

The Noble 381

Chapter 381: Raphael

POV: Third Point Of View

[Congratulations on passing the path of greed. Welcome to the third trial: Balance of Greed.]

At that moment, Raphael felt a sense of confusion and distortion; for a moment everything went dark, and the next moment he was standing on what appeared to be something made of pure gold...

'What is this...?'

He looked around and, without losing his composure, tried to understand his situation. By this point, he had understood many things: such as the deception they had been living all day, as well as the fact that they were now being tested to see if they were worthy of obtaining what they had found before.

Legacy sites and testing sites are a very important find, as they are not easy to come by, and if one has lasted so long, it means that it was left by an important figure and that what lay there was very valuable.

In these cases, the finds are often more valuable than just ruins with magic or old objects that would probably be incomplete or badly damaged.

So he did not want to miss this opportunity.

'She is... Lirena.'

As he understood his surroundings, he realised he was on a huge golden scale, because there was another one just like it next to him.

On the other side was someone he was more than familiar with, Lirena Argent, someone he had studied with at the academy and got on very well with, as she was practically like family.

She was talented, ranking in the top five in her graduating class, not to mention that she was from an influential family, the Argents; and although she turned out to be a half-elf, she was a legitimate daughter and the most talented in her family in her generation.

She had more than enough background to create her own strong faction, the fourth faction of her kingdom in her generation, but she did not do so, and instead had become his second in command.

She was the deputy leader of Raphael's faction and someone he trusted greatly, as they had been through many dangerous situations together, and he was honestly a little unsure of what their current situation meant.

[[ufff~, I arrived just in time. Ahem... well, once again, congratulations on passing the first two tests. This is the third: the Balance of Greed. As you can see, each of you is standing on a huge scale. The counterweight will begin to show the person's greed towards the objects in my city. But beware: this is not your own greed, but the greed of the other person.

This test is performed with those whose karma is most intertwined. This way, we can see which of the two weighs more heavily on the other's heart and determine whether people are truly more important than material things. The test begins now.]]

The voice that seemed to come from everywhere began to sound, and unlike before, when it sounded more muffled, now it sounded more like the man who brought them here.

And unlike before, when they had to fight someone without any context or walk along a path surrounded by many treasures without any explanation, now the rules and the objective had been explained to them more clearly.

Plack!

A loud sound rang out, and on the other side of the scales, many things appeared. Some Raphael could recognise as objects they had found while exploring the city. He looked at Lirena's counterweight, and things had appeared there as well.

"..."

Raphael wanted to speak, but no words came out. He could only look at her, and she seemed to be the same. It was a situation where they depended on each other.

Although places like these are sought after, it does not change the fact that many of them are lethal, and without knowing exactly what kind of place it was, he had to assume that failure was deadly.

"..."

"..."

Silence surrounded the place. Although objects had appeared, the scales did not move at all, and the explanation was not really enough to understand their situation and what would happen next.

Plack!

It was when the tension and doubts were at their peak that he heard a loud sound again, and they both looked to see even more things appearing on the other side of their scales. It seemed that the weight on the other side would increase over time.

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Plack!

It was the sixth time that more items suddenly appeared, but neither of the two scales had moved at all, and that was when finally...

[[Truly, I am impressed. Of all the pairs... you two are the only ones who haven't wavered even a little, there wasn't the slightest hesitation and not the slightest doubt that the treasure was worth more than the other person.]]

At that moment, without warning, the man who had brought them there, the same man whose voice they had heard earlier, appeared before them. He looked like a normal person, except that he was floating and, if they looked closely, he was slightly translucent.

[[I really wish there were more people like you in my era, people who are not forgotten by greed. Haaah~, people like you show that humanity is not entirely lost. Ah, by the way, you may speak now.]]

"What is the reason for all this?"

[[Nothing, lad. As that bastard brat outside said, I just want to distribute the wealth I accumulated in my life and defended to the end, sacrificing so many things, to worthy people. Haaah~, I just don't want it to fall into greedy hands. Is that so hard to understand?]]

"No, it's reasonable, sir."

[[Arthur, you can call me that.]]

"I understand, Sir Arthur."

[[Boy, you're nicer than that brat outside. Well, normally this would end here, but your tests were so perfect that they fulfilled a hidden condition, and the test will be extended. Regardless of whether both fail, they will move on to the next stage, but if they pass, they will have the opportunity to choose an extra item at the end.

"We can refuse."

[[Oh, you really are nice, and that girl too, she seems to agree with whatever you choose, that's how couples are these days?.]]

"...We're not a couple!"

"Yes, it's as Sir Raphael says /_ \"

[[Really? Hmm, but you... hmm, you're like the girl outside... hmm... is it really strange, or am I just misinterpreting the obvious? This seems like a confusing era... Anyway, if anyone deserves more of my legacy, it's people like you, and that's why I'll continue. You have nothing to lose. Next is the greed in your hearts, what you desire most versus what...]]

"Wait, sir, I don't think—" Thwack!"-Gyaaaa!"

"..."

[[...]]

"..."

[[...Boy... I assume that's your family, right?]]

"Yes... she's okay, right?"

[[Yes, she is... uff... I think I should have made them base their greed solely on material things... that was my mistake again.]]

It all happened so fast, and Artur thought there would be a struggle for balance, but once again it seems that humans are not so simple.

They may not be greedy for some things, but that does not mean that such emotion does not exist within them.

And it had just been proven: as soon as the deepest greed appeared on the opposite end of the other's scale, there was an overwhelming conclusion and it was decided in an instant.

The weight caused Lirena, who seemed to want to stop this at the last moment, to fly away, overwhelmed by the weight of Raphael's greed.

Raphael remained as stable as ever. As Artur said, the one on the other side was Raphael's family, and for him, keeping them together and safe had always been his ambition. The weight did not seem even close to that of Lirena.

'That means I failed.'

[Yes, rather, wasn't that a bit too one-sided? I mean, oh boy, I think you're in trouble. Surely she's not your girlfriend? I mean, look what appeared on the other side of your scales.]]

"... she's my subordinate... and we're like family, that's all... I think."

The problem was that on the other side of Raphael's scales, another Raphael had appeared, creating a perfect balance. The meaning of this could be varied, but Artur didn't seem to like the situation.

[[Yes, you're still in trouble. She also appears in your greed, but... Ugh! I hope she doesn't take it personally. Now I feel bad for getting you into this. You know, women can be so petty sometimes! I speak from experience]].

"...Sir, wasn't that what the test was about?..."

Raphael did not understand Artur's sudden... pity, so to speak. Obviously, the test seemed like something that would create conflict and rifts due to greed.

[[Yes, that's true, but you had passed. And I only did this to give you more rewards. Ugh! I shouldn't do anything unnecessary.]]

'...'

[[Anyway, in this test, the first to fall was the one who passed. Well, she will be able to choose two objects if she passes the remaining two, and you lost your chance. Hmmm, but seeing that she is your family, lad, you really are someone I think I can understand. Yes, I wouldn't have found anyone else connected to my descendant, I would have given you my most precious legacy. Hhaaah~ it seems that karma is not in your favour.]]

"..."

[[Yes, I really like that you are respectful, calm and not materially greedy towards people. Anyway, move on to the next test. Oh! And I'll give you a little advantage for doing so well: the fourth and final tests are connected, keep that in mind.]]

"I understa—"

It was a strange encounter, but before Raphael could say anything else, everything began to feel confusing and his surroundings became distorted, causing slight dizziness. It was brief, and he finally felt his feet on the ground again and...

'A dining room?'

Calmly once again, Raphael looked around, analysing his surroundings and trying to understand as quickly as possible what this place was. It was a large dining room with a central table where there was food, but at that moment there was a visible barrier surrounding it.

He quickly noticed that there were several other people besides him, but more importantly, as he looked around, he noticed someone right next to him staring at him intently.

"눈_눈, I'm so glad you're all right, Sir Raphael."

"Yes, Miss Lirena, I'm glad you're well too. But about earlier..."

"Noon_Noon, don't worry, Sir Raphael, but I have a question. Since it happened so quickly, I couldn't see very well, but several people appeared on my counterweight, including some girls. Who were they?"

"...They were my family"

"Ah! I see, and you really don't have to worry about what happened. It wouldn't be reasonable for me to get angry about that. I understand perfectly."

"...Thank you for understanding."

"Ah! but one more thing, sir Raphael, 누_누 could you tell me what appeared in your counterweight?"

[I'm talking directly into your head; this is to correct my mistake. Just tell her that a mature woman with purple hair—bloody sexy! Ahem!, forget that last part—and a girl with platinum hair. Oh! And tell him that you fell shortly afterward too; that will balance things out a bit.]

"...A purple-haired woman and a platinum-haired girl, I didn't see them clearly because I fell shortly afterwards."

Raphael didn't really understand why Artur was helping him even with this, but he understood that it was a good way to avoid unnecessary conflict at such a critical moment. He thought he would deal with it later, once things were safe.

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Chapter 382: Five Neutral Organisations

"Ah!, so it was my family too, huaaa~. Ah, it's nothing, if you also fell it means, there are times when one doesn't understand the importance of things in one's own heart, hee~. Come to think of it, little Cordelia has already arrived in the middle world, hopefully we can meet up soon."

"I completely agree with you, I already want to see my sister, I haven't seen them for five years. I was able to meet with my father and mother, they even said that my cute and bitter, but very cute little sister is behaving better, and my mother said so. I can't wait, I'm really completely out of Phinamiun, to the point where I think I'll go crazy, it was five years, hehehe~, how will it have grown, I have to buy a lot of engraving stones and-"

"Wait! Huh? ah!? Sir Raphael?"

"? What's wrong?"

"What was that... what happened to him all of a sudden? What was that weird laugh?"

"...I don't understand what you mean, I just felt a little happy to remember my little sister."

"No, I just never met her be-.... What is Phinamiun?"

"Well, it's the energy I get from being around the most adorable creature, you know, it's hard to get closer than two metres, but it's still worth it, and that look of contempt as if she always sees rubbish makes her even more adorable, even when she gets angry because I can't fulfil simple requests like stopping breathing, they're something that..."

"Y-y-you! Who are you? Is this another test? Where is Sir Raphael? Are they all fakes? What is this about? At what point did this test start?"

Suddenly things got weird. Hearing Raphael, Lirena immediately turned away from him and started to panic somewhat, shouting and looking distrustfully at Raphael and around her.

In her mind this was definitely wrong, and being at a testing site, she began to draw out various conjectures immediately.

"Ehem, calm down, Miss Lirena. I don't understand your sudden confusion, but you could calm down; you're drawing a lot of attention to yourself."

"Yeah, it's weird to see her yelling at you. Was it because of the previous test? Even if she has a conflict, it's best not to get worked up, it could be dangerous."

At that moment his subordinates, as well as Vasil along with some of his subordinates, began to approach; they seemed to want to mediate the problem.

'Sir Vasil, I'm glad you're alright, and no, it's not a fight, I guess you confused it because I got a little excited remembering my little sister, who I haven't seen in a long time.'

"He's lying! He's not Sir Raphael, he would never act like that. This must be part of the test, he never talked about her to begin with and now all of a sudden he's a loving brother, his personality isn't even like that."

"/_ \ Yes, I really didn't want to mention it, because I felt that if I did, I wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to go and see her. Normally, I wouldn't have cared at all and would have gone with her, but knowing that there was a possibility that she would come in the next generation, and because my mothers scolded me since they knew that I would not want to return afterwards, I restrained myself and set out to create a safe place for her, and even more so because it was confirmed that she would come, it is also good that she did not respond to my messages because, otherwise, I would have gone there. When she arrived in the intermediate world, I almost invaded the royal mansion to see her, but I held back. The barrier was very strong and I couldn't get through it. I really accepted this in order to distance myself a little and hold on until..."

"...you, who are you?"

"You see, sir Vasil, he is not Raphael. This must be the test; perhaps he is not the only impostor. We must find the rest and, more importantly, find the real ones. It shouldn't be difficult; they don't even seem to know who he's impersonating and just talk meaningless nonsense, things the original person would never say or do."

[[ehem! Miss, don't jump to conclusions, the test hasn't even started yet and boy, I've only known you for a short while and I'm surprised too; you don't seem to be calm when it comes to your family]].

"Eh!!, you're telling me he's Sir Raphael, not a test?"

[[Well, yes, anyway, let's not waste time. Congratulations to everyone for passing the third test, The Feast of Concord]]

' ' ...''

[[As you can see, there are only 45 of you left and, on the table, there are only 6 dishes; each one is an elixir of the highest quality and I assure you that it will strengthen you, to the point that, below Soul Conversion, you will rise at least one rank. But you can't split it; if you want the effect to work you must eat the whole thing. As for how they'll deal it out, I'll leave that up to you. The barrier will be lifted in ten seconds]].

With that said, Artur disappeared from the scene as quickly as he appeared, leaving a great deal of tension and anticipation towards the dishes on the table. A few moments later, Raphael was the first to react.

"Well, Sir Vasil, we need to get organised quickly. Sir Clarence doesn't seem to have passed the tests, so we also need to get those of his faction in order; there are also some of the five guilds he controls, and I don't know under what clauses he hired them."

"Ah, now you do sound like Raphael. No... rather, you are right. Tomas, tidy up and don't let anyone touch the dishes."

"눈_눈"

"Miss Lirena, why don't you move? These ten seconds are critical."

"눈_눈 Yes, you're right... just... no, well, we'll clear this up later."

Actually, today to Raphael, it seemed that Lirena was acting a bit strange. Not to mention the complications of the previous test, but now he was concentrating on the test; he had to act fast.

The factions are not really large groups; considering that in all realms, only fifty at most are usually the representatives.

Depending on the number of factions, the number can be smaller, but they are always between 15 to 25 people per faction. These are the faction cores, which are supported by the kingdoms and filled with privileges and resources.

But that does not mean that these are the only ones within a faction.

The Middle World, although very strictly guarded, does not prevent people from entering it, so various people from different parts of the continent enter it.

They can be those who did not give up even if they were not selected as representatives; those who want to become strong even if they did not have the chance to be backed by the kingdoms; or older generations who want to try their luck and move up the ranks.

The latter, at first, could be a problem, as some already had the upper limit that the Middle Kingdom had and had a lot of leverage. But under the protection and specialised nurturing of the kingdoms, easily the kingdom leaders and representatives caught up.

Faction leaders, where more resources were accumulated, became invincible in their rank; that was the methodology implemented by all kingdoms, at least in the first generation, where more care had to be taken.

Eventually, as they became the strongest beings allowed in the Middle Kingdom, they tacitly became the leaders, and the kingdoms gave them their support as they are named as their representatives in the middle world and in the struggle for resources.

With many people entering the Middle Realm, their factions welcomed more people, although they do not have all the privileges of being the representatives.

But if they were lucky and made great achievements, they could receive resources, privileges and act as representatives, making the kingdoms support their actions. If not, they would only receive the leftovers of the representatives.

Still, each faction had no more than fifty people, and the largest factions had no more than a hundred so far.

There were many factions, and although they were like the kings of various places in the Middle Kingdom, they were not everything, nor did they manage all the human resources of the Middle World.

This is because, in addition, there were five neutral organisations to which anyone could belong whether or not they were part of the factions.

These are: the Mercenary Guild, the Mages' Guild, the Alchemists' Guild, the Blacksmiths' Guild, and the churches.

These societies coexisted with the factions of all the kingdoms and were organisations run jointly by the five kingdoms, with no clear leader in place.

They functioned to keep under control those who did not belong and did not want to belong to any faction, and to provide personnel to the factions, of course, at a price for their labour and contributions.

It was a system that avoided a lot of unnecessary problems for the factions.

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'I have to be careful, this is not that simple, Sir Artur said this is connected to the next test.'

For this large-scale expedition, and for which a certain range of forces was needed, Clarence, who was no longer around, had hired mercenaries, some mages and alchemists.

Raphael looked at the distribution and noted that, even taking into account the Clares faction, which had none of its key figures, they were balanced with the people hired.

Care had to be taken, especially with such a dangerous temptation as elixirs, which even he would be lying if he said he wasn't tempted.

Chapter 383: Life Doesn't Give Second Chances.

"Ha... haahh, what are the casualties?"

"Yes, Sir Raphael, there were eight people... none from our faction, all of them were the remaining mercenaries."

"I see... Sir Vasil, what's wrong with you?"

"Haaah~ no, it's just that it feels a bit impartial and even deliberate."

"No, it wasn't, it was just bad luck... the healers only did what they should have done."

"Yes, I know, even so, in the previous test they decided to obey us, now I feel bad that they died since we were partially responsible... not to mention those who failed the first tests. I just hope that here the penalty for failing is not death."

"That depends on who left it, but seeing as it was human, there's a good chance that, even though it could be lethal, it will be lenient with us."

"Yes, I hope so."

No, it's the first legacy found from ancient times since they opened up the middle world. A few have been found, this one seems to be one of the most generous, but that's why it can be dangerous.

Sometimes those who leave these legacies hope that their race or someone with specific qualities will inherit the legacy, and depending on the situation and who finds it, it can be very lethal, impartial, or safe.

And seeing that Artur was human, there was hope that they would not be lethal. Raphael remembered how he had even helped him with his interpersonal problems and he thought it was very likely that they were not in a lethal testing site with humans.

He really hoped his thinking was correct, because some central members of his faction had also failed the first tests, and it would be a great loss if failing meant death.

He looked around and saw that only 18 people remained after passing the fifth test, and those 18 were central members of both his faction and Vasil's.

During the fourth trial, ten seconds were not enough, and just as Raphael had thought, many of the mercenaries rushed forward, coveting the elixirs.

Things were not as uniform as Raphael thought, as the remaining members of Clarens' faction also joined the chaos to get a plate from the table.

Raphael was anything but foolish, and by this point he understood very clearly that any action linked to greed was a mistake, and obviously eating the dishes, although it promised power, and considering what Artur had told him and that the tests were linked, he understood that it would be more of a disadvantage than an advantage.

So before it was too late, he acted decisively, eliminating the first person who approached to take a plate and preventing anyone from touching the plates. Lirena and the rest of her faction were quick to imitate him and did the same.

Vasil hesitated for a moment, but finally joined Raphael as well. Just as they had thought, the ones causing the most trouble were the remaining members of Clarens' faction, while some mercenaries had surrendered and said they would follow his orders.

Then, when order was restored, albeit by force, Vasil and Raphael discussed the matter and both agreed that it was better not to touch the Elixirs.

Ten minutes later, Artur reappeared and explained that the test had been passed, that they had fulfilled a hidden requirement, and that this would ultimately entitle them to an extra reward.

The next test, according to Artur's explanation, was simply to fight a large golem made of valuable metals. It was slow but extremely tough, and its blows could kill almost instantly.

Only Vasil, who was a defensive warrior, was able to keep it at bay, along with Raphael, who was a warrior specialising in speed, stealing its attention and leading it away.

Whenever Vasil could no longer hold it off and it recovered, he would hold it off again, while the rest attacked it whenever they could.

The warriors attacked and retreated, the mages attacked from a distance, and the mages specialising in healing provided cures.

Even so, it was a chaotic battle, and both Vasil and Raphael were not always able to hold the golem's full attention.

If it weren't for the healing magicians, there would have been more casualties, but they, who were only two, gave priority to those in their factions when it came to healing, which meant that the casualties were among the non-members.

Hence the feeling of impartiality that Vasil felt, since technically they were a single group, but he would not say more about it, because even though it pained him, he would not sacrifice someone from his faction for a mercenary; that was the harsh reality that even someone like Vasil accepted.

"Haaah~, well, the core and materials of a golem like that are very valuable, pick it up and store it in..."

[[Don't waste your time, lad. That's not real... This is an illusory realm. I am telling you this because you have already passed all my tests, although this last one felt a little bland compared to how I had prepared it.]]

"...What do you mean by illusion, Sir Arthur?"

"Eh? Raphael, how do you know his name?"

"I met him briefly during the third test."

[[Yes, now I wonder if I should have told you that the fourth trial was connected... haaah~ this is difficult. The fifth trial felt more like a simple combat. It was supposed to be punishment for your greed in the fourth. I mean, for every plate they ate, the golem's strength and speed would increase, and if they ate all six, a second golem would appear, forcing them to spend everything they had to survive, some even paying a high price.]

'...'

[[Yes, I'm just complaining a little here. I mean, in my day there were also legacies here and there; I completed some myself. I thought it would be easy to manage one, but the tests that took me so much effort to devise... I really thought they would be difficult enough that at least the first ones to arrive wouldn't pass them. Haaah~ I should have taken it more seriously, but life doesn't give second chances.]]

"" ... ""

[[Aren't you going to say anything? You seem cautious around me. Yes, that boy outside was the odd one out. Anyway, the time for complaining is over. Well, everyone has finished and everyone has the right to choose one of my treasures. But with the special condition of the fourth test activated, everyone present has two, and that girl over there, with her unrequited feelings, has three.

"Sir! Why are you saying that? Please, don't talk nonsense. o(≥□≤)o"

[[Girl, I'm helping you a little. That boy seems nice, and you seem like a good girl. People with good character should be with their equals—not like that boy out there, and my descendant. I don't know her, but with my lineage she must be someone with good character. Ahem. Anyway, lad, you seem to have things figured out, but take care of those around you. Not just your family, but those closest to you. From experience, I can tell you it's unfortunate to realize how important they are only after they're gone.]]

"...I'll keep that in mind."

[[Good! Now choose. You can take your time. Oh, and this test will remain here, but you can't cheat, because once you know what happens here, you can't come back. It's up to you whether you want to take advantage of this or not. Now then, this was my personal collection when I was alive, so don't hesitate to ask me anything. Oh, and lad, I recommend you choose the sword...]]

And while he was choosing, as if eager for conversation, Arthur began to recommend and explain the great things in his collection.

This time he got the reactions he expected. He thought that boy from outside was definitely the weird one, calling his precious collection rubbish.

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"Well, it seems there's no problem, and it wasn't a lethal test. That's Sir Clare-... Sir Vasil, what do you think we should do now?"

"Hey, Raphael, are you just going to pretend you didn't see Clarens?"

"Honestly, I even want to erase what I just saw from my mind."

"It's weird for you to be so blunt. Ugh, but I understand you. It seems that the test has consequences, even if it's not lethal. I guess this test and him didn't go hand in hand, but seriously, how did it happen? Wasn't it all an illusion? How do you think he—"

"I think they're just unconscious. It would be more efficient if the conscious wizards cast a basic spell against fainting on the unconscious wizards, and when they wake up, they will wake up more."

"You don't want to talk about him, do you? But for his honour, wake him up before the rest."

As Raphael said, everyone woke up with the basic anti-fainting spell, which was basically a very painful but harmless electric spell.

Once everyone woke up, they decided—with the recovered Clarens, whom neither of them wanted to look in the eye—that even though Artur seemed harmless, it was better not to stay under barriers that could attack them at any moment, and even with wolves, it was better to camp outside.

It should be noted that shortly afterwards, Clarens screamed as if he were in excruciating pain.

And it wasn't because the pain in his butt came late, but because they explained to him what had happened and how basically everything he had, and everything they had obtained, was an illusion, and he lost the opportunity to achieve somethin

and they would not really gain anything, as it was an unspoken agreement — included in cooperation contracts — that if they found a testing site with individual rewards, it would not be shared.

Only after a while did he console himself with the knowledge that there was a mine of lunarite and fire amethysts that would bring them many benefits.

Although that caused someone further back, who was eavesdropping, to bang his forehead against the floor when he realised that he had foolishly used one of his choices on something that was abundant in the area.

Chapter 384: Because You Exist

"This really is unacceptable. You greedy bastards, I can't believe you saw the immediate benefits and put Vasil and Raphael in such a complicated situation. You really are a disgrace to be core members The Gilded Circle. And on top of that I heard it was all an illusion; the only thing you'd be eating would be air."

"" ... ""

At this moment, in the centre of the camp they made outside the city, was Clarence giving a loud scolding to the kneeling members of his faction.

The reason was that Clarence heard what happened in the fourth test and decided to call them to give them a strong reprimand; it was his job as a leader.

"Tsk, you are really letting our faction down. I hope they reflect... Really, being blinded by their greed and going crazy like that. It's just a little scolding for now, but I'll impose sanctions later. I hope it will be a lesson to you. Well, you may go."

""Yes, Sir Clarens!""

The reprimand was over. Honestly, it was more of a formality; from what he had heard, what his subordinates had done could constitute a breach of contract on his part and ultimately cause him to lose his share of the mines, something unacceptable to Clarence, so he called them in and reprimanded them in front of everyone to alleviate any discontent.

"I'm very sorry for all the trouble caused. I don't know where those idiots get their greed from, ugh! To end this without any hard feelings, why don't we negotiate a little? I'm willing to give up a little of my percentage."

Turning back to where Raphael and Vasil were, he began to apologise again, and although he obviously didn't want to because of the incident, he was willing to renegotiate a little.

"...I understand, the situation was designed to turn out that way.!

Raphael was the first to comment. It really struck him as odd that the greediest guy he knew - and who just recently the mime commented that he didn't even pass the first test, on something that evaluated greed - was the one he was scolding, but he wasn't going to meddle in the affairs of another faction.

"Yes Clarens, you really didn't have to. In the end we also... killed them. Luckily it wasn't real though."

"¡Phew! No, I understand. You guys were looking at the big picture and you were right to do it and put yours first. That's why we are faction leaders: we always put our interests and members first. All right, we'll talk later. I used to get excited about nothing, and I haven't eaten all day. I'm starving."

"Yes, I too feel that I lack energy, which I wasted stopping that golem's blows. That illusion was really crazy. I really feel like my bones still ache. The owner of that domain must have reached a level of illusion magic that we can't even understand."

"/_ \Vasil, please... let's not talk about how real that illusion was... please."

"Ah!... sorry. Well, let's eat. Oh, and Raphael, from what happened earlier I feel like I don't really know you like I thought I did. Why don't you tell me a little about your sister?"

"Huh?! Do you have any interest in my sister, eh bastard!!!! 눈_눈"

"Eh?! Did you call me a bastard? You, the person with the most manners-?! Hey!, why the murderous intent? Wait, don't get me wrong, I have no interest in your sister like that, I mean, I don't even know what she looks like!"

"Huh!?! Are you saying you have no interest in my beautiful little sister? Who do you think you are, you bastard, to have no interest in her? You should praise her cuteness even if you don't know her...!"

"Ugh! What did I get myself into? Hey, put away that sword, I mean it. Let's talk... I-I'd just like to hear about your beautiful little sister, of whom I have no interest beyond curiosity... naturally."

"눈_눈... Well, yes, after all it is natural to want to know about the prettiest creature. It's good that you don't have any impure interests, after all she will be single forever."

"Yes... whatever you say... ehem!."

"Wow, seriously... it changes his personality to mention her sister. This is crazy. I wonder what she's like."

"Huh?! You greedy dwarf, do you have any interest in my sister?!"

"Fuck! What did I talk for? Hey, you, her second-in-command, control your crazy leader! What is this?"

"(°_o) Where are we? Who am I? Who is Raphael? What even is a Raphael? A person, a concept, or just a thought? At what point do you truly define a being? By its mere existence, or by the experiences it accumulates? If so... who am I? Who is Lirena? What is my role in the world? What should I really believe? Do I exist... or do I exist only because I think I exist?"

"Ugh! Give it up, Lirena seems the most shocked. Just do what I do before it's too late and-"

That day, everyone learned that bringing up the subject of his younger sister in front of Raphael was a taboo that should not be touched upon.

Although things were able to calm down and they could finally go for lunch.

..

.

Clatter!

The first indication was a faint sound, a metallic clattering sound coming from a falling spoon.

Clatter clatter, clunk!

Then another, and another, and along with the spoons the bowls also fell, spilling their contents.

"Cough!...cough!!!"

The sound of metal against stone mingled with a chorus of dry coughs, of throats trying to beg for air.

Raphael, Vasil and Clarence began to sense that something wasn't right, and it was confirmed when someone started coughing up blood and some began to fall.

Clarens had a similar reaction and began to lose his balance.

"Quickly, clerics! Cast purification magic. Mages, if you know spells also help."

Vasil understood it was poison; he immediately spoke aloud and addressed the mages whose area of expertise was purification spells and poison removal. He knew some of them himself and began to chant.

"Puritas clarias"

He lifted his spell on Clarens, who had fallen. He knew that order had to be maintained as much as possible and that they, as leaders, should not be the first to fall in the face of this very sudden situation, but it seemed to have no effect.

He looked at the rest of the clerics to see if they had purified the poison, but most had fallen, were conscious, but seemed unable to do anything.

He himself began to feel the forces leaving his body, but he did not let himself be overpowered and tried to resist it as he tried to expel it from his body by circulating his art.

The warriors, including those who were better physically, were barely standing and conscious.

"It's definitely poison, this situation doesn't look good. The barriers to detect harmful substances have not been activated...so it must be the food, it's sabotage."

Raphael also understood the situation he was in, but unlike the rest, he did not seem affected by the poison, as he had an artifact that his father had given him that prevented any poison or curse from affecting him, but that did not make the situation any less serious.

Noticing that things were becoming uncontrollable, Vasil, who was not overpowered by the poison, turned to his trusted subordinate Tomas.

"Go and call Ophel- cough! Quickly."

"Cough! Yes, sir!"

It was at that moment that Tomas retreated to look for the one who could get them out of that bad situation that was overheard.

Plp! Plap! Plap!

"Congratulations! You really did an excellent job, haha~. Everything was so great that I have to hand it to you. That's something to be proud of."

First there was applause, and then a noise that sounded like someone was having fun clapping for the great show they had just witnessed.

All those who still had the ability turned their gaze towards the source of that voice; someone appeared, walking slowly, with a smile so serene that it was nauseating.

Not long after, a dozen figures walked calmly in their direction, unhurriedly.

"Whoa,"

he said, in a calm voice, as one of his men pushed a heavily muscled dwarf who was barely standing upright to the ground, making a loud sound.

"Hahaha! What's wrong with that guy, has he got soft legs? Oh yeah, he must have, hahaha. How did he sound so loud if he's so close to the ground? Hahahahah."

"Y-you, you're..."

"Hey, it's rude to point at people. Well, what was expected of someone like you? This was too easy, even though I was a bit worried when you decided to join with other factions. But it was better instead, don't you think so, "brother"? Ugh, gross just mentioning it. Well, one last time, that wouldn't be bad, hahaha. You should feel honoured."

"y-you, cough!"

If the person who arrived was someone Vasil was very familiar with, it was his older brother Saelis, and that to Vassil made the situation even more confusing.

"Oh, really, the poison works great. Oh, hold it right there, Raphael! I wouldn't move carelessly if I were you. Do you want all the poisoned to die? Oh, and there's no hurry. It will be a long hour of suffering before they die, so don't worry."

"..."

"Well, I'm glad you're so understanding. For starters, this isn't about you. This is between this bastard and me. Look, I came well prepared and brought some contracts, made by the blessed one of Eshvara. You know what you have to do if you want to get out of here with your faction, right?"

"...Yes."

Raphael was about to attack Saelis, but he was discovered. He was beginning to understand what this was all about: it was an internal struggle within their kingdom, and they had been drawn into it.

So, with that understanding, he decided not to intervene... or rather, he couldn't do anything else, since the lives of his subordinates were at stake.

"How clever. Although I won't say I was surprised that you weren't poisoned. Are you resisting it, or does it not affect you? Well, it's not unusual. After all, you also follow Aeloria... Oh, and you, the same goes for you, Clarens."

" I understa- Cough!..."

"Hahaha!, aren't they reasonable? They are exemplary leaders. If there were any recognition, I would give it to them. Well, now you just have to endure it until I finish my business."

"..."

"..."

"Hahaha! Your faces are truly priceless, hahaha! Hey, you lot, why don't you laugh with me? Don't you think it's funny too?"

"Ha... hahaha..."

A few laughs emerged from among his subordinates, encouraged by Saelis. Some seemed forced, while others genuinely appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Vasil tried to remain steadfast. He finally gathered enough strength to speak clearly.

"Saelis... why?"

The tone was more one of bewilderment than hatred. He really didn't understand. He never coveted the throne and only formed his faction to give those who chose to follow him a better chance to grow.

His father promised him a noble title, and he was more than happy with just that. There was not supposed to be a fight for the throne and, in fact, as far as Vasil knew, there was no conflict between them. He would even say they got along well.

"Haaah~."

Saelis sighed, shaking his head as if it were a ridiculous question. Still, he acted as if he had the patience to answer his silly question.

"Because you exist."

Chapter 385: Valuable Lesson

The silence fell heavily, as if that single sentence explained everything.

"It really was disgusting, wasn't it? Our kingdom is supposed to be 'pure'. We, the royal family, should be even more so, and only have one wife. But there's our idiot father having a mistress."

"..."

"And as if that weren't enough, you, that freak born of something that shouldn't exist, kept running around as if you really thought you were something, even calling yourself my brother. Do you know how disgusting that is? I actually threw up a few times just looking at you."

"..."

"I really just wanted to go and end your disgusting existence, but that fucking senile old man protected you. But now I can finally get rid of your disgusting presence. You have no idea how long I've been preparing for this."

As he spoke, Saelis approached and crouched down in front of him, lowering his voice to a cruel whisper.

"You thought you found information about this ancient city, but I left it there for you to find. You know, I was going to make scum like you useful at least once. That's why I let you come first, so you could bring me what belonged to me."

"..."

Vasil tried to respond, but the poison made it difficult for him to do so. Saelis watched him without blinking, like someone watching a sick animal die.

"Tsk! You really are scum... Ah!? That's Tomas. But who is that? Why is she moving too?"

At that moment, Saelis' attention was drawn to the three figures coming. One was Tomas, whom Vasil had sent to fetch Ophelia; the other was Ophelia herself, and the third figure was a fainting man carried by Ophelia.

At the sight of them, there was a little confident hope in Vasil, but it was immediately broken by Tomas' first words.

"Sir, I have brought Ophelia... yes, Ophelia."

Leaving aside that he looked doubtful if he had done his job well, the person he addressed was Saelis instead of Vasil, making it clear that he had been betrayed.

"Huh?, Ophelia, are you an idiot, can't you tell her apart, she's a fucking stinking hairball, not that woman! Is it time to replace you?"

"S-Sir, I hesitated too, but yes it's her. She even knew our password; apparently she was able to get rid of her smell and trimmed her hair."

Hearing that, Vasil's last hope was extinguished. If he thought about it, it was his brother who recommended him to bring her; that was part of the people who came hired and from the Alchemy guild.

He really regretted not realizing his brother's true thoughts sooner.

"Huh, hell, are you serious?"

"y-yes- uekh!"

"Oh! That way you bite your tongue...Yeah, it's that disgusting hairball. What a change. Well, you did a good job.Hmm, honestly, that smell was getting kind of annoying, and I thought your usefulness was wearing off. Well, I guess I'll use you a little longer; I'll reward you later."

"I-I-I."

"Hey! Why are you always so frustrating? Speak up if you want to say something."

"He...I-I want...my reward...let him live."

"Uh! What's this? Is that why you got all dressed up? You got a boyfriend? Hahaha! And yet you poisoned him; how funny. Although he's not squirming, I guess you immediately gave him the antidote. Hmmm, well, your poison is really great; and you delivered as promised, he'll be one of the lucky ones."

"Th-thank you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, Raphael, don't worry: for you I have the contract I told you about. You know, what happened here must be kept absolutely confidential and contracts must be minimally supervised by a god."

"That wasn't what-"

"Oh, but don't get upset. If I have... let's see... one, two... yes, I have just twenty-five, not twenty-four, haha! Anyway, I'll give you the decision: there will be twelve for each of you, or if you want you can kill each other and take all the quotas, haha! Although you're the only one who can do anything, hahaha!"

"..."

At that moment Raphael looked at Clarens, who was down; the latter was looking at him with regret, not with hatred or resentment, just regret - for the understanding of what Mikael would do and that he could do nothing to oppose.

Leaving aside the hired people, each brought approximately twenty people.

I meant that if Rafael used it all, there would only be a few contracts left for the remaining faction, not to mention the mercenaries or Vasil's faction, That wasn't even up for discussion.

Clarens understood that and didn't really say anything: he understood that negotiation was not an option; he would do the same in his position.

They had gotten themselves into a very complicated situation, without any warning.

It was not carelessness; Raphael accepted this taking into account anything and everything and the other factions.

But Saelis had remained so far out of the frame that he was not really taken into account: so far he only seemed to be a prince who led his faction because it was necessary and was not really concerned about resources or strategic positions.

He even made many contributions with Vasil, so they were as surprised as Vasil himself.

Saelis was not just an unscrupulous arrogant fool as he was acting: he had kept his intentions and actions hidden until the moment he attacked, when no one really expected it.

"You guys are really funny. Looks like you've made up your minds. Anyway, I already feel refreshed after saying what I wanted to... Hmmm, what to do? Well, get to signing contracts; then I'll take my time playing with this trash before I kill him."

With nothing more to say, Saelis approached Raphael; there was not the slightest trace of suspicion, fear, or reaction towards Raphael: he seemed absolutely certain that Raphael would not attack him even if he was not affected by the poison.

He seemed to have everything under control.

"Well, look, here it is, can you read it? It's very clear: in exchange for leaving them alive and not doing anything to kill them, you only have to do three things: first, don't tell what happened here; second, spread the word that it's a good place to hunt, mmm, now that I think about it, I think that's not necessary, mmm, well, it's already there, what's the difference? And the last thing, which I especially like, is that you can't attack me, take revenge or interfere in my affairs."

"That's very vague."

"Hey, that's the way it is: take it or leave it."

"...I'll sign it."

"Ha ha ha, excellent decision! You know, I still think it's a shame to have to involve you guys in this because of that piece of crap brother of mine. I especially like you, since you're a Silvercres, you worship Aeloria, our goddess, and you can keep those fools who serve Luxion and think they're the best on the continent at bay, but the truth is they can't do anything against you."

"..."

"Hahaha! Your face is very funny. You know, the opportunity hasn't presented itself before, but how about we start a beautiful friendship? It could be the beginning of your return to your rightful place. It is known that the Silvercrests are related to us, so you can inherit her great blessing just like our royal family. It's time to go back."

At that moment Saelis extended his hand towards Raphael; his face honestly made it clear that she was hoping for a very good friendship.

It only remained to accept on his part, but Raphael ignored it and, after making sure that the contract was definitely real and that what he said was true, simply signed it and handed it back to her.

"uff... I guess that's a no... anyway. Bring who we'll use with the second contract; I guess it'll be Lirena. I see you've been giving her some of your attention from the beginning. Is it just because she's your second in command? Right. Bring her along, you don't want her to suffer anymore, do you?"

"..."

Raphael really didn't feel like talking to her anymore. Saelis was really annoying and talkative, but he seemed to deliver what he said, and it was true that they couldn't waste time anymore. So, in the direction of Lirena, who was writhing in pain, he picked her up and brought her in front of Saelis, while looking at him to do as he promised.

"Yes, yes. Have the antidote: she needs to be able to sign. Being a mage now really sucks."

In the end, Saelis, somewhat bored with Raphael's reactions, pulled out a vial and tossed it to him; he took it and began administering it to Lirena.

"But seriously, don't you want to make an alliance? I'll be honest: even if we start like this, I'll later make you my subordinate. That in itself is your greatest honor: with me we'll reach the top of this continent - no, we'll go beyond... of this whole world, ugh!- I'll even give in and marry you to my sister. You know, Evangeline is the one who has the honor of being blessed by Aeloria..."

Saelis kept talking, trying to convince Raphael with her sincerity, but Raphael didn't seem willing to listen to him: he was more focused on seeing if what he was given had an effect on Lirena, and luckily Lirena slowly stopped writhing in pain.

"Honestly, your family - not your father - is a big threat to my plans; that's why I want to have you by my side."

"..."

Saelis tried to keep convincing him, but again Raphael was more focused on seeing Lirena's condition improve.

"Is that a no again? Or are you playing hard to get? Do you want to negotiate terms?"

"..."

"Whew, that's a tough one. But you know, Raphael, if there's one thing I don't like, it's that..."

At that moment, without warning and still retaining her friendly aura and even her gentle smile on her face, Saelis moved quickly behind Raphael.

There really seemed to be no ill intent in his movement, which even made the experienced Raphael react a moment late to the attack coming his way.

Blank!

But the attack was stopped by a defensive artifact in Raphael's position; it was imperative that most of the leaders had several ways to preserve their lives, though that barrier slowly began to give way.

"What are you doing, we signed a contract!"

"Yes, but since you turned down the incredibly great opportunity I gave you, I guess I'll have to get you out of the way. Don't worry though, you'll live, hahaha!; though it'll be as a cripple."

Saelis' sword did not appear normal, and as if it were a red-hot knife against ice, Saelis' sword slowly began to pierce Raphael's barrier.

He quickly invested more energy into the defensive artefact to create more defensive layers, but the sword did not stop and broke them all little by little, and because of the contract, Raphael could do nothing else...

"Hahaha! This is really good. Scum was right to bring you along; I can take care of you faster than I originally planned."

Slowly but surely, the sword pierced through the barriers faster than Raphael could create them; no matter how strong they were, the sword seemed capable of piercing through them all.

"Ugh!"

"Hahaha, that's a pity! A pity that's actually really funny. Even though you turned down my offer — since I really liked you — I'll tell you that you'll have the honor of being one of my first stepping stones. When I write my biography, I'll clearly put your name next to a heart, as the great friend you could have been."

"You're... crazy!"

"Hahaha, maybe I am! Hahaha!, but what does it matter? This crazy guy beat you and used you as a springboard, and you really taught me something: if I don't want to end up as miserable as you, I must never let my guard down. When you think you've won — when you think it's all over — that's when you're most vulnerab-"

"You're damn right, you bastard!"

Saelis didn't understand what happened; time seemed to go in slow motion and yet she couldn't do anything when she felt from behind her two hands holding her head, and before she even thought to stop what was happening....

"-E-"

Crack!

"One down."

He could only hear that last part as his head twisted, briefly showing him that his killer was the same man who had been Ophelia's supposed lover a moment earlier, and as if twisting his neck weren't enough, he saw golden gloves coming toward him and about to go into his eyes

CRRK-SCHLK!

He didn't really understand what had happened until the very end.

"I'll be sure to go get the others, you bastard."