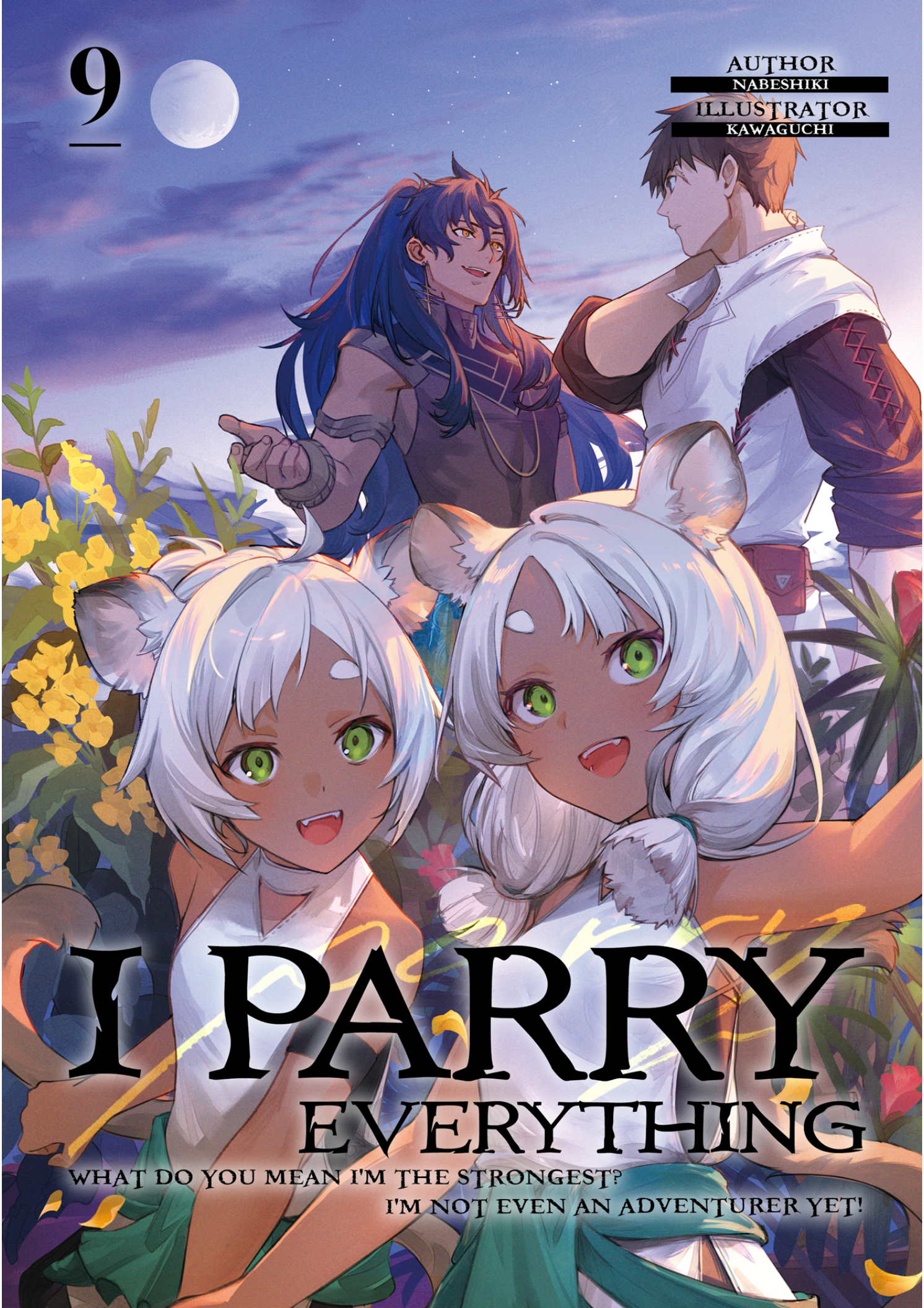
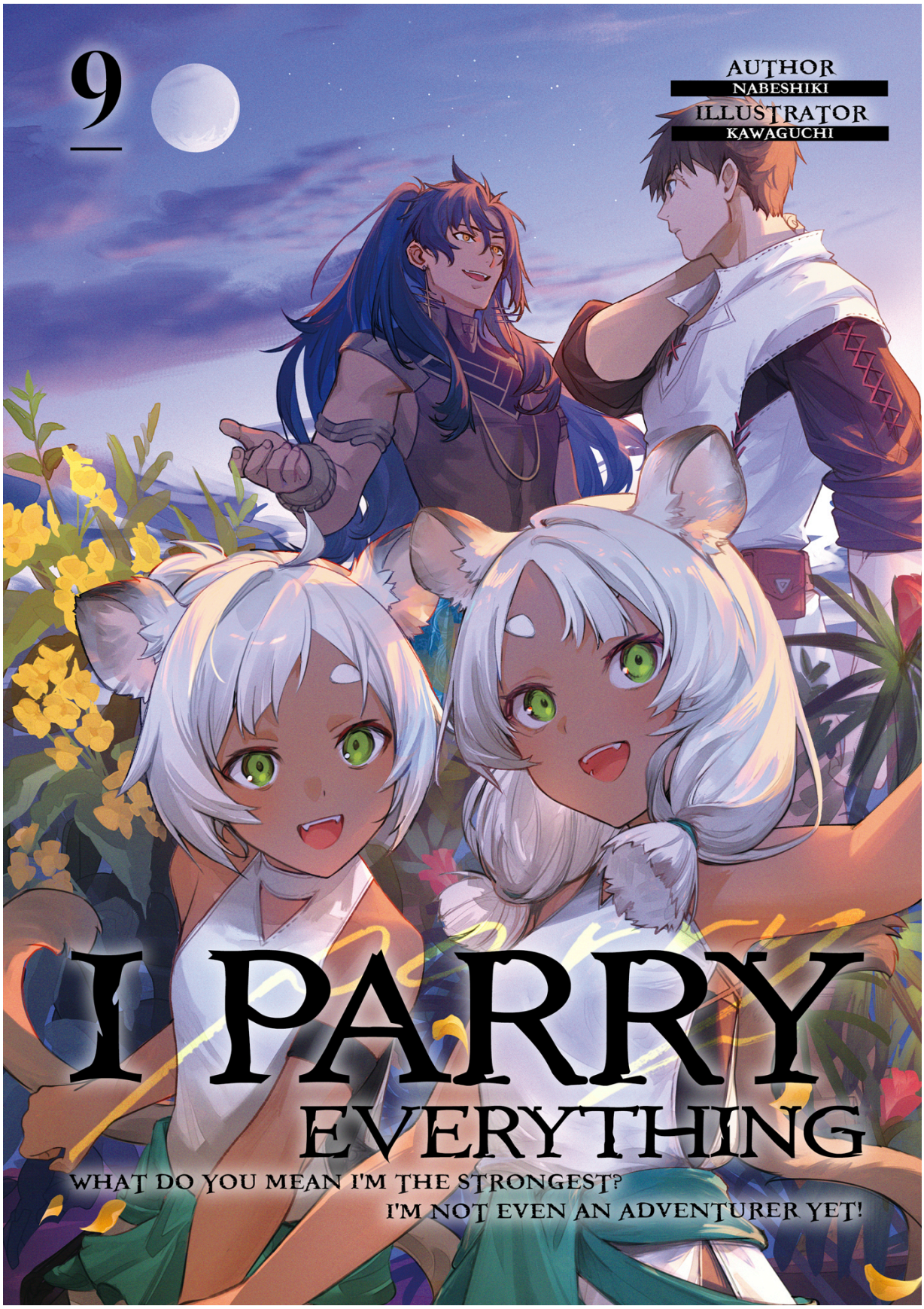

9
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I PARRY EVERYTHING
WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?
I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!


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"Galen, my friend—although I regret being the bearer of bad news, I'm afraid you've made a fatal mistake."
The golem before me crumbled to dust, while those behind it shattered into pieces from the force of the impact.
"Bwuh? The g-golems... Wh-Whuh?!"
"Unfortunately for you, this harmless-seeming man is the person you should avoid antagonizing the most," Rashid said, giving the plump man a shrug.


Illustration 09
"What's so funny? Come on. Out with it!"
"Nothing about this is funny. I am simply relieved. To tell you the truth, I was hesitant. But because of you, that last whisper of reluctance has faded."
Genuine relief flooded her expression—and the heads of hundreds of golems throughout the venue toppled from their bodies.
I PARRY EVERYTHING
WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST? I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!

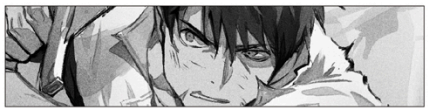
[The Story So Far]

After noticing the remnants of his tattoo, Sirene showed Shawza her pendant, which bore the same mysterious symbol. In return, Shawza shared the tale of the Mio Tribe—their rebellion, brutal eradication, and the death sentences passed on her father and brother.

Noor had just settled into his role as the new proprietor of the City Forgotten by Time when a massive legion of golems attacked, striking mere moments after his inaugural speech. He and Shawza crushed the invasion, then departed with Rashid and the others for Sarenza's capital, answering a summons from the country's highest authority. The city's gates were just coming into view when danger struck again—this time at the hands of the relentless Deadman Zadu. Despite the black-bandaged man's ferocious sandstorms and talent for slaughter, Noor and the others managed to drive him back and reach their destination safely. But what awaits them in the capital proper?

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 165: Sarenza, the Merchant Capital, Part 1

"We finally made it."

Despite the strange bandaged man's interference, we had reached Sarenza City none the worse for wear. The soldiers at the gate had seemed somewhat on edge from the commotion the massive sandstorm had caused, so it had taken Lynne a lengthy conversation and the provision of some kind of document for them to let us pass.

"Those guards sure had a lot to talk about," I noted.

"Yes, their inspection took far longer than I'd anticipated," Lynne said. "My apologies for the wait, Instructor."

"It wasn't any trouble. I passed the time just fine. It must've been pretty draining for you, though."

"I'm just glad that we're through."

As our coach advanced into the city, I found myself shocked by the sheer height of the buildings. Those in the City Forgotten by Time had surprised me too, especially compared to what I was used to back at the royal capital, but these were on another level—and we were barely through the entrance.

Many of the passersby were dressed in clothes that suggested they were merchants. I supposed that made sense for the city of trade.

"This place is huge," I remarked. "And the architecture's stunning."

"Do you really think so?" Rashid mused. "We're still on the outskirts, you know. This district is considered part of the slums."

"The slums?"

"Mm-hmm. Sarenza City is built around the Dungeon of Oblivion, which lies at its very center. Encircling it are the special ward, where

only the truly affluent may reside, and the luxury ward, home to those deemed only relatively wealthy. Beyond that are the belt-shaped merchants' ward—which one might call the backbone of the city—and the ordinary residential ward. Next comes the special ward of acquittal, where those guilty of crimes work off their sentences. The slums form the outermost ring—where we are now."

"Wow. That's a lot of divisions for one city."

"As it stands, the outer wards are for the have-nots, who've been pushed away from the city's center. The entrances are kept in good order, of course, but venture even a stone's throw down the side streets and public safety takes a dive."

"Is it really that bad?"

"The crime rate decreases the closer you get to the center, and the townscape becomes more beautiful. When all's said and done, the slums are little more than a bulwark protecting the inner residents from sandstorms and desert bandits."

"I see..."

Armed with my newfound perspective, I took a closer look down the side roads. In some ways, they reminded me of the royal capital's old quarter—only with more litter and none of the canals. Was there really such a stark contrast between this outermost ring and the city center?

"There sure are a lot of people," I said, turning the focus of our conversation elsewhere. "They don't call it a merchant city for nothing—the streets are packed."

"It's the largest city on the continent, they say. Estimates of the permanent resident count hover around two hundred thousand, not to mention those coming and going for trade."

"That many, huh? The buildings remind me of the City Forgotten by Time, but there's something different about them that I can't quite put my finger on."

"The City Forgotten by Time sprang up naturally and gradually around the resort. That makes its layout a lot more haphazard than here in the capital, where everything was meticulously thought out. Personally, I much prefer the former."

I was admiring the scenery to the sound of Rashid's enlightening

commentary when our coach suddenly entered an open space reminiscent of the royal capital's plaza. A narrow road branched off from it, leading to what appeared to be a low hill.

"That sandy bump over there," I said. "Is that...?"

"The Dungeon of Oblivion. From a historical perspective, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it the heart of this country. This city was quite literally built by the golems unearthed from its depths."

"You don't say."

Lynne had mostly stayed silent since we entered the capital, but our conversation seemed to catch her interest. "I see the very tip is aboveground. The same is true for the Dungeon of the Lost."

Rashid turned to her with a smile. "Indeed, Lady Lynneburg. I am told the dungeon extends deep into the earth and what you see is but a fraction of its true size. Only a handful of privileged individuals have access to its depths." He seemed pleased. "So, now that you've seen it, what do you think of Sarenza City?"

"Honestly, I'm surprised. I didn't realize it was this developed."

"House Sarenza is quite thorough about restricting the information that reaches countries we have no trade with. Make the most of this opportunity to take it in. After all, I assume you won't be visiting often."

"You're right, though I *would* like to make the trip again someday."

"Nothing would please me more."

Though Lynne still seemed a little wary of Rashid, her previous animosity had eased considerably. He appeared to have noticed and was, in turn, making an effort to be more amiable with her. As their conversation washed over me, I gazed absentmindedly at the view of the main street through the window.

Sometime later, we reached another guard checkpoint. From what Rashid had told me, I guessed it marked the boundary between the special ward of acquittal and the residential ward. Lynne entered another exchange with the guards, and we passed through without issue. The townscape became noticeably cleaner, and my eyes were drawn to a number of unfamiliar sights.

"Is that a shop of some kind?" I asked, gesturing toward one in particular. "Its entrance is massive."

"It's an artificial golem workshop."

"Artificial golems? Like the ones you talked about?"

"If you're interested, shall we take a quick look? My father didn't specify a meeting time, so I doubt he'll begrudge you a brief shopping trip."

"Would that be all right, Lynne?"

"Of course. My clothes got a bit dirty in the altercation earlier, so I was thinking of stopping by an inn to clean up before we reach our final destination."

"That's not a bad idea," Rashid said. "Perhaps we should spend a night somewhere and wash off the dust of the road. It's just good etiquette."

"Do you think I could wander the town in my free time, then?" I asked. "There's nothing I want to buy right now, but I'd like to see the sights."

"As would I," Lynne agreed. "May I join you?"

"Sure. If you don't mind, that is."

"Wonderful. Ines?"

"As you wish, my lady."

In no time at all, we had parked the coach at a nearby station and alighted. But as we made our way to the golem workshop, Shawza stopped us.

"Master Rashid, I would advise against taking this road," he said.

"Shawza? What's wrong?"

"There's some kind of quarrel up ahead. I believe it would be best to avoid getting embroiled in unnecessary trouble."

"A quarrel?" Lynne repeated. "Sirene, did you notice it too?"

"Yes, my lady. I can hear arguing. I must admit...I'm a little curious."

"Is that so?"

"Shall we heed Shawza's advice?" Rashid suggested. "There are plenty of other workshops around. What do you think, Noor?"

"Hold on," I said. "Someone's collapsed."

A closer look down the road Shawza had indicated revealed

someone on the ground amid a crowd of people. I couldn't quite make them out, but I recognized the collapsed figure as a beastfolk girl, much like Sirene. She was on her hands and knees while a man shouted at her.

"She's clearly hurt. Why isn't anyone helping her?"

"Noor, it's best to leave things be," Rashid cautioned.

"Why?"

"She's a slave. And in all likelihood, that man is her owner."

"What reason is that not to intervene?"

"She's his 'possession.' The city's laws state that he can do with her as he pleases. If you obstruct him, you could be penalized."

"Is that really how things are here?"

"But...we can't just leave her!" Lynne exclaimed, evidently distressed.

"Lady Lynneburg," Rashid said, "I took you to be wise enough to respect foreign laws. Was I mistaken?"

"There's a limit to what I'll—!"

As we approached, the man continued to berate the groveling beastfolk.

"Useless incompetent. I paid good money for you! The old crone at the trading house said you were healthy and skilled, but it's like you don't even *want* to work! I'm taking a loss here!"

"I'm sorry..." the girl choked out between sobs, her voice quavering. "I'm...sorry!"

The commotion had drawn a crowd, yet no one moved to help. From their smiles, I suspected some were there to enjoy the show.

"Your apologies are worthless," the man spat. "Ugh. I signed the contract and everything. Can't even return you!"

"I... I'm sorry!"

As tears streamed down the collared girl's face, I noticed the bruises on her cheeks. Her body was covered in scrapes and scratches, a clear sign that the man had been beating her.

"How cruel," Lynne said. "We must stop him at once."

"How many slaves in her position do you think there are in this city?" Rashid asked. "I don't mean to criticize your kindness, but you can't expect to save every one you come across."

“Even so— Instructor?”

The apparent “owner” had raised his arm to strike. Before I knew it, I had dashed through the onlookers to stop him, leaving my Black Blade behind.

“Ack! Who the blazes are you?! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to grab you that hard.”

I now stood face-to-face with the man, keeping a firm hold on his wrist.



Chapter 166: Sarenza, the Merchant Capital, Part 2

"What do you think you're playing at?! Do you know how enormous my losses will be if I'm too injured to work tomorrow?! Do you, punk?!"

No sooner had I released the man than he'd started screaming at me, feverishly rubbing his wrist all the while. He wasn't actually hurt, from what I could tell, so I ignored him and turned to the girl cowering on the ground.

"Are you okay?"

Up close, I could see that her arms were bruised as well. I pressed a hand to her skin and activated [Low Heal] without delay. The injuries must have looked worse than they actually were because they vanished quickly, but there was nothing my skill could do to remove the bloodstains from her clothes. She was a sorry sight indeed.

"There," I said. "All better."

"Hey!" the man snarled. "First you ignore me, then you touch what's mine without permission?"

"People aren't possessions. I might not know the ins and outs of whatever's going on here, but you're supposed to care for her, aren't you? Isn't this a little harsh?"

The man scowled at me, still massaging his wrist. "Care for her? Can you not see the dirty little beast ears sticking out of her head? She's not a person—she's *beastfolk*."

"So what?"

"Is this your first time seeing one, or what? Their bodies aren't made of the same stuff as ours. A beating's nothing to them. Besides, *she's* been a debt slave since her parents' generation. You've got to be strict—enforce a little discipline, you know?"

"Since her parents' generation?"

"Pitiful, isn't it? But you reap what you sow. Her parents kicked the bucket before they could pay off the damages they racked up, so now it's on her. Has been since she was born."

"But...why?"

The man stared at me as if unable to believe his ears. "What do you mean, why? What a stupid question. Children inherit their parents' debts. The kids of criminals are criminals themselves. That's all there is to it. She has the very *important* duty of working hard to atone for her parents' sins. Get it?" Chuckling under his breath, he drew a long whip from his bag.

"What are you planning to do with that?" I asked.

"I *plan* to put this girl to work for a long time to come. Can't do that unless she knows her place." He shot me a look sharp enough to cut glass as he growled, "You'd better not try to stop me."

The man swung his whip at the girl, but I caught it midway along its length before it could reach her. The tip snapped downward, tearing into the toe of his shoe. Immediately, his face flushed in anger.

"You no-good punk! I've had about enough of you! If you think paying damages is the worst you have to fear, then think again!"

Those at the front of the crowd simply continued to watch, smiles playing on their faces. Even the people behind them seemed more curious than concerned.

"Gah, it hurts so bad," the man whined. "Thanks to you, I think my foot's just as busted as my wrist. What are you going to do about it?"

"They both look fine to me."

"Oh? Is that any way to treat an injured man? Looking at you, I guess you don't know the market price for injury liability." He turned to the crowd. "You all saw what he did, right? From beginning to end?"

"Sure did," one of the spectators chimed in.

"Of course," added another.

As if on cue, some of the onlookers began to encircle me. Rather than being mere bystanders, it seemed they were actually the man's

friends.

"You all know each other?" I asked. "Why didn't you stop him, then?"

"Why would we?" one shot back. "He bought her, fair and square."

"Don't tell me you intend to buy out her contract," sneered a second. "You don't look like a guy with much to his name."

The men around me exchanged grins. It didn't seem like I'd be able to get through to them.

"So you were hitting her because of money?" I asked. "If you're that desperate for coin, take mine."

"Whoa there. You're serious about buying out her contract, then?" The ringleader of the group eyed me closely, whip still in hand. "She's a high-end slave, despite how she looks—six million gald at minimum market price. Throw in sundry expenses and compensation for the injuries you caused me, and I'd say it comes to ten million in all. Now, not to judge based on appearances, but I don't think you—"

"Is this enough?" I took a single coin from my pouch and placed it in the man's hand. He stared at it for a moment, evidently taken aback.

"A...greatgold? It's not minted by House Sarenza, but...yeah, this is real. Where'd *you* get this kind of money?"

Once he was sure my coin was genuine, the look in the man's eyes changed completely. He laughed and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"Ha ha ha! You've got deep pockets, don't you, friend? Why didn't you say something sooner? I don't know how you earned it, but you must be sitting on a pretty stack of coin, eh? Gambled big and won, did you?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Then you must be troubled for a way to spend it."

"I am, actually."

"Say no more. Our company's just around the corner. Let's have some tea and chat about how to use that fortune of yours."

I was at a loss for how to deal with the sudden change in the men's behavior when I heard a delighted peal of laughter from Rashid behind me. "Ah ha ha!" he exclaimed. "Things have taken a rather interesting turn, I see!"

"Who might you be?" the slave owner asked. "You aren't laughing at *me*, are you?"

"Forgive me, but from the look of your armband, I gather you belong to the one and only Galen Company. As an executive, no less."

"Oh? You've heard of us, have you? Now I *really* want to know who you are."

"Some novice merchant brat, by the look of him," another man provided.

"Yes, quite!" Rashid pronounced. "What discerning eyes you gentlemen have! But I'd expect no less from executives of the Galen Company, a temporary worker dispatch enterprise directly affiliated with none other than House Sarenza. I am but an inexperienced fool who lost all of his assets the other day—and as luck would have it, I was *just* mustering up the courage to ask a more experienced businessman to teach me the ways of his craft from scratch!"

There was a mocking quality to Rashid's smile, and the men turned suspicious eyes on him.

"You've got a silver tongue, kid. For your own sake, you'd be wise not to take such a haughty tone with us. I assume you already know this, but we've got contracts with security firms that have primal golems in their arsenal."

"But of course. Even as a greenhorn, I am well aware of the frightening extent of your influence. I ask only to greet the first-rate merchants of the Galen Company, hoping that I might learn from you and secure my future."

Still, the mocking smile stayed constant on his face.

"Listen, kid," one of the men said, "I'll do you a kindness and overlook the attitude. If you know our name, then you know the way we solve disputes, don't you? Come with us. We'll treat you nice—promise."

As the crowd closed in on Rashid, attempting to seize him,

Shawza stepped between them and swept their arms away. The men frowned at first, but their expressions soon turned to amusement as they studied the one-armed beastfolk.

"Who are you, tough guy? The kid's sitter?"

Another member of the group sneered at Rashid. "Guess your big attitude's paid dividends. You've got a one-armed, one-eyed beastfolk slave as your bodyguard!"

One of the men pushed Shawza by the shoulder—an attempt at intimidation, I assumed—and got a taste of his own medicine in return. He stumbled back and fell squarely on his rear.

"Cur!" the toppled onlooker spat. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh my. That won't do, Shawza," Rashid interjected. "No matter who you're dealing with, the law can't protect you if you're the first to raise your hand. And with so many witnesses, I can't imagine the court would take your side."

"What if there *weren't* any witnesses, sir?"

"Oh?"

"It might be the simplest way to resolve this matter without issue."

Rashid smiled as he watched Shawza examine the men one by one. "No witnesses means no crime to sue over. It's a fine idea—somewhat irrational, but fine nonetheless. If that's how you'd like to proceed, then by all means."

"Understood, sir."

Rashid turned away, and Shawza vanished. A moment later, the clothes of everyone who had accosted us burst apart. The men dropped to the ground in surprise, now half naked.

"Wh-What?!"

"Huh? A-Ack! My clothes!"

"What just happened?!"

"S-Stop laughing! All of you, stop laughing!"

A stir, then stifled chuckles rippled through the rest of the crowd at the unexpected sight. The exposed men twisted and turned, desperately trying to cover themselves with their hands.

"M-Mongrel scum! How dare you shame us!"

"How unfortunate," Shawza remarked. "You really should be wearing clothes if you intend to be out and about."

"D-Don't mess with us! *You're* the one to blame!"

"Am I, now? What proof do you have that I was involved?"

"Huh?! The hell are you on about?! Everybody here saw it! Do you really expect to get away with this?!"

Shawza looked at each of the men berating him, his gaze impassive. "A question, if I may: Was it just your clothing that was cut, or have you noticed anything unusual about your necks?"

"Our necks?"

There was a pause as the men all reached for their throats...then shrieked. It wasn't much, but there was blood on their hands. As their panic escalated, Shawza nonchalantly drew a knife from the folds of his clothes and showed it to the crowd.

"Let us go over what happened," he began. "This, in my hand, is a knife. You gentlemen claim that I used it to tear apart your clothing and wound you. Is that correct?"

"Wh-What of it?"

"Did you witness the moment this knife touched your necks? If so, I would be amenable to taking this to a courtroom. I should warn you, however, that legal evidence demands great precision—the who, where, when, how, and why of what you wish to present. You must know every detail, down to the order in which you were cut. Incidentally, that gold coin was fifth."

"Come again...?"

The slave owner stared down at his hand—at the gold coin, now sliced in two. As his expression froze, the two halves fell to the ground, striking the stone with high-pitched *clinks*.

"Or did you not witness anything?" Shawza asked. "I could always demonstrate again—slower, of course, so that you and everyone present can see. This time, instead of merely breaking the skin, I'll neatly bury my blade in your innards. May it be etched into your minds so deeply that you remember every excruciating detail for your eventual court testimony."

"Wh-What are you saying...?"

"So, who wants to be first? If you'd care to introduce yourselves,

I'd be glad to go in that order."

The crowd uttered not a sound in response.

"Or would you prefer to retract your claim and admit you saw nothing?" Shawza continued to question them, his tone cold and detached. "I don't mind either way."

The men had turned pale long ago, their bodies drenched in cold sweat. Gone was their bravado, and any words they sought to speak were quickly swallowed as their survival instincts kicked in.

Shawza met the group's wavering eyes before leaning in close to one man, speaking in his ear. "Did you perhaps not understand me? I gave you two options. Will you keep your silence about what happened here, or will you keep it eternally? Choose." He punctuated the threat with one last intimidating stare, which proved enough to send the half-naked men running.

"Eek! I... I didn't see anything! Nothing at all!"

"Me neither!"

"M-Monster! S-Someone, help!"

"W-Waaaaaahhh!"

Even the man who had drawn his whip scattered with his companions. Rashid watched him go, smiling in amusement as he picked up the halves of the cleaved gold coin and tossed them after him.

"You forgot your money!"

The pieces soared through the dry desert air and struck the man cleanly in the back of the head. He shrieked in pain, stooped to retrieve them, and then disappeared into the crowded streets, rubbing the fresh scratches left behind.

"Thanks for that, Rashid," I said. "You too, Shawza."

"I didn't do it for you," the latter retorted. "It just happened to be the best way to resolve the situation without a fuss."

Rashid chuckled. "I hadn't intended to get involved, but they were so much fun that I just couldn't resist. I considered slapping them with a reparations fee so enormous that even their grandchildren would inherit it. Shawza's initiative took me by surprise, though."

"It was an emergency measure. Interacting with such lowlifes

only creates more problems down the line. That's why I suggested we take a detour."

"Yet you did a remarkable job of dealing with them." Rashid turned his attention to the girl cowering on the ground. "Still, Shawza, don't you think you're a bit *too* callous? Advising a detour, of all things, when the daughter of one of your former brethren is suffering right before you."

Shawza cast his eye down, away from her, and said nothing in response.

"Well, don't take it as an attack. It's your business, after all. I just wonder if you *weren't* being callous—if you were simply too scared to face the consequences of your actions."

"I..."

"We've been together long enough that I can tell what you're thinking: 'What would saving the odd person on a whim even achieve?'" Rashid continued with a smile. "But that's how you always justify running away. Will you ever achieve your revenge like that?"

Shawza's expression darkened into a frown.

Now that the show was over, what remained of the gathered crowd started to disperse, melting away into the bustle of the city. I spotted Lynne and the others approaching us through the gaps.

Chapter 167: Sarenza, the Merchant Capital, Part 3

"Instructor, may I examine that girl's injuries?" Lynne asked. "I believe I saw you heal her, but just to be certain..."

"Yeah, I was just about to ask," I said. "I gave her an emergency patch-up, but I'd appreciate a second look from someone who knows what she's doing."

"Of course." Lynne tenderly led the girl, who was still clearly shaken, to the side of the street, where she began treating the last of her scrapes and bruises. "Come, now. It's okay. You're safe now."

I looked around, watching other pedestrians stream by. The crowd that had gathered was nowhere to be found, and people carried on with their days as if nothing had happened at all. How strange.

"You should be all better now," Lynne said. It seemed her treatment of the girl was complete. "Can you stand?"

Rather than respond, the girl merely froze up again, letting out a high-pitched squeak. "I... I'm s-sorry." Her face was clean of any blood or dirt, thanks to Lynne, but the terror in her eyes remained.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Lynne assured her. "The scary man's gone, okay? You can rest easy."

"H-Huh? M-Master's...gone?"

"He's not your master anymore. The bad people who hurt you all ran away, so you don't need to worry about them any longer, all right?"

Lynne's soothing smile and gentle voice gradually eased the girl's confusion. As she calmed down, clarity seemed to dawn on her.

"U-Um, does that mean *you're* my new master?"

"No, I'm not. If anyone would fit that description, I suppose it would be Instructor Noor over there."

No sooner had the girl's gaze shifted from Lynne to me than she scrambled to her feet and hurriedly bowed her head. "I-It's nice to meet you, new master! I... I'll do whatever you ask, so...so..." She let out a whimper. "I... I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"What's wrong?" I asked, looking at her curiously. "You didn't do anything."

"Noor."

I turned to see that Rolo had come up behind me.

"She's afraid of you," he said. "Well, of all adult men, really."

"Afraid?"

"Mm-hmm. She fears being hit whenever one gets close to her. I used to be the same."

"Right... I...think I get it?"

"If you spend more time together, she should come to realize that you'd never lay a hand on her. It might take a while, though."

"Ah... I'll give her some space, then."

I suspected that Rolo was right, and seeing the girl tremble as I got closer made me all the more certain. Hoping to be more considerate, I moved a few steps away and practically hid behind Ines, letting Lynne do the rest.

"It's okay. None of us are going to hurt you," she said. "I'll start by introducing myself, okay? My name is Lynneburg Clays. It's a little long, I know, so feel free to call me 'Lynne.'"

"Ly... Clay... M-Mistress Lynne?"

"There's no need for the 'mistress' part. I'm an apprentice to Instructor Noor, the same as you."

"Th-Then, does that mean...you're a slave too?"

"Not at all. I'm what you would call a *page*, someone who serves another in order to learn from them. Though, strictly speaking, it was I who forced the relationship upon him..."

"A p-page...?"

"Basically, we're in pretty much the same position. If you don't mind, could you tell me your name?"

The girl still appeared fearful, but Lynne's smile must have assuaged her; she raised her head, looked around at us, and said, "M-My name is Mina. My mom gave it to me."

"Mina? That's wonderful."

"B-But...everyone says it's a dumb name, for dumb beastfolk."

"That's not true. Here, there's someone you should meet. This is Sirene. She's beastfolk, as you are."

"Y-You're beastfolk too, miss?" The girl stared at Sirene, wide-eyed. "D-Does that mean you're that person's—master's—slave too?"

Sirene looked in my direction at the very mention of the word "slave," equally as wide-eyed. "No, I'm not," she said. "I serve Lady Lynneburg, but not as a slave. She's more my employer. That means, um... How do I even begin to explain this? Anyway, I'm not a slave, just an...employee. Does that make sense?"

"You're not a slave? But you're beastfolk," the girl muttered. There was a slight pause before she echoed, "An em...em-ploy-yee...?"

"That's right."

Sirene crouched down to the girl's eye level. They looked at each other, not saying a word, ears twitching all the while. I didn't have a clue what they were doing, but it seemed to help the girl accept that Sirene wasn't a slave, if nothing else.

"O-Okay. I think I get it," she said at last. "You're Lynne's slave...but not a slave. You're a new kind of slave. An em...employ-yee."

"Not quite, but I suppose that's fine for now."

There still seemed to be some communication issues, but speaking with a fellow beastfolk had put the girl's mind at ease. As I stayed behind Ines, trying not to cause a stir, Rashid approached me with a smile.

"So then, Noor... It's all well and good that you've purchased her contract, but what now? Do you have a plan for taking care of her?"

"I don't, no. Truth is, I haven't considered it at all."

"That's fine—you can simply start now," Rashid said with a shrug. "When it comes to taking servants of your own, teaching them skills, and raising them to work for your sake, the calls are yours to make. She's tougher than she looks, to boot."

"Thanks for the advice, I guess...?"

For some strange reason, Rashid seemed to assume I planned to

take the girl in as a slave. My first idea had been to give her some coin and tell her to live as she pleased, but after what we'd all witnessed, that was most likely out of the question. I doubted she'd make it very far in this city on her own.

"By the way..." I said, keeping half an eye on Lynne's seemingly successful efforts to keep the girl in high spirits. "That whole mess with the locals—is that common in this city?"

"More or less," he agreed. "Rare is the fool who commits such acts of violence in public, but behind closed doors? It's an everyday occurrence. Beastfolk slaves stand on precarious ground in this society, with no one to advocate for them. Generally speaking, they can't protest the way they're treated—not even when it threatens their lives."

"How did things get so bad?"

"To put it simply, it's how the city wants them to be."

"The whole city?"

Rashid spread his arms wide, gesturing to the passersby. "You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you? The looks on their faces as they watched that girl be beaten? That man's compatriots weren't the only ones complicit. They were violent and tyrannical, true, but only because they exist in a society that endorses it. The foundation of their cruelty is the amusement of the onlookers who act as though it doesn't involve them. They care about their close circle, but anyone else might as well be refuse on the side of the street to them. In fact, when it's to their benefit—or even when it just adds a little excitement to their otherwise mundane lives—they'll wish misfortune unto others without a second thought."

An amused smile spread across his face as he watched the bustling townscape.

"But who can blame them? They're obeying the status quo. In business, the presence of winners necessitates the existence of losers. Everyone wants to be on the side making a profit, so it's only natural to cozy up to those with good prospects. Sympathize with one unfortunate soul and you might as well sympathize with them all—there's no end to it. So they turn a blind eye to the weak, the losers, and those with no potential. This is the city of trade, after all;

it was *built* on apathy toward the weak."

"The weak and the losers, huh?" I repeated.

"The most fitting example of which are beastfolk slaves. If anything, many depend on the fact that they'll continue to suffer and lose."

"In what sense?" I asked, following Rashid's gaze to the beastfolk girl still speaking with Lynne and the others.

"The world of commerce is as impartial as it is cruel. For one person to 'gain,' another must 'lose.' Beastfolk slaves like that girl, on top of being born with sturdy bodies, are obedient and docile. They're goods to be traded that bring vast sums of wealth to their owners. They carry out whatever tasks they're given with excellence, and they fetch a high price on the market. Sometimes, they even take pride in those facts and, as sad as it is, grow into adults who maintain that the sole reason for their existence is to serve."

"But that can't be the norm, can it? Don't they ever aspire to more?"

"Some do, but very few beastfolk slaves receive a proper education. Most adults can't read, which cuts them off from the insights of literature, and what options do they have then? Quite honestly, they're such a good-natured people that it makes you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. But as a result, they've ended up weak, ignorant, and pitiable, fated to be used by utter incompetents who somehow managed to solidify their position as the winners of society. In a sense, the beastfolk are the 'perfect' losers—prey born into captivity who keep on giving."

Rashid gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders and shook his head, chuckling. "But I suppose none of that really matters. You won't be able to enjoy this city if you let such things get to you. We've dealt with the trouble, so why don't we do a bit of shopping, as we originally intended? You wanted to see that golem workshop, didn't you? It's just up ahead."

"Yeah, I did, but—"

"Noor. A moment of your time?"

"Rolo?"

"Oh, the demonfolk boy," Rashid said. "Do you object to our

destination?”

“No, not at all. It’s just...the girl. She hasn’t told us about her little brother yet.”

I glanced at Rolo. “Her little brother?”

“Mm-hmm. She’s been thinking about him this whole time, but she’s holding back because of us.”

We all returned our attention to the girl, who recoiled in the face of our stares. She opened her mouth for a moment, then closed it, seemingly thinking the better of saying anything.

“If you feel comfortable, could you tell us about your family?” Lynne asked gently, still crouched down next to her. “Do you have a little brother?”

The girl looked over at me, almost as if seeking my approval. Only when I gave her a small nod did the words start trickling out.

“M-Mom and dad died...when I was little. But...but, my brother and me have always been together. From when we were small until...y-yesterday.”

“What happened?” Lynne asked.

“H-He’s not as tough as me, so he gets sick really easily. And medicine costs a lot. My old master thought he was too much of a bother, so he bought only me. M-My brother’s really weak right now, so...so...”

The girl’s eyes wandered downward, her voice becoming weaker with each word. She spoke between sniffles, tears welling in her eyes and running in rivulets down her cheeks.

“A-As I was leaving, the trader said he was no good to sell and took him away somewhere. A-And then...then... I don’t know... *S*orry. I’m sorry!”

She curled up into herself, unmoving.

“You’re very brave for telling us,” Lynne said, placing a hand on the girl’s back. “Thank you. I’m sorry for making you relive such a painful memory.”

“She said her brother was sick, right?” I mused. That must have been why she was cowering on the street in the first place.

“Yes,” Lynne said. “If only we knew where he was.” Her expression was grave—yet Rashid appeared to be having fun.

"Hmm... I see," he muttered. "Perhaps I was right about who sold her..."

"Have you figured something out?" I asked.

"The emblem on the black collar around her neck—I'm fairly certain I've seen it before. I suspect she was purchased from one of the slave trading houses belonging to the Galen Company—the employer of those thugs we just sent running. It shouldn't be far from here, if my memory hasn't failed me."

"So you think her brother's there?"

"That would be my bet, yes."

As ominous as Rashid's never-faltering smile seemed, I exchanged glances with Lynne, and we both nodded.

"Lynne, do you mind if we leave the golem workshop for another time?" I asked.

"Not at all. It seems haste is in order."

"Are you okay with that too, Rashid? Sorry for the trouble."

"No need to apologize. If that's what you two desire, I see no reason to object. It's your coin, after all." His smile grew even more mischievous. "In fact, I rather think *this* shopping trip is shaping up to be much more enjoyable than any visit to a golem workshop."

"In that case, I don't mean to rush you, but could you show us the way?" Lynne asked.

"But of course, Lady Lynneburg. As luck would have it, I should have an old friend in the Galen Company. This is the perfect opportunity to brush the dust off our relationship."

"Then let's go. Ines, may I trouble you to bring Mina along?"

"As you wish, my lady. Come now, Mina; hop on my back. My armor isn't the most comfortable, but you shouldn't need to tolerate it for long."

"H-Huh? Who are...?"

"I am Ines, Lady Lynneburg's attendant. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I-In... Nice to..."

As Ines lifted the girl onto her back, I walked over to where I'd left the Black Blade in the middle of the street and picked it up. It appeared to have been blocking traffic.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go.”
Rashid took the lead, guiding us farther into the city.

Chapter 168: At the Slave Trader's, Part 1 (Rashid's Acquaintance)

Rashid led us down a complex series of lanes and side streets, getting us to our destination in barely any time at all. The building was far larger and more pleasing to the eye than I'd anticipated, surpassing even the library back in the royal capital.

"Is this the store?" I asked. "It's a lot bigger than I expected."

"It is," Rashid said. "This is the trading house we're looking for, though I'll admit it's expanded quite substantially since last I saw it. Business must be booming."

We made our way inside, stepping into a spacious lobby. At the back, an old woman in strange attire sat behind a white stone reception counter, puffing away at a tobacco pipe. I spent several moments gazing around the room, unsure of where to go, before the old woman impatiently beckoned me over.

"Excuse me, sir? You look a little wet behind the ears. First time at a trading house?"

"Yeah, this is all very new to me."

"That so? Well, I'll see to your friends behind you in a moment. First things first: You've come looking for a slave, I presume?"

"That's right. We're here solely on business."

"You...don't say. Well, since you're a first-time customer, I'll give you the rundown." The old woman examined me critically from head to toe before breathing a short sigh. "The slaves our company deals in can be separated into three broad categories: for labor, for knowledge, and for companionship. The first group are sturdier than most, whereas the second are better educated, making them more adaptable to a variety of work. That's reflected in their pricing, of

course. More than anything else, however, we of the Galen Company are known for our pets and companions. Since your feet carried you here, of all places, I assume that's what you're looking for? They're...rather expensive, I'm afraid."

She really seemed to think I was broke. I supposed that I couldn't blame her—after everything we'd been through, my clothes were in dire need of a wash. So was I, thinking about it.

"Actually, I'm looking for someone in particular," I explained, then gestured over my shoulder. "That girl's little brother."

"Excuse me?" The old woman gawked at my request. "Be reasonable, dear boy. We deal in slaves; I can't even begin to imagine how many brats her age we buy and sell every day. If you're going to obstruct business, then please... Hmm? Now that I get a better look at her...yes, I *do* remember her brother."

"You do?"

"Yes, though I'm afraid we can't sell him to you."

I exchanged a glance with Lynne before turning back to the old woman. "What do you mean you can't?"

"How could we? We *just* moved him to the quarantine annex. He's weak and diseased—already at death's door. If we sold him, it would be a blemish on our establishment's good reputation."

Mina must have heard the old woman's words, because she leaped down from Ines's back and ran up to the counter, latching on to it. "P-Please! Please help my brother!" she pleaded tearfully. "I... I'll do anything! So, please!"

"Your tears are nothing but a bother for me, little lady. Why not ask your master first? Not that I'd recommend it. We built the quarantine annex to prevent sick slaves from contaminating the rest—once they go in, there's no coming out."

"N-No!"

Despite Mina's desperation, the old woman looked nothing more than annoyed.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" I pressed. "I'm asking as well."

"Tsk. You're slow to catch on, aren't you, sir? Sorry, but when I say a slave isn't for sale, I mean it. Now, off with you! Keep pestering me, and I'll have to call someone."

"Pardon the interruption, madam." Rashid approached, sidestepping Mina, who still clung desperately to the counter. He leaned close to the old woman and flashed her a smile. "Just for reference, how much would it cost us for you to consider making the transaction?"

"Excuse me? What nonsense are you...? Hmm. Haven't seen you before." The old woman examined Rashid's face and attire closely before letting out a quiet sigh. "Well, fine. I suppose it wouldn't be *impossible* to enter negotiations, as long as you cover the necessary costs. At a rough estimate, let's see—sundry expenses, the slave's base price, our commission... Two hundred million gald should do."

"Two hundred million?" Lynne and I repeated, exchanging looks.

"Don't take this as me trying to cheat you. To restore the slave's health to the bare minimum necessary for sale, we'd need to pay for his medicine and treatment—and to do *that*, we'd need to pay the expenses associated with handling a person with a communicable disease, as dictated by Sarenzan law. There's also the costly procedure of re-registering him as a slave; we removed him from the record, since we expected him to die soon."

"How about it, Noor?" Rashid asked. "That's her offer."

"Well, I've got the money on hand, so sure. Can we do the deal now?"

"I thought you'd say that," the old woman continued. "What kind of imbecile would burn such a vast sum on a beastfolk brat with one foot in the grave? If you finally understand the idiocy you've been spouting, then leave and don't come back until... Hold on. I beg your pardon? Did you just *agree* to pay?"

I took two platinums from my pouch and set them on the counter. The old woman's eyes flew open, and she reached toward the coins with trembling fingers.

"P-Platinum? R-R-Real platinum?!"

"Is that enough?" I asked. "I've got more if it's not."

"I-It's plenty, sir! We'll have your product ready for sale at once! P-Please, wait right there! I won't be long!" The old woman sprang up and made to leave, only to stop at the sight of a plump, well-dressed man sauntering down a hallway toward us.

“Granny Eija?” he asked. “What’s all the fuss about?”

“M-Master Galen!”

“Making deals behind my back, are we? How many times have I told you not to do business on your own?”

“B-But sir! Our valued customer here wants a slave we’ve already moved to the quarantine annex. He’s given us a two hundred million advance—in coin!”

“What? Two hundred million, you say?” The plump man studied us with suspicion, as if trying to identify us on looks alone.

“Hey, Galen.” Rashid raised a hand, grinning. “Been a while.”

The plump man’s frown quickly morphed into a look of surprise. “I-It can’t be! Young Master Rashid?!”

“In the flesh. I’m glad you still remember my face after all this time.”

“‘Young Master Rashid’?” Lynne and I repeated. We turned to our companion, who seemed not to mind all the fuss. He made his way toward the plump man, his arms wide and welcoming.

“It’s good to see you well, Galen. And your business too, from what I can see. This place has grown so large that I almost didn’t recognize it at first.”

“I could say the same of you, young master! I’m glad you’re in good health! But I thought you were governing the City Forgotten by Time. When did you return to the capital?”

“Quite recently, as it happens. Much has changed of late. Noor here is the new proprietor.”

“Th-This gentleman?”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“R-Right... I’m Galen, manager of this establishment. Pleasure.”

I shook the hand he held out to me. It was unusually soft, except for the many rings he wore, all inlaid with gemstones.

“Now, Galen,” Rashid said, “as your lovely receptionist claimed, we’re here to buy. May we continue with our business?”

“But of course! May I ask what you desire? A slave we’ve moved to the quarantine annex?”

“Yes, there’s a certain someone we’re looking for. This girl’s younger brother.”

"That slave's...? I see. Her collar does indeed bear our emblem. In that case, why don't I show you the way?"

"I appreciate your making this so easy for us, Galen."

We followed the plump man—apparently the company's manager—down a long hallway. He and Rashid must have been old acquaintances; they walked together at the front of our group, chatting with perfect smiles that appeared to have been plucked from elsewhere and pasted on their faces.

"Still, Young Master Rashid, I must say—you truly have grown. When I heard you were departing for the City Forgotten by Time, why, I didn't know what would become of you. I can't begin to express how grateful I am that we've had this opportunity to meet again."

"You've always had a talent for exaggeration," Rashid remarked. "My departure was just me running away. Although, I'll admit, I've found myself pleasantly surprised; life as a resort manager and tax collector was more fun than I ever imagined."

"You don't say. I'm glad to hear it."

Galen's polite demeanor seemed notably different from his initial appearance. He kept rubbing his hands together, making his rings jangle, and would occasionally turn back to fix Rashid with a smile.

"Rashid," I said, "you mentioned he's an old acquaintance?"

"Yes, I made use of his services as a child. Though if you were to say that was all our relationship amounted to, you wouldn't be mistaken."

"Oh, no, perish the thought!" the plump man exclaimed. "It's thanks to you, young master, that the Galen Company became one of the top businesses in the city! Without your patronage, I never would have made it this far."

"You flatter me. Oh, but Galen—the slave? Have we still yet to arrive?" Rashid stopped. The hallway we found ourselves in faced a courtyard, on the other side of which was a large metal door. Several men stood before it, clearly armed. "I do believe we've passed this place already."

"Ah, do excuse me. We've had so much extension work done that even I sometimes lose my way! Please—our destination is right

through that door.” The plump man turned and barked an order to the armed men. “You lot. Open it.”

“Sir,” came a chorus of voices.

The heavy door opened with a low creak, revealing a dim, windowless hallway. I could see why they called it the quarantine annex—entering and exiting was no easy feat.

“This way, everyone,” Galen said. “It’s rather dark, so watch your step.”

The building’s stone hallways were moldy and decrepit, almost as if we had wandered into a cave. We continued down a series of long passages, the air growing more stagnant and choking with each step.

“You weren’t wrong about this place being dark,” I said. “The air’s pretty bad as well. Are there really people staying here?”

Lynne walked beside me, a grave look on her face. “It seems far from sanitary. In these conditions, curing even a treatable illness would be a challenge.”

“No need to worry—this is a storage area for goods on clearance, for which death is the only recourse,” Galen assured us, the corners of a smile peeking out from behind the gold-embroidered cloth he used to cover his mouth. “Quite the pitiable circumstances, but the law clearly requires a stringent quarantine environment. My hands are unfortunately tied.”

We continued to follow the plump man until, at last, we arrived at a miserable room that resembled a basement. If we had set foot in a cave before, then this was a chasm, the air more oppressive than ever.

In front of us, a single masked man guarded an enormous set of metallic doors. He pulled a black lever set into the wall, and a mechanism of some kind creaked as the entrance slowly started to open. Somehow, the hallway beyond it seemed even darker and more moldering than those we’d passed through already. No matter how you looked at it, this was less a quarantine area for the sick and more a waiting room for the dying.

“We’re going in there?” I asked, staring into the darkness ahead.

“Indeed,” Galen said. “However”—he turned his eyes on Shawza

and Sirene—"I must ask that those two wait here. Beastfolk are not permitted beyond this point, I'm afraid."

"Is that so?" Lynne asked, her eyes narrowed as she moved to intercept his gaze. "Why not?"

"The laws of Sarenza forbid them from entering a slave trader's establishment, lest they band together with their kind and revolt. I have already been quite generous in allowing them this far. However, to permit them to go any further would create a number of problems. Isn't that right, Young Master Rashid?"

Still smiling, Galen turned to Rashid, seeking his agreement. Shawza looked at his employer with a troubled expression.

"It's true," Rashid admitted, returning the plump man's smile. "Shawza—you heard the man."

"Understood, sir."

"Thank you," Galen said. "And your companion, Lady Lynneburg?"

"Very well," Lynne conceded, exchanging a glance with Rolo. "Sorry, Sirene, but please wait here. Take care of Mina until we return."

"Yes, my lady."

"Mina, wait here with Sirene, okay?" Rolo said. "You've nothing to fear. We'll bring your brother back in no time."

"O-Okay!"

"I apologize for all the red tape," Galen confessed. "The law can be so stifling, don't you think? By all rights, I should have each of you sign a waiver absolving my company of responsibility should you contract an illness while we're here. However, as you seem to be in a hurry, I'm willing to omit that process."

"Thank you, Galen," Rashid said. "I hope we aren't imposing on you."

"No, not at all. For your companions, Young Master Rashid, this is nothing. Now come—this way."

We ventured into the darkness, the plump man leading the way, leaving Shawza, Sirene, and Mina in our wake. There was a loud groan as the great metal doors shut behind us.

"This place is dreadful," Lynne remarked. "To think there are people here..."

“The ventilation leaves a lot to be desired,” I agreed. “Could they not have added a window or two?”

“And to think we haven’t been served even a single cup of tea,” Rashid added.

“I can’t say that bothers me much.”

“But it’s one of the basic tenets of business. Isn’t it, Galen?”

Only then did we notice that the plump man had vanished. Before we could even think to react, a thick iron gate fell from above, crashing to the ground and barring our return.

“Galen?” Rashid said again. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“My sincerest apologies, Young Master Rashid.” The man’s voice echoed from the darkness beyond the gate. “In my absentmindedness, I neglected to inform you that our company received a missive from your family just the other day.”

“A missive from House Sarenza, hmm? Might you care to elaborate?”

“It requested that I obstruct you and your companions by any means necessary, promising lavish rewards in the event of my success. As I recall, there was even mention of receiving a chair in the city’s senior Merchants Guild.”

A new noise from the darkness caused us to turn. Armed men were advancing toward us—the same group that Shawza had sent running on the street.

“Ah, I understand,” Rashid said. “You wish for us to accompany these gentlemen for a time to secure your rise in the world.”

“I would be most grateful if you would comply. However, as I suspect you might not be so inclined... Well, you know the rest.”

The plump man raised his hand, and several enormous golems rose out of the ground. They must have been cramped down there, I thought, but the hallway was more than spacious enough for them to bring their might to bear.

“Primal golems?” Rashid mused aloud. “It seems my family has placed a great deal of trust in you.”

“Indeed, and I could not be more grateful. They are quite useful, as you know.”

“Out of curiosity...do you happen to know who this young lady

beside me is?”

“But of course: Lady Lynneburg, our most esteemed guest from the Kingdom of Clays. The master did not specify whether I should leave any of you alive or dead, but I intend on sparing her. She will prove to be a most useful bargaining chip in the future.”

“I see. How very rational of you.”

“Such is the way of the world, Young Master Rashid. Be a friend and keep still so we can get this over with quickly.”

A masked man stepped up next to Galen, carrying a board of some kind. He gave it several quick taps, and the golems raised their arms—causing the cavernous hallway to shake and dust to cascade down from the ceiling. Taking advantage of our surprise, the men standing between them advanced on us, blades drawn and eyes on our necks.

“Excellent, Galen. Excellent,” Rashid said with a chuckle. He looked to be enjoying himself. “How very true to your nature. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“I *am* grateful to you, Young Master Rashid,” Galen noted. “You always treated me well in our previous dealings, and it was through your guidance that a humble merchant such as I was able to rise so high. However, I now have many employees to feed and clothe. You must understand.” He turned to the masked man at his side. “Do it. Only the master’s guest need be spared.”

“Sir.”

The massive golems started their approach.

“Galen, my friend,” Rashid said with a grin, maintaining an air of calm even as the stone behemoths closed in on us. “Although I regret being the bearer of bad news, I’m afraid you’ve made several rather fatal mistakes. First—this young lady here, at whom your men are pointing their blades?”

“[Hellflare].”

With a swift cast of one of her favorite flame spells, Lynne melted the dagger aiming for her neck. Its blade turned molten, slowly oozing to the ground, leaving its wielder so shocked that he could only utter a confused “Huh?” in response.

“She’s anything but the delicate little creature she appears to be,”

Rashid continued. “Her ferocity could put even a wild animal to shame.”

Lynne shot him a look, clearly displeased with the comparison. I would never admit it aloud, but I couldn’t help agreeing with him.

“Next,” Rashid said, “the lady in silver armor?”

“[Divine Shield].”

“Aieee!”

A pane of light sprang into existence, severing the blades of the men near Ines. It pressed onward, slicing cleanly through the thick iron bars barring our path. Pieces of the gate fell to the ground with a loud, echoing crash.

“Perhaps you did not recognize her with the beastfolk girl on her back, but she is Ines, the Kingdom’s Divine Shield. You’ll find her even more vicious than her fierce-tempered companion.”

Ines leveled a scathing look at Rashid, then back at the men around her, causing them to retreat two or three steps. Again, I couldn’t exactly fault the observation; Ines *was* a little—okay, *very*—scary when she was mad.

“Th-The Divine Shield?!” Galen exclaimed. “Why is *she* here?!”

“Oh? Did your dear master not inform you?” Rashid asked. “My family remains as useless as ever, it seems. If they were going to send their cat’s-paw to dispose of us, the least they could have done was provide you with the relevant information. Challenging these two ladies to a contest of violence is a fool’s errand.”

“Ngh! I-In that case, I’ll just seize the others!”

“Ah, yes. Now that you’re cornered, your first instinct is to take hostages. Thus, you order the golems—your trump card—to apprehend the harmless-seeming man before that boy there.”

The golems lumbered toward Rolo and me, shooting forward to grab us. I swept their huge hands aside with the Black Blade.

[Parry]

The golem before me crumbled to dust, while those behind it shattered into pieces from the force of the impact. Some of the scattered debris struck the masked man controlling them in the head, knocking him unconscious.

Galen spoke in strangled groans as he sank to the ground.

“Bwuh? The g-golems... Wh-Whuh?!” Not one of them remained.

“Unfortunately for you, he’s the person you should avoid antagonizing the most,” Rashid said, giving the plump man a shrug.

“Are you all right, Rolo?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. I’m fine.”

“Lynne?”

“Yes, I’m unharmed.”

Despite our brush with danger, it seemed that everyone was okay. Rolo could read minds, now that I thought about it—I wondered if he had anticipated this from the start. I saw him exchange a glance with Lynne and nod.

“You’ve failed, Galen,” Rashid said. “Separating us from Shawza and the others was a good move, but everything since has been abysmal. How many times have I told you not to so easily believe the information given to you by others?” He paused for a moment. “Hmm? Oh, I take it back—separating us was as poor a choice as all the others.”

A thundering *boom* shook the air, and the thick metal doors behind us started to buckle inward. That was probably Shawza’s doing.

“Eek! Please, Young Master Rashid, have m-mercy!” The plump man prostrated himself on the ground, bowing his head again and again. “Th-This was... It was...just a brief lapse of judgment! Y-Yes, that’s all! I was given no choice but to follow the master’s orders!”

More crashes echoed as the doors continued to bend, reverberating through the darkness like the toll of a broken bell. Rashid sauntered over to Galen and gently rested a hand on the man’s shoulder.

“That’s all right, Galen. I don’t mind at all. I should thank you, if anything. After all, things played out exactly as I expected.”

“Wh-What?”

“You haven’t changed at all. Not one bit. It’s actually rather amusing how predictable you are.”

“H-Huh? Eek!”

The roar of Shawza’s punches grew louder, each blow bending the metal further out of shape. Fear twisted Galen’s face and those

of his men in much the same way.

"Still, to think my family would order such paltry little traders to stop us," Rashid mused, placing a hand on his chin. "And after inviting us here in the first place! How double-minded of them. Though, I suppose they've never been known for their consistency."

Galen appeared incapable of speech. He simply continued to shriek and cower on the ground.

"That aside, Galen, I'd appreciate your assistance with a few matters." Rashid smiled, cocking his head. "Ah, but I suppose you should apologize to those you accosted first. You've lived in this city for a long time, so I trust you know what to say in a situation like this."

For a moment, the cowering man said nothing. Then another piercing *boom* rang out, snapping him back to his senses. "Y-Yes! Of course!" he choked out, nodding fervently. "I shall apologize with the utmost sincerity!"

"Good answer. You've always been quick to catch on. It's so nice to have an acquaintance from home I can rely on. Now, the thing is, I very recently became bankrupt. I don't have a single coin to my name. And I was *just* thinking it would be nice to have some pocket change."

"Whuh?"

"Thus, I will be taking all of your assets." Rashid nodded, satisfied, then turned back to us with his usual grin. "Excellent. Now that my deeply moving reunion is behind us, shall we press onward? The boy should be farther inside."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed.

Leaving the plump man to Shawza and Sirene, we hurried down the hallway ahead of us. Rashid took the lead, a pleased smile on his face and a spring in his step.

Chapter 169: At the Slave Trader's, Part 2 (Brother and Sister, Sister and Brother)

"They sure are taking their time," Sirene muttered atop the warped remains of two metal doors, staring down the hallway that Princess Lynneburg and the others had taken. "I wonder if something else happened."

A young girl slept soundly on the beastfolk archer's lap, while the one-eyed, one-armed man who had created their makeshift bench waited a short distance away.

"They should be fine," he said. "I didn't sense any more trouble. And we have this lot with us, remember. If anything happens, we can always put the screws to them."

"Oh, right. I really had forgotten about them."

Sirene and Shawza glanced down at the men sitting limply on the cold ground, causing them all to flinch. Pitying them, Sirene turned her gaze back to Mina, the girl peacefully resting in her lap.

"I'm surprised she managed to fall asleep," she said. "She must've been exhausted."

"It's understandable, given what she's been through," Shawza replied. "First the altercation on the street, then the scuffle a moment ago—even if her physical wounds have healed, she's still been under a lot of stress. We should let her rest."

"You won't hear me arguing."

Mina, who had seemed tense and uneasy from the moment they'd met, was now curled up on Sirene's lap like a kitten. The older beastfolk spoke quietly so as not to wake her, but it seemed that it would take a lot more than a simple conversation to rouse her from her slumber.

Sirene's eyes continuously wandered to her bow, which she had set aside for Mina's sake. She was used to having it with her at all times, so leaving it unattended seemed to unsettle her.

"I can hold on to it for you," Shawza said. "Leaving it there is a quick way to damage it."

"Huh? Are you sure?" Sirene paused. "In that case... Please."

Shawza took the weapon and examined it with his single eye. "This is a good bow," he murmured, half sighing. It was a strange compliment coming from a man with such a stern look on his face.

"You can tell?" Sirene asked, her eyes widening and a smile gracing her lips. "Are you well versed in archery?"

There was a pregnant pause before Shawza responded. "No. I used a bow briefly, long ago, but that's all," he said quietly, almost to himself. "But it's easy to tell this one's quality. Its material is already better than ordinary, and the make is excellent too. It fits well in the hand."

For a time, Sirene simply watched her companion admire the bow in his hand, pleased that he was praising the weapon she so cherished. She savored the moment before speaking again.

"I actually received that bow from my master, to celebrate my employment. It's quite valuable, apparently—it was discovered in the depths of the Dungeon of the Lost."

"The depths? Is your master Mianne, the Bow Sovereign?"

"Huh?" Sirene cocked her head. "You know the captain?"

"Only by name. She's famous enough to be revered internationally. Mianne, the Bow Sovereign, a female archer who braved the depths of the Dungeon of the Lost—said to be the most dangerous dungeon in the world—with her compeers and returned unscathed."

"Is she really that famous? She always insisted that she only made it back without a scratch because of how amazing her companions were."

"I can only tell you what the rumors say. She's described as a severe woman with a temperament too fearsome for most. It's said that she can shoot down a flock of birds on the other side of a mountain with a single arrow. Is that true?"

"That rumor made it all the way here, did it?" Sirene looked slightly embarrassed, but she answered honestly. "Well, the truth is...she's a hundred times more amazing than that. Uh, in terms of personality as well."

"I see." Shawza's lips curled into the beginnings of a smile. "In other words, this bow is proof that you have her recognition."

"I...wonder about that." Sirene scratched her cheek. "You wouldn't think so at all if you saw how she acts around me."

"You should trust yourself more. The mere fact that you possess this bow is worth more than any words can convey." Shawza returned to looking at the weapon, his expression serious. "I saw your archery before. Yours isn't the kind of skill that can be learned in a day. Were you under the Bow Sovereign's tutelage for long? Or did you have another master?"

"Captain Mianne taught me archery from a young age. Before that, my mother taught me how to read the wind. Neither one of them was very hands-on; they showed me the fundamentals and then let me figure out the rest on my own."

"Your...mother is an archer too?"

"Yes, though she gave it up long ago." Sirene touched the pendant around her neck. "She told me she regrets not having been able to properly teach my brother before they separated."

"Your pendant..." Shawza said at length, hanging his head. "I'm sorry for what I said."

"Huh?"

"I told you to dispose of it. That was wrong of me."

Sirene was too stunned to speak.

"I said it with good reason—danger awaits you if you continue to wear it—but that's no excuse. You have every right to do with it as you wish."

"No, it's fine. I kind of knew you were telling the truth."

"Yet you still intend to keep it?"

"Yes. It might not have much of a use anymore, but...my brother gave it to me. I can't just throw it away."

Shawza's eye strayed from the pendant.

"Do you not have a bow of your own?" Sirene asked, studying

him curiously.

"What makes you ask that?"

"You seem to have an eye for them. Plus, I heard that everyone in the Mio Tribe was a proficient archer."

"Do you seriously think I could draw a bow with one arm?"

"Oh, right... But you could, u-um...use your teeth...or something?"

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

"Yeah, I don't know why I said that..."

Shawza's brow furrowed as he studied the weapon in his hand. "I did use a bow once, like the rest of my brethren. My skills with it were decent...or so I was convinced at the time. As it turned out, my confidence was nothing more than unbridled arrogance, which cost the lives of my comrades and their families. Now, even if I *could* wield a bow, I wouldn't be worthy of drawing it. Even if I wanted to, my fallen brethren would never permit me."

Sirene said nothing at first, simply watching the man's expression. Then a thought occurred to her, and resolve hardened in her eyes.

"Um, Shawza, I think you really *are* my bro—"

"Give up on that, would you? Rigel is dead. Gone. You could search this entire country and not find a single bone of his corpse."

"But—"

"Whuh? Wh-Where am I...?"

Before Sirene could say another word, Mina's eyes fluttered open. She glanced around, then seemed to remember her circumstances and jumped up.

"Eek! Was I asleep?! I... I'm sorry! I'll get off your lap right away!"

"It's okay. You can rest more, if you want," Sirene assured the girl. "You must be tired."

"R-Really...? Wait, no, I couldn't! S-Someone like me...?"

The girl seemed reluctant to leave Sirene's lap but scrambled to the ground nonetheless. She stood up straight and bowed to the woman who had until then served as her very comfortable bed. But when she looked up again...

"Rigel!"

"Rigel?" Sirene and Shawza repeated.

Mina shrieked and rushed toward the slender boy approaching from down the hallway. The two bore a striking resemblance to each other, and she cried out in shock when she reached him.

"Rigel! What happened to your legs?! And your condition?! You can walk now?!"

"Mm-hmm. The nice people fixed them for me."

"H-Huh?! They did?!"

Mina looked up at the others following behind her brother, then hurriedly stepped forward and bowed to them. "U-Um! Th-Thank you very much for s-saving my brother! *Snff...* Thank, um, *ooh*... Thank you—*snff*—very much!"

Tears flooded her eyes, and she wept so much that she was barely coherent. The recipients of her gratitude smiled politely, and when she looked at her new master, he simply nodded. She turned back to her brother and pulled him into a tight embrace.



“Rigel!” Mina sobbed, crying into his chest. “I... I’m so glad you’re okay! I thought I’d never see you again!”

“Sorry I worried you, big sis,” the boy said. “I’m okay now.”

“No, *I’m* sorry for being bought first! B-But, that man bought me away from them, so...!”

“Yeah, I know. You brought the nice people here, right? Thank you.”

“N-No, I didn’t do anything! Even just then, I was asleep while...while...” The girl turned to those accompanying her brother, tears streaming down her face. “Th-Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!”

For some time, she continued to apologize to her brother and thank her benefactors. Through her tears, however, most of her words were utterly incomprehensible.

Chapter 170: At the Slave Trader's, Part 3 (Rigel, the Younger Brother)

"Noor, Lady Lynneburg..." Sirene approached us, awash with relief as she took in the siblings' joyful reunion. "I see you've found Mina's brother."

"Yeah," I said. "Honestly, we thought he was done for when we first saw him."

"Indeed," Lynne added. "Judging by his current state, though, he's sure to be okay."

I could tell from the look on Sirene's face that she was glad things had worked out. We'd found Rigel in miserable shape—so weak that we hadn't been sure he would survive, even with treatment. Fortunately, thanks to Lynne's desperate efforts to heal him, he was now strong enough to walk on his own.

It had been the right call not to bring Mina with us. Had she seen her brother as we'd first found him, I suspected she would have fallen apart.

All in all, little Rigel had surprised me. Despite his sudden return from the brink of death, he was grinning from ear to ear, behaving as though nothing had happened. He was trying not to worry his sister, I thought, as he slowly moved to stand in front of me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. "Does it still hurt anywhere?"

"Oh, no. Thanks to you, Mister Noor—and you, Miss Lynneburg—I feel better than ever before. I just wanted to thank you properly."

"Again? It was no trouble—really. Nothing worth making a fuss about."

"I understand you also rescued my sister. For that, I offer my deepest gratitude. Truly. You have my word that we'll work hard to

repay our debt."

Mina scampered over, and the pair bowed deeply to us. Though Rigel was about the same size as his sister, his speech was more formal and measured. His calm composure had stood out to me during our first meeting, and now, in conversation, I was amazed at how well put together he was.

"You're pretty mature for your age," I remarked.

"Unlike my sister, I've had a delicate constitution since childhood," the boy explained. "Before my illness, I was trained and educated for intellectual servitude. I adopted this manner of speech along the way. Is it...not to your liking? I can act more childish, should you pre__"

"No, no, no. It's fine. Impressive, even. It's just...are you really the younger sibling?"

"We're twins, actually. That's why we're almost the same height."

"Twins, huh? I can see that, now that you mention it." Inspecting them side by side, the similarities in their physique were obvious. Rigel was just a touch shorter and more slender, but that was all.

Mina looked at her brother, hung her head, and sniffled. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I bet the reason you're so frail is because I took all your Mister Muscles when we were in mom's tummy!"

"'Mister Muscles'?" I repeated.

"That's not true, Mina," Rigel protested. "It was purely an accident."

"Oh! But in exchange, I gave you all my smarts!" Mina puffed out her chest. "That's why you're so brainy!"

I looked from Mina to Rigel and back again. It would have been too awkward to agree outright, but I could definitely see where she was coming from.

"Is, uh... Is that right?" I eventually asked.

"M-Mina..." Rigel whined.

"In any case, I'm glad you're both feeling better," I said. "Would you mind waiting here to recover your strength? We have some more business up ahead."

Rigel noticed the glance I exchanged with Lynne and seemed to catch on. "You're going back inside, Mister Noor?"

"Yeah. This place is full of the sick and injured. Most of them won't last more than a few days unless we do something."

"They're in terrible shape," Lynne agreed. "We must act swiftly."

"You can say that again."

"Noor." A new voice interrupted us. "Sorry, but could you delay those plans for a moment?"

"Rashid?" I turned to see the man in question, standing with Galen. They had parted from us a short while before. "Where have you two been?"

"Oh, I just asked Galen here to bring me up to speed on some recent events. In regard to your plans, I assume you intend to rescue *all* the dying slaves?"

"Yeah, we do."

"Far be it from me to get in your way. However, I *would* recommend adhering to the proper procedure, at least."

"Really?" I glanced down at his hands. "What's with all the papers?"

"It's a catalog of all the assets being sold within the capital—a price list, if you will, distributed only among merchants with a certain level of wealth and trust from their peers." Rashid waved the thick sheaf of papers right beside Galen's face. "I thought the appropriate first step would be to examine the city's current state. Words can deceive, but transactions never lie. And would you believe it, I've discovered something rather interesting."

Rashid began flipping through the papers, and his expression turned uncharacteristically serious.

"As it stands, many business owners have been liquidating their assets at dirt-cheap prices. It's especially egregious in real estate, where slave trading houses that would normally be held as tightly as prized gems are now being listed on the market in droves. Bonds, on the other hand—which are conveniently mobile—have become abnormally popular among buyers. It seems the wealthy are pulling their riches out of the city."

"Why would they do that?" I asked.

"Because of a looming threat they fear they cannot hope to overcome. I wonder who it could be." Rashid stared straight at me,

grinning. “They have good reason to worry—not even a few days ago, there was all that drama about the City Forgotten by Time changing hands. Then, there were rumors of a preposterous man who triumphed over an army of primal golems. And to crown it all, after a strange sandstorm sprang into existence just outside the capital, those at the very heart of all the recent turmoil entered the city. Any merchant deserving of the name would see those risk factors and declare withdrawing from the market a smart move. Although of course, the most accurate information comes from the source—from us.”

“I see. So that means, uh... What *does* it mean?”

“In essence, Noor, this is your achievement. Because of your actions, market prices that once seemed immovable are now shifting, creating splendid opportunities to capitalize on. So I thought, while we’re at it, why not turn an exorbitant profit?”

Still grinning, Rashid gave me a merry clap on the shoulder. I returned the gesture with a look of sheer confusion, while Lynne narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“It couldn’t be...” she muttered. “Did you plan this from the start, Lord Rashid?”

“Oh, no, Lady Lynneburg. How could I have?” Rashid fanned himself with the papers. “I might have predicted this outcome, but that was all. I saw the die had been cast and made an educated guess about what might happen. You brought a genuine miracle with you from the Kingdom of Clays.”

Lynne breathed a quiet sigh. “At long last, I see what drove you to yield such an absurd amount of wealth to my instructor.”

“I did not *yield* anything—he won our contest fair and square.”

“A contest that went exactly as planned, I suspect.”

Rashid’s eyes widened, and a smile graced his features. “If my actions have given you cause to doubt me, I apologize. As I see it, I treated our contest with sincerity and earnestness—for the most part, at least.”

“You need not apologize. I cannot deny that entrusting Instructor Noor with your assets was the best way to ensure their safekeeping. In fact, I would even go so far as to say it was a wise decision.”

"Oh? My read of you was right—you *are* less of a stick-in-the-mud than your brother. You are correct, Lady Lynneburg; Noor is the most trustworthy money box in the country."

"That isn't what I said..."

"You have nothing to fear, of course. Knowing what he is capable of, I would never be so foolish as to attempt to retrieve the assets he now holds by force."

"I know. Instructor Noor is not one to be trifled with. If you even think of trying to manipulate him, expect to be taught a harsh lesson."

Rashid chuckled. "This is why I like you, Lady Lynneburg—you speak frankly on subjects that would cause most others to hesitate. Rarely does someone see the truth of the matter so clearly. May our relationship continue to grow long into the future."

"In that case, Lord Rashid, would you answer me one more question?" Lynne's stare became piercing. "What was your *true* objective in coming to Sarenza City? I doubt it was profit, and it most certainly wasn't because your family summoned you."

Rashid chuckled again—harder this time, causing his shoulders to shake. Only when the sudden bout passed did he return his gaze to Lynne and confess, "I would dearly love to tell you—truly, I would. But as much as it pains me to say this, now is not quite the time."

"I see. In that case, I suppose you won't mind if we put our relationship-building on hold."

"Oh? Even if I *could* tell you, would you believe me?"

"Honestly? I doubt it. All the more reason for us to wait."

Tensions were once again rising between Lynne and Rashid, though I supposed that was nothing unusual. Maybe it went to show just how close they really were; they certainly spoke with each other more frequently than with the other members of our group.

"U-Um, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt..."

"Hmm?" Rashid turned to Rigel, who had mustered the courage to interject. "Do you have something to say?"

"You mentioned that many of the city's slave trading houses are up for sale. I don't mean to presume, but would it not be wise to buy them now, while they're cheap?"

"What makes you think that? Come, now—use your words."

"U-Um..."

Rigel looked at me, apparently seeking my permission to speak. I nodded, and his ears twitched excitedly as he launched into his explanation.

"Here in Sarenza, where the law mandates that children inherit their parents' debts, slaves are considered a valuable, self-replenishing asset. They bring their owners immense profit—particularly beastfolk slaves like my sister and me. However, the more slaves one owns, the harder they become to move, and transporting an entire trading house is naturally out of the question. If what you say about a great threat approaching the capital is true, Mister Rashid, then the city's immovable assets will only continue to depreciate in value. In the worst-case scenario, they could even become worthless. That's why their current owners elected to sell—it would be too risky not to. And if, as you claim, these trading houses are already on the market in large numbers, they must be competing to sell at a profit. In other words, we should expect them to be priced significantly below their normal market value."

I was amazed. Despite his young age, Rigel had come out with all sorts of complicated terms, managing to lose me within just a couple of sentences. A quick glance at Mina beside me revealed the same blank expression I must have been wearing—though I could sense an undercurrent of pride for her younger brother.

"Oh, I *like* you," Rashid said. "You remain calm and analytical, even as a slave yourself. So, why do you think we should buy up the trading houses?"

"Because this drop in price will only last so long. The owners are selling as a temporary asset transfer for risk aversion, assuming they can still turn a profit in the long run. As slave trading houses—and the income they're known to generate—are usually so hard to obtain, ambitious low-to mid-tier merchants will take the risk and start snapping them up. While there's no guarantee of them staying in the black, they can count on selling the assets back to the original owners at a higher price. So, it would be best to seize the initiative before the market backswings. Such an opportunity won't come

again."

"I see. And why should *we* be the ones to buy them?"

"Based on what you said, I assume Mister Noor is the threat in question. If that's true, then you have complete control over the situation."

Rashid still wore an uncharacteristically serious expression, his hand on his chin as he listened to Rigel. I couldn't blame him—the young beastfolk was impressive, to say the least. I usually lost focus within seconds of a conversation with Lynne or Rashid, but he was holding his own with ease.

"You have a sharp mind for your age," Rashid said at last. "Rigel, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, Rigel, one more question for you." Rashid gave the boy a cheery smile. "It's an ironclad rule of commerce to do to one's enemies what one would *least* wish done to oneself. If we bought up every slave trading house on the market, what should we do when their former owners ask to buy them back?"

Rigel paused for a moment, as if weighing his words, before carefully speaking up. "Well, if you had the capital to enact such a plan in the first place, the most obvious response would be to refuse. There is, however, another option. As far as the former owners are concerned, their assets are what matter most. Nothing would pain them more than repurchasing their business, only to find it stripped clean."

"I see... Not bad. So, what would need to be done to achieve such an outcome?"

"Huh? As in, to actually do it? Well, first, you'd need even more capital than was necessary to purchase the trading houses. Then, you'd need to solve an assortment of problems. Where would you move all the slaves, for example? You'd need countless personnel, suitable transport, and the discretion to keep such an operation hidden from the former owners. There's also the issue of clothes, shelter, and provisions once the slaves are relocated, and that's just the start. In those regards, maybe the plan can't be done. Or, no... It can, but only with a great deal of preparation."

As the boy sank deeper into thought, Rashid clapped his hands together and laughed. "I *really* like you! You were just a few points shy of a perfect answer. Maybe I should give you full marks anyway, since you didn't even need a hint. You're outstanding, little one."

"Isn't he just?!" Mina beamed and stuck her chest out even more. "He's super smart! Enough for the both of us!"

The elder of the two siblings was impressive in her own right. Poised on the very tips of her toes, she arched her body so much she resembled a drawn bow—yet somehow, she remained perfectly balanced.

"Let's return to the topic at hand," Rashid said. "Noor? As Rigel just explained, now is the perfect time to purchase the slave trading houses across the city. We'll need a convincing motive and special permission, but we're in luck—Galen here can provide both. Isn't that right, Galen?"

"Y-Yes, of course!" the portly man exclaimed. "G-Gladly!"

"There you have it, Noor. Every company on that list is yours for the taking. So, how shall we proceed?"

"If there are more places like this in the capital, I want to buy as many as I can," I said. "Can you do that for me?"

"But of course. It won't be any trouble at all. While your fortune isn't quite large enough to take over the entire capital, it's more than sufficient to monopolize a single industry. Since making individual purchases would drive up the market price, I'd advise buying in bulk."

"Right. Let's do that, then."

"As you wish. May I borrow that young fellow for a time, to act as my assistant?"

"Rigel, you mean?"

"An extra pair of hands will do wonders to speed up the process. Don't worry—I'll return him as soon as I'm done."

"If he doesn't mind, then neither do I."

"I don't mind at all, Mister Noor," Rigel said. "If anything, I should plead to be so lucky. Getting to learn the business of trade from none other than the Divine Merchant himself will be a priceless experience—and one that I can leverage to be of greater use to you

in the future."

For a brief moment, Rashid conveyed an emotion he hadn't let show before. "Oh? You're well-versed in old tales for someone so young—and a slave, at that."

"Knowledge was my sole means of survival," Rigel explained, his face blank and tone detached. "I memorized every rumor and scrap of gossip that circulated the capital—or at least as much as I could from the confines of a slave trading house. Your younger years are the stuff of legend here, Mister Rashid. They must be common knowledge among the merchants."

Rashid chuckled. "You truly are exceptional. I had high expectations for your intellect, and the depth of your knowledge is just as impressive. You've made an excellent purchase, Noor. Your return on Rigel will far exceed what you paid for him."

Beaming from ear to ear, our host-turned-companion scribbled noisily on a sheet of paper, which he then thrust into my hands.

"Here. You should take this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Another list—this one of the slave trading houses for sale in the city. I've noted their names and addresses and advise that you visit them all. Just do your thing—I'll take care of any business negotiations in the meantime."

"Thanks. And sorry for the trouble."

"Now, as for the price of my labor..."

I was startled; I hadn't expected Rashid to bring up payment after the fact.

"May I use a small portion of your funds to conduct some other business?" he asked, still smiling. "It'll be to your benefit, of course. You'll reap the rewards, and if any losses occur as a result of my actions, I shall cover them in full."

"I don't mind, but why?"

"There are quite a few attractive prospects—well, *prey*—on that list. Since this city's my old playground, I thought I might shake off the rust and have some fun in the process. Not that I won't take this commercial venture seriously. If someone's entrusted me with their coin, I could never gamble it away for my own amusement."

"Right. It's okay if you don't make a profit, though."

"Oh, don't worry. As a principle, I don't believe in absolutes—but given the current state of the market, I can say with *absolute* confidence that I won't cause you a loss. How much are you willing to entrust me with? Choose any amount you please; I'll manage just fine, no matter what you give me."

"I don't see much point in setting a limit. You might as well take it all."

"I-Instructor?!" Lynne exclaimed.

"Oh?" Rashid eyed me carefully. "Since my patron has seen fit to grant me so much of his trust, I suppose I must live up to his lofty expectations."

"No, really—there's no pressure to turn a profit," I repeated.

"Whatever the case, simply leave it to me. Upon your return, you will find that I've amassed a mountain of wealth, prodigious enough to surprise even you."

I really wasn't interested in making more money—I already had more than I knew what to do with. But no matter how many times I tried to make that clear, Rashid, who wore an eerie smile I was beginning to suspect was his true one, refused to listen.

"My, my..." he said. "No matter how old I get, the thought of a huge shopping trip never fails to excite me. I wonder how much I'll be able to make today."

"I'll...leave you to it, then."

I entrusted Rigel to Rashid, whose smile grew more sinister by the moment, and hurried down the dark corridor with Lynne at my side.

Chapter 171: The People of House Sarenza

Situated at the center of Sarenza City was a wooded strip of green, so lush and leafy that even the locals doubted their eyes. Almost in defiance of the barren desert that surrounded the capital, the well-cultivated district had sparkling lakes and verdure in abundance. Majestic palaces dotted its grounds, purposefully designed to stand out from the architecture of the lesser wards, but one caught the eye more than any other: a masterpiece of pure-white stone with golden engravings, boasting an expansive courtyard under a transparent, hemispherical roof.

The courtyard, easily mistaken for a natural meadow at a glance, was dyed in many hues by the blossoms and trees gathered from faraway lands. A stone patio sat at its center, polished to a brilliant white, and arranged upon it were several people who looked no less extravagant. Their jewel-inlaid clothing made them a more striking sight than even the vibrantly feathered birds kept nearby.

In attendance at the outdoor meeting were the members of House Sarenza, who had a firm grasp on the country's reins. It was by their family's hands that Sarenza had made such fantastic advances throughout the course of history. Each person sat elegantly in a custom-built chair, facing a screen mirror—a magical dungeon relic—that gave them an overhead view of a certain city. The looks on their faces were cold and unamused.

"This cannot be real."

"Ha! Of course not. Who would believe such preposterous nonsense?"

"I saw a similar screen-story not long ago—a new release."

"So we all agree this is fake?"

On the screen, a man wielding a thick black slab of a weapon tore

his way through a horde of primal golems, the very symbols of House Sarenza's power and authority. The observers, who had not received any sort of explanation as to the strange sight before them, fell into light discussion.

"Honestly... Lord Zaid and his jokes. Again, he seeks to test us—his kin!"

"Hear, hear. It's an excellent fabrication, I must admit, but it bears all the hallmarks of fiction. Primal golems' bodies repel even orichalcum spears with ease, let alone mithril blades, and that fellow is using a blunt club. Only the ignorant would fuss over such nonsense."

Having said his piece, the young member of House Sarenza laughed, entirely dismissive of what the mirror was showing them. The others were just as skeptical.

The recording—brought back by an avian golem—showed the events purported to have taken place near the City Forgotten by Time, a leisure destination run by Zaid's eldest son, Rashid. It was common practice for entertainment to be unveiled without notice, so the attendees turned their attention elsewhere, taking the opportunity to catch up with their distant kin, many of whom they had not seen in some time.

Despite its dubious authenticity, the recording was strikingly clear. It looped several times before the picture on the screen mirror abruptly changed to show Zaid, patriarch of House Sarenza. A rotund man, he stood on an ornate golden stage outfitted with its own array of recording mirrors, directly beneath his own image on the screen.

"My dear family..." he began. "Thank you for gathering here today. I am well aware how busy all of you are."

A strict education from a young age had instilled all those watching with a rigid sense of etiquette. As one, they ceased their chatter, relaxed into their chairs, and turned their full attention to the man who spoke for them all.

"Now then," Zaid continued, "to start, I must apologize for playing such an absurd spectacle without warning. As the wisest of you must already have gathered, it is entirely fictitious. I repeat: There is not a

shred of truth to what you have just witnessed. For reasons unknown, such fabrications have spread among the public. I summoned you here today to warn you."

"I see..." a white-haired old man said with a calm smile. He and everyone else in the courtyard stared intently at the screen mirror. "I must confess, Zaid, the quality was quite astounding."

The man occupied the seat closest to the patriarch—within conversational distance—marking him as the second-highest authority under Zaid. The rest of the family understood their place and remained silent as they watched the pair speak.

"Footage of that nature has already reached me," the white-haired man continued. "Are you claiming it was all just forgery?"

"I am, granduncle," Zaid said. "As anyone can see, it is part of a ploy by some person or organization trying to destabilize us. I suspect the culprit is—"

"The Kingdom of Clays," the old man finished, his face clouding over. "A most vexing matter, Zaid. Was it not your idea to reopen diplomatic relations with them and end our long-standing no-contact policy?"

"I never dreamed their representatives would act in such a craven, unsophisticated manner. This brings me to the topic of the utterly baseless rumor about my sons Ari and Nhid—that they have lost their allotment of primal golems. It should go without saying that it, too, is a falsehood."

From atop his stage, Zaid made a quick gesture. Thousands of primal golems lumbered into view—some close, some far—and arranged themselves in neat rows within view of the courtyard. Quiet exclamations of awe rippled through those gathered. Rare was the opportunity to witness one in its full majesty—let alone an entire army.

"Rest assured, everyone," Zaid proclaimed. "As you can see, we have not lost even one of our precious golems. Sarenza's public order remains as secure as ever. I swear to you all, I shall make good use of the power you entrusted to me and teach a thorough lesson to those who think they can interfere with our business."

"Excellent, excellent," the white-haired man said. "I gave no

credence to the rumor, of course, but I am glad to see it disproved."

"I am glad to have put your mind at ease, granduncle."

An elderly woman seated beside the white-haired old man laughed. "See, dear? As I told you, Zaid is perfectly capable of managing Sarenza's affairs. He had an excellent mind even when he was small, and now—why, not one of us could hope to rival his business acumen."

Zaid chuckled. "Oh, dearest grandaunt, your praise is too much!"

A wave of relief washed over the courtyard. Now safely assuaged, those gathered broke into casual chatter, lavishing each other with praise.

"Well, I really must be going," the white-haired man said. "How pleased I am to know that the strange rumors circulating are nothing more than that. Ensure they are put to rest, Zaid."

"But of course, granduncle. And as always, thank you for your insightful perspective."

"I must take my leave as well. You have my full trust to manage the situation."

"I wish you a safe return, grandaunt."

Once the elderly couple occupying the foremost seats departed, taking a veritable army of servants with them, the rest of the family began to trickle out as well, paying their respects to Zaid as they went. When only a few of them remained, an aging man in a black suit stepped toward Zaid, whispering into his master's ear so that he would not be overheard.

"Master Zaid, I come bearing news of great consequence."

"Well? Out with it, Wize. And make it quick."

"Despite your esteemed granduncle's and grandaunt's assurances, they have already moved the majority of their assets outside the city. And to make matters worse, there are reports that several more of your relatives are making equally unwise moves. Everyone who was in attendance today is already well aware of recent events."

"Is that all?" In place of a sigh, Zaid exhaled sharply through his nose. "These are just the usual games. Don't take them at face value."

"Of course, Master. My sincerest apologies." Wize gave a slight

bow and retreated a step.

Bar a few careless fools, everyone in House Sarenza knew the truth of what was happening around them. No one dared admit it, but the influential members of the family had already begun decentralizing their assets, quietly liquidating their land and property in Sarenza City. The foundation of power that House Sarenza had spent generations cultivating was at risk of coming apart. The country's status quo now teetered on the edge of collapse.

And thus, a farcical charade had taken shape.

Zaid simmered with self-reproach for having let the situation deteriorate so severely—yet preserving appearances was all that he could do. As the thought passed through his mind, he noticed that two of his sons—the principal cause of the trouble at hand—stood before him, alongside their mother.

"F-Father... We wish to...to humbly..."

"Ari, Nhid." Zaid turned to his sons, striving to smile gently. "What's wrong? Why the formality?"

"W-We wish to humbly apologize for our lapse in judgment. We could never have imagined that our blunder would result in... Well..."

Zaid chuckled. "Oh, worry not—it is the prerogative of the young to stumble. But know this: I will not clean up after you a second time."

"O-Of course! Thank you!"

As he watched his two incompetent sons scurry away with their mother, Zaid coldly considered the truth of his words. There would be no second time.

A long moment passed. Only when Zaid was alone among the remains of what an oblivious bystander might have called a joyous family banquet did he speak into the empty air.

"Lude? Are you here, Lude?"

"I am, yes."

In an instant, the black-cloaked man appeared behind him. Zaid always found it unsettling how Lude seemed to flicker into existence like a shadow, but he pushed the unease aside—he had more pressing concerns to think about.

"How goes your business?" Zaid asked.

"My business?"

"Don't make me say it. The golem from the Dungeon of Oblivion."

"Ah, indeed. It is progressing smoothly, of course. Please, have patience."

"Well, hurry it up. Things could fall apart at any moment."

Lude's face was hidden beneath the dark hood of his cloak, but his eyes were trained on Zaid. "Is that the only reason you summoned me? To confirm my progress?"

"Yes! What other reason could there be?!"

"I am well aware of the current balance—hence my haste."

"Then make *more* haste. I thought your lot claimed to work quickly."

"Very well. But if a faster result is what you seek, I would advise you not to summon me without due cause."

Zaid had several choice remarks about the long-lived race's promise of "haste," but he bit them back. Though he was too annoyed to mask his frustration, he found it painfully clear that the sinister man before him was his last hope. And of course, that weakness only fueled the flames of his irritation.

Once the cloaked man's presence had vanished, like smoke dissipating into the air, Zaid ground his teeth. "Tsk! Useless incompetents, the lot of them!"

No matter the time or circumstance, Zaid considered the very act of trusting others a grave mistake. Placing his faith in someone else only bred weakness and uncertainty—and uncertainty, like coin, only compounded with time. So, he preferred to pull the strings. Through a single conversation, he could grasp another person's mindset, then manipulate their intentions by humoring their desires until he got what he wanted. Those he could not sway with words, he simply crushed with force. He silenced any who opposed him, even resorting to lethal methods when necessary. It was how he had preserved the country's status quo—and how he would elevate House Sarenza even further.

As far as Zaid was concerned, there wasn't a single subordinate he could truly rely on. Everyone was his inferior—a mere puppet awaiting his command. He had deemed only a rare few in the world

worthy of being called brilliant, and if ever someone emerged whose talents he envied, they became his adversary by default.

To Zaid, someone he could not manipulate—could not control—was an enemy without exception. The strong competed, devouring each other in their climb to the top. Such was his life. It was all he'd ever known. And now, the person he recognized as the most talented among his family was blocking his path.

"That blasted Rashid!"

The face of his eldest son, born of his first wife, lingered in his mind. Rashid had always been intelligent, even from a young age. He excelled in every field, especially trade, and had even been his father's favorite for a time. Zaid had seen something rare in his prodigious son and personally ushered him into the world of commerce.

Ari and Nhid, Zaid's sons from his second wife, were straightforward, malleable fools. They stood no chance of becoming enemies. Rashid, on the other hand, was too brilliant. From the very beginning of his days as a merchant, it hadn't taken him long to rise to his father's level and compete with him as an equal. Even then, Zaid had known that he would never be able to bring the boy under his control.

To start, Zaid had given his eldest son a trifling amount of capital. That had been the spark. He had instructed Rashid to use it in his study of commerce, hoping the boy would learn the knowledge necessary to carve out his own future through repeated trial and error. Instead, Rashid defied all expectations. It was as though he couldn't even *taste* defeat. In the profit-and-loss world of merchants, his talents ensured he profited every time.

Zaid was pleased at first, attributing his son's achievements to luck. Yet, a full month later, what had once been a small sum of pocket change had grown into a vast fortune that eclipsed even the wealth of the most powerful people in House Sarenza. Zaid's opinion of his eldest son changed in the blink of an eye.

Rashid possessed a talent for trade so immense that not even his father, the governor of the entire Mercantile Free State of Sarenza, could hope to keep up. Unable to exert control over his son, Zaid

elected to keep him at a distance, sending him to another residence and even pushing away the boy's mother. It hadn't been much later that Zaid received the news that his first wife—a woman he had chosen to marry based on appearance—had passed away. He suspected she had unwittingly ingested poison meant for Rashid, and that the culprit was one of his many relatives wary of the boy.

It was hard to say whether it was the instigating factor, but losing his mother made Rashid more devoted to trade than ever before. Though he had once kept to the buying and selling of various goods, he soon purchased a headquarters for his business, which became a conglomerate as he absorbed more and more companies. Not even several months after his introduction to the world of trade, he had managed to purchase and monopolize his own city district. Then, by his tenth birthday, he had taken over half of the entire capital.

As expected, his actions stirred resentment within his family. Since the days of old, it had been an unspoken rule among those of House Sarenza never to encroach upon one another's territory. But young Rashid, still just a child, was trampling that principle without a care.

In time, many in the family came to loathe Rashid, outraged to have had their domain—or what they'd *thought* was their domain—seized and toyed with. But not even their fury made Rashid obey the words and warnings of his father, the family patriarch. The situation was completely out of hand.

Rashid's behavior—which showed no regard for the community of mutual interest known as family—earned him the animosity of many. It was no surprise, then, when assassins came for him in droves, each sent by those hoping to reclaim their lost assets through force. Despite his young age, he was already a threat to the status quo of House Sarenza.

And yet, the boy survived every attempt on his life. In some cases, he even hired the very assassins sent to execute him, winning them over with promises of better pay. It wasn't long before he rose beyond the reach of his family—even Zaid.

By twelve years of age, Rashid practically owned Sarenza City.

And then, without word or warning, he offered to relinquish his

grasp on the capital to take charge of the remote leisure facility known as the City Forgotten by Time. He was abandoning his stronghold for the world of gambling—a child's pastime, compared to the true world of commerce.

Many of Rashid's relatives were delighted to hear the news. They interpreted his choice as him finally recognizing the danger that would come to him if he stayed in Sarenza City. He had been presented with two choices: remain in the capital and accept the risk that came with it, or abandon his profits and run, preserving his life in the process. The little problem child had weighed up his options and finally made a mature decision.

Zaid, for his part, placed not an ounce of faith in that interpretation. He did not—could not—understand what Rashid was thinking. To claim otherwise would have been folly. So, he continued to keep the unstable factor at a distance. To a ruler, an unknown variable was something to be dealt with before it could evolve into an enemy. To allow someone superior to you to exist in the world you controlled was the height of contradiction.

Zaid had long since moved past any feelings of fatherly affection. To him, Rashid was no longer his son, but an uncertainty. He was a pure and genuine threat—one so incomprehensible that he had to be feared.

Just like the monster of a man King Clays had sent his way.

"That cunning old fox," Zaid muttered. "Letting such a thing loose in my country. Reopening diplomatic relations? What a joke."

The man from the screen mirror who had annihilated an entire legion of primal golems was far beyond the scope of a mere bodyguard for Princess Lynneburg. In fact, he was the greatest threat Sarenza's status quo had ever faced. One would never be able to tell from his appearance, but he possessed an unfathomably terrifying degree of strength. And from the way his weapon so easily shattered primal golems—which turned away even mithril and orichalcum—it had to be the Kingdom of Clays's hidden treasure, the Black Blade.

Why had King Clays given that man his weapon—a sword said to have no equal? The reason was unclear to Zaid, but it held no

particular importance. What truly mattered was that it was *here*, in Sarenza. The very idea seemed preposterous, especially when the Divine Shield alone would have been overkill for the princess's security detail.

Zaid couldn't believe he had invited such a threat into his own lands. What had driven him to do it?

Aah. But of course.

He had put his trust in another and fallen for the cajolery of that elf. And because of that, he was suffering the heaviest losses he'd ever experienced. Not only had he invited that terrifying *thing* into Sarenza, but he'd even allowed it to join hands with Rashid. This was the consequence of neglecting his own principles: an approaching disaster of unprecedented scale.

Zaid had gleaned the truth of the matter, more or less. Unless he was mistaken, Rashid had not simply lost to that man in his Trials; he had strategically maneuvered him into being a controllable asset. Because House Sarenza had frozen the wealth Rashid had gathered over his childhood, there was gald in the hundreds of trillions forever beyond his reach. So, he'd accepted defeat and taken on a tremendous debt, which he would use as a pretext to seize the funds back. He was using the man with him as a proxy bank.

And now, with a sum hanging over his head that could easily mean death, he had come to the capital for one final gamble. He had but one chance, and failure would cost him everything. How was he capable of such an act of madness?

Zaid had sensed that something was amiss when Rashid first transferred to the City Forgotten by Time. He'd known that his eldest, of all people, would never make such a move without some grander scheme in mind. And seeing him now only confirmed that suspicion.

In leaving the capital, Rashid hadn't given up on anything. He'd simply been biding his time, waiting for his moment to strike—expecting a chance to come along that he could entrust his fate to. And that chance had come in the form of the Black Blade's wielder.

For his eldest to have gone to such lengths, he must have had an equally galvanizing motive. Zaid hadn't the slightest inkling as to

what it might be. Did he want revenge for having his fortune unjustly taken from him? Payback for those who'd sent assassins his way? Or was he acting on deep-seated resentment toward the family who'd taken his mother from him? Perhaps it was a combination of all those reasons—or something else entirely. Zaid could think of any number of incentives for Rashid to hate House Sarenza, but it was impossible to discern which were true.

The unknown variable was a monster Zaid didn't understand—the only individual to have surpassed him. But if there was one thing he *did* recognize, it was that Rashid was coming for him with all his might, hell-bent on seizing his fortune, his status, and his country.

Zaid felt his arms and legs tremble violently. His heart rate quickened, and each breath he took became more shallow. They were all too natural reactions, given the circumstances. The two worst enemies he could have imagined had joined hands: a force strong enough to obliterate primal golems with a single arm, and an intellect that had nearly monopolized an entire merchant city on a child's whim. Both were closing in on him.

"But don't you dare think this is the end of me..." Zaid muttered darkly.

Indeed, he had yet to admit defeat. He believed he still had a chance to recoup his losses. But to do so, he would need to resort to the method he despised most for its uncertainty: a gamble. The last option available to him was to trust in that deceptive elf. Surrender wasn't even worth considering—not to his own son, and certainly not to that accursed King Clays.

Thus, Zaid needed to be calm and composed. It was already clear that his efforts to postpone the catastrophe were nearing their limit. Even so, he had to buy as much time as he could—no matter how disgraceful the methods he used might be.

"After everything you've done, I won't let you return home in one piece!" Zaid grumbled. There was no one else in his palace to hear the hatred in his voice.

Chapter 172: The Caravan

It was completely dark out by the time we returned to the Galen Company. Rashid awaited us inside, wearing his usual smile.

"Welcome back, Noor. You look quite satisfied. Everything went well, I take it?"

"Yeah. It was more work than I expected, but we managed to visit every location."

We'd spent the day rushing to the places on Rashid's list, hurrying because we knew that—just like at the Galen Company—there were people clinging to life in cramped rooms who needed our help. The staff at the various slave trading houses must have been warned of our arrival because they let us through after a quick explanation, exactly as Rashid had said they would.

Although the other trading houses' conditions were better than those at the Galen Company, that wasn't saying much. Everywhere we went, we found minor variations on the same theme: the injured and sick languishing in tiny rooms thick with stagnant air.

For the sake of those in need, Lynne and I divided up our responsibilities. Anyone who seemed likely to make a quick recovery came to me and my [Low Heal], while those requiring more specialized care or medical expertise went to Lynne. The rest of our party acted as our assistants, shopping for supplies and lending a hand where needed.

Ines and Mina were in charge of procuring clean clothes and hygiene items, while Rolo and Sirene managed the distribution of water and other provisions. We also sought help from the trading houses' staff, parceling out labor so that everything we needed to do got done.

Mina's contributions surprised me the most. She was a powerhouse, despite her small stature, able to carry as much as Ines without breaking a sweat. Heavy loads didn't seem to bother her;

she completed her work quickly and nimbly before moving on to help Rolo and Sirene of her own accord. By the time we were done, she'd carried more supplies than anyone.

Partly due to her unexpected efficiency—and partly because the slave trading houses all operated in the same district—we had managed to complete our objective within the day. But rescuing the slaves had given rise to a new problem. We'd released everyone at once, and the trading houses hadn't had space to accommodate them all. As it stood, corridors, gardens, and even customer reception rooms were full to bursting. It wasn't bad enough that anyone had overflowed onto the street, and we'd taken precautions before our departure—leaving them with food, clothes, and other supplies, and entrusting the trading houses' staff with their care—but the sheer density of people meant we couldn't leave things be for long.

Although we had a mountain of problems still to deal with, we'd managed to get the bare minimum out of the way. Everyone who was sick or injured had been taken care of—not bad at all for only half a day's work.

"We owe our success to how hard you worked, Mina," I told her.

"Thank you!" she replied. "I did my best!"

"Rigel's contributions were rather significant as well," Rashid noted, patting the boy on the back. "Give him his due praise as well, won't you, Noor?"

The younger of the twins bashfully scratched his cheek. "O-Only because of your guidance, Mister Rashid. I hardly—"

"No need to be modest," Rashid insisted. "You were easy to teach, being such a quick learner."

"Thanks, Rigel," I said. "I appreciate it."

"No... Thank *you*, Mister Noor."

"Good job, Rigel!" Mina added, flexing her slender arms.

At that, the siblings shared warm smiles. It was great seeing them in such high spirits—but before I could get sentimental, Rashid clapped me on the shoulder and presented me with a sheaf of papers.

"Before I forget—here," he said. "These belong to you."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Is it not obvious? They're deeds."

"Deeds?"

"Yes, to almost every slave trading house in the city. Fourteen of the seventeen with House Sarenza's permission to conduct business in the capital, to be precise, all under your name on official documentation."

"Oh, okay."

I thumbed through the papers, counting them. Yep—there really were fourteen. The thought that a handful of documents could represent ownership of those massive buildings we'd visited struck me as unusual.

"I was thinking this earlier," I said, "but there aren't as many traders as I expected."

"The slave industry is rather strict when it comes to acquiring business permits," Rashid explained. "And the trading houses themselves aren't usually so easy to acquire—rarely does one show up on the market. The sellers were very surprised to hear that someone was snapping them all up. As a result, the market price has soared."

He grinned as he studied some kind of price sheet.

"Still," Rashid said, "this is only the beginning. Our work won't be over until we've sold the management rights to their empty husks back to clueless speculators at inflated prices. Ah, I can't help but laugh when I think about the scale of our profit margin. Trade truly never ceases to entertain. Oh, but here—today's profits."

Frowning, I accepted the pouch that my smiling companion held out to me. "Profit? I thought you were *spending* the money."

"Oh, I was. Purchasing the trading houses was a considerable expense. But I more than recouped it through other dealings."

"You...recouped it?"

"I told you, didn't I? That I would conduct some business and give you the profits."

"Yes, I suppose you did..."

The whole situation confused me. How could Rashid have spent so much and still made money?

"It's all in kingsgolds, for ease of transportation," he noted, indicating the pouch. "There was the option of logging it into an account book, but I surmised that physical coin would be more convenient for you, given your near-future plans. Just so you know, it's all good, clean money, earned through a long series of minor purchases and sales. It makes for a respectable sum. Please, think nothing of taking it."

Rashid wore a contented smile, but the weight of the pouch didn't match how lightly he was treating it.

"Wait," I said. "These coins are *all* kingsgolds?"

"Yes. And what you hold now is but a fraction of what I made."

"A...fraction?"

"Well, there are only so many kingsgolds in circulation. The rest of the money had to be converted into platinums and greatgolds. See those sacks over there? There wasn't room for them in Galen's vaults, so we had to leave them out here in the open."

I turned to see a great mound of sacks piled near the entrance. I wouldn't have believed they were all stuffed full of money if not for the coins spilled out onto the floor.

"Isn't it troublesome how much space coin takes up in physical form?" Rashid commiserated. "Still, Galen's been kind enough to volunteer as caretaker. Isn't that right, Galen?"

"B-But of course!" the plump merchant exclaimed. "I, Galen, swear upon my life that not a single coin of Master Noor's shall escape my watchful eye!"

"Now, I'm sure this goes without saying..." Rashid began, "but if even one gald is embezzled..."

"P-Perish the very thought!" Galen's tone took a notably higher pitch. "I... I hadn't even *considered* the idea!"

Rashid turned back to me. "As you can see, dear Galen can guarantee the safekeeping of your entire fortune. I would advise leaving it here for now and withdrawing from it as necessary."

As cheery as my companion seemed to be, I faced a difficult quandary. I'd already been at a loss for how to spend my riches; now, I had even more. It felt like the problem had only compounded upon itself.

"Is something the matter, Noor?" Rashid asked. "Unsure how to spend it all, I assume?"

"Yeah. How did you know? To be honest with you, I don't even know where to begin."

"Hear that, Rigel? I'd say this is a good time to put forward your idea."

"Y-Yes, Mister Rashid," the boy stammered. "Um, Mister Noor? I have a proposal."

"Yeah?" I asked.

Rigel exchanged a glance and a nod with Rashid, then took a step toward me. "It is not my intention to overstep," he began nervously, "but if I am correct, Miss Lynneburg's and your rounds of the slave trading houses have resulted in a large number of people who now have nowhere to go."

"They have, yeah. They're filling the corridors at this point, so we're not sure what to do. I'm surprised you thought so far ahead."

Rigel had hit the nail on the head. Because we'd acted without thinking, the trading houses were now bursting at the seams. We couldn't leave them in their current state for long, so whatever solution we decided on would need to be implemented soon.

"My understanding is that you're the current owner of the City Forgotten by Time," Rigel said. "Would moving everyone there not be the best option?"

"The City Forgotten by Time..." I muttered. "Could we really...?"

Space wouldn't be an issue. I could see there being an abundance of available rooms, and relocating everyone would surely be easier than trying to find new homes for them in the capital. The conditions would likely be better too. In that sense, it wasn't a bad idea, but when it came to transportation on such a large scale...

"It's a nice thought, but is it actually feasible?" I asked.

"The establishment has the capacity for it," Rashid assured me. "And with Melissa there, we can leave all administrative concerns in her capable hands."

"Right, but how are we supposed to move everyone? It would take us several days, at least."

"By my estimate," Rigel interjected, "the number of travelers

should fall within the acceptable requirements for commissioning a large-scale caravan from one of Sarenza's major transportation companies. Here's a written proposal I drafted with the details."

"'Large-scale caravan'? 'Written proposal'?" I was already bewildered as Rigel dropped a thick stack of papers into my arms. They were bound with a cover, and a quick look through them revealed neat diagrams beside dense, precisely written lines of text. "You put this together in a single afternoon?"

"I did, yes. Please excuse how haphazard it must seem. Oh, and —here are my estimates of the expenses associated with such a venture."

"Estimates...?"

As if determined to push the limits of my amazement, Rigel handed me another thick sheaf of documents. There were pages upon pages of sums and other calculations.

"From the guard detail to daily expenses, these cover all the costs involved in setting up a caravan bound for the City Forgotten by Time," the boy explained.

"This is getting a bit too complicated for me..." I muttered. "Does this mean we can actually do it?"

"Yes. We can fund the entire operation using roughly half of the profits earned today."

"Come again? So it won't even make a dent in them?"

"Correct. Even with the caravan, you've managed to turn a profit."

"Oh..."

As good as it was to know we could move everyone, it was rather unfortunate that even such an expensive endeavor wouldn't solve my surplus money issue. Just how much did I have left, exactly?

"Noor," Rashid said. "If you're amenable, might I suggest appending several instructors to the caravan?"

"Instructors?"

"When it comes to human resources, education is the best investment one can make. Ah, and while we're at it, it might be prudent to hire cooks and doctors as well, to ensure the others' continued good health. Here in the capital, one can buy expertise in any field with enough coin. I suppose golem engineers would be the

sole exception, as they cannot travel elsewhere."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Here," Rigel said. "A list of experts in all relevant fields."

"R-Right... Thanks?"

"The figure to the right of each name is the going rate for a five-year contract. Beneath it is the rate for a ten-year contract, and beneath that—"

"Uh-huh... Right. I didn't know that was a thing." I nodded along to the boy's upbeat explanation, scanning the dizzying array of numbers covering the papers he'd given me.

Yep. I don't understand any of this.

Still, there was one thing I knew for sure: This kid was a dyed-in-the-wool genius.

"And that's the gist of it," Rigel concluded, smiling enthusiastically. "May we have your permission to proceed?"

"Definitely. In fact, I entrust everything to you."

While I couldn't claim to have understood a single part of what Rigel had conveyed to me, his energetic demeanor assured me he would manage just fine. I would only hamper his work with my constant questions and clueless ideas.

"Huh? A-Are you sure, Mister Noor?"

"Yeah. It seems like there's a lot to do, so it probably won't be easy, but I trust you to get it done." I paused. "By the way, I know you've done all the calculations, but just tell me if you're short on coin. However much you need—it's yours."

"Y-Yes, sir! Thank you, Mister Noor! I'll strive to ensure that won't be necessary!"

Deep down, I hoped he wouldn't try *that* hard; I was in desperate need of a way to spend my money, and I would take any opportunity I could get. I couldn't bring myself to say that, though—not when I saw the sparkle in his eyes as he hugged the documents he'd put together.

In any case, I resolved not to get in Rigel's way from now on.

"Now," Rashid said, "as for how we'll explain this to Melissa... Shall I send her a letter by avian golem? I can't imagine she would appreciate a swarm of new residents showing up without warning.

Would you care to pen her a message as well, Noor?"

"Me?"

"You *are* the City Forgotten by Time's owner and highest authority, are you not? Melissa takes *your* orders, not mine."

"Oh, right. I guess so. I'll write her something, then."

"Excellent. Use this paper here, if you would. I've already written mine, so we can send them as soon as you finish."

"Got it."

There was a bird-shaped golem waiting by the window. Idly, I wondered if it counted as sentient or if it was just an object.

After scribbling down a quick message for Melissa, I rolled up the paper Rashid had given me and popped it into the metal canister the bird golem was carrying. When I turned back to the others, I saw that Rigel had already moved on to whatever task was next on his to-do list.

"He's very talented, isn't he?" Rashid mused. "So much so that I'd like to hire him personally."

"He really is," I agreed. "I get the feeling that as long as they're together, he and Mina will be standing on their own feet in no time—even without my help."

"Most certainly. Had the boy been alone, he would never have been able to earn enough to buy out his own contract from his master." Rashid seemed to consider something, then continued, "One moment, Noor. You're not planning on releasing him from his contract for free, are you? Even knowing how talented he is?"

"Would there be a problem with that?"

After a moment of silence, Rashid chuckled. "No, not at all. I'd consider it very true to your nature."

Mina stood to one side, contentedly watching her little brother work. I'd expected to provide for them for a while, since I'd taken them into my care, but now I was convinced that Rigel could earn more for them than I ever could, especially with his elder sister's help. They'd do just fine without me.

"Even in my eyes, they have a lot of value," Rashid said. "They're naturally gifted, of course, but it seems they've been hiding their talents their entire lives."

"Hiding them?" I repeated.

"Indeed. Ordinarily, their talents would fetch much greater prices. Perhaps they wanted to restrict their individual worth, lest they become too expensive to be purchased together. I suspect they knew someone who warned them."

"I...see?"

"Take Rigel's achievements today, for example. I gave him a few words of advice, certainly, but the rest was his innate talent. Yet, rather than grow conceited by his own capabilities, he fully understands to whom his life is owed. He'll live long, and he has more than what it takes to do well in the world of commerce. Quite fitting for one named after Rigel the Hero." Rashid turned a smile toward his subordinate standing behind him. "Don't you think, Shawza?"

For some reason, the one-armed beastfolk looked exceedingly displeased. Mina took it upon herself to agree in his place.

"That's right! My little brother's amazing! Don't you think so, Mister Shawza? Don't you? Huh? He's amazing, right? Isn't he? Right?"

Faced with Mina's urging and the pressure from Rashid's silent smile, Shawza graced the girl with a muttered "Yes, he is."

"Sorry for the wait, Mister Noor," Rigel said as he returned. "I've completed all the necessary arrangements."

"What? Already?"

"Yes. I finalized agreements with each service we'll be hiring earlier today, pending only your approval. The fees we'll be paying are above market value, given the sudden nature of the endeavor, but I was able to secure an exclusive contract with a major, reputable transportation company. The caravan will arrive at the City Forgotten by Time tomorrow morning, carrying everyone under your name from the trading houses."

"Wow. Tomorrow morning?"

"Sarenza's capital would not have its reputation as the city of commerce if the flow of goods stopped at night," Rashid explained. "Incidentally, Noor, I assume you have no interest in the trading houses aside from their 'contents'? If that's the case, may I proceed

to sell them?”

“Sure. I don’t mind.”

“I am ever appreciative of your swift decision-making. The market won’t reopen until tomorrow morning, but I can place a sell order to ensure the trading houses are out of our hands shortly after it does.”

“That’s quite a turnaround,” I noted. “You only just bought them.”

“When it comes to trading, speed and timing are everything. I would trade away sleep to spend more time enjoying the wonders of commerce. Still, I suppose I should be well rested for tomorrow. And it would be rude not to make use of the accommodations Galen will so graciously provide. Isn’t that right, Galen?”

“Y-Yes, of course!” the plump man exclaimed. “Nothing but the most luxurious suites for you and your companions, Young Master Rashid! And your meals will be prepared by the finest chefs available. My company will gladly shoulder the expenses!”

“Well, I hate to impose, but if you *insist*...” Rashid wore a slightly mischievous smile as he spoke, the deeds to the slave trading houses in hand. “Thank you, Galen. You’ve saved us the trouble of finding a place to stay.”

And so, we spent the night in the accommodations Galen was kind enough to provide.

Chapter 173: The Woman of Many Allegiances

"Why did Master Rashid leave only me behind...?"

Melissa, head manager of the City Forgotten by Time, stood on the roof of the lavish establishment. Access to the area was restricted to a select few, so she had taken to using it whenever she wanted to be alone with her thoughts. From such a spectacular vantage point, she could see the horizon in every direction, with nothing to obstruct her view.

It had become a habit of hers to come up here and gaze out across the desert whenever her heart felt uneasy. And today, of all days, she was particularly torn. Her employer, Rashid, had taken Shawza with him to the capital—leaving only her behind, for reasons she had yet to understand.

Several times before, Rashid had left Melissa to manage the city in his absence—but this time was different. He had abandoned the city for good, and if her read on him was correct, she suspected he would not come back for her. Was it any wonder she could not help but dwell on the reason?

"Perhaps he no longer has a use for me. Or perhaps...he has grown bored of me."

Or perhaps both were true, Melissa thought. In Rashid's eyes, she had never been a person of much value. The possibility that he'd simply lost any use for her was more than likely.

But then, that was no surprise. She had once been an assassin, sent by Rashid's relatives in House Sarenza to end his life when he was still a child. From the start, her presence at his side should have been nothing but a liability.



Melissa had been born in one of the countless minor nations that surrounded the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. As the daughter of nobles, she was raised in pleasant luxury, never knowing the meaning of want.

Until the day of her eighth birthday, when her country fell into ruin.

It began when the reigning monarch borrowed coin from House Sarenza to fund minor skirmishes against neighboring nations. In no time at all, the interest payments became crippling on a national scale, and the ruling classes—including Melissa's family—found themselves buried in debt.

Just like that, Melissa and her family became slaves, auctioned off to the highest bidder. Due to her noble upbringing and education, Melissa, in particular, caught the eye of a certain buyer, who sent her to a specialized institution to be trained as an assassin for the wealthy.

For better or worse, Melissa's natural talents quickly set her apart. It wasn't long before she received her first major assignment: the assassination of House Sarenza's eldest son.

At the time, Rashid was hated by many in power. After every contract killer sent to slay him had mysteriously vanished, his enemies turned to Melissa, believing her similar age to the young heir might cause him to lower his guard.

At twelve years old, Melissa accepted the job without hesitation. Disguised as a young maid, she knocked on the door of Rashid's estate—and was stunned when none other than her target answered. He welcomed her inside with a cheerful smile, and she wasted no time in attempting to carry out her assignment.

She failed instantly.

Rashid had spotted the poisoned knife concealed beneath Melissa's clothes. By the time she drew it, he had already pressed her against the corridor wall.

At that moment, Melissa was ready to die. To be a hunter, she believed, one had to be ready to be hunted. But what Rashid elected to do next took her entirely by surprise. He released his grip on her, returned the poisoned knife with a smile, and continued showing her

around his spacious estate. Then, several exchanges later, he cheerfully slipped three platinums into the pocket of her maid uniform and asked her to do what she'd ostensibly come to do in the first place: work for him.

Melissa hadn't understood Rashid's intentions in the slightest. What she had known, however, was that she'd been given another chance. She hadn't seen her family since they were sold to different buyers, but the middleman who had assigned her the job insisted that her father, mother, and younger brother were alive and well. The implication was clear: If she carried out the assassination, their safety would be guaranteed. If she didn't, they would be killed.

Despite her first attempt ending in failure, Melissa clung to hope. Her contract with her client was still valid, and she would consider Rashid's mercy a stroke of good fortune—one that allowed her to try again, as many times as necessary.

Yet, even that small flicker of optimism was quickly extinguished. A few months into their cohabitation, Rashid vanished, only to return just as abruptly with a new bodyguard in tow: Shawza, a one-armed, one-eyed beastfolk.

Despite being weak from blood loss and so emaciated that he looked as though he might drop dead at any moment, Shawza always had a sharp glint in his eye that made it clear he wasn't someone to be crossed. From their first encounter, Melissa recognized him as an opponent she would never be able to best. Every word he uttered oozed loathing for all who listened. She felt as though she were caught in the sights of a ferocious predator making no effort to hide its killing intent.

Acting on Rashid's orders, Melissa saw to Shawza's medical treatment. For days, she remained on edge, unable to relax for even a moment. Each time her fingers brushed his skin while changing his bandages, a jolt of terror shot through her at the premonition that he might tear her apart at any second.

Even in his near-death state, with his restricted range of movement, Shawza came across as undeniably formidable. Day and night, he crushed every assassin sent after Rashid, treating each attempt as casually as a walk in the park. As time passed and his

wounds healed, it seemed there was no one in the world who could equal him.

In the past, Melissa had slipped into Rashid's quarters countless times while he slept. Each time, she had intended to slit his throat—and each time, she had failed. Now, with Shawza at the young heir's side, she knew that if she made another attempt on Rashid's life, her knife hand would be twisted and crushed beyond repair.

But surrender wasn't an option. Her client—whose face remained unknown to her—sent her countless missives confirming that her family was still alive. She understood the implication clearly.

Melissa's contract with the client was still valid—something Rashid surely understood. Believing that she wouldn't succeed in her original assignment, he had let her be, hardly considering her a threat. What she still failed to grasp was his motive. He never said anything of significance, and trying to make sense of his actions felt as futile as trying to keep sand from slipping between her fingers. Even if he *had* said something, the sincerity of his words was always in doubt.

If there was one thing Melissa knew for certain, it was that no matter the time or place, Rashid always wore a smile. Even when his life seemed in danger, he would grin, take control of the situation, and crow that it was merely an amusement to him. Melissa suspected he kept her around for the same reason: She was just another piece in one of his games to pass the time.

Or was even that too generous? Perhaps her purpose was merely supplementary—just a means to make his days more interesting.

In the end, Melissa's only consolation was the leeway her unusual position afforded her. She would continue to play the part of Rashid's loyal right hand, staying close enough to maintain an advantageous position—one that might someday allow her to assassinate him. It was her own quiet form of rebellion.

Soon enough, an entire decade had passed since her original client sent her to Rashid, and she had made no progress toward completing her task.

Melissa understood the harsh truth of her situation. At any moment, Rashid could instruct Shawza to execute her. That was why

the news of their departure for Sarenza City had initially been a comfort—at least until she spiraled into uncertainty. Why had she been the only one left behind? She posed no threat to Rashid—he could have her killed whenever he pleased.

The only logical conclusion was that he'd simply lost interest in her. Whether she remained there or not made no difference to him.

The very thought that *this* could be the end of their relationship, after all this time, twisted Melissa's stomach in knots that refused to unravel. But just as she started to contemplate the feeling...

"Is that...?"

Far in the distance, a tiny silhouette stood out against the hazy backdrop of the morning desert sky: a small avian golem designed for simple correspondence. No sooner had it spotted Melissa atop the roof than it dove sharply, swooping down to her eye level and extending one of its thin automaton legs. Attached to the appendage was a small metal canister.

Melissa untied the canister and retrieved its contents: a small letter. The handwriting struck her as familiar.

Dearest Melissa,

We've done a fair bit of shopping in the capital.

Since we have nowhere to store our purchases, we're sending them your way.

By the time you read this, they should already be nearby. Please take care of the rest.

Your beloved friend,

Rashid

The letter's tone was flippant—typical of Rashid—and its brevity left much to be speculated. It was a testament to how he treated her as he would any of his loyal subordinates, even though their true relationship couldn't have been more different.

Melissa breathed a quiet sigh upon reaching the end of the letter. But as she moved to put it away—

"Oh, there's another behind it."

Of course. Rashid was no longer the owner of the City Forgotten by Time. It was now Noor's responsibility to instruct her, which must have been why Rashid kept his own correspondence so brief.

Somewhat relieved, Melissa carefully scanned the second letter. She expected more detailed information and instructions, yet...

Thanks,

Melissa cocked her head to one side, staring blankly at the paper in her hands. Then she tilted her head the other way. No matter how she looked at it, the letter contained none of the information she'd expected. Did it even qualify as a letter? Compared to this, her correspondence with Rashid seemed positively eloquent. She searched for a stray sheet she might have missed, but there was nothing.

"Huh...? Is this...really all there is?"

Was it some sort of code? No, it couldn't be. But then, what was she supposed to take from it? As she racked her brain for answers, something on the horizon caught her eye, making her blink in disbelief.

"It couldn't be..."

There was a traveling caravan—and a long one, at that. Her head told her she was looking at the "purchases" mentioned in Rashid's letter, but her heart refused to accept it. Describing the sight before her as "a fair bit of shopping" seemed utterly ridiculous. At a glance, the caravan appeared to carry roughly a fifth of the City Forgotten by Time's population.

"And they want *me* to do something about it...?"

If she took the contents of the letters at face value, the burden of processing the caravan rested squarely on her shoulders. Again, her intellect warred with her emotions. She could appreciate how little time they must have had to make arrangements in the capital, but springing such a task on her without adequate warning was completely unreasonable.

Then again, this was nothing new for Rashid. He always sprang things on Melissa, simply assuming she would be able to handle them. And despite her consistent reluctance, she always managed to meet his expectations.

She had to, if she wanted to stay close to her target.

It was far from the first time Melissa had found herself in such a predicament, but never had the expectation thrust upon her been so vast. Did Rashid truly expect her to accommodate this deluge of

people without warning or information?

Melissa sighed. “He does, doesn’t he? Or rather, they *both* do.”

If anything, it seemed more likely that the new owner had created this problem for her. Though she could never fully understand what Rashid was thinking, she’d at least spent years by his side. The new employer to whom she was temporarily contracted, however, was far more difficult to deal with.

Upon being reinstated to her position as head manager—under a set of rather favorable conditions—Melissa had come to the conclusion that Noor truly believed in her. He didn’t doubt her nature or her skills for a second, innocently trusting that she was exactly as she went to such great lengths to appear.

It was a far cry from her relationship with Rashid.

And yet, it was likely because of Noor that she found herself in her current dilemma. Rashid had transferred all of his assets to him, meaning the new owner had the final say—though Rashid was clearly still pulling the strings in some capacity. All in all, Melissa had to conclude that they were both to blame.

Having to answer to the demands of two unreasonable employers tempted her to abandon it all, to run away and never look back. Still, the blame—and, therefore, the burden—lay with her as well, for she had agreed to stay on as the City Forgotten by Time’s head manager. Not to mention, abandoning her duties now would mean leaving the approaching caravan adrift without shelter or assistance.

“I suppose I have no choice...”

Melissa stared at the lengthy caravan, its tail end still out of sight, and heaved a long sigh. She was exhausted, without a doubt, but also relieved. Her provisional employer, Rashid, had yet to abandon her. In fact, he had given her a new task to complete. It was a comforting thought, even if it came with the sobering realization that she still wasn’t ready to plunge her blade into his heart.

Still, Melissa thought, it was no time to wallow in trifling melancholy. For the City Forgotten by Time to take in such a great swath of people, a veritable mountain of work would need to be done. The very sight of the unannounced caravan would send the staff into a flurry, and she knew she would need to placate the

hotheaded Kron before he did anything rash.

"Enough of that," she told herself. "We must prepare to take them in at once."

The roles she had been given might have been fleeting—insignificant in the face of her true assignment—but she had to fulfill them all the same. After one last glance at the approaching caravan, which would swell the City Forgotten by Time's population by a significant percentage, she turned on her heel and ran inside, ready to begin her work.

Chapter 174: The Unseen Patron

I think...this is it for me.

Even through the haze in her mind, the girl saw the truth. Her leg was swollen and festering—a gruesome scene painted in shades of black and red. There were people all around her, but as she groaned in pain, not one of them spared her even a glance.

She had been born into slavery. Her parents had died with outstanding debt, which the law had forced her to inherit. Still, she was grateful to them for the sturdy body they had passed on to her—for the strength to work tirelessly for her master.

Only now, she was too injured to be useful.

It had started as merely an irritant. As best the girl could figure, she must have stepped on a rusty nail while carrying a stack of cargo. Her master had dismissed the puncture, not wanting to pay for medical treatment, and she had questioned it no further.

Several days later, her entire leg had swollen and begun to fester. Even standing became a strenuous task. Her master promptly returned her to the trading house he had purchased her from, thanked her for her good work, and departed with another slave. She recalled him mentioning something about a "warranty period," though she didn't quite understand what that meant.

Despite having been returned, the girl hadn't been led back to her old lodgings. Instead, she was taken somewhere entirely new—to a place with stagnant air and a thick, unpleasant odor. There were no windows for light, and the only occupants were the frail, the sick, and the dying. Some had wasted away from illness; others were missing limbs and the light from their eyes; and still others muttered to themselves, spouting words no one else could understand.

No sooner had the girl entered the room than her instincts screamed at her. The cruel fate she witnessed would soon be her own.

The girl recognized her surroundings. She had heard rumors of such dark places—places from which no one ever returned. Immersed in the thick stench of death, knowing that she would never leave, she clung to her swollen leg and tried to stifle her groans. It was all she could do.

Beside her, an old man sat muttering. Whether his words were of sympathy or resignation, she couldn't say—he was speaking too quietly to tell.

"Leaving an infected wound unattended, hmm? It would have been so easy to drain. Too late now, though. Poor thing. But that's the way it goes."

Though breathless from the pain, the girl still found the strength to agree. Such was the way of the world. Because she had lacked one crucial piece of knowledge, she was now facing her demise.

The strong thrived, while the weak simply faded away. Even at her young age, the girl understood that inexorable truth. She was feeble and uneducated—and that was why she suffered.

A shiver ran through her as she began to accept her fate. She wanted to sob, terrified of the end she knew was coming, but she was so dehydrated that a few tears were all she could manage.

Then, somewhere in the blur of pain and fear, the girl noticed someone standing in the doorway—a man who hadn't been there before.

"This place is awful. And still not a window in sight?"

The man entered with a young woman whom the girl suspected was a year or two her senior. Upon spotting the girl on the ground, curled up in pain, he made his way toward her.

"Don't worry—a little injury like this can be treated in no time," he said. "[Low Heal]."



The man placed his hand on her festering leg, which was soon enveloped in warm light. The pain—and the swelling—began to fade before her very eyes.

Huh?

For reasons the girl could not comprehend, her once rotten appendage healed wherever the man touched it. Even her open sores began to close. She couldn't make out his face—hunger and thirst had clouded her vision—but somehow, she could sense that he was giving her a gentle smile.

"This should do for now," he said. "Just...take it easy, okay? You're not fully healed yet."

The man finished treating her—though it seemed he had done nothing more than touch her—and moved on to the next person, repeating the process. Only then did the girl, her thoughts still sluggish from fever, realize something that should have been obvious.

Of course. This is all a dream.

There could be no other explanation. Her rescue was a trick of the senses, meant to bring her comfort in her final moments.

The others in the room, barely clinging to life, watched the stranger work with the same bewilderment. The darkness in their eyes had given way to confusion. Eventually, the man stood, exhaled in satisfaction, and turned to the long-haired young woman with whom he had entered.

"That should do for emergency treatment. Sorry, Lynne, but could you see to the rest?"

"Of course, Instructor. And thank you for your help. I can take it from here."

"In that case, I'll go help Ines and the others with the shopping."

"I'm sure they'll appreciate it."

After the "instructor" departed, the young woman made her way around the room. She retrieved what appeared to be medicine from a case and murmured gentle words as she brought it to the mouths of the sickly. The impact was almost immediate: Languidness melted away from those who were tended to, and they began to push themselves up under their own power.

The slave girl watched, still caught in a daze. Even as the truth began to take root, she couldn't bring herself to believe it was real. It felt as though she had witnessed a miracle. She had never seen a doctor before, but how else could she describe the man and young woman who'd come to their aid? They seemed entirely separate from the world she had come to know.

Once she had seen to everyone, the young woman with the medicine box departed. The slaves—their ailments and injuries gone as though they had never existed—were moved to another room, where they were given clean clothes, hot food, fresh blankets, and a chance to rest.

Not one of the slaves could understand why they were receiving such kindness. Even the most optimistic among them dared not voice their thoughts, for they knew there had to be a catch. Perhaps they would be sold—and at a higher price than usual, now that they were healthy and fed. Many whispered that their saviors' "generosity" was nothing more than a sales tactic, and some even sneered at the notion that they were being shown kindness at all.

Thus, although they had been cured, the slaves' expressions remained grim. They sprawled on the ground, listless, as if they had never even escaped their dark, windowless prison.

As the sun set and a chill crept into the air, the wonder of the miracle they had witnessed began to fade. Wrapped in her blanket, the girl could only watch as misery ate away at them all. She hung her head, and the light of hope faded from her eyes.

"Right, you lot! Load 'em up—every last one of 'em! We're on a tight schedule here!"

In the deep hush of night, shouts rang out, footsteps scrambling in their wake. A group of heavyset men stormed in, looking every bit like bandits and clearly harried for time. One by one, they picked up the stupefied slaves and carried them away. As panicked screams filled the air, a large bearded man with a particularly striking marauder's countenance strolled in and roared:

"Hey! Knuckleheads! Easy on the goods! How many times do I gotta say it? The customer's things are worth more than yer own damn heads! Treat 'em a hundred times better than you'd treat yer

missuses! Got it?!”

“B-Boss, uh... Me and the boys have been thinking, and...”

“And what? Out with it.”

“Well...none of us are married yet. Speaking about our ‘missuses’ doesn’t seem appropriate, what with our employer-employee relationship. It’s a bit demeaning.”

At once, the rough-looking men froze, staring at their boss with confused slaves still in their arms. The bearded man looked around at them, his mouth working silently for a moment before he found his voice.

“Oh, shut it, will ya?! And get back to work! You were hired for yer muscles, not yer brains! If you ain’t got a missus, *imagine one*! It’s what I do!”

“Y-Yes, Boss!” the brawny men chorused. They went back to carrying the slaves away—albeit much more gently than before. Some even asked for permission, turning fearful screams into murmurs of confusion.

The bearded man watched his employees work, his arms crossed and an ominous grin on his face. “Really, what a ridiculous job...” he said with a menacing chuckle. “Twice the market rate just to get this lot where they’re goin’. By daybreak too! Still, I’d never have joined the express shipping business if it didn’t light a fire in my belly!”

The girl held her breath, hoping the strange man—clearly enjoying himself—and his crew wouldn’t find her. But it was no use. Step by step, he moved toward the shadows where she lay hidden.

“Found ya.” He grinned, creasing the array of scars on his face. “Yer a pretty fine hider, little miss. Hate to be a bother at this late hour, but business is business, I’m afraid. Be a dear and come all quiet-like, won’t ya? There’s a spot on the wagon with yer name on it.”

She whimpered and curled inward as the man’s burly arms reached out. But instead of seizing her, he picked her up as though she were a bundle of delicate feathers, careful not to jostle her lest she scatter apart.

Huh?

The picture of consideration, the bearded man carried the girl out

of the trading house to a canopied wagon parked outside. Gently, he placed her in the back, which was upholstered with a pleasantly aromatic plush rug. Her wide eyes grew wider. She'd expected far rougher treatment, given the men's appearances.

"Right, knuckleheads!" the bearded man shouted. "Did ya treat the cargo nicer than ya would yer wives?! And what about the protective sheets?! They better be triple-layered!"

"Yes, Boss!" his men shouted in response. "We're good to go, Boss!"

"Final checks, then! Get to work! And don't forget to look under the cart! So help me, as I live and breathe, no golem wagon of ours is gonna run over a stray cat or sand rat—not one! Ya hear me?!"

"Carts checked, Boss! We're ready to go!"

Each time the bearded man shouted into the night, he received a coordinated shout in response. It seemed there were many more people the girl couldn't see.

"Remember, knuckleheads! Trust is how we put food on the table! Bandits, sandstorms, or whatever else—nothing's gonna stop us from deliverin' this lot on time! But do ya know what's even more important?!"

"A comfortable journey, no matter the rush! The cargo's safety comes first!"

"Well said, boys! Now get us outta here!"

"Yes, Boss!"

Despite the depth and intensity of the burly men's voices, they urged the wagon—drawn by horse-shaped golems—forward with nothing but care and consideration. The girl still thought they looked like bandits, but all traces of her previous fear had vanished.

I wonder where they're taking us...

Strangely enough, the wagon was completely open on all sides. There was nothing stopping her from jumping out and escaping, yet she didn't—and neither did the other slaves. They all remained where they were, trying to puzzle out what in the world was happening to them.

The girl poked her head through a gap in the wagon's canopy. She watched as their cart joined countless others in a procession

stretching far beyond the horizon. They were part of a massive caravan.

What is this...?

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make sense of the situation. The string of miracles seemed to grow longer by the moment. It was as if the world had turned topsy-turvy around noon and neglected to right itself since.

And so, the girl simply lay on the plush, sweet-smelling rug beneath her, taking solace in its comfort. She worried about what might lie ahead...but that didn't stop her from drifting into a deep sleep.

◇

"Hey. Wake up. They're telling us to get out."

"Mmh...?"

The girl awoke to an older beastfolk boy shaking her. The golem-drawn wagon had stopped, and while it was still gloomy outside, the faintest glow of predawn light seeped in. It seemed she would greet the morning in a new, unknown place.

At the boy's insistence, the girl hurried out of the wagon. She had barely caught a glimpse of her surroundings before her eyes widened in shock.

"What is this place...?"

Trees, plants, and other greenery stretched out as far as she could see, all species she had never encountered before. Birds she didn't recognize flitted between branches, while small animals peered out from the leaves. Everywhere she looked, multicolored flowers bloomed with such beauty that it was clear each one had been tended to by hand. The girl found it hard to believe that, not long before, there had been barren sand underfoot.

If anything, the place around her resembled the "heaven" she'd heard about in stories. Had she met her end and passed into the afterlife? It seemed like an awfully peaceful existence, if so.

"Come on. Don't space out." The boy nudged her. "Let's go."

"Huh? O-Okay..."

With sleep still cloaking her thoughts, the girl followed him to where a large group of people had gathered. Judging by their fresh clothes—identical to her own—they had to be the other slaves from the caravan. There were so many of them that she couldn't see the end of the crowd, much less estimate their number.

As the pair moved to join the throng of slaves, the girl spotted the bearded man who had put her on the wagon the day before. He stood slightly apart from them, speaking with an unfamiliar woman dressed in black.

"Here is the cargo manifest, along with a letter addressed to 'Melissa, the head manager,' entrusted to us by the client," he said, his tone surprisingly courteous for a man with his rough appearance and unkempt facial hair. "If there are any issues with the delivery, just let us know. Otherwise, please sign here as proof of receipt."

"Very well. Thank you."

The woman was a sight to behold. Though there were others dressed in black, the way her companions behaved made it clear she was in charge. She signed and returned whatever document the bearded man had given her, and he responded with a satisfied smile and a bow more genteel than the girl would ever have expected.

"Thank you for using Hans & Co.," he said. "That concludes our contract. Unless you'd care to commission us again?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"In that case, we shall depart shortly. Should you need a shipping company in the future, we humbly ask that you consider us. Hans & Co.—your trust and the safety of your cargo are our top priorities!"

"I'll relay that to the proprietor."

"You honor us, madam! I should mention that we're currently running our 'Bandits-B-Gone' campaign. Your caravan's safety—guaranteed. Request us now, and you'll receive our guard escort and bandit corpse disposal services for the low, low price of—"

"Your message is received," the woman interrupted coolly. "Thank you."

For a moment, the bearded man's face tightened into a frown. Then he noticed the girl watching him, and a grin spread across his features instead. He gave her a thumbs-up before turning on his

heel and returning to his men by the wagons. In no time, they were on the move.

The woman in black opened the letter she'd received, read through it, and let out a short sigh. "I see. That explains all this, I suppose. It isn't too far from what I imagined, but to care for them *permanently*..."

She shook her head, then turned to the confused slaves and took a deep breath.

"Welcome, everyone. I am Melissa, the head manager of the City Forgotten by Time, and I have just been entrusted with your care. My staff and I will take you inside shortly. You must be tired from your journey, but I ask for your patience while we prepare."

The woman gave a polite bow, which unsettled the slaves watching her. They weren't used to being shown respect by their superiors—and the city's head manager was obviously someone important.

"Zaza, Leah." The woman in black beckoned to two others standing behind her. "See that everyone is sufficiently hydrated, and ensure they receive standard health checkups while you're at it. Several of them appear weakened from the journey. Those who feel particularly unwell should be escorted to the infirmary."

"Of course, ma'am."

A large group of people in black suits materialized, carrying silver trays laden with small glasses, which they began distributing to the slaves. The girl received one as well and curiously examined the faintly reddish liquid inside. She brought the cup to her lips and found the drink invigoratingly sweet. By the time she finished it, her fatigue had completely faded away.

"Leah," the woman in charge said. "How are they faring?"

"Fortunately, none of them are sick. Their clothes also appear new and clean. However, to comply with our facility's standards for communicable diseases, I recommend putting them through a quick sanitization process, at the very least."

"Do you have something in mind?"

"May I escort them to the medical pools for senior-level patrons? Given their number, it would be the most efficient way to get

everyone cleaned at once."

"You may. Take our health and medical staff, of course, but also our body-care and cosmetics specialists. They can ensure our new arrivals are properly groomed after their bath."

"Yes, ma'am. What should we do about their attire? We'll need quite a large supply to clothe them all."

"The cargo manifest includes additional clothing for them. If that isn't enough, make up the difference from our own supply. And place an order for spares, just in case."

"Of course, ma'am. I'll see to it at once."

"As for you, Zaza—how is the housing plan I requested coming along?"

Leah stepped back, allowing Zaza to take her place.

"As it stands, we face a fundamental issue: Our residential quarters lack the capacity to accept all the new arrivals. However, as you know, we've shut down the colosseum in accordance with the new proprietor's wishes. Over half of the fighters have vacated their rooms, and the monster enclosures—previously for our patrons' viewing pleasure—now stand empty. By my estimate, we can have all of these areas remodeled within the day, creating ample living space for our new arrivals' needs. I've already informed all of our construction staff, so work can begin as soon as you approve the budget, ma'am."

"Consider it approved. Give them the go-ahead to start."

"Yes, ma'am. Moving on, our customer service division would like to know our policy regarding the food we'll be supplying to our new arrivals."

"Tell them to provide essentials similar to what our general staff receive, with a focus on consistency and long-term nutrition. Additionally, since we don't have any reservations from senior-level patrons for the foreseeable future, inform the staff to prioritize the use of luxury ingredients. They tend not to last long, anyway."

"Understood, ma'am. I'll pass that along."

"And get in touch with each division's supervisor. If any anticipate a drop in their supplies, tell them to notify our wholesale purchasing agents to ensure they have everything they need."

“Yes, ma’am. If that’s all, we’ll relay your instructions immediately. We’ll return with a progress report once things are underway.”

“Thank you, Zaza, Leah.”

On that note, the two women took their leave. A long-haired man with sharp eyes approached in their place and bowed.

“You called for me, ma’am?”

“Kron, I entrust you with guiding our new arrivals in their daily needs and affairs. Here is Noor’s policy regarding their treatment—follow it accordingly.”

“Of course, ma’am. Please leave it to me. No matter their number, I shall ensure that not a single one of them leads a slovenly lifestyle.”

The woman paused. “They are our proprietor’s charges, remember. Try not to be too rough with them.”

“But of course. I shall begin preparations right away.”

Kron accepted a note from the head manager and tucked it into his jacket pocket before striding away. Meanwhile, the others in black suits began ushering the slaves toward an entrance of sorts. Their demeanor was exceedingly polite, as if they were welcoming guests or paying customers.

“This way, everyone. Please follow us!”

The girl, standing slightly apart from the crowd, stared blankly at the scene. She still felt as if she were dreaming. Her reverie was broken only when Melissa approached her, having noticed that she wasn’t moving.

“You too, little one.” She crouched down to the girl’s eye level and gave a reassuring nod. “I know you must feel uneasy, having been thrust into the unknown, but please don’t worry. We’ll take good care of you.”

The head manager didn’t smile, but she placed a hand on the girl’s back and gently urged her forward. The gesture felt unexpectedly warm, rather than forceful.

“O-Okay...” the girl said, snapping back to her senses. “Th-Thank you...?”

The girl finally moved, merging with the main crowd. Black-suited

staff members led her and the others down a wide corridor and into a large room, where they were directed toward two separate entrances.

"Women to this side, please! Men this way!"

Evidently, they were being steered into separate changing rooms.

Once she had undressed, the girl followed the staff members' instructions to move along, her mind racing with thoughts of what might come next. The unease that had begun to bloom within her was quickly dispelled when a sweet, floral scent wafted in from the room ahead.

What...is this place?

Wearing the towels they'd been given, the girl and the other women stepped into a bathing area unlike any they had ever seen. A large, shallow pool filled most of the space, its water so clear they could see straight to the bottom. The floral scent that had caught the girl's attention hung thick in the air; in fact, she noticed genuine petals drifting atop the water. It was a far cry from the cold, dark bathing areas she was accustomed to, where the water was so muddy it might as well have been dirt.

At the staff members' insistence, the girl timidly dipped her toes into the water. It was perfectly warm, like touching her own skin. She sank further in, until her entire lower body was submerged, and relaxed.

A tall, beautiful woman—one of the female employees who had just moments ago been waiting in reserve—approached with a pleasant-smelling bar of soap. "Pardon me," she said, then began gently scrubbing the girl's hair, combing out the knots with her fingers. The experience was so pleasant that time seemed to slip away unnoticed. A polished pair of scissors carefully trimmed the excess from the girl's tresses, and tender hands gave them one final wash.

What's happening to me...?

Never before had the girl experienced anything so wonderful. She could only remain still, trying to make sense of it all, as the woman continued to massage her head and shoulders, working out the last of the kinks in her hair. It felt nice, she thought. *Very* nice.

Once everyone was clean, the black-suited women throughout the room dried the slaves—and their hair—with soft towels.

"This way, please."

Next, the girl was led into another room, where a fresh change of clothes awaited her. The fabric was more comfortable than anything she had ever worn before, and even she could tell the quality of the cut. Bewildered, she changed and stepped into yet another room, where a huge mirror was set into the wall.

Is that...?

For a moment, the girl couldn't recognize herself. She stopped in her tracks, staring into her own eyes. The signs were all there, but she couldn't accept them. The person looking back at her had the glossiest, most beautiful hair and smooth, glowing skin. She was dressed like a wealthy merchant's daughter, and if the girl had encountered her on the street, she would have bowed very low indeed.

As she looked around, the girl saw that the other women were reacting in much the same way. They alternated between gazing into the mirror and exchanging confused glances, tilting their heads in shared uncertainty.

Beyond the room with the mirror, they rejoined the men, who had undergone a similar transformation. Each and every one of them now resembled a high-society gentleman. The old man who'd spoken to the girl out of pity in that cramped, dark room was there as well, but neither of them recognized the other. Only when they heard each other's voices did they goggle at one another, eyes wide.

"Next, we've prepared a meal for you all," one of the staff members announced.

The slaves, now unrecognizable from their former selves, were escorted into a dining hall furnished with large, grand tables laden with luxurious dishes none of them had ever tried before. They all examined the scene from a distance, not daring to approach, until they were gently urged into ornamented chairs by the black-suited employees serving as their guides. Apprehension curbed their appetites—but when they finally tasted the food, the dam burst, and they all tucked in with enthusiasm.

There was enough food for everyone, portioned into individual servings. The girl's first venture was a spoonful of soup, which she could only describe as a wave of pure elation that spread all the way through her body. Each sip filled not only her stomach but her heart as well. Slurping down the last drop felt like waking from a dream.

Those sitting at the other tables wore bright, satisfied smiles as they chatted merrily and praised the deliciousness of their meal. The day before, they had been stuck in a cramped, dark room, waiting to die. Now, all their unease—their fears for tomorrow—had vanished into thin air. People laughed together, sharing their delight. Though the understanding that this was reality had gradually begun to creep up on her, the girl refused to accept it. For what could this be if not a dream or heaven?

If the world around her truly was a figment of her imagination, she hoped it would continue forever. She wanted nothing more than to cling to the joy she was feeling. Even if none of it made sense, the thought of everyone having fun together made her feel all warm inside.

Little did the girl know, she wasn't the only one lost in reverie. Every single slave was envisioning a brighter tomorrow—one they'd never even considered before. But their pleasant thoughts lasted only as long as it took them to be guided into the next room.

"What's this, now?" The long-haired, sharp-eyed man from outside now stood on a stage at the center of the room, glaring down at them. "Having fun, are we? Perhaps you think this is heaven? Your expressions certainly seem to say so."

A jolt of nervousness rippled through the crowd, and blissful faces stiffened with unease.

"There's no need to hide it," he continued. "You sorry lot have received the finest hospitality the City Forgotten by Time has to offer. To enjoy it is only appropriate. Unfortunately, I'm here to tell you that this lucky windfall of yours ends today! There won't be any more handouts. You're going to work here from now until your dying days!"

The long-haired man's ominous words stirred a sense of dread in his audience. He grinned and gave a menacing chuckle.

"That's right. Let it sink in. Every single one of you is here for good. You'll be forever tied to the City Forgotten by Time!"

The slaves' faces turned pale. An uncomfortable-looking woman on the stage—the same lady who had taken charge before—shuffled over to the long-haired man and murmured, "Kron? Proprietor Noor's instructions *did* mention guaranteeing them lifetime employment, but isn't your phrasing somewhat...?"

"They're about to become our coworkers," he muttered back. "We can't let them feel like customers forever. I'm just getting them into the right headspace."

"If you say so..."

Kron turned away from his colleague—who still looked uncertain—and raised his voice. "Listen up, rookies! Carve this into your hearts! As of this moment, you've shed your past as lowly slaves! That means no more groveling, no more cringing, and no more falling over yourselves to obey your masters' every whim! From now on, you're all proud employees of the City Forgotten by Time! You'll receive a full education *from scratch*, after which you'll assume your duties. As *first-rate* workers, you will provide *first-rate* service for our patrons and strive to uphold our establishment's *first-rate* reputation!"

Whispers spread through the crowd. Employees? Education? Were their ears deceiving them?

"As per the generous wishes of our esteemed proprietor, you are free to pursue any career path you desire," the long-haired man continued. "Please write down your top three choices on the papers you're about to receive. If you can't read or write, simply ask one of the nearby staff members for help. Should you have any questions, come forward and ask them."

The former slaves exchanged puzzled glances, their confusion deepening as they were handed small paper cards covered in writing. Since the girl couldn't read, it wasn't until she asked one of the nearby black-suited employees for assistance that she learned the cards contained a list of occupations. Guard, stock procurement clerk, face-to-face customer service representative, shipping and transportation worker, hair and beauty worker, cook, doctor, lawyer—

the array of options was exceptional.

"Huh...? Doctor? Lawyer?"

Of all the questions running through the girl's mind, one stood out above the rest: Why were two professions famously known for the high cost of their education among her choices? Her bewilderment was so intense that, despite her hesitation, she approached the man on the stage, who seemed to be scowling at the room in general.

"U-Um, excuse me!" she called out. "C-Can I ask a question?"

"I said you could, didn't I? Out with it."

"C-Can we pick anything? Can I, f-for example, choose to become...a d-doctor?"

"Hmm? Were you not listening, little brat?" Kron fixed the girl with a glare. "Of *course* you can. The proprietor made it clear that your education will be provided free of charge. If you want to become a doctor, you'll be assigned to a practicing professional who will guide you firsthand. Funds have already been provided to cover your teachers' contract fees. Know that you—*all of you*—have a duty to make the most of your blessed circumstances."

"D-Duty...?" the girl questioned.

"Yes. *Duty.* But make no mistake—you will receive your desired occupation *only* if you put in the work! The lazy and indolent will get not a single grain of sand from the City Forgotten by Time! Prepare yourselves, because no matter what you choose, the path to becoming a professional is fraught with hardship!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"That's your question answered. Anyone else?"

Despite her eager response, the girl was still confused. She had *more* questions, if anything. She could choose a profession and learn it for free? What did that even mean?

"In case anyone was wondering—and remember, this *only* applies once you've been trained and stepped into your full-time roles—you will be entitled to a hundred days' worth of paid leave per year. On top of designated rest days, of course," the long-haired man explained. "Bonuses are provided twice yearly as a general rule, and raises are given once per year—*provided* you're working to an

acceptable standard. Otherwise, your salary will *remain the same*! Got that?!"

More whispers rippled through the crowd. Bonuses? Raises? A hundred days of paid leave?

"That's all I have to say about your basic working conditions. If no one else has any questions, I'll move on."

Kron scanned the room, waiting to see if anyone else would step forward. Not a single former slave moved a muscle; they couldn't comprehend the answer they had just received, let alone formulate any further questions.

"If you think of any more questions later, come to my room," the long-haired man said, taking a moment to embrace the quiet. "Now, one last thing—I will tell you all our two most important rules. Listen closely, because I will say them only once, and they take precedence over everything else. If you forget or violate them, we shall strip you of everything—even the clothes on your back—and cast you out into the blazing desert to fend for yourselves."

A hush descended upon the room as Kron's sharp tone quashed even the faintest whispers.

"Rule number one!" he announced. "The exceptional conditions you've been granted are all thanks to Proprietor Noor's kindness, as well as his personal protection of the City Forgotten by Time! Never—not for a single moment—should you forget what he has done for you!"

The long-haired man paused, then continued with equal fervor:

"Rule number two! Never take for granted the blessing of being here! Those who neglect to study and work hard, know this: There is no place for you in this city! To receive, you must give! That is the creed by which first-rate professionals live!"

So menacing was the look that Kron gave the crowd that everyone held their breath in unison, his message loud and clear in their minds.

"I will not tolerate ignorance of our rules, not even if our magnanimous owner forgives it," he concluded. "You can—and *will*—be kicked out. That is all."

Kron's expression remained as severe as before, yet there was a

certain satisfaction in his demeanor, as though he was content to have said his piece. Meanwhile, the black-suited woman behind him rubbed her brow with one hand.

"Kron... None of that was untrue, but..." She sighed. "You and I will need to talk about this."

"Of course, ma'am. I'll stop by your office once today's business is concluded."

The long-haired man bowed, his features devoid of contrition, before departing with a brisk stride. In his absence, the woman in black continued massaging her brow, slowly shaking her head as she watched him go.

"Please let me know which occupations you wish to pursue. I'll note them down for you."

The girl turned to see the staff member she had asked for help, now standing right beside her. She thought back to the many options available to her and the others, but her mind was already made up. Even during the long-haired man's speech, she had known which path called to her.

"I...want to be a doc..."

Despite how certain she felt, her words caught in her throat. How could she say something so absurd? In that dark, cramped room, she'd never have considered entering a profession. She hadn't even known if she would survive the night. For someone who had never even *seen* a doctor before her encounter with the man and young woman the day before, the idea of practicing medicine felt like an impossible fantasy.

And yet...

"I want to be a doctor."

"I'll put that as your first preference, then. Can you tell me your second and third?"

"I...don't want to be anything else."

"You don't?" the staff member asked, studying the girl with curiosity.

The girl knew that, from a practical standpoint, it was more or less impossible for someone who couldn't even read to become a doctor. Yet, the idea didn't seem quite as strange now that she had

said it aloud. Yes, she would need a miracle to make it happen, but she had witnessed plenty in the span of a single day. Would one more really be so much to hope for?

In fact, she hadn't just witnessed those miracles—she had experienced them. She had seen people lost in the darkest depths of despair, their eyes cast downward, raise their heads to behold a brighter future. She had felt her own immovable fate shift in a direction beyond her wildest dreams, all because of the actions of a single man. The world she had once thought so cruel could thrive if only more people embodied his kindness.

Miracles were far from an everyday occurrence—but when they happened, they seemed to come all at once. As long as she put in the hard work...maybe she could even perform one of her own.

"Are you sure you only have one preference?" the female employee pressed. "It's ideal to have a backup or two, in case things don't work out."

"I'm sure," the girl replied. "I don't need any other choices."

The more she thought about it, the more certain she became. She wanted a chance to reunite with her savior—to thank him for rescuing her. What better way could there be to ensure they would meet again than charging down the path he had taken? He was a master in his field—the miracles he had performed made that clear. The girl wanted nothing more than to be like him. Even if she fell short, she would be content simply following in his footsteps.

As someone who'd never had a future before, seeing that man again was her sole, most fervent desire. She didn't know his name or what he looked like, but she would find him. And when she did, she knew exactly what she would say to him.

"Thank you for healing me."

If she truly could choose any future she desired, she would devote the rest of her days to showing her savior how she felt. She had never received much of an education, and there was little she knew for certain, but she had never been more sure of anything in her life. It didn't matter whether her goal was realistic; the vague warmth she had felt in that dark, despair-laden room had since grown into her very reason for existing.

“Are you really, truly sure?” the staff member asked. “There’s no harm in putting down a second or third choice.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” the girl answered, embracing her dream for the very first time. “I want to become a doctor.”

Chapter 175: Night in the Capital

"Here we are, Master Noor. The finest room we have."

"Thanks, Galen."

Having finished my luxurious dinner ahead of the others, I was led by Galen to what he claimed was the nicest guest room he could provide. It was a bold assertion, to be sure, but the accommodation exceeded even his most confident boasts.

Situated on the top floor of the hotel, the room was said to offer a view of every famous landmark in Sarenza City. That, I thought, was more clever marketing than fact—while the landmarks were technically visible, they appeared no larger than tiny specks. Still, I couldn't deny the breathtaking beauty of the cityscape.

As a bonus, the room featured a shower with unlimited water—a true luxury in a desert country—and a "one-person" bed so enormous that it could comfortably fit five people with space to spare. Every aspect of the services and amenities was immaculate. I doubted I'd make many—or *any*—more trips to Sarenza, but if I ever did return, I'd jump at the chance to stay somewhere so remarkable.

But the perks didn't end there. Galen had gone above and beyond by reserving the entire floor for me, meaning I had free rein over every single one of its rooms. It was far more than I needed, in my opinion, but they would have gone unused otherwise; the others had already been assigned rooms on the lower levels. Lynne and Rolo wanted to repair their oracle's orb—a magical, long-range communication device that could transmit both sound and imagery—so they were staying with Ines. Sirene was in a separate room with Mina and Rigel, having agreed to keep an eye on the twins. I'd offered to help both groups, but they'd said they didn't really have a use for me.

And so, here I was, with nothing to do.

I'd passed some time exploring my room, but that only held my

interest for so long. Then I started swinging the Black Blade around, hoping to get some practice in—only for Galen to sprint into the room and tearfully beg me to do "anything but that."

Unable to tolerate the boredom, I wandered around the hotel asking if anyone had chores I could help with. Even simple tasks like cleaning or washing dishes sounded good, but every employee I spoke to went white as a sheet, fervently apologizing for whatever they thought I found "inadequate" about their service.

With nothing else to do, I decided to head up to the roof. Galen had praised its unobstructed view of the capital, and zoning out in front of a beautiful cityscape sounded pleasant enough as a last resort.

"The view's even prettier than I thought."

My first few steps onto the rooftop were tentative—my fear of heights was hard to beat—but I managed to swallow my nerves enough to get a good look around. I stood alone in an open plaza, with no walls or any sort of covering overhead. So many species of plants decorated the space that it might've been mistaken for a garden at first glance.

I relaxed into a small metal chair at the edge of the plaza and gazed up. The sun had nearly set, and a full moon hung crisp and majestic in the darkening sky. The moon probably wasn't a rare sight here—it was likely visible most nights, thanks to the lack of clouds over the desert—but its stark brilliance illuminating the city from above gave the whole spectacle a fairy-tale sheen.

For a while, I simply took in the view. It was truly wonderful—but even that couldn't keep my boredom at bay for long. Before I had the chance to grow sick of staring at the same scene, I decided to head back to my room and turn in for the night—while the view was still a memory worth appreciating.

However, before I could even rise from my seat, I sensed someone approaching. I turned to find Rashid, wearing his ever-present smile as he strolled over and came to stand beside me.

"Good evening, Noor," he said. "Enjoying the hotel?"

I nodded. "The food's great, the rooms are huge, and I got some good rest. The view from up here's just the cherry on top."

"Your praise warms my heart. Despite its shortcomings, Sarenza City will always be my hometown."

"Oh, right. You lived here as a kid, didn't you?"

"I did. Then, when I turned twelve, a minor incident *strongly encouraged* my departure."

"Did you do something bad?" I asked, eyeing him curiously.

"Ah ha ha! More times than I can count, in hindsight. But the capital isn't the kind of place to drive someone out over petty transgressions." Rashid's expression sobered, and he stared up at the moon. "No, I wasn't the reason. Maybe I'll tell you the story sometime."

I joined Rashid in looking up at the sky, but a stir in the corner of my vision soon pulled my attention to the city below. Wagons from the shipping company we'd commissioned were making their way along the roads.

"Is that whole caravan headed for the City Forgotten by Time?" I asked.

"It is," Rashid confirmed. "Rigel chose an excellent company—the relocation is already in progress. You can trust that everyone will arrive safely."

"Yeah, I guess I can."

"Mister Noor, Mister Rashid—I was searching all over for you."

I turned again to see Rigel and Mina. They wore newly tailored clothes, and their hair was neatly trimmed. Had I not already seen their new look when they came to dinner, I might not have recognized them—they looked every bit like children of a rich family.

"We've come to thank you for dinner. The food was more delicious than anything we've ever eaten before," Rigel explained. "You even paid us for our work this afternoon and generously allowed us to stay in this hotel with you. It's so much more than we deserve."

"Yeah, dinner was yummy!" Mina echoed. "Thank you so much!"

The twins bowed. I'd eaten faster than everyone else, so they hadn't had the chance to thank me during the meal.

"You didn't need to come find me just to say that," I told them. "Besides, you were both a big help today. You've got nothing to feel

bad about."

"He's right," Rashid added. "The money you were given was fair recompense for your work. You earned it."

"Rigel, Mina—*we* should thank *you*, if anything. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep helping us out."

"Of course, Mister Noor," Rigel said.

"Yeah!" Mina agreed. "Wherever you go, we'll follow!"

"As much as I'd rather not rain on your parade, you two should leave this city as soon as you're able," Rashid said. His smile faded, replaced by a serious look as he gazed upon the pedestrians wandering the nighttime streets. "Starting tomorrow, things are sure to get messy. Today was but a taste of what's to come."

"Today *was* pretty hectic," I agreed.

We had come across Mina and those men shortly after arriving in the capital, and things hadn't slowed down since. If trouble of that nature was common here, I suspected we really could expect more. While I doubted we'd get trapped and attacked again, it would put my mind at ease if the twins relocated.

"Rigel, Mina, could you move to the City Forgotten by Time tomorrow?" I asked. "I'll cover all the travel expenses, of course."

"If it's just the two of us, we can use the same shipping company as before," Rigel said. "They'll get us there in no time."

"Yeah? Then go on ahead, won't you? We'll rejoin you soon enough."

"Understood, Mister Noor," Rigel answered emphatically—just as Mina's stomach let out a quiet grumble.

"Didn't you just eat?" I asked the girl. "You weren't holding back, were you?"

"No, I made sure she ate her fill," Rigel assured me. "In fact, she ate so much that I started to worry. I think it's just..."

"I-It was just so yummy..." Mina admitted. "I think my tummy's gotten greedy..."

As she cast her eyes down in embarrassment, her stomach rumbled again. She had enjoyed the food, at least; she just hadn't eaten enough to truly sate her hunger. I wasn't sure where her appetite had come from—she didn't look like a big eater—but

appearances could be deceiving. Maybe it even made sense, considering how much she'd worked today.

"If you're still hungry, you should go eat some more," I said. "We're guests here, so the cooks should make as much food as you want. They'll even bring it to your room."

"Really?!" Mina exclaimed.

"Yeah. Order as much as you want. Don't worry about the cost."

"Okay! Thanks, Mister Noor!"

"Just, uh...try not to give yourself a stomachache."

"I'll make sure she doesn't," Rigel declared.

"Good luck."

He would need it. Mina was already tugging energetically on her brother's arm, crying out, "Come on! Let's go!"

"Just a moment," Rashid interrupted. "Rigel, there's something I wish to ask you."

"Yes, Mister Rashid?"

"Your name. You said your parents gave it to you?"

"I did, yes."

"How strange. You were born *after* your namesake's execution, I assume. Were your parents not concerned about their son being associated with a heinous criminal?"

Out of the blue, Rashid had completely changed the focus of the conversation. It wasn't the first time. I wondered what had prompted his sudden inquiry, but his faint smile remained as unreadable as ever.

"I recognize your doubts, Mister Rashid," Rigel answered, his expression solemn. "Many see my name as something negative. Not my parents, though."

"No?"

"In fact, when Mina and I were little, they'd tell us stories of Starpiercer Rigel each and every night."

Rashid uttered not a word in response, instead urging Rigel to continue with a smile. The boy took a moment to collect his thoughts before proceeding.

"Our parents were from a minor tribe with no connection to the Mio. As I understand it, they weren't involved in the fighting but

were enslaved—along with the rest of their village—when Mina and I were babies. Even in servitude, they secretly continued to tell us stories of the Starpiercer. They insisted that just one of his arrows could illuminate the entire night sky. If there was a full moon, he could make midnight as bright as midday."

Rigel paused, staring up at the sky. There was a full moon tonight.

"My parents told me that every night, Starpiercer Rigel showed those stuck in poverty a sight more breathtaking than they could ever have imagined. His light in the sky was a balm for their weary souls, encouraging them to carry on no matter how dark the night seemed. It was just like a fairy tale: a boy and his bow, sparking fires in the hearts of many. Even though he's gone from this world, his light continues to smolder. At least, that's what my parents said."

On that note, Rigel returned to looking at Rashid and me.

"I think, to my mom and dad, Rigel wasn't the boy who united eighteen tribes and drew his bow against House Sarenza. He was a spark in the night sky—a reminder that there was more to life than the harshness they had to endure. It's a shame I'll never get to see it."

The boy's smile turned wistful and yearning as he continued:

"It was because of what they saw in the Starpiercer that my mom and dad gave me his name: Rigel. To them, it symbolized hope—a brighter future. Living up to my namesake is why I always try to work hard. My body's too weak for me to achieve the same feats, but I think I can at least live in a way that won't bring shame upon his name."

Rigel spoke his last words with confidence, bathed in the light of the moon. Behind him, Mina nodded smugly and gave him a small round of applause.

"So, um, does that answer your question, Mister Rashid?" the boy asked.

"Indeed, it does," Rashid said with a grin. "Thank you, Rigel. And sorry for keeping you. You're free to go now."

"In that case, pardon us."

Rigel and Mina gave polite bows before spinning around and

returning inside. Rashid watched them leave, then turned to his side, his smile widening.

"Hear that, Shawza? A little change in perspective can have a tremendous impact, don't you think? I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the matter."

Standing in the shadows, Shawza wore a look of open displeasure. "*My* thoughts, sir? The boy's story is of no relevance to me."

"No, of course not. Forgive me—I meant nothing by it. And there's no need to keep feigning loyalty to me; Noor is the only other person here. Now, answer me this: What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, don't play dumb. Tomorrow, you'll have your once-in-a-lifetime chance." In the pale moonlight, Rashid's smile seemed to grow colder. "Will you take it?"

Shawza stared at the ground so intensely that he could probably have bored a hole through it. "Not yet. Besides, wasn't *your* payment supposed to come after?"

"Hmm? So, you'll let this exceptionally rare opportunity slip through your fingers? I don't mind paying in advance, you know. One might even say that I *created* this situation for you. I ask that you make the most of it."

"What about Melissa?" Shawza asked at length.

"She's not a child anymore. She can manage on her own."

"Are you dismissing me from my duties, then?"

"I am. You have some time before tomorrow morning. Consider your next move carefully."

Shawza kept his eye cast downward, the shadow across his face darker than I'd ever seen it. He brooded for quite some time before eventually turning on his heel and departing without another word.

"Was that a work-related matter?" I asked.

"Oh, no," Rashid said. "More of a personal promise between Shawza and me."

"Do you mind that I was here for it? I mean, it's got nothing to do with me, right?"

“No, I don’t mind. You’re a special case.” Rashid’s usual smile returned as he shrugged. “I suppose I’ll turn in for the night. I’d recommend you do the same—we’re both in for a busy day tomorrow.”

“Yeah, good idea. I’ll stay here a bit longer, then return to my room.”

“We’ll head to my father’s residence first thing in the morning. I’d hate to keep them waiting. Even as we speak, they’re probably scrambling to prepare a warm reception for us.”

“Good point.”

“Good night, Noor. See you tomorrow.”

Rashid waved, the same as ever, and then turned away, leaving me alone on the roof.

Chapter 176: Morning at the Hotel

After getting an excellent night's sleep in my enormous bed and having breakfast in my room, I got my things in order and went down to the lobby slightly earlier than our group had agreed to meet. Lynne hadn't come down yet, but I saw Rashid brandishing a sheaf of papers in one hand, a wide grin spread across his face. Galen and Rigel were with him, and the trio appeared to be engaged in some sort of conversation.

"Ah, I love it when I make a big sale!" Rashid enthused. "I can hardly keep the smile off my face."

"You're in high spirits," I said. "Is there good news?"

"Ah, Noor. The empty trading houses—we've sold them all. At excellent prices, might I add. We've made almost twice what we paid for them."

"Wait—so my total wealth just shot up again?"

"Precisely. As promised, all the profit belongs to you."

"And...if I really don't need it?"

"Come now, don't be like that. It's yours. I also have a present for you. Here—you can carry your coin in this, instead of storing it at Galen's."

Rashid presented me with a square piece of what appeared to be cloth, dyed with strange patterns. It resembled a folded coin pouch, slightly larger than the palm of my hand, and would probably serve that purpose well. But what good would it be for carrying my entire fortune?

"My coin?" I repeated, accepting the pouch. "You mean, the whole lot?"

"What you have there is a Wallet of Mountainous Storage," Rashid explained. "It's a magical bag of sorts. Though it might appear compact, it has an impressive storage capacity—and not just for coin."

"That sounds useful. How impressive, exactly?"

"The general consensus is that it can hold about a mountain's worth—as you might have gathered from the name. I'd say that's a stretch, though. In my estimate, it can hold about as much as five wagons. Try to store any more than that, and you risk tearing the bag."

"Got it. I'll be careful."

In truth, one of my first thoughts upon receiving the wallet had been to try storing the Black Blade inside it. Now, I recognized that as a bad idea; I didn't want to ruin the gift Rashid had just given me, especially not right in front of him.

"It's quite the rare item," he continued. "There are only as many as were found in the Dungeon of Oblivion long ago, and they're rather lacking in substitutes. Yours should contain your winnings from the Trials—Rigel converted them into coins for you."

"Really?"

"I apologize that I didn't ask first, but Miss Lynneburg said that physical currency would be more convenient for you," the boy said. "I had time to stop by the bank, so I converted as much as I could. Of course, I can convert it back to a check if you'd prefer."

"No, that's fine. Thanks, Rigel."

Rigel was exceptionally smart—smarter than I'd ever been at his age. I could have stood to learn a thing or two from him when I was younger, though anything he might've tried to teach me would probably have gone in one ear and out the other. Still, I wished I could share in his wisdom. Learning even a tenth of what he knew would do wonders for my brainpower.

"So, as you've surely deduced, that little pouch is worth far more than its humble appearance suggests," Rashid said. "Try not to lose it."

"Right..."

Even just thinking about how much money I'd accumulated was a bother, and now it was all inside this tiny wallet? No matter how I looked at it, that was tough to wrap my head around. Maybe I could "misplace" it somewhere for someone else to find...

I shook my head, brushing the thought aside. Stumbling upon

such a vast sum of money would scare the living daylights out of anyone. Not to mention, Lynne and Rigel had gone to so much trouble to manage it for me; simply tossing it away would be far too rude.

Of course, keeping the money wasn't much better. It would just sit there in my wallet, collecting dust. I'd heard that wealth was meant to be circulated, not left to build up like water behind a dam. I'd thought bringing it to Sarenza would at least put a dent in it, but now it was getting heavier—literally *and* figuratively—with each passing day.

How had things come to this? Maybe I should just say to heck with it all and scatter my riches across the city.

"Is there a particular way to withdraw something from the pouch?" I asked.

"Simply think of what you wish to retrieve and turn the bag upside down," Rashid explained. "The item you're thinking of will tumble out. A word of warning, though—*never* stick your hand inside."

"Why not?"

"The exact reason is hazy, since the bag is a dungeon relic, but its interior isn't meant for living things. You *could* put your hand in there, if you really wanted to—but it would come out dead and rotten."

I stared at the wallet for a few long moments. "Hmm?"

"The Wallet of Mountainous Storage doesn't have an opening large enough to fit a whole person, so there's no risk of any fatal accidents. Still, don't stick any limbs in there that you aren't prepared to lose. It's a convenient tool, but one that must be handled with care."

"Okay. I'll...be careful."

To be honest, I wished Rashid had started his explanation with that note. Several times during our conversation, I'd almost stuck my fingers in the wallet out of sheer curiosity. He'd called it convenient, but I thought "scary" was a more appropriate term.

"How did something this valuable end up in your possession, anyway?" I asked.

“Its small size and tremendous storage capacity make it popular among certain merchants who wish to avoid paying taxes. As it happens, I chanced upon one in Galen’s room—though I’m sure his reasons weren’t quite as nefarious. Isn’t that right, Galen?”

“O-Of course not, Young Master Rashid!” the plump man exclaimed. “I-It’s just something I had lying around. I’ve never used it once!”

“There you have it, Noor. He wasn’t using it, so he’s giving it to you to apologize for all the trouble yesterday. Right, Galen?”

“Wh-What? I... I mean, of course! Anything for the great Master Noor!”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Thanks. I’ll take good care of it.”

Galen forced a smile so wide that the corners of his mouth strained and veins began to pop from his forehead. “G-G-Glad to be of service!”



"Mister Noor," Rigel said. "It seems that yesterday's caravan made it to the City Forgotten by Time without issue. The avian golem arrived earlier with Miss Melissa's proof of receipt."

"Really? That was fast."

"Rigel chose a shipping company known for its speed and quality of service," Rashid noted. "They charge more, but you get what you pay for."

"Thanks, Rigel."

"It was no trouble," the boy insisted. "If you need anything else, please let me know."

"You've already done more than enough. You and Mina should set out for the City Forgotten by Time yourselves, as we agreed last night."

"Of course. I've already commissioned the company, so we'll head out as soon as we've seen you off."

"Sounds good."

I turned my attention to the hotel entrance, where a bearded man—one of the shipping company's employees, I assumed—stood waiting. Rigel was always one step ahead.

That was when Lynne arrived, with Ines, Rolo, and Sirene in tow. Mina was with them as well, carrying a massive bundle of some sort.

"Instructor," Lynne greeted me. "My apologies for the wait."

"No problem. I just got here myself."

"We've finished our preparations, so we can leave whenever you're ready."

"Got it. Can I ask what Mina's carrying?"

"W-Well, you see, she..."

"I... I'm sorry..." A guilty blush crept onto Mina's cheeks. "Th-The chefs said I could take as much breakfast as I wanted, so..."

The massive bundle swayed with every step she took, releasing a blend of enticing aromas. "Is that *all* for you?" I asked, incredulous.

Lynne glanced ruefully at the girl. "Not quite. She felt guilty about eating so many delicious meals on her own, so she wanted to share some with her acquaintances—the ones we sent ahead to the City Forgotten by Time. The chefs were kind enough to help."

"I see..." I muttered. After hearing about Mina's appetite the

night before, I'd honestly believed the food was all for her.

Looking down the hallway where Lynne and the others had come from, I saw a small group dressed in chef's attire. Their exhaustion was obvious, but they waved Mina off with satisfied smiles. She responded with a wide grin and a wave of her own. As long as she was pleased, I supposed there was nothing to worry about.

Suddenly, I noticed the dagger that Lynne always carried hanging from Mina's waist. "Isn't that yours, Lynne?" I asked.

"I gave it to Mina for self-defense," Lynne explained. "Though, I hope she won't need to use it."

"Understood. Rigel—watch out for your sister, okay?"

"Of course," he replied. "I mean, she's more likely to protect me than the other way around, but..."

"Don't worry!" Mina shifted the teetering bundle of food to one hand, using the other to grab Lynne's dagger and raise it high into the air. "I promise to keep Rigel safe!"

As much as it worried me to send the kids ahead without us, Mina was no pushover. She'd even managed to bring the Black Blade to me after I'd forgotten it during our shopping trip the day before. She had needed to drag it across the ground, of course, but with Lynne's dagger, she'd probably be just fine. It was better than sending Rigel alone, that much was sure, and the bearded shipping employee looked reliable enough to hold his own in a fight.

Honestly, maybe I was worrying for nothing. Rigel seemed much more in control than I was.

"I guess it's time to head out, then," I said. "Lynne?"

"Yes, Instructor."

Overall, we'd enjoyed a wonderful stay at Galen's hotel. The owner was a bit ostentatious, but his staff had all been lovely and accommodating. I looked forward to staying with them again, if I ever got the chance.

Once we'd said our farewells, we parted ways with Rigel and Mina and made our way toward the center of Sarenza City.

Chapter 177: Zaid's Palace

When I heard we'd be heading for the city center, I expected something even busier and more chaotic than what we'd seen so far. So, when we passed through the massive gate set into the towering wall ahead of us, I was surprised to find an abundant forest. The babble of a large river accompanied us as our coach trundled along a beautifully paved road, lined with all manner of greenery, which soon opened up to reveal a gargantuan palace constructed of dazzling white stone, without a blemish in sight.

I remembered my surprise upon first laying eyes on the City Forgotten by Time, but it was nothing compared to this. While I was still distracted, our coach reached the palace entrance, where a genial-looking man in a black suit, somewhere past middle age, came out to greet us.

"Lady Lynneburg, Master Rashid, Master Noor—welcome, all of you. Master Zaid awaits you inside. Please, come with me."

We alighted from our coach and followed him into the palace.

"Wow..." I murmured, my eyes darting every which way. I'd expected the interior to be impressive, considering the grandeur of the exterior, but the sights still managed to surprise me.

To begin with, the white floor had been polished to a mirror sheen. The walls were just as dazzling, reminiscent of freshly fallen snow, and the ceiling was entirely covered with vivid, colorful murals. Every few steps, we passed a fixture or furnishing unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

More than anything, though, the most impressive aspect of the palace was its sheer size. The entrance hall alone was enormous, its width several times that of the city's streets, and its height great enough to put even the central hall of the City Forgotten by Time to shame. It was as though we'd stumbled into the home of a giant from a storybook.

Everything was fascinating and unfamiliar, and my head was on a constant swivel as I tried to take it all in. Rashid, walking beside me, took the opportunity to strike up a good-natured conversation with our guide.

"It's been a while, Wize. I'm glad to see you well."

"Indeed it has, Young Master Rashid," the black-suited man answered.

"Do you two know each other?" I asked.

"We do," Rashid said. "My mother and I lived here when I was little, and Wize took good care of us. He was also in charge of my education."

"Oh, no—such praise is more than I rightly deserve," Wize protested. "You had a sharp intellect from the start. 'Twas *I* who learned from *you*."

"So you've known him since you were a kid?" I mused aloud.

"We were always together—that is, until my mother was poisoned, and I had to move to an estate on the outskirts of the city."

"Poisoned?" I reflexively turned to look at Rashid, but his eyes, sharp and full of intent, remained fixed solely on our aging guide.

"You wouldn't happen to know who was responsible, would you, Wize? A man of your position must have some idea, at least."

The man in black shook his head. "I cannot know. I do not have the wisdom. It was a terrible shame, what happened to your esteemed mother."

"It must be exhausting, wearing so many hats. Even just one of your roles must take up so much of your time."

"Your consideration is much appreciated, Young Master Rashid."

Despite their gentle words, the tension in the air was palpable. Rashid seemed unfazed, examining our surroundings nostalgically as we passed through a massive garden decorated with giant statues carved from white stone.

"This place hasn't changed in the slightest," he remarked. "The family's much the same, I assume?"

"They are, as ever, in excellent health."

"How wonderful."

We continued down a spacious hallway until we reached a set of wooden doors adorned with gold, guards stationed on either side. Wize stopped before them and stooped into a bow.

"Master, I present our esteemed guests from the Kingdom of Clays—as well as your son, Master Rashid."

"Enter," came a voice, dignified and clear, from the room ahead.

Acting immediately, the guards opened the wooden doors, and we entered a lavishly decorated chamber more spacious than the hallway itself. At the far end, a large man with a beaming smile sat upon a raised throne.

"If it isn't Lady Lynneburg and her retinue, come all the way from the Kingdom of Clays," he boomed. "Welcome to Sarenza City. I am Zaid, the current head of House Sarenza."

Lynne bowed politely. "We are grateful for your kind invitation, Lord Zaid."

"Oh, no, the gratitude is all mine. You traveled all this way through a climate to which you are unaccustomed. I was informed of your arrival several days ago, so please, forgive my delay in extending my hospitality. As I understand it, my son Rashid attempted to accommodate you, but it could not have been adequate for someone of your station. You must excuse him."

"Lord Rashid has been good to us—though I suppose I can speak only to the result, not the process."

Rashid wore a mild-mannered smile, ignoring the icy look Lynne was giving him. "It is good to see you again, father," he said. "It certainly has been a while."

"Indeed. We have not seen one another since you left the capital of your own accord, have we?"

"Correct. You are the same as ever, I see."

"I am told you put on quite a show—*before* your scathing defeat, that is. Trials, hmm? Rarely do you not emerge victorious."

"What can I say? My opponent was too formidable."

"Well, fret not about the losses incurred in House Sarenza's name. It was a paltry sum in all—a stipend for our guests to enjoy their stay. I have spoken to the rest of the family, and we are all in agreement."

“As always, father, your decisiveness amazes me. If you’re not concerned about the matter, then I shan’t be either.”

Despite their amiable expressions, I could sense the sparks flying between them. For a father and son, they didn’t seem to get along all that well.

Zaid turned his gaze to me. “And you must be Noor, I presume.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” I said.

“We’ve heard much of your heroic exploits. It was you who triumphed over Rashid during his Trials, was it not? I do not mean to sound partial, being his father, but that is a feat few can claim. I was also informed that, soon after taking over the City Forgotten by Time, you repelled a bandit incursion with your own two hands. I think I speak for everyone when I say that a man of your accomplishments deserves to be the new proprietor.”

“Were you not going to interview me or something?”

Zaid chuckled. “Only as a formality. You’ve already demonstrated your worth. As the head of House Sarenza, I hereby approve your proprietorship.”

“Are you quite sure about this, father?” Rashid asked.

Zaid examined his son quietly for a moment. “I am. Sarenza has more leisure centers than I care to count. He can manage it as he pleases.”

“Hear that, Noor?”

“Loud and clear,” I said, then returned my focus to Zaid. “Um, thanks?”



For all the fuss of our trip to the capital, it seemed that Zaid's business with me had already concluded. I was glad things had gone so smoothly, but at the same time, I wondered whether the summons had really been necessary. Zaid had called it a formality, so maybe he hadn't had a choice.

"Lord Zaid," Lynne said, stepping forward. Though we had resolved my reason for being here, she had other matters to attend to. "Your letter to my father mentioned that you would share the whereabouts of the Lepifolk. I must ask that you elaborate."

"Yes, I suppose it did, didn't it?" Zaid hummed, his tone jovial. "To my knowledge, several demonfolk will soon be up for auction. I knew the Kingdom of Clays was making a zealous effort to locate them, so I decided to inform your father."

"Up for auction...?" Lynne repeated, a flash of distaste marring her composure.

"You might not be aware, as you are not from these lands, but Sarenza City holds a grand auction each year. There, one can find rare curios from all over the continent, unique magical items excavated from the Dungeon of Oblivion, state-of-the-art golem models made by master artisans, and more. As it happens, there is a rumor that a large number of demonfolk will be on the list this year."

"You intend to sell *people*?"

"Indeed. The demonfolk, as you know, have been sought as slaves ever since the high priestess of Mithra's proclamation—one she only recently overturned. Their cursed ability to read minds and control monsters is fearsome, yes, but also exceedingly beneficial when put to proper use. After all, it is not the quality of the tool that matters, but how one uses it."

With each word, Lynne's expression darkened, and Rolo's head dipped slightly lower. Zaid, however, continued with a smile.

"If you would like to take part, Lady Lynneburg, you are more than welcome to. I should also inform you that Sarenza has developed many convenient tools to ensure a comfortable environment for one's demonfolk. If you need any for your slave attendant, we would be more than happy to provide them."

"Lord Zaid." Lynne raised her chin, staring straight at him. "First,

allow me to correct your misconception: Rolo is not my slave, but my friend. Second, the Theocracy of Mithra—having moved past its hostility toward the Lepifolk—should have already sent formal missives to its allied nations, including yours, regarding the proper usage of their race's name."

"Ah, my sincerest apologies! Truly!" Zaid exclaimed with a grin. "'Lepifolk,' yes. Old habits die hard, as they say, but that is no excuse—I must be more careful going forward. Please forgive me if I've caused any undue distress. Your opposition to the slave trade is a cultural difference of which I should have been more mindful."

Lynne's eyes narrowed, and she seemed to consider her next words carefully. "When, might I ask, will this auction be held?"

"It was scheduled for several days ago, but I requested to have it postponed when I received word of your visit. If you wish to attend, we could hold it today, even."

Lynne turned to me, her expression uneasy. "Instructor..." I could tell she was having a hard time making up her mind.

"I'm not sure I have the whole picture, but...that's where Rolo's friends will be, right?" I asked. "I think we should go, then. We can figure out the rest as it comes."

Lynne pondered my response, then nodded. "Yes, you're right."

At once, Zaid issued his order: "Our guest wishes to attend the auction. See to it immediately."

"Yes, Master Zaid," Wize acknowledged. He turned to Lynne and produced an elegant box, which he opened to reveal a small coin.

"What is this?" Lynne asked.

"It is proof of your right to participate. Ordinarily, it is given only to those of suitable reputation or standing after a rigorous review process. Please keep it safe, as it cannot be reissued."

"I understand."

Zaid watched closely, smiling affably as Lynne took the coin.

"As you know, Lady Lynneburg, our nations have long been on less-than-favorable terms," he said. "It is my hope that we can use this opportunity to smooth matters over. That is why I invited you here—though I assume you have already inferred that much."

"Yes, I came here as an envoy of the Kingdom with similar

intentions.”

“In that case, let us both strive to get along in harmony.”

“I truly hope we can, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Show them around, Wize,” Zaid addressed the man in black. Then he turned his attention back to Lynne and said, “Well then, I must bid you farewell—for now, at least. Let us speak of your observational tour of the Dungeon of Oblivion at a later time.”

Lynne gave a slight bow. “Thank you for your consideration.”

Rashid glanced at Shawza beside him, a mischievous grin creeping onto his face as he turned his back on Zaid. “See you later, father,” he said. “Give my best to my greedy little brothers. And tell them I apologize for breaking their toys.”

Our business complete, we departed, leaving Zaid—and the opulent chamber—behind.

Chapter 178: To the Auction Hall, Part 1

"The auction will take place within the palace grounds," Wize explained. "Please, allow me to lead the way."

Outside the palace, we followed our black-suited guide through an expansive garden. As I admired the scenery, I reflected that every single flower must have been thoughtfully arranged.

Rashid flashed his bodyguard a roguish smile. "Are you sure you don't regret your decision, Shawza?"

"I am unsure what you mean."

"The audience with my father. It might be bold of me to say this in front of the palace's security supervisor, but that was an opportunity you might never have again."

"Oh?" Wize regarded the pair with curiosity. "Does this concern me?"

"In a sense. It relates to the best way to kill my father."

"Oh, young master... You do have a knack for jokes."

Rashid turned back to Shawza, grinning. "Still, a certain someone has made sure to stay rather close to me since the audience hall. If you *had* tried something, I suspect my head would have been parted quite suddenly from my body. So, I commend your judgment. I'm rather fond of living, after all."

Wize's features softened into a gentle smile. "Perish the thought. I might be in charge of Master Zaid's security, but I could never do such a thing. Do these old bones of mine even look capable of such a feat?"

"No, not at all, which is what makes you so two-faced," Rashid shot back, his expression unchanged.

"You are too kind in your evaluation of me, young master."

There was a dangerous edge to their conversation, I thought—

though it was so hard to pin down that I wondered whether it was there at all. Perhaps I was simply confusing malice with mischief.

It wasn't long before another gargantuan structure came into view. It was as massive as the palace, though it resembled a temple more than a royal residence.

"This is where the auction will take place," our guide explained.

"It's just as huge as the palace," I noted.

"Yes, my family enjoys wasting exorbitant amounts of money on such things," Rashid interjected. "Though, I suppose one could argue it's not entirely a useless enterprise. It *does* produce some rather excellent craftsmen."

"I can't even imagine the skill you'd need to build something so immense."

"If you come with me, I will show you to the venue's entrance," Wize said. Then, he came to a halt and uttered a quiet, "Oh?"

"Is something wrong?" I asked, noticing he was staring curiously at the scene ahead of us.

"It appears we have other visitors."

Following his gaze, I spied two hooded figures by the entrance, caught in what seemed to be a tense exchange with the doorman.

"I wonder what the trouble is..." I muttered.

From what I could see, the two wearing robes were a man and woman of roughly the same height. The woman stood well within the doorman's personal space, petitioning him for something.

"Huh? What do you mean we can't go inside?"

"The venue is open only to those with an invitation. My sincerest apologies, ma'am, but I must ask you to leave."

"Sure, but...could you not bend the rules a little? For us?"

"Unfortunately not, ma'am."

"But we came all this way for the auction. It's supposed to be held soon, isn't it?"

"Pardon me, ma'am, but may I ask where you obtained that information?"

"Huh?" The hooded woman hesitated. "Um... Somewhere in town. Just overheard it, that's all."

"In town? Can you tell me where?"

"Oh, you *have* to let us in! You just have to!"

The doorman shook his head. "As I said, ma'am, only those with an invitation are allowed inside. If you cannot provide proof of one, I cannot let you through. Once again, I must ask you to leave."

"So we just need an invitation, then. How can we get one?"

"I do not know the specifics, but my understanding is that recipients must possess a certain degree of status and wealth, and undergo a lengthy appraisal process to verify their credibility. It is not something that can be arranged on such short notice. So, once again, I must advise you to leave."

"Can you not, you know, *grease the wheels* a little? We *really* need to be there for the auction."

"No, I cannot. And if you insist on being stubborn, I will have no choice but to call security."

"Seriously? That's a bit much, don't you think? We're not suspicious or anything! Look, we just *have* to get in there—no matter what. You can understand that, can't you? What if I ask really nicely? Please, *please* let us in!"

"Ma'am, my answer is the same..."

The woman seemed to be trying everything—glaring, pleading, even bowing—but the doorman just kept shaking his head. Honestly, I sympathized with him more than with the robed pair trying to sway him; he was just doing his job.

As time passed, the doorman's expression grew more wary of the woman who continued to pester him. "Do you have any means of identification, ma'am?" he asked. "Or perhaps some proof of your assets? If so, I can at least inquire with my superiors about your entry."

The woman hesitated, then glanced at her companion. "Did we bring anything like that, Tirrence?"

"Please don't refer to me by name, mother. We're here in secret, remember?"

"Oops. It completely slipped my mind."

Only then did it occur to me—I recognized their voices. Lynne must have realized something too, judging by the look on her face.

"Those robes..." she muttered. "Aren't they the same ones worn

by members of the Church of Mithra?”

“Huh? Could it be...?” The woman turned at the sound of Lynne’s voice, giving me a clear view of the face beneath her white hood.

“Astirra?” I asked.

“Noor? What are you doing here?”

She had taken the words straight out of my mouth. Before my very eyes stood the reigning high priestess of Mithra, distinctive long ears and all.

Chapter 179: To the Auction Hall, Part 2

Two figures in light-colored robes, one male and one female, stood on a bustling street in the Sarenzan capital, speaking in low voices.

"Well, Tirrence? Did you hear anything?" the woman asked, her features concealed beneath her hood.

The boy shook his head. "Not from my district, no."

"I see. No luck from mine either."

The duo exchanged a look and sighed. Under their hoods, they each concealed a pair of characteristic long ears, along with other features that shared a striking resemblance. They were mother and son—on paper, at least.

The woman was High Priestess Astirra, the highest authority in the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, a nation bordering Sarenza and recognized as one of the continent's leading superpowers. The boy was a fourteen-year-old prodigy and, by all accounts, the Theocracy's *true* leader: Holy Prince Tirrence. Although they were operating in secret, it was unlikely that anyone outside the Church of Mithra would recognize them. None of the passersby on the busy street even gave them a second glance.

"I suppose it was too optimistic to hope we'd come across information on the Lepifolk so easily..." the woman mused. "Perhaps we should have thought this through instead of leaving the Theocracy in the heat of the moment."

"But the intel we received from King Clays and our adherents in Sarenza confirmed the presence of Lepifolk near the capital," the boy remarked. "It would do us well to gather more, if nothing else."

"We simply *must* make sure to thank King Clays properly. If not for him, we might have missed this opportunity entirely."

"I shall make a mental note of it."

"The king of a neighboring country makes for a powerful friend indeed," the hooded woman said, smiling.

A touch of regret seeped into the boy's expression. "Still, I apologize for having involved you at all. This should never have been your burden to bear. Not to repeat myself, but I hate that I've forced you into this situation."

"Now, now, Tirrence. None of that. It's not your fault that I got mixed up with what might well have been the root of all evil. If anyone is to blame, it's that good-for-nothing skeleton. Besides, if I don't take on this burden, who will? The Lepifolk are family to an old friend of mine, and I've spent time with them in the past. I can't just ignore their suffering."

"I suppose. That *does* ease my guilt a little..."

"*I* should apologize, if anyone. It was at my insistence that we came all this way. It might be a bit late to ask this, but are you sure you can be away for this long?"

"Yes, it's fine. Matters of government are quite stable, and our presence is rarely required outside of state ceremonies. Sigir and the other members of the Twelve Sacred Envoys can manage in our absence. Right now, the Theocracy's highest priority should be atoning for its treatment of the Lepifolk—to restore the honor it stripped from them over a century of mischaracterizing them as 'demonfolk.' As a member of the state administration, I can't pretend this doesn't involve me. It's also only logical that we, with our superior perception skills, lead the investigation. Naturally, I intend to devote my utmost effort to this endeavor."

"It's very reassuring to have you with me, Tirrence."

"Likewise. I'm glad you're here too."

"Still, I must admit..." The hooded woman sighed, her shoulders drooping. "We've had our boots on the ground since we entered Sarenza, barely even taking time to rest, yet we haven't come upon anything useful. Things are starting to seem bleak..."

"The Lepifolk are few in number, to the point that rumors of their extinction began circulating decades ago. There are the odd sightings, of course, but it shouldn't surprise us that useful

information is so hard to come by."

"Maybe...we could ask someone from House Sarenza? Or are they off-limits? I forget."

"As the country's rulers, they *must* know the Lepifolk's whereabouts—not that they would tell us. They've been playing their cards particularly close to their chest, using the information they have to tempt the Kingdom of Clays. Even getting a straight answer might be too much to hope for, especially knowing how much their attitude toward our nation has shifted since our policy change. It might not seem like it, but our best option is to be patient and wait for someone to let something slip."

"I see. If you say so, Tirrence, then I trust your judgment."

"Of course, if simple groundwork continues to prove ineffective, we might need to consider other methods. Infiltrating a slave trader's shop—or several—comes to mind."

"Ugh. Slave traders? That brings back memories—and not the pleasant kind. Once, when I was young, I was stuffed into a box and nearly sold."

"You were almost a slave, mother?"

"Horrid, isn't it? I don't know how anyone can assign a price to someone and treat them like an object." The hooded woman paused. "Of course, I'm quite confident in my looks, so I suppose their noticing me was a credit to how good they were at their jobs. I'm an unpolished gem, as they say—no, a polished gem with room to be polished *even more*. My wide array of skills would have earned me a reputation in any industry they sold me into. Don't you think so, Tirrence?"

"M-Me? Well..."

"Don't be shy. I ask only that you be honest with me. I'm magnanimous enough to accept an objective appraisal of my—Hmm?"

"What is it, mother?"

"Shh. Over there. *Listen.*"

The woman gestured inconspicuously toward a slave trader's shop two streets down. The boy strained his distinctively long ears and, sure enough, picked up the faint sounds of a conversation

between two men working in the building's underground storeroom.

"Hey. Did you hear the rumor?"

"You gonna elaborate, or...?"

"House Sarenza's auction. It's said they're going to have *demonfolk* for sale."

"As if. They said that last year, didn't they? And that turned out to be bogus."

"Yeah, but last year, *Lord Zaid* wasn't the one providing them."

"You mean *House Sarenza's* putting them up for sale? Don't they have a monopoly on demonfolk? I can't see why they'd give up their assets. It's not like they need the coin."

"Don't ask me—I'm just repeating what I heard. It's also being said that Mithra's high priestess had a change of heart about the demonfolk, after years of buying up every one she could find. People claim her turnaround is why House Sarenza wants to shed its excess stock. Others say there's no truth to any of it, though."

"Well, who's right? Pick a side, at least."

"Look, I'm just saying—this is a big opportunity for regular merchants like us. If we get our hands on a demonfolk, we'll have our competitors' secrets on a silver platter."

"It's got nothing to do with us, if you ask me. We don't have the coin to win a bid on a demonfolk. Hell, the deposit we'd need to pay to access the auction would probably bankrupt us. I don't wanna hear another word of this. We've got work to do."

"A guy can dream, though, can't he?"

Back on the streets of the Sarenzan capital, Astirra and Tirrence shared a look and nodded.

"Sounds like we've finally found a lead," the former said. "And at quite the opportune moment."

"It's not the most reliable source, but it's certainly worth investigating," the latter agreed. "Shall we go, mother?"

"Of course. How could we not? Never have I been so grateful for these long ears of mine."

"We came here undercover, remember. If the auction is being held on House Sarenza's grounds, we might have a hard time gaining entry without officially registering our presence in the

country. And even then, we might be too late, considering how strict House Sarenza is about the appraisal process."

"So, we don't have time to be picky about our methods? Well, to that I say: [Float]." The woman gestured with her hand, invoking a spell that lifted her a short distance above the ground.

"Don't tell me you intend to sneak in..." the boy said, shooting her a look.

"I dare not hesitate—not when my close friend's family could be sold off at any moment. Come on. It'll work out, somehow!" The woman paused. "So long as we don't get caught, that is."

"I suppose we have no choice, then... [Float]." Tirrence joined his mother in the air. "If we must, we can attempt to negotiate with House Sarenza directly. They shouldn't be immediately hostile, given the long friendship between our nations."

"I knew you'd come around. Your [Float] spell is perfect, by the way—I couldn't fault it if I tried. It usually takes quite some time to master, you know."

"I owe it all to your thorough instruction, mother. But we should cast [Concealment] on ourselves before we make a scene."

The duo enveloped themselves in a peculiar light, melting into their surroundings and muffling every sound they made.

"All magicked up and ready to go," Astirra announced with a chuckle. "We should fly as high as we can so the security doesn't notice us." She looked around. "Um, where's the auction hall again?"

"This way. Follow me."

"Huh? You know how to get there?"

"I do. When I was little, my former mother brought me along to one of House Sarenza's auctions."

"I see... It *does* seem like the kind of event that rotten bag of bones would have enjoyed."

Thus, unbeknownst to all, the pair trespassed onto the palace grounds of House Sarenza from above. They approached the temple-like building that would serve as the auction venue, feigned their identities as legitimate guests, and promptly overwhelmed a poor doorman.

Chapter 180: To the Auction Hall, Part 3

"Astirra?"

"Noor? What are you doing here?"

My suspicion was correct: the robed woman arguing with the doorman was none other than Astirra, and the boy with her was Holy Prince Tirrence.

"Lynne," he said. "We meet again."

"Indeed, we do," she replied. "Are you here for the reason I think?"

"We are, yes."

At that moment, the doorman noticed Wize and rushed over. He probably wanted advice from his superior on how to resolve his problem with Astirra.

"A moment of your time, sir?" he asked, looking stressed.

"Yes?" Wize replied. "What seems to be the matter?"

"These two wish to enter the auction venue, but they don't have invitations, identification, or proof of any assets," the doorman explained in a low voice. "I don't know what to do; they're very insistent."

Wize slowly shook his head, his mild smile unwavering. "You need not ask for their identification, nor for proof of assets. That lady has enough wealth to rival even House Sarenza."

"S-Sir?" The doorman looked utterly taken aback. "What does that...?"

Wize turned to the robed woman, his expression unchanged. "She is Her Holy Highness Astirra, head of state of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra for the past two centuries or so. Her companion is her son, Holy Prince Tirrence. They are the highest guests of honor our country could receive."

"P-Pardon, sir?!"

"Thus, I see no reason to ask security to chase them away."

The doorman froze, the blood draining from his face. He then whirled around to Astirra, who gave him a smile and a little wave, and exclaimed, "M-My deepest apologies, Your Holy Highness!"

"Oh, no, that's all right," Astirra said, looking relieved. "It's our fault for coming here unannounced. Isn't that right, Tirrence?"

Though Wize continued to smile, his eyes narrowed a touch, betraying a keen edge. "I must ask, what brings you to Sarenza, Your Holy Highness? We received no word of your entering the country—much less House Sarenza's grounds. Might I trouble you to enlighten this old fool as to your—no doubt excellent—reasons?"

Wize had every right to be suspicious of Astirra, who was blatantly trespassing on private land. I had to hand it to him, though—his smile didn't falter in the slightest.

Tirrence took a step forward, placed a hand to his chest, and bowed. "Wize. Please accept our sincerest apologies for the sudden nature of our visit. The truth is, my mother and I are on vacation, and we thought it best to travel incognito to avoid all the fuss."

Next to him, Astirra nodded emphatically, though her eyes remained noticeably blank.

"On vacation, hmm?" Wize mused aloud. "I see, I see."

"I hope that's not an issue," Tirrence said. "Initially, we planned only to enjoy ourselves, but then we caught wind of an auction being held in town. One involving the Lepifolk."

"You...heard rumors of the auction?"

"We half-elves have excellent hearing, so we tend to overhear things whether we want to or not. And as you know from the missive our nation sent to Sarenza, the Theocracy is devoting its full attention to the Lepifolk's protection. Even on vacation, we have a duty to act. If we had received news of this beforehand, we would gladly have asked to participate through the proper channels. But it seems to be too late for that, so we came to inquire directly."

"I believe I understand. You must pardon us—we pinned down the rumor of the demonfolk listing only recently, so we did not have time to send a missive to the Theocracy."

Tirrence smiled cheerfully. “But you had time to inform the Kingdom of Clays?”

Wize stiffened slightly.

“How fortuitous that we arrived in time,” Tirrence continued smoothly. “I understand this is all rather haphazard, but might we request an invitation?”

“Naturally. I can think of no reason for anyone to refuse you—or your esteemed mother. I must inform the master, of course, but I trust he will welcome you with open arms.”

“How generous of you,” Tirrence said, his lips still curved upward. “You have our gratitude.”

“Wize, was it?” Astirra interjected. “Your doorman insisted we need a certain amount of capital to participate, but we don’t have much coin on us. Is that a problem?”

“Not at all, Your Holy Highness. As with your previous visits, you are welcome to pay the participation fee and any other associated costs through an envoy at a later date. Your presence here today is enough.”

“Oh, I see. We have nothing to worry about, then? Thank you.”

“If I may be forthcoming, it is the greatest honor to hear Your Holy Highness utter my name.” Wize smiled amicably. “Paired with your cheerful demeanor, why, you almost seem like an entirely different person.”

Astirra let out a nervous chuckle. “D-Do I?” She turned sharply to Tirrence, eyes begging for help.

“You have only seen my mother in formal settings, so I understand why it might seem that way,” the prince began. “As surprising as it might seem, she has a habit of letting loose in her private time—perhaps as a natural reaction to the stresses of her role. This has been especially true of late, as it has been quite some time since she last had the chance to enjoy a vacation.”

“Is that so? Does she normally interact so closely with those below her station?”

“Indeed. Not long ago, she even made several close friends among the church’s adherents.”

“You don’t say. What an enviable position to be in.”

Wize exchanged another smile with Astirra, still clearly suspicious of her. Though the new high priestess looked the same as her predecessor, she couldn't have been more different from that monstrous skeleton with a heart of ice. We knew her secret as a matter of course, having witnessed the incident in Mithra firsthand, but even past acquaintances would probably notice the change.

It surely didn't help that Astirra was doing so little to maintain the facade.

"I must apologize, Your Holy Highness," Wize said. "I was so moved that you deigned to address me that I accused you of something rather untoward."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all." Astirra grinned, gave our guide a thumbs-up, and finished with a cheery "Don't sweat it!" Was she even trying to be discreet?



“Holy Prince Tirrence, I must admit,” Wize continued, turning to the boy in question, “you were always possessed of a sagacious mind, but you have grown to exceed my every expectation. To have remembered the name of someone as trivial as I—why, I can only express my admiration.”

“‘Trivial,’ did you say? Most certainly not. I might have been young at the time of our last visit, but I could never forget how good you were to me. Incidentally...” Tirrence’s attention shifted to another member of our group. “Do my eyes deceive me, or is that gentleman Lord Rashid?”

“It is good to see you again, Your Holy Highness,” Rashid said, confirming the boy’s suspicion. “You were only a child when we first met, so I am delighted that you remember me.”

“As I recall, there was no one else at the auction venue remotely close to me in age. It is an honor to make your acquaintance once again.”

“The feeling is mutual, Your Holy Highness.”

As I watched the pair exchange greetings, I couldn’t help but notice the similarities between them. Both wore refreshingly cheerful smiles, but I could tell from being acquainted with them that they were intensely staring each other down.

Tirrence broke the stalemate to glance at Lynne, whose cheek twitched in response. Although she’d called him a friend before, it seemed she still found him exhausting to deal with when it came to matters of state. I also noticed that, under the glaring desert sun, his teeth were shockingly white.

“If that is all, then I must take my leave,” Wize announced with a bow. “My subordinate here”—he gestured to the doorman, who was now white as a sheet—“shall take over from me and show you inside the venue.”

“Got it,” Astirra said, her tone as warm as her expression. “Give my regards to Zaid, won’t you? And please tell him I’m sorry for dropping by without any warning.”

“Of course, Your Holy Highness. I promise to be thorough in my explanation. Now then, everyone—I wish you a very enjoyable auction.”

The aging man in black regarded us kindly, then briskly walked away.

Chapter 181: The Key to Vainglory

"Master Zaid, I come bearing urgent news."

After his audience with the visitors from the Kingdom of Clays, Zaid had shut himself away—alone—in a room adjoining the vast audience chamber made for his personal use. The screen mirror on the wall showed a certain man's annihilation of the primal golems outside the City Forgotten by Time, playing on loop. Zaid had seen the recording countless times, yet he continued to watch with intense concentration, his thoughts running at a frantic pace.

"Later," Zaid snapped. Between the sweat drenching his brow and the anguish on his face, it was clear he lacked the patience to listen to his trusted servant, Wize, who had just rushed into the room. "How many times have I told you not to bother me when I'm think __"

He fell silent, the anguish on his round face transforming into bewilderment when he heard the few words his aging servant whispered into his ear. Then—

"What?!" Zaid exclaimed. "Mithra's high priestess intruded on the palace grounds?!"

"Indeed, sir. Her Holy Highness wishes to participate in the auction, as she does every year. As we speak, she is inside the venue with her son, Holy Prince Tirrence."

"That scheming fox! Why now, of all times?! The very thought of having to force a smile to greet her... And how am I supposed to interpret her recent change of heart? Damn her! Damn them all!"

Zaid had been aware that two suspicious figures were sniffing around the city, but he'd been too focused on his visitors from the Kingdom of Clays to keep up with them. He ground his teeth as he realized he was now paying the price for that.

"How shall we deal with them?" Wize asked. "I would advise being very careful in your judgment—Her Holy Highness seemed to

be a different person entirely."

"Are you suggesting...she's an impostor?" Zaid asked slowly. Then he dismissed the thought with a shake of his head. "Don't let her fool you. She's always worn a mask and acted with brazen impunity."

"Understood, sir."

"More importantly, how are the preparations coming along?"

"Smoothly, sir. However, I must regretfully inform you that a number of your family members have chosen to send representatives to fill their seats this year. A shame, since they usually attend without fail."

"Tsk. They always were quick to abandon what they mistook for a sinking ship. Note down the absentees; I'll make them regret turning their backs on me before long. What about the security golems?"

"All in position, in full numbers. Masters Ari and Nhid have also announced their desire to lead the new golems you've given them into battle."

"They have, have they? Very well. I suppose the little time they might buy us will prove useful enough. Tell them I have high hopes for them."

"Understood, sir."

"If that's all, then leave. I wish to be alone."

"Yes, sir."

Once his trusted servant had departed, Zaid returned to watching the man on the screen and the strange black object in his hand.

"Damn it all!" he cursed. "What more am I supposed to do?!"

Back in the audience hall, it had been all he could do to feign composure. He had been seized by fear, terrified that one wrong word could drive the man armed with the Black Blade to cut him down on the spot.

Certainly, the man had come across as harmless and relaxed, and no part of their conversation had seemed untoward. But each time Zaid had started to feel at ease, he remembered the devastation outside the City Forgotten by Time. His breathing grew shallow, and his entire body broke out in a cold sweat. For all the wealth and power at his fingertips, he was firmly on the side of the prey. Never before had he been driven so far into a corner.

Zaid was no stranger to adversity—he'd faced more challenges throughout his life than he could count. He prided himself on the tenacity that had prevented him from giving up—that had always opened a path for him—but he knew, deep in his bones, that this time was different. In this trial, there were no resemblances to his past ordeals. The merchant's instincts he'd honed over decades of outmaneuvering his enemies were quicker than calculation and more reliable than reason...

And they screamed at him that a crisis was imminent.

In barely any time at all, the fearsome powerhouse of a man King Clays had sent to Sarenza had destroyed Zaid's most valuable military assets. Worse still, he had done it with one hand, erasing hordes of primal golems as naturally as one might breathe. Each time Zaid watched the recording, hoping it wasn't as he remembered or that he'd simply dreamed it into being, he was forced to reckon with reality: The man was strong. Hopelessly so.

For so long, House Sarenza had reigned supreme, forcing its will upon those ranked beneath it. But now, the status quo had been upturned. The system that had kept House Sarenza in power crumbled around it, and those who had once taken charge now marched to the beat of someone else's drum.

No matter how many schemes Zaid devised, none of them seemed even remotely promising. It all came down to power—or rather, his lack of it. Profit and loss were his bread and butter, so he knew how best to navigate them. Just as he knew that there was only one person left who might save him from certain doom.

"Damn it all! Where's that idiot of an elf when he's needed?!"

Zaid knew it was pointless to expect a member of such a long-lived race to abide by his sense of time. He also knew the elves weren't reliable partners—they were allies of convenience, acting only in their own interests. Yet, for as long as he could clearly remember, Lude had never failed to keep his word. His spotless record was the only reason Zaid put any faith in him, and the reason he felt so dreadfully irritated.

For a man so used to being in control, having to put his fate in someone else's hands was unbearable—especially when that

“someone else” was so openly capricious. So intense was the unease Zaid felt at the threat closing in on him that his eyes had turned bloodshot. His teeth hadn’t stopped chattering—nor had the rest of his body stopped trembling—since his conversation with that terrifying man.

Zaid was convinced that he had a better sense for danger than most people. Now, it was his own fate that struck fear into him.

“Damn, damn, *damn*! Lude! Where are you, Lude?!”

In an instant, a man in a black cloak loomed over Zaid’s shoulder. “There is no need to raise your voice,” he said. “I am right here.”

The head of House Sarenza flinched in surprise. “D-Don’t *scare* me like that! That thing we spoke about—how’s it coming along?! How much longer are you going to make me wait?!”

“You need not worry—the item you desire is right here.” Oozing his usual apathy, the black-cloaked man held out a pale hand to reveal a golden object floating above his palm, glittering strangely.

“Wh-What is it?” Zaid asked.

“A very special relic, capable of unleashing the Dungeon of Oblivion’s true power. It is known as the Key to Glory.”

“The Dungeon of Oblivion’s true power...?”

“The Key is a treasure passed down by my people through the ages,” the cloaked man explained. “It can combine the strength of all the Dungeon of Oblivion’s primal golems, giving its wielder immeasurable power.”

Zaid gulped, causing the fat rolls of his neck to undulate. He was no longer concerned with whether he could trust the clearly suspicious man before him; all that mattered was whether the Key could truly do what Lude claimed.

Perhaps the cloaked man sensed the head of House Sarenza’s anticipation, because he slowly moved the golden relic closer. “Please, take it,” he quietly insisted. “Take it to the Dungeon of Oblivion, and offer it to the dungeon’s core. Then, all the power of Sarenza shall be yours.”

At first, Zaid was too wary to accept, but each word that passed Lude’s lips sounded sweeter than the last. Zaid felt betrayed—by others, his own family, and the world at large. If he could seize their

power as his own...

As he vacillated over his decision, bathing in the strangely comforting light of the golden relic, Zaid realized that it didn't matter whether Lude was telling him the truth. No, it didn't matter at all.

"I see," Zaid muttered. "The treasure of your people. A fine thing indeed."

In the golden light of the relic, his expression gradually morphed from unease into a rapturous smile. If a third party had been present to witness it, they would surely have noticed that the transformation had not come naturally but was thrust upon him. Zaid, however, remained none the wiser.

"Very well," he said, brimming with confidence, beaming from ear to ear. "If this proves to be of use, I will deem you to have successfully dealt with those you invited into my lands, thus carrying out your end of our contract. I must say, though, your people are usually more miserly when it comes to our dealings. Is that musty black slab really worth so much to you?"

"For generations, the Sarenza bloodline—of which you are a part—has graced us with its favor. This is but a small token of our gratitude. We urge you to accept it."

Zaid responded with a noise of appreciation. "Indeed? How generous..."

Lude, his face hidden beneath the hood of his cloak, extended a pale hand, transferring the golden relic to hover above Zaid's outstretched palm. Its glow intensified—and so did the large man's rapturous expression.

"With this, I shall take my leave." The cloaked man turned, then paused and glanced back. "No—on second thought, there is one final matter to address."

"What, there's more? If you're looking for further compensation, don't bother. I only ended up in this mess because you elves failed to—" Zaid was rendered speechless as slender fingers caught his face in a viselike hold, and the cloaked man suddenly lifted him into the air. "Wha— Lude?! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Do be silent. Your words reek of stupidity, and I've no patience left to endure them."

Zaid's cries turned into groans of agony before—*crack*—the sound of shattering bone cut through the air. His corpulent body went limp, arms dangling at his sides.

"Of course, you cannot be blamed for everything," the cloaked man continued. "Retaining the memory of our people is simply too great a burden for someone like you to bear. In hindsight, choosing your family two centuries ago was a mistake—idiocy runs strong in your blood. Still, it is a refreshing thought that, after today, it will all be over."

Lude examined the blood streaming from the breaks in Zaid's skull and grimaced. His pale hand began to emanate red light.

"I command you to *forget* all that you know about my people."

The light cast shadows across the dim room, writhing as though it had a mind of its own. It gathered in Zaid's body, which barely clung to life, before disappearing in a blinding flash.

With the cool demeanor of someone going through the motions, the cloaked man tossed Zaid aside. The head of House Sarenza struck the cold floor with a dull *thump*. Lude watched as what remained of his victim's life ebbed away, wearing a look of complete indifference, until a sudden thought made him exhale.

"How thoughtless of me. I almost let you slip into death when you still have a task to complete for me. Your worthless life must continue...for now."

Lude heaved a frustrated sigh, then extended a hand toward the man—soon to be a corpse—lying motionless before him.

"*Don't die yet.*"

The crimson pool that had slowly been spreading across the pure-white floor went still as blood stopped seeping from the body's crushed skull. Zaid was being brought back from the brink of death. To any other observer, the phenomenon would have seemed to defy all the natural laws of the world, but Lude merely sighed again, watching the process with a cold stare.

"Must I revive this *thing* again?" he muttered. "The very thought is wearying. I would rather get this over with, but it would be most vexing if he started kicking up a fuss. Hmm... Why don't you *take your time healing*?"

No sooner had the languid command been vocalized than the corpulent body's shattered face began to piece itself back together. The blood that had trickled into the creases of the beautifully polished floor rose into the air and flowed back toward its source, moving as elegantly as tea poured from a teapot. Chunks of torn flesh, scattered across the dimly lit room by the elf's powerful grip, inched together with agonizing slowness, knitting themselves back into a recognizable shape.

The black-cloaked man behind the spectacular feat watched with disinterest, as if completely detached from the whole affair. Then, he turned his attention to the screen mirror on the wall.

"Finally..." he muttered. "We are so close."

On the screen was the blurry image of a man, but Lude's eyes were focused elsewhere—on the Black Blade, the gargantuan slab in the man's grasp. Retrieved from the Dungeon of the Lost by human hands mere decades ago—a very recent development for the long-lived elves—it was a relic of an extremely troublesome nature.

Unconsciously, Lude balled his hands into tight fists. "Once we have it, our wearisome work in these lands will come to an end. A mere five centuries, but ah, how staggeringly long it felt. Soon we will possess the relic, though, and twenty thousand years of accrued debt—of accursed history—shall be paid in full. Just a little longer. I need only to be patient."

As the black-cloaked man turned to leave, he accidentally kicked the golden object now lying on the floor. It sailed into one of the white walls, then rebounded with a loud clatter that echoed through the room.

"Ah, I almost forgot. I should ensure the fool is clinging to this worthless trinket when he comes to."

Lude retrieved the golden object, which had begun to wriggle like a living creature after the impact, and turned his attention to the fat man prone on the floor, still in the process of recovering.

"This trifle—the treasure of my people? Merely speaking the words makes me want to retch. I should have said something more fitting, but really—how else does one present an activation key for a reusable trap? Then again, perhaps it *is* a treasure...for one such as

you.”

Lude placed the golden object in the man’s open palm. Fleshy fingers wrapped around it reflexively.

“Yes, I suppose that will do. Remain ignorant. Clutch what you perceive to be treasure. Fill your heart with false glory, as you are wont to do. Entrust your navigation to greed and tread the path to ruin. In the end, history will forget you. Your worthless achievements and meaningless deeds will be consigned to oblivion—a fate befitting humanity itself.”

Lude watched until the reconstruction of the corpulent man’s face was complete—not a scrap of skin or drop of blood out of place—before finally departing the palace. He erased any trace of his presence as he went, vanishing as surely as the memories of the man who would never remember him.

Chapter 182: Grand Larceny, Part 1

The doorman led us into the white, temple-like building—every bit as spacious as its grand exterior had promised. We'd been walking for what felt like ages, yet the venue was still nowhere in sight. Our guide insisted it "wasn't much farther," but he'd said that at least three times already.

"You must forgive my unreasonable behavior outside," he said. "It is no excuse, but never could I have imagined that Your Holy Highness would arrive in such a fashion."

"Oh, it's fine," Astirra replied, waving his concerns away. "You were just doing your job—and quite admirably, at that. If anyone was being unreasonable, it was us."

"As a doorman, I should have recognized you at once. My failure to do so was nothing short of disrespectful. And yet, to have received such clemency from Your Holy Highness... I shan't forget this day for as long as I live!"

Astirra chuckled. "Flattery will get you nowhere—unless you're after my autograph. That, I can do."

"I...couldn't possibly. But it would be terribly remiss of me to refuse Your Holy Highness's kindness. P-Perhaps...on the back of my uniform?"

Over the course of their conversation, the doorman's complexion had returned from a worrying shade of white to its usual color. Now flushed with delight, he beamed as Astirra quickly scribbled on the back of his uniform.

The high priestess seemed more than satisfied with the shift in atmosphere. I was a little concerned about her behavior—her predecessor could freeze an entire room with a stare and would never have been so animated—but maybe it was fine. This Astirra

was the real one, even if an impostor had posed as her for who knows how long. Only those who'd met the impostor in person were likely to notice something was off.

Then again, when it came to being the high priestess, I supposed the real Astirra was technically the fake. It was all a bit complicated.

I turned to Lynne beside me, suddenly struck by a thought. "What's this 'auction' we're going to, anyway? Might be good to know, if I'm expected to participate."

"It's an event where goods are put up for sale to multiple buyers," she explained, looking pensive. "They're held in the Kingdom of Clays whenever rare relics are uncovered, usually from places like the Dungeon of the Lost. Once an item is presented, bidders compete by declaring how much they're willing to pay for it. The highest bid wins."

"So the item goes to whoever offers the most for it?"

"That's right."

Lynne had given her explanation in the same brisk, lecturing manner I was accustomed to, but her expression soon darkened. Rashid seemed to notice this too.

"Lady Lynneburg?" he asked. "Are you perhaps feeling some reluctance at the idea of purchasing slaves?"

"Yes, I am," she answered at length.

"One trades currency for a person's talents. In that regard, it's not all that different from a contract of employment."

"Those forced into slavery are stripped of the right to make their own decisions," Lynne asserted. "It differs distinctly from a master-servant relationship, which is founded on the free will of both parties."

"I see. That is certainly an opinion I would expect from a young lady from the country of adventurers, which holds personal freedom in the highest regard." An amused smile spread across Rashid's face. "In other words, you are dissatisfied with Sarenza's laws and social system—and, by extension, with House Sarenza, who established them."

"That isn't what I said."

"It might as well be. There's a reason our fathers are on such bad

terms."

"Perhaps, but I would rather pursue a more cordial relationship between our countries."

"Of course. As would I," Rashid said, his shoulders bouncing as if he might burst into laughter at any moment.

"What are you two talking about?" I asked. "It sounds complicated."

"It's really quite simple," Rashid assured me. "We were saying that the slaves you're about to buy are particularly fortunate."

"But I wasn't planning on buying any slaves."

"Hmm? Did you not come here to bid on the Lepifolk—formerly, the demonfolk?"

"Yeah, but I'm not going to make Rolo's friends into slaves."

"So you came to spend an exorbitant amount of money...just to discard your purchases?"

"I guess so. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? It's my money to spend."

"Ha ha! I adore the way you think, Noor. It's uniquely *you*."

Rashid seemed delighted—though his laughter turned to surprise when a new voice called out from behind us.

"Hey, Rashid!"

I turned to see a slim young man, with a younger, rather plump boy practically hiding behind him. Though their builds were different, the family resemblance between them was unmistakable.

"Oh? If it isn't my younger brothers," Rashid said. "It's been too long. Are you both doing well?"

"Hmph. Playing the part of an older brother, are you?" the slender one jeered. "Don't push your luck. I heard your misdeeds finally caught up with you, and now you're utterly beggared. I'm surprised you're still shameless enough to show your face around here."

"Fortunately, I've received permission to do as I please. Having nothing to one's name is rather liberating, by the way. You should try it sometime."

"Father might have shown you charity, but your losses should never have been the family's to bear. Pittance or not, it's preposterous that you would relinquish all you own to some foreign

nobody. All you ever do is drag our family's prestigious name through the mud. Well, heed my words: One of these days, you'll get what's coming to you! And so will he!"

"Will we, now? Well, my stance is one thing, but I can't presume to speak on my successor's behalf. If you have a complaint, it might be more expedient to take it up with him directly. He's right here, after all."

"Come again? What do you mean, right— Eek!"

The moment the pair saw me, they shrieked and fell on their backsides.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Y-You're the man from the—!"

"B-But how?! When did you get here?!"

"Huh? I arrived with everyone else," I said. "Wait, do you know me? I don't think we've met."

"M-Monster! Don't come any closer!"

"Waaaaaah!"

With impressive dexterity, the boys scrambled backward down the hallway and quickly disappeared from sight.

"What was that about...?" I muttered.

"Goodness me," Rashid sighed. "That was rather embarrassing. I might only be their half brother, but allow me to apologize on their behalf."

"Were those the brothers who sent golems to the City Forgotten by Time?"

"Indeed. They've never been ones for patience, those two." Rashid grinned, as apathetic as if they were complete strangers to him. "I wonder what will become of them."

I noticed then that the incident had drawn some attention to us. People watched from afar, whispering among themselves and casting us curious glances. Some even backed away.

"Everyone's looking at us," I noted.

"Well, we *are* rather famous," Rashid said matter-of-factly.

"Famous?"

"Have you forgotten everything you've done? No matter—let's go. My brothers might've delayed us, but the auction venue is just

ahead."

There were still a few questions I wanted answered, but we thanked our guide and moved on without him. Before long, we reached a large set of doors, which I assumed was the entrance. A man dressed in the same attire as the doorman stood beside them, wearing a professional smile.

"May I take your belongings, sir?" he asked politely, doubtless referring to my Black Blade.

"Do I need to hand it over to get in?" I asked.

"Among our participants are dignitaries and individuals of high station. Aside from a section of the guard detail, anyone who wishes to pass through these doors must hand over their weapons and other dangerous items—particularly those that cannot be concealed. We thank you for your understanding."

"There's really no way around it?"

"Am I correct to assume that object is a weapon, sir?"

"I suppose so. It's pretty important to me, though."

The Black Blade was a weapon—I couldn't deny that—but to me, it was so much more. It was a treasured possession I preferred to keep close. Hopefully, the doorman would understand.

"Any chance you could overlook it, just this once?" I asked. "I'll do my very best not to bother the other guests."

"My apologies, sir, but we cannot bend on the matter. Please rest assured—our staff will ensure its safekeeping. We shall treat it as though it were a precious keepsake of our own."

The hint of worry in Lynne's eyes gave me pause, but the doorman remained adamant.

"All right," I said at last. "I guess I don't have a choice."

It made sense that dangerous items couldn't be taken into the auction, and rules were rules. The thought of entrusting the Black Blade to strangers worried me, but it wouldn't get stolen if they watched it as closely as the man insisted. In fact, I doubted anyone *could* steal it, considering how heavy it was. More important—at least for where we were headed—was the Wallet of Mountainous Storage, tucked safely inside my clothes.

"Well, where do you want it?" I asked. "Point the way, and I'll

take it there for you."

"Oh, no, there is no need for that, sir. Please, allow me to take it for you."

"Fair warning—it's pretty heavy."

"That won't be a problem, sir. I insist."

The doorman extended a hand toward me, his professional visage unwavering. The whole exchange reminded me of a recent encounter with Kron, only the man before me now gave the impression he might have less trouble carrying my sword. Figuring it would probably be fine, I presented it to him and—

"Noor, wait!" Rolo yelled. "Don't let him take it!"

"Huh?"

By the time Rolo's warning reached me, the Black Blade was already in the doorman's grasp. He held it effortlessly in one hand, a sinister grin spreading across his face.

"Thank you, sir. I'll take good care of it."

Still grinning, he brought the sword to his chest and licked it, his long tongue gliding along its uneven surface. Lynne's eyes widened with sudden realization, and she immediately moved to cast a spell.

"[Uncover]!"

The man's appearance rippled as transparent scales sloughed off in chunks, revealing a face we'd all seen before—one wrapped in black bandages.



"Zadu?" I asked, blinking.

"Aw, found out already?" he muttered in his usual drawl. "Gotta admit, I thought that was some fine acting on my part."

Zadu stuck out his tongue and cackled, eyeing the Black Blade in his hand.

"Well, whatever," he said. "You've handed it over. Gotta say, it's heavier than I expected. Always knew you had a screw loose, and the fact you just stroll around with this behemoth proves it."

With that, the black-bandaged man hefted the sword over his shoulder, cocked his head at me, and gave a twisted grin.

"What are you planning?" I asked. "That sword's precious to me. Give it back."

"Sorry, no can do. Got a job to finish." With a casual wave of his hand, Zadu summoned violent winds, toppling furniture and hurling nearby guests into walls. "See you around, weird guy."

Before we knew it, he had vanished.

"Why was *he* here?" I wondered.

"Whatever the case, there's no time to lose!" Lynne exclaimed. "We need to recover the Black Blade—at once!"

"I'll go after him. Sorry, Lynne, but can I count on you to handle the auction?"

"Instructor...?"

There was no time to elaborate. I sprinted after the man who'd stolen my Black Blade, leaving Lynne to figure out the rest.

Chapter 183: Grand Larceny, Part 2

I sprinted across the expansive grounds, frantically chasing the man who'd stolen my Black Blade. I didn't have Lynne's skill for pinpointing Zadu's location, but he must not have been used to the sword's weight—he'd left more than enough traces behind to guide me. He couldn't be far.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I spotted my target up ahead. The garden's trees rustled in the wind as he darted between them. He must have seen me too because he glanced over his shoulder. Determined not to lose him, I surged forward and leaped.

"[Physical Enhancement]. [Featherstep]." The ground fractured beneath my feet. Then, in the next instant, I was right behind him. "Finally, I've caught up with you."

Zadu clicked his tongue. "Even with a decent head start. Seriously, what's with you? And why's this thing so heavy?" He put on another burst of speed, shattering the earth with each step—but even that wasn't enough to shake me. I matched his acceleration with ease, probably because the weight of the Black Blade was slowing him down.

"Could you please give it back?" I asked.

"No. Have you not been paying attention?"

"It's really important to me."

"And I should care because...? [Alchemy]."

Zadu drew a silver blade that began to glow red. It split into an uncountable array of wicked, cross-shaped daggers, which hovered in front of his chest. As one, they spun in a quick flourish—then shot straight toward my face.

[Parry]

A forceful sweep of my arm was enough to scatter the blades. My

execution wasn't perfect—blood sprayed from the gaps in my defense—but a quick application of [Low Heal] patched up the injuries without issue.

"The hell?" Zadu grumbled. "Who repels mithril without a weapon?"

"I used to practice something similar all the time," I said. "I could do this all day—provided your attacks stay light enough."

"Absurd as ever, aren't you? This is getting to be a real pain, so could you do me a favor and die? [Call Lightning]."

[Parry]

A furious thunderbolt flew from Zadu's free hand—only to be slapped aside. My arm went numb up to the elbow, but it was just enough to divert the bolt past my body and into the trees behind me, where it exploded in a magnificent burst.

"Seriously? Are you even human anymore?" Zadu asked. "Your first reaction to *lightning* shouldn't be to smack it with your bare hands."

"Again, I'm drawing on a lot of past experience. A skeleton practically drowned me in it once."

"A skeleton? What nonsense are you spouting now?"

"Anyway, look—can you just give it back? I need it for work."

"My answer's not going to change. [Alabaster]."

Zadu's next spell conjured countless sharp icicles, reminiscent of the ones Lynne used from time to time, then sent them hurtling toward me. I could probably have turned them away with my arm, like I had the silver daggers, but they looked so cold that I didn't want to touch them. Instead, I scooped up a pebble conveniently resting by my foot, crushed it, and tossed the remains into the oncoming onslaught.

"[Stone Throw]."

Every icicle shattered into pieces, scattering shards that froze the ground solid. I'd made the right call by not touching them—even a few frost particles brushing my cheek iced it over.

"Once again, he proves he's deranged," Zadu remarked. "I've never seen anyone handle that attack the first time they face it."

"I just got lucky," I said. "I've seen a friend use similar magic

before."

"You know, it just occurred to me—could you be even more of a pain *without* this thing? Your movements aren't at all as I remember them."

"You might have a point. It *does* feel easier to move."

I'd grown so used to carrying the Black Blade that its weight no longer bothered me—but going without it felt surprisingly freeing. Zadu had made an excellent observation.

"Still, that doesn't mean you get to keep it," I said.

"Wasn't trying to convince you," Zadu drawled. "[Crimson]."

The next attack to close in on me was a gargantuan fireball—except it wasn't composed of ordinary flame. The incandescent sphere unfurled as it moved, blooming like a fiery flower until a blazing barrier stood between Zadu and me. The flames were so intense that the air around them shimmered, and the ground melted without even making contact with them.

I really didn't want to touch the flaming flower, but I had to do something. Zadu would escape me otherwise. I caught a glimpse of his grin from beyond the barrier as he leaped over the high walls enclosing the palace grounds.

"[Featherstep]."

I took a deep breath and charged straight into the heart of the inferno. Flames licked my entire body—but they wouldn't do any lasting damage as long as I kept moving.

"You won't get away!"

Burned all over, I burst through the flames and gave chase once again. Fortunately, my injuries were light enough that [Low Heal] made short work of them.

"Every time I think you're out of surprises..." Zadu muttered, exasperated. "What's wrong with your head, jumping straight into all that fire? Honestly, it's ridiculous that you're even chasing me."

"Well, you stole something from me. Seems pretty normal to want it back."

"That's really not what I was getting at."

Zadu sprinted across the city's rooftops, shattering tiles with each step. I struggled to keep up as he led me through a dizzying maze of

terrain, leaping between squat buildings, narrow alleys, and high ledges. A jolt of terror shot through me with every ascent, but there was no time to complain. I forced myself not to look down as I continued my dogged pursuit.

"You don't give up, do you?" he sighed. "Why are you so determined to get this thing back?"

"Because it's not just mine. Someone else entrusted it to me."

"Then why not be more forceful? You wouldn't need to chase a dead man."

"Hey, I could never go *that* far."

"Yeah? Why not?"

"Why would I, when we can talk things out? I'm getting through to you right now, aren't I?"

"What are you babbling about...?" Zadu sprang high into the air, landing atop the spire of a tower in what appeared to be a plaza of some kind. He cocked his head, staring at me. "Hey. Just gotta ask—you *really* believe what you're saying, don't you?"

"Of course. I'm not saying anything that strange, am I?"

Zadu examined me for a few moments. "I see. So you *are* a lunatic." A smile spread across his black-bandaged face, like a fissure opening in the earth, as he maintained his balance atop the narrow tower's spire.

"You're free to think that," I said. "But seriously—can you give my sword back? Please?"

"How many times have you asked me? *I can't.* Gotta take this back with me to finish a job."

"Would you do *anything* if you were paid to?"

"Almost." Zadu shrugged. "If you've got a problem, take it up with my client."

"Can you tell me who they are?"

"Hmm? Of course not."

I stared at him in confusion. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

"If it were up to me? Die here, or give up. Either one would make my life easier. [Crimson]."

Zadu conjured another flaming mass in the shape of a flower and hurled it straight at me. This time, I was confident I could dodge it—

but doing so would let it crash into the buildings and people behind me.

"[Tiny Flame]."

I gathered the flames that flickered at the tips of my five fingers into the palm of my hand, then thrust them forward, meeting the giant fireball midair and halting its momentum. Both attacks dissipated on impact, leaving me with little more than a few burns from the firepower of my own [Tiny Flame]. I wasted no time patching them up with [Low Heal].



Zadu stared at me, his head still cocked as he scratched his cheek with his free hand. “That strange healing magic of yours... I’ve been wondering for a while now—it’s not unlimited, is it?”

I paused for a moment. “To tell you the truth, I don’t really know.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“But now that you mention it, I don’t think it’s ever run out.”

“You’re a freak of nature from head to toe, aren’t you? Don’t think I didn’t notice how you used that minor fire spell. Watching you feels like the whole world’s gone mad. Nothing’s worked so far, but...”

Suddenly, Zadu was behind me. He made a sweeping cut with a silver blade that hadn’t been in his hand just a moment ago.

“What if I do this?” he mused aloud.

I didn’t need to dodge—the blade didn’t even graze me. Instead, the tower behind me cracked and split apart, spewing rubble toward the plaza below.

“Are you out of your mind?” I asked. “There are people down there!”

“So?”

“[Physical Enhancement]. [Featherstep].”

With a single kick, I shot off the rooftop and landed among the startled crowd below.

[Parry]

I intercepted the falling rubble with my arm, breaking it apart in midair. Some of my blood scattered with the debris, but it looked like everyone else had come out unscathed.

Up above, the man responsible looked far too pleased with himself, his shoulders shaking with amusement. “Strange, strange... Ever so strange,” he called down. “Usually, the weak become stronger by banding together. But you—you’re the complete opposite. The more useless hangers-on you have around you—the more dregs you’re surrounded by—the weaker you get.”

Zadu laughed—and with ruthless speed, destroyed the remaining towers around him.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted.

“It really is strange. Why cling to all that deadweight? You’d get so much more done on your own.”

A fresh torrent of rubble rained down toward the crowd.

[Parry]

“See?” Zadu said, still laughing as I frantically swept debris aside. “When you’re surrounded by small fry, you waste your time on pointless things. I guess you really are insane.”

He grinned, and a flock of silver cross-shaped blades appeared above his head. They arranged themselves into neat rows and columns, blanketing the sky, while the bandage-faced man began to blur and become transparent, like a mirage.

“Crap...” I muttered.

“See ya, weird guy. Not that I ever want to run into you again.”

“Wait. Please!”

As soon as I moved to pursue him, countless silver blades launched at the people around me.

[Parry]

I repelled the blades with my arms, sustaining more than a few cuts in the process. Blood ran freely down my body, but thankfully, everyone else was unharmed. There was just one problem.

“Damn... He got away.”

When I looked back toward the rooftop, Zadu was gone. And he’d taken the Black Blade with him.

Chapter 184: Private Auction

"Who was that man?" the robed, long-eared woman asked. "He was dressed rather strangely."

Despite the unexpected encounter, Princess Lynneburg of the Kingdom of Clays and her companions were informed that the auction would proceed as planned. So, they continued into the venue, weaving through the stream of other participants. Here and there, they spotted some of those blown into the walls by the earlier windstorm—though, strangely enough, they appeared completely unruffled.

"That was Zadu," the princess explained. "He's attacked us several times before. Instructor Noor always managed to fend him off, but..."

"From the look of things, this 'Zadu' pulled one over on him this time. That black slab he took—the thing reminiscent of a signboard... It's important to Noor, isn't it?"

"The Black Blade, you mean? Yes, it's very important. I don't doubt for a second that he will retrieve it, and yet..." Lynne hesitated, her expression dour. "I cannot help but worry."

A young man—one of the princess's companions—caught the group's attention with a shrug, a rueful tinge to his ever-present grin. "Noor took his money with him. Every last coin we had was tucked into that Wallet of Mountainous Storage. Those were meant to be our funds for the auction."

"That shouldn't be a problem," the long-eared woman announced with a carefree smile. "Our objectives are one and the same—and as that kind old butler informed us, I've been using a credit system for years. Lynne, I'll lend you as much money as you need, without interest, so spend to your heart's desire!"

"Thank you, Astirra. I shall gratefully impose upon you," the princess replied. "However, there's another concern on my mind..."

"What's that?"

"Instructor Noor asked me to 'handle the auction,' then took his money with him. It must be some kind of message—one I've yet to decipher."

"Are you sure he didn't just forget?"

"No, that's not possible. There's *always* a deeper meaning behind Instructor Noor's actions. He never acts without intent."

The long-eared woman blinked. "Huh? Really?"

"Don't let his appearance deceive you—his mind is deeper than most can fathom. But never has he failed to guide us toward the right decision."

"Are you *sure* about that?" Astirra asked, no less taken aback. But before Lynne could respond, an usher stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Dear guests, if you'll follow me..."

"Oh, um, thank you," the long-eared woman said, her eyes drifting over the venue. "Wow, this place is even larger than I expected."

Lynne's group followed the usher, finally setting foot in the auction venue proper. It resembled a theatre, with a stage occupying the central space at one end. If anything about it felt small, it was only relative to the enormity of the building's exterior.

"The auction will begin shortly," the usher informed them. "In the meantime, please relax and enjoy the refreshments provided."

The princess and her companions were led to a large, round table at the center of the venue, finely carved from thick wood. It was ringed by seats and set with drinks in transparent glasses.

"These are good seats," the long-eared woman opined. "Right in the center, with a perfect view of the stage. And they even prepared drinks for us. This place has excellent service."

Lynne's expression darkened. "Nevertheless," she murmured, "I get the distinct sense that we aren't welcome here..."

"Oh? You've noticed it too, Lady Lynneburg?" Rashid said, wearing his usual grin.

"What's got you two so worried?" Astirra asked, then paused. "Hmm? Is it just me, or is there something beneath us? Can you feel

it, Tirrence?”

“Yes, mother.” A boy who bore a striking resemblance to the long-eared woman smiled and took a seat, examining his surroundings through narrowed eyes. “It would appear there are a number of concealed presences throughout the venue. They’re positioned to surround us.”

“Oh. I suppose that explains the good seats—not that I really mind.”

“Your Holy Highnesses have sharp senses indeed,” Rashid said. “What you’re sensing beneath us is most likely an assortment of security golems. Normally, there would be no need for such stringent precautions against guests, but given the recent history of a certain individual in our group...” He paused. “Not that he’s present at the moment.”

“Did Noor get into trouble on your way here?”

The young man laughed. “Indeed, he did. All kinds of it.”

The robe-wearing woman shook her head incredulously as she reached for a drink. “You must have had it rough, Lynne.”

“Indeed, we have,” the princess agreed. “Forgive me for involving you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m far too used to sticky situations by now.” Astirra turned to her son. “Tirrence, you simply *must* try this drink. It’s delightful.”

“If you insist, mother.”

“You won’t regret it.”

Holy Prince Tirrence smiled ruefully as he took one of the glasses from the table. The woman playing the part of his mother seemed completely at ease with their surroundings, while the girl sitting near her remained contemplative.

“Something about the other participants doesn’t seem right,” Lynne remarked. “Those who were blown into the walls earlier look completely unbothered.”

“Presumably because they’re not from House Sarenza,” Rashid explained. “It’s strange—while agents are commonly employed during auctions, this tends to be more of a family event than anything else. Ordinarily, all the seats would be taken by my

relatives."

"But today, the venue's full of people you don't recognize?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say everyone here is an actor, a sellsword, or a well-trained golem operator."

"I see. I can't say I'm surprised."

"Dear me... And after so many of their primal golems were destroyed. It seems they never learn. I can admire their resilience, at least. And I suppose their judgment wasn't entirely mistaken, since Noor isn't here at the moment. What shall we do, Lady Lynneburg? As it stands, we might as well have knives pressed to our throats."

"Nothing," the princess said. "Not until they've made their move."

Rashid chuckled. "Once again, your unassuming appearance belies a daringly intrepid heart."

Lynne's grim expression stood in stark contrast to the mother-son pair, who looked far more relaxed.

Suddenly, lights across the ceiling sprang to life, as if the roof had opened and sunlight were pouring through. A woman's voice echoed throughout the theatre-like venue.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for your patience. Welcome to House Sarenza's private auction—by House Sarenza, at House Sarenza, for *House Sarenza."*

The hostess stood upon the illuminated stage. She bowed to the audience and smiled as brightly as the lights above.

"We extend our gratitude to our fortunate guests who have gathered for this occasion. The rare and unusual goods up for auction today, gathered from every corner of the world expressly for your pleasure, can be found in no other market. Please take the time to appreciate them and, if the inclination takes you, to bid on any you would like to take home. Lastly, as we have first-time participants today, I shall give a brief overview of the auction's proceedings. Please examine the back of your participant's coin. There, you should find engraved your credit ranking and participant number."

"Credit ranking...?" Lynne wondered aloud.

"A simple evaluation of your financial muscle, so to speak—as

judged by the auction's hosts," Rashid explained. "Noor must have roughly as much in assets as Her Holy Highness, so you should have no shortage of credit to work with. What does the engraving say?"

"'Unlimited.'"

"In that case, you should be able to compete on equal footing with any other participant in the venue."

"Should you wish to bid on an item, please raise your coin so that I, your host, can see the back, and indicate the price you wish to pay. You may use hand signals or simply call out. That concludes my explanation. Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the auction!"

After a polite round of applause, the first item of the day was brought onto the stage in an oversized crate. The audience breathed a collective sigh of admiration—though it seemed rather performative, if one paid close attention.

"To kick things off, our first listing is the Great Saint's Tears—a vanishingly rare magical item, enchanted with a blessing of continuous health and beauty for its owner. Originally from the Dungeon of Oblivion, this item will start at a price of one hundred million gald. Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot wait to see your keen financial acuity in action. Begin!"

Rashid wore a cool grin, watching the other guests gleefully drive up the price of the item onstage. "Do you not intend to join them, Lady Lynneburg?" he asked.

The girl seated next to him looked distinctly more bitter as the price rose to greater and greater heights. "Not in the slightest" was her reply.

"Two hundred million gald from number eighteen. Ah, I see three hundred million. Is there anyone else? Yes—four hundred fifty million from number twenty-four. Six hundred million from the madam in the back! Are there any other bids? Don't hold back—everyone is welcome to participate!"

Several more bids were placed, through calls or other signals, before the venue went still. The silence was broken by the sharp sound of a wooden gavel.

"Congratulations to participant number twenty-four, who wins the Great Saint's Tears with a bid of 1.22 billion gald. May your beauty

be further blessed, madam. Now, on to our next listing. This enchanted Divine Spear of Earth comes with a written letter of guarantee from a first-rate craftsman, and—"

Only a smattering of applause for the winning bidder separated the host's smooth transition from one item to the next. Again, prospective buyers made signals and called out, deftly setting prices that were just as quickly exceeded. Amid the pattern of activity, the princess seated at the venue's center remained still, watching in silence.

"It must be tiring, looking so grim all the time," Rashid observed with his usual amusement. "Since you're here, you might as well enjoy it a little."

"I refuse—as I've already made quite clear."

"Is that so? Well, that— Ah. They're finally up. This might go without saying, but do brace yourself. Their appearance might not match your expectations."

"Those are—!"

Lynne raised her head to see five children being urged into a neat row atop the brightly lit stage. Their features matched those of the pale-haired boy sitting next to her.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you've all been waiting for! Today's centerpiece listing: a group of juvenile demonfolk—a race known for its rarity. That's right, you'll be bidding on all five at once! While you admire their curious appearances, please allow me to direct your attention to the items around their necks."

Another buzz of excitement rippled through the venue—genuine, this time. Each of the children onstage had something fastened around their neck.

"You should all recognize them as slave collars. Well, these are a powerful, custom variety made specifically for demonfolk. Allow me to demonstrate. Dance!"

The hostess issued a cheerful command, holding what appeared to be a small key, and the children began to step and sway, moving their limbs in a truly absurd performance. Though the spectacle evoked laughter from the audience, the children's eyes remained

hollow, unable—or unwilling—to focus on a single point.

Lynne averted her eyes from the brightly lit stage, her hand pressed to her mouth. Beside her, the boy whose features matched those of the children onstage did the same.

"As you can see, despite the demonfolk's reputation as savage, abhorrent, and difficult to handle, these magical collars will grant you absolute control over them. Uncover other people's secrets, or have a pack of monsters at your beck and call—a listing with this much potential might never come around again! As these demonfolk are being sold together, let's start the bidding at five billion gald!"

"Ten."

"Twenty."

"Thirty!"

"Forty!"

"Fifty!"

"Already, we've reached fifty billion gald! No, I see a call for sixty over there! Anyone else? Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

Cold, calculating shouts rang out as participants voiced their interest, growing louder and more intense with each raise. As their calls echoed throughout the venue, the princess and the boy beside her kept their eyes squeezed shut, unable to bear the idea of opening them.

"So this is what it's like in person," Lynne muttered. "I'm sorry, Rolo. I..."

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault. But this... It's just too..." Rolo's voice came out hoarse. He pressed his hands to his ears as he wept, tears streaming down his face. "It's too awful."

The princess rose from her seat, prompting a questioning "Lynne?" from the long-eared woman seated nearby.

"Astirra..." Lynne said, her voice frosty and clear. "I appreciate your offer, but I must retract my interest. I no longer need to borrow money from you."

In almost mocking contrast, the venue's excitement surged to a fever pitch.

"Incredible! We've just reached five hundred billion gald*! Do we*

have any other bids? Be sure to raise your coins high into the air. Six hundred billion! Can we go any higher? We've surpassed the highest bid on record, but the listing is still open! These are our final items of the day, so if there are no more— Oh? We have a bid from the young lady over there—one of our first-time participants! A round of applause for her bravery!"

Only a few people deigned to clap as all eyes turned to the center table, to the girl who stood with her hand raised.

"Ma'am—please indicate your offer, if you would. Do you remember how? If you don't know the hand signs, you may simply state—"

"My offer?" Lynne scoffed. "*This* is all I have to offer."

The princess threw her coin into the air, and a great pillar of flame erupted from her outstretched hand.

"[Hellflare]."

In an instant, the coin was reduced to vapor, leaving not even a trace of metal. The flames faded, dying out as quickly as they had appeared, leaving only the hostess's dumbfounded voice in their wake.

"M-Ma'am?"

"Are you sure about this, Lynne?" Astirra asked.

"I am. At long last, I understand what Instructor Noor was asking of me. He never approved of this auction. That's why he took our funds with him, despite instructing me to *handle it*." Amid the icy hush, Lynne slowly raised her head, tear tracks still visible on her face. "I'm sorry, Rolo. I should have realized it sooner. You shouldn't have had to witness this."

"It's...okay. Thank you, Lynne. For getting angry for my sake."

The princess clenched one fist, her shoulders trembling. "Instructor Noor is a kind man. Foreign lands or no, I should have known he could never abide such inhumanity. I am ashamed to have let such trivialities bind me."

Astirra chuckled and slowly stood up as well. "You're always so bold, aren't you, Lynne? Though I must confess, I was moments from taking action myself."

A violent gale burst forth, snatching the participant's coin from

each bidder's hand before scattering them against the well-polished white walls.

"It's honestly unthinkable," she continued. "All these people, treating others like toys without remorse. I'm really quite angry, to be honest with you. I haven't felt this heated since that rotten old bag of bones."

"I understand exactly how you feel, mother, but acting like this within foreign borders could have long-lasting consequences..." Tirrence noted.

"Oh, forget about that. I can't turn back now, so why not go all the way?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right. In for a copper, as they say. I'll do my best to smooth diplomatic matters over later."

Breathing a quiet sigh, Tirrence rose to his feet, joining Lynne and his mother in their act of defiance. As if on cue, enormous golems burst up from the floor, surrounding their table at the center of the venue.

"They really *were* waiting for us," Astirra said. "And now they're sprouting up like mushrooms. *Yuck.*"

"These golems aren't to be underestimated," Lynne warned.

"No, apparently not. But if we combine our strength, we— Ah!"

"I wouldn't try anything, if I were you. We know exactly what you're after."

The hostess onstage had vanished, replaced by a slender young man and an overweight boy. Each clutched an ornamented golden knife, pressing its wicked edge against the neck of one of the children. Even then, the poor slaves' eyes remained completely vacant.

"Aren't those...?"

"My dear younger brothers!" Rashid announced. "Still hanging around, are you?"

"Much to your chagrin," said the slighter of the two boys with a smirk. "You came here for this lot—we've known that from the start."

The plump boy let out a dry chuckle of agreement. "Naturally, we made sure to prepare ourselves. And while that *freak* might have been with you before, I see we have the heavens themselves on our

side. To think he'd turn tail and run before even setting foot in the venue! I had no idea he was such a coward. I was a fool for getting even slightly nervous."

"Not that his presence would have changed anything. You've seen what these collars can do. Mental dominance goes without saying, but they also provide life support. Try to remove them by force, and you won't have any children left to save. It's a marvel what a little tinkering can achieve."

"As you can see, you're out of options—unless you intend to sacrifice your demonfolk friend's long-lost people, that is. Even with that freak on your side, your failure was assured before you even got here. Ah ha ha! Too bad for you!"

The brothers laughed, keeping their knives pressed to the pale-haired children's throats. Lynne uttered not a sound, regarding them with cold eyes.

"What's wrong?" the slender brother asked. "Lost your nerve all of a sudden? You seemed so bold just a moment ago, spoiling the sanctity of this auction with your barbarism. If everything I've heard about foreigners being savages is true, perhaps *this* will make more sense to you."

He alighted from the stage and sauntered past the hundreds of golems surrounding his "guests." When he reached the princess, he looped an arm around her from behind and pressed his blade firmly against her neck instead.

"King Clays's daughter, in the flesh," he remarked. "You've stirred up more trouble than you're worth—and in another country, no less. Strolling into the seat of our power without any information, did you really think you'd come out on top? I bet you enjoyed looking down on us, convinced you had a winning hand. Well, that arrogance was your downfa— Hmm?"

The thinner of the two brothers paused, his mouth snapping shut when he noticed the look on Lynne's face. Despite having a knife at her throat, she was smiling—and so was Rashid, standing next to her.



“What’s so funny?” the young man snapped. “Come on. Out with it!”

“Oh, nothing in particular,” Rashid answered.

“Don’t make me ask again. That smile of yours sickens me. Yours too, Barbarian Princess.”

“Nothing about this is funny,” Lynne said. “I am simply relieved.”

The slender young man frowned, almost gawking in disbelief. “Has the sting of defeat cost you your sanity? Or are you such a fool that you don’t understand the situation you’re— Huh?”

A quiet clatter rang out as the tip of the young man’s knife struck the floor, severed cleanly from the rest of the blade. He stared at it in a daze, his mouth opening and closing like a fish as he struggled to form words.

“To tell you the truth, I was hesitant,” Lynne said, exhaling slowly. “As pressing as the circumstances were—as much as I knew these atrocities couldn’t be ignored—I found myself wondering whether it was truly right to resolve these matters through force.”

Slowly, the princess turned to face the young man still pressing his knife against her throat. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt of a slender sword—an old companion of hers.

“So, in that regard, I must express my gratitude,” she continued. “Because of you, that last whisper of reluctance has faded.”

As her final words left her lips, genuine relief flooded her expression—and the heads of hundreds of golems throughout the venue toppled from their bodies.

“H-Huh?”

“What did you call me, again?” she asked softly. “A savage barbarian? Well, I can’t deny that. Resolving matters by force does come more naturally to me. As the saying goes, it is easier to lead with the strength of one’s arms than the acuity of one’s mind. I’d do well to remember that. From now on, I shan’t get lost in my thoughts.”

She turned, and the golems’ arms were next to tumble through the air.

“Wh-What?” the slender young man sputtered. “H-How?”

“Brother! It’s that beastfolk!” his plump accomplice exclaimed. “It

has to be!”

“Tsk! *You!*” The thinner of the two brothers rounded on his new target. “You fought alongside that freak in the recording, didn’t you?! How we overlooked you this long, I have no idea! Cease what you’re doing at once!”

“I haven’t done anything,” Shawza responded, the picture of calm.

“Excuse me?”

Lynne watched in silence, her expression somber, as hundreds of stony limbs crashed to the floor. She sighed quietly and narrowed her eyes.

“Honestly, how could I have forgotten?” she pondered aloud. “My old self would have been right to hesitate. After all, these golems are the symbol of fear that upholds the status quo of the entire nation of Sarenza. But as I am now... Instructor Noor and Shawza have already been kind enough to show me how to combat them. So, while they might have posed a threat before—”

She raised a hand, and a brisk wind stirred through the venue.

“Now, they might as well be oversized dolls.”

In the blink of an eye, the last of the golems were beheaded, their severed remains striking the floor with a dull, echoing thud.

“In hindsight, there was no need for me to participate in this farce,” Lynne said. “Why did I ever think otherwise?”

“Eek!”

“N-No! This can’t be happening!”

The girl paid no attention to the brothers, who were already cowering on the floor, and turned calmly to face the children on the stage. “Are they okay, Rolo?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm. They are now. Thanks for buying me enough time, Lynne.”

“Wh-What?” The slender young man wheeled around to the pale-haired boy and the armor-clad woman—both of whom had been at the princess’s table only moments before—as they gently laid the unconscious demonfolk children on the floor.

“We safely removed their control collars,” Rolo explained. “It wasn’t that hard, so we shouldn’t need to worry about any lasting

consequences.”

Lynne breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. Well done, Rolo.”

“You did *what*?!” the thinner brother screamed. “No, that’s impossible! Those collars were custom-made by first-rate magical engineers! You couldn’t have removed them so easily!”

“Sarenza does not have a monopoly on first-rate magical engineers,” the princess explained. “And as it so happens, Rolo is an expert himself. His talent is recognized by one of the best in the field.”

“So it was just a convenient coincidence, was it? Preposterous!” In his panic, the young man remembered the elite assassins in his employ and turned to them. “What are you doing?! Did you forget how much I’m paying you?!”

To his horror, every one of his men was pinned to the wall, held fast by countless arrows.

“O-Our deepest apologies, Master Ari!” one stammered.

“H-How—?!”

“My lady,” came a calm voice. “I thought it best to deal with anyone suspicious first and ask questions later.”

“Thank you, Sirene,” Lynne replied.

“H-How can this be?!” the young man spat. “This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

Rashid studied his younger brothers with unrestrained amusement. “When you two were little, I taught you the tricks of gathering information. I said that if you cut corners, you’d regret it.” He shrugged. “That you made such a grave mistake in choosing your opponent tells me you’re still sorely lacking in the basics.”

“A-Ari, let’s run!” the plump boy shouted. “It’s over! They’re freaks—every last one of them!”

Lynne retrieved a small magic wand from her hip and gave it a flourish. “[Cocytus].” A biting chill swept through the venue as a layer of ice froze the brothers’ feet to the floor.

“Eek! C-C-Cold!”

“M-My legs! I can’t move! S-Someone—help!”

“Don’t worry. It’s not lethal,” the princess reassured them. “But I

would advise against struggling, lest you cause your legs to shatter."

"Eep!"

The girl who had single-handedly seized control of the auction gave the shivering brothers a gentle smile. "There's no need to be so afraid," she said. "We're just going to have a little chat, okay?"

Chapter 185: Legacy of the Progenitors

In a liminal space stood a man clad in a black cloak. He waited upon paved stone etched with intricate patterns, surrounded by walls so dark they seemed to swallow all light. Their surfaces rippled gently, like waves upon a still lake.

"Thought you might be here, Mister Lude."

From one of the walls emerged the upper torso of a man with a bandaged face. He carried a black slab which, even within the bizarre room, stood out for its appearance.

"Zadu," Lude replied, breaking his silence. "I was not expecting you so early."

"I have your order with me, exactly as you asked."

Smiling, the bandaged man stepped fully through the wall and tossed the black object forward. No sooner did it strike the floor than the liminal space violently distorted, and a series of loud crashes echoed through the unnatural darkness.

The black-cloaked man, his face still hidden, simply watched as the intricately carved stone shattered and split, fractures running up to his feet.

"Indeed, this is it," he said. "Well done."

Zadu cocked his head. "Is it really that valuable? By my reckoning, the guy who wielded it was the real threat."

Lude didn't answer. Instead, he raised his right hand, and the black club lifted from its shattered cavity in the floor, hovering in midair as if defying gravity. Once it reached chest height, it began to slowly revolve, and he studied it in silence.

"What is it, anyway?" Zadu eventually asked. "Nothing normal is that durable. And there's no way it should be as heavy as it is."

"The answer to your question is something that even we elves,

with all our deep wisdom, have yet to fully comprehend. For a mere human such as yourself, it would be a futile endeavor."

"Yeah? And here I thought knowing everything was your people's thing."

"This, we believe, is the final legacy of an ancient civilization—the architects of the dungeons scattered across the world. It is the culmination of *all* their technology and engineering. But all you need to know is that it is unique and irreplaceable."

"That so? Sounds pretty valuable."

"I know that tone. I would advise not doing anything you might regret. There is no point in ascribing a value to something when no one in existence truly understands its worth."

"Don't get me wrong—I wasn't thinking about stealing it from you. I mean, when it comes to strange old junk like that, I can't think of anyone who'd pay more than you do. So long as I get what I'm owed, you won't hear me complaining." Zadu shrugged, his words taking on a teasing tone as he observed how engrossed Lude was in the mysterious object. "Still, it's not like you to be such a chatterbox. You must've *really* wanted that thing. It's crazy hard, sure, but what else is so great about it?"

"What staggering ignorance," the black-cloaked man said at length. "This sword is not merely 'hard.' It is made of Ideal Matter, a material that should not even exist. It rejects all outside influence, one-sidedly enforcing itself on the material world."

"You're kidding. How come I've never heard of it, then? I dabble in alchemy, and a material that strong sounds like a bad joke."

"Does it not go without saying? It is the pinnacle of long-lost technology. Modern science could strive for tens of thousands of years and still fail to produce even a single particle. Yet the progenitors accomplished that and more, first creating this ridiculous material, and then working it into the form of a weapon. Is it good? Is it evil? It is solely unique, beyond the reach of moral philosophizing. That it even exists in this world is a contradiction."

With that, Lude returned to studying the floating blade.

"Even with it right here in front of me, I find its existence hard to believe," he continued. "The people of the old world created it for a

single purpose: to vanquish the gods themselves. Someone must take up that mantle again—someone who understands this weapon's significance."

Zadu laughed. "'Vanquish the gods,' huh? Guess you were right—that sounds like something only the elves have any business with."

"I shall take my leave shortly, and this sword will come with me. This city is not long for this world. Along with the other nations in the vicinity, it will soon be naught but dust, lost to the desert sand. But before then, I have one more job for you."

"Do you, now? You certainly are busy. Well, I'm always open to more work from you—if the price is right, that is."

"Kill the previous owner of this sword. Money is no object."

Zadu's expression darkened slightly, and he scratched his cheek. "Well...guess I could do that, yeah. It'll cost you more than you're thinking, though. An extra three or four zeroes on the end, at least. Won't be worth the trouble otherwise."

"When I said money is no object, I meant it."

"Ah, yeah. I forgot you elves have a not-so-little nest egg stashed away back home. Gotta admit, I wouldn't mind visiting. Just to see the sights, mind you—the legendary home of the elves must really be something."

"Do not hold your breath. Even if you attempted to visit, our home was constructed in such a way that outsiders would never be able to enter."

"Just thinking aloud, is all. No guarantee I'd make it out alive anyway, right?"

"I must depart. Follow me once you are finished, and you shall receive your pay."

"Payment on delivery again, huh? Can't say I'm too pleased about that, but I'll make an exception for you, Mister Lude. For a fee, of course."

"That is acceptable."

With the sword floating alongside him, the black-cloaked man approached one of the walls and placed his hand upon it, causing its dark surface to ripple. He stepped through and promptly disappeared from sight.

“Now, then...”

Zadu looked at the wall that Lude had passed through. As its dark, marshy surface rippled, it revealed a grand desert city shimmering under the harsh sun—the capital of his birth nation, which had once served as his base of operations.

“What to do?” he mused. “If everything’s getting turned to dust anyway, I could snatch up a magnate or ten and make some pocket money from their ransoms...”

He poked out his tongue, which bore a silver piercing, and slowly licked his lips as he stared out over the city. Then his arms dropped to his sides, as though he’d suddenly lost all interest.

“Nah. I’m not a kid anymore. These days, I’ve got a real job.”

Zadu laughed, seemingly unbothered by the disorienting ripple of the liminal space around him. He touched the image of the city he knew so well, then was swallowed by the black wall, just like the cloaked man before him.

The Old Woman and the Twins

After parting ways with Noor, their employer, Rigel and Mina boarded the wagon they had hired to take them to the City Forgotten by Time. As it trundled through the city streets, Rigel turned to his sister.

"Do you mind if we take a quick detour, Mina? There's somewhere I want to visit before we leave the capital."

Mina poked her head above the packed lunches stacked high around her seat, courtesy of the hotel they had stayed at. "Hmm? Sure, okay."

Rigel turned to the wagon's driver, a rugged-looking man who resembled a bandit. "You heard her, Mr. Hans. Please take us to the place I mentioned to you."

"You got it, kid," the driver said. "Want me to stay with the wagon when we get there?"

"Please. It shouldn't take long."

The wagon's extra stop, it turned out, was at Galen's trading house. The twins made their way toward it while Hans waited on a nearby side street. The building had just come into view when two familiar, rough-looking men stormed out.

"Tsk! After breakin' our backs day in and day out, they fire us over the smallest inconvenience!" one groused. "What a joke!"

"Who needs such a worthless job anyway?!" the other shouted in agreement. He seemed on the verge of continuing his tirade when he locked eyes with Mina. "Hmm...?"

The beastfolk girl stiffened reflexively, letting out a soft whimper. "I... I'm sorry!"

"Well, if it ain't the little brat. Out with your brother? Where's your new owner, huh?"

"I think they're alone, boss."

One of the men was Mina's former owner—the same man her

employer had apprehended for beating her in the street the day before—while the other was one of his lackeys. They quickly scanned their surroundings. Seeing no one else, they exchanged a knowing look, their lips curling into cruel smiles.

"What do you think?" one asked. "The boy's worth a fortune, from what I hear."

"I *think* it's our lucky day," the other replied. "The money we get from selling him should make for a pretty severance payment."

"Hah! Lucky for us; not so lucky for them."

No sooner had the men taken their first step toward Rigel than Mina stepped in front of him, throwing out her arms. "I... I won't let you touch him!"

"Well now, look who's grown a spine all of a sudden! You've got a lot of nerve for a girl who, as of yesterday, couldn't even be bothered to work. How do you intend to stop us, huh?"

Mina murmured a weak protest, her voice trembling as much as her legs. "I... I'll, um..."

"You know, it seems fair to say it was *your* fault we got fired," the first of the men mused, closing in on her.

His companion snorted in agreement. "Guess we're owed compensation, then, aren't we?"

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," a new voice called out from behind them.

The men turned around to see the old receptionist of the Galen Company standing in the doorway. "Do my ears deceive me?" one asked. "Don't tell me you're sticking up for mere *slaves*."

"I'm just pointing out your lapse of judgment," she replied, evenly. "That's why we all got fired, you know."

"What did you say?!"

"Those brats aren't worth the rust on a copper to me. You'd do well to leave them alone—for your own good."

Mina's former owner scoffed. "So, you're worried about us. Is that it?"

"Worry about your own problems!" his lackey chortled. "Like finding your next job!"

A calculating look suddenly crossed the first man's face. "You

know...” he said to his companion, “that old nag must have a good amount of coin on her.”

“You make a good point. We getting them both, then?”

“Yeah, I think we are.”

“S-Stop!” Mina cried. With trembling hands, she drew the dagger from her hip and leveled its tip at the men. “I... I won’t let you hurt either of them!”

The more senior of the two men sneered, chuckling at the sight of her shaking hands. “Pfft. You’re going to fight us? With *that*?”

“You think you can stop us?” his lackey asked, equally amused. “Go on, then. Give it your best shot.”

“Huh? Can I?” Mina blinked, then nodded obediently. “O-Okay. Here goes...” For just a moment, she vanished, and a strong breeze rippled past the men’s flanks.

“Hmm? Was that you?”

“Y-Yes,” Mina stammered. “Mr. Shawza taught me that move. He told me to use it if I ever ran into you again.”

“‘Shawza’? Where have I heard that name— Hmm?”

The men’s shirts fell apart, fragments of shredded cloth drifting to the ground. Now half naked, they cried out in surprise.

“Wh-What the hell did you just do?!”

“I... I’m sorry!” Mina yelped in fear.

“Mina...” Rigel said. “Mr. Shawza *also* told you not to show when you’re afraid, didn’t he?”

“O-Oh, right. Um, what was I supposed to say next, again?” Mina paused in thought, then cleared her throat and attempted her best forceful voice. “Y-You better watch out, or I’ll pull the sausages straight out of your bellies!”

“Sausages?” everyone repeated.

“Um, Mina...” Rigel interjected, “I think you meant to say ‘intestines.’”

“Oh, yeah! That!”

The men drew closer, anger etched on their faces. “So, this *was* your fault! Look at our clothes, brat! How are you going to repay us?!”

Mina shrieked. “I... I’m sorry!”

“If apologizing were enough, we wouldn’t need courts or laws, now would we?”

The two men drew knives from their hips and slashed at the girl without restraint—only to be taken by surprise when she caught both with her dagger.

“Huh?”

“The hell? Even for a beastfolk, how’s this twerp so strong?”

Mina yelped again. “I... I’m really sorry!”

So jarring was the contrast between her frightened apologies and apparent strength—enough to best a grown man with ease—that her attackers began to waver. Nearby, the old woman breathed a deep sigh.

“Good grief...” she lamented. “If you’re truly this blind, I’m not sure there’s any hope for you.”

“Shut your trap!” Mina’s former owner howled. “From the moment you butted in, you’ve done nothing but spew nonsense!”

“‘Nonsense’? That girl was in the top strength class of our company’s menial labor slaves. You should know—you asked for the best we had. We gave her to you for next to nothing, as a kindness to a company executive, yet you still couldn’t treat her properly.” The old woman tutted in disgust, then turned her sharp eyes toward Mina. “And you. I thought I’d watch quietly, but what are you doing, hesitating over these third-rate nobodies? Is that dagger just for show?”

“I-It’s not!” Mina protested. “It’s very important! Lady Lynneburg let me have it for, um...self-protection!”

“Then use it. These men aren’t employees of the Galen Company—not anymore. They’re a couple of backstreet ruffians. It’s in society’s and their own best interests for you to put them in their place.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” With an emphatic nod, Mina thrust her assailants’ weapons back. She readjusted her stance and once again leveled her dagger at them.

The men braced themselves, their own weapons at the ready. Several moments passed—then Mina returned her blade to its sheath.

“Wh-What? Giving up already?” one of the men jeered.

The other clicked his tongue. “Just trying to frighten us, were you?”

“H-Huh?” Mina scratched her cheek, her voice betraying a lack of confidence. “No, um... I’m pretty sure I got you...”

Just as the men exchanged quiet grunts of confusion, the rest of their clothes fell apart in tatters, leaving them utterly naked on the street.

“Gaaah!”

“Y-You brat! H-How dare you!”

“I... I’m so— Mff!”

Mina’s umpteenth apology was cut short when a wrinkled hand covered her mouth from behind. “Will you spend your whole life bowing and scraping before others?” the old woman asked. “Is that how you intend to protect your brother?”

“Mm-mff!” The girl shook her head.

“Then never bow your head to such riffraff again. I couldn’t stand how you just stood there and took their insults. Go on—give them a piece of your mind!”

Mina nodded, and the old woman gave her an encouraging nudge forward. But as the girl reached the cowering men, she turned around, uncertainty on her face.

Intuiting what Mina was about to say, the old woman began massaging her temples. “Don’t tell me you don’t know a single word of insult. At a certain point, being too good-natured just makes you naive. Try saying, ‘And don’t you ever show your faces around here again!’”

“O-Okay.” Mina nodded again, then returned her attention to the men. “A-And, um, don’t you ever show your faces around here again! Please!”

“Y-You’ll regret this, brat!” the men yelled in unison, hands covering their important bits as they fled. It wasn’t long before only the twins and the old woman remained.

“Granny Eija,” said Rigel, who’d watched the encounter mostly in calm silence. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

“What’s this, all of a sudden?” the old woman asked.

"It's because of you that my sister and I managed to survive this long. For that reason, I wanted to thank you before we left the city."

Rigel bowed deeply, causing the old woman to scoff. "I haven't done anything deserving of a thank-you, boy—unless you count doing my job for the company. Hate me if you want, but your gratitude just makes my skin crawl."

"From the moment we arrived at the Galen Company, you were looking out for us. I know you recommended me for the position of educated slave, since I was still young, and prepared an environment where I could devote myself to study. You even made sure my sister never went hungry, despite her eating far more than most."

Mina blinked, then looked up at the old woman. "Huh? She did?"

"Mm-hmm."

The old woman made a sour expression, then heaved a heavy sigh. "And here I was, wondering what you'd come back here for. Look, boy—don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't giving either of you special treatment. You were savvy investments, that's all. What might've seemed like kindness to you was just me having a better eye for value than the rest of our company's sorry lot."

"Even so—when I was sick, you fought to the bitter end to keep me from being moved to the quarantine annex. I remember lying there, unable to move, as you begged at Galen's feet, asking him to pay for the expensive medicine I needed."

The old woman frowned and clucked. "How do you remember a little thing like that? You were practically at death's door."

Rigel smiled.

"What?" the old woman asked. "Don't tell me I'm your only reason for coming here."

"You are. I just wanted to thank you."

She sighed. "What fool gets mixed up with ruffians over something as inconsequential as that? Well, if you're satisfied, get out of here. I've certainly got no business with you."

"Yes, we should be going. Thank you again—and goodbye."

The twins had barely made it a few steps toward their wagon when the old woman spoke again, in a quieter voice this time. "Wait.

Rigel. One last word of advice."

With a sincere smile, the boy turned fully to face the old woman, ready for whatever she had to say.

"Don't ever come back, you hear me? Not to a place like this. Venture out into the world. As long as you stick together, you'll do just fine for yourselves."

"I'll remember that. Please stay healthy and happy, Granny Eija."

"Pah. If you've got time to worry about others, devote it to your future instead."

Rigel grinned, bowed politely, and then turned to his sister. "Okay, Mina—let's go."

"Yeah! Thanks, granny!"

The old woman watched the twins depart, hand in hand. As soon as they were out of sight, she went back inside to her receptionist's desk, where she rested her chin on her hand and breathed a quiet sigh.

"Good grief... I must be going senile. After all my years in the industry, I'd be a laughingstock if people found out I'd come to care for the very goods I'm meant to be selling."

Despite her words, the old woman's frown softened slightly.

"Either way, thanks to that monster of a man, this city's headed for a drastic change," she murmured. "Now that the brats who were keeping me busy are gone, maybe it's about time I wash my hands of this blackhearted business and find work elsewhere."

The old woman opened one of her desk drawers and retrieved her favorite tobacco pipe. She lit it and took a slow drag, gazing at the blue sky through the window as smoke lazily drifted upward. If the trading house hadn't been a shell of its former self, someone might have been around to see the traces of a smile dancing on her lips.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading volume 9 of *I Parry Everything*. As we move forward through the Sarenza Arc, the situation with House Sarenza has begun to shift in dramatic ways. What surprises await the nation's capital city?

Not to suddenly change the subject, but the *I Parry Everything* anime—which began broadcasting in July of this year—has apparently been experiencing a great deal of popularity. According to the producer, there are viewers overseas as well as in Japan. There's even going to be an English dub, of all things. Wow.

As the author of the original work, I was fortunate enough to be shown the production process, so my hopes were high from the very beginning. Even so, I can honestly say I'm surprised by how well the anime was received. Thanks to the tireless work of everyone involved, *I Parry Everything* has become a series that an even wider range of people can enjoy.

It's often said that when a novel is adapted into another form of media, the impression it gives can be drastically altered. However, thanks to the care and consideration of everyone in the production crew, the *I Parry Everything* anime stayed impressively close to the source material. I couldn't be more grateful for that.

Fundamentally, the main characters—Noor, Lynne, Ines, and Rolo—remained true to their novel counterparts. In fact, thanks to the fine-tuning by the anime staff and the voice actors' and actresses' ability to breathe new life into the characters, I believe they became even more lovable than before.

Once again, I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in planning and producing the anime, as well as to all the performers and production staff, including Director Fukuyama. I'd also like to thank each and every one of you who watched and enjoyed the anime—especially those of you who were already

reading the light novels or manga. If you discovered the series through the anime and then went out of your way to pick up the books, thank you just the same! It's because of all of you that I'm able to continue writing this odd little story of mine.

Now, returning to the topic of the story... There are several scenes I've been eager to write ever since I started the Sarenza Arc. One might say that everything else has been buildup and foreshadowing! As some of you might already have guessed from the events of this volume, the next installment will serve as the climax and payoff of this leg of Noor's adventure. In short, it'll be stuffed full of scenes I've been wanting to write for a very long time. A number of the mysteries and unanswered questions that have appeared in the story so far will gradually be revealed, so please look forward to it.

For the most part, this afterword ended up being one big thank-you, didn't it? I would greatly appreciate it if you continue to follow this story, with its rather eccentric protagonist, into the next volume and beyond.

Nabeshiki



The nameless girl who resolves to become a doctor didn't get an insert image, so I gave her one here.

I based her design on a saluki.

Mina and Rigel were based on

Mongolian gerbils.

I hope to see you in the next volume!

カワ"4
Kawaguchi

Bonus Story: The City Forgotten by Time's Break Room

In a room once used as a parlor to receive guests, a long-haired man in a black suit sat behind a desk, glaring at the many documents spread out before him. He held a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other, writing so fervently that an observer would never guess he was on break. In fact, it was the designated break time for *all* executive staff of the City Forgotten by Time.

So when two women entered and found the man glued to the desk, they exchanged glances and sighed.

"Still at it, Kron?" one of them asked. "You know we aren't supposed to bring work into the break room."

"So what?" Kron shot back. "I just lectured the new recruits about duty and discipline. It'd reflect poorly on the owner if we execs were seen lazing around. I need to get this done—simple as that."

"But it's break time. Melissa's always touting the importance of a healthy balance between work and rest. That means no working off the clock, and finishing all your tasks within the time you're given."

"And in principle, I agree with her. I'll be done soon, anyway. Just let me focus."

"'Soon,' huh? That's what people say when there's no end in sight."

Kron clicked his tongue. "I suppose *you've* finished all your work, then, Zaza? And you, Leah? I'd better not find out you half-assed it just to kick your feet up early."

"You won't, because we didn't," Zaza insisted. "I issued the last of my instructions for the construction work I was tasked with overseeing before the morning was out, and I got word it was completed before noon. My craftsmen are the best of the best."

"And my work is proceeding exactly as scheduled," Leah added.

"It'd better be," Kron snapped. "You two play a vital role in supporting Melissa. Make sure you don't embarrass yourselves."

"You say that like you're our boss. Well, don't worry—we'll do our jobs just fine. Here."

"What's this?"

"You have eyes, don't you?" Zaza quipped. "It's tea, a vital component of any break. Melissa said we could use anything in this room, so I figured, why not help ourselves? That particular blend is of a really high quality, rarely even seen at specialty stores."

"Every blend here is excellent," Leah mused, looking around the room. "You can tell it's a cut above what we usually drink just from the smell. And the teaware was definitely chosen by someone with a discerning eye."

"Well, it *did* once belong to Master Rashid," Zaza said. In addition to serving as a parlor, the room had previously been used to store the former owner's vast collection.

Kron gave the women a skeptical stare. "And we're just...drinking it?"

"He gave it all to Master Noor, who said to let the staff enjoy it, since he wouldn't be partaking himself. You take yours with three sugars, right?"

The black-suited man paused, then relented with a nod. "Yeah. Just leave it there. I'll have it later."

Zaza, Leah, and Kron were the heads of their respective departments in the City Forgotten by Time, and the years they'd spent working together had fostered a strong bond of trust between them. The two women sat on a finely crafted couch, sipping the tea they had brewed and casting exasperated yet understanding looks at their furiously working colleague.

"Why do you think Lord Rashid relinquished the City Forgotten by Time to Master Noor? I thought he was quite fond of the place."

"I'm sure he had his reasons. And no doubt Melissa took it harder than we did."

"Master Noor does have a rather hands-off approach to running things, doesn't he? As the manager, she must have a lot on her plate

right now."

"You can say that again. It was hard enough trying to figure out what Lord Rashid was thinking—let alone the new owner."

Kron looked up from his work, sharp eyes turning to the pair chattering away. "Hey. You're not disrespecting the proprietor, are you?"

"Oh, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. We're not complaining—we're just surprised by how much more authority we have now."

"Yeah, it's a good thing. Sure, more freedom to make decisions comes with more responsibility, but it also makes our work more fulfilling. And even though our orders come from Melissa, we're still carrying out Master Noor's policy. Things are good—complaining would just be ungrateful."

"As long as you understand..."

"*We* should be questioning *you*, Kron," Zaza said, oozing sarcasm as she took another sip of her tea. "You seemed to hate Master Noor from the moment you met him. What's with the sudden change of heart?"

Kron bowed his head, chewing his lip in remorse. "Yeah, I can't deny that. I still haven't forgiven myself. Master Noor far exceeds the scope of my narrow-minded standards—though I didn't realize it until after the events of that day. Words alone can't atone for my mistake. I intend to dedicate the rest of my life to his service in repentance."

"Um... No one said you had to go *that* far."

"You're more earnest than you look, huh, Kron? I guess I shouldn't be surprised—you're always so polite and diligent whenever I see you working."

"A man of my meager talents can't afford to slack off," Kron said firmly. "I take pride in my work—I'd stake my life on its quality. Even so, there are more areas than I can count where my best simply isn't good enough."

"I guess you've always been hard on yourself."

"Come to think of it... Kron, didn't you used to work for some kind of crime syndicate?"

"What? No," Kron replied. "I was just a ringer at an underground

gambling den. Sometimes I took work as a bouncer or guard—the usual rough-and-tumble—but I always turned down anything illegal."

"Still smacks of a crime syndicate to me..."

"You escaped to the City Forgotten by Time because you got sick of bullying the weak, right?"

"Not exactly, but close enough," Kron admitted. "Don't you two have similar stories?"

"Yeah, but we're nothing special," Leah said. "You know just as well as we do that most people working here have a shady history."

"Speak for yourself," Zaza cut in. "The most I did was beat up the slave trader who owned me and escape."

A moment of quiet settled in. Then—

"You know that's a crime under Sarenzan law, right?"

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?" Zaza asked. "My life was at stake."

"Let's...pretend we didn't hear that," Leah said. "At any rate, I'm grateful for the chance to work here. You won't find another employer who doesn't ask questions about your past."

"One day, you're applying, the next, you're assigned to a division," Zaza agreed. "Though, that *does* mean we get some real weirdos mixed in every now and then."

"And we cast them out into the desert the moment they cause trouble, without even the shirts on their backs," Kron noted. "Problem solved."

"Would you expect less from our director of conflict management?" Zaza crowed. "You've got a real way with words, Kron."

"We won't be doing much of that anymore, though, will we?" Leah added with a grin.

Kron and Zaza nodded in agreement.

"The City Forgotten by Time is changing," Leah continued. "The only question is: What form will that change take?"

"It's strange to think that, as much as things have already evolved, this is just the beginning..." Zaza mused.

"Hmm... Since the new proprietor took charge, we've had one massive wave of change after another."

"Our overall operating policy hasn't changed much, though," Kron pointed out. "Not that it's our place to question the proprietor's decisions. As staff, we just have to carry them out as best we can."

"You say that, but the impression I get from everything he says is that he wants us to think for ourselves."

"Then that's what we should do. May no effort be spared."

Zaza and Leah exchanged wry smiles. From his way of thinking to his forthrightness, Kron hadn't changed since the day they'd first met him.

"I'm still surprised about Melissa, though."

"Yeah, me too."

"What do you mean?" Kron asked.

"Well, regular employees like us are one thing... But I never expected Lord Rashid to leave *her* behind."

The black-suited man pondered for a moment. "Is it really that strange? She's integral to the City Forgotten by Time. He's just keeping the right people in the right places."

"Even so, given what she means to him..." Leah muttered.

"Huh?" Zaza raised an eyebrow. "Wait, Kron—don't tell me you've never noticed."

Kron said nothing, meeting his colleague's perplexed stare with one of his own.

Zaza exchanged a look with Leah. "Heh. I can't believe this. Here he is, brow furrowed, lamenting about how he's such a poor judge of character and needs to do better. And yet..."

"Right?" the other girl on the couch chimed in. "We've worked with Melissa—and under Lord Rashid—for so long. Has he never wondered, even a little? I suppose that's very Kron, in a way."

"Huh? What are you two getting at?" Kron asked. "Don't mince words—say what you mean to my face."

Zaza hummed, making her uncertainty clear. "I don't know... That seems kind of... Right, Leah?"

"Yeah. It's one thing to speculate, but it wouldn't be right to gossip about something like that."

Kron stared vacantly at the girls as they continued.

"It's just a rumor—if not a somewhat tasteless one. And at this

point, it might as well be an open secret. But still...”

“Yeah. Everyone knows; it’s just polite not to talk about it.”

Kron’s confusion became all the more apparent. “What is this, a riddle?”

“The real head-scratcher is how you haven’t figured it out already. Have we not said enough? You really should work on reading people. Some things are better left to the imagination, you know?”

“She’s right. You’re not very good with these things, Kron.”

“Ugh. Enough dancing around it.” Kron rose from his seat and approached the women. “It’s your fault I’m not getting any work done right now. If you won’t be frank with me, at least make up for distracting me by helping me finish—”

Before he could say another word, the door opened, and the star of the girls’ elusive conversation stepped into the break room. “Zaza, Leah,” she said plainly.

“Director Melissa!” In an instant, all three executives straightened and turned to face her.

“Sorry to interrupt your break. Something urgent came up, and I need the two of you to help me. Can I borrow you for a moment? I’ll make sure you get overtime pay.”

“But of course, ma’am.”

“We’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you. And Kron? I know you have your hands full, but we schedule breaks for a reason. I need you around, so don’t burn yourself out.”

“Yes, ma’am. I won’t, ma’am.”

“Looks like we’re heading out, Kron,” Zaza said. “Could you...”

“Clean up after us?” Leah finished. “Thanks.”

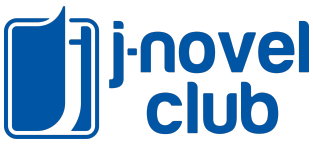
As the pair exited the room, following Melissa, they shot their colleague venomous glares that carried an unspoken warning: “Mention anything about the conversation we just had, and you’ll regret it.”

“What the hell was that all about...?” Kron muttered as soon as he was alone, a sour look crossing his face. In the girls’ absence, he no longer had an outlet for his curiosity—and judging by the looks

they'd sent him, he wouldn't be getting any answers anytime soon.

Exasperated, the black-suited man trudged to the sugar pot on the table and dumped a few generous spoonfuls into his tea. He then sat right in the center of the couch, his attention straying from his documents only when he glanced at the clock on the wall.

By the time Kron's break was over, he was already en route to his next task of the day. All that remained in the former parlor was the teaware, which he had decidedly failed to clean and put away.



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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I’m the Strongest? I’m Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 9
by Nabeshiki

Translated by Jason Li Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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