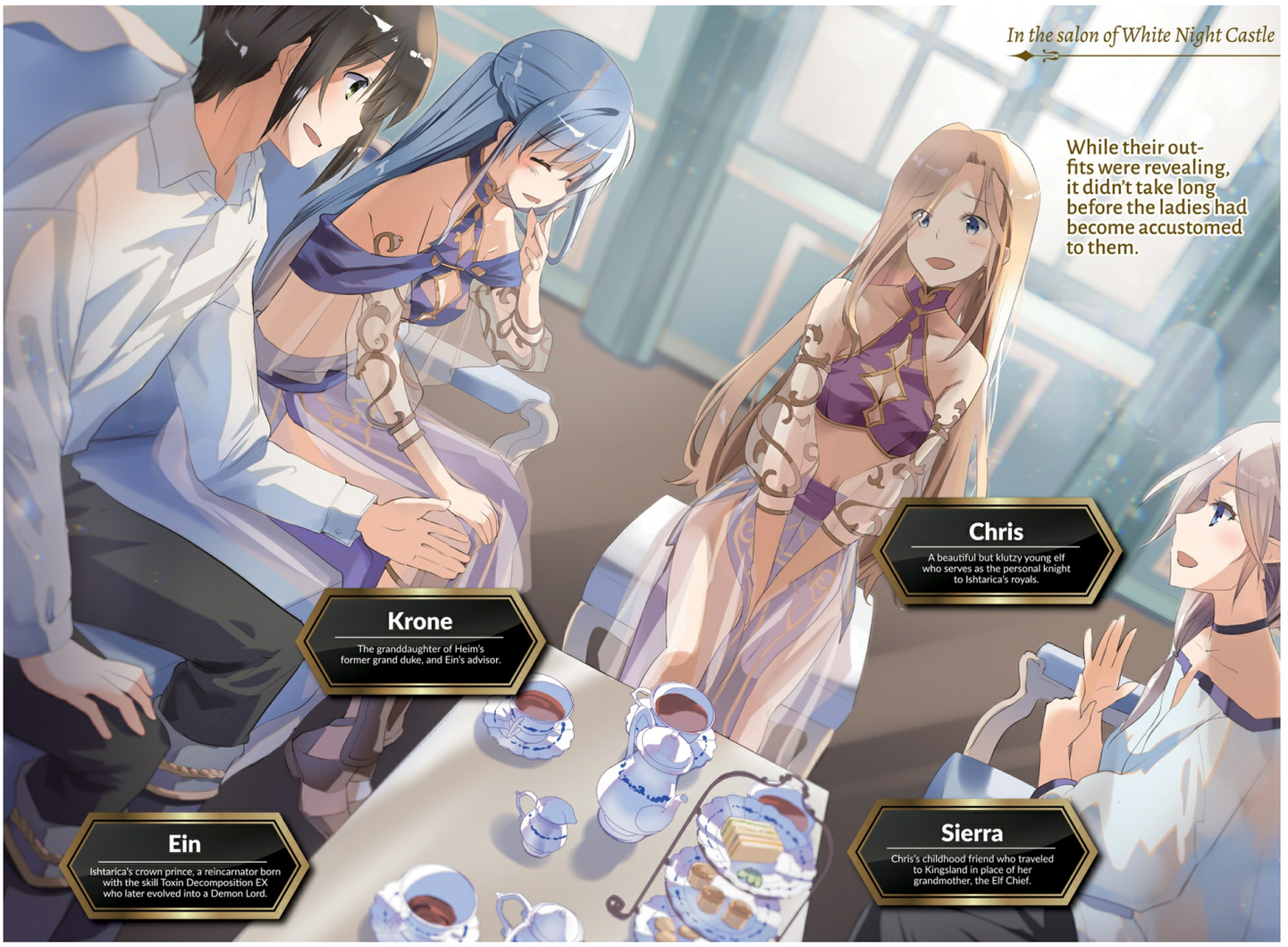

6
RYOU YUUKI
ART CHISATO NARUSE
EATING MAGICAL POWER MADE ME THE STRONGEST!
MAGIC STONE Gourmet


Truly, I'm so honored to meet such a noble and revered man. I cannot find the words to express my elation.
MAGIC STONE Gourmet
EATING MAGICAL POWER MADE ME THE STRONGEST!
6


In the salon of White Night Castle
While their outfits were revealing, it didn't take long before the ladies had become accustomed to them.
Chris
A beautiful but klutzy young elf who serves as the personal knight to Ishtarica's royals.
Krone
The granddaughter of Heim's former grand duke, and Ein's advisor.
Ein
Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill Toxin Decomposition EX who later evolved into a Demon Lord.
Sierra
Chris's childhood friend who traveled to Kingsland in place of her grandmother, the Elf Chief.


I was scared...
Chris finally eked out.
Her feeble words pierced through
Ein like an arrow to the heart.
Can we stay like this
for just a bit longer?
Of course. For as
long as you wish.

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Prologue

Surrounded by cylindrical walls of wood, an elderly woman sat comfortably in the center of what appeared to be a manor parlor. The room around her held sparse and modest furnishings. But rather remarkably, this room actually resided within a massive, ancient tree that had been hollowed out to create a living space.

“It’s safe to say that the beast is on the move,” she said.

It was reminiscent of Demon Lord Arshay’s rampage from long, long ago.

“The timing of His Majesty’s letter and the attack on Magna cannot be a mere coincidence.”

She wearily gazed down at the letter in her hand; a piece of parchment that unquestionably bore the royal family’s seal. The woman had actually received this letter many months ago, but was hesitant to provide a response. She knew that her failure to reply was a display of insolence towards the royals, but she could only find it in herself to keep putting it off. However, the woman was just about to reach her time limit and she didn’t intend to keep the royal family waiting for much longer.

“Sierra,” she curtly called out, her tone of voice curt and flat.

Several seconds later, the door opened and a gorgeous lady entered the room. “Did you call for me, grandmother?”

“I did,” the elderly woman replied. “I have a request for you. Come here, if you will.”

Sierra approached her grandmother and took a knee to await further instruction.

“You know about the attack on Magna, don’t you?” the elderly woman asked.

“I do,” Sierra replied. “It was horrific. We even lost the first king’s villa to the ocean floor.”

The elderly woman nodded. “We Elves cannot ignore this matter any further. I want you to visit the first king’s villa as my representative. Surely you know why?”

“We Elves are deeply indebted to the first king. I am well aware that many of our comrades are still reeling from this recent string of events. Therefore, you’d like me to leave our land in your place to serve as your—the chief’s representative. We must offer our prayers where the villa once stood.”

Satisfied, the elderly elven chief nodded. “Additionally, I must request that you be accompanied by warriors dressed in formal attire as you make your way to the villa. Also...” She paused, preparing herself to state her true motive. “On the way back, I’d like you to visit the royal capital and deliver my written response to His Majesty.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Sierra remained solemn, but visions of Chris’s face flashed across her mind. She did her utmost best to suppress her smile—it’d been a while since they’d last met.

“I’ll have you extend an invitation to His Highness,” the chief continued. “Let’s welcome him to take a step into the depths of our wilderness.”

Sierra placed her hands on the floor in shock. “Grandmother! Are you saying you’d allow His Highness to set foot on our holy grounds?!”

The chief maintained her composure as though nothing was wrong. She remained as calm and collected as ever, refusing to acknowledge Sierra’s question.

“Tell our warriors that you shall be heading to Magna immediately,” the chief said. “I shall be drafting a pair of letters. You *must* deliver them to the royal capital, without fail. Is that clear?”

“Grandmother!” Sierra cried.

“That will be all. Go to our warriors.”

Sierra could ask all the questions she liked, but the answer she desired would never leave her grandmother’s mouth. Realizing just how obstinate the chief

was going to be, Sierra gave up and reluctantly fixed her posture. She was now as solemn as when she had first entered the room.

“Your wish is my command,” she finally said before leaving.

After watching her granddaughter’s exit, the chief’s gaze wandered to the ceiling before plummeting to the floor. She parted her lips and murmured feebly. “You Majesty Jayle, I beg of you to please protect Ishtarica.”

She prayed to the empty space, her weak voice slowly petering out.

Chapter One: A Letter from a Childhood Friend

The normally emerald leaves dotting the streets of Kingsland were losing their color and had started falling to the ground—a sign that autumn was just around the corner. It'd been about a month since Ishtarica's meeting with Heim.

Ein breathed a sigh of relief. He'd heard that Magna's reconstruction efforts were going smoothly. However, the culprit responsible for the port city's monster invasion had yet to be tracked down. While Ein was sure that the red foxes had masterminded the attack, he found it troubling that they hadn't left behind the slightest trace of their actions. He'd been praying for days that even the smallest scrap of information would quickly show up on his doorstep.

Around breakfast time, Ein walked the castle grounds after wrapping up his training routine for the day. Just after entering the castle and rounding a corner towards the grand hall, he noticed Chris nervously jittering about with her back to him. She held a letter.

"Ah," he said with a gasp of recognition. "Chris!"

"Ah, Sir Ein," Chris said, immediately turning around, her beautiful golden hair flowing behind her. "Good morning."

Her profile was illuminated by the sun's morning rays peeking in through a nearby window. Her smile had a quality about it that made it appear as if she had walked out of painting; the elf's effortless beauty was simply unparalleled. Not to mention that the spoiled tone she took with her prince was always adorable.

Is something wrong? Ein questioned. Unlike her usual sunny demeanor, she seemed a bit glum—no, she looked a tad troubled. *I wonder if I can ask...* After hesitating for a brief moment, he glanced down at the letter in Chris's hand and decided to ask anyway.

“Is something the matter?”

“Ah, well, I suppose you could say that...” Chris confessed.

“What’s wrong?”

At the very least, it didn’t sound too serious. Chris blushed, making it appear as though she wasn’t too concerned.

As though to prove this theory, she hastily added, “I-It’s just pertaining to my feelings!”

“Feelings? Did someone ask for your hand in marriage or something?”

“Grrr...” Chris pouted in annoyance as she intensely squinted up at Ein. “If that was all, I could just reject that request! I wouldn’t be so troubled!”

“Um, why do you sound so worked up?”

“Humph! I won’t tell you! It’s all your fault!”

“It is? I’m sorry.”

Ein had absolutely no clue as to what was going on, but he decided to apologize anyway. Chris knew how much she’d confused her prince by taking a single glance at him, but she didn’t want to sound like a troublesome maiden. She decided to ignore his careless marriage question for now.

“I have a childhood friend visiting Kingsland next week,” Chris explained. “They apparently visited Magna with quite the party accompanying them. This letter stated they’d be paying us a visit on their way back.”

“Whoa. Why did they come all the way here?”

“It pertains to the first king’s villa. I believe the chief is grief-stricken by the loss. Elves normally hole themselves up in the forest, so I can’t think of any other reason they’d venture out.”

Ein cracked a forced smile, but he was familiar with the sequestered lives elves tended to live. They refused to mingle with other species and they rarely left their homeland. Yet, they had decided to make the arduous trek to Magna, much to his surprise.

“Hmm?” Ein asked. “I understand that your childhood friend will be visiting,

but what's the problem?"

"Well, it's not really a problem, per se... I haven't met up with her for deca—ahem, I mean, many years, so I'm just feeling a touch embarrassed. I'm sure that they'd all arrive in their formal attire... So needlessly ceremonial."

Ceremonial? Ein wondered. Before he could ask, he saw the exhaustion wash across Chris's face. He'd flashed another strained smile instead, knowing that he'd surely find out soon. For now, the prince wanted to soothe his worried knight.

"Why don't we have breakfast together?" the crown prince offered, placing a hand on her shoulder.

***

The twinkling stars of the autumn night sky felt a touch different from those of a midsummer's night. *I've never really stopped to compare the two skies, so it might just be me though,* Ein thought to himself. He shifted his gaze away from the window and back into the salon, where he quietly waited for King Silverd to set his glass of water back on the table. The monarch sat across the table from his grandson.

"The Elves' actions are very curious," Silverd finally said. "That's why I called you here, Ein."

The king had heard about the letter Chris had received, and had been filled in with a detailed report regarding its contents—one much more thorough than Ein had received.

"I thought we came here for a pleasant chat," Ein said.

"I wouldn't be against that, but seeing as this incident involves you, I should fill you in, Ein."

"Me?"

"Precisely. This relates to the Demon Lord's old territory." Ein immediately adjusted his posture upon hearing Silverd's words. The king continued, "How much do you know about the elven chief?"

"Nothing at all, I'm afraid."

“Then why don’t we start there? The elven chief used to serve at the first king’s side and lived through the great war. Even among the Elves, she has an unusually long lifespan and is still alive to this day.”

“S-Since the first king’s reign?!”

“I don’t blame you for being so surprised. As I said, she’s been alive for an unusually long time.”

Still, that would mean that she’d been alive for over five centuries. Ein had believed that there wasn’t a soul left who’d known Jayle.

“And now we return to the issue: the Elves’ actions,” Silverd said. “I haven’t told you this, but I sent the elven chief a letter a few months ago. I asked if she was aware of any connection between the Demon Lord’s former domain and the first king.”

“But you chose to remain silent about the gravestone I found in the Demon Castle.”

“Of course I did. If she doesn’t know, that’s fine by me, and if she does, then I wanted to hear her thoughts. However, I am certain that the elven chief knows something.”

Silverd’s assumption was justified. As someone who knew the first king personally, and especially as one who served by his side, the chief surely must’ve known of his origins and familial relation to Demon Lord Arshay. It would’ve been more unusual if she had been kept in the dark about it.

“There weren’t any documents relating to the first king’s origins,” Ein started, knowing that this situation was different, “but I believe she’d know something if she had a personal connection to him.”

“Precisely. With that in mind, I sent that letter in search of clues the first king must’ve destroyed while he was still alive. However...” Silverd paused. The outcome of his actions was unexpected, and troubling. “The chief hasn’t sent me a single reply. Yet, she now announces that her people are making a sudden visit to the site of the villa before stopping here on the way back. Hah! If they weren’t elves, I would’ve used a royal edict to drag her out here!” But the king had reasons of his own. “Unfortunately, I’m not allowed to do so.”

This was one of the reasons behind the special position elves held within Ishtarica. A few centuries ago, when elves had mingled with other Ishtarican citizens... *If memory serves...* Ein had learned about it at his academy. The Elves, citizens of the forest, had pledged their loyalty to the First King Jayle and him alone—not the royal family. Additionally, the elven chief was the nation's one and only grand duke, preventing the royal family and the other nobles from criticizing her for her lack of subservience.

"As the records state, the Elves made immense contributions to the first king's reign," Silverd said.

"They were of great help with the restoration efforts after the war," Ein said.

"Quite right. Thus, they're practically autonomous and able to maintain their power. But I wonder what we should do..."

It was difficult to believe that the elven chief was unable to provide an answer. If she *was* hesitant, she wouldn't have sent her people to visit the site of Jayle's villa. She was either choosing to ignore the letter, or was acting curiously, just as Silverd had suspected.

"I suppose I'll have to send a messenger to Syth Mill," the king mulled.

"Syth Mill?" Ein parroted back quizzically.

"Ah, I don't blame you for asking. Those words mean 'silver' and 'verdure' in ancient elven. You'd only hear the name from the elves that live there or in the frontier cities nearby; it's how they refer to their forests and villages. Has Chris mentioned it?"

"I don't believe so. We did talk about the Elves' villages, though."

"You can refer to them as such, but the Elves will look upon you more favorably if you refer to their villages as Syth Mill."

"I see. I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

The two royals decided to take a quick break. Silverd took another swig of ice-cold water from his glass while Ein did likewise. It was exhausting to see the elven chief maintain an air of silence regarding this troublesome tale. Both Silverd and Ein were aware of the complex circumstances that led to Ishtarica's

founding, but they would've felt more assured if the elf chief had simply replied with a letter of her own.

"Is there any chance of the Elves harboring any secret ties to the red foxes?" Ein asked.

"The same thought has crossed my mind," Silverd replied.

"Then..." the crown prince started, about to suggest an investigation.

"But I'm convinced that's impossible," the king cut in, shaking his head. "The red foxes can't possibly step inside Syth Mill as long as the holy grounds still stand."

"What kind of place is it?"

"It's a special location that chases out any outsiders without fail. It's powerful enough to protect Syth Mill from any enemy, but it actually presents a problem."

"And what would that be?"

"It's so powerful that no kind of magic may enter from the outside."

"You're saying we can't use message birds?"

Silverd nodded. Once someone stepped into Syth Mill, only traditional forms of communication could be used. The king had never seen this for himself, but researchers from previous expeditions included this detail in their reports. Even Warren was privy to this information, convincing Ein even further.

"In any case, it's very unlikely that they'd have any ties to the red foxes," Silverd concluded. However, this didn't change the fact that the Elves had been acting strangely, but there was nothing more the royals could do at the moment. "We must wait for them to come here. If they still refuse to talk, I simply must ask them."

The king had decided to observe the situation.

***

With Magna on his mind, Ein left the salon and started heading back to his room. It'd been about a month since the unfortunate incident. That day marked

the first time Ein exerted his powers since his metamorphosis into a Demon Lord; powers far beyond the capabilities of any human. The shocked look on Lloyd's face was still fresh in the prince's mind.

"Well, I'm glad she's doing well," Ein mumbled to himself as he stuck his hand in his chest pocket.

Ein held a letter that Silverd had passed to him just before they started their discussion. Filled with words of gratitude and immense praise, this letter was from the little girl Ein had saved on the streets of Magna. He truly felt glad that the girl seemed to be doing well. His mind moved on to the next topic: his curiosity about just what the elven chief was thinking. Silverd assured him that the holy grounds' presence prevented them from having the slightest tie to the red foxes. However, a cloud of doubt still hung over Ein—were the Elves his friends or foes?

"If only you were here, Marco..."

His thoughts were carried to the Living Armor who once resided within the Demon Castle. If that knight was still alive, there was no doubt in the prince's mind that he would've been a reliable ally. He had been a faithful retainer who remained loyal to Ishtarica to his dying breath. He must've known the elf chief to a degree and could've served as an intermediary perhaps. Just as Ein was wallowing in sorrow, he thought he felt a gentle pat on his chest.

Was he receiving consolation? Ein knew that such a thing was impossible, but he couldn't suppress the smile slowly forming on his lips. When he arrived at his room, he placed his hand on the knob and decided to follow Silverd's lead.

"Just wait and see," he mumbled under his breath with a sigh before stepping inside.

He turned on his magical tool lamp and sank onto the sofa. Feeling a tad weary, he relaxed on the sofa's soft cushions. *What do I do now?* Ein was tired, but he wasn't feeling sleepy. Unfortunately, all he had was time on his hands. He felt oddly drained and didn't have enough energy to study.

I feel like I used up too much brainpower. Maybe I'll just read a little and head to bed. It was then that he heard a knock at the door. *I know this might sound weird, but the knocks sound...elegant and refined.* That alone attested to the

grace of his visitor, the sound reverberating throughout the room like a fine opera.

“Come in,” Ein called.

“Good evening,” an elegant voice replied, sounding like the ringing of bells. It was Olivia, with a pleasant and sweet scent on her person. “Why don’t we talk for a little while?”

Her neck and chest were tinged pink, a hint that she’d just stepped out of the bath. The thin garment she wore complemented her curves, and a passing glance might’ve allowed a lucky guard to sneak a peek at her lingerie. The radiance of her skin and glossy locks pushed Ein to look away before he could even reply. Seeing her chance, Olivia slid next to her son quicker than a trained assassin.

“Y-You’re awfully close,” Ein said.

“Am I? I like being right next to my wonderful boy,” Olivia replied.

She sat on the sofa and wrapped her arms around his neck from behind, drawing him close. Ein knew what she was trying to do, but it seemed like she was a bit *too* close for his comfort. As he was hugged against her collarbone, Ein found her presence to be warm and soft. The comforting aroma from her hair, which brushed against his cheeks, put his mind at ease, and only a faint sigh close to his ears was cause for excitement.

“I came here because I wanted to talk with you,” Olivia said. “Were you busy?”

Ein didn’t mind that his mother dropped by whenever she wished, but he hoped that she wouldn’t talk right into his ear for much longer.

“Not at all,” Ein replied with a forced laugh.

“Thank goodness,” his mother said with relief. “We haven’t had time to sit down and chat these days.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. We have both been busy, haven’t we?”

“You seemed especially busy, Ein.”

“We had the attack on Magna.”

“I know. That was horrific. Without you, I’m certain many lives would have been lost.”

“I was only able to save everyone because grandfather permitted me to.”

“No, you must know that *you* worked harder than anyone else.”

Her voice was filled with affection and praise for Ein— a driving factor that contributed to her well-known “saint” moniker. This sort of tolerance, her willingness to accept without question, would only ever be directed towards him and no one else. The overwhelming love and tenderness that she expressed for the prince allowed him to rely on her for everything. The exhaustion that he felt seconds earlier had dissipated, and he felt so relaxed that he could fall asleep at any moment.

Olivia giggled, quickly noticing his son’s thoughts. “No matter how big you become, you’re still always you, Ein.” As though she remembered something, she added, “Were you able to grow your roots?”

“If you mean of my own volition, I actually haven’t tested it out yet.”

Now an adult Dryad, Ein had the ability to take root. The first time he’d done so was right when he returned from Barth, before he set off once more to fight against Marco. The crown prince hadn’t thought about his roots since, as he’d been assaulted by a whirlwind of events afterwards.

“How can I grow my roots?” Ein asked.

“You just need to think about it,” Olivia replied. “It’s not anything difficult. As Dryads, it’s only natural that we can take root. You just need to act like you’re doing any other everyday task.”

“I see...”

I don’t get it at all. Perhaps it would’ve been different if he’d known that he was a Dryad since his birth. Even so, Ein pursed his lips and thought as hard as he could. *Roots... Roots...* He thought back to the first time he was ever able to grow them. He groaned and furrowed his brows, hoping that roots would burst forth. *But back then, I didn’t do it willingly either.* He couldn’t help but tear himself down, ready to throw in the towel.

“Even if you can’t take root, you’re strong enough. Toxin Decomposition EX allows you to absorb magic anyway,” Olivia assured, sensing her son giving up. “Perhaps your body has decided that there’s no need for you to grow your roots.”

The words touched Ein’s heart. *I’ll grow them one day.* With that in mind, he completely gave up for now and turned to Olivia behind him.

“How about a cup of tea before bed?” Ein suggested.

There was no need for words. Her beaming smile was all he needed as a response and so the pair sat down for a long talk that lasted well past midnight. Ein was able to fall into a deep slumber that night. He wasn’t just imagining it, a good night’s rest was inevitable.

***

The next day, Ein ventured off into the castle district to attend to his public duties. He rode through the city streets in a carriage that clattered about as it rolled on through. Sitting next to him was Krone, who bowed before awkwardly looking up at him.

“May I have a moment?” she asked hesitantly.

They were so close that Ein could easily make out her glossy lips and long eyelashes. Her striking amethyst eyes glittered like jewels while her silvery-sapphire hair flowed behind her like silk. When she tilted her head to one side, her hair fluttered.

“Is something wrong?” Ein asked.

“I’m a little worried about Chris,” Krone replied.

The crown prince understood what she was hinting at. Just the day before, the knight had been looking rather restless. This was probably because she was on horseback duty instead of riding directly in the carriage with Ein. Krone didn’t know about Chris’s old friend, but she noticed Ein’s reaction and slid closer to him.

“Do you know something?” she asked.

“I do,” Ein confessed. “She mentioned a childhood friend visiting?”

“A childhood friend, you say?”

“Yeah, back when she lived in the Elves’ village.”

“An elf of Syth Mill is coming to Kingsland? How unusual.” It didn’t surprise Ein, but it was clear that Krone knew of the ancient elven language.

“They went to visit the site of the first king’s villa, and are visiting the royal capital on the way back. Chris seemed a little wary of the whole thing. She said they’d make a ceremonious arrival.”

“The Elves?”

“Apparently so. I don’t know the details either.”

“I wonder how ceremonious they’ll be. I must admit that I’m a bit curious myself.”

“You don’t know either? Now that’s unusual.”

“Who do you think I am? Goodness...”

She pouted, but didn’t seem at all angry. It looked like she was acting a touch spoiled before finally smiling. The carriage shook ever so slightly, rocking the pair as if to close the gap between them. Neither of them sounded nervous or embarrassed. They simply continued with their conversation as though nothing was amiss.

“Please don’t tell Sir Ein anything. Please don’t tell Sir Ein anything,” Chris’s prayers reached Ein’s ears.

Even since he became a Demon Lord, his sense of hearing had increased dramatically. Chris was likely fretting over the possibility her friend would divulge an embarrassing story or two, leading to the knight’s restlessness. Ein couldn’t suppress a chuckle as Krone stared at him, perplexed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Ein replied. “Nothing at all.”

Furthermore, Chris couldn’t confidently say that she was out of embarrassing stories to share. Especially her numerous escape attempts from when she’d fallen prey to the nasty epidemic that had gone around.

“Hmm, so you’re keeping secrets, are you?” Krone replied.

“Um, why do you have your hand on my thigh?” Ein asked.

Could his adviser truly be so annoyed that he was laughing to himself? Krone’s nails gently dug into his thigh before her touch softened, gently brushing against his skin like a feather. In other words, she was tickling him.

“I’m feeling a little ticklish,” Ein said.

“And you should be,” Krone replied. “Because that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“You’re not even denying it.”

“If you don’t like it, you’re certainly free to get back at me.”

She was implying that he should touch her thigh. He glanced at her legs as they peeked out from her black skirt. When he glanced back up, he saw a mischievous smirk on Krone’s face. It was a triumphant smile; he’d actually dared to glance down for even a second.

“What’s wrong?” she said provokingly. “You’ve turned stiff.”

“Er, well, you know...” Ein started, stumbling over his words.

It seemed that it was a bit too late for him to worry about that. After all, they’d almost locked lips while meeting with Heim. *But there’s a time and place for everything,* Ein thought, giving himself an excuse as he turned to look outside.

Krone leaned forward, her face close against his. “Hee hee, you’re so red.”

She gently poked his blushing cheeks.

Chapter Two: The Elves' Visit

During the following week, Silverd and Ein tended to their duties as usual. While the Elves' actions bothered them, they still had work to do. Considering that they'd just wrapped up their summer meeting with Heim, and given Magna's destruction, the royal's work had no end in sight.

Today, there was a fuss on the main street by White Rose Station—Ishtarica's largest water train terminal that resided in the middle of Kingsland. This bustle was different from the usual hubbub, attracting the interest of bystanders. Ein couldn't hide his astonishment as he watched the raucous scene from his bedroom balcony.

"Amazing."

Everyone's eyes were glued on the elves who marched down the main road; elites who remained taciturn despite the massive attention they attracted. Only a few dozen elves marched in a formation reminiscent of a knightly procession, but they flaunted fantastically majestic attire. Elven warriors stood at the vanguard and rear of the procession, clad in leather armor, woven shoes, longbows on their backs, and rapiers at their waists. Emanating an air of ferocity, these combatants had their long hair slicked back. Those who stood in the middle rose flags in front of their chests. In the marching line was an elf who seemed to be protected by the standard-bearing warriors. *Is that the elven chief?* Ein thought. The flags shielded this particular marcher from view, keeping the crown prince from getting a better look.

"All right," he said.

I should head to the audience room, grandfather is waiting. Normally, Ein wasn't one to carry a weapon around the castle, but he proceeded to equip his trusty black blade and walked back into his room. He grabbed his mantle hanging from the sofa, wrapped it around his shoulders, and started for the door. *If the Elves dare to do anything...* Worst-case scenario, Ein would unsheathe his blade without the king's permission.

Ein had steeled himself to protect his family, even if that meant stepping on Chris's toes. He gently slapped his cheeks and finally left his room.

***

The crown prince thought that he left his room with a steeled resolve, but his determination had only strengthened by the time he arrived at the audience room to meet with the Elves. And yet...

"Truly, I'm so honored to meet such a noble and revered man. I cannot find the words to express my elation," an elven lady said as she gave a curtsy to Ein, who stood beside Silverd.

In their initial greetings, the elves skipped over the king and went straight for the crown prince.

"Hmm... Mm..." Silverd said. Even he was unable to predict this situation, faintly expressing his confusion in the face of such insolence.

While he had his guard up, Silverd couldn't believe that he'd been put in this situation. Also present were Lloyd, Warren, and Chris, who couldn't find the words to express their thoughts either.

However, Ein still had enough courage to voice his thoughts. "Why have you bowed down to me? Surely that honor should go to His Majesty, the king, first."

He glared at the elven lady before redirecting his sharp gaze towards the warriors that accompanied her. At a glance, he could tell that these warriors were as strong or even stronger than the Knights Guard. However, these fierce warriors gulped nervously in the face of Ein's intimidating aura.

"I apologize for my impertinence, but I wanted to first pay my respects to the one who holds our utmost reverence," the woman answered without flinching.

Ein calmed himself down and looked at her. She shared the elven trait of unparalleled beauty. She might have looked a little stiff, but her beauty gave her an air of refinement. Her attire was a bit revealing, but the shawl wrapped around her made her seem dignified.

"We are a people who swore our loyalty to the first king," she continued. "Not once have we forgotten our respect towards the royal family, who carry

his blood.”

“Then why have you chosen to address me first?” Ein asked.

“Because you’re a Dryad, Your Highness.”

“Pardon?”

“We Elves live with nature. Naturally, we hold a deep reverence for Dryads, which was why we chose to address you first.”

Before the king, this elf’s words were beyond disrespectful. Yet Ein could only respond with a weak smile due to her confident tone before he turned to Chris. The knight’s face went white as a sheet, as if to look as apologetic as possible. It seemed as though she was willing to step in at any moment and take responsibility for the elf’s actions. However, Ein wasn’t a fan of seeing that play out and he ended up letting out a small sigh.

“I don’t wish for anything like that,” he finally said. “If you cannot show your utmost respect to the king, I’m afraid I cannot accept your respect as well.” He spoke without fear.

The elven lady stared at Ein for several seconds before she finally placed a hand over her left chest and bowed deeply once more. “I apologize if my actions have offended you.”

“I don’t mind. But as long as the chief is here, I’d like to state that you must prioritize His Majesty first before me.”

She looked a little perplexed and said, “I apologize for my belated introduction as well. I’m Sierra, the chief’s granddaughter.”

“W-Wait, granddaughter?”

“I’d also like to apologize for not notifying you beforehand. The chief is rather elderly and she can rarely leave her estate. I’ve arrived in her stead as her representative.”

It didn’t seem like Sierra was lying—her eyes were unwavering, regal, and clear. She didn’t spare even a passing glance for the confusion around her, removing an envelope from her pocket.

“Allow me,” Warren said as he took the letter.

He glanced at the king. Warren would normally check a letter's contents first, but today, Silverd wanted that letter in his hands as soon as possible.

A near-deafening silence filled the room as Silverd scanned each page under the careful watch of everyone around him. One of the room's pillars was illuminated by the sunlight, casting a shadow over Ein's cheek.

"I've formally received the letter," Silverd finally said, raising his head. He didn't seem to be as weary now, but that uneasiness had made way for slight confusion. "Sierra, was it? Are you aware of the contents of this letter?"

"I am," Sierra replied.

"Very well. I shall discuss this with the crown prince before giving you a reply. Now then, how long will you elves be staying in Kingsland?"

"We've already decided on two days. We don't wish to be apart from our village for too long."

"Then you shall be headed back to Syth Mill in two days' time."

Sierra deeply nodded.

"Warren," Silverd said.

"Your Majesty," came a reply.

"Prepare accommodations for all of them."

This implied that the king would be welcoming his elven guests. *Grandfather has determined that they aren't a threat.* If one was offered a room within White Night Castle, they weren't an enemy at the very least. It was clear that this new letter had been the determining factor. Dying to know just what was in it, Ein eagerly awaited the time when he'd receive the news.

***

As the sun set, Ein was in his office and stretching out in his chair.

"Tired?" Krone asked.

"Well, we've been working away since noon," Ein replied. "Aren't you getting tired too?"

"Me? I guess you're right. My eyes are a little heavy." She rubbed her eyes

with her fingers.

They'd been toiling away at paperwork and it was as good a time as any for a break. She tried to stand up when Ein placed a hand over her shoulder—she was about to get up to retrieve a few drinks and some snacks.

"What's wrong?" Krone asked.

"I'll bring us back some drinks," Ein replied. "I'm sure Martha and the other servants are busy with the Elves."

"I can just go and get some."

"It's fine. Just stay here and rest."

His calm, gentle eyes were pointed directly at her. Krone wasn't audacious enough to turn down the crown prince's goodwill.

"Then I suppose I can act a little spoiled for once," she relented.

"You can at any time," Ein replied. "In fact, that'd make me happy."

He gave a little wave and left the office.

When he came out to the corridor, he noticed the servants busily bustling around the castle more than usual. Who could blame them? They were all forced to suddenly welcome dozens of guests.

"I wonder what that letter grandfather received was all about," Ein asked himself.

The question had filled his mind during his work too. However, Silverd had chosen to tell his grandson at a later time. There was no doubt he was currently in his room, reading the letter and trying to gauge the chief's true intention. Or perhaps he was doing something else. Even though he still had his blade at his waist, Ein was relieved to know he had no reason to stay wary of his elven guests.

"Maybe I should visit grandfather's roo— No, I'd just be causing trouble."

In the end, it was best to sit back and wait. When he stepped towards the staircase leading to the floor below, he could hear a frantic voice ring out.

"N-No! You absolutely can't!" Chris cried. Ein instinctively hid behind a wall

and peered down. “You can’t talk about my childhood or anything! Nothing! Keep everything before my move to the royal capital a secret!”

“Why?” another familiar voice replied.

That must be Sierra. Ein had spoken with her in the audience room during the day.

“I think His Highness will enjoy himself as he listens,” Sierra added.

“Because it’d be embarrassing for me!” Chris shouted back.

“Sure, but in exchange, His Highness will have a good time. Don’t you think your embarrassment is a trivial issue?”

“When you say it like that... Hey! You’re laughing! You’re making fun of me because now I’m considering it!”

Sierra placed a hand over her lips and smiled. “You haven’t changed a bit, Chris.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, I’m not telling. But I’m glad. I haven’t seen you for so many years, and I’m happy to know you’re doing so well.”

“But I sent you a letter.”

Ein had assumed that this meant the two had been talking on a regular basis over the years.

“Are you an idiot?” Sierra relied. “That was about a decade ago! That’s it.”

He buried his head in his hands. Why did Chris make it sound like she stayed in contact with Sierra? How could she say that? *Even I sympathize with Sierra here.* Ein couldn’t help but sigh.

The two elves seemed to be on friendly terms—in fact, Chris’s casual and defenseless tone clearly showed that they were close. If so, she could have sent a few more letters to her childhood friend, even if they had long lifespans.

“At least I sent a letter!” Chris insisted.

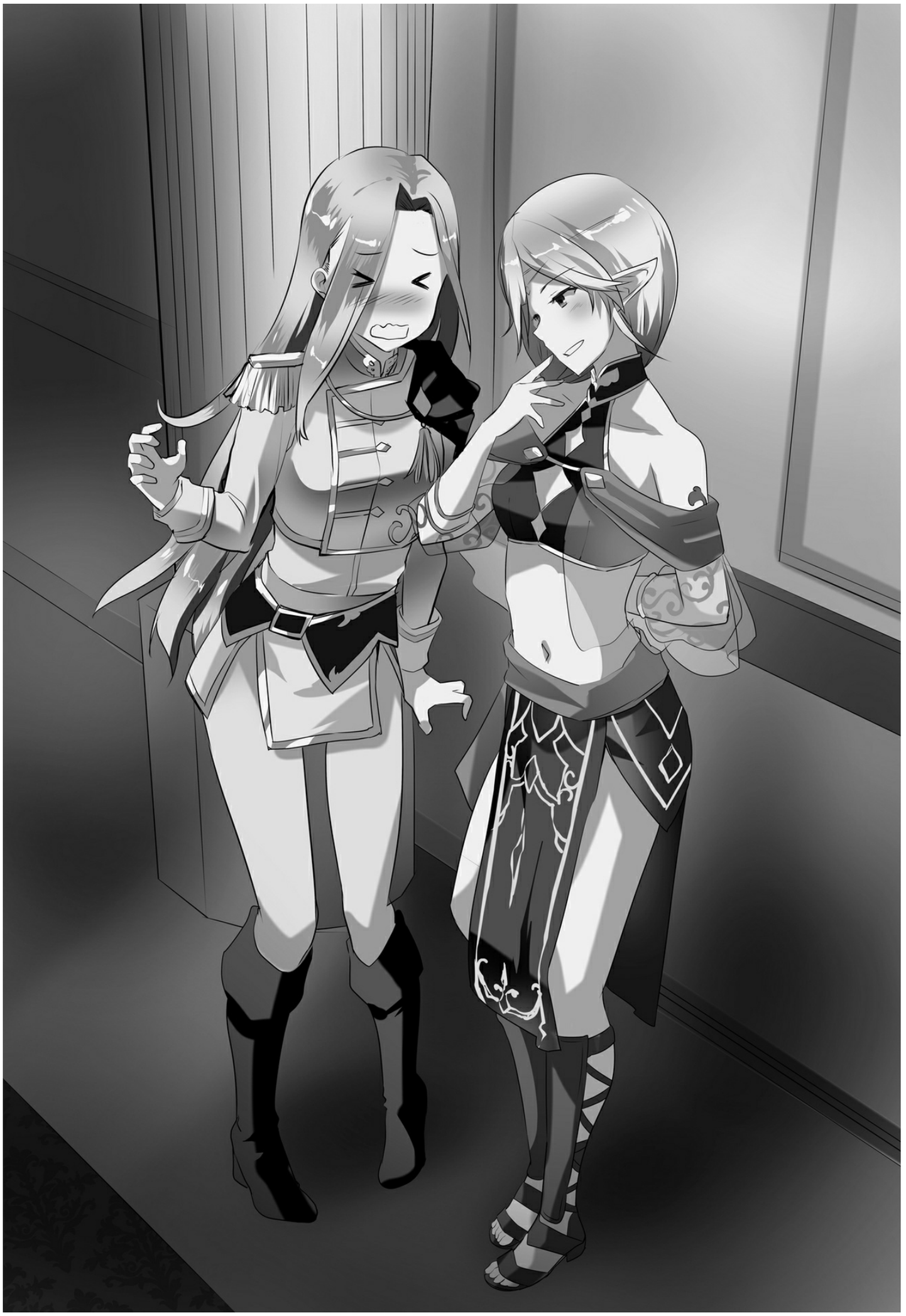
“Okay, then,” Sierra replied. “Why don’t I ask His Highness about it? I’ll ask, ‘Would you say that sending a letter once a decade is staying in contact?’”

She didn’t have to ask Ein for an answer; he already had one: *Nope, not at all.*

“That’s not fair! You can’t ask him that!” Chris cried.

“It’s totally fair. I’d just be asking for his opinion,” Sierra replied.

“Hmph!”



Chris pouted, but Ein was unable to offer any words of consolation—in fact, he was now hoping that Sierra would be a trustworthy ally. As the conversation fizzled out, their voices faded into the distance; they were headed someplace else.

“Right, drinks,” Ein said.

If he was asked about Chris’s letter on another day, he already had an answer prepared: one letter every decade was far too little.

***

The next morning, sounds of clashing metal could be heard ringing throughout the air. Thanks to the sun’s rays reflecting off their blades, the two fighters appeared as if they were surrounded by a glimmering cloud of diamond dust. With every clash of their swords, the combatants felt sharp winds graze their cheeks and the ground shake beneath them. The onlooking elven warriors were at a loss for words as they watched the scene unfolding before them.

“Humph!” Lloyd grunted, his brows furrowed. He stood at one end of the glittering cloud. “It seems you’ve become stronger yet again!”

While the marshal had been forced to take the defensive, he spoke with intimidating confidence. As he prepared to launch another powerful strike at the boy in front of him, Lloyd’s already beefy biceps seemingly doubled in size—his bulging veins funneling blood into his muscles.

“Have at you, Sir Ein! Behold the full force of my greatsword!” Lloyd roared.

The elven warriors all questioned Lloyd’s sanity. The marshal might’ve wielded a practice sword, but such a powerful blow was sure to make a mess of Ein. The castle’s knights understood the elves’ apprehension, but they’d seen Lloyd go all out quite regularly as of late.

“Behold it I will, Lloyd,” Ein declared. The prince had been firmly grasping his sword up until this point, but he proceeded to loosen his grip and remain in place.

Lloyd flashed a fearless grin before lunging at Ein like a hungry dragon. “Ha ha! I knew you’d do that!”

Ein held his blade at a horizontal angle as the marshal put his entire weight into a downward swing. The crown prince held his ground, refusing to budge even an inch as the sparks flew from the clashing of blades. The sparks were followed up by an intense shock wave that emanated from the blow.

“Raaaaah!” Lloyd yelled as he exerted all of his power and pushed Ein back.

Contrary to appearances, the crown prince managed to keep his footing. It only *looked* like he was pushed back due to the size of his hulking opponent. But a few moments later, Lloyd’s body went limp, as though he’d been fully tapped out.

“What...?” he gasped.

He’d exerted so much power that his muscles had given out. Lloyd stepped back in an attempt to recenter himself, but Ein wasn’t about to let this chance slip by.

“I won’t let you!” the boy cried, jumping forward and pushing the marshal back with his blade.

Yet another deafening metal clang rang out as Lloyd’s upper body was pushed back. However, his pride as Ishtarica’s marshal, and one of the nation’s strongest warriors, kept him from bowing out of this bout.

“I won’t let you either! Certainly not!” he roared.

Lloyd’s forceful movements were neither skillful nor were they graceful. He focused what little power he had left in his knees, crouching down as he placed his sword at an horizontal angle. It was just in time for the marshal to receive the merciless swing that Ein had brought down upon him.

“Gh... Graaaar!” Lloyd grunted as he faced the muscular boy standing before him.

Indeed, Ein was a well-toned boy. He boasted a slender frame with lean and mean muscles devoid of any unnecessary fat. Yet, the shock wave from his blow surpassed Lloyd’s last attack.

It was only a matter of time before the battle was decided. Just then...

“Whoa! Whoops!” Ein gasped.

“Hmm?!” Lloyd grunted.

Their swords suddenly crumbled into tiny pieces. It was as if someone had shattered a window by throwing a rock through it.

“Good grief, I knew this would happen again,” Lloyd sighed.

“We can’t do this for much longer, Lloyd,” Ein said. “We need swords specially made for this. If not, they’ll definitely break again next time...”

The pair had crossed swords many times before, but the result was always the same: their blades crumbled to dust. Unable to withstand the impact of their own blows, most weapons would throw in the towel long before their wielders would. Ein and Lloyd cracked forced smiles before they slumped their shoulders. However, the pair was quickly surrounded by the elven warriors’ thunderous applause.

“Th-Thanks,” Ein said sheepishly. He found himself embarrassed for being applauded over a mere sparring match.

He gently waved his hand in reply before heading for a nearby chair to grab a towel.

“The day you also best me with a sword isn’t too far away, I fear,” Lloyd replied.

“Huh? ‘Also’? What do you mean?” Ein asked.

“If you were to use any one of your skills, I’d would’ve been out for the count long ago, Sir Ein. That is exactly why we’ve been training this way. I thought that I might’ve had a thing or two left to teach you when it comes to swordsmanship, but it seems that there’s little left for you to learn.”

“I don’t think so. My movements aren’t as smooth as yours or Chris’s.”

“You’re too humble.”

“I’m not. I just prefer not to drown in my own ego.”

However, Ein never denied that his victory without a sword was rather likely. This was rare for the boy to admit as he never appeared to be cocksure of his skills, but it wasn’t deliberate on his part. It was clear that he had some sort of confidence. In any case, Lloyd was a proud teacher, delighted by his prince’s

improvement.

“Speaking of,” Ein said, a question popping into his head since the Elves were present, “is it true that Celes was stronger than you?”

“Hmm, I never thought I’d hear that name come out of your mouth,” Lloyd replied. “Who told you about her?”

“I think I’ll keep that a secret.”

“Well, it certainly isn’t a topic that I can casually discuss. Perhaps it’s better if I refrain from inquiring further about your informant.”

It was likely that Ein knew about First Prince LeFay, but Lloyd had chosen not to broach that subject either.

“She’s the only person I never managed to land a single blow on,” the marshal finally said.

“Not a single one?” Ein asked incredulously.

Lloyd nodded, though a touch miffed at the truth. “She’d disappear like the mist before raining down a torrential flurry of multidirectional strikes upon you. Before you even knew it, you’d be completely ensnared by her blade. I’ve never seen such a move since, and I doubt that I could land a blow on her, even now.”

“I heard she was strong but I never imagined the extent...”

“I wouldn’t stand a chance against her even if there were several of me.”

Ein wanted to catch a glimpse of Celes’s fabled prowess with a blade at least once, but he knew that was an impossible wish. He wiped the large beads of sweat that trickled down his cheek—he’d started to feel a bit chilled from sweating.

“You have public duties to attend to this afternoon, don’t you?” Lloyd asked. “It’s best that you take a bath now.”

“I’ll take your advice,” Ein replied. “Thank you for sparring with me again, Lloyd.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

With that, the crown prince left the training grounds.

***

It felt nice to take a morning soak in the castle's large baths. After Ein cleaned himself up, he went for breakfast and proceeded to rest before his afternoon duties rolled around. With some extra time on his hands, Ein stood in one of White Night's corridors. *I'm curious... Is Chris still running around with Sierra?* Restless, the boy wondered just when his grandfather would call him in.

"I knew it. It still suits you," Sierra said, her voice echoing out into the corridor. Ein now stood in front of a salon.

He approached the door and honed his senses.

"I agree," Krone added. "It really does look good on you."

"Thank you, Lady Krone. You also look—I mean, Sierra! The mantle!" Chris cried. "Hurry! Give me the one you were wearing yesterday!"

"I haven't brought it with me," Sierra replied. "Besides, we're the only ones here. What's the problem?"

Ein didn't have a clue as to what the ladies were up to. Their boisterous conversation didn't sound like they were cooking up anything nefarious; it sounded like they were changing outfits and Chris was upset about something.

"What are they doing?" he wondered to himself.

He instinctively reached for the door purely out of curiosity, but he quickly realized that he should knock first and did so.

"Sorry, it's me," Ein called. "What are you guys up to?"

There was a loud clatter in the salon, as though something had fallen just as Chris let out a pathetic surprised gasp. As for Sierra, a loud sigh slipped out of her mouth. Needless to say, Ein was taken a bit off guard by the commotion.

"You can come in, Ein," Krone said, calling out from behind the door as if nothing was wrong.

"You mustn't!" Chris immediately replied.

Krone's given me the go-ahead, but it doesn't sound like Chris has...

"Your Highness, please come inside," Sierra added.

Ein didn’t expect to hear Sierra’s okay to enter the room, and he reached for the door. However, he quickly stopped himself. *Still, it seems like Chris is really against this...* As he hesitated, the salon door opened.

“Ah, please don’t mind her,” Sierra said, sounding just as cool as she had been during their initial meeting. “She’s just a little embarrassed.”

Her clothes were different from yesterday—she’d changed out of her formal garb and into an outfit that was easier to move around in, but that was all.

“Embarrassed? By what?” Ein asked.

“Indeed,” Sierra replied. “Perhaps it’s better to see for yourself. I simply cannot explain. Why don’t you come inside?”

“Um... Okay.”

He was guided inside and found that the salon was a touch messier than usual. There was a wooden box, a bolt of fabric, and a pair of woven baskets carrying a change of clothing for two. Under the impression he shouldn’t be looking right into a woman’s potential unmentionables, Ein quickly turned away and ended up locking eyes with Krone.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“Huh? Wait, those clothes are...” Ein started.

She sat on a sofa, her attire different from any he’d ever seen her wear before. She looked bewitching and graceful, not to mention the air of divinity that hung in the air around her. While her chest was covered up to the neck in fabric, the backless top revealed her pale skin for all to see. The skirt hiding her slender waist was on the shorter side, constructed out of a thin and glossy silklike fabric. Overall, Krone’s outfit was a touch revealing and accentuated her figure. The lacy fabric that covered her chest and limbs gave the ensemble an innocent appearance, as if she was a fairy who’d leaped out of the pages of an old storybook.

“I wanted to hear what you had to say, but I guess that’s enough,” Krone said.

Ein’s reaction was all too obvious. At a loss for words, he stood silently while being completely captivated by her stunning beauty. Words were important,

but it didn’t hurt if he expressed his thoughts through his actions every now and then.

“Over here,” Krone said.

Without letting out a single peep, the crown prince obediently sat beside her—they were closer than usual. Thanks to their difference in height, Ein could’ve peeked into her bosom, but he hesitated and turned away. It was a dangerous situation for him to say the least.

“Sierra lent me a set of elven formal attire,” Krone explained. “As she displayed yesterday, you’d normally wear a mantle with this... Hey, why aren’t you looking at me?”

“I have my reasons,” Ein replied.

“And what might those be? Can’t you look my way and tell me? I won’t know otherwise.”

Acting a little spoiled, Krone toyed with her prince’s heart. She clearly knew what he was thinking, and was well aware that her question was on the mean side.

“B...” Ein started.

“Hmm?” Krone asked.

“Because it suits you really, um, well?”

Ein could only end his awkward response with another question. However, his words made Krone far happier than if he just replied with some simple sweet nothings. His sputtering sounded like it came from the heart, even if he was nervously shifting around like a ticklish child the whole time.

“Thank you,” Krone replied. “Hearing you say that made this well worth trying on.”

It was then that things finally clicked in Ein’s head. There was a reason Chris had been crying about a mantle just a few minutes ago.

“Um, Sierra...” he started.

“Whatever is the matter?” the elf replied.

“I’d like to request that Krone be provided with a mantle or something of the sort to wear over her attire.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I truly didn’t bring anything like that with me.”

Ah, no wonder Chris was sent into a frenzy. Where is *she, anyway?* With his attention finally shifted back to his knight, Ein had good reason to cast a sweeping glance across the room. Unfortunately, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did she go?” Ein asked.

“Ah, she’s right over there,” Sierra replied.

“Huh? The curtain? W-Wait...”

If he were to describe what he saw, Ein would most likely compare it to a bagworm. Chris stood wrapped within a thick curtain, as if she had holed herself up in a cocoon. With great skill, the elf poked her head out through a gap in the fabric. Her face was so red that she almost looked like a freshly boiled kraken.

“Good day, Sir Ein,” Chris said. The knight was trying to remain as calm as possible, but that only ended up perplexing her prince further. “I’m so happy to see you this morning. On an unrelated note, would you mind closing your eyes for a few seconds?”

She had likely planned to change out of her current outfit while he was looking away. Ein didn’t mind leaving the room, but Krone quickly grabbed onto his arm and locked him in place.

“No,” Sierra said. “We went through all the trouble of changing your clothes and you’re not even going to let His Highness take a single look at you? As a dear old friend from your childhood, I simply cannot tolerate such impertinence.”

“Impertinence? Heavens, no,” Chris replied. “H-Hey! Why’re you walking this way?!”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just unrolling you.”

“I *do* mind, thank you very much! Hey! Stop pulling!”

“I guess in terms of brute strength, I can’t compete. Should I use magic?”

Sierra snapped her fingers, summoning a gust of wind. Ein didn't find the breeze to be all that strong, but the wind seemingly swirled around the curtain in an attempt to rip it away from Chris's body.

"I *know* you aren't totally against showing off in front of him," Sierra demanded. "Just give up already."

"B-But I can tolerate this wind..." Chris insisted. Her efforts were rewarded, and the curtain remained wrapped around her body.

Sierra smirked. "Sure. Personally, I don't really mind if you stay like that."

"Sour grapes? That's not quite like you..."

Chris cut herself off and gasped. She realized that while the curtain was covering her upper body, her lower half was laid bare for the whole world to see. Quite literally, as the short skirt she wore exposed everything from the thighs down, embarrassing her even further. She felt that revealing just her lower body only made things even more suggestive, which made her innocent little mind start cracking.

I'll pretend I didn't see a thing. Ein wanted to protect his knight's pride, but when he turned away, Krone's own revealing ensemble was right in his face. Knowing this was all too much for him and unsure of what to do, Ein could only awkwardly look down at the floor. The breeze died down, and Chris breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think I'll go to her," Ein said, placing a hand over his jacket.

"That might be for the best," Krone said with a giggle and a nod. Even she could tell what he was up to.

"Chris, can you come out?"

"P-Please give me a few moments to prepare myself!" Chris insisted.

"I know. I won't stare."

"Huh? Well, that also doesn't sit quite right with me..."

Ein kept a smile plastered on his face at her simultaneous display of innocence and fickleness. Just moments ago, Sierra had been relentlessly teasing her old friend, but now she looked exasperated and remained silent.

“Come on, don’t worry,” Ein assured. “Come on out.”

When he reached for the curtain, the knight didn’t put up much of a fight. In fact, it looked as though she practically threw the curtain off of her own volition and revealed herself with ease. Despite that, the knight looked rather bashful as she still hugged her upper body. He quickly wrapped his jacket around her.

“Uh...” she started.

“Does this work for you?” Ein asked.

The prince’s jacket was much larger than Chris’s upper body, and it loosely hung around her person. The baggy jacket was much longer than elven formal attire, allowing her to hide a bit more of her body.

“Th-This works,” Chris squeaked out.

As she clung to the sleeves of his jacket for dear life, she looked all the more adorable—her joy outweighed her embarrassment. She quietly followed his movements with her eyes as he walked away.



“I’m surprised...” Sierra quietly murmured, in awe at Chris’s shift in attitude. “I didn’t know that she was so fond of him.”

After that, they continued with a cheerful conversation for a good while. While the ladies’ outfits were revealing, it wasn’t too long before they had become accustomed to them. Despite her initial embarrassment, Chris eventually removed Ein’s jacket after joining the conversation.

The crown prince later stepped out of the salon as Chris and Krone mentioned that they’d be changing. For some reason, Sierra ended up tagged along with him, and the pair stood next to each other, their backs against the wall.

“You’re speaking a lot more casually than yesterday,” Sierra pointed out.

“Am I?” Ein asked. “Oh, I guess you’re referring to my change in attitude compared to our meeting in the audience room.”

“Indeed. You emanated an intimidating aura that overwhelmed me yesterday, but you’re a lot friendlier today. I can tell that you’re a very kind person.”

Ein hadn’t really thought about it much. He either simply let his guard down or just felt like he was on more friendly terms with her.

“I don’t believe that you were overwhelmed yesterday,” Ein said.

“Oh, but I was,” Sierra replied. “Cold sweat trickled down my back. In fact, I’d even forgotten to give you a letter that I’d received from the chief.” She handed him a letter. “It’s a letter of invitation from the chief. She would love for you to drop by Syth Mill.”

“An invitation, huh.” Ein gave a meaningful smile and took the letter as he waited for her to continue.

“To tell you the truth, this letter contains some similarities with the one that His Majesty received yesterday.”

“I don’t understand. She never responded to us at all until yesterday. But why would she suddenly invite me to your homeland? You called me noble, and yet... I’m sorry if this sounds rude, but this invitation is a touch suspect.”

“It’s all the fault of our chief. As her representative, I’d like to extend an apology on her behalf.”

It truly seemed as if Sierra had no ulterior motives to hide. She was intelligent, but she wasn't trying to launch a psychological attack of some sort. She seemed earnest and sincere.

"I'm unaware of the details, but our chief had been agonizing over her response," she said.

"I see..." he replied.

"She extended that invitation due to her current health. She's getting up there in age and she has been having a difficult time walking for prolonged periods, even around Syth Mill."

"But it's still odd. Surely you could've notified my grandfather before you headed off to Magna."

"You're absolutely correct. But the chief hesitated to do even that."

The crown prince wasn't simple enough to let things slide just because the chief was hesitant. He couldn't grasp the elderly woman's true motives.

"She also gave me a message for you," Sierra added. "The chief can't blame you for your suspicions." As she stared at the boy, he noticed that her gaze was so sharp that it appeared as if it could cut through air. "She said, 'I'd like to tell you what I know about the *former* royal capital, along with the red foxes.'"

"What did you just say?" Ein growled, stepping close to Sierra.

"P-Please calm down! She wants to tell you of the former royal capital and about the red foxes! I'm terribly sorry, but I truly have no idea what she was referring to! I'm simply the messenger! As far as I know, only the chief understands the meaning behind these words!"

"I understand. I'm sorry," Ein said before stepping away and mulling over the message he'd just heard. "No wonder grandfather didn't call for me immediately."

"As I said earlier, I truly don't know anything. I'm her granddaughter and she refused to tell me a single thing despite my pleas." Sierra looked at Ein with a meaningful look on her face. She'd realized that the prince probably knew something, but he'd chosen to ignore what she'd been implying for now.

“I’ll accept your invitation,” Ein finally said. Despite his words, the prince wanted to consult his grandfather first.

If the chief’s words were to be trusted, it was best for the crown prince to make his way to Syth Mill. However, the fallout from the recent attack on Magna still loomed large. The red foxes could still be lurking about, hoping to bare their fangs. As things currently stood, Ein was unsure if he could leave Kingsland at such a time.

“May I ask one thing?” Ein inquired.

“Anything you wish,” Sierra replied.

“Would it present a problem if knights were brought into the village?”

“It’s incredibly hard for me to say this, but it’s unlikely that anyone but Chris and yourself would be allowed to enter. As you may know, we’re quite isolated from the rest of society. You may call us anachronistic, but our village is simply not equipped to welcome a large number of guests.”

But more than anything, the Elves of Syth Mill were far from mentally prepared for this task. Chris could accompany Ein into the village, but despite being his adviser, Krone would likely need to remain on standby in a nearby city. Similarly, the prince felt bad about leaving Dill to wait for him as well.

“Is it already set in stone that Chris and I are the only ones who may enter?” Ein asked.

“I’m deeply sorry, but you’re exactly right,” Sierra answered. “Ah, and if you ever decide to visit Syth Mill with Chris, I implore you to visit the holy grounds.”

“Am I allowed to? I’m an outsider.”

“Under normal circumstances, no. However, the chief personally requested that you visit. Just between the two of us, I’m unsure of the chief’s true intentions. In fact, I have no idea if you can even set foot on the holy grounds.”

“Is there a guard or something?”

“There is, but that shouldn’t be an issue since you have the chief’s approval. But the holy grounds are sealed, you see, and not everyone is allowed inside.”

The plot only thickened. Sierra looked troubled, implying that she truly knew

nothing more.

“As far as I know, only three people have ever been permitted to enter the holy grounds,” she explained, raising three fingers. “The chief, Chris, and finally, Dame Celestina, Chris’s older sister.”

“Why were the last two allowed to enter?” Ein asked. The only definitive common denominator they had was the Wernstein family name.

“The people of Syth Mill were equally confused. Why were they allowed to step into the holy grounds? And why did they receive permission from the chief?”

These questions were only natural. As the crown prince mulled over these queries, he heard Chris’s voice from beyond the door.

“Sir Ein! I’m terribly sorry for the wait!” She’d apparently finished getting changed.

“This is all very interesting,” Ein said. “But I can’t fully promise that I’ll be visiting Syth Mill. I must discuss this with my grandfather.”

However, he already had his heart set. The Wernstein sisters could step foot on the holy grounds and the chief clearly knew things about the Demon Lord’s former territory, including the red foxes. There was no reason for him *not* to go. He didn’t dare vocalize his thoughts, but he was eager to visit Syth Mill.

***

That evening, Ein finally had the opportunity to speak with Silverd. The royals were alone in the small room at the back of the audience room. They exchanged the letters that they received from Sierra and confirmed the contents. Just as she said, the letters were quite similar to one another. The prince continued the conversation by sharing what the elf had told him about the messages.

“It’s clear that she knows of many things,” Silverd concluded.

“I believe it’s beneficial that I visit Syth Mill,” Ein said. “It hasn’t been long since the attack on Magna, but I believe it’s worth the journey if we can learn anything about the red foxes or the first king. About the academy...”

“Very well. As this is a public duty, you are allowed to take time off of course. If this were solely about the first king, I wouldn’t have minded if we delayed this trip, but...”

“I need to know more about the red foxes as soon as possible.”

There was still one question that lingered.

“Only you and Chris can make the trek to Syth Mill,” Silverd pointed out.

“So it seems. Do you think it’s too dangerous?”

“I cannot say with confidence that there will be no danger, but there are very few monsters nearby. You’d mostly be running into small, harmless animals. Additionally, there are practically no foreign enemies who would pose a threat.” The only issue remaining was the red foxes. “I suppose it can’t be helped. To ensure that no hidden red fox learns of your absence, we’ll see to it that you depart from Kingsland in secret. That way, if rumors got out, we could easily claim that you’d fallen ill and call a doctor to the castle. That’d be best.”

“That’s going a bit too far, I think.” Ein was still for the secret departure plan though.

“Ha ha ha. I’m joking, of course. But it’ll be a long journey.” Silverd stroked his beard with a strained smile and gazed up at the ceiling while reminiscing his past. “Sometime in the past, I made a royal visit to a city near Syth Mill. If I recall correctly, the trip took a day and a half by water train. From there, I hear it takes another half day to reach Syth Mill by foot.”

Ein grew stiff upon hearing this would be an unexpectedly long journey. If one were to add all that time together, it would take the prince two full days to reach the chief’s village.

“Have you reconsidered?” Silverd asked with a grin.

“I-I’ll go!” Ein insisted. “Would you think a Demon Lord would surrender just because of a moderately long trip?!”

Silverd couldn’t help but find a shred of humor in the fact that Ein had openly mentioned his transformation. The king clutched his stomach and let out a hearty laugh as he approached the pouting Ein’s side. He patted the crown

prince’s shoulders.

“How very reliable you are,” Silverd said in a gentle voice.

Chapter Three: Preparing for a Journey

Secrecy was a key element of the prince's visit to Syth Mill. It was imperative to exercise utmost caution as he left the royal capital. To do so successfully, Ein required the help of a certain someone.

A few mornings before his departure, the prince had summoned Chairman Graff Agustos of the Agustos Trading Firm to one of the castle's many rooms. There, the man came to stand before Chancellor Warren.

"You wish for my cooperation?" Graff had asked, frozen for a moment after he heard Warren's words. He tilted his head to one side.

"Quite right," Warren replied.

"Will you tell me your reasoning first? Why me?"

"Pardon the lack of transparency. You see, Sir Ein will be headed to a frontier city near Syth Mill."

"Hmm..." That wasn't enough for Graff to fully grasp the situation, but he didn't shake his head either. "Krone and I are greatly indebted to His Highness, and by extension, the Ishtarican royal family. No matter the reason, I won't refuse a request for my assistance."

"I'm grateful to hear that. Now then, there are a few issues I'd like to discuss with you."

And so, Warren hatched a plan. Graff would leave Kingsland on official trading firm business. As he often left the capital to conduct business, this wouldn't raise any eyebrows. Ein and his party would accompany the former grand duke on his "business trip" alongside some knights disguised as new "employees." Naturally, Graff would need to wait for Ein's return. Due to the magnitude of the request and the number of days required to finish it, Warren promised to heavily compensate Graff with a reward for his cooperation.

"No need," the chairman replied. "I've been planning to visit that city

anyway.”

“But...” Warren started.

“Chancellor, as I’ve stated, I owe a great debt to His Highness. Would you please allow me to save a shred of face?”

“But Sir Graff, you’d be undermining His Highness’s reputation.”

“Hmm, well that won’t do. Very well, if you insist on rewarding me... May I have Krone assist me with my work? She’d surely have some time to spare while in the city.”

Warren nodded. This was their compromise. Though Krone would be separated from her beloved, the crown prince would be at ease to know she was with her grandfather.

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Ein stopped by Chris’s room to share what had been decided—he had to tell her of their visit to Syth Mill. Martha, the first maid and Dill’s mother, knocked on her door in Ein’s stead. However, no answer came.

“Maybe she’s not here,” Ein said, about to turn on his heels and leave. He could visit her at another time.

“I saw Dame Chris return from training a while ago,” Martha insisted. She knocked once more and waited for a short while.

“Come in!” Chris called, her voice faint as it echoed throughout the room.

“Maybe she was in the middle of working on something,” Ein said.

“But I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you visited,” Martha reasoned. “Since we received her reply, why don’t you step inside and talk with her?”

“Hmm, all right.”

“Then please excuse me. If you require anything more, please feel free to call me.”

Once Martha left, Ein placed his hand on the door and stepped inside. Chris’s room was very simple. She only had the bare minimum when it came to furniture nor was it adorned with intricate decorations. She had a few

documents laid out on her desk, but that was the only part that could be called messy.

“Where is she?” Ein wondered. He couldn’t see Chris at all as he stood by the entrance.

“I’ll be right there!” Chris called.

“Huh?”

It wasn’t unnatural for her to be in her room, but her voice didn’t come from her bedroom or balcony. There was only one place left.

“Sorry to keep you waiting—S-Sir Ein?!” Chris called.

The bathroom. She emerged, her body wrapped in a bath towel. Steam still rose from her skin as her damp hair clung to her nape—an implication that she was fresh out of the shower. Ein quickly looked away, but the sight remained seared in his mind.

“Sorry, I’ll leave!” Ein shouted.

“I-I’m fine!” Chris stammered. “N-No, I’m not! But I can’t have you wait. No, if it doesn’t bother you... N-No! This is embarrassing!”

“Yeah, no, I think I’ll leave!”

As they were both panicking, it was best to reschedule this visit for another time. But just as Ein was about to hastily grab the doorknob, Chris swiftly took his hand and stopped him from leaving.

“Wait! Please! Just a few moments! I’ll get changed in a jiffy!” Chris cried.

“Either way, I’ll just wait outside!” Ein shouted.

“No! I can’t have you wait outside! I’m sorry! Please wait for me on the sofa! I’m begging you!”

It didn’t seem to make much of a difference where he waited. Despite the situation, Ein wasn’t keen on turning down Chris’s act of kindness.

“Okay, I’ll just stay here,” Ein promised. “When I can’t see you anymore, I’ll go take a seat on the sofa.”

“Please! I’ll be back very soon!” Chris replied.

Following her energetic reply, Ein could sense that she'd rushed out in a hurry. Though the crown prince said that he'd stay, it felt awkward for two to be left alone in a room together now. The slight remnants of residual heat from the steam and the floral aroma of her soap lingered in the air alongside the scent of her shampoo. *I feel bad about this.* Now he *really* felt like should reschedule this meeting.

Chris had just finished soothing her tired bones in the shower and Ein had ruined that moment of peace.

Ein chose to sit and wait for his knight. He sat down on the sofa only to find Chris emerging a few seconds later.

"S-Sorry to keep you waiting!" she hastily said, stepping in front of Ein before she caught her breath.

Her warm, shampoo-scented hair was still damp from the shower, and the warmth was certainly not from her earlier training session. Chris was clad in a simple shirt and pair of shorts that seemed to accentuate her natural beauty. She could've sat across from him, but the knight became a bit too comfortable in her own room and took a seat next to her prince. Ein was silent.

"Why are you burying your head in your hands?" Chris asked, her long, pale legs completely exposed.

I can't stop thinking that I should've left.

"It's nothing, just some stuff," Ein replied. "I'm just regretting something."

As usual, the view from her window made for a dignified yet beautiful picture of the city she was sworn to protect. Ein had kept growing since arriving in Ishtarica, and the boy was quite eager to see what the future had in store for him. He wasn't sure if now was the time to be having these thoughts, but it certainly helped to calm himself down.

"Regretting?" Chris repeated in befuddlement.

"Don't worry about it," Ein replied. "I came to tell you something important."

"An important matter? Ah! Could it be? You're finally planning on launching an attack on the Roundhearts—"

“No. You’re not even close.”

“I-I see...”

Ein wanted to ask why she looked disappointed, but he decided to leave that question for another time.

“After much deliberation, I’ve decided to venture out to Syth Mill,” Ein explained “I want you to accompany me as not just my guard, but as my guide as well.”

Chris’s attitude transformed in an instant. She was now beaming and inching ever closer to Ein, unable to hide her happiness.

“I’m so happy!” she cried, expressing her joy while practically clinging to Ein’s arm. “I didn’t think the words I said back then would become reality!”

“Oh, you mean...”

How could Ein forget? On their way back from Ist, he and Chris had exchanged a few words after defeating Viscount Sage. They promised to go on another journey together, and the time had come for this oath to be fulfilled.

“Achoo!” Chris sneezed, her sheer joy pushing all of the strength out of her body.

She’d been talking with Ein from the moment she left her bathroom. Her hair was still wet, so that might’ve made her body feel a little chilly. It was a good time to call it a day.

“I wanted to talk with you for a bit longer,” Chris said wistfully.

“If you catch a cold before we head to Syth Mill, you’ll have to stay at home,” Ein warned.

“I can’t have that!”

“I guess I’d be partially to blame if that did happen. It might be a bit too late, but make sure to rest up so that you don’t catch a cold. I’ll tell you once we’ve got a set date.”

Ein patted Chris’s head as he made to leave. She squinted and placed her hand on the spot he had touched. The crown prince was glad; he had touched

her without thinking much of it, yet Chris didn't recoil from him. He then headed for the door, and as he walked out into the corridor, thoughts of Sierra popped into his head.

"It's about time for her to leave," he said to himself.

The elves were surely preparing to leave the royal capital. He wondered if he should tell them of his decision to visit Syth Mill as it'd probably be rude to randomly appear without warning. He'd need to ask Silverd about it just in case, but it didn't seem like a major issue.

With a new goal in mind, Ein headed back to his room. He stared out of his window and took in the view—there wasn't a single cloud to be seen in the deep blue sky. He let out a small yawn as he enjoyed the beautiful vista spread out before him.

Chapter Four: Her Birthplace

“Never let your guard down, Ein,” Silverd warned.

“I ask the same of you as well,” Warren added. “Please do be careful.”

It’d been a week since Ein had written up the itinerary for his departure from Kingsland. As the day of the voyage had arrived, the pair of elder statesmen looked on at him with great concern. Within the grand halls of White Night, the prince stood in front of a wooden box. He reassured the duo and turned around, his eyes narrowing due to the sunlight that spilled in through a nearby window.

“If anything, I’m more worried about losing my lunch while I’m carried around in this crate,” Ein said.

“Ha ha ha!” Silverd guffawed. “I’ve heard that you can get out once you’re aboard the water train. You should be able to move freely when you get closer to Syth Mill.”

“Knowing that puts me at ease. I suppose I’ll just have to deal with it until I’m on the train.”

As he was slipping out of the capital in secret, it was only natural for Ein to face this inconvenience. However, he felt guilty about forcing Krone, Chris, and Dill into the very same cramped wooden crates.

“I’ll be sure to hear the chief out,” Ein said.

“Very good,” Silverd replied before lowering his voice to a whisper. “Be sure to ask about *that* too.”

On a surface level, it appeared that Ein was only traveling to Syth Mill to learn about the red foxes. However, the boy and his grandfather had questions regarding the first king and his ties to the Demon Lord’s former domain. But that was not all, as Ein had one more question floating around his mind: *I need to ask about the Wernsteins*.

He'd yet to speak to the king about this matter, but Ein planned to report back at the very instant he learned something. The boy wanted to hear the chief answer this question herself.

"Speaking of, were you against my visit to Syth Mill, Warren?" Ein asked.

"Not at all," the chancellor replied. "In fact, I was for it."

"Only Olivia was against your trip," Silverd added. "But you know as well as I do, she's always against being apart from you."

"It's just as His Majesty says. I'll admit that it was surprising to hear that he'd sent a letter to the elven chief, but that's it. I believe you should meet with her."

The chancellor could only say that due to the chief's seemingly close relationship with the first king. Given that Ein greatly admired Ishtarica's first monarch, Warren was keen to push the boy in hopes that he'd live up to the hero's legacy.

"Ein," a voice called. At the same time, the boy felt a warm touch on his back.

"Mother," Ein replied. "Did you come to see me off?"

"Of course. We won't be able to see one another for a little while. Up until a few moments ago, I was trying to think of a reason that'd allow me to accompany you."

"And I hope you've given up on that endeavor?" Silverd asked.

"Unfortunately, I've been left with no other choice this time."

If Olivia was being serious, she'd be tagging along without further questions. After all, she was the very same woman who arranged a secret trade agreement with Euro while alone in Heim. Clearly, she wasn't one to be underestimated. Krone and Chris appeared soon after, fully prepared to leave.

"I'll buy you a souvenir," Ein said. "Is there anything you would like?"

"I'm fine with anything," Silverd replied.

"And the same goes for me," Olivia said. "But let's see... If you manage to pick up any intriguing stories about our dear Chris, I'd love to hear them."

The knight briefly gasped in astonishment and feebly said, “Please go easy on me.”

“Now then, Ein,” Silverd said solemnly, turning to the boy. “As I’ve said many times before, Syth Mill is home to the elven holy grounds. They prevent evil from entering the village, but that same powerful presence prevents any sort of magic from entering from outside; this includes our message birds. I’d like you to keep in mind that our communication will be completely cut off, even in the event of an emergency. With that said, ensure that you don’t overstay your welcome. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Ein replied. “If anything happens, Dill will bring the knights to Syth Mill, correct?”

“Exactly so. We’ve already arranged for that.”

“I’ll be fine. I don’t plan to push my luck.”

“I certainly hope so, but I find it difficult to trust you after looking back upon your prior actions.”

Ein gave a forced smile while Olivia, who was glued to his back, let out an adorable giggle.

“Now then, I suppose I shall take my leave,” Warren replied, standing up.

“Work, I presume?” Silverd asked.

“Indeed. I’ve dispatched Lily to Heim today, you see. While we’ve concluded our meeting and have ended our relationship on amicable terms, I believe it wouldn’t hurt us to be cautious. I’ve ordered her to conduct a small investigation.”

Was the chancellor being merciless or simply careful? Who could say? A torrent of thoughts was hidden behind his kind smile.

“Sir Ein, I wish you a safe journey,” the chancellor said.

It was at that moment that Graff arrived, signaling that it was time for the prince’s departure. Ein received one last tight hug from Olivia before he hopped into his wooden crate. This uncomfortable vessel was just big enough to fit someone inside, but at least it provided enough room for the prince to stretch

his legs out. *I must be the first crown prince who's twice stowed away in a wooden box.* He thought back to when he'd been smuggled into Ist's Tower of Wisdom. He wasn't exactly thrilled about becoming accustomed to this sort of thing. *What should I do about my jacket?*

Thinking that it'd be cold outside, Ein had brought a jacket along with him. He tried to gauge the temperature by glancing at the light that peaked in through the gaps between the boards, but he was quickly taken off guard by a loud clatter. Krone was climbing into his box.

"I'm sorry, could you scoot over a little?" Krone asked.

"Wait a second, are we traveling in the same box?" Ein asked.

She immediately nodded. Ein remembered that there were several wooden crates outside. *Why's she in this one?*

"You see, we made a small miscalculation," Krone said as though she read his mind. "We might have packed a few too many things into the other boxes, so there wasn't much room left for me to squeeze myself into one."

"What?" Ein asked. "*You* made a mistake like that?"

"Yes, I did." Ein fell silent as she quickly added, "I'm speaking the truth. It was a small error on my part."

In clear contrast to her words, it was quite obvious that she'd done this on purpose. Ein tried to free up some room by cramming himself into a corner. While the crate was a decent fit for one person, it'd be a tight fit with two inside. If they were still a pair of little kids, they might have been able to squeeze themselves in, but they were a bit bigger these days.

"Well, we'll be apart for a while, so..." Krone mumbled childishly. It was unusual for her to take this tone as she revealed her simple scheme. It wasn't difficult to see right through it.

Despite her wishes, she noticed that the box was far smaller than she'd anticipated; it'd be no small feat to fit both of them inside. She reluctantly decided to give up this time when Ein called out.

"Hey," he said. He wasn't a fan of seeing her look so defeated. It wasn't an

ideal solution, but there was one way she'd fit. "If you don't mind sitting here..."

Even though he was a little hesitant to recommend this position, it was the only place left—right in front of him. He timidly made his offer, embarrassed to do it at all. As Ein shifted his body, he made just enough room for her to sit right between his legs. That was the only place he could find for her.

"Are you sure?" Krone asked.

"If you are," Ein replied.

His adviser was a touch nervous, thinking that she'd be leaning on him a bit too much. However, Ein gave her one last push.

"C'mon, over here," he said.

The gentle tone of his voice would have made anyone take up his kind offer without any further questions.

"Then pardon my intrusion..." Krone said meekly.

The crown prince chuckled. "Heh, intrusion? What's that about?"

"H-Hey, I didn't expect this to happen either, okay?!"

She sat between his legs and pouted just a little, but she soon leaned back onto him. She kept her head down, trying to hide the delighted expression on her face.

"Why don't you use this too?" Ein said, offering the jacket he'd brought with him. "I think you'll keep me warm just fine, so you can use it as a lap blanket or something."

"Thank you," Krone said.

Obediently following his suggestion, she spread out the jacket in front of her and used it to cover her legs.



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Just as Silverd had said, it took the prince's party a day and a half to reach their destination from Kingsland. The water train's route took the group northwest, farther to the west than Ist and south of Barth. The following evening, the water train arrived at a frontier city on the outskirts of Syth Mill.

The next morning, the group stood before the forest's entrance, which was directly connected to the elven village. The party noticed that they were surrounded by tall trees they'd never seen before.

With autumn right around the corner, most mornings were still rather dark. The party had some time to spare before the sunrise. In addition, they were in a countryside town with vast pastures—there wasn't much light to go around.

"Sir Ein, we'll set up camp and wait for you here," Dill said as though nothing was wrong.

The other Knights Guard members nodded along. Ein wanted them to rest in the city, but he managed to stay silent. The prince had been arguing with his knights about it the entire time, but they refused to listen.

"Father told me that this should be a part of our training," Dill reasoned. "This shall be a perfect opportunity for knights like us, so we'll be camping out without relying on any magical tools. We'll also be completely self-sufficient, including food."

"So stalwart," Ein said in awe.

The prince was no longer clad in his royal regalia, but rather a set of stretchy clothing that made it a bit easier to navigate the mountainous terrain ahead of him. In fact, Ein found his current outfit to be way more comfortable than the stuffy robes he'd worn while running around Ist. Chris was dressed similarly and had a massive bag slung across her back.

"I'm honored to receive such praise," Dill replied. "Should we receive any word from Kingsland, we'll prepare to head to Syth Mill immediately. We'll earn the Elves' ire, but rest assured; we'll tell them that this is an emergency."

"Don't push yourself too far," Ein said. "I'm begging you."

“We’re not pushing anything at all. A place to sleep and enough food to satisfy our appetites are more than enough. This is not at all inconvenient for us.”

The rest of the Knights Guard nodded along, some of them comparing it to the harsh training they’d received in the past. Dill had apparently joined the knights in a backwater region for intense survival training. Back then, they’d had no more than the clothes on their back while facing far more severe circumstances. Their current situation was much less onerous in comparison.

“Do be careful,” the young Gracier said.

“Thanks, Dill,” Ein replied. “You be careful of bandits too.”

The joke went over well with the knights; the burly warriors laughed before they parted ways with their prince. With Chris by his side, Ein stepped into the forest.

The voices that he’d heard mere moments ago seemingly vanished as the trees surrounding him grew taller still. The trees’ thick and gnarly trunks welcomed the pair of visitors into their domain. When combined with poorly maintained trails to the village, the dense foliage made it hard for the duo to see where they were going.

“I’m counting on you, Chris,” Ein said. “You’re my guide.”

“Of course! Leave that bit to me!” Chris replied immediately. Her lack of hesitation made her seem rather reliable in this situation. One could see the high level of care and kindness she showed her prince as she occasionally checked to make sure he hadn’t lost his footing.

“What’s this tall tree called?”

“That’s a pillar tree. When it matures, it grows several times larger than the ones around it.”

“Awesome... I wonder what its lifespan is.”

“A big tree like this can easily live over a millennium. While this tree isn’t quite so old, it reminds me of another species that usually lives for about five thousand years.”

“I guess I should expect no less from the Elves’ homeland. Consider my expectations blown out of the water.”

Chris was walking ahead of Ein, but she quickly turned around, delighted to hear her prince’s amazement. While there wasn’t a paved road to be seen throughout the forest, the elf skillfully and gracefully walked ahead, occasionally bending her body at the waist to dodge the oncoming foliage.

“If you go deeper into the forest, you’ll be sure to find many more interesting discoveries waiting for you,” she said.

“That’s good to hear,” Ein replied. “I’m looking forward to it.”

They still had a long way to go before they reached Syth Mill, so there was no harm in enjoying the walk there.

If Ein hadn’t made his arduous trek to the Demon Castle last winter, he probably would’ve already asked to take a break. But after trudging through those snow drifts, walking through the mud was a cakewalk for him. Unexpectedly, the prince was having a better time than he thought he would have. He proceeded to breathe a sigh of relief, thankful that he didn’t need to ask Chris to slow down.

“You seem to still be quite fine, Sir Ein,” Chris pointed out.

“For now,” he replied. “The journey to the Demon Lord’s former territory was worse, so I can still walk for a while longer.”

Sunlight trickled in between the foliage from above. It had been dark when they’d left Dill and the knights, but the sun was already climbing high in the sky. In contrast, the forest was still quite dark and carried a touch of creepiness to it. The forest seemingly went on for forever, making the stagnate scenery a tad boring to keep walking through.

“It looks the same anywhere I go,” Ein said. “You’ve never been lost walking around here, have you?”

“Oh, not here,” Chris replied.

“That’s good to hear. Wait, ‘here’?”

“Ah, look! We’ve reached the valley! We’ll be crossing that bridge!”

Ein started to feel anxious. “No, I’ll be okay, this is all part of training,” he reassured himself.

But I’m still nervous. However, it wasn’t all bad that the pair was traveling alone. Even if they got lost, Ein felt as if he could enjoy the moment.

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As Chris had promised, a whole host of fascinating organisms awaited his arrival. Once they crossed the valley bridge, Ein discovered a collection of pillar trees—unlike the ones he’d seen before. Some trees featured broad and emerald green leaves while others had gnarled branches. The light that peeked through the canopy had taken on the foliage’s green and blue hues, giving it a divine appearance.

“I haven’t seen any of these before,” Ein remarked.

Chris giggled. “Are you having fun?”

“Tons. I feel like I came here as a tourist.”

The forest air was crisp and refreshing. In fact, whenever he took a deep breath, Ein could feel the clean air circulating through his body. His legs were getting tired, but the cool breeze allowed him to stay on his feet. When he closed his eyes, he could hear the sound of running water. He opened them once more to discover colorful fish swimming in the limpid stream of water nearby. He poked an aquatic plant, which faintly glimmered under the water’s surface.

“Why’s it glowing?” Ein asked.

“Oh, you mean the fish?” Chris replied. “It has absorbed the magical energy within the water.”

“It feels like I’m walking through uncharted territory. It’s so mystical.”

“Ah ha ha, I don’t deny that.” Ein wasn’t all wrong. Chris paused and continued, “If we’re this far out, we’re practically in Syth Mill. We just need to reach the elven village now.”

She made it sound easy, but the pair were not on a short hike. It was still before noon.

“We’ve still got a ways to go before we’re halfway there,” Ein observed.

“At the rate we’re going, we’re almost there actually,” Chris replied. “We’ve been walking along quite quickly and you don’t appear to be tired at all, Sir Ein. You’re practically walking at an elven pace.”

“I’m glad to know that I’m not slowing you down.”

Even as he started to walk even faster, Ein still had enough energy to crack a joke. He really wasn’t tiring as he thought he would.

“It all feels so nostalgic,” Ein said. “And yet, I’ve never been here before.”

“Oh, maybe you feel a sense of familiarity thanks to your Dryad heritage.”

Maybe. Ein nodded and glanced around. The forest had made him so oddly comfortable, he felt could fall asleep if he closed his eyes.

The pair kept walking without much talking as the silence around them was comforting. They’d stopped for a quick lunch break, but that was it. They spent the rest of their time quietly traversing the forest, and before they knew it, a few hours had passed.

“Sir Ein,” Chris said, suddenly stopping in place. She turned around with a huge smile on her face. “We’ve arrived at somewhere special, even within Syth Mill.”

The dense foliage gave way to a clearing in the middle of the forest. There was a small creek right next to Ein and a large spring upstream. A massive tree stood in the center and spread its branches, providing shade from the sun’s rays. The crown prince had been surprised by all sorts of sights today, but he’d never seen anything like this.

“Amazing...” he managed to say as he took in the breathtaking view.

It looked like paradise; brilliantly colored birds flew around the tree, and plump, ripe fruit hung from its branches. Ein’s eye was especially taken with the gentle, orange glow of the fruit—their vibrant hues breaking up the sea of green that surrounded them. But that wasn’t all. At the bottom of the crystal clear spring, there were aquatic plants that faintly glimmered a pale blue.

“This is called a sun tree,” Chris explained. “Its fruit is filled with magical

energy, and their magic starts oozing out when they fall into the water."

And this was how magical water was created. As it passed through Syth Mill, the creek gave birth to lush greenery to the world around it. Just then, Ein noticed a ripple in the spring.

"Ah, it seems like a fruit just fell," Chris noted.

The fruit floated down the creek, appearing right at the pair's feet. It was about as large as the ripple Ein had picked from the tree he created in Magna, but it resembled a grape. Chris scooped the fruit from the water as its glow flickered like a firefly.

"Are you sure we can take it?" Ein asked.

"Just one shouldn't be an issue," Chris replied.

She used her rapier to slice the fruit in two, revealing succulent, orange flesh as the juice dripped down her hand. Its sweet aroma tickled Ein's nose, the fruit's flesh looking so soft and plump that it was sure to melt away in his mouth. The crown prince couldn't help but gulp.

"Shall we take a bite?" the knight suggested.

There was no way he'd say no to this opportunity. When Ein bit down, the fruit was more fragrant than he thought. His ripples were of excellent quality, but this fruit was equally as excellent. *I never thought there'd be a place like this,* he thought.

Ein glanced at his surroundings as he indulged in the fruit's delicious flavors. He could see unknown plants growing around the spring. They were of various colors: white, blue, and vibrant purple. Some had tips that were curled into little balls while others had vines that grew wildly, wrapping themselves around the tree's trunk. Needless to say, they were all unique in their own way. The tree's exposed roots were covered in moss, welcoming a handful of breathtaking butterflies that had stopped by to take a rest. Ein could see several kinds of small fish swimming under the water's surface; the very same creatures he'd first encountered at the start of his journey. *This forest is brimming with magical energy thanks to the sun tree.* He wanted to take a better look at the aquatic plants too.

“Um, could I go and take a closer look at the aquatic plants?” Ein asked.

“Certainly,” Chris replied. “But are you planning on getting into the water?”

“Yeah. I’ll just roll up my clothes. I won’t get too wet.”

“You mustn’t. I’ll get it for you, so please sit back here.”

Ein wasn’t allowed to step into the water. Chris set her bag onto the ground, rolled up her pant legs to reveal her pale calves, and stepped into the spring.

“The water’s a little cold,” she noted, flashing a bashful smile as she sighed. She searched for an aquatic plant and conveniently found one on the water’s surface. This plant recently had its roots nibbled away by a fish. “This one has a magic stone too, so it might be perfect.”

“Huh?!” Ein gasped. He perked up, unable to believe what he’d just heard.

“Perhaps because so much magical energy accumulates here, aquatic plants found in the sun tree’s spring tend to have magic stones inside them.”

Upon closer inspection, one could see that there was indeed a magic stone embedded in the plant’s tip. This particular stone gave off a pale blue glow. The surface of the stone was like a well-polished crystal ball, slick to the touch.

“Thanks for telling me,” Ein said. “Magic stones, huh...” There was only one thought in his mind.

“Sir Ein, you don’t mean...”

“Yeah, let’s see if I can absorb it.”

He removed the magic stone from the plant and placed it in his palm. Upon using Toxin Decomposition and Absorb, Ein felt a refreshing sensation course through his body. His whole being felt hydrated and cooled as if the water’s blessing had seeped into his bones. While it had no taste, the magical energy within the stone was like a concentrated version of both the forest’s crisp air and spring’s fresh water. The exhaustion that had gripped his body was stripped away in a flash, and even his vision cleared up. The colors surrounding Ein now popped out more vibrantly to him.

“How was it?” Chris asked.

“I’ve only reconfirmed how amazing this forest is,” Ein replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m glad if it suits your tastes.”

Describing this stone as “delicious” didn’t seem apt. The air certainly was, and Ein couldn’t find any other words to describe this sensation.

“I could live here,” Ein declared.

“You won’t,” Chris firmly replied. “Let’s head out.”

“Darn, that’s so frustrating to hear.”

“Huh? Why do you sound so displeased?”

“I’m kidding. I am truly glad that I’m able to visit Syth Mill.”

Chris might’ve lost her chance to hear of the stone’s taste, but she was more than delighted with this answer. She cracked a calm smile, happy to hear that her birthplace had been praised so highly.

“All right, let’s go,” Ein said.

The prince wanted to soak in the sights for a bit longer, but he had business to tend to. Chris nodded energetically and agreed with the prince before she walked ahead, pointing towards the depths of Syth Mill—where the elf chief awaited them.

It’d been a few hours since they walked upstream from the spring. Trees surrounded them from all sides as they approached a slope. It’d been a while since the two had been in direct sunlight.

“Ah,” Chris said with a gasp of realization as they approached the slope. “Look. It seems she came for you, Sir Ein.”

He’d just met her the other day in Kingsland, but Sierra was waiting for them at the end of the slope. There weren’t just warriors present; she was accompanied by a lively assortment of women.

“Welcome to Syth Mill, a sacred mountain free from defilement,” Sierra said. “I’m glad to see you here.”

“Yep, as promised,” Ein replied.

“I’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Right this way, please. We Elves

welcome the noble one’s visit with open arms.”

Just then, the trees started to rustle. The rustling wasn’t ominous, and instead they shook serenely. It was as though the greenery was giving a round of applause in celebration of the crown prince’s arrival. A single breeze blew through them, carrying the voice of a little girl. She was giggling.

“The tree spirits have seemed to welcome as well, Your Highness,” Sierra noted.

“I’m happy to hear the warm welcome, but what are tree spirits?” Ein asked.

“They’re so rare that even we Elves might never see one over the course of our long lives. They don’t like to appear in front of others.”

“That’s amazing.”

Something was lying in wait for him in this village. Ein’s heart was brimming with anticipation as he secretly let out a faint sigh.

Chapter Five: Heim and Assassination

While Ein was walking into Syth Mill, Krone remained in the city. She sat in a room of her own provided by Agustos Trading Firm, enjoying a spot of tea while gazing out through a nearby window and into the evening sky. In a rare sight, Krone clutched her knees atop her chair as she placed Ein's jacket on top of them.

"I wonder what he's doing right now," she muttered to herself, her mind filled with thoughts of her beloved.

There was a knock on the door, and Krone allowed her visitor to enter. Graff opened the door and stepped into her room.

"As usual, the efficiency and quality of your work is most superb," her grandfather remarked.

"I'm honored to receive such praise," Krone replied.

"Your handwriting is also simply enchanting. It's better than before."

"I've been practicing to ensure that no one complains about my letters."

She was referring back to the meeting with Heim, when Tiggle had cynically grumbled about her handwriting. His callous words had pushed her to refine her talents to an even finer point. She didn't feel too bad knowing that her hard work showed.

"Have you finished with your work, grandfather?" she asked.

"Just did," Graff replied, taking a seat beside his precious granddaughter. "A lovely aroma."

"Recently, Belia has been teaching me how to pour tea."

"Ah... If memory serves, she must be the servant whom Her Highness refers to as 'Nanny.'"

"That's right. She's been serving Ishtarica for many years, much like Sir

Warren.”

“You’ve got a splendid teacher, then. Hmm, may I ask for a cup as well?”

Krone gladly agreed and provided her grandfather with a cup. When he took a sip, he quickly smacked his lips with satisfaction. Upon discussing Krone’s handwriting, he remembered a letter of his own.

“I suppose my letter should arrive soon,” Graff said. He couldn’t remember exactly when he did it, but he’d sent a letter to Heim via Euro.

“You’re right,” Krone replied. “I’m sure it’s arrived at House August by now.”

“This is your father we’re talking about. I wouldn’t be surprised if he caused a fuss over it.”

She chuckled. “Indeed, that’s just like him.” The two turned to each other and let out a faint laugh as their thoughts went out to their family across the sea. “Mother will surely scold him, but since she’s a kind soul, I’m sure she’ll assure him that she empathizes.”

“Oh, I’ve seen that scene countless times before.”

As the curtain of night started to fall, the former-Augusts enjoyed speaking of their family.

True to the pair’s collective hunch, the scene they’d anticipated ended up playing out within House August’s halls. Elena had finished her work for the day, unusually returning home just as the sun set. As soon as she opened the door to her home, the noblewoman discovered her husband jumping for joy; a rather unsightly act for his age.

“I’ve received a letter from Krone!” Harley cried with delight. “A letter that she personally wrote to me! Finally!”

With the letter in hand, he danced a little jig before he went to embrace Elena. She could certainly empathize with him. It’d been many years since he’d received a letter from his daughter, especially one she had written herself. Unlike Elena, who’d recently seen her daughter in person, letters were the only way Harley could communicate with the girl. Certainly, Elena could empathize, but...

“I understand your feelings, but you’re a full-grown man for Heim’s sake!” she scolded. “Don’t make such a fuss over it!”

She shared in his joy, but her husband’s enthusiasm was way too much for someone who had just come home from a tiring day of work. Elena gave her bag to a servant before she tugged on her husband’s large hand, pulling him towards her office deep within the manor. *I feel like he’s lost his composure ever since father relinquished his title,* she thought.

“Elena, is something wrong?” Harley asked.

“I feel like you’ve been restless these days,” she replied. “If presented with the opportunity, it might be best if grandfather takes the time to reeducate you.”

“Can’t you give me a break?”

Since when had he been led around the nose? “From the start” was the only acceptable answer to this question. However, this couple had always been a perfect match.

As the former Grand Duke’s son, Harley was affable and quite good at what he did. In fact, he was well-liked by many people. However, if one were to put a negative spin on Harley’s qualities, he lacked the formidability most would expect from a noble. On the other hand, Elena was a bit too unyielding; thus the pair could make up for each other’s shortcomings. Within social circles, their intimacy was widely known and Elena often heard people speak of it.

She dragged her husband to her office and opened the door.

“Come now, step inside and show me the letter,” she said.

“R-Right! Yeah!” Harley cried. “I haven’t read it yet, to tell you the truth! Take a look! It hasn’t even been unsealed yet!”

Elena cracked a smile at her husband’s thoughtfulness and glanced at the letter in his hand. A sofa seemed like a perfect place to start reading. This had nothing to do with work, and it didn’t hurt to sit down and take a few moments.

“Dear,” Elena said, encouraging her husband to join her on the sofa.

They sat down and she placed her hand over the seal. The envelope looked

normal, and the letter inside was written on cheap paper.

“Did we make her too considerate of us?” Harley asked.

“But it’s very useful in this situation,” Elena pointed out. “If the envelope were too luxurious, her letter might’ve been altered.”

The two tried to remain calm, but their hearts were eagerly set on trying to read their daughter’s words. Elena’s fingertips were more restless than usual as she hastily removed the letter from the envelope before opening it. The pair had their eyes glued to their daughter’s handwriting.

A few minutes passed by as they silently read through the letter.

“My father is truly an amazing man,” Harley said. “I’m sure he wanted Krone to live a good life, and he might’ve fallen into a blessed situation, but I’m often scared to hear just how successful my father’s been in Ishtarica. He’s terrifying.” Harley had heard scant tidbits regarding the current state of his father’s affairs, but he still couldn’t hide his awe.

“But this certainly poses a problem...” Elena muttered.

“I feel the same. Ever since father left, the trading industry that Heim’s so proud of ended up stagnating.”

The kingdom’s beloved “Champion of Trade” was now long gone. The loss of such a talent had dealt a huge blow to Heim. Graff’s success in Ishtarica was precisely because he was so skilled at his trade.

“This nation is too small for the likes of grandfather and Krone,” Elena mused.

“Still, our nation is supposed to be sitting at the top of this continent,” Harley pointed out.

The two continued to read the letter. They went through it several times, hoping to not miss a single detail. Krone spoke of her daily life in the castle alongside her duties as Ein’s adviser. She only shared information that she’d been permitted to give out, and even said a thing or two about her beloved. As Krone’s parents, they celebrated their daughter’s newfound maturity, even as she remained a child in their minds. The last line of her letter read, “I hope we can sit down for a meal again, as a family.”

“Indeed, I’d very much like that,” Elena said. “Sitting around the same table for a meal.”

“Yeah,” Harley agreed. “I don’t know how many years it’ll take, but I’d love to meet Krone’s beloved too.”

“I wonder if we can.”

“It’s difficult. We’re up against the crown prince.”

“Shall we aimlessly wander around the city? Perhaps he’ll introduce us to lodging.”

Filled with hope for the future, Elena told Harley the humorous tale of her time in Magna.

Once the letter was thoroughly perused, Elena stretched out. The exhaustion from her long day at work was starting to catch up with her.

“Mmm! If nothing was going on, I would’ve been able to head to bed with happy thoughts,” she said.

“I’m worried about *that* as well,” Harley replied. “Personally, I’m also worried about the third prince.”

“His Highness is certainly one to worry about, but this is more important right now.”

While Third Prince Tiggle von Heim wasn’t in a complete stupor, he spent his days as a lifeless shadow of his past self. He’d become uncharacteristically quiet since the meeting with Ishtarica. It’d been over a month since, but there were no signs of his recovery, leaving many to worry about him. As the favorite to lead Heim as its future king, Tiggle was well regarded by those within the castle, a fact far beyond Ishtarica’s expectations. Needless to say, Elena also looked favorably upon the boy, but she currently didn’t have the leeway to contemplate his current state.

“The kidnapping situation is far more dire,” she reasoned, revealing what was on her mind. “Before I left the castle, I received reports on the eighth victim.”

“Eighth...” Harley said pensively. “Does the victim have a rank?”

“They hail from the house of a count.” She dug around in her pockets and

produced a report for Harley to read.

“A series of kidnappings that pays no regard to the rank of nobles... This is absolutely atrocious. It’s an act unheard of within the history of Heim.”

“There are rumors that it must be a part of the factional dispute going on within the castle’s walls, but still, this is taking things too far.”

The report detailed the kidnapping of a noble’s eldest son, who was the heir to his house. Even if it happened only once, the horrific news of an aristocratic kidnapping was guaranteed to cause an uproar. However, the perpetrator had done it eight times in a row.

“There are a few aristocrats blaming Ishtarica for this,” Harley said.

“How foolish,” Elena replied. “Can’t they see that this doesn’t benefit Ishtarica at all? I hope those rumors can be laid to rest soon.”

“I’m doing my best to extinguish those flames, but doubt only gives birth to more doubt.”

“It’s all very silly... Right after we finally managed to avoid a war with them.”

However, Elena could see where the rumors were coming from. It hadn’t been long since Heim had buried the hatchet with Ishtarica.

Suddenly, there was a frantic pounding on the door. The two glanced at the door dubiously and Harley stood up.

“I’ll get it,” he said.

The moment he opened the door, a breathless member of House August’s private army barged in.

“I apologize for my insolence!” he cried. “Your presence is required at the castle immediately!”

“H-How sudden. Whatever is the matter?” Harley inquired.

The soldier caught his breath, his face filled with dread. “Th-The second prince...”

Harley and Elena both turned white as a sheet after the soldier finished his sentence.

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The continent's champion, Heim, was rather proud of its mighty castle. Elena rushed to the castle's audience room with Harley by her side. But after a few moments, the nobleman suddenly grasped the gravity of the situation and veered off to handle his own duties.

Once the sight before her entered her view, Elena found herself at a loss for words. The bright light spilling into the room highlighted the luxurious and gold-embroidered plush carpet that sat atop the glistening marble flooring. Heim's royal family had spared no expense to transform their beloved audience room into a shining example of their kingdom's wealth and prosperity. At the room's center sat an equally lavish casket. Elena could hardly believe it.

"Ah! Why?!" Garland wept, crumpling to the ground as he leaned over the casket. "My beloved son! Why?!"

The king clung to the casket, the home to a partially dismembered corpse. What remained of the body was dressed in the most opulent attire possible, and any missing body parts had been given wooden replacements. There was no mistaking that this corpse was once a prince.

"Brother! Brother!" Tiggle sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks while he stood across from his father.

Rayfon stood a few paces behind his younger brother. Even he looked dejected, his usual confident and audacious demeanor nowhere to be seen as tears formed on the edges of his eyes. Who could blame them? They were mourning the loss of their beloved brother, the second prince. While the royal family drowned in their sorrow, Garland's anticipated guest had arrived.

"Your Majesty! Sir Rogas has arrived!" a knight bellowed. The knight had forgotten to bow and pay his respects, but no one could bear to point it out.

A ray of hope glimmered upon Garland's tear-stained face as he lifelessly stumbled to meet his guest. "Rogas! Rogas!" he cried.

The general jogged over to his king's side. "Pardon my delay, Your Majesty."

"Th-Thank you. Thank you for coming!"

Garland welcomed the general before guiding him to the second prince's casket. While Rogas appeared to be completely exhausted, he allowed himself to be led to the remains. As the grief visibly overwhelmed him, the general found himself falling to his knees. He peered into the casket through the glass, closed his eyes, and pursed his lips tightly.

"Your Highness, how could someone such as you meet such a premature end?!" Rogas said.

"Indeed! Quite so!" Garland sobbed. "Why was my child robbed of his life?! Why?! How could this happen?!"

"Pardon my impertinence, Your Majesty, but I heard that His Highness was found in his room. What in the world were his guards doing?"

"How should I know?! Everyone was killed, without exception!"

Rogas simply couldn't understand. If an enemy had gone through the trouble of sneaking into the castle just to assassinate a royal, why not make it the king? This also begged the question: why the second prince specifically? Surely, Rayfon or Tiggle would've been a better target, especially since the latter was the favorite to take the throne.

It could've been the result of a personal grudge, but that was a difficult assumption to make. While the second prince might have never unified his people, he wasn't one to make enemies. It was also unlikely that his brothers would've put a price on his life. Tiggle was far and away the people's choice to be the next king, but his older brothers had never issued a word of protest. The remaining brothers simply had no reason to kill the second prince. Another concerning point was the skill of this assassin. They had managed to infiltrate the castle, successfully assassinate the prince, murder countless knights, and vanish without a trace.

"Did Ishtarica do this?!" Garland cried. "Did Ishtarica kill my son?!"

Rogas suspected them as well, but there were still holes to be poked in the king's accusation. "Your Majesty, I don't believe Ishtarica is to blame. They have no need to order an assassination; all they have to do is declare war and wipe us out."

“Then who’s behind this?! Who did this?! Who could possibly put our lives in their crosshairs?!”

“I...don’t know.” But Rogas knew what next steps to take. “We’re currently looking for the suspect. Please grant us some time to complete our search.”

“Rogas... I knew that I could rely on you more than anyone else.”

“You’re too kind, Your Majesty. However, there’s one decision we must make.” Rogas clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug through his skin. His face was awash with hatred like never before as he uttered the words, “If another nation is responsible for this act, how will we deal with them?”

While Rogas already had his answer, he needed to hear those words come straight from the king himself.

“But of course!” Garland bellowed. “We’ll tear them apart, just as they murdered my son! Eviscerate them!”

“Exactly,” Rogas replied. “Our grand kingdom will *never* forgive those responsible. We’ll chase them down and hoist up their head for the world to see.”

“That’s right! Precisely so!”

“Your Majesty, I humbly request that you leave this matter to me. This continent will have no stone left unturned until I find the villain responsible for this.”

“Ah, Rogas! I’ll leave it all to you! You may have full command of my army. So please, I beg you! Avenge my son, avenge my family, avenge us!”

And with his king’s word, Rogas had just been given full command over Heim’s army.

“Please leave it to me,” Rogas said. “Additionally, Marquess Bruno has offered the full cooperation of his house. We’ll find the culprit as soon as possible!”

“Having the assistance of even young Miss Shannon is relieving to hear. I leave it to you!”

With a sincere expression of gratitude on his face, Garland gave Rogas a firm pat on the shoulder.

Chapter Six: The King's Lineage

Ein noticed that every time he walked past an elf, they would refer to him as the "noble one." The people of Kingsland clearly revered the crown prince, but the level of respect offered to him in Syth Mill seemed to far surpass that. *This is an amazing place, though,* Ein thought.

Compared to the other cities he'd been to, the elves' village had a completely different air about it. The village's main clearing was surrounded by a handful of large trees. From there, the greenery grew however it wished and provided thick, horizontal branches that were perfect to build treehouses upon. These treehouses often had their own wooden ladders for easy entry and exit.

The houses on the ground utilized the trees' thick stumps. Spiral staircases led to many homes dotting the forest canopy alongside a large spring that resided in the heart of the village. The water welling up within this spring apparently flowed into the valley and trickled upon the sun tree.

The last place for Ein to visit was the chief manor, a massive residence in the depths of the village. It looked like a colossal tree stump that was about a hundred meters wide. Sierra explained that her grandmother had hollowed out a section of the stump to build her home.

"We have a room prepared for you inside," she added.

Ein shook his head and refused. "I'm fine, I'll be staying at Chris's house."

Silverd had made this suggestion as a safety precaution, to which Chris agreed. This wasn't a decision made by Ein alone.

"I'd like to visit the chief's manor following dinner," Ein said. "Is it all right if we arrive at night?"

"Certainly," Sierra replied. "I'll be sure to tell the chief."

The trio parted ways and Chris guided Ein to her home.

***

Chris's house was on the outskirts of the village. Made out of a stump that was around the size of a normal house, the knight's humble abode had a flight of wooden stairs that led up to the entrance. The adorably thick and round wooden door let out a loud creak as Chris opened it. The setting sun trickled in through a nearby window, dimly illuminating the interior.

"I'll make it brighter," Chris said.

Obviously familiar with her surroundings, Chris touched a nearby crystal ball. At that very moment, the light hanging from the ceiling, along with the surrounding lamps, proceeded to glow.

"That's a magical tool, isn't it?" Ein asked.

"That's right," Chris nodded. "My sister and I bought a pair of magical tools with our very first paychecks."

"Neat. What's the other one you bought?"

"Uh, let's see... Over there!" She pointed to a wooden box equipped with a couple of suction vents. "Now, that was really expensive. As we were out of the house for long periods of time, we didn't want too many dust bunnies to start popping up. This cleaning tool ensured that."

As she happily spoke about the tool, her gaze softened. She crossed her arms behind her back and hummed a little tune as she walked ahead. She was completely off the clock now. She'd always been lightly equipped regardless of the situation, but this time Chris removed her armor and jacket before hanging it on a wall. The knight was just in her uniform now, and even undid the top button on her shirt.

"No wonder this place looks so neat and tidy," Ein observed.

"Ah ha ha... I certainly wouldn't have agreed to invite you in if it wasn't, Sir Ein," she replied. She turned around and scratched her cheek bashfully, her long golden locks fluttering behind her.

With every step she took, the pleasant sound of her boots knocking against the wooden floor rang out.

"Please sit wherever you wish," she said with a strained smile, encouraging

Ein to take a seat.

“Thank you.”

The main room was warm and comfy, most likely due to its beautiful furnishings made of the finest wood. The orange light soaking into the room made the cozy atmosphere even cozier. The stump at the room’s center was used as a large table. Aside from the several wooden chairs around the stump, there was also a leather sofa nearby.



“Can I sit on your sofa?” he asked.

“Of course. Please wait here. I’ll warm up the meal Martha prepared and bring you something cold to drink.”

“When did you two have time to prepare things like that?”

“Um, I believe she knows that cooking is not exactly my forte. So, I think she was just being considerate.”

Indeed, a woman like Martha couldn’t be underestimated. Ein had a hunch that their meal had been placed in a magical tool for storage before being handed to Chris.

“But don’t worry! Even I know how to warm things up!” she assured. She left the crown prince’s side, walking through a door in a corner of the room and into her kitchen.

By himself for a moment, Ein found himself gazing at the forest’s scenery through the nearby window. Syth Mill’s crimson skies were oddly nostalgic for the prince, putting him at ease. He felt as if the strength in his heart was being refreshed. It seemed like his cozy wait for a meal was the perfect time to take it all in.

“This feels nice,” Ein said, referring to the soft and springy texture of the sofa. “Chris, what’s your sofa made of?”

Chris popped her head out from the kitchen. “Is it to your liking?!”

“Yeah, I like it. In fact, I think it’d be great if we could have something like this in the castle. I’m curious as to what it’s made of.”

“Nothing special or expensive. It’s made from tree sap.”

“Pardon?”

“There’s a type of sap that expands if you heat it up. The sap’s collected, thoroughly cleaned, and has a spell cast on it that causes the material to heat up and expand.”

Like rubber. Though Ein barely remembered his past life, he’d been able to grab the word “rubber” from a fragment that passed through his mind. He was

truly in awe of the Elves' technological advancements.

"I wonder if I could have a chair like this back at the castle," Ein mused.

"Leave it to me! As long as we have the tree sap, I can make it for you!" Chris replied.

It didn't sound like this technology was kept secret. Ein was happy to hear that he'd discovered a souvenir of his own to take home.

"Does that mean you made this sofa too?" he asked.

"Ugh... I know I'm clumsy, but I still tried my best. Please don't look at it too closely."

Awesome. She called herself clumsy, but she neatly sewed some leather together to create this splendid sofa; it showed that she was rather skilled with her hands. His stomach suddenly started to growl as he slumped into the sofa. Even though he was resting, his body was feeling pretty sluggish.

"Maybe I'm more worn out than I thought," he mumbled to himself, sighing.

Slowly, his eyelids grew heavy and started to gradually close as a wave of drowsiness washed over him. They'd been taking breaks in between, but he'd spent half a day navigating unfamiliar terrain. His body was ready to call it a day. In addition, the warmth and kindness emanating from Chris's humble abode had allowed him to relax. The crown prince was tempted to take a short rest after his meal.

"Just a bit longer!" Chris called from the kitchen.

"Okay," Ein replied, slapping his cheeks to keep himself awake.

He needed the hearty meal to replenish his stamina. After all, Ein was starting to grow tense as he prepared for his meeting with the elven chief.

***

After polishing off his meal, Ein took it easy for about an hour before Chris guided him outside. As they were headed straight for the chief's manor, Ein was clad in his mantle and had his jet-black sword affixed to his waist. These small touches helped the prince maintain his serious demeanor as his surroundings changed.

A set of lit torches stood equidistant from each other while the moon above gave off a pale blue glow. Thanks to reflections cast by the spring's surface, the prince's surroundings looked quite mystical. Unlike the early evening, most of the village's residents had cleared out and retired to their homes. Only a few guards and citizens remained outside. The moment they caught sight of Ein, they placed a hand over their chest and bowed. Ein noticed that they'd all placed their hands over the left side of their chests specifically.

"Why do they have their arms over the left side of their chests?" Ein asked.

"It's a gesture of loyalty," Chris replied. "It's not something that friends or family do among themselves. As the left side is opposite to the magic stone on the right, it implies that they're offering you their cores."

"Magic stone... Oh yes, that's right. Elven cores are on the left side."

His left hand remembered the sensation he'd felt a while back, when he was still mulling over King Jayle's gravestone. Chris seemingly read his mind and her face turned beet red.

"Please don't think back to that day," she requested sheepishly. "It's very embarrassing."

Back then, they were both very bold with their actions. He couldn't fault her for still feeling embarrassed about it.

"We're at the entrance to the chief's manor! Over there!" Chris hastily said.

"You're right," Ein replied. "And I see Sierra too."

She was standing at the entrance of the manor, waiting for the two visitors. Beside her stood a brawny, elven man. Clad in leather armor, the man was taller than Ein and had his long, blond hair loosely tied back in a ponytail. But unlike most other elves, he had a greatsword slung on his back.

"Who's that next to you?" Ein asked.

"He's Sylas, the warrior chief," Sierra replied. "He's the strongest within our village."

When staring at her profile, she looked a little reserved; perhaps because she was in front of the chief's residence. Ein wanted to ask if Chris was stronger

than him, but he managed to keep mum.

Several seconds after they walked inside the manor, Sierra said, “Thank you for coming. The chief is waiting for you deeper inside.”

“Thank you,” Ein replied. “I’ll head inside with Chris.”

Chris stepped forward when she was quickly stopped by Sylas.

“Pardon me. You cannot enter quite yet.”

“And why not?” Chris demanded, her words thornier than usual.

“As you may know, Lady Chris, not a single weapon is allowed within the chief’s chamber. I’m terribly sorry, but please allow me to hold on to your weapons.”

Ah, got it. The request seemed logical to him, so Ein placed a hand over his belt to start removing his blade. However, Chris stepped up right next to him and shook her head.

“We cannot abide by those rules this time,” she insisted. “The crown prince will personally be meeting the chief. Within this nation, only His Majesty King Silverd may give an order to the crown prince which he must follow.”

This wasn’t wrong. While the Elves were more or less autonomous, it didn’t mean that their chief outranked the royal family.

“I’m fine,” Ein replied. He had his own share of misgivings about earning the ire of the Elves.

But Chris refused to back down. “This is one thing that I absolutely cannot back down from. It’s my duty to protect you, Sir Ein.” She was right.

“I understand what you’re saying, but our customs are...” Sylas replied. He wanted to follow his tradition and was naturally hesitant about allowing the chief’s guests to keep their weapons.

Ein tried to think of a solution when Sierra cleared her throat. “I shall take responsibility for this.”

“Lady Sierra!” Sylas cried.

“We cannot force them to follow our customs. The crown prince, in

particular, has been welcomed by the tree spirits and was personally invited here by the chief. It'd be rude of us to push our traditional rules upon him."

"Very well," he reluctantly said. "If you say so, then it's not my place to argue this any further."

Sierra led Chris and Ein inside.

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"I know how you feel, but couldn't you have phrased that better?" Sierra asked wearily as the party walked deeper into the manor.

While she'd given Sylas a frank talking-to for his attitude, she also suggested that Chris should've taken a more delicate tone.

"I thought we wouldn't be allowed inside unless I spoke forcefully," Chris replied.

"As I said, I understand how you feel. But I guess I'm at fault too. I knew this was going to happen, so I should've told Sylas that beforehand to avoid the situation entirely. I need to reflect on that."

A heavy silence filled the air. While one friend lived in Kingsland, the other had remained in Syth Mill. The great distance between them had likely changed their values gradually over time. Given their long-standing relationship, Sierra wasn't keen on creating any unnecessary friction.

Ein decided to break the tension. "The woody aroma of this manor is quite pleasant."

He wasn't lying either. As the manor's wonderful scent implied, its high ceilings and wide corridors were all made of wood. He felt as if he was taking a pleasant stroll through the forest. The prince's carefree remark had gone a long way towards calming down the ladies.

Sierra chuckled. "Your Highness, the chief awaits you in that room over there."

As they continued down the wide corridor, Ein noticed a colossal yet regal set of double doors at the end of the hall. The chief was waiting for him behind those very doors.

“Chris and I’ll be standing guard outside,” Sierra said. “If you require any assistance, please feel free to let us know.”

“Understood,” Ein replied. “Then I’ll see you later, Chris.”

Ein left Chris’s side and stepped forward to face the doors. There was no one else nearby to open these thick and heavy doors for him. It actually reminded him a bit of the entrance to the audience room back home. When Ein placed his hand over the doors, he didn’t feel their hefty weight at all. But he did feel a touch of magical energy, leading him to surmise that he must’ve interacted with a magical tool.

Once the doors were open, he was greeted inside by the chief. She sat atop a plush carpet at the center of the room with a tall, semicircular ceiling over her head. It was clear that she was rather elderly, but it didn’t look like she’d been around for several centuries. The chief looked to be around seventy to eighty years of age, and she sat tall with her gray hair tied back using a piece of string. It didn’t look like age had gotten to her yet. While Ein was certainly stunned by her appearance, she, in turn, looked equally astonished.

She outstretched her arms as though to grab onto him before she gasped in surprise and held herself back. Her lips trembled ever so slightly as she somberly shifted her gaze to the ground. *What just happened?* Ein couldn’t help but have his doubts as he approached the carpet that she sat upon.

The chief kept her gaze down and breathed deeply as Ein gingerly closed the gap between them. When he finally stopped before her, she slowly opened her eyes.

“I’m sure this was an arduous journey for you,” she said, trying to offer him words of comfort.

“I thank you for going through the trouble to meet with me,” Ein replied. “Thanks to Chris, I haven’t had any notable problems to speak of.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Why don’t you take a seat here?”

He obediently did as he was told, surprised by how fast his heart was beating. The woman in front of him had seen the legendary first king for herself. Given that Jayle was his hero, Ein was more nervous than usual.

“Is Christina doing well?” the chief asked.

“Sh-She is. I’m always indebted to Chris. She’s currently waiting for my return outside the doors, and not a day goes by where I don’t rely on her.”

As the two engaged in some small talk, possibly trying to gauge the distance between each other, they fell silent. Both sides were preparing for the discussion ahead. In fact, this was a chance for Ein to catch his breath and brace himself for the startling news that was sure to come.

“His Majesty has told me that you have many questions you’d like to ask,” the chief said, breaking the silence and staring at the crown prince.

For a split second, Ein hesitated on his words. Indeed, he had many questions on his mind: the red foxes, the first king’s relationship to the Demon Lord’s former domain, the Wernstein family name, and the holy grounds. It was best to prioritize the red foxes in this discussion, but Ein’s time with Chris had unconsciously led him to seek the truth behind her family’s name.

“Could you tell me about the Wernstein family name?” he asked casually.

For a moment, the chief froze, and Ein didn’t miss it. *She knows something.* He was carefully watching the chief; she had a smile plastered on her face.

“You must mean Christina,” she started as Ein remained silent. “She was an introverted girl, but was always very hardworking. When I heard that she’d left Syth Mill to become a knight in the royal capital, I was very surprised by—”

“Elf chief,” Ein said, interrupting her. He came all this way; he wasn’t going to let her play dumb here. “I’ll rephrase my question. Would you please tell me about the Wernstein that’s engraved in the burial ground and Chris’s relation to that name?”

He didn’t tell her where the burial ground he was referring to was located; if his worries were all for naught, this question shouldn’t have been much of an issue. However, Ein knew that there was *something* behind this name and knew that the chief would break her silence about it. He’d guessed right as her shoulders slumped in surrender.

“Ah, as I’d thought... You went to the former capital’s burial grounds, didn’t you?”

Sierra had mentioned the former royal capital before, likely referring to the Demon Castle. The chief's phrasing made it sound like she'd been bracing herself for this moment ever since she received Silverd's letter. But not just that, as she'd clearly been agonizing over the information she could provide.

"So that place is called the former royal capital," Ein said.

"I might be the only person still alive who refers to that place by that name," she added. "Before I say anything more, why don't we make a few preparations?"

She took out a short staff from behind her and tapped the carpet three times. For a split moment, a shrill sound echoed throughout the room and the room's temperature dipped a few degrees, surrounding Ein with cold air.

"It's a seal of sorts," the chief explained. "I used an ancient spell that prevents noise from leaking outside." She silently placed her staff on the carpet and stared at Ein. "I don't like beating around the bush. You were in front of Consort Laviola's grave and saw the name Wernstein engraved there, didn't you, Your Highness?"

Her question was very frank and Ein felt overpowered by her words for a split moment. *This must be the presence that she commands.*

"Correct," he finally said. "At first, I thought it was her maiden name, but I was surprised to learn that it was the same as Chris's. Hence, I'm here to ask my question."

"I don't blame you for being surprised," she replied. "I suppose Sir Marco guided you inside."

"Y-You know Marco?!"

"Indeed. How is he? Is he well?"

Ein fell silent, unable to find a response. All he could do was silently shake his head.

"I...see," the chief said. "Sir Marco must've fulfilled his duties, then."

She spoke as though it was only natural for her to know why Marco resided within the Demon Castle. Though she looked grim, she organized her thoughts.

She indulged in nostalgia for a moment, unable to describe the feelings that washed over her before finally expelling a deep sigh. She peered into his face and nodded, her eyes filled with resolve.

“This shall be a very long story,” she said.

“I’m very much prepared,” Ein replied. “Please tell me what you know.”

“Perhaps I should tell you of what happened before the great war, but I fear the story will be *far* too long, then. Why don’t I tell you about my last meeting with Consort Laviola?”

Ein was secretly elated, knowing that he’d be able to piece together a whole puzzle box’s worth of clues. However, he also felt his heartbeat grow faster, his body becoming tense and stiff due to sheer nervousness.

“After the tragedy of the great war, I worked with the few surviving elves and assisted in the restoration effort. Not a single one of my old comrades are still alive today. Only I stubbornly cling to this mortal coil, refusing to pass.” As they helped with the restoration, one day... “A servant of Consort Laviola suddenly arrived. That person said, ‘Her Majesty calls for you. Please come to the Demon Castle.’”

As water trains didn’t exist back then, the trek was much longer and more arduous than it would be today. However, the chief hastily accompanied the servant to Laviola’s residence.

“When I arrived at the Demon Castle, Consort Laviola was already waiting for me with her servants. I also remember Sir Marco standing beside her, ready to protect Her Majesty at all costs.”

When Laviola laid her eyes upon the chief, she energetically said, “Long time no see.”

Responding in kind to the consort’s gentle smile, the elven chief stepped inside. The chief was at first worried if something had gone wrong, but Marco gestured her to approach the consort. Ein could imagine Marco’s role all too well.

“As you may know, you must pass through a certain cursed room to reach the royal family’s burial grounds,” the chief explained.

That room was so horrific that it'd make anyone who stepped through it feel ill. Ein recalled the creepy nature of the room's uncanny illusions and the dark cloud of greed that squirmed within it.

"You may wonder why the burial grounds are behind that room," the chief said. "It's because Lady Misty had placed a barrier over that area. It came from the same sort of holy ground that protects the people of Syth Mill. I doubt you've tried this, but you're unable to walk inside unless you specifically enter through the castle. It's a very special plot of land."

So special, in fact, that it prevented any outsiders from entering.

"But that filthy *beast* cursed that room," the chief spat.

"It's just as I thought," Ein replied.

"Let's return to the matter at hand. When I reunited with Consort Laviola, she and Sir Marco protected me as they led me through the cursed room. In the royal family's burial grounds, there was already a freshly dug hole filled with a casket crafted by a skilled artisan. The gravestone had already been prepared as well."

"The gravestone of the first king—no, of King Jayle."

It was soon revealed that the consort herself had carried Jayle's body back to the Demon Lord's former territory. Ein didn't expect that. When he rephrased his question, he did so believing that the wise chief knew Arshay as the first king instead. But the elf soon shook her head.

"It must be tough for you to change how you refer to them," she said. "I'll refer to His Majesty Jayle as 'the first king' and Arshay as 'Her Majesty.'"

After showing this touch of consideration for Ein, she continued without allowing him to squeeze in a response. "I hadn't heard that His Majesty had passed. Before his death was publicized, he was secretly carried here. Furthermore, they claimed to have buried his body in the current royal capital. No one else knew about the truth aside from his two attendants."

These two attendants had served the first king. The elf chief couldn't ask about Jayle's cause of death and simply sobbed until she had no more tears to shed. As she was drowning in sorrow, Laviola had bravely stepped forward to

support her with a hug.

“As I think about it, while the attendants might have known about this plan, isn’t it still a bit too forceful?” Ein asked.

“Indeed. I very much agree, Your Highness,” the chief replied. “I think Consort Laviola pushed herself quite a bit. She didn’t even tell her child, who was set to succeed the throne. I’ve no doubt that it was extremely difficult to bury him away from the current royal capital. Unlike today, Ishtarica was more lax back then. We didn’t have enough guards to keep watch and it wasn’t as easy to communicate. The magical tools weren’t as advanced as they are today, so it might’ve been easier to pull some strings from behind the scenes back then.” She was going purely off her own assumptions, but the chief likely didn’t know much more. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I’ve been a bit too emotional.”

She turned to the ground, but her eyes quickly wavered as she started blinking rapidly. It was as if she was holding back tears. Ein silently waited for the chief to regain her composure.

“After that, we returned to the grand hall,” the chief finally continued. “Consort Laviola’s servant exchanged a glance with the others and left my side. A few minutes later, she returned with a baby boy carried in her arms.”

Ein was stunned as he widened his eyes. He started blinking wildly and his breathing became uneven, taking short breaths as his heart continued to pound loudly.

“Consort Laviola had entrusted me with her second child,” the chief finished.

Wait. Why? Why was the child entrusted to her? What’s the reason behind it? Why were the Elves chosen to take care of the child? A myriad of questions swirled within his mind, but there was one thing he finally understood.

“Ch-Chief! Please wait! You don’t mean to say that Chris is—” Ein started.

He hastily approached the elf chief while his hands were glued to the carpet. His palms grew sweaty as the carpet underneath his hands seemed to slip.

“Your Highness, how much do you know about Pixies?” the chief asked.

“Almost nothing at all!”

“Out of the few fairy species, pixies are very special.”

Ein was panicking on the inside, his brain unable to process all this new information. However, the chief cruelly and indifferently continued on.

“They are born from the light and vanish along with it,” she said. “That’s said to be the life of a Pixie. Even while pregnant, their appearances don’t change at all. When they give birth, they expel a light and the child is born from it. Furthermore, pixies retain their youth even later into their lives and can even die with such youthful appearances.”

If a queen was expecting a little one, the security around her was sure to tighten. Ein had never known that she’d had the ability to hide her pregnancy. If this story were to be believed, Laviola had been able to hide the fact that she had another child. Only these two attendants would have been aware of this secret.

“Consort Laviola held the child swaddled in a white cloth in her arms so dearly before planting a kiss on his forehead,” the elf chief said. “She looked exhausted and apologized to the baby before handing him to me.”

“But why...” Ein started.

Why did the queen do this? The crown prince was emotionally invested in this story.

The chief quickly replied, “Even with the Hero King Jayle at the helm, Ishtarica wasn’t fully unified following the war. That was simply the way of things. Many lives had been lost, and the entire nation was in the midst of the restoration effort.” It was then that Laviola had apprehensions of her own. “Her second child had been born with a frail body. She believed that the child couldn’t possibly survive that tumultuous period, and entrusted us to raise him within Syth Mill.”

Laviola had apparently never visited the elven village before, but the first king had left behind words of its existence. He’d heard that the village was surrounded by a special power that chased away outsiders, leading him to place his full trust in the Elves.

“He wished for the child to live not as a royal, but as an Ishtarican citizen who

resided within Syth Mill," the chief said. "He wished for the baby to grow up healthy."

"And so, you accepted his wishes and welcomed the child into your arms," Ein finished.

Her gaze softened as she nodded. "The child's name was Wilfried Wernstein. With that pixie blood in his veins, he lived a long life of around three hundred years before his passing."

This period of time sounded impossibly long to Ein, but it seemed fairies were known for their longevity. According to the chief, Wilfried would've lived for much longer if he were a pure-blooded Pixie.

"He was a very shy child," she said. "He was extremely timid around strangers and preferred the book over the sword. He never opened himself up to any other elves aside from me. In fact, he never once fell in love until his late years in life."

The final years of a pixie differed from that of humans—it wasn't just mere decades, but for a time far longer.

"One day, a gallant elf appeared in front of Prince Wilfried," the chief said. "She was very young, but was drawn to Prince Wilfried's calm demeanor. She fell head over heels for him."

The prince was unable to deny her passionate advances, and the two eventually married.

"The two were blessed with a child," the chief said. "The child grew up, married another elf, and brought a pair of lovely daughters into the world."

Ein didn't even need the chief's explanation to draw his own conclusion from here. *It's not just a potential relation to the royal family.* The royal family's blood was running thick through the veins of the prince's personal knight. In fact, she might have had a higher royal pedigree than the rest of the current royal family.

As Ein understood the truth, the image of Chris flashed across her mind. Her smile and her devotion to him left a lasting impression.

“I’m sure you understand already,” the chief said, her words striking a chord in his heart.

He took a deep breath and said not a word while confirming the facts. The eldest daughter’s name was Celestina Wernstein. The second daughter was Christina Wernstein. In other words, Chris was...

“Christina Wernstein is the first king’s great-granddaughter,” Ein said.

The chief lowered her gaze and nodded. The crown prince instinctively buried his head in his hands as his mind was filled with thoughts of Chris—the knight who was waiting for him outside.

“Your Highness, I beg of you to hear the request of this elderly elf,” the chief said. “I’ve promised Consort Laviola that I’d never talk about this to anyone else. I had no intention of breaking my promise, but here I am, talking about it with you. Could you please kindly keep this story tight to your chest and close to your heart?”

This shouldn’t be done. It was Ein’s duty to swiftly report all of this to Silverd, but he hesitated in the face of the chief’s resolve. How did Laviola feel when she was forced to let go of her child? Even the chief had no means of knowing the consort’s true thoughts. Thus, Ein felt it was imperative to empathize with Laviola and the chief.

“Truth be told, I was rather worried about Christina,” she said. “She is much like Prince Wilfried. Hardworking and diligent, but quite shy and easy to embarrass. Is that correct? She was timid around others as well, so I was worried that she’d be lonely in the royal capital.”

Growing up in Syth Mill, Chris always had Celestina or Sierra by her side. But when Celes disappeared and Chris left for Kingsland, Sierra wasn’t able to support her old friend.

“It’s my fault that Christina is so shy around strangers,” the chief said, her voice filled with regret. “It’s because I treated Prince Wilfried in a special manner. Ultimately, the Wernsteins had been treated just as I have been as the chief. Naturally, this also applied to Christina.”

It was difficult for the chief to raise a royal child normally. Even under

Laviola's orders, it was nearly impossible for the chief to believe she should have treated Wilfried like an average child.

"I hadn't received any letters from her as of late either, so I was naturally worried. But Sierra filled me in on the reason behind that just the other day," the chief said.

Her granddaughter had reported that Chris had become very attached to the crown prince. Sierra was surprised to see Chris so trusting and open with him. She'd actually doubted her own eyes at first. Ein and the chief eventually managed to pull back from their tangent and returned to the matter at hand. He was interested in her story.

"What kind of people were Consort Laviola's servants?" he asked.

He was asking purely to sate his curiosity. It had nothing to do with the current topic, but he was curious about these highly trusted individuals.

"Those two held vital roles when the Unified Nations of Ishtarica was founded," the chief explained. "The gentleman who arrived to retrieve me was a friend of the first king. He developed many of our laws. The other attendant was Laviola's maid and she remained by her side at all times."

People that vital to the nation's founding should've surely been in the history books, but Ein was unfamiliar with them.

"I'm sorry, it seems I haven't done enough studying," Ein said. "I've never heard of these two before."

"Scant records remain from the nation's founding," the chief replied. "Many documents were burned during the war, and memories of many were stolen. Considering that those two had disappeared into the shadows of our history, I don't blame you for being unaware of their existence."

"No wonder. What were their names?"

"They had none. Many nonhumans lacked names back then."

"That's truly a pity. What species were they, then?"

Ein was simply a bit curious about it all. However, the chief's body language suddenly turned tense and awkward as though she was trying to offer comfort

to the boy in front of her.

“They’re precisely who you’ve been chasing after, Your Highness,” she finally said.

“Who I’ve been— Impossible! It can’t be!”

“Precisely. They were red foxes. Those two turned their backs on their own kind and fought alongside the first king.”

“I can’t believe it...” Ein’s mind flashed straight to prejudice. Since he’d long assumed that all red foxes were evil, the prince couldn’t bring himself to accept the chief’s words.

“But you must. It’s the truth,” she replied immediately. “You seem to have known Sir Marco rather well. Then it surely must be odd to know that a pair of foxes worked alongside him.”

Now that she mentions it... If there was a knight who displayed that caliber of loyalty, he’d never back down against the foxes in front of him. According to the chief’s story, the duo must’ve walked through the cursed room while under Marco’s protection. In other words, there was no way the pair could’ve been enemies. Another question proceeded to bubble up in Ein’s mind, but the chief had seemingly anticipated this.

“Sir Marco hadn’t been tricked, nor was he affected in the same way as Her Majesty Arshay,” she quickly stated. “The two attendants had been by the first king and Consort Laviola’s side since the start.”

Above all, Marco was loyal. If the faithful knight wasn’t deceived, Ein felt that this pair was worthy of his trust.

“You know so much,” Ein finally said.

“I cannot think of a greater delight than to know my story has proved useful to you,” she said. Then suddenly, the chief’s aura took a fierce turn. “I must tell you about the red foxes as well.”

“Please do.”

“I haven’t much to tell you, as I was but a sproutling who rarely stepped onto the battlefield. I was in hiding at the time, but I believe the information I *do*

possess to be very important.” She paused and slowly opened her mouth once more. “The first princess once purchased a tome that should depict a lone woman as the red foxes’ chief.”

“How do you know about that?”

They were referring to Katima’s ancient elven tome, but the chief promised to answer that question later.

“You must believe that she’s your only enemy, but I doubt it,” she continued.

“Are other species out to get us as well?”

“No, I believe it’s only the red foxes, but their movements didn’t hint at a single motive. *He* told me that he believed there was another motive at play.”

“By ‘he,’ you mean...”

“Indeed. The first king.”

However, the first king wasn’t certain of his hunch. After all, it was just that—a hunch. The chief apologized, claiming that she wasn’t absolutely certain about it either, but Ein found no need for an apology.

“This is valuable insight,” he said. The prince was thrilled to know that he actually had the opportunity to hear Jayle’s opinion on the matter. “So, how’d you know about Katima’s little purchase?”

The chief flashed a triumphant smile. “Because *I’m* the one who permitted the book’s sale. It seems you’re all rather confused about the author of that book, but I knew him personally. He was a resident of Syth Mill.”

As he was the only person who fit the bill, the image of Consort Laviola’s second child flashed across Ein’s mind. When the prince managed to eke out the name “Wilfried Wernstein,” the chief nodded as she let out a gentle “Precisely.”

What a hapless turn of fate. This famed and passionate elven researcher could’ve lived for a few centuries or a couple of millennia. There were rumors that the author had retired to pursue a quiet life, but no one would’ve ever guessed that they were closely related to the royal family.

“That tome holds the information I passed on to Prince Wilfried,” the chief

said. However, she added that she'd held back the first king's suspicions around the red foxes as it was too vague.

"No wonder that book seemed so separated from reality," Ein said. "When I first read through it, I thought it was odd that the author appeared to be intimately familiar with certain ancient issues."

"We'd entrusted that book to a wealthy house that resides at the foot of the mountains. When I caught wind of the first princess's desire to purchase it, I thought it must've been some twist of fate. I was pleased to permit the sale, as I knew it would be in the royal family's care."

"I won't tell Katima—I mean, my aunt, but I'll be sure to tell her to treat the book carefully."

The chief replied with a satisfied nod.

"Everything you've told me today is endlessly fascinating," Ein said. He wanted to talk a bit more, but he could see a hint of exhaustion on her face.

He took into account the fact that the chief couldn't come to the royal capital. Sierra had previously stated that her grandmother was unable to leave Syth Mill due to her advanced age and poor health. As he'd be in the village for the next few days, Ein saw no reason to have the chief push herself now. He also wanted some time to organize the information that he'd received today.

"I think I'd like to head back for today," Ein said. "If I'm able to have more of your time at a later date, I'd be very pleased."

The chief insisted that he stay, but the prince stated there was no rush since he'd be around for a few days. She finally nodded.

"I searched the archives before you arrived, but perhaps it's best if I go take another look," she said. "There might be a nugget of information about the red foxes hiding away somewhere."

"That'd be great."

"If I find anything, I'll send Sierra to you. I beg you for some of your time."

Before finally taking his leave, Ein deeply bowed before the chief. Upon meeting up with Chris outside, the prince tried his best to properly process his

emotions. Now that he knew the truth, how should he treat her?

Chapter Seven: Within the Darkness

A few hours after Ein's visit with the chief, the clock struck midnight. While this signaled the dawn of a new day in Ishtarica, Heim was still in the middle of its longest night. Heim Castle was wrapped in a hectic and ominous air; its overworked warriors emanating a murderous aura that only added to the relentlessly fierce smog.

That was only natural, of course.

All of the missing nobles had been recovered, and they all claimed that they were the victims of a betrayal. To make matters worse, tragedy had just struck House Roundheart. The house's former mistress—Rogas's mother—had lost her head to an assassin's blade. The entirety of Heim unanimously directed their hatred towards this mysterious culprit.

However, one person found this sudden uproar to be rather...odd—Elena.

"What in the world is happening?" she asked.

The assassination of a noble was horrific news enough, but the murders of a prince and the commander in chief's mother? The effect that it had on the kingdom was simply unprecedented. The question was whether a mere insurgent could pull off such a feat. At the very least, Elena thought that it was impossible. That then begged the question: was Ishtarica to blame?

"Impossible," she told herself. "I simply cannot believe that Sir Warren would lower himself to a series of dirty sneak attacks."

If he were to go through the trouble of killing someone in this fashion, he would've declared war and wiped Heim off the map.

"L-Lady Elena!" her subordinate suddenly called, their face filled with desperation. They were out of breath and sweat dripped down their cheeks.

While no one could be blamed for panicking during such a terrifying incident, the officer looked more nervous and tense than ever before.

“Calm down,” Elena ordered. “What happened?”

“I-I’m terribly sorry!” the officer replied. “But Sir Rogas has...”

Rogas had lost his mother. Elena listened intently, wondering if the general’s composure had evaporated.

“He’s decided to dispatch armed investigators to Rockdam and Bardland!” the officer cried. “They’ll be departing this afternoon!”

Elena gasped. “Who’d you hear that from?!”

“From the knights, madam! I heard them discussing it earlier!”

There was no reason for the knights to lie. If they decided to fib about Rogas’s command, their heads would’ve been lopped off right then and there. In other words, Rogas’s resolve was the real deal.

“With the kidnappings and His Highness’s assassination, Sir Rogas has come to the conclusion that only an outside actor could benefit from our ordeal!” the officer yelled.

“I know! I understand what you’re saying, but this is still a bit too sudden!”

The presence of these armed investigators could easily be seen as a display of military force. For all its power, even a kingdom such as Heim would be met with serious backlash if they were to dispatch their troops to other nations. Should they demand to conduct a search without even the slightest shred of proof to justify it, the other nations would naturally swat away such an unreasonable request. They’d be fools to accept those terms. Heim’s only saving grace was that Rogas hadn’t targeted Euro. It was best if war with Ishtarica was avoided at all costs.

“Did they say anything else?” Elena pressed.

“He’d be sending a letter to Euro,” the officer replied. “He’d like to ask if the nation has any idea about these recent incidents, or so I’ve been told.”

“Then it all depends on the phrasing and how Euro is approached. Very well. If a letter is to be sent to the principality, I shall be the one to draft and deliver it. Please tell Sir Rogas that.”

Elena volunteered herself for this critical role. She wanted to ensure that Euro

didn’t misinterpret Heim’s letter as a hostile accusation. A sudden trip to Euro would require her to reshuffle her schedule, but it was the best move to avoid Ishtarica’s wrath.

“Most certainly,” the officer replied. “I’ll go relay your message right away.”

They swiftly ran out of Elena’s office. She was determined to hash out the letter’s finer details with Rogas before she officially sent it out. While the noblewoman had added another job to her long list of tasks, she was grateful that tragedy hadn’t struck while she was away.

Heim Castle’s grand halls were constantly illuminated, ensuring that the second prince’s body was always surrounded by a pool of light. Contrary to his image, Garland loved his children dearly and often doted over them. The king refused to leave his late son’s side and he eventually passed out sometime before noon.

Meanwhile, a squad of knights lined up outside of the castle as they prepared to leave Heim. The general was a man of his word.

“Thanks to Commander Rogas, we’re inching ever so closer to war,” Elena grumbled, scorning the situation.

However, she quickly took back her words. Though no one could fault her for it, Elena thought it wasn’t right for her to deride her comrades. Heim had been tossed on its head overnight and the noblewoman could feel a cloud of inexplicable suspicion hanging over her head. The kingdom’s nobles and royals were unified under one goal: revenge. While mobilization had been a majority vote and not a unanimous decision, Elena found this to be a touch odd.

“It all fits together a bit *too* well,” she muttered.

It was a strange move to make Heim the primary target. Everything had been aimed at members of the nobility and royalty. Not to mention that it all started right after the meeting with Ishtarica—a curious move indeed. It was as though someone had perfectly lined up a shot in their crosshairs. Just when the kingdom’s patriotic spirit had taken a blow, the culprit decided to twist a knife in the wound. It was as if they’d used Heim’s lack of composure to start a war.

Elena scolded herself. “I must be tired.”

While she was trying to maintain her cool, her mind was frantically searching for a reason behind it all. *Where did we go wrong?* The assassinations aside, their recent wound had undoubtedly been dealt by Ishtarica. While she'd been able to avoid a full-blown war, the noblewoman couldn't nod her head when asked if Heim had ever prevailed over the Ishtaricans. Heim hadn't been victorious on any end at all.

Going further back in time, why did they even host this meeting in the first place?

"Because we broke the secret contract."

Elena chased the cause, unraveling the past little by little. Sometime after Ein and Olivia's departure from Heim, the crown prince had encountered Tiggle and Glint in Euro. There was a minor scuffle at the time, but the two nations had their proper meeting a few years later.

Obviously, the trigger had been pulled when the contract was broken. However, Elena couldn't help but ponder this question: even if the army general's second son was blessed with an extraordinary skill, would that have been enough to casually break a secret contract with the royal family of an immense nation? Surely, they were treating this contract too lightly.

If Ein or Olivia were problematic, perhaps the Roundhearts had reason to go back on their word. But Ein had been diligently devoted to his training, and he was gaining power by the day, far surpassing his peers. Heim might have prioritized skills that one was born with, but it still made no sense for them to break the contract for seemingly little reason. As Elena thought about it a bit more, she concluded that the issues of Heim and House Roundheart were linked.

If so, the Roundhearts' miscalculations began when Glint was born. Blessed with the skill of Holy Knight from birth, the boy couldn't have been a better fit for a military household. Elena recalled that Ein had been treated poorly ever since his brother's birth. It led him to cross the sea with his mother and become Heim's enemy. Little by little, Elena felt like she was putting the pieces together.

"It all started with House Roundheart. Ishtarica and Heim became enemies because of it."

She thought a bit more as though she was setting the stage. While this might have looked a bit too convenient, she could create a diagram displaying the clear divide between Ishtarica and Heim.

“And this recent incident caused Sir Rogas to dispatch an investigative team.”

A declaration of war between nations was inevitable. In that scenario, it was very likely that Heim would come out victorious. While Heim was known as the champion of the continent, a successful war would allow them to unify the entire continent under their rule. Ultimately, this would put Heim on equal footing with Ishtarica.

“Is this a coincidence?”

By complete chance, this would mean that there’d be two unified nations. Coincidence aside, this felt like a strange turn of fate.

“I must think about this carefully.”

This put Elena back at the assassination. Who could’ve done something so atrocious that it pushed Heim to declare war on its neighbors?

“There must be more than one assassin. Even Sir Rogas couldn’t pull off such a feat by himself...”

Indeed, even Rogas would struggle to pull off such an elaborate ploy alone. The culprit would require a coconspirator who possessed more power than the commander in chief. There were very few people with that kind of influence. While this seemed like a crazy idea to Elena, one person *did* come to mind.

A person with more power than Sir Rogas... She turned stiff and froze in place. She knew of exactly one such person who was able to best Rogas in combat. There was a certain tournament held in Bardland every couple of years. Time and again, Rogas had lost to the same opponent.

“Oh, I must be sleep-deprived. How could I have such a crazy idea? Why would Sir Edward possibly want to assassinate someone from Heim?”

A terrifying realization hit her. On their way to their meeting with Ishtarica, she’d heard a curious story from Tiggle. Shannon, Glint’s fiancée, had requested for a message to be sent. Elena had no idea who it was intended for, but she

found the message to be rather interesting and memorable.

We should set a new stage.

It was a simple sentence uttered by a daughter of an aristocratic household. But now, Elena couldn't help but find these words to be quite odd. Something just felt...off. In the midst of this hectic situation, these words remained in Elena's heart.

"It must be a coincidence."

It would be for the best if Elena's worries were baseless with no evidence found to back them up. To confirm her doubts, she had to ask House Bruno if Edward had ever visited Heim. A few questions to Prince Amur would surely chase away her cloud of suspicion. If there were any discrepancies between both parties' stories, she'd know the truth.

It seemed unlikely that Prince Amur would lie. There was no reason for him to collaborate with Ishtarica and assassinate someone in Heim, nor was there any merit in quietly dispatching Edward without notifying Ishtarica first. However...

"No, I mustn't act carelessly."

Elena had no idea how elaborate this plan was, and she certainly had zero clue as to the culprit's motives. Even if her predictions turned out to be true, it would be nothing short of sinister. At the very least, the assassin wouldn't let Elena escape unscathed. She wanted to contact her husband as soon as possible, and she thought it was best to consult Rogas.

"But I probably can't do that."

As he was now, Rogas was unlikely to lend an ear to Elena's words. Shannon was Glint's fiancée, and the two were well-known for getting along. House Roundheart's bond with House Bruno was on par with their loyalty towards the royal family.

"Since Sir Rogas's mother was killed, I'm certain he knows nothing about this. But..."

Should Edward be the culprit, Shannon would undoubtedly be a coconspirator.

“I can’t tell House Roundheart about this yet.”

Then who could she turn to? While Elena still had no idea who her allies were, the only other person she could trust aside from her family was...

“His Highness. Prince Tiggle might just...”

It might have been rude to treat the prince as an absolute last resort, but Elena had no one else to consult.

Just yesterday, Tiggle and Garland were in tears. It didn’t seem like an act; they looked to be truly mourning the loss of a family member. Elena was afraid of going to the king about this, fearing that he’d immediately blab it all to Rogas. But if push came to shove, Elena could likely hold Tiggle down.

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When his father had finally succumbed to exhaustion, the haggard and equally lifeless Tiggle apparently retired to his room. A servant had told Elena all about it. When Elena arrived in front of Tiggle’s room, she knocked on the door.

“Your Highness, it’s me.”

“Come in,” Tiggle’s voice called from beyond the door a few seconds later. He likely hadn’t slept well as his voice sounded feeble. “What do you want, Elena?”

He didn’t even attempt to hide his displeasure with her choice to personally visit him at such a trying time. Elena carefully made sure that there was no one else in the room and approached Tiggle, who was seated on a sofa.

“There is something I must talk to you about,” Elena said solemnly.

Her sincerity had been conveyed as Tiggle furrowed his brows in response. It was clear that whatever she had to say was of utmost importance, and he could tell that this was related to the recent slew of events.

“Go on,” he urged.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Elena replied. “I believe that the assassin possesses the power and ability to either match or even surpass Sir Rogas.”

Tiggle visibly slumped his shoulders before letting out a disappointed sigh. He turned up towards the ceiling as though to imply that he was obviously aware

of that. He was no fool and didn't need everything spelled out for him.

"Leave," he ordered. "I've no intention in humoring your silly stor—"

"One more thing," Elena continued. "Please recall what happened before we left for the meeting with Ishtarica, when Sir Glint had headed to Euro. He was entrusted with a message from Lady Shannon to send to a certain person. Do you remember that, Your Highness?"

At that moment, Tiggle felt like a piece of glass had been shattered in front of him as his vision distorted for a split second. He quickly gulped down his nearby cup of water and slapped his cheeks in an attempt to amp himself up. In fact, Elena had done the exact same thing before entering his room.

"Go on," he ordered.

"I'd like to state my theory," Elena said, clearing her throat.

She told him everything that had gone through her mind while she was in her office. The convenient timing, Shannon's mention of a stage—every idea the noblewoman had was neatly laid out for the third prince to parse. Elena carefully described each of her thoughts in great detail. There was so much information that it felt like they'd been talking for hours. Tiggle listened intently, noticing the thudding of his heart as he managed to keep himself together.

"Your words make sense, Elena," Tiggle finally said. "Hah! I don't understand this one bit! If what you're saying turns out to be true, then we don't know who's an ally or an enemy anymore!"

"So, I'd like to use Sir Rogas's letter to Euro as an excuse to visit the place and personally send them the letter," Elena added.

She refused to rely on Ishtarica for this, believing that the nation was taking a neutral stance. The noblewoman wanted to know if Prince Amur and the principality were cooking up anything nefarious. However, this also included the bet that Ishtarica would remain neutral.

"That's far too dangerous," Tiggle insisted. "Heading to enemy territory is nothing short of foolish."

“They’re still not officially our enemies,” Elena reasoned. “And I’m aware that this is a dangerous task. I believe that I’m skilled enough to work my way around plots like these, so I hope that puts your mind at ease.”

Tiggle placed a hand over his mouth and sat deep in thought. After several seconds, he finally nodded a few times and looked up at her.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll head to Euro as well. We’ll use our private army as well as your house’s as our guards.”

“You mustn’t,” Elena replied. “As you’ve stated earlier, this is very dangerous.”

“A bit too late to worry about that. Besides, my brother’s assassination is proof that danger dwells within this land. I’ll be in danger no matter where I go, especially if there’s someone capable of assassinating a royal running around out there. Furthermore...”

He placed his legs farther apart, rested his elbows on top, and covered his forehead with his palms. Greasy sweat dripped down his neck as Elena noticed his thighs trembling ever so slightly.

“Your words made me realize something,” Tiggle said. “I’m sorry, but I won’t be changing my position on this.” He told her that he suddenly remembered something. “It happened last night.”

“Last night, you say?”

“When we were drowning in sorrow and grief, I recall father referring to Shannon as a ‘Miss.’ It sounded so natural that apparently I never noticed how odd it sounded until now.”

It was certainly unusual for a king to refer to a simple daughter of an aristocrat in such a manner; it carried a tone of respect. It was only more curious that a man such as Garland had said it. Cold sweat ran down the backs of Elena and Tiggle. They had no idea what was happening here and had no clue how it all connected. They could only assume that this dark conspiracy went far deeper than they’d anticipated.

“Elena, I must ask,” Tiggle said. “Just what is going on in our beloved kingdom of Heim?”

Blood drained from the third prince’s face as his vision started to blur. He could no longer trust the king, his own father. He couldn’t help but feel as though his beloved kingdom had been transformed and distorted into something completely different. His eyes wavered as he pointed them towards Elena, practically clinging onto her for solace.

Chapter Eight: The Holy Grounds

A bright light roused Ein from his sleep. He sat up in his bed and rubbed his sleepy eyes before stretching out his arms. *Where am I?* He briefly furrowed his brow at the sight of the unfamiliar room around him, but he quickly remembered that he was staying at Chris's house in Syth Mill. He then remembered the conversation he had with the chief last night.

She had revealed the truth behind the Wernstein lineage, but it was decided to leave it there for the night as the chief had grown exhausted. Upon his return to Chris's house, the prince retired to what was once the room of his knight's older sister, Celes. However, his memory after lying down was a blur.

"What now?" Ein mumbled to himself.

Ever since he learned the truth, Ein had been struggling with how he should treat Chris. However, he had to hide his thoughts in order to leave Chris none the wiser. After he cleaned himself and headed out towards the living room, Chris was already there with breakfast prepared for him.

"Good morning, Sir Ein."

"Um, morning."

"Did you fall asleep the moment you entered the room?"

"Yeah, I think so. I don't remember much since I lay down on the bed."

"Ah ha ha. We walked so much yesterday, didn't we?"

Ein managed to act as though nothing was wrong, and Chris didn't seem to be catching on.

"I've prepared breakfast," she said. "Shall we eat?"

Am I able to enjoy Martha's delicious meal because I'm a glutton? Or...maybe I actually had a feeling about all of this. While Ein would've never imagined that Chris was the first king's great-granddaughter, he must've sensed the elf's

blood relation to the royal family on a subconscious level. He vehemently hoped that his current hesitation was just a temporary thing. How was he supposed to spend his time now?

He came to Syth Mill to meet with the chief, but he couldn't do that now. As Sierra had stated before, the chief wasn't well. The two had talked late into the night, and he recalled the look of absolute exhaustion on her face when they'd left. And so, Ein had decided to give her some time to rest.

So, what do I do now? He headed outside for a bit of a stroll when he spotted Sierra walking near Chris's house. The elf noticed him as well and headed straight in his direction.

"Were you able to rest well?" she asked.

"I was in such a deep slumber that I surprised even myself," Ein confessed.

"That's great to hear." Sierra smiled.

"How's the chief feeling?"

"It's nothing for you to be concerned about. She had breakfast as the sun rose and is now resting. This isn't anyone's fault; the chief is just impossibly old, so I hope it doesn't bother you much. She'd said so herself."

"But isn't that because she took the time to speak with me?"

"N-No, not at all! She really is fine—" Sierra stammered, unable to find a proper response as Ein continued to blame himself. "Ah, speaking of... If you have the time, why don't you try stepping into the holy grounds with Chris?"

"Oh yeah... Can I really go in?"

"Of course. Didn't I say that to you in Kingsland?"

Then why not? He had time to spare, and his interest had been piqued. He hadn't received much of an explanation about the area from the chief, but it didn't hurt to check it out first. Chris would be Ein's guide and he didn't think she'd refuse the request.

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The path to the holy grounds was deep within Syth Mill. It was located behind

the chief's manor. Just as Sierra had said, there was a warrior standing guard over the site. But when Ein and Chris approached them, they quietly lowered their head without uttering a single word.

Ein glanced at the path that led to the holy grounds. A gentle slope continued on, but his view into the depths was eventually obstructed by thick mist. The path was surrounded by the forest on both sides, and the prince was sure that he'd lose his way without his trusty guide by his side.

This part of the forest is easier to traverse. The ground wasn't slick or muddy and gave him firm footing. The path didn't appear to be paved by human hands, but formed naturally instead. *I guess that's not odd.* Thanks to the holy grounds, Syth Mill was surrounded by a powerful barrier. With that in mind, Ein wasn't one to question how this path differed from the rest of the forest.

"Hey," he said to Chris. She was walking just ahead of him.

"Yes?" she replied. She walked along with her arms crossed behind her back as she hummed a little tune. But she immediately turned around when called for by the crown prince.

"I never thought to ask you this before, but just why did you and Celes hang around the holy grounds?"

"D-Do I have to tell you?"

"Your reaction only makes me more curious."

Chris faced forward and started walking beside him. "My sister started it. We were both still young, and... Ah, you know, Syth Mill doesn't have a lot of places to play like Kingsland does! So, I..."

"Ah, you went to explore."

Chris gasped in surprise.

"Bull's-eye, huh?" Ein added.

Chris's face turned a bright red before she looked away, her actions practically confirming his assumption. Ein thought it wasn't anything to be embarrassed about, but Chris probably found it to be unladylike. Not to mention that she was embarrassed to tell the truth to someone she was fond

of.

“After you got the chief’s permission, I’d hazard a guess that you two were exploring the grounds pretty frequently,” he said.

It was no surprise to Ein that the Wernstein sisters had been allowed to step foot on the holy grounds—they were both royals, after all.

“You’re mean, Sir Ein,” Chris said.

“I’m just checking the facts,” Ein replied. “This might be a little insulting to the holy grounds, but did you ever get bored?”

She’d simply gotten used to it, just as Ein had struggled to accustom himself to living in the castle after his initial arrival. He couldn’t even relax in his own bedroom back then. It was different now, of course; he was used to his surroundings. It didn’t matter just how awe-inspiring the holy grounds were, he’d get used to it too. However...

“There was something that always held my curiosity, so I never got bored or tired of the place,” Chris replied. The holy grounds were apparently home to a mystery that had the sisters dying to get to the bottom of. “There’s a massive shrine deep within. It’s never been opened, so my sister and I snooped around. We were searching for a way inside.”

“Which was why you never grew tired of the area.”

“Precisely. We were never able to reach our goal in the end, but...” She’d apparently found a clue. “There are two pillars by the entrance. We discovered that they can glow, so we thought they might’ve been tied to the entrance.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s pretty suspicious.”

“No matter how hard we tried, we could only get one of the pillars to glow. I believe that the entrance would open if we get both of them to light up, but we couldn’t find a way to do it.”

They lacked something. *The holy grounds, a shrine, and a door that never opens.* Ein didn’t believe that he could unravel this mystery within a matter of mere days, but he was still excited to get there and find out. Just then, he heard the voices of little girls.

“There he is! Look!”

“Ah ha ha!”

A single breeze blew through Ein and Chris, carrying the voices of these girls along with it. The pair stopped and glanced in the direction of the voices. They thought that they had heard the girls from the left, but they soon heard them coming in from the right. Suddenly, the girls seemed to be behind them, then high above.

“What were those voices?” Ein asked, surprised.

“Tree spirits,” Chris quickly replied.

While the source of these voices couldn’t be seen, the breeze gently brushed against the pair’s faces. The wind wasn’t mocking them, but trying to play with them as it continued to tickle their cheeks. Just as Ein was feeling the wind tickle him, a pair of glowing spheres appeared before him and started circling. Roughly the size of a fist, these spheres were as nimble as dragonflies.

“Amazing! Amazing!”

“Awesome! Really awesome!”

The two orbs of light approached Ein’s right arm as their bright glow gradually died down, revealing a pair of beautiful, tiny girls. They were far smaller than the average human, and they each had their own pair of bright, translucent wings on their backs. One of them started to play around and dangle from Ein’s finger. She rocked her body back and forth while laughing happily.



“I’m the older sister!” she cried.

“Excuse me?” Ein naturally replied. Standing just a few steps behind him, Chris was quickly baffled.

“Yep! I’m her older sister!”

“I-I see...” Ein decided to not think about this too deeply. “You two are tree spirits, right?”

“No, we’re fairies!”

Liar. Ein flashed a forced smile at the spirited duo, but Chris did mention these girls were fairylike creatures. *I guess they’re not completely wrong...* But the two girls didn’t miss Ein’s expression.

“Hey! You’re doubting us! I can see it in your eyes!”

“We’re fairies! We really are and we’re awesome!”

“It’s certainly surprising,” Ein replied in a gentle tone, as though he were pacifying a child. “But what makes you so awesome?”

The older sister confidently replied, “Okay then! How’s this? We’ll investigate you!” She stared at Ein and let out a groan. “Hrmmm...”

Her younger sister followed suit, but she soon grew tired of it and jumped onto Ein’s shoulder. The pair were free-spirited, reminding the prince of a certain no-good cat lying around in Kingsland.

“You’re a rare creature!” the older sister concluded.

“Hooray! Rare!” the younger sister child in.

This only confused Ein further.

“But why? Your father and mother... Why are they like you? They’re weird creatures too!” one of the tree spirits said.

“Well, if we’re talking about my parents... Rogas is the only weird creature I can think of,” Ein refuted with a smile. “My mother is a Dryad, and she’s more beautiful than anyone else. Remember that, all right?”

“Um, Sir Ein... You’re not wrong, but please don’t intimidate them,” Chris said.

But the older sister didn't seem to agree. She kept tilting her head from side to side. "Nuh-uh!"

She's making no sense at all. What's she on about? Ein looked at the older sister, completely baffled. He had no doubt that Olivia was his mother. While he was born of special circumstances, he was sure that Dryad blood ran through his veins.

"The *first* one to give birth to you isn't a Dryad, you liar!" the older sister accused.

"Pants on fire!" the younger sister continued.

While Ein had no idea as to how this tree spirit figured this out, he did remember that this wasn't his first time being born. He had a previous life that he barely remembered. Perhaps the older sister had the ability to sense this.

"We hate liars!" the older sister said. "Oh, but you can have this!"

"Totally hate 'em!" the younger sister added. "Bye-bye! Play with us again!"

Like a whirlwind, the spirits disappeared as abruptly as they had emerged. They'd just toyed with Ein, referring to him as a "weird creature" as they looked into the deepest reaches of his heart. Then *poof* they were gone. Within seconds, the small fairylike entities jumped to and fro, becoming smaller and smaller until they faded away into the forest's depths.

"What *is* this feeling?" Ein muttered. "It's like I lost somehow..."

He gazed at his palm and found an unusually large acorn in his hand—the older sister had left it behind. This encounter had left Ein with only one conclusion: fairies were amazing.

"Sounds like they'll come again," Ein said. "And this nut..."

"I believe that's proof of their friendship," Chris replied. "When I was younger, the chief had told me that tree spirits have the habit of doing things like this."

"Huh. Have you ever received one, Chris?"

She shrugged. "Unfortunately, today marks the first time I've ever seen them."

The wind died down and the presence of the spirits disappeared completely.

“Friendship?” Ein wondered. “From this interaction? That’s a little odd.”

“Maybe that was their way of displaying affection,” Chris stated.

“Either way, feels weird.”

He let out a forced laugh and took a deep breath, giving his mind some time to process what he’d just seen.

“I know you told me about them yesterday too, but what exactly are tree spirits anyway?” he asked.

“Um, well, they’re spirits who’ve lived in Syth Mill since ancient times,” Chris explained.

Unable to extract any further insight on them, Ein started to see these as “little girls who were fond of playing pranks.” *It’s like I’ve met a literal handful of Aunt Katimas.* He could never share his thoughts with the people he was thinking about, but he felt like they resembled each other quite a bit.

Ein and Chris continued to venture through the sloped path towards the holy grounds; a comfortable trek that made it seem like they were out hiking for pleasure. His curious meeting with the spirits tucked away in the corner of his mind, he kept his eyes on the path in front of him.

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When the pair finally found themselves standing in front of the entrance to the holy grounds, Ein could hardly believe what he saw. The prince was left speechless, unable to believe that they’d arrived at the right place. The path heading towards the grounds was shrouded in thick mist, much thicker than Ein’s Thick Fog skill. He could barely see where he was walking, but he followed Chris deeper into the mist until she abruptly stopped.

To the eyes of Chris and Ein, it appeared as if they stood before a towering wall of transparent glass. When touched, the wall’s surface rippled like a pool of water.

“This is the barrier,” Chris explained as she touched the wall. “If you take one step farther, you’ll be inside the holy grounds.” She slowly extended her arm,

causing her hand to penetrate the barrier. “According to the chief, one must meet certain qualifications to pass through here. I have no idea why my sister and I meet these qualifications, however... Ha ha ha...”

“It’s very puzzling,” Ein agreed despite knowing the answer to her question.

There was no doubt in his mind that the Wernstein bloodline was involved. Perhaps only those with the first king’s blood flowing through their veins could pass through. In that case, it wouldn’t be odd if that was one of the special qualifications that allowed Chris to step inside the holy grounds. If Ein’s hunch held any water... *I should be able to step inside too.*

He reached out and touched the wall. Just as it did for Chris, the barrier wavered before allowing him inside. Chris, who stood next to him, puffed out her chest proudly.

“Sir Ein, perhaps we’re related by blood!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s a possibility,” Ein agreed.

“Good grief... I’m joking, of course.”

Despite the knight’s light chuckling, Ein didn’t see this as a laughing matter. After all, he’d just learned of a great secret from the chief—his smiling knight was royal by blood. While they could be distant relatives, both prince and knight had the first king’s blood flowing thick through their veins. *I wish I could still take that as a joke.* Even though it was a hindrance, the thick mist ended up being a saving grace as it hid the look on his face. If she saw him now, he feared that she’d see right through his awkward replies.

Once they passed through the barrier and headed deeper inside, the mist started to gradually dissipate as it made way for another oddity. As he kept walking, it seemed like his surroundings were now unusually gray; devoid of color even.

“Chris, something’s off...” Ein started.

“You’re fine,” she assured. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Eventually, the mist ceased to be and a world without color emerged in front of them. This wasn’t a metaphor either; the prince’s surroundings had literally

become monochromatic. In the world he knew, Ein had never seen anything like it before. The holy grounds seemed to be in a separate world of its own.

"The entire world is in black-and-white?" Ein asked, turning to the now-monochrome Chris. "Why? How?"

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "To tell you the truth, neither the chief nor I know. But don't worry; it only affects your vision just a little."

"A little" sounded like an understatement, but as the knight was used to this, she didn't appear to be fazed by it at all. It must've always been like this. *I don't understand this one bit.* All the crown prince could do now was just accept the reality in front of him. If Chris and the chief couldn't figure it out, there was no way he could piece together the cause of this phenomenon. *I mean, as long as it doesn't negatively affect me or trap me here...*

"I guess this is how it is," he muttered.

"H-Huh?" Chris asked. "Aren't you a bit too quick to accept all this?"

"I mean, I'm sure this vast world has many places like this."

It became a trivial matter when he remembered that he'd reincarnated into this world. Much to Chris's astonishment, Ein was surprisingly calm as he looked around the holy grounds. If there was any color, he would've surely been blown away by the breathtaking view. *This place is so big.* It was large enough to fit an entire village.

The grounds were surrounded by steep cliffs and a semicircular waterfall dwelled within the depths of the forest. At the grounds' center rested a colossal boulder that loomed tall over Ein and Chris. The boulder's upper half had been split in two, with a shrine on the taller end and a chair on the lower end. From a few steps away, the boulder resembled a terrace of sorts. An arched bridge had been built between the cracks, which connected the greater boulder to a spiral staircase that ran outside alongside it. It reminded Ein of a tiny castle.

The copious cracks and multiple patches of moss scattered around the surrounding stonework implied there was a long history behind these grounds.

"That bridge will lead us to the sacred jade stone," Chris said, pointing ahead.

She gestured towards an arched stone bridge similar to the one affixed to the boulder. Awaiting those who sought to cross it, the bridge appeared to be rather sturdy and reliable.

“The sacred jade stone... Is that the boulder?” Ein asked.

“Correct,” she replied. “The chief mentioned it by name in the past. Oh, and there’s a river running underneath the bridge, so mind your step! It’ll be quite the dangerous tumble if you should happen to fall!”

He looked down and indeed saw a river below. It stretched from the waterfall’s basin and ran along to its destination. The sacred jade stone also had some water flowing through it, apparently. Underneath the pillars that supported it, there was a drainage hole that allowed water to flow through and into the river.

“It’s so high up,” Ein said. “As you say, it’ll be quite the tumble.”

“You can’t even try to test the waters,” Chris warned.

“Even I wouldn’t do such a thing.” The sight of the bridge to the river, however, was familiar to him. “This is kind of like looking down at the castle’s gates from my bedroom window.”

He wouldn’t be injured or perish from a fall at that height, but that didn’t keep Chris from worrying. She couldn’t fathom the thought of Ein being washed away with the river.

“Now then, shall we head inside?” she suggested.

“Yep,” Ein replied. “Let’s hurry up! Once we’ve opened the shrine, we can waltz right in,”

“Is that a challenge? My sister and I tinkered with the entrance for years and it just wouldn’t open.”

“Maybe I’ve got luck on my side.”

The pair proceeded down the bridge as they traded banter. *Yeah, I think this view would be something special with a little color, but it’s still pretty nice.* Regardless of the colorless nature of his surroundings, the crown prince found himself in awe of the spectacular sights. The boulder’s size was impressive

enough, but the idea of a shrine built at the top of such a rock felt rather dignified.

“The entrance is up at the very top of the boulder,” Chris said.

“The top... Over there?” Ein asked.

Atop the spiral staircase stood a regal shrine that resembled an arbor with a spherical roof.

“Should we head there first?” Chris suggested.

“Since we have the opportunity, why don’t we start from the bottom up?”

“Certainly. I’ll guide you there.”

“I know this is a walk down memory lane for you, so let’s take our time.”

“Hmm? Are you saying that I might get lost or something?” She frowned and shot a dubious glare his way.

“No! Since it’s a blast from the past for you, I thought you’d like to take your time and take in the nostalgia a little! You know, sort of like a tourist thing!”

“M-My apologies. I jumped to conclusions...”

“I’m relying on you a lot. If I ever get lost, I trust that you’ll find me.”

“But of course! Even if we were navigating through unfamiliar terrain, I swear that I’d find you!”

“That...seems like a tall ask.”

“Don’t be so calm all of a sudden! I’m not lying! I will *definitely* find you, no matter where we go!”

“You seem awfully confident, but how would you go about it?”

Would Chris simply steamroll her surroundings to find him? They kept walking across the bridge while engaged in this puzzling conversation.

“Your scent,” she said.

I see... “Wait, my what? My scent?!” Ein cried.

“That’s right! I can tell by your scent, Sir Ein.”

“Um, I take a bath everyday though...”

“No! Not like that. How can I explain this, I wonder...”

Maybe it’s like how dogs pick up scent. The crown prince was certainly taken aback at first, but Chris certainly could have doglike instincts and... *No, that’s pushing it.* He shooed the thought out of his head and looked up at the skies. When they’d left her house, the skies were a clear blue, but it was now dyed in a lonely gray.

“You’re doubting me, aren’t you?!” Chris accused.

“Um, well, can you blame me?” Ein replied.

“All right then!” She brought her hands up to her chest and balled them up into fists. “Why don’t I show you?! I’ll prove to you that I can surely find where you are!”

“Wait, here?”

“Of course! Where else?”

“Are we allowed to play around in the holy grounds?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine! I did stuff like this all the time with my sister back when we were kids!”

“Sure, okay.”

He held his tongue, though he was tempted to ask what they were doing in such a sacred place. As the Wernstein sisters were still rather young back then, they weren’t aware of the consequences of their actions.

“So, can I just walk around the holy grounds as I please?” Ein asked.

“Certainly!” Chris declared. “I’ll find you! You can hide or do whatever else you wish. But please don’t dive into the river, all right?”

“I get it. The scent will fade, won’t it?”

“No, it’s because I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

Uh, so, what? She can find me in a river too? While she appeared to be very confident in her nose’s abilities, Chris was stone cold serious about the whole thing. *Still, I feel bad about playing around here, so...* He decided that he’d part

ways with her and explore the nearby area.

While this was completely a matter of guilt, he was reluctant to become known as the crown prince who played hide-and-seek within an elven holy ground. *I wouldn't know how to even face the chief after showing such insolence.*

"All right, then I'll be exploring first," Ein said.

"Very well," Chris replied. "I'll start following you after three minutes pass, so take your time."

With that, she turned away from the sacred jade stone and faced Syth Mill. Once Ein confirmed that she wasn't looking his way, he gazed around the boulder. *All right, let's go past that crack.* He wanted to see the terrace connected to the arched bridge. *How can I get there, though?* He couldn't reach it within the next three minutes by simply walking. Not to mention that he had no idea as to what route to take.

Suddenly, the crown prince had an idea—he could climb the boulder! Ein proceeded to summon his Phantom Hands from his back, using them to scale the sacred jade stone's rocky surface. In the blink of an eye, he was above the boulder and not too far away from the arched bridge. His leather boots let out a faint clack as he landed on the bridge.

"All right," he said.

Guess I'll go. He walked along the bridge for a few moments before finally making it to the terrace. Once he arrived, he took a seat on a stone chair. There wasn't much else in the way of furniture nearby aside from a small stone table that stood in the center.

From this height, Ein was able to silently watch over the holy grounds in its entirety. He could even clearly make out the river along with the shrine's entrance.

"How was that shrine built?"

Though he wasn't sure of how it was constructed, Ein had a good idea as to who built it, or oversaw the project at the very least—First King Jayle von Ishtarica. Only those of his blood were allowed inside of this place. Much like

the hidden library that once resided within the first king's villa, the holy grounds were undoubtedly related to him in some way. This had left Ein with only one question: *why* was this shrine erected? The shrine was clearly important as it served as the heart of the holy grounds' barrier. *Is there something more to it?*

An unopened door... What if the barrier wasn't to guard the holy grounds from outside threats, but to protect whatever was hiding behind its doors?

"I'll ask the chief about it tomorrow."

Perhaps she'd know a thing or two. He slovenly placed his arms and face onto the table. The stone was cold to the touch, cooling the eruption of thoughts within his mind. *Feels nice...*

"Speaking of..."

He'd forgotten to set a time limit for his little game of hide-and-seek with Chris. While he knew he wouldn't be left by his lonesome, Ein didn't want to be away from her for too long. It'd only take away from the time they had to try and open that mysterious door. *Maybe I shouldn't have gone along with this game...* But Chris seemed to be enjoying herself as she'd been acting more naturally than she would back in Kingsland. He didn't want to be a wet blanket.

"I'll just take it easy." *I'm sure we can meet in about ten minutes or so.*

"You used your Phantom Hands, didn't you?" a voice suddenly said from behind him.

"Was it obvious?"

"There's no other way you could've got up here so fast. That might've been different if you knew the way, this is your first time here."

"Ugh, it really feels like I've lost to you."

"There's no win or lose in this situation. Well, as long as you now believe that I can find you anywhere, Sir Ein."

"Well, is there anything you'd like me to do? As a token of apology for doubting you."

"Anything?"

“Within my power, yes.”

He turned around. *Where did she come from, anyway?* His cheeks twitched for a moment when he noticed Chris crouching on top of the terrace’s railing.

“I’ll keep it on hold!” she said. “If I ever have a wish, I’ll use it then!”

“Within my power, okay?” Ein pressed.

“Heh heh, I know! Don’t worry.”

Even within this monochrome world, she shone brighter than the sun and her smile reminded him of flowers in bloom.

***

Ein’s heart excitedly beated as he neared the path leading to rock’s highest point. Due to the terrain it had been built on, the shrine appeared as if it were a castle floating in the sky. Merely approaching the shrine left the boy feeling electrified, and that feeling only amplified when thought about the door awaiting him. Upon his arrival at the shrine, Ein noticed the dome-shaped roof that hung above his head. This roof was supported by a series of equidistant pillars.

A series of decorative stone tiles pointed towards both the temple’s center and a stone arch. A descending staircase could be found at the other side of the arch.

“You’ll find those glowing pillars and the temple door at the bottom of this staircase,” Chris said, pointing at the stairs.



The pair quickly stepped forward to head down. As they took a few steps, they soon reached a dead end marked by an enormous door with two tall pillars standing on either side, welcoming their arrival. The pillars looked quite normal. If they had a defining characteristic, it would be the oddly intricate engravings adorning them.

“How can they glow?” Ein asked.

“Do you see the floor surrounding the pillars?” Chris asked. “There’s a painting.”

“Oh, I see it now.”

Ein had been so taken with the pillars that he hadn’t noticed the mismatched stone tiles underneath them. In front of the left pillar was white stone tile that depicted a castle-like building. The tile in front of the right pillar was black and featured an illustration of a similarly structured castle.

“Paintings... I guess we’ll—” Ein started.

“Step on them,” Chris finished.

“Huh? Really?”

“I’ll rephrase. We just need to step on these illustrations.”

That alone was apparently enough to get the pillars to glow. Ein felt the strength leave his body as he had expected something more complicated.

“That’s it? Really?” he asked.

“Quite right,” Chris replied. “But only the left side will glow. So I guess we must work from there.”

“Got it. Then I’ll step on top of the painting.”

Completely relaxed, he stepped on the illustration without hesitation. He touched the pillar while he was at it, but only it felt like an average stone pillar. He looked up and waited for the pillar to start glowing.

“It’s...not glowing,” he said.

Chris tilted her head to one side, completely perplexed. “H-Huh... I wonder... Would you mind if we switched places? I’ll try stepping on it.”

“Sure, let’s switch.”

He stepped aside and she took his place, causing the pillar to glow almost instantly.

“It glowed!” she cried.

All lit up, the pillar had a rather majestic look about it. Seemingly made of crystal, the structure looked like a block of ice held under the light. Ein noticed a pale light traveling from the pillar’s top, to its bottom, and back again. Despite the holy grounds’ monochromatic nature, this glow looked to be a pale blue.

“Maybe you can light up the other pillar too,” Ein suggested.

“I’ll try it out,” Chris said, going along with his idea.

The right pillar hadn’t done a thing, and the left pillar eventually stopped glowing.

“Are you left-handed?” Ein asked.

“I’m ambidextrous,” Chris replied. “Is that pertaining to this situation?”

“I was just thinking if it might be related.”

Chris fell silent and looked dubiously at Ein as he quickly shrugged.

“Sorry, I’m just kidding,” he said. He walked in front of the pillar on the right, where Chris stood. “I wonder if this one’s made of different material or something.”

He touched the pillar, but felt nothing unusual. *Why does only the left one light up?* He closed his eyes and furrowed his brows while folding his arms in front. A few seconds later, he noticed Chris hesitantly tugging on his sleeve.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

Just as Ein was about to look up and at his knight, he discovered that the pillar before him was now glowing. He was completely flabbergasted; it’d lit up while his eyes were closed.

“Chris,” he said.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?”

“Can you go stand over there?”

The knight seemed stunned for a moment, but she quickly snapped back to reality and jogged over to the pillar on the left. When she hastily stood in front of the pillar on the left and looked up, it started glowing right away. Just as predicted, something started opening.

The door at the room’s center kicked up small clouds of dust as it slowly started to move, the groaning of rocks brushing against each other reverberating throughout the shrine. The double doors yawned wide, giving way to a colorful world reminiscent of the aurora that the crown prince had seen in Barth. A completely new world had revealed itself right in front of their eyes—one that differed from anything they’d seen before as it beckoned them to enter.

“Uh, for now...” Ein said, scratching his temple. “Since it’s early evening, why don’t we head back to your place for now?”

Chris was at a loss for words, and the only thing she could do was nod. Suddenly, the ground started to shake.

“An earthquake?!” Ein gasped, quickly running to support Chris as he looked around.

It seemed like nothing extraordinary had happened nor had it led to anything else, but Ein shifted his gaze towards the depths of the world beyond those open doors. *Is someone inside?* He quickly felt as if he was seeing things. While he kept his guard up, nothing had appeared to leap out at them.

“Um, Sir Ein,” Chris said. “I’m terribly sorry to find that my master acted before me, and I’m extremely grateful that you supported me, but it’s very embarrassing, and, um...”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

He had his arm around her slender waist and had forcibly pulled her close. He could practically feel her breath. Ein quickly apologized and stepped back as Chris breathed a sigh of relief while secretly regretting her actions.

“All right, let’s head back,” he said.

“Indeed,” she agreed. “There might be another earthquake.”

Ein had failed to notice the significance of the drawings that adorned that pair of white and black tiles—they represented a pair of Ishtarican castles that he knew very well.

***

It was well into the evening once the pair had returned home from the holy grounds. Chris and Ein were resting on the sofa after dinner when they heard a knock at the door. It was only then that Ein realized that Chris’s home had no doorbell.

“I’ll go take a look,” Chris said, standing up and heading towards the door.

Sierra was waiting outside. “I bring a message from the chief. May I come in?”

“Of course...”

Chris turned back to Ein for his permission, and he swiftly nodded back. Sierra stepped inside and approached the sofa.

“I’ll go pour in some tea, so don’t be rude to Sir Ein,” Chris warned.

“Don’t worry,” Sierra assured. “I’m not the type to unsheathe my swords like you did.”

“Huh? What’s this about?” Ein asked.

“N-No! Stop!” Chris cried. “Don’t tell him, please!”

“All right, all right. I know,” Sierra replied.

“And Sir Ein, please don’t ask! I’m begging you! Okay?”

The knight disappeared into the kitchen after she left her final warning. While Ein and Sierra exchanged glances, Chris looked restless and eager to head back to Kingsland. The pair smiled at their favorite flustered elf running about.

“We occasionally trade with nearby cities,” Sierra casually mentioned. “Chris once saw an adventurer and brandished her blade without warning. She was young back then, so I suppose you can’t fault her... But she was scolded nonstop for the rest of the day. Her eyes were almost swollen shut from all the blubbering.”

“Are you sure you can tell me that?” Ein asked.

“Of course. I won’t mention a thing that she truly wants me to stay quiet about. I just want to share with you that Chris has her cute side from time to time.”

“I see.”

“Sorry for the wait!” Chris swiftly returned, placing cups of tea on the table. She quickly turned to Sierra. “You didn’t say anything, did you?!”

“This tea is delicious,” the childhood friend replied. “Did you bring this from the royal capital too?”

“Argh! You always change the subject!”

“I didn’t mean to. This really is scrumptious! I’ve never had tea with such a lovely aroma... Or perhaps you’re good at pouring tea for us.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Even if you have good tea leaves, it’ll all be for naught if the wrong person pours it. I think this wonderful flavor is a result of your pouring prowess.”

“I’ve got seconds.”

Ein didn’t know what to say. Was he supposed to praise Sierra’s eloquent conversational skills? After seeing his knight be so easily placated, the prince just couldn’t find the words. He gazed into the nighttime forest through a nearby window and took a sip of the tea that he’d been drinking before Sierra’s arrival. *It really does taste good. I don’t doubt that, but...*

“Good grief. I see you still have that silver tongue of yours,” Chris calmly replied, as though there were no other choice.

It was then that Ein realized that Chris knew Sierra’s personality quirks quite well, and thus she was playing along. Perhaps they were a bad influence on each other to a degree, but they were close enough to engage in friendly banter.

“Sierra, what did you want to talk to me about?” he asked.

“Ah, right,” Sierra replied. “The chief told me about tomorrow’s meeting. She

suggested speaking with you over lunch, but what do you think?”

“I don’t mind.”

It was the perfect opportunity to discuss how he’d just opened the shrine door. There was no chance that he’d keep quiet about something that important happening in the holy grounds.

Chapter Nine: The Guardian of the Shrine

As Sierra and Chris chatted away, Ein took extra care not to disturb or take their attention away as he quietly slunk off to bed. Just like last time, his memory turned into a blur after he lay down. The aroma of wood soothed his mind and the exhaustion built up in his body led him to a good night's sleep. But in sharp contrast to that peaceful slumber, a frantic voice roused him.

"Sir!"

He felt his body being shaken awake as a desperate voice spoke to him.

"Sir Ein! Sir Ein!"

"Hmm?" When he opened his eyes, he saw a worried Chris looking down upon him.

"Please wake up, Sir Ein! Hurry!"

Ein got up without understanding a thing. He rubbed his sleepy eyes and finally managed to open them wide. He noticed that his view was in black-and-white. *Didn't I fall asleep in Chris's house?* He rubbed his eyes again, but his vision hadn't failed him. He hastily popped out of his bed and looked outside, but the world was devoid of color in every direction. *It's just like the holy grounds.*

But he knew he wasn't there. A whole village's worth of elves stood before him, but it was as if they'd been frozen in place; locked in a moment from their day-to-day lives.

"Chris!" Ein cried in worry, cupping her face in his hands.

Soft and warm, the knight's skin was still soft to the touch. She quickly let him know that she was okay.

"You're worried about me," she exclaimed before placing her hands over his, an expression of joy that they were both safe.

After a moment, the pair nodded and started making their preparations. For his part, Ein quickly got his gear around once he'd fully awakened.

"Let's take a look outside," he suggested. "I think it's dangerous to stay here."

"I agree. Let's go!" Chris replied.

The two rushed outside, confirming that the world had taken on a monochrome hue. It wasn't just water, skies, trees, and foliage; everything around them had lost its color. The eerie sight of elves frozen in place caused a chill to run down the duo's spines. *Is it a trap?* Were his past doubts about the chief actually warranted? Was this a ploy of some sort? His previous discussion with her flashed across the crown prince's mind. *Impossible.*

Given that she appeared to genuinely mourn the loss of Marco, the chief couldn't have possibly wanted to trick the crown prince. Ein was more sure about it than ever before. In any case, he wanted to check if the chief was safe and started heading towards the manor.

Sylas stood by the entrance when they arrived, but he was also frozen in place. Ein and Chris cautiously entered the manor and headed straight for the chief's room. The servants that they'd met along the way were similarly locked into place, as though time had stopped for them.

"Sir Ein," Chris murmured.

"I know," he replied.

When they arrived at the chief's room, Chris and Ein quickly glanced at each other before they placed their hands on the door. Together, they opened the door to the room and headed inside without uttering a single word—they were completely in sync. In the center of the room sat the chief.

Ein and Chris both drew in a sharp breath. It was just as they had feared—the chief was frozen like everyone else. While Ein hesitated on his next steps, Chris walked forward with gusto.

"Let's go," she said.

"Wh-Where to?!" he cried.

"But of course. We must leave Syth Mill right this moment and head back to

the frontier city. Once there, we shall return to Kingsland immediately."

In this kind of situation, Chris was surely suggesting the best course of action. But Ein couldn't find it in him to agree.

"No," he insisted. "I can't leave Syth Mill like this."

"I know that you're a kind person. I know that more than anyone else," Chris replied. "But we can't stay here forever." Ein was the crown prince. "We don't know what the situation is like outside of Syth Mill, but this very much resembles the realm of the holy grounds. Hence, we might be fine if we leave this place and head back. In fact, it'd be a major problem if this phenomenon isn't confined to this village..."

Ein wasn't stupid. He knew that she was making the right call, but...

"Chris, a compromise," he said.

As the crown prince, this surely wasn't a wise decision for Ein to make. There certainly were smarter choices available, but Ein couldn't just leave Syth Mill in such a state of disarray. He racked his brain for an option that would let him meet Chris in the middle.

"We'll rendezvous with the knights once we hit the city," he said. "From there, we'll contact Kingsland and request their support."

"And will you return to Syth Mill, Sir Ein?" Chris asked.

"Yeah."

"I cannot agree to that. There's no sense in having you return to danger...but I suppose you won't listen to me, will you?"

"I knew I could count on you."

"Heh heh. However, I'll allow this on one condition: you have to convince Dill and the other knights of your plan."

This was quite the tall request and Ein flashed a strained smile. He tilted his head to one side, knowing that he was fighting an uphill battle.

Unfortunately, the prince's plan soon faced a roadblock. After leaving Syth Mill, Ein and Chris hurriedly rushed into the forest. They'd taken a path leading

back to the city, but were unable to go any farther once they reached the sun tree. They proceeded to try another route, but nothing seemed to work out.

“This wall of fog isn’t letting me budge an inch,” Ein said. “How’s it over there, Chris?”

“No luck!” she replied. “If we were able to walk through this in the holy grounds, why is it stopping us here?”

They couldn’t escape. Ein looked down at the spring to search for a solution, but discovered that the fish swimming in it were now frozen in time. It was the same case when he looked up. *The birds aren’t moving either.* Despite being in mid flight, these birds hung motionless in the sky. If memory served him correctly, they were once brilliantly colored and rather eye-catching creatures; now they were as colorless as everything else. *Only Chris and I remain unaffected.*

Their ability to enter the holy grounds was the duo’s only common denominator. Was that related somehow? Did the grounds hold some sort of remedy to this strange situation? While Chris pondered her next move, Ein continued to think. *What am I not thinking about? Is there anything I should recall?* No matter the case, they had to break this deadlock. *Then...* There was only one thing he could think of.

“Chris,” he called.

“What should we do?” Chris asked herself. “Should we search for another route or...?”

“Chris!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?! My apologies!”

Without another word, the crown prince took her hand, just as she’d done to him when they’d left the chief’s manor. Though he was a little forceful, Ein pulled Chris along as he started walking forward. This use of his power would’ve been welcome had they not been in this situation, but Chris looked a touch troubled as she tried to maintain her composure. Instead of expressing elation as a result of her master’s actions, the knight posed a question.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to your house,” he replied. “We’ll make some preparations before we return to the holy grounds.”

The knight couldn’t refute his words. Chris glanced at his hand tightly squeezing hers as she obediently followed along.

***

When Ein and Chris arrived at the holy grounds, an overwhelming sense of guilt washed over him. He blamed himself for Syth Mill’s current state of affairs, confident that he’d sealed the vilage’s fate when he opened the shrine’s doors. He had no definitive proof, but he was certain that they were related. It was only logical that he had put two and two together.

“This place is the same as yesterday,” he noted.

The mist that had once settled on the holy grounds’ border had vanished. As a result, Ein was able to see the Elven homes in the distance.

“Er, are we really going to test this out?” Chris asked.

“Of course,” Ein replied. He turned towards the shrine’s wide-open doors, still welcoming all who approached into a world of vibrant colors. “All right, here I go.”

He took a moment to brace himself before unleashing a set of Phantom Hands. Now that he was a Demon Lord, he could use all of his magical energy without holding back. If there were any bystanders, they surely would’ve been frightened by their prince’s ominous display of power. In accordance with their master’s demands, the hands took hold of both doors. These appendages pulsated as they wrung Ein’s power for all it was worth—a feat far beyond the capabilities of mere man. However...

“Urgh!” Ein grunted. “Th-The doors won’t close!”

He thought he could bring an end to this stagnant world of monochrome if he closed the doors, but he didn’t imagine that they’d refuse to budge. Exhausted, he fell to the hard, stone floor and attempted to catch his breath.

“It’s no good! They won’t budge!”

“Seems like it,” Chris replied. “Here’s some water.”

She handed him a leather canteen and he quickly opened it up to take a swing of cold water.

“Maybe we have to head inside,” he concluded.

They were here for two reasons. First, Ein wanted to see if they could somehow close the doors. Second, they were willing to enter this mysterious realm if the doors remained open. There was no guarantee that they’d find a solution for their problems if he stepped inside, but no other options came to mind. The holy grounds were the only place they could find a portal such as this. While the crown prince had steeled his resolve, his knight was still hesitating.

“Chris,” Ein said.

She remained silent.

“Chris! Hello?!”

“P-Please don’t shout in my ear!” she cried. “Are you fine with me losing my nerve?!”

“Uh, well, you didn’t answer me... Sorry.”

This small talk seemed unfitting given the serious nature of their situation. She was dumbfounded by her beloved master’s current attitude.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” she finally replied. “I’ve made my choice. I suppose we’ve got no choice but to enter.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure there are no monsters lurking about.”

That was the holy grounds’ strength, after all. The pair hadn’t encountered a single monster during their initial attempt to leave Syth Mill.

“I’ll go in first,” Chris said, touching the colors that lie beyond the open doors. “Seems like...it’s fine.”

“Okay, then I’ll go with you,” Ein said.

“Please wait! I should enter first to ensure your safety!”

“No, I don’t want you to do that. I don’t want you to do everything for me.”

He stepped beside her and stuck his arm inside. He felt his hand gently brush against hers beyond the door. “Let’s go in together.”

“Argh, very well, then. Just don’t go first, all right?”

“I know. Here we go.”

Three... Two... One...

The pair stepped through the portal almost simultaneously and were greeted by a colorful interior. They hadn’t seen anything this vibrant in a while. Beyond the door was a temple of sorts, boasting elegant craftsmanship. Due to this colorful temple’s wellhole construction, Chris and Ein could see a few stories below their current location; everyone was connected into one singular space. White marble double stairs stood on either side, leading to lower levels as far as the eye could see. There was even a corridor that led somewhere else.

The light was also eye-catching. A chandelier hung above, emitting a kaleidoscope of colors as though it’d been embellished with an entire treasure trove of magic stones. It looked brand-new. A series of lamps hung equidistantly on the walls, with some giving off a soft blue glow while others emanated a tainted orange light.

I can’t sense a single monster... Ein thought. Even with his heightened Demon Lord senses, the prince couldn’t pick up on the presence of any monsters. His Toxin Decomposition skill hadn’t activated either—proof that there wasn’t any toxic gas in the air.

Upon fully realizing that the shrine was much larger than he’d imagined, a sense of anticipation welled up in his heart. There was something here.

“Are you all right?” Chris looked up at him with worry; he’d been silent this entire time.

“I was just gauging my surroundings,” Ein replied. “But I feel like it’s been a while.”

“Since what?”

“Since I’ve seen you in color. It puts me at ease.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m quite relieved too. I’m not sure what I would’ve

done if things had remained the same."

Her worries were warranted. Ein reached out and gently patted her head before heading to the stairs that led below. *What's waiting for me at the bottom of these stairs?* This question likely was tied to the existence of the shrine itself. He didn't have a clue as to why this building existed in the first place. *I wonder if the chief knows the answer. She seemed to have known the first king very well. I'm sure she had a few tidbits of knowledge up her sleeve.* Unfortunately, he had no way of asking her now.

"It's decorated with paintings," Chris said. She had taken notice of a painting that hung on the wall as she descended the staircase. It was still a bit far away and difficult to make out. "I wonder what it's supposed to be... The terrain looks familiar. It's a bit sparse, but it does resemble a port."

Though oddly familiar, Ein couldn't put a name to this place. But as they kept walking, another painting grabbed his attention.

"That looks like a rolling plain," Ein remarked. *It doesn't seem like anything remarkable, so why does it look so familiar?*

"The...royal capital," Chris murmured. "These paintings must be depictions of the previous royal capital! I've seen artwork just like this in a book before!"

The first painting must've been Kingsland's port while the other depicted the rolling plains just outside the city. *Is this place somehow tied to the first king? Then what about the phenomenon in Syth Mill? Why was it wrapped into this mess?* Ein couldn't help but wonder as he gazed at the art.

He was suddenly caught off guard by a bright flash of light, causing him to gasp in shock. In the next moment, Ein was assaulted by a head-splitting migraine that led him to reflexively close his eyes.

Even though his eyes were closed, a new scene played out before him. The same plain he'd seen before came into view alongside a young man on horseback. A large force of armored warriors rode up behind the man; some of them human, while others were more bestial.

"Let us build our own country upon this land one day," the young man declared.

Everyone loudly cheered for their leader. Unfortunately, he never turned around enough for Ein to get a good look at him.

“Let’s go to the people who’re waiting for us.”

Shrouded in a white mist, the scene slowly faded away into a bright white.

“What was...” Ein murmured, realizing that his migraine was now gone. When he opened his eyes, he saw Chris walking alongside him. She’d failed to notice what had just happened.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“Did you just see that?”

“See what?”

So only I saw it...

He tried to reply in a normal tone of voice. “It’s nothing. I was just imagining things, I think.”

With that, he chased after his stalwart knight.

***

As far as they could tell, Ein and Chris had reached the shrine’s final floor. As they walked farther down the corridor before them, the pair was greeted by a massive door. This thick, bronze door was far and away much larger than the door to White Night’s treasury. Unlike most entryways, the imposing slab of a door had no keyhole to be found.

Instead, an elaborate image was engraved into the bronze—a man and a woman facing each other within some sort of forest. *Huh, is there something special about the tiles around here too?* Ein wondered. His eyes darted around in search of a solution, but nothing stood out to him aside from the bronze door itself. However, the lamps that lined the corridor’s walls appeared to be powered by something that greatly resembled a magic stone.

“I guess all we can do is touch the door,” Ein said.

“Ah, then please allow me,” Chris said, reaching forward without hesitation. The door didn’t budge one bit.

“All right, let me try next.” He reached out, but nothing changed. “Okay, why don’t we try touching the door together?”

However, the result was the same—the massive door remained in place. Becoming impatient, Chris whipped out her rapier.

“Let’s try cutting this door to ribbons,” she suggested.

“Hey, hey! Let’s not,” Ein said, gently scolding his knight before placing a hand on her shoulder.

Chris quickly grew embarrassed for acting so hastily, but truth be told... Ein was kind of thinking the same thing.

“I’m tempted to break down this door myself, but let’s mull this over for just a bit longer. All right?” he said. “It’d be too late if something were to happen after we ripped it apart.”

Given Syth Mill’s state of disarray, the pair wouldn’t hesitate in turning to their steel. If push came to shove, the prince and his knight weren’t against using a little brute force to save the village in a timely manner.

“Perhaps there’s some sort of contraption somewhere around here,” Chris surmised.

“Maybe,” Ein agreed. “Maybe it’s somewhere outside this corridor or even the shrine? For instance, what if it’s hidden behind that waterfall? If that’s the case, we should probably seriously consider knocking down this door.”

“Agreed. When the time comes, I’ll be the one to do it.”

“Let’s pray we won’t have to. For now, why don’t we walk around this corridor?”

“But the only other things I see around here are those.”

She pointed to the lamps on the wall. As she’d said, the rest of the corridor was empty, and these lamps didn’t appear to be anything special.

“I’ll try touching one,” she said, jogging over to one of the lamps.

She reached out and placed her hand on one of the lamps, but the door remained silent as a tomb. Chris went around and touched every lamp she

could find, but nothing happened. Without a hidden button to be found behind any of the lamps, the pair found themselves at a dead end. *What now?* Ein sat in front of the door and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Hrmm..." he groaned, suddenly overcome with hunger pangs. He hadn't hadn't had a single bite to eat since he roused. "Let's take a break. I'd like to eat something too."

"You're right," Chris agreed. "This might take a while, so I'll prepare something immediately."

Storage-based magical tools were so convenient, allowing meals to be enjoyed even in a place such as this. However, Ein and Chris couldn't make anything too fancy, as they needed another tool to heat things up.

"Here you are," the knight said, handing him a plate of grilled meat alongside a few slices of pillowy soft bread.

Right as Ein took a bite of the bread, its wheaty aromas and flavors danced upon his palate. Soon after, a little meat joined the dance, the seasonings tingling his mind and revitalizing his brain. The meat was tender even when cold, a clear mark of its superb quality. He downed each and every bite with a hydrating swig of water. *No notes.*

Even though his hunger was being addressed, Ein couldn't exactly enjoy the finer points of his meal due to current circumstances. This bit of food was slowly filling him up, but... *It might not be enough.* Still a little hungry, Ein remained silent and looked up at the door. He quickly shifted his gaze to the lamps; they'd caught his attention. *What if...and this is a* big *if...these are powered by magic stones?* When he was younger, the prince would unconsciously absorb nearby stones whenever he was hungry. If these lamps held magic stones within them, he just might be able to fully sate his hunger.

He could never work up the courage to share these kinds of thoughts with Chris. Even he had to admit that enjoyed tense situations, and knew that his observations would be unquestionably met with an exasperated expression.

"You know what, I think I'll go check those out too," Ein said, using that as an excuse to approach the lamps.

He touched one and sensed the faint aura of magical energy. In the blink of an eye, he felt his hunger being satisfied.

“Are they magic stones?” Chris asked.

“Seems so,” Ein replied. “I’ll try absorbing them all.”

The prince wasn’t trying to gorge himself on stones, but rather, he hoped that this act would perhaps open the door. *One... Two... Three...* One by one, he absorbed the magical energy and cleared out one side of the room. He did the same to the other side with ease and the room turned pitch-black; the lamps had been completely stripped of their energy source.

Just then, the stone tiles began to emit a dull glow. This phenomena closely resembled the pillars out by the shrine’s entrance, but the mystical glow stretched across the entire floor and the tiles became transparent. A dull thud rang out from the bronze door. Ein quickly turned to Chris, who stood directly before the door.

“Looks like it opened,” he said.

“What kind of contraption is this?” she wearily remarked.

I guess she’s annoyed either way. Her withered gaze was pointed right at the door before she turned it to her prince.

“For the record, I’m not upset with *you,* Sir Ein,” she quickly clarified. “I’m upset with this shrine!”

“I don’t know what to say...” he confessed. “But I agree, this is an odd lock...”

That was all he could say, really. The fact that his rumbling stomach had led him to the solution was something he vowed to take to his grave.

“Let’s head inside,” Ein suggested.

He placated himself with the excuse that he was “heading towards his *true* goal.” As she was already a few steps ahead of him, Ein chased after Chris. However, a flash of brilliant light assaulted his eyes just as the knight walked through the door. *This again?* Just like his earlier encounter with the painting, a searing migraine flared up.

Here we go. When he closed his eyes, another unfamiliar scene appeared in

his head. They were now within the same forest that was engraved into the door.

“You’re safe now,” the young man from earlier said.

In front of him was a young girl on her knees, her hands together as though she was worshipping him. Her attire looked quite familiar—the design was a bit different, but it looked very similar to everyday elven garb. Even though Ein had only met the chief a few days ago, he noticed that this girl bore a resemblance to her.

“You saved us,” the girl said.

“I did nothing that grand. You appeared to be in trouble, so I simply lent my aid,” the young man said, extending an arm towards the girl.

She stood up and looked up at him, her hands still together in a prayer.

“Let’s go,” he said, scratching the back of his head. The man appeared to be a little embarrassed, but he then looked up to the sky. “Your forest will be safe now.”

Are you...?! Ein thought, but he was unable to vocalize these words. He tried his best to reach out towards this man.

When he came to, the scenery had abruptly faded just like before. In front of him was a sight that he was already quite used to, and he realized that he had his arms stretched towards Chris.

“That person must have been...” he muttered to himself.

I shouldn’t jump to conclusions. For now, I have to press on. He chased after Chris as he tried to steady his breath.

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They walked through many, similarly designed floors. If someone had claimed that a sacred jade stone was nestled inside the shrine, Ein would’ve been inclined to believe them. Ein and Chris descended several flights of stairs before finally arriving at another lengthy corridor.

The walls surrounding them were seemingly made of the same white stone used in the construction of White Night Castle. The floor was covered in

crimson carpeting while the walls were adorned with equidistant picture frames. Curiously, these frames contained blank sheets of paper within them; completely unlike the vivid paintings in the frames on the floors above.

“I can see a door farther down the hall,” Chris said.

This door was much like the other doors they’d already encountered, ornate and firmly shut. However, this one was so far down the corridor, it’d take the pair a little while to reach it.

“Let’s take a closer look at these frames as we walk ahead,” Ein suggested. “We might find a clue somewhere.”

“Right!” Chris replied.

They carefully examined the frames, but there were only blank sheets of paper within each one. Despite that, the pair continued to carry on the hope that there might be a key hiding somewhere. *More paper.* For the umpteenth time, he looked at the frame and sighed. *Is there a specific frame we’re looking for around here?* They’d come this far; it was unlikely to assume that there wasn’t a key hidden somewhere. He gazed at the empty frames and sometimes peered at it from below, hoping a shift in angle would offer some sort of clue, but he came up with nothing at all. *Maybe it’s hidden behind the frame?*

Half jokingly, Ein reached out towards the frame and tugged. The white paper suddenly started to glow as an image slowly emerged. This was someone Ein knew quite well.

“Ramza...” he muttered.

With his trusty greatsword slung across his back, Ramza stood resolutely while flashing a cool smile—something Ein had never seen before. The Dark Knight was looking down at a small boy who’d fallen face first into the grass.

“So? Do you understand your father’s power now?” Ramza asked.

With no throbbing migraine or the need to close his eyes, Ein could watch the scene unfolding in front of him. The voice simply echoed calmly within his heart. He was stunned as the picture flickered for a moment before vanishing. *What...was that?* He stepped away from the frame and immediately reached for a different one.

“Listen well. Skills are very special abilities,” Misty said kindly as she stood beside the boy. They stood within an archive, where the young boy faced his desk. *“As I am an Undead, my lengthy pursuit of wisdom will eventually bear fruit once I evolve into an Elder Lich. Then I’ll have Grand Sorcery at my fingertips, giving me access to all kinds of spells. For example, I could restrain someone without resistance or destroy any magic cast upon me.”*

Ein walked farther down the hall and touched another frame.

Seems like touching these was the way to go, Ein thought. Upon touching the next frame, Ein’s painful headache returned and he reflexively closed his eyes again. It seemed he was already well acquainted with this recurring pain. On a similar note, he was also quite familiar with the scenery that emerged from the painting—a room filled with packed bookshelves accompanied by a desk in the back. This was First King Jayle’s Magna villa, but more precisely, the basement library Ein had once visited.

“What can I do?” the voice of a young man groaned.

Ein had seen this young man numerous times before due to the migraine-induced visions. The young man started scribbling down his thoughts on a nearby book.

“More species have started to follow them*. Our voices fell on deaf ears. They wielded their power as though answering to my older sister’s desires,”* Jayle wrote.

I knew it, Ein thought.

“I wonder what father and mother are up to? Are they trying to stop my sister?”

The young man wrote the passage that Ein had seen jotted in the basement journal verbatim. Jayle was transcribing his own thoughts.

“A countless number of my comrades have fallen. What happened to my sister? Is fighting against her the only path forward?”

Jayle eventually stood up as he finished writing. *“I* have *to do this. There’s no other way.”*

He closed the book and left the library behind.

As the heavy basement door slowly started to close, Ein's headache gradually grew weaker and his eyelids slowly opened again. Without thinking, his eyes darted towards the door standing in the back. *Just as I'd thought...* He heard a clack from the door as though something had been unlocked.

"Chris," Ein called, summoning his knight to his side so he could tell a little fib. "I think I pressed a switch or something. When I did, I heard a sound coming from the door."

"The next time you decide to press something, tell me first, all right?" Chris replied.

"I'm sorry. I'll be careful."

He smiled, much to her dismay. She'd failed to see through his lie and Ein feigned guilt for his carelessness. The prince proceeded to make his way to the door, but it started opening on its own when he approached it.

"Let's go," he bravely said.

It didn't seem like he'd been fazed at all by Chris's scolding. The room beyond the door appeared to be enveloped in a blinding light that made it difficult to see. However, Ein quickly realized that the wind was blowing; so much so that a gentle breeze reached him as he stood outside the door. It was so refreshing that for a moment, Ein thought that he was outside. *We've gone in this deep and you're telling me that this leads outside?* He wondered if he'd left Syth Mill entirely and had ended up somewhere else entirely.

He had a few other theories in mind, but none of them seemed to fit in his mind. All the while, he gallantly walked forward with confident strides, not at all flinching. The two unsheathed their weapons, exercising more caution than ever before as they peered inside of the door. The light was so bright that Ein used one hand to shield his eyes, but he still tried to gauge his surroundings with a narrowed gaze.

They eventually stepped through the door and were welcomed by a chilly breeze. *Where* are *we? I thought we were in a shrine, but now we're...*

"In the sky?" Chris said absentmindedly.

They were high above as far as the eyes could see. Below them were clouds dotting the sky, creating white splotches on a carpet of crimson. The sunset that Ein had usually gazed up at was now beneath his feet.

“I thought we headed down...” he said, unable to hide his awe at this curious sight.

In front of him was a stone path that continued for several meters, and a lone door stood at the end, seemingly isolated from the rest of the world. Ein wasn’t sure if they were truly in the sky, but he decided to not focus on that for now. It was enough knowing that falling from this height would have disastrous consequences.

“Chris, the path is wide enough,” he reasoned. “We shouldn’t fall if we don’t do anything odd. I think we’re fine.”

“I just remembered Celes’s fear of heights,” Chris said.

“And what about you?”

“When I was young, I loved climbing on trees so much that I’d often get scolded.”

That nugget was all he needed to rely on her. When he glanced at her feet, he saw that she wasn’t trembling at all.

“But Sir Ein, look below,” she said. “We should be seeing the continent of Ishtar at our feet, but something looks off.”

“You’re right. I can’t see any buildings.”

“How strange. It’s as though we’ve gone back in time...to before Ishtarica started building its civilization.”

Though they were high above the clouds, it was certainly puzzling that no tall buildings came into view. No castle could be seen towering over its surroundings in Kingsland. *Is this some kind of illusion?* The moment Ein took a step forward to chase after Chris ahead of him, a splitting headache suddenly hit him. It was so agonizing that he couldn’t suppress his grunts.

“Gh... Argh!”

His vision started to blur. The wind drowned out his feeble gasps and Chris

failed to hear him. He reached out, praying that she'd notice, but he hit his limit before she could. Loud noise, as though he was in the midst of a sandstorm, seized his senses as his vision and consciousness faded away before he could ask for help. He felt his body immediately turn lighter. Was it his vision or his consciousness? Either way, he felt himself slip through the floor and fall. He glided through the air as the ground quickly approached him. When Ein eventually looked up, he was perplexed to discover that his previous footing was now floating high above him. He could even spot his own body curled up on the skyward path. There was no way Ein could stop his descent as an omnipotent, invisible force was seemingly yanking him down to the ground.

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The sensation came to an abrupt stop, accompanied by a sudden ringing in his ears. Ein tried to close his eyes and to his luck, found that his vision grew dark as the ringing soon died down. The real problem was what he saw when he opened his eyes again.

"Where am..." he started.

He found himself in the middle of a dust cloud. The breeze was so thick with sand that he was tempted to close his eyes, but when he looked down, he noticed that he wasn't in a desert. At the same time, he heard loud, angry roaring and subconsciously realized that he was in the middle of a war zone.

"Hrah! Grr... Raaaaah!" a bestial nonhuman cried, appearing in the middle of the dust cloud.

With bloodshot eyes, the beast glared straight at Ein as he raised the sword. He bared his rageful fangs as the crown prince noticed a black magic stone embedded in the nonhuman's collarbone, surrounded by reddish-black veins.

"I don't even know anymore!" Ein shouted as he found himself able to control his body once more.

His physical body was supposed to still be high above, but when he reached around his waist, he was able to grab his blade. He decided to act before processing the situation and tried to defend himself. But to his surprise, his opponent's blade went right through him.

“Nooo!” screamed someone behind him.

Shocked, Ein whirled around and saw that the blade had pierced the chest of a human who stood behind him.

“Ugh... Stop,” the person cried. “I can still... Ugh...”

The beast panted heavily while Ein gulped, reeling from the sight of a life being snuffed out right before his eyes. Before the crown prince could react, another nonhuman bellowed while swinging their weapon. Humans and their nonhuman allies fought back, but they were no match for their ardor-filled enemies. One by one, the humans and their allies fell to premature deaths.

“Stop!” Ein shouted.

He frantically swung his sword in an attempt to stop the battle, but Ein couldn’t feel a single thing. His body just passed through his opponents while his blade only sliced air.

“Why?!” he gasped.

That battle only escalated as the fierce fighting kicked up even more clouds of dust into the air. The grotesque sounds of flesh being severed were coupled with agonizing screams as yet another life was snuffed out. The clanging of metal rang out as swords clashed, and the peculiar scent of war wafted into Ein’s nose. This was the smell of iron accompanied by an unpleasant whiff of flesh burning. It made him feel sick. *Is this what a battlefield’s really like?*

Something was off about the overwhelming power displayed by these seemingly insane enemies; they reminded Ein of the wyvern under Viscount Sage’s control. As the crown prince’s attention was transfixed on the horrifying scene before him, he could hear the sound of a horn off in the distance.

The humans and their allies cried in horror.

“It can’t be!”

“You’re kidding me! Are there more of these guys?!”

“We’re already at our limit here!”

Despite the odds they refused to flee the front lines. While some were trembling ever so slightly, they firmly gripped their swords. Ein spotted a

Werewolf who had tears streaming down his cheeks as he bravely bared his fangs. He let out a powerful howl in hopes that it wouldn't be his last.

From off in the distance, a voice suddenly pierced through the battlefield. "If we shed our blood, we can protect His Majesty!" It was the voice of a commander.

Everyone stood firm upon hearing these words and made their resolve. However, reality was cruel; countless footsteps thudded towards them, plotting to strike them down without mercy. Could there have been hundreds? Thousands, perhaps? There might have even been far more than that. An army that vastly outnumbered them was quickly approaching, and there were no signs that this enemy would be slowing down anytime soon.

"Comrades, it's been a genuine honor to fight by your side! Stand proud and char—" Before the commander could finish his sentence and order his men to charge, another person interrupted him.

"He's here! *He's* here for us!" the person cried as the dust clouds quickly started to clear.

In the blink of an eye, the air surrounding the battlefield completely transformed. Another horn sounded from the opposite direction, causing a deafening cheer to immediately erupt. The malevolent nonhuman forces suddenly recoiled, flinching in response to the presence of a single man.

"Raise your blades," he said. His voice came from afar, where the dust clouds should've been.

In reply, the humans and their allies raised their swords to the sky before letting out a powerful battle cry in unison. For his part, Ein forgot to breathe in the face of this seemingly divine savior. The man was difficult to make out from a distance, but he radiated a blinding light. Sitting atop a horse with his own blade in the air, this savior was clad in silver light armor and surrounded by a whirlwind of silver.

The enemy force cowered in fear by the mere appearance of this man. Like a herd of cattle, the enemies frantically tried to flee. They resembled countless baby spiders scuttling about. However, they weren't about to be shown mercy.

With a single swing of his sword, the silver whirlwind ripped through the enemy forces. A wave of pure magic, the whirlwind acted as if it were eliminating wrongdoers in the name of justice. All in the blink of an eye, this man had single-handedly completely turned the tide of battle and chased away the enemy.

“Now!” the man said, turning around towards his allies.

The savior’s troops were triumphantly shouting when another sharp headache suddenly hit Ein. This was far more painful than any of his other headaches, tempting Ein to close his eyes due to the agonizing torment.

“Wait!” Ein called out. “Are you...?!”

He just wanted to catch a glimpse of the man. A split second would have been enough, but the crown prince was unable to open his eyes. All Ein could catch was the glory of the man’s silver armor and the golden sword firmly grasped in his hand. The prince tried to pry open his eyes to get one last look at the man, but his body became weightless once more. As abruptly as he’d arrived, Ein’s body floated into the sky, and the roars of the battlefield quickly faded into the distance.

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I’m...back to normal. However, Ein wasn’t exactly sure if that was the most apt way to describe what had just happened. In control of his physical body once more, Ein noticed that Chris was only a few paces ahead of him. Everything he’d just seen had taken no more than a few seconds in real time.

“H-Huh? Sir Ein?” Chris said, frantically whirling around when she noticed the crown prince on the ground behind her. “Are you sitting?”

“Forget that, what was that scene?!” Ein cried.

“P-Pardon? Are you referring to the scenic view of Ishtar below us, perhaps?”

“No, the battlefield! We were just there!”

“Battlefield?”

Based on the knight’s perplexed head tilt, Ein gathered that didn’t see what he saw. *Like the paintings from before, only I could see it...* It felt far too real for

him to brush it off as some sort of intense hallucination. He couldn't possibly forget the atrocities of that war zone. The scent of blood still lingered in his nose and his ears still rang from those bold cheers of victory. *I'm sure of it. I wasn't imagining what I just saw.* It felt so real to him.

"Sir Ein, what battle are you referring to?" Chris asked.

Afraid of worrying her, Ein didn't want to talk about things too much. Instead, he chose to tell another lie. "I guess the Magna incident came to mind for some reason. Don't worry about it." He flashed a forced smile before standing up. "I tripped because my shoelaces were untied. Don't tell anyone, please?"

"Good grief... That's dangerous!"

"I've tied it properly. See? Look. It's tied very well, don't you think?"

"Don't act all defiant! If you fall, it'll be very dangerous!"

"I'm sorry. Come on, let's go!"

"Hrm... You're the one who tripped, yet you seem so proud of it..."

Ein felt that sneaking in a cheeky word or two would help mask his current state of mind. His gamble was successful—Chris didn't suspect him at all as she obediently continued to walk along the skyward stone path.

A lone door stood at the end of this path. While there was nothing next to the door, Ein noticed a familiar decoration adorning it.

"It looks like his sword," he muttered.

"Pardon? Did you say something?" Chris asked.

"Oh, it's nothing."

The glorious savior of the battlefield had held a sword made not only of gold, but of silver as well. Straight as an arrow, the blade was the perfect mingling of these regal colors and had an elegantly noble air about it. The door standing before Ein held the same qualities—the silver entrance was embellished with vines and leaves of gold. It looked more important than all the other doors he'd seen today.

"And now we've got a lock... What should we do?" Chris asked.

The lock was a seal. The gold ornaments were wrapped around the door, keeping it shut. The golden foliage was dense as the vines and leaves barred their path, but the moment Chris touched it...

“H-Huh?” she gasped.

The golden vines and their leaves began to wither away. Soon after, the decorations slowly disappeared, and the dense foliage completely vanished.

“Sir Ein! It’s gone!” Chris cried.

“This world really *is* filled with its fair share of oddities,” Ein said.

The prince’s apparent indifference had Chris frowning, but he was actually quite shocked. There was little doubt in his mind that this shrine was closely tied to the first king. In any case, the door was ready to open, but it wouldn’t budge. Try as she might, Chris couldn’t get the door to move. *I don’t think this’ll work, but...*

Ein reached out and touched the door. The moment he did so, it let off a flash of blinding light before dissipating into small light particles. The door evaporated as the particles were blown away in the breeze as a thick mist appeared to obstruct their view. The remaining doorframe was filled with this fog, and they couldn’t make out the sky beyond it.

Is this connected to another place? Curiously, the mist refused to dissipate like it had in the past.

“Let’s just press on,” Ein said.

“Agreed,” Chris replied.

They came so far and there was no turning back now. The pair steadied their breathing as they stepped into the door.

A stone corridor appeared in front of them. The well-polished walls, floors, and ceiling reflected light quite well. On either side of the pair, the walls were filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of magic stones propped up on pedestals. There was a wide collection of weapons and armors scattered about as well, much to Ein’s confusion. *It’s totally different from anything we’ve encountered thus far.*

At a glance, one could easily tell that they were in a completely different building. They were in a temple of sorts. *Like a grand mausoleum.* He felt that his suspicions weren't too far off, especially when considering that nonhumans and monsters possessed magic stones in their bodies. With the stones all lined up like this, surely it was paying tribute to the fallen in some way.

Wait... Does this have anything to do with that battlefield? Could these magic stones honor the nonhumans lost to war while this scattered armor does the same for fallen humans? This only solidified his theory that they were within a mausoleum.

"We must be on the lowest floor..." Chris surmised. "Ah ha ha... We were high in the sky just moments ago, so I'm not sure if this is correct, but..."

"No, I agree," Ein replied. "This atmosphere is convincing."

The two kept their guards up and ventured deeper inside. The would-be mausoleum's scenery remained the same for a while, but the pair came to a massive cylindrical hall a few minutes later. Polished, gray stone lined the hall's floor, and a series of pillars stood to support the circular walls. Between each pillar was a pane of stained glass that allows light to spill through. If one were to look directly up, they'd notice that this hall's ceilings were just as tall as the ones in White Night Castle. Aside from those prominent features, there were no pathways, doors, or stairs leading anywhere else.

Ein and Chris had clearly descended to the lowest floor, but that didn't mean that this hall was sparse. An altar lay in the depths of the hall, standing tall atop a stone pedestal and alongside a single blade. The warm light peeking in from the stained glass windows bounced off the cool steel, emanating a divine aura. It looked as if it were a scene depicted in a sacred painting. Ein soaked in this celestial sight for a few moments, unable to tear his eyes away from the sword. *That blade must be...*

Ein's eyes widened in shock—that weapon was eerily reminiscent of the blade he'd just seen on the battlefield. The metal had a reddish hue due to rust, making him unsure if he was actually looking at that very same blade.

"I feel like we mustn't remove that blade," Chris said.

"I agree," Ein replied. "Something would probably change if this blade were

removed. Especially when you consider that this sword has been living in the heart of a shrine at the holy grounds' center for who knows how long."

While he wasn't sure if this change would be for the better or worse, he knew something would happen. Still, what else could he do? He looked around and saw nothing else. His options were limited. He approached the sword, but quickly turned around and tried to explore the rest of the place. Should he leave the shrine, hoping that Syth Mill's misfortune would be magically resolved? This seemed too convenient of a wish.

Suddenly, a change *did* occur. Light poured in towards the pedestal and the blade stuck in the ground. A clap of lightning struck loudly, tempting both Ein and Chris to cover their ears. The light outside of the stained glass refracted, and a blinding sliver of lightning flashed throughout the room as though it was trying to pierce the heavens. Shortly after, a large gust of wind started kicking up.



“Stay by my side!” Ein ordered.

The prince bent his knees, bracing himself for impact while using his unarmed hand to draw Chris close. She was surprised at first, but quickly allowed him to pull her in. Ein instinctively knew that something was coming, fully aware of who had once swung that blade. As the sword was wrapped in a shining light, the prince realized what was about to happen. However, the mere thought caused large beads of sweat to form on his brow.

The ray of light soon scattered.

Once Ein’s vision returned, he noticed that the wind had also died down. Still supporting Chris, he stood up and gazed at the sword that should’ve been in the ground. *Ah... I knew it.*

Removed from its resting place, the sword was now in the hand of a man standing before the altar. The blade had regained the glow of its silvery whirlwind—the same glow Ein had seen on the battlefield. His mind wandered back to horrific sights of battle upon watching this man don a set of silver light armor. The sword was no longer red with rust, as it had returned to its former glory. Ein was left speechless.

“I-It can’t be... Impossible...” Chris said, absolutely astonished by the man in front of her.

The knight wasn’t enchanted by him, but she was so clearly rattled that she could only stand there and stare.

“That sword... How?!” she desperately cried.

The man raised his sword in reply. And almost as if prompted, the sound of a ringing bell suddenly reverberated throughout the hall. At the same time, the light pouring in through the stained glass rapidly changed color, turning crimson before becoming shrouded in the darkness of night. Luckily for Ein and Chris, the appearance of moonlight and glimmering stars provided more than enough light for them to see. *This takes me back to the ride back home from Ist.* As Ein reminisced over his traintop battle, he slowly unsheathed his blade.

“No! You mustn’t! You can’t fight him!” Chris cried.

“Whoa! What’s wrong?!” Ein asked.

“You absolutely cannot fight him! That blade...that man...he’s...”

Before she could finish her sentence, the man vanished. He was gone like the wind, but Ein soon felt a cold, murderous intent behind him. While mid gasp, the prince reflexively twisted his body as a whirlwind of silver blew past where he just stood.

“Huff...” Ein panted, trying to catch his breath.

Had he reacted a moment later, there was no doubt in his mind that he would’ve been dead. As his nerves grew tense, Ein’s brain suddenly snapped itself awake. He was starting to put the pieces together, leading him to an epiphany. *Hidden bloodline... Lineage... That war scene and Chris’s panic... That man must be...*

“Don’t tell me that’s the first king’s blade,” he said.

As he regained his balance, Chris could only nod in silence. She’d apparently seen his sword before in a book, but it didn’t exactly matter at the present moment.

“I see...” Ein said.

He wasn’t that surprised; deep down, he’d seen this coming from far away. The prince had seen quite a few things up until this point, not to mention that the grisly battlefield of old was now seared into his memory. Only a fool wouldn’t have been able to put two and two together. No matter the reason, Ein was standing toe to toe with the first king...or perhaps the Undead creature he’d been transformed into. The crown prince had no intention of crossing blades with him, but the first king instantly stepped forward and closed the gap.

“Ugh!” Ein grunted.

“No... He’s too fast. Sir Ein!” Chris cried, quickly removing her rapier to protect the boy. However, even she couldn’t keep up with this level of speed.

“Raaaaah!” Ein bellowed.

The prince swung his sword around wildly, caring not for swordsmanship or skill. His blows were quickly parried as more air swiftly left his lungs, making it

hard to breathe. *I'm being treated like a child here.* He had a forced smile on his face as he was sent flying into the air. Luckily for Ein, he didn't feel much in the way of pain as his body slammed into a wall. His knight quickly ran to his side, placing her hand on his head to check him.

"Are you all right?!" she asked.

"I can handle this much..." Ein replied. "But I don't think we'll be able to escape without fighting here."

"Th-Then let's at least take this outside!"

"Unfortunately, I don't think we can do that anymore."

Ein glanced over to the door. He'd let out a forced laugh earlier because he'd noticed that the door had been firmly clamped shut.

"We have to fight, or we'll be cut down," he said.

"But..."

"Don't worry. I don't think we're fighting an Undead or anything of the sort." It was clear that this man was related to the first king somehow, but the crown prince wasn't able to figure out just how he was related yet.

"How can you say for certain? If that really is the first king..."

"I know why that is impossible, but I'll just say that it's a royal family secret. But for now..."

He had to fight. If there was no clear path, the only thing he could do was cut his way out. The moment the words left his lips, the first king disappeared once more. Ein realized that the man was aiming for Chris's blind spot, and the piercing murderous intent allowed the crown prince to raise his blade without hesitation. Chris, on the other hand, was still not fully committed. It wasn't her fault if she'd realized that their opponent was somehow connected to the first king.

"I won't let you!" Ein roared, lowering his blade in defense. "No way! From that position?!"

The man expertly changed the direction of his blade, shifting his target from Chris to Ein, who was swinging at him from behind. Using only one arm, the first

king easily defended himself without turning around. This position should've made it difficult to exert power, but he effortlessly forced Ein off-balance. However, the crown prince had more than just swordsmanship at his disposal.

He faced First King Jayle and yelled, "I'll have you blown away with me, First King!"

By combining his Ice Dragon, Dark Knight, and Dryad skills, Ein launched a full-frontal assault against Jayle. The first king said not a word and raised his blade in response. A silvery tornado started to form then burst forth, negating Ein's attacks. Unable to brace herself, Chris felt she was being blown away by the fierce battle.

"Take my hand!" Ein desperately called out as he tried to protect her.

He then brought Chris to his chest, curling his body around her to shield her from the blast. They were sent flying into a wall. The prince's Phantom Hands guarded his backside, but the impact knocked the wind out of him. He bravely opened his eyes and returned his focus to Jayle.

The dim lighting and Jayle's fluttering hair made it difficult to make out the expression on his face. Ein let out a fearless laugh; he'd hoped to finally catch a glimpse of his hero.

"Sir Ein... How can you fight without hesitation?" Chris asked.

"But of course," Ein replied, valiantly bringing himself to his feet. His eyes were filled with a determination like no other. "If the first king even dares to raise his blade against those I love, I'll fight back with no regrets."

He turned back to Chris, flashing her a troubled smile while he scratched his cheek. She was moved by his words—this wasn't affection, but she realized that she felt exactly the same way.

"I see... I guess it's the same for me as well," she muttered.

While watching Ein struggle against this man, Chris noticed that she'd reflexively drew her rapier. If her precious crown prince was getting hurt, she wouldn't hesitate to fight back at all.

"First King... I am Ein, the current crown prince of Ishtarica."

Jayle remained silent.

“Please stay your blade. If you’re angry that we opened the shrine or stepped inside, I’ll apologize as many times as it takes. So please, I ask you to lower your sword.”

But his words fell on deaf ears. “Show me your power,” Jayle ordered.

His words sounded illogical, but it didn’t sound like Ein and Chris had angered him. Jayle’s scant words were cryptic, but it was clear that they would have to fight. Fully aware of their current predicament, the pair made their resolve.

“If possible, I’d just like to incapacitate him,” Ein said.

“Th-That’s a tall request!” Chris replied.

“Yeah, I think so too.”

They were up against a hero king—the one who ended the great war and defeated Demon Lord Arshay. It wasn’t an understatement to refer to him as “the most powerful man in Ishtarica’s history,” and fighting with him with the intent to merely incapacitate was an impossibly difficult task. The difference in power was so great that Ein and Chris weren’t sure if they stood a chance, even if they used everything in their arsenal.

“Darn, this wasn’t the way I wanted to make my dreams a reality,” Ein muttered.

Several years ago, he’d made it his goal to surpass First King Jayle. He didn’t exactly want to achieve that goal in a situation such as this.

“I’ll step forward,” Ein said. “I want you to support me.”

“It’s difficult for me to agree to that, but I’ll obey you just this time,” Chris replied.

Chris wasn’t crazy about her master being the vanguard, but she sensed that she’d only hold him back if she were at the front. If losing here would result in their deaths, then she’d listen to any order that might give them the advantage.

“I’m really counting on you,” Ein said. “Because you’re by my side, I’ll be able to relax and fight to my heart’s content.”

Chris smiled, thinking her prince's bold words to be a rather convenient excuse. Up until this point, the knight believed that she wasn't swift enough to lead the charge. While her deadly speed could easily outpace the likes of Lloyd, one glance at Jayle led her to assume that she'd be at a grave disadvantage against him. However, that assumption would soon be proved wrong.

"If *you're* my opponent, there's no way that I can afford to hold back," Ein said, quickly raising his black blade—now enveloped in a chilly, diabolical aura. The lightning-fast flash of the prince's cold steel reflected the moonlight as it sliced the air.

"Raaaaah!" Ein bellowed, unleashing a powerful wave of ice aimed directly at Jayle.

Merely touching this absolute zero deluge would leave its victim with a wound far more severe than any frostbite. The ice traveled across the stone tiles, but Jayle made short work of it. As easily as he breathed, he used his own magic to nullify the attack, but Ein was already gone. The crown prince had managed to circle behind Jayle, proceeding to unleash a furious procession of Phantom Hands upon the king. Without mercy, Ein attempted to cause as much damage as possible.

This was the real reason behind Chris's place at the back line. If she were to serve as the vanguard, Ein feared that he might hit her in the cross fire; this was something he could not allow.

"Even if I'm up against a legend like yourself, I should be able to leave a scratch at the very least!" Ein yelled. However, the prince quickly learned that he'd been speaking with naivety.

Without the slightest hesitation, Jayle swiftly whirled around to dodge an incoming Phantom Hand before slicing it apart. A second appendage came flying in from his blind spot, but he sidestepped it and made another clean cut. The first king just barely dodged the third arm, sending it right into the ground.

"Huh?!" Ein gasped.

He caught a quick glimpse of Jayle running up one of the Phantom Hands, heading straight for his head. Upon his arrival, the first king sliced off the remaining appendages. Grimacing from the pain, Ein tried to steady himself as

his opponent's silver sword closed in.

"I won't let you!" Chris cried.

She pushed back the blade with a gust of wind so strong that Jayle was forced a few steps back. Even the first king couldn't brace himself from such an impact. *He's strong...* Ein thought. He could hardly believe this man's power—he had it all: speed, strength, and technique. They far surpassed anything that Ein could imagine.

"More... I need more power..." Ein muttered.

A series of dark spheres appeared around the prince's arms, transforming themselves into the Dark Knight's armor. The next time he swung his sword, Ein felt a torrent of power greater than any he'd ever wielded before.

"You must become a disaster... Or you won't stand a chance against the further disasters ahead of you," Jayle said.

What the hell is he talking about? The first king's cryptic words made little sense.

"No, now's not the time to worry about stuff like that," Ein said.

"Are you all right?!" Chris asked.

"Thanks, you saved me back there. Apparently, this guy's far stronger than I imagined."

"I was naive as well. For the first time in my life, I've met someone who's on a completely different level than my sister."

"Stronger than Celes, huh? You might be right."

Perhaps it wasn't surprising to learn that Jayle was stronger than Celes—the mighty elf Lloyd could never hope to hold a candle to.

"Let's continue our battle," Ein said.

Resolve filled his voice as he dashed forward. This time, Jayle raised his sword to defend himself against Ein.

"Hence, I wanted to become a disaster of sorts," Jayle said.

As these puzzling words left his mouth, a wave of hellfire spread across the

room. The stone tiles melted almost instantly while the flames' sheer intensity seared Ein's lungs with every breath he took. Steam rose to the air, the fire seemingly blocking the prince's path.

"Did you think I'd stop?" Ein asked.

The prince refused to falter, choosing to widen his gaze before he swung his blade. While the immense power of ice was on his side, Ein noticed his one-man blizzard being pushed back by the fire's intense heat. This was a difficult pill to swallow, but it all came down to a simple difference in abilities. Even though Ein had evolved into a Demon Lord, he was still having it out against the absolute ideal of Ishtarican might. In the face of such a dominant figure, the crown prince didn't have a prayer. Jayle raised his blade as fire danced in the air.

"I'm not stopping!" Ein roared.

He raised his own weapon in the air, creating a pair of frozen dragons—just as he had in Magna. Modeled after the twins Sea Dragons, these frozen beasts swam through the air, twisted their bodies, and charged straight for their enemy.

"I shouldn't be the light, but the darkness," Jayle said.

The hellfire took the form of a blazing dragon to strike down its icy company. The dragon spread its wings dripping with lava and bared its fangs at the ice dragons. These magnificent frozen beasts of absolute zero should've froze anything in their way, but the lava dragon swallowed them in one swift movement. A few moments later, the pair exploded within the dragon's maw.

"He really does exceed all expectations," Ein muttered.

It was nothing short of insanity; the surrounding hellfire had only amplified the beast's power. The very same magic that saved Magna with a snowstorm had been overwhelmed in an instant. Despite that, Ein hadn't allowed that to bother him.

"O First King, please do me the honor of being my sparring partner," Ein said.

Chris found an opening in the wall of fire and sent a powerful gust at its backside, causing the flames to flicker. This was just enough to open a small path for Ein to rush through.

“This’ll reach!” he shouted.

He reached out and swung his blade, dissipating the heat around him. Ein pumped every ounce of blood into his legs, as the flames would quickly singe his skin if he didn’t. Every muscle fiber and nerve in his body burst with the energy to propel him forward. With Jayle now within his sight, the crown prince was finally able to engage in an honest clash of blades.

“Gh! Graaaaah!” Ein bellowed.

The sensation he felt next was so puzzling that he could barely even start to understand it. Jayle wasn’t budging an inch, as if Ein were trying to push Ishtar aside while standing on the continent’s edge. Many would surely balk at this analogy, trying to accuse the prince of telling a tall tale, but Ein truly felt as if he was trying to overcome an impossible feat. Beads of sweat formed on his brow as struggled to suppress a smile.

“Fall. Fall to the depths. Only there will you find true darkness,” Jayle said.

“What are you on about?!” Ein cried.

“Without resolve, you’ll only lose those important to you.”

A gust of wind from the flames caused Jayle’s hair to flutter out his face.

“You’re...” Ein started.

Sadness had filled Jayle’s face. It looked like he steeled his resolve, betting it all on a tiny sliver of hope. Ein was at a loss for words, realizing that Jayle’s face resembled his own in the mirror. The crown prince was slightly pleased to discover that he was a dead ringer for his hero. Given that Ein was Jayle’s descendant, it wasn’t odd if they shared a few similarities. The only aggravating difference was their power; the crown prince didn’t stand a chance against the first king.

“If you dare repeat that mistake, I’d rather we fall together,” Jayle said.

As they continued to cross blades, Ein could feel his black sword creaking with each strike. The prince’s partner couldn’t endure much more of its opponent’s overwhelming strength, its blade being shaved away in the process. The hilt started to let out a dull groan. Made out of Marco’s Undead armored flesh, this

sword could slice right through a Sea Dragon bone in one swing. However, even a weapon this magnificent was being pushed to its limits.

Enough. I know you're strong. It's a fact I've come to accept from the bottom of my heart.

"Please... Just stop," Ein begged.

Their difference in power was so great that he couldn't help but say a prayer. He showed a moment of weakness in the face of his overwhelming adversary. The reality was merciless; Ein had fallen against Jayle's power. *Again. How many more times will this happen?* Like a pesky insect, Ein was once again sent flying into a wall, and he closed his eyes in light of his pathetic showing. He was just barely able to take a defensive stance before making contact with the wall —it was the one thing that remained in his mind and it was the least he could do.

"Sir Ein!"

At the very least, I'll do whatever I can to save Chris. He wasn't sure if a restored Syth Mill awaited the knight if she returned, but it was certainly better than if she drew her last breath here.

"Gah... Dammit..." Ein croaked.

His body was in agonizing pain. If Chris hadn't rushed to his side to help, he knew that he would've already surrendered.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"It's nothing too serious."

Ein put on a brave face while he activated his Ice Dragon skill, planning to erect a thick wall of ice to hold Jayle back while he caught his breath. *It's not like I expect him to be stopped so easily.* Surprisingly, Ein's predictions ended up being off as Jayle remained in place. It looked as though the first king was waiting for the crown prince to get back on his feet and attack.

"It's nothing I can't handle," Ein said. "Easy as pie."

"You're lying," Chris insisted. "You're hurt all over."

"I'm still all right."

“No, I can’t stand by and watch any longer.” She gripped his hand and flashed a benevolent smile at the boy. “You’ve done enough. You make me wish that you wouldn’t push yourself so far. You’re the only person I know that does that to me.” She stood up and bent her body at her hips as she reached out to the boy. “Please, stand back up.”

Usually, she would never dream of making such a request, but she had her reasons.

“Just as we thought, the first king is amazing, isn’t he?” she said. “I even had the pleasure of hearing him say something cool, so I’m very grateful.”

“Something cool?” Ein asked.

“He said, ‘I’d rather we fall together,’ didn’t he? I quite like it.”

Ein grabbed her hand and stood back up. His entire body was in pain. He’d secretly hoped that he was imagining it, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“Let’s attack him together, with everything we’ve got,” Chris said.

“No,” Ein immediately replied.

She shook her head. “That’s the only choice we have.”

“I’ll do something about it. I just need you to support me a bit longer...”

She shook her head again. “We need the resolve, the resolve to fall together.”

She stared into his eyes, her pupils glittering like jewels. Her gaze was enchanting, but her nobility shone more beautifully than anything else. Ein felt embarrassed for giving up for even a second in front of the valiant king. He slapped his cheeks hard and switched gears; for the first time in a good while, he smiled from the bottom of his heart.

“I can’t win against the first king alone,” he said. “Chris, will you fight to the death with me?”

“Of course. If I get to die by your side, I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’m just talking about resolve, okay? I haven’t given up yet, and I want us both to live, okay?”

“I know that! I’m just sharing my thoughts!”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear. You really are my trusty knight. I couldn’t be happier.”

Before he knew it, he felt the pain in his body subside. *I’m just acting tough.* Ein had enough leeway to mock himself.

“What’s the plan?” Chris asked.

“We’ll give it our all and prove the first king wrong, I guess.”

“So our lack of a plan is a plan in and of itself. We don’t need to worry about the details, so it might be easier for us to fight it out.”

Ein’s wall of ice shattered, revealing Jayle in wait with his sword in the air, waiting for an attack.

“Here I go,” Chris said, leaping forward this time.

Perhaps they should’ve had a bit of a plan, but Ein’s worries were needless. *This makes it easier to fight.* As Ein raised his blade, he noticed that Chris had made way for the path that he wanted to take. It was at that moment that she chose to launch a flurry of attacks against Jayle. They had never planned a single thing out, but Ein wasn’t feeling the slightest bit of pressure.

“Chris!” Ein called out as he received one of Jayle’s blows.

Instead of trying to mount a head-on defense, the prince chose to redirect the king’s attack.

“Right!” Chris shouted. She wasn’t one to let an opportunity slip by.

She thrust her rapier forward. She wasn’t as fast as Ein, but her polished techniques surpassed his. The knight glided like the wind, using not just her speed but the massive collection of techniques at her disposal. She elegantly swung from all directions, her blade whistling through the air. Ein’s and Chris’s blades looked like they were engaged in a graceful waltz. Jayle’s blade would slice their skin every now and then, but the pair were prepared to take a few hits.

They had their lives on the line, and even if they dodged by a hair’s breadth, it only heightened their morale.

Jayle remained silent as he swung his sword. His words made little sense from

the start, and his silence didn't bother Ein at all.

"Here he comes," Ein warned as fire rose from Jayle's feet.

The heat was so intense that Ice Dragon's frost easily melted away. But thanks to the cool winds of Chris's magic, the pair could take on the lava dragon before it could launch an aerial assault. Despite the fact they faced Ishtarica's greatest hero, Ein and Chris only continued to ramp up their attacks. They hit his light armor, then his clothes, his hair, and finally, Chris's rapier was able to make contact with the man's skin.

"Now, Sir Ein!" she called.

This was the best timing Ein could ask for. He was in the best position, and he knew that he could unleash an attack unlike any other. At the very least, he was sure that he could trade blows with the man.

"Light," Jayle said.

Suddenly, Ein and Chris felt their bodies grow heavy as they fell to their knees. The room started to distort as bright specks of light fell upon them from above like snow. It felt like a power bent on destroying all creation rained down upon the pair.

Chris! No voice would escape Ein's throat as a sharp ringing echoed in his ears, stripping him of his ability to breathe. Even so, the practically unconscious crown prince managed to summon his Phantom Hands and bring Chris close to his body. It looked as though she wanted to say something, but he pulled her closer and used his Phantom Hands to shield them both.

"Light without power is inferior to the darkness," Jayle said.

Sound disappeared from the world. The brilliant flecks of snowlike particles danced about as a titanic sphere of light descended upon them. Even the atmosphere seemed to scream in agony as a destructive force capable of mass despair was unleashed. A deafening roar was quickly followed by a powerful shock wave.

Ein could only desperately endure it all as he grunted in pain. "Gah... Argh! Gah..."

He gritted his teeth, using all the magic he had left inside to reinforce his body. Seconds felt like hours as the blast soon died down. *Did we...survive?* Truly at his limit, Ein was only able to muster the strength to look at Chris, who was huddled against him.

“Ah ha ha... Th-That really was something, wasn’t it?” she asked. Her eyes were closed while she was in his care.

She wasn’t trying to sound carefree; Ein knew that her words were mindful of him, and that his body was in tatters.

“But we endured it,” he said. When no reply came, he spoke once more. “Chris?”

She closed her eyes once more and made not a peep. It didn’t look like she had any physical injuries on her, and the hand that he held still had a faint pulse. No doubt her body had reached its limit, and she had simply fallen unconscious.

“It might be difficult to sleep here, but bear with me for a short while, okay?” Ein said as he stood up. “I’m glad mother taught this to me before we came here.”

Roots started to sprout from the ground out of nowhere. They pierced through the stone tiles and forced themselves up. This was the first time Ein was able to grow roots of his own volition. He’d been uneasy since he’d failed to do it under his mother’s guidance in Kingsland. The roots must’ve grown this time, answering to his emotions. He felt like he could instinctively do it and created a cage of roots to protect Chris.

“You cannot save them. If they’re weak, they’re the same as me,” Jayle said, sounding like a broken automaton.

These words angered Ein deeply.

“Don’t you dare be arrogant, Hero King,” Ein growled.

He knew his words were nothing short of insolent as he raised his black sword towards the heavens. His blade was enveloped in dark magical energy, in stark contrast to the silver light surrounding Jayle. The crown prince could sense that the black sword was reaching its limit as it creaked, unable to endure Ein’s

magic. *I'm sorry, Marco. I can't stop anymore.* Though there was no definitive proof, Ein was sure that the loyal knight wasn't one to snap in half.

"As you desire, I'll drown in the Demon Lord's power," Ein said. The moment the words left his lips, he felt his throat become parched as he was overcome with an inexplicable sense of insatiable hunger. "I'll surpass you right now."

The first king would be overcome here, away from the battlefield. Ein turned around to face the corridor that would lead outside this building. The mausoleum's countless magic stones started emanating balls of light that floated into the air. The stones' power was so condensed that it had become visible to the naked eye, creating a scene that was undoubtedly detached from reality. The countless orbs of light flitted about in the air as Ein absorbed them into his body.



The orbs flying into the Demon Lord's body contained the power of fallen warriors. *I can fight.* He regained enough stamina to make himself a fitting opponent for the hero king. With his hunger sated, Ein felt better than ever before.

"Here I go," Ein said, closing the gap in a split second.

Energy coursed through his veins, and he wasn't planning on holding anything back now. There was no way he wouldn't use everything he had against his opponent when he had this much power at his fingertips. Only defeat would await him if he didn't give it his all. Instead of attacking from behind, Ein aimed his jet-black aura directly at Jayle. As he closed in on the king's silver light, the prince could've sworn he saw Jayle smile for a brief moment.

"Raaaaah!" Ein shouted, refusing to let up. "Haaah!"

The prince didn't even have time to breathe as he stripped Jayle of his silver light. As he continued attacking, he felt Jayle grow more fragile. The first king's movements dulled and gradually became slower.

"I've been waiting for this," Jayle said.

"Not yet! I can still go on!"

"I like the night. It brings the morning, filled with hope."

"Fall! Just go down already!"

"And the same could be said for the darkness. Richer than any light, it can make a path that illuminates all."

Instead of reacting to Jayle's cryptic ramblings, Ein started to panic. *Is this still not enough? Am I still inferior? Do I need more power to push the hero king to the ground?*

Don't give up.

Squeeze out everything you can muster! Is there any other power I can use? In the midst of this battle, Ein's mind was desperately searching for a way out. *I know. I have one more power up my sleeve.*

He didn't know exactly how to use this power, but he only had one chance to

make use of it. It was Grand Sorcery, which Ein had used once to restrain Lloyd when he escaped the castle to face down the Sea Dragon. While his knowledge of the power's use was limited, the shrine's many paintings had shown him what it was capable of.

"If I can get a blink's worth of time, that should be more than enough," Ein said, knowing that a stray millisecond could make a world of difference in this battle.

Ein reached out, praying that Grand Sorcery would prove effective against the hero king. The crown prince's vision wavered as he used more magical energy than he initially predicted, but the gamble worked out in his favor. Bluish-purple chains appeared out of nowhere, locking Jayle's arms and legs in place as they slithered around his limbs. Gear forged from monster material would normally make their wearers resistant to magic, but the Elder Lich's magic was in a class of its own. Combined with Ein's power, it proved effective even against the first king.

"Aaahhh!" Ein shouted.

He had bought himself only a split second, well aware that these restraints would be undone soon enough. However, that scant time paid out in dividends... *My sword can reach him!*

A loud sound rang out as though glass had shattered, and Jayle was able to use his power to rip apart the chains that bound him—but it was too late. The hero king wasn't able to dodge the downward swing of Ein's sword as it hit his shoulder.

"Gh... Not yet!" Ein shouted. He was wounded by a counter, but he didn't falter. "I'm not done yet! Raaah!"

Despite his blurring vision, the prince continued to repeatedly bind and attack Jayle. Slowly but steadily, Ein could feel Jayle's light fading; it even felt as if the hero king's reaction time was deteriorating. But then...

"Light," Jayle said.

Ein knew that he was going to be hit again with this attack—the hopelessly divine light that purified anything in its path without question. The specks of

snowlike light that rained upon him were more condensed than ever before, making it easy to tell just how much magic these flecks contained.

“Huff... Huff...” Ein gasped for breath.

Can I defend myself against it? Even if I could, Chris will be...

“I won’t let you,” the crown prince declared, pointing his sword at the first king.

“Pay close attention,” Jayle ordered, the light particles melting into his sword. “This is the sinful blade that ended my older sister’s life.”

Aiming for Ein and Ein alone, Jayle prepared to unleash a single strike unlike any other upon the boy—his ultimate attack. Most would only feel despair in the face of such power, but Ein unexpectedly remained calm. Not once did he lose focus on the sharp blade pointed at him. Amid the flurry of attacks, he placed his hand above his head, utilizing the other power of Grand Sorcery that he knew about.

The prince had no idea what would happen if he attempted to destroy the magic unleashed upon him, but flecks of light started transforming as soon as he activated the skill. In the blink of an eye, the particles shrank as their magic fizzled out. All that remained was a light mist that resembled diamond dust, its glimmer making way for the climax of this battle.

“I’m the one who’s gonna win,” Ein said as he took a defensive stance.

Moments later, the prince found himself giving it his all to defend against one of the king’s supersonic thrusts. In the process, Ein had managed to aim the tip of his blade straight at Jayle’s heart. His muscles felt like they were on fire as they struggled to provide him with enough strength to withstand the might of Jayle’s attack. The magic surrounding Ein’s body was slowly being shaved away while his blade continued to creak from the pressure, implying that it was nearing its limit.

“I’ll say it again,” Ein started. Had Jayle not depleted his magical energy, what would’ve happened? The crown prince dared to not vocalize it, but he was aware that he would’ve likely lost. In other words, the first king’s lack of energy had tipped the scales in Ein’s favor. “I’m the one who’s gonna win!”

Their clash had reached a standstill, but Ein drummed up the last of his power to clobber Jayle's sword from the side with a Phantom Hand. The first king lost his balance as Ein lunged forward, piercing the man's body with his black sword.

Not to be misconstrued as a metaphor or a refraction of light, Jayle's body gradually became transparent. He looked down to his chest before glancing over to Ein; the hero king had a satisfied expression on his face.

"I'm counting on you," Jayle said. He surrendered so easily, it was as though there hadn't been a brutal brawl just moments ago.

The first king's voice remained calm as he vanished like a mirage. Only his sword was left behind, piercing the ground when it fell from the man's hands.

"Huff... Huff..." Ein could only fall to the floor to catch his breath.

Unable to hold on to his sword any longer either, the prince released his weapon from his grasp. As the blade lay on the ground, Ein was tempted to look away from its wretched state. The blade's edge had not only been chipped away, but it was just a step from being shattered completely. Cracks ran along the body of the sword, and it was a miracle that it hadn't completely broken into pieces. Even a master blacksmith like Mouton might struggle to repair it.

The strength completely left his body as he splayed out onto the ground, his limbs stretched out like a starfish. Just then...

"Huh?" Ein gasped.

Jayle's sword turned to light and soared through the air before enveloping the black blade. The light's particles melted into the cracks, wrapped around the hilt, and surrounded the handle. The cracks gradually disappeared, further polishing the jet-black blade. When the light dissipated, Jayle's blade was left behind. While its body was still black, reminiscent of Ein's trusty partner, the sword's overall appearance closely resembled the first king's mighty weapon.

"I don't understand," Ein said.

Maybe I gained a new power. While he had no idea what he had fought, he was aware that the entity was linked to Jayle somehow. *All right, up we go.* Ein reached out to grab his dark sword and leaned on it like a staff. He headed for the bed of roots that surrounded Chris.

With an expert swing of his blade, he sliced away the roots and breathed a sigh of relief after discovering his knight was still safe and sound. *Thank goodness. She's not wounded.* He managed to muster the last of his strength to carry her out of the roots' dark embrace and placed her on his lap.

"The door hasn't opened yet..." Ein observed. He'd assumed that the exit would open once Jayle was defeated, but there were no signs of that. "What now? Huh? Wait, it's wavering."

As he was thinking about his next step, he noticed the walls around him cracking. The stained glass windows shattered as cracks ran through the pillars, walls, and stone floor. The ground started quaking as well.

The ground beneath him disappeared and it felt like he was floating. The world around him crumbled away as he felt himself being thrown into the air. With Chris secured to his back, Ein used his Phantom Hands to grab onto any footing he could find. When he looked down, he realized that he wasn't high in the skies. A vortex of blinding, white light awaited him below, the skies of Ishtar nowhere to be seen. The moment the debris touched the light, it turned into dust. *Is that a piece of the holy grounds' condensed power?*

Ein thought that this vortex might be a torrent of exorcistic power—great enough to purify anything in its wake. If his hunch was correct, he wasn't about to let himself be sucked in, no matter how divine the power was. Considering that he and Chris both possessed magic stones within them, their lives would be at stake.

As even ordinary chunks of debris were being reduced to dust, Ein was keen on avoiding that fate. *I'm not gonna fall.* He'd come this far; there was no way that he was going to surrender here.

"Just you wait," Ein kindly said to the slumbering knight on his back. "I'll get us out in a flash."

For the millionth time today, he forced his heavy body to move as pain coursed through his veins. Before he could scold his locked-up legs, he quietly gave it his all in an effort to run ahead.

The door was now open, and while the path out was slowly crumbling away, it still remained. He jumped, latched on to any footing he could find, and ran up

towards the higher floors. As he continued to flee, the vortex of light seemingly chased after him, the falling debris disintegrating as it hit the torrent. *If only the staircase remained...* He should've been able to head outside then. He paid no heed to his depleting stamina, wishing only for Chris to be spared—he cared about nothing else. And yet, his legs were wobbly, forcing him to face the reality that his body was reaching its limit. After passing through several doors, he made his way to the center of the staircase that led higher above. It was then that he lost his footing as he lunged forward and fell. His arms could barely support him.

"Not yet! Don't give up now!" he shouted to himself. "You can still move, Ein! I know it!"

As destruction approached him from below, he started crawling in a desperate attempt to escape. A part of the ceiling fell on his leg, causing a sharp pain to ripple through his defenseless body. The last bit of his strength had been mercilessly sapped away. *My eyelids feel so heavy...* He bit his lip and powered through, but his body would move very little.

"Gah..."

He reached out and grabbed a bit of the staircase, trying to move forward as much as he could, but he could barely lift his head. *Is this the end for me?* He was ready to throw in the towel.

"Come on," a familiar voice suddenly called from the top of the staircase. Someone enveloped his hand, filthy with dirt, blood, and sweat. "Just a little more."

You're... Ein looked up, but no one could be seen. He thought it was an auditory hallucination and quickly looked around before he spotted her.

"Wait!" he cried. "You're..."

A woman stood at the end of the staircase. Her small frame was wrapped in a silvery dress that he'd never seen before, and her silver hair with tones of sapphire fluttered behind her, enticing the boy to take a step forward. He gazed at her back and stood up to take another step. It was as though the exhaustion he felt earlier had vanished. *I don't get it. I don't get it one bit, but I've gotta press on.*

He ran on and tried to approach her, but he couldn't get closer no matter how hard he tried. The closer he got, the farther away she became, and when he thought she was impossibly far out of his reach, she suddenly drew nearer. Amid this puzzling phenomenon, he found himself slowly approaching the exit.

"Just a bit more!" he gasped.

He finally cracked a smile as he arrived at the row of paintings that had kicked off his journey into the shrine. She was standing outside the door, and it felt like he'd reach her any second.

"You're our savior, but you're also..." Ein started.

Suddenly, she turned around. "Go on. Take care."

Her fluttering bangs covered the majority of her face, but her tone closely resembled a certain lady who shouldn't have been here. Ein widened his eyes in astonishment, but she soon vanished like the mist. *She...* The crown prince soon cleared his mind and ran ahead, only narrowly able to escape the grisly fate of the building that was swallowed whole.

When he finally managed to make it outside, Ein realized that they were safe at last. With faint hope in his heart, he made his way up the staircase, but in contrast to his expectations, the world outside was still colorless. In the distance, he could see elves frozen in monochrome, just as they were before he entered the shrine. It was clear as day that color had yet to return to this world.

"Huff... Huff..." Ein panted.

We're safe now. But was there any meaning to this at all? His mind was filled with a myriad of emotions as he glanced at Chris on his back. *Thank goodness. She's still just knocked out.* After catching his breath, he laid her down and used his sword as a staff to steady his body. He walked a few paces ahead and looked around.

I'll defeat the red foxes. With this firm conviction in his heart, he looked up at the sky as though he were asking the heavens for their permission. He steeled his resolve as he noticed his black sword glowing in response, emitting the same silvery light that had surrounded Jayle. Ein raised his blade in the air.

I'll do it all. If it's for the sake of Ishtarica, I'll do anything. The sword gave off

a stronger glow. *So please!* The silver light surrounding his black sword closely resembled Jayle's light. *Please turn the world back to normal!* With a backhand grip, he thrust his blade into the stone tile at his feet.

With Ein at its center, a ray of silver light pierced through the sky. The flash of light suddenly scattered its essence throughout the land and one of the particles hit the water's surface. Like a droplet, it set off a bright ripple in the water before it ran across the horizon. The nearby waterfall started reflecting a world of vibrant color.

The verdure of the canopy and the azure sky shone gloriously as the sound of running water and the rustling of trees reached Ein's ears. Life was being restored to the world. As she slept, Chris regained her vibrant golden locks, which brushed against her smooth, porcelain skin.

"Ha ha..." Ein chuckled. "I don't get any of this at all. Not one bit."

Even the holy grounds had taken on a series of never-before-seen hues, leaving the prince truly baffled as to why the simple act of plunging his blade into the ground had restored the world's color. For now, these details didn't matter.

"I'm at my limit," he said.

He was sure that Syth Mill had returned to normal. He was tempted to check the village out, but Ein was so tired that he could barely keep himself standing. He managed to make his way back to Chris and sat next to her, as though to protect her peaceful slumber, before he allowed his consciousness to slip away.

Chapter Ten: Under the Night of the Moon

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” Ein could hear a woman’s voice frantically calling to him.

When he came to, Ein managed to barely move his head from his pillow and towards the voice. “Sierra?”

“Your Highness, are you all right?! Please stay as you are. I’ll call my grandmother over immediately!”

She didn’t wait for Ein’s reply as she burst out the door and ran outside. When he looked around, he realized that he was back in Chris’s house. He was back in Celes’s bedroom and it was already dark outside the window. Color had returned, proving that the world surrounding the holy grounds had returned to normal.

He couldn’t understand why he was sleeping here, nor was he able to sense the reason behind Sierra’s panic.

“My body’s fine...” he mumbled.

He expected a world of pain when he sat up, but he was as energetic as ever; his body felt so light. In fact, he hadn’t felt this good in a while.

“Your Highness! Ah, you’re awake, Your Highness,” the chief said. Her face had been filled with dread, but she looked visibly relieved when she approached his side.

“What happened?” Ein asked. “Why am I here?”

“You and Christina were found fainted near the spring. Sierra found you two in the morning, just moments after she’d awakened.”

Ein had thought they’d fainted near the shrine. *This is odd, but I guess it’s too late to worry about unusual occurrences now.* He’d been through his fair share of curious incidents before today, and this was but one of them.

“Chief, how long has it been since Sierra found us?” Ein asked.

“About half a day,” she replied. “Do you remember our plans for today? We’d promised to have lunch together while we picked up our discussion from the other day.”

While Ein was able to piece together the order of events, it didn’t add up. He and Chris had discovered that the world was frozen first thing as soon as they woke up. Then they spent a couple of hours wandering through the forest before arriving at the shrine to embark on a life-altering exploration. Over half a day surely must’ve passed, but they were found unconscious early in the morning. This would only make sense if they were in a coma for over a full day, but it sounded like no time had passed while they were on their journey.

“What about Chris?!” he cried.

“Christina is in her room,” the chief assured. “She’s not injured, and I’m sure she’ll awaken soon.”

He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. *Thank goodness... She’s safe.* He couldn’t fully grasp the situation just yet, but her safety was enough for now.

“Sierra, I must ask His Highness a few questions,” the chief said, implying that her granddaughter should leave the room. Sierra obliged and the chief turned back to Ein. “Please tell me, Your Highness. Why were you and Christina lying unconscious by the spring?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed, though he had his memories from before that. “When Chris and I awoke in the morning, we found the entirety of Syth Mill trapped in the same monochromaticity that permeated the holy grounds. We figured that this was undoubtedly the work of the shrine, and we headed there.”

“Did...you open the doors?”

“By working together, Chris and I managed to yesterday.”

“Is that so...”

“Chief...”

“You need not tell me. Surely, you saw the power of the first king with your own eyes.”

I knew it. She knew what lay in that shrine. Ein didn’t rush her to continue; instead, he left his bed and gazed at his blade as it lay propped against the wall.

“The first king and I are responsible for the creation of that shrine,” the chief confessed.

“I had a feeling he was related to it, but I would’ve never guessed that you helped build the place.”

“I may not look it, but I’m quite adept at magic that utilizes nature.” She reminisced about the past as she continued, “We constructed it before the great war. At that time, we Elves and the other nonhumans who called Syth Mill home were under the constant threat of monsters running rampant. Sympathetic to our struggles, the first king decided to build the holy grounds.”

The grounds served as a massive magical tool of sorts, allowing Jayle to use his own power to erect the shrine.

“To undo the seal of the shrine, one requires two keys,” the chief said, raising her fingers in the air. “First, there must be one who carries the blood of the first king. And two...” she paused and turned to Ein. Her gaze emanated a certain sort of kindness that made it clear that she was willing to stand by his side, but not allow him to leave. “There must be one who possesses the same power as Her Majesty Arshay.”

At long last, the mystery of the pillars had been solved. The black and white tiles that lay at the foot of these structures served to represent the two Ishtaricas—the old and the new. *In other words, I couldn’t light up Chris’s pillar because...* His Demon Lord power had likely taken priority over his lineage. The chief was clearly aware of Ein’s status as the new Demon Lord.

“You don’t have to say a thing,” she said, preventing him from saying another word.

“Chief...”

“A certain someone once told me that the night served as a messenger for the morning. That if we’re to welcome the sunrise, there must be a kind blanket of

darkness to envelope us all first.”

“Those words...” Indeed, this phrase was very similar to something Jayle’s specter had said while fighting Ein. “Chief, why did everything surrounding the holy grounds lose its color? Or why did the color return after Chris and I fought the first king? I have no idea what caused any of this.”

The chief had mentioned the shrine’s unsealing, implying that the wheels of fate were set in motion when he opened those doors.

“I don’t know the details,” the chief answered. “But if I recall correctly, the first king did something to the shrine sometime after the great war’s conclusion. I was never filled in on the particulars, but I couldn’t remove those seals like he did. While I was never able to figure it out, the king did say that he’d left his power behind for the purpose of fighting an inevitable threat.”

Ein gasped before quickly reaching for his scabbard. Upon unsheathing his trusty partner, the prince realized the weapon closely resembled Jayle’s blade, especially when it glittered under the moonlight. The chief couldn’t hide her befuddlement; it was like she’d just seen the ghost of a sword she knew very well.

“Perhaps this odd string of events was some sort of a trial, Your Highness. One to see if you were worthy of carrying his power,” the chief said.

“Did you call me to Syth Mill because...” Ein started.

The prince’s words implied that he’d been invited to inherit the first king’s powers, but the chief refrained from saying a thing. She only smiled, neither admitting nor denying the young man’s claim.

“I see,” Ein said. Her smile was a good enough answer for him, but there was one more question on the prince’s mind. “When Chris and I fought the first king, he didn’t appear to be an Undead, but he wasn’t the genuine article either. Who was he exactly?”

“It was a manifestation of the will and magical energy he left behind,” the chief answered. “Upon possessing his sword, it materialized as the specter who served as your trial. Or perhaps it was a guardian of sorts, waiting in the depths of the shrine to hand the sword’s power over to a worthy candidate.”

“Hmm, now that you mention it, maybe you’re right.”

Ein had faced the fury of a nigh-impossible trial. Given that Jayle’s lingering will was so formidable, the prince could only chuckle when imagining how strong the real deal was.

“Ah, and the powers of the holy grounds...” Ein said.

“Please be at ease,” the chief immediately assured. “Syth Mill is still surrounded by the grounds’ holy power, though I doubt those doors will open again.”

She’d visited the shrine once more while Ein was unconscious. She had climbed up towards the doors, but there weren’t any lines that framed the double doors—they’d transformed into a single slab of rock unlike anything she’d seen. The crown prince breathed a sigh of relief upon learning that grounds still exerted their power, but his mind quickly wandered back to his fight with Jayle’s specter. *I’m still not nearly good enough to surpass him. If this were a battle to the death instead of a trial... No, I’ll stop thinking about that.*

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When Ein checked the clock in the living room, it was already two in the morning. After speaking with the chief, he went to Chris’s room and waited for her to rouse. However, it didn’t look like she was about to wake up anytime soon.

A constant frown dominated Ein’s face as he waited; it was only natural, given how worried he was. Noticing this, Sierra suggested that he go outside and get a breath of fresh air. He took the elf up on her offer, as he didn’t want his frown to be the first thing Chris saw when she woke up.

Once he stepped outside and took in a deep breath, Ein could feel his body being cleansed. When combined with the scents of the forest, the chilly breeze ended up both cooling and refreshing the prince’s warm body. He’d wandered around at night only a handful at times, but as the crown prince, he enjoyed the fact that he was doing something that he normally couldn’t. When he arrived by the spring, he sat down on a nearby rock. *I’m hungry,* he thought.

He’d had a heavy dinner soon after he awoke, but his hunger hadn’t been

sated. He decided to rest here for a few moments before heading back to eat a bit more. While looking up at the night sky, Ein felt as if the stars were way closer to him than they were in Kingsland. He kept staring for a while until he noticed a single gust of wind brush against his cheeks.

Ein, who'd been lost in thought, closed his eyes and heard the footsteps that approached him from behind. The moonlight illuminated him, causing his shadow to reflect on the water's surface. The nighttime breeze led the trees and leaves to rustle, creating a symphony composed of nature's music. Just as a falling leaf created a ripple on the water's surface, a fish jumped into the air and its splashes reverberated throughout the forest.

"Sir Ein," a voice said, its tone akin to the sound of ringing bells. Soon after, the reflection of another shadow appeared on the water's surface.

"Are you all right, Chris?" Ein asked.

"I am. In fact, I could fight another round."

"Ha ha... I hope it won't come to that."

She sat down beside him and suddenly grasped his hand, placing it under the serene moonlight.

"It's weird," she said.

"What is?" he asked.

"I was so sure that I saw you torn to shreds, but here we are, completely unwounded. I thought we were going to die, but it now feels like it was all a dream."

"But it wasn't. I still remember it clearly." He unsheathed the black sword affixed to his waist. "Look. You're familiar with this shape now, aren't you?"

She glanced at the blade and asked for an explanation, but Ein shook his head, vowing to tell her about it later.

"There are some other things the chief told me about, but let's go over that on the train ride home," Ein said.

"Hrm... That sounds like I've got a long wait ahead of me."

“You make it sound like you’re eagerly awaiting a reward.”

“Ah, yes, a reward! I worked hard this time around!”

Chris was usually never one to say such things, but she uncharacteristically wished for her hard work to be rewarded. Perhaps it was because they’d just gone through something so far outside the norm of their day-to-day lives. She seemed to be acting more assertive and courageous than usual. As Ein flashed her a smile, Chris stood up.

She was casually dressed in blue jeans and a white shirt. She’d undone the two top buttons of her shirt and had her sleeves rolled up, putting her beauty on full display for the world to see.

“What kind of reward are you looking for?” Ein asked.

“To tell you the truth, there isn’t much that I desire,” she confessed.

“Then why’d you ask for something?”

“Ah ha ha. Oh, but there *is* something I’d like to do with you.”

She walked in front of him with graceful footsteps, her golden locks flowing under the moonlight. She let out a dazzling smile and turned around.

“I hear that bathing in this water is really quite refreshing,” Chris said.

“Ah, I see where you’re getting at,” Ein replied.

She rolled up her pant sleeves and took off her shoes. When she placed her pale legs into the spring, she smiled as she felt the cool water.

“I’m really good at playing in the water,” he said.

“That’s the first time I heard of that. When did you become so skilled at it?” Chris asked.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever said it myself, but when it comes to the number of limbs, I’ve got plenty.”

“Phantom Hands are against the rules.”

“How do you know— Whoa! Chris?!”

He panicked as the cold water splashed on his face, leading Chris to laugh

with delight as she waded in the water.

“Ah ha ha, you can’t be careless!” she called.

Ein didn’t think that he’d be frolicking in the water at his age, especially after such a life-altering event. Suddenly feeling the nerves of his body ease up, the prince found this kind of play to be actually quite comforting. But for now, launching a counterattack was his top priority. Ein stepped into the water and started flailing about in an effort to splash Chris.

“Eep!” she shrieked. “Y-You don’t hold back, do you?! My turn!”

Just as she tried to return fire the elf lost her balance and fell into the spring. Since they were already standing in the water, the pair wasn’t too worried about getting soaked. However, Ein lost his own footing when he instinctively reached out to grab her. Panicked, the pair kept switching positions before they fell completely into the spring.

“Since you’re the one who was about to fall first, I guess this is your loss,” Ein said, crouching as he managed to catch Chris. He noticed her face buried in his chest as she trembled ever so slightly, refusing to turn up. “Chris?”

“...ared,” she managed to croak out faintly.

Chris appeared as if she were the goddess of the moon; her golden locks damp as she clung to his arms. As though she gave her thoughts form, the elf didn’t even attempt to leave her prince’s side. While she still looked rather dignified, one could feel an aura of helplessness radiating from her.

“I was scared...” Chris finally eked out. Her feeble vocalizations pierced through Ein like an arrow to the heart.

“You’re all right now,” he replied gently, taking her hands in his.

“When I woke up and you weren’t there, I cried in front of Sierra. When I heard that you were outside, I quickly changed and rushed out.”

Then I feel bad for leaving at all. He could easily imagine the forlorn look on her face.

“Can we stay like this for just a bit longer?” she asked.

“Of course. For as long as you wish,” he replied.

He heard the sound of her sobs mingling with the splashing of the water. Ein placed a hand over her head and looked up at the moon before finally closing his eyes. *Thank god that was just a trial.* He used his warmth to reassure the moon goddess trembling against him, hoping that it would soothe her fears.

Chapter Eleven: Before Turbulence

The magic city was home to a skyscraper—the Tower of Wisdom. A man stood on the highest floor, his white lab coat fluttering in the wind as he gazed at a magic stone that he offered to the moon.

“Ah! Father! Oh, my beloved father!”

His entire body trembled with delight as he continued to be enchanted by the stone reflecting in his eyes. As his heart danced with equal parts elation and ecstasy, a strong gust of wind suddenly sent something flying out of his coat pocket. Within the veil of night, an ID card glided through the sky—one that contained the identity of the man allowed to stand atop the tower. His name, Oz, was written plainly for all to see.

“Soon, my dearest wish shall be fulfilled! I can’t be hasty. His Highness cannot become like that woman, like that *failure*! He cannot!”

He had no use for the worthless. He recalled an ancient era and something that happened all those centuries ago, but he quickly gave himself a word of caution. The twinkling stars reflected off the magic stone as his lips curled into a wide grin.

“I see that you agree as well, father.”

Bewitched by the stone, he rubbed it against his face before cracking open his lips to polish each and every surface with his tongue. While the stone was tasteless, he could feel its condensed sweetness fill his body. With every lick and flick of his tongue, his heart delightfully pounded as he felt himself go weak in the knees.

“I won’t repeat the same mistake.” He gazed down and let out a sigh. “I’ll fulfill my goal, without fail.”

He suddenly went down on his knees, appearing as if he’d started to pray while holding the stone tight to his chest.

“I must endure it for only a bit longer.”

With his desired future right before his eyes, Oz’s heart burned for the day that his distorted goals would be fulfilled. His gaze was fixated on a land beyond the sea, in the direction of Heim.

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Far beyond the professor’s stare was Heim’s royal capital, nestled in the quiet blanket of night. On the outskirts, a girl walked alone by the riverbank. As she had some time on her hands, the girl stared at the water’s tranquil surface.



It was then that she heard the sound of the grass rustling behind her.

“Long time no see, Ed,” she said, turning around to face him.

“It truly has been, my dear lady,” he replied, his voice carrying a hint of delight. “You’re just as beautiful as I remember...”

“I told you before, my name is Shannon now.”

Shannon Bruno was engaged to Glint Roundheart, the next head of House Roundheart. She spoke with Edward, the spearman who had bested General Rogas in combat.

“You must call me Shannon. Is that clear?”

“Ah, pardon me,” Edward replied.

“As long as you understand. So, could you fill me in?” Shannon requested, sitting on the grass while hugging her knees. “Was the trip from Euro tiring?”

“Not at all. I’m absolutely filled with joy.”

Edward flashed his pearly whites and stroked Shannon’s hair as she brought herself to the ground. Tempted to catch a whiff of her, he bent down to linger over her. However, she wasn’t about to humor Edward. Instead, she let out a troubled sigh and inched away from him.

“And? What’s with that leather bag on your back?” she asked.

“I suppose you can call these souvenirs,” he replied, glancing at it.

“Just tell me what’s inside.”

“Before I left Prince Amur’s side, I’ve brought a few heads that happened to conveniently once belong to the Euroan aristocracy. What do you think?”

“Hm, very well.”

“Is this gift not to your liking?”

Shannon’s indifferent reply suddenly had Edward sounding as if he was nervously courting his first love. He was honestly quite proud of the gifts he’d brought for her and was certain that she’d unload heaps of praise upon him.

“I didn’t ask for these,” she finally said. “I don’t need them.”

“N-No!” Edward quickly replied. “I only wanted to go all out for you, my dear lady. Set off a bang that I’m sure would help you shine far brighter than before! I pray that my wishes will...”

“My name is Shannon. I told you so, didn’t I? I’m not one for children who don’t do as they’re told.”

“Forgive me, Lady Shannon. Truly, I apologize.”

“Hm, well, since I’ve discovered that you still know your way around a spear... I suppose I can forgive you.”

“I-I’m truly honored to receive your praise...”

“But even you have experienced defeat before,” Shannon continued, causing Edward’s smile to freeze. “Not once were you able to best the vice captain of the Black Knights, correct? When we were leaving the continent, all you could do was buy just a bit of time before you scampered back to my side. If you could’ve seen the look of desperation written all over your face...”

Had anyone else uttered these words, Edward would’ve surely killed them. But since Shannon was the source of such thorny remarks, he was able to hold himself back. Precisely because of his deep and all-encompassing love for her, Edward was able to endure it all while keeping that smile plastered on his face.

“Next time, I’ll be sure to end that armored bastard,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, *that’s* impossible,” Shannon said with a laugh. “He’s surely under my spell too. He’s either wandering around as a hollowed-out husk of his former self or has offed himself by now.”

In contrast to his lady’s cheery demeanor, Edward couldn’t help but grit his teeth in annoyance. He prayed that this conversation would end as soon as possible and wanted to put the past behind him. Not only was this a frustrating story for him to hear, but he felt shame washed over him as the truth poured out of Shannon’s mouth.

“Well, if he’s alive, then,” Edward managed to say.

“It’ll be a meaningless battle,” Shannon reasoned. “I’m certain that you can

beat him now. Even if he *was* alive, how weakened do you think he'd be?"

"If he's under your influence, Lady Shannon, I suppose he only possesses a fraction of his strength from his peak."

"I agree. If winning against such an opponent makes you feel good, well...you may do as you please, then."

"Then should I just forget about all this?" he asked with resignation in his voice.

"That's probably for the best."

Shannon chuckled and languidly brought herself to her feet. Edward saw her struggle and extended his hand to help her up, but his kind gesture was quickly slapped away.

"I'm engaged right now, so I'm sorry," she said.

"That makes me jealous," Edward casually remarked. But in contrast to his tone, his eyes were glittering with murderous intent.

They showed for only a moment, but his emotions were quickly suppressed when Shannon changed the subject; it was as if she had remembered something.

"If you went to an aristocratic household, that means there were children around," she said, glancing at the leather bag on his person. "I thought you hated brats."

"True. I did, but I've managed to build up some resistance towards them," Edward said.

"Hmm. And how so?"

Edward smiled as though he was waiting for the question. "When I was still an adventurer, I left Euro and returned to Ishtarica. While in Ist, I was given a pair of daughters."

However, he'd returned to Euro after growing tired of playing the role of a loving father.

"How horrible," Shannon remarked.

“That role is over,” Edward reasoned. “I no longer regard them as family, and I’m sure they’re living as they please.”

“As usual, you’ll sacrifice anything for your act.”

Even Shannon had not a clue as to how the man before her had such a personality. How had he been raised? Regardless, he was loyal. When she considered that he’d do anything she’d ask, his personality defects became nothing more than adorable “quirks.”

“I heard that you exercised great efficiency the other day,” she said.

“I’m honored to receive such praise,” he replied.

“I’ve also heard that the castle is now in shambles. I’m not surprised; a prince was assassinated, after all.”

“It was quite an easy job. I’m overjoyed to know that I was of use to you. Ah, pardon me, it seems I must go. I shall visit you again in the near future.”

Edward left his rejected souvenir on the ground and melted away into the dark of night. Shannon broke into a bright smile fitting for her age, not at all offended by the stench of rotting flesh and fresh blood that reached her nose. She gazed up at the night sky.

“Ah, that child is going to visit me,” she said. “I should head home soon. Hee hee, I wonder if acting like a spoiled fox cub would elicit a joyous response.”

She let out an innocent giggle. It was unclear if her sigh was purposeful or accidental, but she let one slip out as she glanced at Edward’s kind gift. She furrowed her brows as a troubled expression overtook her face.

“Eat,” she coldly ordered.

Several black tendrils emerged from the ground and dragged the leather bag back from whence they came. Shannon flashed a bewitching smile in delight.

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As Heim Castle remained locked in a state of disarray, two men had gathered to join Elena in her office—her husband, Harley, and the third prince, Tiggle.

The veil of night surrounding the castle should’ve brought a degree of silence

along with it, but the multitude of lit torches around ended up filling the halls with an ominous air.

“Harley,” Tiggle said in a low tone fit for his surroundings. With a solemn expression on his face, the prince reached out for the man. “Join me in Euro. It’ll be much safer there instead of staying here.”

“No, I shall stay in the royal capital,” Harley replied firmly.

“B-But why?!”

“Elena and I have talked this over, but acting as a single unit would be dangerous. With my son accompanying us, we’d surely stand out...and if the rat lurking about were to notice this, there’s a good chance that misfortune may befall upon you once more, Your Highness.”

“But...”

“Please be at ease. I’m the lord of House August. Everyone may know me for not quite measuring up to my wife, but I’m not foolish enough to leave myself open to attack.”

This was no time for jokes, but the Augusts glanced at each other and smiled. It was not only a display of the couple’s unbreakable bonds of commitment, but of their undying trust in one another. The whole scene had Tiggle putting his hand to his head and sighing.

“Don’t be silly...” the third prince said. “You can flee the kingdom if necessary.”

“That is the one thing that I mustn’t do,” Harley replied.

“Ah, of course. With Rogas up in arms, that might be more dangerous.”

For now, the best course of action was to remain silent, obedient, and refrain from going against the tide.

“My husband shall protect our house,” Elena said firmly.

“The both of you are far too courageous,” Tiggle said. “I feel like I’m the timid one here.”

“Not at all. My husband and I are both terrified within an inch of our lives.”

“I see. Then I suppose we’re not all that different.” He guffawed before grabbing his mantle. “I wish you all of the best of luck. I shall play the part of a clown, as I always have.”

The third prince made his exit, all the while clicking his tongue in response to the menacing aura that hung over his castle. With confident and long strides, Tiggle headed for the audience room as Elena followed close behind. His face was filled with a burning rage, as though he’d lost his cool—but this was merely another act.

When he arrived at the audience room, Tiggle approached his father, who was leaning over the casket. Still taking powerful strides, the third prince acted with no reservation.

“Father, I cannot take this anymore!” Tiggle cried.

“Whatever is the matter?” Garland asked. “What’s with your sudden outburst?”

“I shall take my sword, assemble a platoon of knights, and leave the royal capital to find my brother’s murderer.”

“D-Don’t be a fool!”

No one doubted Tiggle’s actions—he was known to be impulsive and honest with his thoughts. It was just then that Elena saw her opportunity.

“You mustn’t!” she cried. “Your Highness, you must stay within the castle!”

“Exactly! Listen to what Elena says!” Garland bellowed. “It’ll be dangerous if you step outside! I don’t wish to see another child of mine fall victim to an assassin’s blade!”

Tiggle turned to Elena. “Do you not feel anything after seeing my brother slain in such a fashion?!”

“Of course I do,” she insisted. “My heart aches after seeing him in such a tragic state.”

“Hah! And yet you prioritize your own protection! Ridiculous!” He clapped his hands, summoning his personal knights.

“Your Highness!”

“Take her away to the prison. A woman of her character has no business serving the grand Kingdom of Heim.”

No one could allow this to slide, and those nearby tried to stop the prince from shooing Elena away.

“Please give me a chance to redeem myself!” Elena begged. “I implore you to show your benevolence, Your Highness!”

“Oho? Then prepare to take up arms with me in my quest for vengeance. If you insist that being a woman precludes you from such action, I’ll lop off your head right this instant.”

Tiggle’s voice was filled with such violent rage that it would be hard for one to believe that he was playing the fool. Even Garland started to tremble, moved to tears to hear that Tiggle was willing to go so far for his brother.

“Elena, I ask of you to lend your strength to my son,” the king said, encouraging the noblewoman to join the prince as a result of the boy’s passionate words.

“If I can be of any use at all, I shall happily take up arms,” Elena declared.

Tiggle smiled. “Well said! Then I shall spare your life. Prepare yourself immediately! We’ll depart the royal capital as quickly as we can!”

He left the audience room before anyone could say another word. He was secretly worried that someone would counter his claims, just now noticing that his heart was beating out of his chest due to his nerves. Tiggle hoped that his act didn’t appear to be unnatural; after all, he’d just hidden his anxiety under a visage of highly articulated rage. It was only a few minutes later, when he was finally alone, that the prince could resume his calm demeanor.

“If Heim were to fall, perhaps I’d have a promising career as an actor ahead of me,” Tiggle mumbled.

“Please don’t say that,” Elena coldly replied, unable to laugh at his dark joke. “That must never happen.”

Tiggle had never held such courage before. Never had he dreamed that he’d willingly act so brazenly, but it was all for the sake of his people.

He had somewhere he must go—to Euro.

Epilogue

The sounds of the water train running along its track gradually reached Ein's ears. As he wasn't riding on the royal water train, the noise seeping in from outside was much louder than the prince was accustomed to. This trip had ended in the blink of an eye, and even though he'd been through quite a bit, it all just felt like a bump in the road in retrospect. Ein sat on the sofa and gazed out the window, taking in the countryside scenery as he thought of what happened just before he left Syth Mill.

***

Earlier that morning, at Chris's house...

"This was something that I wanted to share with you while we ate lunch," the chief said to Ein. "As I've said before, Your Highness, I was unable to find any additional information in the archives that could supplement Prince Wilfried's writings. I'd like to once again apologize about this. However, I was able to recall the words that the first king would often say."

Jayle had apparently said, "The red foxes are after *me.* They hold a grudge against me."

"I think the diary he used to keep in the villa's basement said something similar in it," Ein said.

"In that basement, you say?" the chief asked, her eyes wide with shock.

She wasn't surprised to learn that Jayle's journal was in the villa's basement, but rather, that Ein had been able to enter the library at all. She rustled around in her pockets and approached the crown prince.

"Please hold on to this, Your Highness," she said, placing a silk-wrapped item in his hands.

Ein gingerly unwrapped the package to discover a pale blue jewel before him—a magic stone that emanated a rich aura of magical energy. The stone was

breathtakingly beautiful and unlike anything he'd ever seen. The prince found himself captivated by its vibrant blue hue from under the sunlight; the rays displayed the stone's lack of impurities or even the slightest blemish. He could hardly tear his eyes away from it.

"H-Huh?!" he gasped.

He quickly realized that he'd been involuntarily absorbing the stone's power upon noticing it seep into his body. The prince couldn't understand why, but a single tear rolled down his cheek as he held the magic stone tightly in his hands. Ein quickly wiped the tear away, hoping the chief hadn't seen it.

"That magic stone once belonged to Consort Laviola," she said. "While she was still alive, she saw fit to leave it in my care...until today that is."

Should I be holding on to something like this? Ein thought. *Maybe I should take it to the old capital's royal burial ground.*

"Since you've overcome the first king's trial, I believe you should have it," she said. "Please take it with you." She smiled at the hesitant Ein and bowed before leaving his side. But before she completely took her leave, the chief said, "Please remain good friends with Christina."

Ein watched the chief walk out the door before he turned back to the stone in his hands. He soon remembered his status card and took it out of his pocket.

"As usual, the numbers are all just lines," he mumbled. But as he looked closer, he was unable to hide his awe.

```
Ein von Ishtarica

[Job] Demon Lord, —, —, ——

[Stamina] —

[Magical Power] —

[Attack] —

[Defense] —

[Agility] —

[Skills] Demon Lord, Follower, Dark Knight, Grand
```

Sorcery, Ocean Current, Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training, Ice Dragon, Weaken

His curiosity was likely piqued by his job description. Since most everything on the card was a line, he couldn't parse it at all, but at least his skills were still legible.

"Weaken, huh... Weaken..."

He was almost certain that he'd gained the skill after absorbing Laviola's magic stone, but he wasn't sure exactly what the skill would do. *All right, then let's use it.* He concentrated deeply and thought about Weaken. Soon, he felt his body grow sluggish, heavy, and he was hit with a monster headache.

"Does this skill just debuff me? That's no good."

Perhaps this was a skill employed by pixies given their relation to fairies. It might have allowed pixies to hide in plain sight, becoming indistinguishable from their surroundings. While this might've been useful for smaller-bodied folks, like Pixies, Ein was a little too big to hide himself with something like that. *That's my theory, anyway.* In any case, he couldn't think of a situation where this skill would prove useful.

"Sir Ein! Are you prepared to depart?!" Chris called.

"Sorry! I'm getting things around right now!" he hastily yelled back.

He had no excuses as he was told to pack the night before, but Chris didn't feel like pointing it out due to the whirlwind of recent events. Ein might've not been physically exhausted anymore, but he was still recovering psychologically. He knew he was acting a touch spoiled, but...

"All right," he said.

It's time to go back home. He glanced at the empty bag on the floor and sluggishly stood up to start packing his things.

***

Ein had been on a rather fruitful journey, and he was thrilled to have learned more about his Wernstein brethren. He shifted his gaze away from the window and back into the railcar's interior.

“What were you thinking about?” Krone asked. She had taken the opportunity to sit beside him.

“Just that a lot of things happened in Syth Mill,” Ein replied.

“It sounds like you had some fun. I’m glad to hear it.”

He hadn’t said anything to Krone about Syth Mill’s holy grounds, determining that it was best to report his findings to Silverd first. Per her prince’s request, Chris obediently followed suit and remained quiet.

“The first king’s words are puzzling,” Krone said. “Aside from the chief of the red foxes, I believe we should be wary of others.”

That was really all Ein had told her. Obviously, he had no plans to tell her the truth regarding the Wernsteins, nor did he plan to share that secret with his grandfather. *I’ll eventually need to explain why my sword transformed, though...* Ein thought as he stared at his adviser.

“What’s wrong?” Krone asked. She didn’t appear to be embarrassed by the focused attention. Instead, she quizzically tilted her head to one side; only enhancing her beauty in Ein’s eyes.

“I might be asking an odd question, but...” Ein started, “Were you in Syth Mill, Krone?”

She fell silent.

“Um, when you get all quiet like that... Ack! Hey!”

She said not another word and tugged on Ein’s hand, drawing his face close to hers. They were centimeters apart before she placed her forehead on his.



“You don’t have a fever...” she said.

“I don’t!” Ein cried. “Why’d you suddenly...”

“That’s *my* line. There’s no way I’d be in Syth Mill. I spent the entire time helping out my grandfather with his company.”

She took her forehead away, but she remained close to him. If someone were to push either of them from behind, they would lock lips almost instantly. Funnily enough, it reminded Ein of the time when they’d almost kissed during the big meeting with Heim. He was sure that she was thinking the same thing.

“I have my reasons,” he said, his face still close to hers. “I felt like I saw you in Syth Mill, Krone.”

When he was escaping the shrine, he realized that the woman who’d lent him a hand bore a striking resemblance to Krone. Her voice, and her lips that he managed to catch a glimpse of looked just like her.

“Me?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m half joking, but I thought I’d ask.”

Indeed, there was no way that she’d be there; his question wasn’t a completely serious one.

“Ein, could you be...” Krone started, her tone of voice taking a serious turn before she dramatically paused. She faced the floor, but she soon raised her head to continue. Her cheeks were red with delight as she giggled like an old maid. “Were you lonely without me around?”

“Huh?” the crown prince asked.

“Umm...maybe you were hallucinating.”

It was Ein’s turn to fall silent. *Honestly, that isn’t an unrealistic possibility.* He wasn’t completely confident with his answer. Given that the voice came to him at a time of weakness, perhaps he did feel lonely and hallucinated his beloved as a result? Who was to say?

“Hey, you don’t have to become so quiet all of a sudden!” Krone insisted. “I was also lonely too, you know... Hmph!”

If she truly was a hallucination, it didn't explain the dress that he saw. But...

"I'm sorry. I think you might be right," Ein finally said. There was no definitive answer to his question, and there was a good chance that mulling over it further would've been a waste of time. "I might've been lonely."

"Goodness," she said. "Your pause was a bit mean-spirited, I'd think."

"I was just thinking about it."

When he reached out to pet her head, she cracked an exasperated smile. Just this simple gesture was a small comfort to his weary soul.

***

Ein's train finally slid on into White Rose Station. As he stepped out into the royal capital, Ein realized that it'd been a while since he'd walked under the city's night sky. Alongside the prince was a bustling gaggle of adults and children, all trying to rush home. Since Ein hadn't used the royal water train, he stepped onto the platform like everyone else, but he'd still been on a train meant for aristocrats, so there weren't many people around.

"I'd like to ask this of you once more, but please keep it a secret," Ein whispered to Chris as they stepped off the train.

She broke into a smile and replied with a bit of awkwardness. "I can't possibly tell anyone about it."

Ein wanted the story of his black sword and the trial of the first king to remain a secret. His plan was to tell Silverd first before revealing the truth to others, but Chris had promised him to never speak of it before they left Syth Mill.

"I'll pretend like I never heard any of it," she said.

"But the information we heard was so helpful," Ein replied.

"I-It's a bit too much knowledge for someone in my position. Ah ha ha..."

They were a bit awkward and clumsy, befitting for the two of them. *But I don't mind,* Ein thought as he walked ahead. He then noticed Warren with a crowd of Knights Guard members in tow. He was clearly on guard and quickly approached Ein upon noticing his presence.

“I’m glad to see you doing all right,” the chancellor said. “Let us return to the castle immediately.”

Ein had been acting in secret this entire time, but he’d suddenly received such a grand welcome. He was perplexed for a moment before he swiftly walked off with Warren.

“Something happened,” Ein guessed. From the situation, that much was crystal clear.

“Indeed,” Warren said, his normal calm tone nowhere to be seen. “Even I hadn’t dreamed of this outcome.”

“Tell me everything,” Ein curtly replied, giving Warren permission to provide a brief rundown.

“A very grave turn of events. Heim has declared war on Rockdam.”

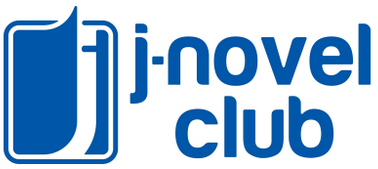
Ein had no idea what kind of expression was on his face when he heard the news. All he remembered was that he inadvertently pursed his lips, and tightly gripped his sword as though he were begging for help.

Afterword

I'm Ryou Yuuki, the author. Thank you for purchasing the sixth volume of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. Just like volume 4, this book's release coincides with the release of a new volume of the manga. If you haven't read the manga version yet, I encourage you to read the two volumes that are currently available. Thank you to Kenji Sugawara for his great portrayal of the story!

We're now approaching the seventh volume and our protagonist, Ein, is about to flourish. The red foxes are pulling the strings behind Heim's war with the other nations. Now that he's just overcome the trial of the first king, Ein will have another chapter of his life awaiting him. The Ishtarican armada will be on the move alongside the military force under Lloyd's command. Please continue to read along with Ein's new battle as the entire world falls into a state of turmoil.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone involved with the making of the sixth volume. Chisato Naruse drew the characters so wonderfully again, and I cannot thank them enough for their illustrations. The efforts of my two editors along with everyone else involved in the making of this book had graciously allowed me to publish this sixth volume. Thank you very much to everyone who decided to pick up the sixth volume. I truly cannot thank you all enough. As I draw this afterword to a close, I hope to see everyone again in the seventh volume. Please continue to support both myself and *Magic Stone Gourmet.*



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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume 6

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo

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