



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

Presented by
MIYAKO TSUKAHARA

Illust.
SATSUKI SHEENA

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

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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 1: The Abandoned Heiress Purchases a Slave Swordsman

◆ Julius Craft, the Black Prince

MY life could be summarized in one word: unlucky.

However, there was little point in clumsily explaining this fact to the blonde-haired, dull-blue-eyed man in front of me. He sat impudently with his legs crossed. *It goes without saying, but I must have him understand my situation, even a little.*

In the back of the room was an alchemy furnace. A ray of sunlight from a window with its curtains drawn illuminated the room. There was a red couch and an office desk. The room also had a cute mushroom-shaped lamp and a trunk with infinite storage that was filled with materials.

Most of the items in this room were purchased with my own money.

The man sitting on a sturdy, black leather chair, looking slightly dirty, was also purchased with my money. He was a little underweight, but still had a well-built body. His golden hair looked like an ancient golden ornament that had been neglected. It had grown unevenly and looked slightly coarse, but still served as a reminder of its former beauty.

His right eye was covered with an unhygienic bandage, resembling an eyepatch. His long golden eyelashes framed his beautiful, dull-blue left eye, as it gazed at me with boredom. He sat brazenly with his legs open. His long legs couldn't be covered by his tattered black overcoat. His tight-fitted pants were wrapped with several stiff belts, and his worn-out boots were caked with mud.

A pair of magical handcuffs were around his wrists as he dangled his arms between his legs. The cuffs were shaped like a mobius strip, a red ouroboros that had no keyhole. A handcuff for slaves, it could only be removed if I, his

master, applied magic to it.

He sat slightly slouched. His bad posture and lazy attitude seemed to imply he didn't retain even a shred of his former noble life.

"Listen well. From today onwards, I am your master. Now, what's my name?" I said, standing in front of him with my hands on my hips.

I could see myself in his dull gaze. My slightly curled, strawberry-blonde hair came down to my shoulders. I was wearing a lacy headkerchief and my eyes were a slightly darker shade of pink than my hair. My skin was white. I was wearing a pair of knee-length knickers under my red apron dress and a pair of brown boots. Calling me "pretty cute" was an understatement.

I am the unluckiest woman in the kingdom. My name is—

"Chloe Sagrid, was it?" the man replied. He had a moderately low voice that was pleasant to the ears, but also had a hint of bottomless intensity.

"That's right, Mr. Julius Craft. Oh, should I call you sir? Is that better? If you prefer, I can call you sir, you know."

"You sure are mouthy. I don't care whatcha call me."

"Did you just say I talk too much, again?" I scoffed. "Well, Mr. Julius. I'm your master, and you're my slave. I bought you with my own money, so you're *my* slave from now on. You're a good purchase! I didn't think I could buy you, the Ever-Victorious General, the Black Prince, with just five million gold. I could make all that back with just one divine elixir, you know? Alchemy's great; I can turn a huge profit and the materials needed are free! It's a perfect business model."

"And? You purchased me with five million gold, so now what? What exactly are you planning, young lady? Are you going to take over the kingdom? Take revenge?" He had a cruel smile on his face.

I sighed at him. "Mr. Julius, revenge isn't *profitable*."

He doesn't understand me at all. Revenge isn't profitable. There may be instances where you might turn a profit, but it's still very rare. Money is the most important thing in this world. I can do anything with it, so it's the only

thing I trust. Money talks. In other words, I won't do anything that isn't profitable.

"See, I'm Chloe Sagrid," I continued. "In this kingdom of Astria, I was the only daughter of the noble Duke of Sagrid, who reigned over a duchy. But do listen. The story is a real tearjerker."

"I'm not interested," he said dully. "But I suppose you're going to run your mouth anyway."

"Now, now, don't be like that," I tsked at him. "You've got all the time in the world, haven't you? As long as those magical handcuffs are on you, you can't do anything at all."

Julius clicked his tongue in annoyance.

How uncouth.

"In any case, I was the only daughter of the noble Duke of Sagrid. Well, I assume it's only natural that you, a general of the Dystiana Empire, aren't aware of the noble families of the Astria Kingdom. Well, the Sagrid household had collapsed."

There was a pause. "Explain," he said.

"Oh my, you seem very interested in me, indeed. Are you intrigued by this young maiden alchemist of rare beauty?"

"You? A *young* maiden?"

I was satisfied with his snide remarks. *Had he not talked at all, I would've been troubled, as I don't possess enough money to house a large man that won't communicate at all.*

"Well, I'm twenty, so I suppose I'm just an alchemist of great beauty," I conceded.

"Beautiful? Don't get ahead of yourself there."

"And you say *I* talk too much, Mr. Julius. There's a reason behind the Duke of Sagrid's downfall. I think I was thirteen or so. My mother passed away, and my father had remarried. My father had actually been having an affair with my now stepmother for quite some time, and they already had a child. Suddenly, I had a

sister one year younger than me, though we came from different mothers. During this time, I was engaged to the prince of the kingdom, Cyril Astria."

"Cyril Astria...the first prince," he guessed.

"You're correct! You're quick to catch on!" I applauded him. "In any case, I thought I was going to marry Cyril, but three years ago, there was a graduation ceremony for the aristocratic academy. I was suddenly publicly condemned during the ceremony, and my engagement was canceled on the spot."

"Canceled?"

"Yes, you've heard that right. I have no idea why, but I was arrested in public and thrown into prison! I had my life spared, but my family had fallen, and I was thrown outside of the royal capital, all alone."

"You look like you wouldn't hurt a fly. Just what kinda heinous crime did you commit?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

"How rude! I didn't do anything! My sister Aliza apparently uncovered all the Duke of Sagrid's wrongdoings. It seems like my father had been involved in some shady business under the table. From kidnapping young girls to human trafficking to loan sharking to murder. Even selling bad drugs to people! It was like I was trapped in some kind of twisted dramedy! I had no idea what was up or down anymore."

"Was your father really involved in all that?"

"No idea." I shrugged. "I was suddenly told all of this and thrown into prison. I was then tossed into a random alleyway. My father was executed, and my family had crumbled. I had no idea what was going on. But even so, I must survive. So, as you can see, I became an alchemist and became wealthy all by myself. I'm now a very popular alchemist. Boy, am I glad I'm able to use magic! Nowadays, it's much more profitable to become an alchemist than a sorcerer."

For the first time, something lit up in his eyes. Like a cruel flame, it silently flickered in his gaze. "Are you sure you aren't looking for revenge, Chloe? I can *kill* every person that you hate."

"You completely missed the point of my story. That's not what I want, Mr. Julius. You truly don't understand, do you? Revenge isn't profitable," I replied.

“And is that sisters of yours, who trapped you in this situation, living without a care in the world?”

“Without a care indeed. She’s the crown princess now. It seems like she safely married Cyril—there was a parade announcing their marriage the other day. Thanks to that, my special item, Flower Fireworks, where flowers dance in the sky, have been selling like hotcakes.”

“Your situation isn’t anything special, but don’t you hate her?”

“Is my situation really that common? Do downfalls occur that frequently?”

“It’s a tale as old as time.”

“Hm, and here I’d thought I was the unluckiest girl in the world. How odd. In any case, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have any anger within me. But you see, Mr. Julius, money is the most important thing in the world. Money doesn’t betray you. That’s why I purchased you from the Slave Arena.”

It was scary going there, but I tried my best. Especially after I’d heard I could buy the Black Prince for five million gold.

“And I’m asking if buying me with money is a means for you to exact your revenge. If you command me, I can take Cyril’s head, since he betrayed you as well. If torture is your goal, I can take him back alive,” Mr. Julius said.

“You’re rather bloodthirsty, aren’t you? As I said, that’s not my intention.”

“Then what is it? Why did you purchase me? Do you need me as your male prostitute? After all, with your looks, you probably don’t get much action.”

“No need for your vulgar talk. I choose money over men. I don’t need a marriage partner, much less a male prostitute. How will that benefit me monetarily?”

“Then why did you buy me?”

“You see, for good alchemy, I need good materials. For good materials, I need to fight strong monsters. I’ll have you work like a dog, Mr. Julius. I need you to tag along to defeat monsters so I can freely gather materials from them.”

Mr. Julius looked away before muttering under his breath, “That’s it?”

He had quietly followed me from the Slave Arena, but if he was as aggressive as rumored, I was planning on fitting him with the Muzzle of Subordination which I'd made with alchemy. The Muzzle of Subordination came to mind when I saw a barking dog being fit with a muzzle during my walks. Alchemy is imagination. One can create whatever they wish, granted they have the imagination and determination for it. Of course, aside from human transmutation.

I stood near him.

Mr. Julius is a head and a half taller than me. When I'm near him, he has an air of intensity. Also, he's slightly dirty.

His dull-blue eye gazed at me with boredom.

"Mr. Julius, now that we've established our relationship, please take a bath," I said.

"A bath, you say," he replied.

"You're very unhygienic right now. Let's clean you up. Let's heal that wound on your eye, and let's change your clothes."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'm your master, so please listen to me."

"I've been a slave for three years. I've forgotten how to take a bath. Will you bathe me, dear master?" he teased. He donned a sarcastic smirk on his face.

I frowned. *You're underestimating me because I'm younger than you. I've still had my fair share of problems, you know. You're making a big mistake if you think my face will get all red or embarrassed with your statement.*

"That's fine with me. You're my slave, so I guess it's my responsibility to get you cleaned up. Come on, then!"

He looked away and sighed.

You think I'm just some clueless twenty-year-old girl, don't you? I was in a very noble family three years ago, but that's all changed now.

"Oh, your handcuffs are in the way, aren't they?" I said. I put my hand over

the cuffs on his arms. “By the name of Chloe Sagrid, I command the handcuffs to turn into a collar.”

The moment I chanted those words, the red mobius strip slipped from his hands and transformed into a collar around his neck. The bright red string turned pitch black. At a glance, it looked like a quality decoration for a person’s neck.

“Mr. Julius, if you listen to my orders like a good slave, I’ll take this off. For now, please bear with this. If I let you, the Black Prince, loose, the kingdom will have my head for sure this time.”

“You were thrown into prison over accusations that may not even be true, and you were stripped of everything you have. You’re certainly an unlucky woman,” Mr. Julius said.

“You were betrayed by your own empire and became a slave. You’re quite unlucky yourself,” I retorted.

He stood up from his chair. He was so tall that I had to look up to catch his eye, and he looked a bit dusty.

“As long as that collar is around your neck, you must obey my orders,” I told him.

“I’m aware. If I go against you, a deadly pain will run through my body, leaving me barely able to move.”

“Glad we are on the same page. Well then, I, Chloe Sagrid, command you, Julius Craft,” I started as I reached my hand towards his collar. *I wanted you to be seated a bit longer, but oh well.* “Firstly, you must not leave my side. You must be close enough that you can always hear my voice. Secondly, you must not do anything I dislike. Are we clear?”

As the words left my lips, a golden lock appeared in the middle of his collar. This meant that the contract had been created.

He furrowed his brows. “Your commands are a little abstract.”

“Well, I want you to listen to my commands, but I also don’t want to restrict you too much. Uh, I guess I want you to be like a harmless roommate or

something,” I replied.

“How naïve of you. You’re a fool who doesn’t understand what kind of man you purchased.”

“I’m well aware of my purchase, Mr. Julius. Now, go take a bath. I’ll show you the bath that I’m so proud of.”

He clicked his tongue. He was intense, but not scary. As a person who was thrown into the royal capital’s alleyway with just the clothes on her back, I’d gotten rather tough myself. I led him upstairs.

Chloe’s Alchemy Shop was in the middle of the royal capital. A two-story house, the first floor was dedicated to the shop and my alchemy furnace. The second story was my living quarters. On one side of the hallway from the entrance was the alchemy furnace. The other side housed the stairs to the second floor. My room had a bath, but Mr. Julius’s room was a storage space. I’d have to clean his room later. I led him further inside, past my room, that only had a bed, to the bath.

The dressing room had a laundry basket and a towel. A linen towel was lying on top of the wooden flooring, and a star-shaped lamp sat on the bay window. There were no partitions between the dressing room and bath, but the bathing area was a step below and surrounded by white tiling.

“Now then, please take your clothes off, Mr. Julius,” I commanded him as he stood in front of me.

“Unfortunately, it seems as though I’ve forgotten how to do that as well,” he said with a grin.

“Liar. You’re lying. But I’m a benevolent master after all, so I suppose I can help you.”

You’re testing me again. I’m not naïve enough to think that you’re actually a very kind person. However, we can surprisingly hold a conversation, so I guess that’s good enough.

I extended my arms towards his overcoat. I started working on the belts. They were so stiff that pulling or pushing didn’t make them budge. As I kept trying to undo his belt, he stared at me silently.

“Forget it, I’ll do it myself,” he said with a sigh.

“If I said I’ll do it, I’ll do it. Do wait a bit more,” I replied.

“If I wait any longer, the sun will set. I didn’t know alchemists were so weak.”

“That’s why we use alchemy. To cover for our *lack* of physical strength.”

If I was physically stronger, I wouldn’t be here doing this.

He quickly removed his overcoat, which fell with a thud. He was completely naked underneath, except for his underwear. He didn’t have much fat on him, and his muscular body was covered with small scars. From old to new, some scars looked gnarly, most likely because they had healed without being treated properly. As he quickly removed his underwear, I pushed a large towel onto him.

I don’t want to look down there. I mean I can, but as a courtesy, I won’t. Perhaps Mr. Julius had gotten tired of teasing me, because he wrapped the towel around his waist. *Phew.* Since I promised to bathe him, I took off my boots and socks.

“Now then, let’s get you all clean, shall we, Mr. Julius? If you take a refreshing bath, it might even refresh your mood! Take a look at this rotating hot spring stone! With one of these in your bath, you’ll constantly have a spring of clean hot water, and the dirty water will be instantly purified.”

The bathtub was supported by four cabriole legs and was filled with milky white water. This was all thanks to that rotating hot spring stone.

“The amazing thing is that this water is actually taken directly from a hot spring! It’s from the famous springs of the Rugal district called the Snow Moon and Flowers Springs! I can sell these stones for a good price, but it’s a bit of a pain to gather the necessary items,” I explained.

I pushed his back as if to urge him to use the bathtub. With only a towel around his waist and a collar around his neck, he obediently got in. His body displaced quite a bit of water, and it went down the drain. More water had overflowed than I’d expected, and water splashed onto my clothes. *I guess I can change later.*

As he stayed in, the water started to turn murky. However, in an instant, the stone had worked its magic, and it became clean once more. Amazing purification abilities, but the downside was that this only lasted about a month. I had yet to make one that lasted forever.

“Let’s wash your hair now. I’ll take off this bandage,” I said.

“Do as you like,” he said with both eyes closed. He seemed to be comfortable.

Though the bathtub felt a little too big for me, it seemed too small for Mr. Julius. I went behind him and started to dampen his dry bandage with my shower head. This was also fitted with a hot spring stone, and warm water would come out with a push of a button. I hadn’t marketed this yet, as it was a bit of a pain to make.

“Let me know if you feel any pain.” I slowly peeled off the bandage over his right eye. Thanks to the water, the bandage slipped off with ease. There was a huge hole where his right eye should be. As it didn’t seem infected or swollen, I assumed this was an old wound.

“Three years ago, my eye was destroyed. I haven’t seen the wound, but since I’m still alive, I guess it healed,” he said.

“I can’t tell if you’re lucky or not. It’s a terrible wound, but it healed up very well. Maybe you have enhanced regenerative abilities?” I asked.

“Slaves can’t use magic thanks to the brand.”

The bath seemed to improve Mr. Julius’s mood. He had become very talkative. I looked for his brand. Behind his neck, under his nape, was a seal that resembled a skull of a beast with two horns. The mark of a slave. His long hair had hidden this seal.

“Regenerative abilities aren’t magic, though,” I pointed out. “It’s a normal human ability where the body tries to heal its wounds. You have a lot of scars, so I guess you’re rather tough.”

“I guess so.”

“I’ll make a beautiful artificial eye for you. Let’s add some kind of ability to it, too. What would you like? Would it make you happy if you can see through

women's clothes?" I teased.

"That would mean I can see through yours too."

"Oh. Then that's no good."

I washed his hair. I shampooed and rinsed it many times until I felt that it was no longer greasy. I used a lot of foam for the wound in his eye, carefully cleaning it as well. He didn't seem to be in pain, but he seemed slightly annoyed. I paid no heed. An unhygienic body would lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. If I were to fit in a specially made artificial eye for him, the area needed to be well cleaned.

"What color would you like for your eye, Mr. Julius?" I asked. "Since your left eye is blue, how about we choose a different color for your right? An odd-eye look kind of excites my inner child. How about you?"

"Not really."

"Since your left is blue, how about we make your right red? How exciting. You can add any ability you want. I'm a popular alchemist around here, so an artificial eye that I make is extremely valuable. You should sound happier!"

"Chloe, I thought you weren't going to do anything unprofitable?"

I froze for a moment, surprised that he called me by my name. I proceeded to use the shower to rinse off his right eye. The overflowing water flowed down the drain. *Maybe I should take a bath after him. My clothes are wet anyways, so it might be best.*

"The artificial eye is free. Your clothes and food will also be free. You're mine now, so I'm doing what a master is supposed to do. In exchange..."

"You said that I'd need to work like a dog for you."

"Indeed. That's exactly right. You're very strong, aren't you? I heard you caused quite a fuss at the Slave Arena. I heard you made a name for yourself in the past war as well, though I'm not too knowledgeable about that stuff."

Mr. Julius was formerly the general for the neighboring Dystiana Empire. Just hearing the name Black Prince Julius was enough to make everyone in the Astria Kingdom tremble—aside from myself, of course. The Dystiana Empire was

massive, and smaller kingdoms like Astria were in constant fear of getting invaded. However, three years ago, when Mr. Julius was betrayed by his empire and sold to the Astria Kingdom, Dystiana had stopped its advances towards us. I wasn't sure about the other countries, but at the very least, war had ended for our kingdom. I had only learned of these incidents from rumors, as I was in a pretty precarious situation myself at the time.

"You're blonde and handsome, but you were called the Black Prince because of your black armor and the black dragon that you rode, right? You inherited the title and domain of Duke of Craft at a young age. But you were sold to Astria and ended up at the Slave Arena. We're alike," I said.

"Who and who's alike?" he asked.

"You and me. We're both *unlucky*."

"Is that why you bought me? Out of sympathy?" he spat out.

Because he'd cleaned up well, though he still looked a little haggard, he had regained some of his former beauty. His beautiful golden hair, pale skin, and long eyelashes complemented his high nose bridge and thin lips. He had a glare, and his eye was of a dull color, but he resembled the rumored beautiful warrior to a T.

"That's obviously not the case," I asserted. "I bought you because you're strong. I didn't want someone that was just above average, I wanted someone that was very capable. Item gathering is rather dangerous, as you can imagine."

"How dumb."

"It's not dumb at all, thank you. We're both fallen nobility without a leg to stand on. If you just laze around, you'll be out of money in an instant. I'll make the money, so I need you to defeat the monsters! I'm counting on you to do your part."

"Either way, I've got no choice but to do as you say," he said dismissively. He sunk deeper into the bathtub and closed his eyes.

I'm his master, but as I'm washing his hair, I feel like I'm his slave.



ONCE he finished his bath, I wrapped him in a fluffy towel and led him into the other room. I had him sit on a stool while I changed out of my wet apron dress. *I wanted to take a bath, but I'll do that later. He's completely naked anyways, so I shouldn't just let him be.* I took a black and white apron dress out of the closet and swiftly changed into it before returning to Mr. Julius.

I decided to dry his damp hair with my wind magic. I could've made something with alchemy, but it was easier with magic. As warm air came out from my hands, Mr. Julius's hair was dried in an instant.

"Oh! You're quite handsome, aren't you? I think cleaning you up made you look much better," I said.

His sparkly golden hair, which was like a ray of sun on a cloudy day, had gotten its shine back. It was straight with no curls but cut very unevenly. Some cascaded down to his shoulders, while other parts only went to his neck. From between the locks of his hair that seemed to hide his right eye, a beautiful almond-shaped left eye surrounded by golden eyelashes peered at me. He was tall and muscular. The scars on his body seemed to emphasize his beauty. He initially seemed a lot older than me, but he appeared to be in his late twenties at most, making him only a little older. My former fiancé, Cyril, was quite the handsome man, but when compared to Mr. Julius, he seemed to fall short.

"You're normal-looking, Chloe," Mr. Julius remarked.

"Shut up! I was called pretty in the past, okay? I'm still a beautiful alchemist, though!" I snapped.

"That's good to hear."

"You're mocking me, aren't you? Aren't you? Well, whatever. Since I'm so kind, I'll even prepare some clothes for you. I don't know your size, though, so here's a one-size-fits-all robe." I hurriedly went to my closet and picked out a black robe. I chose the largest size, so it felt heavy in my arms.

Well, too big is better than too small. I put the large robe on him headfirst. It had a hood, sleeves, and was large enough to cover his feet. I took the towel he had wrapped around his waist and threw it in the laundry basket in the dressing room. As I returned, I saw him lying on my bed.

It didn't have a canopy and was a simple double bed. It was fitted with cute flower-patterned sheets that I had purchased from a nearby shop. Though the large Mr. Julius in his black robe was able to fit on my bed, the sheets didn't suit him at all.

I walked up to him and tugged on his robe. "What are you sleeping here for? This is my bed."

"I feel refreshed after taking a bath. I want to take a nap," he replied.

"Do you always go at your own pace? We still have quite a bit of stuff to do, like buying you clothes and weapons."

"Buy whatever. I'll be fine if I have a sword and a spear. The blades can even be dull."

"I can't carry heavy weapons, and you're my slave. You can't leave my side."

"Then let's go tomorrow."

"Are you a child? That's my bed. Move."

He looked up at me from the bed, an amused twinkle in his eyes. "Our contract is that I have to always stay near you, close enough to hear your voice, yeah? That means I have to sleep in the same room as you. The other condition is that I can't do anything you dislike. Since I'm not getting punished for this, clearly you don't dislike what I'm doing."

"Are you a detective? Jeez. Are you *that* tired?"

"I had to be on guard every day to make sure I wouldn't get murdered in my sleep. Talking with an idiot like you is much more relaxing."

He yawned a little. *He really does seem sleepy.*

"Fine. I'll go make your artificial eye, so you can sleep. I'm really treating you the best that anyone ever could, so be grateful."

"Well, thank you," he replied lazily and closed his eyes. After a minute, I could hear his breathing—he had fallen asleep.

Like me, he's been through quite a bit. I should let him be. I don't have any urgent requests anyway.

I stepped away from him and prepared to take a bath. As I finished and came out, he was still fast asleep. His eyelashes from his closed eyelids had created a shadow over his cheeks. The lack of his right eye felt unfitting for his beautiful face, and I was determined to add an eye to that wound. There was some scarring, but I felt it would look a lot better if I added an eye and cast some healing magic on the area.

I went down to the first floor and stood in front of my alchemy furnace.

“Materials for an artificial eye are an Evil Eye’s eyeball, an Unseeing Crystal Lens, Glittering Holy Water, and since I want it to be red, I’ll add a ruby to it. What additional abilities should I add? I should make it something useful. Maybe I’ll use the Glasses of Truth,” I mumbled.

I went over to my infinite storage trunk, took the materials out, and tossed them into the black alchemy furnace. The materials dissolved into the purified water that I had in the furnace. As I put my hands above it, I constructed an image of the ingredients and the final product in my head and poured my magic in.

The purified water glowed with a rainbow light, and an artificial eye rose to the surface. I pinched the eyeball with my fingers. A red iris was in the middle of the white eyeball.

“It’s very well-made. As I thought, I’m a genius alchemist,” I said as I put the eyeball onto a petri dish. A small hexagram pattern could be seen in the red iris. The pattern was proof that the ability, Anagram of Truth, had been successfully applied. It was a good ability, so I was sure that Mr. Julius would be satisfied.

I took the petri dish and headed back to my room. The sun was setting, but he was still fast asleep on my bed. I headed towards him to fit this eyeball into his socket. *Isn’t it weird that I’m approaching him like this? This is my room and my bed. Why does it seem like this is his room now? Is it because of his aura as a former general?*

I approached him. He was sound asleep and breathing regularly on my cute bed that was illuminated by the late afternoon sun. After pondering over whether I should wake him up, my curiosity had won out, and I decided to fit him with this eyeball. I put the petri dish on my bedside table.

"Mr. Julius, wake up. It's night already. Nighttime. Let's have dinner," I called. I peered in closer at him as I tried to tug on his robe. In the next instant, he opened his eyes and twisted my arm. As I met his cold stare, I flashed a goofy smile. "Good morning, Mr. Julius," I said.

"Oh, it's just you, the idiot," he said.

"Don't give me a weird nickname. Call me Miss Chloe or Master."

"Don't sneak up on me, idiot. I might kill you." He released my arm and sighed. He then sank deeper into my bed, surrounded by the colorful butterfly-and-flower-patterned cushions on my bed. *He looks like he's straight out of a fairy tale.*

"Stop calling me an idiot. Is your vocabulary limited? I'm the great Chloe, who made the Scale of Miracles in just three years! I'm called a genius alchemist on the streets, you know," I informed him proudly.

"Unfortunately, I'm not too well-versed in alchemy. I don't really care if you're great."

"That's fine. I don't expect you to go all 'Wow! Miss Chloe's a genius! Amazing!' or anything." I pouted as I saw the beautiful Mr. Julius monopolizing my bed and saying mean words.

I wasn't here to argue. I rubbed my twisted right arm, throbbing with pain, and held the petri dish with the eyeball in front of him. "Take a look, Mr. Julius. Your artificial eye. It even has the Anagram of Truth embedded in it! To transfer this ability to your eye, I needed the Glasses of Truth, which can only be occasionally found in the Northern Caves after defeating The One Who Understands All. It's super-duper rare and very expensive, so you should be grateful."

"Stop shouting. I just woke up, and your voice is doing a number on my head," he grumbled.

"Were you listening to me? A normal adventurer would cry with joy if they received this kind of ability," I said.

"Be more concise."

“Are you my boss or something?” I huffed.

“You’re too roundabout.”

“And you’re too straightforward. Alchemy requires a lot of materials, and one must always properly explain their products’ effects to their customer. In other words, talking is important. I’m in the service industry, so it might not be a good fit for you. But you’ve got a beautiful appearance, so if I just place you in my shop, girls might be all over you.”

Wait, that’s a great idea. I’ll make so much more money that way. I grinned. *It might be good if I make a lot of cute automatic lamps targeted towards young women.*

There was a moment of silence. “If I’m in the store, I’d probably scare your customers away,” he said.

“The only people who know of the Black Prince Julius are those in the military, some commanding officers, and the nobility. Maybe some of the bloodthirsty wealthy people that frequented the Slave Arena would also recognize you, but the girls in the city would only see a beautiful man. They’d only think that you’re handsome.”

“You’ve made it abundantly clear that you like my face,” he said teasingly.

You always seem bored, but then you suddenly tease me. I have to always be on guard, or I’ll get rattled. I should be careful. “I’m just speaking from an objective standpoint. Anyways, I’m here to fit this eye on you, so sit still.”

“Do as you like.” He continued to lie in the cushions as he closed his eyes. I couldn’t reach his face from my position.

“Mr. Julius, turn your head towards me. I can’t reach you,” I said.

“I’m tired, and I don’t want to move.”

“I’m your master. Listen to my requests.”

“I don’t want to move, but you can, I’m sure. Do as you like, Master.”

My, my. In just one day, I’m wrapped around his finger. “You were rumored to be a cruel and cold-hearted Black Prince, but you can hold a conversation like a normal person,” I said.

He continued talking with his eyes closed, “Do you think a man that can’t talk at all could unify and control an army?”

“That’s true. I guess rumors are just rumors.” With a petri dish in one hand, I climbed atop my bed to reach his face.

I sleep here every day, but it’s surprisingly very uncomfortable now. My mattress is so soft that I feel like I might drop this eyeball.

“Now then,” he whispered darkly, “I can take the king’s head if that’s what you desire. What do you say, Chloe? Should I kill everyone you hate?”

“Don’t talk like a demon king. Stop falling back on your cruel ways. I really am not interested.”

“You’re boring.”

“Do you like bloodthirsty women that go, ‘Oh please, sir, kill the royal family for me!’ or something? You have odd tastes, Mr. Julius,” I said, trying to mimic a troubled woman’s voice.

He sighed and fell silent. *Stop doing that. You make it seem as though my voice acting was terrible or something.* The silence in the room was hard to bear. I was glad he kept his eyes closed as I felt my cheeks growing hot from embarrassment. I was straddled on top of his knees to get closer to his face, so I would hate it if he misunderstood and noted that I wasn’t used to men or the like.

I didn’t get all shy just because I was close to him. I was through with men. Every time I remembered that traitor Cyril’s face, I punched my pillows. I’d even messed up my alchemy, accidentally creating a Relic of Darkness multiple times.

“This might hurt a little since I’ll be touching your eye,” I said. I pinched the artificial eye with one hand and opened his scarred, right eyelids with the other. I brought the artificial eye closer to the wound. Thin, yellow, worm-like strands that resembled nerves extended from the eye and was slowly absorbed into Mr. Julius’s body. It slipped into his socket and in the center of his beautiful white eye was a glowing scarlet pupil.

I covered my hand over his right eye, closing his eyelids, as I chanted a healing spell. “The great droplet of healing, the gospel from the heavens.” My hand

grew slightly warm as a green light slowly appeared and melted away.

I removed my hand and observed Mr. Julius's face. An artificial eye with a red pupil. Upon closer inspection, the scars surrounding his eye were still visible, but his long eyelashes and eyelids seemed to have been restored. I swiped his bangs from his face and took a good look at him. *It looks natural. He was beautiful with just one eye, but he looks a lot better with both. The artificial eye seems to have fit in well.*

I was very satisfied with the result. Suddenly, his eyes flew open, and I met his dull-blue and scarlet eyed gaze. "How is it? Can you see?" I asked.

"I see the face of a normal-looking woman," he replied.

"Yep, I'm sure you can. The artificial eye that I created isn't just a decoration. It's connected with your nerves and will act like a normal eye. I also used my healing magic to heal your wound. Do you want to see yourself in the mirror?"

"No need. My face is reflected in your eyes. Let me have a closer look."

"Huh?" I blinked. *Well, I guess. We're pretty close right now, so I assume he's reflected in my eyes.* His beautiful face was close to mine. I noticed that he had grabbed both sides of my waist as I was still straddled above him.



What, is he pent-up because of his long stay at the Slave Arena? Like any woman will do or something?

There was a moment of silence as he observed me before he muttered, "Chloe, I can see your plain-looking face, but I don't quite understand the effects of the Anagram of Truth."

So, you were just confirming its effects? Jeez, you almost gave me the wrong idea. He once again looked bored and let me go. I immediately got up from the bed.

"So, you *are* curious about its effects. Do you want to know? If you do, get up and eat some food," I said.

"Explain the effects first."

"Will you listen to my other orders, then?"

"Sure, Master."

"It's best if humans are obedient like you currently are. We're having pea soup today. As for its effects, the Anagram of Truth allows the user to see vengeful spirit monsters. They don't have a corporeal form and can normally only be defeated by Holy Magic. However, thanks to your eye, you're able to defeat these monsters as well! It's an effect that's highly coveted by those who are unable to use magic."

"Oh. That's it?"

"That eye's expensive, you know?! You'll soon be thanking me with tears in your eyes, considering spirit-type monsters are very common in most caves."

He silently got up from the bed. I was very, very unsatisfied with his response.

◆ Ms. Popular in Astria

THE next day, I took Mr. Julius to the main street in the royal capital, Astria. My shop was in the heart of the city, so a few steps outside, and we were already on the main street. It was very convenient, and a fine place for a shop.

Last night, for whatever reason, I allowed Mr. Julius to sleep on my bed, so I pulled out a sofa from the empty room that I used as storage. I placed it in a corner of my room and slept there for the night. I wasn't quite sure who the master was in this relationship, but he wouldn't budge, so I had no choice but to comply. For the past three years, I gained the ability to sleep wherever I needed, so I had a good night's rest.

Feeling refreshed, I woke up the still-sleeping Mr. Julius, and made sure he got dressed. I still didn't have clothes for him, so I had him wear the robes that went down to his feet and black slacks. The slacks were for men, but his legs were so long that it looked a bit short on him. Seeing that irritated me a little. With good looks and a good physique, anything he did felt condescending to me. I had him wear a pair of men's hemp sandals. His clothes looked plain, but that only seemed to accentuate his good looks.

I threw away the dirty clothes and shoes that he'd been wearing before we met. I was planning on getting him new clothes anyway, so it felt unnecessary to go through the trouble of washing them.

"Look, Mr. Julius. This is the royal capital, Astria, the heart of the kingdom of Astria! My shop's on the main street of the shopping district in the capital! I've gotten this far in just three years... I'm sure my mother's smiling at me from her grave," I boasted.

"This is the heart of the capital? I thought we were out in the boonies or something," he said as he stepped in front of my shop. He took a moment to observe my house and shop.

My shop had red brick walls and a black roof. A storefront sign and several

star-shaped automatic lamps were hung on the entrance. I was afraid that people would mistake me for a lamp store, so I also hung a waterproof Chaotic Gaze in a birdcage in front of my shop. As the name implied, a Chaotic Gaze was an eyeball. It was the size of a child's head and was floating within the cage.

"The Dystiana Empire is more than twice as large as the Astria Kingdom. It might seem like the countryside to you, but it's still prospering quite well. Don't knock the countryside until you've tried it," I replied.

"Chloe, what's that?"

"Oh, are you interested in that? Has alchemy finally piqued your interest?"

"It's an eye," he said as he stared at the Chaotic Gaze and ignored my sneers. The red eye, which composed the majority of its black body, blinked shyly.

"Hello," it greeted Mr. Julius with the voice of a young girl. As it was not able to actually speak, the voice had echoed directly in our heads.

"This is the Chaotic Gaze. I call her Ms. Gazey. She greets people in front of the door, and if she sees someone trying to break into my shop, she uses her Ms. Gazey Beam to burn them to a crisp. She's more of a security item. Unlike you, she follows orders very well. She also has some intelligence and can discern good people from bad. She can also read minds," I explained.

The Chaotic Gaze, hearing my explanation, floated proudly within the birdcage.

"Looks like a monster to me," Mr. Julius said.

"She's not. She's a product of alchemy."

"Do you think of the design for stuff like this?"

"Yeah. Alchemy relies heavily on imagination, so each design illustrates my creativity."

He continued to look at Ms. Gazey with his red and blue eyes. *He seems to want to say something, but he's silent, so I'll leave him be.*

"We've got a long day ahead of us. We have to buy you clothes and weapons and...that's it. Maybe we're not *too* busy," I said.

“Hurry up, idiot,” he called from a short distance away. As I stood in front of the shop, head cocked to one side and arms folded, he had already left me behind.

I jogged over, catching up to him.

Today, I was dressed in a lace headkerchief and a red apron dress. I worked year-round and was usually dressed in this attire. The only thing that changed was the color of my apron dress. I had a bag with unlimited storage slung over my shoulder. This bag was directly connected to my storage trunk at home. It was a plain, cream-colored cloth bag. I didn’t want to make it too flashy for fear of it getting stolen.

“Why are you walking ahead of me? Do you even know where the shops are at?” I huffed.

“Nope.”

“Then who’s the idiot here?! You’ll get lost!”

“You’re too slow.”

“I was explaining Ms. Gazey to you because you seemed interested in her! You stared at her with a passionate gaze, so she might’ve gotten the wrong idea. She must be crying by now.”

“That thing has a gender?”

“Of course, it does. The voice sounded like a girl’s, didn’t it? A sweet, charming, pretty girl’s voice.”

“You have poor taste.”

“Do you have any complaints about my artistic talents, hm? Just because you have a pretty face, you shouldn’t get too ahead of yourself.”

We continued walking alongside each other. In the center of the main shopping district were a plaza and a large fountain. Shops circled around the fountain. This area was the best place to have a store and thus was full of extremely popular or luxurious shops. They included a sweets shop that the royal family frequented, a perfume shop that the wealthy frequented, clothing stores, and restaurants.

One step into an alleyway, and the shops were suddenly a lot more frugal, targeted towards the common folk. My alchemy shop wasn't marketed as a luxurious one, but certain items could go up to the price of Mr. Julius himself. It was highly dependent on the request.

"The weapon and armor store that adventurers use is in front of my shop and to the right of the alleyway," I said. It was lively in front of the fountain—there were parents with their children and couples. People waved at me, and I waved back.

"I thought the Sagrid family fell because its wrongdoings had come to light. Everyone sure is friendly towards you," Mr. Julius said dubiously, looking down at me as I greeted others.

"Why do you seem a bit disappointed? Did you want people to throw rocks at me as I walked by, getting berated as the Wretched Chloe of Sagrid?"

"I don't want that. I just expected it."

"That's all in the past. It's been three years. Things change. They say perseverance prevails, and that's pretty true here. My sincerity has soothed the hearts of the people, so they're sympathetic and kind towards me now. You're free to call me an angel if you'd like."

He fell silent once more. *I really wish you'd retort. Your silence makes it sound like my jokes fell flat. Maybe I should make a new contract to ban these silences.* We walked through the round plaza that was illuminated by the bright sun and went into the alleyway. It was in the shade and away from the main crowd, but there were still cafés, sweet shops, locksmiths, clock stores, and various other stores.

Mr. Julius looked down at me and said sarcastically, "You were probably much more amusing three years ago, when you only had the rags on your back and resented the nobility."

"Why do you think that? I told you that I'm an angel. I didn't resent the nobility, and I didn't even have time for that back then. It took me three years to be able to accumulate enough wealth with my alchemy to purchase you, so I'm sure we wouldn't have met back then."

"So, you went from rags to a boring normal-looking woman in three years, huh?"

"A boring normal-looking woman, you say. I think that's perfect. I can't believe you prefer women that go, 'Please dye the streets of the royal capital with blood for me!' You have horrible taste." Unfortunately for him, I wasn't the type of woman that preferred blood or evil, so I wouldn't be able to live up to his expectations. I assumed he preferred fighting since he was a former general. "To satisfy your bloodthirsty urges, I'll have you fight powerful monsters. I'll work you like a dog, so let's buy some good weapons."

There was a brief silence before he spoke. "There are no good or bad weapons. With enough force, any dull blade can kill a human."

"Are you a berserker? What kind of train of thought do you have? Since you're strong, I'll get you good weapons to complement that. You'll become even stronger and defeat monsters for me. My alchemy shop will become even more popular! Equipment is very important, so I'll get you something good. Don't sound like some kind of primitive man that doesn't know how to wield a weapon. Were you perhaps raised in the mountain by wolves?"

He completely ignored me and made a selfish request. "I want a dragon, Chloe." He sounded as though I had no authority to deny him.

"They're expensive. Besides, where can we keep something like that? Only the knights' post, the royal family's grand garden, or Duke Sagrid's large estate can house a dragon. I don't have any space at my house. You're too big yourself and I want my bed back."

"With a dragon, we can ride it together. It'll cut your transportation time and expenses. It'll be more efficient for you to gather materials as well. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"That's true, but still..."

"You don't dislike me sleeping on your bed. So, I won't give your bed back."

"Why are you so stubborn?" I sighed deeply.

It's only been two days since I purchased Mr. Julius. I feel like I'm wrapped around his finger, but I'm a little excited. A dragon, huh? Maybe I should buy

one. It's expensive, though.

I decided to think about that later and chose to first lead him into a store that sold equipment aimed towards experienced adventurers and soldiers. The store was spacious and filled with various clothing, weapons, and armor. They also had a warehouse with some inventory, so there was a good selection of items.

"Hello, Mr. Robert," I said.

"Ah, hello, Ms. Chloe. It's a rare sight to see you with a man," a brown-haired gentleman in a suit greeted me. His hair was gelled back, and he had a mustache. Mr. Robert turned thirty-six this year. He had a beautiful wife and five children. Due to the nature of my work, I frequented this shop and had gotten familiar with him.

"This is Mr. Julius. I purchased him from the Slave Arena yesterday. Mr. Robert, could you kindly pick clothing, armor, and a weapon suitable for him?" I requested. Mr. Julius, who had been standing behind me, suddenly tugged on my ear. *Ow.*

"Hey, idiot. You said that my face wasn't known around here. Why did you tell him where I came from?" he said.

"Nothing good will come out of hiding information. Also, I trust Mr. Robert." *He sure is a worrywart.* I wasn't an idiot like he said, so I had carefully picked who I talked to.

"Mr. Julius from the Slave Arena... That's the Black Prince Julius, isn't it? You've made a good purchase, Ms. Chloe," Mr. Robert said with a calm tone.

"I know!" I replied enthusiastically.

"If I recall, Black Prince Julius was sentenced to one hundred years in the Slave Arena," Mr. Robert said. "For every hundred wins, a year would be docked off his sentence. In theory, it was a death sentence, but he won every battle and survived for three years. Very impressive strength, indeed."

"Wow! Mr. Julius, I knew you were strong, but you never told me you were this amazing!" I said, looking up at him as I rubbed my tugged ear.

He looked away with a bored expression.

“Perhaps the arena’s owner had a change of heart, or perhaps he wanted to attract more customers, I heard that an incredible price was placed on him,” Mr. Robert continued. “No average citizen could possibly afford him, and even if they could, he was so feared that no one dared make the purchase. I knew someone with very particular tastes would’ve purchased him, but I didn’t expect that to be you. You certainly have a good eye, Ms. Chloe.”

“I’m glad you understand, Mr. Robert.”

“I’m only interested in the price of items. But I should warn you, Ms. Chloe, perhaps it’d be wise if you didn’t speak about this to others. It’s only been three years since the war; I’m sure many still tremble by simply hearing his name,” he cautioned me.

“You’re right. I’ll be careful.”

“I know you’re very intelligent. Maybe I’ve been a bit too nosy, but I’m a little worried if this reaches King Cyril and Queen Aliza’s ears. I hope nothing will happen to you,” Mr. Robert said with worry.

I hadn’t heard from my former fiancé King Cyril and my sister Aliza for three years. Those at the castle rarely heard rumors about citizens, and I believed that they may have thought that I was dead. I wasn’t hiding the fact that I was Chloe Sagrid, but it was also not the kind of thing I would divulge on my own. After three years, only a few people would talk about the Sagrids, if at all. I was the alchemist, Chloe. Only a select few knew about my former life of nobility.

“Thank you for your concern. I’ll be fine. Mr. Julius here is very powerful. If you would, could you select some armor and weapons as well as everyday clothes and shoes for him? I’d like a whole set, from his underwear to his shoes.”

“It’s truly an honor to be able to select armor and weapons for Black Prince Julius. Will you be buying quite a bit today?” Mr. Robert asked.

“This is a necessary expense, so I’ll pay as much as I need.”

“You’re generous. As always, I thank you for your patronage.” At once, Mr. Robert took out a tape measure and started to find the Black Prince’s sizes.

Mr. Julius obediently allowed his weight, arm length, and legs to be

measured. I was glad he was obedient, as I feared he might cause a stir. I was prepared for the worst, for I imagined him to be some sort of beast, ready to bite at anyone who dared to come close, but everything seemed to be going smoothly.

He was formerly Duke Craft of the Dystiana Empire—he had surely learned quite a few manners. Perhaps I was rude in assuming that he was a beast.

Three years ago, as a daughter of a duke, I had also learned to be polite and elegant, speaking in a refined manner. Now, not a hint of that could be seen from me, and I'd thought that Mr. Julius went through the same process.

I had some time on my hands, so I decided to look around the shop. As I was gazing at some new weapons and armor, Mr. Julius came over to me.

“Oh, are you done already?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to consult with Mr. Robert? You can buy any weapon and armor that you desire. Your master here will buy you anything,” I told him.

“Anything?” he said with a hint of a smile. His eyes weren’t smiling, which scared me a little.

“Don’t say dragon,” I said at once. “Do you like those beasts that much? Are you a dragon maniac?”

“A dragon knight is supposed to ride on a dragon. It’s a drag walking on the ground like ants.”

“Most people live every day by walking on the ground. A dragon is expensive. Do you think I have an infinite amount of money or something?”

“You’ve got some saved up, don’t you? Your lifestyle and clothes are frugal.”

“Hey, don’t say that! Apron dresses are cute! Doesn’t it give off an air of an alchemist? When I walk around like this, everyone will recognize me as Chloe from Chloe’s Alchemy Shop. I’m a walking advertisement.”

“I don’t really care about your apparel.”

"You're the one that commented on it first."

It made me irritated that any old robe would look decent with his good looks and style. *I didn't even know what kind of underwear men wore, so you're not even wearing anything underneath.* However, I couldn't point this out, as it was my responsibility to supply him with the necessary clothing.

"After we buy the necessities, we can go look at dragons. I think there is a dragon store on the edge of the capital. I don't know if you'd like any of them, though. What happened to the black dragon that you were riding three years ago?" I asked.

Before he was fighting in the Slave Arena, he was apparently flying around the battlefield on a black dragon. I had never seen this in person, however. While the war was raging, it felt as though it was none of my concern. I had only heard of Mr. Julius through rumors.

"Who knows? Got killed or released into the wild, probably," he said.

"Did the dragon like you?"

"I guess." He seemed to not be interested in anything, but I felt like he was a bit different when talking about dragons. There was a tinge of nostalgia in his reply.

"Did it have a name?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I just thought of something. Dragons live a lot longer than us, and are extremely smart, right?"

"Yeah. They're a lot smarter and a lot purer than humans."

"You seem to like dragons. I can make you something good."

"With your alchemy?"

"That's right. I'll do you a huge favor, so tell me its name."

There was a pause before he said, "Helios."

"What a cute name. Helios. I'll keep that in mind. If Helios is still alive, we may not need to purchase a dragon. Could I postpone going to that shop for a day?"

“Fine.”

Because he gave in this time, I thanked him. I was a bit hesitant at first, but I thought I might as well say it. Verbally expressing gratitude was free, and after three years in the service industry, I was able to say it without a care. My heart wasn’t that into it, however.

“You should go with Mr. Robert to pick out weapons and clothes of your choosing,” I said.

“It doesn’t really make a difference to me, so I asked him to choose what he thinks would fit. I’ve told you that I don’t care too much about weapons.”

“Are you sure you don’t care about clothing? What would you do if Mr. Robert had bad taste? He’s an old man, so he might choose something totally uncool, like leopard print shirts and pants.” *That actually sounds hilarious, though.*

Mr. Julius looked down at me with a mocking expression. “Talking with an idiot makes my head hurt.”

“You were the one who came up to me while I was browsing the weapons. Don’t bother me.”

“Do you use a sword, Chloe?”

“I use alchemy. I can use some magic, so I mostly choose staves that increase my magic. I’m not very strong, so having a sword would only make me weaker.”

“But you’re still interested in swords?”

“Every now and then, I get a customer that requests for me to add a special ability to their sword or armor, just like your artificial eye. I usually recommend the Anagram of Truth, since that allows the sword to cut through spirits. It’s extremely expensive, but a few capable knights and adventurers still want it. Observing the various weapons here may better equip me for requests like that in the future.”

As Mr. Julius and I were talking in the back, I heard Mr. Robert call out to us. It seemed he had finished selecting Mr. Julius’s stuff. An impressive number of clothes, armor, and weapons were laid on the counter, covering it entirely. Mr.

Robert was clacking away on the abacus. As I was waiting for my total, I confirmed the items that the two had selected.

It seems that, unfortunately, Mr. Robert had good fashion sense and didn't have weird clothes like a leopard print ensemble. *How very unamusing. It's honestly a little disappointing—I wanted to see Mr. Julius try to pull off a full leopard print attire.*

True to his nickname, the counter was filled with black clothing. It wasn't too eye-catching, but the quality was very good. Anyone could tell by simply touching the cloth. There was also a black mantle, a sword, and a spear.

"That mantle looks normal at a glance, but it's woven out of Ariadne's Thread—you actually made this thread with your alchemy. It's lightweight and very durable; the threads are self-regenerating, so any rips or tears would be fixed. It can be washed as is, making it a huge help to housewives. The sword and spear are made of the Diamond of Eternity which was also created with your alchemy. Of course, the weapons are already of excellent quality, but they're also very sensitive to magic. In other words, you can apply magic to the weapons, allowing you to assist Mr. Julius in combat. This old man here chose these items in hopes that you two would get along, even during combat," Mr. Robert explained at length as he was clacking away at the abacus.

"Wow, thank you so much!" I said with an enthusiastic smile. Internally, however, I was frightened at the total cost.

Both the Ariadne's Thread and the Diamond of Eternity were very expensive. Extremely expensive. As the seller, I was well aware of how costly they were. The fact that he bought these items from me, turned them into products, and sold them back, showed his prudent nature. At his core, he was a salesman. Mr. Julius thought that I was very rich, but it wasn't as if my funds were unlimited. If I were to buy a dragon on top of this, my entire savings might be sucked dry.

I glanced up at Mr. Julius, but he was staring out a window with a bored look on his face. *I'm certain that you don't understand the cost of these items. You're a dragon knight, but you don't know the cost of weapons? Were you really a general?*

"What are you looking at, idiot? I get that you like my face, but don't stare at

me. I find it unpleasant,” Mr. Julius said haughtily as he noticed my gaze.

“Big talk for a guy that’s not wearing any underwear,” I mumbled under my breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I was glad he didn’t hear me, and I felt a bit better.

“Five million gold in total, Ms. Chloe,” Mr. Robert said.

“These clothes and weapons came to the same price as Mr. Julius,” I said. I knew it was going to be expensive, but I still couldn’t hide my shock when I heard the total. *It’s not like I can’t pay up, but I suppose I’ll have to do with pea soup for a while as I defeat dangerous monsters and gather rare materials.*

I had received quite a few requests, but it was too much of a hassle to gather the necessary items, so I had them on hold. If I completed these requests, I could make around two Mr. Juliuses.

“The Diamond of Eternity and Ariadne’s Thread are very expensive. I had the best artisan in the city make these products for me, so it’s very costly. Besides, Mr. Julius is of noble birth, just like you, right? I wouldn’t want my store’s reputation to take a toll if I provided him with cheap clothes,” Mr. Robert said calmly as he displayed the total. If a citizen were to work themselves to death for a year, they wouldn’t even come close to being able to pay this amount. He was calm because he knew that I could pay up.

I was on rather friendly terms with Mr. Robert, but the word “discount” was never used between us.

“I understand,” I nodded, still shocked by the fact that I blew ten million gold on Mr. Julius in two days. I opened my bag, which was connected to my unlimited storage, and took out five rolls, each containing one million gold, and handed it to Mr. Robert. He smiled at me.

“Mr. Julius, place these items into my bag,” I said.

“Why do I have to do that?” he said.

“Because this is your stuff! Clean up after yourself! I’m not your wife, I’m your master!”

He clicked his tongue.

“Did you just click your tongue? I just bought you items worth five million gold! You shouldn’t take up that attitude towards me!”

“You bought these items because you wanted to. I never made this request.”

I won’t say it because I’m kind, but you should spend the rest of your life bare naked. Since Mr. Julius stood with his hands folded in front of him, I reluctantly cleaned the counter. Both the mantle and the weapons were light, so I was able to store them with ease. The items all disappeared into my bag, as though it had sucked everything in. I noticed that Mr. Julius’s underwear looked more like shorts as opposed to my triangular-shaped underwear. *I might have to buy them again, so I should keep that in mind.*

“Until next time, Ms. Chloe.”

“Indeed, Mr. Robert.”

Happy with his sales, he bowed towards me before gazing at Mr. Julius.

“Julius, do take care of Ms. Chloe. She really has been through a lot, even if she doesn’t act like it. No matter what others may say about the Sagrids, she is of no fault at all. Everyone understands that now.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving him my heartfelt gratitude. I had never heard him clearly speak of my societal position before.

“She’s quite popular in the city now. If you don’t take good care of her, there’ll be quite a few people after you,” Mr. Robert said, sounding like a worried father.

Mr. Julius remained silent. Without saying a word, he quickly left the store. *I guess he deserves some credit for not snapping back.* I waved at Mr. Robert and left the store as well.

“Since we’re done with shopping, let’s grab a bite to eat. There’s a great place where a beautiful lady serves you food,” I said. I jogged after Mr. Julius before standing alongside him. The sun was no longer directly above our heads—it was past noon.

“Let’s go home. You have something you need to do, Chloe,” Mr. Julius said,

glancing at me.

“I do?”

“Alchemy. You said you’d do something about that dragon.”

“Is your mind filled with dragons? If I don’t eat, I can’t concentrate and won’t be able to use my alchemy.”

“You’re a useless idiot.”

“I’m a human. Even a genius alchemist needs magic and concentration to work.”

“Work like your life depends on it.”

“No. I don’t even feel like working when there’s no profit to be had. I’m going out of my way to invite you to a place. We only have pea soup at home.” Since I would be eating pea soup for a while, I wanted my last splurge to be delicious food. “You’re still a growing boy. Don’t you want to eat meat? You look like a guy who loves meat.”

“I was munching on moldy bread in the Slave Arena. If the food’s edible, I don’t really care.”

“That’s what a beast thinks! Remember who you were... You were of noble birth!” I fake sobbed.

He tugged on my ear again. *Ow.*

“Are you really an idiot? Don’t loudly say the word ‘noble’ in public.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m supposed to hide my true identity, aren’t I? The owner of the shop that we came from said so too. Did you forget? Is your memory that weak?”

“Oh, so you *were* listening to us. I guess you *were* raised well.”

“*You* should listen a bit more, idiot.”

“I am, I am. I didn’t forget because I was too worried about money or anything.”

We continued to walk while arguing. A lady from the stall called out to me.

“Ms. Chloe! So, you’ve gotten a boyfriend!” she said as she handed me a bag of food. Other ladies from different stalls came out to offer me bags of food as well.

I was unable to correct them that I had in fact purchased a slave and smiled weakly. Mr. Julius stayed silent, but he was very handsome, and the ladies kept congratulating me. I had gratefully accepted the food that they gave, and by the time I had reached the restaurant, both my hands were full.

“Isn’t that great, Ms. Popular? Let’s go home,” Mr. Julius said with a tone of satisfaction.

I had never felt so unhappy being called popular.

◆ Mr. Julius the Dragon Maniac and his Beloved Dragon Helios

I had planned to work Mr. Julius like a dog, but I feel like I'm being worked instead. This is odd. Things aren't going according to plan.

As I was trying to imagine items for my alchemy, I laid out materials on the counter. Mr. Julius was staring at me as he sat on a chair in my alchemy room. He still hadn't changed into the clothes that I bought for him, meaning he still wasn't wearing underwear. I didn't want him to sit on my red velvety chair while going commando.

“Are you going to make a dragon out of alchemy?” he asked, observing me.

If he's bored, he should just go and take a bath.

“Do you think I could make a huge dragon out of my cute little alchemy furnace? Are you unaware of the conservation of mass? I can't create anything larger than the total volume of my materials,” I replied.

“Cut the small talk; just hurry it up.”

“You're the one who asked.”

He really goes at his own pace. I feel for his former subordinates.

“You have a problem with that?”

“Nope,” I replied, feigning innocence. *He knows that I think he's a pain.* “Now what should we do here? Your neck already has that contract collar.”

His neck had a black color with a small lock. It looked like a decoration, but it was to show that he was bound under contract.

“An earring sounds painful, so let's make it into a ring. That sounds good,” I said.

“A ring?”

“A dragon’s flute, Carmilla’s ring, Calling of the Heavens, Microscopic Stone, Céfiro’s Tree of Life...” I said, listing off ingredients. “Mr. Julius, you spent a long time with Helios, correct?”

“I’ve raised him since he was an egg.”

“That’s amazing. May I have a lock of your hair?”

“Go nuts.”

“Don’t look so unsatisfied. It hasn’t even grown evenly—no one will notice if it’s cut a bit more.”

I took a knife and cut a lock from the back of his head, where the hair had grown the longest. He glared at me, but I ignored his gaze. *You really should stop glaring at people.*

I tossed all the ingredients into my alchemy furnace. I placed Mr. Julius’s hair in last and proceeded to pour my magic into the furnace. I dismantled every material and tried to recreate a new item in my head. It may sound difficult, but alchemy requires the user to understand each material and have a lot of imagination. When I was an apprentice, my master taught me that.

Depending on the difficulty of the creation process, the consumption of magic would differ. Should an alchemist run out of magic, they would need to perform alchemy over multiple days. Because I didn’t possess a lot of magic, I always thought that it was a bit unfortunate that I couldn’t create items that I desired immediately. The amount of magic that a person had was determined at birth, so there was nothing I could do to change that.

“What are you making?” he asked.

Because I was so focused, I wanted him to leave me alone. As I stayed quiet, he caught on and fell silent as well. The water in the furnace started to glow rainbow-colored. *I’m running out of magic. I feel dizzy.*

Because Mr. Julius had told me to work like my life depended on it, I was determined to finish this before the end of the day. *I’ll have him bow down to me, Chloe, the genius alchemist!*

A small ring floated to the top. It was embedded with a dull-blue jewel, the

same color as Mr. Julius's left eye. The ring had a silver band and was carved with a dragon scale design. I took the ring out of the rainbow water, and the water turned back to its transparent form.

"I did it! It's very well done. It even has the Dragon Flute effect and Health Stabilization. I'm a genius!" I crowed.

"You're done? Hand it over." He extended his hand as though it were his right.

I covered the Dragon's Ring with both my hands. *I can't think of a better name, so that'll do for now.*

"You're greatly mistaken if you think everything will be handed to you on a silver platter," I told him firmly. "The materials for this are expensive! In total, it costs about three of you!" Although materials were generally free, as I gathered them myself, this item would be extremely expensive if sold. I wasn't exaggerating.

"I'm not familiar with the effects of that ring, so its value is news to me," he said.

"Would you like to know?"

"Please do, Master," he said as though he were begging. *He really wants this ring, huh?*

Because I really wanted to explain the ring's effects, I decided to do so. "This is the Dragon's Ring. The Dragon's Flute is already a product of alchemy that can call a dragon, but I upgraded it into a ring. It seems like you and Helios have a bond, so this is made especially for you."

"Then hurry up and hand it over," he demanded.

"You're a bit too hasty. Listen until the end of my explanation. With this ring, provided that Helios is still alive, you should be able to summon him. Since I have no space to take care of a dragon, that Health Stabilization effect will allow you to store Helios inside the ring."

"You talk too much."

"I know, you listen very well, don't you?" I said with a smile.

Because he had been raised well, though he looked annoyed, he still listened to everything I had to say. *How heartwarming.*

Noticing my smile, he clicked his tongue. *I'm used to that. You sure can click your tongue well, can't you?*

"I understand the gist of things. What do you want me to do now?" he asked.

"I want you to thank me." Even between close friends, there should be proper manners. I didn't have a close relationship with Mr. Julius yet, but he should still be polite to me. He still hadn't expressed a single word of gratitude towards me—as an adult, I expected him to act better.

"Thank you, Chloe, for doing all this for me. You have my gratitude," he said after thinking for a moment. His voice sounded a lot kinder and sweeter.

"Ew, gross," I said, unable to help myself.

He stood up and clasped my hands in his. His hands were a lot larger than mine and surprisingly warm. He then tried to pry my hands apart, and I fought back with all my strength.

"I expressed my gratitude. Hand it over," he said.

"Ow! Are you a child? Do you want to meet little Helios that badly? If I give this to you right now, you will use it right away. A dragon might fly right through my window, and it'll be total chaos."

"Then where *can* I use it?"

So, you were planning on using it here and now? Thank god I didn't hand it over.

"The wings of a dragon are very powerful, and if it were to suddenly descend on this quiet neighborhood, it'd cause trouble for everyone. We should go outside the capital," I told him.

"Then let's go."

"No. I just used up all my magic. I'm exhausted, and I didn't even get a chance to eat. It's almost night. We won't summon him today."

"Fine. Then I'll carry you."

"H-Hey! Don't carry me under your arm like I'm some sort of luggage! You pervert! Pervert!"

As he tried to carry me, I ran away while screaming. It might have seemed like we were playing around, but we were both rather desperate. Mr. Julius, especially, was glaring at me with murderous intent. *How simple-minded. You're really serious about that dragon? Come on, you're an adult!*

"Chloe, cut it out," he said.

"That's my line," I snapped. "It's dark already, and if Helios is still in the Dystiana Empire, it'll take an hour for him to get here. It'd be nighttime by then, and he might get lost. As his owner, wouldn't you feel bad for your dragon?"

"...Damn it." He stopped chasing after me.

Physically, his capabilities were way above mine, so I was easily caught by him. He was about to carry me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He wouldn't do anything cute like carrying me like a princess. *It's not like I want to be princess carried by him, but he looks beautiful and is a former duke. It's a shame that it's not his first instinct to treat me like a princess. Not like I care, though.*

"I'll make some preparations today, so once you summon Helios tomorrow, we'll fly to the North Monster Mountains. There's a monster I'd like for you to defeat. If we collect the materials, I can fulfill a request that costs about your arm. That monster's a bit of a pain to defeat, so I'll leave it to you," I said.

"Fine. Hey, what are we going to do if Helios is dead?" he said, throwing me onto the floor.

Did you have to throw me onto the floor? You'll get in trouble for littering, damn you. I was dizzy from my lack of magic, and I landed on the floor with a splat. Finding my landing humorous, Mr. Julius had a mocking smile on his face. Why are you so mean? I didn't think you'd be this mean-spirited.

I stood up with a huff while rubbing my back. "Do you think Helios is dead?"

"No."

"Then we'll be fine. Let's eat dinner, take a bath, and go to sleep. I'll have you

working a lot starting tomorrow." I handed him the ring that I'd been cupping with both of my hands.

It should be fine. He cares about Helios, so I'd doubt he'll try to call the dragon in the middle of the night.

After staring at the ring, he put it on the ring finger of his left hand. I questioned his choice of placement, but since it seemed to have no special meaning, I stayed quiet.



THE next day, we headed towards a grassy field that was on the outskirts of the capital. It was a good distance away from the main road. Mr. Julius was wearing the super expensive black mantle woven out of Ariadne's Thread, had a super expensive sword that was around half my height, made from the Diamond of Eternity on his belt, and a super expensive spear on his back. I had my usual bag and a staff that greatly increased my magic capabilities. I was normal looking while Mr. Julius was enveloped in extremely expensive clothing. This must be the dark side of the wealth gap.

"Well then, Mr. Julius, you ten million gold man," I said.

"I'm sparkling in your eyes, aren't I?" he replied.

"Very much so."

He seemed to be in a good mood today as he joked around with me, but he was indeed sparkling. His golden hair and odd eye look, along with his beautiful face and good physique, were only enhanced by his full black attire. It was enough to tickle a maiden's heart, and he was fawned over as we walked through the city.

He was starting to be regarded as my "boyfriend" throughout the city. Since I was popular, rumors about me spread like wildfire. Mr. Julius didn't seem angry, and it may be better if he was regarded as such so that he wouldn't have to deal with the passionate feelings from other women. *Because he put the ring on his ring finger, people may think he's my husband. Why did you do that? Do you really miss Helios that much? I'm sure you do, but still.*

"I'll explain how to use the ring. It's very simple. Even if you don't have or

can't use any magic, you'll be able to use this item. The good thing about alchemy is that it makes items that are accessible to everyone," I said.

"Enough talk, get to the point."

"You're too hasty. Call out to Helios towards the ring. Wait, is Helios male? I've been calling him a 'he' this entire time."

"Female dragons don't let people on their backs. It's common sense," Mr. Julius said, mocking me with a smile.

"It may be common sense amongst you dragon maniacs, but I didn't know that." *It's been three days since I bought him, and I've already gotten used to his remarks. I don't get as annoyed. I'm so kind, so benevolent.*

He raised the ring in front of his chest and said, "Helios."

The blue jewel on the ring lit up, and a beam of light came from the sky. A pillar of light was created before it immediately disappeared. The blue jewel continued to give off a dull glow.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Easy to use, and highly effective. That's the amazing part about my items," I replied.

"How long do we have to wait?" He sounded irritated.

Do you want to meet him that badly? You're trembling with excitement. You haven't been able to meet him for three years, so an extra hour or two shouldn't be too bad.

"How long would it take for Helios to fly here?" I asked.

"If dragons don't have people on their backs, they can fly exponentially faster. Helios is the fastest dragon in Dystiana. Even from the empire's frontier, it shouldn't take more than an hour," he replied.

"Then that's how long we have to wait," I said as I sat on a large rock. Mr. Julius stood next to me, glaring at the sky with his arms folded in front of him. He looked good just standing there.

Since I was bored, I decided to stretch my arms and legs. Because I had used

all my magic yesterday, I was still a bit tired. I recovered a bit, but I wasn't at full strength. *How odd. I'm still young.* Since I was bored, I decided to start a conversation.

"You're pretty normal, but why did everyone call you cold-hearted and cruel?"

He talked quite a bit when he took my bed, but he was a silent person in general. The silence would continue if I didn't say something. We had plenty of time while waiting anyways. Mr. Julius glanced at me before looking away.

"You just thought I was an idiot that wasn't worth talking to, didn't you?" I accused.

"If you know, then be quiet."

"I'm bored, so let's talk. If you're not willing, I'll just talk by myself. Did I tell you about today's request?"

"No. I'm not interested."

"As humans, we mustn't lose our interest and curiosity in things! You're still young! How old are you, anyways?"

"Twenty-five."

"Wait, you're actually young?! I thought you were around thirty or something..." *He's not that much older than me, but still has an air of dignity to him. I suppose it's because his usual attitude is so haughty.* "You're not that much older than me, but you were a duke and a general of an army. Before I was thrown away by my kingdom, I was spending my days without a care in the world, as the daughter of a duke."

"So, you would've turned into a bigger idiot than you currently are," he sneered.

That I can't deny. I don't even want to remember my past life.

"I used to be a former, elegant noblewoman, you know. I'm still a beautiful maiden alchemist," I replied. "Ah, and about that request—it's from the owner of a merchant store. He would like a Monocle of Authenticity. It's a pair of glasses used to appraise items and identify fakes."

"He can't determine authenticity with his own two eyes? He's a failure as a merchant," he scoffed.

"You're rather harsh. Were you abused by a merchant in the past?" I asked.

He fell silent. I guess he thought that question wasn't worth answering. And he's not wrong. I coughed.

"When you think about the total monetary damage that fakes cause, it's a lot better to have the Monocle of Authenticity. The monocle is a tool and won't make mistakes," I said.

"And?"

"In the North Monster Mountains, there's a monster called the Sharp-eyed Mitra. I need its eye, so I need you to defeat a Mitra. Have you ever fought one before?"

"No. I've killed enemy soldiers, but never a monster. I'm not a guard."

"Aren't humans and monsters completely different in terms of strength? Will you be okay? You can't use magic, and the mountain has a lot of caves. You can't fight while riding Helios there."

If needed, I could defeat the monster by myself, but creating attack items from alchemy also cost quite a bit. If I used the items too much, I would be in the red. I had no choice but to use items until now, carefully making sure I could still turn a profit, but I was counting on him to swiftly defeat the monsters for me.

"Humans and monsters aren't so different. They'll die if you hit them hard enough," he replied.

"That kind of logic is a bit extreme."

Why does he sound like a barbarian?

While we were talking, a black creature was flying straight towards us. It was a lot faster than I'd expected, and it looked as though it was sliding through the sky as it quietly landed in front of us.

"Helios!" Mr. Julius said happily.

I didn't feel much wind, so I assumed this dragon flew differently. Helios was a beautiful dragon covered in black scales. His neck was long and he had a skinny body. His large wings were an awesome sight, and an old rope was around his neck. On his torso was a dirty saddle at first glance, but it was easy to see that it was of high quality.

As Mr. Julius approached, Helios lowered his head. His golden eyes were glimmering with intelligence. Even at a glance, I knew that the dragon was extremely smart.

"Helios, I'm so glad you're safe," Mr. Julius said as he extended his arm towards the black dragon. Helios rubbed his forehead against his hand. His body was about as large as my house, and there was no way I could keep him as is. I was glad I made that ring.

"It's great that Helios is safe," I said.

"Yeah. This saddle also seems usable. Great," he replied with a gentler tone as he petted Helios.

You're like a husband that's relieved to see your beloved wife safe. Helios is a male, though.

"Is that saddle from three years ago?" I asked.

"He looks the same as when I left him in the wild before I was captured."

He confirmed the rope and the saddle. If it was made of leather, it should've deteriorated, but they looked like they were in good condition. *Maybe it's made of alchemy.* I was a bit curious, but I felt he would get angry if I touched the item. He tugged on the rope a few times, and after confirming its strength, he put his leg on the saddle.

Helios lowered his neck and folded his wings to allow easier access. The frame of his wing was covered in black scales, and the patagium was of a slightly lighter color. When he spread his wings, he looked large, but Helios's body was rather skinny and petite.

The stirrup was directly underneath the neck and had a set of reins. A thick belt linked the neck and torso binds. Helios was supporting his torso with his tail and thick legs. His arms and legs, equipped with sharp talons, supported his

body and large wings. His golden eyes were glittering like jewels, and his face was long like a reptile.

I had ridden dragons in the past when traveling for long distances, but Helios's body was a lot more refined and sophisticated than travel dragons. If Helios was a human, he'd be like a muscular young man. Dragons live long, and if Mr. Julius had raised him from an egg, he was probably younger than twenty-five. Helios might've been a young man or even a child.

I looked up, and Mr. Julius had swiftly climbed atop the dragon, his body over the saddle. Helios gently shook his head with delight. The always grumpy Mr. Julius wasn't jumping with joy, but he had a happy smile on his face.

Now he looks the part of the Black Prince and is brimming with the confidence that goes with the title. And they look like a happy couple. I must be a matchmaker then, a jeweler that blessed the two. I now understand why Mr. Julius put it on his ring finger. He's probably a maniac that can only love dragons. There's a lot of different people in the world, so I'll just watch them from afar.

"Hey, Chloe," he called out to me.

I thought he had forgotten about me. "Yes? What's wrong?" I replied.

"Don't just stand there. Get on."

"Get on?"

"We can't fly if you don't get on."

Right. I was so moved by their reunion that I'd forgotten my initial goal: to defeat the Sharp-eyed Mitra.

That saddle looks like there's only room for one. Can I fit? Travel dragons always had around three seats behind the pilot, and I'd never ridden a dragon used for combat before.

"Where should I get on? Am I supposed to grab onto his tail or something?" I asked.

"Do you want to die? There's space behind me for another person. Hurry and climb up."

“Roger.”

Mr. Julius put the spear on his back onto a spear holder that was at the base of Helios’s neck. I approached Helios, and his long neck moved closer towards my face. His intelligent golden eyes were looking at me with interest.

“Hello,” I said, patting his forehead like I’d seen Mr. Julius do earlier. He didn’t reject my hand or bite. He narrowed his eyes and allowed me to pet him. *How cute. I can see why Mr. Julius is all about this dragon.*

“Chloe, don’t suddenly touch a dragon. You especially shouldn’t touch his head. If he bites, he can easily take your entire arm,” Mr. Julius warned.

“Really now? Helios looks smart, so I thought I was safe.”

“He only listens to my orders. If I wasn’t here, your arm would already be gone.”

“That would be bad and rather inconvenient. I’m sorry for petting you, Helios.”

You’re uncomfortable, but you held yourself back because of Mr. Julius, didn’t you?

As I let go, Helios quietly whimpered, and his cold and hard forehead nuzzled my hand. *He’s so cute and lovable!* I couldn’t hold myself back and hugged Helios’s head, petting him. *He’s so cute. I’m willing to part with an arm or two.* It seems my place of comfort was with a dragon. I should’ve bought a dragon instead of Mr. Julius. Helios might just be especially cute, though.

“Chloe, listen to me. Get on, let’s go,” he said.

“Okaaaay.”

Just because you’re jealous that we get along so well right off the bat doesn’t mean you have to sound so annoyed. I won’t steal Helios away from you.

I petted Helios one last time and gently backed away. I proceeded to put my leg on the saddle to pull myself up. I jumped and pulled, but Helios was much too big. Travel dragons usually had ladders to allow easier access, but only a saddle was present on Helios. *Ugh, I can’t get up.*

“Give me your hand,” Mr. Julius said with a sigh after watching me struggle.

"Uh, sure." I obediently outstretched my hand, and he easily pulled me up. I sat behind him. The saddle was large, and if I sat close to him, there was still some room left over. "Thank you. Dragons are hard to mount," I said.

"People usually ride horses in combat. Dragons are rare and hard to control, so I doubt they're ridden often."

"I've used a travel dragon before. Are you familiar with them? Did the empire have them?" I asked as I gazed at Mr. Julius's back.

His uneven, silky blonde hair fluttered on his back. His uneven hair looked good and oddly fashionable. It would be funny if King Cyril copied this look.

"Those dragons are everywhere since they're faster than horses for long distances. But travel dragons, in general, have been bred to be domesticated. They're different from Helios, who's pure-blooded," he replied. Helios gave a proud cry.

It looks like Helios has his own pride as a dragon. How adorable. And Mr. Julius really does know a lot about dragons like a true maniac.

Helios stretched his legs and unfurled his wings. I felt a thin magical barrier around my body, coming from the saddle. I assumed this was to prevent any falls. As I'd thought, the equipment on the dragon was made from alchemy.

"This is a special saddle, isn't it?" I guessed.

"It is, but it only helps a little. If you don't want to die, hold on."

"You don't have to tell me twice, I'll hold on tight."

With a beat of Helios's wings, my body rose in the air. I put my arms around Mr. Julius's waist. He looked skinny, but perhaps due to his height, his waist was fairly large and hard. *I'm starting to remember something unpleasant.* I focused on the texture of his mantle.

The mantle, woven from Ariadne's Thread was smooth to the touch and very pleasant. It reminded me of smooth leather, only lighter and more flexible. It was sturdy and resistant to fire. I was certain of its quality, as I had made the thread myself. It was expensive but very well-made.

After a few more flaps of his wings, Helios took off into the sky. There wasn't

much impact, and the barrier made me feel at ease. Mr. Julius's back was warm. Though I was popular, it had been a while since I'd felt the warmth of a human. I felt like things were going well with Cyril in the past. *I wonder where I went wrong. It feels like so long ago.*

However, my perception of the passage of time was fairly different from reality. As I looked below, I saw the royal capital surrounded by a wall circularly, my former academy, and the castle where King Cyril and Aliza currently resided.

Had everything in my life gone smoothly, I would be in the chalky white castle, fanning my face while laughing elegantly. But I'm currently riding on a dragon with Mr. Julius as my slave; life is truly full of surprises. I rested my cheek on his back, feeling very comfortable. It was as though I was sitting on a new sofa. Helios kept his wings outstretched and didn't flap them very often. He was much faster than a travel dragon, but I felt much less impact. The view below me changed from the city to its outskirts to a forest.

"Don't fall asleep, Chloe," Mr. Julius rumbled.

"It's so comfortable that I might. Helios can fly a lot faster, can't he? I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"If you fall and die, Helios would be upset. Dragons are sensitive, and Helios especially, is proud of being my dragon."

"Safe flying, no accidents, and no laws broken," I said, repeating the travel dragon motto.

"This isn't a war zone. There's no need to go too fast," Mr. Julius said, ignoring my comment.

"The kingdom is very peaceful. The war that occurred three years ago feels like a dream."

"Your head's just as peaceful, huh?"

"Did you just make fun of me?"

I suppose what I'm saying sounds like nonsense to those who were actually fighting on the front lines. But I was trying my best to just survive back then, and I had no time to hate or love someone. If Helios is Mr. Julius's lover, I suppose

money would be mine. That makes me sound a lot more bitter.



I glanced around as I heard a voice call out to me. I was having tea at a café with my friends from the aristocratic academy. I feel like I had quite a few friends, but I couldn't remember their faces or names. Though I, Chloe Sagrid, was the daughter of a duke, I was rather frail. Thus, I always chose to be with others and was nervous if away from the crowd. In terms of title within the academy, I stood immediately under the royal family, but I didn't have much pride and was always scared. As a result, the other nobles never took much notice of me.

I was never ambitious and never wanted to do anything to stand out. Now that I'm an alchemist, I would love to kick the old me in the butt and tell her to be strong. I was a weak, ordinary girl, but I was pretty cute. My strawberry blonde hair, long and slightly curly, with my pale pink eyes and paler skin made me cute. If I had been more confident, I'm sure I would've had a few guys wrapped around my finger, but I was too scared of others.

I was pessimistic and anxious—even if my face was pretty, I could only be in the corners of a crowd. Or so I thought.

“Chloe, I’d like a word,” Prince Cyril said, appearing at the tea party. His hair was a darker golden color, and his eyes were gray. He was beautiful, fitting for a prince. He was well suited in our school uniform, black and red, with a funny hairdo—it was short on the sides and long and twisty in the middle. I had wondered if his hair was just so curly that he could only have this odd hairstyle, but I was unable to ask, as that wasn’t in my nature.

“Certainly,” I replied quietly. I sounded like a woman who only knew how to talk softly.

“In private.”

After he uttered those words, I told my farewells to my friends and stood up. My friends all told me how envious they were and how lucky I was. Their words felt pretentious as they sent me towards Prince Cyril. I thought I was being mocked, but I didn’t notice. Even if I did, I would’ve pretended to be oblivious, as I disliked confrontations. He led me towards the back garden. We were not

on the best of terms, but we weren't unfriendly either; we were doing decently as an engaged couple.

For better or for worse, Prince Cyril had a very manly personality and had desired my meek and obedient nature. I was from a good family, cute, and quiet—a perfect woman, if I may say so myself. I would've loved to show Mr. Julius my past self. I was absolutely positive he would've called me boring.

"Chloe, it's about your younger sister," Prince Cyril said.

"Is something the matter with Aliza?" I said as I jolted with surprise. I felt my blood run cold as though something was off. Aliza was my sister, a year my junior, but I wasn't particularly fond of her. She suddenly appeared in our household when I was thirteen, and it had only been a few years since. She was more of a stranger than a sister. She was lively, energetic, and innocent, but I was afraid of her.

"I'm sure this must be some kind of mistake, but she told me that you were bullying her, Chloe."

"Me? Bully Aliza?"

There was no way I'd do something like that. If I was told this now, I would think that I would never do something so unprofitable and call him stupid for even bringing it up in the first place. However, as a noblewoman, I was timid and weak, unable to stop trembling. In truth, ever since Aliza came, I felt as though I'd lost my place in my house.

My father had started to coddle her and yell at me. My father never had much interest in me in the first place, but I thought it was horrible that he would resort to yelling. I preferred it when he wasn't interested in me. My stepmother was also cruel towards me, but Aliza was sympathetic.

Had Aliza not offered her sympathy, I may not have had a dress to wear or received enough food. Perhaps I was supposed to feel gratitude towards Aliza, but I was meek, and my situation had changed dramatically. Instead, I started to become even more scared of my surroundings.

I feel so bad for my past self. If I could replace her right now, I would create a weapon out of alchemy and defeat everyone! I'd crush them into smithereens!

Oops. I mean, revenge isn't profitable, so I shouldn't do meaningless things.

"She said you despised her for having a different mother and slapped her cheek when she called you 'sister.' But...I can't quite believe it. I had thought that you were a quiet and gentle person," Prince Cyril said.

I shook my head. "I haven't done anything of the sort."

He furrowed his brows with a troubled expression. It seemed he wasn't completely suspicious of me. "You're right. You're not that sort of woman. However, I would've felt guilty had I simply assumed that Aliza was talking nonsense, so I came to confirm this with you. I apologize."

"No, you're not at fault. I truly appreciate you coming to me about it."

Prince Cyril apologetically patted my shoulder and walked away. Thinking back, I may have lost my place in society from this point on. But I had no idea back then and lived through the unchanging days. I felt as though I was slowly being suffocated by a silk cloth, but I clung to the hope that I could leave my household once I graduated. I foolishly believed that I could marry Prince Cyril.

The scene changed. I was most likely dreaming. This was the same dream I'd seen many times in the past. I had seen it so many times that I was getting bored of it; I had consciously tried to avoid this dream, but I figured this was out of my control. One day, I would love to create an item where the user can see a dream that they desire. But it seems difficult to make and control. I fear that it would become a forbidden alchemy item, and I would be monitored by the Alchemist Association as a person who makes dangerous items. That would be a real nightmare.

I was standing near the large hall of my academy. Mr. Julius had stated that my situation was rather common, but I wonder if that's true. As I had done many times before in my dream, I took a seat for my graduation ceremony. The ceremony was accompanied by a party where everyone would eat while standing and as such, wearing a dress was mandatory. For this party, I was already in a light pink dress.

Because I was not often bought things, I had diligently stored my few dresses. I'm proud of myself for taking so much care of my items. I'm not like the other nobles who never wear the same dress twice.

I absentmindedly headed towards the large hall. Suddenly, I was restrained by soldiers. Why did they even restrain me in the first place? I'm a harmless noblewoman. Sure, I'm now an alchemist, but back then, I was only aware that I had magic. I never knew how to properly use it, so I was of no harm at all. I'm quiet, powerless, can't use magic, and cute. Shouldn't they protect me instead? Isn't that the natural response?

Contrary to my opinions, as I entered the hall with my dress flowing behind me, powerful soldiers appeared from both sides and restrained my arms tightly.

"Chloe, I commend you for not running," Prince Cyril said with a pitiful yet angry expression.

"Prince Cyril? What's...going on?" I asked as the soldiers twisted my arms. I was on the ground on my knees.

I was truly confused; nothing came to mind. Students and guests formed a circle around the prince and me as they stared at us. No one stepped forward to help. The people who I thought were my friends looked at me, whispering to each other.

"I've heard that the Sagrid family has been involved in nefarious plots since long ago. Aliza has uncovered these sins and informed me of them. I don't believe that you were directly involved, but it's a serious crime to know about your household's evildoings and look the other way. You lived your life in luxury using dirty money."

Behind Prince Cyril was Aliza, who had her hands clasped in front of her chest. She seemed like she was about to cry at any moment. She looked like a poor unfortunate girl who had no choice but to uncover her sister's sins.



Aliza is a girl with sky-blue hair and aquamarine eyes. She was very cute and popular at our academy. Many people went to her side, as she was trembling with sadness, watching me getting restrained.

“Take her away,” Prince Cyril ordered the soldiers.

I was then thrown into a prison within the palace. I remained there for a few days, until I was greeted by a soldier. Prince Cyril was nowhere to be found.

“Your father has been executed. Considering the sins of the Duke of Sagrid, we shouldn’t have anyone live with that name. You should’ve been executed as well, but you were spared by the benevolence of Prince Cyril. Rejoice,” the soldier said.

I was roughly escorted out of the castle through the servant passages and shoved into a carriage. There was no time to recover or even process what’d happened before being tossed from the carriage into the alleyways on the edge of the royal capital. I was still confused and wearing the dress from my graduation. After that—

Ugh, I don’t want to see the rest of this dream. I’ve always wanted to wake up here, but I could never control that.

“Hey, Chloe,” a voice called from the distance. The voice sounded angry, and I felt like my cheeks would get pinched if I ignored it. *I don’t want to feel pain.* “Wake up, Chloe. I told you not to sleep.”

“...Mr. Julius,” I said, opening my eyes.

His evil yet beautiful face was right next to mine as he glared at me. I realized that I was no longer behind him, but in front. Helios was high in the sky, and Mr. Julius was carrying me with one hand while controlling the reins in the other. I had apparently put my entire weight on him. *He seems angry. What should I do?*

“I guess I fell asleep,” I said. My words didn’t have much meaning, but I felt as though I had to say something.

“You were about to fall so many times that I had no choice but to carry you. I tried to wake you up, but you are a deep sleeper. Letting you fall seriously

crossed my mind.”

“Oh my. Then I’m truly grateful that I’m still here. Thank you.”

“We’ll take a nosedive here. Hang on.”

I clung to him once more. Perhaps it was because I saw a nightmare, though I clung on to the mean Mr. Julius, I felt at ease. *I guess he’s nice for carrying me, though he looks annoyed. I think he did that for his beloved Helios rather than me. Either way, it was a nice gesture.*

We started to go down, decreasing in altitude. Underneath was the beautiful snowy scape of the North Monster Mountains.

◆ The North Monster Mountains and the Non-magic User Mr. Julius

AS the name stated, the North Monster Mountains was a mountain range in the northernmost part of Astria Kingdom. In contrast to the royal capital, which always had a warm and comfortable temperature, the mountain peak was very cold and covered in snow. Because it used to be a mining location, there were several tunnels leading deeper inside. As the mountain range's resources were depleted, it became home to numerous abandoned monsters. At the end of the tunnel was the peak.

"I was asleep, but I'm surprised you got here. Didn't you get lost?" I asked.

"You showed me the map yesterday. It's straight north from the capital. It's probably harder to get lost," Mr. Julius replied.

"You were asleep on *my* bed while I was looking at the maps. Give me back my bed."

"No."

Helios descended in front of the tunnel's entrance without making a sound. After Mr. Julius petted Helios's neck, he left me behind and gracefully jumped off. He landed gently on the ground. I tried to ungracefully slide down but fell down next to him instead. I didn't get off the dragon, I simply *fell*. Mr. Julius glanced at me and sneered.

It's not as though I expected him to lend me a hand. I'm no longer a noblewoman, and I'm wearing proper underwear underneath my clothes. I don't care if my clothes look a bit disheveled. I swatted the dust from my skirt. Helios, looking a bit worried, gently nudged me with his muzzle, covered in cold black scales. *He's so cute. I want him for my wife too.*

"There, there. Good boy. You're so smart," I praised him.

"Helios can completely understand the human language. He's an intelligent

dragon," Mr. Julius said proudly as I was patting Helios's forehead.

Is he a doting parent? More like a doting husband, I suppose.

"So, what shall we do about Helios? Should we tie him somewhere around here? We can store him in the ring, too," I said.

"Are there a lot of small monsters around this area?"

"As the name implies, there are quite a few on this mountain. There's a plain past here with many small monsters, but I don't go there as their materials aren't useful."

"I see. Helios, you can do what you want, but stay close."

Helios cried in response and then did a running start before taking off towards the plains. He was really quiet when he flew and was very cute. It felt like a miracle that a dragon that obedient and adorable was raised by someone as twisted as Mr. Julius. In any case, I was glad Helios grew up to be a good boy.

"Oh, that's right. I wasn't supposed to touch his head. He's so cute, I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry about that," I said, looking up at Mr. Julius and apologizing. He furrowed his brows. *I'm apologizing, so stop looking so angry.*

After a moment, he said, "Helios is only used to me. But he understands that your ring allowed him to return to me. He stuck out his head for you, so it's not a problem if you touch him."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Yay!" I got permission from his owner! Next time, I'll pet him without any reservations.

I saw Helios playfully flying over the wide plains. It seemed the two had approved of me as their jeweler for their engagement rings. I was glad that I worked hard for no profit. *Helios's cuteness is priceless.*

"Did Helios go to eat food?" I asked.

"Yeah, he can swallow medium-sized monsters in one gulp. You said that I could store Helios in this ring, but what are you going to do about food?" he

replied.

Oh, are you curious? Your precious Helios is at stake here, so I can understand your concern, though.

"You can store him in the ring's jewel, but Helios is large and is also alive, so we can't store him as is. We'll shrink him to the smallest size possible, and the effects of the ring will put him in a hibernating state."

"Is that safe?"

"It is. If he stays in the ring, he can stay young forever. But of course, he will lose his freedom as well."

We proceeded down the dark and cold tunnel. The entrance was littered with abandoned pickaxes and shovels, reminding passersby of its past. I took a Round Glowing Signpost out of my bag and ordered it to take me to the mountain peak. The black ball on my hand started glowing. Like a fairy, it started floating in the air, guiding us.

"Lose his freedom..." Mr. Julius murmured in a low voice.

I noticed his hesitation and tried to comfort him. "It's only when he's in the ring. My shop isn't large enough to house Helios, so this is more of a temporary measure. It would be different if I had a house with a large backyard in the suburbs."

"Purchase one immediately once we return."

"Do you think I'm endlessly rich? I'm the daughter of a former criminal, and I was left without a house or any money three years ago. I don't have that kind of money."

"I thought alchemy was profitable?"

"It is, but I can't just suddenly make as much wealth as the noblemen and women." I paused. "Are you thinking of something nefarious right now?"

He had his hand on his mouth as though he were deep in thought.

It's so cold. I took a thick red cape from my bag and wrapped it around me. Mr. Julius's clothes were able to handle temperature changes, and he was walking forward without a care. *I sense a disparity in societal classes.*

"So...from your point of view, the first prince of Astria and your sister tricked and trapped you, right?" he asked.

"I don't know. My father really could've been an evil criminal. The Sagrid dukedom was disbanded immediately, and my house was burned to the ground. It seems angry citizens couldn't hold back their rage. All of the Sagrid territories were reclaimed by the royal family. We don't really have a means to confirm." My shoulders slumped. "Not that I'd want to know, though."

"Chloe, you have a right to get revenge."

"I said I don't want to. Besides, what was the point of them just abandoning me in the capital?" I coughed and changed my tone of voice. "Ahem, I was formerly a quiet and meek lady, good sir. Mayhap they took pity on me?"

As I purposefully tried to sound more sophisticated, he looked at me with a face of disgust. He calmly jabbed my head with his fingers. *I don't understand, but violence is never the answer.*

"Owww! What's your problem? I'm a frail little girl! You're strong, so if you hit me like that, my head will roll off!" I exclaimed.

"That didn't suit you. It creeps me out, so don't do it again."

"You're awful..." *How violent. You get angry just because I changed my manner of speaking? Are you really a twenty-five-year-old? I can't believe you're older than me.* "Really though, let's get serious."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No. I know you're the kind of guy who listens to other people very well, even if you look like you aren't."

"Chloe, don't you think your sister resented you?"

"Aliza was a good kid. She sometimes told some weird lies, but she always protected and pitied me," I lied.

I'm certain Aliza hated me. I wasn't sure if she pitied or resented me, but one thing was clear—I was terrified of her. If I could help it, I didn't want to be involved with her anymore. I had planned to live a decent life as an alchemist. I was through with the royal family, the nobility, and any sort of relationships.

“You’re an idiot,” he replied.

“Why do you keep asking about my past? Are you that curious about me?” I teased.

“I am.”

His reply made me at a loss for words. I wasn’t sure why he wanted to pry, but I was certain that this wasn’t anything romantically related. Something felt odd and suspicious.

“You’re planning on using this revenge plot as a cover to destroy the Astria family so that you can use the royal castle to house Helios, aren’t you?” I deduced.

“Or, you can take it as an attempt to clear the Sagrid name of any wrongdoing and take back what’s rightfully yours—a whole dukedom with plenty of space.”

“I knew you were up to no good. Are you that *infatuated* with Helios? You’re definitely not doing this for my sake.”

He was deep in thought for a while. “That’s just a bonus. Our real goal is taking revenge. Chloe, I want to clear your family name. I’m grateful towards you and want to repay my debt. I won’t forgive anyone who hurts my precious master.” His sweet voice echoed in my ears as he passionately stared at me with his different-colored eyes. It was enough for any woman to go head over heels for him.

“You’re creeping me out, stop it,” I sighed. I rubbed my arms as goosebumps erupted along them.

Mr. Julius sighed and mumbled, “I should.”

If you knew from the start, why did you do it in the first place? I thought.

My Round Glowing Signpost turned a few corners, and we headed towards the peak without getting lost. Light magic could’ve illuminated the tunnel, but it required me to constantly use magic, and above all, I wasn’t good at it.

Even if I had ample magic, as a former noblewoman, I never planned to get into any combat. I had never practiced using magic either and wasn’t able to use it much. I was only capable of using beginner attacking and healing spells,

and my true power shone through my alchemy items. I was an alchemist, after all. I was a little antsy, hoping he would ask about my Round Glowing Signpost.

Ever since I was abandoned, I didn't have much time to spend with other people. Consequently, I also never got to talk much about my items. Of course, I explained to customers about my items' effects, but I loved to explain while actually using the items.

As an alchemist, my creations were like my own children. I found them to be adorable, and I was dying to explain this item. I anxiously looked up at him. He seemed annoyed, perhaps because I refused to take revenge, but I paid no mind to that. Though it had only been a few days, I was starting to understand how he worked.

"Mr. Julius, are you not curious about that floating ball of light?" I asked.

"You said it was a Round Glowing Signpost. I assume it guides us to our destination while lighting the way," he replied while walking next to me.

Damn, he's right. This item doesn't have any other effects either. I struggled to continue the conversation. "You really do listen well. Do you know how difficult it is to create an item that guides the way through alchemy?"

"I don't. I'm not an alchemist, so I don't care."

"Well, yeah, but..."

You're no fun. You don't have to look so angry just because I don't have a house big enough for Helios. You're my slave, after all. Do I have to go through so much trouble to house my slave and his dragon?

It's true that Helios was very cute, and I would love to see him fly freely and be given plenty of food so that I could pet him. But there are taxes to be paid from my store, and the more money I make, the more I must pay.

The taxes I pay with my sweat and tears are to fund King Cyril and Aliza's luxurious lifestyle. That really makes me want to sigh. Now that I think about it, is revenge profitable? If the royal family is destroyed or if I get my family reinstated, maybe? Cost-wise, I'd be taking over a kingdom with the cost of Mr. Julius, so it might be profitable. I won't do it, though. I won't. Really.

"Where's that Sharp-eyed Mitra that you were talking about?" he asked.

"It'd be great if we could meet it on our way to the peak."

"How long until we reach the peak?"

"By dusk. We'll be lucky if we can meet the Sharp-eyed Mitra. It's a very cumbersome monster to defeat, but they're rather rare to find. The stronger a monster is, the rarer they are, and they can suddenly appear from the Otherworldly Gate, you know?"

"I wasn't aware. Monsters are outside my area of expertise," he said, shaking his head.

I started getting anxious. *Will we really be all right? It's not like I can't defeat it, but I'm not strong enough to fight while protecting someone.*

"What kind of life have you been leading?" I asked. "Are there no monsters in the Dystiana Empire? They appear in heavily miasmic areas from the Otherworldly Gate. The other world refers to the land of the dead. It's a place where sinful beings fall, unable to reach the Heavens. Hatred and resentment create monsters, and if they have a strong will to return to our world, they go through the Otherworldly Gate. The gate acts as a self-cleansing mechanism for the other world."

Even first-years at the academy learned this tidbit. It was the most basic information given during world history.

"The Dystiana Empire has monsters, but defeating them isn't the job of the aristocracy. By the time I was able to wield a sword, our empire was at the height of war. I spent more time at garrisons or on the battlefield than at home. I had no time to learn unnecessary things," he said.

"But aren't you still young? Does your empire not have an aristocratic academy?" I asked.

"The Dystiana Empire is surrounded by smaller kingdoms. Your kingdom wasn't the only one that we went to war with, and we didn't have enough soldiers or generals for battle. There's nothing more foolish than a war where you rely on each individual's competence."

As I'd never heard Mr. Julius talk about himself, I quietly nodded. *Are we starting to understand each other? Maybe he thinks a bit more highly of me because I'm such a good master.*

"I became the Duke of Craft when I was fifteen."

"Did something unfortunate happen to your family?" I carefully asked. I felt like this was a topic I shouldn't touch upon.

"...Are you curious about me?" he questioned, glancing down at me with a sarcastic smirk.

He's getting back at me. He listens well and has a good memory. I should be careful with what I say. "Of course I am. You're my precious slave. You cost ten million gold in total."

"Chloe," he said, suddenly tugging on the cloak around my neck.

"Urgh," I said, getting choked. The voice sounded very unladylike, but I thought I was going to die for a moment.

The road was split into two. My signpost had taken one path, and a white entity was approaching us from the darkness of the other path. The white entity was in the shape of a woman. It had no eyes and was wearing a white robe, as though it were part of the clergy. With its small mouth and high nose bridge, it looked pretty from its skinny neck up, but from its waist down was a half-melted face, twisted with pain.

"Mr. Julius, that's a Grief Sienna! A Grief Sienna!" I warned.

"What's that?"

"A spirit-type monster! It's about mid to high tier in terms of power among spirit monsters! It's very dangerous! A Grief Sienna attacks by firing supersonic waves from its face below the waist! Be careful!"

The monster's lower body face was writhing with agony as it headed towards me. *I hate spirits—they're so creepy.* The pained face started to cry tears of blood as it opened its mouth, letting out a shriek. I covered my ears, and the monster fired a crescent-shaped sound wave towards me. Before I was able to dodge, Mr. Julius grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and threw me towards

the side of the tunnel.

The sound wave sliced through the wall above me. Rocks started falling on my head. “Ow! What was *that* for?! I can take care of a Grief Sienna myself!” I yelled.

“The artificial eye you gave me also comes with an ability to defeat these types of monsters, yeah? I can tell where to hit them,” he said as he unsheathed the sword from his waist. He left his spear behind, it seems, and it did look difficult to wield a spear in this small tunnel.

He held his sword in one hand and pointed the blade at the Grief Sienna. In the next instant, the monster’s lower half was flying in the air as it leaned back. From its mouth, a mud-like glob of blood was vomited towards Mr. Julius, who dodged the attack easily. The blood hit the ground, melting the area underneath with a sizzle.

“Ew! Gross! *This* is why I hate spirit-type monsters!” I yelled.

Monsters in general aren’t pleasant, but Grief Siennas also attack in the most disgusting way possible. I hate it. They’re awful. I definitely don’t want to touch that gross blood that comes out of its mouth.

Grief Siennas are only affected by magic attacks; physical attacks go right through them. This was proof that the Anagram of Truth’s ability had properly activated.

“You’re able to cut down these monsters, though! Isn’t the artificial eye that I created amazing?!” I boasted.

“Be quiet, you’re too loud,” he replied.

I felt like he would get angry if I tried to support his combat, so I waited quietly in the corner, cheering him on. *All I did was cheer, and you still got angry at me.*

The Grief Sienna continued to tremble. Above its face, white human arms started to emerge. The white arms held a bent, large sword, striking Mr. Julius. As he parried the attack, the monster’s lower mouth spat out globs of blood again. Mr. Julius kicked the ground to evade the attack, doing a somersault in the air. As he landed, he stepped forward and sliced the monster in half. As its

many faces made a pained expression, their heads were all cut off. After the monster let out a high-pitched, shrill shriek, it dissipated into the air like smoke.

I stared at him, my mouth half agape as he casually sheathed his sword. A Grief Sienna was about mid to high tier in terms of strength. It was strong, but it seemed like Mr. Julius was stronger. I ran over to him and patted his back as a form of praise. He seemed annoyed by this but ignored my actions.

“You’re amazing! Wow! You’re really strong, aren’t you?”

“My first slash was too shallow. I’ll kill it with more ease next time,” he replied.

“That strength is more than enough. You’re already plenty powerful.”

“I should finish monsters off in one blow. If I give them a chance to launch an attack, it might lead to some dire consequences.”

Is that so? He swatted my hand away with irritation and started to walk towards the Round Glowing Signpost. I collected the items that the Grief Sienna dropped: a Lump of Darkness, a Blood Clot of Mourning, and an Eye of Agony. *Pretty good loot*, I thought. After I stored them safely in my bag, I chased after him.

Had I fought that monster on my own, I would’ve probably gotten injured and used up all my magic and a few combat items.

“You just helped me save around 200,000 gold,” I said, quickly calculating in my head and grinning. Had I used some items, my total earnings may have been around 50,000, but I was able to save all of that. *He’s strong and quick. Wonderful.*

“...Stop grinning. It creeps me out,” Mr. Julius said, glancing down at me with a look of dissatisfaction. I was in a good mood; I looked up at him with a huge smile, and he clicked his tongue.

We proceeded towards the peak while running into several other monsters. They were all fairly strong, and I would’ve had some trouble by myself, but Mr. Julius had made quick work of them, making the trip smooth sailing. The higher we went, the more likely we’d run into stronger monsters, as they preferred to live there. Because I had mostly ventured alone, oftentimes I would run out of

energy and was forced to retreat or give up as nighttime approached—before I got to the Sharp-eyed Mitra. This man made my life a lot more efficient.

An expensive purchase, but he's already plenty useful.

"Hey, you're amazing! Even if we don't meet the Sharp-eyed Mitra, we got a lot of good drops already. You really might just be able to topple a kingdom," I said happily.

"Not 'might,' I *could*," he said, correcting me. He seemed confident in his abilities.

I checked the manual wind watch around my wrist. Timewise, we were halfway through the mountain. I felt the miasma get thicker, distorting the surrounding air. I felt a shiver down my spine that wasn't related to the temperature.

Does he not feel anything? He was walking down the tunnel with an unchanging expression. After a while, we reached a wider clearing, and he stopped. This was most likely a transit point for miners; there were many paths that were half-dug, and there was an abandoned cart filled with rocks. The mining operation in the North Monster Mountains was shut down because it was too dangerous. There apparently weren't that many monsters around here in the past, but one day, a large Otherworldly Gate suddenly appeared as the miners were digging.

To close a gate, one must defeat the gatekeeper, an extremely powerful monster. Due to their immense power, they were generally regarded as high-tier monsters, but as they didn't leave their posts by the gate, they were quite harmless. However, if the gate remained open, monsters would pop out and attack humans.

The Royal Guards and mercenaries wanted to defeat the gatekeepers whenever possible, but there weren't many people who were strong enough to pull it off. There were apparently only one or two members of the mercenary guild who could handle a monster of that caliber. I've heard these stories through rumors, as I've received a few requests to make special weapons to take on gatekeepers in the past.

"If you're so strong, why did you become a slave swordsman? I heard that the

Dystiana Empire sold you out to the Astria Kingdom,” I said.

“...It’s a tale as old as time. The Dystiana Empire had spent far too much trying to invade other countries. Naturally, the empire had a lot of enemies. Three years ago, a few smaller kingdoms formed an alliance to attack the empire. The Astria Kingdom was one of them,” he said.

He squinted and glanced at the ceiling and walls, as though he was trying to detect a presence. I did the same, but I could only see stone walls. The air did feel uncomfortable, but that was normal here, and I didn’t feel anything else unusual.

He continued, “The empire probably didn’t like that. Before it got out of hand, they were eager to sign an armistice. Since I was the general leading the attack against the Astria Kingdom and had incurred the wrath of many citizens, they thought I was the perfect sacrifice. Instead of executing me, they wanted me to live and suffer the consequences in front of a crowd for many years to come. That was the degree of hatred that I had incurred.” He spoke casually as though he was talking about another person.

Ever since he was fifteen, Mr. Julius had stood on the battlefields and fought for his empire. The Dystiana Empire sounded evil if they were willing to sell such a person to their enemies. I wasn’t too sure about the actions of the Astria Kingdom, either. Three years ago, I was thrown out, and my father was executed. Mr. Julius became a slave swordsman at around the same time. Even if there was any news about it, I was too busy to care. Though we went through hardships around the same time, I felt like his situation was so vastly different from my own that we had no relation at all.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to survive such a punishment. Thanks for staying alive, you’ve been a big help already,” I said.

“I didn’t live for you.”

“Even so, you’ve been a big help to me. I hope you’ll continue to work hard.”

I’ve made a good purchase. Maybe it’s okay even if we don’t run into the Sharp-eyed Mitra today. He’s worked hard as it is, and it’s getting cold. Maybe we should call it a day.

“Huh?” I felt the ground tremble underneath me. I looked around, but nothing else seemed to be amiss. The rocks piled high in the cart didn’t move at all.

No, wait, I know this feeling...

“Mr. Julius, watch out! Something’s coming from underneath us!”

The view in front of my eyes started to waver. I had planned to jump back, but I was once again grabbed by my neck and thrown towards the stone wall.

“Ugh!”

Just how many times will you throw me?! He’s treating me like luggage, like a person who can’t fight at all.

I fell onto the ground. The monsters hadn’t laid a finger on me, but my body was covered with scratches from Mr. Julius. *My hips hurt.*

“Don’t move, Chloe. You’re in the way,” he said.

“This is the Sharp-eyed Mitra! I didn’t think we would meet one here! We’re so lucky!” I yelled.

“Be quiet, idiot. You’re too noisy.” He unsheathed his sword.

The ground beneath us crumbled and an entity resembling a group of eyeballs appeared. Each eye was about as large as a child’s head, and many of them were stuck together without any rhyme or reason. Towards the bottom were numerous golden strands, resembling nerves. The Mitra was three times larger than Mr. Julius as it floated in the air, staring at us.

This kind of monster would appear in my nightmares. Why are monsters always constructed in the creepiest way possible? I hate it. I guess it makes sense, though, since they’re just people’s hatred and resentment given physical form.

My entire body shuddered as the miasma felt thicker in the air. The Mitra emanated dark magic from its body. *Absolutely disgusting.* Not only was it visually sickening, but I truly felt sick as well.

This was the first problem when fighting the Sharp-eyed Mitra. Though this varies from person to person, if a person has some magical powers, he or she’s

body would reject strong magic from magic-based monsters, incapacitating the person. I was no exception to this, and while I tried to push my limits, my body usually refused to listen, significantly decreasing my chances of defeating this monster.

Mr. Julius looked fine. Perhaps this was thanks to the brand that prevented him from using any magic, but he seemed impervious to the magic released by the Mitra. He kicked the ground, running towards the monster. He swung his sword, slashing the monster into two; he was so quick that I could barely see him, and each of his blows were swift and deadly.

Like some fruit, the sliced Mitra showed its red innards. In the middle was something resembling a statue of a praying goddess. The goddess opened her closed eyes and opened her beautiful lips. Her unpleasant shriek echoed in the tunnel and rattled my eardrums. The eyeballs on the outer portion of the Mitra started to glow as it fired beams of light.

I rolled around, dodging the beams, but Mr. Julius, for some reason, stayed put. He headed straight for the statue, thrusting his sword. The beams of light burned his skin. The mantle made of Ariadne's Thread had protected him a good deal, but I still smelled the unpleasant scent of burnt flesh and hair. As he pulled his sword out, the eyeballs returned to its normal form, and floated in the air as though nothing had occurred.

Due to the monster's fiery lasers, the area under Mr. Julius's eyes and a tuft of his long hair were burnt. The Sharp-eyed Mitra floated around, changing its elevation, as though it were toying around with us. The thin yellow nerves that came out of its body were swaying with the Mitra's movements like a tail.

"Mr. Julius, you must aim for that goddess statue inside of it! You should've asked me before you attacked, and you wouldn't have gotten hurt! Don't just throw me aside!" I yelled.

"Shut up and stay quiet," he replied in annoyance.

He's not relying on me at all!

"You're not well-versed in monsters, and I've defeated this thing before! I have experience! So, listen to me!" I was frightened for a second. I had initially thought that I would sit back and watch him get injured, but I reconsidered. The

difficult part about this monster was fighting it solo. In other words, it would be much easier if we worked together.

I got up and stood near him, a good distance away. I feared he would slice me if I got too close. *This is odd. Why am I so reserved around him when I'm the master?*

"It'll die if I hit it hard enough," he replied, as though implying I should back off.

I was certain that those were his true thoughts. For whatever reason, he assumed that I couldn't fight at all. Indeed, the monster may be defeated if hit hard enough, but I didn't intend to force unnecessary effort. *He even stole my bed. A master who allows her slave to take her favorite bed would surely provide a good work environment as well.*

"That's true, but that's not the issue. You don't have to work unnecessarily. I purchased you to defeat monsters, but I never said I wouldn't offer any help, and I'm not a cruel master that says, 'I command you, slave!' while I watch from a safe distance," I said, taking out my staff that would increase my magic abilities from around my waist. I pointed it towards the monster with my right arm.

My staff was about as big as a fountain pen with a loupe at the end, resembling a large magnifying glass. Of course, the "loupe" at the end wasn't for magnification purposes but was a purified magic stone that was very sensitive to magic. It was a simple design—if I used magic with this staff, my magic power would increase. Because I didn't primarily use magic for combat, the staff was very cheap. The effect was the same no matter the expense, and I requested Mr. Robert to give me the cheapest one so that I wouldn't have to worry about it breaking. Of course, he would always recommend me a more expensive one, a true merchant to the core.

"You're worth ten million gold! Please take care of yourself since your life is so valuable!" I yelled.

"Do I look like I want to die?" Mr. Julius retorted.

"No, you're springing with vitality, but understand that losing you would mean I'm losing ten million gold! Please, *please* understand that!"

"You're...really a noisy idiot." He sighed, but I felt like, for a split second, the edges of his mouth tugged upwards.

Am I seeing things? Yeah, I must be. Definitely. He seems as annoyed as usual.

"So? What do I do from here? Charging in means I'm not taking care of myself, yeah?" he asked.

"Yes. Exactly my point. When the Sharp-eyed Mitra gets attacked, the statue will show itself. I'll use my magic and my items to launch an attack, so aim for its innards while you can! I get sick if I get too close to the monster, so I'll try to support you from a distance!"

"Fine, let's hurry up and kill it. Helios is waiting."

He seemed a little happy. Of course. Helios is waiting for your return, and by defeating this monster, our mission will be accomplished. The only thing left is to go home. I want to hurry home and take a bath myself; I'm so dusty because you keep throwing me around.

"Dance of Fire! Fire Prison!" I shouted.

I poured my magic into my staff as I chanted. A snake-shaped flame wrapped around the Sharp-eyed Mitra. I was only capable of using mid-tier spells. A powerful sorcerer may have been able to defeat the monster using just their spells, but I lacked power.

The monster kept rolling its eyes around as its body split once more, displaying the goddess statue inside. The Mitra wrapped its optic nerves around my flames, swatting it away and closing its body. I immediately took out a red rose-shaped crystal that was about the size of my hand.

"Thorns of Restraint, please get that gross-looking thing!" I ordered.

Of course, this crystal was also a product of my alchemy. As I threw the rose at the Mitra, large thorny vines emerged from the crystal. It wrapped around the monster while stabbing the many eyes with its thorns. The Mitra violently shook from the pain as its body opened once more, revealing the goddess statue, which was trying to launch an attack.

I turned to Mr. Julius to signal his chance to attack, but he was already gone.

As I looked around, he was already in front of me, standing with the Mitra behind him. With a blood-curdling shriek, cracks ran through the goddess statue as it started to crumble. I stared with awe. I wasn't sure when he cut through the monster, but seeing that it was dead, I could only assume that he somehow did. The Mitra dissipated into dust, and Mr. Julius sheathed his sword, his golden hair swaying in the wind.

Oh no. For a second there, I thought he looked kind of cool.

“Mr. Julius! You’re amazingly strong!” I cheered.

“The opponent displayed its weak point—I think anyone could land the final blow. I’m sure you could’ve handled it yourself,” he replied.

I was collecting the loot as I praised him. I was able to obtain Mitra’s Eye, a black, cloudy eyeball, so it was now possible for me to complete the client’s request. I returned to his side.

I felt like he praised me, but I must’ve been overthinking it.

“Uh, I really can’t. The Sharp-eyed Mitra emanates magic from its entire body. If I get close to it, my magic reacts negatively, and I get sick. If I try to defeat it, I’d probably vomit.”

“You would?”

“Yeah. I could still defeat it while vomiting, but it’s not easy.”

“...That would be a challenge,” he said without a hint of sarcasm. He may have taken pity on me as he imagined me trying to defeat the Mitra while puking.

“You seem to be fine even when you get close to magic-based monsters. That puts me at ease.”

“I don’t quite understand, but do all humans with magic vomit if they get close to magic-based monsters?” He had a troubled, yet quizzical look on his face as he touched the slave brand on the back of his neck. It resembled a skull of a beast with two horns and had sealed up his magic.

Would he have gotten sick, too, without that seal? I feel like he would’ve toughed it out either way.

“It varies from person to person, but I’m especially bad with it. I’m sensitive to

the miasma and the dark magic that these monsters use. I wasn't aware of this before, and I never went close to monsters in the past, much less fought them."

"...I see," he replied with an uninterested tone.

You're the one who asked me. I was already used to his attitude, and I put my hand on the burned area below his eye.

"The great droplet of healing, the gospel from the heavens," I chanted as my hand started glowing and healing his wound.

I was much better at healing magic than attacking. The academy I had gone to also aggressively taught me healing, stating that it would be useful in a pinch. My grades were decent, too, if I remember right. I was quiet and diligent. Past me would've never talked to Mr. Julius this casually—I would've been too scared.

"Are we done, Chloe? Let's go home," he said.

"Yes, let's! Today's results are more than enough. Thank you, Mr. Julius!"

I noticed he didn't get angry when I healed him. He was obedient in the bath and when I fitted him with the artificial eye, so I assumed he was really a normal person. *I do wish you'd stopped throwing me, though.*

With these thoughts in mind, I chased after him. He was way up ahead, and I feared he might get lost, so I immediately changed the destination on my Round Glowing Signpost to the tunnel entrance. *I think I really am a great master.*

◆ Delivering Goods and an Odd Feeling

THE next day, after we returned from the North Monster Mountains, I was cooped up in my alchemy room, creating the necessary items to fulfill my customer's request. Because Mr. Julius had worked hard the day prior, I allowed him to spend today sleeping in my room, but for whatever reason, he sat on the chair in my alchemy room, tending to his sword or gazing at the ring which stored Helios. *Is he lonely or something?*

"I did it! Another excellent item! I'm a genius and a gorgeous lady!" I exclaimed. I had spent half a day pouring my magic into my furnace and was finally able to create the Monocle of Authenticity. I proudly took it in my hands as I continued to praise myself.

Mr. Julius, who had finished tending to his sword and got bored of staring at the ring, was asleep on the chair with his arms folded in front of him. He awoke with my excitement and blinked.

"...Don't you feel pathetic praising your looks, when they're mediocre at best?" he asked.

"Zip it. It's important for a person to praise themselves. That's how you can make it through difficult times. Don't you get it?" I replied.

I felt such pep talks were especially important for someone like me, who was weak and lacked self-confidence. A man as strong as Mr. Julius surely would never comprehend the importance of self-praise. *Aren't you lucky you've got a pretty face? My face is above average, you know. I haven't taken good care of it, but I'm fairly pretty.*

I kept those thoughts to myself as I gazed at the Monocle of Authenticity. Though the item looked like a normal, round, black-rimmed monocle at a glance, it was undoubtedly a product of my alchemy. Including the material fees and labor fees, it would cost around 500,000 gold. I tried to keep the price fair to not scare customers away. It was a good price for an owner of a merchant

shop.

"Now then, I'm taking this to Mr. Coldman, so could you please come along?" I asked. I put the Monocle of Authenticity in a small box before placing it inside a black paper bag. The bag was stamped with the name of my shop—I had it custom-made at a printing shop. I believed that this sort of attention to detail was crucial in promoting one's store. A cute shopping bag could capture a young woman's heart and encourage her to make a purchase. "I could let you wait here at home, but we've got that contract around your neck," I said.

"Never leave your side, and don't do anything that you dislike," he said.

"Exactly. You have a good memory," I praised him. I felt like praising a slave was a sign of a good master. "I only wanted you to stay close by my side so that you wouldn't flee and become a criminal or something. You seem normal enough though, so I can undo that part of the contract if you'd like."

"Keep it. I might run and aim for the king's head."

"...You still haven't given up on overthrowing the monarchy to find a place for Helios?"

"I haven't, but...your story smells fishy. You might not have noticed because you're an idiot, but it's odd that you're alive while your father was executed."

He followed me out of my shop. As we didn't plan on fighting any monsters today, he was wearing a large black robe. It was the same garb that I'd given him on the first day, and he seemed to have developed an odd attachment to it. Around his waist was a sword held by a leather belt. He looked cool in his casual attire.

I was wearing my usual apron dress and a headkerchief. I had chosen red for my clothes today. I usually only wore red, blue, or black attire, and residents would often come up to me and say, "Oh, red, is it? Today must be sunny."

My clothing had absolutely nothing to do with the weather, but there was apparently a weird superstition going around stating that the days I wore a red apron dress was a lucky day. I always thought this was ironic as I was the unluckiest woman in the kingdom.

"...Is it bad that I'm alive?" I murmured. His words stayed in my head as I

closed my shop. Ms. Gazey the Chaotic Gaze, floating in the birdcage, sent me off with her beautiful voice. As always, she was very cute.

“I never said that. I just said that it was odd,” Mr. Julius replied.

“I may have a mediocre face and be the unluckiest girl in the kingdom, but at least respect my right to live.” I had gotten unusually upset as I turned away from him and headed to Coldman’s Merchandise, located in the East district.

Mr. Julius, not caring about my attitude, walked alongside me. As I didn’t talk, the silence continued. I wasn’t uncomfortable, but I felt a little guilty for acting so immaturely. I knew that he wasn’t referring to my right to live, but I had gotten angry. I disliked getting angry at people, so I always kept a smile on my face. This hadn’t changed since the time I was the eldest daughter of the Duke of Sagrid. To this day, I prefer to just laugh things off.

After a long silence, I said, “Um...”

“What?” he asked.

“...The thing I said earlier, that was immature of me. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not quite mature yet. It’s only normal.”

“I’m a mature adult. I’m twenty already,” I retorted.

As we continued to talk normally, I felt a wave of relief rush over me. I didn’t want to have any rifts in our relationship since we’d be spending a lot of time together from now on.

“You were a spoiled noblewoman three years ago, weren’t you? It’s only been three years since you learned to live on your own. You’re like a three-year-old,” he said, glancing at me. He wasn’t mocking me but stating his thoughts matter-of-factly.

“What? That makes it sound like you’re more of an adult. You’re only twenty-five. What would that make you? My five-year-old brother?”

“...You and I are different.”

“Well, yeah, but still.” My mind felt weirdly uneasy. I wanted to ask if he regarded himself as above others because he went to fight in the war, but I managed to calm myself down.

Is it because I'm still really a child? Or is there a clear distance between him and me? I shouldn't think about this too much. I'm the always cheerful, pretty young maiden alchemist, Chloe. If I start arguing with him, there will be rumors that I was arguing with my lover.

“...Chloe, what I mean to say is that there must’ve been some sort of reason as to why you’re alive. Your younger sister became the wife of the crown prince, and yet the Duke of Sagrid was executed. No matter how you slice it, it’s odd that a good person like you, who clearly had nothing to do with the supposedly sinful affairs, was sent to prison without question. What happened to your stepmother?”

“...She died.” I was reluctant to talk about my past, but Mr. Julius kept analyzing the situation.

“She died?”

“Yeah. She died. The day I was sent to prison and my father was executed, our primary residence was burned to the ground. I heard that she was unable to escape in time and died in the fire. Aliza is very popular amongst the masses since she lost her precious mother in such a horrific way. She’s like the heroine in a tragedy.”

“How is that a tragedy? Surely you mean a comedy. A dramedy, at best.”

“Her mother died. Isn’t that a tragedy?”

“...There’s no way that makes sense,” he said, furrowing his brows. He was rubbing his temples as though he had a headache.

Well, it’s certainly odd, but it happened, so what can I say? A lot of our servants were also sacrificed in the fire. My sister and I were only safe because she was at the academy, and I was in prison.

I had only found out about my stepmother rather recently through rumors and newspaper articles. It had nothing to do with me now. There was no meaning in digging up past incidents. Mr. Julius seemed very interested, but I assumed it was because he wanted to overthrow the royal family. His actions knew no bounds when it came to Helios.



COLDMAN'S Merchandise, a shop located in the Eastern district of the royal capital, had grown by trading and mining. They also bought and sold jewels, and it eventually became what it is today, the largest store in the kingdom.

The owner, Michael Coldman, also known as the Jewel King, used his company to handle a majority of the jewels that were bought and sold throughout the kingdom. They also sold items to the nobility and the royal family, so I was familiar with the name from when I was a noblewoman. Recently, they started to handle paintings and other artwork, which brought the need for the Monocle of Authenticity.

Mr. Coldman's residence was deep within his estate, which was much larger than what the lower nobility possessed. One of his servants guided us through the hall and into the backmost room of the first floor. This room appeared to be Mr. Coldman's office; there was a large desk, a sofa, and a glass case that housed extravagant necklaces and tiaras made of jewels and gold. I felt these items were fitting for the Jewel King.

Mr. Coldman greeted us warmly with a friendly business smile. I was certain that a well-informed man like him would recognize Mr. Julius. Mr. Coldman quietly glanced at the man behind me but didn't say a word. He was about the same age as my late father and was rather rotund. I handed my item to the gentleman.

"I apologize for the wait; it took some time to gather the necessary materials," I said. "You may wear the Monocle of Authenticity in the same manner as one would wear glasses. Once you do so, the item you're focused on will have its creator's name, place of origin, and composition displayed. If you're looking at jewels, you'll be shown the name of the stone. As an example, I've brought this ring. The stone in the center is made of glass, but is meant to imitate a diamond. Please have a look through the monocle."

He wore the monocle and took a good look at the ring. "Oh my," he said, his voice filled with wonder. The word "glass" must've been displayed through the monocle.

"The rumors seem to be true, Alchemist Chloe. You seemed quiet and dull when you were simply a daughter of the Duke of Sagrid, but you're much

livelier and more beautiful now. I'd love to have you as my son's bride. You must've been through a lot," he said.

I assumed he used to visit the Sagrid domain every now and then. I was never very lively, and I became even quieter when my stepmother and Aliza came into the picture. I held my breath, hoping that no one would find me a nuisance. Mr. Coldman wasn't incorrect in his analysis, but it was still a tough pill for me to swallow. However, I wasn't here to talk about my past, so I put on a business smile.

"Your son is already married, is he not? He's quite popular in the city, as everyone has high hopes for him as your successor. If you require any other items for your work, please don't hesitate to contact me," I said.

Mr. Julius stood behind me, his arms folded. He didn't have a very good attitude, and I could feel his annoyance behind me. I felt like his attitude would sour even more should our conversation continue, so I tried to wrap it up quickly. I handed the item bag over and received a bag with the payment. I confirmed the contents of the bag and put it inside mine. There was exactly 500,000 gold; everything went smoothly. As I tried to head home, the door suddenly slammed open.

"Father! I heard that the popular alchemist is here!" a cute young lady exclaimed as she entered the room. Then she saw me. "My, you certainly look wonderful. Hello!"

She wore a brilliant, pale red dress. Her hair, like Mr. Coldman's, was the color of milk tea and was shiny and glittering. It massively differed from my own dry hair. She was wearing a fragile, glimmering, golden hair ornament that glittered whenever she moved. Her hair, skin, and even her fingernails were daintily polished. She emanated an air of elegance.

She looked younger than me as her adorable pale green eyes were wide open with wonder. Her plump lips had been painted with pink lipstick.

I haven't worn makeup in ages. Of course, I'm cute without my makeup, but it's been a while since I met an actual elegant lady. I couldn't help but be a bit curious. I assumed she was Mr. Coldman's daughter.

"My name is Eliza Coldman! It's a pleasure to meet you, wonderful person,"

she said to Mr. Julius. As he was very handsome, I understood why young women would easily fall for him. Ms. Eliza looked infatuated with Mr. Julius as she directed her doe eyes and flushed cheeks towards him.

I'm sure he'll instantly crush her feelings of love. What a sinful man he is. He'd be wonderful if he didn't throw me around, call me an idiot, or show love only for his dragon. I was nervous, hoping he wouldn't say anything too harsh.

"Hello there, lovely lady," he said in a gentlemanly fashion with a smile on his face. I could hardly believe my ears.

Did he just call her "lovely lady?" What's going on?

Ms. Eliza was, without a doubt, a very lovely lady. *Did she pass his strict inspection? Is it because she's wearing a beautiful dress and seems to take good care of herself?*

"My, thank you so much! I imagined an old man as an alchemist, so I never dreamed it would be someone so wonderful!" she gushed.

"Eliza, the alchemist is Ms. Chloe over here. This man must be...her bodyguard," Mr. Coldman said, scolding his daughter. He continued as though he were confirming the details with me. "This must be Mr. Julius from the Slave Arena. I was planning on purchasing him myself when he was up for sale—I wanted him as our company's bodyguard. I heard that a young woman grabbed him first, and I assume that was you."

"Correct. This here is Mr. Julius, and I purchased him to help me defeat some powerful monsters to gather materials for my alchemy. The Monocle of Authenticity was also created using the materials gathered by him," I said truthfully. I didn't feel the need to hide anything from Mr. Coldman.

Ms. Eliza took Mr. Julius's arms in hers. *She's quite bold and reckless.* I thought he'd get angry, but he remained silent, glancing at her.

"Is that so? If Ms. Chloe didn't purchase him, he would've been our bodyguard? Then it's not too late—Ms. Chloe, would you please sell him to me?" Ms. Eliza asked, her voice filled with confidence.

"U-Umm..." I glanced back and forth between her and her father. She was gazing at me with a fire in her eyes, while her father showed no signs of

stopping his daughter. I finally met the silent gaze of Mr. Julius, but I had no idea what he was thinking.

Do you want to be their bodyguard? They're much wealthier than me, and their estate is large enough to house Helios. Ms. Eliza's very cute, and you might end up marrying each other. You shouldn't have any complaints here.

I couldn't think of a proper reply. "But, um, well, he costs around ten million gold..." I quietly mumbled under my breath.

The day Aliza and her stepmother came to our household, I lost my place. From dresses to jewels, I was only provided with them because Aliza said, "I feel sorry for my dear sister. Please buy her something as well." Even at the academy, Aliza was always by Cyril's side. My friends ridiculed me behind my back, saying that I was a coward and that my fiancé would one day get stolen by Aliza. I silently just smiled back. All my bad memories kept popping up.

I felt my throat tighten. I had only bought this man with money, but I felt the need to reject her proposal. *Chloe, the most important thing in life is money. It's not good to get too attached to people or things. People will betray you, and things might get stolen from you.*

"We can pay twice the price, Ms. Chloe. This is the Black Prince Julius we're talking about, the general who could topple a kingdom single-handedly. My daughter seems to have taken a liking to him as well," Mr. Coldman said.

"But, well..." I started, troubled by the situation.

"We're done, aren't we? Let's go home, Chloe," Mr. Julius said. He gently freed himself from Ms. Eliza's grasp and tugged on my arm. *He's way more violent with me.*

"Y-Yes, we're done, so excuse us! Mr. Julius isn't a product of Chloe's Alchemy Shop, so I would appreciate it if you bought an item of alchemy!" I said with a smile as I energetically said my goodbye. His painful grip on my arm seemed to have brought me back to my senses. I left the Coldman residence, half-dragged by Mr. Julius.



HE continued to pull on my arm until we reached the capital's central square,

near my alchemy shop. He stayed silent, and I didn't initiate a conversation either. Too many things had happened today, emotionally. It was supposed to be a good day since I finished a request and made a profit.

The weather was clear, and a cool breeze brushed against my cheeks. The square was lively during lunchtime, with many happy couples and families bustling in the area. I had originally planned to eat outside for lunch with Mr. Julius, but I continued to look at the ground, unable to feel cheerful. He guided me back to my shop, and I unlocked the front door to enter.

"It's unpleasant to see you look so pathetic," he said in annoyance, finally releasing my arm from his grasp. He furrowed his brows in anger.

"Wh-What's it to you?! I feel down sometimes too! Besides, you were kind to Ms. Eliza, that family's wealthy, and they have a huge house! You might've been happier if you went there!" I yelled. I couldn't hold back my feelings as hateful words tumbled out of my mouth. I knew that he dragged me out when he saw that I was truly troubled. *I don't want to get into a fight.* I bit my lip. "...Sorry, I didn't mean to say nasty things."

My head was a mess. I thought about my former self, my bad memories, Ms. Eliza's words, and my current self. I was just so confused by it all.

Aliza's words echoed in my head. *"Prince Cyril is so very kind, my dear sister! He said he would take me somewhere far away next time! I feel so very sorry for you because you're terrified of horses!"*

I couldn't utter a response back then, and I couldn't find a response now. Nothing had changed. I had meant to become stronger, as the beautiful young maiden alchemist Chloe, but nothing had changed from three years ago.

"Calm down, idiot. I didn't think you'd have a temper tantrum because of an arrogant little girl. You're still such a kid," he said.

"You don't know anything about me. Even I... Never mind," I said. I swallowed my words and went to my alchemy room. Mr. Julius didn't follow me. I heard footsteps going up the stairs. *He's probably back in the bedroom.*



I opened my shop and a few customers dropped by. I sold a few alchemy

lamps and self-defense items. After all the customers had left, I noticed it was dusk and decided to close. I went over to my alchemy room and decided to restock the items that were sold today. I tried to make them but was unable to focus and ended up making *dust*. I had wasted quite a few materials. I would end up deeper in the red should my mistakes continue, so I decided to stop for the day and lay down on the sofa. “I’m hungry...” I murmured.

Had nothing happened today, I had planned to go out and eat some good food, something that I hadn’t done in a while. Perhaps due to my hunger, I started to feel a little sad. “You’re so stupid, Mr. Julius. You’re stuuupid,” I mumbled quietly. I knew that I was the stupid one. I panicked, got angry, became emotional, and vented it out on him. As he said, I was still immature. Had he come downstairs though, I was willing to make amends.

I didn’t have the courage to go back up to my room, so I closed my eyes to forget my hunger. I had used up all my magic with my alchemy, and I was emotionally exhausted. I couldn’t fight the wave of sleepiness that was slowly coming over me.

I’m going to see that nightmare again, aren’t I? I know it. I’m 100 percent sure. But I can’t do anything about it.

I was taken out of my prison cell. I was dragged into a carriage and thrown out onto a dirty alleyway. My dress was ruined, and my body was covered in scratches. The heels on my fragile shoes were broken and my thin silk socks had holes.

“...Poor girl, she’s shivering,” a soldier said.

“She’s the daughter of the evil Duke Sagrid. There’s no need to feel sympathy. The prince even said we can do with her as we like,” the other soldier said, with a disgusting smile on his face.

I ran while tripping. My long hair was grabbed. A sharp pain ran through my body as I felt my hair being pulled out.

“No! No...!” I screamed, calling for help.

No one could hear my cries. I’d always been alone. Ever since my mother died, I’d always been alone. I realized that other people had joined the soldiers.

They were probably the citizens that lived in the royal capital's slums. The strong-looking men gathered around and surrounded me with glee. They all had cruel smiles on their faces. Through my tears and blurred vision, I stared up at the sky. It was so very blue, a beautiful color, indeed.

"...Hey. Wake up, Chloe," a voice said.

I gasped as my eyes flew open. I glanced around. I was in my usual alchemy room. There was a grape-shaped alchemy lamp giving off an orange light. The edges of my eyes felt warm. I quickly rubbed my eyes in an attempt to hide the fact that I'd been crying.

Mr. Julius was looking down at me. I quickly sat up on the sofa, readjusting my posture. I hoped he hadn't seen it. That was simply all in the past. I was scared, and it was painful, but it was all over and done with. I should've been okay, but I assumed that I lowered my guard when I fell asleep. Occasionally, I would wake up and find myself crying.

"Good morning, Mr. Julius," I said. My voice sounded a bit raspy.

He sighed and tugged at my arm, pulling my body up. "How long are you going to be pouting? Make some food, Chloe. I'm fine without eating, but you should eat. Your weak-looking body will only look weaker."

I thought for a moment. "What time is it?"

"Ten at night."

"...You know, my mother told me that if I eat food past nine in the night, I'd get fat."

"I want to let Helios out once a day. You need stamina to ride a dragon. It doesn't matter if you eat too much, but it's more of a problem if you ride without eating at all. Flying on an empty stomach will give you dragon-motion sickness. You might start vomiting."

He was still holding my arm. This was the second conversation about vomit that I'd had with him. *I'm a girl, you know.*

"...Fine. I'll make something, so let's eat together. Or can you cook, Mr. Julius?"

He was deep in thought for a moment. “If you’re fine with horrible-tasting, inedible food, then yes.”

As I felt a rush of relief that he was talking to me like normal, I giggled. He didn’t seem like the type that could cook, and him making disgusting food was all too easy to imagine. I thought it was funny. Mr. Julius smiled and aggressively tousled my hair. My headkerchief, which had already been a bit lopsided when I fell asleep, fell to the ground. My hair was a mess, and it hurt a little.

“Owww, what’s that for? My headkerchief fell off,” I said, escaping his grasp and picking up my cloth. I had considered putting it back on, but decided not to, and threw it onto the sofa. *Work’s done anyways.*

“You woke me up because you were hungry, weren’t you? Give me a bit, I’ll make something quickly. It’s difficult to sleep when you’re hungry, isn’t it? You end up thinking all sorts of negative things too. It’s not good,” I said.

“Your looks are mediocre, but the food you make isn’t bad. Providing enough to eat for your slave is the role of a master, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry for not making anything.” I cupped my face in my hands and gently slapped my cheeks to amp myself up.

I went to my upstairs kitchen and dining room with Mr. Julius following me close behind. I cut some dried meat, lightly fried it, spread some sauce onto a slice of bread, and added some vegetables. He was watching me quickly prepare a meal as he sat on a round stool by the counter. As a token of apology, I poured some wine into a glass and handed it to him. He silently accepted it and put the glass to his lips.

His conduct was very sophisticated, reminding me of his origin. *I wonder if he had a fiancée back home,* I thought as I sandwiched the fried meat between the bread.

“Okay, all done. Chloe’s special dried meat sandwich! It might be a bit heavy for this hour, but we haven’t eaten anything since lunch. I also have some pea soup!” I said, setting the plate of sandwiches on the counter. I ladled the daily pea soup into a soup bowl and placed it next to the sandwiches.

“What about you?” he asked.

“I’ll eat too, of course. I made my own share as well.”

It felt a bit immoral to eat when it was time to sleep, but as I was talking with Mr. Julius like normal, I started to feel hungry. I placed my share on the counter and sat next to him. I took a bite of the dried meat sandwich. The broiled meat, refreshing vegetables, and aromatic bread spread throughout my mouth. I wasn’t even half finished with my meal when I noticed that he had polished off the sandwich in just a few bites and washed it down with the pea soup. He was sipping his wine as he quietly watched me.

Often when Mr. Julius got bored, he would watch me, and I was now used to his stares, but it felt a little embarrassing when he was watching me eat. I had done away with proper etiquette long ago—in the past, I would’ve carefully cut the sandwich into bite-size pieces with a knife without making a sound, and slowly brought each piece to my lips.

“I told you that I had to take over the family title and territory at the age of fifteen and was sent to war, right?” he suddenly muttered.

I gently nodded, my mouth full of bread.

“My father, though a duke, was under suspicion that he had been planning a rebellion with the help of other kingdoms. He was sent to prison and executed. My mother, who couldn’t bear to live without him, committed suicide, and I was left to inherit my family estate,” he said calmly, as though he were talking about someone else.

I stopped eating. My half-eaten sandwich remained on my plate, but I was full. I brought a glass of water to my lips. “Did he really betray the empire?” I asked.

I didn’t understand why Duke Craft had to be connected to enemy kingdoms. Mr. Julius swirled the wine in his glass.

“I’m in the same situation as you. There’s no way to look into it, and no one has. I was left as the sole successor of the Craft dukedom and was made into a slave for the empire in exchange for having my life spared. The emperor told me to work for the empire and to never betray him. I was sent to the war zone,

and killed people as instructed... That was the role that I was given.”

“To a mere fifteen-year-old child?! Isn’t that a bit too cruel?”

“They didn’t have enough soldiers or generals. The aristocrats who were wealthy enough to control the military disliked fighting in the first place. They all hid within their estates, and the people sent to war were the poor, volunteers, or criminals.” His low and slightly raspy voice echoed throughout the room.

In a few weeks, the temperature would drop, and the snow season would start. I could hear bugs chirping in the distance during this pre-winter period. The cool breeze blew in the air.

“...I see. Back then, the war had been going on for a while, but my daily life hadn’t changed. When I was merely the daughter of the Duke of Sagrid, I didn’t think much about it,” I said.

“Sounds about right. With some distance, the war probably felt like it occurred in a different world. No one notices a fire on the opposite side of the bank. There aren’t many that empathize either.” He paused before continuing, “I slaughtered both enemies and allies. If ordered, I killed women and children as well. I received the nickname of a cold-hearted, cruel Black Prince a few years after I got sent to the war zone. I went to war in various places as ordered before finally being captured by my emperor and sold to the Astria Kingdom.”

“And so, you survived at the Slave Arena for three years before becoming my slave,” I said.

“Yeah. I’ve always been someone’s slave... I’ve never chosen my own position, nor have I ever thought of doing so. But...you’re different from me. I...never thought of creating my own path and my own way of living like you have. I don’t think I explained myself enough before. I didn’t mean to demean you.”

He talked while sometimes pausing, carefully choosing his words. My heart felt warm. *Maybe he was bothered by my attitude today. A kind Mr. Julius feels kind of weird. Thinking back, he was always proud and sarcastic, but he’s been nice. I’m not sure if nice is the right word here, but he never hit or shouted at me without a purpose.*

"...Do you feel better now?" he asked.

"Um...thank you. But I'm not able to hold a shop like this all on my own. Three years ago, when I was thrown into the alleyways, my master saw me at my lowest and saved me."

"Your master?"

"Yep, my master in alchemy. We were only together for a short while, but she taught me everything I needed. This shop was originally my master's, but she said she would give it to me before suddenly disappearing one day. Once she left, I realized that my master didn't plan on working at all. The store was ridden with debt and had defaulted on taxes so many times. It took a year to get it all straightened out, and another year to actually turn a profit. And now, here I am."

"Why did your master leave?" Mr. Julius asked suspiciously.

I thought about my master. Her name was Natalia Báthory, and while her age was unknown to me, she was an incredibly beautiful woman. She had glossy black hair and bewitching red lips. Her attire showed some of her breast, and her legs were completely exposed. She attracted the infatuated stares of men as she walked, and my job was to chase after her and fit her with a robe.

She had saved me when I was about to be assaulted in the alleyway, and I ended up living with her in this shop. Though I started out unable to do anything, she worked me to the bone and helped me become independent. However, once she was gone, a tax officer visited me numerous times to collect the debt, and this shop was about to be foreclosed. It didn't help that I was the daughter of the hated Duke of Sagrid, either.

"I don't know why she left. I don't know much about my master, Ms. Natalia. But she helped me and is my savior. She said she would give me this shop, the alchemy furnace, and its materials before disappearing. I couldn't find a trace of her at all, as though she were never here to begin with. Sometimes, I think that it was all a dream," I said.

"Wasn't she a famous alchemist?"

"There isn't anyone that knows much about Natalia Báthory... She disliked

working and rarely left her room. Now, it's cleaned up and is known as Chloe's Alchemy Shop, but this place was initially in such bad shape that it looked like an abandoned ruin. It was a mysterious ruin that was in the middle of the royal capital. I don't think many people were aware that Ms. Natalia was inside."

"...It may have been luck that you were picked up by that alchemist, but it's due to your hard work that the store's now prospering. You've done well."

I pushed my half-eaten sandwich away. "You're rather kind today. I wonder if it'll last going into tomorrow." *I'm full, so I guess I'll toss this. It feels like a waste, but I can't eat anymore.*

"When I was alone, I was thinking about what you seemed so upset about... I've never been very good at understanding other people's feelings. I had only really talked to Helios. So, Chloe..." he said, staring at me with a slightly troubled expression. "I'm...glad that you purchased me. It's comfortable to be by your side. I was able to regain the eye that I lost when I was sold to the kingdom, and Helios, who I treasure. I'm grateful to you. So...don't hesitate. I'll be by your side. While I have this contract around my neck, I'm yours."

There was a moment of silence before I said, "Okay."

Mr. Julius had expressed his gratitude towards me honestly and in a straightforward manner. This was completely different from the sweet talk that he would sometimes sarcastically do. I could feel myself getting embarrassed as I buried my face against both of my hands.

I think my face is beet red right now. I don't want to be seen. It'll look like I like him or something! Calm down! Calm down, Chloe. You're just surprised because Mr. Julius is being uncharacteristically honest today. I'm through with men. I won't fall in love, and I'll only believe in money. I mentally took deep breaths.

"...Besides, that girl we met today wore so much perfume and makeup, and her voice was shrill and annoying. If I had to be around her all day, I think I'd want to die. I'm glad you purchased me. Had you not, I dread thinking about what would've happened at that house," he said.

"You were thinking that? You seemed very kind towards Ms. Eliza."

"They're your customers, aren't they? Even I know my position... When she

treated me like her pet, I wanted to strangle her.”

“Really now? I thought you preferred the Coldman household or something.”
If what he’s saying is true, I feel stupid for getting all anxious and sad.

Mr. Julius brought the plate of my half-eaten sandwich towards him. “That’s why you’re an idiot. There’s no way I prefer them. Had you agreed to sell me to that household for a profit, I would’ve carried you away, called for Helios, and fled that place immediately.”

“You’re bringing me with you?” I asked, surprised.

“Of course, I am. You purchased me, so you have to take responsibility,” he said definitively as he finished off my half-eaten sandwich in one bite.

I was dumbfounded for a second, but a fuzzy, happy feeling welled up inside me. The edges of my mouth kept twitching upwards. I thought he would scold me about it, but he didn’t say a word.

◆ Analysis on Chloe Sagrid (Julius)

I couldn't feel at ease. I wondered if someone was planning on killing me in my sleep again. However, today's unease felt completely different from before. Most combatants at the Slave Arena were either criminals or prisoners of war captured from enemy kingdoms during battle. It goes without saying, but there were a lot of dirty, bloodthirsty men here. I lazily watched my days pass by in the "room" where us slaves were kept—jail cell in every sense of the word except for what they called it.

Three years ago, when I was captured in the Dystiana Empire, one of my eyes was gouged out as punishment for slaying the soldiers who'd come to capture me. Since then, I survived by relying on my remaining left eye, but perhaps due to malnutrition, my vision had started to grow hazy by the day.

It had been three years since I was sold to an enemy kingdom. I was sent to the Slave Arena to show the public what had become of me. I survived as a slave warrior by using sounds, my instincts, and sensing killing intent. I hadn't planned on dying, and I didn't want to die either. However, I also didn't desperately cling to life, and there were times when I just didn't care about anything anymore, but no one stronger than me had appeared. That was the only reason I was still alive.

In the quiet early mornings, I heard two sets of footsteps approach me. My empty room was divided by stone walls. I sat on the dirt floor, chained up, as I rested my back on the cold surface. It was a moldy and dusty place, but better than staying outside in the rain without a roof over my head.

I had thought about revenge in the past. I've thought countless times about returning to the Dystiana Empire and taking the head of the emperor. Everyone had betrayed me. *But then what?* I thought. I had nothing in that empire. There wasn't a single person important to me there. The only one important to me was Helios, who I'd raised from an egg. He was the friend I trusted the most, and my family. If he was able to fly without a care, I didn't care about anything

else. So, I stopped caring. This unease I felt in my chest, and the footsteps approaching me no longer mattered. I closed my eyes without gazing in that direction.

“So, *this* is the Black Prince, Mr. Julius!” a cheerful, young woman’s voice rang out. The voice wasn’t a high-pitched shriek, but it wasn’t exactly low either. Her voice was indeed cheerful, but it was different from the other young women’s shrill screeches that I so often heard. It didn’t hurt my ears, and it didn’t seem to belong in this dump.

“This is the Black Prince Julius. He was captured and handed over to our kingdom three years ago as a sign of armistice. He’s fought in a hundred battles, and is known as the Ever-Victorious General, the Black Prince Julius,” a man’s voice followed, dripping with irony.

This was the voice of the Slave Arena’s manager. Both of his fingers were fitted with a countless number of rugged rings, and when he opened his mouth, gold teeth could be seen. He was a large and muscular man, and I felt irritated every time I heard his voice.

“Ms. Chloe, he’s worth a flat 5 million gold. I can’t imagine that a mere alchemist such as yourself could possibly afford him,” he said.

“I’ll buy him! I’ll buy him immediately! What a steal!” she exclaimed giddily.

“Huh?” the manager said, sounding a little surprised.

As I opened my eyes just a little and squinted, I saw a petite woman in a flowing red skirt standing alongside the manager in front of me. Her golden hair also had some shades of light pink, reminding me of flowers in the spring. She had a red headkerchief, and her large pink eyes also reminded me of the blooming flowers. She didn’t look flashy, but she was cute.

I had thought that a messenger from the heavens had sent for me. *Finally, my time has come.* I mocked myself, for I hadn’t died by being slain but of malnutrition. I assumed I was weaker than I had thought.

The woman rummaged through her cloth bag and took out a heavy-looking sack. She handed the money to the manager in an almost forceful manner.

“Here you go, 5 million gold exactly. Do you have a contract or some sort of

paperwork? Contracts are important, so please bring one over. The deal was that you'd sell him to me for 5 million gold. If you break this contract in any way, my super special 'Chloe's Contract Breaking Crackdown Bomb' will explode, so do be careful," the woman said with a smile, repeatedly requesting a contract.

What's a Contract Breaking Crackdown Bomb? I furrowed my brows at her unusual words. The woman had called herself "Chloe," so I assumed that was her name.

This is the first time I've died, so I've never seen a messenger from the heavens, but I suppose one requires a contract to lead a dead person into the other realm. I started thinking about needless things.

"A-A contract! Of course! But are you quite sure about your purchase, Ms. Chloe? This is the cruel Black Prince Julius we're talking about! He's killed many people and is a very cold-hearted man. He's not the type of man that could be subdued by a cute girl such as yourself," the manager said with a hint of panic in his voice.

The woman called Chloe clenched her fists in front of her chest. "Mr. Manager, sir, I'm the lovely young maiden of rare beauty, the alchemist Chloe! If an aggressive person doesn't follow my orders, I'll deal with them using my alchemy! I've already thought of a few things to make this work. I got this idea when I saw a violent dog being fitted with a muzzle. It's a cylindrical item that fits onto a person's mouth, and if they do anything bad, a jolt of electricity will shock them, preventing them from saying anything else! Doesn't that sound great?"

"Ms. Chloe, I've been the manager of the Slave Arena for many years, and even I've never thought of putting anything that cruel onto the slave swordsmen..."

"Really?"

"Well, if you insist, I'll sell him to you. Truthfully speaking, Julius Craft was a bit too strong, and I didn't know what to do with him. I respect powerful people, and I felt it was a waste if he stayed here until his dying breath. If you want him, Ms. Chloe, he's yours."

"Yay! Thank you so much! I was looking for a strong guy, and Ms. Roxy at the diner said that Mr. Julius was up for sale at the Slave Arena. I thought this was some sort of fate, so I'm glad I'm able to purchase him. I had thought that he might've already gotten sold," the woman said happily.

She sure does talk a lot. Oddly enough, her voice didn't irritate me. I disliked people who talked a lot, but her voice felt soothing to my ears.

"He's expensive, and no one else is willing to buy Julius, a general of the enemy empire," the manager said. "The royal family had allowed me to do with Julius as I pleased—in other words, I'm free to sell him as well. Please, take him home, Ms. Chloe. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"What do you mean? If you mean that a pretty, capable, young maiden and genius alchemist like myself could handle him, you're correct. My shop has a lot of items that could spice things up at the Slave Arena, so please come take a look at my inventory when you've got the time! The many jewels you have around your finger, sir, could be created into a brilliant product of alchemy! I can add all sorts of abilities, depending on payment!"

"Yes... I suppose I'll stop by in the future. Well then, I'll give you authority over this magical contract. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes. I can use some magic as well. I just have to sign the contract using my name, yes?"

"Precisely. Do be careful about the details, however. If you take pity and try to free him, he just might kill you in your sleep."

"Thank you for your concern. I thought the Slave Arena was a scary place, but I'm glad you seem like a normal person, sir!"

I quietly clicked my tongue. *Just what about this man makes him normal? Is this woman stupid? This is a man who forces slaves to kill each other and profits from bloodlust. There's no way he's normal.*

"Mr. Julius! Mr. Julius, hello!" the woman said, walking towards me without any hesitation. She crouched in front of me. She wasn't adorned with ornaments, but her innocent-looking face and beautiful eyes, which reminded me of blooming flowers in the spring, stared at me intensely. "From today

onwards, I'm your master. Nice to meet you. I'm the genius alchemist, Chloe. I hope we can have a good relationship from here on!"

"...You talk way too much," I said, voicing my thoughts.

Chloe's eyes widened with surprise as she said, "You talked." I didn't quite understand her comment here. Perhaps she assumed that I was some sort of beast that couldn't understand the human language.

In any case, messengers from heaven these days sure do talk a lot, I thought. The woman kept reminding me that I wasn't dead, but a human that was to continue living. Indeed, Chloe, who came to me as I was dying, looked like an angel in my eyes.

Chloe left the Slave Arena, holding on to the shackles that came out of my magical handcuffs. Outside the dimly lit Slave Arena made of stone, a clear blue sky entered my view. I assumed that the break of dawn was only a few hours ago. I had lost my sense of time, but I understood that it was still early in the morning. There was a clearing in front of the round, stone building. Trees stood in the distance, and orange-roofed houses were all lined up behind them. I couldn't feel the presence of people. Only weirdos like Chloe would think to visit the Slave Arena so early in the morning.

"Mr. Julius, if you really are a dangerous person, I'd have to take responsibility, so I can't take those handcuffs off you. I'm sorry," she said apologetically, looking up at me.

I stayed silent as I couldn't think of a reply. My vision was still hazy in my one eye. I was able to see much better if the objects were closer, and I wondered if this would ever recover. Chloe claimed to have purchased me because I was strong, but I only had one eye with hazy vision. I wasn't sure if I could even do daily activities by myself.

"My house is on the main street, in the shopping district. It's pretty far from here, and there aren't any carriages this early in the morning. I guess we'll use the Key of Return," she mumbled as she took out a golden key from her simple cloth bag, which was slung over her shoulders. "This is the Key of Return. It's an amazing product that allows us to go back to my shop in an instant. Unfortunately, it can only be used once, and it's expensive, so I don't want to

use it, but I'm also not into dragging you around town in chains. So, we'll splurge a bit here."

After her lengthy explanation, Chloe raised the key into the air and made a turning motion as though she were trying to open a lock. With a clack, a transparent door appeared. Beyond the door was a completely different world. It was connected to a rather small room. A black furnace was in the back of the room, a sofa and a chair were in the front, and there was a counter and a trunk haphazardly placed throughout. There were a few mushroom-shaped lamps. The room was lined with bookcases filled with thick books. It was a bit blurry, but perhaps due to the colorful room when compared to the Slave Arena, I was able to see the shapes of items clearly.

"Mr. Julius, do take a seat. You're tall, so it's much easier to talk to you when you're seated," she said, dragging a chair towards the center of the room.

I didn't have a reason to refuse, so I sat down. She seemed to stare at me with intensity, so I squinted my eye to get a better look at her. She misunderstood my action as glaring, and she puffed out her chest with both hands on her hips. I sensed that she tried to portray herself as my master, but her actions only resembled a rabbit trying to intimidate me. I couldn't help but feel the corners of my lips tug upward.

According to her explanation, her sister had uncovered some evil actions that the Duke of Sagrid had been doing. Though she was formally the daughter of a duke, her household had been destroyed.

I had been a general of the Dystiana Empire for quite a while and had tried to invade the Astria Kingdom, but I wasn't familiar with matters relating to the aristocracy. I was slowly controlling and occupying the outer cities near the border, but as I headed to other battlefields that were in dire need of aid, upon my return, I found that the cities I once controlled were recaptured, and the number of soldiers had decreased. I repeated the process of trying to steal that city once more.

I had flown across the battlefield on Helios for seven years, but there were no signs of the war slowing down. Many times, I crumpled up the letters I had written to the emperor, reprimanding him for the unnecessary loss of lives, and

threw them into a fire. We had tried to invade too many kingdoms at once; we didn't have enough soldiers or weapons for a proper battle. The emperor knew that I would win if I was sent to the battlefield, but all I did was increase the empire's territory by just a little bit. What he should've done was strengthen his military and invade one kingdom at a time. His failure to do so only showed his lack of forethought.

There were only enemy kingdoms around the Dystiana Empire. They would attack places where our defenses were the weakest, taking back the land that we took from them. The center of the empire was filled with well-fed nobles, but as I got closer to the border, the difference in wealth was striking, as the poor and hungry lived in places with high crime rates.

The Astria Kingdom may not have been so different from us, but they did have knights on the battlefield that had good leadership. This was in stark contrast to our army. However, I had never heard of Duke Sagrid.

I also had the title of duke, but it was only for show. I was merely a slave to my empire. Chloe stated that she was engaged to the crown prince, Cyril Astria, three years ago, but was thrown into prison and abandoned by her kingdom. As I saw her casually talking about her past as though she were talking about another person, I felt pity for her. I had thought about killing her sister and Cyril Astria for my new master, but she stated that she didn't want revenge.

Then what am I to do? I closed my eye and mulled over my thoughts as Chloe carefully washed my hair. I didn't like being touched, but her slender and frail fingers felt nice, and I was oddly able to feel at ease.



HOW long has it been since I slept on a proper bed? When I camped outside, I usually slept on Helios's stomach. I had my own room as I was a duke, but I almost never went there. At the Slave Arena, I sat atop hardened dirt and dozed off, but I never got a good night's rest since there were idiots that tried to kill me in my sleep.

Chloe's bed was soft and warm, making me feel very sleepy. She seemed angry, but she didn't seem to genuinely dislike my actions, and I thought she was a kind person. When I woke up, my empty right socket was filled with a red,

artificial eye. I didn't feel any pain as the artificial eye slipped right into my wound. A healing spell was cast on me to heal my scars.

I blinked a few times, and I was surprised at how much clearer my vision became. Even my left eye with hazy vision was able to see clearly, most likely thanks to the artificial eye. Chloe, who appeared clearer in my eyes as well, was indeed good-looking. She wasn't the lovely young maiden of beauty or a bewitching beauty, as she had claimed, but her toned colors reminded me of spring flowers. She was plain, but cute. She was the master who purchased me, and I was her slave. This innocent-looking woman was my master.

Chloe was, in fact, rather harmless. She didn't want revenge, and she didn't seem to pressure me into anything. In fact, she took great care of me. My whole life revolved around a kill-or-be-killed mindset, and her kindness troubled me just a little bit. She got back my lost eye and Helios, who I thought I'd never see again.

The day Chloe purchased me, I had accepted death. Since I had planned on dying back there, I was prepared to die for her at any time, but she kept nagging me to treasure my own life. I thought about it, and while I didn't mind dying at any time, I also didn't mind living a bit longer beside her. Since I had these thoughts, I got irritated when I felt like she was planning on selling me to that merchant's clingy daughter.

Chloe was kind and an idiot, but she seemed especially upset today, and even a little sad. I didn't know the reason, so I went up to her room to think about it alone. If possible, I would've liked to silently stay by her side and watch her work. Because she was kind, there were no guarantees that she wouldn't be fooled by someone. She might get wrapped up in troublesome affairs because she purchased me. But above all, her talkative voice made me feel at ease. Her ever-changing expressions, and the way she moved around nonchalantly made me feel calm. *Yeah, she must be really important to me.* I thought.

I had never felt that anyone was so dear to me aside from Helios. I disliked humans that were in the same shape as me. Chloe and I were both humans, but we were not alike. I couldn't explain it quite well, but that's what I thought. I went down to check up on her, wanting to know if her mood had changed, but I saw her curled up on a sofa in the alchemy room.

I heard her mumbling and groaning in her sleep, and I peered down at her face.

"No... No... Help..." she murmured desperately.

I furrowed my brows. Her long eyelashes were glittering with tears, and her delicate shoulders and arms were trembling. I got down on my knees next to the sofa and called out her name. "Chloe."

Her eyelids fluttered. Tears from the corners of her eyes rolled down her cheeks. I knew that she sometimes had trouble sleeping and groaned in her sleep, but I had never seen her cry. She must've been through a lot of pain. A high-ranking noblewoman who was set to marry the future king was thrown out on the streets. It was hard to imagine that she came out of the entire ordeal unscathed.

All she had to do was say the word, and I was willing to kill everyone who had hurt her.

I slowly touched her cheek. I wiped her tears away and licked my now-damp fingertips. I felt like I wanted to kiss her, and I thought I'd gone crazy. There was no way I'd lust after a woman in her weakest state. I put my hand on my forehead and shook my head. *I should wake her up. I'll talk to her like I usually do, and properly tell her that I'll be by her side. I will forever stay by her side, as long as the contract is still in place.*

◆ A Walk in the Skies and the Otherworldly Gate

I felt like all I did was one-sidedly get angry and pout, but Mr. Julius and I made up. As usual, he went to my bed to sleep, and I slept on the sofa that I had carried into my room. I continued to wonder when I'd get my bed back, but if he was comfortable in it, I would continue to let him use it.

I felt guilty about my immature attitude, and I was willing to give him my bed as a token of apology. I was much smaller and could comfortably sleep on the sofa, but I assumed it'd be uncomfortable for his tall stature. In other words, I was better suited for the sofa. As I was thinking about how I was okay with giving him my bed, I rolled around in my dark room. *It's not that I want to sleep in the same room as him. I think.*

However, the words he said earlier, "*I'll be by your side,*" echoed in my head. I kept telling myself that he meant he'll be by my side as a slave, and it meant nothing more. He'd stay with me because he's my slave, as long as the contract permits. *I know that, don't I? Then why does my heart feel so warm?*

No one had ever said those words to me before. When my kind mother died, and my stepmother and Aliza came into my life, I learned how to fake a smile. I never voiced my own opinions and kept smiling no matter what, hoping to escape each situation as soon as possible. To Cyril, I was nothing but a convenient fiancée who would quietly continue to smile without making a fuss. I noticed that he started to spend more time with Aliza on his days off, and because he said he pitied me, who wasn't used to dinner parties, he would often escort her instead.

I felt like a clown. I lied every day, didn't have a clear sense of myself, and was always alone. Yet, I wasn't sure if my current self was my true nature. I obviously didn't actually think of myself as Chloe, the beautiful young maiden alchemist—I needed to offer myself words of encouragement so that I could function.

Mr. Julius always called me a woman with a mediocre face, and I thought that

he had maybe caught onto my lies. I knew he was more mature than me and had lived a life far harsher than I ever would.

I stared at the ceiling in my dark room and said in a small voice, "Will you really stay by my side?" I expected him to be asleep.

"...I have the slave's brand on me, and I have the magical contract with you. I'll be by your side until you find me unnecessary," a voice whispered back.

I sat up from my sofa, feeling embarrassed. I hadn't expected to be heard, and I felt my cheeks grow hot. I was glad the room was dark, and I saw Mr. Julius lying down on my bed. *Was he mumbling in his sleep? Was I just hearing things?* I sighed and tried to lie back down, but I heard the voice once again.

"If you can't sleep, Chloe, want to come over here? There's enough room for one more."

I wasn't sure if he was serious or joking. I assumed he was teasing me and feared that if I did accept his kind words and invitation, he'd just throw me onto the ground.

"That's *my* bed, you know," I replied. "I'm fine, anyway. I'm small, so I can sleep on this sofa with ease. Thanks for your concern. Besides, why are you listening in on me? You should know that it's good manners to pretend you didn't hear a maiden's mumblings."

"You're energetic, even at night. Good for you. I'm sleepy."

"Did you just make fun of me again? Tomorrow, we'll walk Helios and go to Ms. Roxy's diner. Her food's great, and she's gorgeous," I continued to talk cheerfully, trying to hide my embarrassment at being heard.

"Okay. Go to sleep, then. If you fall asleep on Helios's back, you'll fall."

"You're right. Good night, Mr. Julius."

"Yeah. Night."

I heard his reply as I lay down on the sofa once more. Simple greetings like "Good night" and "Good morning" felt very dear to me. It tickled my heart and made me feel warm.

I wished that calm nights like these would last forever. My relationship with

Mr. Julius revolved around money and contracts. I was sure that people thought our relationship was distorted or odd, but I was glad that he continued to say that it was part of the contract. It put me at ease, since that was something I *could* trust.



THE next day, I expected to enjoy a normal morning. I planned on eating breakfast and keeping my shop closed so that we could take Helios on a walk. As I locked my doors and tried to head towards the outskirts, a luxurious horse carriage stopped in front of Mr. Julius and me.

Ms. Eliza, the daughter of the wealthy Mr. Coldman, emerged, followed by her servant, who was carrying a heavy-looking trunk. Ms. Eliza was wearing a glittering light-blue dress and was adorned with sparkling necklaces and bracelets that felt too bright for the eyes. Her shimmering hair ornament alone looked like it cost 500,000 gold. It was truly an item fitting for the daughter of the Jewel King. Mr. Julius was worth 10 million gold, but her attire alone seemed to cost 5 million gold.

“Good day, Mr. Julius,” she said, completely ignoring my presence.

I was wearing my usual apron dress. I chose black today, and people would come up to me a little sad, and say, “Tomorrow’s cloudy, isn’t it, Chloe? Black is a bit sad...” Thus, I generally didn’t wear black too much. I decided to take a day off from work, so I wasn’t wearing my usual headkerchief.

Mr. Julius, who also planned to only take a walk, was dressed in a black robe. His neck area hung low, and his collar and slave brand were in plain view.

“Let’s go, Chloe,” Mr. Julius said, ignoring Ms. Eliza, who had ignored me.

The battle of ignoring seemed endless, and I reluctantly decided to greet the woman to end it all. I also wanted to pretend that she didn’t exist, but as she was the daughter of the wealthy Mr. Coldman, I didn’t want to cut my business ties over something like this.

“Hello, Ms. Eliza. Unfortunately, my shop is closed today, but is there anything you need?” I asked. Of course, I could talk elegantly like a noble if I liked, but Mr. Julius always seemed annoyed when I did so. He said that it didn’t suit me,

and I couldn't help but agree.

"I've no business with the alchemy shop. I came to continue our conversation from yesterday," Ms. Eliza said a bit forcefully.

"Our conversation, you say..."

"Yes! You're willing to sell Sir Julius to me if I pay you twice your paying price, are you not? I've brought three times the initial price, a total of 30 million gold. How is that for you?"

"Thirty million gold." I assumed the heavy-looking trunk that her servant was holding contained that money. I knew that Mr. Coldman could easily afford that price, but I was still shocked at how expensive Mr. Julius had become.

He looks pretty, but he's a dragon maniac and proud and sarcastic. He's quick to want to murder others and is hard to manage. It's a bit sly that he's sometimes nice. I added my personal feelings there at the end, but this is the kind of man he is.

"Chloe," Mr. Julius said, furrowing his brows at me. I looked up at him and shook my head.

I was surprised by the price, but I hadn't wavered. I wasn't planning on selling him at all. I wasn't the type of person who imprudently forgot our talk yesterday. *I always thought money was important, but it's odd that I'm not prioritizing money here.* I felt oddly refreshed and smiled.

"Is something the matter, Ms. Alchemist?" Ms. Eliza asked, glaring at me. I presumed that she thought that I was mocking her.

I brought my hands to my lips. "I'm sorry, I don't mean any ill intent. Mr. Julius isn't an item, so he's not for sale. It's as I said yesterday."

I won't waver anymore. I won't sell him. He told me yesterday that I didn't need to hesitate. I could clearly say "No" when I needed to. I was the genius alchemist, a young maiden of beauty, after all. The quiet and frail Chloe Sagrid of three years ago was no more.

Upon hearing my words, Ms. Eliza folded her arms in front of her and smiled back at me mockingly. "My father said you were in need of money, Ms.

Alchemist. You were formerly the eldest daughter of Duke Sagrid, were you not? Three years ago, your father was executed in this square, but I shudder to think at your gall of opening up a shop in the same area your father died. I've heard that misers are heartless, and I suppose there's some truth to that."

I sighed. "...Did you think I'd be shocked to hear that or something? Of course, I know all about it." That information was readily available, and it'd be more difficult not to know anything about what happened to my family three years ago. Besides, I was literally involved in every horrific moment as it played out.

I never attended the execution, but it was true that my father was executed in the royal capital's shopping district's square. There wasn't a trace left from that execution. The square was a beautiful place, with clean water always bubbling from the fountain.

"In any case, aren't you in need of money? I could give you 30 million gold in exchange for Sir Julius, and I can even see to it that you get more requests from Coldman Merchandise. I've also looked into your past, when you were thrown into the alleyways. I can talk about that incident, you know? I'm sure you don't want Sir Julius to hear about it," she said, taunting me.

I bit my lip. *To be precise, it was only an attempt, and nothing had actually occurred. Ms. Natalia had saved me back then.* I felt cold sweat roll down my back and my throat tighten.

"...Chloe, order me to kill this woman, and I'll do it in a second."

"You can't, Mr. Julius. I'm fine," I replied. I felt his anger, and a different kind of cold sweat ran down my back. An angry, cold-hearted, merciless Black Prince was more of a problem than my past.

He was always serious, and I felt that he truly would kill her once I ordered him to do so. I thought that he might kill her regardless. *That's bad. We'll be criminals, and I won't be able to live with him anymore.*

"I don't really care about my past. My master saved me, and I'm now a genius alchemist, a young maiden of beauty. Now, please leave. Mr. Julius isn't for sale, and I have no intention of selling him!" I said firmly. I turned my back towards her, grabbed Mr. Julius's hand, and ran away.

There wasn't really a need for me to run, but I wanted to get away from her as quick as I could. She reminded me of my sister—I disliked those types of people. Mr. Julius followed me silently. I was sure he could run faster than me, he was well-mannered for adjusting to my pace.



WE left the royal capital and reached the grassy plains off the main road. I let go of Mr. Julius's hand and tried to apologize for suddenly running. He instead grabbed me, and his large hand wrapped around mine. He still couldn't control his strength—it hurt a little.

“Come, Helios!” he said, raising his left hand with the ring into the air.

The ring glowed, and a pillar of light sliced through the sky. The black dragon appeared from above us, his large wings and sleek body soaring in the sky as though he was celebrating his freedom.

Helios then descended straight toward us. I didn't know what to do when he was coming at us so fast, but Julius pulled me into his arms. He lifted me up with one arm, and then it seemed like he had grabbed the reins on Helios. I couldn't see very well, so that was what I'd assumed. As I looked around, wide-eyed, I was already on top of Helios. I felt like Mr. Julius had grabbed the reins, kicked the ground, and landed on the dragon's back.

“Ugh,” I said, in a very unladylike fashion, as I got used to the new field of view.

Helios flew upwards at an incredible speed, just as fast as he had descended upon us. While Mr. Julius was properly seated, I felt as though I was in an unstable position in his arms. I grabbed onto him as my legs were floating in the air.

I recently realized that Helios was equipped with alchemy dragon items that decreased impact, had a wall of defense, and stabilized bodies that rode on his back. I knew that I wouldn't fall very easily, but as Helios flew straight up at a ninety-degree angle, it got a bit scary.

“Mr. Julius, I'm going to fall!”

“You won't. Grab onto me if you're scared,” he said calmly, holding me with

one arm. I was still terrified and wrapped my arms around his waist. He had scolded me not to move, so I curled myself up smaller, hoping I wouldn't move as much.

I didn't really feel much impact or strain on my body as we flew straight up. The royal capital was growing smaller and smaller, and the blue sky seemed to swallow us whole. Once we made it through the clouds, Helios gave a proud cry as he looped once in the air.

Once my view stabilized, I gave a sigh of relief. The royal capital looked peacized now. It felt surreal that I was on the ground down there mere moments ago, running from Ms. Eliza and pulling Mr. Julius behind me. I felt like Helios was taking me farther away from reality. I slowly loosened my grip on Mr. Julius.

The last time I rode Helios, I fell asleep and woke up right in front of the Black Prince. Currently, I was carried on his lap, sort of like getting princess carried. I was surprised, as I always thought he was an unfortunate man who could only carry and throw people around like luggage.

I looked up at his fearless face, his different-colored eyes facing forward with a smile dancing on his lips. He must've been happy that he could ride Helios again. His golden hair flowed in the wind. He looked like the dignified, proud, Black Prince, often seen on the battlefields.

"You don't have a place in mind, do you? Then I'll fly as I please," he said, glancing down at me.

"S-Sure. Do as you like..." I stammered as my voice cracked and nodded. As our gazes met, I realized that I had been staring at him. I was sure that he noticed me slightly panicking, but he didn't say anything, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Ever since yesterday, I've felt a little weird. I was angry, then pouting, then at ease, then happy when I was talking to Mr. Julius. I felt my heart racing, as though a storm was brewing nearby.

What is this feeling? I've never felt it before. I don't understand.

He tugged on the reins slightly. As though Helios had understood, the dragon

stretched his long neck and tail in a straight line and spread his wings. He was no longer flapping his wings, but I could feel us going faster. Helios skated through the sky, dropping in altitude and only occasionally flapping his wings to maintain a certain height. At first, I could only gasp, but I started to get used to the speed and was able to enjoy the view.

The items that Helios had equipped were well-made. My body never felt strained, and I felt stable. I didn't feel myself going down, and I could only tell we were descending visually. I thought I was lightheaded or felt my body float, but it seemed I had only tricked myself into thinking so. Mr. Julius put his arm around my waist, and I put my hands around his back, clutching onto the black robe. I decided not to hold back since he gave me permission to hold on.

As I heard whooshing sounds, the view below me changed at a dizzying pace; I saw forests, cities, and rivers all at once. We passed over a deep forest in an instant, and we flew by a large waterfall, coming out of a table-shaped cliff, as the water fell into the basin below. I felt some droplets of water as Helios happily flew around the falls.

We cut through the snow-capped mountains of the North Monster Mountains and slowly flew over a port city that was bustling with life. I saw a few kids look up and wave at Helios. I saw Astria Kingdom's open sea. As we flew over the sea, the world around us turned into water. We looped around back towards the city. We flew over Astria's royal capital, and as we rose in altitude, I saw a vast desert stretch out in front of us.

I had wondered if this was the world that was reflected in Mr. Julius's eyes. Soaring in the sky felt very freeing, yet he had stated that from the moment he was born, he was someone's slave. I couldn't imagine his despair when he was arrested and lost Helios. As I saw Helios flying happily and Mr. Julius with a smile on his face, I couldn't help but feel happy too.

I might be stealing their freedom, I thought. Owning a slave is the act of buying a human, so there's no question that the buyer is taking the slave's freedom. It wasn't an unusual practice, but it was nothing to be proud of. I had purchased this man for my work, without much forethought, because he was strong, but occasionally I'd think, *Is this okay?*

"Chloe, isn't Helios fast?" Mr. Julius said, sounding a little proud.

I thought for a moment. "Yes. He flies differently from other dragons. I'm sure it would've been terrifying to face off with him coming at you on the battlefield at this speed."

"Dragons are good at attacking and fleeing. They're much more mobile than horses... They're difficult to control and rare, so it's difficult to make any sort of army with them, though. I was the only dragon knight back at the empire."

I quietly listened to him reminiscing about his past. *I'm not too knowledgeable about wars and knights, but I suppose that's how it goes.* Helios, who had been cutting through the sky above Astria Kingdom, slowed down as though he were weaving between the clouds. He flapped his wings as little as possible, using the wind to his full advantage. His form was very elegant.

I didn't know much about dragons, but I had thought that they loudly flapped their wings to support their large body. In comparison, Helios's movements looked very refined.

"I'm not very knowledgeable about the military, but I think the Astria Kingdom's knights also rode on horseback," I said.

"Probably. There are a lot of dragon knights in the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed to the south. Half of their kingdom's desert, so they can't fight on a horse. It's a country with many dragon knights and sorcerers who know transportation magic. The kingdom didn't seem to be interested in invading others, but their defenses were a lot tougher than the Astria Kingdom."

"Isn't their kingdom a lot smaller, though?" I asked.

"That doesn't mean they're militarily weaker. The Dystiana Empire didn't even have a proper army... I didn't care about any of this until you purchased me. It's the first time in my life that I've ever thought this much about other kingdoms' military forces and power. Until now, all I had in mind was winning the battle in front of me," he confessed.

Beyond the forest was the wide desert, a sea of yellow. It seemed we'd arrived at the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed's border. I learned at my academy that Rasheed was the kingdom of God and was largely supported by faith. The

citizens were mostly peaceful, choosing to pray every morning, afternoon, and evening. They were also known for their research on the Otherworldly Gate and the Otherworld.

The researchers of Rasheed were the first to properly identify what the Otherworldly Gate was. They were also the ones who'd discovered that the monsters coming from the gate were created by the grudges of the dead. Many of their researchers went through the Otherworldly Gate for research purposes and never came back. As I learned about this in class, I remember being surprised by their fearlessness. I also wondered if my late mother was in the Otherworld.

"Erm, um...Mr. Julius, you're, uh..." I stammered. It didn't feel right to call him a slave. It was a fact, but it just felt wrong. "Uh, well...I rely on you greatly for work! You're like my partner! The war ended, so there's no need to worry about that stuff anymore."

I wasn't sure what I meant by "no need to worry," but I had hoped that his painful days had come to an end. I was sure I'd be a good master, and his strength was reliable.

There was a brief silence before he spoke. "You're right. As you've said, it's all in the past."

"Exactly! Was there...perhaps someone i-important to you in the Dystiana Empire? Are you sure I'm not causing you any trouble with this...arrangement?"

He may have had a fiancée who was taken hostage by the emperor, forcing him to fight all these years for her safety. If that was so, calling him my "partner" was a selfish choice on my part, and would be nothing but trouble to him.

My heart felt heavy as I thought long and hard. However, nothing good would come out of being silent. Communication was key; if I was curious about something, I should just ask about it. Staying silent without asking any questions when Ms. Eliza wanted to purchase Mr. Julius was what had resulted in me pouting and getting into a fight with him last time. It wasn't wise to repeat the same mistakes.

He looked down at me with a puzzled expression. "I don't have anyone, and

you're not troubling me. Chloe, I'm fine with being *your* slave."

Just like that, he dispelled my apprehension. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad I didn't cause him any trouble. Had he truly wished to go home to his empire, I had planned to end the contract immediately and send him back home. As I thought about doing so, my heart felt a twinge of pain, but I knew the decision should lie with him, not me.

"Do you not want to be my partner? Is it possibly already filled by Helios? I had thought he was more like your wife..." I said in an overly cheerful voice that surprised even myself. *I'm so easy to read. I didn't think I was an open book until he came into my life.* To be precise, I had taken great care in not telling others my true thoughts.

"You're too noisy. Can't you be quiet?" he said.

"I'm talking because you aren't. You should be grateful!"

"...You're right," he said, looking down at me with a smile. He wasn't mocking me or being sarcastic—it was a genuine smile that made me want to smile back. His expression accentuated his beautiful face, and he felt like a person who wasn't of this world. Shocked, I couldn't help but stare at him.



I felt like we were staring at each other for an eternity. The blue sky spread out in front of us, and it felt like there was only Helios, Mr. Julius, and me in this world. I wished that I could forget everything about the world below and that time would stop. The sky felt so calm and serene. I wondered if this was what Heaven was like.

According to the researchers, the Otherworld has a lower layer that's overflowing with resentment, and a higher layer, the Heavens, that's filled with happiness. Sinful people fall to the lower layer while the good will rise to the Heavens. The people who became monsters are apparently from the lower layer.

I felt embarrassed by the silence and couldn't help but talk. "Mr. Julius, I don't mind if you're my slave or partner, but let's make that alchemy shop larger together, okay? Our goal is to build a house large enough to house two to three Helioses."

I thought I was being too noisy again until he nodded. "I want Helios to have a wife, so that she can lay an egg. Dragons only lay one egg in their entire life. I want to raise another dragon for riding."

"Then we'll house three dragons," I said definitively. Like it was a done deal. "We need a large area for that. As we've been flying through the skies, I've started to think that we don't necessarily need to stay in the capital. The world's large, isn't it?"

He's lively when he's talking about dragons. I was happy to see him looking so happy. I went through a few traumatic things in my life, but it was all in the past. We were now free and could do whatever we liked. We were fine. I felt like Ms. Eliza's words had torn up old scars, drawing new blood, but I thought that I'd be okay now.

Mr. Julius was deep in thought before saying, "The world's large. You're right." He mulled it over as if he'd never thought about it before.

"Why did you raise a dragon from an egg?" I asked.

"...Long ago, before my father was killed, when I was a child, my father went on a business trip to the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed," he said. "He brought

home a dragon egg for me as a souvenir. He told me that it'd be difficult to raise, so I decided that I'd definitely raise this egg, and Helios emerged from it."

"You hate losing, don't you?" I remarked.

"Don't you want to prove people wrong?"

"Is that what it's about? I tend to give up more often than not," I admitted.

"That's fine. You don't have to force yourself and get hurt."

"...You've been rather kind to me since yesterday," I replied, facing down. I didn't want him to see my flushed cheeks.



TO the south of Astria Kingdom, on the opposite side of the North Monster Mountains, was the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed's border. To the north, beyond the mountains, was the Ilzario Kingdom. To the east, in the inland area, was the large Dystiana Empire, and to the opposite direction was the sea. Astria's capital was located around the center of the kingdom. I had only seen the Astria Kingdom on the map; from above, it was shaped like an eclipse.

We had left the desert behind, and far to my right, I started to see a long fence. *Is that the border with Dystiana?* While I was gazing, I felt like I saw something odd above the skies of the empire. I squinted, trying to get a better look, but couldn't make it out any better.

"Mr. Julius, is there something above the Dystiana Empire?" I asked.

"Huh?" he said, slightly tugging on the reins. Helios turned and got closer to the border.

I'd never been to Dystiana. I saw a sturdy log fence, meant to protect the border from horses, and a few forts. Helios lowered his altitude, I assumed to avoid being seen by the border soldiers. He flew as though hiding behind the clouds, and beyond his long neck, I thought I saw a black dot hovering above the empire.

"I might just be seeing things, but I feel like I see something in the sky," I said.

"We can't get any closer than this, Chloe. Let's go back," Mr. Julius replied.

"Okay. I'm sure...I'm just imagining things." I felt a shiver run down my spine, as though I had glanced at something I wasn't supposed to.

"Chloe, when you gaze into something scary, that scary thing can see you too. So, if you think you're scared, you must run. Don't forget that, okay?" My late mother's kind words suddenly echoed in my head. I bit my lip. I didn't remember my mother very well, for she passed away when I was thirteen.

She was very kind, beautiful, and smelled good. I felt like she stroked my hair often. My father was a taciturn man, but I didn't think they fought at all. I wondered why her voice suddenly popped into my head. *Maybe she was warning me not to get close to the empire.*

Helios decreased in altitude as he flew around the border, a good distance away. *Is he tired from flying for so long? I'd love to stay in the skies forever, but I suppose that's not feasible.* As we cut through the North Monster Mountains, I looked below me and tugged on Mr. Julius's clothes once more.

"Mr. Julius!" I said, my voice filled with panic.

"What now? Did you see something?" he said calmly.

"Look at the peak of the North Monster Mountains! It's a large Otherworldly Gate!"

"So what? Monsters emerge from that gate, right? Do you want to close it and do a good deed? Or gather materials?"

A gate was suddenly floating in an open area at the peak of the mountains. There was nothing around the gate except for the large snowy mountains. Judging from the clear view I had from above, I imagined this gate to be large, appearing clearly on this sunny day.

"To close the gate, you need to fight the gatekeeper, a really dangerous monster, so I won't do anything like that, but there's a person on the ground!"

"Oh. Looks like they were killed."

A group of people were on the ground near the gate, and the snowy ground was dyed red.

"Wh-What should we do? What should we do?!" I stammered.

"Nothing. It's got nothing to do with us. We just happened upon them," he said, his tone indifferent.

"But...but we can't just leave them be..."

I had defeated monsters to gather materials many times in the past, but I'd never seen an Otherworldly Gate before. My body shuddered, signaling that it was dangerous to get close. I had only seen mercenaries and knights sent on a mission or adventurers aiming for a bounty head for the gate.

I'm sure a lot of them only had good intentions in mind, hoping that the damage from the monsters could be brought to a minimum, and I felt a little cruel for leaving these people behind.

I should try to help them. But it's not right to put Helios and Mr. Julius in danger to satisfy my own intentions.

"Mr. Julius, please drop me off at the peak. I don't know them, but I must help out when I can. Don't worry. I'm strong, and my alchemy items are the best in the kingdom!" I said.

Yeah, this makes the most sense. They can just drop me off, and I can have them wait for me in the sky. They won't be in danger, and I think...I think I'll be fine.

"What are you saying, idiot? Why do I have to just drop you off?" he asked.

"B-Because it's dangerous! Even I'm not quite sure what lurks there, and I don't want you guys to get hurt." I looked up at him.

I was able to fight against monsters that I'd defeated in the past for materials because I was knowledgeable about them. I was a bit scared of monsters I knew nothing about, and I wasn't powerful enough to fight while protecting Mr. Julius.

"Listen, Chloe. I'm your slave. You just have to order me to defeat those monsters by the gate."

"No, you can't. I..."

"You want to make your shop larger, don't you? You said you'd get a house large enough for three dragons... I'm sure the gatekeeper will drop good

materials. You can make good money.”

“You’re starting to sound like me!” I felt like he was becoming a miser as well. As he grinned down at me, he looked reliable, and I could feel the burden on my chest lighten. *Why am I like this in this situation?*

“Chloe, you’re in the way. Hold on tight so you don’t fall,” he said.

“Huh? What?”

He grabbed me by my collar and tossed me behind him. I felt my body float a little as I desperately clung to his back, fighting the fear of the sudden descent. As I hung on tight, I felt my body stabilize thanks to the alchemy items. I breathed a sigh of relief, and the dragon descended towards the mountain peak.

Mr. Julius took out the black spear made from the super expensive Diamond of Eternity from the weapon holder on Helios’s back with his right arm. He lifted the spear with ease. The weapon was thin and about as tall as me.

I could imagine Mr. Julius fought like this when he was a dragon knight. I clung onto him and curled into a ball, hoping not to get in his way as I watched him work.

◆ The Unit Sent to Destroy the Otherworldly Gate

THE large gate came into view as Helios made a swift descent toward it. Both doors in the middle of the rectangular-shaped gate were wide open. Above the doors was a carving of a suffering person's face. The doors seemed to be made from layers of human arms and legs, and the entire frame was a pale white, reminding me of the color of human bones. The gate was large enough for two of my houses stacked on top of each other to fit through it.

Inside the open gate was the deep, dark abyss that seemed to go on for eternity. I squinted, trying to get a better look, but I couldn't see anything and only felt the repulsive air of powerful magic. I felt sick.

Immediately inside the gate was a large, three-headed beast connected to a chain from the abyss. The beast was only a hair smaller than the gates but was much larger than a two-story house. Each of the mouths on its three heads were equipped with large fangs as it glared with its golden eyes. Its faces resembled a wolf's, but its purplish-red body had a long, reptile-like tail. Its long mane that ran along its back turned into an eight-headed serpent in the middle, and each head seemed to have a mind of its own.

Red tongues hung from its three maws. The left head breathed fire, the middle head breathed ice, and the right head breathed poison; simply touching their toxic breaths would put us in danger.

The snow-covered ground in front of the gate had melted away, letting off a foul odor. I thought that the monsters by the gate made its surroundings decay. Nearby were two pools of bright red blood, with a person lying beside each pool. They were wearing sturdy armor and must've been dispatched by the gatekeeper. A man carrying a large steel sword around the size of his own body stood in front of the two fallen members of his team, trying to protect them. He looked up with surprise as he saw Helios descending from the sky.

"Mr. Julius, it'll be dangerous if you just charge in there!" I shouted.

"Shut up and stay quiet," he replied.

Like a bolt of lightning, Helios headed straight for the three-headed monster. The beast breathed fire at him, but he easily dodged the attack as he continued to plunge closer to the monster. The flames were so hot that it felt like I was being broiled alive.

I had observed this during our fight against the Sharp-eyed Mitra, but Mr. Julius's fighting style was designed to defeat the opponent, even if it meant getting hurt in the process. He'd lose the battle if it meant winning the war.

The mantle made from Ariadne's Thread could protect the wearer against the heat and cold to a degree, but he was wearing a robe today, and I was in my regular apron dress. Just touching the flames would burn us badly. I wasn't willing to lose the battle, so I took out my staff which increased my magic abilities.

I grabbed onto Mr. Julius with one arm, brought the staff in front of my chest with the other, and chanted, "The winds of protection from the universe!"

A barrier of wind enveloped Helios and us. Every time the beast breathed fire at us, the barrier would glow light green and slightly distort while making sharp sounds. I was good at healing and protection spells, but I wasn't strong enough to defend against the gatekeeper—this shield wouldn't last for long.

Mr. Julius released his hands from Helios as he used both arms to thrust the spear into the fire-breathing beast's head. Helios, dodging the serpent mane, flew up, away from their ferocious bites. As Helios flew straight up, the spear cut the head wide open.

This whole ordeal lasted mere seconds; my eyes couldn't quite keep up with what was happening. A white bone could be seen jutting from the beast's wound. A dark-red substance dripped from the beast's destroyed head as it pulsated.

Helios took to the skies once more. The beast, unable to fly, reared its remaining two heads, breathing poison and ice into the sky.

"Chloe, will I die if I breathe that in?" Mr. Julius asked, shaking his spear to get rid of the dark-red substance.

"You might. I've never breathed it in, so I wouldn't know," I replied.

"I can kill him if I get closer, but I can't. Do something."

He talked indifferently, as though he expected me to have a solution. *Does he think an alchemist can just do anything? But I feel much better when he's relying on me than when he just tossed me around.*

"...I will!" I replied.

Helios easily dodged the bullets of ice but was unable to get close to the poisonous cloud. The beast let out a low roar, sending a shockwave as the dragon flew around in the sky.

"Poison, poison..." I mumbled as I rummaged through my bag. I remembered the existence of an anti-poisonous monster purification item that I'd made in the past. *God, I'm a well-prepared genius.* "I made this item with my alchemy, thinking we might run into a situation just like this sometime! It's an item that purifies even the highly venomous Hydra's poison! It's called Purification Space: Floral Scent! Please listen well to how awesome it is! This amazing item can purify any poison in a certain area. It even saved the waterfront city of Matilda when it was attacked by a Hydra's poison!"

"Be quiet, you talk too much. Hurry it up."

"Fine," I grumbled. Since this took effort to create, I was excited to provide an explanation.

Because I was scolded, I reluctantly threw the transparent pyramid-shaped item at the beast. Attack-based alchemy items were simple, and the vast majority needed to simply be thrown at their target. The rest would be taken care of on impact. I've always thought that there wasn't a need for an item that was difficult to use or manage. I believed that alchemy shined best when an item was easy to use yet extremely effective, making it practical.

"Deploy purification space!" I chanted.

At once, the transparent pyramid started rotating around the beast's head, which continued to expel poisonous air. In the next instant, the poisonous fumes were sucked into the pyramid, and the beast, hiding behind its fumes, came into view. As the purification ended, a faint floral scent floated in the air. I

felt that the small details, like adding a nice scent at the end, showed my sensitive side.

The fact that we smelled this fragrance was proof that the poisonous gases were being successfully purified. However, this item had its limits, and if it absorbed poison past its critical point, the pyramid would shatter. We had to be careful.

“I did something about the poison! Now’s your chance!” I yelled. In the next instant, Helios started his swift descent.

The monster, attempting to take cover, kicked the ground. Its thick chain clattered as it came from the gate. Helios, as though understanding Mr. Julius’s thoughts, flew low on the ground, straight towards the beast’s underbelly. The dragon was able to go this low to the ground because he didn’t need to flap his wings as much; it was surely a move that only Helios could do.

Mr. Julius pointed his spear upwards and tore through the beast’s underbelly in a straight line. There was a rotten odor as its body fluids sprayed onto the ground, decaying its surroundings.

“Chloe, grab onto the reins. You just need to hold onto it,” Mr. Julius said.

As I tried to respond, Helios swiftly changed directions, and I could only let out a small shriek. “Oh, whoa!”

The sound of the whooshing wind reached my ears, and the dragon flipped in the air. My view went upside-down for a second, but the saddle made from alchemy prevented me from falling.

Helios dodged the icy bullets and flew above the beast. Mr. Julius jumped off. I desperately clung onto the reins as the dragon no longer had his owner. Helios, for whatever reason, was shaking from side to side as he did a few flips in the air.

“Whoa!” I said, grasping the reins and his armor. At first, I thought he was trying to shake me off, but he seemed to be crying happily. He was just playing around and having fun. I remembered that Helios was still quite young. Since dragons had a long lifespan, there was a good chance that he was still a child.

Icy bullets continued to fly towards us, the serpents on the beast’s back

snapped menacingly, and the beast's long tail tried to knock us down, but Helios dodged all these attacks skillfully, as though he was just playing around. Tears formed in my eyes as I was being taken for a wild ride, but I was more worried about the situation below.

Mr. Julius had jumped onto the beast, slashed at the serpents, and plunged his spear into the poison-breathing monster's head. With a low groan, the monster's neck sank to the ground. Mr. Julius jumped up with frightening agility, aiming for the last head, but the spear's tip was frozen solid. I felt like the blade would crumble if he continued to swing the weapon. *Please, please don't do it. The Diamond of Eternity is super expensive. Please don't break it.*

"Chloe!" Mr. Julius called my name, as though expecting me to do something. Serpents attacked him from behind, but he dodged the attacks while fighting with the handle of his spear. His body had a few wounds as the monster managed to scratch him a few times.

Didn't Mr. Robert say that weapons made from the Diamond of Eternity are sensitive to magic? I thought about possible spells for a moment. Do I have anything effective against a gatekeeper?

"Ms. Chloe, use your anti-evil magic!" a man's low voice called out to me.

Surprised, I nodded and pointed my staff towards Mr. Julius's spear.

"The burning angels of Seraphim, lay down judgment on all evil! The thunder of punishment!" I chanted.

Anti-evil magic and holy magic were similar, but the latter was more upwards compatible and had more uses. The former type of magic hadn't seen much usage, and though I'd learned about it in classes, I'd never actually used it before. If this chant didn't work, I was prepared to use holy magic next, but I wasn't a sorcerer, and I didn't have much magic power.

However, the moment I chanted, I felt my body grow lighter. From the heavens, a white feather descended. Suddenly, a clap of thunder cut through the sky and fell onto the frozen tip of the spear. The tip glowed white. As I kept looking back and forth between my staff and Mr. Julius's spear, dumbfounded, he calmly swung his weapon, shaking off the serpents that tried to wrap around it. A light glowed from within the snakes, and they exploded.

Mr. Julius jumped off the monster's back and thrust his spear into the remaining head. His aim was true; the beast sank to the ground as though the weapon had pushed it down. With a dying groan, the mist surrounding its body dissipated, and the gates closed with a heavy, dragging sound. The arms and legs on the gates writhed into place, and the entrance shut. As I heard the cries of numerous weeping people, the Otherworldly Gate slowly turned transparent and disappeared into the blue sky.

The flesh and bodily fluids of the beast also disappeared, leaving only a black hole in the middle of the snowy field. Helios silently descended to the ground. He lowered his body, allowing me to easily slide off his hard, smooth, scaly back. My boots crunched on the ground, and I continued to run, half-tripping over myself, towards Mr. Julius.

"Mr. Julius! Are you okay?!"

He looked up as he heard my voice. He caught me with one arm as I was about to trip. "...You're too loud."

I grabbed onto him and looked up. His clothes were ripped in a few areas, and he was bleeding, but none of the wounds looked serious. I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad you're okay. I know you're strong, but I've never seen, much less fought, a gatekeeper before. I was worried."

I steadied myself, so he didn't have to keep holding me upright. Then he pulled his spear from the ground. I saw Helios digging through the snow with his nose and throwing it onto his body. He seemed to be having fun, and he looked adorable.

"It was no trouble...is what I'd like to say, but it would've been tough without your alchemy and magic," Mr. Julius admitted. "Even I can't fight against poison. Also, what was that magic? You—"

"Ms. Chloe!" a voice called out, interrupting our conversation. I was planning on explaining that magic, but I turned towards the voice.

A familiar man ran towards me. "Mr. Roge!" I said.

Mr. Roge Gregorio was the current captain of the Royal Mercenaries, the main mercenary guild in the royal capital. He had brown skin and short, spiky,

silver hair. He had a wild appearance, further highlighted by a scar at the end of his eye. He had golden eyes and was very large and muscular. He was wearing military clothes that had a hawk stitched in, symbolizing that he was part of the Royal Mercenaries. He carried a large sword about his size on his back.

Around three years ago, at the age of twenty-two, he became captain of the mercenaries, and I remembered him being quite young, possibly younger than Mr. Julius. Mr. Roge was currently part of the mercenaries, but I heard that he was formerly in the Royal Knights. He quit for whatever reason and entered the mercenary guild. These were only rumors that I heard from Ms. Roxy, so the truth was a mystery to me.

I wasn't particularly close with him, but he started calling me "Ms. Chloe" in a familiar manner because he was my client. I had added a few effects with my alchemy to his equipment in the past. He claimed that he wasn't very good at magic and had requested me to add the Anagram of Truth, the same ability on Mr. Julius's artificial eye, to his weapon. The large steel sword he had on his back had this effect. Of course, these requests came with a price. He wasn't a regular customer, but he was a good one.

Behind Mr. Roge, the two men who'd been lying in their own blood slowly got up. *Seems like they're not dying. That's great.*

"Thank you so much for saving us, Ms. Chloe!" he said, hugging me tight with a huge smile and tears in his eyes.

"Ack!" I cried as the large Mr. Roge clung to me. It felt like a raging bull rammed into my body as I creaked under the pressure.

"I thought I was gonna die! I was sent to close the Otherworldly Gate, but I was about to die and join the Otherworld!"

"M-Mr. Roge, do calm down. I'm glad you're safe," I said, patting his back. He sounded like he was about to cry.

I felt like he was going to lift me into the air at this rate. I could already imagine Mr. Julius making fun of me for it. I thought I could feel a sharp gaze pierce through my back.

"Besides, Mr. Julius was the one who defeated the monster," I said, correcting

him.

“Ah, yes, that’s right! Julius Craft! A man who’s terrifying as an enemy on the battlefields, but very reliable when he’s an ally!”

Mr. Roge rubbed his face on my head. *Ow. He’s like a large animal, and it scares me. His loud voice booms in my ears. He’s so noisy. I feel like I’m starting to understand what Mr. Julius means when he says that I’m so noisy. I should be careful.*

“Owww, do you know Mr. Julius?” I asked Mr. Roge as I rubbed my head.

“Yep! I’m a mercenary that came from the knights! Of course, I know him! I bumped into him on a number of battlefields, but I didn’t want to die, so I ran!”

As Mr. Roge proudly talked about how he fled, the two men behind him, who were most likely also mercenaries, scowled as though they had a headache. Their shoulders slumped, and they sighed as though there was no stopping this energetic man.

“Once the Black Prince appeared with that dragon of his, our soldiers’ heads would fly in the air. It was terrifying! I thought I wouldn’t stand a chance, so I fled and hid. That takes me back!” he exclaimed, nodding as he kept me locked in his arms.

Please let me go. It’s hard for me to breathe.

“Speaking of which, why’re you with Julius, Ms. Chloe?”

“Please let go, Mr. Roge. It’s difficult to talk like this,” I groaned.

“I was about to die in the snowy mountains until an angel appeared and saved me! Of course, I’d wanna hug you! I’ve really come to realize that I could die any day. Now I want to live my life without regrets! I want to hug this beauty in front of me! Is that okay, Ms. Chloe?” he said, proudly voicing his desires.

It felt nice to be called a beauty, but I wanted him to let me go. I wasn’t very close with him, and it didn’t make me happy to be hugged by him. I only thought that he was very muscular. As I thought that he was a man, I got goosebumps.

“Be quiet. Let go. Let’s go, Chloe,” Mr. Julius ordered in a very low tone. He

sounded very irritated. Since he was short-tempered, I hoped to wrap up this conversation and go home before it got any worse. We had just made up, so I didn't want to fight again.

"C'mon, don't be so angry. I'm just happily celebrating my life here, and I don't have any ulterior motives," Mr. Roge said, finally letting me go. He turned to me. "Your bodyguard's short-tempered, isn't he?"

I smoothed out my crumpled apron dress and took a step back, standing next to Mr. Julius. As I looked up at the man beside me, I saw that his brows were furrowed into an intense scowl directed at Mr. Roge. *You shouldn't glare that much the first time you meet someone.*

"He's not my bodyguard. He's my..." I started.

"Slave," Mr. Julius finished.

"Something like that, yes."

As he said the word calmly, I felt a twinge of pain. He didn't want to be called my partner, and he wasn't my bodyguard. He said he was fine with being called a slave. Perhaps he wanted to keep this relationship from a monetary standpoint. I felt like he was keeping his distance.

"Oh, Ms. Chloe, that's a bit...suggestive," Mr. Roge said as he put his hands to his mouth, cheeks flushed.

"H-How so?! Why are you even here, Mr. Roge?!" I said, quickly changing the subject. I didn't want him to pry further about our relationship.

"Why? Because I'm a mercenary," he replied. "There are quite a few Otherworldly Gates popping up around the Astria Kingdom recently, and a lot of squads have been dispatched to take care of them. The gate in the North Monster Mountains was said to be especially dangerous, so as the captain, I decided to head here. But my subordinates were about die, and I couldn't win alone, and just as I was thinking time was up for me, you guys saved us."

"I see. You're famous for your strength, too..." I said, surprised he was so close to death.

"Yeah, I'm very strong, but I've never met the gatekeeper, the Jailer Cerberus,

before. I was underprepared. I tried to get closer, but my footing decayed, and I couldn't move when I inhaled the poisonous fumes. I thought I was a goner," he said with a hearty laugh.

His two subordinates seemed to be tired of their boss's antics. Those two must've been rather strong as well, for they were personally picked by Mr. Roge for this mission. They needed to defeat quite a few monsters to reach the peak —it was an impressive enough feat to reach the top, but the Cerberus must've been a much stronger opponent. I was once again amazed by Mr. Julius, who defeated that powerful monster. *I should give him some good food today.*

"Going to chat until the monsters come back? We're done here," Mr. Julius said irritably. He had collected the items that the monster dropped and pushed them onto me.

"Mr. Julius, these are amazing, precious drops! The Trinity Heart, the Otherworldly Finger, the Poison of Narrow Death, and the Chains of the Abyss! Yay!"

"Great. Come, Helios." He picked me up and jumped onto the dragon's back.



ONCE we returned to the royal capital, we decided to change our dirty clothes and take a bath. I healed Mr. Julius's wounds with my magic, but his black robe was torn to shreds. I tried to toss it away, but he insisted on keeping it, so I promised to buy him a new robe. He seemed to really like the garment. *Is it that comfortable?*

I decided to keep the robe and sew the tears. It felt like a waste to just toss it out, so I decided to use it as my pajamas. *Only because it's a waste! It's not because Mr. Julius seemed attached to this robe! I'm not curious about how it feels! It's not like I want to wear this. I just don't want perfectly good clothing to go to waste.*

Helios went back inside the ring on the outskirts of the royal capital. Before he went back in, he cried and nuzzled his large face against mine. *Adorable.*

We got ourselves ready and headed for the diner, located in an alleyway off the main square.

I was no longer wearing an apron on my dress. Though plain, it sort of looked like a normal blue dress. Just in case, I slung my usual bag over my shoulders. Since Mr. Julius's black robes had torn, he was wearing everyday clothes that we bought from Mr. Robert's store—a black shirt and a vest, tight-fitting black pants, and boots. He had the same black leather belt where he kept his sword.

Because of his black clothes, his golden hair, odd-eyes, collar with a small lock, and ring with the blue stone stood out. The man was already very handsome, so wearing all black didn't make him seem too dark and gloomy. He had been eating properly recently, so his hair and skin looked better than ever, making him even more beautiful. I felt shy standing next to him, as I wasn't dressed up at all.

Mr. Julius seemed a little angry ever since we came back from defeating the Jailer Cerberus. He obediently took a bath, got changed, and agreed to go with me to the diner, but he was quieter than usual. He had always been a man of few words, but something about him seemed more irritable now. He always did seem a little displeased, but I felt he was happier earlier when we were taking Helios for a walk.

Maybe he's hungry. We've only had pea soup these days. As I mulled it over, I continued to walk alongside him as the sun started to set on the royal capital's square. I was hungry, too, and a little tired from riding Helios. Riding a dragon may require more stamina than I'd thought.



MS. ROXY, a well-known beauty in this city, worked at the diner De Zange, which was open until 11 p.m. A popular diner, it was as busy as usual, and the five tables inside were completely full. We decided to sit at the counter in front of Ms. Roxy.

In general, I always came here by myself, so I often took the counter seat. I usually sat at the very end and silently ate my food, but today, I brought Mr. Julius with me. Ms. Roxy stared at me wide-eyed.

"My, my, Ms. Chloe! Isn't this the first time you've come with a boyfriend?" she called from the kitchen in the back as she was fixing a drink.

"Good evening, Ms. Roxy," I replied.

Ms. Roxy was a woman in her late twenties. She tied her black hair up in a bun, and her long eyelashes framed her large, slightly droopy, light purple eyes. The beauty mark near her eye only made her more alluring. She was wearing a dark blue dress and a white apron. Her large, red lips were always smiling.

Her husband had died early, and she loved him very much, so she refused to ever remarry. She had no kids. Many men in the royal capital were after her, but she didn't have a boyfriend. I felt like she would pass even Mr. Julius's strict standards of beauty. I glanced at him, but he continued to frown.

"Ms. Chloe, who is this? Who's this man who stole your heart? Until now, you've always managed to ignore other men's advances! Pray, do tell!" Ms. Roxy's voice echoed throughout the diner as I felt people starting to take notice of me.

"Ms. Roxy...your voice is a bit too loud," I replied.

Since I was a regular at this diner, I was a rather well-known alchemist among the other regulars—bloodthirsty men who loved to fight. I was a bit embarrassed as I felt people staring at me as they whispered, "Ms. Chloe has a boyfriend now?"

I didn't have that sort of relationship with Mr. Julius, but I wasn't planning on yelling out that he was my slave in the middle of the diner. He told me before not to talk about his past either, so I felt a bit guilty about this misunderstanding.

"Um...this is Mr. Julius. Mr. Julius, meet Ms. Roxy. Isn't she beautiful?" I said.

"There are people around here who make their advances on you? They've got peculiar taste," Mr. Julius said in a mocking manner, looking at my face as though he was trying to evaluate me.

"Of course not. The men who come to this diner are all after Ms. Roxy. She's the real beauty." What I said was the truth, and I couldn't recall a single time when a man tried to make advances on me within the past three years.

Ms. Roxy leaned over the counter. She got close to me and whispered, "Ms. Chloe, by Mr. Julius, do you mean *that* Julius that I told you about last time?"

"Yep, that's right. This is the Mr. Julius that you told me about. He's very

strong and reliable,” I whispered back.

Ms. Roxy graciously kept her voice low to not alert other customers that this was the Mr. Julius from the Slave Arena. *I would've appreciated it if you kept your voice low from the start, but it is what it is.*

Ms. Roxy flashed a kind smile. “I see. I’m happy for you. Anyways, what would you like today?” She apparently didn’t have any more questions and returned to being the diner’s owner.

“Mr. Julius, what would you like?” I asked him. “You can order whatever you want. You can even get the most expensive dish! We obtained some good materials that I would’ve never been able to get on my own, so you can drink as much as you like, too!”

I handed him the paper menu. Today’s recommendations were seafood pasta and stewed beef cheek. Though a bit cheaper, innards stewed with tomatoes were also delicious.

“...I’ll have whatever you have,” he said, disinterested.

“Come on, let’s be more interested in our own food. Anything Ms. Roxy makes is really delicious. You’ll start to think that the food I make tastes disgusting. Here, how about grilled lamb with herbs? Or do you prefer fish? What do you like?”

He thought for a moment before replying. “That thing you made before... What was it? Meat and vegetables between thin slices of bread. I thought that was good.”

He was most likely referring to the food we ate when we needed to save money. Instead of bread, I baked a thin dough out of flour and added some meat and vegetables to it. That was frugal food, created to save money, so I was a bit embarrassed.

“Oh, u-um...thank you,” I replied, embarrassed. My cooking had never been praised before, and I blushed. I felt my ears getting hot as I struggled to think about what to say. I wondered why he praised me now, when he’d never done so while eating.

“My, oh my,” Ms. Roxy said, bringing her hand up to her mouth as she smiled.

Seriously, you're getting the wrong idea. We don't have that kind of relationship, do we? I thought to myself. I was just a bit surprised because he suddenly praised me is all. Yeah, that's it. I'm starting to lose confidence, but that's it, right? Right?

"W-Well...let's have meat then. I don't really buy high-quality meat since it's expensive, but since we've got an opportunity here...should we just eat that?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's fine," he replied.

"Ms. Roxy, could we please have two stewed beef cheeks, and an iced tea for me. Please give Mr. Julius some kind of liquor."

"All right, leave it to me! I'll give you the best I can to celebrate your new lover, Ms. Chloe," Ms. Roxy said, winking at me. Her actions were so cute that they even made my heart start racing.

A deep, white plate was placed on the counter in front of us. The dish contained a clear, amber-colored soup and a chunk of well-stewed beef cheek. True to her word about giving us the best, the chunk of meat was large, about half the size of my face. I gulped, staring at the meat chunk, which stood like a mountain. There was a small basket with a mountain of bread as well. I worried that I wouldn't be able to finish it all.

I received a glass of cold iced tea, and Mr. Julius received red wine in a large beer mug. I understood that she was really giving us a lot for our money, but I wondered if Mr. Julius could finish that liquor.

"Thank you, Ms. Roxy," I said.

"Don't mention it. It's just a small token of celebration from yours truly. If any men try to get in your way, I'll cover for you, so take as long as you like with your food," she said. She proceeded to talk to the other men sitting at the counter.

I very rarely got talked to while I was eating at this diner, but I knew she was just trying to be kind. I felt a bit embarrassed by her kindness.

"Mr. Julius, thank you for today. Don't hold back and eat up," I told him.

He stared at the red wine in a beer mug as though he was looking at something odd. “Is this normal in the Astria Kingdom?” he asked.

“No, that mug is for beer. Can you handle your liquor? You don’t have to force yourself to finish the entire thing.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had enough to get drunk, and I didn’t have time for that.”

“...You’re quite different from what I’ve imagined.”

“Just who do you think I am? You seemed surprised when you heard me speak for the first time too.”

“You listen to others very well, and your memory is good, too,” I said.

He sliced the beef cheek with a knife and carried the meat to his mouth. I always thought that his every bite was large. He ate neatly but quickly. I cut my large chunk of meat in half and silently placed it on his plate. He stayed quiet, which I took to mean that he’d eat that half for me. *Thank goodness.*

I cut the meat into smaller pieces and took a bite. The meat didn’t smell gamey, and its rich flavor spread throughout my mouth before melting away. It was very tender, proof that it was well-stewed. I tore a piece of bread, dipped it into the soup, and placed it into my mouth. The bread had absorbed the beef stock and the aroma of the herbs as it filled my mouth with flavor. I felt very happy.

“Um, well, in my head, a really strong and cruel general would be, like, drunk on alcohol and women and would be laughing maniacally while pursuing personal pleasure and debauchery,” I said.

“Yeah, there were those kinds of people in the empire. They were scum that never left their tents and only reported the results of the war to their superiors. You’re not wrong, but...do you ever think that maybe everything I’ve told you up until now could’ve been a big fat lie, and I may have actually been scum like that?”

“You’re not like that. I would never think of you that way.”

“Why?”

"You're not very good at lying. You're an honest person, and...well...I wouldn't want you to be someone like that."

I poked at the beef cheek with my fork. I knew that it wasn't good manners, but it felt easier to talk as I watched my food sink and float in the soup.

"You mean you would dislike me if I was a fool?"

"No. Uh...I just dislike imagining pretty women waiting to be in your arms. I can't quite explain it well, but I just feel a little...sad when I think about it. I think I feel this way because you tell me that I'm mediocre or plain-faced or not cute all the time."

"I never said you weren't cute," he said.

"Really now?" *I felt like he did, but am I misremembering?*

Mr. Julius seemed irritated before we entered the diner, but perhaps I was overthinking it. He was talking normally with a faint smile on his face. *I knew it. It's because he was hungry. He fought a tough battle today, so I'm sure it took a toll on him. Maybe he feels better because he's drinking a little. I'd be glad if he is. I think I like seeing him look happy rather than irritated. If possible, I'd like for him to always be happy.*

He had already finished his food and started sipping on his wine. It didn't look as elegant as he was drinking from a beer mug, but he still managed to look a little graceful. I stared at the rest of my food. About half was still left. I was hungry when I entered the diner, but it didn't mean I could eat much more than usual.

"Chloe, you're the first person other than me to ride Helios. You looked pretty good on him," he said.

"I'm surprised that you were watching me while fighting the Jailer Cerberus. Did I look good up there? Helios was spinning in circles and wiggling his body. I thought I was going to fall off."

"He was probably playing around... Helios isn't even fifteen years old. A male dragon is said to live five hundred years. His body may be an adult, but in human years, he's still a young child. He thinks that I'm his father since I raised him. He...probably thinks you're his mother," he said casually.

I internally ruminated over his words. I remembered Helios nuzzling his large face against mine and felt a twinge of loneliness. *An adorable dragon. He's so cute. But...*

"I-I'm his...mother?" I asked. My heart started to beat loudly, and I could feel my cheeks growing hotter. *How can you say that so casually? You're being sly. It's not fair that you're sometimes kind and that you unconsciously say surprisingly sweet things.*

Knowing Mr. Julius, he probably didn't have any deeper meaning to his words. He just said what he thought. However, I couldn't stop thinking about those words. *If you're the father, and I'm the mother, does that make us married or something?* His words made me panic. Once more, I started to think about the ring he put on his left ring finger. I always thought that was to prove his love to Helios.

As I looked down with my cheeks squeezed between both my hands, he pointed to my plate with the remaining meat. "Are you eating that?" he asked.

I felt foolish for getting flustered. "I'm full..." I said.

"Then I'll take it." He dragged my plate in front of him as he polished off the rest of my food in a few bites. I didn't quite understand, but I felt that was unfair too.

I noticed a few gazes, and I gasped and looked up to see Ms. Roxy and a few men at the counter smirking at me. I was familiar with everyone there. We weren't close friends, but we were, at the very least, acquaintances. I wanted them to stop looking; I was sure these old men, starved to see a bittersweet romance, had too much time on their hands.

I refused to show them any more of my disgraceful behavior, fearing it would've become a good topic to accompany their drinks. My face stiffened as I thought, *We're done eating, so we should go home. Yeah. That's what we'll do.*

"Ms. Chloe! Found you!" a deep voice reached my ears as I was prepared to go home. The man who noisily entered the diner was Mr. Roge. He was wearing the same uniform that we saw in the afternoon. He was alone and didn't seem to have any of his friends with him. "I went to your store, but it was closed, and the neighbors said you might be at this diner. I'm glad I came here! I'm so happy

to see you!"

"Welcome, Mr. Roge. Please shut up," Ms. Roxy scolded the man, who entered the diner and sat next to me with a smile. It was extremely rare for Ms. Roxy to look mad, for she was generally nice to all her customers. Mr. Roge must've been way too loud for her liking.

"Ms. Roxy, beer please! Those two helped me, so I'll foot Ms. Chloe and Julius's bill!" Mr. Roge called.

"Huh? Are you sure?" I asked. He was always noisy, but if he was to treat us to food, I wouldn't mind overlooking that bit. Mr. Julius, who sat on the other side of me, was glaring at Mr. Roge with repulsion.

He doesn't like loud people, so he probably won't get along with Mr. Roge. I feel like we've earned more glances from the other customers with his noisy appearance. I wonder if everyone here has too much time on their hands.

"Boy, am I glad to see you! I wanted to thank you properly, but you guys left in a hurry, so I hurried back to the royal capital!" Mr. Roge continued loudly.

"You still came back rather quickly. How did you return?" I asked.

"My subordinates were badly injured, and I couldn't use healing magic, and we ran out of medicinal herbs, so I used the Key of Return. I had you make one for me a while back. It was expensive, but I'm glad I had you make one. Do you remember my two blood-stained subordinates? They were about to die."

"I should've cast a healing magic on those two. I'm sorry," I said. Mr. Roge wouldn't let go of me back there, and Mr. Julius whisked me onto Helios, so I couldn't analyze the situation very well. Thinking back, the other two were bleeding profusely. *They should've asked me to cast a healing spell.*

"It's fine. If they die and leave me behind, they've failed as my subordinates. Even if they're about to die, they need to struggle to survive. Besides, they're currently resting up. They're alive, so they should be fine."

"I see..." *He looks nice, but I guess he's strict with his subordinates.*

I was sure a mercenary captain had to be strict to a degree, but that was a world I wasn't familiar with. *When Mr. Julius gets hurt, I want to treat that*

wound immediately. I glanced in his direction and saw that he'd silently finished half the mug of wine with a frown.

Will he be okay? I hope he's got a high alcohol tolerance.

◆ A Closer Relationship and an Unrestful Morning

A mug of beer was placed in front of Mr. Roge. The always smiling Ms. Roxy had an unfriendly look on her face as she said a monotone, "Here."

Mr. Roge, not paying any attention to these mannerisms, smiled and said, "Thank you!" He finished half his mug in one gulp. As he was a large and muscular man, I imagined he had a strong tolerance for alcohol.

"Ah, this is so refreshing! I thought I was gonna die back there, so the beer tastes extra good!" he said cheerfully.

Mr. Roge had come to my store a few times to visit, but we never ate together. We weren't close friends. I was as familiar with him as the other people in Ms. Roxy's diner, where I would greet them as I went about my business, but we weren't close enough to grab a bite together.

"I was surprised the Otherworldly Gate's gatekeeper was so strong that even you struggled, Mr. Roge," I said as cheerfully as possible. I was puzzled by Mr. Julius's sudden sour mood, but as he didn't even try to greet Mr. Roge, I quickly tried to think of a topic to make it so things didn't get awkward.

Mr. Julius was kind to Ms. Eliza, who was my customer, but he clearly harbored some sort of silent animosity towards Mr. Roge, like an angry wolf trying to guard its territory.



"Yep, I'm strong. I'm very strong, but... I wanted to show you how strong I really am, Ms. Chloe. I feel pathetic that you saw me on the verge of death instead," he said, sounding a little depressed.

"There's nothing pathetic about fighting to survive," I said. "You must treasure your life. I'm glad you're safe."

"Ms. Chloe...are you some sort of angel? Are you sure you're not an angel?"

"Are you drunk already?" I asked dryly.

Until now, I always thought he was a mature adult, even though he's only two years older than me, but now that I'm getting to know him, he's more like an overly expressive child.

"I wanted to show you my cool side, defeating a monster with ease like Julius," he pouted.

"Yeah. Mr. Julius is very strong. The other day, he defeated the Sharp-eyed Mitra in a flash. He was amazing!" I was happy that Mr. Julius was praised by the captain of the mercenaries. It felt like his potential was being recognized. I turned to look at him, but as our eyes met, he only clicked his tongue.

I don't get it. Is our conversation irritating? Or is Mr. Roge just too loud?

"You know, I can defeat one of those in a single blow too." Mr. Roge clasped one of my hands in his and stared at me as though he wanted to make something clear.

"I-Is that so? That's amazing." I felt the warmth of his muscular hand, but I felt myself shuddering. It didn't feel good.

I tried not to think about it too much. It's just a hand. Just a man's hand. His body and his hands are big. His skin feels tough, and I can see the thick bones popping out from under his brown skin. His hands are about twice the size of mine. As I kept trying to tell myself that it was just a regular hand, I heard a whoosh, and there was a flash of silver. A silver knife was stuck on the counter.

"Whoa..." Mr. Roge and I said at the same time. I couldn't see it very well, but I assumed that Mr. Julius had thrown that knife. *He shouldn't throw knives around, and he shouldn't damage Ms. Roxy's counter like that.*

I opened my mouth to scold him, but Mr. Julius covered my mouth with his large hands, muffling my words.

"...Don't touch her, she's not used to men," he said.

My eyes widened, unable to believe the words that had just left his mouth. *Did he just...protect me? I think he's trying to save me here. He realized that I was troubled by Mr. Roge's advances. What should I do? I'm really happy.*

I felt bad that Ms. Roxy's counter was damaged, but my feeling of happiness was even stronger. *What should I do? It's...as if I'm really in love with him.* As he continued to cover my mouth, he brought me closer to him and peeled Mr. Roge off me.

"Hey, don't get so angry. I'm not here to fight with you, Julius. I wanted to talk with you, but Ms. Chloe was just so cute that I couldn't help myself. I'm just honest with myself," Mr. Roge said, shrugging. He didn't seem angry even though a knife had been thrown at him mere moments ago.

"There's nothing to talk about with you," Mr. Julius replied in a tone I'd never heard before. It sounded lifeless and cold, different from his usual voice.

Mr. Roge pulled out the knife from the counter and twirled it in his fingers. Mr. Julius's mug of wine was empty. His cheeks didn't look flushed, so he didn't seem drunk. He stood up, his hand still over my mouth. I stood up as well in his arms, feeling like some sort of hostage. I was troubled as I'd never been in this situation before. My chest squeezed, and I heard the loud sound of my beating heart.

I knew that this was wrong. If I started being conscious of my feelings, I'd be the one to get hurt in the end. Money never betrayed me, but people and things had. I always tried to keep my distance from others. I'd already lost something so important to me, and I had suffered so much and been through so much pain. I didn't think I could ever recover if I lost something that important to me again.

"Ugh, I said I'm sorry. Agh! I guess this isn't going well. I came to invite you to the Otherworldly Gate unit to defeat monsters, but I guess this means it's a no," Mr. Roge said, sighing deeply.

I was no longer able to keep quiet, and I pulled Mr. Julius's hand away from my mouth. He let his hand drop but continued to embrace me from behind as I asked, "You wanted to invite Mr. Julius?"

"Yeah. He's so strong, so I wanted him to help out. Otherworldly Gates have been popping up throughout the kingdom recently. The knights couldn't keep up with the large number, so they started relying on the mercenaries. They're even asking adventurers who are odd enough to take that request. Even the Adventurers' Guild has received requests from the kingdom, saying that rewards will be paid to whoever destroys these gates. But, as you know, it's dangerous, and even if we *were* to make it to the gates, most of us get killed by the gatekeeper," Mr. Roge replied with a serious face.

"I see. B-But I'm sorry," I declined firmly. "Mr. Julius is my important, er, work partner, so I can't send him to do something so dangerous."

We only defeated the gatekeeper today to save the mercenaries—I didn't want Mr. Julius to do something that dangerous on the regular. *Besides, I need him to make my shop bigger, so I can make money. I didn't buy him to save others.*

"I see. I got it. It's a shame... Besides, if I were to take Julius, you'd need to tag along, and I don't want to put you in a dangerous situation. But I've never seen anyone use such powerful anti-evil magic. You've got a knack for it, Ms. Chloe."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me, you were the one who suggested I use it." I only cast it because Mr. Roge called out to me, urging me to use an anti-evil spell. I was focused on fighting, so I neglected to notice it at first, but the magic flowed through my body as though I was used to casting that spell. I had never used anti-evil magic before.

"Yeah. Gatekeepers are lumps of the Otherworld's grudges. The researchers from the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed discovered that anti-evil magic is the most effective. It's a bit different from holy magic. Holy magic borrows power that flows through the world, but anti-evil magic is said to borrow the power of the angels from the Heavens. You know about the burning angels of Seraphim, don't you? You were chanting their name."

"I only know the chant. I also know a little about the Heavens since I learned

about it at school."

I don't mean to brag, but when I was a noblewoman, I had good grades at the academy. I never talked much and always faked a smile, so my only good point was my diligence towards my studies. That was all I was good for.

Mr. Roge nodded knowingly. "I'm two years older than you, and I was originally part of the Royal Knights. In other words, I was a student of the academy in the knight section, and we went to the same academy together. I knew you from back then, Ms. Chloe."

I paused. "I see."

"Yeah, I even quit the knights because you were...never mind. Anyways, I've never seen anyone use anti-evil magic as powerful as yours. If you ever feel like it, please join the mercenaries. You'll, of course, get paid a hefty sum, and I'll welcome you any time."

"Are you done talking? I didn't think you needed a woman's help to kill a monster of that caliber. I'm disappointed in the mercenaries. You guys seem rather weak," Mr. Julius said. His tone wasn't mocking or ridiculing, just genuinely disappointed in Mr. Roge.

"Say what you will. If we can't close the gates, an endless number of monsters will pop out, and they'll attack people. Before things really get out of hand, we must do something. Even if I...detest you, I still need your help. You only seem to listen to Ms. Chloe's orders, so if that's the case, I need her help." Mr. Roge seemed truly worried about the recent flood of monsters.

I had never thought about it, but for a split second, I wondered if I should help him.

"...Are there any humans in this world that are worth saving from the monsters?" Mr. Julius mumbled.

Mr. Roge looked very pained when he heard those words. I also felt like a thorn had stabbed me in the chest.

"Thank you for the food, Ms. Roxy! And I'm so sorry about your counter. I'll pay for the damages!" I called as I was dragged out of the diner by Mr. Julius.

"Don't worry about it, Ms. Chloe! I get a lot of rowdy men here, so the counter and the chairs are often damaged. Also, that was a pretty good show. Continue to protect Ms. Chloe here, will you, prince?" Ms. Roxy replied, smiling like a goddess and waving goodbye.

Mr. Julius grabbed my hand. His hand was hard and rough to the touch, but felt oddly delicate, and I didn't shudder like with Mr. Roge. In fact, I felt at ease. I desperately tried to ignore the feeling that was bubbling up from my chest. *This isn't good, and I might trouble Mr. Julius.* I continued to think of excuses in my head as I denied my own feelings. Yet, I didn't want to let go of his hand.

"...Mr. Julius, please stop. You walk too fast," I huffed.

Because his walking speed was much faster than mine, I generally chased after him, but since he was holding my hand and dragging me ahead, I kept almost tripping over myself. We passed by a few shops with their lights still on, and he finally stopped at the square in front of the fountain.

It's not good to walk this quickly right after we ate. I can't breathe. It might've been good exercise, though.

The moon shone in the sky above the square as though someone had cut a hole in the heavens. The sound of the fountain, perpetually gushing out water, quietly echoed throughout the city.

Mr. Julius's golden hair glimmered under the moonlight, and I thought back to Mr. Roge's words about the burning angels of Seraphim, who ruled the heavens of the Otherworld. The angel must've been as beautiful as this man.

"Um...thank you. You knew I was a bit troubled by Mr. Roge, and you saved me back there, didn't you?" I asked. He stood still and didn't let go. I hesitantly put my other hand over his.

"Was I bothersome?" he mumbled quietly. He stared at me. His blue eye reminded me of the sky we soared in with Helios, and his artificial red eye glittered like a jewel.

I should've made both his eyes blue, I thought. His blue eye is so pretty that I feel like I did something unnecessary. At the same time, I felt strangely happy that an eye that I had created was now a part of Mr. Julius's body. I felt like I

was going crazy with my thoughts. I didn't drink any liquor, but perhaps I got drunk on the atmosphere.

"Not at all... I was happy," I said, shaking my head.

I wonder if I would feel better if I just said what I'm thinking. Will this pain in my chest go away? I'm not the genius alchemist Chloe, a young maiden of beauty. I'm the same old, timid Chloe, that hasn't changed a bit. I'm a liar, and I lie to myself. I always wear a fake smile. I'm different from you, who's always strong. So, I can't bear to look at you. I felt a rush of pain shoot through the back of my eyes. For whatever reason, I felt like I was about to cry—I was unable to control my feelings.

"...Mr. Julius, you see, I'm not very good with men," I admitted.

"I know. I can tell just by looking at you."

I knew it, he saved me because he knew I was uncomfortable. If I relax right now, I might cry.

"But for whatever reason, I'm not scared of you. Even when I'm touching you or spending time with you, I don't feel scared at all."

"You're an idiot, and you're too kind... I'm a murderer. I'm not as nice as you think I am," Mr. Julius replied plainly, as though he was fact-checking.

I used both my hands to squeeze his hand tightly. "There are non-murderers who still scare me." I paused for a bit. "Three years ago, when I was suddenly thrown into prison...I was thrown out into the streets. The soldiers who threw me out...along with a few other men, surrounded me and...and..."

"Chloe. Be quiet," he said sternly, cutting me off. I closed my mouth.

"Did you not want to hear it? What am I saying, of course you don't."

I tried to let go of his hand. Of course, he doesn't want to hear my story. It's an unpleasant one, and the listener would only feel bad after hearing it. No one wants to hear about that incident. Talking about it is my own selfish desire. I would feel a bit better verbalizing it is all, but I'm only making others share my burden. I'm so self-centered.

I needed to be the always cheerful alchemist, Chloe. She's the one who

purchased Mr. Julius. I felt like talking about unpleasant things now would only burden others. As I loosened my grasp, he pulled me close, and as if to protect me from everything in the world, he hugged me tightly. It was a bit painful as he put so much strength into it, but it was warm, and I felt at ease.

“...No, that’s not what I mean,” he finally said. “It must be difficult for you to always put on a cheerful demeanor. You’re doing well. You don’t have to tell me everything.”

“Why? Why are you so kind to me now? You’re so sly. You’re being unfair.”

As I was in his arms, my cheery façade crumbled, and I couldn’t be my usual self. I started to want to rely on him. I felt like I was reverting to my weak self. I tried to free myself from his arms, but he was much stronger than me, and I didn’t truly dislike his embrace. He hugged me tightly, and the sound of his steady heartbeat calmed me.

A moment passed before I said, “Mr. Julius, if you don’t mind, I’d like for you to listen to my story.”

“Okay,” he said. His response was short, but I felt relieved by his reply.

“I...did feel scared back then, but my master, Ms. Natalia, saved me. I didn’t actually get assaulted, but...I still remember what happened. No one was around to help me, and the men were cruel and scary. In the end, nothing happened since I was saved, but I still feel like a fool for being so terrified.”

“What happened to those guys?” he asked in a low, dark voice.

“I don’t know. Ms. Natalia was flying around on a broom yelling, ‘Get lost, scum!’ and those people really did get lost. All she did was yell, but I couldn’t even utter a single word...”

Because Mr. Julius’s black clothes were pressed against my face, I couldn’t see anything in front of me. But his rugged arms and body didn’t scare me. His low yet sweet voice and his sarcastic words felt soothing to my ears. It was the first time I was able to talk about my experience to another person. In the past, I always just laughed and said that I was thrown out into an alleyway. I was too scared to talk about what happened after.

“Chloe, if you wish, I can hunt them all down and kill them,” he said.

Mr. Julius hadn't changed. Since I'd purchased him from the Slave Arena, he'd said the same thing. I laughed in his arms as my body trembled. I felt my eyes tearing up.

"Thank you. I'm...fine now. I'm no good. I had to live by myself, so I thought I'd gotten stronger, but I sometimes revert to my weak, old self," I said.

"Is it bad that you're weak? It's not always right to be strong."

"Really? I'm whining and acting like a spoiled child. Aren't you disappointed in me?"

I was sure he wouldn't like a crying woman or a woman who was a pain. He didn't like noisy people either. Yet, it felt sly that he was being so kind to me.

"Chloe, I'm strong. So, you can be weak."

"What do you mean by that?"

"...It doesn't matter if you're weak or strong. I'm your slave, and as long as we have that contract, I'll listen to you. That's all."

I paused. "Yeah, you're right. Thank you very much." I slowly released myself from his grasp. I felt like I was the only one getting the wrong idea here.

He was purchased by me and only stayed with me because of the contract. I wished he wasn't so kind to me. I'd start to fall in love with him and think that we had something special. That thought scared me. I was timid and always feared losing things.

There was no guarantee that we'd always be together, and all I was doing was stealing his freedom. These feelings were wrong. I tried to smile like usual. I tried to laugh it off, joking that he was so kind to me because he was drunk, but the corners of my eyes got damp, and tears rolled down my cheeks.

"...Chloe," he said, touching my cheek. He brushed my tears away with his fingertips.

I rubbed my cheeks with both of my hands and tried to smile like normal. "Let's go home, Mr. Julius. Look, the moon's so pretty. We're out so late, aren't we? Tomorrow, we'll... Oh, is it today? Are we past midnight? Anyways, in the morning, we'll use the super expensive materials and make a super awesome

item from alchemy and sell it..."

"Chloe...be quiet," he said, holding my hand and pulling me along. I thought he was going to hug me again, but he instead hid me behind him.

In the next moment, the sound of numerous footsteps clacking on the stone tiles echoed throughout the dark square. The people, dressed in black from head to toe, surrounded us, blending into the night. The moonlight illuminated their shadows, but only their eyes were uncovered, and each person held a dagger, the blades gleaming under the moon. I could make out about five or so people, and they were clearly after us. They looked like assassins.

"Don't move," Mr. Julius said to me as he put his hand over the sword around his waist.

As I stood wide-eyed, I frantically said, "Don't kill these people, okay?"

"Why? Are you telling me to offer them sympathy?"

"No. That's not what I mean, but...you can't kill anyone."

They looked like assassins, but they may not be. I remembered Mr. Robert saying that there were many people who loathed Mr. Julius. Even the always lively and cheerful Mr. Roge stated that he detested Mr. Julius. He said that many soldiers died on the battlefield, killed by the Black Prince and Helios. He might've lost friends, acquaintances, or people very dear to his heart. If so, these people were most likely after this man. They may not be assassins but people who just harbored a grudge.

We couldn't kill anyone. Since the war was over, there was no need to kill others, and while I was his master, I wouldn't allow him to do it.

"Fine," he relented. These people were probably no match for the Black Prince, who had slain the powerful gatekeeper.

A person from the shadows spoke. "I was ordered to kill you. Don't take it personally."

As the people pounced on us, Mr. Julius defeated each one, his sword still sheathed. One by one, our assailants fell to the ground. The entire fight happened in an instant, and there was a clear difference in power. The daggers

never reached him.

He kicked one of the bodies on the ground, rolling them over. He pointed his still-sheathed sword towards the assailant's uncovered eyes and said, "You guys aren't fighting seriously at all. I can't sense a murderous intent from you. You have a different goal in mind, don't you? Whose orders are you following?"

"I can't tell you... I'm sorry," the assailant said before chanting, "Transparent infiltration." His body seemed to melt into the ground. I'd never seen this spell before. As the man seemed to melt away, the other assailants also started to flee.

They left as abruptly as they came. Mr. Julius was staring at the ground where the man had been with a frown.

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Julius. Are you hurt?" I called out cautiously. All I had done was watch this scene unfold in front of my eyes.

"No. They weren't seriously aiming to kill. I thought these guys had a grudge against me, but I couldn't feel a murderous intent. Besides, assassins normally aren't that noisy," he replied.

"It's getting cold, and we can't think well if we're sleepy. Let's go home." I tried to sound as normal as possible, but I couldn't shake this nagging feeling in my heart, as though something was very wrong.

Mr. Julius quietly nodded.



IF a combat amateur like me was able to sense that something was wrong, I was sure that Mr. Julius felt it much stronger. As we changed into our pajamas, he sat on the side of the bed, mulling over his thoughts with a puzzled look. This was a rare sight, as he'd usually steal my whole bed and sleep without a worry.

I was about to lie down on the sofa as usual, but as he still seemed to be awake, I decided to sit right next to him. He didn't seem to dislike that, and I felt weird for having reservations since he was sitting on my bed.

The clock noted that it was eleven, and I thought that Ms. Roxy's diner was about to close soon. I had thought it was the middle of the night, but since we

left so early, it apparently wasn't as late as I'd thought. I usually fell asleep as soon as night fell, but I stayed awake today.

From my room's window, I could see the fountain and the square through the open curtains. It seemed like no one was observing us. I turned off my lamp, trying to go to sleep. Mr. Julius's golden hair glittered as the moonlight shone through the window.

"Chloe, have you known that man, Roge, for a while?" he suddenly asked, staring out the window. I didn't expect him to ask and was silent for a moment.

"U-Um...not really. Mr. Roge did mention that we went to the same academy, but I was the eldest daughter of the Duke of Sagrid, and he was in the knight department. I'm not too familiar with the House of Gregorio. Anyone can enter the knight department at the academy if their family members are knights, and even the common folk can enter if they pass the exam. I'm not too familiar with him," I replied.

"I see... Chloe, I want to hear more about you. I feel a little better when I hear your voice. Some things don't sit well with me, and I have a few questions. Could I ask about your past?"

"...You always say that I'm noisy."

"I do think you talk a lot and that you're noisy."

"But you want to hear my voice?"

"Yeah."

Weird, I thought to myself. I was tired and a bit sleepy, so I decided to lie down. It felt nice laying on my bed for the first time in a long time. It definitely felt different from sleeping on the couch, and I felt a little relieved when all I could see was Mr. Julius's back. Too many things had occurred today, and it took time for me to process things. If I took the time to think about every single incident today, I felt like I would realize something that I shouldn't, so I chose to instead focus on talking about my past.

After a moment of silence, I asked, "Would you like the long version or the short version?"

"Long's fine," he replied.

"You might lose out on some sleep."

"That's fine."

Each of his replies were short, but he was more honest than usual today. He would normally pepper in a few sarcastic remarks.

"I was born...as the eldest daughter of the Duke of Sagrid. I think I was a normal child. I used to have a beautiful and kind mother who had the same hair and eye color as me. Her name was Celestia—Celestia Sagrid. She was beautiful and kind, but very frail. She taught me that I shouldn't eat anything past nine at night, and she told me not to look at anything scary. She always told me to flee instead."

"Anything scary?"

"I'm not quite sure myself, but it was just something I was told as a kid. I was timid, so dark hallways, people's footsteps, creaking floorboards, and the like always scared me, and I'd hide in my mother's bed. She would rub my back and tell me never to look at scary things. My mother was sickly and frail, so I would often get scolded by my father for bothering and getting near her. My father was a quiet man. So much so that it was almost terrifying. However, he always loved my mother...or so I thought. How odd. I wonder why he did what he did."

This was the first time I talked and ruminated about my past with someone else. I tried my best not to think about it too much. I only had painful memories, so I chose to close my eyes. I wasn't sure if it was due to talking about my past or the fact that Mr. Julius was listening to me quietly, but I felt strange.

"I wonder why he...had an affair. My father was always at home, and I felt like he often worked at home as well. My mother was sickly and rarely left the house. I felt like he was always in the same room as my mother. He never talked to me much, but I would often overhear them talking to each other. Do you think they loved each other?" I asked.

"Who knows...? As far as I can tell, they weren't on bad terms, it seems. I... don't remember much about my father or mother either. At the very least, I didn't seem to lack any necessities, and I think I grew up normally. Even so, they

were condemned for their betrayal and executed, so I suppose childhood memories aren't very reliable," he replied slowly. He occasionally paused as he seemed to be thinking about his childhood days.

Mr. Julius entered the battlefield when he was fifteen, but until then, he seemed to have lived a happy childhood, raising Helios and being the future successor to the duke. His parents sounded like mine. I felt a little relieved when I heard that he had his moments of happiness. We were in different regions, and he was older than me, but I felt like we were somewhat similar. I was sure he went through more pain and suffering than I did.

"Yeah...you're right," I said quietly. "Well, my mother passed away due to an illness when I was thirteen. I'm not sure what she was sick with. My father started to hole himself up, all alone, as though he'd forgotten about me. Then suddenly, my stepmother, Mrs. Lizaria, and Aliza appeared."

"Aliza's your sister who married Cyril, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know much about them, but I was surprised to learn that Aliza was just a year younger than me...and my actual sister. I don't think I processed the situation at first. My father started to dote on her and yelled at or ignored me. Aliza was bright, energetic, and cute. I think he was irritated by me, since I was meek and couldn't voice my own opinions."

"Did you join the academy after that?"

"Yeah. It was an aristocratic academy. It's still there, to the east of the royal capital. It's a large academy, and it's kind of like a town. The academy accepted children from aristocratic families, and I entered the dorms. I remember feeling a bit relieved when I was able to distance myself from the Sagrid estate... Aliza was just a year younger than me, so she soon started to attend the same academy, though. You were out fighting a war, while we were carefree, studying at an academy. It was peaceful for us even in the middle of the war."

"It was the same in the center of the Dystiana Empire. My situation was just different—I was in a difficult position. Anyways, you were engaged to Cyril, weren't you?"

I was surprised that he asked about Cyril. I thought he wouldn't care to hear about him. I thought about my former fiancé. His name was Cyril Astria. He was

a year older than me, so he should be twenty-one years old now. He's younger than Mr. Roge, and three years younger than Mr. Julius. Now that I thought about it, the king was still young. He had safely married Aliza and had already succeeded the throne. I hadn't seen him for a while, but I wondered if he was doing well. *Not like I care, anyways.*

We were engaged when I turned ten. To decide the future wife of His Highness, the crown prince, a few daughters of aristocratic families were gathered in front of the palace's lawn. Because my mother was sick, I remembered my father taking me to the gathering. It had been a decade since then, so my memory was a bit foggy, but I vaguely remembered being in a horse carriage with my father. My father was silent as usual, and feeling scared, I made myself as small as possible. I wanted to think that he didn't hate me, but I wasn't so sure.

That day, Prince Cyril and I exchanged greetings to get familiar with each other, and then I returned home. I didn't have much of a conversation with him. I was nervous, and I wasn't the type to strike up a conversation. I remembered that the other girls surrounded him, desperately trying to form some sort of connection. My father didn't get angry at my timidity, and a few days later, I got a letter from the royal family that I was selected to be his fiancée.

I couldn't believe it at first, but judging from my age and household, I felt like it wasn't that odd. My mother stroked my hair after I expressed my confusion, saying in a singsong voice, "Prince Cyril will protect the princess, as all princes do. You're my princess, Chloe. You'll be fine. I'm sure of it."

My mother's voice was graceful like the spring wind, and the tune she would often hum to herself sounded mysterious. I think I loved my mother's voice. Just as Mr. Julius said he liked my voice, I felt at peace when I listened to her.

"Cyril and I didn't really...have any sort of passionate love between us. We were just a normal engaged couple. I'm not really sure what's normal, but all that happened between us was that I would receive letters with the changing season or get a birthday present from him. There was some distance between the royal capital and the duchy, so if we didn't feel like meeting, we never had to."

"...Did you...have any feelings for Cyril?" Mr. Julius asked.

"I didn't really understand feelings like love or crushes. Ever since Aliza came when I was thirteen, I was always trembling. I was always wondering when I would lose my place of belonging. I was always wearing a fake smile so that I wouldn't trouble my father, Mrs. Lizaria, or Aliza. I only answered with 'Yes' or 'I agree.' I never belonged there to begin with... I feel like an idiot." I sighed and laughed a little.

Mr. Julius turned towards me. As I gazed at him with the moonlight on his back, he looked like a messenger of the gods who came from the heavens.



I felt a twinge of loneliness and couldn't stare at his face. I rolled over.

"I was basically the same at my academy. My friends...weren't really my friends, I think. They were my classmates, and I tried not to stand out among the aristocratic female students. I tried not to get in the way, and I always had a smile on my face. I desperately tried to appeal that I was harmless. I didn't want to lose my place there. But in the end, I didn't belong there...I didn't belong anywhere," I said.

"I see," he replied. I thought he would look disappointed and call me pathetic, so I was surprised to hear his short reply. His tone didn't seem to mock or ridicule me, but he wasn't sympathizing or pitying me either. He simply just responded.

"Cyril talked to me at the academy, but he liked sword fighting and horseback riding," I continued. "He had masculine hobbies, and he would often ride his horse to distant areas on his days off. I don't remember spending time together with him. I think he thought of me as a fiancée known for my silence. I do think I acted like a proper noblewoman, though."

"I see. It sounds like the academy is a troublesome place... I'd rather be on the battlefield," Mr. Julius said seriously.

"I feel like you aren't suited for the academy. I can't imagine you attending and taking classes," I said, smiling a little.

"It seems unnecessary. Aren't you taught basically all you need to know by the age of ten?"

"We're taught more than common knowledge at the academy. I think we delve a bit deeper than that... We do learn history and literature, which I'm sure you'd find unnecessary. We also learned proper manners and etiquette fitting for the aristocracy. We learned how to network. That's what I did for three years," I said.

"Sounds unnecessary."

"Perhaps they need to do unnecessary things, or they'd have too much time on their hands. I'm not quite sure, though," I replied as I put my hand to my lips and giggled. I was grateful that we were talking normally, as though I had never

cried in front of him. If possible, I wish he'd forget the entire thing. I didn't want to cry pathetically in front of him anymore.

"Once Aliza entered the academy, she immediately hit it off with Cyril," I continued. "She was energetic, and I heard that they would often go horseback riding together. I think he stayed by her side because she had just become an aristocrat. I continued to always stay quiet and timid. Thinking back, I think Aliza disliked me... Rumors started to go around that I was harassing Aliza, but even then, I stayed quiet."

"How silly and foolish."

"I agree. Thinking back, I do think it was all very silly... But back then, my house and academy were all I had. I was scared, and I desperately wanted a place to belong. I was afraid of confrontations, and though my mother had told me to flee from things I was afraid of, I think I was running away a bit too much," I admitted.

"I'm not blaming you. I think your fiancé's the fool... Anyone can tell that you're a kind and good person just from talking with you a little. People don't change. Back then and even now, you're stupidly nice. I wanted to say that your fiancé was the fool for not understanding that... It seems like I always say too little," he replied, slightly troubled.

He explained his thoughts as though he was afraid of hurting me. He was being kind. I wished he'd stop because his kindness might make me cry again.

"Thank you," I replied. "And I've already told you the rest. I was abandoned in the slum alleyways, and Ms. Natalia picked me up. She was an amazing sorceress and alchemist. She had black hair, light pink eyes, and was around thirty or so. I lived with her for about a month, and she taught me all the basics of alchemy. I only knew her name...and one day, she just disappeared."

"Did the citizens of the royal capital forgive you, who was part of the sinful Sagrid household?" he asked.

"They hated me at first. When I was sent by Ms. Natalia to buy items, no one sold me anything, and I was harassed frequently... But they aren't all bad. You asked Mr. Roge earlier if there were any humans worth saving from monsters..."

“I did.”

“Mr. Julius, I think humans aren’t all that bad. Mr. Robert, for example, treated me like a normal person from the start, and was equally respectful to everyone. Ms. Roxy, when she saw me all beat up and tired, invited me for a meal. Mr. Roge was the first person to visit my shop when it opened, asking for his weapon to be enhanced.”

“...And it’s been three years since.”

“Yeah. In my third year, I purchased you. I wanted to be rich, and for that, I thought that you were strong enough to help me out. I didn’t put much more thought into it than that. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to purchase you on a whim.” As I voiced my reasons, I felt like a terrible person.

Mr. Julius reached out and stroked my hair as though he was touching something precious. It felt nice, but I was a bit nervous. I didn’t dislike it.

“I’m glad that you bought me. I feel odd, as though I’ve become human again. From now on, Chloe, I’m here. I’m strong, so even if you’re weak, I can protect you. You can stay as you are.”

“Thank you, Mr. Julius. Let’s make this shop bigger, find a mate for Helios, and raise a dragon egg. I think it’ll be fun.”

I felt better as I thought about this fun future together. His hands stroking my hair felt nice, and I couldn’t suppress a smile. *I think I like Mr. Julius.* It was scary to admit it to myself, but as I felt his warmth, I couldn’t help but hear my own heartbeat. *But I think we’re fine the way we are. I’m scared of losing him and wishing for something more. If I can remain smiling until the day we part ways, I’ll be satisfied. I’ll be fine if he feels even a little happier.*

He lay down on the bed, hugging me tight. I opened my eyes and stiffened, surprised by his actions.

“What’s wrong? Are we going to sleep here together? This is my bed, but this is a bit embarrassing. What’s wrong? Are you drunk?” I asked, talking fast in a panicky tone. My jokes weren’t funny, but I couldn’t think of anything better.

He ignored my words and hugged me tighter, trapping me in his arms. I closed my mouth, hoping that I wouldn’t say anything weird.

"Chloe...I'll protect you. No matter what happens," he vowed.

I was silent for a moment. "You really are like a prince. I'm relying on you."

"Just go to sleep. Good night, Chloe."

His voice was so kind that I stopped thinking about escaping. I relaxed. *He probably wants to use me as a body pillow. I'll keep it at that.* Mr. Julius's body was warm, and I felt at ease.

"Good night," I replied. It was just a simple greeting, but it felt special and wonderful.



THE bedsheets that my mother used were white. She had the same strawberry blonde hair that I did, which was gently tied and resting on her shoulders. Every time I entered her room, she sat up and smiled. The windows had a thin lace curtain and a table below. There was a vase on that table with new, fresh flowers every day.

"Mother, may I pick the flowers for your vase?" I asked her. I hoped that it would make her happy.

My mother gave a troubled smile and replied, "I'm happy you want to do that for me, Chloe. But choosing flowers for that vase is the only thing your father looks forward to. It'd be sad if we took that away from him, wouldn't it? How about I prepare a smaller, different vase, just for you?" She always had a singsong voice, no matter what she said.

"Father is always angry at me," I replied.

I wasn't fond of my father. He didn't talk much, and when he did, he would always scold me to "Stay out of Celestia's room."

"Your father isn't the best talker, but he and I both love you very much. You'll be fine. I'll always be watching over you, Chloe."

"But you're always in your room because of your illness. How will you be watching me?"

"Well...the sky is very vast and surrounds the entire world. I'm watching you from the skies."

"The skies? Are your eyes in the sky, Mother?"

"That's right. My eyes are connected with the sky. Isn't that amazing?" She stroked my hair with her small and graceful hands. It felt ticklish as I closed my eyes. "Chloe, you're special. You're my precious and special little princess. You're never alone. Like I have your father, you'll one day meet your prince. I'm sure of it."

"By prince, do you mean Prince Cyril?" I asked.

"He could be, but he might not. I don't know what the future holds. The future is filled with hope, and nothing is set in stone."

As I stared at my young self, sitting on the edge of my mother's bed, I murmured, "You're right."

How long has it been since I've been able to see a happy dream? Dreams only ever show me bad memories. As I was watching my child self from above, I felt like my mother glanced up at me.

"...Chloe, you'll be fine," she said.

"Mother!" I reached out for her, and she gently smiled at me. Her smile was kind, fleeting, and lonely.



AS the bright morning sun warmed my face, I opened my eyes. My head still felt groggy. I stayed up late last night. I was always alone, and I never had an opportunity to talk with someone in the middle of the night, so this was a rare occurrence.

I was with Ms. Natalia for a while after she had saved me, but we had separate rooms, and she only talked to me when she wanted me to run an errand or to teach me alchemy. She spent most of her days lazily sleeping.

I feel like I had talked more with Mr. Julius than I had with anyone else in my life. He said that I talked a lot and that I was noisy, but I actually didn't like talking much. I knew how to hold a conversation since I talked to customers in my shop, but I never talked about myself; I found it difficult to do so. I felt like this dark fog that I had in my heart was slowly melting away. My mind felt

lighter.

My mother appeared in my dreams today. I may have had a happy dream because I talked with Mr. Julius last night. He had hugged me. It was a bit embarrassing, but I was happy. As I remembered his embrace, I got up, fully alert. Mr. Julius, who had slept beside me, was already awake and dressed, staring out the window.

What a rare sight, I thought. He only wakes up when I nag at him to get up or tell him that breakfast is ready. He was wearing the mantle made from Ariadne's thread because the black robe was torn. The mantle was lightweight, tough, and easy to wash. The thread can self-regenerate and be used for daily wear.

It is expensive, though. He had his sword strapped to his waist. *Is he planning on fighting something?* Today, I had planned to create new items out of alchemy using the rare items we had just obtained.

“Good morning, Mr. Julius,” I said.

“Chloe, you’re up. Hurry and get dressed,” he replied.

“Huh? Is something wrong?” I slowly slid off my bed and quickly put on an apron dress.

Today’s dress was red. Black wasn’t well-liked, and blue was a neutral color. The citizens of the capital liked to see red, as they thought it was auspicious. I brushed my hair and put on a red headkerchief. Because I didn’t have many options to choose from, I could get dressed quickly. I was ready to go in a few minutes.

“Is there something outside?” I asked, going over to stand next to Mr. Julius after I finished changing.

From the window, I saw that a horse carriage with the mark of the royal family was in front of the fountain in the square. The symbol of the royal family was a beast with two horns. It looked similar to the skull-like brand on Mr. Julius’s neck, but it depicted the beast’s head instead of its bones.

The beast resembled the sacred sheep of the Astria Kingdom. It only looked like a sheep because the legend goes that God had shape-shifted into a

shepherd. I learned from my classes that from there, it became used as the royal family's seal.

"That's the royal family's carriage. But why?" I wondered aloud. "It's so early in the morning."

"...Chloe, let's run," he said. "If we go to the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, no one will recognize us there."

"Why? We haven't done anything wrong, and you're free. We'll be fine. This surely has nothing to do with us."

"Has the lack of sleep turned you into a bigger idiot? Chloe, this clearly has something to do with either you or me."

You were so kind to me yesterday, but now you're sharp-tongued like usual. I can't imagine you being nice all the time, though.

"Let's just observe for now," I said. "We'll be fine. We're just living normally, and they can't arrest us for anything. I haven't met King Cyril or Aliza for three years. Besides, I don't want to run anymore."

Mr. Julius fell silent for a moment. "You're right."

I was grateful that he was worrying about me, but this shop was left to me by Ms. Natalia. I didn't know where she went, but I felt that it was my duty to protect this place until she returned. She saved me without knowing who I was, and I was determined to repay my debt to her. The people of this city, like Mr. Robert and Ms. Roxy, were so very kind. Mr. Roge was a bit odd, but he was a good customer, and so many other people always came up to talk to me.

A lot of things had happened, but I felt comfortable in this shop and town. Mr. Julius was with me, and our lives were just beginning together. *I can't drop everything and run because of the royal family's carriage. The genius alchemist beauty Chloe won't flee because of political pressure.*

A few soldiers filed out of the carriage and headed straight for my shop. I heard them banging on the door.

"Chloe, you've got customers," Ms. Gazey's voice echoed in my head.

◆ Captured, Taken Away, and a Brief Goodbye

I went down the stairs and opened the door. I wanted Mr. Julius to wait in the room upstairs, but he insisted on coming along. Just in case, I slung my trusty bag over my shoulders so that I could take out any items should I need to.

Three soldiers stood in front of the door. They were all wearing the Royal Knights' military attire. It was blue and gray with a golden imprint of the royal family's crest. They were easy to recognize. The soldiers who threw me into an alleyway three years ago were also knights, and I disliked these soldiers. I made sure to keep my distance from them, even within the city. I was nervous to talk to them, but it was reassuring that Mr. Julius was right behind me.

"Good morning, soldiers of the Royal Knights. How may I be of service?" I said with a smile.

An older man who stood at the very front looked at Mr. Julius and me. "You're Chloe Sagrid?" he barked disrespectfully.

"That's correct."

Because the knights were directly controlled by the royal family, there was an undeniable impression that many were rather arrogant. They were very polite towards the aristocracy, but they intimidated normal citizens. I wasn't sure if everyone was like that, but many were.

"I suppose the rumors are true that you have Black Prince Julius, an enemy of this kingdom, in your employ. Chloe, you'll come with us to the castle."

You have no right calling my name so casually when I don't even know you, I thought. Still, I had a smile on my face and said, "Why? Please state your reason." They seemed to want me, not Mr. Julius.

I didn't know why I'd be taken to the castle. I had properly purchased Mr. Julius from the Slave Shop, and I even had the contract. There was no reason for them to make a fuss. I stood resolute, my chest puffed out and my hands on my hips.

"We received a tip last night from Mr. Coldman. He stated that some of his private soldiers were killed. It seems like you had some trouble with Ms. Eliza, the eldest daughter of that household. Did you harbor some sort of grudge? You had Julius attack Ms. Eliza and even kill some of their private soldiers," the knight accused.

I thought about last night. We were attacked by a few people in the square, and Mr. Julius defeated them all—he didn't kill anyone. It sounded like those assassins were part of Mr. Coldman's private army. Ms. Eliza wasn't there, and we certainly didn't attack anyone.

"We did no such thing. We were the ones who were attacked," I said. I believed that I could properly explain the situation. I looked up at Mr. Julius, who had his brows furrowed in a troubled expression.

"We received a statement from Ms. Eliza. We've even received eyewitness accounts from some people who said you were arguing with Ms. Eliza and that Mr. Julius had wielded his sword... Next to the bodies, which were thrown into the alleyways, was a piece of a sword made from a very rare ore. I believe it's called the Diamond of Eternity. Only Julius has a sword made from that."

"I'm telling you that you're wrong. We were attacked, and Mr. Julius never unsheathed his sword. He hasn't killed anyone." I felt cold sweat run down my back.

No one had heard me out three years ago when I was thrown into prison on false charges. The royal family and the knights were the central power. I was just a woman, Chloe Sagrid, and if delved deeper, I was a daughter of a criminal. I felt something echoing from the depths of my heart, telling me that talking to these people was useless. But I was a different person from three years ago. I had something I wanted to protect: my shop, Mr. Julius, and myself. I snapped myself out of these negative thoughts.

"Surely, you're aware of the number of our kingdom's soldiers that this man, Julius, has slain? Were you planning on seeking revenge on the royal family by buying this dangerous man? We'll hear what you have to say at the castle. King Cyril calls for you."

"King Cyril?"

“Come with me,” the soldier ordered. “Julius, you’re dangerous, so we’ll throw you into prison until further decisions are made. You killed the soldiers of Mr. Coldman, who’s well-trusted by the royal family, so I’m sure you’ll be executed this time around.”

“Mr. Julius...” *I’m so stupid. I should’ve listened to him and fled. We just talked about how the world was vast and how we could stay in a place outside the capital.*

With both my hands, I pushed Mr. Julius, who seemed to be prepared to unsheathe his sword at any moment, into the room. “Ms. Gazey, hold them off!” I said to the Chaotic Gaze, floating in the birdcage.

“**Okay, Chloe,**” she replied with a beautiful voice. Her red pupil let out a sizzling beam of light, burning the ground around the soldiers. White smoke billowed in the air. Paying no heed to their angry voices, I closed the door and locked it.

“What are you doing, Chloe? We can just cut them all down and run. If we fly on Helios, no one can catch up to us,” he said, sounding irritated.

I walked up to him and put my hand on the collar and small lock around his neck. “I’m sorry...Mr. Julius,” I said.

“You don’t need to apologize. Let’s run from the window,” he said, grabbing my hand.

I shook my head. *Fleeing from here might be the correct decision, but how long would we need to run for? I didn’t do anything wrong. You fought in the war because you were ordered to do so. You’ve been through so much pain and suffering. I don’t want you to suffer anymore. I’ll prove my innocence and live with my head held high. I do want to stay with you, but...I think freedom suits you best. You look great when you’re freely soaring through the skies with Helios.*

“I, Chloe Sagrid, command that you don’t have to stay by my side, and you shouldn’t do anything I don’t want you to do. In other words, I’m fine, so don’t come to save me.” I poured my magic into the lock.

In truth, I had wanted to remove it from him completely, but I didn’t want

him to come save me. He listened to my orders, but I knew he was the type of man that would kill others without hesitation if it meant achieving his goal. He was just used to doing so. I was sure that all he truly wished for was to soar the skies with Helios, and I didn't want to take that away from him. I didn't want him to fight anymore.

"Chloe, you idiot!" he yelled.

"Mr. Julius, you're free now. I'll be fine. After all, I'm Chloe, the best, most beautiful alchemist in all the world!" I proclaimed.

As he tried to reach for me, I took a step back and swiftly took out a white ball about the size of my palm from my bag. "Please, fly to your heart's content. I enjoyed the time we spent together. Thank you very much!" I said, throwing the ball towards his feet.

His eyes were wide with shock, and I could tell he was angry. *Angry until the end. I think that's fitting.*

"Activate emergency teleportation circle!" I yelled before he was able to grab me.

The white ball turned into smoke as it transformed into a glowing five-pointed star. The emergency teleportation circle is used to flee during dire situations, but the downside is that I don't know where the person will be teleported to. I tried to set a destination, but doing so required more time to activate, so I gave up on it.

Mr. Julius disappeared in an instant as he yelled, "Chloe!" His voice echoed in my room. The door was smashed open, and soldiers flooded into my shop, their swords pointed towards me.

I turned around with a smile and said, "I'm innocent, but I know how violent you all are. I was helpless and harmless, and yet you abandoned me in the streets. So, take me, and only me."

"You let Julius flee! You fool! You've only made your crimes worse," the soldier bellowed at me.

"Say what you will. Now then, take me away. However, if you're planning on doing something like what you did last time, I'll raise my voice. I'm rather

popular here now, so I'm sure the citizens would be angry."

"Take her away."

Two soldiers behind the older one emerged and grabbed both of my arms. *I'm not resisting, so you don't need to be so violent with me.* They took my bag and tied my wrists together. I didn't do anything, but I was being treated like a criminal.

"Ms. Chloe!" Mr. Roge's voice rang out from within the crowd outside my shop. The citizens of the city had heard the ruckus and gathered around the fountain in the square.

"What are you lot doing?! What false crimes are you accusing Ms. Chloe of this time?!" Ms. Roxy yelled at the soldiers loud enough to be heard through the ruckus.

"Let go of Ms. Chloe!" the other citizens chanted.

"I only said I sold that sword to Julius because you soldiers asked, but the sword made from the Diamond of Eternity won't chip by slaying a person. This is clearly a false accusation! I've never sold a dull sword!" Mr. Robert yelled. His usual calm demeanor was gone as he uncharacteristically shouted with anger.

"Ms. Chloe, where's Julius?" Mr. Roge asked as he tried to push through the growing crowd of knights.

"Mr. Roge, everyone...I'll be okay! I'll be back!" I said, trying my best to smile as my arms were tied behind my back with rope.

When I see all these people trying to support me, I feel like crying. See, Mr. Julius? The world isn't full of bad people. So, I want you to be free and happy. As I wished for this from the bottom of my heart, I was pushed into the carriage and taken to the castle.



SIX months ago, Cyril had ascended to the throne, and he had also formally married Aliza. A huge parade celebrating their marriage was held in the royal capital. Because the former king and queen were killed by monsters, Cyril had to quickly take the throne. The citizens warmly welcomed the marriage of the

daughter of the Duke of Sagrid, Aliza Sagrid, a woman with a tragic past who managed to stay cheerful and keep her sense of justice while being bullied by her sister, and His Royal Highness, His Majesty King Cyril, who was also wrapped up in unfortunate events.

I remember thinking that my Flower Fireworks, items created for celebrations, sold quite well at the time. Six months ago, I was only interested in making money, and I never saw Cyril or Aliza at the parade. I wasn't interested in them in the slightest.

I did resent them both, but I chose money above all else. Celebrations made good money, and I wasn't planning on making amends with Cyril anyways. I didn't wish to see Aliza's face either, so I simply welcomed grand celebrations with open arms.

In any case, there was a clear divide between myself, now a normal citizen, and the royal family. I felt like we practically lived in different worlds as I'd rarely see their faces, and I would probably never be involved with them should I continue to live as is. I just didn't care anymore. After so many years, I didn't want them to mess with my fulfilling life with Mr. Julius.

These thoughts swirled in my head as I rode in the carriage.

From my window, I caught a glimpse of the royal capital, where I'd lived for three years. We passed the heart of the capital and headed south into a white castle, which I thought I'd never visit again. I saw a drawbridge in front of the castle gates. The castle was surrounded by moats filled with plenty of water, and one needed to pass through the drawbridge to enter.

The moats were most likely a last line of defense. This kingdom had a long history of going to war with the Dystiana Empire, and should the royal capital get invaded, the castle served as a powerful defense to protect the royal family.

When the former king and queen died, the royal family was left with just Crown Prince Cyril and the second prince, Zeke. Prince Zeke was a year younger than me and Aliza's classmate. I'd only greeted him a few times, but he resembled Cyril in many ways. There were rumors that the second prince would take over the Sagrid duchy, but as it no longer had anything to do with me, I didn't try to actively find out the details.

I gazed at the blue sky. *Where did Mr. Julius get teleported to?* I wondered. *I hope he isn't in a raging river or anything.* As I pictured Mr. Julius being furious that he was suddenly thrown into a river, I felt a bit better. Once I returned home, I wanted to meet him again one day, not as my slave, but just as two people.

I didn't want to drag him into my affairs. I was the one who kept running without confronting the situation—I had to solve these matters myself. I closed my eyes and saw my mother's smiling face. Like she said in my dream, I'd be okay.

I didn't think my father was a criminal. I was too young to know, but I was sure that my father loved my mother. My mother wouldn't have laughed so happily had she not been loved. *I have to confirm the past. I must find out what went on that day. I must do this for my mother, who loved me, and my father.*

I kept telling myself, *I don't want to be protected by a prince; I want to stand by his side. Mr. Julius said that he would protect me, but I want to do the same. I am Chloe Sagrid the alchemist, a young maiden of rare beauty. I'll be fine.*



I was practically dragged out of the carriage by the soldiers. It'd been a while since I last entered the castle. I walked through the front door and past the stone hallway with numerous well-polished pillars. Beyond the hallway was the audience room. Beyond the room was a workspace for the officers, and behind that was the inner palace. The ballroom, often used for the royal family's dinner parties, was in a separate building to the east, and to the west was another hall with a garrison for the knights and a prison for criminals. I was thrown in there three years ago.

The Royal Knights included the palace guards, the king's bodyguards, and any soldiers who defended the kingdom. There were only a few garrisons within the kingdom, but those who worked within the castle were high-ranking officials among the knights. I was taken straight to the west building.

The prison at the top of the building, most likely located there to prevent escape, wasn't different from three years ago—it was a little cold. According to the soldier who guarded my cell years back, the cells on the highest floors were

reserved for nobles. It was meant to ease discomfort as much as possible, and at the very least, had the bare necessities.

The real prison, apparently, was in the basement. Prisoners were thrown into a bare room with iron bars, resembling a cage. I went up the long staircase and into the prison on the higher floors. I was so high up that I could view the royal capital from the window. A hard bed was in the room.

The soldiers pushed me in, barking, “Stay quiet in there.” They closed the door and locked it.

I gazed out the window for a while. My arms were tied, but I was still able to walk around. The rope had painfully bit into my skin, and I tried to shift my hands, hoping to find more space. I couldn’t move them much, and the ropes seemed to only sink deeper and more painfully into my skin. I couldn’t have felt worse.

“Darn you, Cyril. How dare you tie up and trap me, an innocent young maiden? I’ll have to have a word with him,” I murmured as I gazed at the sky. “There isn’t anyone in the world who’s scarier than Mr. Julius. He’s always angry no matter what I say, he calls me an idiot, and he throws me around like luggage. In comparison, Cyril isn’t scary at all.”

Wait, I’m right. That’s exactly it, I thought to myself, agreeing with my own words. *Cyril is a gentleman. A former prince and current king, there’s no way his actions of trapping an innocent person here would be forgiven.*

I wasn’t quite sure what Mr. Coldman and Ms. Eliza were up to, but I felt like if I explained myself, I could properly prove my innocence.

“Did Ms. Eliza want Mr. Julius so badly that she would lie on such a grand scale? Or was she angry that I tarnished her reputation? She does seem to have a lot of pride, being the daughter of a rich merchant and all,” I continued to mumble to myself to pass the time. Voicing my thoughts calmed me down.

“Mr. Julius *is* handsome. He’s very good-looking, but he’s violent and sarcastic. He’s sometimes kind and reliable, but I think the bad outweighs the good here. It’s a struggle just living with him. He steals my bed and only thinks about Helios.”

But he hugged me last night. I wonder what that was all about.

“He listens to me very well and tries to save me all the time. He never did anything that I truly disliked.”

Will I meet him again? I’m sure I can, one day.

“If I meet him again, can I...”

...Tell him that I love him?



I didn’t know how much time had passed. I stopped gazing out the window and sat on the hard bed, patiently waiting. If it was a normal day, I’d be making some cool items with my alchemy, using the super rare materials I had just obtained. I sighed.

Suddenly, I heard the door being unlocked.

“...Hello, Cyril,” I said.

“Chloe!” His Majesty, King Cyril Astria, entered the room.

He looked quite a bit older than he did three years ago. His curled golden hair went down to his back and was tied up. His gray eyes were staring at me. He was wearing a white outfit, fitting for a king, and a cape with the royal family’s crest. He headed straight for me with such intensity that I couldn’t help but freeze up.

“You’re tied up. It hurts, doesn’t it? I’ll free you right now,” Cyril said, taking a knife from his belt and cutting the rope.

I waved my stinging hands in the air and blew on my wrists. Red rope marks were clearly imprinted, and I was bleeding a little. I had thought that I would get insulted first, so I was surprised by his actions. He was oddly kind, like he was when we were engaged. He was the one who had me thrown into prison and abandoned me on the streets with nothing more than the clothes on my back.

Cyril sat down on the bed beside me and looked into my eyes. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” he asked, staring at me with sincerity.

I furrowed my brows, troubled by his actions. I was prepared to snap back should he insult me, but he was far too kind. I wasn't sure how to deal with kind people, and I felt as though I'd lost my target to throw my anger at. *But if he's worried, then I must ask.*

"I was brought here by your orders, was I not, King Cyril? Why did you have me carted off to prison in ropes? Of course, it hurt!" I yelled. I had never complained to him before. *Good, I'm able to yell when I need to. Keep at it, me.*

"I'm sorry, Chloe. Your arrest and Julius's imprisonment weren't ordered by me. It was Aliza's doing," he responded in a calm and dignified manner.

He sounds a lot more mature than he was three years ago. He used to use a more casual tone of speech. It's as though he suddenly became an adult.

"Aliza? Does she have the power to command the knights?" I asked.

"It seems like she used my name to command them. Arresting you simply because of Coldman's statement is absurd... Three years ago, I had believed Aliza's story. We truly thought that Duke Sagrid was a criminal and executed him." It sounded like the memory pained him.

I looked down, unable to find the right words. *If only Mr. Julius was here with me, I thought. I no longer had the capacity to yell. I'm no good.*

"I was in prison, so I wasn't privy to the details, but isn't my father a criminal?" I asked.

"That's what we believed at the time. The one who ordered the execution was the former king, my late father. Aliza was the one who decided to banish you." He paused. "All I did was follow orders, and I failed to protect you."

"I don't understand. King Cyril, what's going on? Is my father innocent? Was he innocent yet executed?"

"Yes, but there's nothing I can do now to prove it. Your father was a silent and hard-to-please man, but he was honest and honorable. For a long time, I trusted Aliza's words... I'm sorry, Chloe." He held my hands, gently brushing over the rope marks with his fingertips. I shuddered and quickly pulled my hands back, as though I was fleeing from him.

“Blaming you for the past won’t change anything, but I was content with the way things were going for me this time around. I’m sure Mr. Julius is very angry at you right now, and you won’t be forgiven with an apology. I’m sure of it,” I warned him.

“Chloe, Julius is a terrifying man. He’s not right for you.”

“Be quiet, King Cyril. You and I are complete strangers now, so there’s no need for your shallow concern,” I retorted. “Oh, sorry for telling you to be quiet. I shouldn’t say that to a king.” I shrugged.

He looked at me with surprise and smiled. He then furrowed his brows into a grim expression. “Chloe, just what *is* Aliza? Are you sure she’s a human?” he asked.

“Aren’t you more familiar with her than me by now?” I paused for a moment before asking, “What happened, King Cyril?”

If Mr. Julius was with me, I was sure he’d get angry at me and tell me to butt out of other people’s business, but I felt like I wasn’t completely unrelated here, and I might as well stick around until the end. I chose not to flee anymore.

After a brief silence, Cyril said, “We received a message from the Coldmans and Aliza ordered your arrest just this morning. I headed to her room, trying to find out what had happened. Then I heard a different person’s voice from her room. No one else was supposed to be there.”

“A voice?”

“It was a man’s. I decided to eavesdrop, thinking perhaps she was having an affair or something. The voice...said to kill you, who was in the way.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I cracked open the door to peek in, and from Aliza’s feet was this sort of...shadow, in the shape of a human. It was so grotesquely shaped. Is that really Aliza? Did I trust something that wasn’t even human, degrade you, and bed something else?” He clenched at his chest, his white attire and cape wrinkling under his grasp.

“King Cyril...” I said softly.

"Perhaps I should thank that shadow, since it finally opened my eyes. I was wrong. Something had been messing with my head. I trapped Aliza in her room and headed straight to you. I don't know what that thing is, but I do know that I should help you safely escape from this place before it's too late." He stood up and tried to take my hand.

I got up without his help. There was too much information for me to process, but if I was allowed to leave, that was what I should do. Even if Cyril was telling the truth, I didn't have my staff or my bag that contained all my items.

As I tried to walk towards the door, I felt something that made my chest tighten. I felt very uncomfortable, as though something slimy was slowly coming up towards this room.

This was scary. This was a scary thing. It was slowly coming closer.

I was always afraid of Aliza. I was timid, and Aliza was cheerful. But above all else, there was just something off about her.

My mother told me to always flee from something scary, but I didn't want to run anymore. Cyril stepped in front of me, trying to protect me from this thing, as a darkness slowly, ever so surely, inched closer.

◆ The Thing from the Darkness

THE door quietly opened. I felt like I saw a terrifyingly ominous illusion enter the room. However, standing in front of that door was my sister, Aliza.

Aliza was a year younger than me, and her face resembled her mother's. She didn't look much like my father or me. Her blue hair, which was the same shade as a frozen lake, was beautifully tied up, and her large, light-blue eyes looked even larger with her neatly done makeup. She wore a luxurious dark-blue dress with gold embroidery decorated with jewels.

I had thought that she was a cheery and innocent girl in the past, but I felt like either my memory had failed me or that she had changed drastically over the past three years. I still felt a slightly cold and terrifying aura from her, but I also received the impression that she was bewitching and cruel.

Aliza, who stood in front of the open door, remained expressionless. Cyril took a step forward as if to hide me from her. As he placed one hand on his sword, she cocked her head to one side with a puzzled look.

"My dear sister! It surely has been a while! Why do you look so angry, Cyril? You were so cruel, trapping me in that room!" Aliza cooed, looking hurt, as though her expressionless face from earlier was a lie. Her words sounded sweet and pouty.

That was exactly how I knew her. She had always acted spoiled around Cyril, saying things like, "It's not fair that you're always with my sister. I would love to talk with you, too!" as she wrapped her arms around his. All I did was watch them from a distance.

I felt an air of nostalgia which I found comical. Back then, my entire world consisted of my family and the academy. Every time I saw Aliza acting so spoiled, I felt uncomfortable, but now I was able to find it idiotic. I couldn't have cared less.

"Aliza, how did you leave your room? I locked it from the outside with a

magical lock. Your magic shouldn't be able to match mine," King Cyril said, glaring at her.

"How horrible! You're making light of me, aren't you, Cyril? I have magic myself, and you even said I was much better than my sister!" Aliza replied with both hands on her mouth, sounding troubled as she ignored his glare. "I unlocked it, of course. Even I'm capable of doing that much."

"Why did you arrest Chloe?" Cyril asked. "It's been three years since then. Just what are you up to?"

"I heard that my sister hired a terrifying murderer from an enemy empire and used him to attack Ms. Eliza! My sister tried to kill her! I'm sure my dear sister didn't want Julius to be stolen away from her, since she's always been so small-minded and petty."

"I might be petty, but Mr. Julius doesn't listen to me anyway, and he wouldn't attack Ms. Eliza for such a flimsy reason. He'd pull my ear, calling me stupid and idiotic if I gave such a stupid order," I said, stepping out from behind Cyril.

I would never say something like, "Kill Ms. Eliza because I hate her!" but even if I did, he'd probably just be disappointed in me. *But he did seem to dislike her, so maybe he'd kill her with glee. No, I doubt it. He surprisingly has common sense. He probably won't hesitate to kill if needed, but he won't kill needlessly. I think. I'm not confident in this. But I hope.*

"Oh my. What happened to the girl who always shrunk back, trembling? I remember you used to always smile and laugh while trying to flatter me. You've learned to talk back a bit, haven't you?" Aliza said mockingly, putting her index finger on her lips.

"People change in three years. Aren't you happy with King Cyril? Then leave me alone! I was in the middle of becoming rich as an alchemist. Things were going so very well for me, an alchemist and maiden of stunning beauty and wit. I don't want you to get in my way," I told her firmly.

Aliza giggled. "How funny. You're acting tough, even though you're the timid Chloe Sagrid. You know you can't do anything by yourself."

"Aliza, just what are you? I saw an odd shape in your room. You were talking

about murdering Chloe with that odd shape," King Cyril said, drawing his sword and pointing it towards Aliza, the silver blade glittering. She stared at the king coolly. "Chloe has me. Three years ago, I hurt her because I didn't listen to her words. This time, I can protect her."

My eyes widened with surprise. He had never said that to me before, and I felt grateful, but nothing more. This was different from Mr. Julius, who made my heart pound as I couldn't suppress my happy feelings.

"You're awful, King Cyril! How dare you choose to protect your former fiancée instead of your loving wife! You're awful! Horrible! A terrible man! You're so very stupid!" Aliza ridiculed him, twisting her body as she pressed down on her stomach. Her shrill voice bounced within the small room.

I didn't think I'd feel so anxious without my staff and bag. However, even without my staff, I was able to use magic. I quickly thought of a few attack spells. I felt like the temperature of the room suddenly dropped. I was led here in the morning, so it must've been around noon now. The sky was sunny and clear, but the room somehow looked slightly dim.

"If you had listened to me and continued to believe in my words, you would've been happy. Why are you all getting in my way? Don't you think so too, my dear sister? I just want to be happy, but everyone hinders me. So...I had them disappear," she said, calling out to me as though she expected me to agree.

"Aliza, what did you do? Father was kind to you, and you lived without a worry in the world. You even married King Cyril! Just what hinders your happiness so much?" I replied. I couldn't understand her one bit. *Am I that much of a hindrance to her? But why?*

"Everyone's in the way. You're the biggest hindrance of all. My dear sister, did you know that Lizaria and I lived in the slums of the Sagrid duchy? You don't know what it's like to be poor, do you? You don't know the pain and suffering I've been through, do you?"

"...Aliza."

No. Lizaria and Aliza lived in a second house that my father had prepared. But who did I hear that from? I never talked much with my father, and I've never

asked Aliza about her past. I feared Lizaria and always ran away. I had never heard about them, and I had never even tried.

“My mother always told me that I was the child of Duke Sagrid. Just once...my mother was wrapped up with dangerous men, and the duke, who happened to be inspecting the area, saved her. After that, they fell deeply in love with each other, but the duke had a wife and a child. He couldn’t come now, but one day, he’d come for us.”

“Is that true?” I asked.

I thought of my father. He was a silent and grumpy man, but he always took good care of my sickly mother. I didn’t know much about men, but I’d like to believe that he didn’t betray my mother. Even if that was true, Aliza was warmly welcomed into the household. I couldn’t understand how I was in her way. *Did she hate me because seeing me alive was a sore sight for her eyes?*

“It’s true. But you see, no one came to pick us up, no matter how much time passed. And when news of your and Cyril’s engagement reached even the slums, I couldn’t forgive you. I’m living like trash, but you were set to marry the future king. I told my mother many times that we should go see the duke.”

“This was when I was ten, wasn’t it?” I said to Cyril.

“...Yeah. I chose you because you were cute and reserved. I didn’t think it’d turn out like this,” he replied.

I simply thought that my family status had something to do with the engagement since I was chosen without ever getting a chance to properly talk to him. I never imagined that he thought of me like that.

“My mother probably went crazy because we lived in a horrible environment. She started to say that I wasn’t the child of the duke. Such an incident never happened, and she didn’t know who my real father was. I was trying to be happy, but she got in my way. Isn’t that so weird?” Aliza said, a throaty laugh escaping her curled lips.

I felt like I saw Aliza’s shadow wavering and changing shape. It was clearly not due to the wind or the sun.

“So, every day, I prayed. I prayed for my happiness,” she said, her voice

growing louder. “Then, one day, an angel emerged from the Otherworldly Gate. The angel said to me that I should kill anyone who hinders my happiness. Thanks to the power that the angel gave me, I can revive people even if they’re killed. The revived people then become very obedient towards me...so, I killed my mother.”

For a moment, I couldn’t understand what she was saying. Aliza sounded so innocent and didn’t have a hint of malice. She just simply stated the facts. Her shadow started to stretch towards the walls, and a black form with two horns on its head started to take shape. *Aliza killed her own mother?*

The Lizaria that I knew came to our house when I was thirteen. She was a woman with blue hair and light-blue eyes, similar to Aliza’s. I never tried to get close to her, and Lizaria treated me as though I didn’t exist. We didn’t talk much, but she didn’t *seem* dead. She always wore beautiful dresses and properly had her makeup on. My father was always a man of few words, so I never saw him being friendly with her, but once he passed, she took over the household and acted as a duchess should.

I didn’t like that my father always yelled at me, so I tried to stay in my room, but I inevitably had to meet him during meals. However, Aliza would always be talking cheerfully, so I just sat there with a smile, waiting for this period of time to end. I soon entered the academy, so I truly didn’t know anything about them. I continued to flee, but to be precise, I just sat back and did nothing.

Aliza continued to smile like an innocent child as she went on with her story, “She lied, telling me that I wasn’t the duke’s daughter, so I killed her. Just as the angel recommended, I stabbed her with my knife. Repeatedly. Mother was sobbing, but I soon revived her, and she became a wonderful mama who listened to whatever I said. The angel’s power is wonderful.”

“Aliza, that’s...” I trailed off as Aliza’s shadow continued stretching towards the ceiling. I felt sick, as though I was standing in the middle of miasma. I felt much worse than the time I met a demon with a thick, evil magic emanating from its body. I bit my lip—I couldn’t faint here. “Aliza, that’s not an angel,” I said, shaking my head.

Only the dead’s grudges and evil intents emerged from the Otherworldly

Gate. They were made from obsession. Angels were said to live in the Heavens, from above. They were the messengers of the gods. Out of all of them, the burning angels of Seraphim, the ones I chanted to in my anti-evil magic, were said to be the most powerful angels. I'd never gone to the Otherworld, so I wasn't sure about angels, but there was no way that a messenger of God would order someone to kill their mother. *That's not an angel...*

"Aren't you simply envious of me, dear sister? I got everything I could ever want, but you have nothing! The angel told me that your mother, Celestia the hindrance, had died, so I went to the duke's house as ordered. Father took me in, calling me his daughter. He disliked you and treated me preciously. I took pity on you and asked him to get you dresses and shoes too! Aren't I kind?"

"Aliza, if that's true, then why did you accuse my father?"

"Because he's a liar... He lied to me. He pretended to treat me well, but he was secretly conspiring with the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed to seal away my angel! Even though he said I was more precious than you, who was a failure! I can tell you his last words, you know. He said, 'Don't lay a finger on Chloe!'"

"Father..." I murmured. I felt like someone had shoved a chunk of ice down my throat. I knew nothing about my father. The man my mother trusted and loved, I feared and hated, thinking that he was a traitor. When I learned that my father was executed in the square, right in front of my shop, I didn't think to mourn him.

I was at a loss for words.

"Your angel allows you to manipulate the dead as you like, correct? Why did you execute Duke Sagrid? You could've just killed him yourself, couldn't you?" Cyril asked.

Aliza sighed and shrugged her shoulders, bored by the question. "Because the angel said I couldn't do that. I couldn't lay a finger on Duke Sagrid or my dear sister. So, when you invited me to the castle, Cyril, I killed the former king and queen on the spot. I just needed them to execute Duke Sagrid—I didn't have a grudge against them or anything. The angel told me that this was the best plan, and...I didn't need them anymore. I said goodbye to my mother, the king, and the queen. It's not a problem, is it? They're dead already anyways."

I heard that Lizaria died in the fire, failing to escape when the Sagrid main house was burned to the ground. The late king and queen were supposedly killed by monsters while they were out on holiday. I wasn't aware that Aliza was responsible for both incidents. But it sounds like her supposed angel had led her to do this.

“Aliza, you wench!” Cyril cried, raising his sword.

“You said you loved me, Cyril. You said that I was so precious and dear to you, more than my sister could ever be! You said you’d protect me forever, and yet you raise your sword at me?” Aliza shrieked, her eyes tearing up as she stared at her husband. She was so beautiful that one couldn’t help but pity her and extend a hand.

“Aliza...” He lowered his sword as though his rage had left him. He stopped moving and stood between Aliza and me. “Why?” he croaked in a pained voice. “Why didn’t you kill *me*? You should’ve killed me like you did my parents and manipulated me as you liked. Why did you let me live?!”

Aliza and Cyril had spent time together, an intimate amount of time that I knew nothing about. I could only watch as things fell apart between them now.

“Because you were my prince who was supposed to make me happy! You had to make me the happiest woman in the world. When I first met you, I knew it was fate. If you believed in me, the angel would’ve made both of us happy forever and ever!” She stared at Cyril, her eyes filled with sadness and despair. In the next instant, her gaze turned into one of hatred and scorn. “I loved you!”

Did this small room just waver for a second? Cyril quickly backed away, coming to my side. Where he just stood, there was a pitch-black mountain of needles, tall as a human, protruding from the ceiling and floor. Had he not backed away, he surely would’ve been stabbed to death. Just that thought made my blood run cold.

“Aliza, why didn’t you execute me? Why did you appear in front of me now?” I asked. I wanted to know why my father was executed, but I was left to live for three years. She must’ve loved Cyril. I’d like to believe her cry of love. *You wouldn’t have married him otherwise. Even if you hated me, I doubt you’d marry a person you don’t even love just because you wanted to take everything from*

me. At the very least, I wouldn't do that.

"Oh, because simply killing you would be boring," she stated plainly. "I wanted you to writhe in regret and frustration as you watched me become queen in your place. I wanted you to experience a life of poverty as I had in my childhood years. We're blood-related, after all. I wanted you to experience what I had and suffer. But you got in the way of the angel."

"When have I ever done so? I don't even know this angel of yours."

I don't have any weapons or items on me. Cyril can't protect me while fending off Aliza and her angel. I can't know that for sure, but I just have a horrible feeling it's true. Whatever Aliza has is worse than the gatekeeper that Mr. Julius had defeated. I felt like someone was telling me not to get any closer to her and to flee. I needed to buy some time. I wanted to continue this conversation and think about my next steps while I could.

Aliza was planning on killing Cyril now. I didn't understand why, but it seemed like she couldn't directly lay her hands on me. She was trying to kill the king and manipulate him into executing me. Had Cyril remained ignorant, loving Aliza, I probably would've been executed for assaulting Ms. Eliza. *I kept telling myself that they would never execute me over something like that, but I guess, as Mr. Julius had said, I'm an idiot. He won't forgive me even if I apologize for this one.*

"The angel was finally able to open so many Otherworldly Gates, but you ordered Julius to go to the largest gate in the North Monster Mountains and close it," Aliza said, continuing to talk. "You killed the angel's cute pet, Cerberus. I felt so bad. The angel kept telling me to kill you and Julius. If you stayed in your place, you would've been able to live longer, but you're so stupid."

"Aliza, that can't be an angel," I told her. "Demons and monsters appear from the Otherworldly Gate, attacking humans. The mercenaries and knights all risked their lives to close the gates, trying to protect citizens from these creatures. Do you even understand what you're saying?"

"I do. My dear sister, I saw a lot of terrible things in the slums, and I've experienced a lot of horrible things. I don't care about other people. I only care about making myself happy. The angel has given me happiness, so if it tells me that you're in the way, I need you to disappear!"

"An angel that tells you to kill your own mother? That's no angel at all!" I shouted, hoping to get that through her thick skull.

A shadow stretched from Aliza's body, wrapping itself around her. Aliza, smiling happily, gracefully outstretched her arms and pointed her finger towards me.

"Chloe!" Cyril yelled.

The stone floor beneath my feet started to rise and crumble as a large snake's head emerged. The jet-black snake opened its jaws, revealing its red mouth and large fangs as it headed straight for the king. The head of the snake was about the size of my body, implying that its body was much bigger.

I lost my balance from the impact of the floor crumbling and rolled around before my back hit a wall. The pain knocked the wind out of me, and I stayed crouched. Cyril stood in front of me, outstretching a hand towards the snake. "The mighty circle of flame, the breath of the flame dragon!" He chanted the highest tier of the flame spells, a spell that I didn't have enough power to cast.

The moment his voice clearly echoed in the air, a large flame dragon, much larger than the snake, appeared and wrapped its body around the black serpent, choking it. As Cyril kicked the crumbling ground beneath him, he swung his sword towards the writhing snake and sliced the monster. The snake's head wasn't fully severed, and Cyril pulled his sword out of its flesh. A blood-like substance poured from the serpent's mouth, dripping onto the floor.

I managed to unfurl my pained body and put both hands out in front of me. *I don't have my wand with me, but I can still use magic. The anti-evil magic was effective against the gatekeeper. It might work against Aliza's angel.*

Anti-evil magic wasn't very useful. It wasn't effective against humans or beasts and wasn't powerful against monsters. Only spirit-type monsters were greatly affected by it, but holy magic was more than enough to take care of them. Thus, there weren't many people who learned anti-evil magic. However, if anti-evil magic was created specifically to defeat evil or malicious demons and monsters, then it was worth a shot. I didn't have as much magic power as Cyril, but Mr. Roge said that I had a knack for anti-evil magic.

"The burning angels of Seraphim, lay down the hammer of judgment on all

evil!” I chanted. As the words left my lips, the black snake’s body started to glow from the inside and exploded. White feathers danced in the air from the explosion and disappeared. I felt like the miasma lessened after my spell.

In the next moment, I felt an overwhelming pressure against my body, as though I was surrounded by malicious intent. My throat tightened.

“Did you think there was only one Everlasting Serpent?” Aliza said with a smirk. A couple of humanlike hands had emerged, protecting her from the crumbling floor. Next to her body was a dark shadow, wrapping itself around her and staying by her side. “I can’t kill you directly using the angel’s powers, but I think it’s okay if it’s an accident. I have just the idea, my dear sister!”

With a low rumbling sound, the walls started to crumble, and four snakes appeared from four different directions, destroying the prison as they forcibly tried to make their way inside the cell. The wall behind me and the floor beneath my feet crumbled away to reveal the palace below and the city in the distance.

“Whoa...” I said, feeling my body floating. I was thrown out of the tower.

I’m falling. I’ll die if I fall to the ground. I have to do something. Something! But I can’t think of anything.

“Chloe!” Cyril cried, grabbing my hand a second before it was too late. Half of his body hung out of the tower as he held me. My body was hanging in the air, and I felt my hand slipping from his every time the wind brushed against my body. He desperately hung onto my hand, and I felt like my bones would break. He was in an unstable position himself, his other hand wrapped around the sword he had thrust into the ground for leverage. “Don’t let go of my hand. No matter what!”

“King Cyril,” I murmured.

Four snakes appeared behind him, with Aliza in the middle of the monsters. The shadow overlapped Aliza’s body, and I felt like I saw two horns and black wings growing from her.

“I’m so moved that I feel like crying. You’re trying to protect my sister now? How funny!” Aliza laughed, peering at me from beyond the broken walls. “You

both are going to die anyways, but you guys look so stupid, acting so desperate. Seriously, you guys disgust me!"

She spat her words with revulsion and stabbed Cyril's hand, wrapped around his sword, with a black needle resembling a dagger. The weapon cut off the king's wrist easily, as though it was slicing through a piece of fruit. As I heard a pained groan, I felt our bodies inching lower, with nothing for him to hold on to anymore. I felt his palm become sweaty around mine.

This is awful! Don't you love King Cyril?!

"Aliza, stop! He's your husband, isn't he? I get that I'm a hindrance, so stop!" I cried, my voice filled with sadness. *I don't want to see anyone get hurt anymore!*

"My dear sister, you're so stupidly naïve! I don't need him if he doesn't love me. Cyril is a traitor who tried to save you!" Aliza shouted.

"Aliza, wake up! There *is* no angel! Only evil is around you!"

"You're such a fool. I can't believe you don't understand how wonderful this angel is. The angel's army will appear from the Otherworldly Gates and make this world into a wonderful paradise! This awful, rotten world will become a paradise!"

The snakes around my sister reared their heads, about to strike. *They're going to kill Cyril. That can't happen. That must never happen.*

"O, light! Destroy the darkness and bring dawn!" I chanted. I felt my body overflowing with magical power. The spell that I had never used before oddly felt familiar, as though I had used it many times in the past.

A blinding light made the serpents vanish, encompassing the prison cell in white. The torrent of light was so bright that I could no longer make out the serpents or Aliza. Cyril's body slipped off the floor.

We're falling. Even so, he held my hand, trying to go under me to break my fall. Blood soared through the air from his arm with the severed hand. *We're going to hit the ground.*

I closed my eyes and murmured, "Mr. Julius..."

I'm sorry. If I had listened to you and chosen to flee, I wouldn't have ended like this. Had I known this would've happened, I should've freed you from that contract. I should've found a way to remove the Slave Brand.

“Chloe!” I heard a familiar low voice call out to me.

I felt no impact from the ground, and I wasn't in pain. I felt something envelop my body. It was a familiar hand that felt reliable but a bit violent. I slowly opened my eyes to see a blood-covered Mr. Julius, glaring at me as though he wanted to murder me.

I gasped. “You're covered in blood!” I was soaring through the air on Helios as my body was being held by Mr. Julius.

The castle and the capital were below, telling me that he and Helios had ascended while I was being carried. The ground, which I thought I was going to fall on moments ago, felt so far away.

“Thanks to you. Hurry up and undo the contract,” he said with an angry expression. His body was covered in slashes, and he was bleeding from his wounds. I was fine, but he looked greatly injured.

“S-Sorry! I, Chloe Sagrid, command you! You're allowed to come rescue me!” I said, hastily putting my hand towards his collar. *Right, I told him not to come.*

Breaking the contract meant that he would be put through so much pain, enough to render him motionless. *Meaning, he's hurt because of me. Because of me.*

“I'm sorry. I'm so, so, sorry. I'll heal you right now!” I said, putting my hand on his body. As I chanted the spell, a soft light surrounded him, and his wounds started to heal. A sigh of relief escaped me when he stopped bleeding.

I felt so bad that I couldn't look him in the eyes, but now wasn't the time to feel down. “Where's King Cyril?!” I asked.

“Oh, the man that was plummeting with you? I had Helios carry him in his mouth and dropped him near the soldiers who noticed the commotion.”

“Wh-Why didn't you take him with us?”

“I could've left him be, you know. I only saved him because I thought you'd

cry about it. Be grateful."

I decided to stay silent, feeling grateful for his kindness. *He was in pain because of me, and he even saved Cyril, so I guess I should be grateful. It'll be fine. Cyril is strong, and there are many skilled sorcerers and knights here. He should be well taken care of.*

As I was being carried by Mr. Julius, I didn't know what to say. "I thought the magical contract was absolute, but you came to save me, anyway," I murmured.

"If you can handle the pain, it's possible to break the contract. I was able to endure it, but I was in so much pain that I thought I was better off dead. Because of you. I needlessly lost blood. Because of you," he repeated.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Don't ever do that again, idiot."

"I'm a stupid, idiotic fool. I thought I could handle this on my own, but I couldn't. I thought I was going to die... I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

He sighed. Then he brought my head to his chest and hugged me with one arm. This so wasn't the time for it, but my heart raced anyway.

"I'm sorry. Thank you so much for saving me," I said.

"Yeah. Glad you're safe," he muttered under his breath.

He must've been worried about me. I felt myself tearing up, but I managed to push back my tears. Now wasn't the time to cry just yet. I wanted him to keep hugging me, but I looked up at him, my face on his chest. I felt at ease looking at his face and was able to think much more clearly than before.

"Mr. Julius. Aliza, my sister, seems to be manipulated by something terrifying from the Otherworldly Gate," I explained.

Aliza had apparently met this angel from the Otherworldly Gate after I got engaged to Cyril, and before my mother had passed. She must've been around ten or so, just a child. Aliza, who was suffering from poverty, wished for her happiness, and happened to latch onto an evil angel. *I'm not sure how much she's done this of her own free will, but I'd like to think that she's being manipulated.*

"The one responsible for the many Otherworldly Gates in this kingdom is her angel. She said that the angel's army would march from the gates and make this kingdom into a paradise," I said.

There was a brief silence. "After you were taken away, Otherworldly Gates suddenly appeared throughout the kingdom. I was transported to a forest somewhere in the Astria Kingdom, so I called Helios to return to the capital. Roge was making a huge fuss about these gates."

"Are the citizens safe?" I asked.

"Seems like the knights and the mercenaries are working together to defeat each gate. A huge gate and a group of monsters also appeared in front of the fountain, in the square, near your shop. The ones who could fight stayed while the rest were being evacuated," he replied calmly, contrary to my panicky tone.

"Do you think Aliza's angel is trying to destroy the kingdom?"

"Who knows? I didn't fight the monsters. I had to pick up my master, who left my side on her own. Roge said he'll defend the place until you and I return. He's crazy, relying on an enemy kingdom's defeated general and a naïve alchemist," he said with a sigh, but he didn't seem to be upset by the idea.

Mr. Roge believed that Mr. Julius would rescue me. I stared into his sky-blue and sunset-red pair of eyes.

"I think that the thing that calls itself an angel is very scary and strong. My mother always told me to run from anything scary, but I want to protect everyone. But I'm too weak to do this alone," I said.

I didn't want to drag Mr. Julius into dangerous affairs. Both when we rescued Mr. Roge from the North Monster Mountains and when I was taken to the castle, I wanted him to stay safe.

But I was wrong. I'm sure that's not how it's supposed to be. I kept pushing him away, thinking that he shouldn't be dragged into my affairs. I was selfishly turning him away. He's strong, and he told me that it was fine if I was weak. I finally feel like I understand those words.

"So, will you fight with me?" I asked.

"I've told you before. You simply need to order me around. I've been *your* sword since the day you bought me. I'll destroy everything you ask me to," he said matter-of-factly, his voice filled with confidence.

I smiled, his words sounding so very like the man I'd come to know and love. "Your reply's a little scary. I only want you to defeat the monsters. King Cyril isn't an enemy, and I'm sure...Aliza's just being manipulated."

"Right now, I can probably *legally* kill everyone who made you suffer."

"I'm fine! Don't do that! This isn't an act of revenge, but an act of charity. We're trying to save people here."

"...Chloe, I grabbed a few random alchemy items from the box in your shop, and the weapon store owner told me to give this to you."

Mr. Julius handed over a simple cloth bag that was tied to the back of Helios's saddle. My bag, connected to the trunk with infinite storage, had been confiscated by the soldiers, and I hoped to get that back soon. He really did grab whatever he could—inside the bag were a number of randomly chosen alchemy items, from expensive items to cheap ones and useful items to useless ones. As I slung this bag over my shoulders, he handed me a staff. This wasn't the usual, cheap magic-enhancing staff that I used, but a very expensive one that I would never buy on my own.

"Th-This staff is...a super expensive magic-enhancing staff made from the Thousand-Year Tree and fitted with the Holy Mineral! I'm terrified that a miser like Mr. Robert just gave this to us. There's nothing more expensive than free stuff, Mr. Julius!" I cried.

"You're right. Isn't that why you're going to protect the capital and its people? Not worth it, if you ask me. You're just working for free," he said wryly.

"I'll take all the materials that the monsters drop! I'm working for free, but this'll turn into a huge profit for me! Besides, I think the monster with Aliza is a lot stronger than any of the monsters I've seen from the Otherworldly Gate. I'm sure a super expensive, never-before-seen material will drop from it! Let's go get it, Mr. Julius!"

"Yeah. Sit behind me and support me from there. I can't use magic."

“Of course! Leave it to me! You’re already strong, but with support from a beautiful genius alchemist, you’ll become even stronger! Let’s defeat all the monsters rampaging through the capital!”

I didn’t want to be thrown again, so I moved towards Mr. Julius’s back. Helios’s back had plenty of space, and since he flew in a stable manner, I felt at ease, especially compared to moments ago when I was falling from the building. With an oomph, I hung onto the ropes connected to Helios’s armor. I didn’t want to cling to Mr. Julius as I didn’t want to hinder his movements, and I knew that I wouldn’t fall off the dragon’s back.

“You ready, Chloe? We’ll finish this quickly. I lost blood thanks to you, and I haven’t been able to eat since morning, so I’m hungry. I want to eat that pea soup you make,” Mr. Julius said.

“Let’s eat something good. Isn’t it kind of sad to be sipping on pea soup after defeating the monsters and heroically saving the kingdom?”

“As long as you make it, I don’t mind eating whatever.”

“...You’re being sly,” I murmured under my breath.

Helios suddenly descended, slicing through the sky. He pierced through the clouds, and I saw the city. As he continued his descent, his body stretched out, and he looked like a black lightning bolt. Just as Mr. Julius had said, Otherworldly Gates were open throughout the kingdom. It was as though black dots had suddenly appeared in my line of sight.

The royal castle had changed into a ghastly form, as though a child had molded the castle out of clay. It resembled the Otherworldly Gate—grotesque, ugly, and surrounded by magical power. I had never been to the Otherworld before, but I imagined that the castle resembled a view from their world.

Above the gray building, where it looked like human arms, legs, faces, and torsos the size of small houses were torn apart and stacked on top of each other, I felt like I saw Aliza standing alone, staring up at me. I was so far away from the castle, and I doubted she could see me, yet I knew that she was looking up at me. It looked like her body was enveloped by something with horns and wings. With a smile, the thing raised both hands towards the sky. Suddenly, Otherworldly Gates opened around Helios, and winged monsters,

shackled by chains from the gates, emerged.

The monsters had white bird-like wings with a body of a beast and the face of a beautiful woman. They were so big that one eyeball was about the size of my entire body. As they flapped through the air, their intelligent gaze followed us. Their red lips murmured a curse-like chant, and I realized that more than ten of these monsters were after us. They were the gatekeepers. Red magic circles appeared around the gatekeepers, and a hot ray of light was expelled towards the ground, burning the capital below. Large cracks started to run through the ground.

From the Otherworldly Gates many Foul-feeding Gryphons appeared as well, flapping their wings. The beasts' upper halves resembled a hawk, while their lower halves looked like a lion. They were dangerous monsters, devouring humans or any other creatures from the sky. Mr. Julius readied his black spear on top of Helios, and I poured my magic into the staff.

The gryphons were weak to ice magic, and they fell to the ground once their wings were removed. However, if we didn't close the gates, an endless stream of monsters would surely appear. Even if we closed the gates, Aliza's angel would just open more.

If that's the case...

"Mr. Julius! Please defeat these monsters and take me to Aliza!" I said.

He nodded. "Yeah. These ugly birds need to get out of our way."

Helios flew straight towards the herd of gryphons. I curled up into a ball, hoping not to be a hindrance, and I thought I saw Mr. Julius swing his spear. The gryphons dropped to the ground as their wings were lopped off. With them out of the way, we headed straight towards the gatekeepers, which continued to mutter cursed chants.

I called to the angels of Seraphim, and Mr. Julius's spear glowed with the light from the anti-evil magic. Helios danced through the air, and with every pass he made by the foul creatures, a gatekeeper's woman-like face was slashed. The monsters' cries of agony and words filled with resentment echoed in the air, making me feel sick.

“Ugh, they are just awful!” I muttered.

“It’s basically no different from that thing you keep in front of your shop,” Mr. Julius said.

“Ms. Gazey’s cute! You really don’t get it, do you?!”

The monsters shrieked, and it sounded as though several shrieks were layered on top of each other. I covered both my ears with my hands, and I felt Helios’s body waver. *Did the sound waves make him lose his balance? I can see the strength leaving his wings. I never thought I’d use this, but I guess I’m glad he brought it.*

I took out my Sound Blocking Device for Sound Sleeping. *You never know what comes in handy, so it’s best to be prepared for any situation. I’m a genius because my items cover a variety of needs.*

I threw a small bear-like object into the air, saying, “Complete silence is what I need! A space of safe sleep, and a soothing lullaby, please!”

A soothing music box melody came from the bear, drowning out their shrieks. I felt Helios regain his strength and the young dragon started crying with joy, glancing at me and squinting his eyes. He seemed to like the lullaby. *He’s so cute. My baby boy’s so cute. Your mother will try her best, okay, Helios?*

“What a stupid sound,” Mr. Julius said, clicking his tongue, showing his distaste.

Helios, with renewed determination, sped up and headed towards the gatekeeper, which had a look of agony. He flew in all sorts of directions, and Mr. Julius’s spear pierced each gatekeeper, one by one, making them disappear. The Otherworldly Gates crumbled, and the hot rays of light fizzed out. Once again, Helios descended, heading straight towards Aliza.

◆ The Angel Appears

THE once beautiful white castle had morphed into an ugly sculpture made from human body parts. Faces of hairless people, filled with pain, glanced around as they were pressed down by arms, legs, and torsos. The eyes all watched us as we headed towards Aliza on Helios.

“This is disgusting, awful, and in poor taste! Why are monsters from the Otherworld always so gross-looking?” I said with disgust, shuddering.

“You said that the Otherworld is the world of the dead, and monsters are what the dead become. Humans are ugly and creepy creatures to begin with. If you peel back a layer of skin, they’re stuffed with tissue, bones, and organs. That thing is much better looking than a rotting corpse, isn’t it?” Mr. Julius replied coolly.

“Why do you have to say it like that?!” I cried, wishing I could erase that picture from my mind. “I’m already trying to keep myself from puking here! I’m a young maiden who likes pretty flowers and stuff, you know.”

“I thought you liked money.”

“Well, yeah, that too.”

Conversing with him felt natural, helping me to feel a little better. I didn’t feel as dizzy as before. From the sky, I could tell that the city I called home was filled with cracks, and a black entity was wriggling from within. In the center of the capital was the fountain near my shop. It looked like there was a huge black hole directly above it. *That must be an Otherworldly Gate. Are Mr. Roge and the others safe? I must do something about Aliza and the angel she’s possessed by*, I thought.

Above the castle, which had now become a grotesque structure, there was a pedestal created out of several open hands. Aliza stood on top, gazing at the sky—at us. The shadow extending from her clearly had horns and wings—I had never seen a monster like that before. The shadow resembled a human, but

monsters normally didn't take a humanoid form. They were generally grotesque abominations that looked like several different creatures were cut and pasted together.

Once Aliza came into view, Helios stopped his descent and began circling around the area. I couldn't see very well, but it seemed like there was an invisible wall surrounding her.

"We can't get any closer. We'll jump off, break the barrier, and get inside," Mr. Julius said, standing up on Helios.

The distance of a two-story building stood between Helios and Aliza. I didn't feel like I could jump that. I was a genius alchemist, capable of using some magic, but I lacked physical prowess.

"Are we really going to jump off?! I'm fine, and I'll try my best, but I'm not like you. I'm a normal human! I'd appreciate it if you could keep that in mind," I said.

"You should be able to break that barrier, right? Just hang on to me."

"I really thank you for your unwavering trust in me! I'm not a sorcerer or anything, but I'll do my best!"

Breaking a barrier. How do I do that? I don't think I can use that much magic, I thought, rummaging through the cloth bag. *I've got just the item for times like this!* I yelled in my head. The bag wasn't well organized, and that bothered me. My trunk and bag with infinite storage were well organized, allowing me to take out items quickly.

"Found it! Okay, I might be able to do something with this!" I exclaimed. As I was taking my time, many yellow balls rose in the air, firing beams of light at Helios. The dragon was able to dodge these, but I was sure he couldn't do this forever. "The mark of sealing a monster! Seal their magic!" I yelled, pulling out a stamp with the word "Seal" on it.

I threw the small, golden stamp towards the barrier, and it grew to about the size of both of my hands. "Seal" was firmly stamped on the barrier. The barrier started to waver, and like a cracking eggshell, a hole large enough for one person opened. I couldn't completely remove the barrier, but Mr. Julius

deemed that the hole was large enough. He slung me over his shoulders and prepared to jump.

"Chloe, I'm taking you with me," he said.

"Yes! I can still fight!" I replied, happy that he relied on me.

I should make an item that allows me to glide through the sky. I feel pathetic being hoisted like luggage, and I want to jump from a tall place and act cool.

He jumped off Helios's back, and I felt myself descending, I held my breath. It felt similar to the time I fell from the castle, but things were different now. I wasn't planning on dying. I was going to defeat this so-called angel, protect everyone, make Cyril another hand if possible, and save Aliza if I could. The terror and misery I had experienced when I was thrown into the slum alleyways were probably what Aliza had felt her entire life.

We made it through the barrier and descended towards the pedestal made from hands. Mr. Julius landed gracefully and let me down. *Thank goodness he didn't just throw me onto the ground this time.*

Aliza, completely unequipped, smiled at Mr. Julius, who had his sword drawn.

"That dragon would get in the way of our conversation, so I decided to just invite you two. Welcome back, my dear sister. It's nice to meet you, Black Prince Julius Craft," she said. She pinched the edges of her skirt and did a little curtsy, fitting for an aristocratic woman. Had it not been for this situation, she would've looked elegant.

I pointed the expensive staff I'd received from Mr. Robert at her. "Aliza, cut it out! I understand that you've suffered, but that's no reason to make the rest of the kingdom suffer!" I shouted.

"But no one came to save me. Only the angel did. I don't care about this kingdom. The army from the Otherworld will march in and make this world a paradise. Once the Astria Kingdom becomes a paradise, I'll send the army to other kingdoms and make the entire world heavenly," she said dreamily.

"Other kingdoms?" Mr. Julius asked, narrowing his eyes.

Aliza nodded happily. "I can make your Dystiana Empire a paradise, Sir Julius.

There will be no life or death. There won't be a need to grieve about death or lament after you've died. Simply a paradise. What do you think? Isn't the angel's plan simply wonderful?"

"What a load of crap. Everything ends when you die. There's no need to think about what happens after that, and no need to lament," he said plainly.

"Is that your take? Well, whatever, you're all in my way, so I'll have you die here, anyway. I can kill you first, Sir Julius. You'll become my puppet, and you'll whisper your undying love to me. I'm sure my dear sister would be devastated. How exciting. Please show me your face of utter despair, dear sister. Show me your expression when you taste the same despair that I did. I want to see you toss aside your mask of false righteousness as you come to hate and resent me."

I heard Mr. Julius click his tongue, and I purposefully yelled words that would anger my sister. "Aliza, I'll save you. I'll defeat the angel for you, so please wait for me!"

"Don't be so stupid! You always act so agreeable, like a good person, with a smile on your face. Astria's citizens are all cold-hearted people who threw rocks at you. Yet, you still choose to protect them?! You make me sick. I hate you!" she shrieked. The moment she yelled her hatred at me, the sounds of her stomping feet and her wide-open eyes seemed to be a desperate cry for help.

"Mr. Julius, please don't kill her!" I requested.

"If that's your order, I guess I'll hold back," he replied.

I pointed my staff towards his sword. "The burning angels of Seraphim, bestow the holy gospel! Provide the light that defeats all!"

As the sacred light was expelled from the staff, his black sword turned white. Black serpents appeared around Aliza, and he rushed towards her, slicing the serpents that got in his way. I used my anti-evil magic to defeat a few serpents that tried to swallow him whole. Our strength was overwhelming. Mr. Julius was powerful, and Aliza had the support of her angel, but she wasn't used to fighting. In an instant, the serpents were slain, and his blade was pressed against her neck.

“...You’re weak,” he said, using the hilt to hit the back of her neck.

With a simple tap, Aliza staggered as though she had suffered from a concussion. As she fell, Mr. Julius tried to catch her, but reconsidered and took a step back.

“Aliza!” I cried.

A human hand protruded from her stomach. The hand with long fingers and sharp fingernails, covered in blood, came from the dark shadow that stretched behind her. Aliza’s body wavered, and she fell to the ground like a puppet who had its strings cut.

Behind her, a man with two horns and two sets of black wings stood. He kicked Aliza’s fallen body, and her thin physique rolled on the ground, bumping into the pedestal made from hands. Her arms and legs were bent in awkward positions. I tried to rush towards her.

“Don’t move, Chloe!” Mr. Julius said sharply before turning to the man. “You’re the *angel*, aren’t you?”

The beautiful man had long, dark hair and a pair of horns grew from either side of his head. His skin was pale blue, and he had purple eyes. He outstretched his two pairs of large, bird-like wings, licking his fingertips covered in blood.

“Pleased to meet you, Celestia’s child. Same to you, normal, human male,” he said in a moderately low tone. He wore a tailcoat reminding me of a butler as he casually mentioned my mother’s name.

“How could you do that to Aliza?!” I accused. *Wasn’t he Aliza’s angel? At the very least, she seemed to believe that. Even in her darkest moments, she was always able to rely on her angel. Why the change?!*

“How could I, you ask? Well, because I’m bored. I’m bored of her. I was able to keep watching until she became this kingdom’s queen, but it stopped being fun after that. I suppose she was a weak, human female, after all. I lent her my powers, but she lost so easily to that man over there, so I felt like I didn’t need her anymore.”

The man put his hand to his throat and started to go “Ahhh” and “Yes” in a

small voice. “It’s been a while since I’ve talked to a human. Are you able to hear my words? I’m not sure if I’m speaking well. Can you understand me? Tell me, Chloe,” he said.

I looked at him. “Who are you?” He talked to me casually, as though I was an old acquaintance of his.

“Me? My name is Mephisto. I’m an angel living in the Otherworld,” he replied with a pretty smile.

His beauty was on par with an angel’s, but the magic overflowing from him felt so evil and cruel that I clenched my jaw. The man who called himself Mephisto waved his blood-soaked hands, splattering the surrounding floor in the red liquid.

“You’re not an angel,” I asserted. “Just what are you?”

“*I am* an angel. See, look at my beautiful wings. Having four wings in total is proof that I’m of a higher class. Six wings mean that you’re in a special class. The world’s a tough place, isn’t it? Just the number of wings will discriminate you from others.”

He outstretched his large, black wings, which were much larger than his body. The wings resembled those of a bird of prey. In comparison, Helios’s wings, though also black, looked much more elegant and beautiful to me.

“Please don’t lie to me,” I said. “No angel has as much evil magic as you do! Why did you trick Aliza? Why did you do something so horrible?!”

“I got bored of the always gloomy atmosphere of the Otherworld. I decided to have some fun in the human world, but my master scolded me for playing around. So, I thought I should bring the army of the Otherworld and destroy this kingdom. I thought it’d be more fun to play with you than with Aliza.”

Before I knew it, Mephisto was standing in front of me. I could only hold my breath as he extended his large hand towards my cheek. His hands were cold like ice—they felt horrifying and disgusting. As I tried to push him away, he easily grabbed me with one hand.



His nails dug into my wrist, and I felt a stream of blood running down my arm.

“Aliza was easily intoxicated by me. She was boring. It’s no fun giving hope to someone who’s already filled to the brim with despair. You see, I like to drag people like you, Chloe, to the depths of the abyss. People like you, who struggle and believe in the goodwill of others. And indeed, you’re rather stubborn. Even after you were abandoned by everyone and lost everything, you still choose to protect others. You’re indeed Celestia’s child.”

“Do you know my mother?”

“I do. I know her *very* well. I haven’t known of a greater hindrance. But alas, she’s dead. She unreasonably gave birth to you and died.”

“What do you mean?” *Mother died because she gave birth to me?* I thought as I looked up at him.

He had a smile of fascination on his face as he looked down at me, his long eyelashes framing his purple eyes. *His face...is coming closer, but I can’t move.* The moment I felt like he was going to touch my lips, I saw the white glimmer of a sword.

“Don’t talk to him, Chloe! This is a monster! You don’t need to listen to this thing,” Mr. Julius yelled.

Mephisto let go of my hand as he grabbed Mr. Julius’s sword. The blade, glowing white, burned the monster’s hand. A sweet scent of rotting fruit reached my nostrils.

“You’re in the way, though you’re just a human male... Oh, perhaps I’m wrong. You’re—” Mephisto started to say.

“Shut up and die,” Mr. Julius said, cutting him off. He forcibly pulled his sword from Mephisto’s grasp.

The sword, sliding horizontally, cut off the monster’s fingers cleanly. No blood came out, but instead, chunks of flesh started to bubble up, recreating the fingers.

“It’s useless. You can’t win. You two don’t have the power to defeat me,” Mephisto said.

"Shut up. My blade just severed a piece of your body. If I keep cutting you down, you'll die eventually," Mr. Julius said.

A swift strike swung down on Mephisto, who flapped his wings, trying to fly away. However, Mr. Julius was faster, as he continued to swing his sword. The monster could only dodge these attacks. Mephisto transformed one hand into a black blade, and the sound of him parrying the sword echoed in the air. As the monster reached forward, slimy, rotten corpses appeared near Mr. Julius's feet, grabbing at his legs and restricting his movement.

I aimed my staff towards his feet. "The thunder of punishment!" I chanted, and a ray of light fell towards Mr. Julius's feet. A blade of light, along with white feathers, surrounded his feet, and the dead around him started to burn away.

He paid no attention to his feet. *He trusts that I can protect him.* I readied my staff once more. Mephisto was slashing at Mr. Julius's chest and stomach, but the wounds were shallow. He grabbed the monster's arm, pulling him close. Then he roughly seized one of the wings and yelled my name, "Chloe!"

"O, light! Destroy the darkness and bring dawn!" I chanted. I felt my body being filled with magical energy, and the staff sucked the magic out of me. I staggered.

I saw Mr. Julius's blade changing shape thanks to the light. The sword glimmered as though it was a divine weapon and was inscribed with letters that I had never seen before. He sliced off Mephisto's wing, and black feathers danced in the sky. One wing was completely severed.

"Damned mortal!" Mephisto roared.

"Seems like you can't regenerate these. I'll cut off these wings that you're so proud of," Mr. Julius said, grinning evilly. He stepped on the monster's back, grabbed another wing, and swung his sword down.

"Agh, this power...this power..." The monster flapped his wings as he mumbled to himself. Mr. Julius was thrown off balance, and he quietly landed next to me like a cat. "...Yes, this will do. Let's meet again, Chloe. I'm looking forward to your heart breaking with sadness and despair." His blade arm returned to its normal form.

“Mephisto!” I yelled.

“Nice. I like it when you call my name. Remember, Chloe, my name is Mephisto. I’m a clown of deception, and...I’m called a demon.”

The monster smiled and Mr. Julius took a step forward as if to protect me.

“I don’t want you chasing me down with your dragon, so I’ll give you some things to play with. Well then, until next time,” Mephisto said, and a large Otherworldly Gate appeared in front of the pedestal made of hands.

The gate opened and a familiar face came into view.

“...Father,” I murmured, my strength leaving my body. My staff fell to the ground with a clatter.

I heard Mephisto cackling in the distance, but I couldn’t bring myself to move. From the Otherworldly Gate appeared my father, hanging on a cross. I knew in my head that this was just something that looked like my father, but its face looked just like him.

Its face and body were sliced apart, and each limb was tied to the cross with a chain. The cross was supported by a mountain of human skulls, and under that were a countless number of caterpillar-like legs, wriggling about. The thing that had my father’s face croaked my name, “Chloe, Chloe.”

Aliza’s voice echoed in my head. *I can tell you his last words, you know. He said, ‘Don’t lay a finger on Chloe!’*

My father was executed by beheading. He realized that Aliza was being manipulated by something that wasn’t human. So, he decided to accept Aliza as his daughter, and was careful not to irritate her too much. His harshness towards me was his method of protecting me as he tried to find a method of sealing Mephisto, who had already claimed Aliza. My father was executed because they found out what he was up to. The citizens of the capital had glared at me with disgust, telling me that my father was beheaded and that I was the daughter of the wicked Duke of Sagrid.

I didn’t mourn or feel sorrow; I simply accepted the facts. I didn’t even know how I was supposed to react. I always thought my father hated me and was a criminal, but I was wrong.

"Chloe, don't look," Mr. Julius said, hugging me and obscuring the monster.

Tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Close your eyes. You shouldn't be looking at that," he said.

"H-He...could be my father who had fallen to the Otherworld! I have to save him! I must!" I yelled.

"Even if that were true, the only way to save him...is to kill him."

I shook my head, rubbing my face against his chest. My throat tightened, making it hard for me to breathe.

"This will be quick. Just stay put, Chloe."

"It's painful... It hurts... It's painful...Chloe," the monster croaked in a voice like my father's, repeatedly asking for help.

He's right. Monsters are just remnants of the dead who have fallen to the Otherworld. My father's already dead, and there's no way to bring him back to life. I couldn't do anything back then—not a single thing. The least I can do is send him off, I thought.

Mr. Julius left my side, and I went to pick up the staff that I had dropped. I tried to stand as tall as I could as I looked up at my father's face. Between the chains that were wrapped around his face, I saw an eye glittering with intelligence gazing at me.

"Chloe," I heard a voice echo in my head. This wasn't the voice of the monster, but the calm, grumpy, formal tone belonging to my real father.

Mr. Julius rushed towards the monster. His sword was still filled with the power of anti-evil magic, and the white feathers dancing in the sky looked impossibly beautiful. He cut through countless skulls and headed straight for the monster. He kicked the ground, jumped in the air, and cleanly sliced the monster in two. It exploded from the inside and started to disappear. My father stretched his hands towards me, finally free from the crumbling chains.

"Chloe, I'm sorry," he said. I could hear my father's voice clearly.

I wiped my tears away with my sleeve and bit my lip, trying to suppress my sobs. Crying and shouting wouldn't change a thing. I thought of Mr. Julius's

kindness and thought I should suppress my cries. As the monster disappeared, the pedestal made of hands started to crumble away.

Mr. Julius ran towards me, picked me up, and yelled, “Helios!”

The dragon swiftly descended from the skies, and we jumped on before the floor beneath our feet crumbled away. From within Mr. Julius’s arms, I reached out towards Aliza. Helios, sensing my intent, grabbed my sister’s body with his feet and soared up.

The destroyed castle now became a mountain of rubble. On the ground, the knights and the court sorcerers were fighting the monsters pouring out from the Otherworldly Gate. I saw from afar that King Cyril was taking charge. The many Otherworldly Gates started to close and disappear into a fog, perhaps due to Mephisto’s retreat.

We headed towards the king, and though his right hand was missing, his wound was all healed up thanks to healing magic.

“Chloe! I’m glad you’re safe!” He tried to run towards me, but saw me step off Helios with Mr. Julius, and stopped in his tracks.

Helios laid Aliza’s body on the ground. There was a hole in her stomach, and she had turned palish-blue from the immense blood loss. Yet, she remained pretty.

The king stared at her body, and his face filled with sorrow as he said, “Medics, take Aliza away. There’s no need to heal her, but treat the body with care as we need to mourn for our loss.” He then turned towards me and bowed deeply. “Chloe, I’m sorry. I was such a fool.”

“King Cyril, we’ll have plenty of time for reflection and regret later. We should hurry and defeat the monsters in the city. We can think about where to go from there after this is all done,” I said.

“Indeed, you’re right. We’ve got enough soldiers here. May I ask you to lend a hand to the rest of the city?”

“Yes, of course. Mr. Julius here is strong, so we can defeat the monsters in the royal capital, can’t we?” I looked up at Mr. Julius.

He stared at Cyril with an unhappy expression. “I would’ve liked to kill you amid all the confusion, but Chloe is too nice and an idiot. You got your life spared, Cyril Astria.”

“Why must you say such things? Now’s not the time. Don’t recklessly intimidate people,” I scolded him.

“Shut up, idiot. Your sister and this man are responsible for the same crimes. Your sister died and paid for her sins, but he’s still alive,” he replied calmly. He wasn’t joking or being blinded by anger. His gaze was calm, and it seemed like he was simply voicing his true thoughts.

“Indeed. You’re right. The events that transpired are certainly my responsibility. I’m sure many have lost their lives. I’ll have to think of a way to redeem myself, but please give me some time. I’ll definitely atone for my sins,” Cyril vowed.

“I can’t simply tell you not to worry about what you did and to hang in there, but we must prioritize killing these monsters to save as many people as possible,” I told him. “We’ll head to the city. Take care, King Cyril!” I tugged on Mr. Julius’s arm and headed towards Helios.

The dragon once again took to the skies and headed for the fountain. At the square, I saw many armored mercenaries lying on the ground. In the middle of it all was Mr. Roge, who was still standing, though injured. He noticed us in the sky and waved his arms.

“Ms. Chloe! Julius! I believed you would come!” he called.

Mr. Julius carried me and jumped from Helios’s back. Mr. Roge ran towards us with a huge smile, looking a bit teary-eyed. He tried to hug us, but Mr. Julius dodged his grasp, and I was the only one who was caught. He hugged me so tightly that I felt like my organs would come out of my mouth.

“I thought I was gonna die! This time, both you and Julius look like angels to me!” he said, letting me go.

I was glad he sounded surprisingly energetic. Mr. Roge, carrying his large sword, and Mr. Julius lined up next to each other. I took a step back and chanted a healing spell, healing both of their wounds. I had wanted to treat the

fallen soldiers as well, but I didn't have enough magic. I'd already used more magic than usual and was just about to run out—I could cast only one or two more anti-evil spells.

However, I didn't despair. *We'll be fine. I have Mr. Julius, so we'll be fine.* I stared at his reliable back and held up my staff. I felt the disgusting presence of the monsters' magic from throughout the city.

"We'll finish this in five seconds, Chloe," Mr. Julius said, his back still turned towards me.

"Yeah!" I replied loudly, though I highly doubted five seconds was enough time. But if anyone could do it, it would be him.

"I'm jealous of you guys. You're on such good terms," Mr. Roge murmured enviously.



FIVE seconds wasn't enough time to defeat the monsters, but it felt like it was all over in a blink of an eye. The sky had turned orange as the sun was setting, so in actuality, it had already been a few hours, but the time flew by.

We defeated all the monsters in the city as Mr. Roge, the other mercenaries, the knights from the castle, Mr. Julius, and I all worked together. When the medics arrived to take the wounded to a temporary clinic, the people of the city were already coming back. I had run out of magic, and I used the super expensive staff as a walking stick to support my body. Mr. Julius stood next to me, sheathing his sword. His hair looked a bit unkempt, but he was standing tall as usual.

"Ms. Chloe!" I heard someone call from a distance. Ms. Roxy and the other people of the city were rushing towards me.

I looked up at Mr. Julius, and he somewhat vigorously tousled my hair. My headkerchief was gone, and I was sure that my hair and face were a mess, but I took pride in that.

I stared at Helios, who was elegantly soaring in the orange sky over the royal capital. The sky felt as vast and free as ever.

◆ A New Morning and the Continuing Days

MS. ROXY and the citizens rushed towards us, hugging me and causing a fuss. Mr. Julius watched from afar. I saw children and old ladies walk up to him to express their gratitude, and soldiers, who surely must've resented him, call out to him. He continued to fold his arms in front of his chest, acting unfriendly.

"I think his unfriendly attitude is charming, Ms. Chloe!" the veteran lady merchant told me.

Everyone seemed energetic, though I was sure they had gone through a terrifying experience. I politely declined Ms. Roxy's invitation to celebrate and decided to head back to my shop with Mr. Julius. She grabbed the disappointed Mr. Roge, dragging him away, and said to the injured yet cheery mercenaries and other men, "Let's drink up today!"

They all confirmed each other's well-being and cheerfully headed home. I knew there were gravely injured people and that some houses were completely destroyed. Cleaning up the city and mentally recovering was going to be a long journey, but the capital's citizens were a strong and cheery bunch. I gazed at the people for a while as they were walking home. They looked so bright to me.

Once I got back to my shop, I saw that the exterior walls were burnt in a few areas, and my flower bed in front was destroyed, but the building was relatively safe. Mr. Julius seemed a bit grumpier and more tired than usual since slaying the monsters, perhaps due to the number of people he had to converse with.

Helios, who was happily soaring through the sky, quietly landed on the square after everyone parted ways. He started acting spoiled towards me, nuzzling his nose against my neck as soon as he alighted. I petted his smooth and glossy muzzle, truly indulging in his cuteness. I wanted to pet him forever, but I knew I couldn't do that. He needed to return inside the ring.

I wanted a house large enough to keep Helios out and free. I wanted to play with him every day, and I was sure that it would bring me happiness.

Mr. Julius no longer complained when I pet his dragon. His exhausted face seemed to perk up a little upon seeing Helios, and he smiled upon seeing the dragonuzzle me.

As usual, his love for dragons never changes. It feels like everything has gone back to normal, but a lot of things won't. Still, I want to forget everything for now and pretend that it's all over.



UPON entering our alchemy shop, we decided to take a bath and change our clothes. We started to discuss who would go in first, and as I felt bad for injuring him with the contract and was grateful that he saved me, I suggested he get in first.

“Do you want to bathe together?” Mr. Julius asked. I felt embarrassed and fled to the kitchen.

I knew he was kidding, but I couldn’t stop getting the wrong idea. *I don’t know what to do when it’s just the two of us.* The house wasn’t any different from how I had left it, and nothing was destroyed. The pea soup I had made was still safe inside the pot, and I still had the bread, dried meat, dried fish, and vegetables that I’d stored.

I put the pot of soup over the stove and sighed while staring at it. The soup was red from the tomatoes, and it was slowly starting to bubble. The three types of sliced meat, peas, the finely cut ends of onions and carrots, and other vegetable scraps, were dancing around in the broth.

Aliza had died, Cyril lost a hand, and I learned that my father had actually cared about me. Yet, my mind was filled with Mr. Julius as I was reheating the soup, and I felt like something was wrong with me. *Now’s not the time to feel happy.*

“Chloe, I don’t have any clothes,” Mr. Julius said, popping into the kitchen. He was wearing black pants, but had nothing but a large towel around his shoulders. Water was dripping from his beautiful golden hair onto his muscular physique covered in scars.

“You *do* have clothes! I bought you a lot,” I said, turning off the stove and

pushing Mr. Julius to the side as I went to my bedroom. In his closet were a few garments on hangers. *I do the laundry every day, so he shouldn't run out of clothes.*

I was out of magic, but I mustered up what I could and used my wind magic to dry his hair. I liked watching his hair sway in the wind as it dried. His damp hair was glossy, and looking at his completely dried hair made me feel the same kind of achievement as washing a large dog. I had washed a few large dogs in the past, when I was first starting out at this shop. Money was tight at first, so I took on any tasks I could, and many included washing and walking dogs.

“The torn robe. You still have it, don’t you? I want to wear that,” he said.

“How much do you like that robe? How do you even know that I kept it?” I asked.

He asked for the black robe that was torn at the North Monster Mountains. I had sewn up a few holes and stored it as I planned to use it as my pajamas, but Mr. Julius had somehow known that I didn’t toss it away.

“I’ll buy you a new one, so bear with the other clothes for now,” I said.

“...Fine,” he replied reluctantly, randomly pulling out a piece of clothing and wearing it. It was a large, black garment.

He must really like loose-fitting, comfortable clothes, I thought, gazing at him. I returned to my room and decided to take a bath. My apron dress was torn and splattered with dark-red blood. It felt like a waste, but I thought it was best to toss it away. *Cyril might give us money as a reward or something. If so, maybe I’ll get some better clothes. I should get Mr. Julius his robe first. Is Mr. Robert okay? I’m sure he is.*

“I’m going to sleep for a bit,” Mr. Julius said as I headed towards the bath.

“Sleep well,” I said, waving at him.

I didn’t think much about our interactions before, but I couldn’t stop thinking about him now and felt embarrassed.

Can I continue on like this? I haven’t told him about my feelings, and this incident was my fault. I’m not sure why, but Mephisto sounded like he knew me

well. I couldn't defeat him, meaning that in the future, more dangerous things could occur. Something awful might happen to Mr. Julius and Helios if they stay by my side. Thoughts swirled in my head as I relaxed in the bath. I felt a twinge of pain in my chest, and I felt as though I was about to cry. I sank my hand beneath the water and closed my eyes.



WHEN I got out of the bath, I steeled my resolve. I saw Mr. Julius still sleeping on my bed, so I changed into my pajamas, a cream-colored dress that went down to my feet. I tied an apron around it to prevent it from getting dirty.

With determination, I lined up all the food I had stored on the table. *It's not much different from usual, though.* I had pea soup, processed meat, fried eggs, cheese, vegetables sandwiched by bread, and stewed dried fish and vegetables with plenty of oil and garnished with herbs. I took out a glass and lined up a bottle of red wine.

As I turned on my favorite grape-shaped and owl-shaped lamps, I felt that the table looked rather grand, though it was obviously not as gorgeous as the dinner parties of the aristocracy. It would've been perfect if I could wear a gown, but it didn't suit the current me, and I felt like it was unnecessary.

My hair was long enough to just tie it together but not enough to completely put my hair up. I was about to go wake Mr. Julius, but he surprisingly woke up on his own and popped his head out. It looked like he awoke from smelling the food. *He must be hungry. We moved around a lot since this morning without eating a thing, so I'm famished too.*

"Food's ready. So much happened today, our first meal of the day ended up being our dinner," I said.

"Yeah. Thanks for making the food. You probably wanted to rest too, didn't you?" he said apologetically, caring for my well-being.

I shook my head, though I was internally panicking. Usually, I would joke around and say something like, "You're being nice? Looks like a storm's coming." However, I felt like now wasn't the time for that.

"I'm fine. I'm not injured, and moving around helps take my mind off things," I

replied.

He sat down in front of the small wooden table. I poured a glass of wine and handed it to him. The orange light from the lamp on the shelf by the window illuminated his body. Every time he moved, I could see his shadow on the walls and ceiling moving with him. I sat in front of him, and after a moment of hesitation, I decided to pour myself a glass of wine as well. *I can drink every now and then, and today's a special day.*

"I caused a lot of trouble for you today, so you can eat as much as you like. I'm sure it'll be a long day tomorrow, too," I said.

"Yeah. There's a chance that they'll call us into the castle to ask us about the details of today's events. Don't do anything unnecessary and try to leave my side this time," he replied firmly. I gazed down at the bowl of red soup in front of me.

Mr. Julius elegantly finished off the soup with incredible speed and was already eating the fish. The food in front of him was disappearing at an amazing speed. I took a spoonful of the pea soup and carried it to my lips. The acidity of the tomatoes and the faint sweetness of the peas filled my mouth. I felt the warm soup go down my throat, and I sighed. *I have to say it, don't I? I've already decided on this.*

"Mr. Julius, I was thinking..." I started.

"You're probably thinking about unnecessary things again. There's no need for you to do that," he said, cutting me off and putting a sandwich in his mouth.

"D-Don't say that without hearing me out! This is important!"

He ate elegantly, but each bite was big and finished quickly. *Did he pick this up from the battlefield, where he probably didn't have enough time to eat? I've only eaten a little. Speaking of which, he's never complained about my slow pace of eating. I would've thought he'd tell me to hurry up or something.*

Because he ate quickly, he would normally watch me slowly eat while sipping a cup of tea. I was bothered by his stares at first, but I'd already gotten used to it. *I'm sure he's staring at me because he has nothing better to do.* As I thought that he probably didn't have any better reason, I was able to ignore his gaze.

"Um, I...didn't know anything. I didn't know that Aliza was suffering, or that my father had tried to protect me, or that Aliza was being manipulated by a demon," I said.

"Your sister was probably freed from her suffering by dying. She had one-sidedly hated the world. I'm not unfamiliar with that feeling, and I understand where she's coming from," he replied quietly. His eyes looked slightly downcast, and his golden eyelashes created a shadow over his cheeks. He didn't sound sad or regretful. He spoke calmly, as though he was simply stating the facts, and it made my chest tighten.

"Are you the same as her?" I asked. I was reminded that he once asked if there were humans in this world worth saving. *Aliza said that she didn't care what happened to this kingdom. If she was freed from her suffering by dying, does he also feel the same?*

"I was, before you bought me. I didn't care about living or dying. I stayed alive because there simply wasn't anyone around to kill me. That was all... But watching you, I think I've lost interest in dying," he replied.

"That's right. You've also got your precious Helios. You're his father, aren't you? Then you can't die." Feeling relieved, I wiped away the tear that was building up on the edge of my eye.

I might be selfish, but I want Mr. Julius to stay alive. If it was possible, I wanted to save Aliza as well. Regardless of the facts, Aliza truly believed that we were half-sisters. When she shouted that she hated me, it sounded like she was desperately reaching out for help.

"Mr. Julius, how about I remove that contract around your neck? I don't think of you as my slave, and I don't want my contract to restrict your freedom," I said, trying my best to sound normal.

I had been considering this for some time now. He wasn't someone who would needlessly take lives. In the past, he was simply a soldier in the war who had followed orders. This contract wasn't needed, and it wasn't necessary for him to listen to my orders. He was an expensive purchase, but he'd already worked his money's worth. I wanted him to be free. I didn't want to drag him into my affairs anymore.

He was quiet for a moment before he spoke, sounding irritated. “And? Are you going to free me and tell me to go wherever I please?”

I couldn’t meet his glaring gaze.

“There might be someone waiting for you back at the Dystiana Empire. And... the sky belongs to no one. I think it suits you well when you’re freely soaring through the skies with Helios.” I mustered my strength to talk. I felt my throat tighten and like I couldn’t talk well.

I kept telling myself that this was the right thing to do, and tried to reason with my heart, but I was internally throwing a tantrum like a child, scolding myself for talking in this manner.

“Chloe, there’s only one contract left—to not do anything you dislike. If that’s all, there’s no need to remove this. I’ll take it as a souvenir... If you’ll allow me, I’ll return to the Dystiana Empire. There’s something that I need to do.” He traced the golden lock around his neck with his fingertips, though he looked unhappy.

“...Okay.” *This was the right thing to do, right?* The delicious food on the table looked unappetizing, and though my stomach was empty, I had completely lost my appetite.

“The contract states that I can’t do anything you dislike. If you don’t want me to leave here this instant, a sharp pain will run through my body, but you’re sure about this, right?” He flashed an evil smirk.

I looked back and forth between his face and the lock. *Of course, I don’t want him to go. I feel like I’m going to cry.* I realized that he tricked me when he said he’d keep the contract, and I buried my face in my hands.

“You’re not being fair. That’s truly unfair. Let me undo that contract!”

“As I said, there’s no need for you to think of unnecessary things, idiot. No one’s waiting for me back at the empire, and there’s nothing else that I need to do. Even if I obtain my freedom, without you, I’ll be wandering around without a purpose and die in some abandoned place.”

“Why do you say that? You sound as if you’re...hopeless without me. I... I...” I stammered.

Have...I become timid again? When I was imprisoned in the castle, I had promised myself to tell him my feelings if I ever saw him again. But I don't want to drag him into my business. It's dangerous. I don't want him to get hurt. I don't want any of that.

"I...like you, Mr. Julius," I confessed.

"Chloe," he called my name, as calm as ever.

I tried my best, you know. It took a lot of courage to confess. I'm sure he doesn't think of me as much. Maybe a master who purchased him with money, I guess.

"You're always sarcastic, and you call me an idiot or stupid, and you aren't friendly, and you're gruff... It's unfair that you're sometimes nice. I like you. So, I don't want you to be near me. You might get involved in more dangerous affairs because of me, and I want you to be free!"

Like a dam had burst, once I confessed, I couldn't stop talking. A torrent of my feelings gushed out. As my chest tightened, I felt overwhelmed and felt a twinge of loneliness. Tears spilled from my eyes, and I couldn't wipe them away fast enough. I felt as though I'd become a child again.

"Sorry, please forget about it. I know I'm being a nuisance right now. Sorr—" With a clatter that cut me off, Mr. Julius got up from his chair and leaned across the table until our faces were close. For a brief second, I felt our lips touch. After his soft yet slightly dry lips parted from mine, I covered my mouth with my hands.

Did...he just kiss me? I couldn't breathe well, and I felt like my heart was about to explode. My face felt hot, and my tears stopped.

"Hurry up and eat. Or do you need me to feed you?" he said.

"I-I'll eat by myself. No, wait. That's not it. Why did you...?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Of course, there is. You're supposed to do that with your lover. Um, you might be used to stuff like this, but are you teasing me?" I swirled the soup in my bowl with a spoon. *I should hurry and eat.*

Though my face was still red, I started to drink my soup. *Why did I start eating here? What am I doing?*

"I'm not used to this feeling, so I can't verbalize it well..." he said. "But I want to touch you. I was a slave to the empire since I was fifteen and had been reduced to a beast. You made me human again. I only need you."

He stared at me eating. His blue and red eyes were gazing right at me. I glanced back at his eyes, blue as the sky and red as the sunset, before quickly looking down at the table. I felt like I had just heard an incredible confession from him. It felt much deeper and more heartfelt than simple words of love, and my entire body grew hot.

"...Th-That's why I think you're sly," I said, placing my spoon on the table. I swallowed the soup in my mouth and gazed at the empty bowl and the bread, which I'd taken a few bites out of.

I made a lot of food because I was hungry, but it didn't mean I could eat a whole lot more. I was glad I only made Mr. Julius's portion for fish as I wouldn't have been able to finish it. I took a sip of wine. I had alcohol in case I saw a nightmare that would keep me up, but I didn't have any recently, so the taste was a bit nostalgic. It burned my throat, and I felt my body become even warmer.

Mr. Julius had finished the bread I couldn't finish and drank the rest of my wine. *He eats and drinks a lot. He's muscular but skinny, so how can he eat that much?* When I first brought him home from the Slave Arena, he was extremely skinny. He had gained some weight since then, but he didn't have any unnecessary fat on him. I stared at his mouth, devouring the food in front of him, and his Adam's apple, bobbing up and down with each swallow. When he finished eating, he got up. I followed suit, thinking that I should clear the dishes, but he grabbed my arm.

"Mr. Julius?" I asked. He pulled me towards him and hugged me tightly to his chest. Even through his clothes, I could feel his sturdy body and his body temperature, slightly lower than mine. I heard his heart beating in his chest, proving that he was still alive. *He's alive and by my side. We were born in completely different places and circumstances. It feels like a miracle.*

"Chloe... I'm glad you're okay. Don't leave my side. Stay close enough that I can always reach you," he said.

"Okay. Don't you run off either," I replied.

"Yeah. I won't just disappear."

As he held me in his arms, I smelled the same pleasant, soapy scent that was surely coming from me as well. I hesitantly wrapped my arms around his body. I was really scared that I would lose anything that became important to me again, but I had a feeling that wouldn't happen with him.

"Mr. Julius, I love you. I love you so much. You saved me and protected me, and I always tried to sound tough, but I did something horrible to you. Thank you for saving my father, who had fallen to the Otherworld. I wouldn't have been able to do that myself," I said in a rush.

"...Forget it. That was just a creature made simply to make you suffer. It's filled with evil. Chloe, know that I'll take any kind of suffering that falls upon you in your stead. I'll definitely kill that demon one day."

"I...I also hate that demon. It's cruel and awful, and I hate it so much. I'll fight with you."

"Yeah. I guess that's one more thing added to our list. Make enough money for a house, find a mate for Helios, and defeat the demon." He sounded a bit happy.

The demon from the Otherworld was terrifying, and I had a few things I wanted to ask it, but as I heard Mr. Julius's confident voice, I felt like I could accomplish anything. I nuzzled my cheek against his chest, acting a little indulgent. I was embarrassed, but I also felt at ease.

"Yeah. There's a lot to do starting tomorrow. Today was hectic too, but we're going to get busier. I want to figure out a way to take that Slave Brand off you. Why don't we remove that collar? I trust you, so it shouldn't be a problem," I said.

"Keep the collar. Ever since I was put under your contract, I started to think about what you might dislike. I only saved Cyril and didn't kill Aliza because of the collar... I can't trust myself. I'm sure this contract will keep me in check," he

replied.

“I understand. Let me know whenever you’d like to take it off.”

I felt like I understood his feelings just a little bit. He was the cruel and cold-hearted Black Prince Julius. I didn’t think this title described who he really was at his core, but his memories of the past wouldn’t just disappear, just as I couldn’t forget about the timid and powerless Lady Chloe Sagrid of House Sagrid.

Just as I keep telling myself that I’m a genius alchemist and a young maiden of beauty, he must also need something to keep him going. He’s strong, but he’s also human and only a bit older than me.

“Chloe, be quiet for now.”

His sweet voice, which didn’t sound gentlemanly at all, echoed in my ears, and I closed my mouth. As I did so, he created a slight space between us and leaned in close. A blur of golden locks entered my vision, and I closed my eyes as our lips touched.

Mother always said that a prince would one day appear in front of me. I met a man who’s impolite, gruff, and odd, but I love Mr. Julius. I’m sure we’ll be fine. I’ll overcome any sadness or pain. I can overcome anything.



THE next day, a messenger from the castle visited us. The castle, which had looked grotesque from the power of the Otherworld, now turned back into a mountain of rubble. According to Cyril, who greeted us at the annex building, the people living and working at the castle temporarily moved into the unaffected detached northern building, and they were currently scrambling to confirm the situation throughout the kingdom. They were offering aid wherever they could.

Cyril had a cloth slung around his neck, supporting his handless right arm. He told us that his brother, the second prince, was helping him govern the kingdom while he was recovering.

He led us deeper inside the building until we arrived at a barren room with a white coffin. Inside was Aliza, her eyes closed, looking like she was sleeping. The

coffin was filled with flowers.

"I...resent Aliza, but I also pity her," he said sadly.

Mr. Julius, looking bored, had his arms folded in front of him as he stared out the window. I kneeled in front of the coffin, clasped my hands together, and prayed for my sister to finally be free.

"King Cyril, it seems like the Otherworld demon who called itself Mephisto had used Aliza's body as its vessel. Did you know anything about this?" I asked in a soft voice, standing up and returning to Mr. Julius's side as I did. We stood around the coffin, and the room was empty, except for the guards standing by the entrance. I didn't know if this information should be known to others.

"A demon, you say...? The Otherworld is where the dead go. I've heard of the Heavens, the realm of angels. A demon is the opposite of an angel. I've only heard bits and pieces from the Otherworld researchers of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed. They're rather secretive," Cyril replied, putting his hand on his chin.

Would the researchers from Rasheed know about Mephisto? They were from a neighboring kingdom, but I'd never been there before. I knew that Astria and Rasheed had some kind of alliance since they were both being invaded by Dystiana. We were not on bad terms with them, and we occasionally shared information regarding Otherworldly Gates, such as new discoveries or new locations.

"We let Mephisto escape," I said. Aliza, manipulated by the demon, had killed both of Cyril's parents. In other words, the demon was his true enemy in this. Mine as well.

"You and Julius did well. The people of this kingdom are grateful to you, and I'm no exception," Cyril replied, bowing his head.

"Mr. Julius is very strong. I'm grateful to him as well." I tugged on his sleeve and looked up at him.

He glanced at me and sighed. I noticed that the irritated clicks of his tongue had turned to sighs, and I felt like this change was a sign of his love. I smiled. He furrowed his brows at me, and I thought that this was no attitude to show to your loved one, but I also thought it was funny and very like Mr. Julius.

Cyril looked at us as though he was gazing at something blinding. “It may be odd that a sinful person like myself is saying this, but I’ll pardon Julius Craft. Chloe, I’ll also erase all the crimes that the Duke of Sagrid was falsely accused of committing.”

“Thank you. I’m not bothered by it anymore... I’m just happy I won’t have to continue looking over my shoulder, waiting for the day soldiers cart me off as a criminal for no good reason again,” I hastily replied, noticing that Mr. Julius tried to open his mouth to complain. He remained silent, since I covered what he wanted to say.

“Chloe, I know that whatever I say now will sound like an excuse. I can’t do much. Do you have anything you want or need?” Cyril offered. “I’m sorry. That’s about all I can do now.”

“King Cyril, can I have anything?” Perhaps a proper lady would show reserve here, but I was no longer one. Mr. Robert had taught me the mental fortitude required to be a merchant.

“Anything you like. If you wish, I would like to give back the land that once belonged to the Sagrids.”

The Sagrid duchy had been reclaimed by the royal family after our main residence was burned to the ground. A bit hesitant, I looked up at Mr. Julius. He lightly shook his head as if to imply that I should decide for myself.

“I don’t need that land or title. It’s too heavy of a burden for me to bear. In exchange, if possible, I want to ask you about the vast land near the west gate of the royal capital,” I said.

“Yeah, I know of it. A church that was used as an orphanage said that it was too far from the city and inconvenient. They moved areas, leaving behind an abandoned house, and the land belongs to the kingdom now, but we’re letting it be since we don’t have much use for it,” Cyril replied.

“Would you give that to me?” I asked.

“That land?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, Mr. Julius has an adorable dragon. I don’t have enough space in my current house near the square to keep this dragon. If I were

to use that land to the west, we could let the dragon roam free without upsetting people,” I explained.

I had been eyeing that location since I decided to build a house for Helios. It was a vast meadow surrounded by trees, and a lone church stood in the middle. A fence surrounded the perimeter, and not many people came close. The plot of land was large enough to keep some sheep, but land in the royal capital was too expensive to use for such things for most people.

That location was near my store, so I felt like it would be perfect. Expensive alchemy items were only created once I received an order, so having my shop in the middle of the capital wasn’t a necessity. Above all, my current shop was Ms. Natalia’s, after all.

“I don’t mind giving that to you, but you saved our kingdom. Surely you would like something more?” he asked.

“King Cyril, that much land in the royal capital is very expensive! This is more than enough payment. Besides, I was truly in need of some land. Thank you so much. In addition, I’d like you to authorize keeping a dragon. I hope the people won’t get angry at me.”

Cyril widened his eyes with surprise for a moment before kindly smiling at me. When I was engaged to him, before Aliza came into our life, he would always smile in the same way while talking with me. It felt a bit nostalgic.

“I don’t mind if there’s no danger. I’m not too well-versed in dragons, but if you say it’s safe, I’m sure it is. That dragon did save our lives, too,” he said, rubbing his injured arm.

“Right? Dragons are really cute and smart and wonderful!” I replied enthusiastically. *My newfound enthusiasm may be my first step toward becoming a dragon maniac like Mr. Julius.* Thinking that he must be ecstatic about receiving land large enough for Helios to roam freely, I glanced up at his face, but he seemed extremely irritated. *Did I do something? Is it because I decided this all on my own?*

“I’m planning on telling the citizens about Aliza and the crimes that the royal family has committed. I’ll also go to Coldman’s place and hear them out before deciding on a suitable punishment. I’ll have them promise never to lay a hand

on you guys again, so I want you to be at ease. Lastly, I'll pass the throne onto my younger brother. I'm planning on helping the citizens who have been affected by this incident. Otherworldly Gates have appeared throughout the kingdom, wreaking a lot of damage. There's a chance that these gates will appear once again. I'll become a knight, and I'm planning on dedicating my life as part of the Expedition Unit to defeat these monsters," Cyril looked down at the coffin with a frown, his face filled with regret.

His hand, covered by the cloth, should be missing from the wrist down. *His resolve is admirable, but it'll be inconvenient to fight without a hand. He lost it to protect me. The least I can do is...*

"King Cyril, if you would kindly leave it to me, a genius alchemist and young maiden of stunning beauty, I can make a lovely prosthetic hand for you! It's my fault, after all, so I promise to make the best in the whole wide world for you!" I exclaimed.

"This isn't your fault, Chloe. It's all due to a lack of my own power. But you're right about needing a hand. One day, I'll send you a request. Julius was able to live in the Slave Arena for three years while missing an eye. I hope to be strong enough that I won't be a hindrance to the knights, even if I've only got one hand."

"Are we done talking? Goodbye, Cyril Astria. Let's go, Chloe," Mr. Julius said, breaking his silence for the first time. He had apparently worn out his patience and tried to leave the room. I bowed towards the king before chasing after Mr. Julius. Cyril bowed to us deeply.

We walked through the hallways of the detached building and went outside. The skies of the royal capital were sunny and clear today. As I looked down, I saw a mountain of rubble, a wrecked garden, and destroyed walls, but as the soldiers were clearing out the debris, I felt like everything would be okay.

"Mr. Julius! What if the king had something else to talk about? Why are you angry? Are you jealous because I'm talking to my ex-fiancé or something?" I said, tugging on his clothes as he walked ahead of me. I was, of course, joking. He was always in an irritable mood, and our relationship may have changed a little since last night, but in truth, nothing much had changed. He remained

irritable, and I was the cheery genius alchemist, Chloe.

“Yeah. I don’t like it when you talk to him,” Mr. Julius said, stopping at the square in front of the castle’s gates.

Wait, uh, did he just admit that he was jealous? Surprised by his words, I felt a little panicked, and Mr. Julius reached out to touch my cheek and then he kissed me.



His kiss was so gentle, I couldn't hide my shock. He grinned while staring at my face.

"So, I guess this gets you to be quiet. Simpler than I thought," he said.

"U-Um! If you tell me to shut up or be quiet, I'll do so! What you just did...isn't good for my heart in all sorts of ways!" I stammered.

"You don't like it?"

"I never said that... But we're, you know, outside!" I buried my face in my hands, embarrassed. I was frustrated that he seemed calm while I felt like my face was on fire.

"So, we might find more information on the disgusting demon if we go to the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, right? That place is also known for dragons, so it'll work out perfect for us," Mr. Julius said.

"You really do listen well, don't you? Are you planning on buying a wife for Helios?"

"Female dragons aren't as rare as males. There's a good chance we can get one."

"Dragons are expensive. Darn, I should've asked King Cyril for some money too..."

He seemed to be in a better mood as we talked about dragons. But I felt like I understood and shared in his love for these creatures now.

"Let's go home, Mr. Julius. We've been quite busy recently, so let's take a break," I said.

"You're right."

"Do you want to walk home, for once? If you don't mind."

"Yeah, if that's what you want to do."

I hesitantly wrapped my hand around his. His warm hand tightly squeezed mine back.

I should buy his favorite black robe from Mr. Robert before heading home, I thought. I felt like this kind of trivial, everyday thought was what happiness was

all about.

◆ Bonus: Julius Craft and the Dragon Egg

JULIUS'S father, who had just returned from inspecting the neighboring kingdom, brought a locked bag to his son's room. Inside was something so big that it required both hands to carry. The shell was hard, thick, and heavy. The surface, shining dull with a pale gray light, felt rough to the touch. What appeared in front of the child was an egg. The egg was inside the bag, treated as though it was a treasure.

Julius, who saw the large egg inside the bag surrounded by a red cloth, looked up at his father and asked, "Father, what is this?"

His father had placed this item in front of him, stating that it was a souvenir. Julius had shimmering golden hair and clear sky-blue eyes. He had just turned ten and was the only son of the Duke of Craft. He had no other siblings. His parents loved each other, but perhaps satisfied that their successor was a male, they didn't seem pressed for another child.

Their private tutor said that Julius was well-built for his age, mature, calm, and a quick learner. He was an excellent student.

Jeanius Craft, the father Julius closely resembled, stood on the other side of the egg he'd placed on the table. His usual silence could do nothing to hide his overwhelming aura. A man full of integrity and fairness, he was admired by the citizens in his duchy and his servants. Despite his silence, he truly treasured his wife, Citrin. Jeanius was always busy with work and didn't have much time to converse with his family, but he undoubtedly loved his son, and Julius admired him. They didn't exchange many words, but that love was felt through living together. Julius's personality most likely took after his father's: quiet, diligent, and intelligent.

"It's a dragon egg. I got it from Rasheed," Jeanius replied indifferently.

He sounds indifferent, but I feel like he also sounds a bit excited. How rare, Julius thought. His father wasn't expressive with his emotions. He had never

seen his father laugh loudly or yell. His father may have acted differently in front of his mother, but he seemed good at controlling his emotions.

I don't think I've ever seen Father look so excited before, Julius thought with surprise as he glanced back and forth between his father and the egg.

"I've heard that there are quite a few dragons in the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed. There are even knights who ride dragons," Julius said.

Rasheed was a neighboring kingdom of the Dystiana Empire. The empire, surrounded by smaller kingdoms, feared Rasheed. They didn't want to become Rasheed's enemy. Rasheed was mostly a desert, but they had conducted extensive research on magic and the Otherworld. Many magic spells, items, and arithmetic that had spread throughout the world were first produced by Rasheed. Julius had learned from books and his private tutor that Rasheed had the latest, cutting-edge technology.

Jeanius had often gone to Rasheed for work, but Julius wasn't aware of what the work entailed, and he figured that he would learn as he got older.

"Dragon knights, my boy. Seeing them soaring through the sky in a formation was the highlight of my trip," Jeanius replied kindly in a moderately low voice. It was a bit different from his usual graceful yet strict tone.

"Is this a dragon egg?" Julius asked.

"Indeed. It's different from the dragons in Dystiana, though. The dragons here have been bred by human hands and adjusted to their liking. This egg is from a pair of pure-blooded dragons. This is precious."

Julius only had a basic knowledge of the creatures. He knew nothing more than what he was taught by his private tutor. He wasn't aware of what pure-blooded meant, and he never thought much about the dragons used for transportation that his father had just mentioned. He could only stare at the precious egg in front of him, slightly troubled.

"Son, you've turned ten, haven't you? I was thinking about what to get you, and by pure coincidence, a friend from the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed said I could buy this egg off them. They offered to hand it to me for free, but seeing how precious this is, I decided to purchase it for a reasonable price," Jeanius

said.

“It’s very expensive, isn’t it?”

“Much more than what I paid for it.”

“And you’re giving this to me?”

His father nodded. Julius thought that while his father didn’t spend money lavishly, he would occasionally surprise everyone with expensive purchases. Once Jeanius felt that an item was necessary, money was never an issue. Julius didn’t know what a dragon egg cost, but he was sure that it was extremely expensive.

“I thought you’d be happy, but perhaps all I did was saddle you with something you didn’t want,” his father said.

“That’s not it at all. Of course, I’m happy, but...” Julius had never imagined that he would have a dragon egg in his possession. He was happy but a little confused at the same time. *What am I to do with this?* he asked himself.

“I’m giving this to you. I’ve heard that it’s difficult to hatch an egg, so do as you wish with your own power.”

“Is it that difficult?”

“I’m not too knowledgeable about dragons, but that’s what I’ve heard.”

“...That makes you being sold a precious dragon egg even more surprising,” Julius said.

“When I told my friend that I knew nothing about dragons and was planning on giving it to my intelligent son, they seemed a little exasperated with me,” Jeanius said without a hint of embarrassment. “Now, where’s Citrin?” he muttered, leaving the room.

“I’ll definitely hatch this egg,” Julius murmured, gently touching the rough surface of the warm egg. He thought he felt a heartbeat and steeled his resolve. *Only I can protect this egg. I’ve never raised a living thing before, but I will hatch this egg.*

He carefully carried the egg to his bedroom, still wrapped in a red cloth. He placed it on the softest spot he could think of—his bed. He then headed to his

family's archives, grabbed all the books he could find about dragons, and brought them back to his room. As he passed by a servant, he requested that they purchase any books they could about dragons.

He opened the books and started reading. His dedication was so strong that he declined lunch and received the books that his servant had purchased. As the sun had set, he used a light source that had grown in popularity at the time, an alchemy lamp. When that wasn't enough, he used light magic to make his hands bright. Julius was good with magic. He had learned swordsmanship and other combat skills and realized that he excelled at fighting more so than his contemporaries.

His father was more into academics, and his mother, to put it nicely, was a kind woman, but she was a bit of an airhead and depended on her husband. Julius wasn't aware of what led to their marriage, but he knew that the Craft name and title came from his mother and that his father became a son-in-law for the Craft duchy. Whenever he asked about his father's upbringing, the question was always avoided, and he figured that his father had his reasons.

"...Every book says the same thing," Julius muttered as he was reading about how to hatch the egg until late at night.

He didn't want to make any mistakes, so he glanced through every book he had, but the information was redundant. He traced the sentences with his finger.

"Dragons eat monsters as their main food source to fuel their magic. To hatch an egg, it's essential to provide magic. A mother dragon will slowly pour her magic into the egg as she keeps it by her side. If a human were to hatch an egg, a stable source of magic would need to be poured into it. There should be three sorcerers with decent amounts of magic for the best results. If the egg receives enough magic, it'll hatch in seven days. Sorcerers pouring in their magic can hatch an egg faster than a mother dragon."

Out of all the books he had collected, only a few noted how to hatch an egg with humans. All of them stated the same thing, so he could only assume that this was correct. He hesitantly touched the egg with one hand and poured his magic into it.

"I hope this is okay," Julius said.

There wasn't a single person in this house who could definitively point to the correct answer, and most likely, not a person in the Dystiana Empire could do so. All he could do was believe in the books that he read. He felt the egg smoothly absorbing his magic.

"Seven days. Don't worry, I'll definitely hatch you," he promised.

The egg must've wanted to be raised by its mother. Jeanius brought this egg back to the Dystiana Empire, where not much research was done on dragons, and not a single expert existed. This was a small life that had experienced an odd fate.

Julius didn't have any siblings. Because of that, he had an urge to protect the existence of a life that could do nothing without him. With a sense of responsibility, he continued to pour his magic into the egg.

Citrin worriedly checked up on Julius from time to time as the boy stayed in his room.

"Your Grace, did you make another unreasonable demand of Young Master Julius?" the servants said with withered looks on their faces. They cooperated as much as they could, providing the boy with food and watching over the egg as Julius took a bath and changed clothes.

Julius continued to pour his magic into the egg, even while half asleep. He had a feeling that he had more magic than others, and he didn't run out of magic as he continued to pour it into the egg. The toughest part was that he couldn't get much sleep. He felt dizzy, thinking that this would continue for seven more days, but his determination never wavered.



THE second day passed, then the third, and on the morning of the fourth day, Julius noticed a crack in the hard shell of the egg. The book had said seven days, but it was only the fourth.

Did I mess up somewhere? Did I fail the dragon? He felt his chest tighten as he thought that the dragon wouldn't hatch. He bit his lip, holding back the tears that started to form on the edges of his eyes.

A crackling sound was heard, and the cracks grew larger. A black baby dragon peeked out from the cracks.

"Helios," Julius said with relief. He had been thinking about a name for a while, and finally came to a decision.

The dragon happily squeaked in reply, his golden eyes passionately gazing up at Julius.

Afterword

HELLO, my name is Miyako Tsukahara.

Thank you for picking up *The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!*

The story between Chloe and Julius was created after I was struck by the desire to write about a penny-pincher young lady purchasing a cold-hearted enemy general. I wanted a female main character who was cheery enough not to be deterred by a cold-hearted man, and so I came up with Chloe, an alchemist and a beautiful (self-proclaimed) young maiden. Chloe was written to be an alchemist from the start, but Julius suddenly started to ask for a dragon one day, and he became a dragon knight of the enemy kingdom. Even while writing, I couldn't help but say to myself, "I see, Julius wants a dragon..."

It wasn't until I wrote Julius's dialogue that these elements became a part of his character. Before I knew it, Helios had appeared, and he was very expressive, cute, and brave. Helios is now a vital part of their lives.

I'd be happy if you enjoyed the story between the kind Chloe and the reliable but intimidating Julius. They're still continuing their adventures, and because they've been through harsh times, I think it'd be great if there was a happy ending waiting for them.

Again, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who has read this far. Thank you so much! I'd like to thank everyone who congratulated me when this story became a published book, my editors, and everyone else who supported me throughout this journey. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

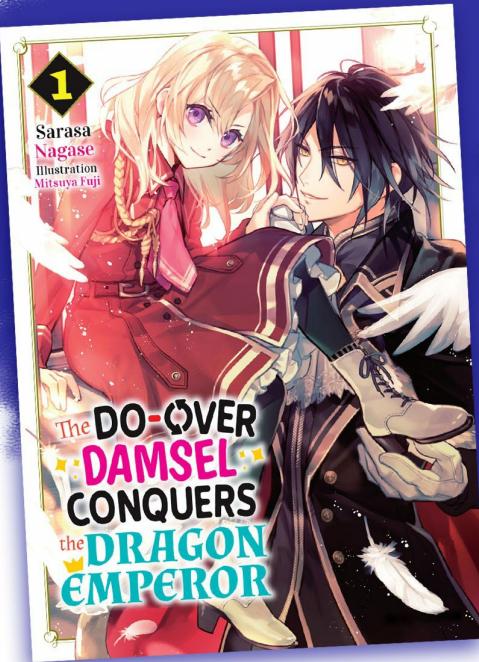
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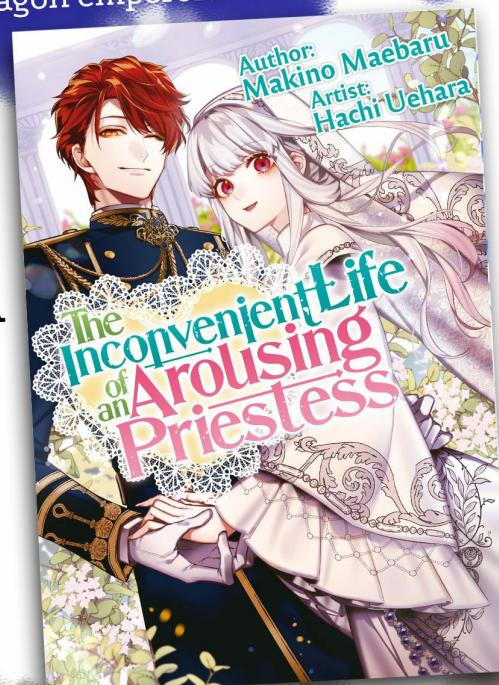
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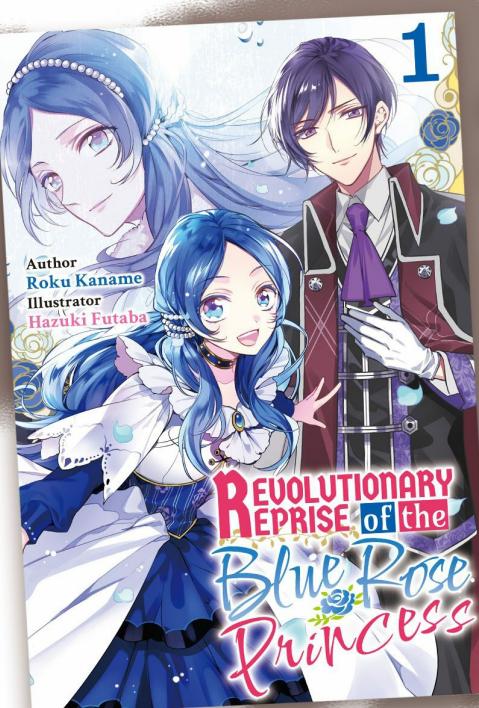
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