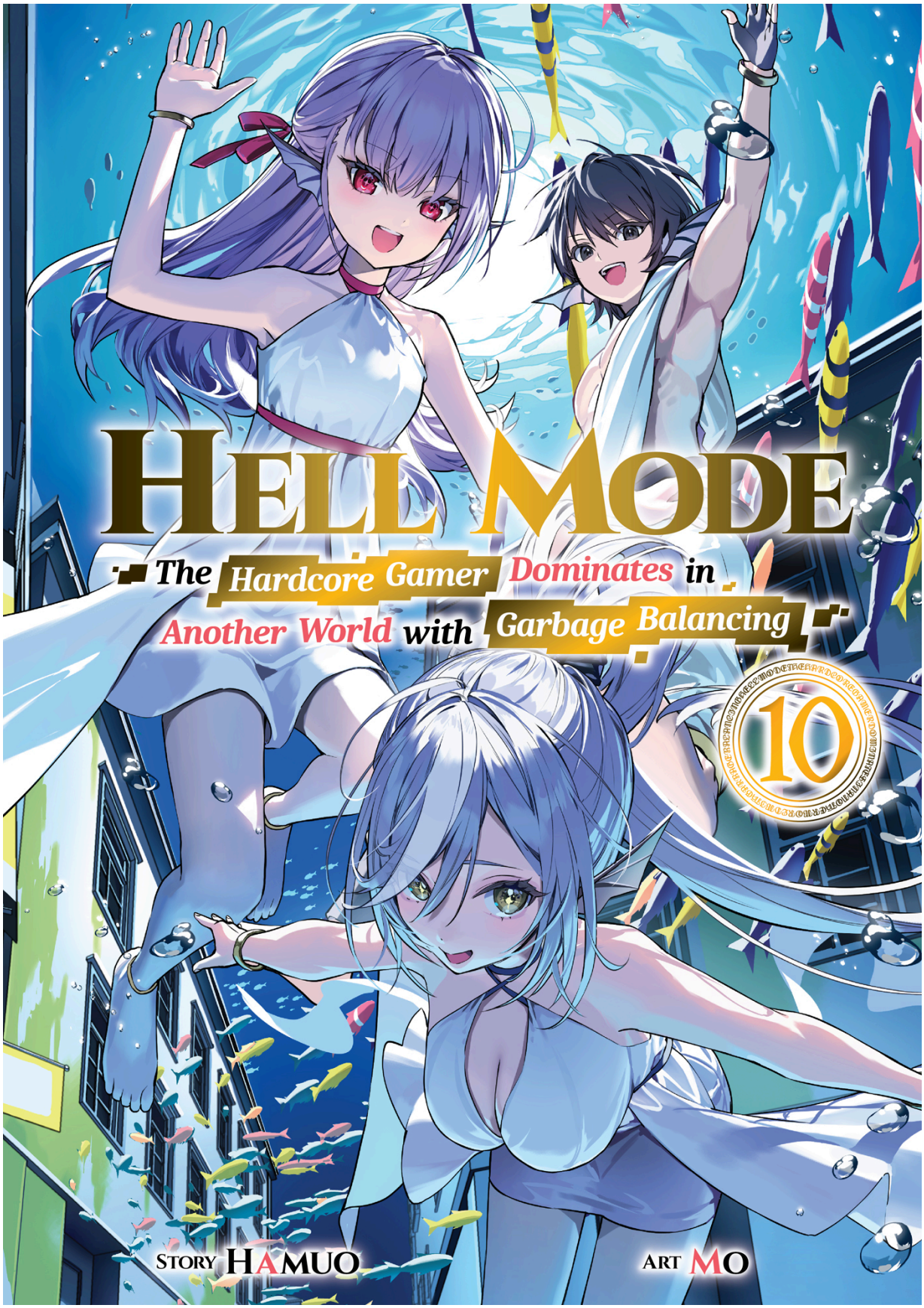
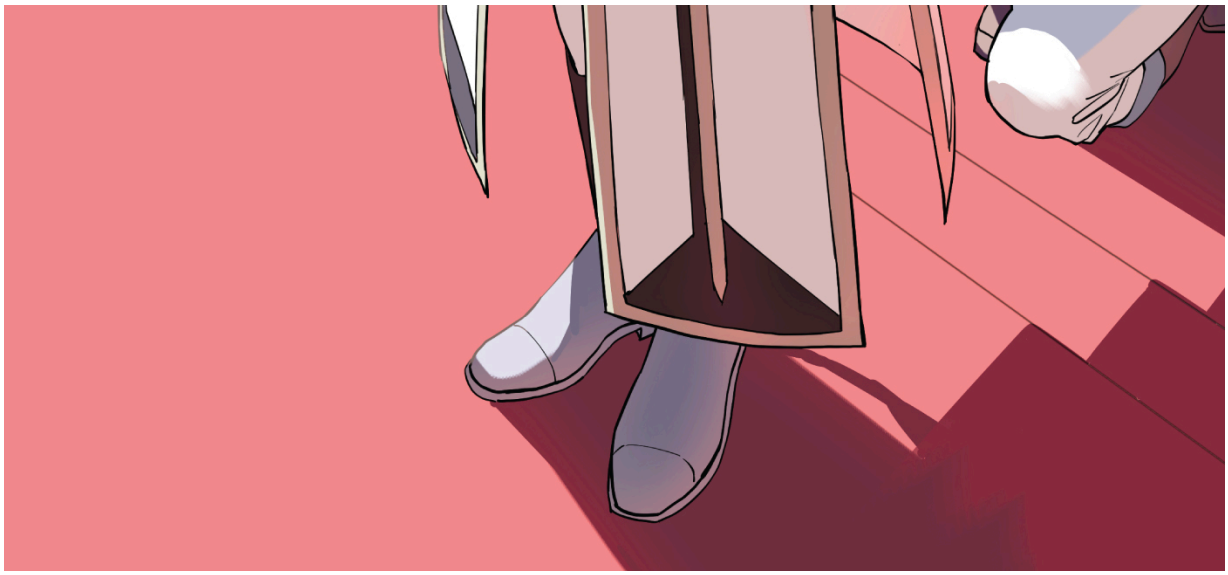

HELL MODE
The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing
10
STORY HAMUO
ART MO


HELL MODE
The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing
10
STORY HAMUO
ART MO


LASTLY, KEEL VON CARNEL. STEP FORWARD.
YES, YOUR EXCELLENCY.
HE STEPPED TOWARD THE THRONE, AND THE NOBLES BEGAN TO WHISPER MORE FURIOUSLY THAN EVER BEFORE.






PRINCESS
RAPSONIL




WORLD MAP
The Forgotten Continent
The Rank S Dungeon
(the Tower of Tribulation)
The Empire of Baukis
Donghao, the
Imperial Capital
Fortenia, the Capital City
Rohzenheim
The Central Continent
Beltias, the
Imperial Capital
The Empire of Giamut
The Kingdom of Ratash
The Holy Land of
Elmahl
Teomenia, the
Capital City
Fabraaze
Miopolka,
a Prostian Province
Patlanta, the
Imperial Capital
Kingdom of
Crevelle
Albahal,
a Country of Beastkin
Barossa, the
Royal Capital
Kingdom of
Calvarna
Brysen,
a Country of Beastkin
The Prostia Empire
on the Ocean Floor
Republic of
Carlonea
The Garlesian Continent
The Galiatan Continent

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Chapter 1: Special Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

September came to a close, and Allen was about to turn sixteen. Beast Crown Prince Beku's revolt in Albahal had been quickly suppressed, but he had stolen the Symbol of the Beast King and fled. The Symbol was a set of orichalcum knuckles and armor, along with the Holy Orb of Quatro, and inheriting these items officially marked one as the ruler of Albahal.

There were reports that some merfolk had fled with Beku, leading to Allen's assumption that they had escaped to the Prostia Empire. The Symbol of the Beast King was necessary for either Beast Prince Zeu or Beast Princess Shia to inherit the throne, and so, the No-life Gamers had decided to go to Prostia.

However, only merfolk were permitted to enter the empire, and it was difficult for outsiders to receive visas. A visa was vital, as it contained the Blessing of Aqua, the Goddess of Water, and allowed those who lived on the surface to breathe underwater, where the Prostia Empire was located.

Beast Princess Shia and the Gamers had headed for the Crevelle Kingdom, a nation of merfolk on the Galiatan Continent. This kingdom, which had been founded to allow the merfolk to trade with those above the water, was dependent on the empire and could only issue visas without the Blessing of Aqua. As everyone racked their brains to find a solution to that problem, Allen suddenly revealed that the Awakened Ability of his Fish A Summon allowed one to change their appearance as they pleased and transformed into a merfolk right in front of everyone's eyes. Those who had gathered in the Crevelle audience room were stunned speechless.

"Allen, does that change your appearance and body composition?" Cecil asked.

“Yep! Take a look at my streamlined body!” Allen replied.

He struck a pose where one could practically hear a cool sound effect as he showed off his merfolk form, and Meruru clapped, her eyes sparkling.

“Awesome! That’s so cool!” she cried.

“That’s right! It’s very cool!” Allen replied proudly.





He struck a few more poses to show off before Cecil broke the silence.

"A-Allen, can you revert to your normal form?" she asked gingerly.

"At most, the effect lasts up to twenty-four hours," Allen answered. "Don't worry. I've already tested everything out."

In truth, this had been his plan for quite a while—ever since Shia had reported that Crevelle was officially unable to issue visas for Prostia. Allen had played a ton of games before coming to this world, and he had encountered regions that were unable to be reached via foot or horseback. Often, one required a ship, plane, or other special method of transportation to head to these restricted areas, or they needed to visit another location that would provide them with the tools to finally enter said area.

Because Allen had retained his memories from his past life, he had expected a roadblock to his travels and asked Captain Rarappa of the Magus Smith squad to create a tool that allowed the user to breathe underwater. But Rarappa had replied that even if the creation of such a tool were possible, the clothing they wore would need to be completely waterproof and able to endure the extreme water pressure, and would need to be coupled with a tool that provided the wearer with oxygen. While that would theoretically enable the party to wade through the waters, the unusual clothing and curiously large magic tools on their backs would draw the suspicion of the merfolk and thus hinder their activities. It was then that the Summoner had recalled his Fish A's Awakened Ability, Mimic.

Effects of Awakened Ability Mimic

- The smoke expelled by this Ability envelops its target and allows them to take on the form of either a monster no higher than Rank A or a human.
- The smoke can cover a radius of up to one kilometer, and anyone within this range can be affected by Mimic.
- Allen can choose who will be affected by Mimic, such as selecting one person within range.
- Users can only mimic things that Allen has seen before.

- Mimic lasts up to 24 hours but can be undone before the effect wears off.
- Those affected by Mimic can replicate the look and characteristics of whatever they are taking the form of.

Allen had predicted that he would run into this situation one day and had continued to test out Awakened Abilities on himself or his Summons. He had found that Mimic could turn him into not only humans but also merfolk, beastkin, elves, dark elves, and even the three demons he had faced in the battle of Rohzenheim, including Glaster. In any case, this power would allow Allen and his party to enter Prostia with a visa from Crevelle alone.

"How long will it take to issue visas for us?" Allen asked as he turned to the Crevelle king.

I'd like it as soon as possible, please, he wished. The Crevelle king had already promised that the visas would be issued, and Allen did not want him to go back on his word just because the Summoner could transform into a merfolk.

"I-Indeed, I shall issue them right away," the king answered. He was clearly taken aback, but he still honored his oath.

"Thank you," Allen replied.

"O-Of course," the king said with a nod.

The Summoner, still in his merfolk form, quietly stared at the king. Though Crevelle was under the rule of Prostia, a king was still a king—it was undoubtedly insolent for Allen to be staring so much, but he believed his actions paled in comparison to the request that he would soon make.

"I-Is something the matter?" the king inquired.

"Actually, I'd like to make another request," Allen said.

"I see... You're a hero who saved our citizens, so I shall accommodate you however possible. What might your request be?"

"Would you please allow us to enter Prostia as ambassadors from Crevelle?"

"Ah, I see..." Shia murmured.

The Beast Princess immediately understood why Allen was so fixated on entering through Crevelle. Just getting into Prostia did not

mean that they could easily search for Crown Prince Beku. If Prostia was truly lending its aid to Beku, the entire empire would do its utmost to protect him. Perhaps a faction of the empire was lending him support unbeknownst to the empire and its wishes, but even so, it implied that Beku's aid wielded impressive power and influence. If that were the case, a simple visa would do very little to aid their search.

"You would like us to enter Prostia as messengers of the Crevelle royal family," Sophie echoed, reaching the same conclusion as Shia. "Is that not so, Lord Allen?"

"That's right," Allen replied, nodding.

"An ambassador?" Cecil muttered wearily. "It's always been on my mind, but how could you make such audacious requests?"

Don't make me out as some sort of villain, Cecil. And this isn't gonna be the only request that I make.

"Oh, and as an ambassador, I would like you to allow me to wield full authority," Allen added.

"What?! F-Full authority?!" the king cried.

His Majesty stood up in shock, knocking over the chair behind him with a loud clatter. Even the princess, who had remained silent, was astonished by her father's astonishment.

"F-Father?" Princess Carmine gasped.

"Is it possible?" Allen asked. "I have no intention of troubling the Crevelle Kingdom. I hope that you will consider the idea."

Allen did his best to calm the king, but the royal only grew more confused. Was the Summoner in his right mind? In short, Allen wanted to become the special ambassador plenipotentiary. This role allowed him to hold the same level of power as the king, albeit solely for diplomatic affairs. While the king did not have the faintest clue what the No-life Gamers were up to, could he truly trust Allen, who claimed he did not wish to trouble the kingdom?

Allen was capable of controlling massive bees the size of dragons and had eradicated tens of thousands of daemonic incarnations and monsters. He had fought a duel against the Beast King in front of a group of representatives of nearly a hundred nations, and during it, he had eviscerated the arena. Clearly, the boy wielded immense

power, but his use of it was completely unpredictable.

"Hmm..." the king groaned as he tried to overcome his shock.

"The shadow of unrest looms over the Prostia Empire," Allen said. "Should anything occur, my army shall provide its full support."

Crevelle's king worked to organize the series of events within his mind. The Prostia Empire had tried to use its army to invade the conference that would decide whether the Beast Crown Prince would claim the Albahalan throne. In fact, it seemed like Prostia had assisted in seizing the Symbol of the Beast King, so there was no doubt that Albahal would try to pin the blame on the empire.

Even if some shady group of individuals had lent their aid to Beku, simply getting rid of them would not put an end to this ordeal. From Albahal's point of view, merely allowing these individuals to attack was an act of aggression by Prostia. It was not out of the ordinary for this sort of issue to escalate into a full-blown war between the involved nations.

The king recalled the message he had received via magic tool from Albahal hours ago. The purpose of it had been to discern whether Crevelle had aided Beku instead of Prostia. When merfolk were mentioned, those on the surface immediately deemed Crevelle, the land of merfolk, the primary suspect. Albahal was aggressively searching for the person who had ruined the royal castle and hindered their choosing of an heir. Their rage might ultimately have been pointed at Prostia, but the king of Crevelle desperately wished for his kingdom to be out of the line of fire.

The monarch knew that Beast Princess Shia, who was not just connected to the royal family but had a direct claim to the throne, was in the room with him. It was in his best interest to do more than simply express that Crevelle held no animosity; cooperating with her to retrieve the Symbol of the Beast King would likely prove more beneficial to Crevelle than maintaining the status quo of being under Prostia's rule. The king closed his eyes as a myriad of options flooded his mind.

"You would like to be the special ambassador plenipotentiary, would you?" the king inquired.

"Correct," Allen replied.

After mulling over his decision for several moments, the monarch opened his mouth once more to state his decision. But just then, his daughter, the princess, intervened.

"Why not allow it?" she asked. "I shall also head to the Prostia Empire."

"What?! Carmine!" the king cried. He widened his eyes and whirled to face his daughter, who sat next to him.

Allen also gazed at the princess when she jumped into the conversation. *Oh? Is she coming to our defense?* he thought. Carmine then stood up, walked toward Allen, and turned around to face her father.

"The Church of Gushara was created by the Demon Lord Army," she said. "We not only failed to notice that this religion worshipped the Daemon God and allowed them to do as they pleased, which led to the Galiatan Continent being threatened, but we also weakened faith toward the great Lady Aqua, the Goddess of Water, who protects us merfolk. For that, we must take responsibility as the Crevelle royal family. I believe that explaining as much to our suzerain, the Prostia Empire, is our nation's duty. And should we visit the empire for this purpose, if I were to go instead of you, father, dispatching a special ambassador plenipotentiary as well would make much sense."

"Indeed. You've got a point..." the king mused.

Hmm, it'd be useful if the princess came along with us. We'd be able to disguise ourselves better. Allen's plan was to become the ambassador and utilize his authority to fulfill his goal. Sure, they might stand out because they lacked the common sense and knowledge of merfolk culture, but if he could retrieve the Symbol of the Beast King from Beku, Allen cared very little about any potential consequences. However, if Carmine tagged along, the group could act more naturally.

"We also must hasten our discussions with His Grace Doresskarei," Carmine added.

Who?

"Um..." Allen started. He was unfamiliar with the name and cut into the conversation with a puzzled expression.

"Ah, you don't know of him, do you, Sir Allen?" Carmine replied. "Duke Doresskarei is a noble of the Prostia Empire and my future husband. We've been discussing plans for him to marry into the Crevelle royal family."

In divulging her situation, the princess had revealed that as a kingdom dependent upon Prostia, Crevelle's next monarch was obligated to marry Prostia's royalty or titled nobility. Since the only child of the Crevelle royal family was Carmine, she had to marry a man from Prostia, who would become the next king.

Her husband-to-be was Duke Doresskarei, but while they had begun talks of marriage, the Gushara ordeal had forced the Crevelle royal family to temporarily flee from the royal capital alongside the citizens. As a result, the marriage discussions had come to a screeching halt.

"I believe we must report back to His Imperial Majesty sooner or later," Carmine reasoned. "And if I join Sir Allen, I can investigate whether the empire was involved in the Albahal revolt. That information will allow us to solidify our future actions as a kingdom."

"You're quite right," the Crevelle king relented. He gave a firm nod and turned to Allen. "Very well. As the princess's attendant, I declare you special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary."

Nice. This went well.

Allen remained on his feet as he nodded in response. "Thank you."

For a split second, the king looked slightly odd, but he quickly whirled around and called for one of his guards.

"Knight Captain Iwanam, please step forward."

A merfolk knight stepped out from behind the king before kneeling behind Princess Carmine.

"I appoint you the princess's guard," the king ordered. "You are the oldest and wisest among the knights, thus I'd like you to fill this role. Please protect and support Carmine."

"Your wish is my command," the knight captain replied. "I, Iwanam, shall give my all to protecting Her Highness."

The older Knight Captain Iwanam gave a deep bow. *Ooh, this is rare. We don't get a lot of middle-aged guys.* Allen's party was made

up of young people. When they visited various royals, people often looked surprised by their youth or were suspicious of their age. It could certainly happen again, but if several middle-aged Crevelle knights were tagging along, Allen felt like it would solidify their credibility and believability. This was convenient.

Since he was called the wisest, I might as well ask him about Prostia's customs and traditions on our way there. And so, the No-life Gamers became ambassadors who were to head to Prostia with Princess Carmine.

After five days of preparations, they were finally ready to head to the underwater empire. It had taken a lot longer than Allen had expected, but Crevelle had to pack after contacting Prostia and receiving a reply; the kingdom was undoubtedly working as fast as it possibly could. One of the factors that had made that clear was the colossal ship docked right in front of Allen's eyes. Countless oars that would propel the vessel forward stuck out from the sides, and other than the fact that they were located well above the water's surface, it looked like a common ship.

Hmm, a ship this big must carry a lot of supplies. This hundred-meter-long vessel was responsible for carrying offerings from Crevelle to Prostia, along with trade goods that the kingdom had received from those on the surface. Crevelle was solely responsible for trading with countries on land for the Prostia Empire.

If the empire required any resources from above the water, it first sold its own ores and precious metals to the kingdom, which in turn sold or traded them to terrestrial nations. The empire then had the kingdom use some of those profits to purchase resources, which were later delivered to the empire. The Crevelle Kingdom would purchase items in the empire's stead, sending them off several times a year.

But the Crevelle royal capital was fairly close to the port. Even when the daemonic incarnations were running amok, the king didn't make any attempt to flee across the ocean. When the believers of the Church of Gushara in Crevelle had turned into daemonic incarnations and attacked the citizens, the king had strangely refused to head out to sea.

Allen had met the citizens of Crevelle and Shia's beastkin squad in the inland region of the Galiatan Continent. The citizens fleeing the Crevelle royal capital did not represent the entire population, but there had still been a couple tens of thousands of people seeking refuge. Perhaps the citizens had not been able to board the docked ship, but even so, surely they, as merfolk, could have escaped into the sea. Water was no obstacle to them. *But the sea monsters are a cause for concern.* Ultimately, the kingdom had prioritized saving as many citizens as possible. Therefore, they had chosen to fight in the rear with the assistance of Shia's beastkin.

But if Shia wasn't there, the merfolk might not have been able to hold the line until we arrived. That reminds me, Shia apparently headed for Galiat because of some sort of divination, just like Zeu did once. Is some sort of God of Fate involved here? Both Zeu and Shia had received prophecies about their future from Beast Astrologist Temi, a member of the Ten Heroic Beasts and a royal advisor. Those words had propelled the two royals to act.

If Zeu had not been told that he would become the Beast King in the future, he would never have gone to challenge the Rank S dungeon. Likewise, had Shia not been informed that the trial given to her would take her to the Union's continent, she would never have run into the merfolk leaving the royal capital to escape the daemonic incarnations. Allen would never have met Shia either.

Temi's divination had brought Shia and Allen together. *Maybe one of the main deities of this world, the God of Fate, put together an elaborate quest and we were forced into it—along with Beast Prince Zeu—through Temi.*

"There you are, Allen. We're about to head out," a merfolk said. Her body was mottled with brown and black, resembling her usual beastkin form.

"Already? Got it," Allen replied. "Will the Country of Beastkin be all right, Shia?"

"According to Rudo's report, they can hold for a while."

For the past five days, the Beast Princess had gone through Rudo to check up on her home country. According to him, things in the royal capital and castle had settled down, and talks of preparing a

team to retrieve the Symbol of the Beast King from Beku had begun. Unfortunately, they had no means to track Beku down—they assumed that he had gone to either Crevelle or Prostia, but that would be a rather long and costly expedition. It was also difficult to act while Albahal was a part of the Five Continent Alliance, and green-lighting such an endeavor implied that they were considering leaving the Alliance. It would take a few more days of serious debate to finalize a decision.

Beastkin were generally short-tempered and eager to fight, and some ominously claimed that the blood of the merfolk was essential to purify the blood that had already been shed. As for Beku, three days after the revolt, he had been officially stripped of his title of crown prince and his claim to the throne. He had not even been present to defend himself.

"So, I guess we still don't know where Beku has gone," Allen said. Since the royal had been deprived of his title, Allen decided that there was no need to refer to him with one anymore.

"A few days before Beku...before my brother raided the castle, there were accounts that a large ship was docked on the eastern coast," Shia replied. "It disappeared the moment my brother fled."

"And we don't know where that ship went," Allen concluded.

"Besides, if we cast suspicion on our allied nations and invade with our army, it means we must leave the Alliance. Should that happen, we would struggle against the Demon Lord Army should they choose to attack, and if our forces were weakened before that, our position within the Garlesian Continent would be in danger. For that reason, many have concluded that we must approach this situation with the utmost care."

When the Demon Lord Army had invaded Rohzenheim and the Central Continent, the armies of the Five Continent Alliance had been joined by Beast Prince Zeu and the Ten Heroic Beasts. The allied forces had thus assumed that Albahal was finally opposing the Demon Lord Army and joining the war. If Albahal dared to attack Crevelle, a member of Galiat's Union and the representative for the current year, the worst-case scenario was the dismantling of the Alliance.

An idea popped into Allen's head. *Maybe if the suspicion were cast on the Crevelle Kingdom, our foes hoped it would confuse the Five Continent Alliance.* Currently, no one had a clue as to why Beku had stolen the Symbol of the Beast King, so Allen thought that it was important to carefully test any and all hypotheses.

"Then I'll tell the queen of Rohzenheim to be extremely cautious when dealing with Albahal," Allen said.

"That seems wise," Shia replied. "Oh? It looks like everyone is boarding."

Allen and Shia headed for the pier to board the large ship's tender. The Gamers had split into two groups and were awaiting the pair.

"Good luck. I'll do my best as the captain of the Special Attack Force," Krena said with gusto. She was in the team farther away from the pier, bidding the others farewell.

This time around, the Gamers were divided into two teams. Allen led one team, which consisted of Cecil, Sophie, Volmaar, Shia, Luke, and Pelomas. Their group would head for Prostia. Meanwhile, Keel led the other team, whose members were Krena, Dogora, Meruru, and Merus. They would remain on land and take charge of the floating island and the Allen Army while Allen was away.

"I'm counting on you, Krena," Allen said. "Lead the Allen Army. And Dogora, don't forget to level up."

Dogora gave a slight nod in response. Slung across his back was Kagutsuchi, Fire Goddess Freyja's divine vessel.

"Got it," he said.

He had not gotten to his max level yet, so he would need to hunt iron golems until he did. He was in Extra Mode now, and while his level cap was unknown, he had already reached Lvl. 96, surpassing Allen.

```
Name: Dogora
Age: 16
Blessing: Goddess of Fire (Mid), Absorbs Fire-type
```

Attacks
Class: Destroyer
Level: 96
HP: 8,249 + 5,000 (Blessing) + 4,800 (Super Fighting Soul)
MP: 3,791 + 5,000 + 2,400
Attack: 8,508 + 5,000 + 4,800
Endurance: 7,755 + 5,000 + 4,800
Agility: 5,865 + 5,000 + 4,800
Intelligence: 3,629 + 5,000 + 2,400
Luck: 5,680 + 5,000 + 4,800
Skills: Destroyer {5}, Super Full Might {5}, Super Explosion {5}, Super Peerless Slash {5}, Super Slaughter Strike {5}, Heart and Soul {3}, Super Fighting Soul {1}, Axe Mastery {6}, Dual Axe Mastery {3}, Shield Mastery {4}
XP: Approx 900,000,000,000/5,000,000,000,000

<u>Skill Levels</u>
Destroyer: 5
Super Full Might: 5
Super Explosion: 5
Super Peerless Slash: 5
Super Slaughter Strike: 5
Heart and Soul: 3

<u>Skill Experience</u>
Super Full Might: Approx 250,000/1,000,000
Super Explosion: Approx 200,000/1,000,000
Super Peerless Slash: Approx 200,000/1,000,000
Super Slaughter Strike: Approx 200,000/1,000,000
Heart and Soul: Approx 150,000/1,000,000

Equipment
Divine Vessel Kagutsuchi: +20,000 Attack
Orichalcum Greataxe: +12,000 Attack
Adamantite Armor: +6,000 Endurance
Ring 1: +5,000 Attack
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack
Necklace: +3,000 Attack

Name: Krena
Age: 15
Class: Sword Emperor
Level: 60
HP: 4,150 + 3,000
MP: 1,832 + 3,000
Attack: 4,150 + 3,000
Endurance: 3,968 + 3,000
Agility: 3,510 + 3,000
Intelligence: 2,250
Luck: 2,688 + 3,000
Extra Skill: Limit Break
Skills: Sword Emperor {6}, Slash {6}, Phoenix Smash {6}, Healing Blade {6}, Supreme Ruling Blade {6}, Valor {2}, Sword Mastery {6}

Equipment
Orichalcum Greatsword: +12,000 Attack
Adamantite Armor: +6,000 Endurance
Bracelet 1: +5,000 HP, +5,000 Endurance, halves Cooldown Time, +20% Attack Skill Damage
Ring 1: +5,000 Attack
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack
Necklace: +3,000 Attack

Name: Cecil Granvelle
Age: 16
Class: Wizardess King
Level: 60
HP: 2,470 + 2,400
MP: 3,974 + 2,400
Attack: 1,640
Endurance: 1,686
Agility: 3,382 + 2,400
Intelligence: 4,138 + 2,400
Luck: 2,541 + 2,400
Extra Skill: Petit Meteor
Skills: Wizardess King {6}, Fire {6}, Ice {6}, Thunder {6}, Light {6}, Abyss {2}, Sparring {4}|

Equipment
Rod of the Wizardess King: +4,000 Intelligence, +20% Magical Damage
Ancient Robe: +8,000 Endurance, Magical Damage Resistance (High)
Ring 1: +5,000 Intelligence
Ring 2: +5,000 Intelligence
Bracelet: +5,000 MP, +5,000 Intelligence, halves Cooldown Time, halves Magic Activation Time
Necklace: +3,000 Intelligence

Name: Keel von Carnel
Age: 16
Class: Saint King
Level: 60
HP: 2,740 + 2,400
MP: 4,100 + 2,400
Attack: 1,580

Endurance: 1,786
Agility: 2,893 + 2,400
Intelligence: 4,030 + 2,400
Luck: 3,634 + 2,400
Extra Skill: Drops of God
Skills: Saint King {6}, Healing {6}, Exorcism {6}, Purify {6}, Holy Wall {6}, Pray {2}, Sword Mastery {3}

Equipment
Rod of the Saint King: +4,000 Intelligence, +3,000 HP, +20% Healing
Vestment of the Saint King: +4,000 Endurance, Magical Damage Resistance (High), Curse Resistance (High)
Ring 1: +5,000 HP
Ring 2: +5,000 Endurance
Necklace: +3,000 HP, +3,000 Intelligence, halves Cooldown Time, doubles Healing Power

---

Name: Sophialohne
Age: 51
Blessing: God of Spirits
Class: Grand Spirit User
Level: 60
HP: 2,834 + 2,400
MP: 4,156 + 2,400
Attack: 1,933
Endurance: 1,719
Agility: 3,011 + 2,400
Intelligence: 4,243 + 2,400
Luck: 3,453 + 2,400
Extra Skill: Grand Spirit Manifestation
Skills: Spirit Manifestation {6}, Water {6}, Wind {6}, Earth {6}, Wood {6}, Bow Mastery {4}

Equipment
Rod of the Sovereign of Spirits: +6,000 MP, -10% MP Consumption
Spiritualist’s Cloak: +10,000 Endurance, +5,000 HP, +5,000 MP, Physical Damage Resistance (Mid), Magical Damage Resistance (Mid), Poison Resistance (Mid)
Ring 1: +5,000 MP
Ring 2: +5,000 Endurance
Necklace: +3,000 MP

Name: Meruru
Age: 16
Class: Talos King
Level: 60
HP: 3,199 + 2,400
MP: 3,570 + 2,400
Attack: 2,161 + 2,400
Endurance: 1,957 + 2,400
Agility: 1,571
Intelligence: 3,570 + 2,400
Luck: 2,522
Extra Skill: Union (Right Arm)
Skills: Talos King {6}, Flying Arm {6}, Oscillating Punch {6}, Freezing Shot {6}, Super Repair {6}, Sorcery Cannon {6}, Super Alloy {2}, Spear Mastery {3}, Shield Mastery {3}

Equipment
Claw Arm (Crystal)
Talos King’s Cloak: +6,000 Endurance, +3,000 MP, Physical Damage
Resistance (Mid)

Ring 1: +5,000 HP
Ring 2: +5,000 MP
Necklace: Magic Disc

Name: Volmaar
Age: 69
Class: Bow King
Level: 60
HP: 3,736 + 2,400
MP: 1,949
Attack: 3,965 + 2,400
Endurance: 2,960 + 2,400
Agility: 3,428 + 2,400
Intelligence: 1,566
Luck: 1,972 + 2,400
Extra Skill: Arrow of Light
Skills: Bow King {6}, Keen Sight {6}, Fire Dragon Shot {6}, Strongbow {6}, Power Shot {6}, Angled Shot {2} Bow Mastery {6}

<u>Equipment</u>
Adamantite Greatbow: +3,800 Attack
Garment of the Chief Protector: +4,000 Endurance, Breath Damage Resistance (Mid)
Ring 1: +5,000 HP
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack
Necklace: +3,000 Attack

Name: Shia van Albahal
Age: 16
Class: Beast Fist King
Level: 60
HP: 3,211 + 2,400

MP: 1,721
Attack: 3,640 + 2,400
Endurance: 3,211
Agility: 2,991 + 2,400
Intelligence: 1,485 + 2,400
Luck: 2,139 + 2,400
Extra Skill: Beast Mode
Skills: Beast Fist King {6}, Heavy Blow {6}, Instant Kill {6}, Throat Chop {6}, Pulverizing Strike {6}, Super Explosive Fist {2}, Sparring {6}, Fist Mastery {6}

Equipment
Adamantite Knuckles: +4,000 Attack
Adamantite Armor: +4,000 Endurance
Ring 1: +5,000 Attack
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack
Necklace: +3,000 Attack

Name: Luketod
Age: 16
Blessing: Sovereign of Spirits
Class: Dark Wizard
Level: 60
HP: 1,839
MP: 2,552 + 600
Attack: 1,067
Endurance: 1,067
Agility: 1,544 + 600
Intelligence: 2,902 + 600
Luck: 1,307
Extra Skill: Starvation Hell
Skills: Dark Wizard {6}, Fire {4}, Ice {4}, Mud {4},

Specter {1}, Dagger Mastery {4}

Equipment
Adamantite Dagger: +3,000 Attack
Giant Rat's Mantle: +3,000 Endurance, Poison Resistance (Mid)
Ring 1: +5,000 Intelligence
Ring 2: +5,000 MP
Necklace: +3,000 MP

Name: Pelomas
Age: 16
Class: Magnate
Level: 60
HP: 1,662 + 600
MP: 1,421
Attack: 948
Endurance: 1,185
Agility: 1,362
Intelligence: 1,866 + 600
Luck: 2,193 + 600
Extra Skill: Libra
Skills: Magnate {4}, Calculate {4}, Analyze {4}, Negotiate {4}, Youth {1}, Sword Mastery {4}

Equipment
Ancient Wood Abacus: +2,000 Attack, +1,500 Intelligence
Arrow Shark Cloak: +4,800 Endurance
Ring 1: +5,000 Endurance
Ring 2: +5,000 Agility
Necklace: +3,000 Endurance

Allen checked his grimoire to see his party members' Statuses.

Dogora's looking really reliable. The reason the two main attackers and Meruru, all three of whom used physical attacks, were staying on land was that it was unknown just how well they could fight underwater. If Meruru switched out her slates, she could attack or defend, making her very versatile, hence Allen had decided to put her on that team. The ones headed for Prostia were able to fight in cleverer ways. As for Merus, he was staying behind so that Allen could keep tabs on the situation above the water, and to use Summons if anything occurred. Allen glanced at him, and he nodded.

"You better have a balanced diet and eat well," Shia, who had transformed into a merfolk, said to Dogora, sounding as worried as usual.

"Yeah, I know," Dogora replied.

This time around, Dogora did not at all sound weary over the nagging. He gave an obedient nod as Allen and the others boarded the tender. When the small boat approached the massive ship, a rope ladder was lowered for the group, and they used it to climb aboard. Their sights were set on Prostia.

Chapter 2: The Voyage to the Prostia Empire

When Allen and the others got aboard the ship, they were guided to a decently lavish room. Allen sat on top of the table and looked around.

"The interior looks pretty normal," he remarked.

Hmm, is it normal to walk around the ship during the voyage? Allen wondered. He had flown on magic ships before, but this was his first time on a seafaring one. He had never been on a cruise in his previous life, but he had utilized ships to head to other continents in video games. Oftentimes, the player was encouraged to investigate the ship, where they would run into a variety of events.

"Awesome!" Luke shouted. "Is this really gonna glide across the ocean?!"

"Yeah, seems like it," Allen replied.

The dark elf pressed his face against the thick window with excitement, and Allen also peered through it. In the distance was the port, but he could not see the Allen Army team that had stayed behind. Merus had used his Ability, Angel Halo, which allowed him to call forth Allen's Summons, and activated Bird A's Awakened Ability, Homing Instinct, to move the group to the Gamers' base within the Rank S dungeon. When Allen glanced around, he noticed that Shia was gazing toward the port as well, with Cecil beside her.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Cecil reassured her.

"Quite right," Shia replied. "Dogora is with them, so I'm sure there won't be any issues."

One of the reasons the party had been split in two was to strengthen the Allen Army. Six months had passed since the army was assembled, and Allen had asked his troops to prioritize class

promotions and clearing Rank A dungeons. As a result, the soldiers had all received class promotions, and the beastkin, elves, and dark elves could all train together now.

From here on, Allen wanted them to take down iron golems, which required Dogora and Krena, the party's main physical attackers, as well as Meruru, who could be a shield if needed. In addition, Keel was a powerful healer and the perfect support.

Allen did more than just assist his army. He had also helped Knight Captain Zenof and Vice-Captain Leibrand, who served Viscount Granvelle, receive class promotions. The Summoner had provided the two knights with a set of adamantite weapons and armor each, just as he had done for his army, and they had become considerably stronger.

The Summoner had also wanted them to lead the joint training sessions with the Hero Army, a force of a thousand troops led by Helmios. Sword Lord Dverg, too, was a part of this army, which the emperor of Giamut had created to serve as a symbol of hope for the world in the war against the Demon Lord Army.

It had been nearly six months since the class promotion dungeon's opening in April, and the Empire of Giamut still would not let just anyone clear it. Its leadership had carefully formulated a plan with future formations and usages in mind. The first step of this plan was the Hero Army. Once everyone in the force had received a class promotion, they were to visit the Rank S dungeon. Before they did so, Helmios wanted to have a joint training session with the Allen Army, which was already using the Rank S dungeon as a training site.

The Hero Army had been formed after the Five Continent Alliance conference, during which Dogora had forced the Beast King to his knees after a clash. When Helmios had asked about how Dogora became so powerful, Allen had given a proper answer and spoken of the Allen Army's movements.

This was the same exact information he had provided to the Adventurer's Guild when he had first wanted to clear the Rank S dungeon. Additionally, he had provided insight on the class promotion dungeon and how to defeat Rank A monsters and

Demonic Deities. He was in charge of an army now, not just a party, so he needed to think and act accordingly. To that end, he had provided all the information he could and was prepared to fight alongside the Five Continent Alliance until the Demon Lord was defeated, as doing so would help keep casualties to a minimum.

That was why, when Helmios had stated that the war against the Demon Lord, which had ended in April, could start again anytime and claimed that it was imperative to strengthen the Five Continent Alliance for when that happened, Allen had agreed. The Hero had asked for a joint training session, and Allen accepted his request.

Allen could not entrust such an important joint training session to Field Marshal Lukdraal or General Rudo, nor anyone else of the same rank. His party members would take command, and he believed that Dogora's involvement was imperative. It would be their chance to showcase Dogora's power to the Hero Army. If they saw how he handled the golems in the Rank S dungeon and that he could deal massive damage to the boss of the final floor, the Hero Army would see that he had not used his full power when he had fought the Beast King. If people began to fear him, Allen hoped that they would also begin to have faith in Fire Goddess Freyja.

Due to these opportunities, even Shia, who was often near Dogora as of late, had agreed to act separately from him. *The team leader will be Keel, though.* Thanks to Extra Mode, Dogora was Lvl. 96, the highest in the party. Even so, Allen had not made him the group's leader. Dogora was strong, but he was inept when it came to commanding others.

Now then, no use rummaging through a room that doesn't have a vase or a set of drawers. A room prepared for travelers generally had vases or drawers, or so Allen had thought. This room, however, was sparsely decorated. There was a table but no chairs; thus he had been left with no choice but to sit atop it earlier. He returned to the table and called out to his friends standing by the window.

"We'll head out soon," he said. "Why not talk about our plans for a bit?"

"Yeah!" the rest of his party replied.

They all sat around the table, surrounding Allen.

“Shia, is it safe to assume that Beku isn’t doing anything right now?” Allen asked. He turned to Shia, hoping to use this conversation to convey the contents of General Rudo’s report to the rest of the No-life Gamers.

“Yeah,” Shia replied. “My older brother escaped Albahal, but he hasn’t done much since. Needless to say, we don’t know where he is, leaving our kingdom at a loss for what to do.”

“I see... While Beku is likely the reason Albahal is hesitant to act, do they also expect the Prostia Empire to join in? More specifically, does Albahal fear that the empire might use military force?”

“Precisely. The nobles predicted the use of military force long ago. They believe that because Beku was the first to be eliminated from the battle to become the next Beast King, he went to the Prostia Empire to get help with his invasion of Albahal. He might have retreated for now, but he took the Symbol of the Beast King with him—he could use that as proof that he’s got a claim to the throne and invade Albahal once more. Naturally, because the chance of that happening isn’t zero, the more timid and careful folks are convincing with their arguments.”

“Either way, Albahal can’t make any moves for a while.”

“I suppose it depends on Beku.” Shia scowled as she thought back to her older brother.

“But Allen, Crevelle and Prostia aren’t the only merfolk countries, right?” Cecil asked. “Isn’t there a chance that there are other nations helping Beku?”

Prostia was a massive empire on the ocean floor. Its territory covered about half of the world’s southern oceans. More precisely, the oceans touching the Galiatan Continent, the home of the Union; the Garlesian Continent in the south, which Albahal was a part of; and the Central Continent, where the Empire of Giamut was located, were all under Prostia’s control. Furthermore, this vast region of the ocean was not all under Prostia’s direct reign or among its provinces. There were several vassal states, such as Crevelle, that served the empire as well.

That was precisely what Cecil had been referring to. It was possible that a vassal state or two could have supported Beku,

against Prostia's wishes.

"Yeah," Allen agreed. "We've gotta do some investigating on that end too."

Just then, an announcement came over the magic tool near the ceiling.

"This vessel will soon submerge."

The No-life Gamers gazed out the window, but countless bubbles obscured their view, and they realized that they were going deeper and deeper into the water. When the bubbles gave way, they were replaced by darkness like the silent night. A hole then opened in the wall, and seawater slowly gushed into the room. The Gamers sat on the table as they looked around nervously. *I see now. There aren't any drawers, vases, or seats in the room because the water would ruin them.* All the while, the water level in the room rose.

"Will we really be all right?" Cecil, who had transformed into a merfolk, asked, unable to hide her anxiety.

"We've already tested our ability to breathe underwater. We were just fine, remember?" Allen replied.

Allen and the rest of his party had had five days to make preparations for their journey. They had used that time to take the form of merfolk and test if they could breathe underwater. Most of the lakes and rivers in this world were freshwater, while the ocean was saltwater with a fair level of salinity.

"Since Lord Allen deems it safe, I'm sure we'll be fine," Sophie said. She had taken the form of a merfolk clutching a shrimp. Despite her words, however, her voice was also tinged with uncertainty.

The Gamers all remained seated on the table as the water rose above their chests. Each of them instinctively closed their eyes and took a deep breath as the water went above their heads. They held their breath for a few moments, but once they could do so no longer, they gingerly exhaled. Nothing rushed out from their mouths, however. Instead, they felt water flow through the slits on the sides of their necks. *Hmm, so they really did fill the ship with water... Guess we'll be living underwater for a while.*

Prostian law dictated that all ships must be filled with water as a

means to filter out any nonmerfolk who would try to infiltrate the empire. But Allen and his friends, who were under the effects of Mimic, could live underwater without issue. As proof, their eyes had seemingly switched into underwater mode, acclimating to allow them to see clearly within the dark room.

"Ha ha. When I'm with you, Allen, I never get bored," the shrimp in Sophie's arms said. He was none other than Rohzen, the God of Spirits, and he, too, had been transformed by Mimic.

"I'm happy to hear that," Allen replied. "And it seems you can breathe underwater just fine, Lord Rohzen."

"I don't usually breathe anyway."

"It's getting awfully dark outside," Faable, the Sovereign of Spirits traveling with Luketod, remarked. She had been turned into a crab.

"We're going to a place where the sun won't reach us," Luke replied.

"You're knowledgeable, aren't you?"

"Heh heh heh."

The boy had simply said what he had just learned, but he was all smiles at Faable's praise. *How deep can sunlight penetrate the water? A hundred meters? Two hundred?* The capital of Prostia, Patlanta, was said to be located deep underwater, implying that perhaps it was in a perpetual state of darkness. Was it always nighttime there? Just then, light trickled in through the window.

"Huh?! What's that?" Luketod cried as he swam to the window.

Allen headed there as well and saw that they were no longer shrouded by darkness, but enveloped in light. They were already at the bottom of the ocean, but a plant that sprouted from the seafloor was giving off a bright light.

"Is this the crystal flower? It's beautiful!" Luke exclaimed.

"It truly is," Sophie agreed. "How breathtaking."

They gasped with awe at the mesmerizing sight. At times like this, he felt like elves and dark elves were not all that different.

The corals of this world glow, huh? The ocean floor was covered with these light-emitting plants, which were decorated with glass-like petals. Schools of fish swam around them like they were doing an elegant dance, and Allen learned that the Prostia Empire was a place

of stunning beauty.

* * *

The ship that carried the Gamers sailed forth, only a few dozen meters above the ocean floor. A few days had passed since the beginning of their travels, and everyone had gotten rather used to life underwater. Allen felt his body move around a bit clumsily because he was underwater, but if he did not pay too much attention to it, it was not all that bothersome. One morning, he entered the living room of their guest space and spotted a merfolk Luke swimming round and round, approaching the ceiling before gliding across the ground. The rooms of the ship were similar to rooms above water, and he was enjoying the feeling of floating around wherever he pleased.

"It's still morning, Luke," Cecil said. "What in the world are you doing? Is that even fun?"

"Sure is," Luke replied. "Wanna give it a try?"

"No, thank you. Breakfast is soon, so don't be late."

The two had often bickered while on land as well, and over the past few days, everyone had been slowly adapting to their new life and conversing as they usually did. Outside the window was the usual breathtaking ocean floor, but the novelty of the sight had worn off long ago. No one gazed out, stunned by the beauty anymore. Allen, the first to get bored of the scene, had realized that no matter how beautiful it was, one would gradually get tired of seeing the same thing for days on end. *All right, today's the day I reach Summoning Lvl. 9.*

For the past few days, Allen had remained in the ship, He had not teleported to the surface, though he could easily do so at any time using Homing Instinct, Bird A's Awakened Ability. He certainly could have gone to fight Goldino or the iron golems of the Rank S dungeon alongside Team Keel, but the Summoner had stayed put. He had already obtained valuable items from Goldino, the final floor boss, and even if he managed to defeat it, everyone had leveled up so much that it would hardly provide enough XP to make the effort

worthwhile. And so, Allen had decided that it was best to focus on leveling up his skills.

The Pelomas Whaling Company was able to source magic stones from across the world, so Allen had a steady supply coming in. Pelomas had managed to do so thanks in no small part to Allen's help; the Summoner hunted down golems and allowed the merchant to sell off expensive equipment, magic tools, and items to gain funds. As Pelomas gained fame, he used his network to the fullest and established routes through which he could purchase magic stones.

Allen could now gather stones from around the world, which he would use to level up his Summoning skill while having Merus work around the clock to make Seeds of Magic and pop them into Storage. And so, the Summoner and his Angel A had formed a tag team in hopes of Allen reaching Summoning Lvl. 9 by December. However, recently, Allen had noticed that Merus would gaze pensively into the distance.

The doors of the living room opened, and the servants of Crevelle brought in breakfast. A loaf of bread that was quickly turning soggy floated atop the plate that had been set on the table.

"Ah, you're all together," a servant said. "We've brought you breakfast."

"Yep!" Luke replied energetically.

He took his seat—or more precisely, took up a sitting posture since there were no chairs—at the table. Everyone else headed over as well and followed suit.

"Allen, happy birthday," Cecil said. "We have to celebrate tonight, don't we?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Thanks," Allen replied.

Today was the first of October. Allen was now sixteen.

"Ah, she's right!" Sophie exclaimed as though she had just remembered. "Happy birthday, Lord Allen!"

High elves lived for over a millennium, so the concept of birthdays was lost on them, but she nevertheless clenched her fists in front of her chest happily.

"How old are you now?" Luke asked.

"Sixteen," Allen replied.

Most of my party members are the same age, so everyone's turning sixteen. While no one was sure if it had been God's intention for Allen to attract people of the same age to his party, naturally, they all had different birth dates.

Everyone's Birthdays

- Allen: October 1
- Krena: December 30
- Cecil: September 1
- Dogora: September 9
- Keel: July 1
- Sophie: March 1
- Volmaar: November 30
- Meruru: September 9
- Shia: August 30
- Luke: March 3
- Pelomas: June 15

"Ooh, sixteen! Congrats!" Luke said.

He munched on his breakfast as he spoke, and food floated in the water around him. Etiquette for dining underwater dictated that one must keep conversation during meals to a minimum so that food would not go everywhere. In addition, it seemed people were keenly aware that air and water acted differently and affected food differently. Soups that land dwellers might generally enjoy had not been served during this journey. Only relatively solid foods were served on this vessel.

Every room, the living room included, was also equipped with a water purifier in lieu of an air purifier. If dirty and unsanitary water remained stagnant in an enclosed environment, it became a breeding ground for certain diseases. For that reason, enclosed spaces like the inside of this ship required a water purifier to keep the water clean and moving.

That was precisely why a large water purifier magic tool could be

found in the city of Crey on Hardcore User Island. One had to respect the lifestyle and culture of the merfolk. The magic tool had been supplied by the Empire of Baukis, one of Prostia's major trade partners. The two had been conducting business through Crevelle for decades.

Now that Allen and the rest of his party had taken the form of merfolk, they were worried about the quality of the water—a factor that they had never been overly concerned about when they were humans. Perhaps this was the norm for merfolk.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Shia asked, noticing Allen lost in his thoughts.

"No, just... Sixteen, huh?" Allen replied. "In my previous world, when someone turns sixteen, their mother forces them to get out of bed and head to a castle. I guess I've reached that age."

"Oh? A castle at sixteen?"

Shia had heard that Allen had originally lived in a different world, but Elmea's powers had forced the Summoner to be reborn in this one so that he could defeat the Demon Lord. She assumed that was why Allen would occasionally mumble about his life in the old world or ramble on about puzzling things with presuppositions that she had never heard of. The Summoner was known for suddenly talking at length about mysterious topics, and that was likely due to his memories from his previous life.

Furthermore, when he was on Hardcore User Island, the island in the sky, he had fought Kyubel, a Greater Demonic Deity, and spoken with him. Back then, Shia had received all the proof she needed to agree that Allen's mind, at the very least, was in a completely different realm, separate from the rest of this world. If Allen had been called to a castle in his previous life, Shia knew that there must have been some purpose behind it. She was dying to find out.

"Yeah. When you go to the castle, the king gives you some money, but you're ordered to use it to defeat the Demon Lord," Allen joked. "And then you're chased out of your hometown."

Only after putting it into words did he realize that life had basically been a version of Hell Mode. It seemed this current world did not have any reincarnators or people from other worlds aside

from Allen. He had frequented the library at the Academy and looked into several heroic tales, but none of them had had any mentions of reincarnation.

"Is that the norm for the people in your previous world?" Shia asked.

"Oh, not everyone's forced to head out," Allen replied. "Only when your father's a hero."

"Ah, so that means in your previous world, you hailed from a household of heroes. That reminds me, you did mention that you defeated the Demon Lord of your prior world."

Allen had told Shia and the rest of his party that there was not a Demon Lord he could not defeat. Naturally, he had been referring to the video games he had played and had not *actually* gotten into a physical fight with the Demon Lord. The reason he had said that was to give his friends hope that the Demon Lord, an existence that had terrorized the world since before they were born, could be stopped.

"I'm just kidding," Allen said. "It's only a joke."

"Then I guess you don't have a knack for comedy," Shia replied. "Sure, that custom might not be of this world, but it's certainly something to be proud of regardless."

Allen recalled the father he had had during his time on Earth, when he had still been Kenichi. Kenichi had done nothing but play games all day while his father was hard at work until ultimately, Kenichi was whisked away to a different world at the age of thirty-five. Allen no longer knew what was taking place on Earth, but if his father was doing well, Allen hoped that the man could retire and live a peaceful life.

Emotions filled his heart and he grew solemn. Seeing this, Cecil could tell that Allen was partly affected by his previous world, as he had immense respect for his current father, Rodin, and treasured his family.

"Your father from your prior world must've been a hero too," Cecil said.

"Yeah, he sure was," Allen said. "Unlike me."

"What are you talking about? I'm sure you can be a hero one day too. In fact, you might already be one."

He had stopped the Demon Lord Army's invasion of Rohzenheim, and he had put an end to their secret Daemonism plot as well. His feats did not pale in comparison to Helmios's, and he was surely worthy of being lauded as a hero. Yet, Allen did not call himself one. The rest of the Gamers wondered just what sort of family he had first been born into and what kind of people he had been surrounded by. What kind of environment had he been raised in to make him find all these heroic feats so trivial? Another announcement from the magic tool broke the silence.

"Thank you for sailing with us and we thank you for your patience. The ship is on schedule and will soon arrive in Patlanta, the imperial capital."

This magic tool, which was usable underwater because it had been specially tweaked to make it waterproof, had been installed on the ship courtesy of Baukis. The king of Crevelle claimed that it had cost them a hefty sum.

Even Allen could tell that the ship had clearly changed directions as it descended vertically toward the ocean floor. The moment the announcement ended, Luke flew—or swam, rather—to the window and shouted so loudly that the water in the room shook.

"Whoooa! Awesooome! There's a city above the flowers!"

Curious, Allen also went to the window, peering through it to catch a glimpse outside. When he did, a colossal crystal flower with petals that were a hundred kilometers in diameter appeared before his eyes. *I see... So, Prostia's imperial capital sits on top of the coral.* If Allen's presumption was correct, over a million merfolk lived atop this titanic crystal flower. The ship sailed around the flower, and when it was halfway around the city, it gradually slowed down and approached the edge of a petal.

They had reached the port. As the ship approached, dozens of merfolk approached it with a massive chain. It seemed the chain would act as an anchor, preventing the vessel from being washed away by the current. When Allen and his friends debarked the ship, he stumbled upon Crevelle offering gifts to Prostia. A red, stout merfolk was haughtily taking charge and giving out orders.

"Good grief... Was there a need for you to come *now*?" the

merfolk grumbled. “Come on, don’t dawdle! The next ship’ll arrive soon!”

To help with their endeavor, Allen and his friends had a few hastily prepared gifts to give on behalf of Crevelle. It gave them an excuse to visit Prostia. But Crevelle was not the empire’s only vassal state, and these gifts would ultimately be sent to Patlanta, the imperial capital. Other provinces and domains under Prostia’s control were arriving with their own offerings and dues, meaning the port was always bustling. The red merfolk was able to stand at the helm of this busy port and give out orders, implying that they were of fairly high rank. *Maybe they’re in charge of this port or something.* With that in mind, Allen flashed a mischievous smirk as he approached the commanding merfolk.

“Oh, thank you *so* much for helping us out despite our sudden visit,” Allen said.

“Huh? Who are you?” the merfolk asked while glaring at the Summoner, who was unfamiliar to them.

“Hello. My name is Alec, and I’m the special ambassador plenipotentiary from Crevelle. I’ll be joining you when you present the offerings we’ve brought.”

Gotta make sure to have a fake name.

“Alec, the special ambassador plenipotentiary?” the merfolk repeated with a dubious scowl.

“That’s right. You see, I’ve arrived on behalf of the king of Crevelle,” Allen explained.

And so, Allen began to speak with the merfolk in charge of the offerings for Patlanta.

Chapter 3: The Offerings from Crevelle

"Oh? You seem awfully young for the role," the merfolk observed.

Allen had received a set of formal attire befitting a special ambassador plenipotentiary and taken the form of a merfolk, but the boy had just turned sixteen. He looked quite young, even by merfolk standards.

"Quite so," Allen replied. "I heard from His Majesty that the kingdom is losing the empire's trust, and so, I've been dispatched in his stead to offer a formal apology. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The motive behind Allen's fake name, Alec, was that he was known throughout the Five Continent Alliance. He wanted to investigate former crown prince Beku's whereabouts within Prostia, and that meant that he would need to sneak into the imperial palace. If he used his real name loudly and proudly, he worried that some of Beku's subjects would recognize it and flee.

Though Allen was unsure whether Beku had a contingency plan in place if he failed to take the throne, since the former crown prince had been able to formulate such an elaborate plan, one could safely assume that every area he had been in had coconspirators of his lurking about. In fact, there was a chance that some of the soldiers in the Allen Army were acting as Beku's eyes and ears.

Scared that was the case, Allen had immediately asked Shia to do some investigating. Perhaps some of her subjects had ties to Beku. She had ultimately concluded that no one had such ties and that they could be trusted, but that did not assuage all of Allen's concerns. It was better to be safe than sorry, and his trip to Prostia was known only to a select few generals and captains outside of his party. Even so, as an extra precaution, he had adopted a fake name.

And it was not just him. Every member of the No-life Gamers would be operating under a fake name to hide their actions.

Team Allen's Fake Names

- Cecil: Seraphi
- Sophie: Solanis
- Volmaar: Volnix
- Pelomas: Peloniki
- Shia: Joanna
- Luke: Luti

Shia and the other beastkin had a law where everyone's names had two syllables. Because of that, Allen had purposefully chosen a longer name for her. The Beast Princess, perhaps either never having expected to operate under a fake name or not being used to using or being called by a name with more than two syllables, had been somewhat hesitant at first. However, Allen had been able to convince her by pointing out that there was no law stating that fake names must be two syllables as well.

"Alec..." the red merfolk said. "That's not a name I've heard before. I find it hard to believe that a young'un like you is the special ambassador plenipotentiary. Do you have any sort of proof?"

"Of course," Allen replied, swiftly producing a letter from the Crevelle royal family. "Here you are."

The document was written in waterproof ink and claimed that Allen's special role allowed him to have the same rights and claims as the king. It referred to him by his fake name, of course, but as long as he was not found out, there was no issue.

"Mm... This letter is indeed from Crevelle," the merfolk acquiesced. "It says, 'Princess Carmine has been sent to provide offerings to the Prostian emperor in addition to the usual delivery of goods, to receive an audience with His Imperial Majesty, and to meet with Duke Doresskarei. She will be escorted by the special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary as my representative.' Does this mean that Princess Carmine is here as well?"

"Indeed, I am," the princess replied, appearing behind Allen. Her guard, Knight Captain Iwanam, was with her. "I am Carmine, princess of Crevelle Kingdom. I have arrived in hopes of being granted an audience with His Imperial Majesty."

The red merfolk immediately changed his tune in front of the princess, exhibiting the utmost politeness.

"Ah, I apologize for my belated introduction. I am Tainomay, the director of the Immigration Bureau of the Prostia Empire. I am also in charge of this port. I was the one who received contact from your ship."

Whoa, he's pretty high up on the ladder. Wait, did he say "Tainomay"? This guy denied our request to enter the empire. The imperial capital was built on a massive crystal flower that was a hundred kilometers in diameter. Each petal represented a district of the city, and one of the petals was dedicated to a massive port. The sea bream merfolk in front of Allen was the person in charge of this port.

Allen recognized the name. He had seen it when he had received a letter denying his request to enter Prostia. He was annoyed at the merfolk, assuming that he could have taken a different course of action had the director allowed him entry. But Tainomay, while polite and subservient to Princess Carmine, was even more annoyed with Allen. The No-life Gamers had pushed their way through and forced a schedule onto the Immigration Bureau to enter Prostia. Until now, whenever Crevelle went to send offerings to the empire, they had to wait about a month until they had received the proper permits.

However, while Allen had sent the paperwork, he had set sail within two weeks of doing so. Even before receiving any sort of permit, he had one-sidedly insisted that he would enter the empire, and only after the group was well on its way was their entry finally approved.

Needless to say, the Immigration Bureau, in charge of a tight schedule, had been required to make some hefty changes. Director Tainomay and his subordinates had hurriedly shifted around the schedule for the past two weeks to squeeze in Allen's ship. The merfolk was thus infuriated with the boy, but Allen was none the

wiser about such thoughts.

"Director Tainomay, I apologize for all the hardship we put you through," the princess said affably, offering her gratitude.

"It's quite all right," Tainomay replied. "Your kingdom went through quite a bit as well, didn't it? You already had your hands full with the rebels advocating for independence from the empire, and then they became the Demon Lord Army's pawns and transformed into monsters that attacked your kingdom. It's nothing short of a calamity. You must speak of it in detail to His Majesty. I've taken enough of your time, so please, go right in."

The director then turned back to Allen, expelling the anger that he had kept pent up until now.

"Ambassador Alec!" he barked. "Move the offerings at once! You're holding up our schedule!"

"B-But—" Allen started.

"Don't make me repeat myself! I only greeted a young sap like you because you claimed to be the princess's attendant! We're done here! Carry the cargo to the warehouse!"

When Allen tried to fight back, he was yelled at once more. Furthermore, Director Tainomay's knights surrounded Allen, eager to get into a fight. The fact that the director had only quickly scanned the letter before roughly shoving it into his pocket was telling—it showed exactly what he thought of Crevelle.

It was no surprise that he felt that way, though. After all, Crevelle had allowed the rebelling followers of Daemonism to do as they pleased and loudly protest in favor of independence from Prostia, only for them to transform into monsters of some sort and dominate the kingdom. The damages incurred were devastating, so Crevelle was exempted from the taxes it paid to Prostia and even received the empire's support. Now, the kingdom had the gall to disturb the Immigration Bureau's workflow and forcibly enter the empire, much to the director's displeasure. Tainomay's attitude made it clear that Crevelle was losing Prostia's trust.

At this rate, it would be difficult for Allen to stay in the empire for a long time, thereby preventing him from investigating Beku's whereabouts and supporters. *In fact, it might be difficult for Princess*

Carmine to meet with Duke Doresskarei. But I guess this is all going as planned. Allen had expected to be treated poorly; for the past few years, whenever Crevelle delivered offerings and goods to Prostia, its people were ordered to unload the cargo at the port. Any documentation was quickly scanned before they were ordered to head back home. They never got the chance to visit the palace, and at times, once they had unloaded the items, they were made to leave within the day. At worst, they stayed a mere few hours before making the trip back home.

Crevelle was treated very coldly by the empire, but this time around, Allen could not be treated similarly. He knew that now was the time for change, and he silently stepped forward, forcing the knights to make way so that he could line up beside Director Tainomay.

"Hmm?" the director asked. "Did you not hear what I said?"

Tainomay voiced his anger, but Allen did not react. The Summoner only had power while he accompanied the princess, but for now, he was the special ambassador plenipotentiary and held the same authority as the king of Crevelle. Tainomay could not force him to leave, and though the knights had surrounded him, they could not attack him.

He gazed solemnly at the goods being delivered from the ship's hangar and into the warehouse. Among the goods was a black object about as tall as a person. Ten merfolk were carrying this item, including Pelomas and Volmaar.

"Hey, that goes over here!" Allen commanded. "That shouldn't go to the warehouse! It should head to the palace with Her Highness! Knight Captain Iwanam, how did this slip your notice?! If that were sent to the warehouse along with the other offerings, whatever would I say to the king?!"

"Yes, sir!" the merfolk carrying the square magic tool, which was three meters long on each side, all replied.

Then, right on cue, merfolk Pelomas fell to one knee.

"Whoa! Ack!" he cried. The merchant had a ring that raised his Attack by +5,000 equipped, allowing him to help carry the item.

The way he had spoken and lost his balance had seemed awfully

staged to Allen. *Aw, come on. Act a bit more natural, please.* Pelomas had lost his balance on purpose, causing the massive magic tool to lean to one side. Volmaar, who was beside Pelomas, made a show of offering his support.

"Uh-oh. Are you all right, Peloniki?" Volmaar asked. "You'd best not drop it."

"Huh? Oh, yes," Pelomas replied. "Thank you, Volnix."

The two spoke loudly, as per Allen's plan. He wanted their conversation to be overheard. But the two were poor actors, and it sounded like they were reading off a script. The other eight merfolk were not in on the act; they genuinely believed that one of their helpers had lost their balance. They decided to set the item down.

"H-Hey, keep a good grip on it."

"No, let's set it down for now."

"Be careful. Easy does it. I've heard this is valuable."

Just then, Allen raised his voice like never before.

"What in the world are you dunces doing?!" he bellowed angrily. "Do you not understand how valuable that is?!"

The director was so surprised by this that his fin stood on end.

"What?!" he cried. "Wh-What's wrong?"

Allen ignored those words and swam over to Pelomas, Volmaar, and the other merfolk.

"No, no!" he snapped. "If you lot are going to set this item down, do it with the utmost care! Do you not know how valuable this magic tool is?!"

His face was dyed red with anger, and he was screaming at the top of his lungs. It was as if he had become one of the haughty higher-ranked officials that he generally despised. He then pointed his anger at the knight captain.

"Iwanam! You were appointed as the princess's guard, were you not?! How in the world did you allow these *fools* to carry this priceless magic tool?! Surely, it's not lost on you that this is an offering to the Prostian emperor from Baukis, an empire that I am close with?!"

Tainomay was stunned by Allen's threatening attitude, and the red merfolk began to find it most unusual that the young Summoner

was able to thoughtlessly scold Knight Captain Iwanam, a man who had been serving Crevelle's king for many years. The director also learned that the item in question, which required ten merfolk to carry, was something so precious that it would be offered directly to the Prostian emperor.

After Allen screamed at Iwanam, he swiftly turned toward the director.

"What? What's going on?" Tainomay asked. "And you said you've got friendly ties with Baukis?"

"Director Tainomay, I offer you my deepest apologies," Allen replied. "Should this purification tool break, Baukis wouldn't be satisfied with merely offering my and the king's heads! Oh, I sincerely apologize! I shall check on it immediately and ensure there aren't any issues."

Allen gave an exaggerated bow of apology and immediately checked up on the precious magic tool. Slowly but surely, Tainomay's face filled with anxiety.

"I-Is that..." he started.

Someone had lost their balance a little, but the item had not even been dropped. It was puzzling to see the special ambassador plenipotentiary panic so much over it. As Director Tainomay stared at the massive magic tool, he recalled Allen's words about how damaging the item would cost more than just Allen's and the king's heads. If both had to pay for such a mistake with their lives, naturally, the one in charge of this place, the director himself, would be held responsible as well. It was no wonder that Allen had apologized profusely.

"It looks fine," Allen reported, having returned to the director's side. "But perhaps we should activate it once to be doubly sure..."

He frowned and mumbled to himself while the director grew more and more nervous by the second.

"Th-This magic tool looks to be a rather large water purifier," Tainomay said. "How vast is its area of effect? Or does it have some sort of amazing effect?"

Even if two magic tools operated the exact same way, their area and type of effect differed greatly. Some purifiers only affected the

rooms they were in, while others could purify an entire enormous palace by themselves. Since Allen kept claiming how precious it was, Tainomay assumed that a tool of this size must be equipped with an incredibly powerful effect. Could it purify the entirety of this massive port that the empire was so proud of? The director immediately shot down his own assumption, deeming that to be an impossible feat.

"Ah, yes, this tool has been developed with an engineer from Baukis," Allen explained. "I have friendly ties with the empire, you see. The engineer claimed that, using Patlanta as a reference...this tool can easily purify the waters ten times the size of the city."

Allen had already consulted Captain Rarappa of the Magus Smith squad about the tool's effects. More precisely, Rarappa had claimed that the purifier's area of effect was ten times larger than the imperial capital of Baukis. While Allen was unsure of the exact size of Baukis's and Prostia's imperial capitals, he guessed that they were similar.

"Pardon?" Tainomay asked. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

The director failed to understand Allen's words. If his claims were to be believed, this tool could purify the waters of ten round, crystal flowers that were a hundred kilometers in diameter, all by itself.

"I'm saying that this one tool can purify the waters of ten Patlantas for the next three centuries," Allen explained. "To think that Baukis is sending you such an important item! I've no doubt that the emperor must really trust Prostia. Ah, yes, truth be told, before I became an ambassador for Crevelle, I was graciously allowed to serve as a liaison procuring magic tools from Baukis. Fortunately, I became friends with one of the emperor's confidants..."

"Th-Three centuries?!" Tainomay stammered. He had never heard of an item lasting for such a long time and was overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the time frame.

Allen had lied as easily as he breathed underwater, and the director struggled to wrap his mind around it all. Now, Tainomay understood Allen's anger. He was relieved that the item was safe. At the same time, he realized that he had gotten involved in a terrifying situation, and the irritation on his face became more apparent.

Good. Seems like he understands the value of the most widely imported magic tool in Prostia.

"As I mentioned earlier, this is a gift from the Baukis Empire," Allen went on. "I'd like to explain how I was able to procure this item."

Allen flashed a discreet smirk. *It doesn't look like he'll scurry off to report this to someone else. He isn't the director of this massive port for nothing. And this is convenient for me.* It had become apparent that Director Tainomay wielded a fair bit of power and had the capacity to act on his own. Allen had been wanting to speak with someone of decent rank about the emperor of Prostia as soon as he could.

"The followers of Daemonism within our kingdom transformed into daemonic incarnations—monsters that hardly resemble humans," Allen explained. "They wreaked havoc on our land, and that kicked off a series of events."

"That, I know," Tainomay replied. "What does it have to do with the magic tool?"

"Because of how severe the damage to our kingdom was, we had no choice but to implore other nations for assistance."

"What do you mean? I fail to understand what you're implying."

"Our kingdom resides in the Galiat, the same continent as the Union. Did you know that they fell victim to the Daemonism debacle as well? This led the Five Continent Alliance to hold a conference. Around three months ago, we joined this conference, as we were selected to be one of the leaders for the year."

Allen had purposefully neglected to explain why the Holy Land of Elmahl and the Kingdom of Calvarna had not been selected to be the leaders this year. Elmahl, the home of the Church of Elmea, could receive support from across the globe even if they did not become the leader of the conference. As for Calvarna, the nation had very little to offer. It had struggled to prove its merits to the Five Continent Alliance and enlist the group's help.

There had been a meeting between the Union's member nations, during which they had concluded that the two countries could not pull in much support from the other four continents of the Alliance,

even if they begged for aid. As harsh as it seemed, international support was not given for genuinely humanitarian reasons. When it was offered, it came at the price of the receiver being greatly indebted to the lender; if the lender was ever in any sort of trouble, they could turn to the nation they once helped. That was why Calvarna, which struggled to repay any sort of debt it incurred, was unlikely to amass any sort of support for Galiat. If Elmahl took the helm instead, people would be quick to point out that the nation could easily receive plenty of donations via the Church and thus required no aid. Therefore, Crevelle was deemed the perfect fit for the role of the continent's representative.

"Oh? And I suppose you used your time at that conference to tearfully beg for assistance," Tainomay said.

"Precisely," Allen replied. "Crevelle's king spent his time at the Five Continent Alliance conference talking about the wretched state of Galiat. The other four continent leaders naturally began to discuss aid and restoration efforts. Thanks to them, we were able to obtain several support lines for goods. Donations have been divided among the Galiatan nations as well. As for the money Crevelle received, I've drafted a report to provide to the Prostian emperor."

Crevelle was a vassal state to the Prostia Empire, but above the water, it was also a member of the Union. That it had cooperated with its fellow members had already been reported. These reports were essential to backing up the lies Allen was about to tell.

Everything I've said has been true. So far. Lying was not easy. If one were to lie too much, they would struggle to keep their story straight. To fool someone, it was ideal to keep the number of lies to a minimum, mixing some truths in with the falsehoods. Allen knew just how important that was.

"I see..." Tainomay said. "I suppose one of these support efforts is this magic tool?"

"There's a bit more to this story," Allen continued. "A class promotion dungeon has appeared aboveground, and the Rank S dungeon in Baukis has become more crowded than ever before."

"Crowded? I thought the Rank S dungeon was virtually impregnable. How could people flock there?"

"And yet, they do. The Beast Prince of Albahal and his party have conquered the Rank S dungeon, and their helpful tips and advice have allowed other challengers to test their luck. They're all hard at work to overcome the Trial of the Gods and receive class promotions. Among these adventurers was a party of dwarves from Baukis, who managed to transport this purifying magic tool from the dungeon back to their empire. This happened just before the Five Continent Alliance conference began."

That was the first lie Allen had told. In truth, he was the one who had prepared the purifier tool. He had then gone to the Magus Smith squad, which had moved from Baukis to Hardcore User Island, and asked Captain Rarappa to make a few tweaks. However, Tainomay did not seem all that interested in the origin of this tool.

"You seem awfully well-versed about adventurers," he observed. "And you speak of your own nation, the Crevelle Kingdom, rather...gruffly."

The director narrowed his eyes with suspicion, unsure if Allen was truly a citizen of Crevelle. *Whoops, I think I said too much.* He had carelessly told a bit too much of the truth, so he swiftly came up with another lie.

"I've been in charge of Baukis for a long while, and you will often see me spending long periods of time away from Crevelle," Allen said. "I fear I've picked up the habit of treating Crevelle as any other kingdom instead of my own. I've also personally visited the Rank S dungeon numerous times during my trips, and naturally, I've picked up on some intel about the beastkin of Garlesia and the adventurers who've ventured to the place."

"Ah, I see..." Tainomay nodded with disinterest. "I suppose living above water comes with quite a few troubles."

"As I was saying, I was present for the Five Continent Alliance conference. It was then that the emperor of Baukis asked me what kind of support the Crevelle Kingdom needed."

"Oh? The emperor came to you personally?"

"Correct. Emperor Pupun van Baukis III has always treated me very well. And since I'm the one who's been purchasing the magic tools to send to the Prostia Empire, I revealed to His Majesty that

the Crevelle Kingdom has lost a great deal of Prostia's trust as a result of the Daemonism incident. I asked him if he would be willing to yield the water purifier he'd obtained just the other day to Prostia as a show of goodwill and friendship, connecting the nation above water with the one below. If Crevelle were to offer this item to Prostia, I told him, it would be a big step toward repairing our eroding relationship with the empire."

"Alec, I find the way you've been talking rather insolent. I'm quite surprised that you were able to negotiate with the emperor, but I see that it ultimately went well. Perhaps the emperor allowed such disrespect because he found you unusual and interesting."

Since Tainomay had drawn his own conclusions, Allen was all smiles. *I'm using the Baukis emperor's name even though I haven't actually spoken with him. I doubt he'll find out, and even if he does, I think I can weasel my way out of it.* The Summoner had already done his research and knew that there were no direct ties between Prostia and Baukis. Even if Baukis somehow caught wind of this story, there was little chance it would send someone to Crevelle to scold the merfolk for such a lie. In fact, the empire hearing the story would also mean that it had heard just how desperate Prostia was for a water purifier. Baukis, ever the enterprising nation, would immediately make some calculations, allowing them to skillfully draw up trade negotiations.

"I see... I understand why someone as young as you was able to be appointed as the special ambassador plenipotentiary," Tainomay said.

The director assumed that Allen was a skillful negotiator who had used his prowess to obtain a precious magic tool from Baukis. Doing so, he believed, was the reason the boy had been named special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary and sent to restore the trust that Crevelle had lost.

"I don't doubt that the emperor of Baukis had his apprehensions, but he ultimately, benevolently handed the item to me," Allen said. "Had that not occurred, I wouldn't have taken this role—it's too grand for me."

He made sure to act humble and talk himself down.

"Either way, I'm surprised that you managed to get your hands on it," Tainomay said, still hardly able to believe that Prostia was being given such a precious item.

"I don't blame you for failing to understand matters above water," Allen replied. "But this item is only valuable to us merfolk. For those on land, even an imperial capital that rivaled the size of Patlanta would only require a water purifier on a much smaller scale."

Allen had perused the trade records between Crevelle and Prostia, and in doing so gained further insight into what the empire desired. They had revealed that Prostia imported numerous magic tools through Crevelle, the most prominent of those being water purifiers. He had then had Pelomas use his Extra Skill, Libra, to see how the water purifier he had brought would be priced across the world. *Yeah, I'm really glad that I had Pelomas with me. This special water purifier costs around thirty-eight million gold in Prostia.*

Value of the Water Purifier in Other Nations

- Baukis: 2,500,000 gold
- Giamut: 2,000,000 gold
- Rohzenheim: 400,000 gold
- Ratash: 0 gold
- Crevelle: 0 gold

The price of the magic tool was drastically lower in Rohzenheim because its people were able to employ the power of spirits to cleanse their water supply and sewer systems. As for Ratash and Crevelle, it was worthless to them. Their necessity for it aside, neither of the two nations could possibly afford such an expensive tool—it was way out of their budget. *And that's only normal, frankly. I had Captain Rarappa work tirelessly for three days and nights to upgrade this special water purifier.* Allen had obtained the water purifier (extra large) from a gold chest dropped by Goldino, the final floor boss of the Rank S dungeon. He had then rushed Captain Rarappa, forcing her to work tirelessly for three whole days to add her tweaks. A magic core had been essential for the enhancements,

and Allen had beaten Goldino every single day for the past three months, giving him a comfortable stock of twenty cores. Materials had not been an issue.

Allen had also entrusted Captain Rarappa with analyzing the magic tool beneath the temple on Hardcore User Island, which he assumed was used to make the island float. He had even put her in charge of developing teleportation tools with a team of golem-user dwarves. Rarappa had clearly already had her hands full dealing with her busy schedule, but he had asked her to add three magic cores into the purifier to give it astonishing effects. For every core added to the item, the cost to Prostia went up another ten million gold. However, when Allen had gone to add a fourth core, the value had dropped to zero, implying that Prostia would have lost the ability to afford it, so he had stopped at three. This had also allowed him to approximate the empire's budget.

"I suppose Baukis has no need for a water purifier of this scale," Tainomay mumbled to himself as he made mental calculations. It looked as though he could not quite trust Allen's story yet. "How can I possibly explain this to..."

Oh? You still don't believe me, huh? Makes sense. This item is worth almost the entirety of Prostia's national budget.

"Indeed, perhaps you'll have trouble reporting this to His Imperial Majesty," Allen said. "Why don't we take this item out for a test run? It might get a bit noisy, though."

The director was visibly relieved by that suggestion.

"Good call," he said. "Could you start the tool up, then? I don't mind a bit of noise."

"Certainly," Allen replied. "Please allow me to show you what this water purifier from Baukis can do. Luti! You're up! Activate the tool as you've been taught!"

"You got it, boss!" Luke replied loudly, strutting forward.

You're a little too loud, but that kinda fits your appearance. I guess it's not an issue, Allen thought. All the while, Luke approached the water purifier. The black magic tool was menacing and glorious. One of its sides had a touch screen, and Luke used it to activate the tool as Rarappa had taught him.

Vwoom! While Tainomay watched on, the item began emitting a low rumble, signaling that it had started up. An intricate pattern appeared on the side that Luke had touched and quickly seeped across the surface to cover the rest of the tool. It began to glow brighter and brighter, eventually illuminating the entire port. The other merfolk spotted the light and turned toward it in confusion as they froze in place. Just then, the director's voice boomed across the port.

"Amazing! W-Wonderful! I can feel the water turning so clean and pure!"

Even Allen could see the water before their eyes become crystal clear. The Prostia Empire was a massive nation that boasted over a million citizens. Needless to say, with so many people gathered in one place, the water was slightly dirty no matter where they went. Now, however, it was becoming so clear and pristine that one could easily forget they were underwater.

"I can't believe I can see the imperial capital so clearly!" Tainomay gasped with an excited glimmer in his eyes.

But a minute after the tool had activated, an earsplitting sound began to shrilly echo through the water. It sounded like an alarm of sorts and caused the water to tremble. The director and the other merfolk glanced around in a panic.

"Wh-What's going on?!" Tainomay cried. "What happened?!"

The alarm first sounded from one location, but gradually, others began to come on all over the place, and red lights started to flash as far as the eye could see.

"What? What in the world is going on?" Tainomay asked again.

"I knew this would happen..." Allen mumbled as he closed his eyes with resignation.

"Knew what?! What's happening?! Tell me, Alec!"

It's nice to know that he can call me by name so casually now.

"I believe that the other tools managing the water in this port have begun to malfunction," Allen replied.

"Malfunction?!" Tainomay gasped.

"Indeed. The tool I brought in is so effective that the other tools throughout the port are no longer able to detect any pollution or

waste in the water. This has caused them to incorrectly assume that they're malfunctioning in some way."

All merfolk required a water purifier and water management tool to survive within the waters. The former cleansed the water, while the latter detected the level of pollution. Pollution levels ranged from 0 to 9, and anything above Level 4 was said to be harmful to merfolk's health. Whenever such a level was reached, the tool would set off an alarm and warn everyone.

"However, no matter how clean the water is, it would never drop below Level 1," Allen explained. "Hence, while there is a setting for Pollution Level 0, it's an improbable outcome that makes the tool believe its detectors have failed, causing it to malfunction. I believe that's what activates the alarm."

"Every merfolk knows that, of course," Tainomay said. "You don't need to speak at length about something so obvious. But there's still something weird about that I can't quite put my finger on... And Level 0..."

Another loud alarm cut him off.

"Ah, the alarms have spread outside the port," Allen remarked.

"Outside the port?" Tainomay asked.

"Indeed. As I mentioned earlier, this tool can purify the waters of ten Patlantas."

"A-At this rate, the entire ocean around our capital will be purified."

The whole of Patlanta soon had alarms blaring from the other water purification tools. They were also emitting a red light, shrouding the hundred-kilometer-long imperial capital atop the crystal flower in a red glow. The shrill alarm continued to assault the merfolk's senses as their surroundings were dyed red. They began to panic, running in and out of buildings in a rush.

"Stop the alarms!" Tainomay ordered. "Tell the Sanitation Department that the tools are malfunctioning!"

"Yes, sir!" the other public officials replied, then swiftly swam off to contact the necessary personnel and activate the necessary magic tools.

Hmm... So, the Sanitation Department's in charge of the water

quality, Allen thought, watching on with indifference. Director Tainomay realized that the Summoner still had a few things he wanted to say and swam over to him with a look of exasperation.

"You've really caused a scene, Alec," Tainomay said.

"But you understand the effects of the magic tool now, I hope?" Allen asked.

"Is that all you'd like to say? You've caused much confusion throughout the capital, and I don't know how to explain this to His Imperial Majesty."

"I believe that's a trifling issue compared to the good that this will bring Patlanta."

"Your audacity is appalling... Hmph, I'll be sure to give His Majesty a full report about Crevelle's intentions. You'd best be prepared."

Director Tainomay had a theory as to why Allen had been chosen as the special ambassador plenipotentiary. The boy wanted to restore ties with the Prostia Empire and thus had explicitly stated that Crevelle was offering it to the empire. He had cooked up a plan to show off the effects of the tool, and even claimed to have personally negotiated with the emperor of the Baukis Empire, a seemingly impossible feat for a merfolk. In a sense, Allen was troublesome to deal with since he broke the mold. That was how he had earned the role of ambassador.

"I would love for you to offer this tool to His Majesty," Allen said.

"I see..." Tainomay replied. "I know what your goal is now."

If Allen were left to his own devices, there was no telling what trouble he might get into—trouble that the director would ultimately be held responsible for. For that reason, Tainomay thought it best to stop Allen here, and an idea popped into his head. The Summoner had brought with him a tool that could very well change the current state of affairs in Prostia. It would render the purification tools in both the imperial capital and the nearby towns and villages obsolete, and would even decrease the number of waterborne illnesses.

The total number of water purification magic tools Prostia would need was going to go way down. This would change the very state of the Sanitation Department as well, allowing them to cut annual

costs for personnel. If this expensive magic tool had to be purchased, it would be cheaper to simply maintain the tools currently in operation, and the Sanitation Department could focus on maintaining water quality and fighting against diseases. But if it were instead gifted to the empire, the cut costs could be pocketed. Prostia could even use that money to decrease taxes for its people, displaying benevolence and garnering even stronger loyalty from them.

Tainomay realized that the entire series of events that had just occurred was something that Allen—and by extension, Crevelle—had planned. By fabricating a reason to activate the magic tool in public, they could show off its effects in a way that would leave a lasting impression on the citizens of Patlanta. When people discovered that it was Crevelle who had provided this awesome tool, it would serve as a solid foundation to allow the kingdom to stand out among the other vassal states.

Tainomay turned toward Princess Carmine. She had a gold-and-black-spotted merfolk lady-in-waiting with her. The royal smiled brightly, but her sunny demeanor only added to her mysterious flair.

"Your Highness... Such a valuable item will surely delight His Majesty as well. I can assure you of that," Tainomay said. He flashed a smile, finding it best to leave a positive impression on the princess.

"Thank you, Director Tainomay," Princess Carmine replied with a nod. "May we visit the palace?"

Voom... There was another low rumble as the magic tool lost its glow and turned off. *Huh? Looks like it's about time. I should've put a shorter timer on it, to be honest.* Allen then acted clearly distraught and panicked as he raised his voice.

"Wh-What?!" Allen gasped, feigning his shock. "What's going on?"

"Hmm?" Tainomay grunted. "What's wrong? Why has the magic tool stopped?"

"I'll go check!"

Allen hastily went to check on the tool, but it remained as silent as the grave.

"Sir Alec, perhaps something broke when we dropped it earlier," Iwanam said loudly, making sure that Tainomay could hear him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Allen snapped. “I was told when I received this magic tool that it was made extra sturdy to ensure that it would work underwater with no issues.”

Allen’s voice was laced with anxiety, and Tainomay could tell that he was silently panicking. What would happen if this tool couldn’t be fixed?

“Damn, I can’t do a thing,” Allen said. “Luti, you’re more familiar with these items, aren’t you? Could you check on this magic tool?”

“Sure thing!” Luke replied. He began to inspect the tool, and Allen left him behind to swim over to the director.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Allen apologized. “This is our fault. I don’t believe there are any issues, but I’d like to carefully inspect the tool before we offer it to His Majesty. May we have a month? I think that will be plenty of time.”

“A month?” Tainomay asked with a frown. “That’s quite a while.”

“Since Her Highness is with me, I would like to stay in the palace, if that isn’t too much trouble.”

Allen bowed deeply and flashed a cunning smirk, hidden from Tainomay’s view. This entire accident had been a sham; the magic tool had a built-in timer and had been set to shut off after thirty minutes. If one chose not to set the timer, the tool would stay running for up to three hundred years.

“Why’re you saying that to me?” Tainomay asked. “I’m only in charge of this port.”

“Is that so?” Allen replied, swiftly giving up without pushing further. “I suppose there’s nothing I can do about that. Um, is it possible for you to dispatch a magic tool user?”

“Dispatch? From where? Prostia doesn’t have any magic tool users. You should know that.”

“Ah, yes. You see, when we got our hands on this tool, I went through Crevelle to request that several dwarves be allowed into the empire so that they could maintain and tweak the tool if needed. But my request was promptly shot down.”

“What? Is that why you asked for nonmerfolk to be allowed in?”

Tainomay frowned. There had indeed been a few dwarves on the list of those requesting to enter the empire, and as it turned out,

they were magic tool users. However, not once had there been any mention that they would be coming to the empire to maintain the magic tool that would be offered to the emperor, and so, Tainomay had declined the request. Or more precisely, he had been tricked into doing so.

"I'd like to ask Crevelle to gather a few magic tool user dwarves and send them here... No, that'll take too much time," Allen muttered, pretending to think out loud while gauging the director's reaction. When Tainomay glared angrily at him, the Summoner felt it was best to move things along. Clearly, the man did not want any more hiccups.

"Not to worry," Allen reassured. "I feared the worst and have brought along a merfolk who's studied up on the magic tools in Baukis. Luti there may look very young, but he's renowned for his skills."

Each person had a role on this trip.

Team Allen's Respective Roles

- Allen (Alec): Special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary
- Shia (Joanna): Princess Carmine's guard
- Cecil (Seraphi), Sophie (Solanis): Princess Carmine's caretakers
- Luke (Luti): Magic tool engineer
- Pelomas (Peloniki): Government official
- Volmaar (Volnix): Sailor

"Shall we call for an engineer, or can we borrow the palace and examine the tool there ourselves?" Allen asked. "Which would be better?"

I don't care which. We can stay in the imperial capital during that time anyway. While feigning desperation, Allen had merely given Tainomay the illusion of choice. No matter the outcome, the Gamers would be allowed to stay in the imperial capital. Moreover, when the magic tool would be ready would be left to Allen's discretion.

"If it's not broken, you lot had best take care of it yourselves,"

Tainomay said. “Yet, I cannot have the princess live in the same place as you. Let’s see... Very well, I shall do my best to secure housing near the palace.”

Huh. So I’m not allowed inside the palace. Well, whatever. I can safely say that I’ve cleared the first hurdle. Allen had negotiated in his favor—his team was being allowed to stay in Patlanta for a good while.

Chapter 4: The Start of a Swimming Investigation

Allen and his team were guided by Tainomay's subordinate to a house with a garden located near the palace. Presumably, the purpose of the garden was to accommodate the large magic tool they had brought. *And the walls are fairly high,* Allen noted. This tool cost about the entirety of Prostia's national budget; it was clear that Tainomay wanted to keep its existence hidden from the public until it was officially offered to the emperor.

The director's subordinate had also mentioned that starting the next day, additional knights would be dispatched to protect the tool. Princess Carmine and Special Ambassador Plenipotentiary Allen already had a few knights to protect them, but their job was simply to protect the house. They did not step inside and always kept a fair distance away.

"Allen, that was so fun!" Luke cried excitedly.

"And it's only going to get more fun," Allen replied as he inspected the construction of the building and jangled the mithril chains securing the magic tool in the garden. "Also, you have to call me 'Alec,' Luti."

"Right! My bad, Alec!" Luke replied.

The dark-elf-turned-merfolk clenched his webbed hands. He seemed to be enjoying his transformation. It was impressive that someone his age was able to play his part so naturally, not sounding stiff or nervous.

"Your acting was good, by the way," Allen said. "Keep it up."

"You got it!" Luke replied.

As the boy excitedly rushed toward the magic tool, Allen shifted his gaze to Volmaar, who stood beside him. *Luke acted better than Volmaar, that's for sure.* Volmaar, possibly reading Allen's thoughts,

frowned in response, implying that he did not work under Sophie to become involved in these affairs.

This house was near the palace, and one could easily see the imperial structure nearby. It was best to keep on guard, as someone could be watching in the shadows. Allen cast everyone a meaningful glance, encouraging them to use their fake names even in private situations.

"What?" Cecil asked, taken aback. "Don't look at me like that. You're being weird. Besides, are you all right with lying so much, Allen? We're searching for Beku, aren't we?"

"Well, *Seraphi*," Allen started, "it doesn't seem like we'll be able to enter the palace anytime soon."

Only when Cecil was called by her fake name did she realize the meaning behind his gaze earlier.

"Oops. I'm sorry, Alec," she replied. "I can't believe we can't enter the palace even with the princess by our side. I wonder if there's some sort of reason behind it."

If you wanna go there, it's concerning that the empire hasn't really allowed any outsiders in. They must have some sort of reason for that too. Allen had gone to great lengths in hopes of entering the palace. Though he had taken on the form of a merfolk, announced his role as the special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary, brought Princess Carmine along, and even given a reason to inspect the special magic tool, he still was not allowed to set foot inside the palace. When he glanced at his friends, it was clear that they all thought something was going on with the imperial family.

"I'm sure Director Tainomay is reporting back to the imperial palace as we speak," Allen said. "I just want to figure out if we're being treated like this since we're from a vassal state, or if it's due to something else."

As he muttered to himself, he Summoned his Fish D, and the nearly two-meter-long Summon began swimming around the garden. When they were on land, Fish D swam through the air, which was certainly an unusual sight. Now that they were underwater, however, it looked like any other fish. *Hmm, since there are a ton of fish near the palace, I think it looks pretty natural.*

Schools of fish of various colors swam near the imperial capital, and there was even the occasional massive sea turtle and ray. Perhaps they were like the pigeons in the cities aboveground, flying about.

"Could you take a glimpse inside the palace?" Allen asked.

"Certainly," Fish D replied.

Thanks to Strengthening, Fish D's Intelligence had increased by +5,000, and it could engage in conversations with the Summoner. Not all Summons followed the same pattern, and Allen divided them based on whether they could converse.

Can Summons Converse?

- Summon types that cannot converse, no matter their rank
- Insect, Grass, Stone
- Summon types that can converse, no matter their rank
- Spirit, Dragon, Angel
- Summon types that can converse based on rank
- Beast (Rank B and above), Fish (Rank B and above)
- Special Summon types
- Bird (they generally cannot converse, aside from the Abilities of Birds G and F)

Looks like I'm getting more Summons that can converse based on rank. While thinking that, Allen entered the house and took a seat on some algae, which acted as a sofa in the living room. There were other chunks of algae properly cemented to the floor so that they would not float away. He concentrated so that he could Share Fish D's vision. *I see... So, there's a palace in the middle of the crystal flower, huh?*

The Fish D swam into Patlanta, the imperial capital built upon the crystal flower, and gazed down at the palace in the middle of the flower. Allen had caught glimpses of the palaces in Baukis and Giamut, but he felt that the one in Patlanta was much larger. Then, the Fish D swam around the structure, and in doing so found a large, open window on one of the lower floors. It used that window to sneak inside.

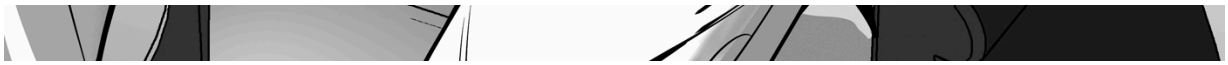
Fish Summons could swim through the ground, so naturally, they could swim through walls as well. However, if it got caught doing so or went into a building with no openings, such as a window, it was sure to raise suspicions. Knowing that, Allen treaded carefully.

The Fish D swam into the palace. It passed through rooms and down hallways, where it spotted other fish of various sizes swimming around. The merfolk that passed by the Summon paid it no heed—this was obviously a common occurrence.

Eventually, the Fish D stumbled upon a room with quite a bit of foot traffic. It peered into the room to find that it was a kitchen. Seaweed, shucked shellfish, and pieces of fish decorated a plate before it was carried elsewhere. *It must be dinnertime soon,* Allen thought, then looked out the window of his house by the palace. He realized that his surroundings had grown darker than when he had first arrived; the light of the crystal flower petals was weakening as night approached. The flower glowed based on the amount of sunlight shining down on the water's surface.

Allen focused back on his Fish D. It swam through the dining area and into a large hallway before it came upon an audience room. *Ooh! Found him! Is that the emperor?* Through Fish D, Allen could see a merfolk proudly sitting on the throne, donning a splendid suit of armor and a magnificent cape. He had to be the emperor.





On one side of the throne sat a merfolk who resembled a minister, and on the other, an elderly merfolk who looked like a researcher of sorts. The presumptive emperor gazed down at Director Tainomay, who was kneeling with the utmost respect.

"Well? What happened, Director Tainomay?" the minister merfolk asked.

Tainomay raised his head before he spoke. "Yes, sire! Princess Carmine of Crevelle is visiting our empire along with one called Alec, a special ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary. They've brought an offering for you, Your Majesty—a water purification magic tool. It is most impressive..."

The director proceeded to explain that the tool could purify water in an area the size of ten Patlantas for the next three centuries. As the merfolk on the throne quietly listened, his expression gradually turned to one of suspicion. When Director Tainomay ended his report, the emperor turned to the minister standing beside him.

"Chancellor Ajiray, do you trust the director's words? Do you think such a magic tool exists?"

Wow, the emperor's pretty gruff, was Allen's first impression.

"I don't blame you for being dubious, Emperor Ignomasu," the merfolk called Chancellor Ajiray answered, nodding thoughtfully with the fins on the sides of his head. "However, I've received reports that the water management magic tools throughout Patlanta all malfunctioned in some inexplicable way."

Their conversation raised doubts in Allen's mind as well. *I don't think the emperor's name was Ignomasu. What happened here?* While Prostia's emperor was rumored to have fathered many children, Ignomasu was not one of them. Yet, Chancellor Ajiray treated Ignomasu as the emperor with no question. Clearly, he was the emperor.

"I see," Ignomasu said. "Crevelle has brought a magic tool on such a grand scale..."

"What shall we do, Your Majesty?" Tainomay asked.

"If they want to shower us with gifts, I see no reason to stop them. And how long will it take to inspect this tool?"

"Alec mentioned that it would take about a month."

"A month... Is there a chance that it'll take any longer than that?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I cannot be sure."

That raised another question in Allen's mind. *Huh? Is it an issue if we stay longer than a month? Will something happen?*

"Then tell him to finish the inspection within a month!" Emperor Ignomasu demanded, his voice much louder than before.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Tainomay shouted back.

"Hmm... The world is moving exactly as I wish!"

Emperor Ignomasu grinned as he gazed at the director. Chancellor Ajiray grinned as well.

"So it seems, Your Majesty," he said.

"Princess Carmine of Crevelle also wishes to meet with Duke Doresskarei," Tainomay added.

"What? Doresskarei?" Ignomasu asked.

"Indeed. I believe His Grace is engaged to Princess Carmine."

"I see... Is Doresskarei still alive? Tell me, Father Shinorom."

A priest? I thought he was a researcher or something.

"Ah, yes, I believe he's still alive behind bars," Shinorom replied. "The blood of the Prostia family is quite useful."

Oh, the duke's imprisoned.

"Hmph. I see," Ignomasu muttered.

"What shall we do, Emperor Ignomasu?" Shinorom asked.

"If we still have a month, we don't need to say anything yet."

"Heh heh heh, you've got a mean streak in you, Your Majesty." A smug grin formed on Shinorom's previously blank face. "Crevelle's princess will surely be filled with despair if she discovers that Prostia is in the middle of a rebellion much like the one they faced on the surface. Oh, I'm just *dying* to see her expression when she hears the news!"

Gotcha. So, Ignomasu revolted and caused the downfall of Prostia. Through his Fish D, Allen had learned that some of Prostia's subjects were rebelling, and that the very existence of the empire was at stake. The Summoner tried to confirm the information with Carmine and Iwanam.

"The man called Ignomasu served as both the captain of the royal guard and the general of the imperial army," Iwanam

answered. Allen could not help but think it sounded a lot like the position General Hoba of Albahal filled. “That means the former captain of the royal guards rebelled in Prostia.”

“Goodness! A rebellion?!” Princess Carmine cried, opening her mouth wide with shock as she turned to Allen. “Then what about Duke Doresskarei? And what happened to His Majesty?”

“Doresskarei still seems to be alive,” Allen answered. “I heard that he’s in prison, so I assume he’s trapped somewhere.”

“I’m more shocked about Chancellor Ajiray,” Iwanam muttered. “I never would have imagined that he’d side with the rebels... Is there some sort of reason behind his actions?”

Allen thought back to the Talents and social standings of this world. The lower one’s social rank, the higher the likelihood of them being born with a Talent. Inversely, the higher one’s rank at birth, the lower the chance that they would be born with a Talent.

Furthermore, it did not matter how high a Talentless person raised their level. They stood zero chance against someone with a Talent. Hence, Allen believed that those born in lower social ranks with Talents of higher stars were the most likely to try to usurp the government. But when he had been a student at the Academy and learned about history across the world, he had discovered that while there certainly were cases where people of low rank tried to rebel and overthrow a kingdom or empire, they were few and far between.

This was due in no small part to the monarchs. Kings and emperors wanted to ensure that powerful people with Talents would not have such dangerous ideas, so they enacted policies that treated the Talented well and kept them appeased. Even if someone with a Talent thought about rebelling and had commoners or serfs on their side, if the rulers also had those with Talents on their side, a rebellion could easily be suppressed.

As proof, despite having been born a commoner, Hero Helmios had been granted the title of duke, the highest of noble ranks. He was engaged to the Giamutan emperor’s younger sister as well. Even outside of Giamut, those with high-star Talents often—no, almost always served as members of their nation’s royal guard.

While monarchs spent vast sums of wealth on their royal guard and knight orders to strengthen their defenses, they also wanted to ensure that their armies, filled with people of lower-star Talents but who were Talented nonetheless, would not run wild either. The main forces were thus deployed to the borders to threaten other nations or to fight the Demon Lord Army. This guaranteed that the military would not amass power near the royal capital.

If, despite all these measures, a revolt occurred, the nation would turn to the Five Continent Alliance and enlist help from neighboring countries. Every nation was united under a common enemy—the Demon Lord Army. It was imperative that the Alliance remained a collective and nipped any other threats in the bud. Therefore, rulers with similar vested interests looked out for and supported one another. Needless to say, monarchs were not the only ones concerned with rebellions. Other nobles also paid extra attention to any potential sparks that could ignite revolts within their lands and utilized those with Talents to suppress any problems.

Allen assumed that such knowledge and tactics were hammered into kids who went to the Nobles College, an institution that Cecil's older brother Thomas had attended. *It's weird that a massive empire like Prostia had no systems to quash a rebellion before it had time to blow up. Is there something else going on?* Ignomasu did not come across as cold, calculating, and highly intelligent. Did he truly have the ability to overthrow the government and turn it on its head? Or was there a different mastermind working behind the scenes and pulling all the strings?

"It relieves me to hear that Duke Doresskarei is still alive, but I can't believe he's imprisoned," Carmine murmured worriedly. "Oh dear, what shall we do?"

Allen remained quiet, ruminating over his thoughts.

"Lord Alec, won't you save Duke Doresskarei?" she begged.

"Huh? Y-Yeah, of course," Allen replied. "I've got some questions for him anyway, so I'll find him."

Hmm... Convenient side quest acquired. After he accepted Princess Carmine's request, he deployed several Fish Ds throughout Prostia to confirm the situation while searching for the prison where

Duke Doresskarei was being held.

Three days had passed. Allen had searched every nook and cranny of the palace, but to no avail. He changed his angle and decided to investigate a different space that he found within the palace. *I think it was around here...* His mind was still filled with thoughts of Talents and social standings as he used his Fish D to investigate the palace. His Fish C was a carnivorous shark, and he knew that it would raise concerns among the merfolk. Meanwhile, Fish A and B were too large and stood out like a sore thumb.

The Fish D swam to a location that starkly contrasted the rest of the palace. It was a dark and dismal place with thick walls and tiny windows. One could barely see the outside world from within, and the water there was stagnant. Because it was devoid of people, one could act in secret, allowing the Fish D to slip through the wall with little worry about prying eyes.

After the Summon swam through several walls and literally cut through the hallways, it spotted a spiral staircase. The hallway at the bottom of the stairs stretched out a ways, then took a sharp turn. At the end of the hallway, Allen could see the shadow of a merfolk. *Guess they've still got people here. Every place needs its guards.*

Allen had his Fish D stop before it reached the end of the hallway and slip into the wall before continuing. *Fish D's ability to swim through walls really shines during infiltration missions like this.* Of course, the wall did not allow water or air to pass through, so generally, it was hard to hear any sounds. But perhaps because the merfolk guards were close to the walls, Fish D could pick up on their conversation.

"Hey, your shift's over," one of them said. "You better not be sleeping too much. Don't want the warden on your case, do ya?"

"Hmm? Hey! Don't kick me!" another wailed.

"Shut your trap. Your shift's over. It's our turn."

"Thanks. All right, we're counting on you."

Hmm, guess we've got more than one guard. Damn. This'll get tough if they spot me, so I'll have to move quickly. He had Fish D approach a wall and only pop its mouth out into the hall, opening its jaw wide. Bird A, which had been nestled inside Fish D's mouth, flew

out. The bird struggled to move around in the water, but it managed to use its Build Nest Ability. Naturally, one of the two merfolk soldiers caught sight of this puzzling scene and approached the Bird A.

"Huh? What kind of fish is this?" the merfolk muttered.

Neither guard noticed Allen and his friends teleporting there using Return to Nest, however. They never got the chance either, because Allen immediately had an Insect E use Scale Powder, putting them to sleep. *Good. I tested it earlier, but I can safely use my Summons' Abilities even underwater. But I feel like they might patch this out at some point.* Allen was in the ocean depths, a couple kilometers underwater. He had already done some testing, so he knew that his Summons could operate just fine. But as he had seen with his Bird A, while non-Fish-type Summons could use their Abilities and Awakened Abilities without issue, they struggled to move around nimbly as they did in the air.

It was not that these Summons had been specifically designed to be able to move underwater. It was far more likely that no one had expected them to be used in the ocean and thus had not created a setting that prohibited it. *That reminds me, I think I'm the first person in the world to have the Summoner Talent. I was told that the deities were doing various tests to tweak this class, so there's a good chance that my Summons might get nerfed in the future.*

"Looks like it went well," Shia said in a low voice, breaking the silence. She had transformed into a gold-and-black-spotted merfolk.

Equipped with brass knuckles and capable of making agile movements despite her new look, she was the perfect fit for this plan. However, the Insect E's Scale Powder had worked a lot better than Allen had expected, so there had been no need for her to knock the living daylights out of the guards.

"Guess it wasn't your time yet, Joanna," Allen replied, making sure to call her by her fake name. "Let's hurry ahead."

"Right," Shia replied.

They ditched the sleeping guards and swam down the hallway. At the end was an iron grate that seemed to guard a small room. When the duo approached it, they found that a hallway stretched out on either side of them, and dozens of rooms with iron grates lined the

area. The iron grate in front of them housed a man with his arms bound by chains. A flounder merfolk in his mid-twenties glared back. *Though to be honest, I'm not really sure how to determine a merfolk's age.*

"Who's there?" the merfolk growled.

"Are you Sir Doresskarei?" Allen asked. The Summoner knew that Julius Doresskarei, the eldest son of House Doresskarei, was not yet the head of the house and thus had no title. There was no need to refer to him as "Duke" yet.

"I am," Julius replied. "And you are?"

Ah, found him.

"We're here to retrieve you," Allen said, approaching the iron bars with Shia.

"R-Retrieve me?" Julius asked. "I don't quite understand."

Allen ignored the question and inspected the bars, only to realize that they were made of mithril. *Which means the duke has a Talent.* When someone with a Talent was restrained, they could easily break free of normal shackles either by using their skills or with sheer force. Oftentimes, the chains or bars used were made of tough minerals like mithril, preventing them from ever breaking free. Allen had studied up on the topic when he had built a prison on Hardcore User Island. He had assumed that there would come a time when he would need to imprison people with Talents.

"Joanna, would you do the honors?" Allen asked.

Shia nodded and gripped the grate.

"Hmph!" she grunted.

The back of her merfolk body and arms doubled in size, and grotesque cracks echoed through the water. As she pulled on the bars, the mithril began to creak before it bent under her grip, creating a hole big enough for a merfolk to pass through.

"What?!" Julius gasped with wide eyes. Even those with Talents could not easily bend mithril with their bare hands.

Shia had more than enough power to begin with, but she was equipped with rings and necklaces that raised her Attack to nearly 20,000. She approached Julius Doresskarei, grabbed the mithril shackles that restrained him, and broke them.

"Did you really come to save me?" the noble asked.

"We did," Allen replied. "We must leave here at once. Is there anyone else we should free?"

"Please allow the empress and her children to flee before I do," Julius requested. "They should be in the room next door."

"Got it."

Allen left that cell and visited the one next to it. When he peered inside, he spotted a merfolk lady dressed in the same rags as Julius, but she was calm and collected.

"Did you really come to save us?" she asked.

"Please keep your voice down, Your Majesty," Allen said. "We'll save you in a flash."

He asked Shia to bend the mithril grate and snap the shackles as she had done before. She did so at each of the cells that lined the corridor, thus saving the imperial family and thirty of their loyal retainers.

"This should be everyone," Allen said. "Joanna, if you would, please."

"All right," Shia replied with a nod, then entered the cell where Julius had once been imprisoned.

"What are you gonna do?" Julius asked.

"We'll destroy this wall," Allen said. "It'll be loud, so I'd encourage you to cover your ears."

We need to be careful about our escape. Fish Summons could generally slip through walls and infiltrate cells if needed. Bird A could also use Build Nest in them as necessary. If a simple escape was the goal, there was no need to destroy the mithril grates and bust through the wall. In fact, teleportation and slipping through walls would leave behind the least amount of evidence and no trail.

However, that method would surely raise eyebrows. It would cast eyes of doubt upon Princess Carmine, Duke Doresskarei's fiancée, and Allen, the special ambassador plenipotentiary, both of whom had just forcibly made their way into Prostia. But if they used brute force and destroyed the grates and walls, Allen hoped that others would assume this was an inside job of sorts.

"Pulverizing Strike!" Shia said, activating her skill.

While Allen could have raised his Attack to give himself higher raw stats than Shia, the beastkin was still the perfect fit for the role. When she activated her skill, which depended on her Attack, she could exert far more power than the Summoner ever could.

BOOOOM. Shia's fist blew a large hole through the wall, and the deafening rumble caused the surrounding water to quake.

Shock waves traveled much farther through water without dissipating than they did through air. As a result, the nearby merfolk almost fainted—they had felt almost the full force of the blow. Allen had not known that and thus had not predicted this outcome; his high level and high Endurance meant he had felt a slight jolt and nothing more.

"Now then, we should head out," Allen said.

Though they created a hole, that did not mean it would be used. He used Bird A's Awakened Ability, Return to Nest, and took all thirty unconscious merfolk to the living room of the house he had been loaned near the palace. Grass C's Potherb helped them regain both their consciousness and their cool. The empress was the first to stir, and she slowly gazed all around her before she opened her mouth.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"We're in a safe place, Your Majesty," Allen replied.

The terrifying shock caused the empress to panic a great deal, in stark contrast to the composure she had shown earlier. As Allen tried to calm her down, Princess Carmine, who had been waiting in the house, rushed over.

"Your Majesty, it truly has been a while," she said gently. "Do you remember me? I'm Carmine. Please come with me. I shall prepare a change of clothes for you at once."

The princess handled the empress and her children while Knight Captain Iwanam handled the men. They were guided deeper into the house, leaving only Duke Julius Doresskarei behind.

"I can't say I'm wholly satisfied with your rough way of handling our escape and your recklessness, but I'm grateful that you saved Her Majesty," Julius said. "For that, I thank you."

Allen sized Julius up. The duke had only given his fiancée, Carmine, a passing glance upon their reunion. There had been no

warm embrace or tears like they had yearned to see each other for so long. *That's a bit weird. Is this not a long-awaited reunion?*

"Truth be told, I saved everyone because I wanted to ask you a few questions," Allen said.

"Questions?" Julius asked. "So, you merely saved us for some answers?"

"Correct. I'm actually on the hunt for a beastkin named Beku. Do you know anything about him?"

With that, Allen began to explain his side of the story, including why he had embarked on a rescue mission.

Chapter 5: Chasing Beku

Duke Doresskarei gazed dubiously at Allen as he patiently listened to the boy's story.

"Hmm... I can hardly believe that you lot aren't merfolk, but if Princess Carmine is with you, I have no choice but to trust you," Julius said.

"We came here in pursuit of Beku, who escaped Albahal," Allen explained. "If you know anything at all, even the tiniest bit of information, I'd greatly appreciate it if you could tell me."

"Ah, so you're moving independent of Crevelle's wishes," a calm voice rang out. "Is Crevelle offering you their assistance?"

Allen turned toward the voice and saw the empress standing there. She had cleaned herself up and gotten dressed in a new set of clothes. She was flanked by her children, who had been rescued alongside her, and behind them were the loyal retainers who had also been freed from their cells. The duke, Princess Carmine, and everyone else knelt to offer their respects, while Allen alone merely bowed his head.

"Precisely, Your Majesty," Allen said gently. "Have you calmed down?"

The empress furrowed her brow for a moment before she opened her mouth once more.

"I-I have. Alec is your name, is it? You've saved us all, and I promise to thank you for what you've done." She then turned to her retainers and asked them to escort her children into a separate room.

"Please give us some time to catch our breath. We'll handle things from here."

While Allen was unsure of how exactly the empress would offer her gratitude, he made no attempt to either accept or deny her offer. *Damn, I've gotten myself involved with another nation's political*

affairs. But I guess there's nothing I can do about it. It's all to pursue my goal. Anyway, I'm glad the kids are safe.

Allen was the son of a serf in Ratash; despite having lived in poverty, he had enjoyed a happy childhood. However, he carried many of his memories and values from his previous life. He believed that people were born equal and could not help but question the norms of this world, where there were slaves and kings—social statuses that were dictated upon birth. Yet Allen had no desire to use those values to change the way of a nation or the world. Though his Summoning level had increased, he had gained powerful allies, and he had an army of five thousand under his command, he had no intention of shifting the status quo. Perhaps he could actually change the mindset of a nation if he wished, but nothing compelled him to do so.

Frankly, it was because of his lack of interest in domestic affairs. He felt that those decisions should be left to those in power, like emperors or kings, as well as the citizens, who made up the majority of a nation. However, if meddling in such affairs allowed him to defeat the Demon Lord Army, he would involve himself as much as he pleased. For example, him assisting Shia in becoming the Beast King implied that he was interfering with Albahal's affairs. He did so because he wanted to strengthen his party, and doing so would ultimately allow him to defeat the Demon Lord Army.

Other than that, the only reason I'd lend a hand is if the request comes from a friend or someone I owe a debt to. He glanced at the empress's kids, who were being led out of the room by her subjects. The rescue operation had been carried out partly to ask Duke Doresskarei about Beku, but also because Princess Carmine had begged Allen for help. He had received a Holy Orb of Macris from Crevelle and felt that he owed a fair bit to the kingdom. He was not against the idea of offering his aid.

"Your Majesty, surely you could do with some rest," Julius said, still kneeling on the floor.

"Don't worry about me," the empress replied. "At ease, everyone. Please sit back, and will you kindly answer Alec's question?"

She sat on an algae sofa on the side of the living room, and

everyone else stood up to relax.

"Most certainly," Julius replied. "Let's continue our conversation, Alec. Unfortunately, I know not of a man named Beku. Even if he's arrived in Prostia somehow, I was already confined in my cell."

"I see..." Allen muttered in response. "How long have you been in that cell?"

"Around three months."

What? Then the revolt must've happened while we were at the Five Continent Alliance conference.

"I'm sure it was very trying for you," Allen said. "How in the world did a rebellion occur anyway?"

"The ringleader is General Ignomasu, a man with great honor who once was allowed to protect His Majesty," Julius answered. "He served as the captain of the royal guard as well. Just three months ago, he suddenly had the knights serving him seize the palace."

According to the duke, Patlanta had the royal guard, which protected the palace, the First Imperial Army, which protected the entirety of the city, and the Second Imperial Army, which guarded the nearby cities and towns. There were around 12,000 soldiers within the First Imperial Army, while the Second Imperial Army boasted a force of 25,000. The royal guard was a small legion of three thousand, but it was made up of those with higher-star Talents and superb equipment that surpassed those of the other two armies by leaps and bounds. The tiny force that was the royal guard was on par with the raw power of the Second Imperial Army, the largest force in the empire.

That same group had suddenly partaken in a rebellion within the palace, capturing the building for their own in a flash. The Prostian emperor had been killed almost immediately. The rest of the imperial family and their attendants had been swiftly captured, and among those prisoners was Duke Doresskarei, who had ties to the imperial family. Duke Doresskarei's father, the acting duke of the house, had been killed by the royal guard at the start of the rebellion when he had resisted.

"It's because he was the captain that he was able to occupy the palace so quickly," Allen concluded.

"That's exactly it," Julius agreed. "And the rest of the royal guard followed his every order. I suspect that Ignomasu climbed his way up to captain with this goal in mind. He might have been a commoner, but his skills were impressive, and we pushed him up to a high rank. Alas, it seems that worked against us."

Ah, so he's a former commoner. Still, the success of any revolt depends on the person's character. Of the three Prostian armies, the emperor would have been most wary of a revolt by the royal guard, which resided in the same palace as him. He gathered people with exceptional Talents and provided them with the best gear, but any ruler knew that while that sort of army would serve as a reliable ally, it would be a huge threat if it became an enemy. That possibility constantly loomed in a ruler's mind. With that in mind, it was quite obvious that the emperor would ensure that the First and Second Imperial Armies were strong enough to keep the royal guard in check.

In other words, Ignomasu was a man of skill and character who had somehow managed to suppress those two armies without anyone detecting his plot. The revolt itself might have occurred a few months ago, but surely, he had been making preparations since long before that.

"Do you know what happened after you were imprisoned?" Allen asked.

"After that traitor Ignomasu murdered the emperor, he holed himself up in the palace," Julius explained. "He claimed to have honorably received an imperial decree from the empress to succeed the late emperor. And then, he went after Her Majesty's children. Ignomasu took Princess Rapsonil, the eldest daughter, and used her as a shield. Her Majesty was ordered to take her own life, and after much humiliation, she had no other choice but to accept his claim to the throne."

The empress, who had been sitting resolutely on the sofa while listening to Julius's story, now quietly faced the ground.

"Ignomasu then claimed to be the emperor and demanded the respect of the imperial armies," Julius continued. "He declared that because he had become the emperor, if they showed any signs of

disloyalty toward him, they would be branded traitors. The imperial armies must have thought that they couldn't turn the tide of battle. They fought back for a month, but ultimately, they surrendered—or, more precisely, they returned to their posts as the imperial army. How ironic, right?"

So this guy just ruined an empire with as little bloodshed as possible? Is it that easy? Wait... Allen was grateful to hear so many details, but Julius's knowledge was puzzling.

"You seem awfully knowledgeable about your empire's affairs despite having been imprisoned. Do you have an informant lurking in the palace or something?" Allen asked.

"Naturally," Julius replied. "Ignomasu didn't kill everyone serving the palace. In fact, he let quite a few survive. And these people have served the imperial family for many years."

Makes sense. When General Ignomasu started his rebellion, he must have thrown many high-ranking nobles into prison, but a majority of them and their retainers had likely acted obedient so that they could avoid imprisonment. Perhaps there were still a few members of the royal guard who were not totally on board with this revolt. No matter the case, some had sided with the former Prostia Empire and leaked information to Duke Doresskarei.

"I see..." Shia mused. "Which means that there must be a force willing to fight against this Ignomasu, and preparations are underway."

"Unfortunately, most of the people in the palace take a neutral stance," Julius said. "More precisely, they fear Ignomasu's power and follow his orders. Of course, there are still people who leak information to me, but I've told them not to do anything yet. No matter how much we want to drag that accursed man off the throne, now isn't the time."

Wait, will those opposing Ignomasu run wild if they learn that everyone has been freed from their cells? Even so, they don't stand a chance against the powerful Talents the members of the royal guard have. Where do I go from here? Only then did Allen realize that he had gone on quite the tangent, and he steered the conversation back on course.

"I think I'm beginning to piece together the rebellion. As I mentioned earlier, I'm actually in pursuit of Beku."

"Ah, so you did," Julius replied. "But as I've also stated before, I don't know who he is, and I've never heard anything related to him. The name of Albahal has reached the ears of our empire in the watery depths. Should anyone have offered any sort of assistance to the Beast Crown Prince, I'd surely know of it."

"Then are you stating that your empire is completely uninvolved with the revolt in Albahal?" Shia interrupted.

"Joanna—I mean, Princess Shia. I haven't said that."

The duke grew more polite the moment he began speaking to the Beast Princess. When Allen had explained his situation and how he was Mimicking the form of merfolk, he had also mentioned that Shia was the Beast Princess. *Yeah, the duke sounds a lot more polite with Shia than he was with me.* It seemed only natural, however. As the Beast Princess, Shia held claim to the throne of Albahal, the Country of Beastkin, whereas Allen was merely a random boy with no formal position.

"What do you mean?" Shia asked.

"I received a report that when Ignomasu forced the imperial army into submission, he hinted that he had forces other than the royal guard under his control. What's more, those forces are apparently made up of beastkin," Julius revealed.

"You mean my broth—I mean, Beku might be involved with that?"

"Who knows? All I can say is that Ignomasu is planning to invade the nations above the water and that he has allies who will help him in his endeavor. If we put two and two together, he likely has a squad or even an army of beastkin on standby within Prostia or nearby. The moment the imperial army so much as considers raising a finger against Ignomasu, the royal guard will fight back and call their beastkin allies, thereby sandwiching the imperial army between two powerful forces."

Hmm, I see. That's why both the First and Second Imperial Armies have been obeying Ignomasu.

"Ignomasu even said that if the imperial army showed their allegiance to him and once again became a force under the Prostia

Empire, they would head to the surface with his allies to invade the continent," Julius explained. "He suggested conquering one of the five continents while they're still exhausted from fending off the Demon Lord Army. I've been told that this is the main reason he was able to fend off the First and Second Imperial Armies, along with the support that nearby nobles rallied, creating a massive force of over 100,000 soldiers."

"Are you telling me your empire's army believed the honeyed words and baseless nonsense that man spouted?" Shia asked.

"Unfortunately so... Needless to say, there were a handful of soldiers and nobles from nearby lands who came to defeat Ignomasu, claiming that we should fight to end the traitor. They left the army or returned to their land."

Yeah, fair enough. This world's kingdoms and empires all had their own armies. They did not exist simply to defend their own nations. Allen had learned about the history of the world at the Academy, but he had noticed that war had never really stopped throughout history. In the past, neighboring nations had fought over borders, food, water, minerals, and other resources. There was no end to the clashes, and the causes of them were also infinite. As nations continued to invade others, there would be one that clinched several victories to expand their rule and successfully reign supreme. This resulted in hegemonic empires such as Giamut.

In the shadows of these massive nations were species like the beastkin, who were subjected to prejudice and racism. They had fled from the Central Continent to Garlesia, where they had formed Albahal, the Country of Beastkin, along with several similar nations. Beast Princess Shia's goal was to unify the Garlesian Continent and create the first empire of beastkin, but that required her to conquer the land of birdkin and other nations, suppressing them with force. Indeed, the seeds of hegemony were beginning to sprout in her plan as well.

The important thing to note was that there had been no large-scale wars between global superpowers or that had involved multiple nations for the past several decades. This was due to the Demon Lord Army, a common enemy for the world at large. Countless

humans had fallen victim to the Demon Lord Army's attacks, and humans were not the only victims. Elves, dwarves, beastkin, birdkin, and even merfolk had been slaughtered by the millions by this force of evil.

It was Crevelle that had taken the fatal blow on behalf of the merfolk. The Prostia Empire was at the bottom of the sea and had not gone to war for many decades after conquering the ocean floor. It had not directly fought the Demon Lord Army either. Had Crevelle been unaffected by the Church of Gushara debacle, it also would not have clashed with the Demon Lord Army.

This was largely because Crevelle worked under the orders of Prostia. The kingdom had used the Holy Orb to gain some land above water, but one could easily have construed that as Prostia trying to get its foot in the door. Crevelle was simply its first claim to territory on the surface, and the empire was not against employing a dominant force to get what it desired.

"You mentioned that Ignomasu was formerly a commoner, correct?" Shia asked.

"He was bestowed with the Talent of Spear King," Julius started with a nod, "and one can easily see that he's polished his skills. But I see now that he did it all in order to join His Majesty's royal guard and set his plan into motion."

That's a four-star Talent, right? I think it's a rank above Spear Lord.

"Naturally, I had no idea about that when he became the general," Julius went on. "He wasn't just known for his expert skills with the spear; since he was a former commoner, he empathized with and understood the needs of the people. He was well respected by our citizens, but perhaps that caused him to become greedy and yearn for things beyond his means."

"'Beyond his means'?" Shia parroted questioningly. "What do you mean by that?"

"He not only caused the emperor's precious blood to be shed, but he's even made Princess Rapsonil his empress! He's trying to make that precious blood his own!" the duke exclaimed, his voice raised in anger.

Right, I think I heard about a princess being trapped in the imperial villa. When Allen had used his Fish D to investigate the place, he had learned that a princess was confined to the imperial villa.

There were really only two paths that a traitor who led a successful rebellion could take: end the bloodline of the previous ruler or continue it by taking it over. Both paths allowed the traitor to justify their actions, but the latter allowed for a smoother transition and declaration that they had rightfully claimed the throne. Clearly, that was the route Ignomasu had chosen.

"That reminds me..." Julius said. "Princess Shia, Sir Alec, couldn't you rescue Princess Rapsonil as you've rescued Her Majesty and her children?"

"I believe so, but we've just kicked up a fuss. We should wait a bit longer and strike when we've got the perfect opportunity," Allen replied.

I've already told you my real name, haven't I? No, I should stop worrying about silly affairs. Personally, I don't really care if we save another person, but we just blew up the palace. We should lay low for a while. While Allen was not against the idea of saving the princess, if he caused any more trouble, he feared that Ignomasu and his faction would catch on to his antics. *What should I do...*

"This makes no sense," Shia chimed in. "Duke Doresskarei's story and the information I have don't quite match up. In fact, they don't fit together at all."

"What do you mean, Joanna?" Allen asked.

"All right, write what I'm about to say in the grimoire you're so proud of, Al...ec."

And so, Allen listened carefully to Shia's side of the story and organized his notes in his grimoire.

- Report 1: General Rudo claims that when Beku started a revolt, he had the aid of merfolk.
- Report 2: Crevelle Kingdom claims that it played no role in Albahal's revolt.

- Report 3: Ignomasu's revolt in the Prostia Empire is on the cusp of succeeding.
- Report 4: Duke Doresskarei claims that Ignomasu has beastkin allies ready to invade nations above water.

Wait, what? She's right, this doesn't add up, Allen thought, agreeing with Shia's doubts. At the same time, Cecil, who was peering at the grimoire from the side, voiced doubts of her own.

"Yeah, this *is* weird," she said. "Are we certain about any of these claims anyway?"

"Nope," Allen answered, confirming her suspicion. "General Rudo claimed to have collected dozens of merfolk bodies, but all we've got is his word."

Luke, who was a short distance away and looked bored, suddenly raised his voice.

"I mean, someone's lying, right?"

"What?!" Julius cried, instantly offended. "I'm not lying!"

"No one said you were."

While the dark elf child joked around, Allen thought the situation over. If every single one of these claims were true, it meant Beku was in the Prostia imperial palace, either providing military aid so that Ignomasu could take over the empire or acting as a deterrent so that the imperial armies would not directly clash with the usurper. Naturally, it was Beku's way of repaying his debt to Ignomasu, who would have helped him with his revolt in Albahal.

Working under that assumption, the Crown Beast Prince would be at Ignomasu's side, waiting for the merfolk to complete his takeover of the Prostia Empire. Once Ignomasu seized full control, Beku would assist with the invasion above water and take Albahal, which refused to make him Beast King.

But if any of the info we were given was false... If General Rudo was lying, the merfolk might not have been involved in the revolt in Albahal. However, that went against both Albahal's formal inquiry into Crevelle about the merfolk soldiers who had attacked the Albahalan palace and their doubts about the origin of those merfolk.

If Crevelle was lying, it meant that the nation had dispatched

merfolk soldiers to Albahal. But that went against Ignomasu's claims that he had received support from the beastkin. Meanwhile, if Duke Doresskarei's story was a lie, it made no sense to Allen that the merfolk had lent their aid to Beku's revolt in the first place. The Summoner had seen and heard Ignomasu via a Fish D and felt that the traitor had not lied about the forces under his control.

"There are just so many unknown factors," Allen mumbled. "It feels like the truth is hidden somewhere behind all these claims. It's been a while since I've felt this sort of rush."

"What are you on about?" Cecil asked.

He ignored her question as he recalled having hit a similar roadblock in the past. *The last time I felt this way was when I couldn't find the stone slate or that gold key.* Allen thought back to two events in his past life. The first was when he had sunk over a hundred hours into finding a stone slab, and the second, his search for a gold key that was displayed as a single pixel on the screen. He had agonized over these items.

During times like those, he would speak to every person or NPC that he could find to piece all the information together and uncover hints about what the game was getting at. However, there had been times when he had simply lacked information, could not trigger the dialogue for more information, or misunderstood the information he received, making a quest incompletable. That had been less of an issue when it had happened during side quests, but if it had been while he was progressing through the main story, it had left him locked out of the rest of the game. In other words, he had gotten screwed.

And back when there weren't any internet forums to look up guides on or boards to ask questions about games, I was just shit out of luck. Man, that takes me back.

"We haven't found the truth yet," Allen muttered. He retraced his thoughts, wondering if he had missed something or misunderstood what he had heard.

Chapter 6: Joint Practice in the Rank S Dungeon

The Rank S dungeon in Baukis was also known as the Tower of Tribulation. True to its name, it was a massive tower that loomed over its surroundings. There was no place for magic ships to dock, so a terminal for them had been built nearby. In addition to being a boarding and disembarkation area for foreign adventurers hoping to clear the dungeon, the terminal was where merchants waited for deliveries of precious gear and magic tools. It also served as a hub for the more than 100,000 adventurers who lived in the city that was the dungeon's first floor, allowing them to purchase their daily necessities.

Four massive magic ships had arrived in the terminal just yesterday, and a thousand fully equipped soldiers had stepped off the vehicles. They had followed the orders of a man with sky-blue hair and his companions—Hero Helmios and his party, Sacred. They had headed for the base located in the city. It was quite a distance away from the temple that teleported people to the actual dungeon, but it had ample space for the thousand troops that would be using it. The Allen Army's base was nearby as well, and a huge welcoming party was held between the two bases the night the Hero Army had arrived.

The next morning, the main members of the Hero Army visited the Allen Army's base. Keel, Krena, Meruru, and Dogora welcomed the visitors and ushered them into the meeting room, where a meeting regarding the iron golem hunt set for that afternoon was held. This was not Helmios and his friends' first visit to this base. They had visited the place several times to exchange information, and today was the final confirmation before their joint training would commence.

"Looks like there aren't any changes," Helmios said. "I'm looking forward to the joint training session."

"We are as well," Keel replied.

Beside the hero sat Rosetta, who had received a class promotion and become a Phantom Thief King.

"Hey, why don't we delay the joint training session for a few days?" she suggested. "Isn't it a bit cruel to the army if we force them to head to battle the day after the welcoming party?"

"What? We had fun yesterday, didn't we?" Krena replied.

"Sure did," Meruru agreed.

"That's not the point!" Rosetta cried, burying her face in her hands. "Ugh, Allen's weird in his own way, but you guys are pretty odd too."

"We're just practicing today," Keel said. "Just testing how we work together and all. I doubt there will be any major issues."

"Are you sure about that?" Rosetta asked with a dubious glare.

"Yeah," Dogora replied firmly.

"The best form of training is through practice. We have to actually fight together and test things out," Dverg, the one-eyed swordsman who had been promoted to Sword King, added.

Helmios nodded as well, and Rosetta let out a loud sigh but said nothing more.

"Then let's go," the Hero said.

They all stood up and left the base. Everyone was already prepared to head for the Rank S dungeon, and the soldiers were waiting outside. The first squads of the Allen and Hero Armies consisted of a total of thirty-four troops. They were all fully equipped. Combined with the four No-life Gamers that made up Team Keel and the ten members of Sacred, a total of forty-eight people headed for the temple to be transported to the second floor of the dungeon.

"Whoa!" Krena gasped. "I knew everyone would notice you right away, Mr. Helmios! You're so popular!"

As they marched, she could hear people whispering Helmios's name. The adventurers in the Rank S dungeon had heard about Hero Helmios's arrival the night before. His silky, light-blue hair and

the orichalcum armor that peeked out from under his mantle made his identity clear. Conversely, despite Allen and his party having cleared the Rank S dungeon, many assumed that they had simply tagged along with Beast Prince Zeu and Sacred. Because of that, the No-life Gamers were lesser known.

"Heh heh, thank you," Helmios said affably.

They arrived at the temple and lined up in a row, firmly declining the offer to cut the line. After some waiting, it finally came their turn to use the cube and head to the second floor.

"Would you like to send multiple parties to the same area?"

The Rank S dungeon and the dungeons at the Academy utilized teleporting cubes to transport challengers to different floors or blocks. Even separate parties could teleport together so long as the total number of people did not exceed forty-eight. If the total was over forty-eight, they could teleport to different areas of the same floor and meet up. Only up to forty-eight people could be teleported to the block on the final floor with three iron golems; the block on the final floor with Goldino, the final boss; and death zones, however. Furthermore, regardless of party size, any members not within twenty-five meters of the teleporting cube would be left behind.

"That's fine," Keel said. "Today, the No-life Gamers will be the center of this mission."

"Very well."

With that, Keel and the others were teleported to the second floor. He immediately took a bag out of his pocket. It was filled with medals that were required to head to the next floor.

"You sure have a lot of those," Helmios observed.

"We do," Keel replied. "Our party and our army have been collecting them as a practice exercise."

"From here on, we'll help collect those medals too. That way we can tackle these floors together."

"Exactly."

Hunting iron golems meant heading to the final floor of the

dungeon. Once a party reached it, they could stay there for days if they had enough supplies. Since Allen was not with them and they could not use his grimoire's Storage, everyone had to carry their own weapons and items. That meant they would have to teleport to the final floor again and again, bringing more supplies each time, which would cost them a fair number of medals.

Of the five thousand troops that comprised the Allen Army, half were training in the Rank S dungeon. As part of that, they were making rounds from the second to the fourth floors to collect medals. The hidden cube could possibly teleport them to a death zone, so they were discouraged from approaching it.

"It's been half a year since we last came here..." Rosetta said as the group finished teleporting to the final floor. "What the?!"

She emitted a gasp when she spotted Merus, his eyes like those of a dead fish despite him not being under the effects of Mimic.

"What? That was rude," he said.

Under Allen's orders, Merus had been creating healing herbs while on the final floor. Summons never got tired and required no sleep or food, but Merus still had memories of his time as the First Angel. As a result, the psychological damage he had sustained was significant.

"H-He's the real deal... The First Angel, Merus."

The soldiers of the Hero Army gasped as they spoke his name. He was known the world over.

"*Former* First Angel," Merus corrected. He sounded exhausted.

"Lord Merus..." Saintess Tabatha of Sacred began, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Why are you here?"

"I'm just a Summon now. I was forced to agree to quite a few unreasonable requests when I was an angel too, though. In any case, don't mind me," Merus replied. He then turned to Dogora. "Here's today's share. Take it with you."

With that, he stood up, leaving the healing items on the ground.

"Thanks," Dogora said as he crouched down to collect them.

The angel did not even turn to face Dogora as he made his way toward one of the walls. There, a farm that could produce Seeds of Magic, Potherbs, Blessings of Heaven, and Silver and Gold Beans

had been set up. Allen primarily used Seeds of Magic, but he wanted to provide for the rest of the Allen Army's needs, so he was having Merus use Grass-type Summons to create healing items. It was something he had been doing for quite a while now. He was only freed from the drudgery to fight Goldino, the final floor boss, but that was unfortunately limited to once per day.

This was all so that Allen could reach Summoning Lvl. 9. Merus had been promised that he could rest once it was reached, and he had no choice but to blindly believe the Summoner's words. Recently, however, he had started to lose faith in that promise.

"Is this really necessary to defeat the Demon Lord Army?" Helmios wondered. He grimaced as though he had stumbled upon something he should not have. "Either way, it's horrible."

Frankly, Keel was not keen on forcing Merus to work such long, unreasonable hours. The Summoner's orders were absolute when it came to his Summons, however, so Keel could only watch on with pity.

"Now then, shall we go to the iron room?" Keel offered.

He did not know what else to say as he watched Merus walk away, and decided to use the cube to head to the iron golems. A moment later, two iron golems, each a hundred meters tall, towered in front of the group.

"Whoa! They're huge!" a soldier of the Hero Army gasped.

Most of them were too stunned by the golems' overwhelming size. Even Rank A monsters were rarely so large. Dragon types were generally massive, but they still tended not to exceed thirty meters in height, and even the largest ones were around the sixty-meter mark. Clearly, the iron golems were completely outside the normal range of expectations, and one could safely assume that they were practically Rank S monsters.

"Don't worry. Today's just practice," Keel said.

Despite his reassurance, some of the Hero Army troops had only just received their class promotions and were still fairly low-level. Needless to say, their skill levels were not high either, so they could not be blamed for their fear.

Every soldier had received a free set of adamantite gear that the

Allen Army no longer needed. Additionally, like Helmios's Sacred, each had been given rings that increased their strongest stat by +5,000 and a necklace that added another +3,000 to the stat. They had all thus had their strongest stat increased by a total of +13,000 through items alone. This generous distribution of equipment was not solely to prevent any casualties during training, though. There was a specific reason their stats had to be increased by +13,000.

"Rohomet, please proceed as planned," Keel said.

A man dressed in sorcerer robes nodded. Bestowed with the four-star Talent of Shaman Wizard King, Rohomet was a vital member of the group who helped ensure that training proceeded as smoothly as Allen had planned.

"R-Right," Rohomet said. "I need to change their attribute to wind, right? My skill level is low, so I can't guarantee it'll go well, but..."

"That's just fine," Keel reassured. "Iron golems won't move unless we approach them or our skills are successful. Even if you fail, you can redo it as many times as it takes."

Still, the other forty-six members of the group kept their weapons at the ready and prepared their skills, swiftly getting into formation. The purpose of this practice training session was to see if it would go well. If it failed for one reason or another, everyone would need to go back to the drawing board and fix any issues.

A short while after the Five Continent Alliance conference, Allen had received a message from Helmios about his Hero Army. Giamut was quite serious about making this plan a reality, and Helmios had mentioned that the empire would sink a fair bit of money and personnel into this mission. While Allen was not sure just how his own army would grow, he thought it was best if the Hero Army compensated for the parts that the Allen Army lacked.

The Allen Army was composed of beastkin, elves, dark elves, and dwarves, Each excelled in their different fields—beastkin utilized their agility and were adept at close combat, elves communicated with spirits to cast healing spells and buffs, dark elves used spirits to attack and debuff, and dwarves used their hardy bodies or the sturdy bodies of their golems to act as tanks.

By combining their strong points, they would become greater than the sum of their parts; each species could cover for what the others lacked. Allen knew that teamwork would be difficult at first, but if they all clicked together, they would open themselves up for more flexible plans. This did not mean that they no longer had any weak points, however, and the Summoner had thought long and hard about where they lacked. He had recalled his battle against Goldino and his first clash against Demonic Deity Bask. Thanks to Merus's Endow Element, the Gamers had been able to launch attacks with attributes that were beneficial for them, allowing them to defeat their powerful opponents.

When they had fought Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, Merus had had his hands full dealing with Kyubel, a Greater Demonic Deity, thereby preventing him from using Endow Element on other enemies. This had cornered the No-life Gamers to the point that they had been on the brink of defeat. Allen wanted another person to learn how to use Endow Element, so he had asked Helmios to include quite a few Shamans in his army. Shamans specialized in changing attributes of their enemies, and could apply buffs and debuffs as well. At one star, they would be Shaman Mages. At two stars, they were known as Shaman Wizards, at three stars, they became Shaman Archwizards, and at four stars, Shaman Wizard Kings. If those with the Talent were trained well, both the Allen Army and the Hero Army would be able to maneuver skillfully around the battlefield.

Helmios had immediately picked up on what Allen was getting at and swiftly gathered a squad of three hundred Shamans. There were only a few Shaman Wizard Kings in the mix following the class promotions, but many had managed to at least become Shaman Archwizards. They situated themselves in the center of their squad and carefully analyzed their allies fighting around them. The Shamans buffed their allies accordingly while debuffing and changing the weak element of their enemies to suit their needs.

Rohomet was in charge of this practice training session. In battle, his allies would protect him while he buffed them. Once everyone got into formation, Helmios and Keel nodded. Rohomet wiped his

hand, sweaty from nervousness, on his robe before raising his staff and activating his skill.

"Here I go..." Rohomet said. "Endow Wind!"

VWOOM. A low rumble echoed throughout the floor as the two iron golems began to move. Rohomet had nailed his skill on the first try. The massive, hundred-meter-tall golems made him inch back in shock, but Dogora rushed past him from behind.

"Krena, take care of the one on the right," Dogora ordered. "I'll be the wall. Meruru, take the left."

He gazed up at the iron golem and drew his two axes, one in each hand. They hung menacingly at his sides as he rushed ahead, while Krena and Meruru also ran past Rohomet.

"Gotcha!" Krena said. "Don't push yourself, Dogora!"

"I'm on it!" Meruru shouted.





The three charged at the iron golems as though they were being sucked in by the monsters. Meruru made the first move.

"Tam-Tam, come forth! Elephant Mode!" she yelled.

As she ran ahead, she raised her arm and placed her nose on the inside of her elbow, acting like an elephant waving its trunk around. She then struck a pose like a heroic elephant, and a massive magic circle appeared in the air right in front of her eyes. The circle spun around, and a moment later, a torrent of light shone down. When the glowing pillar dissipated, Tam-Tam, a hihiirokane golem, appeared in all its glory, using a special slate to transform into Elephant Mode.

Movement and special slates needed to be fitted into magic discs to allow golems to move on the ground, in the water, or through the air. While golems needed to take different forms for each type of terrain, the two types of slates had their own unique functions. Special slates were generally strict upgrades from movement slates, and Allen wanted to prioritize gathering special slates to strengthen Meruru. Currently, she had Elephant, Eagle, and Leopard special slates in her arsenal.

Characteristics of Movement Slates

- Transform a golem into a tank, ship, or airplane, allowing it to travel on the ground, in the water, or through the air.
- Do not change the golem's stats.
- Only affect golem movement and have no other special skills.
- Primarily found on the final floor of a Rank A dungeon, or the second and third floors of the Rank S dungeon.
- Require five slate slots.

Characteristics of Special Slates

- Transform a golem into an animal to allow it to travel on the ground, in the water, or through the air.
- Change the golem's stats.
- Grant golems special functions.

- Primarily found on the fourth floor or the final floor (where the boss is) of the Rank S dungeon.
- Require five slate slots.

Stats of Elephant Mode (raises HP and Endurance, but decreases Agility and Luck)

Name: Tam-Tam
Pilot: Meruru
Rank: Hihiirokane Grade
HP: 30,000 + 10,000 (enhancement slates) + 2,400 (Meruru's skill)
MP: 25,000 + 2,400
Attack: 25,000 + 10,000 + 2,400
Endurance: 30,000 + 5,000 + 2,400
Agility: 20,000
Intelligence: 25,000 + 2,400
Luck: 20,000
Function: Hydro Carbon

Slates in Meruru's Magic Disc (Max 20 slots)

- 5 basic hihiirokane slates (5 slots)
- 1 Gigantify slate (2 slots)
- 1 Supergigantify slate (3 slots)
- 5 enhancement slates (5 slots)
- 1 special slate (5 slots)

Meruru's skill level had reached 6, now increasing Tam-Tam's HP, MP, Attack, Endurance, and Intelligence by +2,400 each. On top of that, enhancement slates increased a stat by +5,000 apiece, and Meruru had allotted two each to HP and Attack, and one to Endurance, marking five enhancement slates in total. The strengthened Tam-Tam was further assisted by Meruru herself, who had maxed out her skill levels. Allen had claimed that by his analysis,

she would be able to easily obliterate the iron golems, which had all of their stats at around 22,000. Meruru had not quite understood that logic, but she had obediently nodded along regardless.

Even with all those enhancement slates, she still had five open slots in her magic disc—just enough for her to slot in a special slate. The Elephant slate she currently had equipped allowed her Tam-Tam to use Elephant Mode.

Allen had told her that hihiirokane slates had a wider range of abilities than the mithril slates. He felt that the special slates were a strict upgrade from the movement slates and would help Meruru unleash her full potential. Special slates, unlike movement slates, which merely disassembled a golem and reassembled it to alter how it moved, transformed a golem so that it could perform a specialized function. Meruru had already known that, though, so she had simply nodded along as Allen had explained it.

CLAAANG! Tam-Tam and the iron golem clashed, sending metallic reverberations echoing throughout the floor. As they grappled, Meruru rushed in, being sucked into the crystal cockpit in the center of Tam-Tam's arched chest to take command. She had Tam-Tam feign retreat, baiting the iron golem to charge straight ahead.

"All riiight!" she shouted. "Hydro Carbooon!"

BOOOOM! The two massive parties clashed again, with Tam-Tam headbutting the iron golem's exposed chest, and the sounds of grating metal assaulted everyone's ears. But this time, the iron golem lost its balance and fell backward. Elephant Tam-Tam used its long trunk to expel a waterfall of mud onto its opponent. *SPLOOSH!* The mud covered the iron golem from head to toe before it quickly began to harden. The iron golem tried to fight against the solidifying mud and attempted to raise its arm, but it was glued into place, leaving it completely helpless.

This ability was primarily used to create simple walls or build foundations for fortresses. But once it had been discovered that the golem's Endurance determined the hardness of the mud, it began being used to stop giant monsters' attacks. Rosetta could hardly believe the scene that had unfolded right before her eyes.

"My oh my..." she said with a touch of weariness. "That child

single-handedly sealed the iron golem's movements. Golems are amazing."

Helmios stood beside her and nodded with awe.

"Like Dverg said, we really don't know how a fight will go until we see it with our own eyes," he noted.

"Super Slaughter Strike!" Dogora roared.

The other iron golem lost its balance and fell backward. *BOOOOM!* Tam-Tam's clash with the iron golem earlier had caused the air in the iron room to shake, but this collision had sent tremors through the entire floor. Everyone gazing at the scene jumped from the impact as Krena rushed toward the poor iron golem that was hobbling on one leg and whaled on it.

"Wow! Those two took down that colossal golem by themselves!" Rohomet said in a trembling voice.

The two Gamers had easily defeated an iron golem, an enemy that was on par with a Rank S monster. The sight of it was beyond anything Rohomet could have imagined, and it filled him with fear and anxiety—these children were in a realm of the unknown that he was not prepared to face. The other soldiers of the Hero Army must have felt the same way, as they anxiously turned to their leader, Helmios. Only Sword King Dverg nodded, impressed.

"Dogora, I see that you've attained immense power," he said.

When Dogora had faced the final floor boss of the Rank S dungeon with Dverg, the boy had lacked confidence and was even unstable—he had urged himself to become stronger quickly, and the fact that he had rushed himself had made him panic from impatience. Dverg had known that this mindset would do Dogora no good, but he had purposefully kept quiet about it, understanding why the boy was impatient in the first place. Cornering oneself in that fashion was often the result of a person despising their powerlessness and being embarrassed by themself. One could only break free of that mindset if they gained power and reflected on themself. In other words, Dogora had gained not only power but confidence as well.

Dverg closed his one eye, indulging himself in this feeling of joy. He had lost his other eye during his battle with the Demon Lord

Army. Even when he had used the Blessing of Heaven given to him by Allen while tackling the Rank S dungeon, even when he had received a class promotion, his eye had not regenerated. He had been told that it was due to a curse the Demon Lord Army had used, but even he was not quite sure of the specifics.

Keel, who was behind Dverg and observing the battle with Helmios, opened his mouth.

"Vanguard, it's your turn. Take your spears and throw them at the golem on the right, the one without a leg. I'd like the Shamans to cast their spells on the other golem."

The soldiers of the Hero Army had not reached max level yet, so they had to join the battle before the iron golem was killed to gain some XP. They approached the iron golem that Dogora and Krena had clobbered and threw their spears. At the same time, the Shamans cast their spells on the one Meruru had restrained.

The healers generously regenerated Dogora's, Krena's, and Meruru's HP, despite them being mostly uninjured. When the iron golem on the right eventually stopped moving, the Hero Army soldiers that had joined the fray all gasped with awe and surprise.

"M-My body's overflowing with power!"

"Congrats, everyone," Helmios said. "You all overcame another Trial of the Gods."

Cheers erupted from the army. This time around, Helmios had brought soldiers who were generals or captains. As his army grew, they would be in charge of the other troops. Most of these soldiers had spent more than a decade on the front lines, fighting against the Demon Lord Army to protect their nation. They all knew that they were seasoned warriors.

For that reason, they were abundantly aware of the power that high-ranking monsters possessed, as well as the difficulty of fighting against them. That three children had easily suppressed an iron golem, a foe that was practically a Rank S monster, made their eyes grow wide with shock. It was an absurd display of might. In fact, these iron golems had been used like target practice—an enemy defeated simply to overcome a Trial of the Gods. If anyone were to make such a claim, it would be laughed off as a joke, but as the

evidence stared back at them, the soldiers felt fear and anxiety. Helmios had expected as much and immediately offered his soldiers his praise, wiping away their fears so that they could smoothly ease into the training plan.

Keel understood what Helmios had done and was secretly impressed with the astuteness of the Hero.

"I've got an idea of how these training sessions will flow now," Helmios said, approaching Keel. "We'll split this into morning, afternoon, and night groups, right?"

"Correct," Keel replied.

The Hero Army had joined the iron golem hunting practice session to show what they would do with the Allen Army starting the next day—it was a joint training session, after all. Today was simply a way to get the Hero Army accustomed to the training method. Until now, the Allen Army had split into three groups, taking three hours each to hunt these golems—one group started at eight in the morning, the next group began at noon, and the final group hunted at four in the afternoon. The members of the Hero Army would join that routine and scour the second, third, and fourth floors of the dungeon to hunt medals. The two armies would need to work together.

"That energy was amazing," Helmios remarked.

"I agree," Keel replied. "I've never seen them defeat the iron golems so quickly either. Within our party, only Lord Merus is capable of changing an enemy's element, but as you can see, he's been busy with...other affairs these days. We fought the iron golems without any elemental debuffs, and frankly, I'm shocked it made such a huge difference."

Helmios nodded along, realizing that the iron golems had taken on the wind element, making them especially weak to the fire attacks Dogora unleashed with Kagutsuchi.

"Lord Merus, huh..." Helmios mulled. "He may be a former First Angel, but he was a First Angel nonetheless. There aren't many people who can reliably match the power and effects he's capable of."

"Exactly," Keel replied. "High Intelligence is necessary to change

an enemy's element, and a class promotion is certainly one way to raise that stat. But another way is to use rings and necklaces, which are what we distributed to the soldiers."

"I see. It's a tactic that's only possible because you're able to gather these items. It does lower our chances of being one-sidedly pummeled by a Demonic Deity."

"Right. And if a Demonic Deity *doesn't* appear, these items will surely help us turtle our way through even more powerful Rank A monsters like dragons."

Thus far, changing an enemy's element had been mostly ineffective against monsters and completely useless against the Demon Lord Army. That was due to Intelligence levels—the caster had to possess higher Intelligence than their target or the spell would not work. For example, while monsters Rank B and below were easily defeated without a debuff, if one were to use the spell on a Rank A monster, the caster would require over 10,000 Intelligence. With items that increased Intelligence, however, the spell's success rate increased. That would keep casualties to a minimum.

"I sort of want a Shaman in my party too," Helmios said.

Just then, the power of the iron golem that had been shackled by mud allowed the fallen golem to activate once more. As it began to stir once more, Dogora and Krena were joined by the rest of the Hero Army as they charged ahead. Dverg watched on forlornly.

"The mere addition of a new dungeon changes the world to such a large degree..." he muttered.

"Dverg, you're getting a bit too emotional," Helmios warned.

Dverg blinked several times. "You're right. It's a bit too early to wallow in my feelings."

He gripped his sword and headed to the battle against the iron golem.

"When a fallen iron golem resurrects, it will revert to the earth element," Keel said. "Please make sure to cast Endow Element again. Since we want to increase the mastery of this skill, please tell your Shamans to only cast Endow Element for a good while."

"Got it," Helmios replied. "That reminds me, Dogora's MP is

something to watch out for too, right?”

“Correct.”

Keel apologized for having failed to mention it, and Helmios nodded with a smile and told the boy that there was nothing to worry about. Allen had borrowed an MP Recovery Ring from Helmios and the Holy Orb of Rubanka from Krena, equipping Dogora with both. Now that he was Fire Goddess Freyja’s disciple, every skill Dogora used consumed an immense amount of MP. He was the main force in the iron golem hunts, so if he ran out of MP, it would deal a heavy blow to both the offensive and defensive capabilities of the group. It was imperative that he kept it high.

Since Allen wanted Dogora to raise his skill levels, the Destroyer had to use his skills several times in a row. Therefore, this joint training session also had to ensure that he was never fully depleted of his MP. If he ever felt that it was low, the Shamans and the rest of the Allen and Hero Armies were to help regenerate it—a plan both armies had already agreed to.

Keel and Helmios gazed at the forty-six fighting soldiers for a while.

“Everyone’s slowly catching their stride,” Keel observed. “As I thought, your army is very impressive, Mr. Helmios.”

It was true. Rohomet and the other Shamans, as well as the rest of the Hero Army, were moving more nimbly and with confidence. Krena, Dogora, and the Allen Army had gotten the hang of working with others. In fact, the Hero Army had learned how to fight alongside Meruru and her golem as well.

“We’re not doing anything too difficult,” Helmios said. “Can I ask why Allen thought about doing this in the first place?”

“I wonder...” Keel replied. “Truth be told, I’m really not sure what goes on inside his head. But I’ve heard him mutter something about Daemonism?”

“Daemonism? Ah, you mean the Church of Gushara. You guys fought against the Demonic Deity of the Demon Lord Army, didn’t you? I’ve heard about the evil element.”

Naturally, Keel was also aware of the evil element. He had learned about it at the Academy, and any clergyman serving the God

of Creation knew about it as well. It was treated as common sense. Many things in this world had been personally created by Elmea. The God of Creation had also made other deities and spirits that were scattered across the world to manage it. The most famous of the gods were the Four Elemental Deities ruling over fire, water, wind, and earth. They placed natural phenomena and materials created from their elements across the world as they saw fit.

Their relationships with one another and their positions were illustrated through elements. The mechanism of natural phenomena and the changes brought upon the land occurred when different elements clashed. The attacker—in other words, the one trying to bring about change upon the land—was treated as the attacking element. The element on the defensive, the one trying to resist that change, was seen as the enduring element. By using this knowledge, a person could consume MP and force such natural phenomena to manifest as what were called "attack spells."

Everything in this world possessed some sort of attribute. As long as one knew what the attribute of their enemy was, they did not need any magic and could easily land a supereffective blow against their enemy while enduring a normally fatal attack. This lesson was taught in the Academy and seen as common sense. For example, if the attacking element was fire and the enduring element was wind, the assailant could land a hefty blow. Conversely, if the attacking element was wind, it would be less effective against an enduring element of fire.

Elements also possessed ranks. The higher an element's rank, the greater the advantage it had against those of lower ranks. Put another way, it was far easier for a higher rank to fatally strike a lower rank. Years of magical research had made that clear.

Element Ranks and Types

- The only element with no affiliation: void
- Basic elements (lowest rank): fire, water, wind, earth
- Secondary elements (second-lowest rank): wood, ice, *etc.*
- Mid-rank elements: time, lightning, *etc.*

- High-rank elements: light, darkness, *etc.*
- Top-rank elements: divine, evil

The lowest-ranking elements were called "basic elements" within the Allen Army. There was a good reason for the name change: When Allen had explained elements to Dogora, the Destroyer had carelessly grumbled, "Damn, so Lady Freyja's the lowest rank, huh?" That had caused the Fire Goddess to manifest from her divine vessel, Kagutsuchi, and beat him to a pulp.

"Certain elements may be superior or inferior to others, but the same cannot be said for the gods," Freyja had insisted. Dogora had already been reduced to a ball of fire on the ground, however, so no one was sure if he had heard the Goddess's words.

Unbeknownst to Keel and the rest of the Gamers, there was a reason Allen had become more mindful of elements and advantages. First, Allen and the rest of his party had not been able to change their attacking element until now. Of course, Cecil and Sophie had been told to be wary of their opponents' effective elements before they fired their attack or spirit magics, but the most they did was care about which spell would deal the greatest damage. Naturally, though, since they could not change the element of a spell, it was simply something to keep in mind.

However, when Allen had gotten hold of Merus as a Summon and Dogora had received the fire-element Kagutsuchi, the battlefield had changed. Gushara's transformation on the island in the sky, in which he had enveloped himself in dark flames and become a Greater Demonic Deity, had rendered the No-life Gamers' attacks ineffective, providing Allen with an incentive to delve deeper into elements.

Thanks to the lives he had collected, Gushara had turned into a Greater Demonic Deity and drastically raised his Intelligence and Endurance. He had become a tank, able to resist powerful attacks, and even Cecil, who had had 40,000 Intelligence with the Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, had hardly been able to scratch him with her spells. Any damage he had sustained was quickly healed by a skeletal Great Pope, and the battle had been drawn out because Gushara had gained an element of higher rank. Allen had theorized

that doing so had allowed Gushara to endure many blows, and the basic elements (those of the lowest rank) had hardly been able to damage him. Merus had then presumed that Gushara had the evil element.

"I'm sure you know this already, Keel, but we don't really have a spell that can change the evil element," Helmios pointed out.

The Allen that Helmios knew planned everything out meticulously since he only had one shot to get it right. He had done just that in Rohzenheim against Demonic Deity Rehzel. The Summoner had asked about activating skills in the air or using an Extra Skill again if one missed. Helmios recalled being surprised by the many questions that no normal person would have ever thought of. A Talent with very few stars could only change the four basic elements, and even Talents with more stars could not touch the divine or evil elements. But Helmios believed that a boy as fastidious as Allen could one day somehow break those limits.

"Indeed, that element is reserved for the God of Evil," Keel agreed. "Ah, yes, that reminds me. Allen mentioned that he wanted to see you use your Extra Skill, God Strike, if we ever ran into another enemy with the evil element."

"Ah, because my Extra Skill is of the divine element," Helmios said.

"We believe your attack can counter the evil element."

The divine and evil elements were the powers of Elmea, the God of Creation, and the God of Evil, the ruler of the Dark Realm, who held as much power as Elmea, respectively. The two deities were absolute. Their existences were inviolable, but those with one of their elements could interfere with the other.

"Call me when you need me," Helmios said.

"Are you sure?" Keel asked. "If you accept his request so easily, he won't hold back. He'll call for you time and time again to see your skill."

"Well, that puts me in a bit of a bind. But Keel, can't you also use purifying magic?"

The party Sacred had Greta, a Saintess capable of casting purifying spells as well. Only Saintesses and Greater Saints—those

with a three-star Talent or higher—were capable of using such magic, which could easily dispel a horde of daemonic incarnations.

"Sure, but in terms of raw power, I don't hold a candle to your Extra Skill," Keel replied.

"I see..." Helmios replied. "Then what about the light or dark element? Has Allen already tested those out?"

"I don't have a clue. But he did say something like, 'If we can't change the element to light or dark, we should all just become the void element.'"

"Makes sense. The void element at least has no advantages or weaknesses."

Higher ranks did not always have their advantages. Even lower ranks could become effective, like the void element. While it was the lowest rank of all, as Helmios had mentioned, it had no weaknesses. If someone with a much higher element rank appeared to endure all attacks, instead of using elemental attacks of lower ranks, it was best for everyone to be the void element. That, at the very least, would reduce the amount of damage they took. Furthermore, void was so basic and low ranked that even Shamans with fewer stars were capable of casting it as an elemental change.

"I didn't think I'd learn so much about elements here," Rosetta chimed in, looking bored as she stood beside the Hero.

"Oh, this is nothing compared to being with Allen," Keel replied.

"What a pain. He was like that the last time we visited the Rank S dungeon together too. I'd like to politely refrain from being next to him."

Though it was only for a short period of time, Rosetta had once fought alongside Allen. She recalled his demeanor and flashed a wry smile.

"Where's the man in question?" Helmios asked.

"He told me to keep that a secret," Keel replied. "But he's carrying out his usual antics."

"To become stronger, was it? That's very much like him."

Just then, Dverg, having defeated an iron golem, returned to Helmios's side.

"Both the Allen Army and the Hero Army are cooperating very

well. You've done well, Keel," Dverg noted.

"Thank you," Keel replied.

He was acting as a mediator for both the Hero and the Allen Armies, but that effectively meant he was mobilizing a force of several thousand. Keel was the type who could voice his thoughts and concerns if needed, and he did not cower in the face of authority. He excelled at analyzing others, understanding their motives, and exercising enough care to never push one beyond their limits. Allen knew that well and had thus given Keel the role.

"That reminds me," Dverg said, jumping into the conversation once more. "I've actually got a message to give Allen. Since he's not here, I thought of saying as much to the sender, but seeing as you're so reliable, I'd like to give you the message in Allen's stead. Will you do that for me?"

"Uh, sure, I can take the message," Keel replied. "Who's it from?"

"The Ratash Kingdom. He's been asked to use the magic tool at the Adventurer's Guild to contact the Ratash royal family. That's all I've been told."

"I see... All right. If you'll allow me, I'll tell Allen whenever I get the chance."

It was then that Helmios unsheathed his sword. "I guess I should go practice my skill. Dverg, could you help me out?"

"Very well," Dverg answered.

"Then *I'll* go collect those chests," Rosetta said, her eyes glimmering with greed. "We wouldn't want to leave our precious treasure in harm's way, would we?"

The floor was scattered with chests dropped by the iron golems. Helmios sighed, realizing that Rosetta was not the type who would ever change.

Chapter 7: Summoning Lvl. 9 and the Growth Skill

Ten days had passed since Allen and his team had rescued Duke Doresskarei and the empress of Prostia. They had spent their time in the house that Director Tainomay had provided, but Ignomasu's subordinate had begun checking on the status of the water purification tool's repairs every other day. And so, the day after the rescue, the duke and the empress had been teleported to Hardcore User Island to keep their whereabouts a secret.

The building Allen's group was using had been loaned to Princess Carmine of the Crevelle royal family. Even Ignomasu's knights could not venture past the courtyard with ease. Still, there had been a chance that the duke and the empress would be seen somehow, which was why Allen had deemed it best to have them flee instead of stressing over their safety within the house.

The merfolk had thus been teleported to Crey Town, the town of merfolk on Hardcore User Island, but with nothing but time on their hands, their minds were filled with anxiety about the Prostia Empire. Wanting to dispel their worries, Allen had asked them to help develop Hardcore User Island, hoping that it would take their mind off things.

"How is Duke Doresskarei?" Princess Carmine asked.

Allen was waiting for his lunch at a long, oval table in the dining area.

"Well, it seems he's taken quite a liking to the view from the island," Allen replied. "Once the whole Prostia Empire ordeal dies down, he said he wants a villa of sorts that he can visit from time to time. I thought it'd be interesting to have a resort area for the Prostian imperial family, and when I mentioned that, he began working with the merfolk to construct a villa separate from the

building they're currently living in."

"Oh my!" Carmine gasped. "I'd love to visit there as well!"

Frankly, Allen was tired of seeing the princess and her exaggerated reactions. *She asked about him this morning too,* he thought. *Should I just send her to the island? But I don't want to raise any eyebrows...*

The day after Duke Doresskarei and the others were rescued, an official had arrived at the house to check on the status of the water purification tool's repairs. Allen had innocently mentioned that he had heard a loud noise from the palace and asked if anything was amiss. The reply he had received was that nothing had occurred and that it was none of his business. They could not publicly declare that the empress and the duke had fled, and it had not seemed like they suspected Allen of any wrongdoing.

Just in case, Allen had sent a Fish D to scout the area, but there had been no conversations that had cast doubt on him. But if Princess Carmine vanished soon after, there was no doubt that suspicious eyes would turn their way. She had to stay in Prostia for a little while longer.

"About what Keel said... Cecil, are you fine with this?" Allen asked.

"Did my father say anything about it?" Cecil replied.

"He doesn't seem to mind since it was Keel's decision."

"If my father isn't against it, I've got no reason to interfere."

Cecil fell silent. A few days ago, Allen had received a report from Keel about the joint training session between the Allen and Hero Armies. Ratash had claimed that it wanted to reward Allen for his feats of saving the Holy Land of Elmahl and the Union on the Galiatan Continent. Allen had not done it for the sake of Ratash, but his grand accomplishments had allowed Ratash to gain greater fame and status internationally. Every now and then, nations would reward such results, and this time around, Ratash had been pressured to do so by the Five Continent Alliance.

As a result, Dogora and Krena had been upgraded from honorary barons to official barons, and Viscount Granvelle had risen to become a count. Additionally, House Carnel, which Keel belonged to,

had not only been promoted from a baronship to a viscountship but also allowed to reclaim the land that had been taken from it following the House Granvelle Affair, masterminded by former Viscount Carnel.

Keel had then proposed an idea to Cecil. She had responded by saying that if her father, Viscount Granvelle, did not object, she would accept the offer. Yet, it seemed she could not easily accept her situation. Ever since receiving that report, she had sounded awkward and clumsy. *Guess it's not so easy to just set your emotions aside. But the food in Prostia's good. I hope she eats well and calms herself down.*

The delicacies of the Prostia Empire lined their dining tables. There was plenty of seafood that was rarely found above the water, and everyone on Team Allen smacked their lips with delight at the delicious dishes they were offered daily. But among all the food, they especially enjoyed the flat buns that came with almost every meal.

When Luke saw the buns piled on the table, he made a beeline for them and chowed down.

"Sweet!" he cried. "We've got luko buns today too! These really are the bomb!"

Princess Carmine explained that the buns were made of the stipes and roots of a seaweed known as Lukomal weeds. They were mashed into a dough and contained a filling. While the precise ingredients were unknown, the filling had a unique sort of sweetness to it, so Allen, who had a sweet tooth, enjoyed the buns a great deal. In his past life as Kenichi, when he had visited his grandparents' house in the boonies, he had always been served a flat bun. He felt that the luko buns greatly resembled them.

"If we can get our hands on the seeds or seedlings of Lukomal weeds, we should try growing them in Crey Town," Allen said.

Since the plant grew in abundance even in tight spaces and could be harvested in large numbers, he believed it was a perfect fit for the small town on Hardcore User Island.

"Nice! That's a great idea!" Luke replied.

Suddenly, Allen froze in place, his mouth agape as he stared straight ahead.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Shia asked.

"I'm about to level up my skill," he replied, still staring blankly into the distance.

"I see..."

Allen did not stop gaining skill XP even while he ate. At first, Cecil, who was strict on manners, had scolded him to no end, but he had refused to listen. Everyone had simply gotten used to his quirks.

Incidentally, Allen did not want to keep too much from Carmine and Iwanam for fear that it might affect their future plans. They were aware of the bare minimum—they knew about his Summons, including the Insect A he had created and his powers, but he had no desire to provide a detailed explanation of just how he had managed to investigate the palace. They did not ask him either.

I'm not hard at work grinding my skill level because I'm stuck or anything. When Allen had been Kenichi and could not find the key needed to proceed further into a game, he would often grind levels and learn a spell to open a door, effectively brute-forcing his way through.

But he knew that things were not so simple in this world. Clearly, he was trying to ignore reality. For the past ten days, he had been unable to find so much as a trace of Beku. He had scoured the entirety of the Prostia Empire and had General Rudo in Garlesia report back, but he had come up empty-handed.

"I've done what I could," Allen muttered to himself, trying to find excuses. "I have to be patient."

"I know," Shia said, unable to stay silent. "But it seems like Ignomasu is continuing to increase his forces. Surely you know that we don't have much time."

Thanks to Fish D's watchful eye, Allen and his party knew that for the past ten days, Ignomasu had been forcibly gathering all the nobles near Patlanta into his palace and having them repeatedly swear their loyalty to him. He was generous with the taxes levied on the lands under his control and other dependent states, and nobles once treated coldly by the Prostia imperial family were now being showered with gifts from the palace treasury. He was using money to appease the masses.

Such tactics were apparently being used due to the advice of Chancellor Ajiray, who knew all the ins and outs of the Prostia Empire, and they had successfully decreased the size of the anti-Ignomasu faction. It seemed the water purification magic tool Allen had brought had played a role in these negotiations as well. Ignomasu had ordered estimates of how much money would be saved if the tool, which was worth the entirety of the Prostian national budget, were used.

Considering that Ignomasu had kept the First and Second Imperial Armies when he had started his revolt and seized the palace, it was clear as day to Shia that he was retaining some soldiers so that he could take over nations above water. But was Beku, who had stolen the Symbol of the Beast King, truly uninvolved with the entire affair?

Shia had not personally seen Beku attack Albahal's palace with the merfolk, but it made her fear that the same thing would occur again when Ignomasu decided to attack those on land. If that were to happen, Beku would naturally wear the three pieces of gear that made up the Symbol of the Beast King and declare that he was the rightful Beast King. The beastkin, who generally believed in strength over all else, would very likely accept him as their monarch without much issue.

"Shouldn't we just attack Ignomasu?" Cecil asked. She often pummeled Allen, so it did not surprise him that she wanted to jump straight to violence, but Allen was still hesitant. There was a factor that he could not discuss just yet.

"If we're gonna do that, it should be our last resort," he replied. "We don't have nearly enough information yet, and we've allowed Ignomasu to swim as he pleases so that we can gather more intel. Get it? 'Swim'? Because he's a fish?"

Ha! I think I'm getting pretty punny! Had he completely forgotten that he had taken on the form of a merfolk as well? Everyone who heard his joke, aside from Luke, stared blankly at him, and a chill settled over the room. The dark elf was too busy stuffing his cheeks with luko buns to have paid attention to the Summoner's pun.

"In any case, we can easily defeat Ignomasu," Allen continued.

“We’ve got a way to have him give up on invading nations above the water without killing him. But we should focus more on what we can and should do— Y-Yes! Finally!”

He shouted with delight as the black pages of the grimoire in his hand displayed the log that he had been waiting for. Allen and Merus had been working together—or to be precise, the Angel A had continuously made healing items, his eyes lifeless—to earn XP for the Summoner, and their efforts had finally borne fruit.

<The Skill XP of Synthesis has reached 10,000,000,000/10,000,000,000. Synthesis has reached Lvl. 9. Summoning has reached Lvl. 9. Expansion has reached Lvl. 8. You have obtained Growth. You have obtained two skills (sealed). Skill names unavailable.>

As he read the pages of his grimoire, Allen began to tremble.

“What’s wrong?” Cecil asked from beside him, worried.

“My Summoning level increased! Finally!”

Allen reached out and grabbed some of the luko buns on the table. He shoved the food into his mouth like a child who wanted to finish dinner so that he could get back to his game, then ran out of the dining area.

“Um... What’s wrong with Lord Allen?” Princess Carmine asked, stunned by what she had just witnessed.

“It’s his usual antics again,” Cecil replied wearily. “Don’t mind him.”

Sophie, always quick to praise the Summoner, clasped her hands in front of her chest, moved by the scene. None the wiser to his team’s reactions, Allen flew into his room and checked his grimoire once more. *All right! There were a bunch of things written in my grimoire, so I’ve got a lot to work through!* He stuck his nose into his book and paused. *Wait... What?* He Summoned Merus, who was shocked to have been called out underwater. When the Angel A spotted Allen, he immediately understood what had happened.

“Ah! Your Summoning level must’ve increased!” Merus crowed.

“Which means I’m finally free from my work! Yes! Yes!”

The Angel A floated in the air—or the water, rather—as he gazed into the distance with tears in his eyes. His tears were carried away by the water around him.

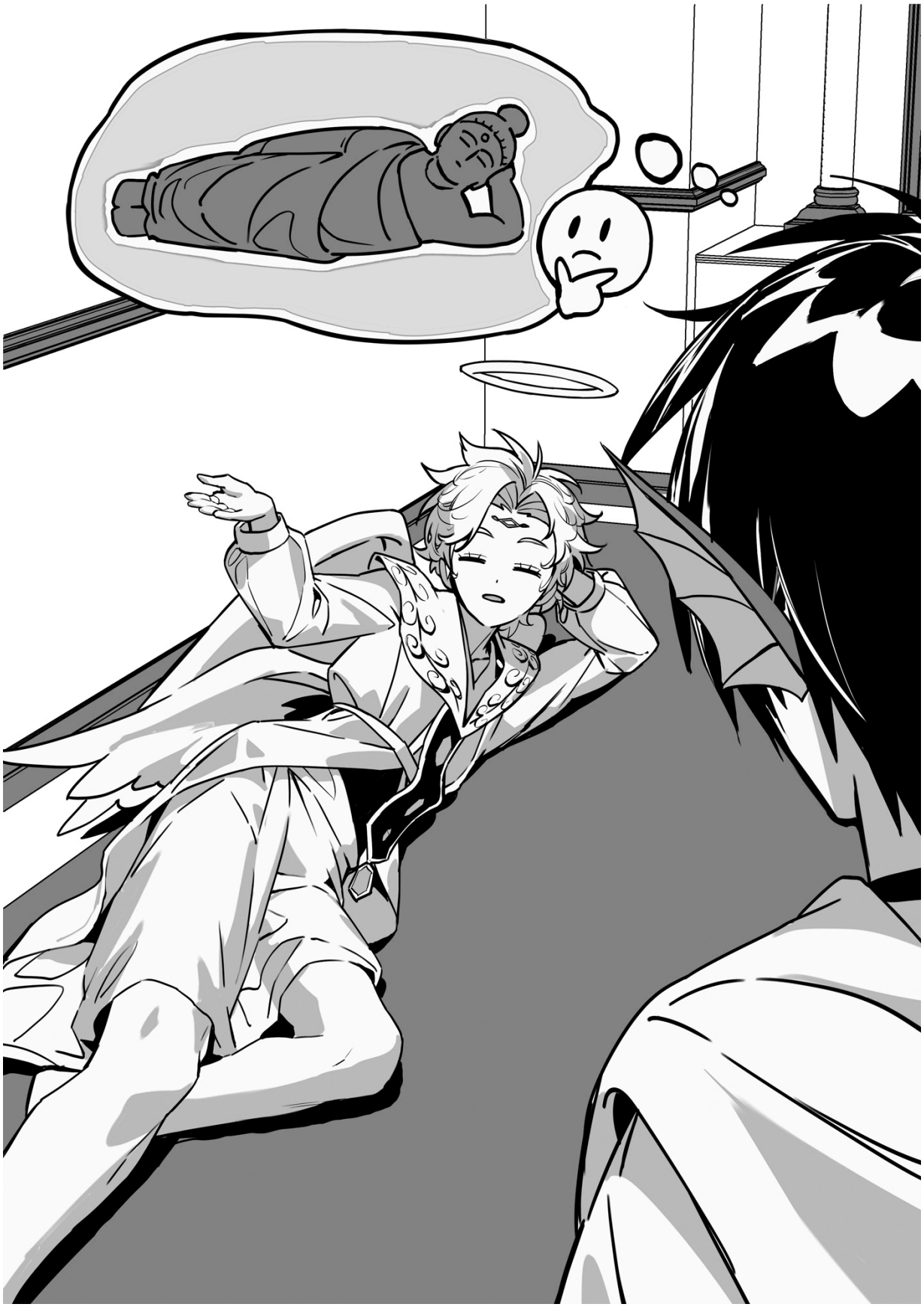
“Can I ask you something?” Allen inquired, though he was not sure if he should break the tearful silence.

“Sure. Ask away,” Merus said absentmindedly. “But once this is done, I’m taking a break.”

“Fair enough,” Allen replied. “I’ll keep my word.”

“Of course you will.”

The Angel A shifted positions in the water as he rolled onto his side, placed his elbow on the ground, and rested his face on his hand. The rest of his body then slowly sank to the ground as he lazed. *Sort of reminds me of the reclining Buddha art I’ve seen.* Allen recalled seeing artwork on TV of Buddha lying down in places like Thailand and Japan. He was also reminded of his father spending a lazy day off in front of the TV in that pose. Merus could not be affected by Fish A’s Awakened Ability, Mimic, so he was his usual handsome self, curly brown hair and all. *Maybe this will bring me some sort of good luck.*





“And? What question do you have?” Merus asked. “As you know, I became a Summon while I was setting the parameters for Rank A Summons. I know little to nothing about Summons of higher rank.”

“Yeah, I know,” Allen replied.

The Summoner, having reached Summoning Lvl. 9, checked his stats once more. In his skills list, he saw the two new skills he had received, but they were simply displayed as “(Sealed)” and provided no details whatsoever. Additionally, every Summon type had the word “Sealed” where the listing for Rank S should have been.

Name: Allen
Age: 15
Class: Summoner
Level: 93
HP: 3,815 + 2,000
MP: 6,060 + 12,060
Attack: 2,124 + 2,800
Endurance: 2,124 + 4,400
Agility: 3,951 + 6,200
Intelligence: 6,070 + 15,060
Luck: 3,951 + 2,000
Skills: Summoning {9}, Creation {9}, Synthesis {9}, Strengthening {9}, Awakening {9}, Growth {1}, Expansion {8}, Storage, Quick Summoning, Equivalency, Deputize, King Me, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {5}, Throwing {3}, (Sealed), (Sealed)
XP: Approx. 1,000,000,000,000/300,000,000,000,000

<u>Skill Levels</u>
Summoning: 9
Creation: 9
Synthesis: 9
Strengthening: 9

Awakening: 9
Growth: 1

Skill Experience
Creation: Approx 3,000,000/100,000,000,000
Synthesis: Approx 0/100,000,000,000
Strengthening: Approx 2,500,000/100,000,000,000
Awakening: Approx 1,200,000/100,000,000,000
Growth: 0/1,000

Creatable Summons
Insect: Sealed, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Beast: Sealed, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Bird: Sealed, A, B, C, D, E, F, G
Grass: Sealed, A, B, C, D, E, F
Stone: Sealed, A, B, C, D, E
Fish: Sealed, A, B, C, D
Spirit: Sealed, A, B, C
Dragon: Sealed, A, B
Angel: S, A
—: Sealed

Holder
Insect: A x 7
Beast
Bird: A x 1
Grass:
Stone:
Fish: A x 50, D x 3
Spirit: A x 5
Dragon: A x 4
Angel: A x 1
—:

Equipment
Orichalcum Sword: +10,000 Attack
Black Dragon Armor: +4,500 Endurance
Ring 1: MP Recovery Ring
Ring 2: +5,000 MP
Necklace: +3,000 MP

My Summons are all locked, and I don't even know what skills I obtained. Were they not able to add them in time? Merus had mentioned that it was a lot of work to create a Summon—it required one to design a creature and give it abilities. Allen knew that he had gained XP by working with Merus, meaning he had leveled up his skills fairly quickly. *Maybe I leveled up too fast.* The Summoner suddenly remembered that he had to make a note of this achievement, so he took out his growth curve journal and jotted it down.

Record of Level-Ups

- 1 year, 0 months old: Obtained grimoire, Summoning Lvl. 1, gained access to Rank H Summons
- 1 year, 10 months old: Summoning Lvl. 2, obtained Synthesis
- 3 years, 0 months old: Gained access to Rank G Summons
- 5 years, 11 months old: Summoning Lvl. 3, obtained Strengthening, gained access to Rank F Summons
- 7 years, 9 months old: Summoning Lvl. 4, obtained Storage, gained access to Rank E Summons
- 9 years, 10 months old: Summoning Lvl. 5, obtained Sharing, gained access to Rank D Summons
- 12 years, 9 months old: Summoning Lvl. 6, obtained Awakening, gained access to Rank C Summons
- 13 years, 11 months old: Summoning Lvl. 7, obtained Quick Summoning and Deputize, gained access to Rank B Summons
- 15 years, 3 months old: Summoning Lvl. 8, obtained

Equivalency and King Me, gained access to Rank A Summons
- 16 years, 0 months old: Summoning Lvl. 9, obtained Growth and two sealed skills, gained access to Rank S Summons

"And? What's your question? Come on, out with it," Merus said.

"I'm seeing a lot of sealed skills this time around," Allen said. "Why are they sealed in the first place?"

Merus seemed a touch bored with that simple question and thought for a few moments before answering, "Sir Allen, you've already deviated quite a bit from normal human territory. Surely you're aware of that."

"Huh? Oh, you mean like Rank As are more than enough to defeat the Demon Lord?"

It had been ten months since Merus had become a Summon, and Allen had received a wealth of information from the Angel A. The Summoner recalled Merus having mentioned something like that before.

"Precisely," Merus replied. "Normally, a Demon Lord doesn't need to raise their Talent level all that much."

Demon Lord was a Talent that occasionally emerged among the demons. Those who possessed it would, without fail, attempt to conquer the world. Whenever a Demon Lord made their appearance, the world was threatened by their very existence. The one who attempted to defeat the Demon Lord and free the world from suffering was known as the hero.

The title of hero was not reserved solely for Helmios, who had the Talent of the same name. Bask, the King of Shura, had been one when he was still a human, and Allen was included as well. But it was difficult for a hero to defeat the Demon Lord alone. They generally formed a party with them as the leader and headed off to battle. These parties differed in several ways, such as the number of stars for certain Talents, gear, party count, and the members' classes, but they all had to meet certain conditions. However, even if a Hero, a five-star Talent, maxed out their level and skills in Normal Mode, obtained a full set of orichalcum equipment, and formed a party of eight or more, all with Talents of three stars or higher, they

still would only have a fifty percent chance of attaining victory. Needless to say, this meant they had a fifty percent chance of losing to the Demon Lord, and if the Hero and their party were wiped out, the world would be cast down a path of despair and destruction.

In Allen's case, his Talent was not Hero but Summoner. There was no precedent for his situation. When he had reached Summoning Lvl. 7 and became capable of using Rank B Summons, Merus had mentioned that his odds of defeating the Demon Lord were likely above fifty percent, even if he were to fight alone. The Heavenly Realm had predicted as much if Allen could use his Summons right.

"Sure, you implied that at Summoning Lvl. 8, I was practically guaranteed to beat the Demon Lord all by myself, but I almost died when I fought Demon Deity Rehzel," Allen reminded the Angel A.

"That's because the Demon Lord has also obtained unprecedented power," Merus replied. "Until now, Demon Lords haven't had any stats higher than 20,000, but Demonic Deity Rehzel easily surpassed that."

Then he wasn't just stronger than a Demon Lord. If I were to use the games in my previous life as a reference, Rehzel would be like a hidden boss of sorts. Even Quick Summoning had not been enough to protect all of Allen's allies. In fact, Dogora had ended up dying once.

"Then we couldn't have won that battle unless everything lined up perfectly," Allen concluded. "Hero Helmios's Extra Skill is super effective against Demonic Deities, my party also has great Extra Skills, the God of Spirits used his Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits to assist us, and I already had Summoning Lvl. 7 by then because I love to grind. We only eked out a win because all of these factors were at play."

"Precisely," Merus responded. "You have an eight-star Talent. Your stats increase far more than any other Talent's do when you level up."

"Like how a Sword Lord gets a bigger boost than a Swordsman."

The growth curve of a Talent was based on its stars. When Dogora had only had one star, Krena, who had been a three-star Talent user at the time, had experienced a greater increase in stats

whenever she gained a level. Hence, Allen, who had an eight-star Talent, enjoyed an exponential boost in his stats when his Summoning level increased.

Like monsters, Summons had ranks, but they were far stronger than monsters of the same rank. For example, a Rank A Summon could easily overpower a Rank A monster. Moreover, whenever a Summoner's class skill rose a level, the number of Summons they could have Summoned at the same time increased by ten. The presumption was that Summoning Lvl. 7 or 8 could easily defeat the Demon Lord, but as that had clearly become more difficult, it implied that this situation was far from normal.

"You've already gained power far beyond the realm of a normal human," Merus explained. "Yet you're trying to gain even greater power. To do so, you must pay a certain price."

Well, it's normal for games to have level requirements for learning certain skills. Besides, a world where you can get everything just by leveling up is no fun. When Allen was still playing a game as Kenpy, there had been a skill that had such an absurdly low drop rate that it would drop once a month at best, after tens of thousands of players had hunted for it.

"I've already gained enough power to defeat a normal Demon Lord, but if I want even greater power, I have to offer something in return?" Allen asked.

Though it was the gods who bestowed power, they only did so after one overcame a trial—in other words, offered some sort of payment. Allen recalled the story of merfolk Macris. In exchange for obtaining more power, he had become a Holy Fish.

"That's what I've been saying," Merus replied. "But obviously, I don't quite know what you lack right now."

"Offer payment," huh? I know it's sealed, but I'll try to Create an Insect anyway. Though he knew his skills were locked, he used his Summoning Lvl. 9 and tried to Summon an Insect.

<Insect S is currently sealed.>

"Well, I expected as much," Allen noted. "Just like my Status says, it's sealed."

He could not Create them, but he had confirmed his suspicions that his sealed Summons were of Rank S. *Will I be told how to use Synthesis to Create these Summons? And Angel S isn't sealed. Guess I'll try it out.* Only Angel S was unsealed, and so, Allen flipped to the Synthesis page of his grimoire.

Only Insect-and Beast-type Summons could be directly Created. The rest required a process of Creation and Synthesis to emerge. Even if the Synthesis failed, an error message usually popped up on his grimoire, and he thought that it would serve as a hint to unlock his Rank S Summons.

"H-Hey," Merus started.

Allen swiftly turned the Angel A back into a card, then prepared Angel A and Dragon A cards, along with Rank S magic stones, which he had obtained from iron golems.

"Let's Synthesize an Angel S," Allen said. "Huh? Nothing's happening."

Never had Allen seen this lack of change before. The cards and stones he had placed on the Synthesis page did not disappear, nor did they shift in any way. Allen turned to the log of his grimoire to see what had happened and spat out some water in shock.

"Pfft?!"

He had been underwater this entire time, so his eyes were constantly moisturized by the sea, but the words he read were so astonishing that his vision blurred and his eyes dried up. He could hardly believe what he was seeing.

<To Summon an Angel S, you must use Rank S Summons. Please also have the requisite number of Holy Orbs in your Storage to Create a Rank S Angel via Synthesis.>

I need Holy Orbs?! And the number I need must be... He recalled the time when he had learned that he required magic stones to Summon his first Rank E Summon, but this was far more shocking

than that.

"Huh? What? I need forty-nine Rank A magic stones for Angel A, right? So would I need forty-nine Holy Orbs to Summon an Angel S?"

His habit of voicing his thoughts had resurfaced. The Summoner realized that he had stepped into a domain where he required an exorbitant sacrifice to attain greater power. As he was lost in his thoughts, Cecil and Shia, who had finished their lunches, entered his room.

"What's wrong?" Cecil asked.

He shared the information that Merus had told him earlier. Cecil, who seemed bored at first, went pale at the mention of Holy Orbs.

"What?! We can't possibly get our hands on so many Holy Orbs," she protested. "That requirement is probably more than all the Holy Orbs that the royal families on land have!"

She's right. And everything's still sealed, so it's not like I can Summon an Angel S in the first place. Allen presumed that Dragon S and Spirit S needed to be unsealed before he could even begin to tackle Synthesizing Angel S. There were so many things he had to do that he began to grow excited. Just then, Merus appeared beside the Summoner.

"Please don't turn me into a card," he grumbled.

Allen felt like there was no need to lie down since there was water all around them, but a relaxed posture might have helped Merus soothe his emotional exhaustion. The Angel A smiled calmly as he lay down, while Cecil and Shia quietly gazed at him with pity. The two ladies knew of the hard work that he had been forced to do. He was finally allowed to get some rest, but Allen was quick to ruin the peace.

"Holy Orbs are created by Holy Beasts, right?" Allen asked. "Then what even is a Holy Beast anyway?"

"A Holy Beast is a beast or person that's gained power in some way," Merus replied simply. He closed his eyes as he lay on the bed.

"That's pretty vague."

"I have no other way of answering your query."

It seemed Merus would not generously provide explanations or additional information of his own accord; he would only answer

questions exactly as they were asked. Even when he had been an angel, he had not been the type to freely give out knowledge. It seemed his personality had not changed when he had become a Summon.

"How do you gain enough power to become a Holy Beast?" Allen asked.

"There are many ways to go about it," Merus replied. "For example, you can become a messenger of God in exchange for attaining more power."

"Aren't there Divine Beasts too? What's the difference between the two?"

"Divine Beasts are Holy Beasts that attained even more power and underwent an additional transformation."

So a beast can become a Holy Beast, then a Divine Beast.

"Wait, so is that what happened to Garm, the God of Beasts?" Allen asked.

"That's right," Shia replied. "Lord Garm was originally just a normal beast."

"He became a Holy Beast, then a Divine Beast, and finally...the God of Beasts?"

"No, he became a Holy Beast, then a *Mythical* Beast, and then the God of Beasts."

Shia spoke firmly and without hesitation, hinting that the story had been passed down in the beast royal family for generations. *Or maybe she heard it directly from the god's mouth.*

"The beast royal family and the God of Beasts have a very close relationship, don't they?" Allen asked.

"Right," Shia answered. "My family has the blood of Lord Garm flowing through our veins. The same should apply to other beast royal families. In fact, King Albahal, the founder of our nation, is said to be a descendant of Lord Garm."

Her words implied that this was a long-established fact. Even in Allen's previous world, certain religions had believed that a monarch and a god inhabited the same body. But that was a belief, and the facts remained unclear. However, in this world, it was certainly possible for a god to have a child with a human.

I get it now. Beasts can also become gods if they gather enough faith from people. And if the deity can have a child with another person... Now that I think about it, the Goddess of Arbitration sort of seems like she originated from a beast. Allen thought of Falnemes, who took the form of a beast, munching away at grass in the stables.

"Wait. If there are Holy Orbs, are there also Divine Orbs?" Allen asked.

"Any further and you'll step into the domain of the gods," Merus said firmly. "I advise you not to pursue that train of thought."

To obtain a Holy Orb, one could, for example, go to Macris and have him shed a few tears. They could also obtain the item by defeating a Holy Beast. Merus had explained as much to Allen when the Summoner had gotten his hands on the Holy Orb of Macris. It seemed the Angel A's warning just now was to ensure that Allen would not get any other funny ideas, but that point went right over his head, and he turned his attention back to his grimoire to organize what he had just learned.

I see. Another addition to my power tier list. Allen, perpetually in pursuit of greater power, had recently created a tier list tracking the strength of others. He wanted to learn more about the powerful existences of this world.

Allen's Personal Power Tier List

- S Tier: God of Creation, God of Evil
- A Tier: Greater Deities (God of Beasts, Goddess of War, God of Bountiful Harvest)
- B Tier: Gods (Four Elemental Deities, etc.), God of Spirits
- C Tier: Minor Deities, Dungeon Master, Sovereign of Spirits
- D Tier: Holy Beasts, Greater Demonic Deities
- E Tier: Demonic Deities

The Demon Lord was excluded from this list because he was apparently more powerful than the previous Demon Lord. Until now, Demon Lords had been weaker than Holy Beasts. Since Greater

Demonic Deities had around the same level of power as Holy Beasts and worked under the Demon Lord, Allen presumed that the Demon Lord himself would be somewhere in either the C or B tier. *Or maybe he's in the A tier. I really don't know. But when I look at this list, I can see how weak I am.* He felt his desire for the grind well up within him.

Since I've learned about the Holy Orbs, it's time to analyze what I've got. Though he was currently a merfolk, his sharp gaze when he began his analysis was the same as ever. Cecil and Shia turned to him with exasperation before they left his room, and Merus breathed a sigh of relief. The Summoner, lost in his own world, missed all of that and first checked his Expansion upgrade. As he had expected, the number of cards he could use had increased from eighty to ninety, allowing him to Summon ten more Rank A Summons.

As the commander in chief of the Allen Army, he needed to simultaneously Summon as many as he could to support his soldiers, who were working to become stronger. If the Demon Lord Army restarted its invasion, Allen would need all the help he could get from his Summons as well, so the more slots he had in his holder, the better. He excitedly closed his grimoire and thought about his next move.

Oh, I should check how to unseal those skills. He tried to use one of his sealed skills when a message appeared on his grimoire.

<You cannot use this skill because it is sealed. To unseal this skill, please unseal the requisite number of Rank S Summons and meet the level requirement.>

Yesss! At least I got a hint! Though he was not sure what the level requirement was, he had at least learned that there was a way to unseal his skills.

All right, next up is Growth. It's not sealed, so I feel like I can use it. It's still Lvl. 1. It's been a while since I've been able to see myself gaining skill XP. He was eager to test it out. *Judging from the name, does it help my Summons grow or something? Maybe I'll use it on*

Denka. Whoops, better take off my MP Recovery Ring or I won't know just how high the MP cost is. Insect H was his go-to when it came to testing out new skills.

Allen removed his MP Recovery Ring and used Growth, but other than the fact that it now resisted the water pressure and was a touch less nimble, the Insect H in front of him did not seem to have changed all that much. *It doesn't really seem any different... Huh?* Allen checked the message that had popped up on his grimoire.

<You have used Growth. Insect H has received Growth H.>

Okay, well, the grimoire says it's been used. But what's Growth H? It costs 2 MP. Is that all? Ooh! Allen flipped the pages of his grimoire to see if Denka had changed and found that a new page had been added.

Type: Insect
Rank: H
Growth: H
Name: Denka
HP: 3
MP: 0
Attack: 2
Stamina: 5
Agility: 5
Intelligence: 1
Luck: 2
Buffs: Endurance 1 + 1, Agility 1 + 1
Ability: Hop
Awakened Ability: Swarm

It's like my Summon got another buff or something. Its stats

rose! He saw that the buffs had doubled and tried to stack another Growth. When he used the skill again, another message popped up on his grimoire.

<You do not have the requisite level for using Growth.>

Guess I can only use it so many times based on my skill level. Allen then Summoned an Insect G and tried to use Growth once more.

<You do not have the requisite level for using Growth.>

Skill level determined the rank of Summons that could receive the buff, it seemed. Growth Lvl. 1 could only affect Rank H Summons. Rank H was the lowest rank of Summon, then, and Growth had to reach a higher level before it could affect Rank Gs. Allen Summoned another Insect H and used Growth on it too. It was a success, meaning there was no limit to the number of Summons he could use Growth on. That being the case, he began using Deletion, Creation, and Growth over and over again to raise his Growth to Lvl. 2. At some point, he realized that his Insect H's Growth level had reached G.

Type: Insect
Rank: H
Growth: G
Name: Denka
HP: 7
MP: 0
Attack: 8
Stamina: 10

Agility: 10
Intelligence: 6
Luck: 7
Buffs: Endurance 2 + 2, Agility 2 + 2
Ability: Hop
Awakened Ability: Swarm

It now costs 5 MP, huh? And this time, my Summon's stats increased too.

After testing things for about an hour, his Growth reached Lvl. 4. *All right, now that Growth is Lvl. 4, I've got a rough idea of how it works.* Allen took notes about the rough effects of the skill, along with the required MP and XP.

Effects of Growth

- Skill level determines the rank of Summons it affects.
- To use Growth on a Summon, the same amount of MP and magic stones used to create the Summon are required.
- Can use Growth simultaneously on all Summons.
- A Summon affected by Growth will have double the buffs as those of the same rank.
- The stats of a Summon affected by Growth are equivalent to those of a Summon whose rank matches the rank of Growth.
- The stats of a Summon affected by Growth are chosen at random from among Summons of the same rank.
- Even if a Summon affected by Growth is used for Synthesis, the Synthesized Summon will not be affected by Growth and have normal stats.

Ranks Affected by Growth Based on Growth Level (Lvl. 5 onward are guesses)

- Growth Lvl. 1: Can affect Rank H Summons
- Growth Lvl. 2: Can affect Rank G Summons

- Growth Lvl. 3: Can affect Rank F Summons
- Growth Lvl. 4: Can affect Rank E Summons
- Growth Lvl. 5: Can affect Rank D Summons
- Growth Lvl. 6: Can affect Rank C Summons
- Growth Lvl. 7: Can affect Rank B Summons
- Growth Lvl. 8: Can affect Rank A Summons
- Growth Lvl. 9: Can affect Rank S Summons

Required XP for Growth (Lvl. 5 onward are guesses)

- 1,000 XP to reach Lvl. 2
- 10,000 XP to reach Lvl. 3
- 100,000 XP to reach Lvl. 4
- 1,000,000 XP to reach Lvl. 5
- 10,000,000 XP to reach Lvl. 6
- 100,000,000 XP to reach Lvl. 7
- 1,000,000,000 XP to reach Lvl. 8
- 10,000,000,000 XP to reach Lvl. 9

MP Cost for Growth (Lvl. 5 onward are guesses)

- 2 MP at Lvl. 1
- 5 MP at Lvl. 2
- 10 MP at Lvl. 3
- 20 MP at Lvl. 4
- 50 MP at Lvl. 5
- 100 MP at Lvl. 6
- 200 MP at Lvl. 7
- 500 MP at Lvl. 8
- 1,000 MP at Lvl. 9

Th-This is amazing. The Summons that couldn't really shine until now might have a use! Whenever Allen's Summoning level rose, he gained the ability to create Summons of a higher rank. Even if the lower-ranked Summons had useful abilities, the higher-ranked ones were strict upgrades stat-wise, and the former thus lost their use.

But thanks to Growth, Rank B Summons could become as strong as Rank As. It would allow Summons with weak stats but useful abilities to have higher stats and fight powerful opponents. And since Summons dictated buffs as well, Allen would be stronger than ever.

If I use Growth on Wally, think about how much damage Explode will do! Allen's Stone E had an Awakened Ability called Explode, whose power relied on its Endurance. As he envisioned more plans that could be crafted when his Growth reached a higher level, another thought entered his mind, and he stared at Merus.

Merus, who had been relaxing until now, snapped awake, sensing that Allen was staring. The Angel A gave a look of genuine displeasure as he sat up.

"Sir Allen, you mustn't forget our promise," he warned. But his words fell on deaf ears.

"If I use Growth on you and your buffs double, your stats would be on par with a Rank S Summon," Allen muttered.

His head was filled with uses for Growth as his mind wandered to his sealed skills. Merely imagining the moment when all his skills were unsealed made his heart dance with excitement.

Chapter 8: Ignomasu and the Imprisoned Mermaid Princess

Five days after Allen's Summoning reached Lvl. 9, he was hard at work, desperately raising his Growth skill. And as promised, he had given Merus ten days to do whatever he wished. Ever since becoming a Summon, the Angel A had been unable to visit the Heavenly Realm of his own accord, and so, he had merely wandered around. A few days later, Merus had returned to Allen's side, but the Summoner had hardly moved an inch since the Angel A had last seen him—Allen was trying to level up his Growth skill as quickly as he could. He was also ensuring that he used Mimic on himself and his friends every twenty-four hours so that they could remain in Prostia.

The Summoner was so engrossed with gaining XP that Merus had even called him insane. Within five days, Allen had managed to raise his Growth to Lvl. 7. All he needed was a billion more XP to raise it to Lvl. 8, and his Summons could receive Rank A buffs, which would double the stat buffs they gave him. His Summons would provide nearly +100,000 in buffs alone, greatly expanding his repertoire for battle, much to his delight. Depending on the buffs, he could attain over 50,000 max MP, enhancing the effects of his MP Recovery Ring. That would make it much easier for him to farm skill XP.

Naturally, he would need magic stones for his grinding, but six months had passed since the Allen Army was formed, and its activities were becoming steadier. It could now provide him with a stable supply of magic stones for his needs. While Allen kept this part to himself, the joint training session with the Hero Army was also a means to support his own actions.

Keel and Helmios were handling themselves well, and the items they obtained in the Rank S dungeon turned a tidy profit for the

Allen Army—or rather, for Allen himself. Magic stones had also entered the market, courtesy of adventurers outside the Allen and Hero Armies, who did not need them, tackling the Rank S dungeon. According to the Adventurer's Guild and the Pelomas Whaling Company, the current number of magic stones available on a given day surpassed Allen's usage. The Adventurer's Guild Information Group had also been formed thanks to his advice, and he had provided them with detailed information regarding how to safely use the class promotion dungeon. All in all, he had created an environment that was very beneficial to him.

The day after Allen had reached Growth Lvl. 7, sixteen days after arriving in the Prostia Empire, Allen and his team were finally granted an audience with Ignomasu. The emperor apparently wanted to personally receive an update on the water purification tool repairs, thus Princess Carmine and Special Ambassador Plenipotentiary Allen had been summoned.

Led by the knights who stood guard, the party stepped into the palace—a building Allen was already familiar with due to having Shared his vision with Fish D. They walked deeper inside, where the audience room with an empty throne awaited them. Princess Carmine stood in the center of the group as they waited in front of the throne for Ignomasu's appearance. Aside from the princess and her guard, Knight Captain Iwanam, Pelomas, Shia, Sophie, Cecil, and Luke were all present as well.

"Do I have to be here too?" Pelomas whispered, looking as nervous as he always did when attending important events.

"Yep. It's better to have you around, Peloniki," Allen replied.

"Silence!" Chancellor Ajiray shouted. "His Imperial Majesty Emperor Ignomasu has arrived!"

Allen felt like a student getting in trouble for talking in class. He silently blamed it all on Pelomas as he knelt and lowered his head.

"You may rise," Chancellor Ajiray said.

Everyone looked up to see the familiar face of Ignomasu, who was sitting on the throne.

"Emperor Ignomasu, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Carmine, princess of the Crevelle Kingdom." She politely

introduced herself. “This man here is Special Ambassador Plenipotentiary Alec, a representative of my father, the king of Crevelle. I hope you will allow him to be in your presence. We are here to provide you with an offering in my father’s stead, Your Majesty.”

“Huh? What’s that? Is that popular in the port?” Ignomasu asked, going completely off topic.

“P-Pardon?” Princess Carmine asked, unable to hide her shock.

The emperor ignored her and turned to Chancellor Ajiray, who stood beside the throne.

“You see those critters on their heads? The shrimp and the crab? I heard that practice was getting popular in the port.”

“I-I haven’t the faintest idea,” Chancellor Ajiray mumbled in response, unable to answer the sudden query.

Ignomasu then glared at Allen. “You’re Special Ambassador Alec, are you? What’s the status of the magic tool? How long do these repairs take? It’s already been half a month.”

Guess he doesn’t really sweat the small stuff. Seems like kind of a common trait among militant people. Allen had spent the last half a month analyzing Ignomasu through his words and actions via Sharing with Fish D, and he had just learned that his analysis was not too far off the mark.

“Things are going well, Your Majesty,” Allen replied.

Ignomasu’s mouth snapped open as the spiky fins on the sides of his face began to tremble.

“Well said,” he boomed. “And can you bet your life on that?”

“I most certainly can. Truth be told, the repairs are basically done.”

“What?” Ignomasu asked, his fins continuing to shudder. “That’s not what you said earlier.”

“I assumed that you would show off this fabulous magic tool to your subjects at the Songstress Contest, which I believe will be held in two weeks’ time. I was preparing for that, Your Majesty,” Allen explained, having already had his answer prepared.

The Songstress Contest was a huge, annual event held in Prostia. Renowned songstresses from across the empire gathered in Patlanta

to participate. Powerful nobles came to enjoy the festivities, as did other citizens who wanted to revel in the jubilations. Ignomasu wanted to use the event to show off both the magic tool and his power.

Allen, who had used a Fish D to eavesdrop on a conversation in the palace, had realized that the tool and the contest would always be mentioned in tandem and asked Princess Carmine all about it. Much like how the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament was always held in the nations of beastkin on Garlesia, other large nations generally had occasions of grandeur as well. Upon hearing Allen's words, Ignomasu folded his fins back, a sign that his anger had subsided.

"I see... Then if, for whatever reason, the tool fails to activate that day, you know what'll happen to you, don't you?" Ignomasu asked.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Allen replied, lowering his head in respect. "I believe it will be the perfect time for you to show off your might to the entirety of the Ignomasu Empire. Rest assured that we're making the necessary preparations for your big day."

Allen had purposefully called Prostia the Ignomasu Empire. According to Iwanam, the original name of the empire had come from the Prostia imperial family unifying the nation, and Ignomasu was a name that the man himself had obtained after rising through the ranks of the Prostia imperial army. The implication of referring to it as the Ignomasu Empire was that when Ignomasu, whose full name was Glaudel van Ignomasu, successfully finished his rebellion, his bloodline would reign supreme over the nation.

"Very well. You may leave," the emperor said gruffly, ignoring Allen's flattery.

He looked bored as he nonchalantly waved his hand to shoo his visitors away. Yet Allen remained kneeling and refused to leave in silence.

"Alec," Chancellor Ajiray warned. "His Majesty said that you may leave. Do so at once."

Allen, his head still bowed, suddenly opened his mouth. "When this Songstress Content is a resounding success, I ask that you keep

me by your side, Your Majesty. I would like to assist with this empire's prosperity."

Though no one could see his expression, he was wearing a very malicious smirk.

"What? You want a reward or something?" Ignomasu asked.

"I wouldn't even dream of that, Your Majesty. I simply want to aid you and your endeavor," Allen responded without raising his head.

"What can you do?"

"I can provide military funds."

"Oh? You can?"

Ignomasu immediately sounded excited, enticed by those words.

"I've served the Crevelle Kingdom as the Minister of Foreign Trade," Allen said. "I have ties with the Empire of Baukis and have negotiated with various other nations as well. My right-hand man is here with me. His name is Peloniki, and he is blessed with a Talent that gives him a very keen eye."

Those words hinted that Pelomas had a Talent that allowed him to appraise the value of goods, a common trait among merchants. In this world, Talent triumphed over hard work.

"Go on," Ignomasu ordered.

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Your Majesty, I don't believe you're a man who'll be satisfied with merely ruling the bottom of the ocean," Allen declared, taking on a confident tone.

Finally, the Summoner raised his head. Even his merfolk form could not hide the villainous expression that took even Chancellor Ajiray aback. Allen had eavesdropped on their conversation with Fish D, so he knew that Ignomasu was showering nobles with so much money that he was even dipping into the Prostian treasury. As Duke Doresskarei had said, if the emperor still wanted to conquer the land above water, he would need all the money he could get.

"The ocean floor is too cramped for a man of your caliber," Allen continued. "Therefore, we have no choice but to invade the surface. When that time comes, the soldiers under your command, Your Majesty, must exert their full potential. You'll require more money than ever before."

The Summoner assumed that several tens of thousands of troops would need to be mobilized.

"To achieve that goal, it'll be best to have the Ignomasu Empire sell its assets to the land above for a good price. I truly believe that Peloniki and I can aid you in this endeavor," Allen concluded.

Unexpectedly, Ignomasu looked rather bored.

"You talk too much," he grumbled. "And? How much can you make? Tell me."

"If I am allowed to operate freely, I can bring in as much as you'd like," Allen said simply and casually. "But if I were to give a number, ten million gold per year."

"Impossible!" Chancellor Ajiray cried. "You lot were cornered above water! How in the world can you make that much?!"

Knight Captain Iwanam gritted his teeth with rage, trying his best to suppress his emotions at the chancellor's words. Crevelle had gone above water for the Prostia Empire, but the Crevelle royal family and its citizens had all come from the ocean floor. It was the empire that had forced the residents of the kingdom to leave their hometown and abandon their beloved ocean floor. Even so, the chancellor did not seem to care about that, let alone feel grateful. Instead, his words reeked of prejudice and discrimination. Even the knight captain could not hide his fury. But Allen did not seem to mind and once again flashed an evil smile, happy to take on the challenge.

"Both Peloniki and I will bet our lives on this promise," Allen said. *Or I'll just bet Pelomas's soul.*

"Pfft?!" Pelomas spluttered, shocked by Allen's sudden oath and unwilling to bet his life. The merchant widened his eyes with astonishment, but the Summoner ignored it all and gave another malicious smirk.

"Ten million gold, huh..." Ignomasu said, sounding bored. "You sure can talk the talk, but is that even enough? Chancellor Ajiray, will that cover our funding?"

"Well, Your Majesty, I cannot give you an answer right away," the chancellor mumbled, possibly wanting to avoid speaking openly about invading the land above. But the emperor paid no heed.

"I see," Ignomasu said to Allen. "Ten million gold a year isn't nearly enough, and that takes an awful lot of time. Can you make ten million in three months?"

From that remark, Allen inferred that the invasion plan had advanced more than he had expected. *Three months? So right after the contest's over, he wants to rally his soldiers and invade, huh?*

"Your wish is my command," he said, bowing again.

"H-Hey!" Ajiray hastily interjected. "Do you understand what your promises in this room will entail?!"

"Oh, Peloniki and I have handled ourselves quite well against those land dwellers thus far," Allen said. "Ten million is a paltry sum. However, Your Majesty, I need you to personally declare that we're allowed free rein while working to achieve this goal."

"Oh, is that so?" Ignomasu asked. "Well, if you really *can* make ten million, I can make you both my confidants."

"Thank you! We will give it our all!"

After giving one more deep bow, Allen glanced at Princess Carmine, who stood beside him. *All right, my negotiations went well. Shall we move on, Your Highness?* The princess noticed his gaze. She closed her eyes for a few moments and took a deep breath as she drew the fins on her face back, sticking them onto the sides of her head before she spoke.

"Your Majesty, w-will you please allow me to pose a query?" she requested.

"What is it?" Ignomasu asked.

"I-Is Duke Doresskarei doing well?"

She stumbled over her words but nonetheless managed to get them out.

"Doresskarei?" Ignomasu parroted.

The princess nodded. "As you know, His Grace is my fiancé. Unfortunately, I've been unable to contact him for a while, and I assume you might know a thing or two about his whereabouts. I understand it is insolent of me, but even so, please permit my asking."

The emperor grimaced and turned away from the princess to stare at the chancellor. Ajiray nervously nodded back. Their reactions

made it clear to Allen just how Ignomasu and his friends viewed Princess Carmine and the Crevelle Kingdom. *His reaction's really telling. Crevelle's one of his precious bases on land, after all.*

Ever since Ignomasu had attacked the palace, he had been taking extra care to ensure that the First and Second Imperial Armies, along with the other nobles, avoided engaging in battles. He probably wanted to conserve his forces for his next goal: invading the land above. That also meant he wanted to carefully maintain the empire's relationship with Crevelle.

When their invasion commenced, Prostia was sure to use Crevelle as a foothold, turning it into a frontline base for the foreseeable future. Needless to say, if Crevelle refused, Prostia would take it by force. Crevelle might have been a tiny kingdom, but it still had an army of over ten thousand at its disposal. One could easily imagine that such a respectable army would not sit back and calmly allow Prostia to take over without offering any sort of resistance. And Ignomasu was not keen on depleting supplies and forces for such a battle. *And the Union might be able to bolster its defenses while Crevelle's buying time.*

Prostia was well aware that the lands above water had an intricate network of magic tools used to communicate dire situations to other nations, with the Five Continent Alliance being the central hub for these distress calls. That network had been set up specifically to combat the Demon Lord Army, but Crevelle was the deciding factor on whether Prostia's invasion would be instantly transmitted to the rest of the world or if that information would be kept under wraps for a while, catching everyone unawares.

To keep Crevelle under Ignomasu's wing, it was imperative that Princess Carmine be free to do as she wished. *At least, that's my assumption of Ignomasu's thought process.* If either Princess Carmine or the special ambassador plenipotentiary were restrained and taken hostage, Crevelle would pretend to listen to Prostia's orders while secretly contacting the rest of Galiat or even the Five Continent Alliance to request aid. No doubt Ignomasu assumed that the nations above water would rally together to destroy Prostia. Allen had analyzed the emperor's thoughts well, yet Ignomasu's next

words managed to surprise him.

"I guess I've got no other choice," Ignomasu said.

"What?!" The chancellor started to panic. "Y-You mean...you..."

"It's a pain, isn't it?"

The emperor glared at the knights in the audience room, and even Allen understood the meaning behind his gaze. The Summoner lost his composure as well. *Wait, you mean...* That's *your decision?!* Allen realized that Ignomasu was far more militant and less tactical than he had thought. The emperor was going to kill him and Princess Carmine where they stood, silencing them. *Crap, gotta speed up our plans. Let's skip a few steps here.*

"P-Princess Carmine!" Allen cried, feigning trepidation. "Don't you understand the situation that you're in?! Please, I beg of you! Just forget about Doresskarei!"

He glanced at the princess, wordlessly asking her to shed a few tears. At first, Carmine was confused by Allen's puzzling words and gaze. But she quickly recalled the plan they had crafted and gave a small nod before crumpling to the floor in tears.

"No... I-I... It can't be!"

She faced the ground and wept while Ignomasu stared, completely befuddled.

"Huh?" he grunted.

Shia, who was acting as one of Carmine's maids, recalled the plan as well and began to play her role.

"What?! D-Don't say that!" she shouted. "A-Alec, you swine! Have you forgotten just how well the Crevelle royal family has treated you?!"

Unfortunately, Shia had sounded very monotone, and upon closer inspection of her merfolk face, her cheeks were tinged with red, indicating her embarrassment. *Shia, your face is red. If you're gonna act, you should go all out like Princess Carmine,* Allen thought, then turned to Shia and continued the farce.

"Excuse me? Joanna, are you still speaking to me as though I'm a simple government official? I'm sorry, but it seems your skull is too thick for you to understand what being a special ambassador plenipotentiary entails."

"You bastard..." Shia said. She pointed at the Summoner, her body trembling with fury. "You're...betraying us?!"

"Heh heh... At this point, I can take the reins. Truly, I'm glad I came all the way down here, where the light of Crevelle's glory will never reach. You see, I've always despised you, living a life of comfort and luxury in the royal castle, fooling around with the princess. You don't know just what I've been through this whole time, do you?"

"Grr..."

"Baukis is a wretched place where dust clouds always hang in the air. I spent many years serving the royal family in that atrocious empire, and instead of rewarding my hard work, they forced me back during times of need, only to immediately send me elsewhere! Just what am I to them?!"

Allen turned to Sophie, who nodded back.

"Heed your tongue, Alec!" she said sharply. "Should the Crevelle royal family fall, even you won't be left unscathed!"

Now that *was perfect acting. You only had a day to learn your line, and you did great. Thank you, no notes.* Impressed with Sophie's acting, Allen prattled on.

"Oh? I'm not so sure. Have you forgotten what Emperor Ignomasu just said? As long as I'm good for the money, he graciously gave me his word that I could serve him."

Allen had only come up with this plan yesterday. When the official had arrived and ordered him to head to the palace, the Summoner had been pleased to know that he was finally being granted an audience with Ignomasu. His goal was to curry favor with the emperor and get as much information out of him as possible. The way things were going, however, it seemed there was no more information to get. And so, Allen had decided to act the part of a traitor of the royal family, as Ignomasu was, in hopes of getting in his good graces. If possible, he wanted to go in and out of the palace freely.

When he had spoken of his plan to Princess Carmine, she had agreed to it immediately. It was vital that the emperor did not grow suspicious of them, so Allen had given the princess a ring to boost

her stats in hopes that it would benefit her acting. Now with over 10,000 Intelligence, the princess was able to perfectly act her part and assist his ploy despite Allen having needed to hasten the plan.

"Did you plan this from the start?!" Carmine asked, her face twitching with anger. "My father and I trusted you!"

She glared at Allen, who smugly grinned back with a triumphant expression.

"Hmph, took you long enough," he scoffed. "No longer will I be the man shackled by Crevelle's chains!"

"Have you no shame?!" Sophie shrieked. "Prepare yourself, Alec! You will be punished for your disloyalty!"

When Allen glared at her, the chancellor interrupted their exchange.

"Enough!" Ajiray boomed. "Have you all forgotten that you're in the presence of His Majesty?!"

Only then did Allen realize that he was surrounded by Ignomasu's royal guards. *Whoops, I got too into it.* Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Knight Captain Iwanam brace himself. No doubt the man was planning to jump in and fight should anyone raise so much as a finger against Princess Carmine.

Next, Allen glanced at Ignomasu. The emperor noticed Iwanam's posture and was on alert, but he made no attempt to rise from his throne. *Looks like he's confident in his skills.* Ignomasu was apparently a Spear King, a four-star Talent.

"Hmm... This is getting troublesome," Ignomasu grumbled. "Let's get 'em."

Allen immediately moved on to the next step of his plan.

"Please, if you'd give me a moment, Your Majesty," the Summoner hastily said. "We have no need to sully the beautiful waters of this audience room with the filthy blood of these land dwellers. Surely, the princess is at least capable of providing you some entertainment."

Ignomasu blinked confusedly for a moment, processing Allen's implications, then slowly opened his mouth once more.

"Ah, she can at least be useful for a conversation. I see. You're quite astute, Alec."

"Oh, not as astute as you, Your Majesty," Allen replied, a mischievous smirk stretching across his lips despite him remaining humble.

"Indeed, if we keep her alive, she'd be useful for negotiations with Crevelle," Ajiray agreed.

Finally caught on, huh?

"All right, take Princess Carmine and her allies to the palace villa. The rest of you may fall back," Ignomasu ordered, rising from his throne. He looked a touch weary as he left via the hallway beside the throne.

"Princess Carmine, this way, please," Chancellor Ajiray said.

As though that was their cue, the royal guards encircled Princess Carmine, Shia, Sophie, and Cecil and slowly pushed the ladies to the exit. Allen, Luke, Pelomas, and Iwanam were left behind, and they followed the royal guard. After they exited the audience room and turned a few corners, they arrived at a long hallway where the knights guarding the place blocked Allen and the other men.

"Men are not allowed beyond this point," the knight said.

In the middle of the hallway was an iron gate, and beyond that was a knight of the villa—a lady merfolk donning a full suit of armor.

"I see," Allen said. "Be well, Your Highness. Henceforth, I shall serve His Majesty Ignomasu. This is where we forever go our separate ways."

Surrounded by the royal guard, Allen spoke haughtily and proudly. Just then, Cecil managed to sneak past the guards and rush toward him.

"Y-You brute!" she shouted. "I won't forget this!"

She charged at him and landed a kick straight in his smug face.

"Gah?!" Allen gasped.

Merfolk Cecil had used her webbed feet to deliver a roundhouse kick, knocking Allen back. *We're going off script, but I like that off-the-cuff reaction. Thank you very much. And Cecil, I can still see your thighs. Guess the merfolk transformation doesn't change that bit.* Following Cecil's impromptu acting, the iron gate opened, and the ladies were all pushed inside. When the gate closed, the armed merfolk ladies in the back took over and guided the princess and her

maids down the hallway.

After walking for a while, the hallway began to arc slightly, obscuring the path they had come down. Then, the merfolk women suddenly stopped. They had not uttered a word until now, and they maintained their silence while encouraging everyone to proceed. Given no other choice, the princess and the other ladies feigned resignation as they gingerly stepped forward. At the hallway's end, they spotted a large staircase and a dance floor. Only when Sophie was abundantly sure that no one else was around did she dare speak.

"It's going well so far," she whispered.

"Is it?" Shia muttered back. "Frankly, I feel like I didn't do too well..."

Allen's voice echoed from within Cecil's clothes.

"No, you all did great," he said. "Seraphi, your kick really did a number on me."

"Oh, did it, Alec?" Cecil replied, pinching the Bird G that she kept hidden at her chest.

"Who goes there?" a voice echoed from the top of the staircase.

Someone slowly made their descent, elegantly swimming down since she had no need for stairs. The upper half of her body was that of a human, while the lower half was that of a fish—she was a mermaid. Her beautiful, shimmering, emerald locks, something merfolk did not possess, formed gentle waves as they flowed down her upper body. She wore a swimsuit to cover her humanlike upper body.

That must be Princess Rapsonil. She's an actual mermaid princess! Cecil hastily shoved the Bird G back into her pocket, where Allen got a good look at the lady thanks to Sharing. Allen had actually caught a few glimpses of her when he had investigated the villa with Fish D, seeing that she was confined with the other noble children but did not receive horrible treatment. He had determined that they did not require immediate rescuing and quietly watched on.

"Your Highness, whatever is the matter?"

A few women dressed as knights descended from the staircase,

rushing to her side.

"Are you Princess Rapsonil?" Shia asked in a hushed tone. "This is Princess Carmine of Crevelle, and we're here to protect and rescue you two."

"Rescue us?" Princess Rapsonil hissed back. "What's going on? Tell me."

"Apologies, but I don't think we can here."

The princess understood the meaning behind Shia's words. She gave a brief nod, then turned toward the staircase and raised her voice at the knights.

"These people are here under orders from Emperor Ignomasu," Rapsonil said. "Follow me. I shall hear you out in the room above."

She swam ahead and stopped in the middle of the staircase, turning to Shia and the other ladies, quietly instructing them to follow her. They obeyed and made their way down the villa hallway.

Princess Rapsonil had the lower body of a fish, so she could glide along the water without ever touching the ground. Meanwhile, Shia and the other merfolk walked and swam as they saw fit, as the villa and the palace had been built such that they could be both walked and swam through. Houses in Patlanta were of the same build, including the one Allen and his group were staying in. The staircases were wide and allowed for quite a bit of freedom.

Allen had his Bird G peek out from Cecil's pocket so he could observe how Rapsonil swam along. A few moments later, Shia and the others entered a wide, lavishly furnished room that must have been for guests. Some of the furnishings were made out of coral, and there was a table made out of crystal flowers that exuded opulence. While the extravagance was inviting for guests, one could see through the window that there was an iron grate separating the villa from the main palace. One could not swim past it. *I don't recall seeing any windows in the hallway that connects these two buildings.* However, since Fish D could pass through walls, windows had been the least of the Summoner's concerns when he had investigated the building.

Rapsonil encouraged Shia and the others to sit at the table of crystal flowers. The imperial princess floated in front of it as she

ordered the knights to stand guard by the entrance of the room and waited for them to leave.

"Now then," she said. "You said you came to rescue me. Would you kindly elaborate?"

"Of course, Your Highness," Sophie replied. "But before I do, we must tell you who we really are. My name is Sophialohne. While I'm taking the form of a merfolk as we speak, I'm actually an elf who resides above water."

"An elf? But you look like a merfolk to me."

The princess could hardly believe what she was hearing.

"I do, and I don't blame you for having doubts," Sophie explained patiently. "Truth be told, this is the first time I've ever taken this form as well. Our leader, Allen, employs a Summon that has the ability to transform us for twenty-four hours. This ability changes our body composition, allowing us to perfectly mimic other species. If not for that, we would most certainly drown within this ocean."

Sophie then provided a brief summary of the events that had occurred thus far. She spoke of the Demon Lord Army's plan, in which daemonic incarnations had been unleashed throughout Galiat, plunging Crevelle into despair, and how Shia had jumped in to help and dispel the monsters, allowing the Gamers to become acquainted with Princess Carmine. Additionally, she explained that Shia's home, Albahal, had also fallen victim to a revolt, and that the Beast Princess was pursuing the mastermind, her older brother Beku, who had fled. Rapsonil quietly listened to the entire story.

"So, you came to this villa in search of the whereabouts of this 'Beku,'" the princess guessed.

"Precisely," Shia responded. "It's been two weeks since we arrived in Patlanta, but we haven't been able to learn where my brother—where Beku has gone. We'd like any clue we possibly can find."

Rapsonil turned to Shia, a sad look on her face.

"Your name... Princess Shia, was it? Are you implying that you expect such a thing as a reward for saving us?"

"No! I'm terribly sorry for making it seem that way," Shia replied hastily. "Rest assured, I wish nothing more than to save you from peril. However, if we save you right away, Allen believes it will limit

our actions."

That's right, Shia. We can't do much until we capture Beku and retrieve the Symbol of the Beast King. Allen wanted to prioritize strengthening the Beast Princess and felt that Rapsonil would have to wait a bit longer. But that aside, it seemed Shia genuinely wanted to help Rapsonil out. The mermaid could sense the Beast Princess's kindness, and her ephemeral expression of sorrow melted away into the waters.

"Princess Shia, I trust your kind words," Rapsonil said. "You must be tormented by your older brother, and yet you offer a helping hand to us. The thought alone gives me peace of mind. However, we have been imprisoned in this building for a very long time, and we haven't heard anything about your older brother."

"I expected as much..." Shia replied as she visibly deflated.

Rapsonil approached the Beast Princess, clasped her hand, and gave an encouraging nod as though to reassure her. Sophie was moved by Rapsonil's kindness, but her heart skipped a beat when the mermaid turned to her.

"Is there anything else you'd like to know?" Rapsonil asked. "About the palace or we merfolk, perhaps? If there's something plaguing your mind, please ask away."

As Sophie tried to come up with a question, Shia, whose hands were still in Rapsonil's grip, spoke up.

"Please forgive my impudence, but Your Highness, was that fabulous tail of yours bestowed upon you by Goddess Aqua?"

Sophie, Cecil, and Carmine immediately looked at Rapsonil's tail. Carmine was the only one who knew the story behind it, and she opened her mouth to speak, but Rapsonil beat her to the punch.

"Ah, yes," the mermaid began. "I'd forgotten that other than Princess Carmine, no one knows about my body. Indeed, the blood of Lord Macris, the Holy Fish, flows through my veins."

"I guessed as much!" Shia exclaimed, her eyes twinkling. "How splendid!"

"And of course, you, Princess Shia, have the blood of Lord Garm, God of Beasts, in your veins," Rapsonil said with a smile. "I've never seen a beastkin for myself, and your merfolk form is very appealing,

but I'm certain your true form is extraordinarily dazzling and overflowing with glory."

Allen listened to the two ladies converse. *It's kinda like a God and a person inhabiting the same body. And Ignomasu wants Rapsonil's blood.* When Allen was still Kenichi, he had learned about theocracy during his history and ethics classes. For a monarch to further increase their power and influence, they exploited the religion that the people of their nation believed in, claiming to rule in the name of God or to be a god who descended to reign over the nation. While Allen was not sure if that train of thought was based on facts and if those people really had spoken with God, it was commonly presumed that in the past, the people had believed in the notion despite it likely having been false.

This world, however, had deities and gods; it was not just blind faith or belief. Deities appeared before people and interacted with them, meaning there actually were people who were accepted by a god and acted as their representative. For example, as Rapsonil had mentioned earlier, the Albahalan royal family had been founded a millennium ago by Albahal, a child of Beast God Garm, and another beastkin. Albahal was thus half god and half beast, a man whose mighty roar could shake the earth in distant lands. Birds startled and flew away from mountains too far away to see at the sound, and some humans within earshot were killed instantly.

"Precisely. Her Highness's bloodline connects this empire to Holy Fish Macris and bestows Lady Aqua's blessing onto all of us merfolk," Carmine added.

"Wait, then there are things that aren't written in *Tales of the Prostia Empire*?" Cecil asked.

"Allow me to explain that to you, Miss Cecil," Rapsonil said before she began telling the tale of her ancestors. "Our founder, Lord Macris, agreed to become Lady Aqua's kin and was allowed to take the form of a Holy Fish. When he did so, he was forced to part ways with his beloved Lady Deirdre. I believe that's how the story goes."

"You're exactly right."

"Then the story has neglected to include that Lady Deirdre was with child—a result of her union with Lord Macris. After he became

the Holy Fish and once again sealed the monster away, he left Patlanta, the imperial capital, and Lady Deirdre gave birth. Her child closely resembles my form, possessing the upper half of a human and the bottom half of a fish."

Allen listened on through Bird G. *Wait, so that story* isn't *about love that was never to be? When did it get changed?*

"When the baby was born, the emperor of Prostia at the time claimed that it was a miracle from Lady Aqua," Rapsonil went on. "The child, he said, was left behind by Lord Macris to protect the empire, ensuring that his power would live on through his kin. And so, the child was adopted into the imperial family, and the emperor retired from his throne, presenting it to that child. Ever since then, there has been the occasional member of the Prostian imperial family like me, who has the upper half of a human and the lower half of a fish."

Fair enough. Which means Macris became Water Goddess Aqua's kin to gain greater power. When Dogora had become Fire Goddess Freyja's disciple, Allen had asked the deity all about the process. Freyja had claimed that deities gave power to those who believed in them, and clergymen were not the only ones who served the gods. At times, deities could create kin or disciples as well. He had then asked if there were any differences between disciples and kin, jotting down her answer.

Differences Between Disciples and Kin

- Disciple: one who acts in lieu of a god. Uses the god's name and believes it their duty to spread faith. Receives a fairly small blessing and maintains the form of a human.
- Kin: one who acts in lieu of a god. Actually carries out the duties of a deity, and receives a greater blessing. More often than not, they lose the appearance of a person and turn into a Holy Beast.

No matter the case, by forming a contract with a deity, the person received greater power while fulfilling different roles. In

general, it seemed there were a lot more kin and only a handful of disciples. Gods received power by gathering the faith of people, which meant they had to focus on their job of maintaining the world. Allen believed these gods required kin to carry out the god's orders and that there was no need to spread their name and role, as surely people already had decent knowledge of the deity. Hence, it was best to keep the number of disciples to a minimum.

I think I'm getting it now. Ignomasu is the type to kill someone if things get too troublesome for him, yet he keeps Princess Rapsonil, who refuses to listen to his orders, alive. She's imprisoned because he wants to have a child with her so that he'll be accepted as the emperor. It was then that Allen decided to move his Bird G around.

"Argh! Hey!" Cecil shrieked.

The Bird G continued to flap around in her clothes, but Allen ignored her cries and moved his Summon over near her neck to whisper into her ear. She was upset at first, but she soon nodded along to Allen's words, after which she turned to Princess Rapsonil.

"Um, may I ask something?" she inquired.

"What is it?" Rapsonil replied.

"Did anything about General Ignomasu's demeanor change before he attacked the palace?"

"Well, Ignomasu was always an ambitious man, but he always seemed to want to serve my father, the Prostian emperor. He always asked how high he could climb the ranks and wondered if he could serve the empire to the point that he'd be seen as a hero. I didn't feel he was the type who actually wanted the throne, but... Ah, yes! Father Shinorom then appeared by his side."

Huh? That merfolk? When Allen had sent out a Fish D to investigate the palace, he had spotted a merfolk dressed in white robes.

"Shinorom?" Cecil asked.

"Yes," Rapsonil answered. "He's an excellent researcher of magical tools and spells. Ignomasu was the captain of the royal guard, so normally, the two men would never have crossed paths, but I always saw them together, and I found that to be rather odd. Shinorom arrived at the palace more than a year ago."

"Then he was a shady man who one would normally be suspicious of."

Cecil tried to dig deeper into Shinorom, but Rapsonil looked doubtful of her words.

"Not exactly," the mermaid replied. "Indeed, I cannot deny that Father Shinorom is...a bit of an oddball. He was always engrossed in his research, and ever since he was given a lab within the palace, he has often spent several weeks at a time there without venturing outside. Of course, he's produced excellent results and contributed greatly to the empire, but others would mention that he had a habit of mumbling to himself, was difficult to communicate with, and only thought about topics that he was interested in. People found him off-putting, unable to really understand what went on in his mind. It seemed he didn't get along very well with others."

Shia and Carmine glanced at Cecil's neck. Allen, who was watching through Bird G, realized that their eyes were focused on him, implying that he and Shinorom were not all that different. *What?! How rude! Go on, keep questioning her!* Allen tried to use Bird G to tell Cecil to get back to asking about Shinorom, but she squeezed the Summon and restrained its movements. However, it seemed his intentions had been heard loud and clear, as Cecil returned to the topic at hand.

"Would you happen to know what Father Shinorom and Ignomasu were talking about?" Cecil asked.

"Yes," Rapsonil replied. "It seemed others also found it peculiar that the two men were so close, and when asked about what they were discussing, they replied that they were talking about strengthening the knights and the future of the empire. Neither said anything more, but it's not too much of a stretch to imagine that their discussions were related to the current state of things."

Shinorom, huh? That's one more thing I've gotta look into. As Allen made a mental note of this man's name, Rapsonil continued.

"I'm... I'm sure Ignomasu started this entire ordeal in time for the precious ritual that Lord Macris will attend. Perhaps Father Shinorom worked with Ignomasu precisely for this moment. Either Shinorom's passion for research was utilized, or he has some goal of his own..."

"Lord Macris will attend this event?" Sophie asked.

"I'm sorry, I haven't told you about that, have I?" Carmine answered. "As Lord Macris takes a year to swim around the empire, the Songstress Contest is held right when he reaches Patlanta."

I had no idea... Wait, then won't everything be solved when that time comes? It seemed Cecil was thinking the same thing, because she then spoke up.

"Wait, can't Holy Fish Macris resolve all these issues? I mean, Ignomasu is the enemy of this empire. He's a threat to you, Princess Rapsonil, and the Prostian imperial family, right?"

"That will never happen," Rapsonil explained, shaking her head. "While there hasn't been an incident of this scale before, records indicate that for the past three centuries, there have been many battles within the empire and its vassal states. Each time, everything from ending the battle to punishing the mastermind was handled by the Prostian emperor. Not once has Holy Fish Macris involved himself, as he's committed to maintaining his silence and nonparticipation in such matters. After all, Lord Macris is the protector of the Prostia Empire and all the merfolk related to it."

"I see..." Sophie said as she petted Rohzen, the God of Spirits, who had taken the form of a shrimp and was sitting on her shoulder.

Well, Macris is coming next month. Is his arrival related to this, or is it all just a coincidence? Beku is still at large, Father Shinorom and Ignomasu keep close ties, and the Holy Fish will visit next month—are all three events connected somehow? While working to save Princess Rapsonil, Allen was slowly but surely gathering clues to piece together.

Chapter 9: Keel's Desires

A few days after Allen had been summoned by Ignomasu, Cecil was in the royal castle of the Ratash Kingdom. She was waiting for Allen and his team to arrive from Prostia. It had been a good while since Gushara, a pawn of the Demon Lord Army, and his believers, the daemonic incarnations, had run amok in the Holy Land of Elmahl and the rest of the Galiatan Continent.

It was Allen and his party who had ultimately resolved the debacle, and the Five Continent Alliance had praised them for their heroic efforts. Keel and the rest of the Gamers would be awarded for their feats. The reward for assisting the nations of the Five Continent Alliance would be provided through one's birth nation—in this case, Ratash. The kingdom would honor Krena, Dogora, Keel, and Cecil for their accomplishments, and today was the day of the awards ceremony.

Cecil had parted ways with the rest of the team and teleported to the royal castle the night before. There had been some things she had wanted to discuss with her father, Viscount Granvelle.

The viscount was currently speaking with Count Hamilton in the waiting room. A short distance away from them stood Allen's parents, Rodin and Theresia, along with Krena's parents, Gerda and Mathilda. The parents had been called to participate in their children's awards ceremony, but only Rodin would be bestowed a reward. His words to Gerda reached Cecil's ears.

"Am I wearing this right?" Rodin asked. He was dressed in a noble's formal attire, but as he was not used to the outfit, he shifted around restlessly.





“Huh? Yeah, you look good. Don’t ask me, though,” Gerda replied in a bored tone.

Theresia quietly piped up from behind Rodin. “You look dashing, honey.”

Rodin smiled, likely having wanted praise so that he could be at ease. Cecil felt that Allen took after his father quite a bit. Ever since the Summoner was a child, his mind had been difficult to read, and he was always saying strange things. However, anytime someone praised him, he looked visibly relieved.

Allen planned to teleport to the royal castle with his friends so that they could attend the awards ceremony. In Rohzenheim, he held the title of grand strategist and thus would receive no reward from Ratash. He had no reason to be present, but he always tried to attend such occasions. Cecil believed it was because he was happy when his friends received praise; it must have felt like he was receiving the compliment as well, and he was thus committed to attending these ceremonies. If Allen were to receive a reward, it would be from Rohzenheim, but Cecil recalled that he had claimed that he simply wanted their assistance when he needed it. He had no need for any other reward.

“Allen’s late,” Cecil muttered to herself as she checked the time using the magic tool on the wall. “It’s about to begin.”

The ceremony would start soon, and that made her a bit anxious.

“You don’t have to worry,” Keel said to her. “I’m sure he’ll make it in time.”

Since this was an official event, Keel was dressed in the formal attire that was standard for high-ranking clergymen within the Church of Elmea: a white robe embroidered with gold. Beside him was his little sister Nina, also in a formal dress well suited to the occasion.

Krena, Dogora, and Meruru were chatting a short distance away. The three of them were also in formal clothes, but Dogora looked suffocated in his outfit. Conversely, unexpectedly, Krena wore her dress well. Only Meruru wore her Baukis military uniform. She was apparently a bit too embarrassed to wear a dress, so in lieu of proper clothes, she had chosen to wear her uniform.

Meruru had actually received her reward from her home, the Empire of Baukis, before everyone else, having been granted the title of baron. She was a lowly soldier who had climbed her way up to become a noble, and no longer was she an honorary baron. Now that she officially had her title, she could have her descendants inherit it and remain members of the nobility. Meruru had mentioned that her family was ecstatic about the achievement.

"Speaking of which..." Keel said as Cecil gazed at Krena, Dogora, and Meruru.

"What is it?" Cecil asked.

"I, uh, was just wondering if things were all right."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, our..."

Keel struggled to get his words out, while Cecil recalled the matters she had spoken about with her father the day prior.

"It's fine," Cecil replied.

Keel looked surprised. "Are you sure? I mean..."

"I said it's fine. Don't make me repeat myself."

"She's right, Keel—I mean, Lord Carnel," Viscount Granvelle said, approaching the two. "You need not be so concerned about us. Cecil and I talked at length about it yesterday. We both support your decision."

"Thank you," Keel said, hastily bowing his head. "I know I'm being really selfish..."

"Nobles can and should take responsibility for their actions. I believe your father has already done so. Above all, House Carnel is *your* house. It all depends on how you will act and make decisions."

"Right. Thank you for saying so, Viscount Granvelle."

Just as Keel gave another deep bow and expressed his gratitude, the door of the waiting room burst open. Allen rushed into the room with Sophie, Volmaar, and Shia in tow.

"Sorry!" the Summoner said. "There was something I had to take care of."

No longer was he in the form of a merfolk. For the past two weeks, Cecil had grown accustomed to seeing him as one, and now, it felt like he was using Mimic to take the form of a human.

"Huh? Where's Pelomas?" she asked.

"Oh, he's staying in Ignomasu's palace," Allen replied. "We finally got our hands on the castle ledger, so he's trying to see if there's anything that could turn a profit."

"Don't forget to cast Mimic on him. If you don't, he'll drown."

"He's risking his life in his own way. I'm sure he wants to give Fiona a Tear of Macris."

The more Pelomas accomplished, the more favor he would receive from Ignomasu, which would allow him more access to information within the palace. Pelomas hoped that this would somehow bring him closer to marrying Fiona.

There were still times when Allen was not really listening to Cecil's words, and she felt compelled to bury her head in her hands when he began to mutter to himself.

"Ugh, my Summons are about to be wiped out on the battlefield," he grumbled. "Also, Bask's just brimming with energy. One day, I'm gonna use him to level up."

Cecil could put two and two together. She presumed that the Insect As and Dragon As that had been sent to the northern region of the Central Continent were being pushed back. This was largely due to Bask and other Greater Demonic Deities having made their appearance.

"Bask? You mean *that* Bask?" Cecil asked. "He's all the way over there?"

"Yeah," Allen replied. "The main force of the Demon Lord Army might've been deployed. It's part of the reason I was late gathering Shia and the others so we could come here."

Though he was trying to draw up several plans, Bask and the other Demonic Deities were powerful, so currently, he was coming up empty. He wanted to head to the Central Continent and fight the Demon Lord Army, but he was busy scouring Prostia in search of Beku and trying to weasel his way into Ignomasu's inner circle. He had little time for anything else. *Shinorom's not in the palace, but that's so suspicious,* he thought.

Priest Shinorom, whom Princess Rapsonil had mentioned, was nowhere to be seen in the palace, no matter how hard Allen

searched. According to the official who had provided the ledger, Shinorom would disappear for a few days at a time, presumably cooping up in his lab, before suddenly reemerging. If Rapsonil's story was true, Allen simply needed to find the lab, but he simply could not locate it within the palace. Just as he considered revoking Merus's break and sending him to the northern region of the Central Continent, a little girl ran up to him.

"Allen!" Myulla, his little sister, cried.

Allen kept a Summon in Rodin Village and saw Myulla almost daily, but from her point of view, she had not seen her big brother in a long while. A huge smile formed on her face. He reached out and petted his sister's hair when his little brother also arrived.

"Long time no see, Mash," Allen said. "Were you able to get a few days off?"

"Yup," Mash replied. "My homeroom teacher said it was fine. I've been staying in the castle for two days now."

"I see."

Academy City also had a base for the Allen Army, and the Summoner had visited the place several times, but not once had he run into Mash, who was attending the Academy. Unlike Thomas, who had enlisted Allen's help to receive a class promotion, Mash was working with a few friends he had made in his classes to tackle the dungeons. Today, he had come alone via a magic ship, and Allen was happy to see that his younger brother had started down his own path.

I should talk about the Demon Lord. I haven't told dad yet either. Allen had not said a word about the Demon Lord to his parents. He had decided that it would be best to report to them after he defeated the Demon Lord so that they would not worry. But next year, Mash would learn about Demon Lord History, and his parents might learn about it then as well.

In fact, Allen was currently struggling against the Demon Lord's subordinates on the Central Continent, and he was not confident that he could defeat the Demon Lord before Mash spoke of the entity to their parents. *I feel like both mom and dad have a vague idea but aren't really saying anything.* Despite the clear absurdity of

the situation Allen was in, his father kept quiet.

Rodin was here to attend the awards ceremony, so surely he had been told why Keel and the others were being awarded, and yet he did not touch upon the topic. In fact, Allen could recall his father having deliberately ignored such subjects in the past. Before Allen was found to have the Summoner Talent at his Appraisal Ceremony, he had clearly shown signs that he was anything but a normal child. Even so, until he had spoken about Talents, neither his mom nor his dad had mentioned that their son was an oddball who obviously possessed some sort of ability. Perhaps they had once again waited until Allen had spoken about it of his own accord. *I wonder if Mihai felt like this.*

Mihai, Cecil's older brother, had headed to the battlefield without saying a word to his sister. Perhaps he had not wanted her to worry. He might have believed that he could shield her from knowledge of the war during his three years of service, or even keep it a secret from her altogether if the Demon Lord Army were defeated.

When Allen found himself surrounded by Mash and Myulla while his mother, Theresia, watched over them with a smile, he felt that he needed to make time to explain his situation to them. As he played around with his siblings, there was a knock on the door.

"Per the king's orders, I've arrived to guide the awardees and those accompanying them to the venue," an official said from beyond the door.

The nobles attending the ceremony had already gathered in the audience room, which served as the venue. Keel, Krena, Dogora, and Cecil walked in front as everyone was escorted out of the waiting room. Only Theresia and Krena's parents stayed behind. When the group reached the audience room, Allen noticed that some nobles who were waiting were surprised when they saw his face. *Looks like I'm getting famous,* he thought as he walked past them.

The group lined up in front of the king's throne. The awardees stood out front with the rest behind them. Viscount Granvelle stood beside the awardees. *I feel like I've been in quite a few audience rooms recently. But nothing, not even the audience room, can beat*

the feeling I get on the boss floor of a dungeon. Just then, the prime minister of Ratash, who stood in front of the throne, finally opened his mouth.

"The king has arrived! Bow to your monarch!" he ordered.

Everyone did so as an intricately engraved door beside the throne, sitting on the platform above, opened. Allen was shocked to see the person who emerged. *Wait, isn't he... Did he just come here to see if Keel received his reward?* Allen spotted the cardinal of the Church of Elmea, donning a lavish robe. The nobles in attendance kept their heads bowed, but frantic whispering reached the Summoner's ears.

"Is that His Eminence, Cardinal Krympton?" one asked.

"Apparently, he's been staying in the royal castle for the past month solely to attend this awards ceremony," another hissed.

"Ah, I see. Someone from our nation will become the next pope, I believe?"

"Then the rumors are true... That blond young man will be the next pope."

Keel, however, kept his head low, as the whispers failed to reach him. He stared at the gorgeous carpet beneath his toes, so plush that the tips of his shoes sank in. The cardinal was, of course, a man of great authority within the Church of Elmea, a global religion, and he took his seat on a pedestal above the others. His was at the same height as the king's throne. The moment he rested in his opulent chair, the rest of the royal family, barring the king and queen, entered and took their seats. Among the members was Princess Leilana, a close friend of Cecil's older brother Thomas whom he had met at school.

The children of the royal family all had claim to the throne, but none sat at the same height as the throne. Instead, their seats put them at the same height as Allen and the others, who remained on their feet. *I guess this is how they observe how rewards are given.* Only one of these royals would be crowned the next monarch, but if anything happened to the successor, the next person in line would wear the crown. Even if they could not sit on the throne, they would become the lord of a territory and have to attend events such as

this, albeit not as grand as this one. Some were sure to be entrusted with important roles.

At last, the one in charge of the most vital task of all entered—King Invel, his queen at his side. Instantly, the room fell silent, and everyone kept their heads bowed until the two reached their thrones. King Invel's hair was slicked back, and Allen was reminded of a villain he had seen in Western movies when he was still Kenichi. *Yeah, he really looks like a heel.* Finally, the chancellor's voice boomed throughout the venue.

"We will now commence the awards ceremony to reward those who have contributed greatly to the Kingdom of Ratash and the Five Continent Alliance! To reward Clergyman Keel of the Church of Elmea, Cardinal Krympton is also in attendance. I encourage you to pay your respects to him!"

Everyone present bowed once more, but not as low as they had for the king. In response, the cardinal bowed as well, and the ceremony began.

"First, Village Chief Rodin of Rodin Village," the chancellor declared. "Step forward."

Unexpectedly, Allen's father was called up first.

"Y-Yes, Your Excellency," Rodin stammered.

This was Rodin's first invitation to the royal castle, and he found himself in front of the king under the gaze of a large crowd. And he was all by himself. Rodin would have never dreamed that he would find himself in a situation like this, and while he had rehearsed for the ceremony, the real deal made his head go blank with nervousness.

Though a touch awkward, he managed to stand in front of King Invel. The nobles began to whisper to one another again, and Allen heard every word.

"That must be Allen's father."

"He doesn't seem to be anything special about him..."

"His hair color's different too. Maybe he just raised Allen and isn't the actual father."

Allen let all those rude remarks slide and stared at his clumsy, stiff father. He vowed to tell Theresia, Mash, and Myulla, who could

not attend the ceremony, about what he was seeing. Meanwhile, Rodin bowed and then knelt before the king, queen, the cardinal, and the rest of the royal family.

The prime minister cleared his throat before unfurling a sheet of parchment and beginning to read it aloud. "You, Rodin, are a man born in the Granvelle fief. Your valor and dedication have allowed you to develop both Krena Village and Rodin Village, contributing greatly to them. To reward you for your efforts, you shall be knighted."

Oh?! Dad's a knight now! Allen was so happy that it almost seemed like he was the one being rewarded.

The chancellor prattled on, sharing a detailed list of Rodin's many achievements. When he was in Krena Village, he had risked his life every year to hunt boars and provided a generous amount of boar meat to his lord. His leadership had been viewed highly by Viscount Granvelle, who had allowed him to become the village chief of a new village. After a few years, he had finished developing the place, creating a stable yield of crops that had allowed him to share any excess with others. For his efforts, he would receive a title. The nobles in attendance all muttered with shock.

"In a mere few years?! How was he able to do it so quickly?"

"And he managed to provide the meat of thirty boars every year?"

"Allen's father is clearly a hero as well."

But Allen's mind was elsewhere. *I thought Viscount Granvelle bought all the boar meat.* When Rodin Village had been completed, it was still considered a developing place and received tax benefits. They had not been required to supply boar meat, and the Granvelle fief had purchased any boars that had been hunted. Needless to say, the meat was part of the taxes the Granvelle fief paid to the kingdom. If the fief, the middleman, were out of the picture, Rodin had technically offered meat to the kingdom.

"For the first time in our kingdom's history, a person from a developing village has been granted a title," the prime minister went on. "Ever since the Land Reclamation Decree was passed twenty-odd years ago, only Rodin has been involved with the development of

two villages and seen them both to completion."

Unfortunately, Rodin's title was not hereditary, meaning it could not be passed down to his descendants. Once the prime minister finished his speech, the king rose from his throne.

"Rodin," he said, gazing down at the newly knighted man. "I ask that you continue to lead my citizens."

A knight swiftly stepped forward with a tray in hand and held it out to the king. His Majesty personally took the accessory that served as proof of title and placed it around Rodin's neck.

"Y-Yes, sire," Rodin stammered.

Rodin was extra careful not to look directly at the king's face, just as rehearsed, and when he gave his reply, a small round of applause filled the room. Only Allen was clapping. This was not how this ceremony had been rehearsed, and the people who were supposed to clap froze for a moment, confused by the clear change in schedule. But the cardinal clapped along, and the crowd finally snapped back to their senses as a thunderous round of applause quickly filled the entire venue. Allen clapped because he was genuinely ecstatic; his father, Rodin, was born a serf, but his heroic deeds until now had finally been seen by the kingdom. When the applause finally died down, the prime minister cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Next are those who helped fight the monsters transformed by the Church of Gushara. Their heroic feats saved countless lives throughout the Galiatan Continent, and they even freed the captured capital of the Holy Land of Elmahl. Per the request of the Five Continent Alliance, His Majesty King Invel will offer them a suitable reward. First, Cecil Granvelle. Step forward."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Cecil replied.

Unlike the awkward and stiff Rodin, Cecil walked forward proudly and calmly, elegantly offering her greeting to the king and queen, the cardinal, and the other attendees.

"You, Cecil Granvelle, helped reclaim Teomenia, the capital of the Holy Land of Elmahl, and offered your aid to salvage the Crevelle Kingdom," the prime minister said. "For your feats, the Holy Land of Elmahl has offered you a report that comes with words of commendation. Heed them well."

Reading letters of commendation might just be part of the process for the Five Continent Alliance, Allen thought as the prime minister read from the parchment. *Maybe they just really value this sort of thing.*

"You have thus contributed greatly to maintaining the Five Continent Alliance, Cecil Granvelle. For your feats, you and your household, House Granvelle, will become a countship," the prime minister concluded.

The nobles began to frantically whisper away.

"Ah! Finally! After all these years, Lord Granvelle has become a count!"

"They were a baronship several years ago."

"Mind your tongue! You'll be ejected from your faction!"

"D-Don't be absurd. All I said was that he was a baron a few years ago."

During Allen's time as a manservant to House Granvelle, the lord had still been a baron. He had been made a viscount when Cecil and Allen had entered the Academy, and now that House Granvelle was a countship, he had entered the ranks of the upper nobles. However, it was almost unprecedented for a former baron to be granted an even higher rank after a mere four years. Many of the other nobles were jealous of that and made little effort to hide it.

Naturally, some were quick to scold any cries of envy, but most of it came at the defense of the factions within the castle. The Academy faction and the Kingdom faction were at odds, and they all wanted to use the opportunity to bolster the one they belonged to. Even those taking honorable stances were making claims solely to secure or maintain their social position rather than to genuinely defend House Granvelle. *Jeez, faction clashes are alive and well, huh?*

Exasperated, Allen watched the king rise from his throne. A nearby knight provided His Majesty with the ceremonial blade, which he unsheathed before using it to gently tap Cecil's left shoulder while she knelt. This was a process done only for nobles who had risen in rank, thus it had not been done for Rodin. Another roar of thunderous applause filled the room, and Allen was not the only one

clapping this time around.

"I shall do my utmost best not to betray your trust," Cecil said.

She gave her words of gratitude only after the applause died down. The king sat back on his throne, and she bowed to him again before stepping back. The prime minister then called for Krena and Dogora to step forward, and when the two knelt in front of the throne, the same list of achievements as Cecil's was read. Krena had received a letter of commendation from Calvarna, while Dogora had received one from Crevelle.

"Krena, Dogora, you have thus been bestowed the title of baron," the prime minister said solemnly. "Should you continue to do well, you may also be given territory."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," Krena and Dogora both said.

So now they're vested nobles with no land to their name. In this world, anyone with the rank of baron or higher was deemed a noble and given a family name. Krena and Dogora, however, had only received titles; if they wanted land, they would have to make massive contributions to the kingdom and have them recognized.

Fighting the Demon Lord Army on a battlefield far away could raise one's rank, but it was not necessarily enough to earn them land. *Which means they can't expand a fief either.* Dogora had Kagutsuchi, the divine vessel, equipped at his back. Normally, one was not allowed to be armed during an awards ceremony, but it was widely known that Kagutsuchi was Fire Goddess Freyja's divine vessel, so an exception had been made.

The king rose from his throne once more, took the ceremonial blade from the knight, and gently tapped Dogora's shoulder. In response, Kagutsuchi glowed a bright red. *Oh? Since Dogora's gaining some attention, is Freyja reacting to it?* For a moment, Allen thought that the room had grown slightly warmer.

"Furthermore, Barons Krena and Dogora will receive a guardian. House Granvelle will be nominated for the role," the prime minister continued. "Count Granvelle, do you have any issues with this arrangement?"

"None at all," the former Viscount Granvelle said.

King Invel nodded, satisfied, and the prime minister proceeded

with the ceremony.

"Lastly, Keel von Carnel. Step forward," he said.

"Yes, Your Excellency," Keel replied.

He stepped toward the throne, and the nobles began to whisper more furiously than ever before. Keel had just reached the age of majority, and he had been named the Apprentice Pope without having undergone any form of special training. It was unheard-of even within the long history of the Church of Elmea, and a communication magic tool had been used to transmit the news to the entire world.

The prime minister's next words made the nobles fidget nervously.

"Anyone who dares obstruct Keel von Carnel's sacred path will surely receive divine punishment by Lord Elmea, the God of Creation," he boomed.

It was practically a threat, but the Church of Elmea was far and away the most practiced religion in the world—no one was brave enough to test their luck against the God of Creation. The parchment that the prime minister unfurled had surely been drafted in Ratash, but perhaps due to Keel's status, it was longer and thicker than any of the previous ones.

"Keel von Carnel, you've saved countless followers of the Church of Elmea, and even guided innocents who had strayed onto the right path. You showed them the way so that they might regain their courage to face the Trials of the Gods..."

Uh, isn't Keel's list a lot longer than everyone else's? Allen only realized as much ten minutes later, when the prime minister was still droning on. He quietly glanced at Keel, wondering if his friend was bored, but the Apprentice Pope kept his head lowered and did not budge a single inch.

"For your efforts, Keel von Carnel, you will be bestowed the title of viscount and be granted the entirety of the Carnel fief that the kingdom once claimed," the prime minister finished.

The nobles, perhaps having expected as much, began to chatter away. The affair that had occurred four years earlier, instigated by Keel's father, the previous Viscount Carnel, was still fresh in

everyone's minds. Yet despite that grisly ordeal, his son, Keel, was having it all returned to him, including his peerage, after such a short time. It was far more astonishing than the chief of Rodin Village receiving an esteemed rank. But Keel's response only sent an ever greater shock wave through the crowd of nobles.

"Your Majesty Invel, and Your Eminence Cardinal Krympton, your words of praise and benevolence toward my house have left me at a loss for words," Keel said. "I, Keel von Carnel, am grateful beyond measure. However, if you're willing to place so much faith in me, I ask that you grant me a selfish request, as insolent as I may be."

"Whatever are you saying? Are you asking for a higher rank and more land?" the prime minister inquired.

In reality, the two parties had already rehearsed their lines, but the other nobles, none the wiser, began to whisper to one another in a frenzy once again.

"What?! Surely, he's being far too greedy."

"Both the Carnel fief and the Granvelle fief are vast already."

"If he doesn't want to be a viscount, will he demand to be a count, just like Granvelle?"

The size of a noble's fief depended greatly on its lord's rank and the quality of the land, but in general, the closer it was to the royal domain, the smaller it would be. The royal domain boasted a high population density, and thus the land was highly sought-after and more expensive. The Carnel and Granvelle fiefs were a good distance away from the royal domain, but they were still quite vast compared to others.

Each of the two fiefs possessed mithril mines, which were prized assets. The Ratash royal family, having required money at the time, had wanted a portion of the mithril included as part of the fiefs' tax payments, and had allowed the two families to expand their territories in return. This was especially true for the past century, when House Carnel had provided mithril directly to the royal family in exchange for being allowed to grow extensively. If all of that land was being returned to Keel, the nobles were not sure what else the boy could have possibly desired. *Man, these nobles are all about titles and land, huh?* But it was thanks to House Granvelle protecting

their territories that Allen had been able to be raised in a village in the Granvelle fief, defeat clusters of goblins and orcs that had infested the noble's vast land, and gain XP in leisure.

"Ahem."

The cardinal loudly cleared his throat to silence the crowd. Like a receding wave, all sound immediately stopped, and then King Invel's voice echoed through the audience room.

"I shall allow it. Keel von Carnel, state your wish."

The king was, of course, in on this ruse and recited his practiced line as well. Still, Keel had to steel his resolve in order to speak his mind in front of everyone. The deafening silence in the room did not last long, and when he finally broke it, everyone gazed at him, wondering if he wished for more land, a higher peerage, or perhaps both.

"I wish for my mother and father to be pardoned," Keel said firmly, gazing up at the king.

Keel had taken part in an Appraisal Ceremony when he was five. He had immediately been ripped away from his home to live a life of poverty and squalor. It had been a far cry from any noble lifestyle. While he had had a few servants with him, they had barely had enough money to feed him and his little sister, Nina. That was an experience he would never forget, not even now that he was an Apprentice Pope.

After some time, a royal envoy had appeared and told him to enroll in the Academy. But all that had awaited him was the story of the horrific acts his father had committed and their consequences. Furthermore, he had heard the tale from the victims of the affair, Allen and Cecil. The moment Keel had learned of it, the words "serves him right!" had flashed through his mind. Former Viscount Carnel, Keel's father, was to blame for the harsh life that Keel and Nina had been forced to claw their way out of, and he had been sentenced to life in prison for his crimes. He was reaping what he had sown, and Keel found it a suitable punishment.

Keel's mother, former Viscountess Carnel, was confined in an isolated area for criminal noblewomen away from the royal capital. And like with his father, Keel believed that she had gotten her just

deserts. Had she stopped her husband, things would have played out far differently.

Such thoughts had never left Keel's mind, even after he made friends at the Academy, cleared dungeons, and became able to live a more relaxed life with Nina and their servants. But when he saw Nina and their servants looking so happy and fulfilled, he was inexplicably struck with the image of his parents trapped in a dark room. He was reminded of the hardships and suffering he had endured during his childhood, and a sense of loneliness welled up in his heart. In hopes of freeing himself from those feelings, Keel went to every church he could find and treated the wounded. While that was one of the duties of clergymen with the Church of Elmea, rescuing strangers from their suffering was his way of trying to dispel the guilt that plagued his mind.

Nevertheless, his remorse persevered, smoldering within his heart. He had become friends with Allen, saved tens of thousands of elves in Rohzenheim, been a part of the first group to conquer the Rank S dungeon, been allowed to rebuild House Carnel, saved the Holy Land of Elmahl from the clutches of Gushara and the Demon Lord Army, and been tasked with one day leading the Church of Elmea as its pope, but none of it had served to assuage the feeling.

One night, when he was all alone, he had recalled his father's face in the darkness. The expression on it had been kind, like the one the former viscount had worn before Keel had taken part in his Appraisal Ceremony. When he had strolled around the city by himself, among the throngs of people, he thought he had seen his mother, happily cradling a newborn Nina in her arms. In the afternoon, when Cecil had spoken of Allen having saved her from a kidnapping like it was a heroic tale, he had not known what face he had made while listening. In fact, he had turned to face the ground in order to keep it from being seen.

Neither did Keel find relief when Dverg had told him that Ratash was going to reward him for saving the Galiatan Continent and the Holy Land of Elmahl. When the Apprentice Pope had been officially notified through a Ratashian official that House Carnel would be reinstated as a viscountship and that their land would be returned,

his feelings still persisted.

Hence, when he had been asked if he would accept the reward and the words "Could I have some time to think about it?" had slipped out of his mouth, he had surprised even himself. When he had then been asked what he, Baron Carnel, wished for instead, his heart had already been set. Had he not felt confident in his desires, he would not have gone to Cardinal Krympton for advice and subsequently exchanged numerous letters with a Ratashian official. He had even asked the official to check if any nobles before him had asked for their relatives to be pardoned as a reward for their achievements.

With the help of Cardinal Krympton, Keel had written a booklet to try to convince King Invel, the final arbiter of the law in Ratash, that pardoning his parents was a fitting reward for all that he had accomplished. It had been a painstaking labor, but it had received the approval of the king, and they were now ceremonially reenacting that approval in order to make it public. This was a turning point in his life, but he could not help but mutter to himself.

"Yeah, I made the right choice," he said, his voice so faint that no one heard him.

"Are you willing to shoulder your father's sins?" King Invel asked.

"Yes. If you're willing to reward me for my deeds, Your Majesty, then I ask that you also reward my parents, who gave birth to and raised me."

"Hmm..."

King Invel rested his face on his hands pensively. *I heard that Invel already knows everything, but he sure looks like he's putting thought into it.*

Keel had notified Allen of his decision following the report on the joint training session between the Allen Army and the Hero Army. *"There's something I want to talk to you guys about,"* he had said, requesting that Cecil and Allen meet with him. The pair had then returned to their human forms for the first time in a long while, and Keel had explained his thoughts. Allen had not had an opinion either way, but Cecil, who had been listening beside him, had been rendered speechless. It was only natural. For most of her life, she

had personally witnessed the torment Carnel's grasp had brought upon House Granvelle.

And so, when Cecil had discovered that former Viscount Carnel had avoided the death penalty despite having been tried for sedition, she had been infuriated. He had used the wealth he had received from the mithril mines as a weapon and tyrannically wielded his power throughout the kingdom, but he had also supported the royal family and the nobles over the several decades since the beginning of the Demon Lord Army's invasion.

Had the guilty verdict brought with it a death sentence, the names of the nobles close to the former viscount would have been brought to light. They had wanted to avoid being outed and instead lobbied to throw him in prison for life, according to Viscount Granvelle's explanation of the events. But Keel had continued to patiently persuade Cecil and Viscount Granvelle.

The young boy had chosen his words carefully, turning not to emotion but to cold logic. Even so, it had been clear to everyone that he was agonizing in his own way, was tormented by his thoughts, and above all else, felt an inexplicable sense of guilt. Knowing as much, Cecil had waited for Keel to finish his speech and simply said that she was fine with it. Viscount Granvelle had firmly declared that his daughter's answer was his as well and immediately told Count Hamilton about Keel's thoughts, the king's approval, and Cecil's and his opinion on the matter.

Count Hamilton had thought that if the grudge of the House Granvelle Affair continued to affect both House Carnel's and House Granvelle's descendants, Keel and Cecil included, it would deeply impact the future of Ratash. Therefore, the count had agreed to offer his aid in hopes that the two houses would make amends. It had taken many months to set the stage for today, and both Count Hamilton and Count Granvelle hoped not only to see the outcome of this ordeal but also to support the kingdom going forward.

King Invel, well aware of the emotions that lingered behind the scenes, took his time before answering Keel. His goal was to ensure that the nobles assumed he had thought long and hard about his decision.

"Very well," His Majesty finally said. "Bring Keel's parents here."

A good while later, the double doors far in front of him slowly opened to welcome the new visitors. Everyone in the room except for Keel and Allen turned to face former Viscount Carnel, dressed in rags and bound by shackles. A knight pulled the rope tied to those shackles, and the noble who had fallen from grace staggered in. Behind him was a lady, presumably former Viscountess Carnel, dressed in the clothes of a commoner. Allen was not familiar with her face, but he dug through his memories of the former viscount. The man had undergone a drastic transformation that told Allen that prison life was no walk in the park. *He's so scrawny now.*

Back when Allen was a manservant of House Granvelle, the former viscount had been plump and round from the luxuries he had enjoyed. But now, the man was practically skin and bones, his weak footsteps making his shackles seem like hefty weights. Keel slowly turned to look at his parents.

Terror. Nostalgia. Guilt. Hate. Myriad complicated emotions washed over the Apprentice Pope; he wanted the ceremony to end, but he did not want it to be over with either. For the first time in a decade, he laid eyes on his parents. He fell silent. These were not the parents that he recalled—they were skinny and considerably older, but above all, they looked so lifeless. Keel could not sense any sort of vitality from his mother or father.

These were the people who had abandoned him, and he, in turn, had deserted them as well. His body began to tremble, and the former viscount, noticing his son's gaze, gingerly raised his head. He looked terrified but full of regret, eager yet reluctant to leave. The two men locked eyes.

"Keel..." his father eked out.

His voice was hoarse and raspy, telling Keel that the former viscount had hardly spoken a word during his time in confinement, instead simply waiting for time to pass.

"Are you...really Keel?" the former viscount asked.

The Apprentice Pope did not know how to answer. He wanted to nod his head in agreement, but he wanted to deny it as well. No longer was he his past self, yet at the same time, he felt like he had

not changed since that fateful day. He remained silent and bit his lip.

"Keel?" the former viscountess asked, breaking the silence. "Is it really you?"

Only then did tears trickle from the Apprentice Pope's eyes.

"It's me," he squeaked. "Father, mother, it truly has been a while."

His voice had grown raspier with every word, and by the end, it had barely filled the room. Both Keel and his parents then went quiet, suppressing the emotions welling up within them, or perhaps desperately chasing after them as they tried to flee. The moments ticked by, and it was King Invel who suddenly broke the silence.

"Viscount Keel von Carnel—no, you're still a baron, aren't you?" the king said. "Are you stating that you're willing to shoulder this criminal's heinous acts? I planned to return House Carnel's peerage and land as a reward for your heroic deeds. You would choose to cast that all aside to save your parents from their infamy? Are you certain of this decision?"

"Wh-What?!" The former viscount hastily raised his voice. "What's happening?! Is my son... Is Keel—"

He was promptly cut off by the loud, metallic *clank* of his shackles. The knight who had brought him in tugged on the rope binding the former viscount as a means of scolding the prisoner for speaking out of turn. However, the frail and scrawny former viscount could not brace himself and fell face-first onto the ground.

"Fgah!" he yelped.

The carpet was plush and soft, but he fell quickly, and Keel felt his chest grow hot with rage. The Sacred Necklace that hung from his neck slowly emitted a glow as though responding to his feelings.

"Stop that!" Keel roared, his anger filling the audience room. "Don't you *dare* touch my father!"

Even Allen and the rest of the Gamers, who had been in a party with him for several years, had never heard Keel raise his voice like that. But the most shocked was the knight, who had been on the receiving end of Keel's furious roar after unintentionally pulling the former viscount to the ground. The knight's surprise only grew when the Apprentice Pope once again raised his voice.

"All Heal!" Keel shouted.

The Sacred Necklace emitted a blinding, golden glow in answer to his command, which traveled up to the ceiling before filling the entirety of the vast audience room. The light made sacred text appear all over the former viscount's body, healing him.

"A-Aghhh?!" the knight shrieked.

They immediately released the rope from their grip, and the light disappeared. Keel then crouched to approach his father, causing the knight to inch back in terror.

"Are you all right, father?!" Keel asked.

He took his father's hand, slender and frail, but with a slight rosy tinge from his HP having been restored.

"I-I'm a-all right," the former viscount stammered. "Th-Thank you."

"Heh. I get it now," Keel muttered. "This was the right path. All I needed to do was save those around me."





The former viscount, who had reunited with his son after a decade, was confused by the boy's ramblings.

"What an impressive light of salvation," the cardinal said. He shed tears of joy, the droplets trickling down his cheeks. "He truly is the one who shall carry on Pope Istahl's will. My eyes did not deceive me."

Allen nodded with satisfaction at the sight. *This is how it should be.* When he glanced at Cecil, who looked visibly relieved, he quietly told her that this was just fine.

"Prime Minister, tell this man and his wife what has been done," the king ordered. "And keep it brief."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" The prime minister immediately listed off Keel's accomplishments. When he was done, he continued, "Do you understand now, Carnel? Your son sacrificed all the rewards he was to be given for his deeds in order to bear the burden of your sins."

"N-No..." the former viscount stammered.

"Is that not so, Baron Keel von Carnel?" King Invel asked.

Keel nodded firmly. "As his child, I should be the one to shoulder my father's crimes. As the lord of House Carnel, it is my duty to take responsibility for my house's misdeeds. Will this be enough to restore my parents' names?"

King Invel firmly nodded before getting up from his throne. He cast a sweeping glance at the crowd in the audience room.

"Will anyone voice their dissent from Baron Carnel's request?" he inquired.

The deafening silence was the nobles' reply. That was true of Count Granvelle and Cecil as well.

"Then Baron Keel von Carnel, in exchange for the rewards for your deeds, I hereby pardon former Viscount and Viscountess Carnel for their crimes," the king declared.

He returned to his throne as the two disgraced nobles dropped down and knelt before the monarch. They bowed their heads so deeply that it almost seemed as though they were prostrating. Keel knelt between his parents and firmly lowered his head with the utmost gratitude.

"While you two have received a pardon from His Majesty, you

may not leave the Carnel fief for the foreseeable future," the prime minister declared. "A private magic ship will be prepared for you both, and you'll head back to the Carnel fief tomorrow."

It's like they're on parole.

"I'll see to it that they don't leave," Keel promised.

When the knights approached the former viscount and viscountess to remove their shackles, a small round of applause echoed throughout the venue. Everyone turned to the source of the noise and spotted Cardinal Krympton giving a standing ovation. He clapped with everything he had, desperate to sear what he was seeing into his memory. The nobles started to applaud as well, and a thunderous cheer filled the room, seeming like it would continue for eternity. It only momentarily died down when the prime minister spoke again.

"This concludes the awards ceremony," he boomed. "His and Her Majesties will now take their leave."

Another loud round of applause echoed through the room as the king, the queen, and the rest of the royal family made their exit. Cardinal Krympton, instead of leaving the venue, rushed straight to Keel.

"Oh, Lord Keel, how splendid you are! Your gestures and mannerisms were sublime!" he cried. "I knew Pope Istahl's words were true! We of the Church of Elmea see hope in you as you walk down your holy path. Please entrust your dear father and mother to us."

"Thank you," Keel replied. "I can't thank you enough. You've helped me every step of the way, and without you, I wouldn't be here right now."

"And I shall continue to offer you my unending support. Please excuse me."

The cardinal bowed and left before Keel turned to help his father, who was curled up on the ground.

"Father, mother, let's go," the boy said.

"R-Right," his father replied.

"We shall," his mother added.

As the three left the audience room, the nobles gave them

another round of applause. Allen and the others followed behind them.

"I see..." Shia muttered to herself. "I can use a method like that too."

"Yeah. It's one of the many correct choices you can make," Allen replied, having heard her.

He finally understood the awkward grimace Shia had been wearing ever since Keel's parents had made their appearance. *She must be thinking about her older brother.* When Keel returned to the waiting room, Nina leaped from her seat with gusto, unable to believe her eyes.

"F-Father!" she cried.

She made a beeline for her father and hugged him as the former viscount tightly embraced his daughter with his hands that had been healed earlier.

"Ah, Nina! How much you've grown!" he said.

"Father! Fatheeer!" Nina cried.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she rubbed her face on the tattered rags her father wore, paying no heed to the musty smell. The former viscountess also felt her tears falling to the floor. The former viscount looked up at his son.

"K-Keel. I-I..." he started as tears began to flow from his eyes.

"Surely we'll have time in the future to catch up," the Apprentice Pope said, having cracked a genuine smile as he gazed down at his father. "When we have more time, I'm going to pepper you with questions. But until then, please protect House Carnel and Nina."

The smile never faded from Keel's face. *Seems like Keel's the one who was saved here. He became an adult before I could.* The former viscount, however, looked befuddled and looked at his son.

"Whatever are you saying?" he asked. "Are you not going to come with us, Keel?"

"I can't," Keel replied. "Your son, Keel von Carnel, must go with his friends to complete his mission."

"I-I see... You really have grown, Keel. Thank you."

The former viscount's voice grew hoarse as he wept.

"Well, since we can use this room until tomorrow, why don't you

at least stay for the day, Keel?" Allen suggested. "And yeah, please take a bath."

"Allen!" Cecil shouted. "Can't you be more sensitive? At least read the room!"

"Gah?!"

She firmly planted her fist into Allen's cheek, and he was sent flying. *I guess this ends one issue. Invel seems awfully carefree, but I guess he always has been. I should learn a thing or two from Keel.* As the Summoner rolled onto the carpet, he thought of the king, the only one who had pretended like nothing had happened after Cecil's kidnapping and the entire debacle around it. But at this point, that was all in the past—it was water under the bridge.

Allen gazed at his family, who was also in the waiting room, along with the other families. Dogora reported to his parents that he had become a baron, and his mother and father happily nodded along. Cecil and Count Granvelle were quietly watching the Carnel family's joyful reunion. And Allen's father, Rodin, who was dying to get out of his overly stiff formal attire, was asking for help from his wife, Theresia, while Mash and Myulla were happily scampering around. Allen also noticed Shia gazing in a different direction.

"What's wrong? Did Keel remind you of your older brother?" he asked, and she quietly closed her eyes.

"As a member of the beast royal family, I will do what I must," she muttered. "I will defeat Beku, the enemy of the royal family."

Her words prompted Allen to recall the stories of Beku that he had heard from her.

Chapter 10: The Captured Beastkin and the Demon Lord's Plan

Allen had not been very well aware of Beku's character, so Shia had filled him in on what her brother was like.

"It was in fact Brother Beku who inspired me to aim to be the Beast King," she had confessed when Allen had first asked her about the man.

Beku had reached adulthood at fifteen and immediately become the Beast Crown Prince. He had entered the Royal Beast Academy at the top of his class and graduated with the highest marks.

Garm, the God of Beasts, was of the belief that one with great power was responsible for protecting and guiding the other beastkin, and so, children of the beast royal family were bestowed with excellent Talents. Beku had thus adhered to the rules of the royal family and left the royal capital to become an adventurer to better his Talent. After a mere three years, he had returned as a Rank A adventurer.

The Garlesian Continent, where Albahal was located, hosted an annual Beast King Martial Arts Tournament. The event invited people from various nations who were confident in their strength to fight to determine who among them was the strongest. It also served as a replacement for territorial wars, as victory brought with it the claim to land. Naturally, Beku had taken part in the tournament many times. He had lost twice to Giru, a royal from the neighboring nation of Brysen, but had miraculously defeated him in their third meeting.

Any Beast King Martial Arts Tournament allowed Beast Kings themselves to enter, barring the one from the host nation. If another nation's Beast King won the entire tournament, the host nation was to relinquish some of its land to the victor. Beku had lost two years in a row to Giru when the latter had still been the Beast Crown

Prince. In other words, for those two battles, the challenger from Brysen had not been the Beast King.

By the time of his third entrance into the tournament, however, Giru had been crowned Beast King. Had Beku lost again, Albahal would have been forced to cede some of its territory. Therefore, when he had emerged victorious, it had meant more than just revenge for his losses. He had also protected his nation, and the entirety of Albahal had cheered with joy.

That was the moment a young Shia had become determined to claim the Albahalan throne. She had seen her brother's power and resolve, his willingness to shed blood for his nation without an ounce of hesitation. Indeed, Beku had finally defeated the Brysen Beast King Giru in their third match—by killing him.

Beast King Martial Arts Tournament matches were usually grisly, and it was not out of the ordinary for fighters to die in battle, but as though a switch had been flipped, Beku had turned into a completely different person after that. He had retired from being an adventurer and entered the world of politics.

Trying to shift Albahal's political stance, he had aggressively suggested plans to get revenge on the humans of the Central Continent. That had been a particularly radical suggestion, as it meant paying no heed to the potential casualties of his precious citizens. It was especially concerning that he had sent those with Talents to the Rank S dungeon despite knowing that doing so would deal a heavy blow to the people and the nation. Even the Albahalan nobles, ministers, and citizens, whose hatred toward the Central Continent's—specifically Giamut's—humans had never disappeared, began to voice their dissent at Beku's extreme measures.

The Beast King had then given a trial to both his second-eldest son, Zeu, and his youngest child, Shia, implying that each of them had been officially recognized as the future heir to the throne. And so, Beku had incited a rebellion. Shia believed that Muza's actions had triggered Beku's revolt, and as Allen recalled this story, he began to see Beku as a rather complex, multifaceted person.

* * *

A beastkin woke up as he heard the pitter-patter of droplets from the roof of his dimly lit prison.

"Shia?" he muttered as he began to stir.

He was not sure when he had dozed off or how long he had been asleep. In a daze, he stared blankly as another wave of drowsiness washed over him. It was then that he saw a light from beyond the iron bars in front of him. The light gradually grew larger and eventually illuminated the unusual sight of the beastkin trapped inside—a chain around his neck tied him to the wall behind him, and his limbs had all been lopped off. An elderly demon dressed in a white coat cackled as he held the light up to see.

"Heh heh heh, are you still alive, Beku?" the demon asked, a malicious grin on his face.

"Just kill me already, Romu," the limbless Beast Crown Prince of Albahal, Beku, answered hoarsely. "No, you go by Shinorom, don't you?"

Shinorom only smiled back. "You're still alive! Very good. Very, *very* good."

The prison guard, who stood outside the cell and had his back to Beku, was a burly demon. Unlike Shinorom, he had horns sprouting out of his head like Demonic Deity Rehzel. When Shinorom told him to remain vigilant, he nodded back.

"Lord Shinorom, Director of Demonic Soldier Research, the Demon Lord is calling for you," the prison guard said.

"Again? What a restless man he is. I reported to him just the other day," Shinorom replied.

"What will you do?"

"I must go if I'm called. When I ignored a summons the other day, Supreme Commander Ardoe gave me such a hard time."

Shinorom let out a weary sigh. He turned his back on the motionless Beku, who had possibly fallen back asleep, judging from the way his head was hanging. The elderly demon made his way down the hallway, lined with similar cells, and walked up a staircase to enter a small room. It was a simple room containing nothing but a magic circle inscribed onto the ground, which Shinorom stepped into and muttered a spell. A moment later, he stepped out of the magic

circle and into a separate, larger room that he had been transported to.

"Ghii!" an odd cry greeted him.

"Ah, Little Ghii!" Shinorom greeted back. "Are you well?"

He spoke kindly to an eyeball monster that was around twice his height, and the monster, in response, coiled its tentacles around the elderly demon, embracing him.

"Ghiiii!" the monster cried again, hugging him tightly.

"Gh... I-I'm glad...to see you're doing well," Shinorom croaked as he began to foam at the mouth, the agonizing squeeze almost popping his eyeballs right out of their sockets.

When Little Ghii was finally satisfied, it released Shinorom from its grasp, allowing him to make his way out of the room and down a hallway in the Demon Lord Castle. Little Ghii followed behind him.

"Ah, Director Shinorom. The Demon Lord has called for you," a demon with horns said.

"I know, I know," Shinorom replied.

That conversation repeated itself numerous times as the elderly director walked past several rooms, down a long hallway, and ascended a staircase. When he finally reached the room that housed the Demon Lord's throne, he noticed that Kyubel, the Strategist of the Demon Lord Army, was already there, speaking with the Demon Lord.

"Director of Demonic Soldier Research Shinorom is here per your request," Shinorom said.

The Demon Lord raised a hand, silencing Kyubel.

"You certainly took your time," he chided.

"I got here as quickly as I could," Shinorom replied.

"Ah, but I waited a fair while."

The Demon Lord furrowed his brow, knowing full well that Shinorom was a man who marched to the beat of his own drum; he was willing to ignore a summons from even the Demon Lord if it was for the sake of his research. Admittedly, much of Shinorom's research had produced excellent results, and many researchers had nominated him for director, but the Demon Lord still was not sure if he had made the right choice.

"The Demon Lord wants to know the status of the Daemon Goddess's resurrection," Kyubel explained.

"Research on it is progressing well, of course," Shinorom replied immediately, flashing the same ominous smirk that he had to Bask moments earlier. "I've even secured a sacrifice who had the blood of Garm, the God of Beasts, flowing thickly through his veins. Preparations are well underway."

"I see," the Demon Lord mused as he kept his brow knitted.

"My lord, I don't think there are any logical issues with this plan," Kyubel advised.

"Is that so?" the Demon Lord asked. "Can we really use this picture book, this mere fairy tale, as a reliable source?"

He opened the book that Kyubel had brought in. It had been written by merfolk many centuries ago.

"I believe so," Kyubel replied. "The Daemon Goddess's power is essential to killing Elmea. We *must* obtain that deity."

"Yes, I know," the Demon Lord muttered. "Ah... They're back already."

The Demon Lord turned away from Kyubel, Shinorom, and the book, his gaze focused on the three Greater Demonic Deities emerging from behind the elderly director.

"Whew, fiiinally done," Bask, the King of Shura and one of the three Greater Demonic Deities, said in his usual lackadaisical drawl. He gazed at the other deities, showing no interest in the Demon Lord despite standing in front of the throne.

"Bask, you killed the least number of enemies," Bildiga said curtly. The beetle with a golden luster who walked on two legs glared at Bask.

"The hell'd you say?! I'll crush you like the bug you are!"

"All I've done is say the truth. And how, pray tell, will you crush me? Enlighten me, if you would."

"Yeah? I've got an interesting process, I tell ya. You started it."

Bask unfolded his hands from behind his head and reached for the greatsword slung over his shoulder.

"Stop it, you two!" Ramon-Hamon shouted, appearing behind them. They had two pairs of arms and legs, along with two faces.

“Mind your tongues! We’re in the presence of the Demon Lord!”

“’Scuse me? *You’re* always making the most noise,” Bask spat. “Don’t get all cocky when you only just became a Greater Demonic Deity.”

“Oh? You sure know how to talk,” Hamon, the younger brother, growled. He glared at Bask, ready to pounce at any moment. “You just became one too!”

“Good grief, guys,” Kyubel admonished. “Have you forgotten that you’re in front of the Demon Lord?”

The three Greater Demonic Deities swiftly turned to the Demon Lord and knelt.

“My lord, we’ve finished destroying the pests rampaging in the northern region of the Central Continent,” Bildiga reported.

“Ah, very good,” the Demon Lord replied. “I presume you mean Allen’s Summons. How were they?”

“Humorously weak. They pose no threat, and I don’t believe their master is at all impressive either.”

“I see...”

“But don’t let your guard down,” Kyubel warned. “I first met Allen in Rohzenheim, but he had become quite a bit stronger before my next meeting with him. He’s gaining power at an absurd rate, and he might even have some sort of skill that somehow hastens his growth rate.”

“I’m not letting my guard down,” Bildiga replied. “I’m simply providing a report of the situation.”

“Merus, who’s been rumored to be a Summon, wasn’t there,” Ramon, the older sister, added. “We suspect that the Summoner has good reason to keep his ace up his sleeve.”

“He hasn’t shown us the full extent of his power, then,” the Demon Lord muttered. “It seems the new hero is a cautious one.”

“I believe that’s a fair assessment,” Ramon-Hamon said.

“Good work, guys,” Kyubel said.

“We’ve been holding back, so the humans have reclaimed most of the northern region of the Central Continent,” Ramon explained. “We’ve eradicated the Summoner’s pests, but isn’t it time to display even greater power to the world?”

The Demon Lord hummed in thought.

"Please allow us to invade the city where either the Rank S dungeon or the class promotion dungeon is. Currently, the Allen Army and the Hero Army have been rather active in those two places."

"We should prioritize resurrecting the Daemon God, General Ramon-Hamon," Kyubel replied in place of the Demon Lord.

"Precisely," the Demon Lord agreed. "We cannot split our army. All forces must use their full power to resurrect the Daemon God."

"Are three Greater Demonic Deities necessary for the venture?" Bildiga inquired.

The Demon Lord did not say a word, answering only with a nod.

"Your wish is our command," Bildiga replied.

The Demon Lord knew that Bildiga was not one to cast doubt on a plan; he had simply wanted to confirm their next steps. Of the Demonic Deities, Bildiga was the only one who would never crack a joke. And so, the Greater Demonic Deities had received their orders.

"Hey, Demon Lord?" Bask asked languidly. "See, I think I worked pretty damn hard for this plan."

"Oh? What bothers you?" the Demon Lord asked.

"He's exaggerating, my lord," Bildiga interjected. "Bask has put in the least amount of work among us."

"That's not *my* fault, dammit!" Bask exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "If I had a real weapon, I would've been able to let loose. I just can't use these dull blades. They can't handle the beatings I dish out."

The Demon Lord nodded. "Ah, yes. If memory serves, your weapons were stolen from you in the previous battle."

"Exactly! C'mon, can't you give me another weapon? I know there's an awesome sword hiding in the castle's treasury!"

"Yes, I do believe we have several orichalcum blades."

"Nah, I'm talking about the Demon Sword! You've got it, don't ya?"

"Bask," Kyubel scolded with a glare, "you'd best watch your tongue."

"R-Right, my bad," Bask apologized.

But the Demon Lord unexpectedly nodded.

"Ah, yes, Demon Sword Onuba," he said. "If you can equip it, you're free to use it."

"Wait, really?! Score!" Bask cheered while quite literally jumping in excitement. He whirled around and rushed out of the room, not caring that they were in the middle of a conversation.

"Good grief, as hasty as ever," the Demon Lord muttered. "Kyubel, what do you think? Can Bask equip Demon Sword Onuba?"

"Perhaps..." Kyubel mulled. "He still has the blessing from Elmea, Perfect Gear. With that in mind, the possibility of him becoming a victim of the Demon Sword is around fifty percent."

"I see... That works for me. If any of you wish for anything, I shall provide. However, you *must* resurrect the Daemon God. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, my lord!" Ramon-Hamon cried.

"As you wish," Bildiga said.

"We won't keep humanity alive for long," the Demon Lord continued. "If anyone gets in the way or is a nuisance, you're free to kill them. Do what you must. Show no mercy to anyone who dares bar my path to becoming a Transcender."

He sank deeply into his throne, his eyes gazing into the distance as they glittered with greed and desire. All the while, Bask was busy making a beeline for the treasury. He ran down the hallway with all his might.

"Was it around here?" he muttered to himself. "I think it was here..."

He peeked around a few corners before he spotted a massive door embedded with a jewel.

"I think it's that door."

He reached the door, guarded by stone statues that stood on either side.

"Lord Bask, I'm terribly sorry, but this is the Demon Lord's treasury," one of the statues said. "Have you received his permission to enter?"

"Huh? Course I did! Outta my way!"

Bask kicked both statues out of his way and leisurely strolled into

the treasury. In addition to the gold and silver stored inside, various items emitting eerie auras were haphazardly scattered throughout. But he was not interested in any of these treasures and stormed right in, kicking aside anything in his way until he reached a pedestal. A greatsword of the purest black was plunged into its cornice.

"Found it! This must be Demon Sword Onuba!" Bask crowed. He grabbed the hilt with both hands and tried to forcefully pull the weapon out of its pedestal. "Hnnngh! What the hell?! It won't budge an inch! Ngaaaaah!"

His muscles rippled under his skin, and hot breaths escaped from between his gritted teeth, but the sword refused to budge. On the contrary, the blade itself began to shudder.

"Y-You bastard!" it cried. "Get your filthy hands off me! Don't touch me, you numbskull!"

"Huh?" Bask asked, loosening his grip.

"Don't give me that pathetic gasp of yours! I'll freaking kill ya, pip-squeak!" the blade shouted even more loudly, making its fury apparent. "Who the hell do you think you are, and why do you think you can just touch me, you puny brat?! Don't you know who I am, filthy worm?! You dumb dodo!"

"Are you...Demon Sword Onuba?"

"Damn straight! Now get lost! I'm tryin' to sleep here!"

The blade fell silent. Bask again did his best to remove it from the pedestal, but to no avail, and it remained silent as the grave. The Demonic Deity also fell silent for a while, his hands still wrapped around the hilt, before he finally decided to open his mouth.

"Hey, I heard all about ya," Bask said. "I know that Gaia, the God of Earth, stole your place in this world, and that you cried all the way to the Goddess of Evil, that hobbling crone."

"What'd you say?" the blade asked, trembling with anger once more.

"You begged and begged, but you couldn't even make it to the Dark Realm, and you ended up as a piece of decor here, huh? What luck. Sleep here, my ass! Gah ha ha ha!"

Bask's laughter echoed through the room, his hands around the

blade's hilt all the while. As his voice died down, no longer did he feel any sort of resistance—he managed to easily slide the blade from the pedestal.

"Was it that funny to you?" the sword asked, shivering as it flew out of Bask's hand. "Drop dead!"

It floated in the air before flying straight at Bask, going for the kill. A grotesque squelch filled the room as it plunged through the Demonic Deity's body. Bask instinctively guarded his chest with his fist, but it did very little to stop the blade from penetrating him. Despite that, though, he continued to grin.

"Niiice," he said in his usual drawl. "I like you, Onuba. C'mon, join me."

"The hell?" the blade grunted with annoyance.

"I need a weapon. And with the Demon Sword in my hands, I'll be even stronger! Come with me!"

"You want me that badly? Then let me kill Gaia, the God of Earth. *That's* where I belong."

"All right! Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!"

Bask used his free hand to grip the Demon Sword. Its sharp edge sliced open his palm and blood dripped onto the ground, but he did not care one bit.





"My elements are earth and evil. Use me well," the blade said.

"You've got two elements?!" Bask gasped. "And I knew you'd be evil! Finally, I've got my hands on an evil-element blade!"

Blood poured down his hand as he tightly clenched Demon Sword Onuba and ripped it out of his chest.

"And don't you *ever* call the Goddess of Evil a hobbling crone again," the blade warned, trembling with anger. "I'll kill ya."

Bask did not respond. He had surely heard those words, but all he did was grip the hilt of the sword with his blood-soaked hands and gaze happily at the quivering blade.

"Bask, try equipping that floating band over there too," the sword advised.

It moved on its own, pointing its tip in the direction of the band. Bask obediently followed.

"Huh?" he asked.

He spotted a floating, belt-like object covered with prickly thorns that resembled a briar, convulsing and pulsating on its own.

"That right there's a Gehenna Band," the sword explained. "It changes your enduring element into evil, and it raises your Endurance a fair bit too. Try it on."

"Seriously?!" Bask gasped. "I can even make evil my enduring element?!"

He kicked aside the gold, silver, and other treasures as he approached the Gehenna Band and gripped it tightly. There was a loud *swish* as the band wrapped around his arm.

"Good," the sword said with a quiver. All the while, the thorns of the Gehenna Band stabbed into Bask's arm.

"What the—" Bask started as the searing pain got to him. "Gah..."

Sharp cracks rang out as the Gehenna Band squeezed Bask's arm before covering his entire body, suffocating him in a death grip. Demon Sword Onuba slid out of his grasp as he curled up on the spot in agony. And still, the band continued to crush the Demonic Deity, who was unable to endure the torture. Blood gushed out of his body, painting his surroundings crimson. The blade hovered in the air.

"You fool," it said mockingly. "That band was made with the

Goddess of Evil's outfit, and a puny worm like you can't possibly utilize it. You'll be reduced to a puppet, and *I'll* be the one to use *you*. A great idea, if I do say so myself."

All the while, the band continued to constrict Bask, squeezing ever tighter, trying to compress its victim into a tiny ball. Disgusting cracks implied that his bones were being shattered, and the Greater Demonic Deity was reduced to the small size that he had been when he was still human. But once that stopped, Bask raised his voice with delight.

"A-Awesome!" he cried.

From between the gaps of the Gehenna Band surrounding his body, golden letters could be seen glowing all over his body.

"Wh-What the?!" Onuba gasped, its body trembling with awe. "Th-Those are Elmea's letters! D-Did you receive a blessing from him?!"

"Yeah, this isn't bad at all," Bask said as he stood back up. When he gripped Onuba again, the sword did not say another word. "Now that I've got my weapon and my armor, I'll go get that kid! What was his name again? Dogora or something? I'll pulverize him until he's mincemeat! Keh heh heh heh!"

A smile of insanity stretched across Bask's face as his mind wandered to his new power and the battles to come.

Chapter 11: Slumbering in the Depths of the Crystal Flower

Shortly after the awards ceremony in Ratash had ended, that very same day, Allen and his party returned to Patlanta, the capital of the Prostia Empire. His party had managed to sneak into Ignomasu's palace, but if Cecil and the other ladies confined in the annex with Princess Rapsonil went missing, Allen feared that it would raise eyebrows. As though to prove his point, the iron gate that was the only point of entry into the annex and the windows fitted with iron bars constantly had guards stationed at them.

According to Rapsonil, the annex was actually a peaceful place that was not normally so heavily guarded. Things had changed only after Ignomasu's revolt. Wanting to learn more about the empire during its times of peace, Allen had asked Cecil and the other ladies to gather as much information as possible. He knew that even after Ignomasu's revolt was suppressed, it would be important for the Gamers to maintain friendly ties with the empire.

Above all, the ladies were hardly allowed to leave their confined area, and the only joy that helped them get through the day was conversation. This was especially true for Princess Rapsonil, who had been imprisoned before anyone else and was dying to have someone to talk to. For that reason, the ladies chose a different topic to discuss every day, and the princess was more than happy to oblige. She found solace in these talks, as they helped her to come to peace with the fact that she was in confinement, and spoke at length in response to any question thrown her way. She was as talkative as ever today, and a girls' party had formed in the living room. The topic was the time when Rapsonil had gone above the water, before she had become an adult.

"I see, so you've been to the Crevelle Kingdom before," Shia said.

"I have," Rapsonil replied. "For the first time in my life, I saw land above the water and how people like you spent their days. The wind, the air, and the various smells that hit me were refreshing, and they reminded me that the upper half of my body was just like theirs. Of course, as you can see, I'm a fish from the waist down, so I couldn't travel as I liked."

"Did you use a barrel, or perhaps a sled, to get to different places?"

"Quite right. I had a special basket prepared just for me."

Allen listened on via Sharing with a Bird G. *If memory serves, Princess Rapsonil's mother, the empress, is a merfolk with two legs,* he thought. *The kids of the imperial family that we saved all had two legs instead of having their lower halves resemble a fish. That means only Princess Rapsonil is seen as Goddess Aqua's kin and is special since she's got the blood of Holy Fish Macris flowing through her veins.*

"Very well, then I shall have another special basket prepared for you," Shia said. "I'd love for you to visit Albahal one day. Princess Carmine had already promised to do so. Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

All the while, the Beast Princess wondered how much support she could rally if she invited the princess of the Prostia Empire to her nation.

"Indeed, I shall be there," Carmine said. "Princess Rapsonil, it'd be lovely if you could visit as well."

"Thank you, Princess Shia, Princess Carmine. But I'm not sure I'll ever see the day..." Rapsonil replied, her expression growing dark.

"There's no need for you to worry," Sophie immediately chimed in. "Ignomasu's reign won't last long. I'm sure his revolt will fail."

Allen had used Cecil, whom he had intentionally sent to the annex with the other ladies, to tell Rapsonil who they were and that Ignomasu was only being kept alive because they were searching for Beku and did not wish to make a huge fuss yet. There was information that could only be gleaned from him, and he visited the living room of the annex every day without fail. Under the guise of reporting the news and sharing updates on his plan to return peace

to Prostia, he would brag about his accomplishments and the nobles who had succumbed to his pressure.

If eavesdropping were the only goal, a Fish D could do the job. However, as Rapsonil was unwilling to engage with him, Ignomasu had not been as braggadocious as he had wished when she had been alone. That had prevented Allen from getting any insightful intel. With Cecil and the other ladies giving him a larger audience, though, Ignomasu spoke at length about his plans. He usually just arrogantly boasted about it while mentioning that the empire was steadily coming under his control. Rapsonil was secretly terrified to hear this.

"Thank you, Princess Sophialohne," Rapsonil said. "Still, I just cannot seem to rid myself of this anxiety. If, by any chance, he catches wind of your leader's plot, there's no telling what he'll do..."

"Lord Allen isn't the type to lose to a man like him," Sophie, who maintained her confident gaze even as a merfolk, said firmly.

"'A man like him,' you say? Princess Sophialohne, you really must have faith in this 'Lord Allen' of yours."

Rapsonil was curious about Allen, who seemed to have earned the full trust of Rohzenheim's princess.

"Lord Allen would like to publicly denounce Ignomasu at the Songstress Contest, in front of a whole crowd," Sophie explained, finally divulging part of the plan. "How does that sound?"

Sophie continued to tell Rapsonil their plan. It was true that Ignomasu had managed to infiltrate the palace, start an uprising, and take over the Prostia Empire using an extremely small force. After that, however, he had forced the Prostian armies to surrender and placed them under his control in hopes of claiming more troops. In other words, to turn the tables once more and revert the empire to how it once was, Ignomasu had to be defeated in front of the citizens and, most importantly, Holy Fish Macris. The only other option was to forcefully take back the empire, but that would inevitably result in countless innocent citizens shedding blood.

"My only concern is the people," Rapsonil said. "As long as it doesn't endanger my citizens, I certainly have no complaints."

"Please rest easy. Matters will not escalate that far," Sophie

reassured her.

Yet despite the attempts to assuage Rapsonil's fears, Allen, through Bird G, could see the worry in her eyes. All she knew was Allen's identity and the fact that he was after Beku. In fact, Allen had gone so far as to outright lie through his teeth, promising Ignomasu that he would make ten million gold within the next three months in hopes of receiving more freedom under the usurper to look into Beku. Naturally, Allen had no intention of making money under Ignomasu's rule and had not taken any action to do so.

Since Rapsonil had no idea what Allen was capable of, she was terrified of the possibility that his lies would be exposed, and no one could blame her. The fact that Sophie visibly held so much faith in him only created more doubt in Rapsonil's mind.

"Your Highness, what is that?" Cecil asked, noticing the princess's anxiety.

Everyone in the living room looked in the direction she was pointing. Beyond the iron grate that guarded the window was a glimmering pillar that dazzled as brightly as the crystal flower. It was a good distance away despite being so clearly visible, implying that the pillar must have been considerably large.

"That's the crystal flower's style," Rapsonil explained. "Once it grows bigger, it'll release crystal seeds."

"Oh?" the Bird G suddenly said.

Cecil, Sophie, and Shia immediately noticed Allen's interest and decided to press the princess for a few more details.

"Is that how crystal flowers propagate?" Sophie asked.

"That's right," Rapsonil replied. "They are created by Goddess Aqua's divine power, and not only do they serve as light within the dark depths of the ocean floor, but they can also ward off evil, protecting merfolk from numerous monsters. Goddess Aqua had the seeds of the crystal flower drift into the water precisely because of this power—it would protect its surroundings wherever it landed."

"If I recall, Prostia exports good luck charms and talismans that ward away evil, known to protect ships from sea monsters."

"Ah, you know us very well. Yes, those charms are created from the petals of the crystal flower. Our empire is home to numerous

skilled smiths."

Cecil's merfolk eyes began to glimmer just like the style of the crystal flower. "Does that mean the power that defended the empire against the sea monster in the *Tales of the Prostia Empire* is the crystal flower?!"

"Quite right," the princess replied.

"So the sea monster exists? Is it not just some sort of evil in a fairy tale?"

"Yes. That's what I've heard, at least."

"Then is that monster under the crystal flower of Patlanta? Or within it? Is there a monster slumbering near the capital?"

Cecil looked taken aback as she gazed at the floor by her feet. When she had read *Tales of the Prostia Empire* for the first time, the depicted illustration of the sea monster was so hideously terrifying that she could not go to the bathroom at night and needed to be accompanied by someone. She had actually gone to Allen, who was asleep in the attic back then, and forced him awake to have him escort her to the bathroom, but that was a story for another time.

"Patlanta, the imperial capital, once existed elsewhere," Rapsonil said before going on to terrify the frightened Cecil even more. "No one lives at the former location now, and it was destroyed by the sea monster, leaving nary a trace behind. In fact, it's said that that was where the monster and Holy Fish Macris fought. When Holy Fish Macris was victorious, he wanted to keep the sea monster from ever resurrecting and prayed to Goddess Aqua to help grow the crystal flower that he'd personally planted. His hope was that by transferring the imperial capital atop the massive crystal flower, the flower's ability to ward off evil would protect the entire city."

A massive crystal flower of that size could not only seal up the sea monster, but also prevent monsters of Rank B and below from ever approaching the city.

"I had no idea..." Cecil said in disbelief. "Wait, it sort of sounds like Allen's..."

Allen, who was using Bird G to listen to the conversation, was also reminded of the effects of his Gold and Silver Beans. Merus had mentioned that the abilities of the Summons were based on past

skills for certain Talents or the blessings of deities. It seemed Grass A's power to keep monsters away was based on the crystal flower.

"Is something the matter with Lord Allen?" Rapsonil asked. "In any case, it is the duty of our family, House Prostia, to ensure that the sea monster remains sealed by the power of the crystal flower and doesn't go on a rampage ever again."

Her eyes were reinvigorated with a powerful glimmer. As the descendant of Holy Fish Macris and the recipient of Goddess Aqua's blessing, the princess and her family were the rightful rulers of the massive empire on the ocean floor. After many moons of confinement, the princess had finally recalled the importance and glory of her house.

"You mentioned the crystal seeds appearing soon. Will they also glimmer and glow like the style?" Sophie asked.

"Quite right," Rapsonil answered, looking enchanted by the mere thought. "The style and the seeds floating about will sparkle unlike anything you've ever seen. It's a wonderful sight to behold. And Lord Macris will be in the capital to watch this spectacle. The Songstress Contest, hosted in tandem with the marvelous sight, will allow you to witness a miracle as the power to ward off evil courses through the ocean floor. Oh, I do wish that you will all be able to see it!"

"Crystal seeds, huh?" Allen mused through Bird G before remembering something. "Oh, that reminds me."

Two days after Allen had learned of the crystal flower seeds, he and Pelomas walked the streets of Patlanta in search of a certain something. They had been relieved of their duty to guard Princess Carmine, and Knight Captain Iwanam and his knights were now following Allen, tasked with the mission of guarding Special Ambassador Plenipotentiary Alec.

Allen had told the palace officials that he was looking for a way to make money, then headed for the market. As the market drew nearer, so did the bustling of numerous merfolk who were busily going about their day. The Songstress Contest, which was being held in five days, attracted various people from different provinces and territories.

"Wow, it's like a festival," Pelomas said as he curiously glanced

around.

I guess the rebellion wasn't a major event to the people. Allen was told that Ignomasu's revolt had mostly stayed within the palace and not spilled out into the streets or the market. The streets were so busy and cheery that one would hardly believe that the empire had just been taken over. Or was the Songstress Contest so important to the citizens of Prostia that the festivities took priority over the unstable state of the empire?

The style's gotten bigger. The style of the crystal flower would continue to grow—when it was ready for the crystal seeds to float about, it would be over a thousand meters tall and twenty-three hundred meters wide. The Songstress Contest would occur atop it so that Holy Fish Macris would have a good view of the jubilations.

"Aren't there a lot of pretty people around here?" Pelomas whispered. He could not help but find the women merfolk who swam past him beautiful.

"Maybe they're contestants who won the preliminary rounds in their region," Allen suggested.

The contest was a show of gratitude toward Holy Fish Macris for protecting the Prostia Empire, expressed through song, and the custom of performing a song was based on Deirdre, the woman Macris loved, as she had made a living singing in city taverns. Allen had not come here for sightseeing and thus had zero intention of making any stops, but apparently, the tavern where Deirdre and Macris had met three centuries ago was still up and running. When the imperial capital had been moved atop the crystal flower, the tavern had moved with it, and the entire building was preserved and kept as a memorial.

This attested to how much the Prostian citizens treasured the legend of Holy Fish Macris and Deirdre. Macris, who usually spent his days swimming throughout the vast ocean, had thus decided to spend just one day—when the crystal flower seeds floated about—in Patlanta. When the citizens first learned of this, they had decided to offer him a song. This tradition had spread through the empire and to other states on the ocean floor.

People were dying to join the Songstress Contest, and every year,

hundreds of people arrived in the imperial capital to showcase their talents. Over time, certain conditions were introduced that had to be met to enter the contest, and Patlanta and major cities in vassal states began holding preliminary contests.

How to Enter the Songstress Contest

- Must be a Songstress or have another Talent related to singing.
- Must be a woman.
- Must not have won the contest before.

Looks like the number of stars doesn't really matter. Singer was a one-star Talent that Deirdre had supposedly possessed, and Allen, who had no buffing skills, had high hopes for it. It seemed merfolk were more likely to receive Talents related to granting buffs, and even if they were not a Singer, Allen hoped to welcome a party member bestowed with a Talent of the same ilk.

Do people with Singer-class Talents get better at singing the more stars they have? Allen wondered, despite not being particularly interested in the field. But just then, his thoughts were cut off by his friend.

"Look! Found it!" Pelomas cried excitedly as he pointed. "That's the magic shop! It's the hottest store in the market right now."

Allen followed his friend's finger and saw a lavish sign that read, "Magic Shop." The group had arrived at their destination. Magic shops generally carried magic-imbued accessories that had effects such as raising one's stats or protecting them from debuffs. Because accessories in general were a bit flashy, magic shops tended to look like luxury boutiques. The store Allen and Pelomas were visiting in hopes of finding anything useful was among the best that Patlanta had to offer—meaning all of its items were extremely expensive.

"I wonder if there are crystal seeds here," Pelomas said.

"No clue. Just be careful not to say anything weird to the store owner, Peloniki," Allen warned. The Gamers had gotten used to using their real names in their private rooms, but he had not forgotten to use their aliases now that they were in public.

"I know," Pelomas confirmed.

"Captain Iwanam, would you wait outside here?" Allen requested of the captain and his subordinates.

The Summoner opened the door to the magic shop to head inside, and Pelomas hastily followed. The moment they set foot in the store, the women merfolk who were busy choosing their accessories all turned toward Allen. Their eyes were clearly filled with suspicion, befuddled that two men were in this store during this time. *Feels like I stepped into a women-only railcar or something.* In his past life as Kenichi, Allen had accidentally done just that and attracted glares from the women around him.

"Welcome," the owner, who had the face of a scorpion fish, called out from the back of the shop. "Please take your time and look around."

Since magic shops generally had priceless jewels and accessories with special effects, their interiors were usually luxurious and expensive by design. Allen, in hopes of being well regarded by the store, was wearing a bespoke outfit he had received from Ignomasu at the palace, trying to look his best. If appearance was all he needed to gain the trust of the store owner, and words and mannerisms were not necessary, that was what he would do.

"Pardon me, but do you have any crystal seeds?" Allen asked one of the employees, who had swiftly approached to help him out because of how well he was dressed.

"Crystal seeds? Ah, I might have something in the back," the employee said, retreating to the back of the store. They returned with a tray with two glittering, light-blue spheres nestled on top. The orbs were small enough to snugly fit within the palm of one's hand.

"Are these them?" Allen asked. "They're beautiful."

"Indeed," the employee replied. "We choose only the best of the best from among the crystal seeds, and ours won't pale in comparison to anything that even the palace requires. But of course, they come at a price—a hundred gold coins each."

Crystal flowers tended to produce seeds from their styles every year around this time. Since the imperial capital, Patlanta, rested atop a massive crystal flower, its seeds were also of impressive size

and unlike any other. Once the colossal style that Allen had seen earlier expelled these seeds, specialists made their way out of the imperial capital to collect the best-looking ones, picking them up off the ocean floor before they had time to bury themselves. The especially beautiful ones were purchased by the empire for a hefty price, while the rest made their way onto the market, usually via magic shops. Allen and Pelomas were in search of crystal seeds that were on the market.

"I'll take both, please," Allen said. "Do you have more, or is this your entire stock?"

The employee returned to the back to get them ready for Allen when the scorpion fish store owner swam over.

"Thank you so much for your business. I'm terribly sorry, however. Those are the only two we have in store. Pardon me for asking, good sir, but are you perhaps an official from the palace?" they asked.

"I suppose you could say that," Allen replied. "It seems our palace bought all the crystal seeds last year, so very few made it to the market. Truly, it's a trial to gather a few crystal seeds for my fallen."

Allen lied like it was second nature to him, fabricating an entire story while Pelomas carefully analyzed the store owner's attitude. The owner, noticing this, flashed a knowing smirk.

"Oh, you jest!" he said. "The new emperor has handed these seeds out to not only the nobles but the officials as well, has he not?"

Allen was secretly delighted that the owner had walked straight into his trap and continued the act.

"Oh dear... I suppose magic shop owners like you aren't to be underestimated. I ought to have known better."

"No, no, I truly apologize for prying into your private affairs," the owner replied. "But I admit that these crystal seeds are harder to come by for people like me. Should the opportunity ever arise, I do hope that you'll entrust me with any excess seeds you may have."

"Of course. I hope you'll buy them off me for a good price, then."

"I still have much to learn and would love to rise to the challenge."

Allen raised his Intelligence to sniff out any lies, but it did not seem like this store owner was trying to deceive him. Still, since the owner was clearly skilled and prominent enough to maintain a luxury store in the best location on the main street, Allen had brought Pelomas along for support. But Pelomas shook his head to support Allen's judgment. It seemed the scorpion fish store owner was telling the truth.

A mere two days ago, Allen had learned that crystal seeds were in Patlanta, and he wanted to get his hands on them. He recalled that he had received a request from a dwarven smith named Habarak, who had moved from Baukis to Hardcore User Island, where Allen's base resided. The dwarf had asked the Summoner to get some crystal seeds if he could. According to Habarak, the crystal seeds were materials that could be added to weapons to give them all sorts of effects.

Effects of Crystal Seeds in Weapons

- Increases stats
- Increases Critical Hit rate
- Increases Physical Damage
- Reduces cooldowns
- Endows elements

Allen was most interested in the last effect, where an element could be endowed. And unlike Shamans, who could only temporarily provide a different element to others, the effect of a seed seemed permanent. Habarak and other smiths had rankings for their Talents: A one-star would be a Village-Renowned Blacksmith, a two-star was a City-Renowned Blacksmith, a three-star was a Country-Renowned Blacksmith, a four-star was a World-Renowned Blacksmith, and a five-star was a Legendary Blacksmith. Only those with a smithing-related Talent were capable of using a skill called Embed.

Smiths also possessed skills like Fire Starting and Forging. These allowed them to forge powerful weapons from materials tougher than iron, such as mithril, hihiirokane, and adamantite. Since

Habarak possessed a four-star Talent, he could forge orichalcum weapons, but if he wanted to use Embed, the base that he would use had to be at least one rank below what he could make with Forging.

For example, even though Habarak could make orichalcum weapons, if he wanted to use Embed, adamantite weapons were the strongest he could use it on. Still, Allen believed that if crystal seeds, a branch from the World Tree gifted by the elves in Rohzenheim or the dark elves in Fabraaze, or a dragon's eye, a rock that could be mined from the dragonkin's village, located somewhere in Garlesia, could be Embedded into the adamantite, it could become even tougher than orichalcum.

As a matter of fact, Allen had tried to get his hands on a World Tree branch from Rohzenheim before coming to Prostia. When he had asked Sophie, his request had been immediately denied. Undeterred, however, he had then gone to the queen, who had stated that he would be arrested on the spot if he dared to take anything from the World Tree. She had, however, permitted him to pick up any branches that had fallen off it. And so, when Allen had used his Summons to shake the trunk of the World Tree, it had caused the queen to pale and crumple to the ground as she bemoaned his actions, but that was a story for another time.

Allen was keen on granting Habarak his wish of finding materials to Embed into items, and the Summoner was also eager to get his hands on some enhanced weapons. The moment he had caught wind of the crystal seeds, he had searched every storage, room, and treasury in the palace that he could, but the seeds were nowhere to be found. He had tried to ask Princess Rapsonil about it as well, but she had merely claimed that the palace's treasury should have a fair amount of them stashed away.

Even if crystal seeds made it onto the market, they were traded for a high price. If the palace was buying most of them, Allen suspected that it was so Ignomasu could hand them out to nobles in hopes of winning them over. At the very least, the scorpion fish owner of the magic store assumed as much. While there were records for paintings, statues, and other priceless works of art in the

palace ledger, there was not a single detail about the crystal seeds, which Allen found odd. He had assumed that some had been sold to merchants for some quick cash, but the scorpion fish store owner's attitude disproved that theory.

Why aren't these precious crystal seeds documented at all? Were they eaten or something? No, it's more logical to assume that there's a reason the nobles being given the seeds aren't listed. While Allen was thinking that, the employee came back out with a bag that looked to be made out of some sort of fish organ. The seeds were carefully stored inside, and he took it and paid for them while signaling Pelomas with his eyes. Pelomas instantly realized that he should gather more information and quietly agreed.

"By the way, I do believe this year's Songstress Contest is coming up," the store owner said. "I wonder what'll happen to the crystal seeds that will be expelled during the festival."

"I wonder..." Allen said, lying through his teeth once more. "But I doubt the palace will buy as many seeds this year. The new emperor's treasury must surely be full by now."

The store owner was visibly happy at the news. "Ah, well, should that happen, please do visit our store once again."

"I think we still need...earrings, right?" Pelomas asked.

"Yeah," Allen replied with a nod. "I should've had you take a peek at Bask, Peloniki."

"Don't give me that. He might have priceless items, but I never want to come face-to-face with a Demonic Deity."

But Allen was already lost in his thoughts. Merus had noted that Demonic Deity Bask's earrings fully protected him from any debuffs, and the Summoner was eager to get his hands on an item like that. Allen and Pelomas headed toward the other accessories, and unsurprisingly, there were quite a few women merfolk shopping there. *I've heard that singing won't be the only factor judged in the contest. You've gotta look your best too.*

According to the intel that Cecil and the other ladies had managed to extract from Rapsonil, there was not much correlation between the number of Talent stars and who had won past Songstress Contests. Allen assumed that the judge, Holy Fish Macris,

would crown someone beautiful the winner even if she was not the best singer. The contestants, naturally, visited several magic stores in hopes of gaining an aesthetic edge over their rivals. And the luxurious shops were well aware of this, as many employees had been assigned to the women's accessories department. Since the winners of the contest were promised glory, it was only natural that contestants were on edge and looking to knock out as many rivals as possible, while magic stores found this to be the perfect business opportunity.

It kinda reminds me of a beauty contest. Allen gazed at the women merfolk grabbing the accessories that were on display and trying them on to see if it was the look they were going for. Others were pushing other women out of the way to get their hands on certain accessories first. It reminded Allen of beauty contests in games that he had once played. Such games had a beauty stat or something similar, and while it had been mostly useless and unnecessary for gameplay, there had always been one scene where it became important, blocking the player from proceeding until they raised it high enough.

When Allen was still Kenichi, he had not had a single clue about being well-dressed, and had been unsure what exactly made someone fashionable. Unlike real life, however, games had a number that he could utilize, so he had simply tried to get that number as high as he could, actual fashion be damned. He had gathered friends with high base beauty or style stats, made them into a class that would only raise those stats, and decked them out with whatever accessories gave the most points, allowing him to overcome the trial. Once the event was over, the beauty or style stat was never touched upon by the game again, and so, Allen still did not have a clue about fashion, even in his current world. He approached a cabinet of accessories and reached out toward an earring.

"Hey!" a merfolk woman snapped from beside him, looking visibly annoyed. Her orange hair flowed down to her waist, and she was lightly dressed. "Don't you know about the upcoming contest? You're a man, aren't you? Ever heard of 'ladies first'?"

Upon closer inspection, Allen's merfolk hand was about to touch

hers, and she tried to swiftly sneak her hand between his and the earring. *I feel like she's just trying to take it from me, but I guess I can concede.*

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "Go right ahead."

The woman snatched the earrings away and did not even give a word of thanks as she quickly moved to the next shelf.

"Allen, aren't you looking for something like this?" Pelomas asked, holding several earrings.

Some were made of shells, some of coral, and some out of a transparent mineral. Earrings of all kinds decorated Pelomas's hands, and they all must have had different effects. He must have used his Analyze skill to find accessories that seemed the most useful.

"Oh?" Allen said, picking up one of the earrings. "This kinda pales in comparison to Bask's."

It's a clear downgrade.

"Is it?" Pelomas asked. "It raises your damage a little, though."

The young merchant then explained the effects and prices of the earrings he had found.

Effects and Prices of the Earrings in the Store

- +3% Attack Damage, 100 gold coins
- +5% Attack Damage, 500 gold coins
- +3% Magical Damage, 100 gold coins
- +5% Magical Damage, 500 gold coins
- +3% Critical Hit rate, 100 gold coins
- +5% Critical Hit rate, 500 gold coins
- Poison resistance, 100 gold coins
- Sleep resistance, 100 gold coins

Fair enough. If you've got one of these equipped to each ear, even a five percent increase is pretty godly. We didn't have anything in our earring slots anyway. The Allen Army had only obtained rings and necklaces from grinding in the Rank S dungeon. Not once had they ever found an earring, meaning clearly, it was an accessory that was difficult to come by above water.

All accessories, earrings included, were divided by type, and the wearer had a cap on the number of benefits or buffs that they could receive from them. For example, no matter how many rings or bracelets one wore, they could only receive buffs from two rings and two bracelets at any given time. They could only receive buffs from one necklace at a time as well, and the effects would not stack even if they wore several necklaces at once.

If Allen got his hands on earrings, which were rare for those on land, he could place one on each ear and receive two additional buffs. He hoped that access to this new type of accessory would help him strengthen his army even further, and he could not help but smile at the thought. His army was working in tandem with the Hero Army, and he could test not only the buffs from the Shaman squad, but also how much they would stack with the earrings. *I know this sounds cliché, but this feels like unifying the world.*

When Allen had reincarnated into his world, he had been thirty-five years old—an age where he had no longer had big dreams. That mindset and his memories remained even after his reincarnation, making him into the Allen he was today. As he dug through those memories, he realized that his previous world had been quite similar to his current one. Both had numerous different species and peoples, each with their own issues.

Each group was so preoccupied with their problems that they could never unify, and the mere claim sounded like a banal platitude—but also an ideal that everyone could believe in. While still Kenichi, Allen had felt that this fragmentation was the only reason such a vacuous idea had come about. However, in this world, different species were united under the Five Continent Alliance to fight against a common enemy: the Demon Lord Army. Because they had a clear goal to work toward, the nations worked together. Still, it was clear that the world was not one. Prostia, for example, flush with precious earrings and filled with many merfolk who were adept at buffing, still refused to get involved with the war against the Demon Lord Army. That alone was proof that the world was still very much fractured and divided. *Since I still have knowledge from my past life, I feel like it only makes sense for me to travel this world.*

Lost in his thoughts, Allen walked around, perusing the items in the store. When he spotted the scorpion fish store owner, the Summoner recalled another mission that he had.

"Um, excuse me," he called.

"Yes, sir?" the owner inquired. The fact that the Summoner had immediately bought the crystal seeds without even attempting to haggle for a lower price led him to assume that Allen was a prime customer, so he hurried over to personally serve the boy.

"Is this all this store has to offer?" Allen asked. "If you've actually got anything better, would you be able to show me?"

"Pardon?" the store owner responded. "I think these items are of fine quality, but... Ah, I see! Men usually prefer items that make them stronger while in dire straits. Yes, of course! I may have something that suits your needs. Let's see... It's a touch expensive, but how about something like this?"

He crouched to the lower levels of the shelf, grabbed a small box, and opened it, revealing three earrings nestled inside. When Pelomas laid eyes on the accessories, he gasped with awe.

"Wow... These certainly are amazing," he murmured.

The store owner was not going to let that remark slide, and his gaze instantly became sharper.

"Ah, are you able to use Analyze?" he guessed.

"I am."

"Then would you kindly show me your skills? How would you price the items in my hand?"

Pelomas quickly gave his response.

Earrings Offered by the Store Owner

- Earring that gives +7% Attack Damage, 10,000 gold coins
- Earring that gives +7% Magical Damage, 10,000 gold coins
- Earring that gives +7% Critical Hit rate, 10,000 gold coins

Hmm, the prices skyrocketed. But that happened with rings as well; the moment they buffed a stat by +500 or +1,000, the prices went up exponentially. Thanks to the Allen Army grinding the Rank S

dungeon, rings were now in ample supply across the market, and global prices were steadily dropping.

"I see... Indeed, you've got a keen eye," the store owner said solemnly before letting out a soft groan.

"Just between you and me, I've got quite a few friends within the palace," Allen explained, his voice becoming stern. "See, I've been told that this store actually has items that are *far* better than this, and I came here to make some purchases."

The Summoner had immediately changed his tone, trying his best to sound high-and-mighty while making sure to emphasize that this store could offer better items. The store owner flashed a smile and spoke to Allen.

"Oh dear, I do beg your pardon. May I ask what it is you're looking for?"

"I'm looking for *the two* that I believe you bought."

Allen had been staying in the villa near the palace for the past two weeks. Naturally, he had had his Fish D swim all throughout the palace, and he had even dispatched his friends to investigate earrings and any items that could strengthen the Allen Army under the guise of researching the market trends of the Prostia Empire. During that time, Ignomasu's antics had caught his attention, as the emperor had taken precious earrings from the palace treasury and sold them, using the money to win over nobles.

Antiques and engraved statues could be given to nobles directly, but they did not consider earrings and other items with powerful magical properties—in other words, items that could be used as gear instead of decor—to be valuable. And so, Ignomasu often sold such things off and instead gave them the money he made. Through Fish D's and his friends' intel, Allen had learned that this store had bought two earrings from the palace.

"Ah, now I see what you're talking about," the owner said, maintaining his smile. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. You see, I've actually decided to put the two up for auction. They're no longer for sale to customers."

"Oh? Is that still true even if I let you name your price?" Allen asked.

“Please wait just a moment,” the owner answered, his smile widening. He then took a few merfolk guards within the store and retreated to the back.

A while later, the owner returned with two hefty, lavish boxes. He slowly opened them up, revealing the earrings that were preciously nestled inside.

“Amazing...” Pelomas said. “These are definitely them.”

The merchant immediately told Allen of their value.

Pelomas’s Analysis

- Earring that gives +10% Physical Damage, +2,000 HP, and +2,000 Attack
- Earring that gives +10% Magical Damage, +2,000 MP, and +2,000 Intelligence

“Ah, yes,” the owner said. “If both of these go up for auction, we believe they’ll sell for a combined three million gold coins. But I believe your keen eye has already determined the value of these items, so...I’m open to discussion with a starting price of 2.4 million gold.”

Oh, go to hell. We know how much these actually *go for. Stop trying to rip us off.* Both Allen and Pelomas knew that the earrings would sell for a total of six hundred thousand gold. They had seen the palace trade records. They indicated that this store had bought a lot more than the two earrings, and Allen wanted to purchase them all, but if he kept allowing the owner to rip him off, he would run out of cash in no time.

Allen turned to Pelomas as though to imply that he was up, and the young merchant nodded. All of a sudden, his body wavered like he was in a heat haze, and the owner immediately glared sharply. Clearly, the scorpion fish merfolk knew that Pelomas was using his Extra Skill.

“Hmm, 2.4 million, you say?” Pelomas wondered aloud. “Which means you’ll turn a profit of 1.8 million if we buy them both.”

“Not bad, young fish,” the store owner muttered in response. “I

see... You were after these from the start."

When Pelomas accurately assessed the price of the items, the owner intuited that Allen had been after these accessories from the get-go.

"Precisely," Pelomas replied. "That's why I've used my skill already. And? How much can we haggle you down from 2.4 million?"

"Hmph, you're too naive. I don't know how impressive your skill is, but if a flimsy method like yours allowed you to come this far, I can only say that you've been lucky. Perhaps it's best if you learn while you can that pure dumb luck can only get you so far."

The store owner pulled a small cylinder and a pouch from his pocket. He emptied the contents of the pouch into the tube and placed his lips on the opposite end to take a long puff, then expelled something from his mouth. The water around him became tinged with white, and a sweet but bitter aroma hit Allen's nose. *It must be tobacco or something.*

As the owner fell silent, Allen turned to Pelomas, who must have been thinking of what to say next. *I'm counting on you, dude. I really,* really *want this gear, and honestly, I brought you down here specifically for this job. Haggle the crap out of him!* Allen was so engrossed in purchasing these earrings that he had forgotten any other reason for having brought Pelomas to Prostia. After learning of the earrings' effects, he had become obsessed with the idea that equipping two per person would raise efficiency and could not think of anything else.





Pelomas's Extra Skill, Libra, helped him appraise the value of an item by comparing it to the price on the market, but it also allowed him to switch between micro or macro modes, letting him know the value of the item in a small market or the amount that a nation was willing to shell out for it. For example, he could appraise the value of an item within a nation and then compare that price with those of other nations, allowing him to get a rough idea of a country's national budget. He could also use it on a micro level and find the price that a person was putting on the item.

The effect of his Extra Skill lasted for an hour on the item, allowing him to know how highly the seller—likely a merchant—valued the goods. If the price dipped and surged wildly, it helped him intuit the mindset and psychological process of the seller as well. When Pelomas activated his Extra Skill, he told the store owner the price he must have paid to the empire for the earrings. He cunningly wanted the store owner to assume that his Extra Skill allowed him to appraise the value of an item and nothing more. Indeed, negotiations between the store owner and the young merchant had already begun.

Chapter 12: A Chance Encounter with Songstress Rosalina

While Pelomas was busy negotiating with the scorpion fish store owner, Allen gazed at the scene with his arms crossed. The night before, when the Gamers were strategizing, Pelomas had shared his opinion about the store owner.

"If he's got a store in a nice area, it means that he's that skilled. They tend to be quite proud of their accomplishments."

"Which means he isn't likely to end negotiations once they begin," Allen had assumed.

"But I really want to keep him on the hook, just in case. I'll boast about my Talent and skills to provoke him—I'll act like a young, naive merchant and goad him into lecturing me."

That plan had only been credible because it had come from Pelomas, who had clumsily entered the lodging industry in hopes of receiving the approval of inn master Chester, the very man who had run a successful lodging business within Ratash. Pelomas had done his best to manage lodges and purchase buildings, and he had eventually taken over Chester's business, thereby earning the wealthy man's seal of approval.

Since Pelomas had seemed rather confident in his scheme, Allen had agreed to let the merchant do as he pleased so long as he could make the purchase. Allen wanted the store owner to halve his initial price of 2.4 million, but even after a good while, he refused to budge much. Still, Pelomas maintained his confident attitude, and the owner leaned forward excitedly, implying that the two were enjoying this battle of wits.

All right, things are heating up nicely. Good going, Pelomas. The owner can't back out now. Allen was skilled at leveraging his exorbitant amounts of money and Status values to accomplish his

goals, but he was not an expert in grasping minute changes in situations and haggling without ever backing down. He crossed his arms and listened as the price slowly went down, choosing not to interfere with Pelomas's plan.

Oh, hey. That's the orange-haired lady from earlier. Is she about to check out? When Allen glanced around, he spotted the lady who had snatched an earring from him. She was speaking with an employee as she took out a bag filled with gold coins. Curious, Allen approached them to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"You must be a contestant in the Songstress Contest," the employee said.

"Can't you tell just by looking at me?" the lady asked in the same annoyed tone she had spoken to Allen with.

"Please forgive my ignorance," the employee swiftly apologized. "Will you kindly show me your entry pass?"

"Ah, right. Sorry, but I think I left that back at the inn."

The lady quickly examined her belongings before giving up, and the employee took the tray with the earring that the lady was about to purchase.

"I'm terribly sorry, ma'am, but I cannot sell you this item without an entry pass for the contest," they said. "I can keep it on hold for you for the day, though. If you would kindly return to your lodging and fetch the pass for me, I'll be more than happy to let you make your purchase."

"What?" the orange-haired lady asked with a scowl. "The person earlier didn't show their pass, but they made their purchase just fine."

"Once again, I apologize for the inconvenience. But the Prostian emperor has mandated that we check the contestants' entry passes before we sell them any items. I'm afraid my hands are tied."

"I've heard of no such thing! Ugh, fine, whatever. I'll just shop elsewhere."

When the lady whirled around, two guards were already standing behind her, likely having received a signal from the employee.

"Ma'am, I really am sorry, but may we have a few moments of your time?" a guard requested, clearly unwilling to budge.

"Move!" the woman snapped. "I'm busy preparing for the contest."

"I'm sorry. This will be over quickly," the other guard said, grabbing her arm.

"Hey! Don't touch me!"

The other ladies who were shopping around instantly turned toward the orange-haired merfolk and the security guards. They whispered worriedly to one another, wondering if there was any danger, but neither the guards nor the employee were daunted as they dragged the lady deeper into the store.

"We'll only take a few seconds of your time, that's all," the employee said loudly, helping everyone else understand the situation. "We simply want to know why you cannot produce your entry pass for the contest."

The lady screamed and flailed her legs as the employee made an exaggerated attempt to pacify her. The other customers gazed at her with pity before they soon went back to shopping. Only Allen quietly watched the rowdy lady disappear into the back. *An entry pass, eh? I smell an opportunity...* He tried to approach the orange-haired lady, the employee, and the guards, but the store owner stopped him.

"I'm deeply sorry for the fuss," he said. "Cases like this have increased over the years, so we've hired more security to deal with them."

"Thank you for your help with the Songstress Contest," Allen said, trying to continue the conversation. "Have cases of people forging entry passes become a problem recently?"

The store owner nodded firmly, and Allen internally smirked with delight.

"Indeed. It tends to ramp up during this time of year," the owner grumbled.

The orange-haired lady, having heard this conversation, whirled around to face the owner and Allen.

"Hey! Just because I couldn't show my pass, it doesn't mean that I forged it or anything! Quit jumping to conclusions!" she yelled.

Allen used this opportunity to use Bird F's Ability, Transmission, to communicate with Iwanam and the other knights waiting outside.

"Knight Captain Iwanam, could you and the other knights enter the store?" Allen asked. "Just ad-lib and match my stride."

Iwanam and the other knights immediately stormed into the shop.

"Lord Alec, whatever is the matter?" Iwanam asked.

"Just a minor issue," Allen replied. "Take this lady to the palace. Treat her well."

"Yes, sir!"

The knight captain nodded, prompting the other knights to head out. They surrounded the guards attempting to take the orange-haired lady away. Overwhelmed by the knights' silence, the guards immediately released the woman from their grasp, and the lady tried to leave the store in an angry huff. The knights followed her out of the store.

"An official... Sir Alec, was it? Thank you very much for taking care of this issue," the store owner said.

Hmm, how shall I respond? I joined in on the commotion, but I won't cause any more problems, I guess.

"This is simply part of my job," Allen replied. "I would love more than anything to be of use to His Majesty Ignomasu in a different way. The earrings are imperative for my goal. I would like you to bring the price down a bit."

"The war is starting soon, then, I presume?" the owner asked with a grin.

"Oh? 'The war,' you say? Have I let something slip?"

Allen glared at the store owner, secretly delighted that the scorpion fish had gotten the wrong idea.

"Ah, pardon me. You have my deepest apologies."

Though he claimed to be sorry, it was clear as day on the merfolk's face that he greedily wanted to take advantage of the situation. He likely assumed that, despite his youth, Alec, who had brought knights with him, was the lord of a noble house. If a young noble like him was looking for a relatively expensive earring, it might have implied that he was trying to stand out in the war Ignomasu was about to start.

As far as Allen knew, merchants were already whispering that

Ignomasu, who had revolted, was trying to conquer the land above water to control his people. It was rumored that once the Songstress Contest ended, the emperor planned to ramp up his war preparations—preparations he was already making behind the scenes. And Allen's actions actually fitted in nicely with Ignomasu's scheme.

The store owner had likely assumed that Allen was getting ready for war by trying to get his hands on earrings that would be useful in combat. When the Summoner had learned that the secret treasures of the palace had already been circulating on the market, he had brought a merchant under his command to this magic store. As though to prove his misunderstanding, the store owner seemed eager to continue the conversation, but a glare from Allen implied that there was nothing to discuss yet and to read the room.

Nice. He's getting the wrong idea. Thanks to this exchange, even if the palace caught wind of him trying to investigate the market to purchase expensive accessories, Allen had several excuses readily available.

"Now then, I suppose I'll leave Peloniki behind," he said. "Continue with the negotiations."

"Certainly," the store owner said with a smile and a nod.

Will Pelomas really be all right? Oh, and since that owner might take advantage of us...

"Mr. Owner, sir, would you be so kind as to tell me your name?" Allen asked.

"Ah, pardon my belated introduction. My name is Kasagoma."

"Hmm, Kasagoma. Very well. I'd like your assistance in the future as well, so I'll keep your name in mind."

"Please ask for my help at any time."

Since Kasagoma now knew that Allen desperately needed the earrings, the Summoner feared that he might become overconfident. To ensure that Pelomas still had room to negotiate, Allen hinted that they could potentially build a relationship in the future. In other words, if Kasagoma drove a hard bargain, Allen would take his future business elsewhere. He shot Pelomas an encouraging look in hopes that the young merchant would be successful, then left the

store to chase after the orange-haired lady and Knight Captain Iwanam.

Ah, there they are. Iwanam was waiting for the Summoner a short distance away from the store, but the shrill screams of the orange-haired lady echoed throughout the area, making the conspicuous group hard to miss.

"I'm innocent, I'm telling you! I'm *the* Rosalina! This must be some kind of trap!" the lady shouted, glaring at Allen as he pushed through a ring of knights. "Hey! What're you staring at?!"

Her eyes were a beautiful shade of emerald, and her skimpy clothes exposed much of her skin, which was decorated with glittering scales. Merfolk were more diverse than the species that lived on land, and they were closer to beastkin than humans. Allen was not sure just how beautiful this lady was, but if she actually was a contestant, she must have been fairly confident in her physique. She looked to be about the same age as Allen, and only then did he realize that he was sizing her up.

"A place I like is nearby, so let's talk there," Allen said.

"What?!" the lady gasped. "H-Hey! What in the world..."

Allen ignored the visibly confused woman and told the knights to go kill some time before picking up Pelomas, then walked toward a shop. Using Bird F's Awakened Ability, Messenger, he relayed where they were headed to Pelomas. Unlike Transmission, which could only send words, Messenger could convey anything the Summon saw and heard. When Allen entered the eatery and took a seat, the orange-haired woman followed. Luckily, she did not flee.

"What would you like?" Allen asked.

"What's your problem?!" the woman snapped. "You didn't even ask if I was free and just..."

Since the orange-haired merfolk seemed to be so on edge, Allen called a staff member over and randomly selected a few merfolk sweet treats. *If they're good, I'll bring some back for Luke. He's been pretty grumpy these days.* Ever since Allen had met with Ignomasu, the Summoner and Pelomas had been allowed to enter and exit the palace as they pleased, but Luke was under the guise of a magic tool engineer and had to stay at the villa. It was safe to say

that the spunky dark elf was annoyed by the arrangement, so if there was anything good, Allen wanted to take back a few treats in hopes that it would put Luke in a better mood.

An employee soon brought out an array of desserts that were famous in Patlanta and placed them on the table Allen and the orange-haired lady were sitting at. It felt like the perfect time for him to spark a conversation.

"So, why did you forge an entry pass?" he asked.

"I've got no reason to tell you," the orange-haired lady replied.

"Fair enough."

"Are you a noble or some sort of official?" the lady questioned, glaring at the Summoner. "I don't care which, but if you're going to take me to the palace, be quick about it."

"Eh, I don't really care what you do. You can leave, and I'll just report back that you gave us the slip when I tried to take you away."

I really don't wanna get into any trouble. If the palace is still unaware, I won't even report back. The orange-haired lady stared at Allen with doubt, but the Summoner only took bites from his dessert and said nothing more. She swiftly got up from the table.

"Hmph, fine," she spat. "Then I'll take that offer of yours and leave."

"But," Allen began, having had a response at the ready, "if you want to enter the Songstress Contest, I might be able to pull some strings. I've got ties with the palace."

Well, not really, actually. But of course, the lady had no way of reading his thoughts, so she stopped and whirled around, unable to leave.

"What do you mean? What are you planning?" she asked. There was still a dubious look in her eyes, but it was clear that she was now more open to conversation.

"There are exceptions to every rule, you know. And I'm in a position where I can make those exceptions. The choice is yours. Though it does look like you'll struggle to buy even a single accessory at this rate."

The lady stared Allen down and mulled over her options for a while before she slowly returned to her seat. All the while, he

continued to devour expensive desserts.

"I can at least hear you out, I suppose," the lady huffed. "What's your name?"

"Didn't you hear me at the store? I'm Alec. And I heard you say your name too. Miss Rosalina, is it?"

"You can just call me Rosalina. And? What do you have to gain from helping me enter the contest?"

Hmm, she's completely unfazed by my appearance and status. She looks like a commoner to me, but she seems awfully confident in herself.

"Oh, I benefit from this exchange too, of course," Allen explained. "I've heard that if you can do well in the contest, Macris will give you a Holy Orb."

"Yeah, obviously," Rosalina replied before she looked at him, wide-eyed. "Wait, so you want a Holy Orb, then?"

"Bingo. I'll help you enter the contest, and if you place high, you'll give me the Holy Orb. Do we have a deal?" Allen flashed a conniving grin.

"Is that it? Ugh, if that's all you wanted, you should've told me sooner."

Rosalina looked at Allen wearily. It was not at all uncommon during this time of year for Prostian men to strike a deal with women in hopes of getting their hands on a Holy Orb. As the name implied, the Songstress Contest had rankings and places, with the top five receiving Holy Orbs of Macris. Fifth and fourth place would each get one, third and second would get two apiece, and the grand prize winner would get three. And on top of being prizes for those who did well in the contest, Holy Orbs of Macris, also known as Tears of the Holy Fish Macris, were the perfect way for a man to court the woman he loved.

There were other ways of obtaining a Holy Orb than entering the contest—one could directly entreat Macris's help. However, that required clearing a difficult mission on the spot, and it was a pain to track down the Holy Fish swimming around the vast ocean floor. *Tales of the Prostia Empire* and other stories that came from those legends often took artistic liberties to depict that fact in their own

interesting ways; oftentimes, heroes or those of low social status would do their utmost to obtain a Holy Orb for their princess, overcoming a difficult trial for the damsel.

"My friend wants one, you see," Allen explained. "Remember the guy with me back at the store? The one negotiating with the owner? Well, he wants one of the orbs, and truth be told, I'd like one too."

Frankly, we'd like three. When Allen had had Cecil equip a Holy Orb of Macris, he had been enamored with the effects that it had on her and became desperate to find a way to get his hands on one. It was then that the Summoner had learned about the Songstress Contest, how the top five would be rewarded with a Holy Orb by Macris, and how men would try to buy those Holy Orbs from the winners. They usually paid ten thousand gold coins to the contestant up front, and even if she did not win, she would not need to return the money.

Allen had immediately had the idea of buying out every contestant, but he did not have nearly enough money for that. Plus, contestants could not accept requests from multiple people, and with the contest a mere five days away, the favorites to win likely already had their hands tied. The only method he had been able to come up with was to buy the Holy Orbs from those who received them from the contestants.

It was then that the Summoner had stumbled upon Rosalina, who wished to enter the contest but was unable to. If she was even willing to cheat to get in, it was safe to assume that no one had paid her in advance. *Now I just need to figure out how promising her chances are. Even a human like me can tell that she's pretty, but I don't know the beauty standards of merfolk, so it's difficult to say.*

"You do? But, like, why?" Rosalina asked, glaring at Allen with suspicion. "What do you want a Holy Orb for? Oh, are you going to give it to the person you love?"

"Sure, yeah," Allen replied. *Pelomas is, at least.*

"I see... So you must be serious about your beloved."

"Yep. So, do we have a deal? I'll pay you the ten thousand gold, of course."

"Why, you're generous. I'm from Minehponta, though I suspect

you can tell by the color of my hair."

"Minehponta?" Allen dug through his memories and recalled it as one of Prostia's provinces. "Huh? As of this year, provinces aren't allowed to participate, right?"

Rapsonil stated that this year, there had been a last-minute announcement stating that provinces and vassal states were no longer allowed to participate in the contest.

"Ugh, yeah. I came all the way to Patlanta and was told that I can't enter. What in the world am I supposed to do? This city really needs to cut the crap," Rosalina grumbled. She had traveled via one of the submarines that Prostia used to travel between the empire and provinces or vassal states, known as magic ships, which used magic tools to propel them through the water. "We weren't even allowed into Patlanta. The official from my province tried to negotiate with the Immigration Bureau, but no luck. Good grief!"

She took out a glossy, translucent rod from her pocket.

"Is that your entry pass?" Allen asked.

"Yeah. I can't use it anymore, though. I went through all the trouble of winning in Minehponta. Oh, and you know what the Immigration Bureau said to me?"

"Uh, 'This is a blessed year, with us welcoming a new emperor. Our Songstress Contest will only allow people of the empire to enter this year,' or something to that effect?" Allen asked.

Allen had raised his Intelligence, so he was able to ad-lib lines that he would usually never have thought of. Since Ignomasu had claimed the throne after his revolt and wanted to restrict the number of outsiders coming into Prostia, he was presumably using the contest and the dawn of a new age as his excuse.

"Yeah, that's the gist, actually," Rosalina said, looking at the Summoner with shock. "Huh, so you really *are* related to the palace somehow."

Hmm, but it still doesn't make sense. I thought provinces were pretty strong contenders. In fact, in prior contests, people from provinces were more likely to rank in the top five than those from the capital. This was because each territory and large city was only allowed one woman to represent their region. Every year, around a

thousand participants entered the contest, meaning that there were only so many slots for outsiders.

However, there were still many from both provinces and vassal states who wished to enter the contest, meaning that the preliminaries were more rigorous for those outside the empire. In other words, everyone who claimed victory in the various regions boasted beauty and excellent singing skills, standing at the top of tough competition before heading for the capital. This year, because of the daemonic incarnation debacle, Crevelle had not been able to host even the preliminaries. *Which means Rosalina won the preliminaries in Minehponta, beating hundreds of other people.*

"Wait, then why are you here?" Allen asked. "I thought you weren't even allowed to enter Patlanta." He smiled, finding this the perfect chance to use her.

"I have Goddess Aqua's protection to thank," Rosalina replied.

"Goddess Aqua's protection?"

"That's right. You remember the fuss that occurred in the port last month, don't you? I'm convinced that Goddess Aqua smiled upon me and lent me her aid so that I could win the contest!"

"Oh, when all the magic tool alarms went off."

Allen could barely contain his excitement as he learned that the little commotion he had caused weeks ago had conveniently created an opportunity for him at this very moment.

"That's the one! I snuck off the vessel headed back to Minehponta and managed to stay hidden until today."

"I saw you trying to buy some accessories. Did you steal money from somewhere?"

"Of course not. Goddess Aqua has bestowed me with the Songstress Talent. If I sing for a night in a tavern somewhere, I can easily make do for a week."

She's pretty strong-minded. Songstress is a three-star Talent, isn't it? This works perfectly for me. Appearance was a vital aspect of the Songstress Contest, and the number of stars a person's Talent had mattered very little. Still, those with higher-star Talents had an unmistakable advantage. Given that singing was a skill, those with more stars could reach a wider range of people and provide better

effects with their songs.

Looking good through methods such as wearing fancy clothes and accessories did not come cheap, and it was not uncommon for nobles to dress their children opulently in hopes that they would win. Commoners, on the other hand, tended to lack the funds to wear expensive jewelry, but they could use their superb singing talents to climb their way to the top.

"A few hundred gold won't be nearly enough," Allen said. "As I mentioned earlier, I can provide the clothes and accessories for you. I'll be sure to pick fine pieces. And you can keep everything I give you."

All I want are those Holy Orbs, and we're square. Rosalina, none the wiser to Allen's thoughts, could only look at him with astonishment.

"You really *are* generous," she said. "What's the catch? What are you planning?"

"No catch. I just want to win."

I really want the Holy Orbs, that's all. I don't know why Cecil's mad at me, though. Through Sharing with Bird G, he could *feel* Cecil shouting angrily at him. Bird F's Messenger transmitted his negotiations with Rosalina not only to Pelomas, but to Cecil and the others who were trapped in the annex as well. At some point, Cecil had begun shouting at Bird G. Allen wanted to focus on the matter at hand and was not fully listening to her scolding, but she mentioned something about not staring at a scantily dressed woman. He was only just barely able to hear her. *Guess I'll need Cecil and Sophie's help for this one. Oh, and they're with Princess Rapsonil, who's always there to watch the contest. We've got a lot to do.*

"Oh, whatever," Rosalina said. "But I have a condition of my own."

"Yeah? Sure, what is it?" Allen asked in response.

"I want a Holy Orb too. So if I place in at least the top three, I'll take one for myself. How does that sound?"

I guess Holy Orbs are pretty important to the merfolk. Maybe she wants to bring one back to Minehponta or something.

"Yeah, okay," Allen replied. "You've got a deal, so go all out

during the contest."

If it incentivized her to try harder, he had no issues. Only the top five out of a thousand contestants would get their hands on a Holy Orb, so he was more than happy to compromise.

"Thanks," Rosalina said. "If I come in fourth or fifth, I'll give the Holy Orb to your friend. If I win the grand prize, the third one will go to you."

"Fine by me," Allen replied. "Just put the one in a bag and don't actually touch it when they give it to you."

Rosalina looked visibly relieved. Then, a smile stretched across her lips.

"Heh heh heh, luck's finally on my side. I can enter the contest now, which means Goddess Aqua must be smiling down on me." With a loud *thud*, she stomped onto the table. "Watch out, world! Get ready for Rosalina!"





Her thin attire fluttered behind her as she pointed into the distance. While everyone stared at her, Allen, though pleased to see that she was so fired up, prayed that she would not stand out too much. Just then, via Bird F's Messenger, he learned that Pelomas had finished his negotiations. The young merchant had managed to bring the price of both earrings down to 1.2 million gold. *And the Award for Excellence and Effort goes to...Pelomas!*

It seemed the scorpion fish owner was cunning in his own way and had sniffed out that 1.2 million was the most Pelomas was willing to shell out. *Hmm, the more merchants adept at negotiating, the better. Kasagoma, was it? You're going on my list of candidates for doing business with the Allen Army.*

After Ignomasu was punished for his deeds, Allen still wanted to maintain ties with Prostia, home to precious items like earrings. Kasagoma had the potential to be a suitable window for that, so Allen recorded the merfolk's name in his grimoire. Pelomas, however, had wanted to show off his mercantile abilities, so despite having heard the outcome of the Holy Orb deal, he was clearly frustrated by the results.

All right, now we just need to sneak Rosalina into the contest. The orange-haired, emerald-eyed merfolk whom Allen hoped to help win the Songstress Contest was still standing atop the table.

Side Story 1: The Sacrifice and the Blood of the Beast (Part 3)

Three years had passed since Beast Crown Prince Beku's fateful victory over his archnemesis, Beast Crown Prince Giru of Brysen. Beku had lost against Giru twice before finally managing to eke out a win during their third bout. Though he had won the tournament, he had renounced his claim to the Beast King title and refused to participate in any other Beast King Martial Arts Tournament, whether it was hosted by his own kingdom or otherwise. Following his victory, Albahal had issued a warning to the other beastkin nations on the Garlesian Continent.

"Should any other Beast King join a Beast King Martial Arts Tournament hosted by Albahal, Beku will not hesitate to paint the stone tiles red with the foolish challenger's blood."

As a result of that declaration, for the next two tournaments, very few Beast Kings had dared to enter Albahal's Beast King Martial Arts Tournament—a historically unusual occurrence. Both instances served to remind the citizens of Albahal of exactly who protected their nation and what it meant to defend a people.

* * *

That day, Beast King Muza and his family gathered in the audience room of the royal castle, located in the beast royal capital of Barossa. On either side of Muza's throne were his wives, Beast Queen Anna and Beast Queen Mia. Anna was a lionkin and the mother of Beku and Zeu, while tigerkin Mia was Shia's mother. The three children sat a step below the Beast King's throne, and the nobles who supported the beast royal family were stationed in front of them on both sides.

Under the gaze of all the nobles, Chancellor Lupu broke the wax seal on a scroll with a large *crack* and began to read.

"As of today, His Majesty Beast King Muza has approved Beast Crown Prince Beku's Talent Asset Tax," the chancellor read. "All commoners whom Garm, the God of Beasts, has bestowed with a Talent must provide at least one year of service."

Chancellor Lupu then outlined the terms of the tax.

Talent Asset Tax

- Those with Talents are obligated to provide one year of service for each star.
- Services will vary. Those with combat-based Talents will clear dungeons, eradicate monster nests, and the like. Those not suited for combat must still help with production or assist in building fortresses.
- Only commoners are subjected to this tax.
- This law shall be implemented in one year.

Once the chancellor had finished reading, a dry applause filled the room. The nobles, seeing the person who had initiated the clapping, hastily followed suit. In a matter of moments, everyone in the audience room was applauding the new law, yet some grimaced and looked taken aback, while others sighed. The man who had been the first to clap stood up amid the noise, then turned around and bowed deeply to the Beast King, who sat above him on the throne.

"Your Majesty, you have my deepest gratitude for accepting this law," Beku said. "I'm certain this will help develop our nation even further."

"The fact that you managed to rally the nobles together is worthy of praise. But don't expect the same applause to greet you when this law is announced to the citizens. You'd best brace yourself," Muza said in a steelier, sterner tone than ever before.

"Yes, sire!"

Beku's voice was filled with confidence, but Muza did not miss

that people were quietly clicking their tongues with annoyance. The Beast King suddenly rose from his throne, prompting the applause in the room to cease.

"It seems there are some of you who are against either the Talent Asset Tax itself or the fact that I approved it," Muza said. "If you have anything to say, now's your chance. Be sure to let me know."

Muza kept his face turned toward his audience as his gaze traveled to his left, where he heard someone click their tongue. Beast Queen Mia turned to the floor as though to flee from his sight, and the other nobles hastily did the same, terrified of locking eyes with him. Beast Queen Anna, who sat to the right of the king, looked on coolly, while Zeu and Shia furrowed their brows with confusion.

"W-Well then," the chancellor started.

"His Majesty approved of this law because he knows that this is the path to making our great nation of Albahal stronger than ever before," Beku interjected sternly. "Don't you ever forget it."

Shia was perplexed by her brother's words; something about them did not sit right with her. Ever since that battle during the tournament three years ago, with every passing sun and moon, Beku's words became sterner. While the Talent Asset Tax might have enriched Albahal and strengthened its military, even the young Shia found it odd that only the commoners were forced to shoulder the hard work and make sacrifices.

Furthermore, it had taken less than a year for the law to be debated by the ministers and approved by the Beast King. Why the rush? And even before its creation, Beku had proposed the Talent Head Tax, a tax on all Talented individuals that increased exponentially based on one's number of stars. That tax had already been enacted, and to force people into hard labor on top of that would mean that some Talented individuals would have several years of their lives stripped from them.

Yet, as though to ignore Shia's concerns, Beku told the other nobles to make preparations to announce the Talent Asset Tax to their citizens. At the same time, he received a scroll from Captain

Kei, who stood nearby. The new law had already been drafted.

* * *

Two hours later, Beku left the audience room and returned to his private room with Kei and his other close confidants. When he opened the door, he spotted the petite, elderly Romu, who had sunk into the seat at the back of the U-shaped formation of sofas near the wall in front of him. Between the sofas was a table made of tough wood, and Romu had just leaned forward to pluck a snack and a cup of tea from the tray placed on it.

"Ah, so you've been back," Beku said as he removed his formal coat and handed it to his servant before standing in front of Romu.

"I just returned," Romu replied. "How was it on your end, Your Highness? The major nobles are on our side, so I doubt you had a hard time."

"But some are still against it, especially my mother—Queen Mia and her faction. It's too late for them to publicly announce their dissent, however."

Beku shooed Romu to the side with his hand, and when the elderly man moved to the sofa on the right, the crown prince took Romu's old seat and sank into it, entrusting his massive body to the cushy furniture. He then closed his eyes, the corners of his lips curling upward with satisfaction as he recalled that Romu, who sat beside him, had helped him enact the Talent Asset Law.

The moment Romu had heard of Beku's proposed law, the goatkin had suggested becoming close with the political leaders of Albahal. Beku had handed Romu some money, and the elderly beastkin had immediately used it to bring nobles to the Beast Crown Prince's side. Of course, not everyone had nodded their heads, and Romu had been unable to convince every noble to side with Beku, but even so, seeing someone who had entered the royal capital as a physician be so politically skilled had been surprising.

"I thought you were just a simple physician, but I suppose the various palaces you went to gave you ample experience," Beku surmised.

"Yes, something like that, yes," Romu replied. "No matter the country, nobles tend to have the same mindset. They're all desperate to protect their rank and status, and Your Highness, you've already earned the trust of the citizens while being the favorite for the throne. No one doubts that you shall be the next king, and so, nobles are eager to earn your favor. They will follow you to the ends of the world. Hyeh heh heh."

Beku kept his eyes closed as Romu's peculiar laughter filled the air.

"Prince Beku," Captain Kei said. "Perhaps you should get some rest."

The crown prince was annoyed by the captain's worry and anxiety, which were apparent in his voice. He snapped his eyes open and locked gazes with Kei, who peered down at him nervously, just as he had expected. Then, Beku averted his gaze.

"A simple task like that hasn't tired me out," he grunted. "Since Romu's here, I'd like to make plans for our future. Kei, chase people away from here."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Kei replied.

The captain turned to the servants who had just finished preparing tea in the room next door and placed it on the table between the sofas. He ordered them to leave alongside the rest of the royal knights, with only him staying behind. Beku took a sip of his tea, swallowing his viscous spit.

"Romu, I passed the Talent Asset Tax as you suggested, but you mentioned that there was more to this plan," the Beast Crown Prince said. "Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

Romu, who sat to Beku's left, chugged his new cup of tea before flashing a malicious smirk.

"Well, with the Empire of Giamut at the helm, the Five Continent Alliance will undoubtedly eradicate the Demon Lord Army soon," he explained. "Thanks to a man named Helmios, Giamut is reclaiming the land it lost at an alarming rate, freeing its territory from the clutches of the Demon Lord Army."

"Is Hero Helmios truly so impressive?" Beku asked.

"He's known as the man of miracles and the disciple of God of

Creation Elmea," Kei, who sat in front of Romu, to the right of Beku, noted.

"The disciple of God of Creation Elmea?" Beku huffed. "He knows how to talk the talk, at least."

"His achievements make him worthy of that moniker, at the very least. Most impressive was his battle at the fortress of the Lamchatka Strait, located between the Empire of Baukis in the north and the Central Continent in the northeast. He worked together with the two empires to—"

"If that place fell, it was said that the Demon Lord Army would make it to Dongbao, the capital of Baukis," Romu interrupted. "Helmios, upon his arrival, swiftly stopped the Demon Lord Army's invasion and even pushed them back, slaughtering them on the ocean."

"I see..." Beku mused.

"Overjoyed by this feat, Baukis allowed Helmios to act as he pleased within the empire, despite him hailing from Giamut. He was even allowed to meet Dungeon Master Dygragni in the Rank S dungeon, so the Hero's power must be the real deal."

Beku silently glanced at Kei. The captain, sitting gingerly in his seat, nodded.

"I shall send a letter to Baukis to confirm the facts," he said.

"Oh, there's no need to trouble yourself, Sir Kei..." Romu snorted mockingly. "In any case, Your Highness, we must think about the era when the Demon Lord is gone. I *am* a beastkin born in the Garlesian Continent, so if Giamut points their forces from the Demon Lord Army at us, I cannot let that slide. Should that time come, I do believe that the Talent Asset Tax won't be nearly enough to cover our bases."

"I see," Beku muttered, following Romu's trail of thought. "We don't have much time until we invade the Central Continent..."

It did not matter how much time had passed since the beastkin's ancestors were persecuted by the humans of Giamut. Clearly, the beastkin still wanted revenge on the humans. A millennium had passed since Albahal, the founder of the country, had borrowed power from Beast God Garm and helped the beastkin escape the

Central Continent and settle on the Garlesian Continent.

While Giamut had not crossed the sea to chase after the beastkin, even after the nations had become comrades to fight against a common enemy, the Demon Lord Army, the beastkin had refused to act friendly with the humans. No matter who they were up against, the beastkin had not forgotten the injustice that was done to them.

The beastkin generally agreed that once the Demon Lord Army was defeated, Giamut would immediately turn on the other four continents in hopes of having the entire world in the palm of its grubby, hegemonic hand. As though to lend credence to that theory, Giamut had immediately nominated itself as one of the leaders of the Five Continent Alliance and refused to back down.

Among the beastkin who were cautious of Giamut's intentions, some had suggested striking first and invading the Central Continent. That opinion was not unique to a certain rank or status, nor did it differ per country of beastkin. Beku, at some point, had decided to use Albahal or even the entire Garlesian Continent to invade the Central Continent, and he was making the necessary preparations to do so.

When had such an idea been implanted in his head? Was it when he had truly become the strongest man in Albahal and was named the Beast Crown Prince, with the throne having been all but promised to him? Whatever the case, Beku required funds, and plenty of them. He knew that his expenses would dwarf a national budget, so he had turned to Romu for some ideas, only to receive several plans. Beku had used those plans to suggest a few of his own, and the Talent Asset Tax had been enacted. It allowed some commoners to head to dungeons to make money, while others would produce items or help build bases, thereby supporting the national budget. However, if the Demon Lord Army fell before Albahal had a proper army at the ready, the country of beastkin would not be able to fight the Empire of Giamut, much less invade the Central Continent.

"Yes, with the appearance of Hero Helmios, time is of the essence," Romu said. "You'll need more money than ever before, Your Highness, though of course, the new law you enacted will

surely help you and your plan. Should we actually go to war against the humans, we may require nobles to join our forces and assist the military. Once the yearlong test run is over, the tax will also be enacted on nobles with Talents, and we can slowly pass laws to force everyone to join the army, Talented or not. We must steadily work our way to that point."

Romu munched on his snack, scattering crumbs everywhere as he spoke. Meanwhile, a scowl slowly grew on Kei's face. When Romu stopped to take a breath, the captain could no longer hold himself back, and he roared angrily, his voice quivering with fury.

"You say that as though it's easy, Romu! Do you not understand that Crown Prince Beku put his status in great danger simply to enact this law?! Queen Mia and the others who are against this plan will become more active than ever!"

Romu listened, undaunted, while Beku quietly kept his eyes closed.

"And if the law includes royal subjects in the future, they'll also get sent to dangerous dungeons!" Kei went on, his voice betraying his rage. "They might be forced to move to a base to help with production! It's not difficult to assume that there will be strong pushback against this idea, and what's more, you'd be imposing a tax on them all! When the time comes, you had better have a plan to defend His Highness should the worst occur!"

Silence then settled upon the room.

"Sir Kei, you need not worry about those who are against us," Romu suddenly said. "Should Giamut ever try to attack, they will have no choice but to get on their knees and beg us for assistance. Surely you understand what would have happened if Albahal remained a weak nation. A mere three years hasn't caused you to forget, has it? The Albahal of three years ago resembled the future of the Garlesian Continent and us beastkin, did it not?"

"W-Well..." Kei started.

"The day Hero Helmios of Giamut points his blade at us will inevitably arrive, just like how the claws of Beast Crown Prince Giru of Brysen threatened us three years ago. Helmios is fighting the Demon Lord Army now, but he's still a hero of Giamut, and a filthy

little human at that. Surely, Sir Kei, even you can easily imagine the empire forming close ties with the enterprising Empire of Baukis to attack us from both the north and the east?"

Romu reached for another snack as Beku, who had been silent until now, opened his eyes.

"Kei, much like how you worry about me, I worry about the future of Albahal," Beku said.

Kei remained on his sofa, his hands on his knees as he gave a deep bow. "Prince Beku, I apologize for my thoughtless remarks."

"Oh, Sir Kei, you truly are so loyal to His Highness," Romu, his mouth stuffed with snacks, said. "Even I can only express my awe at your unwavering loyalty."

"Indeed," Beku agreed. He knew best how loyal Kei was.

"Should Prince Beku become the Beast King, the Talent bestowed upon him by Lord Garm, Beast Sword Lord, and the power of Marquess Patrasche, who has protected the royal family for generations, will be worthy of supporting him," Romu said. "I am but a physician, and certainly someone who is prone to making mistakes. During times like these, Sir Kei voicing an opinion different from mine will allow you to choose the right path, Your Highness. It shall prevent you from ever making mistakes."

Kei looked up and turned to Beku.

"You're absolutely correct, Romu," the crown prince said with a firm nod. "It's because of your varying opinions that I can carefully ruminate over each idea and ascertain which is best. I am very much aware that the both of you are doing your best for me, and by extension, for Albahal. Let's see... As Kei is the captain of my royal knights, surely Romu is fitting to be a chancellor of sorts."

"My oh my," Romu said. "If a wandering physician like myself is bestowed with such an honorable role, surely both Sir Kei and I must admonish you, Your Highness. But if you value my opinion as highly as you do Sir Kei's, then might I suggest you work on expanding the Talent Asset Tax? I would also recommend you form a main force that will do your bidding."

"Expanding the tax to include others..." Beku mulled. "Which means the nobles will be added to the tax as well. That can't be

done so soon. As Kei said, the faction against me is doing all that it can."

"Then perhaps you can inform the other nobles of the Giamutan Hero's numerous achievements. I'm quite certain those whose land is located near the coast will tremble with fear, and that will be your opening. You can promise those in favor of expanding the tax that they will be prioritized when fortresses are made to defend the nation. They'll eagerly agree to your terms."

"Interesting... But for that, I require accurate information. Kei, could you assist me?"

"Of course, Your Highness!" Kei replied.

"Needless to say, I'm aware that this plan alone won't weaken the faction against me, but we can't sit around and twiddle our thumbs. Romu, continue working to ally those in the castle with me."

"I shall do so gladly," Romu replied. "And Your Highness, please do not forget to create a main force for yourself. That will serve as a clear indicator of your power and dignity."

"I'm aware that creating such a force is my role," Kei piped up, glaring at Romu. "I will gather those willing to swear loyalty to Prince Beku and create a squad as soon as I can."

* * *

Within a few years, the Talent Asset Tax expanded to include even high-ranking nobles and royals. Those blessed with combat-oriented Talents were sent to the Rank S dungeon in Baukis, which became known as the Tower of Tribulation. Moreover, thanks to Romu pulling the strings in the royal castle, the faction against Beku was promptly torn down, with more people trying to gain favor with the crown prince than ever.

A few more years passed, and Beku was in his private room, the space illuminated by a magic tool on the wall. He sat on the sofa with Romu, both of them looking as though they were trying to suppress their emotions. They had been told that Beku's younger brother, Zeu, and his half sister, Shia, had been given trials, implying that they were also in the running to become the next Beast King.

Beast King Muza, the current monarch, had made a claim that neither Beku nor Romu could have ever expected. To test Zeu's power and caliber as the Beast King, he had been tasked with conquering the Rank S dungeon. And Shia, who had headed east to the Galiatan Continent, had notified them that she was trying to overcome a trial of her own.

Kei had promptly been sent to confirm the facts, and Beku could only wait. He was anxious and nervous, realizing that he might have to battle his younger siblings for the throne, but there was also a sense of relief hidden in his heart—deep down, he must have expected this outcome. As Beku tried to pinpoint the odd feeling of relief that plagued his mind, the door to his room opened with a *clack.* Kei swiftly stepped inside.

"Prince Beku, it seems Princess Shia has overcome her trial," he reported.

"I see..." Beku replied with a nod.

"Cardinal Krympton from the Church of Elmea has already provided his words of gratitude for her cooperation with the capture of Gushara," the captain continued, still standing. "And it seems Pope Istahl would like to pay a visit to Albahal..."

"Princess Shia never ceases to impress me," Romu said, though he clearly looked bored. "In a mere three years, she managed to clear her trial—before even Prince Zeu."

"Romu, what do you think will happen in the future?" Beku asked.

"May I be frank with you?"

Beku nodded, and Romu's tiny body sank deeper into the large sofa before he did a big stretch.

"It does seem like the next Beast King will be Princess Shia," Romu muttered.

"H-How dare you?!"

In response to Kei raising his voice, Romu glanced at him and gave a condescending huff.

"Oh dear, I can hardly believe that a generally calm man like you so quickly lost his cool, Sir Kei. But the fact that you're so blatantly furious implies that you must've at least vaguely thought the same. For the past millennium, there hasn't been a person who overcame a

trial and failed to become the Beast King. Is that not so?"

"That's wrong! It's not as though there's zero precedent!" Kei cried panically.

"Then it seems we still have a way," Romu said, his eyes twinkling. "Would you kindly tell me the details of any examples that come to mind?"

Kei, who hastily glanced at Beku with worry, was silenced by the Beast Crown Prince's glare.

"It happened a hundred years ago," Beku started. "The youngest child overcame a trial before the firstborn, and it culminated in a revolt that split the nation in two. Ultimately, the firstborn killed the youngest and became the next Beast King. But the firstborn, who became king without following the proper process, couldn't rule over the nation benevolently, and the second-eldest child soon took the throne for themself."

"I see," Romu immediately replied. "Then it seems we only have one path to take."

"Romu, heed your tongue!" Kei ordered sharply, making his anger apparent once more.

"Kei, it's fine. I shall allow it," Beku said in an eerily calm tone.

The captain was at a loss for words and could only watch on in utter shock. Meanwhile, Beku was finally beginning to understand the relief that had been in his heart for the past few years.

"Romu, Kei," he said. "We may share different mothers, but Shia is still my younger sister, and I have no intention of fighting with her. Only now do I finally understand my own desires."

"Prince Beku..." Kei murmured.

"I'd like to make this nation stronger. We beastkin have to be prepared should Giamut or one of the other continents invade, or to prevent that by striking first. I don't need to become Beast King to accomplish all that, however. The title isn't everything. Should Shia or Zeu prove themself worthy of the throne, I shall concede it."

"I see..." Romu muttered. "Your Highness, your train of thought and mindset are truly noble and commendable. However..."

"However, what?" Beku asked.

"Your plan to take over Giamut is now in danger because of

Prince Zeu. What shall we do about that?”

“Whatever do you mean? Is something going on in the Rank S dungeon?”

“Precisely. Do you recall when I told you of Hero Helmios, who hails from the Empire of Giamut? Rumors have started to circulate within the royal castle that His Highness Zeu and Helmios have teamed up to clear the Rank S dungeon.”

“What?!” Beku leaped to his feet. “ Are you sure of this, Romu?!”

“It’s still just a rumor, and nothing more, Your Highness. But the location of the Rank S dungeon is quite convenient for the Hero, and circumstantially, well... It’s not impossible to assume that Baukis has decided to act as a mediator between the two men. Perhaps Baukis and Giamut have some sort of secret agreement.”

Beku frowned as he listened to Romu’s theories.

“Zeu...” he murmured. “Since he’s set to marry Giru’s younger sister, I thought the naivete of his childhood years had left him. It seems, however, that he’s being deceived by the human Hero.”

“No matter the case, should His Highness Zeu overcome the trial given to him by His Majesty Muza, this nation may split in two, or perhaps even three, based on the situation. Surely you’d like to avoid this outcome if at all possible, Prince Beku.”

“But of course! I see now, Romu... Is this why you’ve been pushing me to become the Beast King?”

Romu slowly nodded. “Exactly so, Your Highness. Should you inherit the crown, it matters not if Prince Zeu completes King Muza’s trial—it shall be for naught.”

“Indeed. But how in the world can I make it mine? My father, the Beast King, still stubbornly refuses to hand it over to me.”

“We must remove any obstacles first. For example, we must get the nobles who are against you on our side before Princess Shia or Prince Zeu returns.”

“Are you implying that we pressure His Majesty to abdicate the throne?!” Kei roared. Confusion swirled within his mind as he used his words to relieve the stress that plagued his thoughts. “Romu, I’ve listened to your insolent words in silence until now, but do you truly understand what you’re suggesting here?!”

Romu paid no heed to Kei's glare and angry rebuttal, the elderly goatkin's eyes glittering with ambition as he stared at Beku.

"Your Highness, why don't we use *that* money to form a treaty with another nation?"

Both Kei and Beku were astonished by the unexpected suggestion.

"Romu, what in the world are you saying?" Beku asked. "An alliance with another nation? I cannot understand what's going on in your mind."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Romu apologized. "I haven't explained myself properly, it seems. For the past few years, we've been gathering funds that will be used to fight the Central Continent. We can use that money to aid the Prostia Empire. To be more precise, we can offer our support to Ignomasu, the captain of the royal guard."

"Who? What? Besides, the Prostia Empire is the nation of merfolk on the ocean floor, southeast of here. They may be willing to form diplomatic relations with us, but I doubt that they'd ever try to form any sort of treaty or alliance."

"But if we become the first to form an alliance with the empire, it would put us at an overwhelming advantage. We'll be able to lessen the burden placed on us when we conduct trade. Should that happen, I can guarantee that the money we provide to aid Ignomasu will return to us severalfold. And Your Highness, it can be a very decisive outcome that could very well put you on the throne."

"Then why not support Prostia itself, and not this so-called captain of the royal guard?"

"Because Prostia must change its current policies before it will ever ally itself with us, who are aboveground. And there is one such man who aims to change the current state of Prostia. I believe this will be very convenient for both him and you, Your Highness."

"Are you suggesting that Prince Beku support a revolt in another major nation?" Kei questioned.

"What do you propose instead, Sir Kei?" Romu asked in response. "Would you prefer that Prince Beku, Princess Shia, and Prince Zeu engage in a grisly battle as they dye the ground with their blood?"

"I-I've said no such thing!"

"That's enough, Kei, Romu," Beku said.

Kei reluctantly sat back down on the sofa, while Romu sat across from him with a conniving smirk.

"As I said earlier, I don't wish to fight with Shia," Beku continued. "Nor with Zeu. But I cannot let either of them claim the throne, and with that being the case, I'm left with no choice but to aid Ignomasu for now."

"Surely we can think of an alternative..." Kei started.

"Time is the one thing we don't have at the moment, Kei. We've already spent ample time, but it seems our preparations weren't enough. Romu, you mentioned that my Talent Asset Tax would not suffice, and it seems your warnings have rung true. Perhaps you're right this time around as well."

"Then may I begin negotiations with Ignomasu, Your Highness?" Romu asked.

"Be sure you succeed in your endeavor. The future of Albahal depends on it. I absolutely *must* become Beast King, even if it means aiding a revolt in another nation. I cannot allow Shia or Zeu to inherit our nation in its current state."

"I shall be gone for a good while. After all, Prostia is at the bottom of the ocean."

"You're heading there already? Do you not need to make preparations?"

"They're all done and ready, Your Highness. I knew that you'd make the right choice."

Romu got up from the sofa, gave Beku a deep bow, and swiftly exited the room to retire to his own.

* * *

An entire year passed before Romu returned to Beku's side. During that time, Beast Prince Zeu had enlisted Admiral Garara of Baukis, Hero Helmios of Giamut, and Princess Sophialohne of Rohzenheim to help him and the Ten Heroic Beasts of Albahal clear the Rank S dungeon.

All the while, Beast Princess Shia had met with an ordeal of her own. She had captured Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, only for him to reveal his true identity. Teomenia, the capital of the Holy Land of Elmahl, had gone up in flames as the daemonic incarnations ran amok throughout the entire Galiatan Continent, the Holy Land of Elmahl included. She had swiftly jumped into action to save the merfolk of Crevelle from the horrific monsters and thrown herself into a tough battle before she finally, splendidly eked out a victory, destroying the daemonic incarnations.

With the Demon Lord Army ready to invade once more, the Five Continent Alliance had held a conference where Beast Princess Shia had clashed with her father, Beast King Muza. Once he had returned home, nobles had been gathered to host a meeting where they would, at long last, decide who would next take the throne.

Beku had maintained his silence throughout the flurry of events. A rebellion was being planned within the Prostia Empire, and the Beast Crown Prince had used Romu as his point of communication with Ignomasu, the captain of the royal guard. Only Kei knew the details of their exchanges, and the truly important and confidential bits were kept secret even from him. But preparations were quietly proceeding behind closed doors. Then, one day, Romu returned to Albahal.

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"Kei?" Beku asked. "If you knock so loudly, you'll break the door in. You may enter."

The Beast Crown Prince correctly assumed that his captain had come to visit him, and Kei flew into the room, glaring at Romu, who sat on the same sofa as the royal for the first time in a year.

"Romu! You've returned, I see!" Kei growled.

"Oho ho ho," Romu chuckled. "When I heard that the Beast King was going to abdicate the throne, I couldn't help but return. Sir Kei, I see you're as loyal and faithful as ever. Very good."

"You bastard! What about the plan? Is the Prostia Empire—"

Kei was cut off by Beku, who raised his hand.

"What's going on in the audience room?" he asked.

"His Majesty has finally ordered that the doors of the room be

shut," Kei reported. "For the past week, the ministers have been debating at length, but they haven't been able to settle on an heir. His Majesty must be frustrated by it all."

"How peculiar... They've debated more than enough by now. Why have they not reached a conclusion despite even my father joining the debate?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness. I simply cannot read His Majesty's mind. However, it's quite evident that His Majesty cannot reach a decision himself."

Usually, it was the privilege of the reigning monarch to crown their successor. In fact, they could make the decision all by themself. If nobles had to choose the next ruler, it was generally because the throne was open for some reason, and they required someone to fill the seat.

"I've heard that something occurred between my father and Shia," Beku said. "Is that related to the delayed decision?"

"My apologies, but I really can't say for sure," Kei answered. "All I know is that seventy percent of the ministers support Prince Zeu, and the chancellor does as well. Twenty percent are in support of Princess Shia, mainly those backed by military officers."

"I see," Beku replied with a wry smile. "Then only a measly ten percent remember my existence. No, I'm sure they're actually on the fence between Zeu and Shia. But if Zeu has won over the majority, it's safe to assume that the mainstream opinion is that we should push for friendly ties with the Five Continent Alliance."

"I presume so. Plus, Princess Shia is the child of Queen Mia, who came from Barioh. The queen spearheaded a revolt a few years ago, and people are anxious to put the princess, who carries Her Majesty's blood, on the throne as the next monarch."

"No matter the case, it seems all your efforts were for naught, Sir Kei," Romu said in a mocking tone, licking his fingers clean of the crumbs from the snacks as he did.

"I doubt even *you* would have been able to predict that the elves of Rohzenheim would craft some cunning plans of their own!" Kei yelled angrily.

For the past year, Kei had striven to create more time to form and

train Beku's main forces while doing his best to make the Beast Crown Prince the next king. He had also been in talks with Grand Marshal Siguul of Rohzenheim about invading the Central Continent when the Demon Lord Army was defeated. However, when Siguul had learned that Zeu had conquered the Rank S dungeon thanks to the help of the princess of Rohzenheim, the Grand Marshal had changed his plans, putting the invasion plan on the back burner and stalling for time.

"There must be someone in Rohzenheim who possesses a different thought process," Romu concluded. "Ah, yes, Sir Kei, you've come at the perfect time. I was just about to tell Prince Beku of the negotiations in Prostia."

Kei reluctantly took his seat across from Romu as the elderly physician took a sip of his tea.

"Ignomasu's revolt has all but succeeded. He's now His Majesty Emperor Ignomasu," Romu explained. "Of course, he believes that your support, Prince Beku, was imperative to his rebellion, and he's even entrusted me with a splendid souvenir to express his utmost gratitude."

"A souvenir?" Beku asked.

"Quite so. The wrapping is two magic ships, and as for the contents, three thousand merfolk soldiers, all heavily armed."

"What?!" Kei gasped in surprise.

Beku let out a huge sigh. "He's lending me his aid and telling me to conquer my own country next, it seems."

Kei could only widen his eyes with surprise. He realized that Romu surely must have predicted that Beku would be forced into this situation, leaving him lost for words. Just then, Romu unexpectedly shook his head.

"Don't be absurd," the elderly goatkin said. "Should merfolk patrol Barossa, it will become a huge fiasco. Their job is to help you escape when all is said and done. I suppose they can act as a bit of a diversion."

"You little..." Kei rumbled. "Your Highness, this clearly is not right! It makes no sense. A mere year ago, you mentioned that you refused to fight Princess Shia and Prince Zeu. Starting a revolt in this

nation is out of the question! Please, I beg you to reconsider...”

The captain turned to the Beast Crown Prince, only to see resolve—or perhaps resignation—flickering in Beku’s eyes.

“I suppose...you’ve already made your choice, Your Highness,” Kei said.

“I’m sorry,” Beku apologized. “But at this point, I really cannot think of any other way. I cannot do anything for Albahal other than to play the role of a villain. Kei...will you still stand by my side?”

“I shall accompany you to any sort of hell that you wish.”

Beku clearly looked pained by Kei’s loyalty, but the Beast Crown Prince nonetheless slowly closed his eyes.

“Romu,” he said. “Tell me what your plan is first.”

* * *

An hour later, Beku headed for the audience room, wearing a mantle with the Albahalan royal family’s crest sewn on the back, along with adamantite armor and knuckles. The two royal knights guarding the doors narrowed their eyes with confusion when they saw their Beast Crown Prince marching toward them.

“Prince Beku?!” one gasped.

“We must ask that you step back,” the other said. “Many people beyond this door are—”

Before the guard could finish their sentence, Beku killed them both. *Crack! Crack!* He gritted his teeth as he felt himself crush their skulls with his hands. The guards fell lifelessly to the ground, and the Beast Crown Prince left them behind as he slowly approached the audience room. Using only his right arm, which had a bracelet made of string wrapped around it, he pushed the massive door open. The first thing that entered his field of vision was Beast King Muza, who sat on his throne in the very back of the room, facing Beku.

“Took you long enough,” Muza said.

The chancellor and the other ministers all turned toward Beku, baffled by the words that had left their king’s lips. They could only stare at Beku, who stood at the entrance.

"How did you..." Beku murmured.

He saw that his father was fully equipped in orichalcum armor and knuckles, along with the Holy Orb of Quatro, a yellow jewel that was embedded in the gear. Beast King Muza donned the Symbol of the Beast King as though to make his rank known, and Beku could only stare at his father in shock.

"Beku, why have you come here?" the Beast King asked, rising from his throne. "State your reason."

"There is something I'd like to ask you," Beku replied.

Chancellor Lupu trembled as he rose from his seat and said in a strained voice, "Beast Crown Prince Beku! You must leave here at once! Even you aren't allowed to enter this room right now, Your Highn—"

"I shall allow it," Muza said.

Chancellor Lupu turned to his king in shock, while Muza simply watched Beku slowly make his way toward him.

"Why did you give Zeu and Shia trials, father?" Beku inquired quietly.

The next moment, the entire audience room shuddered. Beast King Muza *laughed*—he opened his mouth so wide that his grin reached from ear to ear as he guffawed at the top of his lungs. It sounded like a lion's roar, and everyone, barring Beku, instinctively covered their ears. Some could hardly react and shivered with fear, while others froze in place. No one could possibly leave the room.

The terrifying laughter soon died down, and silence again settled over the audience room. The king gazed at his son, a wistful, sorrowful look in his eyes.

"It seems I was not wrong. Fine, Beku. I will tell you." The Beast King closed his eyes for only a moment and expelled a sigh of resignation, then went on. "I gave Zeu and Shia trials because you're a fool who dares to even utter that question after all that's happened."

"Wh-What?!" Beku shouted.

"I'm not saying that I had zero expectations of you. And I also know that you tried your best to live up to my expectations. I understand that you tried to change the arrogant, unseemly attitude

that you had in your younger days. But you failed! You couldn't change! What's more, you continuously failed to realize just how unfit you are to succeed me and spent your days toying with silly, idiotic plans! All you've done is idly waste your time away and nothing more! Did you truly believe I hadn't noticed your scheming?! Do you think me ignorant, you utter fool?!"

As Muza roared angrily, Beku could only widen his eyes with disbelief.

"Me?" the Beast Crown Prince muttered. "Are you saying that *I'm* the fool? That I wasted my time?"

"Ha! Even now, you don't understand what you've done!" the Beast King bellowed. "Very well! If I must spell things out for a dunce like you, then I'll do just that! Listen well! As we have the blood of our ancestor, Albahal, flowing through our veins, we must always look to the future and lead our people—that's our responsibility! Zeu and Shia have each accepted the trial I gave them and shed their blood to fulfill their duties, enduring any pain and hardship that came their way. But what about you? What have you done? What's reflected in your eyes? Who have you led? All you've done is bumble around all by yourself, yet you weren't satisfied with your own incompetence and even reduced yourself to such a pitiful and wretched sight! My son, you are nothing but a fool if you've failed to realize what you've become!"

Beku once again realized that Zeu had cleared the Rank S dungeon, with him and the Ten Heroic Beasts having formed a party that transcended race, and that Shia had led her army of three thousand to corner Gushara twice before finally defeating him. Both the Beast Prince and the Beast Princess had fought alongside those who followed their orders. Finally, Beku reflected upon himself and realized that he only had two people who followed him: Kei and Romu.

"Do you understand now?" Muza asked. "Do you have any other questions?"

Beku realized that he was hanging his head and swiftly looked up. "Father, will you please tell me one more thing? Are you wearing the Symbol of the Beast King?"

"And what if I am, my foolish son?"

Beku narrowed his eyes. He took a magic tool clock out of his pocket and glanced at it.

"I'm afraid I'm out of time, father," Beku said. "It seems this is where I must bid you farewell."

"Oh?" the Beast King asked, his eyes dubious.

"E-Emergency!" a knight suddenly cried, entering the room from behind Beku. "Enemies at our transportation platform! They look to be merfolk!"

The ministers and nobles hastily jumped to their feet, and panic ensued in the audience room.

"H-How can that be?!"

"Where's General Hoba?! Out during a time like this?!"

"Dispatch the corps within the castle! Hurry!"

As everyone shouted over each other, another deafening report echoed from behind Beku.

"Marquess Kei and his soldiers have stormed the castle gates!" a knight reported. "They're engaging our garrison as we speak!"

"Ah, I thought it was odd for the people of Brysen to invite us over during this time, but I see you've formed ties with the merfolk as well," Beast King Muza said, grinning. "Yes, it's an underhanded tactic suitable for a simpleton half-wit like you."

"What did you say?" Beku asked. He could not understand why the Beast King had mentioned Brysen. Before he could pose that question, however, Muza stepped forward from his throne, walked around the left side of the round table, and approached his son.

"Still, I suppose you're worthy of *some* praise," Muza admitted. "A fool like you learned to be independent in his own foolish way."

"The fact that you can say that implies that you've been watching your children mature and grow," Beku replied.

The Beast King stopped in his tracks and turned to his chancellor. "Fall back, everyone. It seems I must give it my all to hammer justice into this empty-headed loon."

The chancellor and the other nobles made a beeline for the door, but Beku did not even glance at them. His eyes were focused on the Beast King, who was approaching him. Silence settled between the

two royals for only a moment, but it felt like an eternity.

"What's on your mind?" Beku asked.

The clamor outside the audience room grew louder, and he could no longer stand this deafening silence.

"My other two children have left the nest, but as I'd expected, you're the one who has caused me the most trouble," Muza replied. "You truly are a handful."

"Stop treating me like a child already!" Beku shouted.

"Indeed. My child is finally trying to leave the nest and fly with his own wings. I suppose it's my role as your father to watch you leave."

The Beast King clenched his orichalcum knuckles tightly, the sound of his rippling muscles filling the air. Before he could step forward, Beku made the first move by pouncing, his fist cruelly aimed at Muza's face. He would not show mercy.

"Hmph!" Muza grunted.

Beku's fist did not reach the Beast King. Muza was a touch faster, and he stepped forward, planting his fist squarely into Beku's stomach.

"Gah?!" the Beast Crown Prince gasped.

Blood gushed from his mouth, and he doubled over from the pain. At the same time, Muza ruthlessly hooked his legs from behind, lifting him off the ground and sending him lurching backward. As he fell, Muza leaped into the air and whirled around to launch a back kick.

The Beast King's aim was true, and his foot slammed into Beku's chest, blowing him back. He was sent crashing to the ground, and fragments of his adamantite armor, destroyed by the kick, flew every which way. When he finally managed to sit up, his breastplate split in two, one half falling behind him while the other fell in front and shattered.

"What's wrong? It's too light out for you to be sleeping," Muza taunted him. "Perhaps you should just stay in the nest, hmm?"

Beku struggled to get up as the Beast King leisurely strolled over to his son, mocking him with words that one would use to soothe a child. Before Muza reached him, though, he managed to stand back up.

"Then I supposed I'll end this battle before the sun sets!" Beku roared. "Total Beast Mode! Graaah!"

With a powerful battle cry, he activated his skill, his body bulging and turning more beastly. He thrust his arms, half transformed into those of a four-legged beast, into the ground and charged on all fours. It was a feint, however, and he stopped right in front of Muza, leaped to the right, and tried to pounce on the Beast King from his blind spot. Yet despite the ferocious attack, Muza made no attempt to follow his son's movements.

"Even a fool like you has Albahal's blood flowing through his veins," Muza muttered, standing stock-still. "That much is clear. Total Beast Mode."

As Beku attacked, Muza used his arm, also half transformed into that of a beast, to stop his son dead in his tracks.

"Graaaaah!" Beku howled. He used the speed that he had gained from his attack being parried to jump back, circling the Beast King in search of an opening. Muza lowered his stance and stood in place, his arms in front of his chest as he waited for his son.

"Give it your best shot," he thundered. "Show me the power you used to slaughter Prince Giru!"

"You don't have to tell *me* twice! Super Heavy Blow!"

As though that were his cue, Beku charged straight at his father. He pounced from Muza's front right, and the Beast King used the same skill to counter his attack.

"Is that all you've got?" Muza bellowed. "Super Heavy Blow!"

SMACK! Flesh smacked against flesh, and Beku's body was blown back once more. He instinctively kicked at the floor, redirecting the impact behind him as he whirled in the air and landed on the ground.

"Why?" Beku wondered aloud. "Gear alone shouldn't create such a vast difference in power..."

"Do you really think *gear* is what sets us apart?" Muza asked in response. "You're a fool through and through, my son!"

The moment those words left his lips, the Beast King vanished. Beku gasped and swiftly tried to guard his chest with his arms, but he could not fully defend himself against the two fists that launched

a flurry of attacks. His arms were pried away, and a knee sank into his chest, now open to attacks.

"Ngah!" Beku gasped.

He felt his body be pushed up, then begin to fall because he was unable to catch himself. But right before he hit the ground, Muza landed a hook on his exposed flank. He stopped falling and was blown to the side, where he slammed against the wall. Then, he bounced on the ground a few times and rolled to the wall on the other side of the room. The back of his head hit the wall, screeching him to a stop. Beku could only groan from the excruciating pain as he leaned his back against the wall, slowly dragging his body back up again. All the while, Muza silently watched on.

"If I shamefully flee now, I'll be reduced to nothing but a filthy traitor," Beku mumbled, his mind in a daze. "I must at least get my hands on the Symbol of the Beast King."

He placed his left hand over his right fist, his fingertips gliding along the string that formed the bracelet on his wrist. The fingers on his left hand, trembling, grabbed the string, and he ripped it off.

"You can try!" Muza growled. "But even if you manage to take it away from me, if you don't change your belief that the difference in our power is solely due to gear, you'll never be worthy of inheriting the throne."

Beku brought his left hand to his mouth, the bracelet still pinched between his fingertips, and ate the string.

"Of course," he replied. His words were not in response to his father; it was as though he was reassuring himself. "I *must* become the Beast King. I've already cast aside my pride as a royal in order to attain my goal!"

With a mighty roar, he bit down on the bracelet, woven with Romu's special medicine. His body immediately shuddered, and a moment later, he kicked the wall behind him, sending him flying straight at Muza.

"What?! What's going on?!" Muza shouted as he braced himself.

He was taken aback by Beku, who was faster than ever, but upon noticing that his son was simply running in a straight line, he activated Super Heavy Blow once more.

Crunch! Bones were shattered and blood spewed into the air. Beast King Muza staggered, his fist obliterated.

"Gah?!" he grunted.

His fist was knocked away, but he immediately tried to defend himself as Beku circled him with incredible speed, pummeling him with a flurry of fists. The countless blows were not just straights but hooks and other punches as well, ensuring that he was lifted off the ground, unable to brace himself. Once the king was forced into the air, Beku aimed for that opening and punched him down again, only to lift him once more, methodically tearing through his defenses.

When Beku finally stopped running in a circle, a groove had emerged on the stone tile, worn away and etched by his feet. At its center was Muza, on his knees, his body covered in countless wounds.

"Just kill me, Beku," the king ordered, his breath haggard. "But know this: You cannot ever become king. Zeu or Shia will be sure to end you."

"Oh, I won't let you off so easily, father," Beku replied as a prickly sensation filled his mouth. He used his tongue to trace his canines when he felt them—both the pair on top and the pair on bottom—growing longer by the second. They grew so long and sharp that they threatened to penetrate his mouth. "I shall make Zeu and Shia surrender to me one day. But before that..."

Beku heard a loud voice echo in his mind—his own, whispering like a devil in his ear to take the plunge.

"Wh-What are you planning?!" Muza shouted, frantically writhing around. "Y-You're..."

But Beku paid no heed to the king's words. Muza's neck was just so strangely...*enticing*. The Beast Crown Prince could no longer help himself. He drew his face near, took a deep breath, and bared his four long fangs. *Chomp!* When Beku breathed in, trying to suck up anything he could, the Beast King's body visibly shrank. Muza was forced out of Total Beast Mode, and on top of that, his burly muscles seemed to lose their volume, his massive body turning frail and feeble as the fur that covered it began to fall out.

A loud *clatter* prompted Beku to whirl around, his face sullied with

his father's blood. He was met by the Beast King Corps, who all looked at him, terrified. The moment the Corps soldiers managed to grip their weapons firmly again, Kei and the rest of Beku's personal squad attacked them from behind, causing a rain of their blood to fill the room. Amid the chaotic battle, Kei approached the Beast Crown Prince.

"You fought splendidly," he said.

"It's not over yet. My father is still alive," Beku replied. He turned to Muza in his arms, breathing very faintly.

"And that's just fine. We shall have him lay eyes on the new country of beastkin that you build, Your Highness. We must flee as soon as we can. The Beast King Corps have been dispatched throughout the royal capital."

"Indeed... Kei, lend me your hand."

Beku slowly lowered Muza's frail body onto the ground.

"Soldiers! Don't let a single blade reach our crown prince!" Kei shouted.

The captain swiftly joined Beku in taking the knuckles, armor, and Holy Orb from Muza's body and stuffing them into a magic tool bag.

* * *

Beku, protected by Kei and his personal squad, rushed out of the royal castle amid the noise and clamor of fighting that echoed throughout the building. He used every shortcut and back alley possible as he rushed to the dock. The closer he drew, the farther away the pandemonium got. When he finally spotted two magic ships, he saw armed merfolk gathered nearby—the ships were ready to depart. The moment Beku and his allies rushed aboard, it took off and headed east. They arrived at a city by the shore within the day.

The sun had already set, and night blanketed the port where two magic ships headed for Prostia were docked. One was filled with merfolk, while the other was the one Beku and the other beastkin boarded. A few hours after the ships had headed out into the nighttime sea, they dove under the water, and Kei breathed a sigh of relief. Just then, the door to his and Beku's private room opened,

and Romu walked in with a tray of tea.

"You did well, Your Highness," he said.

"It's thanks to your medicine," Beku replied, taking a cup from the elderly goatkin. "I was able to exert power unlike anything before."

"I see, I see. So, you used it... I'm certainly pleased to hear that. And how did it go? Smoothly, I hope?" Romu asked as he watched Beku take a sip of his tea.

"I got my hands on the Symbol of the Beast King," Beku answered.

"Then you defeated the Beast King, I presume?"

"But...I feel bad for what I've forced you to do, Kei. I'll do whatever it takes to atone for my actions."

Kei shook his head. "Whatever are you saying? I promised that I'd accompany you to whatever hell you wish."

"But Squad Leaders Gafu and Noma were killed."

"But you've still got me," a soldier by the name of Zeka said.

"And me as well," another, named Rui, added.

The surviving squad leaders sounded firm as they took their positions behind Kei. When Beku had changed ships earlier, he had noticed that of the three thousand soldiers in his personal army, half were not with him. Some, like Gafu and Noma, had fought tooth and nail to allow Beku to escape the castle, paving the way with their blood as they got rid of any enemies in his way. Others had wandered about the cities on the way to the port, acting as bait or a diversion.

"But you aren't to blame, Your Highness," Kei reassured him, noticing that his master looked exhausted. "In fact, they threw their lives away for your future, and I'm certain that they couldn't be happier with their sacrifice."

Beku, who noticed Kei's gaze, looked up at his loyal retainer. Kei could see that the Beast Crown Prince's eyes were filled with sorrow.

"My future..." Beku muttered. "I thought that was the future of Albahal as well, but it seems I was alone in that assumption." He sighed. "Father said to me, 'You tried to change the arrogant, unseemly attitude that you had in your younger days. But you failed.' Tell me, Kei. Have I changed? Have I been able to change since the

day that I lost to Giru?"

"Of course. You've become a great man," Kei answered with a nod. But even he could hear the sobs in his voice. He was crying and unable to look his master in the eye, but he unmistakably heard Beku breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm relieved to hear that," Beku said. "I see you as my older brother, Kei. A man like me, who tried to end his father, can trust the words of his older brother and no one else."

"Your Highness..." Kei started.

"Yes, I have you. I have all of you. If the blood of Albahal flows through my veins like father said, I shall lead those who believe in me to a better future. I was far too immature. And a child like me tried to kill my father, who was stern with me yet treated me with endearment. I'd finally been tasked with a trial of my own. I must become the next Beast King of Albahal, and I will shed my blood, endure suffering, and do whatever else it may take to achieve that." Beku paused and turned to the goatkin. "Romu. I trust that you've obtained the entry permit to Prostia?"

"Most certainly," Romu replied. "I've got enough for everyone outside this room as well, including your personal squad and Sir Kei."

The elderly man pulled a magic tool bag from his pocket, shoved his hand into it, and removed two bracelets.

"I see... It seems your story was true," Beku muttered.

"Pardon? Whatever do you mean, Your Highness?" Romu asked.

"My father mentioned something very curious. He spoke of Brysen. I realized that might have been why General Hoba was out, but then I also realized that Zeu and the Ten Heroic Beasts leaving for the Central Continent was all very convenient for me. It was as though the stars had aligned... No, it was convenient for *you*, I suppose."

"I haven't the faintest clue what you're on about. I simply find that you, Crown Prince Beku, are more suitable to become the next Beast King than Prince Zeu or Princess Shia, who are busy becoming friends with humans."

"Heh. I suspect that was the tactic you used to persuade not only me, but Ignomasu as well."

"Goodness, it really does seem like you've changed," Romu said with a grin. "Ending your father must've filled you with renewed resolve."

Pale smoke was expelled from Romu's body, filling the room with white. Right before Beku's vision was completely obfuscated, however, he stood up and gave a deep exhale.

"Hmph!" he grunted.

He exerted an invisible force, creating a gust of wind and blowing the smoke away. When the smoke dissipated, Romu had been replaced with an elderly demon dressed in a white coat, standing there in clear view.

"What?!" Kei yelped, immediately unsheathing the sword at his waist. "You... You were a demon?!"

The elderly demon only grinned. "Oh, your loyalty is truly honorable, Sir Kei! I suppose this is the first time I've met you in this form, Prince Beku. My name is Shinorom, Director of Demonic Soldier Research."

"A pawn of the Demon Lord Army," Beku said. "I've never seen one before."

"I'm mostly in charge of strengthening monsters and Demonic Deities, but I'm currently hard at work trying to resurrect the Daemon God. Though that is admittedly my ultimate goal, I *have* done my best to help you out, Prince Beku."

"Resurrect the Daemon God? Did you drag me into the Demon Lord Army's ploy?"

"Ah, Your Highness, you've become most astute. Precisely so. The blood of Albahal—no, of Beast God Garm flows through your veins. That is something we require, and given this, I have used my time serving you to prepare it."

"Blood? Then you mean..."

Beku recalled the moment when he had defeated the Beast King. A voice had echoed within his head, and he had become overwhelmed with an unstoppable impulse that had forced his body to act.

"Yes, precisely," Shinorom replied. "Of the three siblings, your body is thickest with Garm's blood. And then you ingested the blood

of Beast King Muza, who also possesses the blood of Garm... At long last, my preparations are complete. Even if you had failed, Prince Beku, I had Prince Zeu head to a safe place, and either of you royals would have worked. But I've been watching over you and supporting you for this long, and I couldn't be happier that I'm using a sacrifice I personally raised."

Beku glared at the smirking demon. "I see now. But know that your so-called preparations will be the very thing that threatens your life. I shall be the one to utilize your plan."

"Oho ho? Do you plan on fleeing to Prostia to regain some of your power? Should that moxie of yours have started to grow on that fateful day you lost to Giru, you would've become a true Beast King by now. But no longer will that dream of yours come true. Ultimately, you will never see your dream come true. You're a fool, and you always will be—just as you're foolish enough to sip my tea."

Beku, who was still on his feet, found himself frozen in place. Cold sweat poured down his face. At the same time, Kei hastily jumped forward with his sword in hand.

"Heh heh heh, you'd best watch your back, Sir Kei," Shinorom said.

As Kei braced himself, the door behind him quietly opened. A deformed demon with two heads, two pairs of arms and legs, and one torso appeared.

"Cross Sword!" Kei shouted as he whirled around, his body wavering like he was in a heat haze.

The adamantite sword in his hand emitted a golden glow, then morphed into a cross. Kei pounced, swinging his blade down, but the male head of the grotesque demon cackled loudly.

"Foolish beast, daring to use a skill like that in a place like this," the female head said before she cast a buff. "Hand Crush!"

The muscles on one of their four arms began to bulge and ripple.

"Demonic Explosive Fist!" the male head roared as he activated his skill with his enhanced arm.

His arm shattered the adamantite sword. It also blew Kei's head off his body with a grotesque *squelch*.

"Y-You!" a squad leader said.

“How dare you kill Captain Kei!” the other roared.

The two unsheathed their blades as Kei’s headless body fell to the ground. Shinorom hastily approached the corpse.

“Ah, Sir Kei!” Shinorom cried. “You held the rare Talent of Beast Sword Lord, and I wanted to use you for one of my experiments! Ramon-Hamon, how could you do this to me?!”

“I’m sorry,” the female head of Ramon-Hamon apologized. “He was just so frail that we couldn’t hold our strength back.”

The demon immediately braced themselves when they saw something move in the corner of their eye.

“Kei...” Beku muttered. “You two step back. It seems I’m their opponent.”

“Prince Beku...”

Zeka tried to protest, but the squad leader looked astonished when they spotted Beku’s face, filled with fury and resentment unlike anything before. The Beast Crown Prince slowly turned toward Demonic Deity Ramon-Hamon.

“You’re just a fool whose only worth is as a sacrifice,” the male head of Ramon-Hamon spat as Beku stepped around Kei’s corpse. “Do you have something to say?”

“I do. You’ll pay for this! Ultimate Beast Fighter!”

Mana coursed through Beku’s body, MP welling up from its depths and enveloping him. He was unable to keep all the MP trapped within as it freely flowed out, his voice filled with magic and wrath. He activated a godly skill, one that he had never even heard of before, much less used.

“This must be the power of Beast God Garm,” Ramon said. “It must’ve awakened when he drank his father’s blood. But your entirety must be offered to our Demon Lord.”

“Oh? A mere beast dares to step into the realm of the divine?” Hamon asked.

The demon remained as cool as ever.

“Beast God!” Beku roared. “Graaaaaaah!”

The muscles throughout his body rippled, and long fur grew all over him. In a flash, he transformed into a beast of various components, his body maintaining its proportions. His core was still

a lion, but a beast incarnate revealed itself in front of everyone's eyes. Yet Ramon-Hamon maintained their composure, even as the terrifying monster pounced on them.

"I'm impressed that you can move this well despite the medicine affecting your body," Ramon remarked. "But you still move so slowly in my eyes."

"No doubt," Hamon agreed. "We're the apex of the Greater Demonic Deities, created by Lord Shinorom. We'd never lose to a mere animal."

The two pairs of arms snapped forward and grabbed Beku's four legs. They clenched hard, crushing him while trying to rip him apart. Disgusting snapping sounds filled the room as bones and sinew were destroyed.

"Graaaaah!" Beku bellowed.

"P-Prince Beku!" a squad leader shouted.

"I'll kill you!" the other cried.

"Huh?!" Shinorom, who was hiding behind Ramon-Hamon, exclaimed when he noticed the squad leaders' murderous intent. "Ramon-Hamon, play with these beasts! If we keep them alive, we can use them as test subjects, so don't kill them."

"We'll render them all powerless," Ramon said.

"Lord Shinorom ordered us not to kill you," Hamon added. "Be grateful that you get to live a bit longer."

The Greater Demonic Deity beat the two squad leaders an inch from death. It was as easy as taking candy from a baby for someone as strong as them.

"You won't get away with this... I swear it..." Beku said, consciousness slipping from his grasp. His wrathful gaze was pointed at Ramon-Hamon and Shinorom, and he let out an agonizing roar. He was rolling in a pool of his own blood, all his limbs having been cut off.

"You're still so energetic," Shinorom commented, gazing down at him with a smile. "Don't die yet. I need to sacrifice you to the Daemon God. You've done well, gathering the blood and becoming a sacrifice. You should feel honored by your role. Heh heh heh... Ramon-Hamon, I'll leave the beastkin outside to you."

"Yes, sir," Ramon replied. "We won't kill them, but we won't let them escape."

"It's so boring that it's hardly training," Hamon groaned.

"What *is* this monster?!" a beastkin shouted.

"Why did it appear from Prince Beku's room?!" cried another. "Aghhhhh!"

Shinorom's gleeful tone echoed in Beku's ears, but it was soon drowned out by the horrific screams of the beastkin who spotted Ramon-Hamon after they had left the room.

"Kei, everyone... I'm sorry..." Beku murmured. "I..."

From next to Kei's and the squad leaders' lifeless bodies, the Beast Crown Prince did his best to maintain his consciousness amid the sea of blood. However, he could no longer resist, and his vision slowly faded to black.

Side Story 2: Hell Mode Spin-Off—The Heroic Tale of Helmios (Part 4): Howlden City

Alone, Helmios walked down a long corridor.

"Huh? Where am I?" he muttered to himself. "Why am I here, anyway? Is this a church?"

As he walked, he realized that he did not recognize the building at all. The area was dimly lit, and when he looked up, he noticed evenly spaced lights high above him. The walls and floor were made of stone, and though he realized that he was in a huge building, its simple, sturdy structure was reminiscent of his childhood friend Dorothy's place—the church in Cortana Village, where he had spent his entire life until a mere week ago.

Helmios continued to make his way deeper within, completely befuddled by his situation. At some point, he spotted a small ray of light shining across the floor as though to bar his path. When the boy approached the door that light was leaking from, he sensed someone behind it. Quietly, he reached out for the knob, only to realize that he should knock before entering. He stopped himself and tried to knock, but a voice called out to him from inside.

"What are you doing?" the voice asked. "Come on in."

"O-Okay!" Helmios stammered.

He opened the door with all his might and jumped into the room. It was eerily simple, with pure white walls and floors. Its only furnishings were a dark desk that stood way in the back, facing him, a rectangular table with the shorter side toward the door, a single sofa to the right of that table, and a sofa that could seat three adults to the left.

Two people awaited Helmios within the room. One was a young

man with curly, chestnut-colored hair. He was sitting at the desk, fiddling with a tool resembling a keyboard that was placed in front of a box. His upper body was unclothed, and from behind his shoulders, one could see a set of large, white wings that grew from his back. A glowing ring floated above his head.

He must be an angel...

Helmios's gaze traveled over to the other person, who sat on the large sofa on the left. His long, white hair glided down his body, and he was adorned in a white robe. Most peculiar was that it was difficult to discern his age from appearance.

When Helmios saw the man, he could not help but gasp. *That's...Lord Elmea!* Indeed, the man on the sofa was the spitting image of the God of Creation depicted at the church in his home village. *Which means that angel must be First Angel Merus!* The moment Helmios processed who the people in front of him were, the white-haired man turned to him with a smile.

"Yes, you're exactly right," the god said, flooring the boy by seemingly reading his mind.

"Please leave the rest to me," the chestnut-haired angel said, looking up. "Helmios, why don't you take a seat over there?"

Helmios realized that the voice that had called out to him earlier belonged to this man, and he nervously sat on the sofa that Merus had indicated with his left hand. When he took his seat, he was taken aback by how unexpectedly soft the sofa was, and upon feeling his body sink deeper into it, he hastily began to fidget. The white-haired man, Elmea, faintly smiled as Helmios wriggled around to get comfortable. Once he finally found a good spot, Merus, who had patiently watched on without saying a word, broke the silence.

"I called you here today because I wanted to teach you about the Talent that Lord Elmea has bestowed upon you," the angel explained.

When Merus fiddled with the keyboard on the desk, a glowing white wall appeared between Helmios and Elmea. The young boy was astonished by this, but he was even more shocked when he saw himself appear on the wall.

"That's me!" he cried.

The Helmios that appeared on the wall was snoozing away in the seat of a carriage, using Dorothy's lap as a pillow. Gatsun and Ena sat across from him, leaning forward as they gazed worriedly down at their friend.

"You're currently seeing your physical body," Merus explained. "We brought only your soul here."

Helmios could put two and two together. After defeating the Talent hunters who had attacked him, he must have passed out and been carried away.

"Trials such as Talent hunters will continue to plague you," the angel went on. "I suggest you tread more cautiously. You managed to pull through this time, but you really pushed your limits, and you put your dear friends in danger."

Helmios was quiet for a few moments.

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

"It's fine. It's commendable that you faced your Trial without running away. But in the future, you must make the correct choice."

"Choice?"

"That's right," Elmea answered. "You have been bestowed with a Talent that could very well save the world. To do that, you must make the correct choices."

"Hero... Yeah, you gave me the Hero Talent. Did you do that so I could save the world?"

"Precisely. You see, this world is currently on the verge of ruin at the hands of the Demon Lord."

The Demon Lord? Who's that? Some kind of king?

"More or less, yes," Elmea told him. "The Demon Lord reigns over all demons, and he leads his species on a path of destruction, intent on wiping out every living being in this world who worships us gods —humans like you, elves, dark elves, dwarves, beastkin, merfolk, birdkin, and many more. Under his rule, the power of the demons is overwhelming, and the way things are going, the village you grew up in will also be destroyed."

"My village?!" Helmios spluttered. "What about my mom and dad?!"

"Needless to say, they will be killed mercilessly. But if you can put

your Talent to good use and overcome Trials while making the right choices, you can defeat the Demon Lord before he can ever lay hands on your loved ones. You can save your parents and this world. If you'd like to do that, you must listen very carefully to what Merus is about to say."

"Okay! I will!"

The moment those words left his lips, the glowing wall that had suddenly appeared above the rectangular table vanished without a trace. The boy then turned to Merus, who nodded to him.

"Your Talent, Hero, comes with an Extra Skill known as Natural Gift," the First Angel explained. "It's a very special skill that will allow you to learn Attack, Healing, or any other type of magic you wish."

"Wait, is that why I can use Healing Magic?" Helmios asked.

He was reminded of the time in Cortana Village when he had wanted to help treat his bedridden mother. He had visited his childhood friend Dorothy's church and asked her father, a clergyman, to teach him healing spells. By simply observing the man and practicing a bit, he had quickly mastered the Heal spell.

"Right. Earlier, you were able to use the Talent hunter's skill against him as well," Merus replied. "By simply watching someone use a skill, you'll be able to use it too. Ah, but I'd be remiss to not mention that you can only use four skills."

"Just four? That doesn't sound like a lot."

Helmios counted on his fingers, starting with his thumb. When he was done, he stared at his pinky, the only one left. Merus gave a slight nod of agreement.

"Exactly. Hence, you must make the right choice, and choose wisely. I'll tell you the specifics, but you're currently just a soul. Make sure to commit these all to memory."

Helmios, wanting to do whatever he could for his parents, concentrated and listened closely to Merus's explanation.

Rules for Natural Gift

1. When activated, the user can learn and use any skill that they see.

2. The newly acquired skill will be at Lvl. 1.
3. If the user continues to use the acquired skill, it can be raised to Lvl. 6.
4. The acquired skill will have the same effects as that of a person with a five-star Talent.
5. The user can only acquire four skills.
6. When a fifth skill is acquired, one of the prior four skills must be discarded.
7. When a skill is discarded, step 1 can be used to acquire it again, but it will be reverted to Lvl. 1.
8. When two acquired skills reach Lvl. 2, the Paragon skill can be acquired.
9. When four acquired skills reach Lvl. 4, the Paragon skill will reach Lvl. 2.
10. Natural Gift can only be used once per day.

Even after that explanation, Helmios still could not make heads or tails of his skill. "*Skill"? "Extra Skill"? "Talent"? What's the difference? "Level"? "Acquire"? "Discard"?* Merus had not explained a single one of those words, and while Helmios did his best to at least memorize them, they seemed to go in one ear and out the other because he failed to grasp their meaning. He furrowed his brow and contorted his face as he concentrated.

"Merus," Elmea said, watching the boy. "See to it that Helmios understands what you're saying."

The First Angel nodded and tapped away at the keyboard at his desk before turning back to Helmios.

"I've added Analyze as one of the skills you can acquire through Natural Gift," he said. "It'll allow you to learn more about your Talent and others'. Also..."

Merus turned back to the keyboard. Suddenly, a translucent screen, around fifty centimeters tall and wide, appeared in front of the boy's eyes with a low *vwoom*.

"Whoa!" Helmios cried.

"This is called a virtual window," Merus explained. "You'll be able to make this screen appear and disappear as you please, and you

can use it to read up on any necessary information. I've attached it to Analyze."

Go away, Helmios thought, trying to make the translucent screen disappear. It obeyed, and when the boy wished for it to appear again, it did so. He then carefully scrutinized the virtual window. When he turned to the side, it followed, mirroring his movements. He reached out, trying to use his finger to touch the screen, but his hand slipped through as though there was nothing there at all.

"What is this?" Helmios asked, pointing to the letters on the screen.

"That's your Status," Merus replied.

Name: Helmios
Age: 5
Class: Hero
Level: 20
HP: 395 (790) + 750 (1,500)
MP: 278 (557) + 750 (1,500)
Attack: 395 (790) + 750 (1,500)
Endurance: 395 (790) + 750 (1,500)
Agility: 395 (790) + 750 (1,500)
Intelligence: 278 (557) + 750 (1,500)
Luck: 278 (557)
Extra Skill: Natural Gift (Healing, Blast Punch, Analyze, N/A)
Skills: Hero {1}, Healing {2}, Blast Punch {2}, Analyze {3}, Null, Paragon {1}, Sword Master {4}
XP: 400/1,000
Effects of Analyze: Analyze, virtual window, no notes or records

<u>Equipment</u>
Weapon: N/A

Commoner’s Clothes: Endurance +5
Magic Gear: N/A

“I...can read my name, but that’s about it,” Helmios said.

“Right, you can’t read difficult words yet, can you?” Merus mused. “I’ll need you to study up on your literacy. The virtual window will allow you to take any notes that you’d like. I’ll add the rules of Natural Gift to it, so once you’ve learned to read better, I suggest you take a look and peruse the rules.”

“Yes, sir,” Helmios replied before he was jolted with a sharp *bam*. “Huh?! What the heck?!”

He lurched forward and almost fell, prompting him to whirl around, but nothing was there. Only the backrest of the sofa he was sitting on and the white walls greeted him.

“It seems the carriage your body is in has reached the city,” Merus observed.

Helmios turned back around to face the angel. As soon as he did, however, he found himself facing the ceiling.

“Huh? What?” he muttered.

“Helmios! You’re awake!” Dorothy cried, staring down at him happily. She took up half of his field of vision. “Thank goodness! We just reached Howlden.”

“Dorothy...”

Gatsun and Ena peeked down at him next.

“Hey, you all right?” Gatsun asked.

“Don’t push yourself...” Ena advised.

“I-I’m okay, I can get up,” Helmios replied.

He raised his head from Dorothy’s lap and sat up in his seat before looking outside the carriage window. The vehicle had crossed the Howlden City gate and just creaked to a halt. The crimson sunset illuminated the buildings nearby as people busily walked in front. Helmios gazed at the scene when Knight Captain Maxil peered through the window.

“Hey, Helmios,” he said. “Glad to see you up.”

“Uh, right,” Helmios replied. “Thank you, sir.”

"No, we should be the ones thanking you. If you hadn't been there, I don't know what would have happened to us. But you can put that all behind you. Starting today, you guys will be living at Talent School."

"Talent School? What's that?"

"It's a place for kids Lord Elmea has bestowed with Talents—kids like you—to improve their abilities. The lord of the land has prepared an area specifically for Talented children, but you'll eventually have to head to the Academy."

"Will we be living there too?" Gatsun asked, peering over Helmios's shoulder.

"Yes," the knight captain answered with a nod. "Why don't I just tell you all now? Come on, get off the carriage."

The kids obeyed, and upon doing so, they spotted other children stepping off carriages of their own. Just like Helmios and his friends, kids with Talents had been gathered from across the region, escorted by knights, and now, they all crowded in front of the knight captain.

"Listen carefully," Maxil said. "We're going to take you all to Talent School. It's a place where kids like you, who have been bestowed with combat-oriented Talents, will learn how to wield your skills and what is necessary for your survival. You'll be trained so that one day, you can utilize your powers for Giamut. Be warned that Talent hunters like the ones who attacked today will appear all throughout the empire. To protect you, your families, and your villages, large cities like Howlden have Talent Schools so that you won't have to worry about your safety and well-being. Hence, we've made our rounds throughout the nearby regions and gathered you all here."

"Hey, bring a few of them over here," one of Maxil's nearby subordinates ordered. Moments later, a knight led several soldiers in front of the knight captain, where Helmios and the other kids were.

"Welcome back, Captain!" a soldier exclaimed. "We were worried since it took you so long."

Maxil gave a slight nod. "We'll hand over the Talent hunters who tried to attack us. Take them away from the carriages and throw them in prison. I'll escort these children to the Talent School."

The soldiers all nodded before swiftly dragging the restrained Talent hunters out of the carriage. The criminals had their arms and legs bound behind their backs and were rolled along the ground like worms. Among the captured criminals was Vice-Captain Zeine, and the soldiers could not hide their shock at the sight of him.

"Vice-Captain Zeine?!" one gasped. "Captain, what in the world happened?!"

"He was secretly connected to the Talent hunters and told them our routes beforehand," Maxil explained. "It's likely that there are more traitors in our midst, and we'll interrogate him carefully later. Keep him in a cell separate from the other Talent hunters."

The soldiers were then entrusted with escorting the Talent hunters, while the knight captain took Helmios and the other kids into a large building.

"Is this the Talent School?" Dorothy asked.

"That's right," Maxil replied. "Ah, Principal Muhato, thank you for making your way over to us."

The knight captain looked inside the building, and his polite tone made Helmios and the other kids turn toward the principal. An elderly man clumsily walked over with a magic tool lamp in one hand and a staff twice the height of his body in the other. As Principal Muhato approached, Helmios realized that the man only looked so short because he was hunched over—he was certainly well on in years.

"Thank you all for coming here," Muhato said with a smile. "I'm glad you're all back safely, though this is a bit sooner than our initial plan."

"Yes. Thanks to you, we were able to capture the Talent hunters," Maxil replied.

"Ah, then as I thought, there was a traitor... No matter. I shall leave that in your hands. I'll take care of the children."

"Very well. Please take good care of them. Several knights died trying to protect these young kids."

The knights, who had escorted the children here, all gave Principal Muhato a respectful bow. Maxil then whirled around and left, walking toward the sunset with the other knights, not once

looking back at the kids. Only Helmios and the other children were left behind with Principal Muhato.

"Oho ho ho," Muhato chuckled. "Now then, I'll guide you all inside. I'll split you up into rooms tomorrow, but you must be tired from your long trip. Why not rest a while? I'll have dinner ready in a bit."

"Food?!" Gatsun shouted happily. "All riiight!"

The principal smiled at the boy, and Ena hid behind Dorothy.

"He scares me..." Ena murmured.

Still, Muhato maintained a smile plastered on his face. "Oh dear, I'm sorry to scare you. Oho ho ho."

Helmios finally knew that he could relax and rest easy. No longer did he have anything to fear.

* * *

On the third morning after entering the Talent School in Howlden, Helmios awoke to the sound of snoring filling the room. He slowly sat up, and upon realizing that his other two roommates had also been woken up by it, he headed over to Gatsun's bed to awaken the snorer.

"Gatsun! It's morning!" he said, shaking the boy's shoulder.

In a daze, Gatsun blearily opened his eyes, yawning as he gazed at the ceiling. Helmios then walked over to the window and opened it, allowing the rays of the morning sun to flood into the room—and directly into Gatsun's face.

"Gah!" Gatsun yelped. "So bright!"

"If you don't hurry, you'll miss breakfast," Helmios warned.

"Crap! Right!"

Gatsun leaped off his bed. Meanwhile, their other two roommates approached Helmios.

"Helmios, can't you wake Gatsun up more quietly?" one requested.

"Yeah," the other grumbled. "He can't help the snoring, but the fact that you make such a fuss every time he wakes up is killing me."

"Sorry," Helmios apologized, and his two older roommates nodded

at him, showing their maturity.

Helmios and Gatsun had met their two older roommates the day after they had arrived at the Talent School—one was ten and the other was eleven. Dorothy and the other newcomers had also been placed in rooms with those older than them, and the older roommates generally helped the younger kids grow accustomed to the place. If there were any accidents or issues, it was up to the older kids to jump in and lend a hand.

The two boys followed the hall their roommates had guided them down a mere two days ago, then descended a staircase. Both the hallway and the stairs creaked as they and several other kids made their way outside of the boys' dorm, heading for the cafeteria. Once they reached the courtyard, they took a left in front of the girls' dorm, in front of which was their destination. To the right of the cafeteria was a wooden schoolhouse for daily lessons, and behind that, currently hidden from Helmios's view, was a wooden auditorium. Behind the cafeteria were a farm and a garden that stretched out to the high walls surrounding Howlden City.

When Helmios entered the cafeteria, there were already kids lined up in three rows. He and Gatsun recalled what their older roommates had taught them the day prior and walked toward a stack of wooden trays and cutlery. They each grabbed a set for themselves and stood in one of the lines. When it was Helmios's turn, the server handed him some bread and ladled soup into his bowl. The soup was the same that they had drunk the day before—a simple one made solely of finely chopped vegetable scraps. Helmios felt like this soup was rather plain compared to the ones he had made for his family at home, but he resigned himself to his fate, assuming that this was the norm for these people. Gatsun, on the other hand, a growing boy who loved to eat, was not so understanding.

"Aw, come on," he whined. "Gimme a bit more soup! Please?"

"Sorry, but I can't just offer you special treatment," the server replied.

"Maaan..."

The server paused for a moment. "Oh, all right. Hand over your

bread. I'll give you this one."

The server exchanged Gatsun's piece of bread for a larger one, and the boy made his excitement apparent. Meanwhile, Helmios glanced around the spacious cafeteria. Dorothy and Ena were already seated and waved at the two of them. And so, Helmios and Gatsun went to eat at the same table as their friends.

"Good morning, Helmios," Ena said.

"Good morning," Helmios echoed.

"You're lucky you weren't forced to skip breakfast today, Gatsun," Dorothy pointed out.

"Duh! I got moves!" Gatsun replied.

The boy proceeded to greedily chow down on his bread and practically funnel his soup into his mouth. Helmios, who sat beside him, tore off a bit of his own bread and dunked it into his soup before carrying it into his mouth. The bread was dry and had not properly risen; there were tough spots throughout, and he had discovered yesterday that it was best to soak the bread in the soup before eating it.

"Food is yummy when I get to eat with everyone," Ena said with a happy smile.

Her hair, a far cry from yesterday's messy coiffure, was now properly combed and glossy. Dorothy had brought a comb from home, and thanks to that, Ena was able to fix her unruly locks. *Or maybe she looks better now because she's eating well here,* Helmios thought. He could not help but wonder just how poverty-ridden her life had been back in Cortana Village.

Once the bell rang, signaling that breakfast was over, the kids filed out for class, with Helmios and his friends following suit. They left the cafeteria and entered the schoolhouse, where their classrooms were. Classes at Talent School were divided by year—or rather, by the number of years one had been at the facility. Since Helmios and his group were first-years, having arrived a mere three days ago, they first had to learn basic knowledge about the world. Principal Muhato himself stood in the front to give them their lessons.

"Today, we'll learn the language of our empire, Giamut," he said.

"You kids have much to learn from here on out, and for that, you must learn how to read and write so that you can digest books. That'll be the best— Gatsun! Don't fall asleep on me!"

"Bwah! Sorry!" Gatsun cried. He had been fast asleep at his desk, but he hastily stood up when he heard his name called.

Everyone in class laughed, barring Helmios and Dorothy. *Gatsun... Oh, Ena's laughing too.* Helmios gazed wearily at Gatsun, but then he noticed Ena smiling and once again breathed a sigh of relief, just as he had during breakfast.

The students spent the rest of their time focusing on the lesson. Muhato wrote the Giamutan language on the chalkboard, and everyone copied it down using the tiny blackboards that were in their desks until the bell rang. That signaled the start of break time, Muhato explained. Some of the kids chattered away with their friends, others went to the restroom, but Helmios continued to practice his letters. *I promised Lord Elmea and First Angel Merus. I'll learn how to use my Hero Talent, defeat the Demon Lord, and protect mom and dad! The first step to that is to learn how to read and write!*

When break time was over, the next lesson started. Principal Muhato first spoke about the geography of Howlden. When Helmios's home, Cortana Village, was also brought up, the young boy was reminded of his village life. All the while, the principal started on a tangent as he spoke of a time in his past.

"That's when we captured a horned rabbit," he said. "We split the meat among us. Have any of you ever eaten a horned rabbit? You can roast it whole over a fire, and when you stick your knife into it, you can catch a glimpse of white meat as fat drips from the steaming cut..."

A loud growl filled the room, coming from none other than Gatsun's stomach as he sat next to Helmios. It prompted another round of laughter.

"Ugh, I'm mortified..." Dorothy muttered.

"Yeah, embarrassing..." Ena added.

Just then, Helmios heard footsteps pace down the hallway and approach their classroom.

“Gatsun, are you hungry alrea— Huh?” the principal stopped himself, also hearing the footsteps. When he turned to the door, it opened, and a middle-aged man peeked inside.

“I’m terribly sorry for my sudden interruption,” he said. “I just got an urgent request. I’m looking for a boy called Helmios, but is he in this class?”

“Ah, you’re the viscount’s emissary,” Muhato said. “You’re quite late.”

“My sincerest apologies,” the middle-aged man replied. “The roads were packed, and many failed to notice the viscount’s carriage as well. That caused my delay.”

The man gave a deep bow as Muhato turned away and spotted Helmios. The principal gestured with his chin.

“Go on, Helmios,” he said. “I doubt you’ll be treated horribly.”

“Huh? Me?”

Though he was extremely confused, Helmios quickly put his board and chalk away, then stood up and trotted toward the door. When he left the classroom, he spotted several knights in full suits of armor lined up in the hallway. Still perplexed, he followed the middle-aged man out of the schoolhouse.

It had been three days since Helmios had parted ways with Maxil to be under Muhato’s care. He was now back at the place where that had happened, where a carriage was waiting for him. Escorted by the middle-aged man, the boy boarded the vehicle, and four horses immediately began pulling it along.

“I’m sorry to spring this on you, but I’m taking you to Viscount Howlden, the lord who rules over this area,” the man explained as the carriage creaked forward. He was being less stiff and formal with Helmios.

“Okay...” Helmios said with a nod, unable to wrap his mind around his situation.

“You’d better change into this.” The man pulled a set of clothes from the leather sack next to his seat. “You don’t want to be rude.”

“Right here?”

“Correct.”

Helmios was given no other choice. He took the clothes and

began to get changed on the spot. The top and the pants had a peculiar scent that he had never smelled before—it was oddly addictive. When he finished changing, though, his nose was hit with the musty scent characteristic of outfits that had been stored away for a long while, and he intuited that the aroma from earlier had come from a deodorizer.

After he was done, he gazed outside the window, the carriage clattering throughout the ride. It was just before noon in Howlden City, and Helmios had never seen so many people bustling around before. He could not hide his awe. They were even spilling out onto the roads, making it difficult for vehicles to pass. *Huh, this is weird. I don't really sense a lively or cheery atmosphere.*

For the past three days, Helmios had not set foot outside the school, and he had been fast asleep during his ride there as he had been meeting God of Creation Elmea and First Angel Merus. Not once had he seen the city, and the busy sights made it look like a festival was underway, but he quickly discarded that idea.

While the city was crowded with people, unlike the cheery air of the classroom, everyone looked impossibly exhausted. They lifelessly wandered about the streets. When the carriage left the area, the impressive crowd immediately died down, replaced by several magnificent buildings.

"These houses are all so huge," Helmios murmured. "Their yards are too."

The middle-aged man, who had been quiet since ordering Helmios to get changed, opened his mouth. "This is where lords and those with peerages live."

As Helmios went past these houses, clearly grander and more majestic than the commoners' houses that had lined the streets earlier, he spotted a gate far larger than any he had ever seen. When the carriage approached, the gate groaned open, and the vehicle rushed in, maintaining its speed. It circled the stone fountain before stopping near an impressive manor. Helmios stepped off the carriage, and a sharply dressed, elderly man greeted him.

"My name is Burton, head butler of the house of Viscount Howlden. Sir Helmios, my master awaits. Right this way, please."

They passed through an atrium at the entrance, and a massive staircase stood proudly before them. It had a landing halfway up, then split off, arcing out to either side the rest of the way up to the second floor. Helmios followed Barton the butler up the stairs and headed down a hallway in the right wing, then took a left, and made their way to the front of the manor. As they walked the halls, servants bowed their heads, and Helmios solemnly bowed back.

"It's such a big house..." the boy murmured.

He immediately recalled the temple of Elmea, the God of Creation. *If the manor is this huge, I wonder how big that temple is...* The butler, who could not have possibly read Helmios's mind, sounded proud and happy to receive the words of praise.

"Oho, yes. It *is* a large house, isn't it?" he replied.

I guess he's happy to hear his master or their belongings being complimented. Maybe there's something else I can praise...

"It's a big city too," Helmios added. "I've never seen a city as big as this one! It's awesome."

"I see... Sir Helmios, you hail from Cortana Village, yes? How are you doing in Talent School? Is there anything that troubles you?"

"Hmm, well, I never really did any studying before I came here. It's harder than I thought."

"Is that so? But I heard from Muhato that you're studious and always giving it your all. It may be tough now, but I promise that it shall be of use to you one day."

"Do you know the principal, um...sir?"

"Yes. We once worked in the same department of the palace."

"Really?"

"If there's anything you'd like to say but find it difficult to tell him directly, feel free to come to me anytime."

"Th-Thank you."

As Helmios eked out his response, the pair reached the end of the hall. A lavish door with ornate engravings stood solemnly in front of the boy, and Burton raised his voice.

"I've brought Sir Helmios, my lord."

"Come in," a voice replied from beyond the door.

Burton bowed toward the door before placing his hand upon it

and opening it, using his other hand to usher Helmios inside. The boy gingerly stepped into the spacious room. To his right was a large window, and to his left was an extravagant fireplace, while the middle of the room was furnished with a long, white table covered with a cloth.

"A dining room?" Helmios wondered aloud.

A man sat in the depths of the room, behind the table that stood in front of Helmios.

"Precisely," the man replied. "I've wanted to have a little chat with you. I'm quite the busy man, and the only free time I have is during lunch. I'm sorry to trouble you, but won't you have lunch with us?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure, of course. Thank you," Helmios mumbled.

"Us"? Helmios walked alongside the longer end of the table, near the window, when he spotted two people already seated. The man in the back of the room, whom Helmios had been speaking with, was middle-aged and had a neatly trimmed mustache. What he had said about having a busy schedule must have been true, as his hair and mustache were completely white, lending credence to the idea that he was not free of worries. To his right, near the fireplace, sat a plump, middle-aged woman with her hair tied up. Her large, beautiful eyes sparkled inquisitively within her round face.

"My word! What an adorable child!" she gasped. "Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. You were so late that we already started our lunch."

A servant by the window swiftly stepped forward and pulled out a chair in front of the lady. *Do they want me to sit there?* When Helmios took his seat, the middle-aged man broke the silence.

"I'm Arnold von Howlden, and this is my wife, Shanna."

"Shanna Howlden. Charmed, I'm sure."

"Hi. Um, it's nice to meet you. I'm Helmios."

As the boy fumbled over his words, Viscount Howlden sized him up.

"I hope this doesn't come off as rude, but Helmios, you're a boy, correct?" the viscount asked.

"I am," Helmios replied. "People often get confused."

Though the boy was not very well aware of it, he took after his mother, and with his hair grown out, he was often mistaken for a girl

by the occasional visitor to Cortana Village.

"It took you quite some time, Burton," the viscount said. "Does that mean..."

"Yes, my lord. With every passing day, more and more people are flooding into our capital city, chased out of their homes."

Yeah, the city was super crowded. Even Helmios had found it odd to see so many people on the streets.

"I thought so... I suppose I should limit the number of commoners who can come here."

"Oh, but I'd feel so bad for them," the viscountess replied. "They've lost their homes and come to this city in search of a place to be."

"But this city doesn't have the funds or space to accept so many outsiders."

"But dear!"

Viscountess Howlden could not help but raise her voice in protest. *Uh, what's going on here?*

"My lord, perhaps it's best to save this conversation for another time," Burton advised, interrupting the conversation.

"Ah, yes. Excuse us. This may not suffice for having you come here on such short notice, but feel free to eat as much as you like. The food might have gotten a bit cold, but it's still good."

Almost immediately, the servant who had pulled out the chair for Helmios left the room, then returned with a few other servers pushing small wagons of food. The viscountess gazed at Helmios apologetically, feeling guilty for having startled the young boy. All the while, food from the wagons lined the table, and Helmios was greeted by a lavish feast the likes of which he had never seen before. *Nobles eat so well! And it's still only lunch!* Back in Cortana Village, whenever he and his friends got hungry, they would sneak into the fruit orchard to steal a few molmo fruits to snack on.

"Please let me know if you run out of bread," the waiter said. "I shall bring a fresh batch right away."

Soup and salad were placed in front of Helmios, along with a basket of bread. He was sure that he could not eat it all.





"How's the food? Do you like it?" the viscount asked.

"Yeah! I-I mean, yes, my lord," Helmios replied. His initial response had been full of enthusiasm, but he had quickly remembered his manners and offered a more formal one.

"Hee hee, you're an energetic child, I see," the viscountess said, smiling kindly at him. "I can hardly believe that you're the child of prophecy the margrave mentioned."

"He hails from Cortana Village, so he's not to blame," the viscount explained. "He'll be taught proper manners before he meets with Sir Arctica."

"Arctica?" Helmios asked. "Who's that?"

"We of House Howlden are under the wing of Margrave Arctica," the viscountess answered. "I'm sure you'll be allowed to meet him one day. Dear, if we're going to teach this child manners, why not keep him in our manor?"

"Hmm? That isn't for us to decide," the viscount replied. "And he's still a child. Surely he wants to spend time with friends his age."

"True..."

Viscountess Howlden looked visibly disappointed, making Helmios feel as though he had done something wrong.

"You remember Lucas, don't you? This boy is his son," the viscount said, much to Helmios's astonishment. "He should study hard like his father and learn to make full use of his Talent."

"Wait, you know my dad?"

It was the viscount's turn to look a touch surprised.

"Ah, your father hasn't told you about me, it seems. Hmm, where to start... Yes, I fought alongside your father, Lucas. And in that battle, he lost his arm..." He looked wistful as he emptied his glass of wine.

"Did you and my dad...fight the Demon Lord? Lord Merus told me about it."

"Did... Did you just say Merus?" Viscount Howlden could not hide his disbelief. "*The* Merus? *First Angel* Merus?"

"Yes, in a dream... Actually, I'm not really sure what it was. But my soul was summoned, and I met him."

"Goodness!" the viscountess gasped. Her large eyes grew wider,

and she gazed at the boy with awe.

Did I say something weird?

"Just your soul? Then this is Lord Elmea's..." the viscount muttered.

"Yes! Lord Elmea! He was there too!" Helmios cried.

The viscount placed his cutlery on the table and gave a deep sigh.

"It seems the oracle was true," he murmured. "I didn't think Lucas's child, of all people, would be..."

Helmios did not know how to respond when the viscountess, who sat across from him, began to sniffle. He turned toward her.

"Finally... The horrible, wretched war will be over," she wept. "Perhaps the child who was permitted to return to Lord Elmea's side guided us..."

What child? This house doesn't have a child...or maybe they had *one...* Helmios finally intuited why the viscountess seemed so eager to allow him to stay in the manor. *Oh, hey, it's the knight captain.* The door sounded with a loud *thump*, and Burton brought Knight Captain Maxil into the room, cutting off the boy's train of thought.

"Helmios... My lord, my lady, please pardon me for interrupting your meal," Maxil said. "I came to report back."

"How did it go?" the viscount asked sternly, a stark contrast from the soft demeanor he had shown his wife and Helmios. "Did Zeine spill it all?"

"Unfortunately not. I came to tell you the status of our interrogation. I'm not sure if he received an exorbitant amount of money or if someone important to him has been taken hostage, but he maintains his silence."

"Then I shall allow you to be even harsher with him. If he is after the envoy of God that he heard about from Sir Arctica, I'm certain that he's trying to threaten my land!"

"My dear, please don't treat Zeine too terribly," Viscountess Howlden protested, looking saddened. "When you once went to watch the goblin hunt, he risked his life to protect you. Please, at least, spare his life in kind."

"Y-You're right. Indeed, perhaps it's best if he stays imprisoned

for a bit longer to repent."

It sounded as though Vice-Captain Zeine, who was connected to the Talent hunters, would at least avoid the death sentence. But Helmios was unsure of how he could join in on the conversation, so he merely took a bite of his bread. *I should buy everyone a souvenir before I head home.* As his meal drew to a close, he decided that he wanted to bring back some bread and fruit for his friends. The adventures of Helmios, armed with his Extra Skill, Natural Gift, had just begun.

Bonus Short Story

Chapter 4.5: The Outlaws from Outside the City

The carriage headed back to the Talent School with Helmios on board. The boy had finished lunch with the Howldens, and it had been an hour since they had departed, but they still had not reached their destination. They passed through the Nobles District and onto the main street. The carriage, protected by knights atop horses, was moving rather slowly.

I feel like it'd be faster if I walked the entire way, Helmios thought. The streets, lined with wooden stores, were crowded with people, but they all looked exhausted and lifeless. Everyone looked down as though to turn away from the sunset, much to Helmios's dismay. Just then, Burton the head butler, who sat across from the boy, broke the silence.

"I'm so very sorry for how long this is taking," he apologized.

"Oh, it's fine," Helmios replied with a strained smile.

Upon hearing that Helmios had met God of Creation Elmea in a dream, the viscount, viscountess, and head butler had begun treating the boy differently. Not only was the butler escorting him back to school, but he had even been provided several knights to protect the carriage. Their guardianship slowed the vehicle down, however, and Helmios found it humorous that the Howldens' considerate acts were working against them.

"You're very kind, Lord Helmios," Burton said, misunderstanding the meaning behind Helmios's smile. He then pointed to the basket filled with bread and fruit that was in the boy's lap. "You even prepared souvenirs for your friends."

"Well, I've got a friend who eats a whole lot. His stomach growled

in the middle of class today."

The boy began his story, but he was immediately interrupted by loud, angry roars from outside the carriage, and he snapped his mouth shut.

"You guys are outsiders!" a man shouted. "I bet you snuck in through the gaps in the outer walls! Am I right?! C'mon, answer me!"

"I-I'm sorry..." someone replied.

Helmios leaned out the window to look around and spotted two men, each dressed in leather armor and carrying a hefty stick, outside a tableware store. Their anger was directed at a family of four—a father, a mother, and two daughters—sprawled out atop a dirty mat.

"It's 'cause of outlaws like you roughing up our walls that we gotta keep repairing 'em!" the other man roared, glaring at the family. "How stupid can you be?! If a monster makes it through those walls and into the city, can you take responsibility?! Can you?!"

Nearby people atop similarly dirty mats hastily fled for their lives. When he saw that, the second man flashed a discreet smirk—something Helmios did not miss.

"Who are those guys?" the boy asked.

"They're a group of vigilantes," Burton replied. "Lately, people from other villages have been coming here, and crime rates are on the rise. In response, the people of the city created a self-appointed group of vigilantes to protect the safety of the citizens."

"But they don't have to yell like that, do they?"

"They don't, no. But they aren't totally wrong either. There are indeed migrants who break through cracks in the outer walls to enter without an immigrant permit, and some of them even create holes for others to follow. Surely, Lord Helmios, you understand that we cannot sit by and watch that happen."

When Helmios fell silent, a shrill scream filled the air.

"Let gooo!"

Helmios's head whirled toward the noise, and he saw the youngest daughter of the family from earlier crying for her life. One of the men in leather armor had grabbed her arm and tried to drag

her away. That sight was the last straw for Helmios. No longer did hesitation grip his body.

"Lord Helmios?!" Burton exclaimed.

But the boy would have none of it. He burst out of the carriage and cut through the wave of people working to distance themselves from the commotion. In mere moments, he had jumped in front of the man who was trying to drag the poor girl away.

"Stop that!" he shouted.

The second vigilante froze for a moment, and the older daughter took her chance. She pounced on the man's arm, freeing her little sister from his grasp.

"B-Big sis!" the little girl wailed.

The other vigilante snapped back to his senses and tried to take the daughters hostage while swinging his large stick around.

"I told you to cut it out!" Helmios bellowed.

The boy stepped forward and stopped the stick.

"Hngah?!" the man gasped.

The vigilante had thrust his stick out and was shocked to find himself stopped dead in his tracks, his stick refusing to budge at the hands of a child. He could not help but stare in awe as the other vigilante finally realized that an unknown child had gotten in their way.

"You little brat!" he growled. "This isn't a joke! Raaah!"

He swung his stick around, and Helmios used his other hand to grab that one as well, stopping both men. The vigilantes, unable to hide their shock, used all their might to try to free their weapons, but the boy tightened his grip, crushing them. One vigilante had been pushing, and he fell forward, while the other member had been pulling and fell backward pathetically, landing on his butt.

"Damn you, you little..." the second man rumbled as he stood back up and swung what remained of his stick.

"Enough!" Burton shouted from behind Helmios, the fully armed knights in tow.

Startled, the two vigilantes froze. They spotted the Howlden family crest sewn into the collar of the approaching butler's jacket and immediately turned pale.

"Wait, you're...the viscount's..." one of them murmured.

"Indeed. I serve the viscount," Burton replied. "And this boy is his guest. He has been informed of your daily activities and is simply trying to give you a helping hand. Please leave this place to us and carry out your duties elsewhere, good sirs."

The two vigilantes, able to read between the lines, frantically bowed their heads, then whirled around and raced off.

"W-We're sorry!" they cried in unison.

Once the two men had left, Burton turned back to the migrant family. "I beg your pardon. Do you have a permit with you?"

The mother quietly shook her head. Burton frowned for a moment, but he swiftly turned expressionless once more.

"I suppose there's nothing we can do," he said. "Please escort them out of the city."

The knights stepped forward to surround the family.

"No!" Helmios cried, unable to maintain his silence. "Please, Mr. Burton! Don't be so coldhearted!"

"Lord Helmios, the laws of this city exist to protect those who live here," the butler replied quietly. "To disregard them is to disregard the people of the city. I'm sure all the immigrants who come here, not just this family, have reasons for leaving their villages. However, those reasons alone do not warrant that we bend the laws and make an exception."

Helmios could not refute that claim. He could not choose between the butler's words and immigrants' circumstances—they were equally important to him.

"But they've got such young kids..." Helmios muttered, beginning to tear up while pleading Burton with his eyes.

"I suppose I can arrange a permit for them..." the butler relented with a sigh. He turned back to the family, all of whom were hanging their heads. "Head to the church in the middle of this street by the end of the day. They're a helpful organization that will accept immigrants, but they can't help everyone. I'll have you work there until you receive your permits."

The family all looked up.

"R-Really?!"

“Th-Thank you so much!”

“Thank you for saving us, big brother!” the youngest daughter said.

Finally, Helmios flashed a smile. When he saw how exhausted the siblings looked, he asked them to wait for a few moments and rushed back to the carriage. When he returned, he was carrying a basket filled with a heaping pile of bread and fruit.

“F-For us?!” the parents gasped in shock. “A-Are you sure?!”

“Of course,” Helmios replied. “Eat every last crumb.”

The mother took the basket and burst into tears.

“Huh? Why...” the boy started with confusion.

“Our village was attacked by goblins,” the father explained while staggering to his feet. “We made it out alive, but we’ve barely eaten or drank until now.”

The man’s legs peeked out from his tattered rags. One of them was being stabilized with a splint. Only then did Helmios realize that the parents were covered in wounds.

“No wonder you’re all beat up,” he said. “Okay! Heal!”

The boy knelt down in front of the man and cast his healing magic, healing the injuries in a flash.

“Indeed... Truly, he is the child of miracles,” Burton murmured as he continued to gaze at the boy. The butler quietly wiped away a tear that slid down his cheek.

Afterword

Thanks to everyone, *Hell Mode*, which started serialization in 2020, has finally reached its tenth volume! A total of 1.6 million copies have been sold, and the series is going strong. Thank you all for reading the story this far! I'm still working on it, so I hope you'll continue to support me!

* * *

Now, onto the main story. Pelomas, who was heavily featured in some of the special bonus stories in volume 9, was finally able to enter the main arc. Unfortunately, volume 10 ended just as Beku was about to enter the story as well. Born as the eldest son of the massive nation of Albahal and blessed with an excellent Talent, he fell into despair, and despite his agony, struggled through life to make his decisions as a royal. I hope I was able to really convey the rocky life he's led. It also begs the question of who's the most popular: Beku, Zeu, or Shia?

I suspect Zeu's fairly popular since he had a starring role in the Rank S dungeon arc, but I'm excited about what Shia's going to do next. Rosalina also appeared, bringing the story one step closer to Macris. How will the Holy Fish get involved with Allen and his friends as they roam the Prostia Empire? Please look forward to the antics of Allen and Pelomas, the main character of the Prostia arc, as the threat of the Demon Lord Army looms over them. I hope you'll support the eleventh volume as well.

* * *

I guess it's customary by now that I throw in a little personal story during these afterwords, but I do have something related to

the ocean—fitting for a volume about Prostia. Allen was born in the small (relatively, since the kingdom itself is actually decently large) kingdom of Ratash as a serf and has traveled to Rohzenheim, Baukis, and other places around the world on his adventure. This time around, he went to the ocean floor, but as I was writing the Daemonism arc, I was already wondering where he would go next. He went to the Central Continent, Rohzenheim, Baukis, and the Galiatan Continent (where the Holy Land of Elmahl resides). Perhaps it would've been most natural for him to head to the Garlesian Continent and explore Albahal since it's the last unexplored continent for him.

I *did* think about just carrying on the story in a classic sense, having Allen go to Albahal, enter the Beast King Martial Arts Tournament with Shia, and all that jazz. But that was when I scrolled through X (Twitter at the time), and a certain illustration caught my eye. Mo, the illustrator for this series, had uploaded a drawing of a woman swimming in the sea. She was like a mermaid, gliding through the waters with fish, and it was a splendid illustration that really allowed Mo to strut their stuff.

Eureka! That was the inspiration I needed. And so, while writing the previous volume, I also tried to add *Tales of the Prostia Empire* into it, and wanted to create a setting where Pelomas would finally have his moment in the spotlight. An image alone doesn't warrant an entire story, though. Being a writer isn't so easy. Stories like mine are embedded in a world of fiction, but readers still expect a degree of reality.

I hope you can sense the hard work and resolve I'm putting into the Prostia Empire arc. I actually headed to Miyako-jima in Okinawa so that I could write it, and I wanted to really observe the ocean. I guess the personal story I'll share this time can be titled "Hamuo Heads to Miyako-jima."

It was August, meaning it was the middle of summer and terribly hot, and I stepped out of the airport. But I didn't head to my hotel with an AC, nor did I feel tempted to go to a nearby café to try the mango parfaits (mangoes were in season). No, I did what I felt was most important to me as a writer. That's right, I headed to the gift

shop via taxi to pick out some souvenirs for my editor at the publishing company. It's the best I could muster in hopes of forming social ties as I continued my series into its tenth volume. I believe small acts like that helped my series continue publication.

My editor is a handsome man and apparently loves to cook. Hmph, bet he just got that hobby to get popular with the ladie—Oops, sorry, didn't mean for my thoughts to spill out there. Anyhoo, I went to the gift shop and found some stuff like koregusu, an Okinawan sauce infused with wild chili peppers, as well as salt and other spices. I bought them all and sent them back to my home—I'd already told the people waiting back that I was sending some stuff. Since I've also got an editor in charge of the manga version of *Hell Mode*, I decided to send them awamori and other snacks in hopes that the adaptation will see the story through, which I imagine will mean it stretches to over thirty volumes.

With my most important mission complete, I headed to my hotel. I'd reserved a spot near the ocean so that I could get some inspiration from the sea. When I finished checking in, a flyer by the receptionist's table caught my eye.

"Is this a coconut crab tour?" I asked.

"That's right," was their reply. "You can enjoy the coconut crabs and spend a night under the starry sky. The tour's fully booked today, but I see an opening on Wednesday. Would you like to book a seat?"

"It must be a very popular tour. Yes, please."

"Certainly. Please head to the front of the hotel at around 7 p.m. A tour guide will be there."

I'd planned on doing some research at the Miyako-jima museum on Wednesday afternoon, and since the tour started at seven, I felt like I could make it work. I dropped my belongings at the hotel and called a taxi to take me to a popular restaurant serving Miyako soba noodles. It was made with two large chunks of bone-in meat and was simply the best when paired with beni shoga.

My stay in Miyako-jima would last five days, from Monday to Friday, and I wanted to eat well to prepare myself for the tough research schedule that awaited me. Tomorrow was Tuesday, and I'd

reserved a kayaking experience for the afternoon. I'd heard that I could enjoy the crystal clear waters atop a transparent kayak. I'd never kayaked before, so I was pretty excited!

On the morning of, after breakfast, I stayed in my room to write. I must never forget to write, even if I'm away on research. When afternoon rolled around, I decided to call for a taxi to head out. I could've rented a car to drive around, and I do have a license, but I've never really driven a car, so I decided to use a taxi for all my transportation needs. Miyako-jima was really convenient; within thirty minutes by taxi, I could be practically anywhere on the island.

The meeting point was at the shoreline twenty kilometers from my hotel, and so, like the day before, I called for a taxi. That was when I realized something was wrong. I'd called a taxi no problem just yesterday, but I couldn't get one now. Puzzled, I called another taxi company, but to no avail. In my haste, I called about ten companies before I finally managed to get someone on the line, but all they had for me was bad news. Apparently, a foreign tour boat had arrived, and all the nearby taxis were busy accommodating its passengers, meaning I couldn't call for one at this hour. I went to the hotel receptionist and asked if they could get me something, but no luck. Seconds ticked by, and my kayak experience was drawing near, but I was at a loss. That was when something in the corner of the hotel lobby caught my eye.

"Can I...borrow that bicycle?" I asked.

"Yes, we can lend these out to guests at our hotel for the day," the receptionist answered.

Remember, this was a summer afternoon in Miyako-jima. It was sweltering. I checked my phone to see how long it'd take me, and it was apparently over an hour of a trip.

"Please lend me the bicycle for the day," I said.

Since I couldn't find a taxi and had to get to the kayak experience, I rode that bicycle twenty kilometers to the shoreline. Anyway, I think I wrote a bit too much for this afterword. I'll write the second part of the story of my Miyako-jima trip in the next volume. Can I research in Miyako-jima and finish writing the Prostia

Empire arc? Please look forward to it.

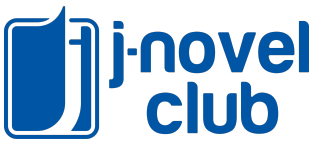
* * *

Along with the light novel, the manga version has also been going well, at its ninth volume! I'd be ecstatic if you'd enjoy the manga too. Let's meet again in the eleventh volume. I'll see you soon!

Finally made it to the coveted tenth volume!
Congratulations!
I hope everyone will continue to stick with us!

-Mo





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Hell Mode *The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing* Volume 10
by Hamuo

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