

Presented by

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

3

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The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy
General! Volume 3

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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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SACRED KINGDOM
OF RASHEED



LAMBDA ASHLACH

Former captain of Rasheed's Dragon Knights. Dislikes the modifications of dragons. Lumine's father.



RUTO IVAN

A seal master and a powerful sorcerer. Salim's younger sister. She worries about her brother.



TAHALA GARENA

Head researcher of the Puerta Research Center. Specializes in researching the Otherworld.



SALIM IVAN

Head researcher at Fores Research Facility and Minne's fiancé. Was killed after having his body taken by Samael.



LAYLA FATIMA

The daughter of a duke and Faisal's fiancée. Helps Chloe and Julius out.



FAISAL RASHEED

The younger brother of King Shesif and Layla's fiancé. Makes his resolve to be at odds with Shesif.

MINNE RASHEED

The king's younger sister and Salim's fiancée. Forms a contract with Mephisto in hopes of reviving Salim.

SHESIF RASHEED

The Holy King. Keeps Salim by his side, despite knowing that he's being manipulated by a demon.

DEMONS

SAMAEL

A higher-ranked demon who took over Salim's body. Takes the form of a beautiful young boy. Nicknamed the Serpent of Death.



MEPHISTO

Formerly a demon with four wings, but had one sliced off by Julius. Highly intelligent. Loves and respects Samael.

character

ASTRIA KINGDOM



NATALIA BATHORY

Chloe's alchemy master. Skilled in both sorcery and alchemy.



JULIUS CRAFT

Former general of an enemy nation who was purchased from the Slave Arena. Very handsome, but sharp-tongued.



CHLOE SAGRID

A girl who overcame a traumatizing experience and became an extraordinary alchemist. Former daughter of a duke and self-proclaimed beautiful young maiden.

ROXY

Owner of the diner, De Zange, in the royal capital. Acts like Chloe's older sister.



CYRIL ASTRIA

Chloe's former fiancé. Abdicated the throne and is now stationed in the Royal Mercenaries.



ROGE GREGORIO

Captain of the Royal Mercenaries in the royal capital. Trusts and relies on Chloe and Julius.

DRAGONS



HELIOS

A dragon raised by Julius from an egg. He's very smart and sensitive.



LUMINE

A female dragon raised by Lambda. Close with Helios.

◆ Samael, the Serpent of Death

HELIOS soared through the skies like a blade of wind. Mr. Julius's spear sliced through the monsters that managed to evade Ruto's magic. The expressionless, pale human faces had bulging, unfocused eyes that gazed into the abyss. They opened their crimson maws, revealing their icicle-shaped rows of pearly whites and slimy tongues. A bottomless void peeked through their teeth, implying that I'd be swallowed whole.

"Consume!" Samael's order rang in my head.

I finally realized what he meant and bit my lip. The monsters clacked their teeth together and flew toward Helios, but he managed to dodge them with ease, allowing Mr. Julius to slice them into shreds with his spear. The vast blue skies were decorated with splotches of vivid, red blood that bloomed in the air.

Ares's large and sturdy body knocked King Shesif's jewel birds away as the dragon plowed ahead. Dark purple blood spilled from the numerous scratches on Ares's torso. Yet, Prince Faisal didn't falter and continued to fly forward.

We should go too, I thought. The corpses that plunged into the desert were buried in the sand. Mr. Julius had mentioned that an ocean of bodies lay at the bottom of the desert when we arrived at the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed. Should Samael be allowed to roam free, there would be far more corpses buried in the sea of sand. With every loop and somersault that Helios did in the air, my world was literally flipped upside-down.

I wasn't able to keep up with the constantly changing scenery, and I could only desperately cling to the dragon's armor. In contrast, Mr. Julius maintained his cool and expertly defeated the monsters. As their necks and wings were hacked away, they fell into their sandy grave below. Helios flew between the monsters that plummeted to the ground as though he was navigating through a dark, thick cloud and continued to increase his altitude.

We were swiftly closing in on Samael, who was high above the skies, looking

down on us as he sat cross-legged in the air. The demon didn't seem at all distressed as he curled his lips to form a smile.

"I guess mongrels like them aren't good enough for you," he cackled. He smiled like a child who wanted to be praised for his actions. "But it served as decent entertainment, did it not?"

"How awful!" I cried. "Please turn them all back!"

"As an alchemist, you should know better than anyone, Chloe. Once mixed together, they can never be reverted to their original forms." His voice sounded nefarious and unpleasant to my ears, as if just listening to him made me filthy. The demon turned to Mr. Julius. "Was it fun to kill these human-dragon hybrids, Julius? Surely it gets you all worked up—you've got the blood of a murderer."

I shuddered. A chill ran up my spine as though a snake was slithering across my body.

Before I could retort, Mr. Julius replied coldly, "Shut up. Enough with your babbling. I'm tired of hearing your voice."

His icy tone was unable to mask the deep fury emanating from him. *He finds Helios more precious than anyone else. I'm sure Mr. Julius doesn't want to harm the dragons. And I feel the same.*

"Are you sure about this?" Samael goaded. "If you kill me, Minne will die. The wishes of Salim, who offered his life for his beloved, and Holy King Shesif, who went to this extent to protect his sister, will be all for naught."

"I don't care," Mr. Julius replied.

"In truth, I don't want anyone to die or get hurt," I added. "But it's nigh impossible to protect everyone. And what I know for sure is that I can't let you be! You'll only cause more pain and suffering for everyone!"

"You can only spout those pretty words precisely *because* you're not intimately involved in their affair," Samael claimed. "If *you* could save your loved one in exchange for the world, can you firmly declare that you would never make that choice?"

Mr. Julius was the one to reply, "That choice will never be necessary. I'll

protect them with my own power. The day that's no longer possible will be the day I die."

His answer was firm, but for a moment, I hesitated and was unable to say a thing. *I'd never thought about it before...*

"Chloe!" Mr. Julius bellowed, snapping me back to reality.

Now isn't the time to think about stuff like that. I had to use my own powers to protect those who were important to me. I pointed my Thousand-Year Tree staff at Mr. Julius's spear.

"Burning Angel Michael, heed my call! Use your fiery sacred flame to thwart the darkness and bring upon dawn! The blade of ancients!" I chanted.

I recalled this anti-evil spell from the book that Jahala had given me. Oddly enough, the spell coursed through my body as though I'd used it many times before. It felt mysteriously nostalgic. A gentle wind surrounded my body, reminding me of the days when my mother used to stroke my hair. It lasted for only a moment before I felt absolutely exhausted, my magical energy sapped away from me.

I grabbed onto the handle on Helios's back so that I could maintain my posture. Suddenly, a sliver of light fell from the skies like a bolt of lightning, transforming Mr. Julius's black spear into a weapon of white. The glowing spear was inscribed with red letters in the center, which I'd never seen before. White feathers fluttered around before disappearing into particles of light.

Once the glow died down, I felt a lot better. However, it felt different from the other anti-evil spells that I'd used in the past; it felt like a good chunk of my magic had been taken away.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Julius," I apologized. "I don't think I can use this spell very often."

"Not a problem," he replied. "I'll kill him in one swing. Let's go, Helios!"

Helios gave a large flap of his wings in response.

"Very well, come," Samael said. "I'll be your opponent."

Various spots of dark void appeared in the sky behind the demon as several

dark hands slowly emerged, layered on top of each other. Each hand transformed into a black serpent with wings. As Helios cut through the air toward Samael, the den of winged serpents pounced on him.

Mr. Julius went on one knee and braced himself atop his dragon's back before he launched into the air. Using the back of the snakes as his footing, he easily sliced through the serpents. For some reason, Samael's eyes were glimmering with genuine delight.

"Amazing," the demon gasped. "It's truly been a while since I used this much power. How long has it been? Ah, I last went all-out when I fought against the army of angels! How long ago was that? Goodness me, I simply can't remember."

"Enough with your incessant yapping," Mr. Julius growled. "Die!"

Mr. Julius jumped off a vanishing serpent and swung his white spear down with everything he had. My eyes couldn't keep up with his speed—he was like a bolt of white lightning in the air.

Helios flew under Samael, likely on standby to catch Mr. Julius. The spear sank deep into Samael's back, the blade penetrating through his stomach. Yet, the demon didn't gasp for breath as he flapped his wings to fly away. Mr. Julius grabbed onto one of the four wings as he crouched low and unsheathed the sword from his waist. He pointed it directly at Samael. There was a flash of cold steel when the unthinkable occurred.



“You’re up, Mephisto,” Samael muttered.

“You had me waiting for quite a bit,” a voice replied. “I was so bored that I thought I was going to die.”

A nauseatingly terrifying presence was right behind me. Someone grabbed me from behind and locked me into place.

“Chloe!” Mr. Julius roared.

Helios gave a panicked cry as my body was forcibly dragged off his back. My feet dangled in the air as I noticed a man’s arm wrapped around my stomach. When I turned around to glare, I locked eyes with a two-horned demon with only three wings—Mephisto. One of his wings was gone. He had a grin plastered on his face, exactly how I’d last seen him.

“Now then. Let’s have you make a choice,” Samael declared, staring at Mr. Julius. “Will you choose the world, or your beloved? Pray, tell.”

The demon’s eyes glittered with curiosity; there wasn’t an ounce of murderous intent or hatred there. He looked like a parent who was watching his child mature. Mr. Julius pulled his spear from Samael’s back and swiftly headed for Helios.

He’s trying to save me.

“Burning Angel Michael, pound your iron hammer of judgment on evil! Divine retribution—” I began my chant, gathering what little magical energy I had left as I focused on both hands.

I tried to fire my spell at Mephisto’s arm coiled around me. *I don’t know how powerful it is, but I should at least be able to free myself!* But before I could finish saying my spell, a dark hole appeared beneath our feet.

Dark light enveloped both Mephisto and me as I vanished in front of Mr. Julius and Helios.

◆ Princess Minne Rasheed

AS far as I could see, a sea of golden sand filled my vision as a temple seemingly popped up out of nowhere. Yet, the building looked eroded from the harsh weather and resembled the massive bone of a beast.

A void hole opened up in the air and I fell out into the temple. The silky sands provided a cushion for me, and it didn't hurt much, but I was covered in the fine grains. *If you're going to kidnap me, at least take some responsibility!* I thought. I should've at least been allowed to land gracefully.

"Ow! What's your problem?!" I demanded in my usual voice as I got up. "You've got no manners, I say!"

I was practically scolding my timid heart that was shriveling with fear. My skirt was a mess and I patted it down, trying to get all the dust and sand off as I picked up my staff. I checked and saw that my infinite storage bag was still working. *I'll be fine. I've still got my weapon with me. I can fight.*

"Unfortunately, I'm not quite used to handling a lady," Mephisto said, floating in the air in front of me. "We're finally alone, just the two of us, Chloe."

He wasn't flapping his wings, but his feet never touched the ground. An instinctive fear welled up within me, reminding me of the time when I awoke alone in a dark room when I was a child.

"You're very troublesome," I said. "Pesky men aren't popular with the ladies; I'll have you know."

"Hatred and repulsion nourish us," he replied. "Very nice. You tremble in fear, yet your eyes tell a different story—they're looking to strike at me and fight back. Lovely." He reached out and tried to touch my face.

"Mephisto," an adorable voice called out.

The demon quietly flapped his wings and retreated deep within the stone temple. A young lady was standing in the depths of this weathered structure.

Enveloped in an eye-catching dress decorated with black roses and long, white sleeves, her silver hair was adorned with beautiful jewels similar to King Shesif's. Her damp, amethyst eyes were filled with sorrow as she cast a melancholic glance.

"Princess Minne..." I murmured.

I'd only seen her from afar at the palace, but her face resembled Shesif's—I was certain that Minne Rasheed was standing in front of me. She was beautiful and looked to be about the same age as me and Layla.

I pointed my staff at Mephisto, who descended right next to the princess and shouted, "Get away from her! Is she your hostage?!"

"Certainly not," Mephisto replied. "Minne is my host, so I can't have her die. I'm simply not used to changing hosts in quick succession, I'm afraid."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," Minne apologized. "I don't have anything against you, but please...don't get in my way."

She placed her trembling hands in front of her chest. Though her eyes were filled with sadness and determination, a passionate flame flickered deep within. She reminded me of Aliza when she had been manipulated by Mephisto. My sister was exploited and used before she was killed. *Is the princess Mephisto's host now?*

"Princess Minne!" I shouted. "Mephisto is a demon! Please stand back! I'll save you!"

I was unable to spare Aliza—my younger sister, who reached out to me and begged for help while she was unable to hide her resentment. *I want to save her!* A sense of duty and responsibility coursed through my body and warmed my cold fingertips that were shivering with fear.

Minne, however, shook her head. "I know that," she said. "I know that very well, and I still chose to form a contact with him."

"Why? What for?" I asked.

"I want to save Salim. The Salim we see now is no longer him, is it? My

brother knew that and continued to lie to me!”

“That’s right, Minne,” Mephisto purred as though he was advising a child. He continued to whisper in her ear. “Salim Ivan is no longer with us. He died to save your life by dedicating his to Lord Samael. Inside that man is Lord Samael, the Serpent of Death—a demon simply wearing Salim’s skin like a suit. Only I have the power to call back Salim Ivan’s soul and chase Lord Samael out.”

“That’s a lie,” I firmly declared. “Princess Minne, don’t be fooled by his sweet words! Mephisto is nothing but a liar! Salim can’t possibly be spared!”

Perhaps he had a nugget of truth in his claims, but I couldn’t believe Mephisto to be a demon who would grant another’s wishes. He killed Aliza, after all. Minne placed her hands over her ears to shut my voice out.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” she cried. “I have nothing else that I can cling to. I’m sorry. If you’re going to get in the way of Mephisto, please die!”

“Princess Minne, please be strong!” I shouted. “Don’t be fooled by this demon!”

“You’ll never understand my feelings! If this world doesn’t have Salim, it can shatter to pieces for all I care! If I *can* save him, even if it’s a spider’s thread that gives me only a small shred of hope, I want to grab onto it! Even if I must rely on a demon!”

“Give me your order, Minne,” Mephisto said, his sweet words poisoning her mind. “What do you want me to do? I am your blade, your puppet. I’ll grant any wish you desire.”

Minne looked up at the demon as though she was grasping onto fragile hope. She said softly, “That child is an obstacle, is she not, Mephisto? If she obstructs your path to save Salim, please make her disappear!”

I bit my lip. Her trembling voice made me painfully aware of her feelings. *If I was in her position, and Salim was Mr. Julius... Would I have strayed off the right path, too?*

“No,” I told myself. I knew that I wouldn’t.

I could never imagine sacrificing the lives of many for myself. I’d probably

struggle and resist until my last breath, even if I turned into a tattered and withered mess. As long as hope was on my side, I'd continue to fight back. And I would never, *ever* beg for help from a demon.

"I've heard that demons cannot stay in this world for long without forming a contract with humans," I said. "No wonder you've been tricking Aliza and Princess Minne."

"There's a bit of a misunderstanding, Chloe," Mephisto replied. "You see, Minne is my *third* host. When Aliza became of no use to me, I was all alone. It's difficult to stay in this world by myself, so I quickly searched for a new host. And I easily found one."

Mephisto elegantly pointed in the air, allowing an Otherworldly Gate to appear. Its white doors, created from layers of human hands and bodies folded on top of each other, slowly started to open as it untangled the fingers with a raucous groan—a horrific grating sound that was unpleasant to the ears.

"There are unexpectedly quite a lot of people who require me," Mephisto said arrogantly. "What was her name again? She didn't make much of an impression, so it's easy to forget. Let's see... Eliza, was it?"

"Ms. Eliza..." I repeated.

She and her father, Mr. Coldman, had been restrained and thrown into jail following the incident within Astria Kingdom. However, Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman had escaped from prison and headed for Rasheed, where she was under the protection of King Shesif.

My stomach twisted into knots as I had a very bad feeling about where this was going. This was the second time I felt this impending dread fill my heart. The first time was with my father—when Mephisto had turned my father into a monster.

"Perhaps this show isn't too entertaining for you," Mephisto said. "I'm sure this woman didn't make a lasting impression on you either, Chloe. Eliza hated you, and I'm sure she meant little to you as well. You might not care at all, but..."

The Otherworldly Gate opened as a monster loomed forth. An ominous and

horrific stench of rotting flesh permeated the area, reminiscent of miasma. I gritted my teeth and tried to brace myself, but the ghastly sight caused me to instinctively clap both hands over my mouth.

◆ A Shadow of Her Former Self

EVERY now and then, an eerie premonition will turn into reality. But this was one of the worst situations that I could've ever imagined. The monster that emerged from the gate was unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

It had the face of a woman with porcelain skin, her mouth fitted with a muzzle. She was three heads taller than me with absurdly lanky limbs, and in her long arms was the head of a beautiful boy. The boy's pale face reminded me of a marble statue. I couldn't make out his expression; his face was beautiful like a doll, but I couldn't shake off the ominous aura that he emitted.

Though this statue looked to be enveloped in white cloth, two burly arms sprouted from his waist. They bulged with muscles and the rugged, thick fingers were adorned with several rings, each fitted with a massive jewel. Numerous, long, jointed legs grew from the lower half of the monster, resembling a grotesque insect.

Its dark, hard torso had a dull luster like it was damp, and the black legs that sprang forth from either side of its torso resembled human arms.

"Your species has interesting ideas," Mephisto said with a shrug. "To amalgamate different species together to form a different, single being is an act that makes me understand just how cruel humans are."

Sweat started to form on my hands as I gripped my staff.

"You didn't..." I started.

"Oh, this is a tad different from the time when I made your father into a monster," Mephisto replied. "I toyed with your dead father's soul back then, but I don't like being a one-trick pony, you see. Oh no, this time, I beautifully combined useless Eliza, her father who treated her so dearly, and her bodyguard, a boy who was in love with her, to form this creature."

"How could you..."

“Take a look, Chloe. They all look so happy. I suppose it’s only natural—they all love each other very much, so they must be elated that they now get to share a body. They must’ve been shivering with delight when I tossed them all into the alchemy pot while they were still alive. Indeed, I got to hear their wonderful screams until their bodies had boiled away.”

“I’ll never forgive you!” I shouted.

My body felt like it was on fire as my skin started to prickle. *What did Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman do to you?!* There was no reason they should be treated with such contempt. It was simply horrible. *I can’t forgive him.* My rage had blown my fear away as I glared at Mephisto.

“Splendid!” the demon exclaimed. “Your hatred is very comforting. Your abhorrence, disdain, and fury are the greatest honor that my work of art could receive!”

He licked his lips with his scarlet tongue. *What do I do? What should I do? If Ms. Eliza and her loved ones can be saved, I’d like to do so. But how?* The aberration in front of me let out a glass-shattering howl as the engraved eyes of marble started to leak tears of blood. The insect monster shuddered and reared its long neck back, preparing to use its colossal body to squash me.

I rolled out of the way to dodge the attack and saw that a burly arm—much girthier than a log—fitted with numerous rings had punched through the ground, leaving a gaping hole in its wake.

“Even a single hit will end me!” I shouted. “Unlike Mr. Julius, I’m just a normal person with a frail body!”

The titanic monster was agile for its size, and it used its armlike legs to jump into the air. When I looked up, I saw a shadow looming over me. I almost tripped as I ran full speed ahead to dodge its attack. As it landed with a deafening thud, a large gust of wind kicked up and blew me onto the sandy floor.

“You’re so powerless, Chloe,” Mephisto remarked teasingly. “You’re Celestia’s child and yet, you’re far too weak. You can’t do anything alone.”

Beside him stood Minne, facing the ground with her hands together as though

she was praying. *If possible, I want to save everyone. If only I had more power.* I only had a few more anti-evil spells left in me. They may have been effective against the monster, but if I defeated it, Ms. Eliza couldn't be spared.

The only way to save them is to probably defeat Mephisto first. My chances were slim, but if I had a sliver of hope, I wanted to gamble on it. My feet were caught in the sand, but I managed to stand up and dodge the oncoming attacks as I rummaged through my bag. I grabbed whatever hit my hand and pulled it out.

"My super effective roach catcher! And thorns of restraint, capture my prey!" I cried.

I threw a small bottle with honey-colored liquid and a crystal rose at the monster. The bottle shattered at the foot of the beast, leaking its contents as it started to morph the sandy terrain. I wasn't sure just how effective it'd be against the giant monster, and I threw as many crystal roses as I could. Thorny vines began to sprout and wrap around their prey. The monster tried to shake itself free from the vines, but my other item—a materialization of my hatred toward roaches—changed the ground underneath its feet into a sticky mess. The more it struggled, the more entangled it became, in the sticky, yellow substance that crept up its body.

The monster was restrained twofold as its feet and body were ensnared, and it desperately shook its neck with Ms. Eliza's face. It struggled as much as it could to free itself. *Ms. Eliza, I'm sorry for treating you like a giant bug. I can only hope that you won't have your memories of this experience when you turn back.*

"I can't do anything alone, you say?!" I shouted. "You're dead wrong! I'm the world's strongest alchemist and a beautiful maiden! If alchemy turned Ms. Eliza and her loved ones into this form, I'm certain that there's a way to turn them back. I'll search for a method, so no need for your concern!"

I spoke as loudly and confidently as I could in order to amp myself up while pointing my staff at Mephisto. I used my free hand to rummage through my bag and grab as many alchemy bombs as I possibly could.

In an attempt to give one final struggle, the boy's face on the restrained

monster opened his mouth. It chanted an unpleasant spell similar to a curse, creating several giant flies the size of my head around me. Each monster was equipped with a sharp beak.

“You never give up, do you?!” I yelled. “Just sit tight and be quiet!”

I glanced at my spherical bombs and selected a green one that had the word “anti-insect” written on it. I threw the bomb at the flies with all my might—it had a wonderful insect repellent effect that was extremely prized during the hot summer months. White smoke billowed in the air. One by one, the flies fell to the ground. *Flies are powerless against me!*

This was partly thanks to my master, Ms. Natalia, who was terrible at keeping rooms clean. *When I think back to that dirty alchemy store I entered when I first started living with her, flies in this vast desert are nothing!*

“Give it up, Mephisto!” I declared. “I’ll clobber you with the proper anti-evil spells that I recently learned!”

“And you think you’ve won? Your bluffs are so comically obvious that it’s *adorable!*” the demon replied. He put a finger to his lips as he tilted his head slightly. “Indeed, this monster is very weak. Is it because it’s mixed with a weak human? A being this frail will certainly be of no use to me. I was only entertained when I was creating it—I’m so horribly disappointed now.”

He flapped his wings and took to the skies before gracefully landing atop the torso of the restrained monster. He gently stroked the grotesque body in consolation before his lips twisted to form a cruel grin.

“I don’t need it anymore,” he decided. “If it’s gonna die anyway, might as well give it some of my magical energy as a parting gift.”

Magic transferred from his hand to the monster’s body and the beast soon started to deform and inflate while it gave an agonizing scream. *At this rate...* Cold sweat dripped down my back.

“Burning Angel Michael, heed my call! Cast judgment on all evil...” I started to chant. But for a split moment, I hesitated.

If I use my magic here, Ms. Eliza might be lost forever. I dawdled and couldn’t fully activate my spell.

The monster's burly arm became grotesquely enlarged and transformed into an enormous sickle. It swung its sharp blade at me without faltering.

I felt no pain, but an inexplicable impact hit me. My vision grew dim, and I felt something warm trickle out of my body.

◆ Celestia Sagrid's Memories

***WHAT...**happened to me? My body feels light and unstable. I can't feel any pain and I'm not suffering, but my memories are all muddled like I was just shaken awake from a long dream, I thought.*

My vision was white and fuzzy, but it slowly started to clear up. I realized that I was lying in front of a ruined temple that had suddenly appeared in the middle of the golden desert. I looked like a puppet who no longer had its puppet master. An arm that had transformed into a massive insect's leg with a sharp sickle sank deeply into my stomach. The wind, clouds, monsters, and everyone had seemingly frozen in place.

It was as though time had stopped while I gazed at the view from the skies above like I was observing a painting. I didn't feel any fear. On the contrary, I felt a sense of ease, surrounded by gentle warmth. Someone was hugging me from behind.

"Chloe." A lovely voice akin to the refreshing spring wind reached my ears.

A pale, supple hand drew me close, enveloping me in a gentle scent. It felt like I was lying in the middle of a soft, comfortably warm, sunny spot. I didn't need to turn around to know who was with me. My chest ached with pain and endearment.

When I finally turned back, I saw an angel with four glimmering, white wings wrapped in a divine glow. She was looking at me with worry written all over her face.

"Mother," I called out to the angel.

She gave a small nod, implying she was Celestia Sagrid—my mother, who I lost to an illness when I was thirteen. She looked exactly as I remembered, with the addition of four beautiful wings. However, they looked completely natural on her; as if she always had them. As Jahala said, my mother must've been an angel.

For some reason, it was then that I remembered my mother's words: eating past nine at night would make one gain more weight.

"I'm sorry, Chloe," my mother said sadly. "I'm sorry for making you suffer so much. But could I ask you to hang in there for just a little longer?"

I had no reason to hesitate. "Of course, Mother! I can't die here. Could you please lend me your powers?"

I wasn't about to go down here. If I died here, who'd keep watch over Mr. Julius, the ever-oppressive, always grumpy, yet occasionally kind man? *In fact...I really don't want anyone else to take that role away from me.*

"I see you found your prince," my mother said.

"I sure did!" I replied. "Mr. Julius threatens people a lot, so I'm not sure if he can be called a prince, but...he's so very dear to me."

She pulled me into her tight embrace. "You're my pride and joy, Chloe. I'm always so proud of you, my beloved daughter. I may have committed a sin, but you're our child. You're my hope. Even the archangels are watching over you."

Her sad expression and eyes filled with tears transformed into a bright smile. She turned into countless particles of glittering light as her body dissipated into the ether. Just then, my body was filled with warmth that reminded me of the spring sun as power coursed through me. My vision started to blur once more, and I closed my eyes before I was greeted with a completely different view.

The scene wavered as though I was looking at a mirage. *Where am I?*

Archangel Michael had just defeated the Fallen Angel Lucifer. I served as Lord Michael's aide and rallied our forces to fight against the demons. And then...ah, I remember now.

To protect my comrades, who had their wings stripped from them, I stood on the front lines to fight. We'd managed to force the demons to retreat, but both my wings had been torn from me and I fell below. I saw the doors of the Otherworldly Gate yawning wide—it was a gate that I wasn't allowed to pass through. Doing so would mean that I would fall into the realm of humans.

While our worlds were connected, I knew that we were in completely

different realms—we applied different kinds of logic to solve our problems, and humans could only live several decades in their world. They were a completely different species from us immortals.

Both the passing of time and our creation varied. The inviolable oath that God created served as the boundary of our two worlds. Staying in the human realm for prolonged periods of time would cause our bodies to turn into particles and dissipate.

“Are you all right? You’re badly injured,” a man said.

I saw the Otherworldly Gate slowly close before my eyes. Even if I wanted to return, I couldn’t fly without my wings, and I could barely get up. I gazed up at the sky in a daze, finding no other solution, when this man had peered down at me.

He was young, had masculine features, and had no wings. I guessed that he was a human. He carried me in his powerful arms back to his manor. For the first time in my life, I think I fell in love.

His name was Clorius Sagrid. He didn’t pry about my circumstances and diligently nursed me back to health. Without my wings, I looked like a human, and I regained my energy as my wounds started to heal. But I knew that I’d disappear soon. I was unable to tell Clorius of the sad news, and as my injuries healed by the day, I felt the magical energy draining from my body.

One day, he said to me, “I love you. I don’t want to lose you. Please, will you marry me?”

A plethora of feelings bubbled up within me—I’d felt nothing like this before when I was an angel. I loved him so much. He was so dear to me, and he made me so happy.

My life here might be short, but I wanted to remain by Clorius’s side for even a moment more and accepted his proposal. I learned later that he knew that I was an angel. He traveled to various nations and desperately searched for a way to keep me in the human realm before concluding that we should form a contract—a marriage.

That was certainly an important reason, but when I sulked and asked, “Is that

the only reason why you wanted to marry me?” I noticed him slightly panicking.

“I also love you very much, of course,” he managed to eke out.

A while after I married Clorius, I started to hear Lord Michael call out to me numerous times: “Celestia, you’re not allowed to stay in the human realm. We hold much greater power than them, enough to distort their common sense. It may turn into a spark for war.”

When I still had my wings, I was told that Lord Michael’s words were absolute, but I pretended not to hear him.

“Celestia, return to the Otherworld at once! Having intimate relations with a human is unforgivable. It’s a sin. If you break the inviolable oath and birth a child, you’ll receive divine retribution!”

But I continued to ignore these warnings. Much like a human, I yearned to have a child with my beloved husband. Clorius, ever so considerate of me, stated that he didn’t need a child, but I convinced him time and time again and pushed through with my selfish wishes.

And so, my dear Chloe was born. My precious, irreplaceable treasure.

As Lord Michael had predicted, I surely must’ve received divine retribution. I felt my body lose its energy little by little, and I could barely even get up. Still, I was happy.

All the while, the demons, who’d just ended the long war in the Otherworld and had time to spare, had started to become interested in the human realm. I felt the presence of powerful demons lurking among humans.

Chloe inherited my power. She has the angelic power to fight and destroy demons. She has an unknown power that is far greater than my own, when I was a thrones angel. She possesses the untapped potential that only humans have.

So, I used what little power I had to hide Chloe, Clorius, and my location from the demons. My body was reaching its limit; I knew that I was standing at death’s door. *Then I’ll use everything I’ve got left to cast divine protection on my precious family.*

It'll help young Chloe and Clorius protect themselves from the demons.

The protection can be used only once, just as they're about to be killed by a demon, but it'll spare their lives. It might not help much, but currently, that's all I can do.

◆ Awakening and Assistance

I felt the rough grains of sand on my face. I felt power coursing from my heart to my fingertips. It felt like a clean spring had welled up in the depths of a forest, nourishing life around it.

My body felt hot; my blood was literally boiling as a blinding light surrounded me. As I was crouched over the sand, four beautiful wings, longer than my entire body, sprouted from my back. Light trickled out from me in a circular arc, grazing the surface of the sand and enveloping the monsters and Minne. The light seemed to go on endlessly.

“Mother! Please give me power!” I cried, scolding my creaking body and bending my arms to clutch the sand.

The vast, golden desert was in front of my eyes as my consciousness returned to my physical body. All of a sudden, I felt the weight of my body return as well.

I stepped on the fine grains with the sole of my shoes and tried to stand back up. When I raised my head, I realized I could get back on my feet easily, like my body was defying gravity. The white wings sprouting from my back flapped two or three times gloriously, released from their shackles. *I’m sure this is the protection Mother bestowed upon me.*

In exchange for her life, I was given power that could be used only once. There was a gust of spring wind surrounding me in a sweet, gently floral scent for only a moment. As the divine light started to fade, the wings on my back dissolved into glittering particles of light and vanished with the wind, leaving not even a vestige of them behind. All the while, I once again fell to my knees on the sand, completely exhausted.

“Ms. Eliza...” I murmured as I looked up.

The horrific monster was nowhere to be seen. Ms. Eliza, Mr. Coldman, and an unknown boy were piled on top of each other on the ground, reverted to their human forms. Princess Minne was also on her knees, hugging her trembling

body. I forced my tired body to move and practically stumbled over to Ms. Eliza.

To my relief, they were all still alive, their chests rising and falling with every breath. Her lavish, bejeweled dress and her hair were covered with sand, but Ms. Eliza was simply unconscious.

“I’m so glad they’re alive...” I whispered, breathing a sigh of relief.

Unpleasant cackling reached my ears, breaking the silence.

“Ha! Ahahaha! Now I understand what Celestia’s protection can do!” Mephisto gloated victoriously. “With that out of the way, you’ve truly reverted to a literal, powerless human!”

He descended upon me from the skies like a demon visiting the human realm. He had not a scratch on him as he bent over laughing manically. It looked like he was having the time of his life.

“I thought that amalgamation of a monster was utterly useless, but it seems it had its uses,” he continued. “So, Celestia’s protection can protect you just once from the verge of death. Holy power is certainly ominous, but it’s done and over now. I couldn’t lay my hands on you because I had no idea what kind of protection you had, but now, I can kill you without holding back.”

“Don’t look down on me!” I shouted back. “You’re left without any hostages. The world’s strongest alchemist and beautiful maiden can take you down now! I’ll go all out from here!”

I staggered to my feet, but my exhaustion caused me to fall to my knees. *What do I do? My magical energy and stamina have been completely sapped. I can barely lift my finger. I just want to close my eyes and fall asleep.*

Mephisto floated high in the skies, distorting the space around him. Several enormous serpents emerged out of nowhere, their slimy bodies glistening under the sun. They closely resembled the ones that Aliza had summoned.

“Ah, those eyes are painted with anxiety! Very nice!” Mephisto said with glee, like he was in the midst of a dream. “If I killed you here, I’m sure I’ll get to watch Julius despair! And then he’d hate humans, and then he’ll... Ah! I’m looking forward to it all!”

C'mon, Chloe, now isn't the time to be on the ground! I can't die here! I can't die for Mr. Julius's sake and for my own sake! My mother used her life to protect mine, and I'm sure my father did the same. *But what should I do? What can I do?*

I was out of energy. *If only I could use my anti-magic spells. I wouldn't lose to those snakes!* I gripped the sand with everything I had.

"It's time to eat, my little ones!" Mephisto said, stroking the serpent's jaw. "Today's menu will be a buffet of humans!"

The serpents glided through the air and flew straight at me. I frantically rummaged through my bag. *C'mon, I've got to have something in here!* I had no time to think and grabbed my alchemy bombs.

"Stop!" Minne shrieked, her cries echoing in the air. "Stop it, Mephisto! You've done enough." She had been hugging herself while crouching on the ground but was now gazing up and imploring Mephisto with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Be silent, my princess," the demon said ruthlessly. "Your wishes shall be granted soon."

"Enough. Y-You don't need to anymore..." she replied.

"I need you to shut your mouth for a while."

Several black hands emerged at Minne's feet and crawled up toward the skies. The arms layered on top of each other and created a birdcage, imprisoning the princess within. A black arm sprouted from the birdcage and covered Minne's mouth from behind. Her muffled voice reached my ears as tears streamed from her large eyes.

"Explode, alchemy bombs!" I shouted, throwing the red orbs that were specialized for attack toward the snakes.

The bombs loudly burst on contact with the serpents as flames licked their bodies. I was able to blow a hole through some of the serpents, but that was all. Despite their wounds, their gaping jaws opened wide, baring their sharp fangs to devour me whole. *Do these snakes not understand the concept of death?*

I crawled toward Ms. Eliza's body and covered her with mine in hopes of protecting her for even a bit. I had nowhere to flee.

Is this it for me?

Mr. Julius always came for me during times like these, but Helios was nowhere to be seen in the skies. It was likely no small feat to find me within this vast desert—what's more, Mr. Julius was busy fighting Samael. *I have to win by myself, and yet...*

Tears started to form in the corners of my eyes. The footsteps of despair were slowly creeping closer, prepared to pounce on my frail heart.

"Come forth from the heavens, grand messenger! Dispel and purify, breath of the divine dragon!" A powerful chant cut through the air.

Rays of light descended from the skies, piercing through the snakes. They exploded from the inside out and started to disappear into the wind. Clouds of sand and dust obscured my vision. As the dust started to settle, I saw a broom floating in the sky. Sitting atop was a lady of bewitching beauty, dressed in revealing witch's clothes and donning a large, triangular hat. I knew her very well.

"Don't you *dare* bully my apprentice, you nasty demon!" she declared in a loud voice.

"Ms. Natalia!" I gasped.

She glanced back at me and flashed an alluring smile, her red lips curled up to form an arc like the crescent moon. It'd been a good while since I last saw my master's confident smile. She turned her broom around and gracefully flew over to me, extending her hand covered in black lace gloves.

My entire body creaked like a door with poor hinges, but I grabbed her hand and managed to stand. Her ruby-red lips were exactly as I remembered, but I felt she was slightly different when I gazed into her scarlet eyes. Admittedly, my memories weren't clear as it'd been three years since I last saw my master.



“Long time no see, Chloe,” she said. “I’d like to say that you’ve grown, but you’re about as tall as I remember.”

“Ms. Natalia, why are you...” I started.

“Does the reason really matter? I came to save you because you’re in a pinch. You’re supposed to cry and wail, ‘Master! I wanted to see you!’ while rushing over to me in this scene, Chloe. Shall we redo it?”

“I don’t think we’ve got the time right now, so I think we should do that later!”

Ms. Natalia folded her arms in front of her chest as I looked up at her and gave a forced smile. *It really takes me back. She’s actually in front of me again.*

After she first picked me up from the streets and taught me alchemy, she suddenly disappeared one day. It’d been three long years since, yet she hadn’t aged a day. *But now’s not the time to reminisce about the past.*

My heart, which was on the verge of giving into despair, suddenly lit up brightly. I was so tired that I could barely move, and I was tempted to just lie down to sleep, but I wasn’t about to look so disgraceful in front of my master.

“Why do you look on the verge of death, Chloe?” Ms. Natalia scolded. “That won’t change your current situation, will it? If that’s the case, smile! No matter what, the last one smiling will always be the winner!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I answered with a large smile.

As I did so, I felt so silly grinning in the middle of the desert, and I couldn’t hide my amusement at my situation. *I wonder what Mr. Julius would say. I can imagine him going, ‘Do something about that foolish face of yours, idiot.’*

“Now certainly isn’t the time to be so weak-spirited,” Ms. Natalia chided. “I hope you haven’t forgotten my lesson. *What is alchemy?*”

“The strongest and best field in the world, better than any magic known to man!” I answered.

“Correct! I am the first and last uber-beautiful witch and truly the strongest alchemist in the world, Natalia Báthory! Together with my apprentice Chloe, I’ll crush you into smithereens, you human-faced bird! I don’t know your name, so

I'll just call you that! A perfect nickname, if I may say so myself!"

Mephisto was still staring at the remnants of the serpents that Ms. Natalia had destroyed. He narrowed his eyes with bemusement.

"Where did you obtain that power, human?" he asked.

He must be talking about Ms. Natalia's magic. I haven't seen it before either. I had no doubt that she was a very skilled sorceress, but the spell she'd just used closely resembled Ruto's. Ruto used powerful spells, but it seemed as though she was offering her lifespan in exchange, and it took a lot out of her. On the other hand, Ms. Natalia seemed as lively as ever.

That wasn't anti-evil magic, either. Her chant never appeared in the book that Jahala gave me.

"Where do you think? Secrets, secrets are so fun," Ms. Natalia replied with a smile while placing a finger over her lips.

Mephisto gave an annoyed flap of his wings. "Hmph, no matter. The addition of another human is no different from another pest. Your deaths are already set in stone."

"Can you move, Chloe?" my master asked. "If you can't, you better sit tight and watch your amazing master's valiance."

"I can!" I replied. "My arms and legs move just fine!"

"Good!"

Her powerful reply echoed throughout the desert. While I *could* still move, I'd be lying if I said that I *wasn't* envious of my master's magic broom that allowed her to float in the air. I tried to put on a tough front, but in truth, the sand weighed my legs down and it was difficult for me to run around. In terms of mobility, there was a clear difference between me and Mephisto, who could fly in the air.

"First, we keep him busy," Ms. Natalia said calmly as I took deep breaths. "And then, we rip his wings off."

I think I have the perfect item to capture a flying creature...

"Yes! I do! I've got it!" I cried.

As Mephisto took to the air, he raised an arm above him. The blue sky started to shift and distort. I wasn't sure if he was planning on summoning more serpents or another Otherworldly Gate, but either way, it wasn't good. And I certainly didn't have enough energy to fight against monsters again.

I dug through my bag and took out one of my alchemy items—a moss ball with a tiny sprout growing from it.

“Grow big and strong to protect the field! Anti-vermin Venus flytrap, capture that human-faced bird!” I chanted.

“Good thinking,” my master replied. “Then why don't I show you the power of the world's best and strongest alchemist? Cover the skies, paralyzing capture net!”

As I threw the moss ball, Ms. Natalia floated higher in the sky and caught it. She plunged her free hand into the open space, took out an iron net resembling a spiderweb, and smashed the two items together. I'd never seen alchemy without an alchemy pot before. Even among the alchemists, I guessed that only Ms. Natalia could accomplish such an awesome feat.

“Double alchemy!” she yelled. “Come forth, anti-vermin plant, Venus spidertrap!”

My moss ball and Ms. Natalia's spiderweb trap fused with her hands, mixing together to form a new item. A rainbow glimmer shone from her hands, making way for a rather cute item—a plump spider with a sprout growing on its back. She then threw the item into the sky with all her might.

The spider spat out a black thread that covered the skies to trap Mephisto inside. In the blink of an eye, there was a spiderweb resembling an enormous, semicircular casting net that covered the desert.

Countless giant Venus flytraps grew from the threads of the spiderweb, their jaws gaping wide to capture their prey. They snapped their mouths hungrily as they moved their stems to restrain Mephisto.

The demon transformed his arm into an ugly blade and sliced the plants into pieces. “You think this kind of toy can capture *me*?” he asked in annoyance while dodging the Venus flytraps that attacked him from behind.

As he did so, his three large wings touched the spiderweb. Smoke rose as a burning stench filled my nostrils. A part of his wing had been burned, causing black feathers to dance through the air.

“Why don’t you hurry up and come down?” Ms. Natalia asked. “You’re basically a chunk of magical energy, aren’t you? I cast a magic sealing spell on the spiderweb, so merely touching it will be bad news for you. I originally made this for troublesome raptors, monsters that spread curses, but I guess demons are no different from them.”

“And my Venus flytraps are meant to gently capture the birds that ruin rice fields, so they aren’t fatal,” I added. “However, they’re specialized for capture, so as long as you fly around with your feathery wings, they’ll continue to see you as a bird and attack you.”

For the first time, I saw what looked like rage fill Mephisto’s face. Until now, he always had a condescending, malicious smirk on his face, and I couldn’t help but grin at his angry expression.

◆ Fluttering Dark Feathers

MEPHISTO'S perfectly beautiful face twisted with rage as he outstretched his arms. Void blades flew out from his palms, shredding the Venus flytraps that tried to restrain him. With a single flap of his wings, he appeared right before my eyes.

"Shall we end our games here?" he said, grabbing my arm. He squeezed tight, causing me to furrow my brows in pain. His arm, which had been transformed into an ominous, sharp blade, appeared in front of my eyes. "I've never been so mocked before," he muttered. "I didn't think pests could do that to me."

"Are you angry?" I asked. "I'm *much* angrier at you; I'll have you know! Because of you, Aliza, my father, and countless other people lost their lives! I'll *never* forgive you."

His nails dug into my arm and specks of blood dripped from the wound. *It hurts, but I know that everyone was in far greater pain than I am.* His blade was aimed at my throat, but I wasn't scared.

"So?" Mephisto inquired. "Celestia's child, who doesn't know how to wield her power, is nothing more than a winged ant. A mere insect to be squashed. I'll rip you into shreds before Julius returns. He won't even recognize you anymore. You'll turn into chunks of flesh, Chloe."

I saw his pupils contract with rage as an unnatural smile was plastered on his face. I glared at Mephisto as I floated in the air, my arm still in his grasp. I couldn't move my body, but I felt like my piercing gaze was better than nothing.

"Cry with despair," Mephisto demanded. "Beg for your life. Your pitiful form will delight me."

"I absolutely refuse!" I shouted back.

"I see. Very well. I've grown tired of playing with you. Die a miserable death."

Just then, I heard the sound of something cutting through the air and

wrapping around Mephisto's blade.

"How dare you do this to Lady Eliza?!" a young boy shouted hoarsely.

An invisible thread had bound Mephisto's arms and wings, making him completely immobile. The demon shot a troublesome glare at the young boy, who was now on his feet, grabbing an invisible string. Just moments before, he'd been unconscious beside Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman.

He looked to be the same age as Jahala, his body wrapped in dark garb that was tight to his frame. He was petite and around my height. He had dark hair, and his amethyst eyes gave a dull glow. His skin was very pale, and he had a dreary atmosphere to him as he tugged on the string in his hands with all his might.

Mephisto's body leaned toward the boy, dragged by the thread. The demon resembled a captured bird as he was drawn away from me. He grabbed the thread in annoyance. Finally freed from Mephisto's grasp, I fell to the ground.

My knees buckled as I collapsed, my trembling legs unable to support me. I sank into the fine sands.

"Good work, boy," Ms. Natalia said. She glided through the air on her broom and hovered in front of me as though to offer her protection. "Leave the rest to me."

"Hands off," the boy replied. "This demon tricked Lady Eliza and treated her so cruelly. I'll be the one to kill him."

"I'd gone through the trouble of fusing your mind and soul with your beloved Eliza," Mephisto trilled. "I would've liked for you to appreciate me more."

"Like hell!" the boy roared, using his other hand to throw another invisible thread toward Mephisto.

It wrapped around the demon's body and squeezed him tightly. I guessed that the thread was about as sharp and tough as a blade but made so thin that it was practically invisible to the naked eye. *It must be a tool for assassination.*

Every so often, a mercenary who visited my store would have these tools for their trade. Any normal person's skin would've been shredded by simply

touching this thread, but there wasn't a scratch on Mephisto, who simply furrowed his brows in annoyance at the string tightly wound around him.

"Now isn't the time for you to be so self-assertive, boy," Ms. Natalia said. "Keep that human-faced bird restrained."

My master grabbed at the air, and a star-shaped lamp appeared in her hand, a flame flickering within. Mephisto paid her no heed and gave a strong tug on the string, causing the boy's body to fly in the air.

"Eliza took a liking to you," Mephisto said. "It's the only reason I kept you alive, but it's truly a pity."

Purple flames started engulfing the invisible wire; the fire greedily swallowed the thread as though it was a rope soaked in oil, traveling up and enveloping the boy's arms in a purple blaze. Yet, the boy didn't release the thread from his grip. He was raised in the air and slammed into the sand, but he'd only let out a muffled grunt as he continued to grip his weapon.

"Come forth from the astral realm, children of the stars!" Ms. Natalia chanted, raising her large, star-shaped lamp in the air.

The lamp floated, the flame flickering within. From between the gaps of the spiderweb and Venus flytraps, I saw the blue skies had turned into a starry night. I felt like I was floating in a sea of stars, and I gulped, mesmerized by their beauty. In the next moment, the countless glittering stars rained upon Mephisto.

Massive meteors and fireballs filled my vision, kicking up clouds of sand and dust. Before my vision was completely obscured by the dust, I saw Mephisto, unable to escape, place both hands in front of his body to defend himself.

Ms. Natalia swiftly glided away and collected the young boy with burnt arms using the tip of her broom before returning to my side.

"What do you think, Chloe?" Ms. Natalia asked proudly. "Your master's alchemy is really something, don't you agree?"

The same dark spiderweb that covered the sky surrounded Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman, protecting them from the impact of the meteors.

“It really is,” I agreed in awe. “I’ve still got a long way to go.”

“But of course,” she replied. “If you could surpass me in just three years, I’m not worthy of being your master, now, am I?”

I looked up at her with deep respect, but she was glaring at the sky, and I followed her gaze.

“I’ve bought more than enough time,” she muttered. “They should be here soon. I’d be troubled if they weren’t.”

The night sky started to crack. Like a hatching egg, bright light peeked from the cracks before it crumbled away, revealing the brilliant blue sky. In the center was a familiar dark figure.

“Helios! Mr. Julius!” I gasped.

Lambda had stated that dragons were the messengers of God. Indeed, as Helios soared through the sky, leisurely flapping his black wings, he emitted an aura of divinity. Mr. Julius was riding on top, using one arm to hold Samael, who had his wings pathetically stripped from him, like he was some sort of luggage.

I almost shrieked in fear—I’d never seen Mr. Julius look so terrifying before. I knew he came to save me, but he was a far cry from a prince riding a white horse. He resembled a Demon Lord riding his trusty black dragon. As I sat on the sand, there was still quite a bit of distance between us, but I was sure that I had locked eyes with Mr. Julius and Helios.

Helios’s golden eyes glittered brighter than the stars in the sky. “GRAAAR!” he roared, letting out a powerful battle cry that shook the earth.

I’d never heard such a vicious roar come from him before. His voice was filled with ferocity and rage as he made his descent like a bolt of dark lightning, aiming straight for the cloud of dust. In the middle of the dust cloud, created by Ms. Natalia’s item, was Mephisto. Mr. Julius and Helios shot into the dust, and I saw a dark shadow pop out.

As the dust started to settle and my vision became clear, I found Samael pitifully lying on the sand, likely thrown off by Mr. Julius. The dark shadow that I’d seen was Mephisto. His body, badly injured by Ms. Natalia, was beginning to regenerate right before my eyes. He flapped his three wings and switched

directions, extending his arm toward Helios, who was pursuing him. The dragon was faster than the demon as Mephisto transformed his arm into a sharp blade.

The demon kicked the air and parried Mr. Julius's dark blade.

"Your movements are clumsy, winged insect," Mr. Julius growled. "Your regeneration isn't keeping up, I take it?"

"It's truly a pity that you're here already," Mephisto replied. "I wanted to go all-out and greet you with a full-course meal. The main dish was going to be a chunk of Chloe, garnished on a plate." Honestly, I had no idea who was the villain here anymore as the demon laughed at Mr. Julius's provoking remarks. "But killing her in front of you isn't a bad show either," Mephisto continued. "I want to see you despair. If I take Chloe and your dragon away from you, you'll no longer have a reason to fight. Humans are emotional creatures. They despair, spite, and hate. I guarantee that a future where you destroy the world will arrive."

The demon continued to speak in his creepy tone as the two men crossed blades. His voice was filled with such certainty that I scowled. The words that just came out of his mouth infuriated me unlike anything else. *What is he even talking about? Mr. Julius isn't that kind of person.*

"Me? Destroy the world?" Mr. Julius replied quietly. "I don't care about you or the world. I'm not bored enough to hate and destroy things that I care nothing about. Only young children will meaninglessly kick a pebble on the side of the road. And yet, you act as though you understand emotions. How foolish."

I had no time to respond. His tone was calm and icy—I thought that my hands would freeze from merely touching those words.

Mr. Julius easily parried Mephisto's attack, blowing him back. Before the demon could regain his posture, Helios whirled in the air and flew behind him. Mr. Julius grabbed the demon's wings.

"Three left," Mr. Julius said as there was a flash of cold steel.

His dark sword hadn't been enchanted with anti-evil spells, and while his blade sank deeply into Mephisto's wing, it didn't sever it. Mephisto continued to struggle as Mr. Julius violently placed his foot on the demon's back and used

brute strength to push his blade into the base of the wing. Like a bird caught in a trap, the remaining two wings flapped wildly. Several dark feathers fluttered in the air and fell upon the golden sand. I could only gulp before Mr. Julius's overwhelming power.

He showed no hesitation in destroying his foes as he mercilessly cut them down. This was the form of the Black Prince, Julius Craft. I felt tears start to form in the corner of my eyes. I'd almost forgotten to breathe as I felt suffocated and gasped for air.

"When my blade doesn't cut well, your suffering will only prolong," Mr. Julius remarked. "You should rejoice. You lot love suffering, don't you?"

Mephisto could only offer a muffled groan in response. I gathered what little magic I had and pointed my staff at Mr. Julius's blade to cast my anti-evil spell on it.

"Just sit back and watch, Chloe," he said. "Your magic will be wasted on an insect like him."

There was a grotesque snap and squelch as a dark wing was ripped from the demon's body. The severed wing fell to the ground with a thud before disappearing into dark particles of light. Now with only two wings, Mephisto staggered to the ground.

He went on his knees beside a fallen Samael, using both arms to hug his body and press down on his back. Samael was still conscious as he glanced at Mephisto. Magical energy spilled out from the latter, perhaps because he'd lost a wing. Black sludge that resembled blood dripped out from where his wing had been ripped out.

"Salim!" Minne cried, freed from her prison.

I guessed that Mephisto no longer had the energy to maintain her cage as she ran out and rushed to Samael, who was in the form of Salim. She clutched his body, her delicate shoulders trembling.

My chest grew tight upon hearing her quiet sobs. Helios had quietly descended by my side, worry written all over his face as he gently nuzzled my cheek with his snout. I petted his face, assuring him that I was fine. His golden

eyes, which had been ablaze with fury just moments ago, were now wavering anxiously. I wanted to stand up and hug him with all my might, but my legs wouldn't listen to me.

I'm pathetic. I'm always being saved. Mother, Father, and Ms. Natalia are always rescuing me. Without them, I would've never been able to reunite with Mr. Julius. I was positive that I'd be long dead. As I touched Helios's cold face, relief washed over me as the tears rolled down my cheeks. I knew that now wasn't the time to cry, but my body finally processed the situation and started to tremble.

Helios continued to nuzzle me with his snout in reassurance. Mr. Julius gracefully jumped off his dragon and walked by me, gently placing his hand on my head as he went. His large and powerful hand gave me a sense of comfort, snapping the tension that had gripped my body. He said not a word and stood in front of Ms. Natalia and me, his sword raised toward Mephisto.

The demon faced the ground, gritting his teeth to bear the pain. Minne, who was still clinging to Samael's motionless body, gazed up and shook her head desperately. With every shake, tears spilled out of her eyes like jewels. Even during a time like this, the princess was breathtakingly beautiful.

◆ Emergence and the Devouring Serpent of Death

MR. JULIUS pointed his blade at Mephisto, his eyes fixed on a quietly weeping Minne. He spared her that glance for only a moment before turning back to the demon as though he'd lost all interest in the princess.

"What's your goal?" Mr. Julius asked. "Pleasure? This was a half-baked attempt if you wanted to take over the human realm."

"I thought you weren't interested?" Mephisto replied on his knees beside Samael. His long, glossy, dark hair was splayed on the golden sands. His tone was hoarse from the agony.

It seemed demons had the capacity to feel pain, and his sliced-off wing couldn't regenerate.

"You're right. I'm not interested," Mr. Julius replied dryly. "But I can't imagine this debacle ending just because I killed you here. I want to put a quick end to this meaningless battle against you demons. Why were you mingling with humans for years and playing around? What do you want?"

"Meaning? There is none," Mephisto replied, still croaking from the pain. Yet his tone sounded frivolous. "I'm simply having fun. Humans are my toys. When you live for so long, you start to get bored, you see. Angels are annoying and noisy. The underworld, where only sinners fall, is filled with gloom and dread. Demons continue to hate angels without changing the status quo. Monsters are cute, but that's it. The mortal realm is far more interesting."

"Chloe's sister claimed she'd use your power to turn this realm into a paradise where there's no life or death," Mr. Julius said.

"All humans have that desire. They simply don't understand that there's nothing more boring than a never-changing eternity. Don't you agree, Julius? For a man like you, who constantly pursues death, such a world should make you cower in fear."

"I saw my mother's memories from when she fell through the Otherworldly

Gate,” I interjected. “You demons lost to the angels. Perhaps that’s why you fled here instead of staying in the Otherworld.”

I didn’t want these two to continue their conversation for much longer. For whatever reason, my heart was hammering with dread. I furrowed my brows as I got the niggling feeling the demon was audaciously marching into a sensitive and tender area deep within Mr. Julius’s heart.

“What an adorable act of provocation, Chloe,” Mephisto replied. “You’re like a baby kitten hissing at me. Your words are meaningless, adorable, and vapid. Both this world and the Otherworld were created by a foolish and arrogant God. It’s far more beneficial to destroy this world as we please instead of rebelling against God...apparently. I follow the orders of Lord Samael, but I’m not very interested in *that person*, you see.”

“Who are you referring to?” I asked.

“Julius, you’ve seen that person before, haven’t you? The demon that’s horrific and brutal, far worse than anything else we know, completely different from the graceful Lord Samael. That demon’s mere existence is abominable.”

Mephisto gave a look of genuine disdain as his voice filled with repulsion. *He must be talking about a demon. Salim Ivan’s journal listed a total of three. The first is Samael, the Serpent of Death. Next is Baal, the King of Wisdom. And there was one last mysterious demon of Blood and Conflagration. We’ve all seen Samael; has Mr. Julius seen one of the other two demons?*

“Why don’t we end the small talk, Mephisto?” a low voice whispered, ending the discussion.

Salim raised his arm and stroked Minne’s face endearingly, wiping her tears away. The princess’s shoulders were trembling, and she knitted her brows with a pained expression, but she accepted his touch. She surely knew that the Salim she loved was no longer with us, but as long as his body was by her side, she couldn’t help but hold affection for him.

“Thank you for shedding your tears for me, Minne,” Salim said. “You truly love me, don’t you?”

“Salim! I... I...” Minne stuttered. “I was never allowed to step outside of my

dark room because the sun's rays were too harsh on my skin. And yet, you visited me every day. I loved you."

"I know, Minne. I visited your room and used magic to create images of animals, grassy plains, and the ocean. I remember gazing up at the starry night with you."

Samael was likely seeing Salim's memories. Minne widened her eyes as large beads of tears started to form, and she nodded frantically.

"I knew that I wouldn't live to see twenty, and I thought that I was fine with that," the princess replied. "But as I started to find you so dear to me, I began to wish for a longer life. I wanted to live. My selfish, unattainable wish cornered you into such a wretched state..."

"I'm happy to learn that you wanted to live," Salim answered. "Please, don't cry. For your sake, I can't die here. Will you listen to my one wish?"

Princess Minne clung to Salim's lifeless, falling hand with both of hers and nodded numerous times.

"No, Princess Minne!" I cried. "You can't lend an ear to a demon's words!"

But my voice never reached her. I could've sworn that I heard her internally shouting for help. I thought back to Aliza's hands—I couldn't grab my sister's back then, and I was repeating the same mistake now.

"Choose to live with me forever," Salim cooed. "As long as I'm alive, so too, shall you stay alive by my side."

"Salim... Yes! I'll always be with you!" Minne replied.

I didn't see myself reflected in her eyes. She couldn't hear my voice. Several thin, snakelike entities emerged from Salim's body and slithered toward Princess Minne. She closed her eyes, her face displaying elation. Several black serpents started to enlarge and coil themselves around her body. She completely vanished from sight without emitting a single scream. In the blink of an eye, the den of snakes slithered back to Salim like water traveling down a drainage ditch. Minne was nowhere to be seen.

Salim bent his joints awkwardly like a stiff puppet as he slowly got to his feet.

He bent his body at the waist, his back pointed toward the sky while his knees and head were on the ground. His back started to split like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. A beautiful boy arose from within Salim's body, tossing him aside like a coat. The boy was slender and had a thin frame, wearing a black outfit embellished with frills. His silver hair and crimson eyes gave him an androgynous look that could easily mistake him for a girl. He gazed down icily at Mephisto kneeling on the ground.

"Wearing a human's skin is no good," the boy said. "I can't go all-out. Mephisto, I went out of my way to lend you my power, and yet look at you, so pathetic."

"Lord Samael, as I thought, you're beautiful," Mephisto replied. "Please don't try to wear the skin of a human. It sends shivers down my spine."

"I can no longer use the body of Salim, the one I had a contract with. In exchange, I got Minne. I understand she formed a contract with you, Mephisto, but you'll give her to me, won't you?"

"Most certainly."

"Will you also return the wing that I've bestowed upon you?"

"Of course, Lord Samael. I've played around more than enough. You may do as you wish."

Samael reached out to Mephisto. The same black serpents that had swallowed Princess Minne devoured Mephisto as well. His demise came so easily. I was supposed to get my revenge on the demon for what he'd done to my family, but he was gulped whole by Samael, like a serpent swallowing an egg. Mephisto had vanished without a trace.

The two remaining wings that Mephisto had left began to sprout on Samael's back. Below his damp pair of wings drying under the sunlight grew two more pairs. The boy, who was as beautiful as an angel, now had a total of six obsidian wings as he outstretched them in all their glory like an ill omen.

Mr. Julius dashed toward Samael, appearing in front of the demon in an instant. He was running on top of pillowy sand, but he launched off the ground and defied gravity, swinging his blade down. Samael spread his wings and

staggered a step back. His image wavered before he transformed into Minne, crouching on the ground in fear.

“That won’t stop me,” Mr. Julius said, ready to lop off her head without hesitation.

“Wait!” I called out.

My mother’s power had allowed me to revert Ms. Eliza and her loved ones back from their monster form. *Maybe I can save Minne too! I can’t let it end like this!*

I couldn’t save Aliza, but I wasn’t willing to lose anyone else to the demons. Mr. Julius, however, didn’t heed my call, and his blade whizzed through the air. All of a sudden, countless small cuts covered his body and blood spurted from his wounds. The collar around his neck had activated, for he’d broken the only rule I had: he couldn’t do what I didn’t like.

And still, Mr. Julius aimed for Minne.

“Stand back, Julius!” Ms. Natalia ordered sternly. She’d finally broken her silence.

◆ The Last Battle

MR. JULIUS'S sword froze at Ms. Natalia's command. His blade had made a shallow wound on Minne's neck as a black, muddy substance gushed out like blood. He took a step back.

"Stand back!" Ms. Natalia ordered once more.

She wasn't taking no for an answer, and he swiftly retreated, jumping away from Samael. Helios outstretched his wings and covered me to protect me from danger. From between the gaps, I saw the land showered by the rain of dark blood. The puddles caused the land below to melt and decay. A foul, rotten stench hit my nose.

Drops of this blood had hit Mr. Julius's skin and clothes, causing parts of his body to also melt away. The punishment dished out by the collar had stopped when he'd finished swinging his sword at Minne, and his wounds had already stopped bleeding.

"Ah, what a pity. I wanted to take Julius with me," Samael cackled. "My plan is ruined."

"Take him with you? To where?" I asked as firmly as I could. I couldn't let my voice tremble now.

"I wonder... I have no reason to tell you."

He gave a small shrug. Mr. Julius's sword, which had directly touched Samael's skin, was almost completely melted away as though it had been dipped in strong acid. He tossed his sword onto the sand, deeming it to be of no use anymore. Ms. Natalia dropped the young boy, who had restrained Mephisto with thread, by my side. She then raised her arms and started pulling the air toward her as though she was tugging on an invisible rope. Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman floated in the air and were dragged toward her accordingly before they were lowered by the boy's side. After gathering everyone in one spot, Ms. Natalia stepped in front, trying to protect me and a weaponless Mr. Julius.

“Why don’t I tell you exactly why I’m called the Serpent of Death?” Samael said menacingly in a low voice as he smiled, still in the form of Princess Minne.

The wound on his neck quickly healed and the gushing black liquid disappeared. His body floated up, his delicate frame stretching his six, massive black wings that sullied the blue skies.

“It’s because I’m death itself,” he claimed.

The skies grew dark. The clear, bright day immediately turned dim and dreary like a solar eclipse covering the world in darkness. A gray shadow loomed over the golden desert as thick miasma started to whirl around Samael.

“Devour everything,” the demon ordered. “Poison of death, decompose everything you see. Dissolve all living creatures and kill them!”

He outstretched his arms as a storm of miasma flew straight for us.

“Omnipotent God of the Heavens! Protect us from any and all calamities! The divine dragon’s cocoon of protection!” Ms. Natalia chanted.

A bright semicircular wall emerged all around us, protecting us from the miasma. Several black, winged serpents were hiding within the flurry of miasma and bared their fangs at us, but they dissipated the moment they touched the defensive wall. Mr. Julius didn’t care about his wounds as he grabbed his dark spear from Helios’s back.

I staggered to my feet, using Helios as my support. The beautiful desert had been engulfed by the miasma and was hidden from view. I could only tell that it’d turned jet-black and melted away as though it was decomposing. *When Ms. Natalia’s magic runs out, we’re going to rot and melt away like the desert and die*, I thought. If so, now wasn’t the time for me to be sitting around in a stupor. I had to do something.

“I won’t last long!” my master said. “What do I do? Think! Nothing is impossible for me, Natalia Báthory!”

The serpents swimming through the miasma tried to bite down on the wall like a school of small fish preying on a larger creature. With every bite, the wall started to crack. I could tell from my master’s voice that she was reaching her limit. I managed to weakly grip my staff and raised it in the air.

Helios used his neck to support my body, ensuring that I wouldn't fall. Before I knew it, Mr. Julius stood by my side and put his hand over mine as I clutched my staff.

"Make the miasma disappear, Chloe," he demanded. "Because of you, I couldn't kill that thing. I'll end him next time."

He looked straight ahead, his voice filled with confidence. I wanted to save Minne, but I couldn't save everyone by myself. I was always being saved by someone. I never had enough power. *If that's the case, I'll do what I can!* If Samael was left to his own devices, he'd make millions of others suffer. We had to finish him here.

"I'm really sorry," I said. "To make up for it, I'll do my best right here! Leave it to me!"

When Mr. Julius's rugged hand touched mine, I felt as though magical energy flowed into my body, replenishing my depleted magic. *I'm still okay. All I need is one last push. Just one more! Please hear my voice.*

"Burning Angel Gabriel, heed my call! Let the holy water of purification overflow your holy grail of the Heavens and wash out our land!" I chanted.

For a moment, my vision went dark as exhaustion swept over me. *But I have to keep standing. If I fall, I can't protect everyone! I'm fine. I'm not alone.*

I want to protect Helios, Mr. Julius, and Ms. Natalia as they've done for me.

"Of course, Chloe. I'll lend you my power," a woman's voice echoed in my head. Her clear tone reminded me of a soft ripple in the water.

Bright light spilled through the dark clouds, illuminating the world. It looked like the stairs to Heaven had appeared before my eyes. White feathers fluttered down from above, brushing against rotting, ruined land, transforming the desert into a land filled with clean water.

The moment the feathers touched the serpents swimming through the miasma, they burst into flames and dissipated. Ms. Natalia's barrier disappeared. On cue, Mr. Julius launched off the water's surface and ran across the lake toward the demon. He jumped into the air. The tip of his spear was illuminated by the light from above, giving it a beautiful, bright glow. The spear,

which had turned pure white, pierced through Samael's chest.

The demon struggled to flap his wings, like a butterfly pinned against the wall. The pure light surrounding the spear spilled from Samael's chest and flowed out.



Samael, who still took on the form of Princess Minne, turned gray as though he'd been turned to stone. His dry skin cracked and crumbled away. Mr. Julius pulled his spear out and prepared to hack off the demon's wings.

Just before Mr. Julius could swing down, ominous, dark flames engulfed his weapon.

"Mr. Julius!" I warned, sensing a terrifying presence.

I tried to rush to his side but almost collapsed onto the desert and grabbed the fine grains of sand. The dark flames stretched out from Samael's feet like an arm as a large, eye-shaped magic circle appeared below him, emitting a purple glow. A certain, slimy figure slowly emerged, surfacing from the water.

He was a burly man donning silver armor, his scarlet cape fluttering in the wind. Peeking between his golden locks were a pair of clear, blue eyes, reminding me of a hawk's fierce gaze. He had deep wrinkles that hinted at his age, and around his mouth was a well-groomed beard. The man looked to be in his late thirties to forties. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was older, but he was brimming with vitality and his confident, overwhelming aura made him seem younger.

"Oswald Dystiana!" Mr. Julius spat, swinging his spear to get rid of the flames.

I was familiar with the name—Oswald Dystiana was none other than the emperor of the Dystiana Empire.

"Long time no see, Julius," Oswald said, easily carrying a limp Samael in one arm.

Mr. Julius's father had been restrained and executed on suspicion of treason. His mother had committed suicide to chase after her beloved, and Mr. Julius was left at the whims of Oswald, forced to do the emperor's bidding. And so, he was sent to the war zone with Helios. The emperor must've surely been the very figure that had wronged Mr. Julius's parents.

But why's he here?

"It's been three years, hasn't it?" Oswald asked. "I believe we gouged out your right eye, but what do I see here? A prosthetic, perhaps? A counterfeit?"

“Why are you here, you bastard?” Mr. Julius demanded.

“Three years ago, your skills were polished like a quality hunting dog. You were demoted to a slave swordsman in Astria, and I expected you to look rather interesting, but I see you’ve become quite the coward.”

“I knew it! You had a demon with you too!” Mr. Julius hissed. “Then you killed my father because—”

“Jeanius was an excellent man indeed. Thanks to him, the Dystiana Empire will surely be able to rule the world. Samael and Mephisto seemed to have placed their hope in you, but you’re no longer necessary. If you choose to live a humiliating life with that cowardly face of yours despite the deaths of Jeanius and Citrin, I suggest you die here.”

Oswald raised his arm in the air, creating a colossal, pitch-black fireball above him. I’d never felt such intense heat before, as a black sun appeared before our eyes. It descended upon us, determined to swallow us whole.

“Chloe, Julius, run!” Ms. Natalia yelled, gazing up at the sky.

I stood back up, using my staff as support while Mr. Julius pounced on Oswald. The menacing, black flames had stolen the white glow of his weapon, which had reverted into the usual, dark spear. Oswald, having finished creating his fireball, summoned a thin, fiery snake to wrap around Mr. Julius’s spear. Fire traveled up his weapon and enveloped his body, but he paid no heed to his burning arm. He swiftly swung his spear back and thrust it forward, gouging out the armor on Oswald’s side.

“You’ve turned into a coward,” Oswald taunted. “You can’t win against me.”

Mr. Julius managed to tear Oswald’s skin under the armor and blood started to flow, but the wound quickly healed. An eye-shaped magic circle, similar to what I saw before, appeared by the emperor’s feet. He was swallowed whole, descending into the magic circle as though he’d fallen into quicksand.

“Get back here!” Mr. Julius roared, trying to chase after Oswald before he froze in place and looked up.

An enormous fireball was falling above our heads. As it slowly inched closer, I felt like I was being burned alive. The sand kicked up and formed a tornado as it

headed for the ball of fire. I knew that I had to run, but I couldn't escape in time. Helios gave a loud, "Rawr!" and called out to his master while poking me with his snout, encouraging me to ride on his back. Unfortunately, I couldn't put any strength into my arms, and my vision started to blur.

"The time has come. The king who breaks logic and rules over all shall manifest once more and the world shall become mine. You may have become a coward, but you're still quite powerful, I see. Perhaps you can become a worthy sacrifice, Julius. If you survive, let us meet again," Oswald said. With that, he fully disappeared into the magic circle along with Samael, leaving not a trace behind.

Mr. Julius rushed over to me as I heard his usual scolding. "Don't sleep, Chloe, you idiot!"

He placed an arm around my waist and carried me as he jumped onto Helios. The dragon glided close to the ground and picked up Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman with his mouth. Ms. Natalia flew on her broom to collect the remaining boy. As the fireball drew closer, Helios and Ms. Natalia's broom flew full speed ahead, searching for an exit from this narrow labyrinth. Pillars of fire rained upon the desert, forcing them to weave through the dangers as the gigantic fireball drew closer still. We were still a good distance away from the exit where light spilled out.

It felt like we were swimming through a pool of lava. Helios's wings were subject to the flames, but he didn't seem at all burned, likely because Oswald's fireball was created from magic. *Mr. Julius did say that dragons are immune to magic... But the same logic doesn't apply to us.*

Mr. Julius tried to protect me, wrapping my body in his as he gripped Helios's reins. His Ariadne Mantle was resistant to fire, but it was only a matter of time before his back turned into cinders. His hands that gripped the reins were burnt black. I wanted to tend to his wounds, but I currently didn't possess enough energy to cast healing magic.

"We won't make it!" Ms. Natalia cried frantically. "We need to buy as much time as we can!"

She raised her arm into the empty space, summoning a silver whistle in her

palm. She blew on it, and a very shrill sound echoed throughout the area. As though that was their call, the ground started to shake.

The desert began to shift and rise before the level terrain suddenly collapsed in. A waterfall of sand fell into the depths below, creating a giant hole. Thanks to that, Helios was able to fly lower to the ground, buying a few more seconds away from the fireball. Ms. Natalia also commanded her broom to descend toward the opening that she had made.

When I glanced back, I saw a pod of bone whales that had no flesh or organs dig through the desert and head straight for the fireball. When we finally made our escape, Ms. Natalia flew right beside Helios under the blue sky.

“Fire doesn’t work on sand whales,” Ms. Natalia said with a wink. “They’re made of bone.”

Parts of her glossy tresses were singed. Mr. Julius and I were covered in wounds, but we were alive. And because we still clung to our lives, we probably won this battle. The fireball sank into the desert, its intense heat burning the sand around it. Amid the sea of flames, I saw a pod of sand whales leisurely swimming through.

In the distance was a crimson dragon headed straight for us—Ares and Prince Faisal. In his arms was an unconscious King Shesif.

It’s finally over. I breathed a sigh of relief within Mr. Julius’s arms and as my tension started to ease, a wave of drowsiness rushed over me. *Even if I clonked out here, I doubt Mr. Julius would be angry with me. I worked so hard this time around.*

When I closed my eyes, I thought I saw the image of my smiling mother standing beside another woman with four beautiful, white wings—Gabriel.

◆ A Wounded Animal (Julius)

AS Chloe lay in a white bed, she seemed smaller than usual. She always had a small and petite frame, but she looked so frail that a single touch would cause her to shatter into a million little pieces. Her pale face was as white as a sheet, and her long eyelashes cast a shadow over her cheeks.

“She’s covered in bruises and scratches, but her bones and organs seem fine,” said Natalia, who claimed to be Chloe’s alchemy master. She crossed her arms beside the bed. “She has no major bleeding either.”

We were currently in a room in the Puerta Research Center. Moments ago, sorcerers who specialized in healing within the research center had been tending to Chloe’s wounds. Once she was healed, they quickly left.

“She must be out of mana, or magical energy,” Natalia continued. “She used anti-evil magic while using the real name of the angels of Seraphim. What’s more, she did so several times. It’s only natural that she’s completely depleted of her energy after using power that could rival God.”

I sat beside the bed where Chloe was sleeping and barely lent an ear to Natalia’s rambling. The massive fireball that resembled a planet that Oswald Dystiana had summoned had likely badly burned my back. Both of my hands were also badly burnt, the skin red and puckered. Yet, the pain didn’t quite register—it felt as though I was gazing upon another person’s wounds.

“Anti-evil magic doesn’t really use your own magic, though. Your body is sort of used as a vessel to have an angel’s magic flow through you. Still, using their power saps your stamina away. Using Michael’s power just once is already exhausting enough. Since magical energy is close to one’s vitality, I’m sure her stamina was completely depleted,” Natalia rambled on, providing an explanation I never asked for.

Chloe was also a bit of a chatterbox. She never really expected my response as she continued to prattle away, but I never found her voice to be unpleasant.

She reminded me of a chirping bird in the grassy plain on a sunny spring day. Her voice was bright, calm, and comforting.

I currently found everything else to be utterly annoying and unpleasant. *I want to hear your voice.*

“You’re like a wounded animal,” Natalia said wearily with a deep sigh. “No one’s gonna take Chloe away from you, Julius. Just calm down. If you continue to glare at everyone like you’re gonna tear them apart, no one can approach you out of fear. I’ll say it again: Chloe’s just out of magical energy. What she needs is a few days of rest like a bear in hibernation. After a good rest, she’ll wake up.”

“Out of magic...” I repeated.

“That’s right. Her condition is stable, and she’ll be fine. So, we’ll treat you, who’s more badly wounded than Chloe, all right? You’re closer to death’s door than she is. Be good and sit still.”

“Don’t do anything unnecessary,” I hissed.

“You really don’t listen, do you? If you’re not in peak condition, how can you nurse her back to health? Stop thinking that this world is filled with just you, Chloe, and enemies. Everyone’s worried about you.”

I directed my gaze to the ground as she admonished me. During the fight with Samael, it was my fault that Chloe had been abducted by Mephisto. It was right after I promised to protect her, and I’d even confidently claimed that I could keep my word.

But in reality, she was kidnapped right in front of my eyes. I didn’t want to remember that feeling. My entire vision turned red.

I became so vengefully unmerciful toward Samael, making both friend and foe cower in fear as I defeated him before using Helios’s hearing and sense of smell to scour the desert from the sky, in search of Chloe.

She’d stated that she was afraid of war, but wanted to do what she could. She was good-natured to a fault, consistently kind to others, and awfully naïve. She’d put on a strong front despite being so fragile and would never choose the option to flee. She never thought about how precious her life was to others and

would always try to protect those around her.

She always stated that I never seemed to value my own life, but I believed that the same could be said for her.

When Helios and I finally found her, she was covered in cuts and bruises. If Natalia wasn't there, I was certain that Chloe would've lost her life before I found her, as Mephisto had claimed. The mere thought made my mind blank like my brain had been completely fried.

I had a very simple reason to fight and live. If that reason was stolen away from me, I felt like a man wandering around in darkness with my light snuffed out—I'd completely lose myself and my purpose.

"Will Chloe...wake up?" I asked.

Natalia's magic healed my burned back and arms. Thanks to that, my dimming vision had become clearer, the white room, bed, and sheets a bit too bright for my eyes.

"She will eventually," Natalia replied. "So, don't do anything weird, all right? Don't try to flee and take her away. Nothing good will come from doing that. The safest place in the world is by the great Natalia Báthory's side, I'll have you know." With that, she headed for the door, but stopped in front before she left. "I don't mind if you stay by her side, but you should wash up and eat something. I'll have food delivered to this room. And I'll tell your black dragon that the both of you are all right. He seemed awfully worried."

For the first time, I looked up at her. She seemed a touch exasperated, but there was a delighted twinkle in her eyes as she gazed at Chloe and me.

"Natalia," I said. "Thank you for protecting Chloe."

"Oh, I didn't think you could express your gratitude," she replied.

"I'm always being nagged about the importance of thanking someone."

"That sounds just like my apprentice. It truly has been a while since I last met her, but I'm so glad that she has you."

Natalia looked like she was taking it all in before she gave a nonchalant wave and left. Chloe and I were left behind in the quiet room. I angled my head

down, my forehead in my hand.

Chloe's fine. She's just sleeping. I repeated these words several times to calm myself down. I gave a deep sigh, feeling my muddled emotions and panic subside like a receding wave.

Her existence felt so fleeting, as though she would break and crumble away at any moment. But Chloe's sleeping face looked calm to me.

"Wake up soon, Chloe," I whispered while touching her smooth cheek.

She was soft and warm to the touch. Any moment now, I wondered if she'd wake up and I'd see myself reflected in her large eyes as she chirped, "Good morning, Mr. Julius! I'm so glad that you're safe!" No doubt she'd give me a huge, peaceful smile.

"Wake up and call my name."

It took me only a moment to have a terrifying thought. What if she never woke up? What if I'd never be reflected in her eyes again? I struggled to breathe, and I felt suffocated, like I was drowning at the bottom of an ocean.

I took her lifeless hand and placed mine on top. I knocked my forehead against her hand in a prayer. My mind was filled with inexplicable impatience—I was tempted to whisk her away with Helios and fly far away from here.

"Can I...really protect you?"

The demon that had fled and Oswald Dystiana crossed my mind. If it was fated for us to cross paths and fight against them... I hated the word "fate" to the point where I felt repulsed, but if Chloe was shouldering such a destiny...

Should I return to the Dystiana Empire right this instant? Is that the best course of action? Oswald had ruined my parents, but that didn't matter now. I threw away my feelings of hatred and vengeance long ago, finding them to be meaningless. I was probably deathly afraid of Chloe getting hurt once more.

If she were to disappear from this world, I'd likely lose my reason to live. I wasn't sure I'd be overcome with a sense of revenge and retaliation, or simply give up and choose death. Either course of action was the same to me. Whichever path I chose, it was meaningless and worthless.

Do I need to worry? Is there any meaning in staying here? If defeating them allowed me to protect Chloe, I'd depart right this instant.

"I'll protect you, Mr. Julius! So, I'll be by your side," a voice echoed in my head. I thought I heard her talk and gave a strained smile.

She was still sleeping peacefully, and I was sure that my mind was playing tricks on me. Still, I knew that Chloe would say those words to me. She was straightforward and would gaze at me with desperation flickering in her beautiful eyes.

We should still be together...for now.

◆ A Calm Awakening

WHEN I slowly opened my eyes, I first saw unusual geometric patterns on the ceiling. A teardrop-shaped alchemy lamp hung above me, illuminating the room in a gentle light. *A teardrop lamp looks quite cute. Maybe I'll make one next time,* I thought as I stared at the ceiling.

"Chloe, you awake?" a familiar voice called out to me.

I slowly turned my head toward the sound; I realized that I was lying on a white bed in an unfamiliar room. The space was cozy and sparsely furnished, and I saw Mr. Julius sitting on a chair by the window.

The last I remembered, he was covered in wounds and his hands were burned to a crisp, but he'd already made a full recovery. He wasn't particularly bothered about his appearance, and yet he managed to look like the most perfectly beautiful man in the world, as always. The only flaw was that he seemed a touch scary.

Dressed in his favorite black robe, he had his long legs and arms crossed in an imposing stance.

"Good morning, Mr. Julius," I said.

"Morning," he replied curtly.

His usual cutting remarks didn't follow—he seemed a bit down. *Is he feeling unwell? He was covered in wounds, after all. Maybe he's still in pain.*

"Where am I?" I asked.

"A hospital of sorts within Puerta Research Center. It's been three days since Faisal ordered you to be taken here. You didn't wake up for three whole days."

He was clearly mulling over these words, and I realized that I'd woken up to a rare, evasive Mr. Julius. I hastily sat up. I felt a little lightheaded, but I was fine; I wasn't the one who'd been badly injured in the battle. Mr. Julius had suffered far more than me, and yet I was sleeping for days. *That makes me feel guilty.*

I was in a simple, white dress, no doubt a hospital gown for this facility, as I hastily combed my hair with my hands to straighten it out.

“Was I asleep for that long?” I asked. “I suppose those three days were perfect for me. I’m brimming with energy! How are you feeling, Mr. Julius? Have your wounds been tended to? Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Don’t get up so suddenly,” he said. “I’m fine. You should still be asleep.”

“You’re so kind. Did you eat something funny? Or maybe you really are hurt somewhere.”

I tried to get on my feet, but he raised a hand to stop me and came to my side. As he sat near me, he peered intently into my face as though he was trying to confirm something.

“Three days, Chloe,” he finally said.

“Are you angry that I’ve been asleep for so long?” I asked. “Sorry for making you wait. But as you can see, thanks to that, I’ve made a full recovery! I’m the usual, perfect, energetic alchemist and beautiful young maiden! If you’re in pain, I can use my magic to heal you. Or are you hungry? If that’s the case, you can go and eat—”

I was cut off mid-sentence—Mr. Julius tightly embraced me. He enveloped me in his big arms and squeezed so tightly that it hurt. He was much larger than I was, and I fit so snugly in his arms that I shifted slightly as I struggled to breathe.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“Your wounds healed, and yet you wouldn’t wake up,” Mr. Julius replied in a hoarse whisper. “Natalia said that you used up all your stamina from forcing yourself to use so much magic, but I thought you might never wake up.”

He sounded like he was in pain—a tone that I’d never heard when I was by his side. His usual veneer of confidence had never wavered before, but he clearly was different now. I didn’t struggle to breathe simply because I was in his firm embrace—my heart was beating loudly, my chest tightened, and I was impossibly embarrassed yet delighted.

“Um, thank you,” I said, feeling my cheeks grow warm. “You’ve unexpectedly got an anxious side to you, I see. But I’m fine. There’s no need for you to worry. You actually *really* like me, don’t you?”

I cracked a weak joke to hide my embarrassment and spoke quickly. If I didn’t, I felt like I’d burst into tears for some reason. My memories flooded my mind. I remembered thinking that I had to protect everyone and do my best, even if I was alone. I remembered that I still wasn’t good enough. I remembered my mother’s memories, her voice, and her kind presence.

“You’re late to notice. Didn’t you know that already?” Mr. Julius replied.

I expected him to retort with a, “Shut up, can’t you stay quiet, you idiot?” but nothing of the sort came. Any feelings of sentimentality I had were blown away by his unexpected words. I struggled to find a proper response as he released me from his grasp and gazed at me, his face close to mine. His eyes were nothing short of serious. His red eye that reminded me of the setting sun and his blue eye that resembled the clear skies were staring straight at me.

One of Mr. Julius’s eyes had been gouged out by Oswald Dystiana; I’d replaced it with a prosthetic using alchemy. Oswald had referred to it as a “counterfeit.” But to me, I saw the sunset and the bright skies in Mr. Julius’s gaze—I couldn’t argue if one were to claim that he indeed had a counterfeit eye, but I thought he looked very beautiful.

“Chloe, you did well by yourself,” Mr. Julius said.

“Thank you,” I replied.

He praised me. That alone made it seem like that battle had truly ended. I did everything to keep my tears from spilling over as I smiled. There were surely other problems to tackle, but for now, I wanted to rest.

Being hasty and fretting over things would do me no good. What was important was that we were alive, and the world was still turning calmly, seconds ticking by.

Only a few seconds later did Ms. Natalia, Ruto, and Layla come flooding into my room.

It’d take a few more seconds until I was told by Ms. Natalia that Mr. Julius

wouldn't leave my side despite receiving her assurances—I was greatly embarrassed by her story.

◆ Interlude Arc: Their Thoughts and Deepening Bonds

◆ Natalia and Celestia

NATALIA Báthory was born within a certain building of the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed—Fores Research Facility. Her parents were both excellent Otherworld researchers and sorcerers, apparently.

She wasn't sure. When she was a young child, her parents had crossed the Otherworldly Gates to visit the underworld and had lost their lives. It was a common story within Fores Research Facility. As the facility handled highly confidential information that could be classified as a national secret, one couldn't leave the place once they became a researcher there. People who became researchers were mostly enamored with the mystical Otherworld, leading to an absurdly low turnover rate. People rarely left the research facility of their own accord.

The facility would get newcomers or new researchers every so often, but no one ever left. A majority of these researchers would lose their lives before they could reach old age anyway.

Some would fall victim to the demons or monsters of the Otherworld, while others would become Seal Masters, using their remaining lifespan to cast magic that could seal a demon's powers away. Seal Masters usually died from emaciation.

In any case, what was clear was that human lives weren't valued so highly within Fores Research Facility, and this was where Natalia grew up. She read magical handbooks in lieu of picture books, and alchemy pots and materials became her toys. This childhood had accelerated her magical growth, and by the age of ten, she was so proficient that she was on par with adult sorcerers and alchemists. Employees within the research facility had high hopes for her future.

One day, she noticed staff members whispering about dragging her down to the underworld for exploration when she turned fifteen. *I don't want to go to the underworld to die!* Natalia thought to herself. And so, she hatched a plan to escape.

The young girl had been sneaking out to the Sealed Room, hiding away from adults to read the forbidden books. She had secretly witnessed the demons tied up and sealed away, dragons being improved upon (or so the adults claimed), and had even snuck into the heart of the research facility, where the Otherworldly Gate stood. She defeated monsters and used their materials for her alchemy.

Indeed, Natalia had explored every nook and cranny of Fores Research Facility—no one was more knowledgeable about the place than her. By the age of ten, she had lost interest in this space; it was dingy and boring. That was her final verdict about Fores.

The ultimate goal of Fores Research Facility was to explore the Otherworld and learn about life and death. They wanted to know if humans could become immortal. Natalia found it foolish for researchers to lose their lives for such a purpose. Thus, this ten-year-old mounted the magical broom that she'd made from alchemy and escaped Fores with nothing more than the clothes on her back.

People chased after her as she hurtled across the golden sands, hoping to get as far away from Rasheed as possible and aimed for the neighboring kingdom.

She'd only chosen the Astria Kingdom because it seemed easy to live in. The Dystiana Empire had a strong sense of comradery between citizens. They were xenophobic, and Natalia had heard that other races were treated like slaves there. While other nations weren't as cruel as Dystiana, she knew she'd stand out from the crowd as an outsider. To successfully escape Fores, she had to find a group of people with whom she could blend right in.

Trade flourished in the Astria Kingdom, and many immigrants lived there. Natalia had read that they also boasted numerous immigrants from Rasheed, and different bloodlines would often mingle. And so, the young girl decided to live in the royal capital, the city with the greatest population density. That

would surely allow her to melt into the crowd.

However, living alone was no easy feat for a mere ten-year-old girl. Though she excelled in magic and alchemy, putting her above adults, she found it wise to hide her true talents. Thus, she was immediately picked up by a nearby church that was running an orphanage.

Fortunately, the Astrian monarch at the time was sagacious, and he had ordered orphans to be offered generous homes and shelters. Natalia lived among the orphans, hiding herself away.

A few years passed, and the abbess of the church had noticed Natalia's talent. In order for Natalia to freely use her alchemy and conduct magical research, the young girl was presented with a formerly abandoned two-story house in the middle of the royal capital.

Natalia found Astria's alchemy to be nothing more than child's play, but she continued to hide her true talents and made items from alchemy to run her business. She needed the money, after all—without it, she couldn't survive. She quickly realized that her work didn't suit her well, but she had no other choice. If she couldn't put food on the table, she'd die. She may have been the world's greatest alchemist, but she was still human, and required sustenance to remain alive.

The abbess who gave Natalia her house was still alive during this time and would frequently drop by out of worry. She wanted to check if Natalia was functioning on her own, and the young girl, left with no other choice, did her best. She worked hard, ate and slept well, and lived the life of a normal human.

The years turned into decades, and once the abbess had passed of old age, there was no one left to check up on Natalia. That was her downfall. Natalia, who had gritted her teeth for work that she wasn't suited for and made alchemy items that were like mere toys to her, found everything to be so silly—pointless.

She once again climbed atop her broom to tour the world. Fores Research Facility had long given up their pursuit, and she was free to do as she wished. She knew that they were likely still researching to achieve their foolish goals, but she never wanted to be associated with them again.

She went around the world, defeated monsters popping out of various Otherworldly Gates, gathered their materials, spotted rare monsters, animals, and plants, and harvested more materials. A few years passed, and she ended up returning to her home in Astria. By this point, Natalia was convinced that she'd seen all the world had to offer and decided to hole herself up in her house.

As a woman, she had turned into a hermit and started researching alchemy, magic, and the Otherworld all by herself. She didn't have any grand ideals like unraveling the mysteries of the world—she was simply bored.

Though she had no noble cause or specific goal in mind, Natalia was the type to become completely engrossed once she started something. She continued her research, forgetting to eat and sleep, and before she knew it, her store was covered in vines, resembling an abandoned building. The inside of her home looked like a haunted house. But Natalia couldn't be bothered. She was busy reading every book she could gather across the world, parsing the text written in ancient languages, making new items, and creating even more powerful spells. It was then that she had an epiphany.

Both her world and the Otherworld were gardens created by God. And his name was...

Natalia was facing her desk, her room filled with books, alchemy materials, clothes, scraps of food, dishes, and other knickknacks. But before she could vocalize his name, she abruptly lost consciousness.

Her soul had fallen deep down, into the depths of void.

"You have died," a voice said, waking her up.

A garden of paradise greeted Natalia. A crystal-clear river flowed, decorated with blooming flowers. The wind that brushed against her carried a pleasant scent. She found herself in a lone temple erected in the middle of nature.

The voice came above a simple altar made from white stone. Natalia was still dressed in a plain, black robe, the same outfit she'd been wearing before she died. She stood up from the stone tiles and glanced around to gauge her surroundings.

“I suppose it’s true that one goes to the Otherworld when they die,” she muttered to herself while crossing her arms. “But why did I die? I wasn’t sick. In fact, I was very healthy, and I’m certainly not old.”

A beautiful lady appeared from above the altar. Behind her was a man emitting an overwhelming aura. The pair wore clothes that seemed far too ostentatious for daily wear. Their garb looked to be from a different nation, and resembled fresh, well-polished armor as though they were off to battle.

The woman had four white wings sprouting from her back, while the man had six.

“You must be angels,” Natalia observed. “According to my research, only the lowest-ranked angels would greet the dead. They didn’t have wings and would look more like remnants of translucent light.”

“Natalia Báthory,” the woman said. “You were engrossed in your research and managed to state the name of God. However, your life ended there. Let’s just say it was due to exhaustion—you didn’t take good care of yourself.” Her gaze held a hint of pity, and for whatever reason, a touch of desperate hope.

“Huh. Now that you mention it, I don’t know when the last time I sat down for a meal was,” Natalia mused. “No matter. I didn’t really have a goal, and all in all, I lived a pretty decent life.”

She may have been the world’s strongest alchemist, but she’d perish without food; she was only human. She had forgotten all about such menial things. Once she became engrossed in her research, she’d forget to eat and sleep. It was a bad habit of hers.

Until now, she managed to snap back to reality in the nick of time and quickly hydrate herself or munch on an energy bar, but it seemed she ran out of luck. Natalia sighed and decided to turn defiant. If she was dead, there was nothing more she could do. She had no lingering wishes and had no one important to her. She had no regrets.

“Natalia, I have a request,” the woman said.

The alchemist cocked her head to one side. When a person died, their soul would head to the Otherworld. The sinful ones would fall to the underworld,

while the good souls would go up to the heavens. The soul would then start a new cycle and a new life.

Angels managed the Otherworld while selecting and guiding souls. *Or so I thought. An angel making a request? She's just like a human.* Indeed, the woman was much more expressive and humanlike than the man with six wings behind her.

"What kind of request?" Natalia asked.

"I want you to save my daughter," the angel replied. "I cannot go to the mortal realm anymore and can only watch over her. I shall return you your life. In exchange, for even just a short while, please allow me to be within your body as well."

The angel's eyes grew misty, clinging to hope. Natalia was amazed that even angels could cry. The alchemist expected angels to be more heartless and expressionless, simply existing as tools of God.

"I'd like to save my daughter, Chloe," the woman said.

Daughter? Chloe? Who's she talking about? Do angels have daughters? I had no idea. But if she's gonna make a request of me, I'd better get a suitable reward for it. Natalia Báthory was still the strongest alchemist in the world, even in death. That fact never wavered. *She's making a grave mistake if she thinks a human would obediently listen to whatever an angel says!*

"I don't quite understand, but I *can* do that for you," Natalia replied. "But I'm not the type to cling to life, you see. So, if my only reward for helping an angel is my life, I don't think that's quite fair."

"There's nothing more valuable than life," the six-winged man said, finally breaking his silence while glaring at the alchemist. "What more could you want?"

His thick, burly arm was etched with a pattern that looked like a thin dragon coiling around it. His physique and face were absolutely breathtaking, as though he'd stepped right out of a painting. His flaming red hair and golden eyes hinted that he was likely one of the angels of Seraphim—one of the highest-ranking angels.

Natalia wasn't scared, and she certainly wasn't willing to pay her utmost respects. She was a human and she was talking to an angel. There was no hierarchy here.

"Well, if you're willing to revive me, this must be a very special case, I take it," Natalia said. "There aren't any records about an angel with a child. And reviving the dead must certainly be taboo. Yet, you're willing to take that risk; protecting your daughter must be very important to you."

"Indeed," the woman replied in a beautiful voice. "This is my selfish request. But protecting that child will lead to protecting the world."

Her tone was pleasant to the ears, reminding Natalia of the spring breeze brushing against her cheeks.

"Do you really have a daughter?" Natalia asked.

"My name is Celestia. Celestia Sagrid. Chloe is my daughter, without a doubt."

I've never heard of that name before. But Natalia had isolated herself from societal affairs. Ever since she left Astria and wandered around various nations, she'd holed herself in her room for her research. Natalia likely had no acquaintances left in the royal capital of Astria. She never liked socializing much anyway, but she didn't even have a family or people she could call friends when she was growing up.

"Well, even if you revived me, I wouldn't know who Chloe is," Natalia said. "All right, I can lend you my body for a while, Celestia."

"Really? You will?!" the angel called Celestia gasped. "Thank you so much!"

She clasped her hands in front of her chest and gave a deep brow. Natalia wasn't at all interested in saving the world, but she wasn't so cold-hearted as to abandon a person who turned to her for help. However, she still wanted something in return, and a worthy reward at that; she was helping an angel.

"I don't mind lending my body, but since I've died once, I'd like to meet someone," Natalia said.

"Who could it be? The abbess of the church whom you were indebted to?" Celestia asked. "Or your parents, perhaps?"

“I don’t really care about my parents. And I don’t need to meet the abbess granny. Humans die. That’s the law of nature, and I don’t wish to meet her again. I don’t want to live a life where I’ll have regrets like that.”

“Then who?”

“I want to meet God, the primordial deity who made this world. Your father.”

“I see...” the angel of Seraphim replied with a nod. “You *do* know our father’s name.” He didn’t seem at all angry. In fact, there was a hint of amazement in his tone.

“Sāgara, the divine dragon,” Natalia said. “I want to meet that God. Since I’m gonna revive anyway, might as well pick up a souvenir while I’m at the Otherworld. And I want to form a contract with him. I want to borrow his power.”

“That power is too great for a human,” the six-winged man said while shaking his head. He believed her endeavor to be an impossible one.

“It’s what I need, or else I might not be able to protect Celestia’s daughter,” Natalia reasoned. “The stronger the better, don’t you think? I’m the world’s greatest sorcerer, and a noble, first-rate alchemist, but a stronger Natalia Báthory will be good for the world.”

“Lord Michael...” Celestia said to the man as though she was begging.

Michael gave a small nod. “Very well. Under the name of Michael, I shall lead you to Father. You *will* agree to Celestia’s request, won’t you?”

“I knew you were an angel of Seraphim, but Michael is the name of the one who’s the greatest of them all—an archangel,” Natalia mused. “If you’re personally here, I presume Chloe is a very important existence.”

“Angels and humans cannot create a child. It’s taboo, and Celestia did precisely that,” Michael said sternly. “However, the child hasn’t sinned. Chloe is the child of Celestia, and is our child as well. She is a unique existence, holding the blood of an angel and a human.”

“In other words, Chloe seems to have several meddling, troublesome fathers.”

“We cannot directly interfere with the world beyond the gates. That’s also taboo and can destroy the logic of the world. And so, Celestia had requested to borrow your power. I have simply agreed to that.”

“Fine with me. But once Celestia leaves my body, I’ll do what I want then. Is that all right with you?”

“Of course. Thank you, Natalia,” Celestia said, a tear spilling from her shimmering eyes.

Even Natalia, who generally seemed unconcerned with the world, gulped in awe at the angel’s beauty. And this was how Natalia Báthory managed to meet with the creator of the world, Divine Dragon Sāgara.

This was before she went to save Chloe, who was being surrounded by men in the slum alleys.

As promised, Natalia had been revived with Celestia inside her body. The angel, wearing the suit of the alchemist, managed to act perfectly like Natalia while rescuing Chloe and bringing her home. Natalia hadn’t been completely kicked out of her body, however—perhaps she was partly responsible for saving Chloe.

Natalia couldn’t understand herself quite well either, but she didn’t give up and write everything off as being troublesome like what was typical of her. She wasn’t willing to abandon Chloe and flee. A few months passed as she taught Chloe the basics of alchemy. One day, Celestia suddenly vanished from Natalia’s body like a puff of smoke.

I guess this means I can do as I please. Natalia was now all by herself. It was then that she started to find her apprentice adorable. Chloe was precious to her, but she still found it troublesome to take care of others and live together.

Chloe was diligent. She was so hardworking that Natalia found it a burden to keep watching over her. She couldn’t quite understand why.

And so off Natalia flew on her broom to once again set out on another journey.

◆ The Captain and the Former King Mercenary

ROGE Gregorio let out a loud sigh before his mug of beer topped with a perfect bed of foam. His dark skin and silver hair that couldn't be tamed had a way of making him stand out with his burly physique that resembled a layer of armor. He was clearly trying to make himself inconspicuous and visibly shrank, causing Roxy to furrow her brows by the counter.

Roge, who normally sat at the counter with a bright smile, was gloomier than usual. As she took the orders of the other customers, she couldn't help but notice his dreary demeanor.

"Mr. Roge, did you finally get scolded by your doctor for drinking too much?" Roxy asked, unsure if she should be angry or worried at the aura that Roge was emitting.

Seated beside him was the new recruit, former king Cyril Astria. The monarch was much younger than Roxy, and he had already abandoned his last name, Astria. Even she was a bit surprised when she saw Cyril brought into her diner with the other mercenaries. Roge had invited them all to host a welcoming party of sorts.

It didn't take long for Roxy to get used to it, however. Adventurers, mercenaries, and those in similar professions often had complicated circumstances.

"Not to worry, Ms. Roxy," Roge said casually, raising his head. "My doctor hasn't scolded me. My liver is tougher than steel, capable of breaking down as much alcohol as I can ingest."

Roxy gave a small sigh of relief—it seemed his issue wasn't so dire. "That's good to hear. I'm not particularly worried about you, but is something the matter?"

She placed a side dish that she'd been giving everyone to eat with their beer—a patty made of stewed beans, onions, and chopped-up sausage made from

pig innards over a slice of thin bread.

The brawny men with intimidating expressions who often visited Roxy's diner were always hungry. Alcohol and a few dishes weren't enough to satisfy their appetites. And so, Roxy spent every day cooking up affordable yet satisfying dishes for her customers. Every single day, she visited the market to stock up on plenty of fresh meat, fish, and vegetables. Eventually, the people of the market gave her leftovers or scraps that they could no longer use, hoping it'd help her even a bit. Still, she didn't turn a hefty profit.

Roxy didn't mind; she didn't open this diner to become rich. Her late husband had dreamed of opening a store like this.

"Ms. Roxy, what might this be?" Cyril asked, narrowing his eyes at the dish that she placed in front of him.

"Well, if I were to explain, it's a patty made from beans, onions, and pig innards," Roxy replied. "It's delicious."

The former king didn't seem at all bothered by Roge, sighing repeatedly beside him, implying that Roge's behavior wasn't anything new. Cyril gracefully paid his respects for the food and hesitantly reached for the thin bread with his hand. He still wasn't used to eating with his hands, a refreshing sight for Roxy. *Speaking of which, Ms. Chloe wasn't used to it either, way back when, she thought.*

She thought back to the adorable alchemist, who now fit in quite well in this city, and chuckled.

Cyril took a bite, chewed it carefully, and swallowed. "It really is delicious," he praised. "All your dishes are really quite lovely, Ms. Roxy."

I always wondered what kind of man Cyril Astria, the fiancé who treated Ms. Chloe terribly, was, but he's really honest. She dared not to vocalize her thoughts and thanked Cyril for his compliment.

Roxy was vaguely aware of Chloe's circumstances. The young alchemist hadn't said a word herself, but rumors spread, and a diner was the perfect place to discuss matters such as that. Roxy couldn't quite remember who she'd heard it from. Was it perhaps from a drunk Roge, or his subordinates who were

parroting what they'd heard?

In any case, she knew that Chloe was the daughter of a duke—that she was Chloe Sagrid, the poor girl who'd been cast aside by Cyril Astria. She was now a popular alchemist within the city.

The young lady was bright and diligent; it was difficult to believe that she shouldered such a dark past. Recently, she got herself a true lover.

His name was Julius Craft. He was handsome, a man of few words, and difficult to understand, but his actions made it abundantly clear just how precious Chloe was to him. Roxy, who was used to seeing romance of all kinds unfold from beyond the bar counter, couldn't be fooled.

"You better eat this food precious, Cyril," Roge warned. "We'll be going out on an expedition again tomorrow to defeat a monster from the Otherworldly Gates. We'll be eating dried meat and bread as tough as rocks for a while. You'll truly understand just how valuable delicious food like Ms. Roxy's is."

"I understand," Cyril replied. "But are you sure you can drink before an expedition?"

"How else can we cope? We're mercenaries. We could die tomorrow, so it's best to have a pint."

"I thought it's your role as the captain to ensure that no one will die."

"Hello? We're all dumb and hot-blooded. You think I can just go, 'Come on, everyone! Do your best so we won't die!' and expect them to listen? I thought you were in the same boat, Cyril."

"...I don't plan on dying. Protecting my kingdom is my reason to live."

"I mean, sure, if you say so. Defeating the monsters by the gates is tough work, and humans can die in the blink of an eye. Best to eat the tastiest grub while you can, don't you think? And of course, it's better to drink while having fun."

"I agree and certainly want you to enjoy yourselves, but you've been sighing a whole lot, Mr. Roge," Roxy pointed out. She shot a scolding look at them as they discussed death while eating. Still, Roge had a point. It was a daily

occurrence for an adventurer or mercenary to energetically eat the food at her diner one day and be dead the next.

“But Ms. Roxy, Ms. Chloe hasn’t returned from Rasheed yet,” Roge pouted. He looked like he’d burst into tears at any moment. In fact, tears were forming in his eyes, so he was already half-crying.

Cyril had a worried and melancholic expression on his face.

Roxy folded her arms in front of her chest. How could she quell the fears of these worried men? She wasn’t too well-versed about Rasheed and hadn’t even known that Chloe had gone to a different nation. She was good friends with Chloe, but they weren’t living together, and they certainly couldn’t keep tabs on everything the other party was doing.

Before Chloe met Julius, she’d often drop by the diner for some food, but she hadn’t done that much recently, either. It was likely because Julius preferred the meals that Chloe made. Of course, Chloe would claim something along the lines of, “I’m being frugal because now I’ve got two mouths to feed.”

Roge had downed his mug of beer and asked for another one.

“I don’t know much about Rasheed, but I’ve heard that it’s a peaceful nation,” Roxy said while pouring another mug of beer. “There shouldn’t be much to worry about.”

Cyril, who was nursing his drink, unlike Roge, added, “The Astria royal family’s familiar with the head researcher of the Puerta Research Center, Jahala Garena. He’s young, but an excellent researcher and a man with good character too. I’ve only met his father, but I believe he’s passed away.”

Roxy handed Roge another mug of beer, but the man downed it in a flash and handed the empty mug back to her. *Should I just leave you with a barrel of beer, or can you at least pour your own drink?*

“You said the place isn’t dangerous, right, Cyril?” Roge asked.

“Right,” Cyril replied. “Rasheed has its fair share of secrets, but it’s not a nation that excludes others. I haven’t heard of any internal strife either.”

“And yet, Ms. Chloe hasn’t returned for a week! Something must’ve

happened.”

“Mr. Roge, surely there are times when Ms. Chloe wants to relax and take a leisurely vacation,” Roxy replied. “Besides, Mr. Julius is by her side, so there’s nothing to worry about. Wait...perhaps they’re on their honeymoon.”

She clapped her hands together after she placed another mug of beer in front of Roge. A vacation, just the two of them, sounded nice. Perhaps they were relaxing in a beautiful inn within Rasheed. *Being young is great. A honeymoon really takes me back...*

When Roxy married her husband, she’d gone on one herself, to a city near the royal capital. They didn’t have much money back then, so the vacation was a simple one. She never was able to conceive a child with him, and he passed away due to an illness. Every now and then, Roxy felt a bit lonely, but even so, she was happy. She had her diner and while some customers were a handful, many came to visit her every day. Men generally visited her diner and in the middle of the clamor, Chloe was one of the only women who ever dared to drop by.

The alchemist felt like a daughter to Roxy. Chloe’s happiness translated to her own, and Roxy couldn’t feel more elated.

“A...honeymoon...” Roge murmured, turning pale. His hand holding his mug started to tremble. “I see, a honeymoon. No wonder they haven’t returned...”

“I believe she mentioned removing the seal from Julius and buying a dragon,” Cyril said, placing his metallic prosthetic hand over his chin pensively. Though his hand looked metallic, it apparently was made from a different material.

The former king claimed that Chloe had made it for him with her alchemy. Roxy met Chloe three years ago, when the young lady had just started her own alchemy store. Because of the nasty rumors that swirled around her, business was rough, and Roxy had forcibly dragged the penniless Chloe into her diner to give her some food.

This struggling alchemist had improved so much that she could create a prosthetic arm—she was now famed to be the best alchemist within Astria. A while ago, she had fought alongside Julius to protect Astria from the threat of monsters. Still, in Roxy’s eyes, Chloe hadn’t changed a bit since three years ago:

friendly, a little airheaded, kind, adorable, and youthful.

Roxy likely wasn't the only one with these fond thoughts. Everyone was worried about Chloe in their own way. Hence, the other customers in her diner had tuned in to the conversation with Roge and Cyril.

"I envy the man who can go on a private vacation with Ms. Chloe," Roge said. "I'm so worried that she might be in danger that I can barely down my beer."

"This is your third drink, Mr. Roge," Roxy pointed out. "Stop spouting silly lies."

"I'm just using a metaphor. I'm expressing how worried I am."

"She'll be fine. Mr. Julius is by her side, and he seems stronger than you."

"Urgh..."

"Honestly, I don't think anyone can match him," Cyril interjected with a firm nod. "Julius is just as the rumors say—no, he exceeds them. He's overwhelmingly powerful and I trust that he'd protect Chloe no matter what."

"Urgh," Roge croaked like a crushed frog.

"Mr. Roge, why don't you give her up already?" Roxy suggested with a strained smile.

Roge had a crush on Chloe for quite a while now. While Roxy was unsure if he was trying to be considerate or he simply couldn't pluck up the courage to confess his feelings, he'd been constantly watching over Chloe since she started her alchemy shop. Chloe seemed completely oblivious, but Roge's feelings were so blatantly obvious to the rest of the mercenaries that it was more like an open secret.

"But Ms. Roxy, I was rejected before I even had the chance to confess," Roge said. "And Julius popped up by her side out of nowhere."

"I suppose so," Roxy replied. "But that's life. That happens sometimes."

"Give up, Roge. Chloe's had a tough time," Cyril said, pausing with great sadness overcoming his features before adding, "because of me. You can't get in her way."

Roxy gave a weary shake of her head as the former king filled the diner with sorrow. *It's probably impossible to tell him to forget his sins, but Chloe's kind. I'm sure she's long forgiven him already... They really are a handful.*

"I know," Roge said, sounding more pathetic than usual. "I know, but let me wallow in my misery for just a bit more..."

He was still rather popular with the ladies, though he seemed completely uninterested in them. Time and again, ladies came to Roxy asking for advice, claiming that he was friendly but a tad cold, while other women liked that side of him.

"Well, I don't mind if you do..." Cyril said.

"If Julius ever manages to remove that mark and is able to use magic, he'll become even stronger," Roge reasoned. "That's a tough pill to swallow."

"If anything happens, we might be able to lend them our power. We just need to do what we can. There's no need to be so down."

"Of course *you* can say that, you lucky guy. You've got her handmade prosthetic arm. Julius also has her prosthetic eye. And me? I'm the only one left with nothing."

Roge became even more glum. Roxy shrugged and decided to give them her special stewed chunk of meat, free of charge. She hoped that would console Roge's broken heart, even a little.

◆ Ms. Eliza's Reflection

PRINCE Faisal returned to the Holy Palace to clean up the mess after the war and had left for the holy city before I'd woken up. Lady Layla stayed behind as Faisal had told her to "Sit tight and stay here in Puerta until I return."

As for King Shesif, he was being treated in a hospital ward in the Holy Palace. His condition wasn't life-threatening, but...

"King Shesif was truly a kind man," Layla said. "When the queen passed away after giving birth to Princess Minne, the previous king died soon after. Young Shesif had to ascend the throne."

It'd been a few days since I'd recovered within Puerta Research Center. I was totally fine now, but Mr. Julius would get angry with me if I wandered around, so I was still lying in bed. He'd often leave to check up on Helios, and I had my complaints about not being able to leave, but I decided to forgive him. He seemed very worried about me.

Lambda and the rest of the Dragon Knights, who weren't badly injured, returned to the holy city with Prince Faisal. Ruto and Jahala were summoned to the Holy Palace, and Ms. Natalia suddenly left without a word.

I was a bit sad to see her go after finally reuniting with her, but she'd said, "I think I'll return to Astria. It's been a while, and there's something that's bothering me." I was sure that she'd return eventually.

Layla had apparently decided to help out with the medical treatments within Puerta. It seemed she was the type who couldn't sit still for long. Between her work, she'd visit me. She was here today too, sitting on a chair by my side and being my talking partner.

"King Shesif became a father of sorts for Princess Minne and Prince Faisal," she explained. "He must've been mentally exhausted, constantly surrounded by so many adults, but not once did he complain or make it seem that way."

"King Shesif simply wanted to save Princess Minne, right?" I asked.

Little by little, Layla had divulged the series of events that had led to this messy situation. I was a bit confused because so many things had occurred at once, but as I talked it out with her, I was able to slowly reorganize my thoughts.

“I’m sure that’s the case,” Layla replied. “Princess Minne was in a precarious position. She was so sickly that simply being under the sun would cause her skin to be burned badly, and she could never venture outside. I remember playing with her in her room when she was little, but as she got older, her illness worsened, and she’d often be stuck in bed with a fever.”

Her voice held a hint of loneliness and nostalgia as she gazed into the distance. I sat up on my bed to listen.

“Many adults called the princess’s illness a curse,” she said. “Some even claimed that standing beside her would cause you to be infected as well. Others stated that she had incurred the wrath of God, and it was best to kill her to prove our devotion to the deity. Prince Faisal told me these horrifying stories.”

“An illness with an unknown cause must be terrifying to others,” I remarked.

“I agree. My parents had also told me to no longer meet with the princess. I don’t know much about Salim, but Prince Faisal always happily told me how precious his younger sister was being treated.”

“Yet, I couldn’t save anyone.” I hugged my knees, covered by the white sheets. I could easily reach out to them had I stretched my arms, and yet I couldn’t do a single thing to spare their lives.

“If you’d like to go there, I’m far more powerless than you,” Layla said. “Thank you, Chloe. I know we’ve only just met, and yet you worked so hard and became so tattered for our sake. Thanks to you guys, Prince Faisal was able to return alive.” She leaned forward to hug me; she felt soft, and a nice, floral scent wafted off her. “I can’t thank you enough,” she said. “You saved our nation. There’s nothing for you to be so down about. Puff your chest out and hold your head up high.”

“Thank you, Lady Layla,” I replied.

Only now was I finally able to say these words.

My chest grew tight, and it became hard to breathe. I was desperately doing what I could. And despite giving it my best efforts, I could only really do very little. It was difficult not to feel glum as I thought about the lives that had slipped through my fingers and been lost forever.

With Layla's kind words, I was finally able to form a bright smile in her arms.

"If Julius finds me hugging you like this, I'll surely get scolded," she said.

"I don't think he gets jealous of ladies," I assured her.

"Oh, you mustn't underestimate the jealousy of a possessive man. Prince Faisal is a bit troublesome in his own way, so I can sort of empathize with you."

"He seems very honest and diligent," I said.

"A bit *too* much of both, if you ask me. He tends to overthink all by himself and then suddenly explodes on you one day. Julius might not be the type who mulls over things for long, but I'm guessing he's just as jealous as Prince Faisal." She pulled away from me and placed a finger over her plump lips pensively.

"Prince Faisal suddenly explodes on others?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh, he does. He'll go, 'Layla, who *was* that man?' and will constantly question me about them. And it comes out of nowhere! I don't even know what man he's talking about, nor do I remember that person anymore."

"You're a beautiful lady. I'm sure you're very popular with the men, Lady Layla."

"It's been bothering me, but there's no need to be so polite with me. Just call me Layla. Besides, you also hailed from the house of a duke, did you not, Chloe? And you're the savior of our nation. Truth be told, *I* should be the one who should be more mindful and respectful toward you..."

"Lady Lay— I mean, Layla, I'd be happy if you stayed the way you are with me. I'm just an alchemist and beautiful maiden who happened to pass by."

Her mannerisms and appearance made it clear that she was a gorgeous noble lady of high standing. I couldn't possibly imagine her being respectful toward me and I hastily shook my hands in front of me to decline her offer.

Layla hid her mouth behind a fan and happily laughed, her voice sounding like

the ringing of bells. I assumed this research center was fairly safe, but she still kept an iron fan with her at all times. Perhaps that fan was an irreplaceable part of her, much like my apron dress.

“If possible, I’d like to be friends with you, Chloe,” Layla said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Of course. We’re the same age, aren’t we? Julius said that you were a twenty-year-old beautiful young maiden.”

“What has he been saying behind my back?”

I was a bit curious to know. He wasn’t lying, but there was no need for him to tell others that I was the beautiful young maiden, Chloe Sagrid.

“You’re beautiful and so mature,” I said. “I honestly thought you were older than me.”

“If you’re the beautiful young maiden, perhaps I should be the lady of bewitching beauty,” Layla mused. “Ah, but that seems like a common nickname.”

As she pondered over introducing herself in the future with a, “Hello, I’m Layla, a sexy, bewitching lady who’s good at seducing men,” I stopped her, stating that it wasn’t her best idea.

I had no doubt that Prince Faisal would overthink those words and end up erupting one day. We giggled together. *Friends, huh?* I thought. *I haven’t had one for so long. It’s a bit embarrassing, but it makes me feel so giddy.*

“Ah, speaking of which, I’m actually here to relay two messages today,” Layla said as though she’d just remembered, snapping her fan shut. “First is from Prince Faisal. He asked if you could stay in Rasheed for a while. He wants to thank you for protecting our nation and fighting for our sake. And another is about your acquaintance, Eliza, was it? She finally woke up, it seems.”

My eyes widened. “She’s safe?! I’m so relieved!”

Thank goodness. When Ms. Eliza and Mr. Coldman had been carried into Puerta, they had apparently used much of their stamina, and their conditions weren’t good. They’d been transformed into a horrific state by the demons,

after all. Jahala, who kept me updated, stated that it was a miracle that they weren't dead. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"And she said that she wants to see you," Layla said. "What do you want to do?"

"I'll go, of course," I replied. "I'm brimming with energy, so I can go and see if she's doing all right."

I'll probably get in trouble with Mr. Julius for wandering around, so I might ask for his permission first.

As Layla left the room, Mr. Julius immediately entered.

"Was that woman with the iron fan here again?" he asked. He was dressed in a loose, black robe and sat down by the edge of the bed.

"Don't call her that," I scolded. "Did you forget Layla's name already, Mr. Julius?"

His description of her wasn't wrong, but it made her sound really powerful, like a brawny fighter. Layla was a beautiful, elegant noblewoman.

"I told you to rest, Chloe," he said.

"I'm fine. I just used my magical energy up, and I'm all healed now. And you put in copious amounts of powdered sand light insects you received from Ruto and Jahala into my meals every day. They're really effective to regain magic. Thanks to all that, I'm fully healed."

I pointed to a lovely, large glass container on the side of my bed. It required both hands for me to lift, and Ruto and Jahala had left me with it before they headed for the Holy Palace. They were very worried about my health.

"Chloe, I'm a Seal Master. I live a very unhealthy life of using my life force to cast powerful spells," Ruto said, handing me a paper bag illustrated with strange, wriggling insects that I'd never seen before.

I'm not sure if 'unhealthy' can fully describe your lifestyle... And I'm still worried about your brother, Salim. But I managed to swallow my words as my body still felt weak. I could only give an obedient nod.

"This is dried, powdered sand light insects. It's famed for being effective in

regaining magical energy within the circle of Seal Masters of Rasheed. It's a bit bitter, but it might help if you mix it in with your food."

"I felt it might not look pleasant, so I've prepared a pretty container," Jahala said, transferring mysterious brown powder from the paper bag into the glass vessel. *"Every now and then, I'll drink some of this powder when I'm absolutely exhausted. It's indeed a bit bitter, but it works very well."*

Since that day, Mr. Julius mixed as much as he could into my meals without hesitation. He put in so much that I wasn't quite sure if I was allowed to intake all this powder at once, but he'd add it to my soup and force it down my throat. As Ruto and Jahala claimed, it was a bit bitter.

Thanks to the insects that made my meals taste bitter and astringent, I was recovering at an alarming pace since I first awoke. I was now as good as new. A few days ago, I could barely lift my arms and put strength in my legs, but I was now stronger than ever before. Still, Mr. Julius insisted on making me eat them.

I stated that I could eat all by myself, but he kept saying, "Open your mouth. Eat." Despite my protests, he wouldn't let me use my spoon and continued to shove food into my mouth. *Obviously, I want to delude myself into thinking this is romantic and that I'm being spoiled. But I'll be honest, it clearly looks like he's feeding an animal as he mixes the feed with the sand light insects, no matter how you slice it.*

As though to land the final blow, he had a look of nostalgia on his face as he murmured, "When Helios was just born, I often ground up small monsters and fed him with a spoon." How else was I supposed to take this remark? Personally, I felt like I'd eaten enough of those powdered insects.

I felt like continuing this insect diet would turn me into a sand lizard, a creature that preferred to eat bugs. *I haven't seen either of them in the wild, though.*

"I'm fine now," I said. "If I don't move around, my reflexes will start to dull. Mother always used to tell me that I'd become fat if I ate past nine at night, and that if I didn't exercise regularly and let my guard down, I'd gain weight."

"Your mother wasn't human, was she?" Mr. Julius said, crossing his long legs and arms. I noticed him always crossing his limbs every chance he got, but I

wondered if they were just so long that they'd get in the way if he didn't keep them crossed.

Maybe he's got his fair share of worries by having a good physique. He was the type of man who would look impossibly beautiful, though he was just sitting down by my bed while crossing his limbs. I drank in the sight as I internally showered his appearance with praise. I knew that vocalizing my thoughts would be met with an "I know very well that you like my appearance."

"Apparently so," I replied. "My father picked her up when she fell from the Otherworld. And that's when I realized something."

"Which is?"

"My mother always said that people would gain weight if they let their guards down. I'm guessing that when she just came to this world and met my father, still brimming with energy, she must've overeaten because the food of the human world was so delicious. Maybe she gained weight then."

"Do angels gain weight?"

"I'm not sure, but she kept telling me this advice as though it was very important, which is why it still remains in my mind."

"Did she not have more important matters to discuss?"

"I only remember her talking about food and weight, to be honest with you."

"...I guess your mother's just like you."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

I didn't feel like I was receiving much praise as Mr. Julius reached out and stroked my cheek. His hand, usually equipped with a weapon, was tough and rugged. His fingers were strong and long, but just a touch cold. As his blue and red gaze peered into my eyes, I felt my cheeks grow warm.

What do I do? I'm really nervous. I'm happy, but really embarrassed. I was by his side every day. If a simple touch made my heart pound this much, I was sure that my heart would stop one day from being overworked.

I love Mr. Julius very much. And it seems he likes me quite a bit too. Yeah, then I'm fine. There's no issue here. Even I wasn't sure what I was talking about.

What issue? Who was I making excuses to? Various thoughts swirled inside my head, and I felt like my mind was about to explode.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re thin, but you look much better. We’ve only got a bit more to go until you reach your usual weight.”

“Stop right there,” I said. “Mr. Julius, how do *you* know my weight?”

After he gently touched my cheek, he pinched it between his fingers. *I don’t get it. Did I say something that warrants a pinch here?* As his fingers left my cheek, he placed them on a small padlock that was tied with a black string around his neck.

“You’re my master, aren’t you?” he said. “It’s only natural to keep track of my master’s physical state.”

“You see me as Helios’s little sister or something, don’t you?” I quipped.

“Are you a dragon? I’ve always thought of you as Chloe Sagrid, an alchemist and a beautiful young maiden.”

“Did something happen?” I asked in shock. “You must be teasing me, aren’t you? Please stop introducing me as a ‘beautiful young maiden’ to others while I’m not there.”

Ever since we started staying at Puerta Research Center, I felt like Mr. Julius had changed a bit. Perhaps it was due to him talking with other dragon maniacs like Prince Faisal, Lambda, and the Dragon Knights. Maybe *change* wasn’t quite the right word—he was reverting to himself before he entered the war. A faint smile danced on his lips as he stroked my hair.

“Helios has been angry with me because he wants to see you,” he said. “He’s been copying Lumine, Lambda’s dragon, and has started poking me with his snout.”

“You seem happy,” I observed.

“Ah, well, he’s always been loyal to me... And I’ve made him see terrible sights. Should we leave this room, Chloe?”

“Thank you for worrying about me. And, um, erm...”

“What? Stop mumbling and just tell me.”

“While I’ve been recovering, you’ve been nice to me, worried about me, and always by my side. I didn’t mind that one bit, I guess.”

“I haven’t changed.”

He roughly tousled my hair before he stood up. *Has he always been like that? Maybe he’s right.* Mr. Julius was always worried about me and though it was difficult to understand his actions, he was generally kind to me. Maybe the way I started to perceive his actions changed.

“Just because you can get up, don’t wander around on your own too much,” he warned. “Do you have somewhere you’d like to visit?”

“Ah, right,” I replied. “Ms. Eliza said that she wanted to see me.”

“She’s still alive? She’s stubborn, just like...”

“I’m a genius, so I know where you’re going with that, but it’s best if you don’t say anything more outright, Mr. Julius. You mustn’t.”

“Why do you have to meet her?”

“Because I’m worried. Aren’t you?”

Mr. Julius only sighed. He said not a word, but I felt like he was calling me a good-natured idiot.



I had a healer within Puerta guide me to Ms. Eliza’s room. I left my room, walked down the white corridor, and knocked on one of the dark doors that stood lining the hall.

“Who is it?” a boy called.

“Chloe Sagrid. I heard from Layla that Ms. Eliza wants to see me.”

The healer gave a short bow and immediately departed. As I spoke to the boy beyond the door, Mr. Julius stood beside me with his arms crossed, a terrifying expression on his face. There was no need to be so hostile. I tugged on his sleeve as he clearly looked displeased that we were visiting. He glanced down at me, and I smiled up at him. A nice smile was imperative for those working in the service industry. He narrowed his eyes wearily.

“So, you two came,” the young voice said.

The door opened and a petite boy, only a little taller than me, emerged. He had been turned into a monster with Ms. Eliza, but later fought alongside us to defeat Mephisto. He looked to be the same age as Jahala, putting him around fifteen to seventeen years of age. His silky, dark bangs covered half of his purple eyes, a bit of melancholy hidden beneath. The skin that peeked through his tight, dark clothes was white as porcelain.

“Lady Eliza is awake,” he said politely. “Lord Michael is being treated in a separate room, but he still hasn’t awoken yet.”

“May I speak with Ms. Eliza?” I asked.

“I thank you for coming all this way, Lady Chloe, Lord Julius,” the boy said, placing a hand over his chest and humbly lowering his head.

“U-Um, no, you don’t have to be so formal with us. You can act like your usual self.”

Sure, we fought together, but this was practically our first meeting with him, and I didn’t expect to be so deeply respected. I panicked as I hastily waved my hands in front of me, rejecting his politeness. Mr. Julius didn’t say anything. *I guess he’s used to being respected. That’s the Black Prince for you.*

“The two of you saved Lady Eliza’s life,” the boy reasoned. “It’s only natural for me to offer you my utmost respect. I truly cannot thank you both enough.”

“Um, er, don’t worry about it,” I replied, a bit sheepish. “I only did what was expected of me as an alchemist and beautiful young maiden.”

“And I guess that profession implies that you must save nations and lives?” Mr. Julius asked, exasperated.

“An alchemist who’s a beautiful young maiden uses alchemy to make tons of money. Saving others is simply a humane thing to do as a person,” I retorted.

“You must be very kind, Lady Chloe,” the boy said with a smile.

I was tickled pink to see his fleeting smile. *Is this how it feels to have a younger brother? Jahala’s around the same age, but he’s so calm and mature. He doesn’t feel like a younger person at all.*

"I— My name is Henri. I am Lady Eliza's guard," the boy said. "This way, please."

He guided us inside. Mr. Julius quietly followed behind me.

"It's nice to meet you, Henri," I said. "Thank you for fighting with us. How are your wounds? Are you all right?"

"I am," Henri replied. "Though I still feel some aftereffects from my injuries. I can't put all my strength into my arms, but I haven't lost any limbs, and they shouldn't hinder my daily life. Lord Julius broke my leg before, but I can now walk around without issue."

I widened my eyes with shock and whirled around to face Mr. Julius upon hearing this story.

"Mr. Julius, when did you break his leg?!" I gasped. "While I was asleep for three days? Did you fight with him?"

"Who do you think I am?" Mr. Julius asked, tugging my ear.

Ouch. It's been a while since I felt this pain.

"I'm sorry, I was just a bit surprised," I apologized before turning to the boy. "Henri, are you acquainted with Mr. Julius?"

"I am," he replied. "I fought with him once in the Holy Palace to save Lady Eliza...is what I'd like to say, but my personal grudges had propelled me. I'm sorry."

He once again gave a low bow. I glanced at him, then back at an uninterested Mr. Julius.

"Mr. Julius, he's apologizing," I said, pulling his hand. "You should respond. I'm not quite sure what happened, but if you wounded him, shouldn't you apologize?"

"He's an assassin," Mr. Julius replied flatly. "There's no need for him to apologize or to receive one."

"I was the one who tried to kill him first," Henri added, his eyes sparkling with admiration. "But I didn't stand a chance. Lord Julius showed his benevolence and only broke my leg. In fact, he even gave me words to live by."

“Did you, now?” I asked, turning to Mr. Julius.

“I forgot,” came his response.

“Perhaps you have, but I have not, Lord Julius,” Henri said. “You stated that I should protect those important and dear to me. Yet, I was unable to protect Lady Eliza and was captured by Mephisto, leading to that horrific battle...”

“That’s not your fault, Henri,” I assured. “You were up against a demon, a being that’s more powerful than a gatekeeper. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“And it’s all thanks to you, Lady Chloe. I still have a vague recollection of that time. You emitted a gentle, warm light when we were transformed into a grotesque entity. A man as strong as Lord Julius can surely protect you, who’s so dear to him, with his own power. And I aspire to be the same.”

I’m dear to Mr. Julius. How do I express this feeling? I’m happy and embarrassed. I had no idea what transpired between Henri and Mr. Julius, but I was left wondering what the latter had talked about while I wasn’t by his side. I covered my reddening cheeks with both hands.

“Chloe, get used to it already,” Mr. Julius said.

“I can’t,” I replied. “And it’s your fault. I find that you’re being unfair.”

“Unfair? I don’t understand.”

“You just are! Everything you do is so unfair!”

“You two really trust each other so deeply,” Henri said with a wistful smile. “I’m very envious of your relationship.”

I had no idea how he was able to glean that from our conversation, and I remembered Jahala giving us a similar reaction in the past. *I feel bad for making those younger than me act so considerate. I’m supposed to be the older sister here!*

“Ms. Eliza must be very important to you, Henri,” I said, regaining my composure.

He gave a small nod. “She is. I was an orphan in a poverty-ridden neighborhood near the Dystiana Empire’s border. I was involved in a battle between orphans and almost died. Lady Eliza picked me up from the alleys as I

was on the verge of death.”

“What a coincidence. I was also thrown into the alleys. It seems we’ve both got ties to such a dreary place,” I said.

“I suppose so.”

He placed a hand over his mouth and chuckled. I breathed a sigh of relief. The towns that bordered the Dystiana Empire suffered from high crime rates, possibly because of the empire’s invasion. Henri must’ve had a rough past, and I didn’t want to force him to talk. Before I met Mr. Julius, I was afraid of men because of the memories that haunted me. It was difficult for me to even talk about it.

There was another door deep inside the room, and Henri opened it to reveal a white bed in the middle of the bedroom. It was similar to the room that I had rested in. A petite, adorable young lady was lying on the bed. She had cushions piled high behind her to raise her body, and she reminded me of a doll. Ms. Eliza was very adorable without her snarky remarks, and I believed that she had terrible luck with men. She widened her large eyes upon seeing us enter behind Henri.

“How are you feeling, Ms. Eliza?” I asked. “I’m just here to check up on you.”

“Chloe... You came,” Ms. Eliza said, a faint smile forming on her slightly haggard face.

The hostility and hatred that she’d displayed toward me in the past were gone, and I breathed a sigh of relief. She could converse and looked better than I expected. *I’m so glad.* I approached her bed. Mr. Julius leaned on the wall behind me.

Henri stood on the opposite side of the bed and gently placed his hand on Ms. Eliza’s back, propping her up against the pillows.

“Are you all right, Ms. Eliza?” I asked. “Does your body hurt?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “I still can’t move my body, but I’m well. Chloe, I heard that you saved me, my father, and Henri.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do much, to be honest. And I wasn’t alone. Mr. Julius, Prince

Faisal, Ms. Natalia, and everyone else helped out so that we could fight against the demon.”

“But you tried to protect me. Henri told me so. And I’ve only done horrible things to you.”

“Did you, now? I don’t quite remember,” I said.

I couldn’t recall. I mean, a lot of things happened, but I was alive and well. I had no reason to be angry or harbor resentment toward Ms. Eliza. I was just glad that she was all right.

“I did,” she insisted. “I wanted Mr. Julius for myself, and out of jealousy, I asked my father to send assassins to attack you. I tried to make you take the blame for being a murderer, and I even listened to Mephisto and went to Rasheed to have King Shesif accept me. I saw you at the Holy Palace, so I told him all about you.”

“You didn’t do much at all. I’m not bothered by it, Ms. Eliza.”

“B-But...”

“I’m actually more worried about your luck with men. Are you all right? I don’t like King Shesif—no, I actually dislike him very much, but you liked him, didn’t you, Ms. Eliza?”

Didn’t she want to become the king’s wife? I hope this incident doesn’t hurt her too much.

“I don’t like him at all,” Ms. Eliza said flatly. “He let me stay by his side, but that was all. He touched my hand, but he didn’t treat me like his other mistresses.”

“I see,” I replied. “I suppose he’s rather kind sometimes.”

“He was mocking me for being a child.”

“There are other, better men for you in the world,” I insisted. “Why don’t we drop by Ms. Roxy’s diner? Her place is usually packed with mercenaries and adventurers—many of these men are single.”

“Can you please not make it sound like my heart was broken?” Ms. Eliza sighed. She gave a smile of resignation. “I’ve reflected on my actions. I really

have. You've opened my eyes."

I nodded. She must've had a terrifying experience. She was captured by Mephisto and thrown into an alchemy pot while she was still alive. Her body melted away to form an awful monster. She must've been so scared, but she didn't cry, scream, or blame anyone. Instead, she reflected on her actions, making her seem like a girl who was actually nice—so much so that Henri felt compelled to protect her.

"Anyone can talk the talk," Mr. Julius said coldly before I could react.

I felt like he had just ruined a good moment; we were about to make up when the room suddenly turned icy. Ms. Eliza paled as Henri awkwardly looked at the floor.

"Mr. Julius, you're rather strict toward young and adorable girls!" I scolded, whirling around as fast as I could.

Ms. Eliza was likely slightly younger than me, as Henri was. I felt like we should generously watch over them—she even apologized. But Mr. Julius stared at the two with a frosty gaze, his back against the wall and his arms crossed.

"This good-natured idiot may have forgotten what you've said and done, but I haven't," he continued. "How much damage have you caused with your selfish actions? If you think simply reflecting on them will clean this mess up, you're gravely mistaken."

"Now, now," I chided. "Ms. Eliza's still young, and when you think about it, it all started because she fell in love with *you* at first sight. It's adorable, don't you think?"

"Adorable? How? Why would I care what a child like her thinks of me?"

"If you think she's a child, why don't you be a bit nicer to her? I'm just glad that she doesn't hate me anymore, and isn't that good enough?"

"Cut it out, you idiot. You're kind to a fault. Because of this foolish child, you almost died."

Well, this is an issue. Mr. Julius is getting angry at me too. I was used to it, and I didn't mind, but he was already intimidating enough. An angry Mr. Julius was

surely a frightful sight.

“Now, now,” I said, raising my hands and hoping that his anger would be quelled.

We came here to visit Ms. Eliza and see how she was doing, not to accuse her for what she’d done. I hadn’t planned on doing anything like that in the first place.

“You’re not kind, Julius Craft,” Ms. Eliza said, tears forming in her eyes. “You’re not kind at all. Henri’s much nicer to me.”

I couldn’t help but internally agree. *Yep. He’s not compassionate and won’t be kind unless he really needs to be.* I’d thought that he was recently becoming much kinder, but he generally was only nice to Helios.

“It’s because you’re spoiled by everyone around you,” Mr. Julius spat. “You received support by crying only because you had your rich father backing you up. That’s all. So, what did you do? You let that go to your head and committed a heinous crime. You opened your eyes because you had a scary experience? Don’t make me laugh. Even a child will put more thought into their actions.”

He was harsher than usual as he continued to rub copious amounts of salt into Ms. Eliza’s wounds.

“Calm down, Mr. Julius,” I said. As I stretched out to put my hands over his mouth, I knew that I didn’t seem mature. As an older sister, I wanted to say something to finish this conversation on a high note, but as long as Mr. Julius remained angry, that was impossible. “Ms. Eliza, Mr. Julius acts like this towards everyone,” I said. “Please don’t mind him.”

“I’m fine, Chloe,” Ms. Eliza replied. “Thank you. You really are kind and good-natured. But Julius is right. I was spoiled by everyone, and I believed that the world would bend to my wishes.”

Henri wiped the tears from Ms. Eliza’s eyes and looked up at Mr. Julius. “Your anger is justified, Lord Julius,” the young boy said. “Before Lady Eliza met the two of you, she may have been a bit prideful, but she had a kind side. She saved me and placed me by her side.”

“Henri finds her to be so dear, so I’m sure she has her fair share of good

points,” I added. “She just made a few mistakes. She was so enamored with your bewitching handsomeness that she strayed off the right path for a short while. That happens from time to time.”

I saw my sister, Aliza, in her. They were close in age, and I couldn’t help but compare the two. I was sure that Aliza had fallen into a similar trap. Because she met Mephisto, she’d strayed off the right path. If I had saved her, would I have been able to converse with her calmly like I did with Ms. Eliza? *I hope so. I have to believe in that.*

“Thank you, Henri,” Ms. Eliza said. “But it’s true that I’ve done something awful. I didn’t want to admit it and fled from the cell in Astria’s castle with my father. You arrived to save me, and then Mephisto appeared. He said that he’d lend me a hand, so I ended up accepting the offer.”

“Were you not afraid of Mephisto?” I asked.

“I thought that he was a very beautiful person. He saved me, and I believed him to be God, a being who could create a world according to my wishes.”

“I realized that the demon was up to no good, but I was unable to express my opinion to Ms. Eliza,” Henri said, gazing at the ground with regret.

“I’m sorry, Henri. You were so worried about me, and yet I refused to listen to your words,” she said sadly.

“No, I was powerless as well. I swore to protect you, but I couldn’t do a single thing.”

“I don’t mind. I’m fine with you just staying by my side.”

They stared at each other, reminding me of Jahala’s words from a while back. “*Are you two done?*” he’d said. “*I can wait here all day, so you may spend as much time as you’d like declaring your love for him.*” I wondered if this was how Jahala had felt. It was sweet and made me feel a tad impatient, but it was so wholesome that I didn’t mind watching over them forever.

I removed my hands from Mr. Julius’s mouth as we locked eyes. He gave me a deathly glare and I was terrified about what he’d say to me later.

“I think we’ll take our leave,” I announced, wanting to give the two lovebirds

time alone.

Henri and Ms. Eliza hastily stepped away from each other.

“Please wait,” Henri called. “I’m sorry. I knew that it’d be difficult for you to accept our one-sided apology. Lady Eliza said that she wanted to thank you when she fully recovered, Lady Chloe.”

“Well, I’ve already received a word of apology, so I’m good,” I replied, tilting my head to one side.

Wait... The Coldmans are wealthy. Will I get money? Or jewels? If they want to give me something, it’d be rude to refuse. I used up a ton of my alchemy bombs, and since Lumine’s joining our family, I’d never say no to more money.

“I’m planning on atoning for my actions, of course,” Ms. Eliza explained. “When I return to Astria, I’ll head straight to the guards. But I’d like to pay you back somehow, Chloe. I’ll do anything you tell me to do or give you anything you want. My father might not be as energetic as he once was, but I’d like to thank you in his stead as well.”

“Ms. Eliza,” I said after a bit of thought.

I was happy to receive the offer, and I was tempted by money and jewels for a split second, but this didn’t seem right. This wasn’t her money—it belonged to Coldman’s Merchandise. If I took all their money, the numerous employees would be left to wander the streets.

“I’ll discuss your punishment with Cyril when we return to Astria,” I said. “I don’t really have a particular thing that I want, but I do have a request.”

Ever since I transferred my shop, I wanted someone to sell my wares at the store on the main street of the royal capital. It’d allow me to focus more on creating items. Any special requests would probably be brought directly to me, but I was looking for someone who’d sell alchemy lamps, hot spring stones, and other items in my stead.

Ms. Natalia stated that she’d be coming home. Should that happen, I’d be so worried about the current state of my store that I could hardly relax at my new home. If Ms. Eliza and Henri came to work at my store, I was sure that their adorableness would attract customers, and I could have them take care of Ms.

Natalia in my stead. I'd be killing two birds with one stone.

Taking care of my master was the most difficult task of all. The mere memory of the atrocious filthiness of her house when she picked me up from the alleys still sent shivers down my spine.

"A request?" Ms. Eliza asked.

I couldn't tell her the details just yet. Nothing was set in stone, so it was best to keep quiet for now. She might need to serve time for her crime in accordance with Astria's laws, after all.

"Once I return and consult Cyril, I'll tell you all about it," I said. "I think he'll accept and even ask King Zeke for his assistance as well. I think Cyril will do that."

"Are you going to rely on Cyril Astria?" Mr. Julius asked, sounding angrier than before.

"You gotta use what you can," I reasoned with a carefree smile. "And if that's the former king, so be it. It's the basics of trade, Mr. Julius."

"U-Um!" Henri called as we tried to leave the room. "I'll also do whatever you tell me to! So, I'd like for you to make me your apprentice, Lord Julius!"

An apprentice. Wait...an apprentice?! Henri seemed as serious as ever. I tried to imagine Mr. Julius with an apprentice, but it didn't suit him at all. I bit my lip to suppress my laughter. Henri was dead serious, and it wasn't right to laugh in this situation.

"No," Mr. Julius declined.

Yeah, I expected as much. He gave his answer and left the room.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I don't think he's angry or anything."

As I tried to chase after him, Ms. Eliza feebly raised her finger and beckoned me to approach her. I obediently did so.

"I was fooled by his appearance," she whispered. "Julius is very scary. I think you might have less luck with men than me."

"I know he's scary, but he has his kind side," I said.

“Only towards you, Chloe.” She smiled at me.

I gently squeezed her hand. “Rest well. I’ll talk to you later.”

With that, we parted ways. I thought up an employee uniform that might suit Ms. Eliza if she ever agreed to work in my store. *Yeah, she’ll be super cute in it.*

◆ Never Underestimate the Wrath of a Jealous Man

I left Ms. Eliza's room to chase after Mr. Julius. All I'd done was lie in bed for the past couple of days, so even a light jog made me run out of breath. Mr. Julius stopped in the middle of a long, empty corridor, silently waiting for me to catch up.

"Why not take on an apprentice, Mr. Julius?" I asked. "But I wonder what he needs to be taught. Will Henri become a Dragon Knight, too?"

I finally caught up to him and stood beside him. I looked up at the tall man to engage in a conversation, but he grabbed my hand and wrapped an arm around my waist. I was wearing a white hospital gown. On top of that, I wore a thin jacket made of smooth fabric with strings that could be tied in the center. The jacket itself was long and covered much of my body.

I wasn't sure if Puerta Research Center controlled the temperature within their building using magic, but it was always faintly warm, and I didn't require thick clothing. I felt Mr. Julius's large, rugged hand through the thin fabric, causing me to jolt in response to his touch. As he pulled me close, he turned my body; before I knew it, my back was against the wall, and I was sandwiched by Mr. Julius. I had nowhere to flee.

Encapsulated by the much larger Mr. Julius, I noticed his collar standing up on his black robe, my eyes drawn to his sturdy collarbone and his slender yet muscular neck.

"Wh-What's wrong?" I squeaked. "Did a monster appear or something?"

He often pulled me close when danger was nearby, so I hastily scanned our surroundings—or well, I tried to, but he blocked my view of almost everything. I'd already learned that it'd do me no good to be nervous or enamored with his otherworldly beauty—emergencies weren't the time to start flirting.

"No," Mr. Julius replied curtly.

"A monster within Puerta?" I mumbled. "This isn't good. There are still people

going around trying to treat the wounded.”

“I said that nothing’s appeared,” he repeated gruffly.

“R-Really?”

Then why did he pull me close? I wondered. He gripped my hand tighter still and drew my waist closer to him, his long fingers entangled with mine. The Black Prince had a lower body temperature than I did and was cool to the touch, but as our bodies pressed up against each other, I felt him warm up to match my temperature. With the difference in warmth gone, the boundary where we touched each other started to blur.

As I put some strength into my fingertips, I was able to feel his rough skin. I felt his chest rise and fall with his steady breathing as our temperatures melted together. He hugged me tightly, the friction from our clothes rubbing together sounding especially loud.

Mr. Julius smelled like sand that had been dried by the sun. *Was he soaring through the desert skies on Helios while he wasn’t with me?*

“What’s wrong?” I asked in a low whisper, clutching onto his dark robe. “Is something the matter?” He held me so close, so tight, I couldn’t see his face.

“You’re overwhelmingly kind to others,” Mr. Julius finally said. “Do you understand what Cyril and Eliza did to you? How much will you forgive? You endanger yourself so much that I can’t just stand by and quietly watch over you.”

The hand on my waist moved up to my back. He pressed his forehead against my neck, his glossy, golden hair making my nape and cheeks feel ticklish. I could feel his sweet, moderately low voice in my eardrums and his breath caress my skin. My hammering heartbeat was deafening, and I was sure that my true thoughts were crystal clear to him.

My face grew warm, the heat slowly transferring to my entire body. I was happy that he was so worried about me and that he held me close. I still had some lingering fear of men, but for some reason, Mr. Julius didn’t make me shudder. It was embarrassing to admit, but I didn’t dislike his touch one bit.

“I don’t like staying angry for long,” I admitted.

“Yeah, I know,” Mr. Julius replied. “Still, you’re much too forgiving. It’s annoying to hear Cyril’s name on your lips.”

“You don’t like him, do you?”

“...You used to be engaged to him,” he growled.

“True, but that was a long time ago. He’s just a customer now.”

“I didn’t like how you made him a prosthetic arm either.”

“Really? I sold it to him for a good price, so I thought you’d be happy with the profit.”

Although Mr. Julius *did* seem grumpy while I was making the prosthetic arm, he generally was always grumpy, so I didn’t let it bother me. I thought that he was angry about Ms. Eliza—I never imagined the conversation would shift to Cyril. *Does Mr. Julius hate him that much? I always knew Mr. Julius disliked Cyril, but...*

“Chloe,” he whispered.

“Yes, Mr. Julius?” I replied.

I wasn’t sure if he was about to tell me something important or if he was going to lecture me for being good-natured, so I braced myself in his arms. Then, I felt a small stinging pain on my neck.

“Ow...” I muttered.

I gave a look of surprise as Mr. Julius pulled back, a faint smile dancing on his lips as he gazed down at me. My mind went blank for a moment. *Did he just...bite me?*

“Wh-What was that for?” I asked. “That hurt.”

“Be quiet for just a bit, will you?”

Why did he bite me? I don’t understand. It hurt and I’m really embarrassed now. I didn’t need a mirror to know that I was red from head to toe. I was blushing so hard that tears started to form in my eyes. The only thing I could do was lodge a complaint, but he sealed the distance between us, his golden locks masking my face like a curtain.

“Mr. Juli—” I started.

His lips brushed against mine as though he was trying to bite me. He literally took my breath away before kissing me deeply. His arms wrapped around me so tightly that I felt like my bones might pop. I’d kissed him multiple times before, but he was more forceful than usual, just a bit more reckless, and he kissed me so hard that I felt our bodies melting away together. I furrowed my brows just a little. Still, I didn’t hate it.

We were in the middle of a corridor, in full view for anyone to see. *But I don’t have the strength to fight back.* My strength left the fingers clutching onto his clothes. *Layla did say that Mr. Julius seemed like the jealous type. Is he angry that I’m trying to rely on Cyril regarding Ms. Eliza’s issue? Is he jealous right now?*

It can’t be. It can’t be, right? He isn’t the type, right? The moment I realized why he was so grumpy, my body grew even warmer. He pulled away and stared at my face; I knew I was wearing an unbelievable expression. I was so embarrassed that I could only look down.

“Helios is waiting for you, but you can’t go out yet,” Mr. Julius said. “I can’t show that face of yours to others.”

“It’s all your fault,” I insisted.

“Get used to it already, Chloe.”

“...Don’t be unreasonable.”

Simply being in his embrace made me feel like my heart was about to burst. *It’s all his fault.* He usually wasn’t so sweet to me, but every now and then, he’d suddenly transform into a different person. I couldn’t be the one to blame.

Mr. Julius leaned on the wall of the corridor, waiting for me to calm down.

Layla, who happened to suddenly pass by, hid her mouth with her iron fan and giggled with a “My, oh my.”

She didn’t try to strike up a conversation with us, but that didn’t help how embarrassed I felt to have been seen in that moment.

◆ Lumine Marries into Our Family

I'D been bedridden for only a few days, but it seemed like I still lost quite a bit of my stamina. I felt tired simply walking through the long corridors of Puerta Research Center as Mr. Julius and I made our way to Helios.

I couldn't move for a while after what Mr. Julius had done to me in the corridor. He patiently waited for me to regain my cool, but as I simply couldn't settle down, he picked me up and brought me to my room once. After catching my breath, we finally decided to head over to Helios. I wanted to see our precious dragon as soon as I could, but it was all Mr. Julius's fault that it didn't happen sooner.

After I visited Ms. Eliza, Mr. Julius was finally satisfied and accepted that I felt better now. There was no need for me to wear the hospital gown anymore, and while I wasn't wearing a headkerchief, I donned my usual apron dress. This outfit made me feel the most at ease, as though I was back at home.

Is my place in Astria doing okay? I wondered. I hoped that Ms. Gazey wasn't lonely. I knew that she didn't have feelings, but I was still worried about her.

"I yearn for Ms. Roxy's cooking," I said. "Don't you, Mr. Julius?"

Though I was finally able to step outside of my room, it was on the condition that Mr. Julius was always by my side. I was grateful to see him so worried about me. Puerta Research Center was so large that it was easy to get lost in, as Jahala had warned before. It was quite a long way until we reached the garden-like hall where Helios was from the hospital ward. Mr. Julius slowly walked by my side, matching my pace.

He always had longer strides and was much quicker than me, but ever since I ran out of magic and fainted, he has been nice to me just like how he is with his dragon. I was used to him tugging on my ear and dragging me along, so I wasn't too familiar with his kind side and it delighted me to experience it. These things can change at the drop of a hat, so I decided to savor his kindness for now.

When he becomes fully convinced that I'm back to full strength, he might revert to his usual, crass self.

“Let’s go meet Ms. Roxy once we return to Astria,” I said. “We should bring back a few souvenirs too. I wonder what Rasheed is known for. Do they have any local specialties? Do you think a cookbook from Rasheed would be a suitable gift? Ah, but Astria doesn’t have any sand lizard meat, so it might not be a useful present.”

I chattered away as usual while we walked down the long, white corridors, feeling myself run out of breath. I felt a bit pathetic that I was getting tired from simply walking and talking.

“Is this conversation worth pushing yourself?” Mr. Julius asked wearily at my side.

He kindly matched my stride, but I was oddly happy to hear his usual biting tone and breathed a sigh of relief. It made me uneasy to see him constantly worried about me. I was the strongest alchemist and a young, beautiful maiden—I wanted to protect Mr. Julius. Or at least, I hoped I could.

“But I haven’t been able to talk this much in a while,” I reasoned. “And you don’t talk much, so if I don’t fill the void, we’ll just have silence settle in between us.”

“Do you not like silence?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t hate it but...”

I stopped talking and started thinking. I didn’t particularly dislike silence or quiet spaces. When I first started living with Mr. Julius, he talked so little that I felt like I needed to force a conversation with him somehow. I may have wanted to build a good relationship with him, but I also was probably afraid that he’d realize my empty words. I kept calling myself an alchemist and a young maiden of rare beauty. If he noticed that I was only putting on a tough front and was actually quite vulnerable inside, he could’ve underestimated me—I didn’t want that.

But things were different now. I like him very much, and my trust in him was probably greater than my feelings of affection. The silence that settled in

between us didn't feel suffocating or awkward. Every now and then, my heart would skip a beat, and I'd become embarrassed or feel my chest grow tight, but that was a separate issue entirely.

Then why do I want to talk with him so much? What compels me to open my mouth? I think...

"Yeah," I finally said. "I think...it's because it'd be a waste if I didn't talk."

"A waste?" Mr. Julius asked.

"For a long time now, I had no one to talk to. As far as I can remember, I could only feel at ease and speak my true thoughts with my mother. Once she passed, I had no one to have a real heart-to-heart conversation with."

My mother's face and voice, along with Ms. Natalia's, flashed across my mind. I respected and trusted my master very much, but she left me suddenly, and she wasn't someone I could speak so casually with. I was very fond of Ms. Roxy, but we didn't have a relationship where I could tell her everything.

"You listen to everything I say, so I guess I feel like I want to tell you everything," I confessed. "You act weary and tell me to shut up often, but you give me a response every now and then, and you entertain my thoughts too."

Above all, he stayed by my side. That alone made it feel like I'd be okay no matter what.

"...But you're out of breath," Mr. Julius pointed out.

"I need to exercise a bit to regain my stamina," I replied. "In a few days, I'll be back to full strength!"

"Yeah. I don't get tired of hearing your voice. Your perkiness helps me remember that we're not in a war zone."

He took my hand and interlaced his fingers with mine. He brushed his lips on the back of my hand like he was saying a prayer. My face grew beet red. I was certain that something just exploded in my mind. *I feel like he's been touching me more too.* Mr. Julius stared right at me, his lips still on the back of my hand.

"There are other ways of exercising than talking, you know," he murmured, his breath tickling my skin.

“H-Helios is waiting for us!” I hastily cried. “Let’s go!”

I didn’t quite understand his words, but they seemed to hide a deeper meaning that scared me. He was probably teasing me as he let out a throaty chuckle.

“I want to eat the food that you make,” he said, answering my initial question.



THE Dragon Knights must’ve still been at the Holy Palace. There weren’t many dragons remaining within the vast garden. Quite a few soldiers were still recovering from the battle, so it wasn’t as though the place was totally devoid of dragons.

Brown and green dragons flew about, though Ares and Orpheus were nowhere to be seen. Ares must’ve left with Prince Faisal, while Orpheus flew off with Ruto for the Holy Palace.

“Helios!” I called the moment Mr. Julius and I reached him.

The dragon immediately sensed us and raised his head before giving a large flap of his wings to reach my side. He blinked with his large, golden eyes and stared intently at me while approaching. After carefully inspecting me from head to toe, the magnificent dragon rubbed his pointy snout against me. I petted Helios’s smooth, cold mouth.

“Hshhh...” Helios purred, letting out an odd cry from the back of his throat.

I’d never heard him sound like that before. He closed his eyes, his snout glued against my face, and I used both arms to hug him as tightly as I could. He was large, so it looked more like I was clinging to him, but as I glomped him, he let out a soft cry, acting spoiled.

When we were fighting against Mephisto and Samael, Helios constantly tried to protect me. As I pulled away from him, I gazed into his intense, golden eyes that were peering at me.

“Thank you for fighting by my side, Helios,” I said gratefully. “Thank you so much for protecting me.”

Helios blinked a few times before he raised his head. “Rawr!” he cried

proudly.

I felt like he was saying, “Of course!”

“He’s been worried about you,” Mr. Julius said, gently placing a hand on the dragon’s neck. “He caught your scent on me, and he was angry about why he wasn’t allowed to meet you.”

Helios gazed down at Mr. Julius and gave a low, guttural growl from the back of his throat. The dragon indeed sounded a touch miffed as he narrowed his golden eyes, reminding me of an adolescent son who was going through a rebellious phase.

“Don’t sulk,” Mr. Julius said. “She’s fine now.”

“Thank you so much for being so worried about me, Helios!” I cried. “But as you can see, I’m good as new! Once we return to Astria, let’s give you a nice bath. I know there’s a lot of sand and dust in Rasheed. You must feel a bit icky covered in it.”

Helios’s eyes glimmered with joy. *We last washed him in the yard of our new home. That feels like ages ago.*

“I’d like to cutely decorate our new abode,” I continued. “Rasheed has a lot of cute furniture, fabric, and alchemy lamps. Let’s buy a few and take them with us. It’ll be our small splurge. It doesn’t hurt to go on a shopping spree every now and then.”

“I thought you didn’t like to use money,” Mr. Julius said. “This is rare.”

“Well, we worked hard, didn’t we? We should reward ourselves every now and then. Which leads me to my next question.” I continued to pat Helios, who was happily poking me with his snout, as I looked up at Mr. Julius. “What should we do about your wages?”

“My wages?”

“You work very well, but I haven’t been able to repay you one bit. You protected Astria, but we were busy moving into a new place, and we flew off to Rasheed without a moment to spare. We haven’t been able to discuss it much, have we?”

I first bought him with money, but it had turned into a bitter memory now. Back then, I hadn't put much thought into the gravity of my purchase. I'd only heard that Mr. Julius was very strong and up for sale, so I decided to take the plunge. I found my actions back then to be arrogant. I didn't regret them, but I was being shallow-minded and far too reckless.

"I'm your slave," Mr. Julius insisted. "Are you planning on paying a slave?" He sounded indifferent and clearly wasn't interested in the money.

"Why don't we stop that?" I suggested. "Shall we just take off that collar now? And we're planning on having Ruto try to erase that mark on your neck. You and I are..."

Calling him a slave made me feel uneasy. The word implied that he was offering everything to me. While that was nice, I felt like there was a gap that couldn't be buried between us—as though Mr. Julius might leave me and go far away one day.

He treated me like a precious treasure and gave his all to protect me. He could only do so because he was strong. And yet, he seemed to exclude himself from receiving the same treatment. He was important to me, and he should be protected too. I hated to see him cast himself aside like he didn't matter.

"Um, you and I are..." I repeated.

What are we? Partners? Lovers? But that doesn't sound quite right either...

"You and I are family," I finished.

Yeah, that sounds the most right to me. Mr. Julius tousled my hair roughly. *Ouch.*

"If we're family, then all the more reason not to pay me," he said. "If your money is mine too, then I don't need a salary."

"Then how about an allowance?" I asked, straightening out my messed-up hair.

Mr. Robert, the owner of an armory and weaponry store, worked to support his family. He apparently gave all his money to his wife, and he was given 10,000 gold a month which he was free to do with as he wished.

He'd taught me a lesson. "Money's tight, Ms. Chloe," he'd said. "I hope you can buy a lot more so that you can help me support my family. Or I'd be grateful if you could give me a discount on the items you're selling. Can't you give me half-off on this Diamond of Eternity?"

I was desperately trying to hold back and not offer any sympathy toward Mr. Robert, who squeezed his family affairs into business. If I kept feeling bad for him and gave him discounts, I'd go bankrupt. Above all, Mr. Robert wasn't particularly poor.

"An allowance..." Mr. Julius said, placing a hand over his mouth.

He then let out a jovial laugh as though he was unable to suppress his amusement.

"What?" I demanded. "What's so funny? I'm being serious here, Mr. Julius! Mr. Robert receives an allowance from his wife! I can't give you a whole lot, but you know, you can have *some* money."

I tugged on his clothing as he continued to laugh at me. *Mr. Julius isn't my slave. He's my family!* If that was the case, it wasn't right for him to be penniless. He was twenty-five and an adult; surely, he'd want to purchase a few things. In fact, it was normal for a man of his age to have some items in mind.

"I don't need it," he said after a good laugh. "You can take care of the money. We can remain as we are."

He tousled my hair once more. Helios gave a look of surprise before happily poking Mr. Julius with his snout. *Yeah, it's rare to see Mr. Julius laugh this openly. I can totally understand why Helios seems so happy.*

I heard the flap of wings and noticed Lumine approaching Helios. This was my second encounter with her. The first time, she was with her father, Lambda, and I didn't get a chance to touch her directly.

Lambda was currently at the Holy Palace with Prince Faisal and the rest of the Dragon Knights. He had no choice but to leave Lumine behind. There were a lot of female dragons in this garden, and I assumed they were waiting here for their parents to return.

Is Lumine lonely? If she and Lambda were as close as Mr. Julius and Helios,

she would undoubtedly feel all alone. I'd one-sidedly assumed that Lumine would become Helios's wife, but I never heard her thoughts directly. Perhaps I was just pushing my feelings onto her. There was a chance that the two dragons had happened to become friends and nothing more. *Will Lumine come to my house? If she does, will she become friends with me?*

"Helios, this lady here is Lumine, right?" I asked the dragon, extremely nervous.

I felt like a mother heading for an arranged marriage meeting with her son. If Helios's lover made me this nervous, I wondered what would happen if I had a son who brought his partner to me one day. *Would I be just as nervous and squeak out a greeting somehow?* I automatically thought of a smaller Mr. Julius and hastily shook my head. *Argh, what am I even thinking?!*

"Why do you sound so reserved?" Mr. Julius asked.

"Well, it's the first time I'm meeting this young lady, and as Helios's mother, I'd like to make a good first impression," I stated.

"You're already acting very unnatural."

"How so? I'm trying to convey that I'm a reliable, kind mother who can be kind to my son's bride, too!"

You were just laughing seconds ago. You're so harsh. Still, this exchange made me feel at ease. A sharp-tongued Mr. Julius and my usual attire made me feel right at home.

I noticed Lumine blinking quizzically at me. She had smooth scales and was smaller than Helios. Her wings and tail were a bit shorter too. She was a touch rounder and smaller, making her head seem larger on her body. It gave her a bit of a juvenile charm—she looked absolutely adorable.

All the female dragons looked similar, so it wasn't like Lumine was especially small or round, but I thought she looked cuter than the others. *Am I being biased like a doting parent? I'm not Lumine's mom, though.*

Lumine gave a soft cry and stuck her head out toward us in greeting. Helios stood beside her, stretched his neck out, and gave a gentle cry in turn.

“Nice to meet you, Lumine,” I said. “This man over here is Helios’s dad, Mr. Julius. And I’m Chloe.”

She gently poked my chest with her snout, encouraging me to touch her. I took her kind offer and stroked her forehead. She felt just like Helios, smooth and cold to the touch, and just a little damp. She seemed rather aggressive with Lambda (or was perhaps just being a bit rough when playing with him), but she now seemed like a composed lady.

“Grr... Grr...” she purred as I continued to pet her. She closed her eyes in the most adorable expression ever.

Yup. She’s cute. She’s a real cutie. Girls are cute. I thought sons were cute, but a daughter is just as adorable. I couldn’t suppress the smile forming on my lips. Lumine was just so, *so darn* cute, and humans smile when touching cute things.

“Lumine, huh,” Mr. Julius mused before offering a word of praise. “She’s a beautiful dragon.” He seemed satisfied, as though it was only natural that Helios’s choice was a real beauty.

“Lumine, will you become Helios’s bride?” I asked her. “You’ll be coming with us to Astria Kingdom. If you leave Rasheed, you’ll also be apart from Lambda. I know that’ll make you lonely...”

The moment she heard Lambda’s name, she opened her eyes and gave a soft cry of protest. “I’ll be just fine!” she seemed to be saying.

Like Helios, she seemed to understand human languages completely. Dragons were smart, and those raised by humans might’ve learned our language. We couldn’t understand what these dragons were saying one bit, making them much smarter and stronger than us. Lambda had called dragons the messengers of God. *I think Samael said the same thing. In fact, he seemed to hate dragons. If that’s true, Helios, Lumine, and the others might really be messengers of God.*

“Seems like it’s not a problem to her,” Mr. Julius said with a wry smile.

If Helios took the same stance with Mr. Julius, would he be in shock? I doubted that his dragon would ever sound so defiant. Lumine stepped away from me to rub her head against Helios’s neck. The black dragon, in turn, rubbed his forehead against hers. They seemed to get along very well, and it was a

wholesome sight to take in.

“I’m so glad to hear it,” I said. “Congratulations, Helios! You’ve got an adorable bride, and I’m happy to have a growing family.” I clapped my hands to bless them both.

“Rawr,” Helios replied.

He then gently bit Lumine’s neck. This act was *very* familiar to me—I’d experienced it myself. I gasped, my hands shooting to a certain spot on my own neck. Lumine gently bit Helios back right in front of our eyes. It was wholesome and adorable, but that wasn’t what filled my mind.

“It’s how dragons express their affection,” Mr. Julius said, crossing his arms, seemingly unbothered. “They bite each other’s necks and become mates. I’ve read about it in books, but I’ve never seen it for myself.”

He gazed down at me, red as a tomato, frantically holding my neck, and pointed to his own. He gently tugged on the black string around his neck.



He revealed his sturdy yet slender collarbone that sexily framed his neckline.

“Chloe,” he said meaningfully.

“I-I’m not a dragon!” I stammered. “I, um, erm...”

“I know you’re not a dragon. That much is clear.”

“Uh, so, um...”

Is he telling me to bite his neck? I can’t do that! Absolutely not! It’s way too embarrassing! I felt like he was upping the ante way too quickly. I knew that he told me to get used to all this, but there was no way I could. *Impossible. Completely impossible!*

“Um, c-could you let me off the hook with your hands?” I asked.

“Hands?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Like holding hands or something...”

I covered my face with both of my hands as I managed to squeak out my thoughts. When no reply came, I timidly looked at him, and he was gazing down at me with an evil smirk on his face.

It was then that Ms. Natalia happened to pass by the artificial sky in the garden on her broom.

“My, oh my,” she said, just like how Layla had done earlier that day.

I was going to die of embarrassment at this rate. I was irked by how composed Mr. Julius was, but to my annoyance, I just loved him too much.

◆ An Invitation to a Banquet and a Double Date

PRINCE Faisal and Lambda returned from the Holy Palace well after I made a full recovery. Layla informed me and Mr. Julius of the prince's return, and the two of us followed her to the grand hall.

It'd been a while since I saw Faisal, but he looked sterner and fiercer than before, as though something inside him had changed. When Layla ran up to him and he held her in a tight embrace, I hastily averted my gaze. Since they were having an intimate moment, I thought it was best to let them be for a while.

Unfortunately, curiosity won me over, and I couldn't help but glance at them periodically. They were so close to me, and I started to grow embarrassed. I remembered what Ms. Natalia and Layla had said as they passed by Mr. Julius and me sharing a moment—I understood how they felt all too well now.

It'd been a while since Lambda reunited with his daughter, and he outstretched his arms to pull Lumine into a tight embrace, but she poked his head with all her might.

"Stop it, Dad!" she seemed to say.

"Good girl!" Lambda said happily, receiving Lumine's attacks with his brawny physique. "You're energetic today too, I see!"

I guessed that this was how these two communicated.

"And you're so friendly with Helios!" Lambda's voice boomed. "Your daddy here couldn't be happier!"

Lumine fled from his embrace and hid behind Helios. The black dragon glanced between the two before he outstretched his neck and wings to hide her from her father. I placed both hands over my heart, unable to take this cuteness. *Helios is protecting his lady! He's so brave and valiant! He's so cool!* I thought.

"Julius, Chloe, if she ever gives birth to a child, you *must* inform me

immediately,” Lambda insisted, whirling around to face us. “I’ll fly over there in a flash.”

“I heard you the first time,” Mr. Julius said, as unfriendly as ever.

Still, the fact that he responded at all implied that he didn’t dislike Lambda.

“And I’ll keep repeating myself!” Lambda cried. “Please show me Lumine’s child! She’s always been quite the fussbudget. It mattered not the number of male dragons who tried to mate with my adorable Lumine. She took no notice of them! And yet, she’s fallen in love at first sight with Helios! This is a miracle!”

“So, Lumine was popular with the men...” I replied in awe.

I wasn’t sure how romance worked between dragons, but Helios was very popular with the ladies as well. Many dragons were watching Helios and Lumine from a distance. While some seemed unable to give up on their love, others had seemingly thrown in the towel and gathered around Ares, Faisal’s dragon. Ares didn’t seem interested as he closed his eyes and folded his wings to sleep.

“Please be at ease, Lambda,” I assured him. “If we get an egg, I’ll be sure to tell you.”

“I’m counting on you, Chloe,” Lambda begged. “You *have* to tell me. Don’t you forget it.”

“I won’t! Don’t worry!” I replied with my chest puffed out. Since his dragon was marrying into my family, I planned on treating him like an important relative.

“When you return to Astria, Helios and Lumine will tag along, yeah?” Lambda asked. “I’m guessing that you will return to Astria once Prince Faisal settles on how to reward you.”

“Yes, that’s the plan,” I replied.

Did he just say, “reward”? I couldn’t help but smile at the term. Jahala had told me important information regarding the angels of Seraphim and my father. I made a request of Ruto to attempt to remove the seal on Mr. Julius, and I even received Lumine as Helios’s bride. I’d already received more than enough, but there was no need for me to decline a kind offer.

I didn't mind gratefully accepting anything that came my way. As the saying goes, "there's no such thing as a free lunch," and if Prince Faisal insisted on giving us a reward, I found no reason to refuse. Money was important, and if Mr. Julius wanted another dragon, it was best to have my wallet prepared.

As the keeper of our family's funds, it was best to have as much money as possible.

"I see," Lambda said. "Then I suppose I must sadly part ways with her soon. Lumine, let's get you all prepared so that you can go off to marry! Let's give you a bath!"

"Rar!" Lumine cried. For the first time, she gave a happy response.

Does she like to take baths? I guess she's just like any other lady and must love washing herself. I'm sure of it. If both Helios and Lumine like to take baths, would they like it if I make one big enough for the two of them? It'll be impossibly huge, but it's not impossible to make.

"A dragon hot spring... Dragon's Bath... 50,000 gold a night..." I mumbled.

"What are you muttering about?" Mr. Julius asked.

"Mr. Julius, how do you feel about managing a hot spring inn? Should we do it?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"I thought it'd be nice to have a large bath for the Dragon Knights. All the dragons could take a dip in a hot spring and stay the night or something."

"Can you make one?"

"The amazing thing about alchemy is that you can make anything if you put your mind to it," I declared.

"I see... A bath for Helios..."

He gazed at the ground pensively, rubbing his chin. *Is he taking this idea pretty seriously?* I was just spitballing here, and I hoped that he didn't ask me to dig for a hot spring vein or anything. *Well, there's no need for that.* My alchemy hot spring stone could easily take care of it. All I needed was land large enough where I wouldn't get in trouble for making a massive hot spring.

While Mr. Julius and I were discussing specifics, Layla and Prince Faisal approached us, having finished their intimate reunion.

“It’s been a while, you two,” Faisal said to us. “It’s only been several days, but it feels like so long ago. I heard from Layla that you’ve recovered quite a bit, Chloe. How do you feel? Are you all right?”

I gave a quick bow and answered, “I’m good as new, thank you!”

“How was the state of the research facility, Faisal?” Mr. Julius asked without offering a greeting first. He crossed his arms and stood next to me.

“We closed the facility,” Faisal replied. “The buildings that conducted dragon enhancements—no, rather modifications—were torn down. They’re all under the sand now. We’ll no longer treat dragons as tools. You have my word on that.”

“Are you referring to Fores Research Facility?” I asked, looking up at Mr. Julius for confirmation.

He gave a small nod. “Yeah. Internal strife within the nation may have been suppressed, but Rasheed has been modifying dragons for many years in addition to their Otherworld research. There are no guarantees that they *won’t* repeat their mistakes.”

I nodded back. While I hoped that Rasheed wouldn’t do stuff like this again, there were no guarantees.

“I’ll consult with Jahala on how to treat the employees that were involved with Fores Research Facility,” Faisal said. “Unfortunately, many were simply involved in Otherworld research. No one knows where their headquarters are located, and even the royal family isn’t aware.”

“I see,” I replied. “But then how was the facility shut down?”

“We’ve got Ruto. We asked her for the location, and when we went to check, someone had already destroyed the underground facility. The researchers were all safe and had been gathered in the building above ground, but that place is more décor than anything. Even if it remains, if the underground structure is destroyed, the research facility is practically closed down.”

“Someone shut it down?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Yeah. I’m guessing it was— No, never mind. There are many who bear a grudge against Fores Research Facility. We don’t know who was behind it for certain, but once we rescued the researchers, we destroyed the building above ground too, and buried it under the sand. I’d like to think that we’re all right now. As long as I’m king, I don’t plan on repeating this mistake.”

“I see.” Mr. Julius’s response was curt, but he seemed to be satisfied. Since he didn’t say anything more, he no longer felt the need to press the issue. In other words, he trusted Faisal. I felt my chest grow warm at this realization.

This was a man who didn’t seem interested in or concerned about other people. I was happy to learn that Mr. Julius could still put his faith in others. Faisal gave a deep bow towards me.

“I’m truly grateful to both of you,” he said. “Rasheed was able to reclaim its peace thanks to you guys.”

“Huh? We didn’t do much,” I replied, embarrassed to receive words of gratitude.

I didn’t deny that we worked hard, but we also lost quite a bit as well. In fact, there were many things and people that I’d failed to protect. Layla told me to hold my head up high, but I found it difficult to do.

“That’s not true,” Faisal replied. “Had it not been for you two, I doubt we would’ve been able to chase away the demon. Chloe, Julius, I cannot thank you both enough.”

“You can’t attain peace so easily,” Mr. Julius said upon receiving Faisal’s deep appreciation.

The prince raised his head and gave a forced laugh. “You’re exactly right. We have a mountain of issues to tackle from here. In lieu of my brother, I believe that I must protect my nation and my family.”

“Then is King Shesif...” I started.

“My brother isn’t unscathed, but he’s still alive.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.”

I didn't like King Shesif one bit, but that didn't mean that I wished unhappiness upon him. He was also desperate to save Princess Minne. I was sure of it. All he wanted to do was protect his sister, but because Samael came from the Otherworld, the king's values grew twisted. Mr. Julius gave a weary sigh. *I know, I know. I'm a good-natured idiot. You're right.*

"Shall we cut the serious talk?" Layla interjected. She'd been quietly by her beloved's side, waiting for an opportunity to speak. "Prince Faisal, you'd like to reward Julius and Chloe for their acts, no?"

"That's right," Faisal agreed. "The Holy Palace has calmed down quite a bit, and we'd like to host a banquet there in honor of you two. It's also a celebration to convey to the citizens of Rasheed that our internal strife has ended."

"And you're telling us to participate?" Mr. Julius asked with knitted brows.

He's quick to reply. He must really not want to go.

"Why do you seem so displeased?" I asked.

"It's a pain," he replied curtly.

"But a banquet sounds lovely!" I exclaimed. "And since we're being invited to this party, we'll get *free* food and alcohol."

A meal that didn't require any money was the best thing in the world. If I were to borrow Mr. Roge's words, I was being baited by free grub.

"Can Julius drink alcohol?" Prince Faisal asked.

"Oh, he can," I replied proudly in his stead. "And he's got a very high tolerance. Even after downing a pint of red wine, he won't get drunk."

I'd never seen Mr. Julius get drunk and I always was curious to see how he'd act when he was.

"I see," Faisal said excitedly. "That's good to know. As an event at the banquet, why don't we hold a drinking contest, Julius?"

"Prince Faisal, I can only see a future where you lose horribly," Layla said with a look of exasperation, hiding her mouth behind her fan. "Why don't you give it a rest?"

The Holy Palace was already making preparations for the banquet, and Prince Faisal suggested that we stay at the palace for a few days as guests until the day of the party. Ms. Natalia and Jahala were even attending. I'd expected Ms. Natalia to refuse the invitation—she hated these occasions more than Mr. Julius—but when Faisal offered a 2000-year-old sweet wine at the banquet, she decided to attend.

"I think both you and Julius will look gorgeous in formal attire and accessories," Layla said happily, snapping her fan shut. "Your current clothes look lovely too, of course, but we've got some outfits made of fine material, and this will be quite the banquet. I remember that the two of you were dressed up when we initially met at the Holy Palace, but there was no time to relax and enjoy the party, was there? This will be a celebration, so I'm sure it'll be tons of fun. I'm not a fan of nobles gathering together, but if you're there, Chloe, I can be swayed."

"Um, Layla, to tell you the truth, I'm not fond of such gatherings either," I confessed.

"I can tell just by looking at you."

"You can?"

"You used to be engaged to Cyril Astria, correct? As Chloe Sagrid, you were the daughter of a duke. But it's difficult to imagine you mingling with the other nobles at parties and such. In other words, you never really acted like a noble, I'm guessing." After a pause, Layla added, "Oh, I'm not trying to be rude. I mean it in a good way."

I could feel Mr. Julius growing angrier by the second. *Is he jealous?* I couldn't stop the loud pounding of my heart. I felt like a child who finally had her first love requited. This analogy wasn't totally wrong, but I was an adult and wanted to act more composed. I wanted to be as cool as Layla, who was able to confidently hug her beloved passionately and display her affection in front of others.

"Since we've got the opportunity though, why don't we dress up lavishly and enjoy the party?" Layla suggested. "One of the joys of being a lady is to get dressed in lovely attire. Men can dress up too, of course. This is where I show

you the power of the ladies-in-waiting of House Fatima! We'll make Chloe so stunningly beautiful that you'll groan upon catching a glimpse of her, Julius!"

I stroked my dry cheeks and tugged on the strands of my coarse hair. I didn't really have time to take good care of my appearance and I couldn't even remember the last time I wore any makeup. My heart was that of a beautiful maiden, but I was pushing a more natural look. That didn't mean that I disliked wearing beautiful dresses and lovely accessories. I simply didn't find the need to spend money on myself.

"No need to do anything unnecessary," Mr. Julius said indifferently. "She's fine as she is."

He seemed completely uninterested. *I expected as much.*

"Now, now, don't say that, Julius," Layla replied. "Ah, you must be worried that men will try to steal Chloe away when she's decked to the nines."

"With your beauty, Layla, I'm always worried about men trying to woo you," Prince Faisal added seriously.

"I'm not talking with you right now, am I?" she responded, completely ignoring the passionate confession.

The prince looked a little lonely. He tried his best to convey his honest thoughts, but Layla didn't seem to notice it one bit. *Maybe it's these types of interactions that'll lead to Faisal exploding one day.*

"Thank you, Layla," I said. "I'm looking forward to a lovely banquet. But do we have to head to the Holy Palace as soon as possible?"

She blinked at me quizzically. "Do you have something to do? Or a place to be?"

"Well, since we're in Rasheed, I wanted to do some sightseeing and shopping. I haven't done anything like that at all since I arrived here."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. You've only seen the ugly sides of Rasheed. Our nation has its fair share of wonder and charm. We're the global leader when it comes to processing jewels, and our alchemy and magical tools are also more advanced than the rest of the world."

“I definitely agree with you on that,” I said. “Astria doesn’t have mystical places like Puerta. We’re underground, but there’s a breeze coming through. Plants grow here, and we’ve got enough water and even a sky.”

“Both Puerta and Fores are special facilities even within Rasheed,” Faisal said, regaining a bit of his gusto after he’d been rebuffed by Layla. “In fact, I’m not quite sure of these places myself. But I think it’s fun to explore even our holy capital. While the hellfire that Emperor Oswald of Dystiana rained upon our nation still lingers, the only saving grace was that there wasn’t much damage to the city despite our numerous clashes. You’ve still got several days until the banquet, and that should be more than enough time to leisurely explore the city. We can prepare a room for you both in the Holy Palace. Why don’t you stay there for a short while?”

“Prince Faisal, perhaps we shouldn’t be too crass,” Layla countered. “There are many people wandering around the Holy Palace, and our guests won’t be able to relax. We should find a lovely lodging for them within the holy city so that they can spend time there in peace.”

“Ah, you’re right.”

“The holy city is very large, so why don’t I be your guide?” she offered, turning to us. “One of my hobbies is to sneak out and secretly explore the city. I think I can show you to good restaurants and reasonable places to shop at. You can leave all of that to me. Before we do that, Astria and Rasheed operate on different currencies. I must guide you to a currency exchange shop first.”

Mr. Julius was always a man of few words, so his silence wasn’t anything new, but even I didn’t have a chance to butt in as Layla swiftly tried to arrange everything for us. *But she has a point. Maybe it’s best to accept her kind offer and have her take care of us. When in Rasheed, do as the Rasheedans do.* I wasn’t well-informed about Rasheed, and having a guide like Layla was very heartening.

“Thank you, Layla,” I said. “You’re a huge help.”

“Don’t mention it. We’re friends, aren’t we?” she replied, grasping my hands with a smile.

“We are!”

I felt my heart skip a beat when an enchanting beauty like Layla smiled at me. I had no doubt that a man would fall for her in an instant if she treated them this kindly. *A magical smile that could defeat any enemy in one shot.* A siren-like beauty was a fitting description for her.

“Chloe, what kind of place would you like to stay at?” she asked. “A romantic spot would be best, right? I know of a good place in the holy city, right by a lake. It really sets the mood. I think it’s a perfect getaway spot for lovers.”

“D-Did you stay there with someone before, Layla?” Faisal asked worriedly.

“Goodness, it’s not right to pry into a woman’s affairs, Prince Faisal,” Layla replied.

“But...”

“Since this is the perfect opportunity, why don’t we stay a night there too? Things shall get busy once we return to the Holy Palace, I’d think. No one could fault us for relaxing for just one day before that,” she said.

“Are you sure, Layla?” he asked, eyes wide.

“Is there a problem with my suggestion?”

“None at all.”

I was in awe. The prince was practically dancing in the palm of her hand. This was in stark contrast to my relationship with Mr. Julius—I was the one being led around by the nose. *This is something I should learn.*

“Mr. Julius, um...” I started.

“What?” he asked.

“N-Nothing.”

I tried to say something that would sound seductive, but when I looked up at his face, I gave up immediately. There was no way I could compete with Layla.

“We’ll be enjoying Rasheed for a few days, be present for the banquet, and then return to Astria,” I said. “It’ll be a bit longer until we get back home, but is that not a problem with you?”

“There’s no need to rush. If you’re fine with it, I am too,” Mr. Julius replied

curtly. He gently patted Helios's neck. Helios was politely waiting with his wings folded in, all curled up. "You can fly with Chloe on your back again. We made you wait for quite a bit, didn't we?"

Helios opened his eyes and gave a happy cry. A good distance away, a couple of soldiers were giving Lumine a good wash. Lambda's boisterous laughter echoed throughout the space, his large body covered in suds.

◆ The Scars of Hellfire

I bid farewell to the employees of Puerta Research Center. I was grateful that they treated me so well, but it was time for us to head to Holy City Altstadt.

Henri and Ms. Eliza also saw us off. The young boy hadn't given up on his endeavor to become Mr. Julius's apprentice.

"I'll visit you when we return to Astria!" Henri had called.

Ms. Eliza had recovered enough to walk on her own. She gave us a deep bow and stated, "I won't run anymore. I promise to atone for my sins."

Mr. Coldman had also regained consciousness. Perhaps due to the aftereffects of being turned into a monster, he'd lost a large chunk of his memories and was rather confused by his situation. He didn't even recognize Ms. Eliza or Henri.

They planned on returning to Astria once things had settled for them. They vowed to atone for their sins—while I knew Mr. Julius would be furious at me, I decided to consult Cyril about their punishment. I wanted a part-time shop girl to sell my wares, and with the return of Ms. Natalia, I was terrified that Chloe's Alchemy Shop would revert to the filthy mess that was on full display before I cleaned it up. I also strongly felt like Ms. Natalia couldn't be left alone. She was shockingly bad at taking care of herself. In fact, she had zero life skills to the point where I couldn't imagine her living alone.

When I had lived with her, I did all the cooking, laundry, and cleaning; I had to wake her up and persistently invite her to meals, or she'd never do anything of her own accord. While I used to be able to take care of her, I currently had my hands full with Mr. Julius and needed further assistance to look after my master. I'd finally managed to make my alchemy shop look neat and tidy; Ms. Eliza and Henri were essential to maintaining the place.

Mr. Roge had told me in the past that community service was one of the penalties dished out to mercenaries and knights. That was exactly what I was

hoping they'd get.

"I heard some rare liquor is being served at the banquet. I guess I'll reluctantly go," Ms. Natalia had said atop one of the guest beds in Puerta. She was rolled up into a blanket ball like a bagworm.

She claimed that she was tired from doing things she wasn't used to, had worked a century's worth of good deeds, and had given back to the world. She wasn't planning on doing much for a while. She had saved me so many times and I couldn't thank her enough.

When I voiced my gratitude, she replied, "Don't worry about it. You're my apprentice, and I saw you in a pinch. It's only natural that I appear to save you."

I asked her how she knew that I was fighting Mephisto, but she nonchalantly waved a hand from inside of her blankets. "Just a coincidence," she'd claimed.

I felt like she was brushing me off, but if she wasn't willing to talk, it was probably something that I didn't need to know.

I hopped on top of Helios with Mr. Julius, and we headed for the place where Emperor Oswald had left scars of his hellfire. They'd never disappear. Prince Faisal had requested to take one last good look before we headed for Altstadt. I was so desperate to survive at the time that the memories weren't as vivid in my mind, but the fear of those powerful flames had been seared into my brain.

As we approached the still flickering flames, it felt unusually hot. A sea of fire was licking the sands. Luckily, there weren't any towns or cities near Emperor Oswald's attack—it was just an empty desert.

Around the flames was a wall of ice made of alchemy, containing the heat within. According to Prince Faisal, several court sorcerers and alchemists were taking turns to keep watch over these walls.

"I'm guessing that Emperor Oswald is human," I said, gazing down at the flames. "But this power is anything but."

"Just like Shesif, he probably has a demon of his own," Mr. Julius replied casually.

When did a demon appear by Oswald's side? When did this debacle even

start? I wondered.

“These flames are made by magic, and they shouldn’t last long,” I explained. “Of course, if the fire burns down a forest or houses, it’ll turn into a natural disaster instead of a magical one and will continue to burn, but there’s no fuel to maintain the flames in this desert.”

“Which means it’s the power of a demon,” Mr. Julius answered.

“Yes, I believe so...”

I’d only sensed Samael during the battle. Oswald was terrifying, but I didn’t feel the presence of a new demon. This could’ve implied that another mysterious demon was trying to eat the Dystiana Empire alive.

“Did Oswald start this war, enticed by a demon?” I wondered.

“Who knows,” Mr. Julius replied. “But he’s always been an ambitious guy. I’m guessing that he started the war of his own accord, but either way, I don’t think he’s done.”

I grabbed hold of Mr. Julius’s sleeve and placed my forehead against his broad back. Every time he talked about Dystiana or Oswald, I felt like he was impossibly far away from me. *I wish this whole thing would end on its own, far away from Mr. Julius and me.* I couldn’t help but say this prayer.

I wanted to live in Astria as an alchemist and spend my time in peace with Mr. Julius by my side, surrounded by Helios, Lumine, Ms. Natalia, Ms. Roxy, and Mr. Roge. That was enough for me.

“There’s no use thinking about a solution that we can’t provide just yet,” I said, pulling away from him and trying to sound as cheery as possible. “Ms. Natalia taught me so. I’m sorry for sounding so gloomy. What I need to do right now is to take care of this fire.”

“Can you?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Who do you think I am?”

“A genius alchemist and beautiful young maiden,” he supplied.

“Please don’t say that. It makes me laugh when I hear those words coming from you.”

It's funny to hear him praise me so emotionlessly. Mr. Julius has made me laugh quite a bit these days. After I giggled, I took out an alchemy item from the cloth bag that I kept slung over my shoulder.

"Prince Faisal," I called out loudly. He and Layla were riding on Ares a short distance away. "I'd like to help extinguish these flames; is that all right?"

He was riding on Ares while hugging Layla from behind. She had rejected his idea of riding politely and ladylike today as well, as she was straddled atop the dragon wearing a skirt. Her pale legs were too bright for my eyes. *I feel like Layla should wear bloomers underneath her skirt like I do.* Perhaps not wearing any was the sign of a mature fashionista.

"Ice and water magic from Rasheed's court sorcerers, along with the extinguishers made by our alchemists, didn't stand a chance against those flames," Faisal called. "If you *can* get rid of the fire, I couldn't be more grateful. Do whatever you like!"

"Okay!" I replied.

In my hand was a red bucket with the word "Extinguisher" written on it. I decided this was a perfect opportunity to show the prince my alchemy. I always proudly explained the effects of my items to Mr. Julius, but today, I had an audience that included Faisal, Layla, and the Rasheed soldiers. *Maybe the splendor of my alchemy items will spread throughout Rasheed. If I get clients beyond the borders of my nation, that'd be perfect. I'd make buckets of money!*

For that, I'd need Ms. Eliza to work hard. An apron dress seemed like a perfect uniform for her. I grinned upon imagining her greeting customers. She was very cute, and I knew that we'd get more male clients. I felt bad for Henri, but this was all business. I'd need him to keep himself in check even if Ms. Eliza was popular among the men.

"This is a wonderful bucket of my own creation!" I explained loudly with my chest puffed out. "When an ancient sorcerer in Astria went berserk with their magical energy, they made a volcano erupt. Lava spilled out, and forests were burned down with no end in sight. My item extinguished the flames from the lava and cooled it into rock. And that's how genius alchemist Chloe, the beautiful young maiden, became a hero in her kingdom."

Prince Faisal, Layla, and the other soldiers clapped their hands in awe upon hearing my mini-speech. *Ugh, now I'm embarrassed.*

"If it makes you embarrassed, there's no need to explain," Mr. Julius said, glancing at my reddening face.

Cut me some slack. This is how I spent the past three years of my life. Maybe I can find some sort of truth beyond this embarrassment.

"Every family has one of my buckets," I added. "It was very useful in extinguishing the flames within Astria's royal capital. I'm not sure if it can fight against Oswald's fire, but it's worth a shot!"

And so, I threw my bucket into the fire. I wasn't sure if just one was enough, so I grabbed all the buckets I could from my infinite bag and tossed them into the flames.

"Extinguishing powder, pour out from the bucket! Extinguish the dangerous flames!" I chanted.

A transparent sludge seeped out from the buckets that I threw into the fire, spreading out to envelop the flames as though to put a lid over the fiery disaster below. The liquid had the power to put out the blaze and suppress magic. Though the fire had naturally spread of its own accord, it still had some magic in it and proved difficult to extinguish, allowing it to spread easily.

White smoke billowed in the air, along with loud sizzling sounds as the flames grew smaller and smaller. It didn't take long for it to completely disappear from within the wall of ice, leaving behind only the burned sands of the desert.

The soldiers gave me a thunderous round of applause, which I responded to by waving back. Prince Faisal and Layla also looked amazed as they showered me with praise. *I don't hold a candle to Ms. Natalia, but I guess my alchemy is nothing to sneeze at.*

"These extinguishing buckets made by yours truly, the genius alchemist and young beautiful maiden, are sold for 15,000 gold each! My shop is in the royal capital of Astria, so if you're ever interested, please drop by!" I said, never forgetting my spirit as a merchant.

Yep, no notes here! I did good!

“To think Oswald’s fire lost to your odd-looking items,” Mr. Julius said.

“What?” I protested. “Aren’t they cute? And they’re easy to spot! This is essential during emergencies! It’s best to have an item that stands out and seems best fit for its role!”

“Looking at you makes the strength leave my body.”

“That’s a good thing,” I chirped.

Mr. Julius sighed. He sounded exasperated, but I sensed a hint of joy in his voice.

◆ Shopping in Altstadt

WHEN we arrived in Altstadt, the holy city, Helios returned to Mr. Julius's ring while Prince Faisal ordered Ares to return to the Holy Palace by himself. The prince seemed interested in Mr. Julius's ring, and I sensed a business opportunity to sell my wares, but when I started my explanation, Mr. Julius seemed angrier than ever before, so I stopped myself.

He probably didn't like the fact that he was trapping his dragon in a cramped space, and he refused to have anyone else own such a ring. *And it does make it seem like we're treating dragons like objects*, I reasoned to myself. He was likely trying to keep storing Helios inside of a ring to a minimum.

Altstadt was bustling with people to the extent it seemed like a fierce battle had never occurred in their nation. Many were wearing garments with long, cylindrical sleeves, and their hems went down to their feet. They came in various colors, from pure white to vibrant hues like red and blue. Others were adorned with lovely embroidery. Many people had wrapped a cloth around their heads, and I guessed it was to protect their hair and skin from the harsh sunlight.

"This is the heart of Altstadt," Layla said, her arm intertwined with the Faisal's as they walked down the busy city streets. "You can buy jewels, dresses, outfits, books, food, and anything else you desire here."

Mr. Julius and I followed them. They were likely familiar with the people in the city as many bowed and greeted the couple. However, no one seemed overly reserved or hyper-respectful; it was more of a casual affair.

"It reminds me of the main shopping district in Astria," I said. "I've got a shop there. Technically, it's now my second store, but this city is much larger than Astria's capital and a lot busier too."

"...Astria's the countryside," Mr. Julius added.

"Well, compared to Dystiana, maybe... Hmm, or maybe it really is the

countryside. When I see Rasheed's city, I'm starting to feel like Astria isn't so big."

When I first guided Mr. Julius through the main street, he called our kingdom the countryside. I wondered just how prosperous the imperial capital of Dystiana was. Like Altstadt, which was brimming with a cheery atmosphere despite the recent battle, the imperial capital might have been peaceful and prosperous, ignorant of their own invasions.

As I walked around, I felt like the merchants and people were completely detached from war. Unfortunately, that wasn't true—this city just happened to get lucky this time around and managed to avoid turning into a battlefield. Astria, on the other hand, was still hard at work to restore its former glory. One wrong move, and Rasheed could've turned out the same.

"Astria is a lovely place as well," Layla said. "I once went on a vacation there with Prince Faisal."

"A few years ago, I went to the royal capital as my brother's guard," Faisal said before turning to me. "Fate is a funny thing. Back then, you were the daughter of a duke, weren't you, Chloe?"

"I suppose I was," I replied with a forced smile, trying to sound casual. It was a past that I didn't like to talk about.

"You lack tact, Prince Faisal," Layla said, gently pinching his side.

That looks painful.

"In any case, Chloe, why don't we get you dressed for the occasion?" Layla suggested. "Since we're having a splendid stroll in the city, we should change you out of your usual outfit to suit the mood. I've got my favorite apparel store nearby. You usually need to be measured for dresses, but the normal clothes of Rasheed can be worn without the need for any precise numbers."

"That's a good idea," Faisal agreed. "The afternoons in Rasheed are hot and the temperature dips at night. The clothes here, woven of silk made from desert spiders, can help regulate your body temperature. It's very comfortable, and above all, it's loose-fitting. I'm rather fond of it. Men and women wear similar clothing, but the colors and designs are different. I'm sure we can find

one that suits Julius as well.”

Silk harvested from desert spiders. I wonder what that's like... It seemed to have the same effect as Ariadne's thread, and I was curious to know which was better.

The world was vast and filled with materials that I wasn't familiar with.

I looked up at Mr. Julius and smiled. “Isn't that great to hear? I know you like clothes that are easier to move around in.”

Much like how I only wore apron dresses, Mr. Julius usually only wore plain robes. He was a handsome man, so I knew he'd suit whatever he wore. *Though I'm not sure if he'd obediently wear other clothes...*

“Yeah, I guess so,” Mr. Julius replied with a nod.

I expected him to find this all to be a huge pain, and his response caught me off guard. *Maybe he's more excited than usual, surrounded by the exotic atmosphere of another nation.*

“I'm not interested in clothing, but you can do as you please,” he added. “I've decided to go along with whatever you wish to do today.”

“You're so nice...” I murmured. “Is something wrong? You've been so nice to me recently. Maybe you've got a fever or something.”

“Isn't it a good thing that he's so nice?” Layla inquired, tilting her head to one side in confusion. She tugged on Prince Faisal's arm, acting spoiled. “In fact, I'd argue that it's normal for your man to tag along with a lady's shopping. Don't you agree, Prince Faisal?”

The prince had a broad smile, beaming more than usual. He looked absolutely elated, like a dog happy to tag along with his master's shopping. *I'm sorry that I compared you to a dog, Prince Faisal.* When I first opened up my shop and didn't have any customers, I took on various odd jobs including washing and walking dogs. I was fairly knowledgeable about them.

“Of course I do, Layla,” Faisal replied. “Allow me to hold your things. I'd much rather do that than see you wandering around by yourself.”

“Why would you say that?” she responded. “You're making me out to be

some sort of troublesome child.”

“U-Uh, no, that’s not what I mean...”

Prince Faisal does speak his mind a bit too much. I smiled wryly as I watched him desperately trying to salvage his lover’s mood. They seemed to be having fun, and just watching them made me happy.

“Let’s go, Chloe!” Layla exclaimed. She stopped fighting with Faisal and locked arms with me. “What color would suit you best? You’re adorable, so a pink outfit with floral patterns might be nice. Cute clothes don’t suit me. My face stands out a bit too much, so it clashes with my appearance.”

“You’re so pretty, so anything will look lovely on you,” I replied.

As she tugged me towards the store, I obediently followed her. In the end, I was never able to understand why Mr. Julius was being so unusually kind to me today, but I had no complaints. *Maybe it’s something I don’t need to be worried about.*

On the corner of the main street was Layla’s favorite apparel store. We purchased the common outfits of Rasheed. Layla chose a red piece decorated with embroidery of black roses. Prince Faisal chose opposite colors—a black garment stitched with red roses. I went with a white one with pink floral patterns; Layla had chosen it for me, matching it to my hair and eye color. Mr. Julius wore a black outfit decorated with an embroidery of a vibrant lily made from gold thread. He stated that he wasn’t keen on changing clothes. And so, I ended up pushing it onto him. We switched clothes in the changing room and ended up purchasing what we wore.

Layla and Faisal were likely used to wearing these clothes. The garments suited them and didn’t seem at all odd. Mr. Julius was slender and tall, so the outfit suited him exceptionally well. The top was worn over one’s head, and a pair of baggy pants that was tied in the middle came as a set. The pants were a bit puffed out but tightly fit around the ankles. It was normal for the top and bottom to come in a set and have a matching design.

“I knew it! You’re so cute, Chloe!” Layla squealed, holding me in a tight embrace.

Though these clothes were loose-fitting, Layla's voluptuous body made her curves stand out, accentuating her beauty. I, on the other hand, looked like flat terrain all the way around. *Flat, and the sleeves are long.*

It seemed I was more petite than the average Rasheedan woman. According to the store owner, the ladies here were tall and curvy, requiring larger clothes. If I were to make these clothes any smaller, I'd need to wear one suitable for children. Quite frankly, I was not willing to wear children's clothes.

While I normally called myself a beautiful young maiden, I was twenty, and an adult. Wearing the clothes of a child was a bit too embarrassing for my taste.

"These clothes certainly look cute, but..." I started.

"Your shrimpy body looks even shrimpier now," Mr. Julius said with a mocking chuckle.

When we entered the store, the owner, an elderly lady, had said, "My, you're a handsome one! But your hair is a mess," to Mr. Julius. And so, she offered to kindly tie his long hair back. It seemed even he was hesitant to coldly rebuff the kindness of an elderly lady. He obediently sat on a chair and had his hair tied in front of a mirror, reminding me of a meek cat. He looked precious and it was an enjoyable sight. I sensed that he knew that I was internally cackling at this scene, and he was currently striking back.

"You really are petite, Chloe," Layla said. "You look so young, too—I still can barely process that you're my age. I wonder if all the women of Astria look younger than the women of Rasheed. If so, I'm rather envious of that."

"I'm envious of beautiful ladies like you, Layla," I replied. "If I had your appearance, I could proudly call myself a real beauty."

"So, a beautiful alchemist?"

"The greatest beauty of all time, unlike anything the world has ever seen! I'm the genius alchemist, Chloe! How does that sound?"

"You're more of a beautiful maiden in my eyes. I think you're perfect just the way you are."

She kindly petted my head in consolation, and I felt like she was trying her

best to make me feel better. *What does she and Ms. Natalia have that I don't? Is it chest size? Is it because they've got a full chest?*

"Maybe I can use alchemy to turn myself into voluptuous beauty one day... Hopefully..." I muttered to myself.

"Chloe, Layla may have a full chest, but that has nothing to do with the beauty of a woman," Faisal answered seriously, apparently hearing my mumblings. He used both hands to gesture how large her chest was, and it didn't make me feel at all better.

"Prince Faisal, you lack tact," Layla scolded, poking his side with her iron fan.

Mr. Julius, hair finally done, walked back to my side. Unlike me, the sleeves and hem of his clothes fit perfectly. He suited whatever he wore, and Rasheed's attire was no exception. This wasn't surprising, considering his noble birth, but Mr. Julius paid no heed to his appearance or mannerisms that it was easy to forget. *Myself included, I suppose.*

"Black and gold... The color of Helios," I said to him.

"Yeah," he replied.

"It suits you very well. And you look a lot cleaner with your hair tied up. Shall we go get you a haircut? I've got a person I frequent in Astria, and I get my hair cut about once a year."

"Once a year?!" Layla gasped with wide eyes. She clasped my shoulders and started shaking me around. "Even commoners in Rasheed get a haircut at least once a month! What kind of life have you been living, Chloe?"

"E-Erm... About once a year, I ask the barber to make my hair shorter. My hair slowly grows out over the course of a year, and once it gets in the way again, I go back, and the cycle begins anew."

"Both you and Julius were born with good looks! Why don't either of you take better care of how you look?! I'll polish you as much as I can for the banquet, Chloe. You'd best be prepared!"

Layla seemed determined. Mr. Julius gave an exasperated sigh. With his hair back, the brand on his neck showed—an unlucky omen of the skull of a beast

with two horns. It was also easy to see the black string and lock tied around his neck.

I found the lock unnecessary now, but he wouldn't let me take it off him. I quietly averted my gaze. I was used to seeing the scars on his body and the Slave Brand, but it still made me feel guilty when it was on full display.

He was suited for flying freely throughout the vast sky, but it felt like I was tying him down here. But once that lock was gone, I felt like he'd suddenly disappear from my side one day. I pressed a hand against my chest as anxiety started to well up. The debacle in Rasheed had come to an end, and we were currently enjoying our day shopping. *Then why do I feel so anxious?*

"We'll take care of payment," the prince said, snapping my gloomy self back to reality. "Thank you both for going along with Layla's selfish whims."

"No, thank *you*!" I replied energetically with my usual bright smile. I didn't want to ignore his kind offer, and if he was willing to buy these clothes for us, there was no need for me to press the issue.

"Selfish?!" Layla gasped, pouting angrily.

Thank goodness. I was lost in some sorrowful thoughts for a second, but it seems they haven't noticed. I didn't want to rain on our parade—today was supposed to be fun.

"Chloe... Are you growing your hair out?" Mr. Julius asked, peering into my face. He took a lock of my hair and tucked it behind my ears.

"Well, not really," I replied. "It's just that I usually realize I need to go for a haircut when it grows out. The people of the royal capital always say that whenever I come in, they realize that another year's passed. My appearance apparently really helps that fact sink in, and this custom is well-received."

"So, in a year, I'll cut my hair with you. Until then, I'll stay as I am."

"Huh? Yeah, sure!"

For a moment, I couldn't understand what he was saying, but when I repeated the words in my head, I hastily nodded. This was a promise—a promise for the future. *This means that I can count on him to be with me for at*

least a year, right?

I felt as though he'd seen right through my insecurities. He gently stroked my hair.

Since it's a promise, I guess I'll grow my hair out like usual, despite Layla's surprise. In a year, my hair would be long enough to tie up. Perhaps by then, I'd become a voluptuous beauty. There was no doubt about it.

◆ Visiting Stalls and Preferences

AFTER we finished changing, we walked along the busy city streets with Layla as our guide. We visited the currency exchange counter and switched some Astrian money over to Rasheedan coins. The gold coins in Astria had an engraving of a star, but Rasheed's was etched with a delicate rose.

Layla claimed that some counters had wildly fluctuating rates and would try to rip off unsuspecting foreigners. Those who clearly looked like inexperienced tourists and were dressed in quality clothes were often targeted, with expensive rates pushed upon them.

How terrifying. I'm so glad Layla's with us, I thought. I knew that I should've looked into exchange rates while I was in Astria, but it'd never crossed my mind. *I should be more mindful about stuff like that if I go on another international trip.*

"Why don't we eat first?" Layla suggested. "Since I think you'll have some extravagant dishes at the banquet, why don't we eat something more common and comforting? Personally, I'd recommend Stall Street, which is nearby. Would you like to go there?"

"Yes, please!" I immediately agreed.

The idea of a street lined with tons of food stalls made me excited. I loved street stalls myself—the food there was cheap and affordable. When I went on long expeditions to gather materials, I'd often stay in cities outside of the royal capital, and frequented stalls for a quick meal. I'd also stay at cheap inns by myself.

Every now and then, Mr. Roge would voice his concerns about my choices, finding it dangerous for a lady to travel alone, but everyone I'd met was kind to me, and I never had any problems. As a precaution, I'd hang Ms. Gazey in a birdcage from my staff; perhaps that was an effective deterrent.

I walked beside Layla while Mr. Julius and Prince Faisal followed close behind

us. It was wholesome to see the prince ask various questions about Helios and Mr. Julius give occasional, short replies.

Stall Street was teeming with people, likely because it was lunchtime. Delectable aromas hit my nose. The scent of deep-fried and pan-fried foods filled the air. The street was a vast clearing lined with numerous stalls covered with cloth awnings. Some of these awnings were decorated with colorful glass ornaments, mirrors, or metallic tchotchkes.

“These decorations in front of the stalls serve as talismans to ward off bad spirits,” Layla explained. “It’s believed that beautiful items that glitter under the sunlight can chase away evil.”

“I see...” I mused. “This is a great idea. These trinkets glimmer beautifully, and they serve to accentuate the appearance of each store.”

“While some people choose to make these ornaments themselves, you can also buy them at stores.”

“Really? Then maybe I’ll buy a few as souvenirs.”

They might serve as good presents for Ms. Roxy and Mr. Robert. I once nonchalantly hinted at the idea of giving a second Ms. Gazey to Ms. Roxy for self-defense, but she gently declined. A beautiful ornament might suit her better, and I hoped she’d enjoy the gift. As for Mr. Robert, even if the design didn’t suit his taste, I felt like his wife would appreciate it.

“Then I’ll guide you to a store later,” Layla said. “While these stalls sell various foods, I recommend skewered sand lizards. There’s another dish where meat is finely chopped and sandwiched between thin, toasted bread. We’ve also got deep-fried fowl stuffed with rice and mutton meatballs stewed in soup. They’re all very delicious.”

“You’re very knowledgeable, Layla,” I remarked.

“I like food stalls. The meals within the Holy Palace and my house are all too stiff and formal. They tire me out. And corsets are so tight and suffocating that I can barely eat.”

“Ah, so you find corsets suffocating too!” I’d thought that corsets were too tight, even when I was still living as the daughter of a duke, but I didn’t have

anyone to discuss my woes with.

“Yup, those things are awful,” Layla agreed. “Every now and then, I come here to satiate my appetite. It’s great that I can eat all the meat I want without worry. Sand lizards are delicious!”

“Sand lizards...” I muttered.

When in Rasheed, do what the Rasheedans do. I had no choice but to eat the dish that Layla recommended.

“Mr. Julius, let’s eat some lizards,” I said.

“No, I’m fine,” he replied.

“Are you not even going to give it a chance?”

“Lizards are similar to dragons.”

Now that you mention it... I reconsidered. I didn’t want to look like I was eating Helios, and that only made me more uneasy. *Maybe there are some foods in this world that I don’t need to try.*

“Thank goodness,” Prince Faisal said with a sigh of relief. “I’m not a fan of sand lizards myself.”

Layla looked up at Faisal with a glare. “Chloe and Julius are from Astria, so they get a pass, but sand lizards are the food of commoners in Rasheed. They’re far cheaper than mutton and oriental turtle doves, Prince Faisal, and thus are consumed very frequently. How can you, the future king, not be fond of this meat?”

“I’m sorry, Layla... But the Holy Palace doesn’t serve sand lizards...”

“You actually haven’t tried it either, so I simply must have you take at least a bite. We’ll go and get skewered sand lizards. Chloe, Julius, you two can choose what you like. Once we’re done eating, let’s meet back up at the entrance.”

With that, she dragged the future king toward the stalls. While Layla may have had a point, I felt a little bad for Faisal for being forced to eat foods that he didn’t like. As the couple melted into the busy crowd, I looked up at Mr. Julius.

“Is there anything you’d like to eat?” I asked. “Aside from sand lizards.”

“Mutton or fowl, I guess,” he replied.

“You like meat, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I never gave my preferences much thought until now, but that seems to be the case. I’m probably just used to the meals that you make.”

“I *did* increase my repertoire of meat dishes. I’m glad that you like them.”

It was a good thing that he enjoyed eating his meals. During difficult or tough times, food often becomes tasteless, no matter what you eat. I felt like my cooking was being praised and gave a beaming smile. He roughly tousled my hair, and I guessed that he was trying to hide his embarrassment.

He’s adorable. What should I do? I never thought the day when I’d find Mr. Julius adorable would come. I hid my internal panic and tugged on his hand.

“Then let’s buy all the meat we can get and eat tons,” I said. “We just exchanged our currency, so we’ve got plenty of money. We can buy every food from every stall and still have some left over.”

“You can’t eat that much, can you?” he asked.

“I think I can eat more than usual. This is my first trip, so I’m pretty excited by the atmosphere.”

“You’re more excited than usual? You look the same to me.”

“You make it sound like I’m always excited or something.”

He ignored my complaint and walked towards the stalls. To ensure that I wouldn’t get lost amidst the throngs of people, he firmly grasped my hand that I’d used to tug on him earlier. We ended up in front of a stall selling stewed mutton meatballs. A large pot filled to the brim with translucent soup was bubbling away. Mutton meatballs were floating around with plenty of spices to mask the gamey scent of the meat.

“Hello!” I said to a lady manning the stall. “Two bowls of soup, please!”

The large lady looked at Mr. Julius and me before saying, “Your husband looks like he’ll eat quite a bit.” She took out a larger bowl and ladled so much soup that it practically overflowed. Mr. Julius wasn’t my husband, but I found no reason to decline her kindness.

“Thank you!” I said brightly, albeit a touch flustered.

Mr. Julius didn’t say a word. *Maybe the ring on his ring finger made it look like we were married to that lady.* That wasn’t my fault—it was his for putting his ring on that finger.

I paid the lady and sat on the bench in front of the stall. The deep bowl was filled with plenty of soup and meatballs so large that I couldn’t eat it in one bite. The hearty soup had lots of other ingredients floating around, and I felt like I’d get full with just one bowl.

I took my spoon and scooped a bit of the meat into my mouth. The seasonings were completely different from Astria’s. Our kingdom favored tomato-based flavors, but the Rasheed soup was chock-full of potherbs and spices. It was a little spicy. The spices had completely masked any gamey odor from the meat, and while the flavor was unique, it was delicious. I was pleasantly surprised.

“This is good, isn’t it, Mr. Julius?” I asked. “It’s a bit spicy, though.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “They’re selling quite a bit of alcohol. It’s seasoned well to encourage people to drink more.”

I nodded in understanding. *I’d never thought about it that way. I don’t really like to drink alcohol on a regular basis.* Mr. Julius would drink every now and then, but I’d never seen him drunk. The men who visited Ms. Roxy’s diner would get drunk in a flash, and I guessed that Mr. Julius might’ve been especially strong against alcohol.

“Would you like to drink a pint?” I asked.

“No, I’ll wait until night,” he said.

“Are you drinking at night, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why don’t we buy a few bottles of alcohol while we’re here? We’re apparently staying at a good inn tonight, so I think we can relax and kick back for a bit.”

As always, he drank all his soup at an astonishing rate. As for me, I was full

after eating half a bowl. I gave the rest to him.

Forget eating around; my plan to visit every stall and eat every dish had ended on my first one. *But it looks like Mr. Julius can still eat a bit more, so maybe I'll steal a bite or two from him.* Thanks to his hearty appetite, I was able to have a small nibble of various dishes. I was happy to see that he ate quite a bit despite his slender frame. Admittedly, I was envious that he was able to maintain his excellent physique while eating tons of delicious food.

◆ Staying at a Luxurious Inn on Faisal's Dime

LAYLA showed me to a store where I was able to purchase two souvenirs for Ms. Roxy and Mr. Robert. I also bought some materials and alchemy items that weren't sold in Astria. Rasheed's diet was composed primarily of meat, beans, and other grains that were easy to grow. In the old days, meat was difficult to preserve for prolonged periods of time, and dried meat often made it to the dinner table. Nowadays, thanks to metallic boxes that could retain heat and freezing stones made of alchemy, materials and ingredients could be kept cool and fresh for quite a while.

Though Astria sold dried meat as well, with a bit more money, fresh meat could be acquired whenever I wished. The same went for vegetables, and while I had to go to the port to acquire seafood, it wasn't much trouble. *But being able to keep ingredients cool is an excellent idea*, I thought.

I bought a freezing stone to use for reference. The store owner told me that the stone's effects lasted for only a few months and needed to be periodically replaced. After touring several stores, I finished my shopping. Layla and Prince Faisal took us to a district where the most luxurious inns within the city were. They decided to take this opportunity to spend the night as well.

I thought that they'd be staying in the same inn as us, but Layla winked and said, "You guys can't...*relax* if we're close by, don't you agree?"

Prince Faisal was grinning from ear to ear—it was clear that he very much enjoyed his shopping date with Layla. She had apparently been repeatedly telling the prince about King Shesif's odd behavior; before this entire affair occurred, there might've been some distance between the couple. But now, they looked very close, as though they were always very affectionate towards each other.

Faisal told me to drop by the Holy Palace tomorrow for preparations for the banquet. I nodded in response. Once the celebrations were over, we could return to Astria, where our daily life would resume. I felt a bit relieved knowing

that I could go home soon.

Faisal had taken care of checking into an inn for us, and I guessed that it must've been very expensive, but shockingly, we were allowed to stay, free of charge.

The inn's employee guided us up a massive, white staircase to our room. When they asked for our belongings and we replied that we didn't have any, they seemed a bit surprised, but asked nothing more. The staff here were likely told not to pry into the affairs of their guests.

While this inn wasn't as grand as a castle, it was still large enough to serve as a manor for nobles. Our room was located on the highest floor. The walls were white, making the room look clean and spacious. A lamp made from various colorful shards of glass—an item commonly seen within this kingdom—looked vibrant and added a splash of vivid hues to the white background.

"Mr. Julius, this place has got five bedrooms and three baths!" I exclaimed.

"Calm down," he replied.

"We'll never be able to stay in an inn this luxurious! I'd love to look around and enjoy this place to my heart's content. This is totally different from the loud, creaking wooden beds that were in the lodgings that I stayed in. That one bed took up most of the room, and you practically had to live on top of your bed. I only used the place to sleep in, though."

Mr. Julius sat on a black sofa in the middle of the wide living room as he shot me a weary look. I was restlessly wandering around our spacious area. *Since we've got the opportunity, why not explore every nook and cranny? Where should I sleep?* Each bed had a canopy. I spotted one with a vibrant, elegant floral pattern, while another was just black, making it seem calm and inviting. There was even a bed that was white and pink, exuding feminine charm. I only had one body, and naturally, that meant I could only use one bed. *It feels like a waste.*

"Have you ever stayed in an inn?" Mr. Julius asked.

"Of course I have," I replied. "I had to traverse long distances when I went to defeat monsters. Thanks to you and Helios, we can now return within the day,

but before you guys were around, I needed a few days to make the journey. I traveled by myself.”

“In Dystiana, it’s dangerous for a woman to be traveling alone. Because of the lengthy war, we never had enough guards or knights to keep watch. If the strength of a nation declines, crime rates will soar. This was especially so for towns near the border—you can say that the law didn’t even apply there.”

“I don’t think Astria’s *that* dangerous, but our cities by the border are also living in poverty. I can’t say the situation there is good. Henri said that he was born in a town by the border; I’m guessing that he’s had a rough past.”

“And what about you? Were you in any danger?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Well, I was at first. I’d never been in combat before. I remember running around from monsters while screaming for dear life. That really takes me back...”

I continued to wander around the various rooms as we conversed. In the depths of the living room was a kitchen fully equipped with plates and cups. There was even a chest to store ingredients—an item that I’d seen multiple times while I was shopping in Rasheed. When I opened the lid, there was a freezing stone inside, keeping the chest cool.

I took out the bottles of liquor that I’d purchased for Mr. Julius from my infinite storage bag and placed them inside the chest. In Astria, we mostly kept drinks cool by burying them in ice, and I was grateful to find a cool box to store these bottles. I didn’t have to worry about the ice melting, either.

“I see...” My. Julius mulled.

“I think you’ve had a much rougher past than me,” I said.

“You’re a woman. We’ve got different issues.”

“Men and women can both suffer and have a rough time. But I’m fine now. Thank you for worrying about me. I suppose Astria might not be as hazardous as Dystiana. I wasn’t in any particular danger.”

“I understand that you don’t want to use much money, but don’t stay in cheap inns. At least don’t stay by yourself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I gave an obedient nod. *He’s right, though. Maybe I’ve just been lucky.* I was able to feel a bit more confident and at ease because Mr. Julius was by my side, but it was important to defend myself.

“I think I’m going to go take a bath,” I said. “There are plenty to choose from, so if you want, why don’t you clean yourself off too? I’ll leave your change of clothes here.”

“All right.”

I felt a bit awkward to see that he was so worried about me, and I hastily took out a change of clothes, placed them on the sofa, and headed straight for the bath as though I was fleeing from him.

Mr. Roge had also been worried about me traveling alone, but I never gave his advice much thought. *Back then, I had nothing to lose.* This didn’t mean that I wanted to die, but I didn’t particularly have a reason to live either. I was just desperate. I wasn’t too bothered about protecting myself or taking good care of my body. Things were different now.

That realization made me very happy, and I hoped that Mr. Julius felt the same. *I think...we’re fine. He’s given me a promise about the future.* Our promise to get a haircut together in a year glimmered like a hopeful star within my heart.

The bathtub was too big for me to use alone. Rose petals were lavishly floating on the water. The white-walled bathroom was thick with the scent of roses, and when I sank into the warm water, I felt like a noble once more. I slowly stretched my creaking body within the tub while filling my lungs with the scent of roses.

“This is amazing!” I said to myself with a sigh.

This inn clearly must’ve cost quite a bit, but I was able to stay here for free. I looked up at the ceiling and grinned. As I was enjoying the full experience of one of the most expensive places in this city, the clouded glass door of the bathroom opened.

Startled, I instinctively sat up with a loud splash. Mr. Julius had entered the

bathroom. Honestly, if it was anyone else, they would've been an intruder. *No, wait... A young maiden here is in the middle of a bath, and he's entering without permission as though it's only natural. He's an intruder too, isn't he?*

He stepped in so casually that it was easy to forget that we *did* usually bathe together, for whatever reason. *Is this...normal for us?* I tilted my head to one side in confusion.

While there were shared baths within this city, in general, men and women bathed separately. I wondered if it was normal for both sexes to bathe together in Dystiana. *But Mr. Julius was formerly a duke. I'm pretty sure he had a bath to himself. In fact, he was of such high birth that he kept mocking Astria for being the countryside.*

"Ack!" I gasped, sinking down into the watery depths so that only my head peeked out. "You came in so naturally that I almost allowed you to! Mr. Julius, I'm taking a bath here!"

He was busy washing his hair and body using a showerhead on the wall (an item that was very similar to the alchemy item that I'd made). He didn't say a word.

Can he not see me or something? Maybe he coincidentally chose the one I was in—we've only got a few tubs here. Maybe he intended to bathe alone, but I just happened to be there. Is that what this is? No... No, it can't be. But if it was, I'd feel bad for taking up the tub he wanted first.

"I can tell," Mr. Julius said wearily, glancing at me.

I'm sorry, excuse me? Why do you look so exasperated? I don't understand you at all. What was clear was that he decided to bathe here despite knowing that it was occupied by me. *But why?* Unlike our home in Astria, we had plenty of bathtubs to choose from in this inn.

"Those rose petals don't suit you, huh?" he commented. "When you're buried under those roses, I feel like I'd lose sight of you."

"Are you trying to call me plain?" I accused.

"I'm just saying that the petals are too vibrant for you."

I tugged at my damp hair. My strawberry-blond hair was too pale for the vividly red rose petals. *He might have a point...* While I was agreeing with his statement, Mr. Julius was showing off his perfect physique in all its glory, water dripping from his flawlessly chiseled body. I decided to muster up the courage to complain one more time.

He might've been used to seeing my body, but that didn't give him permission to see it whenever he liked. I knew that I lacked sex appeal, but I still had the right to feel embarrassed or flustered when showing my naked body. *Does he actually see me as a dragon or something? I'm not sure anymore.*

"So, you knew I've occupied this bath, and yet you still came in?" I asked. "Why? We've got other tubs available."

He pushed his dripping wet, blond hair back. "Do you want to hear an excuse or my real thoughts?"

Clearly, sex appeal was the one thing he *didn't* lack. He had plenty to spare in that department. *I feel like if I took a sexiness poll with the people of the city, Mr. Julius would win by a unanimous vote.* The countless number of scars on his body didn't take away from his beauty—in fact, it further accentuated his muscles, free of any excess fat, and made him look handsomer still. *If I compare my naked body to his, I feel absolutely worthless. It makes me want to pray to him to improve my looks.*

Mr. Julius's question caught me off guard and, in my panic, I tried to escape reality for a moment. I thought I was taking a comfortable dip in the bathtub, but I felt like my body was boiling. My face grew so warm that I was starting to feel dizzy.

"U-Um, whichever you wish!" I cried.

He'd finished washing his body and confidently entered the tub along with me. I had the complete opposite reaction and sheepishly fled to the corner of the bathtub while hugging my knees and curling into a ball. I was trying to make myself as small as I possibly could.

The rose bathtub may have been too magnificent for me, but it suited Mr. Julius very well—so well, in fact, that I felt like the tub was made specifically for him. I knew that handsome men suited all types of clothing, but I didn't expect

a tub full of roses to look good on him too.

“I want to hurry up and take a bath so I can get a drink,” he said. “I can’t use magic, and it’s a pain to dry off my body and hair without you, so I thought taking a bath together would be efficient. That’s my excuse. Since you’re my master, I’ve got a duty to check and see if you’ve got any fresh wounds on your body. That’s...also an excuse.”

“So they’re both excuses,” I pointed out.

These “excuses” were actually par for the course for Mr. Julius. *They aren’t his true thoughts, though, right?* He always seemed to honestly speak his mind, but I wondered if he kept some of his thoughts hidden away. *Then what are his real thoughts?*

“They’re both my real thoughts and my excuses as well,” he admitted. “But...if I were to be blatantly honest, seeing your reactions is very fun for me.”

“You’ve got a bit of a mean streak then, don’t you?” I replied while puffing out my cheeks. *So, you decided to barge in on my bathtime, one of my greatest joys in life, just to tease me? Curse you!*

“Being with you puts me at ease,” Mr. Julius muttered after he flashed a faint smile at my pouting face.

“Even inside of the bath?” I asked.

“Yeah. When you bought me, the first thing you did was bathe me. I guess it’s now ingrained into me that I’m supposed to take a bath with you.”

“You sound like a newborn chick that’s been imprinted and chasing me around like I’m your mom,” I mumbled in a muffled voice while I covered my face with both of my hands.

Ugh, I’m no good. I find this side of him adorable. Hearing him say that made me want to forgive him for anything he did. I was tempted to wash his hair for him again.

“I guess it can’t be helped,” I relented. “I’ll take a bath with you in the future too.”

“It’s all your fault,” he insisted. “In other words, you don’t really have the

right to refuse.”

I raised my head, removing my hands from my face with a sigh. “Isn’t that a bit too unreasonable for you to say?”

But it’s a rare sight to see him surrounded by roses. I guess I’ll forgive him just this once. He didn’t seem like the type to take the initiative and prepare a rose bath to take a dip in, even if he suited it so well.

“Then why don’t I wash your hair for you next time?” I offered.

“Sure,” he replied.

I didn’t know what thoughts ran through his head when I washed his hair the first time, but he did look like he was comfortable. That made me inexplicably happy, and I was a bit relieved when he accepted my offer. *Thank goodness.*

When we first met, I was rather forceful and quite desperate myself. I was glad that my actions didn’t hurt him somehow. Mr. Julius, who was leisurely taking a bath right in front of me, exuding elegance and grace, gestured for me to approach him. The tub was large and there was indeed some distance between me and him; I didn’t know what to do, even if he motioned for me to approach him. And so, I decided to pretend like I didn’t notice. I was hugging my knees, but the rose bath still felt good on my tired body.

“Chloe,” he said, finally calling out my name.

What? Does he need something from me? We might be a bit apart, but I can still hear his voice. I reluctantly turned toward him. *Is there something he wants to show me? No, probably not. We’re taking a bath!*

“What?” I asked.

“Show me your face. The rose petals are so vibrant that I feel like I might lose sight of you.”

“You’re lying! I’m not *that* plain, I’ll have you know! Wait... I think. Right? You’re not being serious, are you?”

Urk... I don’t know if he’s joking or being serious. He didn’t have a mischievous grin on his face, and he looked serious. If a bathtub of roses caused him to lose sight of me, I feared that I’d turn completely invisible in the middle of a rose

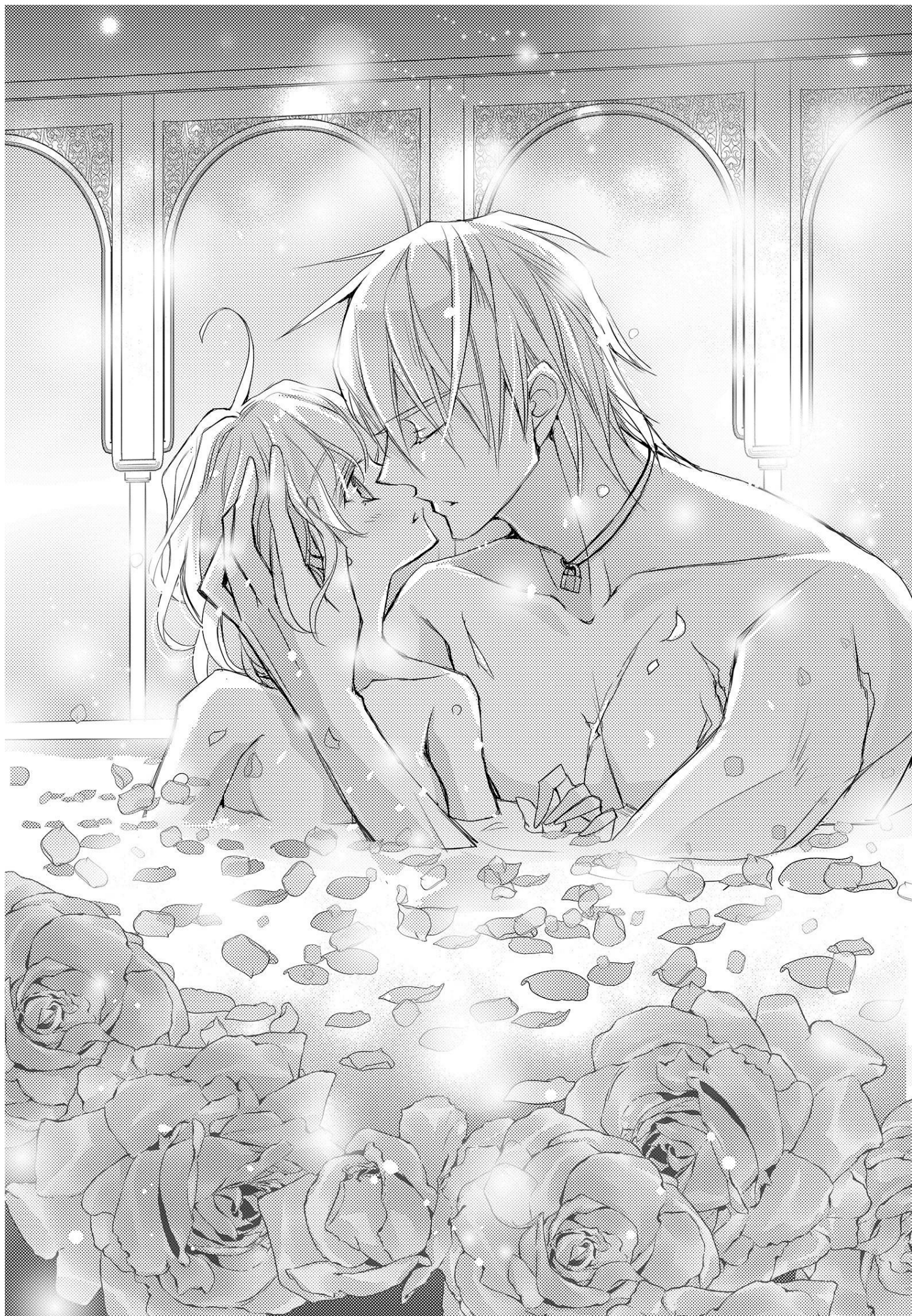
garden with blooming flowers.

I remember a rose garden. There was one in the corner of my academy. I occasionally dropped by to visit for a change of pace, and I'd even conversed with Cyril in the garden before. I wonder if Cyril lost sight of me too. I think I'll ask him next time. I was seriously worried about how plain I was, and I was worried that my warm hues might've made me turn invisible to others.

While I was fretting over this potential issue, I decided to show my face to Mr. Julius in an act of defiance when he approached me. His large hand touched my cheek as he pulled my face close to him.

"Uh, huh?" I gasped pathetically.

I felt my vision grow fuzzy for a moment before I felt his slightly dry, yet soft lips on my own. He kissed me deeply as though he was trying to bite onto me or devour me whole. His large hand touched my nape, and my mind grew blank. His fingertips gently glided over my nape and shoulders as though to confirm something—he was checking where he'd bit me back at Puerta.



The moment that realization hit me, my body became warmer than ever. *I feel like this isn't good for me...* When I noticed that I was growing dizzy, it was already too late. The world started to spin, and it only took a few moments before my consciousness faded to black.

My head and body felt heavy. I felt like I was being pressed down by a boulder.

“Ugh...” I groaned pathetically.

I found myself lying on a bed. When I managed to somehow move my body, I realized I was completely naked. Curled up in the sheets in nothing but my birthday suit made me feel like some sort of countess in the middle of the afternoon. *I don't think all countesses are naked while taking an afternoon nap, but that's just how I imagine them to be.*

But no noble would let out such a pathetic groan like they were about to vomit. *And that's the difference between me and a sexy countess. That reminds me, Ms. Natalia often slept almost completely naked.*

I had no doubt that my master was indeed rather sexy, but the sorry state of her filthy room completely ruined the mood. She was nowhere near a bewitching countess who acted with grace.

Why am I so fixated on the countess? It's because I heard the old men visiting Ms. Roxy's diner talking about such women quite often. Nobles were apparently a rather popular topic amongst commoners—especially raunchy or lecherous tales.

“You okay, Chloe?” Mr. Julius asked.

He was the cause of my dizziness, but he was now elegantly sitting by the window, sipping on Rasheed's special white liquor. He looked quite regal. I wasn't sure just how strong the alcohol was, but I didn't think any normal person would've been able to chug it down. *I think the store owner said that it'd be delicious if it was mixed with some juice.*

“In the old days, water was very valuable in Rasheed,” Prince Faisal had explained while we were shopping. “Thanks to the advancement of alchemy and sorcery, we're no longer suffering from a scarcity of water, but we still

follow old traditions and drink heavily. Alcohol is quite cheap here.”

And it was true; Rasheed’s liquor was offered for a much more reasonable price than Astria. Beer and wine were popular drinks within Astria, but since we were in a different nation, I decided to buy the traditional alcohol of Rasheed. Stuff like this couldn’t be found in Astria.

Mr. Julius was currently drinking a bottle of milk liquor, an alcohol similar to kumis, made from fermented milk with various herbs and spices added for a pleasant aroma.

“I’m not okay at all,” I protested weakly. “I was taking a relaxing bath, but I grew dizzy from the heat because of you.” I proceeded to hide half my face within the sheets and let out a muffled voice. “But thank you for carrying me to this bed.”

It was his fault, but I still couldn’t get over my embarrassment and I felt a bit pathetic. I found a pitcher of water and a glass by the bedside table, so I reached out to drink a glass of water. Sliced lemons were floating within the pitcher, and the glass of water also had a lemony taste to it. After I gulped it down, I felt very refreshed.

Mr. Julius was still casually sipping on his liquor while gazing out the window, and I saw my chance. I slid out of bed and quickly put on a change of clothes. The apparel that was available by my bed was provided by the inn—it was an article of cloth that I had to wear over my head and tie around my waist. The negligee was decorated with a gorgeous, glossy rose pattern. I felt like it wouldn’t suit me at all, but this was a perfect opportunity to enjoy the inn’s amenities to their fullest extent. When I put my arms through the sleeves, the cloth was smooth and silky to the touch. It was very comfortable to wear.

The cool breeze came in through the window that had been cracked open, helping me cool my head. It was already nighttime.

The view from the luxurious inn was splendid. The glittering, starry lights of the city decorated the beautiful cityscape like jewels scattered throughout the area. The view was so breathtakingly beautiful that it seemed like a waste not to enjoy it. I wasn’t sure exactly how long I was out, but I guessed that I’d been unfortunately unconscious for about an hour.

“You’re too frail, Chloe,” Mr. Julius said.

“And who’s fault do you think that is?” I demanded. “I was taking a bath first, meaning that I was sitting in there longer than you. Of course it’d get too hot for me. And you even did something so...”

“I didn’t do much.”

“Urgh...”

Maybe not much for you, but for me... I once again stumbled over my words, unable to refute his claim. While I was trying my best to find a rebuttal, my gaze focused on the small table in front of him.

Various delectable dishes that seemed to pair well with alcohol were laid out. *When did he manage to get his hands on these delicious-looking foods?*

“Did you order room service?!” I gasped.

“Yeah, I ordered a few random dishes.”

“You’ve been enjoying yourself to the max while I was completely knocked out, haven’t you?”

I haven’t even eaten dinner yet. Just as I had regained my energy, my stomach started to rumble, and I decided to sit across from him. He offered me a drink, and I gratefully took it.

It was a bottle of juice. When I poured myself a glass and took a sip, it tasted like raspberries and was very delicious. I hadn’t purchased this during my shopping spree today, meaning that Mr. Julius must’ve ordered this for me when he was getting room service. *I didn’t expect him to be so thoughtful.*

I wondered if he felt bad because I’d passed out, and this was his way of apologizing. *All right, then I guess I’ll forgive him.*

I firmly decided to make sure that there was some distance between us the next time we took a bath together.

◆ A Night in the Desert Nation

THE afternoons in Rasheed were hot as though it was the middle of summer. Though the temperature was warm, it was dry, making the heat tolerable and not too problematic. In contrast, their nights were chilly.

It wasn't as freezing as a mid-winter breeze, but a cool gust of wind gently blew through the open window. It was a bit too cold to be wearing light clothing, but that was all. In fact, it was rather comfortable if one stayed indoors.

"I wonder what this is?" I asked as I gazed intently at the delectable dishes Mr. Julius had already ordered. "Dried mutton, maybe? There's cheese and olives, I think. The seasonings make it a bit spicy."

The room service at this luxurious inn was nothing like the food that we'd ordered at the street stalls in the afternoon. Each dish was carefully crafted and there was very little on the plate. This was, unfortunately, the ubiquitous truth of the nature of expensive food.

"The bill will be forwarded to Faisal, so we can eat and drink as much as we like, apparently," Mr. Julius explained. "And it's *free*, your favorite word."

"I-I can't believe it!" I stammered. "He's so generous and grand! I might fall for him."

"Chloe."

"I'm kidding. Urgh! Ow! That hurts! Don't pinch me! I was just cracking a clever joke, that's all! Don't get angry."

He leaned forward to tug on my cheeks since I sat across from him—I *had* to vocalize my woes. *A mature adult shouldn't be so quick to act like that and be violent. Or is he drunk already?* I wondered.

"Oooh, I sense jealousy," I teased playfully. I managed to evade his painful squeezes of torment and rubbed my cheeks. "You must *love* me very much." I

huffed proudly and stuck my chest out. Mr. Julius stared at me intently.

“You make me keep repeating myself,” he said. “That’s what I’ve said from the start.”

“...Are you really drunk right now?”

“Not at all. This isn’t enough to get me drunk.”

“Ugh...”

“You’re good at digging your own grave, aren’t you? I’m almost impressed.”

His displeased expression shifted to one of amusement as he expertly grabbed a corkscrew and undid the seal on one of the bottles of liquor. For whatever reason, I imagined Mr. Julius just tugging the cork out without using any tools, but he elegantly opened the bottle. *Figures. I mean, he was formerly a high-ranking noble and isn’t a barbarian or anything. I’m sorry. I imagined you using your hands to slice off the lip of the bottle while dynamically chugging down the liquor. I think you could do it if you put your mind to it, though.*

“You’re wearing clothes where it feels like I’d lose sight of you in an instant again, Chloe,” Mr. Julius observed.

He placed his lips on the freshly opened bottle of liquor as he stared at me. I tugged on my outfit, an elegant negligee decorated with a floral pattern. The excellent fabric felt comfortable on my skin, and its design was revealing and bewitching. I knew that I had no qualities or sex appeal that allowed me to enchant or charm a man as I wished, but since the room had provided this change of clothes for me—free of charge, I might add—I thought I’d wear it. There was no reason not to. Since everything was free, I figured that I might as well enjoy this place to my heart’s content. This was my way of being respectful to the lodging and to Prince Faisal.

“I admit that I don’t hold a candle to lovely, large floral patterns,” I confessed. “I’m a *young* beautiful maiden, so I’m better suited to tidy, small floral prints. It’s called being young.”

Mr. Julius pretended like he hadn’t heard a word I said and silently downed the rest of his liquor, emptying it in a flash. A few open bottles were already lying at his feet. The unique bottles of alcohol that I’d bought in the afternoon

were lined up underneath the table like they were waiting for their turn to be consumed.

“Say something,” I urged.

“Well,” he said. “True to your claims of being a young beautiful maiden, you’re cute, Chloe.”

“Whoa...”

His tone clearly sounded fake as he forced his voice to sound overly sweet. I could only let out a pathetic groan. After giving me an obviously phony word of praise, he opened a bottle of wine, which I assumed he had ordered with room service. He once again placed his lips directly on the bottle and gulped it down.

Was he joking? Was that his joke? Is he actually pretty drunk right now? I wondered if he was unexpectedly actually quite willing to go along with playful verbal exchanges. I wasn’t quite sure, but I found that to be rather humorous. I pressed my hands against my mouth and started to giggle, unsuccessfully trying to stifle my laughs.

“This is fun, Mr. Julius,” I said between chuckles.

“Is that so? That’s good to hear.”

“But how much are you going to drink? The banquet at the Holy Palace is tomorrow evening. Prince Faisal said that preparations were complete, and they’d come pick us up tomorrow, I think. You’re going to have a drinking contest tomorrow. That’s a battle. We can’t have you hungover.”

“Did I not tell you? I don’t get drunk.”

“I knew you had high tolerance, but...”

“I’m resistant to all sorts of poisons, including alcohol. It was one of my father’s policies. As the only son of House Craft, he fed me small amounts of toxins since I was young so that I wouldn’t get poisoned and killed. I built up my resistance, and thanks to that, I don’t get drunk.”

“Dystiana sounds way too dangerous...”

I turned pale while Mr. Julius spoke about his affair rather casually. *I had no idea that there was a father out there willing to feed his own son poison. I was*

the only daughter of a duke, but I was never fed anything like that.

“I’d imagine everyone in the royal family went through something similar,” he continued. “Cyril Astria might have experienced something like it. I’m not part of the imperial family, but my father was a bit of an oddball.”

I thought about Mr. Julius’s late father. *I wonder if he resembles the current Mr. Julius?*

“Jeanius, was it?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m surprised you remember,” Mr. Julius replied.

“Of course. It’s rare for you to talk about your past, so I remember it very well.”

“Jeanius Craft and Citrin Craft are the names of my father and mother. I haven’t thought about them for a while. I haven’t even called their names for years now. It’s a bit nostalgic.”

“Your parents must’ve been kind. Your voice sounds calm, so I get the sense that they put you at ease.”

“My father was an oddball, but he was probably a good parent to me. He was also the one who gave me a dragon egg. Without him, I would’ve never got to meet Helios.”

Mr. Julius’s father was likely killed by Emperor Oswald. I wasn’t sure about the details or the nitty-gritty of the issue, but there was likely a demon by the emperor’s side. Mr. Julius lost his father similarly to how I had, but he hadn’t said a word of it. I had also refrained from touching upon the topic.

I don’t think I want to ask him about it just yet. I’m sure that there’ll be a time when he must tell me about his father. I was certain that one day, I’d have to go to Dystiana to fight. Oswald and Samael, in the form of Princess Minne, would be there, waiting for me. I pledged to stay by Mr. Julius’s side. No matter what, I didn’t want to leave him. *Because if I don’t, he’ll—*

“Chloe, I think I drank a bit too much,” Mr. Julius said, cutting off my thoughts. “I’m gonna head outside for some fresh air.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “I think you *did* drink too much. And you just bragged

that you don't get drunk. Are you all right? Do you feel dizzy?"

He immediately stood up and headed for the spacious balcony that stretched outside of the large window. I chased after him. *It looks like his footsteps are a tad unsteady... It really is unusual.*

Judging from the number of empty liquor bottles strewn on the floor, I couldn't blame him, but if that was the case, was his childhood story about poison a simple joke?

When it came to Mr. Julius, the line between truth and jokes often blurred, and by default, I believed every word he said. *I can tell when he says one of his obviously fake compliments, though.*

I put my hand on his back to support him as we stepped outside. The chilly breeze caused my thin negligee to flutter. The skies of Rasheed were clear, and many stars twinkled brightly under the curtain of night. It looked like glimmering jewels were scattered across the sky as the cityscape below emitted its own share of light that flickered like fireflies. All across the city, orbs of light were floating around before vanishing.

"It's very beautiful," I murmured. "It's beautiful, but it makes me feel a touch melancholic."

These flickering lights were actually magical tools—the light of a magical garden lantern. Magical balls of fire were nestled within a spherical cage, and flames rose in the air before they burned away and disappeared. A similar tool was prominently used in Astria as well.

In our kingdom, they were often utilized during celebrations and festivals as they brightly lit up the sky, but Layla had told me that these lights represented the repose of souls in Rasheed. It was a prayer of sorts. This ritual occurred at night, when people mourned those who died in battle as they raised the fire to dance in the skies.

"Chloe, I'll protect you, no matter what," Mr. Julius said. "I'll do whatever it takes."

I thought that he staggered to his feet a little, but I wondered if it was just an elaborate act. He looked up at the starry sky before he focused on me,

wrapping his arms around my body for a tight embrace.

His hug was so powerful that it was almost suffocating, but I gripped and tugged on his clothes in response. His words just now offered little comfort.

“Don’t say that,” I whispered. “It’s bad luck. I’ll always stay by your side, Mr. Julius. And I’ll protect you. I’m quite strong, I’ll have you know.”

“You’re right. You really are strong,” Mr. Julius agreed.

“That’s right. I’m a genius and—”

Before I could finish my usual catchphrase, he placed his lips over mine as if he were trying to devour me whole. The strong scent of alcohol hit my nose, and my mind started to grow dizzy from it all.

◆ The Morning After a Hangover

WHEN I woke up the next morning, I had no memories of the night prior. My head throbbed like it was in a vise, and my body felt awfully heavy. I'd never experienced anything like this in my twenty years of my life.

"Urgh..." I groaned, pressing a hand against my aching head in bed.

Quite honestly, I had nothing else to say. *As a self-proclaimed beautiful young maiden, should I have just gone, 'Ngh...' or something cuter?* I wondered. I doubted a beautiful young maiden would've gotten a hangover and forgotten everything that occurred the night prior in the first place.

"Shut up, Chloe," a grumpy voice scolded from beside me.

Right, Mr. Julius is sleeping right next to me. I pressed my fingers against my temples as I sat up. There were several bedrooms to choose from, yet he decided to sleep right next to me. *What even happened last night? Why am I hung over?* I didn't think I was sick or ill; I was convinced that I'd drank too much the night before.

I knew quite a bit about hangovers. When I visited Ms. Roxy's diner for lunch, I often spotted mercenaries and adventurers who were hungover and looking for a cure. These men would press their hands against their heads while saying, "Ugh... I drank too much. Ms. Roxy, the best cure for a hangover is another cup of alcohol. Fill 'em up for me." Ms. Roxy would always scold and admonish them while forcing these men to drink tons of water.

"Mr. Julius, it seems I've got a hangover," I groaned. "And I don't even remember anything that happened last night. Did something happen?"

I peered at his face as I massaged my temples. *It's a refreshing sight to wake up like this together.* While Mr. Julius and I usually slept in the same bed, unless we were in danger, he tended to sleep in late. His mornings started late, as though he was trying to get back the sleep that he'd missed out on for many years, unable to find a comforting bed to lie in.

If we didn't have any plans, I generally wanted to let him sleep in. I usually

woke up early and slipped out of bed to prepare breakfast, clean the house, tidy up the store, and make alchemy items if I'd received a request. It was very rare for the both of us to wake up together.

Instead of greeting me with a "Good morning," his first words being, "Shut up," suited him perfectly. Mr. Julius smiling at me gently during morning greetings was unfathomable, so I was glad that he was his usual grumpy self. It put me at ease unlike anything else.

"Hangover? Ah, I see..." Mr. Julius said, slowly rising as well.

He was wearing a similar garment to me—one that was tied around the waist—but his clothes were black and decorated with gold embroidery of the lily of the valley. The glittering design was a bit wrinkled as his neck, muscular chest, and well-toned abs were on full display for the world to see. He groggily pushed his hair back; even a sleepy and messy Mr. Julius looked amazingly handsome. As the morning sun's rays peeked through the gaps in the curtains, his golden locks glimmered like jewels.

The brand and lock on his neck and the countless number of battle scars marring his skin were all supposed to be an awful sight, but on him, they looked like elegant marks that only further accentuated his raw beauty. *It's still so early in the morning, and he looks inexplicably seductive...* I stared at him in awe.

"Chloe," Mr. Julius said, glancing at me before letting out a weary sigh.

He pointed at my chest, and I looked down to check on myself. *Wait, if he looks a bit messy, then I should too...*

"Ack! Whoa!" I shrieked in the most unsexy manner possible.

The thin negligee was wide open. I hastily grabbed at the two sides and pulled it back in front to cover my chest. I was still a twenty-year-old maiden, a blossoming youth, and while I was used to bathing with Mr. Julius, it was still embarrassing to be almost naked in front of him for no reason. *This kind of nightgown is no good. I realize now that ultimately, only the band by your waist stays put, and everything else is on full display.*

"Ugh, my head hurts..." I groaned. "Why do I even have a hangover? You were the one drinking heavily, not me..."

“You don’t remember, Chloe?” Mr. Julius asked.

“I know we were out on the balcony to get some fresh air and then, um... Er... Then what?”

“If you don’t remember, it might be best if it was kept that way.”

“Why do you make it sound like something happened?! Now I’m super curious.”

Did something happen? I was dying to find out, so I tugged his arm. He looked at me as though he wanted to say something, and he flashed a faint smile.

“Because I drank so much, you swallowed my saliva that had been mixed with alcohol, and you got plastered,” he explained.

“Phrasing, phrasing,” I chided. “That sounds so disturbing and gross. You could’ve just said we kissed or something.”

“Because you kissed me, you got drunk,” he rephrased.

“Okay, now I know that phrasing *doesn’t* suit you.”

Crap, it’s so early in the morning, and he’s already making me laugh. I did my best to stifle my loud laughs, causing my stomach to cramp up. Because I tried to endure my laughter, my head hurt even more.

“After that, you returned inside, took off all your clothes, and started to dance in the middle of the room,” Mr. Julius explained. “So, I forced you into bed and put you to sleep.”

“Yikes...” I gasped.

I shouldn’t have asked. I only drank a sip or two of liquor, and I’d never gotten smashed before. *I guess I’ve got the bad habit of dancing around naked when I’m drunk. I never knew.* I covered my face with both of my hands in hopes of covering my embarrassment. Then I noticed Mr. Julius giving a suppressed chuckle from the back of his throat.

“Don’t worry, I lied,” he assured me.

“Why did you lie?” I asked.

“It’s true that you started to strip down. It’s probably best if you don’t drink

much in front of others. You should keep that in check.”

I don't know what's going on anymore. So, I didn't dance around naked?

“What actually happened, then?” I asked.

“Nothing much, really,” he answered.

“I didn't cause you any trouble or anything? I didn't projectile vomit all over you or something?”

“You didn't vomit.”

It seemed like he chose his words carefully, as though they held a deeper meaning. He got up from the bed, filled a glass with some water, and handed it to me. I tried my best to regain my memories from last night, but my mind was a blank sheet, and I couldn't recall a single thing. What was clear was that I'd stripped. That was something I had to be careful about. *I had no idea that I had the habit of removing my clothes.*

“We've got a banquet today, but I'm hungover...” I groaned while I held the glass with both of my hands. “I might not be able to eat the lavish dishes.”

A lavish inn may not be the place for me. I became dizzy and fainted in the bath, and I got so drunk that I lost some of my memories. *But all of it is Mr. Julius's fault, really.*

“Jahala mentioned that powdered sand light insects were good for regaining magic and for hangovers. Do you want to eat some?” Mr. Julius offered.

“No!” I protested. “I finally managed to escape my insect diet. They're really bitter, you know.”

“But it's apparently good for your health.”

“Even so, *no*. I'll get better with some water. Can I sleep for another hour or so? I know I usually sleep and wake up early as part of my principles, but I can make an exception during vacations.”

“Yeah. Faisal did say that they'd come to pick us up, but I don't think they'll arrive first thing in the morning. Even if they did, we can just make them wait.”

He took my empty glass from my hands and placed it on the table. As I lay

back on the soft bed, he slid beside me and embraced me in his arms. Enveloped by his burly, large body, I felt so nervous, and my heart started to pound to the point I no longer felt sleepy.

When I peered up at him, he had his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling with every breath he took. I gazed at his body and noticed a small red mark on his neck.

All of a sudden, a part of my lost memories flashed back to me. While I was drunk last night, I remembered saying something along the lines of, "It's not fair that only you get a mark!" and bit him back on his shoulder.

I'm so embarrassed that I could die! How could I have been so forward?! You know what, let's just pretend I forgot all about it. Yeah, that's for the best.

My face redder than a tomato, I pressed my forehead against his chest.

◆ Chloe Sagrid is Dangerous When She's Drunk (Julius)

WHEN the strength left Chloe's body, I supported her thin waist. She'd told me she was afraid of men, but she didn't look frightened or tremble when I touched her. She had likely accepted me.

I understood that. I also knew that she had special feelings for me that made me different from others. However, despite her age, her reactions were a touch juvenile. She was once engaged to Cyril Astria, but that man quickly had his heart stolen away by a woman called Aliza. Chloe was apparently desperate to make a living as an alchemist ever since she was tossed aside in the royal capital. In other words, she was lacking experience in the romance department.

In truth, there may have been numerous men, Roge included, who harbored feelings for her, but Chloe refused all these advances. And because she had, she was unacquainted with the romantic feelings that people had for her. She rejected men to such a shocking degree. She had every right to feel that way. When I think about the traumatizing experience she went through, it makes me want to behead every man who had attempted to assault her—even if they hadn't succeeded.

It seems I'm rather special to Chloe despite those experiences. That's not bad at all. In fact, it makes me feel very good. Still, that didn't mean that I wanted something more; I didn't think that satisfying my greedy desires would advance our relationship further. I didn't mind if things stayed as they were. I truly thought so, but these were probably all excuses I told myself.

The wars hadn't ended. When I saw Chloe's face and heard her voice, I was reminded that I was no longer fighting on the front lines. But my long battle wasn't over—it had never ended. When I saw Oswald Dystiana's face, heard his voice, and mulled over his words, I understood that it was all connected.

So, I didn't mind if I stayed as Chloe's slave for now. I wasn't planning on dying by myself and leaving her alone, but as long as that possibility still persisted, I couldn't get swept up by my emotions and claim her for mine. This

world was far too fragile and delicate for that.

“Chloe. Hey, you there?” I asked.

I'd let my feelings get the better of me and teased her in the bath, but she quickly became dizzy from the heat. When she came to, I pretended that I'd gotten drunk and touched her as I greedily desired, but for some reason, she now became limp in my arms. I didn't think I'd done much, but it was clear that Chloe was far more inexperienced and sheltered than I thought when it came to romance.

I peered down at her face as she clung to me more than usual. A messy smile danced on her lips as she looked up at me in a daze. Her cheeks had turned pink, and her eyes were a little misty. *She's...*

“I feel so lightheaded,” Chloe said happily, slightly slurring her words.

I had no doubt that she was drunk. I was almost amazed by how quickly she could get intoxicated. She hadn't ingested a single drop. I was aware that some people got drunk over the atmosphere or mood of a room, but I wasn't at all inebriated. The story I told her about being resistant to poison was true, and it was the reason that I never got drunk. My father was an odd man.

“Julius, you should always consider the possibility that poison might be mixed in with your food,” my father had said while training me and helping me build resistance to toxins.

“Oh, it must be my fault...” I muttered.

I licked my lips and found they tasted strongly of alcohol. I wasn't sure if a person could get drunk from saliva being transferred by one's tongue. As Chloe went completely limp in my arms, I scooped her up and returned to the room. I decided that it was best if she got some rest and decided to just throw her into a bed, but she weakly gripped my arm.

“Mr. Julius! Mr. Julius!” Chloe chirped.

“...What?” I asked.

“I feel like I'm floating. This is fun!”

“Just go to sleep already.”

“But I’m having so much fun! I don’t wanna sleep!”

She let out a carefree giggle as her hands moved from my arms to coil around my neck. Chloe rarely hugged me of her own accord, and I knitted my brows with concern. I had no intention of doing anything to a drunk woman, but I felt like I’d only complicate matters if I tried to peel her away.

“Mr. Julius, you’re as handsome as ever today, too!” she said with a beaming smile. She seemed to be devouring me with her eyes.

Left with no other choice, I sat on the edge of the bed with her still cradled in my arms. If I talked with her for a bit, I wondered if she’d fall asleep. I wasn’t against knocking her out, but I didn’t mind if she stayed awake for a bit longer so that I could see this humorous side of her unfold.

Chloe never reached for a drink of her accord, and this was a rare sight. I needed to see how she’d act when she was drunk for future reference.

“Today was fun, wasn’t it?” she chattered. “We were able to wear unusual clothes, go shopping, and eat delicious food. It was so much fun!”

“I see. That’s good to hear,” I replied.

“I guess we can call this hanging out, right? Were we? No, maybe it’s a date. I think it was a date! You said that you liked me, so we went out on a date!”

“Guess so.”

“This is the first time I went out on a date with someone I love! It feels nice, like we’re a couple.”

“...Yeah.”

She spoke with elation as she laughed and smiled happily. I would’ve liked to hear her say those words when she was sober, but I knew that she was only able to speak her true thoughts precisely because she was drunk.

“You always come to save me, and you’re always by my side, and you’re so cool, and strong. I love you so much,” she said.

“...I see.”

I started to grow frustrated and impatient in all sorts of ways. I thought it was

better if I hit her on the back of her neck and knocked her out. As she sat on my lap, facing me, she started to complain about how hot it was.

“It’s sweltering!” she said, trying to take off her clothes.

It seemed she not only liked to cling to others and talk, but she also liked to take off her clothes when drunk. These were horrible habits to have.

“Your chest is so broad,” she said. “You probably have bigger boobs than I do... I’m sure of it. Look at those muscles! Amazing!”

She stripped herself down to her chest as she started to compare our bodies. Her palms glided over my body without a care. And then, as though she realized something, she started poking my chest and neck.

“You’ve got a scar here, and here. And over here, too. You’re covered in wounds, aren’t you? I’d love to heal them for you, Mr. Julius, but I think a body covered with scars looks very cool. You look very handsome. It’s only the common sense of the world, you know.”

“Your tastes shouldn’t represent the whole of humanity.”

“Ah, so you found me out. I guess you know what I like.”

“You’ve got odd tastes.”

“So it seems.”

“Chloe...”

For a moment, I’d lost all sense of reason and was tempted to sleep with her. I knew that I’d gone crazy. Just as I was about to lose myself, she let out a loud gasp, snapping me back to my senses.

“Ah!” she cried. “Speaking of, you bit my neck earlier, didn’t you? And you said that this was how dragons express their affection towards each other. I don’t think it’s fair that only you get to do it. I can too, can’t I?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Express my affection!”

Without hesitation, she gently bit my neck. Her soft lips and small teeth touched my skin, but I didn’t feel any pain. Her pale skin looked flushed, likely

from the alcohol.

“You...” I said, my voice so low that I surprised even myself. My throat spasmed.

“Heh heh!” Chloe giggled. “I left a mark on you, too!”



When she pulled her lips from me, she gave a proud laugh. Her smile was more enchanting than usual, and I felt myself almost lose all sense of reason once more. Chloe gave an innocent smile, her fragile fingertips brushing against the mark that she left on my neck. I realized that she was simply copying what I'd done, and I felt my own body fill with heat despite my alcohol tolerance.

I furrowed my brows and let out a deep sigh. She was a lost cause. I threw her onto the bed and she gave a humorously energetic cry.

"Eek!" she shrieked oddly before she was out for the count.

The alcohol had likely made her sleepy as well. She defenselessly slept on the bed as I gazed down at her. A faint smile formed on my lips—surely, I'd be allowed to get back at her just a little.

How much of this would she remember when she awoke the next morning? Whether she remembered fragments, forgot it all, or the memories came rushing back to her later, I knew I'd enjoy myself as I witnessed her various reactions.

◆ Being Rewarded and the Banquet

I knew by simply touching the dress that it was luxurious. The fabric switched to a different material just below the chest and elegantly fluttered outward. Unlike the bride selection ceremony that I'd attended last time, I wasn't hiding my infinite storage bag in my corset this time. It was still tight, but it wasn't suffocating like before.

I think I can eat this time, I hoped. Several layers of chiffon fabric hung over my dress in various colors: light pink, sky blue, and pastel purple. It looked flowery and vibrant while reminding me of the evening sky, emitting an aura of composure.

Under my chest was a large ribbon, and the chiffon skirt had small jewels woven into it. With every step I took, the jewels glimmered. My neck and shoulders were decorated with delicate floral lace.

My half-up hair was braided and adorned with blue flowers. The moment I set foot in the Holy Palace, escorted by Layla and Prince Faisal, Layla's ladies-in-waiting polished me from my head to the tips of my toes. I was still suffering from a hangover and was in a bit of a daze as I let out a groan every now and then.

I was unable to recall all my memories from last night, though I felt it was best if they remained forgotten. I wasn't planning on drinking a drop of liquor anytime soon, though I was never one to reach for alcohol.

On very rare occasions, I'd flippantly say, "I'm rewarding myself for working so hard," while taking a sip or two of extremely weak liquor. It was so weak, in fact, that it was practically juice.

Mr. Julius's liquor must've been really strong. I hadn't drunk a single drop, but a single kiss from him was enough to give me a hangover. I never knew that such a ridiculous thing could happen. Simply remembering last night made me so embarrassed that I wanted to bury myself in a hole. I now realized how awful

hangovers were.

“Chloe! You look so cute!” Layla squealed as she came to fetch me. I’d finished getting ready in the depths of the Holy Palace. “It’s such a waste that you don’t take good care of your appearance! Look at you!” She rushed over to me and squeezed my hands, a happy smile on her powdered face. She was the picture of a bewitching beauty.

“Um, Layla, how old are you again?” I asked.

“Twenty. Same age as you,” she replied.

“Then *what* is this difference?”

I felt like her cleavage could crush an egg if one was put in between her ample bosom. A massive jewel glittered just above her chest. Her lips were red and plump, and her eyelashes were so long that I thought I could hear them flap whenever she blinked. Her red dress fit tightly to her lithe frame, and a slit on the side revealed her pale leg.

In Astria, it was said to be rather uncouth to reveal one’s skin too much, and a lady doing so would be accused of working at a brothel and be scoffed at. However, Layla’s beauty was enchanting and graceful, an alluring princess in every way. I couldn’t blame Prince Faisal for being worried about men trying to woo her as I gazed at Layla in awe. We were the same age, but we were in completely different leagues.

“You know what they say, Chloe,” Layla said. “The grass is greener on the other side. There are times when I want to look adorable and petite like you, I’ll have you know.”

“If I looked as beautiful as you, I would lead men around by the nose and have them buy me meals,” I said.

“You won’t be able to do that. You’ve got Julius, much like how I’ve got Prince Faisal.”

“Y-You’re not wrong, but...”

“You sound a bit tired, Chloe. It must’ve been a rough night for you too, I presume. You look sleepy. Truth be told, I am too. It’s been a while since I was

able to enjoy some alone time with Prince Faisal, so he always gets so clingy when he—”

“L-Layla, you shouldn’t talk about stuff like that so openly!” I cried out, interrupting her.

Not only did she get the wrong idea about what happened last night, but she was about to divulge something rather private. I was merely suffering from a hangover, and I hadn’t enjoyed my night like Layla had. As I hastily tried to cut her off, her lips curled up to form a mischievous smile.

“Prince Faisal always gets so clingy when he’s drunk,” Layla finished. “Since ancient times, the people of Rasheed have often drunk alcohol instead of water, so most of us can hold our liquor quite well. Prince Faisal rarely gets drunk, but I guess the recent flurry of events tired him out. He likely grew relaxed when he understood that he could kick back a bit... He became unusually inebriated.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

Just like me. But in my case, it’s Mr. Julius’s fault.

“And after he became absolutely smashed, he started apologizing profusely to me about the past without going to sleep,” she continued. “He kept sniffing while lamenting his actions, so it was a fiasco to soothe him.”

“That does sound quite tiring...” I sympathized.

Prince Faisal seemed to have a lot on his plate, so when he let loose, I imagined that it was an exhausting affair to calm him down. *What if he has the same thoughts as me? I can’t remember much at all, but the mere thought of me crying and clinging to Mr. Julius would make me feel so bad...*

The only saving grace was that Mr. Julius didn’t sound grumpy at all—in fact, he seemed to be in a good mood. After I fell back asleep and woke up, the food he ordered via room service had been polished clean, and many empty bottles of alcohol were strewn across the floor. Even after I was inebriated and fell asleep, he seemed to have enjoyed himself in the luxurious inn. He was able to take advantage of the amenities of the inn far more than I was. If he *did* wake up in a foul mood, I could only lower my head and apologize to Prince Faisal for not appreciating his treat.

“When he awoke the next morning, he remembered everything, and he was so down like the world had ended,” Layla said. “He was so gloomy that I went through a lot of trouble to cheer him up.”

“You’re so kind, Layla,” I remarked.

“His diligence and honesty are his good points. I do think that he frets and dwells on some topics a bit *too* much, but as long as I’m here, he’ll be fine. I’m sure of it. If I don’t allow him to blow off some steam and relax every now and then, he’ll get overwhelmed by the Holy Palace and end up with stomach ulcers.”

“Ulcers from the pressure of the palace politics?”

“Yep. Our nation does some research on magic and medicine. When one feels psychologically pressured, they get stomach ulcers, apparently. You should be careful too, Chloe.”

“I always make sure to enjoy my meals, so I think I’ll be fine, but I’ll be careful. I think Mr. Julius will be fine too, but I’ll tell him to take good care of his body and mental health just in case.”

“Oh, I’m sure Julius will be fine.” Layla gave a shrug. “Now then, why don’t we head out? Prince Faisal and Julius will have a drinking contest today, right? And a 2000-year-old bottle of sweet wine that was stored in the palace’s treasury will be opened tonight too.”

“I think Ms. Natalia was eager to try that liquor,” I said.

“Ah, she’s arrived already. When she was encouraged to change into a dress, she claimed that doing so would only make the liquor taste worse and declined the offer. The ladies-in-waiting of the Holy Palace told me the whole story.”

“Is Ms. Natalia drinking already?”

“I think so. Shall we go take a look? Jahala and Ruto are eager to see you too.”

Layla escorted me to the grand halls. The delicate high heels I’d been made to wear, decorated with jewels, weren’t suited for running, and I’d never wear anything this luxurious of my own accord. The dress, shoes, and my hair were all works of art. *I wonder if I look nice now.*

I always called myself a beautiful young maiden, but this was a separate matter entirely. I'd always gone for a more natural look and didn't dress up often, but being adorned in such lavish attire made me feel different. *I'm just making excuses to myself. I guess I'm nervous.*

The last time I wore a lovely dress, I was trying to infiltrate the Holy Palace, but today was different. *Will I get praised for being all dolled up?* I tried imagining Mr. Julius going, "You look lovely, Chloe." It played out so awkwardly in my head that I was tempted to giggle.

Many people were gathered in the grand hall. The orchestra was playing a cheerful symphony, and dancers floated around in the middle of the dance floor, their clothes adorned with shimmering jewels that accentuated their exposed stomachs and legs. Their dancing was a mesmerizing sight.

"That was amazing!" I gasped. "And their attire is so exciting! I've never seen anyone dressed like that in Astria."

"In Rasheed, revealing one's skin isn't seen as something that should be avoided or scoffed at," Layla explained. "Being in that attire is akin to a shrine maiden making an offering to God through their dancing. In fact, revealing one's stomach and legs are seen as symbols of fertility or good harvests, and is quite sacred. It's a welcome sight."

"I do find it sacred as well. It's very beautiful."

"I agree. These dances can celebrate victories, the changing of the seasons, call for rain, or even serve as an act of gratitude towards God. Many of these dancers belong to holy temples too. But...erm... When King Shesif was reigning as the monarch... Um... These dancers weren't called to the Holy Palace."

"Because the king might fall in love with one of them," I guessed.

"Yeah. I'm not sure just how serious King Shesif was with these women, but the ladies he had gathered at the Holy Palace were all appropriately dealt with and sent home. Prince Faisal can be a bit, well, unsociable at times, so it seems he had trouble taking care of all the ladies."

"I can imagine it all too well."

It wasn't difficult to envision Prince Faisal struggling to deal with the women

who waited upon King Shesif. *I can't blame him for wanting to get drunk and rant about it to Layla. If I was the prince, I'd do just that. I'd want Layla to give me a lap pillow and pat my head. She has those maternal instincts to her, somehow, even though I know that we're the same age.*

"Layla! And Chloe!" Prince Faisal said, breaking free from the crowd of older, dignified nobles that surrounded him. "We were waiting for you. You ladies took a good while, so we were getting worried."

Mr. Julius was apparently with the prince since he slowly followed him over to us. Mr. Julius was surrounded by Lambda and the rest of the Dragon Knights. *Thank goodness. He's not surrounded by other women.* It would've been disastrous if there were more women who ended up straying off the right path like Ms. Eliza. Young noblewomen were staring at Prince Faisal and Mr. Julius from afar, but the two men were surrounded by burly soldiers and daunting noblemen that the ladies couldn't approach.

"Women need time to prepare, Prince Faisal," Layla noted.

"Layla, I know full well how beautiful you are," the prince replied. "The dress you're wearing suits you very well, but perhaps it's a bit too revealing..."

"I actually wanted to wear the dancers' uniform and display my celebratory dance. It would've been a ball with my iron fan, honoring our victory, and I've no doubt that it'd look gallant and fitting for a banquet."

"Indeed, while the garments of the dancers are sacred, I beg of you not to join in... I can't stand having you show your smooth and supple skin to other people. You look beautiful no matter what you wear. Perhaps you don't need to show off your legs so much..."

"This dress is my reluctant compromise," she said. "I've kept revealing my body to a minimum for you."

I wasn't sure if the prince was praising the dress or bemoaning how revealing it was, but Layla looked rather annoyed. I was already used to this dynamic between them, and I could empathize with the prince, but it seemed he had the tendency to speak his mind a bit too much. Faisal was wearing a white outfit embroidered with black roses—similar to what former king Shesif had worn.

However, the prince didn't wrap his body in glittering jewels, giving him a plain and rustic appearance. Perhaps thanks to his burly physique, he made it work; his body looked as fine as a marble statue, and the simple outfit only accentuated his manliness, complementing his appearance.

"Revealing to a minimum..." Mr. Julius muttered as he stood in front of me and sized me up from head to toe.

He was wearing a black knight's uniform similar to Lambda's. I guessed that it was worn specially for celebratory occasions. A red cape hung over one shoulder, connected by a thin, gold chain that was clasped to his other shoulder. He suited anything he wore, but this uniform made him look like a refined, intelligent Black Prince. *Yeah, he looks handsome.*

If he said, "You look lovely, Chloe," it wouldn't have sounded off at all. But the first thing he'd said instead was, "Revealing to a minimum." I had no idea what he was on about.

"A-Are you saying that it's not worth revealing my sad excuse of a chest?!" I accused.

"No," he replied.

"You clearly averted your gaze just now! Come on, look at me! I'm cute, aren't I? Adorable, no? I'm a beautiful young maiden both inside and out, without a shred of doubt! Look! See?"

"...You're twenty."

"Age is just a number in this situation."

"...I guess."

Even during situations like these, he didn't waver, and I felt at ease that he didn't give me a princely smile and a fake compliment. I raised my fluttering skirt in the air so that he could get a good look and twirled in front of him, but Mr. Julius only stared at me before giving an annoyed sigh.

"I like your usual, *plain* clothes," he muttered.

"My apron dresses are cute!" I insisted. "You call them plain and yet you prefer them? Have you realized their adorable potential, perhaps?"

He tugged on my arm and pulled me close before whispering in a sweetly dark voice, “It’s unpleasant to have to show you to other men looking like this.”

“Eep...” I cried softly, covering my ears with both hands as he divulged an amazing secret to me. My face turned red in a flash.

“You’re not alluring at all, Chloe,” he said.

“Don’t tease me like that...” I huffed.

“I’m not. I’m being serious.”

“Ugh...”

Ever since I’d been treated at Puerta Research Center, I felt like Mr. Julius was closer to me like never before. He was always nearby, but I just couldn’t calm down as my heart was screaming with panic. *He looks cooler than usual! It’s so sly when he whispers stuff like that to me.*

“You look a bit more mature, but I suppose you’re still no different on the inside,” he said with a mocking smile.

I was still trying to catch my breath from his shocking confession. He reached out and tried to tousle my styled hair, but I defended my head, which took a lot of time to decorate, and fled from his grasp.

“It’s good to see you two doing so well,” Jahala said with a smile, parting from the crowd. “You look like you’re doing a lot better too, Chloe. I’m glad to see it. And as usual, you guys get along.”

Behind him stood Ruto in a black dress, smiling happily. Jahala was wearing a black robe decorated with lovely, golden rose embroidery, and because his outfit matched Ruto’s, they resembled a pair of siblings.

It was a bit embarrassing to have a boy younger than me find my interactions with Mr. Julius to be wholesome. *I know he’s not that much younger than me, but certainly looks that way. No, he’s not. The Puerta staff told me that Jahala’s still in his teens.*

“*Were the powdered sand light insects useful?*” Ruto asked. She didn’t physically speak and was using magic to converse with us.

Perhaps to hide that cylindrical tool around her neck, she was wearing a black

scarf. She used to sound a touch pensive and worried, but she now exuded a calmer and more composed aura.

“Yes!” I replied energetically. “Thanks to that, I’m good as new! I was fed quite a bit of the nasty stuff, actually.”

“I’m glad to hear they helped,” Jahala replied. “The powder doesn’t taste very good, but it’s useful for regaining the magical energy that you’ve depleted. I’ve prepared a few bags for you to take home with you as a souvenir from Rasheed. Please be sure to take them when you leave.”

“Thank you so much!”

It was bitter, and I was still hesitant about consuming insects, but I didn’t want to turn down his kindness, so I remained bright and cheery. I was told that it was effective against hangovers too, so I felt like I could give Mr. Roge a bag. *I’m sure the mercenaries would be happy to receive it.*

I expected as much, but King Shesif was nowhere to be seen at the banquet. His life wasn’t in danger, but neither Prince Faisal nor Layla would enlighten me with details about his condition. I felt I shouldn’t touch upon King Shesif and the late Salim, the man who had his body stolen away by Samael many years ago. Even if I were to receive answers to my questions, I couldn’t do anything to help them now. If Prince Faisal or Layla wanted to discuss it one day, they’d probably tell me of their own accord. *Just like how I revealed my past to Mr. Julius on that day.*

“I’m glad everyone’s here. I’d like for all of you to drink, eat, make merry, and enjoy yourselves, but as the one who shall be succeeding the throne after his brother, ancient traditions must be kept. This way, if you will,” Prince Faisal said, reaching out with one arm.

Layla took it and they stepped forward. The dancers in the middle of the hall gracefully twirled out of the scene, making way. Their long, thin garments that flowed behind them, along with the numerous glittering jewels that dazzled their attire, were mesmerizing. They were like fairies that fluttered straight out of a fairy tale.

“Chloe, Julius, let’s go too,” Jahala said to us.

He was standing beside a brawny Lambda—the two resembled a father and a son. It seemed Ruto wouldn't join us as she smiled and gave us a gentle wave. It was likely difficult for her, as Salim's younger sister, to stand in front of the crowd with us. I couldn't imagine Faisal treating her poorly, but she couldn't be rewarded with a medal before the general public.

I looked up at Mr. Julius beside me, wondering if he was going to escort me like the prince, but he gave an exasperated sigh. *Seems like he's not willing to move.*

In fact, Mr. Julius had no plans to obey the new king's orders, and I had to tug on his arm and drag him along with me. I was given a breathtaking dress, my hair was styled like a piece of art, and my makeup was painstakingly done, but as I tried to drag Mr. Julius, who refused to move, I looked like a farmer trying to pull up a massive turnip. *And this turnip won't even give way! Ugh!*

"Stop resisting!" I cried. "We're being rewarded here! This is important! Once we get our rewards, we can open up a hot spring for dragons, and I'm going to be the first proprietress of that inn! I'll be renowned far and wide for it!"

"Are you going to give up on being an alchemist and young beautiful maiden, then?" Mr. Julius asked.

"*And* is an important word here! I'm going to be all of those things! The greater includes the lesser. Don't you worry about it. I'll be the young innkeeper, Chloe, and own a hot spring. It'll be so cute! I guarantee that I'll get bombarded with interviews around the world."

"Chloe, just make a hot spring for Helios and Lumine. That'll be enough. Dragon Knights are mostly men."

"I know that. Do you have a problem?"

"Wonderful, Julius! You'll allow Lumine to bathe too? You're treating her precious like a member of your family!" Lambda boomed. He was walking behind Faisal with Jahala, but he rushed over to us and placed an arm around Mr. Julius's shoulder. I'd never seen him look so displeased even on the battlefield as he fled from Lambda's grasp, but the Dragon Knight didn't seem to mind one bit. "That's a splendid mindset to have." The burly man was all smiles.

“A dragon hot spring is a great idea, Chloe!” Lambda continued. “But excluding Julius, only Rasheed has a squad of Dragon Knights. In other words, you’re planning on immigrating here, I take it? If that’s so, I can meet Lumine whenever I wish!”

“I-I’m sorry, but I can’t answer those expectations,” I apologized. “I’ve got no plans on immigrating...”

“Is that so...? Well, that’s truly a pity. I’m just kidding. You’re a very cute lady, and without Julius by your side, I’m certain that throngs of men would be throwing themselves at your feet, asking for your hand in marriage. My subordinates are restless around you too.”

“Thank you. Even if it’s flattery, it makes me very happy,” I responded with a tight smile.

“Flattery? Nothing of the sort. If you become a mistress of a hot spring inn, many Dragon Knights—men—will gather around you. I’m sure many will choose to stay at the inn, eyeing you, Chloe. My subordinates in particular are filled with ulterior motives...”

“Oh, there’s no need to joke around like that.”

I was happy to receive Lambda’s praise, but I wasn’t personally familiar with any of his subordinates; I doubted that they were like that. I spent some time in Puerta, but not once had one of the employees there tried to strike up a conversation with me.

“You’ve got Julius by your side,” Lambda reasoned. “Still, there are men out there eagerly waiting for an opportunity. I’m certain that Julius is aware of that and is quite worried, which is why he exhibits his reluctance towards you becoming a young mistress of an inn.”

“Oh, that can’t be true,” I said, turning to the Black Prince beside me. “Right, Mr. Julius?”

“You’re an idiot,” he replied.

“You insulted me out of nowhere!”

Why did he become so mean all of a sudden? I just don’t get him at all.

“You two, and Lambda,” Jahala said to us calmly. “You’re standing out way too much. Prince Faisal looks troubled. Why don’t we follow him?”

I gasped and looked around. The sea of people parted to create a path towards the center of the grand hall, where the altar that was a step above the floor sat. Jahala had been walking along but had turned around to fetch us.

Everyone was staring at us, and I was very embarrassed. I was an adult, yet I had someone younger than me retrace their steps for me, making me beyond humiliated.

“I can’t help but jump into conversations about dragons,” Lambda said, stroking his short hair as he turned to me. “Chloe, could you fetch Natalia?”

“Ms. Natalia hates stuff like this even more than Mr. Julius, but sure, I’ll give it a try,” I replied brightly, trying to hide my embarrassment.

She was surrounded by servants in a corner of the grand hall. Ms. Natalia wasn’t wearing a dress but in her usual revealing, enchanting witch outfit. This banquet was one where guests ate while standing, and she was crossing her legs, sitting on a luxurious chair while downing one glass of alcohol after another. She was practically inhaling the liquor. She claimed that joining banquets was a pain, but she seemed to be enjoying herself quite a bit. *In fact, she might be the one making the most out of this celebration.*

Servants, Dragon Knights, and even a few nobles were bringing Ms. Natalia liquor and food. *Amazing. This must be the power of a beautiful lady. The overwhelming force of an enchanting witch.*

“We’re being rewarded, Ms. Natalia!” I called, waving my arms wildly in the air. “Let’s go!”

She wearily waved one arm back. “I’m busy, can’t you see? I’m guessing that there’s so much expensive 2000-year-old liquor available that I have to drink all of it. Just do what you want, Chloe. I’ll leave it to you.”

“I knew it... What shall we do now? Ms. Natalia isn’t the type to listen to my requests,” I sighed.

“Then that’s fine,” Lambda replied. “Thank you for trying. Let’s go, then, shall we? We should hurry up and get this ceremony over with so that we can

passionately hash out the details about that dragon hot spring!”

“I’d love to. You’re interested in business as well, I see!”

I felt like discussing a dragon hot spring with Lambda was a rare and beneficial opportunity, for he was knowledgeable about dragons. As I looked up at him and smiled brightly, Mr. Julius pinched my cheeks for no reason. *Ouch...*

He then silently walked towards the altar, and I hastily followed him. *You were reluctant to move just moments ago. Did you change your mind already? Or maybe seeing Ms. Natalia drink all that liquor made him want a pint too.*

I recalled the number of bottles he emptied last night and was amazed to see how energetic he was today. Because of the dress, I couldn’t move as nimbly as I’d liked.

Jahala and Lambda, perhaps realizing that I was about to trip, stood on either side of me and reached out to grab my hands. It felt less like being escorted and more like a little girl holding hands with her parents so that she wouldn’t trip. Even I internally questioned myself, unsure if a former noblewoman could act this way.

I have to keep it together. If I caused word to spread that the daughter of a former Astrian duke had no etiquette, I’d feel very bad for misrepresenting the rest of the Astrian nobility.

Prince Faisal and Layla stood facing each other on the altar, with Mr. Julius, me, Lambda, and Jahala behind them. The pleasant music that had accompanied the dancers stopped, and the chattering crowd fell silent to focus on us.

“Thank you for attending today’s banquet in celebration of ending the internal strife of our nation,” Faisal announced, his voice filled with dignity and power as it echoed throughout the hall.

It was my second time witnessing a scene like this. The first time was when the former king Shesif had spoken to the people who had gathered. I was very nervous back then, but it was different now. The mere fact that Mr. Julius was by my side made it easier for me to breathe. Because I was with him, I was able to stand proudly with my head held tall. *I guess I’m a simple woman.*

“Fearing the backlash from the royal family, I understand that many of you were unable to speak your minds, but I’m sure you’ve all noticed,” Faisal said firmly, causing the crowd to murmur. “The royal family had been overly involved with the research at Fores Research Facility and expelled the people of Puerta Research Center, which had supported us for many years. Surely, you understand the dangers that were involved.”

The nobles of Rasheed must’ve felt anxious about their nation. Hence, there were people willing to secretly cooperate with Puerta. Some had sided with the royal family, while others were waiting for an opportunity to strike. It was extremely difficult for one to point out a mistake and call it as such. Furthermore, people intimately involved in the vortex of these events may not even recognize a mistake, though it was glaringly obvious to outsiders.

This was true in the aristocratic society that I had once been involved in. In the end, no one had offered a helping hand to my father. *Of course, Mr. Roge had apparently voiced his apprehensions to Cyril... Now that I think about it, Mr. Roge was being very brave. Maybe I’ll give him two bags of the powdered sand light insects as a token of my gratitude.*

“Much blood was shed and those concerned about their nation were chased out. I knew about my brother’s cruelty, but I turned my back on it all. Only now am I finally able to see the errors of my ways.” Faisal paused as he gave a deep bow.

Layla, who stood beside him, bowed as well, causing the crowd to fall silent once more. When the two of them raised their heads, the audience was staring right at them.

“Together with Jahala of Puerta Research Center, and Dragon Knight Captain Lambda, who’d been chased out of the Holy Palace, I crossed blades with my brother,” Faisal said. “I ended up successfully defeating Shesif Rasheed. Many had lost their lives in that desert, though we are all citizens of the same nation. We have fought a battle that should’ve never been sparked in the first place.”

I thought back to the vast desert. When we first arrived, Mr. Julius mentioned the mountain of corpses that must’ve been buried under the sand. I was terrified by the revelation, though my heart squeezed in pain at the lives that

were lost. Even now, that pain didn't fade, but I felt like these soldiers were peacefully in an eternal slumber under the sands. Massive sand whales, made only of bones, were swimming through the sands as if they were messengers, guiding and carrying the souls of the dead to the Otherworld.

"I'm sure that many of you are anxious and are not satisfied with my explanation," Faisal continued. "However, I shall ascend the throne and become the next Holy King. I believe that it is my duty to return Rasheed to its former splendor, a nation filled with peace and tranquility. To achieve that goal, I would like for all of you to lend me your strength. I'm not telling you to forget the past, the blood that has been shed, and the time of peace that has been lost. I implore you to endure your anger and hatred for the time being. Please, for our nation, for Rasheed, I ask you all to support me as I amend the royal family's mistakes."

Faisal's words were straightforward and frank without beating around the bush. His earnest sincerity was apparent. When Shesif had once made his speech, it was difficult to ascertain if he was speaking his mind or if he was adding flair, as though he was in a play, but Faisal was the polar opposite of this. *Or maybe it just sounds like that to me because I know Faisal a lot better.*

I was sure that if I told these thoughts to Mr. Julius, I'd be called a "good-natured idiot" once more. But I wished from the bottom of my heart that these words touched the citizens of Rasheed, its nobility, and the soldiers that were present. I was certain that both Faisal and Layla truly wished for peace to come to Rasheed once more. I folded my hands in front of my chest in prayer, hoping that his words made a difference. A tense, almost suffocating silence filled the grand hall.

Slowly, a small round of applause echoed within the room; like a ripple in the water, the wave of applause slowly spread throughout the crowd as the grand hall was filled with thunderous clapping. I breathed a small sigh of relief.

Layla held a black crown woven of briar and gently placed it atop Faisal's head. The crown looked similar to the one that Shesif wore, but it was adorned with fewer jewels and was simpler in design. If black roses were the insignia of the royal family, the thorny crown must've been the symbol of the Holy King.

I obviously wasn't familiar with the details or their customs, but I felt like the crown suited Faisal very well. Filled with satisfaction and elation, I looked up at Mr. Julius happily. He looked down at me and squinted. His gaze wasn't filled with sarcasm, cynicism, or mockery. His eyes were kind, and it made me feel all flustered inside.

"Jahala Garena, chief of Puerta Research Center, and Dragon Knight Captain Lambda Abhlach have contributed greatly to this recent battle," Faisal went on. "I would like to personally award both of them with a medal from the royal family and would like to return the titles that had once been stripped away from them by the Holy Palace before they were ousted from the capital."

Amid the applause, Layla handed Jahala and Lambda rose-shaped medals made with black crystal. The two men respectfully received their awards before stepping behind us. The black rose crystal seemed like an expensive jewel on its own. *I wonder how much I could sell it for. Could I get one too? Or maybe I can ask Ms. Eliza to sell it to me at a good price through Coldman's Merchandise.*

While I was making a few questionable calculations in my head, our names were called up on the stage. *It's our turn now. I wonder what we'll get.* In truth, I'd already received Lumine, Helios's bride, and learned about the past that my father and mother shared. I'd even received the proper chants to cast anti-evil magic and had been taught the name of an angel of Seraphim. I'd already received more than enough, topped off with a night at a luxurious inn where I could eat and drink as much as I wished on Faisal's dime. *But because of Mr. Julius, I didn't get to enjoy that last bit much...* Still, I had fun. While I didn't deny that I'd suffered quite a bit as well and experienced some pain, I enjoyed myself so much that I felt like all the cons were outweighed by the pros.

I didn't particularly want anything, though I felt like I was lying to myself. *Nah, I'll take what I can get. Mr. Robert always tells me that one can never have too much money.* I recalled the merchant, who certainly wasn't strapped for money, trying to sell me very expensive armor. Mr. Robert's store carried a wide variety of items, and it was a popular place—he had a good flow of customers visiting his store daily.

And yet, he'd sometimes say, "Ms. Chloe... Money's tight, and you'd be doing me a huge service by supporting our family if you bought this diamond bracelet.

How does three of them sound to you?”

When I declined the offer with a, “You’re not strapped for money, are you?”

“You can never have too much money,” he’d reply before adding in a shady tone. “I wish 500 million gold just rained down on me right this second.”

Well, maybe “shady” isn’t fair to say. I also wish money would rain down on me.

“Chloe, Julius, over here,” Faisal said, calling us over.

I excitedly headed to the center of the altar to the new king, Faisal. I realized midway that Mr. Julius wasn’t behind me. I returned to him and forcibly dragged him over.

Come on! We’re in the middle of a huge crowd here! Just listen to me for once! It was embarrassing to be dragging him over in the middle of everyone. I was dressed so nicely, and my hair was done; I wished to carry myself in a more elegant fashion, but I realized I was acting like my usual self. *Not that I care.*

Layla smiled, and her lips parted ever so slightly. She remained silent but mouthed, “You guys get along so well.”

Once we made our way to Faisal, I tried to let go of Mr. Julius’s hand. As a representative of Astria Kingdom and a former daughter of a duke, I wanted to be refined and graceful here. Unfortunately for me, Mr. Julius had a hard grip on my hand and wouldn’t let go, so I used my free hand to pinch one side of my skirt and curtsy.

From afar, it may have looked like Mr. Julius was escorting me, but it was actually the other way around.

“This is Chloe Sagrid, an alchemist from the Astria Kingdom,” Faisal said. “And beside her is her beloved spouse, Dragon Knight Julius Craft. It’s thanks to the valiance of this couple that we were able to be victorious in this tenuous battle. It’s no understatement to claim that without them, Rasheed would’ve been bathed in blood and darkness for many years to come.”

“S-Spouse?” I whispered feebly.

I assumed Faisal would introduce us as, “the daughter of the late Duke Sagrid

and the former Black Prince of Dystiana,” but I was totally wrong. I was happy that our past had been separated from our current selves, but I was tempted to shake my head at the word, “spouse.”

For a brief moment, Faisal looked at us quizzically, but he continued his speech. “Many of our soldiers have seen Dragon Knight Julius’s valor on the battlefield. The same could be said for Chloe, who, despite being an adorable lady, wasn’t daunted by the terrors in front of her eyes and calmly assessed the situation to fight against our enemies. While you two are from a different nation, you’ve fought so hard for Rasheed’s sake. And for that, you have my deepest gratitude. I’d like to thank you both.”

I gave a small bow. Mr. Julius looked predictably annoyed, but knowing that there was a time and place for everything, he remained silent. I assumed he was thinking something along the lines of, “I didn’t fight for Rasheed’s sake.”

“I would love to give you two a title of nobility in Rasheed, but I’m certain that you both have no need for that,” Faisal said. “This medal may serve no purpose for you as well. And so, while this may not be much, I’d like to give you a portion of the jewels stored in the royal family’s treasury along with black rose necklaces, a symbol of eternal friendship with the royal family.”

A black rose necklace? What’s that? I got that we’re getting jewels, which is really nice. Currency is different in Rasheed and Astria, so I’m glad we’re not getting cold, hard cash. Exchange rates and all that are a nuisance. Jewels are perfect! I can sell them and use them for my alchemy! I spent some time mulling over the black rose necklace, wondering if it was a black jewel in the shape of a rose. If it was a sign of friendship, it unfortunately meant that I couldn’t sell it.

“The black rose necklace is a sacred treasure made from a mystical black crystal. It remembers its owner and can find the mystical black crystal that it was carved from,” Faisal explained with a smile, proud of this idea. “In other words, as long as you’re wearing that black rose crystal, you can visit the Holy Palace anytime you wish and meet with us.”

Since Faisal was now the Holy King with Layla being his queen, it’d be difficult for a normal alchemist and Dragon Knight to meet them so casually. Personally, I was very happy with this idea, but as I’d expected, Mr. Julius made a face as

though he had no need for something like that.

“Layla, bestow them with the necklaces,” Faisal requested.

“Certainly,” she replied obediently.

She took out a thin, gold chain with a small, glossy, black rose on the end and offered it to us. I gratefully accepted this reward, but since Mr. Julius refused to follow suit, I received his share too. *I can't sell this. I'll preciousy keep it close to me.*

The moment I received the necklaces, a loud applause erupted as though they were waiting for this moment. *This is a bit embarrassing.*

“Now then, let us end with the stiff formalities,” Faisal declared, his voice reverberating throughout the hall. “Today is a joyous occasion. Enjoy yourselves to your heart's content. There's no need to hold back.”

Layla grabbed my other free hand, necklace and all. Mr. Julius still refused to release me, and so both of my hands were occupied, and I was unable to do a single thing. It seemed I'd be forever unable to gracefully greet the Rasheedan nobility.

“Whew, we're finally done, Chloe!” Layla squealed. “Let's go. I'll help you wear that necklace later. I'm positive it'll look lovely on you!”

“Thank you, Layla,” I replied.

“And Julius, I see that you've already got something on your neck. Having two things will get in your way, no? Why don't we change it into an earring? It might be less bothersome.”

“...No need,” Mr. Julius replied.

“Oh dear, you're as grumpy as usual. I suppose Chloe's husband is always a grouch,” Layla said, smiling up at Mr. Julius.

He averted his gaze.

“Um...” I asked sheepishly. “King Faisal, do you really think that we're a married couple?”

The new king furrowed his brows in confusion. “You both never vocalized it,

but that's what I assumed. Was I wrong?"

"Yeah, um, we're not spouses, yet."

"Well, 'yet,' right? Then you'll eventually become married," Layla chimed in. "It's not really a problem then, is it?"

I cast a troubled glance in Mr. Julius's direction. He seemed completely unfazed. He only nodded and said, "Yeah."

If you're gonna agree, might as well propose to me first. Or maybe, knowing Mr. Julius, he's just feeling lazy and gave a cursory response. That honestly seems more likely in his case. While we weren't spouses, it was true that we were a family; maybe Faisal and Layla weren't wrong with their assessment.

Once the ceremony was over, bright music once again filled the hall, and we made our way from the altar, back to Ruto. She was sitting on a chair beside Ms. Natalia and was staring in awe as my master expertly downed pints of strong liquor in a flash.

There were even more men gathered around them. Ms. Natalia's bewitching beauty paired expertly with Ruto's divine attractiveness. While I understood the men who wanted to throw themselves at Ms. Natalia's feet, Ruto was more of a lady who needed to be protected. At the very least, I felt that way, though I was certain that she was older than me.

"There you are, Ruto," Jahala said.

Ruto smiled and nodded. *"I was standing around by myself when Natalia called me over."*

"Even just standing is pretty tough on your body, isn't it?" Ms. Natalia said casually. "As a Seal Master, it's clear that you've been casting spells that shave off your lifespan. Honestly, you shouldn't use magic anymore."

I widened my eyes in shock, unable to let this comment slide. "Ruto, are you all right? I didn't know you were so ill. I'm sure that even talking in this fashion requires magic. Maybe it'd be better if you kept that to a minimum too..."

"I'm fine, Chloe. A light conversation isn't much trouble. It's a bit tough to be standing around the entire time, and I unfortunately won't be able to enter

Rasheed's iconic desert marathon run, but..."

"If just standing around is tough, you'll die if you enter a desert marathon!" I cried. "Not quite sure what kind of athletics match it is, but..."

Meanwhile, Lambda skillfully forced the men surrounding the two ladies to stand in a neat line. Just like that, there was a long line of men waiting to serve alcohol and food to my master and shower her with high praise. I decided not to be too bothered by that.

"But I'm very grateful that Natalia asked everyone to prepare a seat for me. It's true that I don't have much stamina."

Jahala stood beside Ruto and explained, "Lifespan lost by using life-diminishing magic will never recover. The scars that remain on her body—magic infections, they're called—can never be fully healed either. Their bodies are forever altered. Fores Research Facility knew this and raised kids capable of magic to make them into Seal Masters."

His explanation was straightforward, and there was no sadness in his voice. However, I felt like he must've held some sort of emotion towards Ruto. They both had lost their family, and I was sure that they were able to relate to each other. Since Jahala was mature for his age, they could've looked like lovers, but I felt like siblings was a more apt descriptor for their relationship.

"Yeah, that's the sort of place that facility is," Ms. Natalia said, gently waving her glass. "I hope a Seal Master will never be born ever again. Well, I'm sure you've got your reasons, but don't do anything stupid anymore and shorten your lifespan."

The wine in her glass sloshed around. Her crossed legs that peeked through the wide slit in her dress were so pale that it was blinding. *She looks great. I don't know anyone who's better suited to a glass of red wine than her. If I tried to copy her, I'm sure that I'd accidentally slip and cause the glass to shatter.*

"Don't push yourself, Ruto," I said. "I'll make an alchemy item so you can talk without magical energy. Maybe one that can allow you to talk just by putting it over your throat. Yeah, that sounds perfect. I'll think up the perfect item for you!"

“Thank you, Chloe. But...I don’t think you can help. My body, which has been damaged by the magic infections, can’t be healed no matter what. It’s a curse for using power beyond human capabilities.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a genius,” I declared. “Making the impossible possible is all part of alchemy.”

“That’s right, Chloe, and don’t you forget it,” my master added. “You’re the apprentice of Natalia Báthory, the greatest alchemist there ever was, second to none, the greatest genius of all time in the entire history of the world, the one who knows the truth of the world, and a beautiful witch.” She puffed out her large chest proudly.

The line of enchanted men erupted with applause, lavishing her with even more praise.

“Completely different reaction from when you introduced yourself, huh?” Mr. Julius said mockingly beside me. I glared at him with every fiber of my being.

“Enough chitchat, where’s the liquor?” Ms. Natalia demanded, acting haughty in front of the king. “Faisal, where’s the 2000-year-old bottle? I came here because you promised I could drink it.”

The new king didn’t look even a touch offended. “You’re right. That was the promise. I’ll have it brought out.” He turned to a nearby soldier and ordered, “Bring it out from the treasury.”

I noticed Layla gazing at my master with adoration and respect. I could totally relate to Layla’s feelings, but I strongly believed that one shouldn’t aspire to become like Ms. Natalia. While my master was a glimmering, beautiful witch on the outside, the moment she returned home, she’d strip down and throw all her clothes on the floor.

“You’ve already drank quite a bit,” I pointed out with a sigh.

That reminds me: Ms. Natalia never ate unless I pestered her about it, but she’d chug liquor like there was no tomorrow. I recalled her using magic and making the bottles of alcohol on the cabinet float over to her as she greedily guzzled each one down.

Both Mr. Julius and Ms. Natalia seemed to have a very high alcohol tolerance,

making me realize I seemed to attract that type of person. I felt like maybe it wouldn't hurt to try a sip today. I had a hangover, but I was already good as new.

"Well, of course," my master countered. "I came here to drink. Listen well, Chloe. I may be omnipotent and a genius and have power that could transcend mankind, but I still have things that I don't excel at."

"Cleaning up, being tidy, basic life skills, and making money," I replied.

"Exactly. It's all very troublesome to me. In other words, I don't have a single gold coin to my name. And I can drink all the liquor I want here. I have to drink a century's worth today, as you can see."

"Do you not have any money?" I asked.

"I'm always prepared to not carry any money that'll last me overnight. That's the resolve I've got."

"I won't hand over my savings to you!"

"Oh, don't you worry about *that*. I'll be sure to have you take care of me when I return to Astria."

"No way."

"Aren't children supposed to support their mothers at some point?"

"But you're not my mother."

"Close enough. Come on, Chloe. Your mother here approves of your marriage to Julius. Isn't that great, Julius? You've got her parent's approval."

"Thank you," Mr. Julius replied casually without voicing a word of dissent.

I'm sure that he finds it a pain to speak with Ms. Natalia. I looked at him. The dragon ring took up the ring finger on his left hand, and a slave collar gleamed on his neck. It appeared only his ears were open for accessories, as Layla had said.

"Ms. Natalia, I received a necklace from King Faisal earlier, but is it possible to change this into an earring?" I inquired.

"Why don't you change it with your alchemy?" my master replied. "Or take it

to a goldsmith or something.”

“I wanted to see you use alchemy without the use of a pot once more. I’d like to use it as a reference for myself,” I said.

“Oh? As studious as ever, I see. Very good. All right, then. It’s a bit of a pain, but hand it over.”

I obediently gave Ms. Natalia one of the black rose necklaces.

“Uh, that’s a sacred treasure of the royal family... I wonder if we can just have her work on it like that,” Layla whispered worriedly.

“Are you worried? Who do you think you’re talking about? This black rose is imbued with power, right? Then I won’t touch that part. I’ll just change this chain into an earring,” Ms. Natalia replied, hearing Layla’s comment. The new queen hastily nodded her head in silence. “It’s easy, so just keep your eyes on me. And if this is so precious, why don’t we ensure that it won’t get lost? It’s easy to drop and lose an earring. I think I had an everlasting magnet with me, so we just need to mix the two together...”

She reached out towards the blank space in front of her. The air started to distort, and half of her hand slipped through. After she rustled through this mysterious space, she pulled out an everlasting magnet, a lump of black iron. This was a material harvested from a monster called Galiosa of Brute Strength.

Ms. Natalia held the necklace and the everlasting magnet, enveloping the two items with both of her hands. A vortex of magic started to form, and the two items melted and mixed together within her palms. It only took a moment, and when she opened up her hands, a small, beautiful earring was nestled within.

“And done,” Ms. Natalia said. “I haven’t done a thing to the black rose, but the metallic bit is mixed with the everlasting magnet. It’ll basically stay on permanently. Now then, Julius, come over here.”

As usual, Mr. Julius silently averted his gaze. Unfortunately, for him, this didn’t work on Ms. Natalia.

“If you’re not coming to me, I’ll use my chain spell to restrain your body and forcibly drag you on your knees to my feet,” Ms. Natalia threatened.

“It’s best if you go,” I said to him. “And today’s a celebration, so let’s not ruin that. Come on, let’s be amicable. If a brawl breaks out between you and Ms. Natalia, the Holy Palace will be crushed to smithereens!”

Ms. Natalia was the type to follow through on her promise; if she set her mind to something, she’d never waver. I pushed Mr. Julius’s back and forced him to Ms. Natalia’s side. The earring floated up from her hand, and a small needle poked through his left earlobe and affixed the accessory. Mr. Julius didn’t have any holes in his ear, and it looked really painful.

“A-Are you all right, Mr. Julius?” I asked. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course it doesn’t hurt,” my master replied. “You know the magic that I applied to those earrings, Chloe. The metallic part of the earring fuses with the wearer’s skin, and it only comes off if the wearer wants it to. Now, there’s no worry of this earring being lost, and there’s no hole poked in his ear. Not bad at all, right?”

“So, I can take this off, then?” Mr. Julius asked.

“Yep. Only when you want to. You’re a Dragon Knight, right? It’s easy to lose earrings, so I made this especially for you.”

“It sounds like you don’t need it, Julius,” Layla complained. “I want to see Chloe, and King Faisal also views you as a friend. Don’t be so cold. You should come to see us every now and then.”

I noticed the new king looking a touch lonely. *I’m sorry. I’m sorry that Mr. Julius is so unfriendly.* Mr. Roge wasn’t at all deterred by his attitude and continued to force a friendship with Mr. Julius, but Faisal wasn’t so forward.

This is your fault. You can’t say that you don’t need this special reward in front of the people who gave it to you. I tried to scold Mr. Julius, but before I could, Layla gently took the remaining necklace from my hand and put it around my neck.

“See, look,” she said. “You’re matching with Chloe. Now, you can’t take off that earring or throw it away, can you?”

She took the small black rose on my neck in her palm and showed it off to Mr. Julius with a look of triumph on her face. He touched his left earlobe and gave a

reluctant sigh.

◆ A Blessing to a New Meeting

SINCE I became an alchemist, I stopped wearing accessories. This black rose necklace looked cute, and I was ecstatic to have proof of my friendship with Layla. I happily looked up at Mr. Julius.

“We’re matching, aren’t we?” I asked with a smile.

He replied with a click of his tongue, looking extremely annoyed. *It’s been a while since I’ve been treated this way*, I thought. I wasn’t sure if he was hiding his embarrassment or if he was genuinely annoyed, but knowing him, the latter was more likely.

“You’re not honest, are you?” Layla asked. “King Faisal would’ve said, ‘Layla, I’m so happy that I get to wear the same thing as you. It’s as though you’re always by my side, and I couldn’t be more elated.’”

“Of course,” the king replied. “I’d like to wear something matching with you, Layla, and quite honestly, I’m envious of the two of you.”

“See?”

A woman who’s loved glimmers differently. I could only give a forced laugh at the confident Layla. If Mr. Julius was ever so honest about his thoughts, it wouldn’t be him. It’d be some sort of...odd creature. But the fact that he didn’t remove his earring and toss it aside was proof that he was being considerate in his own twisted way. At the very least, I was allowed to be happy about the fact that he and I were wearing a matching set of accessories.

A short while later, a dark-brown bottle was brought into the grand hall per Faisal’s orders.

“The bottle’s small,” Ms. Natalia complained upon looking at it. “Have you only got one, Faisal?”

He nodded. “Of course. It’s one of the treasures of the royal family, so we don’t have a lot of it. If we did, it’d no longer be a prized possession.”

Meanwhile, Lambda and Jahala brought out dish after dish, filling the table before me as they recommended their favorites.

At first, I tried to be more ladylike and composed, acting reserved because I was in a dress. But when I saw Mr. Julius not hold back and eat even my share, my appetite won over my elegance. When I grabbed a bite of tender lamb that had been stewed with spices, placed it on hard bread, and stuffed my cheeks, Jahala smiled.

“You must’ve been famished,” he remarked.

“A woman who eats a lot is far preferred than one who doesn’t eat at all,” Lambda said, gazing at me like a father would his daughter. “Noblewomen rarely eat anything at occasions like these, and it’s a breath of fresh air to see ladies like you and Natalia eat and drink to their heart’s content.”

I quickly swallowed and hid my mouth under anapkin. “I feel like I’m being treated like an unusual animal here...”

The lamb was so juicy and tender that it melted in my mouth. The spices masked any gamey odor, and the meat tasted oddly refreshing to me. The aroma of the thin, crispy bread paired well with the meat, making it a perfect combination.

“Chloe, this grilled sand round beetle tail is very good. Would you like a bite?” Jahala asked.

“Um, can you please stop recommending all these mysterious ingredients?” I requested. “And please stop trying to feed me dishes that clearly remind me of bugs.”

“Sand round beetles are very good for you. And they might sound like bugs, but they’re as large as you, and their tail tastes like beef. It’s very nutritious. It nourishes your body of lost nutrients.”

“You seem to really like nourishing your body. You’re still so young, too...”

“Being healthy is very important. Researchers tend to become obsessed with their work, which ends up taking a toll on their body. It’s better to have a nutritious meal to replenish oneself.”

“Do you like to practice entomophagy, Jahala?”

“I’m fond of insects. The ones that are edible make it better.”

I guess all boys like insects. He proceeded to happily tell me about dishes with insects. It was wholesome and adorable, like a neighborhood kid showing off a cool insect that he caught. As long as he didn’t try to force me to eat any, all was well. Astria didn’t have the custom of eating bugs. We ate meat and fish, and I’d never seen any insects served on a platter at a palace banquet.

“If it’s good for you, you should eat it, Chloe,” Mr. Julius said, stabbing the sand round beetle tail with his fork and pushing it towards my mouth.

I feel like an animal being fed. I kept my lips sealed and gave muffled groans, encouraging him to eat it in my stead. For a brief moment, I was worried that he’d grab my face and forcibly shove this insect down my throat, but he did nothing of the sort and pulled the fork away from me.

“This isn’t all that bad,” he said, popping the white chunk of meat on his fork, resembling shrimp, into his mouth.

“You can’t eat sand lizards, but you can eat sand round beetles?” I asked. “What’s wrong with you? Are you okay?”

“Lizards look like dragons, but bugs don’t.”

“What does it taste like?”

“Meat.”

Jahala gave a satisfied nod, happy to hear those words. I was told that it tasted like beef, but the only word I received from Mr. Julius was, “meat.” A carnivore like him approved of this bug’s taste; this world was filled with strange dishes that I’d never heard of before.

“Apparently, it’s nourishing,” I said. “I guess you’ll be brimming with energy.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched Mr. Julius—he ate quite a few things served to him without feeling grossed out. I was force-fed the powdered sand light insects last time, and that was more than enough for me.

“I mean, you’re always energetic...” I said.

“Chloe, Jahala’s still in his teens. Perhaps we shouldn’t talk about stuff like that in front of him,” Ruto hastily said.

“Chloe, it’s great that you’re in love with him, but it’s not right to talk about your nighttime fun in front of all these people,” Natalia scolded. “I’m saying this as your mother.”

That’s not what I mean. Wait, what? What are we talking about here?! I covered my face with my hands, feeling like I said something absolutely embarrassing, though I wasn’t sure what.

Lambda laughed loudly as he said, “I’d recommend maybe having ten kids or so, Julius!”

He was silenced with a loud smack by Layla’s fan. *Isn’t that the iron fan?? Looks painful.*

Mr. Julius didn’t deny any of these claims as he said, “We’d need more dragons for everyone.”

Is he drunk? He already drank quite a bit. While he claimed that he wasn’t one to get plastered, perhaps he felt himself loosening up a bit thanks to the alcohol. *Not that I’d know.*

While we were all chattering away, the 2000-year-old wine was being poured into everyone’s glasses. I tried to reach for one, but Mr. Julius stole it away from me.

“My glass!” I wailed. “Mr. Julius, let me drink a sip too! It’s a treasure of the royal family! It must be super expensive!”

“You shouldn’t,” he said.

“I’m of legal age! I might look like a beautiful young maiden, but I’m old enough to drink alcohol, you know!”

“I know. But I’ll still drink this for you.”

“Just because there isn’t enough alcohol for you, that’s no reason for you to take my share!”

“Oh? Chloe, if you don’t want to hand it over to Julius, you can give it to me, you know,” Ms. Natalia said. In front of her were the glasses that she’d received

from Ruto and Layla.

“That’s not my point,” I replied. “I can’t drink a whole lot, but if I miss this chance, I’ll never get it again! Hello? 2000-year-old liquor!”

“I’m guessing that this liquor is very strong,” Mr. Julius answered. “And Chloe, yesterday, you...”

He trailed off as he cast a meaningful glance my way. *Right. I don’t remember much, but I became black-out drunk last night. I even had a hangover this morning, and it was awful.*

“Wait... So, do I become awful when I’m drunk?” I asked. “Did I do something rude to you? Did I really dance while drunk?”

“You’ve got a habit of stripping...” he admitted.

“Oh, what’s wrong with that? Live a little! Strip a little!” Layla exclaimed, encouraging me. “Don’t be such a stiff, Julius. I like taking off my clothes too. I don’t drink because I’m not fond of it, but I’m perfectly capable of stripping while sober.”

And why does she want to do that? Does she like taking off her clothes? Do people with perfect physiques have the need to show off their bodies?

“All right... Then I’ll give it to you, Mr. Julius,” I reluctantly said.

“You’re not drinking, Chloe?” King Faisal asked.

“Are you sure?” Jahala added.

“Really? You’re not drinking?” Lambda asked.

The three of them looked at me with pity.

“I don’t mean anything nefarious!” Faisal hastily added after he was kicked by Layla. He followed it up by apologizing profusely.

Mr. Julius took the two glasses of super expensive ancient liquor and downed it in one gulp. *Aw... I wanted at least a sip.* But I’d much rather lose this opportunity than strip in front of others. If I did something that scandalous, I’d never be able to show my face around the Holy Palace again. *But I didn’t think that he’d drink it so quickly. It’s a 2000-year-old, treasured liquor. And he drank*

it just like that.

While Mr. Julius had chugged down two glasses, Ms. Natalia had emptied three. They both seemed to be enjoying how easily the alcohol went down rather than savoring the flavor. I could only stare at him in shock as he drank the treasured liquor like he was drinking a pint of wine at Ms. Roxy's diner.

While I couldn't blame Ms. Natalia for her tendencies, Mr. Julius was a former nobleman. I felt like he should've taken more time to savor, or savor, or you know, *savor* the flavor of the precious wine.

"What did it taste like?" I asked. "It's a treasure that you can never drink ever again! You should've drunk it more preciously."

Mr. Julius placed his glass on the table and looked down pensively for a moment. "Alcohol tastes like alcohol."

"Wait, is this my fault? Is it because I've only been feeding you pea soup, so you can't even differentiate the taste between cheap and expensive liquor?" I asked.

"I've never been too interested in eating. I can tell that your cooking tastes good in spite of the cheap ingredients, though."

"Please don't praise me so suddenly!"

That wasn't what we were talking about! Stop praising me out of nowhere. You're scaring me!

"There's no need for you to get angry, Chloe," Faisal said, impressed. "In fact, I'm quite amazed that they're so bold and grand that they can down one of the royal family's treasures in one gulp. It's very intriguing to see how Julius and Natalia exhibit no hesitation. I must learn from them."

"Even so, perhaps they should've waited for you to say a toast or something," I insisted.

"I understand very well that they aren't the type to wait for my words. In fact, meaningless speeches will only tone down the celebratory occasion." The new king raised his glass in the air before downing it like the other two.

"It's very rich and smooth with depth in its flavor," Ms. Natalia noted, waving

her empty glass around. “I guess it really was made quite some time ago. But this one glass is strong enough to compete with a cask of wine. Faisal, it might be best if you didn’t finish it in one gulp... Oops, I’m too late.”

The men surrounding her produced a new glass and handed it to her. Their movements were very refined. One handed Ms. Natalia a new glass while another filled it with more liquor.

“Oh dear, I wonder if King Faisal is all right,” Layla said with a troubled expression. “He said that he was going to have a drinking contest with Julius, but he’s not as strong with alcohol as he thinks.”

“Dragon Knights all generally have high alcohol tolerance,” Lambda said. “Hosting a drinking contest is a rite of passage between the new recruits.”

“I see,” I replied. “Are you not going to drink, Lambda?”

“This is a celebration, but I’m still on the clock. And I’m far too timid of a man to place a treasure of the royal family to my lips. I cannot possibly do so.”

Seeing his earnest and serious side, I realized he was completely different from Mr. Julius, even though they were both Dragon Knights. *Not that I’m saying Mr. Julius isn’t serious or anything.*

“Mr. Julius, a drinking contest is apparently a rite of passage for Dragon Knights,” I said.

“Dragon Knights aside, soldiers drink a lot, even on the battlefield,” he replied. “They’re drinking to forget their fears.”

“Can you fight while drunk?”

“Those who drink know they’re going to die. Do you want to hear more about it?”

I shook my head. It was a rare opportunity to hear about his past, but war wasn’t an ideal topic during celebrations. And it’d be even worse if this was about the Dystiana Empire.

“King Faisal, are you all right?” Layla asked, looking up at her beloved with worry.

His cheeks weren’t flushed, and he looked like his usual, diligent self, but all of

a sudden, tears filled his eyes.

“Layla, I’m the happiest man in the world,” Faisal sniffled. “A useless guy like me was able to protect the nation, and I’m surrounded by all of these comrades...”

“You’re right,” Layla replied. “And I’m so happy for you. Why don’t we call it quits with the liquor for tonight?”

“No, not yet! I’m going to have a drinking contest with Julius! I promised him. Julius, my friend! A man of your caliber approved of my Ares! I couldn’t possibly be any happier!”

The king’s eyes were misty as he passionately vocalized his friendship, but Mr. Julius crossed his arms and averted his gaze. *He totally ignored the king, as usual. Oh my gosh. Mr. Roge might be fine with that treatment, but King Faisal’s a sensitive man. You can’t just ignore him.* This didn’t mean that Mr. Roge should be ignored either, of course.

“Why don’t you respond?” I asked him. “He called you his friend, didn’t he?” I tugged on his arm, but there was no reply. Mr. Julius was ignoring this entire scene so spectacularly that I wondered if he was asleep.

“Don’t worry, Chloe, I understand,” Faisal cried. “He may be unfriendly, but underneath that exterior is his kindness. It’s crystal clear when I see him expressing his love for you. I can tell! I can tell when a man is in love. Why? Because I love Layla very much!”

“King Faisal, do calm down,” Layla said. “Here, a handkerchief. Don’t cry, please. Don’t cry.”

“Julius, your black dragon is so beautiful that it encroaches on divinity!” Faisal exclaimed, his voice growing louder. “But my Ares is very loyal and brave as well! Yet, when a man such as you, who undoubtedly detests mixed breeds, approved of my dragon, you saved me from the darkness! I’ll keep my promise, of course. I swear that our kingdom will protect pure-blooded dragons, but even so, I was so moved by your kindness! I really, truly was!”



Layla pressed a handkerchief to Faisal's eyes.

"Chloe, yesterday, you also..." Mr. Julius started as he glanced at me.

"I apologize for inconveniencing you so much yesterday," I immediately apologized. "I'll be careful about ingesting alcohol in the future..."

If Mr. Julius hadn't stopped me, I would've been as drunk as Faisal, and I might've been dancing buck naked in front of a crowd of nobles. I never did get a good description of how the 2000-year-old alcohol tasted, but I was glad that I didn't drink any.

"Come now, King Faisal," Layla said to the drunken king. She spoke as if she was pacifying a baby. "Why don't we take a quick break? Yes, let's go. You're a good boy now, aren't you?"

She grabbed his hand and led him out of the hall and into the depths of the Holy Palace. Mr. Julius looked exasperated, unsure if Faisal was fit to be king.

"King Faisal is very earnest, and he rarely cracks any jokes," Lambda laughed. "When we see him act so spoiled, we feel as though we must protect him as well."

After we enjoyed the luxurious dishes at the banquet, Mr. Julius and I made our way to the balcony, fleeing from the barrage of questions that were aimed at us by the Rasheedan nobles.

The sun was starting to set, and the orange sky was slowly changing to a darker shade of purple. Under the first star of the evening, Helios and Lumine were leisurely soaring through the skies together, their close relationship apparent. I looked up at Mr. Julius and smiled.

"Today was fun, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied.

"So many things have happened, but we were able to meet Lumine and become friends with everyone here. I'm glad we came to Rasheed."

I had my fair share of grief and suffering here, but now, we were all laughing and enjoying ourselves. That fact made me indescribably happy. Mr. Julius widened his eyes, forcibly tugged me close to him, and tightly embraced me

with his strong arms.

◆ Bonus: Mr. Julius, the Dress, and I

THE fluttery white chiffon skirt went down to my ankles. My off-the-shoulder dress was tied at my waist with a black ribbon, and small, glittering jewels were sewn throughout the fabric like stardust scattering across the sky.

Complete with my half-up hairdo and a small, golden, floral hair ornament decorated with a red ruby in the center, I felt like gold. I had no doubt about it. I was surrounded by ladies-in-waiting as they polished me from head to toe. As I adorned my body in a lavish dress and wore extravagant accessories, I felt like I was able to look like a noblewoman for the first time in a long while.

I was wrong.

The dress looked so expensive that I was unable to perform any alchemy for fear of sullyng my clothes. I couldn't ride on Helios, and a quick jog or a fall would cause me to rip my delicate attire. I felt incredibly gauche.

While I was trembling with fear and finishing my preparations in the morning, I thanked the ladies-in-waiting of the Holy Palace and returned to Mr. Julius, who was still snoozing away in the bedroom.

Even after the battle in Rasheed had ended and we partook in the banquet and festivities hosted by the Holy Palace, Mr. Julius and I were still receiving their kind hospitality. I felt like a noble as the maids and other ladies took good care of me, fitting me in a dress every day.

My clothes had been prepared by Layla of House Fatima. I initially refused her kind offer, stating that I preferred my usual clothes.

"You should take better care of yourself, Chloe!" Layla had scolded me while pushing various dresses my way. "Don't waste that pretty face of yours!"

And so, I allowed myself to be squeezed into these glamorous clothes. Predictably, I wasn't used to it. I *used* to spend my life at dinner parties in gorgeous gowns, but I'd spent years working as an alchemist, and my apron dresses were easier to move around in. They felt more comfortable to me. The

rough fabric allowed me to be as active as I liked, and that put me at ease.

The dresses, hair ornaments, and unsteady heels were all stunningly beautiful, and I was happy to be able to wear such dazzling clothes, but I just couldn't feel comfortable in them. Furthermore, every day, Mr. Julius would relentlessly mock me for my appearance.

Since I went through all the trouble of dolling up, I wished he'd offer me a word of praise or two, but all he'd say was, "Looks like you're trying to camouflage yourself," or "The dress is wearing you," or "The fabric around your chest looks loose."

Admittedly, the fabric around my chest *was* loose, and I had nothing to say to that, but there weren't several dresses conveniently on standby that were a perfect fit for me. I assumed that some of these were Layla's and were fit to her stature. Her chest size and mine were...well, different. How different? It was like comparing a deep-dish bowl (that Mr. Roge often ate out of) piled with a mountain of rice with a regular plate of rice.

So...yeah. The fabric around my chest was loose. The ladies-in-waiting had done their best to arrange it, but there was no changing our chest sizes. Before I went to Mr. Julius, who was sleeping away, I checked myself in the mirror one last time. This dress made me look a bit more mature. I called myself a young beautiful maiden without hesitation, but this design was a bit more adult than what I usually wore and was very revealing from the chest up.

It was tight around the waist, and I was worried that the dress would slip and fall off my body at any moment. If I had a curvy body like Layla's, I'd have nothing to worry about, but unfortunately for me, I just couldn't fill in the chest part. *It's not too loose today, though*, I told myself. *I'm fine today*. The dress fit me quite well, and it wasn't too baggy. The white garment made me look modest and ladylike, perfect for me.

The small jewels scattered throughout the fabric glittered with every step I took, but it didn't look tacky at all. Had Faisal seen Layla in this, I was sure that he would've said something along the lines of, "Even a goddess would pale in comparison to your beauty," or "My stunning queen, will you kindly permit me to touch your supple hand?" or "Layla, you're more beautiful than any dress I've

ever seen.” I knew he’d whisper sweet words of love in her ear with a serious gaze, remaining as earnest as ever.

Not like I want Mr. Julius to say that to me, though. The day I’d receive a compliment like that from him would be the day I’d suspect he must’ve fallen ill from eating something weird. *But would it kill him to just say that the dress suits me or something?* According to him, my face was average, and I looked plain. I wanted to think that I’d look decent if I dressed up a little, but...

“Are you awake, Mr. Julius?” I asked, opening the bedroom door. “Good morning.”

He was sitting on the side of his bed, the upper half of his body naked for some reason. Numerous scars stood out on his muscular frame. Some of these wounds hadn’t been treated properly and closed up on their own, while other parts of his body were discolored from being badly burned. His burly frame and bulging muscles were of breathtaking beauty, resembling a marble statue. My dolled-up appearance didn’t hold a candle to him. *I’m sorry! I just feel like I have to apologize here!*

“Why are you half-naked?” I asked.

“I’ve been doing nothing but drinking and sleeping these past few days, so my body’s grown dull,” he replied. “I’m getting dressed to go on a ride with Helios.”

“Ugh... Ditto. I’ve only been dressing up and having tea parties these days.”

Because Layla often called for me, I spent my days eating snacks and drinking tea with her.

“You should rest,” Mr. Julius said. “Maybe you have to go out for tea parties, but you shouldn’t leave this room for anything else.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. “I’m not injured or anything. You worry too much.”

Ever since that battle, he was overly anxious about me. I’d been unconscious for a few days, and it seemed he was worried sick during that time. Because of that, even if I insisted that I was all right, he kept ordering me to rest, stay put, or stay in bed.

But I think he’s realized that I’ve gotten better. He hasn’t nagged at me as

often these days.

While dressed in his black robe and his Ariadne Mantle, I looked up at him and smiled, conveying that I was just fine. He remained as quiet as ever and gazed down at me while furrowing his brows.

“Um, my dress today isn’t as flashy,” I said. “I don’t think it looks too bad on me... Does it? Oh, but I’m a beautiful young maiden. I could make any dress work; I’ll have you know!”

I hastily tried to cover up my question. It sounded like I *wanted* him to call me cute. I stood tall and proud, acting as though I looked lovely in anything, for I was a beautiful young maiden. *Urgh, I’m embarrassing myself!* It seemed awkward for me to ask a timid question before quickly acting haughty. My face slowly grew red and warm as the silence continued.

“I haven’t said anything,” Mr. Julius finally said.

“I know...” I replied.

“So where exactly did you grow embarrassed? Is it because you called yourself a beautiful young maiden?”

“Well, I’m speaking the truth there, so I have nothing to be ashamed about.”

Well, that’s not totally true, I guess. If anyone seriously took my self-praise at face value, it would have made me feel sheepish. For example, if Mr. Julius called me a beautiful young maiden wearily, I was fine, but if King Faisal said the same words kindly, it made me feel very embarrassed. It wasn’t romantic or anything, but I just felt awkward about it all. I was complicated in my own weird way.

“That dress...” Mr. Julius started.

“Y-Yes?” I asked.

He knows, doesn’t he? He senses that I want to be called cute or that it suits me, right? Usually, I was able to ask him outright and go, “Why don’t you shower me with praise? I’m in a dress looking beautiful.” But today was no good. Since I was already feeling bashful, I couldn’t say a word.

What will he say to me? “It doesn’t look sexy on you,” maybe? That sounds

like something he'd say.

"Is very revealing," he finished.

"Huh? Yeah, um, I guess so. A bit more than usual," I stammered.

"So, don't walk around outside."

"Huh?"

"Did you not hear me? It's revealing. It's unpleasant to think that other men can see you walking around in that attire. So, don't walk around outside."

"Huh? Uh, wait, what?!"

He crossed his arms, looking most displeased, but he spoke clearly and firmly. I obviously didn't expect this response and let out a pathetic gasp of surprise.

"Wh-What do you mean by that?" I managed to eke out.

"Exactly what I said," he replied.

"Did you eat something funny?"

"Is that what you think?"

He reached out and touched my hand before his large hand grasped mine. He pulled my waist close to him.

"Mr. Julius, what are you..." I asked, my eyes wide with surprise.

Suddenly, my vision grew blurry as his silky blond locks brushed against my cheeks, tickling my face. Our lips touched abruptly, but it was inexplicably gentle, before he started kissing me deeply. *What's going on?! Why is he suddenly...*

My heart was banging against my chest, my temperature skyrocketing. He tightly embraced my body, which had lost its strength, and my tidy hair and dress became disheveled in his embrace. He laid me on the bed as he removed his Ariadne Mantle that he'd just put on. *Wh-What is he... What's he going to do?!*

I was absolutely confused by this situation as he lay down beside me, the upper half of his body naked.

“I guess you can’t go outside like that,” he said.

“Huh? I, uh...” I gasped.

Just as he’d said, the chest area of my dress had shifted. Because there weren’t any straps on my shoulders, if my dress became askew, I’d end up revealing quite a bit of my body. I hastily fixed my messy dress, tugging on it and hoping it’d straighten out. But I only succeeded in messing it up further. I was just glad that I hadn’t torn it.

“I’ll sleep in our room today,” Mr. Julius said. “I don’t want to do this to Helios, but I’m guessing you’ll walk around like that if I leave you to your own devices.”

“I might be an airheaded idiot, but even I won’t walk around like this,” I insisted.

“Tell Layla not to send over such revealing dresses for you to wear.”

“This one wasn’t good either, I take it? I thought I’d be praised for sure today.”

“You’re a bit dense.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?!”

He gave a weary sigh and started to sleep once more, like he’d completely lost interest in me. I remained in my dress as I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling for a while. *Is this...jealousy? It can’t be, right? Or is it?* I felt like something exploded in my head as my cheeks grew red. I covered my face with both of my hands as his hoarse whisper reached my ears.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Mr. Julius murmured. “It seems I’m the type to get jealous easily.”

Afterword

HELLO, nice to meet you. I'm Miyako Tsukahara. Thank you for picking up the third volume of *The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!*

Chloe, who's popular within the royal capital, met Julius, her strongest bodyguard, in hopes of making more money. She wanted to spend her life in leisure while raking in millions and focusing on her alchemy store. However, she ended up getting dragged into a battle within the Sacred Kingdom of Rasheed, a desert nation filled with mysticism. In terms of this series, this plotline is the second arc to the main plot.

After a long and grueling battle, our hero and heroine decided to take a short break, and the happy couple were able to enjoy some sightseeing in Rasheed! Chloe and Julius have formed a strong bond built on trust while remaining their usual selves in this new country with a different flavor from Astria. It'd make me ecstatic if you enjoyed how they have grown together.

Thank you again to Satsuki Sheena for the wonderful illustrations for this volume as well. I cannot express my gratitude enough!

The cover depicting Julius's thoughts hidden deep within his heart and his passion is portrayed really well! And look at how happy Chloe looks! They've still got a lot of issues to sort out, but I can't help but pray for their happiness!

Layla, Natalia, and the other new characters along with the dragon, Lumine, were illustrated beautifully as well. They look amazing! Thank you so, so much for the wonderful artwork!

Thank you to Satsuki Sheena, my editors, and to everyone who picked up this volume. I'm forever grateful for all the support.

Thanks to everyone's efforts, I was able to reach the third volume in this series. If we ever do get the chance to meet again, I hope you'll consider picking up the next volume.

Now that I'm satisfied with thanking everyone from the bottom of my heart,

I'd like to end my afterword on this high note.

April 2023



Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!

By Makino Maebaru Illustration by Yoko Matsuoka

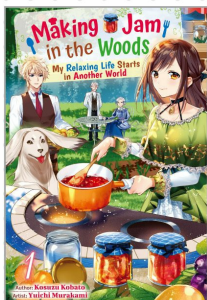
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now

By Suzume Kirisaki Illustration by Cosmic

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

By Kosuzu Kobato Illustration by Yuichi Murakami

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: Fehu Kazuno

Illustration by Jun

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