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I Parry Everything: Volume 3 [Complete]

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Chapter 49: The High Priestess

“My condolences for the recent crisis. It is evident that we, too, should have kept a closer eye on the actions of the Empire. Such ugly conflict between us allied nations of the continent must never again be allowed to happen. Henceforth, let us both move forward with due vigilance.”

Such courteous words had come from a white-robed woman with a dignified voice and the gravitas that so often came with unique status. Her beauty seemed to contradict her age, and a multitude of precious stones glittered on her clothes.

The woman had just completed her inspection of the ruined capital, accompanied by several of her escort, and was now seated on a plain wooden chair in an improvised parlor, erected upon the remains of what had previously been part of the royal castle. Not even a month had passed since the Magic Empire’s attack. Hence, when the Kingdom’s neighbor, the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, had suddenly asked to express their sympathies, King Clays had needed to rely on makeshift facilities to receive his distinguished guest.

“You have my deepest gratitude for the Theocracy’s assistance with our recovery effort,” the king replied, “to say nothing of your unexpected kindness in visiting us personally, High Priestess Astirra. In my capacity as the sovereign of the Kingdom of Clays, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your presence has inspirited my entire citizenry, not just the adherents to the Church of Mithra among them.”

The high priestess’s features, beautiful as a carved sculpture, affected a gentle smile. “Your gratitude is unnecessary, King Clays. Long have our countries shared a bond. As neighbors, our aid is but a matter of course.”

“I am glad to hear that. As you have seen, we are in no shape to repay you anytime soon. Though, should the day come when the Theocracy requires our support, I swear to you that the Kingdom will be there.”

“Your words alone are plenty. It is my hope that we can continue to maintain our harmonious relations far into the future.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

The king and the high priestess exchanged cordial smiles. To an uninformed observer, their exchange would have seemed to be a casual conversation between two close friends...but the atmosphere in the room was somewhat tense. As the reigning figure of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra and its continent-spanning Church of Mithra, the high priestess had de facto authority over the religion’s many followers. And now that her long-standing competitor, the Magic Empire, had lost so much of its influence, she was the most powerful person on the continent.

King Clays quietly examined the high priestess from where he was sitting opposite her. She likely understood the meaning behind his gaze, but she inclined her head to one side and gave him an innocent look.

“Is something amiss, King Clays? Is there something on my face?”

“No, I was simply thinking that, no matter how much time passes, you always look the picture of youth.”

Despite having long since passed her second century, High Priestess Astirra still retained the graceful features of her youth. King Clays could say in all conscience that she hadn’t changed in the slightest since his own younger days. Her beauty made her seem like a character of myth—and, at that thought, the king began to contemplate. According to legend, the elves were a race that lived much longer lives than humans. High Priestess Astirra’s lifespan was said to be the result of their blood running through her veins, but King Clays was equally as inclined to believe that she had turned into a monster.

The high priestess chuckled. “You scoundrel. I shall interpret that as flattery.”

“I was speaking sincerely. By my estimate, your beauty is going to last forever. Elvish blood is a truly wondrous thing.”

On the surface, their conversation was as tranquil as could be. After the Magic Empire’s attack, the Kingdom of Clays had received generous financial and material aid from Mithra, and reconstruction efforts were proceeding smoothly. In these regards, the king truly was grateful to the high priestess. How could he not be, when she had been so quick to support the rebuilding of the royal capital?

At the same time, however, King Clays was treating his old neighbor with the utmost caution; a mountain of evidence uncovered during the Empire's attack seemed to implicate the Holy Theocracy. The high priestess was not an easy individual to unmask, though, and the king was entirely outclassed when it came to plotting and scheming. Knowing this, he decided to cut straight to the heart of the issue.

"Incidentally, there is a matter I'm somewhat concerned about. It would appear that a surprisingly large number of Demon's Hearts—an invaluable product of the Theocracy—were used by the Empire during its attack. Do you have any idea of how this came to be?"

The tension in the air was immediately apparent to everybody in the room.

"In all likelihood, they were stolen from us," the high priestess calmly replied, still wearing an amiable smile. "Because of their value, we strictly regulate the external transport and export of our Demon's Hearts, but I believe we have suffered several domestic thefts. Those must have been the ones the Empire utilized. It is quite regrettable."

That was the exact answer the king had expected: *"They were stolen and nothing more."* In which case, he would give the exact response he had prepared.

"Stolen? I see. For the Theocracy, that must have been a crisis in its own right. It would appear that the Empire targeted us both for our vital resources."

"Indeed. A crisis for us both."

The king and the high priestess both chuckled. It was a hollow gesture, devoid of warmth or anything that could be described as human emotion. Their gentle smiles failed to reach their eyes—a testament to the fact that they were naught but masks—and the laughter that echoed through the room was noticeably dry. The tension could have been cut with a knife.

High Priestess Astirra held the highest position of authority over a religion that was followed in dozens of countries. She was also a sacred figure herself, closest and second only to Holy Mithra, the object of the Church of Mithra's worship. That the blood of the legendary elves coursed through her only strengthened this reputation; half-elves were said to be sacred by nature,

wielders of unique powers who stood closest to the gods.

King Clays did not share this opinion of the high priestess; he knew that common knowledge, no matter how widely disseminated, often paled in comparison to firsthand experience. In his eyes, the woman before him was a monster, untrustworthy under any circumstance, who had turned the political world of the continent into her den. She was a sly, cunning fox who had skulked about for over two centuries—an unknown *something* in the shape of a person, far more terrifying than any flesh and blood monster could ever be. Those who believed in the surface demeanor she presented would only suffer for it. How many betrayals had she orchestrated in her time, hiding her true intentions all the while?

Extracting the truth from the high priestess was like trying to grasp mist, and any attempts to peer into her heart would reveal only an impenetrable darkness. Each time the king encountered her, he felt as though he were confronting a monster from the Abyss, deep within the Dungeon of the Lost.

“Ah, I meant to say—I recently caught wind of a rumor.” The high priestess cast an icy look at the king as though she could see into his thoughts, and smiled thinly. “Apparently, the Kingdom has accepted a *demonfolk* into its citizenry. Is this true?”

A shiver ran through the room, and an unusual pressure took hold of all those present. Still, the king kept his smile from faltering and offered a calm response.

“Ho. So word reached you after all. I would expect no less from someone with so many *ears* across the continent. It is the truth, of course. Due to certain circumstances, the Kingdom has taken temporary guardianship of a demonfolk boy. Is there an issue with that?”

The false smile affixed to the high priestess’s face grew strained. Evidently, the king had struck a nerve.

“‘Is there an issue?’” she repeated, her tone now frigid. Her every word was laced with what might have been killing intent, and it blanketed the room. “You make it sound trivial, King Clays. And *guardianship*, of all things? I would advise you to choose your words more carefully. You speak as though *it* is a person and not some wicked being that brings harm upon the world. Would you not

describe your actions as an infringement of the Demonfolk Vigilance Clause of the treaty between our countries? It would be wise of you to reconsider and turn the creature over to us at once. They are enemies to humanity—an opinion shared by every treaty signatory on the continent. Or do you mean to disagree?”

The high priestess took an aloof and overpowering tone, but the king remained motionless, gazing fixedly at her face. “The treaty is not enforceable to that extent. It was drafted in a manner that respected the individual will of each country that signed it.”

“Yet a promise is a promise. No good will come of ignoring an international agreement. In the first place, the member countries of the Hearth Continent Military Alliance are bound by obligation to extradite demonfolk to the Theocracy immediately upon discovery. Surely you are aware of this?”

“I do remember that, now that you mention it. Unfortunately, the Kingdom is not currently a member of the Alliance. If memory serves...the Theocracy—among others—opposed our entry.”

The high priestess laughed as if to say that she’d forgotten that fact. “Please pardon my discourtesy. Shall I write you a letter of recommendation now, then? Membership will come with great benefits. You won’t need your soldiers to waste their strength exterminating monsters, for one.”

King Clays forced a chuckle and said, “I’m much obliged for your thoughtfulness. I’ll take the offer into consideration.”

In response, High Priestess Astirra chuckled as well. “And in doing so, you’ll slip away again, won’t you? That’s not very decent of you.”

The two rulers smiled at one another. Their conversation seemed peaceful enough, if one dared not scratch beneath the surface.

“Not very decent indeed,” the high priestess continued. “Such indecision is unbecoming of the venerable monarch of the Kingdom of Clays. Your predecessor was somewhat more *adaptable*, you know.”

“Should we have sufficient reason to join, we will consider it. Though you seem dissatisfied, the fact remains that you have no cause to interfere with

how the Kingdom treats its demonfolk...no matter how much the Theocracy hopes to monopolize Demon's Hearts."

High Priestess Astirra's cheek twitched. From a distance, one could see no great disturbance in her composure, but an intense whirlpool of emotions raged beneath her beautiful, affable mask.

"King Clays...is that some form of jest?" The high priestess's tone was now ominous, and everyone in attendance felt an abnormal pressure that threatened to crush their lungs. It was as though all the world's darkness had been gathered and condensed into one place. "You mean to imply that the Theocracy *wants* demonfolk? Pray tell, whatever do you mean? And, 'monopolize'? I'm afraid that I don't understand you. Our method of producing Demon's Hearts is a national secret of the highest order. Depending on how matters proceed..."

The high priestess spoke as though she were blind to the others in the room, all of whom had frozen in place. King Clays decided to pick up where she had trailed off, at risk of appearing to be interrupting her.

"Depending on how matters proceed, that method may end up circulated in writing. If we are nudged too hard, we may be forced to reveal information that we, too, would prefer to keep hidden. Of course, I would rather settle this amicably. I'm sure you understand."

At last, the high priestess's true feelings began to seep through her facade, like a crack marring a fine work of art. "And who would ever believe such spurious fiction?" Her appearance was darkness itself and her low, bleak voice like an evisceration to all those who heard it.

High Priestess Astirra still wore a smile, but it offered no warmth or amusement—merely a glimpse into a dark, unending abyss. Then, she appeared to laugh, though she made no sound.

"Do you speak your nonsense knowing what it would mean?" she continued. "It would not be wise of you, King Clays. Not at all. In his arrogance, the man upon the Kingdom's throne would point his blade at our church? If you do not revise your stance soon, you may end up facing divine retribution, much like that nation of fools who made enemies of us in the past."

The dark clouds swirling about the room had already become a storm of murderous intent, but the king's smile did not waver. "Hah. I assure you, nobody is thinking of directly opposing the Theocracy's authority. We are currently cooperating with you as much as we are able, and we plan to continue doing so. I am simply expressing my concerns that the Theocracy would impose its circumstances on us. Our kingdom takes pride in having maintained its independence since it was founded, brooking no interference from other countries. If you are gracious enough to respect that, then we shall not rock the boat. That is all that I wished to convey. Our countries have been on good terms for a long time. Surely we can reach an understanding."

"I see. Respect, is it? Respect... That is an *interesting* word you've chosen."

The anger emanating from the high priestess seemed to subside in an instant. The dark clouds had disappeared, returning the room to its former harmony. Or at least, that was how it appeared to those only observing the pair's expressions.

"Very well," the high priestess said. "Just this once, I shall make an exception and turn a blind eye to the Kingdom's minor *wrongdoing*. In recognition of the bond between our countries. We must respect each other, must we not, King Clays?" She smiled again, her newfound warmth and sweetness in stark contrast to her previous demeanor. The pressure blanketing the room vanished as though it had been merely an illusion.

"I am thankful for your understanding," the king said. "There is nothing so reassuring as having a reasonable neighbor."

"Indeed. Our ties have endured for so long. That they should be somewhat malleable is to be expected."

As always, the king was impressed; the high priestess seemed to be an entirely different person from before. How could she speak of mutual respect without a hint of shame, all the while wearing such an obvious mask? That aside, something about her wording had him feeling apprehensive.

"As such," she continued, "though I hesitate to call it *compensation*...I do have a request to make of you. Would you be willing to hear it? Compared to the matter we just discussed, it really is quite small."

“A...request, you say?” The king knew all too well that her gentle expression and mild, roundabout phrasing foreshadowed something of the worst nature. “A *request*. That is a rare word, coming from you.”

There was something beneath the word that made King Clays stiffen and a chill run down his spine. The high priestess smiled upon seeing this. She looked amused, as though she were toying with a small child. Her serene expression only deepened the king’s unease.

“There’s no need to be so wary,” she said. “After all, this is a personal matter.”

“Personal...?”

“Indeed. Though it embarrasses me to say this, my son has been feeling a touch *lonely* as of late.”

“Your son... Holy Prince Tirrence?”

“Yes. He tells me he would love to meet with your daughter again. I was wondering if you could grant his wish.”

Holy Prince Tirrence, also known as the Divine Heir, was High Priestess Astirra’s successor. Half-elves, descended from the long-lived elves, were a people who seldom bore children, and the high priestess had *only recently* been blessed with a son. Tirrence would be around Lynneburg’s age or thereabouts.

“The princess?” the king asked. “I understood that your son was hospitable to her when she studied abroad, but I didn’t know they were so close.”

“Indeed, I only found out recently myself. I was surprised too. My son has been quite charmed by Princess Lynneburg. In fact, it would appear that he’s smitten with her, to the point that he felt his ‘yearning heart would burst from its cage.’ That is why he so dearly wishes to meet her at his *coming-of-age* celebration.”

The high priestess spoke of her son’s emotions without the slightest hesitation, but that did nothing to disguise the stench of deception. The king could tell that she was lying but not how much, so he kept his response deliberately vague.

“Ah, he’s come of age? Time certainly does fly. A matter worth celebrating indeed. Our kingdom will send him its blessings, of course, but—though it might be improper of me to say this—whether the princess responds to his feelings is...another matter. That is for her to decide.”

The king’s unfamiliarity with the love affairs of youth came across in his hesitant tone, and the high priestess giggled as though she’d seen something funny. “There’s nothing to worry about in that regard. I’m sure she thinks quite well of him too.”

“More sudden revelations? What makes you so sure?”

Reading his disturbed composure, the high priestess raised the corners of her mouth into a broad smile that seemed to crow, “Yes...just like that.” It was as though King Clays were sitting in front of a sneering monster, one who had just heard the exact question she had been waiting for. Her expression remained as cheerful as ever—an ill omen, the king thought—as she made a series of equally ominous noises that he soon recognized as words.

“Why, the fact that they’re *already betrothed*.”

Betrothed...? His daughter had never mentioned anything of the sort. This was surely another of the high priestess’s falsehoods, but, without Lynne, there was no way for him to dispute it. Perhaps she *was* telling the truth, and that smidgen of doubt dulled the king’s next words.

“This is...the first I’m hearing of it.”

King Clays hadn’t been able to muster a better response. The high priestess had him in the palm of her hand, but what was she hoping to achieve?

After taking a moment to appreciate the confusion she had caused, High Priestess Astirra gave a seemingly satisfied nod. “Yes, it came as quite a shock to me too, but they decided it between themselves; it wouldn’t be right for us to interfere. As the older generation, it is our duty to support the secret affections of our youngers, is it not?”

The high priestess must have sensed that the king’s thoughts were in disarray. She adopted a brazen smile and an even more amiable persona as she continued, “There’s no need to worry. I’m certain that everything will work out

just fine. Should the princess choose to attend the celebrations, it would be a wonderful delight for the entire Theocracy. After all, we plan to hold the most magnificent ball for my son's coming-of-age ceremony."

"A ball...?"

"Indeed. We've already sent letters of invitation to the graduates and dignitaries of other countries; all that remains is your daughter's response. Since our two countries have such a long history of good relations, I thought to keep it a surprise until the preparations were ready. I can count on you to grace me with a swift response, yes?"

Only then did the king realize his mistake. He was far removed from most social matters, and such events were like a showcase of his shortcomings. It was obvious that the high priestess was establishing a trap of some kind. She was devising a plan to obtain a hold on the disobedient Kingdom's weak point: the princess.

He could refuse, of course. As the king, he could simply tell the princess not to go. However...

"As I'm sure you know," High Priestess Astirra said, "it would be deeply regrettable if she did not attend. Missing such an important social event would needlessly besmirch her reputation. It could affect her negatively in the future."

Invitations had already been sent to the graduates and dignitaries of other countries. In other words, were the high priestess to fabricate a scandal about the absent princess, it would easily reach the most influential players on the international stage. To make matters worse, it was more than just an empty threat: she could and *would* do such a thing. She might as well have declared her intentions out loud.

High Priestess Astirra had placed Lynne's future on the bargaining table. She was making it clear that she had already sealed all means of escape and created a situation wherein the king couldn't refuse, all to get what she wanted. He had no way out.

"Of course," she continued, "if you are concerned about her journey to Mithra, then by all means, have her come with friends and an escort. As many as you desire. Pay no mind to lodging or board—we will gladly provide both,

since everyone is so eager to see the princess in her finest gown. Oh, and...” Once again, she affected a smile. “Given the occasion, I shall invite that demonfolk child as well, as a guest. *It* is a rightful citizen of your kingdom, after all. Consider the invitation a sign of our heartfelt respect for your courageous nation’s valiant endeavor in that regard. It can come as your daughter’s friend; that should prevent any issues from occurring. Do give them my best regards. We are ready to give them a warm welcome.”

“I’ll...do that,” King Clays replied. “But whether she attends is up to her.” His tone was hesitant—he knew he was utterly defeated—but the high priestess smiled as though she had expected even that.

“I’m sure she will. Your daughter is a wise young woman, after all. I have faith that she will act in all of our best interests.”

No sooner had the words passed the high priestess’s lips than she stood up and took her leave, her attendants in tow. She stepped onto her airship—a world-class dungeon relic in Mithra’s possession—and departed the royal capital, which was still in the midst of being rebuilt.

Chapter 50: Betrothed

“Father. You wished to speak with me?”

“Mmm... About that...”

All the while wearing a reluctant expression, the king ran his daughter through his earlier exchange with the high priestess.

“Betrothed...?” she asked. “Me? To...Holy Prince Tirrence?”

“Yes, though it was the first I’ve heard about it. Is it true?”

“No, this is news to me as well. What’s going on here?”

“I see. That’s good, then. Actually... No, I suppose it’s still concerning.”

The king was relieved to hear his daughter’s response. As he’d suspected, the high priestess’s claim had been a mere fabrication. Nonetheless, that she’d told such an easily exposable lie to begin with and then tried so brazenly to force the issue raised questions. Was she working toward a secret goal of some kind—one so important that she was even willing to sever the long-standing ties between the Kingdom and the Theocracy? If so, it was an ill portent of things to come.

After watching her father ruminate for a while, a grim look on his face, Lynne suddenly spoke up. “Oh, you know, come to think of it...”

“Hmm? You’ve remembered something?”

“Yes, a rumor. Holy Prince Tirrence used to tell people that he and I were betrothed—in poor taste, might I add.”

“A rumor...?” The unexpected word caught King Clays off guard.

“Indeed. During my study abroad, the holy prince had plenty of girls among his followers, but he was quite enthusiastic about courting me. He often conjured up stories about our ‘betrothal,’ which likely caused this misunderstanding.”

“I...see,” the king replied. He hadn’t heard about any of this either.

“Rest assured, I never so much as humored the idea. In fact, when I graduated from Mithra’s Sacred Academy, I made my stance quite clear to His Holy Highness: ‘A betrothal must be agreed upon by *both* families, our country does not follow such customs to begin with, and, above all else, I am in no way attracted to you as a member of the opposite sex.’ After that, I assumed he would give up on me.”

“O-Oh...” The king knew that Lynne was his daughter, but still—that was a rather bold way to dismiss the prince of a major power. Though he thought she had more or less made the right decision, based on how she had described it, it seemed very reasonable to assume that His Holy Highness might have developed a grudge.

Then again, Lynne had only been eleven when she’d studied abroad in Mithra, and she hadn’t even spent a full year there. Surely it was all water under the bridge.

“How will you respond to their invitation, then?” the king asked. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. For one thing, you’re still undergoing your trial of succession to the throne. You could use that as a pretext for refusing. We can take care of any diplomatic concerns for you, so don’t worry about that.”

Then again, students went to Mithra’s Sacred Academy for more than just the Theocracy’s barrier techniques: it was a gathering place for the leaders of the next generation, where they learned diplomacy and social maneuvering. If the Academy’s graduates had already been invited to attend the holy prince’s birthday celebration, then it was bound to be a grand social event, bringing together the higher echelons of countries far and wide. By choosing not to join them, Lynne would risk damaging her future.

The high priestess was being deplorably manipulative. Then again, she had always been like that.

“So they’re planning a ball to celebrate Holy Prince Tirrence’s birthday and coming-of-age?” Lynne asked.

“Yes,” the king confirmed. “It is being held roughly three months from now. We must be quick with your response.”

The princess paused, no doubt considering the situation, and then said, “Very

well. I'll go. There isn't much time, so we'd best start preparing right away."

"All right," King Clays replied, slightly taken aback by her decisiveness. "But you should know—there are more than a few warning signs that concern me."

"Do you mean to say that you believe Mithra is conspiring against us?"

"I wouldn't go that far... No, never mind. I cannot deny that *something* is amiss."

His daughter had a keen intuition. But then, why wouldn't she? Not long ago, she had been ensnared in a powerful barrier and attacked by a Minotaur from the Abyss. Recalling the events of the other day made the king feel even more uneasy. That his daughter understood the current state of affairs was perhaps a matter of course, considering that she had been the *target* of the assassination attempt in question.

"To be honest," he said, "I don't want you near the Theocracy right now. Our circumstances are nothing like they were during the Empire's attack, when Mithra approved your asylum. This invitation reeks, and as much as I don't even want to consider it...should the worst come to pass, your life may be at risk."

The king had decided that, first and foremost, he needed to warn his daughter of the potential danger. Lynne looked entirely calm, however, as though he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary.

"I see," she replied. "Still, my feelings on the matter haven't changed. We are royalty—threats to our lives are nothing new, and it is our duty to attend such social gatherings. Would you not agree? In any case, I'd rather not give His Holy Highness free reign to once again say whatever he wants about me during my absence."

"Mmm... Even so..."

King Clays was still unsure. This threat was different—everything about it seemed foreboding. The instincts he'd forged through countless brushes with death were screaming at him, wanting him to know that something *truly* dangerous awaited them.

It would have been easy for the king to order his daughter not to attend the ball, but he had always taught her to make her own decisions and not merely

obey the suggestions of those around her. He was also reluctant to make light of her determination.

"Father," Lynne said, "there's no need to fret. I'm going to be fine. I'd be a little worried about going alone, but they won't mind me bringing a few others to Mithra, I'm sure."

"As attendants, you mean? No, they won't mind at all." The high priestess had made it clear that Lynne could travel with any number of people and that lodgings and board would be provided.

"Then everything should be fine."

"Actually...there's one more problem."

"One more?"

"Her Holy Highness has invited that demonfolk boy—Rolo—as well. To go as your 'friend.'"

Lynne blankly stared at her father for a moment, then offered a slight smile. "That should be fine too, shouldn't it? Rolo *is* my friend, and while he's sure to face many difficulties...I think he'll be excited to attend."

"Just to be certain, you *are* aware of what it means for a demonfolk to be 'invited' into Mithra, aren't you?"

"Of course, but...on the contrary, I think it could be a good chance to show people that demonfolk aren't as dangerous as everyone assumes. Since most of the attendees will be young and less prejudiced, it might be easier to get through to them."

"Perhaps, but..." Simply attending the function was going to be easier said than done.

Upon seeing the unease on her father's face, Lynne smiled wryly and shrugged. "In the first place, father, this friction became inevitable the moment you decided to take in Rolo. Why back out now? My brother and I have long since resolved ourselves."

The king thought back to the decision he'd made the other day and said, "True enough." He had chosen to accept Noor's request for the boy to be

sheltered and treated as well as any other citizen, meaning he had personally set this chain of events into motion. Moreover, the Kingdom owed an immeasurable debt to Rolo. It needed to make good on that, which it would *not* do by bringing harm to him.

Nevertheless, the king was *still* uncertain. He bore the mantle of rule, yet he had made a decision that was by all accounts irrational. Those in his position were supposed to prioritize the greater good—to willingly sacrifice one person when it would save ten. Instead, he had done the opposite, creating so much discord to protect a single life. It was the act of a fool.

For a political leader, the correct choice would have been to abandon the demonfolk boy—the child of a race that had not a single ally in the entire world—to protect the citizens of the Kingdom. Even if the people had despised him for it, those in his position were supposed to defend the peace until their dying breath.

But for King Clays, that hadn't been an option. He'd been inspired by an absurd man who seemed capable of anything and who had guided him to a profound realization.

What good am I as king if I can't even protect one little boy?

That thought, though juvenile and completely illogical, had struck a chord deep within him, and now he was foisting the consequences onto these children. Worst of all, they were accepting the burden. The king realized that, while he had been treating his daughter like a child this entire time, she was already so much more of an adult than he was.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've ended up dumping my troubles on Rolo's and your shoulders. I'll have Ines be your escort."

"All right," Lynne replied. "Speaking of which, there's one more person whom I'd like to accompany us."

"Do you mean who I think you mean?"

"Naturally. I'll go ask him right away."

No sooner had the words passed her lips than Lynne happily made her departure, not even staying long enough to explain where she was going. Of

course, it was no mystery that she had gone to find Noor.

“Well,” the king mused aloud, “assuming he agrees, that’ll give me more than a little peace of mind.” The man to whom he’d entrusted the Black Blade was strong, to say the least. There was something about him that made it seem as though he could overcome any danger he faced.

For all that, the king still couldn’t shake his ill premonition. The high priestess had said that, to ease his concerns, he could send *as many people as he desired*.

“They say to let your children go on adventures, but...this one truly has me worried.”

From the window of his makeshift office, King Clays gazed out over the city. The reconstruction effort had only just begun.

Chapter 51: Noor the Pile Driver

"Morning, Foreman."

"Noor! Here bright and early again, huh? You're a real lifesaver."

The reconstruction of the capital was still in its early stages. Houses had been destroyed in the hundreds during the Empire's invasion, and much of the ground was upturned or covered with gashes. I'd even heard that the royal castle, which had once stood proudly in the middle of the city, had been completely obliterated. Many of the citizens were now homeless and without work; it wouldn't be easy to restore the peace we'd once enjoyed.

Despite the situation, however, things hadn't actually changed that much for me. I still carried on with my usual work, even drain cleaning. The rubble thrown around during the attack had ended up all over the place, and it had been a tremendous ordeal trying to clear it, but the city's gutters were now mostly back to normal.

My daily schedule consisted of drain cleaning in the early hours of the morning when nobody else was awake, heading to one of the city's construction sites afterward, then doing my usual training routine after work.

"You're as early as always too," I said.

"'Course I am. As the foreman, I've gotta be the first one here. Sets the right example, y'know? And since a *certain someone* has been gettin' here at the crack of dawn, I need to drag myself outta bed even earlier. Feels like I might fall asleep on my feet."

"I guess that's my bad, huh? Should I start showing up a bit later?"

"Huh? I'm *praisin'* ya, blockhead. We've still got a mountain of work to do here—and with the city in its current state, what kinda foreman wouldn't bend over backward to have a guy who shows up earlier than everyone else and works his fingers to the bone all day? Gah, damn you for makin' me get all soppy."

The foreman scratched his head and laughed. Just as he'd said, there was still

plenty to be done. We were setting a good pace with our construction work, at least—though we mostly had my sword to thank for that.

Right now, one of our greatest challenges was finding shelter for all the people who had lost their homes during the attack. Erecting new houses was of the utmost importance, but first we needed to level the earth and sort out the foundations; otherwise, the buildings would all go crooked in a matter of years. As part of this process, we would drive piles into the ground at regular intervals, all the way down to the bedrock. It was grueling work, with each house needing between ten and twenty. Some larger buildings could require as many as one hundred.

A five-man team would normally manage a couple dozen piles a day—enough for a house or two—and that was considered to be good progress. Armed with hammers, the workers would take turns striking each pile, working in perfect synchronization until it sat firmly in place. The labor was demanding and couldn't be done any quicker...or so I'd assumed.

On a day like any other, I'd come up with the idea to piledrive using my sword—and the result had surprised even me. With a single downward strike, each timber column sank all the way into the earth. I couldn't do it alone, of course—I needed people on either side of the pile to hold it straight, making three of us in total—but our efficiency shot through the roof. At our fastest, each pile only took us a few seconds.

To begin with, it had only been the three of us. We would go from one pile to the next, often having about ten houses' worth done by the time we took our lunch break. By the end of the day, that number had gone up to thirty. This new system hadn't given me any trouble at all; in a sense, it was like an extension of my usual sword swinging routine. I was able to drive each pile into the earth so cleanly that I actually started to enjoy myself.

Then, after an inspection and some planning, we'd come up with our current system. Rather than having the same two workers chase after me, we placed two men at the foundations of each home, ready to hold the piles for me. Now, we were easily clearing fifty houses' worth per day—which had put us way ahead of schedule. That was why everyone now treated me like my assistance was priceless. They all told me how grateful they were that I was doing such an

exhausting task for them.

To be honest, I didn't find it exhausting at all; rushing from one pile to the next and slamming them all into the ground was really fun. It also gave me a chance to become more accustomed to the weight of my sword and work on the precision of my swings. By this point, I was doing it because I actively wanted to; I didn't even need everyone to keep asking me.

Despite how much I enjoyed the work, I'd still offered to let the others have a go—it hadn't felt right to be hogging all the fun. But nobody else on the site could even hold my sword. No matter who tried, it would immediately slip from their hands and crash into the ground, kicking up a huge cloud of dust. It always left such a large dent in the earth and the sound was always so deafening that nobody even wanted to try anymore; they were much too nervous.

That was how I'd ended up becoming the worksite's resident piledriving specialist. My colleagues had even started to call me "Pile Driver." It was on the nose, sure, but it was the first nickname I'd received since I started working as an adventurer. In a sense, it was like getting one of the titles that were always bestowed upon famous heroes—so while I was too embarrassed to use it myself, I had to admit that I was a little delighted.

"That flat, black sword of yours," the foreman said, eyeing the weapon slung over my shoulder. "What's it made of, exactly? Nobody else can lift it, and it looks no worse for wear even after hammerin' all those piles into the ground. I've been in this line of work for a long time, but I ain't ever seen somethin' so ridiculous."

"I don't know, myself," I replied. "It was a gift."

"Hmm... Must be a dungeon relic. They find things like that every now and then, made of materials nobody's got a clue about. I've heard they can fetch a decent amount of coin at auction. Yours might be worth a lot."

"You're probably right. Still, I've got no plans to sell it."

"Yeah, keep it. That sword couldn't be in better hands."

"Will do. I've grown attached to it, anyway."

Before I'd realized it, I'd started taking the sword with me wherever I went. It

was basically my partner. Though it didn't look like much, it was exceedingly handy to have around, and its sturdiness impressed me the more I used it. I'd even taken a liking to its unique weight.

My recent focus on construction work had given me less time for the training routine I'd maintained every day since I was a kid, but the sword was so heavy that I never felt like I was slacking. Just swinging it around made for a decent workout. So, while I wasn't training for as long as I'd used to on the mountain, I could confidently declare that I was getting the same amount done.

The positives didn't end there, though—the sword was still as great as ever when it came to scraping stubborn chunks of grime from drains and gutters. It had also saved my life on more than one occasion. All these boons, coupled with how much it was helping me on the construction site, were more than enough to convince me: it was a phenomenal gift, and selling it was definitely out of the question.

While the foreman and I continued our chat, the other construction workers began streaming in.

"Right," the foreman said. "Let's get started."

"Already?" I asked. "Isn't it still a bit early?"

"Well, everyone's here! You're rubbin' off on 'em, you know. Plus, the way I see it, an early start means an early finish. Better than standin' around wasting time, right?"

"Fair enough."

We were more or less caught up with our piledriving work, so most of today would be spent ferrying the materials we'd need to actually build the houses. We got straight to it, following the foreman's instructions as usual.

The construction site's work roster was pretty consistent, so we were all familiar with each other by now. That said, not everyone was a citizen of the Kingdom; some were soldiers who had participated in the Empire's recent attack. After being taken as prisoners of war, they'd evidently been made to help rebuild the capital.

Apparently, the Empire was paying the Kingdom *a lot* in reparations. It was

even covering the wages of the ex-soldiers. I'd originally been a little wary about working alongside people from a formerly hostile country, but as I'd gotten to know them, I'd realized that they weren't dangerous at all—they were just regular folk like the rest of us.

From what the ex-soldiers had told me, almost all of them had been farmers or fishermen from poor villages. They weren't against the Kingdom or anything like that; they had joined the imperial army out of necessity alone, since it promised a steady salary and social status. The Empire had then stuck weapons in their hands and pointed them in our direction.

That solved the mystery of why I hadn't felt too threatened charging straight into the Empire's ranks; most of them had been regular people with barely any formal training. Compared to marching into battle with weapons they couldn't even wield properly, the work they were doing now was far more suitable.

The ex-soldiers had apparently been told that the Kingdom was a wicked place, but actually spending some time here had opened their eyes to the truth. In fact, they unanimously agreed that they were receiving better treatment as prisoners of war than they'd ever received as soldiers of the Empire. These days, they all had a visible spring in their step.

Some were trying to save up money and eventually return home, while others hoped to stay in the Kingdom permanently and maybe even acquire citizenship here. As it turned out, the application process to become a citizen was fairly strict—there were requirements other than just extended residence, I was told—but it was still a perfectly feasible goal to work toward.

There were all sorts of people working on the site, and it certainly wasn't hurting for manpower. Owing to that, the reconstruction effort was proceeding smoothly.

In the end, the Empire's invasion had come to be known as "the One-Day War," because it had been over in the blink of an eye. A peace treaty between our two countries had since been signed, and trade between our nations was on the rise; destroying all those fortresses and walls had made it easier for members of the public to cross the border.

To be honest, seeing the harmony we had achieved made the war seem all

the more foolish. People said that relations between our countries had been touchy for a long time, but with how well we were getting along now, I couldn't help thinking that they should have ended their quarrel much sooner. Then again, matters probably hadn't been that simple.

I was continuing with my work, still deep in thought, when one of my coworkers approached me. "Hey, Noor. Think you could give us another story at break time?" he asked. "Some of the guys haven't heard you tell one before, and they're getting curious."

"Again?" I asked. "Sure, I don't mind. But, as I've said before, I only really have that one about the goblin."

"That'll be perfect."

"It won't be much different from the last time I told it. You know that, right?"

"Sure do. That's what makes it so good. Right, I'll go tell everyone!"

And with that, my coworker returned to his own work. He was one of the men I regularly spent my lunch break with. Since we were all given a generous amount of time to take a breather, and there was little else to do but eat our lunches, people usually spent the rest of their downtime chatting or napping.

To kill some time, I'd started telling stories about my own experiences and the monsters I was familiar with. I didn't have much adventuring under my belt yet, so I was having to draw from a shallow reservoir, and I wasn't the most eloquent guy by any measure. Still, to my surprise, everybody seemed pretty into it.

Some of my coworkers had even started asking me to tell my stories more often, my encounter from a moment ago being a case in point. In response, I usually told them the goblin story. I *had* tried to detail my encounter with the poison toad, but it was never very well received; for some reason, when I reached the part about the delicious ingredients, everyone always asked me to stop.

The goblin story *also* earned me some strange looks once I got into the details, but that only made sense. Though everyone knew about goblins, their habitats—or the ones around the royal capital, at least—were very carefully

controlled. As a result, most normal people went their entire lives without seeing one. That was probably why everyone was so interested.

During our break, after I'd eaten my lunch, I jumped right into my story.

"What you're about to hear is the tale of my first encounter with a goblin. We were deep in the forest when it appeared out of nowhere—this massive green giant that towered above the trees. And it was *looking down at us*. At that moment, I really thought I was going to die. I mean, I'd never seen a creature so big before."

Of course, my story was met with laughter and one of the usual responses: "Hah! Come on, Noor! We all know goblins don't get *that* big!"

The heckling was coming from the coworkers I got along with, who'd already heard the story several times over and knew where it was going. It was all in good fun and made things more enjoyable for the others, so I pressed on with my story.

"You're right," I said. "If you've never seen a goblin before, that's exactly what you'd think. But trust me when I say that the one we encountered was an honest-to-goodness *monster*. It ripped two massive trees out of the ground and took one in each hand, like *this*! Then, it started swinging them around as though they were twigs, smashing the rest of the forest around us to pieces. It was ridiculous!"



“A *goblin* uprooted and then swung around *two* trees?”

“Yep. A goblin.”

Again, everybody laughed. This always happened at more or less the same points in my story. They all looked like they were enjoying themselves, but I had a feeling they didn’t really believe what I was telling them.

Scratch that—I *knew* most of them thought I’d made the whole thing up.

To be fair, I *did* exaggerate parts of the story to make it more enjoyable. Plus, because we always had so much fun, I’d unintentionally started telling it with a little too much enthusiasm. So, I merely shrugged off their skepticism and continued.

“The goblins that live in the forest are so quick it’s scary. I’d been told they were nimble creatures, but this giant was weaving around so fast that I couldn’t even follow it. In the blink of an eye, it was almost upon us. It mowed down the nearby trees, snatched them up, and started outright hurling them in our direction!”

“That’s one impressive goblin!” my coworker theatrically exclaimed.

“Yeah, it almost had us. It took me all my strength to parry the trees away with my sword.”

“The trees flying right at you?” another of my coworkers asked. “With your sword? That’s impressive in its own right.”

A third coworker laughed. “Well, this *is* Noor we’re talking about here. I’m sure he actually could do something like that!”

“By all rights,” a fourth chimed in, “nobody who came across a monster like that would live to tell the tale.”

“You can say that again,” I replied. “If not for the Silver-rank magician who was with me, I wouldn’t be here right now. She’s a genius who can cast all kinds of magic, but not even her storm of icicles was enough to faze the goblin. It just kept coming for us. Looking back, it still terrifies me. I can’t believe I made it out alive.”

Everybody laughed again—even though I was telling them the cold, hard truth. That was fine, though; it wasn’t like I desperately wanted them to believe

me. Before I'd encountered one myself, I hadn't known what real goblins were like either, so I completely understood their skepticism.

"Well," one of my coworkers said, "putting aside the question of why an impressive guy like you is here with us on this construction site... A Silver-rank, huh? Now that's something. Are goblins really fearsome enough to trouble such a capable adventurer?"

"Yeah, she had it rough too," I said. "She's really smart and talented, but she doesn't have much experience. She froze in shock when we first saw how massive the goblin was."

"From what I remember...you then pulled this huge gem out of the goblin's forehead, and that stopped it dead in its tracks, right?"

"You got it. Never would've guessed that goblins have such an easy-to-see weak spot. Then again, they must be known as the weakest of all monsters for a reason. Oh, from what I was told, though, the one we encountered wasn't a typical goblin—it was a rare specimen."

"It had to have been. If the average goblin were anything like the one you described, I'd be too scared to ever leave the city!"

"I'm with you there. To be honest, I never want to meet another. You should all stay sharp whenever you leave the capital. If you see a monster that even looks like a goblin, run!"

There was another round of cackling—and with that, my story came to an end.

"Your tales are always so much fun, Noor," one coworker said. "Today's was no exception."

"Yeah," a second added. "To think you can get us so fired up over a goblin!"

I paused. "You know, I really *did* meet one. Sure, I exaggerated some parts of my story...but most of what I said was true."

"Don't worry—we know. I mean, your descriptions are strangely detailed. Coupled with the fact that we've heard about that goblin however many times now and still come back for more, you've got real promise as a storyteller."

“You’re going to make me blush,” I said. “But thanks.”

I wasn’t that great at telling stories, but I definitely enjoyed it. Maybe I’d inherited that from my father. He’d always loved stories too. I wasn’t skilled enough to match his way with words, of course, but I could at least take all the main points and squeeze something interesting out of them. And since I’d always been so infatuated with his tales, I understood what it was like to be the audience.

It hadn’t been long after I’d joined this construction site that I’d started telling everybody stories. Out of nowhere, it had even earned me a nickname: Poet. I was more famous as Pile Driver, though—and that was the title I preferred, anyway.

We spent the rest of the day finishing the work we were scheduled to do. Soon enough—as well as earlier than usual—it was time for us all to go home.

“See you tomorrow, Pile Driver,” one of my coworkers said. “Tell us another story sometime!”

“Sure,” I said. “I don’t have that many to tell, though.”

“They’re a good way to pass the time, even if you only ever tell us the same ones. Your stories are pretty ridiculous, but listening to them is kind of energizing. It’s hard to explain.”

Another of my coworkers—someone I saw almost every day—chimed in. “You know, hearing the same story again and again makes it stick with you. I actually told your one about the goblin to my kids, and they loved it.”

“You remembered it and took it home?” I asked. “I’m honored.”

“Yeah. They couldn’t get enough of the huge, quick-as-a-flash goblin. After I finished, they ran all over the house pretending to be one. My wife was beside herself. Think you could come by next time and tell ’em something firsthand?”

“If you’re serious then sure. I can’t wait. Want me to prepare a new one for them?”

“It’d be great if you could, but...nothing about eating poisonous toads, snakes, or mushrooms, all right? Can’t have the kids getting any ideas.”

“Good point. I’ll think of something else, then. Oh, maybe a story about the rampaging dragon that attacked the capital. How does that sound? All of a sudden, I was facing off against it, all on my own. I barely made it out alive.”

“Hah!” My coworker laughed cheerfully. “Sounds great! They love stuff like that.”

“Just so you know...the dragon story’s true as well. Make sure to mention that to your kids, all right?”

“Sure thing. Just know that I’m counting on you to make it interesting. Heck, I’m looking forward to it myself!”

“Noted. I’ll do my best to remember what happened and arrange it all into a good story.”

“Thanks. Right—see you tomorrow, then!”

“Yeah, see you.”

I waved to him and the others, and my workday was officially over. I thought I’d done a good job, if I did say so myself. Next, I would stop by a bathhouse, head to a food stall to grab some dinner, then finish the day with my usual training—all while trying to figure out how to turn my battle against the dragon into a good story.

Before I could even get started on my plans, however...

“Instructor Noor.”

Upon hearing a very familiar voice, I turned around to see an equally familiar person walking toward me.

“So this is where you were,” she said.

“Oh, Lynne. It’s been a while.”

“I’m awfully sorry to impose upon you like this, Instructor, but there is something I must ask you.”

“There is?”

“Yes.” Lynne stood upright. Then she looked me straight in the eye, a picture of seriousness, and said, “If you are willing...could you once again accompany

me to Mithra?”

Chapter 52: A World as Yet Unseen

“Two of the usual, please.”

“Coming right up!”

After going down a side street, Lynne and I sat down on a pair of simple wooden stools by one of the city’s many food stalls. I was famished from work, so I’d suggested that we have our conversation over a hearty meal. It wasn’t long before we were each given a bowl.

“I’ve never had this before,” Lynne said, then took her first bite. “It’s delicious.”

One of my coworkers from the construction site had told me about this place, and I’d been a regular ever since. Everything on the menu was delicious, but one dish in particular was a cut above the rest: egg noodles with finely minced meat and vegetables, all served in a thick white broth. The meat was my favorite part, though I wasn’t sure what it was; when I’d asked the vendor, he had responded only with a faint, creepy smile, and when I’d asked the guy who’d told me about this place to begin with, he’d said, *“You’re better off not asking. Doesn’t matter as long as it tastes good, right?”*

I didn’t know why everyone was being so secretive, but my coworker had made a good point; there was no reason to get bogged down in the details. Lynne seemed to be enjoying it too.

“So, what were you saying earlier?” I asked.

Lynne put her bowl down and turned to me. “Yes—my request. Certain developments require me to travel to Mithra three months from now. The journey may be perilous. If you would be so generous, Instructor, could you accompany me? I would find your presence greatly heartening.”

“To Mithra? Again?”

“Yes. Would you mind...?” Lynne asked. She had picked up her bowl again and was watching me with wide eyes.

The Holy Theocracy of Mithra, huh? We'd planned to go there not too long ago, but our journey had been cut short. Personally, I wanted to go—it was somewhere new for me to explore—but...

"'Perilous' in what sense?" I asked. "Is there a chance we'll need to fight monsters again?"

Lynne put her bowl down a second time, then gave me a contemplative look. "To be honest, I don't know how matters will turn out. I just expect there to be danger. As much as our last journey, or perhaps more."

"Hmm..."

The last time we'd headed for Mithra, we'd ended up fighting a poison toad and that weird man wearing black bandages. If surprises like those were all we would need to deal with, I was sure we'd pull through somehow.

But then, as I slurped up my noodles, something occurred to me: Was it really okay for me to tag along? I was still weak, and a lot had happened to make me keenly aware of that fact. I'd grown a little more confident in myself after defeating that poison toad and the goblin in the forest, but that assurance had quickly faded the day after the Empire's invasion, when the guildsman had told me something truly shocking. Apparently, during the chaos, the capital had been attacked by Goblin *Emperors*—gargantuan monsters that were incomparable to their regular counterparts.

As far as I was concerned, the goblin that Lynne and I had brought down together had already been shockingly huge. Goblin Emperors were supposed to be ten times as large, and several times as fast.

On the day of the Empire's attack, *numerous* Goblin Emperors had appeared across the city. Running into even one of those outrageously powerful monsters would have seen me reduced to paste in the blink of an eye. Yet the city's adventurers had worked together to slay them all.

To my amazement, the guildsman—who was also the guild*master*, it turned out—had taken command of a group himself, and the five of them had slain a Goblin Emperor all on their own. *"Been a while since I got a good workout!"* he'd chuckled while telling me about it.

That was also when I'd discovered that, as well as being the guildmaster, the guildsman had once worked as a Gold-rank adventurer. We chatted all the time, but not once had it even crossed my mind that he might be someone so extraordinary. Just trying to imagine how he and his allies had fought a monster as big as a mountain left me awestruck.

Though, when I'd said that to him, the guildsman had just laughed.

I could only assume that the monsters had all been slain by the time we arrived at the capital. If most Goblin Emperors were ten times as big as the goblin we fought, then their heads probably touched the clouds—and we hadn't seen anything like that. I'd considered it strange that we hadn't at least come across their corpses, but the guildsman had told me that the adventurers had disposed of them. In his words, they would have gotten in everybody's way otherwise.

After hearing the guildsman's story, I'd done some serious thinking. Sure, I'd managed to slay a goblin with some help from Lynne, and I'd managed not to die in my one-on-one bout with that dragon, but that was all. Compared to the people around me—who were *off the scale* in terms of their strength—I was more or less useless.

And then there was the king himself, who had apparently slain *three* Goblin Emperors in short order, without any assistance. He had put his life on the line to protect his people, which was now the topic on every adventurer's lips. I completely understood why everyone respected a man like that. In fact, knowing that someone of such high caliber even existed in the Kingdom had shocked me into wonderment—though, to be fair, that had been happening a lot lately.

My recent experiences had made me realize that the world was so much larger than I'd ever expected...and that was what made me hesitate. Lynne had gone out of her way to invite me to Mithra, but was it really okay for me to go? Wouldn't I just hold her back?

"Would we be the only ones going?" I asked.

"No, Rolo was invited too, so he'd come along with us. Assuming that he accepts, of course."

“Oh, he was?”

“Yes. I thought we should travel just the four of us—with Ines being our fourth, that is. Going in too large a group could cause problems.”

I paused. “What’s your reason for going in the first place?”

“This might sound a little strange, but...this dangerous undertaking is a coming-of-age celebration for an acquaintance of mine. Basically, we’d be attending a party.”

“A...coming-of-age celebration?” How could something like that be dangerous? I didn’t follow in the slightest.

Lynne must have read my expression because she gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry. I completely understand your doubts about this, but the matter is somewhat...sensitive. I’m hesitant to say much more out here. Still, it’s unreasonable of me to make this request without even offering a proper explanation. Please forgive me.”

“It’s fine. You can’t help the situation. But, since this is a party we’re going to, is there anything I need to bring or prepare? I don’t know a lick about this kind of thing.”

Lynne shook her head. “We’ll take care of the preparations, Instructor. We ask only that you accompany us. We’ll make sure you have the necessary attire and anything else you might need. Although we *will* need a moment of your time to take your measurements.”

“‘The necessary attire’? Is there going to be a dress code?”

“Yes. Rest assured, though—we’ll prepare something durable enough to withstand whatever might happen.”

The more Lynne told me, the more uneasy I was starting to feel. Coming-of-age celebrations in Mithra didn’t involve slaying some violent monster, did they? I doubted that was specifically the case here, but I’d heard that there were places in the world with similar customs—places where you’d need to overcome a perilous ordeal if you wanted to be recognized as an adult. Was that where Lynne was planning to go? My head was swimming with doubts.

“Is it *really* okay for me to go somewhere like that?” I asked.

“If nothing untoward happens, then you will only need to attend. Plus, the banquet will no doubt include some truly exquisite cuisine. I’m sure you will enjoy it—though, of course, I do not mean to presume.”

“Yeah...?”

Exquisite cuisine, huh? Lynne was right: that was *definitely* something to look forward to. As I’d discovered during my first trip to the royal capital, it was common for peoples and places to have their own local dishes, and a diverse population often meant an equally diverse food culture. The thought of what things might be like in Mithra made my heart race. Maybe I would discover all kinds of delicacies there, like mushrooms even tastier than dragon’s ruin. I definitely wanted to make the trip, but...

“It’s probably best that I don’t go,” I said.

“H-Huh?” Lynne froze, seemingly taken aback by my answer. I probably hadn’t explained myself well enough.

“As you know,” I continued, “the royal capital is still in the process of being rebuilt. Many lost their homes in the mayhem. I’m doing what I can to help out with the construction work, and I’m worried that abandoning my duties would slow the entire operation.”

Journeying to Mithra was an attractive idea, but I was still needed here in the capital; it was going to be quite a while before we had the city back to normal. It felt wrong to turn my back on all that.

“Y-You’re completely right,” Lynne stammered. “B-But...”

“Besides, there are plenty of people more appropriate for your escort, right? To be honest, I *do* want to see Mithra, and I’m curious about that coming-of-age ceremony...but I wouldn’t be of any help. That’s why I’m going to have to refuse.”

“I...I...I understand. If that’s your wish, Instructor...”

Lynne forced a smile, but I could see the tears welling in her eyes. She picked up her bowl and began to quietly sip her broth. Her silence was completely at

odds with how spirited she'd seemed earlier. I didn't know why my refusal had come as such a shock to her, nor why it had made her so disheartened, but I was truly sorry to see her like this.

"Was there a reason you came to me, of all people?" I asked.

Again, Lynne put her bowl down. Then she looked me dead in the eye and said, "Yes. It can't be anyone else, Instructor."

"Why not?"

"Oh, well... Allow me to correct myself. I shouldn't have been so remiss in making my request to begin with." She got up from her wooden stool, placed a hand over her chest, and gave me a polite, familiar-looking bow. "Instructor Noor, you and Ines are the only individuals to whom I can entrust my life. That is why I humbly request you to accompany me. If you would do me that kindness, then I, Lynneburg Clays, do swear on my name that I will repay you."

She was being dramatic again. It was only a coming-of-age ceremony. I mean, it was nice that she put so much faith in me, but I couldn't help feeling that she was operating under yet another misunderstanding. I wasn't as strong as she thought, and yet...

"I'll speak with the foreman tomorrow," I said. "My response to you will depend on how that goes. Is that okay?"

Her expression brightened considerably. "Of course!" She seemed overjoyed that I might be going with her. I wondered when I'd get a chance to correct her clearly misguided impression of me, but that was of secondary importance right now. If she was determined to rely on me, then I wanted to do what I could to help her. I was well aware of my shortcomings, but I would do my absolute best to make up for them.

Oh, who was I kidding? Lynne made for a noble excuse, but the truth was that I just wanted to go on an adventure. Sure, the construction site was fun. People depended on me, and it was work worth doing. But then there was Mithra, a world as yet unseen to me, where so many new things were waiting to be experienced. Even knowing it would be dangerous, I wanted to go. I wanted to see it. I couldn't contain the curiosity that was bubbling up inside of me, nor could I deny what I knew to be true: my desire to go on adventures was why I

had become an adventurer!

Still, before I could go on a journey like that, I would need to make *a lot* of preparations. After all, the world was a dangerous place, filled with frightening monsters like Goblin Emperors.

To begin with, if we were going to be heading somewhere perilous, then my current level of ability concerned me. Even with Ines accompanying us, I needed to be ready to deal with any monster I might encounter by myself. There was a serious chance that I would never make it back home otherwise.

We had three months before our trip, but that wasn't very long at all. My aim was to use that time to get stronger, at least to the point where meeting a Goblin Emperor wouldn't mean certain death for me. The training I was doing in my free time wouldn't be enough, though; I would need to stop working at the construction site.

After parting ways with Lynne, I spent a sleepless night mulling over what I would say to the foreman. No matter what I tried to tell myself, I was doing something incredibly selfish, and everyone at the construction site would suffer for it.

The next morning, I showed up at the construction site even earlier than usual. "Foreman...?" I said. "There's something we need to discuss."

"That so?" he replied, looking at me strangely. "That's rare. And what's with all the ceremony?"

I didn't know where to begin; even after spending all night thinking about it, I hadn't been able to find the right words. The foreman saw how much trouble I was having and immediately smiled.

"Ah. Gotcha. You're leavin', ain't ya?"

I stared at him in shock and murmured, "Huh? How did you know?" I hadn't even said anything.

"It's written all over your face. Right. Go on, then. You've got dreams to chase, don'tcha?"

“Dreams? What dreams?”

“Eh? Why’re you askin’ *me*? They’re *your* dreams. You must have some, seein’ as you’re an adventurer and all.”

“You know... You’re right,” I said. In this particular case, “dream” might have been a bit of an overstatement, but it *was* something I wanted to chase. “Following them means giving up on my work here, though. You’ve all been so good to me, and now you’re going to have to pick up my slack. I’m sorry about that.”

A wry smile spread across the foreman’s face. “C’mon, none of that. Nobody’s forcin’ ya to be here to begin with. Even if we were, we wouldn’t be able to keep ya here for long. I knew this day would come eventually. No matter how hard I’ve tried to get ya into the Builders Guild, you’ve always insisted on stayin’ an adventurer.”

“I guess that’s true...”

“’Sides, you’ve already done more than your fair share. We’re two months ahead of schedule. Can’t thank ya enough for that. And nobody in their right mind could say that you haven’t proved yourself. I mean, you’ve done the job of a hundred people this month alone. I’ll do the math and send your pay through the Adventurers Guild. Make sure ya pick it up.”

“Will do.”

The foreman paused for a moment, then added, “You’re welcome back whenever, all right? Still got plenty I wanna teach ya. And don’t take this as me givin’ up on ya. For a guy like you, I’d pay the salary of ten—no, twenty—ordinary workers and still consider it a steal.”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely be back. You can count on that.”

And with that, I went on my way. The construction site had been a fixture in my life for so long now, but I was finally leaving it behind me. I was determined to spend the next three months training even harder, starting from tomorrow. I had to, else I wouldn’t come back from Mithra alive.

Chapter 53: Training

In the woods a short distance away from the royal capital, I got ready to begin my usual training. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the early-morning air, and tightened both hands around the hilt of my sword. Then, I swung it at the leafy trees surrounding me.

The sword was so heavy that just swinging it once caused my feet to sink into the earth and a slight tremor to rush through the forest. Then, a fierce gale burst forth, tearing the leaves from their branches and carrying them up into the air. I got into position, counted a few heartbeats, and picked out a single leaf among those caught in the storm.

[Parry]

The leaf came apart with a pleasant *thwip*, but I was already focused on the next one. Then the next. Then the next after that. Each of my movements was quicker than the last, and it wasn't long before I'd parried every single leaf that I'd caught in the gale. Not a single one had even touched the ground yet.

That was the first part of my training done. A warm-up exercise, as it were.

[Parry]

I put a little more strength into my next swing, creating an even more ferocious gale. Then, I activated one of the few skills I could actually use: [Featherstep]. In the blink of an eye, I found myself able to move more freely.

[Featherstep] had started out as a skill that merely silenced my footsteps. Then, out of the blue, it had started removing the air around me too. Thanks to that, I was able to move much faster than usual; while the skill was active, the wall of air that so often resisted my movements was nowhere to be found.

[Parry]

I weaved through the trees as though I were sewing them together, parrying the hundreds of fluttering leaves before they touched the ground. My movements created no wind, and my footsteps were silent, so the only sound that resounded throughout the woods was the tearing of leaves. That was noisy

enough on its own, of course; after a short while, the nearby birds and animals had all gone elsewhere.

[Parry]

Once I was done, I repeated the process: swing to create a gale, then parry the leaves that are torn from the branches. I did it again and again, not sparing a single thought for anything else. The gales I induced gradually became stronger, and more leaves were dragged into the air with each one.

This had become a daily routine for me.

[Parry]

After reaching my target of parrying ten thousand leaves—by my rough count, anyway—I took a short breather. “That’s it for this morning, I suppose.”

As training methods went, parrying leaves was a simple one, but I figured it was a huge improvement over my old routine of merely waving my sword around. I was pretty sure I could move faster and more precisely than before. I was also getting better accustomed to the weight of my sword and could now make split-second adjustments to my swings. I could quite literally feel my own progress.

Of course, when I came up with my leaf method a few days ago, the prospect of growing even a little bit stronger had excited me. But at this rate...

“This isn’t going to cut it...”

I recalled the Goblin Emperors I’d heard about, and shuddered. They were supposed to be several times more agile than the goblin I’d encountered. I didn’t necessarily have to be strong enough to defeat a monster like that, but I *did* need to be able to protect my companions so that we could get away safely. That was why I was training, at least.

Unfortunately for me, it felt as though I’d reached some kind of a ceiling. I’d grown somewhat stronger, sure, but I still couldn’t even imagine being able to hold my own against a Goblin Emperor. I needed another way to train.

To be honest, moving on from my current method was for the best anyway. There were only so many leaves, and three months’ worth of parrying would

probably be enough to strip the entire forest bare. I knew you couldn't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, but that still seemed a bit excessive.

Right now, there was *something* I was lacking...and I had a decent idea of what it was. I needed a training method that was akin to experiencing real, live combat.

◇

That afternoon, I abandoned my usual training regimen to drop by the Adventurers Guild. The moment the guildsman saw me, he called out in his usual manner.

"Well, if it isn't Noor! Haven't seen you in a spell—if you can count a scant few days as a 'spell,' that is. I suppose I'm so used to our daily chats that even a short break feels like a long time."

"You might be right about that," I replied.

"So, what d'you need? If it's about the coin we're holding for you, you can make a withdrawal at any time. Frankly, it beggars belief that you made so much from construction work. I haven't even seen dragon bounties pay that much. Are you *sure* you don't want to join up with the Builders Guild? That tightfisted old geezer *never* forks out that much, and...well, I guess I already know your answer, don't I?"

As always, the guildsman started urging me to find a "better" job. By this point, it was basically like a greeting, so I just went straight into my reason for being here.

"No, the coin's fine where it is," I said. "There's nothing I really need it for at the moment. I came here today for a commission."

"Hmm? A commission? Didn't you say you were taking a break from those?"

"Oh, I don't mean a construction job. Do you have any that involve fighting? Something in the city that I can do every day. I'm aware that I can't go up against anything too strong, but I'm looking for a quick opponent to fight. One that poses a threat but isn't *too* dangerous."

"Come on, Noor. Jobs *that* convenient don't just grow on trees, y'know." He

gave me a look of exasperation, but then his expression turned pensive as though he'd suddenly remembered something. "Wait, actually...I guess some *do*," he said, scratching his head. "But that commission's a little..."

"You have one?"

"Suppose I should at least give you the details."

"Please."

"You know how the area around the Dungeon of the Lost got torn up during the Empire's attack? It destabilized the barrier keeping the monsters in, and some of the weaker ones have been working their way out."

"Really? I hadn't heard about that."

The guildsman paused. "There were signs posted up near your construction site. Didn't you see them?"

"Nope. Work was the only thing on my mind at the time, so I barely even spared them a glance."

So...monsters were spilling out of the dungeon? Weak or not, that was a pretty big deal, wasn't it?

"Anyway," the guildsman said, "these monsters are only from the shallow layers, so they aren't too much of an issue. Adventurers have been working with the city guard to keep them in check. They've even put off slaying some of the things for later."

"They have?"

"Mm-hmm. The monsters aren't as dangerous as they are a pain to clean up, so they're not a priority right now while everything's so busy. The city guard set up a few commissions with us a while ago, but they haven't really been touched."

"So they've just been sitting there?"

"Yeah. To give you the specifics, they're ghost hunting commissions."

I recoiled a little. "G-Ghost...hunting...?"

"You got it. Most of them are for ghosts, anyway. If you're unlucky enough,

you'll run into a skeleton."

"A skeleton...?"

"An animated human skeleton. Never heard of them before?"

"Like...bones? Moving? That's...kind of creepy."

"You aren't scared, are you?"

"N-No..." I tried to protest, though my voice came out shrill. "Of course not."

To be honest, I was pretty bad with that kind of thing. Back when I was a child, my father's stories about ghosts and zombies had made me too scared to even go to the toilet on my own. I'd always cried and begged my mother to go with me.

Such stories didn't bother me *now*, of course. How could they? Ghosts didn't exist, and zombies were made-up. That was all I'd needed to tell myself to get over my fear.

Wait...

They *did* exist?

"To be fair, skeletons *are* monsters to be wary of," the guildsman said. "They're an E-rank threat like goblins but a little bit stronger. They wield weapons, and they're decently sturdy. Not that quick, though, so they're easy to run from. Make sure to do that if you bump into one, all right?"

Only a little bit stronger than goblins? From the sound of it, skeletons were the perfect challenge for me.

"By the way," the guildsman continued, "ghosts are an F-rank threat. We consider them to be inconvenient phenomena rather than actual monsters. They *can* get aggressive, but they don't have any physical means to hurt you; they can only 'come at you' mentally. So we don't slay them so much as we just exterminate them, like rats. Even someone of your unorthodox rank can take those kinds of commissions."

"Right..."

In terms of my adventurer rank, I was still a Novice. Lynne's brother had

offered to put in a good word for me as thanks for my help during the Empire's invasion—*"A recommendation from my family would do much to elevate your rank,"* he had said—but I'd ultimately refused. Some goals were meaningless if you didn't achieve them on your own merit. In any case, having someone who could only defeat a goblin by the skin of his teeth—and with help, to boot—sitting at a high rank was bound to cause trouble.

I wanted to one day stand tall as an adventurer who had gotten stronger through his own efforts and acquired his very own skills. That being the case, maybe this commission really was perfect for me.

"Still," the guildsman said, "if you want to exterminate a ghost, you'll need magic. Just as they can't physically attack us, we can't physically attack them. You don't have any magic skills, do you?"

"I do. Well, technically. Look." With that, I produced a modest fire on the tip of my finger, no larger than the lit wick of a candle. "This is [Tiny Flame]." It was my best—and only—magic skill.

"I can see that. You don't mean to fight with it, though, do you?"

"Would I not be able to?"

"It might not be *impossible*, per se...but I've certainly never heard of anyone who's tried. You'd probably be able to hurt it, sure, but not to any considerable degree. I guess you could try—but don't hesitate to back out if you think it won't work, all right?"

Despite those words of caution, I decided to take the commission. It most definitely *wasn't* my cup of tea, but the chance that I could run into a skeleton—a monster slightly stronger than a goblin—made it worth the trouble. The guildsman had told me to run at the sight of one, but I needed a formidable opponent to fight, even if that meant braving a little danger. Besides, at my age, I couldn't go around saying that I was still afraid of ghosts.

I *was* a bit uneasy, though. [Tiny Flame] was the only effective weapon at my disposal, which was far from reassuring. That was why...

"I wonder if Lynne would be willing to come with me..."

It wasn't that I was scared of ghosts or the thought of hunting them alone.

Definitely not. It was just that, if anything happened, I’d feel safer having someone with me who specialized in magic.

Chapter 54: Ghost Hunt

“Sorry to make you tag along like this.”

“Not at all. The request I made of you the other day was far more unreasonable. Besides, I’m always happy to be of assistance.”

Yesterday, I’d asked Lynne to come ghost hunting with me—and she’d cheerfully agreed. We had set off first thing this morning, and the commission we’d taken at the Adventurers Guild marked our destination as an old underground storeroom near the entrance to the Dungeon of the Lost. Apparently, the place had long been known for being “haunted.” Lynne seemed familiar with the details, and she elaborated as we made our way there.

“The underground storeroom actually used to be part of the Dungeon of the Lost,” she explained. “Though, to be precise, while that’s *geologically* true, there are no paths connecting the two. The space came to be used as a storeroom several hundred years ago, after a group of adventurers cleared out the monsters nesting inside. They realized how spacious and sturdy it was and decided it was a good place to keep food. It has quite a long history.”

“And they still use it, even though ghosts pop up from time to time?” I asked.

“Yes. The occasional ghost doesn’t pose much of a risk, after all. They might deter the faint of heart, but they also keep away rats and such—a desirable perk for any commodity storage. So, while there are minor downsides, there are also benefits. That’s ghosts for you.”

“O-Oh...”

This was my first time hearing that the Kingdom was so nonchalant about ghosts. I certainly would never have guessed that people treated them like vermin repellent... Lynne went on to explain that it was still unknown why they appeared where they did. In fact, it was unclear what ghosts even *were*.

“There are a number of theories,” she continued. “One is that they’re a type of living magic developed long ago, in the age when the dungeons were created. Another is that they’re the lost spirits of adventurers who died unable

to achieve their dreams and now harass the living out of envy."

"That so? You sure know your stuff." Lynne had seemed quite upbeat while she spoke at length about ghosts. Maybe she liked that kind of thing.

"Once I knew we'd be doing this, I did some reading in my family's library. It's important to always be prepared."

She'd even gone to the trouble of doing some research? What a diligent kid. I thought that I should follow in her footsteps and start doing the same—not that I had any libraries available to me.

"Come to think of it..." I said, "I was told that we might end up running into skeletons as well. Are they the same sort of deal as ghosts?"

"Skeletons? Well, while they often appear with ghosts in dungeons, they're classified as a type of monster and actually have a physical presence. I believe the way they come into being is also fundamentally different. In any case, I don't think we'll encounter any where we're going. There were only reports of ghosts in the storeroom."

"Hmm? Really?"

No skeletons, huh? That was a bit disappointing—but also a bit of a relief.

Ghosts had apparently been spotted in various locations across the capital, and I suspected that the guildsman had chosen a safe one for me. I hadn't told him about my desire to fight a skeleton, so he had probably done it purely out of concern. I wasn't sure how to feel about the situation, although I *was* still grateful.

Ah, well. I would just have to make do with ghosts.

"Here we are," Lynne said.

After a relatively short walk, we had reached our destination: an empty plot of land enclosed with wooden fencing and plenty of signboards. I'd come here once before to help clear away some rubble, but this particular spot was obviously restricted.

"Here?" I asked. "Can we even go in? The signs say 'no entry.'"

"Yes, we have permission. Shall we?"

We climbed over the fencing and continued onward. Soon, a large stone staircase leading downward came into view.

“Our destination is at the bottom of those stairs,” Lynne informed me. “That’s where the ghosts should be.”

As we approached the entrance, I noticed a faint chill drifting up from the underground. It was pitch black down there; I couldn’t see anything, no matter how much I strained my eyes. There really couldn’t have been a more appropriate place for ghosts to haunt.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go down.”

“Yes, Instructor.”

I gripped my sword tightly and took my first step down into the darkness. It really was a good thing that Lynne was with me. Not because I was scared of going into a dark underground storeroom on my own; I might’ve gotten lost on the way here without her.

Lynne was only fourteen, but she really was someone you could rely on. I couldn’t have said the same about myself at her age...

As we descended the wide staircase, it became harder and harder for me to see my surroundings. Soon enough, I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face—let alone Lynne, who was walking beside me.

“This is the entrance,” she said, then opened a wooden door and stepped into a spacious room.

It was so utterly dark that I couldn’t see a thing. I cast [Tiny Flame] and used its light to get my bearings while we pressed on through the gloom.

“Instructor, I’m sure you already know this, but please be cautious of the walls and floor. Though I find it hard to believe that this several-hundred-year-old storeroom still contains any active traps, your Black Blade is exceptionally heavy. We can’t rule out something unforeseen happening.”

“Right. Got it.”

Lynne’s warning reminded me of something my instructor had told me back when I’d attended the thief training school: *“For some reason, you set off every*

single trap that you come across. Be sure to stay far, far away from places that might contain any.”

If this storeroom had once been part of the dungeon, then there was a good chance that it still housed dangerous traps. I vowed to myself that I would be as careful as possible—and, with that new resolve, I took a cautious step forward.

Ka-chunk.



The flagstone beneath my foot sank down.

“Hmm?”

An instant later, my footing began to crumble. This wasn’t good—it was *definitely* a trap. I tried to jump away as quickly as I could, but I was too slow; my nerves must have dulled my reflexes. I dropped through the floor, and the crumbling stone paving went with me.

“I-Instructor?!”

Lynne’s voice and the spacious room above grew ever distant as, amid a shower of rubble, I plunged into the unknown. It wasn’t long before I crashed into something that felt like a floor, but it immediately shattered and did nothing to stop my descent. This happened again and again as I twisted and turned in midair, desperately trying to righten myself.

Then, at last, I landed on solid ground.

“That was one heck of a long fall...”

As I pushed the rubble that had fallen with me aside, I examined my surroundings. Or I tried to, at least; it was too dark for me to see anything. At most, based on the echoes of the stones that landed after me, I could tell that I was in a fairly sizable chamber. It also occurred to me that I’d managed to endure the fall without getting hurt, which came as a pretty big relief.

The complete darkness made me realize that the flame on my finger had gone out. I reignited it, and my attention was immediately drawn to what appeared to be a large altar deeper inside the chamber.

Who would put an altar in a storeroom?

That was the question, but before I could even attempt an answer—

“UuuOOOooOUUuuOOGghhhHH!”

A bone-chilling wail resounded throughout the chamber. I peered into the darkness, trying to see where it had come from...and caught sight of something strange and wisp-like.

“What *is* that...?”

The apparent source of the eerie cry was protruding from the altar—which was still just barely visible in the darkness—as if curiously inspecting its

surroundings. At first, I couldn't even comprehend what I was looking at; it was so large that I actually had to gaze upward to see it all. After a moment, however, I realized what had appeared before me: it was half of a gigantic, pale, vaguely human head, and one of its goggling eyes was *staring straight at me*.

The thing slowly rose from the altar and looked down at me from within the darkness. It was such a ghastly sight that it froze me in place. I'd never seen—or even imagined—anything so terrifying before. I'd heard about it, though. Translucent, able to pass through objects, and shaped vaguely like a person—this had to be exactly what I'd come here to find.

"Don't tell me...*that's* a ghost...?"

Now that I was actually seeing one with my own eyes, I was shocked. I'd expected them to be human-sized. Then again, considering how enormous mere *goblins* had turned out to be, maybe it wasn't strange that ghosts were big too.

"UUUuooOOOooouuOOgghhHH!"

Again, the ghost let out an otherworldly wail, and I couldn't help but grimace in terror. It was far larger and more horrifying than I'd ever imagined. To make matters worse, it emanated a horrifying darkness—an unfathomable *something*—that awakened a primal fear within me.

"Instructor! Are you okay?!"

Lynne suddenly dropped down from above...and then froze in shock. The ghost had jerked its head in response to her entrance and was now staring her down. I sympathized with her terror; in fact, I was willing to bet that anyone would. There was ominous, and then there was *ominous*. This must have been what the guildsman had meant when he'd said that ghosts came at you mentally.

"UuuOoOOOouuuOOoooggHHH!"

In response to Lynne, the ghost's vaguely human form began to writhe and change. Its two slender, bone-like arms swelled as thick as tree trunks, then branched into eight sturdy appendages that resembled tentacles. Its legs split apart as well, becoming thin and stretched, and reached toward the floor, walls,

and ceiling. Not a trace of its original shape remained.

Finally, the ghost's two massive eyeballs divided and multiplied at a frightful rate, quickly reaching numbers far higher than I cared to count. It was horrifying. Even if ghosts were harmless, it was no wonder why nobody wanted to go out of their way to deal with them.

"UUuuooOOOOOoOoOgghhhHH!"

All things considered, even knowing that ghosts weren't actually dangerous, this was *way* too scary. Lynne had said that the faint of heart should avoid them, but I was convinced that even the regular of heart would die just from seeing one.

"UuuOOOUuOooOoOOggghhHH!"

During the few moments I'd spent in thought, the ghost had gained another ten arms. Its mass of slithering legs had to have surpassed a hundred, and its countless, bloodshot eyes of all shapes and sizes were glaring straight at Lynne and me. I was genuinely terrified. I wanted nothing more than to run away...but I couldn't do that without even exterminating *one* ghost—not when Lynne had gone to the trouble of accompanying me.

"Sorry, Lynne, but stay back and watch for now. I want to try fighting it alone."

"O-Of course. But—"

"If things start to look dicey, help me out. I'm counting on you."

There was a short pause before Lynne said, "Understood, Instructor."

I readied my sword in one hand and a [Tiny Flame] in the other, doing my best to make it burn as brightly as I could manage. Now, there was no longer anything for me to fear. I wasn't scared of a single ghost—not at all.

Determined, I brought my trembling body under control and prepared to charge the visage of terror in front of me.

"Here goes."

It was time to exterminate a ghost.

Chapter 55: I Parry a Ghost

Surrounded by darkness, I kicked off of the hard ground and closed in on the ghost. Its entire pale, translucent body began to glow with a faint light as I approached.

"What's *that*...?" I mumbled to myself.

Not a moment later, the ghost's arms shot out, and its bleached fingers morphed into countless tentacles that all came for me in unison.

This thing's pretty fast.

The eerie, see-through tentacles were as fast as arrows—but not so fast that I couldn't avoid them. I dodged to the side with some quick footwork. They were harmless, sure, but I still didn't want them to touch me.

Strangely enough, I could sense something like murderous intent from the tentacles as they silently lunged at me. It felt as though, if one were to touch me for but a single moment, it would drain me of every drop of life in my body. Of course, nothing of the sort would *actually* happen, but it was a testament to how staggeringly intimidating the ghost's creepy white body had proved to be. It made me so uneasy that I wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

"UUUuuuOOOooOOoogghhhHH!"

As I frantically jumped, spun, and dodged out of the way of the attacking tentacles, the ghost steadily created more and more. Then, it let out a screech of what I could only imagine was rage and redoubled its assault. A mass of trunk-like arms flailed through the darkness, and their fingers—which had countless eyeballs all over them, I now noticed—extended toward me.

It was like being in the midst of a storm—but again, it was nothing I couldn't avoid. If this was all that the ghost was capable of, then I was fairly confident I could get up close to it.

Or so I thought...

Crap!

I'd only let my guard down for a moment, but that had been enough time for the ghost to thrust its tentacles at my left and right flanks, from underfoot, down at my head, and from behind me, all at once. In short, it was coming at me from every direction.

I was in trouble. The darkness had given me too many blind spots, and I definitely hadn't expected tentacles to come straight out of the floor. I could only assume that the ghost had purposefully diverted my attention, creating an opening that it could exploit. It was impressive; I hadn't thought it was that intelligent.

The ghost's pale tentacles had blocked off every means of escape. As things stood, they were going to touch me. It was a pretty unpleasant thought. There had to be some way of avoiding them...

[Parry]

I swung my sword. It hadn't been a conscious action—my body had moved reflexively. Then, to my surprise, I detected a slight feeling of resistance.

"UUuuuoOOooOOooOogghhHH!"

My sword had parried the ghost's tentacles. The translucent appendages were blown back and vanished into the darkness.

"What...?"

I was confused—weren't physical attacks supposed to be ineffective against ghosts? I recalled that my sword could parry magic, but to think it could make contact with apparitions as well... How did that even work?

On second thought, this was neither the time nor place to care. My sword could parry the ghost; right now, that was the only thing that mattered. Armed with that knowledge, I saw the unfathomable being before me as less intimidating by the second. There was no reason to be scared now that I actually had a way to deal with it.

Again, the ghost took advantage of the darkness to launch its tentacles at me. Only this time...

[Parry]

My swing was deliberate. It deflected every single tentacle, sending them flying back into the deep darkness with even more force than before.

“Looks like I’ll be fine.”

Knowing that my [Parry] worked on the ghost calmed me down a little. There was nothing it could do to scare me now. Still, I would never beat it by staying on the defense; with my free hand, I produced a flame at one of my fingertips.

[Tiny Flame]

It was the only magic spell at my disposal—weak, unreliable, and almost unusable in an actual fight. Against a ghost, however, I actually had an idea: What if I put *five* instances of [Tiny Flame] together?

[Tiny Flame]

A modest fire appeared at the fingertip of each digit on my open hand. My dark surroundings grew somewhat brighter, and the ghost’s sinister form shone a pallid white.

“UuuUUUooOOooouuOOuugghh!”

Upon seeing my flames, the ghost unleashed another blood-curdling shriek. It looked afraid of the fire. That was good—it meant that my [Tiny Flame] would probably work on it.

The ghost took aim at me and unleashed an intense onslaught of arms and tentacles, but I kept parrying them all with my sword, one-handed. There was no need to rush. I focused every fiber of my concentration into the flames at my fingertips while slowly and steadily approaching my target.

As I advanced through the darkness, one step at a time, I carefully focused on my open hand. The five flames gradually inched down my fingers. Once they reached the center of my palm, they merged together perfectly as though they had never been apart to begin with. The flame in my hand burned hotter and shone even brighter.

Perfect.

The ghost must have seen it too because its tentacles lunged at me with even greater intensity than before. Its pale appendages blanketed my field of vision.

This time, however, I wouldn't use my sword; I extended my other arm and directed the flame at the ghost.

"[Tiny Flame]."

I pushed the glowing inferno in my palm to its absolute limit, making it flare up as much as I could until...

There was a bright flash of light and a thunderous roar. The swarm of oncoming tentacles was blown to pieces, scattering in all directions, and the resulting shock wave sent me flying backward. I managed to keep myself from being tossed about too badly before landing on my feet, but the ghost hadn't been so lucky—when I squinted into the darkness, I saw that a full third of its massive body was missing.

"Looks like it worked. Still..."

At first glance, the ghost looked to be in a sorry state, but its body was already beginning to regenerate. It would soon look no worse for wear. As it turned out, I didn't have enough firepower after all.

"I guess it really won't be that easy."

My [Tiny Flame] wouldn't cut it. I'd half expected that, though; the guildsman had told me that the only way to exterminate a ghost was to disperse its entire body at once with a magic spell. In which case, my only remaining option was to try something else—something I hadn't even attempted before. It was a secret fallback plan I had prepared specially for today's ghost hunt. I was going to be playing it completely by ear, but if what I'd just managed to pull off was anything to go by...then I figured that I'd probably be fine.

[Stone Throw]

Using my skill, I hurled my sword at the still regenerating ghost, pinning the monstrous being to the large altar behind it. The ghost writhed in agony and attempted to pull the sword out. Then, when its efforts failed, it desperately resorted to tearing *itself* out of the impalement.

From the look of things, the ghost would escape in the next few seconds—but that was more than enough time for me. Now with both of my hands free, I lit flames atop *all ten of my fingertips*.

[Tiny Flame]

I charged forward, closing in on the impaled ghost as quickly as I could. As I ran, I recalled the sensation I'd felt earlier and used it to guide me as I merged the fires in my hands, creating a small, shining flame on each of my palms.

"UUuuOOooOOooouuOGGgghhH!"

As I burst through the darkness toward the ghost, it swung a daunting number of tentacles straight at me. I was faster, though. As soon as I was right in front of the apparition, I brought my hands together.

My two small, shining flames began to merge, urged on by an emotion akin to prayer. Then, when they fully came together, they unleashed an intense flash and morphed into a miniscule, blindingly radiant bead of light. Although it looked much smaller now, the heat it gave off was far more intense. I'd never attempted this before, but everything appeared to be going as planned.

Please let this be enough to finish this!

This was the culmination of all the magic I could use—the concentrated efforts of my entire being. If it wasn't enough...well, then I'd need to ask Lynne to handle the rest.

I splayed my palms out toward the ghost, and packed as much mana as I could muster into the bead of light.

[Tiny Flame]

The surrounding darkness was painted a brilliant white. A piercing shock ran through my arms. A fierce gust of wind slammed into my body and sent me flying back...

And the massive white ghost was obliterated, along with the altar behind it. Not a trace of the monstrous being remained.

Chapter 56: Phantom Gray

At first, I struggled to identify the ghastly pale monster floating in the darkness before Instructor Noor and me. I didn't think I'd ever seen or heard of its like before, and encountering it in an underground storeroom in the heart of the city was nothing short of a surprise. But then I recalled exactly where we were, and a chill ran down my spine.

"It couldn't be!"

An indistinct form, massive and pale; a body covered in eyes; four limbs that could branch into countless extendable tentacles, which would make short work of prey—such attributes were anything but common among the beings that inhabited this world. In fact, to my knowledge, only one legendary monster possessed them all.

"Phantom Gray..."

Its pale form blended with the darkness, making it appear to be the color of ash—the attribute which had earned the monster its name. The Kingdom of Clays had a long history of dungeon exploration, and accounts of Phantom Gray existed in timeworn records of the past, deeming it an Extreme Catastrophe-class monster.

Hundreds of years ago, Phantom Gray had appeared without warning from the dungeon's depths, and the death toll had reached a thousand in the blink of an eye. The most capable adventurers of the time had come together to defeat it, but vanquishing it completely had proved too much for them. In the end, an elite cohort of men and women from the clergy, all possessing cleric branch classes, had barely managed to seal the monster deep underground—at the cost of a great many lives. Thus, for the aberrant threat it represented, Phantom Gray had become a Named monster.

According to the records, Phantom Gray had been sealed inside a dungeon relic in the form of an altar, reinforced with a several-layer barrier. The altar had then been placed deep within the Dungeon of the Lost so that nobody would ever reach it, and the passages leading to it had been sealed.

Before us now, visible through the darkness, was a large altar like the one mentioned in those accounts. I recognized the spell engravings on it as a barrier technique of sorts, specifically a powerful seal designed for use against spectral monsters. There could be no mistake—this was the very same relic used to contain Phantom Gray, only the spell engravings were now broken in several places, and the altar itself appeared to be on the verge of crumbling. Had the Empire's recent attack somehow disturbed this place enough for a part of the altar to break?

I felt a sudden sense of unease and strained my eyes to see farther into the darkness. At once, I noticed the faint, ethereal forms of ghosts drifting around the crumbling altar. One by one, they were drawn into Phantom Gray's body and absorbed.

"So that's what happened here..."

No wonder there had been a sudden influx of reports about ghosts in this area. The cause of their appearances had thus far been unknown, so they had been vaguely attributed to the dungeon, but what I was seeing explained it all: Phantom Gray was *calling them to itself*.

"OoOOooOaaAaaAAAgGGghHH!"

Its dread wail had my very soul in a vise. A primal fear of the unknown welled up from deep inside of me, and terror rooted me to the spot. I attempted to muster my courage and shake off my paralysis, but my efforts were in vain.

In stark contrast to my nervousness, Instructor Noor was the picture of calm as he evaded Phantom Gray's onslaught. In hindsight, his words from earlier had seemed to imply that he had expected the monster to be down here.

Had this been Instructor Noor's intention all along...? The longer I considered it, the less viable any other alternative seemed. I *had* thought it somewhat strange that a person of my instructor's strength would ask me to accompany him to exterminate ghosts. He had even said that it would "make for good training."

Furthermore, there was the trap he had so "carelessly" triggered upon entering the storeroom. Setting off a trap with one's very first step could only be the act of an amateur with a severe lack of perception, but Instructor Noor

was nowhere near that incompetent. The only reasonable explanation was that his acute senses had detected the abnormality lurking below, so he had collapsed the floor *on purpose*.

If all of that was true, then it seemed to prove my suspicion that Instructor Noor truly had intended to confront Phantom Gray from the beginning. However...

"OoOooAAaaAaAAaaGgGGHHH!"

The monster was simply far too fearsome. According to the records, it possessed no physical weapons, but its mere touch was enough to rob a person of their life. After it had wiped out a strike force comprising dozens of skilled adventurers, it had been given the appellation "Visage of Fear."

Phantom Gray was not an opponent one could confront without a plan, much less with only two people; simply making contact with it meant immediate death. And yet...

In the darkness, amid the mass of sinister, tentacle-like limbs that writhed and transformed just as rapidly as they lashed out, Instructor Noor was gracefully weaving his way through the smallest openings. He was all alone, but he refused to shy away from the monster's fierce onslaught. Even when evasion became impossible, he simply used the Black Blade to repel every pale limb that struck at him. I'd almost forgotten—he had in his possession the peerless relic that my father had once retrieved from the depths of the Dungeon of the Lost.

As I regained my composure, Instructor Noor continued to parry Phantom Gray's attacks with just one hand, as though they were of absolutely no concern to him. In the process, he leisurely began to approach its pale, writhing body.

"Amazing..."

I couldn't find anything else to say. My only thought was that Instructor Noor stood in a realm far beyond what I could even imagine. My fears had been unfounded from the start. I was relieved—but that emotion soon gave way to disbelief as I spotted the five flames at Instructor Noor's fingertips.

"Is that...fivefold casting?" I muttered. "But how...? That shouldn't be..."

Casting five spells with one hand—that is, using [Multicast]—was the pinnacle

of a magician's art. It was an ultimate, unprecedented technique that I had seen Instructor Oken demonstrate many times. But that wasn't all—at Instructor Noor's fingertips were multiple instances of the intense [Tiny Flame] he'd shown me once before. And, like back then, they were [Overcast].

How had he ever become capable of such a feat? Perhaps he wasn't just beyond the realm of my imagination but somewhere much, much farther—somewhere that words could not even describe. But then, as I watched Instructor Noor in shock, I witnessed a sight that sent me reeling.

"I...must be dreaming..."

Still warding off pale tentacles with the Black Blade, Instructor Noor combined the five [Overcast] instances of [Tiny Flame] in his other hand. The resulting inferno blazed with even greater intensity. I was stunned. Was that...?

"[Fusion Magic]?!"

[Fusion Magic] was a supreme skill—a height that Instructor Oken had only managed to reach after more than a hundred years of dedicated study. If a magician perfectly layered two concurrently cast spells with no room for error, they would swiftly begin to increase each other's potency. The theory for it had existed since the distant past, but it required such a monstrous degree of mana control that Instructor Oken was said to be the only person alive capable of achieving it.

In any case, [Fusion Magic] was a skill that combined a single spell with another—at least ostensibly. Instructor Noor had just fused *five* before my very eyes. The excruciating amount of studying it must have taken to become capable of such a feat was beyond the scope of what I could imagine.

The scene playing out before me was nothing short of absurd. Then, while I stood there, feeling slightly light-headed, Instructor Noor reached out toward his foe.

"[Tiny Flame]."

After a flash of light and a deafening boom, a portion of Phantom Gray's body was blown away.

"I don't believe it..." I murmured. [Tiny Flame] ranked among the lowest class

of magic skills. Its sole effect was to create a modest fire at one's fingertip. But my instructor had enhanced it to an unbelievable potency.

The fight wasn't over; Phantom Gray was already regenerating. Instructor Noor showed not an ounce of concern, though. He calmly threw the Black Blade at the monster, pinning it against the altar, then closed the distance between them, fivefold-cast variants of [Tiny Flame] in each hand. He fused them together as though it were as easy as breathing and once again released the spell at Phantom Gray.

Scorching light washed away the darkness, and a thunderous roar shook the ground. In an instant, the monster's massive form, so large that it seemed to dwarf the massive cavern around us, disintegrated together with the altar behind it. Great furrows were torn into the floor and surrounding walls.

I was witnessing magic of a height beyond my wildest dreams. The limit of my own [Multicast] when using both of my hands was sixfold casting. Instructor Oken, the sage known as Ninespell, could only manage nine. Instructor Noor had just cast *ten* spells, all [Overcast]. And, more impressive still, he had *fused them together*.

The sheer might of the attack pointed to a frightening amount of study and training. If there existed an opponent who could withstand *that*, then I thought it safe to assume they were truly undefeatable.

I struggled to imagine when, if ever, I might attain such mastery over magic myself. Even for Instructor Oken, the task likely bordered on the impossible. So awe-inspiring was Instructor Noor's feat that not even a legendary monster had stood a chance against it.

The spell had vanquished Phantom Gray—after seeing its power, what else was I to believe? I prayed that my evaluation was true, for if not even *that* was enough, I had no idea what would be.

"OOoOooOoOAAaAAAGgGGhhH!"

Yet once more, a chilling wail resounded throughout the cavern, dashing my forlorn hope; Phantom Gray had managed to re-form itself, even after suffering the full force of Instructor Noor's spell. It didn't appear to have sustained any lasting damage—in fact, its ghastly pale form was larger than before, and it was

still growing.

Despair overcame me. It was abundantly clear that the monster was getting stronger. Instructor Noor's complex, overwhelming fusion spell hadn't injured it at all. Was defeating such a monster even possible? Again, my body froze in terror.

In the face of this frightening development, Instructor Noor merely said, "I guess that wasn't enough after all." There was nary a hint of unease in his expression; on the contrary, he looked wholly satisfied. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that he looked like someone who had found peace in knowing that he had attempted absolutely everything in his power. How was he able to remain so calm? His attitude felt different from mere resignation...

That was when I remembered something important—this man standing not a dozen paces from me was none other than my Instructor Noor. He surely had an extraordinary secret plan of some kind up his sleeve. I might not have been able to perceive it, but I was certain that it would allow him to seize victory.

As I studied my instructor, my heart full of anticipation, he smiled at me gently. The kindness in his eyes eased my feelings of apprehension, and it was with a newfound sense of relief that I smiled back at him.

Then, he cheerfully said, "All right, Lynne, the rest is up to you."

...

.....

.....

Huh?

Chapter 57: Instructor Noor's Special Lesson

My mind went completely blank. Had my instructor just proclaimed that the rest was up to me? For what reason? No matter how one looked at it, the monster before us was far too strong for me to defeat.

No, wait... The more I considered it, the stranger our predicament seemed. To begin with, why had Instructor Noor even brought me here? He had said that he'd wanted my help and that he'd needed me to lend him my strength, but what if those had just been excuses? What if he had intended for all of this to happen?

What if when he had said that this would "make for good training"...he had meant for *me*?

Of course. It was so obvious. How had it not occurred to me sooner? Instructor Noor had no need to become any stronger, *but I did*.

"So that's how it is..."

Instructor Noor must have seen right through me the other day. He had realized that I was relying solely on his strength and not on my own. I had so carelessly assumed that as long as he was with me when I traveled to Mithra, I would be safe from whatever dangers came our way. Deep down, I clung to the belief that he would protect me from anything and everything.

But this...this was Instructor Noor's way of telling me that I was being complacent. He wanted me to realize that I couldn't just accept my weakness and rely on others for everything. Perhaps, to him, it had appeared as though I'd given up on bettering myself.

That was why he'd brought me here.

"I understand, Instructor." Summoning all of my willpower, I turned to face Phantom Gray head-on. My legs and voice trembled as I said, "I'll...do my best."

I was unsure how I would defeat such a monster, but maybe Instructor Noor had already given me a *hint*...

“Sorry, Lynne, but stay back and watch for now.”

Those had been his words to me when I’d first dropped into the cavern, which could only mean one thing: his actions thus far had been a demonstration for me, one that would guide me down the path to becoming stronger. That realization came to me with a fresh wave of nerves, and I swallowed down the saliva that had built up in my mouth.

Instructor Noor was telling me to do as he had done—that defeating Phantom Gray was something I could manage. He believed that I could do it. He had even entrusted this matter of dire importance to me, despite my inexperience. I needed to live up to his expectations.

But the task seemed impos—

“OoOoooOOOOooAAAGggghHH!”

No. I couldn’t allow my terror to speak for me now, when it mattered most. I expelled any thoughts of despair and dismay from my mind. I *would* do this. Here and now, I would show my instructor the full extent of what I could achieve—which meant I needed to stay focused.

It was still unclear to me what I needed to do, but I would think on my feet. Otherwise, I risked losing my instructor’s recognition.

“Here I go.”

I took a deep breath, focused my willpower to its limit, and prepared to cast my magic according to the sequence that was forming in my mind.

First, I created multilayered instances of [Magic Barrier] in my palms and coated them with [Reflect], [Reflect Heat], and [Reflect Magic]. Then, to push the output of my magic beyond its limit, I applied [Enhance], [Charge], and [Burst] to the fullest extent that I could manage, and concentrated every drop of my mana together with [Condense]. At the same time, I used [Multicast].

All of my preparations were in order. My limit was three spells in each hand, which made for a sixfold casting overall—or, at least, that was what I perceived my limit to be. Instructor Noor had achieved an even greater mastery of magic and was expecting me to do the same.

“[Hellflare].”

Ever so carefully, I synchronized my mana and cast a [Hellflare] in each hand. Then, my arms outstretched, I began shifting the two orbs of devastating heat away from my palms and into the space between them. If I made even the slightest mistake, the resulting explosion would be enough to injure me fatally.

I was so nervous that sweat cascaded down my forehead, but I desperately maintained my composure and devoted all of my focus to my hands. Minute corrections to my mana allowed me to continue moving my two spells inward, but the process was agonizingly slow; mere seconds felt like an eternity. Even the slightest adjustments to my magic were more exhausting than if I’d attempted to pass a thread through the eye of ten thousand needles. Beads of sweat dripped from my chin and wet the ground with almost inaudible splashes, but I was so tense that the noises seemed deafening to me.



“I...did it?”

After my bout of extreme concentration, and despite feeling as though I might pass out at any moment, I realized that I had finished moving my two spells to their intended position. There was now a small, blazing fireball between my hands.

Still, there was more to be done. I maintained the fireball in place, taking care not to destabilize it, as I cast two instances of one spell and then two of another.

"[Windblast]. [Purify]."

The former was meant to augment the potency of my fire and make my final spell maneuverable, while the latter would make my attack more effective against my foe—according to what I'd read, at least. Phantom Gray wasn't technically an undead creature, but it had similar characteristics to one. Plus, according to records of the past, when the members of the clergy had sealed the monster within the altar, their continuous castings of [Purify] had dulled its movements. I was going to put my money on the information that my predecessors had sacrificed so many lives to obtain.

Two instances of [Hellflare].

Two instances of [Windblast].

Two instances of [Purify].

Altogether, I was balancing six spells—the limit of what I could cast at once. And I was going to *fuse them together*.

"It doesn't seem so daunting after all, now that I'm making the attempt."

Fusing my two instances of [Hellflare] had given me a feel for [Fusion Magic]. Now, to my surprise, it didn't seem all that difficult. Yes, the simple act of combining two spells had proved mentally exhausting beyond measure, but this was no time to care.

After a brief reprieve, I began pouring mana into the blazing tempest in my hands. I would stake everything on this single attack; there was no point keeping anything in reserve. With that intent in mind, I focused my entire being into the storm of flames that I was keeping in check.

In the future, I would need to be able to manage a feat like this with ease. Otherwise, I would be ashamed to call myself Instructor Noor's disciple.

"OooOOoOOaaAaaAAGgGhHHH!"

Having taken notice of my spell, Phantom Gray let out a terrible howl and thrust a swarm of tentacles toward me. The mass of pale appendages almost reminded me of a silent avalanche of snow as it surged through the darkness, its movements noticeably faster and keener than earlier. If even one of the extremities reached me, I would be unable to dodge, and my life would be snuffed out on the spot.

I was going to be fine, though. I knew it. The ghostly appendages that had once struck such terror into me now inspired no apprehension at all. After all...

"I'm done."

If I could master the technique that Instructor Noor had taught me, then not even the legendary Phantom Gray would be an opponent to fear. This feeling was what he had wanted to impart to me: the confidence that came with having the strength to ward off the darkness.

"Thank you, Instructor Noor."

Everything was in place. My fusion spell was ready. I aimed the radiant, swirling inferno at the swarm of tentacles coming for me and took a deep breath.

"Here I go. [Hellflare]."

A massive, incandescent burst of flame shot from my hands toward Phantom Gray and disintegrated everything in its path, the monster included. Remnants of magical energy scattered in the boundless storm, which swallowed up what remained of the apparition's pale body and consigned it to the void.

Even now, Phantom Gray would still be able to regenerate—but my attack wasn't over yet.

"[Windblast]."

Using my control over the raging winds, I spread the luminous flames fused with [Purify] as far as I was able. I wouldn't leave a single trace of the monster

behind. I allowed the storm to continue raging and blanketed the area in cleansing fire, determined to sterilize every last scattered vestige of the smoldering ruin that had once been Phantom Gray.

I stood in the midst of a violent inferno, where a single misstep would mean my complete annihilation...but I was strangely calm. I simply continued to maintain my magic, feeling not the slightest bit afraid.

Although controlling my fusion spell was exceedingly difficult, it was nothing compared to the superhuman feat my instructor had shown me. He was so far beyond me that even comparing us was presumptuous—and, when I thought about it like that, I even found it in myself to smile.

Little by little, I accustomed myself to controlling my magic, making the radiant flames continue their dance. By the time a great hole opened up in the ceiling and the light of day spilled through, there were no longer any signs that Phantom Gray would ever regenerate again.

Chapter 58: The Demonfolk Adventurer

It was evening when Lynne stopped by the room I'd been given in Ines's estate. "How about it, Rolo?" she asked me. "Would you like to travel with us to Mithra?"

The Holy Theocracy of Mithra had invited Lynne to attend their prince's coming-of-age ceremony—and they had said that I could accompany her as a friend. It had sounded like something out of a dream, and even after seeing the formal invitation with my name on it, I still couldn't mask my surprise. Mithra had despised the demonfolk for a very long time; they thought that my kind deserved to go extinct, and would normally kill us on sight. My invitation was surely a trick, made up to lure me into their territory so that they could catch and exterminate me the moment I crossed the border.

"I can't imagine Mithra will welcome me..." I said, voicing my concerns. "In the worst-case scenario...they might even kill me."

"You're right. Just as you know, Mithra is merciless with demonfolk. I don't want to put you through any hardships, Rolo. It's just... I thought this invitation might be a good opportunity."

After a brief pause, I repeated, "'A good opportunity'?"

"Indeed. The event in question will be a large social gathering with people from many different countries. Just as you fear, not all of them will welcome you. Some of them might even wish you harm. But, if you are willing, I would like to give them a chance to see you with their own eyes—to show them that my friend isn't as frightening as they think."

Lynne called me her friend. I was still finding that hard to believe—I mean, she was the princess of *an entire kingdom*—but I could tell that she truly meant it.

"But..." I hesitated. "If there are going to be so many people there, the arrival of a demonfolk might cause a panic."

"Perhaps...but they might only be so scared because they've never taken a

proper look at one before."

"There are plenty of people who have seen me in person but still hate or fear me."

"Well, they must be terrible judges of character. Not everyone will be like them."

"You think...?"

"I do," she firmly replied. I was only expressing my honest concerns, but she looked a little sad for some reason. "Rolo... Ines, Instructor Noor, and I—none of us think you're scary in the slightest."

"Mm-hmm. I know. Thank you."

I had already told her about my ability to read minds, and she hadn't seemed at all bothered by it. A lot of people here in the Kingdom of Clays were like that, including Lynne's dad, King Clays. Compared to Noor, their feelings about me were more complicated, but they all treated me warmly.

Of course, not everyone I met was the same—some were outright hostile toward me—but I could at least say that everyone around me was kind. In fact, they were so good to me that I sometimes wondered whether I'd died and gone to heaven.

No, that definitely wasn't the case; the people who suddenly became hateful and disgusted when they realized that I was a demonfolk were proof enough. That was just the natural way of the world, though; nothing could be done to change it. I'd even said as much to Lynne, but it only ever made her as sad as she looked right now.

"It's okay," I said. "I don't mind what people think of me."

"No, it *isn't* okay. That's exactly what frustrates me."

"It...frustrates you...?"

"Yes. I want them to see the savior of my kingdom for who he truly is. I don't think that's unreasonable."

"But it was Noor who did most of the work..."

“Without you, Rolo, none of what happened would have proceeded so smoothly. You should take a little more pride in your contribution. You deserve it.”

“I don’t know about that...”

Lynne smiled, but she seemed a little upset. It reminded me of when Ines had made the same expression. “*Rolo, what do you want to do?*” she had asked me—but I hadn’t been able to answer her. I really didn’t know what I wanted, maybe because I’d grown up being told that it was bad to have ambitions. That might have been why I didn’t understand my own desires as much as other people.

Faced with Lynne’s expression, however, I was suddenly able to think of one thing that I wanted. And with that in mind...

“Lynne, I’ll go with you to Mithra.”

She looked a bit startled; it was likely that she hadn’t expected me to agree so readily. I was sure to face plenty of negativity in Mithra, but I would need to grit my teeth and endure it, even if their abuse turned physical. No matter what they threw at me, I was going to be fine; I was used to it, after all. But before I could say any of that to Lynne, she spoke first.

“Rolo, if you’re thinking of suffering through it for our sakes, then please stop, okay? I want you to come so that we can show everybody who you really are. If I thought it would put you in serious danger, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

It was like she’d read my mind. I knew she hadn’t really, but I could tell that she was genuinely concerned about me.

“Right,” I said. “I want things to go well too.”

“I’m glad. So, can I inform Mithra that you will be attending the ceremony?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Lynne let out a small, relieved sigh, then smiled and giggled slightly. “Wonderful. To be honest, the prospect of going on my own was making me feel a bit lonely. It will be reassuring to have you there with me. I’m not the

most popular person in Mithra, you see.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s because we’re going together that I don’t feel scared.”

Lynne’s smile turned proud. “You’re exactly right. Should anyone there attempt to harm you, Ines and I will stop them—not that Instructor Noor would ever tolerate such misdeeds in the first place. We’ll protect you with our lives, so please have faith in us.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Nothing more about the matter needed to be said. We exchanged our farewells, then Lynne took her leave for the day.

◇

A while after Lynne’s departure, Ines came back from work. I wasted no time telling her about my decision to travel to Mithra.

“I see,” she replied with a gentle nod. She never really let her emotions show, but at that moment, she looked a little worried to me.

“And, um,” I continued, “about the question you asked me...”

“Which one?”

“If there was anything I wanted to do.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I...want to have a go at training to become an adventurer.”

“An adventurer?” Ines repeated, appearing slightly surprised.

“All people of the Kingdom can attempt it, right? I might not be a ‘person,’ but the king let me be a citizen, so I thought that maybe I could...”

Ines cast her eyes down for just a moment before she looked at me again. It seemed that she hadn’t needed long to consider her answer.

“Of course you can,” she said. “You’re already a person of the Kingdom, so there shouldn’t be any issues. Shall we discuss this with the training school instructors? The timing is perfect; they’re all convening tonight, and I’m to make an appearance as well. Come with me.”

Ines set off at a brisk pace, and I followed. My conversation with Lynne had made me realize at long last what I truly wanted. It had come to me easily after I'd actually stopped to think about it—so easily, in fact, that I wondered why it hadn't crossed my mind sooner.

Witnessing the sad expressions on Lynne's and Ines's faces had made me sad too. For the first time, I'd noticed that it pained me to see the people who were so kind to me look so upset. Part of me had wished that I could take their anguish from them and endure it in their stead, and at that moment, a realization had struck me: what I wanted was to do everything I could to cheer up the people in front of me.

Obviously, I needed to get a lot stronger in order to do that. My end goal was simple—I wanted to become somebody like Noor, who could wipe the sad looks off the faces of those around him without taking no for an answer.

Somewhere deep down, I had unconsciously decided that my dream was reckless and impossible, so I had given up on even striving for it. Now, however, I saw things differently. I was nothing—a nobody—so what did it matter if my efforts ended in failure? I had nothing to lose. If there was no easy way to get what I wanted, then I would just need to keep trying.

Perhaps my wish would never come true, no matter how many times I dusted myself off, but so what? After my brush with death, I'd practically been reborn. In this new life, I would become somebody who could help others—somebody who was needed. I knew now that even a demonfolk was allowed to have aspirations, and if there was nothing wrong with wanting my prayers to be answered, then I would do whatever was necessary to make them happen. That was what I had sworn to do.

From now on, if there was something I wanted to achieve, it didn't matter whether I thought it was possible; I would never give up on it. After all, Noor had taught me that it was okay to dream.

Chapter 59: The Meeting of the Six Sovereigns

The Six Sovereigns had finished reporting on their respective duties somewhat earlier than usual and were now studying the demonfolk boy before them. Ines had brought him to their meeting and explained his situation: he had been invited to Mithra by its high priestess and wished to undergo training in order to become stronger.

Everyone in attendance knew what it meant for a demonfolk to cross into Mithra. They were also unanimous in their understanding of the boy's motivation for wanting strength. It was in their reactions that they differed.

The first to speak to the boy was Sig, the Sword Sovereign. "Rolo, was it?" he asked. "So you wish to attend a training school. How old are you currently?"

Rolo shook his head. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. I don't know where I was born either. But...I think I'm older than ten. I heard once that I was 'picked up over a decade ago,' so I might be thirteen or fourteen by now. Maybe even a little older."

"I see."

That was as much as Sig managed before lapsing into silence. The lack of confidence in Rolo's tone made him appear unreliable, and a cursory study was enough to see that he was small and seemingly frail. Of course, that was presumably the result of an upbringing where he hadn't been given adequate nutrition, but it still gave Sig cause for concern. Would wielding a sword really be suitable for this child...?

The next to speak was the man seated beside Sig: Dandalg, the Shield Sovereign. "So, what class would you like to train as? Given your circumstances, I won't write this off as impossible for a kid your age, but you should know that you'll be in for a rough time. We *did* encounter a boy in a similar situation once

before, but, well...he was a bit of a special case."

Dandalg scratched his head as he examined the boy standing in the meeting room. His evaluation was a lot like Sig's.

"But all that aside," he continued, "although the question is what we'll start you with, I'm afraid there won't be enough time for you to prepare."

"I have a potential solution for that," Ines interjected, placing her hands on the sizable round table at the center of the room and casting her gaze along the six who sat around it. "Would you be willing to hear me out?"

"Ho ho!" chuckled Oken, the Spell Sovereign, as he stroked his white beard—his pride and joy. "How rare for you to be so outspoken at one of these meetings, Ines. Go ahead, by all means. My interest is piqued."

"As you are all aware, Rolo and I will be accompanying Lady Lynneburg to Mithra in three months' time. My intention is to train him as much as possible before then, though I realize that this would give us almost zero leeway. As such..."

Ines went on to outline her proposal. After she finished, Dandalg folded his arms and hummed in consideration. "So...rotating shifts?" he asked. "A different one of us to train him each day?"

"Yes. As it stands, I believe that would be the best approach—though I'm afraid it will mean an extra burden for you all to carry..."

"Bah, that isn't even a concern. Still..." Dandalg turned to the boy. "Rolo, right? Is that okay with you? I need to warn you—our training isn't for the faint of heart. It *will* be difficult, and it *will* hurt. Some even abandon it on the first day."

"Mm-hmm. I...think I'll manage," the boy replied—but his voice was fragile and devoid of confidence.

Dandalg's unease grew. "Ines, how do you think he'll... Well, I s'pose it was your idea to begin with, so you must think he'll be fine. Er, he *will* be fine, right?"

"Yes," Ines said. "I am confident that Rolo will be able to endure this training.

Furthermore, it is by no means a stretch of the imagination to recognize that a certain amount of risk will be present in Mithra. I know that my request is unreasonable, but I want to prepare him as much as we are able. Please, lend me your assistance."

"Don't get me wrong—I see where you're coming from. It's just, well... You know." Dandalg looked to Sig beside him for support, but the Sword Sovereign merely shook his head.

Mianne, the Bow Sovereign, was the next to interject. "I don't get it. Mithra has *bounties* on demonfolk. Plus, he's just a kid. Why does he have to go somewhere so dangerous? He's basically being sent to his death." She kept a stern eye on the boy as she said, "Ines, how do you, Lady Lynneburg, and the king think this is okay?"

"You have the wrong idea," Rolo said, weathering Mianne's scowl. "I *asked* to go."

Mianne looked the boy in the eye for several moments and uttered, "That so?" Then she turned her attention to Ines, who gave a confirming nod.

"It's true," Ines affirmed. "Lady Lynneburg has informed me that the final decision lies with Rolo himself. The king also expressed that we must respect the boy's wishes. Rolo has chosen to undergo training and venture to Mithra; I have not pressed him on either front."

"Coming from you, I guess it must be true. That doesn't make it *right*, though. He's still just a kid. Didn't the king decide to protect him? Why send him to Mithra all of a sudden?" Mianne fell silent, then unhappily mumbled, "It's like we're treating him as a tool for diplomacy."

In contrast to the Bow Sovereign's displeasure, Oken winked at Rolo and gave him a thumbs-up. "Ho ho! Well, I'm all for it. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say! I also think that Ines's proposed method is perfect—it affords us room to test all manner of possibilities."

"I'm in favor as well," said Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, from where he was sitting beside Oken. He gave Rolo a gentle smile. "I am sure he will find solace in discovering whatever he may be capable of. Cleric training is a rather foregone conclusion at this point, so the most I can teach him is how to

maintain his own health and protect himself, but I would love to offer him my assistance nonetheless."

Upon hearing the pair's verdicts, Dandalg appeared to reach a decision himself. "Well...I s'pose you're right. Just as Old Man Oken said, nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Indeed," Sig continued. "Naught will come of sitting here talking in circles. If the boy wishes to try, then we should let him. That is all there is to it."

Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows, silently examined the others before finally making his own contribution. "It would appear we are all in agreement. Dandalg, start the vote."

"But I always start it."

"You *are* the leader of the Six Sovereigns."

"Only as a formality..." Dandalg grumbled. "Fine. For the next three months, we Six Sovereigns will oversee Rolo's training in its entirety. Are there any objections? If not, I'll head over to the Adventurers Guild to make the necessary arrangements."

"None," Sig said.

"No objections," Carew added.

"Ho ho!" Oken chuckled. "Nor from me."

"Likewise, I take no issue," Sain declared.

Five of the Six Sovereigns had taken a stance, but the sixth remained silent, a dissatisfied expression on her face as she stared a hole into the meeting room wall.

"Mianne?" Dandalg said. "Have an objection? If so, we'll hear you out."

"Of course I do," Mianne shot back. "More than one. I can't understand any of this. But...it's what the kid wants, so what choice do I have?"

"Rolo," Ines said, "are you truly okay with this?"

The boy nodded calmly, his demeanor no different from when he'd first entered the room. "Mm-hmm."

“Then it seems we’ve arrived at a conclusion.”

“We sure have!” Dandalg announced. He laughed, then placed one of his massive hands on Rolo’s head and mussed the boy’s hair. “All right—starting tomorrow, this kid is our student. Better brace yourself, pip-squeak! We’re a real bunch of hard-asses!”

Chapter 60: The War beneath the Surface

After several days spent dealing with the aftermath of the underground storeroom's cave-in and chasing up the specifics of Phantom Gray's vanquishment, Prince Rein contemplated the information he had received about the sudden appearance of a monster from the history books. Something was awry.

"If the records are accurate," he muttered to himself, "the Mithril Altar should not have been so easily damaged..."

The prince's own sister, Lynne, had been personally involved in the incident, and she had given him a firsthand account of everything that happened. Still, there were several details that nagged at him. According to history books in the royal family's library, the aberrant monster Phantom Gray had been sealed in an altar made entirely of mithril, a material that was hard to damage even in the best of circumstances.

Commonplace blades and spells were unable to leave even a hairline scratch on mithril, and while it was less durable than orichalcum and adamantite, it was exceedingly mana-conducive and easily strengthened with enchantments. Such was why the Kingdom's late saviors had gone to the effort of retrieving a great mithril altar from the depths of the dungeon and placing it in that cavern to serve as Phantom Gray's seal.

And yet, according to an enthusiastic explanation from Lynne, Noor had completely disintegrated the altar using [Tiny Flame]. That news alone had given Prince Rein the first pangs of a severe headache. Leaving that particular outlier of a storybook hero aside, though, it was inconceivable that mere earthquakes or other aftereffects of the Empire's attack had severely damaged a solid mithril relic. The most reasonable assumption was that—

"Somebody *intentionally* destroyed it."

Currently occupying the prince's mind was the event that had marked the beginning of the recent invasion: the failed attempt on Princess Lynneburg's life. Evidence and testimonies had proved beyond doubt that the Empire's chain

of command was responsible, and due reparations had already been arranged within the peace treaty. However, during the course of the investigation, the presence of shadowy third parties had slowly come to light.

There were a number of ominous signs plaguing the entire incident. The foremost, confirmed during the aftermath by several sources—including the emperor's close aides—concerned the summoning magic found in the magician ring's high-purity manastone, and the Minotaur that said magic had produced. Both had come from the same source. The conclusion to be drawn was that this third party had procured the summoning magic, manastone, and ring *before* the Magic Empire could with its own summoning tool innovations. It had also managed the daunting task of capturing a *Minotaur*, a fearsome monster from the depths of the Abyss.

Opposing a Minotaur required exceptional might and skill. Aside from individuals such as the Six Sovereigns, who had encountered many in the past, mere humans were not their match. For the unidentified third party to have captured and then distributed one of the savage beasts, its strength must have rivaled—or even exceeded—that of the Kingdom's finest. It was hard to believe, but the third party's presence in the Empire had already been confirmed via multiple testimonies. There had been plenty of witnesses, which had made it easy to gather information.

Even so, the Kingdom of Clays had yet to pinpoint even the appearance of the interlopers. No matter how thoroughly they investigated the matter, their findings always differed. Some witnesses claimed to have seen a group of old merchants; others, a small, ominous-looking slaver. A few had insisted that the third party was a coterie of gorgeous lady fortune tellers.

Accounts varied wherever one went, and the conflicting testimonies made it seem more and more likely that the interlopers had disguised their presence in the Empire. Perhaps they had used camouflage that disrupted the senses, or altered the memories of those who had seen them after their business was concluded. In either case, they had proved that they could manipulate the Empire from the shadows, that they had an impressive amount of power at their disposal, and that they were capable of executing their sinister business with a deft hand.

The most pertinent question was who these people actually were. The emperor had testified that they were from Sarenza, but one could not ignore the possibility that his senses had also been twisted.

The timing suggested that the third party might be the same mysterious group whom the demonfolk boy Rolo had once lived with, but they had only seen him as a disposable tool and thus had been careful to avoid giving him any useful information. To complicate matters further, the upper stratum of the group had never once shown their faces. It came as no surprise that the trail had gone cold.

There was, however, *another* third party believed to have had a hand in the Empire's affairs. And this one seemed a little easier to follow.

According to Lynne's retelling of the attempt on her life, the beginning of the Minotaur's attack had coincided with the formation of a powerful barrier, which had suddenly restricted her movements. The top brass of the Empire—its generals included—had been entirely unaware of this barrier, meaning the perpetrator was still unknown.

Of course, the Kingdom had a few ideas as to who might be responsible. If one discounted the extremely rare magical relics found in the dungeons—relics such as the Mithril Altar—then Mithra had a complete monopoly on barrier distribution. There were very few people capable of creating one that was so powerful and could affect only a small area.

Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the attempt to assassinate Lynne was unrelated to the recent Phantom Gray incident. After all, Lynne had studied abroad in Mithra, and she had asserted that some of the spell engravings responsible for the potent, monster-sealing barrier had been *scratched away entirely*.

The damage had been too extreme to be considered the result of natural degradation; instead, it seemed more reasonable to conclude that someone in the know had *purposefully* caused it. There was no decisive evidence that Mithra had gotten involved, but in the prince's opinion, everything about the situation pointed to that being the case.

Mithra, along with the other sinister interlopers, had worked closely with the

Empire to enable its merciless invasion. Then, High Priestess Astirra had dared to pay the Kingdom a “sympathy” visit and profess her desire to provide aid.

“How *sickening*...”

The words had slipped unconsciously from the prince’s mouth, muddied with fury. King Clays had been wise to disallow him from attending any discussions with the high priestess. Prince Rein knew that he would not have been able to stay as composed as his father; in fact, he was confident that he would have lost control the moment he saw her face. He might even have drawn his blade at her.

And why wouldn’t he have? The high priestess’s actions were impermissible. Of all the perpetrators involved, *she* had wanted to assassinate Lynne above all else.

“And this talk of my sister’s betrothal to the holy prince...” Prince Rein muttered. The quiet anger in his voice broke the calm brought to his office by the dead of night. “There is only so much mockery we can brook.”

His sister stood out, even compared to the long history of the Kingdom’s royal family. She and the prince had both been applauded as prodigies, but Lynne practically redefined the term. Her genius exceeded all limits, and if she continued to progress at her current rate, the Kingdom’s might would improve by leaps and bounds.

Lynne’s talent was recognized all over; some even proclaimed her to be a miracle child, the likes of which appeared only once every few centuries. On top of that, much of the citizenry was already in staunch support of her succeeding the throne. She had yet to finish the trial that, by Kingdom law, she was required to complete before she could rule, but once she formally obtained that right, she would unmistakably be the people’s choice of monarch.

Prince Rein had not even the slightest desire to contest this outcome. To begin with, the people wanted a hero as their monarch; he doubted they would readily accept a man whose hands were stained from so much dirty work. More than that, though, he sincerely believed that Lynne was the best candidate to rule. By nature, the prince was much better suited to behind-the-scenes tasks than a flashy main-stage performance anyway. He was sure that her ascension

to the throne would unite the citizenry more than ever before, and guide the Kingdom of Clays into an age of great prosperity.

Nevertheless, to the foreign powers who saw an increase in the Kingdom's might as anything but a positive, Lynne was a threat. It would not have been strange for them to decide to eliminate her in advance...and that was exactly what they had done. They had taken advantage of the chaos of war to make their first attempt on her life; then, after that failed, High Priestess Astirra had approached the Kingdom under the guise of compassion, bringing with her the news of a fictitious betrothal. In the eyes of the prince, this was nothing more than the other side of the coin: the high priestess had failed to eliminate Lynne and was now set on turning her into a convenient tool instead. How could he feel anything but anger about that?

Of course, the high priestess would not have fabricated such a tremendous lie for the sake of one objective; Prince Rein could guess that she wanted to squeeze as much as she possibly could from the ever-so-stubborn Kingdom of Clays.

"Does she covet our resources...? Or is she after something else?"

In simplified terms, High Priestess Astirra's foremost objective was surely the assets retrieved from the Dungeon of the Lost—or perhaps the dungeon itself. After all, that was what she and her like had desired since long before the prince's time. Even though hundreds of years had passed since the dungeon was discovered, nobody had ever reached its bottommost depths. Indeed, it was a mystery how far the dungeon descended at all. It was a trove of unknown treasures, containing relics and riches that the powers of many a foreign nation would give dearly to obtain.

But the Dungeon of the Lost did not give freely, and what it did provide was often ruinous. The coming of Phantom Gray had proved to be a significant and truly disastrous event, yet it was only one of countless ordeals in the dungeon's long history.

Still, the Kingdom of Clays had proved time and time again that it could suppress the threats welling forth from the world-famous dungeon without foreign assistance, thereby asserting its right of possession and commanding a

certain degree of awe from its peers. But if the Kingdom's neighbors were ever to deem it *unable* to manage the dungeon, the situation would turn on its head.

"Hypothetically" speaking, were the Kingdom to mismanage the dungeon and allow some manner of disaster to occur, it was entirely possible that the other nations would question the legitimacy of its ownership and use that as grounds for an invasion. Phantom Gray's sudden appearance at a time when the Kingdom was still recovering from war would have made for the perfect justification, had the creature not been swiftly dealt with.

Noor and the princess had managed to stop Phantom Gray before it could reach the public, but the potential tragedy *had* made it clear that somebody was trying to sabotage the Kingdom. And the identity of that somebody was already taking form in the prince's mind.

"All this time, we have placed our faith in the wrong hands."

Prince Rein ground his teeth. Until now, the Kingdom of Clays and the Holy Theocracy of Mithra had maintained a fixed distance from one another, as well as a certain equilibrium. For hundreds of years, they had remained on good terms as allies. The dark rumors surrounding Mithra had never quite faded, but the Kingdom had continued to trust its neighbor for the sake of a mutually beneficial relationship. That was precisely why Prince Rein and his sister had both studied in Mithra as children, and why he had chosen it as her place of refuge before the war broke out.

Now, however, with the war over and so much new information at his disposal, Prince Rein bemoaned his past shortsightedness. No longer could Mithra be called a sworn friend of the Kingdom. The Theocracy had most likely discarded such notions long ago, but the prince had been too blind to notice.

The long-existing balance of power had already collapsed. The Empire was effectively out of the picture, and the Kingdom of Clays had suffered a serious blow. However, the Kingdom had also received significant reparations and the promise of the Empire's secret technologies; with enough time, it would use this knowledge to usher in newfound prosperity.

But the high priestess was too greedy and uncompromising to allow that. She would act, because if there were ever a chance for her to seize the Dungeon of

the Lost, it was now. Prince Rein would have done the same in her position. He knew that if—*if*—he had decided to commit to aggression, and such an obvious opportunity had presented itself, he would not have hesitated to use every means at his disposal to get what he wanted.

"I suppose this means the next conflict is already upon us..." the prince muttered darkly, his composure giving way to frustration. Facing his opponent was like staring in a mirror, only she was drastically superior.

It was precisely because Prince Rein understood the high priestess's goals that his anger continued to grow. His talent for predicting her strategies came from the fact that he had previously considered using them himself, only to cast them aside under the logic that certain lines should never be crossed. Still, he had a firm grasp on her ruthless motivations—agreed with them, even. That was why he felt so deeply frustrated, at her *and* at himself.

"I...should cool my head..." Prince Rein muttered.

He began to consider his sister's "invitation" to Mithra. From every perspective, it was clearly a trap. Whatever awaited her there would invariably be perilous. Yet...the trip could also serve as the perfect opportunity to lunge straight at their enemy's heart. If the Kingdom simply watched and waited, the situation would only worsen. Perhaps it was worth attempting a single, high-stakes gamble.

Of course, that depended on whether Prince Rein could muster the nerve to use his precious sister's life as a betting chip. He didn't even want to consider the idea, but...

"No... Calm down," he said, rebuking himself. He knew that he had a penchant for being soft on his sister. "Discard your personal emotions. Consider every option. Only then can you reach a conclusion."

Lynne was indispensable. She represented the future prosperity of the Kingdom. But that would only come to pass if she had the chance to carry out her duties. To value her above all else would be to put the cart before the horse. Moreover, it was the obligation of royalty to ensure the prosperity of their citizens and the nation as a whole. They were required to act in the interests of those who gave them purpose and status to begin with.

The Kingdom of Clays was embroiled in what could already be described as another war. Although the waters appeared calm, they were raging and churning beneath the surface—and the Kingdom had been dragged into the darkest depths, never to draw breath again.

Given the current situation, Prince Rein could not allow his personal feelings about his family to affect his judgment. There was a game board sitting before him, and he needed to consider the most rational placement of the *pieces* upon it. If risking his little sister's life was necessary for the good of the people and the Kingdom, then he would do it without a moment's hesitation. That was simply what was required of those in positions such as his, who were given meaning and propped up by the systems they oversaw.

The prince's mind raced, and it wasn't long before he reached a conclusion.

"That boy Rolo..."

The demonfolk who had been placed in such special circumstances would be the key. Depending on how he acted, the fate of the Kingdom would change drastically.

Yet, at the same time, Prince Rein had another thought: Had the king already foreseen Rolo's purpose when he decided to accommodate him? If so, then the prince truly had been shortsighted. He had strongly opposed making the demonfolk boy a citizen of the Kingdom, as he had believed that it would incur nothing but misfortune for its people. Then again, his father was a kind, gentle man; it was entirely possible that his only motivations had been his compassion for the young boy and his desire to keep the promise he'd made to Noor.

Indeed, King Clays was a simple man—and a naive one. He valued justice and emotion over the cold calculation of profit and loss. As a statesman, perhaps these traits made him seem like a fool, but they were the reason why his people revered him as a hero—why he was considered a monarch of the highest caliber. The citizens of the Kingdom would follow his straightforward righteousness to the end, for human nature always looked to those with true integrity for guidance.

Prince Rein lacked such virtues. To his own disgust, he could only make judgments by setting advantages and disadvantages on the scales and seeing

which way it tipped.

“I should consult Oken and my father before planning our next moves...” he muttered to himself.

Although the prince had discovered the Kingdom’s single ray of hope, he would not pursue it right away. There were too many things to do, too many things to consider. He would need to process each and every one of them if he wished to strike back at the monster of a woman who had attempted to eliminate his little sister.

“Those lacking in talent...must compensate with effort,” Prince Rein said. Only by steadily accumulating the fruits of his labor would a common man such as he manage to contend with the monsters around him.

Prince Rein opened a window, allowing the night breeze to flow into his office and cool the heat lingering within him. Then, he returned to work, scanning the stack of reports given to him by his subordinates.

Chapter 61: The Adventurers' Daughter

Ines Harness did not know her family. Her parents, adventurers both, had died before she was old enough to grasp her surroundings, leaving her alone.

The young Ines had relocated often, moving between the homes of her parents' adventurer comrades, until she was eventually taken in by the royal capital's Harness Orphanage, a refuge for many children of similar circumstances. The orphanage's director and the staff there were all so kind; they accepted her with open arms, and gave her hot meals and new clothes. Those kind people had extended a hand to Ines and offered her a home, and while they weren't her family, what they provided to her was just as warm.

At first, Ines hadn't believed that she could be a part of their home. Because in the past, no matter where she had gone, everyone had told her the same thing:

"You are a curse."

Anytime she had moved to a new home, an unfortunate event had soon followed—and each time, she had received the same words of scorn before being sent away: *"Your parents were unlucky. That's why they died. You're the same. You bring misfortune to those around you. That's what makes you a curse. I owed your parents, but I've surely fulfilled my obligation to them by now. So...I'm sorry. Go somewhere else."*

However, no matter how much time passed, Ines never received that rejection from the people of the orphanage. Months turned into years, and, finally at ease, she grew accustomed to her new home. For some strange reason, her usual bad luck was nowhere to be seen.

Ines began to think that maybe—just maybe—she had found somewhere she belonged. She had spent enough time playing with some of the other children to be able to call them friends, and she was gradually becoming closer to the staff. For a while, she grew up healthy and wanting for nothing.

Then, on one very fine day in the orphanage's garden, Ines reached a hand

toward the sky for no particular reason. Before she knew it, something mysterious and luminescent was floating in the air before her. It resembled a thin, shining screen, and it was beautiful.

Ines was still quite young. She stood there and marveled at the strange occurrence, wondering what it was. That was when a boy ran over, having noticed the light floating beyond her palm, and reached out to catch what he assumed was part of a game.

The chaos that followed all came so suddenly. As soon as the boy touched the screen, his arm was severed, staining his surroundings a vivid scarlet.

In the aftermath of that disastrous mishap, it became clear that Ines possessed a Gift—a blessing of unparalleled rarity. It gave her a power beyond imagination: a sword of light that could slice through anything. So effective was her ability that, if she so desired, she would be able to massacre a country's entire standing army in the blink of an eye, *without any training*.

In short order, the Kingdom's officials identified Ines as someone who could ruin an entire nation on her own. They were aware that, without any effort or preparation, she had obtained a power with immense potential—one that could bring tremendous benefit or terrible calamity, depending on how she used it.

Ines had at her disposal a staggeringly mighty skill, but her strength brought about her isolation. Those of the Kingdom knew that even if she could not yet control her power, her very existence posed a threat on an international scale. They knew that they could not leave her be, so it was decided that Ines—while still remaining in the care of the orphanage—would receive a special education from every member of the Six Sovereigns, all at once.

Several years passed before, at the tender age of fourteen, Ines was given the title of "the Divine Shield" and the rank of a senior knight of the Kingdom. It was the first time in the history of the Kingdom of Clays that a girl so young had been promoted to such a high position, but not a voice was raised in dissent. By then, tales of her peerless deeds of valor had already spread, and people far and wide knew just how *terrifying* she was.

Did you hear? She split a hill *in two as part of a mere training drill.*

Did you hear? On a joint extermination mission, she cut down a flight of attacking wyverns with a single stroke.

Did you hear? In a single night, she caved in and annihilated the hideout of a bandit group that attacked a merchant caravan.

At first, the stories had been laughed off as mere exaggerations. But as time passed and witnesses of yet more grand deeds came forth, the unbelievable rumors came to be known as the unshakeable truth, stoking the fires of Ines's renown—and the awe of the people. It was in the nature of the citizens of the Kingdom of Clays to love heroes, and they welcomed the female knight with all their hearts.

Ines's intelligence made her a quick learner, no matter the subject. By the time her name had spread throughout the Kingdom, she was already knowledgeable enough to serve in an official administerial position. Her mind was so sharp and well trained, in fact, that she attained the highest results out of everybody who had taken the Kingdom's senior knight examination alongside her.

In almost no time at all, Ines, the Divine Shield, gained the widespread support of the Kingdom's citizens. There were plenty of reasons to champion her: she was an orphan without any family to speak of, she had been raised in a royal orphanage after enduring the death of her adventurer parents, and she had chosen to take the name of said orphanage as her own surname when she was knighted. Even her youth became a factor of her appeal. Nobody could find a single good reason to decry her.

At that moment, a legend was born—a young woman of the next generation who would succeed the Six Sovereigns themselves. Along with her rank as a knight and the title of "the Divine Shield," Ines was given a duty: she was to serve as the attendant and bodyguard of the young Princess Lynneburg, the king's only daughter.

Ines had been somewhat surprised. She was the Kingdom's sword and shield, and she fully intended to dedicate her life to those roles. She was even fine with becoming the princess's bodyguard. But her *attendant*?

Despite her misgivings, Ines accepted her charge. Then, to her surprise, she

discovered that her duties were very agreeable. In plainer terms, they were *fun*.

Princess Lynneburg was cheerful and intelligent. She also chatted with Ines on a regular basis, and told the young knight all manner of things. New stories, facts about faraway places... It was as though she were a dictionary or encyclopedia happily narrating its pages. Moreover, although being forced to play along with the princess's unconventional games was often quite the ordeal, to Ines, it was the source of one fresh experience after another.

On the day of the incident at the orphanage, the director had fortunately been around to reattach and then heal the severed limb, but still—after apologizing to the poor boy, Ines had stopped speaking to the other children entirely. She was reluctant to even approach them for fear that the same thing might happen again, so she hadn't played with any of them since.

Of course, Ines's isolation had not been entirely self-inflicted; on the few occasions she had gone near the other children, they had naturally moved away. They had silently kept their distance when passing her in the hallways, and even stared at her from afar.

Despite their reactions to her, Ines had never felt any hatred from the other children; rather, it was fear that drove them away—the kind of apprehension one felt when faced with something dangerous and unknown. She had accepted that there was nothing she could do about it; if she had been in their position, she likely would have acted the same way.

In truth, there had been *one* child in the orphanage who hadn't turned his back on Ines: that out-of-control ruffian Gilbert, who'd charged toward her at every opportunity with a wooden stick in his hands and a challenge on his lips. He was very much an exception, though; his antics aside, there had been nobody with whom the Divine Shield could share an actual conversation.

In other words, spending time with the princess gave Ines a chance to do something she had not done for a very long time—speak with someone who was (more or less) her age. Just being with her was enjoyable, and the young knight was glad to know that somebody relied on her.

Ines had so much fun, in fact, that she occasionally forgot that her guarding of the princess was a duty assigned to her—though she was never remiss in her

work, which she also thoroughly enjoyed. Princess Lynneburg depended on her, and she answered accordingly.

Entrusted with safeguarding the princess, Ines felt alive for the very first time. She started to think that she had found a place where it was acceptable for her to live, and from there, she even started to see her own existence in a positive light. Thus, she vowed to protect her charge *and* the Kingdom with her very life.

Six years later, however, Princess Lynneburg began the trial that would grant her the right to succeed the throne, and their relationship came to a temporary end. That it was happening so soon spoke to the princess's unprecedented talent; she had overcome every single protocol and cleared all of the assessments necessary for her to begin the trial at the mere age of fourteen, a first in the Kingdom's history.

According to Kingdom law, to gain the formal right to succeed the throne, a viable candidate needed to accomplish a great feat under their own power—one that made them worthy in the eyes of the current monarch and the people alike. To be precise, there was no stipulation that one had to face the trial entirely on one's own...but that was what Princess Lynneburg had chosen to do, and nobody would undermine her decision. Those who knew the princess had recognized her resolve and let her be, confident that she had the expertise to overcome any ordeal she encountered. They would need only wait.

The attempt on Princess Lynneburg's life using a Minotaur from the Abyss had occurred not long afterward. Upon hearing that the princess had very nearly died, Ines had bitterly regretted leaving her side even for a moment. If she had only been there, she thought, she would never have allowed such a thing to occur.

The princess had ultimately survived, but only thanks to the sudden appearance of a single man, who had slain the Minotaur alone. Ines had met him for the first time after the incident. She had known in her heart that she owed him her utmost gratitude, but her emotions had twisted into something more unpleasant.

I *should have been the one to protect her.*

Ines was envious of the man called Noor—a fact she found most bewildering.

She had never even thought she *could* envy another; it was an emotion that others had always directed at her, not the other way around.

On reflection, Ines had come to realize *why* she felt so envious: she was worried that she might lose her reason for being. Noor had accompanied her and the princess for the events that followed the assassination attempt, and their time together had shown Ines that he was extraordinary in every single aspect. He had made direct contact with the Black Death Dragon's lethal miasma, only to return no worse for wear. He had challenged the Dragon of Calamity alone, while it was on the verge of annihilating the entire capital, and somehow *made it submit*. Then, he had spit in the face of the Empire's newly developed weapons, braving their fierce destructive power head-on and routing an army of more than ten thousand soldiers without taking a single life. And *then*, on top of all that, he had asked the Sovereign of Salvation to bring the Dragon of Calamity back from the brink of death, suggested a plan to brazenly infiltrate the Empire that nobody else had even considered, demonstrated that it was possible with the help of the demonfolk boy Rolo, and seized victory from the jaws of defeat for the Kingdom of Clays.

Most surprising of all, every single one of those events had taken place on the same day. In such a short period, Noor had achieved more than any normal person would in their entire life.

Ines felt as though she had glimpsed a height she would never be able to reach. She was no match for Noor. Though she could not pinpoint when, at some point, she had accepted that she was utterly outmatched.

I cannot lose to anyone. I will protect the kingdom that gave me this life from any and every threat, for that is both the duty I accepted and the duty required of me as one who was granted the power of a Gift.

Such were the convictions that Ines had spent so long trying to uphold, never doubting them for a moment. Yet, in a single day—by a single man—they had suddenly been overturned.

Ines had been forced to realize that the role she had imagined for herself was naught but a fantasy—a fantasy that Noor had shattered in no time at all. At some point, although it had been her role to protect others, she had ended up

needing to depend on him—more than once, even. It had made her wonder whether her life thus far had meant anything at all.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, Ines had not felt disheartened; rather, it was as though Noor had freed her from all manner of restraints. But just as she was coming to terms with her pathetic self, Prince Rein had informed everybody of a decision of national importance.

“Our kingdom will be assuming guardianship of the demonfolk boy Rolo.”

According to the prince, the king had decided that the Kingdom of Clays would accept Rolo. There was more, though; as expected, the boy faced many dangers to his person, and frequent attempts on his life were not outside the realm of possibility. For those reasons, he needed a guardian—somebody capable who could stay at his side at all times.

Ines knew that Rolo had already been abandoned by those who had previously “cared” for him, and that he no longer had anywhere to go. And now, she was being told that somebody was needed to protect him—to look after this young boy whose race made him destined to be shunned and ostracized.

“I’ll do it.”

Before she had realized it, and for reasons she could not even begin to explain, Ines had put her own name forward.

“I wish to take care of him. Please.”

Chapter 62: Gilbert, the Spearman

After our scuffle with the ghost, Lynne and I climbed to the surface through the giant hole in the ceiling and decided to part ways. As she left, she said with a smile, “I believe that I finally understand the meaning behind your words, Instructor. Henceforth, I will manage just fine on my own. When we depart for Mithra, I shall show you how much I have improved.”

Then, she went off somewhere by herself.

I wasn’t sure what “meaning” Lynne had taken from my words; in fact, I couldn’t remember saying anything insightful in the first place. And she was planning to improve even more, despite already being so much stronger than anyone else her age? I would have thought that being able to cast magic potent enough to blow a giant hole through the ground and wipe an entire storehouse off the map was enough.

Putting my misgivings aside, though, I figured that I was done with exterminating ghosts for a good, long while. Intangible specters and animated skeletons weren’t high up on my list of favorite things to begin with, and after the first day I’d had...

After asking around, it turned out that what we’d encountered hadn’t actually been a ghost. I *had* been slightly suspicious; that monster had definitely seemed to be more than mere rat repellent. Apparently, it had been something called “Phantom Gray.”

Word of the monster had just reached the Guild when I’d arrived there, and cold sweat had cascaded down the guildsman’s brow like a waterfall when he’d told me about it. He’d looked astonished and said that I’d been lucky to get out alive.

He was completely right—it was said that just a touch from Phantom Gray would kill you on the spot. All those giant pale tentacles I had avoided just because they’d seemed disturbing had actually been bringers of death that had drained away the lives of thousands of formidable adventurers in the past. I thanked my lucky stars that I’d avoided the same fate—and that Lynne had too,

of course. I really did owe her my life. There hadn't been anything I could do to deal the final blow, so if she hadn't been there, the monster's tentacles would have gotten me eventually. I would have been a corpse stuck in that dark, underground chamber, never to be found.

The guildsman had said that Phantom Gray was unlikely to ever show up again, since Lynne had annihilated it without a trace...but it never hurt to be cautious. As the saying went, lightning sometimes struck the same place twice, and there was no guarantee that another one, two, or even ten wouldn't show up at some point in the future. That was why I'd refrained from taking any more ghost extermination commissions; I saw no reason to endure the horrors of my first experience again, especially now that Lynne had vanished somewhere.

Plus, as it turned out, the number of ghost sightings had sharply declined since our return, so there were fewer ghost commissions to go around. That hadn't really factored into my decision, though—I just couldn't work up the courage to go alone when there was a chance that something like Phantom Gray might show up again.

Farewell, skeleton, my archenemy whom I never had the chance to see. I wanted to fight you at least once to test my strength...but I think I'll postpone that idea for a while.

◇

[Parry]

Today found me back in the woods, continuing my usual routine of practice swings. I'd stopped my leaf-striking training a while ago; seeing the trees so sparse had made me feel too guilty. The wind was having a much easier time passing through their branches, to put it lightly.

Each of my swings caused the ground to tremble. Thanks to the weight of my sword, this alone made for decent training...but it felt unsatisfying. I doubted that swiping the air again and again would really make me any stronger.

As suspected, I'd hit a ceiling. There had to be a way for me to get stronger, but how? I'd heard that having a rival of equal strength was a great approach, because you could both improve by sparring against each other, but when I tried to think of anybody at my level, no one really came to mind. In the first

place, did any of the people I could ask even have the time to spare on someone like me?

Maybe I'd ask Lynne the next time I saw her. I didn't like having to use her for my training all the time, but she had come to me about going to Mithra, so perhaps she'd be able to help. Of course, it all depended on whether I could even find her.

As I was busy considering the idea, a sudden voice called out from behind me. "Huh. So this is where the *hero* himself trains alone, is it?"

When I turned around, I saw a familiar-looking man casually resting a golden spear against his shoulder. I would never forget his face, of course—I owed him my life. He'd come to my rescue just when I was about to be killed by the Empire's army. Indeed, his name was...

Gil...?

Gil...

Gil...!

Gil...!!!

"Gil..." I paused for several very long moments. "Hey, is it okay if I call you that? 'Gil'?"

"What was that pause just now?" he asked suspiciously.

Crap. I couldn't remember his name. I owed Something-bert my life, and I couldn't— Oh, there it was. He was Gilbert, the spearman.

"Gilbert," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, so you *do* remember my name," he replied. "I figured you'd completely forgotten it."

"D-Don't be silly... You saved my life. Of course I remember."

It *had* taken me a little while, though.

"Saved your life? What?" Gilbert examined me for a brief moment. "Whatever. How you feel is up to you. More importantly, you look like you've got some time on your hands. Care to help me out with an errand?"

“An errand?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Grandpa Oken picked up this toy from the Empire’s invasion and tinkered with it.” Gilbert tapped the somewhat familiar-looking armor he was wearing. “He wants me to test it out and give him my thoughts, so I’m looking for somebody to play with.”

All of a sudden, Gilbert vanished—or at least, that was how it had seemed. In reality, he’d moved behind me so incredibly fast that I’d only barely managed to keep up with him.

“Well?” he said. “Good enough of a *training partner* for you?”

Even though he was far more capable than I was, he was offering to put aside some of his time to give me a few pointers—just like before. I couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity.

“Definitely. Your speed might be exactly what I need to improve.”

“Seriously?” Gilbert asked, readying his spear. “Good for you, then. Fair warning—I’m not going to hold back this time.”

“That works for me. Ready when you are.”

The moment the words left my mouth, Gilbert vanished once again.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

In the blink of an eye, I brought my sword up to parry his spear. It was a good thing I’d seen that skill of his before, or I might not have stopped it so easily—especially as it had been much faster than last time. In fact, he had struck at me so keenly that I honestly would have believed that he was trying to kill me.

“Ha ha!” Gilbert laughed. “Not even *that* was enough? You know, at some point, the joke stops being funny. All right... I take it that means I can pick up the pace?”

I nodded and said, “Please do. I can take it.”

“Here I come, then.”

He had been wearing a pleasant smile before, but now it was nowhere to be

seen. His next attack really was going to be a serious one. I slowly took in a breath and focused all of my attention on the tip of his spear. The noise from my surroundings became more and more muted, and—

[Dragrave]

In an instant, Gilbert's golden spear was right before my eyes and closing in fast, moving at such tremendous speed that it looked more like a streak of light than a weapon. I dedicated every nerve in my body to tracking it, and poured every drop of strength I could muster into a single swing of my sword.

[Parry]

Gilbert's flashing spearhead clashed with my black sword, sending a spray of golden sparks into the air. The display elicited a sharp peal of laughter from my opponent, who then muttered, "You *blocked* that? Even managed to chip the orichalcum..." More laughter. "Man, that is *funny*. All this cheating I'm doing...just for that?"



I strained my ears, trying to work out what he had said, but it was no use; I

was too rattled from the impact of his strike. Even my sword hand was trembling.

Gilbert laughed again, his whole body shaking this time. He really looked to be enjoying himself. “All right,” he said. “This next one will be faster. That okay?”

Faster than *that*? He sounded so nonchalant about it as well; it was like this came as easily to him as breathing.

“Of course,” my mouth agreed before my thoughts had time to catch up. “Go ahead.”

Gilbert’s attack just now had been more rapid than anything I’d ever experienced. If the next one was going to be even faster, then I wasn’t sure I would be able to keep up. I considered my own ability and, for a moment, thought about retracting what I’d just said...but my training partner was expecting me to keep up with him. I could tell from his voice. He was telling me that I would never get stronger unless I tested my limits, and he was right. I needed to intentionally brave danger, and since he was being kind enough to lend me his expertise, it seemed only natural that I should see how far I could push myself.

“Gilbert,” I said, “as you’re going to so much trouble to help me, please make your next attack faster than I can follow. It wouldn’t make for proper training otherwise.”

“Ha ha!” He laughed once more. “Well, now that you’ve gone and said it, no regrets, all right?” He then lapsed into silence and got into a fighting stance, his spear at the ready.

I faced my opponent head-on and gripped my sword with all of my strength. His next strike was coming...and I was going to stop it.

Chapter 63: Magearmor

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

Gilbert gripped his spear tight. For the fifth time that day, he poured his entire being into his next strike...only to have it blown aside by the Black Blade, sending a violent burst of sparks scattering into the air.

So not even that was enough, huh?

The impact had broken both of his arms—he could tell. The bones in his hands had already shattered as a result of their opening exchange, and it was taking all he had just to ignore the immense pain racking his entire body. His magearmor-strengthened muscles were the only reason he was still able to grip his spear, but the tendons in his arms, which bore his weapon at much faster speeds than he could manage alone, and in his legs, which had kicked against the earth with overwhelming force, were shredded to pieces. He was barely able to stand. There was no more air in his lungs, and the world around him was growing dim.

A mere few clashes—that was all it had taken to reduce the Spear Sovereign to his current, pitiful state. He had struck with more force than ever before, not just once but *several times*, borrowing the strength of the magearmor to surpass his physical limits. Each attack had shaved away at his very life force, yet not a single one had even come close to reaching his opponent. The unrivaled spearmanship of which he had always been so proud could not even touch Noor.

“Ha ha...” Gilbert chuckled. “This really isn’t funny at all.” Once again, he was faced with the reality that his opponent was a genuine monster.

The Spear Sovereign’s magearmor—a piece of magical equipment that used its wearer’s mana to give even an ordinary civilian superhuman strength—was a parting gift from the imperial army’s invasion. This particular set had been retrieved from the battlefield by the Spell Sovereign, Oken, who had then

tinkered with the armor until it was drastically more effective.

Although he had been half dumbfounded by Oken's ridiculous prototype, Gilbert had lent the old man an ear. He had known that human bodies were not meant to wield strength so far beyond their means—at least, not without risk—but after hearing the Spell Sovereign's explanation on how to use the magearmor, he had immediately decided to give it a try. As a result, he knew that he didn't have a leg to stand on when it came to criticizing the absurdity of others.

After Gilbert had taken the magearmor, Oken had repeatedly warned him: *"When you're testing it, keep the output to within a twenty percent increase of your maximum strength."* He had said that anything higher would cause tremendous, life-threatening harm to the Spear Sovereign's body.

Gilbert had agreed—mostly to be free from Oken's nagging—but...

You have got *to be kidding me.*

A mere twenty percent increase was nowhere near enough to touch an opponent like Noor. Gilbert's first full-power strike had stayed at the uppermost boundary of that threshold, but after seeing the attack be effortlessly deflected, he had cast aside all thoughts of his promise to Oken. His next attempt had been fifty percent stronger than his limit without the magearmor, then eighty. Again and again, he had thrust his spear with more force than his body would ever normally be able to endure—and sure enough, just as Oken had said, his body had paid the price.

Even then, Gilbert had not even managed to scratch his opponent. He had put all of his willpower and more than his full strength behind each attack, only to have them struck aside long before they could reach their intended target. It made no sense. Why was there such an enormous gap between them? Why was the Spear Sovereign himself, with his unfair advantage, still so much weaker? His own shortcomings disgusted him.

[Dragrave]

For his next strike, Gilbert once again increased the output of his magearmor. His flesh was torn, his bones crushed, and his body on the verge of falling to pieces. Still, he launched into another thrust that was far beyond his limits.

[Parry]

Yet even that was casually knocked aside. The resulting impact shook Gilbert's unyielding orichalcum spear, which was secured under his arm, and immediately shattered his ribs. Again and again the two men's weapons met, and each time Gilbert was forced to recognize an agonizing truth: he was no match for his opponent.

But he was getting closer. He was forcing Noor to use his sword, something the man hadn't done during their first bout. It was only slight, but it was progress. Gilbert was going to catch up to the monster before him or die trying.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

Each time the Spear Sovereign's weapon was knocked aside, his body screamed out, protesting his recklessness. It begged to know how he planned to rival such an insurmountable beast of a man. His every muscle, bone, and tendon squealed, and even his five senses tried to stop him. *No more*, they said. *You cannot keep going. This is hopeless.*

Gilbert's own body was pleading with him to accept reality—to recognize his own limits. He was so thoroughly outmatched that, even after everything he had attempted, he had not landed a single hit on his opponent. His only remaining option was to accept defeat and give up. He knew this, of course; he hadn't lost his sense of reason. In fact, it was *because* he knew this that he was so unbearably frustrated. And yet...

"Ha ha!"

At the same time, it made him laugh. Despite his frustration, he found the entire situation to be...comical. He was overcome with fury at his own powerlessness and so irritated that he thought he might go insane, but for some reason, he couldn't help himself. The laughter bubbled up from deep within him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Why was he laughing? Had all the blood that had risen to his head sent him over the edge? No... He knew the real reason.

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha!" he roared. "This really is something else!"

Gilbert was *having fun*. At long last, he had found something to strive toward, and now he was beside himself with delight. The motivation he would need to grow stronger—the wall he would need to overcome—was right before his eyes.

[Dragrave]

[Parry]

The Spear Sovereign knew that he was not a worthy opponent for the man before him. From what he could tell, Noor had even forgotten his name. Who could blame him? To someone who stood so far above the rest, Gilbert was just another nobody—one more face among the insignificant rabble below.

And it was true.

Gilbert was shaken to his core. An impossible chasm stood between him and Noor...but he would try to cross it anyway. He fed his magearmor every last drop of mana at his disposal, ignoring his body's countless warnings in his ascent to heights he had never reached before. His flesh howled in agony and tore, and the bones in his feet splintered with his next step. It was all for the purpose of launching his next strike; he wouldn't be able to reach that monster otherwise.

[Parry]

Yet the Spear Sovereign's thrust—the fastest he'd ever managed—was knocked down with ease.

"Ha ha!"

Once again, Gilbert laughed. What else was there to do? He couldn't believe that someone like Noor actually existed. He was paying with his own life to catch up with his opponent, but not even that had been enough. It felt as though he could spend an eternity trying and still never succeed.

"Seems like..." he managed to eke out, "this is still...a breeze to you."

"Yeah," Noor agreed. "I can manage this much, more or less."

"That right? Then...should I make the next one even faster?"

"Please."

Noor readied the Black Blade he was holding in one hand, while Gilbert got into position with his spear, ignoring the sounds of his own body falling apart. He no longer had any feeling in his hands, so he was gripping his weapon through instinct alone. His ears were failing him, and his vision was blurred; he could only focus one of his eyes, and even then, just barely.

The Spear Sovereign's posture began to waver, his vision grew worse still, and his legs convulsed unsteadily. He had finally reached the point of no return. After his next strike, he doubted that he would even be able to stand.

But that was fine. The more his body broke down and the further he went beyond his limits, the sharper his spear became. He could still muster the strength to grip his weapon. This next strike would surpass any other he had ever attempted—and it *would* reach his opponent.

[Dragrave]

No sooner was he lurching forward than he realized something: he was laughing again. There was no deeper meaning to it; the simple act of wielding his spear was just so sincerely *enjoyable*. It was a feeling he had completely forgotten.

That day, in his determination to match Noor, Gilbert struck, thrust, and lunged until his body finally refused to listen to him any longer.

Chapter 64: The Second Meeting of the Six Sovereigns

A cracked set of magearmor sat atop a desk in the meeting room. Hunched over it was an old man clearly in low spirits—the Spell Sovereign, Oken.

"That blasted Gilbert..." he grumbled, crestfallen. "How dare he reduce my adorable little prototype to such a wretched state. It's only been a few days! I *knew* I never should have let him borrow it."

Behind him, Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, seemed to recall something. "Oh, on the topic of Gilbert," he said casually to Oken's back, smiling all the while, "the medical officer attached to the Swordsman Corps has been airing her grievances against him. She says he's been dropping by almost daily to be healed—and each time, his bones and organs are a horrific mess. In her words, he arrives on the brink of death, and treating him is a small miracle in itself. She *has* been lacking in her training, though, and this seems like the perfect opportunity for her to make up for it, if you ask me."

Oken turned, a dubious expression on his face. "That rapscallion's been getting injured that severely? And with the state of the armor I lent him... Just what is he up to? Don't tell me he's going off alone to hunt dragons or some such?"

"Just what, indeed...?" Sain echoed. "I *am* slightly worried for him, but it would appear that he's found something to which he can dedicate himself. Considering how apathetic he's been recently, if whatever he's come across is helping him to regain his fervor, then I'd say it's a good thing."

"Of course you would," Oken griped. "You're not the one he's dragging into his mischief. Who does he think I am, anyway, telling me to fix this armor by tomorrow morning? Even just repairing the cracks on this thing is no small feat. Good grief!"

"You say that, but you still consider it trivial, don't you? Why not do him that kindness?"

“Hmph. It’s trivial for me, is it? Well, that should go without saying! Do you need a reminder too?! I’m the peerless genius Oken, the Spell Sovereign—also known as *Ninespell* Oken! There’s nothing I cannot do! Ho ho!”

As the old man laughed jovially and stroked his prided white beard, Dandalg shot him a sidelong glance. The Shield Sovereign had been listening to the entire conversation.

“‘Peerless genius,’ huh?” he said, evidently holding back an eye roll. “Can’t exactly deny that, I s’pose. How old are you again?”

“Ho ho! Me? This will have been my two hundred and eightieth year, I believe.”

“You...*are* human, right?”

“For someone of such large stature, Dandalg, you certainly concern yourself with the smallest of details! Come now, what’s wrong with having a few extra years to enjoy?”

Dandalg shot Oken a look that clearly said, *“A few?”* but the Spell Sovereign merely cleared his throat and conveniently moved the conversation along.

“In any case, there’s a lot to be said for having a long life. Even at my age, I find the world still brimming with curiosities. Case in point: right under my nose, there is an unbelievable fool capable of *ruining* the magearmor I spent so many days trying to improve! Hmph. I suppose there’s nothing for it. I just so happen to have some time on my hands today, and I already wanted to spend it tinkering with some magical equipment, so I might as well play along with that brat’s request. It’ll be a better pastime than twiddling my thumbs! Ho ho!”

Dandalg watched, impressed, as Oken somehow turned the reason for his complaining into something to look forward to. “You know, old man, I can tell you’ve got many more years in you yet.”

“Ho ho! Naturally!” Oken exclaimed, now even more cheerful. “Would you like to know the secret to my longevity? Eat good food and do what you enjoy—every single day! Feel free to take a page out of my book.”

“Right. I’ll do that,” Dandalg replied, masking his true thoughts about the situation: *There’s no way that’s all it takes to live that long.* Then, remembering

why the Six Sovereigns had all gathered in the first place, he turned to the others in the room. “So, where are we at? How’s Rolo’s aptitude? You know why we’re here today. You’ve all given him a once-over by now, so let’s hear your thoughts.”

One week had passed since the Six had taken the demonfolk boy in for training. After a brief silence, Sig was the first to speak.

“I put him through several tests to gauge his aptitude as a swordsman...but his grip strength makes me wonder whether he should wield a sword to begin with.”

Although the Sword Sovereign was being uncharacteristically indirect, Dandalg nodded his agreement. “Yeah, he ran into the same issue as a warrior. I thought this might be the case from the start, but he just doesn’t have the physique for it.”

Mianne spoke next. “I ran him through the hunter basics, but he’s hopelessly weak. I think it’s because of the injuries he suffered to his arms when he was growing up, but as you’ve said, he doesn’t have any grip strength at all. He wasn’t even able to draw back the string of the smallest bow I gave him. He doesn’t have a future in archery.”

“Injuries to his arms, huh?” Dandalg repeated. “I assume it’s too late to heal them now, Sain?”

“Unfortunately so. His body has already come to accept its current state as ‘normal,’ a likely result of the injuries he sustained as a small child going untreated for so long.”

“Ho ho...” Oken mused. “There is also a rather large issue with him becoming a magician. As it concerns his innate nature, one could say that there is nothing to be done about it.”

“I see...” Dandalg muttered. With the exception of Carew, who had thus far remained silent, each of the Six Sovereigns had given a negative evaluation of Rolo. “Still, the kid’s—”

Six voices spoke in chorus: “Pretty interesting.” “Surprisingly capable.” “Fascinating, ho ho.” “Not a waste of time.” “A promising thief.” “Quite

determined.”

Again, Sig was the first to begin. “Just as Mianne said, Rolo has no grip strength to speak of, so he has almost no exceptional traits when it comes to wielding a sword. Most significant of all, though, is his deathly fear of harming his opponent. I would normally conclude that he has zero aptitude for becoming a swordsman, but, strangely enough, the way he *holds* a sword is surprisingly decent. If given a light, wooden practice sword, he makes for quite a capable opponent.”

“‘Opponent’?” Dandalg repeated. “Against whom? You?”

“I held back, of course, but he still endured for longer than I expected. All through our little bout, he accepted without hesitation that my blade would strike him, and calmly continued to make the best available movements. Such strength of will is hard to come by.”

Dandalg nodded, then turned to the others. “Sig’s right. I knew from the beginning that the kid didn’t have the physique to become a warrior; he’s too frail to be a shield for his allies. But if we’re strictly talking about grit, he’s got that in spades. I, too, noticed that he isn’t the slightest bit concerned about his own well-being. He’s also good with pain—*too* good, in fact. He’d stick it out for as long as nobody intervened, like a certain someone we all met long ago. Though it might take some time, I think Rolo could really become something in the future.”

“You can say that again,” Mianne agreed. “At first glance, the kid looks like a stiff breeze could knock him down, but he’s surprisingly gutsy. Not even shooting a bunch of arrows straight at him broke his composure. In fact, he managed to carefully track their flight paths. As a test, I gave him a little nudge toward the border between life and death, and the look on his face told me he’d already been there.”

“Wait, what?” Dandalg interrupted. “Mianne, what’s this about nudging him closer to death? You went that far on the first day?”

“Is that a problem? It isn’t like we’ve got much time to work with. And if *we’re* training him, then shouldn’t we do it properly? Cutting corners now will only make him suffer down the line, and there won’t be a thing we can do about it

then.”

“You’re not *wrong*, but...there’s an order to these things.”

That was as much as Dandalg could find to say in response to his colleague, who was speaking her mind as freely as always. Then, from behind him, Carew finally weighed in.

“It’s rare to see you so motivated, Mianne. It’s not often that you become so occupied with a single trainee. Even when you were training Noor, I’ve heard that you essentially left him to his own devices. What changed?”

“Of course I left *him* alone,” Mianne retorted. “Except for not knowing how to use a bow, he already had everything sorted. There was nothing I *could* teach him. The most I did was tell him a bit about how to read the wind, and the next moment, he was sending regular old pebbles straight through every target in sight. He could even manage [Arrow Evasion] through physical proficiency alone, even though it’s supposed to be an ultimate hunter technique. Plus, he broke all the bows I gave him, including my beloved masterwork bow. What else was I *supposed* to do?”

“Point taken.” Carew gave a sincere nod, remembering how the person in question had ignored the general practice of avoiding traps in favor of ploughing straight into and destroying them.

“Ho ho!” Oken laughed. “He’s always been rather absurd, hasn’t he? Why, he achieved twofold casting without any instruction!”

“Indeed,” Sain added. “According to the princess, he managed *tenfold* casting in his confrontation against Phantom Gray the other day. His growth truly knows no bounds.”

“Well, one can’t be surprised that he’s come so far by now. Still...a simultaneous tenfold casting, eh? That’s a feat and a half, I’ll tell you... Hmm? Ten? *Ten*...?”

Oken, the man also known as “Ninespell,” suddenly froze up—and the others in the room heaved sympathetic sighs.

“He was ridiculous enough back then,” Mianne said. “I don’t even want to imagine what his [Stone Throw] must look like now. If we gave him a bag full of

mithril chunks, he could probably be our entire border security force."

"Mianne," Dandalg interjected, "you're not implying that he could drive off *wyvern flights* with a mere few pebbles, are you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him. Anyway, thinking about him is a waste of time. Going back to the kid, he seems like he could learn a lot from me, so I'll teach him. I'm not sending him off to almost certain death unprepared, you can count on that."

Dandalg eyed his uncharacteristically fired-up colleague, slightly wary. "So long as you don't take things too far." Then, he turned to the masked man standing silently behind him. "What are your thoughts, Carew?"

"Hmm... Rolo possesses quite a considerable aptitude for being a thief. I don't know the specific circumstances of his upbringing, but he's quite sensitive to the presence of others and is exceptionally good at erasing his own. I imagine both were once necessary skills for his daily life, as unfortunate as that is. Plus, he has already manifested a number of skills. Though time is short, I expect him to continue to grow."

"Noted. And you, old man?"

But when Dandalg turned to Oken, he was startled; the old man was staring into empty space, feverishly muttering something that seemed almost like an incantation.

"H-Hey. Old man? Are you all right?"

"Te— Ho? O-Of course! What were we talking about?"

"Rolo. Are you *sure* you're okay?"

"Ho ho! Rolo! Yes, right... I...just had a little something on my mind, you see. Now, er, Rolo... Well, to begin with, he's unable to use magic. Ergo, it is impossible for him to become a magician."

Dandalg frowned at the overly casual declaration. "He can't use magic? Can you elaborate?"

"It might be more accurate to say that, as a demonfolk, he *shouldn't* use it. In my younger years, I happened to hear an acquaintance of mine speak on the

subject. And after running several tests with Rolo, the results were as I expected: his body's affinity for mana is simply too high."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"No, quite the opposite. If a person with a high enough affinity attempts to enhance their internal mana, they will trigger an overreaction, and the entire process will suddenly begin to deteriorate. If they are careless, the mere act of casting a spell could result in immediate death."

"That severe, huh...?" Dandalg was taken aback. "This is news to me."

"But of course. The exact nature of the demonfolk isn't widely known. Anyhow, since his affinity is tied to his race, there's nothing to be done for it."

"I see... Still a shame to waste all that potential."

"Ah, but his sense for manipulating mana is promising!" Oken happily declared, stroking his white beard. "Though his nature requires him to give up on magic, he was impressively adept with the magical tools and equipment I made him try out—and that's coming from me. With the proper training, he'll see some excellent growth. He certainly has the motivation to spare."

"Indeed," Sain agreed, smiling gently. "Rolo is very determined to face the future. While I cannot train him to be a cleric, I can attest to his diligence. Every day, after your training sessions, he comes to the church library to study. He spares nary a moment for rest."

"Every day?" Dandalg repeated.

"Yes. I expect it won't be long before he grows able to read some rather difficult material. I'm slightly concerned for his health—he really is working hard—but Ines and I are caring for him and keeping a close eye on his condition, so there shouldn't be any issues."

"Good to know," Dandalg said, then turned to survey the others; Sain's input meant that everyone had given their opinion. "I s'pose that does it for our first debriefing. In regard to Rolo's training, well...I take it we've all decided to continue? It sounds to me like we've each found our own reason to stick with him."

“Hmm. No objections!” Oken agreed. “Might I take my leave, then? I’ve remembered a vital piece of business that I simply must attend to! Ho ho!”

Everyone watched the old man hurry out of the meeting room without even waiting for a response. Then, Dandalg and Sain turned to look at each other. “Hey, Sain,” the former said, smiling ruefully. “Didn’t the old man say he had some time on his hands today, so he was going to tinker with that magical equipment?”

“You know how much of a sore loser he is,” Sain replied, wearing exactly the same expression.

The pair made to leave the room themselves, only to stop before the doorway. Sig was standing in their path, staring intently at Dandalg with his hand on the scabbard at his hip. The Shield Sovereign already had a sinking feeling when—

“Might I borrow you, Dandalg?” Sig asked. “You’re off duty today, so I’d appreciate your company.”

Dandalg touched a hand to his head, half astounded. “I’d almost forgotten—there’s another one of us who doesn’t act his age.”

“As we speak, Noor is out there improving,” the Sword Sovereign continued. “And the path of the sword is never-ending. Sorry, but you’re the only one who can serve as my opponent for proper live combat training.”

“True, but we’re old enough that we should actually be taking our age into account, you know.” Dandalg turned to the Sovereign of Salvation. “Tell him, Sain. I’m long past my prime; no way am I coming back from being Sig’s caretaker unharmed.”

“What if I join you?” Sain suggested. “I *have* been rather lax in my exercise as of late. Plus, my being there should make the session completely safe.”

Sig began tapping one finger against the hilt of his sword, seeming vaguely delighted. “Ah, you’ll join us too, Sain? I’ll be able to swing my blade without reserve, then.”

“Hey now. Hold on,” Dandalg protested. “Why are you both acting like we’re going through with this? I don’t feel at all good about it, you know.”

“Rest assured,” Sain said, “no matter how battered and bruised you might get, I’ll be there to heal you. And you, Sig—wield your blade as freely as you please.”

“You know... I think I’ve suddenly come down with a case of the chills,” Dandalg ventured. “Can I go home?”

“Worry not. I’ll restore you to tip-top condition. Dying is the very last thing I’ll allow you to do. Of that, you have my word.”

“Do you *have* to put it like that?!”

Thus, it was decided that Rolo’s training would continue under the guidance of every one of the Six Sovereigns.

Chapter 65: Rolo’s Training

[Arrow Storm]

The modestly built girl standing quite a distance away from me drew her golden bow, then unleashed a rain of several hundred arrows simultaneously. I took a deep breath and watched the sky, making sure to keep her at the edge of my vision.

“Over there, I think...” I mumbled to myself.

I strained my eyes and closely studied the storm of arrows, careful not to miss a single one while I considered my next move.

Over there.

I’d spotted a section where the density of the falling arrows was slightly thinner. By running through there skillfully enough...only six of them would stick me.

[Physical Enhancement]

I used one of the fundamental skills that I’d only recently learned to enhance my legs, then began to run, keeping my feet so close to the ground that I was almost sliding.

The girl shot another volley of arrows. There were far too many for me to count, and now the storm of projectiles was coming at me from two directions: above and directly in front. That didn’t matter to me, though; without any hesitation, I slipped through the weakest part of the barrage, closed in on my target, and put my wooden training dagger against her neck.

“You got me,” she said for the tenth time today.

After lowering my dagger, I paused to catch my breath—only to notice that the girl was staring at me strangely.

“Hey, uh...doesn’t that hurt?” she asked. “Looks like those went in pretty deep.”

“Yep, it hurts,” I replied.

There were two arrows sticking into my back, three into my arms, and one into my leg—exactly as many as I'd expected. I started to pull them out, one by one.

"How are you so calm?" the girl asked. "It just isn't right. Captain Mianne ordered me not to hold back, so I didn't, but...if you'd been just slightly less fortunate with where those hit you, you could be dead right now. It might do you good to be at least a bit more scared."

"It's fine. I'm always careful to avoid the worst of it. Thanks for worrying about me, though, um..."

"Sirene. Remember it this time, will you? I'm your elder, so I want some respect!"

"Um, okay. In that case...may I please ask if we can go another round, Sirene?"

She stared at me in amazement. "Are you serious? Shouldn't you take a break? You haven't stopped once."

"I'm not that tired yet, though."

"Honestly... What's wrong with you? Then again, being able to avoid so many of my arrows makes you crazy enough already. Actually, before I forget—get Marie to heal those wounds up first. She came here specifically to be your medical aide, not to sit on her butt doing nothing."

"Oh, um, right. Marie..."

"*Marieberr*," Sirene said. "Remember it."

We both turned our heads to look at the girl in question, who gave a start when she heard us say her name. "I...I'm fine with just 'Marie,'" she stammered. "B-But, u-um, Rolo...how is it that you're so calm? You're moving about just fine despite all those arrow wounds..."

"I guess because I can tolerate it?" I replied.

"Th-That's not normal!"

Marieberr started to approach me, but she looked absolutely terrified. Her feet slid ever so slowly across the ground. She was probably coming over to

heal me.

“I think it’s also thanks to you, Marieberr,” I said. “With you here, I can get injured as much as I want.”

She let out a soft whine. “P-Please don’t rely on me like that! You’re just as bad as Gilbert! He’s been crawling over to me like a ghoul recently, with his bones and organs all mushed up! I can’t take it anymore! Oh, why do people always have to get so messed up during their training? Captain Sain’s the only one of us who’s fine with all that blood and gore stuff, you know! He might look kind, but he’s completely heartless! First, he makes me the medical officer for both the Warrior *and* Swordsman Corps, citing a lack of manpower. *Then* he makes me do this! I’m going to die from overwork one of these days, I just know it!”

Sain had told me that Marieberr was his “right-hand woman,” and what she did next seemed to demonstrate why. She placed her hands on me—ranting all the while—and my wounds closed up in an instant. The pain I’d been feeling vanished too.

“Thank you very much, Marieberr.” I checked myself all over to make sure nothing was wrong, then turned back to Sirene. “Can we please go another round now?”

She stared at me for a moment. “I still think you should take a break.”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Really? You know the captain told me to hold *nothing* back, right? Don’t come crying to me if you get seriously hurt this time.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want you to hold back.”

“Why are you so desperate to do all this training, anyway?”

I stopped to consider her question. “I need to be at my best; otherwise, I’ll just end up dragging them down.”

“You don’t mean Lady Lynneburg and Ines, the Divine Shield, do you?”

“R-Rolo, is that how high you’re aiming?” Marieberr asked, looking uneasy as she backed away from me. “I...I don’t think I could ever act as support for

people like *them*. They're inhuman! A-And I mean that with the utmost respect!"

I thought she was selling herself short, to be honest. Incidentally, both she and Sirene knew that I would soon be going to Mithra with Ines and Lynne.

"Fine, here goes," Sirene said.

"Mm-hmm," I replied. "I'm ready when you are."

"Whatever happens, I really won't care, okay?"

We both got into position, exactly a thousand paces away from one another. I would struggle to hear anything that Sirene said to me while we were so far apart, but the reverse wasn't true at all; Sirene's beastfolk blood meant that she would hear me even when I was being quiet.

I called out to signal that I was ready. Sirene drew her golden bow in response, then fired another massive volley of arrows into the sky.

"Over there, I think..." I murmured to myself.

Once more, I studied the trajectory of the arrows, then ran through the areas where they were most spread out, only bothering to deflect the dangerous ones with my training dagger. I couldn't dodge or deflect them all, so some stabbed into me, but I didn't really mind.

I slipped through the storm coming at me from above and in front, paying the arrows barely any mind as I charged straight toward my target: Sirene.

"You got me," she said when I once again placed my wooden dagger against her neck. That made for the eleventh time today.

Since I couldn't draw a bow, the most I could do for my hunter training was avoid projectiles. It had been Mianne's suggestion—she had said that, since there weren't any weapons I could use decently enough, I was most likely to survive by scrambling around and making sure my enemies didn't get their hands on me in the first place.

I didn't have much stamina, but Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows, had taught me that I should move as efficiently as possible and pay close attention to the sounds that my bones and muscles made when I ran. Dandalg, the Shield

Sovereign, had shown me that I could suppress a lot of the pain I felt just by regulating my breathing. And as for Sig, the Sword Sovereign, he had made me realize the importance of not letting my opponent's weapon out of my sight for even a single moment.

It was all basic knowledge, but I consciously made sure to put it into practice during my training with Sirene. I always kept my eyes wide open and took the shortest possible route to reach her—and that had worked well so far. After repeated drills, I could feel my body slowly acclimating to the right way to move.

But it still wasn't enough. I needed to do more, else I would end up being a burden on everybody.

"Another round, please," I said.



Sirene shook her head, looking well and truly fed up. “You should do

something about those arrows sticking out of you first. Marie, heal him.”

Marieberr let out another whimper. “I...I can’t take this! C-Can I go already?! I don’t want to see Rolo get hit by any more arrows!”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “I can just keep going like this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sirene snapped. “Do you know what you look like right now? At least pull them out first. You’re a mess.”

“Eek!” Marieberr squeaked. “Gross! *Gross*!”

“Sorry...” I replied. “I’ll try not to get hit by as many next time.”

“Th-That’s not the problem! A-And please take those out already! B-But in a way I won’t have to see, okay?!”

As I hesitated, wondering whether or not I should pull out the arrows, a familiar voice came from behind me: “Sorry I’m late. I had to watch the kids for a bit.”

It was Mianne. After giving us our instructions earlier, she had temporarily left the training school, saying she had to cook for her two children.

“So, did you do as I instructed?” she asked. “You didn’t hold back, did you, Sirene?”

“N-No, ma’am!” Sirene replied, standing bolt upright as she turned to face Mianne. Her ears and tail were sticking up as well.

Mianne also had beastfolk blood, and her tail was slowly flicking from side to side. “You didn’t take it easy because you felt bad for him?”

“I...I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“Yet he has fewer arrows in him than I expected. You know that Sain didn’t lend us Marieberr the Saintess for show, right?”

Sirene’s expression froze. At the same time, Marieberr backed a considerable distance away. Wow, she could move *really* fast.

Mianne approached Sirene, started to closely examine her, then sniffed at the air. “You smell a little excited. Ah, I think I get it.”

“I...I... Wha—?!” The hair on Sirene’s ears and tail immediately bristled.

Mianne shot her a sideways glance, then picked up a training bow. “Rolo, I’ll take over from here. You know what that means, right? You’ll have ten times as many arrows sticking out of you. We’re starting as soon as you get those wounds healed.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

I started pulling out all the arrows stuck in my body. The whole time, I could hear Marieberr whimpering and shrieking behind me.

Chapter 66: The Six Sovereigns' Daughter

"Father, may I have a moment of your time?"

Dandalg was working at his office desk, which was built specially to accommodate his large frame, when a figure quietly entered the room. He looked up from the documents he was reading and gazed at the visitor over his silver-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Hmm? Oh, it's you, Ines. What brings you here at this hour?"

"I wanted to ask how Rolo's training is proceeding. I'm sorry to have foisted the task onto you and the others, so I thought the least I could do was ask after his progress."

"Rolo, huh? Well...he's been putting in a surprising amount of work. When you first brought the frail little kid along with you, I wasn't sure we'd get anywhere—but now he's got all six of us fired up. I've actually found myself enjoying our training together. You don't have a thing to worry about."

Ines's lips curled into a faint smile. "I see. That's a relief. Perhaps I should have asked Rolo himself, but he always remains occupied with something late into the night. I didn't wish to intrude."

"Don't you think you're being a little *too* considerate? Well, it's not like I don't know how you feel, what with how hard he's trying."

"Yes. We're already asking a lot of someone whose body is still so underdeveloped; I wish to avoid adding to his burden whenever possible."

It was Dandalg's turn to smile. "Still," he said, "I can't say I ever expected you to step up and take him in. It was a real surprise."

"Was it...? I don't think I've even done that much for him; at most, I merely stuck him in the care of you and the other Sovereigns. Yes, I carry him from the library to his bed whenever he falls asleep from exhaustion, but that's barely worthy of your praise."

"It's a big step forward from the young woman who never showed an interest

in anyone. Not that there was anything wrong with that, I s'pose."

Ines cast her eyes down. Dandalg's evaluation that she hadn't been interested in others wasn't strictly true; she simply hadn't known how to stay an appropriate distance away from them, which had resulted in her staying silent at all times.

She had thought that taking on her current duties had made her more comfortable with speaking to people, but when the topic shifted to more personal matters, she still never knew what to say. For a long time now, Ines had considered that to be one of her shortcomings.

"Well, don't worry about it," Dandalg continued. "Take things at your own pace. To each their own, as they say."

"I understand."

"On that note, how have *you* been? I heard you were training together with Lady Lynneburg. Oken said something about her making immense progress all of a sudden—and the old man's face was white as a sheet!"

"Yes, I recently started acting as her training partner. It would seem that she grasped something from the slaying of Phantom Gray, as she's improving at a tremendous rate. The other day, she mastered sevenfold casting—and was able to apply [Fusion Magic] to it, no less. I suspect it will only be a matter of time before I am dismissed from my role for lack of purpose." Her expression was gentle, but her words were clearly self-deprecating.

Dandalg's face clouded over. "Ines, how have you been holding up since...you know?"

"Since when?"

"Since you wiped out the Empire's border fortresses."

Ines's lips tightened, and she looked down again. "That was...problematic, wasn't it? I suspected as much."

"No, no, I'm not criticizing you for anything. It ended up benefiting both of our countries. And as a knight of the Kingdom, you carried out your duty excellently. You deserve to be commended, if anything. Back when I was first

told what happened, it was like a tremendous weight had been lifted from my shoulders."

"I...see."

Dandalg sheepishly scratched his head, and his large frame seemed to shrink into itself. "It's just...I wasn't sure *you* would see it so positively. Don't get me wrong here, I'm not planning to make a show of being your guardian and give you some big lecture. But, well...I'm a little worried about you."

"Worried...?"

"Mmm. By rights, I shouldn't have any reasons to be concerned. You're strong enough that you could take on all of the Six Sovereigns together and win, if you so wished. And as the weakest of us, I'm in even less of a position to worry about you."

"That's not true at all. You're the goal that I strive toward, father, and I'm still far from—"

Dandalg chuckled. "I appreciate the thought, but you should open your eyes already. You've long since surpassed us. I mean, with your strength, you could wipe a country or two off the map in a single swing. You know that, don't you?"

Ines didn't respond; she simply looked at the Shield Sovereign, appearing slightly troubled.

"I'm also growing weaker," Dandalg continued. "There's no mistaking that. In the first place, my nickname, 'Dandalg the Immortal,' is mostly Sain's fault, you know? Every time I find myself on the brink of death, whining like an infant, that cold-blooded scoundrel patches me up and sends me right back to the front line. Doesn't matter to him whether I've got no arms or a gaping hole right through my stomach—the next thing I know, he's restored me to tip-top shape and is saying, 'Come now, hurry back to work, Dandalg!' with a smile on his face. The man's scarier than a Greater Demon."

In contrast to Ines's subdued expression, Dandalg cheerfully continued, "And then there are Sig and Mianne, who treat me like I'm their personal shield. I s'pose it was inevitable, since I'm not good for anything else, but still—the most I ever did was tag along with ridiculous people like them and survive, then

suddenly I was some kind of a big shot. The king even gave me the fancy title of ‘Shield Sovereign.’ And when I said to him that I’ve never even used a shield before, do you know what he told me? ‘*You’re* the shield, Dandalg’! Don’t you think that’s a bit much?”

He laughed, causing his broad shoulders to shake. “But you’re different. You have the kind of genuine, honest-to-goodness ‘power’ that anyone would envy. You’ve always had it. No matter what enemy stands in your path, you can’t lose—as long as you *don’t hold back*, that is. In plainer terms, you’re invincible.”

“That...isn’t how I see myself.”

“Well, it’s true—at least from the perspective of a guy like me. But your strength isn’t what I’m worried about.”

“There’s something else?”

“How should I put this...? You’re too kind. You injured a few of the Empire’s soldiers when you tore apart their fortresses, and that’s the reason you’ve been feeling so down, isn’t it?”

“I...” Ines trailed off, unable to find her next words. During their attack on the Empire, she had wielded her sword of light in anger, having considered it necessary to secure their trip home. But as a result of her actions, several imperial soldiers had almost died amid the collapsing rubble. Even though they had been the Kingdom’s enemies during a period of war, that fact still weighed on her mind.

“That’s fine, though,” Dandalg noted. “In our line of work, if you don’t feel anything after hurting someone, that’s when you’re truly finished. That might seem contradictory, but it’s because you are who you are that the rest of us can trust you with your duties. In the first place, after you made such a spectacle, it’s pretty crazy that we’re only dealing with a few injuries. Even while hurtling through the air atop the Dragon of Calamity, you managed to avoid the parts of the fortresses where you thought the soldiers might be. I almost want to ask you your secret; by all accounts, a stunt like that should be outright impossible. Though I s’pose Sig and the like could probably manage it... Anyway, you just did what you could, so there’s no need to feel so down about it.”

“I wonder about that...” Ines gazed down at the floor, lost in thought. She

found it hard to believe that she had truly done as much as she was able. Perhaps she could have done better.

"Having said that," Dandalg continued, "with your good nature in mind, I also think you should avoid using your 'sword' whenever you can. The six of us raised you to be a shield for a reason, you know. After we saw the power of your Gift, we knew that your capacity for destruction could only cause you unhappiness. The burden on you is too heavy for one person to bear alone."

Dandalg looked straight at Ines, then leaned in close. "So even if you make a mistake when using it, don't take it all upon yourself, all right? And don't feel guilty for some stupid reason like not wanting to bother us, because you'll always have us to rely on, if no one else. All six of us think of you as our daughter by blood."

"You...do?"

"Yes, though Mianne's the only one of us who actually has children, of course. Oh, and another thing—you really don't need to seek permission every time you use your power. Sure, you serve the Kingdom, but you're not a weapon. We didn't raise you to be one, and the king doesn't think of you as one either. We just wanted to teach a kid who'd come across a ridiculous power to use it properly. And you always do."

"I'm not sure that's true," Ines replied uneasily. "That isn't how it feels, at least."

Dandalg smiled wryly. "You know, I was surprised when you first decided to look after Rolo. But now that I've spent more time with him, I get it. The two of you are so alike that it's shocking."

"We're...alike?"

"Mm-hmm. You both wield such immense power but refuse to acknowledge it. Your obstinacy is enough to frustrate a guy."

Now that Ines thought about it, perhaps she and Rolo *did* resemble one another. Not in appearance, of course, but in their mutual struggle to find a place where they belonged. They had each spent a part of their life being continually rejected and drifting from person to person. Perhaps that was why

she had brought him to the place where she actually felt accepted. Seeing his reaction had reminded her of when she was first given a warm meal at the orphanage after spending such a long time eating irregularly at the homes where she'd previously stayed.

The memory brought a bitter smile to Ines's face; Rolo really was like her past self. But why had she decided to take him in? There was nothing she could give him.

"Still," Dandalg said, "it looks like Rolo *does* believe in his own potential, if nothing else. I'm not sure if 'confidence' is the right word, but for some reason, he's convinced that he'll one day achieve what he's set his sights on. He's charging straight toward that goal to the point of recklessness. People like him are strong in another way—and right now, you're the complete opposite of them."

Ines kept her eyes down. "Perhaps...I am."

"Mm-hmm. That's a fact." Dandalg smiled at his adopted daughter. "Listen, Ines. Recognize your talent already. Once you do that, you'll realize that you don't *need* to get any stronger."

"Is that what you believe?"

"Yeah, and I can tell you that as the weakest of the Six Sovereigns—as the guy who's spent his entire life running into the strong and getting beaten up by them. I'm so proud of you, my daughter. You're the strongest person in the entire world. You just need to open your eyes to it."

Dandalg placed a large hand on Ines's head. "Anyway, that's everything I wanted to say. You're the representative of the Six Sovereigns, so hold your head high when you journey to Mithra. And don't hesitate to use your 'shield' *or* your 'sword,' if the situation calls for it. Whatever happens, we'll take responsibility."

"I...can't make you do that. No matter the circumstances."

"Then I'll speak frankly: you have no idea how much it would satisfy me if you gave that high priestess a good slap in the face. Sure, it'd be a diplomatic nightmare, but I'd give up my job in a heartbeat to see it happen. I s'pose you'd

never pull such a foolish stunt in the first place, though." Dandalg laughed, each peal as booming and hearty as always.

"Actually, father...there was one more matter I wished to ask you about. If you have the time, that is."

"Come on, what's with the formality? Of course I've got the time. Go ahead."

"I was wondering if you could tell me about Noor's childhood. About what he was like."

"Noor, hmm?" Dandalg made no attempt to hide his surprise. "That's rare. Your taking an interest in someone, that is. And of all people..."

"Is it strange of me?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far. In fact, I think it's a good thing. But why are you asking?"

"I...believe I've lost to him. I cannot see myself ever overcoming him either."

Dandalg chuckled, then scratched his head with a wry smile; he was quite familiar with what Noor was like. "I see. 'Lost to him,' huh? I s'pose you have my condolences. He's...pretty crazy. In a lot of ways. How can I say this...? He just isn't in the same category as the rest of us. Trying to measure him by any established standards will only have you running in circles. You don't need to think about him in terms of winning or losing."

"I compared us to my own personal standards and still came out inferior. But I see that as a good thing. It feels as though I've been relieved of an unnecessary burden and can finally see myself more clearly."

Dandalg was both astonished and impressed—it was truly rare for Ines to be so open with her emotions. On top of that, to his knowledge, she had never expressed such an eager interest in others before. The subtle changes she was going through as a result of those around her, Rolo included, warmed the Shield Sovereign's heart.

He shifted in his sizable chair—custom built, like his desk—and said, "Is that so? That's wonderful. I wonder what kind of face Gilbert would make if he heard you say that."

“Why are you bringing him up all of a sudden?”

“Oh, I was just speaking to myself. Pay it no mind. Actually...you really haven’t noticed, have you?”

Ines gave Dandalg a questioning look.

“Well, that aside, what did you want to know?” the Shield Sovereign asked. “I don’t know all that much about Noor, since he was only with me for three months, but that was still more than enough time for me to realize he was so absurd. Let’s see, where to begin...?” He put an elbow on his desk, rested his chin on his hand, and started thinking back to over a decade ago.

That day, Dandalg set his accumulated stack of work aside to tell Ines stories of the past—and their conversation carried on late into the night. It had been a very, very long time since he’d last spoken so leisurely with his daughter.

Chapter 67: The Best Cooking Around

“Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?” Sirene whispered into my ear. “Whatever that might have looked like, it *wasn’t* that.”

“Okay.”

“I’m a beastfolk, so when I’m focused in the heat of combat, sometimes...*stuff* happens unintentionally. That’s all there is to it.”

“Okay. I get it.”

“Besides, you’re a pipsqueak, a demonfolk, a weakling, *and* younger than me. Not my type at all. So don’t go jumping to any conclusions. If you start thinking of me like that, then I won’t know what... Look, just *don’t*, okay?”

“Okay.”

Once she had finished training me, Mianne had invited Sirene and me to her home. She had showed us inside the moment we arrived and plopped us by the table right next to the kitchen.

I usually ate with Ines, so I’d made sure to tell her about Mianne’s invitation before coming. She had replied that she didn’t mind, then she had gone off somewhere, saying that she would also have dinner elsewhere tonight.

Marieberr had seemingly wanted to come along too, but she had muttered something about being on the night shift again before she ran off crying into the sunset.

“Marieberr sure seems to be having a tough time,” I said. “I wish I could have taken her place or something.”

“She’s just a slacker. Cut her even the slightest bit of slack, and she’ll squeeze it for all it’s worth,” Mianne declared; at some point, she’d come up right behind us. “Work is work. Someone has to do it. Besides, I specifically invited *you*. It’d defeat the purpose of our meal if someone else showed up instead.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Rolo. You. My husband asked me to have you come by. And Sirene?”

Mianne pinched one of the girl's ears. "We beastfolk don't have 'stuff' just randomly happen to us during combat. Stop spreading strange rumors."

Sirene made a strange, high-pitched noise. "Nyes, ma'am!"

"Think about what you've done," the Bow Sovereign said sternly. "Also, food's ready. Eat up."

With a *clunk,* Mianne placed a large plate on the table. It was piled high with a colorful, extravagant-looking dish the likes of which I'd never seen before.

"Can...Can I really have this?" I asked. The words had just slipped out of my mouth. The food looked delicious, but it was arranged so beautifully that I felt like eating it would be a waste.

"What are you saying?" Mianne asked. "If you won't eat, I'm going to kick you out. You better not leave any leftovers either. My husband's cooking is the best there is."

Sirene nodded in agreement, teary-eyed, one ear still caught in Mianne's grasp. Would she...be able to eat like that? I was starting to doubt it when a man's voice called out from the kitchen.

"You should let go of her first, Mianne. You're being rude to our guests."

"If you say so, darling," Mianne said in response.

"Dar...ling...?" Sirene muttered, in apparent disbelief.

At last, Mianne released Sirene's ear. She was gazing behind me, so I turned around...and saw a large man in a white cook's uniform approach the table.

"Welcome, Rolo, Sirene," he said. He had a beaming smile and was carrying more dishes in his arms. "I'm Laius, Mianne's husband. The man of the house, if you want to use such a term. Thank you for accepting our sudden invitation. I wanted to apologize for the trouble I've caused you, as well as treat you to some of my cooking."

"Trouble...?" I shared a look of confusion with Sirene. She didn't seem to know what he meant either.

"Yes, though I think Mianne might not have mentioned it," Laius said as he placed the food neatly in front of us. "She had to step out briefly while you two

were training, right? That was my fault. An acquaintance suddenly contacted me about some excellent ingredients, and I just had to pick them up myself. But it happened during the hours I normally spend with the kids, so Mianne had to take care of them while I was out being selfish. I'm aware you don't get much time with her in the first place, so I couldn't help but feel guilty."

Laius had just finished setting down the dishes when Sirene straightened her back and courteously said, "Oh, no, it was no trouble at all. In fact, when Captain Mianne's not around, it's a lot easier for me to— Eep!"

The hair on Sirene's ears and tail bristled. She must have sensed that Mianne was silently standing behind her again.

Laius chuckled. "You're the honest type, aren't you, Sirene? I see why my wife likes you. Well, to be honest, saying I want to apologize is just an excuse. The true reason I invited you here is that I want you to try my cooking. Especially you, Rolo. I'm quite proud of it, you know."

"Me?" I asked.

"Yes, so don't hold back, okay? Eat as much as you like. There's plenty more where it came from."

"Okay. Um, thank you. I'll...do that."

At the man's urging, I reached for one of the plates arranged upon the table—though I struggled to keep my hand from trembling. Sirene did the same, looking wary of the Bow Sovereign still standing behind her, then tried a mouthful of one of the dishes.

The food looked amazing enough already, but the taste was...indescribably good. Sirene and I greedily dug in, even forgetting how to speak, until eventually...

"That was delicious!" we both declared after we'd eaten our fill.

From the moment the first bite had entered my mouth, I hadn't been able to stop my hands from reaching for more. Just calling Laius's cooking "delicious" didn't do it justice, but I couldn't think of a better way to describe it.

"Well?" he said. "Did you like it?"

“Yes,” Sirene replied. “I’ve never eaten anything so delicious before.”

“Me neither,” I added. “I never knew that food could be so tasty.”

Laius chuckled again, apparently satisfied. “Is that so? Well, that makes all of my hard work feel worthwhile.”

“Did you make all of the dishes yourself?” I asked.

“I did. I’m this restaurant’s only chef, you see.”

“Chef...? This is a restaurant?”

“It’s our home too, but yes—although I’d call it a hobby at most. Since Mianne works too, I take care of the kids while it’s bright outside, then open the restaurant at night. Sometimes I’ll also run it as a café during the day. There isn’t much in the way of seating, as you can see, so we’re just a small business with a limited number of customers. You wouldn’t have guessed any of that from just looking at the place, though, would you?”

“You’re right...” I said thoughtfully. I’d assumed that it was just Mianne’s home.

Sirene was somewhat gingerly massaging her stomach, but she sniffed and gave me a look of amazement. “You really don’t know anything, do you? Captain Mianne’s husband is one of the best chefs in the city. His restaurant is so famous with gourmets that the waiting list is half a year long. People come all the way from other countries to eat here.”

“Wow, really?”

“Really,” Sirene repeated, puffing out her chest and getting ready to lecture me. “The price of a single meal would set an ordinary person back an entire year’s worth of earnings. Just as Captain Mianne’s a living legend as a hunter, her husband’s a living legend in the gourmet world.”

Laius smiled ruefully. “It’s an honor to hear you say that, but you aren’t completely right. My cooking’s just a hobby that I’ve taken a little too far, so I tell my customers to pay whatever they think is fair. After a few of them dumped an unbelievable amount of money in my lap, the rumors took on a life of their own. Honestly, I’m just overjoyed that people are going out of their way

for my cooking. If someone doesn't have any money, I'm happy for them to eat for free."

Sirene's ears twitched—and without missing a beat, Mianne grabbed them both.

"I...I wasn't!" Sirene protested. "I wasn't thinking of eating for free!"

"Oh?" Mianne asked. "My mistake, then. I know you earn a decent salary, so if you're coming to my house to eat, you'll support my family's earnings, won't you?"

"Y-Yes, Captain!"

"Come now, Mianne," Laius said soothingly. "That's enough of that."

"I know, I know." Mianne reluctantly let go of Sirene's ears...then immediately started stroking them.

"U-Um, Captain...? Aren't you going to let go?"

"That was that, and this is this. Your ears are surprisingly nice to touch. Let me stroke them for a little while longer."

"C-Captain?!"

"Oh, stop fussing. It's just for a bit."

Mianne's face looked somewhat flushed as she stroked Sirene's ears. Sirene herself must have been ticklish, because her cheeks kept twitching.

Laius gave another rueful smile as he watched the pair. "Sorry, Rolo. It looks like my wife drank a little too much. She doesn't usually drink at all, but we decided to leave the kids with my parents once we knew you were coming, so I think she's just indulging a little while she has the chance. Don't fault her too much, okay?"

"Mm-hmm..."

I didn't mind at all, of course—but I *did* wonder whether it was okay for us to leave Sirene to her fate...

"In any case," Laius continued, "that's more or less still in the realm of friendly bonding, so I'm sure we can leave them be. Probably."

“You think...?”

We both sipped tea as we watched Sirene writhe in Mianne’s clutches.

“Oh, right. Rolo,” Laius said. “I invited you here to try my cooking, but there was something I wanted to discuss with you as well.”

“With me?” I asked.

“Yes. About being a demonfolk. I’ll get straight to the point: What do you think about Mianne and Sirene?”

“What do I...think about them?”

“As you can see, they’re beastfolk—though not purely. Their blood is rather mixed.” Laius drew closer and quietly focused on the pair; Sirene was being mobbed at this point. “I have beastfolk blood too, though mine is quite thin. As a chef, I consider it a blessing—it’s given me keener senses of taste and smell than most others—but, well... Depending on who you ask, beastfolk blood can be a matter of pride, or something to hate. Or anything in between.”

“Something to hate...?”

“Yes. Fortunately, the people here in the Kingdom of Clays treat us more or less the same as they do humans, but that isn’t the case in a lot of other countries. There, we get dirty looks just for being out in public. Hardly a day goes by without someone throwing stones at us on the street, and that doesn’t even come close to being the worst I’ve seen. Far too many kids have been killed just for the ‘crime’ of having beastfolk blood. Mianne and I traveled all over before we arrived here, you see. It’s because of her past experiences that she always wears that hat to conceal her ears.”

Laius paused to sip his tea, then calmly continued, “I know that you probably accept us as you would anyone else, but I was wondering how you felt about your own blood, if you don’t mind us talking about it. It’s not often that you get the chance to meet one of the demonfolk.”

My blood, huh...? I didn’t think there had ever been a day when I’d forgotten that I was a demonfolk. My entire life, I’d always thought it was a bad thing—that since my very existence was something to be despised, the best thing I could do for the world was die. Others hitting me, kicking me, or hating me

because of my race was only natural.

My world had always been very easy to understand: demonfolk were evil, despicable beings who should never have existed in the first place. But then I'd met Noor, and ever since that fateful encounter...

"To be honest..." I said, "I don't know how I feel."

"You don't?" Laius asked.

I shook my head. "I always thought that having demonfolk blood was a bad thing, but...I'm not so certain anymore."

For the longest time, I'd believed that the blood running through me was evil. Now, I couldn't really see it as a good or a bad thing. I was a demonfolk, yes, but I'd been assured that I could still be of use to others. Oken had also told me about the time *before* the demonfolk had even been demonfolk.

As a result, despite how clear everything had seemed to be before, I didn't know what to think.

Laius chuckled, and nodded cheerfully. "Is that so? Well, that's just fine. Mm-hmm. When you aren't sure about something, it's a lot better to be honest than to pretend you've got things figured out."

I stared at him, puzzled. Why was he in such a good mood? I'd barely even answered his question.

Laius gave me a melancholy smile. "No, sorry. You must be confused, especially as I'm the one who broached the subject. To tell you the truth, I don't understand myself very well either—but I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Sometimes, if you can't decide one way or the other, it's best to just admit it."

He let out a merry laugh, then his tone became more somber. "Rolo, you're going to Mithra, right? I'm sure you already know this, but they're terribly harsh on demonfolk there. They aren't kind to beastfolk either, but that's nothing in comparison."

"Mm-hmm. I know."

"That's why, when Mianne told me you'd accepted their invitation, I thought

you might be giving up on yourself. But your answer just now came as a relief.”

“A...relief?”

“Mm-hmm. Plus, when you were eating earlier, I didn’t see you as someone who’d stopped caring about life. Of course, what you’re trying to do is far from ordinary, and I won’t deny that it seems reckless...but you’re working hard enough that I think you’ll succeed. You don’t look like you’re acting on a careless whim or to get revenge. Much the opposite. You’re approaching this a lot more rationally than I expected.”

“Really...? I can’t say I’ve thought about it very deeply.”

“Ha hah. You’ve done plenty of thinking, I can tell. That’s why I’m relieved. Oh, there’s dessert too, by the way. I’ll go fetch you some.”

“Oh, um... Thank you.”

Laius went into the kitchen and returned with a number of vivid, beautifully arranged dishes. He then urged me to eat. My first bite filled me with pure happiness the moment it touched my tongue. Meanwhile, I could see Sirene watching me with reproachful eyes, still trapped from behind by Mianne.

“By the way, Rolo...” Laius said. “Do you have someone you like?”

“Huh...? Someone I like?” I stared at him, taken aback by the sudden change of topic. Mianne and Sirene were momentarily frozen, awaiting my response. “Um, no, but... Actually, I think I do. I don’t know how they feel about me, but...I think I like them.”

I’d never expected to actually like someone, but now I was surrounded by people who were so kind to me—though I still wasn’t sure why they bothered. I was pretty sure that what I felt toward them was affection.

“Are they close to you?” Laius asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

I liked Noor, Lynne, and Ines. Mianne too, of course, as well as the other members of the Six Sovereigns. I was also fond of Sirene and Marieberr, who helped me with my training. They knew that I was a demonfolk, but they treated me the same as they did everyone else. That was probably why I’d

grown to like them so fast.

Sirene was glaring daggers at me while Mianne continued to stroke her ears and tail. I would need to clear up the misunderstanding between us later...

“I see, I see,” Laius said, nodding emphatically. He looked very satisfied. “That’s wonderful. Just wonderful. Having someone you care about is a splendid thing in itself. It makes you stronger without you even realizing it. Oh, not *physically* stronger, of course; I mean that it makes you more resilient to whatever life throws at you. I’m a lot weaker than my wife in a fight, but having my precious family around reminds me that I can’t ever let myself die. Because of them, I never run out of motivation to do my best.”

Mianne’s and Sirene’s ears pricked up.

“I love Mianne,” Laius continued. “More than anyone or anything else in the whole world, except maybe our children—but that’s beside the point. As a woman, my wife means more to me than anybody else. I’m a fickle person by nature, always moving from one thing to the next, but my love for her will never change. Never.”

“Wh-Where is this coming from all of a sudden?” Mianne grumbled. Her face turned an even deeper shade of red, and she finally unhanded Sirene.

“In short, Rolo—you have somebody like that too, right?”

“Yes. I think so.”

It had taken Laius’s prompting for me to notice, but I did. They were all good people, and I knew that if anything bad happened to me, they would all share my sadness. I had used to believe that my life was worthless, but now, that idea just didn’t seem right to me. If I died, the people I loved would all be genuinely upset. I didn’t want to put them through that—in fact, I wished that they could always be smiling. It was strange; the only desire I’d ever really had was to eat tasty food, but somewhere along the way, I’d stumbled upon something else that I’d really wanted.

It was the people around me who were giving me a reason to live.

Laius chuckled. “No hesitation, huh? To think I was worried that you really had it rough. Looks like it was all a big misunderstanding. You’re already quite

blessed, aren't you? And dearly loved by those around you."

"Mm-hmm. I think so too."

He laughed again. "You know, I've really come to like you, Rolo. Come by to taste my cooking again sometime, won't you? Tell you what, how about I give you my next open reservation? I'm afraid that the schedule is quite full at the moment, though, so the earliest I can do is, let's say...three months from now?"

"Okay."

"Thank you very much, dear customer. Now, make sure you come back, all right? Next time, I'm going to put my all into cooking the greatest meal you've ever eaten."

After that, I chatted with Laius some more while we waited for Sirene—who was finally free from Mianne's harassment—to finish her dessert. Once she was done, we thanked our hosts for having us over, then left.

Chapter 68: Thousand Blades

“All right, the next one’s coming!”

“Yeah! Please!”

After our first sparring match in the forest, Gilbert had returned every single day to help me with my training. Our sessions together had come and gone in the blink of an eye, and now the end of my three-month preparation period was finally upon me.

[Dragrave]

We were far enough apart that we had to raise our voices to hear one another, but Gilbert’s thrust still reached me in an instant. I carefully followed the honed tip of his golden spear, then lightly struck it with my sword.

[Parry]

Our weapons scraped against one another, scattering bright sparks into the air. My parry had knocked Gilbert’s spear slightly off course; rather than piercing my throat, it grazed the side of my neck.

“Another, please,” I said.

The man before me clicked his tongue. “Yeah, yeah. But this next one won’t go so well for you, you hear me?”

We always followed the same training regimen: Gilbert came at me with terrifyingly fast spear thrusts, while I tracked and parried them. That was it. Even though it was so monotonous, he never missed a day and never complained. He simply focused on helping me out.

My opponent’s attacks were sharp—and the more he repeated them, the faster they became. I knew he was only matching my rate of growth, but that meant each and every one was a threat to my life. I couldn’t afford to lose focus even for a single day.

All in all, the purpose of our training was to constantly test my limits. The specter of death lurked in the back of my mind at every moment—that was the

kind of daily routine that Gilbert had created for me.

[Dragrave]

Gilbert's spear had gotten keener by the day, forcing me to improve as well. And after enough time, the way I'd used my sword to parry his weapon had changed. My original approach had been to rely purely on strength. Well, to be more accurate, I simply hadn't had the leeway to dedicate thought to anything other than parrying as hard as I could. That wasn't the case anymore, though; instead of swinging at his spear with all of my might, trying to oppose the force rushing at me head-on, I gently brushed it aside.

Ever since I'd adopted this method, my ability to ward off attacks coming directly for me had improved dramatically. And it was all thanks to the unflagging help of my training partner.

Gilbert was fast. His strikes could close distances in a fraction of the time it took to blink, which made it all the scarier when they were coming straight for my throat. The old me would have died on the spot, having not even seen his spear. But that was the *old* me.

[Parry]

Now, even though my opponent boasted frightening speed, I was able to parry his attacks. Of course, I owed that entirely to his help and patience with me.

On a few occasions, I'd put too much strength behind my parries and snapped Gilbert's golden spear in two. I always felt terrible about it, but he'd laugh and forgive me. Apparently, because of some strange power in his spear called an "enchantment," it would return to being in one piece after a day had passed.

I'd already known this, but on top of being tremendously strong, Gilbert was a really kind, broad-minded guy. Once again, I silently expressed my respect for the man in front of me.

"Sorry, but I need to call it here for today," Gilbert said, lowering his spear. "I've got a little business to take care of."

"Sure," I replied. "Thanks. You were a huge help, as always."

“You know, I’ve been wondering... Is that *really* what you think?”

I cocked my head at him, slightly confused. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Yeah...? Well, whatever. It’s not important. Oh, I should mention that I accidentally let slip that we’ve been sparring like this. My master said that he wants to drop by.”

“Your master? Who’s that?”

“You’ll see. He’s someone you already know.”

“All right. Thanks again, by the way. For giving up your time to help me.”

“I could say the same to you, right? If you’re being serious, anyway.”

“Yeah? I’m glad to hear you think so highly of me.”

“You know, I always get the feeling we speak *at* rather than *with* each other...” Gilbert shrugged. “Anyway, I’m off. Man, I hurt all over today too... I’d better go and get patched up before work.” He slung his spear over his shoulder and went on his way.

A short while later, I started to hear footsteps. I waited, listening to them grow louder and louder until a familiar face walked into view. It was my childhood swordsman instructor.

“Instructor?” I asked. “Why are you here?”

“Gilbert told me what you’ve been up to,” he said, unwrapping the cloth bundle he was carrying to reveal a silver blade in a gleaming white scabbard. “This is a mithril sword. I’ll be using a similar one. I’d like to have a bout against you before you leave for Mithra.”

I paused. “Against me, Instructor? Of course. I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity. I already have a sword, though.”

“Sorry, but that one’s too much of a special case. I’d like us to spar on equal terms, with the same swords.”

“All right.”

I placed my black sword aside and accepted the one my instructor was holding out to me—and that was when he struck. Without missing a beat, I

unsheathed my new weapon and used it to turn his swing aside. The two silver blades clashed, sending up a small spray of sparks.

“This sword’s awfully light,” I remarked.

“It would be compared to the one you always use,” my instructor replied. “Swing it around; give yourself some time to grow accustomed to it.”

“Sure.”

After propping the scabbard up against the base of a nearby tree, I kicked up the twigs at my feet and swung at them a few times with my silver sword. It had a sharper edge than I’d expected; even as I reduced the twigs to tiny little pieces, it felt as though I were cutting through air. It didn’t seem to weigh anything either. Attacking with it was like attacking with a feather.

All in all, everything about this new blade just felt...*off*. Maybe I’d grown too used to swinging that heavy black sword around.

“Do you have a feel for it now?” my instructor asked.

“No,” I replied; the sword was so light that it was making me restless. “It’s still pretty uncomfortable.”

“You’ll get used to it soon enough.”

My instructor struck again. This time, he slashed at me from my left, my right, and overhead—three directions at the same time. I parried them all with a single swipe, this time creating a cascade of sparks.

Yeah, this sword was *definitely* too light. It made me feel as though I were just flapping my hand around. I did notice a response when I exchanged blows, though. If we kept this up, I was sure I could get used to it.

“You’re right,” I said. “I think that helped just now. I’m a little closer to getting a feel for it.”

“I see. Then shall we continue like this for a while?”

“Please.”

I barely had the time to ready my sword before the next dozen strikes came at me—left, right, and left again, almost all at once. I focused on keeping up and

used the least amount of movement I could manage to carefully fend them off, one by one.

[Parry]

Once again, sparks flew.

We continued like that for a while, my instructor swinging at me while I parried each attack, and the sound of clashing blades soon filled the forest. The longer we went on, the more I grew used to the weightless sword that I was wielding.

“I think I’m more accustomed to it now,” I said.

“Good. I’ll speed up, then.”

No sooner had the words left my instructor’s mouth than he was upon me. These strikes came from above, below, and behind, targeting my blind spots. I didn’t have the time to think about how I was going to deal with them; I simply devoted every fiber of my being to parrying the ones I noticed.

I was astonished. My instructor’s unbelievably swift sword struck from every direction, moving quicker than a person could take a breath. But even then, I knew he hadn’t even begun to get started. This had to be nothing more than a warm-up exercise for him. After all...he hadn’t shown any signs of using his signature skill.

“Right, that should do,” my instructor said, adopting a proper sword stance for the first time. “Shall we begin?” His demeanor had changed dramatically—now, it felt as though his presence alone could tear me to ribbons. The tension in the air grew thick as he continued in a quiet voice, “Noor, starting now, I’m going all out. As a favor to me, do the same.”

His words barely reached me. Just standing across from him had caused my muscles to lock up and my heart to pound faster and faster. Was my life in danger? Was that what I was feeling? Even though this was just a spar with my instructor?

“That being said...” my instructor continued, “we aren’t here to kill each other. Shall we say that the first person to be forced a step out of position is the loser?”

“Works for me,” I replied.

“Then I’m going to use my skill. Are you ready?”

I already knew which one he was referring to. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind. He was going to use the skill that he’d shown me while I was training under him as a child, one that would unleash a thousand attacks in a single instant. By any standard, even attempting to endure such an onslaught was a reckless move...but I wanted to see it. No, not just that. I’d already seen it before. I wanted to *experience* it.

So, it was out of pure curiosity that I said, “Yeah. I’m ready.” The words had just spilled out of my mouth.

“All right. Here I come.”

My instructor’s sword vanished. At that same moment, I realized that a dancing storm made up of thousands of swords—well, thousands of afterimages—had me entirely surrounded.

[Parry]

My body moved on its own, reacting to the incoming strikes. There was no time to think—the most I could do was parry. Had I done anything else, I wouldn’t have survived this long. Thankfully, the sword in my hand was light; I would probably be able to keep up.

[Thousand Blades]

Thousands of sparks burst around us. There was a blinding flash each time our swords connected, accompanied by the feeling of metal being chipped away ever so slightly. Hundreds—thousands—of exchanges happened in the blink of an eye, whittling away our weapons just as quickly.

My instructor was fast—*unbelievably* fast. And as I was caught in the throes of my astonishment, his sword got *even faster*. It began to feel inevitable that he would get through my guard.

“Incredible...” I muttered.

Sparks drifted through the air like falling leaves. I was caught up in a skill that I’d admired ever since I was a child—a height that existed far, far above me.

Our swords continued to clash, and their blades continued to wear away. Even the metal that did remain was warping from the immense heat that each blow generated. Everything was happening too quickly for me to confirm it with my eyes, but I could sense that our swords were getting thinner.

This wasn't good. It would only be a matter of time before our weapons gave out entirely. My instructor didn't seem to care, though—he continued slashing at me, focusing on nothing else.

The force behind my opponent's every swing was unimaginably oppressive, and his swordsmanship was downright terrifying. His attacks whirled around me like a tempest, striking from every direction at once. They came at me so quickly and in such great number that my eyes stood no chance of keeping up. But still...

[Parry]

All of my training with Gilbert had done me well. I was just barely able to catch the torrential rain of sword strikes in my peripheral vision, allowing me to carefully deal with them, one by one.

The scattering sparks grew more and more intense until they completely blanketed my surroundings. From a distance, I must have looked like a ball of raging flames. Meanwhile, the silver sword in my hand was quickly disappearing. What remained of the blade would surely snap at any moment. I couldn't afford to slow down, though; letting even one of my instructor's strikes through would see my body cut to pieces.

I couldn't even blink. My instructor wasn't giving me a moment's pause. I just kept parrying, so single-minded in my focus that I'd even forgotten to breathe. I didn't have a clue how much time had passed.

After all that time with Gilbert, I'd started to believe that I was at least a bit stronger. I'd even thought that I might be able to come out of an encounter with a Goblin Emperor in one piece. Now that I was up against *true* strength, though, I realized just how far I was from obtaining it myself. My instructor's power was genuine, and even greater than I'd ever imagined. Dealing with him—and with Gilbert, for that matter—forced me to recognize that the world was full of people I couldn't even begin to measure up to.

[Thousand Blades]

[Parry]

At last, with a piercing shriek, our swords broke cleanly in two. The severed metal spun high up into the air before falling back down and stabbing deep into the earth.

“I guess we’re done, then,” my instructor said, his stance relaxing as he looked over the blades stuck in the ground. “I’m sorry that you had to indulge me. Still, I’m truly glad to have been able to see your growth firsthand.”

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize. I was overjoyed to see your skill up close again. Though, if I’m being honest...I seriously thought I was going to die.”

“Is that so?”

We both laughed, still gripping what remained of our broken swords. The sun had at some point reached the horizon, dyeing our surroundings red. It reminded me of when I was a child. More than fifteen years ago, my instructor and I had crossed blades until the sun had set, exactly like this.

“Noor,” my instructor said. “Lady Lynneburg, Ines...and Rolo too. Keep them all safe. When the time comes, I know I can count on you.”

“Of course,” I replied. “I’ll do everything I can for them.”

To be fair, they were all terrifyingly strong on their own, so I doubted that my assistance would actually be needed. Still, in the extraordinarily unlikely event that it was, I intended to do whatever I could. That was why I had endured so much training with Gilbert in the first place.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” my instructor said. He returned the two broken blades to their scabbards, then quietly departed, leaving me on my own. He had a faint smile on his face as he went.

Chapter 69: The Morning of the Departure

On the morning we were to leave for Mithra, I made my way to our agreed-upon meeting place: a spot on the outskirts of the capital that was meant to be free of people. It was still pretty dark out when I arrived, but I caught sight of a small figure already standing there. Wasn't that...?

"You're here sooner than expected, Lynne," I said.

"I am, aren't I?" she replied. "I was too nervous to sleep, so I came early." She was dressed the same as always, wearing her usual attire that looked easy to move around in.

"Now that I think about it...this is our first time seeing each other in quite a while, right?"

"Indeed. I think our last meeting was when we had to take your measurements for the clothes you'll wear in Mithra."

"That long ago, huh?"

Lynne had arrived with a group of men, who had ended up measuring me all over. That had been two months ago now, and the time since had positively flown by—probably because my training with Gilbert had been so much fun in its own, strange way.

"It looks like Rolo's here too," Lynne remarked.

I turned to follow her gaze and saw a familiar young boy heading toward us. Something about him seemed unusual, though. I couldn't put my finger on what at first, but as he came closer, it suddenly hit me.

"Rolo..." I said, "have you grown taller?"

He blinked at me, then said, "Mm-hmm. Just a little, though."

"That's still impressive, considering that it's only been about two months since we last saw each other."

"I guess you're right. It must be because I'm eating properly. I have you two and the others to thank for that."

“That’s good to hear.”

As we casually exchanged greetings, Ines came into view. Her silver armor gleamed even in the dim light, and her golden hair flowed behind her as she walked. She went straight over to Lynne and gave a small bow.

“Lady Lynneburg. The coach is almost ready for our departure. It should arrive here soon after they finish loading the luggage.”

“Thank you, Ines.”

After delivering her brief report, Ines approached me next. She seemed a lot more welcoming than before, though I couldn’t pinpoint why. Maybe it was the change in her bearing. In any case, I was relieved to see it.

Ines gave me a slight smile. “Sir Noor, it would appear that we are in your care once again. A pleasure.”

“I’m in yours too,” I replied. “I’ll be counting on you, Ines.”

“I shall be relying on you as well. Now, I must momentarily excuse myself—there are still preparations I need to make. I’ll see you later.”

“Sure. See you.”

As I watched Ines hurry off, I breathed a small sigh of relief; she had said that our *coach* was almost ready. To tell the truth, it had occurred to me the previous evening that we might be flying atop that black dragon again, but my fears had apparently been unfounded.

“I guess it was obvious that we wouldn’t be traveling by dragon...” I muttered.

“Do you mean Rala?” Rolo asked.

“Rala...?” I gave him a curious look, not recognizing the name.

“The dragon. You named it, Noor. Don’t you remember?”

“I did...?”

“Mm-hmm. You said that ‘the Dragon of Calamity’ was a mouthful and suggested that we give her a shorter name like ‘Rala’ instead. I passed that on to her, and she really liked it.”

I took a moment to dig through my memories. “Now that you mention it...I

vaguely remember saying something like that."

Back when we had discussed naming the dragon, my first instinct had been to give it a name similar to "Rolo," since he was the one looking after it. I really hadn't put much thought into it at the time, nor had I expected them to go along with my suggestion.

Well, I supposed that as long as the person—uh, dragon—in question was happy, it was fine.

"You said 'she,'" I noted. "Is the dragon female?"

"No," Rolo replied. "Dragons don't have genders in the way that people do. But she asked to be called a girl, and she gets moody when she isn't."

"Yeah? I guess 'to each their own' applies to dragons too, huh?"

Lynne then interjected, having been listening to our conversation. "Instructor, riding on Rala *was* considered, but, well... Due to her size, she's rather conspicuous—as well as a little intimidating. She's currently enjoying some rest elsewhere."

"I...see..." was my eventual response. So they *had* thought about traveling by dragon?! Well, it would certainly be faster than by coach, and there would be fewer monster attacks to deal with in the sky. Thinking about it like that, it almost seemed like a good idea. Almost. I still *hated* heights. Just remembering the return flight from the Magic Empire made me want to pass out again...

I decided to change the topic.

"Oh, right. I don't see anyone else here. Are we the only ones going to Mithra?"

"Yes," Lynne said. "It will only be Rolo, Ines, and the two of us. Ines will take the reins, as she did last time. A small group is able to move and act more smoothly in an emergency, so my brother and father both suggested that we limit ourselves to a capable few."

"I guess that's true." Hearing about a potential "emergency" had me a little worried, but I figured that we would probably be fine. We were going to have Lynne and Ines with us, after all.

Before I could think much else, I noticed traces of a voice come from somewhere above my head. There was a strange figure drifting buoyantly through the sky high above us, and it was coming closer. Whatever it was, it was *obviously* suspicious—but as I deliberated whether to pick up a nearby stone and throw it at the intruder, it waved.

"Ho ho! There you are! I arrived in the nick of time, I see!"

"Instructor Oken?" Lynne asked, sounding surprised.

The suspicious figure flying through the air was none other than my magician instructor. He gently touched down, then proffered Lynne one of the two leather bags he was holding. "Here you go, young lady," he said. "A farewell gift. Take it with you."

Lynne looked inside the bag. "But isn't this...?! Instructor, are you sure?!"

"Certain. It's just a little something to keep you safe. Take it. Though I would rather you not have to use it at all, of course."

"Then...thank you. I'll gladly accept it."

Lynne tucked the whatever-it-was into her breast pocket, at which point my magician instructor retrieved a small object from the other bag. "Now, Rolo...*this* is yours," he said.

"Mine?"

"Indeed. If anything, this is the main item I wanted to hand over today."

Rolo accepted the object and examined it closely. "A ring? Is this...?"

"It is. And yes, it contains *that* gem. You should take it with you. You know how to use it, I assume?"

"Mm-hmm..."

"It isn't something you'll want everyone to see, so keep it in this bag until you need it."

"Okay. Thank you, Oken."

"Ho ho! Think nothing of it!" My magician instructor grinned and gave Rolo a thumbs-up, seemingly satisfied.

Rolo returned the ring to its small leather bag, which he then tied to his waist.

“Instructor?” Lynne said. “May I ask what that ring is?”

My magician instructor chuckled. “I’m afraid that not even you can know...is what I *should* say. But needs must, I suppose! I’ll let you in on the secret, but you mustn’t tell *anybody* else, hmm? Anybody! If they find out about it over in Mithra, it’ll be...very bad.”

He leaned over and whispered something into her ear. A moment later, Lynne’s head shot up, and she stared at him in shock. “Is that truly possible?!” she exclaimed.

“Ho ho! Naturally! I’m a genius, don’t you know! Well, it was young Rein who made the original proposal and ordered the materials, but still—’twas I who made his absurd idea possible, and on such short notice too! In this great big world of ours, only *I* am capable of such a feat! Lately, I’ve been scaring even myself with my own brilliance!”

“Considering that, you certainly took your time with it,” came a new voice. “It was only a week ago that you came begging for my help with tears in your eyes, saying that you wouldn’t finish in time for their departure.”

Lynne turned to face the newcomer. “Instructor Sain?”

I turned to look as well. She was right—my cleric instructor was standing before us, wearing a kind smile.

“Sain...” my magician instructor grumbled. “Shouldn’t you be a *little* more delicate when discussing such matters? Let me make a good show of myself before my disciples! At least now, if not at other times!”

“My apologies, but I can’t do that; lying is a sin, you know. In the first place, wasn’t your plan to give those items to them *yesterday*? I assisted you quite frantically when you told me that. Why did you wait until now?”

“W-Well, I couldn’t help it! I suddenly thought of a way to improve them even further! I’ve got my dignity as a magical-tool engineer to uphold, you know. Besides, presenting them at the very last minute gets everybody more excited, no? Call that a tasteful bit of consideration on my part. You understand, don’t you?”

“Not at all. In fact, I distinctly remember that ‘consideration’ of yours landing us in some rather dire predicaments. Or have you forgotten about those?”

In contrast to my cleric instructor, who was still wearing a smile, my magician instructor looked to be on the verge of tears. He was clearly at a disadvantage—actually, it looked more like he was being scolded.

Had my cleric instructor always been this scary...?

“Ah, ease off of him, Sain,” said a new voice. “He made it in the end, didn’t he?”

Another added, “Indeed. Let it pass. This is the usual for him, anyway.”

“I believe it being ‘the usual’ is the very basis of Sain’s argument,” said a third.

Before I knew it, three more familiar faces had joined us.

“Instructor Dandalg, Instructor Sig, Instructor Carew,” Lynne said, greeting them in turn. “You came.”

“Just to see you off,” my warrior instructor noted. “Otherwise, we don’t have any particular business here.” He seemed to be speaking for my swordsman and thief instructors as well.

Then, *another* person joined us: Lynne’s brother. “Lynne, I need to speak with you about your schedule for when you arrive,” he said. “Could you join me over there for a moment?”

“Of course,” Lynne replied, then followed after her brother. The two stopped a short distance away and fell into a discussion over an assortment of documents.

I didn’t really have anything to do, so I distracted myself with the surrounding scenery—until my magician instructor approached me, at least. Maybe he was feeling uncomfortable around the others after my cleric instructor had given him such an earful.

“Do you need something from me?” I asked.

“Do I *need* something? How distant! I simply came over to say goodbye! Ah, but I don’t have anything to give you, I’m afraid. Sorry if you got your hopes up!”

“No, it’s okay. I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“Ho ho! You’re all business these days, I see! Well, I wouldn’t have been able to give you anything better than *that*, anyway.” He smiled, and gestured to my black sword. “You always carry it around quite openly, but it’s a rather priceless artifact, don’t you know. Make sure you take good care of it.”

“Of course. I always try to.”

Though the sword was sturdy enough to withstand whatever I used it for without looking any worse for wear, I never failed to tend to it afterward. In fact, during my days spent pile-driving on construction sites, I’d gotten into a routine of taking it to one of the city’s bathhouses after work, then cleaning it from hilt to tip in one of the baths.

“That’s good to hear,” my magician instructor said. “Though I suppose it wouldn’t be easy to damage in the first place, no matter how reckless you were with it.”

As we continued to chat, a large coach pulled up nearby. It seemed that everything was ready for our departure; all we had to do now was board. But a moment later—

“What was that?” I murmured.

An ominous cry had caught my attention; it had come from somewhere above us and in the direction we were about to head. A quick look skyward revealed a number of strange shapes, so far away that they were almost just specks. I strained my eyes, and this time I noticed...wings, beating up and down as whatever they belonged to approached us. My first thought was that they were birds, but... No, they were much too large for that to be the case.

“That’s a wyvern flight,” my swordsman instructor said, answering my unspoken question. “We’re coming up to the time of year when they naturally appear, but...there are far too many in that group.”

My warrior instructor had taken the large pair of binoculars hanging from his waist and was now looking through them. “This isn’t good,” he said. “That flight’s been driven [Berserk]. They’re unusually agitated, so it’ll mean trouble if they reach the city. This seems...a little too suspicious to be a coincidence, don’t

you think?”

“I *was* thinking that things have been rather quiet recently...” my cleric instructor mused. “And now, today of all days, in this place of all places... It does indeed make one wonder whether this really is a coincidence.”

“That flight’s several times larger than the ones we normally see each year,” my thief instructor noted. “I find it hard to believe that it’s natural. Sorry about this; it would appear there was a hole in my warning net.”

“Ho ho... You’ve nothing to apologize for, Carew,” my magician instructor added. “Hmph. This is absolutely something *she* would do, the old hag... She sets fire to people’s homes, then drops by to aggressively peddle her ‘barriers’ as if we all can’t see what she’s doing! She hasn’t changed a bit. I...knew that I hated her.”

As my instructors griped, the wyvern flight grew closer and closer. I could tell from where we were standing that the creatures were big—not enough to contend with Rala, but big nonetheless. Their numbers were nothing to sneeze at either. Countless wings beat the air and cast shadows that seemed to darken our surroundings.

“My sword won’t reach that high,” my swordsman instructor remarked.

“Where’s Mianne?” my warrior instructor asked. “We could ask her to drop them all.”

“At home,” my thief instructor replied. “She had to mind her children. We wouldn’t make it back in time if we went to retrieve her.”

“You’re not saying what I think you’re saying, are you?”

“It appears we have no choice...” my cleric instructor said. “We’ll need to rely on Oken.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

My instructors all turned uneasily to the old magician, who was still standing next to me. He smiled gently in response, then leaned close to me and whispered into my ear.

“I can do *twelve* now, by the way.”

“Twelve?” I asked. “Twelve what?”

I wasn’t sure what my old instructor was trying to tell me; the change in topic was too sudden. I supposed that he *was* getting to the age when a person was prone to rambling without warning... Maybe the surprise wyvern flight had shocked him into senility.

“Hmph. Playing dumb, are you?” my instructor whispered, leaning in even closer. “I heard what you did. I’ll have you know that, with a little effort, ten is a piece of cake for me. Don’t get carried away simply because you made a little quick progress!”

Now I was even more confused.

“Listen here, Noor. They might call me ‘Ninespell,’ but that doesn’t mean that’s my limit. Not even close. I only stopped at nine because nobody was even close to catching up to me; it was lonesome enough at the height I’d climbed to, so I saw no reason to proceed even further! I also thought it might be *unbecoming* of a gentleman my age to appear so worked up and obsessive, so I deliberately held back. There was nothing more to it, and that’s the truth!”

“I...see?”

“To prove it, I’ll give you a taste of what I can *really* do. Here, look!”

My magician instructor raised a hand, and six small, floating orbs of lightning manifested around it with a *crackle*. He made another six appear with a wave of his other hand, then sent all twelve darting through the air toward the wyvern flight as though they had a mind of their own.

“Ho ho! Behold!” he announced. “*This* is what I can do with my [Fusion] when I get serious!”

The old man threw his arms up into the air, prompting the twelve luminescent orbs to jerk violently and then start fusing together. Dark clouds covered what had previously been a broad expanse of blue, growing and expanding at a rapid pace, while writhing bolts of lightning coiled around and between them like snakes. It wasn’t long before the entire sky was dark.

Then, an intense thunderstorm began.

For as far as my eye could see, the weather had changed in an instant. It was a staggering sight. As the relentless rain crashed down on my magician instructor like a waterfall, he turned his raised hands toward the ground, then brought them straight down.

“[Thunderstorm].”

Everything was dyed white as a fresh, column-shaped lightning bolt appeared in the sky above, bright enough to sear my eyes and thicker than anything I’d ever seen. A fraction of a second later, there was a deafening roar as the massive bolt impacted the ground, rocking the very earth we were standing on and charging the air with crackling static.



“Incredible...” Lynne murmured, her eyes glued to the spectacle. She said

nothing more; it seemed that she'd been struck speechless.

I was just as stunned. Not a single wyvern had survived the lightning bolt, if one could even call it that; "natural disaster" felt like a more appropriate description to me. All that remained of them were scorched black shapes that began to drop from the sky.

"Ho ho! Something like this is a trifle for someone such as I!"

My magician instructor snapped his fingers, and just like that, the black clouds dispersed. The morning sun once again cast its rays upon us, and thanks to the intense downpour, a large rainbow arced across the sky.

"I imagine *she* will only continue to send harassment of this nature at the capital," my magician instructor said. He then turned to us and continued, "But that is none of your concern, my dear travelers. Head to Mithra with your hearts unburdened, for the city is safe in our hands!"

The old man then gave us his most enthusiastic thumbs-up, which he punctuated with a merry burst of laughter.

Chapter 70: The City of Mithra

Despite the sudden fuss of a wyvern flight attacking us before our departure, our journey to Mithra was going smoothly. In fact, it was going *so* smoothly that it was kind of anticlimactic. I'd been slightly on edge in the coach, wondering if a goblin or some other ferocious monster would attack us, but my concerns proved to be completely unfounded.

With Ines at the reins, our coach made an astonishingly swift pace along the highway. Apparently, it had been made specifically for this journey, using specialized equipment—both magical and mundane—procured from the Magic Empire. It was significantly faster than the previous coach we'd used, which seemed to explain our lack of monster encounters—they couldn't even catch up to us.

Rolo and I spent the ride watching the scenery rush past us, and we reached Mithra in what seemed like no time at all. There had been a number of interesting-seeming towns en route, but we had passed through them all as we headed straight for our destination.

Personally, I'd wanted to kick back a little more and enjoy the view from the coach, but we hadn't been able to afford that luxury. My magician instructor had done an excellent job of dealing with the wyvern flight, but he'd managed to delay our departure in the process. The intense lightning had blown huge craters in the earth all around us, the stone paving of the highways had been torn up far and wide, and the heavy rain had turned the area all muddy. It had taken a while to get everything ready again.

Still, I'd gotten to appreciate tranquil prairies, wide-open plains, and magnificent fields of cultivated land, so I was pretty satisfied on the whole.

Our coach slowed when we entered the city of Mithra, finally allowing us a leisurely look at our surroundings. Knowing that I might not get another chance, I stuck myself to the window and stared outside.

"So this is the capital of Mithra, huh?"

Perhaps because of the excellent weather, the city looked nothing but peaceful. Occasionally, we passed open areas where trees basked in the sunlight, their leaves swaying in the wind, and children playing in plazas decorated with water fountains.

I'd expected a lot from my first trip to a foreign country, and it wasn't disappointing: the city's atmosphere felt completely different from the Kingdom of Clays. Mithra was a country focused around a religion, which explained the churches I saw at regular intervals, lined with stone statues. There were also plenty of sights I couldn't really recognize at all. Each time I saw one, I would ask what it was as though I were a curious child, and Lynne would graciously explain.

As our coach made its way down one of the major streets, a massive, imposing building with grandiose architecture came fully into view. It was large enough that we had seen it before even entering the city, so Lynne had already told me about it.

"Is that the Cathedral you mentioned?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "That building is the heart of the Theocracy: the Cathedral of Holy Mithra, commonly known as just 'the Cathedral.' It is the most significant location in the country, and the symbol of the Theocracy's government and religion."

It was fascinating, seeing all these buildings centered around religion. I guessed this was what people meant when they spoke about things like national identity.

The Cathedral exuded a unique quality that was obvious at a glance, as expected of the most important building in Mithra. Its impressive size had allowed me to see it from outside the city, and even from so far away, I'd been able to make out its intricate ornamentation. Constructing it must have been a painstaking feat, to say the least. From that alone, I could tell that the Theocracy cherished it greatly.

"Mithra's amazing..." I muttered.

Traveling was such a unique experience, and I was genuinely glad that I'd come. Just hearing about the Cathedral from Lynne had excited me, but now

that I was seeing it up close, it far surpassed my imagination. In fact, every sight I could see through the coach window caused me to sigh in admiration.

"What a beautiful city."

I truly meant it. No matter where I looked, I couldn't see a single piece of litter lying about. Not only that, the city was abundant in elaborate architecture and ornamentation, as though it were itself a work of art. Just getting to see it made the journey here worthwhile—though I wasn't going to say no to staying and enjoying our trip for a little while longer.

"Indeed," Lynne said. "I think it's quite beautiful too. Mithra's capital is also known as the Holy City, and some adherents of the religion worship the city itself as sacred ground. It's a good demonstration of how beloved the place is to them."

"I get how they feel," I replied. "The atmosphere here's completely different from that of the royal capital."

But at the same time, something felt off about the city. Maybe things here were *too* different. Ever since we'd arrived, I'd noticed that there was a strange lack of noise. The main street we were traveling along was crowded with people, but they barely spoke—just enough that you could feel they were there. I also heard children every now and again, but that was it. I'd only ever known the royal capital, so I wasn't sure what other cities were like, but still... Everywhere seemed unnaturally hushed.

"The city's pretty quiet, isn't it?" I noted.

"It is indeed."

"Does that have something to do with the event we'll be attending?"

"No, the city has always been like this. I do not wish to say this too loudly, but..." Lynne activated some kind of skill, and a transparent film formed around us in the coach, cutting off the sound coming from outside. I'd seen this before; it was [Concealment]. She then continued in a whisper, "In this city, you are always being listened to. No matter how trivial your conversation might be."

"Listened to...?" I repeated.

“Yes. I do not know the exact method, but specialized members of Mithra’s clergy use their barrier techniques everywhere to gather information. I’ve heard that they are particularly precise, and that their net is notably wide. Though it hasn’t been publicly admitted, the citizenry are generally aware.”

“They really do that?”

“They do. That is why everyone refrains from speaking unless they have to. The few years I spent studying here were a tad claustrophobic.”

“That does seem kind of rough. I guess there’s nothing I’d worry about others hearing in everyday conversation...but I still wouldn’t feel great about it. A short stay seems fine, but for anything longer than that, I think I’d enjoy life in the Kingdom more.”

“I feel the same way. However, I believe that most are supportive of Mithra’s surveillance; they consider it a necessity to maintain public safety. In the first place, it was established under the order of the high priestess, whom the devout adherents to the Church of Mithra truly revere.”

“I see. It sounds like they’re really devoted to her.”

“Yes. Their fervor is also the reason the city is so clean; it is one of the many ways they contribute to their religion. That is why I would advise against speaking ill of the high priestess. Even a careless joke will earn you a nighttime visit from a crowd of inquisitors...or so I’ve heard. Though it is rare back in the royal capital, the followers of the Church of Mithra here in the Theocracy are particularly zealous.”

“I don’t really know much about the Church in the first place. What’s it like?”

“Well...” Lynne stared up at the roof of the coach for several moments, deep in thought. “Like you, I am only viewing it from the outside, so I am far from an expert on the matter...but the Church of Mithra—formally known as the Church of *Holy* Mithra—is a relatively new religion. It arose approximately two hundred and fifty years ago, with High Priestess Astirra as its founder. That is, the *current* high priestess. She is both the religion’s leading figure and its origin point. From the founding of the country until now, she has held complete religious authority on top of being the true political power of the Theocracy. There is little one can say about the Church of Mithra without mentioning her.”

“Wait...she was the *founding* high priestess? And she’s still alive?”

“Yes. High Priestess Astirra is a half-elf, someone who has inherited the blood of the elves of legend, and that is the reason for her long life span. It is said that she is around three hundred years old...but that is no more than a theory. Prying is considered rude, and because the Church’s adherents regard the high priestess as sacred, information about her is hard to come by. That said, if one simply looks through history, records confirm that she is at least older than two hundred and fifty.”

“Uh...right. So, in short...she’s lived a really, really long time?”

“Yes. She established the Holy Theocracy of Mithra on the principles of providing for orphans and the poor, using her own wealth and the teachings she received from Holy Mithra’s divine revelation. It was through her efforts that the Holy City was eventually built, and the Church has obtained more and more followers ever since. That isn’t all, though; because of the tremendous domestic support she has acquired through her charity for the poor and support for the orphaned—whose orphanages have been here from the very beginning—she now has considerable influence in many other countries as well.”

“This high priestess sounds like a really great person.”

Lynne hesitated for a brief moment before she said, “Indeed. Her tale paints her as the very picture of a saint. However, in truth...there are whispers of certain unpleasant rumors surrounding her.”

“Unpleasant rumors?”

“Yes. But the topic is considered taboo, and discussing it publicly is—”

“My lady...” Ines interrupted from the reins of the coach. “We will soon enter the Cathedral grounds. For the sake of caution, I would advise you to watch your words.”

“Thank you, Ines. You’re right.” Lynne turned to me. “My apologies, Instructor Noor, but we must leave things there for now. From here on, our surroundings will be rather sensitive to such topics. I must ask that we keep conversation to a minimum.”

“Right. Got it.”

Lynne had already told me a lot more than I'd wanted to know, so I was satisfied. She dismissed her [Concealment] after I gave my response. Looking ahead of our coach, I realized that we'd gotten quite near to the Cathedral. It was larger and even more solemn up close.

A sudden thought came to me. "By the way...we're going to be attending the coming-of-age ceremony in the Cathedral, right? I know it's a bit late, but...what exactly should I do there?"

Lynne's face lit up in realization. "I...I'm so sorry! I was so occupied with our preparations that I completely forgot to explain things to you, Instructor!" She cleared her throat, sat up straight, and then began:

"Once we enter the Cathedral grounds, we'll be guided to our guest lodgings. Then, after spending the night there, both Rolo and I will attend tomorrow's lunch event, which will also be a ball, and the evening banquet. We should see Holy Prince Tirrence there. He's the son of High Priestess Astirra, whom I mentioned earlier. As for you, Instructor, you will accompany Rolo and me."

In summary, I only needed to be there. And, wait...had I heard her correctly?

"Hold on," I said. "The high priestess... Do you mean the one you just told me about? The amazing old woman who's lived for hundreds of years? *I'm* going to meet *her*?"

I was suddenly feeling apprehensive; was it okay for me to even be in the same building as someone like her? Wouldn't I be extremely out of place? I hadn't even begun to prepare for anything like that.

"Of course," Lynne said. "Since you're here as my attendant and guard, Instructor, you will be right there by my side. Though, strictly speaking...your role is simply a pretext for your attendance. I won't mind in the slightest if you feel the need to 'act independently.'"

"Really?"

"Yes. Should anything...*unforeseen* occur, please act according to your own judgment. After the time we have spent together, I don't doubt that you will be the first person to notice anything unusual."

Anything "unusual," huh? Lynne had told me that the coming-of-age

ceremony would be dangerous, so I'd gotten myself ready to an extent. Now that I was hearing it straight from her mouth again, though, I couldn't help feeling extremely unsettled.

"Right..." I said. "It sounds like something serious is going to happen at this coming-of-age ceremony, huh?"

"I do not wish to make assumptions, but yes, that is quite likely."

"We're not going to get stabbed in the back or anything, are we?"

Lynne paused. "To be honest, I'm not sure *what* might happen. I'm sorry that you're only hearing this now."

"No, you gave me a rough idea a while back, so that's more than enough. I probably wouldn't be able to remember a more detailed explanation anyway. Don't worry, I'm sure everything will work out okay."

Dangerous or not, this was a simple coming-of-age ceremony at the end of the day. And since it was being thrown by such a magnificent city, I was curious to see what it would be like. We'd come this far, so I figured that I might as well enjoy myself.

"I'm truly sorry, Instructor. For forcing my circumstances upon you like this."

"Not at all. You don't need to apologize. To be honest, I'm kind of looking forward to being surprised by whatever happens."

Lynne's expression had been gloomy this whole time, but it gave way to a smile when she heard my words. "Of course," she said. "I'll be relying on you, Instructor."

Seeing her smile calmed me down a little, but our destination seemed so unbelievably intimidating that I couldn't shake my unease. Being honest, I hadn't completely understood Lynne's explanation...but I *had* understood that the high priestess was a widely respected and historically irreplaceable figure. She had lived for hundreds of years, during which she had constructed this beautiful city from the ground up. And now, I was going to meet her. Just thinking about it made me kind of nervous.

"I guess I'll need to brace myself..." I muttered.

“Indeed,” Lynne said.

I would need to be extremely careful. Given her age, causing any sudden surprises for the high priestess risked accidentally shortening her life span or something...right?

Chapter 71: Holy Prince Tirrence

“We have been awaiting your arrival, Lady Lynneburg of the Kingdom of Clays. We welcome you and your attendants. This way, please.”

After our coach had entered the Cathedral grounds, it had pulled into a boarding area. We’d stopped there and alighted, at which point a woman in a white robe had greeted us.

“I shall show you to your rooms,” she said.

“Thank you,” Lynne replied.

We followed the woman into the Cathedral. After passing through its magnificent, ornate doors and through an awfully wide hallway, we came to an open, dome-shaped area connected to various other hallways. A quick glance down them revealed an innumerable number of doors leading to what I assumed were individual rooms.

“Wow...” I uttered. “This place is like a city of its own.”

“Indeed,” the white-robed woman replied. “Because of the Cathedral’s large, complex construction, it is said that anyone who gets lost will never find their way out again. Please be careful not to go astray.”

“Right. Got it.”

We followed the woman up a flight of stairs, heading deeper into the Cathedral. Maybe it was the complexity of the layout, but the interior seemed larger than the building had looked from the outside. I thought we’d already ventured quite far inside, but it seemed as though we weren’t even close to our rooms. Our guide was right; if I got separated from the others, I’d never find my way out. If I somehow lost sight of everyone, in the worst-case scenario, I’d need to break a window to escape.

“This way, please.”

After a while, our guide led us into a small room with a large window. The window was almost *too* large for such a comparatively tiny space, but I wasn’t

complaining—there was a vibrant courtyard visible outside, and the greenery seemed to burst through the glass to meet us.

Still, the room was strange. There was nothing in it that resembled furniture, and aside from the door and the large window, there were no other ways in or out.

They weren't expecting the four of us to spend the night together in here, were they?

But as that thought crossed my mind, our guide stepped onto a glowing bluish-white pattern on the floor and suddenly disappeared.

"What just happened...?" I asked, bewildered. "Where did she go?"

"Is this your first time seeing a transfer barrier, Instructor?" Lynne asked. "People use them for travel—I believe this is a vertical one. They're quite common in Mithra."

"Transfer barrier?" I repeated, not recognizing the term. "For vertical travel?"

"Yes. The Cathedral is quite tall, so these systems are in place to assist with moving between floors. It's very convenient—you simply have to step onto one and it will transfer you. We should go; our guide must be waiting for us."

I paused. "I just have to step onto it...?"

"Yes. Onto that spot there."

I gingerly approached the point that Lynne had indicated. The moment my foot touched it, the view before my very eyes warped, and my body felt as though it were floating. Before I knew it, the scenery outside the window was much farther down than before. That wasn't all, though; for some reason, the floor beneath my feet was transparent, giving me a bird's-eye view of the courtyard garden that I'd seen earlier.

Immediately, I got goosebumps.

The transfer had happened much quicker than I'd expected, and I was bad with heights. The sudden change in scenery outside the window, paired with the transparent floor, caused my knees to lock and my hands to tremble.

As I stood there, trying to get a grip on myself, Lynne, Rolo, and Ines appeared

in succession.

“We’re...pretty high up, huh?” I said.

“Indeed,” Lynne replied. “I believe the guest rooms are on the higher floors.”

“This way, please,” said our guide.

Together with the others, I followed after the white-robed woman, trying to loosen myself up all the while. It wasn’t long before we exited into another wide hallway. This one was decorated a lot more luxuriously than the ones we’d passed through earlier, with sophisticated statues and paintings lining its walls in impressive numbers. There were also ornate vases that seemed as though they would suck you in just from looking at them, and swords of so many fascinating shapes and sizes. I didn’t have an eye for how much these kinds of things were worth, but I knew they must have been quite valuable.

I’d expected as much, but it seemed that we were getting lodgings meant for pretty important guests. It made me want to wander around and properly take everything in. Had I come here alone, I probably wouldn’t have even been allowed through the front doors.

I continued down the hallway, feeling captivated by every curiosity we passed. The next thing I knew, we’d reached our destination.

“This suite is yours, Lady Lynneburg,” our guide explained. “Your young companion and attendant will stay here as well. The gentleman’s room is next door.”

“Thank you.”

“Someone will come for you tomorrow when you are needed. Until then, please spend your time at your leisure.”

“Of course. We shall wait for them to guide us.”

After that brief exchange, the white-robed woman left. We all did a quick check of our rooms before reconvening in the hallway.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“Let’s see...” Lynne paused to think. “We arrived rather late, so I was thinking that Ines, Rolo, and I would check our attire for tomorrow before turning in for

the night. What about you, Instructor?”

“Well...I was thinking of going for a stroll around the building, if that’s okay. There are so many things here that I’ve never seen before, so I was hoping to get a better look at them.”

“Is that so? If you believe that is for the best, Instructor, then I won’t object. However...” Lynne’s expression became slightly hesitant.

“Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“I’m afraid so. It won’t be long before nightfall. If you simply wish to go for a wander, then I believe it might be best to wait until tomorrow. Roaming around the Cathedral at night is usually prohibited.”

“Really? I guess I’ll sit tight in my room tonight, then. The view outside the window was certainly nice enough.”

During my short inspection of my room, I’d poked my head out of the large window, which had given me a distant view over the city. It hadn’t been for very long—I’d instinctively pulled my head back in again out of fear—but if I avoided looking straight down and kept my eyes on the horizon, I could enjoy the view just fine.

Mithra’s cityscape was beautiful; I doubted that I’d ever get sick of it. The sun was just setting, and the steeples of the churches dotted across the city looked all the more captivating in the evening glow. Coupled with the celebratory bonfires that had been lit everywhere in advance of tomorrow’s celebration, it was a magical sight. I could spend the entire evening admiring it.

“In that case, I shall see you tomorrow,” Lynne said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Good night.”

Just as we were about to go into our respective rooms, however, a green-haired boy came into view from down the hallway. Accompanying him were a number of people clad in peculiar white armor who appeared to be his guards.

“Ah, there you are!” the boy said. “You’re late, Lynne. Did you run into some trouble along the way? It feels like I’ve been waiting for you forever.”

“Holy Prince Tirrence.”

The boy—Holy Prince Tirrence, apparently—approached Lynne with a big smile on his face. They both looked to be similar in age, but he was a little taller than her. He didn't spare the rest of us a glance as he spoke.

"I was ever so eager to see you again, Lynne. You have no idea how overjoyed I am. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard that you were coming all this way to celebrate my birthday."

"It was a privilege to receive your invitation, Your Holy Highness." In contrast to the boy's friendly demeanor, Lynne was being stiff and formal. I recalled what she had told me earlier; this had to be the son of the high priestess, the most important person in the entire country.

The boy chuckled. "Oh, won't you stop being so distant, Lynne? We're betrothed, after all. As both of our families have recognized."

"With all due respect," Lynne said, "are you still insistent on spreading that *jest*? I do not recall agreeing to such an arrangement, and it most certainly was *not* agreed upon by both of our families. In the first place, my father was not even aware of the matter."



The boy let out another small laugh. “Really now? But my mother has already

declared it so. I'm sure you realize what that means, don't you?"

"Unfortunately not. I cannot even begin to comprehend how that has come to be," Lynne replied. She looked thoroughly displeased, even though the green-haired boy's carefree smile remained. Ever since their conversation had begun, the air had grown slightly static.

The boy huffed in amusement. "As headstrong as always, I see. You really are the only one, you know. The only one who can display such murderous intent to my face, that is."

"It isn't my intention to come across so harshly. But supposing that it were, I struggle to see why you would want to court such a person for marriage."

"You don't know? Well, that's exactly what's so wonderful about you. I take no interest in those who bend easily to money or power."

"Though I am honored that you would speak so highly of me, I am afraid that I cannot meet your expectations."

From the look of things, the boy wanted them to get along—but Lynne's expression was nothing but chilly. They seemed to be acquainted, but I wondered whether they were on bad terms.

"Always so disinterested..." the boy mused. "It's not that bad a deal, is it? Now that the Empire has brought about its own ruin in the east, the old power balance has crumbled, and *we* are now the preeminent power on the continent. Though your Kingdom possesses a number of talented individuals—quite talented indeed, given your routing of the imperial army—the attack has left you fatigued, has it not? If you were to become my consort, that would mean becoming the partner of the successor of the most influential person on the entire continent. We could provide you with any number of boons. I know you are intelligent enough to recognize that."

"I don't believe that such an arrangement would be in any way beneficial to my kingdom."

"It would be nothing *but* beneficial. Mithra's patronage would elevate the Kingdom's influence. Why do you reject this agreement when it is so obviously favorable? Do you know how long I have waited for you? In fact, why not

accompany me to my room right now? Come, leave those attendants of yours behind.” The green-haired boy airily beckoned to Lynne, still wearing his unfaltering smile.

“You must be joking.”

The tension in the air thickened the moment Lynne spoke. She was emanating an aura so sharp that it would probably run through anyone who got too close. Even from where I was standing beside her, I could practically feel it sticking into my skin like a blade. I could remember feeling the same thing from my swordsman instructor.

This was...bad, right?

“Holy Prince Tirrence, these jests of yours have gone too far,” Lynne said. “If you continue, I shall consider it a slight against my family and act accordingly. I presume you understand.”

Lynne then placed a hand on the hilt of the golden sword at her hip. The armored guards flanking the green-haired boy moved almost immediately to intercept her, while Ines likewise stepped forward to protect her lady. Between their respective charges, she and the guards stared each other down.

The boy chuckled again. “At ease, my dear guards. There’s nothing to be concerned about. She won’t do anything.”

“But, Your Holy Highness...”

“My lady,” Ines interjected, “please step back.”

“The holy prince is right, Ines—there’s no need for concern. This is no more than a *greeting*. It happens quite often when he and I meet.” Lynne turned to the green-haired boy. “Isn’t that right, Your Holy Highness?”

“Indeed, it does. And it should come as no surprise that we are so close. We have vowed to one day be together, after all.”

A few moments passed before Lynne retorted, “Though if you wish to continue *beyond* mere ‘greetings,’ our situation will change.”

“My, how terrifying! Your talent for intimidation is something else. All the same, it relieves me to see that you are your usual self. That’s my Lynne.”

The boy casually waved a hand, and the armored guards quietly returned to standing behind him. Ines also retreated to her position behind Lynne, who removed her hand from her sword. It looked as though things had calmed down a little.

“I would also ask you to refrain from making such flippant remarks,” Lynne said.

“Well, all else aside, I’m happy enough that you came,” the green-haired boy replied. “I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to my birthday party tomorrow.”

“Indeed. I’m looking forward to it as well—although I must remind you that I will *not* be able to meet your expectations in certain regards.”

The boy laughed. “I’m getting chills! Still, a warning.” His expression suddenly became serious, and he leaned closer to Lynne. “I would like you to understand that we are not in your family’s territory. I do not know what you have *prepared* for us, but you would be prudent not to do anything untoward.”

“I regret to inform you that I do not know what you are referring to.”

“Is that so?” The boy studied her for a moment. “Then I will not question you further. After all, whatever *it* is, I doubt it is a gift for me. I sincerely believe that avoiding unnecessary bloodshed would be best for both of us...but if you disagree, we will not shirk from it.”

“Again, I must apologize, but I do not know what you mean, Your Holy Highness.”

“Another thing: your attendant should refrain from calling my mother an ‘old woman,’ *whether you are inside your coach or not*. She is rather scary when angered, you know.”

“As am I,” Lynne said. “I told you that before.”

There was a moment of silence as the boy locked eyes with Lynne; then he burst into laughter. “Is that so? You truly are headstrong, aren’t you? It’s no wonder I fell in love with you at first sight. I wonder what you’ll have to show me tomorrow. Perhaps you *did* get me a gift. In any case, I suppose this will do for our reunion greeting. You and your attendants must be tired from your long

journey.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

“Oh, I cannot wait for tomorrow to come. I’ll see you then, Lynne. I wish you a good night and sweet dreams.”

The boy waved, then turned and headed off down the hallway with his armored guards in tow. Once he was out of sight, Lynne exhaled deeply and visibly relaxed.

“He’s gone at last,” she said.

“What was that about?” I asked. “He was the...holy prince, right? Or something like that.”

“Yes, that was him. You can consider him a...friend of mine, from when I studied abroad here.”

“Right...”

Unless my eyes had deceived me, Lynne and the green-haired boy had *not* appeared to be friends. Still, his family was important enough to warrant Lynne coming all the way here, so he probably had a lot on his shoulders that a regular person like me would never understand.

“I’m sorry about that,” Lynne said. “The suddenness of that reunion caused me to lose my composure. It seems I’m more tired than I thought. If it isn’t too much trouble, I think I should turn in for the night.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” I replied. “Get some rest.”

We said good night and went into our respective rooms. Lynne had mentioned that she hadn’t slept much the previous night, and she certainly looked the part. It really would be wise for her to get some rest.

That night, I finished my daily training routine while gazing out the window, admiring the small lights that dotted the beautiful cityscape. Even as I climbed into bed, I was immersed in the lingering memories of the journey we’d taken.

Chapter 72: The Morning of the Ball

For once, I woke up in a very comfortable bed.

“Still before sunrise, huh?” I muttered.

The sky outside the intricately ornamented window was still the deep, gloomy blue of predawn. Even still, the faint light was enough to grant me an excellent view of the city of Mithra.

No matter where I was, I loved daybreak. Everything was still quiet, as though the entire world were asleep, but I would be able to see people here and there, trickling from buildings. Watching them always gave me the feeling that the city was coming to life—that the day was about to begin.

The previous night, I’d gone to bed early after doing the bare minimum number of sword swings for my usual training routine. The room I was staying in was pretty extravagant, with a separate bathroom where I could use as much hot water as I wanted, so I’d been able to give myself a thorough, refreshing clean after my exercise.

My room also contained a huge bowl of fruit, which I was allowed to eat from as I pleased. After taking a few pieces to quench my thirst, I’d gone to sleep in my fluffy bed, gazing at the view outside my window.

Owing to that, I was in perfect condition.

“Right, guess I’d better change.”

I promptly decided to put on the clothes that Lynne had ordered specifically for me to wear during the ceremony. I wasn’t used to such attire, so it took me a while and some trial and error to wrangle them on, but I managed in the end.

It was probably a bit early for a wander, but the sun was up now—well, more or less—so I wanted to make up for the tour I’d missed out on last night. I stepped into the hallway intending to be quiet, trying not to wake Lynne and the others who were probably still asleep...but then I saw that Ines was standing in front of their room, as though on guard.

“Sir Noor,” she remarked. “You’re up early.”

“I didn’t know you were awake, Ines,” I replied. “Are Lynne and Rolo still asleep?”

“My lady is currently changing. She and Rolo are giving their clothes one final check.”

“Yeah? I’m surprised everyone’s up so early.” Lynne had seemed exhausted yesterday, so I’d expected her to sleep for at least a bit longer.

“They did turn in quite early last night. Based on your attire, I assume you’ve already finished your own preparations?”

“Yep. Thought I’d better do them sooner rather than later. What about you, Ines? You’re dressed the same as you were yesterday. Are you going to change later?”

“No, I will wear this to the event.”

“You will?”

“Yes. I am to be our guard, and this attire serves that purpose. It is also my formalwear. The reason we prepared the clothes you are wearing now, Sir Noor, is that your usual appearance would be rather out of place for this occasion.”

Ines, who was still standing in front of the door, was clad in the same silver armor and skirt that I always saw her wearing. It *did* come across as formal, now that she had mentioned it; and though I wasn’t familiar with the kind of event we were about to attend, I knew it was going to be an important ceremony of some kind. It was easy to imagine my usual getup standing out.

“Thanks,” I said. “That was a big help. I didn’t have a clue what kind of clothes I should wear for an event like this.”

At first glance, the black formalwear they’d readied for me had seemed stiff and cramped. Now that I was wearing it, though, it actually felt quite nice; it was the perfect size for me, and it didn’t restrict my movements at all. I could spin my arms about as freely as I wished. The fabric was smooth to the touch, and although it was really thin, it felt strangely durable.

Unless I was mistaken, my outfit was custom-made. It was a new feeling to have someone go to that trouble for me.

I continued, “These clothes are amazing, by the way. I’ve never worn anything like them before, but they’re really comfortable.”

“Indeed,” Ines replied, “they are of exceptional quality. Made by the finest craftsmen in the royal capital. The mithril thread woven into them should make them quite durable, but too much stress will still cause them to tear. Do be careful not to be too rough with them.”

“Will do.” It was obvious that the clothes were made of quality material, so I’d made a specific mental note not to rip them by accident.

“Incidentally...you are up rather early. What do you plan to do now, Sir Noor?”

“I thought that, since we’re here, I should take the chance to get a better look at the paintings, sculptures, and such decorating the hallways. They’re not something I can see back in the Kingdom, right?”

“I see. Well, I don’t believe that simply wandering the hallways and examining the decor should pose any issues...” Ines thought for a moment. “Still, I would recommend not straying too far. If you were to get lost, it would be quite the effort to find you.”

Ines looked farther down the spacious hallway—though it was too long and wide to really be called one. Countless smaller passages branched out into a positively labyrinthine sprawl. I was completely confident that attempting to brave their depths alone would only end with me getting lost.

“Yeah, I’ll stay reasonably close,” I agreed. “I’ve never really seen much art, so I don’t know much about it. Looking at a few pieces should be enough to satisfy me.”

“Your cooperation is appreciated. It won’t be long before somebody comes to fetch us, so I would advise you to return shortly. It is vital that you attend the ball with us, lest all of our efforts be for nothing.”

“Right. Got it.” I started down the hallway, but then a question I’d been meaning to ask popped back into my mind. “Balls are events where people

dance, right? Will we be expected to?”

“No, only the esteemed guests. We are but guards; our roles are to keep watch and ensure that Lady Lynneburg and Rolo are not put in any danger. Barring exceptional circumstances, we should not be asked to dance.”

“That’s a relief. I’ve never danced with anyone before; I wouldn’t have any idea what to do. Can you dance, Ines?”

“I... No, we are equal in that regard. My duties require me to learn all manner of skills, but in general, I am poor with matters such as dancing.”

“Really? That’s a surprise.” Ines had already shown that she was a versatile person—she could steer a coach, for one thing—so I’d assumed there was nothing she couldn’t do.

“A surprise? Truly?” Ines went quiet for a moment. “By and large, I am able to handle most matters on my own, so I am not the best when it comes to coordinating with others.”

“I guess you *do* have that shield of light skill... It seems pretty convenient. With that at your disposal, it’s hard to imagine you’d ever need anybody else’s help.”

After another few moments of silence, Ines replied, “I would not go that far. My weaknesses outweigh my strengths.”

Our casual conversation was soon interrupted when a voice called out from within the room that Ines was guarding. “Is that you, Instructor Noor?”

“Yeah, I’m out here.”

“Ines, could you open the door?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Ines did as instructed to reveal Lynne, who was wearing not her usual attire but a pure-white gown. In fact, “pure-white” didn’t do it justice; the gown was practically radiant, and Lynne’s presence alone seemed to brighten the dim hallway. Looking directly at her was a bit dazzling on the eyes.

“I see you’re already prepared, Instructor,” Lynne said. “You look very much the part.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “Is that what you’re going in, Lynne? It’s kind of...*really* white. A little blinding, even.”

“Yes... This gown is mostly woven from mithril thread, so it will appear as either white or silver, depending on the angle. I’d hoped to avoid using the material, since it *is* somewhat gaudy...but my brother was very adamant. Do you think it’s too much?”

“Not really. It looks good on you. I can’t really describe it well, but...it makes you look like the princess of some country somewhere.”

Lynne chuckled. “Does it now? I was feeling a little unsure, but for you to have said that, Instructor, it must have been worth having it made.” Her bright smile made it clear that she was in high spirits, and seeing it relieved me a little; she looked to be in a better mood than last night.

“Ah, I almost forgot!” Lynne exclaimed. “Rolo’s almost unrecognizable! Look!”

She shot back into her room, then returned just as quickly with someone I’d never met before. This person, whom she was dragging by the arm, was about her height but a little younger, and dressed in male formalwear that looked a lot like my own.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Um... It’s me, Noor...” the unfamiliar boy said, looking troubled.

“Yes, Instructor. It’s Rolo,” Lynne chimed in. “It’s difficult to tell, isn’t it?”

“Rolo?” I repeated. True, the boy’s hair was pale blue, and the eyes staring at me were the same strange color as Rolo’s, but the similarities ended there. “*Really?* He looks nothing like he did yesterday.”

Lynne huffed in amusement. “Right? I may have overdone it a little with his hair and such...but I think the end result makes up for it. I’m certain that even the aristocracy will be fawning over him.”

Looking pleased with herself, Lynne examined the person who resembled Rolo—no, the person who *used to be* him. I did as well, but the more I studied the boy in front of me, the less convinced I became. There was just no way this was Rolo.

“I seriously didn’t recognize you, Rolo,” I said; despite my doubts, I was willing to pretend that it really was him for the moment. “Your clothes and hair are completely different.”



Now that I’d at least opened my mind to the idea that this was Rolo...it didn’t

seem too impossible. There were still traces of the boy I remembered.

“You’ve gotten really...” I trailed off for a moment. “Strong-seeming? You’re like a whole new person.”

“You think so?” he hesitantly asked.

That was definitely Rolo’s voice, which meant this really *was* him. I was still reeling from my initial shock, though. The old Rolo had been more...gloomy? He had seemed less confident and a little timid, and always came across as frail and extremely downcast.

Now, however, he looked strong-willed and reliable.

“You’re a big improvement over that talkative kid from yesterday...” I mused. Maybe it wasn’t polite to compare Rolo to a stranger, but that well-dressed boy really couldn’t hold a candle to the person standing before me now. I’d heard that Rolo had spent the past few months training, so maybe that was why? His physique had gotten better as well.

Rolo’s hair had always used to hang over his face, obscuring his expression, but now it was neatly swept to one side, making his forehead and eyebrows much easier to see. More than anything else, that had to be the reason I’d mistaken him for an entirely different person.

As I continued to examine Rolo, however, I realized that I was mistaken. The most significant difference was soon obvious: his eyes. Before, they had seemed nervous, and always wandered everywhere. Now, however, they were brimming with confidence, and fixed on some faraway goal that only he could see. It made his gaze feel markedly more reassuring.

That had to be why he seemed so different. Before, his hair had been hiding his eyes, so I hadn’t recognized the change.

“Oh, *now* I see,” I said. “You honestly look like a different person, Rolo.”

My doubts had been cast off, leaving me pleasantly refreshed. That aside, though, he had *really* changed over the past few months. I didn’t know what might have happened, but I’d always thought that he was too gloomy and that he thought too little of himself. But now...something had given him confidence. His appearance matched the strength that had always been within him.

I needed to accept what I was seeing: the boy in front of me really was Rolo. I still considered it kind of strange, but as I studied his face, what had previously been unthinkable started to feel more and more believable.

There we go, I thought. *That was good progress.* With a little more effort, I'd surely be able to embrace the truth about the person in front of me.

"Incidentally, Instructor...where are you going at this early hour?" Lynne asked, interrupting my wholehearted attempt to accept the new Rolo.

"Huh?" I blinked. "Oh, me? I mentioned this yesterday, but I want to look at the works of art they've got on display around here."

"Around here...?" Lynne repeated.

"Yeah. You said going around at night wasn't allowed, but during the morning is fine, right? There seemed to be a lot of stuff you can't find back in the Kingdom. If nothing else, I'm sure the experience will give me a few anecdotes for the future."

After some consideration, Lynne clapped her hands together in front of her chest. "In that case, may I come with you? If you don't mind, of course. I'm not very well versed in art either, but I should at least be able to provide some basic commentary."

"I'd appreciate that. Please do."

"Of course!" Lynne turned to the others. "Rolo, Ines, why don't you accompany us as well?"

"Um, okay."

"As you wish, my lady."

That was how we found ourselves taking a short tour of the Cathedral, admiring the works of art that decorated its hallways.

"—and that vase adorned with splendidly intricate mithril petals must be *The White Vase of Blossoms and Nectar*. It's one of *The Ten White Masterpieces* made by a master craftsman of the dwarves of legend during the ancient mid-Zenovian period."

"Right. That's pretty...amazing?"

“Indeed! Their exquisitely sculpted forms are all so exceptionally beautiful that they’ve become popular among royal and noble collectors alike. Just one is said to be worth enough to purchase an entire grand palace. Now, I believe that over there on the opposite wall is the Dagger of Evil’s Bane, another unparalleled antique from the mid-Zenovian period. It’s famous for being heavily counterfeited, and thus bears a reputation for only entering into the possession of those who can truly discern the authentic article from the fakes. Simply owning it provides a significant amount of status in itself. One theory is that the artisan who crafted it did so specifically in pursuit of that purpose—”

“Right. Yeah. Uh-huh...”

Lynne gave a thorough and scrupulous explanation for every single work of art that we came across, detailing everything from its history to how it had been created to its current market value. It was a feat that only reconfirmed my opinion on the wealth of knowledge she possessed. I was starting to feel bad, though; as much as she seemed to enjoy commentating for us all, she was being so comprehensive that most of what she said went in one ear and out the other.

In any case, I got the gist: everything here was very impressive.

As we walked down one of the many hallways, listening to Lynne’s detailed explanations of various works of art, I recalled a massive painting that I’d seen on the way to our rooms the previous day. At my suggestion, we all made our way back to it so that we could take a better look.

“Here,” I eventually said, looking up at the painting in question. “That’s the one. It’s even bigger than I remembered.”

I’d only seen it from a distance yesterday as we headed to our rooms, but up close, its sheer size was imposing. Its extravagant, highly stylized golden frame was eye-catching enough, but the painting set within it was just plain bizarre. It depicted nothing more than a skeleton seated upon a stately golden throne, clad in robes bedecked with resplendent, inlaid gemstones. To be honest, it was fairly creepy—and that was the reason it had caught my interest. Why was it hanging here in the Cathedral?

“So, Lynne... About this huge painting...” I said. “Why is a picture of a creepy

skeleton hanging in a place like this? It just looks like a monster to me. Does it have some kind of meaning?”

I’d expected Lynne to launch into a fascinating scary story of some kind, but instead, her expression clouded over. Ines looked equally as troubled. Had I done something wrong? I was just speaking my mind, as I’d done with various other works of art we’d passed during our tour.

“Instructor...” Lynne said, her voice tinged with concern. “This painting depicts the sacred icon that is Holy Mithra. Forgive my presumptuousness, but you should refrain from voicing such opinions so openly. It would be troublesome if anyone heard you.”

I paused. “Why’s that?”

“Holy Mithra is the primary and most significant object of worship for adherents of the Church of Mithra, High Priestess Astirra included. Nothing is more sacred in their eyes. By speaking ill of Holy Mithra, you risk offending much of the Theocracy at large.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, it’s... To be honest, Instructor, my opinions on the matter are similar to your own. Still, I make sure never to voice them. It would harm the feelings of a great many people, so I believe it best to be prudent.”



“Yeah, sounds like I shouldn’t speak about it anymore.”

Even as I studied the massive painting again, I could still only see a skeletal monster. I wasn't going to say that, though—not after that warning from Lynne. So, I added one more unspoken rule to the pile that had slowly accumulated during my time here. Living in the Theocracy seemed a little restrictive. Sure, there were so many strange or beautiful things to see, but the Kingdom suited me better.

"Well, I'm satisfied with what we've seen," I said. "We should probably head back to our rooms. Thanks for your explanations, Lynne; they were really helpful."

"I was just thinking that we should make our way back," Lynne agreed. "Shall we?"

We returned to Lynne's room, where we ate the breakfast that had been prepared for us. Afterward, while we were drinking the tea that Ines had brewed, there came a knock at the door. "Lady Lynneburg," called a voice from the other side, "I have come to escort you to the ball."

Ines opened the door to a woman in a white robe, standing in wait. We began getting ourselves in order and readying to leave.

"Thank you," Lynne said once we were done. "Our preparations are complete. Could you show us the way?"

"It would be my pleasure. Follow behind me, please."

As we stepped out of the room, I caught sight of some people farther down the hallway. "Hmm? Who are they?" I mused aloud.

Upon closer inspection, it was a group of the soldiers in strange white armor we'd encountered yesterday—and they were coming straight for us. They didn't appear to be with the talkative Holy Prince this time.

We stood in place and watched the group as it came closer and closer. Then, out of the blue, the soldiers encircled me. "You are Sir Noor, one of Lady Lynneburg's attendants, correct?" one of them asked. "By the command of Her Holy Highness, we are to show you our *hospitality* in a separate room. Please come with us at once."

I gazed around, surprised by the sudden turn of events. They were going to

the trouble of *personally* attending to me? I turned to Lynne, wondering what was going on, but she and Ines both looked as though they didn't know what to do. I didn't blame them, really—we had just been about to head for the ball, and now we were faced with an unexpected change of plan.

"Hospitality, huh?" I repeated. "I appreciate the thought—I really do—but do you mean right now? This is pretty sudden. And...just me?"

"Yes, we have been ordered to take you, and you alone."

"Oh... All of you? Just for me? I feel kind of bad."

I turned to Lynne again, hoping to glean something from her expression; she had the most experience with this sort of thing. Using only my eyes, I begged her to tell me what to do.

"I...shall defer to your judgment, Instructor," she said.

"You will?" I asked. "So...it's okay for me to decide on my own?" I'd specifically been requesting her help, so that was the last thing I'd wanted to hear.

After some hesitation, I made up my mind:

"All right. Since this is an order from the high priestess herself, I guess I should go. These guys would probably get in trouble otherwise."

"So...you really do intend to go alone?" Lynne asked.

I shot her a quizzical look. "Yeah? It sounds like that's what they want, so..."

"I...understand. Please, be careful."

Having sensed the end of our exchange, the robed woman set off. "Then please follow me, Lady Lynneburg, Master Rolo, Lady Ines. I shall show you to the ballroom."

"Instructor..." Lynne said, "I wish you luck and safety."

"Thank you...?" I replied, fixing her with another strange look. "I'll see you later."

Lynne's choice of parting words bothered me a little, but I bade farewell to everyone before heading through the Cathedral in the opposite direction,

following behind the group of six clad in strange armor.

Chapter 73: The Twelve Sacred Envoys

“What is this place? It’s awfully dark.”

The soldiers had led me to a dim, spacious, cavern-like space lit only by the faint sunlight filtering in from above. I could barely make out the distant walls.

On our way here, we’d stepped onto more glowing blue floors than I’d cared to count, and now I was completely lost. At most, I was vaguely sure that we were underground.

As I curiously examined my surroundings, one of the strangely armored soldiers—one with a sword on each hip—was kind enough to explain. “This was once the entrance to the massive dungeon known as the Dungeon of Lamentation.”

“Dungeon?” I repeated. “I didn’t know you had those in Mithra.”

A dungeon, huh? Now that he’d mentioned it, this definitely felt like one. The walls and floor had an aged quality to them that I hadn’t noticed in any of the architecture up above.

“You *didn’t know we had them*? Such ignorance. This city—the capital of our Holy Theocracy—was built upon the Dungeon of Lamentation after the high priestess herself braved the entirety of its depths alone. The ground beneath your very feet is our venerated history. You should be honored that someone such as you has even been permitted to stand upon it.”

“Oh, really? Thanks.” I really was fortunate; from the sound of things, very few people got the chance to see this place.

A few moments passed before the soldier spoke again. “You seem considerably free of care. Do you not understand the position you are in?”

“Hmm? You’re going to show me your hospitality, right?”

“Indeed. But...I struggle to believe that you are still unaware of our intentions.”

Another of the soldiers interrupted the man with two swords, and the group

began having some sort of whispered exchange.

“Leave it, Sigir. Questions will get you nowhere with a man willing to commit such flagrant blasphemy.”

“Truly, what were those Kingdom dogs thinking when they sent this waste of space here? Surely they had attendants with even *slightly* more common sense?”

“Enough. Even for a pagan savage, his sin was too great. It is inexcusable that he was permitted to enter our holy country in the first place.”

“Indeed. Let us finish this quickly and be done with it. The more one converses with a pagan, the duller one’s faith grows.”

“Exactly. The sooner I’m away from that barbarian, the better. Let us dispose of him at once, honored sister.”

“You know we cannot, Miranda. Her Holy Highness gave us express instructions to apprehend him so that he could serve as an *offering*.”

“Ugh... I know, I know. I just wanted to say it.”

“Then we shall commence at once.”

The soldiers’ strange helmets—masks?— completely hid their faces, but I could tell that some of them were female. I merely watched as they continued whatever discussion they were having. Then, one of the soldiers raised a hand toward me.

“Begin.”

A blinding pale-blue light suddenly shot from the soldier’s fingers like a bolt of lightning. It coiled around my body in an instant, wrapping around my arms and legs.

“What?!” I exclaimed. “My body won’t...”

The moment the light had touched me, my movements had started to feel restricted. It was as though my energy had been sucked out of me. What was going on?

One of the soldiers chuckled. “Won’t move? That is an advanced restraining

barrier capable of binding a Minotaur from the Abyss. I was told of your impressive feats during the Kingdom's war against the Empire, but as you are now, even moving a finger will prove too much for you."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't go *that* far..." I flexed a little, and the blue light burst away from me without a sound.

"Wha—?!"

"That light was pretty strange," I noted. Curious, I checked myself, touching where it had made contact with me, but there was no sign it had ever been there. I couldn't see the soldiers' expressions, but they seemed surprised.

"What is this...? Why didn't the restraining barrier work?"

Another soldier ventured a guess: "Perhaps your sacred tool experienced a malfunction. Here, I'll try mine."

Then, the other soldier shot the same pale-blue light at me—though this one was a little brighter. It coiled around my body...but didn't really hurt or anything. It wasn't even particularly itchy. At most, it just felt a little tight, and as if a little bit of my strength had drained from me. I gave a small shrug, and the light burst again.

"Sorry, but could any of you explain what's going on?" I asked.

"Impossible!"

The soldiers must have been pretty flustered; none of them were paying any attention to my question. To be honest, I was kind of at a loss for what to do. Was this the hospitality they'd mentioned? They'd brought me all the way here, but I had no idea how I was supposed to react.

The soldiers convened again, comparing and deliberating over the small tools they'd used to create the pale-blue lights.

Should I have just...left the light alone?

I didn't have a clue. I'd thought there were a lot of hard-to-understand cultural things back in the royal capital, but here in Mithra, there were way more.

"Why isn't the restraining barrier working?"

“Could the Kingdom have developed magical equipment capable of resisting our barriers?”

“That’s...possible. They have the Spell Sovereign, Oken.”

“Then we have no other choice. We must apprehend this pagan directly.”

“We should have just done that to begin with.”

“Positions. Now.”

After another quiet conversation of some kind, the soldiers drew their weapons and surrounded me. I noticed a number of small knives hurtling toward me through the gloom, aimed at my brow, eyes, throat, and other vital parts of my body.

[Parry]

At once, I knocked them away with my sword. The assault didn’t end there, though; without the slightest hesitation, two of the soldiers charged into my reach, one wielding a long two-handed sword, and the other a sword in each hand.

Recognizing the danger, I dodged to the side—but then a barrage of magic spells flew at me from behind the two armed soldiers. I hadn’t seen who’d cast them, but I almost stopped to admire the perfect display of polished teamwork. The soldiers kept coming at me in a flawless, continuous chain.

My appreciation aside, I was only getting more and more confused. Weren’t they supposed to be attending to me? What exactly were they trying to accomplish? Well, there was only one way to find out...

“Weren’t you going to show me your hospitality or something?”

“We are. Does this not *satisfy* you, perhaps?”

“Oh.”

This time, two of the strangely armored soldiers came at me from behind with spears. They were fast; being too careless would see me poked full of holes. I managed to ward them off somehow, but then four of the soldiers came at me together.

[Parry]

I parried all of their attacks with my sword, sending the soldiers flying back through the air to land a short distance away from me.

“He’s better than I thought.”

“Y-You’re joking! He really fended that off?”

“So those reports of this vacant man being a hero of the Kingdom of Clays weren’t entirely hearsay...”

I’d reflexively put more power into that last parry than I’d intended, but none of the soldiers looked concerned. Once again, the two at the rear fired spells at me while the remaining four matched their timing and closed the distance.

It was a six-pronged attack with no openings. I still wasn’t the slightest bit sure what was going on, but I focused all of my efforts on defending against their intense onslaught. How had things ended up this way?

This wasn’t *really* their hospitality, was it? That *was* what they’d said, though...

My thoughts couldn’t keep up with the string of unexpected developments. Still, seeing their superb technique at work was interesting enough; I could watch them for a long time without getting bored. And their relentless, simultaneous assault was warming me up—I was starting to have fun.

“Oh, I get it.”

At long last, I realized what was happening: every country had its own unique culture, and this was Mithra’s way of extending its hospitality to me. The soldiers’ sudden “ambush” was just how they entertained their guests.

Back when Lynne had told me that the coming-of-age ceremony could be dangerous, I really hadn’t understood why—but now everything had clicked into place. *This* must have been what she was referring to; after all, one wrong move here could result in a serious injury. I had to admit, though...I was actually really enjoying myself.

“Sorry—I don’t know much about your country’s culture, so I was pretty slow on the uptake,” I said. “So *this* is what you meant by ‘hospitality.’”

“Indeed. Don’t tell me you expected us to sit down with one such as you and brew a simple pot of tea?”

“Oh, no, I think something like this suits me far better.”

“You have Her Holy Highness’s magnanimity to thank. Be grateful.”

So this was the high priestess’s idea? Well, according to Lynne, she *was* able to hear everything that was said in this country. Had she overheard my remarks about feeling uneasy because I didn’t know what people were supposed to do at balls, then gone out of her way to set this up for me? If so—if she really had taken the time to be so attentive toward someone who was just Lynne’s tagalong—then she really was a great person. It was no wonder that her citizens all revered her.

I’d unthinkingly called the high priestess an old woman, then bad-mouthed her precious painting by saying that it depicted a creepy skeleton. She must have heard every word, but she’d been understanding enough to forgive me anyway.

“You’re right,” I said. “I *am* grateful. I was surprised at first, but this is pretty fun!”

Now that I thought about it, those pale-blue lights must have been the start signal. I hadn’t caught on at all, which must have been why the soldiers had grown impatient and rushed me.

In short, this really was honest-to-goodness hospitality. I couldn’t let it go to waste. I faced the six soldiers, readied my sword, and said, “Let’s keep going. This time, I’ll go all out. Will all six of you keep coming at me together?”

“Hmph. Getting cold feet?” one of them asked.

“Not at all. If your next attacks are anything like the ones from a moment ago, I won’t mind in the slightest.” Our previous exchanges hadn’t felt particularly dangerous; the soldiers had to have been holding back in order to entertain their guest. I had nothing to worry about.

“So you mean to take all of us at once, vulgarian?”

“Absurd,” the soldier with two swords remarked. “But...interesting. A

splendid ball takes place above. Perhaps those of us down here shall enjoy ourselves as well."

"Sigir, your bad habit is resurfacing."

"It matters not. What we must do remains the same."

"I suppose you're right. You heard the man; he said this was 'fun.' So let us share in his merriment. It *has* been a while since we have faced worthy game."

"Today is His Holy Highness's day of celebration. Though our work is not for the outside world, we should still celebrate." The dual-wielding soldier then turned to me and said in a much lower pitch, "I am Sigir the Flash. I accept your challenge."

One by one, the other soldiers readied their weapons and named themselves.

"Rai, Heaven's Blade."

"Miranda, Sacred Scripture."

"Petra...of the Pseudepigrapha."

"Ryuk, Piercing Death."

"Gergnein. Strong Spear."

"We are one wing of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra's Twelve Sacred Envoys. We are the Sinistral, and we shall be your opponent. Be thou ready?"

They'd given me way too many names to remember, but their introductions had *definitely* made an impact. All at once, the tension in the air around them grew thicker. It was probably courteous to name yourself as they had.

Come to think of it...I had a title I could use as well, didn't I?

"I'm a common citizen of the Kingdom of Clays: Noor, the Pile Driver." After mimicking what the six soldiers had done, I flourished my black sword in a downward swing. "Pleasure to meet you."

I'd probably been too nervous; my swing shook the ground and sent cracks running through it. Still, I totally understood the soldiers now—that *had* been fun. It had felt a little embarrassing at first, sure, but the simple act of naming myself made this more enjoyable.

It was a fresh feeling, experiencing this unfamiliar hospitality in an equally unfamiliar land. There was so much about the world that I'd yet to learn. And as one of the soldiers had mentioned, today was a coming-of-age celebration; it would be a shame if I didn't enjoy the festivities to the fullest.

"Okay, who's first?" I asked. "I don't mind if you all come at once like you did earlier. In fact, I think it'll be a lot more fun that way."

I gripped my black sword and adopted a fighting stance, preparing to receive the hospitality that the six before me were so generously offering.

Chapter 74: The Ball

After following our guide through a series of wide hallways, Lynne, Ines, and I reached the ballroom.

“It looks like the event has already begun,” Lynne remarked.

Sunlight filtered into the ballroom, where a resplendent party was in full swing. A banquet had been prepared, and people stood around dressed in formal attire of all kinds. Many had formed pairs and were dancing at the center of the room.

The moment we entered, every nearby head snapped in our direction. They weren’t looking at Lynne or Ines; they were looking at me. I started to hear whispers from farther into the room.

“Is that a demonfolk?”

“So Her Holy Highness was speaking the truth. I can’t believe they brought one of *its* kind here.”

“I’ve never seen one in the flesh before.”

“It didn’t bring any monsters with it, right? We’re not in danger, are we?”

“It’s better groomed than I expected—but just look at the repulsive color of its eyes. They’re just like a monster’s.”

“Don’t look. Do you *want* to die?”

“The nerve of the Kingdom of Clays to bring *that* as a state guest. Talk about poor taste.”

Their piercing stares were accompanied by fear, hatred, disgust, contempt, and irritation. All sorts of emotions flowed from the guests simultaneously and pressed down on my thoughts. It seemed that many of them already knew I was a demonfolk. Maybe they’d been told beforehand that someone of my kind would be coming.

One of the many emotions being sent my way was murderous intent.

“Ugh...”

“Rolo, are you okay?”

I’d always done my best to avoid notice and stay hidden, so I’d never had to face the malice of so many people at once before. The crushing weight of their hatred and the sharpness of their words made me want to violently throw up. But it was fine. I was used to this kind of treatment.

At least, I thought I was.

“Mm-hmm... I’m fine.”

I couldn’t stand the thought of embarrassing Lynne after she’d gone to the trouble of bringing me here. That was why I’d made preparations before we left. I forced down the nausea roiling up from within my chest, and endured the piercing stares as I advanced deeper into the ballroom. It wasn’t long before I spotted a golden throne at the back of the room, with the holy prince we’d met yesterday sitting atop it.

“I suppose we should give him our regards...” Lynne muttered. “Though I’m not particularly enthused about the idea.”

The three of us stepped up to Holy Prince Tirrence, who turned and gave us a smile. Surrounding him were a number of girls who looked to be about his age. They had all been congratulating him before the shift in his attention alerted them to our arrival. They stared at Lynne and me with obvious wariness in their eyes.

“We are honored to have received your invitation, Your Holy Highness,” Lynne said, calmly paying the other girls no mind as she bowed.

Still seated upon his intricately ornamented golden throne, the holy prince huffed in amusement and gave a carefree smile. “Lynne,” he said. “You’re finally here. A little late, aren’t you? Did you run into some trouble?”

“No, not at all. Her Holy Highness issued a direct order for my escort to receive a *warm welcome,* so he departed my side.”

“Is that so? What a *shame*. In any case, why don’t you come closer? Given the occasion, I see no reason for us to chat from such a distance.”

“I am perfectly satisfied with where I am.”

“Come now, we’re on better terms than that, aren’t we? In fact...why don’t you sit on my lap?”

As the holy prince smiled and beckoned, intense waves of displeasure began flowing from the girls surrounding him. Their irritation was nothing compared to Lynne’s, though, even if she wasn’t letting it show.

“A fine jest,” Lynne said curtly. “Might I suggest you direct such words not at me but at your companions? I believe they would be quite overjoyed.”

He laughed. “If that is your wish, I shall take it into consideration. So, how about it? Did you think it over? I am, of course, referring to our ongoing discussion about you becoming mine.”

“I seem to remember very respectfully *declining* that proposition on a previous occasion.”

“Always so cold. Can you not see my fervor for you, despite all the times you’ve rejected me?”

I could feel the girls’ emotions twisting into naked animosity toward Lynne. Meanwhile, the holy prince remained completely unreadable. I’d noticed this yesterday, but I couldn’t see into his heart no matter how hard I tried. That was just the case with some people—often those who’d put up strong walls within themselves.

“How about it, Lynne?” the holy prince asked. “Will you at least join me over there?”

“Over where?”

“Don’t be like that. I’m asking you to dance. This ball is being held in *my* honor. Surely I am allowed the right to choose my dance partner. Do you not agree?”

“If that is your wish, Your Holy Highness, then I have no reason to refuse.”

“Excellent. Shall we, then?”

The holy prince rose from his ornate throne and took Lynne by the hand. Many watched with envy and jealousy as the pair went to the center of the

ballroom, where everybody smoothly stepped aside to create a wide space around them.

“Now, let us dance,” Holy Prince Tirrence said. “After all, this is *my* coming-of-age ceremony.”

He raised his right hand in a small gesture, and the ballroom was filled with slow, gentle music. The others at the center of the room took that as a cue to resume dancing. Lynne and the holy prince joined them, matching the pace of the music. I strained my ears and managed to pick out their quiet conversation over the sound of their light steps.

“Unless I am mistaken, the group we encountered were of the Twelve Sacred Envoys,” Lynne murmured.

The holy prince hummed in agreement. “Oh, that’s right—you know of them. You said they were there to receive your attendant, correct?”

“Where did they take him?”

“Are you worried about his safety?”

“No. Not in the slightest.”

“Hmm. That’s rather heartless of you.”

“Not at all. It would be terribly disrespectful for someone such as I to even dare express concern for Instructor Noor. I was actually worried for *them*.”

The prince laughed softly. “For the Twelve? But you should know full well what they are capable of. They’re said to be equal in strength to your Six Sovereigns.”

“Yes, I’m aware. That they’re *said to be*, that is.”

“You’re very confident in that man, aren’t you?”

“I am. Enough to entrust my life to him.”

“I must say...that makes me rather envious. If I might ask, will I have the chance to join your circle of companions today?”

“Your jokes never change, do they? I’ve had quite enough of them by now.”

“I’m being serious.”

“You always are.”

“Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t trust me, would you? But I’ll prove my sincerity to you tonight—no, right after this. Simply come to my quarters and— My, careful there!”

The holy prince dodged Lynne’s swift stomp with ease, and the two continued dancing as though nothing had happened. I was certain that only a handful of people in the entire ballroom had noticed the exchange.

“Pardon me. That was a misstep,” Lynne murmured. “This is still new to me, I’m afraid.”

The holy prince chuckled. “And here I thought you were attempting to break my foot.”

“Worry not. I’d show enough restraint to keep the damage from being *that* severe.”

“You...really *are* terrifying, you know that?”

“Not at all. As long as you refrain from making any more absurd remarks, Your Holy Highness, I will surely be able to refrain from making any more mistakes during our dance.”

“Ha ha! How very headstrong.”

Despite the nature of their conversation, Lynne and the prince danced together beautifully—they were both so attractive and moved with such grace that anyone might have assumed they’d stepped straight out of a fairy tale. At some point, the people around them had stopped to watch. Even the serving ladies carrying food were enthralled.

Once a little while had passed, Lynne and the holy prince bowed to each other and separated. The former came back over to us, while the latter returned to his throne.

After that, the party continued.

The negative emotions being directed toward me hadn’t let up for a moment. Having Lynne and Ines next to me helped, but I still felt awful. Hatred, disgust, contempt, disdain, murderous intent... All that and more assailed me nonstop,

simply because I existed.

“Whatever they think of you, Rolo, it isn’t worth paying them any mind,” Lynne reassured me.

Several long moments passed before I said, “Mm-hmm. I know.” I really did understand, but that didn’t make me feel any better. Still, I couldn’t worry her any more than I had already, so I decided to change the topic. “Your dance... It was amazing.”

“Oh, you were watching? Dancing isn’t exactly my forte, but I was at least able to pick up the bare minimum. Come to think of it, you took lessons as well, didn’t you, Rolo?”

“Mm-hmm. Just the basics, though.”

“Did seeing the real thing help?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve got it all memorized now.”

Lynne chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect any less from you, Rolo. Shall we, then?” All of a sudden, she was pulling me by the hand.

“Um... Shall we what?”

“Dance, of course. The two of us.”

“Huh...?”

Lynne guided me to what must have been the very center of the ballroom. Everybody moved aside for us, as they had done for Lynne and the prince, but not for the same reason. In no time at all, there was a huge space around us.

“Do you really want to dance with me?” I asked hesitantly.

“Of course,” Lynne replied. “We’re going to stand out no matter what we do, so we might as well make it for a favorable reason.”

“But...”

“Just match my movements.”

Lynne took my arms, stepped in close, and then began moving in time with the music. It was the same dance she’d just performed with the holy prince, so I figured that I’d at least be able to imitate it. I drew upon my memory and

started following Lynne's movements.

"Yes, just like that," she said. "You're doing well."

"Like this...?"

Lynne giggled softly. "I'm impressed, Rolo. It looks like you're already a natural. Shall we up the pace a little?"

"Okay. I think I can manage that."

Suddenly, Lynne started moving *much* faster. Her large strides made full use of the space around us and caused her glittering white gown to billow. She looked like a twirling white flower, and more and more people found themselves unable to look away.

Lynne took confident steps, uncaring of everybody's gazes, and increased the pace of our dance even further. I matched her movements and focused all of my attention on keeping step with her—and that was when I noticed something strange. The dark emotions being directed at me had gradually begun to change into curiosity. Disgust and contempt were becoming surprise and doubt, and even those gradually diluted into simple inquisitiveness.

A small few people were even *enjoying* our dance. The negativity that had weighed me down was softening.

"How are you faring?" Lynne asked.

"Better," I replied. "I think."

"Wonderful. I'm starting to have fun, so shall we keep going?"

"Okay."

We increased our pace yet again and continued to dance. Lynne's movements were free and unrestrained, but after a short while of copying them, I was confident that I wouldn't have any trouble keeping up. She was opening her heart to me, so it was easy to tell what she was going to do next.

From time to time, we would stop holding hands, mirroring each other as we danced, then join together again. Our movements were wide and sweeping, and we gradually became more in tune with our improvisation. It began to feel less like we were dancing at a formal ball and more like we were on a stage for

everybody to see.

People began cheering us on. I thought I even heard the sound of applause. The holy prince was watching us intently, but his expression looked surprisingly delighted, and—

Huh?

The walls around his heart had crumbled slightly. And since the malice in the ballroom had weakened, there was less interference. The holy prince's emotions flowed out and into me, allowing me to sense what he was feeling. It...confused me.

Right now, he was feeling *trust in Lynne*. And it wasn't a small feeling—it was the same unshakeable faith that Noor had once shown me. It occupied almost half of his heart, which was surprising enough...but the *other half* was even more curious.

The prince wore a smile as though he were simply enjoying our dance, but his heart told a different story. Aside from the hope he was feeling and the faith he had in Lynne, there was also *fear* and *despair*, directed at something unknown to me.

"Lynne."

"Yes, Rolo?"

"I think...the holy prince *might not be our enemy*."

"I... What did you just say?"

We continued dancing for a short while, then bowed to our audience. The holy prince stood from his chair and clapped, prompting the rest of the ballroom to burst into applause.

I was feeling much better. It wasn't as though the malice directed at me had completely vanished—there was still plenty of contempt, anger, and disgust—but it had *mostly* changed. At the very least, the fear and murderous intent had abated quite a lot.

"Thank you, Lynne," I murmured.

She laughed. "No, thank *you*, Rolo. That was fun. We'll have to do it again

some—”

Lynne stopped, as did the applause and cheers. In the blink of an eye, the lively atmosphere of the ballroom had ceased. The enthusiasm that had carried through the air was now frozen solid. Nobody said a word, until...

“How strange. Why is a *demonfolk* dancing at my son’s coming-of-age ceremony? I admit, it *was* invited, but I am somewhat troubled by its brazen demeanor, strutting about as though it owns the place. Tell me, all of you who were applauding...what is *your* opinion on the matter? None of you consider *it* to be a person, do you?”

“Your Holy Highness!”

The gentle music playing throughout the ballroom had stopped, replaced with fearful awe. New, intense feelings of terror and trepidation bubbled up to the surface.

“Ugh...!”

“Rolo? What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t suppress my nausea. I’d peeked into *her* heart and immediately understood the danger of my actions. She was the high priestess, a woman so widely feared that she had much of the continent under her thumb, and the greatest enemy that we demonfolk had.

“Please don’t misunderstand me,” the high priestess continued. “It isn’t as though I don’t welcome you. In fact, Lynneburg, Rolo...you’ll find that I have been looking forward to your arrival more than any other. For a long, long time, I have awaited the day you would *become mine*. Come now. Approach. Let us talk.”

The thick, dark hatred that filled the high priestess’s heart far surpassed all of the malice that had been gathered in the ballroom. There was no contest.

Chapter 75: A Conversation with the High Priestess

“Your Holy Highness. Please allow me to express what an honor it is to have been invited to the Theocracy. You wished to speak with us?”

Ines, Rolo, and I had convened at the back of the ballroom, in full view of everyone in attendance, and were now facing a certain figure clad in a solemn robe and seated upon a golden throne bedecked in gemstones. She was High Priestess Astirra, a living legend and the reigning authority in the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. Using the chaos brought about by the Empire’s fall from grace, she had seized control over half of the continent *in a matter of months*.

She smiled and gave a soft chuckle. “There’s no need to be so tense, Lynneburg. Let’s just have a nice, relaxed conversation.”

“‘Relaxed,’ Your Holy Highness?” I was keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings, so I could see that the Cathedral’s guards were quietly forming up around us. Nobody in their right mind would be able to relax in a situation like this.

“Indeed. You are my invaluable guest. Our first order of business should be to celebrate our reunion, no? I’ve been waiting for the day when you would come to the Theocracy again.” The high priestess laughed a second time. In contrast to our nervousness, she wore a smile as finely crafted as a work of art.

My suspicions were proved correct; something was direly off about this woman. Now that I was face-to-face with her, I finally understood why my father—a veteran of countless battles—had told me that facing her was like facing a monster.

Even though we were merely having a conversation, the aura emanating from the woman before me felt like a bottomless, horrifyingly sinister marsh, dragging my entire body down into its depths. I wasn’t timid by any means, but for the first time in my life, I was genuinely fearful of another person.

“By the way,” the high priestess continued, “I heard that a wyvern flight

attacked your capital before your departure. What terrible *misfortune*. The Kingdom of Clays is exhausted and in a period of recovery right now, is it not? I certainly hope that no more events of such an *unfortunate nature* trouble you again." Her tone was almost mocking.

"Ugh..." Rolo was covering his mouth, looking ill.

An unsuspecting onlooker would probably assume that High Priestess Astirra was concerned about the Kingdom. To those of us who knew the truth of the matter, however, her words were obviously a veiled threat.

"The flight had been driven [Berserk] with magic, Your Holy Highness," I said. "Were I to venture a guess, I would say that somebody *purposefully* loosed it upon us."

"My, my. If that is true, then it must have been a terrible calamity indeed."

"Oh, no. My instructor, Oken, reduced the entire flight to ash in one fell swoop. While I do not know who instigated the wyverns, I must admit that I feel quite sorry for them."

"Is that so? Still, I've heard that monster activity has been on the rise as of late; I can only assume there are *many more attacks to come*. It would be best if you stayed wary of your surroundings in the future."

"Thank you for your kind consideration, but it is wasted on us. No matter how many times such trifling *threats* visit our kingdom, it shall continue to stand undaunted."

"Indeed. I'm well aware of how *stubborn* you can be. We are longtime allies, after all."

I was starting to wonder if this woman had any intention at all of hiding her deeds. Then again, everybody present in the ballroom was likely already under her thumb. This was a warning to them—a demonstration of their eventual fate if they did not submit.

As if to substantiate my suspicions, the smile affixed to the high priestess's face did not falter. A slight chill ran through me, but I endured it; there was something bothering me that I needed to mention.

“Incidentally, Your Holy Highness...I noticed that you have been referring to Rolo as though he were an object.”

“And?” The high priestess’s smile vanished at once. There was a brief moment of silence before she spoke again, her voice a pitch deeper and almost unrecognizable from before. “Do you find that objectionable in some way, Lynneburg?”

Her cruel words resounded through the room and gripped my heart like a vise, while her stare froze me to the spot. The pressure enveloping me was so intense that I worried my body might give in at any moment. It really felt as though I were being swallowed whole by a massive serpent. No wonder my father found dealing with the high priestess so arduous. In truth, I was so terrified of the woman before me that I wanted nothing more than to make my escape.

Deep down, however, I knew that I couldn’t show fear. So I continued our conversation, choosing my words with great care.

“Rolo is here today *as my friend*. At the very least, that was what I conveyed to him before we departed. So while I am loath to be so forward, I cannot ignore your remarks. May I ask why you have had such a sudden change of heart?”

The high priestess laughed in delight. “My, my! You *are* courageous, Lynneburg. To raise such trivial grievances to my face, especially when you are so young... It makes me want you all the more.”

“Your Holy Highness...” I pressed. “Could you answer my—?”

The high priestess raised a hand, interrupting me. “Lynneburg. Mind what you say. Are you not being somewhat rude? You appear to be laboring under quite the misconception. I have not had a change of heart; my thoughts on the matter have remained the same from the very beginning.”

“From the beginning? What do you...?”

Once again, the high priestess smiled gently at us—merely an ominous mask by this point, clad in darkness. “I invited you as the betrothed of my son, Tirrence, and as a guest of state *from an enemy country*. As for that demonfolk,

I invited it as both your friend *and* as a curiosity. My intentions have not changed a whit."

The entire ballroom broke into murmurs. The high priestess had just expressly declared that the Kingdom of Clays was an enemy and that she had invited us here with that in mind. We had been considered adversaries from the moment we arrived.

"Enemies, Your Holy Highness?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, what brash, willful ignorance. The Kingdom of Clays accepted that demonfolk as one of its own, despite our country's repeated warnings. Surely you understand the significance of that decision. King Clays knows quite well how we handle demonfolk."

The high priestess turned to look at Rolo. "To side with such a harmful entity is a complete insult to the Theocracy. What could it be if not an act of hostility? By making that choice, the Kingdom turned its blade on us—so yes, you are our enemies. You knew this, did you not? That is why you brought your guards." Her eyes wandered to Ines, then she laughed and made a show of quizzically tilting her head. "Although it would appear that one of them has unfortunately disappeared somewhere."

"I...cannot understand, Your Holy Highness," I said. "My kingdom bears no animosity toward the Theocracy. But if you assumed otherwise, why did you summon me here as Holy Prince Tirrence's betrothed? As a jest, I consider it to be in poor taste, but as something sincere... I would find that even harder to accept."

The high priestess laughed again. "I see. You really don't understand. My, oh, my."

Her expression was one of pure delight. Quietly, she raised a hand, and the soldiers surrounding us all drew their swords in unison. The murmuring in the ballroom died out as suddenly as it had started.

"Indeed," she continued, "my explanation may have been rather lacking. Allow me to put it more simply: the betrothal is our condition for your kingdom's salvation."

“Your...condition?” I repeated.

“Yes. I value your outstanding talent and *blood* quite highly. It would be a terrible shame to see it buried with your insignificant, failing kingdom.”

“‘Failing’?”

“It is the truth, is it not? The Theocracy could make far greater use of your skills. How about it, Lynneburg? Formally betroth yourself to my son, here and now, and relinquish your superior blood to the Theocracy. That is the single *condition* required of you if you wish us to show mercy to the Kingdom of Clays and its foolish king.”

The high priestess laughed once again, more delighted than before. She looked exactly like the monster my father had described. No, she was much, *much* more terrifying than any monster—an unfathomable being that no person could make sense of.

“Still, King Clays is a heartless man, isn’t he?” the high priestess continued. “To think he would send his adorable daughter into the heart of an enemy country like this, without even a decent number of guards. No...in truth, I suppose you have already been abandoned to your own devices. Perhaps he always intended to give you as a tribute. If so, I shall gladly accept.”

Under the high priestess’s appraising stare, I came to a single, instinctive realization: she saw *everyone*, not just the demonfolk, as objects to be used. I could see it in her cold, distant eyes.

“My father intended no such thing.”

“Enough, Lynneburg. This conversation is over.”

“I disagree. We haven’t finished.”

“And yet you refuse to listen. I am left with no choice but to respond accordingly. Guards.”

“Yes, Your Holy Highness!” they replied.

“*Seize her.*”

It happened in an instant: blue light shot from the guards’ hands, branching through the air like lightning. They were using binding barriers—the very same

technique that had once almost allowed a Minotaur to kill me, though the ones coming toward us now were far denser and more intense. They closed in from all sides, streaking toward us, and—

"What?!"

—were repelled by the power of the hair ornaments we were wearing.

The high priestess looked surprised. "What are those ornaments, Lynneburg?" she asked, sounding displeased. "They seem slightly different from our barrier techniques. How did they come to be?"

"It is no surprise that you haven't seen them before, Your Holy Highness," I said. "I made them myself after studying an example."

The high priestess paused. "Don't tell me you created them from scratch?"

"I did. They're magical tools that can lift bindings similar to the one once placed on me when I almost died to a Minotaur. Though I must admit, back when I made them, I wasn't expecting to need them for an occasion such as this."

I'd replied with as much sarcasm as I could muster, but to my surprise, the high priestess looked *pleased*. Her earlier disapproval was nowhere to be seen; in fact, she was trembling in delight. It made me feel extremely uneasy.

"My, how absolutely splendid," she breathed. "Simply remarkable, Princess Lynneburg. I would expect no less of someone for whom I already had such high hopes—though I did not foresee you preparing a unique reflective barrier of your own in such a short time." Then her exultant voice echoed throughout the deathly silent ballroom: "And after only experiencing the binding once! Does that mean you managed to perfect the theory of mimicking secret barrier techniques when you were a student here? Truly wonderful. I must raise my evaluation yet further. You are simply brilliant—and very, *very* dangerous."

The high priestess seemed excited as she waved a hand, signaling the guards to spread out and surround us with their blades still drawn. "To be frank, this is more than I anticipated," she admitted. "You understood our secret barrier techniques from a single glance and made them your own. It would appear that your father severely underestimated your worth...and the worth of your *blood*."

“My blood...?”

“I want you even more. You are the one I’ve spent so long searching for. Well, Lynneburg? Will you formally betroth yourself to my son and become mine? If you do, it will provide further stability not just for the Theocracy but for the entire continent. These lands will experience prosperity like never before. This is the last time I will ask you, so consider your answer carefully.”

“Naturally, I—”

I’d wanted to say “refuse,” but before the word could pass my lips, a loud *boom* echoed all around us.

“What...?” I muttered.

The stone floor shook and cracked, and several metal chandeliers fell from the ceiling and shattered. In an instant, the once quiet ballroom devolved into chaos.

“What is the meaning of this?” the high priestess uttered.

A thunder of hasty footsteps came from the hallway, then a group of harried soldiers burst into the room and ran over to the high priestess. “Your Holy Highness,” one of them said, “we have reason to believe that somebody has intruded into the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation before the Cathedral.”

“The...depths? But why...?” Displeasure returned to the high priestess’s face as she looked at me. “Lynneburg, don’t tell me this was your doing?”

Despite her suspicion, I was just as clueless.

“What are the Sacred Envoys doing?” the high priestess muttered. “Deal with the situation at once. The depths are sacred ground; there are invaluable relics stored there. Apprehend the thief at...!”

Without warning, the high priestess’s expression contorted into what every onlooker clearly identified as anguish.

“Y-Your Holy Highness?! Is something amiss?!”

The soldiers around the high priestess grew agitated. We weren’t the only ones who were surprised; I doubted that anybody in attendance had ever seen that look on her face before. She was truly, genuinely at a loss. Her usual

composure was gone, and her hands and body were trembling.

“H-How?” she muttered. “How did somebody gain access to...? It should be impossible. Nobody should be able to enter—!” Her eyes widened, and she groaned, “H-How?!” in a raspy, strangled voice.

Again, a look of anguish flickered across the high priestess’s face. Her cold mask soon returned, though, and she began issuing orders to the soldiers present.

“I have business to take care of. Seize that girl—but be courteous about it. I expect to come back to good news.”

“Yes, Your Holy Highness.”

The high priestess hadn’t even waited for the soldiers’ response; she had already disappeared in a flash of pale blue light.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll return to my quarters,” Holy Prince Tirrence said, then turned to the soldiers. “Oh, and all of you—bring Lynne to me after this, won’t you?” He smiled and waved at me, and then he was gone in another flash of blue.

At that moment, I could feel a certain emotion welling up inside of me.

“Ines.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“You may go. Carry out my brother’s orders.”

“But, my lady...” Ines looked around. The soldiers were closing in, the ballroom was still quaking, and the chaos hadn’t even begun to subside.

“Instructor Noor has to be the one behind this shaking. It must be his signal to us; he likely found something that spurred him to act. So if we are to move, we must do it now.” I held her gaze and said, “Go. I’ll be fine here on my own.”

Ines closed her eyes and gave a curt nod. “Very well. Be safe, my lady.”

“I will. You too, Ines, Rolo.”

Ines used her sword of light to open a hole in the floor, through which she and Rolo nimbly disappeared. The soldiers around us were too slow to react;

they could only watch. Then, they all laughed.

“What? The attendant and guard just...ran away?”

“Ha. Such impressive fortitude. Was *she* supposed to be one of the Kingdom of Clays’s proud elite? I can hardly believe it.”

“Princess Lynneburg. Are you not going to escape too?”

“No,” I said. “I shall do no such thing.”

“I see. Then please come quietly. We would be grateful if you did not make a fuss.”

“You seem to be under a misapprehension. I won’t be going anywhere with you. I simply meant that I would be staying here.”

“Princess...? With all due respect, do you not understand your current situation?” The soldier waved an arm to indicate our surroundings. There were roughly two hundred armed guards surrounding me—several hundred if you included the ones waiting outside the ballroom. I was faced with approximately half of Mithra’s vaunted Holy Order, elite knights using the best mithril weapons and armor available.

No matter where I looked, I could see only enemies. Not a single person here was on my side, including the dignitaries and guests of other countries watching the scene from behind the soldiers.

“Of course,” I said. “I understand completely.”

“In that case, why such obstinance? Please, come along quiet—”

The soldier had moved to grab my arm, but I seized his wrist first and gently held it aside. “It would seem you are operating under a *number* of misapprehensions.”

“Wha—?! I can’t move?!”

“First, my companions did not run away. They simply went to *search* for something.”

The soldier was desperately trying to escape my grip. I was fairly certain that his mithril armor had been enchanted with [Musculature Enhancement]—it

increased his raw strength to a degree that would normally be unheard of—but I wasn't going to release him just yet.

There was more I wanted to say.

"To address your *second* misunderstanding: I remain here because there is no *need* for me to escape. After all, why should I flee from you?"

I finally let go of the soldier's wrist. He jumped back, looking shocked, and immediately directed his blade at me. Perhaps I'd put a little too much strength into my grip... Upon closer inspection, I could see clear dents in his gauntlet.

"In the first place, what part of my current situation would compel me to run away?" I slowly cast my eyes over the circle of weapons pointed at me, and continued in a voice that everybody could hear. "*There is not a single threat to me in this entire ballroom.*"

As I stood my ground, I started to feel something. There was anger welling up inside of me.

Chapter 76: Dancing White Lightning

The sight was, in a word, *bizarre*. More than two hundred soldiers—knights of the Holy Order, no less—were surrounding a single girl, yet *they* were on the back foot.

“I am somewhat peeved.”

A cold, resonant voice filled the ballroom. It was almost impossible to believe that it had come from the girl who had been dancing so happily only a short while ago.

“No... To tell you the truth, I am *very* peeved,” she continued. “I honestly did not expect that *my friends*, *my kingdom*, and *I* would be made subject to such insults.”

The knights were clearly unsettled, but one attempted to carry out his duty nonetheless. “Princess Lynneburg...we are going to restrain you. If you attempt to resist—”

“Restrain *me*?” The girl in a pure-white gown casually examined her surroundings. Then, in the face of the knights directing their weapons at her, she inclined her head to one side and continued in the same relaxed tone one might take on a pleasant stroll with a friend. “Is that really your intention? Truly? You cannot be serious.”

“So you don’t understand your situation after all. We will need to be rough with you, then. Please forgive us.”

The knights drew closer to the girl. Their naked blades, which gleamed with silver light, were aimed at her chest as though they might suddenly run her through.

The girl studied them curiously. Then a single question passed her delicate lips: “You mean to restrain me...*when there are so few of you*?” Her voice was colder than before.

“Princess. You may be unaware, but we are Mithra’s proud elite. And among us are six of the Twelve Sacred Envoys.”

“Yes, I am fully aware, Raiva, Mandate of Heaven. Over there is Heirut, the Sacred Sword, correct? And that is Kyne, the Bladeless. Those of you gathered here must be the members of the Dextral.” The girl was listing names as plainly as if she were greeting acquaintances at a dinner party.

“Oh? We consider it a great honor that you know our names. Might I assume that you also understand what we are capable of?”

“I do. And while it brings me no pleasure to say this...if you wish to subdue me, I would advise that you summon another hundred of your caliber.”

The air froze over at once, and a prickling hostility emanated from the knights.

“What did you say?”

“Princess, it sounds as if you don’t consider us threats. As if we aren’t worth your caution. Or am I mistaken?”

Even as the atmosphere became more and more tense, the girl remained unfazed. She continued in a dispassionate voice, “No, that *is* what I’m saying. Oh, but perhaps another hundred wouldn’t even be enough to prolong the inevitable. It’s difficult to tell. The gap between us is simply too large.”

“Princess Lynneburg. You are going too far. I understand that you are frustrated, but nothing good will come of provoking us.”

The knights’ growing irritation did nothing to check the girl’s indifference. Without hesitation, she said, “No, I’m actually holding back. Were I to tell you the whole truth, I would say that individuals of your capabilities pose not even the slightest obstacle to me.”

“Do you...truly believe that?”

“I do. I realize that it sounds arrogant, of course, but you seem so oblivious to your position that I feel obligated to tell you. Consider it a warning, to prevent you from getting hurt.”

A long moment passed. “So you mean to say that you are concerned not for your own well-being but for ours?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Now, even the onlookers standing behind the knights could see their agitation

and irritation swelling amidst their ranks.

“You overstep your bounds, Princess. Appearances aside, we are doing our best to treat you with respect. Should you continue to insult us, however...I cannot guarantee that you will come out of this unharmed.”

At last, there was a change in the otherwise stony expression the girl was wearing—her eyebrow twitched ever so slightly.

“You will...hurt me?” she asked, her voice ringing clear and true. It carried no emotion and merely presented the facts of their situation. “I am a disciple of the Six Sovereigns and of Instructor Noor, and you expect to beat me with a mere hundred or a thousand or whatever your number? Do you truly think you can?”

“Princess, I will warn you for safety’s sake that Her Holy Highness has given us permission to heal *any injuries that you may have.* In other words, no matter how much favor she and the holy prince have granted you, if you refuse to comply with us, we *will* need to subdue you by force.”

“Yes, that’s perfectly fine. That’s what I’ve been saying.” The air crackled as sharply as breaking ice. Then, sounding entirely as though she had forgotten something, the girl added, “Oh, but when you do, make sure you come at me *all at once*. I don’t think I could even consider you an opponent otherwise.”

Her cold words echoed throughout the ballroom. Then, the knights silently adjusted their grips on their weapons.

“Seize her.”

That was their signal. One of the knights swung his longsword at the girl, his anger openly apparent. “You’re nothing but a noble brat from a backwater kingdom!” he bellowed. “Know your place!”

His attack was fast—almost too fast for the eye to follow. But its target was already gone.

“What...?”

As far as anyone could tell, the girl had simply vanished. The knight’s longsword sliced through nothing but air, then his compatriots’ eyes finally

widened in surprise.

“Curses! Did she get away?! Where did she go?!”

“Find her! She can’t have gone fa—”

The knights were flustered; they had lost the girl whom their high priestess had ordered them to capture. As they frantically looked around, hoping to find her, a white silhouette appeared overhead.

“Sorry. Please allow me to take back my earlier remarks.”

The girl dressed in white spoke with the clarity and gravitas of a bell. She was standing upside down, her feet on the ceiling. In one smooth movement, she drew the golden sword that she had tucked into her gown, and readied a gray dagger in the opposite hand. She fixed the knights with a glacial stare as she continued in a cold voice.

“You are *worse* than I expected. Your sword is exceedingly slow, and your dexterity is shameful. I apologize for this, but since playing along with you would be a waste of time...”



The girl crouched, both feet still planted firmly on the ceiling. Then...

“I’ll need to take the initiative.”

The white silhouette vanished. A streak of gold flashed across the knights’ vision, yet none of them were able to discern its identity. At most, a few of them discovered that their blades had been cut apart.

“Wha—?!”

As the knights froze in shock, the severed tips of their weapons spun through the air and scattered across the floor to the ringing of metal. But before anyone could shake the confusion of the sight, the ballroom was filled with a mist comprised of dense mana.

“[Lightning].”

Countless lightning bolts struck at once. By the time the knights realized that they were being attacked, they had already collapsed, the strength gone from their knees. Clad in armor as they were, their helmeted heads crashed against the floor one by one.

“Wh-What’s happening?!”

Just like that, a dozen of the knights who had been standing around the girl were now incapacitated. The knights behind them, having noticed this, rushed to ready their swords and get into fighting stances—but they were already too late to react to the incoming threat.

“[Cocytus].”

In an instant, frosty air surrounding the knights’ feet became a mithril-armor-encasing trap. As they struggled in vain to free themselves, a white gown billowed above them as its owner stepped atop their heads.

“[Thunderbolt].”

Not just one but *three* massive thunderbolts fell upon the helpless knights.

“Ngh... Ack...!”

The knights fainted where they stood. Their mithril armor was famous for its high resistance against magic...yet it remained completely frozen. Meanwhile, the girl in white pushed on, stepping over the knights and severing their blades as she went. It seemed that nobody in the ballroom was able to keep up with

her movements; the most they caught was the occasional white afterimage, like a dancing flower.

"What? What's...happening?!"

A wave of disbelief washed over the room. The knights of the Holy Order were Mithra's strongest—the elite of the elite, clad in the highest grade of armor—and their objective was to capture...a single girl. It seemed completely superfluous, not that anyone had dared to protest. Every one of the knights had assumed that just one or two of them would suffice against the princess of a small country like the Kingdom of Clays.

So why had so many of their comrades fallen? Nobody understood what was happening. More of Mithra's foremost combatants were being bested every second.

"What's happening?! What's causing this?!"

One of the knights—an expert among his peers—was actually able to keep track of the girl...and what he saw left him stunned. She was wielding her golden sword in one hand, but in the other were simultaneously cast ice, wind, and lightning spells, which she was blasting into her enemies' midst.

[Multicast]. Most of the knights present had never even seen it before. Twofold casting was rare enough, but *threefold* was practically unheard of—a testament to what a tremendous achievement it was. Fourfold casting and above were in the realm of the legendary Ninespell Oken and nobody else.

How was this girl managing to multicast with a single hand...? It was unthinkable. Many of the knights began to suspect that the sight before them wasn't real, but the man who could keep up with her knew the cold, hard truth: she really was striking down his compatriots, and it wouldn't be long before she came for him too.

And the entire time, while incessantly firing off one attack after another, the girl didn't even look winded. Several fully cast spells coiled about her hand, and then...

"[Lightning]."

The knight fell to the intense bolt, still doubting his own eyes. Nobody stood a

chance against her; most went down without even knowing what they were up against. The situation was so abnormal that none of Mithra's proud elite could react. Even the Twelve Sacred Envoys, the best among them, went down without any fanfare.

In just a few seconds, the girl had gone from being completely surrounded to, well...*this*. Just what *was* she? She moved way too fast.

All that appeared in the flustered knights' vision was a dancing white gown, reminiscent of a white flower. Each time it spun, thunder roared, and more of the Theocracy's prized elites fell. Amidst the chaos, the sight soon became a thing of nightmares—a symbol of absolute terror.

"W-We can't possibly...win against...!"

Victory was impossible. But before the last knight could even finish, he had already been struck down.

Not all of the knights were unconscious, but that didn't matter; in the face of such overwhelming strength, they wouldn't dare to stand up again. Nobody wanted to continue the fight.

Well, except one man.

"Ngh... I didn't expect you to be so strong. It's no wonder you looked down on us. But...this isn't over yet!"

A single knight rose to his feet: Raiva, Mandate of Heaven, the supreme commander of Mithra's Holy Order and the leader of the Twelve Sacred Envoys. He tossed away his snapped mithril greatsword and drew a shining azure blade from the scabbard at his back.

"This masterwork blade was bestowed upon me by Her Holy Highness!" he declared. "I will *not* go down here!"

That was as much as Raiva, Mandate of Heaven, managed to say before he noticed a small crack in the mithril greathelm meant to protect him from magic. Light was shining through the breach.

"What is this crack...?"

[Mistblade]

In complete silence, the girl's gray dagger drew a gentle, caressing arc through the air before splitting Raiva's mithril greathelm in twain, revealing his puzzled expression. The pieces clattered as they struck the floor—and at the same time, the girl cast her spell.

"Please go to sleep now," she said. "[Sleep Cloud]."

"W-Wai—!"

Black fog appeared and enveloped Raiva's head, sending the Mandate of Heaven into a deep slumber the moment it entered his nostrils. His upper body swayed—then he landed face-first on the stone floor with a dull *smack*.

The battle between the girl and the Holy Order had lasted mere tens of seconds. She alone remained on her feet, while several hundred of the Theocracy's elite lay defeated on the floor. There was no room for doubt; she had seized an overwhelming victory.

"Phew..." she huffed. "If a group this small took me this long to incapacitate, I must still have a long way to go. Instructor Noor would have ended a fight like this before it even started."

Silence hung over the ballroom. After scanning her surroundings, the girl took in a breath, blew away the scant fragments of mithril that had stuck to her golden sword, then tucked it back into her gown.

"In retrospect, who am I to criticize others for their lack of skill...? Perhaps I lost my cool a little too much. I'll need to reflect on that."

The girl who had wiped out several hundred knights in the twinkling of an eye—all without wounding a single one—heaved a sigh, looked around, then called out calmly to the onlookers.

"Nobody is injured, are they? I am sorry for the fuss. Now, my apologies, but I must take an early leave of this ball. I'm in a hurry, you see. Do excuse me."

After briefly bowing her head, the girl turned on her heel and headed off in pursuit of the holy prince. Though she received no cheers or commendations as she went, her pure-white gown had not a single blemish or scratch upon it.

Extra Chapter: Tailoring a Gown

Prince Rein was seated at a table in his office with his sister, Princess Lynneburg. They were discussing what she would wear to the celebration in Mithra.

“And those are the details of the gown,” the prince concluded. “Is there anything in the specification documents that you wish to ask about?”

Lynne examined the thick manual that her brother had given her, looking dissatisfied. “I understand the specifications, but...isn’t this gown too extravagant? The cost of weaving it entirely from mithril thread would be prohibitive enough, but making it five percent orichalcum? That’s frankly unheard of.”

“That was what the Weavers Guild proposed, and it’s this gown’s greatest advantage. The orichalcum will significantly increase its defensive capabilities. The added expense won’t be for nothing.”

“But I can’t put such a large burden on the Kingdom’s treasury for a simple piece of clothing...”

“Lynne. I understand where you’re coming from, but this isn’t a private order; it’s a matter of both foreign policy and national security. I can’t allow anything less.”

“If you say so, brother, then I suppose I must acquiesce...”

As the prince explained the practical advantages of the gown’s design, Lynne returned to studying the specification documents, feeling discontented. “I...understand,” she eventually said. “Let’s go with this one, then—though I *still* think it’s too expensive.”

After giving her reluctant approval, Lynne stood up and took her leave. The prince waited until the door had closed behind her before he picked up the documents she’d put back on his desk. As she had said, the quote given by the craftsman was considerably expensive—as much as one would need to erect a large estate or perhaps purchase a small castle and its surrounding land.

“Even so...I’m still uneasy.”

Would the specifications of the order really be enough? When the prince considered what might happen in Mithra now that its relationship with the Kingdom had deteriorated, he couldn’t help but feel concerned.

He turned to a servant standing by. “Call in the representative of the Weavers Guild.”

“At once, my lord.”

The old craftsman had been waiting outside the room and was quick to enter once summoned.

“About the gown we discussed the other day...” the prince said. “I am tweaking the specifications. Instead of making it five percent orichalcum, make it twenty.”

“T-Twenty?!” The craftsman’s eyes grew as wide as saucers.

“Is that impossible?”

“N-No, of course not. But it would make the gown cost d-drastically more, my lord!”

“I’ll pay for it. How much more?”

“A-At an estimate...at least *five times* as much. No, *ten*!”

“I should be able to manage that. Worry not—you will receive your payment. Just focus on making the gown. And...don’t let anybody else know about this change. *Especially* my sister.”

“U-Understood, my lord.”

The craftsman then left the office with an uneasy look on his face, carrying the documents that now bore several new markings.

“That takes care of that...” Rein said, then sank into his chair and took a deep breath. His sister was frugal; if she found out about the change, she wouldn’t hesitate to voice her discontent. It was best to keep her in the dark.

The additional orichalcum would make the gown a reliable piece of equipment that could safeguard his sister. Yet a thought occurred to the prince.

“It still might not be enough...”

The more orichalcum they wove into the gown, the better its durability and magical resistance would end up being. At twenty percent, it would manage to withstand the flames and talons of a Red Dragon...but what if Lynne encountered something even more dangerous? It was entirely possible that she would, in which case...

The prince knew that he needed to ensure her safety at all costs.

“Sorry. Tell the craftsman to come back. There are more requests I need to make.”

“O-Of course, my lord.”

No sooner had the craftsman hurried back into the office than Rein took the specification documents from him and began quickly adding a number of changes. “In addition to what we previously discussed, I wish to implement this and this... We’ll also need these and...everything from here to here.”

The craftsman’s hands trembled as he accepted and glanced over the revised document. “U-Um, with all due respect, my lord...is this truly what you want? To give you an idea, it might cost as much as *twenty* times more than the price we agreed upon...”

“If that’s all, I’ll pay.”

“B-But, my lord—!”

“Are my requests impossible?”

“N-No, that isn’t the issue. If the funds are provided, the Weavers Guild will stake its good name on the gown’s successful manufacture!”

“Then there are no issues to speak of. I’ll take responsibility for the cost, somehow. Just follow the specifications.”

“A-As you wish!”

The prince watched calmly as the old craftsman hurried out of the office, carrying documents covered with even more red markings than before. The Weavers Guild was a collective of craftsmen that the king held in high regard. Though their new order was a challenging one, they would see it through.

As for the cost, the allocated diplomacy budget would just barely cover it. Yes, the price was a little steep, but the prince knew he could cover it by selling some of the spoils of war he'd retrieved during his excursions into the Dungeon.

Still...he was uneasy. What if something happened to his little sister? The gown's specifications were unparalleled—it was likely the single most impressive piece of equipment custom ordered since the Kingdom's founding—but it still wouldn't provide absolute protection.

In the prince's opinion, with Mithra and the Kingdom on such dire terms, Lynne would need armor that could more or less guarantee her safety. She was the next queen of the Kingdom of Clays, after all. And when he thought about it like that...the gown's current specifications seemed painfully lacking. There were so many necessary features he had yet to propose, and money was no object when his sister's life was on the line.

"No, wait. Now that I've thought about it, there's more. Call the craftsman back."

"A-Again, my lord?"

"Yes, again. I've a number of requests that weren't listed on the documents."

"A-At once!"

The same exchange repeated several more times before the prince was finally satisfied. He sold many of his personal assets and possessions to raise a frankly absurd amount of money...and the end result was well worth the expense. The country's best craftsmen had created the greatest Armored Gown in the history of the Kingdom, to which even many dungeon relics paled in comparison.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet!* This volume marks the beginning of the Holy Theocracy Arc, wherein Lynne, our main heroine, takes the leading role.

I've always liked active, out-there heroines who go beyond just being an accessory for the protagonist. Hopefully that came through with Lynne playing a larger role than Noor in this volume. Of course, that doesn't mean our hero is going anywhere—not when this series is called *I Parry Everything*! In fact, to be honest, he'll probably move up a gear and speed way ahead in the future.

This volume is basically a compilation of content from the web novel with some very slight tweaks. I think the biggest change was the "resolution" of each character becoming more high definition (my apologies for the abstract metaphor). In particular, Rolo, Sirene, and Marieberr were explored more thoroughly. They occupied my attention most when I was putting everything together.

Sirene and Marieberr were changed the most, in my opinion. After I received their designs from Kawaguchi-san, I said, "Oh, if they're going to look like *that*, then I bet they'd act like *this*." That inspired a number of adjustments to the section in which they appear and their relationships with other characters.

To be honest, characters' designs influencing their personalities has become something of a trend in this series. Ines was introduced in the first volume, and when I saw her design draft and the details of her armor, I started to think, *Based on its appearance, I'm sure it could do* this*...* Then I added more and more to my writing...which ended up being affixed to the setting of the main story. This is also why Ines's character design draft (which is now available on the web) has so many scribbles and notes on the right-hand side.

As the author, I've made a lot of changes to my characters based on realizations I've had after seeing them drawn for the first time. And I don't just get my inspiration from their equipment—their expressions play into it as well.

I've actually started to feel as though the light novel version of Ines has leaped out of my hands (in a good way!) and turned into a whole new character with a lot of charm. (The sketch of her in Kawaguchi-san's afterword is great, isn't it?)

The same process is happening with Sirene and Marieberr. I'm excited to see how their characters will develop next. Of course, the same can be said for *every* character, to a greater or lesser degree. The power of art is truly immense.

Also, to make one more point regarding the character designs... High Priestess Astirra, who appears in this volume, is a character I've been looking forward to seeing drawn for a very long time. Those who have read the web novel might suspect why. For many reasons, she's quite the idiosyncratic character, so I thought she would be hard to depict. However, Kawaguchi-san whipped her up so fast that I actually overlooked the email for about a week. (I only noticed it when my editor asked me whether I'd checked it yet...) So yeah, that was a thing that happened. (I truly am sorry.)

I seriously thought that if I could receive Kawaguchi-san's design of Astirra, I could die happy. So when it actually arrived, I was overcome with the feeling that I could achieve all kinds of personal milestones. Of course, I absolutely can't die before the next volume releases, since that one really is a certain lady's time to shine. I'll stick with my do-or-die resolution until then, so I hope you'll continue to enjoy the story.

Finally, KRSG-sensei's manga adaptation is going swimmingly. I would be over the moon if you could enjoy *I Parry Everything* in that form as well as this one!

Nabeshiki

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