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AUTHOR

NABESHIKI

ILLUSTRATOR

KAWAGUCHI



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Chapter 1: The Talentless Boy

I was raised by my mother in a small mountain cabin with a field, which we tended together. We lived in peace, even after my sickly father passed when I was little...but our calm didn't last forever. When I turned twelve, my mother, too, fell ill.

Desperate, I cared for her as best as I was able—but, little by little, she wasted away. Then, one day, she handed me a leather pouch containing a small amount of money and said:

"I'm sorry I couldn't give you much of a life. The least you deserve is to live one of your own choosing."

Those were her final words to me; the warmth had gone from her body by the very next morning.

And so, I was alone.

After digging a grave for my mother beside my father's, I resolved to descend the mountain and head for the city. I'm sure I could have kept on living in that cabin, the way I always had; though it was a rural area with no access to a doctor, I had livestock and a bountiful field. The nearby forests were also filled with fruit to eat, as well as wild hares and other game to hunt. I would never have had to fear going hungry, and yet...

I still chose to leave my little home—the place I'd lived my entire life.

You see, I had a dream: I wanted to become an adventurer—one just like the heroes in the great epics my father had told me so many times when I was little. Like the hero who, with his friends by his side, slew a titanic dragon, won its treasure, and moved ever onward in search of the next quest. Or like the one who studied magic under the tutelage of a wizened magician, dispelled the curse afflicting a forest, and was rewarded by the Spirit King with a miracle elixir that could cure any illness.

My father had told me countless stories of such adventures, and each one lit a

flame in my heart.

If I'd had a miracle elixir, then my parents might not have had to die. From time to time, I would let my imagination chase that what-if...but there was no guarantee that it even existed. Maybe the stories were all made up by my father to delight his little boy.

Still, I wanted to see for myself. How much truth was there to my father's stories? How many were just fairy tales?

But, no—maybe it didn't even matter to me whether they were true. In reality, I just wanted to be like the characters that had always amazed me. I yearned to be the hero who would wield his sword for his friends and for the meek, staring down any hardship in his way—who would always win and ensure the story had a happy ending.

Yes, that was how I wanted to be. And that was all it was, plain and simple. I couldn't stop myself from wanting to be a hero.

It took me a few days to descend the mountain, after which I headed for the city's Adventurers Guild. Provided that I hadn't heard wrong, that was where I needed to go to become an adventurer.

Reaching the building itself was easy—I asked a guard where it was, and he led me there right away. Yep, *reaching* it was easy. When I tried to go inside, however, a grim-faced man came out and barred my way.

"This is no place for kids," he said. "Go home."

But there was nobody left waiting for me back on the mountain. I fumbled together an explanation of the circumstances that had brought me here.

"So you're an orphan, are you?" There was a brief pause before he continued, "I guess that changes things. In that case, why not go to a class training school? They've never taken in a kid as young as you before...but if you'd like to try, I'll see what I can do."

Then, scratching his head, he began to explain.

In this city—the royal capital—those who wanted to register with the Adventurers Guild could receive class training at one of the royal training

schools. According to the man, they had been established under decree by the currently reigning king as a way to help prevent the deaths of rookie adventurers. Anyone could attend them for free, and to top it off, the schools would feed, clothe, and board you for the duration of your attendance. All expenses were paid for by royal taxes.

It sounded beyond my wildest dreams. So, naturally, I jumped at the chance to attend.

"If you truly wish to be an adventurer, then go to a training school and come back after you've learned a skill. Any will do."

At the time, I hadn't really understood what the man—a Guild employee—was talking about. It was the first I'd ever learned of the existence of skills.

Skills, he explained, were what people considered proof of one's strength and ability. According to him, every person harbored within themselves the talent for one or two particularly exceptional skills, and the training schools existed to identify that talent.

In this country, there were training schools for the six basic class branches. Anyone could receive training for the class of their choice, through which you would quickly discover which skills you had a talent for and which class you were best suited to be.

So, I decided to follow the man's advice and undergo training. I asked him for directions, said my thanks, then headed straight for the one class training school I had already decided on.

Swordsman.

It was the class I'd always dreamed of being. In one of my favorite adventure epics, the hero had cut down a titanic dragon the size of a mountain with a single swing of his sword. I had always hoped to one day be capable of similar feats. I knew it was just a story, of course, but I couldn't help but wonder what I could become.

No, I decided—what I *would* become.

With that thought running through my head, I enrolled as a student of the swordsman training school...

But it wasn't meant to be.

After several months of training under an instructor, I learned something about myself: I had no talent with a sword. In fact, I was genuinely hopeless.

Generally speaking, the role of a swordsman is to attack. Their ability to wreak utter havoc—in other words, the possession of offensive skills—is valued above all else. But despite training for the entire term set by the school, I never developed a single offensive skill.

Far from it, in fact; I never even developed the commonplace skills that anybody could acquire through hard work. So, with my training term coming to an end and unable to bear the thought of giving up, I asked the instructor for an extension. But the response I received was as follows:

"A swordsman flailing his sword about with no skills to his name is nothing but a burden on his allies. You're wasting your time."

Despite my disappointment, I went off to be trained in another class. If there was no future for me as a swordsman, then I would become a warrior instead.

Warriors were a vanguard class that used all kinds of weapons, putting their lives on the line to shield their allies. Though not as picture-perfect as a swordsman when it came to the ideal adventurer in my head, it was still a class that I admired.

I already knew that I wasn't any good with swords, but that was fine; I would simply use another weapon. Anything would do. As long as I had the strength to live as an adventurer, it didn't matter to me what I used.

So I enrolled at the training school for warriors, where I spent the next few months living among burly grown-ups, training so intensely that it felt as though all my blood, sweat, and tears had been wrung out of me.

But despite my desperation, the only skill that I managed to develop by the end of the training term was the most basic one of all—one that anybody could use. It strengthened my physical ability a little, and that was it. It would never be enough for me to pass muster as a warrior.

In other words, I had no talent for becoming a warrior either.

The instructor had been kind enough to train me personally until the end of the term, but after that, he recommended that I try another class. “If you keep pushing for the impossible, all you’ll have waiting for you is an early grave,” he said.

And so, despite my mounting disappointment, I kept my hopes alive and headed for my next training school.

This time, I’d try to become a hunter. If close combat was beyond my grasp, then I was happy to settle for fighting with a bow and arrow. I wasn’t a total novice to hunting either; I’d had practice setting traps and felling birds with stones back home on the mountain. Maybe I already had some promise—and it was with that thought in mind that I started my training.

Again, however, it was futile.

No matter how desperately I tried, the only skill I was able to develop was [Stone Throw]. It was something that anybody—even children—could develop and use. To add insult to injury, despite the bow being a hunter’s defining weapon, I was never once able to use it correctly before the training term was over. In the words of my instructor:

“You have zero intuition when it comes to handling fine tools.”

I felt awful after leaving the hunter training school; after all, I had learned that I would never be able to live up to my image of the ideal hero from my father’s epics. I wasn’t cut out to be a class that fought magnificent battles, diving into the fray with weapons in hand.

So be it then, I thought. As long as I could go on adventures, my actual class didn’t matter to me anymore. I was fine with giving up the leading role if there was some other way for me to help. Maybe I wasn’t going to be a storybook hero, but there had to be something—*anything*—I could do.

That was why, somewhat frantic, I enrolled at the thief training school. I still had a faint hope inside me that maybe—just maybe—this was where my talents could shine.

But I was naive. In the end, all I managed to develop was a skill that muffled the sound of my footsteps a little.

"You can't even open trapped chests," the man overseeing my training—a thief himself—told me, "and with no detection skills, you can forget about scouting altogether."

Then, in very clear terms, he said that I should try a different class, because it was obvious that I had no talent for being a thief. So, despite having clung to this as my final chance, I was sent away again.

I was at a complete loss. Thief had been my last resort—the only remaining class that I'd thought was within reach for me. All that remained were the magic ones, but I'd given up on those as soon as the guildsman told me about them.

Magic was the cumulative product of one's innate affinity for mana, vast intellect, and diligent training. These three things were required just to reach the starting line. To make matters worse, it was commonly said that the difficulty of pursuing magic classes was incomparable to training for classes like swordsman and warrior. Knowing that, I'd discarded them as options...but now I had no choice. No other paths remained for me.

And so, despite my only knowledge of the world of magic being the bits and pieces I had gathered from children's stories, I decided to jump right in. I was being foolish, but at the same time, who knew? Maybe there was a hidden talent for magic lying dormant inside of me. It was with that in mind that I went to the magician training school and asked to be trained.

To cut a long story short, I was hopeless. At everything. The old magician at the door had welcomed me in, saying: "Mm, why not? Let's see what you can do." But the most I had picked up was a single skill that created a tiny flicker of fire from my fingertip, no bigger than the flame of a lit candle.

It was a basic—no, beyond basic—skill that anybody, no matter how untalented, should be able to learn in three days at most, yet it had taken me the entire term.

"It's quite unusual for a person to be so naturally lacking in magical talent," the old magician had said, overseeing my efforts with great interest. But in the end, he sent me away with a gentle admonishment. "I'm afraid that this is not where you belong. Find yourself a different path to tread."

That same day, I quietly departed the magician training school and gave up on becoming a magician.

All of my training thus far had ended in failure, and of the many classes that I could apply for with the help of the Adventurers Guild, there was only one left: cleric. It was a magic class that, for me, seemed like my most foolish pursuit yet. For one thing, becoming a cleric was even harder than becoming a magician. Those who held the title had almost always been born with a blessing from the divine—with healing magic—and undergone long years of disciplined training as young children.

“Clerics and the like?” the guildsman had said to me. “They’re the one branch of classes where putting your mind to it just ain’t enough.”

I believed his every word, don’t get me wrong...but it was already clear that I couldn’t become a swordsman, a warrior, a hunter, a magician, or even a thief. I had nothing else to pin my hopes on, so I headed for the cleric training school.

Soon enough, I arrived at a large, solemn temple built from stone. I knocked on the doors and then explained my situation and my hopes to the tall priest who came out to see me, but his response was plain and simple.

“You’re asking for the impossible. You have no foundational training. You should give up.”

I knew that all too well, but no matter how insistent he was on turning me away, I couldn’t bear to throw in the towel. “I won’t move from this door until you let me train here,” I said to the man. And, true to my word, I didn’t.

One day passed, then two, and then three, before finally...

“I suppose I can teach you the basics.”

Thus began my training to become a cleric.

Unfortunately, after a training term of nonstop, grueling effort, all I acquired was [Low Heal]. It was below even the lowest class of cleric spell, [Heal], and the most it could do was partially mend my own small scratches, making it a pointless skill for a cleric to have.

Even after training my absolute hardest, this one skill was the only thing I’d

gotten. Put another way, I had proven my complete lack of talent once and for all.

“Coming this far despite not having received a blessing as a child is amazing in itself,” said my instructor, the priest. But despite his consolation, I could see the other trainees who were my age learning far more impressive skills and improving incomparably faster. It was obvious that I was incompetent. In the end, it had all been for nothing.

And so it came time for me to report back to the guildsman—to inform him that I’d learned no useful skills and that I’d been declared to have “no aptitude” for any of the classes.

“You couldn’t learn a single decent skill?” he asked. “You’ll end up dead in a ditch on your first day of adventuring then, no two ways about it. Give it up and go home, yeah? I could look for other work for you too, if you’d rather that.”

Naturally, he told me to cast aside my dreams. It made perfect sense—even I knew that the path of an adventurer was fraught with danger—but I still couldn’t bring myself to quit. So instead, I quietly left the city.

I had no talent. None at all. That fact was as plain as day.

But so what? I suddenly thought. *What does it matter that I’ve got no talent for anything? All that means is that I’ll have to put even more effort into my training.*

I knew then that I couldn’t give up, no matter what. After all, my swordsman training instructor had once told me: “Though it’s extremely rare, if a person constantly trains a skill over a long, long period, they can end up developing an entirely new one.”

I clung to those words. They were all that I had—my last and only hope. I convinced myself that the time I had spent being evaluated had simply been too short, and that, with more training, even I could learn a useful skill and become an adventurer.

Yes, all I needed was some intense training. I decided that as soon as I got back to my home on the mountain, I’d train until I dropped.

Of course, since I wanted to be a swordsman, the first thing I did when I

returned was make myself a wooden sword. Then, using lengths of rope, I hung sticks from the branches of the trees surrounding my home. I struck them away with my wooden sword, over and over and over again with single-minded intent. That, and that alone, would be my training.

[Parry]

I used the one swordsmanship skill that I'd learned during my time at the swordsman training school—the worst skill among them all, deemed useless by everybody.

And so I parried sticks from dawn 'til dusk, day in and day out. At times, I even forgot to eat or sleep.



A year passed.

[Parry]

Now, I was able to parry ten sticks in the span of a single breath. I could feel my own improvement, but I couldn't feel myself developing a new skill. I didn't know *when* it would happen, but I was sure it would. I just had to keep working hard. And when it did, I would be able to stand on my own two feet as an adventurer. That would be when my adventures began.

The thought alone made my heart sing with excitement. I found myself giddily looking forward to each new day, with hope for the future ringing in my chest.



Three more years passed.

Excluding my time spent on necessities such as hunting and tending to my field, I was still training from morning to night, pushing myself until I was on the brink of exhaustion.

I'd long since exchanged the sticks for wooden swords of my own making, having figured that they'd make for better targets. All of my attention had been devoted to parrying the countless weapons as they flew through the air, and now...

[Parry]

I could parry a hundred wooden swords in the span of a single breath, even with my eyes closed. It felt like I'd gotten a little stronger, but I still hadn't developed a new skill. And my time away from the mountain had taught me that skills were everything in this world.

"I guess I haven't trained enough."

Even the realm of a rookie adventurer was still beyond my reach; as I was now, going on adventures was a dream within a dream. With that in mind, I resolved to be even stricter with my training.



The weeks and months went by, and before I knew it, another ten years had passed. I'd kept up my strict training without missing a day and continued adding wooden swords to the point that I could no longer say how many were strung from the trees. I'd stopped counting a few years ago when I'd passed a thousand.

I devoted myself to my training, keeping my mind empty as I parried wooden swords over and over again. All I ever did was parry.

[Parry]

I'd reached the stage where I could parry a thousand wooden swords without even swinging my own, but I still couldn't feel myself developing a new skill.

"I wonder how much training real swordsmen must go through..." I mused aloud. I couldn't even imagine it. Adventurers seemed so far beyond me now that my head spun at the very thought of becoming one.

I didn't have a shred of talent—that much I already knew. That was why I'd tried to make up for it with hard work, but I could feel that I was finally reaching my limit.

The guildsman had told me that I needed to learn a skill to become an adventurer, but I was twenty-seven now and still without one. Even the most run-of-the-mill adventurer needed skills, but no matter how much I struggled, they were beyond my reach.

However, I still couldn't give up on becoming an adventurer and exploring the

world.

“Talk about a foolish dream...”

I'd chased it knowing that it was foolish—or at least, that was what I'd thought. Anyone else in my shoes would have accepted that it was time to look for a different way of life...but I still couldn't lose heart.

And so I descended the mountain and made my way back to the royal capital. I needed to visit the Adventurers Guild again.

Chapter 2: The Adventurers Guild

More than a decade had passed since I'd last visited the Adventurers Guild. Though the interior was more or less the same, it no longer felt as spacious as when I was a child, and the place itself seemed more worn than I remembered.

"Do you have business with us today, sir?"

As I absentmindedly looked around, a petite young woman—no, make that a girl in her late teens—called out to me from where she was seated behind the receptionist's counter. She looked to be the only one there; the man who'd welcomed me so long ago was nowhere to be seen.

"Yes, I'd like to register as an adventurer," I replied.

The girl immediately produced a sheet of paper. "Then please fill this in with your name and the skills you possess. If you can't write, then please don't hesitate to say so. We'd be more than happy to do it on your behalf."

Luckily, my parents had ensured that I was more or less literate. I accepted the sheet and saw that my name and skills really were the only things I needed to write down, so I got straight to work.

<Adventurer Registration Form>

Name: Noor

<Declared Skills>

Swordsman Branch: [Parry]

Warrior Branch: [Physical Enhancement]

Hunter Branch: [Stone Throw]

Thief Branch: [Featherstep]

Magician Branch: [Tiny Flame]

Cleric Branch: [Low Heal]

One by one, I noted down my rudimentary skills for each branch, finishing with six in total. They were all that I had.

"Is this okay?" I asked the girl.

"Yes, thank you. Please bear with me for a moment while I go over— Huh?"

Seemingly confused as she continued to look over my form, the girl reached for a bulky manual sitting atop the receptionist's counter titled *The Dictionary of Skills*. Then, after a short while of examining its contents, she turned to me hesitantly.

"Um, are you sure you filled this in correctly?" she asked. "If there was anything that you forgot to add—"

"That's everything."

She paused for a moment and then said, "What?" My honest answer had turned the look on her face from confused to flustered as she grabbed a small booklet from nearby and hurriedly began to flip through it. From the look of things, she was studying a receptionist's training manual.

"P-Pardon my rudeness!" she said. "Then, um...are you, um, aware of the training schools we have here in the royal capital? Anybody is welcome to attend. You can receive training in the six basic class branches from first-rate instructors and develop new skills for—"

"Yes, I know about them. I've trained at every single one, and those are the skills I have."

"Huh...?!" she softly exclaimed, but her surprise only lingered for a brief moment. "Pardon me. Please hold on for a moment."

She was back to flipping through her booklet. After going through it several times over in search of whatever she was looking for, she looked up at me apologetically.

"U-Um, then, I'm sorry to tell you this, but..."

"I can't register as an adventurer?" I asked. I'd expected as much.

"I'm...afraid not. You don't meet the minimum requirements set by the Guild. I'm really sorry..."

"No, it's okay. You don't need to apologize."

I'd already known that my skills weren't enough to register as an adventurer. The girl looked relieved, but that quickly changed when she heard my next words.

"I'd still like to register as an adventurer, though. Is there anything you can do to help me?"

The girl glanced frantically between me and the training manual, her hands beginning to quiver. She had already been on the verge of tears, but now her face was flushed red. Had my request really been that bad?

"I guess not, huh?" I said.

"Um, um, but, um... P-Please wait here for a moment!"

Just as I was starting to feel even worse for her, she leaped up from her seat and dashed toward the back of the Guild.

"Muh-Masterrr!"

"What's wrong, Aria?" came a voice from out of sight. "Hm? What's got your face all red?"

"Um, you see, there's a man who—"

From the sound of things, she was explaining my circumstances to this "Master" person.

After a short while, a large, grim-faced man lumbered out from the back. Though his expression was mild, his cheek and arms were marred by a number of sizable scars.

I blinked. I knew this man. Though there was more gray mixed into his hair now, his face sent a ripple of nostalgia through me.

"Hey now," he said, "I can't say I appreciate you making sport of our greenhorn — Hmm? Who're you? Haven't seen your face 'round these parts before."

He didn't seem to recognize me. In fact, he probably thought I was some kind

of shady character if the sharp glare he was giving me was anything to go by. However, seeing a familiar face had put me in high spirits.

"Hey," I cheerily blurted out. "Long time no see."

"Hrrm? Long time no what-now? I don't know who you think you are, but—" He paused, placed a hand on his beard, then tilted his head at me. "Wait. Give me a moment..."



After examining me for a while, his face lit up in realization. “Well, I’ll be damned. You sure have grown. You’re that one kid from way back, aren’t you? Noor, was it?”

“That’s me,” I replied.

To my surprise, he’d remembered me. By name, no less.

The receptionist girl, who’d been anxiously watching our exchange, looked between us, a perplexed expression on her face. “Um, is this man an acquaintance of yours?” she asked the guildsman.

“Yeah. Something like that. You can leave him to me now, Aria. Go find some other work to do.”

“R-Right away!”

We watched as the girl moved to another counter and started helping the other visitors, then the man turned back to me, his cheerfulness at complete odds with his demeanor just a short moment ago. “Sorry about that. Remembering faces is supposed to be part of my job. That said, you’re nothing like how I remember. You hit a pretty big growth spurt, eh?”

“Don’t sweat it,” I replied, smiling. “It’s been over a decade. To be honest, I’m amazed you even remembered my name.”

“Ha! ’Course I remember. I couldn’t forget if I wanted to. One stint at a training school is rough enough for an adult, but a little kid comes along and sticks it out for an *entire* term at all six, and without learning a single skill to boot? You were the first to manage it, and you’ll be the last too. Then you up and vanished into thin air. Didn’t hear a word of you from nowhere, so I’d figured for sure that you’d kicked the bucket. What’ve you been up to this whole time?” He paused, scratching his head. “Actually, never mind. Forget I asked. Don’t mean to pry.”

He sounded curious about what I’d been up to since leaving the capital. I had no reason to keep it a secret, so I told him about how I’d returned to my home on the mountain and continued my training alone.

“What? You’re not seriously telling me you spent more than fifteen years

training alone to get a skill, are you? I've never heard of anybody thickheaded enough to—" He stopped mid-sentence, seeming to reconsider. "Actually, I guess you really would do something like that."

Then, somewhat hesitantly, he continued, "So...what skills did you get?"

"I didn't get any," I answered honestly.

Yes, in the end, I hadn't learned any new skills. My instructors had been right to tell me that I didn't have any talents.

"Well, that figures. Royal training school instructors don't get to where they are by looking pretty. People call this city the Adventurer's Holy Land, and even then, they're the best of the best. There ain't much they get wrong. I'm sorry to say it, but if they said you don't cut it, then, well...that's that."

"Yeah. I don't. I trained pretty desperately in my own way, but it was no use."

There's a certain feeling that passes through a person's body when they develop a skill; I'd found that out when developing my rudimentary ones at the training schools. But after leaving the royal capital, I'd never felt it again. In other words, I hadn't developed any new skills.

Still, all things considered, I was sure that I'd made a really good effort...

"Well, don't let it get to you," the guildsman said. "Not everything in life's smooth sailing. There are so many things you can do other than being an adventurer. But, wait...you know that already. So that makes me wonder, why did you come here? Don't tell me this registration form here on the desk is yours."

"It is. Despite everything, I still want to be an adventurer. I know I'm asking for the impossible, but isn't there some way to make it happen?"

"Hold on. You serious?" He frowned at me for a moment before shaking his head, resigned. "Fine, fine. I take my job seriously though, so you're getting the rundown from scratch."

Then, rubbing at the hair on his grizzled head, the guildsman began to explain.

"First things first: adventuring is a job for those after something high risk, high reward; those who are sure of their own abilities; and those who are just plain

weird and get a kick out of danger. Sign up at your own peril. You'll make forays into areas inhabited by monsters, undertake reconnaissance of criminal hideouts, and, at times, even hunt down bounties. When it comes to adventuring, a profitable job is a dangerous one. Put differently, to be an adventurer is to break bread with death every day...but I guess you know that much already."

"Yeah," I replied, nodding. "I'm fine with that." I was already fully aware of everything he was saying.

"Well, long story short, adventuring is a job where you make a point of poking your nose into danger. As such, in the interest of protecting human lives, a set of standards officially recognized by all guilds was established way back. We call these standards 'ranks,' and they were set up so there would be fewer idiots slipping up while trying to do the impossible and dying in a ditch somewhere."

Saying that, he retrieved and then showed me an official rank chart from within the Guild receptionist's desk.

Official Adventurer Ranks

S-rank (Platinum): Individuals recognized by the Adventurers Guild Association as being of extraordinary ability.

A-rank (Gold): Individuals recognized by officially designated institutions as being exceptionally capable and having notable accomplishments.

B-rank (Silver): Individuals recognized by officially designated institutions as being exceptionally capable and of amazing ability.

C-rank (Bronze): Individuals recognized by the Adventurers Guild Association as being capable and of excellent ability.

D-rank (Iron): Individuals who are of excellent ability as an adventurer.

E-rank (Beginner): Individuals who are of the minimum ability required to become an adventurer.

"As a general rule, there are only five adventurer ranks: A through E," the guildsman said. "S-rank, or Platinum, does exist, but it's an honor reserved only for the most exceptional of outliers. Don't pay it any mind. Now, normally, a person's rank begins at E and rises up toward A as they complete successful commissions and gain recognition for their abilities...but for that to happen to you, you'll first need to be recognized as someone who's 'of the minimum ability required to become an adventurer.' Only then can you become an E-rank—a Beginner."

His explanation sounded familiar; I vaguely remembered hearing it from him as a child.

"Now," he continued, "the official requirement for starting out at the bottom, E-rank, is that you have at least one useful skill. By all rights, it's a pretty lax requirement"—he paused—"but I suppose it's a pretty big stumbling block for you. Still, since it stands at pretty much every guild in every nation, not just here in the royal capital, my hands are tied in terms of what I can do for you. Sorry."

Looking apologetic, he scratched at his head.

"I see," I said. "I guess there's nothing I can do, then."

Maybe it was finally time for me to call it quits and grow up. I'd known in my head that this was how things would turn out. To be honest with myself, I'd only really come here to make sure of what I'd been told as a kid.

Despite that, though, it was still a huge blow. Until now, I'd always lived with my sights set on becoming an adventurer. Knowing that it was impossible didn't make it any easier to change how I felt. Still, the impossible was called that for a reason.

"I guess I really will have to give up..." I sighed, my shoulders dropping as my mind went elsewhere.

The guildsman watched me silently for a while before he spoke again. "Well," he said, scratching his beard, "if you *just* want to be an adventurer, then you might not be completely out of options."

My head jerked up reflexively. "There's a way?"

"I wouldn't say there *is* one...but I can't really say there *isn't* either."

“Tell me. Please.”

He let loose a small sigh, then slowly said, “As I explained earlier, you don’t meet the requirements to become the lowest rank of adventurer, E-rank. But, strictly speaking, there’s actually a rank lower than E.”

“Lower than E?”

“Not many know about it, even among those of us who handle these matters. It’s an irregular position called F-rank, otherwise known as Novice. Beginner is generally considered the lowest, but Novice is even lower. It’s a special rank that only exists here in the royal capital. Since it has no stipulations about needing any kind of skills, you can register as a Novice even as you are now. Still —”

“I...I’ll do it!”

Before I’d realized it, I’d thrust myself over the counter in excitement. I knew it was childish of me, but still, I couldn’t contain myself. Tiny as it was, I’d just been given new hope.

“Calm down and hear me out first,” the guildsman said. “The important part comes next.”

“Okay.”

“In practice, Novice rank might as well not exist, and there’s a reason for that: skills or no, anybody can register for it, yourself included. But it comes with certain conditions.”

“Conditions?” I asked. “What kind of conditions?”

“That’s the crux of it. You’re prohibited from undertaking hunting commissions of any kind, and gathering commissions outside the city limits are out of the question too. Those are the conditions. After all, if you can’t protect yourself, even gathering materials becomes dangerous. As for what you *can* do, you’re allowed to undertake miscellaneous commissions within the city. That’s it. In other words, cleaning drains, moving dirt at construction sites, looking for lost cats... Those are the only kinds of jobs you can take at Novice rank.”

“Miscellaneous commissions within the city...”

"That's right," he confirmed. "Nothing else. And what kind of person would be silly enough to sign up to be an adventurer, only to do that? Since the Guild mediates the work, we take a cut of the pay. You'd be much better off finding a regular job. The rank was initially established way back when to force the city's beggars and the like into employment, but ever since the economy stabilized, it's been a forgotten holdover that nobody uses anymore. The law that created it was established a long time ago; there aren't even any traces of it being used in the past hundred years. To be honest with you, there are no benefits at all in registering to become Novice rank. So for your own good, just find a regular job and—"

"I'm fine with that," I said. "Please let me register."

"What?" He stopped and stared at me. "Hold on, did you not hear a word of what I just said?"

"I did. No hunting, no gathering materials—basically no dangerous commissions of any kind that would take me out of the city, right? I'm fine with that, so please let me register."

"Seriously," he said after a pause, "did you not hear me? You know, you'd do well to pay a little more respect to the advice of your eld... No, I suppose you were never the type to listen to what others had to say after you'd set your mind on something."

The guildsman let out another sigh—a large one this time—and once again scratched his head. "Fine. I told you about it, so I'll reap what I sowed. I'll issue you your registration card...but hear me out. You let me know the moment you're sick of it, all right? A regular job would do you better, no two ways about it. I'll introduce you to some people anytime you want. You got that?"

Having said his piece, the guildsman went into a room in the back and returned with a small, dust-covered box. Then, he took a pitch-black card out from within, signed it, and held it out to me.

"If you *have* got that, then take this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Your F-rank registration card. It'll serve as your adventurer's license, more or

less. It comes with conditions, of course, but I just told you about those. Don't go showing it off too much, all right? It really isn't anything to brag about."

"I won't, thank you! I swear I'll pay you back for this!"

And that was how, by obtaining my F-rank adventurer's license, I took the first step toward my long-awaited dream.

Chapter 3: My Long-Awaited Adventurer Life

"You're such a darling, Noor. I can always count on you!"

"Not at all, Mrs. Stella. Thank you for always commissioning me."

Mrs. Stella was an older woman and the client for the drain-cleaning commission that I had just completed. In an exchange that was quite familiar to us by now, she signed off on the commission slip I held out to her, after which I bid her farewell and dashed off to my next job.

The memory of when I first came by her home was still fresh in my mind. It was, after all, my very first job as an adventurer. Mrs. Stella lived in a district of the royal capital that people called "the old quarter" because it had been around for forever. While it was undeniably a part of the city, its proximity to the outermost limits meant it had no access to the city's cleaning services, which were scrupulous in their work in the central districts. As such, the residents of the old quarter had to clean for themselves.

However, Mrs. Stella, who had lived alone ever since her husband and son passed away, had ailing legs and poor eyesight. Without anyone around to help her, the task of cleaning had only become more insurmountable with each passing day. Then, the drains around her home, having gone uncleaned for quite some time, inevitably began to give off an unpleasant reek.

While very much willing to handle the problem, Mrs. Stella nevertheless found herself very much unable to. And so, at her wit's end, she made up her mind to put in a commission at the Adventurers Guild.

"Please," read the request, *"would somebody be kind enough to help me?"*

And yet, nobody did.

From what I understood, in the eyes of your everyday adventurer, the reward Mrs. Stella offered was simply not very enticing. Most preferred high-profit commissions such as monster hunting or urgent material gathering, and those were the types of commissions the Guild usually prioritized when mediating

with clients.

So, perhaps because everyone involved thought that cleaning some residential drains could be handled whenever, by anybody else with free time, Mrs. Stella's commission went ignored. Then, in a stroke of luck, just as she was at a total loss for what to do, I showed up.

She was so thankful upon the completion of my first job that she became a regular client and started requesting me by name. In fact, because of just how happy she was every time I assisted her, I found myself doing a bit extra, instead of just sticking to the details of the commission. As I grew more used to the work, the time it took me to finish the requested sections of drain grew shorter—so, gradually, I would clean out more and more of the surrounding sections too.

Though some might say it was a waste of time, Mrs. Stella's neighbors were very grateful, so I happily continued. Sure, the pay for this job wasn't anything special, but to me, it was worth doing. After all, I got to see the smiles it brought to people's faces, and feel the satisfaction of knowing that I was making the city just that little bit cleaner with my own hands.

That being said, I'd probably overdone it today. Somewhere during the cleaning, I'd lost track of the time, so I'd left for my next job later than I'd intended.

"Am I going to make it?" I wondered out loud.

I hurried through the city's streets, taking two turns along the way, and finally arrived at the construction site that was my destination. As usual, the foreman, who was my second client of the day, came over to greet me.

"Right on time, Noor. It's the usual today. I'm countin' on ya!"

These days, my daily schedule generally consisted of cleaning drains in the morning, followed by moving dirt at this construction site in the afternoon.

As I understood it, the royal capital where I was situated was famously nicknamed "the Adventurer's Holy Land" due to the presence of a massive and ancient dungeon within the city's limits. Since the city had been carrying out some large-scale construction as of late with the intention of enlarging the

roads in front of the dungeon, calls had been sent out for the great deal of manpower required for the project. Eventually, because of a labor shortage, those had become commissions put in at the Guild.

But, like with drain cleaning, local construction work wasn't very enticing to your everyday adventurer. Apparently, I had been the only person to take the commission by choice. That did nothing to change my opinion that I couldn't have asked for a better job, though.

After all, here, no matter who you were, you were judged solely on the amount of work you put in. The more dirt you carried, the more you were paid. With the [Physical Enhancement] skill I'd picked up from my warrior training, I could easily carry five times more than the average person, and with [Low Heal], the barely-even-a-skill that I'd developed from my cleric training, I could slowly but steadily heal myself as I worked, so I didn't even feel fatigued.

My skills might not have been considered useful enough for me to register as an adventurer, but they were a great help for my current lifestyle. [Featherstep], from my thief training, was perfect for catching lost pet cats, and [Tiny Flame], from my magician training, came in handy for cooking. I didn't have much use for my hunter skill, [Stone Throw], but being able to hit faraway things was great for impressing kids.

However, despite it being the one skill that I'd trained so desperately, I found no real use for [Parry] at all.

I still kept up with my training, even now; it was hard to drop a habit that I'd built up over the course of fifteen years. And since I continued to harbor the faint hope that my efforts would one day bear fruit, I had no intentions of stopping—even if that possibility was infinitesimally low.

At any rate, my prospects of becoming a normal adventurer aside, my skills were more than enough to help me pay for the expenses associated with living in the royal capital. Though, as much as I'd like to think that all my training wasn't for nothing, I was still a far cry from even a Beginner-rank adventurer. As things stood, I knew full well that my dream of becoming a hero told of in epics was arrogant beyond belief.

From time to time, I would even ask myself, *Why not just settle for what you*

have? After all, my dream of becoming an adventurer stemmed from my desire to help people, and, well, I was already doing that. I was undertaking commissions, being paid for them, and people were thanking me. Day by day, that was how I lived my life. That alone was fulfilling enough; it would be greedy to want anything more.

Besides, I had no family to look after, and nothing I needed large sums of money for. Taking on risky commissions trying to get rich quick would just be unnecessary.

I guess doing this until I die wouldn't be so bad.

That had been the thought running through my mind as I worked all over the city, and before I knew it, three months had passed.

These days, I had a proper place of residence. I'd taken a liking to the cheap inn that the guildsman had introduced me to, and had stayed there ever since. Part of why it was cheap was that meals weren't included, but since I'd been cooking for myself my whole life, that didn't really bother me.

It didn't have a bath either, but there were plenty of public bathhouses in the city. There were all sorts of different kinds just a short walk away, so I could pick based on how I was feeling that day. Sometimes, after washing myself clean of sweat, I'd even treat myself to something delicious from one of the street stalls. Here in the royal capital, my life was comfortable.

"You do fine work, Noor," said the construction site foreman. "Damn fine work. It's a right pity you're an adventurer. You sure ya don't want to work with me and my boys? I'd pay ya three...no, five times the usual salary. More, if ya want. I know you're good for every coin you'll earn."

The foreman had taken a liking to me a while back, and he'd made a habit of making me similar offers ever since. Still...

"Thanks," I replied, "but I'm already happy where I am."

...I'd made a habit of turning him down with the same response each time.

"A right pity, I tell ya," he said, sighing and giving me a dejected look.

He did that each time too. I felt kind of guilty about it. But, to my own lack of

surprise, I couldn't bring myself to give up on my long-cherished dream. That, too, had become something of a habit. At the end of the day, I wanted to be an adventurer. Though the other construction workers teased me about it, I strove to go on adventures like the ones told of in epics. It was a silly dream, sure, but that didn't matter to me.

I worked hard, moving dirt...and the next thing I knew, the sun had started to go down. It was time to finish up.

"That's all for today," said the foreman. "We're ahead of schedule thanks to you, Noor. I'm countin' on ya for tomorrow too."

"I'll be there," I replied. "See you tomorrow."

Then, like always, I held my commission slip out for him to sign. After reporting to the Guild and receiving my pay for the day, I'd take a bath, then go to my usual spot and train.

Just as I was leaving, however, I thought I saw a flash of light. It had come from the back of the construction site, where the entrance to the Dungeon of the Lost was found.

"What was that?" I asked myself.

Had it just been my imagination?

No, I decided; I *had* seen something. An intense purple-red light of some kind. And as that confirmation took hold—

"Some... Help...!"

—I thought I heard a faint scream.

Chapter 4: I Parry a Cow

Whatever that strange purple-red light had been, I'd only seen it for a split second.

The instant I heard that scream, I took off in its direction. Then, after rounding a corner, I saw it—a huge creature standing by the dungeon's entrance.

"What *is* that?"

It was a giant cow, and it was standing on two legs.

That was my first impression, but I'd never seen a cow like it before. Its head would've been level with the roof of a house, and it was swinging around a massive black metal axe larger than its own body.

Then, I noticed the people surrounding it. They were clad in silver armor that I swore I'd seen before, holding swords and spears at the ready. Weren't they the royal capital guard? They had taken up a battle formation in front of the cow, barring its way as if to protect somebody.

The cow swung its axe at them.

Not good. If they don't get out of the way, they'll die.

The moment that thought flashed through my mind, the bodies of several guards went flying through the air.

You could tell from a glance the weight behind a single swing of that axe. If one connected, a human wouldn't stand a chance.

Then, just as the guards' bodies tragically scattered in sprays of blood, I saw a young girl. She had collapsed, half-sitting on the ground, staring up at the cow in dumbfounded shock.

"...and charge at it! Protect the—!"

From the sound of things, the guards were trying to protect the girl, but the cow scattered them to and fro with each terrible swing of its axe, showering the surroundings with blood. Even as the guards shouted, the cow continued to

attack, killing them one by one.

A sword, torn free from a guard's body along with his entire suit of armor, flew through the air and landed at my feet.

Nevertheless, the guards vehemently made to protect the still-collapsed girl.
“They’re going to die.”

I felt it instinctively. I couldn’t explain it well, but the movements of the armor-clad guards looked dull—considerably so. Were they new recruits who hadn’t had much training yet?

They battled the cow with everything they had—but if *that* was the best they could muster, then they were going to be wiped out. Before I could even finish that thought, the last guard went flying. The girl, still on the ground, was the only one left. If she didn’t move, she’d be crushed into paste.

The cow raised its axe high above its head, ready to bring it crashing down upon its final target.

“Watch out!” I yelled.

In the very same instant, I activated [Physical Enhancement] at full strength, snatched up the guard’s sword at my feet, and dashed toward the cow. As I ran, and before I straightened up, I snatched a pebble from the ground and, using my finger, flicked it as hard as I could.

[Stone Throw]

The skill I’d acquired through my failure to become a hunter only took a moment to use, and it sent the pebble flying straight through the air to hit my target—one of the cow’s eyes.

The sudden attack seemed to briefly confuse the cow but otherwise left it unhurt. All I’d done was make it angry.

“Grrmmoooooo!!!”

Letting off an earthshaking roar, the massive cow turned its focus away from the girl and toward me. But as far as I was concerned, that was just fine.

If I could keep the cow’s anger directed at me, then the girl would be safe, at

least for the time being. She was still on the ground, but all I could do right now was pray that she would find the strength to run while I still had its attention.

After that, well... I guess I'd just have to find a way to deal with this opponent.

“Grrmmmmooooo!!!”

The cow charged at me, each step leaving cracks in the ground as it advanced. It had raised its axe into the air a second time and was making a swing at me with all its might.

As expected of a creature with such immense physical strength, the cow was blisteringly fast as well. It closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye and brought its massive axe down on me from a dizzying height.

If the attack landed, I'd go the same way as the guards—flying through the air in small pieces. However—

[Parry]

Using my sole swordsmanship skill, I put all of my strength into intercepting the axe crashing down on my head and sweeping it to the side.

Sparks flew. Then, with the sound of groaning metal, the hulking axe slammed down by my side and into the flagstones paving the ground, smashing them apart as though they were nothing more than hard candy. The impact sent a violent shock through my legs, and I barely stopped myself from staggering in place.

I looked at the axe and saw that it had stuck deep into the ground.

“Grrmmmmooooo!!!”

With all of its might, the cow yanked its axe out of the flagstones and swept it sideways, aiming to deal me a fatal blow. The massive blade, easily taller than a person, flew directly at my torso.

One look at the black axe was enough to understand the sheer weight it boasted. If even just the edge of its blade touched me, I'd find myself as nothing but scattered pieces of meat. Like what had happened to the guards just a short while ago, my insides would go flying all over the place, and I would die.

[Parry]

This time, I put everything I had into a vertical swing, parrying the massive axe upward with my sword.

There was another clash of sparks, more violent than the last, and then the axe was sailing through the air above my head. A moment later, my face was buffeted by the wind generated by the force of the swing.

What unbelievable strength.

I thought I'd trained quite hard, back at my small home on the mountain, but my arms were already starting to go numb.

The massive axe, gripped in a pair of arms thicker than the torsos of several men, came flying at me in a flurry of blows that rained down again and again like an oncoming storm with no end in sight. It took everything I had in me just to repel them.

How terrifying.

Each time I parried one of the cow's swings, my own inexperience, my own ignorance, was driven into me.

As strong as it seemed, and as much as it was a formidable foe to me, the cow probably wasn't even a proper monster. After all, we were in the bounds of a relatively safe city. I didn't know about the general citizenry, but there was no doubt in my mind that any decently strong adventurer could've taken care of it in a heartbeat.

Just how strong did animals get in the outside world?

I couldn't even begin to imagine it. It was no wonder that the guildsman had told me to give up on becoming an adventurer. Like a frog in a well, I was ignorant of the world beyond the confines of my home.

As I parried blow after blow, a single thought ran through my mind: *It's a big world out there.* I was learning that the hard way.

I thought I'd gotten a little stronger, but reality wasn't so naive. To me, this simple animal, from a city right next door to where I was born and raised, was a threat. I trembled at the realization of that cold fact—but also at the realization that, deep inside me, I knew that I still wouldn't give up on my dream.

Just how much of a sore loser was I?

“Grrrrmmmmooooo!!!”

Indifferent to my self-reflection, the cow once again brandished its axe and pressed the attack. It swung at me again and again in a berserk fashion, putting its undivided attention into each weighty but fast blow, even as I frantically parried them aside. There was no room for me to counterattack, and even if there had been, I still wouldn’t have had the slightest chance of achieving victory. I didn’t have any means of fighting back. Skills were vital for battle, and I had none to my name.

I knew it. It was a silly dream.

As I continued parrying the cow’s axe, each strike a potentially lethal one, that was the thought that stuck in my mind. I’d probably never had a chance of winning from the beginning—after all, I had no talent for anything. No matter how much effort I put in, it never translated into ability. How could I have thought that I could save anybody? I was just being arrogant.

Still. *Still.*

[Parry]

Even if there was no chance of me ever becoming a hero...I wanted to at least protect the single terrified girl collapsed in front of me.

Because no matter where, and no matter when, the ideal adventurer that I’d wanted to become ever since I was a child would always risk their own life to protect the weak.

That was just how I wanted to be. It didn’t matter how long it took me; that was my dream, and I couldn’t cast it aside. If I abandoned this girl, here and now, then how could I ever achieve that dream in the future?

[Parry]

With single-minded intent, I parried more of the cow’s attacks. It was all I could do.

“Grrrrmmmmooooo!!!”

The cow brought its axe down again...but this blow wasn’t aimed at me.

This whole time, the girl hadn't moved. It didn't look like she even had the energy to run; instead, she was still dumbfounded, stuck there staring. Having noticed that, the cow was probably thinking it would kill her first. It brought the axe straight down at her in a trajectory that would go past me and crush her flat.

[Parry]

I'd slipped in front of the girl, making it between her and the cow by a hair's breadth, and once again parried the attack. The axe rebounded upward, causing the cow to stagger slightly.

"Grrrrroooooo!!!"

The cow flew into a rage, putting even more force behind its attacks. Right now, it probably thought of me as a nuisance it needed to get rid of. I could feel its anger and agitation in each swing of its axe, the blows coming far heavier than before. My arms had been screaming in pain for a while now.

But no matter how many blows came, I would parry them all.

No matter what, I wouldn't let that axe come down. As long as I still drew breath, I'd send it back where it came from, every time. Even if I couldn't win, I could at least, until my dying moment, protect this girl.

Or so I thought. I was almost at my limit already.

The sword in my hands gave in first. Though it was of far superior make than the wooden swords I'd trained with back on the mountain, the size difference between it and the cow's axe was simply too great. With the sharp sound of snapping metal, its blade broke into pieces.

Seeing its chance, the cow swung directly at my neck. If the attack connected, it would effortlessly tear right through me and the girl. However—

"I'm not done yet!"

There was still a small part of the blade attached to the hilt of the sword I was holding—enough that I might be able to parry one more blow. It would, however, be the last parry I ever pulled off with this weapon.

Knowing that, I sharpened my focus to its absolute limits, put everything I had

into this single moment, and swung my sword with my entire body and soul behind it.

For an instant, it felt like time had stopped.

The sword in my hands wedged into the cow's axe in the exact spot I had aimed for. Then, with all of my might, I finished my swing, sending the axe away and toward my intended trajectory.

[Parry]

The axe I parried tore free of the cow's grip with tremendous force, spun around in the air, and cleaved directly through the cow's neck before finally ending its flight by smashing into a building with a thunderous crash, disappearing out of sight.

"I...did it?"

Silence.

The cow, now weaponless, stood stock-still without making a sound. Then, after several heartbeats, its head fell to the ground with a heavy thud, followed soon after by its body.

After I'd made sure that the cow wouldn't be getting up again, I finally allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. As a result of that last attack, the sword in my hands had been reduced to tiny splinters. Not even the hilt remained. That truly had been my final chance.

"That was a close call," I muttered, after pausing briefly to gather myself. "It wouldn't have held out a second longer."

Not just the sword either; my body was already at its limit. Now that I had the time to think, I realized that it wasn't just my arms and legs—my entire being was screaming in pain. I was totally exhausted, to the point where just standing made me dizzy.

It was honestly pathetic. All it had taken to put me in such a sorry state was a single cow, and not even a wild one; it was from the city. And I wanted to go out into the world on adventures like this? Even dreams had a limit to how fanciful they could be.

I still needed more training.

"Thank you," came a faltering voice from behind me. "You saved my life. Um...might I ask who you are?"

While I'd been deep in thought, the girl behind me had staggered to her feet to thank me. It looked like she'd finally found the strength to move. Thank goodness.

"I'm glad I made it in time," I said as my only reply.

But was that even true? I looked at the scattered corpses of the guards around us. Their deaths had all been brutal.

"Um... If it's all right, may I ask your name?" the girl said. "I don't mean to be a bother, but I'd like to repay you for what you've done for me."

As I struggled to decide how I should respond, I caught sight of two guards running toward us from behind her.

"No," I told her, "I don't need anything like that. After all, I was just passing by."

Then, too embarrassed to even give any of them my name, I left the rest for the guards to handle and hurried away to the Guild. I still needed to report the day's work that I'd done at the construction site.

Chapter 5: The Assassination of the Princess

That day, the Kingdom of Clays was shaken to its core. Minotaurs were monsters that usually dwelled in the Abyss, the deepest layer of the world's oldest dungeon, which was located in the royal capital: the Dungeon of the Lost. Yet, without word or warning, one had appeared in the heart of the city.

This Minotaur had expressly attacked the Prodigy Princess, who had just returned from her expedition to the dungeon's middle layers. To cap it all off, a powerful restraint had manifested at the same time, physically restricting Princess Lynneburg and leaving her defenseless.

The Gatekeepers, elite guards stationed at the dungeon's entrance, had all, to a man, died. However, owing to a single civilian who quickly intervened and slew the Minotaur, the princess managed to barely escape with her life.

"Is it true? Somebody summoned a Minotaur within the city?"

"Without a doubt, Your Highness. Princess Lynneburg herself, the sole surviving witness, testified that some kind of summoning magic was used."

Upon hearing Darchen, the chief of staff of the Royal Chivalric Order, deliver his report, the prince ground his teeth. "Then the act was intentional," he said.

"So we fear," Darchen replied. "A magician's ring, which we suspect was the catalyst for the summoning, was found at the scene. We believe it to have been worn by a merchant from the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. The Spell Sovereign Oken, captain of our Magician Corps, examined it and said that it had been fueled by a manastone of extremely high purity. So pure, in fact, that it would have been impossible to find for sale on the open market."

Saying that, Darchen held out a purple-red fragment of gemstone.

"I see," said the prince.

Summoning magic was an exceedingly advanced branch of magic that required a high-purity manastone and an intricate summoning circle engraved to an exact degree by a high-ranking magician. Furthermore, a manastone

capable of sealing a Minotaur—categorized as a Special-A, Catastrophe-class threat—was not something that money could buy, no matter how wealthy one was. It went without saying that only a select few entities had the means to achieve all of the above.

“According to Oken,” Darchen began, “the traces of the spell pattern that remained on the manastone reminded him of something from the Magic Empire of Deridas. He said it had a strong resemblance to the designs produced by their state-of-the-art magical tool manufacturing facilities. He also said that sealing a Minotaur into a space the size of a ring was well within the realm of possibility, provided that one used a manastone with an ultrahigh purity comparable to the Theocracy of Mithra’s Demon’s Heart.”

As Darchen continued his report, the prince’s expression grew cloudy. The three countries that had just been named were those that surrounded the Kingdom of Clays. Of them, Deridas was currently the strongest power on the continent, and the country that was currently putting the most political pressure on the Kingdom.

“Is it revenge they’re after?” muttered the prince.

Over the past several years, the Magic Empire of Deridas had been upscaling its military off the back of rapid technological advancements in the field of magical tool manufacturing. At the same time, it had used that newfound might to expand its territory by invading and taking over the small countries around it.

It had also made outrageous demands of the prince’s own Kingdom of Clays, knowing full well that what it was asking for would be impossible.

“Relinquish us the rights to your country’s dungeon. In return, we will loan you our military.”

The Kingdom of Clays was a small country that relied on two particular assets: the plentiful natural resources produced by its dungeon, and the people who gathered around it. If that foundation were to be snatched away, then the country itself would cease to function.

Naturally, the prince’s father had responded accordingly.

“This is our country. We will defend it ourselves.”

Unfortunately, the current emperor of the Magic Empire was not so easily deterred. This incident with the Minotaur had evidently been his response, and the intent was clear—revenge and a threat. At least, that was the explanation that made the most sense in the prince's mind.

"No," he murmured, "that can't be all."

Until now, the Empire's actions had never surpassed simple harassment, but the significance behind today's attack placed it on another level entirely.

The prince's younger sister, Lynne, was, in accordance with Kingdom law, currently undergoing her trials for the rite of succession to the throne. As a result, depending on the time and place, she would be defenseless and alone. The perpetrators behind this incident had specifically aimed for that opportunity and made an attempt on her life. What's more, they had even gone as far as to bind her with a powerful restraint the moment they summoned the Minotaur.

Clearly, they had intended on eliminating her, and their scheme had been planned and executed meticulously. Yet, despite that, they had also blatantly left behind evidence pointing directly to them. The facts didn't line up. It was almost as if they didn't care if they were found out. As if they were brazenly picking a fight.

In other words...

"This act of terrorism against my sister was not so much a threat against our country as much as it was a provocation. They wish for us to declare war on them."

"I'm afraid, my prince...that you may be correct," replied Darchen.

Had the first princess, Lynneburg, been assassinated, then the entire Kingdom of Clays would have been forced to hunt down the culprit. And with the blatant trail of evidence that had been left behind, doing so would have been easy.

After all, the culprit had basically announced itself to the world by name.

However, using that as a basis to press another country for answers would, beyond a shadow of a doubt, trigger the start of a war. In other words, exactly what the culprit wanted.

"They mean to instigate us," murmured the prince, "then crush us in a direct conflict and make up some half-baked pretext to seize our dungeon and its resources."

As far as the culprit was concerned, it didn't matter whether the assassination was successful or not. The Magic Empire of Deridas had tauntingly left unmissable evidence behind, all but asking the Kingdom of Clays to retaliate, if it even dared.

Not for decades—no, not for *a century* had the Kingdom of Clays experienced such an unjust act of meddling at the hands of another country. It was akin to an outright act of aggression. No matter how one looked at it, the fault lay with the culprit. However, to try to use that as footing for making an appeal to the surrounding countries would be...

"Out of the question," the prince said in a low voice.

Indeed, the Kingdom of Clays, which possessed an abundance of resources from its dungeon, was currently surrounded by three major countries.

To the east lay the Magic Empire of Deridas, a country founded upon its unique technology, magical science, which was supported by the large deposits of natural resources found in its mountain ranges, such as magical ores.

To the west lay the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, which possessed large-scale barrier technology passed down by divine revelation and capable of safeguarding an entire city.

Finally, to the south lay the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza, a country that boasted the continent's most robust economy due to its extensive merchant network and ongoing trade with off-continent nations, as well as an impressive capability for espionage thanks to its highly mobile armed caravans.

The Kingdom of Clays had mutual nonaggression treaties with all three countries. However, as things stood, one could not call them allies—not in the truest sense. This was because the relationship between them and the Kingdom was now different to how it had been when the treaties were signed.

Until now, all four countries had maintained an equal struggle for power. Each played to its own strengths, and whatever one country lacked it would

compensate for by engaging in trade and negotiations with the others. For centuries, this was how the peace between them had been maintained.

However, in recent years this pleasant, long-standing equilibrium had collapsed as a result of the Magic Empire's newfound prosperity. Since its current emperor had come into rule, it had found the means to further augment its military might with magical science, and had rapidly acquired more and more power.

Then, using its invasions and annexations of the countless minor countries that surrounded it as an opportunity, the Magic Empire had aligned itself with Mithra and Sarenza, and the three had begun to make unreasonable demands of the Kingdom of Clays, which held such a weak geopolitical position. The Empire's aim was clear: it wanted the Kingdom's dungeon and the resources that came with it.

For the Empire, which had gained its power through the research of dungeon relics, the Dungeon of the Lost was a tantalizing source of even more strength. As for Mithra and Sarenza, they were observing the current situation closely, biding their time.

Now that the equilibrium had been broken and the mutual posturing was a thing of the past, any vulnerability shown by the Kingdom of Clays would be ruthlessly taken advantage of. Put another way, the Kingdom—and the Kingdom alone—was playing the game with a handicap. To begin with, it was geographically in a position where, if the other three countries chose to cooperate and invade, it could do nothing to stop them.

As things stand, we are ripe for the picking.

From the Kingdom's point of view, there could be no worse state of affairs. It was surrounded, and each of its neighbors was on the verge of becoming an enemy.

"It's not that I don't understand what my father is thinking," the prince murmured. "It's just..."

His father was a strict and unbending man, who had flatly rejected every unreasonable demand made of the Kingdom. From trivial demands to major ones to the occasional one that was downright immoral, none had been met

with his father's approval.

In the prince's mind, it was a perfectly appropriate, even just, bearing for a king to have. However, the fact remained that it had also led to a great deal of friction. Because of the king's unyielding sense of reason, because he had stood his ground and refused to budge, the relationships between the Kingdom and its neighbors had, bit by bit, deteriorated.

And as a result, Lynne had been attacked—an act meant to browbeat the king who had never caved to their pressure.

"Our kingdom is on the verge of a crisis," said the prince.

The culprit who had orchestrated today's attack was no doubt waiting eagerly for turmoil to catch on among the Kingdom's citizens—and that it had been such a blatant provocation only meant that the person responsible was already prepared for what would come after. In conclusion, today had been nothing more than a sign; this was only the beginning.

A single pressuring thought took hold in the prince's mind.

We can't waste a single moment.

"Today's attack will not be the last," he said. "We have more threats waiting for us, lurking in the shadows—more elaborate traps lying dormant within our kingdom. Begin investigations into them immediately."

"Yes, Your Highness," said Darchen.

"And," the prince added, for there was another problem yet unsolved, "as for the man who saved Lynne..."

"Lynne" had been Princess Lynneburg's nickname since childhood, and the prince still used it to this day. She had personally told him of the events of the attack just a short while ago. According to her, a man had confronted the Minotaur, a monster from the Abyss, alone, and had walked away without a scratch after slaying it.

But such a thing was impossible—that had been the first thought that crossed the prince's mind upon hearing his sister's tale. If not impossible, then it was at the very least beyond his ability to believe; everything he'd learned and all of

his common sense ensured as much.

Lynne had said that the man had easily parried dozens of the Minotaur's weighty attacks. That he had done so with nothing more than a guard's mass-produced broadsword. That the entire exchange had only taken *about ten seconds*.

She had also said that, while she had been struck dumb watching their lightning-fast back-and-forth, the final blow had come from the man. He had deflected a mana-metal axe large enough to break down a castle wall with nothing more than the broken hilt of a one-handed sword, beheading the Minotaur with its own blade.

Common sense dictated that her tale was, by any stretch of the imagination, impossible. If, hypothetically, such a man truly existed, then it would mean that he possessed a greater ability for combat than the Six Sovereigns had in their youth. Their party of six had, in the past, fought a Minotaur in the Abyss. Led by the current king on an expedition into the Dungeon of the Lost, they had encountered the beast by chance. Their party had consisted of only S-rank adventurers and their reputation had already been legendary, yet they had all resolved themselves for the possibility of death; even Dandalg the Immortal, the party's warrior and tank.

According to them, Minotaurs boasted a hide from head to toe that was tougher than steel. Even their eyeballs were sturdy, impervious to mere arrows and blades.

Luckily, they had been able to harm the beast with the magic of Oken, the Spell Sovereign, and the king's Black Blade, a dungeon relic. Even then, their party had only barely won. Slaying a single Minotaur had taken them all to the brink of exhaustion. Afterward, they had given up on all of the treasure under their very noses and fled home.

The tale was an old one, and now that the Six had far more experience under their belts, the prince was sure that another encounter would go quite differently. However, the lesson remained; Minotaurs were a threat of the highest order.

Yet, Lynne had told the prince of a young man who had slain one alone, like a

fairy-tale hero who had waltzed right out of a story. He found it exceedingly hard to believe.

"My sister must have been confused," the prince said. "For the time being, we should let her compose herself. We'll ask her about what happened again later."

The princess had, after all, been in a life-threatening situation. She may have been the greatest prodigy the Kingdom had ever witnessed, having reached Silver-rank at the mere age of fourteen—far earlier than the prince himself—but a little confusion was unavoidable. After all, she had never truly faced death before.

The prince had even toyed with the possibility that the beast hadn't been a real Minotaur, but that suspicion had already been allayed. One of the Six Sovereigns—Sig, the Sword Sovereign—had examined the monster's corpse and removed all room for doubt.

Things weren't adding up. The only explanation that seemed to make sense to the prince was that his sister's fantastical storybook figure truly existed.

"Did you find out where the man went?" asked the prince. "Our men who ran to the scene saw him, didn't they?"

"That's the thing," Darchen replied. "They *saw* him, yes, but..."

"But? But what?"

"According to them, he vanished before their very eyes, like a phantom. They couldn't track down where he went afterward."

"What? What is that supposed to mean? Are you telling me that our elite reconnaissance corps, under the command of the Shadow Sovereign himself, had this man under their very noses, and they *lost* him? What kind of—"

"What kind of elites are they, then?" was what the prince had been about to say, but he cut himself off. He knew full well that his subordinates were exceptional.

"I understand your concerns, Your Highness," said Darchen. "According to their reports, he disappeared without a sound. But they were certain they saw

him.”

“In other words, the man was good enough to lose them, even while they were using their perception skills.”

“I’m afraid so, Your Highness.”

Who in the world was this man? He was strong enough to slay a Minotaur alone with ease, and quick enough to lose the Kingdom’s elite reconnaissance corps. It beggared belief. Had such a person really been lying low in the royal capital? What was going on here?

The friction between the Kingdom of Clays and its neighbors had reached the boiling point. Right here, within the royal capital, *something* had begun.

“Very well,” said the prince. “Continue your investigations. Don’t waste a single moment.”

“At once, Your Highness,” replied Darchen. The aging man gave a quick bow, then took his leave, his pace brisk.

“We’ll need to hasten our countermeasures. For everything. All at once.”

The prince didn’t have enough information—not nearly enough—and it was making him agitated. The opponent had already made a move—a bold, crude move that spoke of an indifference to being discovered. It could only mean one thing.

“We’re already on the brink...”

War was coming. It may even have already begun.

He had to tell the king. But, no, his father was a perceptive man; he may have realized a long time ago and made arrangements already.

Even still, the prince’s mind churned; he couldn’t stop thinking about his sister’s savior.

“Who could he be...?”

If the man wasn’t their enemy, it would be reassuring beyond words. The prince hoped that was the case; the man had, after all, supposedly saved his sister’s life.

Still, as of now, the man was no more than an unidentified mystery. Too much was strange about him. To begin with, if he was so strong, then how was it that nobody had heard of him before? And if he wasn't an enemy of the Kingdom, then why had he fled without giving his name? That question alone made it difficult to consider him an ally.

"Wishful thinking will get us nowhere," muttered the prince.

Yet it was situations like this that made one want to cling to wishful thinking all the more. As if to shake off that thought, the prince shook his head. In his position, he couldn't put his faith in such things.

"Look at me, wasting my time fantasizing about whether everything my sister said is true. I must look quite the fool."

In Lynne's story, the man had appeared out of nowhere in a time of crisis, and saved the day. He might as well have been a fairy-tale hero with how hackneyed it was.

"First things first, I should calm down and think."

Yet another variable had joined the ones already swirling around in the prince's head. Taking deep breaths to calm his overworked mind, he took a seat in the chair in his office and became lost in thought, trying to make sense of the complex game board with which he was presented.

Chapter 6: Reporting My Completed Commissions

After leaving the scene, I'd taken a brief detour on my way to the Adventurers Guild. I'd wanted to head straight there in order to report my completed commissions, but I'd noticed that some strange men were tailing me. They'd given me a bad feeling, so I'd decided to give them the slip.

Doing so had taken up quite a bit of time, though; it was now completely dark outside.

"Oh? That you, Noor?" asked the guildsman when I entered the Guild. "You had me worried there. Made it out okay, did you?"

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"What, you missed all the hubbub? A monster from the Abyss showed up right by the dungeon's entrance. A right scary one too; one you wouldn't expect to see 'round these parts."

"A monster...?"

"You got it. Damn kicked up a real fuss. I heard it was near your construction site, and that got me worried...but it looks like you missed it. Thank goodness for that, 'cause it would've given a full party of S-rank adventurers a run for its money. Hell, it would've killed me dead before I could even blink, and I was an A-rank back in my day."

"Was it really that terrifying? I guess I should count myself lucky then."

The most I'd come across was a cow. Sure, even that had posed a significant threat to me, but I figured it was better than having met a real monster.

"So what happened to it?" I asked. "Is it still there?"

"No, we're all safe, as things stand. Get this—the monster was a Minotaur from the Abyss, but some mystery man took it out all on his own. In a single blow, no less. Hell of a thing, right?"

"A powerful monster like that...in a single blow?"

"Yeah. Mark my words, we were lucky today. Worst case, the entire city could've been in ruins by now. Whoever that man was, he's got my thanks."

I paused to consider that. "There are some pretty amazing people out there, huh?"

To think that something like that had happened while I was play-fighting with a cow... Evidently, I was still absurdly weak. That was a fact that I had to make sure to internalize.

"Still," I said, "he beat a monster that'd give an S-rank party a run for its money...by himself? Just what kind of person was he?"

"Who knows?" replied the guildsman, pausing to consider my question. "You'd think a guy that strong would be famous, but I haven't heard a single thing about him. The guards are turning the city over looking for him though, so I figure we'll find out sooner or later."

"I guess we will."

As we casually chatted, the guildsman deftly processed my commission slips and handed me a pouch containing my pay. "Here you go—your earnings for today. Not a bad haul you got there."

"It's honest work," I said, taking the pouch from him. "Thanks."

"About that, Noor. You given any thought to taking up a proper job yet?"

"A proper job? I'm already an adventurer."

The guildsman cradled his head in his hands, sighing loudly. "Look. Noor. I know I'm repeating myself, but you know we take a cut of your pay as a mediation fee, right? If not for us, you'd have another thirty percent in your pocket today."

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

"The foreman spoke to me, you know that? Practically begged for me to hand you over. Said he'd never seen a better worker than you. I've had others come to me too; not just him. Everybody's after you. How long do you think this'll last? You should pick a place while you still can and start getting ready to settle down—"

Before I knew it, the guildsman was off again on one of his long-winded rambles. How many times had this happened now? Recently, he'd started telling me about good job opportunities—not at my request, of course. He'd even been referring me to places. I'd kept saying that I didn't need any of it, but, well...

Oddly enough, even though we didn't see eye to eye, the guildsman's persistence never got on my nerves. I got the feeling that he was doing all this because he wanted the best for me.

That didn't stop me from turning him down every time, though.

"So anyway, Noor. Adventuring's an exciting job, even I'll admit that. Made my own living doing it, after all. In the end, that doesn't change the fact that most adventurers die young. I had some close friends back in my day; good, honest folk, the lot of them. But being an adventurer means that, eventually, you'll wake up and realize they're all gone. Why, when I was fifteen—"

This wasn't good. I could tell that he was about to launch into another story I'd already heard—more than once before, mind you. Once the guildsman got like this, I'd have to settle in for the long haul.

As pleasant as it was to watch him enthusiastically tell me about his friends—all the way from when he met them to when they parted—I had work to take care of tomorrow, so I wanted to hurry home. And so, with my usual smile and while letting the story go in one ear and out the other, I watched for the right moment to interject.

But before I could, I sensed a sudden presence behind me.

"I've finally found you," said a soft voice.

I turned around, surprised, and came face-to-face with a small, feminine figure in a cloak. The figure—a girl—lowered her hood, and I realized that I had seen her before. If I wasn't mistaken, she was...



"The girl from earlier?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I didn't mean to be impolite, but I had to meet you again."

It was the very same girl whom the frenzied cow had attacked.

Wait...had she followed me here? As far as I was concerned, I'd done a good job shaking off those strange men who had been tailing me, but I hadn't noticed her at all.

I'd been under the impression that my [Featherstep] skill had improved, since it had become good enough for me to hunt wild hares, wolves, and other animals in the woods back home without them noticing me, but if a kid like her had followed me without my realizing... I still had a long way to go.

But how had she known where I'd gone? Had she just gotten lucky? No, that couldn't be it. She probably had some kind of skill that told her.

"Oh," I said. "You used a skill to find me, right?"

"Yes," she replied. "I've trained at a thief training school. It was rude of me, I know, but I used a long-distance detection skill to locate you. I thought it'd be faster that way, so..."

Wow. That sounded like a really useful skill. And to have learned it at her age?

"So you're a thief-branch class?" I asked.

She paused and then said, "No. The magician branch is my specialty...but I have, roughly speaking, an equal amount of skills for all six class branches."

"That many? Impressive."

"It's something of a tradition in my family. A policy, if you will. '*Learn all that you can learn*,' as our saying goes... But really, it's just a hobby of mine. I'm embarrassed to even mention it before one such as you."

"Not at all. It's plenty impressive."

She was so young—she looked about the same age I had been when I'd first left my small mountain cabin—yet she had so many skills. I should have been used to it by now, but I found myself feeling inferior all over again.

"Um... I'm terribly sorry, but people are watching us," she noted. "May we

talk outside?"

I had no idea how to respond. I tried to signal the guildsman for help with my eyes, but he returned a grim frown and said, "Noor, what did you do?"

"Nothing bad...I think."

It hadn't been that long since I'd come to this city, so there was still a lot I didn't know. Thankfully, each time I'd messed up without realizing, I'd had the guildsman to help me out. That being said, I thought I'd come a long way in getting used to how things worked around here—compared to when I'd first arrived, at least. I didn't think I'd done anything problematic today.

"It's all right," said the girl. "There's nobody around outside, and I'll use [Soundproofing] and [Concealment] to ensure that we aren't overheard."

Were those skills too? That was pretty amazing. I could hardly believe that she considered them part of a hobby and nothing more. Still, why would she go to such lengths for a conversation with me? At a loss, I looked to the guildsman again. He gave me a small nod, still frowning.

"Should I go?" I asked hesitantly.

"Go ahead," he said. "Just...don't forget who you're dealing with. Try not to be rude, yeah?"

I looked at him briefly, confused, and then finally replied, "Okay. I won't."

Then, still not entirely sure of what was going on, I followed the small girl out of the Adventurers Guild.

Chapter 7: The Central Plaza

We walked for a while before finally coming to a stop at the central plaza of the royal capital. As the girl had said, there was no sign of anybody around. At times, I occasionally caught sight of guards moving about as if in search of something, but it didn't look like they took any notice of us.

So this was the strength of her skills, huh? It was pretty amazing.

Once she had confirmed that all the guards had left and that we were alone, the girl began to speak.

"Before I say anything else, please allow me to apologize. I owe you my life, yet I was still rude enough to follow you without your knowledge. For that, I am truly sorry. But please understand; I had to meet you again, no matter what."

Saying that, she gave me a deep bow.

"And," she continued, "I must also apologize for my behavior back at the Guild. It was beyond discourteous of me to suddenly interrupt your conversation and ask you to step outside with me. I beg your forgiveness. My position being what it is, it would be undesirable if I were to be seen like this in public, and I thought that you might have your own circumstances to consider too."

"It's all right," I said. "Don't worry about it."

I didn't think she had anything to apologize for. In fact, I didn't have any "circumstances" worth any particular consideration either. I was starting to get the feeling that maybe there was some kind of misunderstanding at play...

"So," I said, "what did you need from me?"

That was the first thing I couldn't understand; why had she gone to the trouble of following me in the first place? Had the guildsman been right that I had unintentionally done something wrong?

"Just one thing," she said. "I wish to express my gratitude to you for saving my

life. So for that, thank you. Truly.”

Saying that, the long-haired girl gave me another deep bow.

I paused for a moment. “Is that all? But you thanked me earlier, didn’t you?”

“No, that was not befitting of the gratitude you deserve. My life was not the only one you saved today; you saved many of this kingdom’s citizens as well.”

“You must be exaggerating.”

The most I’d done was stop a single rampaging cow. I did feel bad for the guards who had lost their lives, though. One wrong step and I would have gone the same way.

Now that I was thinking about it, my decision to rush in there despite being so powerless had been nothing short of reckless. This girl had an array of amazing skills to her name. Even if I hadn’t butted in, it was entirely possible that she would have handled things on her own.

Of course. Why hadn’t I noticed it until now? I’d *thought* it was strange that she’d collapsed and been on the ground the whole time. It wasn’t because she hadn’t been able to run; she hadn’t *needed* to.

There had been another strange light, blue in color, that had seemed like it was restraining her, but it had faded entirely by the time I reached the cow. If I had left her, then she probably would have been just fine. The more I thought it through, the more I began to feel like I’d done something completely unnecessary...

“You really don’t need to go out of your way to be considerate of me,” I said. “What I did was probably totally uncalled-for. I should be the one apologizing for butting in like that. Sorry.”

“N-No, not at all!” she stammered. “I really am grateful! If you hadn’t come running, I don’t know what would’ve become of me!”

From the look of things, she had a strong sense of duty. I was impressed. Not many people were so considerate at her age.

“In that case,” I said, “I’ll happily accept your gratitude.”

“If possible, I’d like to repay you for what you did. As much as I’m able to.

Name your reward, and you will have it. My father is terribly grateful to you too. He asked if you would allow our family to make use of everything we have in order to show you our sincere gratitude.”

I blinked. “Come again? Everything you have?” I couldn’t make sense of what she was saying. It felt like the conversation had begun to drift in a strange direction. “Your words were enough. Truly. I don’t need anything else.”

“No, please. You must let me thank you properly. My father and brother too—they dearly wish to meet with you so that they can show their gratitude in person.”

“Really. You’ve already shown me more than enough.”

“B-But...that cannot be! Despite how I may seem, I am a person of some standing! I couldn’t possibly do nothing for the person who saved my life! To do so would be shameful! Please, you must allow my family to thank you!”

“Sorry, but...whatever it is, I don’t need it.”

I didn’t know what sort of standing she had, but from where I stood, receiving things that I didn’t need would just put me in a bind.

“Th-Then, is there anything troubling you? My family would be glad to lend you their aid... If you’d like, I’m sure my father would even be happy to discuss the matter of land with you.”

What? Land? Why were we suddenly talking about that? In the first place, I already had a house and a field waiting for me back on the mountain. I appreciated the sentiment, but if I was being honest...I didn’t need it.

“Sorry, but I really don’t need any kind of reward.”

“B-But—!”

I suddenly realized that the girl was now on the verge of tears. But...why? All I’d said was that her words were enough. Was I not getting myself across clearly?

“This will not do,” she declared. “I have an obligation to ensure that you accept our gratitude!”

“Obligation...?” I was pretty sure that gratitude wasn’t supposed to come with

anything like that attached. “Say what you might, but I really don’t need anything.”

“Then until you agree to accept, I won’t move even a step from this spot.”

It seemed that, no matter what I said, she wouldn’t back down. And since she really was about to cry, I figured that she was being serious. Talk about childish...

Wait, she *was* a child.

Still, she was a stubborn one. She reminded me of myself at her age. Maybe this was how the cleric training school instructor had felt when, a dozen-odd years ago, I’d shown up and declared that I wouldn’t move until he let me train there, even in the face of his attempts to send me away.

From the look of things, this girl had quite the obstinate personality. If she waited here for three days and nights without eating or drinking like I had, I wouldn’t know what to do.

I guess I didn’t have a choice.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll meet your brother and father. But that’s it, okay?”

“T-Truly?!”

I really didn’t need any more gratitude than what I’d already been given. After all, the most I’d done was stop a cow rampaging in the middle of the city—not that I’d ever counted on city cows being so ferocious. Maybe it was a regular occurrence here in the royal capital, though. I hadn’t really heard anyone talking about it—everyone was focused on the monster incident.

I wasn’t an expert on how things were done here, so perhaps there was a custom that I didn’t know about of treating people who saved you from violent cows with the utmost hospitality. I couldn’t quite bring myself to understand it, but as the saying went, “when away from home, do as the locals do.”

“Seriously though,” I said, “I really don’t need any kind of grand reward.”

“Of course! Now, let us depart right away. May I ask you to follow directly behind me? I would prefer not to attract any attention, so I’ll be hiding us with [Concealment], [Detection Occlusion], and several other skills.”

Saying that, the girl set off at a brisk walk. Though she had been on the verge of crying mere moments ago, she was now wearing an innocent smile...

All that fretting before hadn't just been an act, had it? Maybe she was more of a strategist than I'd taken her for, despite her age.

Left with no other choice, I followed after the girl, matching the pace of her light skips. Together, we walked into the night that had fallen over the city.

Chapter 8: Lynne's House

"This...is your house?"

I'd thought for certain that the girl was taking me to her home, but when we reached our destination, I was greeted with what was basically a castle. It had sturdy stone walls, and spear-wielding guards stood at both sides of its massive gate, keeping watch. All in all, it looked less like a house and more like a king's castle—or fortress—straight out of a fairy tale.

I found it hard to believe that this was her home, but here we were, so...

"I know it's not the most typical of abodes," the girl noted, "but it's home. Please, do come in." Saying that, she nonchalantly slipped past the guards at the gate.

"We're just going in?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Time is of the essence, and it wouldn't do to distract the guards from their job."

I was pretty sure that keeping watch and stopping suspicious individuals from entering *was* their job. However, they didn't so much as blink at our being there, likely because of the girl's [Concealment] skill. I still had my misgivings, but I put them aside and obediently made my way through. It was her house, her rules, after all.

"Come to think of it," the girl said, "I haven't asked for your name yet. If it isn't a bother, may I have the honor?"

"Oh, me?" I said as we continued to walk. "My name's Noor."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Noor."

Upon hearing my own name, I realized with a start that I didn't know hers. "Now that you mention it, what's yours?"

"Oh! D-Do excuse me; it slipped my mind entirely!" The girl came to a stop, turned to face me, and gave a polite bow, her right hand against her chest. "My

name is Lynneburg Clays. It's a little longer than most, so please feel free to just call me Lynne. It's the name I've been using while I gain experience as an adventurer."

"Lynne," I repeated. "Got it."

She was right; "Lynne-something-or-other" was a bit long and hard to remember, while "Lynne" didn't have that problem. I thought it was a good name.

"I'll be ending my [Concealment] now," she said. "We're safe here, and I wouldn't want us to be thought of as intruders."

She did as she had said, and we continued toward the house. It was truly huge; we'd been walking for a while by my count, but we still hadn't reached our destination. From the look of things, Lynne's family was quite wealthy. Or maybe they were nobles? That would explain this whole situation. No wonder the guildsman had told me not to be rude. Though, that being said, I still didn't have the faintest idea what to do. Nobles, rich people, and their etiquette were all completely foreign to me.

"Oh!" Lynne exclaimed. "Just the person I wanted to see. We can ask her where my father is."

We'd been proceeding down a long and spacious corridor for some time before the figure of a woman with flowing golden hair came into view. Though she had on a skirt reminiscent of those worn by maids, over it, she was clad in heavy-looking silver armor.

"Welcome home, Lady Lynneburg," the woman said.

"Thank you, Ines," Lynne replied. "We'd like to meet with my father. Is it too late to have an audience with him?"

The armored woman paused and narrowed her eyes at me. "May I ask who this man is?"

I could sense that I was being appraised—and from the woman's demeanor, it didn't seem as if she was intent on giving me a warm welcome.

"Ines, he is my guest. Please refrain from acting discourteously toward him.

He is the man who risked his life to save me when I was attacked.”

The woman was stunned into silence for a brief moment before she recovered and said, “Understood, my lady. Please, follow after me.”

Was she a maid of the house? Her armor looked pretty heavy, so I had a hard time picturing her cleaning or doing the laundry without some serious difficulty...

Our eyes met as I was studying her curiously, and she gave me a sharp glare. It seemed that she was quite wary of me, which was entirely understandable—I hadn’t gotten the chance to change or clean myself up after my dirt-moving work earlier. In fact, I was even dirtier than usual today.

Thinking back, I’d started the day cleaning drains, then moved straight to the construction site to move dirt until evening. I’d fought the cow soon after, and on my way to the Adventurers Guild, I’d needed to shake off the strange men following me. The woman must’ve been thinking that I was out of place in a luxurious, servant-staffed house like this. I didn’t blame her; I thought so too.

“This way, please,” said the silver-armored woman—Ines—as she opened a heavy metal door at the end of the long corridor.

Beyond the doorway stood a man holding a beautifully ornamented golden spear. He casually readied it and then looked at us—no, at *me*.

“What’s got you running around this late, Ines?” he said. “And welcome home, Lady Lynneburg.” There was then a pause before he asked, “Who’s he?”

Though the man’s tone remained easygoing throughout his rapid succession of questions, his gaze was sharp. Like the woman, he was wary of me too. Upon closer inspection, the tip of his golden spear was pointed straight at my throat, like he was prepared to strike me down at a moment’s notice.

I was starting to get the feeling that Lynne’s house was a really dangerous place...

“Let him through, Gilbert,” Ines said. “This gentleman is Lady Lynneburg’s valued guest. He must be granted an audience with His Majesty at once.”

“Oh? Her guest?” the man asked. “So you’re the guy, huh?”

For a moment, it felt as though his gaze had grown even sharper...but as he stared at my face, his easygoing demeanor quickly returned.

"I don't really see it, myself," he said.

"Don't be rude to our lady's guest," Ines chided. "Also, you'd best accompany us for the audience. The larger the...escort, the better."

"You got it," the man said. "Lead the way." He stopped pointing his spear at my throat, rested it on his shoulder, and began to follow after us.

Still with Ines leading the way, our group headed through the doorway the spearman had been guarding and soon reached the room that was apparently our destination. This one also had a set of heavy-looking doors, and, upon opening them, we were greeted with the sight of two men—one young and the other middle-aged—talking on a dais.

"Brother."

"Lynne...?"

From the sound of it, the young man was Lynne's brother. He looked to be around twenty, by my guess; not that much older than Lynne.

"Is that my Cloak of the Hermit?" he asked. "You didn't go out, did you? I expressly told you to stay inside for the time being!"

"I'm sorry, brother..." Lynne said. "But please understand—I needed to find my savior."

"So this man...?"

"Yes. This gentleman is the person who saved me."

Lynne's brother looked at me, shocked. It seemed to take him a few moments to find his next words: "This man is your savior?!"

"Sorry about my appearance," I said. "Lynne said she was in a hurry."

Apologizing felt like the wisest move. Lynne's brother was still staring at me, silent, and Ines was blatantly glaring at my face. Maybe that look in her eyes was just her default expression, but that didn't change the fact that her intensity made me worry that I'd done something wrong. I figured that I was

still in the clear, though; when I looked to Lynne for an answer to my unease, she was wearing a happy smile.

"Not at all," replied a new voice. "We are, after all, the ones who asked you for this sudden meeting. My apologies for the hassle."

The voice rang throughout the entirety of the spacious room, all the way up to the high ceiling. It carried such dignity that, if someone had told me that it belonged to the king of a country, I'd have immediately believed them. Its tone was strangely pleasant as well as commanding; for some reason, I found myself standing up straighter.

At once, Ines and the spearman—Gil-something-or-other—went down on one knee and bowed their heads. The owner of the voice must have been the master of the house—that is to say, Lynne's father.

"So you're my daughter's savior, hmm?" the man continued. "You're younger than I expected. Let's talk, shall we? Face-to-face."

Chapter 9: The Audience Chamber and the Black Blade

Lynne's father stood up from his stately chair atop the dais and slowly walked toward me. He'd said that I was younger than he'd expected, but I found myself thinking the opposite about him. Then again, maybe he only looked older than I'd anticipated because of his dignified and imposing bearing.

"I should warn you," I said, hesitating briefly. "I don't come from a noble family or anything like that. I've got no idea what kind of manners I should be using here, so I might do something rude by mistake. Is that all right?"

Etiquette was a completely foreign concept to me, so I'd figured that a heads-up was necessary. As soon as I'd spoken, however, I'd noticed Ines's eyebrow twitch—though she stayed where she was, kneeling to my side. Had I said something wrong? I was genuinely clueless. This would be a lot easier if they could just tell me when I messed up...

"Ha ha!" Lynne's father laughed. "I don't mind in the slightest. We can leave fussing over etiquette to the nobles and their lot. If anything, things will run much smoother this way."

"Yeah?" I said. "That's good to hear. Thanks."

Lynne's father came to a relaxed stop right in front of me. "Oh, no need for that. Pleasantries aside, it is *I* who should be thanking you." He took my hand in both of his—I noticed at once how wrinkled and scarred they were—then deeply bowed his head. "Allow me to thank you properly. If not for your deeds today, my daughter would no longer be with us. No amount of gratitude can repay you for what you've done, but it is from the bottom of my heart that I say this: Thank you. Truly."

I may not have known anything about noble etiquette, but the sincere gratitude that came across in his every word and action spoke for itself.

"That's all right," I said. "It was nothing. Your kind words are more than

enough.”

At that, Lynne’s father gave me a satisfied nod. I’d successfully accepted their gratitude. Well done, me. I glanced at Lynne, wanting to check whether it was okay for me to leave, but—

“Still,” Lynne’s father said, “I cannot allow someone to whom I owe so much to leave empty-handed. Whether it be coin, land, or a palace—name your reward, and I will do everything in my power to grant it. So, what is your wish?”

Somehow, I found myself stuck in a repeat of my earlier back-and-forth with Lynne. Was this just a family tradition of theirs? I was starting to realize that they probably weren’t going to let me leave without accepting something from them.

Still, I only had one wish: to grow stronger, learn some skills for myself, and set out on adventures as a full-fledged adventurer. Though my path to achieving that was still a long and arduous one, it was, at the very least, something that money couldn’t buy.

“I don’t really have any wishes like that,” I said. “Sorry, but I don’t want a reward.”

“I see,” Lynne’s father replied. “So you want neither land nor coin...” He paused for a moment, seemingly lost in thought, then said, “What about treasures? As I’m sure you’re aware, our country possesses the oldest dungeon in the world—and within our family’s treasury lies every kind of rarity that you could possibly conceive of, retrieved from its depths over the course of centuries. There are many useful articles in there that mere coin cannot buy. Why, I’ll even let you take half of the entire treasury, if you’d like. How does that sound?”

“F-Father?!” Lynne’s brother cried, looking at his father with an expression of complete shock. “That’s going too far, surely!”

To be honest, the offer had me in a bit of a bind too. I didn’t know how much was in their treasury, but I was certain that I didn’t want any of it. It was probably all stuff that was useless to me anyway; I was quite satisfied with my current lifestyle. In the first place, I had nowhere to put anything they gave me.

"No," I said. "Sorry, but I don't want that either."

"Hmm..." Lynne's father looked contemplative. "Then what *do* you want? Instead of any further guessing on my part, perhaps it would be faster for you to simply tell me."

"I honestly don't want a fancy reward or anything like that. Your thanks was more than enough for me."

All I'd done was pull Lynne out of a spot of trouble with a rampaging cow; it wasn't anything special. Besides, with how many skills she had, I was sure that she could have managed on her own. I was nothing more than an ignorant fool who had butted in where he wasn't needed.

Still, I was taken aback by the sheer strength of Lynne and her father's sense of duty. I could tell by looking at their house that they didn't want for money, but no matter how wealthy someone was, I thought it was a bit much to keep trying to push gifts onto a person who said they didn't want anything. Then again, maybe that was just how things were done around here.

"So you have no material desires?" Lynne's father asked. "Hmm. What shall we do about this, then?" Standing in place, he turned his gaze to the high ceiling above, seemingly deep in thought.

Er, it wasn't just "material desires"; I genuinely didn't want *anything*. Period.

"I wonder," Lynne's father muttered as if speaking to himself, "what else would be a fitting reward for saving my daughter's life?" Then, evidently having struck upon an idea, he strode back toward the lavish chair in which he'd been sitting earlier and retrieved the worn, blackened sword that had been displayed on the wall behind it.

"How about this?" he asked upon his return, placing the sword in my hands.



"This is a sword...right?" I asked.

"It is. Though it may not look quite the part."

Now that I was holding it and could see it up close, I wasn't sure whether it really was a sword. Sure, it was the right shape, but it was terribly worn and blackened all over, with chips here and there along the edges of the blade. It didn't look capable of cutting anything—and the more I examined it, the more I saw nicks and dents in the flat of the blade as well. There were barely any even areas along its sizable length.

In short, it was more of a flat lump of metal than a sword. I didn't know what it was made of, but whatever it was, it was extremely heavy; I'd barely managed to stay upright when Lynne's father had given it to me. It almost felt like the entire thing was made of a metal even heavier than lead.

"F-Father?! But that's the—!"

"What's the harm, Rein?" Lynne's father said to his son. "I've already retired from active duty, so it's nothing more than a decoration to me. Isn't this a far better alternative to leaving it lying around unused?"

"B-But—!"

"We still have that replica we made, don't we? I'm sure nobody will notice if we hang that up in its place. Ines, Gilbert—keep this to yourselves. Understood?"

"As you command," Ines replied.

The spearman hesitated for a moment and then said, "Yes, as you wish."

As I listened to their exchange, I stared at the flat, blackened lump of metal in my hands and tried to decide whether it truly was a sword. Could I really accept this from them...?

"This wouldn't happen to be really important, would it?" I asked. "If it is, I can't accept it."

"Oh, no," Lynne's father replied. "It's merely something I picked up during my travels. Originally, it was without an owner; I simply happened to take a liking to it, so I wielded it for a while. That's all."

"Something you picked up during your travels...?"

"Indeed," he said. "To you, that is but a secondhand belonging of mine. Surely that's something you would be willing to accept?"

I took another look at the black sword in my hands. A hand-me-down from Lynne's father, huh? The more I examined it, the rougher and shabbier it seemed to be. Its blade was blackened to the point that it looked as though it would soak up all the light that touched it, and a worn-out cloth of a similarly black material was wrapped around the hilt. Yeah, "worn-out" was the perfect description for this sword. And to top it all off, it was heavy enough that my arms were getting tired just holding it.

With all that said, when I thought of the sword as a tool for my training, it started to seem a lot more appealing. Actually, with its weight and shape, it would probably be perfect for piledriving work at the construction site.

"All right..." I said. "In that case, I gratefully accept."

I could only assume that Lynne's father was satisfied with my response, as his scarred face broke into a large smile. It was pretty clear by now that neither he nor his daughter would tolerate me leaving without a reward of some kind, and if accepting this sword was a reasonable compromise, then I figured that I'd gotten off easy.

"What do you say to giving it a test swing?" Lynne's father asked.

I paused to consider his question, then said, "Like this?" and gave the black sword a one-handed swing. As I'd expected, it was unbelievably heavy—but not so much that I couldn't wield it. Thanks to [Physical Enhancement], there was nothing for me to worry about.

"How does it feel, then?" he asked.

"Heavy," I replied. "But I can manage."

Lynne's father laughed. "Ha ha! So you can swing it with one hand, can you? You know, despite how it looks, that sword's a sturdy one. Why, it's saved my life on countless occasions..."

As he spoke, Lynne's father started to get a faraway look in his eyes, like he

was remembering older times. So the sword *was* important to him after all. I started to think that maybe I shouldn't have taken it. Then again, I got the feeling that trying to return something I'd just accepted was a bad move in its own right.

"In that case," I said, "I'll be sure to use it with care."

"It would please me if you did." He gave me another warm smile and then continued, "Now, as it happens, I have a separate request to make of you. Would you be willing to provide my daughter with a little training? Things have been dangerous as of late, you see. It makes a father worry."

"Me?" I asked, taken aback. "Train Lynne?"

It was just one sudden proposal after another, huh? I considered the idea briefly before giving him my answer.

"Sorry, but...I don't think there's anything I can teach her. Besides, shouldn't she get to pick her own instructors? I can't say I know anything about raising a kid, but I'm pretty sure nobody likes a nosy parent, right?"

"Hah! True enough!"

I'd just turned down his request, but Lynne's father laughed as though I'd cracked a joke. I got the impression that smiling came easily to him. In contrast, everyone around us had stiffened—especially Ines, who was now shooting me a terrifying glare.

"Have I said something wrong?" I asked hesitantly.

"Oh, no, not at all," Lynne's father replied. "Rather, I can't remember the last time I had the pleasure of such an enjoyable conversation."

"I'm glad to hear it. Well, if that's everything, may I go now?"

"Of course. My apologies for keeping you. And once again, as Lynne's father, thank you."

"It was nothing. Really. Actually, I feel like I should apologize for accepting such a huge reward."

Despite the fact that I honestly hadn't wanted anything, I had come out of this with something pretty important. Still, I guessed that it was for the best. The

black sword was beaten and battered all over, but that just made me more comfortable with taking it. It seemed pretty sturdy, and I had the feeling that its weight would be perfect for the training I needed to do. Plus, since it was pretty broad, it would come in handy for cleaning drains. I'd put it to the test first thing tomorrow.

"All right, then," I said, "I'd better get going."

Now that I was finally able to leave, I said my goodbyes to Lynne and the others, exited the castle, and hurried back to my lodgings, stopping at a public bath along the way to wash the day's sweat off my body.

Or at least, that had been my plan.

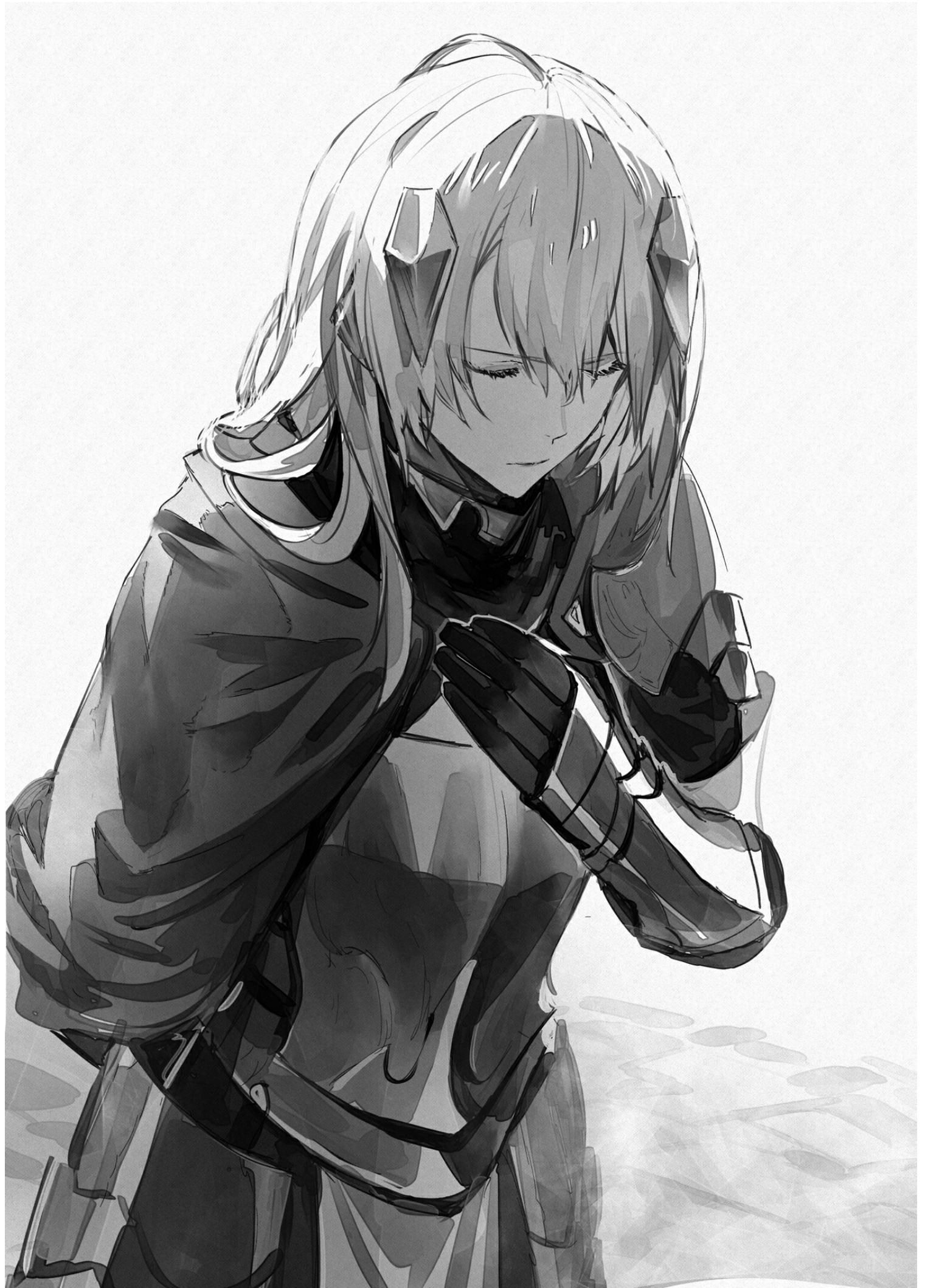
"My apologies, but I need to speak with you. Come with me."

Ines, Lynne's vassal, stopped me before I could make my escape. I did as she asked and followed her, but to be honest...

I got the feeling this wasn't going to be anything good.

Chapter 10: Ines, the Divine Shield

The place Ines led me to was some kind of open plaza within the grounds of the estate. Aside from us, there was nobody around. After surveying the surroundings, Ines came to a stop, turned to face me, and bowed.



"First," she said, "allow me to apologize for my courtesy. My earlier behavior was not a befitting reception for Lady Lynneburg's savior. I imagine that my appraisal of you must have caused you some discomfort. Please, forgive me."

I'd been fully convinced that she was going to rake me over the coals for something I'd said or done earlier. I certainly hadn't expected to get an apology instead.

"It's fine," I said. "It didn't really bother me. Don't worry about it."

I *had* worried a little about how she had reacted to me, but I was also pretty sure that it was justified; I still didn't have a good grasp on how things were done around here, so it wasn't hard to believe that I'd somehow said or done something rude. In fact, if she'd started listing out everything I'd done wrong, I'd have happily thanked her for it.

"You really didn't do anything worth apologizing for," I said. "Please, raise your head."

At my words, Ines relaxed and straightened up. "Is that so? Then you have my thanks, for accepting my apology. I truly am sorry for my courtesy. However, it is my and my colleagues' role to keep the Clays family safe from all harm. Everything else, entertaining our guests included, takes lower precedence. I would appreciate it if you could understand that."

So her job was to keep the family safe? Now that she mentioned it, I did remember thinking that the heavy-looking armor she had on over her skirt—which looked like it was part of a maid uniform—was ill-suited for housework. All of which would mean...

"Oh," I said. "I guess you really aren't a maid, then?"

Ines blinked in surprise at my question. "Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself, have I? I am Ines Harness, member and vice-captain of the Clays family's Warrior Corps."

So I was right; she wasn't a maid. In fact, she was the vice-captain of something-or-other. Though I didn't really have a grasp on the specifics, it certainly sounded impressive.

"Furthermore," she said, "since I was a child, I have also been known as 'the Divine Shield,' and I bear the honor of protecting Lady Lynneburg. Though certain matters currently have me occupied elsewhere, ensuring her safety at all costs was originally my duty. You accomplished that in my stead today, and for that you have my deepest thanks."

Ines then looked me straight in the eye and continued, "Lady Lynneburg's safety comes before my own life. The act of saving her is akin to saving me. As such, I would like to express to you my heartfelt gratitude."

Once again, Ines placed her hand over her silver breastplate and quietly bowed. Though it wasn't anything dramatic, I could tell that she was being sincere. She had said that she valued Lynne's life above her own, and I believed her.

"From here on," she said, "I shall strive to be someone you can depend upon. Should you ever need my assistance, you have only to ask."

Honestly, I really thought she was overreacting. I'd just happened to be in the right place at the right time to stop a rampaging cow. Still, I decided to accept her offer, if only in spirit. I was worried that I'd have something else forced upon me again otherwise.

"Sure," I said. "If there's anything I need, I'll be sure to let you know."

Ines gave me a gentle smile, but it quickly faded back into her usual severe expression. "Nevertheless, I should warn you: we vassals have not yet given you our full approval. Though Lady Lynneburg didn't seem to mind the manner in which you carried yourself earlier in the audience chamber, both your speech and conduct were inexcusable. Such overfamiliarity would not normally be permitted."

Ah, so that was why she'd been shooting me those sharp glares.

"Today was an exception," Ines said. "Should you repeat your insolence in the future, know that it will not go overlooked. In addition, take care not to act in such a manner before the eyes of other vassals; large groups of them, in particular."

"Thank you. I appreciate the advice." Local traditions like this were exactly the

kind of thing that I'd never have figured out on my own.

"As vassals, giving such guidance to outsiders is one of our many duties." Ines paused for a moment, then added, "I thought that I'd better mention it to you."

Wait, had she gone out of her way to pull me aside just to tell me that? The people of this house really were sincere to a fault.

"One last thing," Ines said. "I owe you a debt. If possible, I'd like to know your name." She then gave me another smile—a slight one, just like the last.

I really hadn't told her my name yet, had I? There sure were a lot of people putting that question to me today.

"Me?" I said. "My name's Noor."

"Noor...?" Ines's smile instantly vanished.

For a moment, I was taken aback. "Have I offended you somehow?"

"Oh, no... My apologies; it has nothing to do with you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I must take my leave."

At that, Ines briskly left the plaza, keeping her face hidden from me as she went.

What had that been about? Maybe she'd started feeling sick all of a sudden. Still, with that out of the way, I was finally free to find a bathhouse and go back to my lodgings.

Or so I'd thought. Another voice called out to me from behind.

"Hey, going so soon? Before you leave, what do you say to going a round with me? I'm eager to see what the rumored *hero* is really capable of."

A man appeared from out of the darkness, wielding a spear. Though I hadn't seen him while speaking with Ines, I'd felt his presence near us. If memory served correctly, he was Gil-something...right? No, wait. Albert. That was it.

There was a certain air about Albert that told me he wasn't your average person; at a glance, I would have said that he was a soldier in the house's employ. I wondered what the question he'd asked me meant.

"What do you mean by 'going a round'...?" I asked.

“I guess you could call it live combat training. Sparring.”

“Sparring?” I repeated. “Is it really okay for me to join you?”

“Sure. A little fun never hurt anybody.”

“Then, by all means, I’d love to.”

I was also curious about what kind of training he did. Honestly, it felt like I should’ve been the one asking him.

Though I was still a little tired from my fight with the cow, I’d been using [Low Heal] on myself while walking around and talking to everyone, so my physical fatigue had mostly gone. I wasn’t in perfect condition, so I didn’t know how good of an opponent I’d be for him, but the chance was too good to pass up. I’d just have to view it as an opportunity to learn from somebody with much more experience.

“Huh,” he said. “You’re more keen than I expected. Come with me; the training grounds are this way.”

And so, I followed the spearman, Albert—no, wait, *Halbert*—to the site of what would be our first sparring match.

Chapter 11: Gilbert, the Spear Sovereign

There were still a few people scattered around the training grounds when we arrived—soldiers under the employ of Lynne’s family, I assumed. They must’ve been pretty passionate about their jobs to be continuing their drills this late into the night. Maybe some of them were just here to exercise after work. That thought struck a chord of kinship with me, since my life these days followed a similar routine.

“Let’s see... Over there should work for our spar.”

The spearman called out to one of the soldiers in the direction he’d indicated, who then lent him a wooden-tipped training spear. I’d borrowed a wooden sword at the entrance on our way in. I still had with me the black sword that I’d been gifted, but we were only here to spar; the practice weapon was far more suitable.

With that out of the way, Gil... No, wait. Hal... No, Al...? Something-or-other-bert readied his training spear.

“I might not look it, but I’ve made a bit of a name for myself here in the royal capital,” he said. “No need to hold back, *hero*—show me what you’ve got.”

“Sure,” I replied. “Thanks for putting aside this time for me.”

“All right, here I come!”

And so, without further delay, our live combat training began. Immediately, the air about the spearman changed—he dashed straight toward me, his eyes as sharp as they’d been when we’d first met, his body’s movements going from relaxed to agile. It was a magnificent transition. From that alone, I could tell that he wasn’t a mere run-of-the-mill soldier. Again and again, his pinpoint thrusts came at me. His polished form was beautiful and gave me a glimpse into the extraordinary amount of training he must have gone through.

I dodged his strikes, all the while captivated by them—but something felt off.

He was slow.

No, that wasn't right. He was holding back, and quite significantly. Had he already gauged my ability and decided to be considerate?

"I realize you're being mindful, but you don't need to hold back *that* much," I said. "Even a guy like me could dodge those strikes with his eyes shut."

The spearman paused. "What...? That so, huh? My bad. Then how's—*this*?"

At once, he became dramatically faster. There was no longer any trace of wasted movement in his actions as his spear lunged for my chest, each strike flowing like water. I almost lost myself in his fluid form, beautiful as it was.

But even then, something felt off. He was still too slow. I may not have been able to hold my own blind anymore, but his strikes were still at a level where I could dodge them without really needing to focus.

"No, I can still handle more," I said. "You can go faster."

"You *can*, huh?"

Again, the air about him changed. His sharp gaze was now practically running me through, and his whole body radiated an intimidating bloodlust.

It was like watching a master. His spear leaped through the air as though it were dancing, twisting like a live animal into dexterous feints and strikes from my blind spots, intent on impaling me.

But still, he was being too slow. He'd gotten faster than before, sure, but this was nothing I couldn't dodge. In fact, occasionally, he was even leaving intentional openings in his strikes, inviting me to counterattack. Each repeated thrust left him completely defenseless the moment I avoided it. The only explanation I could think of was that he was *asking* me to strike at his unguarded back.

Wait, was that really the case here? What if this was just his true ability? Was that even possible? If so—if this actually was his best—then could it be that I'd actually gotten a little stronger?

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, however—

[Dragrave]

The spearman's intimidating aura surged explosively, and his figure blurred. I

soon lost sight of him entirely...and then, out of nowhere, there was a spearpoint in my field of vision, headed straight for me.

I was clueless as to what had just happened, but then I realized—his unusually relaxed movements had seemed slow, but that had simply been to make me accustomed to that speed. In other words, it had all been in preparation for this one swift strike.

While I faltered, overcome with amazement, the spear came directly for my throat. It was just a training weapon made out of wood, but it was moving so unbelievably fast that it could have pierced through rock. If the attack landed, then it would blow my head clean off. Even I could see that.

In short, I needed to dodge this strike. The alternative was certain death.

At the same moment that I came to understand my mistake, I put my absolute all into a full-power [Physical Enhancement] and used [Featherstep] to escape the oncoming spearhead. Fortune must have favored me, because I managed to move behind the man before it reached my throat.

“That was close,” I said, breathing an unconscious sigh of relief. I turned around and observed the spearman, who was still turned away from me, standing there silently with his weapon in hand. It really had been a close call. Had that strike connected, I wouldn’t have survived.

But had he really come at me with the intent to kill...?

No, probably not. He’d understood the skill gap between us from the very beginning of our spar—that was why his attacks had started so slow. He’d used them to gauge just what I was capable of; then, when he’d seen me get conceited, he’d struck at a speed that he’d thought I could just barely dodge. That was my read on the situation—and just as he’d anticipated, I’d noticed the spear just in time to avoid it.

The more I thought about it, the less any other explanation made sense. Even now, the spearman appeared to be showing me his defenseless back, but that was no doubt just more of the same. He was probably focused and ready to turn the tables on me as soon as I got full of myself and attempted to attack him from behind.

In short, he was telling me not to get cocky—that I’d defeated a cow and nothing more. Pride comes right before a gruesome fall, and that was precisely why he’d gone out of his way to pull me aside. This was a warning.

“I get it,” I said. “It’s my loss.”

Even bringing up the idea of winning or losing was shameful, but that was all I could say. He’d recognized my conceit in an instant and swiftly put me in my place. To think he’d gone so far just to teach me about my shortcomings... I was in awe at how compassionate both he and Ines were.

“I understand now,” I added. “Any more of this would be pointless.”

“Wh-What? What do you understand...?” he asked.

“It’s okay. Really. This is enough.”

“No, wait. I’m not done with y—”

From the look of things, he was still intent on teaching me—but I’d already learned my lesson. It was one that I would engrave in my heart:

I was still weak.

“I look forward to the next time we meet,” I said. I would put my all into improving so that, when that time came, I could make him face me seriously.

Earlier, I’d wanted to hurry home, take a bath, and then sleep away the fatigue of an exhausting day—but what had I been thinking? I had gotten too used to my comfortable life here, and somewhere along the way, it had made me complacent. This was such a fundamental lesson, but he’d had to teach it to me anyway.

I still needed more training. And so, my heart aflame with this newfound resolve, I left the training grounds behind me.



The princess had been attacked by a Minotaur, a monster from the Abyss. And the beast had been slain by a single man.

Upon hearing this news, Gilbert, the Spear Sovereign, was hardly able to contain his excitement. Everybody else in the royal palace was preoccupied

with their relief that the princess was safe and their profound anger at the culprit behind the attack, while he alone was focused on something entirely different: the man who had slain the Minotaur.

Gilbert wanted to know more about this savior. If the rumors about his strength were true, then maybe he was the ambitious type. That would be fun. Gilbert wanted to see the man for himself—to meet him face-to-face.

While those thoughts were still running through Gilbert's head, the very person he longed to see appeared before him, brought along by Princess Lynneburg on the same day as the incident. Gilbert found it a struggle to keep his curiosity in check. He keenly watched even as the man was invited into the audience chamber and drawn into a conversation with the king himself, trying to gauge his true ability.

The man's deeds were impressive enough to warrant calling him a hero. King Clays had personally wanted to meet him, to see what he was truly like. Just what kind of person lay beneath all of that? Was he constantly craving strength too? It was with this hope of having found a kindred spirit that Gilbert observed with interest, his curiosity piqued.

However, the stranger before him was unexpectedly humble. He didn't want coin, land, estates, or honors. Even when the king offered him mountains of treasure the likes of which would have made any ordinary person's eyes glitter, he remained steadfast in his refusal. His speech was rough, but his bearing was bold. Gilbert, who had been raised an orphan, couldn't see any part of the man that he disliked.

For someone said to have defeated a Minotaur by himself, the man came across as surprisingly mild. He looked about the same age as Gilbert, and in terms of physique, he was a little taller and slightly more built. In that regard, he certainly couldn't be described as weak—but at the same time, he didn't seem particularly driven either. Gilbert hadn't felt the intensity that he'd expected of someone so apparently accomplished.

Was this man truly strong? Now that they'd met, Gilbert was beginning to have his doubts.

To speak frankly, Gilbert was strong and proud of it. He was counted as one of

the best combatants the Kingdom had to offer. Even at a young age, he had proven himself enough to earn the moniker of “Spear Sovereign,” a title worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as the world’s strongest class, Sword Sovereign.

With the exception of Ines, the Gifted recipient of the title “Divine Shield,” Gilbert had been the youngest orphan to ever climb to his current post, and the fastest-rising member of the Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital. He’d been without an equal, forced to train alone using a regimen of his own devising. The only reminders that he was lacking experience had come in the form of occasional tutelage from his instructor, Sig, the Sword Sovereign—also known by the legendary title “Sig of the Thousand Blades.” Otherwise, Gilbert had never encountered anything he could call an obstacle to his progress. To him, even Sig was just a goal that he would eventually overcome.

Not even Ines, wielder of a Gift, currently recognized by all Six Sovereigns as the Kingdom’s ultimate military asset, had ever beaten Gilbert when sparring. That was only to be expected, considering that she played a different role, but still—Gilbert didn’t doubt her might. If she unleashed her true strength, then she would be able to level the entire royal capital as though it were nothing. He knew this well, and that was precisely the reason they could never spar with each other seriously.

It was also why Gilbert found her so boring.

They could never go all out when fighting one another. Their strengths were of separate natures. Truly, there was no excitement to be found against an opponent like that. What he wanted was something else—*someone* else.

But there was nobody who could match Gilbert. He had no rival to speak of, and after what had felt like an eternity of that being true...he had grown bored. His life was devoid of excitement. Everyone was too weak. He wanted a real opponent—someone who was his age, whom he could compete against and call his equal. Though he knew that his desire was self-centered, some part of him deep, deep down continued to search for it anyway.

Then, this mysterious man had arrived. Everybody was convinced that he was strong—and if the rumors about him slaying a Minotaur were true, then he

was. Tremendously so.

Gilbert couldn't help but wonder: had he finally come across a worthy opponent? He wasn't going to squander this opportunity to find out, so he challenged the man to a duel under the pretext of wanting to spar—and, contrary to his expectations, the man obediently accepted.

As soon as the duel commenced, Gilbert launched at his opponent with one full-strength attack after another...but no matter what he did, the man wouldn't retaliate. Gilbert began to puzzle over what could possibly be going on, but then—

"I realize you're being mindful, but you don't need to hold back *that* much. Even a guy like me could dodge those strikes with his eyes shut."

The man had outright said that he didn't even consider this fight a challenge.

Gilbert could feel this insult from his mild-mannered opponent eating away at him, but at the same time, the blood rushing to his head brought with it a pleasant feeling. It was the first time something like this had ever happened to him. Usually, any sort of dispute would be settled long before he had to get serious. Perhaps, for that reason, he had inadvertently been holding back.

"What...? That so, huh?" After taking a moment to calm himself, Gilbert readjusted his stance. "My bad. Then how's—*this*?"

Having renewed his understanding of the man's strength, Gilbert decided to abandon his previous misgivings and attacked with all of his might. His strikes were so ferocious that he surprised even himself as he continued his offensive. This was the fastest, keenest flurry of attacks he'd ever unleashed. He could feel it. And this impressive display made Gilbert realize that he really *had* been holding back. This was the first time he'd ever felt so satisfied with his spear work.

And yet, something was wrong. Even after such an intense onslaught, there were no signs that his spear had even grazed his opponent. Not only that, but the man hadn't even tried to use the wooden sword he was wielding. He had been calmly observing the trajectory of Gilbert's weapon and avoiding it with the bare minimum of movement required. So unbelievably precise was the man's footwork that the spear might as well have not been moving at all.

In short, he was reading Gilbert like a book.

Meanwhile, Gilbert was pushing his strength to its limits. No, he could sense that he had gone beyond them already. But even then, he couldn't so much as scratch his opponent. Not even a single strike connected.

Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Then, the man spoke again: "I can still handle more. You can go faster."

"You *can*, huh?"

Fine then. Gilbert laughed internally; something inside of him had snapped. *If my full strength is what you want—*

[Dragrave]

It was the strongest attack in his entire arsenal—a deadly spear strike faster than the speed of sound. He had once used it to kill a Thunder Dragon tearing through the skies faster than a bolt of lightning. It was a move powerful enough to destroy any opponent, which was precisely why he'd never used it against a person. The very idea should have been unthinkable, but now...

This wasn't a decision that Gilbert had made consciously; his body had acted almost on instinct, and the resolve had come to him as naturally as breathing. The battle instincts that he'd honed to the absolute limit had already reached a conclusion: Nothing else could touch this man. His spear alone wasn't enough.

Before Gilbert realized it, his weapon was flying at his opponent's throat. The attack had been so fast that his own consciousness hadn't been able to keep up. If it connected, then the man would die...but Gilbert held no regrets.

Thank goodness. It'll reach. Just a little more, and my spear will reach him.
Thank goodness.

During that briefest moment, incomparably shorter than it would take to blink, those were the only thoughts that crossed his mind. Then, his spear connected, plunging straight through his opponent's throat.

Or so he'd thought. The man had vanished, as though he were a phantom. It was only when Gilbert's senses caught up with him that he realized his opponent was now standing behind him.

At a complete loss as to what had just happened, Gilbert could only stand there in stunned silence. But before those feelings turned into dismay, he noticed something strange: a large crater in the flagstones where his opponent had just been standing. When had that appeared? The ground had been undamaged just a moment ago. Gilbert had no idea what could have caused it, but he knew it had to be related to the events that had just occurred. In all likelihood, it had been because of something his opponent had done.

Turning his head, Gilbert saw that the flagstones had been crushed in other places too. The destruction must have required a considerable amount of force, yet he'd heard no sound and felt no impact. What in the world could have been responsible?

"I get it. It's my loss."

Gilbert was searching for an answer to the mystery when his opponent, still standing behind him, suddenly spoke.

"I understand now," the man continued. "Any more of this would be pointless."

"Wh-What? What do you understand...?"

"It's okay. Really. This is enough."

"No, wait. I'm not done with y—"

No matter how one considered it, the outcome of their sparring match was Gilbert's complete and utter defeat. It was the first time he'd ever lost a direct fight without even managing to scratch his opponent. And yet...

"It's my loss."

The man had surrendered.

A few of Gilbert's subordinates were still scattered around the training grounds, doing their own drills. His opponent had yielded because he'd noticed their gazes. In other words, not only had the man won, but he'd also shown mercy.

The man quietly made his way toward the exit of the training grounds, only breaking his silence once as he passed Gilbert.

"I look forward to the next time we meet."

Then, while Gilbert remained stock-still, the man took his leave without even looking back.

For the very first time, Gilbert trembled at the feeling of defeat. For those who lived by the sword, there was no greater humiliation than being surrendered to out of pity...yet greater still was his sheer elation. For he now had a new goal—a new person—to strive toward.

That night, as he murmured to nobody in particular, Gilbert, the Spear Sovereign, realized that a fierce smile had crept onto his face.

"Yeah. I reckon this is gonna be fun too."

Chapter 12: The Princess's Request

After leaving the training grounds, I went and trained far more than usual, stopped by a bathhouse on my way back to my lodgings, and then turned in for the night. The next morning began with my usual routine: heading out to start cleaning drains. I wasn't working for Mrs. Stella today, and my destination was quite some distance from her house.

After seeing the drains I'd cleaned around Mrs. Stella's neighborhood, other people had started putting in commissions for me at the Adventurers Guild. Then, as I'd completed those, the same trend had continued, gradually increasing my number of clients. I was a blessed man.

That was how I'd ended up in my current situation, going around and cleaning different places each day. By now, it was a familiar routine of mine.

Today, I'd brought along the heavy black sword that Lynne's father had given me. As it turned out, it was amazingly handy for scraping off the clumps of grime that stubbornly clung to the bottom of gutters. I normally used spare blocks of wood from the construction sites I worked at, but it looked like I wouldn't be needing those anymore. I was surprised by how good the sword was at removing filth.

I did need to be careful when using the weapon, since misjudging an angle or using slightly too much force would result in the stone gutters being shaved away along with the grime, but it was just as Lynne's father had said: the sword itself was incredibly sturdy. No matter how much I used it, it never chipped or cracked.

In fairness, the weapon had been pretty beaten-up to begin with, so maybe I just wasn't paying enough attention to notice any new damage. Either way, it was a wonderful gift.

My day had been productive thus far, but that soon ended when it came time for me to start moving dirt. The abundance of guards investigating recent incidents in the area had made working at the construction site impossible, so I

now had almost an entire day to myself.

Hmm... What to do?

I mulled over this question in the woods on the outskirts of the royal capital. As an F-rank adventurer, I wasn't allowed to take any commissions that required me to leave the city. Off the clock, however, I was free to go where I pleased. Ever since coming to the capital, I'd been using this spot in the woods as the location for my daily training. In a way that I couldn't quite place, its atmosphere felt like the mountain that I'd once called home—and since it was decently far from the city itself, it was nice and free from prying eyes.

The woods also had enough open spaces for me to move around, and plenty of trees for me to hang wooden swords from. Above all, since it was atop a somewhat steep cliff, it had a lovely view of the surroundings. These were all reasons why I'd taken such a liking to this place and started using it so regularly.

After first leaving my mountain, I'd even used this spot as somewhere to sleep—but not having a roof over your head was largely inconvenient, as you would expect, so I'd soon moved to an inn at the edge of the city. Though my room wasn't all that large, the mistress would change my bedsheets while I was gone and wash my clothes upon request. I was grateful to the guildsman for having recommended me such an excellent place to stay.

Since I no longer have any commissions for the day, I guess I'll go through my usual training regimen even more thoroughly than usual.

I readied the heavy sword that I'd been gifted, intent on beginning right away...but then I heard a presence in the direction of a nearby thicket. Was it an animal, maybe? No; while this spot saw its fair share of birds and other small creatures, it was rare for anything capable of making such a noticeable sound to pass by. If the footfall was any indication...it was probably a person.

Curious, I turned toward the sound, only to be greeted with a familiar face that appeared from among the trees.

"Lynne...?" I said. "Why are you here?"

"Good morning, Sir Noor," she replied. "I'm terribly sorry for the sudden intrusion. The guildmaster said you'd probably be here... I hope I'm not

imposing.”

“No, not really. But how did you get here...?”

We were atop a steep cliff. I’d been raised on a mountain, so climbing it wasn’t particularly difficult for me, but it wasn’t somewhere that your average person would easily be able to reach. Plus, although I’d told the guildsman about this spot, I hadn’t given him specific directions or anything...

On second thought, Lynne was able to find the whereabouts of other people using her skills. Not that I thought tailing people was particularly admirable, no matter how many skills a person could use...

“Why did you follow me again?” I asked. “I thought we settled everything last night.”

“Indeed; you have my gratitude for yesterday. I am here today about a different matter. I wish to make a request.”

“A request?”

“I’m aware that you and my father have discussed it once already...but this time, I’d like to ask you personally.”

“Ask me what?” I pressed. No matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn’t figure out what she was referring to.

“Sir Noor,” she said, “please allow me to be your page.”

“My...page? What’s that?”

I was pretty sure nothing like that had come up during yesterday’s conversation.

“As your page, I would be in a position to see to your everyday needs while humbly receiving your knowledge and instruction,” Lynne explained. “In a sense, it is similar to being an apprentice working under a magical research institution, or perhaps under the craftsman of a trade. I, myself, would be satisfied enough just to have the honor of being by your side. I shall endeavor not to be an inconvenience, so please—you need only grant me your permission.”

She placed a hand on her chest and gave me a silent bow. It was starting to

become a familiar gesture, what with how many times I'd seen it performed yesterday. Maybe this was how people displayed their sincerity in this city. Truth be told, I quite liked it. But even so—

"No."

"What?"

Maybe she hadn't expected me to refuse. In a heartbeat, she stared back up at me, looking flustered.

Actually, why *hadn't* she expected me to refuse?

"D-Did my actions yesterday displease you after all...?" she stammered. "O-Or perhaps you think me too inexperienced to be reliable? I...I certainly admit that I made a shameful display of myself yesterday, b-but if you would just allow me to stay by your side, then I'm sure I could be of use. Despite how I may seem, I hold the record for the highest marks ever received at all six royal training schoo—"

"No, it's nothing like that."

It wasn't a matter of anything being wrong with her; it was just that I already had my hands full with work and my everyday efforts to get stronger. In the first place, taking on a disciple was out of the question for me.

"Look, there just isn't anything I can teach you," I said. "And your usefulness doesn't matter to me. I can take care of myself."

I was well accustomed to living on my own, so I was more than capable of meeting all my daily needs. Of course, I was using the mistress's services for my laundry, but that was enough for me; I didn't need any more help than that.

"Th-Then, I can promise that my family will provide you with a more-than-adequate instruction fee, so please—"

"No, I don't need anything like that."

"I-In that case, you may put me to whatever use you wish, whether it be assisting you with your Adventurers Guild commissions, carrying out odd jobs, or anything else. I—"

"Don't need that either."

"Th-Then—!"

"Whatever you're about to say, I probably don't need it."

Gradually, Lynne's face had grown redder and redder, and she looked to be about to cry. I was beginning to think that she seriously *hadn't* expected me to refuse her. Still, when all was said and done, there was no changing what I didn't need and couldn't do.

"I...I swear that I'll be useful to you!" Lynne pleaded. "Is it simply that you have no faith in my ability? I-If so, then please excuse me, but—!"

Still on the verge of tears, she grasped a wand inlaid with a pale gemstone that she'd been carrying on her person and, with both hands, held it out in front of her face.

"[Icicle Dance]."

In the blink of an eye, a chill blanketed our surroundings as though the world had spontaneously frozen over, and scores of clustered icicles began to form in the air. Each one was the size of a person, with a tip that tapered into a keen point. It was like I was looking at a collection of sharpened blades. Then, barely a moment after the clusters had formed, they came crashing straight down with tremendous force—directly at Lynne.

"[Hellflare]."

At the same instant that I recognized the danger, she raised a single hand toward the sky and let loose a roaring inferno from her palm. Even as I watched, the flames grew larger and larger, consuming and promptly evaporating the scores of ice blades raining down on her. Now, what remained was a massive fireball, easily large enough to consume a house. Its presence alone baked everything around us...but then it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Lynne had dismissed the blaze with a mere flick of the wrist.

"That was [Hellflare], one of the highest-classed magic skills I am able to use," she explained. "And this—"

While I stood there, dumbfounded, she returned her small wand to her belt with practiced ease, then used the same motion to draw a golden dagger from a black sheath and swing it through the air.

“[Mistblade].”

Without a sound, one of the large trees behind her slid sideways and collapsed.

“That was one of the secret techniques of the thief branch,” Lynne said. “My instructor, the Sovereign of Shadows, taught me to use it. And this—”

Lynne deftly sheathed her dagger before this time withdrawing a longsword from her back. Then, after adopting a two-handed stance, she swung the weapon horizontally and said, “[Divine Slash].” A flash of light erupted from the blade, rending the fallen tree and leaving the cut bathed in pale flames.

“That was [Divine Slash], a sacred-class swordsman skill,” she said. “It’s a unique technique that’s particularly effective against the undead. And this—”

“No, you can stop there,” I calmly interjected, stopping Lynne from continuing with her display of amazing skills. “I’ve seen enough.” She had already proven that she was an outstanding individual brimming with talent, and that I was all the more pathetic in comparison.

In fact, now that I knew the true extent of her arsenal, I was convinced: she *definitely* could have beaten that cow.

“Th-Then, will you accept me as your disciple?”

Wait, why was she looking at me so hopefully?

“No,” I said plainly. “You’ve only confirmed that there’s nothing I can teach you.”

At my repeated refusal, Lynne looked at me with an expression of shock. But why? Now that she had shown me how amazing she was, it was even more obvious that she had nothing to gain from studying under me.

“D-D-Despite how I may seem, my talents are well recognized by my instructors, the Six Sovereigns! If you would only deign to have me by your side, then you would see that I can be of *some* use! I...I know that I cannot even hold a candle to you, Sir Noor, but please—”

“I can recognize how skilled you are at a glance. It’s just...”

I wasn’t sure how, but she had mistaken me for someone whose instruction

was worth begging for. Just what false impressions had she formed to have reached a conclusion like that...? I wanted to explain the misunderstanding to her, but explanations weren't my strong suit. It was probably best that I just show her the truth.

"You demonstrated a lot of amazing skills just now," I said. "Let me show you mine."

I concentrated and focused my will into my fingertip, and soon enough...a flame the size of a clenched fist sprang into being.

[Tiny Flame]

Back when I'd first learned this skill, the flame at my fingertip had been no larger than the lit wick of a candle. Ever since then, I'd dedicated all of my free time to training it, hoping that doing so would allow me to eventually learn a normal magician skill. Aside from when I was asleep, I always had some of my focus on my fingertip, maintaining the flame that flickered above it.

And this was where all of my hard work had gotten me. The fire was a little larger than when I'd first started, sure, but it was still ten times smaller than [Fireball], the flame-wielding attack spell once shown to me by my magician instructor. In other words, my efforts were still drastically inferior to the lowest class of attack spells.

Compared to the fire skill that Lynne had used earlier, I might as well not have had one at all. No matter how much I tried to improve, I could never make the flame at my fingertip grow larger than the size of a fist. Naturally, I couldn't fling it like a [Fireball] either. After fifteen years of effort, this was the limit of what I could do...

I still cherished it, though. It came in very handy for cooking.

"This is [Tiny Flame], my only magician-branch skill," I said. "As for the other five branches, well...it's a similar story. I shouldn't have to tell you what that means...right?"

The skills I could use weren't even comparable to the ones that Lynne had shown me; the very act of trying to compare us was laughable. Each and every skill she had displayed was phenomenal, and to have learned them at her age? I

could only breathe a sigh of admiration. The word “talented”—no, “genius”—had practically been invented to describe kids like her. There wasn’t a single thing for her to learn from me.

“See?” I said. “This is what I mean when I say there’s nothing I can do for you.”

I extinguished the [Tiny Flame] at my fingertip. Forget teaching—I couldn’t even explain myself half-decently. Making an embarrassment of myself was all that I could do to convince her.

At the sight of my meager spell, Lynne had suddenly hung her head and started to tremble. Now, she appeared to be quietly pondering something. Maybe I’d finally cleared up the misunderstanding between us.

“You get what I’m trying to say, right?” I asked.

She nodded, took a brief pause, and then said, “Yes. I’m fully aware now...of my own pride and immaturity.”

She’d calmed down a little, from the look of things; there were no signs of her earlier desperation. I was just glad that I’d finally gotten through to—

Wait, what? “Pride”? “Immaturity”? What did those have to do with anything? I got the sinking feeling that she’d reached an entirely different understanding than the one I’d intended.

“Indeed, it’s exactly as you say,” she continued. “Someone as disgraceful as I am requesting to be your disciple is the height of presumptuousness. It is only right that you would not deem me worthy as I am now, which is why—”

Again, she placed a hand on her chest—but this time, she remained upright, solemnly looking me in the eye as she spoke.

“Someday, I *will* make you recognize me as your disciple, Sir Noor. No, *Instructor* Noor. Until then, I shall follow you, wherever you may go.”

Chapter 13: “The Talentless Boy”

As my eyes beheld the [Tiny Flame] in front of me, my mind began to recall a story that I’d once heard. An anecdote spoken of at the royal capital’s training schools, about the talentless boy.

The instructors would tell it from time to time, and the boy in question was close to legendary by now, but everybody merely took it as a fairy tale—albeit one with something of a moral to it. After all, hearing it was enough to convince anybody that such a person couldn’t *really* exist.

According to the instructors, this was what had happened:

Though the royal capital’s training schools were famed for the harshness of their curricula, there had once been a single person who had conquered all six; seeing each through to their full terms, no less. And the one who’d accomplished this momentous achievement fifteen years ago had been none other than a young boy who’d simply shown up at the capital one day with no prior fanfare.

However, this tale hadn’t sat right with anybody who’d heard it. Such a boy couldn’t *possibly* exist. Everybody who was actually familiar with the training schools was convinced of that.

Their curricula, devised by the Six Sovereigns—experts in their respective classes—for the purpose of promoting the development of one’s skills, were unrelenting. This training from hell, as it was called, was so severe that it was rare for a person to be able to last three days, let alone a week. But although most didn’t even make it that long and left earlier, their brief period there was still enough for them to come away with a skill or two.

After all, as one might expect, the great hardship brought with it great rewards. The majority of attendees would leave the moment they developed a useful skill. But nobody who went through the experience ever so much as considered the idea of going back a second time. The training schools were not a place one should—or even *could*—stay at for long. After a week, the

curriculum would become a continuous set of all kinds of stress tests for the purpose of triggering the development of skills.

It was an even more severe process solely for the sake of people who wished to obtain an even higher class of skills; an ordeal where the aim was to discover how long one could last under the most extreme conditions. From its very conception, it had never been intended for somebody to be able to overcome and finish it.

Though I, myself, had been quite persistent, two weeks had been my limit. Despite my royal status having afforded me the special advantage of receiving lessons from the instructors from a young age, despite the fact that I had gone in with prior knowledge, and despite the preparations I'd made beforehand, that had been the most I could endure. That was just how harsh the training schools were.

To last three entire months there? And as a child, no less? No such person could possibly exist. Everyone who'd ever undergone training there was convinced of that. Myself included, perhaps even more so.

I couldn't even imagine it. The boy in the story had attended his first training school at the same age as I: twelve years old. And apparently, that young boy had, without fail, completed a full three-month curriculum for all six class branches.

It was impossible. Anybody would have thought as much.

But among all the tales of the boy that begged belief, that was the least of them. Astonishingly, despite undergoing all of that training, he hadn't been able to learn a single useful skill for his goal of becoming an adventurer. After he'd been told by every training school that he had "no aptitude" for their respective classes, the boy had departed his final one, the cleric training school, and that had been the last anyone had ever heard of him. Nobody had been able to track him down.

That was, of course, inconceivable.

That absolutely no news of the boy had been obtainable ever since was also mystifying. Instructor Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows and master of the thief branch of classes, could extend his [Detect Person] to blanket the entire

Kingdom if he so wished. Once he had his mind set on it, there was almost nobody on the continent whom he couldn't find. And yet, he hadn't been able to find the boy. What did that mean?

Was such a thing even possible?

Nothing about the story seemed real. The instructors, said to be some of the strongest and most skilled individuals in the world, grew concerned about the boy after they learned of his departure and used every conceivable means at their disposal to find him. They spared no effort and looked high and low, but no matter how many years passed, they never found a single trace of him.

In the first place, it was difficult to believe in the existence of somebody capable of gaining enough recognition from each of those idiosyncratic instructors for them to expressly search for him. Though I, myself, had been praised by all six as a brilliant student, I was royalty; it wouldn't surprise me to learn that there had been some leniency in their evaluation of me. My accomplishments were straightforward to grasp too; I had simply acquired more skills than anybody else.

But the boy in the story had been different. After all his desperate training, he hadn't been able to develop a single useful skill. Though he'd wanted to stay after his three months had passed, the instructors had driven him out, declaring that he had no talent. In short, although those elite instructors had initially given up on the boy, they'd ended up trying to find him afterward. It was probably because they hadn't been able to let go of somebody so capable.

As it went on, the story only became increasingly nonsensical.

There were too many inconsistencies. And yet every one of the instructors claimed that the boy really existed—that he'd shown up out of nowhere in the royal capital one day, and had vanished into thin air after he'd left.

Though it wouldn't have been strange if a person like that had stories cropping up about him somewhere, there had been no credible sightings of him. All there had been were the occasional vague memory or rumor, hunches that maybe such a boy had been around at some point. In the end, it was no more than a story told—and not told often—by the instructors, who had only seen the boy for a short time. And when I'd insistently pestered Instructor Sain,

the Sovereign of Salvation, to tell me more, he'd said:

"We, too, find it difficult to believe. But he did exist. He was right here in the royal capital."

I'd sensed a touch of regret in his words, but he'd refused to elaborate any further. None of the other instructors would ever say any more than that either. As such, nobody had known any details about the boy; not where he came from, not his name, nothing.

That was why it had only been inevitable that the talentless boy came to be thought of as a fictional character. Such had been everybody's conclusion; not a single person had taken the story as the truth. In the end, almost all of us had understood it to be a fairy tale with a moral to it, collaboratively made up by the instructors to teach students not to become blinded by their own talent, and to teach themselves not to overlook the talent of their students.

I had shared this belief, but now I was beginning to think otherwise—that perhaps the story had been true after all. Because before my very eyes was a person who was every bit as inconceivable as the talentless boy.

Sir Noor had shown me a larger-than-average [Tiny Flame]. It was a spell that Instructor Oken, the Spell Sovereign—also called Ninespell Oken—had shown me while I was little, when he'd been my tutor for magic. Instructor Oken, with a flame dancing atop his fingertip, had said thus:

"With enough training, even a bottom-class skill like [Tiny Flame], only capable of turning one's finger into a candle, can grow to become this big."

Though he'd then laughed and told me that it was practically useless, and that only a thumb-twiddler like himself who'd lived for over two hundred years had the time to waste on such pointless practice.

The memory was still vivid in my mind. I had been able to use [Tiny Flame] at the time too, so after our lesson, I'd tried my own hand at it. However, no matter what I did, I couldn't make my flame bigger. The end result of my trial and error had been me—despite my young age—reaching the understanding that it was not something that could be done in one day and promptly giving up. I'd been convinced that it would require an overwhelmingly long period of dedication, like what Instructor Oken had gone through.

Which was precisely why I was now speechless from shock. The spectacle before me made me doubt my own eyes. Sir Noor's [Tiny Flame] was *several times* larger than Instructor Oken's had been. It could only mean that he had reached a height that not even Oken, the Spell Sovereign—the greatest magician in the world—had achieved. And this was the same person whose swordsmanship had been skilled enough to slay a Minotaur from the Abyss with a single mass-produced, one-handed longsword.

How much training must he have gone through to be capable of so much at his age? I couldn't even begin to fathom it. But his ability was plain to see, flickering in front of me in the form of a [Tiny Flame]. In all likelihood, this young man had a capability for magic that surpassed even the great Ninespell Oken.

As I stood there, trembling in shock, Sir Noor spoke, [Tiny Flame] still alight on his finger.

"I shouldn't have to tell you what this means, right?"

I was struck by the realization of what I'd just done. The display I'd put on for him had been nothing more than me flaunting an array of high-class skills that I'd only just learned. I was ashamed of myself. But then, the man in front of me spoke again.

"See? *This is what I mean* when I say there's nothing I can do for you."

Instantly, I understood everything. With a few brief words and a single action, Sir Noor had corrected a fundamental misunderstanding of mine. Once again, I was struck by the keen awareness of what a fool I'd been. But simultaneously, I also understood that I'd found him—the person whom I had to follow; the next step in my journey.

Near the beginning of my time at the swordsman training school, after I'd acquired all of the skills from his curriculum in three days, my instructor, Sig, the Sword Sovereign, had said to me:

"Anybody would admit that you have talent. In that regard, there is not a single soul in the royal capital that is your match. But in this world of ours there exist individuals who, though far inferior to you in terms of talent, have bridged that difference through the sheer amount of their training. These individuals are

few and far between...but one day, you may encounter one. It is they from whom you must learn. Keep that in mind as you forge yourself. Never grow conceited."

At the time, I had taken his words as nothing more than encouragement for my efforts...but now, I knew that the man in front of me was the exact person whom Instructor Sig had been talking about. I had seen Sir Noor's extraordinary strength with my own eyes.

He'd parried every strike that the Minotaur—sent to attack me via some foreign plot—had launched at him, and slew it. Not only that, he'd brushed aside all suggestions of repayment, from treasure to status to honors; no matter what we'd offered him, he'd had no need for it. When I'd wondered why, my father had told me:

"In a word, it's because he's strong—of body and will. He has no need for anything because he already possesses the strength required to live life alone."

Without any prior warning, my father had given Sir Noor the dungeon relic that once upon a time had never left his side—the Black Blade. I didn't know what it was that my father saw in him, but I trusted his intuition. In the future, my brother and I would lead our kingdom. The royal family of Clays only had a single rule for its members: be strong. What I needed to do now, above all else, was learn from Sir Noor's strength.

I had never seen anybody whom I could call his equal. Instructor Sig's words had been true—as I was now, it was the man in front of me from whom I needed to learn.

At long last, I finally understood.

"Yes," I said. "I'm fully aware now...of my own pride and immaturity."

Sir Noor had yet to fully approve of me. In his mind, I must have seemed to be no more than a self-centered child. That only made sense, considering my words and actions up until only moments ago. But I wouldn't back down—not until I'd gained his recognition and truly understood his strength.

I couldn't guarantee that I would be able to get my resolve across to him. There was a chance that he would just push me away again. But even so—

"Indeed, it's exactly as you say," I told him. "Someone as disgraceful as I am requesting to be your disciple is the height of presumptuousness. It is only right that you would not deem me worthy as I am now, which is why—"

Even so, no matter what, I had to follow this man. My heart was set on it.

"Someday, I *will* make you recognize me as your disciple, Sir Noor. No, *Instructor* Noor. Until then, I shall follow you, wherever you may go."

Because the answer I had been searching for—the true meaning of strength, sought after by the royal family of Clays for generations—lay within the man who stood before my very eyes.

Chapter 14: The Prince's Melancholy

Inside his office, the prince sat listlessly in his chair. A mountain of issues demanded his consideration, but he found himself preoccupied anxiously with one in particular.

"What was my father thinking, giving the Black Blade to a complete stranger like that?"

In some ways, it would have been far more preferable if he'd given away half of the dungeon relics in the treasury. After all, although they had been gradually accumulated over the Kingdom's long history, that was another way of saying that nobody had found any use for them. Their worth in terms of coin was nothing to sneeze at, but at the end of the day, they still went untouched. At most, it was nothing more than a collection of situationally useful items, expensive curios, and works of art.

But the Black Blade was different.

"Of all things...it had to be that sword."

What the prince's father had given to that stranger was the very definition of useful. Its value was simply incomparable to the odds and ends that gathered dust in the treasury.

Back when he had still been an adventurer, long before the prince had been born, the currently reigning king had formed a party with the current Six Sovereigns and delved into the deepest depths of the Dungeon of the Lost. Several years later, after a journey on which they had faced death at every turn, he'd returned with the Black Blade, a special-class relic counted among the finest ever to grace the Kingdom's long history. To some, it was even known as the *Unbreakable* Blade.

Its jet-black blade could not be damaged by any metal, no matter how hard, from mithril to orichalcum to mana-metal. Once, as a test, it had been struck with Dragnil, a dwarven-crafted hammer used for the purpose of forging

orichalcum weapons, said to be made from the fangs of an Elder Dragon. The hammer had shattered to pieces.

Nobody knew what material the Black Blade was made of. It was a complete mystery. The Kingdom's researchers had immediately set about conducting all kinds of experiments on it, and their efforts had led them to a single conclusion: No matter what established knowledge—skills, feats of engineering, or magic—one used, no harm could be done to the sword. Not even the faintest of scratches. As far as anybody knew, nothing in the entire world was harder than the Black Blade. Even adamantite, the hardest known substance in the world, could be called soft in comparison.

Still, there was a far greater enigma: the Black Blade was impossible to damage, so why was it in such terrible condition? Its length was marred by countless large chips, scratches, and dents. The only explanation was that they had been caused by an absurd degree of strength beyond human knowledge. Not even after all of the Kingdom's scholars combined their efforts could anyone find a single literary reference to what could have done it.

What had happened, deep in the depths of the dungeon? For that matter, how had the dungeon even come to be?

The Black Blade was a clue toward solving those mysteries. It was a relic of the highest order, the most significant national treasure of the Kingdom of Clays. Rulers of other countries had salivated at the chance to take a single look, and even offered vast fortunes in the hope of one day obtaining it for themselves.

However, the prince's father had turned down every such request. It was only natural that he had; the sword was simply that valuable. But for him to just hand it over to some suspicious stranger? The prince couldn't even begin to understand what had driven such a move.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. I understand that," the prince muttered to himself. "But even then..."

The prince sorely wanted to know the identity of that stranger. His ability was apparently the real deal—Gilbert had asked to spar with him and hadn't been able to land a single attack—but that was beside the point. Was he truly their

ally? This “Noor,” as he was called, was a complete unknown.

It had evidently been true that he had rescued Lynne from the Minotaur. In that regard, the prince could understand why his father, though usually so stern, had offered up the Black Blade—it was an invaluable offering to match the invaluable life that was saved. But, though Noor was his sister’s savior, he was simply too unknown to trust.

It was suspicious enough that the man had just happened upon the princess at the precise moment the Minotaur had attacked, but then he’d made some silly excuse and run away without giving his name. And in addition to his outlandish strength that made him seem like a character out of a hero’s epic, there was also the matter of his behavior toward the king. It was one thing to be rustic and ignorant, but to show not a speck of loyalty to the Kingdom was unforgivable.

From the look of things, Lynne deeply admired the man—understandable, given what he’d done for her. But should he even be allowed near her? With a single mistake, his strength, enough to slay a Minotaur, could become a tremendous threat.

“There simply isn’t enough of a basis on which to trust him,” the prince murmured. “Still...”

Still, the fact remained that Noor had gained the approval of the prince’s father, the monarch and highest authority of the Kingdom of Clays, and the king’s decisions were absolute. As far as any member of the House of Clays was concerned, they would have no choice but to trust the man if commanded to.

However, such a command had not yet been given. The prince knew from his own doubts and misgivings about Noor that his father was likely holding back on fully extending his trust to the man.

“Does my father grasp the situation we’re in?” the prince wondered—only to immediately answer his own question. It was his father; of course he’d noticed the restlessness lurking within the mood of the Kingdom. And, aware of that, he’d given the Black Blade to a stranger. Which could only mean...

“It’s a form of insurance,” the prince muttered. “An all-or-nothing move. He means for that man to break the stalemate that has ensnared the game board.”

Seen from that perspective, the prince could begin to understand his father's inexplicable judgment from the other day.

The king had *gambled* on the man called Noor, betting that he'd be the Kingdom's insurance against whatever was yet to come—that it didn't matter who he was, because he could swing that sword.

Yes, that had to be why.

The Black Blade. Dandalg the Immortal, known for his superhuman strength, had groaned at the effort it took him to swing the sword even once. Sig of the Thousand Blades had refused to take it, declaring it too heavy for him to wield. And even the king in his prime, commander of the Six Sovereigns, could only wield it two-handed by the skin of his teeth.

Noor had swung it with *one hand*. Not only that, he'd also taken the absurdly heavy sword home with him as though it were a run-of-the-mill weapon. It was enough to make one question whether it truly was a world-class dungeon relic. Perhaps its new home was appropriate after all. It was a risky gamble, but the prince knew that, with things as they stood, they couldn't afford to be picky.

"Something's coming..." the prince muttered. "I can feel it."

The recent turbulence around the royal capital that suggested the involvement of the Kingdom's neighbors. The blatant act of terrorism that was the assassination attempt on Lynne, a member of royalty—a plot that had involved the use of summoning magic in the heart of the city. Both were major moves the likes of which had been unheard of in recent years, and the prince doubted that this was the end of it.

The assassination had not been their enemy's final aim; despite the magnitude of the incident, it had been no more than an attempt to throw the Kingdom off-balance. If the prince had been in their enemy's place—if this had been *his* plot—then he would not have stopped here. He would have continued to scrupulously prepare for his grand scheme, all the while setting into motion eye-catching distractions. The assassination had been a sign of the beginning and nothing more.

That being the case, what was next? Irrespective of how guilty it made him feel, the prince decided that, for as long as he remained in the dark, having

Lynne stay with her savior was likely for the best. If the man wasn't an enemy, then he would be a tremendous guard—one capable of slaying a Minotaur by himself. Nothing could be more reassuring.

Conversely, entrusting the princess to Noor would put him in the perfect position to kill her himself. Still, based on the events of the day before, it seemed infinitely unlikely that such a thought would even cross his mind. The situation had also demonstrated that he currently wasn't their enemy—or so the prince hoped.

"We don't have enough time," the prince said to himself. "Nor enough people."

There were too many uncertainties surrounding Lynne's savior...but in the prince's current predicament, he had no choice but to place his faith in the man. It was a gamble and nothing more, but the Kingdom had been driven into a corner.

Right now, the Kingdom of Clays was at peace—but only on the surface. Behind closed doors, matters were progressing at a rapid pace. There was a fatal lack of manpower, and they no longer had enough time to ascertain how the enemy would make their move.

"I need more information..." the prince muttered.

Taking a gray cloak from the wall and swiftly donning it, he exited his office and headed out into the city.

Chapter 15: My First Goblin Hunt

“I hope you find a good commission, Instructor Noor!”

“Yeah... Me too...”

After having lunch at a nearby street stall, Lynne and I had gone to the Adventurers Guild—the second time for both of us today. The guildsman called out to us as we entered.

“Hey, Noor...why are you together with Lady Lynneburg? And what’s this ‘instructor’ business?”

“Guildmaster,” Lynne said, “while I am an adventurer, please refer to me as ‘Lynne.’ There is no need to call me ‘Lady’ either.”

“Right,” the guildsman said. “That’s on me for forgetting. My mistake, Lynne.”

After apologizing to her, he leaned in close to me and whispered in a low voice: “Noor, what happened...? She was looking for you this morning too, you know. You haven’t done something else, have you? Not after that whole mess yesterday.”

“Well...it’s complicated,” I replied.

I didn’t think I was even capable of explaining it; after all, I wasn’t really sure what was happening myself. As I stood there, mulling over what I should say to the guildsman, I glanced in Lynne’s direction, seeking her assistance. The moment our eyes met, she gave me a cheerful smile.

What was I supposed to do with that...?

That said, she then seemed to have some kind of silent conversation with the guildsman. After they had finished exchanging looks, the guildsman scratched at his grizzled hair, paused, and then said, “Sorry. We don’t pry into other people’s business ’round here. Guild rule. Forget I asked.”

“No,” I replied, “it’s not a secret or anything.”

As far as I was concerned, he was free to pry as much as he liked. In fact, I

actually wanted his advice regarding—

“So, what are you here for?” the guildsman asked. “Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again today, since you said you were going into the woods.”

“My plans changed,” I replied. “I was hoping you could point me in the way of a commission.”

“A commission?” he repeated.

“Yeah. One that two people can accept, if possible.”

“Two people, huh...?” The guildsman glanced at Lynne, who was standing behind me. For some inscrutable reason, this whole time, she’d looked like she was in a great mood. I had no idea why she wanted to follow me so badly.

After our encounter earlier, I’d tried everything I could think of to clear up the misunderstanding between us. Evidently, I’d only succeeded in making it worse. Now she was telling me that she’d follow me anywhere.

Where had I gone wrong...?

To be honest, I was at a complete loss for what to do. I’d tried to continue with my training as if nothing had happened, but I’d soon had to abandon that idea—I’d been too conscious of her watching me the entire time. And when I’d decided to head to the Adventurers Guild to find some work to pass the time with...she’d followed along as though it were a matter of course.

I really had no choice; I’d just have to let her accompany me on some jobs for a while. That way, she was bound to eventually notice her mistake. As such, I had come to look for a commission that would let me do just that.

“Let’s see...” said the guildsman. “What commissions can I offer you? Well, Lynne’s Silver-rank, if my memory hasn’t failed me...so if you two are forming a party, I suppose you could go goblin hunting just outside the city.”

“G-Goblin hunting!?” I stammered. His answer had shocked me so much that I’d reflexively done a double take. I’d never expected to be given a hunting commission; I’d written them off as something that was still completely beyond me. But now, here I was, actually being offered one. “C-Can I really accept that!?”

"Yeah," he replied. "Having a Silver-rank in your party lets you take on Silver-rank commissions. That said, adventurers who aren't of the appropriate rank are more or less deadweight, so unless your party works particularly well together, it's more common to stick with commissions that are one or two ranks lower."

"Th-Then...what's the danger rating of goblin hunting?" I was hesitant, but it was a question that I'd needed to ask.

I took a moment to collect myself; I'd let my excitement get the best of me, but staying calm was the way to go. First, I needed to confirm how dangerous the job was going to be. I'd heard that goblins were the weakest kind of monster—fodder for rookie adventurers to test their abilities on—but I'd also heard about the risks associated with hunting commissions. Where did goblin hunting fall on that scale? Depending on the answer, I could be exposing Lynne to danger by having her come with me.

"What, goblin hunting?" the guildsman repeated. "Beginner. Three ranks below Silver."

"I...I'll take it!" I shouted, unable to contain my anticipation.

Three ranks lower. I could do this.

But then, I had a sudden realization—I was pretty much just using Lynne's adventurer rank for my own gain. And so soon after being fed up with her. I was a little ashamed at how mercenary it was. Plus, before I could accept the commission, I'd have to form a party with her. Would she even be okay with that? If she said no...

I glanced at her.

"Is something the matter?" Lynne asked hesitantly, seeing the uncertainty in my expression.

"Is...Is this all right with you?" I asked her. "I'll need to rely on your rank to accept this."

My voice had grown a little quieter as I grappled with the guilt of taking advantage of her. Upon hearing my question, however, Lynne smiled in relief, as though she'd been expecting something else.

"Of course, Instructor!" she replied. "You are more than welcome to anything I can provide that may be of use to you. I will follow you wherever you may go, so direct me however you wish."

"I-Is that right...?" I said.

She had agreed. It felt like I was conning her somehow, and it was pathetic of me to be relying on such a young girl, but even still...this had been one of my long-awaited dreams. I wanted to go goblin hunting. But the question remained —was I capable of doing so?

I glanced at the guildsman.

"You don't have to look so apprehensive," he told me after a moment of silence. "Lynne's Silver-rank; you'll be fine. Still, don't bite off more than you can chew, you got that? Just 'cause it's low-risk doesn't mean it's safe."

"Got it," I replied. "And don't worry; I know my own strength. I'll stick to what I can do."

The guildsman's words had eased my worries a little. Still, I resolved to stay on my toes. As far as I was concerned, this was going to be an adventure into the unknown.

"You're taking it, then?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Please."

At my confirmation, he retrieved a map from within the desk and showed it to me. "This is the hunting area. Report back with how many you get. We take their right ears as evidence, so don't forget to bring those back with you, all right?"

"Got it," I replied.

"That being said," he continued with a smile, "we've received reports that goblin numbers have been low recently. Don't rightly know why, but you might not even run into one. If that happens, you can just pick some herbs. We'll pay you for those too."

The guildsman then finished writing some kind of document and stamped it with a *thump*.

"Right. Off you go," he said. "Just take care not to hurt yourself, you hear? This isn't a picnic you're going on."

"Yeah," I replied, "I know."

"And be back before it gets dark."

"Got it. I will. Let's go, Lynne."

"Yes, Instructor."

And so, we set out for the place where goblins were said to live—the Forest of Beasts that neighbored the royal capital.

Chapter 16: The Forest of Beasts

If a person left the royal capital and walked north for roughly an hour, they would reach the area known as the Forest of Beasts. Although you risked running into the various species of monster that called this place home, it was also a prime location for picking all kinds of plants and fruits that would fetch an attractive price on the marketplace. Rookie adventurers often came to this forest to complete commissions.

Despite its menacing moniker, the Forest of Beasts' danger rating—as determined by the Adventurers Guild—was quite low. The name was apparently a safety measure devised to prevent intruders from cluelessly wandering in and putting themselves at risk. Though, of course, that wouldn't stop anybody who was unaware of the forest's name in the first place.

"So this is the Forest of Beasts, huh?" I wondered aloud. "The trees are pretty packed together...and they're different from the ones in the woods I usually go to, south of the city. They're huge."

"Indeed," Lynne replied. "It's a slightly different ecosystem around here."

This forest was famous for being a goblin habitat that neighbored the royal capital. Although it was said that goblins weren't particularly dangerous monsters if dealt with in the appropriate manner, that didn't mean you could let your guard down around them. After all, they were perfectly capable of attacking and eating humans. They saw people as food to be eaten, and, upon encountering them, would immediately attack.

Though goblins were omnivorous and could eat fruits, nuts, and berries, they were exceptionally fond of meat. How terrifyingly savage. From what I'd heard, it wasn't uncommon for rookie adventurers to go missing in the Forest of Beasts, only to be discovered later on as nothing more than a pile of bones.

If left unchecked, goblins would rapidly increase in number. And while they usually inhabited the forest and preyed on the small animals within, if their population grew too large, lack of adequate food would cause them to spill into

human settlements.

As such, the Kingdom endorsed the regular culling of goblins to keep their numbers down, providing remuneration via the Adventurers Guild for anybody who participated in the effort.

That being said, the royal capital was called the Adventurer's Holy Land for a reason—you couldn't swing a cat without hitting a powerful adventurer. Since goblins barely posed a threat to such individuals, it wouldn't take much for a local culling to become an outright extermination.

This, too, was evidently disadvantageous. Although goblins were a species of monster, they had their own role to play within their habitat—and if what I'd been told was true, a forest's ecosystem was far more abundant when it was inhabited by goblins compared to when it wasn't.

Since those ecosystems were home to valuable medicinal herbs with useful properties, among other things, the Kingdom made sure to regulate goblin culling to ensure their numbers didn't fall too low. It also had policies in place to protect the environments in which they lived, ensuring that such areas remained as untouched as possible.

As a result, the complex ecosystem of the Forest of Beasts had been preserved—monsters and all—making it a home for flora and fauna rarely seen in other forests. It also made the area a perfect training ground and source of income for rookie adventurers.

And that about summed up the lesson Lynne had given me on the walk here. As it turned out, in addition to her large arsenal of skills, her knowledge was quite extensive too. To be so capable at her age was already nothing short of amazing, but to top it all off, she was even a Silver-rank adventurer. I had no doubts that she'd grow up to become an incredible person one day.

"It appears the guildmaster was right," Lynne said, surveying our surroundings for monsters. "There don't seem to be any goblins around. I suppose their numbers really are low at the moment."

She was probably using [Detect Presence] or something to check for nearby signs of life.

"Oh! Never mind; I've just had a response," she said, indicating a direction to me. "It...feels like a monster. It's a little far, but it shouldn't take us too long. Shall we?"

I was struck by the realization that she was actually terribly handy to have around. Unable to make a single contribution of my own, I obediently followed her as we stepped deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Is it just me, or is it getting darker...?" I asked.

"Indeed," Lynne replied. "I've heard that the older trees in areas like this block more sunlight. I believe that goblins tend to favor these places."

I was pretty sure that the sun was still high in the sky, but our surroundings were dim and gloomy. Since goblins were nocturnal, they disliked well-lit areas and preferred living deep in the forest in places like this, often retreating into dark caves during the day to sleep. While searching out such caves and ambushing the goblins while they slept was an efficient hunting method, they were difficult to find for those who lacked the know-how.

As such, most hunts ended up targeting starving goblins wandering around during the day in search of prey. Brutal.

If what I'd been told held true, goblins weren't all too intelligent. Unlike humans, they also rarely ever banded together, though there were some exceptions: it wasn't uncommon to see groups of goblins in places that had an abundance of fruit or other food. These gatherings had a much higher danger rating associated with them, so it was considered unlucky to stumble across one.

I hoped that nothing like that would happen to us—though I knew that Lynne being here made that very unlikely. Still, as we slowly approached the presence of the monster she'd detected, I couldn't help but get a little nervous.

"Hmm?" Suddenly, Lynne stopped in her tracks and tilted her head in confusion.

"Something wrong, Lynne?"

"N-No, it's just...I definitely detected a monster in this area. But..."

“But?”

She paused. “It vanished.”

“Vanished?” I repeated.

“Yes. It’s possible that someone else slew it, of course, but...I was sure that nobody else was around. How did...?” She tilted her head to the other side, an uncertain look still on her face.

“Monsters *are* living creatures,” I said. “Maybe it just died of old age or illness.”

“That’s true,” she replied. “It’s definitely a possibility. In either case, we should be able to find its body if we go to where its presence vanished. If it just died, we should still be able to collect its right ear for a reward.”

“Good idea; no sense in leaving empty-handed after coming this far. Let’s go.”

For whatever reason, it seemed that today just wasn’t a good day for goblin hunting. I was a little disappointed, but it was out of my control. I decided that I’d happily settle for just seeing a real goblin in the flesh—something I’d never actually done before. I figured that would be more than enough for my first-ever adventure. There was no sense in being too greedy.

“Still, it’s quite strange...” Lynne said. “The forest is far too quiet today. Surely it should feel more alive than this...”

She was right; we hadn’t even heard any birds chirping, much less sensed the presence of other animals. I’d figured that maybe this was just that kind of forest, but apparently not. Come to think of it, Lynne had said that the ecosystem around here was quite abundant; by all rights, it should have been teeming with life. Despite that, we hadn’t run into anything today. Maybe we’d just been unlucky.

While I was mulling that over, we reached our destination.

“It should be right around here...” Lynne began, her head on a swivel as she examined our surroundings.

As far as I could tell, though, the place was empty.

“Or not...” she finished. “There’s nothing here.”

"Yeah," I said. "Looks like—no, wait."

At a glance, there weren't any signs of life around us...but something in my field of vision was assaulting me with a strong sense of discomfort.

"What...is that...?" As I strained my eyes in search of the source of whatever was bothering me, I caught sight of something in the air above us. A pair of small green legs, floating in seemingly empty space—though, upon further inspection, they looked faintly translucent.

As I stared at the legs, they were lifted astonishingly high up into the sky by some unknown force—and then suddenly they were gone, as if something had *swallowed them up*. Droplets of what seemed like water flew from where they had vanished, splashing down onto Lynne's face and my own.

Lynne, apparently having come to some kind of panicked realization, hurriedly activated one of her skills.

"[Uncover]!"

And the moment it took effect...

"What?!"

"What is *that*...?"

What had appeared to be some kind of see-through veil had peeled away to reveal a sudden, strange presence before us—a green-skinned giant standing on two legs. At a glance, it looked humanoid, but I could never call it human.

Its brawny arms stretched down long enough to brush the ground, and its legs were thicker than any three of the huge trees around us put together. Embedded in its head was something that looked like a beautiful purple-red gem, and its beast-like eyes were glaring directly at us. It was making chewing motions with its large tusked mouth, from the edges of which trickled a stream of red blood.

I had never seen an animal like this before. Was it...?

"Th-That's...a goblin—!" Lynne exclaimed, looking up at the giant with an expression of shock.

"Huh..." I said. "So *that's* a goblin."

It was nothing like what I'd imagined—it was much, much bigger. Since everyone called goblins the weakest monster, I'd been totally convinced that they were a lot smaller—but as the saying went, there were some things you had to see with your own eyes.

That being said, the creature in front of me matched everything I'd heard about goblins. It had green skin, walked on two legs like humans, and had a sharp beast-like gaze. It was even using tools—at the moment, it was in the process of uprooting two large trees, one with each hand. It must have been intending to use them as clubs.

"So it's an intelligent monster, huh?" I muttered to myself. "That's pretty scary..."

I'd heard that goblins weren't very intelligent, but that was only in comparison to humans. It didn't mean they were completely dumb. Far from it, in fact; it was often said that they were actually pretty smart when compared to other monsters.

So, in addition to their massive size, they had brains as well? I looked up at the goblin—which had finished uprooting the trees and was now glaring at us with them raised high overhead—and shuddered. I could hardly believe that the world's adventurers all treated these monsters as small fry...but reality was right before my eyes. No matter how much I might have wanted to object, I had to accept it. All the same, I hesitated, shrinking back. This goblin was far bigger than the cow that had given me so much trouble to defeat.

Lynne's expression had frozen stiff. I thought it was understandable, given the situation. Although she was blessed with both intelligence and talent, I doubted that she had much actual combat experience.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," I told her, trying to convince myself of the same. "It's...just a goblin."

People said that goblins were the first barrier that a rookie encountered—that hunting them was the first step a person took toward standing on their own two feet as an adventurer. But to me, what I saw in front of me looked like a towering wall, impossible for me to scale.

Goblins: green, human-eating creatures that were famous for being the

weakest kind of monster. For someone like me who couldn't even be called a rookie yet, they were a formidable foe that I couldn't take lightly.

Still, if I could slay the one in front of me, surely that would qualify as taking the first step toward my long-held dream of becoming an adventurer.

The goblin let loose a roar that echoed throughout our dim forest surroundings, and glared at us with its massive set of eyes. From the look of things, it had decided that we were going to be today's lunch. That thought alone was almost enough to freeze me in my tracks out of fear.

Still—

"Let's take it down, Lynne." I cleared my mind and readied my black sword. I was still scared, but this wasn't the time to think about that. Fear, terror, panic—those were nothing but shortcuts to the afterlife.

We could beat this goblin, I was sure. After all, Lynne was here.

"Yes, Instructor."

And so, our fierce battle with the weakest of all monsters—the goblin—began.

Chapter 17: The Goblin Emperor

As I stared up at the monstrous creature before me, my shock caused me to choke on my words.

“Th-That’s...a Goblin—!”

A Goblin Emperor. It was a subspecies of the most fearsome example of goblinkind: the Goblin King, a Catastrophe-class threat. They were differentiated as such because while Goblin Kings were naturally occurring phenomena that appeared once every few hundred years, Goblin Emperors were not—they were artificially created monsters.

It was known that goblins could be mutated through human manipulation. However, the practice had long since faded into the past, and these days it was considered taboo knowledge that had been the fruit of now-forbidden research. It was done by embedding manastones into the goblins’ skin, then pouring in a massive quantity of mana.

Generally, monster bodies could only handle a certain amount of mana; exceeding that limit would cause them to rupture and die. However, in extremely rare cases, certain goblins adapted to that surplus density. Apparently, if mana continued to be poured into these unique specimens, their bodies would expand like balloons—and if they managed to endure even *that*, they would eventually assimilate the mana and make it their own.

The end result would be a goblin strong enough to rival a Goblin King—an A-rank, Catastrophe-class threat. This reasoning was why Goblin Emperors were classified as being equally as dangerous as Goblin Kings.

But the goblin before me was so huge that I could scarcely believe it. It was at least twice as large as any Goblin King I’d learned about, if not larger. I suddenly recalled a theory that experimentation results were also dependent on the quality of manastone embedded within the goblin’s body, not just the amount of mana one poured into it.

I looked at the manastone shining in the forehead of the goblin in front of me, and immediately I could tell it was abnormal. Its unbelievable size and purity completely set it apart from a regular manastone. Once, when studying abroad in the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, I'd gotten a chance to see a Demon's Heart, said to be the highest grade of manastone in existence. However, this one was its equal in every way—no, its purity might even have been superior.

And yet, it had been embedded into this goblin? No wonder the creature had grown to such an abnormal size.

I had no way of confirming any of my suspicions. However, I did know one thing for certain: not even a Goblin King would be a match for this monster.

Goblin Kings were an A-rank threat—monsters that could just barely be handled by a full party of Gold-rank adventurers. Yet they paled in comparison to the size of the Goblin Emperor before me.

Not only that, it was a kin-eater, a monster that ate those of its own kind and grew stronger off of the mana it absorbed from them. I no longer had any idea just how much of a threat this Goblin Emperor posed. Why was it in a place like this?

I couldn't beat it. I was sure I couldn't. Someone had even used [Concealment] on it. Whether it had been done via the use of a magical tool or something else, I didn't know, but it had to have been done by a person.

It was no wonder that we hadn't encountered any animals in the forest—this monster had eaten them all in secret. I wouldn't have been surprised if there had been people counted among its victims.

Had Instructor Noor come here because he'd sensed it? I *had* thought it strange that a person of his ability would be so eager to go goblin hunting. Had the pure joy that he'd been exuding simply been a contrivance—a way for him to eliminate dire threats in secrecy? Did he always help people like this?

The shame I felt at my own shallowness only grew stronger. Thinking back, I recalled how Instructor Noor had looked at me with such uncertainty at the Adventurers Guild. It must have been because he'd predicted this outcome. He'd been worried about whether it really was okay for him to take me along.

This whole time, I'd been nothing but a burden to him.

The fear I'd felt when the Minotaur had attacked me once again reared its head. Unconsciously, I began to tremble. The strength left my legs, and it was all I could do to keep from collapsing.

But then, Instructor Noor spoke.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. It's...just a goblin."

Just a goblin.

He was right. My fear had dulled my judgment. I needed to calm down; I was going to be fine. Right now, I wasn't alone. Instructor Noor had brought me along for a reason—I was sure of it.

"Let's take it down, Lynne."

Instructor Noor called my name. He was depending on me. I could feel it in his words.

And he was right. Now wasn't the time to be trembling in fear; I had to fight side by side with him. I was sure that I would be okay, because beside me now was the person who had confronted a monster from the Abyss and won.

At that thought, my trembling instantly subsided.

What a strange feeling. Until a moment ago, I had been so scared that I could hardly stand—on the verge of being overcome by death and despair. And I was about to face a terrifying foe to which even Catastrophe-class monsters paled in comparison, with only one other person by my side. And yet...

"Yes, Instructor."

And yet, I found the corners of my lips creeping ever so slightly upward.

As I stood behind Instructor Noor and gazed at the towering Goblin Emperor before us, I smiled.

Chapter 18: I Parry a Goblin

The goblin grasped the large trees it had uprooted, one in each hand, and fixed us with a glare, its eyes reminding me of a ferocious beast. I caught a glimpse of a dark-red tongue peeking out from its long-tusked mouth. It showed no signs of attacking us anytime soon; it felt as though it was taking its time to evaluate its prey.

Could I really fight such a terrifying monster?

But just as that doubt began to worm its way into my chest, the goblin abruptly attacked, raising one of the large trees it was holding up high and bringing it crashing down on the two of us.

The monster's massive body moved at an unbelievable speed. In an instant, the coarse bark of the tree was almost upon me, casting a shadow over my head. Up close, I realized that the trunk was far thicker than I'd initially thought. If it hit either of us, we'd surely die. But—

[Parry]

With all of my strength, I raised my sword and struck the falling tree away. The impact that I felt through the hilt was immense. The exchange had been blisteringly fast...but evidently, my parry had been successful. I had managed to slightly shift the tree's trajectory, and it slammed down into the ground right beside where I was standing, gouging a deep furrow into the dirt. I glanced behind me and saw that Lynne was unhurt as well.

But before I had the time to form my next thought, the goblin attacked again. In a display of brute strength, it swung the massive trunk it was holding in its other hand—its left—directly at us in a horizontal sweep that mowed down all the trees in its path and tore up chunks of dirt where it scraped across the ground. I readied myself to jump over the attack but stopped once I came to a realization.

"Not good," I muttered.

The goblin was already holding another tree in its right hand. True to its reputation as an intelligent monster, it must have sent its attack skimming across the ground because it had foreseen that we would jump over it. If my guess was right, it was intending to smack us down while we were defenseless in the air.

Although the monstrous strength that let it swing trees around was scary enough, it was that calculating look in its gaze that terrified me the most. But there was no way that I was going to let it get what it wanted.

[Parry]

Instead of avoiding its swing, I stabbed my black sword into the ground and forcibly deflected the massive tree straight into the air. The huge goblin must not have expected that because it stumbled for a moment, off-balance.

This was our chance to counterattack. I might not have had any means of attacking our opponent, but Lynne did.

“Lynne, you’re up.”

“Yes, Instructor—[Wind Cutter].”

Countless blades of wind created by Lynne’s skill gathered together in a swirling storm and flew straight at the goblin. The violent gale raced through the forest and tore the surrounding trees to shreds. However—

“Gugyaaa!” The goblin sidestepped the attack as though it were nothing.

For a moment, Lynne looked shocked, but she quickly collected herself.

“[Icicle Dance]!”

She formed dozens of icicles, one after another, each the size of a person, and fired them at the goblin in rapid succession, leaving no room for it to dodge or launch a counteroffensive. The intensity behind her flurry of attacks was tremendous—she fired each icicle with what felt like the force of a cannon shot. Every tree in the vicinity that was struck by one was blasted into splinters, and the ground beneath our feet began to frost over.

But not all of the icicles met their mark. Our opponent was too quick.

“I had no idea goblins were so fast,” I muttered.

I had heard that goblins were nimble monsters, but this was beyond anything I'd ever imagined. As it weaved between the surrounding trees, dodging Lynne's icicles, it picked up one fallen tree after another and flung them at us like arrows. It was taking all that I had in me to knock them down so that they wouldn't hit Lynne.

We couldn't keep this up. Most of Lynne's attacks weren't connecting, and I didn't have any usable offensive skills at all. To top it all off—

"How?! How is it regenerating?!" Lynne exclaimed.

Her fierce barrage of icicles had left countless wounds on the goblin—a cut across its arm, and a toe that had frozen solid and partially shattered among them. She had managed to hurt it, that was for certain—but before I'd realized it, its wounds had vanished. In mere moments, every injury she'd inflicted on it would disappear as though they'd never existed.

"Is it because of the manastone...?!" Lynne muttered, staring at the goblin. "Is that why...?"

By "manastone," did she mean that purple-red gem stuck to its forehead? Upon closer inspection, I got the feeling that the light it was giving off was stronger than before.

"You mean that gem?" I asked. "What about it?"

"It might be the source of the goblin's power," she replied. "We need to find a way to remove it..."

"We just have to remove it?" I confirmed.

"Yes. If my guess is right, that's its weak point."

"Weak point, huh?"

As I continued to strike down the trees that the goblin was throwing at us, I felt a little relieved. I had been surprised by its ability to regenerate, but as it turned out, true to its reputation as the weakest monster, it had a very straightforward weak point. The only problem was, how were we going to get to it?

The goblin was extremely quick; getting in close would be no easy task. I had

no confidence that I'd be able to catch up to it, even if I ran at full speed. What could I do?

Apparently, the goblin had seen our hesitation as a good opportunity to strike, because it immediately launched its next attack. With its hands, it flung a massive heap of giant wood splinters into the sky, all of which soon began to fall toward us. At the same time, the goblin started indiscriminately seizing the broken pieces of trees scattered across the ground, throwing them at us with reckless abandon.

Damn it, I thought. It got us.

The goblin had been observing us with its sharp eyes this entire time. It had gotten a clear view of me striking down its attacks with my black sword—striking them down one at a time, to be precise. Given the sheer weight of my weapon, trying to do the same to a dozen or more trees was beyond me. At best, I *might* have been able to deflect two or three per swing. But even if I'd been wielding a lighter sword, it wouldn't have done me any good; such a weapon would have been incapable of knocking aside such large projectiles in the first place.

I couldn't parry several trees at once—and through careful observation, the goblin had figured that out.

As I stood there, admiring the monster's intellect, the deluge of wood began to rain down upon us. At the same time, tree shards flew at us from the sides like arrows.

What was I doing? This wasn't the time to be struck by admiration. Unless I figured something out, I wouldn't be able to protect Lynne. As soon as I'd thought that, however...

“[Windblast]!”

A violent storm erupted forth from Lynne, shaking the entire forest with all the force of a massive earthquake. Faced with such overwhelming wind pressure, the countless projectiles that had been headed toward us were blown away, scattered into the air.

She was amazing.

Then, as I watched the skill that she'd unleashed, I had a sudden idea.

"Lynne. Can you fire that at my back?"

"You mean my [Windblast]?" she asked. "B-But it's an attack spell. It has enough force to blow a hole through a castle wall..."

"It should be fine if I put my sword in the way. I think it'll give me a decent shot at catching up to the goblin so I can grab that red gem. What do you think?"

She paused to consider my words before giving her answer.

"Okay, Instructor. If you say so, let's do it."

In short, my idea was similar in concept to how having the breeze at your back made it easier to run. I thought that with the strong winds that Lynne could summon up, I could reach quite a high speed.

As plans went, it was pretty basic...but I figured that if I could just do something about the goblin's gem, Lynne should be able to take care of the rest. It was worth a shot.

I placed my black sword against my back, and Lynne put both of her hands against it.

"Ready when you are," I said.

"Here goes... [Windblast]!"



The impact was immediate and immense. Even through the sword, it felt like my body would be blown to pieces by the pressure. But as the overwhelming force pushed at my back, I activated [Physical Enhancement] and kicked off the ground with all the strength I could muster.

The earth beneath me ruptured, and, right away, my body was sent flying forward at an unbelievable speed. It was incomparable to merely running under my own power. Although I'd only taken a single step so far, the scenery around me was already blurring past my field of vision. Then, I activated [Featherstep], and the wall of air in front of me vanished, causing me to accelerate even faster.

Whenever I wanted to travel long distances, I would always use my [Featherstep] skill. Though initially I'd thought its only use was muffling the sound of my footsteps, one day, I'd made the sudden discovery that I was wrong.

Back when I'd trained on the mountain, I had often found that the air got in my way; no matter how much I wanted to be faster, there had always been a wall of it surrounding my body that kept me in check, preventing me from moving how I wanted. But whenever I used [Featherstep], for some reason unknown to me, that air would disappear along with the sound of my footsteps. Thanks to that, I was able to move a lot quicker these days.

Still, this was the fastest I'd ever been. My next step felt so far away. I had to be careful not to lose my balance.

I put my full focus into taking that next step, pouring all the strength I could into [Physical Enhancement], and once again kicked off the ground. Immediately, the impact from doing so ran throughout my entire body, the ground ruptured, and the muscles in my leg groaned in protest. It felt like I had fractured a bone.

But if that was all, then I'd be fine. With [Low Heal], I could mend minor injuries like bone fractures and muscle tears instantaneously.

I took my next step, then another, then another, pouring more and more strength into each one, over and over, countless times, until I was moving faster still. By now, the goblin had noticed me closing in, and it made to jump

backward and escape. The rate at which it reacted was incredible. It moved unbelievably fast.

But right now, I was faster.

"Caught you."

I clung to the goblin's massive face, grasped the red gem embedded in its forehead as tightly as I could, and *pulled*.

"Gugyaaahhh!!!" The goblin screamed in agony as spouts of fresh blood burst from its new wound.

The gem still in my hand, I leaped aside and watched from a distance. The goblin writhed violently in pain and lashed out as though it had gone mad, knocking down the surrounding trees with its sheer strength. As it rolled around on the ground in its anguish, it caused further injury to itself with its own indiscriminate blows. I could no longer sense any of the intelligence that it had demonstrated earlier. And without the gem that had been in its forehead, its wounds were no longer regenerating.

"Lynne...can I leave the rest to you? Sorry, but, if you could, make it as painless as possible."

Now that I had pulled out its red gem—its weak point—the goblin was no longer showing any signs of attacking us. However, if we left it be, there was a chance it would go on to eat other people in the future. So while I felt a little bad for it, we'd have to exterminate it here and now.

"As you wish, Instructor... [Hellflare]."

The moment Lynne activated her skill, the goblin was engulfed in scorching hot fire. Although it was being burned, it made no attempt to escape the flames. Instead, it simply screamed, looking all the while as if it didn't understand what was happening.

"Forgive me, goblin," I said.

Then, writhing in agony until the last, it let out a final groan and met its end. Lynne ceased her skill, leaving nothing but a massive charred body lying on the ground.

And that marked the first time I—with Lynne’s help—ever slew a goblin, the weakest of all monsters.

Chapter 19: Disturbing Developments

The prince sat at his desk, face drawn into a grave expression, still clad in the gray cloak that he used for outings. Until just a short while ago, he had been out in the city, personally gathering information. Unfortunately, he hadn't managed to learn anything useful—the royal capital had been the picture of peace itself. And yet...

"We need to find a lead immediately," the prince thought aloud. "If we aren't prepared..."

Something was coming—he was sure of it—and they dearly needed to find the signs that would shine a light on what it was. He'd issued orders to all intelligence unit personnel to gather any and all information possible. If *anything* out of the ordinary happened, no matter how insignificant, the prince wanted to know.

The prince's job was to connect the trivial scraps of information scattered across the city and use them to predict whatever was coming. That was the only command he had ever been issued by his father, the king. Five years ago, when the prince had come of age at fifteen, he had been told, "You must grasp the state of our kingdom better than anybody else, direct your men well, and be prepared to handle whatever comes our way."

Currently, the prince was having his subordinates interview townsfolk who had other people under their employ. The nets that the prince and his men had cast in advance had yet to catch anything, so their only choice had been to focus on what might have leaked through and steadily gather intelligence from the bottom upward. However, that slow pace had resulted in the current tense state of affairs.

Anxiety struck the prince. They didn't have enough time, nor enough people. He was at a loss for what to do.

Then, he heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Someone's coming..." The prince placed the highly classified investigation reports that he'd been reading back onto the shelf. He could tell from the lightness of the footfalls that the person approaching wasn't Darchen, his chief of staff. In which case, it could only be one of the subordinates whom the prince had sent to carry out investigations—a member of the intelligence unit under the command of Carew, the Sovereign of Shadows.

After a brief moment of waiting, there came a knock at the door. "I come bearing urgent news, Your Highness."

"Enter," the prince called out.

The door swung open to reveal a man, who stepped inside, bowed, and began to speak. "Your Highness. A Goblin Emperor was discovered within the Forest of Beasts."

The prince leaped to his feet in shock, throwing off the hood of his gray cloak. "A Goblin Emperor?! How many casualties have there been?!"

"The reports I received indicate that it has already been slain by Princess Lynneburg and the gentleman called Noor," the man said. "As a result, we have not yet been able to formally verify the extent of the casualties. The scouts who were stationed nearby hastened to the site of the battle and are currently examining the monster's remains."

"Lynne and..." the prince trailed off. At minimum, Goblin Emperors had an A-rank danger rating, equal to Goblin Kings. Assembling a group of Gold-rank adventurers was the first step toward even being able to slay one. Of course, it was perhaps unsurprising that Lynne had managed such a feat, given that she'd been accompanied by a man who'd killed a Minotaur single-handedly. Still, if she had been alone...

In the worst-case scenario, she could have died. Cold sweat trickled down the prince's brow.

"We made contact with Princess Lynneburg afterward to confirm her retelling of the encounter," the man continued. "She gave us this—a manastone of extremely high purity, similar to the one found in the aftermath of the attack on the princess a few days ago. It had been embedded into the goblin's forehead."

"I've heard of such manastones," the prince said. "They're embedded into Goblin Emperors to give them power... Wait. What is this?! Are you telling me *this* was the Goblin Emperor's manastone?!"

Goblin Emperors were created artificially. It was a taboo act that involved embedding a manastone into the skin of a goblin and pumping it with a vast amount of mana, until it became a monster with strength rivaling—or even exceeding—that of a Goblin King. As the process could easily spiral out of control, resulting in excessive amounts of damage and casualties, it and any experimentation related to it had been outlawed by many countries.

That much, the prince knew. However, the size and purity of the manastone before him made him doubt his own eyes. "How strong would a Goblin Emperor grow, with a manastone as pure as this? I can scarcely imagine it..."

"According to our scouts, the corpse was several times larger than an average Goblin King," the man explained.

"It *would* be..." the prince muttered. "This manastone is simply abnormal."

One rarely had the chance to see manastones of such quality. The one fitted into the magician's ring that had been used to summon the Minotaur had been absurdly pure as well, but this one also boasted an exceptional size. Both were superlative articles that rivaled the manastones used in national-treasure-grade magical tools.

How had the owner of these manastones come to possess them? Moreover, how could they have then embedded one into a goblin, as if it were something disposable? Who would do such a thing?

The recent incidents had been the work of the Magic Empire. That required no great deal of deduction; it was easy to tell from the current state of affairs. However, no known manastones of this quality existed—with the sole exception of the Demon's Hearts produced by the Holy Theocracy of Mithra.

The manastone that had been fitted into the magician's ring had been of a size where acquiring it was still within reason, so long as one possessed a great deal of wealth. But *this* manastone should have been by all means unobtainable. And yet, its owner had spent it on a goblin, as though it had been expendable...

It couldn't be. Had the Magic Empire and the Holy Theocracy joined forces?

The prince quickly severed that train of thought; such thinking would get him nowhere in the current situation. He took a moment to collect himself before saying, "It must have been exceptionally dangerous. They did well to slay it on their own."

"Yes, Your Highness," the man from the intelligence unit agreed. "Furthermore, according to Princess Lynneburg's account, the monster had been hiding in the Forest of Beasts with the assistance of an advanced-level [Concealment]. She estimated that it had been there for at least a few days, if not longer."

The prince was momentarily at a loss for words. "What?! [Concealment]!?"

A Goblin Emperor had been hiding within the vicinity of the city for days, under a [Concealment] that not even the Sovereign of Shadows' subordinates in the royal capital's intelligence unit had been able to perceive? Reality hardly seemed to make sense anymore. The prince knew it was very possible that the Magic Empire could have developed some yet-unknown magical tool that was capable of such a feat from their dungeon relic research. But even if it had such technology in its possession, how had it transported the huge Goblin Emperor into the Kingdom?

A carriage or wagon was out of the question. Summoning magic was likewise difficult to imagine; the Kingdom's sensory network would have noticed it the moment it activated. And the Magic Empire couldn't possibly have gotten the monster to travel so far on its own two feet...or could it?

But even if it had, how?

The prince cut himself off again. He would make no headway like this; there was too much to consider. Becoming too worked up at times like this—when maintaining his composure was essential—was a bad habit of his.

"So it had been hiding in the Forest of Beasts for days under [Concealment]..." the prince repeated. "Had we noticed any signs that would have forewarned us?"

"We are currently in the off-season for herb-picking in the Forest, so

practically no adventurers had forayed deep inside,” the man began. “As best we are able to tell, there have been no missing persons either. However, three days ago, the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild requested an inspection of the Forest due to low goblin numbers, the results of which he compiled into a written report sent to the royal capital guard, stating his intentions to limit the amount of goblin hunting commissions. Although, as a seasonal decline in the goblin population is quite common, I believe that the guard prioritized other matters over their response.”

“Three days ago...” the prince muttered. “Then it’s possible that the same thing is currently happening in other regions.”

“It is yet to be fully organized,” his subordinate said, “but we’ve compiled the report that you requested on our investigations into the missing persons and suspicious events of the past three months.”

“Show me.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Here.”

The prince accepted the thick bundle of documents and began to rapidly flip through them, page by page, carefully committing each fragment of information to memory and arranging them together in his mind. At a glance, the incidents were all unrelated.

Citizens unable to sleep due to suspicious sounds during the night.

An increase in the number of stray cats and dogs.

A grandfather who hadn’t returned from his walk the previous day.

A nearby forest that had suddenly become quieter as of late.

The abrupt disappearance of a dedicated husband.

Citizens puzzled due to livestock acting fearful for the past few days.

And more. The prince painstakingly read over each and every entry, mentally marking their locations down on the map of the royal capital that unfolded in his mind. Upon first consideration, the countless incidents had no connection to each other at all...but as his suspicions drove him to arrange them all together, slowly but surely, they formed a conclusion. In his careful observation, he

noticed that the trivial scraps all originated from areas near a number of centralized locations.

Within the bundle of documents was every recent phenomenon that had gone unexplained. As the information that had been gathered by the prince's intelligence operatives filled in the map in his mind, *dozens* of locations that had seen a sudden increase in the number of inexplicable phenomena within the past few days began to stand out.

And when the prince realized the meaning behind it all, the hair on every inch of his skin pricked up in horror. "Prepare the investigations unit for dispatch—include everybody we have who's capable of using [Detect Concealment] and [Uncover]. I'll have a list of locations ready. And call for the Six Sovereigns—tell them it's an emergency. As soon as they're assembled, we'll be asking the king for his commands. Is that understood? Well, if you understand, then go! Off with you! Go!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

At the prince's shouts, the man rushed out of the office and began running down the hallway. The prince immediately regretted his involuntary outburst. In his position, maintaining one's composure was a necessity—a thought that did nothing to quell the intensity of his current anger.

"Blast!" The prince raised his fist and slammed it down on his desk where the bundle of documents still lay. Blood began to ooze through his clenched fingers. Such displays of emotion were rare for him—he always endeavored to remain calm in public—but in the face of the current situation, he found it impossible. He doubted that *anybody* could have maintained their composure.

"Why didn't I realize it sooner?" the prince muttered. If he had, he could have made preparations. But *now*, faced with these circumstances? Every move he made would be one step behind. Even if his every response was as fast as possible, he feared it may already be too late.

The roiling unease and intense anger in the prince's heart were directed at nobody but himself—and the culprits behind this all. Alone in his office, his frustration reached a boiling point, and erupted.

"What is this?! What *is* this?! They would truly go this far?! What sin has my

kingdom committed?! Do human lives mean *nothing* to them?!”

The prince knew that the Magic Empire greatly desired the relics of the Dungeon of the Lost. However, he had never expected that desire to run so deep. He had been convinced that, despite the Empire’s irritating demands, it had been a member seated at the same table, still open to negotiations.

The prince had been naive. The Kingdom’s enemies no longer saw it as an equal—no longer considered negotiations worthwhile.

You would covet our dungeon’s resources so greedily?

The locations of the hidden threats to their kingdom were etched into the prince’s mind. Their distribution could only mean one thing.

“It’s as though...as though...” The prince fell forward across his desk that bore the documents now stained with his own blood, muttering to himself in a voice equally as stained with despair.

“It’s as though they mean to raze the entire Kingdom to the ground...”

Chapter 20: Reporting the Hunt

Shortly after our battle with the goblin, some men calling themselves the subordinates of Lynne's brother showed up and had some kind of intense discussion with Lynne. They seemed pretty shocked when she showed them the purple-red gem that I'd pulled from the goblin's forehead. Apparently, they needed to look into it for some reason, so she handed it over to them. They thanked us and said that they would return it later, but it had already begun to grow dark.

It seemed we had lost track of time while we'd been focused on fighting the goblin. Since monsters were more active during the night and the forest would become even more dangerous, Lynne and I hurried back to the royal capital and headed for the Adventurers Guild—to report the results of our hunt, of course.

"Hey!" I called out. "We're back!"

"Noor?" the guildsman called back. "Huh. Someone's in a good mood."

He had seen through me right away, as expected of someone I spoke to nigh daily. I was indeed in good spirits, and for good reason—I'd completed my first-ever goblin hunt! It might have been trivial to the adventurers of the world, but for me, it was a huge first step—one worth commemorating. I had killed a goblin, the entry-level monster for rookie adventurers. I couldn't keep the grin off my face.

"I am," I replied. "I managed to kill a goblin!"

The guildsman paused. "That a fact? You didn't do anything reckless, did you?"

"I...went in trying not to, but it gave me a lot more grief than I'd expected. With Lynne's help, though, we managed to bring it down in the end."

Honestly speaking, the fight easily could have gone south. I wouldn't have stood a chance of defeating that goblin alone; it was only thanks to Lynne that we'd been able to pull through. I owed her a debt that I could never repay.

"What, so you just watched from the sidelines?" asked the guildsman. "Well, I guess I can't fault you for being sensible."

"Pretty much," I replied. "To tell the truth, all I did was help a little; Lynne did most of the work. Silver-rank adventurers are really something else, huh? I can't even count how many more skills she has compared to me—she's a real lifesaver. I'm not sure I'd be here right now if not for her."

"Th-That's not true!" Lynne looked flustered, and a blush had crept onto her face. "It's the other way around; all I did was help Instructor Noor!"

She really didn't have to be so humble, but maybe that was the truly impressive part of her. Despite being extraordinarily capable, she never acted pridefully, and she treated everybody equally as modestly. In fact, despite her young age, she was such a shining example of a person that I felt like I should take after her more.

"Either way, what's important is that you're both safe and sound," the guildsman said. "I know it was just a goblin, but even a goblin can ruin a rookie adventurer's day if they're not careful. Still, got a little more experience under your belt now, eh?"

"Yeah, you're right about that," I said. "I really learned so much today. For one thing, my mental image of a goblin was totally different before I met a real one. I never even considered that they'd have a gem stuck to their head—or that it would be their weak point."

Hearing my words still laced with excitement, the guildsman made a strange face. "Hmm? A gem on its head? What are you talking about?"

"You know, the goblin's gem. It was beautiful and purply-red."

"Oh, you must mean its manastone!" he said. "But goblin-derived manastones are generally found buried inside their bodies, near the heart or the throat..."

I paused to consider his words. "Really...?"

The guildsman spent a short while stroking his beard, seemingly in deep thought, before shooting me a suspicious look. "Are you *sure* what you killed was a goblin?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure..." I replied. "Right, Lynne?"

"If Instructor Noor says it was a goblin, then it was a goblin," she stated emphatically. "No matter what anybody else might say."



Why was she being so forceful about it...? Questions aside, though, if Lynne was also saying that it had been a goblin, then it must have been one.

"That so?" Lynne's words had done nothing to change the strange expression on the guildsman's face, but they had apparently been enough to convince him. "Sorry for doubting you, then. I s'pose goblins *do* come in all kinds of species. Just figured I'd double-check, you know?"

"Do goblins not usually have a gem stuck to their head?" I asked hesitantly.

"Ordinarily, no," the guildsman told me. "But I can't say it's *impossible*, per se...and I *have* heard about their manastones being buried in their heads or thereabouts. S'pose it's not a stretch to imagine that a goblin could have one stuck to its forehead. I guess the one you killed was just a rare specimen."

"Huh," I said. "So goblins can come in all shapes and sizes? That's pretty interesting."

Stories were useful, but you couldn't beat seeing the real thing for yourself. Still, if I were to encounter the goblin that I'd met again, I had no confidence in my ability to pull out another win. Even if I had Lynne with me again, there was no accounting for any surprises that might happen. Plus, it was lucky that we'd only encountered one goblin; if we'd been surrounded by several that were similar in size to the one we fought, things could have gotten pretty dire.

"One thing's for sure," I said. "I learned that goblins are really dangerous creatures. We got lucky because we were only up against one. Had there been two or three...I'm not sure we could've pulled it off."

"You got that right," the guildsman said. "I couldn't tell you the number of times I've heard about rookies killing a goblin, letting their guard down, then getting ambushed from behind. Goblins might be small fry, but get yourself surrounded by them and even veteran adventurers would be hard-pressed. It's a good thing you happened to go while their numbers are low."

"Yeah. I think I'll probably leave off the goblin hunting for a while. This one gave me a good idea of just how lacking I am. I figure it's best that I don't stumble into danger because I overestimated myself, you know?"

The next time I attempted a goblin hunt, it would be after I'd trained more

and become stronger. I also still needed to get used to wielding the heavy black sword that Lynne's father had given me. When the goblin had launched a rain of trees at me all at once, I'd been helpless. At moments like that, when push came to shove, I needed to be able to swing my weapon without it holding me back.

"That's only sensible, especially if you're not confident yet," the guildsman said. "Reckless is the last thing you should be. You've only got one life to live, after all."

"Yeah," I said. "Don't worry, I know my own strength better than anybody. I won't do anything crazy."

Still, I probably wasn't suited for goblin hunting to begin with. Killing creatures that looked humanoid just didn't sit right with me—I'd started to feel bad for the goblin right before we slew it. I figured that, next time, I'd ask the guildsman for another kind of monster hunting commission.

"Right, then," he said. "Hand over your proof-of-kill, and I'll get you your pay."

"Hmm?" I looked at him blankly. Proof-of-kill? What was that?

"'Hmm?' my rear end," he replied. "I told you to bring back its right ear as evidence that you'd killed it, remember?"

I paused. "Oh. I think we burned it."

Lynne's skill had sent the ear up in flames, along with the rest of the goblin. I had been so focused on killing the monster before us that the thought of taking its right ear had never crossed my mind.

"Hey now. You know that, without proof, we can't fork over the bounty, right?" grumbled the guildsman. "Not that one goblin is anything to fuss over, but...ah, to hell with it." He tossed a silver coin at me.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"A gift from me, to commemorate your first goblin hunt," he answered. "You didn't get to earn much today, right? It should at least cover a bath and some food."

"Are you sure...?" I asked. "Sorry for making you fuss over me...but thanks. I

appreciate it."

He was right that I hadn't earned much today, since work at the construction site had been suspended. I decided that I'd give the coin to Lynne later, to thank her for helping me out. I could easily cover the cost of my bath with the savings I'd earned up until now, after all.

"Thanks," I told the guildsman, "for everything. You were a huge help today. I'd better turn in for the night, though. See you tomorrow."

After saying goodbye, I readied myself to leave the Adventurers Guild. It had been an intense day. By my reckoning, I'd gotten far more of a workout than if I had just gone to my usual dirt-carrying job. Just as I'd heard, monster hunting was hard work. I was dirty all over, so I made a mental note to stop by a bathhouse on my way back to my lodgings, to wash the sweat off of my body.

Lynne wouldn't follow me *that* far...right? It was getting late, so I set my mind on sending her home.

"Well then, it's time I should be going home," she said. "Presuming there's nothing else you need of me, Instructor Noor...?"

Oh, thank goodness. She wasn't going to be stubborn about it.

I immediately reined myself in, though; this wasn't something that I should be celebrating. Lynne had really looked out for me today. I figured that I should at least thank her before she left.

"Nothing at all," I told her. "You were a huge help today. Would it be all right if I relied on you again, next time?"

"Of course. I'll do my best to be of help to you, Instructor."

Smiling, she placed her hand to her chest and gave me a quiet bow. Was she going to do that *every* time...? Her sincerity was something else. Truthfully, though, I really didn't think that she needed to be so respectful toward me.

"Well then, guildmaster," she said, "I shall excuse myself."

"See you around, Lynne," the guildsman replied, waving her off with me as she made to leave. Then, as we watched her retreating back, he spoke to me in a low voice. "So, Noor...how long are you going to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?" I asked.

"Well, we've been over this more times than I can count by now, so you probably don't need to hear it again...but the foreman of the Builders Guild came to me today. He half begged me to convince you to go work under him. Seems he's taken quite a liking to you—I've never seen that stubborn old geezer talk someone up so much. The way I heard it, your pay would be crazy good; goblin hunting wouldn't even compare. Some of the foremost companies in the entire city belong to the Builders Guild. If you're under that geezer's wing, you'll never have to worry about finding work again—I guarantee it. And you don't need me to tell you that you're already at the age where you should be getting ready to settle down and start a family."

"We can go over this as many times as you'd like, but how I feel about it isn't going to change."

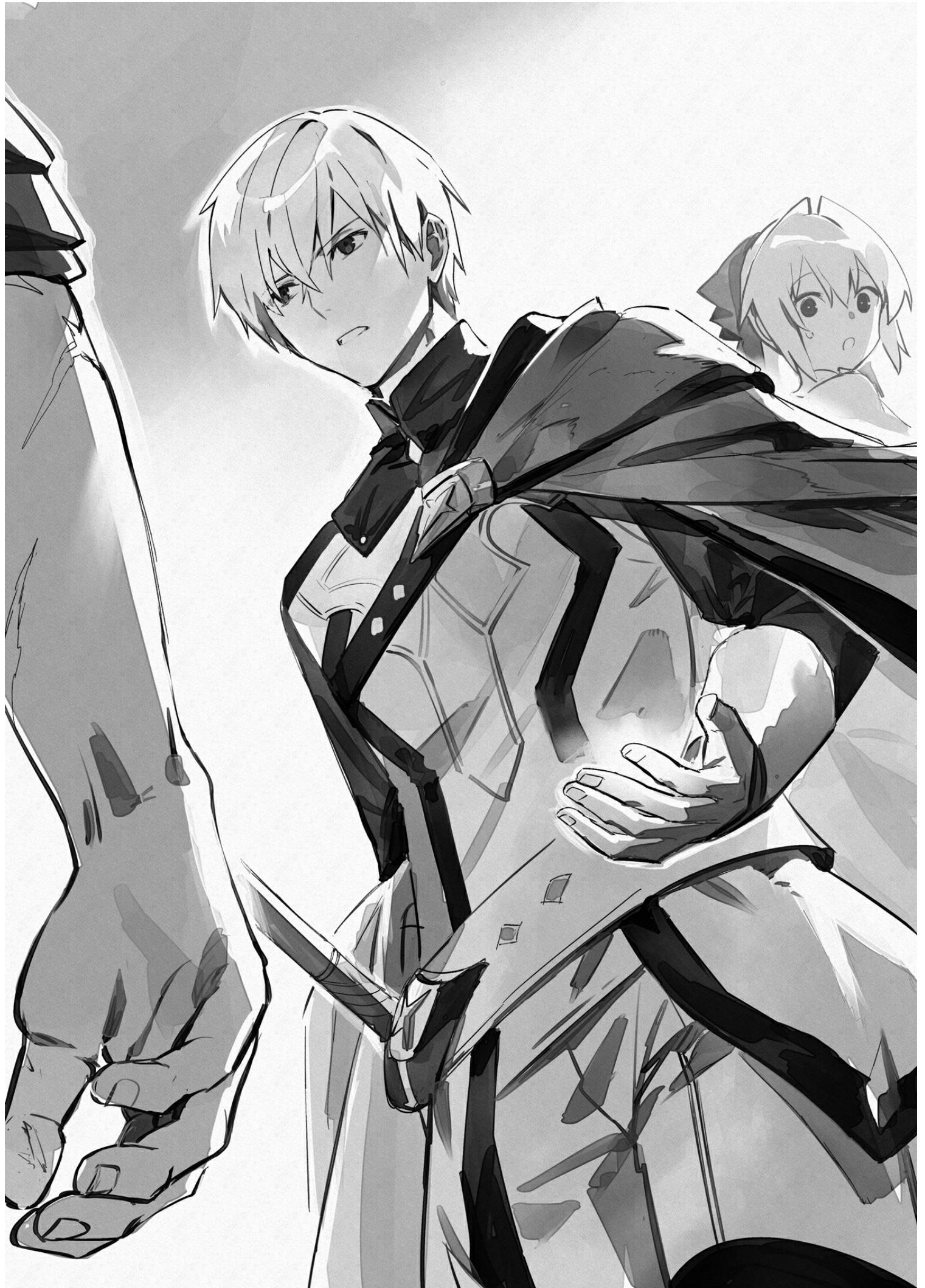
"Sure, yeah, I know," he said. "Still..."

Sensing that he was about to launch into one of his long-winded rants again, I prepared myself to cut him off and leave...but before I could, somebody suddenly burst into the guild—somebody I thought I recognized.

"So this is where you were, Lynne," they said, and I realized that it was Lynne's brother. "Does that mean Sir Noor is here as well?"

"Brother...?" Lynne asked. She had run into him before she could leave, and looked slightly taken aback.

Lynne's brother seemed to look around for a moment, then headed directly toward me the moment he spotted me.



I exchanged a look with the guildsman.

"Hey, did the world turn upside down today?" he asked. "First Lady Lynneburg, now Lord Rein needs something from you, Noor? You *sure* you didn't step on anybody's toes or anything?"

"I really didn't... At least, I don't think I did."

I was sure that I hadn't done anything like that. Well, somewhat sure... Although, in front of the guildsman, who had cleaned up after my messes back when I'd first come to the royal capital without a shred of common sense, my protest sounded pretty weak...

While we were still at a loss, Lynne's brother arrived in front of me, giving me a clear view of the grim expression on his face as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Sir Noor. Pardon me for being abrupt, but, tomorrow morning, would you go with Lynne to Toros? It's a city in the mountainous region of our kingdom. I'll provide you with a coach and a guard. I apologize that I cannot tell you more at the moment, but...please. We need your help."

Chapter 21: Coach Ride to the Mountain City

The next morning, Lynne and I found ourselves on a rocky coach ride.

After making his request yesterday, Lynne's brother had followed up by saying, "*I shall spare no expense when it comes to your travel costs and hiring fee. Please. You're the only one I can ask.*" I wasn't entirely clear on the details, but apparently, due to a shortage of hands, I was the only person suitable for the role who had been available on such short notice. I took this to mean that, while he had plenty of people he could ask, I was the only one who seemed like he had the free time.

It was a fair enough assumption; the dungeon entrance construction site would be closed for a while longer, and thanks to the black sword that I'd recently been gifted, I'd made unexpectedly fast progress with my drain-cleaning work. Why, just this morning, I'd cleared out ten days' worth of commissions all at once, so I figured those drains would be fine for the time being.

All things considered, Lynne's brother had made his request at the perfect time.

From what I understood, our coach would be heading northwest from the royal capital toward the mountain city of Toros, where we would be staying for a brief while. Then, so long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, we were to cross the mountains and head for the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, one of the Kingdom's neighboring countries. Apparently, Ines, who was riding along with Lynne and me, had a letter that would take care of our entry, among other things.

As for the details of my job, I had been asked to accompany Lynne, and that was it. I had my misgivings, but her brother's exact words had been as follows: "*Provided nothing untoward occurs, it should be no different from a sightseeing trip.*" This was shaping up to be nothing more than a leisurely holiday as far as I was concerned.

The commission certainly was a strange one, but I'd seen no reason to refuse it.

"I'm sorry for my brother's unreasonable request..." Lynne said. "I hope that our journey is smooth, at least."

"It's no problem," I replied. "I *am* being paid, after all."

After discussing it with the guildsman and gaining his approval, Lynne's brother had hired me through the Adventurers Guild. I was currently an F-rank adventurer, which meant that I couldn't accept any hunting or harvesting commissions outside of the city, but being a chaperone or a baggage carrier was evidently fine.

In short, I would be Lynne's attendant on this journey—something like a manservant, as it were. I thought it was a pretty suitable role; although I had no redeeming features as an adventurer, I was confident that I could carry heavy luggage with the best of them.

As for my hiring fee, Lynne's brother had asked me to name my price. I didn't know the going rate for such things, however, so I'd left that to the guildsman to handle. "*I got you a pretty good deal, so kick back and take as long of a trip as you'd like,*" he'd told me, but, to be honest, the pay hadn't really factored into my decision. Lynne had told me that she'd be glad to have me along, and I owed her for yesterday's goblin hunt. Since it had been a request from her, I'd had no reason to refuse.

That being said, the *real* reason I'd accepted this commission had been because of something else—something that I hadn't told Lynne or the guildsman. Although it wasn't a secret, per se...it had been pretty difficult to reveal that my main motivation for taking the job was that I'd wanted to ride in a coach for the first time in my life.

As far as I was concerned, this coach ride was the best hiring fee I could've asked for. Unless you counted the villages that I'd passed when journeying down from my mountain home, the royal capital was the only city I'd ever laid my eyes on. I was eager to see others—and if my luck held, I'd even get to travel to another country. To say I was excited would be an understatement.

All else aside, venturing to all kinds of different places was a dream of mine.

I'd wanted to make it happen under my own power as an adventurer...but that was still a long way off. In any case, even acting as someone else's attendant, nothing was better for broadening my horizons than traveling—which was exactly why this job was a wish come true for me. After we'd finished loading the coach with our rations and luggage before our departure, I'd been left with nothing to do, but I'd paid no heed to that and had settled in to savor the relaxing journey.

The coach we were riding in was pretty luxurious; the seats were soft and comfortable, the roof was sturdy, and there were proper—though thin—walls all around us. The interior didn't feel cramped at all. There were large doors on either side that opened to let passengers like us inside, and big windows set into each of the walls that gave us a clear view in all four directions. They could even be opened and closed. Once I'd heard that we could travel while feeling the wind on our faces, I'd asked Lynne if we could open the front and rear windows. As a result, we were now leisurely bouncing along to the movement of the coach, enjoying the refreshing breeze.

The view from the window was tranquil—wheat fields as far as the eye could see, ready to welcome the harvest season. Now that I thought about it, this area was close to the roads that I'd taken when I'd first left my mountain home—but back then, the freshly planted wheat had still been a verdant green.

I hardly recognized the scenery before me, and all it had taken was a changing of the seasons. A veritably golden plain now stretched to the horizon. One look at this landscape was enough for me to understand the true abundance of this region—and, by extension, this kingdom. I wondered whether I'd get to see scenery like this—or even more amazing than this—all the time if I became a proper adventurer and set out on my own journeys.

I loved the thought of that, so much so that I was actually leaning forward on the edge of my seat. The others might have thought I was letting my excitement get the better of me...and that was exactly what was happening.

In contrast to my enthusiasm, the person in the driver's seat—Ines, our guard—looked downcast. She, Lynne, and I were the only three people on this coach ride. "You have my deepest apologies for being dragged into this, Sir Noor," she said the moment our eyes met.

I thought apologizing was a bit unnecessary—we were only taking a trip, after all—but I chalked it up to Ines's strong sense of responsibility. Maybe this was how she always talked to people. Still, I couldn't deny that she looked very unwell today. It was possible she suffered from that “motion sickness” thing I'd heard about.

“Are you feeling sick...?” I asked.

“No, I was merely lost in my own thoughts...” Ines replied. “My apologies. You may rest assured; I shall devote my full attention to ensuring your safety henceforth.”

I hadn't really been worrying before...though Ines's behavior was giving me a good reason to start. She'd been brooding over something this entire time. Besides, despite what she'd said about guarding me, wasn't her main duty to protect Lynne?

It was only the three of us on this trip, so a number of duties had fallen on Ines's shoulders—taking the reins among them. She already looked unwell, so I didn't want to make her work any harder than was necessary.

“No, that's all right,” I said. “I'll keep myself safe. As best as I'm able to, anyway... I'm pretty confident when it comes to running away.”

I wasn't very optimistic about my fighting skills, since I'd only recently reached the point where I could slay a goblin by the skin of my teeth, but running and hiding were specialties of mine. I knew from experience that I was capable of escaping unscathed from a pack of mountain wolves that had me surrounded.

“That shouldn't be necessary,” Ines said. “I have my [Shield]. It is my duty to protect those around me.”

“Your shield...?”

I examined Ines, who was sitting in front of me, more closely. Like the previous time we'd met, she was dressed in something akin to a maid uniform, over which she was wearing silver armor. However, I couldn't see anything on or near her that resembled a shield.

“It doesn't look like you're carrying anything to me...” I said. I couldn't even see any kind of weapon on her.

"That would be because I don't need to. In fact, many things are more convenient for me that way."

"I see," I said, not actually understanding at all. Maybe she saw that in my expression, because she gave me a slight smile.

"Perhaps I should give you a demonstration. [Divine Shield]."

Ines held out her hand, and a massive, shining wall of light appeared in the air before her. It looked intangible, but it undeniably *felt* like some kind of barrier. The breeze that had been blowing toward us from the front of our moving coach had completely vanished.

"Wow..." I said. "So this is what you meant, huh?"

"Yes," Ines replied. "Should anything happen, please hide behind me. Most weapons and spells are unable to penetrate it."

"Will do. Thanks."

I *had* been a little apprehensive about setting out on a trip with only two other people, but now I was sure that we'd be fine. According to Lynne, Ines was as strong as the spearman who'd given me some pointers at their training grounds. Alb...no, Gil...? Wait, that's right—*Lambert*. Apparently, Ines was just as strong as Lambert.

Lynne had told me that *he* was skilled enough to slay a dragon by himself. I couldn't even compare to a guy like that—I'd struggled desperately against a single goblin.

In short, Ines was definitely no pushover. I decided that I'd gladly accept her protection.

My concerns allayed, I went back to appreciating the vast fields of golden wheat. This time, however, something seemed out of place. I leaned toward the driver's seat, which had a better view of the surroundings, and squinted my eyes.

"What's that?" I asked.

Upon closer inspection, I'd noticed a strange trail being drawn through the wheat in the distance. It was said that strong winds could sometimes damage

crops and knock them over, but that didn't seem to be the case here. It was more like something was trampling a path.

"Sir Noor? Is something the matter?"

At my question, Ines had also begun surveying the wheat fields, but she didn't seem to have noticed what had caught my eye. Granted, it was very far away and hard to see—but I was sure that something was moving over there. What was it?

"Is something amiss?" Lynne leaned out of the coach and similarly began studying the fields, evidently having heard our conversation.

"There's something over there," I said.

All of a sudden, her expression became one of shock. She must have spotted it as well.

"[Uncover]!"

It was as though a transparent veil had been covering the far edges of my field of vision, and Lynne's skill had peeled it away to reveal what lay beneath—a creature that resembled a massive black toad. Its gait was squat and leisurely, and next to it was a single small boy.

The boy who had appeared out of nowhere looked around, seemingly surprised at something. Then, he and the strange toad locked eyes.

Before my brain recognized the danger, my feet were already moving.

"Wait, that's a—!"

I could hear Ines's voice calling out from behind me, but I had already activated [Physical Enhancement] and was running full tilt toward the boy and the toad.

Chapter 22: The Black Death Dragon

When the princess's [Uncover] revealed the creature that had lain hidden in plain view, I gasped. "That's a...no, a Black Death Dragon?!"

Although it had the appearance of a massive black toad, the monster in the distance was a species of dragon known for its savage disposition. They were said to have claws harder than iron which they used to rip apart their prey, fangs sturdy enough to crush boulders, and an instinct that drove them to consume anything that moved.

But what was most terrifying of all was their breath, a miasma stored in a sac at the back of their throat. Any living creature with which it made contact would, without exception, suffer hideous burns and be reduced to nothing more than a pitch-black corpse.

That malevolent breath was the origin of its moniker, "The Bringer of Black Death." Of all the monsters that inhabited the continent, Black Death Dragons were counted among the most ferocious.

Being a species of dragon, its strength in battle went without saying—and due to the sheer risk posed by its miasma, which could do harm across vast areas, it was treated as a Special-A-class threat. The secondary effects of its breath were also dire; it could soak into the soil, creating areas of charred, black, barren land as far as the eye could see. Countless examples of such places existed across the continent.

But why was a Black Death Dragon so close to a human settlement? Under usual circumstances, they lived deep within toxic swamplands, and people rarely ever encountered them.

It couldn't be because of that boy next to it, could it? I studied his distinctive features, and though I'd only ever heard tales of his kind before, I reached what I thought was the right conclusion.

"What is one of the demonfolk doing here...?" I muttered.

The demonfolk were a race of hated demihumans who, after suffering a crushing defeat in a great war against the Holy Theocracy of Mithra over two hundred years ago, lost their country and scattered all over the world as a result. Though they resembled humans in appearance, there were clear differences between the two races. For one, it was said that all demonfolk could communicate with magical beasts at will, a special ability that they possessed from birth. It was also said that, by nature, they were beings similar to monsters. Many historical records existed of demonfolk controlling ferocious monsters as though they were extensions of their own limbs, placing entire cities at risk.

With all that said, actual sightings of demonfolk were rare; as the story went, their race had been hunted to the brink of extinction. This was my first time seeing one of their kind.

Still, they were only *almost* extinct. Rumors spoke of survivors of the great war who remained in hiding in places unknown, awaiting the chance to exact their revenge. It was recommended that such people be killed on sight, though the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, which despised the demonfolk as enemies, offered a generous price for any captured alive. As a result of that, once upon a time, there had even been adventurers who professed themselves to be “demonfolk hunters.”

“Don’t tell me that demonfolk boy brought that Black Death Dragon all the way here...” I muttered.

Once I’d recognized the child to be demonfolk, I started to make sense of the situation. In all likelihood, he had directed the Black Death Dragon to come here. But *why*? If left to its own devices, it would devastate all the nearby towns—and there was nothing we could do about it, not the three of us alone. No matter how resilient a person might be, the dragon’s miasma breath would cause death in mere moments. Running at it without any countermeasures was tantamount to suicide.

And yet, why—*why*—was *he* doing exactly that?!

“Instructor!”

The princess made to dash after him, but I hastily invoked my [Divine Shield],

creating a barrier of light that obstructed her path and forced her back.

"You mustn't, my lady."

I could feel the conflict and inconsistency in my own actions. It was my role to protect those whom I accompanied. Mere moments ago, I had told our traveling companion that I would safeguard him with this very shield...but right now, above all else, I needed to protect Princess Lynneburg. I had no higher duty than that.

I told myself that my only choice was to give up on that man—to give up on Noor.

But what happened next beggared belief. Noor had already reached the Black Death Dragon, and, with his sword in a one-handed grip, was now parrying its oncoming claws. My mentor and foster father, Dandalg, the Shield Sovereign, had once barely been able to swing the Black Blade with two hands. Yet here was Noor, casually wielding it with one.

Not only that, but he was using the sword to repel direct blows from the claws of a *dragon*, said to be able to shatter any kind of weapon, and doing so handily. The strength that had allowed this man to slay a Minotaur alone—that had made that mad dog Gilbert admit to its absurdity—was the genuine article; I understood that without a shadow of doubt.

However, that strength would not be enough, for the danger of a Black Death Dragon did not lie in the claws and fangs boasted by its massive body.

We should have turned tail and fled the moment we laid eyes upon the dragon; with our current fighting strength, there was nothing we could do against it. We needed to return to the royal capital at once to regroup, and come back with reinforcements, but I knew that such an effort would be in vain. The Six Army Corps of the Royal Capital were all deployed on separate missions; that was why this assignment had fallen to me.

"The royal capital is about to experience danger the likes of which we have never before seen," the prince had said to me. *"Should you receive news of the city's ruin, take Lynne and Sir Noor with you at once, and seek asylum in the Holy Theocracy of Mithra."*

He had forbidden me from revealing anything to the princess. If she had known the truth of our situation, she would have refused to leave.

Although I didn't disagree with the prince's judgment, I was conflicted. I couldn't reconcile myself to the idea that my comrades and subordinates would be putting their lives on the line while I, alone, made my escape. The guilt of leaving them behind weighed heavy on my conscience.

Nonetheless, I had been entrusted with a mission: I needed to guard the princess and escort her to safety. I'd devoted myself to protecting her, no matter what sacrifices I would have to make in the process. In that sense, I was still giving my life for the Kingdom, just like those I'd left behind. That thought was the only reason I'd been able to come this far.

But now, here we were, in the face of the unexpected—a Black Death Dragon had appeared before us. It had most likely been stationed here by that demonfolk boy. Had our enemies anticipated that the princess would take this route to escape? I could not say for sure, but one thing was clear: this road was now lost to us. Our only choice was to turn back and run.

We were already close to Toros. If we did nothing to stop this monster, then it would cause unspeakable damage to the nearby city and perhaps even beyond. Such was the danger its threat level posed; losing one or two towns was the best-case scenario.

But still, we had to run, even though our doing so would rob so many of their lives. It was only the three of us here; no matter how hard we tried, there was nothing we could do. Even as the Kingdom's strongest shield, retreat was my only option, and yet...

"What is he *thinking*!?"

I sounded more accusing than I'd intended, but who could blame me? Noor had dashed away from the coach, and I had barely managed to stop the princess when she'd chased after him. Now, he was a considerable distance away. Even if we were to try to regroup and make our escape, it was unlikely that we'd be able to act fast enough. Because of him, we'd missed our chance to withdraw.

He had charged into battle without a second thought, without paying any

heed to those around him—of that much I was sure. In all likelihood, he intended to *save* that demonfolk boy.

The man was a genuine fool. He believed that he was saving a child, clueless to the fact that the boy had brought the monster here to begin with. That simpleminded thought—or split-second judgment, perhaps—was what had spurred him to action.

I could understand *why* he had gone, but what he was doing made no sense. The person he was risking his life to save was the very culprit behind the threat he was facing.

Though, had I not known that...I would have gone too.

That was the next sentiment that welled up inside of me. Risking one's life to protect the weak was how a warrior—how someone of my class—should rightfully behave. When there was a frightened person in front of me, I, too, wanted to defend them. Aspiring to that ideal was the reason why I'd joined my profession—why I'd trained so hard.

But people weren't characters out of fairy tales; there was a limit to what we were capable of. Sometimes, risking one's life to protect another meant exposing someone else to danger. Sometimes, it was necessary to calmly and rationally decide who was more deserving of being saved.

Right now was one of those times. Yet, for all that...

What was this man's *deal*?!

Before I'd realized it, I found myself gnawing on my lip. He called Princess Lynneburg "Lynne" without a care in the world. And as thanks for running to her rescue, the king had bequeathed unto him his beloved Black Blade.

Long before I'd ever met Noor, I'd known his name. Dandalg, the Shield Sovereign—my foster father, whom I revered—had spoken it countless times. Whether it had been during training, on hunting expeditions, or any time I'd faced hardship, my father had used every opportunity to mention him.

"*I wonder...what would Noor do?*"

It had been a habit of his; a phrase that he would let slip around me and

nobody else. Each time, I would ask whom he was referring to, but he never told me. He would only ever smile and tell me to forget what he'd said.

But my father had never stopped saying that name. I remembered feeling annoyed every time I heard it. He had me, so why did he always feel the need to bring up some random stranger? I hadn't known what to make of the emotion that had stirred within me.

According to others, I came off as being disinterested in people. I agreed. Perhaps I had disciplined myself to be that way. Perhaps because, in my experience, I was somebody who was best kept at a distance from others.

I had been very young when my adventurer parents disappeared and the royal capital orphanage took me in—and not long after, I'd realized that I possessed a mysterious power. With a little concentration, I could create a thin, see-through sheet of light. I hadn't understood what it was at the time—I'd simply thought it was pretty—so I'd shown my little trick to one of the other kids whom I'd always played with...and accidentally sliced their arm clean off.

Others had seen me as an object of fear ever since.

Once people realized that my ability was a Gift, rare even among the annals of history, I was showered with praise—but even then, the look in the eyes of those around me never changed. *"Don't get near me,"* it said. *"You're dangerous."*

I didn't blame them for it. If I erred in the use of my Gift, I was capable of bringing ruin to everything around me. Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had taught me that, and ever since I'd started learning how to control my newfound power, I'd made sure to avoid human relationships. Distancing myself from others had become a matter of course, and, gradually, their words and actions had ceased to have any bearing on my emotions.

Or at least, that *should* have been the case. Instead, I'd found myself strangely envious of a man about whom I knew nothing save his name. I couldn't help but wonder why.

Now, that same man had appeared before me, sending me deeper into chaos. He addressed the princess whom I'd dedicated my life to serving with casual familiarity, and stood at her side, where duty had called for me to stay for so

many years, as though it were a matter of course. When I'd learned that he was the "Noor" my father had spoken of, it had been like having everything stolen away from me.

During the coach ride, it had been that same unsightly sense of rivalry that had compelled me to assure him that I would protect him, even though he didn't need protecting.

The truth was, when he'd leaped out of the coach, I should have been able to stop him...but some part of me had stoked my inaction. In that moment, I had genuinely believed that he could triumph. After all, he was my father's "Noor." He had the recognition of the king, the princess, Gilbert, and every one of the Six Sovereigns, my father included. Maybe he could do it.

Maybe he could find a way to defeat that walking calamity.

In spite of myself, I'd felt hope. I'd been free of the jealousy and envy that lingered inside of me, and it had caused me to let him go.

Noor was a foolish man. He'd rushed headlong into the jaws of death, oblivious. But if he was a fool, then I was a far greater one. I'd understood the situation at hand, yet I still hadn't stopped him.

"Ready yourself, my lady," I told the princess. "The miasma is coming."

The Black Death Dragon, locked in combat against Noor, opened its maw wide. Deep within its throat, I could see a swirling maelstrom, noxious and jet-black. It was about to let loose its most fearsome weapon.

"Instructor!"

"There's nothing we can do for him, my lady. He's already beyond our help."

The dragon breathed its miasma breath. The pitch-black cloud made direct contact with Noor, dispersing into an eruption of thick, dark fog that blanketed the entirety of my field of view in a matter of moments.

"Here it comes, my lady! Get behind me!"

At once, I invoked my [Divine Shield], forming barriers of light that encompassed the entirety of the space between us and the Black Death Dragon. Countless shields overlapped to form a rampart of illumination. However, that

alone could not fully defend us against the miasma. Some of it seeped through the gaps in my wall, but it was quickly neutralized by the princess's cleric skill, [Purify].

Somehow, we'd managed to keep ourselves, our coach, and its horse safe. But that was all we'd done. We'd put everything into what had amounted to a token resistance.



“Instructor!”

“Don’t, my lady. It’s already too late for him.”

“B-But—!”

“Don’t! Right now, you should only be thinking of your own survival!”

As I shouted admonishment at the princess, I bit down on my lip once again. From the moment that Noor had dashed off alone, I had foreseen this outcome. That was precisely why I was so angry—at him, for having run off without considering the consequences, and at myself, for having not been able to stop him. These mistakes had created this situation where the princess’s life was now at risk. In the end, I hadn’t been able to protect anybody at all.

I wasn’t fit to be a guard.

The Black Death Dragon’s miasma began to condense into an even thicker cloud. Noor could no longer be saved; a single breath of that poison was enough to be fatal. For a high-ranking cleric, it would be just short of impossible to cure. Even if Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation himself, were here, Noor would still have almost no chance of surviving. With miasma this thick, one’s life span became a matter of mere seconds.

“Instructor!”

The princess was desperately worried about Noor, but it was already too late for him. In fact, if we delayed any longer, we would find ourselves in dire straits as well. I dedicated my full focus to ensuring the princess’s safety...

And then, suddenly, I heard a sound from within the black fog.

“What...is that?” I mumbled.

Maybe it was the sound of Noor fighting the Black Death Dragon. Of him mustering the last of his strength to put up a resistance.

But the sound didn’t stop. Occasionally, it was joined by the noise of something breaking apart.

“What *is* that...?” I muttered to myself. I could see that the unfamiliar racket had confused the princess as well.

Then, an abrupt gust of wind blew across the wheat fields. At once, the dense shroud of miasma began to dissipate—and deep within the recesses of the black fog, I saw the Black Death Dragon bring its claws down in a vertical swipe.

But the attack never reached its mark; it was parried soon after by a man holding his sword in a one-handed grip. Incredibly, he was still standing, facing the dragon—even as blood streamed from all over his body.

“Instructor...”

He was already beyond our help—anybody would understand that from one glance at his grievous wounds. And yet, he calmly fixed his gaze on the dragon, and continued to stand. As the curtain of miasma slowly began to clear, he single-mindedly parried the Black Death Dragon’s claws with his sword, all to protect the demonfolk boy on the ground behind him.

Faced with such a sight, both the princess and I could find nothing to say. That was when I realized: the source of those unfamiliar sounds had been the dragon’s claws as they *shattered*, one by one.

I could no longer call what I saw foolish, because in front of me now was the very embodiment of an ideal I had always aspired to: plunging headfirst into danger with no heed for one’s own safety, and protecting another even at the cost of one’s own life. There was a *shield* before my very eyes, and it was everything I’d ever envisioned it to be.

Chapter 23: The Cursed Child

Today was the first time the boy would take a life.

"I hope I don't mess up..."

He was terrified. Despite being one of the demonfolk, bearers of cursed blood who were abhorred by the world, he couldn't stand to see blood—because he only ever saw his own.

For as long as the boy could remember, he had been kicked, beaten, and treated as less than human. Trying to speak would get him punched. Making eye contact with somebody was like asking to be hit. Even when he kept to himself, he'd always be targeted simply for existing.

Nonetheless, the boy had never once thought of complaining—after all, such treatment was just how things were supposed to be for those of his birth. Sometimes, he did think it was strange. Why did people do such awful things to him? No matter how much the question weighed on his mind, however, he made sure never to ask it. The one time he had dared, he'd been beaten until he was unrecognizable. For three days, he had been given water and nothing more.

Grown-ups had done many terrible things to the boy, but the thought of getting revenge—of doing the same back to them—had never even crossed his mind. How could it have, when he knew just how much it hurt?

The boy's mindset hadn't come about from him being compassionate or sympathetic by nature; no, it was more fundamental than that. He could *feel* the thoughts of other people. Being around someone was all it took for him to know what emotions they were experiencing—and with some conscious effort, he could see their innermost thoughts with no trouble at all.

When the grown-ups had realized what the boy could do, they had started treating him even more harshly. None had taken well to having their mind read. They had feared that the boy could feel what they felt and see what they

thought, and even have access to their deepest secrets. They had called him unnatural, repulsive, and disturbing—a revolting animal in human's clothing.

To the grown-ups, the boy only further justified their hatred of demonfolk. They began to avoid him, isolate him, and beat him more than they had ever done before. He was an object for their hatred, to be abused at every opportunity. On the kinder occasions, that meant conjuring up excuses to strike or shun him. At other times, he would be kicked or neglected for no reason at all.

For the boy, such horrid treatment became the norm. Every single day, he was punched, kicked, and beaten without fail. Eventually, he grew numb to the pain, even as it racked his body.

The treatment the boy had endured was why he had never even considered raising his hand against another. How could he ever force somebody else to go through the same horrible experience? He could feel what others felt, so it would only result in double the agony.

Consequently, the boy had never so much as harmed another person; even the most savage beating paled in comparison to the thought. But today...he had no choice. Not only would he have to hurt someone, he would have to kill them. Otherwise, the grown-ups would be even more awful—not only to him, but to all the other slave children too.

He had to take a life. He couldn't mess up.

The man who had given the boy his orders had even said, "If you do just as I say, I'll give you something tasty to eat." So, the boy had no choice. Grown-ups, kids... He would kill whoever was required, leaving no survivors.

In return for a job well done, the man had promised not only to feed the boy delicious food every day, but also to stop beating him for no reason. It seemed an ambitious claim, as the man would often strike the boy and the other children, but the boy had never seen him go back on his word. Breaking a promise meant being beaten, while keeping one was cause for praise.

And the boy had promised to kill.

Despite his powers, the boy had found that he was wholly unable to read the

man's mind. A protective magic tool was the reason, apparently. The boy had grown used to it, though, and the man had been nice enough to give him a promise to keep.

But that wasn't all—today, the boy actually had a chance to be useful to others. He didn't know whether he would live to see tomorrow, but what he was doing would help an entire country, and that was something to be proud of.

At least, that was what the man had told the boy before sending him off.

The group of people whom the boy was helping had always shunned and abused him and the other children. At the same time, however, he had been born and raised among them. Maybe it was a good thing that he was finally being of some use.

A lot of people are going to die soon, the boy thought. And it's going to be my fault.

After all, it was he who had led the vile Black Death Dragon here.

Demonfolk had the inborn ability to attune their thoughts with those of a monster—a cursed power that gave the wielder complete control over their target. The boy had been taught this fact by a much older demonfolk whom he'd once met by chance. Apparently, long ago, their race's ability had only been used to manage livestock. But as time went by, the demonfolk started using it on monsters and for wars, killing many people in the process.

"That's why everybody despises us now," the older demonfolk had said.
"That's just the way it is."

By birth, the boy was an aberration—a cursed animal—that could communicate with monsters. That was what he'd always been told growing up. Even so, he wanted to be useful to people. He was demonfolk, but he wanted to help others and hear kind words from them in return.

That was why, no matter how much he trembled, he kept his heart set on doing a good job. Even though he was scared, even though he didn't want to take a life, he would keep his promise. It was the one thing finally in his power.

But no sooner had the boy steeled his resolve than the [Concealment] hiding

him was stripped away.

"Huh...?"

He was shocked; the [Concealment] had been strengthened with a magical tool, and now it was gone? Just like that?

The next instant, the boy realized his mistake; now, *he* was the target of the Black Death Dragon's glare. A lapse of concentration had broken his control over the monster, and he could tell from its predatory gaze that it now saw him as prey and nothing else.

The boy knew then that he was going to die. The dragon was already familiar with killing and with stripping the flesh from its victims' bones—the boy had understood that from the moment it was brought to him—and there wasn't enough time to reestablish mental control over it. He could only watch as it opened its maw wide and raised its claws high over its head. It was going to tear him to shreds.

As soon as the boy realized this was the end, he had a thought—one that came from the bottom of his heart.

I'm glad.

By dying here, he wouldn't have to hurt anybody. He wouldn't need to feel the pain that he caused them.

But along with his relief came guilt. Although the weight was gone from his shoulders, his failure would probably result in another of the children being viciously beaten.

I'm sorry, he said to nobody in particular. *I was never able to be a good boy.*

The boy knew that useless kids were punished. That was a lesson he'd been taught many times before.

I'm sorry that I was worthless till the very end.

He was no doubt getting what he deserved, he thought. For being useless. For being born with a cursed power. And for thinking that he was more unfortunate than others.

After a lifetime spent being labeled a cursed child, this was his punishment for

existing.

Just as the dragon's monstrous claws came down, the boy spoke a silent prayer. Demonfolk had no gods, nor were they permitted faith...but he had once heard that those who died were reborn into a new life. He believed in that idea, even if only slightly.

And so, to nobody in particular, he prayed with all his heart.

If I'm reborn, I hope I won't be beaten so badly in my next life. I hope I can be of use to someone, just a little bit.

There wasn't much else the boy wanted...or so he thought. In his last moments, from deep within him, a spot of greed reared its head.

And one more thing: if my wish comes true...just once, I hope I get to eat something tasty.

In the face of death, that was all the boy wished for. He shut his eyes and waited for his time to come...but the claws of the Black Death Dragon never ripped through him. Instead—

[Parry]

A stranger who had appeared out of nowhere caught the dragon's claws against his black sword, which he wielded in a one-handed grip, and sent the blow that should have been the boy's end flying back up toward the sky.

Chapter 24: I Parry a Toad

As I parried the huge claws of the black toad in front of me, an unexpected thought crossed my mind: this thing wasn't all that big of a deal.

To be fair to the monster, its every blow struck with intense force—enough to send a violent jolt shuddering through the hilt of my sword. Still...they weren't particularly hard to parry. The toad's physical strength was about on par with that of the goblin I'd fought yesterday, if not a little weaker, and its movements were definitely slow. If my guess was right, it probably belonged somewhere near the bottom of the monster rankings.

But, wait... If people called goblins the weakest monster, and this toad was even weaker than that, then maybe it wasn't a monster at all. In that case, we'd probably be just fine. Slaying it was going to be a tall order for someone like me with no offensive skills, but I was sure that we'd manage. I simply had to wait for Lynne and Ines to catch up—which meant I needed to buy some time.

Luckily, my stamina was the one thing I could feel a little confident about.

Just as I readied my sword, however, the toad abruptly began to swell. Something was wrong—but by the time I realized that, I was already staring down its wide-open maw, at something black swirling deep in its throat. Before I could even consider what it might be, the toad violently spewed it out.

As the cloud of black fog came straight for me, I knew that I could avoid it...but doing so would mean putting the boy behind me in harm's way. Instead, I stood my ground and took the miasma head-on, waiting as it enveloped my entire body.

The smallest amount seeped into my mouth, and I retched up blood.

"Poison...?"

My entire body was racked with intense pain and dizziness. From the taste alone, I could tell that I'd just ingested some kind of poison—and a deadly one, at that.

It was then that something occurred to me: hadn't Ines been about to say something before I ran off? She had probably meant to warn me—to tell me to be careful of this poisonous toad. Now I knew why its blows hadn't been particularly impressive; its greatest weapon wasn't its powerful-looking fangs or claws but the lethal poison stored in its belly. Ines had been about to tell me just that.

As blood spurted from all over my body, I had a single thought:

Yeah... If this is all it's got, I think I'll be just fine.



A long time ago, when I'd still been living alone on my mountain, there had been an incident where I'd mistakenly eaten a mushroom that my mother had once told me never to eat under any circumstances. It was called "dragon's ruin," as its poison was said to be toxic enough to kill a dragon.

As for why I'd picked it and brought it home with me...I honestly couldn't remember. Maybe I'd ended up with an especially large haul that day and was too busy celebrating to notice the hazardous mushroom that had gotten mixed in. Whatever the case, I'd thrown it into my pot, stewed it, and eaten it for dinner.

A while after that, I'd been struck with severe stomach pain and started to spew vast amounts of blood. By the time I'd realized that I'd eaten something I shouldn't have, it had already been too late; the mushroom was too far gone for me to vomit it back up.

It felt like the poison had circulated to every part of my body. I'd been unable to move, so I'd focused all of my efforts into using my then recently acquired [Low Heal] on my stomach. It had been the only thing I could think to do.

Bit by bit, I'd felt my stomach recover—but even the slightest break in my concentration had caused me to throw up fresh blood. Stuck in a situation where letting my guard down would result in me bleeding from every conceivable part of my body, I'd kept using [Low Heal], all the while preparing myself for death.

My suffering had continued day after day, morning and night. Occasionally, I'd

managed to get up and drink some water, only to collapse back onto the ground afterward, bleeding and writhing in pain. During each brush with death, I'd stubbornly clung to life...until eventually, by some stroke of luck, my continuous use of [Low Heal] allowed me to recover enough strength to move around a little.

It had been agonizing beyond words, but, with my newfound vigor, I'd made sure not to miss out on my training routine; I'd once decided that I would hone my skills every single day, and giving up wasn't an option. I hadn't been able to put much strength into my arms, I had been vomiting blood the entire time, and I hadn't known whether I would even survive the effort, but my stubborn determination kept me swinging my wooden sword nonetheless.

On the morning of the eighth day, I'd noticed something strange: the pain in my stomach had gone, I was no longer throwing up blood, and my body felt remarkably light. Although, that last one had sort of made sense, considering that I hadn't eaten a proper meal in a week.

My first instinct had been to go out hunting for something nutritious. Famished as I was, I'd craved some meat, and even in my weakened condition I'd thought myself perfectly capable of taking down a wild boar. With thoughts of my next meal running through my mind, I'd ventured into the woods—only to promptly make my second great blunder.

I was bitten by a huge venomous snake.

At the time, I'd resigned myself to death on the spot. Even after somehow managing to kill the snake, I'd been convinced that waiting to die was the only choice left to me, so I'd merely lain on the forest floor with my eyes closed.

But strangely, no matter how long I'd waited, I'd never felt the venom take effect. No part of my body hurt at all. Perplexed, I'd picked myself up, grabbed the snake, and gone home—whereupon I'd cooked and eaten the reptile. Its species was said to be inedible due to its venom, but hey—I'd been *really* hungry.

Besides, the snake had been the only food I'd had at hand, and since its venom hadn't seemed to work on me, I'd been pretty sure it wouldn't be harmful enough to matter. After all, I'd found myself so unaffected by the

snake's bite that I'd started to doubt it was venomous at all.

It had been a very simpleminded train of thought, but, well...I *had* been a child at the time.

When I'd actually eaten the snake, a shocking realization had struck me: it was *unbelievably* tasty. Its meat was far juicier than that of any mountain bird, with a depth that surpassed any mushroom I'd ever eaten. It had felt as though its sweetness was suffusing my entire body.

Most amazing of all had been the rate at which my body recovered while eating it—something that I chalked up to the snake's nutritiousness. After I'd finished enthusiastically devouring my meal, I'd immediately gone out to find more. One taste had been enough to get me addicted.

I'd soon managed to find another, but just setting eyes on it had triggered quiet alarm bells in my head. Though I hadn't been sure during my first encounter with the species, this second meeting had made me certain that I was looking at a poison spike snake—an animal that my mother had taught me never to eat, no matter how hungry I got.

I was troubled. Until then, I'd always lived in accordance with my mother's teachings, and everything she'd taught me had proved to be correct. Yet I'd already eaten a poison spike snake with no repercussions. How?

While I was lost in my thoughts, I was bitten again. That was when I realized: it wasn't that the snake was nonvenomous; I was just *immune* to its venom. I didn't have a clue about the mechanics of how it had happened, but the dragon's ruin that I'd eaten had evidently given me a certain degree of resistance against poison.

In addition, the [Low Heal] that I'd thought was relatively useless had actually proved to be quite helpful. I wasn't certain, but I'd had an inkling that the skill also provided some degree of poison nullification. This had made me absolutely delighted. I'd thought that, maybe, this was my path to obtaining a new skill—and so, from that point on, I started testing every single poisonous mountain plant and animal on myself. Occasionally, one would prove to be more lethal than I'd expected and cause me to violently hack up blood, but I'd always manage to pull through using [Low Heal], and nothing I ate was ever as bad as

the dragon's ruin.

In the end, however, my expectations had only been met with disappointment. I never acquired a new skill.

On the bright side, I *had* made a discovery: poisonous plants and animals were, in general, very tasty. And although I'd run into exceptions to that rule every now and again, I'd yet to meet an example that wasn't at the very least nutritious. Maybe something about being unappetizing caused poisonous flora and fauna to naturally stock up on nutrients.

In any case, that was how I'd developed a fondness for eating poisonous plants and animals, a practice that I'd continued ever since. As long as I took care to dispose of their toxins, they made for pretty high-quality ingredients—and when I *couldn't* dispose of them, well, that was when the gradual nullification afforded to me by [Low Heal] came in handy. Besides, all it took was a little endurance, and I'd eventually develop a resistance anyway.

Long story short, I was now quite used to dealing with poison. I could honestly say that my tolerance was pretty high—it was one of the few redeeming features that I had to my name.

The toad's black fog was definitely an intense poison. The moment it had made contact with my body, I'd known that its lethality rivaled that of a dragon's ruin. Still, if that was all, then I was confident I could pull through.

Dragon's ruin was actually pretty tasty; I'd made it a common ingredient in my stews ever since that fateful encounter. Sure, I'd cough up a little blood each time, but it never got any worse than that. In the end, once I was certain it was safe, I just couldn't resist the allure of good food.

My overall point was that poison of this degree wouldn't work on me. As I was engulfed in the fog, I quickly began using [Low Heal] to neutralize its effects. My reaction time hadn't been perfect—I was bleeding a little—but I could tell from past experience that the attack wasn't enough to hinder me. Soon enough, my wounds closed, leaving me as good as new.

The black fog dispersed across my surroundings, but from the look of things, my nullification had done its job—the boy right behind me was unharmed. Thank goodness for that.

Relieved, I continued parrying the toad's claws as it swung them down at me. Although they looked thick and sturdy, my bet was that the sword in my hand was more resilient.



Each time I repelled the claws bearing down on me, they chipped and shattered in succession. I was amazed at my own weapon; although it was heavy, it was impressively durable. I had initially underestimated its value due to its battered appearance, but I was now convinced that it was a princely gift indeed.

As I offered a few silent words of gratitude to Lynne's father, the toad's razor-sharp claws continued to shatter, one by one. Then, when it ran out of claws to use, it opened its gaping maw and tried to bite me with its serrated fangs. Of course, this was equally ineffective; I parried every single attack until the toad was left toothless.

All things considered, this was one savage toad. Even without its claws and with its teeth shattered, it continued to lash out at me. Still, it was clearly weaker now—maybe spewing its poison had depleted some of its stamina too. As long as I kept this up, it was possible it might collapse all on its own.

Just when that thought crossed my mind, however, the toad began to swell again. Its intentions were obvious—it was going to open its maw and let loose another cloud of poison. It swelled and swelled until it was much larger than it had been the first time. It was risking it all on this one last attack, I was sure. Its poison would probably be thicker and even more intense.

But not even I would fall for the same trick twice. I readied my sword and focused on the toad's movements. Then, at the precise moment when it swelled even larger and opened its maw to spew its poison—

[Parry]

I struck upward at the toad's lower jaw with all of my strength. Hit directly from below, its maw forcefully snapped shut—and the massive cloud of poison and compressed air, now with nowhere to go, shot back into the toad's body. It bulged and bulged, before finally...

Beginning from its back, the toad violently burst open, splattering the surroundings with chunks of meat.

"What an awful sight..." I muttered to myself. As violent as the toad had been, nothing deserved a death as horrible as that.

Then, as my eye caught lumps of the toad's flesh that had scattered about the area along with its poison, I was struck by a thought. Before long, it had compounded into a realization that I found impossible to ignore.

Hey...this toad could be pretty tasty.

Chapter 25: The Demonfolk Boy

When I finally managed to pry my attention away from the scattered chunks of toad meat, I saw that the boy from earlier was still behind me, sitting on the ground and covered in mud. I breathed a sigh of relief; he seemed unharmed.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm...”

Slowly, the boy picked himself up. I thought he looked a little unwell—maybe he’d breathed in some of the toad’s poison—but he could stand, at least, so I figured he wasn’t in any grave danger for the time being. I’d just need to ask Lynne to heal him up. She really was a girl of many talents.

“That was a close one, huh?” I said. “It was unlucky that you ran into that thing. Did you come all this way out here alone?”

The boy flinched a little, and his shoulders quivered. “N-No, I...I...brought it with me...”

“Brought it with you?” I repeated. I could hardly believe that a kid like him had tagged along with a toad that ferocious. “Really? Why’d you do that...?”

The boy flinched again. “I...I promised to bring it to that city over there. H-He told me that I needed to, so, so I...!”

“You mean Toros?” I asked. “Wait, you promised? Don’t tell me you’re...”

This boy had been told to bring the toad to Toros, which could only mean one thing: despite how young he looked, he was partway through a delivery. But still, why something so poisonous? Plus, it had been so huge that bringing it all this way must have been pretty—

And then it hit me. If my rule of thumb that most poisonous animals were delicious held true, then so long as one somehow treated the toad’s toxins, then it would probably make for a pretty tasty dish.

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that I was right. I

wasn't very educated, so all of my discoveries were probably common knowledge to most other people. Everyone obviously knew that poisonous creatures were delicious, so it wouldn't be weird at all for large cities to have ways of processing the toad's poison.

Wait, but that meant... Oh no.

"That toad was an ingredient?" I muttered to myself. Considering things from that point of view, everything clicked into place. It was massive enough that even a single toad would provide an abundance of meat, and if one wanted the freshest taste possible, then delivering the animal alive was clearly the best option. The fact that it had been hidden under a [Concealment] earlier had probably been to keep it safe from despicable meat thieves and the like.

So that was what was going on here. In which case, I'd just caused this boy's valuable merchandise—merchandise meant to supply Toros—to explode into unsellable chunks. I was shocked at my utter lack of foresight.

"I'm sorry," I said, eyeing the mess around us. "I've done something awful. That was an important delivery for you, wasn't it? It's no excuse, but I had no idea." It was an apology from the bottom of my heart...not that an apology would be enough to make up for what I'd done.

"Huh...?" The boy stared at me with wide eyes. Had I said something wrong?

"You know, bursting that toad." I nervously pointed at the bits of ex-toad that surrounded us. "Or...was that okay? Did I...not mess up after all?"

After some hesitation, the boy nodded, evidently willing to forgive me. I supposed that the toad *had* been attacking him—though I didn't know why—so maybe he'd just written off what I'd done as inevitable.

"Still, how did you bring that ferocious toad all the way here?" I asked. "Don't tell me you dragged it along behind you."

Yet again, the boy flinched. His shoulders trembled, and when he spoke, it sounded as though he was forcing his voice out. "I...I can...control monsters. That's how I brought it here..."

"C-Control monsters!?" Unconsciously, I did a double take. A small child with the power to control such a huge toad? Was that even possible?

"That's an amazing skill," I continued. "The world sure is full of surprises, huh?"

And he was so young too. I wondered how he'd acquired such an impressive skill for himself.

"H-Huh...?" the boy said. "Skill...?"

"Is it not one?"

He gave a start at my question and then froze. This whole time, he'd looked kind of scared...but I wasn't sure what of.

"No," the boy replied. "I was born...with this power. I'm...a demonfolk."

"You were born with it?!" This time, I did a *triple* take out of shock; the world was full of surprises indeed. I'd never known that people could be born with such extraordinary powers. Once again, I was reminded of how little I truly knew about the world.

I was glad that I'd ventured outside the royal capital—I'd never expected that I would get to meet someone so fascinating.

"It's pretty amazing that you can just do that from birth," I said. "That's a genuine god-given talent if I've ever seen one."

"Huh...?!" the boy exclaimed. "U-Um, I'm a demonfolk! We...we all have this power!"

From his flustered appearance, I could pretty much guess what he was trying to tell me. "Right, so that ability is standard among your people, huh? You guys must be pretty amazing then. I couldn't tell you the number of times I've wished for a power like that."

Back on my mountain, I'd enjoyed taking care of my livestock, but it had also been hard work. On days with good weather, I'd allow them to graze freely under the sun. Night came with the risk of wild animal attacks, though, so I'd always needed to bring them back into their sheltered pens before then—and on the double if it looked like rain. Caring for them hadn't been easy by any means.

Plus, when I'd used their help to tend to my fields, while the animals I'd raised

for years were obedient and already knew what to do, the younger ones that I hadn't finished training would often ignore my commands. At such times, I'd often daydreamed about how much easier things would be if I could talk to animals.

Now, faced with a living example of something that I'd never thought was possible, I found myself in awe of how vast the world really was...although, in some ways, it was small too. One little trip outside of the royal capital was all it had taken for me to meet somebody whom I'd never imagined could exist. Evidently, the thrill of adventure could be found a lot closer to home than I'd realized.

As I indulged in my own wonderment, the boy's eyes opened wide. "Huh...?" he said, staring at me in shock.

Had I said something strange again? I really hadn't meant to...

"U-Um, aren't you afraid of demonfolk?" the boy asked. "Don't you...hate me?"

"No..." I replied, confused. "Why would I be afraid? And, uh, what do you mean by 'hate' you...?"

I was starting to feel as though the boy and I were having two entirely separate conversations. For one thing, what was it about this situation that was scaring him so much? I didn't really get about half of what he was saying, especially the parts about me hating him—I'd just met him, after all. Lynne was a pretty unusual kid in her own way, so I'd had trouble getting through to her as well...but this boy was definitely giving her a run for her money.

"My power...scares lots of people," the boy explained; maybe he'd seen the confusion on my face. "They really hate it..."

"Oh, so that's what you meant," I replied. "Yeah...I guess there are people like that everywhere you go."

That had been the only response I could think of. He was talking about people who didn't like animals, right? I'd never met anybody like that, but I'd heard that they existed.

"Still, you shouldn't let that get to you," I continued. "I mean, no matter what

anybody says, your power's obviously useful.”

“Useful...?” the boy replied.

“Yeah. For tending to livestock, looking for lost cats, all kinds of things. Off the top of my head, you could also get animals to help with fieldwork, and...maybe use birds to deliver messages? Yeah, that sounds like it'd be really convenient.”

As I randomly listed off ideas as they came to mind, the boy began to cry. “I can... I can be useful...? Me...?” Large tears streamed down his face as he looked at me.



I wondered if he'd been through some tough times recently. Maybe he wasn't considered very talented by his people, or something along those lines. Still, it was a big world out there; those kinds of limited personal judgments were more unreliable than one would think.

Still, for a little kid like this to wonder whether he could be useful... No matter how you looked at it, he was undervaluing himself. It was a real shame, considering how amazingly talented he was.

"Of course you can," I said. "A power as incredible as yours is nothing to be ashamed of. Just look at me; I've got no talents to my name, and I'm still hanging in there. And, hey, if you don't want it...you could always give it to me!"

"R-Really...? I can be...needed by people...?" The boy stayed where he was, facing me, and fell silent as he continued to cry.

I wondered why he found that so hard to believe. I thought his ability really was incredible—enough to make people jealous. It was sad that he hadn't yet realized what he'd been blessed with.

Maybe his current circumstances didn't allow for it, but I was sure that there would come a time when everybody would need his help. Anyone could see that, even a guy like me. After all, he had a kind heart—kind enough to forgive the mistake of a passerby with barely any hesitation.

So, I waited as the boy cried. Only when I saw that his tears were running out did I place my hand on his head and say loud and clear: "Yeah. Of course you can. You can be as helpful as you want and then some—more than I could ever be."

Chapter 26: The Princess's Duty

After seeing Instructor Noor slay the Black Death Dragon, Ines and I began using purification and wind spells in conjunction to clear its miasma from the area. Before long, we could move freely again.

Although we had been stuck in place before, guarding our coach and its horse, we had still been able to watch the entire battle from afar, from beginning to end. It had been awe-inspiring—that was the only way I could describe it. The dragon’s rampage had torn rents into the earth, and its claws had struck again and again at blistering speed, as if the monster had gone mad. But Instructor Noor had parried every attack, each clash causing a loud earthquake-like rumble, and shattered the dragon’s claws.

I was still struggling to accept what I’d seen; this battle between man and dragon hadn’t played out as it should have. Instructor Noor, while at a disadvantage due to having to protect the boy behind him, had faced the monster head-on without ceding a single step. And when the dust had cleared, man—not dragon—had been the last one standing.

Who would ever believe such a thing?

To my surprise, as Instructor Noor walked back toward us after the battle, the boy he’d saved in tow, his stride looked calm and collected. He was acting as though nothing of importance had happened at all.

“Instructor!” I called out. “Are you injured?!”

“Oh, no,” he replied. “I’m fine.”

“B-But you’re bleeding all over!”

As he drew closer, I could see that he was completely drenched in blood—to the point where it was a wonder he hadn’t bled out yet. There was nothing “fine” about him. I needed to begin treating him immediately.

“Ah, you mean all this?” Instructor Noor asked. “It’s no big deal. Just leave it be, and it should fix itself up. Well, I say it should—it already has.”

"Wh-What? But that can't... Don't worry, Instructor. I'll heal you up right aw—" I rushed over and placed my hands on him, ready to begin healing...but no matter where I checked, I couldn't find any cuts. "You're right... You don't have a single wound on you..."

"Told you, didn't I? I'm fine."

I couldn't believe it. Evidently, he wasn't feeling any ill effects from the blood loss either. There wasn't a single trace on his body of the miasma ever having touched him. As much as I couldn't believe it, the truth was before my very eyes.

"P-Please excuse me for doubting you," I said. "You...really are unharmed."

"Yeah," Instructor Noor replied. "I don't mean to brag, but I'm pretty resistant to poisons." He had a casual grin on his face as though he considered it something trivial, but I knew that the explanation couldn't possibly be that simple.

He'd been covered in lethal miasma—the ultimate poison—so potent that it could even corrode the ground. It was a dreadful thing, similar in nature to a curse tinged with a dragon's mana. There was no conceivable way that a person could come into direct contact with it and be fine.

Then, I had a sudden realization: there was one possibility that I'd yet to consider. Upon closer observation, there was an oddly serene aura emanating from Instructor Noor. I had seen a similar phenomenon once before, long ago, when I was still a student attending the class training schools. Instructor Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, had shown me an aura of the same nature.

Which led me to wonder...did Instructor Noor possess a sacred spirit too?

A sacred spirit was what awaited a person who honed their body and mind with a saintly degree of dedication. It allowed them to purify anything they touched, and heal any kind of wound instantaneously.

However, unlike skills, a sacred spirit was not something that was simple to acquire. It required a person to endure a significant amount of abnormal life-and-death training. It was the culmination of an ideal that only a handful of saints in history had ever reached. Even my instructor Sain, called a living

legend by those who dedicated their lives to serving the divine, had needed more than forty years to gain true mastery over his sacred spirit.

And yet, Instructor Noor had done the very same at his young age?

I stayed my disbelief. This was Instructor Noor; of course it was possible for him. But just how much training had he...?

"Lynne, could you check if this kid is okay?" Instructor Noor asked, interrupting my stupor. He placed a hand on the shoulder of the boy standing next to him. "He looks a little unwell."

Wasn't this boy...?

"It's all right..." the boy said hesitantly. "I'm...fine..."

"Are you sure?" Instructor Noor asked. "You're so pale."

Upon hearing my instructor's words, things finally clicked into place. I studied the boy's features. I had been too far away to tell earlier, but now...

"I've always been pale," the boy said. "I'm...a demonfolk."

"Yeah?"

My suspicions had been confirmed; the boy was a demonfolk. Pale skin, pale-blue hair with shades of silver, and eyes the color of deep darkness that seemed as though they would swallow you up the more you studied them. He was part of a race that the whole world eyed with apprehension due to its ability to control monsters—a people who had been branded enemies of the divine for the past hundred years by their enemy, the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. I'd heard that barely any of them had survived...

"So it's true?" I asked. "The boy's a demonfolk?"

"Yeah," Instructor Noor replied. "You really know your stuff, Lynne."

"I do. Although, I've never met one before."

Instructor Noor seemed well aware that the boy was a demonfolk. Had he known from the very beginning and gone to his rescue nonetheless?

"Instructor," I continued, "what...do you intend to do with him now?"

"I was hoping he could ride with us—if that's okay?"

I was slightly shocked. The demonfolk as a people were so dangerous that most countries advised they be apprehended or killed on sight. Even though Instructor Noor had just saved him, all that awaited the boy was...

"Are you sure?" I asked. "He's a demonfolk... And the monster he brought with him just..."

"Yeah, I know," Instructor Noor replied. "But it's not like any of us were harmed, right? It's a shame that some of the wheat around here was ruined...but he's out of a job now because of me. I'd like to do something to make up for that, if I can."

"Job...? What job was he doing?"

"He told me he was bringing that poisonous toad to the city."

"He was bringing the Black Death Dragon to...?!"

Similarly to how he'd called the Goblin Emperor "just a goblin," Instructor Noor had called the Black Death Dragon a "poisonous toad." For somebody with his incredible strength, maybe there wasn't much of a difference...but if that dragon had been let loose in the middle of a city, people would have died. However, the boy would have been putting himself at risk too, so why had he...?

Instructor Noor turned back to the boy. "Come to think of it, you said that someone gave you this job, right? Who?"

The boy cast his eyes downward and shook his head at the shrewd question. "I...don't know. He didn't tell me who he was." That must have been the most he was willing to give us, as he then fell silent.

Ines stepped forward. "Under these circumstances, it will do you no good to keep secrets. We'd appreciate the truth." Her forceful words caused the boy to flinch and his shoulders to begin to tremble.

The boy's next words came hesitantly, as though he feared how Ines might react. "I...really don't know. That's just how we were raised..." The frightened look in his eyes, coupled with his timid bearing, confirmed my suspicions—he was a slave.

Although slaves were forbidden in the Kingdom of Clays and rarely discussed by its citizenry, in other countries, they were a part of everyday life. If my conjecture proved correct, the boy's master had probably taken advantage of the boy's demonfolk status to use him as a disposable child soldier.

"Do you have a home to return to?" Ines asked. "Can you make the journey on your own?"

"I...don't know," the boy replied. "They blindfolded me on the way here..."

"So you can't go back even if you want to."

He nodded.

"There you have it," Instructor Noor said. "Think we can bring him along? I want to take him somewhere he'll be safe."

At last, I finally understood Instructor Noor's intentions. He'd saved this poor boy knowing that he was one of the demonfolk, a race hated by so many. It was an act that would make enemies of all kinds of people, yet Instructor Noor had chosen to do it anyway.

I was ashamed of my own narrow-mindedness; the mere fact that this boy was a demonfolk had made me act like such a coward. How dare I call myself royalty when this was all that I amounted to? I should have learned my lesson by now—I already knew that I was too prone to espousing theoretical knowledge. It was something my father always scolded me for.

"Do not allow hearsay to mislead you. Place your faith in what lies before your eyes."

I studied the boy's face anew. Nothing about him resembled the race of evildoers that I'd heard about in stories. All that I could see was a skinny young child with nowhere to go. He'd likely never had a decent meal in his entire life. If I couldn't help one poor little boy, how could I call myself the daughter of the Adventurer King?

Instructor Noor turned to the trembling demonfolk boy. "What's your name? I don't think I ever asked."

The boy looked up and mumbled, "It's...Rolo."

"Rolo, huh?" Instructor Noor smiled, as though he were making a joke. "Short, sweet, and easy to remember. I like it!"

"Ines..." I said. "I'd like to second Instructor's request. Could we bring this boy—could we bring *Rolo* along with us?"

"My Lady Lynneburg..." Ines replied. "I understand how you feel, but our current situation..." She looked torn. Her primary duty was to ensure my safety—of that I was well aware. But still, I...

"There should still be space in the coach," Instructor Noor said. "But if not, he can take my place."

"There is space," Ines replied with a frown. "I agree that we have an obligation to safeguard orphans, demonfolk or no. However, considering our current situation, we will struggle to bring him along with us. In the first place, demonfolk are forbidden from entering the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. Also, it pains me to say this, but...dropping him off at one of the cities en route would be akin to signing his death sentence. Our best option may be to part ways with him here, away from prying eyes."

Ines's logic was faultless; the boy's race could not go ignored. The Holy Theocracy of Mithra still bore the memories of its war against the demonfolk and saw their entire people as enemies to the divine. Any who happened upon the boy would try to apprehend and imprison him.

The country still had active bounties on the demonfolk. In the worst-case scenario, if we brought him with us into Mithra, we would similarly be branded sinners and come under attack by the Theocracy's soldiers. We couldn't afford to take that risk, but even then, I—

"Weird... Could've sworn he'd be dead by now..."

That was when I realized there was a man behind us, swathed in the remaining wafts of the smoky black substance that had been the harbinger of his appearance.

Chapter 27: The Black-Bandaged Man

"Weird... Could've sworn he'd be dead by now..."

"Strange" was the only way I could describe the man who had just come out of nowhere. He had a massive cross-shaped sword on his back, his upper body was bare, and there were black bandages wrapped around his face. Hanging from his waist were countless knives of all shapes and sizes, which jangled with his every movement.

Yeah, what an odd-looking man.

"And these hunks of bone and meat everywhere..." the man continued.
"Wooow. Don't tell me they're what's left of the 'cargo'?" He turned to look at us.

The man seemed to be talking about the toad, which could only mean one thing. "Were you...the client for Rolo's delivery?" I asked.

"Me, the client?" The man studied my face. "Nah...I'm just a 'hire.' How about you? What's your deal? Looks like you took a dive in that miasma...so how're you still alive? Don't tell me...you killed that thing?"

So he wasn't the client, but he *was* in the same line of business as Rolo.

"Yeah, that was me," I replied. "I didn't know it was an important delivery, so I kind of made it blow up... Sorry."

"Why're you...apologizing to me?" the man asked.

"Didn't you say it was your cargo?"

"Ah. Nah, I've got nothing to do with *that* part of the job. Doesn't matter a lick to me if somebody wrecked the thing. My business is with *him*." The man pointed a finger at Rolo, who was standing behind me.

"With Rolo?" I asked.

"Yeah. I came here to 'take him home.' Far as I'm concerned, that's all that matters."

"So you came here to pick him up?"

"Well..." the man drawled, "something like that. Got told it'd pay well, you see."

"Pay?" I repeated.

Then, as I was preoccupied with the man's strange behavior, he abruptly disappeared. Sensing danger, I tightly grasped the sword in my hand and swung it hard, without hesitation.

[Parry]

A cascade of sparks scattered across our surroundings. The man had unsheathed the large silver cross-shaped sword on his back and struck at Rolo. I'd only barely been able to see the tail end of his movement.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"You...sure like to get in the way, huh?" the man replied. "Why don't you just...hand him over?"

"Are you talking about Rolo...?"

"Couldn't care less about his name. But yeah...that kid behind you. He's worth a lot, you see. Or at least, his corpse is."

"His corpse? What do you mean? Didn't you come here to pick him up?"

"Doesn't really matter to me whether he's alive or dead...though I think leaving him alive will piss off my client, you know? I guess *they* could do the killing after he's been delivered...but doesn't that sound like a pain? Suppose you could call this professional courtesy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's fine. Not like there's any point in me explaining either, so..."

As his words trailed off, the man vanished from sight again. A strong sense of unease assaulted me from behind, so I whirled around and brought my blade to bear.

[Parry]

My weapon clashed with the man's silver cross-shaped sword and

immediately snapped it, sending another violent scattering of sparks across the area. The man watched as the severed blade flew away, then scowled at me.

“Who...are you? There’s something off about you...”

After casting his broken sword aside, the man vanished yet again...or so I thought. He was suddenly coming at me from my blind spot, a pair of golden knives in his hands.

[Parry]

I didn’t even have time to breathe.

“Real busybody, aren’t you?” the man said. The intensity that he was radiating spiked sharply.

“Get behind me, my lady!” Ines cried. She and Lynne must have sensed something at the same time that I did, because they moved into a defensive stance.

Then, my ears were assailed by a sharp ringing noise.

“Suppose I’ll start by taking that head of yours.”

The man disappeared again, leaving a rent in the earth where he had once stood—and then he was right in front of me. The impact that had resulted from him kicking off of the ground sent Ines and Lynne flying backward. I almost lost my balance too, though I quickly steeled myself and managed to swing my sword at the knife headed directly for my throat.

[Parry]

Our two blades clashed, and the knife shattered into pieces—though it wasn’t a one-sided exchange, by any means. The tremendous weight of the man’s strike sent an intense shock through my sword and into my hand.

My arm ached and groaned. I was shocked. The man’s appearance had given no indication that his blows would carry so much power. He had swung as hard as the cow that I’d fought the other day—no, even harder. His attacks were sharper too.

The man was so slender, and his knives were so small. How was this possible?

Even as I found myself admiring my opponent, I somehow managed to parry his next knife—then the next, and the next after that. The man brought out another knife with each new attack, chaining them together into a rapid assault. He was striking with ridiculous speed; I was getting dizzy just trying to keep up.

Once again, I doubted my own eyes. This man wasn't just strong—he was frighteningly quick as well. He dashed all around me, striking from every conceivable direction, over and over again. I was just barely managing to protect Rolo by using my instincts to sense the man's attacks...but that was all I could do. My opponent was too fast; I had no hope of keeping up.

If this went on, he'd kill me.

As I started to grow anxious, the man came to a sudden stop. Sharp eyes watched me from between the black bandages wrapped around his head.

"Weird..." he drawled. "Why...aren't you dead yet?

"I, uh...don't know how I'm supposed to answer that..." I replied.

The man cocked his head to one side in apparent bewilderment, still staring at me. Then, his gaze dropped to his waist. "Ah...damn. There goes most of my collection. Building it up wasn't easy, you know." Looking somewhat forlorn, he put his hands where so many knives had once hung and surveyed their remains on the ground.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the man only had two or three knives left hanging from his waist, along with a collection of empty sheaths. I'd shattered all his other blades.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Evidently, the man had stopped attacking because he'd run out of weapons to use. But as I saw him staring at the shards of metal scattered across the ground, despondent, I couldn't help but feel a tiny bit guilty.

"Don't get me wrong—I *am* sorry for breaking all of your stuff," I said. "But, to be fair, you attacked us out of nowhere."

"Oh," the man replied, "don't worry. I don't blame you or anything. It's just...I could maybe understand mithril, but orichalcum and dragontusk aren't ever supposed to break, you know?"

"Yeah...?"

"Yeah," he confirmed. "That's just the way it is... Well, the way it *usually* is... I knew there was something off about you. There aren't many people who'd start worrying about their opponent midway through a fight. And that sword of yours...it's stranger than you are. A weird guy with a weird sword... Well, whatever. Guess I'll do things the simple way today."

The man picked up the broken silver sword that he'd cast aside earlier and flung it high into the air.

"The simple way?" I asked.

The man kept his hand raised, and the silver cross-shaped sword came to a halt in midair. It started to spin—then, gradually, it began to shake furiously and emit a bright red lightning-like glow, as though it had suddenly become burning hot.

Completely lost as to what was happening, I simply stared in blank amazement as the glowing red mass burst, splitting into countless tiny beads that scattered through the air. The next instant, they shifted form into silver cross-shaped knives that blanketed the sky.

At a guess, there were several thousand of them.

Suspended in the air, the mass of glittering silver weapons looked just like rain clouds.

"Oh...and don't worry about breaking these ones," the man said. "Shatter as many as you like. I'll just remake them, yeah?"

He brought his arm down with a smile, and the spinning silver blades shot toward us all at once, spreading out as they descended on us like a flock of birds.

Chapter 28: Deadman Zadu

After Princess Lynneburg and I were sent flying, we stayed at a distance and watched the explosive exchange of blows between Noor and the newly arrived stranger.

"It couldn't be..." I said. "Is that who I think it is...?"

"I believe so," Princess Lynneburg replied, agreeing with my suspicions. "The Deadman."

Deadman Zadu. He went by many aliases and was a *former* S-rank adventurer.

"But why is he in a place like this...?" I muttered.

Zadu had been an adventurer who hailed from the Mercantile Free State of Sarenza. Some said he was the son of a wealthy merchant, while others claimed he was an orphan—but almost nobody knew the true details surrounding his birth.

He had started his adventuring career when he was fifteen, and it hadn't taken him long to distinguish himself. His fame grew quickly, and before even a few years had passed, he had gained a reputation as a remarkable adventurer capable of completing any commission by himself.

Any commission.

Acquiring the title of Dragonslayer, an achievement sought after by countless adventurers, was but the first of Zadu's many great deeds. He gained trust and popularity at an unbelievable rate—and in what seemed like no time at all, he rose to the highest echelon of society.

By common standards, S-rank was the pinnacle of adventuring—a height that most would find unattainable even after a lifetime of work. Zadu had only needed a few years and reached that peak at the age of twenty.

Whether it was in terms of strength, fame, or fortune, despite his youth, Zadu stood at the top. Everybody knew him as a peerless prodigy and a hero—and

they were right to. He was leagues above the average person in every way. Both magic and swordsmanship were merely tools of his will, his talent for learning was matchless, and he had even mastered alchemy to an extent that was said to rival the dwarves, who were legendary for their skill with the art. In every conceivable field, Zadu gained fame and status exceeding that of all others.

Indeed, he was defined by his strength and superiority...the latter of which he had *far too much*.

Zadu himself paid almost no mind to his fame, but everybody else sang his praises, put him on a pedestal, or made him the target of their envy. The Mercantile Free State of Sarenza's young hero, the S-rank adventurer Zadu—his very existence drove them wild.

As his renown grew, even those who had never laid eyes upon him began to extol his virtues, and it wasn't long before not a single person doubted his suitability as an adventurer. Everybody idolized him, some even to the point of worship...and Zadu's ability lived up to every expectation placed upon him.

But then a renowned merchant family mysteriously went missing. Every last member of their household disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Zadu was the culprit.

Thirty-six people had been massacred by his hand, including children, in-laws, and servants. When questioned as to why he had done it, his answer had been simple:

"Because I was commissioned to."

He had killed them because he'd been told the pay would be good. The commission had been very simple, and, true to his client's word, the reward had been excellent. Throughout his entire explanation, Zadu had seemed quite pleased.

That was when people realized: unlike an ordinary person, Zadu had no concept of right and wrong. When it came to commissions, *he didn't discriminate at all*.

Variations of the saying "beggars can't be choosers" were popular among job-seeking adventurers, but nobody took the proverb as seriously as Zadu. No

matter the details of a commission, he would accept it without hesitation.

He didn't discriminate. As long as there was profit to be found, he would quite literally do anything. Even murdering a baby was fair game if the price was right. The law meant nothing to him either; in fact, illegal commissions not offered at the Adventurers Guild—commissions that any other adventurer would hesitate to accept—were easy pickings to him.

Ironically, Zadu's slaughter of the merchant family only served to propagate his reputation as a man who completed every single commission he accepted, including questionable jobs that could never be brought into the light of day. He came to be known as the strongest living adventurer, who would do anything for you as long as you had the money. As such whispers spread, Zadu's fame—as well as people's fear of him—swelled to even greater heights.

To a certain few, the rumors only served to make Zadu even more appealing. And Zadu himself, when presented with those individuals' expectations, *met them all without discrimination*. From that point forth, his treatment by society did a complete reversal. People and organizations from all walks of life went from treating him like a hero to fearing him, to the point that they even began to avoid bringing him up in conversation.

Naturally, some began to question Zadu's suitability as an adventurer, but his position as an S-rank went unchanged. He had too many feats to his name, and his past contributions to the Adventurers Guild were immeasurable. Without his deeds, the Guild's list of achievements spanning the past few years would become pathetically short.

The Adventurers Guild Association—a gathering of every Adventurers Guild across the continent—held a conference, and it was eventually decided that the truth about Zadu's crime would be rewritten. One convenient piece of evidence after another was revealed, all painting the late merchant's family as corrupt, and the narrative surrounding Zadu's incident soon became as follows: "What he did was problematic, but it ended up being for the greater good."

Ultimately, Zadu retained his qualifications as an adventurer.

Needless to say, many took exception to the whitewashing. The voices questioning Zadu's status as an S-rank adventurer gradually became

louder...but then an incident occurred which put the entire issue to rest.

Zadu overthrew a country.

He fought an entire military by himself and came out victorious. Then, in accordance with his client's wishes, he massacred every member of that small country's royal family. Complying with the details of the commission, he impaled every last one of them to the wall using swords.

Zadu maintained that he'd felt nothing about the country he had ravaged—no sympathy, no hatred, nothing. He had brought it to ruin without experiencing a single emotion.

Of course, it was because he'd simply been doing as instructed—because the commission had been on the good side, as commissions went. Zadu had shown that he would destroy an entire country without any reluctance, as though he were stomping on a nest of ants.

"Any commission is a good commission."

For Zadu, that common adventurer's saying held true. In his eyes, all commissions were equal. Ethics, common sense, all forms of armed might, a country's dignity and history... None of them mattered. Destroying an entire country had seemed no different to him than stamping out a den of goblins.

As word of Zadu's deed spread, even the Adventurers Guild Association, which had previously turned a blind eye to his actions, realized it could no longer remain silent. Zadu was stripped of his qualifications as an adventurer the very next day, an enormous bounty was placed on his head, and commissions pertaining to his subjugation were distributed to every Adventurers Guild across the continent.

In a single night, "Zadu, the strongest adventurer" became "Zadu, the nightmare bounty." Famed adventurers grouped together and set out to subdue him, eager for the reward, only to find that he had already vanished.

For a brief while, there was no news about Zadu at all. Major figures from multiple countries offered vast amounts of money for his capture, fearing for their lives, which caused a steady increase in his bounty—and in the number of adventurers seeking it, hoping to strike it rich.

Soon after Zadu's bounty had swelled to a truly absurd amount, a clue was discovered regarding his whereabouts. Spirits were high as the bounty-seeking adventurers grouped into their various cliques, which then came together to form the largest strike force ever recorded. Their array had several times more people than would be required to slay a dragon and was equal in size to a full-scale army.

The odds were in their favor. They were a host of over a thousand, formed for the sole purpose of defeating one man—Zadu. And so, they headed for the place where he was said to be...

But none returned. Every single one of the renowned adventurers who had set out to collect Zadu's bounty was found dead the next day.

The Adventurers Guild was at a complete loss. Their only conclusion was that the bounty target, Zadu, a former S-rank adventurer, was impossible to subjugate. Unfortunately, the price on his head had reached a staggeringly high point. The flow of adventurers pursuing him for that bounty would never end, and every one of them would be marching to a pointless death.

From there, Zadu would become more feared, and the bounty attached to the “impossible commission” would climb even higher—inspiring new adventurers to hunt him down. It would be a never-ending cycle of death, so the Adventurers Guild decided to take the only logical next step...

They claimed that the hunt for Zadu had proceeded without a hitch.

Because he had proved impossible to subdue, the Guild spun the narrative that the strike force had successfully killed him. It needed to prevent any more meaningless deaths—any more pointless fearmongering—so an official announcement was made that the bounty target had “met his end” at the hands of the gallant adventurers.

His killers’ names were kept a secret, and all those who had contributed to the bounty were given back their money under the pretext that the successful adventurers had refused to take it.

And so, to the select few people who knew the truth, Zadu came to be known as “the Deadman.” It was a fitting alias for an abomination who was being treated as dead yet still lurked out there in the world, somewhere unknown.

Zadu was somebody who *needed* to be dead, because no good could ever come of him being alive.

The top brass of the Adventurers Guild Association ruled that the best way to minimize the harm that Zadu would cause was to ignore him entirely—and the arrangement worked. Zadu, who had always been indifferent to status and fame, never drew the attention of the public again. To everyone but the select few who knew what had really happened, he was treated as a dead man and eventually forgotten.

Of course, it went without saying that Zadu was still alive. Reports were made that he continued to “work” for those who hired him, and corpses bearing the unique wounds created by his signature cross-shaped mithril knives were occasionally still discovered.

I had seen the investigative reports about these corpses with my own eyes while helping the royal capital guards with their work.

Zadu’s signature weapon was called the Silver Cross. It was a defining symbol of the threat that the continent’s Adventurers Guilds had ultimately swept under the rug—a lethal weapon that, with Zadu’s alchemy, could snap dozens of iron blades in the same breath that it claimed hundreds of lives.

And right now, thousands of them were dancing in the sky above me.

“No...”

There was no longer any doubt in my mind: the man before us was Zadu. It was clear from his appearance, his weapon, and, above all, his strength. Zadu, the former S-rank adventurer... In a straight fight against a monster like him, I would not stand a chance.

As my dismay got the better of me, the silver crosses flitted through the sky like a flock of birds. Then, all at once, they began to rain down on Noor. But that wasn’t all—at that very same moment—

“[Thunderstorm].”

Zadu’s ominous chant caused black thunderclouds to blanket the sky. Flashes of light came down all around us, gouging furrows into the earth, and the smell of burning filled the air.

"Instructor!"

"Stop, my lady! It's too dangerous!" Frantic, I moved to block my ward as she attempted to run to Noor.

Noor had engaged Zadu in combat and was still standing. While continuing to protect the demonfolk boy behind him, he swung his solitary blade with tremendous force, using it to deftly hold off the entire swarm of crosses.

In my eyes, Noor was inhuman too...but he would eventually reach his limit. After all, he was fighting while still trying to protect the boy. By common standards, it was an untenable position to take during a battle. An outlier like Zadu was not an opponent Noor could confront while burdened with a handicap.

At least...not alone.

I wanted to cry out in frustration, but not a sound escaped me. My legs carried me a single step forward, but then I resisted them. It was possible that Noor and I could eke out a victory if we worked together, but...I *could not* forget whom I needed to protect. It was my duty to deliver Princess Lynneburg unharmed to the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, where she would be able to seek asylum.

In circumstances like these, I absolutely had to keep my composure and assess my priorities. That was why... That was why I needed to...

"My Lady Lynneburg. May I have your permission to provide Noor with my assistance?"

My duty was to protect Princess Lynneburg. To keep her safe, even at the cost of my own life. But for that duty to be realized...we needed Noor. We would require his absurd strength in the times to come, I was sure, which was precisely why *I could not let him die*. The Kingdom of Clays could not bear to lose him. In the future, he would be indispensable to us.

Though, I confess, the words had escaped me before that justification had even taken form.

"Yes, of course," Princess Lynneburg replied. "Please."

"Thank you for your understanding, my lady."

I had taken another step forward before even hearing her response—and by the time her words reached my ears, I was already running as fast as my body would allow.

Chapter 29: Blades of Silver

[Parry]

I put all of my strength into sweeping away the flock of silver cross-shaped blades assailing me, sending a blinding spray of sparks scattering into the air. A number of the knives broke upon hitting my black sword, shattering into fragments of metal. At the speed they were flying at me, just touching them with my weapon was enough to send some of them crashing into the ground.

Still, there was a limit to how many I could hit with each swing—and it didn't help that I was missing more than I'd thought I would. That eerie man was probably manipulating his silver weapons from afar.

The knives that I couldn't intercept with my sword flew at Rolo and me like a storm of blades. I stood in their way to protect the boy, and sprays of blood gushed from my body as they pierced into me.

Luckily, the damage itself wasn't all that serious; I could use [Low Heal] to close up the wounds to some extent. The problem was...

"My back's totally against the wall here," I muttered.

I was stuck. There was nothing I could do. While I'd been preoccupied, the shady man with bandages on his face had retreated to a distance where I couldn't do anything to him. If I moved even one step closer to try to stop him from sending his silver blades after us, Rolo would be in harm's way.

Rolo seemed to be the man's target, so I had to protect him—but the only thing I could do was stand in place.

This wasn't good. It was taking everything I had just to repel the waves of silver knives—no, they were already overwhelming me. One after the other, they stabbed into my body...

"[Divine Shield]."

And then a thin sheet of light appeared in the distance, next to the man who

was controlling the silver blades. It extended straight toward him, slicing through the ground as it went—but without a moment’s hesitation, the man successfully dodged to the side. During that brief instant, the flock of silver knives faltered in the air.

It was *only* a falter, though. The storm of blades quickly corrected its course and flew high up into the sky, breaking up into clusters of several knives each, which scattered in all directions as though they were living creatures with minds of their own.

This was bad. The knives were going to fly at us again, and this time it wouldn’t just be from a single direction; they would attack from everywhere at once. I couldn’t defend us from all of them—I only had a single sword.

Even as I stood there, grasping for a solution, the man’s silver blades gained new momentum and came crashing down in unison.

This was it—I was convinced that I was done for. Nevertheless, I readied my sword...and another sheet of light appeared out of nowhere, this one before my very eyes. In the time it took for me to process my surprise, the oncoming knives crashed into the transparent barrier that now filled my field of vision and were sent careening away one by one.

Unsure of what had just happened, I simply stood and watched the spectacle as it played out. Wasn’t this...?

“My apologies for being late.”

The next thing I knew, Ines was standing next to me. A small wave of relief washed over me at the sight of her.

“I’m glad you came, Ines,” I said. “You really saved me there.”

She didn’t reply; she was busy creating walls of light to repel the silver blades flying at us from every direction. Even as she did so, however, she found the time to swing her arm in our opponent’s direction, sending a sheet of light shooting toward him from her hand.

It was the “shield” that she’d shown me during our coach ride on the way here—but I’d had no idea that it could be used like this. It shot forth like a single blade of light, slicing a straight line through the air and ground.

But our opponent was fast. He dodged Ines's attack—the keenness of which reminded me more of a sword than a shield—without any difficulty. And yet...

"[Divine Shield]."

The sheer intensity of Ines's onslaught didn't wane in the slightest. Even as she repelled that man's silver blades, she continued to fire swordlike sheets of light at him, one after another. They hewed through the ground as they flew, slicing it up before my very eyes.

Despite my amazement, I started to get a bad feeling. Ines's attacks were undoubtedly quick...but they still weren't connecting. For all their intensity, they showed no sign of catching up to our opponent at all.

Ines's streaks of light were easy to read. You had to look closely to notice the signs, but if you did, it was simple to tell which direction they would go. It was almost like they were *asking* that man with the face bandages to avoid them. And although Ines's shields acted like walls that guarded us from his silver blades, they couldn't exactly strike them down like I could with my sword. The situation hadn't changed at all—we were still dead in the water.

"Sir Noor..." Ines said. "As you can see, I'm having some difficulty hitting him with my shield. My apologies, but is there any way in which you could lend me your assistance?"

"Let's see..." I murmured.

It seemed that Ines had been thinking the same thing that I had. As she continued to protect us with her shields, I considered what I could do. Thanks to her, we were safe for the time being, so I took a moment to compose myself and examine our surroundings.

The mass of blades was flying freely through the air, swift as a flock of birds. Trying to strike them all down with my sword would be difficult. In the face of so many deadly weapons coming down on me all at once, I didn't think there was anything that I *could* do...but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that each individual knife wasn't much of a threat on its own.

And although the blades were flying pretty fast, I knew about certain birds that were faster—birds that I'd occasionally knocked out of the sky with stones,

back on the mountain that I'd called home. If I used my [Stone Throw], I could probably hit these knives too.

I couldn't see any stones in the area, but I *could* see shards of claw and fang scattered all around—remnants of the giant toad that had exploded earlier. They would do the job just fine.

I picked a piece of toad fang up from the ground and showed it to Ines. "I think I can bring those blades down with this."

She hesitated briefly before replying. "Are you certain you can hit them?"

I looked back up at the flock of silver blades in the sky. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

I couldn't make any guarantees, but I was fairly confident. Dropping birds with stones was a forte of mine—one of the very few signature moves that I had to my name. The man's knives made for small targets, but I figured that I could still pull it off.

That being said, I wasn't throwing stones; I was throwing the dead toad's claws and fangs. I felt a little guilty about flinging around its remains...but beggars couldn't be choosers. I'd just have to do my best to put its parts to good use.

"Very well," Ines said. "Then I'll drop my shields briefly as you throw. Don't worry about adjusting for me—I'll match your timing."

"Got it," I replied.

I stabbed my sword into the ground, bent down, and picked up as many claws and fangs as my hands could carry. I knew that I couldn't guarantee a hit on such small targets, but thankfully the ground was absolutely littered with ammunition. At the very least, I wouldn't have to worry about running out.

"Okay, here goes," I said.

I gripped the rocklike shards in my hand as tightly as I could, causing them to audibly crumble. They were harder than I'd expected, but with another full-strength squeeze, I managed to reduce them down to tiny fragments. Perfect. Even if my aim was sketchy, throwing so many small projectiles at once would

increase my chances of hitting my targets.

Thanks to Ines keeping us safe, I could dedicate my full concentration to throwing stones—er, that is, toad pieces. I gripped them tightly, listening to the sound of them being crushed even smaller in my hand, and focused all of my strength into activating a full-body, full-strength [Physical Enhancement]. Then I invoked both [Featherstep] and my sole hunter skill at the same time.

“[Stone Throw].”

Swinging my arm as hard as I could, I flung the crushed fragments of toad at the oncoming swarm of silver knives. Immediately, the *boom* of a tremendous explosion roared throughout our surroundings as my projectiles scored direct hits, knocking a considerable number of the blades out of the air.

I hadn’t really been precise with my aim, but, from the look of things, I’d done just fine. The claws and fangs must have been quite hard because the blades they hit were instantly reduced to small shards of metal.

Before, the knives had been moving around as though they were alive, but it looked like smashing them caused them to lose their power. The bits and pieces that now lay on the ground showed no signs of attacking us again.

I still felt bad for the toad, but its remains had done the job perfectly—probably even better than stones would have.

“Okay, round two,” I said to Ines.

I crushed the bits of toad in my other hand, then flung them as hard as I could.

“[Stone Throw].”

Once again, the countless fang and claw fragments flew straight toward the flying silver knives, shattering them to pieces and knocking them out of the sky. I thought I’d gotten even more of them than my last throw—probably because my aim had been better this time.

Confidence welled up within me. If I could keep this up, we really could win.

I bent down again to pick up more pieces of toad, then gripped them as tightly as I could. They were so hard that they cut into my hands and made

them bleed a little, but that meant nothing to me at this stage. I crushed the remains into tiny fragments, took aim at the swarm of silver blades, and once again threw with all my might.

"[Stone Throw]."

More knives shattered—many more than last time—and scattered through the air. As I grew more used to hitting moving targets, my aim was becoming more accurate. I crushed the next batch of toad pieces.

"[Stone Throw]."

As I focused on the next batch, the next, and then the next again, the time it took me to pick up, crush, and throw the fragments began to decrease. After a certain point, I stopped signaling Ines; she was deactivating her shields in perfect sync with my throws, so I figured there was no need to keep giving her verbal cues.

All of my attention was devoted to picking up claws and fangs, and throwing them. Thanks to Ines, I didn't have to worry about anything except dropping the silver blades flying above us. Silently thanking her, I steadily continued to up the pace of my throws.

[Stone Throw]

With each fistful of crushed remains that I threw, countless silver knives fell from the sky in a violent spray of sparks—and the more I repeated my task, the brighter those sparks became. It hurt to look at...but turning away would stop me from being able to hit my targets. Instead, I activated [Low Heal] on my aching eyes and continued to throw as hard as I could.

[Stone Throw]

Pick up, throw. Pick up, throw. With each bombardment, a portion of the knife swarm shattered and dispersed, as simple as that. I could feel my accuracy gradually improving. Every throw caused a deafening *boom* as my projectiles smashed through the mass of blades, turning them into silver shards that caught the light as they fell into piles on the ground.

It was as though silver snow were falling all around us. The plain upon which we stood—which had been blackened by the breath of the poisonous toad—

was gradually dyed silver-white by the drifting shards of silver.

“Just a few more...” I muttered.

When I eventually snapped out of my toad-throwing trance, I saw that the number of knives still in the sky had been greatly reduced—enough that I could probably manage the rest with my sword. But just as I processed that thought, the man in the distance vanished.

Struck by a sense of foreboding, I immediately pulled my sword out of the ground, moved in front of Ines, and swung as fast as I could.

[Parry]

A mass of sparks scattered about our surroundings. Despite having been so far away a mere moment ago, our opponent had already managed to reach us.

“That was close,” I said. “I *knew* something felt off.”

I thought the man would press the assault, similar to his flurry of attacks from earlier, but instead he calmly backed off and stood still, fixing his gaze on my face.

“That’s my line...” he began, in his slow drawl. “How’d you block that strike just now? And...is all of *this* your work too?” He looked around at the shattered fragments of silver metal scattered all over the area.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’ve dropped birds that flew about as fast before. Not that I’ve ever knocked down this many, obviously.”

“Can’t say I expected you to drop this many either. I’m running real low now, thanks to you...”

“I *am* sorry for breaking them,” I said, “but you’re the one who sent them at us.”

“Yeah. Like I said earlier, I don’t blame you. Still...”

The man vanished again.

[Parry]

Instantaneously, there was another spray of sparks. The man’s knife had been aimed at Rolo this time.

"It means I have to recoup the losses I've made, you know?"

Once more, the man vanished—but my eyes managed to follow him this time, if only just barely. Matching his movements, I swung my sword without holding back, sending yet another cascade of sparks dancing through the air.

I really couldn't let my guard down when it came to this guy; he was fast, and his strikes really packed a punch. The way he dressed was a little strange, but there was no denying that he was absurdly strong. I'd never imagined that there were people like him out in the world. One short trip away from the royal capital and I was already running into nothing but surprises.

The man was faster than a goblin, and his attacks were several times heavier than those of that huge cow I'd fought. I could hardly believe he was a human just like me; as far as I was concerned, he was more like a monster. If I lost focus for an instant, he'd kill me. I broke into a cold sweat at the thought.

Still...after my encounter with that goblin, I already had firsthand experience of how dangerous a *genuine* monster could be. This guy was stronger than that, sure, but the difference wasn't large enough that it mattered to me.

I'll manage, I told myself as I gripped my sword tightly. At first, his blindingly fast attacks had sent chills down my spine...but now I was gradually getting used to his speed.

[Parry]

I gauged the timing of the bandaged man's fast, weighty strike, then knocked it aside with a full-strength swing of my sword. Once again, I was impressed by the sturdiness of my weapon. Although my opponent's knife had felt extremely hard in its own right, my sword was evidently superior—of the two knives that he'd been wielding, one had snapped at the base of the blade.

The man leaped back and stared at his broken weapon. "What's *with* that sword...?" he asked, sounding confused. "This here's adamantite, you know? Why is *my* weapon the one that's breaking?"

I paused. "That wasn't expensive, was it?"

"Ah, whatever. I can buy more whenever I want. I just have to...save up the coin." The man threw his broken knife at me, and vanished. "[Thunderflash]."

[Parry]

The knife he'd thrown at me had moved faster than my eyes could see, but his strike was even faster than that; I only barely managed to move my sword in time to parry the attacks. I *really* couldn't let my guard down when it came to this guy. A little bit slower and I'd have had a knife in my throat...

"Could you *please* not surprise-attack me while we're mid-conversation?" I asked. "I honestly thought I was going to die."

"Well, that'd be because I was trying to kill you..." the man replied. "Seriously, what's with you? And I *knew* that sword seemed weird...no, make that you and that sword both. How did you even see my attack, much less deflect it...?"

"I just kind of...did?"

"That's not really something a person *just kind of does...*"

He placed his knife—his last one, by the look of things—back into its sheath at his waist and glanced around. Ines hadn't moved; she'd been protectively standing in front of Rolo this whole time. Even if she *had* resumed her offensive, I was fairly sure this guy would have just dodged her attacks again.

After uttering a silent prayer, I said to the man, "Are we still doing this...?" I didn't want to fight any more, if possible.

"No..." he replied. "Can't work without my tools... Look at this mess. There's mithril everywhere. I can't be bothered collecting it all...and my spells don't work on you either...so I'm out of tricks. That lady's real dangerous too, so I suppose I'll just have to close up shop for today."

"Then...are you leaving?"

"Yeah. I heard there's going to be a big party at the royal capital...but I suppose I'd better give up on that too, huh?"

"At the royal capital?" Ines repeated. "What do you mean by a 'party'?"

The man smiled beneath his black bandages. "I didn't get the details...but it's going to be a real wild one, apparently. It sounds like fun...but I got told to head back early, yeah? Suppose I've had enough fun already anyway...so I'll play nice and leave. See you 'round, weird guy."

He turned to leave.

"Right... See you."

Relieved to be rid of the strange man, I reflexively replied with an ordinary send-off. As soon as I did, however, he came to a sudden stop, turned back around, and stared at me.

"You really are a little off, huh?" he asked.

"You think so...?" I replied. "I wouldn't agree..."

Although he scared me, being told that I was "off" to my face wasn't something I could just let pass. I mean...if anyone was "off" here, it was obviously the half-naked guy with black bandages wrapped around his face, right?

"I do think so," the man called out in that creepy voice of his, smiling as though he were enjoying himself. "I've seen a lot of lunatics in my time...but even compared to them, you take the cake." He then looked at Rolo, who was standing behind us. "You should thank your lucky stars, demonfolk boy. Ah, what a waste. If I'd brought you back, I'd have made a tidy sum—your corpse would've made me enough to replace the tools I lost today ten times over. Still..."

Again, the man vanished. I clutched the sword in my hand, feeling almost like every hair on my body was standing on end, and swung as hard as I could.

[Parry]

An intense shower of sparks flew, and the man's final knife shattered into pieces—but not even that stopped the broken weapon from scratching a cut into my neck.

"With a guy like this around, there's not much I can do, hey?"

Under Ines's and my attentive gazes, the eerie half-naked man with a face wrapped in black bandages let out a laugh that sounded more like a groan, then vanished along with the dark clouds in the sky.

Chapter 30: To the Royal Capital

As I watched Instructor Noor and Ines's awe-inspiring battle against Zadu—and even for a while after Zadu's departure—I found myself unable to move. Their exchange had been of a world entirely unlike the one I knew. Had I moved even a single step closer, I would have been cut to pieces in a heartbeat.

Zadu's departure had been just as abrupt as his arrival. Once I was finally able to confirm that no signs of the man's presence remained in the area, I allowed myself a moment of relief. Evidently, he'd come here for Rolo and Rolo alone, so he'd simply left when he was forced to give up.

But when Instructor Noor and Ines walked back to me, Rolo in tow, and told me about Zadu's unsettling parting remarks, unease once again welled up within my chest.

"At the royal capital...?" I asked. "What could he mean by that...?"

"I'm uncertain," Ines replied. I could tell that she was feeling uneasy as well. "However, his exact words were that it would be a 'wild one.' Quite the suggestive remark."

Ines and I were brooding when Instructor Noor called out to us. "Are you two interested?" he asked. "In the party, that is."

"I am..." I replied. "Is something going to happen at the royal capital...?"

"You are? Then how about we head back now? We haven't gone that far yet. I remember Ines said something about not being able to take Rolo into Mithra, but the capital's less of a problem, right? Turning around might not be a bad idea."

Ines looked torn upon hearing Instructor Noor's proposal. "Sir Noor, that would be—"

But before she could finish, Rolo suddenly collapsed to his knees and began to shiver, clutching at his shoulders.

"What's wrong, Rolo?" Instructor Noor asked. "Are you cold...? You look awful."

Rolo ignored the question, still shivering. "Y-You came...from the royal capital?!"

"Yeah, we did. I was thinking of dropping you off there, since it sounds like we can't take you along on our trip. Do you not want to go?"

"N-No, that's not it... You...You can't. You can't go back!"

"Can you explain why?" I asked.

"I heard... *He* said that...that the biggest one is going there... That the capital is done for... I *heard* it. He said it's going to be a show far grander than the Black Death Dragon could ever be!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Instructor Noor asked.

Rolo didn't answer; he simply continued to cower, shivering in place. Instructor Noor, Ines, and I exchanged looks.

"Ines," I said, "let's return. The situation sounds more dire than I'd imagined. Is that agreeable to you, Instructor?"

"Of course," he replied.

Ines's response came more hesitantly. "Please wait, my lady. I cannot agree with this course of action. I have orders from Lord Rein to—"

"Enough, Ines. I already know. He told you to take me to Mithra to seek asylum in the event that something happens to the capital, didn't he? That's why you're refusing to go back."

"My lady... How...?"

"I'm his sister; it isn't too difficult for me to guess his thoughts. I imagine he knew I would be hesitant to go...but, to be honest, I do wish he'd given me a proper explanation. Still, my brother isn't the kind of person to give thoughtless orders. That's why I kept silent and obeyed—because I thought it would be for the best. After all, I'm sure he has some plan that I cannot fully grasp."

Ines paused before replying. "In that case, my lady, we should continue on to

Mithra. You'll be safest there."

"Perhaps, but...things are different now. We have new information from both Zadu and Rolo. We must return to the royal capital at once to inform them of the oncoming danger. Moreover...what good could ever come of me escaping alone?"

"My lady—"

"We both know what happened to the demonfolk after they lost their country. Even if I *can* make my escape now, all that awaits me is that same fate. I must not run."

At my words, Ines looked at Rolo shivering and cowering on the ground. "Very well..." she said. "We shall return. But please, my lady—you must not leave my side."

"Thank you, Ines."

"What about you, Rolo?" Instructor Noor asked. "If you don't want to come with us, we could say goodbye here, but..."

Although Rolo seemed to waver a little, he managed to whisper through his trembling. "I'll...go."

His answer surprised me, given his earlier reaction.

"I might not be able to do anything..." Rolo continued, "but my people will be there, causing it all, so..."

"Yeah...?" Instructor Noor replied. "Dea... Dem... Your people kind of have it rough, huh?"

He said no more, falling silent as though something was occupying his thoughts. Then, he turned around to look at the site of his earlier battle. Staring sorrowfully at the scattered chunks of the Black Death Dragon's corpse—now all covered in shattered fragments of mithril—he quietly shook his head. Here and there, I could see moments of regret in his expression.

Instructor Noor was in pain thinking about Rolo's upbringing—I was sure of it. I was ashamed of myself; I'd been blind to the boy's circumstances at the beginning and had only worried for my own safety.

"Let's go," Instructor Noor said after a short while. "We're in a hurry, right?"

"Let's," I replied. And with that, the four of us boarded our coach, which we'd left nearby.

Like Rolo had said, a great danger likely awaited us at the royal capital. The idea of confronting it willingly made me afraid...but with Instructor Noor at my side, the man who had slain a Black Death Dragon and repelled the legendary Deadman Zadu, maybe it didn't matter what hardships lay in our path. Perhaps he would simply smash through them all.

I found myself hoping that would prove true.

Right now, my duty as the princess of the Kingdom of Clays was to stand my ground. I needed to escort my instructor—a man who in every way seemed like he'd stepped right out of a hero's epic—to the royal capital, even if doing so cost me my life. As things stood, that was quite possibly the only thing I could do for my kingdom.

"Make haste, Ines. Go as fast as you can."

"Yes, my lady."

And so, this time with Rolo the demonfolk boy aboard, our coach resumed its journey—back down the road we'd come from, to the royal capital.

Extra Chapter: Princess Lynneburg's First Goblin Hunt *Five Years Old*

"Princess Lynneburg's a real handful, huh? Can't believe she said she wanted to go for a walk at this time of night."

"Yeah. It's a good thing everyone—the king too, mind you—talked her down earlier while the sun was still up. But you know her; we can't let our guards down."

"Is she really that much trouble? She's just a pampered young lady, for one thing—and isn't she still five? Say whatever you want, but she just looks like a regular little girl to me. I mean, I know she's a person of tremendous importance...but she doesn't need *this* many guards, does she?"

Kyle the All-Hearing, an A-rank adventurer who had been summoned as the result of an emergency commission put through the Adventurers Guild, shrugged and looked at the others as he spoke. He was currently on an all-night guard mission and was sitting around a fire with five other elites gathered from several different origins, including from the ranks of the Kingdom of Clays's own soldiers. The group, the members of which were experienced veterans and heroes in their own right, was on alert—but their vigilance wasn't directed at some unknown outside threat.

After all, their current mission was "babysitting."

Their duty was to guard (and keep an eye on) Princess Lynneburg, the Kingdom's very own Prodigy Princess. The king had taken the ten-year-old Prince Rein out on an educational magical beast hunting expedition, so it fell to these guards to watch over the princess, who had remained behind in the castle.

"You only say that because you don't know a thing about the princess, boy. Once you get to know her a little, you won't be running your mouth so freely."

"Ha! That's pretty fainthearted of a man who beat a dragon to death,

Strongfist Barzhe! I looked up to your legacy once, you know. Retiring to work in the royal palace has made you too soft. Growing old must be awful, huh?"

"What did you say, boy?!"

Barzhe, an old soldier with a massive frame, shot up to his feet and glared at Kyle, a tall young man of slender build.

"I've heard all about you," Kyle said. "Your only duties these days are babysitting the princess and doing odd jobs... To think you were once a hero and a Dragonslayer!"

"You lack respect, Kyle," Barzhe growled. "We commissioned your help because we had high hopes for your reconnaissance expertise, but that's no license to mouth off."

"Drop it, you two," the captain of their band of guards said. "If Captain Sig hears you, sorry's the least you'll be."

"Ah, what's the harm?" Kyle replied. "All of the Six Sovereigns are out on the hunting expedition tonight. Not even Sharp-Eared Sig can hear us from where he is now. On the flip side, though, that means we're the only ones around tonight. Don't let your guards down, eh?"

"Indeed," Barzhe replied. "We must stay alert, or the princess may outwit us."

"Ha hah!" Kyle laughed. "Me, outwitted by a five-year-old? You're joking."

"I'm completely serious."

"Hah! Damn, you really are!"

"If you can't bring yourself to understand...then perhaps I should teach you a lesson."

"Hey. Barzhe, Kyle. I told you to drop it."

At the guard captain's intercession, the two grudgingly backed off. There was a brief silence before Kyle spoke again.

"Hey, it's not like I'm turning my nose up at the work, yeah? I've just got my pride to maintain. Prodigy Princess or not, no kid's getting the better of me. I'll earn my pay, you can be sure of that."

Barzhe's reply came equally as delayed. "Let's hope that's true."

And so the night deepened without any further ado. The young princess obediently went to bed, where she promptly fell into a restful sleep...

Or at least, that was how it had appeared.

"W-We've got trouble!"

Just as the moon rose fully into the sky, illuminating the world below with its light, Kyle the All-Hearing ran to where his fellow guards were stationed. He was supposed to have been keeping an eye on the sleeping princess, but here he was, his face ashen.

"What's wrong?"

"The princess is missing! I can't find her anywhere!"

"What...? Did you do a thorough search?"

Upon hearing Kyle's news, the other guards tensed up.

"Yeah," Kyle said. "I checked every corner of her bedchamber, but...she's just completely gone!"

"You volunteered to take up lookout duty, didn't you?!" the guard captain yelled. "What were you doing?!"

"I...I'm sorry. She disappeared during my meal break. I know it's not an excuse, but it was only for an instant—"

"What have you done?! This is an emergency! Where's the princess?! Surely you at least *know*?!"

"I do... I left a search needle in her nightgown, so we should be able to detect her location on this map. She's just a kid, so she couldn't have gone that far—"

"If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it!" the guard captain barked. "Hand over that map!"

After seizing the map of the royal capital and its surroundings, the captain spread his hands over its surface and activated his [Detect] skill. What he saw next made the blood drain from his face.

"This...is bad."

The princess was moving at an incredible pace and had already left the bounds of the city. It was hard to believe that a little girl could run so fast. Moreover, for reasons yet unknown, she was heading in a straight line northeast. Could she have been kidnapped? No, it was still too early to draw conclusions. The only thing that was certain was...

"The princess is headed for the Forest of Beasts."

"Why there...?"

"As I recall...for a while now, she's wanted to see with her own eyes whether the Forest's day and night ecosystems really are different. The king told her off when he found out and said she wasn't allowed to go, but she still tries to sneak out from time to time. The esteemed Sovereign of Shadows always catches her before she leaves the castle, but, of course...he isn't here tonight. With her greatest obstacle out of the picture, the princess must have seen this as her best chance to slip away."

"You must be joking..." Kyle muttered. "You mean she wasn't kidnapped? She ran off on her own, *through our surveillance network*? Some of those traps are for binding magical beasts! You're telling me a five-year-old figured out a way to get around all of our safety measures and then *actually pulled it off*!?"

"This is the princess we're talking about..." Barzhe stressed. "It's entirely possible."

The guard captain was quick to interject. "At any rate, there are goblins around at this time of night! This is a crisis, you hear me? We need to pursue her at once!"

Grappling with his own impatience, the guard captain issued his orders. He knew this blunder was enough to get him dismissed from his position; now, his only hope was that nothing worse came of it. If something wasn't done soon, it was entirely possible that he and his guards would be responsible for the death of a little girl—specifically one who was said to possess talent unseen since the founding of the Kingdom.

Desperate, the guards all made after the princess as though it were their own lives on the line.



On a moonlit night, deep within the Forest of Beasts, a pack of goblins surrounded a single little girl. Her hands were full with a multitude of nuts, berries, and flowers of every color, and her eyes were brimming with tears.

"I'm sorry..." the girl said. "I didn't mean to make a mess of your home. I'm really, really sorry..."

Being subjected to the gazes of the person-eating fiends was none other than young Princess Lynneburg. She faced the pack of monsters and continued to apologize with all her heart, weeping as she did so.

"I'm really, *really* sorry..."

Yet the goblins, unable to understand her words, merely bared their fangs and pressed in closer. In no time at all, they were only a step away from the little girl who had done nothing but cry and apologize.

That was the exact moment the guards reached the scene.

"No! Protect the prin—"

The guard captain had started issuing his order the moment he laid eyes on the situation, but it was too late—that was when the goblins chose to spring on their victim, all at once. What followed was...

"—cess...?"

...unexpected. Before anyone had realized it, there was a sword in the princess's hands, adorned in golden ornamentation that reflected the light of the moon. Then, she swung it, sending countless goblin heads spinning into the darkness of the night.

"I'm *really* sorry."

Next, a number of goblin torsos dropped to the ground, separated from their legs. The girl then leaped high into the air, cutting through any surviving monsters around her as she went.

"I'm sorry... I didn't think it'd turn out like this. I promise I'll do my best so that you don't notice me next time, so...I'm really, *really* sorry! [Fireball]!"

With the moon at her back, the weeping girl produced one massive ball of flame from her hand after another, using each one to incinerate more and more goblins. All the guards could do was stand there and watch the slaughter.

Then, they began to doubt their own duties. *Why did we come running here?* they thought. *To protect her?* How could they when she was already annihilating a pack of goblins before their very eyes?

The next thing the guards knew, the weeping little girl was in front of them, bowing her head. The goblins had all been slain.

"I'm sorry..." the girl said. "I was just going to play a little and then go straight back home, but there were so many rare plants, so... I'd never seen a real moonlight blossom before, you see...because they only bloom on moonlit nights... I...I just lost track of time, and I didn't realize it until I was already surrounded... I'm really sorry..."

As the little girl wept and apologized desperately, one particularly large-framed man knelt down and said in a gentle voice, "You're safe, my lady. That's all that matters to us. Come on; let's go home."

The man's wrinkled face was marred by deep scars, yet kindness radiated from his smile nonetheless. Upon realizing who the man was, Kyle the All-Hearing could not help but doubt his own eyes—and for the second time that night. After all, it was said that nobody had ever seen a smile grace the features of the taciturn, expressionless, once-legendary adventurer Strongfist Barzhe, feared for being savage enough to beat a dragon to death with his hands.

The next day, as Kyle watched the young princess plead his defense in front of the king's newly returned expedition party, explaining how the incident was entirely her own fault, he made a vow to himself: he would apply to work at the royal palace and devote his entire life to keeping her safe.

Afterword

Hello, my name is Nabeshiki. Before I say anything else, thank you for picking up this book.

I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet! was something I started posting on Shosetsuka ni Naro half on a whim, born from a feeling of “I'll just write something fun and invigorating!” To my surprise and gratitude, I received an overwhelming response right from the get-go.

Among those responses were a truly unbelievable number of requests to adapt this series into a novel, manga, or the like. (I'm quite certain that my unfamiliarity with the situation caused a great deal of trouble for many people...) The editors with whom I corresponded gave me many warm words of encouragement and were kind enough to inform me just what exactly was so interesting about this story named *Parry*. The various opinions that I've received from everybody have greatly encouraged me during my writing of this series. As such, I'd like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to all of you.

During the development of this series, I had the extremely good fortune of meeting the wonderful Kawaguchi-san, the illustrator for the novel adaptation. I am blessed to have their illustrations. They were able to perfectly grasp the key character components from my character bio sheet, which was so detailed that it slightly frightened my editor, and produce character designs about thirty times better than I, the original author, could ever have imagined. When I saw the character design drafts, all I could do was bring my hands together in earnest worship in front of my screen.

Of course, I was deeply moved not only by Kawaguchi-san's character designs but also by the way they expressed the setting and world of *Parry* through their illustrations, better than I ever could have hoped for. To put it quite mildly, Kawaguchi-san, I consider you to be a god. Thank you so much.

I would also like to thank Ootomo-san, who worked with me to build the novel adaptation from the ground up, and Furusato-san, who provided their cooperation up until the publication of this book. Furthermore, I would like to express particular gratitude to the great Inagaki-sama, who was the first to find *I Parry Everything* on Shosetsuka ni Naro, and who provided their ceaseless, enthusiastic support, even as I continued to wander about in confusion.

Most of all, I would like to extend my gratitude to all those who have picked this book up and enjoyed it, all those who read the web novel and purchased this book anyway, and all those who continue to enjoy the web novel despite my relatively relaxed (by which I mean very slow) updates. Thank you so much. It is because of you, the readers, that I can continue to write this story.

I'd also like to express my thanks to everyone in the editorial department for their hard work managing marketing and sales, Araki-sama for the design of this book, Namikawa Daisuke-sama for voicing the main character Noor in the commercial, KRSG-sensei for their work as the artist of the manga adaptation...and so many more people whom I cannot fit in this afterword. It was due to all of your involvement that this book was able to be published. Thank you. Perhaps the reason why I feel as though *Parry* is no longer solely my creation is because the characters have already been accepted by so many people.

Although I feel unbelievably blessed and lucky to have been able to publish this book, and the author in me is ecstatic...if I think about it calmly, I've only produced a single volume so far. There are so many scenes, events, and characters I still want to express. I can't wait to see how the characters of *Parry* will grow and change in the future. (Yes, I know I'm the one who'll be writing them.)

I plan to have fun and keep doing my best with writing both the web novel and published versions of *I Parry Everything*, so I hope you'll keep an eye out for them. In particular, I promise that the second published volume will be even better than the first.

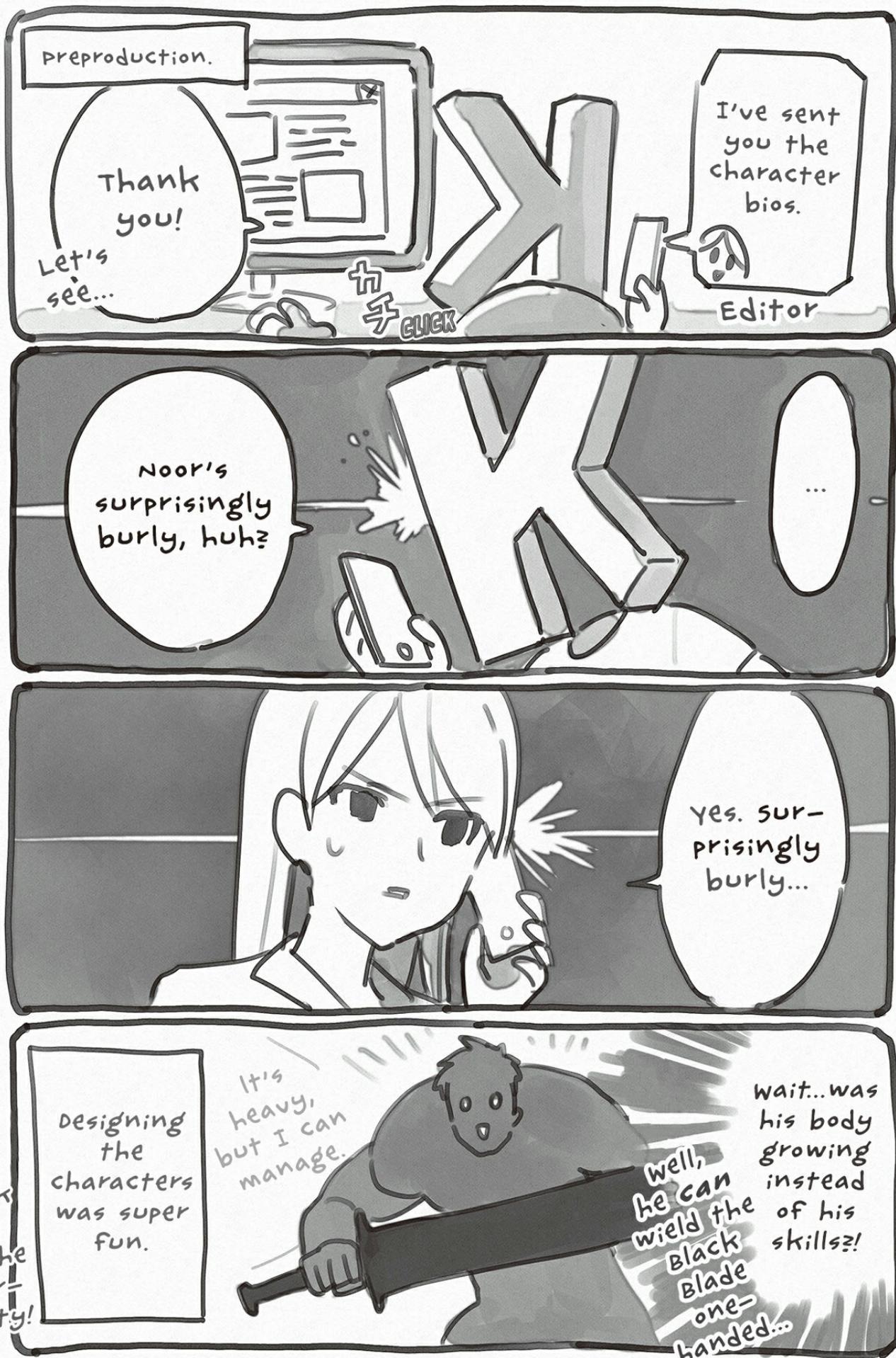
I really believe that *Parry* is the kind of story that improves with each book, so if you liked this first one, I sincerely hope that you'll accompany me for just a little while longer.

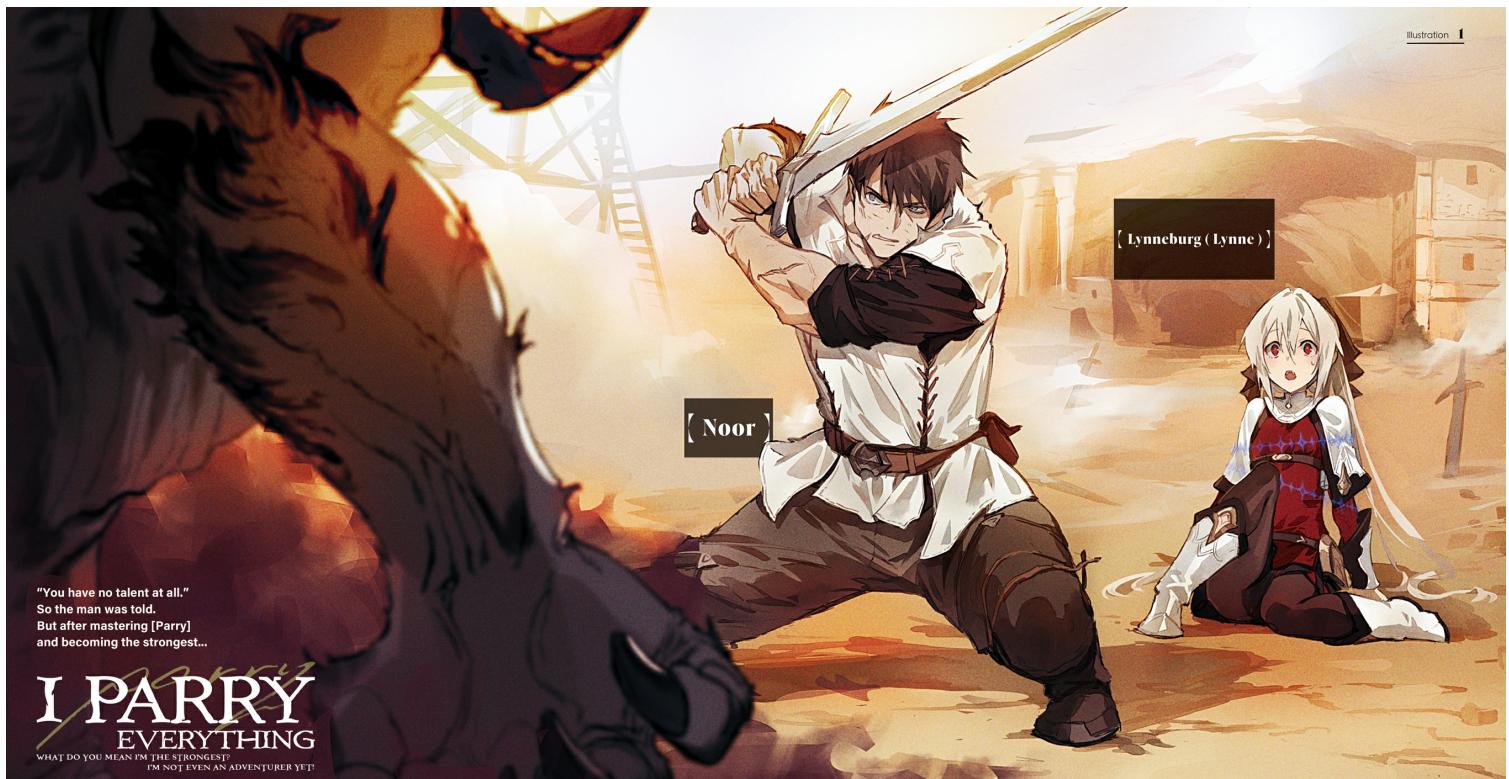
Nabeshiki

September 2020

Afterword

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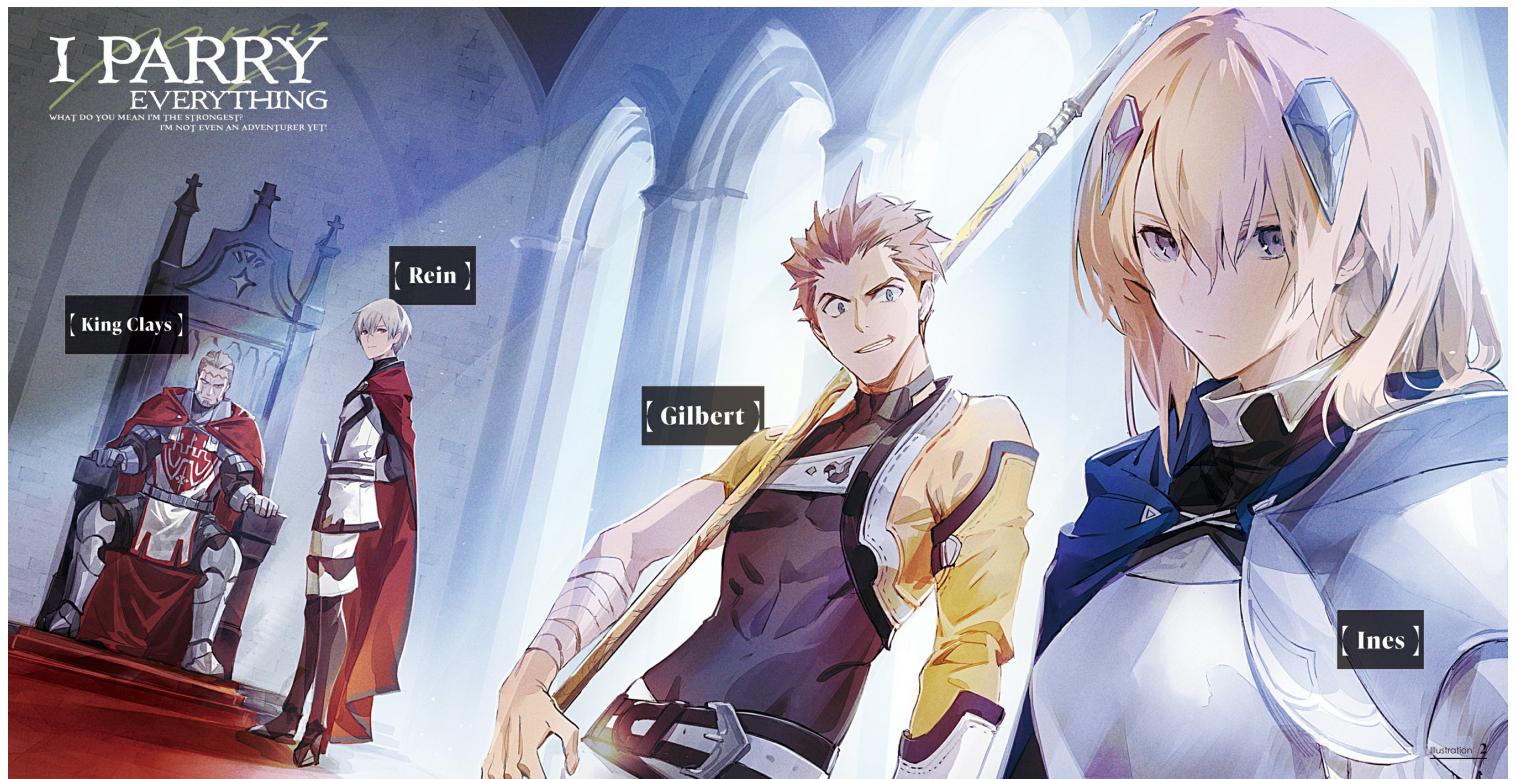
"You have no talent at all."
So the man was told.
But after mastering [Parry]
and becoming the strongest...

I PARRY
EVERYTHING

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

I PARRY
EVERYTHING

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



Bonus Short Story

Side Story: Noor's Gourmet Tour of the Capital *The Introduction*

After work, you could usually find me having dinner at one of the food stalls or dining halls lining the main streets of the city. My colleagues on the construction site were always eager to recommend me all sorts of restaurants and tasty dishes, and it was a secret hobby of mine to try out new places to eat based on that information.

One day, while my coworkers and I were having a zealous discussion about which eateries had good food, we were interrupted by a sudden burst of laughter. It had come from behind me.

"Heh. So *that's* what passes as tasty for you guys, huh? I didn't realize you were all such comedians."

I turned around to see a short, familiar-looking man—someone I'd spotted around the construction site every now and again. He was wearing an ominous smile that I couldn't get a read on.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Hold it, Noor," one of my coworkers said. "That guy's bad news."

"Heh heh. You won't find any of the good stuff on the main streets, I'll tell you that. We *real* gourmets hang out in the back alleys. But I guess I shouldn't have expected *taste* from the likes of you lot."

Glancing to my sides, I saw that my other coworkers were all shrinking back. I wasn't sure why; hearing the short man denounce the food served on the main streets had piqued my curiosity.

"You don't say..." I replied. "Are there really eateries that good in the back alleys?"

"Heh heh. You interested? I can take you to one...if you've got the guts to step up to the challenge."

"Challenge...?" I repeated.

"Don't listen to him, Noor," one of my other coworkers said. "I'm telling you this for your own good: going with him is the last thing you wanna do."

"Why's that?"

"Well...'cause he eats..." My coworker looked around as if seeking agreement from the others. "Y'know..."

"Don't," another of my colleagues said. "Don't remind me."

"Urپ..." heaved a third. "Just thinking about it makes me..."

"C'mon, can we drop this? I'm gonna... Ugh..."

"Are you guys okay?" I asked. "What's with you all of a sudden?" We'd been chatting and having a blast just a moment ago, but now everyone was holding their hands over their mouths, looking queasy.

"If you're that curious," one coworker said, "then I s'pose you should go see for yourself. I...really don't want to explain."

"Yeah," another chimed in, then turned to the others. "Anyway, this is *Noor* we're talking about. I bet he'll be fine."

"Good point," remarked another. "Trying it out once—and *only* once—might even be a good learning experience."

"Go for it, Noor," added a fourth. "You'll understand once you're there. Tell us all about it afterward, all right?"

"If you say so," I replied. "Sure."

And so, the next day, despite being somewhat suspicious of everyone's reactions, I went with the short man to wherever it was he'd wanted to take me.

"Heh heh. Well, here we are."

We were now outside a tiny eatery hidden deep down a dark alley. As soon as we entered, I was struck by an odd smell coming from the back. It was hard to

be certain, but it might have been the food.

"What kind of place is this...?" I wondered aloud.

"Haven't seen you here before, sonny."

The person who'd spoken was an old woman with a peculiar and somewhat gloomy air about her. By the look of things, she was the owner of this establishment.

"Yeah, he's with me," the short man said. "Says he's got an interest in *gourmet* food, so I brought him along. The usual, please. Enough for two."

"Hee hee! The usual, eh?" With an unsettling smile on her face, the old woman loaded two plates with something from the back, then placed them in front of us. "Hee hee... Tuck in."

"What's this?" I asked.

"Just try it," the man replied.

I did as instructed and scooped up a hefty chunk of whatever the old woman had served me. It looked like some kind of sticky, rotting fish carcass minced up and heaped in a pile...but I shoveled it into my mouth nonetheless.

"Hmm..." I mumbled. The bones scratched and painfully stabbed at the inside of my mouth, and the stench of rotting fish was so intense that, for a moment, I considered spitting it all out. But after making it past that initial struggle, my taste buds were overcome by a flavor that was mysteriously delicious.

To be honest, I still preferred the food served by the stalls on the main streets, but this dish was definitely tasty—just in a different kind of way.

"You were right," I said. "This *is* good."

"What?!" The man was staring at me, looking shocked for some reason. "I see, I see! You're more promising than I thought!"

"Really...?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm seeing you in a whole new light."

I couldn't understand why. The only thing I'd done was give my honest opinion...

"Right, in that case, let's move on to the next dish," the man said. "Could we get *you-know-what*, please? You know, the one that almost made me faint when I first tried it two years ago."

"Hee hee. Are you sure it's not too soon?" the old woman asked. "This is sonny's first time here, after all."

"I'm sure," the man replied. "If my read on him is right, he'll be fine."

"Hee hee. Well, I'm not responsible for anything that happens. And you're not getting a refund, even if you can't finish it."

"No problem. Go ahead and serve us."

"Hee hee. 'Preciate your patronage."

And so, I was greeted by my next dish: a pitch-black *something* that I could find no words to describe.

"What...is this?" I asked.

"Try it and see," the man replied.

"If you say so."

Again, I did as instructed, only to be immediately hit by a severe sense of discomfort. The first thing I tasted was a nauseating sweetness. Then, a moment later, a violent mix of spiciness, bitterness, tartness, and sourness assaulted my tongue in unison. As I swallowed, the strength of every flavor peaked explosively, stimulating my mouth and throat. I was basically clinging to consciousness, but still...

"That was good," I said.

It was close, but the dish just barely qualified as "good." It had a unique taste that I'd never experienced before, but it was definitely still edible. I didn't think it contained any poison either, so I figured that, with enough exposure, I could solidify its position in the "tasty" category of my mind.

"You don't say..." the man remarked. "You really don't say. I misjudged you, buddy. I didn't think you'd make it this far. You've got my respect!"

He was staring at me in surprise again, though I still wasn't sure why. Then,

his eyes began to sparkle. I was only getting more and more lost.

"Still," he went on, "if something of this level is a piece of cake to you...then there's only one thing left to try. Shopkeep, bring *it* out. The dish that I risked my very life to eat three years ago."

"*It...?*" the old woman repeated. "W-Wait, you can't mean..." Her eyes opened wide in shock, then she continued in an admonishing tone, "Are you sane? That isn't something some run-of-the-mill amateur can stomach. You've been coming here long enough to know that."

"Yes, yes," the man replied. "I'm prepared, though. I'll take responsibility for whatever happens. Bring it out."

"Hee hee... Someone's getting carried away. Ah, but what do I care? Remember, you're responsible. Hee hee."

With a sinister cackle, the old woman filled a dish with something else from the back—something that reeked and practically seemed to *glow* green—before placing it in front of me.

"What's this...?" I asked.

"Poisonous toad simmered in soy sauce," she explained. "The barbarians up north used to eat it to test their courage...though it's been a long time since that tradition's been followed."

I didn't catch a word of her explanation—the odor of the dish was too pungent. I wondered whether it was even edible.

"This'll take some grit..." I said.

"Heh heh. Getting cold feet?" the man asked. "The first time *I* saw it, I almost blacked out from the smell alone. It only gets worse once it's in your mouth, and—hey, hey, hold it! Don't eat so much at once! You'll die!"

I'd acted without hesitation and taken a generous bite of the green...substance. Immediately, the inside of my mouth was overwhelmed by a stench so foul that I started to question whether I was even eating food. It was grossly reminiscent of the most pungent gutters I'd ever cleaned, and yet...

"This is tasty," I said.

And it was, although just barely. It had an unmistakably sour smell, and its texture was so horrid that just trying to swallow it made my mouth, throat, and stomach ache unbearably all at once...but after I made it past all that, I could tell that the dish was jam-packed with nutrients.

Sure, it looked and smelled awful, but it definitely wasn't inedible. In fact, if you could steel your nerves, there was a lot of merit to be found in eating something so nourishing. I'd doubted whether it even qualified as food before, but now I was reasonably confident that it did, even if only by the narrowest margin. I mean, it wasn't like there was poison in it.

To think that dishes like this even existed... The world sure was a huge place.

"What...?" The short man's eyes shot open. "'Tasty'?!"

I gave him a puzzled look. "Didn't you bring me here because the food is good...?"

"I mean, yes, but... Are you sure? A-Actually, wait. It's been a long while since I last had that dish, so let me just test—gack!"

After taking a single bite, the man dropped to the floor, looking like he was choking. He eventually managed to get up again, with some effort, but not before hitting the ground in frustration.

"H-How can...you call something like this...tasty?!"

"Hee hee. Give it up already," the old woman told the man. "It's your loss. The rookie beat you. *He* holds the title of Bizarre Gourmet now."

"Ugh, damn it!" the man cursed. "I never thought you'd make it this far!"

"Bizarre Gourmet"? I had no idea what they were talking about. Weren't we here because he'd wanted to introduce me to some good food?

"This isn't over, you hear me?!" the short man sputtered. "W-We'll see who gets the last laugh next time!"

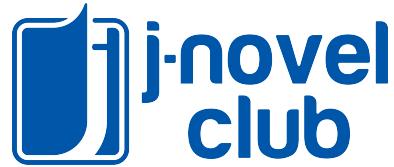
After his proclamation, he paid for both of our meals, left the tiny eatery, and vanished into the night. I'd come along intending to pay for myself, but my only choice now was to gratefully accept his kindness.

"That was great, thanks," I told the old woman. "I think I'll come again."

"Hee hee. You do that, sonny. Bring him along too. I'll plate up no less than the best next time, so look forward to it."

"Sure, I'll do that. I can't wait."

And so, after finishing my food and saying my thanks, I stepped back out into the night, leaving the gloomy little restaurant behind me.



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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 1

by Nabeshiki

Translated by Jason Li Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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