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EVERYTHING
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I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!


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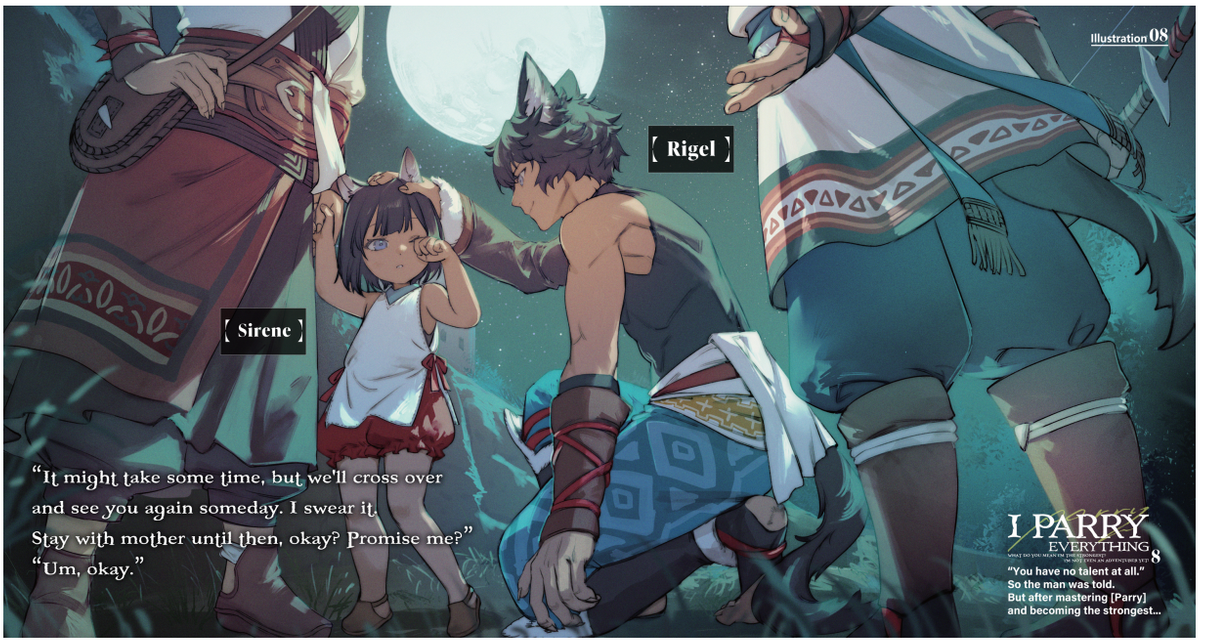

Illustration 08
【 Rigel 】
【 Sirene 】
“It might take some time, but we'll cross over
and see you again someday. I swear it.
Stay with mother until then, okay? Promise me?”
“Um, okay.”
I PARRY EVERYTHING
WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST? I'M JUST USING SKILLS ADVENTURER 8
“You have no talent at all.”
So the man was told.
But after mastering [Parry]
and becoming the strongest...


Illustration 08
【 Ines 】
【 Noor 】
【 Lynneburg (Lynne) 】
【 Zadu 】
Countless blades erupted from the sand around Zadu
and circled his body in a sea of jagged silver.
A flash of crimson obscured the man from view,
then faded to reveal him wearing a broad grin
and brandishing a strange, reddish-black blade.
[Parry]
I PARRY EVERYTHING

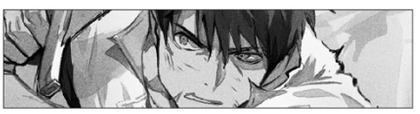
[The Story So Far]

Noor and his companions spent some time in a beastfolk village,
developing fields and canals to help improve the locals' lives.
Then the lord of the region, Rashid, appeared out of the blue,
insisting that the village pay an extortionate sum in taxes.
He invited Noor and the others to the City Forgotten by Time,
where they would take part in Trials, a sacred series of gambling matches.
In the event that they won, he would grant the village
exemption from the taxes they apparently owed.

Soon after the party arrived in the city—a lavish
establishment for Sarenza's wealthiest—they seized their first victory.
They were triumphant in a game of dice, then in a game of cards,
before Noor finally triumphed in the third and
final round: a hard-fought one-on-one match against Shawza,
the one-eyed, one-armed beastfolk.
As part of his reward, Noor was made the new owner
of the City Forgotten by Time, but
Rashid seems to have plans for him and his companions...

Characters

Noor



Noor

At twelve years old, after being told that he had no talent for any of the six classes, he went into isolation and spent a decade honing his only skill: [Parry]. Despite being an adventurer of the lowest rank, he's unbelievably strong—though he's the only one who has yet to notice.

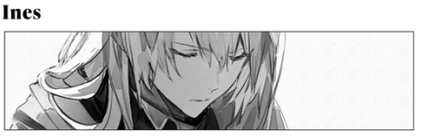
Lynneburg (Lynne)



Lynneburg Clays (Lynne)

Fourteen. Unequaled in all fields, and the first princess of the Kingdom of Clays. Enemy powers made an attempt on her life, but Noor managed to save her. She has called him "Instructor" and followed him ever since.

Ines



Ines Harness

A knight of the Kingdom of Clays. She has wielded a unique defensive skill since she was a child and uses it in her capacity as Lynne's bodyguard. Twenty-one.

Rolo



Rolo

A demonfolk boy. The circumstances of his birth and upbringing are mysterious. As his race is largely scorned and oppressed, he has lived a very miserable life.

Sirene



Sirene

Vice-captain of the Hunter Corps led by Mianne, the Bow Sovereign. A prodigious archer with beastfolk blood who met the high standards of her captain and serves as the youngest vice-captain in the Six Army Corps.

Rashid



Rashid

The eldest son of the head of House Sarenza, and the former owner of the City Forgotten by Time. He invited Noor and his companions to participate in Trials for the chance to win a tax exemption for the beastfolk village.

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Chapter 152: Shawza and Sirene

“Your name is Sirene, correct? Did you come alone?”

Rashid, former owner of the City Forgotten by Time, smiled kindly as he watched his guest enter the room. He had expected her arrival. Sirene, in contrast, had needed to work up the nerve just to knock on the heavy door. She looked taken aback by the warm welcome.

“Y-Yes,” she replied. “This is personal business, after all. Though I did receive my lady’s approval.”

“Personal business, hmm? But where are my manners? Please, sit. Do you drink tea? If so, which leaves would you prefer?”

“Anything is fine, as long as it isn’t too hot.”

“In that case, Melissa, please prepare the finest tea we have. Ah, and ensure the cup is of an appropriate quality for our guest.”

“Sir.”

“U-Um… You don’t have to go to that trouble on my…account…”

Sirene sat down on the couch her host had gestured to, cowed by the welcoming mood. At first, she seemed surprised by how comfortable it was, but she soon shrank into herself and gazed awkwardly around the room as though searching for what to do next.

Melissa briskly brewed the tea, observing Sirene’s discomfort with a sidelong look, and placed a cup in front of their guest. “Here you are. I’ve cooled it to a comfortable drinking temperature.”

“Thank you… Oh, this is really good.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Rashid said. “Now, you mentioned having business here?”

Sirene started, tearing her attention away from the tea and its pleasant aroma. “R-Right. Um, so, well…” Though the young hunter struggled to broach her reason for being there, her gaze was a good indication—it was directed squarely at Shawza.

Rashid smiled. Rarely was a guest he entertained quite so easy to read. “Is your business with Shawza, perhaps?”

“H-Huh? Oh, um… Yes, actually.”

“Ah, how silly of me to get my hopes up. Melissa, shall we step outside? They’re bound to want some privacy.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Then we shall take our leave. Please, take your time.”

“O-Okay. Um, thank you?”

With a cheery wave, Rashid departed the room with Melissa in tow. Sirene and Shawza faced each other without a word, one slightly nervous, the other appearing faintly irritated.

The first to break the awkward silence was the black-suited man, who spoke in a voice that resembled a low growl. “What do you want from me? Out with it already.”

Sirene placed her empty teacup down without a sound, no less hesitant than before. “Um, I… Well, first, I’m sorry this is so sudden.”

“Don’t get me wrong—you haven’t offended me. I’m just telling you to do away with the pleasantries and get to the point.”

“Earlier, during the Trials…I saw a mark on the back of your neck. I wanted to ask about it.”

Shawza’s face twisted into a bitter frown. “Ah. You saw it?”

“Sorry. Should I not have brought it up?”

“No, it’s fine. I won’t deny that it’s there. What about it, though?”

“It used to be a tattoo, didn’t it? One that you erased.”

Shawza’s expression remained cold as he turned away. “Yes.”

“I want to know more about the tribe that bears that tattoo as its mark,” Sirene pressed. “My family was a part of it, but I hardly know where to start looking.”

The suspicion in Shawza’s eyes morphed into realization, then disinterest as Sirene said her piece. He shook his head. “So you were one of us, were you? Then I suppose I can tell you some of what happened.”

“R-Really?!”

“Still, what good will knowing do you? The tale you seek is one of a ruined people. Understanding your roots won’t gain you a thing.”

“Though you might be correct, I’ve lived my entire life in the dark. I’ll take anything I can get, no matter how small. I can’t say my reasons go beyond that, but I still want to know.”

“So you just want to sate your curiosity?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

Though Sirene awkwardly scratched at her cheek, the look in her eyes was sincere. Shawza opened his mouth slowly, as if the very act of speaking were a strenuous effort. “And you have no other leads?” he asked.

“No, none at all. It’s been over a decade since I parted from my father and brother, and I haven’t heard news of them since. I don’t even know if they’re still alive.”

“So your interest is mainly in your family.”

“Yes. My brother’s name is Rigel. I was never told my father’s. The only memento I have to remember them by—if you can even call it one—is the mark on this pendant. I thought you might know something, since it matches what used to be on the back of your neck.”

Shawza had kept his head low but looked up at Sirene’s mention of her brother’s name. Surprise filled his one good eye as he gazed upon the pendant.

“That’s… I see. I thought I recognized it.”

“Did you know my family, by chance?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Th-Then—!”

Though Sirene’s expression lit up in anticipation, Shawza’s clouded over. The next words he spoke were filled with venom.

“That pendant tells me who you are—it’s true. I’ll believe that you’re looking for your father and brother. But tell me: What good will knowing those fools’ fates do you?”

“‘Fools’…?”

“Yes. If you want the truth, I’ll provide it, but you’re going to regret asking me. The only tales I have to tell are about two wretches who were a curse on those around them. You won’t enjoy hearing it. *I* won’t enjoy telling it.”

The girl sitting before Shawza had sharp eyes. All they sought was the truth. “I’ll decide whether I regret my decision once I’ve heard what you have to say.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I won’t sugarcoat it just because they were your family.”

“That’s fine. In fact, I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

Shawza watched Sirene for a moment, waiting to see if her resolve would waver, then breathed a small sigh. “To begin with, how much do you know about our ruined people?”

“Almost nothing. I’ve learned only their name since coming to

Sarenza. My mother always refused to tell me anything."

"I can't say I'm surprised. That was wise of her." The black-suited man sank deeper into his chair and exhaled. "A little over a decade ago, our people—the Mio Tribe—gathered the country's most influential beastfolk settlements under one banner and rebelled against its ruling body: House Sarenza."



“Against House Sarenza…?”

“Yes. We kindled the flames of uprising within beastfolk who were dissatisfied with the status quo…only to be struck down in a matter of days. If I left it there, you’d already have most of the story.”

“What happened…to my father and brother?”

“Your father was our chieftain, leader of all eighteen tribes that had taken up arms for the cause. In name only, mind you—he was a coward, pure and simple.”

“A coward…?”

“And his son, Rigel, though lionized as a hero, was nothing more than a hotheaded fool.”

Sirene remained silent as she digested Shawza’s scathing remarks. She said nothing in protest and simply listened as he continued.

“To call what happened a ‘battle’ would be generous at best. It was a one-sided slaughter. In the face of House Sarenza’s bottomless resources, we were powerless. Our archers were torn limb from limb by their golems, if not blown to pieces or crushed entirely. All that bloodshed, and for what? Nothing. Our people died in droves, but do you know who survived? Your father and your brother, Rigel. They were captured—almost entirely unharmed—and taken to be executed.”

“Executed…?”

“Yes. The day after their capture, your father was publicly executed in the capital. They tied him to the gallows and cut off his hands and feet. Then, as he wept and convulsed, they decapitated him and fed him to monsters.”

Not a single word passed Sirene’s lips. After more than a decade in the dark, she’d thought she was ready for the worst. She had known that her father and brother might already be dead, yet her father’s fate was more horrific than she could ever have imagined. It was made even more overwhelming by how the one-eyed bodyguard described it, his every word dripping with contempt. The sheer force of his emotions emptied Sirene’s mind of thoughts, and it took her a long moment to find the strength to ask him to continue.

“And…my brother? What happened to him?”

“Rigel was declared to be the same as your father: a leader of the rebellion. Thus, his fate was just as severe. His flesh was carved away and his bones were broken until he was an

unseemly wretch, weeping and pleading for his life. Then they let him go and allowed him but a taste of freedom before capturing him again and finally taking his head."

Again, Sirene said nothing. She found herself barely able to breathe.

"That's where his story ends. They burned his corpse, so you've not even bones to mourn."

"I...see..."

Sirene stared down at the floor, her head swimming with Shawza's tale. As she finally reconciled herself to her family's fate, a small glimmer of hope cut through the darkness—the chance for some much-needed closure.

"But my father and brother... They fought and died for what they believed in, right? For—"

"No. Were you even listening?"

Her desperate attempt to find comfort had scarcely taken shape before it was crushed into nothing by the man sitting across from her.

"Their beliefs had nothing to do with it," Shawza growled. "I doubt they had any to begin with, considering how little thought they put into their actions. They were empty-headed fools who neither gathered information nor prepared themselves for what was to come. Instead, they allowed themselves to be carried away by those around them. Your brother was *not* the hero everyone wished for him to be; he was an idiot playing at being one. It was *his* fault that so many of our people died such meaningless deaths—that we beastfolk are in an even worse position than we were before. Even at the end, he proved his complete lack of honor by attempting a cowardly escape to save his own hide. *Beliefs?* What would a man like that know about *beliefs*?"

By the end of his piece, Shawza's words had taken a heated, jagged edge. Sirene recognized them for what they were: pure, deep loathing.

"They should have died on the battlefield with their people," Shawza uttered. "It would have been far, *far* better if they had. If I came face-to-face with them now? I would rip them apart with my own hands. Ten times, a hundred times, a *thousand* times wouldn't be enough."

He glared at the floor, his remaining arm tensing with each hate-filled word. Sirene felt the air around them tremble every

time he clenched his fist. His loathing had spiraled into pure, murderous rage. Even knowing that it wasn't directed at her, Sirene felt herself stiffen and freeze.

After a period of silence, Shawza let out a gentle sigh. "Sorry. I shouldn't have told you after all."

"No, I'm grateful you did. Thank you."

"Even so… Look—forget any wishful daydreams you might've had. Your brother's gone. Even if he were alive, that would mean he hasn't contacted you in over a decade. Do you think he had even a shred of compassion for his family? I *know* what kind of man he was. He would never have returned to you and your mother—he wouldn't even have remembered the promise he made with you."

There was a brief pause before Sirene spoke. "You…can't say that for sure."

"Why not? I knew him far better than you do. He was a coward, through and through. He ran from even the slightest hardships, escaping reality to indulge in comfortable delusions until he'd left everything behind. In the end, duty and responsibility lay abandoned as he thought of nothing but himself. That's who he was to the core. Don't bother trying to learn more; family or not, he isn't worth your time."

So potent was Shawza's anger that the walls started to creak. Even the tea utensils on the shelves were keening and clattering. Sirene grasped the pendant around her neck.

Shawza leaned forward, his voice coming out low and guttural. "Another warning—you should throw away that trinket. Though it used to represent the coming together of our people, we now view it with disgust and contempt. That you share blood with the Mio Tribe is enough to gain you countless enemies, and the very act of carrying that thing around with you will see you branded an omen of disaster. If some stubborn vestige of sentimentality means you can't do it yourself, then let me break it for you, here and now. For your and your mother's sakes."

He reached out to grab the pendant, but Sirene drew back.

"Please don't."

The one-eyed man paused, then withdrew his arm. "My apologies. It belongs to you. How you act upon my warning is up to you and you alone."

"I won't get rid of it. Ever."

"So be it."

Turning away from Sirene, who was still squeezing her pendant, Shawza sat back down on the couch. “Is there anything else you want to ask? Not that I have any more answers to give.”

“No, you’ve told me enough. Thank you.”

Still clutching her pendant as if to hide it, Sirene stood and gave Shawza a slight bow, her eyes downcast. No sooner had she finished the gesture than she was gone, having slipped past the room’s heavy door.

Once her slender form was out of sight, the room’s remaining occupant sighed. “Your brother Rigel was the lowest, vilest coward there was. You won’t find him, no matter how hard you look. So why bother digging up the past…?”

His low voice carried through the room but faded away before it could reach anyone’s ears. Whether his irritation was aimed at Sirene or himself, nobody could say.

Chapter 153: Starpiercer Rigel, Part 1

“Mother, is Sirene asleep?”

“Yes, finally. Try to be quiet or you might wake her.”

“Mm-kay.”

Rigel was twelve years his baby sister’s senior. They were children of the chieftain of the Mio Tribe, a minority group of beastfolk that numbered only in the hundreds. Since ages past, their people had resided in the scarce woods upon a steep mountain, within the settlement they had so dexterously built despite the conditions.

So rough was the terrain that not even other factions within the beastfolk, a race famed for its physical aptitude, could easily access the Mio Tribe’s home. This allowed the tribe to control who could reach them, and they spent their days with minimal contact with the outside world. The only exception were their youth, who occasionally ventured outside their settlement to earn coin via mercenary work.

Although the land they lived on afforded them little in the way of luxury, the Mio Tribe enjoyed their freedom, and their proficiency in hunting and archery ensured they never went hungry. Rigel’s newborn sister, Sirene, was a plump, healthy baby as a result. He spent a while studying her content expression as she slept in her crib before turning to their mother.

“Mother?” he asked shyly. “Could you teach me archery again? If you’re too busy, I can do the housework to free up some of your time.”

She met his pleading look with a smile and loosed a gentle sigh. “Come now, Rigel… You know there’s nothing else I can teach you. You’re a quick learner, and you’re already better than me.”

“Aw… But I still can’t read the wind as well as you can.”

“I suppose that’s true, but you have me beat in everything else. What more could I even teach you?”

The woman responded to her son’s insistence with an exasperated smile. She had once been the Mio Tribe’s greatest hunter, tasked with protecting their home from outside threats. Twelve years ago, she had married the tribe’s young chieftain—

three years her senior—and, in due course, given birth to Rigel, their first child. She had used the opportunity to retire from active duty and transition into being an instructor for the village's young warriors.

The Mio Tribe had expected great things of Rigel from the moment he was born. His mother was a peerless archer, and his father, the chieftain, was well respected for both his strength and his mild temperament. But even in the face of this pressure, the young boy hadn't disappointed. He'd grown astoundingly fast, going from being able to walk after six months to running through the forest after a year to matching—and occasionally beating—adult men in contests of strength by the age of three.

Not much later, Rigel's mother had started to teach him archery—partly spurred on by the rest of the tribe, who were eager to see his progress. Yet even his most ardent supporters were surprised to witness the results. At five years old, Rigel could pick up a warrior's heavy bow, nock an arrow with one finger, and then release it with enough force to pierce steel armor.

Archery had been the young boy's companion ever since.

The mountain-dwelling Mio Tribe had an age-old custom: Each child born to a warrior family would be given a bow with a string wound so taut that not even an adult could draw it. The bow represented the tribe's wish for the child to grow up brave and strong—enough that they might one day be able to use it.

In truth, the custom was largely ceremonial—many adults never managed to draw the bows given to them at birth—but Rigel drew his by the age of seven. His arrow pierced the wooden target he'd aimed at…then the massive boulder behind it and several trees for good measure.

By the age of ten, Rigel had achieved several more equally impressive feats, and the entire tribe had recognized him as a full-fledged warrior. Unprecedented though it was, nobody had objected to the child joining the adults in their rigorous training—for his archery technique had already surpassed theirs, and the force behind his arrows had climbed to heights that no longer warranted comparison.

In a warrior tribe where martial strength was synonymous with pride, piercing steel with a wooden arrow wasn't that unusual an accomplishment. Rigel stood out because his arrows could punch holes in ten layers without losing momentum,

shooting through even the thick walls of the training hall and ripping apart massive trees in the distant forest beyond.

Talk of Rigel's spectacular feats was common in every hearth and home. It even reached the far desert sands via the Mio Tribe's mercenary work, though few believed a young child could be capable of such greatness.

Only when Rigel was twelve did things start to change.

On the night his younger sister was born, between the fading light of dusk and the dark of night, shooting stars made a rare appearance in the sky. Visible across the entire desert, they arrived in spaced intervals and drew glittering trails across the canvas of twilight. Those with knowledge of the stars found it curious, but nobody thought much else about it; the phenomenon wasn't unknown, and shooting stars were known to occur in showers.

The next night, however, it happened again. And the next. For days, the night sky was streaked with lines of light.

Of course, people were quick to notice the abnormality. The most striking detail was how the stars moved—they appeared to *ascend* before burning out. Some took these reverse meteors as an ill omen, yet others saw them as a sign of good fortune and took pleasure in watching them each night.

Days passed, and the strange phenomenon continued. Rather than abate, the shooting stars actually began to *increase* in number, and unease grew to the point that unoccupied young adults took up their war bows and set out to determine their cause. Apprehension lurked at the back of their minds, for what if this really was the harbinger of some great danger?

The star chasers gathered together, all outstanding hunters from their respective settlements, and headed in the direction of the shooting stars. Each one of them had been hunting from a young age, and their excellent tracking skills led them to the source in a matter of days: a mountain.

Certain they were on the right track, the star chasers had scaled the steep terrain, headed straight for the base of where the strange lights shot up into the sky. At long last, they reached the bank of a lake close to the Mio Tribe's village. Standing there, alone, was a single boy.



The first question out of the star chasers' mouths was whether the boy had seen the strange shooting stars streaming across the night sky. Yet his reply had come swiftly:

"Shooting stars? No, I haven't seen anything of the sort."

The star chasers were immediately suspicious. They pressed the boy further, insisting that he must have seen *something*. How could he not have when they were at the very source of the mysterious phenomenon?

At first, the boy cocked his head, clearly puzzled. Then recognition dawned on his face. He nocked a crude handmade arrow, *heaved* his bowstring back, and aimed straight up at the sky. When he loosed the arrow, a shining star was born. Its bright tail climbed higher and higher, then vanished into the darkness without a sound.

The adults stared upward, mouths agape, but the boy looked calm. He asked whether that was one of the "shooting stars" they had mentioned, and the star chasers could only nod in response. The arrow fired from the boy's bow had indeed been what they were searching for. In the end, their "shooting stars" had been mere wooden practice arrows.

Bewildered, the adults had asked the boy why he was shooting at the sky. In all seriousness, he had responded that he had no other choice; his arrows caused excessive amounts of damage when he fired them horizontally. Targeting the heavens was the only way he could practice without starting trouble, as his arrows would burn up before reaching the ground.

The star chasers couldn't believe their ears. The boy's arrows caught fire? And what had he meant by them causing "excessive amounts of damage"? Of all the great archers they knew, not one was capable of the feats the boy spoke of.

But as understanding slowly came to the adults, so, too, did excitement. They asked the boy his name, and when they learned that he was the "Rigel" praised in so many rumors, the tales about him that had once sounded absurd started to seem more and more real. The star chasers peppered him with questions, eager to know more.

Though taken aback, Rigel confirmed that the stories about him were true, more or less, and apologized for having caused such an uproar. Tears began to well from his eyes as he asked the star chasers for their forgiveness; he had no other way to practice his archery.

For all his talent, Rigel seemed entirely like a child who had just been caught doing something wrong. The star chasers were taken aback by the contrast. They came together to decide their next move, then bid the boy farewell and departed.

The star chasers returned to their respective villages the next morning and spread the word of what they had seen. The night sky was full not of shooting stars, they said, but of wooden arrows loosed by a young boy. As hard as it was to believe, the Mio Tribe really had raised such a prodigy.

The village elders were incredulous at first, but the young warriors were adamant, and the conviction in their eyes made it clear they were speaking the truth. Anyone who doubted the claims made about the boy were invited to check for themselves, for he was as real as the streaks covering the night sky.

Tales of Rigel from the Mio Tribe spread to every corner of the desert, sparking enough interest that even those from distant settlements made the journey to see his legendary archery. Several of those visitors were master archers themselves, famed across the land for their talent. They had spent decades with their bows as constant companions and refused to accept the stories told of Rigel until they had seen the boy with their own eyes.

The aged masters' years of training and experience had told them it was inconceivable to shoot an arrow with enough force to have it catch alight. Not even the old—but true—stories of past archer heroes had contained such ridiculous notions. Yet when they saw Rigel in action, they exchanged glances in silent disbelief...and burst into uproarious laughter. Upon returning home, they immediately began to sing the boy's praises.

"Among the Mio Tribe, there is a young man who sends stars into the sky. He will one day be the hope of our people."

Rumors that were once fantastical came to be known as the truth, then progressed into legends among the beastfolk. Rigel was none the wiser, too absorbed in his training to notice. He focused entirely on his own improvement and took great pleasure in conquering his shortcomings. Each new day saw him able to do something that had seemed out of reach the day before.

As more time passed, Rigel's archery only continued to improve. Each night, hopeful beastfolk all across the desert counted the shooting stars as they increased in number, blazing

trails across the sky. Many had no other forms of entertainment, so the ranks of the star watchers continued to swell.

Admiring the boy's "stars" became an integral part of the beastfolk's daily routines, so almost everyone noticed when the streaks suddenly started to burst. Each explosion lit up the night sky—and while it certainly was strange, those who saw it weren't particularly surprised. They knew Rigel must have made a new breakthrough of some kind. Partly in jest, they began to say that he'd finally shot a real star out of the sky.

In truth, the speed of Rigel's arrows had reached a breaking point. The friction they now generated as they tore through the air caused them to explode in bright bursts of light.

The adults had mostly been joking when they said that Rigel was shooting stars out of the sky. Among the children, however, that fantastical notion seemed all too real. They spread the story as though it were the truth, and so amazing was the nightly spectacle that even the older generations found themselves tempted to believe it.

Nights in the desert became a little brighter than before. As the sun set and darkness fell, adults would smile at the bursts of light and say to each other, "Rigel's shooting the stars down again." At the same time, the children would nock and shoot their own arrows, desperate to catch up to him.

At some point, Rigel gained the name "Starpiercer," and the appellation quickly began to spread. For the beastfolk, who were so proud of their archery and their history as hunters, the sight of the boy's wooden arrows was a source of great encouragement. Slowly but surely, they began to feel a faint sense of hope for the future.

Somewhere far away, a child of their kind was reaching the stars themselves. Though Rigel didn't know it, he had become a symbol of his people's dreams.

Sometime later, Rigel and his father were summoned to take part in a meeting between the beastfolk villages. Collectively, the beastfolk had formed what one could describe as a nation. It wasn't a cohesive state—more a loose alliance of many minor settlements—but its members came together in times of conflict, and major decisions were made by consensus.

As the pair stepped through the entrance of an old wooden council hall, Rigel's father explained to his son that their people's alliance had existed since ages past and that he should consider

the others in attendance as he would distant relatives.

Rigel took a few more steps forward, but something he spotted made him stop in his tracks. Sitting at the very center of the hall was a massive bow—a legendary relic of the beastfolk passed down for tens of generations. Long ago, a hero had used it to pierce the hardened carapace of a Divine Beast. Yet in all the time since, not a single person had managed to draw it, which was why it had come to be known as “the Divine Undrawn Bow.”

In truth, Rigel was barely able to process his father’s explanation; he was too smitten with the legendary bow. It was more beautiful than anything he’d ever seen. Its body was made of a material he didn’t recognize—gray and as transparent as glass, with a faint glow coming from deep within—and while its bowstring *looked* delicate, it was woven from some manner of steel wire that sparkled gold, silver, and a multitude of other colors.

Rigel was rooted to the spot, unable to even look away from the bow. The most senior of the elders approached him.

“Interested?” the man asked. “Try drawing it, then. In front of everyone. If you succeed, it’s yours.”

Rigel jumped at the chance, reaching for the bow without a second thought. Others warned him to be careful, saying that he’d lose his fingers otherwise, but he paid them no mind. The thought of being able to hold such a beautiful work of art made him happier than anything.

Doing as the senior elder had instructed, Rigel approached the transparent bow in full view of everyone gathered and wrapped one hand around its grip. He hooked the metallic, strangely lustrous bowstring with his other hand and pulled it back in one smooth motion, keeping it drawn as he kept his stance.

Shock rippled through the gathered elders. As a test, they gave Rigel the sturdiest mithril arrow they had on hand and took him outside so that he could loose it. Before the arrow could even leave the bow, however, it was splintered by the force of the bowstring. Fragments of mithril tore through half of the council hall and scattered debris all around them.

Those present were astounded. To think a single arrow could cause so much destruction.

The elders retreated into lengthy deliberation before at last coming to a conclusion: the Divine Undrawn Bow would be

entrusted to Rigel of the Mio Tribe. His father already had their trust, and Rigel gave them no reason to believe he would abuse the weapon if they bestowed it upon him. Every master archer who had ever spoken with the boy supported the idea, for in their own words, who was better equipped to wield the bow of legend?

And so, at the tender age of thirteen, one year after his sister was born, Rigel was granted the eighteen tribes' legendary Divine Undrawn Bow. Now that his weapon could keep up with his astounding physical strength, piercing distant mountains became the least of what his arrows could achieve. In no time at all, he managed to scatter the thick clouds of the rainy season and even disperse the massive sandstorms that sometimes assaulted the desert's settlements.

Rigel could no longer use his faithful wooden practice arrows; they didn't stand a chance against the force of his new bow. He switched to metal arrows, but even then, the slightest misjudgment in strength would cause them to explode, creating meteor showers that turned the night sky as bright as day.

Even those who knew of Rigel couldn't believe that the spectacles he produced were the result of a single boy and his bow. They could only assume that some unknown deity was creating miracles on a whim.

Through these phenomena, the eighteen tribes—an alliance without a king—experienced the birth of a new legend. As even more time passed, Rigel's archery continued to act as a bridge between him and his distant brethren, who grew to adore the young prodigy in turn.

Two years later, when Rigel turned fifteen and his sister, Sirene, was almost old enough to speak, the elders' prediction came true: he became the greatest hope of his people.

Chapter 154: Starpiercer Rigel, Part 2

For generations, the beastfolk were people of the forests, free roamers of the plains, and custodians of the abundant, water-rich lands that surrounded the vast desert. Each year, they hunted only as much as a particular region could sustain, held feasts and prayed in gratitude to the region's spirits, and stored their harvests for the year to come. Though faced with nature's unforgiving conditions, they mastered the art of foraging and wanted for nothing as a result.

A benevolent observer would say the beastfolk's society was peaceful and free of strife. Someone less charitable might describe it as insular and greatly resistant to change. Still, change did come to this closed-off world, set in motion by the arrival of foreign visitors.

Wandering merchants from distant lands came bearing new medicines and rare trinkets, and their presence in beastfolk settlements became increasingly common. For a people who had so little contact with the wider world, their guests were an endless source of novelty. Their different ways of thinking led to some minor disputes, but they were soon resolved amicably, and the two cultures came to enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship.

At the time, the beastfolk were the stronger of the two peoples—masters of the land who had honed themselves in nature's harsh climes. Their arrows could pierce even the toughest monster hide, and in the forests that were their home, all game was theirs for the taking. In their culture, it was a mark of pride to share the spoils of a successful hunt with those who were less fortunate.

The merchants, on the other hand, were weak and in need of protection. To the beastfolk, they were ignorant of the forests and defenseless besides—bound to wander into danger if left to their own devices. Whenever the merchants traveled within beastfolk lands, they would ask the elders for their counsel or hire young beastfolk as guides, paying them with curious foreign gifts.

Though the two peoples had distinct schools of thought, they did not intrude upon each other's expertise and thus were able

to share the profits from their neighborly relationship.

But then came the year of a grievous drought. The weather was harsh, rain was scarce, and the availability of both game and crops dwindled as a result. One beastfolk settlement saw not even the slightest drizzle.

Though uncommon, drought had long been a part of their land, so the settlement's elders knew of an oasis that their people had used as refuge for generations. So when their water sources ran dry, they moved.

The oasis was prone to flooding and unsuitable for long-term residence, but in years of drought, it was an ever-reliable source of water. Guided by their elders, the beastfolk stepped foot onto land they had not needed to use in decades. However, when they arrived, they saw a sight that not even the elders could explain: dozens upon dozens of completed houses.

On closer inspection, the mysterious residences belonged not to the beastfolk but to merchants. The elders approached one such house and asked its occupant, "Why have you settled here?"

"Because this land now belongs to us. We pioneered it, and for a long time, it has been our home. You cannot ask us to leave—we have nowhere else to go. Here, look. This is the title deed."

The beastfolk were unconvinced that a simple piece of paper could prove anything, let alone land ownership. But after consulting one another, they decided to leave the oasis's new residents alone. It was unfortunate, as the land and its precious water had been so crucial to their ancestors, but they had no right to monopolize nature's blessings in the first place.

The merchants were a weak people; if their very survival depended on the oasis, then that was to be respected. The beastfolk, with their abundant knowledge, could simply move elsewhere. There were no limits to where they could venture, and if they traveled far enough, they would surely find water elsewhere.

Thus, the kind beastfolk did not protest. They smiled as they bade the merchants farewell and spent the year somewhere else without issue.

Two years later, there was another drought, this one more severe than the last. When the beastfolk returned to the oasis, they found that the number of houses had multiplied, and a sturdy fence now prevented their entry. Again, the elders reached out to the merchants.

“Our people have shared this land since the days of our ancestors. You could not have known this, so we do not blame you for settling here, nor will we ask you to leave. We ask only that you allow us a part for ourselves.”

“But this is much too sudden,” the merchants said in response. “We possess the legal ownership of this land and have purchased the rights to its water. Here, look at all these documents!”

The beastfolk were then asked what proof of ownership they could provide—and of course, they could only answer, “None.” The oasis had been used by everyone since ages past, and such papers had never been necessary.

At last, when the beastfolk explained that they had no money to their names, the merchants declared that they could not share the oasis’s water with them. Despite their reluctance, the beastfolk had no choice but to depart.

Though the younger beastfolk were indignant, their elders soothed them. They possessed the strength to win any conflict, but allowing the situation to escalate to that point would bring shame upon the spirits of their ancestors. There was no pride in bullying the weak.

The beastfolk were strong and knowledgeable; it was only natural for them to make concessions for those in greater need. If relinquishing the oasis would settle the matter, they thought, then so be it. The younger generation were admonished, and the beastfolk once again surrendered the land to the merchants. It was not long before they discovered another source of water and spent the rest of the yearlong drought in comfort.

A decade later, the same story. In the midst of an intense drought, a settlement of beastfolk once again traveled to the oasis, guided by their elders, and were met with a shocking sight. Where there had once been water, there now stood tall stone walls and sturdy metal gates watched over by guards with weapons and armor.

No sooner had the guards spotted the confused beastfolk approaching them than they readied their weapons and called out: “Present your permits.”

The beastfolk confessed to not having any, and the guards’ response came just as quickly.

“Then you must pay the toll.”

“We have never needed to pay a toll to enter this land.”

“Perhaps not, but times have changed. It is the law, and those who refuse to obey must be imprisoned.”

The beastfolk were exhausted from their long journey and so reluctantly paid the toll to pass. But when they entered the metal gates, they found that the once abundant spring was almost dry. The elders, confused, asked the merchants to explain themselves.

“Ah, the water? We sold it a long time ago. It was of excellent quality and fetched a high price. If you wish to use what remains, then again, you must pay.”

The beastfolk abided by the merchants’ laws and paid, though the fee was exorbitant, and the water was muddy at best. Worse still, when their money ran out, they were chased from the land without another thought. They searched for alternative refuge but, unable to find anywhere, ultimately returned to their drought-stricken home.

All too late, the beastfolk came to a realization: the freedom they had once enjoyed was no more. The merchants with whom they had peacefully coexisted had parceled out and sold great swathes of land to those of their people who had arrived in their wake. Then, with the profits they had made, the merchants had developed more land, expanding their influence and repeating the cycle.

Now, even the elders were indignant. For countless generations, the bounties of the land had been shared among all. Lakes, rivers, earth, and sky—everything was a blessing from their ancestors and the spirits of nature. So pleaded the beastfolk…but the merchants received their passionate appeal with stony expressions, stating simply that they possessed the rights of ownership.

“These documents are widely recognized as legal, whereas your claims have no basis.”

Indeed, the beastfolk had no physical evidence. Still not wanting to come to blows with the merchants, they surrendered the oasis and departed for elsewhere.

Yet now…there was nowhere else for them to go.

Discontent toward the merchants propagated swiftly among the beastfolk. Some even insisted that they should take back the land that was so unjustly stolen from them. Nobody doubted that they would claim victory in battle, but even then, few supported it. To their people, there was no greater shame than

violence done in anger, and harming another was the vilest act imaginable.

Thus, they endured their new hardship, choosing to continue down the path of diplomacy with their pride and dignity intact. However, the unfortunate truth of the matter was that their time was almost up.

No longer could the beastfolk drink from the lands their ancestors had protected. Their new homes had little in the way of game, and their forests were being cut down for lumber, leaving them bare. Settlements that had once thrived could no longer provide for their people, and many newborn babies perished as a result.

Tensions finally came to a head, and the younger beastfolk rebelled against their elders. A faction of conspirators took up their bows and marched toward a merchant town. They doubted the merchants would continue to ignore them in the face of an armed force, but most of all, they simply wished for their wives and children to be freed from thirst and hunger.

Little did they know, the merchants understood the growing discontent of those whose lands they had stolen and made preparations in advance.

Even when the young beastfolk arrived, the merchants were perfectly calm. The former group's plan was to protest for several days, resorting to violence only as a last resort, but they were taken by surprise and surrounded by a contingent of massive, doll-like constructs.

Though the beastfolk hadn't known it, the humanoid stone mechanisms were "golems," which the merchants had discovered in the Dungeon of Oblivion. When fed manastones, they became tireless, lethal weapons that obeyed their masters' every order unless rendered physically unable to.

Faced with opponents they could not hope to beat, the beastfolk panicked. Several gave up their pride and begged for forgiveness, recognizing the victory they had thought was guaranteed as only a mirage. The merchants watched them in cold silence before giving the golems their orders.

And in no time at all, the young beastfolk were reduced to clumps of gore and viscera.

Until that moment, the beastfolk had been gravely mistaken. They had assumed they were stronger, smarter, and tougher than the merchants, who were weak, ignorant, and in need of

protection. But the opposite was true. The merchants had only feigned weakness, tolerating the beastfolk's belittlement and conserving their strength in secret.

To the merchants, the beastfolk who saw themselves as so wise and magnanimous were naive fools. They had physical strength, true, but what did that matter? Enough time and care had made it easy to strip away their assets.

The young beastfolk's attack marked the end of the merchants' preparations. They made a proclamation the very next day.

"Despite our best attempts to reach a mutual understanding, the beastfolk have resorted to violence against our innocent citizenry. Though it pains us deeply, we are forced to recognize that the cordial relationship between our peoples is now a relic of the past. We will take any measures necessary to protect ourselves from the risk of lawless and unreasonable violence. No mercy shall be shown."

The merchants' first act was to send several hundred golems to the village of the "raiders" and raze it to the ground. In a single night, a long-standing settlement—and most of the beastfolk who called it home—were reduced to naught but ash upon the sand. Only those who cried for forgiveness were spared, though they bore the dishonor of being known for harming innocent merchants and were saddled with a demand to pay reparations they could not afford. In the end, they were forced into slavery, one and all.

The other beastfolk settlements seethed with anger. Yet patience was a virtue of their people, so they refrained from taking action. The merchants' atrocity was inexcusable, but the young beastfolk had attacked first. Resorting to violence had been their fatal mistake.

"If we tread the same path, it will only result in more victims."

The elders told cautionary tales handed down since ancient times and warned the younger generation not to act rashly. Hearing of their ancestors' hardships kept their frustrations in check, and their relationship with the merchants was ultimately maintained, allowing the beastfolk to remain "good neighbors."

However, this came with a price. The rivers and lakes on which the beastfolk survived were slowly taken away by one title deed after another, and the creation of new laws forbade them from even entering the forests that spread out before them.

As their access to the land and its bounties continued to shrink, the beastfolk gradually wasted away. Though they maintained their trade with the merchants, the latter felt no obligation to assist the weak and extorted their desperate trade partners for all they were worth. Before long, the beastfolk were left with barely anything of value.

Beastfolk society had changed so that money became a requirement to live. Yet a beastfolk with a talent for business was rare indeed. Most lacked a formal education and were too occupied with finding their next meal to focus on anything else. Their children began to starve, and sickness claimed their elders, taking with them their people's ancient knowledge before it could be passed down.

Thus, the people of the forests, once custodians of the vast plains, were chased to the corners of the desert, their position growing more untenable by the year. In only two generations, they had become a minority whose only remaining pride was their skill with a bow.

As the beastfolk's numbers continued to shrink, the merchants' population exploded. They experienced such great luxury and abundance that even their slaves became the subject of envy among the beastfolk's youth. Many abandoned their homes for the merchants' cities, seeking to improve their fortunes. But, ignorant of the ways of commercial trade, they soon found themselves deceived and eventually clapped in chains.

In time, beastfolk slaves became a common sight in merchant cities. The balance of power between the two peoples had changed so dramatically that certain beastfolk even came to take pride in their status as slaves. Their lack of freedom chafed, but working guaranteed them full bellies and roofs over their heads. Rather than deny reality, they thought, why not work toward a better life from within a slave's bonds?

The beastfolk's old settlements lacked game, arable land, and anything else that could earn them a profit. And while their children would be born into slavery, forced to shoulder their parents' debts, it was a better fate than starving to death in the desert.

As a people, the beastfolk were hardy and extremely adaptable—traits that fetched them higher prices than other slaves at the markets. Surely that was something to take pride

in. It was by that logic that many beastfolk slaves came to view themselves as fortunate, recognizing that the alternative was much, much worse.

Some immersed themselves in their masters' words, allowing the dark seeds of escapism to sprout into conviction. But for many other slaves, they remained only a comforting lie—a work of unmistakable fiction meant to keep them in their place.

Among the merchant people, the beastfolk gained a reputation as powerful but obedient slaves who could "endure great strains before they expired." They were relegated to mere commodities...albeit ones that fetched a handsomely high price.

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Around the time of his people's relegation to starvation and slavery, Starpiercer Rigel appeared in one of the few beastfolk settlements to have remained self-sufficient. To the elders, who despaired at the cruelty of their people being driven to the farthest reaches of the desert, it was as though their savior had come. Here, at long last, was the boy who could stand against the merchants' intolerable actions.

For who could, if not the boy whose strength surpassed even the heroes' epics—whose power was rivaled only by the figures of ancient myth?

Some spoke openly of taking retribution on the crooked merchants. Perhaps it could actually be done, for what was a golem's stone hide to someone whose arrows created stars in the night sky? Rigel, however, had no such thoughts of revenge; he practiced archery purely for his love of the art. Even his decision to take up the Divine Bow had come entirely from his appreciation of its beauty. He considered it far too powerful to be used in combat—pointing it at another was unthinkable and would surely bring about great misfortune.

So, no matter how much the adults pleaded with him to head their cause, he staunchly refused.

When the beastfolk realized that Rigel would not be swayed, they turned instead to his father. But the chieftain was a prudent man. Though he acknowledged that victory over the merchants—even at the cost of many lives—could restore to the beastfolk their pride and ancestral lands, he also knew that defeat would cost them even more than they had already lost.

Rigel and his father's position was obvious, if one gave it any thought: against the merchants, who had spent years conserving their resources, the beastfolk were at a severe disadvantage. Many found it hard enough to put food on the table, and it was all they could do to care for themselves and their own. In a drawn-out conflict, it was clear who would come out victorious.

Once the first arrow was loosed, there would be no going back. So while Rigel's father expressed his understanding of their people's plight, he stated that he could not agree to anything rash and refused to send his son into battle.

Before long, those who had placed their hopes in Rigel started to resent him.

"Why did you take up that bow if not for this? You have been given such astounding strength, and you would let it waste away?"

Eventually, their resentment spread even to the younger generation, and those who saw Rigel spewed insults behind his back.

"He's no hero of ours. He's just a coward."

Rigel knew why the others disparaged him. How could he not? Every time he traveled outside his home, he saw more and more of his people as slaves. Certainly, a few had donned the yoke by choice, but the majority had been forced into thralldom without a single say in the matter.

Slaves went everywhere with iron collars and chains, and when their masters beat them, they could only respond with smiles or grovel feebly in the dirt. By all accounts, they were treated no better than pets.

Rigel understood the emotions that drove others to place their hopes in him: their fear of succumbing to the same fate as their brethren, their desperation to intervene, and their apprehension bordering on despair as they wondered whether it was already too late. He understood those emotions because he felt them too. But even then, he could never turn his beloved archery into a tool for slaughter.

Or so he thought.

One day, while visiting a merchant city with his father, Rigel came across a little girl being sold into slavery. He pictured his sister in her place, and from that point on, he knew he would take up his bow. He appealed to his father the very next day.

“Our people are wasting away, and we’ve done nothing to resist it. The merchants no longer fear us, let alone respect us. This is where acting as ‘good neighbors’ in the face of their injustices has brought us. I respect our predecessors’ decision not to resort to violence, but enough is enough; we *must* show that we are willing to fight back. We don’t need to kill anyone, and I’m not trying to get revenge for the past. I just want the merchants to know of our people’s anger. I want them to know that we still have our dignity.”

At first, Rigel’s father refused to hear his son’s entreaty. But as more time passed, he could only agree.

That year, an extreme drought ravaged the desert. Unless the beastfolk broke their “contract” with the merchants and encroached on land they were barred from—or perhaps even took it by force—their people would die of thirst and starvation. For so long, they had worked together to endure, but they were finally at the end of their rope.

Rigel’s father had risen to a position of influence over not just the Mio Tribe but his entire people. In the end, rather than hold out for an unknown future, he chose to fight for the young lives at risk in the present. Though he would never admit it, his decision had come mostly from his faith in his son. It was said that a golem’s hide was as hardy as the toughest mineral, but Rigel had proved that his arrows could pierce such things with ease. A drawn-out conflict would end poorly, but with his strength, perhaps it wouldn’t come to that.

In short order, Rigel’s father gathered the other chieftains and hesitantly expressed the faint hopes he harbored. They agreed with his resolve, and their council swiftly reached a verdict:

“If Starpiercer Rigel takes up his bow, we will gladly follow.”

And so, the beastfolk prepared themselves for war. As per the traditions of their people, men of able body would fight, while women, children, the elderly, and the infirm would retreat to secret refuges. There they would remain until news of their victory reached them by way of a secret cipher. It was an ancient measure intended to prevent the extinction of their people in the event of a crushing defeat, and while many hoped it would not come to that, they understood the risk they were taking.

Thus, each warrior sent their family away to a secret location that only they knew.

For Rigel and his father, that refuge was across the northern

wall. The barrier that served as the border between countries was tall and daunting, but Rigel's mother had once been a warrior without equal; she would scale it easily under the cover of night, all while carrying her daughter, Sirene. The merchants would have a hard time pursuing them into the Kingdom of Clays. And if the beastfolk won the war, it was an ideal place for reestablishing contact.

Rigel placed a hand on his sister's head and crouched down to speak to her. She had just recently learned to speak.

"It might take some time, but we'll cross over and see you again someday. I swear it. Be a good girl and stay with mother until then, okay? Promise me?"

"Um, okay."

Three-year-old Sirene looked tired and confused, and for good reason—she had woken up in the dead of night to a place she didn't recognize. Still, she nodded at her brother's words.

"Mother, take care of Sirene."

"With my life. But I think we'll be okay. Before we part, Rigel...promise me something."

"Of course. What is it?"

Rigel's mother stared into her son's eyes, her expression grave. "You've grown so strong, so quickly. Even as your mother, I can hardly believe it. With the Divine Bow in your hands, you look as though you could take on the world. You're my pride and joy, Rigel."

Rigel scratched his cheek, attempting to hide his embarrassment. "Mother... It's only because you and father—"

"But," his mother continued, "the bow is a tool for the weak to fight the strong. Remember that. No matter how great your archery might become, you must never overestimate your strength. If you encounter true danger in battle, then I want you to run. Can you promise me that?"

Rigel fell silent, taken aback by his mother's uncharacteristically forceful tone. He took a moment to consider her words, then slowly nodded.

"Okay. I promise. If all hope seems to be lost, I'll run. Don't worry, mother—I'm not going to my death."

She turned next to his father. "My love, take care of our son."

"I will. The wait might be long, but stay safe. We'll find you when the time comes."

"We should go, father," Rigel said. "Mother, be well. Sirene,

keep this lucky charm safe, okay?”

“Mm-kay…” the girl managed. “Bye-bye?”

Rigel had prepared a lucky charm for their parting: a pendant marked with the Mio Tribe’s insignia. He pressed it into her little hands and mussed her hair with a smile before turning and silently departing with their father.

Rigel’s mother waited until she could no longer see the pair. Then she took young Sirene in her arms and, under cover of night, scaled the imposing northern wall.

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That night, after saying quiet farewells to their loved ones, the beastfolk gathered for war. Their first objective was to raid the merchants’ weapon depots and steal their opponents’ armed might before it could be used against them.

Their greatest obstacle would be the merchants’ golems—silent, powerful mechanisms excavated from the Dungeon of Oblivion. They were the main reason the merchants could force their unreasonable demands. Powering one required nothing more than a manastone, and the result was a murderous monstrosity that obeyed its master’s every command until it broke down. Their durability was exceedingly high, and even quality mithril swords struggled to find purchase on their armor.

Yet the golems weren’t invulnerable, nor were they unlimited. Rigel had tested his bow against fragments of destroyed golems and proved that his arrows could pierce their armor.

Rigel’s father, who had been given the position of war chief, laid out their battle plan: once the golems were destroyed, they would finally bring the merchants to the negotiating table. The absence of weapons would put them in a better position to argue for greater concessions. Through the use of diplomacy, the fertile ground the merchants had monopolized would return to being common land, and the beastfolk’s enslaved brethren would be granted their freedom.

Even at the outset of war, the beastfolk had to remember that they weren’t fighting to wipe out their foe, no matter how much they hated them. They needed only to demonstrate their anger, and it was crucial not to create more victims than was absolutely necessary.

“Until the merchants give up on their obstinate desire to rule

us, we shall target every weapon at their disposal. We will take their strength until they have none left."

The beastfolk were waging a war of justice. It would be a long and painful test of endurance, but many—even Rigel himself—believed that the Starpiercer's archery could hasten it.

As their opening move, the beastfolk sent their scouts into a merchant city to find where its golems were being kept. The merchants had plenty of warehouses for their common goods, but the beastfolk's talented hunters quickly rooted out the handful that were being used for weapons.

Their first raid of the war happened the very same day.

The beastfolk began by capturing those inside the warehouse and leaving them tied up outside. Then, once the warehouse was empty of people, Rigel took aim. The strength of the Divine Undrawn Bow, coupled with his talent as an archer, ensured that a single arrow was enough to pierce through dozens of inactive golems and create a massive explosion. Several more arrows reduced the warehouse to a heap of rubble.

In mere moments, their raid had come to an end.

The beastfolk were ecstatic—their first move had proved more successful than they'd ever imagined. They let out involuntary cheers and patted each other on the shoulders, exchanging words of encouragement. It would not be long, they thought; they would reunite with their families soon.

Preserving their momentum and making use of their race's inherent endurance, the beastfolk headed straight for the second warehouse. The process repeated. Rigel unleashed more arrows, and in no time at all, not a single golem remained.

Now wary of the attacks, the merchants activated their golems in advance of the next raid. Still, Rigel made short work of them; their armored bodies were no match for his arrows.

Although the golems were as sturdy as the rumors made them out to be, even ordinary beastfolk arrows proved able to stop them—provided they were fired accurately enough into the golems' joints. So fell the third warehouse, then the fourth, almost anticlimactically. By the end of the first day of the war, seven merchant warehouses had fallen without a single casualty on either side.

The beastfolk warriors were in a heady mood. Their first day had turned out more fruitful than any of them had expected. As they chatted about their success, a faint hope began to blossom

in their hearts: if they could continue pressing the attack, bringing the merchants to the table might not be such a far-fetched idea after all.

On the second day, the eighth warehouse fell amid the dark of night—still with no casualties—and the beastfolk's hopes only continued to swell. The war they had feared so intensely had turned out to be far simpler than they'd imagined. It wouldn't be long before they could bring the good news back home and reunite with their loved ones. The mood was infectious, and all took part in it.

They could never have imagined that they had traitors in their midst—people for whom coin meant more than kinship.

Even if some of them *had* suspected the betrayal, they would surely have denied it in their hearts and never thought of the matter again. The beastfolk were too proud to accept there being cowards among them. They were honorable warriors fighting to protect those dear to them.

And it was that good-natured disposition that brought about their downfall.

On the third night of their campaign, the beastfolk followed their scouts to the next warehouse, drawing closer than they had the previous days. Several voices spoke out in concern but were dismissed with chuckles, for what was there to fear? They had already disposed of a great many golems, and their food and arrows were both in generous supply. Every one of them was a talented warrior; together, they would overcome whatever obstacles stood in their path.

The beastfolk's successes had eased their nerves. Optimism abounded in comparison to the start of their first day. But what dulled their judgment most of all was their impatience—the faster they ended the conflict, the sooner they could see their families again.

By the time they noticed something was amiss, it was already too late; their arrows had stopped working against the golems. Rigel's father, who had been leading from the front line, gave the order to retreat, but his army was already surrounded.

The golems took forms the beastfolk had never seen before. They had been buried in the sand, disguised as rocks, awaiting the perfect moment to emerge. The very thought of being ambushed took the beastfolk by surprise. Their senses were unmatched; how could anything have escaped their notice?

Then, the golems moved.

They were fast—too fast. Not even the swiftest runners among the beastfolk could escape their massive hands. Worse still, they had power to match. The strongest beastfolk came together to free their comrades from the automatons' clutches, but they failed to unfurl even one stony finger. They could only watch as their friends were mercilessly crushed into pulp.

If only the slaughter had ended there. The most prudent of the beastfolk had expected the merchants to have more golems than were being kept in their warehouses, but nobody—not even the paranoid—had anticipated *this many*.

Strength, speed, number—the beastfolk were outmatched in every way. As more and more of their kin were mangled and maimed, those who survived them gave into despair. Screaming, they scattered in an attempt to escape.

But where could they run to? Arrows failed them, and the number of corpses strewn across the sand only continued to grow.

Rigel was the sole point of resistance. His arrows could still pierce the golems' armor—but in the time it took him to draw his bow, more of his people fell victim to the constructs' onslaught.

The beastfolk had wanted a war without bloodshed. Now, before the ambush had even concluded, blood ran along the desert in rivers. All the while, a gathering of merchants watched from a place far beyond the reach of arrows. They shared a fine vintage and laughed over the distant screams.

"At last," they said. "This should mark the end of those nuisances."

The amused merchants—the most influential in the land—beheld the carnage through precious spyglasses excavated from the Dungeon of Oblivion. They watched the fools who had bared their fangs perish at the golems' hands and raised a toast in celebration of the joyous event.

Almost every spectator was a descendant of the first merchants to have set foot in beastfolk territory. Their predecessors had marched into the desert and cleared a path for those who would succeed them. Now, they fully controlled trade in what they called the Mercantile Free States.

To each other and outsiders, the gathered merchants were known as House Sarenza. They had spent generations monopolizing wealth and power, and that time had taught them

plenty about the race with whom they shared the land. Since the very beginning, the merchants had wanted nothing more than to wipe out the beastfolk and the “strength” they took such pride in.

And while the recent appearance of the boy who pierced the heavens had posed an unexpected threat, today’s events would put that to rest as well.

Transparent glasses clinked together as the merchants celebrated. Now, their business would grow unobstructed, and their future would shine with unhampered candor. In one smooth motion, they had done away with their problems and tied up the last of their loose ends.

Thanks to the informants they had paid, the merchants now knew where almost all of their enemies’ loved ones were hiding. Because of the beastfolk’s foolishly simple plan, dependent entirely on pure strength, the merchants had gained a lawful and exceedingly convenient way of procuring new slaves in abundance.

The merchants, now deep in their cups, made merry as blood continued to stain the sand, envisioning their future riches. They understood their victims better than their victims knew, well aware of their hardships, their poverty, and even the discord that had spurred them to attack in the first place.

Little did the beastfolk know, the anger they were so desperate to express was already common knowledge. The merchants knew of their pride and the sympathy for their brethren that had compelled them to act. They even recognized their impatience, born of a dangerously uncertain future.

The day’s events had been a long time in the making. As much as the merchants had wanted to crush their enemies sooner, they had resisted the urge to bring their hidden might to bear and waited patiently for the moment it would reap the greatest reward. Against a foe that was stronger and far more honest, it was best to create a pretext for their oppression and saddle them with debt.

The wish passed down through generations of merchants had finally been realized. It was time to *collect*.

For too long, the beastfolk had lived without a leash. Enduring their freedom had been strenuous, but it had all been worth it to watch their demise. As the battle proceeded and the primal golems trampled their opponents, the merchants exchanged

words of congratulation. Several raised their glasses to the dying masses, for their victory had depended on the beastfolk "starting" the war.

To the gathered merchants' applause, the golems continued to rampage, every bit as cold and calculating as their masters. The beastfolk had no idea they were being watched—that the country's most powerful merchants were assessing their worth—yet they still fought desperately against the odds.

Of the surviving resistance, Rigel and his father stood out the most. Not even running out of arrows was enough to stop them, as they switched to their daggers and resumed the fight. It was an absurd spectacle—small, unreliable blades against ancient weapons of war—but they managed to keep up nonetheless.

The pair had been taken completely by surprise, and hundreds of their brethren had perished in mere moments. They were drenched in enough blood to impair their movements, but still, they raged against death. Even when they were the only two who remained, they fought as valiantly as the heroes of old.

The merchants who had expected a carefree spectacle were shocked. The battle thus far had cost them sixteen times more primal golems than projected and five times as many manastones to fuel them—though they had overprepared in the latter case. They had also lost two hundred times as many top-grade artificial golems, the closest man-made constructs could get to primal golems, and witnessed twenty-five times as much collateral architectural damage.

Still, losses were an inevitable part of business. And when they took their future gains into account, the situation at hand could barely be considered a setback.

Alone among the golems, Rigel and his father continued their valiant fight for another half day before they were cut down by members of their own race. Those they had assumed to be reinforcements were actually mercenaries in the merchants' employ, and they stabbed the pair in the back when their guards were down.

For a while, the father and son continued to resist, but their blood loss eventually overcame them. They collapsed to the ground, almost drowning in their comrades' gore as they lost consciousness.

At last, the beastfolk's rebellion had met its end. Their attempt at a careful, drawn-out war hadn't even reached its fourth

morning.

Those who had fought so desperately for their families were, in the end, left with nothing. The peace they had enjoyed with their loved ones; the lands that were so dear to their ancestors; their quiet, modest lives; and even their basic dignity as a people—everything that mattered to them was gone. Their reluctance to kill had culminated in hundreds of deaths and doomed thousands more of their kind to a tragic existence of slavery.

Even Rigel and his father, who had survived the massacre, had only as much as the merchants deigned to give them: a reputation as sinners, and the ire of an entire people.

Mere days would remain until their public execution.

Chapter 155: Starpiercer Rigel, Part 3

Rigel awoke in an unfamiliar city. The sky above was clear and blue.

Where am I...?

There wasn't a single cloud in sight. The sun's harsh rays beat down from above, and each breath Rigel took parched the inside of his throat. Each desperate attempt to swallow caused the foul taste of blood to spread through his mouth.

As his bleary vision slowly cleared, Rigel saw his father clapped in thick, metal chains. Then he realized that he, too, was bound.

They were atop a tall stone tower of some kind, which gave them an excellent view of the scenery around them. Rigel watched as his father was dragged away, still restrained, then forced down onto a platform of black metal. He appeared to be shouting something.

Two men in obsidian armor stood at his sides. They raised their bulky scimitars high in the air, primed to bring them down at any moment.

Rigel gazed down upon the city. A sea of eyes stared up at him, watching him with curiosity of another kind. Some looked delighted, as though watching a show put on during a festival, while others peered at him with unease. There were even some beastfolk among them, dressed in rags.

Before them all, there stood a massive black cage crammed with monsters. Its upper portion was open to the heavens—an invitation, almost. Rigel wondered what it was for. He also wondered why such a large crowd was watching him.

At that very same moment, one of the scimitars came down, severing one of his father's arms. The other descended in short order.

Next, they went for his legs.

For each limb severed, a loud cheer rippled through the crowd. They applauded as the severed chunks of meat were tossed into the cage for the excited monsters to fight over.

Rigel couldn't process what he was seeing. It was far too cruel, even for a nightmare. But as stones cast by his brethren in

rags struck his face, he was forced to accept the harsh truth of his situation.

Oh, that's right. We lost.

Silent titans had slaughtered his companions, tearing them apart without a shred of mercy and without even giving them a chance to speak their final words. They were undignified deaths—and that same treatment was now being extended to his father, the only other survivor. The man's limbs had all been severed, and he was screaming something with his last breaths.

Only when he strained his ears to listen did Rigel realize what his father was saying—he was pleading for his son's life to be spared.

Somewhere, deep in his heart, Rigel clung to the thought that he was only in a dream. A cruel dream, but a dream nonetheless. Even that faint hope faded when the mockery began.

"Filthy hick. It's too late to beg."

"Wail, gnash, and scream. It's what you deserve."

"Do you even realize how much trouble you've caused? Let this execution shine a light on your ignorance."

The abuse came from the beastfolk in worn clothes. As if to add to their jeering choir, the guard in front of Rigel started to read aloud the details of his people's fate—the people he should have protected.

"The women, children, and elders you thought were hidden are already in our custody. Though many came quietly, those who resisted even slightly were cut down without mercy or exception. Your living relatives, their descendants, their descendants' descendants, and so on will repent for your sins in perpetuity through their work as slaves."

Rigel accepted the words read in such a cold, emotionless tone as the truth. The guard went on to list the exact locations where his fallen brethren's loved ones had taken refuge—locations they had entrusted to Rigel in case something happened to them in battle.

As despair darkened the world around him, Rigel saw the guards place something beautiful on the black metal platform. It was the Divine Undrawn Bow. A man in heavy black armor raised an equally black hammer overhead, then brought it down without restraint.

The transparent bow shrieked under the force of the impact. Helpless to intervene, Rigel could only accept that everything—

truly everything—he and his comrades had fought for was now lost to them.

It was all for nothing.

Even as tears welled up in his eyes, Rigel refused to look away. The hammer came down once, then twice, then a third time, causing his partner to bend and crack.

Several strikes later, the Divine Bow's gold-and-silver string could no longer bear the tension. It snapped, scattering specks reminiscent of white snow.

As gemlike fragments of the bow danced through the air and into the crowd, glittering in the sunlight, Rigel saw the executioner's blade descend on his father's neck. He tried to scream, "Stop!" but the desiccated voice that he eked from his throat was drowned out by the spectators' cheers. In the blink of an eye, his father's remains were thrown into the monster cage and devoured.

It's over. Well and truly.

Rigel knew that he was next, but he couldn't summon the will to fight. Even if he could have, he lacked the strength to put up a meaningful resistance—not that it would have changed anything.

The executioner's blade came down, and Rigel's right arm was gone. The pain was agonizing, but cheers drowned out his screams.

"——————!!!"

The crowd reached fever pitch. And when the newly severed arm was thrown into the monster cage, the noise redoubled.

As he listened to their shouts of anger, shrieks of abuse, and wordless jeers, Rigel felt the true depths of his people's hatred. He and his compatriots had fought to save them from their misery...yet they had delighted in his father's death and now cheered for his. In the end, their war had been the height of arrogance.

To those he'd wished to save, Rigel was naught but an enemy. In their eyes, their masters' abuse was worth tolerating for the lukewarm comfort of a guaranteed meal. Anyone who would threaten that security, meager though it was, deserved to be punished. The rag-wearing beastfolk wanted the agitators torn limb from limb and their bones fed to the monsters, for only then could they sleep at night, safe and assured.

The entire war had been for nothing. From the moment Rigel

and his compatriots had set out, this had been the only way it could end. At some point, tears had started streaming down his face.

Then a red-hot metal rod was pressed into his eye.

The scorching heat burned from his eye socket to his throat, but Rigel no longer acknowledged the pain. What was an eye or an arm after everything he had been through? His comrades, his father, even the bow meant to save his mother and sister—he had lost everything that mattered to him. What point was there in being alive?

It was sad, though, that he would never be able to draw that wondrous bow again.

At that moment, Rigel gave up completely. He closed his remaining eye, faced the sky, and waited for the end.

If you're going to do it, then hurry up.

But fate denied him even that small comfort.

Rain...?

A small droplet struck Rigel's brow. Reflexively, he opened his eye and saw a strange cloud swirling in the previously clear sky.

The raincloud was titanic, unprecedented in size and scale for a desert city. As the crowd stared up at its almost sinister tendrils, it blackened and unleashed a flash of yellow lightning. The wind picked up, whipping into a genuine storm, and the spectators ran for cover, having lost interest in the execution.

Rigel's death was meant to set an example. In the absence of a crowd, his captors saw no reason to continue.

"'Starpiercer' Rigel's execution shall be postponed to a later date."

He was tossed into a dark cell, still chained, and left to rot. Although he had survived, all that remained within him was an empty void. Eventually, as he listened to the storm rage from within his cell, he realized that he was smiling.

At first, Rigel was confused by his involuntary expression. But when he searched inside his heart, he quickly found the reason.

He was *relieved*.

Yes, he had lost everything. But at the same time, he had finally—*finally*—escaped the expectations thrust upon him. Part of him delighted in that fact; no longer would he bear the burden of being the "Starpiercer."

What was this side of him? The words "coward" and "fool" were far too kind. He'd given so many faith in themselves and

the future, yet this craven wretch was the most he amounted to. He had known his true nature from the start but allowed others to tout him as a hero. Playing the part had even brought him comfort.

Rigel had grown drunk on the lie that was his title. It didn't matter how hard he'd tried to live up to being the Starpiercer; in the end, his courage, his pride, and everything else about him had remained mere fabrications. The hopes others had pinned on him were all rooted in falsehoods and forgeries.

In truth, Rigel was far weaker than everyone had thought—weaker than even he'd thought himself to be. His hands had been shaking the first time he'd loosed an arrow at one of the merchants' warehouses. He'd wanted to drop everything and run away…and maybe he should have. Wasn't that what his mother had told him to do?

Yet, he had remained and put on a show of strength—strength he knew he didn't have. He had acted the part of everyone's hero, and what had that done for his comrades? They had perished believing in a lie.

"Starpiercer"? What good was that name anymore? Everyone who had used it was dead—a victim of the false hope their supposed savior had given them. It was a cruel joke that he, of all people, had survived. And for what? So he could sit around and smile about the duties he could finally shirk?

This was the true identity of the so-called "Starpiercer."

The others had wagered everything on Rigel and died as a result. The very thought filled him with bone-aching sadness—but more than that, it seemed so ludicrously comical. In the end, the emotions mixed into bleak apathy. Everything was over. Finished. He could grieve as much as he wanted; it wouldn't change a thing.

"Hah… Hah… Hah hah hah…"

Gone was the boy known as the hope of all beastfolk. In his place sat an empty shell who could only laugh at his own faults.

Drained of all vitality, Rigel slumped onto the cold stone floor and watched the blood pour from the stump where his arm had once been. Seeing his own pitiful state triggered another burst of hoarse, feeble laughter.

"Oh? Did you just laugh?"

A youthful voice came through the darkness, as did the patter of slow footsteps—enough for several people. At fifteen years of

age, Rigel was still an adolescent, but the boy he saw when he glanced up looked even younger.



“Interesting…” the boy continued. “Your father just met his end begging desperately—*pitifully*—for your life. Should you not respect his dying wish and at least *try* to survive? Or does your life no longer have a purpose?”

The boy wore a mischievous smile as he peered through the iron grille. Behind him stood a number of guards, though he paid them no mind as he continued to pepper Rigel with questions.

However, Rigel did not respond. He had no answers to give, nor the willpower to speak them. He did not even raise his head.

The boy didn’t seem to care. He unlocked the door to his prisoner’s cell and entered with four guards, still smiling. “Well, in that case, why not sell it to me? I’ll give you a good price for it.”

Irritation coursed through Rigel at such ridicule. “Enough…nonsense,” he spat. “Just…*kill me*!” Each time he moved, his thick chains scraped along the floor and walls of his cell.

The guards held Rigel down while the boy peered at his face with interest. “Oh? So you’re still able to speak in that state. Color me impressed. But I’m afraid to say this won’t be a fair transaction. You have no right to refuse, you see. Your only choice in this matter is the price you’ll sell yourself to me for.”

“I’m doomed to be executed. A mere child can’t change that.”

The boy chuckled. “You’re absolutely right. Still, being a member of House Sarenza isn’t without its perks. You wouldn’t believe how many seemingly impossible feats I can achieve when I’m not picky about the method. Like…this.”

At the boy’s signal, another four people dressed as guards entered the cell. Moving as one, they went behind the guards pinning Rigel down and thrust daggers into the backs of their necks.

Rigel watched with a hollow eye as blood spattered the walls and the four guards collapsed in heaps on the cold stone. “What…are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m saving you. Though I have my conditions, of course. Next group! Come in, if you would.”

More guards entered the cell, dragging a young beastfolk with them. Stature-wise, he was almost an exact match for Rigel.

“What do you think?” the boy asked. “Pretty close to you, right? I just so happened to spot him in the crowd earlier and figured I couldn’t pass up such a golden opportunity.”

The beastfolk managed only a choked whimper. In stark contrast to the other boy's cheerful smile, he looked absolutely terrified.

"I don't know what you're planning, but enough," Rigel said. "Whoever he is, he's got nothing to do with me."

"Oh, but he does. When your arm was lopped off, he laughed like he'd never seen anything funnier. Not to mention, I lost count of how many stones he picked up to throw at you. It seems clear enough to me that you have *plenty* to do with each other."

"And...? So what if he did all that? I hold no grudges against him."

"Fair enough. I accept that you don't care. I *do*, however. He damaged something I want. For that reason, he must be dealt an appropriate punishment."

"H-How does that make any sense?!" the beastfolk wailed. "I wasn't the only one who threw stones! Wh-Why'd you have to single *me* out?!"

"Yes, yes. You criminals all spout the same drivel. You're so quick to blame others but play innocent when it comes to your own sins. It's textbook. So textbook, in fact...that it's rather boring."

The light in the boy's eyes turned cold. When the beastfolk noticed, his face screwed up in terror.

"I— Wait, no! P-Please, I'm sorry, so—!"

"If apologies were enough, we wouldn't need laws, now would we? Guards, you know what to do."

"Sir."

"W-Wait—!"

At the boy's command, one of the guards severed the weeping beastfolk's arm. He collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain as he bled, before he finally weakened and grew still. Only once the guards had made sure he had no pulse did they press a hot iron to his left eye and bind him in the same chains that held Rigel.

"What...are you doing?" Rigel asked.

"Is it not obvious? He put up a real struggle at the end there, didn't he? Then again, I'd expect no less from *the* Starpiercer Rigel. Can you believe that even when he was half dead, it cost four guards their lives to put him down for good?"

"What are you talking about...?"

“Come now. It’s exactly what it looks like. In an attempt to escape, the criminal Rigel killed four guards before he was subdued by more who came to investigate the commotion. Immediately after, he succumbed to his wounds and bled to death. Look—these documents here say exactly that.”

The boy held up some papers and released them. They drifted through the air before coming to rest on the blood-spattered stone underfoot.

“In short, Rigel died in this cell,” he continued. “Oh, but what’s this? A stranger who *just so happened* to be here. Who are you, friend? Nobody anymore, I suppose. Nobody to be, nobody to be missed.”

“You killed that boy…just for this?”

“Well, yes. His death was no loss to me, so why not? I’ll admit, it *was* a pain having to find material to blackmail my friends here, but it was all worth it in the end. Now, nobody will need to lose their job! Isn’t that right, everyone?” The boy turned to the guards with a carefree smile and patted them on their backs.

“Is that all lives are to you…?”

“Yep. Some have value to me, others don’t. Yours *does*, *his* didn’t. That’s all there is to it.”

“Enough nonsense. Whatever you want from me, I have nothing to give you and your lot.”

“By that, do you mean House Sarenza? Ah, I recognize that expression. Pure hatred. You’d really like to kill every last one of us, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. And while that might be beyond me…I can at least manage *you*.”

Rigel’s eye glinted with fury. He focused his strength into his remaining arm and, with a thunderous crash, tore his chains free from the wall. The guards started to panic…but the boy burst into laughter.

“Trust you to break free so easily. And that glower! Why, if looks could kill…”

“This is no empty threat. I *will* take your life.”

“What are you waiting for, then? You could have done it ten times over before I even managed to get a word out.”

“I—”

“You won’t kill me, and I’ll tell you why. You’re smart. You despise House Sarenza, who were behind the slaughter of your compatriots, but what would the death of a single child change?

The aim of your revenge is something far greater."

Rigel gritted his teeth. It was as though the boy had read his mind.

"Now, back to the matter at hand—will you make a deal with me?"

"What makes you think I'll even consider it? I might only have one arm, but that's more than enough for me to kill every one of you."

"Oh, just listen, will you? You'll find it's to your benefit."

Rigel glared at the boy, pure loathing in his eye. The boy smiled coldly in response and took a step closer.

"The truth is, my family *hates* me. Especially my father. They were soft on me at first, but fear must have taken hold. My food is poisoned on a daily basis. I wonder why. Because I've gone against the grain so many times, I'd wager. Still, things have been particularly awful of late. They're not even trying to hide it anymore."

"Are you expecting me to sympathize?"

"Oh, no. I want you to join me. Everyone hates you, and everyone hates me. We're quite alike, don't you think?"

"Join you…?"

"Yep. I've long been in the market for a right-hand man—and when I saw your arrows in the night sky, I was certain I'd found one. That's why, when I learned you were going to be here today, I happily went to the trouble of setting up this meeting. I wasn't supposed to be at the execution, you see. If anyone asks, I wasn't here. Not that anyone will. My look-alike is down by the lakefront as we speak, enjoying a relaxing vacation with my ever-talented maid."

"What do you even want…?"

The question had sprung from Rigel's mouth unbidden. Not even his murderous intent had wiped away the boy's uncanny smile. As far as Rigel was concerned, it was the first time he had ever met a living creature he couldn't get some kind of read on.

The boy's smile grew wider, as though he knew exactly what Rigel was thinking. "My conditions are simple," he said. "From now on, you will serve as my bodyguard. In return, I will swear to keep you safe."

"You want me…as your *bodyguard*?"

"That's right. You'll protect me from my family and ensure my survival. Then, when I'm an adult at the top of House Sarenza, I'll

erase your past crimes and grant you your freedom. After that, you may do whatever you please, even tear out my family's throats with your bare hand."

"What if I can't wait and decide to start with you?"

"As appealing as it might sound, I doubt you will. You have a keen eye for profit and loss—a rarity among beastfolk. You've been given a choice between my life and all of House Sarenza. I doubt you're foolish enough to choose the less valuable option. Are you?" The boy cocked his head. Despite being much shorter than Rigel, he seemed not the slightest bit scared about meeting the beastfolk's eye.

"So you're offering the lives of your family as payment? Why?"

"Didn't I say? They keep trying to kill me. Not that I really mind. These life-and-death stakes are actually rather fun. Still, I'm greedy. I'd like to see the future. If my family's lives are the price I need to pay for that, then so be it. And you—*you'll* gain the chance to massacre them. In return, I ask only for the life you've already given up on. How about it? Not a bad deal, right?"

Rigel stared down at the blood covering the stone beneath them. Then, his lightless eye sparked with emotion. The boy watched with his usual smile, though it seemed entirely innocent, despite their situation.

"Oh, and one more thing. You might have cast aside your old identity, but I'll need to call you *something*. How does 'Shawza' sound? I used to have a cat by the same name."

Chapter 156: Noor, the New Proprietor

When Sirene returned, it was with a solemn look on her face.

“How did it go?” Lynne asked quietly. “Were you able to learn anything about your family?”

Sirene nodded. “I was, yes. It was…unpleasant.”

“I see…”

“Forgive me, my lady. You’ve shown me such consideration—even delaying your journey for me—and yet…”

“Please, Sirene. I’d like to help however I can. If you come across any more leads, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Yes, my lady. Thank you.”

Sirene’s smile looked natural, but there was still a sad air about her. After she’d headed out alone, stating she had personal business to attend to, I’d wondered where she’d gone. I still wondered, but it didn’t seem like a good idea to bother her or Lynne right now—they both looked kind of down. Instead, Ines, Rolo, and I watched over them from a short distance away.

“Do you know what happened, Ines?” I asked.

“Not the details. Just that Sirene had a private matter to see to.”

“Oh.”

Ines stood with her back to the wall, vigilant as ever. Still, from the way she kept glancing at Lynne and Sirene, I could tell she shared my curiosity. Rolo and I continued to watch the dispirited Sirene for a while…until a cheery shout came from farther down the hallway.

“Ah, Noor!”

I turned, having recognized the voice, and saw Rashid approaching us with Melissa and Shawza in tow. “Have you already finished packing?” I asked. “You mentioned you were leaving soon.”

“Indeed. We’re penniless now, you see, so we have no luggage to weigh us down. Technically, my only possessions are the tea leaves and utensils in the room I mentioned—though I wish to leave those where they are. I must thank you again for your magnanimity in allowing me to enjoy my beloved collection one last time. From now on, it’s all yours. Do with it as you will.”

“Are you sure? I probably won’t use them at all.”

“Then might I suggest converting the space into a break room for the staff? It would be a shame to let it go to waste.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.”

Lynne interrupted our casual chatter by stepping toward us and performing a formal bow. “Lord Rashid,” she said, “thank you for welcoming my attendant’s sudden visit.”

“Think nothing of it, Lady Lynneburg. It was hardly an imposition. Though, I *was* surprised that you allowed such a precious companion of yours to come to us alone. May I take that as a testament to your budding trust in me?”

“Her business was private, so I deemed an escort unnecessary. Besides, she is not so weak as to require my protection.”

“My, my. How considerate you are of your subordinates. You may rest assured—I left her to discuss her business in private.”

“For that, you have my deepest gratitude.”

Despite the formal overtones of their exchange, Lynne seemed constantly wary of Rashid. I could practically see the sparks flying between them.

“By the way, Rashid,” I said, “didn’t you mention wanting to speak with me before you left?”

“Indeed, I did. As the former proprietor of this establishment, it would be rude of me not to at least give you an overview of how to run things—a passing of the torch, if you will.”

“Oh, that’d be a huge help.”

“Having said that, there isn’t much to cover. Your management policy is entirely up to you, and the staff will strive to carry out any commands you issue. It would be a waste of time to wade through the formalities and minutiae…so why don’t you just ask me whatever questions you might have?”

“Hmm…” I didn’t know where to begin. There was too much I didn’t know. “I guess, first and foremost, Melissa’s not the manager anymore, right?”

“Correct. I discharged her while I was still the proprietor. Please don’t think too badly of me for it. She’s a special case, you see—an irreplaceable subordinate.”

“I don’t mind. It’s just…what should I do now that she’s gone? Having a manager sounds pretty important.”

“Pick whomever you wish to replace her. The staff of the City Forgotten by Time is rife with talent. Most of them could fulfill

the role if all they had to do was keep operations afloat."

"Yeah? So I can pick *anyone*, right?"

"Yes, anyone. It is the proprietor's exclusive privilege to appoint the manager. You could appoint yourself, if you so wished, or even bring someone over from the Kingdom of Clays."

"Does that include Melissa?"

"Melissa?" Rashid exchanged a glance with his attendant, then looked back at me, surprised.

"Can I not reappoint her?"

"As I said…the choice is your prerogative. Whether she accepts, however, is hers."

"Makes sense. In that case, I'd at least like to ask her." I turned to Melissa. "Would that be okay?"

She said nothing in response, though I could tell from her expression that she was hesitant to accept.

"You don't look very interested."

"That is…true," she said. "Quite honestly, I am surprised that you would trust me with the role to begin with."

"Really? It goes without saying, but I'm not from these parts. I don't know a thing about running this place, so I figure it makes the most sense to put you back in charge."

This time, it was Lynne whom Melissa exchanged a glance with. They both blinked at each other in surprise. Coupled with Rashid's amused laughter, I gathered that I was missing something.

"Is there a problem with that?" I asked.

Since I'd only come to Sarenza as part of Lynne's escort, I couldn't suddenly abandon her to do my own thing. We had unfinished business to attend to, after which we'd return to the Kingdom of Clays. I figured it would be best to leave the City Forgotten by Time in the hands of someone who already knew how to manage it.

"I take it you do not understand the significance of the manager's role," Melissa said. "Shall I explain?"

"Please."

"The manager is appointed to be the proprietor's representative. In short, they are a deputy with *full* authoritative power. In the proprietor's absence, the manager may enact whatever policies they wish. Knowing that, would you still entrust the role to me?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

Melissa shot Rashid another look, unsure how to respond.

"Noor—a word, if I may?" Rashid asked.

"Yeah?"

"Now that Melissa has been dismissed from her position as the City Forgotten by Time's manager, she is simply my personal attendant. You would be asking me to lend her to you."

"Oh, really? That's fine with me. I could really use her help, if she's willing."

"It's fine, is it? Ha. I suppose it is, then. How amusing."

When I turned to Lynne, I saw her wearing the same look of confused hesitation as Melissa. "What do you think, Lynne?" I asked. "Would there be a problem with that?"

She took a moment to consider the question. "The idea has some merit. As you said, Instructor, we are foreigners; it would be a great ordeal for us to find someone capable enough to fill her shoes. However, if we are borrowing her expertise from Lord Rashid, I imagine the cost will be—"

"Oh, no, don't worry about that," Rashid interjected. "You can borrow her for free."

"For free?" Lynne shot him her most skeptical look of the day. "Lord Rashid, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I said, Lady Lynneburg. If you can guarantee her safety while she's here, then I'm willing to—no, I'd *like* to—allow her to stay. How about it, Noor?"

"Yeah, that sounds fine. I'm not sure I can make that guarantee, but I'll do what I can."

"That should more than suffice, given your abilities. As an aside, she *will* receive fair compensation for her managerial work, won't she?"

"Of course."

"Then I've nothing more to say about the matter. What do you think, Melissa? The new proprietor's offer seems quite attractive, if I do say so myself."

Despite Rashid's obvious cheer, Melissa continued to frown. "Does that mean you're intent on leaving me behind, sir?"

"Is that so bad? Noor has been kind enough to promise your safety. We both know there would be no better place for you."

"You're asking me to take him at face value."

"I think he's done enough to prove he's trustworthy. Isn't that right, Noor?"

"Sure. I can't promise everything will go well, but I promise to

do my best to stick to my word."

"There you go," Rashid said, satisfied. But Melissa still wasn't convinced.

"One could say that's no promise at all," she retorted.

"Now you're just being difficult. Nobody can tell the future; we can only do our best and respond to problems as they arise. If anything, I'd say that Noor's answer was a further testament to his sincerity. He made you the offer knowing full well what he needs and what he doesn't. That makes him a shining example of what the proprietor of the City Forgotten by Time should be."

I wasn't sure I deserved that much praise; I'd only followed the flow of the conversation.

Even in the face of Rashid's unfaltering smile, Melissa appeared reluctant. She turned to me and asked, "What would you do if I suddenly said that I wished to resign?"

"I don't know what I *could* do. That'd be your choice, right? I'm not going to tie you to a job you'd rather leave."

Melissa blinked at me. "Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah. As for the actual work, feel free to do only as much as you think is necessary."

"In that case, I would be...*amenable* to considering the offer."

Despite her suspicions of me, Melissa seemed to be coming around. But while Rashid watched us with amusement, Lynne looked slightly worried.

"That's fine, then," I said. "Right, Lynne?"

"Yes, Instructor. After some consideration, I believe your proposal to have Melissa continue her managerial role to be the best option. It would take us much too long to find someone as equally capable and trustworthy."

"Oh?" Rashid remarked. "You consider Melissa trustworthy, do you, Lady Lynneburg?"

"I do. At least in terms of her expertise and ability."

"Is that so? I am honored that you value my subordinate so highly."

"Of course, Instructor Noor has the final say. If he believes she is suited for the role, then, as an outsider, I have no right to object."

"I suppose that's true. We *are* outsiders, aren't we? It seems prudent that we maintain our silence."

"I was speaking for myself. But if that is the act you wish to commit to, then indeed, it would be prudent."

The mood between them seemed as volatile as ever. Still, I gathered from Lynne's response that she was on board.

"So, those are the terms," I said to Melissa. "How about it?"

"There you go, Melissa," Rashid crowed. "Negotiations were a success. The new proprietor seems to value you quite highly. You'll need to strive to meet his expectations."

After a drawn-out pause, Melissa gave her response: "I understand. I shall accept." Still, she didn't seem any less reluctant. I didn't know why, but she was apparently quite wary of me.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be counting on you."

"I shall endeavor not to disappoint. May I ask how you prefer to be addressed, sir?"

"Just 'Noor' is fine."

"As you wish, Master Noor. Then I, Melissa Mormont, accept the role of manager and proprietor representative of the City Forgotten by Time. It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance."

"Likewise. It'll be reassuring to have you around."

Melissa performed a perfect bow, then accepted my handshake.

"I suppose that concludes my passing of the torch," Rashid mused. "There's nothing I can tell you that Melissa doesn't already know."

"Makes sense."

"Would it be acceptable if I resumed my duties at once, Master Noor?"

"Oh, sure."

"There is a mountain of tasks to be seen to. I shall be frank: a change in ownership such as this is completely unprecedented, and the City Forgotten by Time is currently in a state of emergency. If we wish to stay afloat, I must first ensure the bare minimum of operations—by your leave, of course. For that purpose, I would greatly appreciate your cooperation, Master Noor."

"Mine? I don't mind, but I'm not sure I'll be of any help."

"You need only to give a speech to the staff to commemorate the transfer of ownership."

"A speech?"

"Yes. The sudden change has caused confusion among the general staff and, by extension, the residential districts. We

should clear up any baseless rumors before they become an obstacle to future operations."

"I see. That makes sense."

"Furthermore, it is my understanding that you will not be staying here for long. That makes our explanation all the more urgent. If you are willing to provide your opinions to be used as a foundation, Master Noor, then I shall have our specialists draft a script for you."

Melissa was launching into her work with a lot more gusto than I'd expected, considering her earlier reluctance. Or had that just been her resentment at having her job taken from her?

"So I need to be the one giving the speech?" I asked.

"Who else? If you do not outline your intended policies, we of the staff will not have a compass to guide us. I assumed you understood this when you agreed to purchase the City Forgotten by Time. One wrong step in management carries the risk of rendering our employees homeless and without work."

I shrunk back at the sharp glint in Melissa's eyes—and I wasn't even receiving the full brunt of it. She'd reserved half for Rashid, who was standing to my side with a faint smile on his face. Her reproach seemed to be directed as much at him for selling the resort as it was at me for buying it.

"Got it," I said. "I have a few questions first, though."

"By all means, ask away. I shall answer them to the best of my ability. However, might I suggest we have this conversation while we draft your script and prepare for the staff assembly?"

"Uh, sure. Sorry, Lynne, but could you join us? I'm not great with big-picture stuff."

"But of course, Instructor," Lynne replied. "I'd be happy to help."

"Then let us take this to the proprietor's office," Melissa said. "I'll lay out a basic schedule while we walk."

Melissa and her brisk approach to work reminded me a lot of Lynne. The former was older and a little taller, sure, but the two seemed very alike and equally reliable. I was glad that Melissa had accepted my offer to stay—it was like having a second Lynne to count on.

"Good luck, Melissa," Rashid said brightly. "I'll be back for you one day."

"Sir." Melissa's eyebrow twitched slightly. "How long are you planning to leave me here, exactly?"

“Well, that depends on how things go.”

Thus, we followed Melissa to the proprietor’s office, where she would immediately set about preparing the script for my speech—the one I would need to give to every single employee of the City Forgotten by Time.

Chapter 157: The New Proprietor’s Speech

After parting ways with Rashid, I focused on the task at hand: preparing the speech I was going to give to my new employees.

Truth be told, I didn’t really need to do anything except rattle off a list of things I wanted to say. A secretary I’d never seen before transformed them into something I could present before passing the completed script to Lynne and Melissa to be checked. Then we were done.

We’d finished my speech with time to spare, so I thought I would get a head start on practicing it. I read from the script the first few times, but there were so many awkward pauses as I looked up and down that everyone advised me to give up on the idea. According to Melissa, the script was only there as a reminder of sorts. I was allowed to use my own words as long as I said essentially the same thing.

In the end, I decided to keep the script on hand—just to keep me on track—but say whatever came easiest to me in the moment.

“I didn’t realize the staff was this big…”

We had arrived at the central hall where I was going to give my speech. It was larger than the room containing the lake, yet it was *teeming* with people—thousands of them, if not more, all stood in neat rows. I froze at the sight of them. Even looking at them from the waiting room to the side, I found it overwhelming.

Despite the size of the crowd, the hall was utterly quiet. I could hear the cries of animals in the distance from the complex’s other areas. It was enough to make me wonder whether my audience was just a mirage.

“Due to the hurried circumstances, we were only able to gather two-thirds of the full staff,” Melissa explained. “Nevertheless, the crowd before you is representative of every member in the City Forgotten by Time’s employ, from management, to maintenance, to engineering, to all the temporary staff. It is thanks to their hard work that facilities are maintained, necessary goods are acquired, and services such as

food and entertainment are provided. Altogether, they would number roughly thirty thousand."

"Wow. So there's twenty thousand people out there now."

I was only just starting to realize what an absurd purchase I'd made. I'd understood that the establishment was massive and that there had to be just as many people working behind the scenes as in plain sight, but still—I didn't think I'd ever seen a crowd this large before, even back in the Kingdom's capital.

"Should I shout my speech?" I asked. "Even then, I don't think it would reach the people in the back."

Melissa shook her head. "That won't be necessary. The lectern in the center is equipped with a sound-broadcasting device. Simply speak into it at an ordinary volume and your voice shall reach everybody. Also, please be aware that we will be projecting your figure throughout the hall."

"Huh. That sounds convenient."

"It's time. Please ascend to the central platform. Many of those in attendance are here despite it being their scheduled day off, so it would not do to keep them waiting."

"Got it." Still thinking about how many convenient devices Sarenza had, I picked up my script and turned to Lynne. "Here goes nothing."

"Good luck, Instructor," she said. "We'll be waiting right here."

"Thanks again for the script, by the way." She'd been quite passionate about helping me with it.

"It was my pleasure."

Following the red carpet that had been laid out for me, I left the waiting room for the central hall proper. Every one of the staff members bowed when they saw me. Considering how many of them had gathered, that single gesture was a sight to behold.

"This way, Master Noor."

"Right."

Together with Melissa, I advanced toward the central stage, climbed the staircase, and stepped up to the lectern. Throughout the hall, I saw enlarged images of myself on every hanging screen mirror.

I could feel everyone's eyes on me. The central stage was more of a towering platform than anything else, five times taller than the average person, which gave me a clear view of the employees' expressions. They seemed slightly nervous—but in

the presence of a complete stranger, who could blame them?

I never usually had a problem with public speaking, but the sheer size of the crowd was intimidating, to say the least. I didn't even know where to look as I spoke. Plus, with the central stage being a lot taller than I'd expected, looking down was a little bit terrifying.

Still, I couldn't let that bother me forever. After checking that I was properly in front of the sound-broadcasting device, I hesitantly began my speech.

"Hi. I'm Noor, the new proprietor."

The sound of my own voice caught me off guard. It was so *loud*. Melissa had been right—sticking to an ordinary volume was more than enough. I almost breathed a sigh of relief. If not for her warning, I would probably have burst everybody's eardrums.

Everyone could hear me—that much was clear—but not a single person in the crowd reacted. Their rigid expressions told me why: there was an air of fear hanging over the hall. Of course they'd be scared—a complete stranger had just been given complete authority over them.

I was just as uneasy as they were, but it was my job to clear things up. I needed to let them know I wouldn't give them any strange orders. Thus, I turned to the first page of the script Lynne had helped me with.

"Circumstances have led to Rashid passing ownership of this place to me. I understand how sudden this must seem, but please don't worry—I don't plan on asking anything strange of you. I know Rashid said something about you spending the rest of your lives on boats, but I'm not going to make you do that. Even if I *do* love fish."

Most of the crowd looked confused, but the black-suited staff members who'd been there for Rashid's joke held their chests in relief and exchanged smiles. They hadn't seriously thought I'd do that, had they?

"Also, some of you might already know this, but I'm not from this country. I don't know your customs, and, to be honest, I don't really know anything about this place. That's why I've asked Melissa to continue in her role as manager. My only request for the rest of you is that you keep following her instructions. Things shouldn't be much different from before, so please don't worry."

A few ad-libs aside, my speech was going surprisingly well.

Practicing with the others must have paid off.

"That said, there are *some* changes I wish to make," I continued, throwing occasional glances at the script. "I've heard that many of you are working here because you're in a lot of debt, and, well… Melissa?"

"Zaza, Leah—please step forward and assist the new proprietor."

At Melissa's signal, two women advanced to my side.

"I am Zaza, director of personnel affairs."

"And I am Leah, the financial director."

The woman called Zaza began: "Currently, of the 30,106 staff members employed by the City Forgotten by Time, our records show that those who bear a debt—no matter how small—number 12,014."

"At the proprietor's request, I calculated the total sum of these debts," Leah continued. "Including interest, the sum amounts to 7,869,270,000 gald. Forgiving this amount would represent a major loss for the establishment, so the proprietor has kindly offered to settle the debt with his personal funds."

"Yep," I confirmed. "Please go ahead and settle that."

"Understood, sir."

The two staff members stepped back. This was my first time meeting them, but Melissa had already brought them up to speed and facilitated the deal to ensure that everything would go smoothly.

My initial intention had been to pay off everyone's debt in private, without all this rigamarole, but Melissa had advised me otherwise—first, so that no strange rumors would circulate, and second, so that everyone could have the peace of mind of knowing where the money was coming from. It would also soothe some of the unease the staff must have felt about me. Lynne and Melissa really had done an excellent job with my script.

"Oh, while I'm at it… If anyone here is having money troubles, let Melissa or me know. I'd be glad to help out, as I am with the debt. Don't hold back; I've plenty to spare."

A slight buzz went through the crowd, accompanied by a wave of flabbergasted expressions. I glanced down at my speech and continued.

"It has also been brought to my attention that some of the fighters from the entertainment hall's colosseum were forced

into their current positions to settle tremendous debts. Regarding this…”

I turned to the last page of my script—or at least, to where it was meant to be.

Huh?

I checked again and again, to no avail. The last page didn’t appear. Now that I was looking, I noticed that I had only two pages on hand when there should have been three. I was missing the most important part of my speech!

“Regarding this, we’ll…sort it out. Somehow. Probably. For the time being.”

“‘Somehow’?”

“‘Probably’?”

“‘For the time being’?”

The crowd exchanged glances and whispers. Melissa sidled up to me, a questioning look on her face.

“Master Noor, what happened to the rest of the script?”

“I think I left it in the waiting room.”

“You…left it?”

Looking over, I saw Lynne staring at me from the doorway. Her face was pale, and she clutched the last piece of my speech in trembling hands. Now that I thought about it, I *had* noticed her jumping around and making exaggerated movements behind me as I’d started down the red carpet. I’d assumed she was trying to wish me luck with a strange dance or something.

Crap.

The hall grew noisier as I whispered with Melissa. I couldn’t exactly run back over to Lynne, so I did the next best thing and offered her a silent apology.

“Do you remember the rest of the script?” Melissa asked.

“More or less. I *did* practice it a lot.”

“Then it seems we’ve no other option. Please convey the conclusion in your own words.”

“Is that okay?”

“Just be aware that your words carry weight. It will not be easy to take them back.”

“Got it.”

Giving up on the script, I returned my attention to the crowd. “Sorry about that. I forgot the rest of the script I prepared, so I’ll need to fumble through the rest. I’m not a great speaker, but this is important, so I’d appreciate it if you listened.”

I waited for the room to quiet down again, then continued: “First, I’d like to tell you all not to worry. I know I’m a complete stranger, but as the new proprietor, I’ll ensure that you and your families never go hungry. Also, I don’t intend to expose a single one of you to any danger.”

Although it wasn’t word for word, I’d managed to give a pretty decent summary of the last page of my script. I thought I had, at least; the dubious look Melissa was giving me said otherwise.

“Are you sure you should make that promise, Master Noor?”

“Did I…say something wrong?”

“You were close to the script, but… Never mind. If you plan to keep to your word, then there is no issue.”

I shot her a puzzled look, wondering what she meant. I couldn’t stop now, though.

“On top of that, I don’t want to make anyone here do a job that doesn’t interest them. If you’re dissatisfied with your current duties, say something. I can’t promise I’ll be quick, but I’ll do my best to help you out. Please don’t hesitate to rely on me or Melissa if you have any problems.”

Again, I gazed across the hall. The crowd wasn’t giving me much of a reaction; they simply stood there, eyes wide and expressions blank.

“Anyway, that’s pretty much everything that’s changing. There might be bigger changes in the future, but I promise they won’t be bad for you. There’s not much I *can* promise, really, but I do mean to stick to everything I just said. Uh… That’s all from me.”

Having said my piece, I swiftly descended the stage and strode back down the red carpet. The silence slowly made way for the buzz of chatter, then a thunder of applause that quickly spread. Given the size of the crowd, it sounded as though a full-blown storm was raging indoors. The deafening noise followed me as I returned to the waiting room, punctuated by an announcement that sounded throughout the hall.

“That concludes Proprietor Noor’s inaugural address.”

Once I was back in the waiting room, I turned to Melissa. “Was that okay?”

She paused for a moment. “It was, yes. Although I was briefly concerned, I believe you did a fine job.”

“Really?”

“Your closing remarks better suited an opportunistic politician than a new proprietor, but perhaps that lack of realism was for

the best. The staff's misgivings have largely transformed into hope. Please keep in mind, however, that this is only temporary."

"Only temporary?"

"Yes. Your perceived competence will depend on whether you can keep to your word in the time to come. Still, we should consider this a success. Thanks to you, we should be able to return to the baseline level of operations."

"That's good to hear." I was also pleased to see that some of the tension had drained from Melissa's face.

"Well done, Instructor," Lynne said, stepping over. She looked calm, especially compared to her previous unease.

"Sorry I forgot the script, Lynne. Especially after you went to all that trouble to help me with it…"

"It's okay. Your speech was far better than the words I put to paper. But then, I would expect no less from you, Instructor." Lynne tended to exaggerate with her praise, but that didn't stop it from embarrassing me.

"At the risk of repeating myself, Master Noor," Melissa began, "please take care to abide by your words. You alone are responsible for them."

"Yeah, of course."

Melissa looked at me strangely for a moment, but her calm demeanor was quick to return. "Then I shall speak no more of the matter. Shall we return to your office and discuss your upcoming schedule? There are several items on the agenda that will need to be aligned with your plans as a member of Lady Lynneburg's retinue."

"Sure. Sounds good."

I'd almost forgotten, but we'd only come to Sarenza because some big shot had invited Lynne to the capital. As part of her escort, I couldn't stay in the City Forgotten by Time for long.

I gave Melissa a silent thank-you for the reminder, then followed her back to the proprietor's office. We arrived to find a familiar face waiting with his constant companion, Shawza.

"Hey there. We meet again, Noor."

"Rashid?"

"Excellent speech, by the way. I've seen few that were better."

"I thought you'd already left."

"That was the plan, but I just received a letter via aerial golem mail. I wanted to discuss its contents with you."

"With me?"

Rashid withdrew two rolled-up sheets of paper from a small metal cylinder and passed them both to me.

"What are these?"

"The first is a summons for me. My family's council reached a conclusion faster than I thought they would."

"House Sarenza summoned you?" Lynne asked.

"Yes. The family wants me to explain this whole affair. I have more than an inkling of their grievances with me, but that isn't my main concern. You see, they want Noor as well."

"Me?"

"See that second missive? It's a summons for you."

I unfurled the second sheet of paper. He was right—my name was on it.

Lynne peered at the paper as well, frowning. "There's no mistaking House Sarenza's seal... This is a legally enforceable letter of summons."

"Correct," Rashid said. "Your studiousness impresses me, as always. Still, legally enforceable or not, it shouldn't be too serious. You could technically ignore it and be fine. It's just...I wouldn't recommend refusing House Sarenza. Not unless you're prepared to face the consequences—which, mind you, might not be as unpleasant as what they have in store for you if you agree to go."

"What do they want me for?" I asked.

"Although the City Forgotten by Time is now an independent entity, more or less, it used to be a relatively significant source of income for House Sarenza. Now that you're in charge, I imagine they want to vet your capacity to run it."

"Yeah...?"

"So, what do you think? Will you go?"

"I don't see why not. Lynne needs to go to the capital anyway. Speaking of which—Lynne, would you mind if I get this done in our spare time?"

"Not at all, Instructor. We're headed to the same location, after all."

"Come to think of it, does this mean we'll be traveling together, Rashid?"

"It certainly seems that way. Before that, though—"

Rashid was cut short by a rush of footsteps coming from down the hallway. "M-Master Rashid!" The doors burst open to reveal Kron, the long-haired gambler, with a flat board in hand.

“I-It’s an emergency! Please, you have to—”

“Come now, Kron.” Rashid smiled. “I’m not the proprietor anymore. You should report to Noor there, not me.”

With an expression of anguish, Kron turned to me and held up the board—a screen mirror. It displayed an image of the desert. “S-Sir! P-Please, look!”

“What’s this?”

“We’re under attack!”

“We are?”

“Yes! By an army of golems!”

A closer look revealed that he was right: Within the scenery shown on the screen mirror was a legion of hulking shapes lumbering across the desert, kicking up clouds of sand in their wake.

Chapter 158: I Parry Some Golems

“That tablet is rather small. Melissa, could you enlarge the image for everyone to see?”

“Of course. A moment, please.”

At Rashid’s behest, Melissa fiddled with some kind of control mechanism on the office’s desk. In the blink of an eye, the image being shown on Kron’s board was displayed across an entire wall of the room.

“Oh?” For once, Rashid’s cynical, ever-present smile disappeared. “That’s a rather substantial force. To think they’d send such an army as an opening move…”

Now that the image was larger, the figures in the sand were easier to see. Kron was right—they were golems.

“Rashid, are they the same kind of golem you brought to the beastfolk village?” I asked.

“More or less. But the City Forgotten by Time’s golem allotment only numbers a thousand or so, including the ones stationed on constant guard duty. That force must contain at least ten times as many.”

“Are you sure? They’re hard to make out with all the sand.”

“Yes. And unfortunately, when two forces of equal quality clash, numbers decide the outcome. We won’t stand a chance if we use golems alone.” For someone apparently on the back foot, Rashid still looked relatively unbothered.

“Why are they attacking us in the first place?”

“I can’t say for certain, but I suspect news of this establishment’s change in ownership has already circulated Sarenza. The wealth of treasures gathered here has attracted the eye of some rather unsavory elements, especially now that they aren’t under House Sarenza’s protection.”

“So basically…they’re bandits?”

“One could call them that, yes.”

“I’m not so convinced,” Lynne interjected from behind us, a skeptical look on her face. “I find it hard to believe that mere bandits would possess such a sizable force of golems. The maintenance cost alone would be exorbitant.”

Rashid smiled at her. “Nothing gets past you, does it, Lady

Lynneburg? I shall be candid, then—I suspect my younger brothers supplied the golems."

"Your...younger brothers...?"

"Yes. Or House Sarenza, at least. No one else possesses them in such numbers."

"Then why did you call them bandits?"

"Because, while my brothers *do* own those golems, they would never admit to attacking with them. At most, they would claim the constructs were stolen from their warehouses. House Sarenza's word holds enough sway that even absurd falsehoods can be spun into truths. Treating this oncoming force as thieves is a clean way of avoiding future complications."

"That makes sense. But why are they here?"

"To take my life, first and foremost."

"They wish you dead?"

"Indeed. As you know, Sarenza's inheritance law grants me preferential heirship to all of House Sarenza's assets on account of my being the eldest son. There is no end of people in this country who would profit from my death—my younger brothers first among them."

"Is that so...?" Lynne turned troubled eyes back to the golems being shown on the wall.

"I hoped to depart early to prevent this, but they must have come to a decision quite quickly. As always, I am appalled by my brothers' lack of restraint. If only they had waited, I would have gone to them."

"Are we really under attack from your family?" I asked.

"Yes, I'd say there's an eight—or even nine—in ten chance that my very own brothers directed those golems. Although, we're only *half* brothers, mind you; we don't share the same mother."

"Is there a chance we could talk them down?"

"If only. I've never been on good terms with them, so I doubt they'd even come to the table. Even if that weren't the case, I think we're beyond the point of negotiating. I can't see a single living being in that force—just golems."

"I...don't quite follow."

"Ah, of course not. You must still be new to our technology. Put simply, golems can't be swayed from the orders they're given—not unless their masters give them new ones. The lack of a supervisor nearby means we've no chance of convincing this army to abandon its current objective. Not to mention, as

golems are rather obtuse—despite their large heads—their orders must be kept simple. Destroy, plunder, slaughter... You get the idea. Their current purpose is bound to be along those lines."

On the wall behind Rashid, the force of golems continued its relentless advance. Their figures became clearer the closer they came. It almost looked as though their numbers were increasing.

"And that goes for all of them?" I asked.

"I would imagine so."

"Taking your life can't be their only objective," Lynne remarked.

"Indeed, there is more my brothers must have their eyes on. The various rights over this region, the national treasures in storage here, and a certain foreign lady of high status would all be among my suspicions. Each represents something of great value to them—something they would struggle to obtain by legitimate means."

"So they've decided to operate in a gray area..."

"A half-hearted testimony blaming it on bandits is all they need," Rashid said, as cheerful as ever. "Even if they fail to establish that as the truth, they can simply call it their way of punishing me for my incompetence in ruining the establishment our family left in my hands. It is, as they are so fond of saying, a win-win situation."

The golems drew nearer with each passing second.

"So, what will you do, Noor?" Rashid asked. "You *are* the new proprietor, after all."

"Well...what would *you* do in this situation?"

"Hmm... I don't have any experience with being attacked here, so I can only give advice based on my predecessor's anecdotes. Standard practice would be to first assign the city's allotment of golems to the protection of the general employees, then respond to the attack with the remainder...but anyone can see we lack the numbers for that. Thus, I suppose the wisest course of action would be to rely on our surplus assets as our means of counterattack."

"Our surplus assets?"

"To put it plainly—all of you." Rashid looked around the room with a smile on his face. "Come to think of it, Noor, you said something interesting as part of your employee address. Something about not exposing them to danger, right? Not to

mention your promise to guarantee the safety of my precious subordinate Melissa."

"Yeah, I did say that."

"Then might I propose that you spearhead the counterattack?"

"Me?"

"Indeed. Lead by example, as they say."

Lynne had a contemplative hand on her chin, ever the opposite of the upbeat Rashid. A long moment passed before she nodded emphatically.

"He's right. Given the circumstances, that *would* be the best division of our strength."

"Lynne...?"

"The most effective way of preventing casualties would be for you to head out alone, Instructor. As much as I'd like to assist you, I am far too inexperienced; I'd only end up getting in your way."

"Actually, it'd be pretty reassuring to have you with me..."

"I know, Instructor. I wish I could join you. But against a force of that size, it makes more sense for me to stay in the rear guard with Sirene and Rolo, where I can help ensure the safety of the general populace."

"You think...?"

"Naturally, in the extremely unlikely event that you require our assistance, we will do our best to provide it."

"I...guess I'll count on you when the time comes, then."

Lynne made it sound so logical that I couldn't help but nod along. But did she really expect me to fight an entire golem army? *Alone?*

"You'll be fine, Noor," Rolo assured me with a kind smile. "Good luck."

I focused my thoughts in his direction, desperately hoping he had some kind of last-minute lifeline that would get me out of this predicament. Another ring like the one he'd used to summon Rala in Mithra, maybe. Unfortunately, the only response he gave me was a weak smile that seemed to say, "You don't need anything like that."

Next, I turned to Sirene at Rolo's side. I wondered if *she'd* come with me, though I couldn't bring myself to ask; she still seemed preoccupied with whatever was getting her down.

That left only...a certain knight in shining armor.

“My apologies,” she said. “I am duty bound to protect Lady Lynneburg. I will stay in the rear guard with her and ensure that nobody else becomes entangled in the golems’ assault. Do forgive me.”

“Oh… Okay…”

“Please don’t make that face. In the event of true danger, I will come to assist you.”

“Really? I’ll hold you to that.”

So, not even my last ray of hope would accompany me—at least not to begin with…

“Don’t worry, Noor,” Rashid contributed. “This attack is half my fault, so I’ll send Shawza into battle with you. You can count on him—he’s fought his fair share of golems before. Isn’t that right, Shawza?”

There was a pregnant pause before the one-eyed beastfolk responded. “If that is your command, sir.”

“Yeah?” I said. “I appreciate that.”

Even with Shawza’s assistance, the sheer number of golems being displayed on the wall was enough to make me anxious. I turned back to Ines, just in case.

“Seriously, if things look dicey, I’ll be counting on you.”

“Rest assured, if you find yourself in *true* danger, I will be there.” She narrowed her eyes and glanced to my side. “More importantly, I would not be so quick to lower my guard around that man.”

“You mean Shawza?”

“Yes. We know nothing about him, his true strength included.”

“Right. I’ll be careful, then.”

Ines didn’t sound very concerned about how I’d fare against the golems. How exactly had I ended up in this position, again…?

“Now then, don’t drag your feet,” Rashid said merrily. “They’re almost here.”

“Right… Yeah…”

“We’re counting on you, Noor, Shawza.”

“Good luck, Instructor,” Lynne chimed in.

“Yeah…” I muttered. “You *will* come to my aid if I need it, right?”

“Of course—not that I think you will.”

“I really will hold you to that, Lynne. Seriously.”

“What are you doing?” Shawza interrupted. “Let’s go already.”

I followed after the one-eyed beastfolk as he strode out of the

room, my nerves no more assuaged than before. No matter how many times I glanced back, everybody seemed content to let me go.

Shawza saw me back to the reception area at the entrance to pick up my sword, then took the lead as we jogged toward the oncoming force of golems. They had already reached the sand dunes on the outskirts of the City Forgotten by Time.

"Hey, Shawza?"

"What?"

The blank expanse ahead of us gave me an unobstructed view of our opponents. Out here in the desert, where the golems' steps shook the ground under our feet, the sight was a lot more intimidating.

"D'you, uh, really think we can beat that army by ourselves?"

"No. We don't stand a chance."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same thing."

We were in agreement, then. So...why were we here? All of a sudden, that question was the only thing I could think about.

"Master Rashid tends to put too much faith in the people he takes a shine to," Shawza continued. "Don't feel the need to live up to his expectations. As I understand it, we're in similar positions, you and I—but there's no achieving the impossible, no matter who asks it of you."

"You're right about that."

"I intend to do what I can, then abandon this city with my master in tow. What *you* do is your decision, but remember that you only have one life. Give thought to how you'd like to use it."

Shawza's commentary as he glared at the oncoming army was quite possibly the most logical thing I'd ever heard. I *had* felt like Lynne had been expecting too much of me lately. Maybe that was my fault—I'd always known that my failure to clear up the misunderstandings between us would lead to trouble.

In any case, this was no time to ruminate on my past mistakes. Golems of a kind I'd never seen before had started to pop up out of the sand.

"Is it just me, or are there golems growing out of the ground...?" I asked.

"They can move through the sand. Those on the surface are only a fraction of their number."

"Ah. I kind of wish someone had told me that earlier... You've fought them before, right?"



“A long time ago.”

“How’d you manage that? Is their armor as hard as it looks?”

“Yes. Ordinary blades stand no chance at penetrating it. The last time I fought them, I used a bow. There’s a trick to it.”

“You can pierce their armor with arrows?”

“Depending on your bow, your strength, and where you aim.”

“Right.”

The golems looked tough at a glance, but if arrows could puncture them, then their armor surely paled in comparison to that of the Divine Beast. On top of that, even the largest of the golems seemed only twice as tall as the goblins I’d once encountered. Together with my sword, maybe I could brute force my way through them.

“Did you win when you fought them?” I asked.

“No. We had a much larger force than the two of us, but it meant nothing. The golems reduced every one of my allies to paste.”

“Oh… I’m sorry to hear that.” My hope that we might win had sparked into existence, then faded just as quickly. “Just making sure, but…they don’t happen to have any weaknesses, do they?”

“None worth noting. Even when they’re half destroyed, they’ll continue to fight as long as they’re connected to the manastones that power them.”

“So how do we beat them?”

“Aim for their joints or remove their limbs to restrict their movements. If you want to stop them for good, then your only choice is to reduce them into fine rubble.”

“Got it. Break them apart until they can’t move anymore, right?”

“Yes. If you can even manage that.”

“By the way…their insides aren’t edible, are they?”

Shawza shot me a look like he doubted his ears. “What? Of course not.”

“I thought as much. Just figured I’d make sure, you know?” I’d needed to dismantle the Divine Beast carefully so as not to damage its tender insides. I wouldn’t have to worry about that with the golems, at least.

“They’re here,” Shawza growled.

The golem army was before our very eyes. Glancing down, I noticed that Shawza was gripping a jagged knife roughly as large as the dagger Lynne sometimes wielded.

“Is that what you’re fighting with? I thought you used a bow last time.”

“It’s a makeshift weapon, but it’ll do. Were you expecting me to draw a bow with one arm?”

“Ah…right.”

“Worried” didn’t even begin to describe how I was feeling. My only ally was missing an arm and an eye and seemed intent on fighting with an improvised weapon. Our opponents, in contrast, were heavily armored and wouldn’t stop moving unless they were quite literally reduced to pieces. Still, letting even one through would put those behind us at serious risk. I could only emulate Shawza and do what I could to get through this.

Here goes nothing.

“[Physical Enhancement].”

I focused strength into my entire body, remembering how I’d peeled away the Divine Beast’s carapace. Once I’d taken aim, I tightened my grip on my black sword and brought my arm back. It was my first time fighting against golems; I didn’t know how tough they were, so I would start by throwing as hard as I could.

“[Stone Throw].”

My target—a golem towering at twice the height of a goblin—was blasted into pieces the moment my sword made contact with it.

“Huh.”

That had been surprisingly easy. My sword spun through the air with a low thrumming sound, leaving scattered sand dunes and more shattered golems in its wake. Nothing could slow its momentum. Maybe dealing with this army would prove easier than I’d expected.

Shawza seemed somewhat relieved as he watched my sword carve its path of destruction. “I see. So that lump is a throwing weapon.”

“‘Lump’? It’s a sword.”

“A…sword?”

“Yeah. I don’t usually throw it.”

“Whatever you say. You…wouldn’t happen to have another weapon, would you?”

“No—just the one.”

Shawza gave me a curious look. “The one you just threw away? How do you plan to fight, then?”

“That…is a good question.”

Shawza and I stared into the distance, watching in silence as my sword vanished into a sand dune. Slowly, he turned his head to look at me.

"If I didn't know better, I would think you just threw your only weapon without a single thought for the fight ahead."

There was a long, long pause. "Well..." was the most I managed to say before I gave in and nodded at him. He'd pretty much summed it up. Then, once I'd realized just how dire the situation was and steeled my resolve to retrieve my weapon...

"Tsk."

With a forceful click of his tongue, Shawza vanished from my side. Not a moment later, a blast of wind erupted from the spot he'd just occupied, kicking up a minor sandstorm that obscured my vision. Squinting through it, I saw a one-armed shadow in the distance yanking my black sword out of the sand.

"Wow."

The figure threw my sword high into the air, where it spun lazily toward me before landing in my outstretched palm. I hadn't even needed to move from where I stood. As soon as I caught my weapon, Shawza launched into a series of lightning-fast strikes, blasting apart the limbs of every golem around him.

"He's pretty incredible..."

After retrieving my sword and clearing his way through the golems in his path, Shawza returned to my side not even out of breath. His sharp gaze bore down on me.

"I'd like to tell you to think more when you fight, but I need to ask—what's with that weapon? I've never held anything as heavy."

"I told you—it's a sword."

"You're still trying to get me to buy that? It's closer to a crude lump of metal. How are you supposed to cut anything with it?"

Shawza's eye was fixated on my blade, studying it curiously. I understood how he felt—in his position, I wouldn't have called it a sword either. It was, as he'd said, closer to being a lump of metal. That and a charred and ruined signboard were the usual comparisons people made. Even those who recognized it as a weapon called it a club instead of a sword.

Come to think of it, I certainly hadn't been doing my blade's reputation any favors. Cleaning drains, digging holes, driving stakes into the ground, and carving water canals weren't ordinary uses for a weapon. Lynne's father had said it was a

sword, though, so that must have been the case. Probably.

"Forget that," I said. "I'm more impressed that you can take down golems with that tiny knife."

"I wouldn't bring a weapon I couldn't use to the battlefield—though your blunt instrument is much better suited to the task."

"That's true. Except it's a *sword*, not a blunt instrument."

I was relieved, in any case—almost to the point that our battle felt anticlimactic. Now that I knew my sword worked so well against the golems, I could just keep using it to cut down their numbers.

"Sword, club, whatever. Throw it again; I'll retrieve it for you. We'll thin out their ranks as much as we can."

"Sure. I can't think of any better ideas."

"Don't forget, though—I only have one arm. Hold back a little so it doesn't land as far away. That thing's heavy."

"Got it. I'll be more careful."

As I reactivated my [Physical Enhancement] and drew my arm back again, I suddenly had a thought. Shawza wanted me to show some restraint on account of his missing arm, but he'd looked perfectly relaxed when he threw me my sword. I'd never met anybody else who could control it with a single hand. In that case, what if...?

"[Stone Throw]. Ah... Oops."

My thoughts must have influenced me, because my sword traveled even farther this time. Still, Shawza—who'd broken into a sprint the moment I released the weapon—caught up with ease and tossed it back through the air without issue. Once again, it landed straight in the palm of my hand.

Shawza made his way back to me, carving through the golems with his knife and severing their limbs left and right. I couldn't help but admire his work.

"I thought I told you to hold back," he said upon reaching me, shooting me his sharpest glare yet. "Why, then, did you throw it even farther?"

"Sorry. I messed up. It didn't look like a problem for you, though."

"Constantly fighting at full strength is a surefire way to run out of stamina. Against an army this large, we need to pace ourselves."

"That makes sense. But—"

The sensation of movement beneath our feet caused us both

to leap aside. I barely had time to register the massive golem that burst out of the sand before I swung my blade.

[Parry]

The golem's arm came at us from above, only to be thrust upward when it made contact with my sword. Shawza severed the repulsed limb at the shoulder, causing it to drop into the sand with a dull *thud*, before following through and using his momentum to remove the golem's other arm and its legs as well.

Barely a moment later, more golems of roughly the same size began to pop up around us like sprouting mushrooms. Each one looked more agile than the golems we'd seen lumbering across the desert—and from my brief exchange with the one Shawza had just taken apart, I could tell they were tougher, to boot.

"These ones look stronger," I noted. "Can we still beat them if I hold back?"

"Tsk. So they sent primal golems too, did they...? No, don't hold back. These ones are nothing like the main group."

"Then I'll put more strength into my throws."

"Don't complain to me if I can't retrieve them."

"I'm sure you'll manage. Just put your back into it."

"Tsk. Hurry up, then. We don't have time to waste."

"All right. Here goes. [Stone Throw]."

I reared back, then launched my sword as hard as I could. Shawza vanished at the very same instant.

My weapon spun with even greater force than before, blowing straight through the massive golems that had risen from the sand and reducing them to rubble. Even then, it retained its momentum as it continued to soar through the air. Shawza wove his way through the destruction, finally caught the spinning sword in the distance, and then threw it back to me with perfect accuracy.

My initial concerns had vanished. I was even starting to enjoy our game of catch.

"Hey. What's with the smile?"

"Oops. My bad." My amusement wasn't hidden in the slightest—something that seemed to exasperate Shawza. "I was just thinking that we might actually be able to manage this."

"As soon as you think you've seen the last of them, even more will arise in their place. Don't let your guard down. Or do you *want* to die with a stupid grin on your face?"

"Good point. I'll take more care."

As much as I'd enjoyed watching the golems burst into pieces, Shawza was right—we were in the midst of battle. I would need to stay focused. We couldn't risk getting comfortable.

"[Physical Enhancement]. [Featherstep]."

Now that I'd warmed up, I could summon even more strength for my throws. As I squeezed the hilt of my sword so hard that the force kicked up the sand around me, I felt yet another pang of gratitude that my weapon was so sturdy.

Because I'd only learned the trick of throwing my sword during my recent battle with the Divine Beast, I was glad to have the chance to practice it. Each attempt was better than the last. I felt no pressure as the massive golems all charged me at once; I already knew what to do. I gathered my strength until the very last moment, picturing the trajectory my sword would take, and…

"[Stone Throw]."

In an instant, the golem closest to me was reduced to pieces as small as the grains of sand underfoot. The second golem met the same fate, as did all the others in my weapon's path. For how hard they'd seemed earlier, I almost couldn't believe they were so brittle. Barely a second of contact with my blade was enough to blow several hundred golems to pieces.

Shawza dashed after my sword with a roar, his knife claiming the limbs of just as many golems as I'd destroyed. At the end of his rampage, he once again snatched up my weapon and sent it flying back into my hand. The practice must have been helping him too; that was my farthest throw yet, but he'd seemed to manage just fine.

I couldn't help but wonder—what if I changed *how* I threw my sword?

"[Stone Throw]."

After multiple attempts, I'd worked out that it took only about three tenths of my strength for one of my throws to shatter the golems closing in on us. That being the case, I could reduce how far I threw my sword and instead focus on increasing its rotational speed.

In the distance, my sword almost seemed to hover in place as it spun. In no time at all, it had formed a small-scale sandstorm that started to drag the golems around it into its clutches. Mechanical shrieks filled the air, as did the loud wails of the constructs' parts scraping together as they fought against the

storm and the spinning blade at its center.

The golems' struggles were entirely in vain. One by one, they were torn to pieces. I almost felt sorry for them. But as we couldn't risk leaving them be—and they contained no edible parts—we didn't have much of a choice.

My discovery of a new method to clear through the golems was all well and good, but how was Shawza going to retrieve my sword now? No sooner had the thought occurred to me than he leaped into the ferocious sandstorm without as much as a grunt and threw my weapon back to me once again.

Of course, he wasn't as quiet when he returned. In fact, he gave me quite the earful…

If nothing else, I now knew that I could manage the tricky-seeming maneuver without issue. All that remained was the busywork.

The events that followed could be summarized as a prolonged game of catch between Shawza and me. From time to time, a golem or three slipped past us and headed for the city, but it didn't take us long to chase them down and demolish them.

"Looks like we pulled it off after all," I said.

"Mmm."

I'd felt so apprehensive at the start, but Lynne and Rashid had been right to put their faith in us. We spent a while longer seeing to our work until, before I realized it, there wasn't a single golem left. We'd reduced them all to rubble on the sand.

Chapter 159: In the Central Hall

The staff of the City Forgotten by Time, who had gathered in the central hall at the manager's command, watched the room's massive screen mirror with transfixed concern. They had seen the magical device plenty of times before, but never had its imagery been so hard to accept.

"Are those…golems?"

"Why are there so many?"

The rolling sand dunes beyond the city's walls were an ordinary sight to the city's employees, but the advancing horde made them harrowing to behold. Those who watched found it hard even to breathe. Nobody knew what was going on—all they could do was continue to watch. Melissa had given them strict instructions not to venture outside.

"Wait… Is that the new boss—Mr. Noor?"

"Sure is. But who's that next to him? Must be one of us, judging by his black suit."

"That's Mr. Rashid's bodyguard. I've crossed paths with him in the hallways."

"Why's the boss out there, though? Isn't it dangerous?"

"Maybe he…went out to negotiate?"

"What, with a horde of golems?"

"How should I know? I can't think of any other explanation."

"What do you think the golems want? They look like they're headed straight for us."

As the staff watched the two men on the screen, even more people started to pour into the hall, all packed together despite the wide entrance. Many led children by the hand or carried them in their arms; the residents of the outer market districts must have come to take refuge.

"They're even letting the outer residents in?"

"I guess that confirms it—the golems really are coming this way."

"But why?"

"Maybe conflict broke out on the northern border, and they're just passing by."

"I don't know… You'd think we would've heard a rumor, at

least."

"Wait. Do you feel that?"

Tremors shook the entire complex, growing in severity as the sand-colored titans continued to advance. Stone monsters were closing in, and no one had a good explanation for why.

The City Forgotten by Time was a recreational facility for the rich; the veteran staff knew it lacked a standing army large enough to match the oncoming horde. Some in the hall were already preparing for the worst, trying to make peace with the fact that these would be their last few hours among the living.

Yet, as it turned out, their resolve was wholly unnecessary. The events that followed, shown clearly on the room's screen mirror, caused the jaw of every staff member to drop in shock.

"What...in the world?"

Noor, the new proprietor, held some manner of black club in his hand. Then his arm twitched, the club vanished, and dozens of golems were reduced to pieces. A cloud of sand obscured the screen's image, and delayed explosions rang out somewhere beyond the complex's thick walls. So violent were the impacts that even the central hall started to crack.

"What just happened?"

When the shaking subsided, the staff members looked at each other, completely bewildered.

"Is it just me, or did the boss just throw that thing?"

"He's not fighting, is he? Against those golems?"

"Nah, he can't be. You'd need to be insane to take on a force that large with only one other person to help."

"You're right. He must've been trying to negotiate, but—"

"But then the golems crushed them."

"Really? Then how do you explain *that*?"

"Are those...*the golems'* arms being torn apart?"

The screen was so heavily obscured that the onlookers could see only rough shapes, almost as though they were watching a shadow play meant for children. Still, the golems' size made them hard to miss. The constructs closed in on a lone, much smaller shadow...only to have their arms, legs, and torsos chopped apart and scattered with ease.

"What's going on? What's happening?"

Nobody in the hall understood what they were seeing. Between raging bursts of sand, they caught only short glimpses of the man who was tearing the stone monsters asunder.

“Mr. Noor...?”

Indeed, standing calmly among the throng of golems was none other than the city’s new proprietor—the man who had addressed them not too long ago, making all sorts of bold promises.

One of the golems brought its weighty arms down on Noor, then reeled back as he repelled the crushing blow with his black club. Not a moment later, the defenseless construct’s limbs were severed and sent tumbling into the dunes below.

The city’s new owner watched calmly as his opponent collapsed, then drew his arm back, ready to throw his club again. In the blink of an eye—or perhaps even faster—the black slab vanished. An entire row of golems was reduced to nothing before another gust of sandy wind covered the screen.

“I can’t believe it. Is he actually fighting them?!”

“The boss? Really?”

“Well, how else are we meant to interpret what we’re seeing?”

Everyone’s eyes were glued to the screen mirror. Now and again, a gust of wind would clear the sand obscuring the action, revealing a desert strewn with fragments of destroyed golems. Thunderous impacts shook the entire complex, and with each one, yet another burst of sand obscured the screen mirror.

To the spectators, it was already clear who was locked in combat: the proprietor so new that many had yet to even process the change of ownership. True to his word, he was doing what he could to keep them out of harm’s way.

As the staff continued to watch the spectacle, in a trance and with their mouths agape, a certain smug-seeming man turned to the young woman beside him.

“Phenomenal. My expectations were high, yet he somehow surpassed every one of them. I was never unduly worried about our safety with those two around, but to think they’d manage all this... You’ve found an excellent servant, Lady Lynneburg.”

In contrast to the man’s cheer, the girl wore a grim expression as she kept her eyes on the screen. “You misunderstand our connection, Lord Rashid. May I clear up your confusion?”

“By all means.”

“Instructor Noor is not my ‘servant,’ as you put it. Due to the circumstances of my coming here, he has entered Sarenza as a member of my escort. Back in the Kingdom of Clays, however, our positions are very much reversed.”

“Oh? Reversed, you say?”

“If anyone, *I* am the servant. After all, I have received his kind permission to follow him as his disciple.”

“I see. What an interesting quirk of your kingdom’s culture. Your father has given his approval, I assume?”

“Indeed, he has. Instructor Noor has saved our kingdom from certain doom on many occasions. Both my father and I have much to learn from him.”

“Fascinating. I would expect no less of the country that raised Rein. The more I learn, the more my interest grows.”

Lynne glanced at Rashid, recognizing the cheer in his voice, before looking back at the screen mirror. Her eyes followed the one-armed beastfolk and his trail of destruction. “On the topic of phenomenal individuals…Shawza really is formidable. Instructor Noor and my father aside, I’ve never seen anyone handle the Black Blade so deftly.”

“Isn’t he just? A man of few words—and rather aloof—but the perfect attendant otherwise. You won’t find anyone more reliable in a pinch.” Rashid cocked his head at an exaggerated angle, watching the side profile of the girl who refused to look at him. “But let me turn that back on you, Lady Lynneburg—would this battle not be tidied up quicker if you sent your Divine Shield into the fray? A single ‘sweep,’ and gone is the mess, no?”

“You are correct. However, on the off chance that even a single person is among that golem horde, such a command would only force her to shoulder an undue burden. I cannot allow that.”

“My, my. You’re so kind to your people. Perhaps I should learn from your example.”

“In any case, her presence is unnecessary. Opponents of that degree aren’t even enough to make Instructor Noor break a sweat.”

As if to prove Lynne’s point, the two figures on the overhead screen continued to tear through the golem army. A major portion of Sarenza’s military strength was being crushed with ease, yet her expression barely changed at all.

Rashid smiled. “‘Of that degree,’ huh? Despite how it looks, those golems make up a significant part of Sarenza’s military force. Ah, but how fortunate I am to have made an acquaintance such as you.”

“My apologies, but I still do not trust you in the slightest.”

“Then I suppose I must continue my endeavors to win you

over. For, to a merchant such as I, there is no greater asset than trust."

Lynne narrowed her eyes at the man before returning her attention to the sand-obscured screen. "It is about time that I step outside, in case my support is deemed necessary. I doubt Instructor Noor will allow any of our foes past him, but we cannot risk being careless."

"Then please, don't let me keep you. Your presence will be reassuring, to say the least; the complex's security force would be rather unfortunately outmatched on its own."

"Melissa, please see to matters here in my absence."

"Of course, ma'am," she said.

Lynne departed without another word. Rashid waited until she was completely out of sight before smiling at the black-suited woman to his side and giving her a dramatic shrug of his shoulders. "Did you see that, Melissa? The young princess is quite the personality, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir."

"The entire time we conversed, she was tracking the movements of every person in the city's vicinity. That was the Sovereign of Shadows' infamous [Detect], I'm sure. She was even kind enough to use it where we could see her."

"Yes, sir, though I would assume her true intention was to let us know she was watching us for any suspicious behavior. A light warning, if you will, to make us aware of her surveillance."

"Indeed. It's a shame that she still doesn't seem to trust us."

"From her point of view, it makes perfect sense to be cautious."

"Well, my interest in her is stronger than ever. I'd heard she was softhearted, but I see now that she's far more than just a sheltered baby bird. Did you notice? From the very start, she's been treating this attack as not an emergency but an opportunity. It was her idea to show Noor on the central hall's screen. No wonder Rein was always raving about her."

The black-suited woman sighed quietly at her master's cheer. "And what are we to do, having earned the ire of someone so capable?"

"For a start, I suppose we should see to the responsibilities she left us, lest we risk displeasing her even more."

"I had no intention of doing otherwise."

"Then again, at this rate, I doubt that'll even be necessary."

Once more, a strange silence settled over the hall. Although it would have been entirely natural for chaos to break out among the crowd, nobody so much as moved from where they stood. They were captivated by the sight of the new proprietor carving his way through the golem horde.

To call the spectacle on display a joke or fabrication would have been to understate its absurdity. With each swing of his mysterious black club, Noor destroyed waves of primal golems, Sarenza's greatest military asset. Even as the one-sided fight dragged on and on, the new proprietor's calm never so much as wavered, and his opponents never managed to put a single scratch on him. It was as though he knew the staff were watching and wanted to show them they had no reason to worry.

Noor threw his weapon again, and an even greater wave of shock rippled through the crowd. They watched as the black club spun violently through the air, whipping up a fierce storm around it.

The screen's image suddenly became crystal clear as all the sand in the air was sucked up by the swirling winds. Larger and larger the sandstorm grew, eventually becoming so strong that it pulled even the golems into its clutches as though they were naught but stray leaves.

"You must be joking..."

Before everyone's eyes, what should have been an army without peer fell victim to the proprietor's vortex. One by one, golems were pulled into the spinning black object at its center and reduced to fragments as fine as the grains of sand around them.

So absurd was the sight that the city's employees could no longer perceive the golem horde as a threat. How could it possibly endanger them when they had such an unthinkably capable man protecting them? It felt as though barely a moment had passed since he'd stood in front of them all, making irrational promises aplenty. He had even declared that, for as long as he was the proprietor, he wouldn't allow harm to come to a single one of the city's inhabitants.

At the time, few people had paid the man's words any mind. Empty vows were a hallmark of those in power, and one would need to be a fool to expect anything to come of them. The staff of the City Forgotten by Time knew that better than most, for the

complex was a gathering of those with nowhere else to go. The privileged—such as those of House Sarenza—treated their employees as no more than replaceable cogs. And why wouldn't they? The powerful saw no reason to risk their own safety to protect those of no meaningful worth. In the process of business, it was only natural for the unprofitable to be pruned and cast aside as necessary.

The new proprietor had promised to protect his employees without asking for anything in return. To someone more naive, that might have seemed compassionate, but even the children of Sarenza would have recognized such a pledge as nothing more than lip service.

And yet, the new proprietor had made good on his word. He was protecting his employees from an oncoming threat, exactly as he'd said. Noor had met the danger facing the city head-on and was currently *crushing it* by virtue of his own strength.

As the city's staff watched the fantastical scene playing out before them, a new question began to surface in their minds. The new proprietor was already keeping one of his promises; would he make good on the others too? As one, they thought back to everything else Noor had said during his address. It had sounded too good to be true, but who were they to doubt him now? He was already carrying out the most unrealistic promise of them all.

Nobody had thought things would change when the City Forgotten by Time was put in new hands. Under normal circumstances, replacing the proprietor would do nothing to improve their days of hard labor, the unreasonable demands thrust upon them, or their exploitative superiors. They already had the great fortune of being in a city better than most. There was no use in asking for more or dreaming of a sweeter future; by all means, it was better to accept their current situation than face certain disappointment. The best way to ensure their survival was to merely endure the oppressive treatment they received from their superiors.

As the most powerful group in the country, House Sarenza had assets and authority on a scale that put its would-be rivals to shame, making them more or less untouchable. The riches they had gathered over the generations, coupled with the ever-formidable golems in their possession, formed a power base that demanded total obedience. Nobody could stand against

them, and nobody would dare try—there was zero chance they would succeed.

Or at least, that should have been the case. As the staff watched the stone titans, symbols of House Sarenza's control, be reduced to pieces, the world they knew fell apart around them. Whatever conclusions each of them drew, one thing was clear: the arrival of this new proprietor would bring about great change—change that none of them could predict.

Soon enough, the sandstorm on the screen started to fade. Once the air was clear, the sky seemed starkly blue, and the sun shone down on a vast expanse covered with shattered stone remains. Only two figures remained on their feet: the one-armed beastfolk, and the new proprietor with his strange black club. The former wasted no time in returning to the city. The latter took a moment to pat the sand from his clothes before he followed. He had not a single wound on his body.

The new proprietor slung his strange weapon over his shoulder as he walked, his expression calm and gait relaxed. He looked as though he were returning from a task as trivial as mowing the lawn.

A quiet whisper spread through the crowd gathered in the central hall.

"The boss is coming back."

At once, without even being ordered to, the staff of the City Forgotten by Time arranged themselves in neat rows, preparing for the return of their new employer.

Chapter 160: Ruin’s Footfalls

Aside from sharing a name with the country’s ruling family, the capital of Sarenza, Sarenza City, was an economic hub where the majority of the nation’s wealth was gathered. Though its structures boasted fine architecture and lavish decorations, they all paled in comparison to the shining white palace towering in the vast, sylvan garden in the city’s center.

Inside a room in the palace, which was grand enough to seem like an entirely new world, two young men shared self-satisfied smiles and drank red fruit wine from golden cups. “Ha ha!” the first exclaimed, his cheeks red from drinking. “Penniless from a silly little gamble! A fitting end for Rashid, if one exists!”

“You said it, Brother Ari,” agreed the plump boy beside him, equally intoxicated. “Such an unsightly end suits him well.”

The two young men were brothers, both of House Sarenza. Ari, the more slender of the pair, was the second son, while the other, Nhid, was the fourth. For the umpteenth time that day, they raised their golden cups and shared a toast.

“Eleven trillion lost in a Trial that he instigated. It’s unheard of. Ha ha ha. Perhaps he lacked a useful piece with a talent for dealing.”

“He must’ve been so sure of his victory, considering the crowd that he gathered to watch. Made it all the more shameful when he lost.”

“Losing his position as tax executive is one thing—that’s a job that reeks of the masses. But losing the right of ownership over the City Forgotten by Time? He’ll be a laughingstock in our family’s history books until the end of time, if we don’t outright strike him from the records to preserve our house’s good name.”

“Indeed. I’ve heard that the family intends to cover his losses to avoid any further shame. I wonder why we’re even bothering—it was *his* mistake, after all.”

The pair placed their empty cups on the table, and a nearby servant promptly moved to top them up. Ari, the older brother, snatched up his drink without hesitation and drained it in a single gulp. He gazed out the window over the palace’s expansive garden and sighed.

“Though, I suppose he *is* still one of us—from a legal perspective. And there’s no law against parents taking on their children’s debts. Not that this is much of a debt for our family. It’s a good way to display our virtue to the masses, at the very least.”

“Indeed. Why, I remember father letting me off with a smile when I lost two billion as a child.”

“Mother was furious, though.”

“Yes, but she forgave me after some light punishment.”

“We’re family. It’s only natural that we cover for each other.”

The brothers exchanged more smiles as they reminisced about the past and shared more wine. So expensive was their choice of drink that an ordinary citizen couldn’t hope to taste it in their lifetime, yet the pair downed it as freely as water.

“Rashid always was different,” Nhid said. “You wouldn’t think he bore father’s blood at all, with how dim-witted and barbaric he is.”

“But of course—his mother was some vulgar commoner who caught father’s eye by mistake. *Our* mother is the scion of a high-class merchant family. It’s obvious what sets us apart.”

“It makes you wonder why we have to treat him as our eldest brother, especially when even father hates him. I know the laws of succession have been in place since the age of our great-grandfather, but still…”

“Well, there was a time when father *did* see Rashid as his son, and it’s not so easy to take that back. But you know as well as I do how everyone in the family feels about him being first in line to inherit. It’s only a matter of time before they nudge the politicians toward making a move against him through the courts.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing the inheritance law has stuck around, though.”

“Indeed. Laws are all about how you use them.”

“You said it, Brother Ari. I mean, as long as Rashid perishes, you’ll be next in line to inherit father’s wealth.”

“All’s well that ends well.”

The brothers shared another toast, their expressions smug.

“I’d even go as far as saying that I’m *grateful* to Rashid.”

“Everyone was so overjoyed during the family council, weren’t they? He’s finally getting what’s coming to him. Then once you inherit, brother, House Sarenza will be stable for another generation.”

“My… You two seem to be enjoying yourselves. I hope you don’t mind if I join you.”

Tension flickered across the brothers’ expressions as a high-pitched voice resounded through the room. They shot to their feet and turned to the door, where they saw a woman bedecked in jewels and other finery.

“Mother! What a pleasure it is to see you. Thank you for gracing us with your presence.”

The woman chuckled. “I heard my adorable sons were holding a celebration. How could I miss it? I canceled all of my plans for today—some petty politician’s banquet is a trifle compared to time spent with family.”

“Wise words, mother.”

The woman lowered herself into a lavish chair, her every movement oozing elegance. As she eyed the attendant pouring her tea with trembling hands, she said in a quiet voice, “Ah, yes. Ari, Nhid—I happen to have caught a rumor on the wind. The primal golems lent to you by the family—is it true that you sent them to the City Forgotten by Time? Whose permission did you receive for such a bold move?”

“W-We…”

The brothers froze, hardly daring to breathe. Their mother must have noticed their sudden tension because she lowered her teacup from her lips and placed it on the table without a sound. Her smile was perfect—yet artificial in every way.

“My, whatever is the matter? You look terrified. Please don’t misunderstand me—my intention isn’t to criticize you. The opposite, rather. There is profit to be made in bold actions. You sent the golems after Rashid, yes? An excellent move.”

Only once they were certain they hadn’t earned their mother’s ire did the brothers appear to relax.

“Indeed, mother,” Ari said. “I know we decided during the family council to summon him to the capital, but it was clear that none of us actually want him here. I suspect the majority were of the opinion that Rashid meeting an *unfortunate accident* was the preferable outcome. So I thought, as the next heir of House Sarenza, why not take the initiative?”

“By sending out our entire force of golems? You understand that they are the backbone of our fortune, do you not? No amount of wealth can replace them.”

“I do, yes. It was a tough decision to make—I won’t deny that

—but a griffin brings its full might to bear even when hunting a sand rat. When we considered the potential profit, we decided the risk was relatively trivial."

"And *that* is why you are my sons. Having an eye for opportunities to *deal with* a troublesome rival is a precious talent for any merchant. Ari, Nhid—your acumen has proved you both worthy of inheriting House Sarenza. Your father must be proud."

"Thank you, mother."

She smiled—sincerely this time—and the tension hanging over the room began to fade. "Incidentally…I was under the impression that there was to be more to this celebration than a toast?"

"But of course." Ari motioned to a servant. "Bring it in. And be quick about it."

"At once, master."

At the young man's behest, a massive tray was carried into the room and placed upon the table. When the cloche was lifted, mother and sons were treated to the sight of a thick slab of cooked meat.

"My, what a sight," the mother said. "What manner of dish is this?"

"An entire roast pig. Prepared specially for you."

"A…pig, you say?"

"We chose one with an excellent pedigree and entrusted its rearing to an expert breeder. Only the finest of feed went into its growth—no other pork in the world even compares. It would be our honor if you saw fit to taste it."

"I hope it doesn't disappoint. That aside—what *is* that vulgar noise?"

The mother's face twisted into a frown, her lack of interest in the dish having quickly made way for displeasure. Her sons' breath caught in their throats, and when they strained their ears, they noticed she was right: hurried footsteps echoed down the palace hallway, growing louder by the moment. Realizing it was one of their servants, their expressions twisted to match their mother's.

"Commoners. They never learn," Ari spat. "Don't they know we have a guest?"

"One of your servants is in serious need of discipline."

"You're exactly right, mother."

"P-Pardon me, masters!" exclaimed the man who burst into

the room mere moments later. “I come bearing urgent news about— *Gack!*”

The servant’s announcement was cut short by a hard kick to the gut. He doubled over, groaning and clutching his stomach, while his master glared down at him.

“You understand why I needed to do that, don’t you?” Ari asked.

“O-Of course, m-master. Running in the hallways is—*urk*—forbidden…”

“Correct. Your low birth does not excuse you from the bare minimum of etiquette. How many times must I teach you that?”

“M-My deepest apologies! H-However—”

“Enough. I don’t have time to hear your excuses. Have you brought the farseeing screen I ordered you to fetch? Mother intends to watch it with us.”

“O-Of course, master! That’s what I came to speak with you about! Th-The—”

Again, Ari thrust his foot into the man’s gut, driving the rest of the air from his lungs. “Kreutz, Kreutz, Kreutz. You overestimate your importance. We’ve been kind enough to pause our meal this long, yet you insist on wasting our time. How much do you think that meat costs? Do you understand that you could work your entire lifetime and still not earn even a fraction of its worth?”

“I… I’m sorry, master! Truly! I shouldn’t have interrupted your precious meal—”

“You *still* don’t understand. While you’re wasting our time with your apologies, our food is getting cold. You aren’t worth even a *slice* of that pork—or do you mean to replace it with something of equal value?”

The man whimpered. “I… I wouldn’t dare, master! P-Please, have mercy!”

“Your tongue is doing you no favors, despite the ease of your work. Do you see this knife? I had it made specially to slice fine meat; it should work just as well on you. Now, I’ll give you one more chance. Choose wisely.”

Ari’s irritated smile grew more sadistic as he brought the tip of the knife to his servant’s throat. Its blade shone as clear as a mirror.

At once, the man’s expression morphed into terror. “M-My deepest apologies! I shall give my report without delay! The

golems you sent to the City Forgotten by Time—that is, ah, all twelve thousand of them—have…have…"

"Still stumbling over your words? Don't you know that time is money—or do you just take pleasure in inciting my ire? I was only going to dock your wages, but I suppose this calls for a fine as well. Don't worry if you can't pay—your family can make up for it at the slave mar—"

"Th-They've been wiped out! All of them! Down to the last golem!"

Ari froze. "What? 'Wiped out'?"

Still pressing cold metal to his servant's throat, Ari glanced over his shoulder. He locked eyes with his younger brother, who had just moments ago been carving their pork with a matching knife.

"Did you hear that, Nhid?" Ari looked incredulous. "'Wiped out,' he said."

Nhid scoffed and, with gusto, returned to portioning out their celebratory meal. "We both know that's impossible."

Ari snatched the bottle of wine from the table and upended its contents over the servant's head. The man didn't dare move as it drenched his clothes and stained the carpet red.

"M-Master Ari…?"

"Kreutz. Do you know why I was kind enough to take you in, even though you're just as stupid and useless as every other commoner out there? It's because you were *obedient*. I would have thought you were grateful for my charity, even if only a little."

"O-Of course I am, master! It is thanks to your infinite kindness that a fool such as I am able to—"

"Then if you're going to tell a joke, at least laugh along with it. And *do* consider the time and place, won't you? Our dear mother is here today. Even an ignorant half-wit such as you should know that those golems represent Nhid's and my *entire* military force. What did you mean, 'wiped out'? At whose expense was your pathetic little jest? Tell me, Kreutz."

"M-Mercy, master!"

"Enough. No more. I've no use for a fool who can't answer a simple question. You're dismissed. *Permanently.*"

"M-Master Ari? What— *Ack!* Ungh!"

Ari pressed the tip of his knife into the servant's neck and swiped to one side. Although the wound wasn't deep enough to

be fatal, blood spewed forth, darkening the growing stain on the carpet.

"You lot. Throw this carpet out," Ari snapped. "And get this fool out of my sight."

"At once, master."

"Oh, and Kreutz—this should go without saying, but I don't have severance pay to spare for useless half-wits. Find your own means to cover the cost of the cold meat and stained carpet you owe me for. I'm sure you have a family member or two you can sell."

"P-Please! Anything but that! M-Mercy! Mercy! I— *Gungh!*"

The ex-servant was dragged away by his former colleagues. His pleas grew quieter and quieter until they faded out completely.

"Apologies for the fuss, mother. Shall we eat?"

"Ari, what was that?"

"M-Mother?" Ari was halfway through taking his seat when his mother's reproachful voice caused him to freeze.

"Do you not understand me? Then allow me to speak more plainly. Your actions just now were disgraceful for someone expected to be the future head of this family."

The brothers' expressions stiffened as their mother stood and approached the elder. She caressed his face and continued in a more tender voice, as though speaking to a child.

"I do not criticize you without cause, Ari. This is for your own good. How many times have I warned you that your kind nature will be your undoing? If a servant proves too worthless to even earn their keep, sever their limbs on the spot. Strip them of their assets and sell their family to the cruelest slaver you can find."

Despite his mother's gentle touch, Ari was shaking. The fear in his eyes was obvious. "Y-Yes, mother. I understand, mother."

"Do you? Because I thought you said something about that servant owing you a debt of gratitude. You must understand—no matter how much they might resemble us, the poor are not the *same* as us. They are beasts who will give in to depravity if we do not carefully manage them. Since they're lazy from birth, proper punishment is necessary to whip them into shape—all the more so if you plan to entrust them with important family-related matters. How many times must I tell you this for it to sink in?"

"M-My deepest apologies, mother."

"Oh, Ari. I'm not *angry*. I am simply confused. Why did you

allow that incompetent to live? All you've done is release yet another vermin into the world to spread baseless lies about our family. And we don't want that, do we?"

"O-Of course not, mother. I see my mistake now. I'll see to his execution and be more careful when selecting personnel in the future."

"There. Was that so hard? When choosing servants for our family, you must learn to separate the wheat from the chaff. It's all about birth, breed, and upbringing. Only once you have those elements can you begin their education. Why, it's the same process you went through when selecting this pig for me."

"You're exactly right, mother."

The boys' mother returned to her seat, her visage refined as she cut into her portion of meat. She popped a morsel into her mouth, and her lips curled into a satisfied smile. "Delicious. You chose well, Ari."

"Th-Thank you, mother."

"If you have taken my lesson to heart, I have nothing more to say. Come, let us eat; the food is getting cold. I look forward to the entertainment you've prepared."

"Yes, mother." Ari turned to a servant. "The avian golem should be in position. Bring up the image."

"As you wish, master."

In an instant, a bird's-eye view of the City Forgotten by Time was projected onto the screen mirror on the room's wall.

"I applaud your forward thinking, Ari, Nhid. Settling matters with your longtime rival and cleaning up the garbage in one fell sweep—simply wonderful."

"It *is* a dump, isn't it, mother? A gathering of vagrants of poor birth, much like Rashid himself. I thought you might enjoy this plan."

"You thought correctly. I never tire of watching the fruits of a commoner's labor be stripped away and reduced to nothing. Such pleasure is our privilege as the chosen. Not to mention, it isn't often that we get to watch golems overrun an entire city. It will make this meal taste all the finer."

"Yes, mother."

The trio took up their cutlery, watching the screen in eager anticipation. They openly scoffed and snickered when they saw only two men facing the golem horde.

"Pfft. What do you think they're doing? Begging for their lives,

perhaps?”

“How laughable. That’s the man who succeeded Rashid, is it not? I saw his face on the documents shared during the family council. And beside him is… Did Rashid sell his own bodyguard to cover his debt? Pathetic.”

“The City Forgotten by Time should have its own golems. Just the low-quality dregs, though. Where do you think they are?”

“Does it matter? Perhaps the new owner is so incompetent that not even the machines would follow him.”

“I wondered what kind of man he was, but I see now that he’s no better than the rest of the gambling-addicted trash that gather in that dump. My, but I do look forward to watching the primal golems crush him into a pulp.”

The boys’ mother held her cutlery at the ready, licking her lips as she awaited the scene that would whet her appetite. The brothers followed suit, eager for their mealtime entertainment to begin…but found their expectations betrayed by the city’s new owner. He threw a black object, destroying a throng of golems and obscuring their screen with a cloud of sand.

“What…was that?”

“Why can’t we see anything?” Ari complained. “Fix it.”

“A-At once, master.”

The trio waited impatiently, cutlery in hand as they stared at the screen mirror. Soon enough, the sand cleared, and their vision was restored. They had expected to see two crushed corpses—the inevitable outcome of such a one-sided battle—but instead, the screen showed naught but the remains of shattered golems.

The mother and her sons stared at the screen in mute confusion. Although their food was getting colder, they continued to wait for their mealtime entertainment. They assumed it would appear at any moment…but the events they had wished for never came. Instead, they were shown the bizarre sight of their primal golems—the country’s most formidable fighters—being crushed to pieces by two men.

It was the younger brother, Nhid, who broke the silence. “What…is the meaning of this?”

Nobody had an answer for him. The opportune time to enjoy their meat grew further by the second, but the trio paid their cold food no mind as they tried to make sense of the colossal sandstorm that began to form on the screen.

Only once their entire golem force had been dragged into the vortex did Ari think to voice a question. “What…*was* that? It can’t have been real, can it…?”

Again, there was no response. Silence returned, broken only when the sandstorm subsided and the aftermath was clear to see. The mother’s eyes flew open in shock, and her sons’ followed suit.

“What…?”

The screen showed a common desert plain, empty of the golems they had expected to see there. Only the one-armed beastfolk and the man grasping a club of some kind endured, standing triumphantly among scattered fragments of rock. Were those all that remained of the brothers’ great army?

There had to be a mistake. The trio were caught in some cruel nightmare—they had to be.

The new proprietor glanced up at the sky as though to check if someone was there. At the same time, all three members of House Sarenza swallowed their breath.

“Who…*is* he?”

“Is he looking at us? No, it has to be a coincidence…”

The man was staring at the avian golem, but the trio couldn’t shake the feeling that he was staring straight into their eyes. Despite its absurdity, the thought ran rampant through their minds…until at last, the man picked up a small stone by his feet, calmly drew his arm back as if taking aim, and—

Each of the three spectators recoiled and cried out in unison. The mother seemed the most shaken, having leaped up from her chair and shrieked loud enough for her voice to reach the rest of the palace. The man’s stone had only destroyed the avian golem—and the magical farseeing device with which it was equipped—but it truly had seemed as though he were targeting *them*.

“Y-You…you dare?! You *dare*?!”

In a white-hot rage, the mother grabbed her plate of sliced meat and threw it at the screen, which now showed a frozen image of the man’s face. He shattered into pieces alongside the magical device, but even then, the mother’s anger continued to rampage. She ground the shards under her expensive footwear, erupting in shrill screams all the while.

“M-Mother…?”

The young men had never seen their mother in such a state.

She was always so composed, but now she looked as if she'd gone half mad.

Before the brothers knew it, they were shaking. So much sweat drenched their hands that their cutlery slipped from their grasp and struck the polished stone beneath them, making a clatter so loud that it reverberated through the extravagantly furnished room.

Both boys went rigid. Their mother normally detested any unwanted noise made during mealtimes, but she made no attempt to rebuke their breach of etiquette. Instead, she continued to scream, seizing and throwing anything she could get her hands on.



At last, Ari and Nhid came to understand the truth of their situation. No wonder their mother had lost her composure so violently—they had lost *everything*.

Then, they remembered the man who'd cast a stone at them: the new owner of the City Forgotten by Time. Had they not summoned him to the capital along with Rashid? It would only be a matter of time before he arrived, and now they had no means with which to defend themselves.

A chill ran down the brothers' spines.

"No… No, no, no…"

Raw screams and the crashes of thrown objects overwhelmed the room. Not one member of the House Sarenza trio could bring themselves to accept what they had just seen. How could they, when it might as well have been a blatant declaration of their downfall?

"It has to be a lie! Yes, that's right—it must be! It's some sort of trick!"

Even then, the footfalls of ruin rang clearly through their minds. It didn't matter whether the trio was ready to hear them; slowly—but inevitably—the patter drew closer to their city.

Chapter 161: To Sarenza City

Shawza and I had reached the city's outskirts when I spotted Lynne, who had come out to greet us. She eyed my face, looking concerned.

"Welcome back, Instructor. Are you hurt?"

"No, not at all. I was pretty worried at first, since everyone kept touting the golems' strength, but Shawza and I were enough in the end."

"I observed your battle from afar." Lynne smiled. "It was breathtaking."

Ines brought up the rear. She was smiling, like her lady, though her expression bore its usual stiffness. "Noor, it would appear you didn't need my assistance after all." She turned to the man at my side. "Shawza, I expect you heard what I said before you departed. Please, allow me to apologize. I was wrong to doubt you."

"Don't bother," Shawza replied. "You were only doing your job."

"I shall interpret that as acceptance. Thank you." A professional air settled over her. "Were those all the golems sent in the attack?"

"Seems that way. No promises, though—we only eliminated the ones we could see."

"I understand. In that case, may I trouble you to brief me on what else you know of them?"

"Fine. I'll share what I can."

"You have my thanks. My lady, may I remain here for a while?"

"Of course," Lynne said. "I'll return to the complex and start preparing for our departure."

"Understood. I will rejoin you once I've finished."

"Then I shall take my leave. See you soon, Instructor."

"Hmm?" I turned to her. "Oh, right. See you."

No sooner had Lynne hurried away than Ines and Shawza launched into a deep conversation about security. Though their expressions were grave, they seemed a little more relaxed around each other.

I had nothing to contribute to the pair's exchange, and the

thought of waiting around didn't much appeal to me, so I bid them a quick farewell and strolled into town. I hadn't made it very far when a strange sight stopped me in my tracks.

"What...is *that*?"

I spied a large group of monsters lazing about on the sand. Upon taking a closer look, I noticed Rolo at the center of them, being...not attacked, but definitely mobbed. He spotted me from among the crush of creatures, all several times his size, and gave me a gentle smile.

"Noor. You're okay."

"Yeah, it all worked out somehow. What's going on here?"

"The golems' footsteps really scared the monsters in the colosseum. They were in such a frenzy that they risked causing serious damage, so I asked Melissa if I could take them outside to calm them down."

"Yeah?"

"Well, being able to see the golems only scared them more. They've settled down now, at least. They haven't gotten to sunbathe in a while, so they're in a good mood."

Rolo was right—the ferocious-looking monsters were sprawled out on the sand, enjoying the sun's rays. The peaceful atmosphere made them seem like pet cats and dogs, despite some of them being as large as the green dragon I'd encountered before. Had I come with food, I suspected they might even have bounded toward me, their tails wagging with excitement. Not that I wanted a pack of scary monsters to charge at me...

"How did you get them all out here, though?" I asked. "Some of them look too big to fit through the entrance."

"I used this." Rolo held up his hand, showing me a ring embedded with a tiny crimson gem.

"Ah, that'd do it." I recognized it as the same ring he'd used to summon Rala in Mithra. "I didn't know you could keep other creatures in there too."

"It wasn't made just for Rala. In fact, it can hold most monsters, as long as they don't fight against it. Watch." Rolo gestured, and several nearby monsters scattered into dazzling red light that quickly vanished into the ring's crimson gem.

"Wow. I'm surprised it has room for them."

"Well, it has enough space for Rala, and none of the monsters here even come close to matching her size. I can fit them all in at

once without much trouble.”

“That’s pretty spectacular.”

“Apparently, it’s quite nice on the inside; the monsters don’t get hungry or anything. It doesn’t compare to fresh air and freedom, of course, but— Ah, that’s enough, everyone. Thanks.” Rolo made another gesture, and the ring flashed, releasing the monsters inside.

Rolo could use the ring a lot more casually than I’d expected. I was impressed; he seemed to be picking up useful new talents left and right.

“Now that you mention it,” I said, “I guess Rala didn’t come along this time.”

“She was sad that she wouldn’t get to see you, but we decided it was best if she stayed in the capital. She has an important job to do.”

“Yeah? That’s a…shame?” For a moment, I really did regret that she hadn’t come with us. Then it struck me that, in the event of an emergency, we might’ve had to ride around on her back again. I didn’t feel good about it, but my fear of heights made me glad she’d stayed behind.

“By the way, Noor—can I ask a favor?”

“A favor?”

“Can I bring a few of my friends here with us? They find it much too cramped indoors.”

“Oh, of course. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. And don’t worry—I’m sure they’re capable of sourcing their own food and such.”

“Sure. If they need any help, though, let me know. I’ve got more coin than I know what to do with.”

“Mm-hmm. I will.”

A green dragon nuzzled up to Rolo and got its chin rubbed in return. It seemed to be enjoying itself. My eyes started to wander, and only then did I realize Sirene was sitting atop its head, still as a statue. Her bow was in her hands, as always, but she looked to be spacing out; her gaze was locked on Ines and Shawza, who were still engaged in conversation some distance away. She didn’t seem to have noticed me—a rare occurrence, given how wary she normally was of me being around her weapon.

“Sirene? Are you okay?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh…? A-Ah, Noor?! Wh-When did you get here? Um,

welcome back!”

Sirene hopped down from the dragon’s head without another moment’s hesitation and landed gracefully in front of me. Her eyes were less clouded than before, but I could tell something was still eating away at her. The way she kept glancing around made that obvious.

“Those golems looked quite fearsome,” she said. “Are you o—Um, well, I suppose you are. You seem fine…”

“Yeah, they couldn’t even scratch me.”

“Amazing… I would love to learn how your body works.”

“Are *you* okay? You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

“I-It’s nothing, really. Oh, um, right—is Shawza okay?”

“Yeah. He roughed up his palms a little, but he assured me it wasn’t anything serious.”

“I…see. I’m glad you’re both unharmed. I was here on guard, but I didn’t see as much as a single sand rat.”

“You can thank Shawza for that. He couldn’t have been more thorough.”

As if on cue, our man of the hour came our way. He must have finished his conversation with Ines. Rather than stopping when he reached us, he pressed on, not even taking a moment to meet our eyes.

“U-Um, Shawza,” Sirene called out to him.

The man stopped. “Yes? Need something else from me?”

“Um… I…” Sirene went quiet, clearly having some trouble saying whatever was on her mind. Her silence continued for a little while longer before her mouth opened again. “Thank you for helping Noor.”

Shawza shot her a quick glance, then turned his eyes forward again. “You have no reason to thank me. I acted out of duty, not altruism.”

“That so?” I said. “Then I’ll say it. Thanks. You saved me back there.”

“*You* have even less reason to thank me…”

“Huh? Why’s that…?”

There was a drawn-out pause. “Doesn’t matter. We worked together to save each other some trouble. Don’t take it as anything more than that.”

On that note, Shawza took his leave. Sirene’s eyes didn’t stray from his back.

“Hey there, Noor. Impressive work out there. You’re not hurt, are you?”

The distinctive, cheery voice belonged to Rashid. How many times had people asked me that question today…?

“Nah, not one bit. The clothes you lent me are a little worse for wear, though.”

“So much wealth, and *that’s* what concerns you? You never fail to entertain. Feel free to ruin as many suits as you please—they’re yours now, after all.”

“Sure, but…isn’t it a waste? They seem pretty high-end.” I suddenly recalled my destructive sprint through the complex—yet another thing I would need to fix.

Rashid wore a good-humored smile. “I wish my younger brothers could have heard you say that. But wishful thinking aside, I must be making my departure soon. I wanted to ask when you intend to leave.”

“Hmm?”

“Have you forgotten already? We were summoned to the capital.”

“Oh, right. We were, weren’t we?” No wonder Lynne had mentioned something about preparing for our departure. The relief of defeating the golems had pushed all other thoughts from my mind. “I ought to go get ready, then.”

“Shall we travel together? We *are* going to the same destination.”

“Sure. Might as well.”

“Then I shall wait until you and your companions are ready. Ah, but first—your employees in the central hall are concerned for you. Might I suggest dropping by to assuage their fears?”

“They’re worried about me…?”

“Of course. You’re the proprietor now. They’re all in orderly rows, patiently awaiting your return. Something they never did for me, might I add.”

“Yeah? I’d better hurry, then. Wouldn’t do to keep them waiting.” I started toward the City Forgotten by Time’s main complex with Rashid in tow. “Should I be worried about more golems? Shawza and I got as many as we could find, but it wouldn’t surprise me if there were more lying in wait.”

“What do you think?”

“I doubt there are more nearby. As soon as my rock took out that last bird-shaped golem, Shawza said we were done.”

“Then I’ll take your word for it. Given the scale of our enemies’ losses, I can’t imagine the city coming under attack again for quite a while. It takes specialists and a great deal of time to excavate golems of that quality.”

“Makes sense. I guess we’re okay, then.”

Truth be told, part of me still worried that another group of golems would pop up out of the sand. Rashid and Shawza were the experts, though, so I put my faith in their words.

When we arrived back at the massive doors to the central hall, we found Kron waiting for us in his usual black suit. “Master Noor,” he said, extending both arms toward me, “please allow me to carry that for you.” He seemed intent on taking my black sword before I went any farther.

“I doubt I need to remind you, but…it’s heavy.”

“Please rest assured—I might have embarrassed myself once, but it shall not happen again.”

“Yeah? Well…be careful, then.”

Gingerly, I placed my sword in Kron’s hands. I started to worry when his feet sank into the floor, but he kept the weapon steady nonetheless. He looked as though he would manage, at least for the time being.

“I shall wait here until your return,” he said.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yes, sir. By all means, see to your business. If you happen to need my services, do not hesitate to summon me.”

“Right… I’ll, uh, try to make this quick.”

I entrusted my sword to Kron, who was still slowly sinking. As I opened the doors ahead of me, I vowed to return before the floor swallowed him up completely.

The moment I stepped into the central hall, I saw exactly what Rashid had described—an entire room of employees, all arranged in neat and orderly rows. They turned to me without missing a beat and bowed in unison. I worried that I’d be stuck there, overwhelmed by the atmosphere, but Melissa came to my rescue. She approached me and dipped her head in a slight bow.

“Welcome back, sir. Please, come this way.”

I followed her toward the center platform. The staff kept their heads down the entire time, waiting for me to take the stage. That was when I noticed they weren’t the only ones gathered—around the outer rim and in the corners of the room, people dressed in a variety of styles were busy eating a meal.

“Melissa, who are they?” I asked.

“Because we were thrust into a state of emergency, and this hall is the safest place in the complex, we invited residents of the surrounding commercial districts to stay here. As you entrusted the management of resources and personnel to me, I elected to calm them by supplying food to those who were hungry. Of course, if you take issue with that, we can cease.”

“No, it’s fine. Thanks.”

By the time I was up to speed, we had already ascended the platform. It really was tall—once again, I couldn’t help but feel that I was atop a miniature tower. Looking down, I could make out each and every face in the hall. The younger children looked timid enough already, so I tried to keep my voice as low as I could.

“Sorry for the noise,” I said. “We took care of the golems, so things should quiet down again. You can rest easy knowing that we shouldn’t see more anytime soon.”

Relief washed over the crowd. My voice resounded throughout the otherwise silent hall, as it had before, but I was too focused on not scaring the kids for it to bother me.

“Also, in case any of you were worried about me, I can assure you that I’m perfectly fine. Truth be told, I could probably manage several more attacks of that size. Oh, but I’ll try to be more careful next time. I came out unscathed, but my clothes weren’t quite so lucky.”

I showed everyone the damage I’d done to my suit. They must have thought I was speaking in jest because a quiet laugh rippled through the crowd. The sound seemed to put the children at ease; their smiling faces looked up at me.

“I’ll be leaving for the capital soon—I have some business to attend to—but I shouldn’t be away for long. From the sound of things, I only need to go there for a quick chat. Until then, keep working as you normally would. Ah, and Melissa told me there’s food ready for you all. Have your fill before you return home. That’s all from me.”

A reserved cheer went up throughout the room. I stepped away from the magical device that made my voice louder and turned to Melissa.

“Was that all right?”

“Yes. As an operations briefing, it was more than sufficient.”

“Great. In that case, I’m going to head out with Rashid and the

others. Oh, but I need to ask a favor first."

"Of course, sir. I shall do whatever I can to help."

I placed a beat-up leather bag in Melissa's hands. "I want you to give this to Shin, from the colosseum."

"You want me to give him this pouch?" she repeated, studying it curiously.

"Yeah. Can you ask him to take it to a certain village for me? There's a map I drew inside. He mentioned that he's far-traveled and knows the northern region well, so he shouldn't have any trouble."

"Understood, sir. I shall ensure that it reaches him."

"Thanks. And sorry that I'm leaving everything in your hands while I'm gone."

"You need not apologize. Please rest assured, I shall ensure that operations remain stable in your absence."

Melissa bowed to me, and the rest of the staff followed suit. Their show of respect made me itchy and restless, but I *was* slowly getting used to it. I descended the central platform and returned to the entrance, where Lynne and Rashid were waiting for me.

"Are we ready to go, Lynne?" I asked.

"Yes, Instructor. No more preparations need to be made on my end."

"Shall we, then?" Rashid pressed. "We shouldn't keep our hosts waiting—especially when they requested us by name."

"You're right," I said. "I'd feel bad if we did."

"Ines awaits us by the carriage," Lynne added. "We can depart whenever we wish."

"Got it. Just give me a moment to change. Oh, thanks, Kron."

"It was no trouble, sir." Kron waited for me to retrieve my sword—his head was level with my waist by this point—before he crawled out of his hole in the floor. He bowed deeply, his expression nonchalant. "Master Noor, I speak for all the staff when I say we look forward to your return."

"Yeah. Keep an eye on things while I'm gone."

"But of course. Not even a single sand rat will make it into the complex in your absence. I swear my name on it."

As soon as I was changed, I reunited with Lynne and the others. We left the City Forgotten by Time behind us, en route to Sarenza's capital city.

Chapter 162: The Man in the Black Cloak

“Those fool sons of mine!”

In one of Sarenza City’s countless leisure palaces, a corpulent man sat upon a garish golden throne. He was Zaid, head of House Sarenza, the highest authority in the Mercantile Free State. Servants twitched and whimpered with each incensed outburst and irritated click of his tongue.

“To waste twelve thousand golems in a family squabble, of all things… Don’t they know how much a single primal costs us to unearth?! No, clearly not. Those fools have *no idea* how much wealth each one creates for us. Time and again, I explained that they’re the most vital piece of our family’s history…yet still, those half-wits lost their entire allotments in one fell swoop! I’d be impressed if it weren’t such a catastrophe!”

Zaid sat with his head in his hands. He had assumed the pose when his servants informed him of his sons’ blunder and refused to move from it since.

In total, Ari and Nhid’s lost golems represented only a fraction of what Sarenza possessed domestically. Considering the countless stone titans secretly lying dormant in House Sarenza’s underground warehouses, their loss wasn’t great enough to be unrecoverable.

But neither was it small enough to be overlooked.

The destroyed primal golems were no common assets; they were the country’s *greatest* weapon and the backbone of House Sarenza’s legacy. Those who commanded them had tremendous, irreplaceable power at their fingertips. It was for that reason that, since generations past, House Sarenza had shackled excavation experts with exclusive contracts, ensuring that primal golems remained within their family and never reached public circulation.

The golems that *did* go up for sale were mere replicas, inferior to the originals in every regard, but House Sarenza still advertised them as top of the line. Such commerce added to their riches, while the family’s monopoly on what were *actually* the best products enabled them to ensure their superior roles and status.

House Sarenza had already been wealthy. They had cut their teeth in the business of moneylending—a lucrative endeavor, to be sure—but collections had proved a laborious task. Then they had purchased their first golems, sold to them by a strange vendor of unknown origins, and everything had changed. Debt collecting became as simple as giving an order. No matter how much money they lent or how high they set their interest, they always got what they were owed.

The vendor—a self-proclaimed excavation specialist—put an exorbitant price on primal golem orders, but House Sarenza considered the fees a mere investment. The profit derived from their new constructs was more than enough to cover their cost.

In the most severe cases, a single spoken command could ensure the deaths of those unable to pay their dues. Though it meant giving up on potential income, it greatly encouraged other debtors to make good on their payments. Those who understood the danger were far more likely to cooperate, no matter the interest rates being thrust upon them.

House Sarenza's business grew exponentially. In barely any time at all, they found themselves loaning money to any and all comers. People, nationwide merchant companies, and even sovereigns—all feared the threat of the primal golems.

Eventually, House Sarenza ran out of rivals. They siphoned coin from everywhere their influence reached, proliferating their wealth in a never-ending cycle. The golems' strength of arms presented power, wealth, and even political authority to House Sarenza on a silver platter, and those who had started as a simple merchant family became rulers of the entire desert.

To generations of House Sarenza's kin, the golems were a mechanism for infinite wealth. They required a steady supply of manastones, but that was barely worth consideration; because they completely lacked autonomy, they could be put to work without pay, meaning there was always more profit to be had.

Zaid continued to ruminate. Golems were the hallmark of the system known as the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. How had his sons lost their entire allotment, and in such a painfully one-sided battle?

"That blasted King Clays! Who on earth has he sent here?!"

The image taken by his sons' servant showed two men: Rashid's bodyguard and a complete stranger. The latter was said to be the City Forgotten by Time's new proprietor.

Zaid had used every means at his disposal to be rid of his eldest son, but the best he had managed to do was relegate him to some distant corner of the country. There, the boy had lost a Trial, of all things, to their intruder from the Kingdom of Clays. Worse still, that same intruder had shown that he was capable of destroying *twelve thousand* primal golems practically on his own.

The man's employer, Princess Lynneburg, and her guard, the Divine Shield, represented sizable threats of their own, but Zaid had at least *planned* for their arrival. He might have been able to plan for the stranger as well, had he known the first thing about the man.

Already, the stranger was en route to the capital. It hadn't been long ago that Zaid had used House Sarenza's authority to summon Rashid and the new proprietor to a meeting—but since then, the simple unease he had felt toward the latter had grown into true terror.

Sarenza City had an ever-present guard of golems deployed in the local area. Their numbers dwarfed the allotment Zaid had given his sons, and they would act on his command at any moment he wished. However, with the information he now had at his disposal, he suspected that he was still as good as defenseless.

The crisis facing House Sarenza threatened to undo the centuries of work that had secured its rise to power. Worse still was the fact that Zaid, the house's current head, had set the catastrophe in motion, involving himself with the troublesome Kingdom of Clays despite being fully aware of the risk. More than his sons, he was to blame for welcoming such people into his country in the first place.

Never had there been a force strong enough to defeat primal golems with ease—not at home or in any of the nearby nations. House Sarenza had even gone as far as to stamp out anyone with the *potential* to be a threat, such as the dim-witted beastfolk who still fought with bows, outdated though they were.

Zaid always took his opponents' strength into consideration. Then he devised plans to strip that power from them, accounting for every single variable in the process. Every time, the outcome was the same: a crushing victory, and the chance to seize every last one of his enemy's assets. He had taken great care to keep out of harm's way and stamp out the seeds of competition before they could sprout, all for the sake of his comfortable

system. For generations, that was how the family known as House Sarenza had operated.

And yet…

“Who *is* that man?!”

Because of one stranger—a man whose name Zaid didn’t even know—everything had fallen to pieces. He was starting to regret ignoring his merchant’s instincts.

As far as Zaid was concerned, a merchant stood nothing to gain from being bold. He much preferred the opposite, never engaging in games unless the outcome was utterly certain. Only once he had “settled” the risks would Zaid even *consider* stepping up to the table. Some mistook that caution for cowardice, but he paid them no mind; he took pride in moving with such great care, and it always won him great profits in the end.

If only Zaid had stuck to his principles, he would never have ended up in his current situation. His plan had originally been to avoid all contact with the Kingdom of Clays. If an offensive had been in the cards, he would have devoted years to gathering information before taking even the smallest of steps.

But in the end, he had acted out of character by issuing them a bold-faced challenge.

It irritated Zaid that he had created the circumstances for his own downfall…but it wasn’t entirely his fault. He had acted on the advice of an outsider. Surely the better part of the blame rested with him.

“Lude! Where’s Lude?!”

The corpulent Zaid, not used to acknowledging his own mistakes, throttled the stem of his wine goblet. His thick hands trembled, and the servants grimaced as his voice echoed through the palace.

Before long, a man in a black hooded cloak made his appearance. He went by the name “Lude” and enjoyed a reputation as one of the most prestigious slavers in Sarenza. He was also an excavation specialist who had shared a contract with House Sarenza for generations.

“You called, Lord Zaid?”

“Bah! Don’t feign ignorance with me!”

Zaid flung his golden goblet in the man’s direction. It sailed past Lude and punched a hole in the painting on the wall behind him, scattering expensive liquor in the process. Servants recoiled and desperately tried to stifle their whimpers.

In contrast to the furious head of House Sarenza, the black-cloaked man looked calm and composed. He remained perfectly still, as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Zaid clicked his tongue. "Out, all of you. I want to speak with him alone."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

The servants practically sprinted out of the room, pitying the poor man faced with their master's wrath. They had never seen Zaid so enraged before.

"Lude. Do you know why I summoned you?"

"I would imagine it concerns my proposal to invite those from the Kingdom of Clays to Sarenza."

"Indeed. For generations, you have served my family without fault. That's why I deigned to accommodate your request. Do you remember your promise? That in exchange for King Clays's musty old relic, you'd give me something of much greater value? That *your people* would take care of any obstacles that arose in the process? Well, I can't help but notice that things haven't gone as you claimed they would."

"That is an accurate description of the circumstances," the black-cloaked man said. He showed no signs of worry or unease.

Zaid heaved a sigh. "You speak as though this doesn't concern you. Traced to the root, this catastrophe is *yours* to deal with. Need I remind you that I followed your advice and, in breach of precedent, granted King Clays access to the Dungeon of Oblivion? You claimed you would at long last reveal the demonfolk's whereabouts to House Sarenza—*and* that you would give that impudent King Clays a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. Yet here we are. How do you plan to make this right?"



“Before we discuss that,” Lude said, “has the relic truly been brought into the country?”

Again, Zaid clicked his tongue. He had long since grown accustomed to the man’s unflappable attitude, which was all that kept him from further expressing his displeasure. He touched a mechanism built into his golden seat, and the large screen mirrors installed around the room flickered to life.

“There. Take a look,” Zaid urged. “This farseeing record was courtesy of my sons’ servants. Is that not the Black Blade, excavated from the Dungeon of the Lost by King Clays himself?”

The screens showed a man carrying what resembled a blackened sword. After a moment of consideration, the black-cloaked man said, “Indeed. There can be no mistaking it.” He stared at the image for some time, his expression hidden by his hood.

“I still don’t know why you care so much about it, especially when you show such little concern for everything else. It’s one of a kind, I’ll admit, but it looks no better than a battered old antique to me. I know you elves have a fondness for that kind of thing…but with how events have played out, we need to renegotiate. I’m no longer fond of simply handing it over to you.”

The black-cloaked man said nothing. Then, “Pardon?”

“Take issue with that, do you? Your contract with House Sarenza might be old—older than my great-grandfather’s generation—but I still demand compensation for the losses you— *Gack!*”

In the blink of an eye, Lude had appeared right in front of the outraged Zaid. He said nothing, merely tightening his hand around the man’s neck and slowly lifting him into the air.

“Ack! L-Lude?! Wh-What do you think—*ngh*—you’re doing?! Gah!”

Pale fingers clamped around Zaid’s throat. He writhed and groaned in pain, desperate to break free, but it was no use. The fingers dug in deeper, pressing between the rolls of the haughty merchant’s fat neck and cutting off his air supply.

“C-Can’t…br— *Ack!* St-Sto—!”

Zaid thrashed about, his face distorted from the pain, but the black-cloaked man showed no mercy. Under his dark hood, two long ears caught the cracking of bone.

“Aghhh! Nnngh…!”

“Our contract, hmm? Indeed, there exists such a thing

between us. As I recall, it stipulates that, in exchange for our generous assistance, your filthy little family shan't ever sully my people's name by speaking it with your wretched tongues."

"Uagh! Ngaaah! Ack!"

"And that if you fail to comply, your only 'compensation' shall be the complete extermination of your bloodline."

"*Nguh!*"

There was a loud *crack* as the merchant's neck and jaw gave in to the force of Lude's pale hand. Five slender fingers sunk deep into bloated flesh, splattering the polished white floor with the crimson blood that spurted out between them.

Zaid struggled no more. His body went limp, and the color drained quickly from his skin.

"Our agreement was made a mere two centuries ago. Have you already forgotten?"

The man dressed in black heaved a heavy sigh. Zaid's eyes had gone white, and red-flecked froth dribbled from his mouth.

"I suppose you have. Your kind's insignificant lifespans don't lend well to long-lasting memories. You mistake the power you were given for your own, growing heady and ignorant of your true place. It is no wonder your word is as cheap as your life."

Lude opened his hand, and his fat victim tumbled forward, striking the floor with a loud, meaty *smack*.

"Disgusting," the man in black said, staring down at the body prostrated before him. "The more I deal with you creatures, the more it sickens me. Short-lived, dim-witted, and slaves to your desires. You breed like rabbits and squabble amongst yourselves for meager gains. How many times have I wished for your extinction?" His voice was mostly devoid of emotion, although his words betrayed the loathing he felt inside.

"And who are you to speak of worth, transient and ignorant as you are? You know not even your own. Against that 'old antique,' as you put it, the mountains of *dreck* you people and your ancestors purport to have made mean nothing. They are no more important than the life of a single gnat."

Zaid did not—could not—respond, his face a mess of blood and ichor.

"Your kind could toil for millennia and still not produce fruits of equal value. You would wipe yourselves out if left to your own devices. How can you fail to understand such a simple truth?"

Zaid's consciousness had faded, and his chest remained

perfectly still. As the cloaked man's long ears heard the bloated merchant's heart begin to slow, he quietly inhaled, then spat out one final insult.

"Truly revolting. Why must I allow waste such as you to live? It vexes me to no end. But...your time has not yet come. You still possess some use. Your disposal can wait."

The black-clad man spoke as though trying to placate himself. He grabbed the limp body by the head and picked it up with a single hand.

"*Heal* already, you worthless lump of meat."

Pale blue light shone from Lude's hand, and the corpulent man's bones started to piece themselves back together. The gore splattered across the floor floated up and returned to its host as though time were reversing. The merchant's heart began to beat again, and his pale face regained its color. Brought back from the verge of death, he coughed and sputtered as air once again filled his lungs.

"Guh— *Ack!*"

The forceful restoration complete, the cloaked man leaned down and spoke softly into his victim's ear. "How do you feel, Lord Zaid?"

Zaid screamed and scrambled backward. "L-Lude?! How *dare* you! Do you th-think you'll get off lightly after— *Gack!*" Slender fingers grabbed him by the chin, squeezing his jaw like a vise.

"How careless of me. I should have wiped your memories first."

"Ngh! Wh-What are you— Gah!"

"Do shut up. Your breath reeks of stupidity. I've no desire to waste more effort than I need to."

"Ah-ahhh!"

Again, there came the sharp *crack* of shattering bone. The cloaked man elected not to wait this time and repaired the fresh wound with the same pale blue light as before. Then, another *crack* rang out, and the process repeated.

Lude's eyes were apathetic as he carried out his work. After several more cycles, he parted his lips to speak—reluctantly, as if the very act bothered him. "*Forget* everything that just took place."

This time, red light erupted from the man's hand. It engulfed Zaid's head, stopping his body from writhing and causing his eyes to widen. Gradually, the merchant's expression settled into

one of docility.

The cloaked man let go, leaned close to his victim's ear, and repeated what he had said before: "How do you feel, Lord Zaid?"

The merchant's hollow eyes swam as he desperately attempted to recall something…to no avail. "M-My…head hurts. Wh-What am I doing? Why am I on the floor?"

"You had another attack. Chronic diseases are so unfortunate, are they not? Here—your medicine. It will make you feel better."

"R-Right… Thank you, Lude. You're always here for me." Zaid accepted the restorative potion and drained it in a single gulp. "Whew. I… I appreciate it. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"It was no more than the *usual*," the cloaked man said emotionlessly, staring down at the pale-faced Zaid.

"S-So, what were we talking about, again? I remember that I summoned you…though I don't remember why. Blacking out must have affected my memory."

"We were discussing our visitors from the Kingdom of Clays. Because the primal golems that the other excavators and I gave you were no match for them, you requested an even more formidable specimen."

"O-Of course, but…stronger than primal golems? I've never heard of such a thing. Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"To answer one question with another, why would I have?"

"W-Well…" Zaid trailed off, reflexively flinching from the hint of anger in the cloaked man's voice. As the head of House Sarenza, it should have rankled him that he felt so submissive, but he couldn't bring himself to object.

"Our contract with you stipulates that we provide only the necessary degree of support. We cannot grant you more."

"R-Right… I think I recall that…"

The man in black returned his attention to the screen mirror and the figure displayed upon it. "But of course, what we deem to be 'necessary' has changed."

"Will it really be enough…?" Zaid asked nervously. "We'll need more than a slight improvement to do something about *him*."

"Fear not—the strength of the Titan slumbers within the dungeon. If we use it, no foe will be able to stand in our way."

"Is it truly that great?"

"Yes. The Titan of Oblivion is the greatest power my people know. A primal golem is nothing in comparison. If you have no objections, I will head into the dungeon to fetch the key."

“The key?”

“Indeed. We cannot activate the Titan without it. I shall entrust it to you, Lord Zaid, if you are willing.”

“If I accept, will this ‘Titan’ you speak of obey me?”

“Yes. There is no weapon more *suitable* for the ruler of this land.”

“R-Right…”

Zaid suddenly realized he was trembling. Something inside him—something beyond the usual timidness he kept hidden—told him to beware the man whose face he could not see. It was a strange sensation; as the head of Sarenza, he had always struck fear into his guests, not the other way around.

The mysterious terror surging from within Zaid seized his body and refused to let go. He couldn’t think of a single reason to be afraid of Lude, yet he panicked whenever they met. Where *had* the emotion come from?

“One last matter, Lord Zaid. Here.” Lude gestured with his hand, and several children stepped in front of the confused merchant, their eyes hollow and their faces pale.

“Are these…the demonfolk in your possession?” Zaid asked.

“Yes. As minor as the error might have been, I still feel obligated to compensate you. Use these creatures as you will, be it as slaves or as manastones to feed your golems. My people have no use for them.”

“R-Right. How very considerate of you. My thanks.”

“Now, I must be off to the Dungeon of Oblivion. Keep our guests within reach in my absence. What use is absolute power if you have no enemy to unleash it upon?”

“Y-Yes, of course,” Zaid intoned, scrounging whatever dignity he could from where he was slumped on the cold floor. “I expect great things, Lude.”

The cloaked man made his exit, leaving the extravagantly furnished room behind. He proceeded only a short way down a dimly lit, seemingly empty hallway before he came to a sudden stop.

“I know you’re there, Zadu.”

“Hmm? If it ain’t Mister Lude.” The air of the corridor shimmered like a heat haze, creating coils of mist that parted to reveal a man. His face was wrapped in black bandages, and a string of daggers hung from his waist. “Need something from me?”



“I have decided to rouse the Dungeon of Oblivion. But before I do, I have a request.”

“Ahh, I get it. *Cutting this city loose*, are ya?” Zadu turned to a nearby window and gazed out over the cityscape, largely unbothered. “I kinda liked this place. Wasn’t bad for findin’ decent equipment. S’pose it’s lost its use to you, huh?”

“Before I depart, I shall erase all traces of my being here. Retrieve the relic in the meantime.”

“Mmm… The Black Blade, you mean?”

“It should arrive soon. Act in haste, if you can. As for your payment…it will need to be upon delivery.”

“But you want me to work fast? Ain’t like you to be so tightfisted, Mister Lude.”

“The majority of my assets have already been relocated. I sent them *home*, as it were. Consider this an opportunity to request any reward you desire. *If* you return successful, that is.”

The black-bandaged man grinned. “That so? Well, I’m usually a ‘pay up front or beat it’ kinda guy, but I suppose I can make an exception—what with the extra compensation and all.”

“Return as soon as you acquire the relic. I shall be headed for the deepest layer of the Dungeon of Oblivion.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal. Black Blade, here I come.”

Zadu stuck out his tongue and cackled with delight. Then he was gone, as though he had never even been there to begin with.

Chapter 163: Desert Storm

Our carriage trundled across the desert, carrying two more people than usual. Rashid and Shawza had planned to travel using the former's personal golems, but we had insisted that they ride with us, as we had plenty of room to spare.

"The weather's nice," I remarked. "Not a single cloud in sight."

"This is the norm here," Rashid said. "Is that not the case in the Kingdom?"

"We get a lot of sunny days, but rarely are there no clouds at all."

"Is that so? To think a short trip north could make such a difference. Fascinating."

Ines, our driver, sat at the front, while Rashid and Lynne occupied the seat behind her. I sat with Rolo, Sirene, and Shawza on the wider seat at the back. Owing in part to Shawza's large frame, we were close enough together that we bumped shoulders whenever the carriage experienced a particularly large jolt.

"Lady Lynneburg," Rashid said, "I must thank you again for graciously allowing us to ride with you."

"It was no trouble. We had the space, and a journey is more enjoyable with company."

"Hah. I couldn't agree more. Don't you think so too, Shawza?"

The usual tension between Lynne and Rashid seemed to have faded, at least to some degree. They weren't friends, by any means, but it was still a marked improvement. Shawza was the only person in the carriage who looked openly uncomfortable.

"Sir..." he said, "I still don't see why we had to ride together."

"Really? Are we not cooler in here than we would have been otherwise? One must accept kindness when it is offered—and this is an excellent opportunity to indulge in some cultural exchange."

There was a long silence before Shawza replied, "Yes, sir." He turned his discontented gaze to the window. Outside, the two wingless bird-shaped golems he and his master had intended to ride kept pace with us.

"Are you no good with carriages, Shawza?" I asked.

“That’s not the problem.”

“Really? You’ve had a frown on your face this whole time.”

Another pause. Then, “This is how I always look.”

That was fair enough; he *did* always look as though he were chewing something bitter. Still, he’d clearly been uncomfortable since getting aboard the carriage.

Sirene, who was sitting next to me, seemed restless for another reason. She glanced at Shawza every few seconds, clearly wanting to say something. Shawza must have been aware, though he seemed to be deliberately ignoring her.

Rolo sat between the pair, wearing a troubled smile. “You don’t have to worry, Shawza.”

“About?”

“I might be a demonfolk, but I don’t expose people’s secrets when I can help it.”

“Secrets? I don’t have any.”

“Oh… Of course not. S-Sorry—that was a strange thing to say.”

“You really can trust him, Shawza,” I chimed in. “He won’t air your dirty laundry, no matter how embarrassing it might be.”

Shawza went quiet for a moment. “I wonder about that.”

Sirene’s expression went through an impressive number of iterations as she listened to our conversation. She glanced from Shawza to Rolo, clearly on the verge of speaking up, but still never uttered a word. As much as I respected her restraint, I figured she really should just voice whatever was on her mind.

Our carriage raced across the desert at a rapid pace. Some of that speed came down to the horses’ enthusiasm—we had given them Divine Beast stew from the carriage’s cold storage—but we also had the luxury of more even terrain. The road we were taking was relatively flat, if one ignored the sections buried in sand.

The view outside the window was completely unobstructed. We were moving so quickly that the desert blurred past us, but the golems above had no trouble keeping up with our carriage.

“Do you always use those to get around?” I asked Shawza.

“We do,” Rashid answered in place of his taciturn bodyguard. “Artificial golems are quite handy for travel.”

“‘Artificial’? So they’re man-made?”

“Indeed. Some call them imitations of the specimens excavated from the Dungeon of Oblivion.”

“Wow. That’s some impressive craftsmanship. What sets them

apart from the excavated ones, though?"

"There are quite a few differences, if one gets into the details…but the greatest have to do with the quality of the material and the power output. Artificial golems are nowhere near as formidable as their counterparts, since the latter were the product of technologies still unknown to us. Of course, making our own gives us more creative freedom, which allows us to put them to a wider variety of uses. One example are the golem birds that specialize in mail delivery."

Now that I thought about it, Lynne had mentioned that the City Forgotten by Time's main complex had been built by specialized construction golems. There must have been all sorts of golems out there, all designed to improve the people's daily lives.

"Talented golem engineers are few and far between, so most belong to major companies," Rashid continued. "It's rare to get to meet one…but as we're headed to the capital, you might get the chance. On that note, why not order your very own custom golem? You certainly have the funds."

"That *does* sound pretty interesting."

It had never occurred to me before, but I really could benefit from having my own golem. Even if it could only follow simple commands, I was sure it could help out with farmwork—watering the crops or spreading fertilizer, for example. If I brought it back to the beastfolk village, it would make tending to the massive field a cakewalk.

I didn't know if the capital city's markets would sell what I wanted, but if ordering a custom golem was on the table, well…the sky was the limit. Excitement welled up within me as I started to consider what I might ask for.

"Noor, can you see that?" Sirene suddenly asked, gazing toward the horizon. "Something's not right."

"Hmm?" The concern in her voice drew me from my daydreams. I squinted, but nothing stood out to me. "Where? I don't see anything strange."

"It's a sandstorm," Shawza interjected, apparently of the same opinion as Sirene. The look on his face turned grimmer than usual as he added, "And I smell something bad in the air."

"'Something bad'?" I asked.

"Yes. We should stop the carriage. Now."

I turned to Lynne. "You heard him, right? What do you think?"

“Ines, pull us over,” she said.

“As you wish. Please stay alert of our surroundings as you disembark.”

Once we’d piled out of the carriage, I squinted at the horizon again. This time, I saw the sandstorm Shawza had mentioned, far off in the distance. It was growing larger as it came straight toward us.

“I’m impressed you two managed to spot it from so far away,” I remarked.

“I am rather confident in my eyesight,” Sirene replied.

“So was I, but I guess I’m no match for you. Do all beastfolk have sight as good as yours?”

“No,” Shawza answered. “Even among our people, it is considered quite a feat.”

“That so?”

For a moment, I wondered whether I could still pride myself on my eyesight. “Probably not” was the conclusion I came to. The only other beastfolk I knew much about was my hunter instructor from when I was a kid, and her vision had been spectacular. I couldn’t compare at all.

Though, to be fair, maybe she was just an exception.

A memory came to me of when I was twelve, roughly halfway through my time at the hunter training school. My inability to control my strength had caused me to break every bow I touched, and when the school eventually ran out, I was banned from ever laying hands on one again.

One night, still desperate to continue my archery training, I’d steeled my resolve and crept into the school’s archery range. There hadn’t been anyone on watch—just as I’d expected—and I soon came face-to-face with the newly restocked training bows.

Before I’d even managed to touch one, a series of dull flashes had illuminated the darkness. By the time I’d realized what they were—moonlight reflecting off a volley of arrows—it had already been too late. I’d leaped back, but the arrows had changed trajectory, following me like living creatures before piercing through my clothes and pinning me to the stone wall of the range.

It hadn’t taken me long to figure out that whoever was on watch had caught me. I’d looked around in an attempt to apologize…but I hadn’t been able to spot anyone. In the end, unable to pull the arrows free, I’d remained stuck to the wall until

morning. I distinctly remembered being awoken by my hunter instructor and the incredulous look she'd given me.

"I figured it was you..."

I'd apologized immediately, of course. And when I'd asked about the arrows, she'd explained that they were hers. Apparently, she'd been lying in her bed at home when she'd sensed a "thief" sneak into the range. After grabbing the bow she always kept by her pillow, she'd fired a number of arrows from her bedroom window.

My instructor's home was nowhere near the training school, which explained why I hadn't been able to spot her. The fact she'd managed to pin me by my clothes without getting a scratch on me was nothing short of amazing, especially as she'd been half asleep at the time. Then, after firing enough shots to ease her concerns, she'd gone straight back to bed.

Hearing my instructor's explanation had terrified me, and I'd come to the grave realization that I would never get away with anything as long as I was within her range. Having learned my lesson, I'd apologized once again and then done things the right way by being upfront and pleading for the chance to prove I *could* use a bow.

Eventually, my instructor had run out of patience and given me several of her personal bows to try—bows so stiff that few people could even draw them. I'd broken every single one, proving once and for all that I had no talent for archery whatsoever.

From that day forth, my instructor hadn't even let me float the idea of picking up a bow again. Looking back, I figured that was fair enough; the ones I'd broken must have been pretty expensive. I made a mental note to get her something to apologize.

As I wondered whether the capital would have any good bows for sale, the weather began to take a turn for the strange.

"I knew it," Sirene said. "Something's not right about that sandstorm. Wind doesn't normally move like that."

She was right; even from this distance, the currents seemed off. Suddenly, the storm split into two and started fanning out to the sides.

"Does that usually happen around here...?" I asked.

Rashid shook his head. "Sandstorms of that size aren't particularly rare...but I've never seen one do that." At some point,

his ever-present smile had vanished.

The strange storm continued to advance, moving as though trying to encircle us. Before long, the howling sand had us completely surrounded.

Sirene pointed into the storm. “Is…somebody *in* there?”

“Yes,” Shawza said, “and we can assume they aren’t a friend. Keep them in your sights.”

“Of course.”

I strained my eyes as hard as I could and, sure enough, spotted a human-shaped silhouette among the sand. There was a strangely dressed man…grinning at us?



“Hey…” I said. “Isn’t that…?”

“Do you recognize them, Instructor?” Lynne asked. “I can’t make them out.”

“Yeah, it’s that half-naked guy—the one with black bandages around his head. He’s walking toward us with a great big smile on his face.”

“Half-naked guy… Black bandages…” Lynne seemed shocked. “And with a great big smile on his face…?”

Rashid wore a grim expression, his usual relaxed demeanor nowhere to be found. “If that’s the man I’m thinking of, then we might be in some trouble.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’ve met him before. He was no pushover.”

Rashid went quiet for a moment. “Really now? I suppose I shouldn’t have expected less from you.”

“Instructor,” Lynne said, “are you saying it’s…Deadman Zadu?”

“I think so? The name rings a bell…”

In an instant, the man vanished from sight.

“[Parry].”

My sword moved almost on its own. There was a thunderous *crash*, and sand blew in all directions as something impacted my weapon. All of a sudden, the strangely dressed man was standing right in front of me.

“Long time no see, weird guy,” he said.

“Could you be more careful? What if you’d hit someone?”

The man’s creepy smile didn’t falter. “As always, we’re not even close to bein’ on the same page. So that’s the Black Blade, huh? Guess it’s true what they say about it bein’ indestructible.”

Barely a moment later, the daggers in the man’s hands cracked and shattered. He tossed their hilts onto the sand and plucked a new pair from the loop of sheaths around his waist.

“Are you here for Rolo again?” I asked.

“Not this time. I’m after *that*.”

“My…sword?”

“You got it. Think you could play nice and hand it over? Don’t wanna do more work than I need to.”

“Sorry, but no.”

“Yeah, figured.”

The man vanished from sight again. A sneaking suspicion caused me to swing around and raise my sword.

“[Parry].”

There was another clash of blades, and my weapon sent the

man flying back, destroying his daggers in the process.

"C'mon, give me a break…" I said. "I told you last time, didn't I?"

In midair, the man grabbed another two daggers from his waist and landed smoothly on the sand. "Ah, what a pain. You're a real nuisance to go up against, you know that? Stubborn, for one thing, and my collection always ends up in pieces."

"You could always just leave."

"No can do. Job from a real special client, y'see."

Again, he vanished.

"[Parry]."

I timed my swing to counter his attack. Although it sent him flying back again, his expression remained nonchalant as he landed and replaced his broken weapons.

"Still, this ain't gonna get me anywhere," he drawled. "What to do, what to do…?"

The man turned his gaze to Lynne. Ines was already moving to protect her, and Shawza stepped in front of Rashid.

"Please get behind me, my lady."

"Sorry, Ines."

"Don't move, sir."

"Thank you, Shawza. My apologies, but I'm leaving this to you."

Zadu's grin widened when he saw the guards' scowls. "The rumored 'Divine Shield,' huh? I see you're with the infamous prodigal son of House Sarenza, and the demonfolk I missed out on before. Coin to be made wherever I look…but we'll need to take a rain check. Sorry, but my sights are set on a much bigger prize."

Yet again, the smiling man vanished. I felt a sharp prickle on the back of my neck and spun around.

"[Parry]."

I just barely managed to hold up my sword before the blades of the man's daggers reached me. Had I been even a beat slower, they would have been buried in my neck by now.

"Seriously, could you cut that out?" I asked.

"Sure. Soon as you hand over the sword."

"I told you I can't do that."

"Figures. S'pose I should have used it from the get-go instead of wasting my time."

"Used what?"

In lieu of a reply, the man dropped his arms to his sides and stared into the distance, where the massive sandstorm still approached us. It grew fiercer by the second.

“Went to the trouble of making the thing,” he said. “Might as well make use of it, right?”

Only then did I notice them—countless sharp, silver flashes of light hidden within the onrushing wall of sand.

Chapter 164: Sirene's Archery, Part 2

"Don't tell me *you* made that sandstorm," I said.

"Took you this long to notice, huh? See, I figured normal methods wouldn't work against a guy like you. But *this* would take anyone by surprise."

Even at a glance, the approaching storm was large enough to qualify as a natural disaster. Countless silver blades gleamed within, tearing apart rock formations in their path as though they were nothing.

"Impossible..." Lynne murmured, her face pale. "Are those all Silver Crosses?"

"Silver...what?" I asked.

"Zadu's signature weapons. If we get caught in their midst..."

"One of you should come out just fine," the black-bandaged man said, looking in my direction. "As for the rest of you... Well, who knows?"

Zadu was probably right; although my [Low Heal] would get me through the storm, it wouldn't do much to help the others or our carriage. I doubted they would come out unscathed.

"I don't suppose you can block it, Ines...?" I ventured.

"My apologies. Negating such a great offensive is beyond me."

"Ah..."

If not even Ines could protect everyone, then I wasn't sure there was anything we could do. The man wasn't throwing his weapons at me, as he'd done during our previous fight, and there were far too many in the storm for us to deal with. We couldn't even run, as the sandstorm had us completely surrounded. Things were looking extra grim.

"There's the rub," the bandaged man drawled. "Be a pal and give me that sword, won't ya? I'll let your small-fry companions off the hook."

"Fine," I said in short order. "This is all you want, right?"

"Instructor?!" Lynne exclaimed.

"Sorry. I can't think of another way to get us out of this."

I'd spent so long with my black sword that I considered it precious to me. In many ways, it was my ever-reliable partner. Still, as reluctant as I was to hand it over, it wasn't so important

that I'd let my friends get hurt to keep it. I felt bad for Lynne's father, who'd given me the sword in the first place, but my hands were pretty much tied. And since I was doing it for his daughter, he'd surely understand…right?

"Just to be sure," I said, "will you really let us go?"

"Yup. I want your sword, not their lives."

"Please wait a moment, Noor," a voice interrupted us.

"Sirene…?"

"You don't need to do this," she assured me. "I think we can manage."

"As in, we can weather the storm?"

"Um…no. That would be suicide. But I was just thinking—I could shoot them down, right?"

"All of them?"

"Yes. Was that not clear?"

She was referring to not the sandstorm but the blades sheltered within it. Seeing her bow already in her hands, I could tell she was serious.

"Are you sure you can hit that many?" I asked. "They won't be easy targets."

"I'm relatively confident. Since the storm's man-made, it's full of openings."

"I'll take your word for it. You've got this, then?"

"Yes, I'd say so." Sirene shot a sharp look at the strangely dressed man. "Though I'd rather *he* not try anything in the meantime."

"Well, you heard her," I said.

"Hmm? Me?" Zadu shot back. "D'you really expect me to play nice?"

"I don't think he's going to cooperate, Sirene…"

"U-Um, actually…" Sirene's gaze seemed to waver. "I was hoping that you'd, well…"

"Oh, right. I'll keep an eye on him."

There was a slight pause before Sirene replied, "Thank you. That should more than suffice." She turned to Lynne. "Is that all right with you, my lady?"

"Of course, Sirene. If you think you can manage, then I trust your judgment."

"Then I shall begin." Sirene nocked an arrow and drew back her bowstring in a single movement. "First, one."

Her arrow tore through the air. At first, it appeared to vanish

into the vast storm, never to be seen again, but then I noticed it moving with the wind. It gained speed, moving faster and faster through the maelstrom of sand before slamming into a flash of silver and ejecting it from the storm.

The cross-shaped blade flew toward us, then came to rest in the sand near my feet. To my surprise, I saw Sirene's arrow return with it, rushing back to her like a well-trained bird of prey. She plucked it from the air with two fingers, nocked it, and then drew her bowstring back again.

"Next, ten."

Once more, Sirene's arrow ventured into the storm. It caught a much stronger, much fiercer current than before, and just as she'd proclaimed, ten silver blades were forced outside the raging winds.

"Now what's your deal, hmm?" Zadu mused. "Don't tell me you can actually *see* the air's movements."

"Not all of them, but enough to grasp the bigger picture."

"You don't say... Guess you're a pain in your own right, huh?"

"Next, a hundred."

This time, when her arrow returned, Sirene allowed it to drop into the sand at her feet. She plucked four more from her quiver, nocked them all at once, and released. Each one traveled into the sandstorm at its own trajectory. They spun with the winds at dizzying speeds and sent dozens upon dozens of blades scattering through the air like silver snow.



“Next, a thousand.”

Sirene remained the picture of calm as she snatched up ten more arrows and gracefully sent them on their way. Their cluster brought to mind a swarm of birds, and they dove into the sandstorm as though hunting for prey. There came the harsh clatter of metal against metal, and the intensity of the silver snowfall redoubled.

“Next, *two* thousand.”

Sirene picked out another ten arrows and repeated the process. They wove in and out of two sections of the sandstorm as though sewing them together, relying on the currents alone for propulsion as they sought out and shot down their prey time and time again. Each impact knocked another blade from the storm, and soon enough, the desert was a graveyard of glittering metal.

“Wow, Sirene…” I exhaled. “You’re *amazing*.”

“Master Mianne made me do this sort of thing as training. In fact, my targets then were smaller than the blades I’m focused on now, so I thought, well…”

“You’ve done this as training? Really?”

“Yes. I mean, I wouldn’t have managed this much otherwise. Results come from practice—rarely does one achieve something of this nature on the first attempt. To be honest, when I’m put on the spot, my nerves keep me from performing even half as well as I do during training.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“That’s why my master says training should always be a hundred times as intense as actual combat.”

“A…hundred times?”

“Yes, or else it would ‘serve no purpose.’”

I thought about my own past experiences, and the goblin I’d encountered with Lynne quickly came to mind. It was a towering creature, roughly ten times as tall as the average person. The colossal Goblin Emperor was said to be ten times larger than that, but not even an opponent that huge would satisfy Sirene’s criteria. I tried to picture something a *hundred* times the size of a goblin, and a shiver promptly ran down my spine.

“Of course,” Sirene said, “that seems a tad excessive to me. I tend to settle for about tenfold.”

“Right… I’d, uh, say that’s a good idea.”

“What I’m doing now just so happens to fall within the bounds

of what I've practiced." She kept her gaze fixed on her arrows as they tore through Zadu's blades, then nocked another ten on her bowstring. "Next, four thousand."

Once again, the arrows cut across the blue sky above us. They circled the sandstorm several times as though they had minds of their own, then swooped down all at once, catching the winds and spinning even faster than their predecessors. More blades were ejected from the sandy tempest, blanketing the desert in yet more "snow." As things stood, it would only be a matter of time before Sirene's arrows felled every one of the black-bandaged man's Silver Crosses.

Zadu clicked his tongue. "I can't say I appreciate this. It was a real pain stirring up those storms, y'know."

"Weren't you going to get in her way?" I asked.

"Believe me, I'm trying. The wind isn't moving on its own; my mana's been conducting it from the start. I've been mixing up the currents to throw her off...but from the look of things, I shouldn't even bother."

"Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. I made the storm completely unreadable. Only someone who's wrong in the head can make sense of that kind of madness. Guess this was a bad matchup from the start. How was I meant to anticipate this...?" Despite his words, the man seemed to revel in watching his sandstorm begin to fade.

"By the way, Sirene..." I said. "Why do you keep saying numbers? Is it part of your technique?"

"It's, um...just a habit I picked up during training." As her eyes tracked every one of the blades and arrows, she took a deep breath and once again drew her bow. "Next...*ten thousand*."

A fresh barrage of arrows shot straight into the weakening sandstorm. They began a slow, circular ascent, quashing the blades in their path, before reaching the peak of the raging winds and darting straight up and out. They hung in the air for a moment, their task seemingly accomplished, then caught another current and plunged back into the storm. Their movements looked sharper than ever as they continued to deplete Zadu's arsenal.

"Whoa..."

For a while, I could only stand and watch as Sirene's arrows triumphed over the strange man's cross-shaped weapons. The last blade fell, and the sandstorm petered out with it.

Sirene scanned the desert as if making sure her work was complete, then lowered her bow and exhaled. “There,” she said. “It’s done.”

I responded with a nod. “Yeah. You really came through for us.”

“Hmm… Suppose she did, didn’t she?”

Somehow, Zadu had ended up at our side. The three of us stared out over the quiet desert, taking in the calm. The blades showed no more signs of movement, and the sight of them glancing and shimmering in the sun was almost mesmerizing.

“Guess I should close up shop for today…” the bandaged man said at last.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yup. As I said, my aim was to seize your blade. But if your little sidekicks are *this* much of a pain, I’d rather not waste my time.”

“Hear that, Sirene?”

“Yes,” she crowed, satisfied with a job well done.

I returned my attention to Zadu. “Are you gonna retrieve all your blades?”

“Too much trouble. They’re only mithril—I can make more anytime I want. You’re free to take ’em, if you care enough to pick ’em up.”

“That wasn’t why I asked. I was just thinking it might be dangerous to leave so many sharp objects lying around.”

“Yeah? Well, can’t say that bothers me.” Wearing an annoyed expression, the man took one of his ornamental daggers from the ground. “If nothing else, I guess this served as a nice little bit of reconnaissance. Would rather have taken the sword, though. Or your life.”

“You speak as though you’re gonna come back…”

“Three cheers for the genius. Don’t get me wrong—were it up to me, we’d never cross paths again. But a job’s a job, right?”

“Why do all this in the first place? Surely a man of your talents can aspire to more than being a bandit.”

“Hmm? Are you talkin’ to me?”

“Who else?”

“You…really are a weird one, huh? Not used to people givin’ me lectures all calm-like.” The man seemed to stare at me through the black bandages covering his face, then grinned. “Maybe you really *do* have a few screws loose. This job was

meant to be a simple one, but with how much trouble you and your little followers cause me, I might have to up my fee. And on top of that…”

“Yeah?”

Countless blades erupted from the sand around Zadu and circled his body in a sea of jagged silver. A flash of crimson obscured the man from view, then faded to reveal him wearing a broad grin and brandishing a strange, reddish-black blade.

[Parry]

Zadu’s blade struck my own and shattered mere moments before it could reach my heart.

“On top of that,” he continued, “the sword’s owner is a lot more troublesome than the last time we met. Makes a guy wonder what happened, right?” The man glanced down at the broken fragments of his blade, still grinning from ear to ear, then turned his back to me. “See you around, my strange friend.”

He flashed us another of his eerie smiles, then vanished in the blink of an eye.

A Certain Maid and Her New Employer

“So you’re the new maid, are you? What’s your name?”

“Melissa. It is my honor to serve you, Lord Rashid.”

“Mm-hmm. Do your best. And yes, I might be the master of the house, but you don’t need to be so formal.” The boy who’d opened the manor’s front door stared at the calm girl waiting before him. “How old are you? You look a lot younger than your speech and demeanor would suggest.”

“I shall turn twelve this year.”

“Ah, so we’re the same age. Excellent. I was just thinking that I need someone to converse with. It’s strange, but my servants keep quitting. It gets painfully dull, being alone in a manor as large as this. Here, come inside.”

“Pardon my intrusion.”

At her new lord’s insistence, Melissa stepped into the manor. The pair headed down a long hallway and past an elegant garden, but even then, Rashid refused to look away from the girl following quietly behind him. He wore a carefree smile, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“Hey, Melissa. Not to be forward, but may I ask you a question?”

“Anything, my lord.”

“That blade hidden under your clothes—what’s it for? Looking at the shape, I’m almost inclined to believe it’s a weapon.”

Before the new maid could utter another sound, her knife was snatched out from under her attire, and she was pushed up against the wall.



“I’m afraid this won’t do, Melissa. Not at all. A newly hired servant shouldn’t be bringing dangerous things into her master’s home. Were you planning to peel some fruit, perhaps?”

Even with her back against the wall, Melissa kept her composure. “I need it for you, my lord. In case I must defend you.”

Rashid stared closely at her face, watching for even the slightest change. Then he grinned wider. “Oh, is that all? Sorry that I doubted you, then. I was never informed that you’d double as a guard, and your reasoning seems rather forced, but that’s how these things are sometimes, no? Here—you can have it back.”

Melissa was released, and her knife was held out to her. She stared at the blade for a few moments before accepting it with a polite “Thank you, my lord.”

From there, the two continued their tour, the boy acting as though nothing had happened at all. “Now, come along. In here,” he said. “As you can see, there’s a lot of cleaning and laundry to be done. Those duties fall to you now, I suppose.”

“Pardon…my intrusion.”

“So, let me give you a quick overview of the place. First, the room we passed through before was the parlor. That’s the first kitchen there, and beyond it lies a smaller one for servants. There’s another, larger kitchen on the other side of the garden, but it doesn’t get used unless I’ve got plenty of guests. You shouldn’t ever need to go there—when I need to host, I simply hire a chef.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Ah, and—there’s one more thing I’d like to ask, if you don’t mind.”

There was a pause before Melissa said, “Anything, my lord.”

The boy stopped and turned to her, his pleasure clear on his face. “I’ll get straight to the point, then. Who hired you? Was it someone I know?”

“I know not what you mean, my lord.”

“Ha ha. Come now, there’s no need to play dumb.” Rashid continued to smile at the girl whose expression refused to change. “It’s a simple question, really. Who’s your real employer—the person who sent you here? My granduncle? He *is* next in line for father’s fortune, after me. Or was it my grandaunt Sthezini? One of my greedy little brothers, perhaps? Ari and Nhid

are about old enough to start receiving their allowance; it wouldn't surprise me if their first thought was to hire an assassin. So? Am I on the right track?"

Melissa stared at him, blank-faced. "As I said, my lord, I do not follow."

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter *who* sent you. I'm just worried you might've been deceived, is all. And just so you know, I see right through that little performance of yours. You're being way too subservient. I'd work on my acting skills, if I were you."

"My…deepest apologies, my lord."

"That aside, I'm rather thirsty. Let's take a break, shall we? There's a tearoom down this way."

Rashid proceeded a few steps deeper into the manor, then stopped and turned around. Melissa hadn't moved.

"Oh? What's wrong? Don't just stand there; come brew me some tea. I'm parched."

"I…understand, my lord."

This time, she acquiesced, and the pair soon found themselves in another room.

"Here we are," Rashid said. "The tea set I always use is on that shelf over there. It's somewhat expensive, so do be careful with it."

Melissa fetched the set, as instructed, and got to work steeping tea leaves in hot water. The boy watched from his table as she poured the steaming brew into a cup and carried it over to him.

"Your…tea, my lord."

"Thank you, Melissa. But what's wrong? Your hands are shaking."

Her breath hitched. "I… I…"

"Ah ha ha. Your reactions are awfully amusing. Don't tell me—is this your first time trying to kill someone? I'm surprised they sent you, if so. Or…is this all an act, meant to lull me into a false sense of security? I very much doubt it."

The maid said nothing.

"Melissa? Another word of advice, if you don't mind." The boy's smile turned cold, and he leaned so close that their faces almost touched. "Your naivete will be the death of you. Or perhaps I should say 'your unconditional compassion for others.' Do you let your weakness show on purpose, hoping someone might swoop in and save you out of pity? I'm amazed that you've

survived this long. You're not cut out for this line of work."

Still, the girl made no sound. Rashid took the teacup from her quivering hands and turned away from her.

"To be blunt, I think you're incompetent. Why even take a job of this nature without the guts to see it through? Although, I guess the *true* featherbrain is whoever entrusted you with the task in the first place."

At last, Melissa broke her silence. "Do you really think I was given a choice?"

"I suppose not. I can see you, by the way. Look."

Rashid nodded, directing Melissa's attention to a nearby mirror. She recoiled when she saw her reflection, knife raised in preparation to stab her new lord in the back, and scrambled to hide the weapon from view. The boy slowly turned to face her, looking as amused as ever.

"Oh? What's wrong?" Rashid pressed. "Not going to do your job? How about I show you my back again? Would that make it easier? Here, I'll even close my eyes so I can't see the mirror. Go ahead. Do as you please."

True to his word, he turned around and squeezed his eyes shut. He even spread out his arms as if to welcome her blade. Melissa raised her knife again, but her slowness spoke to her indecision. She managed to bring the weapon only halfway to her target before she stopped completely.

"Lord Rashid...when you said you were alone in this manor..."

"I was lying, of course. My servants are gone, that much is true, but as for *guards*... Well, my allowance is enough to cover a few. They're all quite talented—enough to mask their presence and shoot an arrow straight into your heart, should they need to. I'm surprised you caught on. Perhaps you aren't *completely* incompetent after all."

Melissa glanced around, then slowly lowered her knife and hung her head. "In that case, there is nothing I can do. Punish me as you must, be it with torture, execution, or otherwise."

"Hmm? Giving up already? You're surprisingly rational. I suppose that's a good thing. Don't be so hasty, though—I never said I wouldn't hire you."

She looked up at him, suspicious.

"You see," Rashid continued, "I don't blame you for trying to kill me." Teacup in hand, he returned to facing her and relaxed into his chair. "You aren't acting on some personal grudge, are

you? You're here purely by circumstance—because you just so happened to have this task thrust upon you."

"I…suppose that's true."

"In that case, why not work for me? I can pay far more than whatever you were promised."

Melissa's eyes widened. "Is this not a rather *strange* turn of events? You called me incompetent not even a few minutes ago."

"Indeed. And you are. You're having a carefree chat with the person you're meant to assassinate."

"Then why—?!"

"Because you aren't to blame," Rashid said plainly. "Yes, I think I *have* taken a shine to you. I'll do you a favor and hire you now before your current employer cuts you loose. Here, how's this for compensation? Consider it an advance payment on your wages."

Still smiling, the boy held up three fingers before reaching into his pocket and taking out just as many white coins. He placed them on the table and awaited a response, but one never came; Melissa's eyes were glued to the money.

"Hmm?" Rashid leaned over, looking surprised. "Is it not enough? Was your previous salary higher? In that case—"

"Wait, please." Melissa's expression was inscrutable. "What merit is there in hiring me? Haven't you considered that I might still try to kill you?"

Slowly, the boy shook his head. "You're not concerned for *my* sake, are you? I said you were compassionate, but good grief… To answer your question, maybe I just don't care."

"I…don't understand."

"You asked why I'd want to hire you, and there are two simple reasons. One, I don't have anyone my age to speak with. And two, I think it'd amuse me to have you by my side. That's about it."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"You don't need to. I don't mind either way," Rashid said with his usual smile. "Now, if you're content to move on, I wish to ask about your birth. And the ornamentation on your knife… I think I've seen it before. In one of Sarenza's neighboring countries, such blades were used during ceremonial dances—though I think the nation collapsed as a result of all the debt they owed us. To that end, I would assume…you're someone from that country—and of rather high birth, no less. So they clapped you in chains when your homeland fell apart, then sent you here to kill

me. Or something along those lines."

Again, Melissa was speechless.

"Well?" Rashid asked, studying her expression. "Am I right?"

"I…shall leave that to your imagination."

"Ah ha ha. You really are bad at lying. The truth's written all over your face. Unless this is all an act, of course—then you're a phenomenal actress. This is just a guess, but something about you tells me you were easily coerced. They don't have someone in your family hostage, do they?"

Melissa responded with a glare. "Lord Rashid, is it really so amusing to toy with those beneath you?"

"Sorry, sorry. Your reactions are so funny that I couldn't resist. I didn't mean to seem malicious—truly, I didn't!"

The boy laughed so hard that he had to clutch his stomach. By the time he'd calmed down and wiped the tears from his eyes, Melissa's stare was colder than he'd ever seen it.

"So, how about it?" Rashid asked. "Will you work for me or not? Based on your circumstances, I'm willing to let you 'keep' your current job. I imagine you'd prefer that, wouldn't you?"

"Still, I cannot see what you have to gain from this…but I suppose I have no choice."

"I get someone to talk to—I thought I made that clear. Well, there's also the *real* reason, but I doubt you'd take me at face value."

"I suspect not, no."

"Hah. Then I won't tell you. So, are you in or not? I really don't mind what you pick, but"—Rashid gestured to the three white coins on the table—"the way I see it, working for me isn't too bad a deal."

Melissa glanced out the window, then sighed and bowed politely. "I gratefully accept your generous offer, Lord Rashid…under the condition that I may continue to make attempts on your life during my service."

"Ah ha! Honest to a fault, aren't you? You could have done that *without* telling me, you know. I knew you weren't cut out for this kind of work." Rashid picked up the coins, deposited them in Melissa's pocket, and then handed her his teacup. "Now, brew me another, won't you? It's a shame to waste this pot, but I was so caught up in our conversation that it's gone cold."

"At once, my lord…"

"Ah, and—another word of advice."

Melissa paused on her way to make more tea, keeping her back to the boy.

"About the poison you slipped into my cup... In this situation, it would have made more sense to use something *fast-acting*. Plus, avoid tampering with delicate drinks such as tea; the change in smell is easy to detect. Put some more thought into your next attempt, all right?"

Still grasping the tea set, Melissa's hands began to tremble again. The boy's smile widened in response.

"But enough about that. My tea, Melissa? I'm still waiting."

More silence. Then, "Yes, Lord Rashid."

Under the many eyes watching her from the garden outside the window, Melissa slowly poured tea into her new employer's cup.

Shin’s Journey Home

“Please take this.”

Shin, the former gladiator, eyed the worn leather pouch on the polished white table before him. Was this why Melissa, the City Forgotten by Time’s manager, had asked to see him in her office?

“What is it…?” he asked.

“Proprietor Noor asked that I pass it along. He requests its delivery to a beastfolk settlement in the north.”

“Noor? Oh, the guy who saved my hide in the colosseum?”

Shin’s scarred face lowered as he once again examined the dull-colored pouch. He paused, deep in thought, then picked it up as if to accept. The pouch had some weight to it, and a light clattering came from within.

“What’s in here?” he mused. “Stones?”

“For your own sake, I would pretend so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? It’s not something dangerous, is it?”

“It is, in a sense. Though it will not harm you directly.”

“What’s with the riddle…? Ah, it doesn’t matter. I owe him my life. Danger or no, a little errand like this is nothing in comparison. Which settlement, though? There are several in the north.”

“He mentioned there being a map inside the pouch.”

“A map? Must be this, then.” Shin reached into the bag and retrieved a scrap of paper from atop a bed of shiny rainbow stones. “Hmm? You’re telling me *this* is a map?”

Although it bore the usual markings—symbols, words, and such—the snaking lines and messy handwriting made it a nightmare to comprehend. Worse still, Noor’s directions were all irrelevant-seeming nonsense; the cipher on some ancient treasure map might have been easier to understand.

“Keep your back to the rising sun, then turn left at the odd-looking boulder to your right.”

“Go straight between the two strangely shaped cactus plants.”

Shin spent some time glaring at the esoteric instructions, furrowing his brow and humming in frustration. Then he clapped

his hands together.

"I've got it," he said. "Noor wants me to go *there*, does he?"

"You have a destination in mind?"

"Yeah. Noor's instructions make barely a lick of sense, but I get the gist of them. It's my hometown."

"Your hometown?" Surprise flickered across Melissa's features before her cool composure returned. "In that case, please make the journey at once. I understand there are also two letters inside the pouch—please deliver those as well."

"Got it. Shouldn't be a problem."

"And this is for you."

"For...what? This wasn't in my contract."

"Consider it a bonus for your...special fight."

As he accepted the small bundle being offered to him, Shin noticed traces of remorse seeping through Melissa's expression. "What's this, now?" he asked. "Concerned for me, were you?"

"As a fundamental rule, only the gladiator slaves guilty of serious crimes were to be matched against the green dragon. It might have been Rashid, the former proprietor, who proposed the exception, but that does not change the fact that it went against our establishment's code of operations." Melissa cast her eyes down. "I admit, I never expected you to agree."

"If someone in your position starts worrying about those kinds of things, you won't ever see an end to it," Shin said, the corners of his mouth upturned. "Consider it all water under the bridge; I was partly to blame for letting the reward money tempt me into signing the contract in the first place. Plus, while I can't say I was ever comfortable, you never treated us beastfolk poorly. I'm grateful for that. And it all resulted in my freedom in the end, right? Though I suppose you could also call me unemployed. In any case, the air tastes so much sweeter when you're free of debt."

Shin took in an exaggerated breath, a broad smile on his scarred face as he tossed the small bundle into the leather pouch.

Melissa exhaled softly. "Then I trust you to see the delivery through."

"Yeah. Thanks for everything. And a word of advice—don't let matters this small bother you so much. You might not realize it, but it's all over your face."

"My face...?" Disgruntled, she brought a hand to her cheek.

Turning his back on the city's manager, Shin departed, his stride energetic as he advanced across the desert sands. Nostalgic thoughts of home traveled with him. Such a long time had passed since his last visit…but he doubted much had changed in his absence.

◇

"What in the…?"

With his memory to guide him, Shin reached the end of his journey without issue. The troubles only started upon his arrival; the very first thing he saw caused him to mistrust his own eyes.

He had traveled to his hometown—at least, he thought he had. The settlement before him wasn't at all as he remembered it. For one thing, it had a towering wall of sandstone around it, as though it were some great fortress. Shin was starting to wonder whether he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere when a voice suddenly called out to him.

"Big brother? Is that you?"

Shin turned around. At first, he didn't recognize the young man in front of him, but a closer inspection revealed traces of a person he'd once known. And when he focused on the man's voice…

"Don't tell me… Kyle?"

"Shin! It really is you!"

In the desert village Shin was from, everyone was family, and men called each other brothers even when they had no blood ties to speak of. It was a nostalgic tradition—one Shin had almost forgotten about.

"You've grown so much," he said. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"Well, it *has* been about a decade. I still remember when you set out for the city, resolved to make a fortune. We were all so worried when you never came back. Where have you been all this time?"

Shin couldn't help but scratch his cheek; Kyle was just as honest and straightforward as he remembered. "Well, it's a long story…" he said. "I made it safely to the capital, but I got mixed up in some shady business and landed in pretty serious debt. Before I knew it, I was working as a gladiator slave."

"A gladiator? Why something so dangerous?"

“Well, as a slave by debt, I didn’t have a whole lot of options. But it also came down to greed. I just needed one good fight, I thought—then I could purchase my freedom, buy all of you presents, and return home with a fortune to spare. So I picked up a blade and headed straight for the colosseum. Problem was, things never worked out that way. I was pretty confident in my fighting skills, but look where that got me.”

Shin let out a self-deprecating laugh and gestured to his face, scarred and weathered as it was.

“It landed me in some real danger recently…” he continued, “but a good man came to my rescue. Part of why I came back here was to repay him. Truth be told, if his request hadn’t given me the push I needed, I might’ve been too ashamed to show my face.”

“Is that so? Then I guess I owe him my thanks.”

“Oh, and for the record—I don’t have anyone hunting me down, so don’t worry about that. The city was thrown into chaos by these foreigners, who showed up for a Trial and came away the new owners. My debt was written off in the process.”

“For a Trial…? And when you say they became the new owners…”

“I don’t know the ins and outs of it, but the colosseum I belonged to was shut down. It put us gladiators out of work, but we also had our debts paid, so I’m finally a free man again.”

“I see…” Kyle seemed to fall into thought.

“That aside,” Shin went on, immersed in nostalgia, “this place really has changed. We never had a wall the last time I was here.”

“It has. I have many stories to tell you, brother, but let’s head inside first. If we worry the guards, they might turn us into pincushions.”

“Guards? Pincushions…?” Shin looked up and saw several wooden watchtowers he hadn’t noticed before, all containing vigilant young beastfolk with their bows at the ready. “Strict setup you’ve got there. Are we housing buried treasure or something?”

“You jest, but you aren’t far off the mark. The increased security’s nothing short of necessary.”

“Wait, really?”

“We were just as surprised. It all started the other day.”

“The other day?”

“A group of travelers showed up from the Kingdom of Clays to

the north. If not for all they did for us, our settlement would have stayed just as dreary as you remember it."

"Travelers from the Kingdom of Clays, huh? For some strange reason, that seems to ring a bell..."

Shin pondered Kyle's words as he was led into the settlement. He experienced a moment of tender relief upon seeing that, the enormous wall aside, things were more or less as he remembered them. Everywhere was much cleaner, though, and the people's expressions were a lot more spirited.

The pair continued on their way, Shin exchanging quick greetings with those who recognized him. Then it occurred to him that there was someone else he had yet to catch up with.

"Is the elder doing well, by the way?"

"Yes, very."

"That's good to hear. He was already past his prime when I set out, so I thought that might've been my last time seeing him."

"Truth be told, he might be the healthiest he's ever been."

"What?"

Kyle seemed on the verge of explaining when a loud shout cut him short: "My word... Shin?! Is that you, Shin?!"

Shin turned to see the very man they had just been speaking about. The old elder sprinted toward them at such great speed that he kicked up dust in his wake.

Though taken aback by the old man's vigor, Shin bowed his head. "It is good to see you well, Elder. First, I must apologize. After everyone entrusted their coin to me, I came back with nothing to show for it. I know it is shameful, but—"

"Bah, enough already! We've no time for these formalities, Shin—we're shorthanded *everywhere*." The elder grabbed Shin's arms and started flapping them up and down. "Come, help us tend the fields! Or build new houses! Anything!"

"R-Right..." For a moment, Shin was swept up in the elder's momentum, but then he came to a sudden realization. "Wait... Construction I can understand, but fieldwork? We've never had fields to begin with."

"We never *used to*. But take a look—you can see them from here."

"Excuse me...?" Turning in the direction the elder indicated, Shin saw tall crops in abundance. "You're right... There's a field right next to the village. But we're in the desert. How is this possible?"

“Surprised, eh? We had some guests recently who performed all manner of miracles. That was but one of them.”

Shin stared at the distant field of green. He was already convinced that it was all some elaborate daydream, but then he noticed something else that made the sight even stranger. “Wait, wait, wait. But this can’t be. How are you growing those crops without water?”

The elder chuckled. “Have you truly not noticed, Shin? Look beneath you.”

Only then did Shin perceive the sound of streaming water coming through the gaps in the planks under his feet. He bent down, tentatively opened the wooden cover…and saw a seamless glass canal transporting water clear enough to make him doubt his eyes.

“H-How is this possible?” Shin sputtered. “Is this water flowing through the whole village? Where’s it coming from?”

“The truth is…” Kyle began.

Shin was dumbstruck by the events his brother went on to explain. “Let me get this straight…” he eventually said. “The Divine Beast—the same one from your grandmother’s fairy tales—popped out of a hole one of the visitors dug. It went on a rampage, looming as large as a mountain…until the visitor just up and…slew it?”

“Yes, that’s the gist of it.”

“Then he crushed up the creature’s remains, sprinkled them across the sand with some water, and the ground suddenly became fertile? Of all the… I think the myths your grandmother always told us were more realistic.”

“I get what you mean. I was there to see it, and still, I find it hard to believe. There’s more to it, you know—things we haven’t even told the others.”

“Well, what you’ve said is enough for me, I think. My brain already feels full to bursting.” Shin shook his head, still trying to come to grips with Kyle’s story.

A wide smile peeked out from beneath the elder’s bushy white beard. “Well, all you really need to know is that our home now has arable land. Yes, it happened through a string of miracles more shocking than any of the stories my doddering old mind can remember, but who are we to argue with our new reality? Other settlements who heard the rumors are already requesting our assistance—and we intend to help them all, of

course.”

“Do we have the means?”

“Fortunately, yes. We have more than enough money for any construction materials they might need, and enough water to provide it freely for everyone. No wonder so many wish to move here.”

“Seriously? You’re giving out water of this purity…for free?”

“We have rules in place, but yes—it is free for everyone’s daily needs. That was our visitors’ wish, and we have no intention of defying it.”

“This is all…so much to take in.”

“Put simply, everything is going smoothly. That is why we are so busy. Constructing new homes, caring for the crops, fending off bandits—there is too much to do! You came back at just the right time, Shin!”

The elder grabbed Shin’s hands again and gripped them tight. The former gladiator, still doubting everything he had seen and heard, merely stared up at the sky. Only a booming cry from above brought him back to his senses.

“Oh?! Is that Shin I see down there?! It’s been too long, big brother!”

Shin traced the cry to a nearby watchtower, where several young men were waiting with bows by their sides. One of them—a large, sturdy-looking man—was waving down at him.

“I’d recognize that needlessly loud voice anywhere,” Shin remarked. “Is that you, Golba?”

“Ha! It is indeed!”

“When did you get so big? You make Kyle’s growth seem tiny in comparison.”

“Ga ha ha! Well, I *was* the only one with plenty to eat!”

Shin looked part exasperated, part sentimental as he remembered Golba’s love for strange foods and the poisonous Death Scorpios he had eaten by the dozens. Then, he heard a high-pitched whistle.

“What was that? An alarm?”

“Good guess!” Golba called down. “We’re under attack!”

“We are?”

“From time to time, bandits come by looking to take our food and water!”

Shin was still trying to work out what was happening when a young beastfolk—one of the village’s guards, by the sound of it—

called out a warning. “Captain Golba! There’s around thirty of them, south-southwest!”

“Got it!” the captain shouted back. “Only a small one today, then! Let’s go with Capture Plan A!”

“Yes, sir!” cried a chorus of voices.

“Capture Plan A…?” Shin mumbled. Unable to follow the words and commands being shouted above his head, he simply watched as a volley of arrows was loosed from the guards’ bows. The arrows tore neatly through the air, then landed to a cacophony of explosions and screams. Large clouds of dust billowed from the impact site.

“What on…? Did those arrows just explode?” Shin asked.

“Wa ha ha ha!” Golba boomed. “Not the arrows, but our magical traps! The arrows only drove our enemies into ’em!”

“Magical…traps?”

“Instructor Rolo set ’em up before he left. They’re nonlethal and made for capturing, so even the youngsters can handle ’em! Our settlement couldn’t be more secure!”

“When did our simple little backwater become so capable?”

“It’s all thanks to Instructor Sirene’s training!”

As Shin struggled to formulate a response, guards began to carry in the bandits, all of whom were bound.

“Captain Golba, we’ve captured all the raiders!”

“Excellent work! Take ’em to the usual place and get some grub in their bellies!”

“Hold on. You’re feeding them?” Shin asked. “Even though they came to rob you?”

“Indeed we are! It was hunger that drove ’em to banditry in the first place, so we’ve gotta feed ’em before we can hope to start up a proper conversation! That’s how our visitors saved us, you know! Bandits—take your time and enjoy yourselves! We’ve more than enough food and water to go around. And once you’re set straight, you can go home!”

“What…?”

Golba leaped down from the watchtower, kicking up a cloud of sand where he landed. He laughed, grabbed some of the bandits by the scruffs of their necks, and dragged them farther into the village.

“What in the…?” Shin uttered. He was still reeling from how much his hometown had changed when the elder spotted the small, worn leather pouch in his hand and turned white as a

sheet.

“Shin, wh-where did you get that p-p-pouch?”

“Oh, this? It’s why I’m here, actually—I was asked to deliver it.”

“A-Asked to…b-b-by whom?”

“This guy—Noor. What’s gotten into you?”

“Noor?! D-Does that mean it c-c-contains…?!” The elder snatched the pouch from Shin and yanked it open. The moment he saw its contents, he twitched once, then froze. “Rain…”

“Elder? What’s wrong?”

“R-R-Rainbow… Beautiful, rainbow-colored…” The elder shoved his head halfway into the pouch and chuckled maniacally. “I knew it,” he muttered. “It’s rainbow! It’s all rainbow! The *world* is rainbow!”

“Show me, Elder.” Kyle extricated the pouch from the old man’s grasp and peered inside. Cold sweat beaded on his brow. “As I suspected… It’s all kingsgold.”

“Kingsgold…?” Shin asked.

“A denomination we’d never expected to see in our lifetimes. Each one is worth ten platinum—or *a hundred* greatgolds.”

“Wh-What?!” The blood drained from Shin’s face. Had he known the truth about his cargo, he would never have taken the delivery so lightly. “N-Noor must be insane. We met only once…yet he entrusted me with a genuine fortune.”

The pale-faced elder pressed closer to Kyle, who was still examining the contents of the pouch. “I-Is there anything else?!” he stammered. “Just the kingsgold, yes? Please let that be the worst of it!”

“Just a letter, from what I can see.”

“A letter?! G-Give it here!”

The elder snatched the letter Kyle had retrieved from the pouch and immediately began scanning its contents. Gold-accented paper bore a short message in handwriting more beautiful than any the elder had seen before.

To the elder and Kyle,

As a result of the Trials we played, your village won’t need to pay taxes for the next hundred years. Hope that gives you all some peace of mind as you keep up the hard work.

On another note, I was made the new owner of the City Forgotten by Time. I received a summons to the capital not long after. I’m going there now to meet with House Sarenza.

Sorry to leave all the fieldwork to you guys, but here's some coin to help you out. I've got way more than I could ever need, and you're bound to have better uses for it.

Noor

Only the signature at the end was written in a messy scrawl, and the name it depicted was one the elder remembered well. Things were entirely as he had suspected. Kyle and Shin, who'd read the message over his shoulders, were too stunned to even speak. Never had such a short letter contained so much absurdity.

"A... A hundred years..." the elder murmured at last.

"You said they took part in the Trials to contend our village's taxes, right?" Shin asked. "To win an entire century of exemption, though..."

"E-Even if we accept Noor's explanation, as implausible as it sounds, he also claims to be the new owner of the City Forgotten by Time!"

"He never mentioned that to me..."

"He also says he was summoned to the capital to meet with House Sarenza! Wh-What is the meaning of this, Shin?!"

"D-Don't ask me! How should I know?!"

"Elder," Kyle interrupted, "there's another letter inside. I think it's from Lady Lynneburg."

"N-No time to waste, then! Let me read it!"

No sooner had Kyle retrieved the second letter than the elder grabbed it and pulled its contents from their envelope. There were several sheets of ornamented paper in all, and the handwriting on them was methodical and precise.

Dear Elder, Kyle,

First, please allow me to apologize for the brevity of this missive. Circumstance has rendered me painfully short of time.

As you are well aware, we partook in a Trial, under House Sarenza law, against the former proprietor of the City Forgotten by Time. We proved ourselves the victors and were able to secure your settlement a century of tax exemption.

In the process of our contest, Instructor Noor—whose funds we borrowed to participate—was able to turn approximately seven billion gald, to use the domestic currency of Sarenza, into ten trillion, two trillion of which we used to purchase the City

Forgotten by Time. As it stands, the entire establishment, even its employees, now belongs to him.

We enclose herewith a portion of the remaining funds. As you can imagine, it puts nary a dent in Instructor Noor's total wealth, so please use it for the benefit of the village. Furthermore, please note that the exemption we agreed upon with a representative of House Sarenza concerns your settlement, with no other stipulations.

Thus concludes my report. Once again, I apologize for its brevity. I wish for your and everyone's good health, and the continued prosperity of your village.

Yours sincerely,
Lynneburg Clays

The letter was rather detailed, despite its claim to the contrary. Its overall message was essentially the same as Noor's, but the extra information only added to the madness.

"N-Noor is worth *ten trillion gald*?!" The elder gulped, his consternation redoubled. "Even against House Sarenza…how was such a sum even attainable?! No, wait… More importantly…"

So preposterous were the letter's contents that the elder was quickly sobered. He spent several moments deep in thought before turning to the young man beside him.

"Kyle…"

"Yes, Elder?"

"Your opinion, if you please. It says here that our *settlement* has tax immunity. Would the exemption hold even if we took on more people?"

"That was the implication, yes. If our exemption is for the settlement as a whole, then its population shouldn't matter."

"I-In that case, where do we draw our borders? These days, I consider our land to be the rough area around our homes and fields, but as more and more people move in…"

"If we take Lady Lynneburg at face value, the agreement made with House Sarenza specified our 'settlement' and nothing more. That should mean we can expand as much as necessary."

"I see… A-And what about our assets? How much of them is going to be taxed, do you think? I doubt we have a blanket exemption—would that not be too convenient?"

"Well, nothing in the letter goes against the idea…"

"I suppose."

“In fact, I think we can view the lack of stipulations as a *free pass* of sorts.”

The elder pondered for several moments. “Indeed, I think so too.”

For a time, the pair returned their attention to the letter, taking the lull as a chance to catch their breath. Then the elder spoke again.

“Another question, Kyle—one that has been bothering me for some time now. The name *Lynneburg Clays*... Does it not sound familiar to you?”

“She and her companions said they came from the Kingdom of Clays to the north. I simply assumed she was a member of the royal family there.”

“I see, I see. Yes, that would make sense. It explains her elegant demeanor, for one thing. Oh, and how she managed to procure the Wellspring Pipe, a national treasure in the truest sense. To think a member of the Clays royal family took on a Trial for our sake, competed against House Sarenza, and won us blanket tax immunity for the next century.”

“Indeed, that was how it happened.”

Several more moments passed in relative calm before the gravity of the situation struck the elder with all the force of an earthquake. “Hawawawawaaa?! My word, my stars, my *beard*! Th-This is no time to stand about! Kyle, send the messengers!”

“Send them where?”

“To all the nearby settlements! No, to all our brethren in Sarenza! We need to discuss this face-to-face! The fate of the beastfolk’s next century rests on our meeting!”

Afterword

I Parry Everything has reached its eighth volume. Thank you all so much for your continued support.

The voice acting cast for *Parry*'s anime adaptation was announced the other day. I was fortunate enough to sit in on the dubbing sessions for several episodes, which gave me a look into a world completely new to me. The voice actors' range was a sight to behold, and the emotion of the main dialogue moved me beyond words. I was also impressed by the amount of creativity that went into ad-libbing the background chatter. Again and again, I was amazed by how many ways a human's vocal cords can express speech and tone—though it must have been common knowledge to those already in the industry.

For the first time, I was also able to see what a crucial role the sound director plays. They oversee the production as a conductor oversees their orchestra and add their own impressions to each part of the work as a sound engineer, all while translating the blabbermouth author's hard-to-understand wishes into clear instructions for the cast. It was like watching someone perform miracles on a daily basis, and the whole experience made it clear to me that most works would never even make it off the ground without a sound director to take the reins.

I will refrain from mentioning *Parry*'s sound director by name, as that information has yet to be announced, but I wish to convey my deepest gratitude to them—for staying in complete control of all the chaos that goes into producing an anime and for perfectly interpreting my vague remarks about the nuances of the work. Sound Director-sama, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I don't have room to list them all, but I was awestruck by the wide variety of professionals working behind the scenes of the anime's production. Even by the time these words reach you, the readers, I expect they're still going to be working their hardest. My admiration for them is far greater than I can express.

The anime is due to broadcast in July 2024, and thanks to Dai Fukuyama, the director; Shigeru Murakoshi, the screenwriter;

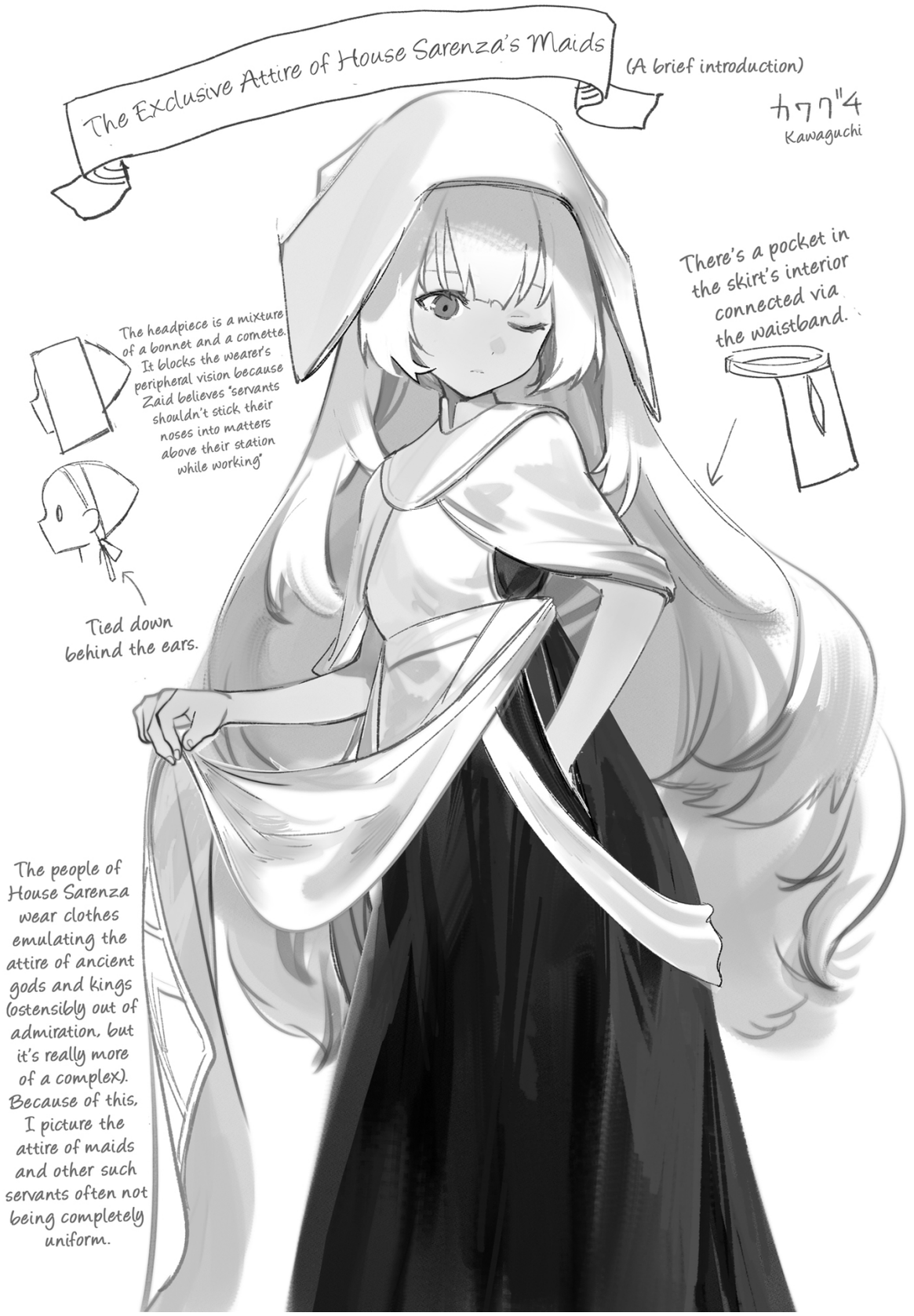
and everyone else at OLM, I expect it to be a magnificent watch. As the author, I look forward to you all being able to enjoy it.

To suddenly return to speaking about the light novels, Kawaguchi-san came up with the designs for Zadu and Lude, who appear in this book's illustrations, around the time we were working on volume 3. My slow pacing kept them out of the spotlight, but I'm glad to finally have this chance to unveil them to you.

Personally, I'm a huge fan of Lude's design—as much as I am of Zadu's—but I'm afraid you'll need to wait to see his face.

The Sarenza Arc, set in the desert nation of Sarenza, has more to go before we're finished. I would be honored if you continued to read along.

Nabeshiki


The Exclusive Attire of House Sarenza's Maids
(A brief introduction)
カワグチ
Kawaguchi
The headpiece is a mixture of a bonnet and a comette. It blocks the wearer's peripheral vision because Zaid believes "servants shouldn't stick their noses into matters above their station while working"
Tied down behind the ears.
There's a pocket in the skirt's interior connected via the waistband.
The people of House Sarenza wear clothes emulating the attire of ancient gods and kings (ostensibly out of admiration, but it's really more of a complex). Because of this, I picture the attire of maids and other such servants often not being completely uniform.

Bonus Short Story

The Vice-Captains and Customer Appreciation Day

“I wish to thank you both for graciously inviting me to this meal. I am grateful beyond words.”

In the downtown district of the royal capital, a woman with lustrous, flowing hair bowed deeply to her two female companions. She was Rei, the Phantom Princess, vice-captain of the Shadow Company.

“Hey… Come on. There’s no need for that. We only invited you out for tea.”

Her companions—Melusine, the Librarian, vice-captain of the Magician Corps, and Marieberr, the Saintess, vice-captain of the Cleric Corps—looked uncomfortable in the face of such an earnest gaze.

“Melusine’s right, Rei. We’re pretty close in age, so you can drop the formality. Just be yourself! It’s not like we’re going anywhere fancy.”

“Nevertheless, this is my first time being invited to such an occasion,” Rei contended. “Melusine, if not for the magical bracelet you completed for me the other day—this wonderful accessory that crystallizes my existence—I would not even be able to have this conversation with you both. Truly, I cannot thank you enough. Never shall I forget this debt I owe you.”

The white-haired woman bowed again, tears welling from her gemlike eyes.

“It’s…fine. Really,” Melusine insisted. “It was just a side project I tinkered with in my downtime. Plus, it’s still a prototype, so there’s plenty more work to be done. I mean, as it stands, the two of us are the only ones who can see you.”

“Even so, it is more than I could ever have asked for.”

Rei, Melusine, and Marieberr each wore a thin orichalcum bracelet on their right wrist. The magical accessories allowed the latter two to see Rei, whose inherent Gift prevented others from perceiving her clearly.

Melusine was glad to have one of her creations accepted with such gratitude. She felt a tad guilty, as she’d thrown the bracelets

together on essentially a whim, but Rei appeared sincerely overjoyed nonetheless. The Phantom Princess rubbed the band as she walked, deftly avoiding unaware pedestrians who almost bumped into her from behind.

"You know, Rei, I never knew you were so beautiful," Marieberr remarked in a singsong. "I mean, I *did*, but you're prettier than I ever imagined."

"She's right," Melusine agreed. "At first, I even wondered if the bracelet's functions were faulty."

"Thank you, both of you," Rei said. "It's relieving to hear you say that, even if you *are* just being nice."

"We mean it!" Melusine insisted. "We wouldn't have said anything otherwise."

"The truth is…I was rather nervous about you seeing me. People fear me, for the most part. 'She's as see-through as a ghost,' they say. 'I can't even tell where she is.' Or 'I think I heard something! Wasn't this place supposed to be empty?!' I'm glad you two are so kind."

Idly, Melusine realized it was perhaps her first time encountering such natural-born obliviousness. Far from being fearsome, a woman of Rei's beauty would leave most men slack-jawed—if not completely stunned—when she passed them on the street. She was so attractive, in fact, that few would bat an eye if another woman asked for her hand in marriage. Melusine considered putting such thoughts into words, but Marieberr spoke up before she could.

"Well then, girls—now that the pleasantries are behind us, shall we move on to today's main event?"

"Main event…?" Rei echoed. "O-Oh, of course! My deepest apologies for my oversight!"

"Think nothing of it! We've come to this battlefield to carry out the gravest of duties. I trust you've remembered that!"

"The gravest, hmm…?" Melusine muttered.

"Now, onward! Our mission awaits!"

Excitedly taking the lead, Marieberr the Saintess guided the trio to a large restaurant, where a signboard stood outside.

Customer Appreciation Day! All-You-Can-Eat Cake, All Day Long!

Melusine sighed. Over the course of their many outings together, she had grown well accustomed to Marieberr's true colors. "That 'Saintess' really is more gluttonous than her title would suggest." Still, she followed the girl inside—alongside Rei,

who was dodging other pedestrians with graceful ease.

"Welcome to our restaurant!"

"Come on, you two! Over here!" Marieberr called, clapping her hands to get her friends' attention. She had already taken her seat at a table and was paying no mind to the looks she was getting. "Quickly now! Hurry! This isn't a matter to be taken lightly!"

"Uh-huh... Coming." Melusine headed over with Rei in tow, shooting the restaurant's other patrons a look that screamed, "*I'm not like her!*"

Once the trio were all seated, a waitress came by to take their orders. "What can I get you today?" she asked.

"Okay, okay. So, to start..." Marieberr stuck out her chest and declared, "One of everything on the menu, please!"

"P-Pardon? One of *everything*, ma'am?"

"Yes, including the drinks!"

"Of...of course, ma'am."

"I'll go with this baker's choice set," Melusine added. "Just the one will do."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Th-Then, I'll have the strawberry—"

"Will that be all?" the waitress asked, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Rei was speaking.

"Um, sorry, but could you hold on a little longer?" Melusine said. "Our friend hasn't ordered yet."

"Hmm? Oh, my apologies. Will she be here soon?"

"She's already here. Look. Right there."

"P-Pardon?" The blood drained from the young waitress's face as she turned to the chair Melusine was pointing at. "I... I'm awfully sorry, but I c-can't see anybody there..."

"Oh, right. Yeah. I guess not."

"That was so inconsiderate, Melusine," Marieberr chimed in. "You said it yourself that we're the only ones who can see her, didn't you?"

"It's okay..." Rei muttered, clearly dejected. "Please don't let it bother you. I can simply make do with your leftovers."

"Sorry, Rei," Melusine said. "Here, I'll order for you. You were about to ask for the strawberry mille-feuille, right?"

"Y-Yes, please. Thank you."

"Then that's all," Melusine told the waitress. "You can leave the mille-feuille there—in front of our friend."

“O-O-Of course, ma’am!”

The young waitress scampered away as though eager to escape the two women who had suddenly begun speaking to empty air. Soon enough, Melusine noticed several employees huddled in a corner. They whispered among themselves, shooting the trio glances all the while. Though a sigh escaped her, it was tough to blame them, really.

“It must be so hard for you, Rei,” Marieberr said consolingly. “I know being undetectable helps with your work, but it must be a huge obstacle for your daily life.”

“I’m used to it by now, so…”

“Does it mean you can’t usually come to places like this?”

“In a sense. While I infiltrate many different establishments as part of my missions, I never visit as a customer. None of the staff ever notice me.”

“Must be rough,” Melusine said. “That earring of yours is pretty heavily enchanted with attention-drawing magic, but it barely had any effect.”

“That is what it means to have a Gift.” Rei smiled weakly. “It’s caused me trouble ever since I was born. Even my own parents have a hard time seeing me. They did their best to raise me in spite of that, but it only led to others treating our home as haunted. As soon as I was old enough to take care of myself, I chose to leave, so as not to burden my family any longer.”

“I…see…” As the mood grew somber, Melusine started to regret having broached the subject in the first place. Then she saw Marieberr cramming the newly arrived cakes into her mouth, shrugged, and quietly sipped her black tea. It wasn’t as though she minded a more serious topic of conversation.

“I had no trouble leaving, of course, but as nobody could see me, I found it difficult to even earn my daily bread,” Rei continued. “I survived on fallen fruit for a while before Captain Carew just barely happened to notice me crying in the corner of a tavern, racked with hunger. I’ve never been able to find anywhere else that could employ me, so I’ve been with the Shadow Company ever since.”

“That’s, well…good for you, I suppose?”

“Yes, I consider myself very lucky.”

Again, Melusine wanted to comment. As much as she sympathized with Rei and the hardships she had endured, it seemed like a trick of the universe that such a kind, talented, and

peerlessly beautiful woman could exist. She admired the Phantom Princess for never resorting to thievery or crime, despite her hunger and how easy it would have been for her. Given that Rei hadn't even mentioned such deeds, she must not even have considered them in the first place.

Of course, Melusine refrained from saying anything. Rei was speaking her truth, and the last thing she wanted to do was seem insensitive.

"Come on, you two!" Marieberr exclaimed. "What are you spacing out for?! The clock's ticking, and I don't see your forks moving! Here—the menu! It's time for seconds!"

"None for me, thanks," Melusine said. "I feel full just watching you."

"I shall refrain too," Rei added. "This is enough for me."

"Aww, but it's Customer Appreciation Day! We've got to eat our money's worth!"

Melusine believed the Saintess had already eaten enough for the three of them, and that ordering any more would actively harm the restaurant. Still, she merely sipped at her tea without a word.

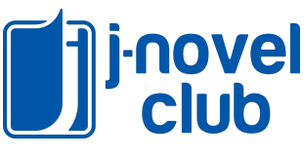
Rei stayed quiet as well, staring at the cake on the small plate in front of her.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Melusine asked. "Or is the food not to your liking?"

"No, that's not it... It's just, I've always dreamed of sitting in a restaurant like this and having friends to chat with. Getting to enjoy cake on top of that feels sinful."

"Ah, right... I see..." Melusine replied with a nod. She and Marieberr would need to do everything they could to avoid corrupting someone so beautiful—inside and out—with their baser desires.

Putting her teacup down, Melusine finally dug into the cake she'd ordered. Marieberr was off in her own little world, too busy stuffing her face to take notice of her friends' conversation. Rei watched them both for a while, a joyful expression on her face, before picking up her fork and finally cutting into her mille-feuille.



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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I’m the Strongest? I’m Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 8
by Nabeshiki

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