

Dinner that night consisted of buckwheat gruel with minced turnips and some wild grass they had picked on the way home, just as her mother said it would be. The same exact thin, diluted gruel as always.

“Thank you for the food,” Unen mumbled.

Her mother flashed her a big smile. “I promise I’ll fill your belly with a feast to die for, someday.”

***

THE woman brought the water bucket over to Unen the next day too.

She told Unen to help her draw water from the river the next day also, and the day after that and the day after that, and gave Unen a single small roll each time upon carrying the bucket to her house.

Unen no longer turned down the bread.

Before she knew it, secretly helping out in the woman’s field when her mother kicked her out of the house had become a daily routine for Unen.

The woman had two big sons at her house. They barely spoke to Unen, but they never made any faces as they watched their mother give Unen jobs left and right.

Once, when her eldest daughter who was married to someone the next town over, visited with her young children and a baby, they entrusted Unen with babysitting them. Unen had her hands full dealing with a little rascal, who was only three but a lot larger than her, but it all worked out when she was paid with baked sweets that melted in her mouth.

***

A month passed with this new routine until a certain summer day rolled in,

and everything changed.

Unen had been walking behind the woman carrying a bucket full of water as usual. The water that swayed with her every step sparkled wherever it caught the sunlight. Unen squinted her eyes against the ticklish splashes of water that landed on her nose every now and then when the water hit the rim of the bucket and fell back in a big wave.

Wind blowing through the forest brushed against her cheeks. Unen stopped, suddenly feeling like someone had called her name. Frightened to death that her mother had come for her early, she trembled as she turned around. There was an adult man carrying a huge pack on his back down the road.

Long hay-colored hair hung in a loose braid behind his back, and he was glancing around as if in search of something.

Wind murmured in Unen's ears again.

A voiceless voice permeated her body. It was like a drop of water falling onto the ground, moistening the surface for but a second before soaking in faster than it had come.

Without realizing, Unen's lips moved as if they were tracing the disappearing murmur, *"Unen Ende Baina…"*

The man spun toward Unen as if he had been drawn to her. Surprise plain on his face, he slowly walked over to Unen and crouched down in front of her.



His augite-blue eyes peered straight into hers as he asked in a gravelly voice, “What…did you just say?”

“Eh…?”

Had she said something bad? Just as Unen was about to apologize, a loud shout from the woman rained down on her from behind. “Hey, you there! What do you want with that child?!”

“Eh? You’re mistaken, um…” The man stood up, looking cornered. “It’s not that I want anything, um…well, I’m not a suspicious person.”

“Anyone can say whatever they want about themselves. Get away from that child this instant, or I’ll call for someone. You kidnapper!” The woman put her water bucket down and jogged over. Pushing past Unen, she positioned herself in front of the man.

“Kidnapper? I would never! I’m a doctor. I’ve only just arrived in this area, but I was staying in the neighboring town until yesterday. If you think I am lying, I humbly implore you to confirm with them—”

“Neighboring town? Are you possibly Doctor Hereh?” the woman exclaimed in surprise, before the man could finish speaking.

“Ah, yes.”

The man leaned back as far as the woman leaned forward. “Yup, you have the trademark hay-colored braid. My daughter lives in that town, you know, and mentioned that a reliable doctor had arrived. So what’s going on? You aren’t going to settle down in that town?”

“Yes, I’m afraid not. I’m in the middle of a journey.”

“So? What business do you have here, doctor? Hm?”

“No business, really. How do I explain? I thought I heard someone call my name as I was walking…and then that child…” The man looked down at Unen again and fumbled for words.

Then something caught his eye and he studied her carefully from head to toe, like he was taking her apart. Crouching down in front of Unen a second time, he lifted the water bucket out of her hands and placed it on the ground beside her.

As he took her arm in his hand, something scary flashed across his face.

Unable to pull away from his grip, Unen felt her entire body tense.

The man rubbed and pressed her arms for some reason before lightly pressing around her eyes. Then he peered inside of her eyes, told her to show him the inside of her mouth and her tongue, and finally, slowly examined the tips of Unen's fingers—her discolored nails.

"Is this child yours?" he asked the woman in a low growl.

The woman sucked in her breath and quietly responded, "No."

***

A short while later, the man exited the woman's house. Holding a single tiny bag in place of the huge pack he had earlier, he left alone in the same slight fury from when he had questioned the woman.

The woman watched him go and told Unen that it was time to weed the field. Relieved from the bottom of her heart that the woman wasn't behaving any differently, Unen happily nodded.

***

THE sun sunk below the horizon, bringing it close to the time Unen's mother would come to fetch her.

Unen was about to tell the old woman she was going home when she spotted someone coming up the road. It was the man from earlier in the day, and one other person. Walking a few paces behind him was…Unen's mother.

Unen felt as if someone had strung her up by the neck and punched her in the gut. Whatever bread, gruel, and water was in her stomach immediately washed up to her chest.

Mommy found out. She saw me with auntie. She saw me in auntie's field.

"What? Are you saying some strange old lady matters more to you than your mother?" The acrid voice distinctly replayed in Unen's ears.

Mommy's gonna abandon me now. I'm gonna be abandoned—

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Wrapping her arms around her

head, Unen squatted on the ground, trying to make herself as small as possible. She didn't know any other way to weather the coming storm.

"It's okay," a kind voice said above her head. Unen apprehensively lifted her face to find augite eyes right before her. "There's absolutely nothing you have to apologize for. Nothing," he reassured.

Unen saw her mother huff with exasperation behind his hay-colored hair.

"Unen, you're going away with this person now," her mother declared.

"HUUUH?" squeaked the woman behind Unen.

"Good riddance," her mother said, rolling her eyes as she turned her back on Unen. As she did so, sunlight caught on something attached to the side of her head, sending sparkles into the air. It was a very beautiful hair ornament decorated with red, rose pink, and other sparkling gems—of colors Unen had never seen before.

Chapter 17: A Peaceful Life

RATHER than being sad for having left her mother forever, Unen was preoccupied with anxiety over what the future would bring. However, receiving three proper meals a day soon eased most of her worries. Inn beds proved a thousand times more comfortable than her old cot, and she even got to snuggle up in a soft, warm blanket whenever they camped outdoors. She had never known blankets as anything other than sharp, filthy scraps of cloth before.

The man—Hereh—was beyond kind. Not only did he feed her real food, he also taught her many things: about the plants growing along the road; about the forests, land, and rivers they traversed; about their current location with in-depth descriptions of the surrounding terrain; and about the travelers they passed by. The more Unen came to understand, the clearer her thinking became—just like how she was building stamina from receiving good food for her empty belly.

At the same time, discoveries of what she didn't know increased with every new piece of knowledge. Hereh would always patiently answer her questions of "how" and "why," but occasionally she would ask a question even he didn't know the answer to. Yet, he never dismissed or belittled her questions.

But there was one thing Unen could never bring herself to ask him: why had he taken custody of her? What did he say to her mother when he'd left to speak with her? What happened during that conversation?

Just imagining the kind of answers she might receive squeezed her chest with indescribable dread.

There was one thing she knew for sure—she was worth less than a hair decoration to her mother.

The sight of the silver hair ornament adorned with many augites had burned into the back of her eyes. Unen slammed her eyes shut to rid herself of the image before slowly opening them again.

“Shall we get going, Unen?” Hereh held his hand out to her.

He had finished packing their bags, and it was time to move on to the next town.

Unen gave a big nod. “Yeah.”

No matter what Hereh is thinking, I will do what he wants me to do. Unen flattened her lips into a tight line, and reached out to take Hereh’s big, warm hand.

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HEREH discovered an abandoned cabin in the middle of a forest after about a year of wandering with Unen. After visiting the nearby towns to confirm the cabin no longer belonged to anyone, he laid claim to it and set about repairing the building, reviving the tiny field overrun by wilderness, and making the home livable once again.

Hereh didn’t introduce himself to others as a doctor now that they had decided to settle down in one area. They had more than enough gold saved up, so he instead donned the title of apothecary to supplement their livelihood, selling the medicine he made to the doctor of the nearest town.

Fortunately, the doctor Hereh selected as his business partner was a skilled and reasonable man who knew what he was doing. Thanks to his high appraisal of Hereh’s medicine, they were able to live a humble, yet comfortable, life deep inside the forest, all without even scraping the surface of his savings.

***

“CHECK,” Unen said softly, feeling guilty as she moved her piece on the chess board.

Her opponent slammed his hands on the table in protest. “Wait a minute! I was still thinking about my move!”

Milosh chuckled mirthfully and mussed his son’s hair with his big hand. “Don’t be a sore loser, Simon. You’re older than Unen, aren’t you?”

“Is it okay to cheat if you’re smaller?!”

“Cheat? When Unen asked if you were done with your turn a second ago, you

told her to go ahead with hers."

"I immediately took it back right after!"

"I didn't hear you say anything of the sort?"

"…I said it under my breath, so you might not have caught it…" Simon pursed his lips.

Hereh gently placed a steaming cup in Simon's hand. "Thank you for playing with Unen. Why not drink some tea and take a short break? Unen, here are the baked sweets Simon brought with him. I heard Zola baked them. Let's eat them together."

"Wow! Thank you, Simon!" Unen speedily set about clearing the table. The few times she tried Zola's home cooking, it had been mouth wateringly delicious.

"You'd better be thankful," Simon smirked.

Milosh landed a karate chop on Simon's head, wiping the expression off his face. "Don't brag when you weren't the one who cooked it."

Hereh flipped open the woven basket's lid and removed the cloth covering, unleashing the sweet smell of fruit and nuts into the cabin. Unen's mouth watered as she brought over plates.

"Let's dig in," all four said in perfect unison. Only the sounds of them chewing furiously followed.

Milosh looked at Hereh after downing his biscuit. "Hey, Hereh, why don't you just move to town already? You're actually a doctor, aren't you? You can live a comfier life if you move to Yezero."

"What good comes of inviting competition to your town?" Hereh gave him a teasing smile, but Milosh wasn't about to give in.

Flashing an intrepid grin, he countered, "No skin off my back if I get a single competitor. Besides, Unen will be turning eight soon. You can't keep her locked up in this forest forever."

The comment took Hereh off guard, and his brow wrinkled. But a moment later, it softened as he let out a small sigh. "…I do understand why you bring

Simon here with you sometimes. I'm very grateful for it."

"Then pack your bags and come to town. I don't care if an adult like you chooses to cut himself off from the world, but you've got issues if you're forcing it upon a child too." Milosh put his elbows on the table and leaned forward, holding Hereh in his glare.

Unen squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. She had absolutely no complaints with her life in the forest. She was kept busy with farming and chores, and truly valued and enjoyed assisting Hereh with making medicine. Any remaining free time she had was filled with Hereh's lessons, so she had no time to spare for what Milosh was constantly harping on—the supposed importance for children to spend time with other children their age.

"I fully understand what you're trying to say. But I—we—can't leave this forest."

"Why not?" Milosh huffed gruffly.

Beside him, Simon stood up with a straight face and said, "Thanks for the snack."

Milosh and Hereh looked away from each other simultaneously, awkwardness coloring their faces.

"Unen, I challenge you to tree climbing next. I'll give you the special privilege of choosing what tree we'll climb."

"…Ah, okay."

Unen was curious to know what direction the adults' conversation was going to take, but decided to accept Simon's considerate offer anyway.

"We're going outside to play," Unen informed the adults, and followed Simon away from the table.

Hereh's distressed voice slipped out the door before she could close it.

"Please, Milosh. Don't ask me anything right now."

Unen quietly shut the door without waiting to hear Milosh's answer.

***

IN the end, simple days continued to pass by without much change to Hereh and Unen's routine.

Then the fated day arrived, three years ago.

On a late-spring afternoon when the sun was at its highest, and just before Unen was about to celebrate her twelfth birthday, a sudden great earthquake struck the entire Baborak Province with Yezero as its epicenter.

At the time, Unen and Hereh had traveled deep into the forest and were standing in front of the distillation furnace making medicine.

Swept off her feet as if someone had knocked her legs out from under her, Unen painfully fell onto her backside. Unrelenting tremors followed, shaking them violently at the center of their gut. Every tree in the forest was teetering; the birds all took flight in a flurry of wings. The brick distillation furnace, which was taller than Hereh, emitted spurts of harsh grinding noises as it fell apart, and shrill shrieks of glass bottles shattering reverberated throughout the clearing.

"Are you all right, Unen?!" Hereh shouted, as he clung fast to a tree that managed to remain standing beside him.

Instead of answering with words, Unen nodded her head over and over again. When the shaking reached a lull, she called, "Hereh, the furnace—"

"I'm more concerned about the town." Hereh sent his grim gaze beyond the forest. "This is going to be a big disaster…"

Unen gulped. A nearly two-meter tall distillation furnace made of brick had hopelessly crumbled to pieces. It wasn't hard to imagine what happened to the houses and buildings, which were well over that size and made of far less durable materials.

"…Let's go, Unen."

"Okay."

They returned to the cabin, cautiously treading their way through the countless aftershocks that jolted the earth. Hereh entrusted the medical bag he'd carefully stored in the cabinet to Unen and he carried the other bag, which

was filled with bottles of disinfectant and an assortment of other medicines. They hurried west to the town of Yezero.

“Unen.” Hereh said her name but kept his eyes locked on the direction they headed.

“Yes?”

“I once ran from the suffering that transpired in front of me.”

Unen wordlessly waited for him to continue as she ran to keep up with him. They had to watch their step around downed trees and branches.

“But I believe…I mustn’t run away from this disaster. Even if it means…losing our peaceful life. I’m so sorry, Unen,” Hereh whispered, in the stiffest voice Unen had ever heard him speak in. “An equal level of responsibility accompanies power. I will fulfill my job as a doctor. Will you help me, Unen?”

Despite feeling like the anxiety would crush her, Unen gave him a resounding, “Yes!”

***

THE town of Yezero was in a tragic state.

The bridge spanning Kenu River had completely fallen into the river and even parts of the embankment had collapsed. The watermill had lost its foundation and now leaned across the river, creating an unintentional dam, and a fragment of the washed-away bridge had gotten lodged in it. Every building with two stories or more, without exception, had caved in on itself, and the stone dividers and walls that remained had transformed into mountains among the wreckage. Even the one-story wooden houses had sunken roofs.

Hereh headed straight for Milosh’s clinic.

The tremors of the quake must have hit the two banks of the river differently. Many of the buildings located in the same area as the clinic were in a comparably better state. Milosh’s house was barely scathed in spite of its two stories. Unfortunately, all the glass windows he had recently splurged on for the clinic had shattered.

“Hereh! You came?!” Relief washed over Milosh’s face upon seeing Hereh and

Unen.

Hereh and Unen weaved their way around the numerous injured already crammed into the clinic, until they reached Milosh. Hereh handed him the bag stuffed with medicine and took control of the situation.

“Leave the inner room open for seriously injured patients. Then get Zola and Simon to help by separating patients according to degree of injury. We’ll treat the most critical patients first,” Hereh directed. “And most important of all, spread word of our medical treatment procedure throughout town, so everyone knows. Only you can do this part, because the residents know and trust you. I’ll help as much as you need with treating the injured.”

“Okay,” Milosh agreed, and called for Zola and Simon.

Not long after, Zola came running inside short of breath. She was blue in the face.

“Milosh! Milosh! Simon, our Simon, hasn’t come home yet!”

“What?!”

“Remember you sent him on an errand to the town hall? I thought he would’ve raced home after all that shaking, but he hasn’t returned yet!”

“Town hall collapsed!” someone shouted from outside the clinic, where they waited for treatment.

Zola screamed and fell to her knees hyperventilating in panic.

Too restless to do nothing, Unen flew out the clinic. She raced outside but didn’t know where the town hall was or what she could even do, and stood rooted to the ground with her fists clenched tightly with a burning impatience to do *something*.

“Unen, this way!” Hereh dashed out of the clinic after her, but kept running toward the river.

Unen chased after him without a moment’s hesitation.

***

THEY rescued Simon from under what had once been the town hall two hours

later.

They managed to save him in such short time because Unen had made use of her small stature and crawled into the cracks and crevices between the wreckage. She pointed out exactly where Simon was buried, then was nearly buried alive herself by a further collapse of stone debris from above when an aftershock shook through the area.

Patiently enduring the intense pain from the injuries she had received from the wreckage caving in on her, Unen waited for Simon’s surgery to end. She prayed to every god in the world for Simon, and for his parents.

Chapter 18: Parting Ways

TWO weeks had passed since the day the earthquake struck.

With every day that went by, the number of people out searching for those who had never returned decreased, while the number holding funerals for the lost increased. Amid the endless ringing of funeral bells that filled the skies over the town, Milosh's clinic was packed more than ever with the injured and sick who came pounding on his door.

Many more were left waiting in a line snaking outside the clinic and down the street; some slept in the line waiting for their turn, while others would return in the morning hoping to be seen by the doctor. Far more would have died had the earthquake hit during the harsh winter or the summer months. Fortunately, they were currently experiencing the mild weather of late-spring when flowers bloomed in profusion. Those who had lost their homes wouldn't freeze to death from the cold of winter while they sought to rebuild.

A further blessing was that unlike with floods and droughts, the earthquake hadn't done much damage to the fields and fruit trees. If they happened to run out of food, they would only have to wait a short while for the wheat-harvesting season to arrive. Though the aftershocks hadn't let up yet, each person, one after another, managed to lift their head and gradually begin to put their life back together.

Hereh and Unen hadn't returned to their cabin in the forest since they left and they stayed at Milosh's house instead. Hereh treated the sick and injured alongside Milosh—while Unen assisted Zola—they each completed whatever they were capable of doing each day.

As one of those long days came to a close, Unen was preparing a late dinner with Zola in Milosh's living room at the back of the clinic. Hereh, who had finished his work ahead of Milosh, went upstairs to check on Simon.

By the time Unen finished putting Hereh's plate of food on the table, Milosh

charged into the living room like a stampeding bull.

“What’s the meaning of this?! HEREH!” He began to yell, but blanched and accidentally bit his tongue when he realized the key person wasn’t even in the room.

“If you’re looking for Hereh, he went upstairs to examine Simon.”

“O-Oh. He did?”

“Did something happen? You’ve got a scary look on your face,” Zola asked reproachfully.

Milosh awkwardly scratched his head. “No, um, uh?” fumbling for words, his eyes wandered the length of the room.

Shortly after, they heard the stairs creak overhead.

A dark frown creased Milosh’s brow once again. He marched over to where Hereh was descending into the living room and used his body to block his path.

“Hereh, it sounds like you told Amh *your child died* in the earthquake when he asked. Amh’s wife wanted me to convey her condolences to you.”

Zola gasped. Beside her, Unen quietly pulled on the rope of her memories, searching for one that fit the name. *I’m pretty sure Amh is the carpenter who fixed up the cabin for us three years ago.*

Milosh leveled Hereh with a hard glare and deliberately lowered his voice to a threatening growl. “I don’t know *what* you’re trying to do, but think about how Unen must feel. You’ve gone and killed her off to everyone else here.”

“Unen has already given me permission to do it.”

“What?” Milosh’s voice cracked. He flipped around to look at Unen.

Unen slowly nodded to him.

Ignoring the dumbfounded and confused statue otherwise known as Milosh, Hereh dispassionately explained as though he were only talking to himself. “I wish I could’ve pretended to be alone and single, but it was implausible to pull off when so many knew a child was with me. But as luck would have it, aside from your family, there appears to be no one who can clearly recognize Unen’s

face or name, so there's still hope."

"Hope for what?!"

Hereh accepted Milosh's menacing gaze head-on. "Milosh…from now on…I want you to treat Unen and I as complete strangers."

"I keep asking you for an *explanation*! Give me one first!" Milosh shouted angrily.

Hereh's expression didn't waver. "You asked me again and again why we never came into town."

"…I did," Milosh conceded, uneasy about the strange turn the conversation was taking.

Hereh cast his eyes down. "I am…being hunted down by people I was once allied with."

"You're being hunted?" Milosh parroted, his eyebrows shooting up. "C'mon, you came here six years ago. Do you think they're still after you after all this time?"

Hereh wordlessly turned away.

Milosh sighed loudly at his friend. "What in the world did you do?"

Unen glanced from Milosh to Hereh. As Hereh said, he informed Unen of this before he'd told Milosh. However, he hadn't told her a single thing about the cause—*why* he was being hunted.

Perhaps he would tell the reason to Milosh? Unen's hopes were quickly dashed, as Hereh merely kept his gaze trained on the ground.

Milosh scowled at his tight-lipped friend for a long minute. Then he sighed once again, letting the tension out of his face. "I've got a pretty good eye for people. I can tell you're not an evil person just by looking."

"Thank you." Hereh's wisp of a voice unsteadily shook the air in the living room.

Milosh put both hands on his hips as if to bring the conversation back to the main issue and peered at Hereh's lowered face. "So? You're thinking your

hunters might catch up to you?”

“Not might—they *will*. They will unquestionably capture me after I’ve drawn this much attention to myself in one location. It’s only a matter of time now.” Hereh stared into Milosh’s eyes, truly cornered unlike ever before. “I don’t want to get you guys—and most of all, Unen—involved in this trouble. Your family can insist you were only involved with me for trade. But the same doesn’t apply to Unen. That’s why I have to do whatever it takes to hide my connection to her.”

“Hereh, you can’t be—” Milosh sharply sucked in his breath.

A lonely smile touched Hereh’s lips. “Milosh, the other day you promised you would do me three favors.”

Hereh had obstinately declined Milosh’s offer of gratitude for having saved Simon’s life. *“I won’t be satisfied until I thank you,”* Milosh had appealed on many occasions, but Hereh only stubbornly turned him down. It had gotten to the point that Milosh jokingly promised three favors as a parody of a fairy tale.

Milosh reluctantly nodded. Hereh held up the first three fingers on his right hand and began to list his demands.

“First favor: please don’t ask for any more information about why I’m being hunted. Second favor: I want you to quietly let me leave when the time comes. And for the last favor…won’t you please allow Unen to stay with you and your family? As the one who constantly pestered me about moving to town for her sake, you must understand what I was thinking when I came to this decision, yes?”

Milosh stood motionless for some time. He merely stared at Hereh in silence.

Before long, he staggered back to the table and slumped into the nearby chair, like a puppet that had its strings cut.

“You’re going to leave on your own no matter what—that’s what you’re saying.”

“Yes,” Hereh softly affirmed, then pulled a pouch from his pocket.

Unen remembered seeing that pouch before. It was the leather pouch he’d

always carefully tucked away at the bottom of his bag for emergencies, right from the day they started traveling together. He must've brought it downstairs with him when he heard Milosh's angry holler from Simon's room.

Hereh revealed the contents of the pouch on the tabletop. Countless augite and gold coins caught the lamplight, scattering colorful sparkles across the room.

"I doubt this will be enough for what I'm asking of you, but please use this for Unen's expenses—"

"Don't need it," Milosh curtly said over Hereh. "Don't you dare belittle me, Hereh. I can easily raise a child or two without your charity."

Not even a fragment of hesitation remained in Milosh's eyes. But at that moment, he realized something important he'd forgotten to do and glanced diffidently to his wife.

"You don't mind, right?" he asked, seeking Zola's approval.

Zola smiled and put her arm firmly around Unen's shoulder, winking teasingly at Unen when she froze in her embrace. "Of course not! I've always wanted our second child to be a girl, so it all works out!"

"Besides, you've taught Unen about all sorts of things, right? Seems to me like she'll turn out to be more useful than our Simon! She's more than welcome here," Milosh added warmly, and smiled at Unen.

"Thank you," Unen replied, the words rising from the bottom of her heart from where she stood in Zola's embrace.

Of course, her heart ached as if it were being squeezed in a blacksmith's tongs at the thought of separating from Hereh in the near future. But regardless of the pain, the fact Milosh and Zola had accepted her and Hereh's requests shone a shimmering light of hope into her despair like a star twinkling in the pitch-black night.

Hereh let out a single sigh of relief and slowly gazed at each of their faces. "Thank you, Milosh, Zola. You too, Unen… I'm sorry for forcing you to go along with my selfishness…"

Unable to find the right words to say on the spot, Unen merely shook her head, filled to the brim with unspoken emotions.

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THE resulting discussion between Zola, Hereh, Milosh, and Unen produced a backstory for Unen. “Unen is the child of a peddler. She lost her parents in the earthquake that happened to hit Yezero when they were visiting to sell their wares, so she was adopted by her father’s friend, Milosh.” They were going to proactively circulate the story throughout the town.

“I’ll help you out as best I can, until my hunters are nearly here.”

“Don’t be stupid. We both know it’ll be *me* helping *you* out.”

Zola burst out laughing at Milosh’s ridiculous pout. Infected by her laughter, Hereh, Unen, and even Milosh himself cracked a smile.

Four laughing voices shook off the veil of darkness for a while after.

***

TWO and a half months passed, and the day they had to part ways finally came.

One of Milosh’s acquaintances, who he had asked to inform him if any outsiders turned up, told him that two strange men had appeared in the neighboring territory asking for Hereh.

Hereh prepared to leave that day. The following morning, he left the clinic while it was still dark. Unen and Milosh saw him off.

“Listen to me closely, Unen. The world will open before you. You must never forget that.”

Those were the last words Hereh left behind.

“Come back safe,” Unen had said to Hereh, harboring some small hope. She said those words anticipating he would answer with a promise to eventually come back.

Hereh’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Then he smiled sadly, and left without saying anything at all.

* * *

Chapter 19: Transgression

THE night breeze gently brushed Unen's cheeks.

She began to speak quietly, under the watchful eye of the star-filled sky. "When I started getting jobs to make maps outside of Yezero, I got an idea. If I continue to gradually spread my scope, so that one day I'll come to make a map of the world, I might be able to see Hereh again. And this time, I want to thank him properly for all he did for me. I want to thank him for taking me with him. For raising me."

The light from the lantern at her feet dimly detailed the surroundings. Only the flicker of its orange flames proved that they were in the here and now.

They were on the rooftop of the turret with the best view of the kingdom, the same place Unen had come under attack that very afternoon. Unen had ascended the stairs to the roof with Mouru and Ori following close behind after the banquet ended.

"We don't have to worry about anyone overhearing us here," Mouru assured.

Just as he had said, the land below the starry sky, for as far as they could see, was devoid of people. There was no one aside from them.

Unen finished telling the two men before her everything she had to share at last. She studied both of their faces closely, waiting for a reaction. "Hereh said he was being hunted by people he was once allied with. And…Ori, you brought up your 'village' when we were talking in that room just this evening."

"Unen, you're Hereh's child who supposedly *died*, aren't you?" Mouru had pressed her in the antechamber—only for Ori to immediately raise an objection.

"Her age doesn't match up." Ori glanced Unen over. "Aren't you fifteen now? That man left the *village* over fifteen years ago."

Repeating Ori's words in her head, Unen firmly took control of the conversation. "I told you the truth, per our promise. Now it's your turn to give me the truth."

Mouru huffed loudly and shot Ori a dirty look. Then, the creases in his brow eased, and he shrugged. "Guess it's my fault for purposely aggravating the situation by keeping to myself the possibility she might not be blood-related…"

"Purposely aggravating?" Ori cocked an eyebrow.

"Well, you know how my mind works. But this just goes to prove he didn't run off to enjoy a second chance at life with a new wife and kid." Mouru tossed Ori a sardonic smile, then faced Unen, the right corner of his lip curling up to accompany the ever-present cocky glint in his eyes. "By the way, I'm guessing your birthplace was in the outskirts of Roggen. How 'bout it? Am I right?"

"All traces of Hereh disappeared completely around there," Ori supplied.

"You're giving away the information too soon, Ori!"

Ori turned his gaze coolly away from Mouru's protests. They were in an unusually good mood, likely because they had obtained new information from Unen.

Unen was completely capable of deflecting his assertion that she was Hereh's child. She had chosen to tell them the truth. In order to force their hand, she exchanged the information she knew to make them drop their own lies. But most of all, Unen was fed up with their ambiguous relationship, where it was unclear whether they were her friends or foes.

"You were trying to throw me off when you asked me to make a map of Roggen."

"Perfect answer." Mouru showed her a real smile. "No one ever imagined that Hereh had a child with him, after all. That's probably why the tracks stopped temporarily at Roggen, didn't they?" he said, looking over at Ori for affirmation.

"They did."

Earning his partner's agreement, Mouru brought his gaze back to meet Unen's. "But it was only a matter of time before he would be captured again as long as he continued his work as a doctor. In that sense, he made the right choice to take you and seclude himself inside a forest after a year of travel."

For six years, they had lived quietly in hiding, away from human habitation. To Unen, those days had been happy. But how had it been for Hereh? Once again, doubt clamored inside her, and she bit down on the inside of her cheek. Considering Hereh had left Yezero alone in the end, Unen's existence had undeniably been a burden on him.

Mouru dropped his shoulders and made a reluctant smile that was a strange blend of deeply bitter and wryly amused. "Anyway, you've got me in a bind now. I feel like we have to return the favor to a degree since you've gone and laid bare all your secrets." He looked at Ori beside him, both eyebrows raised as if to wordlessly ask for Ori's opinion.

Ori loudly exhaled and stepped forward. "We're from the same village as Hereh. We're hunting him down to get back the Book of Secrets he brought out of the village without permission."

Unen was a little surprised at how Ori, not the smooth-talker Mouru, was taking the lead, but she quickly gathered her thoughts and asked, "So being on a job for the Legendary Mage Notsors was a lie?"

"…Not all of it was a lie."

"Then how much of it was true? For that matter, are the Notsors you speak of and the Notsors I know of the same person? While we're at it, does Notsors even exist?"

She waited a few minutes, but Ori didn't answer any of her questions. An unreadable veil cloaked his deadpan face per usual. He simply set his lips in a straight line and furrowed his brow until the creases had made deep trenches.

Unen threw up her hands and sighed at them. "You guys said that you're observing me."

Hearing that, Ori promptly shot daggers with his eyes at Mouru, the opposite of what had happened just a few minute ago. Mouru merely turned his face

toward where the sun would rise with a shameless look of indifference.

Ori eyed Mouru with a frosty glare for some time, but he eventually gave up and returned his attention to Unen. Answering her as if carefully picking each word, he said, “Knowledge is power. And great, unnecessary power gives birth to needless discord in the world. What happened with Vrba is a good example of that.”

“But as far as I know, Hereh never caused any strife or discord around him. If anything, he helped a great many people.”

Mouru took over when Ori hesitated. “So *far* he hasn’t,” he countered.

What is that supposed to mean?

Reading the question on her face before she asked it, Mouru added, “There’s no guarantee anywhere that he will continue to be a good person. Besides, the actions he has taken for ‘good’ may eventually backfire on him.”

Unen made an incredulous expression. “The same goes for everyone—myself as well as you two. And I find you both more questionable than Hereh.”

Mouru rolled his eyes and shrugged dramatically. “Well, yeah, it’s only natural to have more trust in someone you’ve lived with for years than people you’ve just met. Sheesh.”

Unen gave Mouru a disgusted look. Then, mustering everything within her, she mercilessly shot them where it hurt. “That’s not the problem. *You* aren’t trustworthy because *you’re still lying to me.*”

Ori sharply caught his breath. Mouru’s eyes narrowed on Unen.

“Your objective isn’t just to bring back the Book of Secrets. I’ve fallen under your surveillance just for being taught by Hereh. Furthermore, Mouru said you want to prevent the spread of knowledge. Putting the pieces together, it’s easy to see that you need to drag Hereh back with you along with the Book of Secrets.”

Unen thought back on the things she heard Mouru say inside the antechamber that evening. Fighting off a second bout of that same bone-chilling fear, she summoned her determination and continued cornering them.

“Yet for all that, neither of you even seems to be taking it into account. Additionally, there’s what your predecessors said to me, ‘Should Hereh ever come back, tell him that Notsors will never forgive him…’”

She stopped there to catch her breath and glared at the two men. “Be honest. You plan to kill Hereh.”



A menacing burst of wind raced across the rooftop, throwing the three shadows cast by the lantern's flames into disarray.

Neither Mouru nor Ori said a word. Wordlessly, motionlessly, they aimed silent gazes at Unen.

Understanding what their silence meant, Unen's eyes angled sharply. "I won't let you kill Hereh," she said fiercely, Suffocating stillness reigned for a long while; only the howling wind and flickering flames ticked away the seconds passing them by.

Abruptly, Ori drew a deep sigh. "To be clear, we haven't received orders to *kill* him. However, we have been told it's on the table depending on the circumstances," he answered matter-of-factly.

Mouru brought his right hand to his forehead, evidently thinking, *Now you've gone and done it.*

Ori went on, his expression unchanged, "But I have no intention of killing Hereh either. He has a duty he must fulfill. We have to bring him back to the village alive. He can atone for his transgressions after that."

"Transgressions?!" Unen shouted, "Teaching the child of a poor whore is a *transgression?* Saving the lives of the injured and sick is a *transgression?!* You guys like to claim knowledge brings disaster, but to me it's *you* who's the disaster!"

"Can you still say that even if it'll destroy the human world?!" Ori yelled harshly.

The Murmur suddenly snapped inside Unen's chest the instant she heard his tone. Ori stooped over holding his head at almost the exact same time that she gasped.

"Are you all right?! Ori!" Mouru ran over to Ori in alarm.

Using his partner's hand for support, Ori slowly raised his head. His shoulders heaved up and down with his ragged breathing.

A memory was triggered as Unen watched Mouru help Ori off the ground. This same exact thing had occurred on numerous occasions during her travels—

inside the forest, and when Hereh had taught her. Whenever the voiceless Murmurs vibrated unexpectedly in Unen's ear, Hereh always grimaced and held his head as if enduring great pain.

"You okay?" Mouru asked again. His usual aloofness had completely fallen from his face.

"I'm fine," Ori responded with a strained smile.

His voice overlapped with the smiling, *"I'm fine,"* Unen once used to hear.

However, her nostalgic memories were smashed to pieces by Ori's next words.

"Hereh murdered an innocent person during his escape from the village. That's the transgression he committed."

Chapter 20: Stormy Night

UNEN joyfully accepted the position as a live-in assistant for the King's Aide Harabal and set out on a trip back to Yezero. She would report the good news to Milosh and his family before taking up residence inside the castle. Unen walked the five-day trip home on foot with Irena, who celebrated Unen's career advancement like it was her own success.

On either side of the two girls traveling the highway was Ori and Mouru, serving as bodyguards.

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THE group of four took up lodging in the town of Qena on the third night after departing the royal capital.

The drizzle that began before sunset turned into a raging thunderstorm that pounded against the roof of their inn. A heavy downpour of rain whipped in through the cracks in the slatted shutters hanging over the windows, spraying a fine mist. The only relief was that the chilly wind aired out the stuffy humidity inside.

King Klinack had given them money for their traveling expenses, so they decided to borrow a lamp from the inn for the night. At first, Unen thought they might be splurging on too many luxuries, but she quickly thought twice as the storm continued to howl like a deranged beast. An ominous feeling, that something far from good was going to crawl out of the darkness, fell upon them.

The lamp they placed on the small table near the window cast multiple rings of light on the ceiling. The unreliable light of its wick-trimmed candle couldn't even illuminate the corners of the room, which was already so small that if Unen and Irena placed their bags on the floor, they would have no space for their feet. Nevertheless, it did a sufficient job reverting what sounded like roaring beasts shaking the windows outside into the familiar sounds of wind

and rain.

Unen was absently watching the orange flame flicker in the wind from where she had sprawled on the bed when Irena, who was sitting on the next bed over oiling her sword, spoke to her in an unusually quiet voice. “Hey, Unen? What exactly went down that night?”

“Hm? What night?” Unen automatically responded with a question.

Irena thrust her chin toward the room Ori and Mouru were staying in. “You spoke with those two about something the night before we left the capital, right? What in the world did you talk about? I’m terribly curious, because you’ve all been acting strange ever since.”

Irena’s eyes were clouded with worry—the same look she had when she watched Unen leave for the turret that night with Ori and Mouru. Unen gasped. She only now realized that she had been so distracted with what was going on with herself that she hadn’t taken the time to stop and consider what Irena must’ve been going through over the past three days.

Very little of the conversation that took place on the turret could be shared with Irena. However, there were many ways Unen could’ve put Irena’s worries at ease without divulging the details. She gnawed on her cheek until the taste of blood satiated her self-disgust, and then sat up primly on her bed.

“I’m sorry for making you worry. To be honest with you, I told them…what I know about Hereh.”

“Oh yeah, Mouru did go on saying something about your teacher to the king.”

Irena must’ve been really worried ever since Mouru brought that up…over three days ago. Guilt-ridden, Unen started to apologize again, but Irena quickly leaned forward, her brows knitted in a frown.

“Say…you can tell me if I’m wrong, but…did Mouru say stupid stuff to agitate you into leaking information?”

“Ah…yup, pretty much.”

“And the reason why all three of you seem oddly in the dumps is because you ripped them a new one with your retaliation?”

Irena's teasing smile got a heartfelt, "Guilty as charged," from her.

"But…we look that depressed? All three of us?"

"Yes. I've been thinking you've all been acting strange, but then it dawned on me after I said it! Those two are acting just like my little brothers do after they've been scolded for doing something bad!"

Unen burst out laughing remembering how Irena's cheeky brothers, both younger than her by two years, would angrily push the blame onto each other. *"You did it!"* and *"It's your fault!"* they'd insist.

Irena flashed a knowing grin and winked. "In your case, I'm going to guess you're half-depressed and half-angry?"

As Irena guessed, Unen was beyond a doubt furious. Then again, her fury wasn't directed at Ori and Mouru for calling Hereh a murderer, but at the unreasonable situation that had forced her to listen to him being condemned without the ability to defend him.

Irena's guess had hit the nail on the head again as well, since Unen was also feeling depressed. It had been roughly two weeks since she had met Ori and Mouru, and they had since saved her on more occasions than she wanted to count. Granted, since her relationship with them was that of employer and bodyguard, Unen had come to trust them to some extent. Yet—

"Ori's never one for many words, so the change doesn't stand out as much, but it's obvious you and Mouru are speaking less. And really, when Mouru's silent, it feels like he's scheming something bad, and I wish he'd cut it out! Seriously!" Irena shuddered.

"Huh? But didn't Mouru look like he was having a blast chatting up the other inn guests downstairs? Was he really acting that different from usual?" Unen cocked her head.

"He was *too* different," Irena insisted. "He seems to have returned to his old self once we reached town, but he barely said a word on the road. He REALLY gave off the feeling he was coming up with some sinister plan. What do we do if he actually has been plotting this whole time?"

Unen smiled sympathetically at Irena, who started muttering curses under her

breath. Then she quietly closed her eyes and rummaged through her memories from that afternoon.

Ori had led the pack horse by the reins and Mouru had walked to the right of the horse. The image of their backs as they took the lead replayed behind her eyes.

Now that Irena brought it up, it did seem like both Ori and Mouru spoke less compared to before. But Unen doubted her past included anything that upset them. At most, they were licking their wounds from having a short little girl tear into them with, *"but to me it's you who's the disaster!"* Except, Unen seriously didn't believe they would ever be affected by such a small thing.

In the first place, they were still keeping a lot of secrets from her, in spite of the fact that Unen had confessed everything about herself to them in full.

I'm the one who wants to mope! She griped on the inside.

They had confessed under the star-filled sky that one of their goals was to prevent the spread of knowledge.

But what Unen had learned from Hereh honestly did not amount to much. There must be others who needed to be watched more than her. Coming to that conclusion, she burned with shame.

"What's wrong, Unen? Your face is bright-red?" Irena tilted her head while she put the finishing shine on her sword with a felt cloth.

Unen frantically waved both hands in front of her. "Y-You're just imagining it!"

Though she inhaled deep breath after deep breath, the memory of her foolish past self continued to stab at her heart, tormenting her.

Yes, until now, Unen had prided herself on her intelligence. After all, only a select few people could read and write in the town of Yezero, and when it came to arithmetic, there were none who surpassed or even equaled her knowledge.

Naturally, the adults in town were endowed with a great breadth of knowledge in their fields, especially the doctors and blacksmiths, and she couldn't even begin to compete against them in those regards. However,

surrounded with people who used such skills on a daily basis, Unen had come to view their talents as only natural because they made a living off of those skills. Somewhere deep within her, she had grown conceited, and believed that the ability to read and write had somehow made her special compared to the rest of them. What was their normal knowledge in the face of her unique expertise?

But she was wrong. Not to mention, even if she only took those with knowledge of letters and numbers into account, she'd still find quite a number of people throughout the world who had a much deeper understanding than she did. Unen became painfully aware of that fact when she spoke in-depth with Harabal at the Kujh Castle banquet. Her newfound awareness of her own childishness made her want to dig a hole and bury herself in it.

As one would expect of the king's mathematician, what Harabal knew about math—that Unen didn't—could amount to an entire mountain. Trigonometry was one example, which he had alluded to briefly during their audience with the king. In the past, Hereh had taught her the concept, but had to give up on teaching the subject in-depth because he didn't have any detailed tables or diagrams on him, much to his disappointment.

When Unen had told Harabal that during the banquet, he temporarily excused himself and returned with a book. "These are the tables of logarithms created by a mathematician from Komni Kingdom to the south." He happily held the book out to her, and proudly tapped his chest. "I'm currently in the middle of creating a table with even more digits."

In no way could Mouru have missed overhearing Harabal's explanations, seated directly beside him. Nevertheless, Mouru and Ori hadn't paid him the least bit attention. In other words, they didn't decide who to keep an eye on by gauging the depth of the knowledge their target possessed.

The knowledge Hereh had brought out of their village—that was the component Unen *might* have that Harabal did not. What specifically that knowledge could possibly pertain to was beyond Unen, but Mouru and Ori apparently viewed the chance that Unen could spread the mysterious knowledge that wasn't ever supposed to leave the boundaries of their village as a threat.

Killing Unen would be the fastest and easiest method to get rid of that particular concern. Dead men tell no tales. The village's secrets could simply follow her to the grave. But, despite having had countless opportunities to off her, they hadn't taken that option as of yet.

Which could only mean one thing: there was another reason why Unen caught their attention. The first thing she could think of was that they wanted to use her as bait to lure out Hereh. But what good was bait for someone who was God knows where?

"Hey, Unen, you okay?" Irena's concerned voice dragged Unen back to reality, away from her meandering speculations.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry, Irena. I was lost in my thoughts."

"You look really tired. Why don't we get to sleep?" Irena suggested, as she placed her sheathed sword gently on top of her bag.

The girls exchanged goodnight's and rolled over in their separate beds. The cryptid howls would return from the darkness if they put out the lamp, so they left it flickering. They would find themselves stuck in this town for a while if the weather continued into the morning.

"Say, Unen?" Irena whispered in a voice nearly washed away by the sound of the rain.

"What?"

"Please tell me if there is ever anything I can do to help you."

Irena's voice shone a small light into Unen's heart.

"Thank you," Unen said, grateful from the bottom of her heart.

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THE violent storm lost its steam past midnight and cheerful chirping slipped through the slatted shutters around dawn.

Unen's group left the inn after breakfast as planned, and continued their way to Yezero on the rain soaked roads.

A perfectly bright, clear blue sky spanned over the broad fields on both sides

of the road. Not a single cloud was in the sky as far as the eye could see, and the puddles and water droplets decorating the blades of grass sparkled and glimmered under the sunlight.

Today's going to be yet another hot day. Unen wearily sighed.

King Klinack had lent the group a single horse for their journey back to Yezero. Their travels would have been much harsher on them if the sleek, fawn-colored horse hadn't been carrying their bags. Unen internally piled words of gratitude on the horse peacefully following Ori's lead as she stared at its swishing tail.

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THEY waited until the sun blazed down on them from directly overhead to take a break in the shade of the trees at the side of the road. Each chose a stump or large stone to sit on and ate the salted sardines they had bought in the capital along with the hard-baked bread that had been supplied by their lodging in Qena for lunch.

As Irena had pointed out, Mouru was undeniably speaking far less than usual. Aside from exchanging an opinion or two with Ori about the roads and towns they would be coming up on, he ate his bread in silence without chattering pointlessly like he normally would.

On the other hand, Ori's talkativeness hadn't changed much. If a change had to be pointed out, it would be…that he was looking at Unen a lot more than he used to… At least, it felt that way to her.

I'm imagining it, she told herself. But whenever she caught his face out of the corner of her eye, it was pointed toward her. Looking back on their travels together thus far, she couldn't deny that there was a dramatic increase in the number of times her eyes were now meeting his.

She took the plunge and turned her face toward his. Her gaze met Ori's head-on.

His unreadable countenance remained unchanged. But he didn't seem to be glaring at her either. If she had to name what he was doing, "observing" would be the closest description.

Undaunted, she boldly observed him back. He continued staring without

flinching. Did he think whoever looked away first would lose, like in a cat fight? Feeling stubborn, she held his gaze for as long as he kept hers, until he finally gave in and sluggishly opened his mouth.

"What's wrong?"

I'm the one who wants to ask what's wrong with you! Unen thought, though she didn't put it into words. "Nothing." She shook her head.

Ori studied his hands for a bit as though he were contemplating something before finally bringing his gaze back up to Unen's. Quietly, he asked, "Do you want to ride a horse?"

"Huh? Where did that come from?" This time, Unen's baffled thoughts flew out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

Am I wrong? His dubious expression seemed to say.

"You were staring at the horse the entire time we were walking."

"That's not because I wanted to ride him… I can't even ride a horse in the first place."

"Want me to teach you how?" Ori offered out of nowhere.

Unen couldn't help but take a hard, long look at his face to see if he was toying with her. His face was dead serious.

What in the world was he thinking to bring up horseback riding with her? Entirely unsure of where the conversation was going, she settled for nodding several times.

"Oh, um, sure. Thanks. Some day when we have the time I'd like to learn…"

Ori continued staring at her like he had more to say, but he eventually let out a heavy sigh and returned to his food.

Perplexed by the whole thing, Unen quietly exhaled.

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THE party finished their lunch and hit the road until they came to a tributary of Cerná River.

Neither Unen, Irena, nor Sissel had known the name of the small river, about

10 meters wide, when they came across it on their way to Kujh. However, due to the rains last night, the volume of water had increased so much that it couldn't even compare to when they'd crossed it the first time. Brown muddy torrents were churning just under the bridge.

The bridge stood unaffected by the raging river. The bridge's girder had been built with many logs and was fixed firmly to both banks. On their way to the royal capital, they thought that the bridge had been built too extravagantly for the size of the river, but now they were convinced that it was warranted.

However, while the bridge's architect had incredible technique, he apparently lacked the passion to keep his masterpiece maintained. Countless wheel tracks were carved into the bridge planks covering the girders, while foot traffic and horse hooves had worn away at the wood, and the handrails had also been repeatedly damaged.

No one would be bothered by the state of the bridge planks and handrails when all that was below was a perfectly clear water current no higher than an adult's waist, far below them. Presently, however, the whitecaps of the muddy water were pressing hard against the bridge's girders.

"Unen, you should walk closer to the center of the bridge," Irena advised.

"Oh, okay." Unen stepped out on the left from behind the horse and walked over to Irena.

"Don't step on the moss. You'll slip," Ori warned, briefly glancing over his shoulder.

With almost the exact same timing, Unen's right foot landed on moss.

The sole of her boot completely slipped right across the top, and her world spun rapidly backward.

Ori rushed to pacify the neighing horse that was startled by the sound of her toppling over. Across from him, Mouru stepped to the side away from the horse, careful not to get kicked.

"Are you okay?" Irena asked in a small voice, carefully approaching Unen.

Wanting to cry over the shame of having fallen rather than the aching pain

radiating from where she had hit her left shoulder and back, Unen muttered, “I’m okay,” and used the handrail beside her as a crutch to pull herself off the ground.

Within seconds, the crutch crumbled beneath her hands.

Instantly, gravity disappeared below her.

Just as she was wondering why the sound of Irena’s scream had come to her delayed, Unen’s entire body was engulfed by the rushing ice-cold water.

Chapter 21: Starting Over

SOMETHING rammed into Unen's stomach within seconds of her realizing she had fallen into the raging river. The impact knocked the air right out of her mouth, leaving her gasping as water rushed around her.

Remembering Hereh's warning to never let water into your lungs, Unen barely stopped herself from breathing in. Relentless force continued to shove something long and flat into her abdomen—or more accurately, the surging current was pushing her into the object. Wrapping her arms around it, she clung for dear life to the log-like object.

Getting close to the limit for holding her breath, the back of her throat started convulsing for air. Knowing it'd be the end of her if she opened her mouth, Unen thrashed her legs and arms, clambering her way inch by inch up the log toward the light.

Before long, her face broke through the water's surface. Fresh air rushed into her chest in a massive wave, causing her to wheeze. Tightening her arms against the pressure of the water, she swung her head around while sucking in shuddery breaths.

Unen was clinging to one of the bridge piers that had been carved out of a log. The bridge girder was right above her head and the whitecaps of the muddy stream were rushing all around her.

I have to let everyone know I'm safe and where I am immediately! Unen raised her voice over the torrent to shout the names of Irena, Mouru, and Ori in order.

"She's below us!"

She heard Ori's voice at a slight distance over the flurry of footsteps.

Unen looked up at the backside of the bridge girder and strained her voice to inform them of her situation, "I was able to grab hold of a bridge pier somehow!"

“Stay put! I’ll save you right now.”

“Oka—”

Something hard slammed into Unen’s shoulder before she could finish the syllable. Taken by surprise, her grip on the girder loosened. By the time she realized a piece of driftwood hit her, she had been peeled away from the pier by the surging current.

Instantly, muddy water blotted out the boundless blue sky. She managed to inhale one last deep breath a second before her head was pushed under water again, but, jostled by the rushing water current, she couldn’t tell which direction was up. Rocks, sticks, and other solid objects incessantly crashed into her body from all directions. For a mere second, she felt her feet touch the sand on the river bottom, but the sensation disappeared faster than it had come. She raked her hands through the water for something to cling to, but only hit a rock, breaking her nails and cutting up her fingers instead.

Am I going to die here? Unen clenched her fists and almost simultaneously felt the Murmur reverberate in her chest.

The water current steadily lost its surging force and the light shining through her tightly shut eyes gradually grew brighter.

Unen’s knees hit the riverbed just as her sense of up and down reoriented itself. Right when she thought the waves were rolling over the top of her hair, the water’s surface sunk lower and her head popped out above it.

There was a tremendous howl of wind, and small splashes were smacking Unen in the face. Nervously opening her eyes, Unen found a wall of muddy water right in front of her.

Her chest, followed by her waist, appeared above the murky water from where she sat disconcerted on the riverbed. Then, the riverbed of algae and sand was entirely exposed to air.

The river water had split to the left and right, slightly above where Unen sat as if held back by an invisible wall. The wall of muddy water had created a spindle-shaped space around Unen, dividing the river in half.

Unen choked and choked again on the spurts of splashes pouring down on

her from above, getting water into her mouth and nose. As she gagged, the reality of her situation came to her. The ridiculous wall of water standing at one meter in height all around her—had been created by the fearsome power hidden within *wind*.

Just as she was wondering why the wall to her right suddenly lost its shape, she noticed Ori dive into the water and kick hard to reach her. He pulled on Unen faster than the water could close in on her, swiftly put a looped rope around her waist, and held her to his chest with his left arm.

Muddy billows swallowed Unen from her head down. The water current swept the ground out from beneath her feet, and she was washed away by it again.

But this time, her face surfaced right away. Ori’s arm around her waist was keeping her head above water.



Ori swam for shore with Unen in one arm. She realized another rope was attached to hers, tied around his waist and stretching toward the shore. At the other end of the rope pulled taut under the waves was Irena and a tree at the bottom of the bridge. Several unfamiliar people were also there assisting her.

Finally, Ori arrived at the shore. Rising from the water, he laid Unen on the ground and flopped face-up on the grass panting.

Cheers erupted from where Irena stood.

Unable to wait for her coughing to stop, Unen squeezed out through gasps for air, “Thank…you…for…saving…me.”

“Save…your…thanks…for Mouru…” Chest heaving under his chaotic breathing, Ori shakily raised his arm and pointed a shriveled finger at the bridge. “I couldn’t have…done anything to help…if not for his…spell.”

Unen searched for Mouru with strained eyes.

Irena was holding hands with unfamiliar men under the tree rejoicing over their success. Yet another man was holding the reins of their pack horse. And beside him, Unen watched Mouru limply collapse onto the ground.

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THEY decided to rest under the trees near the bridge. The four men who had assisted Irena gathered around the open-air fire with them. They had been walking slightly behind Unen’s group when Unen had tumbled into the water, so they lent a hand during the rescue by pulling on the lifelines and steadying the pack horse.

Leaving the tea brewing to Irena, Unen hastily pushed together a bed by spreading her blanket in the shade, a few trees away from the fire. Bunching up the top portion of the blanket into a makeshift pillow to support Mouru’s head, Ori laid him down.

Apparently, Mouru couldn’t even sit up on his own; he had drained all of his strength with that powerful spell. From what Unen learned later, he had used up a ton of magic to restrain the surging water current right after she had fallen into the river. Immediately following that spell, he cast another to split the

muddy water around her. A great deal of power had been required to manipulate the sheer volume of water with wind.

Unen and Ori shared the task of piling up bags around Mouru so he could sit up without falling over. Once Unen finished stabilizing his position, she sat back on a corner of the blanket and thanked him formally.

“Thank you very much for saving my life.”

With a voice weaker than the buzz of a mosquito, Mouru whispered, “You’re very welcome. I wouldn’t be able to sleep easy if you died on me now.”

“Why?” A question out of pure curiosity—not sarcasm or cynicism—burst from her lips.

Half-buried in the blanket, Mouru weakly raised an eyebrow at her. “‘Why?’ Do you really mean that? I don’t think this is one of those things that needs a deliberate explanation.”

“Isn’t it more convenient for you both if I’m dead?”

Mouru’s eyes wavered at her question.

I knew it. I was right. Unen bit her cheek.

However, instead of answering her question, Mouru beckoned his partner closer in a thin voice, “Hello, my man Ori? Has your brain checked in today? Didn’t you promise me you would tell Unen today for sure?”

“I couldn’t clear people away the way I wanted.”

“Clear people out of the way? You don’t have to take it that far. You could’ve just whispered it to her in a corner like we are now. What’s the problem with that? Hold on, what the heck were you two talking about during lunch then?”

After a slight hesitant pause, Ori mumbled, “I offered to teach her how to ride a horse.”

“HUH? Where did horseback riding lessons come from?” Both of Mouru’s eyebrows shot up with his hoarse voice.

Seriously, what led him to randomly bring up the horse? Unen joined Mouru in studying Ori’s face.

Out of nowhere, Mouru moaned as if the reason had finally clicked for him. “Please don’t tell me…you were trying to use that as an excuse to talk alone with Unen?”

Startled by the conclusion that had never crossed her mind, Unen turned reflexively toward Mouru, then spun back to Ori.

Sulkiness broke through Ori’s deadpan mask.

“Aaah, sheesh, you just used up what was left of my energy. I’m going to sleep now. I’ll be sleeping for a bit, OKAY? Things got awkward because of you, so it’s your job to fix it.” After jabbing Ori with those words like a whining child, Mouru pressed his eyes shut and fell fast asleep without moving a centimeter.

Unen pushed to her feet, careful not to wake him. Ori slightly adjusted the location of one of the bags and also stood up on the other side of his partner.

“…*What* exactly did you make more awkward and complicated? What is it you want to tell me that requires other people to be out of the way?” Unen glared at Ori with burning resolve.

Ori’s expression remained as flat as ever. “I want to clear two misunderstandings,” he said abruptly. “I can’t speak for our predecessors from three years ago, but Mouru and myself are after Hereh to hear his defense more than to condemn him.”

He had to be out of his mind to think Unen would immediately take his words at face value after he’d grimly gone on about disturbing things the other day, like making Hereh atone for his terrible transgressions and whatnot.

Unen defiantly placed her hands on her hips and inhaled deeply to puff her chest out to decrease their size difference. “Aren’t you going to kill him if he resists?”

“We’ve been told to prioritize our safety over everything else. Is Hereh a violent man who’d come after our lives?”

Could the man who had always been so docile, who had never raised his hand, and rarely ever shouted, be capable of taking Ori and Mouru’s life? No, never.

Quickly realizing the answer to the question, Unen quietly sighed. Then she recalled that on the turret Ori had said, “To be clear, we haven’t received orders to *kill* him. However, we have been told it’s on the table depending on the circumstances.” While what Ori had said hadn’t been wrong, it also hadn’t gotten the right connotation across compared to what he was saying now.

Whether he noticed the deep lines in her brow or not, Ori continued right over her thoughts, “The second misunderstanding I need to clear with you is about our mission to prevent secret knowledge from spreading. We don’t plan on harming you. If possible, we would like to seek your peaceful cooperation.”

I wish you had told me that sooner rather than bring up some horse, Unen muttered deep within her soul.

Purposely turning her expression grim, she tore into his remark. “You’re telling me I have to cooperate with you if I don’t want to be watched?”

“We will…be watching you,” he plainly asserted, then shook his head as if in a panic over his own words. “Ah, no, it’s not that…we will be watching you. We want to confirm…” He thoughtfully considered his next words, then faltered, “…er…see through to the end what and how much you know. To the extent that we can, that is…”

Unen really couldn’t hold back the loud sigh from escaping her this time. “You said you want to clear the misunderstandings I have, but it’s not that I was confusing what you said, but that you suck at explanations, you know?”

“Sorry,” he apologized without making excuses.

With impeccable timing, Irena shouted, “Hey!” and waved at them with a kettle in her other hand. “Tea is ready. Want some?”

“Thanks. I’m coming now,” Unen answered, and turned back to Ori once more just to be sure. “You’re done talking now, right?”

“Yeah.”

For now, it seemed that Ori and Mouru weren’t hostile toward Unen. They also didn’t appear to have plans to slaughter Hereh on the spot either. Unen spun around, her body light from having the weight taken off her chest.

But then Ori had to go and make a tiny noise. “Ah…”

“…What now?”

Let’s clear up as much as possible here and now. Determined, Unen turned back to Ori and met his usual serious expression.

“About my offer this afternoon…to teach you how to ride a horse…I meant it.”

Unen desperately steadied herself from having the rug pulled out under her once again.

“Th-Thanks. Then, I’ll take you up on that later.”

Ori quietly nodded, a slight, satisfied bend to his lips gave the barest hint of a smile.

Chapter 22: Great Responsibility

“WOOH, for a time there I wasn’t sure how things were going to turn out, but I’m sure glad it was a successful rescue!”

The four travelers who helped save Unen smiled broadly as they each patted her on the back and remarked they were very happy to see that she was in one piece.

“Anyway, your mage friend is something else altogether! I’ve never met such a powerful mage before! He divided the water down the middle like a scene out of a fairy tale!” One of the men excitedly looked over his shoulder at Mouru, who was sleeping under a tree behind them.

His excitement rubbed off on the man next to him, who turned to face Ori. “You’re just as amazing as your friend, mister swordsman. You’ve got some real guts to dive into a rushing river. Not something most people could do!”

“I have to give it to the young lady here though. While we were panicking about your friend falling in, you had already pulled out a rope, handed one end to the swordsman, and tied the other to the tree in a matter of minutes! I haven’t seen someone move so quick to take action in a disaster before! You could show us a thing or two!”

As the third man continued passionately praising Irena and Ori’s abilities, the fourth patted Unen on the head. “Be careful where you step, boy. Make sure you listen to what your big brothers tell you from now on. And try not to get into any more danger.”

Unen docilely nodded, not wanting to waste the energy to correct her gender.

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UNEN’S group continued to rest in the same spot once they saw off the four men who left after thanking them for the meal. They couldn’t go anywhere until Mouru replenished his stamina a little more.

Mouru continued to sleep like the dead in the same makeshift bed under the tree. He didn't even twitch when Unen accidentally dropped an empty kettle on the ground beside him.

Ori shook him awake around the time the sun began to set.

Mouru's eyes opened with a look that could kill. He let out a grudging sigh that sounded as if it had crawled up from the depths of hell, and uttered but a single word demanding libations, "Tea."

Irena, who had been pouring herself a second cup's worth of tea, prepped a cup for him alongside hers with a dry smile.

"Oh, don't pour the water into my cup until it cools down some more. Dump out some of the water. Look at me, hey? Do I look like I can hold something that heavy?" he complained. "That's it, reduce it to the size of a single gulp. Huh? Of course that's not all I'm having. How would that be enough? You'll be serving me seconds and thirds, obviously."

"AGH! Quit your complaining!" Irena snapped, brandishing the kettle.

"If you don't like my instructions, you're welcome to hold the cup to my lips…" Mouru offered with a cool smile.

Irena's agitation visibly switched to flustered as she turned her face away from him.

"*Ah*, I changed my mind. Don't bother. Ori, you help me drink it."

"Don't you love having women nurse you back to health?" Ori pointed out.

"I'd take you any day over a woman with a vein bulging out of her forehead."

"You should say that after you take a good look at the vein bulging out of *my* forehead at the prospect of caring for you," Ori retorted.

What in the world had caused his silence and sullenness from before? Unen softly sighed in relief upon seeing Mouru return to his old ways.

***

EVEN after they watched several groups of travelers pass them by on the main road, and it was nearing the time they had to get moving to reach the next

town before dark, Mouru still didn't have the strength to move.

Staring down at Mouru leaning weakly against the bags, Ori suggested, "Want me to put you on the horse…?"

"Won't do me any good. I can't sit up," Mouru answered with an unusually grim face.

His partner spared him no sympathy though. "I said I'd put you on the horse. Like this." Ori acted out laying Mouru sideways on the horse's back before making a half-baked attempt at reassurance, "You won't fall over if you're on your stomach."

"No, please, *don't*. That really, really HURTS. My face would hit the horse's flank with every jostling step and his backbone would dig right into my ribs. I'd have bruises for days."

From the sound of it, Mouru had experienced that method of travel before.

Unen pressed her lips together. Mouru had been reduced to this state because she had slipped into the river. She didn't want to put him through such a miserable ride after he had sacrificed his own health to save her life.

She walked over to Ori, who was swiftly preparing the horse to carry Mouru and said, "Wait." Then she crouched in front of Mouru and asked him, "Okay, what position works for you then?"

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"…I am so sorry."

"You aren't the one who has to apologize," Ori responded, untroubled by what stoked Unen's guilty conscience and led her to shrink into herself beside him. Mouru's hands hung limply from Ori's shoulders.

Asking for Mouru's opinion had resulted in Ori agreeing to carry him on his back till the next town.

"Thanks, Ori. A friend who helps you in your time of need is a friend indeed."

"I wish you'd let me think that about you sometime," Ori grumbled, hiking Mouru's slipping body further up his back.

Now entrusted with leading the horse, Irena giggled as she watched the two men argue. “You can say whatever you want, but when it comes down to it, you’re great at looking after others, Ori. Do you have a younger brother or sister?”

“Ah, no—”

“He has one younger sister,” Mouru answered over Ori’s hesitance, amused. He raised his voice to a falsetto and teased, “Isn’t that right, big brother?”

“Shut your trap,” Ori snarled and violently shook him.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, owwww! That hurts! Be gentler with my poor, weak, and injured body…”

Ori halted in his tracks at almost the same time Mouru abruptly stopped talking. Irena handed Unen the reins and lined up next to Ori.

Four men were standing in the thicket down the sunset-dyed road in front of them.

“…Do you recognize them?” Mouru asked softly.

Ori nodded ever so slightly. “They’re the highwaymen knockoffs we encountered on the way to the capital.”

“Looks like they’ve hired some local thugs to join in the fun.”

Overhearing them, Irena openly frowned. “That pretty boy still hasn’t given up yet?”

“Nah, this is most likely what you call ‘trying to settle the score,’” Unen supplied. The other three tiredly groaned in understanding.

Unen could practically *see* the four men who helped save her from the river spreading the tale around town as a good bar story. No doubt the other three were imagining the same scene.

But was it possible for these petty highwaymen to learn that the spiteful group that’d given them hell was only made of four, two of which were girls, and the mage was out of commission, and decide to *not* set an ambush for them? Of course not.

The man with the most garish beard of the four squared his shoulders and dropped a provoking line just like Unen thought he would, “Yo, I’ve been waiting for you to crawl back here.”

“Yer not gonna say ya forgot our mugs, are ya?”

“We were on the brink of death thanks to you!”

“Darn, you didn’t die,” Mouru quipped.

The entire group of highwaymen sharply inhaled, their faces all turning a magnificent shade of scarlet.

“You bastard!”

“I’ll beat the living daylights outta ya!”

Ori’s sigh shook the bloodlust permeating the air. “Don’t taunt them when you can’t do anything to help out.”

“I’ll try not to next time,” Mouru vaguely promised.

Irena tossed a wry grin at their awkwardly positioned conversation beside her and took a half step forward. At the same time, Ori laid Mouru on top of the bags on the horse’s back.

“Back up a little,” Ori said to Unen.

Leaving the horse to her, Ori drew his sword. In front of him, Irena was already in position with her unsheathed sword.

Unen did as she was told and carefully backed up a good distance with the horse so as to not hinder her guards. Mouru moaned with the horse’s every step, his head and limbs limply bouncing on top of the luggage.

Unen couldn’t restrain her sigh at the sorry state of the “master mage with incredible powers”.

“I think you should work out more, Mouru,” Unen remarked despite the situation, using the same line Irena always lectured her with.

Mouru’s composed voice came from the right side of the horse where his head dangled. “Don’t have to. I’ve got Ori for that.”

Feeling like she could just *imagine* Mouru’s arrogant gaze from his tone of

voice gave Unen the urge to yank on the feet drooping in front of her.

Down the road, Irena and Ori were battling two enemies each.

One of the men snuck behind Irena, only to be hit with a surprise blow when she expertly spun around in a circle, slicing as if she had been waiting for him. He dropped his sword as blood gushed from his arm. The other man, who had looked down on her for being a woman, rushed to attack, but it was already too late for him. He had to defend from Irena's forward counterattack and found himself in a stalemate.

Meanwhile, Ori's opponents were using the full advantage of their numbers. Ori had his hands full just evading the constant lunges and beating off the attacks assailing him from multiple directions.

Feeling high on what he perceived to be an overwhelming advantage, the man on the right pushed off his right foot to lunge at Ori, thrusting his sword forward. Ori promptly spun on his foot, taking a few steps outward to the right, letting the thrust pierce through empty air to his left. Now the other opponent on the left couldn't attack because his ally was in the way.

Without pausing, Ori hoisted his sword up with both hands and sliced through the shoulder of the man in front of him faster than his ally could circle around.

Shrieks pierced the air.

"You know how Ori often says, 'knowledge is power. And great, unnecessary power draws equally great disaster to it'? That's like a precept in our village, but there's actually more to it," Mouru said to Unen in an uncharacteristically quiet voice.

"There's more?"

"Yes, more." He paused for a moment to formally think over his words, and leveled his tone, "'And those with great power must take an equal level of responsibility,' or so it goes."

Hereh's nostalgic voice rushed back to Unen.

"Responsibility of equal level comes to those with power. I will fulfill my job as a doctor."

“I mustn’t run away from this disaster. Even if it means…losing our peaceful life.”

Hereh said that when he left the forest where he lived in hiding, and brought Unen out with him.

The shrill sound of steel grazing steel brought Unen back to reality.

The third scream of the evening shook the mad red skies.

“So when we heard Hereh had raised you, we were both annoyed at how it’d complicate things. But we were a little happy at the same time.”

Mouru’s voice ever so slightly tickled her ears.

Not sure how to respond, she silently turned her eyes on the road ahead.

Ori’s sword flashed in the dusk and sent the last thug’s sword flying. The four highwaymen scuttled away, leaving curses and threats behind them.

The first star of the evening peacefully twinkled in the eastern sky that was tinged dark-blue.

Chapter 23: A New Journey

“CARE to repeat that?! You’ll be working in not only the royal capital, but at the castle at that?! As a scholar’s assistant?!” Milosh’s overwrought voice resounded through the room.

After safely returning to Yezero, Unen gathered Milosh, Zola, and Simon in the living room following the clinic’s morning hours to share the news about her new job. She had the three of them sit around the table as they rejoiced over her return, and handed Milosh the official missive from the king…only to have him question it.

“Is this missive real? Sure you aren’t being tricked?”

Unen made a strained smile from where she stood right beside his chair and answered, “It’s real.” She looked in turn to Irena at her side, then to Ori and Mouru leaning against the wall, seeking their support. “Right?”

Glancing at Unen and her three friends nodding together, Milosh peered back down at the sheep parchment in his hands. “Hold on, let me read it closely. There might be some proviso hidden in the teensiest of letters that’ll allow them to make you do some questionable work in some scary dungeon or give them permission to sell you off…” he grumbled, running his eyes over every corner of the parchment.

Zola snatched the missive out of his hands from the seat opposite of him. “Oh come on, I can read this too.” She took a few minutes to look it over. “I don’t see anything particularly out of the ordinary included in it.”

“Lemme read it again.”

Ignoring Milosh as he snatched the missive back, Zola looked up at Unen with a big smile. “Good for you, Unen. You’ve taken one step closer to your dream.”

“Yeah.” Unen gave a big nod.

Right in front of her, Milosh had finally been convinced of its legitimacy at

last, and held the missive over his head as he was overcome by emotion. “Is it real?! It’s real, all right! I see. I see. This is amazing!” Then his face abruptly turned skeptical again. “No, wait.”

“Wait for what?” Zola’s calm voice promptly prodded her husband.

Milosh pointed at a corner of the missive with his brow furrowed, his expression turning grim. “The date is from eight days ago.”

“Yeah, because I signed it at the castle on that day.”

“Does that mean your contract has started already?”

“Yup. So I won’t be able to stay here for long.”

Since Mouru had collapsed from exhaustion after saving Unen from the river, their journey back from the castle had taken two more days than their trip there.

“When do you plan to leave?” Zola asked.

“I was thinking I’d like to finish packing tomorrow and leave the morning after,” Unen began.

As Unen was about to say more, Milosh jumped to his feet and shouted, “We can’t just sit around then!”

“What’s wrong, darling?”

“We have to prepare to give her a send-off party! Do you want to send our adorable daughter off with just a hug and kiss goodbye?! I’m going to run over to Bernard’s place real quick! Go let your father know in the meantime!”

Bernard was the heir to the butcher shop located in the western town square, while Zola’s father was the town’s vintner.

“I plan to be back in time for the afternoon patients, but if I don’t make it back, Simon, you get started by recording their medical histories for me!” Barely finishing that sentence, Milosh urged, “Let’s go!” and rushed out of the living room, dragging Zola with him by the hand.

Left behind, the five youngsters simply stared thunderstruck at the door they flew out of.

“Wow, your dad acts fast,” Irena commented, impressed.

Simon’s disgruntled voice came in fast over hers, “He just wants to drink and let loose.”

“You know that’s not true,” Irena flatly rejoined. “He’s ecstatic and proud that Unen’s going to work at the castle, but he’s definitely feeling lonely to see her go far away. I feel the same exact way, and I know your mom and dad must have it a thousand times harder than I do. Maybe he can’t move on unless he sees her off with a bang… Doesn’t that go for you too, Simon?”

Flustered at the direct question, Simon’s eyes darted around the room and forked the conversation onto Ori and Mouru instead. “Enough about me. Why are you two going with her?”

Though Mouru cocked a skeptical eyebrow at him, he generously accepted the reins Simon had tossed at him. “Why would I let such a glorious job as the King’s Mage slip out from under my nose?”

“I bet you’ve got some wicked schemes brewing.”

It was foolish to expect a sincere admission from someone who was truly scheming evil plots.

Sure enough, a ridiculing smile curled its way onto Mouru’s lips. “Be my guest and be content with honest poverty if you think aiming for success in life is evil,” he scoffed.

“I meant you’re scheming evil things toward Unen. Aren’t you guys after Hereh?” Simon snapped, holding his ground.

Mouru’s eyes narrowed on Simon even as he continued smirking. “I understand why the parents who raised her would worry, but you? Not so much. Seriously, between you and this girl right here, everyone around Unen is overprotective.”

Irena suddenly started waving her hands in front of her in a panic. Wondering what was wrong, Unen opened her mouth to ask Irena when Simon loudly snorted.

“Do I need to have a reason to worry about Unen, my best friend and little

sister? Do you not care about others without a special reason?”

Mouru’s mood turned sour at having someone challenge him head-on. He grimaced as if displeased and turned away from Simon.

***

MILOSH and Zola returned just before their afternoon appointments. They both insisted to Unen, “You don’t have to help out today,” and left with Simon to man the clinic at the front of the house.

“Then, I’ll head home too. See you tomorrow,” Irena said with a smile, reaching for the back door’s handle.

“Take care,” Mouru replied, waving his right hand.

“What? You aren’t coming to the farewell party tomorrow?”

“Neither Ori nor myself are shameless enough to crash a gathering of close friends and family who are seeing off a loved one.”

At hearing Mouru’s unusually quiet response, Irena’s eyes went round and wide until the whites showed. Then she pursed her lips and dramatically intoned, “Now that’s a big fat lie!”

A second later, she loudly laughed, “Just kidding. To be honest, my opinion about you being shady hasn’t changed much… How could it when you two never share anything about yourselves?” she said, shrugging with a teasing smile. “But I’ve come to think it’s okay to trust you—as of a second ago.”

“Just a second ago?!” Mouru’s voice cracked.

Irena scratched her head a little awkwardly. “You were in a terrible mood when Simon talked back to you, right? But you still didn’t bring up what we talked about in the castle courtyard. That’s what did it for me.”

“That’s all that did it for you? So flipping that around, you mean we never earned even the tiniest fraction of trust from you after all this time?” Mouru objected, baffled.

Ori furrowed his brow beside him. “You mean ‘I’ not ‘we.’”

“For that matter,” Mouru protested, “we at the very least know the

difference between what should and shouldn't be said! So rude!"

"Again, 'I.'"

Mouru pretended he didn't see Ori's glower or hear his retorts. Leaving them to their bickering, Unen glanced up at Irena.

"Irena, what did you talk about in the courtyard?"

"Um, about that…" Irena's eyes examined the ceiling for a bit, before she shook her head hard to jolt herself into action. "We talked about how much Simon, me, and everyone loves you, Unen!"

Irena's sunny smile stole Unen's breath for a second. Slightly delayed, a burning heat filled the inside of her chest like a roaring fire. It was almost as if she had swallowed a piece of the sun itself.

Irena pulled the red-faced, frozen Unen into a tight hug for a moment before straightening back up again. "See you tomorrow, Unen! Take it easy today! Good night!"

Once Irena's back had disappeared down the street, Mouru turned to Ori. "Okay, I think it's time for us to return to the inn."

"Yeah."

They both stepped out onto the road toward the town center, facing the opposite direction of Irena.

A gust of wind blew past the empty space where they had been standing beside Unen all this time…

"See you later. Give everyone our best wishes. We'll come to get you the morning after tomorrow."

A beat of silence.

"Ah, okay. Um, well, erm…thank you for everything! I look forward to the start of our next journey together!" Unen's reply accidentally came out delayed, and panic caused her to thank them in a loud voice.

Mouru and Ori both blinked.

After a slight pause, they shared a happy look, and said together, "Same

here,” their lips turning up into smiles.

Afterword

HELLO, I'm *Dawn of the Mapmaker*'s author, Akira Nashiki.

My love of reading awoke when I came across Jules Verne as a child, and as someone who grew up consuming literature translated from English into Japanese, I'm deeply moved to have my novel cross the ocean into your hands like this.

Thank you very much for picking up my novel!

The original plot for this story was based on a key image: a duo made up of a swordsman and a mage unveil the world's secrets at the end of their journey.

A dynamic duo with completely different personalities, skills, and area of expertise—this is the golden combo you will often find in mysteries, such as the characters Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson, or Richard Jury and Melrose Plant. As someone who loves buddy stories, I just had to make a similarly fascinating pair play a major role in my own novel.

And that is how Swordsman Ori and Mage Mouru came to life. But as I was working out the story's plot, the number of secrets that needed to be kept from the reader continued to grow! Why were the two men on a journey in the first place? How did they come to learn there were even such mysteries and secrets for them to unveil? Yes, they had ended up *too* closely tied to the core of the story.

Thinking there needed to be someone to connect this duo to the reader, I created the heroine Unen. I had her represent an ordinary person to pull the reader, who would be clueless about her world, into it.

But, as you know, she also has secrets she can't divulge to anyone. Intuitive readers may have picked up on several hints in the strange things Unen says before her secrets are revealed by the narrative in the third arc. Stories where you are writing from the main character's point of view are very difficult to write when your character is continually lying, so I was very relieved and

exhilarated when I finished writing the key scene that exposes her lies.

Unen's secret and Ori and Mouru's goal have become clear, allowing the stage to switch completely over to the Royal Capital City of Kujh.

Serving as attendants for the princess on her trip to escape the summer heat, Unen comes across a clue on the whereabouts of her missing teacher Hereh in the plateau town of Pavarna, but things are never that easy…

I hope you will enjoy the continuation of their adventure as the distance between Unen, Ori, and Mouru steadily decreases, confronting one another at times, and working together at times too.

See you in volume 2!

-Akira Nashiki



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