

EARTHS G MAGUS 81

81 Breakthrough

[Spirit force has increased]

[Congratulations! You have mastered the middle stage foundation of the earth element]

Now that his focus had been broken, Emery realized it had been quite a while since he had checked his status. So, he decided to examine the symbol on his hand and just as Killgragah had mentioned, some functionalities in the palm-symbol worked since it was connected to his lifeforce. He selected his personal information and the following showed:

[Emery Ambrose]

[16 years old]

[Spirit Aptitude B]

[Spirit Affinity: Plant, Water, Earth, Darkness]

[Plant Spirit - Middle Stage]

[Water Spirit - Initial Stage]

[Earth Spirit - Middle Stage]

[Darkness Spirit - Inestimable]

[Battle power 21 (16)]

[Spirit force 36 (24)]

[Fey Bloodline - stage 1]

[Acolyte Rank 2]

Looking through his updated general information, Emery slightly smiled at the results of his most recent training. During his four days of training, his spirit force increased by a total of three points, and not only that, his battle power also increased by five more points, which was out of his expectations. He gave it a thought and the only explanation he could make sense the most was the latest addition to his status.

[Fey Bloodline - stage 1]

So far, he had experienced two instances of bloodline activation, the first one was done with the help of a potion booster, which also increased his strength permanently afterward, while the second one was activated naturally in his battle against the woman. This second instance differed in a sense that it was a lower increase, however, to make things matters, Emery was glad there were increases in his physical condition.

For a moment, Emery daydreamed of waving a huge sword and battling countless foes, however, when he tried to move his right arm... a hint of disappointment struck him. He tried to feel whatever was left of his right arm(which was now only the right shoulder) only to become more pensive. Fortunately, the

depressing thoughts were drowned out by the long, grumbling complaint of his stomach. And with his attention shifting once more, he hadn't considered how he would be living without food or water for a long time?

He stood up with his slightly numb legs and went to the black dragon whose intent gaze seemed to be locked in watching the outside world.

The so-called 'great and mighty, Killgragah' didn't seem to put this matter in such high regards, but for Emery this was a matter of great importance. After all, if he didn't eat or drink anything, he would die. Once more, Emery asked, "Dear Magnificent Killgragah, I, a humble acolyte needs forms of sustenance. If I don't, then a supreme being such as yourself would soon be seen as a delicacy in my eyes."

"That's preposterous!" exclaimed the black dragon. "However, you are bothering me. At the other end of the tunnel, there should be some food there. Now, go away."

Emery didn't say much and only nodded in gratitude. He went back through the passage he had come from and found that the floor was stained with dried blood. Not far away, was the black dagger, that Granny had used to try and suck energy lifeforce from people. He picked it up and inspected it closer. At first glance, the dagger appear dull, however when Emery tried to run his finger by the edge, it cut through his skin like metal and leaves.

[Moon Dagger - Tier 3 Artifact]

[Weight: 2.1 kilogram, Length: 35 centimeter]

[Spell unavailable - bound to owner]

Like what he had seen so far, Granny's dagger was special. However, what kind of spell did it contain? If it was only the sucking of lifeforce, Emery wasn't sure if he would like to use this. For now though, he decided to keep the jet black dagger by strapping it on his waist before continuing on his journey to reach the other end of the tunnel. Soon enough, he found himself in a small basement-like room.

There were several wooden containers that had moss growing on the outside, however, the inside seemed to be filled with water. He scooped it with his left hand, smelled it before taking a sip, and then within an instant, it quenched whatever thirst he had. Sitting on another side of the room were more than a dozen leather sacks, and when he opened it, a pile of triangular leaf packages lay inside. Emery grabbed one and after he had unpacked it, the content appeared to be some sort of bread. Again, he sniffed it but Emery's brows twitched. It smelled nothing.

Since cooking was somewhat related to alchemy, Emery tried his spell analyze and received the following information:.

[Analyzing...]

[Lembas Bread]

[A consumable item. The choice of food by humanity's mortal enemy, the elves. However, none can deny its nutritional effectiveness. Just one small is enough for daily consumption]

Emery placed a small piece of the bread into his mouth. He was kind of expecting some kind of taste, however, it was just plain and simple. After finishing the piece, he bore witness to its effect as his grumbling stomach no longer complained and felt full. Better than starving to death, he supposed.

He then rummaged through the other sacks, only to find they all contained the same tasteless bread. Searching around the room even further didn't garner any results but since his main objective in coming to his area was fulfilled, Emery traveled back to where the black dragon was.

On the way, Emery pondered why there was a storage room here. Then he remembered the description of the bread, elves... there was only one elf whom he had encountered, and that was back in the Magus Academy in one of the forests near Elder's Respite. So, this meant that something happened afterward when he lost consciousness in the battle against the orcs.

Not wanting to think more of it, Emery arrived back in Killgragah's chamber only to find the black dragon fast asleep. He didn't mind the sleeping dragon and proceeded to sit down on the corner and started cultivating his understanding of the elements. This time, he went for the water element.

"Water is always flowing, never ending, adapting to its surroundings," Emery muttered. Soon enough, the illusion of a raging current flashed before him and carried him away. He tried to go with the flow and let himself be carried away. Without him realizing it, several more days had passed once again.

[Spirit force has increased]

[Spirit force has increased]

[Spirit force has increased]

[Congratulations! You have mastered the middle stage foundation of the water element]

Similar to what he had experienced earlier, the bout of energy and new understanding woke him up from the trance. He got up, took care of himself in the other room before returning to this chamber. The succeeding days were spent on mastering two of his spells that were collecting mold in the back of his mind.

[Stone skin]

Emery's skin became as hard as stone and tried to cut a bit of himself using the jet black dagger. Its sharpness still penetrated his defense, however, when he tried crashing into the wall or punching himself in several parts of his body, he felt nothing. He smiled knowing that the stone skin was effective.

[Whip splash]

At first he tried using it in the dragon's chamber but nothing happened. A suspicion came into his mind, so when he tried using the spell in the storage room where there were dozens of water containers, a whip made out of water formed and slapped the ground he was thinking of hitting. His suspicion came into fruition that this spell indeed needed some kind of catalyst. However, because of that, Emery placed the spell back in his mind since water was an extremely precious resource right now.

Overall though, Emery was quite satisfied he was able to use the spells.

Emery continued training and two weeks later a new notification came out of the symbol in his hand.

[Spirit force has increased]

[You have now reached acolyte rank 3]

It took him only about three weeks to break through the third rank. He continued making progress with the three elements except for the darkness. That element was just something he couldn't understand how to begin cultivating with. Also, he decided for himself to not be over reliant in asking questions to the dragon.

A month had passed but it looked like breaking through the fourth rank was a milestone. Emery could feel it.

After another month had and only then he had success.

[You have reached acolyte rank 4]

Progress is progress, was what Emery believed in. He was becoming a bit more cheerful, but the dragon, who had not spoken with him for a long time, said, "Aghh, I can't stand it anymore. You are regressing instead of moving forward! This is worse than I thought."

82 Spirit Core

Based on his deductions, the acolyte rankings increase seemed to follow a rule. And that was whenever his spirit force increased by ten, his rank would get upgraded.

[Plant Spirit - high stage]

[Water Spirit - middle stage]

[Earth Spirit - high stage]

[Darkness Spirit - Inestimable]

[Battle power 23 (17)]

[Spirit force 50 (31)]

[Fey Bloodline - stage 1]

[Acolyte Rank 4]

Despite all the progress he had made so far, however, the black dragon's nasty comments started coming once again. Killgragah said, "Aghh, I can't stand it anymore. You are regressing instead of moving forward! This is worse than I thought."

Emery couldn't understand what this chained dragon was talking about. In his point of view, the continuous practice and results he had received in the past three months were more than satisfactory. Granted that cultivating his four elements one by one each time may take longer because he remembered Magus Minerva had said to not cultivate them at the same time else his body would explode, still, was slow progress to the eyes of a mythical being be enough of a reason to receive some boeing?

He rose to his feet and approached the black dragon, fearlessly. Even though the dragon had spent the majority of its time sleeping or gazing at the outside world, sharing the same room would somewhat make some sort of connection between the two. And since this black dragon seemed to not like mincing words, Emery felt more comfortable talking back in the same manner, "Can you stop being annoying? I'm doing my best here and you're breaking my concentration."

"Grahaha! Your face, your face! You look so proud when you should be ashamed!" roared the black dragon. "Again, you are in a room filled of Khaos energy, but what have you achieved so far? A shameful rank four acolyte. I feel like if In this rate i will need at least a 5 year nap till you reached magus rank."

Emery clenched his fist. "Damn, you never say something nice, do you?"

"Show me something worthy then. I say what I see. And if that was what you call your best, then you're as bad as an ogre shit, kid!" bellowed the black dragon.

Emery gritted his teeth. He wanted to give this damned dragon a good solid punch, however, this was just the way this being spoke. Still, he hated that when he had something to say, the more this dragon looked down on him. Blood was starting to pound in his ear when he said, "My spirit aptitude is B, and I have four affinities as an acolyte. I'm not as talented as the others and I can only work hard."

"Then care to enlighten me, 'Oh dear, great and powerful, Killgrahah, the Guardian of Khaos?' "

Killgrahah opened its massive jaws, as if it was about to say or eat him. However, not one word came out as it lied back down, ignoring Emery.

"Tch, you're a dishonest dragon, that's what you are!" Emery burst out. The black dragon opened its eyes as it stared at Emery. "That's right, you're no mighty, great or powerful. You're a fraud! You said you'd guide me but what have you done so far, huh? Well, let me tell you then what I see; a big-ass, lazy, phony, black dragon, all talk no do! The thing you only do is say nasty, unhelpful things!"

Emery finished his outburst with a great of his chest. He looked up to Killgrahah who had just risen from its position and opened its wings. The black dragon started flapping its expansive wings and Emery was starting to get blown away when a blob of energy covered him and threw him in the air right hovering before Killgrahah, the great dragon.

They went higher and higher until they were close to the black swirl at the ceiling; Emery could no longer see the ground. The dense energy of Khaos started to feel like little blades poking him at all parts of his body. Emery became nervous at the thought of this black dragon might drop him, but he stomped on the ground to regain some courage before staring straight to Killgrahah with raging eyes.

The black dragon and the puny human gazed into each other's eyes for a good few seconds before the dragon said with its deep voice, "I wonder... Are you really brave or plain stupid. Still, I did promise I'll guide you, and I, Killgrahah, does not break promises."

After the dragon said its thoughts, a wave of energy exited the dragon and entered Emery's body. Emery floated higher as he felt his mind was being overloaded with energy, but when the transference stopped, he opened his eyes only to find he was back in the illusionary space where the Faceless man had always appeared and mocked him.

A voice called out to him, and indeed the Faceless Man was there. It said, "This is my form when I'm taking a peek into your being. Your hopes and your pain are able to manifest itself through me and I have seen all of them. I applaud your courage, but I despise your naivety. Nevertheless, I, Killgragah, am bound to find the new master of Khaos, let us see if you are worthy."

Emery once more floated upwards in the dark room of his mind along with the Killgragah in the form of the Faceless Man. Soon enough, they reached a small sphere which housed four separate lights. There were two dominant lights, the green and yellow; a slightly smaller blue light and another one that was so minuscule that it looked like a dot compared to the others, that was his dark element.

"The sphere is what we call a Spirit Core," said Killgragah. "Look at how tiny and insignificant it is. The four elements that reside in your core are like separate entities and are trying to cancel out one another. You see, whenever you cultivate an element, the energy that passes through your core is fed to only one of them; that element takes up a huge part of your spirit core, making it harder for the other elements to grow and interact with each other in a healthy manner; therefore, your progress is greatly suppressed.

"This distasteful way of humans cultivating the elements is utterly foolish. Us, dragons, have long mastered the elements even before you humans began to understand the meaning of civilization. Funnily enough though, you puny humans think you are the rightful masters of the galaxy.

"Do you understand now, kid? The reason you're having trouble advancing darkness is because you have your hands full keeping the three elements from killing each other! Give all you have to darkness. The darkness element rules over space, so make it your core, the overlord of the three elements. Expand your core, dominate them and only then you'll become a magus worthy of the Lord of Shadow!"

The illusion shattered into thousands of pieces and Emery opened his eyes. He was back near the swirling ceiling where the dragon had taken him as it kept flapping its dark wings.

Emery recalled the first time he had heard about the elements from Magus Minerva. She had mentioned that magi who had multiple affinities must be careful in cultivating two elements at the same time, since that would bring an unfortunate result.

"I know what you are thinking, kid! You want to ask why then merging or cultivating two elements at the same time are prohibited right?"

He nodded.

"That's easy. It's because humans are not brave enough, the practice does involve a lot of risk. Many ancient humans have tried it only to fail again and again. Over time, the wrong cultivation became the standard and this ancient method soon faded into obscurity in the annals of history."

"Then, if I were to fail—"

"And that's why I think you are stupid!" interjected the dragon. "You're thinking of failure already when you haven't started yet and are mostly relying on good fortune to come your way!"

"Okay, how not to fail then? What is it that I should do?"

The dragon snorted and said, "For starters, this technique can only be done during the early stages of elemental cultivation, and those who attempted it were magi or supreme magi already. Their cores had already solidified, so it was too late for them.

"Second, you need to prepare yourself, humans have a weak psyche. If you can't handle the pain of being ripped apart, you'll lose everything.

"And of course, a place with high spirit density will increase your chances. Currently, you have plenty of that in here."

Emery was silent as he thought about it. But it looked like the dragon wasn't finished yet.

"Look, you want to get stronger as fast as possible, right? Once you have achieved success, the energy of Khaos in this spatial space will benefit all of your elements at the same time. You will no longer have to endure the stares of those in the academy as if you are some sort of trash. Yes, I have seen your fears. If that doesn't motivate you though, revenge will be within your grasp against that woman and those who have killed your father. So, let the power of darkness become your primary source of power."

Emery became pensive as he considered everything the dragon had said. Ever since he had been practicing the elements, it was indeed becoming harder and harder to understand the elements each one of them, even more so with the darkness, which had been deemed as one of the rarities even within the whole academy.

He then had thought about any hidden motifs this dragon may have; only one explanation came into his mind, this dragon probably had plans in using him in the future, however, Emery would use his knowledge too. A mutual benefit per say. Two were able to play this game and he would not be on the losing end if that were to pass.

"Well, I have told you the way. It's your choice to do it or not," said the black dragon as they landed back on the ground.

Emery only had one word to say. "Okay."

83 Core of Darkness

Now that a chance to turn things around had presented itself to him, he needed to grab it. Again, there was nothing that he could lose other than his unfortunate life.

Emery silently turned from the black dragon and headed back to the spot he had been cultivating on. He sat in a cross-legged position, ordered the symbol on his palm to bring up the darkness manual he had bought from Golden City's Magus Guild.

[Darkness is the home of the void; within its emptiness, there you'll find yourself]

Emery's surroundings, including himself, became nothingness. He couldn't perceive anything within his five senses other than what others referred to as self-consciousness. However, even that thought was somehow fading as if he was emptiness itself.

A few moments passed, and just like his previous attempts in understanding the basics of the dark element, three great different colored lights appeared within the darkness and whipped away his

concentration. Emery opened his eyes as he tried to catch his breath. He figured what he needed to do, so once more he focused, deeply looking into himself and not through the darkness element.

Within the dark room of his mind, he saw a sphere that resembled his spirit core and within it, he could only see the green, yellow and blue lights. From afar, he watched the three lights cover the whole sphere, where the dark colored lights, a miniscule dark blob, hovered alone, staying still.

Emery unconsciously reached out and the spirit core seemed to contract as it tried to touch the black light inside. The three lights suddenly darted, and the green light at the head shoved away the small dark blob. So this was what Killgragah had mentioned about and his experience just now. Whenever he practiced the darkness element, the three lights would always try to deny opportunity for the dark to grow. All this was due to his talent not having the capacity to cultivate and to hold them all effectively. The more he tried, the more the elements wanted to break apart.

He consciously reached out for the dark blob. And like earlier, the three lights shot themselves and he created a wall to block all three elements. Once he felt like he was connected with the darkness, unlike the other times he had probably been doing with the other elements, he broke down a small portion of the wall and let the green light collide with the dark element.

Emery returned to the void and all his senses were once again blurred. Within the emptiness of space, a faint green light was growing larger and as he focused his eyes intently, he saw a multitude of trees, flowers, roots, everything related to plants and felt a sense of involvement in relation to the creation of them all.

Right now, he was trying to cultivate the plant element in the attempt to merge it with the darkness element as the core. Unbeknownst to him all this time, Killgragah, in the form of the Faceless Man, was beside him and said, "Since we are both connected through Khaos, I can feel your progress. Right now, I can see you're making the darkness as your core while the plant as the second subservient. Although you can do that one at a time, the difficulty of merging the others will exponentially be a whole lot harder, making it close to impossible, because those elements will think you are eliminating them. Connect with all of them concurrently, and you will have a significant increase in power, of course the chance of failure will also increase."

The way he had learned the path of cultivating the elements were different. However, since this was a dragon, a mythical being that was probably even more powerful than all of the magi he had met so far, Emery accepted the black dragon's suggestion and completely demolished the barrier blocking the other two elements and let them collide with the dark and green elements.

Back in the emptiness, the yellow light appeared in the distance and a world of sand and a giant rock seemed to reside in it. Not far away was the blue light with its world showing great torrents of water, rushing in from all different directions.

All four elements; the dark, the plant, the earth and the water, converged into one spot of his spirit core and the feeling of overwhelming energy current became painful as if a thousand blades were slashing his whole being at the same time.

Emery gritted his teeth, not letting even a grunt come out from his throat, and focused entirely on incorporating the dark blob into his spirit core. His physical body was trembling and blood was dripping from his mouth.

He lost sense of time and the black light eventually dimmed, then became smaller and smaller until it completely disappeared. At that moment, his spirit core became a translucent dark core, however since it had become so, the other three lights thrashed and tried to break free from the spirit core creating cracks.

As if Emery had eyes everywhere, he saw the trees withering, the water turning murky, and the stone breaking.

"This is the crucial part, kid. Don't give up now!" said Killgragah to Emery, whose face paled into snow-white. However, the more Emery concentrated, the more his environment was breaking into pieces, and Killgragah suddenly disappeared! Emery could tell his spirit core was cracking countless and just when it created what seemed to be on the verge of shattering, a surge of Khaos energy rushed into his body and the Faceless Man appeared once more.

The whole body of the Faceless Man twisted and curled and transformed into a mirror of himself. It said, "You are not going to make it!"

"Yes, I can!" he shouted back.

"Give up already!"

"I won't give up. I won't fail!" said Emery with gritted teeth.

"Then prove it!"

If he died, then he would die. He was already past the point of return, so all thoughts of the same nature were meaningless. Emery roared at the top of his lungs as he threw all doubts away. He grabbed on to the three lights in his core and then the images of the elements' environments shattered as a black vortex formed and sucked them all in. And in that moment in his spirit core, the final crack appeared making it explode into countless pieces. However, in the place of a translucent dark core, a solid grayish dark core appeared as the three colorful lights of green, yellow and blue, stopped thrashing around and started spinning within the new core as if they were merrily chasing, synergized with each other.

[Congratulations! You have mastered the foundation of the darkness element]

Emery's eyes opened before vomiting blood. He fell on his back on the ground, barely able to lift a finger.

The black dragon's face looked down on him and said, "Hahaha, you've succeeded, kid."

Emery gave a weak smile but after just a few seconds, he felt energized once more and checked his status through the symbol on his hand.

[Spirit Affinity: Plant, Earth, Water]

[Plant Spirit - High Stage]

[Water Spirit - Middle Stage]

[Earth Spirit - High Stage]

[Battle power 24 (17)]

[Spirit force 55 (31)]

[Spirit Core of Darkness - foundation]

[Fey Bloodline - stage 1]

[Acolyte Rank 4]

The first thing he noticed was that his darkness was taken out of the list of spirit affinity but all three reached the high stage at the same time. Not only that, an additional five points had been added in his spirit force. However, what really caught his eye was the newest line of information.

[Spirit Core of Darkness]

This was what the black dragon had helped him achieve and clearly, the benefits were evident. Aside from recovering his energy in almost an instant, when he tried to cultivate the elements, the spirit energy around him flowed like a steady stream into his spirit core and distributed the energy equally.

84 Invitation

So far, he hadn't experienced any harmful effects. Aside from the unhindered flow of spirit energy, the only thing that had changed so far was the spirit core's color, which previously glowed white but now dark gray. And because of that, based on his previous estimation, he would need two months to increase the spirit force from 40 to 50, however this time, he only needed one month. That one month had passed and the notification he had been expecting to appear did indeed arrive. His palm glowed and showed the following:

[You have reached acolyte rank 5]

[Spirit force 60]

This was a good stopping point for a quick rest, so he stopped meditating, got up and paid his respects to the black dragon.

"I sincerely thank you for the guidance," said Emery, slightly bowing his head.

"Hmpf, thank me once you've become a magus," replied the dragon, once more proning itself to sleep.

Emery understood that no more words were needed between them; hence, he returned to sit in his spot.

In order to become a magus, he would need to have a breakthrough at rank ten. And based on what he had deducted so far, he only needed fifty more spirit force for that to happen. He was halfway there. It should take a couple more months.

Once more, he returned to close his eyes in understanding the elements with all his heart.

[Spirit force has increased by...]

[Spirit force has increased by...]

[Spirit force has increased by...]

Due to his new spirit core of darkness, the rate at which he absorbed the spirit energy couldn't be compared to his previous gathering rate. For every two to three days that had passed, his spirit core got a bit bigger every time the notification alerted him. It went on for a while and just when he had reached spirit force seventy, that was when he noticed the notification for the upgrade of ranking didn't appear. Emery initially didn't think of it at first, making reasons such as it might be late, or maybe he needed it to be seventy-one but when his spirit force already reached seventy-two, Emery broke out of his trance and proceeded to ask the black dragon for insight.

The black dragon sighed and said, "Right, I have heard of this before. You know, humanity's way of ranking is kind of stupid. From what I know, humans assigned rank six acolytes with a spirit force of one hundred. However, to reach the magus rank, a total of a thousand spirit force is required."

He was about to give this dragon a piece of his mind but it continued speaking.

"Rather than thinking of how to reach the magus rank, your priority right now should be meeting the rank six's requirements," said the dragon, giving a yawn. Killgragah added, "You should need a spirit force of one hundred and the element's understanding should be at peak stage."

From the time Emery spent in his return from the Magus Academy into being transported in this spatial space, he had spent four months in Mistshire and another four months with the dragon. He wasn't sure if the year the Grand Magus in Magus Academy had mentioned would apply to a year here on Earth or longer, but Emery had a gnawing feeling he had little time left.

Despite having little time though, he tried to push through reaching rank six acolyte. Now that he knew what requirements he needed to break through to the next rank, he spent whatever left of his time practicing the spells in his arsenal, namely: [Whip splash], [Stone skin], [Fragmentation(except this one)] and [Smoke].

As he withdrew power from the elements inside him, Emery couldn't help but notice that the stone skin and whip splash seemed a bit different from before. The whip splash emitted a slight dark aura within its edges and it could smash the ground with greater power than before. Although he had no way of actually measuring its effectiveness, Emery believed it was stronger than before. As for the stone skin, it also emitted a slight dark aura within the crevices of the armor, and when he tried to cut himself using the moon dagger and it required more force before he started bleeding.

After noticing these small changes, Emery went to the black dragon to confirm his suspicions, but Killgragah refused to answer and only harrumphed. And even though he didn't have any definitive answer from the black dragon, Emery went with the conclusion that this odd phenomena was really due to the changes in his spirit core, which was now dark-colored.

Interpersonal relationships were also odd if a person thought about it. Due to the amount of time Emery had spent in this spatial space and the black dragon being just there, he unconsciously grew a faint connection in his heart despite their minimal interactions. Emery had gotten used to the dragon's habits

of occasionally saying ridiculous stuff as if practicing some lines about how much of a powerful being it was then snide comments, watching the outside world for days on end, and sometimes sleeping with a booming snore that at times would disturb his own cultivation or slumber. Despite all the benefits, interesting moments, etc., Emery still formed a wall of distrust against the dragon on purpose. He wouldn't let himself be on the losing side again, Granny's betrayal was still fresh in his mind as if it had just happened yesterday.

In one of the days, after he had finished cleaning himself, Emery was a bit fed up from cultivating all day and practicing the spells. So, he took a piece of wood from one of the wooden containers and fashioned it into a practice sword with the help of the moon dagger.

He held it with his left hand, since his right arm no longer existed, and once he started practicing Emery felt he was starting from square one again.

The black dragon had just awoken from its slumber and saw Emery practicing swordsmanship. It sneered at him and said, "What does a magus need a sword for? Focus on your magic, dumbass!"

Emery rested the sword on his shoulder and said, "Once I get out of here, only a portion of the spells' power can be used in my world. I still need something to protect myself with. However, if you have something that can help me better than this, then that'll be the time I'll lay down the sword."

That was the reasoning he gave to the black dragon, but in fact, a lifelong dream since childhood wasn't something that could be easily abandoned.

More days passed, and eventually so did weeks, Emery continued alternating his practice sessions between the sword, magic and cultivation because like his previous experience in caring for the herb garden, actual application was truly needed to increase his understanding of the elements. And as for increasing his spirit force, it of course went higher, but the time in between each point became longer and longer.

Emery couldn't truly point a finger to what was wrong, but he could feel that breaking through rank six couldn't be just done with sitting here and cultivating all day. And while he was pondering what he should do about his spirit force, an information appeared on the symbol in his hand:

[You are invited to join the second year in Magus Academy]

[Duration: Three months]

[The recall spell will activate in 30 days]

From notification, it seemed like his initial suspicion of the next year the Grand Magus had mentioned coincided with a year from Earth. This bit of information though weighed heavily on the back of his mind. Of course there were many things he wanted to do at Magus Academy: meeting his four friends, apothecary training, learning advanced spells, and probably finding a way to restore his non-existent right arm.

Just one of the reasons above was enough to make him not want to give up this opportunity. He only had a month left, and getting out now was the top priority. He stood before the dragon and once again demanded to be let out. So, he didn't care about the dragon's anger and scorn because he needed to be able to go to the Magus Academy no matter what.

Unexpectedly, the dragon's answer wasn't the one he was expecting. The dragon sighed and said, "You really don't give up that easily, do you? Well, I'm getting tired with the same view of the outside anyway,

85 Favors

[You are invited to join the second year in Magus Academy]

[Duration: Three months]

[The recall spell will activate in 30 days]

He stood before the dragon and said, "Killgragah, let me out."

The black dragon had always scoffed every time Emery had asked for this to be done. However, contrary to his expectations, the black dragon grew pensive, looked out the window, and said, "You really don't give up that easily, do you? Well, I'm getting tired of the view from the outside anyway, so I'll tell you something first."

"There is?" Emery's eyes glowed.

The black dragon stretched its limbs and said, "As a supreme being and you, the person who houses the creation of Khaos, it's my duty to show you the right path into becoming a real magus. Hence, I was reluctant to tell you this at first."

"Tell me what is it that needs to be done, so I can repay your kindness, great and mighty Killgragah," answered Emery in the most flattering tone he could muster.

The black dragon's mouth seemed to curl upward. If it were anyone else, except Emery, that had seen this, it would look like a menacing grin. Killgragah said, "There are two things that I need you to swear by to do, if you don't, I shall not agree. Do you understand?"

"I'm listening," said Emery.

"Very well, my first requirement is I need you to find me a place of power where the power of Khaos can dwell while you're away. The second thing is, once you're back in the Human Magus Academy, I need you to do me a favor there. However, I shall not tell what that favor is until you agree. Otherwise, forget we ever had this conversation. What say you?" said the black dragon.

Emery thought about the dragon's offer. First of all, what was a place of power? He needed to know what kind of place he had to look for in order to succeed. As for the dragon's second request, it sounded dangerous. However, the black dragon had stated its demands. If he didn't grab this chance, maybe he would have to stay in this spatial space for a long time before being able to get out on his own power. Wait—did the black dragon planned this from the start?

The dragon's eyes turned sharp as it said, "Kid... did you think I don't know what's on your mind? Have you forgotten we're connected through Khaos and I can somehow understand your thoughts?" It stood and stretched its wings, looking down on Emery. "Hear me now! If it wasn't because of your foolishness, I would have been able to let you in and out as much as I want. However, my power has been drained too many times! First, it was that stupid elf and magus; after that, it was because you let yourself be

drained by that stupid crazy woman! I just regained enough power to let you out once, but do you understand, kid? This is your fault!"

Emery had nothing to retort against this black dragon. Everything Killgrahah had said made sense, so he could only keep his head down.

"Henceforth, remove whatever thoughts of you trying to deceive me. For the place of power, once you're out, I shall guide you where to proceed. I am sure a planet as green as yours will have what I am looking for," said the dragon. It moved its pointed head closer, only a few distance from Emery, and added, "As for the second task, if you don't succeed, don't bother coming back looking to get benefit from Khaos. Are we clear, kid!"

Clearly Emery's plans backfired, he just kept his head down and nodded to agree in order to get out of this place.

The dragon withdrew its big pointy snout and snorted. Emery thought the black dragon had changed its mind. He tried to think of something reasonable when the black dragon spoke once more, which was something he didn't want to come to fruition.

"Kid, you know, I am kind of worried you will do something stupid and will not be return because you will have died. I think it is better for you to stay here until you are strong enough. Do not worry about the Human Magus Academy for now. You will eventually be stronger than anyone if you keep doing everything I tell you to do.

No! Was what Emery wanted to shout in protest, however, an idea popped in his mind. He said, "Supreme being, Killgrahah. I may be a puny human in the eyes of someone as mighty as you, however, this little one has received guidance from you. Therefore, place trust in the wisdom and strength you have imparted me with. With that being said, if you could grant me a spell that would increase my chances of survival and success in the upcoming future—"

"Hmpf! Once again, you are trying to fool me, kid!"

"That is not what I have in mind, dear supreme being. I thought of it as protecting your investment, which is me," immediately replied Emery.

The black dragon grew silent, seemingly thinking of what Emery had just said. "Hmm... you have grown in wisdom, kid. And that's because of the awesome me! Hahaha! Anyway, what kind of spell are you most interested in?"

Emery's heart jumped in joy but he didn't let a sign of it show.

He had been thinking about this ever since he had tried out the spell whip splash. What he lacked was an offensive spell and although whip splash was listed as an offensive spell, the condition of having water nearby before it could be used was too much of an inconvenience, he believed. Of course he could have water on him at all times with a waterskin, however, water was an important resource he needed for survival. He needed something else that didn't require such a necessity to be expended. Emery answered, "Offensive spells are what I think I most need right now."

The black dragon nodded its head twice as it said, "Good, good. My patience has truly paid off, hahaha!" Killgragah cleared his throat before adding, "I like the way you think, kid. I've decided! You shall part with one of my strongest spells."

Right in front of Emery, he watched as the black dragon emitted a dark aura and rushed it into him. Emery was back in the dark room of his mind with the Faceless Man.

Emery's body floated in the air as the mental energy from the black dragon entered his being. When he opened his eyes, he returned to the darkness of his mind where Killgragah, in the form of Faceless Man, stood by waiting.

He stepped closer to Killgragah and noticed a dark glowing thing on top of Killgragah's white palm. A humanoid appeared not far from where they were standing covered with dark armor from head to toe while holding a golden spear and a great shield that spanned from the chest down to the floor, looking just like a knight from the Magus Academy. Killgragah shot a beam of black light on his hand to the humanoid, which bore a hole into the humanoid and melted whatever barred its way. After that, Killgragah showed another form of the black thing, which burned the humanoid and melted its equipment.

Emery's pores opened as the blaze from the distance still lingered in the air. He felt that if he got any closer, the heat residue would also burn him.

Killgragah mentioned that this spell was called [Hell's Flame]. It was a spell that could melt even the high grade armors the dwarfs made for the Knights in the Magus Academy. The spell's other form was that of a fireball, which couldn't be extinguished by normal means.

Emery was still amazed by the spell when Killgragah created a cliff out of nowhere and stood on it. The Faceless Man form raised his hand high and a crackling noise resounded as another black ball with lightning shooting out from the surface of the ball formed.

[Gravity Maelstrom]

Killgragah then flew upward and dropped the ball into the rocky cliff, which instantly flattened into million pieces.

The power and the image of the spells awed Emery, making him say, "Yes! Any of those two will do!"

86 Portal

The illusion ended and the dark room disappeared as his consciousness returned to his body in the spatial space, facing the black dragon. "Yes! Yes! Any of those two will be perfect for me. It will be even better to get both!"

The black dragon stared in silence for a moment before it bursted out in bellowing laughter. "Hahahaha! Your excited face, it's really a fun sight to see! Hahahaha!"

Emery was as silent as a thousand languages.

"Are you blind again, kid? The spells I showed you had fire and lightning elements within it. You don't have affinities with those two elements. Anyway, those spells can't be used by any magi who is not a supreme magus rank," said Killgragah.

Emery stomped his feet. At times like this, the dragon was still messing around.

"In any case, other than my innate spells and darkness element, the other elements I have are lighting and flame. Let's see... hmmm... that's it... I've figured out what's the perfect spell I can bestow you. You should have no trouble learning it," said Killgragah. The black dragon opened its mouth and blew at Emery, its breath was accompanied by a light.

[Spell has been received. Blink - Rank three - Darkness affinity spell]

[It allows the caster to use the power of space and time to appear in a nearby location in which the caster has vision of.]

Emery was still stuck speechless. He was grateful he received a new spell in his arsenal and it was a rank three at that, however, with the definition of this blink spell, after seeing such a catchy display of destruction spells, he felt tricked because blink was obviously a utility spell!

"That spell should be the best for you, kid. Khaos is the Lord of Shadow, who also reigns the power of space. The usage of the blink is close to infinity and it'll become more powerful as you grow in understanding it. This skill is much greater than the two you just saw," declared the black dragon. Killgragah then added, "Not to mention, a flashy spell will make you a bigger target. Remember, as a dark elemental, the darkness is our friend, we dwell in it, and attack where enemies least expect it. Anyway, your survivability is the utmost of importance, you can use this spell in a variety of ways and make sure you take the time to master it too."

Better than nothing from this stingy dragon was on Emery's mind before he once again thanked the dragon.

"That should be all, kid. You better find me the place of power before you get recalled to the Human Magus Academy," said Killgragah.

"And how will I find it?" asked Emery.

The black dragon opened its wide jaw and out of its mouth, a powerful blast filled with great amounts of dark energy exploded at the entrance tunnel of this chamber.

A dark portal appeared and Emery hastily grabbed a few items he had; the wooden sword, a couple of lembas bread just in case, and a rectangular container of water fashioned out of wood before heading toward the portal.

As he stood before the gleaming portal, he turned around to look at the dragon one last time, gave him a nod as his thanks before jumping into the black portal.

The portal sucked Emery in and the buzzing sound once again rang in his ears. After the buzzing cleared, the sound of wind, crashing against the wind filled his mind. Emery opened his eyes, and realized he returned to the exact spot where he had been lying on the ground talking to Killgragah after Granny had disappeared.

The sun's rays peeked through the leaves of the dense forest, gently touching his face. He stayed still, feeling the soft grass and taking in the earthy musk. The breath of air felt refreshing compared to the damp, enclosed space he had been sharing with the black dragon for more than half a year. Somehow,

now that he was back, that spatial space and the dragon felt surreal in a world where such things were considered to be imaginary beings.

As he stayed motionless on the ground, he spoke in his mind, trying to communicate with the black dragon. "Killgragah, can you hear me? Hello? Supreme being, mighty and powerful Killgragah, are you there?"

However no voice returned to his call. Was that all just a dream sequence because he had been on the brink of death? But that couldn't be, the last thing he could remember before being transported was that winter had arrived, now that he was back here, it looked like late spring or early summer was the season. Once more, he tried with a louder thought in his mind, "Hello! Are you there!"

"I can hear you damn it, kid! Don't shout!" yelled a voice in his head.

Emery let out a laugh and replied, "Why are you not responding then?"

The dragon's voice sounded tired as it said, "Moving you back, consumed a lot of my power... I feel sleepy now. I'll rest for a while. Remember, I won't be able to pull you back inside unless you can find me a place of power. Let's see... there... I can sense it...?Northwest of your position, about two mountains away. you can just head there first..."

After that, the connection was lost. He could no longer hear Killgragah. Emery got up and checked the direction where he was supposed to head later based on the sun's position.

Once he had gotten his bearings, first things first. He walked with heavy steps toward the entrance gate of the Mistshire settlement. Once he passed the gate, no laughing of the children, hunters walking around, women doing some weaving, no nothing greeted him. Everywhere was lifeless and all the huts appeared as if they'd crumble into pieces with a single blow from the wind.

He passed by every hut and made way toward Granny's hut located on the farthest of the settlement that had once housed him and thought of as a place of warmth and security. When his eyes landed on Granny's hut, the place now housed cold and hate in his mind.

Oddly though, there was something odd beside the hut. Emery remembered this was the place where Obed had been digging a mass grave for the settlement's residents. It had been closed with the earth and a pile of stones was stacked on top of one another. Emery didn't want to believe this was Granny's doing because it didn't make sense, however, would there be any one who would bother doing this since this settlement was situated in a secluded location? He couldn't come up with an answer because this explanation was the one that made the most sense even if he thought it was contradictory at the same time.

Emery entered the hut and found the bag he had left behind. He checked if there was something he could grab from the storage area, however, there was none.

Last, he went to the herb garden; also emptied out of herbs, however, there was one thing that caught his attention. In the center of the garden, there was a large stone that he knew wasn't there before. It sat on top of what clearly looked like earth that had been dug out. Emery knew this was Lanzo's grave and Granny placed Lanzo in here. But why? He truly couldn't make sense of Granny's mind.

After paying his respects, Emery covered his face with a cloth and wore a mantle that hid his missing right arm. He examined the symbol on his arm one last time.

[Emery Ambrose]

[16-year-old]

[Spirit Affinity: Plant, Earth, Water]

[Plant Spirit - High Stage]

[Water Spirit - High Stage]

[Earth Spirit - High Stage]

[Battle power 27 (19)]

[Spirit force 85 (50)]

[Spirit Core of Darkness - foundation]

[Fey Bloodline - stage 1]

[Acolyte Rank 5]

Emery turned away from Lanzo's grave with cold eyes, finally proceeding with a journey toward the northwest.

87 Beggars

Emery made sure to enjoy every bit of the fruit. Remembering how he had consumed endless days of the tasteless bread, he began to develop appreciation for all the little things in this world and because of that, his connection with nature became stronger even if he wasn't consciously doing so. The droplets soaking the ground, and in turn the earth giving life to plants. The earth, water and plant spirit energy permeated his being on an unconscious level. After having achieved a significant increase in elemental cultivation, he could sense the energy of the universe. Even though it was far different from the particles in those of space and although the connection was faint, Emery saw the world in a brighter color.

When the dark clouds passed and the sun's blessing reached the ground, Emery went back on the road to travel further north. Three days had gone by since he had passed the two mountains; he had been attempting to call Killgrahah however, the dragon inside of him wasn't making a sound, even a small snort at all. Nevertheless, Emery continued walking and from on top of a hill, he saw a small but bustling town that had various decorations hung on both stone and wooden houses, making it appear festive.

Emery decided to visit the place, thinking it'd be a good time to take a rest from his wearying travel.

Venta Town

As Emery neared the town, he remembered from his family's scholar that this place was a trading hub between ruled by merchants, declaring it a neutral state against the nearest kingdom, which was Lioness in its south and Belgiae kingdom to its east, hence, as evident by the number of armed men patrolling the edges of the town and he had passed by down the road, this place was a strategic place.

When Emery entered the town through its wooden wall, some of which were stones, the many streets enjoyed a heavy traffic of carts filled with goods, and an endless amount of stalls where there was fierce competition happening between their neighboring merchants for the people passing by. Although it wasn't as busy as Lionarch, one could feel a sense of grandeur that this town would eventually rival the Lioness' Capital City in terms of goods being traded and passing by.

There were hundreds of residents moving up and about in between the streets and markets. Emery walked the streets and saw the multitudes of items being peddled ranging from clothes to weapons, accessories, house furniture, rags, fruits, vegetables tools, etc. but there was one particular stall that caught Emery's eye and when his eyes met the person attending the stall, the attendant seemed to look at him with disgust for a moment before busying himself with tasks.

"Are you going to buy or what? Go away if you're not buying. It's bad for business," said the attendant.

Emery gulped. He felt for his pouch hanging on his waist, aside from herbs and a scarce amount of potions, he sighed because there was nothing, hence despair filled his growling stomach. He had hoped for coins to magically appear, but alas, reality was once more cruel. The pig's pie and skewered meat was just right before him, however it felt so near, yet so far.

He sighed as he turned around thinking why did that Granny even had a need for money. She didn't need it, she should just stay the monster she was and gather food from the forest since she was a danger to people. Still, now that he had thought about it, it was indeed strange that the other huts he had checked in Mistshire had their valuables emptied. Was that done by her or some lost wanderers had arrived and sacked the place? Nevertheless, the issue was he had no money to even afford a bit of a luxury.

He frustratingly walked away when a speeding carriage ran before him and splashed the muddy water from the hole on the ground, completely dampening his only mantle that kept him company in the two days he had been traveling.

Silently grabbing the chunks of mud that had stuck to his mantle, the carriage's door opened and two people dressed in clothing more luxurious than the common folk descended as well as a couple of armored and armed men.

"Silas, look at what you've done," said the fair lady who seemed to be a few years older than Emery. Her curled blonde hair bounced in the air and mature clothing gave an air of maturity around her. She made her way toward him and said, "I apologize for almost bumping unto you."

Emery kept silent, still trying to save his mantle from bits of earth.

"Luna, don't get too close with beggars," said the young man, who looked the same age as Emery, keeping his hand on the sheathed on his waist, approaching Emery and his sister.

"Don't be impolite, Silas," reprimanded the fair lady, bowing in apology before offering Emery a bag filled with coins. She said with a smile, "Here, please take this as a sign of my sincerity. You can buy food and new clothing with this."

Emery's lips curled downward underneath his brown scarf.

"I don't need it," he said, walking away.

"Hmpf, it's good that a beggar knows his place," Silas scoffed.

Emery continued his way, ignoring the spiteful remark of the young man who was the stark opposite of his older sister. Although he needed the coin, he wouldn't lower his self-respect to receive coins he hadn't earned himself.

He turned to a corner of a street and gazed at his reflection through a glass pane of a house. Indeed, he looked like a beggar: tattered, hole-ridden, and muddied clothes, unkempt hair peeking through his face covering, and he probably smelled awful. No wonder those two fancily dressed people thought he was one.

Since realizing his state of image, Emery thought it was best to get clean clothes, wash up and had his hair cut. Although his appearance of a beggar would allow him to blend in some dark corners, in order to interact with normal people or hide within the crowd, he needed to look like a local. Not to mention, he also wanted to eat warm food again... To do all of that, of course he needed coins, but he wasn't about to beg like his appearance had suggested.

He continued walking around and eventually found a big gathering of people right in the center of the festive city-town. But because of his appearance, when he had tried to talk to people, they all walked away from him. After eavesdropping from the locals though, he had figured this crowd had gathered due to a popular local gaming event.

The game was a test of strength against the big man showing off his big belly. Their challenge to the people was plain enough to understand. And that was to find the strongest man present. There was a prize involved, which was only fifty coins, however, that didn't stop people from entering the competition just to have the boasting right that they were strong men.

Remembering the pig's pie and his outfit, Emery decided to join.

88 The Stronges

Amongst the crowd, Emery realized that the fair lady was in the crowd.

The trumpets sounded and two people came forward to show how the test of strength would be conducted.

The first one to test his strength looked like your average person compared to the large man. The large man and the average man lifted the resting rock beside them and threw it at the same time. It wasn't even a competition though, the rock thrown by the average looking man didn't even come close compared to the other rock.

The second person to try was one of the people who guarded the young man and fair lady from earlier. Again, the situation was the same.

"There it is! The opening bout has been finished. Now, who dares to test their strength against this man?" exclaimed the host. "Everyone, come and join! See if you can throw farther against the record set by Gregory the Giant!"

There weren't a lot of people who stepped forward, but those who did, all appeared to be large people as well. When they stood beside the man called Gregory the Giant, they were all dwarfed by how tall and stocky the man was.

With the urging growl of his stomach and the need for new clothes, Emery stepped forward to join. He was the only one who looked out of place, barely reaching the shoulders of the large men as well as general width overall, so murmurings from the crowd resounded about how a thin and puny beggar entered a competition of strength.

He couldn't blame them though. He had seen his appearance and if he had been an onlooker himself, he'd probably think the same.

Emery removed his mantle because it'd get in the way once he lifted the rock and threw it, but kept his brown scarf covering his face.

He had forgotten he was missing an arm since he had been used to using just one arm for about half a year now, but he was reminded of that when one of the participants said, "Do you need a hand?"

A burst of laughter followed. Another participant chimed in, "He certainly needs one, hahahaha!"

Emery smiled underneath his scarf. He didn't mind this kind of teasing, not that he was used to it and didn't have self-respect, rather, what was the point? Actions speak louder than words, right? Even more so, when it came to using strength as basis.

Before he had come here and got trapped in the spatial space with the black dragon, his strength had been able to stand against an adult marauder who looted for a living, and now after receiving several increases of his battle power, he was confident he could beat this Gregory the Giant and the other participants.

That disappeared though as the man, who had thrown the rock before the competition earlier, threw another rock and surpassed Gregory's latest rock by two more paces. Disbelief appeared in the faces of the crowd as well as Gregory, the Giant. The man-in-arms appeared as if he was just doing something natural as he bowed to the rude young man and polite fair lady Emery had encountered earlier.

Emery stared at man-in-arms before looking down at the sitting rock him. He looked to the left and right, and noticed that out of all the participants, he was the only one who hadn't thrown the rock yet. As he bent down, once more the distasteful comments entered his ears. They weren't even bothering to hide it and simply said what was on their minds. However, whether it was pity or insult, nothing they said didn't matter to him.

"Why is that beggar participating?"

"I think he's a clown hired by one of the merchant lords."

"Really one hand? Who does he think he is?"

"Hey, get out! You don't belong there, fucking beggar!"

The crowd hurled all kinds of ill-disposed comments as Emery bent down and grasped the rock with his left hand so tight that it appeared to crumble a bit. He hadn't used magic or his understanding of the earth to do this, it was just pure strength from a thin-looking person.

Hush filled the atmosphere. Everyone was dead silent.

Emery got into position. He placed one foot behind him, pulled the rock behind him as far as he could, before finally throwing it with all his strength. The rock fell with a loud thud; half-buried in the ground. All the onlookers' eyes widened.

The host, himself, even decided to recheck the rock to believe what he had just seen. He then gave a gesture to Gregory the Giant, who went ahead and checked the rock. Since it had been half-buried, the giant had to dig around the rock and when he tried to pick it up, everyone saw how heavy it had been for a man of large stature to lift the rock. Another man began to count his steps, which brought gasps of disbelief to the audience. "Twenty paces!" exclaimed the host.

With just that, all doubts had been erased amongst the crowd and participants.

"Amazing! The young man was able to throw the farthest! We have our winner, people of Venta!" exclaimed the host. The previously silent crowd quickly changed into an eruption of louds claps and cheers! The young man who looked like a beggar defeated all the large men and set an all time high new record!

"What's your name, young man?" asked the host in the midst of roaring and cheering.

Emery wore his mantle once more, thought for a moment before saying, "Merlin. Just call me, Merlin."

"Well, we have it everyone! Merlin!"

"Merlin...Merlin...Merlin..." chanted the crowd.

Emery stretched out his hand and asked, "Where's the prize money?"

"Oh, ah. It's over here," said the host, placing the pile of coins on Emery's palm. The host turned around to the crowd once more and said, "Everyone, give cheers to Mer...lin...?"

After Emery had received the pouch of coins, he immediately departed, not caring for the praises of the people or anything. He disappeared amongst the crowd, took several alley turns and once he was completely out of sight, he took a breather.

He had to get out as fast as he could because in a trading town like this, there were bound to be people who would want to take advantage of merchants and beggars especially with a big pouch of coins. Even though he had shown his strength to be stronger than that large man, it was better to stay hidden and out of trouble.

Emery waited a good few more minutes. And after making sure no one had followed him, he exited in another alley to do the following: he bought new clothes, washed up, got his hair trimmed, bought another iron sword to hide under his new mantle, rented a room in an inn, and ordered hot food.

At the moment he took a bite of the steaming chicken thigh, a voice called out to him.

'Ahh, meat. It has been a long time since I have tasted freshly roasted meat,' said the black dragon in his head.

'Really? Just when I was about to eat, you show up?' replied Emery in his head.

'Give me a break. I've just woken up. Anyway, it looks like you're near a place of power, northwest of here,' said Killgragah.

'Okay, I'll ask about it in a bit. For now, just watch as I enjoy every bit of this chicken,' said Emery, almost laughing to himself.

The black dragon irked. "I'll remember this, human..."

After that, Emery went ahead and finished the chicken thigh. He proceeded to order ale; when the lady caretaker arrived, he asked, "Can you tell me more about the forest in the northwest?"

The caretaker darted her eyes before leaning closer to him and said in almost a whisper, "That-that's the forbidden forest also known as Evernight forest..."

89 Quintin

Now that he thought more about the blue powder and the rumors surrounding the Forbidden Forest, Emery came up with a possibility of explanation. The place of power somewhat affected the herbs and possibly the animals residing in it, hence the blue powder being a powerful alchemical ingredient as well as stories mythical creatures, scary monsters, etc.

Still, this was all conjecture in his mind. Nothing was concrete yet, so he asked the caretaker further, "Can you tell me more about it?"

Once again the caretaker appeared hesitant. She sealed her lips as twirled her fingers around the coin. Emery took notice of that and a new understanding about how the world of adults operated came into his mind. So, he fished out a single coin and slid it on the table. The caretaker hurriedly took it and said, "What would you like to know?"

"What are recent rumors or news about the location?" he said.

"I've heard from the patrons that several people had tried to enter the forest again. However, a week has already gone by but none of them have returned. Hence, they are pronounced as dead or missing. Some of the victim's family ventured in as well but they also never came back," said the caretaker in a hush.

"What else?" asked Emery.

The caretaker opened her mouth and closed it. She said in an even lower voice the following, "One of the patrol guards mentioned he had sighted a large creature that was thrice the size of a human! In fact, not only one but multiple of them! So, the merchant guild has placed a warning not to go inside the forest."

"Okay," said Emery, handing out another coin.

"Thank you, dear patron. I'll make sure the innkeep will give you our best room," said the caretaker with a smile before grabbing the empty dishes sitting on Emery's table.

Emery got up a few minutes later and headed to the innkeep after having his fill of staring out the window in silence. Indeed the caretaker had given good word to the innkeep, so Emery received a new room that had a clean and comfortable bed. The room was also far away from the noisy clanking of

tankards and rowdy drunkards on the first floor. Before turning in for the night, Emery made sure to still practice cultivation until the candle hissed dead before resigning to his bed.

He was getting ready to leave when his path was blocked once again with a carriage. This scene felt like it had happened before. Fortunately, it hadn't rained last night or earlier, so he didn't get muddied. The carriage opened its door but it wasn't the fair lady with a mature aura from yesterday descended the carriage. Instead, it was the man-in-arms who had participated in yesterday's competition.

"Pardon me, but you are Merlin, correct? My lady requests for your presence, it is very urgent. Please," said the man, gesturing with an open arm toward the carriage.

Remembering the incident from yesterday, especially that rude young man, Emery didn't want anything to do with them even if the lady was polite to him. Not to mention, he had decided to go to the Forbidden Forest already. Taking a detour was not what he wanted. Trying to cover his face, he said, "I'm afraid you've got the wrong person."

"Please, Mr. Merlin. The young lady's planning to venture into the forbidden forest today. Since you have proven your strength from yesterday's competition, she has adamantly requested for your assistance in the matter," said the man-in-arms.

Hearing the name Forbidden Forest, Emery thought to himself for a moment changed his mind on going in alone.

Emery got on the carriage; there was only him and the man from yesterday's competition. The carriage ran without hindrance until they arrived in a large, luxurious building, located in a place where there were almost no wooden houses nearby, all stones instead.

He got off the carriage and entered the building. Emery counted about thirty men stationed in different places wearing gray and white uniforms with different weapons on hand, some of which did not even look like Britons; he believed these people were most likely mercenaries or perhaps slaves hired by the master of this place.

And based on the shape of this mansion, and a couple more guards patrolling the halls, Emery figured the fair lady and young man from yesterday were the son and daughter of a powerful merchant. This town, after all, didn't have nobles. It was run by the merchants guild, and they had declared this town as a neutral state, which meant no lords or kings was the overlord of this town.

As he walked deeper into the mansion, guided by the man, they arrived in a great hall reminiscent of a king's royal hall. There were a couple more people in waiting, about twenty of them, but they were clearly not part of this mansion's guards basing it on their clothings. When he neared them, Emery recognized some of them were people from yesterday's rock-throwing challenge and especially the stocky man from whom Emery had stolen the title of the strongest man, Gregory the Giant.

Gregory showed a wide grin with his yellowish teeth, some of which were missing. He came up to Emery and said in a loud but not intimidating voice, "Merlin, right? So you've been called too? Your arm strength is amazing, but care to tell me your secret? Surely you'll need people who have the same strength as you with the thing we're about to do."

Emery kept silent, a slight wind blew away his mantle, showing the sword on his waist. Gregory noticed this and said, "A sword eh, you sure are full of surprises! I expect to see more of your surprises later, hahaha!"

Just when Gregory's laughing echoed in the silent hall, the door on the side of the hall creaked open and out came the curled blonde hair young lady from yesterday with the man-in-arms from earlier walking behind her.

This time the fair lady wore a more reserved clothing which gave the impression of a powerful merchant. Her curled blonde hair had been tied into a bun and her aura seemed a bit oppressive. Although she seemed different from yesterday, she still bowed before the guests and said with the same polite tone she had used on Emery yesterday. "Thank you for accepting my invitation, honorable guests. For the benefit of everyone, I would like to introduce myself as Luna Quintin, the daughter of Derien Quintin. I am sure some of you have been briefed by our head guard, Kastan before your arrival but some haven't. So, to answer your questions, I have gathered you here for the quest of finding and bringing my brother back safe and sound."

Emery observed his fellow guests and noticed that some of them changed attitudes when they had heard her name. From that, Emery believed this woman, Luna Quintin, seemed to be a powerful individual or at least the daughter of a powerful merchant.

Luna continued, "Yesterday, my brother went into the Forbidden Forest bringing a handful of guards with him without the family's consent. Therefore, I am looking for brave and strong people to accompany me in my search for him."

Hushes and whispering started amongst the crowd.

90 Ques

"Anyone who will join my escort party shall receive a hundred coins," said Luna as the door from the side opened again, and a person entered pushing a cart with lots of bags sitting on top, which jiggled with the sound of coins.

Luna's assistant grabbed one of the pouches and proceeded to hand one of the guests a bag of coins. And just with that gesture, not one of the guests moved away from their places. They stood by waiting for their turn to receive the coins.

Emery couldn't help but notice how this woman seemed to have deep coffers of coins. He did a quick calculation of the coins spent and the results astounded him. There were about twenty of them, so this meant she had just spent two thousand coins!

Emery, being a former noble himself, knew that two thousand coins was a huge amount. Such an amount would certainly raise some eyebrow or would need the approval from the head of the family. However, there was no one here other than the guards; the head guard, Kastan, and the guests. If his guess were to be correct, this Luna must be the head of the household Quintin or the acting authority.

Emery was the last person to be given the bag of coins, and Luna took the last bag herself and personally handed it to Emery. She went over to him, with Kastan beside her, and said, "Mr. Merlin, I hope you are joining today's quest. I will feel much safer with a strong person such as you joining the party."

He considered the option for a moment. If the forest's threats would be even half as dangerous than it was rumored to be, it would be better if he came with other people joining him. So, in the end, he nodded and accepted the bag.

Luna smiled gracefully and said, "Thank you, I hope you will stay close and protect me."

Emery feigned ignorance as he tried to understand the meaning behind her words. Why did she say that specifically to him? He didn't notice he had been staring at her for quite a while when Luna let out an exasperated sigh and said, "Oh please, don't give me that stare. You've won the competition yesterday, so it only makes sense for the strongest man to protect me, right?"

The moment the word 'strongest man' exited her lips, Emery heard the faint grumblings from some of his soon-to-be comrades.

Once everything was set from preferred weapon of choice, leather armors, etc. The expedition group headed out while the sun was at its peak in accordance to the formation Kastan had arranged earlier.

They exited through the north gate, which was heavily guarded with many patrol guards. Within a few hours of march, they arrived at the entrance of the Forbidden Forest where there was a person with a dark skin standing and waving to them.

"What's the situation? Have you found any leads?" asked Kastan on horseback.

"Yes, I've seen a day's old foot tracks only going in but there's nothing that implies they went back," said the dark-skinned man in black and gray uniform.

"Very well, Asur." Kastan descended from the horse, as well as Emery and the other two guards, except for Luna. They left the horses to be watched over by another guard. Kastan then said to Asur, "Lead us the way."

Emery stretched his neck to try and see how tall the trees were. But from where he was standing, they appeared to be trying to reach for the heavens. And as far as his eyes could see, only lush and wild vegetation, leaving the rest to the imagination because the entrance to the forest did give an ominous aura. It looked like they were about to enter a monster's mouth because not even the light from the sun above penetrated its deep inside. It was just like the stories he had heard from Lanzo.

Before they went inside, Kastan asked the vanguard to light a torch. They all went inside the Forbidden Forest's mouth and the only light of the torch gave some sense of security as they traveled through the rough terrain. Looking back, the sun's light appeared as if it was being swallowed by darkness the further they traveled.

They couldn't really tell how many hours had passed since they had been walking, but they were pretty sure the sun was about to go down. Because earlier, they had been able to see each other with just one torch, however, now, the lit torches made them appear as silhouettes; human shadows made out of the darkness breathing down their necks.

A wind blew past them; it spooked the horse Luna was riding on, almost throwing her off on the ground. Hence, Kastan forced her to walk on foot in fear of breaking her neck if she fell from the horse.

"Miss Luna, the sun is about to set. We'll set up camp here. Please return, it's getting too dangerous," pleaded Kastan for the nth time.

Luna sighed. "How many times do I have to tell you, I have to be here."

"But—"

"Hush!" Asur said. Everyone stopped talking. They started hearing the beating of their own hearts due to the deafening silence. Soon enough though, faint whispering and wailing, entered their ears. From the distance, Emery could see a small glow, flickering randomly.

"Over there," Emery said in a whisper.

The group cautiously neared the thing Emery had pointed out. And as they neared, stronger wailing entered their ears but after that, metals clanking and roaring of beasts. They drew closer and the glow Emery had seen was actually fire, and its flickering was caused by the movement of people running around the fire.

When they were able to see more clearly, they saw humanoid shaped silhouettes with beasts' heads fighting with a group of silhouettes holding swords, axes and spears.

"Mo-mo-monsters!" shouted one of the paid fighters as he tried to run away, making some of them also flee for their lives.

Luna Quintin, however, appeared unfazed. She drew her sword and commanded, "That's my brother's group! Charge!"

Gregory the Giant roared as he led the charge along with the nine other vanguard.

"Silas! Silas!" Luna raised her voice.

"Lu...a? We... o... here!"