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# The EPHEMERAL SCENES of SETSUNA'S TOURNEY

The Former 68th Hero and His Peculiar Quests

> Rokusyou • Usuasagi Illustration by sime



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Vol. 4

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#### Translation by Andria McKnight

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#### Setsuna's Journey World Map The Demonlands Seden Tarado Guilonde lubana Lypaed Miglis Ellana Nubul Kutt Sagana Gardir Toria Sahar Bartle Lycia Reglia Ineses Former kingdom of Grand The **Dragonlands** Ocean / Lake / River Desert Forest



## Prologue



"Just get out there and interact with people, Setsuna."

Those words signaled a beginning, like the skies at dawn, and served as shackles, since I yearned for twilight.

That promise, which could never be broken, was both the meaning of my life and my atonement for surviving.

Because I was here in place of my friend.

I would never, ever forget that.

"Don't...leave...me..."

Alto's whispered plea still lingered in my ears. I couldn't trample over the courage and emotion he'd put into those words.

Which is how I gained another purpose in life.

"I want to see my family." That modest wish was now one I vowed to realize.

Another smoldering coal to add to the fire. And another, and another. I kept coming across reasons to keep on living.

He was like the flame in a lamp: he didn't radiate bright light all around him, but instead gave off a warm, gentle glow.

We had finally begun our lives in this world.

We hadn't been blessed with anything one could call normal.

We waded our way across the land like plants without roots.

And the person who had taught us how to live such a peaceful life was a hero who walked in twilight...



## Chapter One Aster ~ A Brief Repose ~



#### Part One: Setsuna

I'd experienced a lot since becoming an adventurer, but this past month had been particularly chaotic. We had wound up in the kingdom of Lypaed after traveling through a cave where a dragonfolk lived in order to help Cyrus, a knight who had been exiled from his country. Amid all that, we'd gotten caught up in the conflict between Lypaed and Guilonde.

The dragonfolk who lived in the cave was my wife's older brother and best friend of the person to whom I owed my life, but I ended up fighting him before knowing all that. Looking back on it now, I can't help but think that I could've done something irrevocable. At any rate, it had been a precarious month.

It was the end of the third month of Salkis, what they called summer here, and the fourth month was just about to begin. Lypaed was situated on the northern part of the Sibling continent, so it tended to get lower temperatures, and since we'd passed the height of summer, it was fairly chilly.

Alto and I had planned on going straight to the guild after we moved to the inn, but he still wasn't awake when his training time came around, so I decided to take the day off.

On top of the tense atmosphere due to everything the kingdom was dealing with, we'd also had to be in disguise, so we hadn't really had time to truly relax in a while. I figured he was exhausted both mentally and physically, so as I watched him sleep, I took inventory of what we needed to do and rescheduled our plans.

The special postrequest was one of the things on my list; I needed to see Cyrus to sort out the paperwork. We wouldn't meet until Alto was feeling better, but I had to make the arrangements in advance, so I quickly wrote a letter and gave it to the reception desk at the castle while Alto was asleep. To be honest, I thought it would probably take time to coordinate with him.

But the very next day, someone claiming to be Cyrus's servant showed up at the inn to deliver a letter from him. It said he had tomorrow off, and that he wanted us to come to the castle reception at ten in the morning. I began to write to Cyrus, telling him that Alto had recovered, so we would be there together, and that I wanted him to teach me how to rent a house here in Lypaed so that I could try to save money. I also told him I was ready to do what we had discussed when we said good-bye the last time we saw one another, then handed my message to his servant.

"Master, we're going to see Cyrus today, aren't we?" Alto looked at me after he was finished getting ready, curious about the day's plans.

"Yes. We'll go to the castle to meet Cyrus and then, if he has time, we'll go to the guild together."

"He's going to the guild with us?"

"That's right. Since you and I took the quest from Cyrus on short notice, and he was the one requesting it, we have to go together to explain things to the guildmaster."

"But why do we have to go to the castle again? Can't we just meet at the guild?"

"Not really. He said in his letter he wanted us to come to the castle. I don't know why, though."

"Oh. Do you think I can eat sweets there?"

"...I don't think there will be sweets."

There was no reason for them to serve desserts, not to mention the fact that I wasn't sure if we would even go inside the castle or not. Alto's ears drooped against his head dejectedly, but he knew better than to beg. He looked so dispirited that I couldn't help but laugh internally while I suggested a solution.

"How about we buy something from a food stall once we're done with our errands for today?"

"A food stall!" His ears perked up, and his eyes shone happily.

"I'm sure we'll find something delicious there."

"Yeah!"

"Shall we go, then? Do you have everything?"

"Yep!"

I hurried him out the door, all the while trying to keep from laughing at how quickly he perked back up, and we headed to the castle with the cloudy sky overhead.

We followed the road, still wet from rain earlier, to the location indicated in the letter, where we saw Cyrus dressed in knight's armor with a cloak wrapped around him.

He said he had the day off, but is he planning on going to the guild still dressed as a knight? I wondered silently to myself as we approached him. He smiled happily and waved the moment he spotted us.

"Sorry to make you come all the way to the castle. Would you come with me?"

I nodded and Cyrus began walking. As we proceeded down a long, empty corridor, he turned and spoke. "I guess it's weird for me to ask how you two have been." Immediately, he followed up with, "We just said good-bye a few days ago, after all, so that would be kinda dumb," and scratched his head awkwardly. "I dunno why, but seeing the two of you makes it feel like our journey together was ages ago." He let out a soft sigh, and a tired smile crossed his face. Alto quickened his pace a bit to join him.

"Are you tired, Cyrus?" he asked with concern, his ears lying lightly against his head.

"I'm not tired. I've just got this strange kind of unsettled feeling, I guess you could say."

Alto gave him a confused look.

"Well, thanks for worrying about me anyway. I honestly don't know how I feel myself." His brow furrowed deeper, and he patted Alto on the head.

"Cyrus," I called just as we were about to round a corner. He stopped and looked from Alto to me. "What's this odd, standoffish atmosphere in the

castle?"

"How could you tell?"

I answered his question with one of my own. "Were you able to talk with Eugene and Keith?"

"…"

I saw him fall silent, which confirmed my hunch about the situation he was in. Cyrus had risked his life and overcome challenging circumstances, so much so that even a dragonfolk had accepted him. I was sure people had all sorts of opinions about him now. He was also having trouble gauging the distance between himself and Eugene and Keith—the two people he trusted most, which must have been wearing on his nerves every single day.

All of that probably contributed to the strange mood Cyrus was picking up on. I was sure he was struggling with it.

That was a problem in and of itself, but what was more troubling was the fact that Cyrus was suffering from an emotional injury stemming from some other source. I was worried about whether or not his heart could heal from it. He might not even be aware it was going on in the first place, for that matter.

"I'm not sure if you can tell yourself, Cyrus, but it seems like you're emotionally wounded right now."

"Emotionally wounded?" He frowned, not understanding what I was getting at.

"I know it was ultimately a plot to outmaneuver Guilonde, but being falsely accused and having your most cherished pride and beliefs taken from you still must have hurt."

"There was nothing I could do about that."

"That's true. But that doesn't mean it didn't hurt."

"Maybe. But I'm not the only one who suffered."

"I know, many people involved in this incident were hurt. But again—that doesn't invalidate your feelings."

"All right, so I guess I was hurt. You're saying that's the reason for the weird tension in the castle?"

"Well, it might be something else. I think you've got a lot of things troubling you. Having people direct envy and jealousy toward you can feel very unsettling. I think being in an environment like that might bring out the lingering shadows in your heart."

"…"

"You should take care of yourself more, Cyrus. You said I was your friend, and as your friend, I don't want to see you worn down like this."

"Hearing you say all that made things click. Thanks for worrying about me. But I'm Eugene's knight; my oath to him won't ever change. I swore an oath to Lord Revale, too, and I will uphold both of those vows for the rest of my life in order to protect this country. So I'll just have to grit my teeth and bear it."

I expected that sort of response from him, but that was exactly why I was worried.

"If that's what you've decided, you should have an open, honest conversation with Eugene and Kyle. Talk about the hard times, the painful moments, when you felt angry, and when you felt like you'd lost all hope."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

I could understand that Cyrus was concerned for the two of them and didn't want to talk about his emotions, but things wouldn't get any better like this. I was about to tell him that, but just then...

"So, are you going to tell us about what happened while you were away from Lypaed?" Suddenly I heard another voice. Cyrus turned around and we saw Eugene and Keith appear from around the corner.

"Eugene..." Cyrus seemed speechless for a few moments, but then he came back to himself. "In that case, I want you to tell me what happened here while I was away as well."

"Can I join in on that conversation? I've got a special bottle of liquor."

"Sure. The three of us should have a nice, long chat. Keith's treat."

The tension seemed to leave their shoulders, and a calm fell between them, telling me that the bonds they shared wouldn't be so easily severed. I truly hoped that their heartfelt chat would ease Cyrus's worries and allow his emotional wounds to heal.

"Shall we go, Lord Keith?" a knight who had been waiting by himself behind Keith suddenly called out.

"That reminds me, why are you two here anyway?" Cyrus asked. "I told you to wait in the room. Stop them next time, Fred."

Apparently, the knight's name was Fred. Come to think of it, he'd been standing behind Keith in the throne room as well.

"I intended on doing just that, but they were both concerned when they saw you acting strangely and came all the way out here."

"Cyrus, let's go inside the room for now. We shouldn't leave guests waiting in the corridor." Keith interrupted the conversation between Cyrus and Fred, urging us to move.

"Under normal circumstances there'd be no need for you to come all the way out to the castle, but there's something I really need to ask you. I'm sorry, but would you mind giving us a bit of your time?"

Ahh, I see. So it was Keith who summoned me here. I glanced over at Alto, who already seemed bored with the matter. He wagged his tail as we followed behind Keith and the others.

I thought we might be heading to a meeting room, and sure enough, they walked us through a courtyard that led to those rooms. The courtyard had a beautiful garden, with flowers in a wide range of colors planted neatly in rows.

Just then, I felt someone's presence, so I turned to look in that direction. Cyrus noticed me moving and glanced the same way.

"Unusual for you to have a girl with you, Georges. Did she ask you to be her boyfriend or something?" Cyrus teased. At this, the others turned to look in the same direction.

If I recall correctly, Sir Georges is another one of Eugene's knights.

Alto ignored our reactions and instead focused on the flowers in front of him. I watched him as I listened to Cyrus's conversation with the others.



"This is my younger sister. You've met her before, remember? I promised to let her watch Georges and me train today," Sir Fred replied in a cold voice, apparently not appreciating Cyrus's joke.

"Ah, right. Miss Sophia. If she's going to watch you and Georges train, won't she be waiting a while?"

"Some of the knights' schedules changed today. Just as you were assigned to Prince Eugene, I was assigned to Lord Keith. I heard that since your original posting didn't work for you, you swapped with Georges."

That explained why Cyrus was wearing his knight's uniform on his day off.

"Cyrus, if you're busy, we can do this another time," I said, cutting into their conversation.

Since Cyrus and Sir Fred were still talking, Keith answered me. "The king is aware of the special postrequest. He has no intention of placing any further burden on you, so it's nothing to worry about."

"I see. Thank you." I was grateful for the king's consideration, but at the same time it made me think about how tough it was to serve in the palace.

"And since we were assigned as guards, I asked Georges to deliver a message to my sister to apologize." In the middle of my back-and-forth with Keith, Sir Fred had explained why Sir Georges and Sophia were together.

"That's fine, then. We'll go on ahead, so you can apologize to her yourself," Keith told Sir Fred, but the knight stubbornly refused to leave his side, saying it was his responsibility.

Keith gave up, a wry smile coming to his face. Meanwhile, Eugene whispered to me, "Is that okay with you, Setsuna? Do you have time?"

"Yes, it's no problem at all," I answered. Eugene grinned, then walked toward Sir Georges and Sophia, surprising Keith and Sir Fred, who quickly hurried after him. Cyrus briefly shot me a guilty look, then followed after them.

"Master, they smell sweet and yummy." Unable to be patient any longer, Alto told me what he thought of the flowers. I replied with a smile.

When we arrived at the meeting room, Eugene and Keith took their seats first, with Alto and me sitting across from them on a sofa. Cyrus and Sir Fred did not sit, but instead stood behind Eugene and Keith.

Once everyone was settled in their place, they offered us tea and snacks. I wondered if they had brought the refreshments for Alto, who thanked them and happily began to eat.

Just then, someone rapped at the door. Keith told them to enter, and in came the knight who had been in the courtyard with us a few moments ago. Eugene took that opportunity to formally introduce the two people I'd met earlier.

The knight standing behind Keith was Sir Fred, Keith's first knight, while the one who just came in was Sir Georges, Eugene's second knight.

The first and second knights were the highest-ranked knights in Lypaed. They were exclusively assigned as guards to the royal family and could enter places accessible only to royals, unlike regular knights. As such, being appointed as first or second knight was an honor that required the utmost trust from the person they guarded. Eugene introduced them to me since I might come in contact with them in the future.

Conversely, Sir Georges and Sir Fred asked Eugene why they were being introduced to me. I suppose from their perspective, it would seem strange for the prince himself to introduce them to some ordinary adventurers, but they were shocked to hear that we were actually Sena the bard and his companion, Alice.

Now that we were all introduced, Eugene explained why he had asked me here. "I didn't intend for this to be so formal, but since it's related to our national defense, I decided to bring you here to this meeting room."

"That's completely fine. What is it you wished to talk about?"

"Well, this is about your special postrequest. I wanted to know how much you planned on telling the Adventurers Guild," Eugene said.

Cyrus spoke next. "This is a bit of a touchy subject, but we're concerned about the teleportation circles. It was revealed to the king that one of the places they led to is Zeghur Forest, which we were told not to disclose for reasons of national security. Of course, I was ordered not to divulge this information, but I can't control whether or not you talk about it, which is why Eugene and Keith were hoping to find out how much you plan on telling the guild."

I nodded to show that I understood his explanation. It seemed like they had framed it in a roundabout way out of respect, but it was clear they were telling me they'd rather I not inform the guild.

"Now I see why you asked me here. Truth be told, I haven't thought about how much I am going to tell them. I guess I figured that if the guild asked me, I would tell them. What details would you prefer I keep to myself, lest they cause trouble here in Lypaed?"

"Only the place where you met Cyrus. That's all," Eugene said, leaving me speechless.

"Hang on a minute. If I can't say where we met, then I won't be able to tell them how far I guarded Cyrus."

"Yes, but can't you just tell them how long the job took, and omit the details about the location? The government is willing to vouch for that with the guild."

"However, they already know that I was in Kutt before I met Cyrus, so once they confirm that date, they will have a rough idea of where we met. At the very least, they'll know it was somewhere in Kutt."

*"…"* 

"Anyway, if I can avoid telling them the location, I will. But please don't get your hopes up."

"Very well, then."

I glanced at Alto, who was devouring the snacks, and thought it was quite the tall order. My shoulders sagged as I thought about how much this one small thing might cost me.

That was the extent of their business with me, so I turned to Cyrus to discuss the request from his letter.

"What is it?"

"Here." I went over to him and handed him two small cloth pouches. The magical tools he'd asked me for were inside. I told him that and he gave me an apologetic look.

"Oh, right. I wrote that in my letter. I didn't think you'd have them ready so quickly. It's just, I don't have the money to pay for them right now. I'll get in touch with you again once I do, so can you hang onto them till then? I should be getting my reward money soon."

"Keep the magical tools. You can just pay me sometime when I'm in Lypaed."

"I couldn't..."

Eugene and the others looked at the objects in Cyrus's hands with curiosity.

"What kind of magical tool is that? I can give you an advance if you need it," Keith offered. Cyrus fell silent and scratched his head awkwardly.

"Are you sure I can have them first?"

"Of course. Go ahead," I replied.

Once Cyrus had my confirmation, he shoved the bags toward Eugene and Keith's chests. Caught off guard by the slightly rough way he handed them the bags, Eugene and Keith quickly took them in surprise.

"What's this?" Eugene opened the bag and placed the object inside in his palm.

"A ring?"

"Yes, it's imbued with the same magic as mine."

"So, it's a magical tool to change hair and eye color? Why give this to us?"

"I thought it might be useful for you to have, just in case. So I asked Setsuna for them while you two were filling Alto's head with nonsense."

He must've been talking about the last day of our stay at the castle. They'd been talking about Cyrus's childhood, but Eugene and Keith's version was so different from the one Alto had heard during our journey that he'd gotten all confused. On that note, I think the version of the story that Alto decided to believe in the end came down to Cyrus's daily behavior.

"Just in case...," Eugene muttered as he stared at the ring in his palm.

"I hope that such a day never comes, but if it does, I will risk my life to protect you. But even then, it might not be enough, and you might need that ring."

*"…"* 

"If there ever comes a time when you find yourselves alone and in danger, you can fool the enemy by changing your appearance with this ring. That'll give you a better chance of survival. Please keep it with you at all times."

"All right."

Cyrus smiled with satisfaction when he saw the two of them nod firmly.

"You'll have to practice using magical tools, though, which means the three of us should use it to go down to the castle town."

"...Absolutely not."

"No way."

Eugene and Keith immediately turned him down, but after a moment of silence they burst out laughing, and soon after Cyrus started to laugh as well. Sir Georges and Sir Fred watched stone-faced while the three of them laughed. Still, their expressions weren't without warmth; I thought they almost seemed like living embodiments of Eugene and Keith's concern and protectiveness of Cyrus.

Keith covered the cost of the magical tools. He said that since they would be the ones using them, it was only natural for them to pay. Cyrus frowned at first, as he'd intended to give them the magical tools as a gift, but eventually gave in.

After that, we waited for Cyrus to finish handing off his duties, then headed for the guild. I was watching Alto's face change restlessly every time we passed by a food stall, when Cyrus spoke to me. Seeing his hair and eye color changed due to the ring made me feel a little nostalgic.

"By the way, you said in your letter you were looking for a house?"

"That's right. I'd originally planned to earn money for our journey in Kutt, but Lypaed seems more comfortable for Alto to live in, so I thought we'd stay here for a while instead of returning to the continent."

Generally, beastfolk and humans didn't get along. Adventurers valued strength above all else, so there were some who were friendly with beastfolk, but most humans didn't go out of their way to get to know them. This was particularly true on the southern continent, where the larger beastfolk population meant there were more opportunities for interaction, and hence more friction.

As for Lypaed, beastfolk hadn't had much opportunity to come here, so there hadn't been many troubles involving them before, making for a more welcoming atmosphere. That was what convinced me to stay here for a while.

"Maybe you should just settle down here for good," Cyrus said jokingly, but I could see that his eyes were serious.

"This is an easy place to live, but my goal is to travel the world. Right now, I don't have any intention of putting down roots anywhere."

"That's a shame," Cyrus said with a smile, and I smiled softly back. "Renting a house involves a lot of complicated paperwork and procedures. If you were going to stay here long-term you could just ask the king for help, but you won't be doing that, right?"

"Right."

"In that case, can you wait a bit? I know some landlords who won't be strict about paperwork."

"It looks like you're so busy you can't even take a full day off, so you really don't have to go to the trouble."

"It's no big deal, just leave it to me. In exchange, let me come visit when you move in, okay?" He seemed like he knew what he was doing, so I decided to accept his generous offer.

"All right, then. But I want you to tell me if it gets too difficult."

"Sure. Wait a few days, okay? I'll send you a letter to let you know what I find."

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

Now that the matter of the house was settled, all we had to do was take care of the special postrequest. I wanted to get it over and done with today, so I urged Alto to hurry up after getting distracted by the food stall Cyrus had recommended, and we headed for the guild.

The moment we entered the guild, people stared at us as if they were trying to size up the outsiders. Most of them were looking at Alto. That being said, their gazes didn't seem discriminatory, like the looks Alto had received in Gardir; it was just that it was unusual to see a beastfolk around these parts, much less a child.

We ignored their reactions and headed up to the reception desk, while Cyrus called out to the man working there. He turned to us, revealing a masculine face that was overpowered by his beard. Alto muttered "Bushy beard" under his breath, and I had to clear my throat to stop myself from laughing.

"I'm Cyrus. I was being attacked by monsters when these two saved me. They turned out to be adventurers and escorted me here. I want to give them a reward for the quest—is there anything I can fill out to do that?"

"So, you want a special postrequest form?"

The man shifted his gaze from Cyrus to me and Alto. "A young man and a beastfolk child with hair the color of...," he murmured, before suddenly asking, "Hey, are you Setsuna?! And is that beastfolk boy Alto?!"

"Yes, that's right."

I didn't even have time to wonder how he knew our names before he continued. "I got a request here to confirm your whereabouts!"

"What?"

My eyes widened slightly in response. I didn't understand what he meant by that. The man regained his composure once he saw my reaction and grinned. "You know a lady by the name of Rayna? She's been runnin' around looking for ya! She sent out a request through headquarters for people to notify her if we saw ya."

*"…"* 

I was fairly sure I knew what this was about. Rayna was the guildmaster of the Kutt Adventurers Guild, and I hadn't yet told her how to make the medicine she requested.

I bet she's furious with me...

"Anyhow, I'd like to ask you some questions in another room. Do you have the time for that?"

Alto and I were fine, but I wasn't sure if Cyrus was free. I glanced over at him to check.

"I'll do whatever you need me to today."

"Thanks."

The guildmaster had watched our exchange and must've figured he had the all-clear because he started talking. "Great, glad it's all right. I'm Drum, the guildmaster here."

We introduced ourselves, and then Alto followed suit. Drum chuckled when he saw Alto bow his head and said, "I'm countin' on you two to work hard for us!" before leading us to another room.

In the end, we decided not to complete the paperwork for the special postrequest. Just as we'd feared, we couldn't fulfill the criteria to apply for it without revealing too much.

When the guildmaster asked about where we'd met, Cyrus claimed that he didn't know exactly where it was, and I said we'd been so lost that I didn't know either. Alto said all he knew was that we were in the mountains.

Drum shrugged and said, "So should we just put down somewhere in Kutt?" But Cyrus was reluctant.

"No, I feel like we might've been somewhere in Guilonde..."

I understand how Cyrus feels, I really do. The official destination for the teleportation circle is the Demonlands, so that's why he wants to say that. But we were in Kutt. There's no way we could've been in Guilonde.

"But Setsuna just said he was in Kutt without a doubt, so you couldn't have been in Guilonde. By the way, Setsuna. How'd you even get to this continent in the first place?"

I can't blame him for asking that. It would be fine to reveal that we passed through the cave now, but that would just confirm the fact that we did indeed meet in Kutt. And if we try to avoid saying that, then we'll have to change the time frame Cyrus hired me for and say it was on the other continent... Ahh, this has gotten so complicated!

"On second thought, let's just forget about the special postrequest. We'll just stay strangers," I suddenly announced, and both Drum and Cyrus stared at me in shock.

Well, what else am I supposed to say? This is impossible.

I decided to give up on the reward. I didn't care much about ranks anyway, so I wouldn't be upset if I didn't get more points toward my next rank.

We dropped the subject of the special postrequest, so there was nothing left for Cyrus to do. The conversation moved toward Rayna, and Drum said he would explain everything to her, but he kept trying to ask about my journey from Kutt to Lypaed, so I had no choice but to feign ignorance for both Cyrus and Lypaed's sake.

Still, I couldn't deny that I was last spotted in Kutt. After all, people at the Kutt guild had seen me, and my Cube had been recorded there.

Every time you put something in a Cube, the date was recorded to prevent any cheating during quests that required monsters to be slayed. So if anyone looked at the day I captured the gosylina, they would see that I was in the Zeghur Forest at that time.

Following from this, since it had already been confirmed that I was in Kutt, there was a good chance the guild might someday do a thorough search of the forest, meaning there was also a very good chance they would discover the cave Revale was in. So it was best for everyone if, on paper, Cyrus and I remained complete strangers, and that he was in Guilonde at the time.

Drum gave us exasperated looks and said, "Why'd you even come here,

then?" And honestly, I couldn't blame him. All I could do was give him a vague smile in response.

Now that Cyrus couldn't pay me, he was upset that I wouldn't be recognized for my achievements. But when I whispered to him under my breath so that nobody else could hear, "Now you can collect your reward without having anything to worry about," he made a sour face.

"There's a lot of things I'd like to ask you about, but if you don't feel like talking, I can't force you. Let me know if you change your mind. Now then, let's speak about this matter with Rayna in earnest." Drum heaved a big sigh and looked at me and Cyrus. "Shall I continue?"

I figured he was just being considerate since this conversation had nothing to do with Cyrus and he didn't want to waste his time. I asked Cyrus what he wanted to do, and he said he would go ahead and leave since he had nothing to contribute, so we made plans to meet again in a few days.

After we said good-bye to Cyrus, Drum picked up where he'd left off. "Rayna sent a message to each guild saying that an adventurer, who was supposed to give her instructions for preparing a certain medicine free of charge, had gone missing, and to contact her if he showed up."

"...I was thinking about sending her a letter."

"Sadly, that's not gonna cut it. I'll contact her directly. Now, I'm just making sure one last time, but you do still plan on providing her with those instructions, right?"

"Yes, nothing has changed. I've compiled the formula already, so it would be helpful if you could give it to the guild's medical clinic."

I took out the documents from my bag and gave them to Drum.

"Thanks. You know, if we can share this around, a lot of adventurers' lives could be saved." He accepted them happily, but I went quiet when I saw the somewhat pained smile on his face, and the room descended into silence. "Ah, sorry about that. I really do appreciate it. Could you sign this contract?" He regained his composure after a moment and placed several sheets of paper on

the table in front of me. As I read through the document, I thought about the Adventurers Guild.

Judging by Rayna's actions, it seemed like the Adventurers Guilds were more closely connected than I'd imagined. They communicated across countries so quickly that I wondered if they had some kind of magical tool that acted like a telephone.

I'd joined the guild without much thought just because Kyle had told me to, but when I decided to do a little more digging into Kyle's knowledge about the guild, all I could see were fireworks and a message that said *Just find out for yourself*, which exasperated me, so I abandoned my search. If he felt the need to joke around like that, surely there couldn't be anything harmful about the organization.

"Please tell her that I'm very sorry for causing trouble for the guild." I finished looking over the contract, signed it, and handed it back to Drum.

"Thanks. That's all I got for you, but is there anything you need?"

"I accepted a quest from Agito of Team Moonlight. I have the finished product ready for him, so can I just give it to you?"

Drum looked at me in surprise, staring at my face without moving.

"Um, Drum?"

"Uh, sure. Can I ask what Agito asked you for?"

"A medicine I made."

I told him about Agito's request and Drum let out a low, subdued chuckle. "I see. So because of that quest from Agito, Rayna found out you know how to mix medicines. That was a disaster right there."

I chuckled wryly as I thought back on our exchange in Kutt, then set the wooden box filled with medicine on the desk.

"Would you like to check the contents?"

"Nah, it's a personal request. Maybe if I thought it was suspicious I'd check, but if *Agito* trusts you enough to request it from you, I'm sure it's fine. I'll take it off your hands and deliver it safe and sound to him, don't you worry."

He took out some kind of magical tool and sealed the box.

"Thank you."

I wondered what he meant when he was talking about Agito, but my instincts told me not to bring it up, so I decided to end the conversation there.

Now that we'd settled a few matters, I checked the time and realized we'd been here for quite a while. I'd been planning to take on some quests, but I decided to abandon that idea and call it a day.

"Alto, let's go home. How about we buy some dinner from the food stalls and then go back to the inn?"

He wagged his tail in response and nodded happily. I wondered if he had been feeling a little nervous, since I'd mentioned a few days ago that I wanted him to try taking on a quest alone this time.

I thanked Drum and we left the guild. We walked around the food stalls for a while, but there were even more than when we'd been here with Cyrus, so Alto couldn't decide. I told him to narrow it down to three and then pick one, but watching him groan to himself as he tried to choose was quite amusing.

"Master, what should I do?" He was so anxious about it that his ears lay flat on his head as he looked up at me, so I could only think of one response.

"We'll buy something from all three places."

His ears perked right up in response.

The next day, Alto and I headed back to the guild so we could take on quests.

He didn't speak much on the way there, and I knew it wasn't just my imagination. It was clear that he was anxious. However, when I looked in his eyes, it wasn't just negative emotions I saw, but a glimmer of determination that he'd be able to do it by himself.

As soon as we entered the guild, we began walking toward the bulletin board where the quests were posted, but then Drum called me over.

"I think you can handle a yellow quest, Alto, so why don't you go pick one

out?" I said. He looked a little nervous, but nodded and ran over to the bulletin board. I watched him go, then greeted Drum as I approached him.

"Hey, sorry for asking you to stop in," he said.

"It's fine. Is there some kind of problem?"

"Nope, no problems. I just wanted to talk about your rank."

"My rank? Well, I haven't taken on any quests lately so my rank should be the same as the last time I checked it."

"Apparently, you providing instructions on compounding that medicine free of charge has been recognized as a contribution to the guild. Headquarters will determine how many points you'll be awarded, but considering how full your Cube was yesterday, I'm sure your rank will jump up a fair bit."

"Thanks for letting me know."

After that, we chatted for a while about recent events in Lypaed, until I heard quiet footsteps approaching me. I glanced beside me and saw Alto looking up at me holding a piece of paper he'd torn off the bulletin board.

"Did you decide which quest you want to take?"

"Yes."

The piece of paper he held out to me was wrinkled, and had been stamped *Ongoing* three times.

That stamp was used to keep a quest active after the normal posting period of ten days had ended. Normally, after ten days, the money deposited as the reward was returned to the person who issued the quest, but if they didn't take back the reward money and got the guild to stamp it as *Ongoing*, the quest would stay open.

So that meant it had been over thirty days since the guild accepted this quest. Alto held his breath and watched me as I read through the details. It was a long-term request for a live-in position.

Quest name: Live-in Conversation Partner/Helper

Duration: More than one month

Payment: Negotiable (will pay for food and clothing for the duration of the quest)

Description: Looking for someone who can keep an elderly person company.

Notes: Will need to be comfortable living with beastfolk, as client is one.

Points: 30 points

What in the world...?

Drum was quietly looking at the piece of paper in my hands, and he seemed to have read my thoughts when I looked up at him. He nodded, telling me my hunch was right. I was wondering if this would be okay for Alto's first quest.

But I'd decided I would let him make this decision himself.

Still...

I was struggling to suppress my conflicting feelings. I looked from the paper to Alto, who was waiting for my answer.

"Why do you want to accept this quest, Alto?"

"Because I saw who the client was."

"I see. Do you understand the details of the quest?"

He shook his head.

"Not all of it. I was going to ask you, Master."

"Right. Do you understand what your duties will be?"

"Yes. Doing chores for the client and talking to them."

"That is true... Well, I'll read the part you were having trouble with for you."

"Okay, Master."

"First of all, it says it's a live-in position. That means you would sleep and work at the client's house. Next, it says the duration of the quest is for more than a month. That means there's not a firm date for when the quest will end."

His eyes widened when I explained that to him.

"You may not be able to see me while you do this quest. Are you still okay with that?"

His face clouded over now that he understood the nature of the quest. Perhaps it was because he'd already made up his mind, but he gave a definite nod despite the anxious look on his face. I was a little surprised at that. I was convinced he would choose another quest once I hinted at the possibility of him having to leave me.

*"…"* 

I looked down at the quest again. There was a reason why I was hesitant in letting him accept it. It didn't have anything to do with the details of the quest, but because the duration was so vague.

The reason this quest had gone unclaimed for so long, besides the client being a beastfolk, was undoubtedly because the duration was for *more* than one month.

Alto could read simple quests like the ones for slaying monsters, but he hadn't been able to read the duration for this one. That meant he'd chosen it not knowing it would be so long.

Which was why I wasn't sure about letting him accept it.

His tail swayed slightly as he stared at me, perhaps indicating that he was anxious that I hadn't responded yet.

"When you accept a quest, it's your duty to fulfill it no matter how difficult it becomes. Are you prepared for that?" I knelt down in front of Alto and asked him this seriously. He stood up straight, looked me in the eye, and nodded firmly. "Well, in that case I won't stop you. Do your best, Alto."

"Hey, are you sure about this?" Drum frowned with concern.

"I'll go to the client's house with him. All it says on here is that they're elderly, so if they need the help of an adult, Alto won't be of much use."

Plus, I wanted to know what kind of person the client was.

"I see... Well, come back later and tell me whether he's going to take the

quest."

"I will. Are you all right with that, Alto?"

His anxious expression brightened when he heard that I would be coming along, and he answered with an enthusiastic "Yes!" while wagging his tail in delight. He was thrilled that I would be coming with him, but in sharp contrast, I was feeling quite glum about it.

At any rate, first we need to meet the client.

Then I could think about things. We had plenty of time, so we provisionally accepted the quest and then headed to the client's house.

The client lived about twenty minutes away from the guild. There were no other houses around; it stood all by itself. The sky was thick with clouds and it looked like it would rain at any minute. My impression of the house was that it was small and modest, seamlessly blending into the tranquil scenery. I wasn't sure whether that was due to the overcast weather, or if it was always like this.

Out here, it wouldn't matter how loudly Alto fought with Jackie—he was unlikely to disturb anyone. There was no sign of anyone around.

Alto and I rapped on the door to summon the owner of the house. After a few moments, I thought I heard someone moving inside, and then the door opened. A short, white-haired man probably in his sixties with ears the same shape as Alto's stared at us with cautious golden eyes. I wondered if he was also a wolf-type beastfolk like Alto.

"May I ask who you are?"

Alto was a bundle of nerves since this was his first quest, but he seemed to relax once he heard the man's calm, gentle voice, and let out a sigh of relief. On the way here he'd probably been worried that the client might be a scary person, so he must have been relieved to see that he had a very kind smile.

I didn't know what he was like just yet, but Drum had told us that he was a respectful old man, so he probably wasn't a bad person. I'd decided not to say anything, but if he turned out to be someone who might treat Alto badly, I

would step in and immediately take him home.

*"…."* 

*""* 

After he asked who we were and I didn't answer, the old man seemed puzzled, and Alto gave me a confused look as well.

Normally, I would tell the client that I accepted their quest, and I would introduce myself and Alto. But this time, it was my apprentice who had taken the quest, so I just silently stood there waiting. Since Alto showed no signs of making a move, I decided to help him out.

"Alto, you're the one who accepted the quest," I said.

He seemed to come back to himself and panic a bit, then looked toward the client. He stood straight up and introduced himself in a firm voice.

"My name is Alto. I'm a swordsman. My guild rank is yellow. I've come here today to accept your quest."

He handed the card Drum had given him to the client. Once I saw that he'd done that, I explained my purpose in coming with Alto.

"My name is Setsuna. I'm a scholar, and my guild rank is blue. Alto is my apprentice. He's the one who wants to accept your quest, but since there were no age requirements on the quest, I came to accompany him just in case."

The client calmly watched over us and listened to me speak. Once I was finished, his eyes softened and he replied to Alto. "My, my. Thank you for coming all the way out here in this weather. I never expected such an adorable adventurer to come visit me! I can't have you standing outside. Please come in, come in!"

The old man led us to a simple yet clean parlor. He asked us to sit down and then left the room, returning a few minutes later with drinks on a wooden tray. He set what appeared to be hot tea in front of us and then settled into a chair.

"I don't know if it'll suit young people's tastes, but please help yourselves." He smiled cheerfully and prompted Alto and me to have a drink.

"Thank you for the tea."

"Thank you."

After Alto saw me sip the tea, he started drinking his slowly to test the temperature. The client watched us with interest.

Is there something in this tea? I was a little wary as I sipped it, and then my eyes widened.

"…"

It tasted like green tea, something I hadn't had for quite some time. I'd bought and drank many kinds of tea since becoming an adventurer, but this was the first time I'd had anything that resembled green tea. I took another sip, and the client looked surprised when I told him what I thought of it. "Delicious..."

"B-bitter..."

But my words were drowned out by Alto's loud voice that came out at the same time. The client laughed as though he'd successfully pulled a prank while Alto stuck out his tongue from the taste, his eyes filling with tears. It wasn't particularly kind to pull a prank on someone when you met them for the first time, but I didn't sense any malice in it, so I smiled wryly and continued drinking my tea. For some reason, I got the feeling that pulling pranks on people was one of the old man's favorite pastimes.

Alto looked down at his tea with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. He probably didn't want to be rude and not finish it, so he let out a sigh and swallowed the rest in one big gulp. Of course, that didn't make the bitterness go away, so he grimaced. The man chuckled, stood up abruptly, and left the room. His agility made him look like he was in great shape for his age. He certainly didn't seem old.

For a moment, I wondered if maybe my initial misgivings had been right, but I remembered Drum's reassuring nod and pushed those thoughts out of my mind.

"Here's a cup with milk and honey in it. I think you'll like this one better, Alto."

The old man returned and set a cup in front of Alto, who looked deeply suspicious of it but decided to go ahead and give it a try. This time, it was the

flavor he'd been expecting, and Alto looked up with a huge smile on his face.

"It's sweet! Yummy! Thank you."

The old man nodded happily, then gave me a warm smile. "Honestly, I didn't think you'd like it either."

"It's the first time I've had this tea, but I really like the flavor."

"I see. I'm glad you like it. Most people react the way Alto did when they taste it."

"Is it sold in Lypaed?"

"No. This drink comes from my hometown, Sagana. Not many people like to drink it because of its bitter taste, but when the seasons change and it gets colder, they say drinking this staves off chills and will keep you healthy. I have some planted in my garden that I harvest and dry out so I can drink it as tea. Most children don't like it, though."

The old man's eyes seemed to fill with nostalgia as he looked at Alto. *I see. So he made this tea for Alto, since it's cloudy and chilly outside today.* 

"But it seems you prefer sweet foods, Alto. I have some sweets in the living room, so we can chat in there if you'd like. It's more comfortable there, so it won't matter if we talk for a long time."

At first, I wondered why we needed to be comfortable in order to discuss a quest, but then, when I considered the nature of it, I changed my mind. I wondered if suggesting we move to the living room was a way for the old man to size up whether we were the kind of people he could relax with.

Perhaps I was reading too much into it, but if I was right, then I thought Alto must've passed the first hurdle. Speaking of Alto, it didn't seem like this had crossed his mind at all because his eyes were just sparkling at the prospect of sweets.



We went into the living room, and the old man gestured for us to sit down on the sofa. Even when Alto and I sat side by side, there was still plenty of space to spare. Once the man saw that we were settled, he set down several boxes of sweets on the table and told us to eat whatever we liked. He smiled happily as he watched Alto agonize over what to choose, then excused himself from the room to make some more tea.

He seems like such a mysterious man.

As that thought ran through my head, Alto finished selecting his sweets and put them on his plate. Then the old man returned.

"Now, please allow me to introduce myself. I'm the one who made the post at the guild. My name is Ragi."

He set the tea down on the table and then sat on the sofa before telling us about the quest. Alto appeared to have lost all his nervousness, because he was now sitting up straight to listen intently to the man's story.

"Alto, are you the one who accepted my quest?"

"Yes. Is that all right?"

"It's fine. There's nothing about this job that requires heavy labor. I mainly just want someone to talk to."

"Okay."

I quietly listened to their exchange.

"Are you all right living here with me for a while and being apart from Setsuna?"

Alto glanced at me anxiously and then looked back at the old man. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out, and his gaze fell on his lap. Ragi watched every move Alto made, carefully observing him.

After a while, Alto slowly lifted his face. He clenched his fists as if strengthening his resolve, then declared, "I'll do my best. Please take care of me, Ragi!"

Ragi's breath momentarily caught in his throat when he saw Alto's piercing

gaze, but then a soft smile spread across his face.

"And please take care of me, too. Oh, that reminds me, Alto. Would you mind calling me Grandpa from now on? That would make me really happy."

Alto probably wasn't expecting him to say that, because he looked quite surprised. Ragi had a kind smile on his face as he waited for Alto's response.

But his eyes were very serious. He'd been surreptitiously observing Alto's words and behavior. I didn't think it was so he could play another one of his pranks, but for the time being, I decided to just quietly watch over the situation.

Alto took his words for what they were, and glanced back and forth between the two of us for a few moments while he thought about it. When he saw that I wasn't going to say anything, he turned toward the old man and said "Gramps."

Ragi was shocked speechless for a moment, then chuckled happily. He kept laughing and laughing, as though he couldn't contain it. Alto seemed completely baffled as to why he was being laughed at.

"I'm sorry, it's just that your reaction was so pure. I don't mean any harm by it."

I wondered if Ragi didn't actually think Alto would call him Grandpa and was the verge of saying as much, but changed his mind once he saw Alto's expression.

"That's fine, Alto. You can call me that."

This time, it didn't seem like he was testing Alto—he sounded genuine.

"Um, and you can keep calling me Alto."

"All right. I'll do that."

Alto wagged his tail busily, happy that the old man had agreed to his request. I was inwardly surprised that Alto, who was usually so cautious of others, was able to be himself so quickly here. I didn't know whether it was because he had chosen this quest on his own, because they were both beastfolk, or because Ragi was so tolerant.

"I want you to take on the quest, Alto. And as for your master, would you mind telling me what you plan on doing during that time?" he asked quietly.

Alto's eyes widened and he looked up at me anxiously. I patted his head in reassurance, then cast a sleeping spell on him.

"Did you do that because you're going to say something you don't want Alto to hear?" Ragi looked very suspicious of my behavior. The soft tone of voice he'd directed toward Alto was gone. The rain outside picked up, turning into a downpour.

"Or perhaps it's about the reward for the quest?" He glared at me coldly, not hiding his irritation. That explained why he had been observing Alto so closely, and why he was acting so cold toward me now. Alto and I had experienced this same thing before in our journey, and the thought that history would be repeating itself made me want to sigh. However, I believed that Ragi would understand if I explained things to him, so I tried my best.

"You can discuss the reward with Alto, since he's the one who took on the quest."

*"…"* 

Ragi furrowed his brow, not understanding what I meant. The look in his eyes urged me to continue. It seemed like he was willing to hear me out.

"My question is about the length of this quest."

Since this was a sensitive question, I found it a bit hard to ask. And honestly, I didn't want to have to ask it. But I had to. I sat up straight just like Alto had before and looked into Ragi's eyes.

"I apologize if I gave you the wrong idea. But as Alto's master, I've decided I need to know. I'm sorry if this question offends you, but I would appreciate an answer."

*"…"* 

Ragi didn't take his eyes off me. He didn't answer, either, just quietly waited for me to say something. His gaze was intense, as if he was trying to gauge my true intentions. The tension in the air between us was in sharp contrast to how it had been between him and Alto. He remained silent as he stared daggers at me, so I continued.

"Shall I take it that this quest will be for the duration of your remaining life?"

He replied calmly without hesitation. "What if it is? Then what would you do? I assumed you knew that when you agreed to this quest."

"To be honest, I was hoping that wouldn't be the case, for Alto's sake. Because he has no idea. That's why I was holding out hope for him."

For the first time, I saw Ragi's eyes waver as he stared at me in shock. "Wait, you mean you were the one who encouraged him to take on this quest?"

I felt sad that that was how he perceived it but didn't show it on my face. I took a deep breath before explaining.

"No. Alto was the one who found the quest on the board, and he's the one who decided to take it."

"Then why didn't you tell him what the quest meant?"

There was a faint note of blame in his voice.

"As Alto's teacher, I've decided that I won't interfere with his decisions. Of course, if he does something dangerous or life-threatening, I'll intervene. But if this is what he's decided, then all I can do is watch over him. However, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel conflicted when he came to me about the quest."

I chose my words carefully as I told Ragi how I felt.

"Since you've led a long life, I think you understand what it says about Alto that he speaks in such a simple way."

After that, I told the old man everything about Alto, from the time we met, and what our relationship was like now.

Once my story was finished, Ragi turned to look at Alto with sadness in his eyes.

"That's why I'm Alto's whole world right now. I'm everything to him. He's always scared that I'll let go of his hand one day, or that I'll disappear."

The first thing Alto did whenever he woke up was to look for me. He did it unconsciously, without knowing why.

"I told Alto to take on a quest alone because I wanted to expand his world, even a little bit. I wanted him to gain the confidence to do things on his own, without my help. I wanted him to very gradually get used to a world without me in it."

*"…"* 

"To be honest, since he's so shy, I thought he would come to me with a quest that involved interacting with the people in town. Or maybe something simple like slaying a monster or collecting medicinal herbs. Alto has the ability to do all those things, which is why I wasn't concerned."

I picked up my now lukewarm tea and took a sip, trying to wash away the sadness in my heart with the bitter flavor.

"So you can imagine my surprise when he chose your quest. And I was about to tell him he should choose a different one."

I was well aware that I was saying something Ragi might find very rude. I paused a minute, trying to decide if I should continue or not, and he quietly said, "Please, go on."

I exhaled deeply and took another deep breath before continuing. "Even if this quest goes smoothly, this is his very first quest, and for it to end in an inevitable good-bye would be an extremely painful experience for Alto. That sadness might damage him before he can get more confidence and expand his worldview."

I was sure I was right about that. I knew Alto would grow fond of this man, and I knew he would be kind to Alto. I could tell after watching the two of them interact. Alto had never been able to enjoy kindness and warmth from others up until now, so I knew this would be a very happy time for him. But simultaneously, it was glaringly obvious that having to say good-bye to the old man would be equally painful and leave a lasting impression on him.

"So if you thought it through this far, why didn't you try to stop him?"

"...I wasn't able to stop him because you're the client."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"I'm saying you're the reason he chose this quest."

Ragi's eyes widened with surprise, and he stared at me without blinking.

"Your quest really stood out from the others. The paper was old and tattered, and the deadline had been extended three times. I'm sure Alto wondered why no one else was taking on your quest, or why it kept hanging up there like that."

"And he thought it was because I'm beastfolk?"

"Yes."

*"…"* 

"If it were just that, perhaps I would've been able to stop him. But once I explained to him that it was a live-in position and the duration was vague, and that he would have to live apart from me, he still didn't say no."

My hands felt weak resting upon my knees.

"I think Alto didn't pick up on the implications of the unspecified duration of the quest because he doesn't have much life experience. Still, he chose the quest, so he needs to take responsibility for it. If that's what he's made up his mind to do, then I won't prevent him from doing it."

Adventurers had to choose quests keeping all those circumstances in mind, but in my opinion, asking that much of a child like Alto was going too far. Ragi must've felt the same, because a pained look came to his face as he glanced at Alto, who was still asleep.

"Perhaps...you're a bit too hard on Alto. He's only a boy, after all."

I couldn't say I disagreed. But even so...

"Maybe I wouldn't be so hard on him if he was just an ordinary beastfolk boy."

And with that, I released my spell on Alto that changed his hair and eye color. Since he was asleep, we didn't see the color of his eyes change, but his natural hair color became apparent.

Ragi froze with shock and said in a strained voice, "He's a Bluewolf..."

"Did you know that Bluewolves are given as offerings to the moon goddess?"

"How do you know that? Apart from us beastfolk who are the victims, only a select few of the priests of Ellana know about the Bluewolves' connection to Endia." Ragi gave me a suspicious look, so I pulled out a book.

"I'm not a follower of Endia, and I don't know any of them, either. The reason I am aware of this is because of a sentence hidden in a passage of this historical tome, so it was a theory on my part. After I did some more research, I realized it was true."

I pointed to the sentence in question. However, this book didn't actually exist; it was something I had created just now. The reason I knew that Bluewolves were given as offerings to Endia was because of Kyle's knowledge. Obviously, I couldn't say that, so I had to create this book as a last resort to explain how I knew.

Ragi stared at me, trying to gauge if I was telling the truth. Meanwhile, a painful emotion had resurfaced inside of me. Ever since I came to this world, I'd lied as easily as breathing, but every time I did, it felt like something piled up deep inside my heart.

"If you were a priest of Ellana, Alto probably wouldn't be alive right now."

Ragi seemed to take me at my word, which just added another bitter feeling to the heap inside my heart, but I felt like as long as I lived in this realm, I would have to continue lying.

"I'm surprised he's survived this long in the human world."

"When I first met Alto he was sick, and his eyes had turned white. His hair was a very light color, and he was covered in filth, so I didn't realize he was a Bluewolf at first. It was a series of coincidences that led to him not being taken to Ellana, which is why he's still alive."

"Beastfolk are all different depending on their race, but most of them get their coloring from one of their parents. They may be born one color, but when they grow up, they'll have the same coloring as their mother or father. It's not uncommon for their coloring to turn from white to black, for example."

"I think Alto's hair might've started changing color before he met me."

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"It's possible..."
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"If Alto had been taken to Ellana, he would've been offered as a sacrifice, and his life would've ended there. That's why I think I have to be strict with him and teach him how to survive on his own, even though he's just a child. Plus, I'm an adventurer, so who knows what might happen in the future."

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"…"
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Ragi fell deep into thought. Just then, he raised his face, as if remembering something.

"Are Alto's eyes blue or purple?"

"He has one blue eye and one purple eye."

"...I can't believe it."

He choked up and closed his eyes tightly, a sad expression on his face, then leaned back against the sofa.

"Is there a problem with Alto's eye color?"

Ragi looked so shocked that I began to feel concerned.

"So you knew, which is why you changed his eye color?"

"I changed his hair so people wouldn't realize he was a Bluewolf, and his eyes to keep his heterochromia from making him stand out."

"I haven't been to my homeland for a very long time, so it's possible my information is outdated..." Ragi couched his reply, before continuing. "Endia, the moon goddess, who is said to be the cruelest of all the gods, also has one blue and one purple eye. Bluewolves who have the same eye colors draw particular attention from Bluewolf hunters..."

"Bluewolf hunters?" I couldn't help but repeat these ominous words I was hearing for the first time.

"That's what we call people led by the priests of Ellana who exclusively kidnap Bluewolves. Even if they only get the faintest bit of information about a possible Bluewolf sighting, they'll relentlessly track them down."

"Why are they after Bluewolves?"

"It's a truly ridiculous reason. Endia hates beastfolk, and the closer their colors match her own, the more she hates them. Specifically, fur blue like the moon and eyes the same color as her own, blue and purple. For that reason, Endia's followers view Bluewolves as a sign of sacrilege toward her and offer them as a sacrifice."

He clenched his fists, face flushed with fury. I could feel the blood draining from my own face when he told me that. I impulsively reached out and pulled Alto close to me. My movement must've snapped Ragi back to his senses because he let out a deep sigh as if to calm himself.

"That's all I can tell you. The rest isn't worth hearing."

And so, he ended the conversation regarding Bluewolves.

"Thank you for telling me all that. I won't forget what you said. Not when I need it to protect Alto."

I reached over and gently stroked Alto's head as he slept. I would never let the goddess Endia have my apprentice's life.

"There's something I need to apologize to you about, Setsuna."

"What?" I stopped stroking Alto's hair and looked up at Ragi as he bowed his head deeply.

"I had the wrong idea about you."

"It's really not a problem. Please raise your head."

"Alto always looked at you to see your reaction before he said or did anything, so I thought he might have been enslaved to you even without a collar. That said, I thought it was odd he didn't seem like he was threatened by or afraid of you."

*"…."* 

"That's why I asked Alto to call me Grandpa."

"Ah, not to check Alto's reaction, but to gauge my own."

He nodded firmly.

"I wanted to see if you were just flattering me or trying to get on my good

side. But contrary to my expectations, you didn't say a word. And I certainly wasn't expecting Alto to call me 'Gramps.'" He chuckled at the memory.

"I'm sorry if he was rude to you."

"No, no. I'm the one who asked him to call me that, so there's nothing to apologize for. And he certainly wasn't rude. He took my request at face value and obliged. He's a kind boy."

*"…"* 

"And that was when I realized how wonderful of a teacher you are to him." Ragi smiled at me, making me feel a bit bashful. I stroked Alto's hair, changing it and his eyes back to their previous color.

"Will you hide his true hair and eye color at least until he's capable of protecting himself?"

"Yes. That was my intention."

Ragi looked relieved to hear my answer and nodded. He poured me a fresh cup of tea, and I warmed my chilly hands around the hot mug.

"Well, it seems we've gotten off topic. Perhaps I should explain the true meaning of my request to Alto."

"No, please don't say anything to him."

"But won't that hurt him?"

*"…."* 

"It seems you have a plan, don't you?"

He was trying to fish for information, perhaps to try to make it easier for me to broach the subject, but I had a hard time talking about it. Ragi patiently waited for me, but I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye; instead, I stared down at the mug in my hands. The surface of the tea rippled slightly from my shaking hands.

"When I first saw your quest, I wasn't expecting this. But now that I see how well you and Alto get along, I really want him to genuinely enjoy the time he

gets to spend with you."

"Setsuna..."

"I don't know if this is the right decision or not. Maybe I'm wrong. But I'm a human, and I just can't help but think you're capable of giving Alto a fun experience that I can't."

Just like humans have their own idea of fun, surely beastfolk would have different ways of enjoying themselves. And since I was a human, I didn't know what those were. But as time went on, Alto might grow up without knowing certain joys that a beastfolk can experience only in their childhood, and I didn't want that to happen. So I thought this was a fantastic opportunity for him.

"I know that what I'm saying is very selfish. I know that not letting him know now might hurt him more later on. And I know that I might be putting a very cruel burden on you. But won't you please let Alto accept this quest without telling him the true nature of it?"

I was well aware this was an entirely self-centered wish that might hurt not only Alto, but Ragi as well, since he wouldn't be able to tell the truth. I wouldn't blame him if he said no.

"Setsuna, you seem far too hard on yourself."

I looked up at the gentle tone of his voice and he gave me a strained smile.

"You don't have to worry about me. I posted my quest at the guild knowing my time is drawing near. If this is you being selfish, then I'm being selfish, too. I'm asking someone to take care of me while I die, after all. I'm anxious about being alone, which is why I'd like someone to live with me. I'm afraid of passing by myself. That's why I went to the guild to post the quest."

As he smiled sadly at me, I wasn't sure what to say to him.

"To be honest, I'd almost given up on it. I'm beastfolk, after all—I didn't think any humans would show up who would be willing to live with someone like me. Still, I wanted to cling onto that glimmer of hope, that maybe tomorrow a beastfolk adventurer or kindhearted human might show up at my house."

"Setsuna. I don't want Alto to know, either. My reason is largely the same as yours. Alto is a kind boy, so if he discovered the true meaning behind the quest, he would worry himself sick."

"Probably."

"And if that happened, I wouldn't be able to see him smile genuinely. The thought of him crying out 'Gramps!' because his heart is fraught with worry instead of saying 'Gramps!' with joy is just too much for me to bear."

*"…"* 

"I want someone to talk to, so your request isn't a burden on me; it's a happy solution that will let me see Alto smile. Besides, I'm going to leave this world anyway. You'll be the one suffering the most here, since you'll be left behind after knowing everything all along."

"[..."

"Your job after I'm gone will be to support Alto."

*"…"* 

I realized something from our conversation just now. I would grow just as fond of this man as Alto would. Honestly, I wondered how I'd even be able to compose myself in front of Alto when Ragi passed away. I wasn't confident I could.

"Please...forgive me."

For some reason, Ragi reminded me very much of my own grandfather.

"...Please take care of Alto," I said, and Ragi lifted his head. I bowed just as deeply as he had.

Perhaps it was inappropriate, but I couldn't help but think that if Ragi was sick, I could help save him. That if Ragi didn't have much time left to live because of an illness, I could use my abilities to heal him.

Alto slept peacefully with his head in my lap. Well, I guess it was more accurate to say that I had put him to sleep with my magic. Even if it might have

been necessary, I inwardly apologized to him anyway as I lightly shook his shoulder to wake him up.

"Nn..."

He slowly sat up and gave a light stretch, then rubbed his eyes. Once he saw me beside him and Ragi in front of us, he hastily apologized.

"I'm sorry."

I'd used magic to put him to sleep, so he had nothing to apologize for, but I couldn't tell him that.

"You were only asleep for a little while," I said. Ragi nodded, and Alto let out a sigh of relief.

"So what will you do, Setsuna?"

Ragi returned to the subject we were talking about before I put Alto to sleep, but I felt like his intent had switched from feeling me out to simply wanting to know how to get ahold of me. Once again, Alto looked at me with wide eyes that trembled with anxiety. I lightly patted his back a few times to soothe him.

"We were thinking of staying in Lypaed for a while, so I was planning on renting a house somewhere."

"Have you accepted a quest that will keep you in Lypaed for a while?"

"No, nothing like that. I just want to save up some money to continue our journey, so I'm going to devote my attention to that for the time being," I replied to Ragi, who gazed at me calmly and quietly as I spoke.

"How long are you thinking about staying?" He nodded a few times and looked like he was contemplating something.

"I haven't decided yet. It could be six months, could be a year. We're not in any rush. Alto and I are taking a leisurely journey around the world to expand his horizons. You don't have to worry about us."

I'd told Ragi in a roundabout way that I wanted him to live as long as possible, and he gave me an awkward smile.

"I see. I understand your situation now. In that case, Setsuna, why not stay

here? Fortunately, I have many rooms. The only drawback is that it's a bit inconvenient to get to the guild from here, but if you'd like, you could use my house as your base while you're in Lypaed."

Alto's face lit up when he heard Ragi's offer. His ears perked up and his tail began to wag as he looked up at me. There was no doubt he wanted me to answer yes.

Should I really stay here, though?

This quest was for Alto's benefit. It was time devoted to him. If I was here, then nothing would really change from how we'd been living up till now.

I struggled with those thoughts for a while, but then Ragi smiled knowingly, giving me some words of encouragement.

"I think both Alto and I will feel better with you here. And we'll be fine if you have to leave for a few days. Of course, you may come and go as you please."

There were layers of meaning to those words. He was taking Alto's wish for me to stay, consideration for my feelings, and his own situation into account—all things he couldn't say out loud right now.

"If you'll accept me paying for lodging, then I'd love to stay here with you and Alto."

I thought he would probably insist no matter what I said, so I decided to just take him up on the offer. "You're such a serious person," Ragi said with a laugh, which settled our relationship as landlord and tenant.

"Alto, I'm going to stay here, but I'll be taking my own quests from the guild. That means that I generally won't be helping you with your job here, but if there's anything you find difficult or can't do, just let me know."

"Yes, Master!"

Alto seemed relieved he didn't have to part ways with me. As I looked at him, I wondered if what I was about to impose on him was too cruel, and began to fall into a pit of self-loathing. I nodded as Alto kept happily chattering on and tucked my inner conflict deep into my heart.

"I'm sure I'll cause you a lot of trouble, but I'm excited for you to be staying

here." Ragi rose to his feet and bowed. Alto quickly got up and bowed in turn.

"I'm really looking forward to it, Gramps!"

I couldn't help but grin when Alto called him "Gramps," and Ragi didn't seem to mind, either, judging from the gleeful smile on his face. Strangely, hearing Alto call him that didn't feel weird at all. It was almost as if that's what he was meant to call him.

"I'm looking forward to it as well. By the way, Setsuna, you're free to call me whatever you want, even if it's 'you old goat!'"

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"…"
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I would never call him that, and I was sure Ragi was well aware of it. He was watching me with amusement, seeing how I would react. But Alto piped up before I could say anything.

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"Old goat!"
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*"…."* 

*""* 

I lightly flicked Alto's forehead.

"Ow!"

Unable to stand it any longer, Ragi doubled over with laughter.

"That's not a nice thing to call someone. There are some things you just shouldn't say. You need to think very carefully about things before you say them out loud." Alto rubbed his forehead as I scolded him.

He hung his head and apologized. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

"I'm sorry, Gramps."

His ears were laid back against his head as he looked at Ragi, who had tears in his eyes.

"It's fine, it's my fault you said it. There's nothing for you to apologize for," Ragi said through bursts of laughter. "It's been a long time since I laughed this much. Once again, welcome to my home, Alto and Setsuna."

Ragi smiled kindly at us as if he were really enjoying himself, which seemed to cheer Alto up. The mood in the air enveloped me in a soft warmth, like I was standing out in the sun; it felt somehow nostalgic and made me think of my grandfather.

"Well, how about I explain a little about the house?"

Ragi wanted to tell me about the house since I was renting a room, and he wanted to be sure the one I chose aligned with my preferences. We decided to discuss rent and the like afterward.

"On the first floor, there's the living room here, dining room, and kitchen. My bedroom is also on the first floor, along with a bathroom. There are five rooms on the second floor, but one of them is for storage. You can choose whichever one of the vacant rooms you'd like and use it as you please."

And so, I decided to choose a room. Alto wanted me to share a room with him, but I was strict and told him, "You're on a quest." He nodded firmly and chose the room right next to mine.

Once we were finished selecting our rooms, Ragi gave us a tour of the house and chatted with us about various things. This was my first time living in a house, as well as Alto's, so he kept pointing at things with sparkling eyes, asking, "What's this?" and "What's that?" Ragi looked fondly at Alto when he did so and happily answered every question.

As I listened to Ragi's tour, a thought crossed my mind. I remembered that Cyrus had asked to visit when I had settled in somewhere.

"Ragi?"

"Yes, is something the matter?"

"No, it's just, a friend of mine will be visiting now and then, and I was thinking that might be a lot to ask of you. Maybe it would be better for me to rent a house on my own after all."

Alto's ears stood straight up, and he stared at me in disbelief, waiting

anxiously for Ragi's answer. However, Ragi smiled tenderly at Alto.

"No, no, please have them come over. The more the merrier, after all! I'm looking forward to it."

Alto was clearly relieved. All I could do was smile and thank Ragi for his kindness. Alto stopped asking questions, and now that we were finished with the tour and choosing rooms, I told him and Ragi that I would be back in a little while. My apprentice tugged on my sleeve.

"I need to move our things out of the inn. Also, a friend promised to help me find a place, so I'm going to tell him I'll be living here."

"I see. Yes, it's best to get that taken care of right away."

Alto still wouldn't let go of me, so Ragi knelt beside him. He smiled softly at Alto, then gently patted his head. Alto narrowed his eyes in pleasure, enjoying the sensation.

"Think I can give you your first task?"

"My first task?"

"That's right. I'd like you to help me make lunch. Do you think you can do that? I bet if you help me out, everything will be ready so we can all eat together by the time Setsuna gets back. What do you think?"

"I'll help!"

Alto let go of me and balled up both of his fists as he nodded emphatically. Ragi glanced over in my direction, implicitly telling me to go ahead and leave before Alto changed his mind.

"I'm looking forward to lunch. Do your best, Alto."

"I will!"

"Be careful, Setsuna."

The two of them saw me off as I stepped outside into the light rain. I went to the guild and explained the situation to Drum, then went to the inn and wrote Cyrus a letter. I apologized to him and told him I'd found a house to rent and would be moving out of the inn.

Alto's excited voice greeted me when I came back to Ragi's house, which had a warm atmosphere the likes of which I'd never experienced before. I washed my hands and went to the living room, where I saw a bunch of delicious-looking dishes lined up. I tried one of the vegetables Alto said he chopped, and told him it was good, to which he replied with a happy smile. I wondered if it was just my imagination that Ragi looked a bit tired.

After lunch, we went upstairs to clean our rooms.

"I generally try to keep the rooms fairly tidy, but...," Ragi said, and took out some cleaning supplies from the closet and handed them to us with an apologetic look on his face.

"No worries."

I took the supplies, and Alto and I began cleaning. When I opened up the door and windows to sweep the dust outside, the rain had stopped, and I could see light through the parting of the clouds.

I realized Alto had come up beside me to admire the view.

"The sky is pretty, Master."

"It is, isn't it."

We gazed in awe at the beauty of nature through the window, our attention rapt. The sunlight was just peeking through a gap in the clouds, and for some reason, it made an almost mystical impression on us. In Japan, we would call this phenomenon an "angel's ladder," but did angels even exist in this world?

We enjoyed the view for a while longer, then began wiping down the floors with a rag. While I cleaned my room, I went to go check on Alto occasionally. He'd taken Jackie from his bag and set him on the bed, and merrily placed his books, notebooks, and other personal items on his desk.

Just as we finished cleaning, Ragi came up and looked at Alto's things with interest. He seemed at a loss for words when he saw Jackie on the bed, but when Alto noticed his reaction he happily introduced Jackie and told Ragi that I had given the rabbit to him. Ragi glanced over and made eye contact with me, but I quickly looked away. It seemed that the stuffed animal was unpopular with everyone except for Alto. *Did you hear that, Kyoka?* 

Ragi happily listened to the rest of what Alto had to say. They looked like they were genuinely grandfather and grandson—Alto had completely opened his heart to Ragi. I watched over the scene with a warm smile on my face.

It was now time for dinner, which Ragi cooked for us, saying it was his welcome present to us. Alto offered to help, but Ragi wouldn't let him. We had already decided on how we would divide up the household chores beforehand, and were supposed to alternate cooking dinner; however, Ragi seemed to really enjoy making us feel at home by cooking for us and enthusiastically said he'd like to do it every night from now on.

I'd never eaten Ragi's cooking before, but we both really enjoyed it, with Alto even raving that it was better than anything he'd had at a restaurant. "I'm glad to hear that," Ragi said, laughing happily.

What he'd made for us seemed to be his specialty—a traditional dish from Sagana eaten on celebratory occasions. He told me with a nostalgic look in his eyes that the seasonings differed for each family.

"Master, what's your specialty?" Alto asked, his competitive spirit sparked by Ragi's proud story.

"I don't really have one," I answered honestly, and Alto slumped in dejection. He didn't seem to believe me, though, because he said he would ask Cyrus the next time we saw him. I had to admire how far he was willing to go to win.

Under normal circumstances, I would've told Alto that if he wanted to compete with someone, he needed to challenge them with his own skills, but he looked so happy that I didn't want to dampen his mood. I also didn't want to shorten my lifespan unnecessarily having to watch Alto cook just yet.

I'd heard that Lypaed's traditional dishes were delicious, but Ragi said they were generally only served during festivals at food stalls and restaurants, which disappointed Alto even more.

After we were finished with dinner, I noticed it seemed quiet and realized Alto was asleep. It had been a stressful day yesterday, and now his belly was full, so he must have tired himself out. Ragi was gazing at Alto's sleeping face as

if he were looking at his own grandson. We didn't speak, just quietly passed the time together.

It seemed like an idea had suddenly popped into his head, because Ragi abruptly left the room, then returned with two glasses, some snacks, and a bottle of alcohol.

"Do you drink, Setsuna?"

"Yes, I enjoy a glass every now and then. But is it all right if you drink?"

"Of course. How about we share a drink together, then?"

"I'd love to."

Ragi set a glass in front of me and filled it with alcohol. I poured his drink, and after a brief toast, we quietly started to make our way through the bottle.

Once we were sick of the silence, Ragi began telling me what Alto had been up to in my absence.

"I asked him if he'd ever cooked before, and he told me confidently that he had, so I expected you'd taught him how to cook and had taught him how to use a knife...and had a very scary experience as a result."

I nodded sympathetically, and he gave me a slightly reproachful look.

"I've sworn to never let him hold a knife until he gets a little bigger."

*"…"* 

Ragi shook his head and laughed.

"Do you think you can teach him?" I asked.

"Not a chance," he answered quickly and laughed again. The time passed amiably as I shared stories with him about Alto and me, and asked Ragi about himself. At some point the bottle ran dry and Ragi murmured, "Setsuna. I'm about to tell you something, and I'd like you to take it as common knowledge among beastfolk."

"All right."

"Beastfolk have a vague sense of when they're going to die. It's difficult to explain how. All I can say is that we just *know*. But we don't know exactly when

it will happen, of course."

I kept my gaze on the glass in front of me as I listened to Ragi.

"Humans and beastfolk aren't only different physically, but in the way we die as well. Beastfolk will grow weak about a week before we pass and gradually lose our mobility. Then a few days before our death, we'll stop being able to eat."

I imagined that unfortunate day.

"So if I become unable to eat food, I want you to take that as a sign that my death is imminent."

Ragi stopped talking for a moment and then opened up a new bottle, topping off my glass.

"...Thank you."

"Until then, I can live my life normally, and I can even hold a sword. So you don't need to worry about me; you just do whatever you need to do."

*"…"* 

"I know I'm being selfish—"

"Ragi. You don't have to talk about it anymore," I interrupted him before he could apologize. I smiled at him, trying to express the fact that I didn't want him to worry about it.

"I'm going to do everything I can. Even if it seems more like you'll be protecting Alto than being helped by him, I'm looking forward to our time together."

*"…."* 

"And please teach him how to use a knife," I said jokingly, making Ragi laugh.

"You're his master, so I'll leave that one to you, Setsuna. Oh, but if you'll allow it, I would like to teach Alto the ways of the beastfolk. Would that be all right by you?"

"I think that's a great idea. I'm sure that what you have to teach him will be very important to him in the future."

I'd actually been thinking of asking him to do that in the first place, so I wondered if he'd sensed my intentions. In any case, I enthusiastically agreed and bowed my head. Ragi asked me to lift my head and began talking happily.

"I think I'll teach him how to play pranks on people as well!"

I'd never seen him smile as wide as he did just then, which surprised me a little.

"...Please don't go overboard with the pranks, since I'll probably be the victim."

Just imagining it made me let out a long sigh, which made Ragi chuckle like some kind of villain. I just knew he was already plotting the kinds of pranks he was going to teach Alto.

"I can't wait for tomorrow!"

*"…"* 

The way Ragi smiled merrily made him look full of life, and it naturally put a smile on my face too. But when I thought about the meaning of his smile, I felt a little conflicted.

After we drank a bit more together, Alto woke up. Even though he'd been asleep a moment ago, his eyes sparkled at the sight of the snacks in front of him, and he asked Ragi if he could have some. Once he got permission, he began to gobble them up.

Now that Alto was awake, the room suddenly got very lively, which filled the space with a different kind of coziness. He gestured wildly as he regaled Ragi with tales of our travels, to which Ragi listened attentively. At some point, it started raining again, but the sound of it was drowned out by Alto's excited voice.

I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I was just having fun with Master and Gramps, but now I was all alone in my bed. This was the first time I'd slept apart from Master since becoming his apprentice, and it felt strange. Sleeping alone made me feel really lonely, even though I'd always slept alone before I met Master.

I couldn't sleep, so I got out of bed with Jackie and went to Master's room.

I wonder if he's still awake.

I thought he might be asleep already, so I hesitated in front of his door. Just then, the door began to open slowly in front of me.

I looked up in surprise and saw Master standing there staring at me.

"What's the matter, Alto?" he asked in his usual kind voice. It filled me with relief. Then I remembered this afternoon, and how I'd told him I wanted to sleep in his bed with him, but he'd said no, and all I could do was look down.

Master saw me frozen there and let out a troubled sigh. I braced myself for him to tell me to go back to my room while I squeezed Jackie tight and waited for him to speak. I knew I should apologize and go back to my room on my own, but I couldn't even get the words out.

"Alto."

I hesitantly looked up at his face. He was smiling. Maybe his sigh wasn't a bad sigh after all...

"Come on, Alto," he said, letting me into his room. He got into bed and patted the spot next to him like he always did. That was the sign that it was okay for me to sleep next to him! Jackie and I happily jumped into bed with him.

"Sorry, but could you have Jackie sleep on the chair over there? This bed is small," Master said with a smile. I lay down and he gently pulled the blankets up over me.

"I'm sorry, Master." I was finally able to say the words I'd been wanting to for a while now.

"Why are you apologizing?"

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"Because I couldn't sleep by myself."
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"...Yeah."

His response stung a little. I lowered my gaze, but then I heard him chuckling softly. He patted my chest over the blankets. The feeling was really gentle, and it made me feel relieved.

"You can sleep with me tonight, but I want you to try sleeping by yourself tomorrow. Then you can sleep with me again the day after."

I didn't understand what he meant by that, so I just stared at him.

"You can tough it out for a day, right? So if you try your hardest for one day, you can take the next day off. You can get used to it slowly like that."

I can be tough for one day.

"Think you can do it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You don't have to rush. It's all right to take it slow learning new things."

I nodded and Master patted my head.

"But, Alto, I don't want you to ever think something's impossible from the start. Try it once, and if it doesn't work out, try to think of how you can succeed. If you fail, all that means is that you can challenge yourself."

Oh, I see. That's why he told me no this afternoon.

Master's hand was so gentle and warm that I began to feel drowsy as I remembered our conversation from this afternoon.

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"Yes?"

"I'll...be tough...tomorrow..."
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I was so sleepy that I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore, but I wanted to make sure I told him that.

I'll try hard tomorrow...

I heard Master chuckling from above my head.

"Okay. Good night, Alto."

I was too sleepy to speak anymore. I wanted to answer him, but all I could do was form the words in my head.

Good night, Master...

## ◇ Part Three: Ragi

As the sun started to peek over the horizon, I heard the sound of the door opening and quiet footsteps. I had a feeling the person they belonged to was trying not to wake me. The footfalls got even quieter when they passed in front of my room.

But unfortunately, their consideration was wasted on me, because I'd woken up even earlier than them. I hadn't tried to—this is just something that happens when you get as old as me. In fact, the older I got, the earlier I woke up.

Setsuna got out of bed a little later than me, very skillfully cloaked his presence, and went out into the garden. Even though I had been a mercenary for many years, I'd never seen someone with his level of training. He'd introduced himself as a scholar, but it was evident that the title wasn't enough to summarize his abilities, and that hunch was confirmed as I watched him out the window. Who was he, really?

I'd lived a long time, but my life was almost at an end. When first I'd sensed this several months ago, I'd thought about departing for the Waterside on my own. But those feelings wavered after a few days, and I decided to post the quest at the guild.

Since then, several adventurers had shown up on my doorstep, but they'd all been good-for-nothings asking for my life savings as their reward. Of course, I had no use for money after I was dead, so I could've given it to them, but their attitude toward me had been careless, as if it didn't matter what they did because I was just going to die anyway. So I'd felt like things wouldn't work out with them and asked them to leave. I didn't really want to talk about money.

Perhaps that was indulgent of me. One could even say it was a mistake. After all, the nature of quests is doing tasks in exchange for money. Although their demands were excessive, it was work, so it was only natural that the matter of payment should be settled.

Of course, I knew that logically. Even if it was an excessive demand,

adventurers worked by negotiating until both sides agreed to the terms. I also knew they had to make a living and earn money when they could—otherwise, they might be out on the street.

I knew it was quite common for them to start negotiating at the highest price, but I just couldn't get myself to a place where I could even begin to discuss it. My heart rejected the very idea. I wanted to live out the rest of my days with someone I could laugh with.

But life didn't always work out that way, and I never thought about taking down the posting, even once. One could even say it was expected, since humans feel uncomfortable around beastfolk. Things had just turned out this way, and my house here would become my final resting place, but deep down, I wanted to go home to Sagana. I wanted to die there. But I didn't belong there anymore.

I can't possibly go back to my friends and family now.

As I kept turning down adventurers, rumors must've spread about me, and adventurers stopped showing up at my house after a while. I began to wallow in my loneliness and spent more time reflecting on my past. Even looking back on it now, I'd led a turbulent life.

Back then, the war between beastfolk and humans was raging fiercely. Although I was young, I desperately threw myself into battle, but no matter how hard we tried, the situation didn't improve. The number of beastfolk dwindled, and our oppression at the hands of humans persisted.

That largely came down to the fact that the different tribes of beastfolk had fought separately, without a country to call their own, while the humans had united and fought in organized groups among their countries to overwhelm us. Even the superior physical abilities of beastfolk were powerless in the face of their sheer numbers.

To counter this, Sagana, the country of beastfolk, was founded about three hundred and fifty years ago. In lieu of a king, it was decided that representatives of each tribe would come together to rule Sagana, and that every ten years the representatives would meet to decide who would become

their top representative. With this system in place, they were able to convince tribes of beastfolk who didn't like to be subservient to others to join, and built a sense of unity.

In the midst of this battle between beastfolk and humans, one human actually helped found Sagana, leading some beastfolk to believe that the relationship between us and humans would someday improve. Personally, however, I never thought the day would come when beastfolk and humans could come together hand in hand.

My proof for this was that even after Sagana was founded, the war didn't end; in fact, the fighting only stopped several decades ago. Although I didn't participate in the final battle, I heard it was a tragic one. If someone were to ask me if I could forgive what humans have done to beastfolk, my answer would immediately be no, and I think most beastfolk feel the same. That was how deep the divide between humans and beastfolk ran.

Which is why I prepared for the worst. I might end up dying alone. If that happens, there's nothing else I can do about it.

That was when Setsuna and Alto showed up to ask about the quest. I listened to what Alto had to say, watched his reactions, and ultimately grew very fond of the beastfolk boy. It felt quite nice to hear him call me "Gramps."

But the human sitting next to him, who he called master, was a problem. I didn't understand his intentions. Based on Alto's interactions with the man, I was sure that he hadn't been enslaved, but...

Would a human really make a beastfolk child his apprentice?

And if Alto was his apprentice, what did the human intend on doing while the boy was here with me? I asked him, and he used magic to put Alto to sleep. Honestly, I thought, *Not again!* I figured he'd heard the rumors and thought I'd turn down another human, so he used a beastfolk child to get to me. But I couldn't be sure. The blood of a warrior boiled inside me, but I suppressed it and decided to hear him out.

Once I'd heard what he had to say, I became painfully aware that I was only thinking about myself. I realized my preconceptions about humans had interfered with my ability to see Setsuna's true nature. I had put myself up on a

pedestal and blamed him when he only had Alto's best interests at heart the entire time.

The young man bowed to me, a beastfolk, for the sake of Alto's future.

...No, that's not quite right.

I had a feeling he respected me from the beginning. I was the only one here who'd gotten caught up in the differences between beastfolk and humans. What had led the man to turn out like this?

He trembled because he cared so much about Alto's feelings and my own. I realized that my attitude and words had hurt him deeply, yet he'd put his own feelings last and was purely concerned about his apprentice. And before I knew it, I'd opened up to the young man who would do anything for the sake of this beastfolk child.

"Master! Take that!"

Alto's voice interrupted my reverie. I glanced out the window and saw that Alto had joined Setsuna's training session. He had a serious look on his face as he frantically sparred with his master.

Even if he wasn't born in Sagana, I'm surprised that a beastfolk child would open his heart so much to a human. Though I suppose I can't really talk.

Thinking that, a melancholic smile touched my lips. It was a mystery to me as well, but before I knew it, I was asking Setsuna to live here.

"Ah, you got me again! That's not fair, Master!"

I heard Alto complaining to Setsuna. If I strained my ears a little, I could hear their whole conversation. Beastfolk have very good hearing.

"Why? What's unfair about it?"

"That one was mine!"

"What? It's your fault for being too slow, Alto."

Setsuna had used Wind magic to make floating targets, and they were competing to see who could break the most.

"But you tripped me!"

"Of course I did. I told you we were training with obstacles, remember?"

"But I can't do obstacles!"

"I don't know what to say to that."

I had to laugh when I listened to their conversation. Suddenly, I realized I'd been laughing a lot ever since they'd shown up the day before.

I'm glad Setsuna's living here, too.

If he weren't here, I was sure I wouldn't see Alto smile very much at all.

He'd thought about my offer for a while but had ultimately accepted. I thought back to that moment and ended up remembering something else in the process.

I had decided to tease him a little bit and said, "By the way, Setsuna, you're free to call me whatever you want, even if it's 'you old goat!'" and was surprised when the person who responded was Alto instead.

"Old goat!"

Even just thinking about it was hilarious.

Alto was just too earnest, which put Setsuna in quite the predicament. It was almost like watching someone look after their troublesome younger brother.

I thought Setsuna a very kind young man, but when he was trying to teach Alto a lesson, he concealed that kindness. That might invite misunderstanding to someone who didn't know their situation. He must have known some people would see it that way, yet he still imposed this training upon Alto. Setsuna himself seemed to feel the most conflicted and guilty about this situation, which was sad yet unavoidable.

Something Setsuna had said echoed in my ears: "Maybe I wouldn't be so hard on him if he was just an ordinary beastfolk boy." That's right; no matter how misunderstood he was, or how guilty he felt, Setsuna would grit his teeth and steel his heart to train Alto to survive. That way, his Bluewolf apprentice wouldn't end up as a sacrifice to Endia.

Even though it must be difficult for a human and beastfolk to travel together, Setsuna took on Alto as his apprentice, protected him, and trained him. The boy wasn't his own child or even of his own race, but when he rescued Alto from the slave trader, Alto had asked to stay with him. For that reason alone, they were together. Honestly, I couldn't wrap my head around it.

Still, the way he was...

"Stop taking my targets!"

"If you don't want me to take them, you'll have to break them faster than me."

Outside the house, Alto and Setsuna continued to train—and to argue. I quietly opened the window and gazed out at their vigorous practice session.

"Gyaaaah!"

Alto had become quite annoyed when Setsuna broke another one of the targets he'd been after. Although he yelled about it, he didn't give up. It seemed like he had a very competitive personality. The next thing I knew, I had another smile on my face, and my interest in them had grown even stronger.

I have a feeling things are going to get fun around here...

I also thought I would be able to have the kind of end I'd been wishing for.

.....

That selfish thought made my heart ache. My wish would only hurt Setsuna. I silently apologized to him and Alto as I gazed out the window. Just then, Alto noticed me. I wondered if the window had made a sound when I'd opened it. Once he saw me, he was about to run over, but Setsuna stopped him.

"Alto. What do we say?"

Alto's ears lay back apologetically and his tail wagged. "Thank you, Master!"

"Yes, good work today. Make sure you wipe yourself down before you get cold."

He nodded cheerfully and ran over to me. I wasn't sure how many times I'd smiled so far at that sight, but I did it again. This must be what it felt like to have

a grandchild.

"Good morning, Gramps!"

"Morning, Alto."

Setsuna slowly walked over and greeted me as well. "Good morning, Ragi. I'll go ahead and make breakfast now."

"Morning, Setsuna. There's really no rush."

He nodded, then went to go make breakfast. I watched him leave before turning my gaze to Alto.

"Is Setsuna strong?" I asked to satisfy my own curiosity. Alto's eyes glittered in response.

"Master's the strongest!"

My eyes widened. I hadn't expected him to reply that way.

"The strongest?"

"Yeah, the strongest!"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I've never seen him lose."

"I see..."

I wonder what he's fought?

When I watched Setsuna train, I could feel the warrior blood within me sing. My desire to fight against strong people hadn't waned, even after all these years.

"If I fought against Setsuna, who do you think would win?"

I'd asked him that as a joke, but Alto looked back at me seriously. It was almost as if he were searching for something, or sizing me up, and that surprised me.

He might be young, but he's definitely a Bluewolf.

The wolf beastfolk tribe was divided into Bluewolves, Silverwolves, and all other wolves. Bluewolves and Silverwolves were rarer than the rest, and they

had magical abilities the others lacked. On top of that, Bluewolves were among the strongest of any beastfolk tribe. It seemed like a glimpse of that was manifesting in Alto already.

However, something was missing—the love of fighting alone. My Bluewolf friends had always spoken about how they wanted to test their strength to the very limit. Although I had similar urges, they weren't nearly as strong as Bluewolves'.

That quality of theirs contributed to Ellana's obsession with hunting Bluewolves, who were exceedingly rare, even back when I'd lived in Sagana.

I don't want Alto to be like that. I want him to grow strong enough to stand on his own two feet, yet never have to be alone.

That's what I thought as I looked into Alto's eyes, and why I was struck by the urge to tell him everything. Because I wanted to give him the power to protect himself.

"Gramps! I think if you fought Master, he would be stronger than you," Alto told me in a serious voice.

"What makes you think that?"

Although it made sense, a small part of me thought that I wouldn't know unless we fought, which is why I'd asked.

"Just 'cause?" Alto tipped his head to the side with a puzzled look on his face. I couldn't help but burst out laughing. He looked so innocent that it was hard to believe he had been so serious just a few moments ago.

"Oh yeah? Just because, huh?"

Alto didn't seem to know how to take my chuckling, which only made me laugh harder. As the two of us spent a peaceful moment together, I heard Setsuna calling us for breakfast.

I thought about how bland food had been when I'd eaten alone. Eating dinner with Alto and Setsuna last night had reminded me of the joy of sharing a meal with others. I was grateful for that, and thanked the sun god Saadia for bringing them into my life.



## Chapter Two Leadwort ~ Playful Heart ~



After Alto and I were finished training, I cleaned up and went into the kitchen. Ragi said I could use anything I needed for breakfast, so I chose ingredients I thought Alto would like.

I'd moved out of the inn the day before and was now staying at Ragi's house, but this was still the first time Alto and I had lived in a house like this, so I figured we would just stumble around and learn things as we went. I wanted to do my best not to cause trouble for Ragi. As that thought crossed my mind, I thought back to this morning.

As I'd quietly gone downstairs to do my training, I'd sensed Ragi moving in his room. It seemed like even though he'd woken up much earlier than us, he'd stayed quietly in his room so as not to wake us all up. If that was the case, I decided I would tell him to go about his daily business without worrying about us.

When breakfast was ready, I called for the two of them to come down, and Alto raced in, excited for the meal. Ragi came down a few moments later and sat at the table with a pleasant smile on his face. Alto looked excited, happy to be able to chat with Ragi during breakfast. But when he suddenly twisted around in his seat, he ended up knocking over his cup of milk and spilling it.

I could understand Alto's excitement. He didn't have to worry about what people thought of him here, and he wouldn't be subjected to rude looks. The mental burden he had to carry under normal circumstances was gone. Ragi's house was a place where we could fully relax.

After we were finished with breakfast, I told the two of them I was going out and Alto suddenly looked anxious. But he didn't tug on my sleeve like the day before. He just pursed his lips and looked up at me. That look on his face made the breath catch in my throat, because then...he smiled. He squeezed both hands into fists and did his very best to give me a big grin.

"See you later, Master!"

Seeing Alto like this filled me with both relief and a little bit of sadness. That surprised me, but I smiled back at him nonetheless.

"Yep. I'll be back later. Please take care of him, Ragi."

"Of course. Be careful out there."

"Alto, you do your best helping Ragi around the house, okay?"

Alto nodded happily in response and waved to me. I waved back, then looked at Ragi. The older man watched Alto tenderly, before shifting his gaze to me with a resolute nod.

I took a leisurely stroll toward the Adventurers Guild. As I walked, I looked at the open-air markets and shopfronts and thought about buying some ingredients on the way home. Ragi had told me he didn't need me to pay for food, but I had to think that having me and Alto (who had quite the appetite) to feed after being by himself for so long would put a burden on Ragi's household budget. The least I could do was buy some ingredients.

I arrived at the guild, putting that out of my mind for now as I pushed open the door. As I stepped inside, I heard Drum's voice—he sounded stressed over something.

"I don't know what to tell you."

"...Please."

There was a young man bowing in front of the reception desk, pleading with Drum about something. There were only a handful of people at the guild since it was right after lunchtime, so their voices rang out clearly. I greeted Drum with my eyes so as not to disturb the two of them, and he nodded in return.

I went straight for the bulletin board to search for quests. The only quest I'd taken since leaving Gardir was making medicine for Agito, so my wallet was looking a bit anemic. I'd been exchanging the monsters I'd defeated and put in my Cube for money, but my expenses had been outweighing my earnings.

I looked at the board to see if there were any profitable quests, but since Drum and the young man's voices were echoing so clearly, the other adventurers in the room and I couldn't help but have our focus naturally drift over to their conversation.

"Listen, I'm sorry, but that's not enough for the quest reward."

"This is all the money I have!"

"But a single half-silver isn't gonna cut it for a full day's work."

As I listened to their conversation, I could see how Drum had found himself in this predicament. As he said, one half-silver coin for a day's work was too cheap for an adventurer. A night's stay at an inn in Lypaed was three full coppers, so if you had breakfast and lunch, your reward would be gone.

Adventurers needed money for lodging, food, weapon maintenance and new weapons when your old ones wore out, and other sundries, so naturally, they wanted to be compensated fairly for their work. No one would choose a quest that had such a low reward. I was paying two coppers per night to Ragi, which included breakfast and dinner, and even I would groan seeing a quest like that posted.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Drum called me over.

"What is it?" Although I had overheard their conversation and knew what he'd been talking about, I couldn't tell him I'd been eavesdropping.

"I've got a bit of a problem here. No one will take this kid's quest because that's all he can pay."

I glanced over at the man. His shoulders were slumped and his head hung low, but he looked up when he noticed my gaze. He looked gentle, and he had golden hair and blue eyes, which was common in Lypaed. His features made him appear even younger than he had seemed from a distance, but I had a feeling he was probably around the same age as me.

"Normally, I'd just turn him down flat, but he's from the orphanage, so..."

The Adventurers Guild had a policy of taking on as many quests as they could from orphanages, plus people who had left an orphanage within the space of a year. This system existed to help people without family become more independent.

If I recalled correctly, the orphanages run by the guild didn't force the children they looked after to become independent as soon as they reached

adulthood. Instead, the orphanages would allow their charges to stay there until they were twenty, to give them more time to gain experience out in society. But if you lived in an orphanage as an adult, you had to pay a certain amount in living expenses, which the orphanage would put toward their operating costs.

"What's the rank of the quest?"

"Yellow. It's not life-threatening, but no yellow-ranked adventurer could make a living on a quest like this, so I can't force anyone to take it."

Adventurers who accepted quests with poor conditions at the encouragement of the guildmaster would be given first dibs on quests with higher rates of return later, which gave adventurers an incentive to take these sorts of orphanage quests.

But what caught my attention about this quest was that it was for a yellow-rank. Many adventurers at that rank were still working to pay off debts, so they could go bankrupt before taking on a quest that would help them turn a profit. Yet Drum had no choice but to work with them, which led to this dilemma he found himself in.

...Come to think of it, I wonder if Zigel has finished paying off his debts yet.

I suddenly remembered Zigel, who had taught me the basics of currency. As I talked to Drum, I thought about how nice it would be to see him again.

"So it's a quest within the city, and it's not life-threatening?"

"That's right."

"I'd be happy to at least hear you out about it," I said.

The man looked up at me in disbelief. Drum's face contorted into a grimace, and he apologized to me. "Sorry..."

You called me over here in the first place because you wanted me to take it, right? I thought, but after what had happened two days ago, I gave him a cheerful smile instead.

"No, no. I'm the one who caused trouble for you."

I'd wasted his time with the special postrequest incident. Drum nodded in

reply, and I turned to the young man with the quest.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Setsuna. I am a scholar and my guild rank is \_\_"

"Oh, Setsuna!"

I was right in the middle of introducing myself when Drum held up a hand, interrupting me.

"Your rank actually went up!"

He told me my guild rank had been updated, and once he was finished with the paperwork, the emblem on my hand changed from blue to purple.

"I went up five levels all at once? Is this some kind of mistake?" I asked with confusion.

Drum seemed exasperated and explained. "Knowing how to mix medicines is a closely guarded skill, and most would refuse to teach it to a medical facility."

*"…"* 

"But thanks to you, now people who can't even go to a medical facility can get treatment. It only makes sense the Adventurers Guild would reward you for something like that."

"All right, then. Thank you."

Drum chuckled dryly. "Don't thank me, thank the guild!" he told me, before turning back toward the young man. "Sorry for interrupting."

I apologized as well.

"Please don't worry about it!" He hastily waved both hands in front of his chest.

"As I was saying, my name is Setsuna. I am a scholar and my guild rank is purple. I can't say I'll accept your quest for certain, but I'd be happy to hear you out about it."

The man shook my hand and said, "Thank you, thank you!" over and over again. His hand was trembling slightly.

"My name is Norris! And, um..."

It seemed like he didn't know where to start, so I asked him simple questions to get the ball rolling.

"Would you like to talk here, or somewhere else?"

"I want to take my time talking through this with you. Would you mind if we went somewhere else?"

"How about the second floor?"

Norris nodded and Drum gave us permission to use one of the rooms on the second floor. He looked truly apologetic about the whole situation, and the two of us went upstairs.

The private room had only a simple table and some chairs. You could order anything to drink besides alcohol, but when I asked Norris if he wanted something, he shook his head and got right down to business.

"May I ask what the guest is about?"

His eyes wavered anxiously. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. I wondered if he was afraid to tell me since no one would take his quest; even if the guildmaster urged you to, ultimately it was up to the adventurer to accept. Perhaps he was scared that I would turn him down, too.

"I'm planning to open up a store during the fourth month of Salkis with my wife, but she got injured, so now I have to do it on my own." When he finally spoke, his voice was very quiet.

"So is the quest helping out with your store?"

"Yes. Preparations were going smoothly until two days ago, but then my wife was attacked by bandits. She survived, but she needs to rest for a while." His clenched fist trembled on the table as he thought about his wife.

"That's terrible. Do you need to stay by her side and care for her?"

"Honestly, I want to postpone opening up the store altogether. We've been saving up for a very long time together, so I would have liked to postpone the opening until after her injuries heal, but unfortunately that won't be possible."

"May I ask why?"

"She was taken to one of the kingdom's hospitals. It was the closest place from where she was attacked, and she needed urgent medical attention, so I had no other choice. But her medical bills have really piled up. We already took out a loan from the guild to open our flower shop, so I can't borrow money from anyone else. I have no way of paying the hospital by the end of next month."

He took a deep breath to try to calm himself down before continuing.

"Even if I let go of the shop, I borrowed the money for it, so I won't get anything back. Our only choice is to go ahead and open up the shop and try to earn money that way. Honestly, I might be able to sell my farm that I used for collateral on the loan and make up the difference, but..."

"But if you do that you won't have anywhere to live," I said, and he hung his head. "So, if you open your shop, you think you'll be able to pay back the hospital?"

"I think if I run the shop for a month, we'll earn just enough to pay her bills. But just barely. However, there's a problem with that..."

Norris sighed and continued, his eyes fixed to the floor.

"My wife and I were going to run the shop together. We need two people to run the shop; it's too much work for me to do on my own. But if I pay someone a normal wage, then I won't make enough money to pay the hospital bill."

"Ahh, I see. So that's why you could only offer a half-silver."

"That's right. Anything more than that and it won't be possible. But please... this is our dream. I don't want to give up on it, and I don't want my wife to have to live on the streets. I don't want her to lose her smile..."

Norris gritted his teeth and repeated the same words in a pained voice. His heartfelt cry was filled with conflict, helplessness, and powerlessness from not being able to fix the situation on his own. He was unwilling to give up, yet at the same time, was crying out for help. His pleas resonated within my heart, making it ache. I knew all too well how it felt when you cried out for help and no one lent a hand.

"Norris."

His body froze when I said his name. The color drained from his face, and he looked as if he were standing before a firing squad.

"Please tell me more about the quest."

"What ...?"

"You haven't told me any of the specifics yet."

He'd explained why he'd posted the quest at the guild, but not what exactly the job entailed.

"R-right! Um, so I'm looking for someone to help me run the store when it opens next month."

He began to explain the other details in rapid succession.

"We're opening a flower shop, but the kinds of flowers we grow are very labor-intensive."

They're florists...

The nostalgic sound of Kyoka's voice echoed through my head when I heard that.

"So I need someone to handle the store. Originally, my wife was going to run it while I took care of the flowers."

Norris's voice brought me back to reality.

"The store itself isn't very large, but I want to try to sell as many different varieties as possible."

"I see. How long do you need me to help?"

Norris had been enthusiastically filling me in on the details, but now he shut his mouth. When he spoke again, it was in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Until either my wife gets better, or I find another employee..."

"So it might be a long-term request."

"Yes..."

This definitely wouldn't be the most effective quest in terms of saving up

money to continue my journey.

"Norris, I came to Lypaed with my apprentice, and we're staying here for a while because we ran out of money to continue our journey. So I need to save up some more to keep going."

"Money for your journey..."

"That's right. My apprentice has currently accepted a quest for that purpose as well."

"...And one half-silver isn't going to be enough for you to continue your journey."

"Exactly."

"…"

Once he understood my situation, he slumped with disappointment, as if he was giving up. Then I asked him a question.

"What do you intend on doing if I turn down your quest?"

"I... I'll open up the shop on my own and somehow struggle through it. I'm the only one who can protect our dream, and our future."

Even though he was on the verge of despair, Norris was still trying to protect his wife, which showed me what a strong, kind person he was. His single-minded determination moved me, and I began to think that maybe I should accept his quest. My life wouldn't be in danger like in Cyrus's quest, so I wouldn't have to put Alto at risk. In the end, if it just came down to the matter of money...

"I'm sorry I wasted your time," Norris said, starting to rise from his seat.

"I still have questions."

"Huh?" he gave me a puzzled look.

"If I accept your quest, would you allow me to take on other quests at the same time? Say, on the days the shop is closed, or just for the mornings or afternoons?"

I thought I was being selfish to accept a quest that wouldn't fund our journey,

but I also felt bad about abandoning Norris, who was giving it his all.

"Oh, um..."

I could tell his mind was racing, so I talked slowly in order to help him calm down.

"If you allow me to accept multiple quests, then I'll take yours on, Norris."

He stared at me without blinking, his eyes filling with tears.

"It's fine if you take on multiple quests, but if you work without taking a break..." He roughly wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Please don't worry about that. Most of our journey has been spent on the open road and not in a town, so my stamina is quite high."

"I—I see. It's hard to even imagine that kind of life. Anyway, I can't thank you enough for taking my quest. The reward really is only one half-silver, though...," he said with a pained look on his face. I decided to make him a suggestion.

"How you pay me a bonus on the days when we sell more flowers than expected?"

"I'd love to do that!"

"That'll be my incentive to work hard," I said with a grin, and he gave one of his own in return. This was the first time I'd seen him smile since we met, and it was a gentle smile becoming of his kind nature.

After we finished discussing the quest, we made plans to meet up again, then parted ways. I went downstairs to tell Drum I had decided to take the job, and he gave me a look of surprise. Evidently, he hadn't expected that.

"What made you want to take a dead-end quest like that?"

"Why did you call me over, then? Just to tell me about it?"

"Well, because you're the kindest person here right now. I still didn't think you'd accept it, though."

"I see. I'm sorry to go against your expectations, but I didn't take the quest because I'm kind. I did it because I'm interested in floristry."

To be honest, I hadn't been able to abandon Norris once I heard the reason behind his quest, so I suppose I couldn't really argue that it'd been my goodnatured personality that had led me to accept it. Still, I didn't like the idea of being manipulated by Norris, so I answered that I was interested in floristry instead.

That hadn't been a lie. While I was talking with Norris, I remembered a conversation I'd had with Kyoka, and it had definitely made me interested in flower shops.

Not noticing that I had gotten lost in my feelings, Drum said, "Norris's quest doesn't start for a few days, right? Do you want to take a different quest in the meantime?"

"Yes."

"Should I put quests aside for you for when you come to the guild?"

Since I had accepted Norris's quest, I was now getting first dibs on other jobs. I wondered what I should do, but then thought back to what Ragi had said to me the night before.

"Alto's more dependent on you than he thinks. When you go out, you should try not to be gone for too long at first, so that you don't make him too anxious. Then Alto will understand that you'll always come back, and he'll slowly get used to you being gone. He might be a little lonely, but at least he won't panic."

Right now, it was important that Alto get used to life with Ragi, so I agreed that I should only be out for a little while.

"Could you find me something by tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, ideally a job I can finish in half a day."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to find something like that, but I'll take a look."

"Thanks."

I said good-bye to Drum and left the guild, then bought some ingredients I thought Alto would like. I took my time as I walked, once again remembering that conversation with Kyoka.

"Brother, I was thinking about working at a florist shop when I grow up."

"Where'd that come from all of a sudden?"

"Here."

She'd handed me a bouquet so large I could barely hold it.

"I got paid for the first time today!"

Kyoka had recently started a part-time job, but it wasn't at a florist.

"You bought this for me with your first paycheck?"

"Yep. I was planning to get you something else, but the bouquets in the hospital flower shop were just so beautiful that I just had to show you!"

"Oh, okay. Thanks. I love it."

"Tee-hee."

Kyoka looked so cute when she giggled shyly like that.

"So why do you want to be a florist?"

"Because I'll get all the flowers that don't sell!"

Wouldn't those flowers be withered, though?

"And then I'll be able to bring you flowers every day!"

I appreciated the gesture, but I didn't want her doing that for a number of reasons.

"Oh, but working at a bakery would be nice, too. My friend works at one, and she was telling me about how exciting it is to get leftover pastries at the end of the day!"

I didn't have anything left to say. Kyoka was talking about her future career with a materialistic mindset, but I knew she wasn't serious, because she was working hard studying to become a doctor.

"Brother."

*"…"* 

I wasn't sure how to describe how I felt. I stopped walking and looked up at

the sky. The sun was setting, and it would soon be replaced by a waning crescent moon. The stars were just barely beginning to appear, giving off a soft glow. I listened to the sound of the insects and gazed up at the evening sky for a while, and my restless heart began to calm.

"...It'll be a new moon soon."

This close to a new moon, the stars shone even more beautifully than they normally did. And just like those stars, I should be able to hear my wife's voice without interruption from the moon. As I thought of her face, I prayed the new moon would hurry up and come soon. I wanted to hear her voice so badly all of a sudden. I couldn't help it. I let out a sigh as if to release all those emotions, and then began walking again.

That reminds me, I haven't written a letter to Tuuli yet. Alto and I should write one when I get back home.

"When I get back home..."

It made me feel a little strange to say the word *home*. When I thought about why, I realized it was because it was a different sort of place from the inns I'd been staying at. Even when you paid to stay consecutive nights at an inn, you still had to take all your belongings with you to avoid theft, so your quarters would be devoid of life when you came back. But now I was able to leave my things in my room at Ragi's house.

Alto was waiting for me to come home. That feeling filled me with nostalgia, and reminded me that I had a place where I belonged to go back to.

"Time to go home to Alto."

I suddenly felt a great pang of longing for that home, and my pace quickened.

The next day, I headed back to the guild to take a quest to try to fill my wallet. The moment I stepped inside, Drum beckoned me over. I figured he was going to give me a quest and followed him to a private room, thinking this to be the preferential treatment he alluded to the day before, but his voice took on a serious note as we walked.

"You have a guest here from the castle. Do you have any idea why? I didn't ask for any details, but just be careful not to get caught up in anything unusual."

"Thank you."

Drum gave me a worried glance outside the door and then excused himself. I knocked and heard a reply from inside. The voice didn't sound familiar, which puzzled me.

"Excuse me."

I went inside and saw a woman dressed like a castle maid. Once my memories caught up, I remembered that this woman had been standing behind the queen when she'd stopped me in the hallway of the castle.

"Are you Mr. Setsuna?" she asked, staring at me.

"Yes. And you are...?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Her Majesty's chief lady-in-waiting, Margaret."

She rose from the sofa and gave me a perfect bow. Apparently, she didn't recognize me from the castle when I stayed there as Sena.

"Is it okay having the door closed like that?" I wanted to make sure, since I'd heard it was frowned upon for a noblewoman to be alone in a room with a man.

"That's fine. My children are grown, and no one knows that I'm here meeting with you."

She must have asked the guild for discretion, so I figured it was fine and moved further into the room.

"Please, have a seat." She gestured toward the fancy sofa. This room was very different from the simple one I'd chatted with Norris in the day before.

"What can I do for you?"

I didn't have a good feeling about this, with her being the queen's attendant, but something must've happened for her to come all the way to the guild.

"The queen would like to personally ask you to take on a quest, Mr. Setsuna."

"Her Majesty requested me personally?"

"That's correct. However, it's very important to note that this is a secret from both His Majesty and Prince Eugene."

"...A secret?"

Yep, I had a really bad feeling about this.

"What about Cyrus?"

"Please keep it a secret from him as well."

"I've accepted a long-term quest that begins on the fourth month of Salkis, so I might not be able to help Her Majesty with this."

I tried to refuse before even hearing what the quest would be, but...

"Yes, Mr. Drum already apprised me of the situation. I also know that there's a bit of flexibility with the time frame. Would you please meet with Her Majesty to hear her out?"

Drum doesn't always practice what he preaches, huh...

"May I ask what the quest is about?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but only the queen may tell you."

"Won't it cause a problem to keep this a secret from the king and the others?"

I tried one more last-ditch effort to get out of this, but Margaret just wore a serene smile on her face.

"I promise no harm will come to you, Mr. Setsuna. So please rest assured."

There's no way I can rest assured about any of this...

But going back and forth like this wasn't going to accomplish anything. After all, this woman was just a messenger from the queen.

"When can I meet her?"

"She'd like to meet you on 4th Salkis 7, at one in the afternoon."

"All right, I'll make sure I can meet her that day. Where should I go?"

"I'll reserve a private room at one of our shops. But only people with an invitation can enter, so you'll need to bring this letter."

She held out a single envelope.

"All right."

I put the envelope in my bag, and Margaret let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm so pleased that I'll be able to bring good news back to the queen. Thank you so much." She gave me an elegant smile and asked me to go and call for Drum. Apparently he was going to show her to a different exit. I said good-bye to her, then went to get Drum.

"Wait for me here till I get back," he told me when I found him, so I killed time by reading the bulletin board.

"Hey, sorry I took so long." Drum apologized when he returned, and after exchanging a few pleasantries, we got down to business.

"Are you going to take the request from that lady?"

"I'll decide once I hear specifics about it on 4th Salkis 7."

"Well, I don't get involved with private quests. Just make sure you give it some good thought before you take it on."

"I will. Thanks."

"So what do you want to do about today's quest?"

I took out my pocket watch to check the time. If I took a quest now, I'd be late getting home that night.

"I'll go home for today."

"Already?"

"Yes. I've been worried about Alto the past few days, so I'm trying not to stay out for more than a few hours at a time."

"I see. So that's why you didn't want any quests that took up more than half a day."

"I'm going to start working with Norris at the beginning of 4th Salkis, and he

said it was all right to take on other quests at the same time, so I'll come back then."

"Okay. Be careful on your way home."

I nodded and left the guild. It was past lunch, so Ragi and Alto had probably already eaten. I thought about eating someplace in town, and coincidentally found myself in front of the food stall Cyrus had recommended before, so I bought something and went home. It was a pretty popular place, because as soon they sold out, they closed up shop for the day. I'd been lucky to be in the right place at the right time!

I wasn't able to buy anything the other day on the way to the guild, and they were all sold out by the time I got home, so Alto had been disappointed. Even though he'd already eaten lunch, I was sure he'd want to try some, so I bought enough for four people.

Alto spotted me from the window and came bursting out the front door to greet me.

"Welcome home, Master!"

"Thanks, I'm back."

Ragi slowly appeared in the entryway with a smile on his face.

"You didn't take a quest?" Alto asked.

"Someone had a private quest for me, so I just talked to them and then left the guild. I thought about eating something and taking a simple monster-slaying quest, but..."

"But what?"

"Then I saw this and decided to buy it and bring it home so we could enjoy it together."

Alto's eyes sparkled when I took out the food I'd bought at the stall.

"Is that the one Cyrus told us about?!"

"Yep. The one that shuts down when they sell out, so you have to act fast! I

lucked out."

"Yaaay!"

Alto happily clutched the package to his chest and urged me back into the house. I said hello to Ragi in the entryway, and he greeted me with a gentle smile and a "Welcome home."

I wondered why something so simple made me feel so relaxed. It was almost like we'd known each other for a very long time. I was cautious of Ragi before I met him, but now that I'd gotten to know him and talk with him, I didn't feel any wariness at all.

I tried to figure out why that was, but came up with nothing. I figured it wasn't anything more complicated than we got along, so I decided to stop worrying about it.

"Would you like to join us, Ragi?"

"Well, Alto and I just ate lunch..."

"Master, Gramps, let's hurry up and eat!"

*"…"* 

Ragi grinned and let out a sigh when he saw how eager Alto was.

"I suppose I'll join you."

"Give anything you can't finish to Alto. He'll like that."

"Where does Alto put all that food?"

Seeing Ragi mutter that to himself with a deadpan look on his face, I couldn't help but laugh. I was sure that Alto was already full, too, but Ragi glared at me, as if to say that it was no laughing matter, which just made me laugh even harder. It took a while before I could calm down and dry the tears from my eyes.

As we ate the food I brought back from the stall, Alto told me what they'd been doing while I was gone. I suppressed a laugh as I watched Ragi put his portion on Alto's plate.

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"Master."

"Yes?"

"Gramps says he's gonna put new wallpaper in my room and in your room."

"New wallpaper?"

"Yes, because he says it's faded and peeling in some spots."

"....."
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I wondered if it was expensive to re-wallpaper rooms in this world. Perhaps if we were living here long-term, it wouldn't be a bad idea to mend things that were in disrepair, but Alto and I wouldn't be staying here forever. And by the time we were going to be leaving, well... I didn't want to keep thinking along those lines.

I think it's fine how it is.

But I couldn't say that, because I couldn't explain why I thought that.

"Master?"

Alto seemed puzzled about why I'd fallen silent, and I wasn't able to answer right away.

"I see. In that case, I'll pay for the new wallpaper."

And with those words, my resistance to changing the wallpaper evaporated.

"Setsuna, this is my house, so I should be the one to pay for it," Ragi said, immediately turning down my offer.

"But I'm sure it's expensive to re-wallpaper rooms. Plus, we're the ones staying in them."

"I have enough money put away to redo all the walls in this house. There's nothing for you to worry about. Come to think of it, maybe it would be a good idea to put all new wallpaper in after all."

"Are you rich, Gramps?"

"Yes, I'm richer than you, Alto. You should expect a big reward for your quest!"

"Reward...," Alto murmured, as if just now remembering he was in the middle of a quest. Ragi looked like he was suppressing a laugh, then cleared his throat.

"Do you have any requests?" he asked.

"Requests?"

"Yes, is there anything you want?"

To be honest, I was a bit bewildered at this sudden talk of a reward. I'd assumed he and Alto would discuss those terms alone together later. I suppose the fact that he brought it up now in front of me proved that he respected me as Alto's master, which made me happy. But I also didn't want to hear this discussion, because bringing up a reward made me think about the end of the quest.

Ragi waited patiently for an answer. Alto looked up at me hesitantly, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"Can it be anything?" he asked.

"Just say whatever you like."

"It doesn't have to be money?"

Ragi nodded gently and Alto's ears began moving busily as he blurted out his request.

"Even after the quest is over, I wanna come visit Gramps whenever Master and me are in Lypaed!"

*"…"* 

It felt like time froze. I heard Ragi's breath catch in his throat. I stared at Alto in shock but then quickly averted my gaze and reached for my cup. I couldn't show him how flustered I was.

"Gramps?"

Ragi was still paralyzed. At the sound of Alto's worried voice, he regained his composure and blinked a few times. Even though I was the one who had asked him not to tell Alto the truth, I now deeply regretted it. Perhaps it would have been best if he'd known from the beginning.

"Alto..."

"Setsuna." Ragi must have known what I was thinking. He gave me a serious look and shook his head slightly. He was the one who had agreed to my request. This situation was no longer mine to handle.

"Is that not okay?" Alto misunderstood our reactions and slumped in disappointment, his ears lying flat on his head.

"I was just shocked because that wasn't the answer I was expecting. Alto, that's not a reward." Ragi gave him a troubled smile and gently patted his head over and over again.

"You can come back home whenever you want. You and Setsuna are welcome here anytime." He smiled at Alto and spoke in a quiet, deep voice.

"Okay!"

"As for your reward, we can talk about that another day, since it seems you don't have an answer at the moment. Now, what were we talking about?"

"What we're gonna do with the wallpaper."

"Oh, right! The wallpaper. Anyway, I'll pay for that. Setsuna, you need to save money for your journey, so I don't want you to spend needlessly."

"Thank you." At this point, all I could do was agree with him.

"After all, the only thing I need to pay for is supplies, since Alto and I will be putting up the new wallpaper."

"Me? But I've never changed wallpaper before."

"Don't worry, I'll teach you. I think it'll be fun!"

"Okay!"

*"…"* 

I'd never changed out wallpaper either, so I didn't know if it would really be that simple. It didn't seem like something a single enthusiastic "Okay!" from Alto could solve. I could only imagine it was a difficult task even for an adult, so I was unsure if Alto would be able to do it; Ragi might end up doing the bulk of the work.

"Everything's an experience. It's okay if things don't work out on the first try." "I'll do my best!"

The two of them looked so excited that I couldn't put a damper on the situation, so I decided to help out where I could and joined in on their conversation.

"Are you going to take a quest tomorrow, Setsuna?"

"I haven't decided yet. Is there something you'd like me to help with?"

"I was thinking about showing you around town on the way to buy the wallpaper. What do you think?"

"I wanna come, too!"

"I don't quite know my way around the city yet, so I'd appreciate that."

"It's a plan, then. We'll all go out together tomorrow."

"Yaaaay!"

Alto wagged his tail happily and Ragi watched on fondly. It really was a wonderful sight.

We ate dinner and made our plans for the next day, but Alto must've hit his limit once we were finished, because he fell asleep. All the excitement had tired him out. I carried him up to his room and laid him on the bed. He'd had trouble sleeping alone before, but I had a feeling that wouldn't bother him tonight. I was sure he would sleep soundly until the morning.

I quietly left Alto and returned to the living room where Ragi offered me a drink. I had no reason to refuse, so I nodded, and his smile widened. As we drank, we both talked about our day. When I told him I was probably going to pick up a quest, he seemed worried about me overworking myself.

We chatted like that for a while, but when I began to clean up to go to bed, Ragi murmured an apology to me.

"I want to continue my relationship with Alto just like it is."

"I know I'm the one who asked you to do this, but are you sure it's not too

painful?"

Ragi smiled bitterly and placed a hand on his chest. "I'm sure. Alto reminded me what happiness feels like. When he said he wanted to stay connected to me, my heart was filled with joy."

He gave me the happiest smile I'd seen from him these past few days, and I could tell it was genuine. Earlier, I'd thought that Ragi couldn't respond because he was in too much pain, but apparently that wasn't the case. Alto didn't want money as his reward. He just wanted to be with Ragi longer. And Ragi had realized that he shared this wish—his final wish—from the bottom of his heart.

"Thanks. I feel the same way, Ragi."

"Setsuna, I..."

"I'm just happy seeing you and Alto smile."

I interrupted him by tapping him lightly on his wrinkled hand.

"Alto and I will smile even more with you around. Please feel free to be yourself here, without holding back, just like Alto. Please give me the pleasure and responsibility of raising Alto for a while, Setsuna."

*"…"* 

I was at a loss for words. He was looking at me with the same gaze as earlier, filled with compassion and kindness.

"Okay. Once again, thank you so much."

"You really are such a serious young man. Try calling me 'old goat' just once like Alto did. Then maybe you won't feel like you have to be so formal with me."

"...You still haven't given up on that?"

After Ragi told me to be myself and stop being so polite around him, I felt the tension leave my shoulders. I would try to loosen up a little. He smiled with satisfaction, then poured alcohol into the glasses we'd been about to put away and handed one to me.

"Let's toast to raising Alto."

"...I told you I was going to sleep since we're going out tomorrow, right?"

"See, this is what I'm talking about when I say not to hold back!"

*"…"* 

We bantered back and forth, and Ragi and I ended up staying up late drinking and chatting. I went back to my room, then remembered I was going to write a letter to Tuuli. It was a shame Alto wasn't with me, but I decided to write to her while I was in a pleasant mood.

The next day, Alto and I got ready to go out with Ragi. The older man told us that in Lypaed, it had become popular to wear a dagger strapped to your back, akin to the proverb "the skillful hawk hides its talons," so Alto fastened his twin swords behind his back.

The advantage was that it didn't look like he was carrying a weapon, but I thought it might make it difficult to unsheathe his swords. As I considered this, Ragi called us to leave the house.

Since I already knew all the shops on the way from the house to the guild, we walked around a different area. Ragi showed us different places, such as clothing shops, the butcher, and produce markets. From time to time, we'd take a break and eat something from a food stall as we walked.

Alto held Ragi's hand so he wouldn't get lost, and most of the vendors assumed that they were grandfather and grandson.

"Are we going to the general store next?"

"That's right, that's why we went out today. You're not tired?"

"Not at all! I've got lots of stamina, so don't worry!"

Every time Ragi fretted over Alto and asked if he was tired, Alto would reply with an enthusiastic "I'm not tired!" Since we had walked so much during our journey, it would take a lot to tire him out. Ragi must've realized that as well, but still couldn't help himself but ask. He really did seem like a concerned grandfather.

We arrived at the general store, and after looking around for a bit, we went over to where they had the wallpaper display. Wallpaper was something you had to order in advance, and it would be ready in about two days. Ragi said that that was fine, and the shopkeeper gave him a big book with all the wallpaper samples in it.

Ragi asked us to choose whichever pattern we wanted, so I went ahead and picked out a calming color. Alto was having a hard time deciding on one for his room. He'd been scrutinizing and comparing samples for quite a long time now.

"Alto, have you decided which one you want?"

"Not yet."

Ragi asked him the same question again and again, and Alto had the same answer.

"Alto, what's making it so hard for you to choose? Will you tell Gramps that?"

"Gramps told me to choose my favorite, so I'm looking for that."

I despaired, thinking this would take a while. He'd put a lot of thought into choosing a cup back in Kutt, too. Tuuli's method of choosing a favorite thing had influenced him, so whenever someone told him to pick what he liked best, he put way too much thought into it. That was why, ever since then, I had secretly banned myself from using the word *favorite*. I just prayed that he would make a decision sometime today. Tuuli once said that it had taken her six months to decide on her favorite shoes...

"...I see."

Ragi must have given up, too, because he didn't say another word. I guess the shopkeeper also figured this would take a while, because he gave us some space, his shoulders trembling. I hoped it was because he was suppressing his laughter and not because he was angry.

"I choose this one!"

"Ooh, let's see."

I had thought it would take longer, but Alto gleefully showed us the wallpaper sample. It was a light purple and white wallpaper, and the colors were very calming.

"Are you sure you want this one? You don't want something brighter?"

Alto didn't look at any the shopkeeper or Ragi suggested, or even the other ones he'd been wavering between before now, just firmly said, "I want this one!" I could guess why he had chosen the wallpaper, though.

"It's the color of Master's eyes and Gramps's hair!" Alto said, smiling joyfully. Ragi reached up to gently fix his hair and made eye contact with me, then smiled just as happily as Alto.

We ordered the wallpaper and arranged to have it delivered to the house. They would also send the tools we'd need to change out the wallpaper.

After we were finished shopping, Alto clutched his stomach and told us that he was hungry, so we went into a nearby restaurant. Since it was past lunchtime, we were able to take our time and have a leisurely meal.

"Well, we bought the wallpaper. I've pretty much finished showing you around town. Is there anywhere else you want to go?"

I didn't have anywhere in particular I wanted to go, so I said no and looked over at Alto.

"[..."

Even though Ragi was the one who asked him, for some reason Alto was staring at me.

"I want to see where Master is going to work!"

"Oh, actually, I want to see that, too."

Ragi agreed with Alto's request, so I said I would take them. Though I'd never been before either, so I couldn't really show them the way—the three of us would have to find the place together.

As we walked, we browsed the various markets and stalls, and when we arrived at our destination, we found Norris working inside the shop, drenched in sweat.

"Is the shop open already, Master?"

"It opens on 4th Salkis 2, so he's probably getting everything ready right now."

"Oh, that must be tough!"

Alto stared at Norris, who was wiping the sweat off his face with his sleeve. He noticed us watching him and gave us a look of surprise.

"I'll go say hi to him. Can you wait here?"

"I wanna go with you," Alto said immediately without smiling, and I heard Ragi gasp a little next to me. He was probably surprised about the difference in Alto's attitude, but he had been an exception. Normally, Alto didn't smile at people he was meeting for the first time.

I wondered why Alto had been less wary of Ragi, but concluded that he probably didn't have the presence of mind to be. Taking on a quest all by himself had been a whole new experience for Alto, so he was probably more worried about that than anything else.

"Setsuna!"

I started walking over to Norris, but he came to me first.

"What are you doing here?" He seemed anxious that I'd shown up without notice, so I gave him a smile.

"Good afternoon, Norris. My landlord was showing us around town, and I wanted to see where I'd be working before we went home."

"Oh, I see. Thank goodness. I thought you were going to tell me you'd decided not to take the quest after all."

"I've already turned in the official paperwork at the guild, so if I turned it down now, I'd have to pay a penalty," I answered.

Norris smiled, his face filling with relief. He looked around me and noticed Ragi and Alto for the first time, which surprised him.

"I'll introduce you. This is Ragi, and the boy is Alto, my apprentice. Alto has taken a live-in quest with Ragi to help him."

"It's nice to meet you, Ragi and Alto."

"Ragi, Alto, this is my client, Norris."

Ragi nodded and said, "Nice to meet you," which Alto echoed perfunctorily,

staring at Norris the entire time. Norris didn't seem offended by Alto's attitude and responded kindly, "Nice to meet you, too."

"Are you getting the shop ready, Norris?"

"I am. We have to open in three days." He heaved another big sigh, and I wondered if he was just exhausted.

"It looks like you're working yourself too hard."

"I'm fine."

"Norris, have you been eating? Have you been sleeping properly?"

"I'm eating and sleeping fine. Why?"

He seemed surprised by my sudden questions, but I could tell he was lying from the slight aversion of his gaze. I had a bad feeling about that expression and studied his face. It seemed like he was hiding something, but I could also see dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks looked gaunter than the last time I'd seen him.

"Please don't tell me you're taking care of the flowers, getting the shop ready, caring for your wife, and doing the chores at home all by yourself?"

"I'm fine," he said again.

"Norris, can we talk?"

"I'm fine."

He was still smiling, but I could tell he was forcing it. I heard Alto suck in a breath behind me.

"I took on your quest so I could help you. I can't have you passing out due to exhaustion before it even starts!"

I turned around to ask Ragi if I could have some time with Norris, but Ragi preempted me, placing his hands on Alto's shoulders and nodding to me. He must've had something to say that he thought could help, so all four of us ended up going inside the shop.

Norris took us to the back room where there was a table and chairs, and we all sat down. There was a simple kitchenette there, but when he asked if we

wanted anything, I told him that I would make some calming herbal tea for everyone.

I used telepathy to tell Alto to stay quiet, then asked Norris what was going on. He hung his head and explained, "When I'm not doing something, I get too scared."

Norris's wife's name was Elly. She still had a high fever and was finding it difficult to work on her own. Norris said he was worried she might never recover, or that she might depart for the Waterside while he was away. He was scared of losing the person he loved.

I heard that she had received treatment, so I wondered why she was still having difficulty getting around, but I decided to ask about that later and just listened to him.

Although he was worried about Elly, he knew he had to keep working or it would be all over. He choked up as he told us about how anxious and scared he was every day.

"I can't tell Elly that, though, because she's still weak from her injuries. If I complained to her about it, she'd probably cry and say it was all her fault. I thought about talking to a friend, but they're all stressed with their own lives, so I don't want bother them."

*""* 

"When I start worrying about what would happen if I lost Elly, or if I can't pay back my loans, or if I have to live on my own, whether the shop will work, and what to do if it fails, I stop being able to eat and sleep."

In this realm, there weren't any government-assistance programs like they had in the world I'd grown up in. Everyone had to figure out how to survive on their own. And if they couldn't do that, they'd die.

"So when I saw you out there just now, I thought you were going to abandon me. I thought you'd come to turn down the quest even though you listened to me so kindly the other day. I'm so sorry for thinking that about you."

I could tell that he was exhausted both physically and mentally right now, and that a number of fundamental issues would have to be resolved if he was going to feel better. As I pondered what to do, Ragi, who had been quietly listening, spoke up.

"I know we just met, but may I say something?"

Norris nodded.

"I think you need to let other people help you. I know that's very difficult in your situation, but if things continue like this, you'll break down."

*"…"* 

"The most important thing for you to do right now is to make sure you don't let it break you and get some stability, then build an environment where you can maintain that stability. You have to take care of your body and mind, or else you won't be able to protect your loved ones."

Norris grew even paler in the face of Ragi's quiet chastisement.

"But I..."

"You don't have to think too hard about it. All you have to do is muster up a little courage."

"Courage...?"

"That's right. Muster up the courage to ask for help, for the sake of you and your loved ones."

"...If you ask for help and they refuse, then what's the point in asking at all?"

Norris's face darkened, and he looked down. I was sure he had experienced rejection before. I thought the same way. Just wishing for help was pointless, but it was also rare to meet someone who was willing to help. As I started to think about this, I felt someone's gaze on me and looked in that direction. Ragi's eyes met mine, and he quickly looked back at Norris.

What was that about? I wondered, but I knew this conversation was important, so I brushed it off.

"Sometimes people do reject you, yes. But I think you know not all people are

like that. There's someone right here who offered to assist you."

Hearing Ragi say that, Norris lifted his head.

"All you have to do is tell Setsuna or me that you need help. The fact that we were all brought together must be destiny. Setsuna is telling you that he wants to help. And although I'm a beastfolk and I'm not sure how you feel about that, I'm offering my help, too."

I couldn't hide my surprise at what Ragi was saying. He'd told me that his experiences had made him resent humans, yet here he was offering Norris a helping hand. I wondered why, but then Ragi looked back and forth between me and Norris.

"People like you and Setsuna, who always put others before yourselves, need a lot of courage to ask for help. But if someone who is willing to come to your aid reaches out, it's important to let them do it. If you wait until it's too late, then nobody will be able to help you."

I wondered what Norris thought about Ragi admonishing him. Silence filled the room, and after a while Norris finally spoke.

"Please help me," he forced out, and Ragi and I answered in unison.

"Yes!"

"Of course!"

At this, the tears Norris had been suppressing rolled down his cheeks, and he bowed deeply.

After that, we put our heads together to come up with a plan. The whole time, Alto stared at us silently, and not because I had told him to be quiet. It seemed like there was something on his mind.

We helped Norris set up the shop, which ended up taking until evening. I was worried about what he'd do for dinner that night, so I invited him to eat with us, but he told me that Elly was waiting for him at home, so I gave him some things I'd bought at the food stalls and we left. "Now that I have some free time, I'm going to relax with Elly," Norris said. I surreptitiously cast a recovery spell on him in hopes that it would help his condition improve.

Ragi and I walked side by side on the road at dusk. Alto had been running around at full speed ever since the morning and had fallen asleep, so Ragi was carrying him on his back. Before that, Alto had been half-asleep while he walked, so Ragi had asked, "Want Gramps to give you a piggyback ride?"

Alto had been hesitant at first, but his sleepiness must have gotten the best of him, because he ultimately climbed onto Ragi's back. He happily chattered away for a while, but soon reached his limit and began breathing deeply and quietly. I thought back to the first time I had given Alto a piggyback ride.

We slowly walked home and chatted with one another. The moment our conversation tapered off, I decided to ask him about the question I'd had earlier.

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"Ragi."
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"Yes?"

"Why did you want to help out Norris?"

He adjusted the position of Alto on his back before answering.

"Children learn by watching adults. Good or bad, they recognize what adults are doing as the right thing to do. That goes especially for Alto, who watches us both very closely. So, if we behave poorly, it will have a negative impact on Alto's education."

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"Even though you know Alto dislikes humans, you're trying to raise him to be able to live among them. I don't want my own distaste for humans to get in the way of what you're trying to do."

Ragi gazed up at the dim sky. I could imagine the reason why he told me he disliked humans was because of the experiences he'd had in his life. Yet he kept those feelings inside himself and refused to act on them, for both Alto's sake and my own.

"Besides, it's very sad to see a young person struggling to ask for help. The old me would've definitely turned a blind eye, but..."

Ragi gave a strained smile, then turned his gentle gaze toward me.

"Right now, I'm enjoying my life with you and Alto. I've come to think that living with you, a human, isn't so bad after all. I guess I've gotten a bit bolder in my old age, because I remember thinking, 'That man isn't a bad person.' Even when he saw me and Alto, he was a little surprised, but his attitude didn't change. I can't do much to help, but I wanted to do what I could together with Alto."

Ragi had offered to go check on Elly, who was now recuperating at home, and to take her lunch. For now, he had decided to take on those two tasks to relieve Norris's anxiety about not being with Elly all the time and to help with meals, which she couldn't go without.

Norris was apologetic but grateful, saying that it would be a huge weight off his mind not having to worry about preparing meals for Elly or cleaning up afterward. However, it must've been painful for him to not be able to give anything back. He asked Ragi if there was anything he could do in return even though I knew he couldn't afford it.

"In that case, could I ask you to help replace the wallpaper in my house?" Ragi asked. "I don't know when we'll do it, but sometime soon."

"I'm good at putting up wallpaper," Norris replied. "Elly and I wallpapered the shop by ourselves," he added, saying that he would be happy to help.

"Are you sure Elly will be fine with me and Alto visiting?" Ragi suddenly murmured, looking worried. The reason he was concerned was because Norris had agreed without consulting Elly first, but Norris replied full of confidence, saying that he was sure she wouldn't mind and that she'd be very excited to meet the two of them.

If Norris said so, I was sure it was fine. I was planning to meet Elly in two days when I was going to help load flowers, before Alto and Ragi, so I decided to check with her just in case to make sure there would be no problems.

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"Hey! That's...mine..."

"....."
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We both froze in our tracks when Alto started muttering something in his

sleep. Ragi's shoulders shook as he chuckled.

"I wonder what he's dreaming about."

I looked at his face to guess. Alto was frowning and gritting his teeth. It didn't seem to be a happy dream.

"He's scowling, so I think he's dreaming about someone stealing his food."

Probably Cyrus taking the last bit of his favorite meal. When I told Ragi my guess, he laughed again.

"I wonder if he's hungry again. I'll have to make dinner once we get back," Ragi murmured, then smiled tenderly at me and said, "Let's head home, Setsuna."

For some reason, hearing him say that in his kind voice produced a stifling sensation in my chest. It quickly passed, and I decided it was just my imagination and that I shouldn't dwell too much on it. Then I went ahead and followed Ragi.

Early in the morning on the second day of 4th Salkis, I waited for Norris in front of the nearly empty guild. While I did so, I thought back on the previous night. It was the second new moon since I'd parted ways with Tuuli.

On the first new moon, I'd been so busy helping out with Cyrus's problem that I didn't have time to talk with her for very long, so our conversation had ended quickly.

But this time, we could talk as much as we wanted. When that thought crossed my mind, a sense of nervousness I'd never felt before welled up inside of me. For the first time, I learned what it felt like to call someone you loved. I didn't think I'd ever forget that feeling I experienced leading up to our call.

"Tuuli..."

I mustered up the appropriate amount of mana and called her name. A few moments later, I heard a slightly nervous voice in my ear.

"Setsu...?"

Hearing her call my name made my heart flutter. Once I got over that initial bout of nerves, we both shared what we'd been doing lately, and then our conversation ended. I had told her much of what I wrote in the letter the other day, but she mainly told me about her life and conversations with Kukka.

I was surprised and somewhat amused to hear that after we set off on our journey, the stuffed horse I gave Kukka had started to walk and eventually run. Despite the lingering awkwardness, I was relieved to hear Tuuli laughing, which made me happy.

"Setsuna."

I heard a voice approaching, calling my name, and turned toward it.

"Good morning, Norris."

"Good morning. I'm looking forward to working with you today."

Norris got out of his wagon and politely bowed, and I did the same.

"Thank you so much for the other day. If you all hadn't come to see me, I wouldn't have been ready on time, and we wouldn't have been able to open the store today."

He looked me straight in the eye. His coloring had definitely improved since two days ago.

"I feel like Ragi did more than me. You couldn't turn him down because his words moved you, right?"

"I think I was able to muster up the courage to ask for help because of both of you."

"I'll tell him that."

"Please do. Well, should we go to my house?"

The reason we'd met in front of the guild instead of at the shop was because Norris had wanted to check on his flowers, and I'd wanted to make sure with Elly that it was all right for Ragi and Alto to come and visit her. If possible, I was hoping to check her symptoms to see why her fever hadn't gone down. I had also never seen a flower garden, so I'd asked Norris to show me his.

Norris gave me a ride in his wagon to his house. This was, in fact, the first time I'd ever ridden in a wagon, and since the road wasn't paved, the trip was very rocky and left a bad impression on me. After fighting against the movement of the cart for quite some time, I heard Norris say, "We're almost there."

There was a house in the distance that I assumed was Norris's. I was jostled back and forth with the wagon, and Norris picked up speed, which only made the cart shake worse. Wondering what was going on, I leaned forward to look and saw that someone was doubled over by the gate.

"Elly!" Norris yelled and drove the wagon even faster over to the gate, calling out to the crouched-over woman. She looked up, hearing her name, and let out a sigh of relief. Her face was bright red, so her fever must have been high indeed.

"Ah, Norris..."

"What are you doing here? I told you to stay in bed!"

"I'm sorry, but I was anxious."

"There's nothing to worry about, remember? I'm not going to be running the shop alone."

I quietly climbed out of the wagon as I listened to their conversation. The bed of the wagon creaked faintly and the two of them turned at the sound. Norris frantically asked if I was all right and then apologized to me.

"Setsuna, this is my wife, Elly."

The woman bowed to me. She was around the same height as Norris, and had golden hair and blue eyes, just like him. She must have been having a hard time breathing, because her twin braids shook on her shoulders every time she took a breath.

"Elly, this is Setsuna, the man I told you would be helping me."

"It's nice to meet you, Elly. I'll be helping Norris out with work for a while."

I gave a simple introduction, and Elly looked like she wanted to say something, but I turned to Norris. "Norris, we need to get her to bed. It's not good for her to be out here like this."

"You're right. Elly, let's continue this inside," Norris said, and gently picked her up in his arms.

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"I can walk."

"You could barely stand up just now."

"But..."

"I'm sorry, Setsuna. Could you come inside with me?"

"Of course."
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Norris went inside the house, not listening to Elly. He showed me to a room that looked like a parlor, where I waited. Norris carried Elly into the bedroom, went to move the wagon, then briskly trotted back to the house.

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"I'm really sorry about that."

"Please, don't worry about it. Is Elly all right? Can I talk to her?"

"Yes, that's fine."
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We went into the room where Elly was and found that she was sitting on the bed waiting for us. As planned, I explained about Ragi and Alto and asked if it was okay if they came to check on her.

"I'm looking forward to meeting these beastfolk," she replied hesitantly, her face flushed. Apparently, she thought that beastfolks' ears and tails were very cute. "Oh, don't worry. I won't touch them without asking," she said through a labored breath.

Elly looked like she was in pain, so Norris left the room to get her some water.



After a while, Elly caught her breath and looked at me with a serious look on her face. "Thank you so much for agreeing to help my husband. He was beside himself with worry until two days ago. I knew Norris was overworking himself, but I couldn't do anything about it. As you can see, I'm in this state right now, so he won't even tell me when he's having trouble. Norris just pushes himself too hard..."

Elly's breathing came faster and I called her name a few times to calm her down, after which she continued.

"Norris's complexion has improved, and I'm so glad to see him eating and sleeping again. But then I started to worry that he was being scammed and fretted over how to fix that. Why are you all so willing to help him?" She said everything quickly, then waited for me to answer.

"I asked Norris what he planned on doing if I turned down his quest, and he told me he was the only one who could protect your dreams. After hearing that, I decided to help him out."

*"…."* 

Big, fat tears fell from her eyes.

"I could tell he was a very kindhearted person. You have to be very strong and kind to be able to protect someone else. If I thought he was going to give up, I might not have agreed to take the quest."

*"…."* 

"But once I saw his resolve, I made up my mind as well."

"I see..."

"It's only natural that you're skeptical. I talked with Norris about the quest, but if you're not comfortable with us helping around the house, please let me know. Whether you believe me or not, I can understand that a woman might be scared to have a strange man coming over. Ragi was very worried about that. If you don't think you'll be comfortable with it, we'll come up with another solution. So when you give me your answer, I want you to put your feelings

first. Do you need our help?"

For a moment, her pain seemed to disappear, and she answered with a smile. "Yes, please. It's okay, I'm not scared at all. I see the elderly beastfolk man in the market shopping from time to time. And actually, he's helped me once before."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it was when I was a little girl. He helped me pick up some apples I'd dropped. I thought he was a very kind person, and he had a very bushy tail, so I wanted to try talking to him. I remember it very clearly."

A bushy tail...? That's why she wanted to talk to him?

"Oh, so that's why Norris was so certain you wouldn't say no."

"Yes. Although I admit I was a bit suspicious of you, Setsuna."

"It's good to be wary of people you don't know."

"I'm sorry."

Suddenly her face contorted in pain again.

Just then, Norris returned with some medicine. He gave it to her and helped her lie down.

"Would you mind if I took a look at your injuries? I'm a Windmaster, so I can treat illnesses and injuries to a certain extent. I also specialize in medicinal herbs, so I might be able to mix up a remedy to save you some money."

"As I'm sure you already know, we can't afford any more medical treatments or medicines."

They probably wanted to avoid taking on more debt, and any further help might have been a burden to them. Still, if Elly's fever persisted, it could become life-threatening. Even if I didn't use magic to treat her condition, I at least wanted to change her medicine. All she was taking at the moment was a very weak painkiller.

"If her fever doesn't let up, it'll lead to something she won't be able to

recover from."

All the color drained from Norris's face.

"Norris, I won't charge you any money for the diagnosis because it'll be good practice for me. So please, let me examine her first. We can discuss what we'll do after that."

"Then...Setsuna, would you please take a look at Elly's injuries?"

"Norris!"

"Elly, your life is more important. If Setsuna says it's that bad, then he means it."

"You're right, I'm sorry. Thank you. To be honest, I'm in a lot of pain...," she confessed tearfully.

"I'll be just outside, so please call me when you're ready."

"Okay."

I waited out in the hallway, and my eyes were drawn to the flowers that decorated it in places. I wondered if Norris had put them there for Elly. Beautiful flowers might make her feel better.

Kyoka always put flowers in my room...

"Setsuna, I took off the bandage. Was there anything else?" Norris suddenly emerged from the bedroom and followed my gaze.

"Oh, the flowers were just so beautiful I couldn't help but stare."

"Elly and I grew those." He smiled proudly for a brief moment, then went straight back into the room. I followed him and found Elly lying face down, embarrassed. I let her know I was about to begin, then examined her back. She had been struck by a weapon while she was running away, and it had left a nasty wound running from her shoulder down to her hip. It looked incredibly painful. Honestly, I was surprised she had survived.

Still, I can tell the treatment she was given was very bad.

"Norris, did they cast healing magic on her at the hospital?"

"They did."

I couldn't believe my ears. They had done little more than stop the bleeding. If they'd cast a stronger spell on her, she wouldn't have been in this state. This was basically akin to waiting for a deep wound to close on its own, which would leave a scar on your back. In the worst case, the wound might not close and the patient could die. I couldn't believe what Norris had told me.

"It looks like the wound hasn't fully closed yet..."

Norris looked down at the floor, and Elly answered for him.

"We don't have any money, so we could only afford the lowest level of treatment. And paying for a scar to be removed costs an additional, even steeper fee."

The lowest level of treatment was probably just enough to save a person's life. Now I understood why Elly was in so much pain, and why she had such a high fever. As I'd surmised, it was imperative that we changed her medicine to prevent the wound from festering and filling with pus.

I could easily heal this wound, but if I did it without listening to their feelings, I'd just be doing it for my own sense of self-satisfaction. So I wanted them to choose.

"If something isn't done, this could be very dangerous. I could use magic to heal the wound right away, or I can prescribe an ointment, which will take about a month and probably leave a scar. No matter which method you choose, you'll need to take antipyretics to reduce your fever, antibiotics, and painkillers."

Norris's face contorted in frustration.

"You might have doubts about my skills, but Norris, you were there in the guild when you heard that my rank went up because of the medicine I made."

Elly reached out and took my hand.

"How much would each treatment cost?"

"A lot cheaper than at the hospital."

At guilds and medical institutions, the baseline price for medical treatment was fixed to ensure a certain amount of income. Under that system, family

members received treatment for free, while friends enjoyed a discount of up to half price. Since they couldn't pay the standard fees from the start, I offered them my discounted half-price rate as friends. Additionally, medical treatment among adventurers while on missions was considered a guarantee of each other's lives, so our current situation wasn't bound by this rule.

"Setsuna, I think I'm going to turn down your offer of treating my injury with magic. Can I just take oral medications and not an ointment?"

"Your wound isn't all the way closed, and if left untreated, it will only get worse, which will end up costing you even more in the long run. As with anything, the sooner you treat it, the cheaper it will be."

"...It's the same when flowers have a disease: If you catch it early enough, there are ways to treat it," Norris said.

Norris and Elly exchanged glances, then nodded faintly to one another.

"Setsuna, please give us the ointment and medications."

"I'd be happy to."

Now that I had their answer, I took the medicines from my bag. I'd developed the ointment after a lot of trial and error, but its effects were tried and tested.

I had Norris apply the ointment to Elly's wound so that he could learn how to do it, then asked Elly to take the oral medication.

"Once this medicine runs out, I'll come examine you again. Is that all right?"

"That sounds fine."

"Let me know if you need anything at all, or if the medicine doesn't agree with you."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Oh, and about the payment for the medicine..."

I knew they couldn't pay me right away, and it wasn't like I needed the money immediately, so I thought about some kind of long-term payment plan. But no matter how much time went by, they should really have as much money as possible for the flower shop... I began thinking of how to collect payment

without using money, when suddenly the image of Alto's face, his ears lying flat on his head, popped into my head.

"Setsuna?"

"Norris, Elly, are either of you good at cooking?"

Their eyes widened with surprise at my sudden question, but they answered politely.

"I'm not bad, but Elly's a great cook."

"Would you teach me how to cook some Lypaed dishes in exchange for the medicine?"

"I don't think we know anything that would be worth that much...," Norris said hesitantly.

"Well, anything works as payment as long as both parties are satisfied. It doesn't necessarily have to be money, although that is the easiest and most straightforward method."

"Are you sure you want something other than money as payment?"

"Yes. I need funds for my journey, but since I'm in Lypaed, I might as well learn about the specialties of the region. Which is why I thought that learning how to make traditional dishes might be a good payment for the medicine. It's only a suggestion, so feel free to choose whatever you want."

The two of them exchanged glances. Elly nodded, and Norris carried on the conversation.

"What kind of dishes would you like to learn?"

"I'd love to learn how to make some kind of traditional dishes you might eat on a celebratory occasion."

"Traditional dishes..."

"A celebratory occasion? Do we have something to congratulate you about?"

"Not in particular, but my apprentice is looking forward to eating dishes from all over the world, and I recently heard that some dishes here are only made on special days."

I explained my conversation with Ragi and they both smiled softly.

"So then, when my apprentice Alto learned that each family has their different take on the dishes, or that there are some you can only eat on festival days, he got pretty depressed."

"I understand the feeling. I was always excited to eat special foods on holidays."

"Same here. Some I didn't even like, but I still wanted to eat them anyway!" Norris said.

"Right, or you'd just put it on your plate because it's supposed to be lucky!"

The two of them excitedly began sharing memories of the food, sounding just like Alto.

"Neither Alto nor I have a country to call our own, so I don't really know much about those types of dishes. Alto doesn't have any memories of that nature either."

Of course, I still had my memories from when I was in Japan, but Alto had nothing of the sort. The traditional dishes from Sagana that Ragi had made for us were his first experience eating special-occasion foods.

"Also, since we're adventurers, we mainly cook out in the open air. When we're in towns, we eat at inns or restaurants, but I can count the number of days we've spent in a village or town in the last month on one hand. Maybe if the timing works out, we could eat at a festival, but those sorts of opportunities are hard to come by."

One option was researching the dates of festivals, but since transportation was limited, it seemed like we'd miss out often.

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"...."
"...."
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"You said you didn't think cooking would be worth the price of medicine, but I beg to differ. I'd be learning about this kingdom's culture and making Alto happy at the same time. So I think it's a fair exchange for my medicine."

I wanted to give Alto as many fun experiences as I could and let him reclaim

his childhood. Even if I couldn't take away his painful memories, I wanted to give him more happy memories than bad ones.

"Setsuna..."

"I'll cook! Once my wound heals, I'll cook for Alto! You don't want to have to make the dishes from scratch, right?"

"Right, although I do want to learn how to make them."

"I'll write down the recipe and give it to you. I'll put all my heart and all my skills into whipping up some amazing dishes!" Elly said with a firm nod.

"Ah... I'm sorry. We would love to make our country's cuisine for Alto."

"You don't have to apologize, Norris."

"...All right. Only if you agree not to be so formal with us all the time."

"Okay," I said, and smiled at Elly.

"Setsuna, thank you for accepting the cooking as payment. It makes me happy to be able to help out. I know that this whole business with the flower shop has caused a lot of trouble."

"It's not a problem."

"I want to thank you again as well, Setsuna."

The two of them seemed much calmer now, and they let out sighs of relief as they smiled at each other.

"Oh, I know! I can make special dishes from other countries, too. I'm better at making our country's dishes, of course, but would you like me to make others, too?"

"Are you sure it won't be too much trouble?"

"Not at all!"

"That would be great."

"Leave it to me!"

"Setsuna!" Norris called my name and I turned toward him. He looked paler than he had the day before and was shaking his head. I looked over at Elly, who had a big, cheerful grin on her face, seemingly lost in thought about which dishes she should make. What in the world was going on?

Norris just kept frantically shaking his head. Judging by the pallor of his face, I guessed there was some kind of problem with the dishes from one of the countries, but I'd already asked her to make them, so it was too late to take it back. I was going to ask which country it was, but when I saw that Norris was on the verge of tears, I decided against it.

Elly tried to get up to see us off, but I stopped her and encouraged her to rest. We told her what time Ragi and Alto would be coming and when Norris would be back, then went out into the garden. I expected to see colorful flowers blooming all around...but there weren't any.

There were many types of varieties planted in the garden, but not one of them was blooming. Most of them were just buds. It certainly wasn't like the gardens I'd seen on TV.

I knew there were some types of flowers you could pick when they were still budding, but surely not all of them could be like that. Which is why my first impression upon seeing the garden was a doubtful, "Huh?" and I don't think anyone could blame me for that.

"Setsuna, is something wrong?"

I guess my reaction was out of the ordinary, because Norris gave me a puzzled look.

"I was just surprised to see that all the flowers were buds."

"Normally most flowers are sold as buds."

"Really?" I couldn't hide my surprise and Norris chuckled.

"Let me guess... Have you never been to a flower shop before?"

I hadn't. I was mostly bedridden in the hospital in my previous life, and I was only ever on the receiving end of flowers. I hadn't sent anyone flowers in this world either, so I'd never shopped for them at a store.

"I've never worked in a shop before. Do you think that's going to hinder me from completing the quest?" It was a bit belated now, but I found myself worrying about that. Luckily, Norris shook his head.

"For a sales job, all you need to be able to do is read, write, and do calculations, really."

That made sense; I doubted Drum would've recommended me for a job I couldn't do.

"Growing flowers to sell requires certain skills, so that's why I wouldn't ask you to do that."

"What kind of skills do you need?"

"Well, there are a lot, but the most important one is knowing how to manage the growth of plants with magic."

I hadn't expected that answer. Was magic necessary to grow flowers to sell in this world? This place was definitely filled with magical energy. I thought I'd gotten used to being in a different world, but I guess I was still a bit naive.

"We don't have much time, so I'll explain while I work. Also, sorry about this, but please don't touch the flowers."

I nodded in response to his warning and listened with interest to his explanation. He allowed me to observe at a distance so that I wouldn't interfere with his work.

"The reason they're all buds is because the flowers can't be sold once they're open."

He put on a pair of gloves, carefully picked the flowers using pruning shears, removed what seemed to be excess leaves, then placed them into a wooden bucket.

"Do people buy them in the bud stage so they can enjoy seeing them open at home?" I asked, still not understanding.

Norris smiled and said, "No." He put his shears away into the small tool bag he wore around his waist, took off his gloves, and picked up one of the flowers. It was still a bud, but as he held it up, it bloomed right before my eyes. "…"

It was such a fantastic sight that I was rendered speechless; all I could do was stare at the open flower. The excitement of seeing the flower bloom before me along with its beauty made me sigh, and I couldn't help but share my feelings.

"It's beautiful..."

I heard Norris laughing as I continued staring at the flower.

"This really is your first time seeing it, isn't it, Setsuna?" he said, then handed me the flower.

"Yes. I'm really impressed."

He smiled happily and took out the shears from his bag, put on his gloves, and continued cutting flowers.

"When I was a child, I asked the same question you did: 'Why do you sell flowers that are just buds?' And the florist did the same thing I just did. He taught me that being a florist is a job that brings out the full potential of the role flowers play."

"The role flowers play?"

"Yes. Flowers have the ability to convey the thoughts and feelings of the people they're shared between, so I learned that florists must skillfully choose flowers for their customers to match those feelings. It's said that when a flower is just a bud, no feelings have been entrusted to it yet, but when it blooms right in front of the customer's eyes, that person's feelings are imprinted right on the flower. And the flowers that bloom will directly convey those feelings to the other person."

*"…"* 

Entrusting your feelings to flowers... Come to think of it, that's what Eugene and Keith did with the purple anemone.

"Anyway, that's how I got interested in flowers and decided to become a florist when I grew up."

"I see. It's a wonderful job."

"Thank you."

"Still, I don't know whether I'll really be able to do this."

"Don't worry. Most of the time, you'll just hand over the flowers the customer has chosen and arrange them to look nice."

"What?"

"We often decorate the flower buckets with what that flower looks like when it's in bloom, its name, and what it represents as an example for customers to refer to while they choose. Occasionally customers will ask us for advice, though, and that's when my heart really sings."

"Ah, I see."

I wasn't sure how to answer besides that, but Norris must've found it funny because he laughed out loud.

"No matter what way, shape, or form it takes, as long as people are happy with the flowers I've grown, then that's what gives me the greatest joy," he murmured softly as he gazed adoringly at the flowers.

I asked Norris if there was anything I could do to help. He hesitated a bit and then said, "Can you load the wagon with the buckets?" so I went ahead and started carrying them out to the cart. The one warning he gave me was not to remove the flowers from the buckets at any time.

"This field is enchanted to make sure the flowers stay as buds. My shears and gloves are magical tools, so when I pick the flowers and put them in the buckets, I can maintain their enchanted state. But the spell is broken once you take them out, so please be careful."

"Okay."

I carried the buckets over to the wagon and started to read the magic etched into this place—a type of Earth magic that drastically slowed down the flower's growth rate when it came close to blooming. There weren't many people who could use magic to stop time, so Earth magic was being used to control the flowers' growth instead.

I was extremely intrigued to see that Earth magic could be used this way. If I used Time magic instead, not only could I do that to the flowers here in this field, but I could make the flowers on all the trees nearby bloom at the same time, which made my heart pound with excitement.

I gave a pat to the horse, which was grazing on grass, and returned to Norris. I'd finished carrying all the buckets to the wagon and had been watching him work, when I realized there were some flowers he hadn't picked.

"Norris, why didn't you pick the flowers on the right side of the field?"

"It's too early for them. It'll take time for them to bloom if I pick them right now."

I looked back and forth between the flowers in the bucket and the ones he hadn't picked, and honestly couldn't tell the difference.

"They look the same to me," I told him.

"Being able to tell the two apart is an important skill for managing the flowers' growth," Norris explained. "It's difficult to determine whether the buds are being sustained by Earth magic or if they're still naturally developing. If we pick buds before they're ready and put them in the buckets, they won't bloom when people buy them. We'd be laughed at and called amateurs if we sold flowers like that."

I see. I had no idea there was so much to being a florist.

With newfound respect, I asked Norris, "Does it take a lot of time to learn to tell the difference?"

He gave me a slightly sad look. "Yes. Under normal circumstances, you'd enter an apprenticeship once you reach adulthood and learn from your mentor." Norris gestured softly with his hands as he formed his sentences. "But in our case, things were a bit different. An elderly couple—farmers who specialized in growing flowers—used to own this field. They doted on both me and Elly ever since we were little. We used to come often to help them out on the farm, so once I became an adult, I didn't hesitate in choosing to become a florist. We both love this job."

Norris lowered the shears he was holding.

"When we became adults, the elderly couple became our guardians. Then, when we turned twenty and left the orphanage, they gave us this land and the house. They went to go live with their daughter. We received so much kindness from them, yet couldn't repay them at all. But they seemed so happy about going to live with their daughter that we couldn't say anything."

I was sure that the elderly couple had been like a family to Norris and Elly.

"We actually planned on telling them we were going to open up a flower shop, but decided to keep it a secret for a while so we could surprise them. In the end, though, we couldn't find the right moment to tell them and let that chance slip away. Our dream was to sell their flowers. They grew those flowers with such love and care, and Elly and I wanted to give people a chance to share that, which is why we worked so hard to save up that money."

Norris stared off into the distance, a sad smile on his face. Then he gave me a look and started walking. I wasn't sure what to say, so I followed him in silence.

He led me to a rose garden.

Even though they hadn't bloomed yet, the rosebuds were large and proud. They captivated me, and I thought they would bloom into very beautiful flowers.

"It's a shame when your dreams don't come true. But Elly and I are very lucky. We don't know our parents, but we met people who loved us just as much. And they gave us the means to live a good life."

*"…"* 

"Since we can't repay our debt to them directly, Elly and I decided that we would grow new flowers and name them after the elderly couple we respected so much."

Norris had an incredibly serene look on his face as he gazed happily at the roses. I had a feeling this was what he and Elly were so desperate to protect—the origin of his love for flowers.

"This red rose is called a Cindy rose, and the white one is a Laglut rose."

I gazed at the roses while listening to Norris.

"Me and Elly's dream changed. Now our dream is to send these roses to the two of them, at their daughter's place. We're hoping to see them smile when they hear there are roses named after them."

I noticed he'd turned his gaze toward me, so I looked at him.

"We're very lucky," he said.

I'd never grown flowers before, so I couldn't even imagine how much effort it had taken to grow this field of roses. Plus, they had named them after people they deeply cared for. There was no way they had made any compromises growing these flowers.

"But please...this is our dream. I don't want to give up on it, and I don't want my wife to have to live on the streets. I don't want her to lose her smile..."

I remembered what Norris had told me the other day.

I see. That's why he was so frantic when he was talking to Drum. They've been working really hard to protect this place that means so much to them, deliver these roses, and repay the people they owe so much to.

"I hope your dream comes true."

I meant it from the bottom of my heart. I would do my best to help them keep what was important to them.

"Thank you."

I shifted my gaze away from him and took one last look at the bud of a dream that had yet to bloom.

We moved on from the rose garden and Norris picked a different kind of flower. It seemed like it would take a few more days for the roses to grow. I told him I was looking forward to seeing them bloom, and he said he felt the same and smiled.

"I'll pick some more flowers and then we can go back to the shop," he said, continuing to expertly cut flowers with his shears. However, a few flowers had bloomed before he could put them away, and Norris put them into a separate

bucket. Since he told me he couldn't sell those flowers, I wondered what he was going to do with them.

"Norris, what are you going to do with the flowers that bloomed?"

"I'll put a few up in the shop as display items. Any that are left over can be pressed or turned into wall decorations, which the general store will take."

"I see. So even if one blooms, there's somewhere for it to go."

Maybe the way I phrased that was strange, because Norris started laughing. He paused and looked at the flowers that had bloomed.

"The flowers I overlook end up blooming like this. That means I've still got a lot to learn."

Since the magic just slowed down their growth, flowers that had reached their limit would still bloom. There might be a few like that of each type. Norris seemed disappointed, but I thought it was amazing.

"You seem to really like flowers, Setsuna," he said, changing the subject since I hadn't responded.

"I do."

I loved flowers because I loved my grandpa. When I was a child and couldn't go outside because of my illness, my grandfather would bring me as many real flowers as he could. But one day, he brought camellias into my room, and my mother had been furious. Apparently, camellias are considered bad luck because the petals fall off, leaving behind only the stem, so they're generally avoided as gifts for sick people. But they were my grandfather's favorite flower, which meant they were my favorite flower, too.

I rubbed the back of my left hand, thinking about my grandfather.

"If there are any flowers you want, please let me know. Even just a single flower on the dining table can change the whole atmosphere of the room. I hope Ragi and Alto take some home too, to brighten up their days."

"I'll do that. Thank you."

"I'm glad you're someone who loves flowers." Norris's eyes softened and he spoke happily, then set about his remaining work.

There was nothing else for me to do, and I didn't want to get in his way, so I took a stroll around the flower garden. I could also pick flowers without having them bloom, but I didn't possess the skills to judge whether they were ready or not—an ability that Norris had fostered since childhood.

I thought once again about how amazing Norris was.

"I think it's about time to go to the flower shop."

Norris had finished his work and come to find me. I took one more look at the flower garden, and the two of us left.

I got off the wagon and looked around the shop. This was the first chance I'd had to take a good look around the place, as I'd been rushed the last time. It was a small building, clean on the outside, with a bright, inviting atmosphere inside. Even though they were just buds, putting the colorful flowers inside would really draw people's attention to the shop.

"By the way, why did you choose to put your shop here?"

"There's a lot of foot traffic, and the knights do their patrols around here, so that also means it's safe," Norris explained after tying up the horse.

"Could you unload the buckets, Setsuna?"

"Sure."

"You don't have to take out the ones in the very back."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to take those home for Elly. I'm thinking I'll bring her flowers every day until she recovers."

"That's a nice idea. I bet that will make her happy."

As we chatted, I moved the buckets out of the wagon, while Norris set them up in the shop. He arranged the display flowers so that they could be seen clearly and attached tags with the flowers' names, what they represented, and price written on them. The tags seemed to be in Elly's handwriting, because the letters were very cute and neat.

"You can watch me work in the morning to see how I do it."

Considering that I didn't have any sales experience and had never bought flowers from a florist before, I couldn't really man the shop by myself just yet, so I would take the morning to learn from Norris and get the hang of things.

Now all the flowers were on display, and we were ready. It was time to open the store. Norris took a deep breath, slowly looked around the shop with a serious look on his face, and muttered, "Let's do this," under his breath. He balled his hands into fists and silently raised his head. There was no hesitation in his eyes.

"Setsuna, I'm counting on you."

"We can do this, Norris."

We nodded to each other, and Norris opened the shop. There must have been people who were curious about the new store, because we started selling flowers the moment it opened. Norris took his wares out of the buckets and held them where the customer could see them bloom beautifully. He repeated this process for each flower they asked for, and when all the flowers had opened, he neatly arranged the leaves and stems, tying them with twine to make them look nice, then handed the bouquet to the customer.

More people came in to buy flowers than I'd expected. A lot of people in Lypaed must like to decorate their houses with flowers. The customers all looked happy as they left the store and admired the flowers they had purchased. I was a little curious about where these flowers, filled with the emotions of the person who had bought them, would end up.

"Setsuna, that customer wanted three lavenders, right? And a single lily for the one in front of them, and a lily for the person before that?" Norris asked, as I took a breather after dealing with a sudden influx of customers.

"That's right," I nodded as I remembered.

Norris scribbled in the ledger. I was actually supposed to do that after making a sale, but it had slipped my mind.

"I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay. I was free, so I just wanted to do it before I forgot. And dealing with customer after customer is tiring when you're not used to it."

Norris gave me a sympathetic smile, and I couldn't help but sigh softly thinking about how he'd been working just as hard. It was my job to record the details of a sale in the ledger, so I couldn't help but feel a bit useless.

I'd learned about this process the first time I purchased something in this world. When I'd bought the plant encyclopedia and basic map I needed for quests from the Adventurers Guild, the guildmaster had kept a ledger, just like Norris.

In my previous world, shopkeepers didn't do such things, so I found it a little strange and dug through Kyle's memories. Out of caution, I chose not to ask the guildmaster, since he'd been suspicious of me when I registered with the guild.

"It's common practice to keep a ledger for the transaction of goods, or else you'll lose track of who sold what to whom, when, for how much," was the answer I got, followed by a note with what looked like a complaint from Kyle:

"Unlike the world I used to live in, there's no automatic record-keeping like when you enter items into a cash register. I think a magical tool like that would sell well, but only the rich would be able to own one, since it would be far too expensive for poor people, so there goes that idea. Come to think of it, I don't care about making a profit, and it sounds like a hassle, so I've decided not to keep a ledger."

It seemed like Kyle just enjoyed selling things and didn't care about the money. Neither he nor Hanai seemed to have any interest in that regard, so I'd have to learn about it for myself. The fact that it was a new experience made it particularly fulfilling to learn, just like when I taught myself to make medicine.

Regardless, I knew I needed to be careful not to make any more mistakes. I'd already understood the importance of keeping a ledger before starting and still ended up causing trouble for Norris, which made me feel bad.

Just before noon, the flow of customers slowed, and I started sweeping up all of the leaves and stems that had accumulated on the floor. When Norris was

free, he taught me how to tie up the flowers to make them look nice. I was good at making small flower arrangements, and Norris complimented me, saying that I had an eye for it.

The reason I caught on quickly was because when Kyoka was little, she would pick dandelions, white clover, and lotus flowers and say, "Brother, make them look pretty!" as she handed them to me. I wondered if seeing the flowers people brought me in the hospital is what made her become interested in flower arranging.

What was important was that I wasn't doing it for myself. When I made her a bouquet, she'd happily take it home and give me the leftover flowers as a thank-you...though I originally thought they were meant as a get-well-soon gift. I was a bit confused about the whole situation, to be honest.

Still, seeing something so little make my sister so happy made me want to see her smile even more. At first, all I could do was tie them with ribbons, but I researched how to tie all sorts of different bows and other ways to make the bouquets look beautiful.

Since our parents were both busy working as doctors, Kyoka spent a lot of time with me when she was little. Although my capabilities were limited, I cherished her smiling face. Her joy brought me happiness, and I wanted to make her dreams come true as much as I could. But there were still many things I couldn't do for her.

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"Budder!"
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I remembered what she used to call me when she was very little.

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"...ster..."

"....."

"Master!!"

"Huh?"
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Suddenly, Alto's voice pulled me out of my reverie and snapped me back to reality.

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"Alto?"
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"I called your name over and over, Master!"

He looked upset with me for not having noticed his presence. For some reason, seeing him filled me with relief. I looked around and saw Norris smiling at Alto, but Ragi was looking at me with a worried expression on his face. I gave him a puzzled glance, wondering why he looked so concerned, but he just chuckled and shook his head as if to say, "Don't worry about it."

"What were you doing, Master?"

"Norris was showing me how to arrange the flowers nicely."

"Can I see?"

"There aren't any customers, so I don't see why not."

Norris kindly agreed, and I shifted my body slightly to give Alto a better view. He looked at the bouquet of flowers on the table and whispered to himself, "So pretty..." It was such a natural, heartfelt reaction that Norris couldn't help but smile. While Alto admired the bouquet, I asked Ragi and Alto why they'd come.

"We'd planned on going directly to the house, but thought Norris might feel better if we dropped by first."

Norris bowed gratefully at Ragi's thoughtfulness.

"Elly is really looking forward to meeting you and Alto," I said, to which Ragi raised an eyebrow. I could tell he didn't fully believe me, but once I told him what Elly had said, he furrowed his brow, looking like he'd been caught off guard.

"I don't remember that. Do you think she'll mind?"

"I don't think so. Even if you don't remember Elly, I don't think she's the kind of person to hold it against you."

"I certainly hope not..."

Ragi nodded a few times, and when it looked like he was satisfied, Alto tugged lightly on my shirt.

"What's up?"

"I want this flower."

Norris must have heard him because he called out "Alto," who cautiously looked over.

"That flower might be lonely by itself, so how about you pick a few more that you like? And you too, Ragi, if you'd like. Setsuna, would you untie the twine for me?"

Norris took them over to stand in front of the flowers that were for sale. Ragi seemed hesitant, but Alto carefully looked at each flower, examining each one.

"I'll pick this one!" After looking at them for a while, Alto pointed to a yellow flower that resembled a sunflower called a sealal. Norris took one out of the bucket and told Alto to keep his eyes on the flower bud. The next moment, the sealal began to open, captivating Alto, whose eyes shone brightly.

"Wow... That's the first time I've seen a flower bloom!"

Norris handed Alto the newly bloomed sealal. His tail wagged happily back and forth as he thanked Norris. Alto must have been overjoyed, because his tail wagged for quite some time.

"What are you going to choose, Gramps?" Alto asked impatiently, probably wanting to see another flower bloom.

"Please choose whichever you like."

Norris and Alto both watched Ragi, who gave a half-hearted chuckle. After thinking it over for a bit, he chose a white lisianthus.

"I'd like this one."

"You got it!"

Alto stood fixed to Norris's side and anxiously waited for him to take the flower out of the bucket. He reminded me of Kyoka when she was little. She would stare intently at my hands with a big smile on her face.

"Alto, Ragi, please give those flowers to Setsuna."

The two of them handed their flowers to me. I trimmed the leaves and stems, then added the flowers I'd been using for practice to make a new bouquet. The sealal Alto chose stood out quite prominently, but I was quite happy with the arrangement.

"Yep, I think I can let you handle the arrangements from now on," Norris said, giving me a passing grade. Then he whispered, "Please give it to Alto," so I handed the bouquet to my apprentice. Alto gently took the flowers, being careful not to crush them, and smiled with satisfaction.

Norris, Alto, and Ragi went to visit Elly, leaving me to watch the shop by myself. Between customers, I had a bite to eat and started to memorize the names, prices, and meanings associated with each flower. As I did, I noticed an uptick in female customers, perhaps because they were out shopping for dinner.

Most of them came for a single flower rather than a bouquet. Once they'd paid for a flower, I would take it out of the bucket, paying special care to the direction in which it would open, just like Norris had done. The flower would bloom right before their eyes, and I'd hand it to them directly. Watching the women blush with joy as they watched the petals unfurl impressed upon me just how dear flowers were to the people of this country.

Meanwhile, orders for flower bouquets began trickling in. As I chatted to the customers and tied the flowers with twine, I began to feel as if something was missing. Tying the bouquets with the string was cute in a rustic sort of way, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it didn't do justice to how beautiful the colorful flowers were. They needed something a bit more elegant...

I thought about what to do and then came up with an answer I was eager to try out. I needed thin paper for it, and wondered where I could get some. I remembered the wallpaper at the general store and decided to stop by there on my way home, thinking that might work. But there was also a chance it wouldn't, so I decided to keep it a secret until I knew for sure. Having that little secret to myself was kind of fun.

After some time, Norris returned to the shop and looked around at the flower buckets in surprise.

"What happened to all the flowers?"

I showed him the ledger and explained the quantities and types of flowers I'd sold while he was gone.

"I never expected them to sell so well! I'm so happy! I think I should pick more

flowers tomorrow."

Norris's face filled with hope. I also thought things were off to a good start and asked how Elly's visit with Alto and Ragi had gone.

"Elly was really thrilled. She said she wants to become friends with Alto as soon as possible. She was nervous talking to Ragi but got over it pretty quickly."

"I see. It might take some time for Alto to get used to her, so please tell her that."

"Elly's used to that sort of thing, so it's okay. Most children who came to the orphanage were really cautious at first, too." Norris sounded like he didn't really want to talk about it, so I just nodded in response.

"Also, she said she was really happy because the medicine was working so well she barely felt any pain in her back."

"I'm so glad to hear that. But just because she doesn't have much pain doesn't mean she shouldn't rest. Getting up and moving around could delay her recovery, so please tell her to continue to take it easy."

"I will. In fact, I told her that several times myself!" Norris laughed with a hint of frustration. I could tell that Elly had gotten better. I breathed a sigh of relief, but at the same time couldn't help but pray that she wouldn't push herself too hard.

"Excuse me. I'd like to reserve some Founding Festival flowers."

I wondered what Founding Festival flowers were, but then Norris came to my side and dealt with the customer for me. After they left, Norris explained it to me.

"The Founding Festival is the day we celebrate when the current king defeated the previous king, who was a tyrant, and succeeded to the throne. Our king stood up for the people of Lypaed, and that's why we use that day to express our gratitude to him."

"I see."

I remembered that the previous king had been incredibly wasteful with the country's finances, which had put the kingdom under a great deal of economic strain. Taxes had been through the roof and people had struggled to survive.

"When I was a child, the elderly folks used to tell us the same stories over and over again, about how hard and painful their lives had been. They said, 'The king shed his blood to win for us, and that's why we have peace."

*"…"* 

"That's why, on the day of the Founding Festival, we offer our gratitude to the king who saved us from having to live like that."

I could see now why the citizens of Lypaed were so fond of the royal family, especially the king and queen.

"Flowers are one form of gratitude we can offer. On the day of the festival, women decorate their hair with gerulito flowers, and men stick them in their breast pockets."

Gerulito flowers looked like a smaller version of a gerbera. They symbolized gratitude and happiness. I looked over to the blooming gerulito in the flower bucket and Norris followed my gaze.

"Some people grow them themselves for the festival, but others buy them at flower shops. The chamber of commerce also passes them out free of charge."

"If they're reserving the gerulito flowers, does that mean you'll be open on the day of the Founding Festival?"

"No, gerulito flowers will stay healthy for about ten days after they bloom, so most people will probably come to the shop about seven days before the festival. We'll be taking the day off so we can enjoy ourselves, too. Hopefully I can see the king and queen greeting the citizens at the castle. They must've been busy last year, because it was canceled."

Norris let out a soft sigh and muttered sadly, "There's a rumor going around that the king is ill, so maybe this year's event will be canceled, too."

I knew both of them were fine, but I couldn't tell him how I knew that, so I decided to change the subject. "Does the festival get quite lively?"

"Well..." Norris started to answer my question, but then trailed off.

"Norris?"

"You'll have to see for yourself. I don't want to spoil the fun for you. Oh, and please tell Alto that there are some dishes that can only be eaten on the day of the festival."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled."

"They're delicious, so you should try them, too. Oh, and one more thing. The actual festival begins once the sun goes down, so you should try to be around Main Street just a little before sunset."

That was all Norris would say about the festival, and he changed the subject.

Finally, our first day was coming to an end. Once we closed the store and went to the back room, Norris breathed a sigh of relief as he flopped down onto his chair. Not moving a muscle, he stared off into space.

"Norris, are you okay?" I was concerned and called his name, but there was no response. I wondered what was going on, but then I also felt the fatigue from doing something I wasn't used to. I went ahead and boiled some water in the kitchenette to make tea. When it was done, I set a mug down in front of Norris, and the sound of it against the table seemed to bring him back to reality, because he looked at me.

"Setsuna."

"I made you some tea. Please have some."

"Thank you so much."

He slowly sipped his tea and then began to tell me what was on his mind.

"I was thinking, maybe this is all a dream. Because it seems too good to be true. I was able to open the shop, we sold more flowers than I expected, Elly—who has been doing nothing but crying—finally smiled... Is this all really real? I was afraid that maybe when I went home, I would wake up and fall back into despair."

I wondered if his nerves had finally given out after making it through the day.

"I'm sure Elly can't wait for you to come home. My guess is that she'll be asking you all about today over dinner!"

Maybe he could picture it clearly in his mind, because Norris chuckled.

"And I'm sure she'll be overjoyed when she hears how many flowers we sold. We pretty much sold everything you picked this morning."

There were only a few flowers left in the buckets. Norris looked at me like he wanted to say something, but I continued telling him how I felt.

"Dreams may be dreams, but today one of your dreams came true, right? It's too early to wake up now."

Norris's face crumpled and he answered me through laughter and tears. "You're right. Elly and I won't ever wake up from our dream. All right, Setsuna. Let's get ready to go home. I have to see what comes next in my dream with Elly. And I'm sure Alto's waiting for you."

"Yeah."

Norris drained his tea in one gulp. We tidied up a little, then all of a sudden he looked at me as if he were just remembering something.

"...Setsuna, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"If you use magic, could you make Elly's scar on her back completely disappear?"

"Yes. Don't worry, I'm not sure how long I'll be in Lypaed for, but if you ask me to do it while I'm still here, I can do it anytime."

He looked me in the eyes and nodded firmly. "Could you not tell Elly about that for now?"

"Of course. I won't tell anyone."

I knew he wouldn't be able to ask me to heal Elly until after he had repaid his debts. The future was still uncertain right now, but I could tell that Norris was determined to make that happen.

"She hasn't said anything about it, but I know she's bothered by the scar on

her back, so I want to get it healed for her."

"Okay. When the time comes, leave it to me."

Norris smiled happily in reply, then gave himself a quiet word of encouragement:

"I'll do my best."

I left the shop before Norris and hurried to the general store, where the shopkeeper remembered me and earnestly listened to my request. Once I was finished, he told me they could make paper as thin as I needed it, but that it would need to be made to order, just like the wallpaper. I didn't have a problem with that, so he showed me the sample book and I placed an order. He said that it would be delivered to Ragi's house when it was ready. I also bought some ribbons that caught my eye, paid, then left the shop.

I got home and went inside, planning on telling Alto all about the different flowers I sold today, but he was already asleep on the sofa. Ragi was across the other side of the room, smiling as he read Alto's diary.

"He was just telling me what he'd put in his diary, but couldn't seem to stay awake."

He handed it to me, still open. Alto had written about his day, and how Elly gave him a bracelet made of flowers. When I read the part where he said it "smelled very yummy," I couldn't help but laugh.

Meanwhile, Ragi carried Alto up to his room. By the time I finished reading Alto's diary entry, Ragi had come back with alcohol and snacks in hand. He didn't have to ask if I wanted a drink; he just sat down across from me. The two of us chatted about our day while we drank.

Ragi felt like Elly harbored no ill-will toward Alto, just like Norris, and I agreed with him on that.

The story of the bracelet was a bit more complicated than what Alto had written in his diary, though.

Apparently, Elly had begun making a wreath the day before she was attacked

by the bandits, but had been unable to finish it due to her injury. Ragi thought it was a shame that the flowers would go to waste, so he'd suggested Elly turn them into smaller rings, which gave her the encouragement to finish making the wreaths. She'd given one to Alto as a sign of friendship.

Ragi said that because of this, the three of them had opened up to each other quite a bit.

"Even though she wasn't feeling well, she tried to prepare lunch for us..." Ragi let out a deep, exhausted sigh, and picked up his glass.

"I guess that's why Norris also looked so tired when he smiled..."

"Norris did everything he could to try to stop her. It was only when he asked her, 'Why do you think they went to all this trouble coming here to bring you lunch?' that she finally gave up."

Ragi chuckled as he slowly sipped his drink.

"Both Norris and Elly are incredibly diligent people."

"I think so, too," I said quietly.

There was the occasional spell of silence as we sat there drinking, but those were enjoyable, too. Calmly, peacefully, we sat there together.

It was my third day working at the flower shop. I took payment from a customer and was about to give them back their change when I realized we didn't have enough copper dimes. Norris saw, and came over to us.

"I'm sorry, miss, but would you mind paying in exact change?"

I was confused watching the exchange between Norris and the customer, who said, "Never mind, then. I'll come back again later," and left. I was watching her go, a contrite look on my face, when Norris suddenly turned toward me.

"Setsuna, we're about to run out of copper dimes, so could you ask the customers to pay with the exact amount? I don't think we'll last long before I have to go get money exchanged."

"Why don't you just go now? I can mind the shop."

"Oh, no, I want to bring a whole day's worth of money at once, including this afternoon's sales."

I wondered if it was worth the trouble of not having enough change just for convenience's sake, and he must've known what I was thinking. "Setsuna, you've never gone to the money exchange, have you? The fee you pay depends on the amount you get exchanged, but if you take more than a certain amount you'll only have to pay a flat rate, which is why I like to do it all at once."

"I see. I didn't know that."

"Well, most people don't have to exchange money unless they start a business."

He smiled and handed me half of the copper dimes he had. I couldn't have known about the exchange fee, but it was still completely my fault for not having change on hand, yet he didn't blame me for it.

Looking back, even though I'd made mistakes and gotten confused a lot over the past three days, I'd been having fun because helping out at the shop was so exciting. Maybe somewhere in my heart, working in this flower shop had made that dream come true, which is what kept me motivated.

Ever since I came to this world, I had been making medicine like an apothecary, but I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that I could only do so because of someone else's power and not my own. I couldn't have become an apothecary in my previous life, so it was just hard to believe that's what I was doing now.

Similarly, even though I worked as a scholar doing translations, I hadn't mastered languages through my own efforts, so it was difficult for me to attribute those accomplishments to my own abilities.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that, because scholars and apothecaries didn't exist in my old world, even though I felt fulfilled in my work, it was hard to say I had achieved my dreams.

The flower shop in the hospital, on the other hand, felt so familiar and close—it had given me the illusion that I could work there like everyone else, which is why working at Norris's flower shop felt like an extension of those times and

made me really excited.

I hadn't realized any of that until I started working with him.

That wasn't the only reason I enjoyed it, though; part of it was because of Norris's personality. So the day before we had two days off, I asked if I could help him work overtime as a gesture of my gratitude.

"It's okay. I'm sure Alto is waiting for you to get home soon." Norris looked up from his ledger and smiled.

"I can stay for a little bit. What are you doing?"

"I'm tallying up the flowers we've sold so I can figure out how many we need the day after tomorrow."

He showed me the ledger: It was a table with the name of a different flower in each row, and columns for male, female, and gender unknown, followed by increments of fifty beginning at fifty, and the shop's working hours in increments of an hour. Numbers were written in black and red in the boxes—looking at the size of the numbers, black seemed to indicate the totals up to the day before, with red the total for that day.

In this world, numbers were consistent across all languages, including the beastfolk language. It was said that the three great gods taught all humans about numbers. The world I came from had used different numerical systems for different languages, like Arabic and Chinese numerals, which made me endlessly curious about the impact it had on economic growth.

With those thoughts in mind, I shifted my scattered focus back to the ledger.

At first glance, I thought that the columns in increments of fifty might have been to represent ages, and that Norris was asking me to fill in the ledger every day with how old the customers were. There didn't seem to be any other possibility given the magnitude of the numbers. But judging customers' ages was difficult for me, so I asked Norris about it, and he kindly told me I didn't have to worry about that.

Maybe it was difficult for me because I could only perceive age through the sensibilities of my previous life. Here, someone who I thought was in their

twenties might actually be in their seventies, and it was even harder to tell with beastfolk. And dragonfolk were impossible even to think about; Revale looked like he was in his late twenties, but he could easily have been over a thousand years old. Come to think of it, I had no idea how old Kyle was, either.

I could use magic to deal with it, but it just felt wrong somehow to resort to magic to figure out someone's age, so I decided against it. Just as I wouldn't ask a stranger their age, I didn't want to learn how old they were without saying anything to them.

"Do you do this tally every day?" I asked Norris, looking at the ledger spread out on the counter.

"Yes. I need to check how many of each flower I need for the following day," he replied.

"Oh, I see. I didn't notice because you were always cleaning up when I went home."

"I decided to put off cleaning until tomorrow. I wanted to go home early for Elly's sake since tomorrow's a holiday, but I was curious about how we did today so I wanted to tally them up. Don't mind me, Setsuna. Go on home."

However, if he put off the cleaning until tomorrow, that would mean he'd be coming in on a day off. In Lypaed, most shops closed on days that ended in one, five, or six, and Norris's shop was no exception. Since tomorrow was the fifth, it would be the first holiday of 4th Salkis. He'd been pushing himself so hard that I couldn't help but worry about him working on his day off.

"I'll take care of the cleaning," I offered, hoping to lighten his load. I started to get the cleaning supplies, but then noticed he looked slightly troubled.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"It seems like there's something wrong with the totals."

He flipped through the ledger with a grim expression on his face. He seemed to be recounting how many of each flower had been sold and checking to see if it matched the numbers in the ledger. I wasn't sure what might have happened to make the tallies not match up, but wondered if maybe the issue was in how the numbers had been counted, which I might be able to help with.

I had tried to get used to counting in this world many times before, but each time I'd given up because I kept making mistakes. The method involved drawing a horizontal line for each count of one, and stacking them up to five to count as one group of five. So, one to three resembled the same number in Chinese numerals.

The problem was that you just continued adding horizontal lines up to five, so it was easy to accidentally draw six lines in a hurry, or finish with only four lines and mistake it for a group of five. Well, it would be a different story when I taught Alto, because I'd have to teach him to get used to the counting method of this world.

"Want me to do the tallying? Sometimes when you look at numbers too long it can be confusing, so it might be faster if someone else does it."

Norris was hesitant, but he bowed his head gratefully and showed me how to tally the data. The total of the male, female, and gender unknown columns represented the number of flowers sold, while the age columns were for reference only, so the numbers there didn't necessarily have to match the sales count.

The issue was with the columns divided into time intervals. The numbers in these columns had to match the total from the gender-related columns, but there was a discrepancy between the entries for roses and lisianthuses. I thought there might have been a miscalculation from incorrectly reading the data, so I recounted the figures only to find that the tally itself was accurate.

I was convinced that the error lay in the tallying for the table, so I got Norris's permission to tear the last page in half and create a separate table for roses and lisianthuses. I went back to today's sales page and began to recount the table. Since the tallies were kept in the order in which the flowers were sold, the tally marks tended to jump from one column to the next each time, so I was careful not to overlook any entries and consolidated the figures under the gender-and time-related columns using Japanese-style tally marks.

After a while, I finished the recount and called out to Norris. He had been cleaning while I worked, but stopped and looked at the chart I'd made.

"The tally for two in the afternoon was missing one, and the man who bought

a lisianthus at four was also missing," I explained, pointing to Norris's table and my table.

"I see. Thank you very much."

He realized where he'd made a mistake and sighed in relief.

"Setsuna, what are these symbols?"

Now that he had relaxed, he was curious about the tally mark I'd written, and pointed out the Japanese character.

"This is a symbol I thought would be useful when tallying numbers. I made the shapes of the lines from three to five unique so that they wouldn't be mistaken for another group."

I couldn't tell him that it was a kanji from my previous world, so I wrote the lines in order from one to five, pretending it was a unique symbol I came up with on my own.

"That is easy to understand. I definitely think it would reduce mistakes."

"Go ahead and try it."

Here, in this world without kanji, I'd never imagined that anyone would use this Japanese character as a new, unfamiliar symbol. But much to my surprise, Norris was quite enthusiastic about it and continued to eagerly write it again and again, nodding in satisfaction.

"I don't think it's anything special," I said, still reeling, to which Norris shook his head.

"Small shops like ours should incorporate any improvements like this whenever possible!" he said enthusiastically.

Seeing how happy he was reminded me of Zigel, who I'd met during my first quest, and I couldn't help but think how capable and competent Norris was.

"I'm glad I was able to help. Now that we've finished tallying up, are you going to go home?"

"Not yet, I'm still cleaning up. Once I get started, I feel bad if I don't finish, so I'll go home once I'm done. Setsuna, please don't worry about me and head

## home."

I understood that feeling. But since I was the one who'd started the cleaning by getting out the supplies, I couldn't just leave.

"In that case, why don't we clean up together? It'll be faster that way."

We decided to divvy up the cleaning and then go home.

Since Master had two days off, Gramps also gave me a day off. We were going to take a quest together, but when I looked at the bulletin board in the Adventurers Guild, I didn't see anything that really jumped out at me.

The only quests that had been posted to the Yellow bulletin board were ones Master had told me about before, like picking herbs. Because this was our first quest together, I wanted to do something he hadn't done before, instead of these sorts of basic ones.

That was when I came up with asking for a fishing quest. When Master and I went fishing, he looked like he was having so much fun and said it was his first time, so I knew he'd never taken a fishing quest before. Unfortunately, there were no yellow-rank fishing quests, and I wasn't sure if fishing even counted as a quest. I couldn't ask Master right now, so maybe I'd sneak over to the guildmaster and ask him.

Master was behind me reading a book at the desk. I wanted to surprise him, so I hoped he wouldn't see me.

I thought now would be a good time, so I looked for the guildmaster and saw him straightening up something at the counter. If I went all the way over there to talk to him, Master would probably notice and be able to listen in. Just when I was about to give up on it, I had a completely different idea.

Master could do anything, and I thought he knew everything, but recently he'd said there was something he didn't understand, which surprised me a bit. It all suddenly came rushing back to me. Even if there weren't any fishing quests, I knew for a fact that there were quests involving that thing he didn't know. I was sure he'd be happy to do that sort of a quest.

I already knew there wasn't a quest like that on the Yellow board, so I went to check the Green board. It was the same when I found Gramps's quest, but I'd gotten much better at reading. There were still a lot of words I didn't understand, though. I'd recognized more words on the Yellow board, so I wished there had been a good quest there.

I wanted to ask Master what the words infiltration, expulsion, and cultivation

meant, but I managed to stop myself. Dahlia had told me there was a book called a dictionary where you could look up words you didn't know, so maybe I would save up some money and buy one. Well, I hadn't finished my quest and received a reward yet, so I'd just have to work hard on that first.

Even if I was with Master, I wondered whether I'd be better off choosing a quest that would earn me a reward. If they scaled the reward to my rank, then the amount Master earned would decrease, but I knew he wouldn't care about that and tell me to choose a quest I wanted to do.

"Alto, you still haven't decided? At this rate we won't have any time left to do a quest."

"I can't find anything good yet."

I was thinking so much I didn't know what quest to pick. I thought and thought but couldn't decide what to do. And just then, a quest fell right into my lap.

## Part Three: Setsuna

We were the only adventurers in the guild and it was all quiet, perhaps because we came early in the morning. Drum sat silently at the counter, sorting through requests. He did that every morning, just as Nestor in Gardir had done as well.

After he was finished with that, Drum held the stack of quests and went over to the bulletin board to begin posting them. Alto's eyes began to sparkle, and then he tore one off the board and brought it over. He handed it happily to me and I took a look at it, and felt my chest tighten.

"Alto, are you sure you want to do this quest?"

He nodded emphatically, and I could tell he'd already made up his mind, which caused that tightness in my chest to constrict even further. The first line read: *Quest Name: Preservation of Ruins*.

Alto knows I'm interested in ruins.

It was sad that we couldn't accept the quest, since Alto had been so kind picking it out for me.

"Can we take this quest, Master?" He looked up at me anxiously.

"Alto. It takes half a day on horseback to get to these ruins."

"I've never ridden a horse before. Can't we do it? Couldn't we walk?"

He seemed disappointed when I mentioned the horse.

"That's not the point, Alto. It would take a day to get to the ruins and back, and surveying them would take another half day."

The quest involved checking how weathered the ruins were and replacing barriers for preservation. There were also other things involved, and based on that I calculated it would take half a day to complete the work.

*"…"* 

Alto looked like he didn't understand what I was talking about. I wanted him to come to the realization by himself, but gave up and sternly asked him, "Alto.

What is your job right now?"

"My job...is to take care of Gramps."

Suddenly his face contorted in anguish. It seemed like he'd figured out the problem, but I continued my questioning.

"And how many days off did he give you?"

"Just today..."

"That's right. You don't know where these ruins are located, and you didn't know the details of the quest, so I can't blame you for picking it. And I know you chose this quest with me in mind, which is very kind of you."

I stopped there. Alto's head drooped, and I knew I didn't have to say anything else.

"I should've realized we couldn't do it when you said it would take half a day by horse. I got distracted by the horse and messed up. I'm sorry."

He apologized by bowing low, so I could see how bad he felt about his mistake. It was just like him to be so remorseful.

"You realized your mistake and apologized, so it's fine."

I stroked his hair and smiled at him.

"Now, what should we—"

Suddenly Drum interrupted me mid-sentence by calling my name. He saw me lecturing Alto and came over to me.

"Don't you think you're being too hard on the boy?"

"I'm sorry if we were being too loud. We should've gone somewhere else. But this is a problem between me and my apprentice, so I would appreciate it if you stayed out of it."

"That's not the problem. As you can see, you're the only ones in here right now, so it makes sense why you lectured him here. But since this involves a quest, and I'm the guildmaster, I think I have the right to offer my opinion, don't you think?"

I couldn't argue with that, so I nodded and said, "Yes."

"The reason why the guild allows adventurers of different ranks to form temporary parties is so that lower-ranked adventurers can gain experiences in a variety of different quests. They need to know what they're in for when they get to the higher ranks, both for their sake and for the sake of the guild."

As Drum spoke, Alto tried to return the quest form, saying, "It was my fault," but the guildmaster just poked him in the forehead. I laughed and said I wasn't in the mood to argue about it either, and Alto looked at us both with relief.

"To be honest, I feel sorry for him. But there's more to it. Since you're a scholar and a sorcerer, I was hoping you would accept this quest, and thought it would be good training for a novice. So, from the guild's point of view, we can kill two birds with one stone."

"But Alto's in the middle of another quest."

"Hm? So why don't you ask for just one more day off? It's a master's duty to fight for his apprentice, right? I'm not saying you should disrespect your client, but it's normal to schedule your days off. Lots of adventurers take time off here and there, even with live-in quests, so old man Ragi shouldn't mind if Alto asks for a couple days off."

"Ragi already agreed to one day off, though, so I feel like it'd be rude to ask him to extend that to suit us."

"Well, that is true, but..." The guildmaster sat down in the seat next to me. "This is a good opportunity, so I want to talk to you about something."

With a strained smile on his face, Alto said that this was his fault one more time before being seated. I wondered what Drum might want to talk about, but he told me, "Don't worry, it won't take long."

"What is it?"

"I think it goes without saying that one of the duties of a guildmaster is to verify the true nature of new adventurers who arrive under their jurisdiction, to ensure they're not criminals or anything like that. So, I was checking your quest history and was surprised to find out that, apart from one temporary party you joined, you've done all your quests solo."

How did the conversation shift from Alto's quest to me?

I glanced at Drum with a puzzled expression, and he continued.

"Which brings me to my main point. Normally this isn't something I'd come right out and say; adventurers are expected to figure it out for themselves, but I thought I'd mention it to you out of concern since you've had limited opportunities to learn such things working solo."

I nodded.

"You're right to prioritize the client's quest, but there are other things that matter, too. You need to start looking at things from the perspective of creating a conducive environment for an adventurer to work in. That's one of the duties of someone in a leadership position. Even if people in lower positions scream at the top of their lungs, their working environments often end up unchanged, which is why those in positions of power, whose opinions are more easily heard, need to be the ones to step up and improve the environment for everyone else."

The duty of someone in a leadership position...

Memories from months ago when I joined the temporary party with Agito flashed through my mind. I remembered Agito and Beet had persuaded Nestor to offer me the reward, and although I didn't care much about the reward, they'd insisted that adventurers should receive fair compensation because they risked their lives for quests.

Taking that into consideration, Alto's days off were the equivalent of a reward, so it was only right for him to receive them.

"You're an incredibly talented individual who can handle anything without much trouble—something you should be more aware of. But since you've mostly worked solo, you lack the common sense that most adventurers have. That's why you don't attach much importance to rewards."

"I understand."

"Let me be clear: Your performance as an adventurer is not only satisfactory, but commendable. The guildmaster of Gardir has reported to the main guild headquarters with each completed quest that your work is meticulous and flawless. With your skills, you should aim to move up as quickly as possible."

I found myself feeling happy that Nestor had evaluated my work so highly.

"That's why it's a shame. As a rule, the guild doesn't promote people who seem incapable of fulfilling leadership roles, so understanding your role is very important. I mentioned earlier that this is something you should've realized on your own rather than having to be told, but it seems like you never had the opportunity before, which is why I'm giving you this advice."

I expressed my gratitude and noticed Alto looking at me happily.

"Thank you very much. Now then, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go home and ask permission for Alto."

"Sure, good luck."

With Drum's warm words of encouragement, we hurried back to Ragi's house.

Part Four: Ragi

We reached our destination with time to spare before evening fell.

"We got here faster than I thought we would."

We crossed the stone walkway and stood in front of a cabin nestled halfway up a cliff. Both the cabin and the rock beneath our feet protruded unnaturally from the cliff like shelves. It had an artificial feel, and had probably been created by Earth magic.

"Nice work. I was surprised when you said you wanted to come with us, Ragi. But it seems my worries were unfounded," Setsuna said with a smile, the last to arrive.

But his eyes weren't smiling. He knew that I didn't have much time left to live, so he was probably worried I'd strain myself and shorten it even more...

"You should really stop treating me like an old man," I joked lightly to ease his concerns, while subtly signaling to him with my eyes that the most important thing right now was to praise Alto, who looked dejected. Setsuna nodded and gently patted Alto's head.

"Good job, Alto."

"I couldn't ride properly. I'm just a burden. I'm sorry."

Alto had never ridden a horse before and had been feeling down ever since Setsuna had rented a horse and two-person saddle from the Adventurers Guild. According to Setsuna, Alto had been saying that he wanted to practice ever since he became an adventurer, but Setsuna had purposely not taught Alto because he thought it was too early for him to ride a horse for quests.

"There's no need to apologize. I never taught you, so how could you know?" Setsuna tried to reassure him, but Alto wouldn't hear it. "What matters is that you hung in there for such a long time on horseback. You did great! Really."

After Setsuna praised him, Alto seemed to cheer up and his tail wagged happily. As I watched their heartwarming exchange, I thought that I'd made the right decision to come along, despite my reservations.

When Setsuna and Alto returned from the guild and asked for Alto to have another day off, I was going to say it was fine right away. However, Alto had a solemn look on his face that piqued my curiosity, so I asked what happened, a mischievous glint in my eye.

Setsuna grew serious and told me, "We need two days for a ruins preservation quest, because this will be a good experience for Alto for the future."

Looking at his expression, I found myself overcome with the feeling of wanting to do something for this master and apprentice. In that same moment, I remembered their morning training and thought that this quest might prove useful to Alto someday, so I agreed to give him an extra day off on the condition that I accompany them to the ruins.

That wasn't the only reason, though; I'd felt a profound sense of loneliness at the thought of being away from this pair, whom I adored, for two days. So, with the guildmaster's approval, we ended up coming here together.

I'd lost myself in thought for a moment thinking about this morning's events, but Setsuna's voice brought me back to myself.

"According to the quest form, we're supposed to enter the ruins from this cabin."

That made sense, considering the cabin was built into the side of the cliff. Setsuna used the key he'd brought to open the door and went inside. Alto followed, and I brought up the rear.

The first thing that caught my eye was the artificial cavern built into the rock wall, which stood out in the room. I was briefly surprised and, as I glanced around, saw that the interior was very spacious. There was a fireplace, a desk and chairs, and four simple beds. It was very nice for accommodations built for people coming to help preserve the ruins.

"We're supposed to attach a lifeline to those stakes, then enter through that opening."

There were four stakes driven into the ground in front of the curious cavern

entrance—the beginning of the ruins. The passage beyond was a steep slope, and I could see how one might easily tumble down if not being extra careful. I was glad I had come along after all.

I thought back to when Setsuna had tried to persuade me not to come because it was too dangerous. A long time ago, the mountain had shifted. Half of it had disappeared, while the other half had turned into a cliff face. The ruins inside had also moved, leaving no way to walk on them, so there was a considerable risk of falling. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard this story for the first time, but after seeing the ruins for myself, there was nothing else I could do but take it as fact.

There must have been ruins near the entrance on the side that had disappeared, because I could see exposed, broken pathways with no door. The cabin had been built around the entrance instead to prevent the interior of the ruins from being exposed to the elements and deteriorating.

"What shall we do? We were planning on just returning tomorrow, but I'd like to take a break before the survey. Ragi, if you're feeling tired, should we rest up and start tomorrow instead?"

"But won't that make you late for work the day after tomorrow?"

"If it comes to that, I can use Wind magic to teleport along the way, so please don't let that worry you." Setsuna said this casually, but it was quite an extraordinary statement. Although he wasn't suggesting to teleport the entire distance we'd traveled on horseback, teleportation magic consumed different amounts of mana depending on the weight you carried and the distance. Pushing himself that far just to make it back in time for his job the day after next seemed unreasonable.

"Didn't I tell you not to treat me like an old man? I'm not so old that half a day on horseback tires me out." I found that strangely amusing coming from me, but I honestly wasn't tired at all.

"Well, let's take a short break before entering the ruins. Alto seems to want some sweets."

Alto had looked a bit tired, but now his ears perked up, and he eagerly began rummaging through his bag for snacks.

"Gramps, which one would you like?"

I was grateful for the time Setsuna had given us, and took one of the snacks Alto offered.

After resting for a while, we began preparing to survey the ruins. Setsuna tied a rope to one of the stakes and wound it around Alto, explaining how it worked and its importance as he did so. Although Alto looked a bit confused, he listened attentively and watched what Setsuna did with his hands.

Once Setsuna was finished explaining, he handed a rope to Alto to put his training into action and set up Setsuna's lifeline. I watched on, impressed at how clever Alto was, as he did his best to set up the lifeline, turning over what he had been taught in his head the whole time.

That wasn't to say things went smoothly, but of course it's rare for things to go right the first time you do something. Setsuna seemed to understand this too, smiling and saying, "This bit's a little tricky, isn't it?" as he continued to patiently guide Alto through the process.

Finally, when their lifelines were set up, Setsuna noticed I hadn't prepared mine and called out to me. "Ragi, do you not know how to set up a lifeline either?"

I gave him a knowing smile and took off my shoes. "When you're as skilled as I am, you can climb cliffs just by focusing on your footing! I can climb down a slope like this with my eyes closed."

I wasn't joking; it was something that was possible for an adult beastfolk if they honed their strength and sense of balance. Human and beastfolk bodies were fundamentally different, after all. That was why I had come along, because I wanted to impress this upon Alto.

## Finally...

I felt my excitement rising, but reminded myself not to overdo it and balled my hands into fists to restrain myself. I didn't want to show off too much and have Alto try to copy me. I had emphasized my own capacity to do this, rather than that of beastfolk in general, to avoid drawing too much attention to the

fact that Alto might be able to do it, too.

This was too dangerous for a child whose body hadn't fully developed, and Alto still had a lot of growing to do, so it would be too risky for him to attempt trying to imitate me just yet. Instead, I was doing this so he would have it to look back on when he was fully grown, so I hoped it would leave an impression on him.

Learning how to tie knots the right way was also crucial. I was sure it would come in handy when Alto eventually took on quests alongside humans, so right now, that was the more important skill for him to master. I just hoped that what I did today would someday be useful to him.

"All right. Just don't push yourself too hard."

Although I hadn't told Setsuna what I was thinking, he seemed to understand and didn't say anything further. Instead, he said to Alto, "What Ragi's about to do is dangerous for children, so don't try to copy him."

Alto didn't seem to get it at first, so Setsuna rephrased what he'd said, explaining that he was allowed to try it when he grew up, which Alto seemed to understand. I admired the power of Setsuna's keen insight, as usual.

"Don't worry. One of the basics of being an adventurer is to avoid dangerous things, so I won't try to copy him."

"Good job, Alto. Now, here's another question. What's the last thing you need to prepare before entering ruins or caves?"

I didn't know whether it was because the question was so easy or because it had left a strong impression on Alto, but he answered immediately. "A light source!"

"Correct."

And with that, Setsuna took out a square piece of paper from his bag and handed it to Alto. It was a single-use Fire magical tool. Alto gleefully tore the paper and a fire ignited from the tear, quickly burning into a fist-sized ball of fire that floated overhead.

The magic fireball couldn't burn things, but would light the way for about ten

hours. It was a standard magical tool for exploring dark places like caves, and Alto seemed to be very fond of it. His eyes sparkled with a light other than that of the fire reflected in them.

I watched Alto for a while, then he looked at me and said with quiet reluctance, "Shall we go?" I understood how he felt and nodded.

The slope of the ruins wasn't as steep as the face of a cliff, but it was slanted enough that if you put a stone on it, it wouldn't roll, but skip and fall. Setsuna faced backward and rappelled down, holding onto the rope as he descended slowly. Next to him, Alto followed his master's example and moved his feet down the slope.

I felt sorry for Alto that his first experience using a lifeline was to rappel. If they were ascending, he could have watched Setsuna climb upward from beside him, but here he had to keep looking down.

The side wall of the passageway, which was illuminated by the fireball above Alto's head, was about seventy-five mers, give or take. That might not seem like much distance for a hallway in a building, but when it was in height, it made a big difference.

However, contrary to my expectations, Alto didn't seem frightened. His feet were planted firmly, and he wasn't trembling even though we were so high up. It seemed like my concerns had been unfounded.

"How can you walk like that? You're amazing, Gramps." Alto noticed me watching and called out.

"It's not anything special. You'll understand when you grow up, Alto." As I spoke, I slowly descended the slope keeping an eye on Alto's face. Supporting my body by gripping onto the floor with my feet, I had to be careful not to break it, which was a bit tricky.

If I were in the mountains, I'd dig my toes into the ground as much as I could, but I had to be more careful since these were precious ruins. If I did something like that, I'm sure I'd get a scolding from Setsuna. He was already inspecting the walls for any cracks or fissures.

"Hey, Alto. Don't just focus on Ragi. Do what I'm doing and check if the ruins are deteriorating. Things can degrade a lot when they're left unattended for a year."

"Yes, Master."

Alto began to stare at the walls with the same serious expression Setsuna had.

They're so much alike.

I suppressed the urge to burst out laughing and watched the two of them work. When Setsuna had mentioned the ruins being empty for a year, he'd been referring to the fact that the university in Lypaed sent quests to the Adventurers Guild once a year to check that the ruins were being preserved. Setsuna had told us about that when he explained the quest to us.

"Take a look at this, Alto."

Halfway down the passage, Setsuna pointed to a wall that was badly cracked.

"Wow!" Alto said.

"The previous report said that all the damage to the ruins had been repaired, so this must've happened in the past year. Let's try to find out the cause."

Setsuna took something shaped like a spoon from his bag.

"What's that, Setsuna?"

I'd never seen that kind of tool before, so I was curious.

"The client gave it to me. It's an Earth magical tool. If you tap on a spot, it'll resonate to give you feedback on the surrounding geology."

As he spoke, he lightly tapped the wall with the magical tool, and it echoed with a deep, low sound.

"I thought there might be something causing stress on this wall, but that doesn't seem to be the problem. If there were issues, it would emit a warning sound, but it's not doing that right now."

"I see. What other sounds does it make?" I asked, my interest growing. Alto looked excited, too, as he stared at Setsuna.

"I've only read the manual, so I don't know the actual noises it makes, but if you tap on an area and it's hollow, it makes a sort of dried-out sound. If you tap it and it makes a dripping sound, that means there's water."

"I really hope we get to hear that."

Setsuna smiled at my response and took out something that looked like a feather duster, about the size of a calligraphy brush.

"And that?"

"This is also an Earth magical tool, for repairs. It'll be faster to show it to you than to explain."

With that, he swept the feathered part of the tool over the cracks, which disappeared without a trace.

"The manual warned not to use it on paintings or patterns, because if you use it by mistake you can't undo the effects," Setsuna said, seeming just as surprised as we were at the results, staring intently at the magical tool.

"Can I do it next time?" Alto pleaded.

"Yes, when we find another spot to repair," Setsuna promised.

The survey proceeded smoothly in this fashion. We checked every room on both sides of the passage and then finally reached the bottom.

"We made it to the bottom!" Alto exclaimed triumphantly, but Setsuna shook his head and pointed to a door. He opened it, revealing a spiral staircase, indicating that our survey wasn't over just yet. Alto slumped, and Setsuna chuckled as he removed the rope from Alto's waist. He'd changed the rope several times during their descent, and it seemed like this one had also served its purpose.

"We won't need a lifeline for this staircase," Setsuna said.

Just like everything else, the spiral staircase leading to the floor below was at an angle, and since it was essentially on its side, the center of the spiral was like a ceiling. The landing looked to be less than a mer in length, with the diameter of the cavern in the center one mer, so all told it looked to be under three mers

in height. Of course, we couldn't use it as a staircase, but thanks to the central cavern we could move forward by stepping over the landing of the staircase that blocked the path.

"Shall we?" Setsuna asked, jumping lightly over onto the side with the staircase.

Alto was behind him, and the light must not have been reaching Setsuna because he took out another magical tool and ripped it, causing a fireball to float above his head as well.

"That'll make it easier to see things," he murmured, and began looking all around him.

Alto followed behind him and placed his hand on the floor—which was about as tall as he was—and used it to gracefully leap over to the staircase side.

I guess I won't have my moment to shine after all.

I was a bit disappointed as I followed suit. After about seven mers, we finally reached the end of the staircase, and came to another door.

"This should be the last floor..."

Setsuna bent down and looked at the stake in front of the door.

"Are there more long passages and rooms up ahead?" I asked Setsuna, feeling weary at the thought of encountering the same sorts of sights we'd already seen. So far, the ruins had been nothing but stone passages and empty chambers. Anything of value had already been taken out of the ruins, so I was starting to feel a bit fed up.

"This passage only has one room at the very end, but it seems longer than anything we've seen so far," Setsuna replied.

I assumed it wouldn't take too much more time, so I waited for the two of them to finish preparing before opening the door.

"Master, how deep is this place?!" Alto exclaimed in surprise, peeking around from behind us.

It must have been deeper than I first thought. I estimated it to be about 220 mers deep, but Setsuna didn't say anything in reply. Instead, he took out a small

object that looked like a pebble from his bag.

"Go ahead and measure it to see for sure," Setsuna said.

"What is this, Master?"

"Another single-use magical tool. Rub it thirty times with both hands."

The Earth magical tool that Setsuna gave Alto was commonly used in investigating ruins like these. Alto rubbed it in his hands, and as soon as he'd done it thirty times, it began to emit a faint blue glow. He followed Setsuna's instructions and threw it down the passage, where it rolled away.

"180... 200... 220... 232 mers. Master, it stopped moving 232 mers in that direction!"

The distance and direction the magical tool had moved was represented by numbers and arrows in Alto's mind. I remembered how surprised and amazed I'd been at the sudden appearance of numbers and arrows in my mind when I'd first used that magical tool centuries ago. I'd probably had the same expression on my face that Alto did now.

"It's generally used to measure holes where you can't see the bottom, but I thought this might be a good chance to use it anyway. Remember to take one with you when you go on surveys in the future, Alto."

"Okay, Master!"

I couldn't help but chuckle hearing them talk. If he hadn't had the chance to use it yet, Setsuna could have just waited for the next opportunity and taught Alto then. But Setsuna loved teaching Alto new things, so he'd decided to use it anyway.

"Is something the matter?" Setsuna asked, noticing my reaction.

"No, I was just thinking you're a very hard worker."

"Gramps, why is Master a hard worker?"

It was Alto who'd responded immediately. His gaze was so earnest I couldn't contain myself and burst out laughing. A troubled expression flickered across Setsuna's face, and he looked at me.

Perhaps he realized he'd gone a bit overboard. It was quite challenging to find the right balance when teaching, after all, especially for someone as young as Setsuna, who was still feeling his way through life.

"I was just thinking that you must love watching Alto learn, which is why you're trying your best to teach him all sorts of things."

"I'll try harder!" Alto happily burst out.

Setsuna nodded, looking slightly embarrassed. "Well, when we get back, we'll review what we learned today," he said, smiling as he ruffled Alto's hair. Watching master and apprentice together, I found myself liking the two of them even more.

A little later, we arrived at the door of the final room at the far end of the passageway. There was a door at our feet, and here, too, stakes had been driven into the floor of the passageway in front of it.

"The next room isn't very large, but it's where the important artifacts in these ruins are stored. It says here we should change our lifelines and examine the chamber thoroughly."

Hearing this, I couldn't help but let my excitement get the better of me at the thought that not all of the artifacts had been removed from the ruins, and I waited for the two of them to finish getting ready. After Alto and Setsuna had tied ropes around one another's waists and made sure they were secure, we finally opened the door.

Before us lay a room exactly like the ones we'd seen before. The only difference was that this one had a raised dais-like object made of bluesilver attached to the floor.

"Setsuna, what's that?"

"It's a secret. Let's examine the chamber first."

Although Alto and I both raised our voices in opposition against Setsuna's teasing, he started examining the room with a serious look on his face. We reluctantly followed behind and worked hard to complete the survey quickly. Maybe that was why it felt like we finished in no time.

"Master, we're done examining the room, so please tell us!" Alto urged Setsuna, and I secretly agreed.

"It's a bit hard to live up to such high expectations."

With a little hop, he jumped up onto the dais, which was about two mers high, and stood there at an angle with one foot on the floor. Alto climbed onto the floor to imitate him and tried to keep himself from falling, but he ended up slowly sliding back down.

"Maybe it's still too difficult for you, Alto, so I'll make an exception this time." Setsuna chanted some sort of incantation and Alto's body began to float in the air.

"Windmasters can use this kind of magic, too, but it's usually reserved for emergencies, like when someone falls off a cliff. So even if you team up with a Windmaster, you shouldn't expect them to use it lightly," Setsuna explained.

Alto nodded in response, but apparently that wasn't what had interested him, because he had a different follow-up question.

"Master, can you use magic to fly?"

I didn't understand why he was asking such a thing, but Setsuna seemed to have an idea almost immediately, because he gave a pained smile.

"Yes, but when I'm in a hurry or panicked, I might forget to think about using magic I don't use too often. I need to learn from your example and train more," Setsuna said with chagrin, but Alto shook his head.

"I think you're doing great, Master!"

Although I wasn't sure what they were talking about exactly, it seemed like they'd once fallen off a cliff, and that Setsuna could have avoided it entirely if he'd used magic back then.

"Did you get injured when you fell off the cliff?" I asked Setsuna as I climbed up onto the floor.

"At the time, I saw Alto falling and panicked. I caught up with him using teleportation magic and used a barrier to soften the impact, so we didn't get injured, but I realized I needed to be more versatile with my magic," Setsuna

said.

"I got knocked unconscious, but Master told me later on why I didn't get hurt. But if I could fly, I would've gone to the top of that mountain to see the scenery!" Alto chimed in.

I felt sorry for Setsuna, who seemed to feel quite guilty about this story, where he had behaved quite unlike his usual meticulous self. But after Alto suddenly dispelled the tension in the room, I burst out laughing instead.

"Alto, it's one thing when you're with me, but you can't just ask that sort of thing from other sorcerers," Setsuna warned.

"Sorry, Master," Alto apologized and looked down humbly. He nodded, and then with a serious expression on his face, said, "I'll only ask you." It was a stern, yet sweet moment, which was typical of the two of them.

"As long as you understand. Anyway, how about I reveal the identity of this magical tool you've all been waiting for?"

I had been momentarily distracted by their discussion, but quickly shifted my gaze to the dais.

Once Setsuna saw that I was watching, he inserted his fingers into the five holes on the right side. Light shone from the top of the platform, projecting some kind of symbols onto Setsuna's face.

"I can't read those symbols, Master. Can you teach me?" Alto asked.

"This is the ancient script. It says, 'Incorrect destination for teleportation,'" Setsuna explained.

"Oh! So this is one of those magic teleportation circles I've heard about!" I blurted out, unable to contain my excitement. Startled by my sudden exclamation, Alto gave me a surprised look.

"Sorry about that," I apologized. "It's just, this is my first time seeing a teleportation circle, so I couldn't help myself."

"You've never seen one before, Gramps?" Alto asked, realizing how rare they must be. His eyes began to sparkle with excitement. Although teleportation circles have been found in every country, they're so valuable that they're

usually strictly regulated, making it extremely rare for them to be seen by the general public except under special circumstances like this.

"It would be amazing to see a teleportation circle even once a year," I said honestly, and Setsuna looked apologetic.

"It's broken, so we can't use it, which is why adventurers like us were hired for this job. If it was functional, the job would go to higher-ranked adventurers, white or black ranks, or be handled by the kingdom's own sorcerers," Setsuna explained.

"I see." I understood now that the reason lower-ranked adventurers like Setsuna and Alto had the chance to take on a job like this was because the device was broken and not as valuable. Still, I was glad to be able to see a teleportation circle with my very own eyes. Everyone knew that they existed, but few had ever actually seen one, making this an incredible experience for me.

"Can't you fix it, Master?" Alto asked.

"I'm afraid not," Setsuna replied. He moved his right hand slightly in the device, causing the ancient characters to change. "It might be broken, but even the magic that causes these characters to float in the air is valuable. If we could understand this technology, then we would be able to incorporate this sort of a function into the magical tools that are created now. Although that would be very expensive," he explained as he continued to operate the device.

"What are you doing, Setsuna?" I asked.

I was curious as to why the characters were still changing despite the teleportation circle being broken.

"Although the circle can't be used for teleportation anymore, it still shows you all the functions it can perform. Checking that was also part of the quest," Setsuna said.

"I see. So that's why they requested a scholar," I surmised.

"Right. Or, more accurately, being able to read the ancient script was a requirement for accepting the quest."

After a while, he let out a small sigh and said, "Thanks for waiting. I'm finished with the inspection."

"Nice work. By the way, what do the ancient characters there say?" I asked as he was about to take his fingers out of the device. I found myself not wanting the magical tool to stop.

"It says, 'Please reset the destination for teleportation,' and it prompts you to input how many mers you want to travel in each cardinal direction."

"Oh? So if you entered that information, wouldn't it solve the problem we had earlier?" I asked.

"Sadly, the input function is broken, so we can't set any values. Normally there'd be a display here for putting in the numbers...," Setsuna explained, pointing to an empty space in the air with his left hand. "But as you can see, there isn't, so we can't fix the destination for teleportation."

"I see. That's a shame," I replied.

Naturally, if it were something that could be easily fixed, they would've done so already, so despite the fact I'd expressed my regret, I honestly wasn't all that disappointed.

In the middle of my conversation with Setsuna, Alto suddenly cried out, "I remember now! That's been bothering me for a while!"

"What's the matter, Alto?" Setsuna inquired. "Why'd you yell out all of a sudden?" We both looked at Alto, surprised.

"I asked Master about magic teleportation circles. At the time, I thought it was strange but couldn't figure out why. Now I understand!"

"You did? What was it you found strange?" Setsuna asked kindly.

"Master said all the teleportation circles on the north continent face toward the Demonlands."

"Yes, they do."

"But you said the Demonlands are dangerous, and once you go there, you can't come back."

"Is there a problem with that?" Setsuna retorted, smiling.

"There is. How do we know all the teleportation circles end in the Demonlands if, once you go there, you can never come back? If the people who went there never returned, we wouldn't know where they wound up, right?"

As I listened to this exchange, I was both surprised that they were talking about all that and impressed by Alto's perceptiveness. If I were Alto, I might not have questioned it and simply accepted the matter. Unfortunately, I didn't know the answer, either. I'd never even had any doubts until today. I wondered how Setsuna would answer, and he surprised us by chuckling and smiling at Alto.

"It's amazing you noticed that, Alto. I had a feeling you would."

The apprentice nodded, clearly pleased with his master's compliment.

"But Alto, you already know the answer," Setsuna said, causing Alto to grow confused. "Try to think about what happened today."

As Alto racked his brain trying to remember, I thought with him, and something clicked in my mind.

I see. You knew Alto would think about that. You're quite the strategist, Setsuna.

Just as I was amazed by Alto's insight, I was surprised by Setsuna's shrewd teaching style. This master and apprentice were truly fascinating to watch. As I pondered this, Alto seemed to come to the same conclusion as me and began to answer Setsuna.

"I know! It was the Earth magical tool I threw!" Alto said.

"Correct," Setsuna confirmed, prompting a broad smile from Alto. "Of course, they teleport a more powerful magical tool than that one, but the principle is the same. Regardless of the destination, whenever they try to locate it based on the distance and direction, the magical tool always ends up pointing to the Demonlands, which is how they knew."

"Ohhh!"

"Well, in reality, they're not going all the way into the Demonlands to find the

magical tools, so it could be pointing to an unknown land beyond there that we don't know about yet. But we know that they point to the deeper parts of the Demonlands, so that's where we say the teleportation circles go."

"That solves it, Master! Thank you so much!" Alto seemed thrilled to have unraveled the mystery, and Setsuna seemed just as pleased. Seeing master and apprentice get along so well warmed my heart. Perhaps because I was being so quiet, the two of them turned toward me at the same time looking concerned. I smiled at them, and they both smiled back.

Seeing the ease of that gesture, I felt hot tears well up in my eyes. It made me feel like I wasn't alone. They acted like it was only natural that I was here with them, and the days I'd spent back in my homeland, smiling with my family under the trees, came rushing back to me. Whenever Alto would yell "Gramps!" at me, or Setsuna would call out "Ragi!" their voices would be filled with nothing but fondness for me.

By opening their hearts to me, the two of them had allowed me to believe that we'd become a true family. Even if it was just a temporary situation, deep down, I wished that time could stop, because right in this moment I was truly happy.

Who could have imagined I'd know such peace at the end of my life? Certainly not me. Nobody else would ever know just how much color these two had brought back into my life.

## Part Five: Setsuna

The ruins survey quest that Alto chose for me ended without incident. I was surprised when Ragi told us that he wanted to accompany us, but I had a feeling he wanted to come to show Alto how to use beastfolk powers.

I learned from our overnight stay at the ruins that Ragi was a very active and curious person who had experienced a lot in his life, and as he'd confessed already, that he liked pranks. He looked just like Alto whenever something interesting caught his eye, and the way their eyes sparkled looking at things like magical tools made them seem like a real grandfather and grandson.

Thanks to this quest, Alto's rank rose one level to yellow 2—the second of three levels for yellow. He must've been happy that the color of the emblem on the back of his hand had changed a little, because he kept showing it to Ragi and me.

I'd been thinking about everything that had happened up until yesterday as I walked, but now that I had reached my destination, I stopped reminiscing about those pleasant memories and came back to reality. A sigh escaped my lips, and I entered the prestigious-looking building in front of me.

I took the envelope Margaret had given me from my breast pocket and handed it to the shopkeeper, who took the envelope, eyed me from head to toe, then showed me to a room. As I walked down the hallway, I couldn't hear anyone, and saw no one else around.

The shopkeeper asked me to wait in a neatly decorated room, so I sat down on the sofa. He brewed a cup of tea using the supplies from the cart in the room, placed it in front of me, and quietly left the room. I could sense someone in the room next door, but pretended not to notice.

In the meantime, I reached out to take the tea, but stopped partway. My eyes had been drawn to the teacup itself.

"Aren't you going to drink?"

A door opened, different from the one I'd used to enter. I rose from the sofa

at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Oh, please. No need to be so formal."

"Very well."

"Still too formal!" the queen replied with a lighthearted grin and sat down on the sofa across from me. Margaret made tea for the queen, and another woman stood behind her. I didn't know her name, but I remembered seeing her at the castle. She must be one of the knights protecting the queen.

"It's nice to see you again, Sena. I had heard you wouldn't look the same as the last time I saw you, but you really do look completely different! If I didn't know better, I wouldn't recognize you if I saw you in town."

Honestly, I thought the same about the queen. She didn't have on much makeup and was wearing commoner's clothes, so she looked like an entirely different person from the woman I'd seen at the castle.

"Why aren't you drinking your tea?" The queen looked at me with bemusement.

"The teacup was so beautiful I was mesmerized," I replied.

"Oh, Sena! I see you understand the value of this cup." The queen smiled and took a sip of her tea. I followed suit.

"It's delicious," I told her honestly, and took another sip.

"Isn't it just? I thought you'd like it, so I asked the shopkeeper to make it for you. He's the only person I know whose tea-making skills rival Margaret's."

Hearing the queen's comment, Margaret's face softened into a smile.

"How did you know I like tea?"

"Cyrus told me. He told me Alice likes to eat, and that you, Sena, like alcohol and tea. Since we're talking about a quest, I thought alcohol wasn't appropriate, so I decided on tea."



"Thank you."

The queen smiled cheerfully and drank the tea that Margaret had prepared for her. After enjoying a few sips, she set the teacup back down on the table.

"Now then, we don't have all day, so I'll get to the point."

"All right."

"I want you to keep the king and me confined on the day of the Founding Festival."

"....." I couldn't believe what I'd just heard.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"I want you to keep the king and me confined on the day of the Founding Festival."

Apparently I hadn't misheard...

"Are you asking me to die?"

"Pardon?" The queen gave me a confused look, which I couldn't comprehend.

"You might have been a bit *too* quick getting to the point, Your Majesty," Margaret observed, laughing all the while. Honestly I didn't know what was so funny. If anyone found out I locked up the king and queen, I'd definitely get the death penalty.

"Oh, no, not like that!"

The queen began panicking when she saw the look of shock on my face.

"Sena, do you know about the Founding Festival?"

I told her a simple version of what Norris and Ragi had told me, as well as some secrets they hadn't.

"I see! Well, I think those two were very considerate!" She clapped her hands together lightly and nodded. Margaret and the third woman also nodded in agreement.

"I want to spend the Founding Festival with everyone," the queen said.

"So why don't you? Why do you need to be put under confinement?"

"Because I was told we don't have time for that."

Well, I'm sure the king is still very busy cleaning up after the mess from the last incident.

"I ask him again and again to hear me out every day, but he won't listen. Keith said they're busy, so I should go and enjoy it by myself, and when I told them I just wanted someone to listen to me, Eugene said I should think about the time and our situation..."

The gueen looked down dejectedly.

"What did the king say?"

"He said, 'Now's not the time for that.' He's barred me from entering his study lately. Perhaps he doesn't want to waste his time arguing with me, but I've even had to eat meals alone."

"Honestly, I can see where the king is coming from..."

"I know that His Majesty, Eugene, and everyone else are all busy working to rebuild the kingdom. I know how important that is. But last year, we were unable to hold the Founding Festival because of Guilonde. That's why I really think we should properly celebrate it this year, while their influence is fading."

"You mean for the sake of putting the unease of Lypaed's citizens to rest?"

The queen stared at me. "How did you...?"

I told the queen what Norris had said to me.

"Oh... I see. Well, that makes me very happy." She cast her gaze downward, shoulders trembling slightly. Then she lifted her face, tears shining in her eyes as she smiled.

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"Sena."
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"Yes?"

"The Founding Festival is a very important day for our kingdom. It's a special day for Lypaed..."

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"…"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm asking you to take this quest because I want to make the people feel at

ease. But that's not the only reason. Would you mind if I explain to you how I truly feel?"

The queen earnestly explained her feelings, touching on everything the royal family had been through, and why she wanted to spend the Founding Festival with everyone.

"Will you accept my quest?"

"What will you do when I'm keeping the king confined?"

"Convince him to spend the Founding Festival with everyone."

"You want to do that on the same day?"

"The festival really starts at night. We'll have plenty of time."

She looked at me expectantly, but I had to be honest about what I was thinking. "I'm sorry, but I can't accept Your Majesty's quest at this time."

"I promise you won't be charged with any crimes, Sena."

"I admit that's one of my reasons. But the other thing is that there's still a few days left before the Founding Festival. Maybe his work will calm down before then, and you'll have a chance to talk."

The queen looked disappointed, but quickly put a smile back on her face. She looked so sad that I added something before she said anything.

"I'll casually mention this issue about the Founding Festival to Cyrus, but I won't tell him we met. After that...if nothing changes and still nobody will listen to you, *then* I'll accept your quest."

"...Really? Do you promise me?"

"Yes, I promise. So before we resort to anything too aggressive, could you please try talking to him again?"

"All right, I will." She nodded, then looked straight at me. "Thank you, Sena."

"Of course. My real name is Setsuna, so please call me that from now on."

"Okay, Setsuna!" She gave me a sparkling smile—the kind of smile that brightens a person's heart. After that, we chatted a little about recent events, made an appointment for a later date, and parted ways. I went back to Norris's

shop, feeling confident that Cyrus would be able to convince Eugene and the others.

After I returned home, we all sat down to dinner and talked about our day. Elly had given Alto some sweets that he happily told me were delicious. Ragi told me how Elly had been during the day. Her fever hadn't completely subsided, but her complexion was gradually improving. Norris had told me the same thing, so I thought it was safe to assume she was recovering well.

I brought up the topic of the Founding Festival. I'd wanted to talk about it earlier, but had gotten distracted and forgotten about it. It was Alto's first time hearing about the festival, so once Ragi and I explained it to him, his eyes began to sparkle. Well, I was sure most of his interest lay in eating the special food that would be served there, but still.

Just like Norris and the queen, Ragi didn't share any details about the celebrations, so I had to look forward to finding out myself.

I had a feeling Cyrus would tell me the same thing. I thought back to my conversation with the queen that afternoon and wrote a letter to him, saying I hoped he was looking forward to the festival. I fell asleep thinking about how I would visit the castle the next day to give him the letter.

Two days later, I tucked the letter I'd received the day before into my bag and went to Norris's shop, where I asked him to sell me a few of the single flowers we kept on hand for the general store and other purposes. He told me he wouldn't let me pay for it, but I insisted, and finally he relented. After that exchange, we finished our preparations and opened up shop.

After a little while, a steady stream of customers started to come in to buy flowers. I asked them to pay in exact change, entered the sales in the ledger, then was quite busy cleaning up and doing other chores around the shop. Just before lunch, foot traffic decreased.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Norris, can I step away from the register for a bit?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sure."

After he gave me the go-ahead, I took out the several types of paper and ribbon I'd brought and set them on the counter. Norris watched with a puzzled expression, not saying a word.

I took the flowers I'd bought from the buckets and arranged them to look nice. I should've kept them in water somehow, but I gave up on that and tied them together simply with twine, then laid them on top of one of the sheets of pretty paper I'd spread out on the counter. I gently wrapped them in a single piece of paper, then tied a ribbon around the stems to create what's called a "presentation bouquet."

It came out quite well, so next I tried it with two different colored sheets of paper to make the same style of bouquet. It looked even fancier than with the one sheet, and made for a very eye-catching bouquet.

"Setsuna!" Norris suddenly called my name, as if he couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Isn't it pretty?"

"It's gorgeous! I've never seen a style of bouquet like that before!"

Norris couldn't take his eyes off the bouquet, which was wrapped in light pink and white paper.

"Would you teach me how to do that?" He tore his gaze away and looked right at me.

"Yes, of course."

I started from the beginning and showed him how to make the bouquet. Norris watched my hands and tried to make one himself, and after just a few tips, he had a pretty good bouquet of his own.

"Wow... It even changes the way the flowers look..."

He gazed at the bouquet he'd made for a few moments, then took off the wrapping and started making one with the two varieties of paper. He did this several times until he could skillfully make the bouquets on his own. He hadn't said a word since his previous comment—his attention was completely focused on the flowers.

"Ah, sorry!" he exclaimed, coming back to his senses. "I got carried away. I didn't think that just using paper could change how the flowers looked so drastically. Ah, speaking of which, I used up your paper! I'm sorry!"

"That's what I brought it here for, so please don't worry about it. The flowers you and Elly grow are so beautiful that they gave me the idea to make these bouquets."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. So, what do you think? Should we sell the bouquets like this? We can charge extra to cover the cost for the paper and call it a wrapping fee, and sell them to be given as gifts."

I couldn't make bouquets for Kyoka anymore, but I was glad I had learned the skill since it was coming in handy for Norris's shop.

"…"

"You can recommend these bouquets to customers and tell them it's one way to make the most of their flowers, which are entrusted with their feelings for the person they're giving them to. I'm sure that would make them happy."

In my previous world, my grandfather, parents, and Kyoka had given me flowers that they'd entrusted with their wishes for me to get well soon. The flowers Norris and Elly grew were no different. They were for the sake of others.

"Thank you. I think this will help make the shop even more prosperous."

"You don't need to thank me. I get to see the beautiful flowers bloom every day, so now I'll get to watch them become even more beautiful."

Norris swayed when he heard me say that, and the next moment, he doubled over laughing. I stared at him in confusion.

"Is the reason you're always watching me serve customers because you want to see the flowers bloom?"

It was true; when I didn't have any work to do and he was serving customers, I would always glance over to watch the moment a flower opened.

"That's right."

Norris just burst out laughing again at my response.

"I thought it was strange. You've already got the job down perfectly, but for some reason, you kept watching my hands, and I just couldn't figure out why. Ahh...now I finally get it!"

He must've laughed a little too hard, because he was dabbing tears away from the corners of his eyes.

"You really love flowers, don't you, Setsuna? Still, I don't have enough hands to do everything by myself, so please help me out instead of just watching."

When the day's work was done, Norris stared excitedly at the paper and ribbons. "I'll take one home to Elly," he murmured to himself, and happily made her a bouquet.

## Part Six: Cyrus

I felt a little guilty taking a day off for the first time in a while and let out a little sigh. Right about now, Eugene and Keith were probably busy at the palace with meetings about the military budget, writing reports, and preparing for the surveys they'd be going on soon.

It would be harvest season in less than two months. Every year, in the lead-up to harvest season, I would go on an expedition surveying each territory, but last year I couldn't move freely due to Guilonde's interference, which was incredibly frustrating. We'd been able to eradicate their influence this year, though, so I had a feeling the inspection would go smoothly.

Georges and Fred looked like they wanted to kill me when I said I was going fishing...

As I walked with my fishing rod in one hand, I spotted the two people who had gotten caught up in my personal business and ended up coming to Lypaed with me. One waved, and the other smiled and looked at me.

"Hi, Cyrus!"

"Hey, Alto. You seem like you're doing well."

"Why do you look so tired?"

"Because I came back from an expedition yesterday."

Alto looked confused and said, "Expedition?" So Setsuna explained it in simple terms for him.

"If you're tired, do you want to put off fishing for another day?" Setsuna asked with concern, and I saw Alto's ears droop slightly. I remembered how he'd never tired of searching for fish in the underground cave, so I figured he must really like fishing and had been looking forward to today.

"I'm not that tired. It'll be fine," I said as I looked at Alto. Setsuna gave me a half-smile and lightly nodded. "All right, should we go? The fishing spot I mentioned before is fine, right? It's upstream of the river that flows through town, so we'll have to walk a ways to get there."

"Sure!"

The place we were heading to was a hidden gem among gems, and although they weren't too strong, there were some monsters there. I knew Setsuna and Alto could handle them, which is why I was taking them with me. I'd only been there once because a senior knight had taken me, and I explained that to Setsuna and Alto as we made our way to our destination.

On the way there, Alto asked me, "What're you good at cooking, Cyrus?" I told him I didn't really have anything I was good at making. For some reason, he looked sad at my answer. I was going to ask him why, but his attention flitted to something else, and by that time we'd reached the fishing spot, so I never got the chance.

"Oooh, pretty!"

The two of them smiled as they looked around at the scenery. The water that flowed through the river was clean and clear.

"The fish are jumping! Are those fish edible?"

"I'm not sure. But if we do catch some that are edible, shall we bring them home to Ragi?"

"Yeah! I'll try my best!"

"Is Ragi the landlord you're renting a room from?"

"Yeah. Sorry I went ahead and agreed to stay with him without telling you first, since you were trying to find me a place."

"Eh, don't worry about it. He's treating you two well, right?" I asked, and Alto told me all about this Ragi. I could tell from the way he talked that their landlord spoiled Alto a fair bit. Alto is extremely shy around strangers, so I wondered if the reason he'd warmed to Ragi so quickly was because they were both wolf-type beastfolk. Well, as long as they were getting along, that's all that mattered.

"By the way, where do you live, Cyrus? The castle?" Alto asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer, but since there wasn't any reason to hide it, I just went ahead and told him. "Yeah, I live in a room in the castle. While I was in

exile, the people who were my family confiscated all my money and even sold off my house, so when I came back, I didn't have a home anymore."

"…"

"…"

"I was on a secret mission, right? So neither Eugene nor anybody else could say anything about it. They apologized to me a lot afterward."

"Your family sold your house?"

"They did."

Alto had an uncomfortable look on his face that made me chuckle.

"I've always had a bad relationship with my family, which is why I cut ties with them. Even if I went back home, they'd probably just try to use me for the Protection of the Dragons I received."

"Does that make you sad?"

"Not anymore."

"Oh... I guess that makes sense. Just like Master and I have Gramps, you have Eugene and everyone else."

Hearing those words made the faint resentment I still held in my heart fade away.

"Yeah, you're right."

I reached out and roughly tousled Alto's hair, but he just frowned and glared at me. I thought he would start complaining, but Setsuna spoke before he had the chance.

"If we don't start fishing soon, we'll run out of time."

Alto looked at Setsuna wide-eyed, then started staring all around him until he focused on one particular spot, which he quietly crept toward.

"I'm gonna fish there!"

"Make sure to watch out for monsters."

"Don't worry. I'll put up a barrier stone."

I was surprised he would use such an expensive magical tool for fishing, but since Alto was still a child, it was probably necessary for him to fish safely, though I knew he could easily defeat any monsters in the area.

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"Hey, why was Alto creeping away like that?"

"So the fish won't swim away."

"Oh... You go to that much trouble just to fish?"

"It's good practice for training his stealth skills."
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*"…."* 

You sneak training in even when you're having fun? I thought with exasperation, but I had to admit he had a good point.

"So if you approach Alto while he's fishing and you make a noise, he'll get mad at you. And he'll glare at you if you're being loud nearby, so watch out," Setsuna warned me with a grin. Well, if Alto really took fishing that seriously, I wasn't planning on bothering him.

Keeping Alto in our sights, Setsuna and I cast our own lines and chatted about recent events. I told him about going around with Eugene to hunt monsters in the different territories, and that I'd been much more comfortable traveling with him and Alto than when I accompanied the prince.

"Alto's still a child, so I have to make sure we get enough to eat and plenty of sleep."

"I figured as much. I'd never had such delicious food out camping before and had never been able to sleep like a rock in forests filled with ferocious monsters..."

Honestly, I had nothing but complaints about the food we'd had while touring the territories. But if I kept talking about it, all I'd do was complain.

"What about you? Have you gotten used to life in Lypaed?"

"Yeah, every day feels really fulfilling."

He told me about how his landlord, Ragi, showed him around town, and even

told me about shops I didn't know existed. I made sure not to forget to recommend to him some good restaurants in the area.

"By the way, have you accepted any quests?"

"Just the long-term quest Alto took and a ruins preservation quest we did together."

I remembered he'd told me that he was a scholar, so I asked him what a "ruins preservation" quest entailed. Something like that sounded impossible for me—I don't like that sort of detail-oriented work.

"And the long-term quest?"

"Master, I'm hungry!"

I was going to ask him more about Alto's quest when the boy ran over clutching his stomach, interrupting us. We moved over to a clearing where we could relax and eat lunch. I laid out a thin blanket, and Setsuna started crowding it with all the food he'd brought. There was a wide assortment of dishes that included things he'd made himself and things he'd bought from food stalls.

I'd thought this back when we were traveling together, but there were a lot of dishes that Setsuna cooked that I'd never eaten before. He used a generous amount of herbs and spices, and his cooking skills made everything taste even more delicious. Setsuna's cooking was probably why Alto was obsessed with food.

Whenever I see something delicious, my stomach immediately starts growling. I ate alongside Alto almost as though we were competing with each other; I could feel his gaze of disbelief on me the whole time but pretended not to notice. After we polished off most of the food, Alto went straight back to what he'd been doing before lunch. He really did love fishing.

As for me, since I was already exhausted and now had a full stomach, I was suddenly hit by a wave of drowsiness.

"I've set up a barrier and I'll keep watch, so you can go ahead and rest for a bit."

"I'll be fine," I said. Still, the warm sunlight, gentle breeze, and sound of the rippling water wasn't helping me stay awake. I sipped the herbal tea Setsuna had made, feeling nostalgic, when he brought up a new topic of conversation.

"I heard the Founding Festival will be held in the fourth month. Nobody will tell me much about it, though."

Hearing the reason why nobody would tell him anything, I couldn't help but chuckle.

There was no way I was going to tell him, either. The people he'd asked must have been trying not to spoil things so he could enjoy finding out for himself.

"How are you going to spend the festival, Cyrus?"

"The Founding Festival...? Honestly, I haven't even had time to think about it." An involuntary frown creased my brow when I thought about recent events. "Everyone in the castle is busy. It's not my place to meddle in how they run things, but ever since I received Lord Revale's protection, I've had to escort the king a lot, which is new for me."

"I see."

"The king's not the only one who's busy; the civil and military officials are, too. There's just so much work to do."

"You're exhausting yourself running around all the time like this. It wouldn't hurt to take a few hours' rest during the Founding Festival."

Images of the documents piled up on Eugene's and Keith's desks flashed through my mind. They were definitely overworking themselves.

"Rest, huh?"

"It only happens once a year, so why not enjoy it with your friends?"

"You sound just like the queen." Setsuna's comment reminded me of what the queen had been saying lately, which stirred up some bitter feelings.

"The queen?"

"Yeah. Lately, she's been saying the same thing to the king and Eugene, and every time it interrupts their work, so she's been causing them a fair bit of

trouble."

"Does the queen have something special in mind she wants to do that day?"

"Something special? No, not at all. She just wants to have fun with everyone. The queen likes to enjoy herself, whether it's eating meals with people, chatting, or making them wear these clothes." I let out a deep sigh. "It's just frustrating how she wants to play around and drag others into it when we're so busy."

"Is that what the queen said she wanted to do? 'Play around'?"

"Why do I need her to spell it out for me?"

"Well, you won't know until you ask, right? If she wants to spend time together, maybe you should listen to her feelings and see what she really wants."

"We don't have time for that..."

Eugene and the others were so busy that they barely even had time for meals. I'd started to feel uncomfortable sitting up, so I lay back. The blue sky filled my vision.

"Maybe if you took some time to talk things out, you could all enjoy yourselves more."

"So you're taking the queen's side, huh? I told you, we don't have any time for that."

Lying down had made me feel properly sleepy.

"Isn't the Founding Festival an important day?" Setsuna's unusually quiet voice reached my ears.

"Sure, it's a once-in-a-year celebration. But there's always next year, right? So whoever wants to enjoy it can enjoy it for all of us."

"Cyrus, the Founding Festival is very important to the people of Lypaed."

"Yeah, I guess so. It's a day...where you can eat delicious food...and it's a lot of fun..."

I remembered hearing the excited voices of the people outside the castle last

year. We were too busy for that right now, working hard to protect the smiles of those people.

"The queen...should just have her own fun...without bothering Eugene and the king...," I muttered, closing my eyes.

"The queen doesn't think the Founding Festival is all fun and games, Cyrus."

I could hear Setsuna in my hazy consciousness, but his voice sounded very far away.

"For the people of Lypaed, the Founding Festival is..."

But I fell asleep before I heard the rest of his sentence.

I woke up to find myself covered by a blanket. I hadn't even noticed Setsuna move, but after traveling together I was well aware of how strong he was. I looked for them and saw Alto a short distance away, still fishing. Setsuna was downstream from Alto, working away at scaling a fish.

"Alto," I called out softly, trying not to be too loud.

"Oh, Cyrus. Good morning."

"Morning. Catch anything?"

"Yeah. I got something to bring back to Gramps." He wagged his tail happily and glanced over toward Setsuna.

Setsuna sensed his gaze and said sternly, "It's time to pack up, Alto."

"Okay," Alto obediently replied and started putting his things away, but his eyes, ears, and tail betrayed his emotions. I couldn't help but speak up when I saw him looking so dejected.

"We can always come back, you know."

"But aren't you busy, Cyrus?"

"Sure, but I'll work hard to make time to fish with you, Alto."

"Yay!" Alto's happy expression tugged at my heart. I tried to think of what was bothering me but couldn't figure it out, so I let it go.

We went back to town, and since Alto was insistent on delivering the fish to Ragi right away, we said good-bye without having dinner together. I apologized for mostly sleeping during our fishing trip, but they both laughed it off, saying they were both tired, too.

After I waved good-bye to Alto and we made plans to meet again, Setsuna handed me a single gerulito flower.

"A friend gave this to me, so now I'm passing it on to you."

"Wow, I'm getting flowers from guys now? Well, thanks."

Gerulito flowers symbolize gratitude, so I accepted it gladly, thinking it was a token of thanks for the fishing trip that day. I tucked the flower into my chest pocket, then went back to my room in the castle. I asked a maid to get me a vase, and put the gerulito flower in it. As I gazed at the flower blooming serenely in the vase, I felt once again like there was something I needed to remember, but I just couldn't put my finger on it.

## Part Seven: Setsuna

Fishing with Cyrus turned out to be a bittersweet experience for me. Before I met with the queen, I'd been looking forward to having fun on this trip, but now I had to put her task first. It had been quite challenging to keep her secret and not give away that I was speaking on her behalf. Yet, despite my efforts...

*"…"* 

A small sigh escaped my lips as I prepared breakfast. I wondered if Cyrus would understand the meaning behind the gerulito I'd given him. Would he speak with Eugene on the queen's behalf? It seemed unlikely, judging by our conversation yesterday.

Refusing something from the start was turning a blind eye to what was in front of you. I understood he was busy, but Cyrus had still promised Alto to go fishing. So why couldn't he spare just a little bit of that time for the queen?

I understood both the queen's and Cyrus's perspectives. I hoped they would be able to compromise with the queen instead of just telling her they were busy and dismissing her feelings, and try to understand why she was so insistent upon spending time together.

The image of the queen's sad smile came to mind. There was still time until our next meeting. I silently hoped that her feelings would get through to Eugene and the others.

Despite everything that I was feeling, I still went to work every day, and right now, I found myself in the middle of a scene of pandemonium. The cause of this chaos was the bouquet displayed near the window, which had been neatly wrapped by Norris. It was beautiful, eye-catching, and had a blackboard below it that read, *Now offering bouquet wrapping services!* 

We thought that only one in every few people would be interested due to the increased price from the paper and ribbons, but shortly after Norris went to get more flowers and I took over the shop, customers started pouring in.

I was well aware we were short-staffed, and that there was a crowd outside. Some of the people might have been here just to see what all the commotion was about, but since I was alone in the shop, I couldn't even go out to explain.

I thought about going out to disperse everyone except paying customers, when suddenly I heard a voice say, "What's all this commotion?" followed by immediate silence.

"Is the shop owner here?" I heard, and just then a knight entered the shop.

"I'm sorry, but the owner is currently out."

"...Lord Setsuna?" the knight asked, looking slightly surprised. It was Sir Georges, Eugene's second knight, whom I had been introduced to when I last visited the castle. "What are you doing here? Well, that can wait—first I need to hear what all this commotion is about."

It sounded like Sir Georges had come across the crowd during his patrol and was concerned something had happened. I explained the reason to him as simply as I could.

"We started selling wrapped bouquets today, and it seems to have attracted more interest from customers than we expected."

"Wrapped bouquets?" Sir Georges cocked his head curiously, so I pointed toward the bouquet displayed in the window. "It's beautiful. So you're selling bouquets that look like that?"

"Yes. We can make a bouquet with the flowers of your choice, but the wrapping paper and ribbon is a separate charge."

"I see," he answered, eyes glued to the bouquet. He noticed my gaze and shook his head. "Ah, it's nothing. I'll go and tell the crowd outside to disperse."

"Oh, I can do that."

"It's better for you to attend to your customers."

"Thank you."

Sir Georges nodded and went outside. It seemed like whatever he said had worked, because soon after, only people who intended to make a purchase remained. I thanked him and attended to the customers. After a while, Norris

returned to the shop looking quite flustered, and I told him that one of the patrolling knights had dealt with the situation outside, which helped us make it through the chaos.

"Phew. Good job, Setsuna," he said in a tired voice, carrying one of the empty flower buckets that had been outside.

"It was a bit hectic, but I had fun."

"Do you really find being so busy enjoyable?"

"Well, isn't it kind of exhilarating when ideas you come up with go well? Like you just want to laugh out loud?" I joked, and Norris burst into laughter.

The two of us chatted while we started to close up shop, but just then I heard someone approaching. I lifted my head to look and saw Sir Georges coming toward us, slightly out of breath. His complexion looked worse than when I last saw him.

"Excuse me, but I'd like to buy some flowers."

"I'm sorry, but we're already closed for the day," Norris responded anxiously.

Sir Georges slumped, looking even more upset. Norris must've felt bad for him, because he said, "Well, why don't you come in anyway?"

I ushered Sir Georges inside and quickly closed the door behind him to prevent any other customers from coming in. Once I'd done that, Norris smiled and spoke to him.

"What kind of flowers would you like?"

"My engagement ceremony starts today, and I've been looking for a gift. I saw the bouquet on display this afternoon and thought it was perfect. I don't know a lot about flowers, though, so I'd appreciate your help choosing some for me. Ideally, I'd like flowers that will continue to bloom without withering for twelve days."

Unfamiliar with what an engagement ceremony was, I searched Kyle's database and found that it was a custom among Lypaed nobility. After a man proposes to a woman and she says yes, he visits the woman's residence for twelve days, presenting gifts each day to confirm his commitment to their

engagement. On the final day, they invite their parents, relatives, and friends, and he proposes once again in front of everyone, pledging his eternal love.

During this event, the gifts he gave her over the past twelve days are displayed, and the man may be ridiculed for any gift that is judged inadequate. I know that I certainly couldn't bear the thought of being laughed at for a once-in-a-lifetime celebration.

"I'm sorry, but we're sold out of cut flowers for bouquets today. And my shop doesn't grow any flowers that can last for twelve days."

"I see... I really thought she'd be happy with that... That's a shame."

"Why don't you come back in seven days? I can have flowers suitable for an engagement ceremony ready for you then."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Sir Georges thanked Norris, then let out a sigh. "Well, at least one gift is sorted, but now I need to figure out what to give her for today."

Norris stared at Sir Georges intently. "Wait a minute... Are you telling me you haven't decided on any other gifts?"

Sir Georges nodded and shrugged with obvious discomfort. Norris couldn't help but hold his head in his hands. Knowing how kind Norris was, he must have been empathizing with Sir Georges' fiancée.

"I've had a ton on my plate lately and completely forgot about the engagement ceremony."

Sir Georges was one of Eugene's knights, just like Cyrus, so he'd probably been so busy that he hadn't had time for himself lately.

"Her name is Sophia. It's not that I don't care for her, although you might not believe me... I don't mind if I'm the only one who gets laughed at during the ceremony—it's my own fault for forgetting. But I can't bear the thought of Sophia being ridiculed for doing nothing wrong." His brow furrowed, as if picturing the scene in his mind, and I truly felt sorry for him.

"Well, in any case, I'll be going now. I'll try looking for something else," he said, and went to leave the shop.

"Most shops around here will have closed by now; only restaurants will still

be open, so you probably won't find anywhere that sells gifts at this hour."

Walking outside at night was risky, and shops often closed before sunset so that people could get home before dark. As Norris had said, even if the knight went around to the shops now, he wouldn't find anything suitable for a gift.

"...Still, I have to look. I don't want to upset her; I want to make her smile. I know I have no right to say that at this point, though..." Sir Georges sighed deeply, and I wondered if there was something I could do to help him. He wanted his fiancée to smile just like I always wanted to see Tuuli smile.

"If it's all right with you, would you wait here for a bit? I can go pick flowers for your bouquet now."

Norris must have been thinking the same thing as me.

"Since it needs to last twelve days, I only have one type that will work, and they're still just buds. They'll start blooming tomorrow morning, so I was going to sell them tomorrow, but there's nothing else I can think of. You can give them to your fiancée and tell her it's a special surprise for tomorrow morning. That will cover today's gift, right?"

"...Are you sure you don't mind?" Sir Georges responded.

This conversation, particularly the words "twelve days" and "flowers," reminded me of something, and I immediately got an idea. It seemed like a miraculous solution to this situation.

But in order to make it happen, I would need to use Time magic. My logical brain warned me not to say anything about it, so I decided to keep the truth to myself.

"What type of flower are they?"

"They're a new variety of rose."

"The Laglut and Cindy roses are about to bloom?"

I couldn't help but interrupt, and Norris nodded happily.

Those roses are really going to bloom? That would be such a special memory. I wish I could give them to Tuuli.

That feeling welled up within me and made my heart race, even though I'd been on the verge of giving up.

"I'm sorry, what are the Laglut and Cindy roses?" Sir Georges asked.

Norris began to explain happily, and as I listened, not only did my idea from earlier resurface, but learning that the flowers in question were those special roses only heightened my expectations.

"When exactly will the roses bloom tomorrow morning?"

"I'm sorry, but I can only say it will be before sunrise."

"I see... If I tell her that, she'll stay up all night just to admire them."

Norris and I both nodded in understanding.

"Make sure to remind her to get a good night's rest when you give them to her. Although I can understand why she'd want to stay up to watch."

If only there was something else I could use besides Time magic...

But of course, such a convenient method didn't exist. In order to make my idea come to life, it was absolutely necessary that the roses remain as buds for a long time after they were taken out of the bucket, and the only way to control that seemed to be through Time magic.

I could create a magical tool to control what time they bloom... No, that's no good. I was surprised when Norris showed me he could control when they opened, so if I revealed that I had a magical tool that did the same thing all along, he'd get suspicious.

I closed my eyes for a moment, pondering what to do. Revealing my ability to use Time magic could make the scene I envisioned a reality, and Sophia wouldn't have to stay up all night. Plus, I could then deliver budding roses to Tuuli...

"In that case, would you please prepare the roses for me?"

"Sure. I'll get you the Cindy roses. They're a deep crimson color and symbolize love, so I think they'll be perfect. Though I'm sorry you didn't get to choose them for yourself from the display flowers."

"It's all right. Like I said before, I trust your judgment."

Their conversation was just wrapping up, and I couldn't stand still any longer.

"Sir Georges," I called, and he turned toward me.

"Yes, Lord Setsuna?"

I got the idea for what I was about to do from a tradition from my previous world, where a person would give their lover a dozen roses, with a different meaning behind each one. I couldn't remember all twelve of the meanings, though, so I couldn't reproduce the tradition exactly.

"I've developed a spell to make multiple flowers bloom simultaneously whenever you want them to. Would you like to try it? However, since it's my original magic, you'll have to keep it a secret."

"I had no idea such magic existed. I'd really appreciate it, and of course I promise not to tell anyone."

"I promise not to tell anyone either."

"Thank you. I'd like to try it out once before using it on your flowers, though, so could you pick some more flowers still as buds, Norris?"

"Sure. How about instead of going all the way to the field, we use some of the flowers I put aside for Elly?"

"If that's okay with you, then I'd appreciate it."

Norris smiled and stood up to get the flowers from the cart in the stable. However, he stopped in his tracks as if remembering something.

"This is completely off-topic, but do you two know each other?"

He must've found it strange that we knew each other's names, so I was about to explain the situation, but Sir Georges beat me to it.

"I met Lord Setsuna when a friend introduced us."

"I see. I was just curious why Setsuna knew a knight's name is all."

"Ah. It was a coincidence that I ran into Lord Setsuna at this shop, and it seems like he'll be helping me again. It must be fate that brought us together."

Sir Georges' words confused me; I didn't remember having helped him before.

"That's just my way of looking at it, though, so please don't let it worry you."

Before I could ask what he meant, he looked at me and lightly shook his head, putting any further questions to rest.

"Anyway, since we'll be relying on each other for now, there's no need to be so formal. And you don't need to call me by my title."

"All right, I'll call you Georges then. And you can call me Norris."

Although I was still somewhat confused, I followed Norris's lead and asked Georges just to call me Setsuna, and he nodded in agreement.

However, when Norris left the shop, Georges addressed me as if our previous conversation hadn't happened.

"Lord Setsuna, I've been wanting to express my gratitude to you." He slowly and respectfully performed a knight's salute. It was a truly beautiful gesture that conveyed his feelings. "I'm deeply grateful to you for escorting Cyrus back to Lypaed."

He looked around cautiously as if checking for eavesdroppers, but I had already cast a barrier to ensure our conversation remained private.

"I wasn't able to thank you earlier with Norris present."

That made sense; he couldn't talk about that in front of others.

"I witnessed the moment Cyrus was stripped of his knight's emblem firsthand."

Georges clenched his fists. "Even though I knew it was wrong, as a knight, I had to obey my orders. But that didn't mean my heart wasn't crying out. Cyrus's voice has been echoing in my ears ever since that day, and I can still feel the tremors of despair that racked his body in these hands of mine. I will never forget what it looked like to see him stripped of everything he held dear."

Ah, I see. Georges was the knight who had been tasked with restraining Cyrus

so he didn't cause a scene. He was another one of the people hurt by that incident.

"As a comrade and a friend, I couldn't do anything for Cyrus except pray for his safety every day. I wanted him to live."

*"…."* 

"After the king told me the reason for Cyrus's exile, I prepared myself to lose a friend..." Georges lowered his gaze, his expression going blank.

"Cyrus has been different since he returned to the castle. His smile, his eating habits, his dedication to training, and his style of fighting have all changed."

"...."

"He changed so drastically in such a short amount of time. I can't even imagine what caused those changes." He sighed lightly before continuing.

"Despite what he went through, he's never expressed a word of resentment. I'd prepared myself for the worst, thinking, 'I can't blame him if he hates me or doesn't think of me as a friend anymore,' but he still treats us the same as always."

It felt like there was some minor misunderstanding going on here, almost like Georges wanted Cyrus to hold a grudge against him. But Cyrus didn't seem to resent anyone, or hate anyone either for that matter. This was just a guess based on what I'd seen of Cyrus, though, since I didn't know how he felt deep inside.

"Cyrus always wanted to be a knight of Lypaed."

Georges and I quietly locked eyes.

"Even though his knight's emblem was stripped from him and he was exiled, Cyrus always remained a knight of the kingdom at heart. His loyalty never wavered, and he dedicated himself to his country."

He stared at me without blinking, then gritted his teeth and looked down. "I see. So that's how it is. Both Cyrus and I are knights of Lypaed. We must obey our lord's commands. There is no room in our job for hatred or resentment—all that matters is that we live our lives as knights."

As he said that, he placed a hand on his arm, and I was certain his knight's emblem was engraved there, just like Cyrus. After a short period of silence, Georges lifted his head and a gentle smile appeared on his face.

"Thank you."

I could sense his heartfelt feelings in that gesture, and I accepted them with a nod.

Norris returned after a while, and came into the back room where Georges and I were waiting. He was out of breath, so I made him some warm tea.

"Welcome back. I'm sorry for making you go to all this trouble."

"Please don't worry about it, Setsuna." Norris gulped down his tea, still standing, then handed me a flower bucket. "What kind of magic are you going to cast now, Setsuna?"

Without answering him, I touched the lisianthus in the bucket and used Time magic. A faint light enveloped the flowers, gradually dissolved into them, and disappeared.

The two of them watched my hands as I gently removed the flowers from the container.

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"Huh...?"
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*"…"* 

Normally, flowers would bloom as soon as they were removed from the bucket, but the lisianthus remained closed.

"The magic seems to have worked, so I think we're good to try it out for real."

I was confident that the magic had worked just as I'd imagined, and I enjoyed the looks of surprise on their faces. Georges' eyes widened, while Norris's gaze remained fixed on the flower.

"What kind of magic is this? I thought you were a Windmaster, Setsuna."

"I used Time magic. I stopped time for these flowers, preventing the buds from blooming."

"…"

"Time magic?" Georges looked astonished, and Norris, puzzled.

"Isn't that type of magic incredibly rare, Setsuna?"

That was when I realized my mistake—the way the two of them had reacted made me notice.

Their response to seeing my Time magic was just how other people would react toward the scene I wanted to create. Word of the magic would spread, sparking interest in the spell, as well as the person who'd used it.

I had considered how this would affect me, of course, which is why I only used the magic after making them promise not to tell anyone, thinking that there wouldn't be any repercussions if they kept quiet. That in and of itself wasn't wrong.

The problem lay in how I had obscured the fact that I was going to use Time magic from Norris and Georges. It came from my desire to surprise them, but it was a significant mistake.

They hadn't taken something like this into account when they agreed not to tell anyone. Would they still have agreed to keep it a secret if they knew how much trouble that promise may cause them? In the end, didn't I still deceive them? My carelessness was unforgivable.

"I'm sorry, I should've explained the magic I was going to use before asking you to promise to keep it a secret. I didn't realize the burden it would place on both of you."

*"…"* 

"Please, forget you ever made me that promise. Of course, I'll continue to help you, Georges, and if you're asked about the Time magic, you can mention my name without hesitation."

I bowed deeply to them both.

"Setsuna, please lift your head. I won't tell anyone. When I made you that promise, I did so prepared to keep silent no matter how much trouble it might be. And if it will cause problems for you, Setsuna, to whom I owe so much, then

I won't tell a soul."

"I feel the same as Norris. After all, I'm the one who insisted on finding a present for Georges."

"...Thank you." I raised my head, grateful for their kindness.

"So, Setsuna. How are you going to make that lisianthus bloom?" Norris asked with a slightly cheerful note to his voice, as if to dispel the subtle tension in the room, and pointed to the flower I held.

"Shall I show you, then?" I said, handing the lisianthus to him.

"It's not really going to bloom, is it?" Norris held the flower up to inspect it, spinning it around gently, and I snapped my fingers.

Before his very eyes, the lisianthus gently uncurled its petals.

"Wow..."

*"…"* 

Norris's eyes widened and he exclaimed in surprise, and Georges stared at the lisianthus in wonder.

"Setsuna, this... This is amazing!"

I smiled at his comment and nodded.

"I can give a signal or set it for a certain amount of time, after which the Time magic will dispel."

"Are you going to do this with the Cindy rose?!" Norris's voice trembled slightly, probably because he was imagining the same scene I had earlier.

I waited for Norris to calm down, then explained my idea of using twelve roses for the performance. The more detail I went into, the more Norris's eyes sparkled, while Georges flushed red and froze.

"I'm going to have to do that...?"

"I think it's a great idea! Think of how memorable it will be!" Norris encouraged him.

"But..." His eyes wavered. Even his ears were red.

Georges leaned his elbows on the desk and rested his head in his hands as he pondered. So far, he hadn't uttered a single negative word. Wondering what he was so worried about, I thought that maybe he was just purely embarrassed that he'd have to go along with the performance I'd come up with.

After thinking it over for a while, he must have gotten over it, because when he raised his head he had a look of resolve on his face. His ears were still red, though.

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"Let's do it."
"Sure."
"Okay."
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With Georges on board, Norris and I teleported to the field to pick the Cindy roses.

Once we arrived at the field, Norris looked around the rose garden and carefully selected a bud of average size from the group of Cindy roses and cut it off with shears. He placed it in the flower bucket, and we teleported back to the flower shop.

Georges wasn't surprised by our sudden appearance, but he did gasp slightly when he saw the rose. "It's even more beautiful than I expected! Thank you, Norris."

"Not at all," Norris replied, a hint of pride in his voice.

Georges thanked me as well, but I told him I didn't really do all that much, and he took a seat.

Once we were all sitting down, we discussed how to proceed with the engagement ceremony, including how he should handle the gifts over the course of the following twelve days. After we were finished hammering out the details, Georges chuckled and said, "You must be the first sorcerer to use Time magic for something like this, Setsuna."

He was right. I couldn't think of anyone else who would use magic for such a frivolous purpose, so I just nodded in agreement.

"I'm not serving any country and I'm not affiliated with a team, so I can use magic in whatever way interests me," I explained.

Since I had both Kyle and Hanai's combined mana, my magical power would never run out. While it came easily to me, it wasn't something that was normally that simple. A sorcerer's life and death is determined by their mana, so using it for fun wasn't an option. That was especially true if you served your country or were a part of a team, because you never knew when you'd be called on for battle, which was why it was a sorcerer's duty to conserve their mana.

"Is the reason why you don't have any affiliation because you want to be free to use your magic?"

"Yes. I don't know what the future holds, but right now I want to prioritize what I want to do."

"I see. I suppose that's one way to live." Georges nodded without saying anything else.

Georges frowned as he carefully examined the delicately embroidered white ribbon in front of him.

Elly had embroidered it in her spare time and given it to Norris, telling him to use it for something special. Apparently, Norris had planned on selling it with the slogan "A special ribbon for a special day." The embroidery was very lovely, and I decided I'd buy some of it when I sent Tuuli her bouquet.

I watched Georges out of the corner of my eye as he wrote on the ribbon, searching his feelings for what to write, and I called out to Norris.

"Norris, how about we hold off on selling the Cindy roses and Laglut roses until Georges' engagement ceremony is over?"

If this performance with the dozen roses gathered a lot of attention, it would definitely boost our sales, so it would be a shame to sell the new roses now. That was my thinking behind this suggestion, and Norris started to nod, but then stopped and shook his head instead.

"I'd like to do that, but if we wait too long the flowers will bloom," he

explained.

"I see... Then what if I cast Time magic just on the rose plots? That way the flowers won't bloom even if they grow, and I can make the magic dispel once you take the flowers out of the buckets as usual, so it shouldn't be an issue."

"But Time magic is incredibly rare, isn't it? I can't ask you to do something like that!"

"Georges has been able to get his gift, and I got to see the scene I imagined in my mind unfold in reality. You're the only one who hasn't gotten anything out of this yet, so I want you to accept this in return. Especially seeing as your shop is about to get a whole lot busier," I said.

"All right. If it'll put your mind at ease, then go ahead. But please don't keep worrying about me. I owe you a debt I can never repay, so it's no problem for me to keep your secret," Norris assured me.

"All right." He seemed to understand my sentiments, so I accepted his words with an embarrassed smile.

I noticed Georges observing our interaction, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. But when I turned to look at him, he tried to look away, and gave me an awkward chuckle.

"Georges, you have to come up with what to write on your own. I can't help you with that," I told him before he had the chance to ask for help, and Norris nodded his agreement. Georges gave us a bitter look and sighed, straightened up in his seat, then tightened his grip on his pen.

After Georges finally finished putting his feelings into the ribbon, he handed it to Norris, who tied the white ribbon very gently around the stem of the deep crimson rose. He might have felt like a father sending his child off into the world for the first time, as he was finally parting with the roses that he and Elly had so carefully nurtured up until now.

"It's tied, Setsuna."

"Good. I'll cast the spell now, so could you hold onto it just like that?"

"Okay."

I gently touched the rose Norris held.

The two of them watched over me looking slightly nervous as I softly chanted the spell. The rose seemed to be slowly growing under the magic's effect...or at least, that's what I assumed. There were no visual changes, and I wouldn't be able to see the miraculous moment just before the bud bloomed.

"Now, Setsuna."

On Norris's cue, I stopped the spell that sped up time for the rose, and switched to one that froze time. Norris took a breath and smiled.

"I've seen this magic twice now, but it's truly amazing, Setsuna. The moment the magic is dispelled, the flower will bloom."

Honestly, I didn't think I deserved such praise—Norris was the amazing one here. I secretly wished, *May the two of them always be happy*, and cast a spell on the ribbon as well.

The two of them sighed with relief, and I couldn't help but smile. All that was left was to continue this process for twelve days, and then perform the final task at the engagement ceremony on the final day.

"Here, Georges." Norris politely held out the Cindy rose to Georges, who accepted it with a smile.

"I appreciate it. Thank you, Norris and Setsuna. I'll be counting on both of you for these twelve days." Georges gave a knight's salute with the rose in one hand.

"Here's to a successful proposal!"

"Good luck!"

Georges laughed shyly, bowed again, and then left the shop. He walked away, his back straight and his gaze fixed ahead.

"I hope everything goes well." Norris had a solemn expression on his face, almost as if he were the one undergoing the ceremony.

"I'm sure it will." I nodded, recalling the sight of Georges and Sophia when I'd

seen them that day at the castle.				

## Part Eight: Georges

I rushed to my fiancée, Sophia, holding the crimson Cindy rose enchanted with Time magic. The sun had fully set, so I was sure she must have been worried about me, and I thought back on the day's events, feeling ashamed of my incompetence.

I recently proposed to a woman much younger than me: the little sister of Fred, my close friend. Fred and I are the same age and have known each other a long time. He's always watched over Sophia, his sister, and I'd come to see her as a younger sister, too.

Fred adores Sophia, and despite our age gap the three of us like to spend time together. Due to my friendship with Fred, Sophia always felt like family to me, and because of how close we were, I'd never seen her in a romantic light. But as her affection toward me grew, I began to develop feelings for her, and in a twist of fate, I ended up engaged to her.

This morning, after roll call was over, Fred reminded me of something.

"Georges, you remember today is the engagement ceremony, right? I'll never forgive you if you do something to embarrass my sister." He smiled at me, and I just stood there, wide-eyed. Instantly, a cold sweat broke out across my back. I stared at his face without replying, and saw his expression cloud over.

"...Georges. You didn't seriously forget, did you? Please tell me you've already decided on your gift."

*"…."* 

He kept asking me rapid-fire questions, but I couldn't speak. My mind was completely blank. The color must've drained from my face, because he put his hand on his face and sighed.

"I was worried you might've forgotten, which is why I asked. You did forget, didn't you...? You're always like this; I'm sure you never would've proposed without my sister pressuring you. Well, I know you've been busy lately, so that

must be why."

Ever since Cyrus had returned to the castle, things had been extremely busy around here. That commotion was an extension of what he'd risked his life for. If he hadn't returned, we might be in all-out war with Guilonde right now, so I should be happy that we were this busy. Still, I'd forgotten something incredibly important while attending to my duties.

I knew that was just an excuse. It was my fault that I'd forgotten all about it until Fred reminded me.

"...I'm sorry. Truly. It's my own fault." I finally managed to utter an apology, to which Fred gave a wry smile.

"No need to apologize; I should've reminded you sooner. Anyway, you lucked out, because at least it's not too late."

He comforted me by patting me on the back, and I slumped.

"And it's only day one, so you can make sure you get everything ready for the next eleven days, right? Sophia's really looking forward to seeing what you get her!"

I didn't know what else to say. Each word from Fred felt like another blow, and all I could do was stand there motionless.

Usually during our morning break, I'd chat with my colleagues, but no one approached me today, probably because they noticed the frown on my face. They probably thought I was in a bad mood, but I was just feeling troubled. My mind was preoccupied with only one thing.

I knew everyone around me was concerned with my well-being, but I didn't have the luxury to pay attention to that right now.

I was consumed by a single thought.

...What should I give her?

If I could just figure that out, my worries would disappear, but it seemed like an impossible task. How could I have forgotten something so important?

I was supposed to give her a gift she would like, but that in and of itself wasn't

the issue. The problem was that I had to show off all the gifts on the twelfth day. They couldn't be too expensive or too cheap, and they needed to be tasteful, but what did that even mean?! What could I get her that fit all those criteria?

I wish I could throttle whoever came up with this idea!

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the murmurs around me quieted down. It seemed like I'd inadvertently put out a hostile aura.

I tried to regain my composure and started thinking about what Sophia might like. She was a kind girl, so I knew she'd appreciate anything I gave her. Even if she didn't like it, she'd still appreciate it because it was from me. But that wasn't good enough. I wanted to give her something that she genuinely enjoyed.

The age gap between us was frustrating. It shouldn't matter so much in the big picture, but she had only just come of age, so I felt like there was a significant difference in our values at this point in our lives.

When our engagement was announced, not even Cyrus offered his congratulations, but instead spat out a curse.

"Georges, you know that's a crime, right?"

*"…"* 

There are lots of married couples with a greater age gap than ours, but here in Lypaed, very few people get engaged to a woman who's just reached adulthood. There are some countries where engagements are arranged before adulthood, or where you can only marry the person your parents decide for you. Although political marriages exist here too, they're not as strict as in other countries.

"She's just entered high society, and you already want to keep her all to yourself?"

When he teased me like that with a smirk on his face, I seriously considered strangling him. Maybe I should've.

I was supposed to be thinking about gift ideas, but instead found myself

reliving unpleasant memories, which only made me more annoyed. Just then, the source of my irritation coincidentally showed up.

"Hey, Georges. What's got you so angry?"

"...Shut up."

Cyrus and I were Eugene's knights; he was first knight, and I was second. When Cyrus had been falsely accused and stripped of his knighthood, I had been the one that had to restrain my friend. I could still vividly remember everything from that moment. I wondered how many times I'd thought how glad I was that he'd returned to Lypaed.

"Are you all right?"

Even though I'd expected him to hold a grudge against me, he was still my friend just like before. There seemed to be some kind of tension between him, Prince Eugene, and Keith, but things were gradually returning to normal.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay? It starts today, right? Have you decided what to give her?"

Not him, too... Do I really seem that clueless? Well, I guess I am, and that's why I'm in this situation to begin with.

*"…"* 

"Come on...," Cyrus said, half-teasing, but noticing my silence, he sat down next to me with a serious look on his face. I shifted my gaze away from him and sighed, not knowing how many times I'd done so that day. Seeing the state I was in, Cyrus called out to one of the soldiers in the waiting room.

"Hey, who's on today's patrol squad for Main Street?"

"The seventh squad, sir!" the soldier replied with a hint of nervousness, indicating his own squad. Ever since Cyrus had received the Protection of the Dragons, the number of soldiers who admired him had increased. The air in the room had changed drastically ever since he walked in.

"Georges will be supervising today, so keep that in mind on patrol."

I lifted my head to look at him, surprised by that suggestion.

"Well, there's no point in sitting here worrying about it, right? Look around Main Street while you patrol and you might find something good."

"I'm supposed to guard Prince Eugene this afternoon..."

"Let me take care of that. I'll explain it to him. He'll probably find it amusing."

With a mischievous chuckle, Cyrus left the room after patting me on the back. I felt a mixture of irritation and gratitude toward him as I watched him go, and began to prepare for patrol. Honestly, I really appreciated his suggestion.

I didn't want to waste this opportunity Cyrus had given me, so I set out on patrol. Everything was going smoothly. As I walked, I looked at a number of different shops along the way out of the corner of my eye. I was planning on making a list of potential candidates in my mind and then visiting the shops after work.

That was when I encountered Setsuna again. For some reason, he was working at a flower shop, and it proved to be a lucky encounter for me.

The voices of the people in the bustling restaurants snapped me back to reality. Someone called out, "You dropped something!" which triggered a sudden wave of anxiety in me, but when I looked down, I saw the stem of the rose. The ribbon was still tightly tied around it, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was grateful I hadn't absentmindedly damaged the rose or lost the ribbon. I had only been able to obtain it with the help of Norris and Setsuna, and it was important I give it to Sophia.

"Convey your feelings... I'm glad I remembered that before giving it to her."

Something Setsuna said earlier when we were discussing the details of the ceremony came back to me.

"Along with the rose, you'll also be conveying to her your feelings."

It wasn't just about giving an object, but about showing her how I felt. I'd completely forgotten about that. Even if I were to give her something she liked, it would just be an object with no feelings attached, so I had to make sure I expressed my feelings to Sophia, since she would become my wife.

And so, I had written down how I truly felt on the delicately embroidered ribbon.

"I hope she'll like it."

Looking at the pure white ribbon tied around the rose, I began to feel shy. I prayed that my feelings would reach Sophia when I offered her my twelve emotions.

The guards at the gate opened the doors for me, and I stepped into the room. Although they were all familiar faces, hearing them cheer me on saying "Good luck!" was pretty embarrassing.

I took a deep breath in front of the door to the mansion and mustered up the courage to knock. Normally, the butler would've answered, but instead the door opened to reveal Sophia, with her waist-length, soft, golden hair, and eyes that always reminded me of a calm blue sky. Her face visibly relaxed when she saw me, and she gave me a slightly bashful smile. It seemed like maybe she'd been worried after all.

"Good evening, Sophia. I'm sorry I'm so late."

"Good evening, Sir Georges. I know you're busy, so thank you for coming." Her voice trembled slightly, and I wondered if she was just as nervous as I was. If it were Cyrus, who was more accustomed to dealing with women, he might've been able to say something witty, but I wasn't good at such things.

"...I'm looking forward to these next twelve days."

It was kind of a clichéd line, and I wasn't completely satisfied with it, but sometimes you just had to make do with what you had.

"S-so am I. Thank you," she replied with a hint of shyness, lightly clutching her skirt, which was the same blue as her eyes. Her demeanor reminded me of how she'd been when I first met her as a child. Back then, she'd hidden behind Fred's back and said hello to me, and now she was looking up at me with the same shy expression.

Although there were still moments when I wondered if I was truly worthy of marrying Sophia, I'd sworn to make her happy, so I knew I had to push aside my doubts after today.

"Sophia."

"Yes?" Her nervous voice brought a smile to my lips, and I gently cleared my throat.

"Will you accept this from me?"

I gazed into her sky-blue eyes and offered her the crimson Cindy rose, expressing my feelings through it. Her eyes were glued to the flower, and she carefully reached out to take it, making sure not to touch my fingers.

"Even though it's just a bud, it's very beautiful."

She looked completely enchanted by the rose. "But why is it still a bud?" she asked quietly, and I figured I should explain at least that much.

"This rose will bloom during the day, so you won't stay up all night."

"....." She looked up at me sheepishly, and I couldn't help but chuckle. I could tell she intended on staying awake.

"Sophia, your answer?"

My words seemed to snap her back to reality, and she hastily recited the customary response. There were certain things we had to be mindful of during this courtship ritual, such as not touching the other person, not entering their home, and that the woman must give one of two responses. If she said, "I'll be waiting for you tomorrow," it meant that she hadn't changed her mind, while "Would you like some tea?" meant that she wanted to call off the engagement.

I had a feeling I'd asked a superior once why those rules existed, but I couldn't remember the answer.

"Thank you, Sir Georges. I'll be waiting for you tomorrow."

She blushed and gazed at me kindly. I tried to hide the relief I'd felt the moment I heard the words "I'll be waiting..." I knew it was silly of me to feel this way, and I didn't want to embarrass myself too much in front of her.

As I walked back home, alone on the darkened path, I wondered if Sophia had noticed the word written on the ribbon. It was the same word symbolized by the gerulito flowers that were embroidered on it: *Gratitude*.

"Each of the twelve roses has its own meaning, and you can convey those same feelings to your partner with each rose. It's like making twelve different vows to the person you're going to spend your life with."

In all honesty, when Setsuna told me that, I'd felt embarrassed. That sort of thing's not really my style. And since I'm bad with words, I haven't had many

chances to express my feelings to Sophia.

Which is why, in the end, I'd changed my mind and decided that if I was able to convey how I felt, even a little, by writing on the ribbon, it was worth it. She had always been up front about her unwavering feelings, so I thought it was important to tell her what I needed to say as her future husband.

I went back home, sat down on my bed, and sighed. The first day had ended smoothly, and thanks to Norris and Setsuna, I had plans for the remaining days. I felt a little bad that I was causing them so much trouble, but was glad they seemed to be enjoying themselves at least. I had eleven days left, so I was going to do everything I could to express my feelings to Sophia.

Gratitude: I'm grateful to you and your family for being engaged to you. — Georges

♦ Part Ten: Georges—Day 2 of 12

The next day, as I entered a sitting room in the castle, somebody called out to me as if they'd been waiting for my arrival.

"Good morning, Georges. My sister's been staring at that rosebud since yesterday. She really liked the embroidered ribbon, too, but her favorite thing about your gift was the message you wrote."

It was Fred, my closest friend.

"Oh yeah...?"

"That was a wonderful rose you managed to find."

"Perhaps it's because I'm such a stand-up guy," I joked lightly, and Fred looked at me with surprise.

"Did something happen?"

"What do you mean?"

Fred's gaze shifted toward the chair in the corner of the room.

"Sophia was really delighted."

"By the rose...?"

"No. She was looking forward to your gift and was restless the whole night. Then, after you left, she kept staring happily at the rosebud and ribbon right up until she went to bed."

Fred looked serious as he described Sophia's behavior.

"She hasn't had much of an appetite lately, and she hasn't been sleeping well. She's always rubbing her eyes sleepily, and the reason she was uncharacteristically bold the other day when she asked to watch us train was because she was worried about you."

"She was worried about me?"

"You hadn't been able to eat properly until he returned, right? And you weren't getting much sleep, either."

"Fred..."

"I know this isn't for me to say. I was only watching from the sidelines, and even I thought that what happened was unbearable. It felt like I had a knot full of lead in my stomach."

He paused, staring into the distance.

"But when he returned to the castle, everyone who was close to him before he left cheered up again, except for you."

*"…"* 

"I understood why, so I didn't say anything. But Sophia sensed something was amiss. I wouldn't say anything, so she didn't ask. She just worried about us both in silence."

"She did?"

"Georges. Last night, she said you seemed more cheerful. I thought maybe she was just saying that to make me feel better, but now I've seen you for myself, I realize she's right. What could've happened to you in just half a day?"

Fred's question prompted me to tell him about my encounter with Setsuna the previous afternoon. I talked about thanking him and how he'd ended up listening to my problems.

"I see, so that's what happened. I was worried about you yesterday, but it looks like everything worked out."

Fred stood up from his chair and smiled brightly, as if to close out the conversation. Now that I thought about it, I realized I hadn't seen him smile like that in a long time. He told me he was relieved, and once he'd left, I headed back to my post.

As I walked to Norris's shop after work, I recalled my conversation with Fred about how worried Sophia had been over me. She had always been generous with her kindness. Sometimes, I had to perform missions that required me to suppress my emotions, like that incident with Cyrus, but I realized now that, even in the midst of a situation like that, Sophia and Fred had been by my side

worrying the whole time.

At Norris's shop, I carefully wrote my feelings onto another ribbon. Setsuna and Norris were surprised that I arrived earlier than yesterday, but I'd already decided what I was going to write before I even reached the shop.

It seemed like Sophia had lost some of her nervous energy on the second day, because her smile looked more natural than the night before. She was a bit surprised to see a second rose, but accepted it with a happy smile.

"I'll be waiting for you tomorrow..."

She looked down shyly, then glanced up at me. I couldn't help thinking how pretty she was.

There were so many things I wanted to tell her, but the words failed to come out, as usual. The second day ended with me just saying good-bye. For the remaining ten days, I resolved to not only express my feelings through the ribbons, but to try to say them out loud to her.

Respect: I deeply admire your kindness. —Georges

Three crimson roses were arranged in front of me, special gifts from someone I'd loved for years. Each rosebud was tied with a pure white ribbon, embroidered with flowers. Yesterday's embroidery was a sealal, which symbolized respect, while today's was a bellflower, symbolizing sincerity.

The flower embroidered on each ribbon shared the same meaning as the message written on it. I wondered how Sir Georges had managed to find the ribbons, as well as roses that stayed in bud form.

The messages were brief but uniquely him and ended with his name. It really felt like he'd filled the rosebuds with his emotions, and every time I saw the flowers and elaborately embroidered ribbons with his feelings written on them in that neat handwriting of his, I felt so happy I could cry.

I wish the flowers would hurry up and bloom...

Every day, I looked forward to seeing his feelings come into flower, and I whispered as I gently poked the rosebuds:

"When are you going to bloom? Please make sure you do it when I'm watching."

Even though they might not be able to understand me, I couldn't help but wish for it anyway. After all, these flowers symbolized how he felt about me. I couldn't afford to miss the moment when those feelings blossomed, and I moved my fingertips from the bud to the ribbon, lightly tracing the letters with my finger. Memories of Sir Georges' serene face and the way he called my name in his deep, gentle voice made my heart skip a beat.

"I'm glad Sir Georges is feeling better."

I spoke this to the empty room. He'd been feeling unwell for a while, and even though I had sensed something was wrong, considering his missions as a knight were usually confidential, I'd refrained from asking.

Even before, Sir Georges and my brother would sometimes look downhearted, and their expressions would often go blank, as if they had a lot weighing on their minds. At times like that, I tried to stay quietly by their side so I didn't add to their burdens. I know how people tend to think about bad things even more when they're alone.

They're so much more mature than me, so most of the time they seem to go back to normal within a few days. They must know how to process difficult and painful things by themselves.

But this time was different. Both of them withdrew and began speaking less. They lost their appetites. Knights were usually mindful of taking care of themselves, but their eyes had darkened as if even eating had become painful. I became anxious, wondering what kind of mission could have caused them such distress.

After a while, my brother's complexion improved, and when I asked him, "Are you all right?" he smiled and told me he was better now. I thought maybe the difficult mission was over, and if so, then Sir Georges should recover soon as well. But he still looked down.

My brother told me, "Just being by his side like always is enough." So I did that, even though it was difficult being by their side sometimes because they were so busy, which made me worry more about their health.

On the first day of the engagement ceremony, Sir Georges didn't come to my house until quite late at night. I started to worry that something happened to him, so I asked my brother, but he only gave me a vague answer. I was so anxious waiting. But I wasn't worried that he might not come, because Sir Georges was a sincere person and I knew he wouldn't break a promise.

And then, the moment arrived. I was very nervous, but the moment I saw his face, I was filled with relief. As I stared into his beautiful blue eyes, I knew everything would be all right.

I'm not sure what happened exactly. All I knew was that Sir Georges recovered three days ago. And I didn't have to know; even if we couldn't share certain things with each other, I was certain it wouldn't damage our relationship.

"What sort of message will he bring me tomorrow?" I wondered, as I toyed with a ribbon. There were nine days until the engagement ceremony, and with each additional rosebud, my love for Sir Georges only grew stronger.

Sincerity: I promise to always be faithful to you. —Georges

Georges stared at the ribbon that was embroidered with crimson clovers without blinking. He'd written down his feelings for the past few days easily, but today seemed to be a struggle.

With the exception of the first day, Elly had done the embroidery especially for Georges and Sophia. When Norris mentioned that the Cindy roses would be used for an engagement ceremony, she'd said she wanted to do something special too, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

They discussed various ideas and decided to embroider flowers on the ribbons based on their meanings. Norris chuckled as he told me that Georges had agreed after he'd consulted with him. It seemed that Sophia had been very pleased with the embroidered ribbons, which made Norris exhale with relief.

I heard another small sigh, and couldn't help but look over. Norris did as well.

"I'm sorry..."

Georges seemed worried that he was keeping us waiting.

"I know it's your day off..."

Under normal circumstances, the shop would've been closed yesterday and today, but since Georges had to give gifts over twelve consecutive days, Norris had made an exception. He prepared the rosebuds and ribbons, I enchanted them with Time magic, and we met up at the shop with Georges once he was finished with work.

We would leave once he was finished writing down his feelings onto the ribbon. The longer he took, the longer we would be there, but since we only had to go home afterward, it wasn't a big deal. Norris felt the same way and spoke kindly to Georges.

"Don't worry about us. Just focus on finding the right words," he said.

"I'm enjoying myself each day, too, so don't worry about me either," I added.

I hoped that would help set his heart at ease, and Georges nodded meekly to Norris, but furrowed his brow at my response. "What do you mean you're enjoying yourself?"

"I'm imagining the roses blooming in eight days."

Georges gave me a dubious look and sighed once more before returning his gaze to the ribbon, still unable to find the right words.

"Virtue is difficult," he muttered softly with a troubled expression on his face. I agreed that it seemed quite challenging.

In front of me, Norris also closed his eyes and muttered, "Virtue, virtue..." in an effort to help. I tried to imagine what I would write if I were to give this ribbon to Tuuli, but I couldn't narrow it down and find the right words, so I suggested we start by coming up with words associated with *virtue*, and told the others my idea.

"Other words that come to mind when you think of 'virtue'?"

"Yes. Like honest, kindhearted, something you don't want to lose?"

"Hmm..."

Norris and Georges pondered this. After a while, Georges called us over to have a look over his message and see if it sounded strange. I could see the joy at having come up with something, and anxiety about what to do if we thought it was odd, both written on his face.

We read it, and really hoped that all of Georges' efforts would pay off. It would be truly wonderful if we could celebrate that moment together. Just eight more days until then.

Virtue: I will stand by the goodness of your virtue and protect it. —Georges

I had heard from my brother that, three days ago, Prince Eugene and his knights had set out for a survey of the domain. Originally, Sir Georges was scheduled to go along, but he was excused due to our engagement ceremony.

Despite not going along on the survey, Sir Georges still seemed to be overwhelmed with work to be done, and he'd been going to the castle much earlier than usual. My brother was also leaving home early every morning and would only return after the sun had set.

I couldn't help but worry when I saw him come home exhausted every day and sleep like the dead, but when he woke up in the morning, his expression was always bright. It was as if he was enjoying the brief time he had right then, which left me feeling quite conflicted.

Unlike my brother, Sir Georges rarely showed his emotions with me. Still, it was easy for me to guess from his behavior that he was tired because we'd been together for so long. When we first met, I'd hidden behind my brother's back, but before I knew it, I felt myself always looking for Sir Georges.

I now had five rosebuds. Each rose came with a word, and beside it, a message from him. Sentiments I never would've thought him capable of expressing were written onto the embroidered ribbons. I absently gazed at the cute yellow dagenia flowers, which bloomed at the beginning of Salkis.

I wondered how he felt when he chose these words. What expression did he have on his face when he wrote on the ribbons? Each time he gave me another rose, my feelings for him grew. I lightly picked up the ribbon tied to yesterday's rose and read the words.

"He still remembers..."

No matter how many times I read it, a smile crossed my face, because the memory of that time remained vivid in my mind. I remembered his eyes softly gazing at me through the troubled expression on his face.

It was something that had happened when I was a child. There was a

significant age gap between Sir Georges and me, so our values differed in many ways as well. He was composed, and I, a restless girl. At the time, I loved to challenge myself with new things, but he didn't seem to have the same interests. He just wanted to watch my brother and me have fun.

When I was younger, both my brother and Sir Georges indulged my every whim. But unlike my brother, Sir Georges didn't try new things with me very often, which used to upset me. I would burst into tears, wondering why he wouldn't play with me, and he would desperately try to comfort me with a troubled look on his face.

I was too young to realize that everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses. As I reread the words written on the ribbons, I felt a slight pang in my chest and wondered if he still felt bad about that. At the same time, though, it made me happy that he remembered such little things, and I smiled as I read the words *perhaps* and *occasionally*.

I spent a pleasant afternoon revisiting old memories, and had an unexpected visit from a friend. When she saw the roses I'd received from Sir Georges, she frowned.

"He's giving you the same flowers every day? Sophia, are you sure about him? The roses are beautiful, but don't you think just tying ribbons to them is a bit too simple? It's not too late, you know? You could still ask him if he 'wants some tea' tonight."

I knew she was just concerned for my well-being. But I never once considered it.

"I'm happy with his gifts."

That didn't seem to satisfy her. It was challenging to explain this to someone with different values, but I knew that I couldn't convey even half of what I wanted to. And that's just how it was—we valued different things.

Of course, getting expensive items or different gifts each day might be nice. But a gift like this was filled with his emotions, and couldn't be replicated.

Sir Georges had carefully written his feelings on the ribbons, letter by letter. Words weren't his specialty, but he was making a conscious effort to try to

convey his feelings to me. And that effort itself was the greatest gift I could think of.

Once my friend left, I sighed softly to myself in the now quiet room. Only seven more days until the engagement ceremony. I silently wished deep in my heart that day twelve would come without any issue.

Effort: Perhaps I should try new things with you occasionally... —Georges

Thanks to Setsuna's medicine, my fever had gone down and the wound on my back was getting better. Before Norris brought him here, I was in constant pain whether I was sitting up or lying down. I didn't like to worry Norris, so I kept telling him I was fine, but honestly, the pain had been unbearable.

Maybe he knew I was just pretending to be strong. Just like I knew that he'd been trying to protect everything on his own.

But now, sitting on the sofa and embroidering a pure white ribbon, I no longer felt any pain. I still couldn't stand up for long periods of time, but at least I could move my hands.

There were two beastfolk in the room to watch over me.

One was a little boy named Alto, who had cute wolf ears. He stared intently at my hands as I embroidered. A little farther away, an elderly beastfolk man named Ragi sat in a chair and quietly read a book.

They were kind people who'd offered to help us out of concern. Norris was too busy with the shop, and I couldn't move much due to my injury, so they would bring me lunch every day except on Norris's days off.

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"What flower are you embroidering?"
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"It's a cactus flower. It means 'passion.""

"Oh..."

Maybe it was because he thought it was odd for drawings to be made with thread, but Alto had been watching me embroider all the time. At first, he'd been wary, and hadn't spoken to me other than to say hello, but he gradually warmed up to me after I started to give him sweets as a thank-you for bringing me lunch. Ragi quietly complimented me, saying, "Nice strategy," which made me happy. Now we were close enough to eat lunch together.

"Shall we leave soon, Alto?"

"Okay!"

At Ragi's prompting, Alto got up from his chair. They hadn't spent much time

with me, but it was enough to eat lunch together and for me to embroider a flower onto the ribbon.

"Take care, Elly. Be sure not to push yourself too hard."

"I won't. Thanks again for today."

"See you tomorrow, Elly."

"See you tomorrow, Alto!"

It was always lonely when they left, even though I enjoyed hearing Ragi's caring words and Alto telling me he'd see me tomorrow. Now that I was alone in the empty room, I continued my embroidery. The next day's ribbon was already finished, but I was embroidering the same design onto other ribbons.

Twelve roses, twelve words, and twelve ribbons, each one embroidered with a flower that symbolized the word. I was sure this would become popular. I only wished I wasn't injured so I could help more, but I was grateful to be able to lend a hand at all.

"... I might as well enjoy it," I paused mid-stitch to whisper to myself.

Norris and I both knew that being able to smile like this was close to a miracle. Which is why I'd decided that when I was completely healed, I wanted to repay Setsuna and the others as much as possible. I would make Alto a bunch of delicious food. I knew he'd be pleased, and more importantly, that that was what Setsuna wanted most.

I wanted to do something for Ragi as well, but I wasn't sure what to do yet. If I made him some clothes, would he wear them? I needed to thank the guildmaster, too.

Just when I was thinking it was about time for the shop to close, I heard the front door open and a flurry of footsteps. Moments later, the door to my room burst open.

"Elly!"

"What's wrong, Norris? I didn't hear your carriage. Did you run here?" I wanted to ask him, but he opened his mouth before I had the chance.

"The ink smeared on the ribbon! Can you fix it?"

He handed me the ribbon. There were some words neatly written on it. I was afraid it might be rude to read too much, but it was a short message, so I couldn't help it.

"I think it would be better to rewrite it on a new ribbon." I handed the ribbon back to Norris, then took a box from the nightstand. I opened it up and took out a ribbon embroidered with blue asters.

"Thanks! Sorry, but I have to hurry back."

"Okay. Good luck. But did you run here?"

"No, I asked Setsuna to teleport me because there wouldn't be enough time otherwise to redo the ribbon. He's waiting outside, so I have to go."

Wow, I'm so jealous. I want to try teleporting with magic, too. Norris left before I could even tell him to be careful, and after I heard the sound of the key in the lock, the room went silent again.

"Only six more days until the engagement ceremony. I wish I could go, too."

I felt a little disappointed as I looked down at the ribbon in my hands. Although I'd never met Georges before, Norris seemed like he was having fun and was working hard on his behalf, so I was sure he was a good man.

I remembered the words he'd written on the ribbon, and felt my heart warm. I returned to my task of embroidering the ribbons for tomorrow as I thought about the meaning of the blue aster flowers.

Trust: I'll try to be the person you trust most in your life. —Georges

That morning, I arrived back home after having surveyed the territories and finished reporting to the general that I'd returned to the castle. Lunchtime passed as I was adjusting my schedule, and I was about to return to my room, hoping to recover from my exhaustion, when I ran into Keith.

He asked if there had been anything of concern during the survey, and I briefly mentioned the monsters we encountered. He nodded and asked me for a detailed report later. In return, I asked what had been going on in the castle while Eugene and I were gone, and he told me that Georges' engagement ceremony was the talk of the town. Even I had heard rumors about it since returning to the castle. I couldn't imagine what kind of roses could be so popular, and I found myself intrigued.

It seemed that the king was also interested in the roses, and once Eugene heard about it from Keith, he decided to attend the engagement ceremony.

"Apparently, the roses are still buds, and they won't bloom."

*"…"* 

Keith quietly told me why the king was so interested in the roses, and from that explanation alone it was clear why Eugene and Keith wanted to attend the engagement ceremony. If there was a sorcerer capable of such magic in Lypaed, it was their duty to establish connections and perhaps persuade them to join us. Well, that might be the second reason.

"Aren't you going to ask Georges about it?"

"I don't think it would be very tactful to put a damper upon the engagement ceremony."

"That's true. Anyway, as friends of Georges, I'm hoping we get an invite."

Keith chuckled and lightly patted my arm before leaving. After that, I ran into several more acquaintances, and at that point it was too much trouble to go back to my own room, so I went to the break room set aside for knights and lay down on one of the beds. I don't remember anything after that.

The next thing I knew, it was time for dinner, and I decided to go out. Before I

left the castle, I put on the ring that Setsuna had given me, which was essential if I wanted to relax walking around town.

I used the warm lights glowing from the houses to lead my way and headed toward the restaurant I had in mind. Most of the shops were already closed and there weren't many people around. But among the few people who were out and about, I noticed someone walking as if trying to avoid attention. Since he wore knight's armor, I followed him out of curiosity, only to find out that it was Georges.

"Hey, Georges."

"What are you doing here?"

"I should be the one saying that. If people see a knight sneaking around, it's bound to draw attention."

"That's true." Georges nodded in agreement and our gazes met. I looked into his eyes and felt a sense of relief spreading throughout my heart.

It looks like he's come to terms with it.

Georges seemed to have harbored guilt about my situation for a long time, but there was nothing he could've done about it: He was a knight, and it was his job to obey orders. I wanted to tell him not to worry, but I refrained from saying anything because I knew it would do little to comfort him.

It had taken me a while to come to terms with my own feelings as well. I'd decided not to say anything untoward and continue with the same attitude I'd always had. To some extent, you had to work this out on your own.

"So, where are you going?"

He held a surprisingly beautiful rosebud in his left hand; I couldn't help but feel captivated by it. And despite it being so eye-catching, I'd only noticed it just now.

"Are you on your way to go meet Sophia? You're right to try to avoid attracting too much attention."

There were all sorts of questions I wanted to ask him, but I pushed them aside. Georges seemed to want to keep certain things hidden, so I decided not

to pry. But I wanted to let him know about what I'd discussed with Keith to make sure he wouldn't be inconvenienced.

"Oh, that reminds me, Georges. Eugene and Keith will be attending the engagement ceremony. I'll be there, too, of course."

"What? Why? Why would they do that?!"

That alone was enough to convey to him our true intentions.

"Because everyone is curious about those roses you're giving your fiancée, obviously."

Apparently, Georges hadn't told anyone where he was buying the roses.

"Why didn't you try to stop them?" He stared at me with a sour look on his face.

"Why should I stop them?" I responded lightly to his earnest question.

Georges frowned even more, but it didn't matter to me. Eugene and the others were already well aware of this situation, and they had still decided to attend the ceremony. It wasn't only because they were curious about the roses: They also genuinely cared about him. So why would I stop them from celebrating Georges and Sophia?

Besides, Georges was a good friend of mine. I was surrounded by people who were jealous or tried to get on my good side because of my relationship with Eugene, but Georges had always treated me the same ever since we first met.

Even after I'd received the Protection of the Dragons, his attitude toward me hadn't changed, despite the fact that other people had definitely begun treating me differently.

When I heard that he was engaged to a woman who'd just come of age, I knew that it wasn't Georges who had made advances toward her, but that the woman wanted Georges all to herself. It was easy to imagine that scenario.

I felt like praising Fred's sister, to be honest. She may have been quiet and outwardly subdued, but I knew that she was fiercely passionate, and that her feelings were unshakeable.

"I'll watch him from behind and you watch him from the front, Cyrus. We'll

split the task and protect Prince Eugene together so that no one will harm him."

He always said things like that. He worked quietly and without distractions. That was why Eugene and Keith also trusted Georges. We wouldn't miss the chance to celebrate his special day.

"I can't wait to see what words you'll dedicate to Sophia."

I was going to enjoy this to the fullest, because I didn't get a chance like this every day. I laughed at Georges but he socked me in the abdomen. My body was enhanced, so it didn't hurt much, but being punched suddenly always caught a person off guard.

"Dammit! I should've strangled you when I had the chance!"

It was so rare to see Georges have an outburst that I doubled over laughing.

Just five more days until the engagement ceremony.

I said good-bye to Georges and cheerfully headed to the restaurant. On my way, I recalled the words written on the ribbon and a smile formed upon my lips. He truly was a knight among knights—at least, that's what I believed.

Passion: You will always have my support, so live the life you want. —Georges

Our family guards called out to me from the doorway of the house. I listened to what they had to say and then peeked toward the mansion. I saw Sophia and Georges talking by the front door.

"It would be in bad taste to interrupt now," I said with a smile, and the guards nodded in agreement. I decided to wait here with them to allow the couple to share their precious moment together. As I observed them from a distance, I couldn't help but sigh as I noticed something.

It seemed like Georges was still doing it without realizing. Although he'd made some progress, it was about time he stopped thinking of Sophia as a little sister.

I knew that Georges loved my sister, but since they'd known each other for so long, he still didn't quite treat her as a woman as much as he should. I understood where he was coming from: After thinking of her as a sister for so long, it probably wasn't easy to suddenly see her as a romantic partner. It might be fine for them to just be celebrating his realization of Sophia's feelings and his proposal.

But that wasn't enough. Sophia wouldn't be happy like this. As I was lost in thought about what to do, I suddenly heard the voice of a man who should have been at the entrance come from right beside me.

"What are you doing here?"

The two of them had finished their meeting. The guards' bashful smiles suggested they had been trying to get my attention for a while now.

"What do you think? I was waiting here so I didn't disturb your time together."

Georges seemed unsatisfied with my response and let out a light sigh.

"I'm going home," he said before walking away. I told the guards I was leaving and followed after him.

"Let's go for a drink. Come with me," I suggested.

"…"

Georges wasn't a big drinker, so I thought he'd turn me down, but I was surprised when he agreed. I hid my shock and managed to stay calm as we entered a quiet place where we could talk.

The drinks arrived in front of us, and we sipped them quietly without talking much. I assumed Georges must have something to say to me since he accepted my invitation, but he seemed hesitant to start the conversation. I realized this would go nowhere unless I took charge, so I led the way.

"There's something you want to ask me, isn't there?"

I broached the topic and Georges set his glass down on the table, his gaze unusually serious.

"Are you sure you're okay with me marrying Sophia?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't believe my ears. And once I realized he was serious, I was just astonished. "Now? Georges, are you seriously asking me that *now*?"

It made me want to laugh. Seriously? Now? What was he thinking? I laughed aloud and saw Georges' eyes darken.

"Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't be something so easily accepted, you know?" His voice and expression were so serious that I had to respond in kind.

"That might be true. But I've always felt like I could entrust my sister to you. I know you, Georges, and besides..."

Sophia was the one who'd fallen for him first. My little sister, who always followed me around calling me "Big Brother!" in her little baby voice. Since she was so much younger than me, I'd always adored her almost like my own child.

Honestly, the idea of her getting married someday never crossed my mind. I do remember when she was little and would say, "When I grow up, I'm gonna marry Big Brother!" It always put a smile on my face. Maybe I even cherished her more than our parents did. And my feelings toward her haven't changed. They haven't, but...

When did she stop wanting to marry her Big Brother and start wanting to marry Georges? I think Sophia was around seven years old when I first met Georges and became close friends with this taciturn and awkward man.

Georges indulged my sister's whims just like I did and never complained. Sophia felt like a sister to him.

Given his personality, he wasn't usually fond of children, but I was surprised to see how good he was with her. And perhaps because he was a close friend of mine, Sophia quickly grew fond of him.

Come to think of it, the first time Sophia mentioned becoming Georges' bride was when she was ten years old. At the time, Georges and I just thought it was amusing. Like it was just another childhood phase, or an extension of how close she felt to him.

So when had that changed? It must've been around Sophia's twelfth birthday, during Silkis. Before then, she'd always just called him Georges, but she started using his title. We were surprised at how suddenly this change had taken place, but we chalked it up to her just being around that age and shared a sad, wistful smile with each other.

Looking back on it, though, Sophia must have secretly loved Georges ever since then. She kept her feelings to herself without sharing them with anyone. Maybe that was a sign of her maturity at such a young age. Though whether it was because she was mostly surrounded by adults, or because she spent a lot of time with me, I wasn't sure.

I'd thought of my sister as a child for so long, but now she was becoming an adult. I felt that intensely when I discovered her quietly crying alone one day. Up until then, she used to cry openly in front of the family, but at some point, she'd begun to hide her tears and quietly let them out when she was by herself. It was then that I realized she'd grown too big for me to keep holding on to.

Even when I asked why she was crying, she wouldn't answer. She just said it was nothing, and that she was fine. This happened several times before it hit me—Sophia always cried the day after she met with Georges.

Well, usually it was me inviting him and Sophia tagging along. I thought that maybe he'd said something to Sophia behind my back, so I asked her about it.

Although he was my close friend, I'd never forgive anyone who made my beloved sister cry.

"If you won't tell me the reason, I'll just ask him myself," I told her, half-threatening, and she reluctantly began to speak.

"Brother...I have feelings for Sir Georges."

I was shocked at this unexpected confession. I'd figured that she only ever thought of him as a brother, just as he thought of her as a sister.

"But he only sees me as a little sister," she said, weeping. "No matter how hard I try, I'm only a child in his eyes."

"Is that why you started calling him Sir Georges?"

"I wanted him to see that I was a woman...even if just a little bit."

I hid my inner turmoil as I heard her speak softly, looking at the floor the whole time.

"What's the rush, Sophia? You're only fourteen. You'll grow up to be so much more beautiful than you even are now!"

But she just shook her head and kept crying. She didn't even seem like the little sister I'd known my whole life.

"I want to grow up as fast as I can. Because, if I don't grow up fast enough, the next time I see Sir Georges, there might be another woman by his side."

I couldn't argue with that. My sister looked at me, her eyes full of tears.

"I'm always so anxious about that, Brother..."

Listening to her words, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was talking to a different woman. When had she started having these sorts of adult thoughts? I wiped her tears away, but inside I was a whirlwind of emotions.

Sophia had become even more beautiful than she was back then. There were so many indescribable emotions surging inside of me. I felt the same way Father must have been feeling; his disappointment over the past few days was so evident that it was almost funny. I couldn't blame him, though.

I sighed as I thought about my future brother-in-law and his wife, then poured another drink. I never could've accepted it so easily if it weren't Georges, I thought as I watched him drink.

"Besides what?"

I got so lost in my memories I wasn't paying attention. I paused for a moment and then decided not to say anything.

"I'll keep that to myself. It's probably better for you that way anyway."

Georges furrowed his brow, but didn't press further. Some sort of sixth sense had probably told him to keep quiet.

I looked at him and a bit of guilt welled up inside of me. The truth was buried inside my heart: I had sabotaged any relationship he might've had with a woman he'd been interested in because I was on my sister's side.

"Will you be my little brother, Georges?"

It was time to face it. I kept speaking, hoping he'd understand. "You're not going to just be another one of her guardians anymore. You're going to be her husband."

He froze at my words and gave me a genuinely displeased look.

"I'll be counting on you from now on...Little Brother."

I wanted Georges to cherish Sophia not as a sister, but as a woman. I was confident he was the only one who could make my beloved sister happy.

*"…"* 

Pretending I hadn't heard his reply, I laughed out loud, and our time together passed. We said good-bye in front of the bar, and when I returned home, I found Sophia waiting for me with a pout on her face.

"It's not fair to go out with Georges alone for drinks!"

She was mad at me for not inviting her. Was the fact that she still held the rose a sign of protest against me?

The ribbon tied to the rose swayed gently. White anemone flowers were embroidered at the ends of the ribbon, and the words written on it were typical

of Georges—straightforward and sincere. Only four days left until the engagement ceremony...

Honesty: I want us to live acknowledging each other's truths. —Georges

As I headed toward Setsuna and Norris's shop, I tried to keep as much of a low profile as possible. Due to the fact that I was Eugene's second knight and my engagement was coming up soon, news about the ceremony had spread far and wide. Honestly, I hadn't expected people to talk about it so much, but it seemed like many were trying to figure out the secret of the roses that wouldn't bloom.

Thanks to Eugene saying that he was looking forward to the ceremony, and that he hoped people would watch over our engagement quietly, hardly anyone bothered me anymore. Sometimes I did feel like I was being followed, though, so I made sure no one was tailing me before I headed to the shop. I knew how much trouble it would cause Norris and Setsuna if someone was tailing me.

I wanted to avoid causing them any more needless trouble, which, honestly, might be impossible. I felt like I was already burdening Setsuna, not to mention Norris.

Cyrus mentioned that Eugene and Keith were going to attend the ceremony. If that was the case, we couldn't avoid Keith seeing the rose, and if a sorcerer like him saw it, I was sure he'd figure out that it had been made using Time magic. And once he realized that, it would be inevitable that Keith, or worst-case scenario, the king, would ask who had cast the spell.

Setsuna had said that he wasn't affiliated with anyone because he wanted to be free to use his magic, and I'd promised to keep his secret. However, if the king ordered me to tell him, I would be forced to break my promise.

Just as Setsuna showed his sense of honor by saying he'd help with the ceremony even if it meant revealing his true abilities, if worse comes to worse, I have to protect him even if it means stopping the ceremony.

Now that I had made my decision, I went to the store and talked to Setsuna, but he told me, "I don't mind talking to the king. He already knows my thoughts on the matter, so I don't think he'll force me." I breathed a sigh of relief and then went to Sophia's house.

Once again, Sophia was dressed beautifully tonight. I handed her the ninth rose. She looked down at the ribbon embroidered with pink tulips and happily accepted her gift.

Even if it was just for a moment, I spoke to her every day. Most of the time I was only listening to Sophia talk, but it eased the rough edges of my heart. Ah, I see. It's times like these people are referring to when they talk about happiness.

"Sir Georges?"

"What is it?"

"I know it's impolite to ask such things, but..." She looked up at me with a slightly uneasy expression on her face and I almost felt like bursting out laughing. That part of her hadn't changed since she was a little girl.

"Don't worry about it. Just go ahead and ask."

"After the engagement ceremony, would you tell me where you bought these ribbons?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Um, I..." She stumbled over her words and her face began to grow red. I gave her a confused look.

"I want a ribbon for my hair that has the same embroidery as this one."

Norris and Elly ran a flower shop, not a general store or clothing store. I didn't know if they'd be willing to do that. But I could at least ask.

"I see. The embroidery on this ribbon is done specifically for me and you, Sophia. It's not their main profession, though, so I can't guarantee if I can make it happen or not. Is that all right?"

Her eyes widened at my response. Then, with a delighted smile, she happily nodded and said, "Yes. It's okay even if they say no."

Our conversation settled down and she told me, with a happy look on her face, "I'll be waiting for you tomorrow." Even though it was the ninth day, she'd still looked shy while saying it, which I thought was adorable. I found happiness in our time together and reluctantly began to walk away, but halfway to the gate, I stopped and glanced back. Sophia hadn't gone inside yet; instead, she

was clutching the rose to her chest and gazing at me with a sad expression on her face.

Her expression hit me like a bolt of lightning. Was that how she looked every day when I said good-bye? That made me feel even more reluctant to leave.

*"…"* 

When our eyes met, she quickly put on a gentle smile and waved at me. For the first time, I saw a glimpse of the woman within her, in the way that she smiled and hid her feelings. Dissatisfaction, loneliness, sadness, joy, happiness. The childlike Sophia who was always open and honest with her emotions in front of Fred and me was no longer there.

The things Fred said yesterday lingered in my heart. He'd called me his little brother. That meant he recognized me as Sophia's husband. Not as her guardian, but as her spouse.

I'd been so foolish. Even the conversation we just had about the ribbon was no different. She wanted to wear the same item that I had given her. I hadn't realized until it was too late.

From this day forward, my perception of her would change. She would go from being the adorable little girl I needed to protect, to the woman who would become my beloved wife. She was no longer just a girl. I was angry at myself for not understanding that sooner.

I waved back at Sophia, then started walking. There were three days left until the engagement ceremony. I was fortunate to realize all this now. I truly believed that. If I had kept up this misunderstanding, I'm sure that I would have deeply hurt her.

Happiness: My happiness is seeing you smile. —Georges

## Part Eighteen: Sophia—Day 10 of 12

After I received the tenth rose from Sir Georges, we chatted for a while and then I bid him farewell, saying, "I'll be waiting for you tomorrow." I had no doubt I'd be able to smile and say good-bye to him like usual. Why couldn't I? We would see each other the next day, right? It wasn't like we'd be apart for a long time or never see each other again.

Yet here I was, crying in front of him. I was happy, so I didn't know why I was crying; there was nothing to be sad about. All I knew was that I felt an inexplicable dread being away from Sir Georges. My tears just kept flowing uncontrollably, and I couldn't calm my nerves.

I had the feeling he wanted to wipe away my tears, but he never brought his hand to my face. Instead, he clenched it tightly into a fist and let it drop before reaching out to me, then let out a deep sigh as if he had given up on something.

When I heard that sigh, my entire body tensed up. Was I causing trouble for him? Since I was an adult now, did he think my tears were shameful? As I began to entertain those thoughts, I couldn't bring myself to look at his face. Yet the tears wouldn't stop. I just didn't want to be a burden on him.

"Sophia."

He said my name in a deep, low voice. I was so scared to hear what he was about to say that I flinched.

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"Sophia, please don't cry."
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*"…"* 

"When you cry like that, I can't help but want to hug you."

"Huh...?"

I wasn't expecting him to say that, and I instinctively looked up at him. But instead of a cold, exasperated gaze, he turned to me with a slightly strained smile on his face.

"I can't touch you for these twelve days, so I can't wipe away your tears right now. And I can't comfort you when you feel lonely."

His words struck a chord inside my heart.

"I feel sad when I'm away from you, too, even though I know I'll see you again tomorrow."

Oh, so it was loneliness I was feeling. I loved him so much that I didn't want to leave him. And even though I was surrounded by the rosebuds filled with his feelings each day, I was still lonely without him by my side.

That realization just made me cry all over again. Even though I knew the reason now, the tears wouldn't stop. He chuckled when he saw how frantically I was trying to stop weeping. His smile, along with the memory of our earlier conversation, made me happy he felt the same way.

"I'm okay now. Forgive me, Sir Georges."

He stayed by my side until I stopped crying, pretending to look at the flowers in the garden to avoid seeing my tearstained face.

"You don't have to apologize. I want you to rely on me more. It hurts me to see you enduring everything by yourself. But you'll have to wait until the thirteenth day, because there's nothing I can do right now."

After he said that, he smiled at me kindly and said good-bye.

"Good night, Sophia. See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Sir Georges. Until tomorrow..."

Then he walked away without even looking back once. As I watched him recede into the distance, my tears wouldn't stop flowing.

I went back to my room and my brother worried when he saw me, but I told him I just felt lonely saying good-bye. He sighed and told me to put a cold cloth on my eyes before bed, so I lay down with the cloth while I gazed at the rose I'd received today.

"I wonder if Sir Georges knows that the meaning of a rose changes depending on the number of them..."

I suddenly thought about it. I had ten rosebuds now, which represented...

"Someone cute..."

I wondered whether he really felt that way about me and grew embarrassed, burying my face in my pillow. After a little while like that, I remembered that Sir Georges didn't know that much about flower symbolism, so he probably wasn't aware. After all, he didn't know the meaning behind the flowers I gave him every season.

"I wish he knew, though...," I inadvertently said out loud, my voice echoing in the empty room. I wanted him to think that way about me. I wanted him to love me. I felt that way from the bottom of my heart. Sir Georges was a man of few words, and it was only recently that he'd begun to tell me how he felt.

I'd heard from my brother that Sir Georges had been criticized by the other knights for choosing me. I felt bad about it, but at the same time, I couldn't contain my joy. The fact that rumors were spreading about our relationship meant that everyone knew I wanted him for myself.

I turned my face toward the rose and reached out for the ribbon. A snowdrop was embroidered on it today. It was a flower that bloomed when the snow melted, to herald the coming of Silkis. It symbolized hope.

I let my hand drop, not caring that it was hanging off the bed.

"I've always wanted to become Sir Georges' wife."

Always... Ever since I was a child. And that wish was about to come true.

"It's been so long..."

I truly felt that way. He'd only seen me as a younger sister, and changing that perception had been very difficult. It was only because of our age difference that he saw us like that, though: that he was the adult, and I, the child. I longed for the day when I'd become a grown woman. I couldn't tell you how many times I'd cried from not knowing whether he would show up one day and announce that he was engaged to another woman.

"Ever since that day, I've loved you. But now you love me back. Don't you, Sir Georges?"

My eyelids felt heavy, so I closed my eyes. After a while, I heard a soft knock

at the door, but I was too tired to respond.

"Sophia?"

I could hear my mother calling to me from far away. I felt her tucking my arm under the blanket; she must've come to check on me. I heard her whisper, "Good night," and turn off my light. Then she gently stroked my hair and spoke softly to herself.

"Only two more days until the engagement ceremony. Time really does fly..."

"....."

"When you said you wanted to become more ladylike for Sir Georges, I was truly surprised."

I was going to be his wife. I'd decided that when I was twelve years old, during Silkis. I kept it a secret from my brother and father, but told Mother everything.

"To be honest, I wish you would stay my little girl a bit longer..." My mother's kind, yet sad voice brought tears to my eyes. "I'm so happy that your dreams came true. I'm glad you didn't give up."

Thank you, Mother. Even though I couldn't move, I told her so in my heart.

"Oh, and you should take advantage of your father a bit more. He's been feeling lonely."

*"…."* 

And with that, she chuckled softly and left the room. I heard the door closing and then drifted off into the depths of sleep.

Hope: Even in adversity, I will never let go of you, for you are my hope. — Georges

Part Nineteen: Georges—Day 11 of 12

*"…"* 

*"…"* 

A deep quiet enveloped us. It wasn't a heavy, oppressive silence, but simply that of our feelings resonating with each other.

Today marked the eleventh day of the engagement ceremony. I handed Sophia a Cindy rose, the ribbon around it embroidered with crimson roses. I'd already received her answer. But she kept staring at me.

I knew I should go soon, but my feet were frozen, and I was bound by her anxious gaze. Tomorrow would be the twelfth day, where I would hand her the final rose in front of everyone. We wouldn't have time for a private conversation tomorrow.

"...Are you sure you are happy to be marrying me?" I knew I was only asking this because of my own weakness. I wished she would stay by my side, but I couldn't help but worry that a different path might lie in store for her instead.

This is the last time I'll ask her this question, so I hope she forgives me.

"It's not too late to break off the engagement."

If she said that was what she wanted, it would take me a while to recover. But since I'd known Sophia since she was a child, I also wished for her to live the life she desired.

"No..."

She looked up immediately, replacing the troubled look on her face with a gorgeous smile. I was mesmerized beyond words. When had she become so beautiful? I couldn't take my eyes off her radiant face.

"Okay."

That was all I could say. I felt like there was still something I wanted to convey, or something I wanted to ask, but I couldn't put any of it into words.

I suggested she go back inside today without seeing me off, saying that I

wanted to be the one to watch her leave today. She pouted slightly, but reluctantly went inside.

I was planning on stopping by Norris's shop on the way home today to prepare for the following day's rose, and on the way there, I thought back on everything that had happened up to today.

Every day, I had written my feelings on the ribbons. And with each passing day, my feelings for Sophia had deepened. Every rose I gave her only increased my love for her.

My desire to make her happy.

My determination to protect her from anything.

My resolve for us to live together.

With each passing day, my feelings grew clearer.

Norris's shop was already closed by the time I arrived, so I entered through the back door and the two of them greeted me warmly. Today would be the last time we gathered here together like this. Just as I was thinking about how reluctant I was to leave, Setsuna placed a cup of tea in front of me.

"Tomorrow's the big day. Let's not let our guard down right at the end," he said, reminding me that it wasn't over yet.

"That's right, Georges. Here's the ribbon for tomorrow," Norris said, handing me the last ribbon. It was embroidered with a pure white rose. Without hesitation, I began to write down my feelings. Norris carefully tied it to the rose and Setsuna enchanted it with magic. After we went over the final details, all our preparations for the next day were complete.

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"Setsuna."
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"Yes?"

"There's one thing I'd like to ask of you tomorrow."

There was something I'd held back ever since I'd begun to think of Sophia as a woman. And in order to fulfill that wish, I needed Setsuna's help to ensure no one would interfere. He blinked for a moment, then smiled happily and said,

"Leave it to me." I thought I saw a mischievous glint in his eye, but I chalked it up to my imagination and left the shop.

As I walked back home, I gazed up at the two streams of shimmering stars flowing across the night sky. They reminded me of Sophia's eyes.

"I wonder if Sophia knows the meaning of eleven roses..."

Norris had been teaching me more about the symbolism of flowers each day, including the ones I'd received from Sophia in the past. I wondered if she'd imbued them with her emotions just as I was doing now and sighed at the thought.

"Sophia really loves you, Georges," Norris had told me. I would never forget those words. I wished I could go back in time and throttle myself for being so blind.

"Someone beloved..." I murmured the meaning of the eleven roses, and Sophia's happy face when I handed her today's rose flashed through my mind. She had blushed and cast her gaze downward, and I realized that might have been the first time in those past eleven days that I'd directly expressed my love to her. I wondered if that was why she'd been so happy. It wasn't something I could easily say in front of her.

But the next day, I was determined to honestly express my emotions. And that was why I'd asked for Setsuna's help.

"Just one more day until the engagement ceremony..."

Love: I love you with all my heart. —Georges

The words written on the rose I received today, the eleventh day, made me the happiest of all, because Sir Georges told me he loved me. I was so overwhelmed with happiness that I lost myself in thought while I stared at the roses and the ribbons. Just then, my brother said, "Do you really want Georges to propose to you when you have dark circles under your eyes?" So I hastily got into bed.

It was too hard to fall asleep, though. My mind was swirling with thoughts of everything that had happened before, the events of today, and what would happen the following day, and I thought that I might never get to sleep. But the next moment, I awoke to the chirping of birds and realized it was morning. I was surprised that I'd slept so deeply and had woken up feeling refreshed. I got out of bed and reached for the rose, holding the ribbon between my fingers. Not a single flower had bloomed. At this point, I understood that some kind of special magic had been cast upon the roses to prevent them from opening.

"I can't untie the ribbon... How mysterious..."

I read the words inscribed on the ribbon I received the day before, which had become a daily routine for me. I felt a smile on my lips as I looked down at the ribbon.

"Huh? Why are the words disappearing?"

For some reason, a part of the message written on the ribbon had vanished. And, when I looked closer, I saw that some of the text from the other ribbons was also missing. The only words now remaining were the eleven that showed the flowers' meanings, each tied to a single rose.

"Gratitude, respect, sincerity, virtue, effort, trust, passion, honesty, happiness, hope, love..."

"….."

I wanted to know why the words had disappeared. Knowing I would never again be able to read the feelings Sir Georges had written down made sadness and loneliness swirl inside my heart.

"But...maybe it's for the best."

Yes. Perhaps it was better that they disappeared, because those words were a gift from Sir Georges to me, and me alone. I didn't want anyone else to see them.

Maybe he thought the same?

It would be nice if he did, I thought, letting happiness embrace me as my day began.

It was day twelve, the final day of the engagement ceremony, and the main event was underway. My heart pounded in my chest, accompanied by a vague sense of unease. Even though it had only just begun, I hoped the ceremony would go smoothly, because among the guests were Cyrus, a first knight, Keith, the prime minister, and Eugene, the first prince.

Father, Mother, and Brother had all known they were coming, so why hadn't any of them told me? I couldn't believe it! Didn't they know I had to mentally prepare myself? I didn't want to commit a faux pas against the royal family on my engagement day. I prayed silently for this day to pass safely as I waited for Sir Georges.

The first half of the ceremony would take place in the garden, because Sir Georges couldn't touch me or enter my home until he gave me the final gift. After the proposal, he and I would go around together to greet all the guests.

For that reason, everything had been readied in the garden. Both Georges' and my parents had made sure there was no shortage of food, drinks, and places to rest. I imagined it must've been difficult to prepare the property for the prince and others, but it made me happy to know that Sir Georges was trusted by the royal family so much.

The guests were free to enjoy themselves as they pleased. Some people genuinely admired the rosebuds Georges had given me, while others wondered why he'd given me eleven of the same gift. Who invited them anyway? I had to be careful not to scowl. But what I couldn't forgive was my brother laughing beside me, telling me how funny he thought it was that my expression

constantly kept changing. Absolutely unforgivable.

Countless thoughts swirled through my head as I eagerly awaited his arrival. My parents and brother tried to calm me down, but all I could think of was Sir Georges.

Then, the moment finally arrived.

A murmur went through the crowd as it parted. Sir Georges was here. My body instantly filled with tension. I desperately tried to stop trembling. My brother gently stroked my back, which helped me feel a little better. I held onto Sir Georges' feelings along with the eleven rosebuds he'd given me as my brother slowly escorted us to a location that had been specially prepared for us.

Mother suggested leaving them in the vase, but I wanted to hold his feelings over these past twelve days close to my heart. Each of the large rosebuds was quite heavy, but their weight represented his emotions, so I vowed not to drop them.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears. I couldn't see Sir Georges yet, but judging by the crowd, I could tell he was approaching. Just as I thought it must be time, Sir Georges appeared, and my body temperature instantly rose.

He was dressed in the white formal regalia of the knights with a navy blue cloak draped over his shoulders, his beloved sword at his waist. He looked incredibly dignified, quite different from his usual self. He was always handsome, of course, but seeing him in his formal knightly attire for the first time made him look indescribably gorgeous.

My heart pounded faster with each step he took. His eyes were fixed solely on me, unwavering, but his gaze was so fierce that I couldn't help but shift my focus. Looking behind him, I saw two figures wearing white hooded robes, each carrying a large basket in their arms. Just then, a breeze blew, and I thought I made eye contact with the violet eyes of one of the men, peeking through the gap in the hood.

The two figures stopped partway so Sir Georges could approach me alone, and my brother also quietly moved away from me. Sir Georges stopped three

paces in front of me and performed a knight's salute. I couldn't lift my dress because of the roses in my arms, but I tried to curtsey in return as gracefully as I could.

We both stood up straight and locked eyes with each other. I noticed a different light in them that I'd never seen before. He was gazing at me so tenderly.

That was enough to make me blush. I was probably bright red by now, yet I couldn't tear my gaze away from his eyes, almost as if I was bound to them.

"Being able to welcome this moment with you tonight makes me truly happy," he said quietly. No one else uttered a word. "On this twelfth day, will you accept my final gift?" He took a step forward and gently offered me a pure white rose.

The serene white seemed to soothe the passionate red of the others. If I were to compare myself to a crimson rose, then he was this pure white rose watching over me. The white rose was also still a bud, but it was truly magnificent.

I accepted the other rose from him and noticed that there were two ribbons tied to it—one red and one white.

"Thank you, Sir Georges. I'm happy we get to welcome this moment together, too." My voice trembled with nerves, but he smiled kindly at me, which helped me get through my sentence. After I'd finished speaking, he nodded and stepped back.

He stood up even straighter, puffed out his chest, and took a deep breath before looking into my eyes. I was captivated by his intense gaze. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look at me like this—not as his friend's sister, not as someone he had to look after, but as a woman.

I fought the urge to cry tears of joy. It wasn't over yet. The best was still to come, I reminded myself.

"Sophia, will you marry me? If your answer is yes, return the pure white ribbon to me. If your answer is no, return the crimson one." His proposal was straightforward. There were no fancy words—it was just straight to the heart. I

looked at the rose I'd received and saw the white and red ribbons.

The crimson ribbon had only the word eternity written on it.

The white ribbon had the words eternal farewell.

I stared at the two ribbons, pondering for a moment. I thought he might've made a mistake. As I hesitated, I heard a murmur go through the crowd.

...Isn't it strange to answer a marriage proposal with eternal farewell?

He seemed to read my thoughts when he looked at my troubled expression and smiled gently, as if to assure me that everything was all right.

As the guests watched us with nervous anticipation, I untied the pure white ribbon and returned it to him.

"You returned the ribbon to me that says 'eternal farewell." His words caused another stir among the crowd. That wasn't surprising—even I thought it was a mistake.

"I shall erase this ribbon before you," he said, and in that moment, the pure white ribbon burst into flames and disappeared. I stared at the scene wide-eyed, understanding the meaning behind his actions.

The reason why he'd erased *eternal farewell* was because he had no intention of ever parting with me. Tears welled up in my eyes, but I fought them back. I couldn't cry. His proposal wasn't over yet.

This was his gift for me, so I knew I'd regret it if I didn't accept it in its entirety.

He continued as I pressed my lips together tightly.

"I vow the eleven words from the past eleven days on today's rose. Please accept my feelings." His deep voice echoed in my ears as I recalled the words embroidered on the other ribbons.

"Gratitude, respect, sincerity, virtue, effort, trust, passion, honesty, happiness, hope, love..."

And the word embroidered on the rose's ribbon today.

"Eternity."

*""* 

I murmured softly. "For eternity...?"

"For eternity."

An eternal vow.

His unwavering gaze was directed at me, and the tears that had been welling up in my eyes streamed down my face. The rosebuds were damp with my tears.

Now the meaning of the words he'd sent with the roses became clear. Every day he had gifted me roses to convey to me his feelings. I hugged the roses tightly against my chest. Each of his emotions was precious, filling me with happiness and overflowing emotions of my own.

"I love you, Sophia."

Suddenly, the twelve roses in my arms began to glow. The light was so beautiful that it was surreal, and I was left breathless staring at it.

The buds blossomed into large, elegant roses.

These roses...

They had bloomed in unison as I held them!

The sight I'd been eagerly waiting for had unfolded right in front of me, in my arms.

I wasn't the only one completely captivated by the scene.

*"…."* 

Everyone who had been watching felt the same. We were all still, enveloped in silence, as if time had stopped for a moment.

I wonder who it was that snapped out of it first... The sound of a clap echoed through the space, as if its owner had been overcome by emotion, and the entire crowd broke out into applause. It grew louder, with exclamations of wonder and congratulations mixing in. Our guests' blessings overflowed around us.

Now the roses cradled in my arms had transformed into a magnificent bouquet. It was a wondrous, miraculous type of magic. Sir Georges had given me a feeling I would cherish for the rest of my life. I've never received such a marvelous gift before...

I looked up at Sir Georges tenderly, and he returned my gaze with an incredibly sweet expression on his face. As he stepped closer, a soft breeze blew around us, and colorful petals fluttered from the baskets held by the figures behind him, dancing around us in celebration. The guests laughed and chatted with excitement, enchanted by the swirling petals.

After a while, as the petals continued to flutter around us, they ascended into the sky all at once. Strangely, neither Sir Georges nor I was affected by the breeze; our clothes had remained undisturbed.



I watched the petals rise into the sky, completely in awe, and before I knew it, Georges was right in front of me. Our eyes met for a moment, and then he pressed his lips against mine. I was surprised, but before I could react, he gently embraced me, careful not to crush the roses.

"...I wanted to hug you so badly, I couldn't help it," he whispered, and I nodded in agreement in his arms. I'd also wanted him to hold me. My overflowing emotions turned into tears, which he gently wiped away before stepping back.

Just then, I heard a surprised yet amused voice behind us.

"Dammit, Georges! Now look what you've done!"

It was Sir Cyrus, Prince Eugene's knight. I turned in his direction to see him completely covered in a sea of petals.

A low chuckle sounded beside me, and I looked up to see Sir Georges laughing. His smile made me happy, and I couldn't help but laugh alongside him.

"Always keep smiling, Sophia."

I beamed in response and told him I would. Seeing us smiling at one another, our families and friends clapped and cheered for us all over again.

"Sir Georges."

Amid the excitement and laughter around us, I gently called out to him.

"Yes?"

"Could you write your feelings on the crimson ribbon?"

He'd written down a sentence on each ribbon before. Hearing my request, he chuckled softly and whispered in my ear:

"Sophia, do you know what a pure white rose means?"

White roses have various meanings, but the first one that came to mind was "thinking of you."

Eternity:

## Part Twenty-one: Norris

After Setsuna and I watched the end of the first half of the engagement ceremony, we quietly slipped away together. I was grateful that we were able to leave Sophia's manor without anyone noticing. I told Georges that we would wait for the best timing to slip away and return home as soon as possible. Since the shop was closed for the day, I had no other commitments scheduled.

"What will you do now, Norris?"

"I'm going to stop by the shop before heading home."

"Maybe I'll go home, too, then," Setsuna said as he took off his robe and stretched out his arms overhead.

"Uh, Setsuna?" I was trying to remove my expensive-looking robe as well, but the hood had gotten caught so it was taking a bit longer than expected. I had a feeling my hair was all messed up, but I didn't care about that right now. There was something I really needed to ask for his help with.

"Yes?"

"If you don't mind, would you like to come over to my house for tea?"

Setsuna packed his folded robe into his bag. "Ragi told me that Elly hasn't fully recovered yet, right? I don't want to disturb her by coming over."

"It's fine. In fact, she already knows you might be coming back with me."

"Really?"

"Yes. She's been wanting to hear all the details about the engagement ceremony."

"I'd love to, then. Shall we buy her something from the food stalls? It's a good time for tea, so we can get something light that won't spoil our appetite for dinner."

"That sounds good."

Setsuna and I walked back to the shop, chatting about trivial things along the way. We picked up some food from the stalls that would go well with tea.

Setsuna did some shopping as well, but the amount he was buying seemed a little odd. I wondered who would be eating all that, and he told me he was getting food to take home for Alto. It still seemed like a lot, but I guessed he would just eat it over several days.

After we stopped by the shop, we headed home in the carriage. I talked to Setsuna about my request on the way there, and he readily agreed. I felt relieved, but then suddenly became worried about Elly. She must have been eagerly anticipating our return. I hoped she wasn't pushing herself too hard.

"Norris, welcome home! Hello, Setsuna!" Elly heard the carriage and came out of the house to greet us. She could walk slowly now, but I wished she would stay inside a bit longer if possible.

"Thanks for having me," Setsuna said, and looked Elly over carefully. She must've noticed the reason why he was examining her, because she happily told him, "My fever's gone down!"

Elly cheerfully urged us to come in and we went inside, prepared tea together, and told her about today's events. I told her all about the crowd, the fancy clothing the nobles wore, how Cenius from the money exchange store had been there, and that the prince, prime minister, and Sir Cyrus, the prince's first knight, had all been invited.

"Wow, really?"

"Really! I was so nervous I thought I was going to die!"

I'd never even considered the possibility of royalty attending, so I really was nervous. Even though we'd been walking behind Georges, so we were quite a fair way away, it was still surreal to be in the same garden as them. I had felt so out of place.

"I guess it's a good thing I didn't get to go after all." Elly's sighed with relief. "What about the roses? How were the Cindy and Laglut roses?"

Elly knew all about how they had been enchanted.

"They were beautiful. So beautiful. The roses we grew blossomed all at once in front of so many people. Lady Sophia looked overjoyed as she gazed at them."

"I'm sure she was."

"The nobles and even the prince were amazed by Setsuna's magic, but they were also astounded at how beautiful the roses were. They were all saying how wonderful and gorgeous they looked, and the garden was filled with cheers and applause. I don't think I'll ever forget that sight for the rest of my life."

"That's lovely. It's so nice to be recognized by so many people."

Elly must've been imagining it. She seemed overwhelmed by her emotions and tears rolled down her cheeks.

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"I'm so glad we grew them."

"Me too."

"And I'm so glad we didn't give up."
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"Yeah."

We'd failed countless times, felt frustrated and discouraged, and even thought about giving up. But we hadn't been able to in the end. And because we didn't, here we were today—people praising the roses we grew. That moment filled me with true happiness. I sincerely wished Elly could have been there to experience it firsthand.

As I gently wiped away her tears, I realized something... Setsuna had been sitting in front of me, but he wasn't there anymore. I looked around the room to see where he had gone and found him staring intently at some flowers in a vase.

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"S-Setsuna, I'm sorry!"
"I apologize, Setsuna..."
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Both Elly and I blushed profusely. Setsuna said nothing and remained standing there silently.

"What else happened?" Elly asked.

Setsuna recounted Georges' words verbatim, detailing how the roses were handed to Sophia and the arrangement of the ribbons. Elly listened eagerly, her

eyes twinkling.

"Still, Norris's skills are truly exceptional. Not only did he match the sizes of the roses without seeing them lined up together beforehand, but he even matched up the Laglut rose, which was from an entirely different field, perfectly to form the bouquet."

"I thought that having equal-sized roses in the bouquet would look more beautiful. I didn't want any one of the twelve meanings to outweigh another, so I chose roses that looked like they would be the same size when they bloomed rather than the largest ones."

"It was a wonderful bouquet."

Setsuna openly praised me, and I suddenly felt very bashful. Having Elly stare proudly at me made it even worse. I felt overwhelmed and changed the subject.

"Are you sure it was okay for you to do that?"

We told Elly about how Setsuna had buried Sir Cyrus in flower petals, and she looked at him with concern.

"It'll be fine. Georges will smooth things over, and Sir Cyrus won't take it personally. Probably."

"...'Probably'?"

"Probably..."

Both Elly and I gave Setsuna a wry smile at the way he said that. Honestly, I couldn't help but worry whether it was all right to do something like that to Sir Cyrus, but since Georges, the prince, the prime minister, and even Sir Cyrus himself had laughed about it, I hoped there wouldn't be any repercussions. Surely Georges would smooth things over if need be...

We spent a peaceful time together, and Elly's questions eventually died down. I noticed Setsuna glancing at the clock on the wall, so I sat up straight and spoke to him.

"Setsuna."

"Yes." He nodded, understanding my signal.

I turned to Elly and said, "Elly, let's have Setsuna heal your wound."

"Norris!" She gripped my arm tightly and shook her head.

"It's okay, Elly. We've more than surpassed our sales goals this month."

"...Really?"

"Yes, really. I can repay our debts at the hospital for this month and next month without any issues."

"But how...?"

"We didn't expect our flower wrapping to be this popular, which was the biggest factor behind why our sales increased so much, far above our initial predictions."

*"…"* 

"And starting next month, the Cindy and Laglut roses will also be able to contribute to our sales. Since they'll stay as buds for as long as we need, none will go to waste."

I felt like we should pay Setsuna for the Time magic he used, but he seemed to consider it his way of repaying me for burdening me with his secret, so I had decided not to mention it anymore.

"So don't worry about a thing. Let's get your back healed!"

"Shouldn't we prioritize giving Setsuna his bonus reward money first, for helping out our shop so much?"

"You've already paid me enough. Please don't worry about it," Setsuna said, helping my case.

"What? Really? You're not lying to me?"

The adjustment to Setsuna's fee was the first thing I did with the extra money.

"I receive payment through the guild, so if you're worried, you can ask Drum about it."

"I'll show you the ledger later, Elly."

"Okay."

She still seemed uneasy and wouldn't agree.

"Plus, it's not good to tie him down to our quest. He's purple rank, so we're not the kind of people who can afford to pay him what his real fees are."

"Purple..." Elly's eyes widened as she stared at Setsuna.

"Setsuna's goal was to earn funds to travel. The longer we keep him, the further he gets from his goal."

"You're right. We can't do that. Are you sure it's okay to have him treat me?"

"Yes. Trust me."

"Okay." Elly nodded as she met my gaze.

"Setsuna, please take care of Elly's treatment."

"Please heal my wound, Setsuna."

We both stood and bowed our heads to him.

"Leave it to me. I'm going to do everything I can to heal you." Setsuna smiled gently as always and accepted the task.

Elly lay face down on the bed with her back exposed, just like the first day Setsuna had examined her. The wound was still swollen and looked painful. It was no longer bleeding, but the angry scar from her shoulder to her waist was distressing to see.

Setsuna examined her wound with a serious expression, then gently placed his hands on her back and began chanting an incantation. As his chant ended, small magic circles appeared over the wound and floated up. I watched breathlessly as the magic circles spun, gradually healing her wounds.

*"…."* 

I wanted to say something to Setsuna, but no words came out. I'd been holding my breath this whole time.

"Norris?" Realizing I'd gone quiet, Elly called out to me sounding worried, but I couldn't respond.

"Norris, are you okay?" she asked, her voice laced with concern. But why was she worried about me? As I wondered this, I looked at her face and noticed her frowning. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Oh..."

I only just now realized that tears were falling from my eyes. I wiped them away with my sleeve and tried to smile, but failed.

"The wounds on your back... They're gone...," I said to Elly, and the magic circles over her body dissipated.

I'm so happy.

Now Elly wouldn't have to suffer and see that scar anymore.

"Huh?"

"I believe you're completely healed now. You won't need to take the medicine anymore. I'll excuse myself for the time being, but if there's anything you're concerned about after checking your back, please let me know."

Setsuna let out a light breath and left the room. Elly stared at her back in the mirror, eyes wide and unblinking. When she finally did blink, the corner of her mouth began to tremble, and tears streamed down her face.

"It's completely healed... I never thought the scar would completely disappear..."

The two of us held each other and cried, sharing our joy. I vowed to one day repay Setsuna's kindness. I knew that I would never forget how he had helped us.

After we finally calmed down, I fixed Elly's blouse for her and called for Setsuna. He came back into the room, asked her some questions about how she felt, all of which Elly nodded to, and told us that she was completely healed.

When Setsuna finished speaking, Elly happily went to the kitchen to make tea. I figured she probably wanted to see how she was feeling. Smiling, Setsuna and

I left the bedroom and sat on the sofa in the living room.

"Now that Elly's injury has healed, I think she can work in the shop starting tomorrow."

"Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. In which case, you won't need me anymore. I don't want you to waste any more money, so if you want to end the quest today, that would be fine."

"Huh? But I wanted to work with you, too!" Elly placed the tea in front of us, a sad look on her face. Then her expression darkened, as if she'd suddenly realized something.

"Elly? What's wrong?"

"Starting tomorrow, I won't be able to see Alto and Ragi anymore... That makes me sad," she said, her eyes on the floor.

"Setsuna, if you don't mind, could I ask you to continue the quest until tomorrow? Please work with us for one more day, to monitor Elly's condition."

Elly was feeling down, but I was also worried about having her suddenly start working again. Of course, I didn't doubt that he had healed her completely.

"Sure, that's fine with me." Setsuna must've sensed my feelings, because he gave us a warm smile and agreed.

"Elly."

"Yes?"

"I promised to thank Ragi by helping him redo the wallpaper in his house."

"Really? I didn't know that!"

I hadn't told Elly because even if her injury hadn't healed, she would've insisted on coming along.

"So you should ask Ragi if you can help too. The more the merrier."

"I'll do that! Oh, I forgot the snacks! Let me go get some." Elly smiled cheerfully and headed to the kitchen, leaving Setsuna and me chuckling to one another.

After Setsuna left, Elly and I lay in bed side by side, discussing all sorts of things. We talked about the events of today, everything that had happened until now, Setsuna, Alto, Ragi, Georges... My situation and environment had changed so much over the past month, as had Elly's.

"Elly, I was thinking about something. Someday, I want to be the protector, and not the protected."

"The protector?"

"Yes. I might not have as many talents as Setsuna, but just like he and Ragi reached out to us, I want to be able to look out for other people."

"So you want to protect others by helping them?"

"Yeah. There are some things that only Setsuna can do, but there are things only I can do, too. Right now, I still have a lot to learn, but I want to work hard to grow."

"Okay. I'll try my best, too."

"I was thinking it'd be nice to be able to repay Setsuna someday."

"Definitely. But what do you think would make him happy?"

"Maybe we could create a new flower and name it after him?"

"Hm... I'm not sure if he would like that."

Elly giggled softly, perhaps imagining his reaction. Her expression was so peaceful, and she seemed genuinely happy. Seeing Elly like that made me feel happy, too.

I owe Setsuna, Ragi, and Alto my heartfelt gratitude...

With that thought in mind, my long day came to an end.





## **Epilogue**



## ♦ Part One: Setsuna

Georges and Sophia looked so happy during their engagement ceremony. The performance using Time magic went exactly how I'd imagined it as well. The sight of the roses all blooming at once was beyond beautiful, and it left an incredible impression burned into everyone's memories that I hoped they would never forget.

At Georges' request, I had discreetly diverted the crowd's attention to the flower petals for a moment. When asked, he told me there was no particular reason for the request.

Afterward, I'd gone to Norris's house and told Elly about the ceremony. Although I enjoyed sharing the story, I couldn't help but think that she probably would've liked to have seen it with her own eyes, and I was sure Norris felt the same.

I could project my own memories like I did with Revale, but it was Light magic, so I gave up. I didn't think it would be a good thing if my ability to use Light magic became known. Although I couldn't do it then and there, I thought there might be a solution if I looked into it further, and decided to come back to the topic when I had some free time.

After I left Norris's house, I went back home and told Alto and Ragi about the engagement ceremony over dinner. I mentioned what had happened at Norris's house, too.

Alto's ears drooped, and he looked as sad as Elly had. He was more disappointed than I expected him to be when he learned that Elly's wounds had healed, and that he would no longer need to go deliver lunch to her. He'd become quite friendly with her lately and enjoyed watching her embroider.

"But Elly said she'd help with the wallpaper if Ragi didn't mind."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Alto stopped eating and looked at Ragi, who gave a small nod and said, "Please tell her I'd appreciate it."

With that, Alto cheered up and resumed eating with his usual gusto. After an enjoyable dinner and a drink with Ragi, I returned to my room. Alto wasn't in my bed, so it seemed he was sleeping alone tonight.

I lay down in bed and let out a deep sigh. As I went over the events of the day in my head, my memories seemed to join together, and I started to think about everything we'd been through up until now. My first job at the flower shop had been a good experience for me, and Alto was going through a lot of changes, despite his aversion to interacting with people. Although I intended to continue to focus on healing his emotional wounds, I hoped he'd be able to face his challenges on his own eventually.

I let out a yawn and felt myself growing drowsy. I quickly went over my plans for the following day and realized this would be the last time I thought about my current quest.

"Last day tomorrow...," I murmured to myself, and was surprised at how disappointed I felt. Was I regretting the end of my job at the flower shop, or was it something else? That question popped into my mind, but quickly dissolved with another yawn. Tired, I decided to stop thinking about it and drifted off to sleep.

Today marked the first and last day of preparation with Norris and Elly together. Norris looked pleased to see her so lively and energetic, happy that she could work.

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"Norris, is that spot okay for the Laglut and Cindy roses?"

"Yeah, I think that's good."

"Do you think they'll sell?"

"I'm sure they will."

"Do you think we'll be able to give them to Laglut and Cindy someday?"

"Let's work hard to make sure we can."
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"Yeah."

The two of them held hands as they talked about the rosebuds that would go on sale today. Norris and Elly's dream might be starting anew from today. As I thought about that, I went outside to clean up around the shop, trying not to disturb them.

We opened the florist, and in no time at all the Laglut and Cindy roses sold out. It seemed the rumors of Georges' engagement ceremony yesterday had already spread, and all sorts of people came to buy the flowers.

There were many requests from customers asking us to delay the roses blooming, but we refused, telling them that the sorcerer who'd done that had left Lypaed. Though some of them were initially disappointed, their eyes sparkled with satisfaction as they watched the roses bloom in front of them, and they left staring adoringly at the wrapped flowers they'd bought.

"Elly, are you tired? Do you feel all right?"

"How are you, Elly?"

Norris and I frequently checked on her and watched over her while we worked. Although her wounds were healed, her stamina hadn't completely recovered yet. She would need to gradually get used to working again.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Norris looked worried, but Elly smiled.

"Yes. But...I was just thinking tomorrow might be tough."

Norris smiled wistfully. "That's right, Setsuna won't be here tomorrow. It'll be challenging for us to manage the shop alone."

"That's also true, but what I meant was that it seems like some people are coming here specifically to see Setsuna," she said with a sigh.

"People are coming to see me?" I repeated, not understanding.

"You didn't realize?" Elly looked at me in disbelief. "Haven't you noticed the women waiting outside the shop, even when Norris and I are free, so they can talk to you when you're finished dealing with a customer?"

"Um... Isn't that just because they like the flowers?" I asked, and Elly gave me another incredulous look.

"People who love flowers can't take their eyes off them the moment they bloom. Just like you, Setsuna."

"Setsuna, you always look so happy watching flowers bloom that anyone can tell you love them."

That moment when the buds bloomed never failed to amaze me, no many how times I saw it. But I hadn't realized this was so obvious.

"Just like Norris, eh?" Elly said, poking her husband in the side.

"This conversation is getting off track, Elly."

Norris evaded his wife's attack and urged her to continue.

"If people stop coming here because Setsuna is gone, sales will drop. And they'll ask us why Setsuna left."

"...Are you sure it's okay if I leave, then?" I asked Norris, starting to feel concerned.

"Of course. Neither of you need to worry," Norris smiled. "I already anticipated this, and I took the future of the shop into consideration when I asked you to heal Elly."

"Did you?"

"You did?"

Elly's and my voices overlapped.

"If you look at the ledger, it's quite obvious that Setsuna's customers are all women buying single flowers. And if you look at the pattern of his customers every day, they're overwhelmingly young ladies. Just so you know, I also keep track of the types of flowers they purchase. If I don't do that, we'll end up picking too many of the ones that won't sell as well after today."

Businessmen sure were serious...

"Norris, you're amazing. I'm seeing you in a whole different light."

"No, it's the ledger that's amazing."

I finally understood why keeping the ledger and analyzing the daily statistics were so important. Elly nodded in agreement, looking relieved and glancing at Norris gratefully.

That afternoon, Georges came by to see how we were doing and to order some seasonal flowers for Sophia every month. Despite it being Elly and Georges' first time meeting, they chatted like they'd known each other for a long time.

Before I knew it, it was time to close, and we started cleaning up. Norris urged Elly to sit down, and even though she said she was fine and wanted to help, he insisted.

"I was moving my body little by little while I recovered, so my stamina has recovered quite a bit," Elly insisted, but it was clear that she was trying to hide her fatigue from us. Elly reluctantly sat down, and we chatted with her while cleaning up. Just then, I noticed two shadows peeking in from outside the shop.

"Norris, I'm going to check on something. I'll be right back."

"What's wrong?"

"Alto and Ragi are outside the shop."

"Oh really? I hope it's nothing urgent. Go ahead and check on them."

Elly happily poked her head outside the shop, calling Alto's name and waving.

"Thanks. I'll be right back," I told Norris.

"Okay."

I went outside and walked over to the two of them. Alto immediately hugged me.

"Are you done with work, Master?"

"Almost. Is something wrong? Why are you here?" I asked Ragi.

"We heard your quest ended today, so we thought we could meet you and eat dinner together. It seems we were a bit early, though."

"I see. We'll be done in a little bit. Do you want to find a place to eat and wait for me there?"

"I don't mind waiting."

"Yeah, we'll wait here!"

I nodded and quickly returned to the shop to tell Norris and the others why Alto and Ragi had come.

"Norris and I can finish cleaning up, so it's okay if you leave," Elly told me, sneakily reaching for a cloth, but Norris took it before her.

"Don't keep them waiting, Setsuna. You can go."

I shook my head, declining their thoughtful gesture. "I want to finish packing up and end the quest properly."

"You're so serious, Setsuna."

"He's such an honest person, isn't he."

Norris and Elly showered me in kind words and warm smiles.

Once we finished cleaning, I left the shop with Norris and Elly and, seeing Alto, gave him a look telling him not to approach us yet. Although all that remained was to lock up the shop, it was still an important part of the process. Norris locked the door, signifying that work was done for the day.

Norris and Elly looked at one another, then bowed to me.

"Thank you so much, Setsuna. If you hadn't accepted our quest, I think we'd

still be lost."

"Thank you, Setsuna. Because of you, my wounds have healed, and I'm able to get back to work. I can't thank you enough."

"You're welcome. I had a great time working with both of you today, and I hope that all your dreams come true. Please take care of yourselves."

"We will. Thank you, Setsuna. We wish you all the best as well."

"Yes, thank you. You take care of yourself, too, Setsuna..."

"I will."

Now that I had finished my quest, we said our good-byes. I turned to see Alto waiting for me, gazing at us seriously.

"Alto?" I'd expected him to come running immediately, but when he didn't, I called out to him. At the sound of my voice, he looked up in surprise, then happily ran toward me. Ragi watched over him and slowly followed. I took a step forward to welcome Alto, with Norris and the others close behind.

They greeted us, and Elly began chatting happily with Alto, while Norris and Ragi talked about changing wallpaper. As I listened to everyone's voices, I suddenly looked up at the sky. A beautiful scene had unfolded, woven from light and darkness.

It was that brief time of day when the light faded and darkness appeared, leaving a single pale line in the evening sky. Twilight, dusk, sundown, nightfall... It was such a beautiful moment I couldn't help but be captivated by it.

Suddenly, I realized I couldn't hear the voices around me. I shifted my gaze from the sky to my surroundings and realized everyone was looking up at the sky too.

"We're going to eat dinner. Would you two like to join us?" Ragi asked, but Norris looked at Elly before declining.

"Unfortunately, Elly still has to build up her stamina and I think she's reached her limit for today, so we should go straight home. I appreciate the invitation, but we'll have to pass this time. I'm sorry."

Elly looked disappointed, but Norris was firm, putting her physical condition

first. Ragi chuckled softly, watching them.

"Taking care of your health is the most important thing. Don't worry, we'll have other chances."

Hearing him say that, Norris and Elly smiled happily at Ragi.

"Well then, we best be off."

"See you soon, Norris."

"Setsuna, I promise to treat you to a home-cooked meal soon!"

"I'm looking forward to it, Elly."

*"…"* 

Whenever the topic of conversation turned to Elly's home-cooked meals, Norris's expression seemed to change, but seeing the excitement on Elly's face, I decided not to ask why.

We parted ways with Norris and Elly and the three of us strolled down the darkened street and entered a restaurant Ragi had suggested. I didn't know whether Ragi knew the owner or had just made a reservation, but we were led to a quiet table away from the hustle and bustle.

Ragi ordered dishes we'd never tried before, focusing on meat dishes he thought Alto would enjoy, and when the food arrived, we all shared them and chatted about our day.

I mainly talked about work, while Alto talked about all the tasks he helped Ragi with and what he'd learned, gesturing animatedly the whole time. Seeing Alto talk to Ragi and me completely openly without any reservations made me glad I'd decided to stay here in Lypaed.

I thought the reason Alto was able to enjoy his days so peacefully was thanks to Ragi's comforting presence, and I realized that his kindness hadn't only extended to Alto, but also to me. Ragi reminded me of my grandfather, and the time we spent together had become irreplaceable.

Every time Alto smiled, I felt my heart get lighter. Ragi's gaze felt endlessly kind, gentle, and reassuring as he watched over Alto and me.

The drinks we secretly shared together at night made me wonder if I might have been able to spend times like that with my grandfather had I recovered from my illness and he'd still been alive. It felt like I'd fulfilled a promise to him that I hadn't been able to keep.

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"Master?"
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"Yes?"

"I wanna hear more about Gramps's adventures as a mercenary, don't you?"

"Definitely."

Agreeing with Alto, I pulled myself away from my reveries and looked at Ragi, who gave us a weak smile.

"What countries did you go to, Gramps?"

"After I left Sagana, I started working as a mercenary and took a boat from Bartle to Nubul, then traveled extensively across the northern continent," Ragi replied, going on to tell us all about his time as a mercenary.

"Are the grilled fish in Nubul really that delicious? Come to think of it, I've never had any fish from the sea."

"I haven't had any fish from the sea, either...I think?" Alto's uncertain answer made both me and Ragi burst out laughing.

"Yeah, we've never had the chance since Gardir, Kutt, and Lypaed are all inland."

"I wanna try fish from the sea!"

"Me too."

"Well, since you two are adventurers, you should visit a coastal town someday."

"Will you come with us, Gramps?"

*""* 

Ragi smiled at Alto's innocent invitation and answered without hesitation.

"I don't have the energy for long journeys anymore."

"...Oh." Alto slumped, and Ragi chuckled softly, patting his head.

"It's not the same as fish from the sea, but Gramps knows a good fishing spot down by the river. The fish you brought me last time were delicious. How about we go fishing together next time?"

"Yeah, let's go!"

Ragi deftly changed the topic of conversation, and I watched quietly as the two of them started talking about fishing.

After we were done eating our meal, we thanked Ragi for taking care of the bill and went outside the restaurant. It was fully dark now, and I felt uneasy about walking home without any light, so I reached into my bag to take out a Fire magical tool.

"It's a waste to use a magical tool just to get home," Ragi said from behind me.

"Don't worry, I have plenty of them."

"Even so, it's not good to use things when you don't have to. We're in the middle of town, so seeing as there's no threat from monsters, why don't we use one of these like the other townsfolk do on their way home? It adds to the atmosphere."

Ragi took something out of his bag. We stood by the glow of the light from the shop and the lantern hanging outside it, and Alto and I looked at the object, simultaneously saying its name.

"A lantern? Is that yours?"

"You brought a lantern?"

Although Alto and I both knew what a lantern was, we had never used one. When it was just the two of us, I would use Light magic, and with company, I'd make a campfire before it got dark, and we would stay in that spot. If we had to move around, we used a Fire magical tool.

Ragi nodded and told Alto he could hold it. Once Alto had a firm grip on it, Ragi got the flame from the lantern hanging outside the restaurant and, kneeling down, carefully lit the candle inside the lantern.

Alto and I stared at Ragi's hand, waiting for the flame to catch. A few moments later, a faint flicker of light inside the lantern illuminated the area beneath our feet.

After Ragi checked to make sure the flame wouldn't go out, he brushed the dirt off his knees and stood up.

"We only need a lantern to get home. It really does add to the atmosphere, don't you think?"

The soft light only illuminated a small circle around our feet, but I nodded my agreement. I thought I might even prefer the light of the lantern to the Fire magical tool.

"Alto, you lead the way. Guide us home."

"Got it! Master, Gramps, follow me!" Alto's tail wagged energetically, perhaps because he was happy to be relied on, and he walked slowly in front of the two of us. Ragi must have been worried about letting Alto lead the way, though, because he was by his side in no time, gently smiling and giving him instructions about the lantern. I smiled and caught up with them.

We walked side by side with Alto in the middle. We walked closer than usual, shoulder to shoulder, so we could stay within the range of the lantern's light. Walking and chatting together like that, the journey home felt even more peaceful than normal.



# Another Chapter Japanese Iris ~ Tidings ~



## ◇ Part One: Tylera

By the time the sun reached its peak, we'd arrived at our destination. We marched along the city streets, guided by the three gleaming towers that shone brightly in the sunlight and served as landmarks, but our journey was finally coming to an end.

The three towers were known as the Three Spires of Endia, and enshrined within them was a statue of a goddess said to have been built approximately nine thousand years ago to overcome a calamity of monsters. The central tower was 105 mers high, while the two flanking towers stood at ninety mers apiece. There were no taller buildings than these on the entire continent, for it was said that building anything taller would be disrespectful to the gods.

Beneath those three spires lay the Holy City, capital of the kingdom of Ellana. Built by the people who constructed the statue, it was officially named Endia after the goddess they worshipped. However, most people only ever referred to it as the Holy City.

"Thank you for visiting the Holy City of Endia. I have the honor of being your guide. My name is Detraas, one of the Eight Imperial Knights."

Perhaps it was because we had sent an envoy ahead, but the representative of the knights dispatched by the Holy Emperor didn't hesitate to reveal his name. As a member of the Eight Imperial Knights, who served directly under the Holy Emperor, he had the authority to do so. The fact that such a high-ranking individual had been sent to greet us made it clear that this mission came with considerable expectations.

"We appreciate your hospitality and are honored."

"Oh, no! Welcoming the hero who serves as the divine messenger of the goddess Endia and the esteemed princess-general of Gardir is our honor. Please forgive us for not showing you more hospitality. Shall we proceed?"

I chose not to react to his exaggerated greeting and let him lead the way as we advanced with the hero's troops. There was only one gate to the Holy City. The single gate in its walls had been built to the north, facing the Demonlands, but as a result it was extremely inconvenient to pass through from Gardir

because you first had to travel around the entire perimeter of the city walls. Not only that, but they were ten mers high and quite intimidating to walk beside.

"The walls of Gardir are high, but nothing like this."

Conscious of Detraas riding in front of us, the hero, standing beside me, spoke quietly.

"It's true. These walls are over twice as tall as Gardir's."

Larutas, who had been riding on my other side, slowed his horse.

That's being a bit overly considerate...

It wasn't because he wanted to avoid interrupting my conversation with the hero, but to make room for Detraas, who had left the vanguard to the knights and stopped his horse to join us.

I'd much prefer to ride with Larutas..., I thought and turned around, but my deputy general understood his role well and was looking elsewhere as if he didn't notice me.

"How does it feel to be back in the Holy City after three years, Princess Tylera?" Detraas exchanged the expected pleasantries with me. I was going to respond with the reply I'd prepared, but before I could speak, the hero interrupted.

"What?! You've been here before, Tylera?!" He sounded surprised, and I realized I hadn't mentioned coming to Ellana before. I was about to answer him, but Detraas spoke first.

"Sir Hero, Princess Tylera visited our Holy City during her coming-of-age ceremony three years ago, which was attended by the previous Holy Emperor."

"Really? No wonder she seems so calm. Everything looks so unusual to me I feel nervous."

That explained why he'd been marveling at the walls for a while now.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't able to attend the funeral when the previous Holy Emperor passed away."

"It can't be helped. After all, it's a miracle you survived, Princess Tylera."

The hero gave me a questioning look, as if to ask what Detraas was talking about. He seemed to be calculating just how close to me he should appear to be.

"It happened two years ago now. I left Gardir to attend the funeral with the sixty-seventh hero as my escort, but we were attacked by a horde of monsters."

"You were?!" the hero exclaimed in surprise, and Detraas gave him a strange look. It was clear Detraas was observing him and, given that the knight had brought up the story of me "surviving," it seemed like he was trying to learn more about the hero. Deciding that it wasn't wise to continue this line of conversation and reveal any more about his character, I changed the subject.

"We can share that story at another time. Would you inform us of the schedule for the upcoming events, Detraas?"

"Of course."

His expression remained unchanged, and Detraas explained our schedule. We would arrive at the city gate in three hours' time, and only the hero and I would be allowed to enter the Holy City. From there, it would take two hours to reach the palace at its center. Horses were not permitted inside the Holy City, so it would take some time.

"In that case, we should arrive at the palace by the evening." I already knew this beforehand, but I said it out loud for the benefit of the hero.

"Yes. Your audience with the Holy Emperor will be tomorrow. So for today, please allow me to show you to your lodging, and I will contact you early tomorrow morning regarding the audience."

"Very well," I responded, then fell into silence.

"You seem quite tired," Detraas said to me. "Since we still have some time before we reach the city gate, I shall refrain from conversation and focus on acting as your guide. Or would you prefer to take a short break soon?"

"Please don't worry about me. My energy will soon return since I'm on horseback."

"Very well. Do let me know if you need anything. I'll be just ahead."

I nodded briefly and he saluted, then rode back to the knights. Once he left, I looked over my shoulder at Larutas, who seemed to be approaching, and scowled at him. Seeing my expression, Larutas slowed his horse, giving up on coming to join me, and turned his face as if to say he'd had no other choice.

Now that I'd gotten him back, I sighed deeply and turned toward the hero.

"You seem to have a lot of questions."

"Well, yeah." He seemed to be sulking. Perhaps it was a combination of him being upset, or possibly worried, about things he hadn't been told before, and bewilderment from the sudden influx of information.

"You're allowed two questions. Then there are things we need to discuss before we reach the city gate."

"What?!"

I ignored his protests and continued. "However, before I answer any of your questions, there's something I absolutely must tell you first. May I speak?"

He nodded timidly to show that he understood. I thanked him and began.

"As I mentioned before, you must never let down your guard in front of the people of Ellana."

"What I did earlier, was that okay?"

"If possible, you may want to try acting slightly more naturally, but I guess I shouldn't ask too much of you."

"Okay, so I need to polish my acting skills a bit more. Still, is it really that bad if I don't stay on guard?" he asked slowly, and I nodded.

"Yes. This may appear to be a victory ceremony, but its true purpose is to establish the hero as being under the authority of the Holy Emperor. You mustn't show any weaknesses because we don't know what they might do to achieve that goal."

"I've heard that before, but I don't understand much about politics," the hero replied, seeming confused. Maybe it seemed irrelevant to him, but he lacked a sense of urgency.

I reluctantly repeated my previous explanation. "Publicly, a hero is someone awakened by the followers of Endia acting under the divine will of their goddess. That's why the Holy Emperor, who is entrusted by Endia to govern the people, sends priestesses to guide the hero."

"Yeah, I remember that part." The hero nodded, still seeming a bit detached from the conversation.

"Those priestesses are individuals who work to assist the Holy Emperor, and only members of Ellana's royal family or those with magical abilities belonging to the royal families of other nations may become priestesses. Since they're meant to aid the Holy Emperor, naturally they're only found in the Holy City; however, there are priestesses in Gardir whose job it is to guide the hero, who are an exception."

"But I don't have a priestess. So Ellana's honor is in danger, right?"

It was true that the hero lacked a priestess.

Despite how it looked to the public, the priestesses in Gardir were in fact the ones who performed the hero-summoning ritual. In other words, they were Gardir royalty who had the ability to use magic. Right now, no one met those qualifications, so the hero didn't have a priestess.

"Yes. Since they don't have a priestess to guide you, the Holy Emperor can't place you under his authority, and we don't know what they'll do to put you there. That's why I want you to be cautious."

"Got it. I'll be careful."

The hero nodded solemnly. Even though I'd told the hero we weren't sure what they would do, I knew the ultimate measure Ellana was considering. However, they may have prepared some other method, so I kept quiet about it, hoping he wouldn't let his guard down.

"You can ask me two questions now. Go ahead," I told the hero midway through our journey, just as promised, after delivering my warning.

"Only two?! That's so mean!"

"We don't have much time."

"Fine. But what I'm about to say isn't a question, it's a complaint, so it doesn't count!" The hero pouted and I nodded. "Why didn't you tell me about your near-death experience?"

"I never came close to dying."

"What?! But didn't he say you were lucky to survive after being attacked by those monsters?" He glared at me as if to say that there was no use trying to play dumb.

"Ah, I see how that might've been misunderstood. The way in which Detraas spoke about it was confusing. It wasn't really a big deal, so I didn't think it was worth mentioning to you."

"Then tell me all about it. And remember, this doesn't count as one of my questions."

I chuckled softly at the hero's insistence and began to tell him the story.

"On the way to the former emperor's funeral, we encountered a large horde of monsters. We fled immediately and returned to Gardir. The sixty-seventh hero served as our rear guard. One person died during the incident, hence why Detraas said I was fortunate to survive."

"Who died?"

"The sixty-seventh hero. I had only met him briefly over the course of that trip, but from what I heard, he loved to fight. When I left him in charge of our rear guard, he charged forward instead of withdrawing with us. And since we were in the process of a retreat, we couldn't stop him and were almost immediately separated from him."

"Then what?"

"By the time we returned to Gardir, he had already passed away. Only his armor returned from the battlefield."

When a hero died, the hero's armor automatically returned to the place where the naming ceremony was held. I'd known that since I was a child, but was hesitant to tell the hero about it.

"It's a shame about the sixty-seventh hero, but I'm glad you're safe, Ty."

However, the hero's concerns seemed to lie elsewhere.

"Thank you for worrying about me, but all we really did was run away. I wasn't in any immediate danger thanks to the hero, who sacrificed himself to draw the enemy away from us."

"I should be more like him."

"No, please don't. We need the hero to run away with us next time."

He chuckled, and I reiterated my point. The hero nodded and then said, "All right, onto the first question," and that ended that topic.

I was a bit anxious, but I had to go along with him. "Go ahead," I replied.

"What're the Eight Imperial Knights Detraas mentioned? It sounds like something important."

The hero's question was straightforward but surprisingly mundane. Naturally, I'd considered he might ask this, but I still wondered whether it was all right to waste his question on something so easily answered. I didn't think he would be interested in specific positions within Ellana, but I answered with the facts anyway.

"The Eight Imperial Knights are the group of knights who report directly to the emperor. The Order of Knights of Ellana, also known as the Imperial Guard, select only eight individuals for their imperial allegiance and excellence to be given this responsibility."

"I see." The hero nodded solemnly. It seemed like there was something on his mind, so I decided to provide some additional information that might be useful to him.

"There's a similar position called the Eight Holy Sorcerers. The number eight is significant because it represents the eight attributes—Fire, Water, Earth, Wind, Light, Darkness, Void, and Time—that correspond to each of the eight sorcerers. They are chosen from among Endia's devout followers worldwide, based on their loyalty to the emperor and mastery of a particular attribute of

magic. If there are no suitable candidates for an attribute, the position remains vacant. Currently, the seats for Void and Time are empty."

"I see. Are there any other positions that serve directly under the emperor, or is that all?"

"There are also the priestesses, which I mentioned before, bringing the total to three. Other than that, when the emperor is a child, an imperial regent assists in the affairs of the country, and a holy regent assists in the rituals of religion."

"I see. I'll try to remember the names and roles of all those people, but I think memorizing the priestesses will probably be impossible. Then there are all the important political and religious figures... Oh, sorry! I forgot the most important one, the Holy Emperor! Even though he's still young, we better be careful seeing as he's still the emperor, right?"

"How did you know that the emperor is young?"

"Isn't he?"

"Yes, but I never told you that."

"Makes sense. Good."

"What exactly made you think he was young?"

"Well, based on what we've been discussing, you've only come to the capital twice: once when you came of age, and once during the former emperor's funeral. So that must mean the emperor is still a child, right?"

"I don't follow."

The hero's thought process was as mysterious as ever, leaving me at a loss.

"That's a problem for me if you don't understand."

"And for me as well."

An awkward silence followed.

"Is this strange mood my fault?!" the hero piped up after a while.

"It seems so."

That was the only response I could think of.

*"…."* 

*"…"* 

I quietly observed the hero, who continued to ponder in silence.

"Oh, I know!"

"What?" I asked immediately.

"I know how to explain it better to you," the hero said with a proud look on his face. I didn't really want to see that sort of expression from him, but all that mattered was that the hero was happy.

"First, you visited or attempted to visit the capital twice. When you came of age and then when you were an adult for the former emperor's funeral, right?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that strange?"

"What is?"

Another awkward pause.

"Oh, yeah. So there's already a new emperor, right?"

"Yes."

"And shouldn't there have been a ceremony when the emperor ascended to the throne?"

I finally understood what he was trying to say.

"Oh, I see."

"Good, you understand. I was worried you'd never get it." He breathed a sigh of relief.

"In other words...if there was a new emperor on the throne, then there should've been a ceremony, and if there wasn't one, it must have been because the emperor was too young. Is that what you were hinting at?"

"Yes, exactly. I'm glad you get it now. I figured he'd be around five years old."

"That's correct."

"Great!"

I was impressed by his skills of deduction and wished some of them would rub off on me. I still didn't understand why he'd asked about the Eight Imperial Knights, but I didn't have time to pry any further. We were nearing the city gate, and time was running out.

"Satisfied? The city gates are in sight now. We'll be there in about five minutes, so should we skip the last question?"

"How old are you, Ty?"

"...?!" My eyes widened in surprise.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were older than me, and I've been speaking to you disrespectfully."

The question going through my mind wasn't Why were you thinking about that? so much as You just thought about that now?!

"The current legal age of adulthood is sixteen, but in the past, it was twelve. For matters related to religious ceremonies, the old rituals are still followed, so the age of adulthood remains twelve for the royal families of Ellana and Gardir. That makes me fifteen, while you, Hero, are seventeen, meaning that I'm younger than you."

"Well, that's a relief. So I wasn't rude after all."

I could understand the hero's sense of relief, but whether or not someone was older or younger was trivial to me. Yueltena, for example, was over twenty years old, but she was my younger stepsister. That was because I was from Gardir's royal family, and she was just a noble.

How a person was treated based on age fluctuated depending on their circumstances, so I couldn't help but wonder why age held any significance.

More than that, though, I was dissatisfied that the hero was bothered by such trivial matters. The hero should not worry about me, but carry himself with confidence.

"However, you're technically only one year old, Hero." I knew it wasn't very

mature of me, but I had to protest somehow. The hero went to say something, an expression mixed with both joy and anger on his face, but I pretended not to notice and joined the knight squad waiting at the city gates.

## **Afterword**

#### **ROKUSYOU**

"It looks like he's come to terms with it."

Cyrus said those words to himself, but it's quite a difficult thing to come to terms with something. You might seek advice from someone, face it alone, or even find that there are times when coming to terms with something just isn't possible. Here, I was reminded of just how hard the journey to come to terms with something can be.

Volume 4 is a story where each character grapples with their own emotions and comes to terms with them while working hard for the sake of their loved ones. I hope you enjoyed it.

#### USUASAGI

Thank you so much for reading *The Ephemeral Scenes of Setsuna's Journey*. My name is Usuasagi. It's been about a year since the last volume, but it took a lot of time to write this one because, apart from personal matters, I went even deeper into the story being told in this fourth volume.

The Ephemeral Scenes of Setsuna's Journey is serialized online, and as of March 2023, has progressed to the fourth volume. In this installment, the story centers around life in the kingdom of Lypaed, which becomes an important setting that has an impact on Setsuna's heart. However, I felt like I hadn't fully encapsulated the essence of life in this town. But before I delve further into that, please make sure you've read the main story first because there are spoilers ahead.

Continuing on, I identified areas that felt lacking during the process of adapting the web novel into the book and created a task list. But once I

reviewed the completed list, I found that there wasn't enough time to include all the scenes I wanted. Unfortunately, that meant we had to cut several scenes we'd planned to add.

When we thought about what we felt it was essential to add, we narrowed down the focus to Norris's conflict, Georges' character, and what it was like living with Ragi, and managed to fit everything into one volume of over three hundred fifty pages for the Japanese version.

However, there was a story about a certain banker that appeared in the web novel version that got cut, along with the fact that Norris had borrowed money from them. We ended up leaving the person's name in, though, so for those familiar with the web novel version, please try to find it!

## **ROKUSYOU & USUASAGI**

We began the manga adaptation in the past year, and have just finished volume four of the light novel. It makes us unimaginably happy to see people enjoying *The Ephemeral Scenes of Setsuna's Journey*.

Finally, we'd like to thank the editors, who we always cause so much trouble for, sime for drawing such lovely illustrations, everyone from the publisher, and you—our readers—who have been patiently waiting for this volume. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

March 3, 2023

Rokusyou & Usuasagi

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