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WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?
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I Parry Everything: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter 31: The Advent of Ruin

Prince Rein had run himself ragged dashing around the royal capital, but rest and sleep were the last things on his mind. “There’s no time to spare,” he muttered to himself. “We *must* locate the pieces they’ve placed in waiting for us.”

The dozens of hidden threats lurking within the city had manifested themselves. The investigations unit had revealed the first with [Uncover], but now powerful monsters reared their heads all throughout the city, catalyzing such mayhem that the calm of that morning felt like a distant memory.

Fortunately, soldiers had already been dispatched to the locations of almost every hidden threat, and the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital, commanded by the Six Sovereigns of the Kingdom of Clays, were spread across the city in force. With a cohort of hired adventurers marshaled by the Adventurers Guild also providing their assistance, the newly appeared monsters were being dealt with appropriately.

The skirmishes happening across the city were hard fought, but a much worse outcome had been avoided thanks to Lynne and Noor’s report of a Goblin Emperor hidden under a [Concealment]. Cleanup parties had been formed based on their intelligence, and the overall conflict was going well as a result. Mercifully, though the number of injured was high, the deployment of clerics had proceeded successfully enough to have prevented any fatalities from occurring thus far.

The capital’s forces had evacuated as many citizens as possible to the safety of the western districts. Even if buildings were destroyed and the walls encircling the city were reduced to pitiful rubble, the royal capital would recover as long as its people survived. Thus, while things had devolved into mayhem, no significant damage had been done.

Not yet, at least.

“This isn’t over,” the prince whispered. “There has to be more to come.”

Their enemy, the Magic Empire, was blatantly attempting to destroy the Kingdom of Clays, and it was the prince's estimation that the attacks identified thus far were no more than *opening moves*. This was already an act of aggression on an unusual scale, but it was still only the groundwork; the Magic Empire would wait patiently for the right timing—when the Kingdom's military strength was spread thin—and only then would it trigger the next big wave.

That was what the prince would do in their position.

In essence, the prince played the same role as his current enemies, so he understood their methods far more keenly than he would have preferred. That was what made him so certain they had more waiting in store. However, that understanding did nothing to help with the problem he now faced: he knew that *something* was coming, but he didn't have the faintest idea *what*.

"Where?" the prince muttered. "Where will the next attack come from?"

He had spent the past day and night on his feet, and now his soles were worn and bloody. After entrusting Ines, the Divine Shield, with orders the previous evening—to take his sister Princess Lynneburg to the neighboring country of Mithra to seek refuge—the prince had set about running around in relentless pursuit of information that would help him get to the bottom of their current situation.

However, he hadn't found a single scrap of useful intelligence. Right now, the shadow company—the most elite intelligence unit in the Kingdom of Clays, spearheaded by the Sovereign of Shadows—was scouring the royal capital and its surroundings in a bloodshot-eyed frenzy. So as not to bring shame upon their reputation as the very best, they were conducting reconnaissance at a frankly absurd pace and had already searched through almost every locality in and around the city.

And yet, *they hadn't found anything.*

Fueled by his fatigue and anger, the prince's patience was at its limit. The enemy's attack would happen any moment now...but where would it come from? And what form would it take? He had no answers. No matter how desperately he looked, his efforts turned up no results.

In the city and all its surroundings, there was nowhere left to look. Alleyways

narrow enough that only rats could pass through them, the nearby woods that were home to monsters, the city's various dungeon-related facilities, the underground aqueducts—they had scoured every possible nook and cranny from top to bottom. An attack from above had seemed entirely possible too, so they had even searched the sky. But they had found nothing.

The prince had even begun to believe that there was nothing else left for them to do. Or maybe...

Maybe such an exhaustive search bearing no fruit only meant that his intuition had been off the mark. Nothing would make him happier than learning that his worries had been unfounded all along. Perhaps he was just being overly optimistic...but was it possible that there truly *was* nothing more to come?

Maybe it was because his exhaustion had finally become too much—or maybe it was because of some other reason entirely—but the prince allowed that meager hope to stop him in his tracks. Trying to catch his breath, he tilted his head back to look up at the sky...which was the exact moment he noticed the faintest trace of something *unusual,* far away at the bounds of what his eyes could see.

"What's that...?" the prince muttered.

The disturbance was no more than the smallest of tremors. At first, the prince tried to write it off as his weary eyes playing tricks on him, but he struggled to believe that was true. From what he could see, far up above, a portion of the clouds was trembling in a way that just barely seemed unnatural. And as he continued to observe it, the disturbance gradually increased.

"It can't be..."

Upon realizing his mistake, the prince ground his teeth with enough force to draw blood. He had been shortsighted. His time spent on the ground, scurrying here and there, had simply been a waste. He'd thought they had left no stone unturned in their search, but they'd had an enormous blind spot this entire time.

"So...it's coming from even higher up..."

The prince had already considered the danger of a wyvern attack from above

and issued orders to watch the sky as closely as possible. Unfortunately, there was a limit to how much they could monitor; even the farsighted Hunter Corps could only conduct detailed surveillance up to the height of the clouds at best. If the threat were to come from a place even higher than that...

“Then it would be the same as if we didn’t search at all.”

As the prince despaired at the error he’d made, the disturbance he was watching became larger by the moment. It was already obvious that *something* was there—a massive, rippling, indistinct silhouette. The next “piece” that the prince had so desperately searched for was now before his very eyes and drawing closer. The crisis that he’d been pursuing—to the point that it had made his eyes bloodshot—was *right there.*

“[Uncover]!”

Seeking to reveal the unknown danger hidden under the [Concealment] as soon as possible, the prince activated one of his own skills to tear away the transparent film. And then, with almost unsatisfying ease, there it was. A massive shadow was cast over the city, shocking him speechless.

“What...?” the prince finally eked out. “No. No, this can’t...”

Before him was a single, titanic being of a species anyone would recognize as one of the mightiest examples of monsterkind: a dragon. To make matters worse, it was no common specimen; it was an *Elder Dragon*, the apex of its species. And here it was, above the city.

The prince couldn’t bring himself to believe his own eyes. The sense of duty within him that fueled his desire to protect his kingdom reflexively rejected the truth.

Because what he was looking at embodied the complete destruction of the royal capital.

It was a dragon that all knew of yet none had ever laid eyes on—that none *should* ever lay eyes on: a dragon regarded as catastrophe itself.

“The Dragon of Calamity...”

When the prince finally accepted the reality of the situation, his shock

morphed into fury. “What are they thinking?!” he screamed amid the chaos that surrounded him. “That *thing* is beyond human ken, yet they would use it to their own ends?! Have they lost their minds?!”

The prince now found it exceedingly difficult to believe that his enemies were sane human beings. They had surely gone mad. How could they ever have done this otherwise?

“They would unleash that *thing* upon civilization...?”

The Dragon of Calamity was the oldest dragon in existence—an infamous monstrosity that mankind was never meant to disturb. Said to be more than thousands of years old, it was the subject of countless legends passed down over the ages. These stories, recorded in so many books, could only be described as fairy tales that bordered on nightmares. They told of innumerable tragedies that were hard to reconcile with reality.

However, there existed irrefutable evidence of the dragon’s atrocity-laden history: The aftermath of its breath, gouged into more mountains than one could count. The ruins of a great metropolis, said to have been leveled in a single night. A paltry lake, which was all that remained of a military fortress torn up on a whim.

Anyone who was familiar with such stories, even if only scarcely, would immediately recognize what the appearance of this living legend meant.

A slight movement from the Dragon of Calamity could shatter a mountain with ease—and if the monster flexed its tail in sport, a man-made castle of stone would crumble effortlessly. In the face of this great threat, a single question prevailed in the prince’s mind.

Why?

According to books that detailed the ancient history of the continent, although the Dragon of Calamity was a monstrous, unmanageable disaster once awoken, it would only rampage for a short while before falling back into a slumber. These dormant periods were known to last hundreds of years, which meant that, by staying far away during its active periods, people were able to coexist with the dragon, if not exactly live alongside it.

According to those same records, it had only been about 150 years since the Dragon of Calamity—which was black in color—was last awake. Its next active period shouldn't have arrived for another two hundred years or so, yet here it was before the prince's eyes, its massive frame suspended in the air by its flapping wings.

"No..." the prince muttered. "Don't tell me they intentionally woke it up. That would be absurd..."

Hundreds of years ago, a single brush with the Dragon of Calamity had almost reduced the entire continent to ruin. As the story went, a certain greedy man had plucked a scale from the dragon while it slept, seeking to exchange it for some trifling sum of coin. This careless act had awoken the monster, which had then flown into a rage and started reducing all the settlements in the area to cinders.

The rampage described in the books had ended up lasting ten whole years, and scars of the tragedy still remained all over the continent. Naturally, people had died in droves, and every country that had existed at the time had been brought to ruin.

Mankind took from this indescribable catastrophe a valuable lesson: never disturb the Dragon of Calamity.

And so, hoping to prevent such a foolish act from ever being committed again, those who had experienced the calamity documented their harrowing memories using every method available to them. These records were passed down from one generation to the next, all so that mankind would never again be at the mercy of that monster so far beyond its ken.

Yet, despite it all...

"They would go to such lengths for a mere conflict between people? How *stupid* must they be?!" the prince exclaimed. "Have they learned *nothing* from the past? This is a line that should never be crossed. How are they incapable of understanding something so simple?!"

There was nothing mankind could do when faced with the Dragon of Calamity. Its arrival meant the annihilation of an entire region. "Civilization's End" was another one of its names, and there was no shortage of examples of

the countries it had destroyed. To the dragon, works of man built over untold generations of human history were easily torn down like mere constructs made of sand.

And now, that legendary being was flying calmly in the sky above the city, headed for the royal castle where the prince's father was.

"This is the end," the prince whispered. "It's all over..."

The dragon's ominous form drove him to despair, robbing him of the strength to even stand. It was clear to him now: today would mark the final day of the history of the Kingdom of Clays. The Dragon of Calamity was beyond human control. There was nothing that could be done. No person in existence could revert the current situation.

After all, this was reality. Only in some wild fantasy would a hero conveniently appear to save the day.

"No... Get a hold of yourself!"

Mustering the last dregs of his willpower, the prince put strength into his legs and stood. This wasn't over yet. The situation wasn't hopeless. There was still more he could do. Right now, at this very moment, he needed to act.

And so, after taking in a deep breath, the prince began issuing orders to the liaison officer who was frozen in place at his side.

"Move everybody in the evacuation area outside the city at once—*everybody*! Drag them if you have to! Just get them out! Abandon all possessions, and leave not a single soul behind! Am I understood?!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Immediately upon receiving the prince's bellowed orders, the liaison officer dashed away to relay them. The prince broke into a full sprint so that he could do the same for his other subordinates, even as he despaired over the giant shadow rippling in the sky above his head.

The battle taking place within the Kingdom of Clays was no longer a fight to protect the royal capital—it was a rush to abandon the city and survive.

Chapter 32: The Road Home to the Royal Capital

“We’re almost there, Instructor.”

“Yeah. I can just barely make it out.”

The coach in which Ines, the demonfolk boy Rolo, Instructor Noor, and I rode hurried toward the royal capital. We had maintained full speed since starting on our return journey, and though I knew we were working our horse too hard, its persistence had gotten us within view of the capital in less than half the time we’d spent traveling toward Mithra.

The sight of the city left me at a loss for words—I could tell that something was off. Ines, who was at the reins, looked tense as she scowled at the smoke rising from the capital.

“I knew it...” I said. “Something’s wrong.”

The wind carried to us the smell of something burning. Black smoke drifted upward from the capital. Even from this distance, it looked awful. The plumes weren’t rising from just one or two locations either; they were coming from all over the extensive bounds of the city. It was as though every district was enveloped in flames.

As I gazed upon the ominous sight growing ever nearer, I swallowed my breath and whispered, “To think things were this bad...”

I knew full well why my brother wanted me far away from the city, but his desires were irrelevant in the face of this situation. The fact that I had considered it acceptable to run away on my own... The shame at my own thoughtlessness struck me anew.

“Hmm? What’s that?” Instructor Noor muttered. He was looking up at the sky, a puzzled expression on his face. Evidently, he’d spotted something...but his gaze was directed so far up that he was staring more or less directly overhead.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Look, up there,” he replied. “Can’t you see it? I think something’s there.”

“Above the clouds...?”

“Yeah, look.”

Instructor Noor pointed at a spot far up above the clouds, right over the city. No matter how much I strained my eyes, I couldn’t see anything.

“I’m afraid I can’t—”

Surprise stifled my words. As I fixed my gaze in the direction Instructor Noor was pointing, I gradually began to make out *something* in the hazy sky above the city. A subtle tremor that I could only describe as the slightest of disturbances. Little by little, it appeared to be descending toward the ground.

“You’re right...” I said. “There *is* something there.”

It was moving. I could see a rippling mass of some kind that almost blanketed the entire section of sky above the city.

“That can’t be a living thing, can it?” I murmured. “It’s too...”

Despite everything, I doubted my own eyes. Whatever I was beholding seemed abnormally large, especially compared to the buildings I could see in the distance. It was too big to be something living—far too big.

A moment later, we *all* swallowed our breaths.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

We had been gazing at the sky, surprised, when *it* appeared out of nowhere. Someone somewhere had probably used [Uncover] on the rippling mass, and what I saw as the transparent film peeled away almost rendered me speechless.

“No...”

The sight of a titanic dragon flying above the royal capital dumbfounded me—and it was because I recognized it that my daze was all the more paralyzing. The behemoth looked exactly like the infamous Dragon of Calamity, the likeness of which was described and depicted not just in the records of legends, but also in picture books, reference books, grimoires, chronicles, and pretty much every

other kind of text that existed.

“It can’t be...” I said. “Truly?”

The Dragon of Calamity. Its appearance guaranteed the complete and utter annihilation of the surrounding region. But such forebodings were irrelevant now; no matter whether one knew the legends or believed this was the true Dragon of Calamity, the scene before my eyes made the fate of our land all too clear.

The titanic dragon that loomed over half of the city moved leisurely through the sky...toward the royal castle. As I watched from the coach, a small “No!” escaped me.

The royal castle of the Kingdom of Clays had originally been built similarly to a fortress, and in times of emergency, it served as a command center from which my father—the highest authority in the Kingdom’s military—could issue orders to its surroundings.

If my father ran away now, it was possible that he would make it out in time. His physical ability was more than enough for him to escape...but I knew that he would never choose to. From the look of things, I thought it likely that much of the citizenry was still within the city. In a situation where they had to be evacuated, my father would always stay to act as their shield.

After all, he was himself one of the greatest military assets in the city and the Kingdom, as well as one of the strongest individuals *in the entire world.* Although he had retired from active duty, he showed no signs of having weakened, and with him were the Six Sovereigns, whose combat prowess made them worthy of their titles.

I already knew what was going to happen: my father the king would lead the Six Sovereigns into a direct confrontation with the Dragon of Calamity, all so that as many people as possible could escape the city.

But even so...

“Please...run...” I whispered.

No matter how much of a veteran and hero my father was, he was no match for his opponent. All that awaited him was certain death. The city would fall,

and its king would die. The Kingdom of Clays would—

“A dragon, huh? This is my first time seeing one. They’re so big.”

My mind had been full of nothing but projections of the worst, but Instructor Noor’s voice brought me back to my senses. Amid my inner turmoil, I mustered all of my effort to speak in the calmest tone I could manage.

“My father is over there. If that dragon reaches him—”

My next words caught in my throat and stayed there.

“Should I go help him?” Instructor Noor asked.

“No, I...fear it is already too late.”

I wondered why I had even bothered to state the obvious. What could possibly come of telling Instructor Noor about my father? We were still far away from the city—there was nothing we could do from where we were. And even supposing we *did* reach him, we would still be powerless to change anything.

“I’m pretty sure I can just barely make it,” Instructor Noor said. “If I run, that is.”

I stared at him in surprise. “Truly? From so far away?”

“Yeah.”

From what I could tell, he was entirely serious.

“If you do the same thing you did when we fought that goblin, I think I can get there in time,” he finished, speaking as though it were the easiest feat in the world.

Although my thoughts were preoccupied with my unease, his words reached me. He couldn’t possibly mean...

“Do you mean my [Windblast]?” I asked. “I suppose I can use it, yes, b-but...”

The spell wasn’t supposed to be used in such a manner. Back then, I’d only fired it at Instructor Noor’s back because the dire situation had demanded it. Moreover, he had just fought back-to-back intense battles against a Black Death Dragon and Deadman Zadu, which were bound to have drained him considerably. How could I ask him to head straight toward the Dragon of

Calamity?

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’ll only get in the way if I go...” Instructor Noor began. He was the picture of calm, as though the current situation didn’t bother him at all. Smiling at me, he raised the Black Blade in one hand as he continued, “But there’s still a chance that I’ll be able to do *something* to help. That city’s done a lot for me—and so has your dad—so I’d like to do what I can.”

At that moment, I remembered just *who* was standing before me.

“You’re...right,” I said.

Just like that, my hesitation was gone. Why had I ever doubted whether we could make it in time? *Of course* we could. After all, Instructor Noor had just said so. My decision was immediate—I would do everything in my power to get him there.

[Windblast] was an advanced, wind-attributed offensive spell. Ordinarily, it wasn’t supposed to be fired at people; it was high-class lethal magic that contained enough force to blow away an entire stone fortress or, on a direct hit, blast the average monster into tiny pieces. That was why, back in the forest, I had been so hesitant about using it on Instructor Noor. Even after agreeing to his plan, I didn’t think I’d put even half of my strength into the spell...

But I wouldn’t hold back anymore. There was no need to. Last time, Instructor Noor had walked away without so much as a single scratch on him. A spell that would have seriously injured anyone else had to him been no more than a helpful tailwind. And that wasn’t all—*everything* about him deviated from the norm. My narrow-minded common sense couldn’t take his measure. So, to live up to his expectations, I prepared myself, body and soul, to fire a [Windblast].

There was no need for any hesitation or restraint. Not when the person in front of me was none other than my Instructor Noor.

“All right,” I said. “Ines, lend me a hand.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

Following the orders I gave her, Ines used her [Divine Shield] to create multiple barriers of light. She then formed them into a single cylinder, which she placed on its side. I got Instructor Noor to stand at one end, which was

pointing toward the royal capital, while I stood with both of my hands on the other.

“Here I go,” I said. “The impact will be incomparably stronger than last time. Do forgive me.”

“What?”

The next instant, I put all of my focus into preparing myself. I would need to gather all of my mana and fire it at Instructor Noor’s back.

I formed multiple instances of [Magic Barrier] on the palms of my hands and—as an extra precaution—gave each a coating of [Reflect] and [Reflect Magic]. My [Windblast] was going to be amplified and compressed by Ines’s cylindrical [Divine Shield], an absolute protective barrier, so I needed to be ready for the impact.

Next, to maximize the output of my spell, I layered on [Enhance], [Charge], and [Burst], then used [Condense] to compress the mana I had gathered in my palms. At the same time, to dramatically increase its power, I activated [Multicast]—a skill that Instructor Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had taught me. Three spells in each hand was the limit of what I could currently manage. Adding both hands together meant I was capable of a sixfold casting.

I was focused on the upcoming task—on firing every single speck of power through Ines’s cylinder of light and into Instructor Noor’s back. This was the absolute limit of what I could do, at least insofar as what I’d been able to think up on the spot.

In the time that it took me to take a single, deep breath, I’d completed all of the preparations. This was as far as my ability could take me. At best, it would only break the speed of sound; it wouldn’t be enough to reach the Dragon of Calamity. But with Instructor Noor in the equation...

“Here I go...” I said. “[Windblast].”

I fired my sixfold-cast spell, enhanced with everything I had. Almost immediately, I felt a tremendous impact through both of my hands as they were violently blown away from the cylinder of light. The bones in them had shattered, and Instructor Noor, who had taken the spell directly in his back...

Had vanished without a trace. It was as though he had simply disappeared into thin air.

“Instructor...?”

Not even a beat later, a large crater appeared in the road leading toward the royal capital. Then another, and another still. The massive depressions emerged in quick succession, like a giant leaving footsteps in its wake, and the earth between them split apart, creating a lengthy fissure which stretched toward the city like a bolt of lightning.

The ground juddered and rocked, and all the trees within my field of vision shook as if they had been struck by a terribly violent earthquake. From the sheer force of the vibrations, it felt like a vast meteorite had crashed into the earth.

At the same time, far off in the distance, I saw something leap high into the air. It was the silhouette of a person, wielding a sword in one hand.

“May fortune favor you, Instructor.”

The shape continued straight ahead. Then, in the blink of an eye, it vanished into the backdrop cast by the Dragon of Calamity in the sky above the royal capital.

Chapter 33: The King's Final Moments

From the highest point in the capital, the king looked out over the city he ruled. The royal castle's spire had been constructed to facilitate the issuing of citywide orders during emergencies, and from it one could clearly grasp the state of the surroundings.

Thick black smoke as far as the eye could see. Houses, churches, and marketplaces engulfed in flame. The sheer number of homes that had been destroyed was beyond counting, and the sounds of furious combat could be heard from all over the city. And in the sky, there was the titanic black dragon that had appeared out of thin air.

The king stared, burning the images into his mind. "So this is the 'trifle' he spoke of?" he wondered aloud. "How poorly I have judged his character. I never imagined that he would resort to such a blatant use of force."

"He" was Emperor Deridas III, the ruler of the Magic Empire. As the king gazed at the approaching dragon, he ruminated over the final—and failed—negotiations he'd had with the emperor several days prior, as well as the man's final parting words.

"Such absurdity they would try to force down our throats," the king muttered. "Relinquish our dungeon and all of its resources? Preposterous."

For the Kingdom of Clays, acceding to such a demand would be equivalent to closing the book on a thousand years of storied history.

Unlike the three nations that bordered it, the Kingdom of Clays was small. It was less than a tenth of the size of one of its neighbors, and its natural resources—waterways, mines, forests, and more—were scarce. Despite all this, it had a sole, critical asset: the Dungeon of the Lost, said to be the oldest dungeon in the world. It had been by trading the ancient relics and magical tools found within and enriching its treasury, and also by maximizing the use of most of its territory as farmland, that the Kingdom had managed to sustain itself throughout history despite its meager size.

The Dungeon of the Lost was the reason why the royal capital was called “the Adventurer’s Holy Land.” It was also the origin point of the Kingdom’s founding. Even after countless generations, it stood as the core of the Kingdom’s economy and a keystone of the people’s livelihoods. Every citizen in the land benefited greatly from its gifts.

Yet the Empire had demanded everything. For the Kingdom, conceding wouldn’t have just impacted the lives of the populace—it would have guaranteed the collapse of the very Kingdom itself. The emperor had been fully aware of this, but he had made the demand anyway.

Deridas III was mad with greed...but the king still remembered a time when that hadn’t been the case. Although the emperor’s tendency to make outrageous demands hadn’t changed, the man had once been perfectly capable of reaching common ground. At the very least, the king’s impression of him had been that he was a ruler who balanced ambition against reason.

However, the emperor grew older, and each year took a greater toll on him than the last. Backed by his empire’s sophisticated industrial technologies, he had annexed the neighboring nations that possessed dungeons and zealously used their ancient relics and magical tools to raise the Empire’s research to even greater heights. And with each successful reproduction of such resources, the Empire’s might—both armed and political—had become greater.

That was when the emperor truly changed. He stopped hiding his greed and ambition, and became a man who scorned even the idea of maintaining the equilibrium between his empire and its neighbors. Perhaps he’d considered such notions to be unnecessary after acquiring the power to enforce his selfish desires.

As the Empire had grown in strength and thrown its weight around with increasing frequency, the Kingdom’s other two neighbors had started to follow suit. A nonaggression pact was formed between Deridas, Mithra, and Sarenza, then the three nations proceeded to annex the smaller territories within their reach in a brazen grab for natural resources, political influence, and armed might.

“Do they truly crave power so dearly?”

The focus of the three nations, as well as the source of the Magic Empire's might, were dungeons and the resources found within them. From their depths, one could recover any number of earthshaking relics, many of which were without equal in their usefulness when it came to invading another country. If the proper research was invested into them, they could even be reproduced, augmenting a nation's military might and making war a trifling affair.

Such was the dark path that Deridas III had decided to follow—and even now, he showed no signs of straying from it. Considering his immense greed, it was no surprise that he now wanted the Dungeon of the Lost so desperately; he was convinced that it would grant him even more power.

But what good would come of perpetuating such a cycle? Power existed to ensure the happiness of a nation's citizens. Keeping that power in check and only wielding it when necessary was a perfectly valid way to rule too.

However, when the king had voiced that belief, the emperor had sneered.

"Such notions are why you have been eternally stagnant, stuck as the ruler of a tiny kingdom. You were never fit to be a king."

And the emperor's tirade hadn't ended there.

"'Crushing a tiny kingdom such as yours would be a mere trifle. If you fail to accept my terms, do so having made peace with your fate,'" the king repeated, remembering the threat. "Hmm. A man of his word, that emperor."

The king had understood that the emperor was dangerous. He had expected him to devise some kind of scheme, but this massacre... Not only had it come sooner than the king had ever anticipated, but it was also more merciless and much grander in scale.

Although the emperor had made his intentions perfectly clear, deep down, the king hadn't taken him seriously. He had been convinced that the man was still human—that he only wanted the Dungeon of the Lost beneath the Kingdom, and that he was merely indifferent to all of the culture and history residing above it.

Perhaps the man had been right, and the king wasn't fit to rule. King Clays was a stubborn man, and politics had never suited him. It was much more his

nature to mindlessly swing his sword than to order his vassals about. Even just a short while ago, he had been running around the city, combating the monster outbreak—he'd slain three Goblin Emperors himself.

But that had been the most that the king's aging body could manage. He'd left the rest to his vassals and his son Prince Rein, choosing to ascend to the royal castle's spire so that he could fully dedicate himself to the role of coordinator, observing the battlefield and adjusting the positions of his troops. However...

"This is where my reign ends..."

The truth was, it was Prince Rein at the helm of this situation. After the prince's coming-of-age at fifteen, the king had entrusted him with the command of the Kingdom's intelligence operations and domestic affairs, in the hope that the roles would help him gain experience as the successor to the throne—and the prince had quickly exceeded the king's expectations.

Seeing this, the king had then given the prince the authority to command the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital, along with orders to slay a thunder dragon. The prince had achieved the task with splendid skill—beyond the king's wildest expectations, in fact.

The king knew that his son had already far surpassed him. The Kingdom no longer needed King Clays to flourish.

Due to the prince's excellent foresight, the current crisis had been prepared for well in advance. Prince Rein's orders to evacuate the citizens had also been timely and well judged, by the king's reckoning. Casualties had been kept to a minimum so far, and although cleanup of the monster outbreak was an uphill battle, the Kingdom's forces were steadily making ground. Perhaps they even had the upper hand now.

In contrast to the situation, however, the king was in a sorry state.

"It was my failure that led to all of this. I do not even have the right to beg their forgiveness."

The Dragon of Calamity loomed before the king's eyes, steadily drawing closer. It was the worst crisis a nation could ever face—the embodiment of despair itself, a symbol of ruin spoken of in legends across the entire continent

—and it had been brought here by the king's misstep in negotiations with the emperor. As he gazed at its titanic silhouette, a sudden thought occurred to him.

If only they were here with me now.

Sig, the Sword Sovereign.

Dandalg, the Shield Sovereign.

Mianne, the Bow Sovereign.

Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows.

Oken, the Spell Sovereign.

Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation.

The Six Sovereigns were the king's vassals and good friends, with whom he had fought many a life-and-death battle. They were comrades he could trust like no other. Had they been here with him now, then perhaps there would have been a sliver of hope to the situation.

But the Six were currently scattered across the city. To quell the chaos as quickly as possible, they had been dispatched to separate districts to take command of their own respective battlefields.

Things were no longer how they had used to be. The Six now held major posts within the framework of the Kingdom—a Kingdom that could not afford to have all of its best assets tied down in a single place.

The king thought back on what he'd already long since realized—that the sequence of chaotic events that had engulfed the city in the flames of war had likely been no more than a large-scale diversion meant to keep apart the Six Sovereigns, the Kingdom's main military assets.

Although the king had been fully aware of this, going along with the diversion had been the only way to protect the lives of his people. Thus, he did not regret having ordered the Six to separate to manage the cleanup effort. At the end of the day, the enemy had simply been two steps ahead.

However...the king had never expected the Empire to be so merciless in its choice of methods.

“Truly, I have committed an irredeemable wrong.”

Overcome with regret, the king apologized to his people, who had graciously followed their foolish ruler; to his son and daughter, to whom he hadn’t been able to bequeath the realm he so dearly loved; and to the Kingdom, the storied history of which would soon come to an end as a result of his failure.

The king drew his longsword from its scabbard at his hip, and silently held it at the ready. “Though it is no atonement for what I’ve done, I can at least take one of its eyes with me.”

A single eye from the legendary Dragon of Calamity... The king thought he could manage that much, so long as he staked his life on the attempt. Slaying it was an impossibility, but he’d at least give it a scar to remember him by.

With that in mind, and with death before his very eyes, the king suddenly realized that his own blood was boiling. The sensation was nostalgic—a reminder of the time when he’d been no more than a mere adventurer dungeon-delving with his companions. He smiled wryly at the realization.

“Not fit to be a king indeed.”

Simply standing here like this, sword at the ready, was far more suitable for a man such as him. Because as foolish as he was, he could still take an eye for an eye—though he would be giving up much, much more in this exchange. Tightening his grip on his weapon, he walked to the balcony’s edge, one slow step after another, preparing to strike his final blow.

But the king was stopped in his tracks. The Dragon of Calamity had opened its maw wide, giving him a clear view of the blinding light within.

“I was hoping to get a single blow in, at least...but it seems you won’t even permit me that.”

The dragon was intending to let loose its legendary breath weapon, the Light of Destruction. According to legends, the attack had reduced mountains to dust, incinerated countries, and reverted cities to barren plains. And now, after a single look, he knew those stories were more than just fables.

The light in the dragon’s maw was so mana-dense that space appeared to warp around it. Just as the legends claimed, it would bring nothing but absolute

destruction. No amount of magical barriers would provide any consolation. The moment the dragon unleashed its breath attack, the king would be reduced to dust—and the entire city along with him.

At this realization, the king abandoned all thoughts of resistance.

“I’m sorry, Lynne.”

Instead, faced with his own death, he focused on his daughter Lynneburg.

The king knew that Prince Rein, concerned for his sister’s life, had sent Lynne away to the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, where she had once studied as a child. But he also knew that even if she made it there safely, many hardships still awaited her. Mithra had allied itself with the Magic Empire. It was the safest of the Kingdom’s three neighbors, but that didn’t mean very much at all.

The king was well aware of what lay at the end of the road for royalty of a fallen nation.

But at the same time, Lynne was with Noor, the man to whom he had given the Black Blade. Perhaps, by having someone so immensely capable by her side, she would manage to avoid such a terrible fate. Rein surely thought the same; he had sent Ines, the Divine Shield, who had served as Lynne’s bodyguard since the girl was a child, on the journey with them. If there was one final prayer the king could make—one last thought he would have occupy his mind—it was that his daughter would survive and go on to live a happy life.

The king was astonished at himself. His kingdom was on the verge of ruin, yet his greatest concern was his daughter’s safety. Truly, he was unfit to rule.

“Nevertheless...I should at least spend my final moments being true to my duty.”

The king cast his beloved longsword aside and drew forth the Blasting Sword, one of the dungeon relics in his possession, imbuing it with all of his mana as he prepared to leap into the maw of the dragon before him. He would stake everything on this next strike.

Even if the king couldn’t take one of the dragon’s eyes, he would use the final moment before his body disintegrated to stop it from firing its breath. The rest he could leave to his capable son and vassals. They would find a way—he was

sure of it.

“Come, dragon. I’ll show you what mankind is made of.”

A glaringly brilliant light shone deep within the beast’s maw, warping the space around it. The legendary Dragon of Calamity was on the verge of unleashing the Light of Destruction. But before it could—

Out of the corner of his eye, the king saw *something* shoot into his field of vision.

“What...?”

Soundlessly and at an unbelievable speed, it flew straight toward the Dragon of Calamity...

[Parry]

And then the behemoth’s head snapped straight upward.



Simultaneously, the abundance of condensed mana in the dragon’s mouth

formed a single ray of light and fired into the sky above the city, tearing through the clouds. The beam drew an arc through the air before landing upon a distant plain like a fallen star, bathing the entire area in white.

Then, after a delay, the shock wave hit. The resulting windstorm flattened houses of wood and brick in an instant, and even scattered stone buildings to the wind as though they were leaves. The radiant glare that accompanied it seared the king's eyes.

But even within the violent storm of light and wind, the king could see the dragon as it started falling headfirst out of the sky, its body limp. And accompanying the beast on its descent through the whirling debris was a man who looked vaguely familiar, holding fast the sword that had once been a constant companion to the king on his adventures.

Chapter 34: I Parry a Dragon

The dragon was confused. Why was it falling out of the sky? Why was the ground steadily approaching from above?

Seeing the insolent, puny eyesores below had made the dragon want to erase them with its prided light, so that was exactly what it had done. Or so it thought...

But, no, it *must* have obliterated them. After all, its light—the destruction of all things—was right there before its eyes, dazzlingly radiant.

So...why?

The dragon had fired its breath attack directly at one of the puny beings below—an insignificant speck that had dared to act hostile.

So why was its light now careering through the sky?

Why was the dragon *falling*, gazing at it from below?

As the dragon observed the inverted sky, it wondered to itself. Even as it struck the ground and shattered the earth with a thunderous roar, its back covered in scales harder than pure quartz flattening the stone buildings in its wake, it struggled to understand.

What had just happened?

Suspicion occupied the dragon's thoughts. This was wrong. It was almost as though something had sent *it* flying through the air, not the other way around.

Dust and debris scattered as the dragon, still puzzling over its conundrum, returned to its feet. Then, among the murky cloud, it noticed a certain figure: one of the puny beings, holding something akin to a black needle. It was the very same being the dragon had caught a glimpse of moments before firing its light.

The being stood silently atop the storm-blasted earth, gazing at the dragon.

Ah, thought the dragon. *Here it is.* This thing *is to blame. This puny mite was the cause of what happened to me. It covered my beautiful, prided scales in*

dust, and for that, it cannot be allowed to exist.

The dragon had found the answer to its questions, and immediately it flew into a rage. It felt no pain at all, nor were there any wounds on its body...but it still refused to overlook the tiny creature's misdeed.

In truth, the dragon didn't know *what* the creature had done, or how it had done it. But somehow, using some cheap trick or another, it had stopped the dragon from acting as it pleased. Convinced of this, the dragon seethed with fury.

This cannot be ignored.

The dragon let loose a frenzied roar that rocked the earth and shook the sky. There was no particular reason for its anger. Anything that got in the dragon's way would be trampled into powder. Anything that opposed it would be torn to shreds and chewed upon until the dragon was satisfied. These reactions were etched so deeply into its soul that they were almost instinctual. If the dragon so wished, it could crush every puny being in the area so finely that not a trace of them would remain. After living for thousands of years, it knew this was the absolute truth.

And so, without hesitation, the dragon swung its vaunted claws—each several times larger than one of the puny beings—down at the unpleasant creature before its eyes. It wanted nothing more than to crush the nuisance, so it readily indulged that urge, but...

[Parry]

Again, the dragon couldn't understand what had happened. In the past, its claws had ripped through mountains, reduced the puny beings' fortresses to ruin, and even torn irritating members of its own species to shreds. The tiny being should have been reduced to an equally tiny stain, but the dragon's claws had instead been *turned aside*, whereupon they struck the earth with a deafening *boom*.

Such an outcome was impossible.

The dragon turned, intent on making its next strike with its massive, prided tail. This grand appendage had beat even the dragon's most resilient brethren

into a pulp; one small, insolent creature didn't stand a chance.

So, the dragon spun in a wide arc and brought its glorious tail—clad in scales far harder than iron—around with all its might, crushing hundreds of the puny beings' dwellings and reducing stone walls to rising clouds of dust in the process. Then, taking pleasure in the clamor of the destruction, it thrust its tail straight at the tiny eyesore.

Delight filled the dragon's heart, for it knew the mite wouldn't be able to put up any resistance.

[Parry]

Suddenly, the dragon felt out of place. Only when its senses caught up did it realize that it was, for some reason, now flat on its back.

The dragon was confused and clueless as to what had just happened. Then, it was racked with doubt. After an attack from its prided tail, the creature should have been reduced to nothing...so why was it still standing there?

To make matters worse, the puny being looked *calm*, as though nothing had happened at all. It was merely waiting in place, still holding that tiny black object so similar to the worthless needles the other tiny ones loved so dearly.

The dragon pondered the strange situation. What was happening? *How* was it happening? But no matter how it considered things, something was wrong. The world it looked upon was full of contradictions. The weak did not defy the strong, and the dragon was the embodiment of absolute strength...yet it was almost as if that puny being had just *repelled* its tail. And with minimal effort!

No, that couldn't be. Such a thing was impossible. Some kind of accident was surely to blame.

Then, a realization struck the dragon: It should have used its light—its greatest weapon and pride—from the beginning. It should have unleashed its breath.

The dragon opened its maw wide, focusing the tremendous amount of mana it had accumulated during its hundreds of years spent asleep in its throat. Nearby space warped under the pressure. The mana at the back of the dragon's throat swelled and grew blisteringly hot. Although the behemoth did not have

the facial muscles to express its emotions, it was smiling deep down.

This was it. There would be—no, there *could be* no more accidents. There was simply no chance for them to occur. After all, during the thousands of years that the dragon had existed, no living thing had ever escaped the annihilation of its light. This would be the end of this puny being. It was the ultimate fate of the fool who had opposed the dragon—the apex of all life.

The dragon's faith in itself was unshakeable. The surging mana in the back of its throat converged into a critical mass until...

From the dragon's maw burst forth a radiant light—an attack that had incinerated the dragon's enemies for thousands of years, reduced so many mountain ranges and even countries to naught, and altered the very shape of the earth. And this destructive force was focused on a single, puny being.

"Groooaaarrr!"

In the blink of an eye, the surroundings were dyed white as a single ray of mana—bearing the promise of the certain destruction of all that it touched—shot from the dragon's mouth straight toward the insignificant eyesore that was its target.

The dragon knew that no matter what happened, this would be the end. But as it basked in its own conviction and delight...

[Parry]

The dragon's prided light, which had been imbued with all of its strength, was abruptly deflected upward. It shot far off into the distant sky before landing and creating a meaningless crater somewhere farther than the eye could see.

Why?

Why...was this happening?

Then, the dragon finally understood. There was no room left for doubt. It was the puny being. *It* had interfered with the breath attack, leaving the dragon's appetite for destruction and devastation unsated.

At long last, the dragon admitted it: this eyesore—this puny being—was an enemy. Despite its species, it was an unpleasant existence powerful enough to

be considered a nuisance—and in its arrogance, it was now standing before the dragon as an opponent.

Knowing this, the dragon flew into an even greater rage. Such vexation needed to be dealt with.

No longer did the dragon want the delight of tormenting this puny being. All that mattered was annihilating it entirely. It would tear the mite apart, chew it to pieces, and then trample it underfoot, over and over again, until neither flesh nor bone remained. On the horizon was complete and utter destruction, for that was the unavoidable fate of all who defied the dragon. No creature had ever proved to be an exception to this rule, and neither would this one.

Yes, that was what the dragon would do. That was what it *needed* to do.

“GRRRROOOOAAAARRRR!!!”

As the dragon bellowed, its deep-seated yearning for destruction and devastation awakened. It made use of all of the might at its disposal to unleash a barrage of varied blows, all to crush its eyesore of a foe. It no longer cared whether it injured itself in the process; as long as it could destroy the runt that had proved so unpleasant, nothing else mattered.

Each one of the dragon’s blows gouged furrows into the ground and violently shook the earth, causing every one of the puny beings’ dwellings in sight to collapse. Dictated by its own impulses, the dragon was destroying everything it laid its eyes upon.

At times like this, all the dragon needed to do was surrender to its urges. When its consciousness finally resurfaced, everything would be over; its surroundings would be no more than a pleasant expanse of rubble. And after it had destroyed everything and improved its mood, it would return to its bed, where it would leisurely enjoy another several-hundred-year slumber.

As unusual as this exchange had been, it would end no differently from the rest—of that, the dragon was certain. And as it gave into its impulses once again, it returned to basking in its own delight.

[Parry]

But as the dragon continued its assault on the puny creature, its rage and

delight gradually transformed into less certain emotions. Suspicion. Doubt. Confusion. As it watched the mite wielding its tiny black needle, it couldn't help but feel perplexed. How was the nuisance still alive? Hadn't the dragon just attacked with all of its might? Indeed, it had. So why had its foe not died? Why was the eyesore still moving?

And...why were the dragon's great claws and scales—far harder than iron and pure quartz, and impervious to even diamond—so badly wounded? They should have been impossible to damage, but in their current state, one would think they were as brittle as a block of wood. The dragon had never experienced such a thing before.

That was when the dragon noticed yet another abnormality: this entire time, the puny being hadn't exuded even a speck of killing intent. Not once had it even pretended to attack. It was almost as if the creature didn't recognize the dragon as an enemy, despite the reverse being very much true.

In a similar vein, the dragon had always dismissed the nuisances that appeared before it, bearing hostile intent, as wholly insignificant. Their attacks hadn't been able to cause it any pain at all, so it had merely left them to do as they pleased. After all, when the right time came, the dragon could crush them as its mood dictated.

During those kinds of encounters—of which there had been many—the dragon hadn't even felt any animosity toward the creatures. They had simply been too weak to be considered enemies. Yet during this engagement, wherein the dragon was swinging its claws down in one attack after another, it was almost as though...

As though the dragon was the weak one, swiping at the strong.

The dragon was furious. It was in disbelief. Such arrogance from one of the puny beings could never be permitted. It was the privilege of the strong.

The dragon's pride—its instinct as an absolute existence that had known nothing but victory for thousands of years—roused from where it was etched in the deepest recesses of its body. Obeying its demands, the dragon attacked with its prided fangs, which were harder than anything and capable of crushing even diamond.

In response, the puny being gripped its black needle tight and calmly awaited the attack.

[Parry]

The dragon heard an unpleasant *crack* as its fangs were struck and broken at their bases. Then, its neck was abruptly twisted upward, giving it another view of the sky as it pathetically crashed toward the ground.

Confusion overcame the dragon. The impact of its landing had split the earth, and as it sank into the rubble, it ruminated over what had just occurred.

The dragon's rage had already passed, making way for doubt and then conviction as it was finally made to realize the truth.

This world was ruled by those with power. The strong commanded the weak, and the weak had to obey without question. This was the fundamental truth of the world of dragons—the sole, instinctual rule of their species.

And so the dragon, being what it was, had no choice but to obey its impulses and admit the truth: That right now, *it* was the weak one. That, as the loser, it was forced to submit.

Thus, in accordance with its instincts, the dragon acted in a manner befitting a loser. It laid its neck and stomach flat on the ground, head nuzzled against the earth, and closed its eyes as though leaving itself to the mercy of the puny being before it.



Then, the dragon stopped moving. For the first time in its life, it had assumed

the posture of *submission*.

Chapter 35: Battle on the Streets of the Capital

As far as the eye could see, smoke rose in massive pillars. The royal castle that had once stood so tall had crumbled away with barely any resistance, and its wreckage now danced through the air in a storm of wind.

In the distance, Instructor Noor was doing battle against the Dragon of Calamity. I couldn't quite make him out, but the sight of their clash was awe-inspiring to behold. Each of the dragon's movements caused the earth to quake, destroying the buildings in the eastern districts of the city in the blink of an eye. Even as I watched, houses crumbled, and more and more of the area fell into ruin.

But most fearsome of all was the incredibly intense ray of mana that the dragon would occasionally fire—its legendary breath attack, the Light of Destruction. Each instance shot far away toward the distant plains, where they bore craters into the earth.

I was watching a battle that changed the very shape of the surrounding terrain.

It was a life-and-death struggle straight out of a hero's epic. Nobody would ever think it was a clash between man and dragon, but it was exactly that. Instructor Noor was holding his own against the Dragon of Calamity, as proven by the behemoth's relentless assault.

Instructor Noor had said that he would rescue my father and run, but those were far from being easy feats. No matter how capable he was on his own, he wasn't omnipotent, and as a member of the Clays royal family, I could not allow him to bear the entire burden alone. Even if the support I could provide was minimal at best, I needed to go.

So, Ines and I—with Rolo in tow—abandoned our coach, mounted its horse, and hurried into the city to catch up to Instructor Noor.

The sheer destruction that awaited us was unlike anything I had ever seen

before. Not a single trace of the city from a few days ago remained. Blessedly, I couldn't see any people around; they had all presumably been evacuated to somewhere safe. But before I could even express my relief, Ines's voice sobered me up.

"There's something over there. Stay alert, my lady."

I turned at once, and what I saw froze the blood in my veins. Before us were three gargantuan Goblin Emperors. A silent exclamation of shock escaped me. We had attempted to slay one—just one—the other day, and even Instructor Noor had been troubled by the effort. Coming face-to-face with three was enough to severely rattle me. Why were there so many, and why were they here? I had assumed that the Goblin Emperor we killed was the only one.

As if in response to my loss of composure, one of the deviant monsters used its massive hand to scoop up a chunk of debris, which it then lobbed in our direction. We were too slow to respond; the projectile crashed into the head of our poor horse, sending us flying through the air.

The pack of Goblin Emperors nimbly dashed toward us, intent on pressing the assault...but their path was suddenly barred by one of Ines's shields of light.

"Thank you, Ines."

"My lady. Stay close to me, please." Her voice was strained, despite the fact that we'd managed to pick ourselves up and right our postures.

As long as we had Ines's shields, the Goblin Emperors couldn't lay a finger on us—but we still couldn't afford to make any careless moves. Just being surrounded by their towering forms made my legs lock up in fear, rooting me to the spot. This feeling wasn't new to me; I'd experienced it the last time I faced one of these monsters too.

But...Instructor Noor and I *slew* that Goblin Emperor. How had I brought myself to fight? How had I willed my body to move? I had the vaguest feeling that I'd heard something reassuring—but what?

What would Instructor Noor say if he saw me like this, pathetic and afraid? If my memory served me correctly...

"There's no need to hesitate, Ines. They're *just goblins*." As soon as I forced

the words out of my mouth, my legs stopped trembling.

“Indeed, my lady,” Ines replied, looking up at the titanic dragon thrashing around upon a plain of rubble. “Compared to *that*, they really are just goblins.”

She was right. What was Instructor Noor currently locked in mortal combat with? None other than the legendary Dragon of Calamity. If I truly wished to learn from him, then I couldn’t let a handful of *mere goblins* scare me. He would be appalled.

“Let’s take this slow and steady,” I said. “I’ll suppress their movements one by one. [Icicle Dance]!”

I summoned countless icicles from the ground, hoping to impale the Goblin Emperors and freeze them in place, but they were too fast. No matter how many times I tried, I couldn’t hit them—not without Instructor Noor here to help me. Cold sweat was starting to drip down my brow when Rolo stepped out from behind us and spoke.

“I’m sorry, but... **Don’t move.**”

“Gug-hya?!”

At the boy’s command, one of the Goblin Emperors froze in place.

“[Icicle Dance]!”

I summoned my icicles directly below the monster, and they swiftly ensnared its legs.

“Ines.”

“My lady.”

Then, Ines dismissed the shield of light that had served as our protection. In its place, she created a shining blade, which she swung silently at the Goblin Emperor.

“[Divine Sword].”

The light carved a straight line through the air and severed the monster’s head from its shoulders. Not even the surrounding buildings were spared; they were bisected at the same angle and sent up great clouds of dust as they

crashed to the ground.



“One down...” Ines said after confirming that the goblin was no longer

moving. She then extinguished her sword of light and once again invoked her shield.

When used as a blade, the light produced by Ines's Gift, [Divine Shield], could easily shear through even orichalcum armor. There was nothing it could not cut, which explained why the royal family had granted her a second title: the Divine Sword.

I was appalled by my own loss of composure. How had it slipped my mind that I had someone so capable by my side?

"Two to go," Ines finished.

The remaining Goblin Emperors had sprung high into the air to avoid Ines's slash. They dived toward us, but Ines caught them against her shield, repelling them.

"I'm sorry. **Stop moving.**"

And the moment they landed, Rolo froze them in place.

All it had taken was *a simple command* to stop the gargantuan monsters dead in their tracks. I could scarcely believe that the Rolo before me was the same child who had been so scared of us earlier. On top of that, I had never known that demonfolk possessed power to this degree. It was no wonder why the world feared their kind. Or, wait—was Rolo just exceptional...?

In truth, part of me was still afraid of the boy. But his decision to swallow his nerves and come with us must have been because he wanted to help Instructor Noor. He had mustered all of his courage to stand here with us.

"[Cocytus]."

I froze the ground over once more, fixing our opponents in place and turning them into ice sculptures. Then, Ines decapitated them.

"And that makes three."

As we finished off the Goblin Emperors, the thunderous roars that had been rocking the area suddenly ceased. The dragon's head, which had been thrashing about high above the dust-covered city, was gone.

"Instructor...?"

The dragon could no longer be seen or heard, which could only mean—

“It can’t be...”

The battle was over. And if my premonition was correct...*Instructor Noor* was the victor. Still, I was uneasy. Not even he could have come away from a battle against the Dragon of Calamity uninjured. No matter how resilient he was, the idea seemed impossible.

“Let’s hurry.”

“Yes, my lady.”

We all ran deeper into the city, clouds of dust still rising around us like mist as we fought off the waves of monsters in our path.

Chapter 36: A Conversation with the Dragon

“I thought I was going to die...”

It was the truth. The immense force of Lynne’s spell had caused me to black out for a moment, and when I came to, I was already flying through the air. The ground was getting closer and closer, and immediately, I understood my predicament.

I need to stick the landing or I’m done for.

Frantic, I kicked off of the earth and broke into a bounding sprint. I’d narrowly avoided a gruesome fate, but I didn’t have any time to feel relieved; the walls of the city were almost within spitting distance. I desperately—very, *very* desperately—leaped up into the air and managed to sail over them at the last possible moment. I was safe.

Or so I thought. Now, I was hurtling straight toward the dragon’s head. It had been so far away just a second ago, but now it was right in front of me.

In a daze, I swung my black sword. The dragon’s scales were hard; colliding with them would probably leave me in worse shape than if I’d crashed into the city’s walls. Thankfully, my swing managed to kill my momentum right as I slammed into the dragon’s head, knocking it out of the sky and sending us both plummeting toward the ground.

That was when things got *really* bad. When I came to my senses, I realized I was standing amid a windstorm of debris, face-to-face with the dragon that had unwillingly served as my cushion.

“This...can’t be good.”

The beast let loose an earthshaking roar and stared directly at me. Everything had happened so quickly that I still wasn’t caught up with the situation, but even amid my confusion, one thing was clear: I’d angered the dragon.

And it definitely was a dragon.

Monsters like this were a staple of most legends and fairy tales, so even a guy like me knew about them. This was my first time actually seeing one, though. It was huge, and far more ferocious-looking than I'd ever imagined. Even after seeing it from far away, I was still completely taken aback by its size—its titanic body looked as though it were propping up the sky.

The dragon raised its claws like it was going to crush me—but as I watched the massive creature before me move, I was struck by an odd feeling. The difference in size between our species was far more despair-inducing than I ever could have expected; a puff of air from its nostrils would be enough to send me flying, and getting stepped on would end my life without question. The prospect of confronting such a terrifying monster should have scared me out of my wits.

Strangely, though, as I stared at the dragon, I didn't feel that afraid. In fact, its claws actually seemed incredibly slow as they came down at me.

Maybe getting blasted into the city at an unbelievable speed, narrowly escaping death over and over again, had numbed something deep inside of me. I just couldn't bring myself to feel particularly scared.

The dragon was certainly huge...but that just made it all the more easy to tell what it was going to do next. Plus, if nothing else, I was pretty sure I could fend off its attack. Still a little dizzy, I steadied my sword and decisively struck aside the claws coming down at me from above.

[Parry]

I felt the weight of a massive impact and heard a thunderous *boom*. The dragon's claws had failed to crush me, instead crashing down to my side and carving furrows into the earth.

That had been easier than I'd expected. The dragon's blow had been just as heavy as it appeared, of course—the attacks of that berserk cow or the goblin were nothing in comparison—but I'd actually been prepared for it to be heavier.

In terms of the force of the impact, Lynne's spell that had sent me flying here in the first place had been far and away more intense. I mean...it had made me black out and then convinced me I was going to die. I'd endured it, though, and

even lived to tell the tale. When I considered things that way, the dragon's claws didn't seem scary at all.

So, as I applied [Low Heal] to myself, I simply focused on staying alive and frantically weathering the dragon's attacks as they came. I dodged and parried my opponent's blows, trying to move as little as possible but occasionally stepping out of the way of oncoming boulders and other debris. Once I got into the swing of things, it wasn't particularly difficult; as it turned out, the dragon didn't actually have that many ways of attacking me. That said...it *was* pretty scary whenever it struck at me with its enormous tail, mowing down the surrounding buildings in the process.

Occasionally, the dragon would also try to hit me with an intense light from its mouth, but—to my surprise—my sword could parry that too. Incidentally, no matter what the blade came into contact with, it never seemed to suffer any new scratches. It was a mystery that I'd been wondering about for a while now.

At last, I'd created a little breathing room for myself—and it was then that the dragon did something truly unexpected.

"Grrr..."

It stopped attacking and instead crouched down in front of me. I was relieved to be safe, but at the same time...

"What are you doing...?"

The dragon stayed flat on the ground, unmoving. Its eyes were partly open, so it probably wasn't sleeping. It didn't seem like it had collapsed out of exhaustion either. No matter the reason, though, I couldn't feel any more hostility from the behemoth; it was just lying still, watching me.

As I was puzzling over what to do, I realized something—the sight of the dragon's head and neck reminded me of a story from when I was a child. It was an adventuring epic in which the protagonist, a hero, beheaded an evil dragon and earned the title of "Dragonslayer." The dragon's scales, claws, fangs, and bones had then been used to make fine weapons, armor, and medicines, blessing the local area with wealth and good fortune.

My father had told me many stories of such heroes when I was a little boy,

and I remembered wanting to grow up to be just like the Dragonslayers. Following that thread of thought...

“Behead a dragon, huh...?”

This was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do just that. Would slaying this titanic dragon make me just like the heroes I’d always admired? As that wild thought spun around in my mind, I took another look at the now docile dragon and reflexively shook my head.

“I...can’t kill you.”

The dragon was unmistakably evil. It had just destroyed more houses than I could hope to count, and while I didn’t know for sure, there was a good chance it had killed a lot of people too.

Even so, as things stood, I couldn’t feel any hostility from it. Its earlier roars which had shook the earth had quieted down into gentle growls, and it seemed to be in a much calmer mood. In fact, it was even holding its head out toward me as if to say, “Do whatever you want with me.” The look in its eyes was sincere, like it was making a genuine appeal to me.

In a way, its soft growls reminded me of the affectionate cries of the small animals that had become attached to me back at my home on the mountain...

The moment that thought crossed my mind, I knew I couldn’t take the poor dragon’s life. I was fine with killing animals I was hunting as game, that were tearing up my crops, or that were trying to eat me, but I couldn’t bring myself to harm something that was acting friendly. Now that the dragon wasn’t rampaging about, I just couldn’t slay it.

At any rate, my sword wasn’t suited for beheading anything to begin with. It wouldn’t stand a chance against a neck as thick as the dragon’s.

Abandoning all thoughts of slaying the dragon lying in front of me, I relaxed my grip on my sword. “I’m really not cut out to be a storybook hero, huh?”

All that aside...why had the dragon changed its behavior so dramatically? It had gone from being in the heat of a berserk rampage to acting meek and obedient. No matter how much I thought it over, I couldn’t even begin to figure out the reason.

“Instructor! Are you okay?!”

I turned around, having heard a familiar voice from behind me, and all the pieces immediately fell into place.

“Oh... I get it. So *that’s* what happened.”

In front of me were Lynne, Ines, and the dea...dem...the something-folk boy Rolo, who had the amazing ability to control monsters.

“Instructor! You’re not hurt, are you?!”

“Nope, I’m just fine.”

“You’re...what?”

Sure, the impact from Lynne’s spell had fractured every bone in my body, but I’d recovered myself with [Low Heal] while weathering the dragon’s assault. In other words, I really was doing fine. Lynne was giving me a strange look, but I ignored that for now—I needed to thank Rolo.

“Rolo. You saved me,” I said. “I almost died.”

Now it was Rolo’s turn to look at me strangely. “Um...what?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you calm the dragon?”

“Me?! N-No, definitely not!”

“What...?”

Rolo was vigorously shaking his head from side to side, looking shocked. Was he telling the truth? But...how else could the dragon have ended up like this?

“Really?” I asked, feeling the need to make sure. “It wasn’t you?”

Rolo shook his head so frantically that his body moved along with it. Since he was denying his involvement with such desperation, he had to be telling the...

No, wait. That just couldn’t be right. It *had* to have been Rolo. I couldn’t see anybody else around, and he was the only one of us who could control monsters. He was scared of people finding his ability frightening—although I wasn’t sure why—so maybe he was worried that we’d start to fear him if we knew he could control such a titanic dragon.

Still, I wished that he would be a little more honest with himself—especially when his wasn't the kind of power that could stay hidden forever. He clearly wasn't going to admit it, though, so I supposed there was nothing to be done.

"Well, whatever," I said. "If you say so, Rolo."

"Mm-hmm... It definitely wasn't me."

"Sure, I can go with that. Anyway...there's something I want to ask of you."

"Me?"

Rolo might have been insecure about his power, but we had a perfect use for it: "If possible...can you send the dragon back to its home?"

"Its home...?" he repeated.

If the dragon stayed here, someone was guaranteed to come along and slay it. Maybe that was the best outcome for human society—it was a monster infamous for devastating its surroundings, after all—but still...I couldn't help feeling bad for it. I was being unreasonable, but, if possible, I wanted to quietly let it go free.

Lynne looked at me uneasily. "But, Instructor, this dragon is..."

"I'm aware that killing it here and now would probably be for the best, but...I'd rather we not resort to that, if we can help it. I realize I'm being selfish. Even so, do we really have no choice?"

After pausing to think, Lynne responded, "All right. If that's what you wish, Instructor."

"Think you can do it, Rolo?" I asked.

"I don't know... It's hard to get a monster this strong to obey. But...I should be able to ask, at least."

Rolo started to approach the dragon lying on the ground. Although he was still pretending to be unconfident, it seemed he was willing to fulfill my request—though I didn't think he needed to put on the act, personally.

"Please do," I said.

"Mm-hmm. I'll try."

As I gave it some more thought, however, I realized that Rolo's attitude was actually pretty admirable. Despite being so amazingly gifted, he didn't meaninglessly flaunt his ability. It was impressive that he was so humble—though a little more pride wouldn't have been a bad thing for a boy of his age.

I was sure Rolo would never misuse his power or throw his weight around, and while I did think he was a little *too* shy, I found myself liking him a lot.

"Okay...here goes!"

Rolo stood in front of the dragon and struck up some kind of silent conversation with it. Then, the behemoth let loose a low growl.

"Huh...?" Rolo exclaimed. He turned to look at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It... It says it'll do whatever its master asks."

"That's... Wow."

Even though I'd expected this to happen, I was still a little surprised. Rolo was one terrifying kid, and he was sure to have some pretty amazing things in his future. If he could just do something about his somewhat gloomy personality, I was sure he'd be popular when he grew up.

"In that case, could you ask it to peacefully return home?" I said. "And...I know this is a pretty big request, but could you also ask it not to harm any people from now on?"

"S-Sure... I can do that..."

Rolo turned back to the dragon and closed his eyes. From the look of things, he was managing to get through to it. After a brief while, the dragon gave a deep growl and raised its titanic body off the ground.

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Yeah... It said it will obey all of your requests."

"W-Wow..."

"Yeah... Wow..."

The dragon spread its massive wings wide and, with a vigorous flap, leaped

into the air, creating a windstorm in its wake.

“Incredible...”

“To think such a thing is possible...”

Lynne and Ines were staring at the departing dragon in amazement. Meanwhile, Rolo and I exchanged looks.

“It really left...”

“Y-Yeah...”

The four of us remained silent for a while as we watched the black dragon retreat toward the east, relieved that the major crisis was over. But as I was enjoying the calm, an intense purple-red light suddenly flashed across my field of vision, dyeing the sky a deep crimson.

“What?”

Then, a ray of scarlet light engulfed the dragon, scorching it from head to tail. The behemoth plummeted headfirst toward the ground below, where it struck the earth with a thunderous *boom*.

Chapter 37: The Magic Empire's Advance

"I simply cannot stop laughing. Who knew that steering the future could be so simple?!"

The emperor was in high spirits as he took in the sight of the royal capital. He still remembered the invasion plan put to him by his vassals, which had set his heart racing when he first heard it: Brainwash monsters using demonfolk, then release them onto the streets. At the same time, send the legendary Dragon of Calamity toward the city to destroy whatever remains. Immediately afterward, dispatch a large-scale detachment of the imperial army to slay the dragon and seize control of the Kingdom under the pretext of "providing aid."

Technically, the Dragon of Calamity had only gone on a brief rampage before regaining its senses and leaving the capital, but that hardly mattered. The emperor had never expected it to destroy the entire city to begin with; legends were prone to embellishment, after all. But what the dragon had actually achieved was well worth the amount he'd paid that unsettling slaver.

The emperor watched as the dragon fell onto the smoking city below and smiled. "In the end, a millennia-old dragon is but a beast—nothing more than one of my pawns."

One shot of the Empire's newly developed superweapon Brionac, the Spear of Light, had engulfed the dragon and sent it plummeting toward the ground. The performance of the armament had seen rapid improvement thanks to the Demon's Hearts, manastones provided by the Theocracy of Mithra. The emperor didn't like that Mithra's sly fox of a high priestess held a complete monopoly on such a rare magical resource, but it was fortuitous that she'd offered to cooperate with the Empire, even if she was clearly acting out of a sense of superiority. He didn't mind, though; one day, he would claim her nation too.

"But first, the Kingdom."

On the whole, everything had gone according to plan so far. With the Ring of Gyges, a massive-scale [Concealment] magical tool developed through the

utmost efforts of his empire's brilliant researchers, the imperial army had managed to reach the Kingdom of Clays's capital with relative ease. They had also brought with them three Aegises, mobile mana-bulwark generators capable of protecting against even the Dragon of Calamity's Light of Destruction, and four Brionacs, mana cannons powerful enough to burn through even the dragon's scales.

The ultrahigh-output mana-beam discharge weaponry—against which the legendary Light of Destruction seemed like a warm breeze—was being operated by the Empire's magician corps. They had accompanied the imperial army, which included nine thousand rank-and-file soldiers. Every one of them was fitted with state-of-the-art equipment that could turn even a newly drafted recruit into a warrior to be reckoned with. This included mageblades, swords that could easily shear through iron, and mageshields, which created force fields that could nullify magic and reflect arrows and blades.

As for the army's chosen elite—who numbered a thousand—they had magecannons, which could sustain continuous, long-distance spellfire that rivaled the offensive magic of an intermediate-ranked magician, and magearmor, which could nullify almost every kind of magical offense.

Altogether, the imperial host surpassed ten thousand troops. In comparison, the *entire population* of the Kingdom of Clays totaled fewer than forty thousand. Of those who could fight, there were only the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital, who were always on active duty, and a militia corps of vagrant adventurers. Together, they numbered not even two thousand—and how many of them would even be able to put up a fight in all this chaos? Maybe several hundred at best, if the emperor was generous with his estimation.

To summarize: in both quality and quantity, the imperial army had an overwhelming military advantage.

The emperor could hardly contain his laughter. His empire, which had honed magical tool technology to its limits, was now unrivaled. And through this advance, the entire world would come to know it.

The story that would go down in history had already been decided: The Kingdom of Clays had been careless in its management of the Dungeon of the

Lost, allowing monsters to spill onto the streets of the capital. Its wanton greed then roused the ire of the Dragon of Calamity—and with that, the nation had signed its own death warrant.

That was when the Empire stepped in, freeing the Kingdom's citizens—as well as the invaluable, world-famous Dungeon of the Lost—from the mad rule of their witless king. At the end of the day, those of the imperial army were acting as relief troops, out to save a nation from an unnecessary demise. Indeed, they had only come here to *rescue* those in peril.

"That being the case, we must ensure that they're suffering from a *proper catastrophe*."

The emperor hoped the city would be reduced to nothing at all—management of the aftermath would be easier that way. He intended to raise a new capital on the very same plain, in which he would establish new magical tool research facilities. To that end, it was more convenient if everything currently here was razed to the ground.

The Kingdom's citizens were just as much of an inconvenience; they were unreasonably loyal to their idiot of a king and would no doubt spark civil unrest under the Empire's rule. For those reasons, they needed to die. Only a select few would be allowed to live, and only because the emperor wanted to make his "relief troops" pretext seem more believable. He could always order their deaths later down the line, anyway.

Still, as ruthless as the emperor was, he did feel *some* regret over the destruction of the Kingdom's capital. The city's complete annihilation would leave the troves of dungeon relics collected over the nation's long history and stored in the royal castle's vaults buried under all the rubble. Some would be recoverable, but others would almost certainly be broken beyond repair.

Indeed, he regretted the loss, but he also wrote it off as unavoidable. Besides, if that cunning idiot of a king hadn't made much use of them, they probably didn't have much practical value.

"Although...losing the Black Blade truly pains me."

The Black Blade had been retrieved from the deepest known layer of the Dungeon of the Lost and was the one thing the emperor genuinely regretted

having to sacrifice. It was a dungeon relic in a class of its own, made of an unknown metal that no substance or spell could even scratch. If the mystery of its composition or creation process were to be unraveled, the world's weapons and military equipment would advance by leaps and bounds. The possibilities were endless: armor that could stop any weapon or spell, blades that could slice through dragon scales, and even theoretical magical artillery—which no known metal could support—that could wipe entire cities off the map.

All things considered, the Black Blade contained the power to change the world. If the emperor could just acquire it, he would be able to start a genuine societal revolution. If he could successfully analyze and reproduce it, the creation of an invincible army would no longer be a dream.

Truly, it was a great loss. The peerless relic's misfortune had carried it straight into the hands of that ignorant fool of a king.

Time and time again, the emperor had made King Clays an offer for the Black Blade, but the pigheaded man only ever refused. Even a request to simply *look at* the weapon had been denied. Now that a crisis was on the Kingdom's doorstep, the buffoon had likely hidden the relic somewhere it would never be found. If so, its latent potential would go entirely wasted, lost in the mists of time.

But the emperor had taken that into consideration. Even if he couldn't find the Black Blade amid the debris, he would at least have its source—the Dungeon of the Lost. The monstrously strong citizens of the Kingdom had dedicated hundreds of years to exploring its depths, but even now, much of it was still uncharted. It was entirely possible that below its deepest known layers slept relics made of similar materials to the Black Blade.

If the emperor sent his forces, armed with their advanced weaponry, to explore the dungeon and excavate every relic waiting in its depths, then finding what he wanted wouldn't be so hard. Perhaps the world's oldest dungeon housed relics even more preposterous than the Black Blade. If so, then the Empire would stride even more confidently into the future—and the *entire world* would reap the unfathomable benefits.

King Clays, the fool, still couldn't understand that. He had responded to every

one of the emperor's kind propositions with flat refusal—which was why the emperor would annihilate him. His followers would die too, without question. The idiot king's seat of power would crumble away, as would its insignificant history, and become nothing more than a memory.

The Empire planned to wipe the slate clean. It would serve as a fine demonstration for the other nations.

"History does not require multiple narrators," the emperor mused aloud. "One truth is enough."

Henceforth, the history books would speak only of the Empire's triumph. Truth was decided by the victor, and as long as the Empire was around to testify to the details, that was enough. Nobody else was necessary.

If any of the Kingdom's citizens somehow managed to survive, the emperor would forcibly silence them and sell them off as slaves. He had already reached an agreement with the head of Sarenza's Merchants Guild; they would purchase all the refugees he could round up and seal any loose lips among them.

"That said, I thought the destruction would be more thorough."

As the wind cleared away the dust hanging over the capital, the emperor was afforded a better view of his target. He'd watched as the dragon descended on the idiot king's city, and while its rampage had only been short, it had certainly been violent. How, then, was only a quarter of the area in ruin?

The emperor had hoped for a wholesale massacre of the city's populace, but, in a disappointing turn of events, it appeared that more than half of them were still alive. If that didn't change soon, the imperial army would be forced to stamp out a considerable number of "rebel forces." It would be somewhat tedious—but at the same time...

"It should be fun, in its own way."

A smile crept onto the emperor's face as he stroked his white-streaked mustache; on the horizon was a delightfully one-sided slaughter. Adventurers from all over the world gathered in the Kingdom, but they were rabble all the same. Even together, they were no match for the imperial army and its arsenal

of magical weaponry.

Still, there were a few among the emperor's opponents who caused him a *little* concern: the veterans who'd developed an array of high-class skills and possessed what was frankly an abnormal degree of strength. And nobody exemplified those traits more than the Six Sovereigns.

Sig of the Thousand Blades.

Dandalg the Immortal.

Carew the Reaper.

Heaven's Bow Mianne.

Ninespell Oken.

Sain, the Demonic Saint.

Each and every one of them was a genuine monster. Then there were Ines the Divine Shield, protégé of the Immortal, and Gilbert the Dragonslayer, right hand to Sig of the Thousand Blades. Plus, if the rumors were true, the current prince and princess were becoming fearsome in their own right.

Finally, loath as the emperor was to admit it, the idiot king was another force to be reckoned with. It had been the man's unrivaled might, barbaric as it was, that had allowed him to act so arrogantly toward the Empire.

The emperor found it irritating that these individuals possessed such monstrous strength. Thanks to them, the Kingdom of Clays had been able to maintain its independence.

"However, that ends today. A new age approaches."

In his journey to this point, the emperor had trampled over many other dungeon-possessing territories. He'd conscripted droves of the Empire's poor, equipped them with mass-produced, state-of-the-art magical equipment developed from research into dungeon relics, and given them a direction in which to march. That was all it had taken to break the nations and armies that opposed him.

Military might was now defined not by training or discipline but by the strength born from intellect. The proof was in the ten thousand soldiers at the

emperor’s disposal.

During its invasions of other nations, the Empire had needed only a thousand troops to achieve its goals. This, however, was a special occasion. The emperor considered it a demonstration to the world, advertising the birth of the mightiest army in existence. That was why the soldiers were all outfitted with the latest equipment. People would speak forevermore of the fate that awaited anybody foolish enough to defy the Magic Empire. After this show of power, none of its surviving opponents would ever attempt defiance again.

“Indeed, this is an exhibition.”

Using its cutting-edge developments in magical science, the Empire would slay the millennia-old symbol of terror that was the Dragon of Calamity and seize control of the foolish, tradition-bound Kingdom of Clays. Alongside the tale of the idiot king who brought about his own disgraceful end, the emperor would announce to the world that “legends” were nothing more than a relic of the past.

“Your Imperial Majesty—look.”

“What?”

The emperor gazed in the direction indicated by one of his imperial guards, who had been standing by his side, and saw the figures of a group of people. Upon looking through his [Farsight] magical tool, he made one out to be a woman clad in silver armor. She was glaring straight in his direction. Evidently, she had already used [Uncover] on the [Concealment] covering the imperial army.

“Who’s that?”

“Ines, Your Imperial Majesty. The Divine Shield. There’s no doubt about it.”

The emperor clicked his tongue. “So she was here after all.”

The Divine Shield was a living legend, famous all across the world. As her title implied, she had been bestowed with the Gift of a god—and as expected of someone described as “divine,” she was even more of a monster than the Six Sovereigns. Unarmed and unarmored, she could guard against a dragon’s breath and slice clean through orichalcum. If she was in the capital, then it was

no wonder the Dragon of Calamity hadn't achieved much.

"In fact...this may be the perfect opportunity."

Even a monster like the Divine Shield was a thing of the past. The age where legends reigned supreme was already over, and the age of intellect had begun.

"Use Brionac."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty."

The Divine Shield possessed a useful ability—one that the greedy emperor longed to take for himself. Unfortunately, she was a follower of that nuisance of a king. Convincing her to cast aside her loyalty would be no easy task. The emperor had even considered brainwashing her, but after pondering the idea a little more, he had concluded that it simply wasn't worth the effort. It was a shame, but he'd just have to kill her.

Brionac, the Spear of Light. It was the pinnacle of the Empire's research into magical weapons, capable of burning through the Dragon of Calamity. The emperor's army had brought four to this battlefield, and they were about to fire their second.

The Divine Shield could produce light that was said to be "invincible," but that was inconsequential when the blistering heat of their Brionac would erase her from existence. Here and now, the emperor would personally fell yet another legend. Despite her peerless beauty and seemingly limitless strength, the monster would meet oblivion after just one of his commands.

"Ah, such joy. I simply can't get enough of war."

The emperor loved watching the annihilation of cities with long and treasured histories. He loved watching people be trampled underfoot. And most of all, he loved subjugating those whom he disliked, especially when he could have them brought to their knees or destroyed. His pulse raced at the prospect of putting King Clays through the same torture. His long-awaited desire was about to be sated.

It was a shame that he wouldn't get to see the idiot king's last, bitter expression, but he wouldn't lose any sleep over it. Results were paramount, and as it stood, he had achieved complete victory. That was all he needed.

Then again...if the idiot king had one strength, it was his sturdiness. It was entirely possible that he would find one way or another to cling to his meager existence.

The emperor took a moment to consider what he'd do in the event of the king's survival. Perhaps he would sever his limbs and keep him in the dungeons of the imperial court as a pet; that way, the fool could spend the rest of his days regretting his defiance. Putting him through every form of torture imaginable was another appealing option. Yes, that was the better choice. He would reduce the king to a sniveling, groveling mess.

As he thought about what he would do after laying waste to the royal capital, the emperor chuckled with growing amusement.

"The weapon is ready, Your Imperial Majesty."

"Fire."

He gave the order to his vassal without hesitation. At once, Brionac's merciless light—a tremendous wealth of mana refined and amplified by an ultrahigh-purity Demon's Heart—gathered in the barrel of the cannon. Then, it shot toward the capital as a single ray of crimson light.

"This is the end."

The emperor's face warped in delight as he watched the ruinous beam surge straight toward the Divine Shield and—

[Parry]

And then veer off at an unthinkable angle. An unknown man had jumped in its path at the very last moment, and now the crimson light was soaring up into the sky.

Chapter 38: A Tide of Silver

After parrying the red light that had suddenly come flying toward us, I stared in the direction it had come from. “That was close. What was that thing? And what’s with that crowd over there? It sure is big.”

On the eastern plains, opposite the side of the city where the dragon had rampaged, I could see a massive group of people. Lynne’s [Uncover] had revealed them. They were all clad in dark-purple armor and armed with long silver swords and shining red shields. They were also in an orderly formation and seemed to be gradually advancing toward us.

“It appears the Magic Empire has mobilized its army,” Lynne replied. Her tone was somber, and the blood had drained from her face. “It looks like there are several thousand of them. No, more than ten thousand, perhaps. There are too many for me to count.”

The Empire’s army? What were they doing here? This whole situation had me completely bewildered.

“Come to think of it, what’s wrong with the city?” I asked. “What happened here?”

I had been too panicked to notice before, but we were all alone in the capital. The streets were usually bustling with people until the early hours of the morning...but now, it felt like the entire city was empty.

“We happened across my brother’s subordinates on our way here,” Lynne said. “They told us a little bit about the situation. Apparently, monsters appeared all over the capital, and the citizens have been evacuated to the western districts, where things are relatively safer. I believe the city’s soldiers are busy coordinating the effort.”

“That so? No wonder I haven’t seen anyone.”

Still, for monsters to be popping up all over the city... What was going on?

“That said, I assume they saw that intense light from a moment ago,” Lynne continued, staring at the massive group of armed soldiers in the distance.

“Reinforcements should be on their way...but it might be some time before they reach us. And even if they do come, the city’s standing army isn’t nearly enough to beat such a large host.”

Ines stepped forward to stand in front of Lynne. “This is as far as we go, my lady. We must fall back. We’re simply no match for an army of that scale.”

“You’re right. We’ll withdraw and join up with my brother. What about you, Instructor?”

“Me? Why even ask? With everything that’s happening, my answer should be pretty obvious.”

I was, of course, planning to run away with them. I didn’t even think the alternative was an option. Lynne had phrased her question in a pretty strange way, though; it was almost as if she thought me staying here alone was a perfectly valid course of action. Just who did she think I was?

“You’re right,” Lynne said, smiling. “It was a stupid question.”

Oh, good. She understood me.

Wait, she *did* understand me, right? Just to be safe, I decided to say my intentions loud and clear.

“Yeah. I’m going to ru—”

“Incoming!” Ines suddenly cried. “Get behind me!”

I followed her gaze and saw a deluge of purple-red spheres flying through the air, getting closer and closer. At a guess, they were some kind of spell, fired by the massive army in the distance.

“[Divine Shield].”

Just as the storm of spheres began to rain down on us, Ines created one of her shields. She had managed to protect us, but...

“Damn!” Ines cursed. “We’re pinned down!”

The magic spheres now crashed down on us like a torrential downpour, not letting up for a second. In no time at all, the ground around us was gouged away, cutting off our escape. We were well and truly stuck.

Lynne scanned our surroundings, looking anxious. “This is my fault,” she said. “As soon as we saw that army, our top priority should have been to run.”

I was feeling pretty lost myself. But before I could even attempt to get my bearings, Rolo let out a cry.

“L-Look! There’s another light!”

I turned to where he was pointing and saw another crimson ray flying toward us. This time, I also saw where it had come from—a massive black tube covered in complex-looking engravings. If we didn’t react, we’d get hit by the same thing that brought down that huge dragon.

“Another one... It’s coming...” Lynne was staring at the oncoming light, looking even paler than before.

I guess I didn’t have a choice. Steeling my resolve, I took a step forward.

“Instructor? What are you doing?”

“If we don’t have a way out, then we’ll just have to make one. By force, if that’s what it takes.” We had already seen that my sword could deflect these attacks—though I didn’t know why—so I needed to be at the very front of our group.

“Make one...? But how?”

“I’ll go out and run around for a bit. That should give you three some time to get away.”

“B-But, Instructor!”

Lynne looked at me uneasily. To be honest, I wasn’t feeling all too great about this either. Still, while I was useless in a fight, I was pretty used to running around.

Back on the mountain where I was raised, I’d often angered the local birds by stealing their eggs for dinner. They would attack me, of course, but getting away from them wasn’t too hard. The same went for the swarms of venomous bees after I stole their deliciously sugary hives; I always managed to escape unscathed. As long as I ran for my life, I was sure I could outrun this massive army too.

“Don’t worry—I won’t do anything crazy,” I said. “I plan on making it back in one piece.”

I wasn’t going to rush straight into the enemy’s ranks and start fighting them or anything like that; distracting them was the best I could manage. Against that ceaseless rain of spells, buying time was my only option.

It was worth a shot, I thought. Pulling this off would give my companions an opportunity to escape—and as Lynne had said, the city’s soldiers would come to my rescue sooner or later. Maybe I was being overly optimistic, but I only had this one basket, so in went all of my eggs.

“Understood, Instructor,” Lynne said. “But please allow me to help you, even if my assistance might not be worth much.”

“Sure. Go for it.”

Lynne gently placed a hand on my back and started preparing some kind of spell. It was probably defensive magic, so my hopes were high.

“Okay. Prepare for impact.”

Sorry, what? “Impact”?

“Lynne,” I said. “Don’t tell me you’re using...the usual?”

“I am. But don’t worry, Instructor.” She smiled at me. “I’ll make sure to control its strength this time.”

Wait, wait, wait. No, seriously. Please wait.

Lynne had *definitely* misunderstood something. She was getting ready to launch me straight at the soldiers in the distance—and the absolute *last* thing I wanted to do was attempt an all-or-nothing suicide attack on an army that large. I’d only spoken up because I thought I could run around near them and scatter their magic.

Something told me Lynne didn’t grasp my intentions at all.

“Hold on just a—”

“Good luck. [Windblast]!”

Seemingly oblivious to my concerns, Lynne fired her spell. A violent storm of

wind crashed straight into my back.

This wasn't good. My sword was still in my hand, meaning there hadn't been anything to cushion the impact of Lynne's spell. This time, I was dead for sure. I was convinced. But in a last-ditch attempt to survive, I kicked off the ground in an uncontrollable rush.

I took my first step forward, then my second—then I fully activated [Physical Enhancement] and went even faster. An instant later, I was hit by the delayed shock wave of Lynne's spell, pushing me even farther ahead.

Thank goodness.

Somehow, I'd managed to avoid immediate death, but I wasn't out of the woods just yet. I was rocketing straight toward Ines's shield of light, which had been protecting us from the rain of magic spheres. I went low, barely slipping through the gap between the shield and the ground. Now I needed to deal with a torrent of offensive magic.

Not good. I'm going straight into it!

I was already moving at a tremendous speed, which gave me even less time to react than before. I watched the spheres' trajectories and reflexively twisted my body to dodge them, but that would only get me so far. Against a particularly concentrated group of spells, no amount of contortion would save me.

Thinking fast, I swung my sword in a horizontal sweep.

[Parry]

The spell spheres in front of me ricocheted away. I was safe. And at the same time, my suspicions were confirmed. My sword had worked against the dragon's light, the crimson ray from earlier, and now these attacks. I wasn't sure how, but it was capable of parrying magic.

Still, with how heavy the blade was, I could only manage several spheres at a time. It was a far cry from the overwhelming number still coming toward me. What could I do? The only future ahead of me was a fatal collision with a barrage of magic attacks.

But was that really true?

I'd spent so much of my life parrying wooden swords. For a dozen or so years, it was the only thing I ever did. Thanks to that, I could now parry a thousand wooden swords in a single breath.

At first, the weight of my new sword had thrown me off completely; it was nothing like the wooden swords I was so familiar with. But the more I'd used it, the more comfortable I'd started to feel. Each swing made it a little easier to wield, and after being blown away by Lynne's spell so many times, I'd grown more accustomed to moving at insane speeds.

The spheres I'd parried earlier had almost felt weightless. They were a piece of cake compared to wooden swords, so—

[Parry]

I swung my sword hard, causing several hundred of the spell spheres to fly away and vanish. I could do this. Each swipe blended seamlessly into another step, allowing me to accelerate even more. There was no need for me to dodge the spheres anymore; I was extinguishing them with ease.

Slowly but surely, I was feeling even more familiar with my speed and the weight of my sword. Maybe I could take things further. I was physically tired, but otherwise I felt great.

"Let's see just how far I can go!"

At this rate, I was only moments away from colliding with the enemy army—and with my current momentum, I wouldn't be able to change my trajectory. That was just fine, though; I was resigned to my fate. Going with the flow and diving right in was a much better option than recklessly trying to stop dead.

Fortunately, I was confident in my ability to run away. If I sensed that things were getting dicey, I'd just take off. Even if the enemy soldiers surrounded me, I knew that I'd manage—and if some strange circumstances actually put me in dire straits, I'd still take solace in knowing that I'd made it easier for Lynne, Ines, and Rolo to get away.

Resolved, I put even more strength into my legs, cracking the ground beneath me as I accelerated. I was going so fast that my vision was blurry. Everything was shooting past so quickly that I could have sworn I'd stepped into another

world. Then, before I'd even had the time to blink, I reached the front line of the enemy army. My first opponent, clad in heavy armor, raised his sword and shield.

[Parry]

I swung my blade with all of my might—and with no resistance at all, my opponent's huge sword sailed up into the air.

Thank goodness, I thought. I'd been worried that he might catch my swing. Evidently, although he had some impressively grim equipment, his reaction speed didn't match that of a goblin. In fact, he looked almost *stationary*. The other soldiers were the same. They seemed equally slow, which meant that, maybe...

[Parry]

With my next swing, I parried several dozen swords, sending them all up into the air at once. It hadn't required much effort at all, so I tried a hundred—and again, barely any resistance. Curious, I parried two hundred, then three, then four, then *five*...

It was strange; even after parrying so many swords, I was barely breaking a sweat. Maybe it was because my own blade was so heavy, but my opponents' weapons felt lighter than feathers. There was only one thing to try next.

[Parry]

I put all of my weight behind my next swing...and managed to knock *a thousand blades* from the soldiers' hands.

Huh. That hadn't been so hard. I was perfectly capable of parrying a thousand weapons in a single breath. It was like being back on the mountain, training with my wooden swords.

After my little experiment, I was convinced: I could probably buy Lynne and the others plenty of time. Thus, I decided to parry the enemy's swords for as long as my strength—and stamina—would allow me.

Run around and parry—those were the only two things I needed to do. After all, I was only serving as a distraction. I purged my mind of unnecessary

thoughts, then devoted all of my attention to parrying what was in front of me.

◇

Meanwhile...

A silver-colored tide had appeared in the sky. It roiled as though it were alive, drawing elegant arcs through the air like a bird and glittering in the sunlight as it leisurely spun round and round.

At first, the soldiers of the Magic Empire didn't know what was happening. Their mageblades, granted to them by the emperor himself and capable of turning any man into a mighty warrior, vanished from their hands one moment and reappeared in the sky the next.

Thousands of magic swords—*swords that could shear through iron*—reflected a dull silver light as they spun up into the air. Then, they started to come back down again.

In a half-crazed panic to protect themselves, many of the soldiers raised their mageshields. Fortunately, their defenses were wondrously capable; they repelled the falling swords and sent another scattered tide of silver back up into the sky. The soldiers breathed a collective sigh...but their relief was painfully short-lived.

All of a sudden, their shields vanished. Just like their swords, they were there one second and then gone the next. The soldiers instinctively looked to the sky in search of their lost equipment, and there it was. Their shields, which should have offered them an impenetrable defense, were now gracefully spinning through the air, high above the tide of swords from which the soldiers had just protected themselves.

Those who grasped the situation rushed to escape, but their offensive formation meant they had nowhere to run. Suits of unyielding armor crashed into each other before collapsing in heaps. Those unfortunate enough to be at the bottom, pinned down by their compatriots, could only look up at the sky and scream.

And so, the lethal, all-piercing magic weapons rained down on the soldiers, who had lost their means to protect themselves.

It was sheer pandemonium. The Empire had intended to use its mageblades to butcher the citizens of a kingdom weakened by monsters, but now they were stabbing through the arms, legs, shoulders, and torsos of the panicked soldiers as they tried to escape. The unlucky ones were hit more than once.

Most of the soldiers ran around screaming, desperate to get away, but the stauncher few rearmed themselves and adopted fighting stances, readying themselves for their unknown enemy's next attack. It proved to be a futile effort—their swords were sent flying again.

Nobody knew what was going on. They couldn't see or sense anything...yet their weapons had once again vanished.

Something was wrong. The impossible was happening. Every last soldier realized this, and it drove them to panic. They didn't even know what was attacking them. The imperial army had possessed every advantage and thought itself unbeatable, but now it was having to face its own fragility.

Just like that, the battlefield devolved into pure chaos. Some cast their weapons aside, shouting and screaming. Others sat and prayed to their gods. Some could only beg for help as they lay covered in blood. The army's advance, once proud and assured of victory, was now wrapped in the grim aura of despair.

Even the most stalwart soldiers found their morale shot by the fourth time they were disarmed. Unable to grasp the true form of whatever inexplicable phenomenon was attacking them, they lashed out in terror, injuring their own compatriots.

Then, as their will to fight reached an all-time low, the soldiers noticed seven huge silhouettes in the sky above them. Four looked like massive tubes, while the remaining three took the form of large crosses. Those who recognized them immediately doubted their eyes; they were the four Brionac cannons, the imperial army's superweapons, and the three Aegises, their impenetrable magical bulwarks. They were symbols of the Empire's proud, state-of-the-art magical science—peerless armaments that promised glorious victory.

So...why were they up there?

As the soldiers stared up at the sky, doubt struck them. Then, as the seven

objects spun slowly overhead and crashed into the ground with seven thunderous roars, the army fell even further into despair. Their unparalleled cannons had plunged deep into the earth, and their defensive generators were so bent and mangled that not a trace of their original cross shape remained. The detailed conduits engraved into the equipment were dark, meaning there was no more magic in them.

It was clear to everyone that all seven armaments were now useless.

The imperial army had lost its superweapons *and* its bulwarks, and its soldiers no longer had their swords or shields. That could only mean one thing: they had suffered complete and utter defeat. Almost everyone possessed enough reason to realize this.

But there were still some who refused to yield—those of stout hearts and strong minds who picked their swords back up time and time again, gallantly seeking out their hidden enemy. It was no use, though; soon enough, their morale crumbled too. Their swords were being shattered as though they were glass, and by something they couldn't even see.

"What...is this? What's...happening?"

At long last, the imperial general in command of the entire army managed to eke out a few words. Before, the army had been making a spirited advance to conquer the royal capital, but now they saw it as a place where helplessness, despair, and terror reigned.

And so, by the time the ebbing tide of silver had made its seventh circuit, not a single soldier possessed the will to fight. Nobody even attempted to pick up their sword. The ten-thousand-strong imperial army that had prided itself on being utterly undefeatable had been completely annihilated, and all without suffering a single fatality.

Chapter 39: The Emperor’s Steed

The emperor watched the approaching silver tide. Although he didn’t quite understand what he was looking at, he found the way it roiled through the sky as though it were alive simply captivating.

“What *is* that?”

A closer inspection revealed the answer: it was a cluster of swords. Very familiar swords. In fact, they looked exactly like the mageblades he’d supplied to his imperial army. But how could that possibly be the case? For what reason would they now be spinning through the air?

Before the emperor could question his senses any further, he realized there was *somebody* standing behind him. He whirled around from atop his horse and was greeted with the sight of a man holding something...*black*. The unexpected figure was looking straight at him, and their eyes met.

“Who are you?”

The emperor received no answer. An instant later, the man vanished as though he’d never been there to begin with.

“What in...?”

Suddenly, the earth where the phantom had stood cracked, rocking the nearby area. The emperor’s horse whinnied in fear, and the countless silver swords in the sky began to rain down on the imperial army below.

The soldiers raised their nigh-impenetrable mageshields in unison, ready to ward off the onslaught—and that was when the emperor noticed they weren’t holding their mageblades. He tugged on his horse’s reins, trying to calm the beast, then called out to his imperial guards nearby.

“What is the meaning of this? What’s happening?”

None of them answered; they were all too busy staring skyward, muttering to themselves in dumbfounded shock.

Unable to help himself, the emperor followed their gazes to see the air now

full of...boards? They seemed familiar too, though he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

Again, the emperor questioned his subjects: "What are those planks doing up there?" And again, nobody even attempted to respond. Everyone was too busy trying to avoid the falling swords—and now, the soldiers were *completely* empty-handed.

What in the world was happening? As the emperor searched for an answer, the phantom from before reappeared behind him.

"You again?"

Their eyes met once more. The emperor observed the man's face more intently this time, and that was when he realized—

"Aren't you...?"

This was the same person he'd spotted through his [Farsight] magical tool—the man who'd moved to protect Ines, the Divine Shield. But...that couldn't be right. If this really was him, then why was he *here*? Not even thirty seconds ago, he had been standing in the capital, about as far away as the [Farsight] tool was capable of seeing. How had he traveled so quickly?

No, that wasn't important right now. There were more pressing concerns. It was clear from the man's unremitting stare that he *knew* he was looking at the ruler of the Magic Empire. But what was he after? In circumstances such as these, there could only be one answer:

He had come for the emperor's head.

"Eep!"

An unusual squeak passed the emperor's lips. He had an entire army at his beck and call, yet he was completely defenseless. His subjects, to whom he'd bestowed such reliable weapons, looked to be useless. Even his imperial guard, who were always stationed near him, were engulfed in the surrounding chaos. The situation couldn't have been more favorable for an assassin.

Upon realizing his predicament, the emperor shrunk back in terror—but his fears quickly subsided when he remembered that he was fully clad in his

resplendent golden Kaiser's Armor. It was made of orichalcum and could repel any attack or spell.

Let the man come, he thought.

It was clear now that the imperial army was useless, so the emperor would simply need to fight for himself. Not even masters of the blade could match his skills with a sword, and it was with this reassuring thought that he drew his custom-made Kaiser's Blade—equally as radiant and golden as his armor—from its scabbard at his hip. Still atop his horse, he got ready for combat.

Only the man did not rise to the challenge. He looked away as if no longer interested and once again vanished into thin air.

"So you won't come for me after all, eh?"

All of a sudden, something else appeared in the sky—a large, black tube. It landed right in front of the emperor, stabbing into the earth with a booming crash.

"Gack!"

The emperor tumbled from his vaunted steed and received a mouthful of dirt for his troubles. He jerked his head up as quickly as he could, and that was when he realized the black mana-metal tube before him looked almost like a Brionac, one of the Magic Empire's newly developed superweapons. That couldn't be right, though... Just a moment ago, the Brionacs had all been pointed at the city of that idiot king. It was impossible for one to have fallen from the sky.

Then, another three tubes dropped down from above. Each one speared the ground with a deafening *boom*.

"How? How is this happening?"

Nobody replied. Usually, such impudence would have made the emperor fly into a rage, but the scenery before him was simply too chaotic.

"What... What is this?"

As the emperor started to repeat himself, the man appeared behind him for a third time. Again, the phantom merely stared before vanishing without a sound.

“Who *is* that?”

The emperor’s head was full of nothing but questions. Desperate to find at least *some* answers, he frantically started organizing his thoughts.

He had brought with him ten thousand soldiers arranged in perfect formation, each armed with an impenetrable shield and a blade that would turn them into a mighty warrior. They couldn’t have been more lavishly equipped. And considering that they were effectively a cleanup squad—one final nail in the coffin of an already defeated King Clays—their victory should have been guaranteed. The emperor had intended for this to be an enjoyable little jaunt more than anything else.

Nothing should have been able to stop the imperial army. The rank and file had their mageblades and mageshields, while the handpicked elite were clad in magearmor and equipped with magecannons. Then there were the four Brionacs, capable of overpowering even the legendary Dragon of Calamity. They even had three Aegises, large-scale magical defenses capable of repelling any magic no matter—

Right, the Aegises. His invincible shields. They should have made his army invulnerable to any attack or ambush it faced, so why weren’t they working?

The emperor looked around, and then he spotted them—among the panicking soldiers and the four black tubes sticking out of the earth were three crosses bent violently out of shape. Were they...? No, it was impossible. The strange objects before him looked nothing like the Aegises he remembered. *Those* were a brilliant white, and their delicately engraved circuits glowed with magical light. Their solemn majesty had almost a divine quality—nothing like the wretched lumps of scrap iron he was currently seeing.

“They can’t have been broken. It’s impossible.”

The Aegises were the ultimate defense, capable of repelling anything. They were invincible shields that should have protected the undefeated imperial army...so how had they come to be like *this*?

“Why is this happening?”

The emperor couldn’t understand. Then, once more, the mysterious man

appeared, holding his sinister *black sword*.

“What is—? No...”

The emperor’s eyes bulged as, for the first time, he realized what he was looking at. In the man’s grasp was the Black Blade, the peerless relic he’d sought ever since he happened to see it being used by the idiot king. It couldn’t be anything else.

Then, suspicion struck again. If that truly *was* the Black Blade...then who was this man? That fool King Clays had always refused to part with the sword, so why was it now in this stranger’s possession? And how was he so casually holding it one-handed...?

The Black Blade was unique in every single way. It was *impervious* to magic and made of a material tougher than orichalcum, dragontusk, and even adamantite, the hardest known metal. But most notable of all was its inexplicable weight; not even ten strong soldiers could carry it.

Yet here was this man, wielding it with one hand. It was a preposterous achievement. The “great” King Clays, whose absurd strength made him capable of sending a hundred men flying with one arm, had needed *both* hands to use the Black Blade—and even then he had only barely been able to swing it.

“Ridiculous.”

The evidence all pointed to one conclusion: this man was even stronger than the monstrous King Clays. It was nonsensical to think that such a person could exist. But if this phantom truly *was* holding the Black Blade, and without the slightest sign of exertion...then nothing could stand in his way. The entire world was at his mercy.

“Ludicrous. Simply ludicrous.”

The emperor babbled to himself, not wanting to believe such a harrowing explanation, but it was too late; he couldn’t deny what he was seeing. Although he didn’t know why or how this had all come to be, one thing was certain: *this man* was the cause. The Black Blade in his hand could only have been bequeathed to him by King Clays himself, which meant he was the absolute dolt’s vanguard. He was clearly an important asset, so why was the emperor,

who had more than enough subordinates gathering intelligence on the Kingdom's affairs, only learning about him now? Had their research not been thorough enough...or had the Kingdom only recently acknowledged this man's talents? Was it even possible that someone so powerful could go entirely unnoticed for so long?

In any case, the outcome was the same. A *single man* had deprived ten thousand soldiers of their blades and shields, driving the entire imperial army into chaos. He had stabbed their Brionacs deep into the ground and reduced their Aegises to miserable piles of scrap.

The emperor's face contorted in anguish as he finally accepted this catastrophic nightmare as the truth. There was one thing he still couldn't understand, though—if this man possessed such strength, why hadn't he attacked yet? He had the perfect opportunity to cut down the ruler of the Magic Empire.

What was there to do? This man evidently knew the emperor's location—they had met eyes more than once now—but he refused to act. Instead, he appeared and disappeared, over and over again. It was almost like the emperor was being mocked...and the moment that crossed his mind, the man's lips curled into an ominous grin.

"Aaghck!"



The emperor let out a choked yelp. He understood the meaning behind that

cryptic smile. The man knew his identity and was *playing* with him, driving him deeper and deeper into a corner and reveling in his terror. That had to be it. This monster was humiliating and toying with his prey, doing exactly what the emperor had wanted to do with King Clays. And why wouldn't he? A man with such unrivaled strength could do whatever he pleased.

Again, the man's lips twisted into a sinister, mocking smile.

"Eek!"

This time, the emperor felt something warm run down his leg—then he let out a silent cry of shock as the leering man vanished again.

It was obvious what needed to be done, and with that thought, the emperor mounted his vaunted steed. It was outfitted with a magical harness of the highest grade, which was constructed of orichalcum and enchanted to increase the mount's physical strength severalfold. Then the emperor turned his back on his panicked soldiers, urged his horse to go as fast as it could, and ran away from the battlefield—alone.

Chapter 40: My Training School Instructors

I kept parrying swords in a single-minded daze and eventually managed to break through the crowd. In front of me now was an old man in shiny golden armor, sitting astride a horse with a similarly gaudy harness. He had turned around and was looking straight at me.

“Who are you?” he asked the moment our eyes met.

Truth be told, after seeing this man’s strange getup, I wanted to return the question. I didn’t have the time to stop for a pleasant chat, though; I could see the swords I’d just parried falling toward the ground. If the soldiers reclaimed their weapons and came at me all at once, I wouldn’t stand a chance.

I needed to hurry. I needed to keep parrying. So, I dashed back into the crowd of soldiers at full tilt, entirely focused on running circles around them and deflecting their weapons. As it turned out, they also had shields of some kind, which they were using to repel the falling swords. I decided to parry those too.

Somewhere along the way, I noticed some of the massive black tubes that had fired the crimson beams from earlier, as well as some white cross-shaped devices that were giving off the same light. I sent them all flying upward with as much strength as I could muster.

I was well aware that I was only buying time, but parrying those things was way better than just leaving them there. I pressed on, turning aside everything in sight...and eventually found myself at the back of the crowd again, where the shiny old man was still atop his horse.

“You again?”

As soon as our eyes met, he called out to me. I wanted to greet him in turn, but I couldn’t speak; my nonstop parrying hadn’t given me time to catch my breath.

“Come!”

The old man looked scared. He drew a sword from the scabbard at his hip, but his arms were so skinny that he couldn’t hold it straight. Maybe he thought I

was some kind of villain here to take his life. Given all that was going on, I didn't blame him.

Still, I didn't see a need to parry his sword away; it was pretty obvious from how he was holding it that he wouldn't be able to swing at me. He was just pointing the tip in my direction to keep me away, so I decided to ignore him and ran back toward the soldiers who'd started picking up their weapons.

After another round of parrying, I realized that I'd returned to the back of the crowd again. I stopped and started taking deep breaths—I needed at least a short break so that I wouldn't collapse—but as I was greedily sucking air into my lungs, I noticed something strange. For some reason, the old man was now in a heap on the ground, his face covered in dirt. Had something happened to make him fall off his horse? Would he be okay?

I was kind of concerned about him, but then I noticed some of the soldiers trying to pick up their swords. I couldn't let that happen, so I rushed back into the army and started parrying once again.

The next time I returned to my break spot, the old man looked absolutely terrified. Was I really that scary in his eyes? I stopped to watch him, but his face just scrunched up more and more. It looked like he was going to cry.

Wait, you've got it all wrong.

I wasn't here by choice. In fact, I wanted to leave this battlefield as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the man was curled up into himself, frightened half to death. Sure, he was one of the people who'd come here to attack the city, but I couldn't help feeling concerned about him. After all, he was a scared, trembling old man.

In an attempt to prove that I meant him no harm, I put on my biggest smile. It might have looked kind of awkward, but that wasn't entirely my fault; all the intense exercise had starved me of air and made my face stiff. Still, as long as he understood me, that was fine. I pushed the corners of my lips up as far as they would go.

The old man's expression became hard to read. He had stopped trembling too, from what I could see. I wondered whether I'd gotten through to him. I worried that I hadn't, but I could see soldiers taking up their swords again in the

distance. Naturally, I couldn't let that happen, so I sprinted toward them.

But then, my legs stopped listening to me.

On reflection, the most I'd eaten today was a light breakfast. I'd also thrown up a lot of blood while fighting that poisonous toad. I probably would have been okay if things had ended there, but then I'd needed to deal with that weird guy covered in bandages, eat Lynne's full-power spell, and take on a massive dragon. *Then* I'd gone through all of this crazy exercise. It was no wonder that I was about to hit my limit.

My mind was made up: I would wrap things up here and then make a run for it. But before I could enact my master plan, my knees gave out entirely.

This wasn't great. I'd misjudged what my body was capable of. Stopping here was as good as asking to get mobbed, but my legs were done for. Running wasn't even an option. I couldn't rely on [Low Heal] either; it was great for healing wounds, but it did nothing to remedy hunger or exhaustion.

It was hard to breathe. I wasn't getting enough air.

"Gack!"

The next thing I knew, I was coughing up blood. I'd probably strained my lungs too much as well. And my movements were becoming even more languid. This was *definitely* bad. I couldn't move my legs. My head felt fuzzy. Everything looked blurry. I'd pushed myself too hard—moved too fast. A wave of dizziness hit me...and then everything went black.

When I came to, there were soldiers armed with swords all around me—and they were coming closer. I couldn't run. I couldn't fight back. My legs still refused to move.

This was it. I was going to die.

Still, I'd done my best to buy Lynne, Ines, and Rolo some time. My one wish was for them to have made it out okay.

Prepared for death, I gazed up at the heavens...and saw what looked to be glittering stars. I couldn't understand it. More lights than I could count were trailing through the sky, getting larger and larger until—

[Shooting Star]

A shimmering rain of arrows crashed down all around me. The projectiles twisted through the sky like birds changing their flight paths. Then, one by one, they found their marks in the arms and legs of the surrounding soldiers, incapacitating them.

“Wait, this is...”

I’d seen something like this once before; it was an ultimate hunter technique shown to me by one of my old instructors. She had only agreed to a demonstration because of my unyielding stubbornness, and she had stressed that she would only show me once. It was a skill that could pierce through any target between heaven and earth.

The newly wounded soldiers cried out in pain and dropped to the ground, but not everyone was out of action. Some retrieved their swords and continued toward me, looking furious. I still couldn’t move. There was nothing I could do.

[Dragrave]

Then, the soldiers around me were blown away by a sudden blast of wind. I turned to see where the attack had come from and spotted a familiar-looking man holding a golden spear. He was...that spearman guy.

“You came for me, Al... Wait, Hal... Lambert.”

“It’s *Gilbert*.” He silently surveyed our surroundings. “The hell happened here? You know what? Scratch that. It had to be you. I heard some idiot charged an army alone. I was wondering who, but now it all makes sense.”

Gilbert smiled and shouldered his spear, but I could see a group of soldiers advancing on him from behind. I tried to warn him but choked on my own blood.

[Thousand Edge]

Thankfully, I didn’t need to worry. The soldiers instantly collapsed, bleeding from cuts all over their bodies as though they’d been slashed by countless blades. I’d also seen *this* skill before. It was...

“You’re late, Teach,” Gilbert said. “I got here first.”

“My apologies. The others will arrive soon.”

I could never forget the person I was looking at now. He’d aged a little, but I still recognized him. He was my old swordsman instructor, wearing a single longsword at his waist—the man whose class I’d always dreamed of becoming.

“Thank you, stranger,” he said to me. “Your assistance is greatly appreciated, but allow us to handle the cleanup at least. We’d sully the Six Army Corps’ good name if we sat idly by.”

With that, my instructor quietly placed a hand on his sword. Then, in the blink of an eye, he drew the weapon in a horizontal sweep.

[Thousand Blades]

True to the name of his skill, a thousand blades swept across the battlefield, traveling so fast they were barely visible. Blood sprayed from every soldier they touched, creating a display that reminded me of crimson flowers in bloom.

This was it. The swordsman I’d always longed to become performing the skill that I’d spent years and years trying to learn. Seeing it just once had captivated me entirely. It was the reason I’d started practicing with wooden swords.

Even when my efforts to develop a new skill ended in failure, I desperately sought that one move. I’d even tried to make my own version; if the real thing was out of my reach, then I was fine with an imitation. But all my twisted motivations managed to produce was a brute-force technique to knock away a thousand wooden swords. It couldn’t slice through things like the real deal could, so the likeness was nonexistent.

All these years, I’d wanted to see my swordsman instructor’s skill again—and now here it was, right before my eyes. I watched, enraptured, as he unleashed one attack after another. My focus only waned when I saw two more people approaching.

“Oh, Sig. As I recall, I told you *not* to kill so indiscriminately. Corpses don’t make for very good informants, I’ll have you know.”

“Ho ho! Don’t be unreasonable, Sain. You know that’s too great a request against an army of this size.”

One had slender eyes and was wearing what looked to be the white garb of a clergyman. The other was an old man dressed in pitch-black robes, but most notable of all was his full, tremendously thick white beard that covered most of his face. He was the perfect image of a magician.

I recognized these two as well, both from their clothes and the way they spoke. The man in white wearing a gentle smile was my cleric instructor, and his old, upbeat partner was my magician instructor. They continued their leisurely conversation despite the soldiers closing in on them.

“You say that, Oken, but it’s quite a bother speaking with a person after they’ve died. The living are so much more *obedient*.”

“Ho ho! Would that have something to do with the nature of your ‘questioning’? I’ve heard many describe *death* as a more favorable alternative.”

“Perish the thought. I’m sure there’s been a misunderstanding. All those tears are shed in *gratitude*. You should hear how much they thank me when I restore them to perfectly sound health, with no physical defects whatsoever. After all, when it comes to limbs, I can regrow as many as I please.”

The old magician’s face grew pale, and he stepped away from the man in white. “Sain... You...”

“Just a little joke of mine.”

“Well, they scare everybody off. Stop telling them, would you? Please?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly. A lighthearted jest is the perfect thing to relieve some tension on the battlefield.”

“You will notice that I am not laughing.”

The two men continued their exchange as they routed the soldiers around them. The old man was casting *nine spells* simultaneously, while his partner was stopping oncoming swords with his *bare hands* before taking them away and using them to cut down their former owners.

“They should be here any moment now, should they not? I do believe we should prepare.”

“Yes, yes. We’ve been on the receiving end all day; I’m hardly going to miss

the grand finale, now am I? You lot. Are you ready?”

“Sir!” A group of people in black robes suddenly appeared, brushing off the transparent mantle that had made them invisible. From the look of things, they’d been hiding under a [Concealment].

“Everybody at once, now.” My magician instructor raised his hands up high and in them formed nine shining magic circles. One by one, the same circles began to appear in front of each of the people in black robes.

“[Earthbind],” they all chanted simultaneously.

The ground suddenly bulged upward, engulfing the legs of the bewildered soldiers and rooting them in place. Then, on the other side of the confused imperial army, I saw a group of armored figures charging in our direction. The earth trembled with their advance.

“Ho ho! And now, the long-awaited arrival of the Warrior Corps—the defenders of the capital themselves! Oh, goodness. Their eyes are all bloodshot. You *did* tell them not to kill anyone, yes?”

“I made quite sure; after all, I worry for them the most. The city they were charged with guarding is in ruins. I imagine they’re peeved beyond measure.”

The warriors in heavy armor raised massive shields as they advanced, their feet kicking up thick clouds of dust, then barreled into their foe. The imperial soldiers, still rooted to the ground and with nowhere to go, were sent flying all over.

At the forefront of the warriors was a particularly large man, clad in silver armor and three times as tall as the average person. He charged without a shield or a weapon, and the sheer momentum of his advance threw enemy soldiers left, right, and center. I recognized him too—and considering his gargantuan build, I definitely wasn’t mistaken. He was the warrior instructor who’d taken care of me during my three months at his training school.

My magician instructor looked at the imperial soldiers soaring through the air and sighed. “Good grief, what a mess. Whatever happened to not killing anyone?”

“You say that as though you weren’t the one who devised this strategy.”

“Mmm, well, disabling the enemy and taking a one-sided victory is always the best course of action. And with such a great disparity in the size of our armies, there’s no such thing as a fair fight.”

“You seem to be in a good mood, Oken.”

“Ho ho! No matter how old these bones get, a good fight always gets my blood boiling. Now, I’ll be putting the prison over here. The rest is yours, Sain.”

“Indeed. You can leave it to me.”

“Don’t blink—this’ll only take a moment. You lot! Ready?”

“Sir!”

My magician instructor and the group of people in black robes began activating another magic skill. Then, they all chanted in unison.

“[Stone Prison].”

Sturdy-looking walls of rock sprang up from the ground, each as tall as ten people. They surrounded and enclosed all the imperial soldiers the Warrior Corps had thrown into a massive heap. Soon enough, the prison made of stone was complete.

“Shall we, everyone?” my cleric instructor asked—and another transparent film peeled away to reveal a group of people wearing white robes. “We must save any survivors and teach them the error of their ways. Remember, dead men make for poor informants, and they offer little in the way of manual labor.”

“*Must* you phrase it like that?” my magician instructor said.

Another group wielding swords arrived and, together with the people in white robes, made their way into the stone prison. Some of the imperial soldiers were still outside the enclosure and trying to flee, but my warrior instructor simply grabbed them in his huge arms and lobbed them over its walls, one after the other.

The people in black robes soon appeared atop the prison walls, and they were joined shortly after by figures wielding bows. Both groups looked down on their surroundings, keeping watch. The Kingdom’s forces had gained complete

control of the area.

It wasn’t long before the last of the imperial soldiers surrendered and joined their comrades in the prison of stone.

Chapter 41: Dragon in Pursuit

“Instructor Noor? Are you all right?”

After the battle came to an end and just as I was about to collapse from exhaustion, Lynne, Ines, and Rolo arrived. Lynne took one look at me and cast some kind of healing magic, which made me feel a lot better.



I didn’t know what spell she’d used, but I was already able to move around

again. She really was an amazing kid—it was like she could do everything.

“Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better because of you,” I said. Then I rose to my feet and picked up my sword. “Thanks, Lynne.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Why don’t you rest a little more?”

“No, that’s okay. I can move just fine.”

I *was* pretty hungry though. I wanted to get something to eat right away...but it didn’t really seem like the time or place for that. It’d probably be asking for too much. Meanwhile, the soldiers around us were all still busy scurrying here and there. The group in white robes and those clad in armor were bringing the captive imperials out of the stone prison in bunches, healing their wounds, and asking them questions.

“Well, Sig?” came a voice from nearby. “Any promising information?” I turned to see my magician instructor speaking with my swordsman instructor.

“Yes. Sain got their commanding officer to speak. There aren’t any forces lying in ambush; this is all of them. Carew’s scouring the city again for good measure, but he reported that there don’t seem to be any further threats there either. He’s likely right.”

“Then I suppose this is the curtain call for today’s battle, ho ho!” My magician instructor twirled his long beard with his forefinger as he spoke.

“However, there’s been no sign of the emperor. It appears he ran.”

“The emperor? What’s this all about? Wait, you don’t mean the *emperor* emperor? Did that wily old fart really come all this way?”

“Yes. We’ve the testimonies of multiple soldiers to prove it. There’s no fault in our information. He was here, wearing golden armor.”

“Now that *is* odd. You don’t think his idiocy finally got the better of him, do you? I’ll wager he was all puffed up about his army’s equipment. For someone who makes his subjects call him ‘His Imperial Wiseness,’ he could stand to learn a thing or two about prudence, ho ho!”

“Golden armor?” I asked. The words had just slipped out. “You mean that old man?”

The two looked at me, then my magician instructor said, “You saw him?”

“If you mean the weird old man wearing golden armor, then yeah, I met him earlier. His horse was dressed up all shiny too. You could hardly miss him.”

My magician instructor began fiddling with the mustache he was so proud of, looking deep in thought. “Shiny horse, you say? Perhaps...it was outfitted with orichalcum armor. Hmm. Dreadful aesthetic taste aside, that would certainly give it a wider range of capabilities. Given that it was a commander’s horse, it was likely enchanted with [Musculature Enhancement], [Windbreak]...and perhaps [Arrow Reversal] too. It must be exceptionally quick, meaning he’s likely made it quite far by now. Hmm, what are we to do?”

He returned to stroking his ample white beard.

“If he makes it to the border, he’ll be out of our hands,” my swordsman instructor said. “He’ll simply reassemble his forces and invade again.”

“Indeed. Once he’s back in the Empire, there’ll be any number of military checkpoints between us—not to mention that canyon-spanning bridge. And we can’t just waltz in as though we’re imperial citizens.”

“Shall we concede his escape then?”

“No, no. This is our once-in-a-lifetime chance to drive that blasted old coot into a corner. We *must* seize it. Although, it may already be too late. We’d likely need to grow wings and fly if we wish to catch him before he reaches the border. Hmm.”

Fly, huh?

“If you’ve no suggestions, I see no reason to dwell on it any further. We should give up on him and prepare our strategy for the next attack.”

“No need to be so hasty. There’s always the chance that racking our brains will conjure forth a good idea.”

“Well? Do you have anything in mind?”

“I *might*, if you’d just let me think...”

“We don’t have the time to waste on such leisurely pursuits.”

Before my instructors could say anything else, I cut into their conversation. “I might know a way.” An idea had suddenly popped into my head.

“What?” my swordsman instructor asked.

“Do you now?” my magician instructor added. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“Well,” I said, “if you’re looking to *fly*, I think I can help.”

The old instructor turned to look straight at me and observed my face. “Ho ho! Now here’s a man with something interesting to say. Tell us, *how* shall we fly? I’m perfectly capable of achieving it with [Float], but I can’t say I fancy my chances of pursuing the man all on my lonesome.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure this’ll work for multiple people at once.”

“*Multiple people*, you say? Could such a convenience truly exist? How fast can one travel with this method of yours? There’s no point using it if we cannot outpace our target.”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about that either. It flies pretty fast, I think. Assuming it’s still alive.”

“It? What is this ‘it’?”

Well, “it” wasn’t human, for one thing. And there was no knowing whether it would actually listen to what we had to say.

“I’m pretty sure it’ll work,” I replied. “I mean, you’ll have *him*.” I gestured to Rolo, who was standing basically right next to me.

“Huh...?” Rolo said. “What...? Um...me?”

“Ho ho? A demonfolk child, if my eyes haven’t failed me. I see, I see. Now, would you care to enlighten me about this ingenious plan of yours?”

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My swordsman instructor took his leave, apparently having other work to do. The rest of us headed toward where that crimson light had shot down the dragon. We found the beast still collapsed on the ground, scorched all over.

It didn’t so much as twitch, so I almost thought it was dead—but when I put

my ear against it, I could still hear its heart beating. It had a pretty impressive will to live. If we were quick to treat it, there was a chance we'd save it yet. To that end, I got my magician instructor to fetch my cleric instructor.

"I've healed all kinds of people and animals in my time," my cleric instructor said, "but a dragon of this size is a first even for me." He smiled, placed his hands on its charcoal-black scales, and began reciting some kind of silent prayer.

Right before our eyes, the dragon's scales began to renew themselves, and its cracked claws and fangs started to regrow. In no time at all, the dragon was not only back from death's door but also looking completely reinvigorated. My cleric instructor's talent really was unbelievable.

Lynne had told me that healing magic consumed a lot of the caster's stamina —and with how much healing me always seemed to tire her out, I didn't doubt her. Even just using my [Low Heal] made me famished. Treating a creature of this size couldn't have been an easy feat.

"Instructor Sain," Lynne said, "I think I should help you after all."

"Oh, this much is nothing," my cleric instructor replied. "I'm an old hand at this. I'm more concerned about you, Lynne. You pushed yourself a little too far, don't you think? I forbid you from doing any more. Get some rest."

"Yes, Instructor..."

Had she done that because of me? I'd been convinced that she could do anything, but maybe I'd been relying on her too much. Hearing their conversation made me regret my earlier confidence a little.

"But that aside..." My cleric instructor turned his head to look at me, his hands still on the dragon, and smiled. "You've really grown, Noor. I almost didn't recognize you."

"What?" my magician instructor asked. "That's *Noor*?" He clearly hadn't remembered me anywhere near as well.

"It really has been a while, huh?" I said. "You two haven't changed at all."

My cleric instructor chuckled. "I knew it was you right away. Your build is

entirely different, but your features and the air about you are precisely the same as they used to be. I was quite surprised when I heard someone wanted me to bring the Dragon of Calamity back from the brink of death—doubly so when I found out *you* were that someone. Just so you know, I don't have any qualms about lending you my power, although I *will* refuse anything coming from Oken."

The gentle smile on my cleric instructor's face was exactly how I remembered it.

"Ho ho!" my magician instructor laughed. "So it *is* you, Noor! I *thought* you looked familiar. Hit a bit of a growth spurt, eh? Bless me, but I almost let you pass me by! Time certainly flies, don't you think? Has it truly been over a decade already?" I'd started to wonder whether he remembered me at all, so this really was a pleasant surprise.

"About fifteen years, by my count," I said. "I never thought I'd get to see you again either, Instructor. I thought you would've kicked the bucket by now."

"Ho ho? What an awful thing to say so casually! I'll have you know I've got *at least* another hundred years in me. I plan on still being around long after you're gone and buried! Ho ho ho!"

I chuckled along with him. "Your jokes haven't changed a bit, I see. I'm glad you're still doing so well."

"Hmm? I don't believe I made a joke. I'm always the picture of seriousness! Ho ho!"

The old man smiled joyfully as he massaged his beard. His expression was exactly how I remembered it too. It really took me back.

"So, this is the rumored Dragon of Calamity, eh?" my magician instructor said. "It has a dreadful intensity about it. To think I'd get the opportunity to see a legend up close... There's something to be said for living a long life!"

"Indeed," my cleric instructor added. "I never expected to be able to touch one."

"With that said, Noor... Are you quite certain this will work? I'm afraid I don't like my chances of stopping the dragon if it goes on another rampage."

My magician instructor was looking up at the dragon grimly. I understood why—if it went wild again, I wasn't sure I could stop it either. Thankfully, everyone here was so much stronger than me that it wasn't even a contest. And above all else...

"We'll be fine," I said. "Rolo's with us."

"Rolo, eh?" My magician instructor followed my eyes to look at him. "So that's your name."

The boy flinched at our sudden gazes.

"Ho ho. So tell me, Rolo—how confident are you in this plan?"

"I...I'm not...confident at all..."

"Ho? Ho ho?! N-Not at all, you say...?" My magician instructor turned back to me, his face stricken and depressed all of a sudden. He didn't have to look at me like *that*. I could understand where he was coming from though; Rolo wasn't exactly screaming confidence.

"It's fine, Instructor," I said. "Despite how he looks, Rolo—"

Before I could finish my explanation, a sudden tremor shook the ground. It felt like an earthquake, but it was actually the result of the dragon's growling.

"It appears the dragon is going to wake up soon," my cleric instructor said.

"Already?" I asked. "Wow."

"Ho, ho ho ho... You *are* certain we'll be okay, yes?!"

"Yeah," I replied. "Rolo?"

All the blood had drained from the face of my poor old instructor, but an explanation of Rolo's skill could wait until another time. A demonstration would probably be much more effective anyway.

"O-Okay..."

Rolo shut his eyes, and the dragon immediately raised its massive neck. The beast had seemed titanic enough just lying on the ground, but now its tremendous size was even more apparent. It slowly stood up on all fours, reached its head toward the heavens, then let out a mighty and intensely

furious roar. The earth shook even more violently than before, and the aftershock was so powerful that it became a struggle just to stay on my feet. Simply being in the vicinity of this colossus made every hair on my body stand on end.

“It really is huge...” I muttered.

The dragon spun its head around to examine the tiny beings at its feet. Its large eyes focused on us, glimmering like giant crystals, and immediately I began to shiver in terror. Maybe my instincts were to blame—the ones that told me to be afraid of such huge beasts.

In spite of my fears, one person among us looked completely unfazed. “Thank goodness,” Rolo uttered. “It says it’ll listen to us.”

“Really?” I replied. “Wow.”

Rolo had just said something absolutely incredible—and as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Apparently, that was enough to move my anxious old instructor.

“Ho ho... Now this is a marvel. This... This... Wow. I mean... Just wow.”

I was starting to worry he might go into shock. Well, I supposed that I didn’t need to be *too* concerned; I’d known from the very beginning that this was how things would play out. Still, no matter how many times I saw Rolo’s power, it never failed to take my breath away. The colossal dragon was sitting obediently in front of the small boy. It bent forward and let out a low growl that even I could guess the meaning of.

“It’s angry, isn’t it?” I asked.

Maybe it was because I’d spent so long living on a mountain, but there were times when I could sort of tell what animals were feeling. The dragon had sounded a lot like the creatures I was used to whenever they were quietly angry—like when something they held dear was hurt and they wanted to get back at whoever was responsible.

“Uh-huh...” Rolo said. “A-And, um, it also says thank you. For healing it.”

“Yeah?”

Now that Rolo mentioned it, I *could* recall something like compassion in that earlier earth-shaking growl. I'd been convinced that this dragon was evil, but maybe that wasn't the case at all.

"Can you really understand all that, Rolo?" my magician instructor asked. "Wow. Wow! Would you mind interpreting for me in the future? Ah, the progress I could make with my research!"

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Oken," my cleric instructor said. "First, we need to say, 'You're welcome.'"

My magician instructor's face lit up with childish curiosity as he studied the dragon, while my cleric instructor was waving at the behemoth with a more composed and gentle smile. They were like complete opposites.

The dragon gave another low growl.

"Do you know what it just said, Rolo?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. It said...it wants revenge. It wants that to be its next order."

"M-My word!" my magician instructor cried out. "'Order'? Have you truly tamed the Dragon of Calamity to such a degree?! W-Wow! Simply...truly...wow!"

Was it just me or had "wow" become one of his most-used words all of a sudden? Well, it wasn't like I didn't get it. I was just as impressed.

"Yeah," I said. "Rolo's amazing."

"Um, it's not what you think," the boy replied. "It was actually Noor who—"

"GRRRROOOOAAAARRRR!!!"

Rolo hadn't been able to finish before the dragon's bellow drowned him out. "It...says it doesn't want to wait any longer," he explained.

"I guess that makes sense," I said.

"Ho ho... I believe I understand now. Your ingenious plan is for us to fly on the dragon's back, correct?"

"That's right. I figured there's more than enough room."

"Splendid... Ho ho... What a glorious idea! I love it! Let me go with you!"

“You know you can’t, Oken,” my cleric instructor interjected. “We need you here to manage the stone prison.”

“I...I know... I just wanted to try saying it...”

As my old instructor stared forlornly at the dragon, Rolo, Ines, and Lynne got ready to climb onto its back.

“You’re going, Rolo?” I asked. “You too, Lynne?”

“Someone needs to protect Rolo,” Lynne replied. “I’m confident that Ines and I can keep him safe.”

“Come to think of it...you’re right.”

I hadn’t actually thought this far ahead. Rolo was the only one who could speak with the dragon, so he *had* to go, but he was also just a kid; someone would need to keep him safe. I wondered whether there was anything I could do to help.

“I would have gone either way though,” Lynne said. “You’re the same, right, Instructor?”

“Me? Um... I’m...”

Wait a minute. I’d come here to help *my instructors* fly—at no point had getting on the dragon myself even crossed my mind. I mean, sure, I *could* mount the beast; this was all my idea to begin with, so it made sense for me to join them. There was just, uh, one *little* problem: I was afraid of heights. I wasn’t totally hopeless with them, but...I was still pretty bad. Just standing on a high cliff was enough to make me freeze up and want to curl into a ball. It wasn’t quite as bad when I didn’t look down, but I’d rather avoid a situation like that altogether.

Then again, I *had* dragged Rolo into this. I could tell that I wouldn’t feel right about letting them go off without me, so I resigned myself to my fate and gave Lynne my reply.

“Okay. I’ll...come.”

“As will I,” my cleric instructor said. “I’d like to keep an eye on my *patient* until the very end. Plus, ‘talking things out’ happens to be a specialty of ours. Isn’t

that right, Carew?”

“Don’t lump me together with you. I don’t get a kick out of scaring my conversation partners.”

Out of nowhere, a masked man dressed head to toe in black had appeared behind us—or had he been there the whole time? I hadn’t noticed him if so. His face was mostly covered by his mask, but I still recognized him. He was the thief instructor who’d once trained me.

“Long time no see, Noor,” he said. “Take me along too. You’ll need a [Concealment] for a mount this large. I just so happen to have one of the enemy’s [Concealment Enhancement] magical tools, so you can leave that to me.”

“Good to have you,” I replied.

“It’s a pleasure to have you with us, Instructor Carew,” Lynne added.

“Ho ho! Ines, Carew, and even Lady Lynneburg? No need for quantity when you have *quality*, that’s what I say! Now, quickly, time runs short. You’d best get go—”

“Wait a moment, please,” came another familiar voice from behind us. “Take me with you too. You’ll need a negotiator.”

“Brother?” Lynne said. And standing right behind him was someone else I recognized. “Father! You’re okay!”

“I am. Sorry to have worried you. I’m glad you’re all right as well, Lynne.”



During this father-daughter reunion, Lynne’s brother made a beeline for Ines.

“You were headed to Mithra,” he said. “You came back.”

“I did, my lord. I shall accept any punishment you deem appropriate for this breach of orders.”

“No...it was my fault for issuing such a foolish command in the first place. You did well to return. And you too, Sir Noor. We owe you a great debt.”

I shrugged. “It didn’t feel like the right time to be enjoying a holiday, you know?”

He paused for a moment and then said, “Indeed. As I’m sure you can tell by the state of things.”

“Still, it’s not over yet, right? If we’re going, we’d better hurry.”

“You’re right.” Lynne’s brother then turned to their father. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I’m counting on you, Rein,” the man said. “You have full authority to act as you see fit once you’re there. You know our kingdom better than I do right now. Just tell me about it later.”

“Yes, father.”

Everyone began climbing onto the dragon’s back. I was about to (very gingerly) start doing the same when Lynne’s father called out to me.

“Sir Noor.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry to be so dependent on you. But please, keep my children safe.”

“Yeah... Don’t worry. I’ll get them back to you in one piece.”

“I trust that you will,” he said, looking me straight in the eye. His scarred, wrinkled face then broke into a gentle smile.

Once I was atop the dragon, Rolo said to the behemoth in a soft voice, “You can go now.” And right on cue, it flapped its enormous wings, buffeting our surroundings with a fierce storm of wind.

Amid the dust and debris being blown through the air, the dragon’s titanic body lurched upward, and we took off toward the sky.

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“They’re gone.”

“Indeed.”

After the titanic dragon’s departure, a person emerged from the shadows cast by a towering wall of rock. Waiting nearby was a hulking figure clad in silver armor. The two men—Sig the Sword Sovereign and Dandalg the Shield Sovereign—stood next to each other in silence as they watched the dragon leave.

After a while, the armored giant spoke. “Are you sure about this, Sig? You could have said something to him. To Noor.”

“It’s fine. The boy is alive and well. That is enough.”

“But you looked for him, didn’t you? You’ve blamed yourself for his disappearance all these years.”

“I could say the same of you.”

“Well, yeah. I suppose all six of us felt responsible way back then. But you gave us a real fright when you said you were going to ditch all of your work to search for him. And now he’s finally back.”

“It’s fine. That business is concluded.”

“Concluded?”

“We six weren’t necessary to his story in the first place. That we even considered taking in and raising a boy of such sheer *talent* was arrogance beyond measure. Who could have guessed that he would grow into the man he is today?”

The two men eyed their surroundings, marveling at the sea of scattered swords and shields, and at the ruins of the magical armaments that had once been the enemy’s main military assets. It seemed impossible to think that a single person had charged into an army of ten thousand and disarmed every single one of them.

Dandalg shrugged, his large frame accompanying the movement, then cheerfully said, “You’re right about that; we six are nothing compared to Noor.

Old Man Oken was right too—the boy grew up not needing our help. Still, to think he'd get *this* strong... He's like a hero out of a fairy tale. How funny is that?"

"Dandalg," Sig said softly, "after the reconstruction effort is finished, lend me some of your time. I plan to restart my training from scratch. Otherwise...I'll never catch up to him." His face was deadly serious as he touched the sword at his waist.

"Hey now, you're not thinking of becoming a challenger at your age, are you? I don't mind playing along, but we're getting old. It wouldn't kill you to settle down a little."

"The path of the sword is never-ending. Besides, how can I allow my blade to rust now, when I've just been shown how much farther there is to go? Unless I resolve to put my very life on the line, he will forever remain ahead of me."

Dandalg scratched his head and sighed; his old friend was as unbending as always. "Yeah, I knew you'd say that." He paused, then added, "Was he really *that* impressive? I didn't get to see it firsthand."

"He was. It was impressive enough to make me wonder how I ever thought I was good enough to teach others. It shames me to my core how much I've been slacking." Sig began tap-tapping the scabbard of his sword with his fingertip. Dandalg had known the Sword Sovereign for most of his life, so he immediately recognized this indicator that his friend was in an excellent mood.

"And yet you seem pretty pleased."

The corners of Sig's lips curled upward. It was a rare sight—the man almost never smiled. "Of course I am," he retorted. "Who wouldn't be after witnessing such a display?"

"True enough," Dandalg replied. Seeing his friend so overjoyed, he couldn't help but smile as well. "After a show like that...who indeed?"

The two men stood there, side by side, watching as the Dragon of Calamity faded into the distant sky.

Chapter 42: Shield of Light

On the back of the Dragon of Calamity, we flew in the direction the emperor had almost certainly fled and soon crossed the border.

My instructor Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows, had used a [Concealment] bolstered by a [Concealment Enhancement] magical tool to hide our gigantic mount from sight. We'd passed three towns and military checkpoints now, but nobody on the ground had even batted an eye. It seemed safe to say that our venture into the Magic Empire's domain was proceeding smoothly...but there was still one problem.

"This is the only way he could have escaped," my brother said. "Have you found anything?"

"No," Instructor Carew replied. "My [Detect] isn't turning up anyone who matches his description. Lady Lynneburg?"

"No luck," I answered. "I've been searching for a while now, but I can't find him either."

Instructor Carew and I were each making full use of our [Detect], [Hawk Eyes], [Farsight], and [Clairvoyance] skills to scour our surroundings. But despite our best efforts and how far we'd traveled, we had yet to find even a trace of the emperor.

"If you *and* the Sovereign of Shadows haven't found him, then he must be quite a ways ahead of us," my brother said. "In the worst-case scenario, he may have already reached the imperial capital."

We soon approached a massive canyon, affording us a view of the Iron Bridge that stretched across it. Beyond it stood several intimidating fortresses, and far beyond *those* lay the emperor's stronghold, the imperial capital. If our target was already across the bridge—the borderline that had once separated the Kingdom and the Empire—then pursuing him would become a lot more complicated. We were all aware of this.

Instructor Carew spoke first. "It may sting considering how far we've come,

but we should consider turning back. Beyond this point lies the heart of the Empire. We can expect to face countless fortresses and military installations of a magnitude beyond what we've seen already. We cannot charge in rashly. So, how shall we proceed?"

"You're right," my brother said. "We..."

As they continued to deliberate, I turned to Instructor Noor for his opinion. "What do you think, Instructor Noor? Instructor...?"

He didn't even react. Ever since we'd mounted the dragon, he had been facing the heavens, his eyes squeezed shut in what could only be a show of profound concentration. I wondered what he was thinking about.

As I was staring at Instructor Noor's back, I noticed a sudden glimmer out of the corner of my eye. Activating my [Farsight] revealed a horse in golden armor galloping at a preposterous speed.

"Look, over there." I pointed. "It's moving so fast."

"That's him," Instructor Carew said. "We've finally located the emperor. But we're nearing the imperial capital's defense network. We need to decide *now* whether we're going to pursue him or turn back."

The emperor urged his horse onward and was soon swallowed up by an enormous mana-metal gate, the mouth of an even greater wall of mana-metal and stone. Its battlements were lined with magical armaments—the same black cannons we'd seen earlier on the battlefield. Beyond all that, I could see a line of several fortresses. The entire stretch was littered with imposing mana-metal weaponry. Before us was an utterly impenetrable barrier which had stood strong for the past five decades, the result of generations of emperors wary of their neighbors. If we continued our pursuit, our small group would be diving straight into the jaws of death.

"If we wish to continue, we'll need to get past *those*," I said.

"Indeed," Instructor Carew replied. He seemed to share my concerns. "I won't call it impossible, but it certainly won't be smooth sailing. We should manage the journey there, but the effect of my [Concealment] will be weaker on our return. Do not expect us to come away unscathed."

“I understand you, Carew,” my brother uttered, his expression bitter. “But as it stands, letting him get away is not an option.”

That was true; if we allowed the emperor to escape now, it was a foregone conclusion that he would augment his army and come back for revenge. The soldiers with whom he’d invaded had almost all been conscripts from among the impoverished, farmers, or refugees of neighboring nations. The Empire was fully capable of turning laymen into mighty warriors in an instant by equipping them with its superior arms and armor.

The source of the Magic Empire’s strength was its continuous output of formidable magical tools. It could mass-produce as many top-of-the-line armaments as it wished as long as it had the resources—and its concentrated efforts to expand its borders meant it had them aplenty.

In truth, that was even more terrifying than it sounded. To the Empire, the term “resources” meant more than just material goods; people were included as well, and there was an abundance of them to be used. The emperor would round up the impoverished and the refugees from wars of his own making and send them out as soldiers, promising them fame and fortune. Creating another army would come easily to him.

War had already begun. From here on out, any time we wasted was time the Empire could spend getting stronger. It had suffered a crushing defeat today, but its next invasion would only be more fearsome. So, we could not afford to tarry. If we did...

“Lord Rein, Lady Lynneburg.” Ines stepped out in front of us without any warning. “Given the circumstances, may I have your permission to annihilate the enemy?”

“Annihilate...?” I repeated.

Only then did I remember something crucial: there was a reason why Ines was bestowed a title that stood even above the Sovereigns—why her ability was regarded as legendary. She was the Divine Shield, but she excelled in more than just defense. In fact, the reason she usually chose to ignore her other title, “the Divine Sword,” was because her blade often proved *too powerful to be of any use.*

Ines had stood by me as my subordinate for so long that I'd completely missed what was staring me in the face. Instructor Noor wasn't the only legendary figure with us; there was one more outlier here who defied common sense.

"Just as Instructor Carew said, if we are to proceed through here, we will need to secure a route back," Ines remarked, then gazed at the fortresses ahead. "Perhaps it would be wise to annihilate those defenses while we have the chance."

She had said that as though it were the most natural thing in the world, but she was right; if this was to be our path home, we would need to eliminate the threats on it. Part of me wondered whether such a thing was even possible...but for Ines, it absolutely was.

"You're right," my brother said. "Do it, Ines. Don't hold back."

"As you wish, my lord."

Under normal circumstances, Ines would never have made such a proposal; she always tried to avoid harming others when she could help it. That was why it had surprised me so much. But after some thought, I realized that it made complete sense. The Empire hadn't only roused the dragon's anger—it had also roused mine, my brother's...and Ines's too. The home in which she was born and raised, the city she had vowed to defend with her life, had been so mercilessly destroyed. Though she hadn't said it outright, Ines had been holding on to her fury this entire time.

"Rolo," Ines said, "I must request that you speak with the dragon. Please ask it to fly as low as possible. And tell it that I will momentarily need to stand on its head, for which I beg its pardon. I don't mean to offend."

"O-Okay..." Rolo replied. "I'll do all that..."

"Thank you." Ines calmly made her way along the dragon's back, traversed its neck with ease, and came to a stop on its head.

All of a sudden, the dragon went into a nosedive, and the towering mana-metal fortress was right before our eyes. We all clung to our mount, desperately trying not to fall, but Ines remained on her feet. She moved her

slender arm in a sweeping motion and, in that single flourish, created a shield of light massive enough to cover the entire Dragon of Calamity. The barrier grew larger still...then she swung it horizontally.

“[Divine Shield].”

The shield sliced through the air and cleaved the indomitable mana-metal fortress in twain. At the same time, the black cannons sitting on its battlements exploded into pieces.

Ines swung her vast shield of light a second time, then a third, further destroying the immense structure in front of us with each new attack. She continued to sever everything in our path as the dragon practically skimmed the ground.



In the blink of an eye, we were already past the Empire’s first line of defense.

The dragon accelerated, and we closed in on the second fortress. Its array of cannons were pointed straight at us, but...

“[Divine Shield].”

There was another flash of light, and the second fortress suffered the same fate as the first. Debris tumbled around us as we pressed ever onward.

One after another, the daunting structures in our way were reduced to fragments of mana-metal that crumbled noisily to the ground. We watched the same scene play out before us again and again.

“Incredible...”

This was the might of Ines, the woman whom all Six Sovereigns refused to antagonize—the greatest sword and shield in the entire Kingdom of Clays.

“That should make our return journey secure enough,” she said.

“Indeed,” came my brother’s slow and measured response. “Well done.”

Ines’s breathing was normal, like she hadn’t exerted herself at all. Just watching her had made my heart pound furiously in my chest, but Instructor Carew and my brother looked similarly calm; they were focused on protecting Rolo from falling debris as though that awe-inspiring display hadn’t even been a distraction.

They were all so amazing—and Instructor Noor was no exception. His eyes were still closed, and he was still facing the heavens. It was like he’d known from the very beginning that this would happen.

“I can see the emperor’s horse now,” my brother said. “It’s going even faster than I expected. Is there any way the dragon can speed up?”

“Mm-hmm,” Rolo replied. “There is...but this is apparently as fast as it can go without throwing us off.”

“I see.”

The emperor urged his horse to go even faster; our [Concealment] had long since unraveled, so it was very likely he had seen us. Not even our dragon could keep up anymore. The steed, enhanced by its orichalcum armor, was gliding along so swiftly that I half expected it to take flight.

At this rate, the emperor would reach the imperial capital.

“Lynne,” my brother said. “Prepare yourself. Our next actions will determine the course of this war. We are going to pursue the emperor to the capital.”

He was asking me to steel my resolve. I could understand why—we were headed for the enemy’s stronghold, the imperial capital, and there was no telling what would await us there. But even knowing that, there wasn’t a single trace of unease in my heart. Why would there be? I had *them* with me.

Ines, the Divine Shield—the Kingdom’s greatest defender.

My brother Rein. He was only six years older than me, but our father the king had long since entrusted him with managing our kingdom’s domestic affairs. He was also next in line to inherit the throne—and with it, the right to command the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital.

Instructor Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows—head of the royal capital’s intelligence units and master of thieves, capable of masking his presence from absolutely anyone.

Instructor Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, who had managed to heal the legendary Dragon of Calamity in barely any time at all.

And of course Rolo, the young demonfolk boy who had tamed that same dragon of legend.

But most significant of all was Instructor Noor. He had faced the Dragon of Calamity in single combat, defied its Light of Destruction, and rendered ten thousand soldiers powerless. Not even Ines’s terrifying display of might had managed to shake him; even now, he was gazing up at the sky with his arms crossed. I was sure he could hear our every word, but he hadn’t uttered a word in response.

Then it hit me. He wasn’t simply lost in thought; he was quietly listening for our resolve. A man as strong as he would have no issue marching into the Empire and then marching out again unharmed. Its state-of-the-art weaponry had been like mere toys to him. As far as he was concerned, the question of whether we should continue onward or turn back didn’t matter at all.

Sometimes...I wondered. Was it possible that Instructor Noor had yet to show

us even a glimpse of his true strength? In all my time with him, not once had I seen him attack. Perhaps, in his eyes, everything up until now had seemed as inconsequential as brushing away dewdrops. How could I ever follow him if I allowed something like this to scare me?

"Very well," I said. "Let us show them whom they choose to bare their fangs at."

Instructor Noor was still gazing at the heavens, but I saw him nod once, right as the dragon gave its wings a mighty flap. He truly was unfathomable, from his strength in combat to the profundity of his thoughts. *And he was on our side.* That alone convinced me that we couldn't lose.

Indeed, there wasn't a single thing I needed to worry about. Because right now, I was surrounded by the strongest people I could ever imagine.

Chapter 43: Flames of Magic

Nael, the capital city of the Magic Empire, was one of the fulcrums of the continent's economy—a massive metropolis and central political unit from which the Empire ruled over its smaller, neighboring nations.

The vast city had as its defense towering mana-metal ramparts. Even the entrance was a large, heavy black gate, engraved with a faintly luminescent magical crest to facilitate its opening.

All of a sudden, that same crest began to shine more brightly. The Empire's sophisticated magical technology had granted the gate a certain kind of intelligence—enough to detect that its master was approaching. So, it opened without a sound.

An old man clad in resplendent golden armor raced through at a blinding speed. He was atop a horse with similarly lustrous armor and was headed straight into the heart of the city, toward its tallest building.

"How dare they? How *dare* they?!"

Upon entering the palace—a culmination of the most sublime architecture—the man in gold dismounted his horse, his face twisted in fury. He then stepped into one of the constructs installed for his personal use—a magical ascension device called an "elevator." It took him to the topmost floor, where his throne awaited him. It was from there that this self-proclaimed emperor of the world ruled.

As soon as the emperor entered the imperial throne room, the place where he truly belonged, one of his subjects cried out in surprise.

"Y-Your Imperial Majesty?! What happened to you? And where are the others?!"

The minister he'd tasked with managing affairs in his absence was at a complete and utter loss, and understandably so—the emperor was supposed to be leading ten thousand men to invade the Kingdom of Clays, but here he was alone and disheveled.

“Forget them,” the emperor spat. “They were useless anyway. Those irritating...*incompetents*! I suppose even the best weapons are useless in the hands of the inept!”

The emperor gnawed on his dry, cracked lips. In the heat of the moment, he’d been so overcome with terror that he ran away—but that pathetic emotion had since ceded to anger. Why had his legions of soldiers been so helpless? Why had his vassals, whom he’d thought were competent, devised such a foolish plan? Did that make the emperor himself a fool for believing in them? How *dare* they?! Even the minister, the most able subject in his empire, was now staring out the window in unsightly dismay!

“Y-Your Imperial Majesty...” the man said, his voice quavering. “What...is that?”

The emperor turned to look. “What are you talking...? N-No, it can’t be...”

As he stared out the great window of his throne room, his anger turned to panic. He wanted to question what was before him, but there was no need; he had seen it just a short while ago, terrorizing the Kingdom’s capital. That same titanic beast was now flying through the sky above the city—and it was heading straight for the imperial palace.

“That’s the Dragon of Calamity...” he muttered. “But why is it here...?”

The emperor had been fully committed to his escape, not once taking his eyes off the road ahead. There was no need to; the [Windbreak] enchantment on his horse’s armor had allowed him to travel without any resistance, at a speed that nothing could match. Now that he thought about it, though, he remembered a strange occurrence on his journey—a moment when his horse had suddenly accelerated even faster than expected. He hadn’t known why when he was clinging to its back, but now the answer was right before his eyes.

“No...” he muttered. “Didn’t we kill it with a Brionac?”

It was a rhetorical question, but then the emperor came to a realization. From somewhere deep within him, shivers began to run through his body.

“It couldn’t be... They resurrected it?!”

There was no better answer. The Kingdom had Sain the Demonic Saint, a

fiendish man with abnormal healing powers. How dare he? The man had revived the dragon!

“But how?”

How were they controlling it? After the Holy Theocracy’s constant hunts, demonfolk were a rare resource. The only survivors he knew of were those under the yoke of that slaver from the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. So...how?

An idea came to the emperor’s mind—one that infuriated him to no end.

“That man betrayed me! Where is he?! *Where is he*?!”

The slaver from Sarenza controlled a pack of strong beastfolk, made use of demonfolk, and could even bend large monsters to his will. This was some scheme of his; there was no doubt about it. But why? He had been showered with so many favors—with so much wealth!

The emperor clenched his fists, trembling with rage.

“Do you mean Master Lude, Your Imperial Majesty?” the minister asked. “He had some urgent business to attend to, so he departed for Sarenza.”

“Curse that *snake*! And you, fool! Why didn’t you stop him?!”

“Y-You...gave him your favor, Your Imperial Majesty. S-So—urk!”

The emperor seized his closest aide by the neck, causing the man to grimace in agony. True, the emperor was but an old man, but the strength afforded to him by his orichalcum armor was more than any normal man could endure.

“Enough of this,” the emperor eventually said and threw the man to the floor. “Prepare *it*. We’ll kill that dragon once and for all.”

“‘I-It,’ Your Imperial Majesty?” the minister asked. Even after being violently choked, he was committed to his duty. “M-May I ask...?”

“Keraunos. Prepare it.”

“B-But, Your Imperial Majesty...” The ever-loyal minister’s face blanched with uneasiness as he dared to question his liege. “It’s still experimental! The sights haven’t even been calibrated! Using it now would pose far too great of a risk! A-

And here, in the heart of the city?!”

“Fool. Can you not see what is right before your eyes? The dragon’s Light will consume everything. Either we kill it or we *be killed*. Do it. *Now*.”

“B-But...using it during the current stage of testing might result in unforeseen collateral damage! Surely there’s another—”

The emperor silenced his obedient servant with a fierce kick, sending the minister flying into a wall before he collapsed in a heap, motionless. He stared for a moment, then turned to a second man in the room—another aide.

“Do it. Even one shot is fine. That’s all we’ll need to bring it down. Brionac was enough earlier, and Keraunos is far superior.”

“Y-Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Enchant the barrel with [Mana Tracing]. That should make up for the sights being useless. The incompetent should have known that. And *don’t miss*.”

“O-Of course, Your Imperial Majesty!” the loyal vassal exclaimed. “As you will!” He then set about doing his ruler’s bidding.

The emperor was drenched in sweat, but he broke into a smile. This was perfect. So much of his plan had been altered, but he could salvage at least this small part. Using the Keraunos, the peak of what magical science could achieve, he would once again eliminate the Dragon of Calamity and make the Empire’s strength known the world over. Dealing with the irritating kingdom across the canyon could come later.

From here on, the emperor refused to put his faith in the deceitful schemes devised by his foolish vassals. There was no point when the flames of war already burned bright. Instead, he would confront the enemy directly. He would refine the Keraunos, the ultimate weapon, and crush everything in his path. His empire’s unrivaled strength meant he had never needed such petty tricks to begin with. Daunting majesty befitted the Magic Empire far better—and with that thought, his lips curled into an even broader grin.

Some sacrifices had been made during today’s expedition, but that was fine. He’d received information in exchange, and now that he had reclaimed command from that group of incompetent generals, the next battle would be

his victory.

Now in high spirits, the emperor sat on his throne, the symbol of his own authority. “What’s taking so long?” he asked the aide. “Hurry it up.”

“Y-Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. I’ve just finished using the magical transmission device to call the control room and relay your orders. I’m trying to connect you with the gunner now. If you would allow me just a little more time—”

“Hurry it *up*, you dimwit.”

A moment later, the gunner’s voice blared out: *“This is the Keraunos. R-Ready to fire.”*

“Then fire,” the emperor replied. “Now.”

“P-Please hold on, Your Imperial Majesty. I’ve just been contacted by the city’s surveillance unit. There’s something on the dragon’s back!”

“Shut up. Fire.”

A few more moments passed, then all the magical lights illuminating the throne room flickered and dimmed. Firing the Keraunos even once required all the mana in the imperial capital, and countless mana furnaces had been installed all over the city to supply it. All of this fuel would be gathered together, compressed, and then unleashed as a bolt of lightning that could incinerate even a god.

This devastating attack was the reason why the Keraunos was also called “God’s Lightning.” Its might completely outclassed that of the Brionacs. Those were mere portable artillery, whereas the Keraunos was the distilled essence of the Empire’s magical science—the crystallization of humanity’s intellect.

“Aha. Aha ha ha!”

Staring at the world outside his great window, the emperor laughed. It was a scornful chortle, full of pity and assured superiority. The dragon had narrowly escaped death earlier, but now it would be shot down once more. Never had a “legend” been more pathetic. Thankfully, it wouldn’t have a chance to shame itself a third time; this shot would scatter it to the four winds, leaving not even a trace behind.

The emperor's derisive laughter echoed in his heart, and all the lights in the imperial capital disappeared as their mana flowed into the Keraunos. In an instant, a single intense mass of light appeared in the city, swelling as though the submerged sun were rising again. Then, with a flash, it shot out of the cannon—made from an alloy of mana-metal and orichalcum—from whence it had materialized.

True to its name, God's Lightning was a divine sight. It tore through the sky, headed straight for the dragon. But this was not the light of a deity, the emperor thought; it was the light of *man*, fashioned by humans and their thirst for knowledge.

This supreme attack, the product of the greatest wisdom known to man, already had an enchantment engraved in its mana-waves. It could no longer miss, nor could it be outrun or avoided. The light was certain death, and whatever it targeted would be utterly exterminated.

The emperor continued to laugh as he bathed in the light's unmerciful rays. After this was over, he would fire the Keraunos straight at the Kingdom of Clays. He no longer cared if its dungeon suffered some damage as a result; his empire already wielded the strength of a god. Earlier, the plans of his moronic vassals had kept him from displaying his full potential, but no longer. During their next encounter, *His Imperial Wiseness* would be in direct command.

This was it. The moment of truth. The emperor's enemies had put him through greater humiliations than he'd ever thought possible. Would this not make for the perfect act of revenge? He leaned forward, his face warped in delight and his heart swelling with aspirations for the future, eager to see the divine light swallow the dragon whole.

However...

[Parry]

The blinding radiance, shining as though it were the sun itself, diverted upward, straight above the dragon.

"Hweh...?"

The light climbed higher and higher before finally splitting apart like the

branches of a tree. Then, as the emperor looked on in shock, the falling stars began arcing through the air. They were homeward bound and continued to divide into countless streaks that filled the sky above the imperial capital.

“Wh-Whuh...?”

The emperor’s stupor held as he watched them land. In accordance with the enchantment engraved in their mana-waves, they altered their paths in midair as they were drawn to *large sources of mana*.

One of the targets chosen by [Mana Tracing] was a collection of magical tool research facilities surrounding the Magic Core, the city’s greatest mana supply site stocked with every manastone the Empire had managed to buy, seize, or coerce from its vassal nations. These facilities were where the Keraunos’s cannon resided and where the Empire’s foremost knowledge and technologies were concentrated. They represented hundreds of years of imperial history and were the source of the Magic Empire’s power, which had allowed it to reign supreme over every other nation that had ever stood before it.

The emperor could only watch as the heavens crashed down on every single mana supply source that supported the Empire. A particularly large collection of streaks headed for the Magic Core as though being sucked back into their point of origin.

That was when he finally processed what was happening.

“N-No... No! Please, no! Anything but that!”

The emperor screamed, but there was nobody around to hear him. His vassals had already fled, leaving him alone in the imperial throne room. The skies above the city were painted a dazzling white...

“No... Noooooo!”

And in one fell swoop, Nael’s flames of magic were completely extinguished.

Chapter 44: The Throne Room

How long had I been out for? I'd thought that I would be okay with flying on the dragon's back so long as I didn't look down...but that had soon turned out to be a naive delusion.

I'd squeezed my eyes shut before we even took off and craned my head up toward the sky, hoping that not being able to see the ground would somehow get me through the whole ordeal. Instead, what followed was an unimaginably terrifying sequence of events.

Firstly...the ride hadn't been anywhere *near* as smooth as I'd expected. The dragon lurched up and down more than I'd ever anticipated, and my eyes being closed made it all twice as scary. I'd heard voices around me and was pretty sure Lynne even asked me a question at one point, but my heart was pounding so fast that I hadn't been able to follow the conversation, let alone respond.

My insides had tossed and turned in a way that I hadn't thought was possible, and even though I hadn't eaten anything in a while, I'd constantly felt like I was going to throw up. Still, I'd toughed it out. By some stroke of luck, I'd managed to hold on.

But that luck hadn't lasted.

Partway through our journey, the dragon took an especially sharp dive. My vision went completely white, and what happened after was still a blur to me. Frankly, it was a miracle that I hadn't fallen off while I was unconscious.

And now there was a glaring light in front of me, bright enough to give me a tan. My gut screamed that it was bad news.

"What's...?"

I'd only just come to my senses, but it didn't take me long to figure out the light was dangerous. The dragon's paled in comparison, as did the crimson beam that had shot the dragon out of the sky. If we didn't do something, we'd end up completely cooked.

Without a moment's hesitation, I grabbed my sword and kicked off the

dragon’s back as hard as I could, directly toward the light. The terror of jumping into empty air made me reflexively slam my eyes shut, but I wouldn’t have been able to keep them open anyway—just getting that little bit closer to the beam had engulfed me in an unbelievable heat that made my skin blister.

Still...

[Parry]

Using my sword, I tried to force the light high up into the sky. The hilt jarred in my hand—but even with my eyes closed, I could sense that it had worked.

I nervously opened my eyes to see a bright pillar rising toward the heavens and a dragon flapping its wings. What a relief—the dragon had managed to avoid getting hit. The blinding light drew a clean arc through the sky, then broke into fragments that scattered in all directions. Each one left a trail as it fell toward the earth, making the entire scene look like a shower of shooting stars.

The fantastical sight took my breath away—then so did the realization that I was *really* high up. My entire body went stiff.

“Uh-oh.”

My decision to leap from the dragon’s back meant I was now hurtling through the air. Then, completely helpless and terrified out of my mind, I crashed headfirst into a tall building. The impact was immense, but I’d managed to bring my sword in front of me in the nick of time.

The building’s walls were made of some kind of ridiculously hard metal, but even then, I just kept going. I came face-to-face with one thick, sturdy wall after another, and each time, my sword smashed right through it. The process repeated more times than I could count until, eventually, I tumbled to a stop in a large room.

“Phew... It’s finally over...”

I breathed a sigh of relief, grateful to have struck this building instead of the ground far, far below, and took a moment to appreciate the sheer bliss of having a floor underneath me. All in all, I’d been *seriously* lucky, but where was I now? A quick look around revealed a familiar-looking old man clad in gold. He was definitely the same person from before—after all, not many senior citizens

traipsed about in weird and gaudy suits of armor. The chair he was sitting in was also very shiny and golden, and surrounding him was a group of soldiers in dark-purple armor.

The soldiers' armor wasn't exactly the same as what I'd seen the army wearing earlier, but it was close enough that I could tell they were from the Empire. In other words, I'd managed to land myself in a *very* bad spot.

Or so I thought. On closer inspection, something seemed off.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?! Are you not aware this is treason?!"

"Accept your fate. For the Empire to survive, this must be done."

The soldiers were ignoring me entirely, instead drawing their swords and closing in on the old man. I'd heard something before about him being an emperor, but was I mistaken? It looked like he was about to be cut down.

"This is where you die."

"C-Cease this! Help! Somebody, help!"

"Your Imperial Majesty...there are no longer any soldiers here who respect your rule. Now, rest in peace knowing that we, the Circuit of Ten, shall see to the consequences of your actions."

"Eep!"

"The time has come. My apologies."

One of the armored soldiers, who was notably taller than the others, swung his large, curved blade down on the old man...

[Parry]

But I dashed straight in between them and parried the strike. The tall man's weapon was knocked from his hand and stabbed straight into the ceiling.

"What...?"

"Eek!" The old man cowered upon seeing me.

Seemingly taken aback by my sudden intervention, the newly disarmed soldier began shouting at me. "Wh-Who are you?! Do you mean to defend this man?! Move aside! It was his nonsensical actions that brought all this about! If

our empire had not been burdened with such a fool of an emperor—!”

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but you really should calm down,” I said.

I was now standing at the very center of the group of soldiers. They produced a number of black tubes, large and small, then pointed them at the old man and me.

“That attire...” one of the soldiers muttered. “Mercenary, are you?”

“Tsk. We didn’t foresee an ambush like this,” another said.

Before I knew it, a wave of mana spheres was closing in on me.

[Parry]

I swung my sword in a wide sweep and repelled them all.

“Wha—?!”

“This mercenary is skilled. Strike together.”

“Wait,” I said. “You’ve got the wrong idea.”

“What other explanation could there possibly be?”

The soldiers were all pointing their weapons at me. Based on what they’d shown me so far, I wasn’t going to have any trouble fending off their attacks; the real challenge was trying to get through to them. I was standing in front of the old man, but I was so greatly outnumbered that I wasn’t sure I could protect him.



“Please get down, sir,” I said to the old man. I needed him as low as possible,

so I grabbed his head and forced him to the ground.

“Y-You dare...?! This insolence will not g—mmph!”

“Oops.”

Unfortunately, in my haste, I’d used a little too much strength; the old man’s head went straight through the floor. It looked pretty serious. Was he okay?

“*Gasp*!”

Oh, good. He was still breathing. The robust golden crown atop his head had evidently kept him safe.

“I know not who you are, knave,” one soldier said, “but it will do you no good to maintain your allegiance to that man.”

“Just so,” another added. “He has destroyed our empire beyond repair and must answer with his life. Move aside.”

Even so, I was sure there was a better option. “I don’t really know what’s going on, but can’t you just talk it out?”

“If such a thing were possible, we would have done it a long time ago!”

Okay... Yeah. They were way too riled up to listen to me.

“Die!” the soldiers all yelled as they came at us in unison. Daggers, whips, dual blades, claws, some kind of weird shiny stick thing—a multitude of weapons struck at the old man with single-minded intent.

[Parry]

Again, I stopped their attacks. None of the soldiers were very fast, so they weren’t likely to pose a threat. Considering that they had all grouped up to attack one old man, I figured they weren’t too confident in their skills.

“Who *are* you?” one asked. “I can tell by your clothes that you are not of the Empire.”

“You must be a hired adventurer,” another said. “But with such tremendous strength, why would you take *his* side? Do you not see his current state? You cannot expect a reward from him now.”

“I guess I *do* count as a hired adventurer, even if only by the skin of my teeth,”

I said. “But it wasn’t this man who hired me. I promise you, there’s been some kind of misunderstanding here.”

“Silence!” shouted a particularly slender soldier. “All you must do is move aside. That man must pay for his sins.” He then threw something at me—something that flashed brightly.

This wasn’t good. It was probably a bomb of some kind; I’d seen them used for demolition on construction sites. There was nothing my [Parry] could do against an explosion, so my only choice was to get the old man clear of the blast.

“Watch out!” I cried.

“Gwuh!”

The old man was still embedded in the floor, so I only had one option: I kicked him square in the flank. He shot across the room, then crashed into the far wall at such great speed that his head went straight through the metalwork. His body dangled below it.

Oops. Maybe I should have held back a little more.

It was probably fine, though; I’d used less strength than when I shoved him into the floor, and his shiny golden armor really could take a beating. At the very least, I was pretty sure he wasn’t dead. But that aside...

“Why are you doing this?” I asked the soldiers. “How can you gang up on an old man? In fact, he’s your emperor too, right?”

The tallest of the men replied, “He *was*, but... No, I suppose he still *is* our emperor. His death today—his atonement for his actions—can be his final duty. To send the correct message, we must kill him now, with our own hands.”

“I’ll be honest, none of that reasoning made any sense to me.”

“You need not under...stand!” he barked, his response punctuated with a grunt as he lobbed several bombs at the old man. He’d thrown them quickly too—I wouldn’t be able to parry them away in time.

Once again out of options, I sprinted over to the old man, grabbed him by the legs, and yanked him out of the wall as hard as I possibly could. He rolled across

the room like a large, gaudy ball—away from the explosives, might I add—and collided with the golden chair he'd been sitting in earlier, breaking both it and the crown atop his head.

"Aieee!"

Even then, the toughness of his armor kept him from sustaining any serious injuries. I'd definitely been a little too rough with that one, but, hey—it beat dying. Now we just needed to deal with these soldiers. Why were they so insistent on attacking an old man?

"Can we really not take a breather and discuss this?" I asked. "This man can't even fight to protect himself. And you've seen how old he is, right? If you leave him be, nature will take its course soon enough."

"There's no time for such leisurely nonsense!" the tall man exclaimed. "We cannot afford to waste a moment more! The enemy has already invaded us, and they've brought the Dragon of Calamity with them! We must prove that we do not wish for conflict, else we will experience ruin beyond repair! If we do not offer up his head *now*, our empire will... Our empire will...!"

"Wait, if you please," said a soft but clear voice, interrupting our standoff. "We appreciate your intentions, but you mustn't kill him. After all...the dead cannot atone for their sins."

Immediately, the soldiers stopped in their tracks; standing before us were four people who hadn't been there before. My cleric and thief instructors were in front, while Lynne and her brother stood behind them.

"Oh, good," I said. "You're here."

"Are you all right, Instructor?" Lynne asked.

"Yeah. I thought I was going to die back there, but I got lucky. Where are Ines and Rolo? I don't see them with you."

"Rolo's still on the dragon; they're in the sky near here. Ines is guarding him. The four of us descended to come after you."

"Yeah?"

I peered through the massive window and saw the dragon flying outside. Rolo

waved at me from atop its back.

“Sir Noor,” Lynne’s brother said, though his eyes were completely focused on the old man, “might I ask that you entrust the rest of this to us? *Negotiations* such as these do fall within our purview, after all.”

“Sure. Go ahead,” I replied. “They weren’t listening to me at all, but proper communication is the best solution for everyone.”

Lynne, her brother, and my instructors really had saved my skin by showing up. The soldiers hadn’t been at all willing to hear me out, so I’d been at a complete loss for what to do. A discussion actually seemed in the cards now though, so it was probably best to leave things to my traveling companions. I was sure they’d do a good job.

“We are in your debt,” Lynne’s brother told me. “Lynne, take Sir Noor back to the dragon and see to his wounds. He appears to have pushed himself quite hard.”

“Of course, brother. Shall we, Instructor?”

“Sir Noor. For everything you’ve done...thank you.”

“No problem,” I said. “You can take care of the rest.”

And with that, I went off, leaving the three men behind me to sort things out.

◇

Now facing the Circuit of Ten, inheritors of a generations-spanning mission to protect the imperial capital, Prince Rein spoke quietly. “It has been quite some time since we last saw each other. Please, put your blades away. Your sentiments are greatly appreciated, but we have business with that man. If possible, we’d like you to relinquish him to us alive.”

“Prince Rein,” the tallest of the ten replied, “we take no issue with handing him over. Not one of us desires to war with your kingdom; our decision to take our emperor’s head was made so that we might provide you some small portion of the reparations necessary to beg for your forgiveness. We offer you our unconditional surrender—and if you believe that is not enough, the ten of us will present you with our heads as well. After all, we failed to stop this war to

begin with.”

The tall man was the very same person who had wielded a curved sword and tried to kill the emperor with explosives.

“Thank you,” the prince replied, “but that will not be necessary. The last thing our kingdom desires is more corpses. Rather, my first wish is to speak with your emperor; we have much to discuss, and I intend on being quite *thorough*. I apologize, but would you mind waiting until we are done?”

“Not at all. Please, go ahead. We are in no position to object, even if we wished to.”

“I appreciate your understanding.”

Prince Rein’s words of gratitude contained no warmth at all. He glared at the old man slumped on the floor, who immediately cowered and let out a pitiful whine.

“Eep! Help! I...I mean, f-forgive me...”

“Come again? Did you just ask me to *forgive* you?” The prince stared at the old man with cold eyes, then the corners of his mouth twisted slightly upward. “But of course. That is the very reason we came here.”

“T-Truly?! Th-Then—!”

“In the lead-up to today, *twenty-three* of our kingdom’s people disappeared under suspicious circumstances.”

“Hwuh?”

The prince continued, his expression utterly blank: “Today had its share of victims too. Twelve eviscerated by monsters. Nineteen crushed under collapsed buildings. Thirteen burned to death. Thirty-eight dead from broken limbs caused by flying debris. Sixteen dead from crushed ribs or spines. Six dead from severed limbs. Twenty-seven dead from various kinds of cranial injuries. And *one hundred and twenty-seven* ripped apart, crushed, or cruelly reduced to no more than lumps of meat by the monsters released into the city. These are only rough estimates based upon the extent of my own knowledge, but the fact remains: you are directly responsible for them all.”

“S-So...what are you...trying to say...?”

“I said we would *forgive* you, yes? I was quite sincere. If you are willing to undergo just as much suffering as *all* of the victims I just listed, we are willing to absolve you of your individual crimes in this matter. After that is concluded, I would like to open impartial *dialogue* between our two nations regarding the end of the war and reparations. Is there anybody present who objects to my proposals?”

“No!” came a chorus of voices.

Everyone except the emperor had spoken. His face began spasming as he said, “W-Wait... What do you mean by...‘just as much’?”

A person approached the uneasy-looking old man from behind and replied in a gentle voice, “Don’t worry. You won’t die.” It was the white-robed cleric instructor, and with a kind smile he continued, “We’ll make sure of that. The dead cannot reflect upon their deeds or change for the better, you see. So, no matter what happens, I can guarantee you will not die. I will personally be responsible for bringing you back from the brink of death again and again and *again* and *again*...so you have nothing to worry about. I recommend you make your peace and accept your sins, because even if your legs are lost, your skull is crushed, or your organs are ground down, I shall return you to well enough health to converse with us once it is all over.” His casual monologue almost could have passed for the chant of a spell.

Next to speak was a black-masked man. “Are you worried about whether you can handle all that pain? Don’t be. You won’t so much as lose consciousness, not even when the agony begins to wear down your mind. I can guarantee you won’t go insane either. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure that you fully and thoroughly experience the suffering of those who fell victim to your meaningless malice—those whom you killed for no good reason at all.”

The old man had all but melted into a terrified heap, but the prince continued: “Naturally, you need not be concerned about your disgraceful state becoming exposed to the public. We take no pleasure in such things. We’ll make sure you have a [Soundproofing] around you so that your unpleasant screams are entirely contained. No matter how much you beg for help, nobody

will come. So please, rest assured and wail to your heart's content. No one will ever hear you."

"Engh!"

The old man was so panicked that he'd lost the ability to speak, but he mustered everything he had and managed to squeeze out a final entreaty.

"F-Forgi...!"

Slowly, the white-robed man approached. "We just said that we would, did we not? We will *forgive* you for everything. That is...only if you truly wish to repent." He stepped right in front of the old man and continued in a low murmur, "I hear that everybody was in great pain. Some were lucky enough to be healed in time, but many died—and not even I can bring a person back from the dead. In that respect, you're very...lucky. To have such a skilled healer here, that is. Your arms, legs, even your *neck*—I will regrow such things as many times as you need. You are indeed *very lucky*."

"Eep..." The old man's face went as pale as a corpse's, and an unpleasant-smelling puddle began to spread across the floor.

"Please don't misunderstand us; we don't do this to satisfy ourselves," the prince said matter-of-factly, looking down on the emperor. "We simply wish for you to understand the true extent of the pain you have caused the people of our kingdom. In truth, you are getting off lightly. There are still many more victims than the ones I mentioned earlier: those who lost their homes, their jobs, their parents, their children... The list goes on. But you can be forgiven for it all with *just a little pain*. You, who stole the lives of so many, will get to live. We will return you to perfectly good health afterward, for the discussion regarding our postwar reparations. After all, we must do this as *fairly* and as lawfully as possible."

The old man had squeezed his eyes shut in fear. Prince Rein leaned in close, his face utterly devoid of emotion, and spoke in a tone as cold as ice.

"Our kingdom is ever so merciful, don't you think?"

Chapter 45: Return to the Royal Capital, Part 1

From the very tall building we were in, I stared out over the surrounding scenery. Though I was too scared to check anywhere near the vicinity of "straight down," all the plumes of smoke rising into the air were enough for me to tell that the imperial capital was in shambles. Everything had gone to pot while I was crashing through one wall after another, and it was easy to guess why.

"The light from earlier..." I muttered to Lynne, who was busy healing me. "Did it fall on the city?"

"It did," she replied. "The beam of mana fractured after you deflected it, then landed all across the imperial capital. The smoke billowing from all of those facilities was the result."

"I've...done a pretty awful thing, huh?" I'd been so focused on parrying the light that I hadn't spared a thought for the consequences. The monstrous amount of damage I'd caused was...

"No, Instructor. I don't believe it should weigh on your conscience. The Empire fired it, and all you were doing was protecting us. The fault doesn't lie with you."

"Maybe, but...it had to have killed people, right?" The thought alone made my heart feel heavy.

"I...don't believe that's much of a concern, actually. According to my brother, the beam had a [Mana Tracing] enchantment applied to it, so most of the places it destroyed were magical research institutions or facilities that contained mana furnaces."

"Mana furnaces?"

"Yes. As the mana surrounding them is quite dense, entry is usually impossible. Most of the magical research institutions that were destroyed were

also surrounded with dense mana, so they wouldn't have been safe to be around for very long. The populated areas seem to be entirely unharmed, so I think it's very likely that human casualties are minimal."

"Yeah...? I hope that's true."

"Of course, I've heard that those facilities and their like were vital to the city, so their destruction won't go unnoticed...but the impact won't even be close to what our kingdom has suffered."

Lynne's explanation had made me feel a little better, but there was no changing the sheer scale of the damage before me. People had to have been hurt.

We'd only ended up here because we were chasing the emperor; how could any of the residents of this city have foreseen such sudden destruction? Sure, I knew that we'd come to prevent any further crises on our end, but I still felt awfully guilty all the same.

"So here you are, Lynne. Sir Noor too."

While I'd been preoccupied with my thoughts, Lynne's brother and my two instructors had shown up.

"Brother," Lynne said, "have the negotiations concluded?"

"Yes, they went quite smoothly. The emperor was very *cooperative* and was happy to listen to everything we had to say."

"He accepted *all* of our proposals with open arms," my cleric instructor added. "He's deeply sorry for what he's done and is well on the way to reforming himself."

"Though whether you can actually describe what happened as 'negotiations' is another matter..." my thief instructor remarked.

"I'm glad to hear you could all work it out," I said.

My cleric instructor smiled gently, the same way he always did. "Indeed. It just goes to demonstrate the importance of reaching out to others while you still can. It's too late to settle your affairs once you're dead, after all."

"Then...is it all over?" Lynne asked.

“Yes, all the necessary procedures have been taken care of,” her brother replied. “The war is over. Henceforth, we will be working together to rebuild what each of us has lost.”

That was a little...anticlimactic. The war had just begun, and now it was over. If negotiations had been this straightforward, I thought, then they should have just used their words to begin with. I supposed that was easier said than done, though. Maybe the circumstances at the time hadn’t even allowed for open discourse.

“So is that old gu—the emperor going to stick around?” I asked. He was pretty frail—and not very well trusted by his subjects, from the look of things.

“No,” Lynne’s brother said. “After our discussion of the Empire’s future government, he *voluntarily* abdicated. A successor from his bloodline will be chosen to inherit the throne.”

“That’s probably for the best.” I didn’t know a thing about politics, but even I could gauge that much. He’d seemed pretty timid and was getting on in years.

“Considering the state of the Empire’s government, the successor is likely to be the emperor’s grandson.”

“His grandson... Is he young?”

“Yes, still only ten years old. Not yet fit to rule, of course, which is why a custodian is due to be appointed. The boy will also be assisted by other advisers—the prime minister, who has been the practical head of political affairs for quite a while now, and the Circuit of Ten, whom you saw with the emperor earlier.”

“Those guys...?”

That worried me a little—more than a little, actually. A young kid inheriting such a huge empire was surprising enough, but hearing that the violent group of soldiers who’d refused to listen to me would be taking over with him was downright worrying. Was this country going to be okay?

As I was mulling that over, I noticed that the ten people in question were approaching us.

“Sir Noor, was it?”

I readied myself, thinking they were going to attack me again. Instead, the tallest man stepped closer, removed his helmet, and bowed deeply to me.

“Please excuse us for our behavior earlier,” he said. “We thought you were a guard in the employ of the emperor, not a citizen of the Kingdom. That misunderstanding caused us to point our blades at you, and for that, we’d like to apologize. I realize that we are in no position to ask for your forgiveness, but even so, we will do everything in our power to make amends.”

His sudden politeness surprised me. I certainly hadn’t expected him to say sorry.

“Water under the bridge,” I said. “You don’t need to make it up to me.”

“Truly? Then I thank you for accepting our apology.”

“That said...I don’t think it’s very nice to gang up on an old man. I don’t know the specifics of your situation, but you shouldn’t resort to violence just because words have failed.”

“Indeed... You are entirely right. Now that our heads have cooled, we realize how shameful our actions were. From this point forward, we will seek peaceful resolutions to any and all issues that arise. War was never our preference to begin with, which is why recent times have left the importance of our posts by the wayside.”

“Really...? I wouldn’t have guessed that by looking at you.”

The man smiled wryly. “Your suspicion is understandable, given the earlier fracas. But allow me to say this: If you had not stopped us, the Empire would have been thrown into a messy and protracted civil war—and we are exhausted enough already. Then, the smaller nations around us would have attacked while we were weak, spurred on by their accumulated resentment toward us. Your intervention was all that prevented this, and we have since reached an amicable solution. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“I really didn’t do anything that grand. I mean, it was only by chance that I came across you guys in the first place.”

The man looked at me curiously. “By...chance? I see. What a strange *coincidence* it must have been, then. You just *happened* to stumble into the imperial throne room, the highest point in the city, protected by so many thick mana-metal walls?”

“Yeah. I jumped off the dragon’s back and suddenly found myself shooting straight toward your building. I thought I was going to die. Thankfully, my sword was sturdy enough to get me through all those walls. I don’t want to imagine how I might have ended up without it.”

“I...see. So it was *by chance* that you were holding such a powerful sword and *mere happenstance* that you ended up in the imperial palace, the political center of the Empire. As a result, there is no need for us to feel indebted to you for so selflessly stopping us. Is that what you wish to say?”

It was a little strange that he kept repeating the same point over and over. Still, I only had one answer for him.

“Yeah, you got it. In fact, I feel like *I* should be thanking all of *you*. I’m really lucky that your floor happened to be there. Saved me from falling all the way down to the ground.”

“Ha ha! A lucky floor, you say?” The tall man threw his head back and roared with laughter. “You’re a fascinating man, Sir Noor. Very well; we shall go with your account. But please, remember this: in the future, we will spare no effort to lend you our assistance, even should it cost us our lives. No matter your wish, ask and we shall see it done.”

“I *really* don’t think you need to go that far, but...okay. Thanks. Even though I won’t ever take you up on your offer, I appreciate it.”

The man was a lot more reasonable than I’d expected. Something was still a little off, though. I felt like I’d created another misunderstanding of some kind...but at least they weren’t swinging their weapons or throwing explosives at me anymore. I considered that good enough progress, so this was done and dusted for the time being.

Or maybe not, actually. I’d forgotten about something really important—something that made me realize *I* should be the one apologizing.

“Come to think of it...I need to apologize too,” I said. “I destroyed a lot of your buildings, right? The city wouldn’t be in this state if we hadn’t come here. Sorry.”

“The city...? Ah, you mean the Keraunos?”

“Yeah.”

“No, that... No matter how you look at it, that was a mistake on our part. You were on the dragon’s back at the time, and our actions put you in great peril. The destruction before you was the result of our decision to use an incomplete weapon, which we subsequently lost control of. You are not to blame.”

“But people might have been hurt or killed, right?”

“Possibly...but we have yet to receive any reports of such. If you wish to speak of wrongdoings, then the Empire’s sin of breaking the treaty between our nations and invading the Kingdom is far greater. Whatever the case, we have no desire to condemn any of you for your actions.”

“Really? Okay. But if there’s anything I can do, just let me know. I’m happy to help move rubble, or anything like that.”

“Truly...? Ha ha! It seems there’s no end to your generosity!”

The man threw his head back again, and his laughter seemed to echo across the city. What a jovial guy. I chatted with him a little more, but it wasn’t long before Lynne’s brother came over.

“Randeus, Your Excellency,” he said. “We must take our leave. There’s much we have to report upon our return.”

“Very well, then we shall see you off. However, I must ask—are you sure you wish to leave us to our own devices? This may sound strange coming from me, but should you not have somebody stay behind to oversee the postwar cleanup?”

Lynne’s brother shook his head slightly. “No, the governing of the Empire is the Empire’s concern; I’d rather the Kingdom meddle as little as possible. If you can reach your own solutions, that will suffice. After all, we have already come to our agreements with your emperor: mutual noninterference, the provision of

your classified technological discoveries, and future exchanges between our people."

"Are you...certain those are all you want?"

"Yes, they are everything we desire. The Kingdom could want for no greater rewards, and as long as the Empire holds to our agreements, our nations will continue to be good neighbors. Besides, considering my position, I like to think I am a good judge of character. I trust you will stay true to your word—and you will do your best to, won't you?"

"I extend my gratitude to the Kingdom. We will not squander the kindness you have shown us."

"It will take us both a long time to rebuild. You lost your research facilities to the flames, did you not? I understand they had a long and significant history."

"We reaped what we sowed. And while valuable research materials may have been lost, lives have not. All we can do is start again from scratch. We have already informed our military outposts that the war is over, so you may leave knowing that your return home will not be hindered."

"Thank you. On that note, we shall be off. We can handle any further correspondence through messengers."

"Indeed. I wish you safe travels. Ah, and Sir Noor—I've just realized that I never introduced myself to you." The tall man, who'd been having some kind of complicated-sounding conversation with Lynne's brother, turned to face me. "I am Randeus, head of the Magic Empire's Circuit of Ten. Should you ever require my assistance, you need only ask."

"Sure thing, Ran... Ran...deus? Yep, got it."

"I look forward to the next time we meet, Sir Noor."

"Likewise. Oh, and no more bullying the elderly, okay?"

"Of course. I'll take extra care to remember that."

Once we were all back on the dragon, Rolo closed his eyes and said, "Okay... It's time to fly."

Right on cue, the behemoth spread its vast wings wide and took off—and, as

expected, my fear of heights made me want to curl up into a little ball. That said, I was feeling a little less scared than on our trip here. Maybe I'd grown more accustomed to flying.

Only a little, though. It was *definitely* still terrifying.

"Hey...Rolo?" I said. "Could you get it to, uh...fly as low...as possible?"

"Mm-kay."

And so, we bid one last farewell to the ten people who'd attacked that old man, and they saw us off as we left the imperial capital.

Chapter 46: Return to the Royal Capital, Part 2

I didn't even want to remember the trip back, but we'd at least returned to the royal capital before dark. Lynne's father was waiting for us in exactly the same place he'd seen us off—I got the feeling he'd been standing there the whole time.

"We're back, father," Lynne's brother said. "The war is over. Negotiations proceeded smoothly."

"Indeed, it appears they did. Well done, Rein. You can give me the details later."

"Of course."

"First, we must thank the man to whom we owe so much."

"Yes. I witnessed Sir Noor go above and beyond with my very own eyes. We must reward him accordingly."

"Um...reward me?" I asked.

"Indeed," Lynne's father replied. "You've done much for us, and it seems only right to make sure that you are properly compensated. Land, property, wealth—you may ask for whatever your heart desires. As long as we have the power to provide it—"

"No, I'm okay."

"Pardon?"

I was immediately reminded of the last time he'd tried to force those things on me. Riches didn't interest me—I wouldn't have anywhere to store them—and neither did property or land.

"I appreciate the thought," I said, "but there's nothing I need. Even if I didn't already have a roof to sleep under, I wouldn't mind camping outside, and I can hunt for food anytime I want."

“Truly? Are you certain?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

I thought my response made perfect sense—if you accepted something that you didn’t need, it would only sit around gathering dust, right? So why did everyone around me have such concerned expressions on their faces?

“N-No... No, this will not do,” Lynne’s father said. “This time, you *must* accept suitable compensation. It will set a bad example otherwise.”

“You say that, but...”

I genuinely didn’t want anything. The black sword that he’d given me last time was more than enough—but just as I was about to say as much, I caught sight of Rolo next to me.

“Wait, sorry—I *do* have a request,” I said. “If that’s okay.”

“Oh? Oh!” Lynne’s father exclaimed, his scarred face creasing in a wide smile. “Of course, of course! Please, whatever you wish! After all you’ve done for us, we can’t let you go unrewarded!” Some people really enjoyed being generous, huh?

“It’s actually about this kid here,” I said, putting my hand on Rolo’s shoulder.

The boy looked up at me with wide eyes. “Huh? What? Me?”

“Who...?” Lynne’s father trailed off and then said, “A demonfolk boy?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “He doesn’t have any family. Apparently, he belonged to a merchant’s group that visited the Empire, but it looks like they left him behind. We’ve got no idea where they went.”

Back when Lynne was healing me, her brother had been gathering information. He’d discovered that the group with whom Rolo had been living had suddenly left the Empire, and all anybody knew about their destination was that it was somewhere in Sarenza.

Rolo had come back with us because of the whole dragon situation, but now he didn’t have anyone to return to or anywhere to go.

“What do you want for him?” Lynne’s father asked me.

“I want him to be able to live a normal life here, same as anyone else. Can you do that?”

If there was anything I wanted, it was that. I’d considered taking Rolo in myself, since it was because of me that he’d needed to come along with us, but my income was far from stable. He would be much better off in the care of a rich family.

“You said you’d give me property or land, right?” I continued. “In that case, could you give him a home? Food and clothes too, if you can.”

Lynne’s father crossed his arms and nodded. “I see what you mean. If we’re to give him land and property, he first needs to be a citizen of our kingdom. Is that the nature of your request?”

“Is that how it works? Sure. If you need to do all that, then please do. He’s saved our lives a bunch of times. He got the dragon to listen to us, and the war wouldn’t have ended so quickly without his help. So if you’re going to reward anyone, reward him. That’s all I want.”

“That’s all...? I see...”

Lynne’s father made a bitter face and gazed up at the sky. Was he finding my request hard to accept? Maybe he was upset that I wasn’t taking anything myself. I didn’t really get why, but he and Lynne wouldn’t take no for an answer when it came to expressing their thanks. There was a chance it was a cultural thing for them, but that didn’t change the fact that I didn’t want anything.

Yeah, I definitely needed to make myself clear about that.

“I really don’t want anything else,” I reiterated. “I’ll turn down any other rewards you offer me. I mean it.”

I was sure that would settle things. There was no more room for them to argue...right?

“Very well,” Lynne’s father said. “If that is your wish, then that is what we’ll do. But...are you truly certain? Our family has a respectable amount of wealth in all forms, and it would be no trouble for you to take some.”

Just as I feared, he was trying to add stuff on.

“If you’ve got enough to offer some to me, then you should find a better use for it,” I noted. “Lots of people lost their homes, right? You should be helping *them* out. What’s the point of riches if you can’t use them at a time like this?”

“You’re...right. Ha ha ha! You’re absolutely right!”

Lynne’s father sure was cheerful. I’d been convinced that I’d soured his mood, but here he was, laughing uproariously.

I sighed, relieved to have survived the gift-giving offensive, but the feeling didn’t last long. It suddenly occurred to me that this *really* wasn’t the time to be standing around chatting.

“Excuse me,” I said, “I’ve just remembered that there’s somewhere I need to be. Lynne, let’s part ways here.”

“Instructor?” she asked. “Where are you going?”

“See you later! Take care of Rolo!”

And with that, I dashed off, leaving everybody behind me.

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My destination was the Adventurers Guild, which I soon discovered was falling apart. Half of the roof was gone, as were large chunks of the walls. I went inside and caught sight of the guildsman behind the now smashed-up counter, hard at work with a weary look on his face.

“Hmm? Well, look who it is!” he called upon noticing me. “Weren’t you headed for Mithra? I guess it makes sense that you’re back, though, considering the state of this place.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t the time to be enjoying a leisurely holiday. We turned around pretty fast.”

“Makes sense. No harm done, I suppose; even if your commission ends up being canceled, the contract I got you should mean you’ll still get a hefty sum. That aside, you look like you took a few tumbles in the dirt. And your clothes... Are those scorch marks?”

“It’s a long story. I got a pretty intense workout.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised, what with everything that happened. Everyone’s just as banged up as you are. Ran into some nasty spots of trouble myself, actually. Thought I was going to die more than a few times.”

“Tell me about it. After everything I went through, I’m completely beat.”

I exchanged a look with the guildsman, and we both laughed.



“Well, despite it all, what matters is that we’re both safe,” the guildsman said.

“Anyhow, though I don’t feel good about putting this on you while you’re so exhausted, the foreman of the Builders Guild has been turning the place upside down looking for you. Says he’s short on manpower. Clearing rubble, setting up temporary housing—they’re going to be working themselves to the bone from here on out.”

“Yeah, I figured. That’s why I came. So, where do they need me? I’ll make my way there now.”

“Here’s a map. Take it with you.”

“Thanks.”

I accepted the map, exited the Guild—which looked like it could collapse at any moment—and headed straight for the construction site where they were clearing rubble.

“What a day...” I sighed unconsciously.

Thinking back, it had been one thing after another ever since this morning. Our leisurely coach trip had turned into a battle with a poisonous toad. A weird, bandaged man had attacked us straight after, then Rolo’s story had prompted us to return to the capital. From there, I was sent *flying* by Lynne’s full-strength spell, narrowly avoided colliding with a dragon, had to scramble around to avoid dying to it, then parried so many swords and shields that I almost dropped dead.

As if all that weren’t enough, I’d soon found myself barreling through the sky on the back of the same dragon that had tried to kill me. The terrifying experience had made me pass out—and when I came to, I was in the Empire, stopping a group of violent soldiers from attacking an old man.

With all that said, I certainly hadn’t helped myself. I understood my own limits, but I’d recklessly ignored them and charged headfirst into everything. It had resulted in some really close calls, which I’d only survived thanks to the help of the people around me. Lynne, Rolo, Ines, Al... Gil...? Something-bert, and my instructors—they had all pulled me out of some really sticky situations. If any one of them hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have been alive right now. I owed them my life.

So much had happened, and I was absolutely starving. To be honest, I was so worn out that I wanted to fall asleep on the spot. Still...

“No time for that right now.”

The entire city was a mess. First things first, all the rubble needed to be cleaned up. And there was a chance that people were trapped under it. They’d need help. The thought of that drove all notions of taking a break from my mind.

Plus, even after we cleared away all the rubble, that wouldn’t be the end of it. So many destroyed houses needed to be rebuilt, and the ground was all torn up from the dragon’s rampage. Leveling it out again would be grueling—and after that, we’d need to begin laying all the foundations for the new buildings. There was a mountain of work to be done.

Thankfully, Lynne’s healing meant I wasn’t feeling too bad physically. I was famished, but that wouldn’t be a problem after I scrounged up something to eat.

Good, old-fashioned manual labor—that was the best kind of work for a guy like me. It was lucky that I had my sword because it was about to see a lot of use. Swinging it around all day had made me realize that while it was battered and beaten, too blunt to cut with, and shabby to the point that I doubted it could even be called a sword, it was as sturdy as anything. Nothing could scratch it, no matter how hard, and its tremendous mass just added more weight to my swings. What’s more, even after suffering so many intense impacts, it hadn’t bent or warped in the slightest. So, sure, it couldn’t slice through anything—but it could strike things just fine.

I’d never be able to do anything fancy and eye-catching with the sword, like killing monsters or slaying dragons, but it was perfect for all of the pile-driving and foundation-laying work I was about to do. I was also growing more and more accustomed to using it.

I dusted the black sword off, and slung it over my shoulder. “All right. Here’s where my real work begins.”

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I rushed straight over to the work site. A whole lot of people were there already, clearing away a whole lot of

debris.

Chapter 47: In the King’s Makeshift Office

Through negotiations between the Kingdom of Clays and the Magic Empire, several agreements were reached. First, the emperor would bear responsibility for the war and abdicate. Second, the Empire would pay reparations to the Kingdom and fund the entire rebuilding of the royal capital, which the imperial soldiers captured as prisoners of war would assist with. Third, the Empire would surrender its technological discoveries in the field of magical tool production, which had thus far been classified as a national secret. And fourth, the Empire would agree to a blanket noninterference treaty.

The emperor’s “abdication” would not be announced until after his grandson’s government was properly established. As a result, for the next few months, the Empire would appear to maintain its current system of rule while internally undergoing extensive purges and transfers of power. This was naturally expected to arouse opposition—but as the emperor was still alive to confirm his intentions, the process would continue with relatively little interference.

The Kingdom would be contributing too; several of Carew’s elite subordinates from the Thief Corps were being dispatched to help with both the outward-facing work and the matters being kept behind closed doors. Prince Rein had informed King Clays that they would be working under Randeus.

Yes, the king had entrusted the management of all such matters to his son. He wasn’t particularly worried about having done so; the prince was much better suited to the task and would surely do a fine job. Instead, there was something else occupying the king’s mind.

“Giving that demonfolk boy a ‘normal’ life, free from distress...”

Such was the request of a certain man.

Seated on a cloth-covered chair in a makeshift office, the king was deep in thought. “A tall order, indeed...” he muttered. “A *demonfolk*, of all things...”

Noor, the hero who’d saved the Kingdom, had asked for the protection of the

demonfolk Rolo to be his reward. He'd also wished for the boy to be granted equal status to humans by means of citizenship.

"To think that would be the *only* request of our kingdom's savior," the king said. "I suppose we have no choice but to grant it."

In the Holy Theocracy of Mithra and many other nations, the demonfolk had long been considered an enemy race that was to be exterminated. So extreme was this hatred, in fact, that few demonfolk now remained. That was the legacy the boy had survived.

Demonfolk were born with incredible abilities. History told of them being able to read minds and control monsters—sometimes even other people. These special characteristics meant they were widely known, though their reputation was founded almost entirely in folklore. Everybody knew of the persecution the demonfolk faced as a result of their skills and the acts of terror some had committed in the past, but accounts from individuals who had actually met one were extremely rare. Even the king had only set eyes on members of their race a handful of times.

The demonfolk were considered a threat because of their power to control ferocious monsters, which they had used in times of war to slaughter humans in droves. Little wonder, then, that the king had shuddered upon seeing that boy manipulate *the Dragon of Calamity*. The boy—Rolo—had claimed that he was only speaking to it, but in either case, the attack on the royal capital had made it evident that his race wielded terrifying abilities. There was no scarier enemy to have.

But while the king was assured of the threat the demonfolk could pose, he still had doubts about the innate "evilness" of their race.

Indeed, humans and demonfolk had warred in the past, and the latter had carried out brutal invasions into the lands of the former. But, as far as history was concerned, that was no worse than what the humans had done to each other. There was far more human blood on the hands of other humans than on the hands of the demonfolk.

And, in terms of numbers, humans were responsible for so many more demonfolk deaths than the reverse. In fact...there was even some evidence that

humans had instigated the war to begin with. The plain truth was that there existed no rational justification to view the demonfolk as especially dangerous. There wasn't much reason to fear them over any other human.

However, speaking of such things publicly—if one even knew of them in the first place—had become taboo. Anybody with even the slightest understanding of the subject also knew that all of the stories about the "looming threat of the demonfolk" came from Mithra. The trust that other nations placed in the Holy Theocracy was the basis for the international pacts regarding how the race was to be treated.

In the first place, Mithra's voice was so influential because of the barrier techniques it had provided to so many other nations. These techniques were able to create invisible walls of power that could prevent monsters from entering human settlements or stop dungeons from creating them entirely. In towns and cities of a certain size, this was something that everyone benefited from. The Holy Theocracy had a monopoly on these barriers and, through the Church of Mithra, distributed them across the land to "provide security to the people."

In exchange for its techniques, Mithra asked cooperating nations to carry out a request: condemn the demonfolk as an exceedingly dangerous threat to humanity. Members of the race were to be killed on sight or captured alive to be extradited to the Holy Theocracy, which promised great boons to those who complied.

Few opposed this request. Mithra's claims were likely rife with misinformation, but what did that matter when the Holy Theocracy was offering such effective methods of protection? There was nothing to gain from refusing.

It was unclear why Mithra and its church were so obsessed with the demonfolk. Perhaps there was lingering resentment from the great war it had fought against them, but that had taken place hundreds of years ago. There had to be more to it. There had to be *something* about the demonfolk that made the Holy Theocracy oppose them so openly.

Unfortunately for the Kingdom, to support the demonfolk was to make an enemy of Mithra, a major power with roots spread all throughout the world.

“This is...no small ask,” the king murmured. “Mithra is far too great a foe to have.”

That said, the Holy Theocracy had been making some concerning moves as of late. The attack on the royal capital had involved Demon’s Hearts, rare manastones that could only be produced in Mithra, and the country’s management of them was too strict for so many to have simply slipped through the cracks. It had to be assumed that the Holy Theocracy had officially supplied them to the Magic Empire.

But for what reason? The Kingdom of Clays had a history of good relations with Mithra. It hadn’t been that long ago when Lynne had studied abroad there, and the Holy Theocracy had done nothing to warrant suspicion then.

The Kingdom’s investigation into the matter of the Demon’s Hearts was soon to begin in earnest, and the channels through which they were distributed would quickly be made clear. At this point in time, the king couldn’t help but suspect the Holy Theocracy. He didn’t know why, but *she* evidently wanted to destroy the Kingdom of Clays.

“And now, of all times, I am asked to protect a demonfolk boy. A boy who happens to be one of the heroes who saved our kingdom. It is not our way to repay a debt with ill will, but...”

Choosing to protect him would add more fuel to the currently blazing fire.

Many people had already caught sight of the young boy who could control that titanic dragon, so it was a given that Mithra’s high priestess would find out about him. Her Holy Highness Astirra would no doubt use the information as a pretext for an incessant offensive.

In his heart, the king wished to protect the boy. It wasn’t right to set up barriers and isolate an entire people just because they were demonfolk. They were intelligent neighbors, and discourse was always an option. Furthermore, Rolo was a child; he had nothing to do with the past actions of his race.

How wonderful would it have been if the king could have spoken his true thoughts? But a man in his position could never entertain such naive fantasies. He called out to his son, Rein, who was waiting in the entrance of his makeshift office.

“Give that demonfolk boy citizenship, a home, and the means to ensure that his life henceforth is free of any hardship. I’ll leave the details to you.”

“As you wish.”

The prince made a brisk exit, no doubt to begin conveying his orders to his many subordinates.

Now alone in his office, the king sank deeper into his chair. “Noor, hmm? What a truly unpredictable man.”

Noor had flatly refused to accept anything a person could ever want—goods, property, treasure, and even land. It was as though he possessed none of the desires that were present in everyone else. Was it because he had, in some sense, lost his mind?

“No... I daresay he truly has no need for such things. And with his strength, it’s no wonder.”

Everything the king had offered him, he likely could have obtained on his own, had he felt like it. All material goods were readily available to him and thus had no value. That was the degree of strength he had achieved.

“To force the Dragon of Calamity to yield, all on his own...”

The king had seen it from nearby. Using but a single sword, the man had parried one devastating blow after another, each powerful enough to tear the city to pieces, and sent the dragon tumbling across the earth.

Noor was a genuine hero—the king knew this to be true because he had personally been called one in the past. He had always admired the heroes described in fairy tales and constantly strived to become closer to them. Noor was the very image of that ideal...and, what’s more, he had wanted for nothing. It was enough to make one wonder whether he’d stepped out of a story about a saint who was too good to be true.

And when he *did* at last make a request, it was to save a demonfolk boy.

“To ask us to recognize a demonfolk as a citizen of the Kingdom and safeguard him is tantamount to asking us to turn our back on Mithra.”

It was territory that should never be entered—a taboo that many nations

knew of and never dared touch. Yet, without a second thought, that man had pressed onward. Helping that demonfolk boy had been his *only* desire.

What was he thinking? What was his true goal? No...he likely had no deeper intentions at all. That had truly been his only wish.

“Does he intend to overturn the very conventions of our world—all of those which bind us so? He would drag our entire kingdom into his impossible task?” The king fell silent. “No... I suppose ‘drag’ isn’t the right word.”

Right now, the king *wanted* to follow that hero along his path, to witness the future he would choose. His heart throbbed with unmistakable eagerness, as though he were a child waiting for the next part of a story. Even if it endangered the people of his kingdom, even if it tore away the veneer of peace spread across the world, he wanted to see what Noor would do. The desire within him was almost tangible.

The old emperor had been right to call him a fool of a king. He was a disgrace to all who would consider themselves the ruler of a nation.

But...

“To be an adventurer is to chase a foolish dream to the end. As the insignificant king that I am, the most I can do is support—” He paused. “No, I suppose that excuse is a little too forced, isn’t it? I’ll need to borrow Oken’s wisdom later to conjure up a better one. Ah, but how dreadfully troublesome it is, having to fulfill our hero’s request!”

As the king spoke, his countenance was one of unbridled joy. It wasn’t long before roaring laughter could be heard coming out of the makeshift office.

Chapter 48: A Tasty Meal

For some time now, the boy had felt like he was dreaming. Yes, that had to be it. He had already been torn apart by the claws of the Black Death Dragon, and this was just one of those fantasies that people saw after they died.

After all, how could any of it have been real?

He had spoken to the Dragon of Calamity and ridden on its back, together with the man who'd saved him and the princess of a kingdom. They'd descended upon the imperial capital, defeated the emperor, and then returned without any difficulty. Only in a made-up story could such things happen—and the impossible sights he'd seen along the way had made him convinced that it was all in his head.

A single man charging into a vast army and creating a silver tide of countless flying blades. A beam as bright as the sun ascending high into the sky before splitting apart and raining down upon the imperial capital like a meteor shower. A beautiful lady clad in silver armor, tearing apart towering metal fortresses as though they were made of clay. And most impossible of all, he had managed to help others fight gigantic monsters.

It just couldn't be real. What else could it be but his imagination?

So many wonderful things could never have happened to him. It had all been beyond his wildest dreams. But still, he was elated. So what if it was all a lie? It had been amazing all the same, and he'd never seen so many captivating sights before.

It had all started when that man used his black sword to parry the Black Death Dragon's claws. Yes, that was when the boy's fantasy began—when he was torn apart so instantly and painlessly. He was actually thankful. Not to anybody in particular, but thankful all the same.

Thank you for letting me end on such a high note.

He was so convinced that he was dreaming that he didn't even blink when the beautiful lady in front of him said, "You'll be living with me from now on. I hope

that's okay, Rolo."

From there, he was brought to an enormous house, given a fresh change of clothes, and then seated at a white table overloaded with so many kinds of dishes. It was all so new to him that he could only stare, half in a daze.

The lady was the same woman who had sliced apart the Empire's fortresses from atop the dragon. He knew that without a shadow of a doubt, but she looked so calm and gentle right now that he still second-guessed himself.

Mm-hmm. This was definitely a dream. His conviction grew even stronger.

"What are you doing? You're not going to let all this go cold after the nice people prepared it for us, are you?"

He flinched, not having expected the lady to speak to him again. "H-Huh? I can...eat this?"

"Of course," she replied, looking at him strangely from the other side of the table. "This is dinner. Oh, are there things you can't eat? I could ask them to make something else."

He frantically shook his head. Being honest, he had no idea whether he *could* eat what was in front of him; he'd never tried any of it before. But if this was a dream, then surely there was nothing to worry about. And even in this made-up world, refusing it was outright unthinkable. He'd rather take his chances than have it be taken somewhere else.

However, even with that in mind, he couldn't bring himself to eat. The food was just too luxurious. Not even dreams could be *this* perfect, right?

"C-Can I really...have this food?" he asked.

The word "food" reminded the boy of small chunks of black bread. They'd often been hard as rocks and reeked of dirt and mold, but, during his days behind iron bars, he'd savored them all the same.

"That's enough to keep you alive. Be thankful we even give you food."

For as long as he could remember, that was what they'd told him—and they'd always given him the same thing to eat. But the plates before him now were filled with so many different things. Was this...food? There was so much he

didn’t recognize. The bowl right in front of him—was it some kind of soup?

“There are...vegetables in it? Meat too...”

He’d never had anything so extravagant. Before he could get lost in his amazement, however, he remembered something that grounded him.

Oh, that’s right. This is a dream.

It was kind of strange that his dream contained things that he’d never seen when he was alive...but maybe the dreams you had after you died were just a bit special.

He felt relieved. Since none of this was real, he was allowed to eat, right? Since it was all imaginary, he wouldn’t be mercilessly beaten for having the same food as a human.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

The lady was telling him that it was okay. But, wait—what if the food didn’t taste like anything? He already knew it was all a dream, but he didn’t want to *know* know. He was afraid that the moment he took his first bite, this lovely illusion would come to an end.

“There’s no need to hold back. Nobody’s going to get mad at you. Here.” The lady held out a piece of white bread. “Eat as much as you want.”

He hesitated for a while, but then his stomach rumbled. That was weird; why was he hungry in a dream? He swallowed...and then made up his mind.

“O-Okay. I’ll...have some.” He gingerly reached out for the bread—but when his fingers finally touched it, something felt very wrong. “It’s...soft?”

It was nothing like the bread he knew. Instead, it felt smooth and unbelievably fluffy, as though he were touching cotton. Just what was it? Confused, he tore off a piece and ate it.

“It’s sweet...”

A strange taste gently spread throughout his mouth. And it wasn’t just sweet—it was something else too. Something he had never experienced before.

“It’s...tasty?”

The words had stumbled past his lips before he realized it. He didn't know whether it was the correct description, but surely *this* was what people meant when they said something was "tasty." How could it not be? Never before had he eaten something that tasted so much like happiness, nor had he ever felt such joy.

How was any of this possible? How was he actually feeling these emotions? This was all a dream...right?

"What's wrong?"

And then, the boy finally realized what was happening. Tears welled from his eyes as the truth was made clear to him.

This isn't a dream.

He wasn't dead. The dragon hadn't killed him. Because that man had come to his rescue, he was alive—and because he was alive, he could eat this tasty food. But then, why...?

"Are you...sure?" he asked. "Can I really...have this?"

"There's no need for that. It's just bread." The lady—Ines—smiled wryly. "Eat as much as you want. There's plenty more where that came from."

"Mm-kay..."

In silence, he began eating the food laid out before him, shedding large tears all the while. He knew now that this was real, though he still struggled to understand it. How had this happened to him, and why were the people around him being so nice? No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't figure it out.

But there was one thing he was certain of: this was all because that man had protected him. Because he'd asked for the boy to be given a home.

Back then, as the Black Death Dragon's claws had come down, the boy had truly been glad to die. He'd believed that he could only bring harm to the world and that his demise was for the best. That was why he'd resigned himself to his fate and prayed.

If I'm reborn, I hope I won't be beaten so badly in my next life. I hope I can be of use to someone, just a little bit. And if my wish comes true...just once, I hope I

get to eat something tasty.

Now, not even a day later, one of those prayers had already come true. He hadn't even needed to be reborn. And it was all because of that man.

"I can... I can be useful...? Me...?"

After seeing the Black Death Dragon be blown to pieces, he'd told that man about his wish without meaning to. Even though he was despised so much, he wanted to do something—to help someone. It was a modest dream, but he'd never dared to voice it; doing so would have gotten him beaten, kicked, and mocked. "You're a demonfolk," they would have said. "How dare you."

How could he ever be useful to somebody? It simply wasn't possible. He was a demonfolk, a creature cursed with sinister powers from birth, a being whose purpose was to be hated by everyone and everything. His entire life, that was what he'd been told—and what he'd believed. He'd known that...so why had he said his wish aloud? He'd regretted it immediately and instinctively shrunk back from the man, waiting for the blow to come...

But it never had. Instead, he'd received a surprising response.

"Of course you can. A power as incredible as yours is nothing to be ashamed of."

The man hadn't dismissed his dream. He'd even said that the boy's cursed power was "incredible."

Of course, the boy had immediately assumed that the man was lying. The only other times he had received praise were when someone was trying to manipulate him—when someone who hated him as much as everyone else wanted to use his powers for their own gain. He'd thought that he was being deceived again, so he'd reflexively tried to read the man's heart.

Immediately, the boy had realized his mistake. Nobody had ever said anything so nice to him before and, while he already knew that the man was lying to him, there was still that very slight chance that he was telling the truth. The moment he looked into the man's heart, that wonderful illusion would disappear forever...but it was already too late. By the time he realized it, he was already aware of the man's true feelings.

He wasn't lying. The man had spoken from the heart. But how could that be? Even more surprising was that he hadn't felt the smallest speck of anything negative toward the boy, even after finding out that he was a demonfolk.

Why?

It was the first time someone had shown the boy even a shred of unwavering trust, so he'd hesitantly continued to ask about the dream he'd never told anybody.

"I can be...needed by people...?"

Tears had spilled from the boy's eyes as he spoke, while the man had simply listened. And when the boy's tears had eventually stopped, the man hadn't beaten or ridiculed him; instead, he had spoken from the heart once again.

"Yeah. Of course you can. You can be as helpful as you want and then some—more than I could ever be."

For the first time in his life, the boy had been given words he could believe in. But he hadn't managed to embrace them—and the more time passed, the harder it became.

More than he could ever be...?

That was impossible. How could he surpass someone who could parry the claws of a Black Death Dragon with a one-handed sword, fight a dragon that had destroyed an entire city all on his own, and come back safe and sound after charging into an army of ten thousand soldiers? It sounded impossible—but the man had been nothing but sincere when he made the claim.

The boy had eventually come to a conclusion: maybe he could trust the assertion after all. If this man who was so much more amazing than he was had said it, then maybe there was some truth to it. Of course, the boy hadn't been able to believe it right away, but he hadn't wanted to immediately disregard it either.

After having his most genuine wish validated, the boy had felt something sprout in his heart that had never been there before. It was still vague...but he already knew that it would never disappear.

I can be as helpful as I want and then some...

In that case, it had to be okay for him to hope. Maybe then he really would become somebody useful. Maybe he would achieve the dream that he had always thought impossible. If wishing for that was allowed, then he would do everything in his power to make it come true, no matter how far away it was.

In a sense, the boy really had died and been reborn. And in this new life, he would become somebody who could help others—somebody who was needed. He would do it because that man had given him the strength to—because he had been told that, even though he was a demonfolk, it was okay for him to dream.

And, of course, because he didn't want that man's assertion to end up being untrue.

The boy choked back tears as he stuffed more and more food into his mouth, right in front of the gently smiling lady.



“You don’t have to eat so quickly,” she said. “Nobody’s going to take it from

you. You and I are the only ones here, so take as much time as you want."

"...Okay."

That day marked the very first time the young demonfolk boy Rolo was shown kindness by others. As he silently thanked them all, the warmth of his newfound determination began to spread through his chest.

The Talentless Boy

At the Sword Sovereign's training school in the capital, an unfamiliar boy had appeared without word or warning. "Please train me to become a swordsman," he said.

"Train you?" Sig replied. Never before had such a young boy come to his school. "Do you have a permit from the Adventurers Guild?"

"Yeah. Got it just a bit ago."

"Hmm. That *is* the seal of a guild official, but you are much too young to... No, never mind. You have a permit, so I suppose I must accept."

The training schools of the capital worked to cultivate adventurers, and they shared an unspoken rule: accept all comers. The Guild decided who was eligible to be taught, and the instructors of the schools obeyed. All things considered, it was an exceedingly simple procedure.

Still, Sig had to wonder what the guild official was thinking. There were surely some other circumstances at play, but this was a mere child. How on earth was he to endure the school's training—training that had made physically fit adults give up?

As the head instructor of the swordsman training school, Sig decided to speak plainly with the boy. "You will not be given special treatment simply because you are a child. All are treated equally here, and the training is severe. Are you resolved to endure it?"

In response, the boy looked the Sword Sovereign straight in the eye. "I know," he replied. "And I am."

Sig was still convinced that the boy would drop out. As far as he was concerned, seeing him last even three days would be a pleasant surprise. He gave his subordinate a training regimen for the swordsman hopeful to follow...

And, to his surprise, the boy did not quit. Not after three days. Not even after a week.

Swordsman training involved swinging a blade from dawn till dusk, and the boy did just that. The skin on his palms wore away, covering his hands in blood, but he showed no signs of giving up. On the contrary, he began slashing and swiping with even more force, tearing the muscles in his skinny arms to ribbons.

Those who lacked the necessary motivation always gave up before the first day was through, but the boy reached his tenth in the blink of an eye. That was when Sig revised his opinion of the aspiring swordsman; his resolve, at least, was the real thing.

This unexpected turn of events begged the question: How far was this boy willing to go? Slightly intrigued, Sig continued to watch over him—and the boy continued with his training regimen, entirely undaunted. Soon enough, he reached a point beyond any other trainee before him.

Students were most likely to develop skills when their bodies and minds were under extreme stress, so that was the environment Sig's training school tried to foster. Those daring enough to attend were made to practice swinging their swords for hours on end, parry an onslaught of weapon strikes and iron balls, and go without rest, even when the bones in their hands felt on the verge of shattering. The process was repeated again and again, and it naturally involved a great deal of suffering.

Of course, the training was also psychological, intended to unite each student with their blade. That in itself was a certain kind of insanity.

Nevertheless, the boy endured it all. It was an impressive feat, especially considering that he had never so much as held a sword until recently. It was also astoundingly rare for someone so young to be able to swing a blade with such single-minded focus.

He could have a truly bright future.

But as that thought began to consolidate in Sig's mind, he noticed something odd. Despite having worked so hard, the boy had only developed the most rudimentary of skills: [Parry]. How was that possible? In the Sword Sovereign's experience, such great progress—especially from someone so young—should have manifested *something*. Yet, even with the odds in his favor, the boy had acquired nothing.

Perhaps he was just a late bloomer, Sig thought. He would secure a new skill soon enough—and when he did, his strength would grow at a rapid pace.

After all, the boy had an absurdly keen eye.

As a result of much pestering, Sig had reluctantly shown the boy his namesake skill, [Thousand Blades]. So blindingly fast was the attack that even he, the Sword Sovereign, had difficulty controlling it.

Truth be told, Sig had considered the demonstration a pointless endeavor—few could even perceive the skill, such was its speed—and obliged the boy only on a flippant whim. He certainly hadn't expected the lengthy and very detailed analysis that came after. The inherent property of [Thousand Blades] made it too quick for even the Sword Sovereign to entirely keep up with, yet the boy had somehow managed to follow it all. Not only that, he had distinguished each individual movement and even pointed out habits that Sig had failed to notice.

All the hairs on Sig's body stood on end. Now aware of the boy's outstanding raw talent, he knew that he had come across a most valuable bud—one he would even give up his free time to nurture. In an uncharacteristic development, he started to believe that the boy could match—or even surpass—him as a swordsman.

In secret, Sig had such high hopes for the boy. His heart soared to have found a child with such an exceptional gift. As the training regimen continued, however, something unexpected occurred: no matter how hard the boy tried, he could not develop even a single useful swordsman skill. It had to be some kind of mistake, Sig thought. The situation seemed impossible. But no—even after countless attempts, the boy failed to learn anything.

Sig was concerned, but he pressed on. The boy was as hardworking and persistent as they came; if there was a single useful skill that he could learn, no matter what it was, he would surely develop it eventually.

The boy had some kind of talent in him—that much was certain. Somehow, in some way, he was sure to find success. That was why Sig continued to train him, persevering until they reached the most difficult level. At that point, it seemed impossible for the boy *not* to develop a skill.

Again and again, the boy attempted to learn something useful, but his efforts

bore no fruit. He could not be a swordsman. Against a weak monster, perhaps he would be able to employ enough tricks to stand a chance, but against a true threat...all that would await him was a quick death. He had been blessed with a great physique, an indomitable will, and excellent eyes, but some stroke of misfortune meant he had no aptitude for swordplay. The god of the blade loved him not.

After much anguish, Sig accepted what had to be done: “There is nothing more I can teach you here. You should choose a different path.”

“But—!”

The boy refused to back down. Of course he did. He had endured three months of desperate training only to be told that he possessed “no talent.” As his instructor, Sig bore part of the blame for this, but he could not ask the boy to continue what would only be a futile endeavor.

“A swordsman flailing his sword about with no skills to his name is nothing but a burden on his allies. You’re wasting your time. Give up and move on.”

After that purposefully cold remark, Sig chased the boy out of his training school. The boy had genuine talent, and that was precisely why his future had to take him down another path—a path that was not mastery of the sword.

◇

At the warrior training school, Shield Sovereign Dandalg frowned and crossed his arms. “Hey now. You’re not actually serious about training here, are you?” Standing before him was a kid—one who had apparently been chased out of the swordsman school.

Dandalg wasn’t completely in the dark about the boy’s situation. Sig had mentioned that he’d been “taking care of a child” as of late. He’d even said that the youth could end up unfit for swordsman training and would possibly head for the warrior school next. Upon seeing the boy in the flesh, however, Dandalg had realized something: he really was just a kid.

Is he going to be okay? Can I really let him train here?

Those doubts were his first impressions. The boy didn’t have the kind of physique that was expected at the warrior training school, a gathering place for

the stout and sturdy.

Warriors were supposed to be shields for their allies. Someone so small was bound to spend more time in the air than on his feet, especially when up against the other trainees, but Dandalg could not refuse him. The boy had the approval of a guild official, after all.

So, left with no other option, Dandalg allowed the boy to participate.

Now this is a surprise.

Dandalg had expected the kid to give up after a mere taste of the warriors' harsh training regimen—a regimen that so many adults ended up fleeing from—but he was actually managing to keep up. Well, maybe that was a bit of an overstatement. The training was far more than his tiny body could endure, but he desperately stuck with it, almost to the point of shaving down his own life span.

How can someone like this exist?

Dandalg couldn't believe it, but the proof was right before his eyes. The kid was strong—not just in body but in heart and mind as well. He ignored whatever pain he was feeling, threw his own safety to the wind, and kept pressing forward with single-minded intent. It was bravery of an extraordinary kind, bordering on insanity—and that was exactly what warriors needed above all else.

No matter how much pain he was in, the kid refused to give up. The sight actually sent a shiver down Dandalg's spine. Wasn't this exactly the kind of person he'd been looking for—someone with an indomitable will, who could serve as his right-hand man?

Incredibly enough, the kid soon worked his way up to the most difficult stage of the warrior training regimen—a first since its founding. Everybody else had dropped out before reaching it. The king was interested in the best of the best, so Dandalg had created an aptitude test that bordered on the impossible. Of course, there was no point in having a regimen that *nobody* would ever complete, so he had settled on one that he could at least finish himself.

Never had Dandalg expected another soul to finish his regimen, yet that was

exactly what the boy did. He somehow managed to survive an ordeal so harsh that it could only be described as hellish, but that wasn't what surprised the Shield Sovereign most.

"How is this possible?"

No matter how hard the kid tried or how many times he put his body through hell, he never developed a single proper skill. Dandalg was known for being more optimistic than most, but even he was flabbergasted. A profound dissatisfaction welled up from within him. He didn't know whether it was directed at a god, fate, or some other intangible unknown, but what it said was clear to him.

He tries so hard. Can't you at least give him something?

The kid soon reached the end of the three-month training term, but even then he wanted to continue. This was another first for Dandalg. He wasn't sure how to react. The term was over, but there was still one option: he could make the kid a fresh recruit of the Warrior Corps he captained.

Yes, he *could* do that, but what if the kid never managed to develop a skill? His foolhardy bravery would drive him too far, and he would die defending his allies. It was too likely of an outcome, so Dandalg shook his head.

"No. If you keep pushing for the impossible, all you'll have waiting for you is an early grave. I hate to say it, but you're not cut out to be a warrior. Move on."

And so the Shield Sovereign chased the kid away. It was unfortunate but, for someone so capable, there was sure to be another path out there.

◇

A pain in the butt. Someone who reeked of trouble. Those were the first thoughts that Mianne, the Bow Sovereign, had when she saw the child who had come to her hunter training school, wanting to be taught.

"Please train me."

"You're serious?" Mianne asked. "Well, fine, I guess. Take this and throw it over there." She picked up a pebble at her feet and gave it to the kid, but he just seemed confused.

“Over where?”

“There. Just point and throw.”

“You mean that tree branch? It looks a little far away... Do you want me to hit it?”

“Yep. Come on, I haven’t got all day. If you don’t like it, you can leave.”

It just so happened that Mianne was feeling especially irritable. She waited for the kid to throw the pebble and then watched absentmindedly as it flew through the air.

Right. As soon as he misses, I’m sending him packing.

She used this particular challenge whenever she wanted to chase away a prospective trainee. It was an excellent method for getting rid of anyone she disliked, who had no potential, or whom she thought might be a pain to teach. She seldom had much of a basis for that last one, but a hunch was a hunch, all right?

Her technique worked for existing trainees as well. Anytime she had a bad feeling about one, she would assign them a test with ridiculous conditions under the pretext of “training” and then give them the boot once they failed. “Sorry, but you’re not cut out for this,” she would declare. Perhaps it was a little underhanded, but the king had never said that it wasn’t allowed. Plus, as the head instructor, she had full discretion over such matters anyway.

Besides, if there *was* something wrong with her approach, then it was the fault of those who’d forced the job upon her.

Mianne had known from the moment she laid eyes on the kid that he was going to be a *huge* pain in the butt. He was the type to never listen to others—she could practically smell it. That was why she’d decided to get rid of him. But, despite her expectations...

The boy’s pebble hit the thin tree branch with a clear *thunk*.

“Do it again” was Mianne’s immediate reaction.

So he’d struck the branch. Big deal. He wouldn’t be so lucky the second time, then she would shoo him away. Yep, that was absolutely what she’d do.

“Then will you train me?” the boy asked.

“Sure. If you hit it again.”

He would miss, of course. His target was actually more like a twig than a branch, and asking him to strike it with a rock from so far away was like asking for the impossible. Mianne herself would miss one in every ten shots if she wasn’t using her bow.

Sure, the boy had succeeded once already, but a single fluke was within the realm of coincidence. He would miss this one, then she would chase him off. She was getting a bad feeling from him anyway.

Just as instructed, the kid tried again. And the very moment the pebble left his hand, Mianne realized that she’d messed up.

It’s going to hit.

She was already certain. The kid had read the wind, focused on the target, and applied just enough force to perfect the pebble’s trajectory.

Aw, crap.

Mianne wasn’t even able to think of a new excuse before the pebble smacked the very top of the tiny tree branch.

“Did I do good?” the boy asked.

“No. You did not.”

Despite her irritation and the *extremely* bad feeling in her gut, Mianne allowed the boy to begin his hunter training. A promise was a promise, and going back on her word would make her look bad.

But then she had an idea. She would get the kid to continue throwing rocks and not even let him *near* the bows. That would make him less of a headache.

And so a week passed.

“Can I try using a bow?”

Mianne had ordered the kid to keep throwing rocks, and that was what he had done—for the most part, at least. On occasion, he seemed to suddenly remember why he was there and would then pester her to let him try using a

bow. She had a terrible premonition every time it happened...but she always reluctantly conceded.

Of course, her premonitions were never wrong. The results were consistently disastrous.

Just as Mianne had expected, the kid *never* listened to her advice. He seemed to hear it but then proceeded to do something entirely different. She had encountered the same problem before with other trainees, but he was the worst by far.

That wasn't even the end of it, as much as Mianne wished it were. In fact, the boy's poor listening skills were *the least* of her problems. The bad feeling she'd had when first laying eyes on him had proved to be completely and utterly correct.

The kid was unbelievably clumsy—no, something way beyond that. He had managed to break every single bow she'd given him. In some cases, he'd merely snapped the bowstring. In others, he'd snapped the bow itself, or crushed it with his tremendously firm grip. The occasional one had inexplicably *exploded*.

In no time at all, the school's stock of training bows had taken a serious hit. The situation had gotten so ridiculous that Mianne even let the boy borrow her prized masterwork bow, which she understood to be the strongest and sturdiest bow in existence.

Yet he had still managed to bend it out of shape.

The kid was now asking for *another* chance, but remembering all of the previous incidents just made Mianne frown.

"I'll do it right this time!" he pleaded. "I know I will! Please!"

Mianne had lost count of how many times he'd said that, but it was somewhere in the dozens now. She shook her head at him, her face pale, and said, "No. Absolutely not. How can you even say that, knowing how many bows you've broken? If you're just going to ruin them the literal moment they're in your hand, is there even a point in trying? Seriously, what's with your grip strength? Do you know how few training bows we have because of you? And don't even get me started on how you bent my masterwork bow! Ugh... I don't

think a stronger bow even exists! Just stick to throwing rocks!”

“Okay...”

A few days later, Mianne visited the training school on a whim. The trainees were all practicing with bows—except the kid, who was still throwing rocks at his targets.

That was when Mianne took another, closer look at the boy. She watched him for some time, then came to the conclusion that there was *definitely* something weird going on. Using nothing but pebbles and his own strength, he was managing to hit targets at distances that bows would have struggled to reach. Mianne rarely took an interest in other people, but this kid was piquing her curiosity.

“Who taught you how to do that?” she asked.

“Huh? Nobody,” the boy replied. “I just picked it up while hunting birds.”

“Birds, hmm? What kind?”

“The ones that swoop down from the sky to grab mountain rabbits.”

Mianne paused. “Yeah? Can you hit them?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a hunt otherwise.”

“Ah... Right. So you can.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or throw her hands up in the air. Of all the birds native to the Kingdom, only one species matched the boy’s description: thunderflashes, named as such because they came down from the sky like thunderbolts when hunting. An average person would have trouble following one with their eyes, and even an expert hunter with a superior bow would have a nightmarish time trying to shoot one down.

Mianne could hunt thunderflashes with her eyes closed, of course, but most people would consider the feat impossible. How, then, had this kid managed to take them down with mere rocks? He hadn’t even known the [Stone Throw] skill at the time! She was at a complete loss for words, and that feeling only compounded when she spotted the target he was using. The custom-made mark that her subordinates had prepared for the boy was riddled with holes.

At first, the boy had used wooden targets like all the other trainees. His rocks had soon smashed them to pieces, however, so Mianne's flustered subordinates had replaced them with targets made of other materials. That had remedied the problem, but what she was seeing now was still ridiculous. The large steel shield that he was currently aiming at, positioned so far away that most others could barely even see it, was completely full of holes. And he had made those holes with *rocks*!

Is there even a point in him being here? He could spend his whole life throwing rocks and do just fine.

Her suspicions had been proved right—this kid was abnormal. Sure, he didn't have the tiniest scrap of talent when it came to using a bow, and the only skill that he'd managed to develop was [Stone Throw]...but wasn't that enough? The boy had such an unnecessary fixation on using a bow that Mianne had to wonder whether he even understood its purpose.

Bows were tools that helped their wielders shoot projectiles farther and more accurately than would otherwise be possible. Even the ones that required a lot of strength to draw ended up serving that same purpose. Every bow, without exception, existed to compensate for the user's inability to hit and penetrate a target.

This kid didn't need that help. Using nothing but his own strength, he could turn any old pebble into a weapon capable of piercing through a steel shield. It was outrageous. What if he were to replace those rocks with lumps of iron? He had the potential to become a rapid-fire cannon with nigh unlimited ammunition—one that could smash through heavy armor and even sturdy castle walls with ease. If he used fragments of mithril, he would become a veritable killing machine, able to annihilate a hundred charging soldiers with a single throw.

Such a weapon was already far more terrifying than any bow could ever be. Plus, while a bow gave great power to its wielder, it also imposed great limitations on them. The kid would be much better off without one.

Mianne had been right all along: making the boy throw rocks from dawn till dusk was the much better choice. Soon, he would realize the truth—that his

very existence went against everything the bow represented—and then leave the school of his own accord. Trying to teach him would have been an enormous pain, and she wanted absolutely nothing to do with it.

Three months passed.

After overcoming all of the unreasonable demands that had been thrust upon him, the boy was now stubbornly hanging around the training school, still begging to use a bow. Mianne no longer had a choice—she would need to remedy the situation once and for all.

"I told you, didn't I? You don't *need* a bow. Plus, you have zero intuition when it comes to handling fine tools. Even if you got your hands on one, you'd just break it! Archery is the absolute *last* thing I would ever teach you!"

"B-But—!"

"Stick to throwing rocks and you'll do just fine for yourself. You don't need anything more. Now clear off. You'd only get in my way here."

The kid was still clinging to the gates of the school, so Mianne removed him with a series of forceful kicks. There was nothing she could teach him. Here at this training school, people who were already better shots than the Bow Sovereign herself would only take up space.

He really is a pain in the butt.

Though the boy was obsessed with acquiring the skills he needed to become an adventurer, Mianne knew he would do just fine without them. Instead of tying himself down with things that didn't matter, why didn't he spend his time doing whatever he wanted? From the moment he had arrived at the hunter training school, he had already possessed enough strength to live a life without restraints—on his own too, if he so wished.

In all seriousness, beneath whatever lies and excuses she told herself, Mianne wished the boy would open his eyes to the truth already.

◇

“Please... Train me to become a thief.”

“Train? A child like you?”

Carew had been enjoying his midday break, reading a book, when a boy with slumped shoulders and muddy boot prints all over his body showed up to the thief training school.

“Yes,” the child replied. “Please train me.”

“Ah, would you be Noor, then? Very well. Come with me.”

Carew had heard about this boy and already had a rough grasp on what kind of person he was. There was no need to waste time asking questions he knew the answers to, so the training began at once.

On the whole, thief training was quite plain. Improving one’s stealth and seeing through that of others. Approaching a target without a sound. Detecting, deactivating, and avoiding traps and snares. A trainee would repeat these basic drills over and over while the difficulty gradually increased. Then, after a certain number of repetitions, they would develop a thief skill.

However, no matter how hard the boy trained, the only skill that he acquired was [Featherstep]. In itself, this was a fine development—it softened the sound of one’s footsteps and was fundamental to any and every thief. The problem was that the boy had nothing else. If stealth were all a thief was capable of, they would find it difficult to perform the tasks required of their class.

That wasn’t all, though. The boy also possessed what was considered a fatal flaw in the world of thieves: he was hopelessly clumsy with traps.

In a party of adventurers, it was the thief’s duty to pick locks and detect traps. Instead, the boy obliterated any locked chest he was given—contents included—and tripped every trap he got close to. The chest problem was avoidable if you never let him get his hands on one, but his “talent” for setting off traps was a serious issue. Were the boy made to run a gauntlet of them, he would somehow find a way to trigger every single one.

Even traps that were inactive or undergoing maintenance would spring to life when the boy approached them. His discordance with them became so absurd

that it seemed reasonable to describe it as an act of god.

At first, Carew wondered if the peculiarity was the result of a skill or Gift. He tested the boy with a magical tool meant to detect such things...but the results came back negative. The kid was just innately unlucky *as well as* hopelessly clumsy.

Yet, even though the boy set off every trap he neared, none of them were actually a threat to him. When poisoned arrows tried to run him through, he knocked them out of the air with his bare hands. When a giant, iron ball started rolling toward him, he stopped it head-on. Even when a throng of venomous snakes was dropped on him, he just crushed the serpents' heads, dressed their corpses, drained their blood, and brought them back with him. Carew had asked what he intended to do with them, and the boy had replied that he was going to have them for dinner.

The kid was entirely missing the point. True, he rendered the traps useless, but not by detecting and then disabling or avoiding them. Rather, he *triggered them* and then destroyed whatever they threw at him. It was unmistakably impressive...but also completely *wrong*.

The boy was training to become a thief. Carew acknowledged his great courage, perception, reflexes, and survival instincts, but that was beside the point. There was no "correct" approach to disabling traps, of course, but the Sovereign of Shadows was starting to regret not having taught the boy even the bare minimum of common sense before starting his training.

No matter how many traps the kid stumbled into, he would always come away unscathed—but the same wouldn't be true for his eventual party members. He was fatally unsuited for working in a group, and this fact alone disqualified him from becoming a thief-class adventurer.

Of course, that didn't mean the boy had no other prospects.

"Are you truly set on becoming an adventurer, no matter what?" Carew asked.

"Yeah. No matter what."

Carew didn't ask any further questions; he knew from their time together that

the boy wasn't the type to be easily swayed. In fact, that was part of what made him so likable.

The kid wasn't *bad*, per se. His capacity for stealth was excellent, and his intuition was terrifyingly sharp. But those qualities alone did not qualify one to be a thief. The three-month training term sped past while Carew pondered these thoughts, and he soon found himself saying farewell to the boy.

"You wish to become an adventurer, but you can't even open trapped chests, and you have no detection skills," Carew said. "You also trigger every single trap you come across, so you can forget about scouting altogether. You have no future as a thief. Pursue a different class."

Despite having said this, Carew already knew that the boy had no talent for becoming a swordsman or warrior. Mianne had also deemed him unfit to be a hunter—though Carew had to doubt whether she had even bothered to train him.

The boy hadn't developed any thief skills worth speaking of. This meant his only remaining options were magician or cleric, but his prospects for those classes were faint at best. It seemed inevitable that the boy would ultimately fail to meet the minimum requirements to become a standard-regulation adventurer.

Carew smiled beneath his mask. He felt bad for the kid...but this was a prime opportunity. The boy was stubborn and strong-willed, but when he was eventually forced to give up on becoming an adventurer, Carew would recruit him into his royal capital intelligence unit.

The boy had no skills, and his penchant for triggering every single trap he came across was indeed bothersome. Nevertheless, the methods he used for stealth and his innate ability to sense abnormalities in his surroundings were exceedingly impressive. Above all, he also had patience and tenacity of a degree that was awfully rare to come by. For someone in Carew's profession, these traits were more valuable than any others. The boy was sure to become an exceptional intelligence operative one day.

I've found an excellent candidate.

With that thought, Carew refused the boy's request to extend his training

term and sent him away from the thief school.

Carew's evaluation—that his future recruit had great promise—was further reinforced when he noticed that the boy was still relentlessly trying to find and pursue him, even after he'd used [Concealment] on himself. Nevertheless, he went on his way and soon faded into the darkness of the night.

◇

"Please... Train me to become a magician!"

After responding to a knock at the door of his magician training school, Spell Sovereign Oken had found himself standing face-to-face with a child. He cocked his head slightly at the tyke, whose face was streaked with tears, and stroked his prided beard.

"Ho ho? You're rather young for a prospective trainee, are you not? If my memory hasn't failed me, applicants must be *at least* fifteen years old... Has the age requirement gone down?"

"The man at the Guild referred me! Please, let me train here! This is all I have left! Please!"

"Ho ho. Such an entreaty. You've piqued my interest, child. If that is your desire, you are welcome to try."

Thus marked the beginning of the boy's magician training.

Just as Oken had suspected, the kid was hopeless. He had absolutely zero talent for magic, and mana flowed so poorly through his body that it was shocking. To use magic, one was required to familiarize oneself with mana from a young age, then spend time studying magical theory. The boy stumbled at the very first step; his mana was simply too coagulated.

"Perhaps he started working his mana a little too late," Oken mused aloud. "Hmm, but even so, few are born with such a poor aptitude for magic. Given his age, his mana should be more supple... I wonder if some part of his natural constitution is causing it."

It wasn't that the boy had no mana at all—in fact, he actually had more than average. The issue was that, for some reason, it had hardened inside his body

and refused to flow. And if the mana couldn't be moved, then it couldn't be used.

Conversely, it was possible that this unique condition would give the boy a hardy resistance against magical attacks.

Oken was frank with the kid and informed him that no amount of training would improve his prospects. Still, the boy refused to leave the school.

"Hmm. I suppose I'll see where this goes."

Oken acceded to the boy's determination and decided to let him continue with his training. Many trainees eventually became fed up and left of their own volition—but for those who refused to leave, the best course of action was to let them train until they were satisfied.

Be that as it may, the magician training school was a destination for those who already had knowledge and technique to a certain degree. For a boy with neither, the only training he could undertake was meditation in the mana resonance chamber. This process consisted of shutting oneself away in a completely dark, soundless, and isolated room to confront one's inner mana.

The chamber was designed to enhance the occupant's senses manifold, which made it excellent for those hoping to develop skills. Of course, this unique environment amplified one's pain, fears, and unease as well. Depending on the person, one could very well go mad just from entering it.

Most could endure no more than a few seconds in the chamber—but, even after Oken explained this, the boy showed not a hint of reluctance to attempt the meditation.

"Are you quite sure about this?" Oken asked.

"Yeah. I'll do it."

Well, the Spell Sovereign mused, every experience was a chance to learn. He'd give the boy a fair chance.

He won't be in there for long, anyway.

Thus, without thinking too much about it, Oken allowed the boy to enter the mana resonance chamber.

Minutes turned into hours, but the boy didn't come out. He was nowhere to be seen, even when Oken awoke the next morning.

The Spell Sovereign paled. This was very bad. Had the kid passed out in there? Perish the thought, but...in the worst-case scenario, he might have even died.

Panicked, Oken peeked inside the chamber, only to see the boy sitting quietly as though nothing were amiss. The child glanced up and, upon seeing the old man, shooed him out with a firm "Don't get in my way."

What in the world...?

From then on, the boy spent all of his time in the mana resonance chamber, leaving only to eat and answer nature's call. Few dared to use the training method in the first place so, for all intents and purposes, it became his personal room.

Oken was concerned—naturally—and checked on the kid at regular intervals. He would ask if everything was all right or inquire as to whether the boy had suffered any physical debilitations but was always urged out with the same response: "I'm fine."

Oken was rather confounded. He'd allowed the boy to meditate because there was nothing else for him to do, but the mana resonance chamber was still an advanced method that even expert magicians shrank away from. It was among the most severe and difficult forms of training that the school had to offer.

However, despite all his time in there, the boy had yet to develop a single skill.

Yes, Oken was *most certainly* confounded. He wondered how such a thing was even possible.

Three months passed.

As the end of the training term approached, during one of his forays out of the mana resonance chamber, the kid paid Oken a visit. He had finally managed to develop a skill and wanted to demonstrate it.

Oken kept his expectations low as he prepared to watch; the boy's natural

constitution all but prohibited him from working his mana. Still, the child had worked tremendously hard, so the Spell Sovereign was ready to commend him no matter the result.

But when Oken saw the spell...

How...can this be?

He was astounded. The boy was showing him [Tiny Flame]. As magician skills went, it sat at the very bottom rung of the ladder, but that wasn't the issue at hand—the kid was manifesting the spell from *two fingers*. In short, he was twofold casting. Even though he'd barely even touched magic before.

How can this be?

Oken stiffened in shock. Multicasting was the ultimate mana manipulation technique, acquired only after *years* of painstaking study and training. Its existence had been considered a fantasy back when he was young, so he'd been openly astonished when he'd achieved it himself.

Only after *fifty years* of work had Oken managed to learn multicasting. Afterward, with his chest puffed out, he'd shared his newfound wisdom in the many taverns where his travels had taken him. It hadn't been until several decades later that he'd started to hear about others who'd achieved the same feat, and such people wouldn't even have existed without his guiding hand.

Yet this boy hadn't needed to be taught. He'd achieved multicasting under his own power in just *three months*.

How can this be?!

Oken was so shocked that his thoughts were stuck in a loop. Occurring right before his eyes was something impossible—an event that would shake the very foundations of the history of magic. But while he was overcome with excitement, the boy was downcast.

"This is the best I can do," he said. "No matter how hard I try, this is all that I can manage."

Even after composing himself, Oken couldn't bring himself to reply to the child, whose shoulders were slumped in disappointment. Indeed, the boy's

sense for magic was unparalleled...but his natural constitution was fatally flawed.

Oken was witnessing a magnificent accomplishment, but he couldn't celebrate it. As regrettable as it was, he could tell that the boy had no future as a magician. After dedicating his entire life thus far—almost three centuries—to the study of magic, he could feel this unfortunate truth in his bones.

It was a waste. A terrible waste. In a rare bout of sadness, the forever optimistic old man grieved from the bottom of his heart.

If only the boy's vessel—his natural constitution—had been more suitable. He would have made a name for himself the world over as a magician without equal.

"Ho ho," Oken said. "It seems, I'm afraid, that this is not where you belong. Find yourself a different path to tread. One that can truly accept you—and you, it."

The training term ended, and Oken sent the child away. But as he watched the small figure depart, a sudden thought occurred to him.

Perhaps he could adopt and raise the boy himself.

He pondered the idea for a moment but quickly decided against it. The boy had enough strength to pave a way for himself, no matter what happened. He had a certain something that other people lacked and would surely manage to shape his own future.

So, assured of his decision, Oken merely watched until the boy was gone from sight. The child was capable enough not to need any teachers or masters—much like Oken himself, in the past.

◇

"I want to be a cleric. Please train me."

One snowy morning, a boy who appeared to be at the end of his rope showed up outside the church also serving as the front door to Sain's cleric training school.

"Did you undergo the rite of blessing when you were younger?" asked Sain,

the Sovereign of Salvation.

“The rite? What’s that?”

Sain pitied the boy. How had he ended up wishing to become a cleric when he had none of the necessary foundations? Though it was regrettable, there was nothing that could be done.

“You cannot become a cleric without the necessary foundational training. You should give up.”

Sain decided to turn the boy away. His heart went out to him, it really did, but training him would be impossible. There was much that needed to be done to prepare a cleric before they could work miracles, and a person who hadn’t received the blessing of soul simply wouldn’t be able to use the miracle of healing magic.

Those who were to become clerics underwent a rite shortly after birth. This rite guided soul into their bodies, and it was the amount of soul they could hold that would determine the potency of their future miracles. The only exception to this rule was those who were blessed with particularly extraordinary Gifts.

These unique circumstances meant that trainees of the cleric training school were decided years in advance. It was the only school that had such a rigorous selection process, and applicants were never accepted on such short notice. Had the guild member who approved the boy’s training permit not known that? It was unthinkable that they would have sent him otherwise.

“There must be a mistake with your permit,” Sain said. “The only trainees here are the ones whose enrollments were arranged well in advance. My apologies, but I cannot take you in.”

But the downcast boy was too stubborn to accept this explanation. “I won’t move from this door until you let me train here,” he declared.

The boy was strong-willed, but Sain was also the director of the royal capital’s orphanage; he had plenty of experience dealing with children and knew that this bout of hardheadedness would only be temporary. No child would be able to bear the snow for long. So, assured that the boy would give up and leave, Sain went off to begin his work for the day.

Noon eventually rolled around, and Sain received an update from one of his staff members, who looked entirely at a loss. “The child is still there. Should I drive him away?”

“Leave him be,” Sain replied. He had much to do that day and soon traveled to another site where his attention was needed.

The day passed, and the next morning...the boy was still waiting outside the church.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been here this entire time.”

“I have.”

The boy was lying. He wasn’t even wearing a coat, so it was unthinkable that he’d braved the elements all night long. If he had, he certainly wouldn’t have possessed the stamina to give such a firm response.

“You can visit every day if you wish, but nothing will change,” Sain assured the child.

“I could say the same to you. I won’t move a single step until you let me train here.”

“Continue as you will, then.”

Like the day before, Sain left the boy and started going about his business. He was curious, though, and peered down at the front doors from his window whenever he had a momentary break from his work.

After several such checks, Sain came to a realization.

“He...truly hasn’t moved a single step.”

It was afternoon now, and the boy was still waiting in exactly the same spot. Did that mean he really had stood there all night? Even when the sun began to set, he refused to move.

No longer able to ignore his growing suspicion, Sain hurried to the front door. “I truly am sorry,” he said to the child, “but I cannot teach you, no matter how long you stand here. To become a cleric, one must possess certain special qualities that you do not have. I mean you no ill will—this is simply the truth.”

“Still...I want to try. Please.”

“You’re asking for the impossible. Please, give up and go home.”

“I...don’t have a home to go back to.”

Sain could no longer believe that the boy was lying. It seemed that he truly had nowhere to go. “In that case, would you like to come to my orphanage? There are many other children there. I’m sure you’ll be able to make friends.”

The child paused. “*Then* will you train me?”

“That, I cannot do.”

“Then no.”

“I...see. I suppose my only option is to let you stand here until you are satisfied.”

Though troubled, Sain decided to leave the boy be. The child seemed to be in fine health, after all, and was waiting right outside a church filled with veterans of healing magic. Sain informed those working the night shift that, in the event of the boy’s condition taking a turn for the worse, they were to give the child treatment, a warm bed, and a hot meal. He also asked that he be contacted without a moment’s hesitation.

Once that was settled, Sain went home for the day. His staff didn’t contact him...but still, he found himself unable to sleep. Had the kid given up yet? A child, no matter how stubborn, would never risk their life just to prove a point. They would always give in eventually.

But what about that boy? He had seemed so unbending. He had no home to return to. Sain started to regret not having dragged him to the orphanage, and these thoughts preyed on his mind as he waited to hear from the night staff.

Before he knew it, the sun was rising.

Once again, it was snowing outside. Sain headed to the church earlier than usual, concerned, and there he found the boy still waiting by the doors.

“Have you truly been here this whole time?” Sain asked.

The child gave the same response as he had the morning before: “I won’t

move a single step...until you let me train here."

The boy's resolve felt almost tangible, and a sudden realization sent a chill down Sain's back. If he let this child continue his protest, then he would surely see him again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. The demonstration would go on *until the boy died*.

In his determination to avoid such a tragic outcome, Sain was left with only one choice: he had to give in.

"Very well. I suppose I can teach you the basics. Come in and you can join the others for cleric training."

"R-Really?!"

"*However*, there is no guarantee that any of it will be possible for you. Please understand that."

"Yeah, I know! Thank you!"

So the boy's cleric training began. Nobody could doubt his enthusiasm, but there was no changing the fact that he lacked something crucial—something that all the others who strove to become clerics already had: a blessing.

Just to make sure, Sain used a specialized gauge to measure the amount of soul the child possessed. The boy's complete lack of a foundation had already been near certain, and this test only confirmed it. He had no soul to speak of.

Clerics worked miracles by taking soul into their bodies. This was the basic premise behind the usage of divine magic, which included the manifestation of miracles such as [Heal]. Because the boy didn't have any soul to use, his training could consist of nothing more than informational lectures—but that didn't stop him from wanting to participate in the same miracle training as the other trainees. Again and again, Sain tried to convince him of the unreasonable nature of that request, but to no avail. The boy would not be swayed.

Able to recognize a lost battle when he saw one, Sain gave in to the boy's request. Deep down, he pitied the child, knowing that he would never obtain what he wanted...but then something strange happened. The boy threw caution to the wind and persisted with his training until, eventually, he developed [Low Heal]. It existed below even the lowest rank of cleric skills, but

it was a cleric skill all the same.

“How...can this be possible?” Sain murmured.

It was, by any measure, inconceivable. Cleric skills could only be used by those with soul, the catalyst of miracles. One could not use a power their body did not possess, yet this boy had seemingly done just that.

The only conclusion to be drawn was that this child wasn’t borrowing the power of soul to work miracles; he was *using his own strength*. The word “absurd” didn’t even begin to describe it. That the boy was capable of such a feat meant that the potency of his miracles wouldn’t be restricted by the amount of soul he possessed. For all intents and purposes, they had *no upper limit*.

How in the world had the kid achieved this?

Sain could hardly believe it. Everything he knew told him this was impossible, but he had to accept the truth: in this particular aspect, the boy had stepped into territory far, far beyond what the Sovereign of Salvation had ever ventured into himself.

Upon seeing what the boy had accomplished, Sain realized that he was falling short in his own training. He had been a fool to pity the child, and now he was swamped with regret.

Among that remorse, however, there existed a kernel of gratitude. Thanks to the young teacher before him, Sain was resolved to climb to even greater heights...but the boy’s expression was far from joyful.

“So...this isn’t a skill...?”

“It is,” Sain replied, “though I’m afraid it won’t qualify as being useful for an adventurer. But coming this far despite not having received a blessing as a child is amazing in itself. Although it might not have sunk in for you yet, what you’ve achieved is truly staggering.”

“Oh... So I was no good after all.”

Even after receiving Sain’s praise, the boy looked terribly dejected. His reaction was understandable enough; he had failed to achieve what he’d

wanted to, and tomorrow would mark exactly three months since he'd come to the training school. According to Kingdom law, that was the limit of how long a trainee could study for, and the boy was no exception.

That night, as Sain pondered the issue, he had a thought. The boy's talent had yet to properly sprout but, with enough time and education, he could—no, he *would*—become second to none. Perhaps he would even become fast friends with Ines and Gilbert, two of the orphanage's new arrivals.

Sain had made up his mind—he would invite the boy with no family to the orphanage he managed. But when he went to extend the offer the next morning...the child was nowhere to be found. He'd departed from the training school without so much as a farewell. According to one of the staff members who'd seen him go, he'd headed in the direction of the Adventurers Guild.

At once, Sain gathered the Six Sovereigns for a meeting. He asked what they would do with the boy—Noor—who possessed such tremendous talent, and a unanimous agreement was made: all six of them would take him in and raise him.

By then, however, the boy had already vanished from the city. According to the guild member who had seen him last, he had simply disappeared without saying where he was going.

Upon learning this, Sig declared that he was relinquishing all of his duties to set out on a search for the boy. This incited a veritable uproar in the royal palace, and only through the combined efforts of everybody else—the king included—were they able to stop him.

It was ultimately decided that the Six would conduct a *joint* search for the child, but no matter what methods they employed, they found not a single clue as to his whereabouts. Even catching his shadow seemed a perplexingly impossible feat. Disappointment abounded, and time passed...

It would be more than ten years before they saw him again.

Extra Chapter: Noor and the Black Blade

“Another fine day’s work. I’ll see you tomorrow for another, Noor.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

After finishing up another day of clearing rubble and filling in holes, I bade farewell to the foreman and the work site. My coworkers, who had finished with me, were chatting in scattered groups, already heading home, or otherwise occupied with whatever business they still needed to take care of.

“Hey, Noor,” someone called out to me. It was one of my coworkers—a man I chatted to sometimes during breaks and occasionally went out to dinner with. “Been a while since we ate together. How about it? I came across a nice place yesterday.”

“Sorry, but I’ll give today a miss,” I replied. “I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Somewhere to be? Got an errand to run?”

“Yeah, I’m headed for a bathhouse.”

He paused. “You’re going for a bath? Couldn’t you just do that after we eat?”

Bathing was commonplace in the royal capital. There was an abundance of public bathhouses, which generated their water using dungeon relics, and many operated late into the night, so my coworker’s question made perfect sense.

“I would under normal circumstances,” I said, “but I’m going to be in there a bit longer today. Need to clean this.” I pulled the black sword off of my shoulder to show him.

“That’s the tool you always use for work, isn’t it?” he asked, staring at it curiously. “It’s a...shovel, right?”

“No, it’s a sword.”

“A sword? That thing?”

“Yeah.”

He cocked his head, now eyeing the blade more suspiciously. I could

understand why—it was covered in chips and dents and didn't look like it could cut anything at all. From its appearance alone, it was hard to believe that it was a sword—but that was what Lynne's father had called it, and I was inclined to believe him.

"Well, whatever," my coworker said. "Wait, are you seriously taking that thing into a bathhouse with you?"

"I am. It's done its fair share of work too, so I figure it deserves a proper clean."

Despite how damaged it looked, the sword was sturdy to the point of seeming unbreakable. It was also *very* convenient for work, though the tasks I put it through meant it was often caked in dirt and other filth. I tried to rinse it once a day whenever I found the time, but its surface was so rough and uneven, and there were so many nooks and crannies that were a lot more difficult to clean. Doing a proper job of it would take me a decent while, which was why I'd set aside plenty of time today.

"Won't the other people in the bathhouse have something to say about that?" my coworker asked. "That sword of yours is pretty filthy."

"It wouldn't surprise me."

He was right—I'd used the blade to clean drains this morning and then to dig and fill holes this afternoon. Most bathhouses would stop me at the door if they saw me try to bring it inside.

"But I found the perfect place," I continued. "That's where I'm going now."

"Yeah? Guess we'll grab a meal another time, then."

"Count on it. See you."

He still seemed a little skeptical, but that was fine. I said goodbye to him and then headed straight for the public bathhouse that was my destination.

◇

"It's me again!" I called to the middle-aged receptionist lady. "Can I borrow a place to clean my sword?"

"Good to see you again, Noor!" she replied. "Been waiting for you to come

back. And of course you can—you're always welcome here! Take as long as you'd like!"

"Thanks. Here—the entry fee."

"Oh, you know you don't have to! *I* should owe *you* for coming! You enjoy yourself, now!"

The bathhouse that I'd come to was a small and shabby one tucked away in a corner of the old quarter, in the western part of the city. It was one of the few that hadn't been damaged during the Empire's attack, but the building was very old and had been pretty dirty the first time I'd come. The place hadn't seemed to attract any customers at all, to the point that I'd wondered whether it was even open for business.

I hadn't been looking for any old bathhouse, though; I'd wanted somewhere I could clean my sword, and one glance had told me that this was the place. I'd figured that the receptionist of a spick-and-span bathhouse would turn their nose up at me the moment they saw the state of my sword, but a messy and more run-down establishment would probably be okay with it.

Contrary to my expectations, the receptionist lady *had* given me a look that was blatantly disapproving—but she had let me in on the condition that I cleaned the baths after I was finished.

So that was exactly what I'd done. After washing my sword, I'd scrubbed the grimy baths from top to bottom...and the next time I'd shown up, the receptionist lady's attitude had taken a complete turn. She'd thanked me profusely as soon as she'd caught sight of me.

As it turned out, my thorough cleaning had made the bathhouse almost unrecognizable from its old state, and the place had started to attract more customers overnight. That hadn't been all, though—for some reason, the customers who'd come the day after my visit had immediately recovered from all kinds of ailments. Back pain, stiff shoulders, lethargy, chronic fatigue... Strangely enough, even stomachaches, bruises, and small cuts had been healed.

I'd found it hard to believe, but rumor had spread until the bathhouse was doing a roaring trade.

Ever since then, I'd used this same bathhouse to wash my sword whenever it got dirty—under the same condition as my first visit. And each time I showed up, the receptionist lady thanked me over and over for my help. From what she'd told me, the bathhouse had been on the verge of closing its doors due to its lack of customers. Its makeover had breathed new life into the business, and she'd even been able to hire new employees.

The lady had gone as far as to call me the bathhouse's "savior." It was very nice of her, but I was more pleased to have found somewhere I could wash my sword as much as I wanted. Although the receptionist had been reluctant the first time, she'd been welcoming ever since.

"I really have found the perfect place," I said to nobody in particular.

To top things off, I was going to have the baths entirely to myself today—the lady had cleared everyone else out to make it easier for me to clean. The baths here were small compared to those of other establishments, but there was still enough room for about twenty people. And today, it was just me and the black sword.

I could kick back, use as much hot water as I wanted, and hop into whichever bathtubs took my fancy. I could even bring the sword into them with me, since I was going to clean them all out after.

In short, today was a perfect day to get my sword all squeaky-clean. This was probably the only place I could enjoy such luxury. Thanking my lucky stars, I sank into the hot water and got to work scrubbing my blade with its dedicated, hard-bristle brush, which I'd made sure to bring with me.

"You were a big help today. I'll be counting on you tomorrow as well."

I knew it was a bit weird to be talking to my sword, but I'd grown really fond of it. It had done a lot for me—both today and in general—and it never chipped or scratched no matter how roughly I handled it. These days, it was my ever-dependable partner—something I could rely on for all kinds of work.

I continued to soak in the bath, using the brush to clean out all the cracks and crevices of my sword. It was *much* easier to wash with hot water than cold, and the results spoke for themselves. After a while of careful scrubbing, the blade started to reflect the light.

A while after *that*, once I'd cleansed the sword over and over again and scrubbed even the scratches that were hard to see...it actually started to shine.

"There we go."

I took my newly clean and glossy sword in hand and examined it, pleased with my work. Then, after warming myself up a little more, I cleaned the baths as usual. By the time I was done, my determination was renewed: with my wonderful partner at my side, I would do my absolute best tomorrow.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading the second volume of *I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet!* Compared to the first volume, which had quite a few laid-back scenes, this one was a lot more do-or-die. From the outset, the very fate of the Kingdom hung in the balance. I imagine some readers of the web novel were taken by surprise.

To tell the truth, I'd originally written (well, planned to write) the Magic Empire Arc as one volume rather than two. Back when I first began posting the series on Shosetsuka ni Naro, I thought in passing that it would be nice to get it published one day. I started with the intention of making each arc a clean hundred thousand characters, the average length of a pocket paperback—but as I wrote more and more, the number of scenes I wanted to include quickly ballooned. Before I knew it, the first arc was over two hundred thousand characters.

I was fortunate enough to have been contacted about publishing the series during the early days of my posting. My aim was to pay close attention to the overall story structure to ensure it made for a good, single-volume reading experience, but I soon realized my naivety when I ended up with twice as much text. Troubled about what I should do, I spoke to my editor. To my gratitude, they decided that we could simply divide the arc into two books, since the contents of each could hold up on their own. It was a very clear and simple conclusion.

Be that as it may, this resulted in most of the flashy scenes being in volume two, while volume one ended without much payoff or a strong conclusion. Though this method was easy on me, the author, I think these factors were relatively disadvantageous for the publisher and their sales strategy. To the editors and the publisher who were kind enough to make that decision—and to the readers who stuck with the series, picked up the second volume, and gave favorable reviews—I can only thank you.

All in all, although the first two volumes of *Parry* have a slightly irregular structure (with one ending at a "turning point" and the other launching straight

into the climax), I think the two volumes together consolidate the story quite nicely. I suppose they're parts one and two of a single volume in everything but name.

Having said that, as the author, it feels like we've just gotten through the prologue. There's so much more story to go.

If all goes well, the next volume will start the Holy Theocracy Arc. It begins with the high priestess of Mithra, where Princess Lynneburg (Lynne) studied abroad, invoking an arranged marriage that Lynne has no memory of. The arc will include elements of the popular "breaking off an engagement" trope but should diverge in the sense that our heroes will set out to *physically* break the engagement. Or something like that.

Considering the amount of relevant text in the web novel, I imagine this new arc will need to be split across more than one volume as well. The exact details are still unclear, but I hope you'll continue to accompany *Parry* in the meantime.

As some of you may have noticed, the chapter that concludes this volume ("The Talentless Boy") covers the same events as the chapter of the same name at the beginning of volume one. Of course, the version in this volume was told from a variety of new perspectives. It's quite amusing to compare the two volumes and see the severe discrepancies between the protagonist's outlook and those of the people around him, isn't it? Will there ever come a time when this gulf gets bridged...?

Please stick around, because there's more to come!

Nabeshiki

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