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


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The World Tree of Gluttony.
Crown Prince Ein had coined the name himself, as the tree had pierced the heavens after laying down its roots in Heim's royal capital. Glittering, crystallized byproducts of the tree's growth hung on its branches and wavered in the nighttime breeze.
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In the spiritual realm
The last bit of the blue sky was consumed by the void, and the entire world turned dark. A massive ball of light hung in the dark sky and only then did Ein finally notice it.
???
Rejoice. The time has come for you to lose yourself and fuse with my being!
The orb emanated a black light that was darker than the void above him. Hot airs of white shimmered along its rims, and Ein felt a thick magic unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was clear that he had very little time left.
Ein
Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill Toxin Decomposition EX who later evolved into a Demon Lord.


In the garden of
House August's former manor
I was told that it's a good luck charm.
As Krone remained at her beloved's side, she felt her heart beating faster and faster. However, she noticed his fingertips move ever so slightly.

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Prologue

Where am I? was the first question on Ein's mind after he regained consciousness. He tried to move, but his body felt like it was being restrained by something, locking him in place. He wasn't sure if his eyes were open or closed. In fact, he couldn't even tell if his surroundings were warm or cold. But there was one thing that he *did* know—his memories had, fortunately, been left untouched. With his latest exploits still fresh in his mind, Ein set about unraveling the events that had led to his current predicament.

If I recall... Ein had defeated the red fox chief, Shannon, and put an end to the grisly, centuries-old feud between Ishtarican and the foxes. However, a small display of compassion had left his heart open to attack, causing his body to spiral out of control; much like Arshay's had. Before losing consciousness, Ein had activated the Follower skill he'd received from Marco. In that desperate act, he had pleaded for a certain trio of heroes to assist him. Ein remembered it all too well.

Then am I in the afterlife? If Ramza the Dullahan, Misty the Elder Lich, and Marco had been successful in ending his rampage, the crown prince's void-like surroundings surely had to be where people went after death. Unfortunately, it was a difficult theory to test in his current environment.

"I did well," Ein muttered to himself.

I worked hard. He'd risked his life to defeat the red foxes—a feat that not even the first king had been able to pull off. With the foxes out of the picture, at least one impending threat to Ishtarica had been squashed. The nation had one less danger to be concerned with, and its future had been assured. *It's a happy ending for all. There's no need for me to work any harder now. It's pretty common for the hero to die at the end of a story anyway.* Ein couldn't help but mock himself.

Yet, his heart remained uneasy. He fell silent and told himself that this was the end. Everything was over. The final page of his story had been flipped; all that was left was to close the book for

good. *That's all.*

Ein couldn't utter another word. Was it by sheer coincidence that he had regained consciousness, or was this a reward for his hard work? His eyelids grew heavy. Though he had no idea if his eyes had been open or closed up until this point, he felt his consciousness being quickly stripped away—as though he'd fallen into a deep slumber.

The end was near.

His time, his consciousness, his whole existence as Ein von Ishtarica was coming to a close.

Do you really want *it to end?* As the question filled Ein's heart, Ishtarica's lush scenery flooded his mind; his memories of his time in the nation rushed back to him. The smiles of his family and those near and dear to him were vividly seared into his brain, refusing to ever let him forget.

"Don't be silly. There's no way...that I can let it end here."

A strong determination filled Ein's heart. His fading consciousness instantly became more vivid, and the world around him began to regain its color. It was better than seeing nothing at all, but his vision was still mostly obscured. He realized that he was in a dimly lit space that was warm and damp—filled with heavy, stuffy air. When he strained his eyes, he noticed that he was in a familiar stone prison.

"This is the Demon Castle's..."

This was the cursed room that he had seen on his way to Jayle's grave. As Ein stepped forward, he could feel the granules of sand and dust scattered across the stone tiles underneath his shoes.

"How unsightly." A voice echoed from the corner of the room.

Ein turned to the voice and spotted a little girl, crouched down and clutching her knees. He couldn't make out her face because she was facing the floor, but there was no mistaking this child.

Ein stood in front of her, refusing to be intimidated. "Why did you appear in front of me, Shannon?"

"I wanted to disappear. But because of you, I couldn't," the red fox replied.

"That answers nothing."

"You think you have the right to talk like that? *You're* the one who devoured my magic stone."

Now that she mentions it... Ein hadn't consciously tried to eat the

magic stone, but he even remembered the sound it had made when he bit down.

"Why were you after Ishtarica and King Jayle?" Ein inquired. "Not to mention that you had me in your crosshairs too. Why in the world would you want Heim as a puppet?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Shannon replied. "Because I wanted to take everything away from you."

"It couldn't be any less obvious. While we were acquaintances, we only met once during the party that night."

Shannon giggled. "You just haven't realized it."

"What do you…"

"I've always, *always* wanted to ensnare you. I didn't mind if it took me years, decades, or even centuries. I wanted you to experience exactly what I've been through. That's all there is to it."

"What are you on about?!"

"Shut up. I no longer care about a dryad like you who failed to save me."

Shannon refused to say another word. Ein bent down and placed a hand on her shoulder. He shook her petite body, but she maintained an almost magnetic gaze on the floor without ever raising her head.

Just how long had Ein been standing there? He tried his best to get anything out of Shannon, but his attempts ended when he felt an unignorable heat wave emanating from beyond the door. He was instantly distracted by the warmth, and when he turned back to face Shannon once more, she had vanished without a trace.

Ein hastily rushed out the door, hoping he'd figure out what was going on if he headed outside. A familiar corridor continued through the Demon Castle, and he noticed a crimson light flooding in from the windows that lined his surroundings.

"What's going on?" he wondered aloud.

Questions flashed across his mind as he rushed ahead and ran out of the castle. The former capital was enveloped in hellish flames.

A dark-haired man resembling Ein stood in the distance, in front of the crown prince. "Your end will come very soon. Everything about you will be finished," the man said.

Unlike Ein, the man had long dark hair that fell to his waist, and looked to be around five years older. He was considerably taller as

well. Ein had never seen this man before, but this mysterious figure's voice sounded awfully familiar. *It's echoed in my head before.*

When the crown prince had fought against Glint and killed Shannon, this very man's voice had filled his heart.

"You have no choice but to unite with me," the man continued.

"I understand now," Ein said. "No wonder I suddenly started hearing a voice at that moment."

"I expect no less from the one who gave birth to me. I appreciate your swift understanding."

"Being complimented by you doesn't make me happy at all."

"Don't say that. I'll feel forlorn. I love you."

"I didn't expect to hear that. I thought you'd despise me for getting in your way."

Though the two had met for the first time today, they conversed like they were old friends. Neither said much, but each could easily understand the implication of the other's words.

"Indeed," the man replied. "You purposefully postponed our union. You even summoned a three-person cleaning crew, so I suspect that you loathe me to an extreme degree. But even so, I love you."

"Oh?" Ein said. "And why's that?"

"Because I'm your spawn. It goes without saying that I'd love you; why would you ever assume the opposite?"

"Because I hate you, of course."

"Heh. Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha! I'm ecstatic! I didn't think you'd view me like that!" The man's voice trembled with delight as he abruptly shifted his tone. He sounded a touch annoyed as he went on, "Apologies. It seems like they're here."

The man turned his back to Ein and started walking ahead. "I'll return after I deal with that trio outside. You stubbornly refuse to unite with me, but I've grown even stronger. Surely, you cannot resist me."

"W-Wait!" Ein called.

"Don't be so hasty. I'll be back soon."

The man's last word echoed throughout the castle as he vanished like the mist.

"I..." Ein started.

Is really there nothing I can do? He pummeled himself with

questions and frantically sought for answers. He once again felt his consciousness gradually fading away. But the crown prince refused to give up. *I'll never let myself get knocked out here!* He steeled his resolve and balled his hands into tight fists.

He was left alone to view the blazing inferno, desperately searching for a way to offer his assistance.

Chapter One: Headed for the Stage of Battle

On the seas just outside Roundheart, Marshal Lloyd Gracier stood on the deck of the *Leviathan*. He'd lost an eye, but his piercing gaze was locked on the colossal tree that towered in the distance.

The World Tree of Gluttony.

Crown Prince Ein had coined the name himself, as the tree had pierced the heavens after laying down its roots in Heim's royal capital. Glittering, crystallized byproducts of the tree's growth hung on its branches and wavered in the nighttime breeze. The tree's majesty could be seen from afar, atop the ocean.

"It's as if…" Lloyd trailed off.

It was as if he were watching a party of heroes assemble to defeat the Demon Lord. He gazed at the trio who had just arrived at Port Roundheart. Now wasn't the time for him to dawdle.

Lloyd clapped his hands, attracting the attention of the knights and crew on board. "May I have your attention! We're heading back to Ishtarica now."

A clamor of confusion ran through the ship. They had assumed that they were on standby, ready to offer any assistance if needed; they didn't expect their marshal to order a retreat.

"I understand how you feel, and all too well at that. I feel powerless," Lloyd said. "However, it's clear as day to me that we'll only be deadweight. We must realize that our pride and dignity are worthless in this scenario. All we can do is wait for the trio to report back!" The marshal was clearly vexed, but he tried to hide his emotions behind a brave face. It shocked everyone around him. "We must do what we can! We must prevent Ishtarica's citizens from falling into harm's way!"

Lloyd spoke vaguely, but it was clear that Ein had become a potential threat to Ishtarica. It hadn't been long since the prince's roots had reached the shores of Kingsland. The image of that event had been seared into Lloyd's mind. Everyone was painfully aware of Ein's deep love for his nation. However, it was also the

duty of Lloyd and his knights to keep their prince from harming the people he loved so much.

"Listen to the marshal's orders and get into position," the ship's captain barked.

The knights and the rest of the crew began to frantically run across the deck.

"Hurry!"

"Don't just stand there!"

They vowed to do what they could.

Moments later, the *Leviathan* started sailing back towards Ishtarica.

"I wish you luck," Lloyd murmured, praying to anything he could as he wished for the trio's safe return. "Sir Ein, we eagerly await the day that you become king."

Lloyd truly believed that his wish for the future would become a reality, and that it wasn't too far away. He vehemently prayed for the return of the hero—the rumored reincarnation of the first king.

***

Not long after stepping off the *Leviathan*, Misty the Elder Lich, Ramza the Dullahan, and Arshay, the Demon Lord of Nightmares, arrived at Port Roundheart. The World Tree of Gluttony's roots ran through the city's cobblestone streets, making it difficult to traverse. The homes that had narrowly avoided the *Princess Olivia*'s cannon were now tangled in a mess of roots. The city's sorry state was akin to a village deep in the forest—one left that had been abandoned for many centuries.

"Misty," Arshay called out. While her gothic dress was splendid, it was unsuitable for her surroundings. "What were you planning on doing with my magic stone?"

"If you hadn't been resurrected?" Misty inquired. Her lovely appearance equally clashed with the city.

"It's not something you'd like to hear," Ramza said coolly. He maintained his dauntless composure.

"But I'll probably be curious about it later anyway," Arshay replied. "Tell me."

"Ramza and I planned on gouging a hole in that tree and

tossing your stone inside," Misty answered.

"Ugh... I-I feel like my stone would've exploded."

"That was really the only option we could come up with. Ramza and I planned on using everything at our disposal to stop Ein, but to be honest, we probably don't stand a chance against him."

"Even with *that* man with us?" Ramza asked.

"Yes, it's an impossible feat, even with our loyal knight."

"Um, speaking of, where *is* Marco?" Arshay inquired.

The other two flashed strained smiles.

"You'll probably be able to see him soon," Ramza said.

Misty cleared her throat and straightened her back. "Let's get back on topic. We must stop Ein—no, the World Tree of Gluttony."

"And we don't really have a plan in mind," Ramza added.

"Oh, I know what that's called. 'The brute-force approach,' right?" Arshay chimed in. "And that name is impressive. Did you come up with that, Misty?"

"No, Ein named himself so before he lost consciousness," Misty replied.

Arshay nodded in understanding.

"If either of you can think of a plan after seeing the tree, I don't mind waiting here for a while. But, what are you two thinking?" Misty asked.

Ramza and Arshay looked up at the tree that towered over the royal capital and let out a forced laugh.

"I don't think petty tricks will help us this time around," Ramza observed.

"I know what to do," Arshay added. "Using force is the best way to suppress stuff like that."

"But don't forget about teamwork," Misty warned. "Let's avoid any reckless attacks or useless techniques. And if we *really* can't stop Ein at all, be prepared to self-destruct."

"Noted," the king of swords replied.

The silver-haired Demon Lord froze in place and gazed at the ground quietly.

"The same goes for you too, Arshay. Is that clear?" Misty asked.

The little girl recalled her past as she tightly clutched the hem of her dress, her fists trembling. When she looked up once more, her eyes had transformed completely, filled with a fiery glare.

"I'll stop that child. No matter what," Arshay said firmly.

After steeling her resolve, no longer did she look sluggish or dopey. Her voice was filled with an overwhelming aura that the other two had never heard before. Ramza and Misty were a touch taken aback, but they exchanged a pair of firm nods.

"Let's go," Ramza muttered.

The three quietly walked ahead.

"In any case, neither Misty nor I have received any magical energy," Ramza suddenly said.

They'd both been summoned due to the effects of Ein's Follower skill, and a question quickly filled their minds.

"You're right," Misty agreed. "I received plenty of it when I was initially summoned, but haven't received a drop since."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Arshay asked.

"When Marco used it, the summoned followers would be provided with magical energy. But we haven't received anything."

"We're probably seen as his enemies," Ramza concluded.

"I thought the same," Misty agreed. "Which is why I took a few magic stones. We can restore some of our mana at the very least, so don't you worry about that."

***

Meanwhile in Kingsland, a certain Cait-Sìth was walking through the halls of White Night Castle. Dressed in a white lab coat, she was none other than the first princess of Ishtarica, Katima.

"Mrow... It's about time," she muttered, checking her watch.

She had a feeling that the trio had already left the *Leviathan*, and that Lloyd had ordered the ship to turn around. This was perfect. No one was around to get in her way. With Lloyd away, only Chris could break through the barrier to Katima's lab...and she was fast asleep. The Cait-Sìth walked through the hall and to the hospital wing.

"Princess Katima," a knight on guard said. "May I ask why you're here?"

"Are you perhaps headed off to visit Officer Dill?" another knight inquired.

Katima nodded. "And I need to speak with Bara too."

“Of course,” a knight responded. “Miss Bara is still inside, I believe.”

“Oho? Thank mew very much!”

“But Your Highness, are you sure that you don’t need to remain in your room?”

“Mrow? Why do mew say that?”

“His Majesty was furious when he learned that you went to Ist without permission.”

“Indeed! I won’t lie, I did get a meowssive scolding when I got back! But we all have our own things to deal with. And I was pardoned thanks to Lady Misty covering for meow.”

Katima had acted for Ein’s sake, and had also coincidentally played a role in resurrecting the Demon Lord. Silverd, a strong believer in dishing out punishment for misdeeds, but ensuring that no good deed went unrewarded, had found himself unable to scold his daughter too harshly.

“So please excuse meow!” Katima said.

Even she knew not to be so noisy around the injured. But when she laid eyes on those in treatment, they smiled joyfully at her. She was the type to liven up the castle and was extremely affable to the knights and the castle’s servants. The current royal family were all amicable, but Katima was especially so. Her willingness to level with her people had gained her an extreme level of popularity.

“Mrow…” Katima sighed. “I so kindly chose to enter this room without even a single purr… But if you guys are all meowing, I guess I’m not being all that considerate.”

“Ha ha ha! There’s no use in us being glum, is there?” one replied.

“Quite right! An injury cannot be helped!” another agreed. “In fact, I’m proud that I was hurt while protecting my nation!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear all that,” Katima said. “But don’t reopen your wounds, all right? That’s an order.”

She walked through the knights lying on their beds and headed for the room in the very back. After a gentle knock, Bara, likely having heard the knights’ ruckus, opened the door and ushered the princess inside.

“Was I a bother, mew think?”

“Oh no, not at all,” Bara replied. “If your mere appearance livens up the knights, I couldn’t be a happier nurse, Your Highness.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Bara pointed to a chair near a desk in the back. “Please have a seat here, at Officer Dill’s bedside.”

Dill’s condition was the most precarious, and Bara had stationed her desk beside him.

“When mew were…fighting in the war zone, were mew near the wounded?” Katima inquired.

“I was, Your Highness,” Bara replied. “I advanced with the crown prince’s army, and we discovered many injured people upon our arrival in Bardland.”

“But no one was as injured as Dill.”

Bara paused for a moment before she replied, “Precisely.”

“I knew as much. Mew don’t need to look so sad. Ahem. I just merely wanted a glance at my sleeping guard’s face before I took a catnap.”

Katima sounded cheery as usual as she walked ahead, but it was clear that her footsteps were rather sluggish.

“And how was it?” she inquired.

The question was vague, but Bara immediately understood the implication. “You must be referring to the medical magical tools you retrieved from Ist.”

“Mrow! Looks like… Ah, found it.”

“Right. Those tubes are connected to a small tool that resembles a magic stone furnace. I’m impressed by what they built in Ist… They’re truly on technology’s cutting edge. Usually, I’d need several magical tools for this, but this tool alone is good enough to handle the task.”

Good enough. That was all. It was far from excellent. Katima emitted a large sigh, unable to help herself.

“Even the tool I stole from Ist isn’t good enough to help him in his state then…” Katima said.

“Er…” Bara trailed off.

“I know, I know. It was just one of the many pawsibilities that was worth testing out, that’s all.”

Despite the resignation in her voice, the expression on Katima’s face said that she was far from giving up. When Bara peered into the princess’s visage, the royal looked dignified, as though she had steeled her resolve.

“Are the other knights all right?” Katima inquired.

“Th-They are!” Bara replied. “The other nurses are ensuring that they’re well looked after!”

“Hmm, meow… Then I don’t need to hold back with my request!”

“A request?”

“Purrecisely! I need mew to carry Dill’s bed out of here!”

Bara stared at her in utter confusion, but Katima only smiled in response. The princess stood up and walked towards the door.

“Carry Dill to my underground lab, please,” Katima said. Her tone was forceful—one that implied that she refused to hear any complaints.

“Do you have another way to treat him?!” Bara asked.

“I do… Mrow… I do indeed, but…it’s a bit of a trial to do alone. I need your help, Bara.”

As Katima’s lab was filled with oodles of expensive magical tools, Bara had assumed that some of them were also from Ist. Out of a simple concern for safety, the tools hadn’t been used just yet—the princess needed to carefully analyze and prepare them. With newfound joy and hope in her heart, the little nurse flashed a smile.

“Of course, Your Highness!” Bara cried. “I shall bring him right away!”

She faithfully followed the royal’s orders without an ounce of doubt in her mind.

However, Dill was still fighting for his life, and his chances of survival were very low. His parents prayed and believed that their son would make a full recovery, but Katima wasn’t so optimistic. In fact, she was certain that he would perish soon if she sat around and twiddled her thumbs.

“Mmm… He’s sleeping well!” Katima remarked.

Despite her thoughts, Katima didn’t appear to despair at all as she opened the door to her lab. After watching Dill carried in on a stretcher, the princess smiled and extended her paw to touch him.

“A squad of healers will be here tomorrow,” Bara explained. “If your new treatment method works out, I’m sure that Officer Dill will turn the corner, Princess Katima.”

“Mrow… To be furrank, healing magic won’t do much to help Dill’s condition, unfortunately.”

“And you’ve got a better method in mind.”

“I think I do. I asked Lord Arshay all about it on the train ride back… So I think it’ll be effective.”

“Asked her about what, Your Highness?”

Katima didn’t respond, but her whiskers swayed in the air. “Good grief. I went through all that danger and trouble, so if mew don’t get better, I won’t furrgive mew! Don’t furrget: mew still have to be my guard.”

When the first princess went off to Ist, she struck a deal with Krone. The Cait-Sìth wanted to save her nephew and her guard. And so, the princess rushed through the Tower of Wisdom and gathered all the healing tools she could find before returning to Kingsland.

“Mrow. Let’s begin,” Katima said.

“Most certainly!” Bara replied. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Of course! When this is over, I need *mew* to take a look at my wounds! Is that clear?”

“Y-Your wounds?! Princess Katima?! Please wait! What are you planning?”

But the princess wouldn’t answer. She pushed the stretcher into the back of the room, and stopped in front of a massive, bed-shaped magical tool. Various tubes protruded from it. In her shock, Bara rushed forward, hoping for an answer, when suddenly, a transparent wall resembling a pane of glass materialized between her and the royal.

“Princess Katima!” Bara cried. “What are you doing?!”

“Putting up a barrier juuust to be safe,” Katima replied. “I originally planned on using it to protect myself in case an experiment failed.”

“What are you—”

“Don’t worry. The barrier will go down in a few meowments.”

Bara banged on the barrier, but it refused to budge. Katima could no longer hear the nurse’s voice, and only heard the girl’s futile pounding. The royal ignored it all and took out a small black stone from her coat pocket.

“Thanks to Oz, I’ll be able to use this, mew see,” Katima said.

This stone had been embedded in one of Oz’s hands. Katima wasn’t about to abandon the stone, and had taken it before she left the Tower of Wisdom. She proceeded to draw Chris’s rapier,

which she'd secretly stolen.

"Meow! Mrow! Meow! Huh? Am I actually a genius with the blade?"

From afar, it looked as though she were engaged in a strange dance—like she'd lost her marbles and randomly started swinging a blade around. However, the princess seemed to be enjoying herself, her eyes filled with determination.

"All right. Here I go."

She lined up the black stone on her desk next to an empty magic stone, and placed them beside Dill's body. Katima proceeded to use the rapier to slice through the bandages that enveloped Dill's body. She looked down and bit her lip as she saw the deep gash in his body. With renewed determination, she took out a syringe from her pocket and pierced Dill's neck. For the several seconds that followed, a tense silence filled the room.

"Princess…Katima?" Dill said feebly as he opened his eyes.

The princess brushed the knight's hair away from his eyes. "There are many things that I must tell mew. But time is of the essence, and mew don't have much left, Dill." The syringe contained a medicine that forced a person to regain consciousness. It took a heavy toll on the body, but Katima was convinced that had she not used it, Dill would've never uttered another word again. "If we stand around and twiddle our paws, mew'll die very soon."

Dill fell silent.

"But there's one way I might be able to save mew. It may change everything about your body, but even so… Do mew want to live, Dill?"

As soon as he came face-to-face with the royal's gaze, Dill knew he was in deep. He'd fallen in battle and was now unable to stand at his master's side. The faithful knight quickly noticed Ein's absence, and instantly understood what had happened.

"My loyalty…hasn't…died yet…" Dill managed to eke out.

He was so frustrated that he was on the verge of tears, but he managed to suppress his emotions while conveying his innermost thoughts to Katima. He weakly reached out to the princess, only to have his lifeless hand supported by her paws.

"Very well," Katima said. "Then I shall steel my resolve as well."

Before Dill could even question what the princess meant by

“her resolve,” he lost consciousness once more. With the knight fully knocked out, Katima rammed a magic stone into his gaping wound. She quickly shoved the tubes from the magical tool into his body, and used the last tube to pierce an empty magic stone.

“When the core and the magic stone are linked, it starts connecting itself to the surrounding organs and reconstructing flesh,” Katima said. “After another pass over the artificial Demon Lord creation research, that much is already clear. But now, we run into a bit of a pawblem…”

Dill was a human—he possessed no core. Even if the core was destroyed, a magic stone could persist by itself, and thus, it was easy to prepare an empty stone. However, if one’s magic stone was destroyed, the core would die with it.

But as the princess had listened to Arshay’s explanation, the furry royal had thought of a certain solution. Indeed, Arshay’s resurrection had been the answer to Katima’s woes. Following the same process of the Demon Lord’s return, the black magic stone simply needed to serve as the core.

“Apparently, the necessary environment will be suppawted by this magical tool,” Katima said. “Sadly, I haven’t had enough time to process every step, and I’m just copying what I saw Oz do earlier. It looked to meow like this step was vital to rebuild your body around the magic stone.”

Truthfully, Katima had wanted to hear what Oz had rattled off during his battle with Chris. Instead of hearing it for herself, the princess had to settle for whatever she’d been told on the train ride home. That was all. From there, Katima used her own expertise to bring her conclusions in line with the mad professor’s discoveries.

“At the very least, mew won’t become a chimera or anything. So no worries there.”

Was this black magic stone a completed product while others were prototypes? Or was it because her subject was being treated in a completely different environment? No matter the case, she knew that this stone was totally different than the ones found inside chimeras.

The only real roadblock was Dill’s status as a run-of-the-mill human. Oz’s creation didn’t take humans into account, making Katima’s aims seem rather unrealistic.

“Princess Katima! No!” Bara shouted.

Katima couldn’t hear her voice until now, but she realized that Bara was no longer alone. The nurse had called for help, and a handful of knights were trying their damnedest to break through the barrier. They had only managed to make a tiny crack so far—not nearly enough of an opening for someone to squeeze through.

“There are records of failed experiments on subjects with completely different traits!” Bara cried.

“Nya ha ha! Mew don’t think I know that?” Katima replied.

“There haven’t been any nonhuman-human experiments either! It’s all been with monsters! Officer Dill is just a normal human being! The use of an artificially embedded magic stone completely changes the purpose of the experiment itself! Please, Princess Katima!”

“I know all that.”

“Then please stop! If this fails, he won’t come out of this unscathed!”

Ever since she arrived at the castle, Bara had been always eager to learn something new. Her studies also included a decent amount of reading on the artificial Demon Lord. Katima’s intentions were as clear as day to the nurse as she desperately sought to stop the royal. Bara was convinced that this wouldn’t end well. However, her words fell on deaf ears as Katima continued. The princess thrust the rapier into her own magic stone. Blood and magical energy gushed out of her self-inflicted injury as she hastily connected a tube to her wound.

“Oof… This hurts more than I expected! Nya ha ha…”



That was good enough. Relieved, Katima knew that she could now fall to the floor without any worries. She fell upon Dill's body, serenely smiling atop his chest.

"I don't remember firing my caretaker," Katima murmured.

She spoke these final words with grace and elegance, fitting for a princess, as her vision faded to black.

Chapter Two: Everyone's Lives at Stake

The World Tree of Gluttony began to squirm as the trio approached the royal capital. The roots were not only sprawling across the cobblestone roads and constricting homes; they were attacking the trio from all directions. Misty had just raised her staff in the air when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"I'd like to have a few practice swings," Ramza said unemotionally, his calm face turned towards the tree.

Misty let out a small sigh, almost exasperated by how nonchalant he was being in this situation. But instead of giving him a piece of her mind, she stepped back.

"Oh, all right," she relented.

Several roots rushed at the trio, and the Dullahan's greatsword met them halfway.

"I certainly expected as much, but these roots are completely different from the ones that I'm familiar with," Ramza muttered.

Considering that these roots moved on their own, they were by no means normal. But most critically, these roots were incredibly robust. While they were no match for the Dullahan, he noticed that they were much sturdier than any monster bone he'd cut through.

"Of course," Misty replied. "We're not up against a normal tree, you know."

"Yeah," Ramza said. "I now know that they're quite tough."

There was no doubt in his mind that the tree's trunk was much sturdier than appearances implied. Based on his prior combat experience, Ramza surmised the bark to be far more robust than a rare metal or massive boulder. But whether this sturdiness would hinder the Dullahan's attacks was a different story.

Also, Ramza's swordsmanship far outclassed Ein's. Proud of his "King of Swords" sobriquet, the Dullahan was second to none in Ishtarica's long history of swordplay. If the ladies at his side relaxed for even a moment, they would quickly lose sight of his godlike speed.

"How does it feel?" Arshay inquired.

"Not as bad as I expected before I set foot on this land," Ramza

replied.

Even an awakened Demon Lord couldn't possibly pose a threat using the most minuscule amount of power—no, one required a much greater force. The roots were all sliced into bits as they fell to the ground. They wriggled on the floor for a short while before they quickly wilted away.

Again and again, the roots tried to restrict their enemies, but their attempts were in vain. With a gust of wind, the roots were hacked into tiny pieces.

"Can we join in too?" Misty asked.

"Sure," Ramza replied.

"I'll also help," Arshay said.

The roots continued their barrage of attacks, and the ladies displayed power on par with the Dullahan's might. The Elder Lich, who had achieved the pinnacle of sorcery, transmogrified the roots into grains of sand. Meanwhile, the Nightmare of Envy only needed to let out a deep exhalation to lull the roots into an eternal slumber. Even so, the roots refused to let up.

The trio ran ahead, making haste to reach Heim's royal capital. The roots running along the ground had gradually become more languid. When Ramza turned around, he noticed purplish red mana wrapping around the roots like chains.

"Is this your doing, Arshay?" Ramza asked.

"Mhm," the Demon Lord replied. "They keep coming and coming, so I thought it was just better for them to slowly fall to their ruin."

"That's quite the mean attack you've got there."

"Huh?! I-I'm just trying to be efficient, that's all!"

Amid his joking banter, Ramza made sure to thank the little girl. Thanks to her, the roots had stopped attacking, making it much easier for the three of them to traverse the terrain. The royal capital grew closer and closer, as did the massive tree that loomed over it. With Ramza at the helm, the arena for the final battle was close, but the Dullahan suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

Just outside the city gates lay a series of destroyed castle walls. The structure's sorry state had made it virtually impossible to imagine the city's former glory, not to mention the similarly ruined castle gates. Before the gates solemnly stood a single knight—a warrior whose loyalty knew no bounds.

“It certainly has been a while,” he said.

“We walked past each other just yesterday,” Ramza replied.

“Ah, but we haven’t been able to exchange any greetings until now, have we?”

“I suppose you’re right, Marco.”

The Living Armor’s body stood out, even at night. Veinlike tubes ran along his body, pulsating and glowing with every breath he took. The color of his veins was even darker than the time when he’d fought Ein. This proved that the loyal knight had reverted to his prime, or possessed strength even greater than that.

“I believe that Ein had told you that you completed your duties,” Ramza said.

“Indeed, your message has been received. And I’m truly grateful my loyalty has reached you,” Marco replied. He placed a hand over his chest and gave a deep bow.

“Then I shall give you a new order, Vice Captain of the Black Knights. Come with us and use your blade to help stop Ein’s rampage.”

As Ramza stretched out his hand, Marco tried to reach out several times as though he were trying to cling to his captain’s command. However, the Living Armor finally shook himself free of his hesitation and shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” Ramza asked. “Why don’t you answer?”

“Forgive me, Captain,” Marco said. “I’ve already received a new mission.” He summoned a large sword from the air.

Ramza had expected as much. He felt a sting of lament inside as he drew his sword as well.

“If you cannot follow your captain’s orders, it implies that your loyalty has died,” Ramza said.

“What a funny thing to say,” Marco replied. “My loyalty has not died, and my actions are proof of this. Hence, I choose to grab my sword.”

Despite his vague statements, his loyalty shone brighter than ever before, intent on following Ein’s orders. Instead of expressing joy at his reunion with Arshay, the Living Armor chose to express his loyalty first.

“Lord Arshay, not once have I forgotten the gratitude I feel towards you,” Marco said.

“Yeah, I know,” the Demon Lord replied. “I know that you’re

kind.”

“Please forgive me. As you may know, after that battle, I was truly supposed to serve—”

“Silence. That’s enough,” Ramza interjected, wanting to protect Arshay. “We’re here to stop Ein. If you’re planning on getting in our way, we must beat you by force.”

“Then I shall simply remain loyal to ensure my master’s happiness. Should I be allowed to protect him, I won’t hesitate to fight against you, Captain.”

“I didn’t expect a man like you to misunderstand the meaning of happiness.”

“No, not once have I mistaken Sir Ein’s happiness. If you’ll allow me to assert myself, I believe that I more precisely understand his happiness than you do, Captain, for you’re trying to put an end to his rampage.”

“What exactly is going through your mind?”

In truth, Ramza didn’t wish to fight the Living Armor. It seemed pointless to wear himself out here, and he was eager to find Ein as soon as possible. The Captain of the Black Knights couldn’t hide his frustration.

“I’ll say it as many times as I need to,” Marco replied. “For my master, I shall fight whoever opposes him, including my own captain.”

Ramza furrowed his brows. Mana ran thick through the Living Armor’s body, but it seemed like he was using almost an absurd degree—Marco looked like he was needlessly wasting precious magical energy. Just then, the Dullahan jolted as an epiphany hit him.

“Ha ha! You truly are a troublesome man!” Ramza shouted.

He suddenly vanished from sight and reappeared in front of Marco while swinging his blade down.

“Dear!” Misty called.

“Brother!” Arshay shouted.

“You two go on ahead! I’ll catch up soon!” Ramza reassured them.

Marco turned his blade horizontally, easily parrying the Dullahan’s attack but not budging an inch.

“As impressive as always, Captain,” Marco said. “My arms have grown numb from your attack.”

“No need to flatter me. You haven’t moved from where you stand,” Ramza replied.

Every swing was swift, fast, and skillfully done. Any swordsman would’ve been awed and astonished by the battle that was currently unfolding at the castle gates. The apex of swordsmanship had been condensed into this battle of cold steel.

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Arshay and Misty rushed through the gates, leaving Ramza behind to face Marco. Most of the city had been reduced to rubble and King Garland’s prized castle had become nothing more than a towering dustbin. Only a handful of common homes remained, all trapped beneath a mass of sprawling roots spawned by the World Tree of Gluttony. The capital’s streets looked far more battered and bruised than those of Roundheart.

“Any being deemed evil by that child has been murdered, absorbed, or both,” Misty noted. A few moments later, she noticed a few skeletons on the side of the road. Based on the pieces of Heim armor scattered around them, these departed warriors were once soldiers in the kingdom’s army. “Just what happened when you lost control, Arshay? Did you retain any shreds of your consciousness?”

“A few, yes,” Arshay replied.

Misty looked surprised. “And you couldn’t fight back?”

“Nope.”

“Then, how did you feel at that moment?”

“You know, that’s a mean question to ask *now* of all times.” Arshay groaned and racked her brain for an answer. In the meantime, Misty just smiled as she patiently waited for the girl to speak. “It’s kind of like the time I wasn’t sleeping at all, but somehow evolved from that.”

“Excuse me?”

“I felt so achy, annoyed, and asphyxiated. I couldn’t even sleep in my own bed! My body rubbed directly against the sheets and then my thighs kept rubbing together… Gah, it was all so infuriating that I thought about tearing myself to shreds. Then right as I clicked my tongue, a strand of hair fell out and onto my pillow. Oh god, I wanted to burn that blanket so much… It felt like

sandpaper against my skin.” Misty remained silent as Arshay continued, “Every creature that entered my gaze appeared to me as a filthy insect in need of extermination. It was only when I bathed that I felt refreshed… So, I guess that’s how I felt when I went berserk.”

Misty had heard of Arshay’s experience for the first time, but the girl had explained it in a way only she could. The Elder Lich parsed out that Arshay had struggled, but not much else.

“How in the world is that anything like an ‘evolved’ form of extreme sleep deprivation?” Misty inquired.

“I-I told you that it was a difficult question to answer!” Arshay replied. She stomped the ground.

Misty chuckled. “In short, you want to save Ein as soon as you can.”

“Right! Yeah!”

And with that, the Elder Lich pointed her staff in the direction of the August estate—the World Tree of Gluttony’s chosen home. In an instant, Arshay switched gears and a wave of purple-tinged magical energy emerged from her body.

“Where should I attack?” Arshay asked.

“Wherever you like,” Misty replied. “We have to attack the entire tree anyway.” But right at that moment, a series of vines sprawled out from the duo’s blind spot. “Arshay!”

“I know!”

The battle was now underway. Misty didn’t even bother to turn around as she reduced the vines to sand, just as she’d done to Heim’s men. Arshay joined the fray, and the mere presence of magic in her breath caused another set of vines to instantly wither. Was the tree trying to size them up? Despite letting out sighs of relief, the pair remained vigilant as the tree seemed to be enjoying itself. Something started falling from the tree’s branches—crystallized fruit in the dozens. It was as though a star shower were raining down upon the duo.

Then all of a sudden, a peculiar kind of laughter came rustling out from the roots.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

“Heh… Hee hee! Heh heh!”

The laughter moved to surround each fruit as new creatures emerged from within the magical pulp.

“What…*is* that?” Arshay asked.

“Well, they clearly aren’t friendly,” Misty replied.

Each creature stood about two stories tall and looked like walking rose gardens. However, their petals had sharklike fangs, and repulsive tongues sprouted from their heads. The pair couldn’t help but shudder at the horrific army of gleeful plant monsters that now surrounded them.

“I wonder if they’re strong,” Arshay muttered.

The disgusting flora turned to the Demon Lord with repulsive delight; the sheer sight was sickening.

“When one considers they spawned from crystallized energy, they can’t be weak,” Misty replied. “But perhaps their numbers are more troublesome than their power.”

“I can see that,” Arshay said. “But why are they all looking at me? I don’t get it.”

“Hmm, ah, I might have an idea.” Misty clapped her hands together. “I was summoned by Ein, but you weren’t. Maybe that’s the deciding factor.”

“I-I don’t get it! Is that why they’re so hostile towards me?! They don’t have to treat a small girl like me with such animosity!”

She took a step forward.

“Arshay!” Misty called.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll handle this myself,” Arshay replied.

She paid Misty’s warning no head and quietly walked ahead, exuding an overwhelming pressure as she approached the rose monsters. Her long, silver hair fluttered about as though a gust of wind had hit her. The Demon Lord slowly outstretched both arms, her gaze fixated on the World Tree of Gluttony.

“Those that are awake shall all fall asleep. There are no exceptions,” Arshay murmured. A peculiar sound rang out in the air as the ground at her feet started to crack and spread to the nearby homes, which quickly crumbled away. “So…”

Even Misty fell to her knees, struggling for air. The Elder Lich could only purse her lips and watch on through her blurry vision while Arshay continued her attack. This was the very Demon Lord who had ruled the land and gone berserk five centuries ago. In fact, she was so terrifying that her name had been forever etched in the annals of history as the Great War’s instigator. Her power hadn’t waned just yet, and she exhibited a might that struck terror

into anyone who had laid eyes upon her, exactly as she had done all those centuries ago.

“This is just a dream,” Arshay said. “It’s a little scary, but a dream nonetheless.”

A sonorous orchestra of curious laughter filled the air. It neither belonged to Arshay nor the rose monsters, but laughter from men and women of all ages echoed throughout the city, creating a cacophony of sound that ravaged the ears of those who heard it. Once the laughter had latched onto an unfortunate victim, it refused to release them from its grasp.

Anyone who heard the laughter would fall to the ground. The houses that remained standing were instantly reduced to dust, and the rose monsters’ petals were swept away. The creatures seized up and writhed on the ground in agony for a few moments before they never moved again. It all happened so quickly. In a flash, Arshay’s voice had sent everything around her into a deep slumber. The Demon Lord’s awesome display of power was nothing short of shocking.

“See? They’re all asleep,” Arshay said in her usual languid manner.

The dignified visage that she’d shown moments before had dissipated as she clenched her fists victoriously.

“Don’t look at me with that smug attitude! That was dangerous!” Misty shouted.

“E-Eep!” Arshay cried.

Beads of sweat appeared on the Elder Lich’s brow as she watched from afar. She went down on one knee and leaned heavily on her staff for support. The pressure was simply overwhelming.

“D-Don’t get mad…” Arshay said. “I did my best, you know.”

The little girl looked visibly dejected, and Misty could only hang her head in exasperation. The Demon Lord was in a class of her own. Despite Arshay’s easygoing attitude, she was indeed powerful enough to exert her will over the entire capital. She would be a capable and reliable ally in this battle.

“We’ll pick this up when we get home,” Misty said.

Arshay looked relieved. “Whew. So you won’t be angry with—”

“I’ll scold you once we’ve cleared things up with Ein.”

“Ugh…”

It was time for a counterattack. With renewed vigor, Misty

gazed at the World Tree of Gluttony, but quickly noticed a metamorphosis taking place. A good distance away from the pair, more fruit fell to the ground while several thick roots and vines emerged from the dirt. Clearly, the tree now viewed Misty as an enemy as well. The two ladies were certain; the real battle was about to begin.

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While Arshay and Misty fought for their lives within what remained of the city's walls, the men standing outside the main gates were doing the same. Again and again, clangs of steel rang in the air as Ramza and Marco crossed blades, but neither budged an inch. Ramza continued to have the advantage in this duel, but he still was unable to clinch a definitive victory.

He sliced through Marco repeatedly, but the Living Armor's copious cuts and wounds healed almost instantaneously. The glimmering particles that fell from the tree melted into Marco's body, restoring his metallic visage to peak form. Ramza's countless slashes proved futile.

For the umpteenth time, Ramza saw the Living Armor's wounds heal and muttered, "Looks like you're not gonna run outta mana."

"Oh? The same could be said for you as well, Captain," Marco replied.

"Unfortunately, that's not the case for me and Misty. As for Arshay, she's been reincarnated."

"Hmm... I expected this outcome."

Without a face to look at, it was quite difficult to surmise Marco's current expression, but his tone of voice made it clear that he was rather satisfied.

"If I wanted to end this, I'd need to attack you with an ultimate something-or-other that I don't have enough mana to use," Ramza said. "Not to mention that it probably still wouldn't be enough to beat you in prime form."

"That's because you're going easy on me, Captain," Marco replied.

"No need to be humble. If I'm gone, you'll be second to none with a sword."

"It's truly an honor to hear that from you. Goodness me, I do

feel a touch of guilt when it comes to Sir Ein. He's not only summoned me while using a colossal amount of magical energy, but he's seen fit to protect me from your countless strikes."

As Marco prattled on, Ramza scratched his head.

"You've got a really roundabout way of expressing your loyalty, eh, Marco?" he said.

"I've done no such thing. I told you from the start, didn't I?" Marco replied. His body began to glow as he gripped his sword and rushed ahead. "I wish nothing more than to ensure the happiness of my master, Sir Ein!"

He unleashed an almighty swing that he would've never been able to use before. It was all thanks to the enormous amount of magical energy that he'd received from Ein.

"What an unreasonable power!" Ramza said. "You've surpassed your limits long ago, and yet, you don't seem to be negatively affected by it at all!"

"What a curious thing to say, Captain," Marco replied. "I find that *your* power is far more unreasonable!"

As the terrifying battle continued, the barren wasteland surrounding the pair was continuously gouged into by the swinging of their blades. And still, the two men didn't let up. Under normal circumstances, they would've used all of their magical energy long ago, but Marco used every ounce of power he had in his body to continue fighting. Ramza, on the other hand, still seemed to be holding back. There was something of a power gap between the two men, and no amount of magical energy could change that.

"Huff... Huff..." Marco panted.

"You're tough," Ramza remarked.

Clouds of dust danced in the air, revealing that the ground and their pair's surroundings had been utterly decimated. Neither party could launch the deciding strike in this duel, causing the deadlock to linger. While Marco's wounds healed up quickly, his fatigue continued to mount. This wasn't a matter of mana, but of pure stamina.

"I find myself overwhelmed by an indescribable emotion," Ramza said. "My opponent stands before me in shambles, but I can't land the final blow. I've never felt anything like this before."

Only Marco showed signs of fatigue—Ramza was still going

strong.

“I can only say that I’m impressed, Captain,” Marco said. “I’ve become painfully aware of the gulf in power between us.”

“What a coincidence. I’m also painfully aware of my lack of power,” Ramza replied.

Gradually, ever so slightly, Marco received less and less magical energy. His mana well had started to dry up, and his stance had changed from the one he had several minutes ago. As the fearsome duel waged on, the difference became clearer still. No longer did Marco’s wounds heal instantly, and the cuts on his armor began to slowly increase.

“Haven’t you done enough?” Ramza called, noticing this change. The Living Armor remained silent as the Dullahan continued, “I know what you’re planning.”

“I wondered what you were planning to say, but do you really expect me to retreat?” Marco replied. “Unfortunately…” He plunged his sword into the ground, in a sign of surrender. “Perhaps I simply was not enough. I’ve received far too much power from Sir Ein. When one looks at the battle behind us, it’s easy to see that he’s been giving me more than my fair share of magical energy.”

Ramza sighed. “I thought that that was the case.”

“I’ve played my role. I leave the rest to the three of you.”

“I had a feeling you were up to something, but I never thought you’d actually use our clash to drain Ein’s power as much as possible.”

“I believe I’ve clearly stated my intentions to prevent any misunderstandings. I only wish for Sir Ein’s happiness, and nothing more.”

“I hear this a lot myself, but you don’t explain yourself enough.”

“You have my deepest apologies. I shall commit that to memory.”

Neither had the will to fight. Ramza walked into the city as a clump of roots started shooting their way out of Roundheart and through the wasteland.

“I shall join you later,” Marco said. He turned his back to the Dullahan and raised his sword once more.

“It sees you as an enemy as well now,” Ramza remarked.

“But I was able to drain it of far more mana than I expected.”

Ein—the World Tree of Gluttony—was a mass of power. And so, Marco had chosen his preferred plan of attack. Before the tree saw him as an enemy, Marco had done everything he could to sap away Ein's mana.

"I'll be waiting for you inside," Ramza said. "Clear up this area in a flash and join me."

"Yes, sir!" Marco replied. "Your order has been received!"

They only had a bit farther to go. Ramza stepped into the royal capital as he slapped his cheeks and steeled his resolve.

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"Arshay, did you notice that?" Misty said.

"Notice what?" the Demon Lord asked.

As the pair spoke, they skillfully dodged an onslaught of roots and vines that came from all directions.

"Our opponent seems to have calmed down," Misty observed.

"I-I can't tell! I'm too busy fighting back," Arshay replied.

"Come on. Just take a good look."

Just then, the vines and roots around them had all been sliced into little pieces.

"She's right," the Dullahan chimed in. "This is our greatest opportunity yet."

"Dear! What happened with Marco?!" Misty inquired.

"I'll explain later! Just know that he's on our side!"

Arshay was elated to hear the news from Ramza. She had assumed that Marco had abandoned her, and breathed a sigh of relief. As she calmed down, Ramza was quick to snap her back to her senses.

"We're really at our limit here!" he roared. "If we don't hurry, we won't be able to stop him!"

Misty launched a volley of spells, Ramza swung his blade, and Arshay continued to lull her enemies into a slumber. With the Dullahan joining the fray, the battlefield had stabilized. The trio grew tired, but the World Tree of Gluttony was running on fumes as well.

"I get that we're forcing Ein into a dormant state, but then what?!" Ramza asked.

"We'll think about it when we get there!" Misty replied. "We

must focus on sending Ein to sleep, then we'll be able to handle him from there!"

"Got it! Simple enough! I'm not against that at all!"

As the three began to fight back with gusto, a new horde of rose monsters emerged before them, laughing and giggling eerily. The multiplying creatures were hell-bent on protecting the World Tree, and bared their fangs at the intruders.

"Outta my way!" Ramza roared.

He was most suited to fight against them. With a single swing of his sword, the creatures were shredded into ribbons.

"Keep it up, you two!" Misty shouted. "I'll work on Ein's roots and force him to take a nap!"

"What if we go all out and kill him?!" Arshay asked.

"Even if we did, we can't kill him anymore! He's way too tough! Don't worry about that!"

Upon hearing those words, Ramza leaped ahead to aim for the trunk.

"Dear!"

"Brother!"

The ladies called out to the Dullahan, but he paid them no heed.

"Remember this well, Ein," he said. "*This* is the might of the man who taught you the way of the sword."

Every time he swung his jet-black greatsword, the air was sliced in twain. It was almost as if the space between each slice wavered, like it had some sort of magnetic force.

"Raaaaah!" Ramza shouted.

The air surrounding Ramza's blade was dragged along as he swung at the World Tree, creating a powerful gust of wind in the process. It was a squall so powerful that it caused the ocean to crash against Port Roundheart and towards the capital. His strike was bleaker than the dark of night, blotting out the light as it crawled towards the World Tree of Gluttony.

"Gh... Gyaaaaah!"

An earsplitting shriek pierced the air, its howling so loud that the three were tempted to cover their ears. As the World Tree cried out in pain, a deep gash ran along its trunk, proof of the attack's success. But their joy lasted for only a second as everyone shuddered at the thing that emerged from the gash.

“That’s the calamity given form once the World Tree of Gluttony reaches maturity,” Misty explained.

“Yeah,” Ramza nodded. “It’s enough to destroy this continent in an instant! He would’ve become an absurdly terrifying Demon Lord!”

Several large eyeballs peeked from the gash, their gazes darting around grotesquely. A dark, viscous liquid surrounded them before it started leaking from the wound, as though the tree were crying.

Arshay had locked eyes with the abhorrent entity for only a moment, and she still couldn’t stop shuddering. She gritted her teeth in response to the fear that gripped her entire body.

“I’m scared. But…” She knew that she couldn’t let this slide and chose to look within herself to renew her strength. “You can’t come out. You can’t! Just—” Arshay paused as she outstretched her arms, using all her strength to unleash a torrent of magic at the World Tree.

“Stop already!”

Arshay’s attack was much mightier than the blast she’d fired off upon arriving in Heim. Her mana, thick with magical energy, shone brightly as it whizzed through the air. Like a spear, the mana plunged into the trunk, and for a few moments, silence settled upon the city. The Demon Lord’s attack exploded within the tree, damaging its innards.

“Misty!” Ramza shouted. He continued to hack away at the vines as he encouraged his wife to take advantage of this priceless opportunity.

The Elder Lich swiftly raised her staff in the air, and turned it on its side in front of her. “I’ll seal it up, tree and all!”

Her spells displayed a level of dominance unlike any other. The ground beneath her staff started crystallizing and spreading, freezing the roots dead in their tracks—as if they’d fallen into a deep slumber. The rose creatures stopped in their tracks, unable to fight back. The wave of crystallization reached the World Tree’s roots, swiftly transmogrifying its trunk from wood into beautifully glistening crystal. However, the crystallization slowed to a crawl as it tried to work its way up; the polished earth began to crack, and the tree started to shake. It was then that Misty knew her attempt to seal it had failed.

“Is this still not enough?!” she cried.

“Let’s try again!” Ramza shouted. “I’ll create an opening somehow! I know the three of us can do it!”

Unfortunately, the Elder Lich was unable to perform consecutive castings of the spell. She needed time to recharge her mana before she could cast it again, and a vision of failure flashed across her mind—was it all for naught?

“Make that four,” a voice called. A loyal knight in shining armor appeared before his captain.

“You made me worry so much, Marco,” Arshay said, unable to help herself. “We need to talk later.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Lord Arshay. I shall speak with you once this is all over, so I beg for your leniency at this moment.”

However, Marco’s appearance didn’t automatically improve their situation—no, the battlefield soon transformed as well.

The sky shuddered, and Arshay’s purple-tinted magical energy started to waver around the World Tree. The earth began to split, and from the fissures emanated warm breath. The vines that emerged were thicker than the width of Kingsland’s main street, and exponentially longer than a Sea Dragon. Each of the tendrils’ many thorns were larger than a warship, and had a gaping maw at the tip—just like the rose monsters. These darker-than-black roots started popping out one after the other until they had completely surrounded the quartet.

“Looks like the tree’s ready to end this as well,” Ramza observed. A bead of cold sweat ran down his neck.

The fight had gone on for too long, and the tree had matured even more in the meantime. The new vines looked intimidating, enveloped in magic straight from the World Tree. Even Ramza, who’d had the advantage against these vines, and swashbuckling Marco struggled to slice through these woody tendrils.

“Graaaaah!” Ramza shouted as he swung his greatsword.

Despite his best efforts, he was unable to completely sever the vine, with only drops of jade blood trickling out from its wound. The Dullahan was taken aback by the vine’s robust nature. As he peered into the center of the gash, he spotted something he’d never seen before.

“How can you even call this a plant?!” he roared. “I’ve never heard of one with bones in it!”

The vines were actually massive spinal columns with bony and rugged cores. Ordinary bones would've been a breeze to deal with, but these enhanced appendages had erupted from the World Tree itself. Hacking through these vines was no longer a trivial task for Ramza.

"Captain!" Marco shouted as he swung at a vine heading towards the Dullahan.

"Thanks!" Ramza replied.

But of course, the tree wasn't going to attack with just one vine. Just as the vine was being sliced and diced, even more emerged to take its place. Each vine zoomed out of the ground and through the air, ready to attack its enemies from any direction. The quartet had never faced such an insurmountable force before, nor did they have somewhere to flee.

"Each of these vines is stronger than any sea snake," Ramza grunted.

"'Sea snake'? Do you mean to speak of the Sea Dragons?" Marco asked. "If so, I wish I hadn't learned that."

In Ishtarica, Sea Dragons were seen as walking calamities—national disasters that struck once every two hundred years or so. These monsters would emerge from their slumber and rip the coastline to shreds, taking many innocent lives in the process. Unanimously known as "the King of the Ocean," these beasts knew no equal. And yet, these vines had been deemed to be even stronger than this royalty.

"This couldn't be any worse..." Misty muttered as she turned to face Port Roundheart.

"What's wrong?" Ramza asked.

"Ishtarica will be hit by the shock waves of these attacks if we do not hurry!"

"What?! Our hands are full as it is! Damn it!"

"Very well! Lady Misty, please leave the front line to us!" Marco shouted.

"He's right. You just focus on casting your spells!" Ramza added.

The Dullahan sliced through a flower that had opened its jaws wide for a hearty bite. As the flower fell to the ground, it wilted away while emitting thick miasma that made Ramza and Misty furrow their brows. But at the same time, he'd discovered a weak point.

“Aim for the face!” Ramza ordered.

“Right! That seems to be the easiest way to beat them!” Marco replied.

Aiming for the face was way faster than trying to cut through the vines’ sturdy bones. Like most other creatures, the head served as a vital structure. With that in mind, the knight could make short work of the vines. They dodged, parried oncoming attacks, and shoved the tips of their blades right into the flowers’ boney maws.

“Guess things won’t go that easily…” Ramza muttered.

A few more fruits dropped from the World Tree’s branches and exploded directly above the knights. A blinding light show filled the air and ripped through the duo’s armor.

“Gah…” Ramza grunted. “I didn’t expect the tree to evolve this rapidly. Misty’s spell will no longer…”

“This is tough…” Marco admitted. “It’s completely different from how it was just a few minutes ago!”

“You guys!” Misty worriedly called out. She tried to reach for them but was abruptly stopped.

“Stand back!” Ramza ordered. “This is a job for the front line!”

“But…”

“Keep building your mana! I’ve got another job for you!”

“Other than building my mana back up?”

“Right! You’ve probably noticed, haven’t you? Even if you use that spell again, it won’t work against such an empowered foe!”

“Then…”

“Just stand back! We’ll prepare the stage, so don’t waste the time you’ve been given.”

Their back-and-forth ended up wasting some of that valuable time. After some hemming and hawing, Ramza’s firm tone had finally convinced Misty to make a hasty retreat.

“Arshay, stay by Misty’s side!” Ramza ordered. “If she falls, we’ll have no path to victory! Don’t leave her!”

“Okay!” Arshay replied.

Only Ramza and Marco stayed on the front line, gritting their teeth through the pain as they carefully hunted for the opportunity to mount a counterattack. The shafts of light bearing down upon them soon became too many to count, and while the pair could slice through any vine, the onslaught was simply

overwhelming. As cuts appeared all over the warriors' bodies, they could no longer ignore the pain and their movements gradually dulled. Marco could sense that he was reaching his limit, and as his last act, rushed forward to defend Ramza.

"Captain!" he shouted.

Even in this situation, you still choose to protect me, Ramza thought. His heart grew warm, but at the same time, he was frustrated with himself.

"You never change, do you?" Ramza muttered.

"I never will!" Marco declared. "For Ishtarica's royal family, I will always—"

"No, I know that your loyalty will never waver. I'm talking about how pathetic *I* am..."

Like Marco, Ramza had been turned into a pin cushion with a litany of serious injuries and blood gushing from his wounds. And yet, the hand that gripped the Living Armor's shoulder was anything but feeble, a display of Ramza's strength like never before as he forced his subordinate to stand back. Of course he was in pain. But above all, Ramza was most pained by his own shortcomings.

"Marco, I'm certain that you must have regrets about yourself. During *that* war, you were unable to protect our home," Ramza muttered. But he'd also rued his past, just as much as the Living Armor did. "I have no right to be shielded by you. I forced my own son to murder my sister."

Not once did Ramza want to be protected either.

"Gaze upon me, the King of Swords, second to none with a blade."

The Dullahan spoke nothing but the truth. This chant gave him the strength to stand proud and unleash all of his power.

"Gaze upon me, who shall never permit such a creature to stand before my boot."

Despite the millions of lights wildly shooting through the air, the shafts of light surrounding Ramza suddenly scattered and dissipated. In a display of great power, he raised his sword to the heavens and a tempest started swirling around him.

"Marco," Ramza murmured.

"Y-Yessir!" Marco replied.

"You've only seen the most wretched side of myself. You're right

to mock me as a man who was unable to protect his family. I've done nothing but bark orders at you, and met my end long before you did. I've been a truly incompetent commander, and any insult you hurl at me shall be warranted."

Marco could never bring himself to make such remarks, even if he'd be lying through his teeth. The knight gazed at Ramza, only further convinced that he was right to follow his command.

"And because of my pitiful shortcomings, I have no right to be protected. I put my life on the line to save this kid from his ensnarement." Ramza turned back. "You're probably wondering why a guy like me is speaking with such grandiose words."

The faintest of smiles appeared on his face, attesting to his humanity despite the despair he found himself up against. Merely gazing upon him filled one with a sense of relief and renewed their confidence. The piercing shafts of light were a second away from striking his body when the expression on his face suddenly changed. Before the Living Armor stood the King of Swords, his gloriously intimidating aura blinding those who laid eyes upon him. He quickly faced forward to grasp his trusty weapon.

"Don't underestimate me, World Tree of Gluttony," Ramza growled.

As the King of Swords and Ishtarica's founder, he saw this to be a matter of pride. Wielding the sharp wind that surrounded his blade, he swung downward and unleashed his attack. The crack that ran along the ground suddenly grew deeper, and the dark clouds that hung over the city instantly dispersed. The powerful gust reached the tree itself, slicing its branches, leaves, and even its robust vines to bits. All fell victim to the King of Swords's mighty strike.

"Gah…" Ramza grunted.

Even the shafts of lights had all disappeared, but Ramza had used so much energy that he needed to lean on his greatsword to remain standing. However, his actions had transformed the battlefield in an instant.

"That was splendid," Marco said.

"I've no need for flattery," Ramza muttered.

"I'm not flattering you. When you swing your sword with that much finesse, I've no choice but to be convinced that I was correct to follow you all along."

This time around, Ramza accepted his knight's assistance. As Marco lent him a shoulder, the Dullahan turned to face his subordinate and grinned.

"I'm certain that the World Tree of Gluttony has used up quite a bit of its power," Marco said.

The tree's vines started wiggling about once again, but it had been visibly weakened. Clearly, Ramza's attack had left a lasting mark.

"Misty, I'll cut it short because we don't have time," Ramza said.

Misty couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen her husband so exhausted. He hadn't been this tired during the war, and he had been more energetic even in his skeleton days. The Dullahan, that stubborn fool, had the tendency to believe that there was beauty in hiding any and all weakness. The epitome of masculinity, Ramza always carried himself with an air of strength, and he wasn't one to needlessly engage in pointless conversation.

"An aria," Ramza said. "If he's gonna go all out, we must do the same, or we won't be able to fight back."

Misty gasped as her expression changed.

"I know what the drawbacks are," the Dullahan continued. "I know that you'll be defenseless during that time, and once you've fired your spell, you'll become a frail little girl."

"Are you sure?" Misty asked. "I'll be completely useless afterward."

"I'll say it again. The World Tree of Gluttony is going all out without much forethought. If we hold back in fear of what the future could bring, we'd only lose. At this point, we've got little choice but to rely on the legendary Elder Lich."

Misty nodded. "I won't be mad that you called me a 'frail little girl.' It made me a little happy to think that you still viewed me in such a light." After she joked a little, she flashed a melancholic smile. "I'll do my best to hasten my preparations, but I'll need a little more time."

"Take all the time you need. I'll buy plenty for you," Ramza replied, putting on a tough face before he turned to his trusty subordinate. "You heard us, Marco. Can you still fight?"

"You needn't even ask. As long as my body can still move, I shall fight by your side, captain."

"Well, aren't you reliable?"

The Dullahan rummaged through his pockets and took out a pair of magic stones. He bit through the first one like he was munching on a ripple and absorbed its magical energy as he handed the other to Marco. The Living Armor used the tip of his blade to shatter the stone and absorbed the magical energy that flowed out.

"All right, one final push," Ramza said. "You ready?"

"Of course! Your wish is my command!" Marco replied.

The two knights rushed forward as Misty began to chant her aria.

"The draconic scythe that rules power."

The concept of an aria was nothing new. It'd existed for many centuries, ever since the birth of magic itself. The chanter had to name their aria and make a declaration to accompany it. The words that flowed out of the chanter's mouth were laced with magic, transforming this spell into the physical manifestation of one's magical power. It was very much a magic meant for use in battle.

"It's the story I heard long ago, when I was still a skeleton," Ramza murmured.

Of course, magic could still be used alongside an aria. In recent years, the ancient art had become less popular and scarcely seen. However, this didn't mean that arias had lost their effectiveness or meaning.

"I heard that before Misty became an Elder Lich, she had a teacher who was like a mother to her," Ramza said.

By chanting an aria, one could wield power that was far above their means. Naturally, this relied heavily on the user's raw potential as all magic did, but arias depleted an immense amount of magical energy and in exchange, allowed the user to soar past their limits.

"I gaze upon the sun that exists within my dreams, and count the sins which lie in the corpses of my kin."

This wasn't really the way that arias were meant to be used. They generally served to confirm the casting of a spell along with acting as a way to calm one's heart before they unleashed their magical energy. Still, the fact that arias strengthened one's abilities was no secret.

"I heard that she learned countless spells and mastered them

all, barring one. Misty claimed that even after a millennium, she was still unable to use that one spell," Ramza said.

And yet, many shied away from using arias simply due to the amount of time they took to prepare. No one had the leeway to leisurely ramble off a long chant when faced with a monster, and even if they could, it didn't automatically boost their magical power. Furthermore, there weren't many situations that forced one to use a spell that was well above their punching weight—only when they were in a situation of life and death did that opportunity arrive, but it was likely *after* they'd blown through all their mana, rendering any desperate attempt practically useless. In any case, the use of arias was extremely limited.

The two knights continued to hack away at the roots and vines that assaulted them, desperate to protect the chanting Elder Lich.

"I hadn't heard that until now," Marco remarked. "I'd never thought that there was a spell Lady Misty *couldn't* use."

"I doubted my ears when I first heard it too," Ramza replied. "In fact, it's equally shocking to learn that there was someone who *taught* Misty magic. So protect her! That's our only role here!"

Slowly, slowly, the seconds ticked by. They were able to protect her, but time was going by way too slowly. Even ten seconds seemed far away, and buying more than that felt like an impossible feat. The knights were tempted to give up, but they refused to turn back and placed their trust in Misty.

"This body, layered by fragments of shattered mirrors, requests wisdom from the Goddess of Time."

She raised her staff to the heavens, and the two knights were convinced that the aria would soon be completed.

"Shall my prayers be heard..."

Her staff transformed into a scythe enveloped in blinding light; it resembled a beautiful jewel made entirely from crystal.

"For I have sinned. I beg that the day that I atone for my crimes shall never come."

There was a flash of light that resembled diamond dust. The attack danced through the air and raced across the ground, silencing the atmosphere around it. The dirt surrounding the trio began to crystallize as she ended her aria. Misty swung down her scythe, and it pierced through the earth before her attack turned into light and disappeared.



The Elder Lich panted, barely able to remain standing, and soon she learned that her attack wasn't enough. The World Tree of Gluttony was evolving by the second, and while her spell had left a deep gash in the tree, it continued to pulsate ominously. Liquid black as the darkest void leaked from its wound and sullied the ground, melting away the crystallized dirt beneath it. However, the remnants of Misty's spell fought back. The spilled black liquid began to slowly crystallize and was pushed back, but the melted crystals started spewing miasma in a bid to attack the trio. Only Arshay remained unfazed. The ground, soaked with the black fluid, gave birth to void vines that squirmed as if to taunt the quartet.

"I'll fight too," Arshay said as she stepped in front of her comrades.

She condensed a wave of indigo magical energy in the palm of her hand, and the clump wavered as it slowly morphed into a tiny crystal ball. It shook the surrounding air and the ground below it. Misty and Ramza quickly realized what the Nightmare of Envy was doing—she was converting her life force into magical energy.

"I won't forgive you if you risk your life on this attack," Misty warned.

"Yeah, you'll get a bonk on your head," Ramza added.

Arshay turned around and flashed a carefree smile. "Heh, you guys shouldn't be talking. You two declared that you'd stake your lives to stop that child, but I'm not allowed to do the same? Don't worry. I'll probably fall asleep, but I'll wake up later." She paused before she added, "And if I wanted him to fall into a deep slumber, I'm the best suited to that role. I can cause nightmares, after all."

The indigo clump floated away from Arshay's hand. It flew towards the tree, following a slow, gentle trajectory as though carried away by the breeze. Serenely, the orb floated in front of the tree, and at once, a creepy fit of laughter reverberated through the city.

The crystals began to crack and an eyeball peeked through the split trunk. Beads of sweat appeared on Arshay's brow, but she didn't avert her gaze from the tree.

"If you think you can endure it, I dare you to," she said, declaring her authority as the Nightmare of Envy.

"Heh... Eh heh heh heh heh!" The creepy laughter continued to echo in the air.

“Good night, World Tree of Gluttony.”

The indigo light scattered and brought forth a destructive tempest. Not long after that, the light spun itself into a spiral that pierced the heavens. This mighty display of the Demon Lord’s power lasted for several moments. However, Arshay suddenly lost consciousness, putting an abrupt end to her light show. Ramza managed to catch her before she fell to the ground.

“I’m so proud of you, my baby sister,” he whispered kindly.

He gently lowered her to the ground and glanced at Marco before turning to the tree. The Living Armor was astonished by the sight in front of him.

“The World Tree of Gluttony… It commands such astounding might,” the awestruck knight murmured, praying that this monolithic enemy would finally admit defeat. Just then…

“Wh-What?! What just happened?” Ramza asked.

The tree shook violently as though something had just clocked it right behind the head. The black liquid stopped flowing from its trunk, and the void vines started wilting.

“I-It can’t be! Did Sir Ein’s will perhaps…” Marco started.

“You might be right!” Ramza roared. “Misty, this is our last shot!”

“I know!” the Elder Lich shouted back.

Right before the aria sapped the last of her mana, Misty mustered every ounce of power left in a bid to push back the World Tree. The melted crystal rehardened before climbing up the rest of the trunk. Then in a flash, the tree had completely crystallized and Misty fell to her knees.

“I think…that we’ve sealed it up,” she said.

The royal capital’s surroundings had been completely transformed into an isolated plot of land—now untouchable by the ravages of time and space. Every tectonic fissure, root, and robust vine had been sentenced to a crystalline death. Heim had become a land of crystal.

The eerie clouds and crystalline stars no longer loomed over the city, giving way to the slowly emerging sun off in the distance. A new dawn was about to break over this long and hard-fought battle.

“It seems that you and Arshay were able to amaze me with your greatest spells,” Ramza said.

“Darling…” Misty murmured.

“Your hand, my lady. You’ve done well.”

He was far more exhausted than his beloved, and yet, his manly smile led her to smile back as she took his hand.

“Are you sure you couldn’t have used that spell to stop Arshay back in the day?” he asked.

“Maybe, if I had been able to use it then,” Misty replied.

“True. It would’ve been nigh impossible to buy you enough time to prepare it.” He turned to his knight. “Are you holding up all right, Marco?”

“Yessir. I feel so pathetic for being protected in this situation,” the Living Armor replied.

“Don’t be silly. I’m the strongest knight, and there’s nothing wrong with a little protection from the strongest.”

“If you’ll pardon my insolence, I’m your subject.”

“Hmph, I don’t care much for those sorts of things.”

There was a touch of sternness in Ramza’s voice as he tried to hide his embarrassment. He turned his gaze to the World Tree of Gluttony before helping his wife to her feet, and the pair exchanged a chuckle. Even within the vast Kingdom of Heim, the tree stood out like a colossal piece of glass decor or a frozen tree that had succumbed to the ravages of a harsh tundra.

“What’s happening to it?” Ramza asked.

“Time has stopped for everything around us,” Misty replied.

“What?”

“The tree is neither dead nor is it asleep. As I said, time has simply stopped for it.”

“But then is Ein…”

“Don’t worry. I’ve thought of a few ways to save him.”

“I see. Which means…”

They had won. In fact, this may have been the best-case scenario. Ramza couldn’t put his elation over their victory into words, but it had gripped his body. With his strength leaving him, Ramza could only let out a sigh of relief.

“I’d like to take a short break,” Ramza said.

“Me too,” Misty replied. “How does a decade-long rest sound?”

“I’d love that, but I’m afraid we can’t do that just yet,” Marco added.

“I know, I know,” the Elder Lich said. “We’re just going to take a small, short break. Just to rest up.”

With Arshay still fast asleep, the trio fell to the ground as well. Their limbs splayed out in every direction as they gazed up at the sky, its hues gradually taking an azure appearance.

Chapter Three: The Consort’s Sapphire Pearl

While the war raged on in Heim, Lloyd had just returned to Kingsland aboard the *Leviathan*. Upon entering White Knight Castle’s audience room, the marshal shared news of the trio’s arrival in Roundheart. As Krone and the others listened on, they were suddenly jostled by a loud rumbling that shook the castle. While everyone else furrowed their brows, Lloyd, who’d been kneeling this whole time, stood up and gazed out of a nearby window.

“Your Majesty, it seems that battle is continuing to drag out,” he said.

Out in the distance and across the ocean stood what remained of Heim. Even in the dead of night, the kingdom’s gloomy skies were unmistakable. In fact, the glistening tree Lloyd had seen from the *Leviathan*’s deck could also be seen from White Night.

“Lloyd, head to the port at once and take command,” Silverd ordered.

“Right away, sire!” Lloyd replied.

“Have the *Leviathan* and the other royal vessels be ready to spring into action. We aren’t sure what’ll happen, and we must be ready to fire back.”

The marshal hastily left the audience room with a stern expression on his face. He’d just returned to file a report, but with a possible battle on the horizon, he had no choice but to head back to work.

“I can’t do a single thing… I’ve never felt so impatient and powerless before.” Silverd grumbled.

At this, everyone nodded.

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Ramza had said that a single vine from the World Tree could outclass the power of a single Sea Dragon. Just minutes after he said that, the tree’s roots reached Kingsland. Krone left the

audience room to see this threat for herself in the safety of her office. From her window, Krone had noticed the royal vessels, resolute symbols of Ishtarica's cutting-edge technology, all gathered in a single display of their astonishing might. But despite their best efforts, the vessels were still being pushed back—a disheartening sight to behold.

"Ein..." Krone murmured.

Only the tree's roots proved to be a worthy threat. They'd sprouted alongside the World Tree itself, and sought out any and all sources of the nutrients they craved. The roots had thickened considerably by the time Arshay had done away with them. They were so sturdy, they could even stand up to a direct hit from a warship's cannon. Luckily, the roots weren't about to sink their opponents, but it was only a matter of time.

Krone smacked her cheeks and rushed out of her office. "I need to take a closer look!"

Krone swiftly passed by the swarm of knights and servants frantically prowling the grounds as she made her way to a balcony at the back of the castle. She reached her destination in a matter of minutes, but discovered a small battalion of Knights Guard members defending the door. With this in mind, Krone presumed that Silverd was on the other side.

"Lady Krone, it's far too dangerous for you to be outside," one of the knights said.

"I know," Krone replied. "Will you kindly share His Majesty's location with me then?"

"I suppose we cannot hide anything from you."

"But of course. His Majesty and I are worried sick, the same as you."

Without another word, the knight allowed her to pass. If the roots had breached the castle's walls, she'd be in danger no matter where she went. It wasn't as if heading outside would've kept her safe either. If fleeing was a real option, she would've done it as soon as Lloyd was ordered to port. But above all else, the knight noticed the determined look in Krone's eyes and knew that there was no stopping her.

"Ah, so you came," the king said as Krone stepped through the door.

He didn't even need to turn around to know it was her. It was

rather late, but the tree's glow illuminated the fleet out at sea, providing a clear view of the proceedings.

"It's in times like this that I'd love to hear what my catnapping dunce of a daughter would have to say," Silverd grumbled.

Krone chuckled. "Indeed. Princess Katima would've been a reliable ally in this situation, Your Majesty."

"Quite right. I must begin thinking of a way to scold her, that dolt... In any case, you could've left if you wished to, Krone."

"If you will pardon my insolence, I believe that you should've fled first, Your Majesty. Do you not agree?"

Silverd grumbled, unable to argue against her logic. "No matter the case, the outcome shall remain the same. Should those tree roots make it past the warships and reach the castle, I'll be in the same situation regardless of my location."

"Precisely. Even if you had fled as soon as you could, nothing would have changed."

As Krone stepped behind the king, he noticed an air of dignity about her. With the starry sky's light twinkling in her eyes, Krone stared at the shore—her determination clear for all to see. Her appearance could be compared to that of a divine painting's subject.

"Had I been able to offer any sort of assistance, I would've crossed the sea with Lady Misty and the others," Krone murmured.

"I feel the same," Silverd replied.

"Hee hee. Your Majesty, *I* may be allowed to go, but surely, you must stay behind."

"Perhaps so... Personally, I'm reluctant to let you go as well, Krone."

"I think I shall be fine." Krone smiled confidently. "Without Ein around, I'm not of much value to this nation."

"Don't be ridiculous. Your loss would deal a heavy blow to Ishtarica! You're irreplaceable."

"I'm truly honored to receive such high praise, Your Majesty. However, I don't wish to be in a world without Ein—it's simply unimaginable."

Krone's stern disposition was still apparent as she apologetically tilted her head, but her fingers trembled ever so slightly while wrapped around the balcony's railing. She was frustrated at being so powerless, and even though it had crossed

her mind for only a moment, the idea of a world without Ein had struck fear in her heart.

The king replied in the gentlest tone that he could muster. “Then we must bring Ein home as soon as possible.”

All the while, the tree’s roots grew longer still; Ishtarica’s armada was its pride and joy, but even they couldn’t fend off the roots fast enough.

“Lord Arshay mustn’t have lost,” Silverd muttered.

“I agree,” Krone nodded. “Had she admitted defeat, the roots would have swallowed Ishtarica whole by now.”

This revelation implied that the legendary trio were in the midst of an extremely tough battle with defeat right around the corner. If this foe could hold its own against the combined might of the reawakened Demon Lord, the King of Swords, and the Elder Lich, it only served to prove just how powerless Krone and Silverd would be in this fight.

Suddenly, the waves beyond the balcony started to wildly crash.

“We must head back inside,” Silverd said.

He’d mentioned the idea of remaining in place, but the king knew they couldn’t remain out in the open. His tone was firm, but Krone refused to budge. But just when he reached out to yank her inside, the pair suddenly recoiled from the railing.

“Wh-What in the?!” the king gasped.

“Your Majesty!” Krone cried.

“Make haste! Head inside, and stay away from here!”

In a shocking turn of events, a clump of roots had emerged from the ocean and smashed the balcony’s railing. The pair attempted to flee, but even more roots barred their path forward. A series of vines sprouted from the roots, giving birth to a blooming rose that stood taller than any man. A ferocious, yawning maw resided in the center of this flower, saliva oozing from its fangs.

“The both of you must flee now! Please, I beg you!” a Knights Guard member cried.

“Hurry, please!” said another.

“Leave this area to us!” a third shouted.

In the moments that followed, more and more knights flooded onto the balcony with their swords drawn. However, the simple flick of a root rendered their attacks powerless. Even so, the

knights refused to surrender and tried jumping to their feet in order to save Krone and Silverd, but they were quickly restrained by the vines. Bound by even more vines, Krone was hoisted into the air while Silverd was pinned against the floor.

Krone gritted her teeth, but not a single tear rolled down her cheek. She faced down and closed her eyes as though in prayer.

“Stop! Don’t you dare lay a hand on her!” Silverd roared.

Giving it his all, the king struggled to bring himself to his feet and save the young lady, but it was all to no avail. The mighty vines refused to budge. The floral maw slowly encroached upon Krone while gleefully cackling.

“Heh heh… Ha ha ha!”

“Graaah!” Silverd groaned as he gave one more push.

“Hee hee… Heh heh heh heh!”

But just as the flower was about to devour Krone, a blinding light erupted from her chest pocket.

“What the?!” Silverd shouted.

“I-It’s coming from Lady Krone!” one of the knights yelled.

The roots and the flowers flinched in the light’s presence. To Krone’s shock, she was able to move freely again and she reached into her pocket.

“My lucky charm…” she murmured.

She took out a leather bag—the very one that she’d received from Misty as a good luck charm. When Krone gripped the bag with both hands, a blinding, blue light leaked out from the opening. The roots and flowers recoiled, freeing Silverd and the knights. They swiftly rose to protect her, but they were still up against the World Tree. Krone was isolated from her allies and no sword swing would reach her.

Just then, something flew in from the open door. There was a gentle tap as the vines and roots were pierced through.

“I’m so glad that I made it in time,” someone said coolly. It was the voice of a familiar woman.

Why is she here? Krone wondered. But she received no answer as she was freed from her restraints and fell to the floor. The lady swiftly rushed to Krone’s side to support her body.

“L-Lady…Sierra?” Krone murmured.

Indeed, there before her was Chris’s childhood friend—an elf with shorter, silver hair.

“Wh-Why are you here in the royal capital?” Krone exclaimed.

“I’ve arrived under my chief’s orders,” Sierra replied. “I came here with the belief that our ancient elven knowledge could assist you... It seems that I was right to head this way.”

“Thank you for coming!” Silverd said. “Sierra, please bring Krone over here!”

“Please be at ease, Your Majesty,” Sierra replied. “You’ve no need to worry anymore.”

She held several silver knives covered in ornate etchings—some of them had already pierced the vines and roots that had attacked Krone and Silverd.



“These blades carry an ancient curse,” Sierra explained. “One filled with a holy magic quite effective against those with evil aims.”

The roots that had tried to assault the group lay lifelessly on the half-destroyed balcony, now nothing more than a pile of ordinary plants.

“I see… Especially after witnessing you save us with that power of yours.” Silverd said, expressing gratitude to Sierra.

“Not exactly, Your Majesty,” the elf replied.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“While I’m not completely sure of it just yet, I suspect that the item in Lady Krone’s hand saved you.”

“This…item?” Krone asked as she held up her hand.

“Precisely,” Sierra nodded. “But it’s best if we move elsewhere before I explain myself further.”

Krone borrowed Sierra’s hand to stand up. The young lady had twisted her ankle and an intense pain shot through her body, but the splitting headache that followed drowned out any other pain she felt.

“Ouch…” Krone winced.

She just managed to stand up, but she almost buried her head in her hands due to the sheer torture. She could barely make out Sierra’s and Silverd’s worried voices; they were so faint, as if they were out in the distance.

“Lady Krone!”

“What’s wrong, Krone! Can you answer me?”

Instead, a different voice entered Krone’s head to relieve her of her agonizing headache.

***

When Krone came to, she was curiously no longer on the balcony. She noticed a few changes in the decor, but she found herself in what appeared to be a corner of Silverd’s room. She tried to move, but quickly realized that she couldn’t move her legs or turn her head to look around. Barely managing to maintain her composure, Krone noticed a man and a woman nearby.

The man sat up in bed as the woman noticed that he’d regained consciousness.

“I feel sluggish from sleeping for so long,” the man said. “Could I go outside and swing my blade around, just a little?”

“If you want my permission, you better speak to the citizens next month,” the woman replied.

For a moment, Krone thought that the man’s voice belonged to Ein, and that the woman’s tone was hers. She was shocked by the stark similarities in their voices; however, the bed’s canopy obscured the couple’s faces.

“Next month? Next month, huh…” the man muttered.

“Good grief!” the woman cried. “Why are you hesitating?”

“Sorry. It’s just that…I don’t think I can last a month.”

There was a tone of resignation in the man’s voice as he petted the woman’s head. She, in turn, buried her face in his chest as tears rolled down her cheeks. Her body trembled as she wept.

“Is there…nothing we can do?” she asked.

“Nothing at all,” he replied.

“It’s because I—we—let you fight all by yourself!”

“No. I believe I am simply the one who was supposed to fight.”

She raised her tear-filled face. “Is there anything you’d like to do?”

He thought for a moment before he smiled. “I’d like to spend my last days in my hometown.”

She said not a word and nodded.

***

“Lady Krone!” Sierra shouted.

“Huh? What just…” Krone muttered.

When the young advisor came to, she found herself lying in one of the castle’s many bedrooms, without a vine to be seen. A worried Sierra sat at Krone’s bedside and helped her sit up. Krone looked out a nearby window and spotted the warships still out at sea, but she noticed the water’s surface had returned to its natural calm and tranquil state.

“I’m truly glad to see that you’re safe,” Silverd said as he rushed to stand by her side, looking visibly relieved. “You gave me quite the scare.”

“Quite right. I’m so glad,” Sierra added.

“What have I…” Krone trailed off.

“You’ve been unconscious for about an hour,” Silverd replied.

“I’m terribly so— W-Wait! The leather bag! Would you know where it is?” She called out after noticing her good luck charm was gone.

Sierra quickly pointed to the bedside table.

“It’s right here, Lady Krone,” Sierra said kindly.

The bag sat atop a wooden tray, and when Krone reached out, she clutched the bag tightly. Silverd and Sierra exchanged a glance.

“Pardon me, but I looked inside the bag,” Sierra said.

“I don’t mind,” Krone replied. “I received this from Lady Mist—I mean, a very special someone. However, I have no idea whom that magic stone belongs to.”

“Lady Misty? You mean…”

Krone realized that Sierra probably didn’t know about the Elder Lich and rephrased her wording. However, she soon realized that her display of consideration was completely unnecessary.

“She’s the person I told you about,” Silverd said. “Lady Misty, the Elder Lich, is the first king’s mother.”

This implied that he’d filled Sierra in on the details of Ein’s rampage as well.

“Are you sure about telling her that?” Krone asked.

“I had to,” Silverd replied. “Because the good luck charm you’ve got in your hands is actually—”

“If you don’t mind, can I take over from here, Your Majesty?” Sierra inquired. She grabbed a round chair and sat beside the bed. “The stone within that bag has been in Syth Mill since ancient times. And considering that it had been kept in the chief’s quarters, only she and myself should’ve been aware of its existence.”

“This stone must be very precious then…” Krone murmured.

“I believe so. But to tell you the truth, I’m not sure whose magic stone it is either. The chief said that she’d tell me the truth when the time came for me to succeed her.”

“Then why did Lady Misty have it?”

“Indeed. That puzzled me.”

“I was confused as well,” Silverd added. “I can’t possibly imagine Lady Misty as a thief, and it’s impossible for the chief to have lost such a valuable and precious stone.”

“And so, His Majesty and I have reached a conclusion,” Sierra said confidently. “The chief must’ve given it to the crown prince without informing me.”

It was then that Krone recalled her last interaction with Misty. The Elder Lich had handed Krone the bag and said, *“Here’s a new good luck charm for you. I was in Ein’s room before I came here and—Whoops. Forget what I said.”*

If the chief had really given the stone to Ein, and Misty had taken it from his room, it all made sense.

“And it’s that very stone that stopped His Highness’s rampage,” Sierra said.

Krone had assumed as much. When the elf had arrived to offer her aid, she’d mentioned that Krone’s lucky charm had fended off the roots and vines for a short amount of time.

“Putting aside any petty grievances I have with the chief for keeping me out of the loop, it seems that the stone can keep His Highness from running wild,” Sierra explained. But she soon spoke of her suspicions. “However, that stone had been kept wrapped in a special silk woven with magical energy from our holy grounds. Without the cloth’s protection, anyone who touches it would have their body eaten away—it possesses a very special power. And yet, Lady Krone, you seem completely fine touching it. That’s very peculiar to me.”

“Perhaps it’s because this leather bag was made by Lady Misty,” Krone reasoned.

Sierra shook her head. “That leather bag is a normal bag, and nothing more. It’s well tanned, but that’s all.”

“What?”

“Neither Sierra nor I could handle the bag,” Silverd explained. “In fact, merely touching it made us feel sick.”

“It’s true,” Sierra said. “I had a few of our warriors and some of your Ishtarican knights touch the bag, but not one of them could safely move it.”

“Indeed. We only managed to carry it here thanks to one of Majorica’s special magical tools. However, the implement quickly hit its limit and broke down.”

And yet, Krone had managed to store such a potent item in her chest pocket. She clutched the bag with both hands, but her present company could hardly stomach it. They looked at Krone

suspiciously as she held the stone without succumbing to any adverse effects. It led Krone to reach a certain conclusion.

Sierra said that I could suppress Ein's rampage, Krone thought. *And it seems only that I can use this power. Maybe there* is *something that I can do for Ein.* The feeling that filled her heart was impossibly minuscule and feeble, but it was there—hope. Her heart pounded with excitement.

Chapter Four: Old Memories and the Raven-haired Demon Lord

Ein frantically rushed through the burning remains of the former royal capital, searching for an opportunity to help in any way he could. But he was soon brought to his knees by a sudden, head-splitting migraine.

“Gah… Agh…” he groaned.

He writhed around on the ground, holding his head in his hands as he screamed in agonizing pain. The prince assumed that the legendary trio had fallen, but the pain quickly disappeared with an unsettling swiftness. Ein remained on high alert as his surroundings suddenly shifted to a room not dissimilar from his grandfather’s own. The only real differences were a few rugs and one or two pieces of furniture.

Baffled, Ein surveyed the room to discover a man sitting up in bed. The crown prince tried to approach him, but found himself unable to move. Ein was only allowed to watch from a distance as a bystander.

“I’d like to spend my last days in my hometown,” the man said. His voice sounded strikingly similar to Ein’s.

The canopy on the bed obscured the man’s face. Next, Ein saw a woman seated next to him; the pair had been engaged in a conversation.

“But there’s something I must do first,” the man said.

“Are you going to fight again?” the woman inquired.

“No. There’s something that I must leave behind.” He stood up and headed to a window in the depths of the room. “Please allow me to leave this castle for roughly one fortnight.”

“What a cruel thing to say. You just said that you won’t even last a month, and here you are, stealing away half of the time I have left with you.”

“Are you mad?”

“I won’t be, if you promise to stay with me until I die.”

“Ah… Then I suppose I must show my obedience and endure your scolding.”

There was a jokey tone to her voice, but she remained seated as her body trembled. Whenever she sighed, one could hear her sobbing.

“Please forgive me. I’m doing this for our child,” the man said.

“You’re so unfair…Jayle,” she said.

This woman was known as Consort Laviola von Ishtarica.

***

The scene faded to black and shifted once more. Ein found himself in a familiar forest, lush with greenery. *Isn’t this the road to Syth Mill?* Ein wondered. When he glanced around, he noticed a vital difference—he was now able to walk around. His newfound joy soon turned to vigilance at the sound of crunching leaves and twigs behind him. He whirled around, ready to fight.

“I’m almost there,” Jayle said as he emerged a few paces behind Ein.

The first king was short of breath as he walked along, using his dignified blade as a walking stick for support. He walked by Ein without taking even a moment even to address his presence, but the prince quietly followed him. From behind the sun tree and its bushels of sparkling fruit, a squad of elven warriors emerged to fend off any intruders.

“Halt!” one of the warriors called out.

“We won’t allow a single person to enter our forest—” said another before they recognized the first king.

“I’m sorry for surprising you,” Jayle said. “Is the child here?”

The elves quickly changed their tune.

“Right this way!” one said. “Our chief is at the back of the village!”

Jayle borrowed one of the warrior’s shoulders and walked deeper inside. After a while, he reached the village and the elven homes. There weren’t as many homes as Ein had seen during his visit, and the architecture appeared to be much more rudimentary than what he was accustomed to. However, the chief’s large stump of a manor had remained unchanged. It was all so familiar to Ein as he entered the manor alongside Jayle.

“Your Majesty?!” the chief gasped as she looked up in astonishment. “Why are you here?”

The chief looked much younger—in her twenties at the oldest.

“I’m sorry for my sudden visit,” Jayle apologized. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay here for about ten days.”

With the war over, the king was supposed to be in the royal capital. The chief was completely puzzled, but gazed at the ground when she noticed Jayle’s condition. Elves were astute when it came to picking up the subtle differences in humans, and the chief was especially so. A single glance was all she needed to notice Jayle’s state, and she trembled, just like Laviola had. The chief couldn’t possibly look up as she gestured for Jayle to come farther into the manor. The first king respectfully declined and pointed behind her abode.

“I’m not asking you to let me stay here,” he said. “I have something that I must do, so I’ll head over there.”

“I shall go with you,” the chief offered.

“I’ll be fine. I think I can make do by myself.”

“But I cannot possibly leave you alone in your current state!”

“I know my body best. Don’t worry. I can still go on for a bit longer.”

“Please don’t say that! There may still be a way to save you!”

Jayle flashed an awkward smile and fell silent. The elven chief made a series of desperate pleas, looking as if she’d burst into tears at any moment. But she stayed strong and turned her face to the ground. Jayle gently patted her head a few times before he turned around.

“I haven’t been exercising much lately, so this’ll be the perfect opportunity to get some,” he said.

“The war has ended,” the chief opined. “I believe that being just a little out of shape is just fine... And where exactly are your attendants, Your Majesty?”

“I came here in secret, so I left the royal capital by myself.”

“How could you do such a thing?!”

“My impending death must be kept a secret until the very last moment. Or else, our fragile nation will have gone from one uproar to another.”

The chief let out a pained gasp at the mention of death, leading Jayle to immediately regret his phrasing.

“I’ll be off,” he said apologetically. “I’ll be back when the sun sets.”

“Please take care of yourself,” the chief begged him.

“I will. Thank you.”

And so, Jayle set off alone, just as he’d arrived. He walked to the back of the manor. The path was relatively smooth when compared to the rest of the forest, and a faint smile stretched across his face. After a short while, he stood in front of the wall that divided the holy grounds from the rest of the world. He slowly stepped inside, through the invisible wall that denied those who had no right to enter. Jayle had made it himself, and Ein followed behind the king. As usual, the holy grounds were devoid of color.

After they trekked through the swirling mist that permeated their surroundings, the pair spotted the sacred jade stone—a massive boulder that had been split in two. At the top was a shrine. *It looks so new,* Ein thought. He’d heard from the chief that the shrine had been built before the Great War, when Syth Mill was under threat by hordes of prowling monsters. As many had been terrorized by these creatures, Jayle and the chief built a shrine to fend them off.

“Whew, this is tough,” Jayle said.

He fell to the ground, his limbs splayed out in all directions. But Jayle wasn’t lying in a random pile of dirt; he rested right in front of the bridge leading to the sacred jade stone. He closed his eyes to listen to the waterfall, hoping that the sounds would soothe his tired body from the long journey to the village. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t be able to rest.

“Hey! You’re sleeping here!”

“You weirdo!”

A surprised Ein turned towards the voices and noticed two orbs of light floating around Jayle.

“Long time no see,” Jayle said.

“Mhm!”

“Why are you here? Are you bored, just like my older sister?”

“I’ve got something to do,” Jayle answered.

“Huh. You’re busy, but you’re sleeping? What a weirdo!”

“But you look tired! Maybe we can give you a bit more energy!”

No doubt about it. Those are tree spirits. Ein had also met them before, and the spirits were playfully conversing with the first king. The spirits fluttered their wings, and a sparkling powder fell upon Jayle. This act seemed to gradually restore his lost stamina. *W-Wait,*

they were friends?!

Ein was so dumbfounded by Jayle's friendship with the tree spirits that he'd failed to fully comprehend the powder's astonishing qualities. All the while, the trio continued to converse.

"Can you give me more of that powder?" Jayle asked.

"Nope!"

"That's all we've got. We can give you more later!"

"Oh, that'll be a big help," Jayle replied. "All right then. Would you like to come with me?"

The tree spirit sisters nodded. The first king stood up and the spritely pair playfully flew around him as they crossed the bridge. A shocked Ein swiftly followed.

When the trio made it to the top of the jade stone and the shrine's entrance, Jayle made no attempt to solve the riddle that Ein and Chris once had. The first king simply needed to stand before the door and it gave way. When he stepped inside, it was the very shrine that Ein had once entered.

"Heya!" a tree spirit said. "Why do you have all these pictures on the walls?"

"I thought it'd be sad to have nothing at all," Jayle answered. "Since there are heroes slumbering beneath us, I thought it'd be nice to spruce up the place with some beautiful Ishtarican scenery."

"I see... You're so nice!"

After walking down the staircase and past many paintings, the trio made it to the shine's bottom floor. This was precisely where Ein and Chris had struggled to unlock the next door, but it was nothing to Jayle. It was only natural, for he was the creator of the place.

In a flash, he walked through the door and into the heart of the shrines. With only one door remaining, Jayle and the tree spirits traversed the skies on their way to the mausoleum.

"You can see all of Ishtarica from here," Jayle said. "It's an artificial view of course, but I still think it's wonderful."

"It's beautiful!"

"Awesome! We're so, so, *so* high up!"

I should go too, Ein thought. He didn't know why he was being shown all of this, but he was curious as to what Jayle was about to do. But try as he might, Ein couldn't step forward. A hand on his

shoulder had stopped him from moving at all.

"Satisfied?" said a man who stood behind the crown prince. Ein had last encountered the man when the former royal capital had gone up in flames. He'd retreated when the legendary trio first arrived.

"Do I look like I'm satisfied?" Ein replied.

"No, not at all."

"And why did you show me all this?"

"I didn't. You gazed into his memories of your own accord."

"Why are you here to stop me?"

"Plans changed. I can no longer fight outside."

"Huh, so you lost to everyone?"

"Unfortunately, yes... They've all pinned me down. Considering that I'm still a newborn, it's been tough for me to handle them all at once. Good grief. If you united with me, we could've ended it in a flash."

"Well, sucks to be you. I'm not planning on doing that." Ein said as he arched his eyebrows in defiance.

The man stared at the crown prince. "But as I said, plans changed."

"Are you here to forcibly rip my consciousness from me?"

"That's right. I can't wait for much longer."

"Huh... I'm baffled as to why you haven't done it sooner."

"I'd naturally considered it, but now that you've got something of a powerful hold over your consciousness... Things have become unfortunately difficult to control. It's now imperative that we unite as soon as possible. I'm rather tired, and I don't exactly have much leeway to worry about other people anymore." The man was in the doldrums. "What a pity."

The hand gripping Ein's shoulder tightened, preventing him from fighting back. Without any control over his body, the prince was thrown off the path and flew into the Ishtarican skies below.

"I absolutely *detest* those who dare point their blades at me," the man said. "I'm quite saddened by this all. I wanted you to die by my own hand, but I haven't recovered enough of my strength to fight you just yet."

With that, the man vanished. The strong breeze that brushed against Ein's cheeks served as a cold reminder that he was falling faster and faster. His body would eventually hit the ocean or the

ground. Regardless, a fall from this height would leave him in extreme pain. He knew that he was sturdier than most, but not once had he considered falling from such a high place. He thought of using his skills to break the fall, but…

"Nothing's working," Ein muttered.

From his Phantom Hands to Thick Fog, none of his powers would activate. All he could do was sprout roots, and he almost let out a giggle in light of this horrible situation.

"Well, I guess he's taken most of my power already!"

Ein braced himself for the impending fatal impact about to ravage his body. However, he was suddenly hit with a much softer blow than he'd anticipated. Before the shock could settle in, Ein realized he was surrounded by ice-cold seawater and that he had a salty mouthful of it too. He swiftly rose to the water's surface in hopes of getting some air.

"Bwah!"

He spat out the seawater and looked around—he'd fallen a short distance away from Kingsland's port. He also noticed that Kingsland was no longer the royal capital of legend, but the one he'd grown up in. *What now?*

Despite his best efforts to remain vigilant, Ein felt a sharp sting in the back of his eyes when his gaze found the royal capital. He knew that it was no time to cry before the scenery of his beloved home, but that was a tall order to fulfill. When he whirled around, he spluttered in astonishment.

"The *Leviathan*?!"

Several moments later, he'd managed to swim next to the vessel. In fact, the boat was so close to him, he could hardly believe it. As he hadn't seen it on the way down, Ein wondered if the *Leviathan* had always been beside him. *Now's not the time to be lost in thought.* While approaching the boat, Ein summoned a root that allowed him to climb onto it.

Huh, why can I still summon roots? When one considered that the prince had been born with the ability instead of absorbing it, perhaps a different set of rules was at play. With that in mind, it would make sense if his innate abilities remained.

"I should hurry."

He urged his body to keep moving forward, taking great strides across the ship crafted from Sea Dragon scales. Once he passed

the deck, Ein climbed atop a streamlined roof. It was only then that he took a moment to sit down and wring the seawater out of his clothes. As his clothing lost its extra water weight, Ein noticed that the jet-black sword was still firmly fastened to his waist.

Out of breath, he gazed up at the skies and noticed that the clouds hadn't moved an inch. Jayle had mentioned that it was all artificially made; however, the realization that this also applied to the clouds saddened the crown prince.

It's so quiet. If that man's words were to be believed, he would surely come to kill Ein. If so, it was foolish to simply wait here for him. Just then, time finally ticked forward for the world around Ein. There was a deafening splash as the ocean in the distance wavered, and bubbles arose from two spots. The serene ocean soon transformed.

Ein unsheathed his black blade and braced himself as he strained his eyes to peer beneath the water's surface. Whirlpools began to form and the currents were all awry, dominating an area of the ocean. *It can't be...* Ein's chest pounded with dread as a creature bulged from beneath the water and broke through the surface, splashing water everywhere.

"GRAAAAH!"

The King of the Ocean's mighty howl made the sky waver, and Ein could even feel it vibrate against his cheek. What's more, two of them appeared at once. The second one appeared right beside the first, and glared at Ein who was atop the *Leviathan*.

"I absolutely detest *those who point their blades at me. I'm so sad. I'd wanted to end you with my own hands, but I haven't recovered enough where I can fight against you."*

I see now. He's gonna try to kill me using my powers... The ones that he stole. But...

"Did you think that I'd give up here?" Ein asked.

If he'd found himself in an even more precarious position without a power to his name, Ein would've admitted defeat. However, the prince knew that his innate powers were still at his disposal. If he could still summon his roots, he was certain that his Toxin Decomposition EX skill remained intact.

"RAAAAAH!"

The two dragons rushed through the water and headed straight for Ein. *Don't worry. I have nothing to fear. I just need to fight*

like the last time, when I went to save Chris. That's all. As he braced himself for the dragon's impact, the resolute prince faced his enemies head-on. But suddenly, a wispy, white wind glided across the sea's surface.

"I had a feeling this would happen after Sea Dragons appeared."

His breath grew white from the sheer cold, and the ground quaked and rumbled. With air growing even colder, Ein had already braced himself for the worst. The ocean's surface began to freeze over as a creature leaped out from the royal capital, creating a shadow over the *Leviathan*. The King of the Tundra's roar reached his ears.

"GIIIAAAHHH!"

The monster in the air raised its massive arm high above, and the Upaskamuy let gravity do the rest. It stomped towards the *Leviathan*, and the Sea Dragons easily broke the ice as their snapping jaws headed straight for Ein.

Chapter Five: A Role Only She Can Play

It was early in the evening, a bit too late for lunch, but a bit too early to enjoy dinner. Despite her sudden visit, Krone was welcomed warmly by a smiling Olivia. The princess started with an apology for allowing Krone to tag along with Katima to the Tower of Wisdom, but the young advisor shook her head.

“I went because I wanted to,” Krone insisted. “It wasn’t under your orders, Princess Olivia.”

“But I wasn’t able to help one bit,” Olivia replied. “All I did was work my mouth, and I left everything else up to you.”

“That’s not true. In fact, we were able to take action thanks to your efforts, Your Highness. There’s no need for you to apologize.”

The two knew that they’d never agree on this matter and chose to end the conversation. While changing topics, Krone shifted her attention to the sofa Olivia was sitting upon.

“May I take a seat next to you?” Krone asked.

“Of course,” Olivia replied. This puzzled the princess; Krone would usually sit across from her, but this time, the young lady had chosen to sit beside her.

“Your Highness…”

Suddenly, Krone hugged the princess with all her might. Not once had the advisor done this before, but Olivia was neither stunned nor surprised. She placed a hand around Krone’s back and drew the young lady close.



“It’s the first time you’ve ever been so childish in my presence,” Olivia remarked.

“I’m sorry,” Krone apologized. “But could we stay like this for just a little while longer? That’s all I ask.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. We can be here for as long as you wish, Krone. I shall be by your side as long as you desire it.” Olivia’s tone was serene and gentle, her floral scent soothing Krone’s mind.

“When we met at that social gathering all those years ago, I would’ve never thought that I’d be allowed to become so closely acquainted with you.”

“Ever since then, you have been nothing but the most splendid young lady. I still remember how you were a touch nervous that day.”

“Oh dear, please don’t remind me. Back then, I truly believed that I was able to act perfectly, I’ll have you know.”

“Hee hee. You were so very adorable.”

As the two reminisced about the past, Krone was convinced. She didn’t want to let this peace slip out of her hands either.

“I’ve always wanted to act spoiled with you, Princess Olivia,” Krone murmured.

“My, oh my,” Olivia replied. “You can act spoiled with me whenever you wish. You may continue to visit my room whenever you wish.”

“Thank you. That makes me so happy to hear,” Krone replied.

Her voice grew smaller for she knew that there were no guarantees about her future. Would she be able to indulge in this luxury ever again? She once again strongly felt that she never wanted to release this palace of tranquility from her grasp and she muttered under her breath.

“I just…absolutely don’t want to lose you,” she whispered.

“Pardon? Did you say something?” Olivia asked.

“Ah, I just said that I should be careful so that I wouldn’t act spoiled every day.”

Had Krone stayed a few seconds longer, she feared that she’d never be able to let the princess go. And so, the advisor lied as she drew back from Olivia.

“Are you satisfied already?” Olivia asked.

“Not at all,” Krone replied. “But if I stay any longer, I won’t be able to leave your side, so I must control myself.”

“Oh, don’t say that. If you keep saying such adorable things, I’ll be tempted to grow my roots and tie you down so that you’ll never be able to leave.”

“Hee hee. Then I’d be spoiled to no end.” Krone elegantly curtsied. “Unfortunately, I must return to work. Thank you so much for allowing me to spend time with you despite my sudden visit.”

“I don’t mind at all. You may come back anytime you wish.”

The two ladies smiled at each other, and Krone left the room. Once the advisor left and stepped into the corridor, she frowned. She cupped the leather bag in her pocket and faced the ground.

“Even more color has left her face,” she murmured.

Even though the princess had put on a brave face, she was clearly paler than before. Krone hadn’t said a word of it, but she also noticed that Olivia’s body was becoming cool to the touch. The young advisor didn’t need it spelled out for her; she knew that it was because Olivia was unconsciously connected with Ein in some way. In other words, things hadn’t rounded the corner just yet.

“No…” Krone murmured.

She hugged herself and trembled faintly—they were headed for the worst-case scenario, just as she’d imagined. Then suddenly, Martha spotted the young lady and hastily approached her.

“Lady Krone!” Martha cried. “I’ve been told that we’ve just received word back from Heim!”

Krone steadied her breathing and slapped her cheeks, hoping to switch gears. Having heard that Silverd was also making his way to the audience room, she swiftly left to join him.

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Silverd, Lalalua, and Krone gathered in the audience room, having been told that Lloyd had received a report from Misty. According to the marshal, a glowing bird had flown onto the deck of the *Leviathan*, and spoke using Misty’s voice before it vanished into thin air.

“Thanks to the trio’s efforts, Sir Ein’s rampage has been stopped!” Lloyd reported. “According to Lady Misty, he currently lies dormant.”

“Then has Ein been saved?!” Silverd said joyfully as he stood up.

Both relieved, Lalalua and Krone hugged each other.

“Of course, Your Majesty!” Lloyd replied. However, he had some grim news to deliver as well. “But… We have no idea how to wake him. It seems that Lady Misty is looking for the right way to rouse him as we speak. In the meantime, the trio shall keep watch over Heim.”

“Very well,” the king replied. “But what of Ein’s will? Has Lady Misty mentioned anything in regards to that?”

“I’ve been told that Sir Ein must be fighting a battle within his own heart, all by himself, sire.”

Silverd furrowed his brows and approached the marshal. “So what you’re saying is that it’s a clash of wills between Ein and the Demon Lord’s essence, or something of the sort?”

Lloyd nodded. “That’s what I believe, Your Majesty.”

“Is there anything that we can do?”

“Lady Misty has only told us to sit back and wait. I’ve been told that Sir Marco joined the fray, and even then, they were backed into a corner and almost lost.”

“I-I don’t believe it… Has Ein’s power simply undergone a colossal growth spurt?”

“That’s what it seems, Your Majesty. If even the likes of Lord Arshay has struggled against such a foe, I believe it would be a display of insolence to even suggest that we could help in battle. Sir Ein has become just that powerful.”

Silverd placed a hand over his eyes and fell silent; even Lalalua was at a loss for words. It seemed all hope was lost, except for one young lady in the room.

“If I may say a word or two?” she asked with determination. After receiving a nod of approval from the marshal, she went on, “Sir Lloyd, you’ve made no mention of Ein’s chances of returning to his normal self. By chance, does that mean that Lady Misty has made no promises either?”

“Nothing gets past you,” the marshal said.

The king gasped, but Krone remained calm—seemingly unfazed by the situation. She knew the answer to her question, but it still stung her in the heart.

“Sir Lloyd, please share your thoughts with me,” Krone pleaded. “Is there a chance that Ein could awaken and resume his rampage?

And should that happen, must we end him once and for all? What is your take on the situation?”

The marshal wasn’t keen on answering the young lady’s questions, even though he easily could. Misty’s report had put every card on the table, and he frankly wished never to speak of it.

“Lloyd, His Majesty and I are curious as well,” Lalalua said.

And so, the marshal had no choice but to say *something*. “Should we fail to find a suitable way in which to wake Sir Ein, or should he lose to the Demon Lord, we may never stand a chance of truly ending his rampage.”

He struggled to continue on. Combined with what he said earlier, if there was a chance that Ein would go berserk again, it was clear what they had to do. No one dared to say it, and they refused to acknowledge the truth, but Krone broke the silence.

“If a rampage threatens the world, then the tree must be cut down beforehand.”

It was only then that Lloyd refused to say another word. He didn’t want to deny reality with a lie, but he couldn’t speak the truth either. He feared losing not only Ein, but the loss of another precious and priceless life important to him—Olivia.

The princess had taken root in Ein. The crown prince’s death would guarantee her death alongside him. Everyone was aware of this fact, turning the room gloomier still.

“Then I must be by his side,” Krone said firmly.

She didn’t want to lose both Ein and Olivia, and adamantly insisted on saving the both of them. The young advisor was undaunted and undeterred as she turned to the king.

“Your Majesty, those four risked their lives and finally managed to stop Ein. Should he awaken once more, he would’ve evolved further, and I can’t imagine them stopping him then,” Krone said, justifying why Ein would need to be defeated. “In fact, it might already be too late if we act after Ein shows signs of losing control again. To save this world, we must either take Ein’s life or save him before any of that can happen.”

“And what do you expect me to do?” Silverd replied. His tone was unusually gruff as though he’d forsaken all hope.

“I’ll fight until the very end.”

She didn’t mention what she’d do or how she’d fight, but as the king fell silent as he stared at her visage.

“My beloved has done the same. No matter what unreasonable situation he was forced into, he never gave up hope and valiantly faced them all. But I cannot be like him,” Krone said. Her face, however, remained determined, dignified, and proud. Elegance was all around her as she continued, “The only thing I can do is fight and struggle. With everything at my disposal, I’ll bet it all on a chance to simply hear his voice again.”

Silence permeated the room as Krone’s words filled their minds. A myriad of emotions welled up within the others, from admiration to pain to courage. But above all, a sense of helplessness gripped their hearts. The king was most struck by her passionate words.

“I didn’t think I’d still be learning new things at this age,” he mumbled while turning to his wife. “Any small detail is fine. I’ll gather all the information that I can from the researchers. I shall ask Sierra to contact the chief as well.”

He walked out as Lalalua hastily stood up and chased after him. “Y-Your Majesty! Dear! Please calm down! Argh! Good grief! Lloyd, could you please gather the reports for me and send them to me later? I’ll chase after him!”

Just after the king and queen made their swift exit, Lloyd stood up in awe and turned to face the little lady. He slumped his shoulders slightly, but he’d also been motivated by her words, just as Silverd had.

“I can’t lose to those two,” Lloyd said. “I must quickly go through the reports and find anything that’ll allow me to take action. Has anything happened while I was away? How’s the castle?” Aware of the recent damage to the castle, the marshal wondered if there was anything he could do on his end. “I hope it wasn’t anything serious.”

“Oh, there’s something I must tell you,” Krone replied. She hadn’t mentioned it earlier, but Katima had taken Dill to her lab while the marshal was away. Lloyd had received no word of this incident. “I suggest that you head for Princess Katima’s underground laboratory. I think it’s best that you’d see things for yourself instead of hearing it from me.”

“Hmm? I’m quite confused, but very well.”

Krone wasn’t one to leave out any details, causing Lloyd to quizzically tilt his head. However, he quickly turned on his heels

and left, leaving Krone behind.

***

Krone headed for Chris's room. Sierra was already there, sitting at Chris's bedside as she slept.

"Chris was always a hard worker," the elf murmured when Krone entered the room. "She always said that she wanted to be just like her big sister, Celestina, and often tagged along whenever they went into the forest. Chris only became a knight because Celes made an offhand remark about it. That was all it took."

Until then, the sisters had never been outside Syth Mill and the handful of villages that surrounded it.

"So when Celestina disappeared with the first prince, Chris closed herself off to the world for a while," Sierra explained. "I think she was lonely beyond belief. She then became a personal knight to the second princess, who was later married off. I think Chris must've felt like she had nowhere to be."

Krone knew of the existence of LeFay von Ishtarica. He was Silverd's first child—a genius who stood head and shoulders above his peers. However, he'd taken Celestina into the Dungeon of Spiriting Away, and they'd never been seen since then. The incident was still a mystery and had many unresolved questions. Ein had once heard the story from Majorica, and Krone had learned of it as a child while taking lessons with Warren.

"Thinking back, I'd still occasionally receive letters from Chris back then," Sierra said. "But it all suddenly ended one day."

"Ten years ago," Krone guessed.

"Precisely. The last letter that I'd ever received was her talking about how the second princess would return with the crown prince." The elf's smile made it clear that Chris's letter had articulated her joy quite well.

"Lady Sierra, Lady Krone, please excuse me," Martha said as she entered with a tea platter.

Krone took this opportunity to ask the maid a question. "Martha, do you recall the time when Chris still used to write letters?"

"Pardon?" the maid asked before she quickly caught on. "Ah, the ones for Lady Sierra, I presume? I recall that Dame Chris's last

letter was sent around a decade ago."

Sierra's eyes widened in shock and awe. "I-I'm surprised. A superb servant of your rank remembers such a trivial thing from so long ago."

"I don't remember every little detail, of course. I only recall because I was actually involved in drafting that letter."

As she poured a fresh pot of tea, Martha told a tale from just after Ein arrived in Ishtarica—in the days before Krone's own arrival.

***

No one could argue that things around the castle had livened up considerably in the days following Ein and Olivia's arrival. Even the servants were well aware of this fact, especially when they opened the staff room's window to discover Ein and Katima plotting almost every day in the courtyard.

"Martha! Martha!" Chris called. The knight, who'd been quiet until now, had been enjoying the hectic days that came along with royals' arrival.

"Dame Chris, this isn't where the training grounds are," the maid replied.

"I-I know that! I'm actually here with a request!"

"You seem to be in a rush." Martha turned to her subordinates. "I'll leave this place to you."

"Certainly," the subordinate replied.

The maid then took Chris to a separate room before she posed her query. "Is anything the matter, Dame Chris? I've been told that you're off from work today."

Chris fidgeted nervously and her thighs rubbed together. She was the Vice Captain of the Knights Guard back then, but she looked unusually unreliable on that day.

"I, um...forgot to write Sierra a letter," she mumbled.

"Lady Sierra... Ah, your childhood friend," Martha replied. "If you'd forgotten, why not quickly send her one? Perhaps that will help you make amends."

"Erm, w-well... Ever since Sir Ein and Princess Olivia returned, I haven't sent her a single thing."

The knight had always sent at least one letter a week—

sometimes three a week when things became hectic. The frequency of her letters might've been a bit too much for some, but Martha knew that the knight's childhood friend had become a major pillar of support for her. And so, the maid had always watched over the elf, allowing her to do as she pleased.

"Now that you mention it, you haven't sent a letter at all," Martha said. "But you were always so excited to receive letters from Lady Sierra, if memory serves. Did you two get into a fight of some sort?"

"No, we rarely fight," Chris replied. "It's just that she tends to endlessly scold me..."

"Ah, so there's a different reason for your lack of correspondence." Martha had quickly put the pieces together. "Indeed, since Princess Olivia and Sir Ein arrived at this castle, the place has been livelier than ever before."

"Ugh..."

"Good grief. I don't blame you for the satisfaction that you may feel during the busy days, but why not just say so in a letter and send it already?"

"I've rewritten my letter several times, but I just can't seem to find the right words to express myself... D-Do you think Sierra's mad at me? She's not that petty, right? I mean, it's just a few letters!"

Chris raised her head in panic, and the expressive elf was an adorable sight. Martha felt a smile creeping across her face, but sheer cuteness alone wouldn't save the elf this time around.

"I'm not sure about your friend's anger, but if I was in her shoes, I'd be quite worried," the maid said. "The letters I'd received regularly had suddenly stopped, after all."

"I can't argue with that..." Chris mumbled.

"As I've already said, if you're going to look so visibly depressed, might I recommend sending her a letter as soon as you can?"

"I know that. I know, but I just don't know what to say."

"Can't you write one as you always have?"

"I-It's embarrassing to admit, but I've completely forgotten how I used to do it!"

The elf cupped her cheeks with her hands and crouched. Martha looked down at Chris and flashed a strained smile.

"Dame Christina Wernstein, Vice Captain of the Knights Guard,"

Martha started.

“Ugh…” Chris replied.

“Ah, apologies. You also serve as the personal knight to Their Highnesses, the second princess and the crown prince, I believe.”

“Mmph!”

“Goodness… How could someone of your position fail to write a single letter? You write daily reports regarding Sir Ein and Her Highness.”

“They’re separate matters entirely!”

Perhaps drafting reports for work wasn’t exactly like writing a letter to a friend, but Chris knew her way around a pen. She surely had more than enough words in the vernacular to properly express herself.

“May I ask about the reports? Are there any issues?” Martha inquired.

“None at all! I always write them with the utmost care as though one may find them in a book!” Chris said…right before she was flicked in the forehead. “Ouch! Wh-What did you hit me for?!”

“Why not channel a bit of that energy into your letters?”

Not once had Martha ever flicked the elf before, and Chris pressed her hand against her forehead in shock. She blinked several times, but didn’t voice another complaint.

“Um… Well, Martha, I was hoping…” Chris mumbled.

“Certainly,” the maid replied. “If it’s my help you’d like, I shall offer it. It is around the time where I can relax a little.”

“Really?! Thank goodness! Now I can finally send that letter!”

“And? How many months have you neglected your friend?”

“Uh, I think around a year or so… Eek! Wh-Why did you hit me again?!”

“I’ve heard that elves view time more slowly, but I highly suggest that you reevaluate your ways next time.”

“I shall commit it to memory! P-Please help!”

Chris stood up energetically, and even Martha was tempted to smile at the elf’s cheery demeanor. And so, the knight marched towards her room. It was then that they bumped into a pair of familiar faces.

“Nya ha ha! Thank goodness Martha’s gone!”

“We just need to keep this a secret,” Ein said.

“Mrow? Ohhh, mew’ve got an evil streak, my young crown

prince.”

“We’ve made it this far. I want to enjoy it until the very end. It took so long to make the preparations up until toda…”

“Mrow? Why’d mew trail off? Mrow?! Meoooow!”

The two had turned the corner and spotted Chris, who looked adorably clumsy until now. She was still smiling, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Hey, Chris. Your eyes aren’t smiling at all,” Ein remarked.

“Mrow! And Martha’s here too!”

The two royals inched back, feigning innocence, but Chris and Martha stepped forward and continued to corner them. When they made it to a hallway where the path split off in opposite directions, the royals took their chance to make a break for it.

“Would mew look at the time! I’m busy, busy, busy!”

“I’ve gotta start my training too!”

The pair dashed in opposite directions, but they were both quickly caught by Chris and Martha. The maid grabbed the first princess by the scruff of her neck, and Chris grabbed Ein’s back and drew him close. Both the princess and the crown prince looked absolutely pathetic.

“Okay, I won’t run,” Ein said. “Can you please let me go? This position is a bit embarrassing.” He could feel her chest pressing up against his back, and the knights chuckled at him from afar.

“Oh?” Chris replied. “I wanted to carry you all through the castle.”

“Darn… Aunt Katima, I’m sorry,” Ein said.

“Wait a meownute! Don’t think about ratting meowt!”

“Chris, I’ve got the plans in my room. Could you please forgive me now?”

“Mew! Traitor! I can’t believe mew! If she sees it, she’ll find out the stuff I stole from father! Huh?! Ack! Martha! No, wait, that was a slip of the tongue! My maw just blurted out silly things, mew see!”

The exhausted Martha dragged Katima around—there was no escape in this situation. And with that, the first princess had lost any dignity she had as a royal.

“Mroooow! Please! Please! I’m begging mew!” Katima implored her.

“Save your excuses for His Majesty, if you will,” Martha replied.

As Chris and Ein watched the pair leave, the elf turned to the crown prince. “Perfect timing, then. Why don’t you spend the rest of your afternoon studying in your room, Sir Ein?”

“Okay…” Ein grumbled. “Wait, I thought you were off duty today, Chris. Why were you with Martha?”

“Ah, I needed her help to write a letter, you see.”

“Huh…” A confused Ein nodded his head.

“Dame Chris, I shall be there after dinner!” Martha called.

“Thank you! I’ll be waiting!” Chris yelled back.

“Erm, I just feel so humiliated right now,” Ein mumbled.

Chris cleared her throat and released the crown prince from her grasp. Before escorting Katima to the king, Martha caught a glance of Ein scratching his cheek in embarrassment as Chris flashed a joyful smile.

***

Martha finished her story and quietly gazed down, desperately hoping that such peaceful days would return. Krone and Sierra looked at each other and giggled.

“And what did you tell her to do?” Sierra asked.

“I believe I told her to write about her daily life and to earnestly apologize for the delay,” Martha replied.

“No wonder… I thought that letter was a bit long in comparison to her usual ones. Her letters stopped after that, but it seems like she’s not completely to blame for it.”

Sierra smiled; she once called Chris an idiot because her last letter came about a decade ago. As Sierra recalled the past, she didn’t look at all angry as she decided to let it all slide.

“Please excuse me,” Martha said.

“Thank you for sharing such a lovely story,” Sierra replied.

After the maid took her leave, Sierra and Krone were left alone to watch a slumbering Chris. Her breathing was steady and she didn’t appear to be in pain or agony—it looked like she’d wake up sometime soon.

“And I guess I can’t be angry at her this time,” Sierra said as she brushed a loose strand of hair off Chris’s face.

“Angry?” Krone asked.

“If she was simply pushing her luck, Chris would’ve been in for a

good scolding. But it seems like she had a good reason for it. As a fellow elf, I'm proud of her for risking her life and offering it all to the crown prince."

At the mention of risking one's life, Krone pressed her hands against her chest. She said not a word and turned her back to Sierra. Just as Krone was about to excuse herself and return to work, Sierra suddenly shifted topics.

"Lastly, I'd like to tell you everything that I know," Sierra said.

"What do you..." Krone started.

"That *item* you have doesn't just eat away at people simply by being near it. Those who touch it will feel as though they're being implored to release it from their hands."

And so, even without a specialized enclosure, the stone could safely sit nearby if left alone.

"Other than yourself, I've never met a soul who had been unaffected by its touch," Sierra said. Krone quietly listened as the elf continued, "In fact, I had no idea that it wielded such power. The chief once told me that the stone was the most precious item in her possession, but I'd never heard a peep of any powers contained within it."

Sierra shared everything she knew. She was repeating herself several times, but that was a trivial issue.

"I'm quite certain that only *you* can use that power, Lady Krone," Sierra said.

Krone, who'd seen herself as helpless in this situation, had finally heard from another person that perhaps she could be of use, somehow.

"I..." Krone started. She soon stopped herself. She feared that if she put her resolve into words, she'd be stopped by Sierra. "I think I'm going to take a walk. Get a breath of fresh air."

"Of course," Sierra said. "I shall be by this child's side, so please call me if there is anything you require."

Even Krone was aware that her segue was unnatural, but luckily, Sierra said not a word of it and allowed her to walk out the door.

"I pray that a dazzling future awaits in the direction you're headed," the silver-haired elf said in quiet prayer.

Krone didn't miss those words as she left.

***

Back when Krone had entered Chris's room, she had noticed a small amount of pale-blue light leaking from the leather bag's opening. She reached in to grab the stone, and discovered it shining more brilliantly than ever before. The stone then pulsated. Like a beating heart, it continued to palpitate, its pulsations gradually synchronizing with Krone's own heartbeat.

"There's a role that only I can play," Krone murmured.

During Ein's encounter with the Sea Dragon and Upaskamuy, Krone could only pray from afar and wish for his safety. Not once had she stepped onto the battlefield. She knew that she'd only be a nuisance, much less any sort of help. Obviously, she had to fight back tears, upset with herself for being so unsuited to combat. However, there was nothing she could do to change that reality. And so, she had chosen to stand at her beloved's side as his advisor.

But if she were to be cynical, the role of advisor didn't necessarily *need* to be fulfilled by her. Anyone could've taken her place; Warren, for example, was far wiser and had years of experience that she didn't have. Not to mention that Ishtarica had plenty of other extremely capable officials who could tend to the crown prince.

Yet now, finally, Krone found a role that only *she* could fulfill. Now knowing that she could put it all on the line for his sake, the young advisor had never felt a greater joy in her life.

"I don't want to live with any more regrets," Krone said.

Simultaneously, another voice with her timbre said the exact same words. Her good luck charm shook just a little, and as her mind was filled with Ein, she paid no heed to the source of this mysterious voice.

"I came here so that I could be by his side," she said.

She recalled her reason for crossing the ocean in the first place. Krone had even abandoned her home nation and parted ways with her family in order to live in the faraway land of Ishtarica. She followed her heart. Guided by her good luck charm, she left the castle and firmly walked towards her goal.

Chapter Six: The King’s Blade

Despite the dazzling sea of stars that hung over Kingsland, the cityscape was completely ignorant of the torrent of emotions within Krone’s heart. Without telling a single soul of her plans, she’d left the castle and made her way to the pier. If Krone had told anyone, she was sure that they would’ve discouraged her from what she was about to do.

After arriving at her destination, she quickly approached a few employees of the Agustos Trading Firm. Said employees were shocked by her sudden appearance.

“I have somewhere I must go. Prepare a ship and set a course for Heim, ” she ordered.

“Umm… Is this order coming from the castle?” a crew member gingerly asked.

“No, it’s coming from *me*.”

The firm’s employees were all thoroughly confused. The idea of sailing off to Heim with the boss’s granddaughter sounded like a suicide mission.

“Would you kindly inform us of exactly why you’d like to sail there?” a crew member asked.

“I’ve been entrusted with an important task,” Krone replied.

“Well, if we’re not filled in on the particulars of your task, I’m afraid we can’t set sail.”

Upon noticing Krone’s odd behavior, another employee ran off to fetch Graff from the firm’s office.

“Won’t you listen to my order?” Krone asked.

“I’m afraid we can’t. As this is an order from you and you alone, we must exercise extreme caution,” another employee replied.

“Ah, you have nothing to worry about. Aside from being the one to give you this order, I’ve made this decision for myself.”

“We still mustn’t allow you to put yourself in harm’s way, my lady. If I may have a few more moments of your time, the chairman shall be with us shortly.”

The trading firm’s office wasn’t far away from the port—only a few minutes ride on horseback, in fact. Krone intended to finalize

her decision before her grandfather arrived.

“What should I do…” she mumbled.

Krone felt as if she was wasting time, but knew that she couldn’t bend a grown man to her will. While she didn’t want to throw in the towel, she could easily see a future in which she was forced to. A lingering fear started to grip her trembling body—she couldn’t give up yet. But just then, her lucky charm began to glow as if it were offering her support.

The surrounding employees quickly moved to shield their eyes from the blinding light, but mysteriously enough, Krone was unfazed by it. Convinced that the charm had sided with her, she felt a spurt of newfound confidence welling within her. However, her assumptions were soon proven to be inaccurate when a peculiar vision unfolded before her eyes.

***

With an unchanging, artificial sky hanging overhead, Ein hadn’t the slightest idea of how long he’d been fighting. On the other hand, he was up against a trio of infamous walking calamities—Upaskamuy and the Sea Dragons. Each of these dragons had forever clawed their names into Ishtarican history. Despite Ein’s previous victories over this trio, none of them had lost an ounce of destructive might. The crown prince couldn’t say the same, as he’d been stripped of his absorbed skills. All things considered, he was lucky if he could put up a fight in the slightest. As the battle currently stood, it had become more of a one-sided affair. However, the prince had managed to hold his own quite well.

“Gah…” he grunted.

With their Ocean Current skill, the Sea Dragons had fired off numerous beams of water that were quickly frozen into sharp icicles by Upaskamuy’s frosty aura. Speaking of the King of the Tundra, one fell swoop of its mighty arm had ripped the *Leviathan* in half and almost sent Ein flying into the water. The Sea Dragons bared their fangs, glaring at him with murderous intent. He summoned his tree roots to provide footing, and dodged the duo’s assault.

“GRAAAH!”

However, Upaskamuy took the opportunity to freeze the ocean’s

surface and charge directly at Ein.

“This must be Upaskamuy from before King Jayle sent it limping away,”

In comparison to this beast’s monstrous display of speed and power, the Upaskamuy that Ein had bested came off as a pathetic husk of its former glory. The prince knew that he couldn’t dodge the attack and layered his tree roots to create a shield, but his efforts were in vain. The dragon’s arm ripped through the prince’s wall of wood as though it were shredding a piece of paper.

“Gah…” Ein grunted.

Upaskamuy’s massive fist dwarfed Ein in an instant, and the force of its blow only served to hammer home the sheer difference in size. His bones creaked and his organs cried out in pain as he flew back. Unable to soften the blow, Ein was shot into the ocean and directly before the gleeful Sea Dragons that awaited him. The sunlight that shimmered through the water reflected their white fangs, and Ein knew that he’d be eaten. With nowhere to run, he desperately racked his mind for a solution and came to only one conclusion.

“I’ll plunge my blade into them and use Absorb.”

He couldn’t see another way out—he’d take out these dragons just as he had while saving Chris. He skillfully changed direction in the air and let gravity take over.

“Fall already!”

He summoned a tree root from the ocean and clung on, pushing his aching body to the limit as he aimed for the Sea Dragon’s forehead. He plunged his black sword into the dragon’s head and activated his Absorb skill. He’d hoped that the familiar feeling of satisfaction would grip his body, but it never did. The prince found himself disappointed to realize he couldn’t replenish his lost energy.

“GRAAAH!”

His ears were pierced by the dragon’s panicked shrieking—an oddly relieving sound that let the prince know he could still do some damage. He noticed some movement in the corner of his eye and clicked his tongue with annoyance; that wasn’t the only Sea Dragon he was up against. The other dragon unleashed a blast of water that scratched the prince’s cheek and sent a sharp pain running through his body.

As something of a cruel reminder, Upaskamuy's icy aura prickled at his skin and froze his damp clothing. The prince instantly felt his body growing heavier as the cold ate away at his stamina. The black sword fell out of the Sea Dragon's forehead; the monster wasn't about to miss its chance as its eyes glimmered and it bared its fangs. Ein barely managed to avoid the attack and used his roots to regain his posture.

The Sea Dragon then whipped its tail around. Ein attempted to parry the blow with his blade, but his battered body had made him slow to react. It was only a moment too late, but that was all the monster needed. The Sea Dragon used its tail as a hammer to knock away Ein, roots and all. The crown prince was sent flying, zooming through the air like a shooting star before slamming into the stone architecture of Magna's nearly destroyed port.

"Ah... Gah..." Ein grunted.

He bounced and rolled on the ground several times, but Ein managed to plunge his sword into the pier to stop himself. The two Sea Dragons roared triumphantly, and Upaskamuy froze the ocean under its feet as it headed for land.

"What would King Jayle do?"

If the first king had been in this situation instead, what would've he done? Ein had become so laughably weak without his absorbed skills. His Demon Lord metamorphosis had provided him with more power and he'd gotten a grasp on his Dryad abilities, but all that would be meaningless if he couldn't prevail. Jayle, on the other hand, surely would've been able to win this battle. Ein was certain of that.

"Huff... Huff..."

It wasn't as though Ein *couldn't* pull off a "hero king" victory. However, the prince had a trick left up his sleeve. But realistically speaking, pulling off this trick would be akin to daydreaming while already in a dream. Fully aware of his odds, Ein flashed a wide smile. As he looked at his sword, still stuck in the pier, the prince chastised himself for having such silly thoughts.

If it's possible, I want enough power to make one last push. His will was determined and unrelenting, but his body had reached its limit, much to his dismay. He gritted his teeth and steadied his breathing as a surge of intense pain traveled from his toes to his fingertips. Just then, right in the corner of his eye, the prince

spotted a glimmering, pale-blue light.

“Ein!” a voice cried.

He could hardly believe his ears. Barely able to move his body, Ein couldn’t get a closer look at the light. However, a familiar floral scent emanated from the light, completely stealing his attention away.

***

Krone’s peculiar vision was none other than Ein’s desperate fight for his life. While she hastily rushed to his side, she realized that she couldn’t touch him. The young advisor knelt next to her beloved, but there was no sign that he’d noticed her presence. A tear rolled down her cheek as she wondered why such a cruel vision was being shown to her while she was powerless to do anything about it.

“Krone,” he said, causing her to forget her tears and lean forward. “Even before I lost consciousness, I thought…”

“Thought what?” Krone asked.

“You shouldn’t have been coy, I think.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” She blinked back blankly before she said, “Wait…”

She instantly knew what he was talking about. Ein’s calm, warm voice guided her to the only conclusion. This pier was exactly where she’d sent Ein off, and she remembered that she promised to kiss him on the lips if he returned. But she didn’t expect it to be brought up here, even if this was an auditory hallucination. Still, she smiled after hearing his silly grievance.

“I’m sorry. But…” Before Krone could finish her sentence, Ein stood up and reached for his sword as a tear rolled down her cheek. “Next time, I promise to not be coy with you.”

Krone has put on a brave face, but she was the type to easily become lonely—more than anyone else. And yet, she spoke firmly; even if Ein thought that he was imagining things, her words gave him the strength he needed.

“For the first time, I so strongly wished that you were by my side,” Ein said.

“Then I’ll come to you,” Krone replied. “I promise that I will.”

For a moment, his shoulders shook slightly—he was laughing.

Running into danger without giving a damn about the consequences was an extremely Krone thing to do. Of course, Ein didn't actually ask her to come, but he spoke warmly and confidently as he turned his back to her.

"I promise… I promise that I'll return to your side."

***

Krone's presence had vanished. The world began to serenely turn once more. More precisely, only Ein's field of vision had begun to move, but he failed to notice it. Time had started to tick and the Sea Dragons and Upaskamuy were headed straight for him.

"I'll offer everything I have to you," Ein said as he gazed down at his sword. "I don't mind if you mock me for being an empty shell of a man who can't even use my powers properly. But even so, I can't die now. Not here."

The blade wavered in response as though to imply that such resolve wasn't enough.

"I'm well aware that I'm lacking as your master."

The blade wavered in response as though to imply that he was exactly correct.

"But I…" Ein paused for a moment and noticed that the blade stopped wavering—it was listening intently for what the crown prince would say next. "I'll surpass *him*."

Ein had made an oath to transcend the very hero who'd firmly engraved his name into Ishtarican history. Ever since he was a child, the crown prince had wanted to be just like the first king one day, and now, a battered Ein declared that he'd outclass Jayle. It was then that something the first king's specter said flashed across Ein's mind.

"Show me your power. You must become a disaster or you won't stand a chance against further disasters ahead of you."

Those were the exact words Jayle's specter had said before they clashed in the mausoleum. Ein had fought desperately back then, paying no heed to such cryptic nonsense. *But I think I understand what he was trying to say now,* Ein thought.

He'd gotten the premise wrong all along. Jayle didn't fight to defeat Arshay; he fought to defeat Shannon. He must've wanted to become a disaster so that he could get his hands on more power.

“Fall. Fall to the depths. Only there will you find true darkness.”

The words only confirmed Ein’s suspicions. The vaunted hero king, Jayle von Ishtarica, might have wanted the Demon Lord’s power for himself.

“Without resolve, you’ll only lose those important to you.”

“I’ve known that for a while now,” Ein muttered. Cracks ran through the black blade as bright, silver light spilled forth. “And if so, I’ll become the ideal that the hero king had wished to be.”

A strong breeze blew through the ocean and enveloped Ein in a silvery hellfire.

“I defeated the red foxes. I simply need to use my Demon Lord powers to surpass the hero king. And if you think the same, I can promise you right here.”

Ein glared at his sword and gripped it tightly. The silver flames grew stronger and brighter.

“I’ll give you everything I’ve got and become the Demon Lord who exceeds the hero king.”

The scenery suddenly shifted. Ein found himself in the depths of the shrine—in the mausoleum where he’d once fought Jayle. *I’m seeing the continuation of the first king’s memories. This is where I left off.*

Jayle and the tree spirits now stood in front of the pedestal where his sword had stood. Ein was nearby.

“If I had more power, I could’ve saved my older sister,” Jayle murmured. “I’ve constantly regretted being weaker than her.”

The tree spirits seemed tempted to speak, and Jayle let out a laugh as he noticed their hesitation.

“In terms of raw strength, she’s far more powerful than me,” he said. “I just got lucky that this sword and this God-given skill of mine proved to be extremely effective against her.”

“Really? You seem much stronger than that nightmare!”

“Huh, I don’t get it at all!”

“Well, that’s just life. I’ve actually wished to be as strong as her. In the midst of many battles, I’d actually hoped that I could become a Demon Lord. However, it’s as if my prayer would make that happen right away.”

“It’s all way beyond me.”

“Hmm, how can I phrase this right?” Jayle wondered. “If I were reincarnated, I would want to return as a Demon Lord, I guess.”

If Ishtarica's citizens heard this statement, they'd be shocked by the first king's desires.

"So, I'll leave my sword here," he said as he plunged his weapon onto the pedestal. "Then maybe one day, humanity can join forces with the Demon Lord to fight the red foxes. Or perhaps a future royal will come into this world as a Demon Lord. No matter the case, my blade, the vessel of my power, will become an essential tool. And if the new nightmare goes on a rampage, it'll be needed to stop them."

"Is that many, many years from now?"

Jayle released his sword and turned around. "Probably. Or, well, maybe…just maybe, I'll be the one to retrieve my sword. If reincarnation is real, that is."

"Then we'll wait for you!"

"My big sister and I will wait and wait!"

"Hey, now, no, no!" Jayle said hastily. "I was just joking!"

"I don't get it, but I think it'll be fine! No promises though!"

"Yeah, we'll wait for you like good girls! We're good at welcoming people!"

And with that, the tree spirit sisters flew away. It seemed they'd gone to play somewhere in the mausoleum, and Jayle smiled at the wholesome sight. Left behind, he just gazed at his sword before he suddenly turned to where Ein was standing. No one was supposed to be in the room with him.

"You already understand, don't you? These holy grounds are a memorial for the fallen warriors—a place to honor them—and it's also where my blade was sealed," Jayle said.

Ein wondered whom Jayle was talking to when the two suddenly locked eyes.

"I'm glad I got to speak with you before I go," Jayle said. "And now, I'll hand over all my power over to you."

"You can see me?" Ein asked.

"Yup. And I was waiting for the opportunity to speak with you."

"But I thought… Your Majesty, are you not dead?"

"Think of me as a specter, a phantom that was left behind, just like the one you fought when we first met. I'm only able to speak with you using the remnants of the power that still lingers here."

Jayle flashed a friendly smile—when he did, he was the spitting image of Ein. Only their outfits and the lengths of their hair

differed. They wouldn't be mistaken as twins if they stood next to each other, but as clones of each other.

"I couldn't win," the first king said. "The moment I shoved that blade through my sister's chest, Jayle von Ishtarica had lost to the red foxes."

"I ended up losing to the Demon Lord's power too," Ein replied.

"But it's still not over for you." Jayle spoke firmly as he gazed into the crown prince's eyes. "The battle hasn't concluded—not yet."

Ein remained silent and listened to Jayle's voice. The first king was slowly turning translucent, signifying that his power would be gone soon.

"You know what you need to do now, don't you?" Jayle asked.

Ein replied without missing a beat. "I defeated the red foxes. Now, I just need to defeat this rampaging part of myself—the World Tree of Gluttony."

"That's right."

Ein walked forward. He stared at the sword that had been plunged into the pedestal. It looked nothing like his black sword nor did it resemble the specter's blade. Before him lay a dazzling silver sword—the true form of the king's blade on full display for the world to see in all its glory. Dignified and regal, it emanated overwhelming power that caused Ein to gulp nervously.

"And to accomplish my goal, I've decided to end everything once and for all," Ein said. Not a shred of doubt clouded his face and his eyes twinkled with determination. "I'll reach for the happiest ending I can. Once this battle is over, will your blade disappear?"

Jayle shook his head. With its role fulfilled, the blade would lose the hero king's power, but the jet-black blade forged from Marco's armor would still remain. The crown prince reached out to grab the hilt of the first king's sword.

"If you want to surpass me, you must win," Jayle said.

"I know," Ein replied.

"You must end it all, and return home."

"I will."

Ein kept his back turned, and could feel Jayle's presence growing fainter. Even the first king's voice sounded feeble and small. Ein knew it all, but he didn't turn around—he focused only

on Jayle’s voice and the pounding of his heart. When he tightly gripped the hilt of the sword, light began to shine in the mausoleum, all around him. From the depths of the corridor that led to the room, he could hear marching footsteps.



The footsteps stopped at the pedestal—every fallen hero of the Great War had gathered. At once, they knelt with respect and gazed up at the two royals.

“I’ll surpass you right here,” Ein declared.

His body quivered—not out of fear, but out of excitement. His heart danced in anticipation.

“Then,” Jayle’s voice grew fainter as he vanished from the pedestal and continued, “call out the name inscribed on the sword.”

The name echoed in Ein’s mind. As he tightly gripped the hilt, the scenery around him began to blur. The silver wind that emanated from the sword obscured his view of the mausoleum. Instead, he could hear clearly. He could hear the roars of the valiant heroes and the deafening pounding of the butts of their spears as they hit the stone tiles below. He heard himself remove the sword and raise it high in the air, the sharp blade slicing through the wind magnificently. It sounded as though the soldiers were ready for battle, or cheering the awakening of the king’s blade, which had fought alongside them in the war zone.

The sounds soon died down, and were replaced with the bloodcurdling roars of Upaskamuy and the Sea Dragons. When Ein came to, the king’s blade stood on the ground in front of him, his hand still tightly gripping the hilt. As he tried to pull out the blade, he felt the slightest of resistance. This king’s blade was waiting for its name to be called. It had lain in slumber for centuries, waiting for an opportunity to wield its power once more.

“Lend me your power,” Ein said before uttering the true name of the blade ready to awaken, “Ishtar!”

A million pillars of light rained down from the heavens and surrounded the entirety of Kingsland. A blinding tornado erupted from blade’s resting place, and a raging wildfire of silver flames destroyed everything in its path. The king’s power had fully manifested and nothing was going to stop it. In the face of such godly power, Upaskamuy and the Sea Dragons erupted into particles of light as they were eradicated from this world.

Ein von Ishtarica
[Job] ——

[Stamina] 9999 + α
[Magical Power] 9999 + α
[Attack] — + α
[Defense] — + α
[Agility] — + α
[Skills] Hero

Chapter Seven: Back Where It All Started - Risking Life for Love

Everyone was blinded by the light that was emitted from Krone's pocket. She took that opportunity to run up the ramp and head for the ship's deck. She *had* to go to Heim. Recalling what she'd just seen, she steeled her resolve and boarded the ship. The ship's crew only regained their vision moments later, and before they knew it, she was on board.

"I don't have time!" she called. "Please! Let me set sail for Heim!"

She was always able to calmly reason with others, but this time, her feeble voice conveyed her desperation. The ship's crew took pity on her, but they shook their heads, unwilling to allow the young lady to head into danger.

"Fine! I'll move this ship myself!" Krone said.

"My lady! Please wait!" a crew member frantically called out.

"Wait, the anchor hasn't been raised! She can't do that herself!" another shouted.

The frantic crew immediately regained their calm. They didn't want to forcibly drag her off the ship and continued to call out to her from the pier. *I can't move this ship,* she thought. Her face was riddled with desperation as she racked her brain and looked around, but no solution came to mind. Graff had finally arrived.

"I know why you want to head for Heim!" Graff shouted. "But I won't permit it! I can't allow you to!"

"Grandfather, please! I'm begging you! Let me go to Heim!" Krone yelled back.

"Absolutely not! No amount of reasoning will bend me to your will this time around!"

"Ein's fighting alone! I can't just quietly sit here and wait without doing a single thing to help him!"

"And I said that you can't go! Return to the manor right this instant! Your father and brother have arrived safe and sound, so go see them already!"

Krone had been busy and hadn't met with Harley and Riel yet. As Graff pointed that out to scold her, he outstretched his arms.

“I’ll say it again. It’s been a while, so spend some time with your family and calm yourself down,” Graff said.

She gazed down at her grandfather and recalled Chris’s actions from the other day. The elf had been gravely injured, but had gone to the Tower of Wisdom for Ein, and even fought against Oz. The sight was seared into Krone’s mind. She felt the same. She would risk her life because she loved him so. Her feelings hadn’t changed, ever since she left her home nation and had wished to be by his side.

She’d received a star crystal from him, seen his kind character, and had fostered her love for him since she arrived in Ishtarica. And she’d only confirmed her feelings earlier. She didn’t mind if she had been hallucinating, but his voice and his presence were soothing—she knew that her place was by his side. Krone couldn’t give up—she never would. Resignation was the one path she refused to take.

“Grandfather, I can’t do that,” Krone said as she conveyed her feelings.

Her voice sounded ephemeral and beautiful, her desperation gouging out the hearts of those who heard her and commanding everyone’s awe.

“I haven’t changed—never have. I’ve always risked my life for my love for him,” she said.

Perhaps her words were worthy of scorn. Perhaps people would despair upon gazing at the girl who drowned in love. Yet her words were convincing—she was the very same young lady who’d cast aside her family name and braved the treacherous ocean to reach Ishtarica. Every day, she made an earnest effort to do her best.

But that didn’t mean that she would be allowed to leave. Graff ordered his men to drag her off the ship, and they raced up the ramp to grab her. Krone braced herself as she clenched her fist in front of her chest, but she knew that there was very little she could do against a horde of grown men.

“GRAAAAAH!”

A mighty roar that rocked the waves of the ocean echoed throughout the city. The water around the port rose high in the air and created a liquid shield that surrounded the entire area.

“You came for me,” Krone murmured.

Two Sea Dragons popped out from the shield of water—El and Al. They surrounded the vessel that Krone was on, their beautiful scales reflecting the port's light. They elegantly stretched their necks out and received a good petting from Krone before they used their Ocean Current skill to sever the anchor that tied the ship to the docks. The vessel slowly moved forward as the crew members and Graff approached it to stop Krone.

"Grrr..." El growled, forbidding the men to move another inch.

"Stay back, everyone," Graff ordered.

"But chairman..." one crew member started.

"I told you to stand back! We can't do a thing against these two!"

The twin Sea Dragons viewed Ein as their father, and knew to never harm Ishtarican citizens. Even now, they were protecting Krone and exhibited zero hostility, but that didn't mean that Graff and the others could suppress the dragons. With a look of resignation on his face, Graff looked up at the deck and locked eyes with Krone.

He was stunned. Since when was she able to speak with such a dignified air about her? The chairman was struck with wonder and awe—an amazement much greater than he felt while in the presence of Queen Lalalua. The old trader had never expected to see his granddaughter in such a light.

"I shall go to the castle and explain the situation to His Majesty," Graff said as he turned away from the Sea Dragons.

When the ship approached the wall of water, the dragons used their Ocean Current skills to create an opening—as if sailing through a door, the vessel was allowed to pass through. Krone's ship gradually grew smaller and smaller as it sailed away from Kingsland, and past the docked *Leviathan*.

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Despite an eerie silence and the darkness of night, the ocean route to Heim was a peaceful one. Krone could only hear the waves that crashed against the boat as El and Al swam alongside it. Even when she arrived at Port Roundheart, her surroundings had been oddly serene. There wasn't a single person in sight within the ruined city. Regardless of the city's current desolation,

Krone recognized it quite well.

She'd only visited Roundheart a couple of times when she was a child, but it was still quite familiar to her. The clash between Ishtarica and the rampaging World Tree had indeed left its mark, but the city's atmosphere had remained the same.

How shall I get off? Krone wondered. She didn't know how to stow the ramp away, and it had been stolen by the waves as she sailed.

"Grar," El squealed adorably as she stuck out her neck.

"Will you take me to shore?" Krone asked.

El happily opened and closed her mouth as Al let out a confident laugh, revealing his fangs.

"Thank you both," Krone smiled. "I was only able to make it this far because of you guys."

She petted the two dragons before she turned her gaze to Heim's royal capital. She'd been born and raised there, and yet a titanic tree now towered over the entire city. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen. There was no doubt in her mind that she was looking at her Ein.

"Oh my," a familiar voice called out. "I didn't think that you'd come here alone."

Krone spotted a black-haired beauty waiting for her amid the rubble. The woman removed her hood to reveal her identity.

"Lady Misty..." Krone muttered.

"I thought you'd come," Misty replied. "Ah, and are these dearies your rumored children? Come now, I'll feed you some of my unused magic stones."

"Grar?"

"Rawr! Rar!"

The Ishtarican-raised dragons eagerly ate the stones without a second thought. El sucked on the stone like a piece of candy while Al crunched down and enjoyed the succulent flavor. Misty watched them eat as she recalled her past.

"Ramza used to be so small," she said as she placed a hand by her hip. "He was around this tall, and was a tiny, skeleton child."

Indeed, he was quite small.

"He looks so dignified now, but I suppose even he had a childhood," Krone said.

"Quite right," Misty replied. "He was always so adorable as he

trotted after me. He gradually grew larger and eventually evolved. It took many centuries, but he finally transformed into a Dullahan. Perhaps these two will evolve into different sorts of dragons one day."

Krone's cheeks twitched as she worried whether the twins would still listen to any commands after they evolved.

"Don't worry," Misty said, picking up on the girl's worries. "Their master is far, far stronger than them." She walked along the main street. "I have a horse prepared right over there. Why don't we head to Ein together?"

The telltale signs of a grisly war surrounded her, but Krone held herself strong and followed. The frightening number of corpses and the stench of blood that lingered in the air almost made her sick, but she didn't have the time to be timid now.

Things got easier after she got on the horse. Once Misty gripped the reins, they slowly but surely approached the tree. When they arrived, they met up with Ramza, who was leaning up against a large boulder.

"Misty claimed to have sensed the presence of sea snakes, but I didn't think you'd come here alone," he said. "I would've wanted you to be more wary of being possibly toyed with by barbarians."

"He's right. Be more careful next time," Misty added.

"Th-Thank you for worrying about me," Krone replied.

The two were oddly kind and considerate; they were friendlier than they looked. Krone didn't feel weirded out and felt peculiarly at ease with them. Just then, she heard some steady breathing from Ramza's lap. When she glanced down, she spotted a little girl snoozing away with a little drool around her mouth. The girl was none other than the Demon Lord Arshay, the Nightmare of Envy. It was almost laughable to imagine that this innocent little girl was the very scourge who'd lost control and taken the lives of countless Ishtaricans all those years ago.

"It's all thanks to her that we were able to stop Ein," Misty said.

"Yeah. She's helped us a ton," Ramza agreed. "But she turned some of her life force into power, so she won't be waking up for a while."

"Lord Arshay..." Krone murmured anxiously.

"Don't worry. She's always been like this. Every time she finished some kind of job, she always yearned for bed. She just cleared

away a big job this time around, so she'll be sleeping a little longer. That's all."

Misty giggled. "That's quite true."

This only further proved that Arshay had a peaceful personality. Krone thanked the Demon Lord from the bottom of her heart, and prayed that the little girl would wake up soon.

"How does the royal capital look?" Krone asked.

"It's quiet," Ramza replied.

"Why don't you go check it out for yourself?" Misty suggested. "But you can't go all alone. You might know your way around the city, but I'll still have someone to guard you. Why don't you go with him?"

"Yeah, then you'll have nothing to fear."

The pair claimed that the young advisor's guide was waiting for her beyond the castle's gates. Krone thanked them before they parted ways and she made her way into the royal capital. Slowly but surely, the memories of her time there came rushing back, and the path to the capital was nostalgic. She'd passed through the castle gates countless times before, and though it was in ruins, it still held the vestiges of its former glory.

"I never thought that I'd return here," Krone murmured.

And under these circumstances. Krone had once seen Heim Castle as a fantastic place, but all of that changed when she came face-to-face with Ishtarica's seismic advancements. Now, the castle was completely destroyed, stripped of its former splendor. The aftermath of the war and Ein's rampage had created a grim scene.

"I've been waiting for you, Lady Krone," a suit of Living Armor said as he approached her. "I am Marco; I serve Sir Ein. And as you can see, I am a Living Armor."

He clearly looked like a monster. Krone didn't recall Ein having a monster knight as his subordinate, but she was familiar with the Living Armor's name and species.

"Sir Marco, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Krone Agustos and I—"

"Ah, you mustn't, Lady Krone!" Marco cried. "Please just call me Marco. I serve Sir Ein, and as such, you mustn't provide me with any honorifics."

He quickly led the way and guided Krone deeper inside the capital. She had no time to protest; he acted the perfect butler,

making even her gaze at him in awe. Marco continued to make a few more requests, asking the young lady to be less polite. A confused Krone did her best to sound more casual, but the Living Armor shook his head with dissatisfaction. It was only when she'd given out the kind of stern orders she gave her own people that Marco finally nodded with joy.

"Lady Krone, if I humbly may, could I tell you a story of my past?" the knight asked.

"Of course. I'd like to hear it," Krone replied.

"It's a story from many years ago, before I was tasked with a mission within Lord Arshay's castle."

"Do you mean within the Demon Lord's former territory, when the former royal capital was still standing?"

As she quickly added on the bit of the royal capital, Marco looked visibly happy and cheerfully continued, "You see, I actually already had a master in mind."

"Do you not mean Lord Arshay?"

"Perhaps in a broader sense, one could see it as such. I served Ishtarica. However, I actually had a different master in mind."

Krone nodded along, but noticed that armor reminded her of Dill. While the young knight served Ishtarica as one of Silverd's subjects, he was Ein's knight above all else. Silverd might have been at the top, but Dill's loyalty lay with someone else.

"Well, what happened to your master?" Krone asked.

"Something happened and it meant I could no longer leave the royal capital," Marco replied, a touch depressed. "And so, I could no longer tag along with them. A friend told me that he'd spent his final moment with the person he loved. After that exchange, I was left with a handful of words that kept me waiting in the Demon Castle."

"And what were those words?"

Marco gazed up at the sky as he dug through his memories. "'If I were to be reincarnated, I would like to a be a Demon Lord that can win against them.'"

Those were the final words his master had said before he left this world. And so, Marco vowed to forever wait in the Demon Castle until that moment arrived.

"A Demon Castle is the right place to wait for a Demon Lord," Krone remarked.

“Precisely,” Marco said. “The beasts had caused my memories to fade, but I was able to maintain the tenacity that lay deep within my soul. I’d also received a similar command from my captain, and so I continued to wait for that fateful moment to arrive.”

He ended his story. The two stopped in front of the manor of Grand Duke August, though it was more difficult to find remnants of its former splendor. Luckily, the estate sat on the very edge of the World Tree’s trunk. However, the land had been swallowed whole by the tree’s gluttonous roots. Grand Duke Harley was a noble of the highest caliber, while the former duke, Graff, had helped his household flourish unlike anything before. The estate now was a pitiful husk of its former self, and not a shred of its former glory could be seen.

However, one part of the estate remained—the very garden that had changed Krone’s fate forever.

“This is as far as I can go,” Marco said.

“Thank you,” Krone replied. “I’m not quite sure what I can do, but I’ll try to speak with Ein.”

And so, the two parted ways, and Krone walked along the uneven floor to approach Ein’s roots.

“Where should I speak to him?” she wondered.

Should I touch the thick roots that are spread through this area? Krone thought. *Or should I lean against the trunk of the tree? Maybe I should climb it a little.* Unfortunately, no solution came to mind. Still confused, she walked along when she heard the voices of girls above her head.

“Amazing! Awesome!”

“It’s such a rare creature! So unusual! Amazing!”

“Huh?” Krone said.

Two orbs of light flew about and descended upon her. When Krone peered inside, she could see small humanoids within the light.

“I’m the older sister!” the orb said.

“The older sister?” Krone parroted.

“Yep! I’m her older sister!”

“And *I’m* the younger sister! Our mama asked us to come here, so we flew all the way to the World Tree!”

I mean, yeah, I could’ve guessed as much that you’re the younger one. Krone wearily gazed at them, befuddled by their appearance.

Who are they? What kind of species are they? And who's their mama? No one was around to answer her questions, and Krone decided to ignore the mysterious orbs and press forward. When she noticed that they followed her, she gave a strained smile.

"Why do you have a magic stone *outside* of your body?" one asked.

"Come on! Let's get it out! Out it comes!" the other said.

"Ack! H-Hey!" Krone cried. "Don't do that!"

The older sister sneaked into Krone's clothes and took out the small leather bag. "Hey, why are you still alive? I just took the stone out of your body, didn't I?"

"You're a strange creature!"

Krone sighed. "I'm a human. Stop talking nonsense and give that back!"

This reply displeased the two orbs of light. They stomped in the air angrily and violently returned the bag.

"You're a liar!"

"You're a strange creature and a liar! You're a liar like the World Tree!"

Krone gasped when she heard the tree spirits mention the tree. "Do you know where Ein—I mean, the World Tree is?"

No one could miss the colossal tree, but she was specifically referring to the location in which Ein was trapped inside. Her presumptions were soon proven correct.

"Yup! That liar's sleeping over there!"

"Over here! Come on!"

Krone hastily chased after the flying lights. She ducked past some branches and jumped over the vines before she finally was guided to the spot. There was a large hole between the trunk and the roots, resembling a small cave.

"We're gonna go play!" one of the tree spirits said.

"The World Tree's sleeping! Don't wake him up!" the other called.

"Thank you for bringing me here," Krone replied, familiar with this location. "Oh Ein, I didn't think that you'd be here."

This was where he'd first met her, and they had a lovely nighttime tea party with Olivia. The seats out on the terrace had fused with the trunk of the World Tree of Gluttony, but she could see Ein seated on one of the chairs, fast asleep. The roots that

grew out of his sides stretched over to the World Tree's trunk. The terrace was covered entirely by roots and vines as glistening fruit hung overhead. It was as if they were in something of a hidden base with a breathtaking, mystical view. As she sat next to her beloved, she noticed dozens of star crystals rolling around her feet. She smiled as she gazed at him.

"Ein," she called out.

She brushed away the hair on his forehead and placed her hand over his. She sandwiched the lucky charm in between them and vehemently prayed for his return. A pale-blue veil surrounded them.

"Why don't we continue from where we left off that night?"

She recalled what she'd seen from the castle's balcony and looked up at the night sky, praying that she could somehow be of use to him. The sky was filled with millions of twinkling stars, and Krone's beauty was unlike anything else.

Chapter Eight: The World Tree of Gluttony Part 1

Just moments after Ishtar's reawakening, the artificial Kingsland suddenly ceased to be. The unmoving sky that hung over Ein's head had shattered like a pane of glass, giving way to a creeping darkness that swallowed up everything it touched. Despite the void closing in around him, Ein felt as if he were falling through air. However, he soon found himself in a tranquil garden filled with blue fire roses and similarly blue skies above him. In the middle of this garden stood a particular figure—alone with his back turned to the crown prince.

"Someone's getting in my way," he said. "I can feel my power being repelled."

"Oh, so the first thing you say is an excuse. I see…" Ein replied.

"That wasn't my intention, but it doesn't matter. I can't say that I've regained my full strength, but I'm confident that I'm still powerful enough to stand before you." The man kept his back turned as he went on, "My only concern lies within that sword and its power."

"Yeah, I figured."

"That power was nowhere among the abilities that I'd pilfered from your being, nor could I sense even a trace of it from the black blade fastened to your corporeal body."

Upon turning to face Ein, the man flashed a strained smile. However, he'd managed to keep his cool—he didn't feel cornered in the slightest.

"And that's when I understood what had happened," he said. "That sword's power was part of you all along."

"You know, I assumed that you'd just let your guard down," Ein retorted.

"Oh, please. Don't spout such silly nonsense. Since trying to fuse with your consciousness, I haven't once given myself the chance to relax. Like I said earlier, my diminished strength precluded me from fighting you directly. I hadn't fully recovered yet."

And in an instant, the man unleashed an overwhelming pressure into the air. But as Ein had already prepared himself for this, he remained completely unfazed.

“This will go only one of two ways,” the man said. “I force you to fuse with me or you put me down with that power of yours. Is that clear? As you can see, I’m quite desperate here.”

“In that case, I’ll end it here and now,” Ein said as he stepped forward, firmly gripping Ishtar in his hand. Even as the prince approached his foe, the pair still stood a good distance away from each other.

“Shall we introduce ourselves?”

“No need.”

“Why not cry out your name? Just like you did when you mercilessly slaughtered your father?”

“But it would serve no purpose. We know each other very well, after all.”

“Oh? But I haven’t told you my name.”

“After all of these clashes of ours, I’d be lying if I said I *didn’t* know who you are. I named you after all.”

The man’s joyful smile beamed in stark contrast to Ein’s icy glare.

“Can’t you say my name? Just once at least?” the man requested.

“I planned on it,” Ein replied. “Talking to you would be a bother otherwise.”

In a flash, Ein vanished. There was a strong gust of wind, and he instantly reappeared behind the man. With its tip directly aimed at the man’s throat, Ishtar burned with a scorching silver light.

“I’ll begin,” Ein said in a low voice.

Just as Ein swung the king’s blade, a familiar black blade appeared to parry his strike. The prince knew this blade very well—intimately so. The man turned around to lock eyes with the royal.

Ein shouted at the top of his lungs. “World Tree of Gluttony!”

As blades of black and silver clashed, the repeated blows resulted in a flurry of magical energy. After even more strikes, the residual energy exploded and the blue fire roses’ azure petals danced in the air.

“This feels great!” the man cried with glee. “You finally said my

name!”

“I regret it!” Ein roared back. “I should’ve never given you a name!”

“Oh, don’t say that! You’ll make me sad! Very soon, we’ll fuse and blossom as the perfected World Tree of Gluttony!”

They displayed equal power and skill. Ein felt like he was fighting his own shadow—his enemy had been born from him and evolved, after all. Still, the crown prince looked annoyed when he noticed the World Tree fighting with *his* black sword. Ein gradually realized that while they were on even footing, his enemy had more power at his disposal. And that wasn’t all.

“I suppose that the strength of this blade alone isn’t enough to best you,” the World Tree said.

He then shot out a salvo of Phantom Hands—each tendril locked onto Ein. However, the prince took a page out of the specter’s book and sliced through every single one. As he continued to parry the attacks, he calmly assessed his situation. *I knew it,* he thought. There was no doubt in his mind. The World Tree of Gluttony could access every skill that Ein had absorbed. He scoffed at himself for collecting such a vast and troublesome set of abilities.

“I was born when you transformed into a Demon Lord,” the World Tree said.

“Yeah, I guessed as much,” Ein replied.

“Ever since then, I’ve been a Demon Lord as well. But make no mistake, *I’m* the one who holds all the power, not you, Ein. It is I who became *the* Demon Lord, ruling over all the power you absorbed.” The World Tree declared that he had every power required of a Demon Lord in the palm of his hand. “However, I couldn’t take your dryad abilities. It seems that I can’t steal something you were born with.”

It was like trying to take wings away from a bird—its innate abilities still remained.

“If you’ve got all my skills, you don’t need to fuse with me!” Ein declared.

The ice dragon’s power suddenly fell over the garden, and biting frost quickly ate away at the prince’s skin. But Ein used Ishtar to clear the way before approaching the World Tree.

“No, I still *must* fuse with you,” the World Tree said. “Unless that

is done, I cannot use all my powers as freely as I wish."

Just after raising Ishtar into the air, Ein unleashed a series of slashes that were so swift, they were practically invisible to the naked eye. In their wake, each swing left a trail of silver flame that sliced through tendrils and frost alike. With godlike speed, the prince's blade reached the World Tree, but the blow was soon blocked, causing a dull clang to ring throughout the air.

The Dullahan's pitch-black gauntlet had caught the blow with its woven magic structure. However, this supposed final, uncrackable layer of defense crumbled with another swift strike from Ishtar.

"Good grief, I suppose this isn't enough against you," the World Tree said with an exaggerated sigh.

He had found himself coming face-to-face with the very blade that had once slain the previous Demon Lord. Even with all of his power, the World Tree couldn't simply do as he pleased.

"I'd expect no less from my own father," he said.

"I'm not done yet!" Ein shouted.

The crown prince flicked his blade again, assaulting the World Tree with a flurry of attacks. He was able to cut through the man's defenses, confident that he could pierce through the World Tree's windpipe. Yet, the World Tree seemed as calm as ever; even facing the blade, he was completely undeterred.

"Let me ask you one final time," the World Tree said, his voice filled with pity as he knew what he was about to do to Ein. It was as though he knew that he'd win. "Hero…"

The World Tree paused for a moment as magical energy burst out from his gauntlet. Ein covered his face with his hands and was quickly overpowered as the enemy backed away.

"Why don't we fuse and consume everything?" the World Tree offered.

"Gh…" Ein grunted. "Why would you…"

"It's hunger. As you say, I'm a glutton. I'd consume all living creatures just to see if I can satiate my cravings."

"Only nothingness lies at the end of that road! Do you want to boast of your power in a world devoid of others?!"

For the first time, the World Tree of Gluttony laughed from the bottom of his heart.

"Heh," the World Tree chuckled. "I'm not trying to be the strongest in the world. I simply want to consume everything in it.

Perhaps see if it may sate my hunger."

"You mean..." Ein said.

"That's all. It's so simple. It doesn't matter if I'm all alone after it's all over. If my hunger has been satisfied, I'll happily spend my remaining days by my lonesome."

The World Tree knew quite well that no one else would understand his train of thought. He looked on proudly.

"Fuse with me, hero. Let us swallow the world whole," the World Tree offered.

Just as the Tree started to ease up on Ein, he noticed that the prince had been left completely paralyzed for a brief moment. In an instant, hundreds of Phantom Hands descended upon Ein—he didn't even need to turn around to sense the attack. A tendril shot out to grab one arm, and another Phantom Hand restrained the other. The blue fire roses by his feet froze, and the ice crept up Ein's legs, cementing him in place.

The World Tree of Gluttony pointed his dark blade at Ein's throat as he awaited the crown prince's reply.

"You've been so wise up until this point." The World Tree sighed deeply. "It would be so baffling to see you make the wrong choice now."

"I've grown up since then," Ein replied.

The silver wind that enveloped his body caused the Phantom Hands to dissipate into the air and the ice grasping his feet began to melt under the silver flames, freeing him from his shackles. Ein grabbed Ishtar and held it horizontally in front of him.

"But," Ein paused as though to remind his foe of an important fact, "you should know that I've always been stubborn!"

He roared angrily as he stepped forward, closing the gap between the melancholic World Tree and himself. Ein's godlike speed was impressive, but unfortunately, he found himself easily parried by his enemy. If speed was all he needed to eke out a victory, it would've been easy; Ein gave a wry smile, knowing that it'd take much more than that. The World Tree chortled as he easily parried the crown prince's attacks.

"Not bad at all," he said. "The mere thought of understanding you on a deeper level brings me inexplicable joy. I can't help it. This doesn't feel bad at all!"

Ein grunted in surprise.

“And look!” the World Tree cackled gleefully. “I’m crossing blades with you as I speak!”

“And what of it?” Ein growled back.

The crown prince had never faced such a peculiar enemy before. The World Tree’s swordplay was unlike anything he’d ever seen before. Every aspect of the World Tree’s being gave him a slight edge, causing Ein to grit his teeth in frustration. The World Tree wielded more power and speed than Ein could ever muster.

“Ah, that expression! That voice!” the World Tree shouted. “In our time together, I’ve seen so many sides of you! But not once have I seen such desperation and hatred on your face before! Never!”

“As long as you got the idea, it was worth it!” Ein exclaimed.

“That just entrances me more! It’s so endearing!”

The clash of cold steel grew faster with every swing, but only the World Tree was increasing his ferocity.

“I’ll pierce your body with your own sword!” the World Tree shouted.

Ein lost his composure and went down on one knee, crushing the blue fire roses beneath him. The black blade was aimed straight between his brows and his limbs were restrained by a series of jet-black tree roots, giving him no chance of escape. Yet the crown prince’s piercing gaze was sharper than the steel pointed at him.

“Did you think it’d be that easy?” Ein asked.

“I hoped so,” the World Tree replied.

“Then you should reevaluate your assumptions.”

Once again, the blistering silver wind erupted from Ishtar and burned through all the roots in the flash. Even though the black blade was quickly parried after that, its wielder smiled through it all.

“Don’t you dare get cocky, World Tree of Gluttony,” Ein warned.

The World Tree shivered, and his lips quivered with delight. As Ein rose to his feet once more, the air around him only intensified.

“I’m not gonna let this end,” Ein said.

“And yet an end will come,” the World Tree replied. “It may sadden you to think about, but everything shall inevitably come to an end.”

“Yes, an end will arrive…when you’re dead.”

“Ah, you’re just so *endearing*!”

Their swordsmanship stood on equal ground. Ein might have fallen short in other areas, but things weren’t so simple. The World Tree intuited his situation and expressed joy at Ein’s valiance, but the eyes that gazed upon Ishtar contained a hint of loathing. For the first time, the World Tree expressed an emotion similar to frustration before his lips curled up into a conniving grin.

“But this isn’t as bad as I thought,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?” Ein asked stiffly.

He should be the one with the disadvantage. There was no doubt about it in his mind. As long as Misty and the other legendary heroes prowled about the capital, the World Tree would be almost certainly distracted. He had more than just the fight to worry about. And lucky for him, Ishtar proved to be extremely effective against the Demon Lord.

“I’m afraid there isn’t a solid foundation to that confidence of yours,” Ein said.

“If you’re curious, take a look around,” the World Tree replied. “The world is destroyed.”

As Ein glanced at his surroundings between clashes, the plains which he thought continued on endlessly were starting to be swallowed by the darkness. The blue skies were no exception. The corner of the world was shrouded in darkness.

“So, are we standing in the only place I’ve got left??” Ein asked.

The World Tree smiled and pointed his black blade at Ein. “That’s right. It’s all you’ve got. You can say that these are your final moments. Ever since you let me take charge, your soul was gradually being sucked away. The growing darkness is proof of that. When it covers the entire world, I will truly have fused with you.”

“I don’t care. I just need to defeat you, that’s all.”

Ein raised his hand and summoned his silver wind, but it was parried so easily. The wind roared as strongly as before, but the World Tree seemed to relax ever so slightly.

“I recognize your power more than anyone in the world,” he said. “Filled with unrelenting courage, you never give up. I’m well-read when it comes to your perseverance.”

The World Tree hadn’t been toying with Ein until now, but it was clear that the situation had shifted in his favor.

“Yes, the hero king’s powers are troublesome, but above all, I find your spirit to be the biggest nuisance,” the World Tree said, referring to Ein’s determination and resolve. “But now it’s only a matter of time. Soon, we’ll become a single being and then we can roam the world…and consume everything in our path.”

He spoke with confidence, implying that he wielded enough power to break Ein’s unrelenting spirit. The World Tree revealed very little with his words, but Ein could easily imagine that his foe had a powerful move up his sleeve. Something so overwhelmingly powerful that the crown prince would be forced into submission. *What’s he planning? He doesn’t want to just destroy this world. He has something else in mind.*

This artificial world was a manifestation of Ein’s consciousness. Should this world disappear, it would mean that his own sense of self had crumbled away. The world around him was being destroyed as they spoke and his power was gradually being sapped by his enemy.

“You must’ve had powers that you couldn’t use because I’ve retained my consciousness,” Ein surmised. “And now, you’re slowly learning how to use them.”

“Oh, how I find you so dear!” the World Tree said. “Just how deeply do you understand me?”

“It’s not like I want to. I’m only doing so out of necessity; don’t misconstrue my motives.”

“That’s but a minor detail. I only wish to have your understanding. The process of how you came to that epiphany is none of my concern.”

Every word that escaped his lips irritated Ein to no end, but he had no time to be bothered by it. *As time passes, the gap in power will only continue to grow.* As he witnessed the world around him slowly being lost to the darkness, the prince took a deep breath or two to calm his racing heart.

“I’ll end it here,” Ein declared.

“Yes. Let us become one and put an end to it all!” the World Tree crowed.

Ein *wanted* to believe that he could still handle himself and that he had some time left. If he didn’t, only the path to defeat remained. He gripped Ishtar tighter than before and firmly took a step forward as a mocking cackle reached his ears.

“It’s all going well,” the World Tree said. “I can feel my power growing.”

The tree stepped back and outstretched his arms like a pair of wings. A dark gust of wind sprang forth from his body, overwhelming Ein.

“Oh, how comfortable this is! I feel like I might burst with ecstasy!” the World Tree shouted.

Ein knew that the hero king had bestowed enough power upon him to turn the tide against the World Tree. He also knew that there was a chance he could carve out his desired future with it as well. The prince was silently thrilled to have been given this opportunity, but the situation had quickly spiraled out of control. The world was crumbling around him, and the edge he’d gained from Jayle had been dulled. As though to prove Ein’s doubts, his enemy gazed at him for the first time with murderous intent.

“As the Demon Lord of the World Tree, I declare that I shall swallow your husk whole.”

The Demon Lord’s hair grew down to his waist, and his bewitching face contained a hint of charm, but he was unable to hide the pure fury and wrath that flickered in his eyes. He smiled calmly and fearlessly as the dark winds around him roared like never before. Then all of a sudden, he vanished.

“It brings me great pride to see your valiance, but…” he started. Even Ein couldn’t keep up with such speed as the Demon Lord appeared behind him.

“What?!” Ein gasped.

“I would’ve loved to see you grovel for your life.”

Suddenly, the crown prince felt as if his back were on fire. He grunted in pain, but he wasn’t burned—the heat came from the blade that vertically sliced into him. The searing pain caused his face to contort in agony, but the prince bit his lip to stifle his voice. He twisted his body and swung Ishtar upward, but to no avail.

Despite the powerful silver winds that enveloped Ein’s being, the Demon Lord decided to take the potentially deadly blast head-on. The hand that gripped the blade’s hilt was charred, and fresh, black blood spurted into the air. And yet, the Demon Lord smiled.

“Not bad at all,” he said. He smiled down at Ein as the boy fought through the agonizing pain. Metaphysically, the crown prince was just a little shorter than the Demon Lord. “I yearn for

more. Paint your face with despair.”

Ein twisted his body around and nimbly leaped to the side as he raised his sword once more.

“It makes me so happy,” the Demon Lord said. “You’re but a shell of myself, and yet you show me your own splendor.”

I’m up against a Demon Lord, and one stronger than Arshay, the Nightmare of Envy, at that. This man was right on the cusp of becoming a deity within the spiritual world.

“Gah… Ah…” Ein grunted as the Demon Lord blocked his attack.

All the Demon Lord did was swing his blade to the side, but his raw power and speed was unmatched. Ein couldn’t even defend himself as he was brought to his knees. The silver flames that enveloped Ishtar were now hardly effective against the Demon Lord, and as the world continued to collapse, its light was reduced to a feeble flicker.

“I’m shocked,” the Demon Lord said as he placed a hand over his own cheek. Feeling a searing warmth upon touching his face once more, he could feel his black blood gushing from the wound. “Where in the world is that power of yours coming from?”

“Huff… Huff…” Ein panted.

“Take a look. There’s almost nothing left in this world. What remains is only a mere fraction of what it was when you first arrived.”

“So what?”

“While my power grows, yours continues to leave you… And yet, how in the world are you able to harm me? The hero king’s power can indeed kill me, but a feeble man like you can only dream of wielding such might.”

As he stood now, Ein’s stamina couldn’t hold a candle to his gusto as a young child. In fact, he was even weaker than he had been during his encounter with the Sea Dragons.

“How are you still standing?” the Demon Lord asked. “You’ve lost all your skills, and you’ve regressed into a normal boy. You’re just Ein, a piddly human who managed to borrow the hero king’s power after losing your Demon Lord abilities. You’ve been reduced to such a pitiful state, and I can’t seem to understand what propels you to press on.”

“Even so…” Ein muttered.

“Hmm?”

“Even so, I can’t give up here!”

The silver wind that the crown prince brought forth was frail and weak. He could barely grip Ishtar, and even his legs were wobbly and unstable. He just managed to take a step forward, and yet his spirit and determination hadn’t waned.

“You’re starting to wow me, Ein,” the Demon Lord said.

If Ein relaxed now, he was worried that he’d fall. Not to mention that the Demon Lord before him still had his guard up. He was ready to counter Ein’s attacks with a thrust of the black blade at any time. The crown prince allowed the Demon Lord to come close, only to brush past him.

“This is where it ends,” Ein said.

The Demon Lord had meant to skewer Ein’s throat, but he could hardly believe what he saw. “You…dodged my attack?!”

“Make no mistake, *you* were born from *me*!”

Ein dodged the attack at the last second and plunged Ishtar into his foe. The feeble crown prince couldn’t ram the sword through the Demon Lord’s heart, but he’d managed to cut away his armor. With the Demon Lord now exposed, the silver wind had regained its effectiveness.

The Demon Lord hastily swung his sword and pushed Ein away. For the first time, the man had been brought to his knees.

“Gah…” the Demon Lord grunted.

Oddly enough, the two men were facing each on one knee—their posture may have been similar, but their expression couldn’t have been more different.

“I told you to make no mistake,” Ein said boldly as he gritted his teeth against the pain and stood up. Never had he looked this confident and brave. “I made you. Aside from the fact that you’re *the* Demon Lord, our powers are the same.”

“So what? It still makes no sense that you were able to hurt me,” the Demon Lord spat.

“Hah, you still don’t get it, do you?”

Their swordplay might have been equal, and Ein was only weaker because he clearly neared death. But that didn’t mean that he was completely helpless. He stood up before the Demon Lord could and gripped Ishtar.

“You truly are…” the Demon Lord started.

“Yep, I just need to get stronger as we fight,” Ein replied. “If we

were on equal footing up until this point, this would've been more than enough." His magical energy and stamina had sapped away, but his ingrained skills couldn't be pried away from his still-warm hands. "I told the first king that I would surpass you."

This was the oath that he'd sworn to Jayle.

"If I lost to you, it'd make me a liar," Ein said.

"Heh. Ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!" the Demon Lord guffawed. "Is that so? So in this battle, you surpassed yourself and became stronger, eh? I see!"

The Demon Lord finally rose to his feet. His wounds had healed, and Ein sighed—he'd seen this coming.

"I'll retract my statement of calling you a husk," the Demon Lord said. "Even if you've had everything stripped from you, the valor that wells up in your heart is beautiful."

Those words reminded Ein of his childhood days, when he was thought of as his household's inferior older brother. Thanks to his Gift of Training and copious use of Toxin Decomposition EX, he had been able to gain more power. However, when all of his skills were stripped from him, he was left with very little.

Yet, even so, Ein took a step forward. He moved ahead to defeat the Demon Lord.

"Everything I've worked towards hasn't been for nothing," Ein said.

Another furious clash of swords ensued. He dodged the Dullahan's powers and Upaskamuy's ice, avoiding a fatal blow in the process.

"All of my skills might be gone, and I might just be a regular kid now, but I'm still Ein... And I'm not going anywhere."

As he thought back on everything, Ein realized that he'd lived a life filled with excitement. He crossed the sea, became a royal, was lauded as a hero after defeating the Sea Dragon, scoured the continent in search of the truth, and met people from all walks of life along the way. More than anything else, these memories had become irreplaceable treasures to him.

"I won't let you take everything away from me... Not anymore," Ein said. "And to prevent that, I won't lose to you."

For a moment, the Demon Lord shuddered. Was it fear? He could hardly believe it. Ein's current form was far from elegant and boasted very little power—he was standing at death's door. And

yet, how could the Demon Lord fear such a frail person? With each of Ein's attempted dodges, spurts of blood gushed out from new wounds. However, his eyes burned with a determination that never wavered as he faced the Demon Lord again and again. The Demon Lord quickly realized that he'd felt that rash of fear for a reason.

"You didn't give birth to me for nothing..." he muttered. "I see now."

Fresh blood trickled down his cheek and lips. As he tasted his own blood, the Demon Lord realized that he'd been unconsciously retreating. He was in awe, but he soon widened his eyes and smiled. Ein was too busy fighting to care and continued to swing his sword. *I've gotta hurry! I don't have much time!*

His blade could still reach the Demon Lord—Ein had a much greater chance to prevail than before. Only after several more clashes did Ein notice the Demon Lord smiling and found it to be rather creepy.

"Why won't you use your other powers?!" Ein demanded, hoping to shake himself free of this unease.

"Because it's hardly effective against the hero king's power!" the Demon Lord replied.

"Yeah? Then I wouldn't mind if you gave it all back!"

"Unfortunately for you, I'll have to decline that offer! I may not use them, but these powers are mine and mine alone! And if by some miracle, you happen to Absorb them from me, it'd be quite troublesome!"

"At least let your guard down a little!"

"Oh, give me a break. I know more than anyone that I can't win if I hold back against a man like you! I'm no fool, as you can see!"

"Funny to hear you say that right after you gave words to your stupid wish!"

"Hah! If following my primal instincts makes me sinful, then mindless beasts would've sinned merely by existing!"

Ein was so engrossed in his fight that he failed to account for his surroundings. Swallowed up by darkness, his world began to ripple around the edges. It'd turned into a massive celestial orb that floated in the air. In fact, it was quite reminiscent of a solar eclipse.

"I've no plan to debate the mechanics of sin and justice with

you!” Ein yelled.

The clangs of cold steel soon began to shift. No longer were the two men on equal footing. Gradually, Ein began to get a feeling for the Demon Lord’s movements and adapted accordingly. With his brain working at full capacity, the crown prince finally started to gain the upper hand.

“If you’re going to steal the world that I love so much, I just need to stop you then!” Ein shouted.

The world wavered. The blue skies were dyed in the deepest of black, and there was an inexplicable sense of sluggishness that fell upon Ein. He wasn’t sure if he’d become too hot or too cold, but he knew that he felt deeply uncomfortable. Just then, the Demon Lord stepped towards Ein and swung his black sword. The crown prince had very little left in him, and it wasn’t an understatement to say that he’d made it this far on sheer willpower alone. If he relaxed for even a millisecond, he knew that everything would come crashing down on him, and he refused to stop his arms.

“Huh?” Ein gasped.

Suddenly, his knees buckled as he fell lifelessly upon the blue fire roses. The roses’ thorns stabbed his thighs, mercilessly piercing through his skin in the process. The pain was less of an issue compared to the strength that had seemingly left his body. It took a few seconds for him to stand back up again, but he felt that his senses had dulled.

“Finally,” the Demon Lord said as he outstretched his arms with a flourish.

Annoyed by how heavy his body felt, Ein managed to grip his blade tightly once more. The fingers that wrapped around Ishtar were as feeble as a baby’s. *Already?*

“Finally! I’ve been eagerly awaiting this moment,” the Demon Lord said.

It pained Ein to even blink as the world in front of him rippled and shook. “No… Not yet!”

“You’ve done enough.”

The last bit of the blue sky was consumed by the void, and the entire world turned dark. A massive ball of light hung in the dark sky and only then did Ein finally notice it. The orb emanated a black light that was darker than the void above him. Hot white gases shimmered along its rim, and Ein felt a thick magic unlike

anything he'd ever experienced. It was clear that he had very little time left.

"Rejoice," the Demon Lord said. "The time has come for you to lose yourself and fuse with my being!"

From the ground around them, a fist-sized chunk of light floated up and zoomed towards the dark orb in the sky. Ein found himself pained to discover that every blue fire rose had rotted and wilted away.

"This will be an offering of sorts," the Demon Lord said. "Your final farewell, since you won't be coming back from this."

When Ein peered into the Demon Lord's eyes, there were several other eyeballs darting within. It made Ein's hair stand on end in pure terror.

"I shall show you my gluttony and insatiable thirst," the Demon Lord said.

Ein instinctively grabbed Ishtar and forced his body to advance. He thrust his blade forward and skewered the Demon Lord's throat. The weapon glided through his flesh with no problem at all. *This bastard...*

The Demon Lord purposefully remained in place, with even more black blood gushing from the wound. Upon focusing his senses, Ein could hear the sounds of their hair brushing up against each other. His panting was deafening and he steadied his breathing as he quietly glared at the Demon Lord. The power vested in Ishtar glittered to defeat the Demon Lord, but the enemy was as calm as ever.

He drew Ein close and whispered in the crown prince's ear. "This is your last chance."

"What the—?!" Ein gasped.

As he was brought closer, Ishtar slid farther into Demon Lord's wound. Black blood spurted from his mouth—this would've been a fatal blow to any normal person, but Ein was unable to shake the unease that gripped him. He tried to pull away, but the Demon Lord had wrapped his arm tightly around the prince's body.

"This power can only be used here," the Demon Lord said. "Why do you think that is so? It's because you keep fighting me."

"I don't believe it!" Ein roared. "I'm still—"

"Still resisting? Are you sure about that?" the Demon Lord smiled. "Give up. You lack the power to fight back in your current

state.”

Ein was spiritually resisting still, but it served little purpose at this point. The Demon Lord spoke eloquently despite the sword in his throat, and his voice was filled with a passionate tone.

“Let us sing. This is the power of the World Tree, born from you,” the Demon Lord said. He sounded like he was reciting a hymn within a cathedral. The solemn sound of a piano filled the air, enough to make Ein doubt his ears. “Indulge in the blessings within my arms and fall into an eternal slumber.”

The Demon Lord pulled Ein in for a passionate embrace as though he were bidding farewell to his beloved wife. The arms that enveloped the crown prince were powerful, refusing to let their prey wriggle out of their grasp.

“Stop!” Ein grunted. “I’m not gonna die with you!”

“Oh, you won’t,” the Demon Lord assured. “We’ll become a single being.”

The two couldn’t have been more different. The sound caused the black sphere in the sky to crack.

“May my blessings rain upon you,” the Demon Lord said.

It shone brightly while retaining its inherent darkness. The power within the dark sphere leaked from its cracks and dispersed. Rays of pure darkness penetrated the sky and gouged out the earth. They flew in a spiral, leaving scattered petals in their wake. Needless to say, one would hesitate to touch the rays—anything that unfortunately fell in its trajectory began to wilt. Their bodies began to turn black and shrivel up.

And then, with a gentle tap, Ein was released from the embrace. He fell to the ground, atop a pile of dark and wilted blue fire roses. Ishtar’s form had started to change as well, morphing into a clump of steel that had been left to the ravages of time. It wasn’t long before the blade fell beside the royal.

“Slumber for eternity. From here, let us sate our hunger, *together*,” the Demon Lord said.

Ein said not a word, and he couldn’t move a single finger. Only one other sign of life remained: a single blue fire rose by his feet that had managed to evade the cold clutches of death.

Chapter Nine: The World Tree of Gluttony Part 2

Silverd stood in a corner of the audience room—one that allowed him to gaze towards Heim. He seriously stared through the window, unable to bring himself to take the throne. He then noticed a menacing glimmer off in the distance, filling him with trepidation.

“A jet-black sun…” His Majesty muttered.

Even the clouds floating over Kingsland were pulled into this void-like sphere, towards a light that seemed to shine with an amethyst’s hues. Even in the middle of night, this light was striking. *What happened? Did something happen to Ein?* Silverd wondered worriedly. He was worried about Krone too, of course, but the mysterious rays sent shivers down his spine. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door, and Lloyd rushed inside.

“Your Majesty, it’s an emergency! Please allow me to mobilize the water train!” Lloyd shouted.

Silverd didn’t seem to mind this outburst. “You have my permission.” He continued to gaze out the window, towards the skies that loomed above Heim.

“You saw it, didn’t you?”

“It’d be most unusual if I *didn’t* notice it, Lloyd.”

The marshal went on his knees. “The fleet of ships that returned from the earlier battle have already returned.”

“And what of my ship?”

“It’s still docked, Your Majesty.”

“Then have my ship sail forth as well. The only vessel remaining is the *Princess Olivia*…”

Before he could finish his statement, there was another notable change. The black sun that appeared over Heim had started to crack, and *something* was spewing forth from it. That little detail didn’t escape Silverd’s keen eyes.

“What in the world is that?” the king gasped.

He was so far away, and yet it was all so crystal clear. He locked

eyes with an inorganic gaze…one that seemed to joyfully smile back.

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Back within the confines of what was once her family's prized rose garden, Krone quickly realized that the situation around her was continuously shifting. In mere moments, she'd been surrounded by a horde of rose monsters, a threatening tangle of twitching tree roots, and the many bushels of explosive magical fruit that loomed overhead. Krone's only source of protection from the constant attacks and magical bombardments was the blue veil that surrounded her. Serving as something of a shield against the World Tree's machinations, the veil had become the last line of defense in holding off the tree's complete awakening.

Despite not saying a single word, the young advisor felt her hands tremble as she gently caressed her beloved's cheek with her fingertips. She wasn't afraid of dying, but she refused to admit exactly *what* she feared—even to herself. Up until now, she'd never once cursed herself for being so intelligent. Outside the veil, an unsettling laughter bounced from wall to wall while thick saliva oozed from the maw of each rose monster.

"Ha! Ha ha ha!"

"Heh heh heh!"

"Hyah! Hee hee! Ha ha!"

Ein? As the minutes droned on, Krone felt her beloved's body steadily losing its warmth. A quivering sensation quickly took hold over the girl's face, causing her lips to grow numb and a stream of tears to sting her eyes. The very fingertips she'd just caressed him with were now soaked with tears. She hoped that a tight embrace would warm him up, but it only ended up reinforcing the painful reality of the situation.

When Ramza, Misty, and Marco had arrived on the scene, they instantly felt the same stinging pain in their hearts. Despite that pain, the trio approached the blue veil, still holding out a sliver of hope. The World Tree attempted to hold them back, but they mustered up all the strength they had left to reach Krone.

"It seems to me that Lady Krone isn't to leave his side!" Marco said.

“It sure does,” Ramza muttered before he turned to his wife. “Misty, was this all part of your master plan?”

“Of course not!” the Elder Lich cried. “If I knew, I would’ve planned something entirely around her!”

Krone didn’t realize that she had company. In reality, she’d been overwhelmed by an inexplicable sense of panic that had gripped her entire body for the first time. In an attempt to ground herself, she focused all of her senses on her beloved’s face. Krone didn’t need the situation spelled out for her—she was keenly aware of the World Tree’s odd behavior and its sudden overabundance of magical power. It wasn’t hard for her to put two and two together in the mathematics of her prince’s fate.

“Ein, please…” she pleaded.

The tears kept flowing from Krone’s deep amethyst eyes. Despite wiping her eyes dry until they became red and swollen, the tears just wouldn’t stop.

“I’ll never play coy with you again! I promise… I’ll never, *ever* do it again! I’ll be more honest and open with you! I swear!”

Krone was never one to beg. But for the first time in her life, she found herself on her knees, beseeching the man she loved so dearly. She continued to sob desperately and clutched Ein’s face as she brought it close to her cheek.

“Please. Wake up…”

But it wasn’t Ein answering her desperate pleas. The blue veil finally started cracking, allowing the World Tree’s forces to slip past the legendary trio and strike the young lady. Yet, the weeping Krone showed no fear. The tears kept flowing down her cheeks as she flashed a defiant glare at her enemies—ready to adamantly defend her prince from the encroaching world around them.

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The World Tree of Gluttony felt his hands tremble in ecstasy as a serene smile stretched across his face. As his spawn gazed at the world crumbling around them, Ein remained deathly silent.

“This is what it means for us to merge into a single being,” the tree said.

The crown prince’s consciousness had been shattered, and his inner world was just about to disappear completely—at least, it

should have.

"Why?!" the confused World Tree shouted as he watched on from his corner of the world. The blue fire roses had already wilted and rotted away—a victor had seemingly been declared. "He should be dead… Why does this world still persist?"

However, no amount of mental gymnastics could lead him to an answer. Completely perplexed, he whirled around to glance at the fallen crown prince.

"No… You're still…" he murmured. The tree could hardly believe it—the boy was still alive?

"Gah… Guh… Ah…" Ein grunted, coughing as he endured the continued pain.

But his body wasn't moving. *This… This isn't over yet,* Ein thought. Despite the fact he couldn't open his eyes or gauge the state he was in, Ishtarica's crown prince still lived.

"To say I'm astonished would be an understatement," the World Tree remarked. "I unleashed enough power to crumble an entire continent, and yet…here you are."

Ein tried to wiggle his fingers, but it was to no avail. As the tree approached, the crown prince was overcome with a sense of urgency, but his body still refused to move. His entire being was now an ashen black, but it wasn't the result of immolation. No, he'd been cursed—destined to be consumed by the World Tree and its magical energy. *Move. Please, move. I have to.*

All the while, the World Tree arrived at his side. He held the black blade with a reverse grip—ready to plunge the blade into his creator's head.

"Frankly, I'm almost proud of your spirit's unyielding tenacity," the World Tree said.

Barely able to move, Ein couldn't snap back with even the slightest of rebuttals. Surely, only death awaited him.

"Please. Wake up…"

Then, from out of the dark sky's deepest reaches, *her* voice pierced his mind like an arrow. The World Tree was visually stunned as he stared in the direction of the voice's origin.

Is she nearby? Ein knew it was impossible, but he couldn't simply dismiss her voice as an auditory hallucination. At the very least, he wanted to know if she was close by. He opened his eyes and looked to his side. If she *was* there, he'd have to give her a good

talking-to for coming to such a dangerous place. *I could still fight… If only my body would move…*

He could barely tell if he'd blinked, much less moved his fingers. The idea of moving his body had become a pipe dream to the prince.

"As a token of my respect, I'll ensure that the two of you are never separated," the World Tree said.

With the black sword's tip at Ein's throat, the World Tree finally thrust it down.

"What the… What is this light?!" he shrieked.

A veil of blue light suddenly enveloped Ein's body, protecting him from a surely fatal wound. Only able to withstand the single blow, the azure shield proceeded to shatter and its fragments melted away into the prince's being.

"What's going on?" the World Tree wondered. "No… It's nothing that requires my concern."

Killing Ein was his only objective. With nothing else standing in his way, the World Tree simply needed to swing his blade down once more. He regained his composure and thrust his blade, but this time, a silver wind blew him back.

It's warm. Ein felt a warmth course through his body as the blood started flowing to his extremities once more. His wounds began to heal, and his breathing steadied. *I can still fight.* As these reassurance filled his mind, the prince reached out for now-dulled Ishtar and firmly grasped it.

"I…" Ein started.

He suddenly sat up, paying no heed to the World Tree's slowly recoiling footsteps. After Ein used the holy sword to bring himself to his feet, a silver light started cracking through the blade's dull patina. Almost instantly, Ishtar had returned to its former glory—its shining silver splendor slicing through the darkness.

"I can still…" Ein groaned.

A powerful aura emanated from the prince—an aura that bore down with pressure of the hero king himself. The void that had once consumed the world above and beneath Ein had been suddenly pushed back by Ishtar's light.

"I can still fight!" Ein declared.

"I have no idea where that power of yours came from, but it won't change a thing," the World Tree said. "You're still going to

meet your end, here and now."

"It doesn't matter. I just need to defeat you before this world crumbles away."

When faced with the prince's intense aura and overwhelming resolve, the gluttonous villain only furrowed his brows in response. However, there was no need for him to panic. He knew the void surrounding them would blot out the light and swallow the world once more—he just needed to buy himself a little time. If necessary, he could blow Ein away with the same attack he'd used earlier. Even if Ein had found his second wind, he'd still lose in the end.

"Very well. I shall bless you again, as many times as it takes," the World Tree said.

Another melodious chorus rang out as another void-like sphere materialized, causing Ein to crouch as he stepped forward. With his footing firmly established, the prince rushed ahead and swung his blade—fighting with a completely new aura about him.

The World Tree easily blocked the first swing, but he was visibly caught off guard by the second. Unable to block the blow, the glutton leaped out of the way and took a few steps back. When the third swing came, it looked as if he were desperately trying to escape Ishtar's reach.

"I don't understand," the World Tree said. "Where is all of this power coming from? How?!"

Ein's world stood on the brink of total destruction, and his diminished stamina reflected that. Even at this very moment, the once-sunny skies had crumbled away as they were sucked into the darkness. Despite that, the prince moved with a gusto that fiercely outpaced his performance in his initial clash with the World Tree. Ein hadn't just recovered—he now displayed a level of power and swiftness that would've come in handy during his battle with Jayle's specter.

"Really? You're trying to surpass him?" the World Tree asked.

"I am!" Ein declared. "I'll rise above the first king's legacy and defeat you where you stand!"

An azure light burst forth from the prince's body that, in combination with Ishtar's power, left a stunning series of silvery blue afterimages in his wake. Propelled by the mighty powers that permeated his being, Ein slashed through the World Tree, riddling

the glutton with wounds that refused to heal.

The very power used to defeat the previous Demon Lord had awakened from its slumber once more. Before this very moment, the depowered Ein hadn't been able to draw out Ishtar's true power. But now, he displayed a deftness that put him on par with or even surpassed Jayle's abilities. Incurring a mere scratch, let alone standing within the prince's overwhelming presence, shredded away one's magical energy at such a rate that they'd lose their breath right away. Even if the World Tree had managed to expertly dance around Ishtar's blows, another unclosable wound would appear on his body before he knew it.

"Is there something I can't see in your movements?!" the World Tree gasped.

Upon closer inspection, the presence of Ein's afterimages made it clear that the World Tree couldn't keep up with his creator. He looked up and clicked his tongue with annoyance when he noticed that the sphere hadn't fully coated itself in darkness just yet. Ein swung again and again, cornering his foe.

"This isn't funny at all!" the World Tree shouted.

"Funny? I've never been more serious!" Ein roared.

"Gah... Then that makes you even more annoying! How many times will you stand up?! How many times must I cut you down?"

"I'll stand back up as many times as it takes! I'm not giving up until you fall!"

"I wish you could understand that persistence is exactly what pisses me off the most!"

The time had come. Filled with immense power, the void-like sphere stretched out across the sky alongside the sound of an ominous hymn. Hit with a wave of tension, Ein's expression took a stern and nervous turn.

"I'm not losing either!" the World Tree bellowed.

To satisfy his all-consuming, primal urge to devour, it was key that he fused with Ein. The World Tree yearned for a power greater than any other, making it imperative that he amassed enough power if he were to swallow the world whole.

"I shall grace you with even more blessings!" the World Tree shouted.

He raised his hands high in the air as he jumped away. The new void-like sphere cracked open, unleashing another wave of black

light.

“Perish! Submit to your fate!” he yelled.

Ein gripped Ishtar tightly and stood tall. His body overflowed with a power unlike anything he’d felt before. He raised his sword high in the air and braced himself. Before the rays of darkness could reach him, he swung his blade down and roared from the top of his lungs.

“Haaaah!”

A gust of silver wind surrounded him before it swirled around the blade and shot out at the incoming rays.

“Gahhh… Ahhhh!” Ein bellowed.

Despite the cursed power they ripped through the sky with, the dark rays never once touched the ground—they had clashed with Ishtar’s mighty wind before ceasing to be.

“Impossible! I don’t believe it!” the World Tree cried.

“Then what’s in front of your eyes?” Ein demanded. “If it’s impossible, then I shouldn’t be here anymore!”

The World Tree had enough power to wipe a continent off the face of the globe. Directing all of that godly power at one boy would be seen as unreasonable, but in this world, such an act was the next logical step. And upon swatting away such an attack, Ein had proven the World Tree’s point. The glutton hadn’t let his guard down at all—not even for a moment.

“Hah! Ha ha ha ha!” he laughed. “Splendid!”

Relief washed over the World Tree’s face as he noticed Ein inch back ever so slightly. Finally, the silver light had been pushed back.

“Unfortunately, that won’t be enough!” the World Tree retorted.

“Gah… Aghhhh!” Ein shouted.

The following impact quickly knocked the wind right out of him, not to mention that the indestructible curse still lingered. As the curse crept across Ein’s face, parts of his body were once again dyed in an ashen black. However, Ishtar’s divine magic quickly set about purifying the rot.

“Huff… Huff…” Ein panted.

“H-How did you survive that?” the World Tree said incredulously.

Supported by Ishtar’s might, the prince took a knee. He might’ve been having a rough go of it, that was all that ailed him. Even if he hadn’t fully recovered, was unable to use his skills, and had had most of his strength sapped away by the World Tree. *But*

that doesn't matter. He could still fight. He knew it to be so. In fact, there was nothing more important to him at this moment.

"My goal still hasn't changed," the World Tree said. "I shall bless you as many times as it takes, until you can no longer stand! I'll even draw you into my loving embrace again!"

"And I'll stand back up, as many times as it takes," Ein replied.

The royal had managed to endure the earlier hit, but he knew that he'd used up a good chunk of his dwindling stamina. He managed to hide his concerns and feign nonchalance. The World Tree, on the other hand, was initially shocked by Ein's second wind, but… *He still has some power left.*

Somehow, Ein had to find a path forward, and he racked his brain for an answer. It was then that he felt a thorny prick on his hand. When he looked down, he spotted a blue fire rose on the ground beside him. *Huh, it managed to evade that light.* The rose proceeded to beautifully bloom, having narrowly escaped the all-consuming void.

Even in a precarious situation such as this, Ein flashed a smile. When he brushed his fingers against the petals, he noticed something glowing underneath the flower. When he reached out, he felt his fingers curling around what appeared to be a pale-blue magic stone—Consort Laviola's stone.

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As Krone remained at her beloved's side, she felt her heart beating faster and faster. However, she noticed his fingertips move ever so slightly. Ein's physical body was starting to visibly regain its lost vitality, and Krone entangled her fingers with his, firmly clutching the magic stone between their hands.

"I was told that it's a good luck charm," Krone murmured as a serene smile crept up her lips. Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes and streaked down her cheeks. "I'm so happy right now."

She brushed her beloved fingertips once more as she spoke. "I'm so, so happy that I get to be with you again, in *this* garden of all places. But…"

That wasn't enough for her.

"I'll be even happier if you wake up, Ein. I swear to God."

She couldn't help it. A tear rolled down her cheek and onto the

back of Ein's hand. She knew that he was in far more pain, but she couldn't stop putting words to her thoughts.

"You're kind to a fault... And a bit shy to boot."

She was describing the boy she loved so dearly.

"Sometimes, you're a thoughtless optimist."

But even so.

"You've got a firm, mean grip on my heart... You're the most precious thing in the world to me."

Krone saw the time they'd spent together as nothing but endearing, and thought back to those times as she gently caressed his cheek.

"I know you tried to end this all by yourself, but I'm not going to let you do it alone. I never will, Ein."

She gazed at her beloved—his eyes still firmly shut. Was it all her imagination? She felt his hands grip her back.

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Ein grabbed Laviola's magic stone. Before he could tuck it away in his chest pocket, the words of his beloved echoed in his head.

"I know you tried to end this all by yourself, but I'm not going to let you do it alone. I never will, Ein. I don't care if you're upset with me for traveling to such a dangerous place. I'm going to stay right here, until you come back."

Krone's voice quivered with sorrow, stirring Ein's heart. He tightly gripped Laviola's stone, and stood back up. He placed the stone into his pocket and took deep breaths to steady himself.

"Sorry, World Tree of Gluttony, but I've gotta end this quickly now," he said.

He was acutely aware that this was a race against time—the longer the battle drew out, the closer he neared defeat. Laviola's stone began to glow brightly. Guided by the dazzling shimmer, he felt a power course through his veins.

Why? Ein wondered. *I didn't use Absorb.* Ever since he was a child, he had tended to unconsciously absorb the stones of those around him. Had his old childhood habit run wild? Or was it a coincidence? It was by sheer luck that Krone had brought the stone to him, but it didn't surprise him. Understanding his situation, Ein nodded along, but suddenly felt the stone violently

pulsating in his hands.

What was that? He could recall that he'd unconsciously absorbed most of the stone's power upon receiving it from the elven chief. However, he'd stopped himself midway. Much of Laviola's magical energy remained with the stone—one that shone with a beautiful sapphire sheen. Luckily for the prince, it was this azure magic that had allowed him to move once more.

At the same time, Ein noticed Ishtar glistening in the corner of his eye. After all, this was the very same blade that Laviola's husband had once wielded. *Wait a second...* The first king and his consort had finally been reunited, causing an ancient fairy tale to flash across the crown prince's mind.

"I don't believe it," Ein muttered.

"Don't believe what?" the World Tree asked, tilting his head to one side as he launched another flurry of attacks.

Accompanied by Upaskamuy's frosty aura, a rain of endless roots and Phantom Hands descended upon the royal. However, the royal in question seemed rather dumbfounded as he easily cut down everything that came his way.

If I fail now, I might die here. What if I can't even use it in the first place? No, now's not the time to be second-guessing myself. A myriad of thoughts flooded Ein's mind as he continued to cycle through a torrent of questions and answers. Finally, he lowered Ishtar.

"You're finally giving up?" the World Tree asked as one of his eyes twitched. He extended one arm and stretched out his fingers as he spoke icily, "What a boring end to this farce."

Disappointment. There was no other way to describe how he felt.

"I wanted to fuse with you, even though your acts of resistance have become a nuisance," he said as another throng of Phantom Hands emerged from his back. They were headed straight for Ein, eager to end him. "But I've never thought you'd show me such a blatant display of resignation."

But before the World Tree could fully voice his disappointment, his face twisted in shock.

"Show you what now?" Ein asked.

The Phantom Hands dissipated in the blink of an eye. Ein hadn't even swung Ishtar; the tendrils had vanished before they could even reach him and turned into pale particles of light.

“You should’ve lost all of your powers again!” the World Tree shrieked. “How can you negate my attacks?!”

“You’re right,” came a reply. “I’m just the little ol’ powerless Ein you keep yammering on about. But you do know that I still have another skill up my sleeve, right?”

Ein’s Absorb ability had played into his Demon Lord transformation, but every ability he’d absorbed prior to that had been stolen by the World Tree. However, there was a peculiar skill he’d attained after his metamorphosis. The World Tree surely knew about it, but both parties had been convinced that the skill had no combat applications and shoved it aside.

“This little joke of yours isn’t funny at all!” the World Tree shouted.

Another volley of Phantom Hands shot out at the crown prince, but they quickly disintegrated. Ein took a deep breath as his thoughts wandered off to the corporeal world. Far off in the distance stood his beloved nation—a country with a deep love for silver in all its forms. This was enough for Ein to steel his resolve and face down his foe.

“Very well!” the World Tree yelled. “I’ll skewer you with the blade!”

He immediately activated every single skill at his disposal while running ahead with the black sword in hand. The world tree believed that he simply needed to smother his enemy with overwhelming power to walk out victorious.

Ein, on the other hand, was frighteningly calm despite the sword flying at him. *History repeated because of me, and for that, I must take responsibility.*

“I’m the man who shall ascend to Ishtarica’s silver throne! And as such, I’ll put an end to this feud!” Ein shouted.

As their blades clashed, clusters of jet-black particles and silver lights intermingled with each other. In this exchange, Ein had finally walked away as the victor. The light quickly overtook the darkness, dispelling the void that slowly enveloped the entire world. Shafts of sunlight peeked through the void, as though the sunrise had finally arrived.

“How can you use this much power?!” the World Tree shrieked.

Indeed, Ein hadn’t reacquired any of his lost skills nor had his speed or power improved a single iota. And despite it all, the

power gap between the two of them had only grown smaller. In fact, Ein was starting to gain the upper hand.

“That speed…that agility…that accursed silver that burns my flesh! How?!” the World Tree shouted.

“You still don’t get it?” Ein replied.

“Heh heh… Not at all! I should have stripped you of all your power! Even with that king’s power, you can’t possibly stand as my equal!” He glared at Ishtar as it sliced through the air before bracing himself for impact with the black blade. “This time, I’ll take your attack, head-on! I’ll pulverize this so-called heroic power of yours!”

“There’s just this one thing I’ve wanted to tell you…” A silver light spiraled around Ein’s body as the black blade hurtled in his direction. “Don’t get it twisted; I’m no hero!”

And at that moment, the two blades clashed.

“I’m the Demon Lord, one who shall surpass the hero king!” Ein declared.

A fierce clash ensued as the World Tree was lit ablaze by the prince’s power. But at the same time, the crown prince had been hexed by his enemy’s cursed strikes. Silver and black clashed against each other—over and over again. Slowly but surely, the black had been pushed back by silver’s glory. Hoping to push back, the World Tree furrowed his brow as he attempted to summon the Dullahan’s armor.

“Huh?! Why won’t it appear?!” the World Tree gasped.

Try as he might, not even a ringlet of armor would appear. Ein wasn’t one to pass up this opportunity.

“Raaaaah!”

With a mighty roar, Ein sunk Ishtar deep into one of the World Tree’s shoulders. A geyser of black blood gushed from the wound and brought the glutton to his knees.

“Where in the world is such power coming from…” the World Tree murmured.

As the gears in his head began to turn, something Ein had said replayed in his mind.

“You’re right. I’m just the little ol’ powerless Ein you keep yammering on about. But you do know that I still have another skill up my sleeve, right?”

He gasped in horror upon coming to this epiphany. It couldn’t

be… However, he soon convinced himself that it *had* to be the only logical explanation.

"You definitely woke up, there's no arguing that," the World Tree said. "But you're not the only thing that awakened…"

Despite falling to his knees, the World Tree brandished his blade as he faced the crown prince. As the two clashed once more, a shock wave rippled out throughout the realm, giving the World Tree a moment to vocalize his thoughts.

"I was also growing weaker," he said. "With that in mind, I guess I can't use the skills I stole from you. Am I right?"

Instead of saying anything, Ein simply replied with a triumphant smile.

"Gh… Impossible!" the World Tree roared. "Are you saying that you bet it all on a silly farce?!"

"Yeah…and the odds weren't exactly in my favor!" Ein shouted back. "But it looks like I've pulled one over on the house! Seems that Weaken does exactly as it describes, and you're giving me a firsthand demonstration of its effectiveness!"

The final skill he'd obtained, Weaken, was the seemingly useless power that resided within Consort Laviola's stone.

"I don't know if it's because this realm is a place within my heart or if we're tied by an inseparable bond, but as long as this skill affects you too, I don't care!"

Having tested Weaken before, Ein knew that it only worked on himself. Unsure if the World Tree would share in the disadvantage, the prince had staked his life on this risky gamble. Had he failed, he'd only have put himself on the back foot—an act tantamount to suicide. It all depended on exactly what these two shared between each other. However, Ein also bore the brunt of the skill as well. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have been able to put up a fight, but he was spared this time.

"The hero king's power is despicable!" the World Tree spat.

If it wasn't for Jayle's power, Ein wouldn't have had the edge in this situation. As the power didn't belong to him, it had been left unaffected by the effects of Weaken. This left the World Tree to wither while the prince could still use Ishtar's might to turn the tables. *I'm only standing thanks to the efforts of King Jayle and Consort Laviola!* The synergy between the couple's powers was spectacular—like something out of a fairy tale. But as this story

became real, Ein's heart burned with a ferocity he'd never felt before.

"This is the end!" he shouted.

"What?!" the World tree gasped.

For a split second, Ein had vanished. Even the World Tree couldn't keep up with his speed. When the crown prince reappeared, he was right beside his enemy as he swung down Ishtar with all his might.

"Fall to the depths, World Tree of Gluttony!" Ein bellowed.

The World Tree hastily raised the black sword to defend himself, but it shattered on impact—he'd been impaled by Ishtar. Another geyser of black blood sprayed into the air before it trickled down the silver blade, soon reaching Ein's hand and dripping onto the ground.

The world tree sighed and gazed up at the sky. "Ah, so this is how it feels to have your hopes crushed."

A sense of resignation washed over his face as noticed his extremities starting to fade away. Ein no longer raised his blade—the breathtaking crossing of blades had come to an end. No longer did the World Tree emanate even an ounce of magical energy, and Ein took a step back.

"This is my victory," he said.

"No. Unfortunately, you're wrong," the World Tree said.

The crown prince felt a cold wind brush against his back and the tree's masklike face morphed into a grin. The tree's visage oozed with an inexplicable sense of unease.

"There are no winners in this battle sadly," the tree said.

"What do you mean?" Ein demanded.

"Exactly what I said. Ah, well, I suppose you've won this battle, and you can be proud of that, of course. But you've simply won a battle within your heart... That has no bearing on the battle raging on the outside, correct?" Suddenly, the tree produced a black sword out of thin air. "Ah, put your guard down already. I'm not in the mood to fight you anymore."

Then why do you hold your sword? But before Ein could actually ask the question, the World Tree had plunged the black blade into his own throat. He coughed grotesquely.

"Whether I win or lose, my ultimate goal hasn't changed one bit," the tree said. "It's a pity that I couldn't fuse with you, but I'll

treat myself to a nice meal before I'm gone."

"Wait!" Ein shouted. "What are you planning?!"

"Heh. Heh heh. Perhaps we couldn't become a single being, but let's warmly welcome the final moments we're about to share together!"

And with that, he disappeared. Ein fell to his knees in astonishment, but he quickly looked around as he recalled the World Tree's final words. *How can I awaken in the real world? I have to chase after him.*

"Ugh… Is it because he's still alive?" Ein wondered.

Trapped in a cage forged by his own psyche, the prince couldn't find any sort of exit. He could quickly circle his surroundings with a quick jog, but the world only continued to crumble around him. Just then, the wilted patch of blue fire roses regained their vigor—their green leaves shining in the light once again as their petals bloomed. Only a handful of roses bloomed, creating a path forward.

"A door…"

A pair of double doors stood out in the distance—the very ones that led to the mausoleum. They proceed to yawn wide open, allowing Ein to peek inside to confirm his suspicions.

Chapter Ten: The World Tree of Gluttony Part 3

With the sky's edge dyed in a deep blue, a new morning had dawned upon the legendary heroes.

"Dear, look," Misty said.

The World Tree's trunk has started to crack apart. At the same time, its vines, roots, and fruit gradually turned into particles of light. A silence proceeded to fall upon the ruined royal capital. However, the dark orb still hung in the air. Through the cracks in the orb's shell, the eye that had been staring directly at Misty and her allies had started to frantically dart about.

"It's trying to induce its own birth," she said.

"Is he going all out, then?" Ramza asked.

"No, it wants a premature birth, even if that sacrifices some of its vitality. Do you see the black liquid leaking from the trunk? It's slowly floating towards that glowing ball."

Misty had mentioned this nascent calamity when they first squared off with the World Tree. Not to be outdone, Ramza made note of its potential to destroy the entire content in one fell swoop. The Demon Lord's power couldn't be stopped if this being was about to emerge right before their eyes.

"At this rate, it'll die," Misty noted. "Even if it has its roots across the continent and can feast on everything around it, it'll soon starve to death. It won't be able to sustain its appetite."

"Then what happened to Ein?!" Ramza yelled.

No one held the answer as silence settled in. Just then, a dark-haired man appeared out of nowhere. Unlike everyone else, he had a few things to say.

"He's still sleeping. Eventually, I'll have him join me in the front row and we'll watch the world burn together. Hand in hand, we'll welcome those final moments as a pair."

The man emerged behind the trio, prompting them to immediately whirl around and grab their weapons.

"I almost thought that Jayle had come back from the dead for a moment there," Ramza said.

While they were all shocked, they knew this man wasn't Jayle.

"Thank you for the kind heads-up, Mr. World Tree of Gluttony," Misty said. "Could you tell us one more thing? You mentioned that Ein's sleeping, but did you lose to him?"

"I wonder," the man replied. He walked slowly ahead without a care. "But I cannot forgive *her*."

The moment those words left his lips, the trio pounced on him, only to be quickly restrained by void tendrils that grew from his limbs.

"I suggest you don't move," he said. "As my mind and body are on the verge of unraveling, I don't think I'd be able to hold back if I lose control. Why don't the three of you just watch over me?"

No amount of struggling would allow them to break free. In fact, the more they struggled, the tighter their restraints became.

"I'm going all out now," he said. "It would be meaningless if you low-life abominations tried to put up a fight against me. That won't change, even if a *certain* Nightmare of Envy were to join the fray."

An attack shot out from his blind spot.

"You knew I was here?" Arshay gasped.

While she'd been slumbering away from the battlefield, the Demon Lord forced herself to awaken when she sensed a change in the air. Despite secretly keeping tabs on the situation from afar, Arshay had quickly fallen victim to the World Tree's void tendrils. Even if she exerted her immense power, she couldn't break free with any of her spells.

"Stay there and watch the world wilt," the man said. "You'll all fall to the same fate soon enough and rot away. Equality at its finest."

The World Tree's footsteps were wobbly and unsteady. His vision had already started to blur, a sign that he only had a small fraction of his power left. Luckily for him, the girl he was looking for wasn't too far away. She was still surrounded by that blue veil, making her easy to spot, and he smiled with glee.

"Hello there," he said with a friendly smile as he approached. The blue veil glowed and flickered with vigilance.

Krone raised her head when she heard his voice. His face so closely resembled Ein's that she was overcome with a mixture of grief and vexation.

"Stop," she ordered.

“I don’t need to listen to you,” he answered. “I may hate you, but never will I feel any sort of sympathy. Do you know why?”

“Not at all.”

He drew nearer. Krone instantly knew that the World Tree stood before her, but she continued to embrace her beloved while refusing to flee. She glared at him with animosity, gripping the dagger that she’d brought for self-defense.

“That little trick is pointless,” the World Tree said.

A simple wave of his hand was all that was needed to shatter the veil. He didn’t even need to lift a finger as one of the vines crawled to her side and restrained her hand. Her blade slid from her grasp, but she desperately clung onto Ein, refusing to be torn away from him.

“You like to hurt frail girls, do you?” a scorn-filled voice snapped.

“Mm… He’s smaller than I thought. That’s why he lost,” a languid, sleepy voice added.

“Quite so. A far cry from Sir Ein, no doubt,” a loyal voice chimed in.

The restrained trio stood between Krone and the World Tree. Beside the young advisor was Misty, who brought the girl close.

“I suppose the fact that you were able to escape is worthy of some praise, but don’t insult me any further,” the World Tree seethed, displaying his annoyance.

He wanted to quickly kill Krone, unleash his power, and consume everything that he could. He’d gaze upon the destroyed world alongside his other half, and finally, he wanted to take a look at Ein’s face before the tree resigned himself to his death.

“You’re all nothing but a litter of weaklings that failed to die,” the tree spat. “I’ll take care of all of you in a flash.”

It was clear that he’d reached his limit, just barely clinging to his sanity.

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Ein walked through the mausoleum with a new light illuminating the walls every time he passed a fixture.

“I knew it was you,” he said as he reached the mausoleum’s depths. He looked up at the pedestal where the fabled sword had been sealed.

“I’m glad that I was able to meet with you again,” the man replied.

“The pleasure is all mine, Your Majesty Jayle.”

Jayle sat on the stairs that led to the pedestal and gazed at the boy. “You can sit next to me.”



Ein was surprised by how casual the first king's words were, but obediently sat next to him.

"Congratulations," Jayle said as Ein took his seat.

"It's not over yet," the boy replied.

"No, it's surely been settled. You've not only defeated the red foxes, but you've surpassed me. Haven't you?"

"I hate to break it to you, but I haven't cut down the World Tree just yet." Jayle shrugged as Ein went on, "But... I would like to thank you for your help back there."

"Hmm? Help with what?"

"You lent me your power, as did Consort Laviola. I can't thank both of you enough."

"Ah, so you believe that we are the ones to thank for your victory."

"Am I wrong?"

"I wouldn't say we were. Ultimately, the effectiveness of any power depends on whoever wields it."

Jayle looked as serious as ever—he didn't seem like he was trying to be overly considerate, and his tone was earnest.

"You should be proud," Jayle said. "Be confident in your own strength."

Ein remained silent.

"Is that your reply?" Jayle asked.

"No, I just never thought you'd be showering me with endless generosity up until the very end here," Ein admitted.

The first king broke into boisterous laughter. It seemed that Ein's stubbornly given reply and terse expression had tickled Jayle's funny bone.

"Ha ha ha, what a hoot!" Jayle said between fits of chuckling. "Whew, I never thought that I'd laugh like that again given my current circumstances."

It was then that Ein recalled his own present situation. "Um, may I ask you something?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Are we sitting next to each other because of Ishtar, Your Majesty? Or more accurately, because of the memories it contains?"

"Hmm, I wouldn't say that."

"Then are you an Undead or something like that?"

“Nope… But I’m not going to give you the real answer to that. My lips are sealed, even if you pelt me with more questions. Consider it a friendly warning.”

“What… But you said I can ask you something.”

“But I never said that I’d answer. And besides, I don’t want to give something away so easily. It’s nothing major though, so there’s no need for you to worry.”

Ein felt like he was gazing in the mirror. Jayle’s verbal mannerisms and appearance resembled his own so closely—they were like clones. The prince was thrilled to know that he had so much in common with his hero, but he felt an odd sort of kinship with the man—it was eerily easy for them to get along.

“Now then,” Jayle said as he sat up straight. His cheery demeanor turned solemn. He gazed up at the mausoleum’s ceiling as he spoke. “With that taken care of, I’ve wanted to properly thank *you*. You’ve accomplished what I couldn’t. For so long, I’ve existed with so much regret looming within me… But thanks to you, I can finally move on.”

“So…are you sure you aren’t an Undead?” Ein asked.

“Ha ha ha, I’m *never* telling.”

“Ugh… All right.”

“Don’t sigh at me like that. Even if you did know, it’s of little consequence. Not to mention that it’s better that you didn’t know.”

“Honestly, that only raises more questions.”

“That’s the way of the world, kid. It’s a cornucopia of mysteries, and that’s what makes it so fascinating… Well, at least I think it does.”

“I give up. I doubt you’d answer any of my questions anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s for the best.”

Afterward, the pair fell silent for a moment or two. Only their faint breathing could be heard echoing within the majestic walls of the mausoleum. They quietly stood up and headed for the altar.

“Uh… At the very least, could I ask why your sword was named ‘Ishtar’?” Ein inquired.

“Sure, but there’s no special reason behind it,” Jayle replied. He paused for a moment and glanced at his blade, which was now fastened to his descendant’s waist. “The sword’s full name is ‘Ishtar the Mainland Blade.’ The dwarf who forged it coined that name. He thought that since the king’s blade was foretold to unify the

continent, there wasn't a more fitting name. So no, I didn't name it with any illusions of grandeur in mind. Be sure to remember that."

"I-I never doubted you," Ein stammered. "Besides, that story leaves no room for doubt."

Nowhere else in the world would one find a king more up to the task of unifying Ishtar—Jayle was the only man for the job. Over time, the king's court would agree to blade's new name. The first king now stood before the pedestal in which Ishtar had once slumbered. Ein was only a few paces behind them.

"Return Ishtar to its resting place," Jayle said as he turned to face the crown prince. "You have no further use for it."

"But..." Ein started.

"If you cast aside my power, you'll be able to wake up. The very power Demon Lords detest will break you free of the World Tree's grasp and allow you to escape. And after all that, freedom will be yours."

Ein felt more than a touch anxious—he wasn't sure if this gamble would pay off. The prince trusted Jayle and this avenue of escape, but he didn't trust himself to defeat the World Tree. Knowing that the king's power had to be returned to necessitate his escape, Ein couldn't help but hesitate.

"You know... I'll be mighty pissed if you tell me that you're too scared to give up my power," Jayle said. "Just something to keep in mind."

"Can I ask you one more thing?" Ein inquired.

"Yeah, what?"

"I'm shocked that you're talking to me without much decorum."

"It's not like the extra politeness and stiff manners would benefit me much here. I'm not a fan of all that anyway." Ein still was unsure, but Jayle paid no heed and went on, "Let's get back to the matter at hand. You've surpassed me, so you don't need to rely on my power anymore, right?"

"I don't think that I actually have surpassed you."

"Oh no, you definitely have. You're so much stronger than me now, and I almost didn't recognize you when we met."

Jayle's smile was kind, a beacon of hope. He gently shook his head and pointed to the pedestal, encouraging Ein to return Ishtar. The prince took a deep breath and finally steeled his resolve as he walked ahead.

“King Jayle,” Ein said, calling out the hero king as he gripped Ishtar’s hilt. “I’m really glad that you were my hero.”

“Is this admiration… Or a recurrence? I’m really not sure,” Jayle replied.

“Recurrence, Your Majesty?”

“You’ll understand one day. Right now, I just want you to think about yourself.”

Still confused, Ein drew Ishtar with a backhanded grip and stood before the pedestal. Light poured in from the stained glass windows, and the prince noticed Jayle’s reflection in the blade—it was as if he were looking at his own.

“Thank you for everything,” Ein said.

“You bet,” Jayle replied.

“I’m gonna save the world now…”

“Yeah, get on out there.”

Ishtar slid back into its pedestal. The blade emitted a pale-blue light that spiraled upward towards the ceiling, and the mausoleum was dyed in the colors of a dazzling light show.

And finally…

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Just like he said would, The World Tree of Gluttony had brought the heroic quartet to their knees in a flash. They all now teetered on the verge of defeat.

“You’re all so pathetically foolish,” the World Tree said. “You’re all so terribly weak in comparison to him. You all know that you have no right to stand before me, right? Why do you keep getting up?”

“Heh heh… Ha ha ha!” Ramza chuckled. “I’ve never been good at giving up.”

“I’ll stand up as many times as it takes for my master,” Marco added.

“If I’m gonna die… I’d prefer to go out with a bang!” Arshay said.

Their pithy replies annoyed the World Tree, but there was one voice in particular that infuriated him to no end. Using her staff to support herself, Misty stood resolute as her prized robe fluttered in the wind.

“Well, if we die… So will you,” she said.

“Oh?” the World Tree replied. “You truly believe that we’re on the same level?”

“Of course I do. If you’re so sure that you’re so different, why don’t you tell me why? You’re going to destroy everything, aren’t you? Then it’s all the same. You’re a frail creature, right alongside livestock, insects, and— Gah!”

The World Tree cut her off with a mighty kick to the gut. “Shut your trap. Speaking with you is absolutely repulsive.”

He noticed Ramza’s rage filled face as he looked around, but the World Tree quickly dispatched the remaining heroes by slamming them into the ground with his magical energy. Only a young lady remained—Krone.

“Finally,” the World Tree said as he cackled menacingly.

He approached her, smacked her cheek with the back of his hand, and sent her flying to the ground.

“Ouch…” Krone grunted.

“I’ll end you with my own hands. Without fail,” the World Tree said.

Krone had been separated from her beloved. She crawled on the ground to reach Ein once more, but her body was overcome with a pain unlike anything she’d ever felt. Even so, she didn’t stop. She earnestly drew Ein back into her embrace once more, paying no head to her own messy hair as she carefully pushed away a few strands from her beloved’s cheek.

“Ein…” Krone murmured.

“He won’t wake up,” the World Tree said. “And he never will, not without my permission.”

“Get up, sleepyhead. It’s almost morning.”

“I told you that he’ll never awaken!”

With a furious roar, the World Tree leaped at Krone, but Marco quickly dashed in between them. The knight swung down his greatsword, but it shattered after the World Tree effortlessly blocked it. The glutton proceeded to hit Marco with a roundhouse and sent him flying into a stone wall.

“Don’t touch her!” Ramza shouted.

“Stop! I won’t let you kill her!” Arshay yelled.

The pair tried their best to protect her, but the World Tree’s powerful punches had beaten them into submission. After looking around the battlefield, the glutton picked a crude sword off the

remains of a fallen Heim soldier. It wasn't much of a blade, but it was more than enough to snuff out a single young lady.

"I'll end it here," the World Tree growled.

As he approached her once more, the defeated heroes tried to will their bodies into motion. They couldn't let Krone die here, but their limits had simply been pushed too far.

"No!" Arshay's desperate cry echoed throughout the garden.

The World Tree didn't stop. He raised his blade and prepared to swing down, but Krone simply turned to her allies and smiled.

"Thank you for protecting me until now," she said.

There was no mistaking her words. The World Tree quickly swung down. Everyone feared that all had been lost when suddenly, a clang of steel rang out.

"We meet again," a familiar voice said as he drew Krone close to him.

"World Tree of Gluttony!"

It was now his turn to wrap his beloved in his embrace and protect her with everything he had. He used his black blade to parry the World Tree's attack.



Tears erupted from Krone's eyes and flowed freely down her cheeks. "It took you so, so long."

"I'm sorry," Ein apologized.

"I'll never forgive you. Never ever. Not until we return home together."

"Yeah, I know," he said gently as he wiped a tear from her eye. He drew her close and muttered, "Wait just a bit longer. I'll..."

"Aghhh! Why?!" the World Tree shrieked. "Why do you keep resisting me?!"

"I'll defeat him right now."

While the World Tree stood on the edge of insanity, Ein had just made a firm declaration. Krone nodded back. His allies were tempted to speak up, but they soon shut their mouths when they noticed Ein approaching the glutton with his sword drawn. There was nothing they could do or say—the heroes could only sit back as an inhuman display of swordsmanship unfolded before their eyes.

"There's nowhere to run, World Tree!" Ein roared.

"Run? I've never done such a thing!" the World Tree shouted back. "I've only traveled down the best route to satiate my thirst and hunger!"

"Excuses! You ran from our fight and tried to lock me within my own heart!"

The World Tree gasped with annoyance.

"What the matter?" Ein called. "You're not fighting with the same gusto you had earlier!"

Refusing to face the crown prince head-on, the World Tree dodged a strike before running up the larger tree's trunk. Ein chased after him, kicking his way up the tree and slicing through any branches that impeded him. In a panic, the World Tree summoned a horde of Phantom Hands and attempted to melt down a series of ice pillars in order to use Ocean Current. However, they were no longer fighting in the spiritual realm, making the World Tree's attacks useless.

"Give it all back," Ein said. "Everything you've taken from me, I want back!"

He cut down every attack that came at him, using Toxin Decomposition EX and Absorb to convert it all into power for himself. Ein took advantage of every opening he could find to

swing his blade. The World Tree started losing power with every hit he took, but inversely, Ein just kept growing stronger and stronger. After fighting their way up the tree's, the pair finally arrived at the very top. From that spot, they could see the continent beneath them in its entirety.

"This is where it ends," Ein said.

The World Tree had no choice but to resign himself to his fate—he had no hope of flipping the odds in his favor. Now standing on the lofty treetop, the pair stared into each other's eyes. The World Tree looked utterly defeated, but had shifted his gaze to the dark orb floating in the sky before he outstretched his arms.

"Let us end this together," he said as Ein fell silent. "I'll risk it all and drop my full potential upon the world."

"You think I'll just let you do that?" Ein asked.

"But you can't stop me anymore. Even if you kill me, and you will, the newborn is already wailing and it cannot be stopped."

It was all too late. From the moment he'd made this decision, the World Tree had unleashed a curse upon the world. The cracks in the dark orb of light grew larger, revealing a fetus that lurked deep within the sphere. Its time had come. As clear as day, an ominous power could be seen seeping out of the being. It rocked Ein to the core of his soul—it was unlike anything he'd ever fought before. *It could destroy the world in an instant,* he surmised.

He hadn't once considered the world's overwhelming vastness before, but Ein's intuition told him that this being commanded a great power. Even so, he remained calm as he stood before his enemy, firmly gripping his blade.

"I'm the one who brought you into this world," Ein said "And for that, I'll take responsibility until the very end."

"I'll say it again," the World Tree crowed. "You can't stop it. Even you don't possess the abilities to stop such an overwhelming power!"

His guffawing echoed above the skies of Heim. He claimed that there'd be no winner in this battle, but Ein wasn't sure if that was true. *No, if the world really is destroyed, he'll still win... Even if it isn't how he planned to.*

"We'll just die together!" the World Tree cried.

"No, you're the only one who's dying here," Ein replied.

The prince skewered the World Tree with his blade and drew

him close. None of the glutton's wounds appeared to be healing—he'd reached his limit as well. When the crown prince finally freed his foe from the deadly embrace, the tree walked away feebly and gazed up at the sky.

"You've forgotten one thing," Ein said.

"What did you say?" the tree asked.

"You've forgotten my power."

The tree gasped before he laughed and dismissed the idea. "It's impossible, even for you. You can't absorb that much power."

"I'll just continue to keep doing what I've been doing all along—purify the toxins and absorb it from there. That's it."

A vertical crack ran through the dark orb of light. If it opened like an eggshell, surely the countless eyeballs trapped within would be dispersed throughout the world. Heim would serve as the central hub, but the voices of men and women of all ages would echo across the globe. It seemed that even the clouds were drawn in as everything spiraled into the orb. *It really does look like it's trying to consume everything around it.*

The orb blasted a swirl of black-and-purple light directly at Ein. All at once, he could feel the curse overtaking his body. An intense pain grasped his soul, as if his flesh and bones were being melted away by its searing intensity. The curse had even started to turn his skin an ashen black. *I'm fine. I can still fight.* The crown prince took a deep breath and outstretched his arms like a pair of wings. He activated Toxin Decomposition EX and Absorb. He pulled the dark blast of light into his body and absorbed the orb's power. After a few moments, the particles permeating the air gradually dissipated into Ein's body.

The eyeballs within the orb quickly shifted their attention to Ein before an earsplitting screech erupted from the orb. It was unclear if the screams came from a pain associated with absorption, but the creature within was either trying to flee or redirect its rage at the man stealing its strength away. The curse targeting Ein only grew stronger as it attempted to swallow him whole—turning his skin darker than the black of night all the way up to his neck.

"There's something I'd like to tell you," the tree said.

The World Tree no longer had the power to stop the boy, nor did he intend to. He spoke as Ein stood with his back turned to him. The final result of this clash would soon be uncovered. As the

sphere in the sky started to lose its form, the eyeball within simply gazed down at Ein before it disintegrated into mana and was absorbed. The curse eating away at Ein's body had slowly crept up to his cheeks, but it was too late.

"If you ever find yourself drowning in your own power one day…" the World Tree murmured.

He said nothing more, but the implication was clear: Should that day ever come, he'd be born again. He'd use his second chance to definitively fuse with Ein and transform into a Demon Lord that would devour the world in hopes of satiating his hunger.

Ein kept his back turned and firmly declared, "I'll end my own life before that could ever happen. You'll never be born again."

The World Tree had expected as much; it was exactly the response he'd imagined. The realization made him burst into a fit of laughter.

"Heh heh…" he chuckled. "Yeah, I'd expected as much from you."

His body was slowly disintegrating. Carried by the wind, he was slowly absorbed into Ein's body. Moments later, the exhausted void sphere fell towards Ein before melting away into his body. It let off a burst of silver light before it crumbled away. The swirl of light dissipated in the clouds that had gathered, allowing the bright morning sunshine to dazzle upon what was once Heim's royal capital.

Aside from the skin around one of his eyes, Ein's entire body had been consumed by the curse. His skin had turned black. But when the clouds dispersed, a silver light almost instantly purified his body. Ein felt the strength leave his body as he fell off the tree. Right before he lost consciousness, he gazed up at the colossal canopy.

"Huh, you don't look half bad when you just stand there," he muttered.

The tree's lush green leaves wavered in the wind as the prince fell through the branches. With the massive tree now splendidly towering over him, Ein quietly closed his eyes.

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Krone used her fingers to gently comb Ein's messy hair out of

his face. She used her head to shield him from the sunlight that peered through the branches. But as a gust of wind blew through, a smidge of sunlight managed to spill into his eyes.

"Mmm..." Ein started.

He furrowed his brows, shocked by the brightness. The chirping of the birds encouraged him to awaken, and he slowly opened his eyes.

"Where...am..."

As his vision slowly returned, he found himself face-to-face with the very woman he'd be yearning to see again. He soon realized that he was sleeping atop her lap, and the corners of his mouth tugged upward to form a smile.

She smiled back happily and playfully. "This is where we first met." Her tears fell onto his cheeks. "I was shocked when you fell off the tree, but Sir Ramza quickly leaped in to catch you."

There was a brief moment of silence, and Krone said, "What will you say to me first, Ein? 'Long time no see'? Or perhaps 'Thank you for lending me your lap'?"

She'd said those exact words when they'd reunited in Magna's port. Her beauty had only heightened since then. Her voice was always pleasant to the ears, akin to the ringing of bells in Ein's mind. Back then, he remembered the words that had naturally flowed out of his mouth—it was the same in this situation as well. He had no reason to think. His words had already been chosen for him.

"How about, 'I love you'?" he replied.

A single tear rolled down Krone's cheek and fell upon Ein's face. These words were so impossibly important, and he'd made his beloved wait so long to hear them. She placed her hand on his cheek and gave a small nod.

"I love you too," she replied.

As the sun's rays shone upon them and the birds chirped in the distance, the two were in their own world, having just exchanged a set of priceless jewels they'd never trade the world for. Their faces inched closer as they slowly kissed.

Chapter Eleven: I’m Back, Ishtarica

It was just past noon and Martha found herself racing through the halls of White Night Castle with an envelope in hand.

“Your Majesty!” she cried.

She didn’t even bother to knock before busting into the audience room and walking directly towards Silverd and Lloyd. The two men looked at her with shock.

“We’ve received a message bird from the *Leviathan*!” Martha exclaimed as she presented the envelope to her king. “The butlers have seen fit to write down the contents of the message. Please take a look!”

“Wh-What…happened to Ein?” Silverd asked frantically as he swiftly took the envelope and opened the seal.

The king’s heart pounded loudly; he was gripped with equal parts curiosity and fear in regard to the letter’s contents. But his hesitation lasted mere moments as he steeled his resolve and scanned the letter. For a moment, he froze, but he soon broke out guffawing.

“Heh… Heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha!” He couldn’t stop laughing as a constant stream of tears ended up sullying his lavish clothes. “Good grief… It’s as though our worries have been completely disregarded! Just how simple could a letter be?”

“Your Majesty, what happened to Sir Ein?!” Lloyd asked.

But the king continued to laugh without answering his question. “Martha, do you know what this letter says?”

“N-No, Your Majesty,” the maid replied. “I was told to bring it to you right away.”

“Hrmm… Whatever is going on?” With that, the king stood from his throne. “We have preparations to make.”

He rubbed his red, swollen eyes and flashed a genuine smile. He walked ahead and handed Lloyd the letter as he brushed past the marshal.

“Have a read,” the king said.

The letter truly was simple, containing no more than a few words.

Crown Prince Ein shall return with Lady Krone aboard one of the Agustos Trading Firm's vessels.

That was it. But for Lloyd, this was the best news he'd ever read since sending Ein off to Heim on that dinghy. Crying, he clutched the letter with both hands and fell to his knees.

"Lloyd, we must make preparations to welcome Ein's return. Make haste," Silverd ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the marshal cried.

There was no time for celebrations yet. The marshal nodded and stood back up as he wiped away his tears.

"Mrow? Did that mommy lover finally wake up?" Katima said, her voice shooting out from the private meeting room behind the throne.

"P-Phrasing, Princess Katima, phrasing..." Dill replied.

The princess emerged from the meeting room in a wheelchair pushed by Dill.

"Phrasing? Have I said anything wrong, meow?"

"I believe that loving one's mother is quite a beautiful thing to behold," Dill said.

"And now you hit meow with an even more convoluted reply instead of just simply nodding along. Good grief..."

Silverd turned around as the conversation hit his ears. "Ah, so you heard me. Let me remind you that it hasn't been all that long since *you* opened *your* eyes, you dingus. You're staying within the castle's confines for the indefinite future, but I suppose I can make a small exception—just this once. Follow me."

"How generous mew are, father! See? We've got permission! Dill, push me along, and let's have some fun!"

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness," Dill said. "I'm unsure exactly how I'm supposed to facilitate 'some fun.'"

"Just push meow with all your might! We'll zoom for the stars!"

"I won't do that."

"Father, my caretaker won't listen to me."

"And you're to blame for all that," Silverd replied.

As His Majesty offered Dill some sympathy, a stunned Katima quickly meowed up a storm of grievances. It was now the king's turn to be troubled by his daughter. Off in another corner of the room, a smiling Lloyd and Martha watched on.

"Good grief," the king muttered. He had a certain young lady on

his mind as he left the room. “I must hear the full story, but I suspect Krone was somehow involved in this affair.”

“I agree,” a familiar voice replied.

“Sierra.”

“My deepest apologies. I had a hunch after I spotted your maid running through the halls.”

Sierra stood by a set of windows that were across the hall from the door to the audience room.

“I shall return to Syth Mill,” she said. “It’s a pity that I can’t welcome the crown prince home, but I must start investigating that stone immediately.”

“I’m counting on you,” Silverd replied. “Should you learn anything, please tell me as soon as you can.”

“Of course.”

“But what about Chris?”

“I know her well. I’m sure she’ll awaken as soon as the crown prince returns.”

She chuckled, bowed in front of Silverd, and said her farewells before she walked away.

“The next king has surely been blessed with a truly splendid inner circle,” he murmured.

Afterward, he shuffled off to his chambers to let Lalalua know their grandson was safe.

The Ishtarican public had been informed of Ein’s return from Heim. However, not a word had been uttered of the presence of Arshay, Misty, and others on the prince’s voyage home. This selective telling of the truth was done to prevent a potential uproar. While questions surrounding the Ishtarican-Heim conflict still remained, the people of Kingsland were more concerned with their heroic crown prince’s valiant return above all else.

The trading firm’s vessel slowly approached the royal capital. Once the anchor was finally dropped, a ramp was lowered onto the docks. Krone supported her beloved as he managed to just barely shamble off the ship. While everyone else looked pained to see their prince so beaten down, a certain feline princess felt like cracking a joke.

“No need to flirt while you get off the ship, mrow!”

“No, my body’s just covered in wounds, that’s all!” Ein replied

before he changed topics. “Aunt Katima?! Why are you in a wheelchair?!”

“W-Well, I’ve got my reasons, mew see…”

Even if he were provided with a full explanation, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to process it now. That story would wait for another day. Ein walked forward, still with the aid of Krone, and stopped in front of Silverd.

“Grandfather, I’m back,” he said. The king remained silent as the boy went on, “I acted despite your attempts to stop me, and the Demon Lord’s power sent me spiraling out of control. There’s no excuse I can make to defend myself.”

He knew that he’d caused a lot of trouble, and didn’t expect his triumph over the red foxes to square everything away. And so, he chose to apologize obediently.

“And Krone also went a little wild,” the king replied.

“Yes, I understand that, Your Majesty,” she said.

“As you know, no good deed shall go unrewarded, but I also believe that no sin must go unpunished. Thus, I have a punishment for you too.”

Ein and Krone listened solemnly, gulping as they awaited the punishment Silverd was about to proclaim.

“You’re both fools,” the king said. “Neither of you shall be allowed to work for a while. Until the day I see fit, you both must live peacefully within the castle.”

“G-Grandfather?!” Ein cried.

“Your Majesty?!” Krone gasped.

This hardly counted as a punishment. But before the two could voice their concerns, Silverd’s shoulders trembled and he drew them both close.

“I’m so glad that you fools returned home safe and sound!” he said.

A single tear fell upon Ein’s neck. The king clung to the both of them for a good while before he suddenly stood tall and silently walked away, much to their confusion.

“I’m sorry. He’s a king, you see,” Lalalua said as she approached the couple. “He must hide his tears in front of the populace. Ein, welcome home. And Krone, thank you so much for risking your life for him.”

The queen hugged the crown prince and then his advisor.

Lalalua's eyes were damp—no doubt she was trying to hold back her own tears.

"I shall wait to hear the full story until you return to the castle," she said. "Both His Majesty and I shall be waiting there for you. Take your time, and come back home."

"Umm... G-Grandmother!" Ein called.

But he was soon stopped by Krone, who gripped his hands tightly. It was best to listen to her words here; they could talk again in a different place. Now all alone, Ein soon heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"Sir Ein!"

How could Ein ever forget him? It was the loyal knight who had served him for years, risking his life numerous times in the process.

"Dill!" Ein cried. "You're okay! I'm...huh? D-Dill?"

He looked around, but the knight was nowhere to be seen. The crown prince glanced at his surroundings, but his fearless friend couldn't be found.

"I'm right here, Sir Ein!"

Ein turned towards the voice and saw a Cait-Sìth that possessed the fur of a lion. A sword hung by his side and he wore the knightly clothes that looked so familiar, but Dill was no longer a human. Only his burly body bore a slight resemblance to the Dill that Ein had once known.

"D-Does House Gracier have some kind of species-switching ability that I know nothing about?" Ein yelped. He had no idea what else to say.

He could hardly believe his eyes and had even wondered if he was still trapped within the World Tree of Gluttony.

"It's a long story, but Princess Katima saved my life," Dill replied.

Completely befuddled, Ein turned to the no-good cat, but she only crossed her arms in front of her proudly. *She's useless...* the crown prince thought. Left with no other choice, he turned back to his loyal knight.

"There are many things I'd like to speak with you about, but perhaps it's best we returned to the castle first," Dill said.

He went back to push Katima's wheelchair and he encouraged the royal to set foot in the castle.

***

There was a lady in particular who welcomed Ein's return with overwhelming enthusiasm—his mother. Olivia cried tears of joy as she took him into her tight embrace—first with a hug, and then with her roots. Even as the clock ticked into the wee hours of the night, the princess refused to let the boy out of her grasp. Alongside Krone, Olivia and Ein laughed as they shared their stories.

The next evening, a resting Ein was suddenly caught off guard by his mother's abrupt arrival. In the next moment, he discovered that she was quickly preparing him for something. She had her reasons, of course. A certain klutzy elf must've unconsciously noticed his return, and was about to awaken very soon.

"M-Mother... Do I really have to throw on the formal attire?" Ein asked.

"Hee hee, of course you do," Olivia chuckled. "You're my precious son, and you must go to her looking your absolute handsomest."

"I-I don't know how to argue with that."

After he finished changing, she joyfully tidied his hair; Olivia seemed to be enjoying herself quite a bit. Ein looked a touch embarrassed as he fiddled with his collar in hopes of distracting himself. It was then that his status card slid out of his pocket.

"Are you still the World Tree, I wonder?" Olivia asked.

"Hmm, why don't we take a look?" Ein replied.

He picked up his card and placed it in front of him. Olivia peered at the card from behind her son.

```
Ein von Ishtarica
[Job] ——
[Stamina] 9999 + α
[Magical Power] 9999 + α
[Attack] — + α
[Defense] — + α
[Agility] — + α
[Skills] World Tree of Gluttony, Poisonous Charm,
Curse of Solitude
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“I see, so you are,” Olivia said.

Does she not care about the “gluttony” bit? Ein thought as he chuckled. *I see nothing but problems with this.* He’d managed to regain his powers once he awakened, but the realization that such a powerful force slumbered within him made Ein pause.

“Hee hee,” Olivia giggled. “You’ve only become more charming.”

“Have I?” Ein asked.

The first princess seemed to be overjoyed as she patted her precious son’s head, and no one had the gall to spoil her mood. He had no idea what Olivia—or dryad women, rather—found so charming about it, but he assumed that the “World Tree” name simply held quite a bit of influence.

“But I wonder what exactly the World Tree of Gluttony skill is,” Ein said. “All of my absorbed skills are gone now.”

“As it’s a skill of the World Tree itself, perhaps it’s just been bundled up into one name,” Olivia guessed. “And the other two skills are…”

“Likely the ones I obtained from Shannon.”

Sensing her son’s pain, Olivia hugged Ein from behind. The glum crown prince soon calmed down after receiving his mother’s embrace.

“I can’t look like this when I’m visiting the sick, can I?” Ein said.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia apologized. “I shouldn’t have suggested that we glance at your status.”

“You’re not at fault. I was curious myself.”

He pumped himself up once more and tried to slip the card back into his pocket. His mother, still curious, had her eyes fixated on the list of skills.

“I’d thought that I’d see ‘Hero’ on the list…” she whispered to herself.

“Mother?” Ein asked. “Did you say something?”

“No, nothing at all.” She flashed a saintly smile. “Your hair will be done soon. Sit tight, my dear.” She reached out to once again brush her son’s hair.

Through a nearby window, one could see Ishtarica’s crimson skies as the sun set. After making his way to Chris’s room, Ein pulled up a chair and sat at her bedside. Relief washed over his face—Chris appeared to be simply snoozing away.

“Chris, I’m back,” he said.

Her eyes remained closed, but one of her ears twitched in response to his voice.

“That’s a tactful response,” he remarked. He smiled, amused by what he just saw. “Remember your ceremony in the audience room? You’re the type to just run wild and plow ahead, aren’t you? I’m no different, really.”

Chris didn’t utter a word.

“Since we both run around as we please, we’re always leaving grandfather with a headache.”

“Mm… Mm…” Chris groaned. She flipped towards the crown prince as her eyelids slowly but surely opened. “H-Huh? Where…am…”

How many days had it been since they heard each other’s voices? It had only been a few weeks at the most since Ein sailed away, but it felt as if they hadn’t spoken for years.

“We’re in your room, Chris,” Ein said.

“My…room?” Chris murmured.

“That’s right. In the castle.”

A chilly breeze blew through the window. It’d been opened for some air circulation, but the bit of a nip in the air helped wake her up. Once hit with a cold draft, Chris seemed a touch bothered by the cold as she sat up. She spotted Ein and froze. Was she still dreaming? Had Oz sent her to the afterlife? Barely able to keep a grip on reality, Chris felt the last bit of hope in her heart surging as she reached out. She was about to bet everything on this small gesture. She had prayed for the best—the happiest of all possible outcomes—but it seemed as if she had clung to a desperate wish.

But when she took that gamble, the knight finally managed to touch his hand. She gasped, feeling the very real crown prince’s warmth through her fingertips.

“Sir…Ein?” she whispered.

“Yep. I’m right here, Chris,” he replied.

Her blonde locks were splayed across her bed as she remained still as a stone pillar, her eyes focused solely on her beloved prince. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes before they began to roll down her cheeks, one by one.

“I worked really hard,” she mumbled in a quivering voice.

“I know,” Ein replied.

“I truly believed that you’d be waiting for me. This is the hardest that I’ve *ever* worked in my entire life.” Her lips trembled as she lamented her shortcomings while rubbing her forehead against his hand. “But I couldn’t win. I was carried back to the royal capital as though I had fled from battle! So I… I…wanted to do anything that I could.”



When Ein had returned to the castle, he heard that she'd gone with Krone and Katima to Ist. Right after the conclusion of her brutal bout with Edward, Chris had stepped back into battle before her wounds had been given the chance to heal.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I…couldn't be by your side. I'm so sorry!"

Ein placed his other arm around her back and drew her close as he gazed down. Before putting his thoughts into words, the prince believed that *he* should've been the one to apologize.

"I'm the one who was weak," he said. "I've made you endure many hardships. I'm sorry. Because of me, you've suffered so much pain."

"N-No…" Chris wept. "It's because *I'm* weak!"

She continued to cry as Ein gently rubbed her back, denying her self-defeating remarks.

"Hey, it's only thanks to you that I was even able to return," Ein said. "And for that, I truly thank you. I know I'm a little late, but I'm here."

The elf wrapped her arms around his back and hugged so tightly that it almost hurt. To her, his warmth was real—anything but a dream. She couldn't be happier to hear his voice again. For a while, she continued to sob and tears fell down her cheeks. After her eyes had grown all red and puffy, she finally managed to wipe her tears away and smiled.

"Welcome back, Sir Ein!"

***

That evening, another person had awakened from a long coma of his own. But when Warren opened his eyes, no one was by his side. A dazzling kaleidoscope of light spilled into his room from a nearby window—a combination of moonlight and street lamps from the oddly cheerful castle district.

"Why am I in bed?" he muttered. "Ah, that man… He…"

He tried to sit up, but his body felt like a lump of lead. The chancellor realized that he'd awoken from a coma and was determined to confirm his situation as soon as he could.

"You're finally awake," a familiar voice said.

He was sitting on a sofa in the corner of the room. Warren had

failed to notice his presence. The area around the sofa was dark, making it difficult to see the man's face, but his tone was all too recognizable.

"I know of two loyal subjects," the man said. He stood up from the sofa and approached Warren's bed. "One is Marco. He's an irreplaceable subordinate to me, and there's no knight in history who's more loyal than him."

"Y-You know Sir Marco?" Warren stammered. "You must be…"

As the man approached, the moonlight shone onto his face. The visage of a valiant, handsome man came into view, his glossy, silver hair falling to his waist. Warren's memories of the past had grown vague and fuzzy over time, but not once had he forgotten this man's face.

"A-Are you Sir Ramza?" Warren asked. "Wh-Why are you here?"

Ramza didn't reply and went on, "The second is you. You stayed by Jayle's—my son's side, and even after he passed, you continued to devote your life to Ishtarica. You've changed your name and face many times, continuing to kill your true self while remaining loyal to this nation. It may be a truth that is obscured and hidden in history, but you're also a hero."

"But… I-In any case, if you were to trace my origins, you'd find nothing laudable about it."

Warren had been in love with Consort Laviola. It was why he remained in Ishtarica and continued to serve the nation.

"I don't blame you for self-deprecating remarks, but the question lies in whether you held any sort of love for Jayle and Ishtarica," Ramza replied.

"I…" Warren started.

"You don't need to tell me. I already know. Had you felt no such love and endearment, you wouldn't have traversed the continent with Jayle, much less served Ishtarica until now. That thought wouldn't have crossed your mind."

Ramza had a satisfied expression on his face as he chuckled and returned to the sofa. Beside him stood a quiet girl, and he grabbed her by the scruff of her neck before slinging her over his shoulders.

"L-Lord Arshay?!" Warren gasped.

"Yep, my idiot sister's right here," the Dullahan replied. "If you want any details, pry them out of the current king. You might think

that even my existence here is a dream, but I can assure you that this is reality."

"Ugh… Ramza, you know that I'm strong," Arshay mumbled in her sleep, seemingly upset by how she was handled.

"Yeah? So what?" Ramza grinned. "Bit ironic to see Nightmare Arshay fast asleep at night, huh?"

She hung limply around his shoulders like a sleeping kitten. As she was, she looked nothing like a Demon Lord. In fact, it would've taken some time for anyone to believe that she had once been on a continent-destroying rampage. Warren stared at Ramza as he turned his back to leave.

"What in the world happened?" he wondered aloud.

His mind was filled with questions. Both Ramza and Arshay were alive?! Impossible! Who could blame the likes of even the wise old Warren for being so baffled by this news?

***

The next morning, Silverd summoned Ein and Lloyd to the audience room's back office for a meeting.

"In the near future, we shall host a massive parade and report our victory to the populace," the king said.

"I'm sure that there'll be celebrations on the eve of the parade as well, so I suggest we divide the jubilations over several days," Lloyd said. "Ah, and the academy graduation is coming up soon as well! I recommend we adjust our days with that in mind."

"Indeed! That sounds very good."

"Sounds to me like this'll be an exhausting party," Ein said as he listened in. The mere thought tired him, and he gave a strained smile.

He knew how important these parties were. It was a way to mourn the lives of the knights that had been lost while also celebrating the nation's victory. The gloomy atmosphere festering within the residents could also be dispelled.

"Now then, the next issue is with Ein," Silverd said. "How shall we touch upon your Demon Lord transformation?"

"We should probably tell everyone, huh?" Ein replied.

"There's no need for you to worry, Your Highness," Lloyd assured him. "You defeated not only the Sea Dragon, but our

nation's enemy. You're a hero, and I doubt anyone will be suspicious of you even if you announce that you've become a Demon Lord."

"I agree," the king nodded.

Ein placed his hands on the table. "Wait a second! I think you're both being a bit too nonchalant about this whole thing…"

"I agree with Sir Ein's assessment," another man added. He was Ishtarica's top official. A staff was nestled in both of his hands as his long beard swayed carefreely, just like his personality. "I believe we should first announce his status as the World Tree. He'll be seen as an almost divine being before we touch upon the Demon Lord business."

"Wh-What?!" Silverd gasped. "Since when did you…"

The chancellor ignored the king. "We'll have him grow trees like the one he'd sprouted in Magna. It is important that we offer any fruit those trees yield to our citizens. And given that our enemy had used Demon Lord powers, it would be best if we claimed that Sin Ein has evolved into a World Tree as a result of absorbing and purifying said powers. We could say he gained Demon Lord powers in the process. I believe that will nicely wrap up this matter."

He paused and flashed his usually friendly smile. "How does that sound?"

"You appeared out of nowhere and you speak like nothing is amiss!" the king cried. "When did you wake up?!"

Lloyd erupted into boisterous laughter. "Ha ha ha! Sir Warren, it's nice to see you awake again! It's truly been a while since I last saw that mysterious personality of yours!"

Only Lloyd was smiling. Ein was also stunned as a myriad of feelings washed over him. Warren glanced at the crown prince and sensed the boy's thoughts as he smiled kindly.

"I woke up just last night," Warren said. "But I've been gone for a while and I had to catch up. I was up all night before joining this meeting."

"Why didn't you call for me?!" Silverd demanded.

"I'd heard that Sir Ein returned. I simply tried to express my consideration and thought it would be better for you if I appeared the next day."

"Good grief. Our chancellor is as carefree as usual, I see," Lloyd

said wearily.

The red fox approached Ein and went down on his knees. The crown prince still struggled to find the right words as Warren looked up at the boy with narrowed eyes and took the royal's hand.

"Sir Ein, Belia told me everything," he started, trying to apologize.

"Yeah," Ein replied.

"I've been hiding a secret, and that is a sin. I may have been devoted to Ishtarica, but my red fox blood will never dilute. I've given you much agony and grief, and made you suspicious of me. That fact alone simply makes me unworthy."

"N-No! I learned the truth right after! You didn't betray me at all! In fact, it's my fault for jumping to anger without knowing the whole story first!"

"You must never say that, Your Highness. Please, I ask that you scold me for my actions."

Warren had kept his secret for so long, but he and Belia had shown their loyalty to Ishtarica for centuries. No one else could understand the torture and agony that came with killing one's true self in order to maintain their loyalty.

"I know that this is a little too convenient for me to say, but I'd personally love it if you stayed on as our chancellor," Ein said. "I'm really sorry. I know that it's a selfish request."

Warren chuckled happily as a tear rolled down his cheek. "Your words are far too kind."

"Now then," Silverd said. "Your presence is very convenient, as I'd like to borrow some of your wisdom."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the chancellor replied. "Should my elderly body still be of any use to Ishtarica, I ask that you order me however you see fit."

He placed his hands on his staff to support himself, but his stature, which had supported the nation for centuries, was nothing but beautiful. *And now, a happy ending,* Ein thought. *Wait, no...*

The crown prince had one more thing he had to fulfill—a promise that he'd made to *her* earlier.

"I just need to muster up the courage," he mumbled.

Chapter Twelve: Victory Day

The azure skies shone above the academy district as the spring sun encouraged the flora to bloom. The rays were gentle, and the serene breeze brought along the warmth of spring. Today was the day on which many academies held their graduation ceremonies, and the Royal Kingsland Academy was no exception.

“Look up at the sky,” Silverd said. “Even the heavens are blessing your departure as you all begin a new chapter in your lives.”

His speech was short as he stepped off the podium. It was a part of his public duties to attend the academy’s graduation, but he had a different reason this year—his grandson was also present, having just overcome a series of hardships.

“Head of class, Ein von Ishtarica.”

The hero’s name was called, and the boy stepped up onto the podium. The auditorium was filled to the brim, and every single person was focused on Ein. *Huh, I’m not as nervous as I thought I’d be,* he thought. He was already used to getting up on grand stages, and thrilled to know he’d developed the mental endurance for it.

Compared to the war of words he’d had with Heim just before the war, this was a piece of cake. However, Ein had never thought to link the two occasions together before. He couldn’t help but crack a little smile. Just the other day, the prince had been swinging his sword through a battlefield, and now he was speaking before his peers at his own graduation ceremony. He began his speech, his voice reverberating throughout the room.

“I…”

He spoke valiantly and confidently. Every movement he made commanded the attention of everyone who was present to hear him.

***

The festivities would be called Victory Day. The name was quite

self-explanatory, and combined with the celebration on the eve of the holiday, the jubilee would continue on for ten days—the longest festival in Ishtarican history. After the graduation ceremony concluded, the real party would be kicked off.

"Ein's speech was really something, huh?" Butz said.

"I-Indeed... It was simply magnificent," Leonardo agreed.

Butz looked quite relieved now that it all was over while Leonardo still had tears in his eyes.

Loran chuckled. "How long are you going to be crying for, Leonardo?"

"Where else shall I cry then?!" the son of House Pholus exclaimed. "I can recite His Highness's speech by heart! Truly, he's a splendid man. For the first time, he divulged his life in Heim before he came to Ishtarica, and he spoke of all the experiences that he had here! It's been a priceless treasure to simply hear it all from Ein himself!"

"Yeah, yeah, Loran and I know that," Butz said. "How long will you keep weeping?"

The trio walked out of the auditorium and onto the grassy lawn between the school building and the gates. Graduates and students were chattering among themselves—some expressed joy at their graduation while others were sad and lonely to see them go. They all cried as they parted ways with their friends, but rejoiced at the start of a new chapter in their lives.

"We really graduated," Butz murmured.

This would be the last time that they'd set foot in this academy. As the realization set in, he couldn't help but feel a tinge of melancholy.

"You guys are..." he started.

"I'll be working in a lab near Kingsland," Loran said. "Leonardo, you're bound for the Legal Affairs Bureau, right?"

"Yeah," Leonardo nodded. "I'll be learning under my father. I managed to pass the exam as well."

"Feels weird that we won't see each other as frequently anymore," Butz said as he scratched the top of his nose. It was rare to see a few tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

The trio fell silent as they gazed at the terraced café—it was a place filled with many memories. They stood there for a while, reminiscing about the past.

“Oh, there you guys are!” Ein shouted. He held a tube containing his diploma in one of his hands.

“Huh?! E-Ein?! You sure you can be here?” Butz shouted.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Your Highness, your speech was excellent!” Leonardo cried. “I was moved to tears and continued to cry at your speech. Wait, Butz is right! Why are you here?”

“Aren’t you going to the parade?” Loran asked.

Ein was scheduled to visit the academy district’s main street and join a procession that would take him all the way to the castle. He was set to leave right after graduation and shouldn’t have had any time to spare.

“I made something of a selfish request,” the crown prince replied as he smiled while scratching his temple. “There was something that I wanted to do on my graduation day. Truth be told, once the ceremony was over, I wanted to hang out all night with you guys in the city.”

“I mean, we’d love to, but you know you can’t do that!” Butz replied.

“Yeah. But I had to see you all, one last time, at least. I didn’t want to just leave.” The royal walked over to the terrace, much to the confusion of the trio. “I want to speak with you guys, one last time… Where we always sat.”

Everyone was stunned. How could the crown prince, the nation’s hero, return home with such a trivial request? Simultaneously, they all smiled joyfully. Ein hadn’t changed a bit since they first met and would always be their friend.

“Well, if you’re *begging*!” Butz shouted.

“I’m honored to receive such an invitation,” Leonardo said.

“Heh heh heh! This is our last day together, after all!” Loran chimed in.

And so, they lined up and gracefully walked against the flow of the other students, headed straight back to the building. The students gasped at Ein, but they only greeted him and did nothing more.

As the four walked together, Ein had his usual carefree smile on his face. No one dared to disturb their final leisurely moments together.

***

By the time the parade had died down, it was well into the afternoon.

“I’ve never seen such festivities within Ishtarica’s long history,” Warren said.

“Indeed,” Lloyd nodded. “Even the castle itself can sense how cheerful everyone is.”

The two were beside Silverd as they gazed down at the castle district from the terrace balcony. The joyful mood was a splendid sight to behold. Naturally, they would visit the city later, but for now, they were allowed to partake in a short break and enjoy the view.

“Dear, I finally found you,” the queen said.

“Ah, Lalalua!” the king said. “Why don’t you come here and join us?”

“I’d love to, but I’m looking for Ein.”

“I spotted him restlessly pacing the halls ever since he returned. Is something the matter with him?”

“Well, I haven’t seen him.”

“Have you visited Krone or Olivia?”

“Olivia told me she hasn’t a clue, but she kept looking at me with a huge grin on her face.”

“Then she clearly knows something!”

It was clear that the princess had no intention of divulging the truth. It was the first day of the party, and yet the boy of the hour was nowhere to be seen. Silverd felt compelled to groan in exasperation.

“And where might Lady Krone be?” Warren inquired.

“You see, Krone is gone as well,” Lalalua replied. “The other officers told me that she just vanished.”

The three men came to the same conclusion.

“Your Majesty, perhaps Lady Krone is with Sir Ein somewhere,” Warren assumed.

“I had the same thought,” the king replied. “And it’s no wonder that Olivia seemed to know a thing or two. They probably told her just in case, but asked her to keep quiet.”

“On that note, I’m curious about Chris’s whereabouts as well,” Lloyd added.

“She’s with Olivia,” Lalalua said. “Chris said that she’d hold herself back with Olivia’s help… But I wonder what she was really going on about.”

Clearly, Ein and Krone had gone somewhere together, and it was imperative to find them as soon as possible. Lloyd headed for the door to find them when Warren suddenly opened his mouth.

“Your Majesty, I’ve just spotted Sir Ein and Lady Krone.”

It was by complete coincidence that the chancellor had managed to find the two as he gazed down at the castle district. Even from afar, he could make them out. Lloyd turned back around and smiled as he gazed in the same direction.

“That’s El and Al, Your Majesty,” the marshal said, knowing that there was nothing that he could do.

“Quite right,” Warren agreed. “I believe the two are dragging along a vessel of Agustos Trading Firm. And I’ve got a sneaky suspicion that they haven’t received the proper permission to use that ship.”

The king was at a loss for words. Where were the two headed? He had no idea, but it was clear that they were going far from Kingsland. Silverd jumped to his feet and approached the fence of the terrace.

“That…rampaging crown prince!” he shouted towards the ocean. It was rare to see the king panicking so clearly, and Lalalua and the others chuckled as His Majesty caught his breath. “Huff… Huff… That crown prince… I’d like to see who raised him! I know I see her every day, but good grief!”

There was a knock on the door, and Martha called, “Pardon me, but I’ve just received a letter from Sir Ein.”

Lalalua allowed the maid to enter as she knelt and handed the letter to the king. Silverd angrily tore it open and unfurled the note inside.

I would like to use my reward for defeating the red fox by giving myself a day off, the note said.

Silverd gazed at the ceiling as his cheeks twitched while Warren stroked his beard with interest.

“Lady Martha, perhaps a royal edict was issued so that you may remain silent?” he asked.

“That’s right, chancellor,” she replied. “The two also gave me strict orders to provide this letter after they set sail.”

Ein was shockingly well prepared today, it seemed. And unfortunately for Silverd, he wanted to scold the crown prince, but found himself unable to do so. Defeating the red foxes was a glorious feat, and merely asking for a day off would be nowhere near equal in value.

“Perhaps it’s you, Warren, who injected the hero with unnecessary intelligence?” Silverd inquired.

“I haven’t the faintest clue about what you’re on about, Your Majesty,” Warren replied.

The king could only lifelessly gaze at the ship that Ein was on. What king would deny a hero a single day to himself?

“Be back by sundown,” he said serenely. His voice was carried by the wind, towards the sea.

Childhood Epilogue: The Pink Gemstone

After crossing the sea, I mounted a horse and rushed through Roundheart. A squad of knights stood on guard as I trotted up to Heim's royal capital. They all seemed so shocked to see me, but I couldn't blame them. My nation was in the middle of a massive celebration, and that nation's crown prince had suddenly arrived in formal attire. It would've been odd if they *weren't* suspicious of my spontaneous appearance. However, I didn't provide them with any explanation and just rode ahead.

"Wh-Why did you bring me here all of a sudden?" Krone asked. "Is something the matter?"

"It's all on my end," I replied.

"What? Goodness... It's the first day of the parade! You'll get in trouble if the crown prince goes missing."

"Ah, don't worry. I cashed in my reward for defeating the red foxes, and gave us a day to ourselves. We'll be just fine."

I was sure that such a grand reward would leave my grandfather no choice but to accept my offer.

"Are you sure about using such an important reward to do this?" she asked.

"Yup," I answered. "In fact, I can't think of a better way to use it."

"R-Really?"

Krone still seemed to be a bit confused, but then again, I was being more forceful than usual. I felt a little bad, but I couldn't give away my reasoning just yet. With a sigh, she sensed that I must've had a plan and didn't pursue the topic. We continued to make some small talk as we rode to our destination.

"Here we are," I said.

"Isn't this...where my house once was?" Krone asked.

The World Tree of Gluttony's remnants were still standing over and within the August estate. Perhaps the tree would eventually die, but it no longer carried the ominous air that had permeated it just the other day. Its leaves were lush and crisp with bits of sunlight peeking out through the foliage. I even heard birds chirping. I stopped the horse and gazed up at the tree.

“I wanted to come here,” I said.

Krone chuckled. “We were here together, just the other day. How sudden this is.”

“I’ve just…got a lot of things going on.”

I stepped off the horse and slipped my hands under her arms to lift her off.

“I used to be taller than you, but you outgrew me in the blink of an eye,” she said.

“Do you not like to be held like this?” I asked.

“That’s not what I mean. I’m so happy that I feel like hugging you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But I want you to let me escort you first.”

I offered an arm, and she clung onto me as she stepped close, being careful to not hinder my stride. She had her questions, but I could tell that she entrusted everything to me.

“Let’s go,” I said.

As she held my hand, I couldn’t help but notice her own hands were so warm and adorable. Perhaps Krone felt the same—she flashed a beautiful smile as her arms remained entangled with mine. I could practically hear her every breath and heartbeat as we walked alone… We were so close to each other. I don’t think that we’d ever been like this before. Still, I wasn’t nervous. I was simply happy to spend this moment with her, and cherished it.

“Um…” I started.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Do you remember our date at the port from a few years back?”

“Of course. I’m confident that I remember every single little detail about you.”

I felt the same—there wasn’t a single memory with Krone that I’d forgotten. *Ugh, I feel like I can feel my own heart beating,* I thought. Suddenly, I was struck with nervousness as beads of sweat began to form on my brow. I took out a handkerchief to wipe it away and quietly steadied my breathing.

“You’re so weird,” she chuckled.

The terrain around us was still rocky and unstable, but Krone still saw this as the home she grew up in. She stepped away from my side and gracefully walked ahead, her arms behind her back. She looked so stunning…like a fairy.

“Um, Krone,” I said again.

“Yes? What’s wrong?” she asked without turning around.

“I didn’t understand what my gift to you really meant back then. Even after I became a Demon Lord and told you of my worries, I still feel like I hadn’t fully grasped it.”

But it was different now. It was a way to convey the feelings welling up in my heart. My heart started pounding faster and faster... Simply seeing her in front of me was enough to make my chest twinge with pain. Suddenly, Krone stood still. She was standing where I woke up—the very place we first met as well. We were now facing each other in a place filled with so many memories for both of us.

“Um, Krone,” I started once more.

She tilted her head to one side. Her scent traveled to me with the wind, and my nerves only grew more tense. But this nervousness welling up within me didn’t feel unpleasant in the slightest.

“Goodness... Whatever is the matter?” she asked. “Your face looks redder than usual, and when I locked arms with you earlier, I felt your heart pounding so loudly.”

“A-Ah ha ha...” I laughed. “I think it’s more difficult *not* to be nervous on this day.”

“Why are you nervous anyway? Do you feel ill?”

I’ll tell you why soon. You don’t have to look so worried. I’ll calm down soon enough.

“There’s something that I’ve been wanting to say...and say it to you here,” I said.

The sound of my noisy heart faded away as my ears were focused only on Krone’s voice as she stood in front of me. My eyes were only fixated on her.

“What did you want to tell me?” she asked.

I’ve already decided on it. There’s no need to steel my resolve any further, and I don’t have to hesitate. So I... I...

“Krone...” I said.

The moment I called her name, the little birds on the ground flew high up in the skies as though to offer us their blessing. High above they flew over our heads. I thought only about my beloved as I managed to eke out my final words.

“Will you...” I went down on one knee and offered a box to her.

When she saw it, a tear rolled down her cheek. I’d never seen

her smile so brightly as she graciously accepted. She took the item inside the jewelry box. Only one of its kind existed in this world—a pink star crystal.



Afterword

Long time no see, it's Ryou Yuuki here. I'm so happy that I get to greet you guys once more. Were you able to enjoy the ninth volume?

This will be the end of Ein's childhood as he heads into the next phase of his life—adolescence. I was allowed to write a story that segued into this next chapter. I revised and added on quite a bit from the web novel version, and I couldn't be happier if you enjoyed reading it.

There's no scheduled publishing date for Ein's adolescence yet, but it's actually already finished online! In the next chapter, he'll face the Dungeon of Spiriting Away, where the first prince and Chris's older sister disappeared. He'll also have some of Jayle's previous hints to reconsider as well. It's also where the truth behind God's cryptic words from the first volume will be revealed. If any of this gets published, I'd love to see you here once again.

This is a bit of an ad, but I've also got a Twitter account where you can find the latest news on *Magic Stone Gourmet* and the other series I've been writing. As of this writing in Spring of 2021, I've been uploading long chapters of series other than *Magic Stone Gourmet*. I think that they're rather enjoyable reads! If you're interested, please join me on Kakuyomu!

Twitter handle: @_ore2gou

Kakuyomu: https://kakuyomu.jp/users/ore2gou

Shousetsuka ni Narou: https://mypage.syosetu.com/1152209

I suppose this afterword isn't so different from my usual ones, but I've been sort of thinking of making my afterwords a bit more special as a way to finish up the childhood arc of this series. But, um, well, easier said than done. It's a bit hard for me.

In fact, I've been rewriting this very afterword for the past two hours, and it seems lacking as a way to end a major arc of this series, but I just can't settle on a way that I like. So as usual, I'd like to finish up all bright and cheery!

For the usual acknowledgments. Thank you to my two editors who've stuck with me since the first volume. They taught me so

much, and I can't see them as anything but a priceless treasure. Thank you to the series's graphic designer for providing me with such beautiful covers! I'd like to thank all the bookstores and employees who've been selling my books, and everyone else involved in the making and logistics of this series!

Big thank you to Sugawara for being in charge of the manga version. The manga is still going strong, and I'd love to thank the editing department for it as well!

Above all, a huge, *huge* thank you to Chisato Naruse for their illustrations! All of the illustrations are my treasures and memories that I wouldn't exchange for the world. Thank you so much for rendering out such a wonderful Ein!

Lastly, thank you to everyone who picked up this volume. This series wouldn't have happened without you, and I thank everyone who's cheered me on!

And this is where I'll take my leave. I'm not sure where I'll meet you next—the next arc of Ein's life, or a different series—but I'm sure I'll be able to see you again.

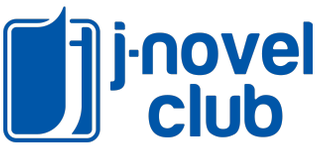
I hope to see everyone again soon!


EATING MAGICAL POWER MADE ME THE STRONGEST!
9
RYOU YUUKI
ART CHISATO NARUSE
MAGIC STONE Gourmet


The World Tree of Gluttony.
Crown Prince Ein had coined the name himself, as the tree had pierced the heavens after laying down its roots in Heim's royal capital. Glittering, crystallized byproducts of the tree's growth hung on its branches and wavered in the nighttime breeze.
MAGIC STONE Gourmet
EATING MAGICAL POWER MADE ME THE STRONGEST!
9


In the spiritual realm
The last bit of the blue sky was consumed by the void, and the entire world turned dark. A massive ball of light hung in the dark sky and only then did Ein finally notice it.
???
Rejoice. The time has come for you to lose yourself and fuse with my being!
The orb emanated a black light that was darker than the void above him. Hot airs of white shimmered along its rims, and Ein felt a thick magic unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was clear that he had very little time left.
Ein
Ishtarica's crown prince, a reincarnator born with the skill Toxin Decomposition EX who later evolved into a Demon Lord.


I was told that it's a good luck charm.
In the garden of House August's former manor
As Krone remained at her beloved's side, she felt her heart beating faster and faster. However, she noticed his fingertips move ever so slightly.



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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume 9
by Ryou Yuuki

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