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The
**Abandoned
Heiress**
Gets Rich with
Alchemy
and Scores an
Enemy
General!

2

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The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy
General! Volume 2

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SUTERARE REIJOU WA RENKINJUTSUSHI NI NARIMASHITA.

KASEIDA OKANE DE MOTO TEKIKOKU NO SHOU O KOUNYUU SHIMASU. by
Miyako Tsukahara

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Arc 2: The Beautiful Alchemist Purchases a Rare Dragon

◆ To the West of the Royal Capital, a New Store with a Large Yard

I stood on the wide, grassy plains and looked up at the clear, sunny sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. The cool breeze brushed against my cheeks, and the pleasant aroma of the flowers basking in the sunlight tickled my nose. The weeds, which had grown as high as my ankles, made the land seem flat as far as the eye could see. When I shifted my gaze, I could see the walls that surrounded the royal capital.

These grassy plains bordered the capital's walls and were surrounded by an iron fence. The fence, however, continued on into the forest and was covered in vine-like foliage, making it difficult to make out where it ended.

"I've finally become a landowner," I murmured as I put my hands on my hips and heard my heart beating.

Every time the wind blew, my blue headkerchief would flutter. It was securely fastened behind my neck, but it seemed like it'd fly away at any moment.

"It's on the edge of the capital, but it's still expensive land, and Cyril kindly arranged for us to have ownership of it," I said. "Since this land is owned by the kingdom, we're not required to pay any taxes, and we received a handsome reward from the royal family. With these savings, we can do nothing and play around for a year."

Just a few days ago, Otherworldly Gates appeared throughout Astria, and monsters roamed the kingdom. I, Chloe Sagrid, an alchemist and young beautiful maiden, fought against those monsters with my reliable partner, and saved the royal capital. To show their gratitude, the royal family gave us a large plot of vacant land to the west of the capital, and quite a bit of money.

I gazed at the vast land in front of me, soaking in the reality that I'd now become a great landowner.

"If you got time to chatter away, help me out," an authoritative yet sweet voice called out to me.

"All right, all right," I replied.

I stopped just standing around on the grass and turned to jog towards the voice. A slender black dragon lowered his head and torso while spreading his wings as he lay down on the plains. In front of the dragon was a tall, handsome, blonde man who was exposing his muscular upper body.

This was Mr. Julius. After I purchased him and went through quite an ordeal, he became my reliable partner. The black dragon was his beloved son, Helios.

A handsome, blonde man... A perfect description, if I may say so myself, I thought. It was the best way to describe him. He dampened his brilliant, golden locks that had grown out to his shoulders, and water dripped down his body which had been covered in numerous scars. He was the epitome of being devastatingly handsome.

"If there was a dictionary with illustrations of that phrase, I'm sure you'd be depicted there," I said.

"What're you talking about?" he asked. His artificial scarlet eye and blue eye looked at me quizzically.

"I just thought the words 'devastatingly handsome' suited you so well."

"I'm aware that you fancy my face. Stop saying stupid things and lend me a hand."

I stood beside him. In front of me was Helios, happily narrowing his golden eyes. He seemed to be quite comfortable. As always, he was exceptionally cute. His smooth, glossy scales were covered in bubbles as he quietly allowed himself to be scrubbed. Obedient towards Mr. Julius, Helios was trying his best to stay still.

"Have you finished washing him?" I asked.

"Yeah... It's inconvenient when you can't use magic," Mr. Julius said with

furrowed brows as he touched his nape.

He had a deck brush in his hand and a bowl of bubbles by his feet. It was a wholesome sight, but unfitting for a man like him. However, Mr. Julius was an extremely attractive man. The brush sort of looked like a new type of weapon, and it suited him well enough that I was unable to laugh in his face about it.

When I talk about attractiveness, I mean it in a general sense...though he is my type. I surprised even myself, but I'd...well...fallen for this brazen, proud, extremely reliable, and sometimes kind Mr. Julius.

Life was unpredictable. Just three years ago, I was the daughter of a duke and engaged to the first prince of Astria, Prince Cyril. Now, I'd become a beautiful, genius alchemist who stood alongside Mr. Julius, a former general of an enemy nation. But now wasn't the time for me to be so pensive while staring at his face. I had to clean Helios, who was covered in bubbles.

"I'd always sort of thought that life would be inconvenient without magic," I said. "Did you just notice how troublesome tasks could be?"

"Using magic would make battles a bit easier, but that's all. I'm no longer on the battlefield, and I have no complaints about my lifestyle. You can use magic, so it's not an issue," Mr. Julius replied.

"But you just said it was inconvenient."

"I need magic to wash the bubbles off Helios. But you're here. It's a bit inconvenient, but it's nothing major."

On his nape was a seal in the shape of a beast skull with two horns. This was the Slave Brand that prohibited him from using magic. Around his neck was a lock, a magical tool that forced wearers to stay obedient and to restrain them should anything go awry. The effect of this lock was heavily reliant on the user's magical capabilities. If the wearer possessed more magic than the user, the former could easily resist the latter. For example, if I were to use this lock on my master, Ms. Natalia, who was a powerful sorceress and alchemist, she'd be able to undo the tool easily.

As such, to make slaves never become insubordinate to their masters and take full advantage of this lock, the Slave Brand was used to seal magical

powers.

Mr. Julius, formerly a general of an enemy nation, was handed over to the Astria Kingdom three years ago. He was sentenced to incarceration indefinitely and had become a slave swordsman of the Slave Arena. And I, a young, beautiful alchemist called Chloe, had purchased him.

“You’re as sly as always,” I mumbled.

“You say something?” Mr. Julius asked.

I shook my head. *He said that I was here to use magic, so there were no major inconveniences.* I knew that I should probably take those words at face value, but it sounded like he expected us to always stay together. I couldn’t help but feel a little shy.

To hide my embarrassment, I purposefully spoke loudly. “All right, Helios! I’ll use my magic to wash off those bubbles, so close your eyes!”

I removed a wand that was strapped to a belt on my waist—it was an item that I’d received from a store owner, Mr. Robert. It was incredibly expensive.

During one of my shopping trips, I’d dropped by to thank Mr. Robert for the wand.

“I don’t need your gratitude. Just be sure to continue shopping at my store, Ms. Chloe,” he’d said.

And so, I’d purchased a few of Mr. Julius’s favorite black robes from the store.

“Julius is a very handsome man and a former aristocrat,” Mr. Robert had said. “Why don’t we dress him up in better apparel?” He proceeded to recommend clothes that were over ten thousand gold each. I politely declined this offer.

It’s not like I’m not willing to buy luxurious garments if Mr. Julius asked. However, the man himself had preferred cheaper robes. My hands were tied. I felt bad about declining Mr. Robert’s requests, but if he had any complaints, he’d have to take them to Mr. Julius, who wasn’t interested at all in fashion.

“Rar...” Helios said, suddenly opening his eyes.

He seemed a little startled by my voice and raised his head while staring at me. His intelligent, gold eyes twinkled happily at me. He blinked once and

outstretched his bubble-covered wings.

“Whoa,” I said.

With a flap, a gust of wind and the bubbles from Helios’s wings rained down on me. He swiftly stood up—he had a slender body, but he was as large as a small house. I was covered in bubbles and water.

I was dressed in my apron dress, but Mr. Julius, who likely knew that he’d get wet when washing Helios, was shirtless. Needless to say, I got the worst of it.

“You all right, Chloe?” Mr. Julius asked. Water and bubbles dripping from his body, he pushed his hair back as though it was a nuisance.

He didn’t seem at all worried—in fact, he had a small, mocking smile forming on his lips. He clearly seemed to find the situation humorous as I was absolutely drenched from head to toe.

Mr. Julius, looking devastatingly handsome like usual, stood beside me as I gave Helios a reproachful look. The dragon stared back at me with pure, innocent eyes. He blinked at me cutely.

“Don’t play around too much. I know it’s fun to tease Chloe a little,” Mr. Julius said, giving Helios a gentle warning. As a dragon maniac, the man was extremely forgiving of his son.

“Is Helios teasing and playing around with me?” I asked.

“Even he knows that you’re a kind idiot.”

“Don’t you have any other compliments? Call me cute, or elegant, or angelic,” I pouted. I was joking, of course, and didn’t mean for him to take my words seriously.

“...I suppose you sort of look like an angel,” Mr. Julius said after some thought.

“Helios,” I quickly said before Mr. Julius could say anything more. “I’ll wash those bubbles off for you, so stay still, okay?”

I used the wand to conjure a large shower with my water magic. Helios, feeling refreshed by the water under the sunny skies, suddenly flew up and did a lap around the skies of the royal capital. That alone was enough to dry off

most of his body.

Once Helios returned, he lowered himself onto the dry grass a short distance away and closed his eyes.

“Is he asleep?” I asked.

“It’s been a while since I was able to wash him,” Mr. Julius replied. “He’s been through quite a bit since he’s been by my side. I haven’t seen him sleep while looking so serene since his time at the house of Duke Craft.”

“Then it’s best if we let him sleep. Mr. Julius, does he need a blanket or something?” I asked.

“Can you make a blanket to cover a dragon of that size with your alchemy?” Mr. Julius looked at me wearily.

I wanted to say that nothing was impossible for me, but I had my limits. Even if I was able to create a blanket that could wrap around Helios, it would be troublesome to carry around. It was better to make Helios smaller. *That’s it! I’ve got it! We just need Helios to be about as small as a puppy. I think that might be possible.*

But when I saw the dragon look so comfortable on the grass, I felt it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. I shook my head to dispel any silly thoughts. I specifically requested a large plot of land so that Helios could experience some freedom. It didn’t feel right to make him smaller. While he was calmly spreading his wings and drying his body, Mr. Julius and I went inside the church that solemnly stood in the middle of the plains.

Though the structure looked like a church, it served as an orphanage and was well-equipped with a variety of tools for survival. The white walls occasionally had spots of chipped paint, and the wooden door was a bit heavy. The roof was blue, and the square chimney leading to the fireplace jutted out.

Past the entrance was a small chapel. Underneath the stained glass was a sacred idol with more than half of its gold paint chipped away.

In the depths of the chapel was a door leading to the living quarters. It contained a large dining hall and kitchen, and there were quite a few rooms. I wasn’t planning on using many of the rooms, but as an alchemist who required

numerous items, it was reassuring to have ample storage space.

I'd gradually changed the second floor of my shop—located in the central square of the royal capital—so that I could live in comfort. However, this house was new, and I hadn't renovated it yet. I was planning on doing so when I had the time. Wanting to clean my drenched self, I walked down the hallway to the bath. The stone walls and wooden doors were devoid of any color, making the corridor feel cold and uninviting.

Mr. Julius was right behind me, presumably wanting to take a bath as well. I would usually allow him to go first, but since I was soaked, I bravely wanted to claim the first bath today. I cleaned the large bathtub that was used at the orphanage, placed the hot spring stone that I created from my alchemy, and made a bath that I was proud of. I could now enjoy hot water whenever I liked. I stopped in front of the bathtub.

"Mr. Julius, I'd like to take a bath," I announced.

"I can tell," he replied with a puzzled look. He made it sound like I was saying something odd.

"Unfortunately, since there's only one bathtub, I'll go in first," I said. "I'm an elegant and frail young maiden of beauty, so I get first dibs."

"I'm soaked too. It's far more efficient if we bathe together."

"Th-That may be so efficiency-wise, but..."

"Is there a problem? I've seen your body numerous times since you purchased me. I'm already used to it," Mr. Julius said nonchalantly.

He quickly entered the bath. I was left behind as I stood there frozen in my heavy, dripping wet clothes.

"I don't get what just happened, but I feel like I'm beat," I muttered.

I was a little vexed. Ever since I started living with Mr. Julius, I'd changed in front of him without batting an eye—I didn't want to be underestimated or scorned for being a shy woman. Even so, I was rather reserved and didn't change in front of him that often. *Or so I'd like to think.*

"Ugh, my clothes are freezing..." I mumbled.

Water dripped onto the floor. My magic could've dried me off, but it couldn't wash away the soapy bubbles. Like a soldier off to fight a battle that I couldn't lose, I made my resolve. I took off my clothes and wrapped a towel around my body. I was still feeling a little shy. *The naked body of a beautiful young maiden is a rare sight to see. I can't show it off so easily.* As I made excuses to myself, I entered the bathroom.

The bathing area was fairly large; it was easy to guess that it was formerly used to bathe multiple children simultaneously. The floor of the wash area was made from dark blue stone, and the cute bathtub was made from a large stone lined with numerous colorful tiles like a mosaic.

Mr. Julius was already neck-deep in the tub. He glanced at me, but didn't say another word. For whatever reason, I made myself smaller and soaked myself in the edge of the tub. The hot spring stone continuously gushed out fresh hot water. The stone carried water straight from the source, after all. I felt the warmth seep into my freezing body—it felt nice. However, I was a bit embarrassed and couldn't stand the silence.

"Why're you silent? You're bathing with the adorable Chloe," I goaded. "Don't you have any thoughts?"

Mr. Julius didn't look particularly annoyed, but he didn't look ecstatic either. He stared at me. *I think you should act a bit more reserved.*

"You're so scrawny," he noted. "Is it because you've only been drinking pea soup?"

"Can you phrase that any worse?!" I shouted angrily.

I splashed all the hot water I could onto him. Looking as handsome as ever, he brushed his bangs back and chuckled jovially.

"You...laughed," I murmured.

I wasn't sure if I'd ever heard him laugh before. I gazed at him in shock. Mr. Julius furrowed his brows before sighing.

"Looking at you makes the strength leave my body," he said.

"Are you praising me?"

“I am.”

“...Well, if you say so.”

I didn't quite understand his words, but I felt like he evaded the true nature of my question.

“Speaking of, what will you do about the store?” he asked. “Are you gonna completely transfer here?”

“Are you curious? You're becoming more like a merchant by the day, Mr. Julius. Keep it up so that we can become wealthy.”

“Money's necessary. Dragons are hard to obtain as it is, and a female, which is comparatively cheaper than a male, costs at least fifty million gold. And that's the lowest price.”

“That's worth five of you.”

Even if I combined the reward I received from the kingdom and my savings, I didn't have enough. Mr. Julius cost five million gold, and an additional five million was needed for his gear. If I were to make the same calculations for a dragon, I might need upwards of a hundred million gold. I expected to live in luxury for the next year thanks to the money I received from the royal family, but that proved to be a short-lived dream.

“We were lucky that we were able to receive free land to house dragons,” I said. “But fifty million gold is a bit...”

“Seems like you should hurry up and open shop,” Mr. Julius quipped.

“You're only thinking about the dragons.”

“I'm thinking about you too. This is your shop, after all, and I'm making a request for a dragon. I plan on helping out.”

“...Fine. My shop's actually open for business. Much of the kingdom and the royal capital has been destroyed from the Otherworldly Gates that appeared the other day. Demand for lamps and fireplace stones made from alchemy have skyrocketed. But I *did* do a little something to the door of the shop...”

Before I could finish explaining, an adorable voice called out to the bathroom.
“Chloe, you've got customers.”



IN the central square of the royal capital, in front of Chloe's Alchemy Shop, was a birdcage containing a floating eye around the size of a child's head. The eye, called Ms. Gazey the Chaotic Gaze, was a product of my alchemy, and she was fairly intelligent. She was more of a security item.

Though intelligent, she didn't have the capacity to think and speak for herself. She would notify me if I had a customer, or use her Ms. Gazey Beam to burn intruders who clearly held malicious intent. She would also listen to my orders—I was her master.

Her voice sounded like an adorable girl's and was transmitted directly into my head. When I heard her call out to me, I swiftly washed myself off and headed out of the bath. I couldn't keep a customer waiting; they were important for my business.

I no longer had the time to worry about Mr. Julius's stares or the fact that we were bathing together. I tossed aside any shred of embarrassment I had, and quickly stepped out. Mr. Julius silently stared at me as he languidly stayed inside the tub. Around his neck was a black band and a padlock—a magical lock. I used to restrict his movements with two orders: to never leave my side and to never do anything I disliked. However, I'd done away with the first rule, and he only had the second request to follow.

Since we were now able to act without being so close to each other, I left him in the tub and used magic to blow warm air on my hair and body to dry off. I changed into a black apron dress. I only had red, blue, or black dresses to wear. I wasn't really particular about the color either; I just happened to wear the first dress I grabbed—black, in this case.

Black apparel wasn't popular with the residents of the city until recently. They didn't seem to care as much now. This was partly thanks to Mr. Julius, who protected the royal capital from disaster. His nickname, the Black Prince, was seen favorably by the citizens.

Shortly after I purchased him from the Slave Arena, many mistook him as my lover—not many made the connection that Mr. Julius was *the* feared Black Prince Julius. A former general of the Dystiana Empire's army, many citizens of

Astria would shudder from simply hearing his name. But he was now a hero who had protected the city from the monsters of the Otherworldly Gates. Mr. Julius and I were publicly commended by the Astria royal family.

In front of the fountain at the central square, King Cyril and his younger brother Zeke loudly declared that my father, the Duke of Sagrid, who was executed three years ago, was innocent of all his crimes. And Julius Craft, who'd slain numerous citizens of Astria during the war, was pardoned of his war crimes. Many people had attended this declaration, and so, the name of Black Prince Julius had spread throughout the royal capital.

Thus, if I wore a black apron alongside my lover, the Black Prince, we matched—proof that we were on good terms. *Or so it's been said.* People used to look at me glumly whenever I wore my black attire, but now they noted that we were a pair. I couldn't tell if this change was for the better or for the worse. *Honestly, it's a little embarrassing.*

In any case, I was wearing black for today. I preferred this mature and dark color recently; I was already twenty years of age, and I was a bit sheepish to wear vibrant red dresses.

Once I finished changing, I jogged over to the chapel. There was a door for the entrance, and two other doors deeper inside. The left door that I just exited from led to the bath, the kitchen, and the living space. In the center was a sacred idol underneath some stained glass, and to the right was an office. The space was likely used for administrative duties when running the orphanage. Beyond the office was another exit that led to the backyard. There was a door in the living space to get to the yard as well. I used my alchemy on these two doors, which led to the yard, and connected them to the entrance of Chloe's Alchemy Shop.

In other words, I had two ways to enter my store in the heart of the royal capital. When a customer opened the door to my store, they'd be able to enter the office of the orphanage. Thanks to its ample space, I'd be able to place my items for sale along with my alchemy furnace.

Since I'd decided to renovate this office and make it part of my store, I took out the purified water, dried the furnace, and requested Mr. Julius to carry it

here for me. The equipment was heavy, but we placed all our luggage on Helios's back and walked down the street of the royal capital. The moving process had been much easier than I'd expected, but of course, we stuck out like a sore thumb.

I was popular with the citizens, so many came to help out while kids watched in interest.

I opened the door to the office—the location of my new store. The space was decorated with my alchemy furnace, my trunk with infinite storage, a few lamps I made from my alchemy, empty bookshelves lining the walls, and a magnificent desk and chair. I didn't have the time to do much more just yet, so the room looked barren. When I opened the wooden door that was supposed to lead to the backyard of the church, I was met with the sight of the fountain from the central square. Ms. Gazey was floating in front of the entrance.

“Chloe, you’ve got customers,” she repeated.

In front of my shop were Mr. Roge, the captain of the Royal Mercenaries, and Cyril, my former fiancé and the king of Astria who'd recently married and lost my younger sister, Aliza.

“Long time no see, Ms. Chloe!” Mr. Roge called out. He was wearing his mercenary uniform donned with a crest. It was easy to tell that he was muscular. He hugged me with a broad smile, and it felt like a raging bull had just charged at me.

The brown-skinned Roge Gregorio looked a little intimidating at a glance with his silver, spiky, short hair, gold eyes, and a scar by his right eye. But once he opened his mouth, one could easily tell that he was a cheerful man. He rubbed his face against my head as though he was finally reuniting with a relative. Cyril looked on, dumbfounded.

Cyril had cut his long, slightly curled, golden hair. With his neatly trimmed short hair and cool gray eyes, he looked like a beautiful man. For whatever reason, the king was also dressed in a mercenary uniform. His right arm was resting on a cloth sling that hung from his neck. His hand had been lopped off from the wrist down—I couldn't see underneath the cloth, but I expected it to be missing.

He'd lost his right hand after trying to save me the other day. Since I was now able to analyze the entire situation calmly, I felt a pang of guilt when I saw him in such a state.

"Welcome, Mr. Roge, King Cyril," I greeted.

"Your hair smells so nice, Ms. Chloe," Mr. Roge said while hugging me, bringing his face close to my hair.

"Ah, I've freshly gotten out of the bath. I'm sorry to keep you both waiting," I said.

"A bath?!" Mr. Roge suddenly turned red-faced.

A flabbergasted Cyril furrowed his brows. "Roge, it's rude to carelessly touch a young lady."

"Oh, it's fine. Ms. Chloe and I are close," Mr. Roge said before turning to me. "Isn't that right, Ms. Chloe? And you're my angel. I'm in the stuffy Royal Mercenaries with so many untidy people. You're my oasis. You're so cute today too. You soothe my soul."

I was happy to receive compliments, but I really wanted him to release me. I didn't dislike Mr. Roge, but his powerful embrace was painful and a little suffocating. I gave an unpleasant shudder. I didn't try to be so obvious about it, but I wasn't good with men.

"Let go. She's mine. Don't touch her without permission," Mr. Julius said in a dangerously low voice from behind me.

Did he say that I'm his? I must be hearing things. I must! He's not the type to say stuff like that. But it's what I heard. His tone sounded irritated, but his words were sweeter than ever. I cupped my face with my hands in embarrassment.

Mr. Roge reluctantly released me from his hug. Between my fingers, which were covering my face, I glanced behind me and saw Mr. Julius dressed in his favorite, cheap black robe. He stood there looking comfortable, drying his hair with a towel. He couldn't use magic. I usually used my own to dry him off, but I was in a rush today and had left him behind. His golden locks were still a little damp.

Mr. Roge glanced at me, then back at Mr. Julius, as his face turned beet-red. “Ah, by bath, you must mean... I-I mean, I’m sorry to intrude.”

“Apologies. Perhaps we’ll come again another day,” Cyril added, looking a little uncomfortable.

They hastily glanced away from us, and I immediately realized that they were misunderstanding the situation.

“Y-You’re both wrong!” I quickly said. “I’m not quite sure what you’re thinking, but I assure you that it’s not what you’re imagining. We’d just finished washing off Helios, is all! But we’re done now!”

While I tried to clear up the misunderstanding in a panicked tone, I cursed Mr. Julius, who calmly found a chair in my new shop. He elegantly sat down and crossed his legs, looking as expressionless as ever. *This is your fault, you know! Help me out here!*

Mr. Roge let out a sigh of relief. “I-I see. You were just washing your *dragon*. Th-Thank goodness. I assumed that—”

“Roge, not another word,” Cyril interjected.

The two looked to be good friends. I guided the duo into my new store. Mr. Julius proudly sat in the only sturdy wooden chair in this space. With his long legs crossed, he silently stared at my customers, but he looked a little disgruntled.

I didn’t think this was a good attitude to take. *We’re in the service industry, so we must be a bit more friendly.* But I didn’t want to imagine Mr. Julius greeting the customers in a lively manner. I just let him be.

I tried to retrieve a few more chairs from a different room, but Mr. Roge stopped me, saying, “We’ll leave quickly, so no need.”

I felt it was rude to make the king stay standing, but since he gave his consent as well, I silently stood by Mr. Julius’s side. Mr. Roge and Cyril situated themselves on the other side of the large desk and faced us.

“Um, what brings you here today?” I asked. “Some shopping, perhaps?” I straightened my posture and tried to act professionally as the owner of my

alchemy store.

“Right. It’s a long story, Ms. Chloe,” Mr. Roge started.

“Then cut it short,” Mr. Julius demanded.

“You’re as snappy as always,” he replied with a strained laugh. Mr. Roge didn’t look angry at these words. “You’re mad because Cyril’s Ms. Chloe’s former fiancé, right? I totally get it. Cyril’s about as handsome as you, and he’s got a good personality. I understand why you’re worried.”

“...Stop that, Roge. I’ve committed a crime. I’m not suitable for Chloe, and saying such things will only trouble her,” Cyril said.

“See? Look how honest and honorable he is. Let’s not dwell on the past. I don’t want to make the atmosphere all gloomy, y’know? But since Cyril is such a dreary man, you’d think the Royal Mercenaries were having a funeral every day! All because of this guy!”

“For that, I apologize...” Cyril said while slumping his shoulders.

Mr. Julius, who remained seated next to me, glared while folding his arms in front of him. “I don’t really care about you guys. You talk too much. Just state your business.”

“You’re so hasty,” Mr. Roge said. “Small talk is a display of mental capacity, Julius. You might be able to glean some unexpected information from idle chatter. But I apologize. It does seem I’ve spoken a bit too much. I didn’t mean to get in your way today.”

After an earnest apology, Mr. Roge closed his mouth and seemed to be deep in thought. “Where shall I start,” he mumbled. “I know that I’ll be bringing up painful memories for you, Ms. Chloe, but I quit the Royal Knights three years ago. This was around the time when the Duke of Sagrid was executed, and you were thrown out onto the streets of the royal capital.”

I gave a quiet nod. I really wasn’t eager to dredge up my past. My father was charged with his sins, and I was convicted of the same crimes. Once King Cyril had passed his judgment on me, I was thrown into the alleyways of the capital. From there, I was surrounded by soldiers and men of the city, and Natalia Báthory, my alchemy master, saved me. An amazing sorceress and alchemist,

she provided the house that was currently known as Chloe's Alchemy Shop.

I was here today all thanks to Ms. Natalia. She taught me alchemy, but she just disappeared one day. She didn't talk about herself much, and I didn't have a clue as to where she currently was.

"To tell you the truth," Mr. Roge started, "three years ago, I went to Cyril a few times to tell him that his actions were wrong. I kept quiet until now because I didn't want to start anything."

"You did?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah. It sounds unbelievable, doesn't it? I'm just a knight, so it seems absurd that I could talk with the crown prince. I wasn't planning on saying anything because I didn't think others would believe me."

"Roge is a year my senior," Cyril said. "When I entered the academy, he was famous for being the most skilled amongst the students in the knight section. The House of Gregorio weren't aristocrats, and they weren't known for their combat prowess. He stood out precisely *because* he was a commoner."

The king carried a tone of loneliness—he must've had his own thoughts about the situation. I glanced at Mr. Julius, but as I'd expected, he looked completely disinterested. He had his arms folded and his eyes closed. *Is he planning on taking a nap? No, I know that he listens to others very well. I'm guessing he's still paying attention.*

"I preferred sword fighting and honing my equestrian skills, so I challenged Roge to a mock battle numerous times...and lost every time," Cyril said. He sounded a little uncomfortable when he had to mention the last bit.

Cyril was an honest man. He didn't have to go out of his way to mention that he'd lost against Mr. Roge. *But I never expected Mr. Roge to be so strong. I attended the academy at around the same time as he did, but I'd never even heard of him back then.* I was desperately attending school during that time, so I didn't have a chance to take in my surroundings.

"In any case, we were of completely different ranks, but I'd gotten close with Roge," Cyril explained. "When Roge graduated and entered the Royal Knights, there were rumors that he'd become the captain. But seniority takes priority, so

things didn't go as smoothly. When I took the throne, I thought that he'd eventually be promoted, but..."

The king had a pained expression. Mr. Roge had quit the Royal Knights before Cyril was given the crown. This was around the time when I was abandoned in the alleyways.

"I don't know what had happened back then," Mr. Roge said after a pause. "I couldn't speak for the executed Duke of Sagrid, but I know that you're a kind person, Ms. Chloe."

"Did you know me during my academy days?" I asked him.

"Yeah. I knew you pretty well. I couldn't speak with you because of our difference in rank, but even from afar, you always looked lonely and anxious... You were just the type of girl that people would want to protect. So I went to Cyril in protest and said that imprisoning you should be out of the question."

"I had no idea. Thank you, Mr. Roge."

Upon hearing my words of gratitude, he sheepishly ran his large hand through his spiky, silver hair. "Forget it," he replied. "It's something I did of my own volition, and my actions proved meaningless in the end, anyway."

"I didn't lend an ear to Roge's words. Now, I only wish that I had. I know that it's too late to have any regrets," Cyril muttered. He spoke slowly, seemingly frustrated with himself.

"In the end, I couldn't help you one bit, Ms. Chloe. I started to despise my surroundings, causing me to quit the Royal Knights and enter the Royal Mercenaries. I was relieved when I saw you energetically tending to your shop," Mr. Roge said.

I would've never guessed Mr. Roge's reason for quitting. When I opened my shop, he was my first customer. I now realized that he was watching over me from afar.

"Roge was right all along," Cyril admitted. "I'd caused trouble to all sorts of people because of how frantic I became."

As Mr. Roge had stated earlier, while he was feeling nostalgic about the past,

the king seemed rather glum. It was depressing to see a beautiful man look so defeated.

“King Cyril, Mr. Roge just said the same thing, but it’s all in the past. So, um, please, cheer up and feel better,” I said. I couldn’t find anything else to say and gave him the most inoffensive words I could find.

Mr. Julius, who’d kept his eyes closed until now, cracked them open and glanced at me. He stayed silent, but I felt him saying, “Don’t say anything unnecessary, you idiot,” with his eyes. I closed my mouth in reply.

“See, he’s so gloomy, isn’t he? I’m not here to voice our regrets,” Mr. Roge said. “I just wanted to explain why Cyril’s wearing the uniform of the Royal Mercenaries. Sorry for going off on a tangent.”

“Don’t be. I understand just how worried you were for me. Thank you, Mr. Roge,” I replied.

“Er, well, sure. Sorry for spouting unnecessary stuff.”

“It wasn’t unnecessary at all,” I said. “Anyways, you’re here with King Cyril because you’re his friend, correct?”

“Right. I’ve heard from Cyril about what happened between you and him. Cyril was planning on publicizing everything to the citizens, but after talking it over with Prince Zeke, it seems that a few parts will be kept quiet.”

“I think that’s for the best,” I said. “Aliza has already passed, and she’s...my younger sister. She was just manipulated by something evil.”

“I’m sorry, Chloe,” Cyril apologized.

I didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t at fault. But my father, who was innocent, had been executed. It was all in the past, but the pain in my heart was inconsolable. Mr. Roge let out a loud sigh then gave a powerful slap to the king’s back. A thundering smack reverberated in the air. *That looked like it hurt...*

Cyril seemed surprised, but not in pain.

“He’s been like this every day, y’know. I’m tired of it. He can regret his actions all he likes, but he’s so gloomy,” Mr. Roge said. “I far prefer the haughty and

sarcastic Julius—he's easier to be around."

"I have not a single thing to talk about with you," Mr. Julius said, annoyed that he was brought up at all.

"You're so cold, man..."

In contrast to his words, Mr. Roge didn't seem offended at all. It was a humorous sight, and I felt the atmosphere ease its tension a slight bit. I was grateful for Mr. Roge's consideration, and I gave a sigh as well before mustering my cheeriest voice possible.

"I understand the relationship between you two. I also know what direction the royal family's taking. But why are you here at my store?" I asked.

"Ah, well, simply put, Cyril wanted to give the throne to Zeke, enter the Royal Knights, and spend the rest of his life closing the Otherworldly Gates," Mr. Roge said. "But the Royal Knights are under the direct control of the royal family. Needless to say, everyone shows tremendous reservations towards Cyril. They'd say, 'We mustn't let you do this, King Cyril! Please stand back!' and the like."

"I can see that happening."

I understood the feelings of the Royal Knights all too well. They were around the former king, after all. They wouldn't dare act so casually and friendly with him.

"And so, Cyril came to me. The mercenaries are filled with idiots who don't give a damn about ranks and social statuses. They'll treat him as their equal, or if said bluntly, they won't treat him as well as the Royal Knights."

"That's just fine with me," the now-Prince Cyril said with a firm nod.

"He joined the Royal Mercenaries not as King Cyril or as Cyril Astria, but as plain old Cyril. But hear me out, Ms. Chloe and Julius," Mr. Roge said.

"Yes?" I replied once my name had been called.

Mr. Julius continued to ignore Mr. Roge.

"He's saying that he wants to live without his right hand," Mr. Roge said. "I can only think that he's underestimating the monsters of the Otherworldly

Gate. There's no way he can fight after losing his dominant hand. The mercenaries are pretty busy—we've no need for dead weight. The world isn't kind enough to warp to the prince's selfish desires."

"That's true. A loss of a body part would put you at a disadvantage. This is especially so for lost limbs. On the battlefield, that would be equivalent to death—the kindest thing to do is to kill him," Mr. Julius stated, involving himself in the conversation for the first time.

I thought that he was taking a nap, but it seemed he *was* listening the entire time. Though Mr. Julius's statements seemed cruel and harsh, Mr. Roge gave a firm nod at these words.

"That right! Exactly so! You get me, Julius," Mr. Roge said. "So I got pissed off and dragged Cyril over to Ms. Chloe's shop."

"Ah, so you'd like an artificial hand," I said, clapping my hands together.

I finally understood the reason for their visit. The red artificial right eye for Mr. Julius was made by my alchemy. I was a genius alchemist, so I was able to connect the nerves of his body to the artificial eye, allowing it to function and see like a normal eye. I even added the Anagram of Truth so that he could defeat spirit-type monsters with physical attacks. These monsters could usually only be defeated by holy magic. I was very proud of my creation.

I was overjoyed by Mr. Roge and Cyril's request. Cyril had lost his hand by protecting me—I was eager to create a hand for him to express my gratitude and repay the favor.

"...I'd stated that I wanted to become a man that could fight even after losing a body part, like Julius," Cyril said, facing down. "I feel pathetic. I'm sorry for taking your time by waffling over my decision."

There was no need to be embarrassed by living with an artificial hand, and I was personally glad that he'd made his choice. Magic couldn't regenerate lost limbs. Had we recovered his hand when it was freshly severed, he may have had a chance to retain it, but his hand had likely been buried under the debris and rubble when the castle fell.

"Is that all you need?" Mr. Julius said. "You talk too much."

“You don’t understand how Cyril or I feel, do you?” asked Mr. Roge. “Unlike you, we can only meet Ms. Chloe every once in a while. Why not allow for some small talk?”

Mr. Roge seemed to be pouting a bit, but Mr. Julius completely ignored him and fell quiet once more. This response was par for the course for this man, and Mr. Roge didn’t seem to be annoyed about being ignored.

“Mr. Julius, since I’ll be conducting some business and doing my alchemy, it’ll take a while. You can go to a different room and rest,” I offered kindly.

He didn’t provide a response, but he remained in his chair, conveying that he would be staying put. Looking bored, he once again closed his eyes as though he was taking a nap. As I looked up, I was met with a grinning Mr. Roge.

“He wants to stay with you,” Mr. Roge said with a snicker. “You gotta pick up on how a man’s heart works.”

Oh, be quiet. Feeling like I’d get teased no matter what response I gave, I decided to switch topics. “Let’s get back to the artificial hand, shall we? What kind of hand would you like? I could make it similar to a normal person’s hand, but there’s a bit more flexibility with limbs than, for example, eyes. You don’t have to be so fixated on one shape and be a bit more whimsical or playful.”

“Whimsical?” Cyril asked quizzically as he tilted his head.

“Right. For example, we can make a hand that could transform into a weapon as needed, or perhaps apply an effect that increases your magic to become the world’s strongest sorcerer. Stuff like that. I can’t modify your body made of flesh and blood, but I can tinker all I’d like with an artificial hand made of alchemy. Of course, this hand can function normally as well—you can cuddle with animals, use a knife and a fork, and change your clothes without a hassle. An artificial hand is only useful if it doesn’t hinder your everyday life.”

“That’s amazing. I’m not too familiar with alchemy, but it seems quite omnipotent,” he said.

“Not quite. There are still a few restrictions and if we make items that are too dangerous, we’ll get scolded by the Alchemy Association,” I explained. “Some of these items even become forbidden, and we’re never allowed to create them

again. If you keep making such items, your alchemy license will get revoked from the association. You'll become a stray alchemist."

"...I see. I had no idea. I'm sorry for being so clueless about these matters, though I was the king."

"Oh, please don't be. Alchemists are a little unique. I believe...er...it was a practice that originated from the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed. Truth be told, I'm not too familiar with its history either," I said. "My master wanted me to learn alchemy through hands-on experience rather than through lectures. In any case, what kind of hand do you desire, Cyril?"

"I wish for a hand that would make me as strong as possible," the former king replied with a serious expression.

Mr. Roge gave a dry laugh. "I'm not too sure about that request of yours."

I understood where Cyril was coming from, but as Mr. Roge had stated, it was a bit too vague. I put a finger to my lips, deep in thought.

"Let's see..." I murmured. "An artificial hand that would make you strong... Does that mean you'll leave the specifics to me?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind," Cyril replied.

"It might take some time, but would you like to wait here? Or will you leave and come back another day?" I asked.

"Would it be fine if we stayed?" Cyril asked.

Mr. Roge and I both nodded our consent.

My mind was now filled with work as I rummaged through my infinite storage trunk—it was stuffed with materials. I'd been busy these past few days and had hardly performed any alchemy. As luck would have it, I had plenty of materials and items to spare. In addition, when I fought against the monsters that rampaged in the city, kind citizens picked up the materials that dropped and delivered them to me. I had numerous rare, expensive items at my disposal. Cyril came at a perfect time, and I felt like I could make the strongest artificial hand ever.

"Let's see... Why don't we use the materials that dropped from the monsters

of the Otherworldly Gate?” I suggested. “We have the Chains of the Abyss and the Poison of Moribund. I also have a lot of Otherworldly Fingers to spare. We can even use the Right Hand of the Asmodeus and the Nerves of Nuranus. Yup, we’ve got a lot of luxurious, expensive items here.”

I took these materials in my arms and threw them into my alchemy furnace, one at a time. Once I poured in my magic, the transparent purified water within the furnace reacted to my magic and the materials and gave off a golden glow. The items I used this time were all extravagant. A lot of the materials were dropped by monsters that had deeper ties to the Otherworld. I felt the contents of my alchemy furnace react more than usual.

After a short while, the purified water’s glow started to wane, and a hand was floating in the liquid. I scooped up the finished artificial hand using both of mine. Since I felt that this hand would feel off if it looked too humanlike, I instead opted to make it silver. It looked like armor, but the hand itself was rather soft to the touch. The joint was fitted with a sphere, making it seem more metallic. I didn’t mind making a normal hand, but I let my creative juices flow, and I believed I made it look much cooler.

“This is a wonderful creation!” I crowed. “I’m a genius! A young maiden of rare beauty and intellect!”

I raised the artificial hand into the air as I praised myself. It was important to self-praise. Doing so gave me motivation to do my best for my next job.

“Oh, are you done already? You’re amazing, Ms. Chloe. I’d expect no less from a genius alchemist and young maiden of rare beauty,” Mr. Roge said, nodding along.

He agreed with all my praises. Cyril, who stood next to him, looked at me kindly as though he was gazing fondly upon a young child in his neighborhood. I started to grow a little shy.

Since my shop and my alchemy furnace were in separate rooms until now, only Mr. Julius had ever seen me perform my alchemy. In other words, I hadn’t shown anyone else my process of mumbling to myself while I praised my appearance. *Oh shoot, this is embarrassing.* I often called myself a young beautiful maiden or something of that sort, but I mostly did so to cheer myself

up. I didn't truly believe that I was *that* beautiful.

But it didn't feel right to hastily deny these claims now, so I clumsily lowered the artificial hand I had in the air. Mr. Julius, who'd been taking a nap, stared at me intently before he broke out in a condescending smirk.

"Um, er, well..." I stammered. "I made something wonderful, so I was happy and couldn't help myself. Anyways, here's the artificial hand, Cyril."

I tried to remain as serious as I could as I handed my creation over to him. Mr. Roge peered at the item with great interest while Cyril gave a troubled furrow of his brows. Even Mr. Julius seemed curious as he stood up and approached my side while staring at the hand I created from alchemy. I used way more items to create Cyril's hand than I had with Mr. Julius's eye. Of course, this meant that the former possessed far greater effects than the latter. *He might complain about that to me later. I'm scared.*

"Cyril, your arm, please," I said. "I'll fit this onto you."

"Got it," Cyril said as he loosened the cloth around his neck with his only hand.

His wrist was peeking out from under the military uniform. His hand was gone, and there was only a round, smooth surface in its stead.

"This might hurt a little. To connect this to your body, I must make the artificial hand combine with your flesh," I warned.

"Not a problem," Cyril replied.

I pushed the wrist of the artificial hand against Cyril's arm. Since the hand was larger than mine, I used both of mine to hold it in place.

"Here I go," I said.

Silver strands extended from the hand and slowly approached Cyril's arm. They penetrated his skin and slowly wormed their way inside. Cyril furrowed his brows, making it seem like he was bracing himself. Gradually, the boundary between his flesh and the hand was covered in silver before it was completely absorbed by his skin. The attached area became smooth. It now looked like his right hand was made of metal—as I'd thought, he looked very cool.

“The hand has been attached. This artificial hand is connected to your nerves, so you can use it like a normal hand. Try moving it around,” I said.

Cyril stared at his new hand, which had morphed to become the perfect fit for him. He brought it in front of his face as he clenched and unclenched his fist. His movements were fluid. I was sure that it wouldn't affect his daily life.

“It moves just fine. There's no pain or discomfort,” he observed.

“That's great to hear. This artificial hand is made from the Chains of the Abyss. It has the unique ability to change shape, and your hand could turn into a chain. I think chains are convenient to have. You can restrain, attack, or stall your opponent, so I'm sure it'll be useful in many situations,” I said.



“My hand can turn into a chain?”

“That’s right. And with the effect of the Poison of Moribund, you can temporarily paralyze any foe you injure. I wanted to create a weapon with lethal poison that could defeat others in one blow, but if, for example, you got into a fight with Mr. Roge and hurt him with your chain, you’d kill him. So I nixed that idea.”

A deadly toxin was a choice if I wanted to make the strongest weapon possible, but safety was also important. This artificial hand wasn’t too dangerous, but it could still function as a viable weapon. *A wonderful creation, if I may say so myself.*

“I wouldn’t do anything like that, but if I’m not used to wielding it, the worst-case scenario might happen. I thank you for your consideration,” Cyril said, sounding a little flustered.

“Even if you accidentally hurt yourself, you should be able to move again in about an hour or so. I hope that puts your mind at ease,” I said. “I considered adding other effects too, but the materials I used were so rare, and I feared that I might oversaturate the item, which is no good.”

“This is more than enough, Chloe. Thank you... I’m grateful that I can freely use both my hands once more.”

For the first time since he came to my shop, Cyril gave me a bright smile. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that he looked a bit happier.

◆ The Seal Master

I gave Cyril an explanation on how to use his new hand. My products were generally made simple—I felt that products made from alchemy should be functional without using any magic. As such, none of my items were complex.

This applied to Cyril's hand as well. He simply needed to shout out a command to transform his hand into a chain. Since I used the Chains of the Abyss, I'd name this item the Prosthesis of the Abyss. As Cyril had requested, it was extremely powerful and rather dangerous. To prevent him from accidentally activating it while hugging an animal or the like, the words he'd need to chant were quite long and had some flair:

"The Chains of the Abyss that are connected to the Gates, I permit you to unleash your immense power."

This was a phrase that one would never utter by accident; I doubted he'd use these words regularly, either. Above all, I felt like he'd sound cool when he said those words. Cyril earnestly accepted this activation phrase, but others didn't seem to agree.

"Er..." Mr. Roge groaned with a hint of awkwardness.

Mr. Julius gave a disapproving furrow of his brows. *Goodness, these two just don't understand my creativity. They're both fools.*

"Just to warn you, Cyril, please never activate your hand inside a room. It's dangerous. I don't mind if you do so when you get used to wielding your weapon, but you should start by practicing in an open area. Since we've got a huge yard, you can use our land to practice," I said.

Cyril gave a solemn nod at my words.

"At 50,000 gold an hour," Mr. Julius added.

He seemed serious and expressionless. *It doesn't look like he's joking, but I bet he is.*

“You’re ripping us off,” Mr. Roge said. “Just because Cyril’s a former king and prince, and might be hopeless when it comes to money, doesn’t mean you can scam him like that.”

No one could argue with that sound logic.

“I see. I’ve never really purchased anything on my own, so it’s true that I know nothing when it comes to pricing. But even I’m aware of how precious this hand that Chloe created is. I’ll buy it at your asking price,” Cyril said as he moved his prosthetic around and gazed at it from various angles.

I was glad that Cyril seemed to take a liking to his new hand.

“Fifty million gold,” Mr. Julius muttered quietly.

“It’s not *that* expensive!” I hastily said.

While it was true that I used costly items to make the hand, Mr. Julius was asking for far too much. Though Cyril was a former king and must’ve been rich, it wasn’t good practice to try to squeeze money out of him.

“I’m sorry. Mr. Julius wants a dragon, so he’s just trying to get some money,” I explained. “Since it’s my fault that you lost your hand, Cyril, I’ll add a bit of a discount as consolation. How does two million gold sound?”

“Understood. I’ll send the payment at a later date. Is that fine with you?” Cyril asked.

“Of course. I trust you, and I know you won’t just take the hand and run.” I gave a nod. Normally, I’d request payment as soon as I handed the item over, but I felt bad sending him back without his hand. That would’ve been inconvenient for him.

“Thank you,” Cyril replied with a smile. As though he remembered something, he turned to Mr. Julius. “You want a dragon, Julius?”

“You’ve no right to call me by my name. If you’re done with your business, leave.”

“Mr. Julius,” I scolded. “He’s a customer. Cyril’s buying this hand for two million gold, so don’t be so huffy.”

I tugged on his clothes, and he gave his usual click of his tongue. He must’ve

disliked Cyril, but I wasn't sure if there was a person that Mr. Julius *didn't* dislike.

"If you gave me permission, I would've killed him. Just because you're kind and you forgave him, doesn't mean that I did," Mr. Julius said.

"Don't say something so dangerous. Goodness," I said before turning to Cyril with a troubled smile. "Don't worry, he's like this to everyone."

Cyril nodded. "Got it. It would've been perfect if the Astria royal family owned some dragons, but unfortunately, we don't have any pure-blooded ones. Even the royal family can't get ahold of those so easily. And it's almost impossible to tame a wild dragon."

"Dragons that are available to the general public have all been domesticated. Only the Dragon Knights of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed could create a unit that has tamed wild dragons," Mr. Julius, the dragon maniac, said.

I was certain that he only responded to Cyril because he loved dragons so much.

"I don't think they sell pure-blooded dragons in that kingdom much either," Cyril said. "I hope you can find what you're looking for."

"But why do you even need another dragon?" Mr. Roge asked. "You've already got a splendid one."

"Mr. Julius wants a mate for Helios," I chimed in. "I agree with this idea since Helios is probably lonely all by himself. I know that dragons are expensive, but I wouldn't have guessed that they were that hard to obtain."

I thought that I could purchase one as long as I had the money. I sighed.

"The Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed is full of secrets. The process of capturing dragons and breeding them is kept under wraps; we don't even know how they domesticate and modify a dragon. Dragons that have been modified can be purchased and bred quickly, but an unmodified, pure-blooded dragon is beautiful. So, Julius's dragon is named Helios, I see. Even his name has an air of divinity around it," Cyril said, praising Helios.

I was also of the mindset that Helios was adorable, but I could feel the passion

behind Cyril's tone. He might've been a bit of a dragon maniac himself.

"Well, Helios is especially beautiful, even amongst the unmodified dragons," Mr. Julius said proudly, content with the praise that his dragon received.

I liked seeing Mr. Julius in a good mood. It was sometimes difficult to discern his slight emotional differences, but I was happy to see him look so happy. *I guess this is my weakness because I fell for him.*

"Rasheed is known for not only their dragons but also their research regarding the Otherworld. I'm sure they've got some information that we're unaware of, but they won't hand it over to us so easily. We used to be allies, but ever since we formed a peace treaty with the Dystiana Empire three years ago, we're not looked at so favorably," Cyril said with a frown.

I wasn't too familiar with the details of these political affairs. I was abandoned in the royal capital since then, after all.

"Would it be difficult for us to go and purchase a dragon?" I asked.

"It's not as though we severed all diplomatic relations," said Cyril. "You can enter their kingdom, but it might just end as a small vacation."

As I saw the former king look so troubled, I remembered another question I had.

"A bit off-topic, but do you know if a Slave Brand can be removed, Cyril?" I asked.

"A Slave Brand?" he repeated.

"Yeah. The Slave Arena said that such a thing was impossible."

I'd gone to ask, just in case. The receptionist had told me, "You can carve a brand into someone, but you can't remove it," and chased me away. I was a bit frustrated by this response, but Mr. Julius didn't seem to care.

"The people who are marked with that brand in that arena are all criminals. They normally wouldn't make it out of there alive. I don't think there was ever a case like Julius, where one survived and was sold because of their combat skills," Mr. Roge said.

"Is that so?" I asked. "I'm not well-versed about stuff like this, but I assumed

that purchasing slaves was quite a common practice.”

“Only the worst and most terrifying criminals are sent there. Even if one *can* make the purchase, I doubt anyone will,” Mr. Roge replied before hastily adding, “Oh, I don’t mean to speak ill of you. I’m just speaking from the public’s perspective.”

I glanced over at Mr. Julius, but he didn’t seem to mind the comment.

“Then I guess there aren’t many that can erase this seal,” I muttered.

“A seal master is tasked with the job of applying these brands or seals on people. The owner of the arena probably hired one,” Cyril said, placing his prosthetic hand on his chin. He then stared at his hand, surprised by its texture. The hand looked metallic, but it felt close to human—it seemed he couldn’t hide his shock by this incongruity.

“A seal master?” I asked.

Cyril nodded. I wasn’t well-versed about this occupation. Those who possessed immense magical energy and were skilled at using magic were called sorcerers. People skilled only with healing magic and had ample knowledge about medicinal herbs were called healers. They worked at medical facilities to treat illnesses and wounds. If one could channel their magic into items and create magical tools, they would be called magical toolmakers. Finally, there were alchemists such as myself—we created our products by combining our magic with items that contained magical energy. Almost anyone could use our items.

Then what’s a seal master?

“While the Duke of Sagrid was a special case, the Astria Kingdom doesn’t usually condone capital punishment. Those convicted of serious crimes are sent to a prison called the Slave Arena. The Slave Arena is just their tentative name,” Cyril explained.

“So, the Slave Arena’s just another name for a prison,” I said.

“Right. That facility used to be a cell that belonged to the royal family. But a few generations ago, the queen stated that maintaining such a facility was cruel; she disliked that it was under our rule. And so, it was removed from the

royal family's jurisdiction. Ever since, it has been entrusted to the House of Grand. Their household has always produced officials in charge of punishing these criminals."

When I was Chloe Sagrid, the daughter of a duke, I'd never had this kind of conversation with Cyril. It wasn't wise for an aristocratic lady to be interested in the Slave Arena, and the facility hadn't existed in my world back then. It had always been there, of course, but I'd never so much as laid eyes upon it.

"Musik Grand is the man who sold Mr. Julius to me. He stated that the royal family had tasked him with doing whatever he wished with Mr. Julius. I think he said something like Mr. Julius was too strong, and that it was a waste to have him rot in the Slave Arena. And that's how I purchased Mr. Julius," I said.

"I doubt Musik expected cute and frail Ms. Chloe to purchase Julius," Mr. Roge said, finding humor in the situation.

Indeed, the man had looked rather shocked when I requested to purchase Mr. Julius. I'd never seen anyone look so bewildered before, so I wasn't sure if this word was the right descriptor.

"I doubt Musik Grand wants to go against the Astria royal family. I'm guessing he was choosing his customers wisely...and he thought it was fine to leave Julius to you, Chloe," Cyril said.

"This one's kind to a fault," Mr. Julius said, tousling my hair. "The owner of the Slave Arena has a much better eye than *you*."

I grabbed my headkerchief, trying to keep it in place as I grumbled, "Ow. That hurts! Ouch..." *Mr. Julius really needs to understand how to control his strength.*

"You're right..." Cyril said with a sigh. I didn't want Mr. Julius to blame him too much—the former king was just feeling a bit better before he was knocked back down into depression again.

Looking slightly glum, Cyril continued, "You're absolutely correct. I can't refute that claim at all. In any case, our kingdom doesn't quite permit slaves. The Slave Brand was to make it so that the House of Grand could handle the criminals with ease, and these prisoners were pitted against each other to make some money. These criminals would never be released into society again

anyways; they were tools to make money, and if they killed each other, we could reduce their numbers. Thus, the prison and the arena were put in the same place, making what people call the Slave Arena.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said as I grabbed Mr. Julius’s hand on my head with both of mine, locking him into place. It might’ve looked like we were playing around, but I was pretty desperate. The tousling was painful, and he ruined my neatly arranged hair.

“The people there are either garbage, akin more to beasts than humans, or stupid. Even if they were released, they would’ve done no good to society. There’s no need for you to feel sympathy,” Mr. Julius said.

It seemed he’d caught on to my thoughts and tried to reassure me. The man had survived three years inside that arena; I had no doubt that his words were true. Even so, I felt that such treatment was cruel. *But there are many who were tormented by these criminals. I guess it’s not right to feel sympathy... This is a difficult, gray area.*

“When I was being raised as the next king, I was taught that this was a necessary evil,” Cyril said. “Since Musik and his household have been tasked with maintaining the Slave Arena, the royal family doesn’t really have a say in the matter.”

“Makes sense. You just tossed all responsibilities regarding criminals onto them for generations. I guess you can’t say much without stirring up trouble,” Mr. Roge said with a slump of his shoulders.

Cyril nodded. “Precisely. Unfortunately, this means that I’m not too familiar with the seal master, either. That practice didn’t originate from our kingdom. Brands are carved into people in the Slave Arena to increase the effect of the magical lock, no?”

“I believe so,” I replied. “The effect of the magic lock depends on the user who pours their magic into it. If the wearer has their magical powers sealed, it’s probably almost impossible to break it. I think Mr. Musik told me that when I went to buy Mr. Julius.”

Mr. Musik, the owner of the Slave Arena, was a large, muscular man with an intimidating face. When I talked with him, he didn’t seem too bad. He felt like a

normal person to me, but when I told Mr. Julius that, he looked at me wearily.

“The brand that Julius has is called a Slave Brand primarily because everyone at the Slave Arena has one. However, its proper name is the Magic Suppression Seal. I’ve heard that this magic *wasn’t* created specifically for slaves,” Cyril said slowly, as though he was trying to dig up his memories.

The Slave Brand by itself didn’t have an effect to make the wearer do another’s bidding. That role was left to the magic lock. Yet, it was odd to me that the seal received a nickname with the word “Slave” in it. I gave a nod of agreement.

Mr. Julius sighed beside me. “I don’t really care about proper names.”

“Right, I suppose that bit was unnecessary,” Cyril said. “From the research about the Otherworld to studies about sorcery, the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed has far surpassed us. Alchemy, magical tools, and seal masters all originate from there. I’ve heard that any questions regarding these topics usually lead to an Otherworld researcher. I’m guessing these technologies are derived from their research.”

“Rasheed again...” I murmured.

That kingdom had come up often in our conversations today. Dragons, alchemy, and the seal all pointed to a kingdom that I’d never visited. *Maybe I’d learn more about that terrifying, dark, four-winged demon Mephisto, who possessed Aliza, if I head to Rasheed.*

“I don’t really mind about the seal, but it’s essential for us to go there to obtain a dragon. We should head out as soon as you’re prepared, Chloe,” Mr. Julius said.

“You’re way too hasty! Slow down! We just moved into our new house, we don’t have the funds, and even if we did, we’re not sure if we could purchase a dragon just yet,” I swiftly said, shooting his suggestion down.

He grabbed the strings of my apron dress and tried to carry me out of the building, so it was of utmost importance to stop him right this instant. *Is he bored of this conversation already?* I offered my resistance, but Mr. Julius was much stronger than me—he hoisted me up and carried me under his arm. I

couldn't flee, and he wasn't willing to let go.

"Looks like a wild beast grabbing their kid by the scruff of the neck," Mr. Roge said with a smile as he painted a much more peaceful picture of the scene.

None of this was peaceful for me. *You should be asked to pay 50 million gold to buy a dragon. Only then will you know how this feels,* I thought while glaring at Mr. Roge.

"Could you wait a little longer?" Cyril asked, giving a slight frown. "You won't be able to meet an Otherworld researcher, a seal master, or a Dragon Knight knowledgeable about dragons and breeding by a simple visit there. I'll write a letter for you. Why don't you bring that to an Otherworld researcher with ties to the Astria royal family? If all goes well, you might be able to find a seal master."

After a slight pause, he continued. "But I don't want either of you to be reckless. It's my duty to slay the monster that had possessed Aliza. Our kingdom is still filled with numerous monsters from the incident that occurred the other day. I can't go along with you...but if you obtain any information, I don't want you to charge in headfirst. I know you're strong, Julius, but Chloe was the daughter of a duke a mere three years ago."

Under Mr. Julius's arm, I puffed out my chest towards a worried Cyril. "I'll be fine!" I said brightly. "I'm the genius alchemist and young beautiful maiden, Chloe!"

"We don't need your concerns. Chloe has me. Hurry on home, and send us the two million gold, along with your letter. That's about all you can do for us," Mr. Julius added.

I widened my eyes in shock at his rude words. I was filled with deep remorse for Mr. Julius's action. *But hearing, 'Chloe has me,' is kind of nice. No, no, I still feel bad about all this.* I felt like I was refusing Cyril's kindness.

"You're right. Sorry for taking up so much of your time. Later, Ms. Chloe, Julius. I haven't really heard any bad rumors about the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, but I've never gone myself. It doesn't hurt for you two to be extra careful. If anything happens, feel free to rely on me anytime," Mr. Roge said.

“I’ll return to the castle and send the letter along with payment. Take care,” Cyril said.

The two opened the door and left my store. The city square and fountain were right outside as I heard Ms. Gazey say in her beautiful voice, **“Goodbye.”**



THE next day, I received the letter and money from Cyril. The messenger from the royal family had given us two letters: one was to an Otherworld research facility in the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, called Puerta Research Center, written to a researcher called Jahala Garena. The other was to me.

It had been a while since I received a letter from Cyril. When we were engaged, he often wrote me a letter during the changing seasons or on occasions like my birthday. With a hint of nostalgia at his neatly written words, I read the letter.

I was sitting on the edge of the bed in the bedroom of our new house. Mr. Julius was behind me, lying down with his eyes closed. He slept often, as though he was making up for the sleep that he lost until now. It was only until recently that he was able to sleep on a proper bed once more. I thought that was a positive thing—my master, Ms. Natalia, had often told me that a good night’s sleep was vital for a healthy body. Whenever she was wrapped up in a new alchemy project or researching magic, she’d frequently forget to eat and sleep. “You must eat well and sleep well, no matter how busy you are. These are the most important things for a human to survive. Do you understand?” she’d say. It sounded like she was trying to remind herself too.

I wonder if Ms. Natalia is doing well. Where has she gone? I’m sure she’s doing fine, though. The area we designated as our bedroom had ceilings and walls made from gray stone. When I placed a large, wool cloth dyed red and orange, the room felt slightly more inviting. Upon entering, there was a fireplace to the right, and a double bed to the left. Since only a solid wood bed frame had been left behind, I purchased a new mattress and some sheets.

The bed that I’d been using until now had been fitted with cute, flower-patterned sheets and matching floral-pattern cushions. My taste was rather effeminate. When Mr. Julius slept in it, he looked a little funny and fairytale-

like, but this time around, I chose a more low-key design. The sheets were white, and the comforter was a deep indigo. I kept my old pillows and cushions with floral patterns, adding a spot of cuteness to the bed. Mr. Julius, who couldn't care less about interior design, had said, "You can do whatever as long as I can sleep."

On the bedside table was a star-shaped lamp I made from alchemy. From the ceiling hung a round alchemy lamp, which looked like three spheres strung together. The back of the room had a window and two large closets. There wasn't much of a difference from my old room—we just had a fireplace now.

I'd suggested to Mr. Julius, "Since we've got so many rooms to choose from, why don't we sleep in separate rooms?"

"We can just stay as-is," was his reply, and so, we continued to share a room.

"You probably miss me when I'm far away from you, huh?" I said half-jokingly, trying to hide my embarrassment.

"I do," he answered.

Ever since, I chose not to bring that subject up anymore.

"What's written in that letter?" he asked, turning towards me.

I heard the fabric rustle. Yesterday, we washed Helios and made a prosthetic hand, so we decided to take a day off today. As we'd decided to visit the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, I'd been organizing my items in my infinite storage bag since this morning. It was almost time for lunch. Mr. Julius had taken Helios out to the North Plains earlier to hunt some small monsters. Helios needed to eat, after all.

When Helios consumed a monster, they didn't drop any materials. This was unfortunate, but there was nothing I could do. Helios's meals took priority.

My infinite storage bag was a convenient item made from my alchemy—it was connected to my infinite storage trunk. I could take anything out of my trunk whenever I wished, making it very convenient for trips. This product wasn't made for the public since I feared someone abusing it.

The bag I had before was confiscated by the soldiers when I was arrested and

escorted to the castle. I hadn't seen it since. I guessed that it was crushed under the debris and destroyed. It was made from simple cloth, so it wasn't a particularly tough or sturdy item.

"Are you awake? Would you like to read the letter?" I asked. I tried to hand Mr. Julius the letter.

He gently shook his head without taking it. "I'm listening, so read it out loud."

"Oh, are you acting spoiled?"

"I want to hear your voice."

Recently, Mr. Julius was rather straightforward. *Well, it's not like he changed overnight. He's sort of always been this way, I think. I just couldn't tell from his words and mannerisms before.* Feeling my cheeks grow hot, I put a hand over my chest. I couldn't get used to his words, and I felt oddly nervous. I didn't hate this feeling, but just knowing that I loved him made each trivial, everyday occurrence special.

"...All right. Then make sure to listen," I said.

"Yeah."

I shifted my gaze down towards the letter and proceeded to read. "'Chloe, thank you for making me a prosthetic hand yesterday. I tried testing it out, but it's going to take some time to master. Roge tagged along with my practice, and he ended up warning me numerous times not to use it in actual fights just yet. I'll have a messenger from the royal family deliver the letter for Rasheed and the payment. If I keep coming to meet you, Julius will get angry, so I'll just leave you with a letter.'"

"He's got that bit right," Mr. Julius said.

"You don't like Cyril, do you?" I asked.

"I don't. I find it unpleasant when I see him talking with you."

"...Er..." I decided to read the rest of the letter. I knew the reason why he found it so unpleasant. It was embarrassing for me to say, so I just left it at that. I thought that was for the best. "'I have another thing to apologize about. I hope you remember Eliza and Michael Coldman of Coldman's Merchandise. I'm

aware that they tried to frame both you and Julius for crimes that you didn't commit. We'd restrained and imprisoned them in a cell for nobles, hoping to interrogate them, but I was notified that they disappeared the other day."

"...The soldiers of the Astria Kingdom are all useless," Mr. Julius said with a sigh.

"Now, now. The castle's destroyed, and the royal capital is in ruins. I'm sure they were short-staffed."

I quelled his irritation. Coldman's Merchandise was the largest store in the kingdom, and they even had a private army. They must've had plenty of ways to flee.

I continued to read. "'We're planning on investigating the Coldmans' residence, but I presume that they've fled far away. They've only got money to spare, after all. As jewel merchants, they've conducted business across numerous nations. They could be fleeing to a different nation. Eliza had stated that you were in the wrong, Chloe, for not selling Julius to her. If you notice anything odd about your surroundings, please let me know immediately.'"

Did Ms. Eliza like Mr. Julius? They'd only met a few times, but did she like him to the point where she cursed me? I couldn't quite understand love, though I was aware that it could've been love at first sight.

Mr. Julius sighed. "That's a bit troublesome. I doubt a mere merchant could do anything, but don't wander off by yourself, Chloe."

I placed the letter on the bedside table, turned around, and peered into his beautiful face.

"Are you worried about me?" I asked.

"I now believe that my only reason to live is to protect you," he replied.

I grew flustered as I met his serious gaze. He took my hand and brought me close to him; I heard his rhythmic heartbeat.

"...Let's head to the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed tomorrow morning," I said. "I'm not sure if I can purchase a dragon, but we should meet the Otherworld researcher and ask for a seal master. I'd like to remove that brand from you."

“I don’t mind if I remain like this.”

“But I mind. I don’t want you to be permanently marked by the Slave Brand. And I’m sure you’ll become much more powerful if you *can* use magic. You’d be able to defeat monsters in no time... And besides, we might have to face that demon one day.”

“You’re right. If we can tear the wings off that stupid demon, we might be able to sell them for a good price.”

“I see that you’ve become quite the businessman, Mr. Julius. Are you planning on selling them?”

“There’s never an issue of too much money. We need to buy the dragon.”

I giggled at his usual, dragon-maniac-like reply. I wasn’t afraid of exploring an unknown region or the warning that I’d read in Cyril’s letter. With Mr. Julius by my side, I wasn’t just encouraged—I truly felt like I could become the kingdom’s strongest genius alchemist of great beauty.

◆ Puerta Research Center and Fores Research Facility

THE next morning, Mr. Julius and I climbed onto Helios's back and flew towards our destination. We planned on leaving for only a few days, and we put out a "Sorry, Closed" sign in front of our store's entrance, located in the city square.

"Could you please tell any customers that we're currently away visiting the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed?" I requested of Ms. Gazey.

"Leave it to me, Chloe."

Helios, perhaps happy to be able to go on a trip with everyone, flew freely. He soared between the clouds and would occasionally lean to the right or left while changing altitude. He outstretched his neck and wings—his form was very streamlined. He didn't flap his wings much, and he looked very refined. I could only hear the wind as we cut through the air. The royal capital quickly grew smaller and smaller until I saw only the vast, grassy plains below me.

I was sitting behind Mr. Julius, who was wearing the mantle made from Ariadne's Thread. I wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing up close to the mantle on his back. I was in my usual apron dress and headkerchief. I didn't mind changing my attire since we were headed to a neighboring kingdom, but I felt most comfortable in my usual style.

The Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed was hot as it was located in the middle of the desert. Thinking I'd feel cooler if I dressed in cool colors, I wore a blue dress. Since the Ariadne Mantle was made of fabric that could freely adjust to temperature, hot or cold weather didn't matter to Mr. Julius. When I became rich one day, I was tempted to make a dress out of Ariadne's Thread.

I might not be able to take the plunge though, since that's a bit too luxurious.

Once we flew past the forest that marked our kingdom's borders, the view changed completely. A golden sea of sand spread out in front of me. The seemingly endless desert came as a huge shock to me. During my academy

years, I'd learned that Rasheed was mostly desert in my geography and history classes, but I'd never seen it in person.

There was sand wherever I looked. We were soaring through the skies on Helios, making this trip a breeze, but the mere thought of having to walk through this desert was scary.

"Look, Mr. Julius. The desert," I pointed out. Since I'd never seen it before, I tried to convey how awed I was.

"I can tell," he replied curtly after glancing at me. He didn't seem as emotional.

"Did you go to the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed during the war? Have you crossed this desert before?" I asked.

Mr. Julius had apparently battled against other kingdoms outside of Astria. Since the empire had tried to invade all the surrounding smaller kingdoms, he'd likely visited different places as he fought in the war.

"I've only gone a little past Dystiana's border. The capital of Rasheed, the holy city of Altstadt, lies beyond this desert. I was the only Dragon Knight in Dystiana. The cavalry is useless in the desert since horses can't walk over sand well," Mr. Julius replied.

"I can see that. Their legs would get caught in the sand," I said.

"Yeah. As for the infantry...even if any were able to traverse the desert, almost all of them would die before reaching Altstadt. The general consensus is that no one would ever dream of invading Rasheed unless there's a really good reason to do so."

Mr. Julius spoke calmly and emotionlessly. Every now and then, he'd take on a monotone, without even sounding particularly nostalgic when divulging his past.

"But the Dystiana Empire went against this logic, right?" I asked.

"No one in Dystiana would dare call Emperor Oswald Dystiana an imbecile. If anyone did so, it'd somehow make its way to the ears of the inquisitor, and your head will roll."

“The inquisitor?”

“They punish anyone who goes against the emperor.”

“The empire sounds terrifying. I wouldn’t want to live there.”

I’d always imagined Dystiana to be scary, but it was far more terrifying than I’d initially thought. The Dystiana Empire and the Astria Kingdom had signed a peace treaty three years ago, but I didn’t know much about anything that occurred after. I’d never heard of anyone from the royal capital visiting the empire, and I hadn’t seen any tourists from Dystiana either.

I only had the occasional stories from Mr. Julius to go off of, and the empire was still very much unknown territory for me. I was happy that he was willing to share, of course, but I didn’t want to force him to speak about it. In any case, I didn’t think I’d ever set foot in the Dystiana Empire.

Mr. Julius had stated that there was nothing left for him there. He didn’t leave anyone behind, nor did he have any loose ends to tie up.

“We could only destroy the stronghold that bordered on Rasheed. The desert served as their natural barrier, and they probably couldn’t have cared less about the stronghold. All we were able to do was destroy a structure that served more as a watchtower—it wasn’t much. And a different general, who followed whatever the emperor demanded, sent troops to the desert. Most of them died. It was a foolish idea,” Mr. Julius said.

“...Did they die in the desert?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s said that a lot of human remains are buried here.”

“Ugh...”

I didn’t want to hear that bit. The silky gold sand had a beautiful, intricate pattern as it was being blown by the wind. Now, fear gripped my body. If I were to be buried in the sand, I doubt anyone would’ve been able to find me.

“Don’t ever, *ever* drop me, please,” I said.

“...I’ll never drop you, but I can see you falling by yourself.”

“I’m not *that* clumsy. I’ll never just fall.”

“I’ve experienced firsthand that you’re an idiot who does such foolish things,” he stated. “Even if you fall, I’ll definitely come for you, so don’t worry about that. Helios knows your scent, and he can find you even if you’re in an endless desert.”

Unable to refute that, I closed my mouth. *But my scent?* I bathed every day and did my laundry quite frequently. I didn’t think I was smelly, but it still bothered me. *What scent do I give off? If I could talk with Helios, I’d love to ask. I hope it’s a pleasant smell. If he told me that it was the aroma of pea soup, I wouldn’t be able to recover from that.* It would be a cruel thing to say to a young, twenty-year-old maiden.

I’d like a lovely rose scent. Maybe I’ll buy some perfume.

“Thank you for catching me the other day,” I said. “I’m slowly starting to feel like I might actually fall and get lost in the desert.”

“I don’t mind if you do. If you fall, I’ll catch you. That’s all there is to it.”

“Thank you! I’ll be relying on you!” I was feeling a bit shy, but I responded energetically.



AS we flew farther ahead, the sun’s rays became stronger. The sunlight was much harsher than what I’d experienced in Astria. Still, perhaps because the season was shifting to winter, the heat wasn’t unbearable. The rays were warm, but the breeze was cool.

The holy city of Altstadt, the center of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, suddenly appeared in the middle of the desert. The city was surrounded by a wall, protecting the area from the sands. I was tempted to visit Altstadt, but our destination was different today. We flew ahead as I gazed at the city below—it was larger than the royal capital of Astria.

The desert view slowly started to change. Once we were past the sands, we were met with the view of the dry, barren earth. I saw occasional bits of foliage sparsely adding splashes of green. There were steep mountain ranges and hills. Finally, I saw a road laid on the cracked ground. Small villages dotted the road, but if one were to step a little away from the streets, there was only desert. In

the center of a group of trees, a lake suddenly appeared, and nearby was a large city, though it wasn't as large as Altstadt. The aerial scenery was completely different from what I'd seen at Astria's royal capital.

I continued to gaze below me, surprised by how different the world beyond the border was. Puerta Research Center was farther east than Altstadt and located on a small hill called Starry Hill. Cyril had provided a map along with the letter to help us find our way.

As we headed towards our destination, we saw a white temple atop a steep hill that resembled a mountain. The hill looked difficult to climb, and the temple was unlike anything that I'd seen in Astria. It was made from white mud walls and had a low, round roof. From above, it looked like multiple circular disks were stacked on top of each other.

Mr. Julius gently tugged on Helios's reins, gradually decreasing altitude. I started to grow nervous when I thought about visiting a different nation. *The academy taught that many people in Rasheed are friendly and calm. We've got the letter with us too, so it shouldn't be a problem.*

Helios quietly landed atop a hill. I was able to see the blue skies and the golden sands. The large, white, temple-like structure was in front of me. A rather small door stood at the center, and it looked like multiple stacked towers. Above this tower was the round roof that I saw from above. The structure in the center was larger than its surroundings, and the round roof made me a little hungry. *It kind of reminds me of a macaron.*

Mr. Julius stored Helios in his ring. He was likely worried about leaving Helios alone in an unknown land. I had the same thoughts as him and agreed that it was better to keep the dragon inside the accessory.

I took the letter out from the infinite storage bag I had slung over my shoulder and clenched it tightly. Mr. Julius had walked on ahead towards the door, and I quickly chased after him.

We stood in front of the rich gold doors at the center of the Puerta Research Center. The letter in my hand started to give off a magical glow. As though it was confirming our identity, the Astria royal family's emblem, a beast with two horns, gave off a red glow in front of the doors. After the crest glowed two or

three times, it completely disappeared like a lamp being turned off. The doors then automatically gave way, beckoning us inside.

While I was a bit hesitant, Mr. Julius calmly set foot inside the building. I jogged after him so that I wouldn't get left behind—because of our height difference, he had a much longer stride, and it was difficult for me to keep up.

The interior of the Puerta Research Center looked like a white temple. Multiple large pillars stood in a wide hall, and the ceiling was painted with beautiful people with wings, blue skies, white clouds, and a black dragon that resembled Helios. I gave a gasp of surprise, moved by the beauty and size of the place.

Deeper inside the halls was a white stone statue of a winged woman that was missing her head. Light from the skylights shone onto this statue.

There were numerous doors surrounding the round halls. None of these doors looked unique. This breathtaking place was but a decoration, and I guessed that the research center was beyond these doors. *I feel like I'd get lost in here.*

Deep within the halls, a door opened without a sound. A dignified man's voice echoed throughout the area, reminding me of a calm forest—it wasn't too deep, but his tone carried weight.

"Welcome to Puerta Research Center."

The man appeared from the door and approached us as we stood in front of the headless woman's statue. He was dressed from head to toe in a deep purple robe like the night sky. Underneath, he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt that opened up around the neck, giving a cooler impression. The edges of his robe, including his neck and his sleeves, were lined with gold, and it looked like he was wearing a dress. A brown belt was tied around his waist. His white pants were baggy enough to hide his physique. If I were to gaze at him from afar, it could've looked like he was wearing a skirt.

This man with tanned skin, purple eyes, and black hair looked more like a young boy to me. Large golden earrings hung from his ears, and he had a red, streamlined pattern under his eyes. *He sort of gives off an air of divinity.*

The boy stopped in front of us and gave us a graceful bow. He was around the same height, perhaps even a bit shorter than I was. It seemed he was yet to hit his growth spurt. *He really does look like a young boy.* I bowed as well. I didn't give a curtsy like I'd done between aristocrats in the past; I greeted him like I would a customer.

"I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Chloe Sagrid. This man next to me is Mr. Julius. We came from the Astria Kingdom."

"I'm Jahala Garena. I'm a researcher at Puerta Research Center, specializing in the Otherworld. I'm currently the head researcher here." He spoke politely with a friendly smile.

As I'd learned, the people of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed were friendly. I'd considered the possibility of being treated more coldly, so his kind demeanor made me feel relieved.

"You still look so young. That's an impressive feat," I replied.

"Ah, well, I have my reasons," Jahala said. "I don't want to keep you both standing, so shall we head inside? It's quite an unusual twist of fate to see Chloe, the daughter of Duke Sagrid, and Julius, the Dystiana Empire's Duke Craft, together. I'm...very intrigued by you."

"...You know us quite well," Mr. Julius said sternly.

Jahala would've surely noticed the hostility in Mr. Julius's tone, but he didn't seem to mind and gave a serene smile.

"I received a letter from King Cyril of Astria via a magic pigeon containing quite a bit of information about you. Keeping secrets will lead to losing one's trust. It's imperative to be truthful from the beginning," Jahala said. "Now, this way, please."

"Um, I've brought a letter as well," I said.

"Ah, of course. I'm sure the contents are the same as the one I received, but I'll still take the letter. It's simply to confirm your identities."

Jahala took the letter and headed deeper into the hall. I tugged on Mr. Julius's clothes as he stood there looking annoyed, and we followed the head

researcher inside. A long corridor was behind the door, supported by numerous pillars equidistant from each other. To my right were various plants; I hadn't seen many since I entered this kingdom. There were vine-like plants with uniquely large, green leaves and others with sharp, pointed leaves. Most of this flora wasn't common in Astria.

Beside these plants was a river with sparkling clear water flowing through it. I wasn't sure where the river started and ended, and I was surprised that even a desert like Rasheed had a river. *Obviously, they'd have water though, or else they can't survive.*

To my left were various doors—this facility seemed to have many. The high ceiling had numerous windows, allowing the breeze to enter the building. We were indoors, but it felt like we were walking outside.

"There used to be many researchers here at Puerta. Now, there's only a handful left, myself included. We've been through quite a bit," Jahala said meaningfully.

The sound of the flowing river echoed through the corridor. Mr. Julius was silent, and I didn't know what to ask, so I remained quiet as well. Our footsteps reverberated throughout the room.

"This is my laboratory. We actually have more empty rooms than filled ones. If you were to venture deeper inside, you'd get lost. The deeper you go in, the more maze-like this building becomes, so please be careful," Jahala warned.

"I'll be sure to do so," I replied.

As he'd stated, I was already beginning to lose my bearings. The scenery didn't change, and since everything looked so similar, it was difficult to remember which door I'd come from. Jahala proceeded to open a door against a white stone wall.

We were greeted by an incredibly spacious area. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a large desk with a few chairs stood in the center. Atop the wooden desk were various maps of nearby nations as well as the map of Rasheed. Near the wall with a large window was a glossy, dark-brown wooden desk. *There's so much stuff here.*

Books and materials from monsters were stored haphazardly on the shelves. Some items were familiar, while others remained a complete mystery to me. *I guess different nations have different monsters.*

“I’m sure the long trip has tired you out. Please take a seat,” Jahala said.

“Thank you,” I replied, taking him up on his kind offer.

I immediately took a seat around the large desk in the center, but Mr. Julius stood behind me with his arms folded in front of him. *You don’t have to be that wary. Jahala seems like a good person.*

From a door deeper within the room came a woman wearing a purple robe with the hood pulled down to cover her eyes. I could only see her nose and lips. She pushed a silver cart into the room and silently brought out some tea for us. Inside the flower-patterned teacup was a liquid of light beige color. It didn’t look like black tea, nor did it smell like it. It had a sweet and rich fragrance.

“This is called cinnamon tea. It’s a drink created by boiling cinnamon with milk and adding sugar. It’s a common drink in Rasheed, but are you all right with sweet things?” Jahala asked politely.



I'd never heard of cinnamon tea before, but from his explanation, I was sure that it would be delicious.

"I love sweets. I'll help myself to this tea," I said.

The petite woman who offered me the tea stood behind Jahala, who sat across from me. I put my lips onto the teacup and indulged in the rich, milky flavor. The drink had a faint sweetness mixed with the wonderful aroma of cinnamon.

"I've never had anything like this before. It's delicious," I said.

Mr. Julius should have a sip too. Maybe he doesn't have a sweet tooth.

"I'm happy to hear that it suits your tastes. It's been a while since I've had a guest from a different nation, so I was a bit nervous," Jahala said.

"I've heard that the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed often goes to other countries to notify others about the results of their research. I assumed that you often interact with others," I replied.

"Well, I've got a few things going on. I'll be frank with you, Chloe. I wanted to ask for your assistance."

"My assistance? Um, you see, I actually came here to ask for your aid as well."

"I'm well aware of your circumstances. You'd like to remove the Magic Suppression Seal that's on Julius's neck, correct? You came here to meet the seal master for that purpose. Indeed, there's a seal master within the Puerta Research Center. It may be difficult to remove the seal, but I think it's worth trying."

"Really? Thank you!"

"But for that, I'd love for your assistance. Our kingdom is currently facing imminent danger. I need your power, Chloe. If my predictions are correct, you can feel the presence of evil, can't you?"

Feel the presence of evil? Confused by his words, I quizzically tilted my head to one side.

"Do we need to hear this story?" Mr. Julius asked.

He stepped forward and stood beside me while I remained seated. He placed his hand on the table and leaned forward, as though he was trying to intimidate Jahala. The researcher seemed undeterred and calmly looked up at Mr. Julius before giving a nod.

“I can tell Chloe all about the seal master, the unusual incident that occurred at Astria, what Duke Sagrid was trying to seal, and her special power. I believe this exchange will ultimately benefit both parties. Above all, I’m sure this is some sort of fate,” Jahala said.

“Fate?” I repeated.

My late mother’s words echoed inside my head. *The future is never set in stone.*

“Indeed,” Jahala nodded. “You met Julius, and you both came to visit me. This must be some kind of predetermined fate. And it’s your destiny to cooperate with me as well.”

“How idiotic. I thought Otherworld researchers were more logical and grounded in reality. I didn’t expect you to babble on about *fate*,” Mr. Julius spat.

“The ultimate goal of Otherworld research is to see the future. I knew that the two of you, guided by the stars, would come to see me. And I know that you both will cooperate with me as well.”

“...This is stupid. Let’s go, Chloe.”

Mr. Julius grabbed my hand and tried to get me to stand, but I used my other to clench his hand and shook my head.

“Mr. Julius, I’d...like to know more about my father,” I said.

It was clear that Jahala knew about my father—the man who tried to seal the demon that was possessing Aliza, but was instead executed by that monster, and fell to the Otherworld. I’d always thought that my father was a terrifying man, so I didn’t know much about him. It might’ve been too late, but I still wanted to know about my parents.

I needed to learn more about the demon as well. This was something I

shouldn't be fleeing from. I was doing this for my father, whom I could no longer save, and for Aliza, who hated me but still reached out and begged for help.

"It's obvious that we'll get embroiled in a troublesome situation. Let's go, you idiot. I don't mind keeping this seal on me, and it's not an inconvenience," Mr. Julius said before turning to the researcher. "We've no intention of involving ourselves in your kingdom's affairs. It's much too high of a price to pay for mere information."

Mr. Julius's calm analysis of the situation was likely correct. If I heard Jahala's story, there'd be no turning back. *But even so...*

"You'd like a dragon, wouldn't you, Julius? It's difficult to *currently* obtain a dragon in Rasheed. If you lend me your help, you'd be able to spare the dragons as well," Jahala replied nonchalantly.

Mr. Julius's expression changed; he seemed a bit interested now. "What do you mean by that?"

It seemed the head researcher of Puerta Research Center was aware of how to get Mr. Julius's attention. *He looks so young, but he's impressively astute. I guess he's not a head researcher for nothing.* I felt Mr. Julius's grip loosen, indicating that he was willing to hear the rest.

Jahala paused for a moment before he spoke. "I understand that you're wary of me. I know that you don't want Chloe to be thrown into danger. The same goes for me, of course. I don't wish to put foreigners in danger—into the center of our kingdom's issues. I'd just like to make a very simple request of Chloe."

Jahala put his elbows on the table and laced his hands in front of his face. I sensed his desperation behind his straightforward gaze. *He remains as composed as ever, but reality might not be as peaceful.* I looked up at Mr. Julius, and he looked down at me. I felt like he was telling me to make this decision for myself.

"Is this request something I can fulfill?" I asked.

"It's something that *only* you can do, Chloe," Jahala replied.

I was silent for a second before I finally spoke. "So, what do you want me to

do?”

Jahala looked relieved and let out a sigh. He glanced back towards the robed woman behind him, and she gave a nod.

“Please,” Jahala begged. “For the sake of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, please find the demon haunting the Holy Palace.” He kept his voice low as though he was divulging a secret, but his voice echoed clearly throughout the quiet room.

“Is that...something I can do?” I asked, furrowing my brows.

Jahala nodded firmly without a shred of doubt. Mr. Julius had seemingly made his resolve as he sighed, sat next to me, and gently flicked my head. *I thought you loved me. Don't flick me like that.* His actions were very telling—he was clearly conveying how he thought I was a good-natured idiot. I internally apologized to him.

But I knew that Mr. Julius's heart had wavered at the mention of dragons. I was sure that a dragon maniac like him would do just about anything for those majestic beasts.

“Now, where shall I begin...” Jahala said before he started to explain. “I suppose I should tell you a bit about the current state of affairs in Rasheed. Are you aware that many people in our kingdom research the Otherworld?”

“I am. It's very well known,” I replied.

Mr. Julius looked bored and reached for his now-cold cup of cinnamon tea. The sweet drink was apparently to his liking as he finished it in one gulp, furrowed his eyebrows, and placed the cup back onto the table. He crossed his arms in front of him and closed his eyes. His attitude left much to be desired, but he was always listening much more carefully than I was. *It's so weird.*

“Otherworld research is roughly divided into two groups. Our institution, the Puerta Research Center, focuses on the heavens. Our goal is to look into the future. The second group is called the Fores Research Facility. They study the lower layers of the Otherworld with their objective being finding immortality.”

“The...underworld,” I murmured.

I'd learned that the Otherworld was divided into upper and lower layers. Sinners would fall into these lower layers where their grudges and regret would transform them into monsters. It was called the underworld. Good souls would rise towards the upper layers. This paradise was called the heavens.

Citizens of Astria were taught to always be good and kind so that their souls would one day rise to the heavens upon their death. This deterred people from committing crimes or sins.

"Seal masters originated from Fores Research Facility," Jahala continued. "They're sorcerers who specialize in the seal monster's powers. Researchers of Fores Research Facility have been able to visit the underworld numerous times. They can subdue and bring back demons they meet, giving birth to a profession known as seal masters."

"They can *bring back* demons?" I asked incredulously.

I thought back to Mephisto, the demon with four black wings. His powers far exceeded humans, and he possessed intense, malicious magic. Above all, he was very twisted. He fed off the misery of others and watched their suffering with glee. He was the lowest of the low—the epitome of awful. I felt bringing back such a monster from the underworld was nothing but dangerous.

"The Otherworld is a place filled with magical energy. Demons are like huge stores of magic. If they were sealed, they wouldn't differ from a normal human...or so Fores Research Facility claims. Puerta Research Center responded to these statements with outrage. We said that such research was much too dangerous. And, well...as we'd expected, it put our nation in peril," Jahala said.

"Did the demon escape?" Mr. Julius asked. He opened his eyes a crack and it was clear that he was listening.

"I believe so," Jahala replied. "I don't know the details, but I can tell you that Fores Research Facility won the trust of our king and chased Puerta Research Center from the heart of the kingdom. This all happened a few years ago."

"Their research was so dangerous, yet they still gained the king's trust?" I asked.

"They did. King Shesif believed their research would strengthen our kingdom's

power. With the king backing them up, their research became even more relentless and wicked. Believing it to be dangerous, we fought with the research facility and tried to stop them, but our efforts were in vain. They continued their research and we repeatedly clashed against each other, but now there are almost no researchers left in Puerta Research Center.”

“Were they killed?” Mr. Julius guessed.

“Correct. Anyone who claimed that the Fores Research Facility was conducting dangerous acts was assassinated. Even my father, the former head researcher, and my mother were killed,” Jahala said.

“That’s awful...” I mumbled as I looked down.

Jahala was silent for a moment before he said, “You don’t have to worry about me.” He calmed himself and resumed talking. “My late father stated that the Fores Research Facility and the Puerta Research Center were once on friendly terms. The previous king, Mishar Rasheed, was apparently a sensible man who would never condone vile acts like assassination. The previous king had passed before I was born.”

“So, is the current successor, Shesif Rasheed, a complete fool?” Mr. Julius asked.

Jahala shook his head. “No. I’ve heard that King Shesif was a noble man, much like our former monarch, King Mishar.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

Did he suddenly change personalities? I felt my heart thump. This situation mirrored what Mephisto had done to Aliza. My sister had been manipulated into hurting numerous people.

“My father had said that the Fores Research Facility and the Holy Palace may be manipulated by the demon,” Jahala said quietly.

I thought so. I expected those words, and I wasn’t too shocked by what he said.

“Is this like how my sister had been possessed?” I asked.

Jahala nodded. “I believe so. I think my parents were killed because they

noticed the existence of the demon.”

“So, do you want revenge or something?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Revenge is meaningless,” Jahala said. He didn’t seem at all offended by this question. “I’d like to protect the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed and its citizens from the grasp of the demon. That is my duty as an Otherworld researcher.”

“Is that really all you want to do? Your parents were killed, and you’re not harboring a grudge against it?”

“Mr. Julius, your statements are a bit too crass,” I said, tugging on his clothes.

I knew that he wasn’t able to trust Jahala just yet, but he was being far too insensitive towards a person who’d lost his parents.

“I’m fine,” Jahala replied with a smile.

“I understand your situation now,” I said. “I’d like to help you out.”

I’d lost my father. If a demon was involved with this incident, I couldn’t turn a blind eye. Mr. Julius let out a sigh, but he remained seated. Had he truly disapproved of my actions, he would’ve forcibly carried me away with him. The fact that we were still here meant that he knew how I felt about the matter. I thanked him in my head.

“Thank you so much, you two,” Jahala said with a deep bow.

For the first time, I felt his tone become overly emotional. Once he raised his head, he pointed to a location on the map that was splayed across the table. His finger was on the capital of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed that was surrounded by desert, the holy city of Altstadt.

“In a few days, King Shesif will have a bride selection ball at the Holy Palace in Altstadt,” Jahala said.

“A bride selection...” I murmured, cocking my head to one side. *That sounds completely different from the tense topics we discussed moments ago. A ball sounds like so much fun.*

“Everyone is familiar with the faces of the researchers at Puerta Research Center. As such, we’re unable to get close to the Holy Palace. And even if we were able...we’re not able to discern who the demon is, nor the person

controlling the king,” Jahala stated.

“I’m sure a large crowd will gather at the ball to select a bride. It’ll be easy for us to infiltrate, but how can I find the demon?” I asked.

“You should be able to sense a demon’s presence. The late Duke Sagrid had stated that...you’ve received divine protection.”

“My father did?”

I hadn’t expected my father to be a topic of discussion.

“Indeed. I’m not sure what it means, however... Only my father has directly spoken with the duke. Your father had stated that he must find a way to seal that *thing* before you find out the truth, Chloe.”

I’d almost never talked with my father, but he was always thinking of me. It was painful that I could no longer convey my gratitude to him.

“I theorized that you’d be able to sense the presence of demons,” Jahala said. “Perhaps you feel something whenever you’re near them. My father told me that they perfectly mimic the form of humans, or they hide near their accomplices. No one’s been able to recognize them.”

Confused, I thought back to Aliza. From the start, I was terrified of her. I didn’t know why, but I instinctually feared her presence. This feeling was similar to when I fought monsters with unusually high magical energy. My mother had told me to never look at anything scary and to flee the first chance I had. *Which means...*

“...Whenever I feel terrifying magic, I feel sick, get scared, or feel a chill in the air. Doesn’t everyone?” I asked slowly.

Did I assume wrong?

“Not everyone has those instincts,” Jahala said. “Unlike monsters that lack intelligence, demons can skillfully hide their presence... If my memory serves me correctly, King Cyril Astria wields quite a bit of magical power, but he married a girl who was possessed by a demon, did he not?”

“That’s true...” I mumbled.

“I doubt he would’ve tied the knot had he instinctually feared her like you did.

It seems no one else in your kingdom had noticed the presence of the demon either.”

I gave a small nod. This was all very peculiar, and I needed some time to process everything. I never thought of myself as having such an ability. I put my hand on my knees and gripped them tightly. *I don't even know much about myself. Was my father worried that I'd notice these demons? Maybe he thought that once I did, I'd surely be killed.* I could no longer ask my father about it. Since Jahala's father had passed, I was unable to ask him either. I could only imagine a possible answer.

The lady who was quietly standing behind Jahala took off her hood. She was a young woman with brown skin, gold eyes, and elegant black hair. A small cylindrical item, about the thickness of my thumb, stuck out from her neck. A round, metallic decoration was fitted on the end.

“Ah... Uh... Gh...” The woman stared at me and tried to talk.

It sounded like her voice was coming from her, but she gave a troubled grimace and placed her hand on her throat.

“Please save my older brother... He was a kind man,” said a beautiful voice that came from her throat. Her voice was carried through the cylindrical tool.

“And you are?” I asked kindly as I gazed back at her.

She looked to be around my age or even a bit older. She took her hand away from her throat and gently shook her head, conveying that she could no longer talk.

“This woman is Ruto Ivan, a seal master... She's the younger sister of Salim Ivan, the head of Fores Research Facility. She fled here from that institution, and we're currently sheltering her,” Jahala explained.

“Um, her voice...” I trailed off, not knowing if I should ask. *But ignoring what just happened seems a bit forced.*

Ruto smiled warmly, conveying that she didn't mind.

“Seal masters can engrave seals into bodies and prohibit the use of magic. I'm sure you're aware of this since Julius has his magic locked up. However, to do

so, one requires an immense amount of magical energy—enough to greatly affect a person’s body. In other words, seal masters sacrifice their bodies. This allows them to place seals,” Jahala said.

“They use magic by sacrificing their bodies,” I murmured.

I clenched the apron on my dress, uncomfortable by this thought. Jahala seemed quite nonchalant about it, but this practice struck me as cruel. *Is this the norm for the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed?* Since I didn’t know much about their culture, I decided to stay quiet.

The head researcher’s voice reverberated throughout the room. “Some may lose an arm or a leg, but most feel adverse effects on their throat. They lose their voice and the ability to breathe properly. Thus, we have these air vents, allowing them to keep their throat open so that they can breathe.”

“Mm,” Ruto said, pointing towards the cylindrical tool by her neck. Presumably, there was a hole there to assist her respiration.

“Seal masters can cast magic on their vocal cords for a short amount of time to converse, but it requires quite a bit of stamina, so they can’t do it for prolonged periods of time,” Jahala explained.

Ruto nodded. I was at a loss for words. I probably had no right to offer any sort of opinion to Ruto, but I wasn’t sure if magic at the expense of one’s body was worth it.

“Why would they go to that extent to bring back demons? What’s their end goal?” Mr. Julius asked warily. He seemed to have no sympathy for Ruto.

“Well, there are quite a few reasons. Immortality research, interrogating demons to learn the secrets of the Otherworld, increasing military strength... There’s no end to the usage of demons. Ah, and they could be used...to genetically enhance dragons,” Jahala answered.

“What does the Otherworld have to do with modifying dragons?” Mr. Julius asked.

“I’m sure you’re already aware, but unmodified dragons are extremely rare. Long ago, the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed treated dragons with more care—they were called the messengers of God. But in recent years, we’ve started to

treat dragons as tools to increase our military might. We tried to genetically enhance their capabilities.”

“I’m not a complete expert on dragons,” Mr. Julius admitted. “My knowledge mostly comes from the books I’ve read. This is the first time I’ve set foot in Rasheed, and I’ve read that this kingdom raises *unmodified* dragons.”

“Of course, there are dragon breeders that take great care in preserving pure-blooded, unmodified lineages. But the royal family is trying to breed and completely reconstruct dragons so that they’re stronger and easier to raise... Ruto told me that utilizing the knowledge of the demon was essential in modifying the body of dragons, and that such research was being conducted in the Fores Research Facility. Now, unmodified dragons are few and far between. Any breeder that wants to protect unmodified dragons, and any Dragon Knight that voices their concerns have been ousted from the heart of the kingdom.”

“...How disgusting.” Mr. Julius put his hand to his mouth, seeming annoyed by it all.

I wonder what it means to “completely reconstruct” a dragon. For example, travel dragons in Astria had been modified. They were much larger and plumper, completely different from Helios.

“Our request puts you in danger,” Jahala said. “Simply providing you with information and asking Ruto for methods to remove your seal wouldn’t be sufficient payment. In the depths of Puerta Research Center, we have a few unmodified dragons—we’re trying to help conserve their pure bloodline. We’re even protecting some breeders, caretakers, and Dragon Knights.”

“Are you trying to build an army to revolt?” Mr. Julius asked.

“The Puerta Research Center doesn’t wish to take up arms against the royal family. We remain loyal to them. All the more reason why it’s vital to find that demon. Ruto’s older brother and the royal family are being manipulated by it. Once we get rid of the demon, I believe that the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed will return to what it once was.”

“That conclusion seems a bit too simple,” Mr. Julius scoffed.

I tugged on his clothes once more. His mannerisms were rude towards people

who were distressed by the current state of their kingdom.

“Say what you will. Once Chloe finds out who the demon is, we’ll take over from there. As a reward, we can give you an unmodified, pure-blooded dragon. We’ve got a few young ones,” Jahala said.

Mr. Julius’s eyebrows twitched, indicating that he was clearly enticed by this offer. *You’re a simple man yourself; you’ve got no right to reprimand others.*

“Jahala, you see...” I chimed in. I had to let him know an important tidbit. “Mr. Julius has been raising an absolutely adorable dragon called Helios. This dragon is like his son. To be frank, we’d like to find a wife for Helios. Do you have any single female dragons?”

Jahala nodded. “I think we do. And as you can tell from our current state of affairs, it’s difficult to raise a dragon baby. I think we have a few female dragons that haven’t mated with a male yet.”

Ruto nodded at these words.

“Then, if we cooperate with you, will you be able to give us a cute, female, single dragon? For free?” I asked.

“Of course. This will be your reward for cooperating with us, so we won’t take any payment from you. You’re doing this to save our kingdom, after all. I wouldn’t dream of asking you for money.”

“...Yay!” I clenched my fists triumphantly.

We’d be able to receive an expensive and extremely rare female dragon for free. This was a rare opportunity that I couldn’t pass up. *It’s not just rare; I doubt I’d ever get this kind of offer again.* After I heard Jahala’s story, I felt like I should cooperate out of a sense of need, duty, and obligation, but in the end, I was completely blinded by the prospect of gaining a female dragon. I was clearly excited—enough for Mr. Julius to call me an “Idiot.”

“What are you smiling for?” Mr. Julius asked as he tugged my ear. “Do you understand that you’re trying to cross another dangerous bridge?”

I knew that remaining composed was important, but I was against violence. He may have just been fooling around with me, but it was quite painful—he was

like a large dog that didn't understand his own size and strength.

"I know, I know," I reassured. "I'll be fine. I'm a genius alchemist and young beautiful maiden. Besides, I have you by my side. I was internally panicking because I didn't have the money to purchase a dragon, but all I have to do is tell Jahala who the demon is. And just like that, we can get a female dragon for *free*. There's no better deal than this. I think this is fate, and we got some dragon luck on our side. We're super lucky today!"

"...You... Have you been listening to this suspicious child's story?" Mr. Julius sighed.

He released my ear and folded his arms in front of him. But he didn't try to leave, meaning that he was enticed as well. *Takes one to know one, I guess.*

"As you can see, Mr. Julius has stated that he'll do his best for the dragon, so we'll cooperate with you. But in exchange, Jahala, please give us that dragon. It's a deal," I said.

"Of course. Your assistance might just save this kingdom. I'm counting on you," Jahala said kindly. He didn't seem bothered that he was called suspicious.

Maybe he's aware that he might come off a bit shady at times.

Ruto gave a deep bow. I didn't know much about her, but if she was willing to undo the seal on Mr. Julius, I had no doubt that she was nice. She didn't look evil.

"And how can we enter the Holy Palace? I doubt anyone can just waltz in," I said.

"As I stated earlier, King Shesif is looking for a consort. In a few days, a ball will be hosted at the Holy Palace, and various aristocrats are planning on bringing women of suitable age. I'd like for you to participate in that," Jahala said, looking solemn.

"...Are you saying that because I'm totally a young maiden of extremely rare beauty?" I replied just as solemnly.

Mr. Julius silently pinched the back of my hand. *Ouch.*

◆ The Bride Selection Ceremony at the Holy Palace in Altstadt

FOR the next few days, Mr. Julius and I stayed at the Puerta Research Center. We weren't allowed to go outside on the off chance that our faces would be seen, so we were restricted to the facility. We didn't experience any inconveniences, but it was a little suffocating.

Still, I wasn't bored. There were various papers documenting alchemy and unique materials in the research center. I'd never been exposed to this information before. While I was in the archives reading books about alchemy, Mr. Julius had been searching for any papers on dragons.

Our stay was a bit constrained, but it was fulfilling and worth it. We were only allowed in certain sectors, but there was so much new information to be found there that I couldn't possibly cram it all in within a few days.

Several days later, Mr. Julius and I rode on a stocky dragon to Altstadt as Jahala had instructed. We were advised against riding Helios since that would make us stand out. Before we left, we apologized to Helios, and he gave an unusually gloomy growl. I felt bad for leaving him, but it was all for the sake of getting him a cute bride. I needed him to endure it for now.

At the holy capital, there were several maids dispatched from Puerta Research Center already waiting for us. Mr. Julius and I did as we were told, and we got dressed inside a lodging in the capital. Once preparations were done, we headed to the Altstadt Holy Palace, where the ball was held.

It'd been a while since I'd worn a corset, and I didn't miss how it squeezed my body tightly. It was difficult to breathe and move around in. *I don't think I became fatter, though.* When I was the daughter of Duke Sagrid, numerous factors had made me lose my appetite, causing me to have a thin, frail frame. I was now eating properly and exercising regularly, so I believed I had a healthy-looking physique. *It's not that I got fatter, but I've just gained a healthy amount*

of weight. That's all it is. That's what I'll keep telling myself.

Along with my corset, I wore a lavish dress. I hadn't worn garments of this quality for a long while now. Inside the light pink skirt, which went down to my feet, were numerous white, lacy fabrics layered on top of each other like a cake. I was wearing delicate, red high heels, and my exposed neck was decorated with a gold necklace. My short hair was gently tied back. My hair ornament was a black rose—the symbol of the Rasheed royal family, which indicated my loyalty to them. I saw that other women had black flowers on their dresses, in their hair, or on their accessories.

Jahala had prepared a backstory for me as well. I was the adopted daughter of Count Costario. He didn't have any children and thus had raised me with much love and affection, albeit a little overprotective. Thus, I rarely went out. The count was, of course, secretly cooperating with the Puerta Research Center and in on this ruse.

This setting helped explain why I wasn't too familiar with the aristocratic etiquette of Rasheed and why I wasn't close to anyone either. My skin was lighter than a person from Rasheed, but since I came from an orphanage, it'd make sense why I wasn't aware of my birthplace. Though I was adopted, I'd taken the count's family name, and had the right to attend this bride selection ceremony. The royal family had asked for women between seventeen and twenty years of age, so I was barely in the clear. I thought I looked much younger than my age anyways, so I felt like I was perfect for the role. *I am a beautiful young maiden, after all.*

The Altstadt Holy Palace looked like an enormous temple from the outside. The chalky white structure that stood in the center of the large city had a gold roof. Its splendid exterior matched its interior—the grand hall for the bride selection arena was luxurious and gorgeous.

The walls and pillars were gold, and motifs of a black rose were painted on top. It was magnificent and beautiful, but it felt a little gaudy to me. I carefully walked close to the walls and headed deeper inside the grand hall. I was careful not to be in the way or bump into any of the elegantly dressed noblewomen of Rasheed.

I wasn't here to be chosen as a bride, after all. I was here to sniff out the demon. In other words, there was no need for me to aggressively sell myself to the king. *In fact, it'd be more troublesome if I was selected as a bride. I am a beautiful young maiden, so I can't deny that possibility.*

"Mr. Julius, you look so weird to me," I said, looking up at him.

He had taken my hand and was expertly escorting me towards the hall. It was odd enough that I was dressed up like a noblewoman, but it was even more unusual to see Mr. Julius in such fancy attire. Just glancing at him was enough to make me feel like I might fall over with laughter.

Though I was the oldest daughter of a duke, I didn't stand out much compared to other nobles, and I was abandoned in the slum alleys three years ago. In contrast, Mr. Julius served as a general for the Dystiana Empire.



He never got to the heart of Rasheed and didn't engage in battle with this kingdom as much as the other nations, but there was a good chance that people were familiar with his existence. He claimed that, at most, people only ever saw him from afar. Even so, I declared that he didn't need to come with me to the Holy Palace, but Mr. Julius refused to listen.

He even demanded that I once again add the rule where he must stay by my side to the contract, so I had no other choice. I brought him along. He probably thought that I'd get wrapped up in annoying affairs if I was left to my own devices. *He doesn't trust me at all. I suppose that's my fault.*

Jahala suggested Mr. Julius be my chaperone. However, while I had a backstory, Mr. Julius would stand out if he also had an unusual hair color. And so, Ruto used her magic to dye his hair black.

Many people in Rasheed had dark hair. Some had fairer skin because they were of mixed race, so Jahala had stated that Mr. Julius should be in the clear if his hair was dyed black. I'd never seen magic that could change one's appearance before. Seal masters were apparently people with immense amounts of magical energy who sacrificed their bodies to use an even more powerful sealing spell from the seal demon.

This implied that Ruto was not only a seal master, but a highly skilled sorcerer as well. Since Rasheed was on the cutting edge in terms of sorcery, I was sure that she possessed spells that even I wasn't aware of.

Mr. Julius, with his dark hair, was dressed in clothes suitable for a butler. He was wearing a neat black vest and had a black rose pin on his chest. He sported a dark jacket with gold hems and wore black gloves. Mr. Julius was handsome and had a good physique, so anything he wore suited him well, but I was too used to seeing him wear a loose, black robe. He looked completely different and funny to me. I wasn't bothered by his dark hair as much as his attire.

"...You do too," Mr. Julius said, shifting his gaze from the grand hall to me. He stood tall by my side. It was bad manners to raise one's voice in a venue like this. Mr. Julius seemed to be aware of this as he spoke in a softer tone.

"Are you in complete awe of my jaw-dropping beauty when you see me all dressed up, hm? Do you feel like surrendering yourself to me?" I joked while

puffing out my chest proudly. I tried my best to ease some nervous tension.

He remained silent. *He should never be silent. Now, it just seems like I'm some self-conceited woman who believes she's totally hot. I'm getting embarrassed.*

"...Enough about clothes," I quickly said. "Look, Mr. Julius. There are so many unusual foods here. Shall we eat?"

In the grand hall was a round table covered in a white tablecloth. It was filled with lavish food and drinks, beckoning us to eat to our heart's content. The noblewomen who were hoping to be chosen as King Shesif Rasheed's bride likely had no time to eat.

I saw a few elderly chaperones dressed in extravagant attire eating and drinking while engaged in conversation. I guessed those people were the noblewomen's parents. Count Costario wasn't at this venue—in fact, I'd never even met him. We feared that if the royal family somehow caught wind that Count Costario was connected with Puerta Research Center, his entire family might be harmed.

"So, you were planning on having Chloe infiltrate the Holy Palace all by herself?" Mr. Julius had accused.

"I expected you to adamantly claim that you'd tag along with her," Jahala had replied without looking apologetic.

"Hey, what do you think that skewered meat is? Is it mutton? It certainly might be. Would you like some, Mr. Julius? There're quite a few meat dishes here. I've never seen meat with a white sauce. I wonder what it tastes like. Since we're in a desert, I suppose there aren't many vegetables or fish. But look, there are tomatoes and onions," I chattered away as I gazed at the food.

"Can't you be a little quieter?" Mr. Julius asked with a glare.

I reluctantly closed my mouth. Perhaps out of consideration, the food we were given at Puerta Research Center were common dishes in Astria. We had bread, pea soup, and mutton innards stewed with tomatoes. It was refreshing to see the food of Rasheed prepared in the grand hall. If possible, I wanted to remember a few recipes and the taste to take home with me. If I told Ms. Roxy about them, I was sure that she'd be ecstatic.

“I’d love to eat, but this corset’s on me really tight... My heart feels full,” I said with a sigh. I wanted to eat mutton. “It’s not often that I get to eat luxurious food, but I can’t in this get-up.”

“Are corsets supposed to be that tight on you?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Yeah, very. It’s not like I got fat or anything, all right?”

“I know.”

How does he know? I stared at Mr. Julius, but he said nothing more and remained composed. He was keeping a watchful eye over the people who gathered at the venue. I noticed that some attendees were glancing our way as well. *And it doesn’t seem like they’re looking because they’re in awe of my stunning beauty.* In fact, many were focused on Mr. Julius.

He stood out, and for a moment, I feared that he’d be recognized as *the* Julius Craft of the Dystiana Empire, but the women’s passionate gazes told a different story. He was an incredibly handsome man if he stayed silent—so much so that Ms. Eliza Coldman was willing to get her hands dirty to obtain him. It seemed he was about to create more victims who fell for his appearance.

You’re a sinful man, Mr. Julius. I was a bit annoyed by this. I’d attended several balls at the castle when I was engaged to Cyril. I didn’t have any reason to do so now, but until Aliza came to my household, I was properly raised as the daughter of a duke. Hence, if I needed to use etiquette and manners that were fitting for a person of such status, I was able to do so.

I was currently not the alchemist Chloe, but Chloe Costario, the daughter of a count. I fixed my posture, and my expression grew stiff. Properly educated noblewomen would never laugh with their mouths wide open. *It’s no wonder your facial muscles will become stiffer.* I wasn’t sad because this situation reminded me of my past.

I was a bit worried about remembering those painful days, but I was able to stay surprisingly calm. I was a bit relieved to know this and able to reassure myself that I was no longer trapped by my past.

The noisy grand hall suddenly grew so silent that one could hear a pin drop. Everyone was focused on the depths of the grand hall. The attendees all put

their hands in front of their chests and lowered their heads. I hastily followed suit. Even Mr. Julius, who didn't seem the type to lower his head for others, bowed like the others. Since this mission would grant us a female dragon, though he complained a lot, he did his best to fit in.

"Thank you for gathering, all. You may raise your heads," said a low voice that boomed through the hall. His deep tone was reminiscent of the dark skies.

When I raised my head, I saw a few people standing on an altar. I deduced that the man in the center, who'd just spoken, was King Shesif Rasheed. I'd imagined him to have a muscular, burly physique, but the man with shimmering, long silver hair looked to be rather elegant. His silver hair stood in beautiful contrast to his brown skin. He was thin and tall and clad in a long, white robe with gold borders. The hems were decorated with a black rose, and he wore a delicate crown on his head. The crown had numerous glittering blue jewels of various sizes, all the same color as his eyes.

"I thank everyone throughout Rasheed for gathering here for me today. My father left the world far too soon, and I'm sure many of you had your concerns when I took the throne at a young age. But where I lacked in power, I was supported by all of you. And for that, you have my gratitude. I hope for your continued support and aid from here on out as well," the king said.

Many aristocrats gasped in amazement, moved by their monarch's words. I'd only heard stories of King Shesif from Jahala, and I was prepared to be faced with a terrifying man, but my fears were all for naught. The king spoke in a graceful manner, and coupled with his appearance, he exuded benevolence. *Was this man really manipulated to expel Puerto Research Center from the heart of the kingdom?* I started to have my doubts.

"Thanks to all your efforts, our kingdom has finally entered an era of peace. Today, I am here to choose a bride who will support Rasheed by my side. However, even if you are not selected, I want you all to think of yourselves as part of my precious family. I hope you enjoy yourselves today," His Majesty finished.

He gracefully sat down on his throne atop the altar. The other members of the royal family who stood beside him took their seats soon after. To the king's

right was a man with the same silver hair, but he had a manlier physique. He wasn't completely popping with muscles, but he had a good build. To Shesif's left was a beautiful woman who emanated an aura similar to that of the king. The young woman wore a stunning dress, and for whatever reason, I got the impression that she was an ephemeral existence.

For now, I didn't feel sick, nor did I get a shiver up my spine. I didn't fear them like I had with Aliza, implying that the royal family wasn't possessed by a demon. Thundering applause rose from the hall, and I clapped along as well. Mr. Julius didn't.

The venue grew lively once more, and the orchestra that was in the corner of the hall started to play some songs. I tugged on Mr. Julius's clothes, and he brought his face close to mine so that I could whisper.

"The king seems like a nice person," I said in his ear.

He quietly glared at me as though to say, "What about him makes him seem nice? Are you blind?"

He ignored my comment and asked, "Did you feel anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing yet."

Now, what should I do...? If the possessed person was deeper within the palace, I wouldn't be able to find them if I stayed here. *Maybe I should find a reason that would allow me to venture into the heart of the palace.* While I was trying to think of a plan, an adorable voice called out to me, causing me to turn around.

"Excuse me, may I bother you for a moment?"

A woman around the same age as I approached my side and stood by the walls next to me. She was wearing a blue dress and had a black rose on her chest. Her long, black hair was tied on top of her head, and she had pale skin. A magnificent black fan was in her hand, and her plump, red lips were sure to charm anyone. Her almond-shaped eyes made her seem like a spirited young lady, but she was a beautiful woman.

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "My name is Chloe Costario, adopted daughter of Count Costario. It's my first time to be in such a social setting, so I'm afraid I

haven't gotten around to becoming familiar with all the aristocrats' names and faces. Pardon me, but may I ask for your name?"

I introduced myself first, assuming that I was talking to a person of higher rank than myself. *It's not rude to give the first introduction, and I don't want to stand out.* I gently pinched the corners of my skirt and gave a slight curtsy. The woman did the same. Mr. Julius took a step back—proper etiquette for a chaperone.

"I'm Layla Fatima, eldest daughter of Duke Fatima. Charmed, I'm sure." She smiled and spoke clearly.

"Lady Layla, I do feel apologetic for asking for your name. I'm terribly sorry," I replied.

Layla, the daughter of Duke Fatima. I committed it to memory. If she came from the household of a duke, there was a good possibility that she had blood ties with the royal family. She must've been the highest-ranked woman amongst the aristocrats who gathered here today. I visibly shrank when I heard her words, acting apologetic for my ignorance.

"I didn't think I'd seen you around before," Layla said. "Count Costario's adopted daughter, I see... I heard that he had no suitable heir, but I never knew that he had adopted a child."

"Ah, he kindly picked me up from the orphanage several years ago. I still haven't mastered etiquette, so the count was worried that I may embarrass myself. He went out of his way to shield me from social gatherings so that I wouldn't have to experience anything of the sort. I'm here today only because we received a letter from the Holy Palace, but I don't expect myself to be selected. I'm simply waiting for time to pass," I replied.

"Is that so? I'd expected all the women here to be desperately appealing to King Shesif so that she may be selected. Is this your first time seeing His Majesty as well?"

"Quite so. I'm familiar with his name, of course..."

"As I'm sure you can tell, the man sitting on that throne is King Shesif. He's much past marriageable age, but he hasn't settled down quite yet. He's well

known for being quite the womanizer, but I wonder if any of that will change once he marries. I fear the future won't be bright even if someone marries him."

"Perhaps it's better to keep those thoughts a secret," I whispered.

"Oh dear," she said, hiding her mouth with her black fan. "Oh, I'm sure no one's listening. Everyone's desperate to catch the king's attention. Ah, the dance shall begin soon. One must flutter her skirt like dancing butterflies and compete for beauty. Goodness, how gauche."

"Do you not want to be selected, Lady Layla?" I asked.

"I'm already engaged. I'm only here out of...duty, shall I say? I don't think my attendance was necessary, of course..." Layla said before switching topics. "Now, where were we? Next to the king is his younger brother, His Highness Faisal. And that lady is the king's younger sister, Her Highness Minne. Prince Faisal is a Dragon Knight and my—"

The orchestra cut her off as its music filled the grand hall. The melody was pleasant, and it was a bit nostalgic for me. The music was different from the Astria Kingdom, and I'd never heard it before. There was an instrument that looked like a rounder violin, a flat strings instrument that was played by plucking, a flute-like instrument, and a set of drums that was played with hands. None of these items were seen in Astria.

The gathered noblewomen were escorted by men and led to the center of the grand hall, where they proceeded to dance. This scene was also nostalgic to me, making me think back to the times I had danced with Cyril. Layla closed her mouth and gazed at the dance.

I was curious about the term "Dragon Knight," but I thought it was best not to pry any further.

"This is a gathering to choose the king's bride, but this also implies that the women here are all single. If they don't get selected by King Shesif, they'll use this ball as an opportunity to form relations with others. Aristocratic men are here as well, after all," Layla said with a sigh before shifting her gaze to me. "What about you, Chloe? Have you not been told anything by Count Costario?"

Is she suspicious of me? I need to be careful and not say anything unusual.

"I haven't been told anything," I admitted. "I was told to quietly stand near the walls."

"I see. Since your hair color is different from ours and it's clear that you've got another nation's blood inside of you, people find you very unusual and beautiful. Many have got their eyes on you. I saw some men trying to converse with you, so I took the initiative and called out to you first. You looked like a little lamb who strayed into a pack of wolves."

"Do I seem that way?"

Well, I am a beautiful young maiden! I proudly shouted internally. *Are you listening, Mr. Julius? She called me cute! Woohoo!* If the situation permitted, I was tempted to gloat to him, but now was clearly not the time. I remained modest and reserved.

Layla smiled. "But many are afraid of that gentleman behind you. He's very beautiful but quite intimidating."

She used her fan to gesture towards Mr. Julius, who indeed seemed a little scary. *But it's not unusual for a person in his role to be a little intimidating.*

"Oh, you must mean Mr. Julius," I said.

"Mr. Julius?" Layla repeated.

"Mr. Julius is my bodyguard. He's very skilled and has been hired by the House of Costario. He's my chaperone tonight, but he can also guard me if needed."

Layla peered into his face, but he remained expressionless and glanced at her. This was quite rude on Mr. Julius's part, but Layla, thankfully, didn't seem to mind.

"Hm," she said.

Mr. Julius was dressed in clothing that hid his Slave Brand and the collar around his neck, but I was still worried that he might be found out.

Layla gave a meaningful smile and stared at me. *Did she find us out?* She seemed to be a strong-minded woman, and I knew I couldn't let my guard down

around her. I felt my body grow tense.

“...Do you perhaps have a...*lovely* relationship with your bodyguard?” Layla asked confidently.

My voice rose an octave as I desperately tried to deny her claims. “U-Um, e-erm, n-not at all...”

I was caught off guard—I didn’t expect her to scrutinize our relationship. Before she was able to open her mouth once more, the venue became lively. The crowd on the dance floor parted, leaving a path open. A man walked down this path and approached me. As Jahala had said, many people in Rasheed had dark hair, but the man who was currently making his way towards me had shimmering, silver locks.

His bangs were long and grew shorter as they approached the back of his head. A large gold hoop adorned each ear, and he had a burly physique. Dressed in long, dark clothes embroidered with golden roses, he was about as tall as Mr. Julius. He had brown skin and reddish-purple eyes like the skies of dusk. His stiff expression made him seem a little intimidating.

Only three people in this venue had silver hair, and Layla had introduced them all to me: King Shesif, Prince Faisal, and Princess Minne. The king was still seated on his throne, meaning that the man in front of me was the second prince, His Highness Faisal.

I hastily bowed my head. I debated on whether to pinch the corners of my skirt and do a curtsy or place my hands in front of my chest and bow—I chose the latter. Since everyone had made this gesture for the king, I guessed it was suitable to use towards the second prince as well.

I should’ve asked Jahala more about the culture of Rasheed. Hindsight is twenty-twenty here. Jahala did encourage me to ask any questions, but I didn’t know what to ask. I thought I’d be okay since I was the former daughter of a duke anyways. I was too naïve... I lacked vigilance.

“Good day, beautiful young lady. Layla, would you kindly introduce her to me?” Faisal said. He nodded in reply to my bow.

He called me beautiful! That’s the second compliment I’ve received today! I

guess I do look decent if I'm all dressed up. I wished Mr. Julius had given me a compliment or two. A “You look cute” or “That dress suits you” would’ve sufficed, but the only words he’d given me were, “Are corsets supposed to be that tight?” It had nothing to do with my appearance.

In any case, why has this prince come to me? Since Layla was the daughter of a duke, it was logical to assume that she had ties with the royal family. Prince Faisal may have simply stopped by to chat with her.

Mr. Julius took a step back from me and bowed. It may have been vexing for him to lower his head towards the royal family of a former enemy kingdom, but his manners were flawless.

“Prince Faisal, this lady here is Chloe Costario, daughter of Count Costario. She’s the adopted daughter of the count, and it’s my first time meeting her as well. She’s not used to these social gatherings, so I hope you don’t scare her away,” Layla answered with a breathtaking smile. Her expressions hid her true feelings—a suitable gesture for an aristocrat.

“I’m Chloe Costario.”

I gave a short introduction. It would’ve been rude of a person with my rank to talk at length to a member of the royal family. A short greeting should’ve been enough. *I think I’m fine.*

I didn’t expect to converse with a person from the royal family, but we weren’t acting suspicious. We didn’t do anything that made us stand out, either. The prince didn’t seem to notice Mr. Julius’s true identity either, as he kept his gaze on me.

“Now, Layla, don’t spread such gossip about me,” Faisal said. “I won’t try to scare such a pretty lady away.”

He furrowed his brows. Layla had said that King Shesif was a womanizer, but the prince seemed more honest and serious.

“Then I suppose I have nothing more to say about that. Do you have business with her, Prince Faisal?” Layla inquired.

“Chloe’s hair stands out. There aren’t many in Rasheed with Chloe’s strawberry blonde hair. I wondered if she was of mixed race, or if she was an

immigrant from a different nation. Since she was by your side, Layla, I thought that she was a friend of yours.”

“Goodness. Prince Faisal, I believe today is King Shesif’s bride selection ceremony. Your turn will come later, I would think.”

“Once my older brother ties the knot, it will be my turn.”

“I do remember you saying that you couldn’t marry before the king...” Layla murmured with a troubled expression.

Since you now know who I am, I wish you’d hurry and go elsewhere. I internally begged Faisal to leave my side.

“Chloe, since this is a splendid opportunity, may I have the pleasure of this dance? Truth be told, my brother would like to see you dancing,” Faisal said.

“...Me?” I asked quietly.

I was internally panicking. *Thank goodness I said that I wasn’t used to these social situations.* I was currently not acting the part—I really was flustered by this all. I didn’t dislike dancing, but I was trying my best to lay low.

I should’ve dyed my hair black too. I wonder why Jahala said that I’d be fine. Did he expect this kind of situation to occur? I wanted to pay a quick visit to the Holy Palace, find the demon, and head home. *I hate how naïve I am. I now understand why Mr. Julius looked at me wearily when I accepted Jahala’s request without a second thought.*

Still, this was all for our dragon. I made my resolve and was determined to do my best.

“Is King Shesif interested in Chloe? That’s a bit of a conundrum,” Layla said, looking at me with worry.

“He said that she was like the morning star that glows in the middle of the darkness,” Faisal added. “Even from afar, that hair color stands out... Can you dance, Chloe?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” I admitted.

The prince extended his arm towards me, and I gingerly put my hand over his. I couldn’t decline a request from the prince, and before I knew it, I was the

center of attention. Guided by Faisal, I took a step forward, but Mr. Julius grabbed my other arm.

“...I understand how you feel, but it’s only for one song,” Layla said, putting a hand on Mr. Julius’s chest and calming him down. “Please suppress your emotions, valiant knight.”

She seemed used to handling men. Mr. Julius looked annoyed, but he quietly followed Layla’s request. *Are pretty women his weak spot?*

“Who’s that man?” Faisal said, glancing at Mr. Julius.

I squeezed the prince’s hand and remembered what Aliza had used to do. Her sly gestures had worked against Cyril, so I was sure that they’d be effective against Faisal, too. I’d seen Aliza’s cheerful, sunny, and fearless disposition up close. Her demeanor was unlike any other noblewoman and had enchanted anyone around her. I knew it all too well.

“Oh, I do apologize, Prince Faisal! My bodyguard is a bit of a worrier, you see... My father had sternly ordered him to keep me from harm’s way. I’m not used to these situations, so he’s been worried that my manners are unsuitable for these elegant gatherings. He’s most worried that I may anger some people, and I am in no position to be dancing with someone of your caliber, Your Highness. He’s a bit old-fashioned at times, I suppose,” I said.

I clenched the prince’s hand with both of mine and looked up at him. I was doe-eyed and teary, trying to use my beauty to its full potential. *Whatever anyone says, I’m a young, beautiful maiden!* Unfortunately, I didn’t possess a mature, sexy demeanor; I tried to appeal to my cuteness instead.

“I see,” Prince Faisal said, glancing back at me. “Then shall we go, Chloe? There’s no need for you to worry. You can entrust everything to me.”

His smile changed his appearance completely—the intimidating man now looked gentle and kind. As I headed to the dance floor in the center of the venue, I glanced back at Mr. Julius. He seemed to be talking with Layla. I felt myself become a little irritated, but now wasn’t the time to be so emotional. I inhaled and steeled myself.

If I was able to dance properly and was fancied by the king, I might be able to

infiltrate the palace. I could sense the presence of a demon within this grand hall, and I presumed that the possessed person must've been a part of the king's inner circle. Once I found who that person was, I needed to simply flee. I didn't expect myself to be chosen by King Shesif.

But I'm a beautiful young maiden, so I might get selected, I jokingly told myself as I tried to calm my nerves. *It's been a long while since I've danced at a formal occasion.*

◆ Chloe, the Chosen Beautiful Maiden

ELEGANTLY dressed ladies were gracefully dancing in the middle of the grand hall. I felt the stabbing glares of the women around me as I was led to the dance floor by Prince Faisal. *Their piercing gazes hurt.* I hadn't experienced these scowls in a long time, and I was immediately tempted to flee. *I hate stuff like this.*

The world I used to live in always gave me this feeling. Jealousy, lies, two-faced—my surroundings were filled with these factors. I was equally guilty of such things, as were the people around me. I couldn't speak for everyone, but I, at the very least, felt like all my relationships were superficial. I didn't think I was able to form a bond that *wasn't* built on lies and ulterior motives.

"You look anxious. Don't worry. Relax," Prince Faisal said, leading the way.

He put a hand around my waist and pulled me close. All at once, I felt a shiver run down my spine. He treated me completely differently than Mr. Julius did. Prince Faisal was strong, but he exercised gentle care when he touched me. The former general, on the other hand, would carry me violently, though I oddly didn't seem to mind it at all. Recently, I was also getting used to Mr. Roge charging at me and hugging me tight. *I'm still not totally fine with it though.*

Prince Faisal was handsome and kind, but I wanted to leave as soon as I could. I gave him the best smile I could muster, desperately hiding my repulsion. I was good at giving professional smiles; it was part of my job. *I didn't think my experience as a noblewoman and as an alchemist would be used all at once. I suppose it's important to be exposed to everything.*

Prince Faisal's long legs danced in rhythm to the music. It seemed safe to leave everything to him. I straightened my back and followed his expert lead, dancing to the best of my abilities in uncomfortable heels that I hadn't worn for a while.

My light pink dress twirled and blossomed like a flower. The other dancers,

taking great care not to hinder the prince, all moved to the edges of the room. Before I knew it, only Prince Faisal and I were waltzing across the ballroom floor.

“...You seem rather used to dancing. It appears Count Costario has educated you well,” Faisal remarked, bringing me closer and whispering in my ear.

“Thank you,” I replied.

While the music of Rasheed differed from Astria, the basic dance steps were apparently the same across nations. I was glad that I didn’t seem too clumsy. Thankfully, Prince Faisal’s actions seemed very businesslike—he was likely telling the truth when he claimed that King Shesif had ordered him to dance with me.

“I’m sure you’ve heard a few rumors about my brother and have some reservations. But I assure you that he does have his kind side,” the prince said.

“I’m not anxious at all,” I replied. “I simply believe that a man such as he is wasted on myself.”

A chandelier hung in the center of the grand hall. It was made from glass, and reflected its light spectacularly, making it shimmer. The light didn’t burn on fuel or oil, and I guessed it was similar to my alchemy lamps. *But I’m amazed that they could create such a large chandelier. I don’t think I could wrap my arms around it.* Alchemy couldn’t create items larger than the materials used to create it. It also couldn’t produce anything larger than the alchemy furnace.

How did they make this? Does Rasheed have an enormous furnace? Every time I twirled around or curved my body, the chandelier would appear in my field of view. I couldn’t help but be curious about it.

“You’ll likely be selected,” Prince Faisal whispered in my ear. “Out of all the beautiful ladies here, my brother hasn’t taken his eyes off you.”

The music changed to something calmer. I nodded as Faisal was practically hugging me.

“Is it because of my unusual appearance?” I asked.

“Indeed. The women of Rasheed are beautiful, without a doubt, but he seems

to have grown tired of them. My brother sometimes treats women as priceless jewels,” Faisal said, sounding a touch weary.

As Layla had told me earlier, it seemed the king was indeed quite the ladies’ man. Prince Faisal’s tone was mixed with a hint of exhaustion.

Suddenly, the music stopped. The prince released me from his grasp and turned towards the throne on the altar. King Shesif was standing. Faisal gave a single nod to his brother before he led me by the hand towards the throne. I allowed myself to be guided towards the steps covered by a red carpet, and slowly made my way onto the altar.

When I saw the king up close, he exuded a sort of effeminate beauty. His long silver hair and golden crown that dangled large jewels onto his forehead and hair were merely accessories that accentuated his stunning appearance. He gave a composed smile that outshone the jewels and extended his hand towards me.

“Shesif, here is Lady Chloe Costario, an adopted daughter of the House of Costario,” Faisal said, guiding my hand towards the king before taking a step back.

The king’s hand was just as womanly as his face. His slender and supple fingers grabbed mine. Perhaps his body temperature was low—his hand was cold to the touch. I wanted to bolt away and return to Mr. Julius’s side as soon as possible, but there was nowhere to flee here. I did my best to endure this situation and gave the best business smile that I could.

“It’s a joy to meet you, beautiful lady,” the king said. “The moment I laid my eyes upon you, I’d chosen you as my bride. I had Faisal dance with you and check your upbringing, but I could no longer endure the sight. Just watching you dance with my brother tears my heart apart with jealousy and grief.”

Shesif had a sad smile as his sonorous voice clearly echoed throughout the hall. I did everything I could to suppress my laughter. *It feels like I’m in a play. I’ve never had such flowery language used towards me.* The king’s words rang hollow in my ears. He seemed too used to this whole scene—it sounded like he was acting. *I can see how he’s a womanizer. He must’ve whispered sweet nothings into the ears of countless women.*

I agreed with Layla. It surely would've been difficult to lead a happy married life with this king. I wasn't too experienced with romance, and I wasn't an expert on relationships, but this was a woman's intuition.

"I'd like to make you my bride," Shesif continued with a smile. "Chloe, my heart is yours. So please, give your heart to me as well. Let us both work together to fill the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed with happiness and joy." His tone was benevolent and affectionate.

From the halls, I could hear a few people giving reserved applause to the scene. The claps slowly made their way outwards as a deafening applause filled the room along with loud cheers. I was certain that no one welcomed a mysterious woman like me as the king's bride. The applause, cheers, and blessings all sounded empty and deceitful. This whole ordeal was so nostalgic. It felt like this grand hall was filled with everything that I'd lost in my aristocratic days, and I didn't want any of it back. I just wanted to return to my daily life in Astria. *But you're the one who decided to be here, Chloe*, I admonished myself.

It was true that I was blinded by the prospect of receiving a female dragon for free. But if I was the only one who could find the demon, I thought it was best to cooperate with Jahala. The demon might have ties to Mephisto, the one that escaped from my grasp.

"Come. Join me. I'd like to know more about you. Why don't we sit down and talk, Chloe?" Shesif said, taking my hand and leading me towards the door that was deep within the altar.

I was tempted to turn towards Mr. Julius, but I held myself back. I didn't want to act too suspicious, and Mr. Julius would be in a more dangerous position than me if our identities were revealed. As I proceeded further inside the Holy Palace, I felt anxiety creep over me. I was terrified of King Shesif.

However, this fear was different from the one I felt towards Aliza.



ONCE I entered the door of the altar, I was greeted by a corridor. On the sides of the corridor lined with white pillars, were several statues of a headless woman with wings—the same sculptures seen at Puerta Research Center.

In the churches of Astria, there were stone statues of a man leading sheep. *I suppose even our objects of worship differ greatly.* Our footsteps echoed loudly across the stone corridor.

“I’m sure you’re surprised. I’ll send a messenger of the royal family over to Count Costario. You don’t have to worry about a thing,” Shesif said with a refined smile.

I apparently had no right to refuse. This was the king, the highest-ranking authority within this nation. *It’s the same in every country.*

“And when were you adopted by Count Costario?” Shesif asked. “Your adoption hasn’t even reached *my* ears, so I can see that you were raised very preciously.”

His tone was gentle.

“I was graciously adopted into his household a mere few years ago. Hence... I’m not very familiar with aristocratic manners and etiquette. I fear my mannerisms are lacking, and I have no idea what to do,” I answered.

Just act like Aliza. I’m Aliza. I continued to mutter these words inside my head like some sort of spell. I let my anxiety fill my eyes as I sheepishly looked up at Shesif and squeezed his hand like I was begging for help.

“Don’t worry. All you need to do is stay by my side. The role of a queen is to simply give birth to an heir. I won’t expect anything more from you. If you could innocently and proudly bloom like the lovely black rose of Rasheed within the Holy Palace, that’s all I could ask from you, my dear,” he replied.

His words were sickly sweet and poisonous to my ears. On the surface, it sounded like he was treating me with respect, but it felt like I was being mocked. I preferred Mr. Julius to insult me and call me an idiot.

Once we reached the door at the end of the corridor, the servants who stood in front opened it for us. Amongst the many doors, this one was the largest, and I tried to remember the path there.

I doubted I’d get lost, but I thought it would be best to keep the route in mind since I was planning on escaping as soon as possible. On the other side of the door was a wide room decorated with paintings, tall urns, and vases with

flowers. The quality of these items was no doubt excellent, but this decor was a bit too showy for my taste. Atop the stone floor was a gorgeous rug adorned with a complex design.

A large sofa was placed in the middle of the room; it had an eye-catching, red rose pattern, and there was a low table with cabriole legs. The frames and legs of the table were embellished with gold—a glimmering sight that was blinding. I guessed that the table by itself cost more than 5 million gold. If I were to sell all the furniture within this room, I calculated that I'd have around 50 million gold.

I don't think I'm too far off. Money's there, if you know where to look. Although, I guess it's only natural for the Holy Palace to be extravagant.

Encouraged by Shesif, I took a seat on the sofa. He sat next to me, uncomfortably close. He approached my face while clutching both my hands, and I arched backwards, trying to gain some distance.

“Oh, your actions are so innocent, Chloe,” Shesif said. “Have you perhaps never locked lips before?” He seemed happy, not at all offended when I glanced away from his beautiful face.

“...Never.”

Which was a lie. I had.

But I didn't need to be stupidly honest here, so I shook my head earnestly.

“You're positively adorable. And your hair—what do we call this color—ah, yes, strawberry blonde. It glimmers so beautifully, matching your shimmery, kind eyes. You're like an angel filled with benevolence and love.”

“Have you ever seen an angel, King Shesif?” I asked, trying to act innocent.

“I have,” he replied with a nod.

I was shocked by his frank response and looked at him. “Amazing! I've always thought that angels were just characters from fairytales!”

Where has he seen one? Aliza had called Mephisto her “angel.” Perhaps the demon's four beautiful wings had caused her to believe that. There was a possibility that Shesif had mistaken a demon for an angel as well.

“I'm looking at one right now. Chloe, you're my angel!” He coiled his arms

around my neck and forcibly brought me close. *He's strong!* He whispered in my ear, "You fell from the Otherworldly Gate to meet me, didn't you?"

I cringed at his words and felt my hair stand on end. I no longer was able to fake a smile as my mouth twitched with fear.

"Come, be mine. As long as you remain blooming beautifully, my love for you shall never wane. I just need you to listen to me," he murmured as his other hand brushed over my lips.

I feel sick. This is awful. I'll just kick him in the stomach and leave this room. He looks pretty weak, so I feel like I can overpower him.

"King Shesif...one cannot remain beautiful forever," I said, trying to buy some time as his lips approached mine. "Even flowers will eventually wilt and droop over their vases. As long as one remains alive, this is a fate that no one can avoid."

I was sure that pretty people would maintain their beauty no matter their age, but faces would change as years passed. No one could remain looking the same eternally. A person who could do such a thing was no longer a human.

"Indeed. *People* age," Shesif said in a bored tone.

"It sounds to me like your love for women will wilt if they can no longer retain their youthful beauty, Your Majesty."

"I'm only interested in beautiful things, Chloe. The world will change soon, and we will welcome reform. We shall be freed from the shackles of age and death, and we will stay beautiful forever. Just like the angels."

"The world...will change?"

"Indeed. You're aware of this, aren't you? You mustn't get in my way...Chloe Sagrid. Obediently become mine and reside within the Holy Palace, untroubled by the outside world. I shall protect you. If you're deaf and blind to the noisiness of the world, you can remain happy. The world will change eventually, and you'll become our kingdom's...*goddess*."

"I don't understand a word you're saying. Let go of me!"

So, he knows my identity. But how? Since he knew who I truly was, I no longer

had to feign innocence. I thrashed within his arms, desperate to escape. The king gripped both my arms tightly and slammed me down onto the sofa. He looked weak, but he was much stronger than me—I was no match for this man's strength.

I grit my teeth. For a moment, I felt like I could see the blue sky behind him, reminding me of the time I was abandoned in the slum alleyways. *This isn't the time to be scared, Chloe! You can't solve anything by letting your past haunt you!*

I glared at him and inhaled deeply before I shouted, "Don't touch me. I'm Chloe, an alchemist and beautiful young maiden! I'm expensive, you know! If you try to touch me even once, it'll cost you 50 million gold! I know you're rich, so you better cough it all up!"

Good, I can yell. I didn't use the best choice of words, but all I needed was confirmation that I could still raise my voice.

"How interesting, Chloe. The current you is much more appealing than the silly façade you showed moments ago," Shesif said.

"Oh, are you the type that gets turned on when people show resistance? Ugh, high-ranked people are all twisted to the core! Enough, I said let go! You *know* who the demon is, and you're following its orders, aren't you? Are you planning on endangering the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed?"

"A happy kingdom where old age and death don't exist—it's my ideal world. If that world can be created, I don't care if that creator is an angel or a demon. They're immortal beings of the underworld that provide us with their intellect. I'm just using what I can, that's all."

"In Astria, a demon caused an army of monsters to appear, killing many. Do you still believe that a demon could offer you their wisdom?" I challenged.

"The powerless die. People die fighting in wars, and illnesses kill people too. Death may seem unfair at times, but all humans are equal in the face of death. Only the manner of death differs. Hence, there's no need to mourn or be enraged. Either way, once a world of immortality arrives, the very notion of death shall disappear."

“...Tell me who the demon is. You’re being manipulated, King Shesif.”

“Oh no, I’ve always been sane. At the very least, that’s how I see myself, but perhaps I don’t seem that way to others.” He gave a throaty chuckle filled with mockery.

The king himself didn’t look to be possessed. *Then is he being charmed by a demon’s sweet-talk?* I thought about the king’s ideals—immortality and eternal youth. But I still couldn’t quite understand his train of thought.

“...How did you know that I’m Chloe Sagrid?” I asked.

“Ah, well, one of my pretty flowers whispered into my ear. They fled from Astria to our kingdom recently, so they’re quite knowledgeable. They said that you snuck in here, acting like an aristocrat of Rasheed. Perhaps this is fate—the fact that you came here, the reality that you’re going to be mine—all of it. It must be fate.”

“I don’t believe in stuff like that. My mother always used to tell me that the future was never set in stone.”

If I can’t use my hands, I can just use my legs. And luckily, I was wearing some pointed heels. I bent my knee towards the king’s covered stomach. I wasn’t too skilled with martial arts, but I’d fought numerous monsters for their materials. *You’re making a big mistake if you think I’m just some frail noblewoman!*

I’d never hit a person before, but Shesif was an exception. Any man who forcibly tried to pin down a resisting woman was undoubtedly mankind’s enemy. I was about to kick him to my heart’s content.

Remembering the grudge that I bore against the barbaric men and soldiers when I was attacked in the alleyways, I used my full strength to deliver a kick to Shesif’s abdomen.

“...You!” he growled.

He probably had never gotten hit by a woman before—the king looked to be in pain as he slid off the sofa while pressing a hand against his stomach.

I immediately stood up and made a dash for the exit. My heels were difficult to run in, and I broke one of them when I kicked the king, so I slid them off. Just

as I was about to put my hand on the door, I saw that it opened from the outside.

I was greeted by the sight of an extremely displeased Mr. Julius with the most terrifying scowl on his face. He was so scary that I almost screamed, but I managed to clap my hand over my mouth and suppress myself. I thought it'd be rude to scream at my savior.

◆ Irritation (Julius)

AS I'd expected, matters became troublesome. I folded my arms in front of me and leaned against the wall as I stared at Chloe dancing with some prince on the ballroom floor.

I knew that the kindhearted Chloe wouldn't decline that Otherworld researcher's request. I had a bad feeling since then, and my predictions came true.

As I saw her frail, thin physique in a dress, she looked decently nice. She wasn't the "beautiful young maiden" that she often called herself, but she was elegantly dressed. A stark contrast to her usual attire, she was pretty enough to attract the attention of others.

She especially stood out in a room full of people with black hair. When I noticed people staring at her, I felt my irritation grow. The last time I felt something similar to this was when Helios was about to be taken by Emperor Oswald of the Dystiana Empire. Had she not stuck her nose into another nation's business, none of this would've happened.

I wanted to take her back and go home. I'd remove that dress that exposed so much of her skin and change her back into her usual plain apron dress. I wondered if Chloe would be furious with me if I barged onto the ballroom floor and carried her away. If I returned to Astria with her, abandoning Rasheed and being unsuccessful at locating the demon, I was sure that she'd be upset. I could imagine her stubbornly insisting on staying here by herself. I touched my neck over my clothes.

It seemed I'd formed a habit of touching the lock around my neck whenever I was thinking. I could feel the small, hard lock under the fabric with my fingertips. I wasn't at all interested in the affairs of others or of other nations. I couldn't care less about them living or dying either.

While I understood the state of peril that the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed was

in, I didn't care. It had nothing to do with me, and whatever will be, will be. But if helping them was Chloe's desire, I'd follow her wishes. When the good-natured Chloe desired to do something, her actions were more often than not correct. If this was what she wanted to do, I assumed that it must be necessary.

"...This is a problem. That girl will be selected," a woman called Layla said. She'd been standing by my side.

I knew that she was speaking to me, but I didn't think I needed to talk with her; I remained quiet and listened to her words.

"I think King Shesif has grown tired of the women of Rasheed," she continued. "Chloe is eye-catching—she's beautiful, and she's got differently colored hair. And unlike the noblewomen that the aristocracy is familiar with, we've never seen Chloe before. I suppose it's only natural for him to be interested in her."

Layla continued to whisper to me, and it didn't seem like she expected me to reply. Annoyed by how she kept poking my arm with the tip of her fan, I glanced at her.

"How terrifying. You don't have to glare at me like that," she said. "You're in a relationship with Chloe, aren't you? You're jealous because she's currently dancing with Prince Faisal."

She smiled and looked up at me with determined eyes. She resembled Chloe in a way—she kept talking even if I didn't answer. *She did say she was the daughter of a duke, too.*

"You don't have to worry about Prince Faisal," she assured me. "He's my fiancé. I doubt he has any ulterior motives towards Chloe. If he does, I'll kick his abdomen with everything I've got."

I haven't asked a single question, but she sure does talk a lot. Even if that prince was engaged, it was very unpleasant to see those hands touching Chloe's body. *Jealousy, huh?* I ruminated over the woman's words.

I was apparently a man who got easily jealous. I felt this same irritation towards Roge and Cyril. *I see...* I realized my own feelings a bit too late as I finally came to an understanding.

"The problem here is King Shesif. I can't say this too loudly, so could you lend

me your ear?" Layla requested.

I let a beat of silence pass. "Is this important?"

She proceeded to spread her fan out and cover her mouth. "It's *very* important," she whispered.

Roge's words echoed in my head. "*You might be able to glean some unexpected information from idle chatter.*" Reluctantly, I lowered my posture and brought my face close to Layla. She brought her lips to my ear and covered half her face with her fan.

"I told you that King Shesif was a womanizer, didn't I? But this wasn't so in the past. He used to be a very kind man, like Prince Faisal. The king would pity even a bug that wandered into the Holy Palace and would allow it to escape. But one day...he just changed."

"Is there a reason?" I asked.

"That's what I want to know, honestly. Prince Faisal insists that King Shesif has his reasons and continues to support His Majesty. But I...disagree. I don't think King Shesif is in his right mind."

"It's not uncommon for a king to play around with women."

"True. But it seems to me like the king doesn't seem to care about Rasheed anymore. It looks like he's trying to shift his eyes away from reality. I've known him since he was young, so I feel like he's so obviously different now. Everyone else is afraid to say anything because the prince loyally follows the king."

"Aren't you the prince's fiancée? Surely Faisal will lend an ear to your words?" I said.

"I've tried to talk it over with him numerous times. I've told him that something just doesn't feel right. But His Highness insists that he believes in his older brother and won't listen to me."

"So, what are you trying to say?"

Whoever this Shesif is, I had no intention of handing Chloe over to him. I now knew Layla's side of the story, but she talked too much. I never grew tired of Chloe's voice, but Layla's tone was annoying to my ears. It wasn't enough for

me to find it offensive, but I was eager to end this conversation.

While we were talking, the music stopped, and Chloe was being led by Faisal towards Shesif.

“...Recently, the Otherworld researcher Salim Ivan has been wielding quite a bit of power,” Layla said. “I thought it was simply because he became Princess Minne’s fiancé, but I feel like there’s more to it.”

“Are you implying that the king’s being manipulated by that man?”

“I don’t know. Since his youth, King Shesif has always been a capable, bright man. I’d like to think that he wouldn’t be so easily deceived, but...” she trailed off and stepped away.

I once again stood tall and gazed towards Chloe, who was now standing on the altar of the grand hall. It seemed she’d been selected as his bride. I clicked my tongue when I saw her disappear into the Holy Palace with Shesif—she never once looked back at me.

Whenever people had a bad feeling or an eerie premonition about something, they usually came true. My irritation had apparently been obvious.

“So scary,” Layla murmured.

“That idiot,” I muttered without thinking.

Even without my weapon, I was confident that I could take care of the aristocrats and soldiers here. I took a step forward to chase after Chloe.

“Wait,” Layla said, grabbing onto my arm. “You mustn’t stand out. You’re strong, aren’t you? And you’re Chloe’s lover.”

“That’s right,” I said. I didn’t want to waste time talking to her.

Layla gave a happy smile at my reply. “I see. That’s very good. Very good, indeed. You’re going to save her, aren’t you?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“You’re a bit too intimidating and unfriendly for a prince going to save a damsel in distress, but no matter. I can’t leave Chloe either since I was the one who approached her. That may have caused her to stand out even more... If

you're with me, we can enter the heart of the Holy Palace. I can't help you past that, but it's a lot better than being chased by soldiers here, don't you think?"

I was about to shake her hand away, but I stopped in my tracks. Finding logic in her reasoning, I nodded.

I needed to be by Chloe's side as soon as possible. She acted tough, but she wasn't particularly powerful. On the contrary, she had a timid and meek personality. Just thinking about a terrified Chloe, or Shesif possibly doing something awful to her made me want to kill him.

"All right. Lead the way," I said.

"Leave it to me," Layla replied with a firm nod.

We skillfully glided past the crowd of people and opened the door at the end of the grand hall. No one had found Layla suspicious. In comparison to the rowdiness of the grand hall, the temple-like palace was serene, with only a few soldiers guarding the area.

Once Layla gave a slight bow to the soldiers, they went to their knees and bowed deeply.

"Lady Layla, who might this man be?" a soldier asked.

"My new servant," she replied firmly. "Must I explain everything to you?"

She confidently proceeded past the apologetic guards who made way for her, and a few turns later, we came out to a corridor lined with white pillars. On either side of the corridor was a white stone statue of a headless winged woman.

The deity that was worshiped in Rasheed was a winged woman. She didn't have a head because it was apparently insolent to even imagine the face of God. We hid in a hallway just outside of the corridor, and Layla stopped walking.

"...If you go straight here, there'll be a large door. That's the King's Room. In the past, I used to often go there to talk with King Shesif and Prince Faisal, but I don't feel like doing so anymore. I'll often be greeted by a sight that I wouldn't like to see," she said softly.

Like a cat on guard, her eyes looked around restlessly. She acted confident and bold, but unexpectedly, she might've been rather nervous. The act of her guiding me here equated to betrayal or treason towards the king and the royal family. She couldn't be so composed.

"...Chloe," I whispered, unable to help myself.

Layla's words made me imagine the worst possible scenario. I tried to proceed, but Layla pulled on my clothes.

"Wait, you're unarmed, aren't you? Blades aren't allowed at the banquet, after all. Here, I'll give you this," she said, handing me her fan.

"...A concealed weapon," I muttered.

I felt I'd be fine even without a weapon, but it was better than nothing. A fan with outer spokes made from iron held about as much power as a thin club. War fans were concealed weapons that aristocratic women favored, though it was a dangerous item to be carrying around for fun.

"I just have it for self-defense. So, you can take it," she said.

"Got it."

I tried to leave Layla's side when Chloe's nagging echoed in my head. At the time, I brushed it off, thinking that she was being too noisy. But her incessant scolding had apparently remained in my head. *"Mr. Julius, you won't lose anything by expressing your gratitude. In fact, you have everything to gain. If you express your gratitude, you'll surely receive something good in return. Think of it as an investment in your future,"* Chloe had said proudly.

She's noisy even if I'm not by her side, I thought. Was it because I'm so used to hearing her voice every day?

"Thanks, you really helped me out. You should hurry and return," I said curtly.

"Oh my. I thought you were rather unfriendly, but you unexpectedly have a kind side," she said with a smile. "All right, good luck, prince."

With that, she retraced her steps to leave. I walked in the opposite direction and proceeded forward. I didn't see any guards in the corridor. My footsteps had naturally grown more rushed, and before I knew it, I was running.

Suddenly, I felt a presence. I used the fan to block the item that came towards me. With a metallic *clang*, I parried the attack. The fan I'd borrowed was decently sturdy. A few strings with hooks attached to the end immediately followed the initial attack. I heard the strings cutting through the air, but no one could be seen.

"This is troublesome," I grumbled.

I was in a hurry. I had no idea who this person was, but I had no time to be their opponent. The strings I struck to the ground sliced the stone floor. These wires were enough to shred my flesh if I even dared to touch them with my bare hands.

Iron wires were also concealed weapons that assassins preferred to use. I closed the fan, parried a wire, and twirled it around my weapon. I could feel something heavy on the other end. It was difficult to determine where these thin, glimmering wires came from, but I could feel some weight, meaning there was a person on the other end.

And a regular person was no match for me.

"I'm in a hurry," I said. "Just die already."

The wires that sliced the stone floor rose in the air towards me. I kicked the ground to dodge the attack—for a brief moment, my world was upside down. As I'd thought, I couldn't see anyone in this large temple.

As I jumped, I pulled the fan back. I tugged as hard as I could, and I carefully landed on one leg. There was definitely the weight of one person on the other end. That was all the information I needed. I used the leg I landed on to kick the ground once more. I opened the fan with the wire coiled around it and felt the string grow taut. The wire broke, and it danced in the air, reflecting the light.

After I knocked down the strings, I rushed towards a blank area where I felt a human's presence. I could hear the rustling of fabric as they tried to flee, but they were too late. I reached out and tightly grabbed the first thing I could. I felt something akin to hair, and I even thought that I'd plucked out a few strands within my palm. I used all the force I built up from my dash and aimed my knee squarely at my foe's stomach. I heard a groan and then a gasp for air.

The person was lighter than I thought. They had a small frame like a woman. *Is this person a woman?* But that didn't matter to me. The iron fan was a relatively lethal weapon. If used well, it was easier to kill a person than with a sword, since there was no worry of its blade chipping.

I couldn't see my opponent's body, but it was clear that they were trying to escape. Their hair still in the clutches of my hand, I was about to swing the fan down to snap their neck...and then I stopped.

I felt like Chloe would be upset with me. I didn't quite care whether I killed a person or not. None of that mattered to me. If anyone would get in my way, I wouldn't hesitate.

But once again, Chloe's voice echoed noisily in my head. *"Mr. Julius! Let's be more peaceful and amicable!"* And so, I didn't shatter this person's neck. But since it'd be troublesome if they gave chase, I approximated where their leg would be and used all my weight to stomp the ground. I heard a dull crack and felt a bone break beneath my foot.

"Gah! Ugh...!"

This person must've been trained; their cries of agony weren't loud. I released their hair and heard a thud as something invisible fell to the ground. Gradually, their invisibility faded, and the ground distorted in front of me as they came into view. The person was wearing a loose, black garment. Since this cloth was covering most of their body, I couldn't tell if this was a man or a woman.

I only knew that this person was young—they could've been a child. The person clutched their broken leg as their dark eyes filled with rage gazed up at me. Blood trickled from their mouth. *You won't die just because your stomach's kicked and your leg's broken.*

I thought back to the time when Chloe and I were attacked at the city square. *They were probably assassins under Coldman's firm. They used some kind of unusual magic too. It made them invisible and blended in with their surroundings. I'd thought that the spell was unusual, but if it was specifically made for assassins, it's no wonder that neither Chloe nor I knew of it.* An assassin's techniques and weapons were almost never revealed to the public. Which makes sense for their profession.

“...This is a waste of time,” I grumbled.

I wasn't interested in the identity of the person on the floor. The letter from Cyril Astria stated that Michael Coldman and his daughter had fled the kingdom. I surmised that they sought asylum in Rasheed, and the sacred kingdom had taken them in. This was troublesome—they were able to escape a prison sentence because the soldiers of Astria were useless. *Cyril Astria should pay us 100 million gold as an apology.*

Chloe acted like a miser, but she had the tendency to be modest when receiving money. *Damn, that idiot.*

“Wait, Julius Craft!” the person on the ground shouted. The voice sounded like a young boy. “Because of you, Lady Eliza is...”

I glanced at him before I proceeded deeper down the corridor towards the door where Chloe must've been.

“Lady Eliza is a bit prideful, but she's a lovely and endearing lady! But all because you... It's all your fault!”

“Shut the hell up and stop whining,” I snapped. “If she's that important to you, you just need to protect her. That's all.”

“Don't act like you understand!” the boy yelled before stammering. “Lady Eliza is... King Shesif is... Argh! Damn it! Damn it!”

I'd met Eliza Coldman once or twice in my life—I didn't remember her much. I only noted that she was shrill and noisy, and the scent of her makeup and perfume were offensive to my nose. She bore a grudge against Chloe.

In other words, if *she* was here, it meant that King Shesif knew Chloe's true identity. Which was why Chloe was selected as his bride.

Upon having this revelation, I once again ran ahead. Since she was important to me, I just needed to protect her. The only person in the world who was so extremely dear to me was so good-natured that she'd get embroiled in the affairs of others if I let her be.

And...as the person who was closest to her, I knew that best.

◆ Eliza Strikes Back

WHEN I opened the door, I was met with the sight of a furious Mr. Julius and I cowered in fear. Trying to hide the fact that I almost screamed, I gave a goofy grin.

“What a coincidence, Mr. Julius,” I said. “How did you— Wait! Where are you going?”

After he looked at me silently, he pushed past me into the room. *I just fled from Shesif. Why’s he trying to enter the room?* I hastily tried to grab Mr. Julius’s arm, but in an impressive show of strength, he just dragged me along.

“Wait, Mr. Julius! Come on, let’s run! Let’s flee. He knows all about us!” I said.

“...I’m gonna kill him,” Mr. Julius growled.

“Let’s be peaceful! Please! Let’s keep the peace!”

He’s terrifying! He was unmistakably angry. And all because of my carelessness. I have to reflect on my actions.

While I was doing my best to tug back on Mr. Julius’s arm, I was suddenly grabbed by a large, invisible hand and raised into the air. It was similar to a strong wind blowing me away, but I definitely felt an intent or a mind behind this invisible force. As Mr. Julius and I were floating, we were pushed back towards the end of the room.

I floated close to the ceiling, and my dress was blown upwards as I flipped in the air. This was an unfortunate position for me. I usually wore bloomers under my apron dress to protect me from this shameful pose, but I was out of luck today—my dress had no such undergarment, and my underwear was on full display for the world to see. This was embarrassing for even the beautiful alchemist Chloe. I knew that now wasn’t really the time to be bashful, but this was a rough experience for a woman my age.

Under me, I saw Shesif slowly getting up, his hand on the sofa. It seemed my

kick had hurt him quite a bit—he was still applying pressure to his abdomen. *You get what you deserve.* I was floating in the air for only a moment, and I soon felt my weight and gravity hurling me towards the ground. It was as though I was lifted towards the ceiling and suddenly released from the invisible grip.

“Whoa!” I yelped pathetically as the ground was closing in on me.

Mr. Julius expertly regained his position in the air, grabbed me, and skillfully landed on the floor. The difference in our physical abilities was as clear as day—if he wasn’t here, I was certain that I would’ve painfully hit the ground.

“...Salim,” Shesif called out.

A man slowly sauntered inside from the door. Just moments ago, no one had been in the corridor, but this man had appeared without my notice. A chill ran down my spine as fear gripped my body. I felt incredibly nauseous as my head throbbed loudly, and my fingertips grew cold.

This feeling was much stronger than what I had with Aliza. It felt like I was right in front of Mephisto—in fact, this man was much scarier than what I’d experienced back then.

A demon didn’t simply possess the man—it seemed like he *was* the demon himself. I couldn’t help but clench tightly at Mr. Julius’s clothes. He carried me around the waist and brought me close to protect me from the impact of the landing.

My painfully dry throat felt like it was glued together. I was unable to utter a sound.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” the man called Salim asked.

I heard that name before. I racked my brain and remembered that Ruto, the seal master, had an older brother named Salim Ivan—the head of Fores Research Facility.

Salim was a skinny man with a kind voice. Clad in a white robe with gold borders, he wore a hood over his eyes, only showing his mouth. Overpowered by his aura, I got goosebumps with every step he took as he entered the room.

I feel sick. I'm scared.

"I'm fine..." Shesif said. "I thought that she would obediently become mine, but she doesn't act cute at all. Eliza, my flower. You're much more adorable than she is."

"Goodness, you make me so happy, King Shesif," Ms. Eliza replied.

She had her arm wrapped around Salim's arm. I was so taken aback by Salim's intensity that I failed to notice her at first. Eliza Coldman was the daughter of Jewel King Michael Coldman, the head of Coldman's Merchandise.

Her hair was the color of milk tea, and she was wearing a hair ornament filled with glittering jewels. Her magnificent dress, decorated with priceless gems, glimmered with every step she took. She was so enchanting and pretty that I couldn't believe she was in prison just days ago.

Her emerald-green eyes glared straight at me. She looked at me with rage and fury. *She thinks I threw her in prison, after all. But is she not scared? I'm so terrified of Salim. He chills me to the bone.*

"Come, Eliza. It'll be dangerous for you if you get involved," Shesif said.

Ms. Eliza's eyes sparkled with joy as she removed herself from Salim's arm and obediently headed towards Shesif. The king gracefully sat back down onto the sofa. Ms. Eliza sat by his feet and placed her head on his knees, acting spoiled. Shesif, in turn, gently stroked her hair as though he was petting a kitten.

Ugh, I don't want to see this. There was nothing more awkward than watching a familiar person blatantly flirting with another. Remembering the proverb "one man's fault is another man's lesson," I tried to leave Mr. Julius's side. But he kept a firm grip on my waist and wouldn't let me go.

"Drop them below, Salim. They deserve to scurry around the ground like rats," Shesif commanded.

"Your wish is my command," Salim replied as he extended an arm towards us.

"I *know* you know, Shesif!" I yelled.

The king was aware that Salim Ivan was the demon. He knew it, and still chose

to use Salim's power—or, if I were to borrow the king's words, utilize the demon's intellect.

I felt the presence of intensely ominous, dark magic. I tried to resist, but I didn't have time to say a thing. A dark hole that seemingly led to the abyss opened up below my feet. It looked like nothing more than an endless hole.

"Good riddance, Chloe Sagrid! Why don't you two die together? A much better man than Julius has fallen in love with me at first sight! Isn't it wonderful? Are you jealous?" Ms. Eliza cried out happily.

I thought this with Aliza too, but why does everyone want me to be envious of them? I felt slightly irritated, but I was more worried about Ms. Eliza. It was painfully obvious that Shesif was anything but a kind, wonderful husband. He was easy on the eyes and was at the top in terms of political power, but I wouldn't want a man like him. I wouldn't be able to love him. In fact, I despised the king. Ms. Eliza's triumphant laughter echoed throughout the room as I immediately lost my footing.

Mr. Julius still carried me in his arms as we fell into the abyss below.

◆ Dropped into an Underground Labyrinth

MY vision was dyed black as I floated for a moment before I touched the floor. It felt like I was teleported instead of dropped into some unknown area.

I'd used my alchemy to connect two spaces before, but my items had a reputation for being gentle and thoughtful towards the user. Even if I was able to distort a space, I made sure to keep any possible adverse effects to the user to a minimum. However, the teleportation magic that Salim Ivan used was not so. I felt dizzy and experienced motion sickness. He forcibly dragged us into a different place without any care for the person on the receiving end.

It also looks bad when he opens up a hole beneath your feet. My emergency teleportation circle is much better. Am I actually smarter than a demon?! Does my genius surpass a demon?! I glanced around the dark space and used my light magic.

"Light, illuminate," I chanted, creating a small light.

Using light magic to brighten my surroundings used quite a bit of energy—I wasn't going to continuously use it, but I was finally able to confirm my environment. I was standing in what looked like a stone funerary box. It was a small space with ochre walls. The sides of this confined area were blocked by stone walls, making it impossible for me to escape. Iron bars were in front of me, reminiscent of a prison. It was dark and difficult to see beyond the metal bars, but I could tell that it was connected to a corridor.

Mr. Julius, who'd been gripping the bars, turned around. Illuminated by the small light, he glared at me with irritation. *He doesn't have to be that mad, even if I did drag us into this situation.*

"Uh, erm..." I stammered. "I'm sorry. I didn't think this would happen..."

"Did that man do anything to you?" he inquired.

"Of course not! He really is a womanizing monarch! I understand why Shesif wanted a beautiful maiden such as myself for his wife, but I kicked with all my

might to flee. I'm all right."

So, he's not mad, just worried. I felt a smile form on the corners of my mouth as I looked up at him. *He doesn't praise my outfit, but I guess he still worries about me. I know that now's not the time, but I can't stop myself from smiling.*

"Salim Ivan's the demon, isn't he?" he said, ignoring all the self-praise that I just stated.

This makes me a bit embarrassed. I wanted him to say something—anything. *Ignoring isn't nice.*

"Did you sense it too, Mr. Julius?" I asked. "Can you sense the presence of demons as well? Thank goodness I'm not alone in that."

It was uneasy to know that only I had a certain unique trait. I felt a bit relieved, but he shook his head.

"I can tell by your expression. I haven't felt anything from Salim—he just looked like a normal sorcerer to me," he replied.

He immediately denied my claims, and I expelled a small sigh to ease some nervousness. *So, I guess only I can sense these demons, as Jahala had said.* I still couldn't understand how or why, but I had to admit that I possessed some unknown power. *Maybe I should accept this fate if it can help others.*

"...You're right. Ms. Eliza clung onto Salim so tightly too. Do you think she just has rotten luck with men? She fell in love with you before running off to Shesif... I know that Coldman's Merchandise traded jewels, so it wouldn't be odd if she had some ties with the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, but even so," I said.

"Stop talking nonsense. We need to escape from here. Can't do anything about these iron bars, but the walls are made from stone. Use your magic to open a hole in the ceiling, Chloe," Mr. Julius replied.

"Aren't you worried about Ms. Eliza's unfortunate luck with men?"

"Are you in any position to talk?" He gave a weary sigh.

He's...not wrong. The face of Cyril popped up in my head and I stared at Mr. Julius before I said, "You're right."

Our cell didn't even have any windows, and our voices echoed loudly. I

guessed that there was a corridor beyond these metal bars, but I could only see darkness. I could've illuminated the area beyond, but I felt like it'd be a waste of energy and decided against it.

"In any case, we've found the demon. But Salim Ivan is... I don't know how to explain this well, but I don't think he's *just* possessed by a demon. He absolutely terrified me, and I think there's something more..." I muttered.

"Something more?"

"I can't quite put it into words myself. But all we need to do now is report back to Jahala, and we'll get a female dragon. Isn't that wonderful, Mr. Julius?"

"I don't know where we are, but as long as we can go outside, we can ride on Helios and fly away. Destroy the ceiling. You can use spells of that caliber, can't you, Chloe?"

As usual, Mr. Julius expected me to be able to do virtually anything. I wasn't a sorcerer, but an alchemist. I recently learned that I was adept at anti-evil magic, but I only have normal capabilities for other elements. *I'm not sure if I can destroy the ceiling, and even if I could, wouldn't I just be burying us alive?*

"Leave it to me, a woman with a good track record regarding safety and trust!" I said before I continued. "Is what I'd like to say, but it's far too dangerous to open a hole in this small cell. We seem to be underground, but I don't know deep down we are. Worst case, we might be buried alive once the ceiling crumbles. That's not how I'd like to go—it seems painful."

"I'll carry you out and escape before that happens."

"We don't have to do an all-or-nothing gamble on your physical capabilities just to escape this place! I'm not only a genius, but well-prepared, you know. I'm ready for anything!"

"You're well-prepared?" He looked at me dubiously.

"Yup! Er, but I'll be a bit troubled if you look at me right now, so please avert your gaze. Do you promise?" I asked, looking up at him seriously.

This was very important to me—specifically to my sense of shame.

He furrowed his brows. "Explain."

"I'm going to strip," I said. *You heard me.*

I wasn't joking around. This dress was in the way, and I'd abandoned my shoes. It was vital for me to take it all off here.

"...I don't mind. It's not like I'll do anything just because I'm watching you change," Mr. Julius said.

"But I mind! And also, I do wish you'd mind it a bit more! Anyways, don't look, got it?"

With an annoyed click of his tongue, he turned away. I immediately removed my dress and it fell to the floor around my ankles. I guessed that this garment was expensive, but there was nothing I could do to save it. *I'll just leave it here. It's totally in the way.*

A corset was tightly fastened underneath my dress, squeezing my organs. I undid the string, and I felt like I could finally breathe. Under my corset, I'd hidden my infinite storage bag wrapped around my stomach and chest. *Good call, me.*

The bag, at a glance, was completely empty, so it was thin and easy to conceal. When I requested for this bag to be placed around my body, the person dressing me had looked at me oddly.

"Why do you need this bag under your clothes?" the stylist had asked quizzically.

"To make my breasts look larger!" I energetically proclaimed. It was a hassle to explain my true reasoning.

They didn't find my excuse particularly unusual. *Thank goodness my chest isn't that big.* And so, my chest had actually looked slightly larger than usual. *Not like anyone cares.*

"Whew, I feel so much better. I thought it was better to be safe than sorry, so I brought my infinite storage bag with me. Thank goodness. I had the corset on really tight so that it wouldn't stand out. I couldn't eat because of that, but hey, good call on my part, right? I'm a genius, a young, beautiful maiden of great intellect," I proclaimed.

Satisfied by how well-prepared I was, I took out an apron dress from my bag and swiftly put it on. I wore my usual boots, and I felt much more comfortable. Beautiful dresses looked elegant, but they were difficult to move around in. Apron dresses were the way to go.

“...Hey, Chloe,” Mr. Julius suddenly said before posing a strange question. “If I were to provide self-praise and call myself a beautiful young boy, how would you feel?”

Mr. Julius was indeed a beautiful man, but he was twenty-five. He didn’t look younger either, so I didn’t see him as a boy.

“Mr. Julius,” I said slowly. “When I call myself a beautiful young maiden...I feel so in spirit. It’s a state of mind.”

“I see. Then that’s fine,” he replied.

I understood his implication, so I decided to tell him my reasoning. I didn’t actually think that I was a beautiful young maiden. I wasn’t sure if he really agreed with my logic, but he looked back at me.

Once I was back in my usual attire, I handed him his sword. “Here!”

I probably looked really proud of myself. Mr. Julius silently tousled my hair quite roughly. Thinking that this was his way of praising me, I felt even more pride, but his gesture was a bit painful.

I took out a Round Glowing Signpost from my bag. It was a white sphere that required both hands to hold and sort of resembled a large egg.

“Illuminate the darkness and lead the way outside,” I said.

The Signpost glowed at my words. Since we finally had enough light, I undid my light magic and confirmed my surroundings. My light magic had allowed me to see the interior of this cell—a small space blocked by metal bars. My Round Glowing Signpost finally allowed me to see beyond, into the darkness.

Past the iron bars was a seemingly endless dark corridor. It was made from smooth stone that was supported by occasional wooden frames. Like a sharp knife that had sliced through bread, the surface of the corridor was smooth. It was square-shaped and wide enough for Mr. Julius and me to pass through

together.

My Signpost floated through the openings between the iron bars and shed light onto the passage in front of me. I saw numerous twists and turns, implying that the underground route was rather complex. I was glad that I didn't hastily try to leave through the ceiling. It was clear that this vast underground area was man-made. If so, it could've been far deeper underground than I'd originally anticipated. *We were able to avoid getting buried alive.*

"This is like a labyrinth, Mr. Julius. My Round Glowing Signpost will guide us out, so don't worry there. It can accurately lead us out of paths that it's taken before, but it can still guide us through unknown terrain. Cave-like areas, like the one we're currently in, usually have wind blowing in from the entrance, so my Signpost will react to that and lead us out. A very useful item, isn't it? I made it, you know," I prattled on.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," came his reply.

Happy to hear his praise, I proudly puffed out my chest. *He didn't praise me when I was in a fancy dress, but he praised how well-prepared I was. I guess I'll forgive him just this once.*

"By the way, where'd you get that fan, Mr. Julius?" I asked. "It looks like Layla's."

"Borrowed it from her. It's a war fan. We don't need it anymore, so keep it stored," Mr. Julius answered.

"A war fan?"

He handed me his borrowed weapon, and I found it to be a lot heavier than it looked. After I scrutinized the item, I stored it in my infinite storage bag, which was connected to my trunk. *I'll return it to Lady Layla when I meet her again.*

"It's a type of assassination tool," Mr. Julius explained. "The outer spokes are made of iron. That woman apparently has her doubts about the Rasheed royal family. She claimed to be the second prince's fiancée, but she willingly cooperated with me. But now that our identities are revealed, she might be in danger since she lent me a hand."

"...Lady Layla," I murmured.

She was the daughter of a duke and Prince Faisal's fiancée. I looked down, reminded of my own past. *Is she okay? Her aiding us may be seen as her betrayal, and she might be punished.*

I'd been restrained and thrown into prison before. I was terrified and confused, anxious about my future. Layla seemed to be a lot stronger than I was, to the point where I thought it was rude to compare myself to her. Even so, I had no doubt that she felt fear. I'd dragged Layla into this mess. Had I not accepted Jahala's request, I would've never met her. I truly felt like I'd done something unnecessary.

"It's a waste of time to be worrying here. Let's leave," Mr. Julius urged.

As though he was trying to cheer me up, his indifferent yet powerful tone reached my heart. I looked up at him and gave a firm nod. His red and blue pupils gazed down at me; his hair was still black. *He looks great with darker hair, too.* Feeling some of my nervousness die down, I was able to have these thoughts. *I suppose pretty people look great no matter what. Shesif's a good-looking guy too, but his actions were creepy and disgusting—I hate him.*

"Mr. Julius, the Diamond of Eternity is tougher than iron, so I think you should be able to cut through the iron bars, but I don't want your blade to chip, so I'll apply some magic to it. Oh, and would you like to change too? I've got your Ariadne's Mantle," I said.

"It's a pain, so I'll just stay like this," he replied.

He affixed his sword sheath on the belt of his butler uniform and unsheathed the black blade. I took a few steps back, removed my staff from my bag, and aimed it towards his sword.

"Sharp blade of water, blade of limpid stream," I chanted, applying a film of water over the weapon.

It was vibrating ever so slightly and difficult to discern with the naked eye. It was a beginner water spell and didn't possess enough power to slice through the iron bars of this cell by itself. *But I've got Mr. Julius with his incredibly expensive Diamond of Eternity sword. I think this is good enough.*

Quick as a flash, Mr. Julius swung his blade enveloped by water right in front

of my eyes. He sliced through the bars as easily as cutting up vegetables for a stew. The iron bars fell to the ground. The effect of the water magic faded, and he sheathed his sword.

My Round Glowing Signpost floated ahead and slowly proceeded forward. Mr. Julius rushed after it, and I followed suit.

Once we broke free of our cell, the path in front of us seemed to go on endlessly. I felt an eerie presence fill this underground corridor, but I chalked it up to my imagination. *I'm just caught up in this situation. That's all. That's what I want to believe.*

We chased after the Signpost as it took a few turns. The path was smooth. There were no stairs or windows—only alchemy lamps lined equidistant from each other, lighting the way. They were simple rectangular tools and didn't have any whimsical or playful touches to them. My lamps were in cute shapes like mushrooms and grapes, but none of these had any unique characteristics. They looked old, and I could see the occasional wear and tear. Cobwebs hung from some of them, and they seemed to be losing their power.

"I think Shesif knows that Salim Ivan is a demon," I said. "The king stated that he wanted to create an ideal world where there was no death, and no one would age. He said he'd use the demon's intellect or something of the sort."

"Immortality is his ideal, huh? A fitting thought for a person in power," Mr. Julius spat.

The deserted corridor was so quiet that I felt like I could even hear myself breathe. To keep my mind occupied, I started a conversation with Mr. Julius, but his reply had a biting tone.

"Do high-ranked people not want to die?" I asked. "I don't want to die either, but I don't want to live in eternal youth. That thought has never crossed my mind."

"And if your self-praise of being a beautiful young maiden is a state of mind, I'm sure you're always going to be one anyway."

He remained expressionless, but I found his words humorous. I tilted my head, not knowing if I should laugh, and instead chose to complain.

“Please don’t analyze me so calmly. It’s very embarrassing, and I wish you’d let stuff like that slide,” I said.

“If the king’s joining forces with the demon, the fatalist researcher of Puerta Research Center will never have his wishes granted.”

“Just call him Jahala. That nickname’s longer than his actual name,” I quipped.

“Jahala Garena claimed that all will return to normal once the demon’s killed, but that’s wishful thinking. I doubt things will go that smoothly.”

“I agree... What should we do?”

“If he carries a firm resolution and acts like a king, it shouldn’t be a problem. That’s how revolts go,” Mr. Julius said.

“But Jahala said that he didn’t wish to go against the royal family.”

“Then he shouldn’t do anything unnecessary. I hadn’t thought of going against the Dystiana Empire in the past; I didn’t get that emotional. When I was on the battlefield, I got to spend time with Helios too. And the emperor had apparently held my skills as a Dragon Knight in high regard.”

“I can believe that. You’re strong. The emperor of Dystiana was about the same age as my father, I believe.”

“Yeah. His name’s Oswald Dystiana. If he’s still alive, he should be around that age.”

“The empire’s been quiet for a while. Do you think they stopped waging wars?” I asked.

“Who knows? But I’m aware that the repeated expeditions exhausted the nation. I don’t have the faintest clue what they’re thinking, but the Dystiana royal family and the aristocrats there are all fools—the lot of them. That, I know for sure.” Mr. Julius seemed to genuinely not care about Dystiana.

A short while later, he stopped dead in his tracks. Puzzled, I looked up at him and then towards the end of the corridor. The path was narrow, but a vast clearing was in front of us.

There were several enormous, cylindrical glass pillars standing solemnly. They seemed to stretch towards the ceiling, and I felt like I was looking at a tall

aquarium. There was a tube above the cylinder that lined the ceiling and continued deeper inside the room.

The glass, cylindrical aquariums were filled with what looked like purified water—the same liquid that I used for my alchemy furnace. An unknown animal was floating within.

“...A dragon,” Mr. Julius muttered in a low voice.

I strained my eyes. The specimen looked completely different from Helios, and it was a bit too awkwardly shaped to call a dragon. It looked like a patchwork of various animals sewn together. Above all, dragons were large creatures. The organism within the aquarium wasn’t even half the size of Helios.

“It doesn’t really look like a dragon...” I observed.



The moment those words left my lips, the ceiling started to crumble as small rocks fell from above. The earth started to shake, and the ceiling suddenly fell apart. Large rocks fell with a loud rumble, destroying the ground underneath as it kicked smoke and dust into the air.

Mr. Julius grabbed my apron dress and dragged me towards the end of the corridor to dodge the debris from above. *Does he not throw me around anymore because he views me more favorably, I wonder?*

As we escaped being squashed by the boulders, I remembered a time when Mr. Julius had just arrived at my house and *threw* me out of the way while fighting. I had pathetically rolled on the ground and was covered with little scratches. *I guess he's not going to throw me around anymore. I'm glad. Kinda miss it, though. Just kidding. I don't miss it at all.*

As dust and dirt danced in the air, pebbles and debris fell from the ceiling. I put both hands over my mouth in an effort to not inhale any dirt, but I was in a confined space with no windows. Feeling suffocated, I ended up coughing a few times. Mr. Julius lowered my body towards the side of the wall. He had one sleeve covering his mouth while he held his sword in his right hand.

I also grabbed my wand, which increases my magical capabilities. Amidst the clouds of dust, I sensed a malicious presence. My Signpost floated along past the ceiling and illuminated the wide area. I couldn't see the blue skies above, implying that we were, at the very least, two floors underground.

"...Is that a Man-eating flower?" I murmured.

From the dust emerged a red flower mixed with bright colors that made it look poisonous. I was familiar with this plant. Man-eating flowers lived deep within forests and were an organism not quite like a plant but not quite like an animal either.

It was different from monsters that appeared from the Otherworldly Gate. It was technically classified as an animal, though it looked like a plant—it mostly ate small animals.

The thick petals of the flower were larger than me, and a mouth was in the center, ready to swallow anything that came near. It had no teeth, and the

gaping maw was filled with digestive fluids. It also had a few vine-like tendrils that could also consume its prey. Since Man-eating flowers generally couldn't move, they used their vine-shaped appendages to grab small animals. It was mostly harmless to humans if we didn't approach them.

It was called the Man-eating flower because careless people had gotten close to it in the past, leading to accidents where they were eaten by the plant.

"But Man-eating flowers don't live here. They can't even move by themselves..." I said. In the next moment, my Signpost illuminated the creature completely, and I let out a shocked gasp. "Uagh!"

I'd never seen anything like it before. Its torso was around half the size of Helios, but it was the body of a dragon. From its neck up, the red petals of the Man-eating flower were in full bloom. It had no wings, but instead long, green tendrils to catch its prey. It had two dragon legs and a long tail. It was small, but I could tell that it was originally a dark brown dragon.

"What... What *is* this? I-It's like a mix between a dragon and a Man-eating flower..." I murmured in horror, unable to tear my eyes away from this monstrosity. My voice trembled as I gazed into its face—it had the mouth of a flower and lacked eyes and a nose.

I recalled the glass cylinders I saw moments before, filled with purified water with misshapen specimens floating inside. It looked exactly like this aberration in front of my eyes.

"You're probably right. Female dragons are much smaller than males. I read in a book that they're only about half the size of males. I've never seen one before, but judging from this size, this looks like a monster...created by fusing a female dragon with the so-called Man-eating flower. This is a product of an experiment where they tried to genetically enhance—no, simply modify a dragon. This is horrible," Mr. Julius said in a gravelly voice. He wasn't completely enraged, but his tone clearly displayed his anger and resentment.

"So...is this a female dragon?" I asked.

It was hard for me to admit, but when he pointed it out, I could only see it that way. The vines swayed in front of us. The putrid yet sweet stench of rotting fruit hit my nose—this was likely the smell of the digestive fluids emanating

from the flower's mouth. I'd never fought against a Man-eating flower before, but I met one while I was gathering items for my alchemy on the outskirts of a forest.

This was before I met Mr. Julius. My master, Ms. Natalia, had suddenly disappeared, and I'd just started trying to become independent while using my alchemy. I remembered hastily fleeing while being careful not to make a sound.

It looked disgusting, and I felt like I'd lose if I fought against it. I had no idea what a Man-eating flower was back then, so I went to Ms. Roxy's diner and told her that I saw a "disgusting flower."

A middle-aged man who was an adventurer had told me, "That's a Man-eating flower, Ms. Chloe. You're lucky that you didn't get eaten." He proceeded to kindly provide details on this plant.

Man-eating flowers only had the instinct to eat and propagate. It was technically classified as an animal, but its actions and characteristics were more akin to a plant. The abomination in front of my eyes had the body of a female dragon, and I couldn't help but think about Helios. I bit my lip. *I'd like to avoid fighting against it if I can.*

"Chloe, that's not a dragon," Mr. Julius said sternly. "It looks completely different, and I doubt it has a will of its own. It's practically dead."

The Man-eating flower lookalike had already finished its life as a dragon. It may have only possessed the instinct to feed. Its vines stretched out in front of us like a large hand; each green tendril was thicker than an adult man's arm. It was long and looked flexible like a whip.

"Are *you* all right, Mr. Julius?"

I wouldn't be surprised if he's more hurt by this sight than I am. Mr. Julius had treated Helios more precious than anyone else in the world. He surely wouldn't have wanted to see a dragon transformed into such a horrendous form.

He glanced at me and gave a small nod. "Yeah. I'm disgusted by it, but I think it'd be happier if it was dead," he said.

"...I agree."

“You don’t have to do a thing.”

“No, I’ll fight alongside you!”

The vines rushed towards us. Since Man-eating flowers were plants, they were said to be weak to fire. The monster in front of us had the body of a dragon, but its vines undoubtedly belonged to the plant. Still, if I were to use fire magic in this confined space, the results would be disastrous.

While I was trying to think of a different strategy, Mr. Julius rushed towards the Man-eating flower without hesitation. He easily slashed through the green tendrils and dashed towards its body. Beyond the vines was a gaping mouth that could easily swallow a small animal whole.

The appendages that Mr. Julius had sliced fell to the ground, wriggling. It was a disgusting sight. I thought his sword would reach the monster’s torso, but the cut vines regenerated at an alarming speed and pounced on him. He continued to hack away, but for every vine he cut, new tendrils quickly took their place.

As his reliable partner, I knew that I had to do something. If I was told to take care of a troublesome issue, that was what I’d do. I was a genius alchemist, wasn’t I?

“Something useful, something useful... Found it!”

I rummaged through my bag and took out a small bottle filled with light blue liquid. The label read, “Dangerous if consumed.”

“Mr. Julius, please dodge!” I shouted. “It’s a plant, so it must be weak to herbicides!”

Hearing my words, Mr. Julius immediately grabbed the vines, slashed through them, and moved to the side. I threw the small bottle towards the monster. The vines, perhaps thinking that the bottle was some kind of food, wrapped around it and broke the glass, allowing the liquid to spill out.

“Don’t let weeds grow! Extreme Herbicide!” I yelled.

My words activated my item, allowing for white smoke from the liquid to dance in the air. The vines sensed danger and faltered before it tried to flee, but vegetation was no match for my items. The moment the vines touched the

smoke, they turned brown and wilted. The head or flower portion of the aberration writhed in agony, stomping the ground with its dragon legs. The vibration from its tantrum made me almost trip, and I hastily used my staff like a cane to regain my balance. *Ugh, I feel like an old person. I look so uncool.*

“Can’t you do anything about those idiotic phrases that you blurt out?” Mr. Julius asked, staring at the Man-eating flower that was stepping backwards in pain.

“Nope. I infuse a ‘kotodama,’ words that activate an item in my alchemy products. When I create an item, these words are necessary for it to activate, and I can’t change that. When I created my Extreme Herbicide, I imbued my feelings of wanting to destroy all weeds. And the effect is great, as you can see. You can praise me, you know?”

“The vines are dead, but the flower isn’t.”

He didn’t praise me, but instead pointed out how my alchemy didn’t work on all plants. He was right; the vines were wilted and wouldn’t regenerate anymore, but the flower was still a vibrant, toxic-colored red. Every time it shook its head, its digestive fluids dripped onto the floor, creating sizzling puddles that melted the ground.

“I think...that the flower portion might not actually be a plant. If blood flows through those petals like an animal, then my herbicide won’t be effective,” I said.

The Man-eating flower lookalike, perhaps finding the loss of its vines too great, tried to retreat into the corridor. There was no need for us to fight this modified dragon any longer, and I suggested that we should escape.

“We should flee while we can too, Mr. Julius,” I said. “My Signpost is leading the way. We can escape through the hole that the Man-eating flower created.”

“...It’s pitiful to see it still alive in that form. I’ll kill it,” Mr. Julius replied, rejecting my idea.

I paused for a moment. “All right.”

I sympathized with him. My late father had been turned into a monster. I was unable to fight back then, but I don’t think I could’ve tolerated seeing my father

persist in such an unsightly form.

The Man-eating flower lookalike swung its tail, destroying the glass cases in the process. With a shatter, the misshapen specimens flowed out with the purified water like some sort of sludge. The deformed fetuses, dead before they were born properly, lay on the floor lifelessly.

The Man-eating flower lookalike slowly lowered its head to the floor. Its petals encapsulated the fetuses and started to eat. It looked like it was swallowing its prey whole—I saw the dragon's neck bulge as a lump descended towards its stomach.

"So it still retains its instinct to live. This is horrific," Mr. Julius said as the Man-eating flower lookalike was clearly regaining its strength from eating. "Seems like I've got a reason to cooperate with Jahala Garena too, now."

He clenched his sword as he spat his words with disgust. This monstrosity continued to eat its comrades, though I wasn't sure if I could even call them that. After the Man-eating flower consumed numerous deformed fetuses, it gave a violent shudder. Mr. Julius stepped forward to slash it, but I hastily grabbed his clothes. There was no way I could win against him in terms of speed, but I was desperate and managed to stop him as I clenched the hem of his attire.

"Wait. Please!" I yelped. "It's acting weird!"

"I know. Which is why I'll kill it before it does anything funny."

"Wait! This is dangerous!"

I was aware that Mr. Julius was strong, and I knew that he was confident enough to best any foe. He didn't seem to feel much fear either. *Was he always like this, or did he become so fearless after spending years on the battlefield?* My role was to protect this reckless man, just like how he was always protecting me.

I knew he was strong, and he had my utmost trust, but I didn't want to go headfirst into any danger, and I didn't want him to get injured.

"Chloe, let go," he ordered.

“I’m telling you that it’s acting odd. When you fight against monsters, you have to analyze them carefully. I know that thing’s not a monster from the Otherworld, but this rule should still apply.”

The Man-eating flower lookalike enlarged its dragon body as it continued to tremble. The petals unfurled wide and took on an even more vibrant color. Thick, green roots started to protrude from its body as they penetrated the floor and stretched below. In a flash, a root grew right next to me, cutting through the air as it extended swiftly. I couldn’t have possibly dodged the rapidly growing roots. Had I moved even just a little, it would’ve pierced through my stomach, and I felt cold sweat run down my back.

The green roots started to bulge and pulsate as they seemed to carry nutrients back to the main body. It looked like these veins were sapping energy from this building. Mr. Julius carried me under his arm like luggage and used the roots as footing to climb towards the ceiling that had crumbled down on us moments ago.

He gracefully moved around while I was literally dead weight. *I only have the physical capabilities of a normal woman, and Mr. Julius is the odd one here. I hope he won’t chew me out for this later.*

It seemed the upper floors were formerly a workspace. Desks, chairs, and documents were strewn around in disarray, implying that the Man-eating flower monstrosity had rampaged through here. I shifted my gaze towards the documents by my feet.

“Research on genetically enhancing dragons...” I read.

I randomly grabbed the stack of papers and shoved them into my bag. My footing started to waver. The roots had stretched out to the upper floors where we were at, piercing the walls and floors, and creating a large hole. The building started to groan and sway.

“I have a really, *really* bad feeling about this,” I muttered.

“I do too,” Mr. Julius replied.

A large crack started to run through the ceiling, and my Signpost floated towards it, trying to guide us to the exit. Light trickled through the crack. *I’m*

totally grateful for your help, Round Glowing Signpost, but priorities! Now isn't the time! I didn't want to create a hole through the building and escape. I didn't know the location or size of this building, and I deemed it to be dangerous.

"And now you're going to collapse after all?!" I shouted angrily at the ceiling as pebbles and dust started to fall from above.

And, of course, I didn't receive a reply from it. My footing started to tremble as the body of the Man-eating flower lookalike below grotesquely inflated.

"Helios, come!" Mr. Julius shouted, raising his ring.

What should I do? I frantically rummaged through my bag. *Should I just use magic? But I can't use anything useful.* There were defensive spells to create a barrier, but I couldn't protect us against the crumbling ceiling and debris that would inevitably rain upon us. And if we were underneath the desert, I definitely wouldn't be able to guard everyone against the torrent of sand that would fall upon us like a waterfall.

And if we get hit by the debris, it might injure Helios's wing. Worst case, we'd be buried alive! Wait, buried alive?

"My Parasol for Disasters!" I gasped.

I dragged out an umbrella-shaped alchemy item from my bag; I'd made this in the past, but it didn't sell. I opened my umbrella as Mr. Julius grabbed the string on the back of my apron dress and jumped onto Helios. The narrow corridor was a bit too cramped for the black dragon. I wasn't carried like a princess, nor was I carried underneath his arm—I was grabbed by a string on my back. *Does he think I'm playing around because I opened up an umbrella in this situation?*

The floor beneath us crumbled away, and the building, seemingly having reached its limit, started to collapse. As I'd expected, a massive amount of sand and debris fell from above.

"Open, umbrella!" I yelled.

"Fly, Helios," Mr. Julius ordered.

As we spoke together, my umbrella opened midair, covering Helios's entire body as we made our ascent. The umbrella repelled the sand and debris that

showered upon us. Sand continued to pour relentlessly into the large hole as we flew outside and escaped the underground labyrinth.

A barren desert surrounded us. Once Helios was high in the skies, the Parasol for Disasters disintegrated and returned to the shape of a normal umbrella before the crumbled fragments tumbled from the skies into the desert below, its job done. *I'm glad I made it. Didn't sell well, though.*

It'd been a while since I breathed outside air, and I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with fresh oxygen.

Helios let out a long cry, possibly glad that he was freed from that cramped underground. He gave a large flap of his wings and elegantly glided through the air in a gentle, circular trajectory, dodging the clouds of dust in the air.

"That was the worst escape route possible," I said. "We were almost buried in the sand. Aren't you glad you've got the genius alchemist Chloe on your side, Mr. Julius? We're lucky the Parasol for Disasters didn't sell out."

"Guess so. Keep it up," he replied.

"You *praised* me!" I gasped.

I let the compliment get to my head as I eagerly tried to explain the effects of the parasol. But I saw Mr. Julius put down his sword and grab his spear that was nestled by Helios's armor, looking as vigilant as ever. I calmed down and saw the dust clouds still obscuring our vision below.

"The Parasol for Disasters is an item of alchemy that protects someone from falling objects, like you just experienced. It was unpopular because buyers couldn't differentiate my item from normal umbrellas and it didn't sell well." I figured that we had some time to spare until the dust settled, so I proceeded to provide an explanation. "And while it boasts excellent defense from items falling onto your head, there aren't many situations where that's required, so I guess it has a niche usage."

"Wouldn't coal mines or miners want an item like that?" Mr. Julius asked.

Whoa, he usually doesn't answer. This is a bit moving. He's finally starting to act like an employee of Chloe's Alchemy Shop!

“Miners usually wear helmets, and no one really has the time to open up an umbrella when something starts to collapse,” I answered.

“Is there a reason why you made it as an umbrella?”

“I thought it’d be cuter.”

The dust started to settle, and thick vines began to protrude from the destroyed underground labyrinth. The large flower, about the size of five houses, was composed of thick petals and had the body of a scaly dragon. The lower half of its body was buried underground, and it looked like it was trying to fuse with the earth.

A large red flower had bloomed in the middle of the desert. There was a hole in the center of the petals, as though something had been gouged out, and it was filled to the brim with digestive fluids. The fluid started to bubble and dribbled onto the golden sea of sand every time the body shook.

The land sizzled as the fluid dripped, causing smoke to rise in the air. These puddles created a hole in the ground. The Man-eating flower and dragon hybrid no longer had any legs. In exchange, numerous thick vines emerged from its body.

It was buried in the sand from its waist down, and a thick root grew from that area, trying to entangle anything in its grasp. It penetrated the desert and seemed to be growing endlessly. I couldn’t see the tips of these roots, but I guessed that they were spread out under the sand.

Helios expertly dodged the monster’s gaping mouth that tried to swallow us whole as his intelligent eyes glanced at us, waiting for Mr. Julius’s orders. I quickly moved to the end of the stirrups, doing my best not to get in the way. Moving around in the air still felt unstable to me and I was a bit cautious, but I’d started to get used to it after several times.

“You’ve grown so much since I last saw you.” Taken aback by the size of the large Man-eating flower dragon hybrid, I phrased my remark like an aunt seeing their niece for the first time in a while in an attempt to escape reality.

“I don’t like that one bit,” Mr. Julius said angrily as he looked down at the monster. “I’ll cut through that disgusting flower and separate it from its body.”

“I’m sure the Man-eating flower didn’t want to turn out this way either, so I feel like it’s not right to call it disgusting... I didn’t think you cared about appearances much. I guess you’ve been raised well, Mr. Julius,” I replied.

“Those vines are in the way. They’re plants, aren’t they?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don’t have any more of that Extreme Herbicide. It’s a popular item, and I hadn’t gotten around to making more, so I’m afraid I’m all sold out.”

“...Fine, we’ll cut it down.”

“Yes, let’s! We can’t let the weeds grow!”

The female dragon that only had its dragon torso would never return to its original form. It would follow the instincts of the Man-eating flower and would simply be living in misery. We could do nothing but kill it.

“Dance of Fire! Flame Prison!” I chanted towards the tip of Mr. Julius’s spear as I pointed my staff towards it.

The black tip was engulfed in flames and transformed into a weapon on fire. Helios was likely listening to our conversation; with a gentle tug of Mr. Julius’s reins, the dragon soared into the air before cutting through the wind with a sharp descent, headed straight for the Man-eating flower.

Mr. Julius kneeled atop Helios and maintained a half-standing posture as he swung his weapon, easily hacking through the vines that tried to ensnare us. To the Man-eating flower, our small size made us seem like nothing more than bees trying to play with the flowers. It looked much smaller from above, but up close, the aberration was much larger than I’d anticipated.

“It’s like fighting against a castle...” I muttered.

“I don’t know how many dragons were being experimented on underground, but it’s clear that it’s receiving nutrients from below,” Mr. Julius replied.

The vines that were seared and sliced by Mr. Julius were quickly regenerating to their original form. The flower didn’t have any eyes, but its large petals swayed as though it saw us. The petals closed unexpectedly swiftly, displaying that they moved quickly despite their size. When they opened once more, it

spat its digestive fluids towards us. A fountain of its expelled fluid rained from the sky in large droplets.

Helios increased his speed and cut through the wind, dodging the attack. He evaded the vines next and increased his elevation. The dragon dove under the thick petals that were around the size of a ballroom in a castle and flew in a circular trajectory as it closed in on the area where the flower and the female dragon was connected.

Still maintaining his half-standing posture, Mr. Julius thrust his spear towards the base of the flower's neck and used Helios's flying momentum to slice through the flower's side. A bright red, fleshy cross-section peeked out from the neck wound, but it immediately regenerated and healed.

"Mr. Julius, we should retreat for now! It's way too big, and we're at a disadvantage! Please give me some time to think up a plan!" I shouted.

We were under the petals. Every time its body moved, or the petals shuddered, digestive fluids rained upon us. I once again opened my Parasol for Disasters to protect us. The fluids were more potent than my parasol—the item I'd been using for self-defense had holes burned into it.

This item really didn't sell well at all. I guess we can call it a failure. And this umbrella isn't even strong enough to defend us. Plus, I can only block anything above our heads. I can only use it for extremely specific situations. I should've made an item that would create a round barrier all around us, protecting us from all sides or something.

Mr. Julius obediently tugged on Helios's reins and flew into the sky. The hungry vines tried to chase after us. It was easy for Mr. Julius to slice through these tendrils, but his efforts were futile if they endlessly regenerated.

As though to hide from the large flower, Helios positioned us between the clouds of the sunny skies while gaining some distance.

"Do you think that flower will die once it runs out of food?" I asked.

Mr. Julius thought for a moment and shook his head. "If it has the body of a dragon, I assume it can move. It's currently absorbing nutrients from underground, but once it depletes that area, I'd imagine it would start moving

and attack a city.”

“That’s bad. I guess it’s best to kill it now while it won’t move. Man-eating flowers quietly live deep in the forest—if we don’t approach it, it’s generally about as dangerous as a harmless animal or plant. How could anyone do something so awful?”

“If you’ve got time to sympathize with that thing, find a way to kill it,” Mr. Julius said calmly.

A man as passionate as he was would surely be infuriated by this sight, but he didn’t lose himself to blind rage. He sounded as serene as the calm seas. *He’s... used to fighting.*

“It can regenerate if we slice it, so I’m guessing we should burn its roots or freeze it,” I said.

“Can’t you use your magic?” Mr. Julius asked.

“I’m not a sorcerer, so my spells aren’t that powerful. I’m apparently adept at anti-evil magic, but that’s only towards certain species, and it’s not effective against living creatures and normal monsters. It has the body of a dragon too, and I’ve never fought against one.”

“It’s said that a dragon’s body can repel any magic. I’ve never tested it on Helios, though.”

“Rawr!” Helios cried. He was apparently angered by Mr. Julius’s words and gave a rare roar of reproach.

Mr. Julius gently patted Helios’s neck, trying to calm him down.

“...So it doesn’t really seem to have any obvious weaknesses, but the one area that’s exposed is the center of the flower where it spits out digestive fluids,” I said. “If it uses that area to digest, it must be connected to its organs too... All right, let’s test it out.”

“Got it,” Mr. Julius replied.

As usual, he didn’t really question my plans. It made me happy when I thought that he trusted me to such a high degree.

“Right! I’m a genius alchemist and a beautiful young maiden! You can leave it

to me!”

Yeah. We'll be all right. I think we can do this. I tried to sound as confident as possible. Being a beautiful young maiden was a state of mind. I mustn't be too worried about how the words sounded. *Maybe I should nix the “young maiden” bit and just call myself a beauty.* My master, Ms. Natalia, was a beauty. I felt like I lacked the allure and maturity to call myself as such.

Helios flew right above the flower.

“Digestive fluids are fluids... If I freeze it, I imagine we just need to crush the frozen blocks,” I mumbled to myself as I removed several items that resembled chunks of ice from my bag. These were also products I made from my alchemy.

“Please get as close to the center of the flower as possible,” I requested, cupping my hands around the multiple ice shards. “These are called Freezing Crystals. I originally made this for cities that were plagued by water-related disasters. If these are thrown into a river or a lake, they'll instantly freeze it and prevent flooding. The frozen liquid will slowly defrost, giving cities time to protect their citizens from danger. It's a wonderful item.”

“I just need to shatter what you freeze, right?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Correct! I don't know how much these can freeze the flower, but if we freeze its digestive tract, nutrients will no longer be supplied to its body, so it should decrease its regenerative capabilities!”

Mr. Julius sliced through the numerous vines that entangled around Helios as the flower opened its jaws. Helios glided above the center of the flower. I took the Freezing Crystals I had in my hands and tipped every ice shard I had on me into the foaming digestive fluid.

The petals trembled as the flower's mouth folded inwards and closed. Helios gave a flap of his wings before he slid between the petals and made a speedy escape. For a moment, I felt like the scorching temperature of the desert under the bright sun had decreased. Frost fell onto the flower and in the next instant, ice enveloped it.

The dragon torso convulsed in agony. Its vines writhed in pain, slamming the ground multiple times, and kicking up dust. Mr. Julius had stated that magic

didn't work on dragons. While alchemy products required magic during deconstructing and production, once that was finished, it was nothing more than a tool.

Is that why? I asked myself as the ice traveled from the flower to the dragon's body, ultimately reaching the vines. Helios flew between the frozen vines of the massive flower, and Mr. Julius used his spear to shatter the ice. The fragmented vines fell onto the desert and were swallowed by the sand before it was lost forever.

"I'll destroy the center," Mr. Julius said.

Helios followed his words and flew straight towards the frozen flower. Like a black bolt of lightning, Helios's streamlined form allowed him to gain speed, and I could only cling on in desperation. The alchemy saddle had decreased the impact of the nosedive, but as my eyes saw the scenery whizz past me, I felt like I was falling.

Mr. Julius stabilized himself by grabbing the reins with one hand and using his legs for balance as he drew his spear back. His weapon no longer had the effects of my fire magic. *I should quickly cast something!* But Helios was much faster than my chant, and in a flash, we approached the flower's center.

The digestive fluids of the frozen flower were also frozen solid. *But this thing is huge. It's a bit too big to shatter, I think.* Mr. Julius didn't pay attention to my silent worries as he twirled his spear and plunged it into the center of the flower.

A large cracking noise sounded. Helios continued to fly through the air before he made an ascent once more. Large crackles rang out as the flower was cleanly sliced into two. The flower hadn't completely shattered, and Helios once again headed towards it. *I've gotta do something too! If we take too much time, the ice will melt!* I saw the frost start to melt, and water dripped onto the sands, trying to create a puddle.

I looked around, trying to think of a spell, when I saw two dark dots in the blue sky, headed straight for us.

"Someone's coming, Mr. Julius!" I warned.

At first, I thought they were birds, but as they approached us, I had a clearer view.

“Dragons!” I gasped.

One of the dragons looked unusual; I’d never seen the species before. It had four wings and a scarlet body. Its neck and tail were long, and it had two large horns. It was a bit larger than Helios. Atop that dragon were two familiar faces. There was Prince Faisal, who I met at the Holy Palace and danced with, and behind him was Lady Layla. Her dress and hair blowing in the wind, she had a fearless, determined gaze locked on the flower and dragon hybrid.

Ruto was riding a brown dragon alongside them. It looked to be an unmodified one. As I saw the petite woman straddle the magnificent beast, she carried an air of dignity and valiance. Her appearance was a far cry from myself, who was still desperately clinging to Helios.

“Lady Layla!” I cried.

“We’ll talk later! We must defeat that monster first!” Prince Faisal yelled, approaching our side while riding the scarlet dragon.

The prince was carrying a spear as well, but unlike Mr. Julius’s, his weapon had three prongs at the end. Helios and the scarlet dragon circled around the flower like bees buzzing for nectar as the monster started to crumble.

Mr. Julius’s spear had fire magic applied to it and he sliced through a thick petal. It fell towards the desert with a deafening thud.

I thought I heard Ruto’s voice say, *“Please stand back.”*

Before I knew it, the brown dragon was floating high in the sky with Ruto on its back. Multiple magical circles that gave off an ominous glow floated around her. *I’ve never seen such magic before.* Helios and the scarlet dragon flew away from the massive flower, which still remained standing despite its petals being hacked off.

Like a bubbling fountain, the digestive fluids started to leak as the ice began to melt. It was trying to regenerate. The twisted vines started to move once more, and the remaining petals furled towards its center.

“May the dark arrows descend upon you! Acid rain!” Ruto chanted.

A shower of black arrows from the magical circles that covered the sky fell upon the monster. The arrows easily penetrated the half-frozen flower; it didn't have time to regenerate. We were winning by sheer numbers. The countless magical arrows continued to pierce the large flower, and the monster gradually grew smaller and smaller amidst the clouds of dust.

Ruto's magic was unusual. Among my acquaintances, I knew that Cyril had an immense amount of magical energy and could use magic on par with a talented sorcerer. But even Cyril wouldn't have been able to use a spell that was this powerful with such a wide range over a long period of time. If he could, he'd be able to destroy other nations with ease.

Sorcerers weren't omnipotent.

The arrows continued to descend until the large flower had been completely neutralized. They pierced the land and seemed to be destroying even the roots of the monster. We flew up and maintained an altitude higher than Ruto's magical circles so that we wouldn't be dragged into her devastating attack. As I gazed down at the grotesque monster, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of pity.

Once her magical circles faded, Ruto pressed down on her throat and sat back down on her brown dragon. The dragon slowly descended onto the ground, as though it was exerting its utmost care towards her.

Helios and the scarlet dragon followed suit. Helios, perhaps happy to fly with another dragon, playfully flew around the brown one. *I wonder how Helios is portrayed in the eyes of the four-winged, scarlet dragon.* It was clear that the body of the scarlet dragon had been modified in some way.

“Research on dragons...” I muttered under my breath.

Until now, even if I saw a plump travel dragon, I hadn't thought twice about it. I'd never even considered how that dragon was created. But after I'd seen a creature that was an amalgam of a flower and a dragon, I couldn't help but feel sorry for it.

*“It's more common to see dragons with their abilities or appearances modified in other nations. To make something like *that*, there have*

undoubtedly been numerous experiments conducted,” Mr. Julius said simply, adding to my words.

He was gazing at the scarlet dragon. With a gallant flap of its four wings, it flew beautifully in my eyes. Its appearance may have been a little unusual, but I felt like it didn’t differ much from Helios.

◆ Salim Ivan and the Rasheed Royal Family

ONCE the underground labyrinth crumbled, a stone temple-like structure appeared from the gaps in the sunken desert. The brown dragon quietly descended on a stone floor near some pillars. The four-winged, scarlet dragon landed shortly after, and Helios followed suit.

As I slid off Helios's back, he gently nudged me with his snout as though waiting to be praised. His scales were still cool to the touch within the warm desert, and I lovingly rubbed his forehead. He happily closed eyes for a moment before he shifted his gaze towards the scarlet dragon quietly standing beside him. The scarlet dragon seemed to have noticed his stare, but it closed its eyes without offering a response.

"Are you all right, Ruto?" I asked.

She had dismounted the brown dragon's back and was sitting down, leaning against it, exhausted. The dragon worriedly wrapped its long neck around her body and used its wing to shield her. I rushed over to her side as she looked up and nodded. She looked pale, but that was all.

"...I'm glad that you're all safe. I thank you both for defeating that beast with us," Prince Faisal said with a deep bow after he dismounted the scarlet dragon with Lady Layla.

I was a bit worried about a possible altercation, so I felt some of the tension leave my shoulders when I heard his gratitude. Prince Faisal was about as tall as Mr. Julius, and they seemed around the same age. They exuded a similar aura as well—perhaps because they were both Dragon Knights who fought while riding dragons.

Both Prince Faisal and Lady Layla were dressed in the same attire that I'd seen them in at the Holy Palace, but Lady Layla's dress was torn in several places.

"Why are you thanking us? Sleep talk in your sleep. We didn't fight that thing for you guys. I now understand how the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed treats its

dragons. You lot can all get dominated by the demon and perish for all I care,” Mr. Julius said menacingly. Calling the first words he uttered “unfriendly” was an understatement.

“Mr. Julius, I understand your anger, but please calm down! A smile is essential for a person working in the service industry! Even if you’re angry, you still have to smile! Like me!” I hastily said as I tugged his arm. I gave him a bright smile.

I’d never seen him so furious before—he was surely thinking about the modified dragons. *Please calm down*, I desperately thought as I looked up at him. He glanced at me wearily.

“Did you and Lady Layla come here to defeat that, erm, Man-eating flower-esque monster?” I asked.

Prince Faisal shook his head. “No, this is by pure coincidence.”

“You see, Chloe...” Lady Layla said, standing next to Prince Faisal. “I was almost arrested for treason because I lent you a hand.”

Her dress was in shreds and her hair was a mess, but she blossomed like a beautiful flower in the middle of a desert, and she talked with pride.

“Treason...” I murmured. “I’m so sorry, Lady Layla. All because you got involved with us...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I simply followed my heart. There’s nothing for you to feel guilty about, Chloe. But I heard you aren’t Chloe Costario, but Chloe Sagrid. And that man beside you is Julius Craft. King Shesif said that you both came from Astria Kingdom.”

“I’m sorry for lying to you. We’re—”

“Since Ruto came to save you two, you’re cooperating with Puerta Research Center, aren’t you?” Lady Layla said before turning to the woman. “It’s been a while, Ruto. Do you feel a bit better?”

Ruto nodded. Lady Layla didn’t seem angry or hostile. If possible, I didn’t want to be at odds with her.

“Once my brother had chosen Chloe as his bride, there was an uproar at the

palace. Salim Ivan captured Layla and claimed that she'd brought a spy from a different nation into the King's Room. He accused her of treason," Prince Faisal said.

"He's not wrong about us, I think. There's no point in hiding our identities any longer," I replied. I glanced towards Ruto, just in case, and she gave a nod of approval. "We were requested by the Puerta Research Center to investigate the internal affairs of the Holy Palace," I divulged.

"I knew it..." Prince Faisal muttered. "Layla's my fiancée. I told my brother that this must've been some sort of mistake, but my brother's new lover said that he had selected Chloe Sagrid, a woman from Astria, as his bride. She claimed that the man with Chloe was Julius Craft of the Dystiana Empire, also known as Black Prince Julius. I was unable to offer a rebuttal."

"That new lover must be Ms. Eliza," I said. "I happened to cross paths with her in the past, so I'm painfully familiar with her."

"I see. I think this is a bit too much of a coincidence..." Prince Faisal said.

"According to Jahala, this isn't a coincidence, but fate," I said.

"Which is stupid," Mr. Julius grumbled. He wasn't smiling, but he was no longer glaring at Faisal.

"You hate the word 'fate,' don't you?" I asked with a dry smile. "I'm not a huge fan of that word either."

"Fate..." Prince Faisal said slowly. "Layla had told me in the past that something was off about my older brother and asked me for advice. I had an inkling as to why, but I wanted to believe in my brother. I thought that I couldn't just throw my family away... But I chose to save Layla. I prioritized her over my brother and sister. Let's go to Puerta Research Center together. I'll tell you everything that I know."

"Faisal..." Lady Layla murmured, squeezing his hand. She looked up at him anxiously.

"Above all, Layla is the most important person in the world to me. Perhaps it was fated for me to betray my older brother," he mused.

“...I don’t care about the Rasheed royal family. But I’ve got plenty of questions about dragons,” Mr. Julius interjected.

“Oh, come on. Have *some* interest in the Rasheed royal family, too,” I scolded.

Lady Layla and Prince Faisal had created a nice mood, but Mr. Julius had destroyed it. For Prince Faisal, this was one of the most important decisions of his life, but... *I guess I should’ve expected Mr. Julius to not care.* Mr. Julius had displayed his usual dragon maniac antics and Prince Faisal nodded without looking upset.

“I’d like to talk about that as well. I’d heard rumors that you ride on a black dragon, Julius Craft... He looks absolutely empyrean. If you don’t mind, would you allow me to have a closer look?” Prince Faisal requested.

Lady Layla narrowed her eyes at the prince’s quiet yet passionate words. She had a look that said, “There he goes again...”

Cyril had been infatuated with dragons as well; it seemed all men were huge dragon fanatics. *So, we’ve got another one here.* And this prince was a Dragon Knight, implying that he had enough passion to become good friends with Mr. Julius.

As Prince Faisal praised Helios, the scarlet dragon slapped his tail onto the ground of the temple, upset. The brown dragon didn’t seem to be interested in any of this and continued to gaze at Ruto with worry while Helios proudly raised his head.

The four-winged scarlet dragon’s name was Ares. He was born when the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed had started to genetically enhance and modify dragons. Ares’s father also had four wings. This dragon was still young, around the same age as Helios.

Ruto’s brown dragon was called Orpheus. An unmodified dragon, he was over a hundred years old, but no one knew his exact age. He seemed much calmer as he gazed at Helios and Ares like an older brother.

We waited for a short while until Ruto recovered her strength before we set off on our dragons to Puerta Research Center.

Below us was the Man-eating flower lookalike—Prince Faisal had told us that

these were called magical beasts. The area where this beast had been defeated had started to collapse. Like an endless swamp that was large enough to swallow the royal capital's shopping district whole, a waterfall of sand flowed down.

Mr. Julius stated that Helios had never flown with another dragon before and allowed his son to playfully fly circles around Ares and Orpheus. It seemed Helios was curious about them.

Orpheus didn't seem at all interested in the black dragon. Ares, perhaps still annoyed that Helios had received praise from Faisal, spread his wings out wide and flew proudly. His green eyes glanced at Helios, as though saying, "*I'm the better dragon here!*"

I wonder what Helios would say. Maybe he'd ask, "Why do you have four wings?" In my head, Helios had a cool voice fitting a beautiful boy. Since he was Mr. Julius's treasured son and my child as well, I was certain that the dragon would possess a cute human voice. *If I were to create an alchemy item that allows Helios to talk in the human language, I'll definitely make the voice dignified and cute, fitting for a beautiful young boy. I think that'll be best.*

"...I'm glad you're safe, Lady Layla," I said.

The noblewoman was riding on Ares next to us—we were flying at the same speed. Upon closer inspection, her dress was torn pretty badly, exposing her pale legs. I thought that this would feel immodest for a woman of her status.

Prince Faisal had tried to princess carry his fiancée, but Lady Layla vehemently refused the offer. Mr. Julius had quickly grabbed me and flown away on Helios, so I wasn't able to see the conclusion of this quarrel. *I don't know where to look, so I wish she wouldn't look so calm.*

"I could say the same to you," Mr. Julius said curtly.

He did barge into Shesif's room out of worry for me. Once I had time to think properly about the series of events that I'd just lived through, I suddenly felt embarrassed, and my heart felt full. *I...really do love Mr. Julius.* I knew that this was no time to be elated, but I gave a small sigh, allowing this warm feeling to permeate throughout my body.

“I’m fine. I have you by my side,” I said before turning to Lady Layla. “And I’m glad you have Prince Faisal by yours, Lady Layla. You didn’t turn out like me.”

I was the one who dragged her into this mess, but her status and situation were so similar to mine that I was getting déjà vu. Things didn’t go well between Cyril and me, but I thought that Lady Layla and Prince Faisal would get along just fine. *...Even if that means betraying Shesif.*

“Will this become a battle between brothers?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Prince Faisal replied. “If the king was not manipulated by a demon, but using it to his advantage, then the citizens must crown a different monarch. Though it seems like my brother has a few plans of his own.”

“I guess we can’t just go home now,” I said to Mr. Julius.

Our initial plan was to relay that Salim Ivan was the demon and receive a female dragon in return. I’d learn a bit more about my father from Jahala, and then we’d head back home. But I was now in too deep; I couldn’t just feign ignorance and return to Astria.

“...If this kingdom continues to treat dragons like toys, then they’re better off destroyed. It all depends on Faisal’s thoughts,” Mr. Julius said.

“How rare for you to call people casually by their name,” I remarked.

Mr. Julius generally called people by a nickname, their full name, or something to that effect. *How unusual.* He didn’t reply, but instead gently tugged on the reins as though to admonish Helios for flying around so restlessly.

Helios’s golden eyes glanced at Mr. Julius for a moment before he gave a powerful flap of his wings, outstretched his body, and increased his speed. Ares, noticing the playful Helios was flying faster, tried to outspeed the black dragon. I locked eyes with Lady Layla, the corners of her red lips tugging upwards to form a smile. She gave a look of confidence and pride. Prince Faisal was behind her, looking a little troubled and apologetic.

“They’ve challenged us, Mr. Julius. What shall we do?” I asked.

“Hang on tight, Chloe,” he replied.

Oh, he’s raring to go. Every now and then, he acts so childish.

While Helios and Ares were contesting their speed, Orpheus, who had Ruto on his back, was serenely flying behind us. The first dragon race ended with Helios's victory. Mr. Julius remained expressionless as usual, but it was easy to tell that he was in a good mood. Ares was larger and had four wings—he had a more stable flight. *I feel like he'd have the advantage in long-distance races.*

Helios and Ares descended in front of the gates of Puerta Research Center. Orpheus arrived a short while later, and Ruto got off his back.

"We'll go to the heart of this facility," Ruto said calmly as she gently pressed the tool near her throat.

She still seemed a little pale and sickly, but she looked a lot better, proof that much of her stamina had recovered. When she put her hands in front of her chest, a large, purple magical circle glowed under our feet. The scenery wavered, and all of us, including our three dragons, had been transported to a white temple-like area.

It had a high ceiling and was wide enough to allow all three dragons to extend their wings. There were no windows, yet light shone into the room. Various plants were situated behind the lined pillars, their green leaves growing freely. On the ceiling was a painting that we'd seen at the entrance of this research center—beautiful, winged people and a dragon.

"Welcome back, Chloe, Julius. And I'm glad you made it back safely, Ruto," Jahala said. He'd been waiting for us at this temple.

Beside him was a burly middle-aged man. The muscular man, decked out in silver armor, was clearly a soldier. On his chest was the emblem of a black dragon. *Is he a Dragon Knight?* His dark hair flowed in gentle waves, and he had determined gray eyes. He seemed to be in his early to mid-thirties.

"It certainly has been a while, Prince Faisal, Lady Layla," Jahala said.

The head researcher and the burly man beside him gave a bow fitting for a king's subject. A number of men appeared behind them and took the reins of Orpheus, leading the dragon further inside. Orpheus, seemingly used to this procedure, obediently folded his wings and walked.

"We'll feed and look after your dragons," the men offered as they tried to

take Helios and Ares away.

Prince Faisal gave a nod of approval, but I looked up at Mr. Julius. *What do you want to do?* It was best for Mr. Julius to decide. I couldn't casually make this decision by myself. The men wore the same armor with the emblem of the dragon as the middle-aged man beside Jahala.

In the end, Mr. Julius declined the offer. Helios folded his wings and crouched behind us. He curled up and closed his eyes.

"It's been a while, Jahala," Prince Faisal said before turning to the middle-aged man. "And the same goes for you, Lambda. I'm sorry for my actions until now."

The man beside Jahala was called Lambda, and he once more gave a dignified bow.

"Please don't be. I should be the one apologizing for betraying you, Your Highness. I'm terribly sorry," Lambda said.

"I'm sure that's because of my actions. And Jahala, I knew of the accusations cast towards Puerta Research Center, and yet, I turned my back on them. I can't find the words to express my sorrow about your parents."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't angry, but now certainly isn't the time to be swept away by emotions," Jahala answered before turning to us. "Chloe, Julius, this man is the former captain of the Dragon Knights, Lambda Abhlach. He'd cut ties with the royal family to protect the dragons, and was being pursued before I took him in. We're sheltering him here."

Lambda bowed to us—his actions were graceful and noble, telling of his former high rank. I bowed in turn, but Mr. Julius glanced at him and did nothing more. *How rude.* I irritably pulled on his clothes, but he didn't change his attitude.

"This area can be called the heart of Puerta Research Center," Jahala said to me. "The floor above, where you and Julius stayed before, could be called a mere decoration or disguise. Please think of this area as the true identity of Puerta Research Center. We trust you and welcome you both."

Jahala smiled as I heard the clear, irritable click of Mr. Julius's tongue. It was

abundantly clear that Mr. Julius didn't trust anyone here, as usual. *I'm a bit relieved to see that he really hasn't changed.*

"I'm sure you're all tired. Would you like a bite to eat first?" Jahala offered kindly.

"Talk first," Mr. Julius replied, declining the invitation.

I hadn't been able to eat at the Holy Palace, and the mention of food made my stomach growl. I inadvertently placed a hand over my stomach. My clothes had gotten dusty from our fight with the magical beast, and my hair was coated with grainy sand, making me feel gross.

If possible, I wanted to eat, bathe, and change clothes. *It'll be good for my health, and I'll get to experience other cultures...* I gave Mr. Julius a pleading gaze, hoping he'd read my mind, but he simply ignored me.

"Then why don't we change locations? We should at least go to a room where we can sit," Jahala said.

"Black Prince Julius, the Dragon Knight of Dystiana, feared for equaling 500 soldiers by himself," Lambda said in a soothing baritone voice. "I'm honored to be able to meet you. I'd like you to trust my subordinates. The Dragon Knights of Rasheed are well-trained in handling dragons. I swear to you that we won't put your dragon in any danger. Dragons are the messengers of God—we should respect their existence... Hence why I chose to betray the royal family for them."

I'd never met a Dragon Knight captain aside from Mr. Julius, but Lambda seemed agreeable and modest. *A huge difference...* For whatever reason, my thoughts had reached him this time, and Mr. Julius pinched my waist. *Really? My waist?* I was fairly slim, but when he grabbed my fat like that, it bothered me a little.

"...Fine. Be good, Helios," Mr. Julius relented as I was still worrying about my waist size.

What's with him today? From calling a person properly by their name to allowing others to touch his dragon, Mr. Julius seemed like a completely different person. He would've never done any of these things in the past.

Maybe he's gotten used to a healthier lifestyle and is reverting to his former self... He was a duke in the past, after all.

"In exchange, let me meet him and the other dragons later. Are there other dragons aside from that brown one?" Mr. Julius asked.

"Of course. And we've got numerous dragons, from young to those over a century old. Your dragon is called Helios, I see," Lambda replied before he ordered his men. "Men, treat his dragon well."

A few soldiers nearby went up to Helios and grabbed his reins, waking Helios, who had his eyes closed. The dragon must've been listening because he obediently stood up and allowed himself to be guided deeper into the building.

As he passed by, he nuzzled his snout against me, possibly feeling a little lonely. I petted his forehead, and he happily closed his eyes.

"I'll see you later, okay?" I said lovingly.

"Rawr," he growled softly.

"Now, this way, please," Jahala said. "You look exhausted, Ruto. You used a life-diminishing spell, didn't you? I'll prepare some medicinal tea."

Ruto nodded. With Jahala as our guide, we moved from the front of the temple, a vast, sterile area, to deeper within Puerta Research Center. Next to the corridor where the dragons were led, there were several doors. Jahala touched one of them, and a ring-shaped emblem glowed on the door.

Inside was a meeting room. The walls were lined with bookshelves, and an office desk stood in the back. In the center of the room was a low table surrounded by a luxurious sofa. The delicately crafted alchemy lamp was in the shape of the lily of the valley. I'd never made a lamp in that shape before, I found it to be cute. I studied the lamp closely for reference, tempted to make something similar.

As I looked around the room, I saw an alchemy furnace sitting in the corner. *This is making me a bit nostalgic.* It hadn't been too long since I'd arrived in Rasheed, but it felt like I hadn't set foot in my alchemy store for ages.

I sat on the sofa with Mr. Julius, and Lady Layla and Prince Faisal sat across

from us. Jahala sat on a lone chair, and Lambda stood beside him. Ruto sat on a chair across from the head researcher.

Several women, all dressed in the same robes as Jahala, entered the room and brought us some sweet tea. I put the cup to my lips and felt my nervousness ease when the sweetness filled my mouth.

“Now then, Chloe. I’d like to hear your conclusion. What did you witness at the Holy Palace?” Jahala asked.

I was elegantly sipping on my tea, but upon noticing everyone’s gaze on me, I hastily returned my cup to its saucer.

“R-Right...” I started.

Salim Ivan was scary. I felt a similar kind of terror when I faced Mephisto. Such horrifying and brutal magic that hurt my entire body was not fitting for a human to possess. But Salim Ivan was Ruto’s older brother. *I wonder if I can say my true thoughts...* My words would surely hurt her feelings.

Unable to verbalize my opinion, I glanced towards Ruto. With a solemn look on her face, she gave me a quiet nod of approval.

“...King Shesif knows the demon and is purposefully placing it by his side. I’m not sure if he’s being manipulated or if he’s doing so of his own free will. The demon is Salim Ivan. I felt an inhuman presence emanating from him,” I said.

I heard Ruto gulp. She paled, but she didn’t look away. She was clenching her fists on her lap.

“I see... I guessed it was either someone from Fores Research Facility, the king, or his brother. I didn’t expect Salim to be the devil himself,” Jahala said sadly.

“You know about what occurred in Astria, don’t you?” I asked.

“I do. The letter I received from King Cyril had noted a brief description of the incident.”

“My younger sister, Aliza Sagrid, had been possessed by a demon ever since she was a child,” I began. “She believed that entity to be an angel that appeared from an Otherworldly Gate, and she was manipulated by the demon’s words.

Because of the demon, Mephisto, many were harmed. Aliza died, but she remained as a human until the end.”

“I see... So your sister was a *human* that was simply being used as a puppet.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Aliza was still human, so there may have been a method to save or spare her, but ultimately, I couldn’t do so. I think Salim is a bit different from her. I don’t really know who Salim is, but he didn’t seem human. But of course, that’s just what I felt, and it’s pure speculation on my part.”

Jahala gave a kind smile. “I believe your intuition, Chloe. You’re different from us.”

I heard Mr. Julius give a small sigh next to me. *No doubt he finds Jahala’s actions dubious.*

“Did my brother say anything, Chloe?” Prince Faisal asked.

“King Shesif was once a man who was suitable for the nickname, ‘Wise King.’ And while Salim was extremely passionate about his Otherworld research, he did it all to advance our nation,” Lady Layla commented. “He wasn’t one for jokes, but he was a diligent and earnest researcher. How could this have happened?”

I paused for a moment before I spoke. “The king had wanted to create an ideal world where people would never age or die. He claimed that the demon would lend its intellect to him.”

“My brother must’ve sounded deranged to you,” Prince Faisal muttered sadly. He furrowed his brows in pain and anguish at the thought.

Lady Layla gently placed her hand on his back. After the prince had made his resolve, he stared straight at us. A man with royal blood flowing through his veins, his look of determination seemed far more kingly and regal than Shesif’s.

“As Layla has said, since his youth, my brother was a gentle pacifist who disliked fighting. He resembled our late father. Rasheed has remained a peaceful nation because, for generations, its kings were against war. The king is a man who wishes for peace, and those who can fight, such as Lambda and myself, work to preserve that. This is the kind of history that the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed is built on,” Prince Faisal explained.

“The military might of Rasheed should’ve been easily able to stop the invasion of Dystiana. But you all refused to fight properly. You’d send an occasional sorcerer or two to your nation’s boundaries, but I’d never even caught a glimpse of a Dragon Knight,” Mr. Julius said.

Prince Faisal nodded. “Precisely. It was of utmost importance for us to unravel the mysteries of the Otherworld—to figure out the mysteries of this world—than to fight with Dystiana. If we were to clash with your empire head-on, we’d only give birth to strife. Rasheed’s forces are there only to protect the kingdom. War is unnecessary.”

“I always wanted to clash swords with Black Prince Julius at least once, however,” Lambda added regrettably.

“My brother changed...a few years ago, I believe. Layla had told me that something was wrong, but I feigned ignorance. I knew what my older brother was trying to protect,” Prince Faisal said.

“Protect? Protect what?” Jahala spat, showing his emotions for the first time. “King Shesif’s actions are putting this kingdom and the entire world in danger. Numerous Otherworld researchers of Puerta Research Center immediately raised a red flag when they noticed the abnormality and had lost their lives. My parents were killed too.”

The head researcher’s calm expression turned to rage. While he acted mature, he was likely younger than me. My heart twinged with pain when I imagined the responsibilities that rested on his shoulders.

“...You’re exactly right,” Prince Faisal said. “But I—we wanted to protect our family more than our kingdom... Salim Ivan is Minne’s, my sister’s, lover.”

Lady Layla looked down. Ruto clenched both her hands tightly in front of her chest like she was praying. I wasn’t familiar with the status that an Otherworld researcher of Rasheed held, but Minne Rasheed was the only daughter in the royal family. In other words, she was a princess.

A princess and an Otherworld researcher? I feel like their social ranks differ a bit too much. I thought back to Minne when I was being selected as Shesif’s bride. She had beautiful silver hair and wore an expression of vague sorrow. Her skin was clear and pale, and I received an impression that she was a fleeting,

transient existence.

“Minne has been ill since she was young. Exposing her to sunlight would cause her skin to burn, and she has a small appetite. Time and time again, she’d break out in a high fever and couldn’t eat a single thing for days. I don’t know the cause, but we were told that she had an incurable disease and wouldn’t live past twenty,” Prince Faisal said, recalling the past. “Due to our age gap with her, my brother and I treated our younger sister precious. She’s so dear to us. Minne is an honest and good girl. When we were told that her sickness was incurable, my brother and I desperately looked for any treatment options, but our efforts were in vain. I pitied Minne.”

“Princess Minne would occasionally spend some time with me as well. She could rarely leave the confines of her room, but we read books together, and she had called me her older sister as we formed a close bond... I borrowed my father’s influence and gathered all the famous doctors of our kingdom for her, but I was told that the illness that she was born with would never be cured,” Lady Layla said softly.

Shesif’s words echoed in my brain. *“A happy world where old age and death don’t exist...”*

“I don’t know when Salim and Minne had gotten romantically involved. Salim was a capable man, and though still young, he was declared to be the next director of Fores Research Facility. He often came to the royal palace to report on the results of his facility’s research. I did think there was quite an age gap between him and Minne,” Prince Faisal said.

“When I heard about Salim and Princess Minne’s relationship, I believe she was around fifteen years of age,” Lady Layla chimed in. “She could’ve easily gotten married by then, so I believe she wasn’t *that* young.”

“You’re right. You and I have been engaged since we were kids. I suppose I’m a bit *too* overprotective when it comes to my sister...” Faisal and Layla looked at each other and gave a dry laugh. He shook his head and resumed his story. “Sorry, we’ve gone on a tangent there. Salim, always the passionate researcher, had started to become even more engrossed in his research at around this time.”

A relationship between a princess who wouldn't live to see her twenties and an older Otherworld researcher—it seemed like an inspiring tale illustrating a fleeting, yet beautiful romance. However, this likely wasn't the case.

“Fores Research Facility is different from Puerta Research Center. The former's goal is to venture into the underworld, where the grudges of the dead permeate the air. What is death? Why must the dead go to the Otherworld? What's in the underworld, where the sinners fall? Ultimately, their objective is to research the monsters that spill out from the Otherworldly Gates and wreak havoc in this world. But research shifted to pursuing immortality when a certain researcher met a demon...or so I'm told,” Prince Faisal said.

He casually talked about demons, an existence that the people of Astria hadn't even heard of.

“Are demons well-known throughout the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed?” I asked.

Prince Faisal thought for a moment before answering. “No, I believe only those close to the royal family and the researchers are aware of them. Many fear learning about unknown existences. Once the seeds of worry and doubt are planted inside the hearts of citizens, they'll spread and give birth to war. Otherworld research is already a dangerous field as it is, and some are against it altogether.”

“To tell you the truth, I'm not too knowledgeable about them either. Faisal never told me about them; I was always an outsider,” Lady Layla accused.

“I didn't want to drag you into this mess,” the prince replied, looking troubled.

Mr. Julius, who'd been sitting next to me, crossed his arms and long legs that didn't quite fit in the chair, and closed his eyes. He was silently conveying that this conversation was taking too long, but knowing him, he was still listening.

“My brother wanted to save Princess Minne. And I wished for my brother's happiness. Hence, I became a seal master,” Ruto said. Her voice didn't come from her throat and echoed throughout the room. *“Forgive me, it's much easier for me to convey my thoughts like this than to physically talk.”*

“Don’t push yourself, Ruto,” Prince Faisal said. “Seal masters are people who shave off their lifespan to utilize powerful magic. And you possessed quite a bit of talent as a sorcerer. The same could be said for Salim, but it’s always been said that the House of Ivan produces excellent sorcerers and Otherworld researchers. When I learned of Ruto continuing to use her powers as a seal master, it was all too late.”

“Did Salim get devoured by the demon when he went to the underworld?” Jahala asked.

Even if that was true, it was much too cruel to vocalize those thoughts in front of Ruto. I furrowed my brows, but I’d done the same moments before—I’d told everyone that Salim was the demon. I was unable to do anything to help, but I couldn’t stop feeling pity for Ruto. My heart squeezed in pain for her.

“I have no idea what happened. I’ve gone to the underworld numerous times with my brother as a seal master. We applied the seal demon’s seal to the several demons that we’d met and brought them back to the research facility. But the repeated trips to the underworld had taken a heavy toll on my body. There were many days where I couldn’t even get up, and on those days, my brother went to the underworld alone,” Ruto said.

“By himself? Without a seal master?” Lambda asked in surprise. He’d been silently listening to our conversation.

“Princess Minne’s condition had continued to worsen by the day, and I believe that made my brother grow impatient. He may have tried to glean some information from the captured demons... In any case, my brother had saved the princess. Her Highness had gotten well, and Fores Research Facility had transformed.”

“Puerta Research Center had been repeatedly claiming that Fores Research Facility was conducting some dangerous experiments. And so, we were chased out. When Salim had saved Princess Minne, he’d already sold his soul to a demon,” Jahala said.

“Indeed, I believe that to be the case,” Prince Faisal agreed. “Minne made a full recovery, and my brother had declared Salim Ivan as the director of the research facility. My brother has changed as well. He’s no longer the peaceful,

kind man that I knew. He started to indulge in debauchery, as though he had a low opinion of himself.”

“So, he wasn’t always a womanizer,” I remarked.

Prince Faisal and Lady Layla firmly shook their heads, conveying that the king used to be anything but. *When I was alone with Shesif, it looked like he was acting in a play. If he really was acting, I wonder if I was a bit rude.* I thought back to the time I kicked him with all my strength and gave an internal shrug. *Nah, he deserved that. Acting or not, he touched me without my consent, so he deserves to get kicked.*

“I...wasn’t directly involved in anything, but I had my suspicions. I didn’t expect Salim to be the demon, but when I saw that Minne had miraculously been cured, I knew something must’ve happened. Didn’t know what, though,” Prince Faisal admitted. “Fores Research Facility had been corrupted, and my brother changed, acting like an idiotic king as though he was fleeing from something. But Minne trusts Salim. When I saw her look so happy, I thought that our peaceful days would continue if I turned a blind eye to everything.”

“*Peaceful?! Do you know just how many people were killed?!* ” Jahala roared with fury, glaring at the prince.

Prince Faisal gave a deep bow. “You’re right. I’m really sorry. What I meant was that the Holy Palace was peaceful. I chose my family over my kingdom. I thought that I must protect whatever my brother had been protecting. I believed...that my brother only had myself by his side.”

“The king...was listening to Salim’s—to the demon’s—orders to protect Princess Minne,” I concluded, thinking back to my time with him.

Did he spout those words to act like he was obedient to the demon? Or...did he become a figurative demon and truly pursue a land of immortality?

“I believe so,” Prince Faisal said with a nod.

The prince believed in the king—believed in his brother. He thought that these actions were all to protect Minne. *But if so, what should I do? Who am I supposed to save? I just don’t know.*

“If the demon has become Salim, he must be long dead by now. We’re not

even sure if your younger sister's actually alive. Demons can apparently revive the dead and manipulate them like puppets. You turned your back on the countless sacrifices to protect this temporary, superficial happiness," Mr. Julius said indifferently. He stared straight at Faisal.

His gaze didn't contain any anger, disappointment, or resentment. He was simply trying to confirm the facts. Silence fell upon the room. Jahala's rage-filled eyes and Ruto's face, clouded with sorrow, had all calmed down as the quiet continued. Prince Faisal looked down and clenched his fists so tightly that his nails dug into his skin.

"That's right. You're exactly right. I didn't have any proof, but I think I vaguely understood the situation. And yet, I..." Faisal trailed off, shook his head, and raised it towards us. His eyes were filled with a bright, determined light as he rid himself of any hesitation. He looked straight at Mr. Julius, Jahala, Lambda, Ruto, and finally towards me. "But it's different now. I want to protect Layla and this kingdom. When I saw Layla being almost taken from me, it opened my eyes. I'll fulfill my duty as a person born in the royal family, even if that means pointing my sword at my brother."

Jahala gave a heavy sigh at Prince Faisal's resolve. "There's a chance that King Shesif and Prince Faisal had been manipulated by the demon's sweet-talk without their notice. It'll do us no good to simply pin all the blame onto you. I apologize for losing my cool."

I suddenly remembered something and rummaged through my bag. "...Um, Jahala, I found some research notes from the underground area where we were trapped. Would you like to take a look?"

It was a bit dirty and ripped in some places, but I placed a legible stack of papers on the table. Dust danced into the air.

Ugh, I really want to take a bath.

◆ Salim Ivan's Journal



TODAY'S Date: xx/xx

Princess Minne's condition grows worse by the day.

I'm frustrated by my inability to do anything.

The strong rays of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed are harming her skin. She must've been suffering, confined to her room, but she told me that the Otherworld research certainly must be dangerous. She continues to worry about me, a person who's unable to save her.

I investigated the Forbidden Archives of Fores Research Facility. In the lower levels of the Otherworld, also known as the underworld, there are demons. They're immortal beings with black wings and highly intelligent. So intelligent in fact, they can converse with humans with ease.

Most of them are liars and hostile. Fores Research Facility has used seal masters to incapacitate a few demons. The demons had their magical powers sealed and were brought from the underworld. All of them only had one pair of wings.

According to the hastily scribbled research notes left by someone, titled *Forming a Contract with the Underworld and Higher-ranked Demons*, the demons they had captured were all of lower class. These notes, which had been securely stored within the Forbidden Archives, implied that the ones we'd brought back were weak amongst the demons. If I were to use an army analogy, they were like privates, the lowest ranked, where their lives were seen as the easiest to dispose of.

A demon's standing or rank is determined by the number of wings.

One pair of wings was the most common amongst lower-ranked demons, and two pairs indicated a higher rank. Demons with three pairs of wings were apparently equated to gods, and they were of the highest rank. According to the notes, there was apparently a demon with six pairs of wings, trumping the

three-paired demons, but the research notes had some pages torn, so I was unable to read any further.

In any case, in the past, a person from Fores Research Facility had apparently formed a contract with a high-ranked demon with three pairs of wings and saved someone from the brink of death.

The details haven't been recorded, but the mysterious powers of the higher-ranked demons could apparently even manipulate human lives. They have the power to allow people to escape death's door, such as by curing incurable diseases. But the notes also state that this act would endanger the whole world.

The research papers continued with these words:

"Just as a fish cannot live on land and humans cannot survive in water, demons can't exist in the human world for long. For a demon to do anything to the human world, they must form a contract with a human.

The price for such a contract varies.

In exchange for a demon granting a human's wishes, the human must also grant the demon a request. Should the demon want to obtain the body of a human, the human must offer their own body. If the demon attains a body, it will be able to live freely amongst humans.

Demons are cold, cruel, and indescribably evil."

I'm not sure what destruction a demon could cause should they be unleashed upon our world. So, I shall keep this bit hidden.

I will jot this down solely for the record, but we mustn't make contact with the demons. It is impossible for higher-ranked demons to listen to us just because they've been sealed. Humans can't possibly restrain these beings.

They're gods of evil that mustn't be touched."

"Please forgive my sins. Despite it all, I want to save my wife."

This confession was at the end of the research notes, admitting to wanting to save their wife. This must've been their final note. I have no idea who wrote this. The name "Jis" was scribbled on the final page of the notes, but no one of that name exists in Fores—I assume this is a false name or alias.

The notes, the paper, and the ink look surprisingly new. If so, this was written not too long ago.

I felt like I saw a ray of hope. If I could find a demon with three pairs of wings and form a contract, I might be able to save Princess Minne's life.

Today's Date: xx/xx

I went with Ruto to capture a demon with one pair of wings and returned. I interrogated the demon and forced it to tell me any information it had on a demon with three pairs of wings. The demon died, but that's fine. There was no use for that one anyways.

Apparently, these seemingly immortal demons can die in a sense. Well, a demon's death is more akin to simply disappearing. No corpse remained as it disintegrated like grains of sand.

There are only three demons with three pairs of wings: ■■ the Serpent of Death, ■■ of Blood and Conflagration, and Baal the King of Wisdom.

I don't care which of the three comes to my aid. If I don't hurry, Princess Minne's fleeting life will become a memory of the past.

Today's Date: xx/xx

It seems humans are treating dragons like treasured pets.

They find joy in creating dragons that have been crudely sewn together like a quilt. They don't seem to understand that their actions are blasphemous towards God.

Is Mephisto still fooling around, I wonder?

"I tire of the underworld. Humans are a lot more interesting than angels and demons. I want to leave this place and play around with humans," the demon had said. His statements were unusual for a demon with only two wings—demons of that rank were usually all foolish. I gave him the nickname the "Jester of the Underworld" and gave him a pair of my wings. And with that, he left.

Even though we've a goal.

How odd.

I wonder why I'm writing this all down. Are the memories of this man's body forcing me to do so?

How very interesting.

Now then, why don't we continue desecrating the beasts of God?

I'll treat these dragons, the messengers of God, as my toys. I'll play around with them like Mephisto has been doing with humans.

There's still a long while until my master awakens.

I need more blood and more hatred. *They* chose a different being, but I believe this one to be my master.

In any case, now's not the time. I suppose I'll act like I love the woman that this man's body had apparently loved. Since we look the same, I doubt she'd notice.

Humans are foolish creatures. So foolish they are almost endearing.



◆ The Calm Before the Storm

AS Jahala finished reading the research notes that were more like Salim's journal, a listless silence spread through the room. Mr. Julius suddenly stood up and pulled on my arm. I obediently got up as well.

"Talk's over," Mr. Julius said. "Salim Ivan formed a contract with one of the three demons and sacrificed his body. In exchange, the princess of Rasheed was saved."

"Seems like it. Are you all right, Ruto?" Jahala asked.

Ruto gave a small nod. *"I'd been prepared for this."*

Despite her determined words, she looked a little pale.

"The demon that I faced in Astria called himself Mephisto. His name appears in Salim's journal as well. The demon that's acting like Salim is related to Mephisto, it seems..." I said, trying my best to resist as Mr. Julius tried to drag me out of the room.

I wish you'd stop dragging me. We're talking about something serious here, but it looks like we're just fooling around.

"My younger sister, who was possessed by Mephisto, said something similar to King Shesif," I continued. "She claimed that an army of demons would appear from the Otherworld and change our world into a paradise, where there's no life or death."

"That just sounds like the Otherworld. Neither demons nor angels die... Perhaps the demons are planning on incorporating our world into the Otherworld," Jahala said, crossing his arms. He seemed deep in thought.

"...I find it odd how immortality leads to paradise. Because all life comes to an end, I believe we can live in the present to our fullest and cherish the time that we have," Lady Layla said flatly. She gently shook her head like she just couldn't understand their ideal.

“There’s no use talking about this any further. Salim Ivan is the demon, and the king is being manipulated by the demon. What must be done is to slay the demon. It’s that simple,” Mr. Julius said.

“Mr. Julius, Salim is Ruto’s older brother. And Princess Minne is...” I started.

“Thank you, Chloe. But Julius is right. He shouldn’t have formed a contract with the demon. Puerta Research Center had repeatedly told us that Fores Research Facility’s actions were dangerous. And this is what it culminated into,” Prince Faisal said calmly. “Protecting our country and increasing our military strength were all excuses. The monster that you fought is a magical beast. Salim stood at the center of this experiment and wanted to create an even stronger dragon. A female dragon who’d just laid an egg was seen as worthless, so we used her to conduct experiments. We created a hybrid of a monster and an animal. I thought it was cruel, but I gave my tacit approval.”

“You’re awful. I’m disgusted,” Mr. Julius spat. He stopped dragging me and stood still.

He always reacts to dragons being brought up. I’m sure he cares more about them than any royal family.

“You can say what you like. Your words aren’t wrong, really. In the end, a few magical beasts escaped from the research facility, and numerous staff members fell victim, causing the institution to close. I’d only heard stories of the beasts, but I’d never seen one before. It was horrifying,” Prince Faisal said.

“I’m glad you’ve finally realized that Prince Faisal,” Lambda said. “Creating hybrids from dragons is a blasphemous act towards God.”

The middle-aged Dragon Knight was trying his best to contain his outrage. Like Mr. Julius, Lambda treasured dragons. It must’ve been painful for him to see these cruel experiments up close.

“Lambda, I’m aware that you and the other Dragon Knights had been saying as much from the start. I’m sorry that I didn’t listen to you. I’ve made my resolve. I can’t put the citizens of Rasheed in danger just to protect my brother and sister,” Prince Faisal said.

He stood up with determination. Mr. Julius sighed next to me as though

implying, “That’s the only natural course of action.” I tugged on his arm. While Mr. Julius was correct, I could understand where Prince Faisal was coming from and his desperation to protect his family.

“Once we’ve made our preparations, we’ll try to take control of the Holy Palace. I want Lambda and the other Dragon Knights to come with me,” Prince Faisal said before turning towards us. “Julius, could you lend me a hand as well?”

“...Don’t ask me,” Mr. Julius said, glancing at me.

Everyone’s attention was now focused on me. I was embarrassed—I felt like an emperor who controlled an extremely powerful beast.

“Of course we’ll assist you!” I exclaimed. “We’re already in this neck-deep, and Mephisto is the enemy of my family. Mephisto might be lurking near the demon who’s posing as Salim.”

Mr. Julius gave a deep sigh at my enthusiastic response. It seemed he knew that I would accept Prince Faisal’s request.

“I know he’s got a bad attitude, but Mr. Julius is a dragon maniac. I doubt he can let those magnificent beasts be,” I said before turning to him. “Isn’t that right?”

I tugged on his sleeve and gazed at him with anticipation, hoping that he’d vocalize his thoughts. But as always, he was quiet. Everyone stared at me with sympathy, and it felt like I was being pitied. *I’m used to his silence, so don’t worry!*

“Mr. Julius is very strong. I’m sure he can make the Holy Palace fall within five minutes!” I boasted proudly, puffing out my chest. I turned to Jahala to confirm one more matter, just in case. “Um, and about Helios’s bride...”

“Of course, Chloe. Helios is currently in the heart of our research center, greeting the other dragons. I hope he finds a girl he fancies,” Jahala replied.

“Oh? So the black dragon Helios is looking for a mate? I’ve got a great girl in mind. She’s my pride and joy—my adorable, beloved daughter,” Lambda said.

“Your daughter?” I asked.

“I raised her, so she’s my daughter.”

I unexpectedly experienced what it felt like to set my child up for a marriage meeting. Lambda gave a jovial laugh, but Mr. Julius seemed displeased. *He looks like he doesn’t want to become in-laws with Lambda. Do dragons even visit their relatives or in-laws over holidays?*

“Chloe, the men of Rasheed are all dragon maniacs. I’m sure they’ll get along just fine with Julius,” Lady Layla said wearily.

“It seems that way,” I replied.

Even Ruto was nodding along.

Once our goal had been set, we decided to take a short break. Prince Faisal, Lady Layla, Mr. Julius, and I were guided by Jahala to some living quarters. On the way, I remembered the war fan that I’d borrowed from Lady Layla and returned it to her.

As she happily accepted her item, Prince Faisal said, “I told her that I’d protect her, but she won’t stop playing with these weapons.”

“*Playing?! How rude!*” Lady Layla snapped.

She swiftly walked ahead into a guest room with Prince Faisal hastily rushing after her. It seemed Prince Faisal always talked a bit too much. I knew that one shouldn’t get involved with marital quarrels, and I let them be.

Mr. Julius had wanted to visit Helios before we went to our room, but I insisted on taking a bath. My hair was filled with sand, and my clothes were dusty and dirty. Ruto had undone her transformation magic, returning Mr. Julius to his usual golden locks. His hair was silky, but it was clearly filthy with sand.

“Chloe, you can rest here. I’ll go and visit Helios,” Mr. Julius said.

“Why don’t you wash up too? If we miss this chance, we don’t know when we’ll get to take a bath next,” I said. “Bathing and eating are important—we haven’t been able to eat anything for a while. The plan to subdue the Holy Palace might start once we take a short break, so we should rest while we can.”

Mr. Julius, a former general, knew the importance of getting enough rest. He

furrowed his brows and fell silent with a frown.

“The Dragon Knights are used to handling dragons, aren’t they, Jahala?” I asked.

“Of course. Rasheed is a kingdom that’s walked alongside dragons for many generations,” Jahala said, guiding the way as we passed Prince Faisal and Lady Layla’s room.

We proceeded deeper inside the facility. The corridor was made from glimmering white stone, and a rug on the floor absorbed the sound of our footsteps. The handmade rug with intricate colors looked extremely expensive.

“I’m sure Helios is still greeting the other dragons. Children don’t like it when parents try to butt into their affairs,” I said.

“...I still don’t trust the people here yet,” Mr. Julius replied.

“I’m the type that easily trusts others, so I’d appreciate it if you remained wary and suspicious of others,” I said. “Make sure I’m not conned into buying a shady vase or something.”

“You won’t buy stuff like that. You’re vigilant when it comes to money.”

“Oh, you know me very well! Anyways, we can just take a quick bath, so why don’t we? Those butler clothes don’t suit you, so let’s get you changed. You can wear all the black robes you want right now, since I recently bought quite a few pairs at Mr. Robert’s.”

“...Fine.”

He looked down at his attire and pulled a face like he was forced to agree with me. I was glad that Mr. Julius was tempted by the comfort of his black robe. He was so good-looking that his face could be used as a weapon, and he was well-built, making the formal clothes suit him, but he was unable to hide his tyrannical attitude. The attire was unfitting for his demeanor.

Jahala chuckled as he listened to our conversation and opened the door to our room. “You two really do get along well. I’m glad that you’re both here. I feel like I’m starting to see a faint ray of hope amidst the darkness.”

“I know you must have been through a lot, Jahala. Don’t worry, I’m sure this

plan will be a success. You've got the beautiful genius alchemist Chloe, along with a very powerful Mr. Julius on your side!" I trumpeted.

Jahala lost his parents, but he's been doing his best for his kingdom. I'm sure he's felt like crying a lot, but he's put a cork on his emotions and bottled them up. I know that's difficult to do. I sort of understand. I felt it was imprudent of me to believe that we were the same, but I thought we were similar in more ways than one.

I responded with gusto, trying to cheer Jahala up, but he smiled with a pained expression. "...When I watch you, I feel like I'm not fighting this alone... I'm really sorry for relying on you both so much."

"Don't you worry about it! Mr. Julius and I are adults, and I believe I'm older than you. I'm like an older sister! You should rely more on your elders."

"Thank you. Ever since I lost my parents, I kept telling myself that I had to act mature to protect my kingdom and Puerta Research Center. An older sister, huh..."

"I'm a young beautiful maiden, as you can see, but I'm also older than you."

Jahala's eyes teared up a little as he chuckled. Mr. Julius remained silent with his arms folded in front of him. He didn't offer his usual sharp-tongued, negative comments, possibly because he also felt pity for the head researcher.

"I hope you two can rest to your heart's content. If you'd like to meet Helios, you can go straight down this corridor. There's a cafeteria in the back, and further ahead, you'll find a large hall that leads to the research rooms. The dragons should be there," Jahala explained.

"I understand. Thank you. Then I'll take you up on your kind offer and relax!" I said with a smile.

After we rested, a battle would begin. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't anxious, but I couldn't look nervous in front of others. I had to act strong for everyone and Jahala, who'd been working hard on his own until now.

"...I've still got much to tell you, Chloe. About the demon and Duke Sagrid, I have many stories. I'm sure you're tired right now, so we can save that for later... I'm so sorry to involve a kind person like you in this dangerous mess,"

Jahala apologized.

“This is fated to be, isn’t it? My mother used to tell me that fates and the future are never set in stone, but I’m sure good fates exist as well. I can’t quite articulate what these are called,” I replied.

“I’m sure the angels of Seraphim have guided you here. I truly cannot thank you enough.”

The head researcher bowed deeply before he proceeded further down the corridor. Mr. Julius quietly stood there, looking slightly disgruntled, and I pushed his back into our room.



THE guest room was of a simple design and looked very comfortable. There was a single large bed with white sheets, a sofa, and a table. I wasn’t sure where we were, but for some reason, we had a window. Soft light trickled into the room, and we had a view of a garden filled with unusually thick plants and vine-like foliage.

I dragged Mr. Julius into the bathroom. It wasn’t polite to sit on top of a sofa or bed with dirty clothes. We needed to change first. *I can do the laundry when I get home. It’d be convenient if I had an item that allowed us to do laundry easily wherever we went. Maybe I should make one soon.*

“Look! The bathtub’s pretty large! And there’s hot water inside! How does this work?” I peered inside and gasped. “Wow! This is my rotating hot spring stone!”

Inside the white bathtub, which matched the corridors and the room, was a square slab of stone. My special rotating hot spring stone was inside. The shape was the same, but it felt slightly different. *Is there an alchemist who makes these stones in Rasheed?*

“What are you standing around for? Hurry and strip,” Mr. Julius, who’d been watching in grumpy silence, suddenly said nonchalantly.

I widened my eyes in shock. “Why are you assuming that we’re going to bathe together?”

“I don’t want to waste time.”

“...You should understand that the naked body of a beautiful young maiden is very precious.”

“Sure, I guess your body’s built like a beautiful *young* maiden.”

“I’ll sue you! I feel like you’ve sinned!”

Mr. Julius, as usual, wasted no time in taking his clothes off and quickly got into the tub. I buried my head in my hands as I was left behind in the changing room. *When I’m by his side, it feels like I’m in the wrong for being so embarrassed. I’m slowly getting used to it, though. I’m a former daughter of a duke, you know... Well, whatever.*

I exhaled, amped myself up, and followed Mr. Julius. He glanced at me as I covered myself with a towel.

“Is there a necessity for you to cover yourself?” he asked dubiously.

Of course there is. Does he see me as a dragon instead of a woman? He doesn’t, right? ...Right? Ugh, I feel like that’s a possibility...

I entered the tub and faced him as I curled myself into a little ball. He was facing down as though he was deep in thought and suddenly looked towards me. He always seemed grumpy around others, but he looked unusually troubled right now.

“Is something wrong? Are you worried about something? Are you angry that we’re embroiled in Rasheed’s internal strife?” I asked.

“Well, knowing you, you’ll probably stay here by yourself even if I try to return. I’ll protect you. That’s all,” he replied.

“I can’t believe you can say something so embarrassing so casually... But thank you.”

I cupped my hands over my red cheeks. I’d just gotten into the water, but I already felt so warm.

After some silence, he said softly, “Earlier, I heard a familiar name.”

“A familiar name?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Salim’s journal had the name of the person who wrote the research notes in the Forbidden Archives: Jis... My mother used to call my father by that name.”

“Your father, the late Duke Craft? He was imprisoned by the Dystiana emperor, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, under the suspicion of being a spy to neighboring nations. My father’s name is Jeanius Craft. And only my mother called him by his nickname Jis.”

“...You don’t mean...”

“My father used to visit Rasheed every now and then. I don’t know what for, but I always assumed it was for his work. He got the dragon’s egg there too. I feel like there’s just one too many coincidences here.”

“Did your father perhaps go to the underworld and form a contract with a demon?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but it’s a possibility. Both my father and mother are dead, so there’s no way to confirm that. Maybe it’s not that important and I’m reading into it too much.”

“You think so?”

I felt uneasy, but I was unable to figure out why, and I fell silent. Mr. Julius reached out and touched my cheek.

“I didn’t mean to make you anxious... Don’t worry about it. It’s all in the past,” he said.

“I’ll protect you no matter what, Mr. Julius,” I promised.

“Right. I’m relying on you.” He gave a faint smile.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Mr. Julius rarely talked about his past, remembering his parents must have caused him some pain. I smiled up at him, trying to cheer him up, but he proceeded to pinch my cheeks and stretch them out for whatever reason. *Ouch.*

“Chloe, you’re sympathizing with Jahala’s circumstances, aren’t you? I know you’re good-natured to a fault,” he mumbled. Satisfied with stretching my cheeks, he released me from his grasp. “But what’s about to start here is a civil

war. It's completely different from fighting against monsters."

"Oh, I know... Is what I'd like to say, but truthfully, I'm a bit scared. But I don't think it's right to leave things as-is. There's a demon in Rasheed, and Mephisto might be there too. I want to do what I can."

Jahala had apologized to me earlier, but I felt I owed Mr. Julius an apology as well. I was dragging him into my selfish actions.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Julius. I know I'm always relying on you," I said. "I always think that I'll be fine when you're by my side... So I think I'm acting spoiled towards you."

"I don't mind. Either way, even if I'm not around, I'm sure you'll get yourself involved in this mess somehow. That's the kind of idiot that you are."

"...Yeah. I think that's the kind of idiot that I am."

"I'll protect you no matter what. The day you bought me, that's been my life's purpose."

I fell silent and sunk into the water, creating bubbles with my mouth. *Don't say something like that so suddenly. And we're in the bath!* I was embarrassed, but I had nowhere to flee. I soon ran out of breath and emerged from the water.

"Thank you," I whispered.

I was supposed to be scared of fighting, but those feelings were blown away. My heart felt fuller than ever, and I could only muster a small voice.



ONCE Mr. Julius got dressed in his usual black robe with his silky blonde hair, he looked like he was back to his normal self. I changed into a blue apron dress. Then, the two of us decided to visit Helios. Despite everything that I'd said to Mr. Julius, I was also worried about Helios, and I wanted to see the cute female dragon that Lambda had in mind.

I wasn't a dragon maniac, and I'd never seen any other type other than a travel dragon before I met Mr. Julius. Helios was the first unmodified dragon that I'd ever seen, and I'd never laid my eyes on a female dragon before.

“What are female dragons like? Why can’t they fly with humans on their backs?” I asked while walking down the long corridor.

I was curious about Mr. Julius’s father, Jeanius Craft, but worrying about it wouldn’t get me any closer to the truth. I decided to let it be for now.

Maybe Jahala, Prince Faisal, or Ruto will know something about it if I ask them, though. But judging from their reactions when they read Salim’s journal, there’s a high chance that they know nothing about the person called Jis. No one said anything, though I might just not be observant enough.

“Female dragons are smaller and have shorter wings than males,” Mr. Julius replied. “They don’t have enough strength to fly around with humans on their backs. Women and children might be able to ride them, but then you might as well ride a male dragon—it’s a much more stable experience, and they’re much faster. No one will go out of their way to ride a female dragon.”

“I see. So it’s not like the female dragons don’t want people on their backs; they just can’t fly well in that state,” I said.

“Yeah. A person as light as you might be able to ride one, but Helios will probably get angry if you ride another dragon.”

“Does he get jealous?”

“He’s a pretty prideful dragon.”

“That’s adorable. I remember Ares getting annoyed when Prince Faisal praised Helios. Everyone’s got their own bonds. Ares *is* a modified dragon, though...”

“I have no intention in denying the existence of the living.”

I gave a small sigh of relief at this response. Ares wasn’t at fault here, and I thought that the scarlet four-winged dragon looked beautiful. *I would’ve felt a little sad if Mr. Julius felt repulsion towards these dragons. I’m glad.*

We walked through the long corridor until we were met with a large clearing. The high ceiling opened up to the skies. My neck hurt as I gazed up and saw a large hole in the ceiling, where light was pouring in. It felt more like a grassy plain than a hall—it was easy to forget that this area was inside a building.

The plain was still an unusual sight as it housed several plants that weren't seen in Astria. Plants with thick, juicy leaves grew all around. The building stretched high above in a circular shape, with this plain serving as the center. It looked like a tower with a gaping hole in the center.

Jahala had said that the depths of this research center were like a labyrinth, and I agree. I was able to say with confidence that I would surely get lost here if I took a step inside.

A roaring waterfall was in the upper areas of the building. I had no idea where this water was flowing. A rainbow formed in the center, and it seemed the water fell onto the grassy plain, but I never saw anything overflow—there were no rivers or lakes here either. I could see the white mist sprayed by the waterfall.

Dragons were flying freely within this large space. Some were sleeping on the grass. There were brown, white, and dark green dragons. I glanced around for Helios, and the black dragon, who apparently noticed our arrival immediately, raised his long head and stared at us. He gave a large flap of his wings to indicate his location.

Several smaller dragons were by his side, and I stood there in shock. *H-He's popular with the ladies, isn't he?*

"Mr. Julius, Helios seems so popular with the girls," I observed.

"He's a beautiful dragon. It's only natural," Mr. Julius replied.

"I don't know what to feel..." I pressed my hands against my chest.

Ms. Eliza fell in love with Mr. Julius at first sight. Maybe Helios takes after his father. My cute son is so popular among the girls. I guess I should be happy about this.

"The female dragons really are small," I noted. "They're only about half the size of Helios. I sort of thought that for animals, females were larger than males."

The dragons that tried to play around with Helios were all small and seemed a bit rounder than the slim black dragon. *Maybe I get that impression because their wings are short.* They resembled dogs with wings more than dragons. *But*

they have scales instead of fur.

In other words, the females looked oddly adorable. It was horrible to think that these cute ladies were modified and transformed into Man-eating flower hybrids.

“There are still a lot of mysteries surrounding the biology of a dragon. Some say that dragons can only lay one egg because the females are so small. I didn’t learn any of this in Rasheed, but from reading books,” Mr. Julius said.

“How splendid! To think you studied dragons in Dystiana. You’re truly a studious man, Julius! May I call you by your name?” a booming voice said behind us.

I jolted in surprise and saw that Lambda was behind us. As he loomed behind us like a small mountain, I felt his intensity.

I was familiar with scary-looking adventurers and mercenaries from Ms. Roxy’s diner, but a captain like Lambda commanded a different presence. He seemed calm and kind, but he was so powerful that merely standing behind someone would cause them to tremble.

“Please allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Lambda Abhlach. I was the former captain of the Dragon Knights that directly served the royal family, the Fidda Riche. But we were almost never sent out to battle. The Dragon Knights are generally tasked with patrolling Rasheed, scouting other nations, and defeating monsters.”

“I’m Chloe Sagrid, and this here is Mr. Julius,” I said with a bow since Mr. Julius wouldn’t respond to the introduction.

Lambda smiled. For whatever reason, I was immediately reminded of my father. I was sure he was a lot older than Lambda, and the two men didn’t look similar either. *Maybe my father gazed at me with the same kind eyes as Lambda’s when I was young. I was probably so young that I can barely remember.*

“Thank you for your greeting, Chloe. I suppose truth is stranger than fiction at times. I didn’t think Julius, who’d make soldiers tremble by the utterance of his name, is with a lady as, uh...” Lambda trailed off.

“A beautiful young maiden like me,” I finished, trying to help him out.

I’d be more than happy if this phrase was used to describe me. *I’m a simple woman.* Mr. Julius tugged on my ear as though to say, “You’re embarrassing, so stop it.” *I’m doing this to lighten the mood, you know. You should be more understanding. Even I get embarrassed saying this at times. On extremely rare occasions.*

“Right. A beautiful young maiden like you is with Julius... I suppose even the cold-hearted, cruel Black Prince is powerless in the face of love,” Lambda said.

What should I do? Lambda was as earnest as he looked. He gave a firm nod and spouted words that were more embarrassing than my own.

I stood there mortified before I managed to squeak out, “R-Right, something like that. I wish it was something like that...”

I gave a confusing reply as I buried my face in my hands. I heard Mr. Julius sigh right next to me. *I dug my own grave on this one. I screwed myself over spectacularly.* Lambda stood next to me and shifted his gaze towards Helios. To be precise, the Dragon Knight was staring at the crimson female dragon beside Helios. Nothing would come from me hiding my face, so I lowered my hands.

“Your dragon is beautiful, masculine, and divine, Julius,” Lambda said. “My subordinates said that the dragons flocked towards him the moment he was brought here. I do hope he chooses my daughter.”

“Is your daughter the crimson dragon with large gold eyes?” I asked.

“That’s right. I’m happy that you can tell, Chloe! Her large eyes are adorable, aren’t they? Her name’s Lumine. It’s only been a few years since she was born. I raised her lovingly and with tender care—she’s my daughter and my pride and joy. Other dragons are cute as well, but Lumine’s special.”

“Lumine...” I said.

Lambda’s passion was intense. Lumine was indeed cute, but Helios must’ve had his own preferences. *I wonder who Helios’s type is?* As his mother, I was determined to love any girl he chose. A child born between Helios and his mate would surely be cute, no matter their sex.

Speaking of, Mr. Julius had stated that he wanted another dragon to ride. But why? Who will he allow to ride that dragon? I can't ride a dragon by myself and fight. I feel like we'll be fine if we've got Helios. How odd. The second potential riding dragon doesn't seem to be for personal use.

"Helios seems popular. Are black dragons rare?" I asked. "There doesn't seem to be any other black ones."

"The most common color is brown, followed by dark green. Red and white dragons are rare, and there are hardly ever any black ones," Lambda explained.

"Aren't dragons the same color as their parents?" I asked.

"Oddly enough, no. We don't know what color dragon will be born until the egg hatches."

"Did Rasheed lose their patience from the lack of rideable male dragons and start to modify them?" Mr. Julius asked.

Lambda nodded. "Indeed, I believe so. The modification of dragons started when research regarding the Otherworld had progressed, long before I was born. It's said that knowledge of the Otherworld had been utilized for these enhancements, much like with alchemy."

"True, I've heard that alchemy was derived from Otherworld research..." I agreed.

But alchemy couldn't transform a dragon's appearance. I looked a little doubtful as Lambda spoke in a resonant voice.

"Alchemy uses inorganic or dead substances. But this is different. Hybrids of living organisms and species were created. It started with captured monsters and animals before ultimately culminating in trying to create powerful dragons."

"Were animals used in alchemy?" I asked, furrowing my brows.

I felt goosebumps. I'd never thought of using animals, and I never planned on doing so. I was repulsed by the thought. I didn't know how to describe it, but I thought that such an act was absolutely diabolical.

"Rasheed is a desolate kingdom with much of our land being desert. It's

difficult to travel using horses or on foot. We don't have many resources, and while we're currently known as a prosperous and peaceful nation, we used to be a lot smaller and weaker," Lambda explained.

I nodded. "We *did* fly here. I thought that it'd be a bit inconvenient to live in this kingdom."

"Exactly. Initially...the goal was probably to protect our kingdom. Research on sorcery became popular, and we gradually shifted our sights towards the Otherworld. And so, Otherworld research started to become popular."

"Even without resources, you can protect your kingdom if you've got military strength. So, research about sorcery and the Otherworld progressed, and you all used that technology and wisdom to develop your country, making Rasheed into the kingdom that we know today," Mr. Julius said.

That by itself didn't seem too bad.

"Precisely," Lambda nodded before he continued. "From there, wild dragons were tamed and gave birth to the Dragon Knight profession. I was told that quite a few people lost their lives while attempting to domesticate these dragons."

Mr. Julius crossed his arms in front of him. "The current military strength that Rasheed possesses is astounding. No sane king would want to wage war on Rasheed."

"Are you saying that Oswald Dystiana is insane?" Lambda asked with interest.

Mr. Julius shook his head. "I have no doubt that he's an ambitious person. But...I don't quite know what he's thinking."

"For whatever reason, Dystiana suddenly stopped invading other nations three years ago, and now they're eerily silent," Lambda said. "We were too preoccupied with the rivalry between Fores Research Facility and Puerta Research Center to care. I saw how Fores treated dragons, and I went against the king. I left with my dragons and my subordinates, and now I'm here."

"You're against modifying dragons, right?" I asked.

Lambda gave a firm nod. "I am. Mixing two living beings to create a different

life is a blasphemous act towards God. Since ancient times in Rasheed, dragons have been known as the messengers of God. We humans mustn't treat that sacred life so thoughtlessly. And..." he added, "it's not like dragons always used to only lay a single egg. Dragons live a lot, lot longer compared to humans. They don't have any natural enemies, and they don't get sick. They usually live until the end of their natural lifespan, but we're not aware of their precise average age. We die first, after all. We *do* have a few records, but..."

"Dragons are said to live around 500 years, no?" Mr. Julius said.

"In actuality, they might live for a lot longer. Orpheus, the dragon that Ruto rides, has apparently been around since Rasheed started their dragon research."

I clasped my hands in front of my chest. "True, Orpheus looks quite old."

It didn't seem like a dragon's appearance changed much with age, but Orpheus seemed much calmer and more serene than the excitable Helios.

"I'm pleased to hear that you can tell that, Chloe. I can sense the love you have towards dragons!" Lambda praised. "But it's not like we can converse with Orpheus. We only know his age, presuming that the records are correct. These records are already ancient and have been archived, but according to them, females apparently laid multiple eggs in the past."

"So, not just one," I said.

This is different from what Mr. Julius told me. He only had his knowledge from books. The Dragon Knights of Rasheed had walked alongside dragons for many years, and they must've had some knowledge that even Mr. Julius knew nothing about.

"Correct. Dragons started to lay only one egg when Fores Research Facility started their experiments on these beasts. According to Jahala, the ancient texts apparently stated that we'd incurred the wrath of God," Lambda said.

"The wrath of God..." I murmured.

Salim Ivan's journal contained a similar phrase. The writer of that journal had clearly changed midway, implying that the one who wrote about those dragons was the demon disguised as Salim.

“Modified dragons are much easier to breed than pure-blooded, unmodified ones. The former must’ve inherited some genes from the animals that they were modified with. The more Dragon Knights there are, the stronger our forces will be. Rasheed could’ve thus started to alter the messengers of God, or the kingdom may have wanted to eradicate people like us, who were vehemently against these modifications. It’s all in the past now, so I suppose we may never know,” Lambda said sadly with a shake of his head.

When I attended the academy in Astria, I learned that the people of Rasheed were extremely religious and peaceful. In reality, however, it seemed that it wasn’t a complete paradise as my lessons had claimed. When one was raised in a land that was surrounded by desert, some may have strayed from the right path in an attempt to protect their kingdom.

I glanced at the four-winged scarlet Ares, who was quietly sleeping away from the rest of the dragons.

“I talked a bit too much. I tend to forget about the time when it comes to dragons,” Lambda said apologetically.

“It was very informative. Thank you for telling us,” I replied.

“Yeah... It was interesting,” Mr. Julius said, giving a rare word of gratitude.

Mr. Julius? Thank someone? Will pigs fly? I was shocked, but we were talking about Mr. Julius’s favorite topic: dragons. *I guess it’s not too surprising.*

“Look!” I said. “Helios seems to be close with Lumine!”

I looked at the black dragon while tugging on Mr. Julius’s clothes. Helios and Lumine were nuzzling their foreheads against each other. I felt like a mother who was watching her son’s first love blossom. I was happy, but a little sheepish, and the entire scene was adorably wholesome.

“I guess Helios has finally chosen his bride...” I murmured.

“And he chose Lumine! Julius, your dragon has excellent taste!” Lambda boomed with a broad smile and an enthusiastic nod.

Mr. Julius gazed at Helios quietly. “He’s always been alone.”

“Huh?” I asked. “Helios had you, didn’t he?”

“Guess so.”

“Our family will grow. We need to work a lot and make a lot of money! If we save Rasheed, Prince Faisal might give us a handsome reward. We’ve still got a long road ahead of us, but let’s work hard to support our growing family, Mr. Julius.”



“Yeah,” Mr. Julius replied with a faint smile.

I felt oddly nervous when I saw his occasional smile, free of any sarcasm and cynicism. As Mr. Julius, Lambda, and I approached Helios, the dragon lowered his head and rubbed it against me. I lovingly stroked his smooth, hard forehead. It was cold to the touch and felt nice. Helios happily closed his gold eyes.

“Helios, even if you get a bride, don’t forget who your mother is, all right?!” I exclaimed.

“Of course he won’t, idiot. What are you saying?” Mr. Julius asked.

“And I guess he won’t forget you and your sharp tongue either... Don’t copy this man’s mannerisms, okay, Helios? You must never call a lady an idiot. Lumine will start to dislike you,” I said with zeal.

Lumine’s large eyes blinked before she gently poked Lambda’s side with her snout. She was small for a dragon, but she was still much larger than a person. A poke from her snout looked powerful, but Lambda’s sturdy body received these playful attacks without budging.

“All right, Lumine!” Lambda laughed. “I’m so happy for you! And to think you were able to snag a black dragon as your husband! I’m so proud of you, my daughter!”

He continued to give high praise to Lumine. *Dragon maniacs are all oddballs.*

“...Mr. Julius, um, if, by any chance, we lose, all these dragons here will be used for experiments, right?” I asked as an unpleasant possible future crossed my mind. “Girls like Lumine will all be...”

Mr. Julius put his hand on my head and roughly tousled my hair. *Ouch.* “There’s no need to think about loss before a battle. You’re a genius alchemist and the strongest in the kingdom, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes, of course! I’m the best, strongest genius alchemist in the kingdom, *and* a beautiful young maiden.”

“Then there isn’t a problem at all.”

I grabbed Mr. Julius’s hand with both of mine. *He’s flicking me more than he’s petting me. Can’t he act more princely? He’s a former duke, yet he’s so violent...*

But he could be doing this on purpose.

“Though you both hail from a different kingdom, I greatly appreciate your support. We’ll be going against King Shesif—in other words, we’ll be rebels. We’re lucky that Prince Faisal has come to our side. We can finally show the citizens that we aren’t illogical, and it’ll increase our credibility,” Lambda said. He fixed his posture as he was being poked by Lumine.

“I’ve no intention of sticking my head in the affairs of your kingdom, but I don’t like how dragons are treated like objects,” Mr. Julius replied. “And... demons are entities that threaten nations and bring chaos to this world. This girl here is good-natured to a fault, and I’m painfully aware that she won’t just leave that be.”

“I’m sorry for causing you trouble, Mr. Julius,” I apologized. I *did* feel guilty for dragging him along with my antics. I recalled his furious expression when he came to save me from the clutches of Shesif.

“I don’t mind. You can do as you like. I’ll just follow you,” he said.

“The world really is a strange place. It drew the general of Dystiana and an alchemist of Astria together. I guess I can leave my precious daughter Lumine in both of your capable hands. If her relationship with Helios leads to her giving birth, you must show me. That’s a promise. You must absolutely give your word,” Lambda said.

“O-Okay...” I stammered.

Lambda was a composed, older man, but his intensity grew exponentially when it came to dragons. *But Lumine is cute.* I was happy to see that my family would grow. Their child would surely be cute. *But what does a baby dragon look like? They hatch from eggs, don’t they?*

“By the way, Mr. Julius, you said that you wanted another dragon to ride, didn’t you? If Helios and Lumine have a baby, would you want it to be a male?” I asked.

“If possible, yeah. But that’s something out of my control, and I won’t be able to tell until the egg hatches,” he replied.

“I’ve always found this odd, but you have Helios, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Am I in your way when we ride Helios together?”

Maybe he wants us to ride separately. I didn’t mind, but I felt a little down if he saw me that way. I was petite, so I didn’t think I was too much of a bother. Mr. Julius looked down at me wearily and narrowed his eyes. “What the heck are you saying?” his eyes seemed to ask.

“If you ride on a different dragon, Helios will get angry. Even if you were to ride his child, he’d still be annoyed,” Mr. Julius replied.

“Then why?” I asked. “Are you planning on renting out that dragon to get some money as a side gig?”

“No.”

“Then I’m even more confused. I personally don’t mind since I’m happy to see our family grow, though.”

I guess he doesn’t see me as a nuisance. Thank goodness. Lambda gave a hearty laugh as Lumine poked his back.

“Chloe, those who raise dragons also want their sons to ride a dragon that they raise. I see, so *that’s* what you meant by a growing family. I’ve heard some bad rumors about you, Julius Craft, but you seem a lot calmer in person. I now see why,” Lambda chuckled.

“Huh? Wh-What?!” Surprised by these words, I hastily looked up at Mr. Julius.

A son... Wait, a son?!

“Mr. Julius, do you have an illegitimate child?!” I asked, utterly confused by it all.

Did he leave a family behind in Dystiana?

“How’d you come to that conclusion? You’re the only family for me,” Mr. Julius replied with a sigh. He seemed exasperated by my question.

Wait...did he just confess his love to me?! Then why do I feel like I’m being mocked right now?

“Y-You know, there’s a time and place for stuff like this. Say those words to

me in a lovely café or something..." I mumbled.

My eyes teared up as I was filled with confusion and embarrassment. I covered my face with my hands.

"That's what I've been implying from the start, but I guess you haven't noticed at all," Mr. Julius said, looking exasperated. He remained as composed as ever.

He did mention wanting a baby dragon, but how was I supposed to understand his implication of wanting a child himself?! I didn't think I was dense; Mr. Julius was simply difficult to understand.

"Hey, you guys, I'm here to let you know food is ready..." Jahala approached us before he stopped. "Huh? What's wrong? What's going on?"

I couldn't reply. Lambda's loud, jovial laughter echoed throughout the open space, causing Lumine to turn away. It seemed like she was saying, "You're too noisy, Dad!"

◆ Duke Sagrid's Wish

LARGE dishes lined the table. The skewered meat was apparently mutton. It was cut into bite-size pieces and had been cooked with several spices to make it easier to consume. The hard, dry-looking bread had been slathered with oil made from pressing olives. Finely sliced onions were floating around in the amber-colored soup.

There were fruits in the shapes of stars, and there was a large, round fruit about the size of my palm. Its insides were juicy and pale white. I'd never seen it before, but it was refreshingly sweet and delicious. I took the meat off the skewers and transferred it to my plate before using a knife to cut it into smaller pieces. The meat looked tough, but it was tender enough for my knife to easily glide through. The aromatic herbs gave a wonderful taste, and I detected no gamey odor.

It'd been a while since I had a meal, and I ate in silence. Eating was important, and there was nothing better in this world than a free meal. It was important for me to face this food seriously since it was free.

"You must've been famished, Chloe. Please forgive me for making you work hard on an empty stomach," Jahala said as he gracefully sipped his sweet tea.

Mr. Julius had already polished off his portion and reached for the meat that I was served. *Mr. Julius is eating a lot more than I am. Why does Jahala pity me like a starving girl? Maybe I look desperate because I've been eating in earnest.* I'd lost my composure with Mr. Julius's confession earlier, but I wasn't so delicate that I'd lost my appetite because of it. I ate my share.

But I could never really eat much to begin with. The meat and bread were delicious, but I gave over half of my share to Mr. Julius. Still, I drank all my soup and ate the fruit. Mr. Julius must've preferred the meat, for he never touched the fruit, choosing to eat only the meat, bread, and soup. He had a much heartier appetite than me, but he devoured the food with great speed that it didn't seem like he ate much. And while he was fast, his manners were neat and

refined. He didn't eat greedily.

Then what about me? Why does it look like I'm the glutton here? How odd. I used to be an aristocratic lady.

"I would've loved to prepare a more luxurious meal, but as we've been abandoned by the royal family, we're in a tough position. Otherworld research has currently stagnated, but we're able to make some money with alchemy. We've got enough funds to properly feed the staff and the dragons, but money's a little tight," Jahala said.

"And yet you served us something as luxurious as meat. Thank you," I replied.

I used thinly sliced innards or scraps of meat for my meals, and I subsisted mostly on pea soup. Meat was a luxury that was hard to come by. If this meal, filled with meat and fruits, wasn't regarded as magnificent, I didn't know what to call my frugal foods.

"In Rasheed, meat and fruits are a lot cheaper than vegetables. We don't have much arable land to grow vegetables, after all. We eat mutton often, along with sand lizards. Sand whales are a lot larger, however," Jahala explained.

"Sand lizards and sand whales?" I asked.

"Sand whales are large, but they don't have much meat, so we don't really hunt for them. They're also uncommon, and one will rarely encounter the species. Sand lizards, on the other hand, are rather common. They're hostile and dangerous, but they've got a lot of meat. It's not an issue if people hunt them down."

Jahala smiled. I knew of lizards that hid under the shadow of rocks. I knew of whales that swam in the ocean. However, the researcher's description seemed to be rather different.

"...Mr. Julius, I've never heard of these mysterious creatures before. Have you?" I asked.

"How should I know if you don't?" he replied, looking uninterested.

Then I'm glad we were served mutton today. People in Astria ate this meat as well, and I was a bit scared to try sand lizard meat.

“Ah, we’ve got no time to be talking about these lizards. I must tell you about your father, Chloe,” Jahala said quietly.

When I was summoned by Jahala for a meal, I assumed that we would be guided to the cafeteria, but we were instead taken to a private dining room. The room wasn’t too spacious and had a circular table. Only Jahala, Mr. Julius, and I were present.

I fixed my posture at his words. I was full, and my plate only contained some fruit.

“Please forgive me for using information as part of our negotiations. I was desperate,” Jahala said apologetically.

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “I understand the current state of Rasheed now, and you’ve lost your parents too. So—”

He cut me off. “No matter my past, it’s a fact that I’ve dragged you two into Rasheed’s internal strife. And for that, I’m deeply sorry.”

“I’ll learn about my father and the demon, and you even gave us a female dragon. I believe these rewards are more than enough. Please don’t be so bothered.”

Jahala looked glum while I gave him a bright smile. I truly didn’t mind. A lot of things had happened, but Mr. Julius and I returned safely, and we were now eating meat. Helios got a girlfriend, and Lumine was adorable. I didn’t want Jahala to be bothered about it. Mr. Julius looked at me, conveying that he thought I was being far too kind.

“Thank you, Chloe,” Jahala smiled.

He stared straight at me, and I felt oddly nervous. When I thought about it, I knew nothing about my father. He always seemed grumpy, and I didn’t think he’d ever even hugged me before. He never smiled at me or held me. I always assumed that he hated me.

But now, I’d been told that my father was finding ways to seal a demon for my sake. He had already passed, but his final words to Aliza were apparently, “Don’t lay a finger on Chloe!”

While my father was alive, I didn't know a single thing about him, and we were never able to resolve our differences. My chest tightened with pain when I thought that I'd never be able to do anything for him.

"I met your father, Duke Clorius Sagrid, once in my life," Jahala started. "It was around six years ago. My father, Reyes Garena, was still alive and was the director of Puerta Research Center. He'd been discussing matters with Duke Sagrid over several meetings."

Jahala spoke with a hint of nostalgia. I recalled my mother's voice calling out to my father. My mother always complained that my father's name was too long, and she shortened it to "Riu." She'd often say his name in a singsong voice, and I always thought that it sounded too cute for my terrifying father.

"I've heard that my father was looking for a way to seal Mephisto," I said.

"That name came up in Salim's journal as well, didn't it? He's the demon who formed a contract with your younger sister. Duke Sagrid confided in my father because they were apparently old friends," Jahala said.

"Old friends?"

"Precisely. I never heard the whole story from my father either, but ultimately, they couldn't find a way to seal the four-winged demon before they ceased correspondence with each other. Then my father passed away." He let out a small sigh and shook his head. "My father said one last thing before he departed this world. And that was about you, Chloe."

"About me?"

"He said that the child of Duke Sagrid had received divine protection. The child could find the demon and drive it away. The world might be destroyed because of Rasheed, so I should go to this child for assistance."

I said nothing. *Why me? I don't get it. But there's one thing I know for sure.*

"Mephisto...seemed to know my mother," I said slowly. "Is my mother... perhaps a demon?"

Jahala widened his eyes and quickly shook his head firmly. "Of course not. If my predictions are correct, your mother...was most likely an angel."

My mother, an angel? Panicking, I spoke without thinking. “What a coincidence, the people of Astria also called me an angel too,” I said, cracking a weak joke.

Mr. Julius immediately tugged my ear and brought me back to my senses.

◆ Research About the Heavens

AN angel.

My mother was an angel. She was indeed a pretty woman, always calm and kind. She was sickly, but never said a word of complaint. I thought that she must've been a strong person.

"...Jahala, do angels really exist?" I asked.

He touched his fingers to his mouth and tilted his head ever so slightly. "To assume the existence of angels just because demons exist might be a bit too assuming as a theory. Puerta Research Center conducts research on the heavens of the Otherworld. Unlike Fores Research Facility, we don't try to cross the Otherworldly Gate. We merely elucidate the monsters that appear from the gates and protect the people. We also predict the future."

"The research from here discovered that anti-evil magic was especially effective against monsters, right?" I asked.

"Correct. But anti-evil magic is a bit unique and different from the other forms of magic. Anti-evil spells borrow power from the angels of Seraphim, who live in the heavens. It's essential for the user to have an affinity with the angels."

"You use the plural term 'angels.' Is there more than one?" I asked.

"There is. For whatever reason, those who can use anti-evil magic have received the goodwill of the angels of Seraphim. This is an extremely rare phenomenon. I've been taught that the Puerta Research Center was created by a gathering of such people to hear the voice of God."

"Sounds shady," Mr. Julius suddenly said, looking annoyed.

"Have you ever received harassment from God, Mr. Julius? Or are you perhaps an atheist?" I asked.

I guess the existence of God would be unbelievable to an atheist. I wasn't knowledgeable about the beliefs in Dystiana, but God was a very commonly

believed existence within the Astria Kingdom. It was said that God cast judgment on the dead in the Otherworld and took the form of a shepherd. Whole roasted sheep had thus been used as an offering, and mutton was often consumed during times of celebration as alms from the deity. Sheep wool was also very common in Astria. I'd never questioned it before—it was the only world that I knew.

Mr. Julius glanced at me and narrowed his eyes wearily. "You've only been through hardships, and yet you still believe in a god?"

"I think my hardships have nothing to do with the existence of God. And my life isn't all that bad. I got to meet you and Helios."

Had everything been smooth sailing when I was the daughter of a duke, I would've been Cyril's wife and the queen. I wouldn't have become an alchemist, fought against monsters, ridden on a dragon, or had my ear pulled by Mr. Julius. I may have lived my entire life without ever meeting him. In that case, while I had some painful memories, I wouldn't dream of redoing my life or trading it away. I wouldn't do anything different. I had my fair share of hardships, of course, but I felt from the bottom of my heart that my current life was precious.

"...Chloe," Mr. Julius murmured while furrowing his brows, looking grumpy as usual. He may have thought that I was carefree, a simpleton, or an idiot.

But of course...Mr. Julius had a much harsher and crueler past than me. I find my current life precious, and I'm glad that I got to meet him, but he might not feel the same. His father had been executed and his mother had committed suicide. Young Julius Craft was thrown onto the battlefields before his eye was gouged out, only to be sent to the Slave Arena. I squeezed his hand with both of mine and gazed into his eyes.

"Mr. Julius, you might not believe in God, but you've got an angel right here. True to my nickname, I'm an angel, here for you," I said.

He ignored me completely. *And I did my best to cheer you up, too!* An awkward silence filled the room, and I hastily released his hand to hide how mortified I was. I turned back to Jahala.

"Anyways, about hearing the voice of God..." I said.

“Oh, are you two done already? I can wait here all day, so you may spend as much time as you’d like declaring your love for him,” Jahala said with a smile.

I had no idea how old Jahala was, but I was sure that I just made a minor watch me flirt.

I hid my face with my hands and managed to squeak out, “I’m fine now.”

Mr. Julius gave a throaty chuckle. *It sounds like his mood’s improved. Whew.*

“Oh, are you sure? It’s quite wholesome, so I truly don’t mind... But yes, we were talking about how Puerta Research Center was founded. It was a gathering of people who received the goodwill of the angels. They chanted anti-evil magic and listened to the voices of the angels. They used that to predict the future.”

“Are the angels actually gods?” I asked.

“This is highly confidential information even amongst the staff at Puerta. Only a few people know of this, but I’ll confide this information to you both,” Jahala said in a quiet voice.

I inadvertently stretched out my back while Mr. Julius crossed his arms and long legs. With downcast eyes, he seemed uninterested.

“The angels of Seraphim were created by God to manage the Otherworld,” Jahala whispered. “They look like people, but they’ve got six white wings, indicating that they’re the highest rank amongst the angels.”

“Mephisto did say that the number of wings determined the rank. Four wings indicate a high rank, and six wings are in a special class, I think,” I replied.

“It seems the same rules apply to the angels as well. Each angel of Seraphim has their own name.”

“A name... Does that mean my mother also had an angel’s name?”

“No, the name of an angel called Celestia has never appeared in any research notes or archives at Puerta Research Center. There are four angels of Seraphim that we know of: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel.”

I’d never heard of these names before. I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “The phrase, ‘burning angels of Seraphim’ is chanted when using

anti-evil magic. Is the angel's name not Seraphim?"

"The group of these four angels is called Seraphim."

"I chanted my spell asking for a single angel called Seraphim... I must've sounded *really* stupid," I groaned.

Jahala covered his mouth and chuckled. "Is that the anti-evil chant that's used in Astria Kingdom?"

"Is it different in Rasheed?" I asked.

"Of course. I can give you a book with the proper spells later."

"How was I able to use anti-evil magic while getting the chant wrong?" I asked.

"Unlike normal spells, which require the user to build and expel their magical energy, anti-evil magic calls for assistance from the angels in the Otherworld. The human body is just a vessel that allows the angels' powers to flow through. Of course, this is exhausting for the body, which receives overwhelming power."

"Now that you mention it, using anti-evil magic really drained me. I get hungry too," I said.

I wasn't a capable sorcerer, but I apparently excelled in anti-evil magic. The fight against monsters in Astria still remained fresh in my memory. Anti-evil magic was effective and powerful against monsters, but I couldn't use it endlessly. After only a few uses, my magical energy would be depleted.

"I see. I can't use anti-evil magic, so I only have book knowledge. But it's said that if those who've received the goodwill of these angels request help, the angels will lend their aid. To put it in extremes, you can simply shout, 'Michael, please help me!' and it'd get the job done just fine. I suppose chants were created for formality's sake because such cries lacked specificity," Jahala said.

"Have the researchers at Puerta talked with the angels of Seraphim before?" I asked.

"That's what I've read. There are only documents that record that encounter...but it seems like Rasheed has angered God. The citizens of Rasheed,

who used dragons like tools, restrained demons, and lusted after the wisdom of God, have been abandoned by the heavens. We can no longer hear the voices of the angels; all we have left now is knowledge.”

“...Is God angry?”

“Rasheed mythology states that God takes on the form of a black dragon. It’s so huge that it covers the heavens. The dragon made the angels, and the angels made humans. The angels live in the Otherworld, and once humans die, our souls are taken to the Otherworld. Good souls rise to the heavens while sinful souls fall to the underworld.”

“That last bit lines up with Astria’s beliefs,” I said. “It’s said that evil people fall to the underworld and suffer.”

“Correct. Legends such as these may differ slightly when passed down orally, but the general gist should be the same. Eventually, a few angels or apostles rebelled against God. These rebels turned into demons and continued to wage war in the underworld.”

“The angels became demons?”

“Demons are a form of angels that have been corrupted. They’ve wronged God. Since Rasheed sided with the demons, it’s only natural for our kingdom to receive divine punishment... At this rate, I’m sure Rasheed will perish. And by extension, the rest of the world shall, too. I believe my father had his misgivings about it all.”

“I don’t care about Rasheed or the world. Chloe and I are completely unrelated to the sins of your kingdom. Whoever Chloe’s mother may be, this alchemist here is just a normal-looking woman. Don’t push your hopes onto her,” Mr. Julius suddenly said in an icy tone.

“I’m an alchemist *and* a young beautiful maiden,” I corrected.

“Self-proclaimed.”

“Right, but even so.”

I nodded as Mr. Julius grabbed my arm. *He’s suddenly gotten all grumpy. I thought he agreed with my decision to fight against the demon in the Holy*

Palace and to cooperate with Jahala and Prince Faisal. Mr. Julius had become instantly disgruntled once the talk about my mother had finished.

He picked me up from the sofa and dragged me out of the room. I managed to bow to Jahala.

“We’re only helping because Chloe is a good-natured person. I also hate seeing you lot treat dragons like toys. I couldn’t care less about the state of Rasheed and this world,” Mr. Julius spat.

I might have been a kind idiot who dragged Mr. Julius into my antics. Even so, he seemed especially angry. *He didn’t seem irritated when we were in our room, or when he was talking with Lambda.*

“I’ll be troubled if this world is destroyed, and I’d feel sorry for the innocent citizens if Rasheed falls. We came all the way out here, but we were just trapped underground and covered with sand. We didn’t even have a chance to tour the kingdom! Kindness will always be rewarded in the end, Mr. Julius,” I said. “Mr. Julius? Are you listening?”

Jahala gave a deep bow towards us as we left the room. Mr. Julius continued to drag me by my arm as we walked down the corridor. His grip was strong, and he walked quickly—I felt like I was going to stumble. *Why’s he so angry?*

It was unusual to find him in a good mood, but even so, he seemed especially enraged. We returned to our room, and Mr. Julius silently lay down on the bed. I sat on the side and let out a sigh.

My mother’s an angel. There was no concrete evidence to confirm this fact, but there were too many coincidences to simply laugh that statement off.

“I’m shocked, Mr. Julius. I didn’t think I, a woman who was called an angel of the shopping district, was actually an angel. If my mother’s an angel and my father’s a human, does that make me half-angel? A half-angel doesn’t sound too cute,” I muttered. I spoke in a bright voice, trying to shoo away the heavy atmosphere that filled this room.

“Shut up, idiot. There’s no proof, and yet you took that story seriously?” Mr. Julius replied.

“I knew you’d think that. I still can’t seem to process that my mother was an

angel... But still..."

"Forget it, Chloe."

Mr. Julius didn't want to talk about this topic any further. I looked down at his beautiful face as his eyes were closed. *He's got long eyelashes. He's only lying down, yet he looks so handsome... Mr. Julius said that if he had a son, he'd want the child to ride on the child of Helios and Lumine.* I grew restless as I ruminated over that shocking discovery. I was more surprised by the meaning behind Mr. Julius's constant request for another dragon than by the fact that my mother could've been an angel.

I covered my face with my hands. *Ugh, I'm growing embarrassed.*

"What *are* you doing?" Mr. Julius asked wearily.

It's your fault. Perhaps curious about why I'd grown silent, he cracked his eyes open and glanced at me.

"Nothing," I replied before switching topics. "Mr. Julius...you seemed angry earlier. Is there something bad if my mother is an angel? Do you have some bad memories with angels? Maybe you've got a phobia of white wings?"

He completely ignored my playful remarks and answered seriously. "...If, for example, your mother was really an angel, and you truly had the power to defeat demons, what would you do?"

I gazed into his red and blue eyes. I couldn't process his question for a moment, and I didn't understand why he'd ask me such a thing.

"I'll defeat the demons then, of course," I finally replied. "Mephisto has done something cruel to my father, Aliza, Cyril, and the people of Astria. He shouldn't exist in this world, so I think we should vanquish him. All the more if I've got the power to do so."

"Right. You'll impose that responsibility upon yourself. You've got no reason to put yourself in such danger, nor do you have any obligation to do so. You're only putting unnecessary weight onto your shoulders."

Mr. Julius spoke casually, but I couldn't contain my joy and smiled at him.

"You're worried about me. Thank you," I said.

He looked away. *Is he...embarrassed? Yeah, he is.* He'd probably been worried about me in the past too, but I never realized it. His expressions didn't change much, and he usually looked grumpy. I always thought that he was either angry or exasperated with me. Now that I knew that he was always thinking about me, even without his words, I was able to understand his feelings just a bit more.

The sight of a shy Mr. Julius is destructive. I did everything I could to suppress myself from groaning while clutching my chest. It wasn't good to behave suspiciously in the middle of an important discussion.

"I'm happy that you're worried about me, Mr. Julius," I finally managed to say. "But we don't want the world to be destroyed, do we?"

"You don't have to fight. You also have the choice to flee, don't you?" he replied.

"If I run, will you run with me?"

"I'll...follow your orders."

"You're lying. You'll probably try to fight alone, won't you? If the world gets destroyed, that means Helios and I would die too. You'll...try to protect us, won't you? Since you're so strong."

After a brief silence, Mr. Julius agreed. "Yeah, probably."

I stretched my hands towards him and brushed his golden bangs away from his face. Mr. Julius grabbed my hands. With a gentle tug, he pulled me onto the bed. He brought me close and hugged me tight. He'd taken a bath not long ago, and the pleasant scent of soap tickled my nose.

"U-Um... I know we've slept together like this before, but I...umm...erm..." I mumbled as my face grew warm.



We've slept together on the same bed in the past, and he'd treated me like a body pillow many times. But as we touched each other and I felt his warmth, it felt like I'd never done anything like this before. I couldn't calm down.

"I won't do anything...yet," Mr. Julius murmured.

"So that means, uh..."

He'll do something someday. I wonder when that day will come. I'm sure I'll be nervously going to bed from now on. He squeezed tighter still, and I furrowed my brows as I felt some pain. He acted like a large animal that was desperately trying to protect something that was important to him.

"Chloe, you don't need to think too hard. Do as you like. If you want to save the world, do it. I'll just listen to you."

"But you seemed so angry earlier... Are you sure?"

"...Yeah. It's all very simple. I know it's unlike me, but I was a little agitated. I felt like accepting that your mother was an angel would lead to me losing you."

Of course, even Mr. Julius gets anxious from time to time. He's a human, just like me. Even if my mother isn't human, I'm me. And that will never change.

"Don't worry, Mr. Julius," I said in my usual cheery tone. "I may have gained the prestige of being an angel, but I've always been the best alchemist within my kingdom and a young, beautiful maiden. I'm strong in my own right."

"Yeah. You're right," he smiled. His embrace loosened as we locked eyes. "I'm guessing that a battle will commence soon. I've said this before, but even if we're fighting a battle contained within a kingdom, it's still war. It's completely different from the battles that you've been in... Don't leave my side, Chloe."

"Of course. I'll protect you too, Mr. Julius!"

"Yeah. I'm relying on you." He squinted as he spoke in a kind, sweet tone.

He brought his face close to mine, and I closed my eyes. Our lips interlocked gently as he entangled my fingers with his. His large, rugged hand was a bit colder than mine.

It was at this moment that we heard a knock on the door.

“A squad of Dragon Knights are coming here from the holy city. I’d like for you both to come with me,” Prince Faisal said from the other side.

Mr. Julius peeled himself away from me and gave an irritated click of his tongue.

◆ A Crusade to Control the Holy City

AN army of dragons was flying in the sky. They looked like small dots from afar, but as they approached us, they became crystal clear. The magnificent beasts were blotting out the desert skies.

The forces that Shesif sent after us included plump dragons and oddly shaped, small ones with long wings. They were of all sizes, and I guessed that they'd been modified like Prince Faisal's Ares.

I rode atop Helios with Mr. Julius, who'd already changed into his Ariadne's Mantle for the battle. In his hand was a spear made from the Diamond of Eternity. I pumped myself up and wore my usual blue apron dress and headkerchief. On either side of us was Prince Faisal on his scarlet dragon, Ares, and Ruto riding the brown dragon, Orpheus. In front of us was Lambda on a dark green one and Jahala on a brown dragon. Lambda's subordinates were riding their own dragons as well.

We approached the opposing forces at around the same speed as them. Had this been in any other situation, I would've been excited to see a formation of dragons taking a walk in the skies.

But this was war.

Mr. Julius's words struck my chest and remained etched in my mind. I'd gotten prepared at once when Prince Faisal came for us. When I came out of my room, Lambda and his men were standing alongside their dragons in the vast, grassy courtyard. Prince Faisal planted a kiss on the back of Lady Layla's hand as though he was saying a prayer and prepared to depart.

When Jahala's subordinates, the Otherworld researchers, raised their hands, the skies above the grassy plain split in two, showing the actual sky. With that, we flew outside.

"Are you scared, Chloe?" Mr. Julius asked, glancing back at me.

I flipped through the pages of the book in my hands and showed it to him.

“I’m fine. But look at this. Jahala’s book on anti-evil magic has the real spell written down, but I wonder if changing my chant will change the power of my magic. Can my anti-evil magic just one-shot these demons?”

“Who knows?”

“If we defeat the demon—Salim—first, do you think we can avoid this war?” I asked, hopeful.

“Don’t think things are that simple...but if I see Salim among the enemies, I’ll go for him. You just focus on defeating the demon. You don’t need to worry about anything else.”

“...All right.”

I knocked my forehead against Mr. Julius’s back and exhaled. I felt my nerves ease ever so slightly—his kind words and thoughtful actions made me happy. War meant that my opponents were human. With each approaching second and the enemies drawing closer, that fact became much clearer. My hands trembled.

“We’re all human. It’s painful that we have to fight against each other,” I muttered.

Has Mr. Julius felt like this his entire life? My chest tightened.

“You get used to it. I did,” Mr. Julius replied. “But you don’t need to get used to this.”

“...When this is all over, let’s go home and eat something delicious. What would you like? I’ll make all your favorite foods.”

“I want pea soup, and that dish where you rolled up scraps of meat and fried them.”

“Ah, you must mean a patty! It contains plenty of meat and vegetable scraps. That’s frugal food to eat when times are tough. Did you like it?”

“I’ll have anything, so long as you make it,” he said.

“All right! You can leave the food to me! Once we receive a handsome reward for this, we’ll splurge and buy a huge chunk of meat!”

An army of dragons glided in the clear blue skies over the barren desert. Once we were able to see the soldiers riding these beasts, Ares raised his speed and flew in the front.

They obviously outnumbered us as they filled the sky. Atop the unusually shaped dragons were soldiers wearing armor decorated with a black rose—the crest of the royal family. A white, four-winged dragon carrying Salim was at the front. Beside him was Shesif riding on a dragon with large wings.

“Brother!” Prince Faisal bellowed, his voice cutting through the skies. “I’m begging you to open your eyes! That man, Salim Ivan, is a demon in disguise! We even found a journal from the underground facility, which serves as proof. At this rate, this kingdom and this entire world will be led towards destruction!”

“Faisal...you’ve been misled by these rebels. It’s not too late. Come back to my side, and I’ll even overlook Layla’s faults,” Shesif said. He didn’t emotionally raise his voice, but he could still be heard clearly. He gently shook his head and extended his hand benevolently.

“I’m not rejoining you,” Prince Faisal said. “Shesif, you’re a lot wiser than me, so I’m sure you’re aware of everything already. And yet you keep the demon by your side. You’ve changed. You used to be a kind brother who disliked conflict more than anything else.”

“Nonsense. I haven’t changed a single bit, Faisal. But it seems a waste of time to discuss matters further... Had you closed your eyes and ears, you would’ve stayed in eternal bliss. You wouldn’t have had to lose anything.”

“Then I suppose...we must fight. As a member of the royal family, it is my duty to protect the people of Rasheed! Salim, I’ll have you pay for your crimes of misleading Minne and for fooling my brother!”

“...Ah, how noisy. The smallest dog barks the loudest,” Salim said, tilting his head ever so slightly. His mouth formed a grimace, but he was wearing a hood over his face, and it was difficult to make out his expression.

“Attack! These people are rebels who bare their fangs against the royal family! There’s no need to hold back!” Shesif commanded.

A wave of dragons flew towards us. I committed the new chant to memory

and hastily put the book into my bag.

Helios slid between the dragons that were coming at us. He twisted and turned his body, dodging the oncoming enemies. With every swing of Mr. Julius's spear, several dragons and soldiers fell to the desert below, like a bird that had lost its wings.

I bit my lip as Mr. Julius charged straight for Salim. *I want to hurry and end this ordeal.* The longer this battle progressed, the more innocent lives were sacrificed—countless people would be harmed. Whether that be friend or foe, I absolutely didn't want to see it come to that.

One after another, Dragon Knights stood in front of Helios, forming a defensive wall to protect the king and Salim. The dragons chased after us and blocked our path. *I've gotta do something!* But every time I was reminded that I was against people, my mind grew foggy and prevented me from thinking clearly.

"You don't have to do anything. Hang on so you don't get thrown off!" Mr. Julius said sternly.

With that, I gripped the strings on Helios's armor. The dragon skillfully dodged a Dragon Knight that was approaching us, did a somersault in the air, and started chasing him from behind. Mr. Julius swung his spear and hit the soldier's head.

The concussed knight went limp and fell off the dragon's back. The dragon chased after its unconscious rider, who was falling headfirst into the desert, and left the scene of the battle. The man who just fell wouldn't survive. I had no idea who he was, but I felt like I was being vividly shown how replaceable and cheap human lives seemed to be in the midst of war.

When I imagined Mephisto and Salim ridiculing the lives lost as they hid away, an indescribable feeling welled up from within me.

"Julius! Aim for Salim!" Lambda called out before ordering his troops. "Men, carve out a path for them!"

Lambda and his knights sliced through the air and dove into the middle of the battle. Jahala, who was flying beside Lambda, followed up on this attack and

chanted confidently to cast his spells.

“Come, the freezing storm of silver! May the icy winds cast a binding blizzard!”

An icy storm froze the soldiers riding on top of the smaller dragon. The dragons broke their formation as though they’d lost sight of their goal. With no soldier giving out commands, the dragons had fallen into a state of confusion and panic.

Jahala had aimed for the smaller, swifter dragons so that they wouldn’t attack us at full strength. Even so, the enemy, more than half of their bodies frozen, tried to regain their composure to attack us once more.

“Puerta Research Center and the Otherworld researchers protect the kingdom. We must protect the kingdom from demons who’ve strayed from the right path! We’ll catch up with you two soon! Go on ahead!” Jahala called.

Prince Faisal and his four-winged Ares flew straight through the path that Jahala and Lambda’s men had created. He was headed straight for Shesif. *I can’t be scared now!*

“Mr. Julius, let’s head for Salim!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, I know,” came his reply.

Helios chased after Ares. While a few soldiers blocked our way, we managed to fly through the skies towards our goal. As a former general of Dystiana, Mr. Julius boasted the strength to single-handedly dominate an entire kingdom. The Dragon Knights, who, according to Lambda, had never fought in a battle before, were no match for the former general.

He proceeded to cut down numerous soldiers as they fell into the desert. Even so, it looked like he was giving Helios commands to avoid battle as much as possible. *Right, because of the contract around his neck, Mr. Julius has started to think about things that I might dislike.* That was the only contract he had—don’t do anything I dislike. I wanted to take the collar off him, but he stubbornly wanted to keep it and didn’t listen to my request. And so, the contract remained as well.

Mr. Julius had stated that without the contract, he might be unable to

suppress his urge to destroy everything in his path. *It seems like he views himself as a cold-hearted human...but I think he's changed quite a bit since we first met.*

The Mr. Julius right out of the Slave Arena would've mercilessly cut down anyone blocking his way.

"Brother, we've committed crimes. We were manipulated by Salim, expelled Puerta Research Center and their staff, though they only showed goodwill, cruelly treated dragons to create magical beasts, and chased our long-time loyal Dragon Knights from the holy city. All the while, a countless number of people have lost their lives," Prince Faisal shouted. His voice reverberated through the air.

Shesif gazed coolly at Prince Faisal.

"This is all the result of turning a blind eye to these incidents and pretending not to hear about anything because I believed in you. I don't want to be wrong anymore. Shesif, please!" the prince begged.

"I've told you before, Faisal. Talking with you is a waste of time. If you point your blade towards me, then you must be prepared for the ramifications," Shesif replied.

"But...!"

"Salim!" Shesif called out, cutting Prince Faisal off.

Salim's dragon stood between the king and the prince. While we were confronting them in the air, Ruto caught up to us on Orpheus.

Ruto's voice echoed into our heads. *"My brother simply wanted to save Princess Minne. How could this have happened? It's my duty to defeat you, who takes on the form of my brother. I've cooperated with him and brought back demons from the underworld. And for that, I must atone for my sins!"* She glared at Salim. He must've heard her words because his lips curled up into a faint smile.

"I've got memories of you. They're the memories of this man. You're Seal Master Ruto, who brought back low-ranked demons and treated them like slaves. And...you're my sister," Salim said.

“You’re not my brother! Leave his body at once!”

Her heartfelt cries fell on deaf ears. That body no longer contained the personality of Salim, the passionate older brother whom Ruto had talked about. There was something else instead—something that had been controlled by a demon.

When I confronted Aliza, she was able to spout her own words while being manipulated by Mephisto. This wasn’t so for Salim.

“I’m your older brother, Ruto. Look closely. We’ve got the same face, don’t we?” Salim said as he removed his hood.

He took off his robe, which fluttered in the wind and fell to the ground below. Underneath was the slender body of a man. He was wearing thin sorcerer’s attire, and four wings sprouted from his back. His face resembled Ruto’s with tanned skin, slightly curled hair, and gold eyes. His jet-black wings resembled a bird of prey—similar to Mephisto.

“Just kidding. Since you’ve already found me out, guess it makes no sense to hide it anymore,” the demon said, flapping his four wings and taking to the skies.

He slowly put his hand over the dragon that he’d been riding just moments before. That simple gesture severed the dragon head, as though it’d been sliced by a sharp blade. The poor dragon didn’t even have time to process what had just happened as its body plummeted towards the desert. It flapped its wings a few times, but that was all.

I gulped, and I felt Mr. Julius’s body grow tense with fury.

“Hello. Ah, now I feel much better. I shouldn’t do something as despicable as riding the illegitimate child of God. I shudder at the thought,” the demon said casually.

“You bastard!” Mr. Julius roared.

Yeah, he sounds really angry. I was of the same mindset. I felt something ugly well up from within me.

“No need to get so upset. That was simply an imitation of a dragon, so to

“speak. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe this dragon is a hybrid of an Ulama. It flies very well and can lay many eggs. I’m not quite sure if it’s a dragon or a bird anymore,” Salim said.

“Those that have been created haven’t sinned. And yet, you...” Mr. Julius growled in a dangerously low voice.

“Anger, hatred, love, joy...humans are indeed interesting. I didn’t have this feeling when I didn’t possess a body of flesh, but perhaps Salim’s memories have changed me. I’m closer to a human than ever before. Hence, I understand your feelings very well. Julius, Chloe, and Ruto...I’m familiar with you three.”

The demon flapped his wings and approached us. His face drew close, and just when I thought he was going to touch my cheek, Helios swiftly flew back and gained some distance. Cold sweat ran down my back.

“I believe you’ve met Mephisto. He couldn’t kill you it seems, Chloe Sagrid, child of Celestia,” the demon said.

Mr. Julius clicked his tongue.

This demon knows my mother too... The demon playfully twirled in the air before outstretching both his hands. Shesif must’ve known the demon’s form—he didn’t seem surprised or shocked by the transformation.

“I’ve been called Samael, the Serpent of Death,” the demon said.

“I don’t care. You’ll die here anyways,” Mr. Julius said, pointing his spear towards the demon.

Ruto used both her hands to create some sort of symbol, and Faisal raised his weapon as well. I pointed my Thousand-Year Tree staff at Samael, who proceeded to bend over laughing. He found humor in this situation.

“Humans are desperately pointing their blades at *me*?! I’ve never experienced this before! No need to be so anxious. Now, why don’t I tell you all an interesting story?” Samael said.

“Silence!” boomed Prince Faisal. “I’ll destroy you, demon that plagues our kingdom!”

Samael stared at the prince coolly. “Don’t you understand *why* Shesif listened

to me? It's so simple that you'll surely find the answer with a bit of thought. Salim, who came to the underworld, formed a contract with me. He wanted to save the life of a woman he loved. In exchange for that woman's life being spared, Salim followed my orders and offered his body to me."

Samael's words were a continuation of Salim's journal. The journal didn't state what happened to Salim's body. *Does this mean that he went to the underworld, met Samael, and died?*

"After I obtained a body of flesh, I came to this world and saved Minne. It's all very simple, you see. Minne's life is in my hands. If you kill me, Minne shall perish as well. And so, out of love for his younger sister, Shesif, though realizing that I'm a demon, pretended not to notice," Samael finished.

"...I guessed as much. I had that feeling ever since I realized that you're a demon," Faisal replied in a soft, hoarse voice.

"He chose his family over the fate of this world. I suppose that's an emotion called 'love,' which foolish humans seem to have. I can understand that feeling, of course. And because I can, destroying this world is all the more delightful for me."

Samael continued to laugh. Before I knew it, I'd clenched my staff so hard that my hand had started to grow numb.

◆ King Shesif Rasheed

SAMAEL did a loop in the air to change his direction and hovered by Shesif. The king remained expressionless as he stared at his brother. *Shesif stated that the demon would create a land where no one would age or die. Was his true goal not to attain immortality, but to simply save his sister?*

If this was the case, we might've still had a chance. If our words could reach Shesif, we could perhaps end this meaningless battle. Our goal was to simply defeat Samael and save Minne, but war had broken out. Even as we spoke, people were losing their lives and falling into the desert.

"Brother! There must be another way!" Prince Faisal bellowed. "We don't need to listen to the demon's orders to save Minne!"

"I can't turn back now, Faisal," Shesif replied. "Though I was bestowed the title of king from my late father, I'm anything but. I chose to protect my family over the peace of my people."

"I, too, would like to save our family! Both you and Minne are my family."

"Faisal, to save Minne, I gave my approval while knowing that Salim's actions would be dangerous. I even begged him to save my sister... I knew his future, and yet I pleaded for his assistance. I chose to save Minne by sacrificing Salim's life and Ruto's voice."

Shesif's tone remained benevolent and calm, a far cry from the roars and clangs of weapons mixed with the desperate wingbeats of the dragons that filled the air. His voice seemed unfitting for this situation.



“You knew his future?” Jahala asked, his voice quivering ever so slightly. Freeing himself from his opponents, he and his dragon flew down near us.

“Indeed, Jahala,” answered Shesif. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? The goal of Puerta Research Center is to predict the future, is it not? It’s the task of the researchers to see the future of our kingdom and this world. Your parents were really quite skilled.”

“I see... My parents told you the results of their predictions.”

“They warned me numerous times that it’d be dangerous...that something horrifying would occur. I disregarded their concerns. When Salim—I mean Samael—had visited me, your parents immediately realized that Salim had become a demon.”

“...So you killed them.”

“I didn’t directly sully my hands, but it might as well have been me. A filthy person such as I is unfit to take the throne. But unfortunately, I’ve no intention of relinquishing the crown. And as such...I shall kill anyone who goes against me. I must fulfill my goal.”

The large jewels that adorned Shesif’s crown and attire started to give off an ominous glow. It was as though these stones had a mind of their own. They floated in the air and surrounded the king as a form of defense. Splashes of vivid colors flashed across the sky—I saw red, blue, purple, white, and a myriad of others. I covered my eyes for a moment, blinded by the brilliance, and when I opened them once more, Shesif’s stones had transformed into large, bejeweled birds.

With their sharp beak and talons that could easily tear a human to shreds, the birds flew around Shesif like guard dogs. Their glimmering, translucent bodies contained a dark, thorny pattern. The black thorns which ran across their beautiful bodies pulsed like veins and gave off a sinister air.

Samael pointed his finger at Mr. Julius and me. “Now, let’s begin. A frail human’s body will have difficulty facing you lot, especially Chloe and Julius. All right, then how about this?” Samael said as though he was singing.

My mother also used to talk in a singsong voice, but this was completely

different. Samael sounded like a warbling bird that indicated an ill omen.

“Show me how you despair. Allow me to dye this white desert red with your blood. Satisfy me with a tumultuous banquet of your blood, screams, and resentment,” Samael said, spreading his arms out.

Screams suddenly filled the air. I gazed around and saw numerous black holes in the sky, gaping wide open. Several long, black arms emerged from these holes. Their deformed fingers latched onto anyone, friend or foe, restraining the Dragon Knights as the fingers coiled around them.

“...Mr. Julius, let’s go!” I shouted.

“Yeah... I won’t hold back. Is that okay?” he replied.

“Yes, of course!”

The Dragon Knights, ensnared in the grasp of these misshapen fingers, started to turn black and grotesquely inflate. The dragons that these knights were riding did the same, and the rider and his mount seemed to fuse together in a horrifying shape.

A magical beast that lost its will as a human and as a dragon. The sight greatly resembled the Man-eating flower hybrid that we’d fought in the desert. The monstrosity in front of my eyes had the wings and torso of a dragon, but at the end of its long neck was an expressionless human face.

“Wonderful. Even these arrogant, beautiful dragons could become so hideously ugly when mixed with humans. Now, kill and consume!” Samael ordered with a laugh.

The human-dragon hybrid magical beast attacked the other Dragon Knights, who managed to evade the dark arms’ grasp. With Lambda at the front, the two forces clashed against each other. A magical beast flew towards us while one of Shesif’s jeweled birds swooped in from the front.

“Chloe... I’ll defeat my brother. I must!” Ruto yelled.

“Brother... It’s only right I’m the one to put an end to you!” Prince Faisal roared.

The two headed towards the large jewel birds. The birds swiftly attacked us,

trying to rip through our skin.

“Pierce, fiery blade! Flaming sword dance!” Jahala chanted.

A circular blade of fire swung towards the oncoming birds. But the flame merely grazed the birds before vanishing. Prince Faisal wielded his spear expertly, but his blade and magic were repelled by the birds’ tough bodies, proving to be ineffective.

“Chloe, between those birds and my spear, which is tougher?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Your spear, but please keep in mind how expensive that is!” I shouted.

These birds were created using Shesif’s magic, meaning that should the king run out of energy, these animals would vanish. He seemed to have quite a bit of magical energy within him, but he wasn’t physically strong. My experience of kicking him as hard as I could told me that Shesif was rather weak. *And...these magical beasts are made from dragons and humans. I want to prevent Mr. Julius from harming both these species as much as possible.*

I took a deep breath and shouted at the top of my lungs. “Ruto, I understand how you feel, but please leave Samael to Mr. Julius and me! Prince Faisal, please aim for the king while we go for the demon!”

Jahala immediately nodded at my words and headed towards Ruto.

“Ruto, emotions and hatred will only hinder you in this fight,” Jahala said. “We must create a path for them. Please lend me your aid.”

“*I...understand,*” Ruto relented.

“Then let us work together! Magical resonance!”

“*Sturdy iron prison, use my blood as your fuel and capture all our foolish enemies! Blood cage!*”

It seemed like Jahala’s magic was pouring into Ruto. She raised her hand in the air, and an enormous, glowing, white magical circle appeared from above. The circle expelled a sludge of fresh blood as it extended across the sky like a spiderweb. The thin webs of blood captured the jeweled birds and magical beasts as they transformed into a solid cell of iron. It looked like a birdcage. The

birds, unable to flap their wings in a confined space, fell to the desert below, cage and all.

Is Ruto all right? For her to use such a powerful spell on a grand scale would surely affect her body. Worst case... But now wasn't the time to turn back. Helios flew between the strands of blood and headed towards Samael. Ares, with Faisal on his back, aimed for Shesif.

To Be Continued In Volume 3.

◆ Bonus: A Housewarming Party

I sliced through a huge chunk of meat and cut it into larger-than-bite-size pieces. After seasoning it with some salt and pepper, I fried the meat in a deep skillet with olive oil. Once the beef had started to brown, I removed it from the pan and added my diced celery and sliced onions. My vegetables had started to caramelize, so I added plenty of red wine, roughly chopped celery, herbs and spices, and mushrooms. I allowed the meat to stew. On another stove beside it, I boiled some potatoes.

While the food was cooking, I stored away the rest of the ingredients I'd received. To make our new home comfortable to live in, Mr. Julius and I cleaned the space in the morning and headed out to the marketplace to buy some food afterwards. The grocers wanted to thank us for protecting them from the monsters, so they gave us plenty of food.

We brought our gifts back home, and I decided to start preparing dinner. Mr. Julius took a seat at the counter and started drinking some alcohol that we'd received. We had plenty of ingredients on the counter. I divided the food into perishables and non-perishables while making a mental note of items that we should eat today.

"This fish we received today...is cod. It's a filet of Astrian King Cod. We should probably eat this soon," I said.

Leafy vegetables needed to be eaten quickly, while edible roots and beans had a longer shelf life. There was no rush to eat dried meat either.

"Since we have some potatoes and you're drinking, why don't we go a little classy and make some fish and chips?" I suggested. "Ms. Roxy's diner occasionally serves it as a snack. It's delicious."

Luckily, our new cooking area had four stoves to use. I'd already been using one for the meat and another for the potatoes. I placed an iron pot over the third stove and poured in plenty of oil. While that was warming up, I made

some batter by combining flour, beer, and eggs. I dipped my fish filets into the mix and placed them into the hot oil. Bubbles rose to the surface as the fish started to fry, and a lovely aroma filled the room. I placed the golden-brown fried fish onto towels to drain the oil. Then, I sliced some potatoes into sticks and started to fry them as well.

I didn't deep-fry food when I was living alone. The food I ate was more on the frugal side, like pea soup. Ever since Mr. Julius joined me, I wanted to make meals a bit more lavish, and since we hadn't celebrated the move to our new home yet, I thought that this was the perfect opportunity.

"And food is served. Fish and chips, Mr. Julius. Some people like to add a dash of vinegar, but it's just as good if you sprinkle some salt and eat as-is. Which would you prefer?" I asked.

"...Just the salt," Mr. Julius replied.

"I thought so. I'm still making stewed meat, our main course for today. You can snack on this while you wait. It's hot, so be careful not to burn yourself."

"...Okay."

I placed a plate of fish and chips in front of him. He was drinking red wine in a large wine glass. Red wine, fish and chips, and Mr. Julius. Just the sight of him eating made any food in his vicinity look elegant. *I suppose this is a power that handsome men possess.*

"What's wrong, Chloe? Do you want to drink, too?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing... Was just thinking about all the frugal food I had you eat."

"Your pea soup isn't bad."

"We received plenty of ingredients today, so we can indulge ourselves for a while. I say that, but we'll probably just get an extra dish for our meals or something."

"That's fine. I don't care much about my meals," he said.

"That so?"

"Anything you make is fine by me."

“That so...”

This is a little embarrassing. But I’m genuinely happy to receive such praise.

Mr. Julius continued to gracefully down his wine as he pinched the fish fritters and guided it to his mouth. His manners were beautiful as the alcohol, fish, and potatoes disappeared in a flash. *He must’ve been hungry. We only had a light breakfast and he diligently helped me clean. We were so into it that we almost forgot to eat lunch.* But my automatic cleaning tools—items that I’d made using alchemy—had done most of the work.

Thanks to those, the dusty cooking area became sparkling clean, and we were able to take a bath in comfort. We only had the bare minimum in terms of furniture, so it looked a little drab, but we were slowly adding a personal touch to our home.

“Is it good?” I asked.

“Hm...yeah. I never had this before, but it’s not bad,” he replied.

“You never had fried fish and potatoes before? What kind of life did you lead?! Wait, sorry, I sort of know.”

Mr. Julius was the former general of Dystiana. I always envisioned generals and other high-ranking officials eating luxurious meals while chugging alcohol, but it seemed that wasn’t the case for him. I felt an odd sense of duty as I wanted him to eat more delicious food.

After I checked that the fire under the oil was out, I checked on my other two dishes. The potatoes were soft enough that I could easily poke through them with a fork, and the meat had grown tender from being stewed with the wine.

I took the potatoes off the stove and transferred them to a plate. I sprinkled some salt and added a few pats of butter. The butter melted nicely from the heat of the tubers. I poured the beef stewed in red wine onto a large plate as well, before I plated a portion of the meat and added the potatoes on the side.

“And here you are. Beef stewed in red wine with a side of potatoes. You can even pour the sauce from the meat onto the potatoes—it’s delicious. Since you worked so hard today, I’ll sprinkle plenty of cheese on top just for you.”

I'd also received an enormous chunk of cheese from a grocer. I used a cheese grater and added some cheese. The grated cheese looked like powdery snow as it melted from the heat of the potatoes.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" I asked. "There's seconds, so eat as much as you like."

"...Yeah. You should sit down too. You're being restless," Mr. Julius replied.

"You're right. Then, let's eat together."

I had a kettle of boiling water on the fourth stove. I poured myself a cup of tea and placed it on the counter. The counter was large and had several seats. The cook of the former orphanage must've worked here, and likely during breaks, they might've taken a seat for a quick meal.

"I thought about carrying the food to the dining area, but this area seems large enough," I remarked.

"Here's fine. It would be a hassle to move around. And the liquor's here too," Mr. Julius replied.

"Don't drink it all," I warned. "Be careful and pace yourself."

"...You tell me to eat up, you tell me to not drink much. You're busy as always."

"Alcohol's expensive! This stewed beef contains an entire bottle of red wine, you know. This is a luxurious meal! Isn't this what true happiness is about?"

"Your definition of happiness seems rather cheap," he said dryly before ladling the beef into his mouth with a spoon.

I poked my meat with the spoon—it was so tender that it easily fell apart. I thought that I hadn't stewed the beef enough, but this must be some really high-quality meat.

"This is good meat...really good meat," I murmured. "It's so tender. Amazing!"

"Good for you. But I agree; this is good."

"You praised the food... The power of excellent meat knows no bounds!"

I spooned the meat into my mouth. The aromatic spices, the wonderful taste

of the potherbs, and the lovely tender meat filled my mouth. I put a hand on my cheek as I indulged myself.

“Delicious! Quality meat is just so good... I know that’s generally a given, but this is just so, so good. After this bite of heaven, I can’t go back to the cheap stuff!” I exclaimed.

“I liked that dish you made... You stewed scraps of meat and placed it on bread,” Mr. Julius replied.

“Have you acquired an unsophisticated palate due to living with me?” I asked.

“No, you’re simply just a good cook.”

“Are you drunk? You’ve been praising me to bits... What’s going on? I can hardly believe it.”

I chewed on some of my boiled potatoes and swallowed as I stared at him. *Good meat is delicious. But I don’t think the quality meat’s the only factor that makes me think this meal is so tasty.*

“Mr. Julius...I know we’ve just moved here, but I hope we can continue to be together,” I said, raising my cup of tea.

He gently clinked his wine glass with my cup. “Yeah... Likewise, Chloe.”

We locked eyes and broke into smiles.

Afterword

IF you're a first-timer, nice to meet you! And for those who've purchased the first volume and have graciously decided to pick up the second one as well, long time no see! I'm Miyako Tsukahara.

Thank you for picking up volume two of *The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!*

Chloe and Julius just became acquainted in the first volume, but now they get along very well. I hope you were able to feel Julius's deep affection for Chloe, despite the fact he's a *tsundere*! You might think he isn't quite "dere" enough or acting sweet towards Chloe, but rest assured, he definitely is deep down!

This volume features a good-natured Chloe, who decided to visit a neighboring kingdom on a whim. Soon, she gets embroiled in another nation's affairs and drags Julius along for the ride! The highlight of the volume, in my opinion, is Satsuki Sheena's illustration of Chloe in a fancy dress!

Julius usually calls Chloe "average," "mediocre," or "plain" (while secretly thinking that she's an angel), and Chloe's clothes usually look tattered because she's always in combat. Please praise how good she looks in a dress, how cute her dress is, and how she's a beautiful young maiden who's only twenty!

All the illustrations are wonderful, of course! Even Julius was portrayed with his beautiful physique! It's lovely! I'm so grateful!

It seems being a "beautiful young maiden" has become a catchphrase of sorts for Chloe, while Julius is still shooting glares at everyone, and Helios is as cute and innocent as ever. I'd be so happy if you enjoyed this book!

Lastly, I'd like to express my gratitude to my kind editor, who's supported me this far, to Satsuki Sheena for the lovely illustrations in both volumes, and to everyone who has read this book. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

February 2023



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By **Makino Maebaru** Illustr **Yoko Matsuoka**

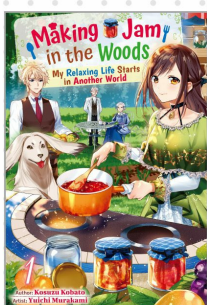
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By **Suzume Kirisaki** Illustr **Cosmic**

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By **Kosuzu Kobato** Illustr **Yuichi Murakami**

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA
-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: **Fehu Kazuno**

illustr: **Jun**

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