

The EPHEMERAL SCENES of SETSUNA'S JOURNEY

The Former 68th Hero
and the Dragon Maiden

2

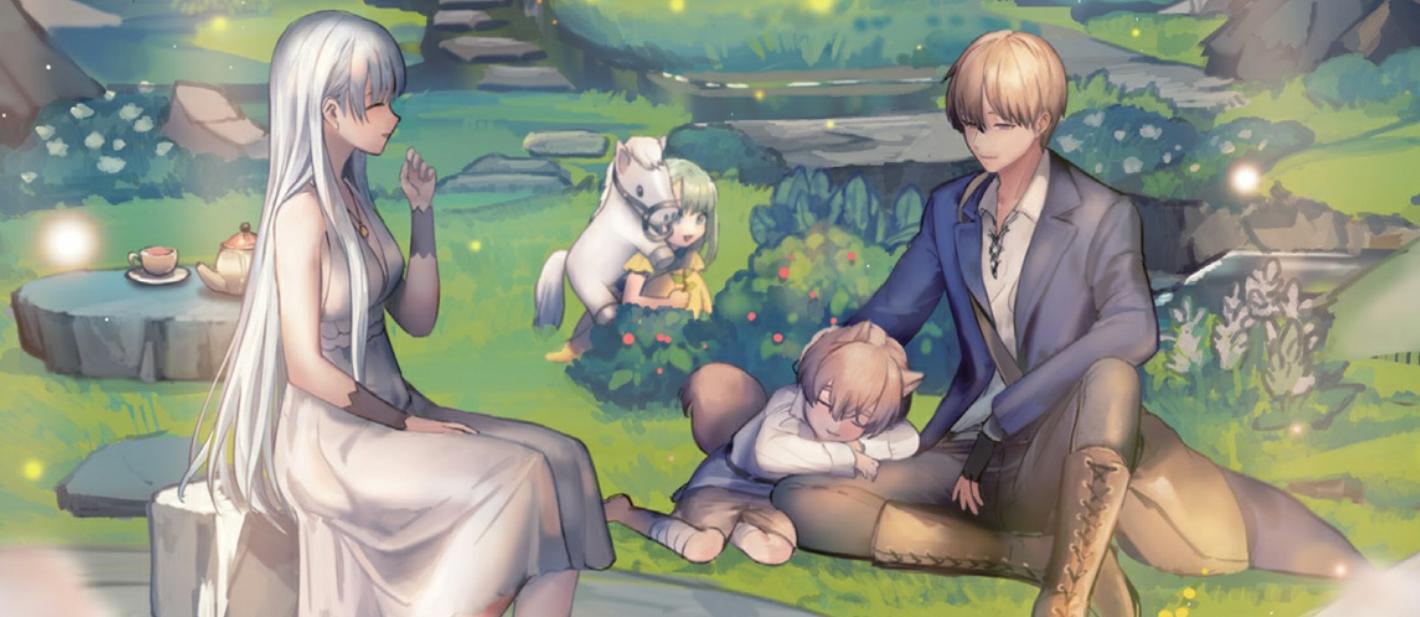
Rokusyou • Usuasagi
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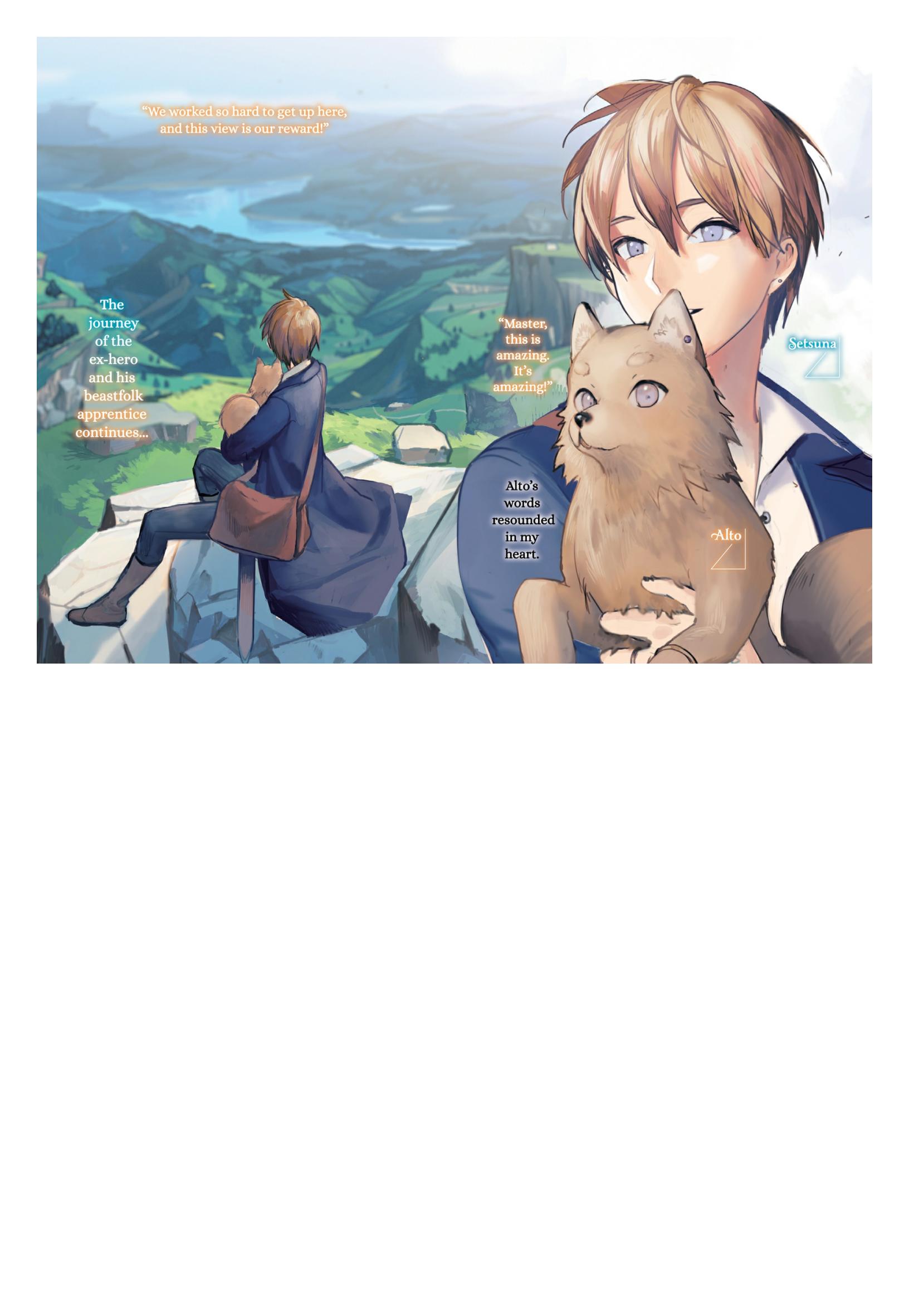


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"We worked so hard to get up here,
and this view is our reward!"

The
journey
of the
ex-hero
and his
beastfolk
apprentice
continues...

"Master,
this is
amazing.
It's
amazing!"

Alto's
words
resounded
in my
heart.

Setsuna

Alto



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Rokusyou • Usuasagi
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YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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The EPHEMERAL SCENES of SETSUNA'S JOURNEY

Vol. 2

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Translation by Andria McKnight Cover art by sime

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SETSUNA NO FUKEI Vol. 2 ROKUJUHACHI BANME NO MOTOYUSA TO RYU NO OTOME

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: October 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Sheila Wu

Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rokusyou and Usuasagi, author. | sime (Illustrator), illustrator. | McKnight, Andria, translator.

Title: The ephemeral scenes of Setsuna's journey / Rokusyou and Usuasagi ; illustration by sime ; translation by Andria McKnight.

Other titles: Setsuna no fukei. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023. | Contents: v. 2. The former 68th hero and the dragon maiden —

Identifiers: LCCN 2023002882 | ISBN 9781975363871 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975363895 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975363918 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Action and adventure fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.R6646 Ep 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023002882>

ISBNs: 978-1-97536389-5 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6390-1 (ebook)

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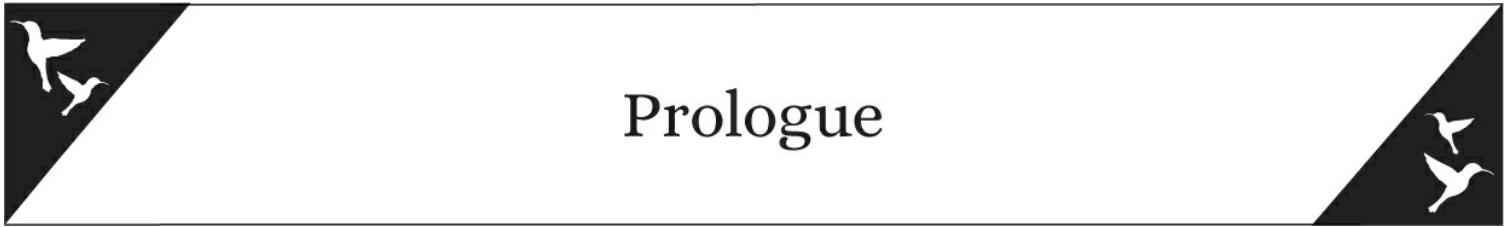
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Prologue

I was alone in the darkness. Even if this was to atone for my sins, I was still filled with fear and loneliness.

I couldn't hear anyone's voice.

I couldn't sense anyone else's presence.

I couldn't see anything...

I would never see my family again, and I was not allowed to return home.

But having been banished from my family and stripped of my name, I had nothing to live for even if they did free me from my thousand years of imprisonment.

The only future that awaited me...

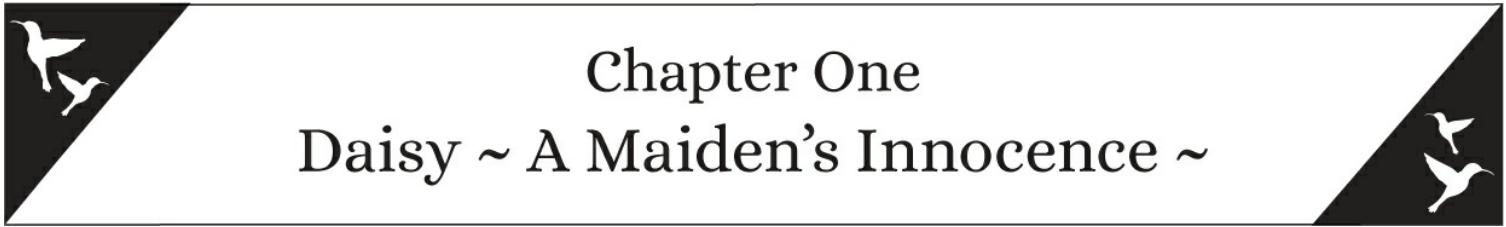
...was not filled with hope.

But with my certain death.

I continued living only to atone for my sins, feeling the crushing weight of my

guilt and my fear.

Then suddenly, someone with violet eyes and a strange presence appeared before me...



Chapter One

Daisy ~ A Maiden's Innocence ~

◇Part One: Setsuna

We left the Kingdom of Gardir and were journeying toward a country called Kutt. I was walking under a clear blue sky with Alto, a beastfolk boy who had become my apprentice. It was Salkis—summer—and although it wasn't that hot out, we worked up a sweat as we walked. The reason for our journey was so I could see the world, and according to Alto “to study and find out what I want to do.”

We'd just crossed the border from Gardir into Kutt, and so far, our journey had been quite smooth. We hadn't run into any monsters or slave traders. Gardir was home to many slave traders because beastfolk were allowed to be enslaved there. It wasn't uncommon for them to kidnap beastfolk and sell them, so I had to be careful that Alto wouldn't be targeted.

As such, for the past few days, we hadn't started fires at our campsites, and we had eaten simple meals of preserved food. I didn't want to start a fire and attract unnecessary attention. And just in case, I had also put up a magical barrier so no one could see us.

Since it was Salkis, it wasn't that cold. Still, sitting there at night without the comfort of the firelight made me anxious. Obviously, there were no streetlamps or shops along the road, so once it got dark, we only had the light from the moon and stars to rely on. For the first time, I felt the illusion of being wrapped up in darkness while camping. It didn't seem to bother Alto, but I suppose that made sense considering the environment he had lived in before.

But at the end of those struggles, we'd finally crossed the border into Kutt that morning. It was one of the countries that had laws protecting beastfolk. It was a crime to keep them as slaves, and if you were caught doing so, you would face a harsh punishment. So the slave traders shouldn't be very active here. I couldn't entirely let my guard down, but I expected it would be more comfortable here than in Gardir, where it was dangerous for beastfolk to even walk around.

Before we crossed over, Alto did his best to keep walking without stopping to

look at every flower that caught his eye. It was for his sake, but I also had my own reasons for wanting to leave Gardir as quickly as possible. Alto never complained once when he saw me hurrying. Perhaps he was too hesitant to say anything, but each time we made eye contact, he smiled at me with a bright expression.

Now that we had crossed the border, Alto and I began to walk at a slower pace. Since we were going slower, Alto took more time to stop and observe things that caught his interest. I didn't think it was a bad idea to let him set the pace to the city. I still wasn't used to this, and I think my anxiety had rubbed off on him. But now there was no reason for us to hurry. I decided to find a place where we could make camp early so we could have plenty of time to rest and relax.

"Master."

I heard him call me and shifted my gaze over. "What is it?"

"Are those red berries edible?"

I looked where he was pointing and saw a small shrub waist-high with lots of red berries growing on it. "You should check the plant encyclopedia."

"Can I?"

Alto had finally learned to read simple words, so I knew he had been eager to look up various things in the encyclopedia. His personality was just like mine in that he liked to look things up on his own. But since we had prioritized getting out of Gardir quickly, we hadn't had time to grant his wish. From time to time, I sensed he wanted to ask me. I felt sorry for him, so I would give him brief explanations and leave it at that.

But now his eyes sparkled with happiness, and his tail wagged. I couldn't help but smile.

"Sure. We can take our journey at a more relaxed pace now. But don't forget to stay aware of your surroundings."

Slave traders weren't the only dangers. There were monsters and bandits to consider. I warned him that he still had to be alert when he was somewhere his safety wasn't guaranteed. Alto nodded emphatically and replied with an

enthusiastic “Okay!” His ears pricked up as he looked around to check our safety, then pulled the encyclopedia out of his bag and began looking up the red berries. He asked me about words he didn’t know and found the entry about the fruit.

“Master, it says they’re gooseberries and that they’re edible.”

His eyes sparkled with joy once he found out he could eat them. His ears and tail twitched about busily, expressing his happiness. I grinned at his excitement and said the words he had been waiting for.

“Shall we try them, then?”

“Yeah!” He nodded. His eyes sparkled as he shoved one juicy gooseberry into his mouth, but the moment he bit down on it, he shrieked.

“?!”

He looked so funny with his hand clamped over his mouth that I couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “Aha-ha-ha!”

“It’s so sour!” he shouted. Apparently, the gooseberries in this world had an incredible bite. “You’re so mean, Master!” His eyes filled with tears as he glared at me.

“What? I didn’t do anything,” I said, putting a berry in my mouth.

“You *knew* they were sour!” he complained.

I bit down on the berry, and the flavor spread through my mouth all at once. “They are pretty tart.”

The astringency was very strong, but not so strong as to render them inedible. I plucked off another one and ate it. Alto stared at me while I did so. “Aren’t you going to eat any more?” I teased.

He continued to stare at me and said, “Nope.”

His reaction was so adorable that I couldn’t help but laugh. The gooseberries were the size of marbles, and they had a very sweet aroma. So I bet Alto had expected them to be sweet, but those expectations had been dashed, and after I teased him once, his tail swayed grumpily. I thought for a moment, then reached into my bag to take out a pouch. I handed it to Alto. He gave me a

puzzled look as he accepted it.

“Let’s pick some of them.”

He clenched the bag in his hand.

“What? I don’t want any. They don’t taste good!”

“Don’t say that. Eating fruit is important. The key to growing stronger is not to be picky,” I said, and began putting gooseberries into my pouch. Alto helped me with a reluctant look on his face. Once the pouch was full, I put it back in my bag, and we resumed walking.

Apparently, Alto really disliked the sourness of the gooseberries because the whole time we walked, he kept sucking on the candy I had made. He’d stop if something caught his interest, then he’d look it up in the encyclopedia and tell me if it wasn’t in there as the two of us slowly continued along.

I wanted to give him plenty of time to research and think, so I made another bag identical to his and gathered small branches for firewood.

I kept an eye on him as he showed interest in various things while I did so. Right before sunset, we found a place with clean water.

“Alto, I know it’s a bit early, but let’s make camp here for the night.”

“Okay.”

He took out the barrier needle he had attached to his belt and stabbed it in the ground. Meanwhile, I took out a pot and some bricks from my bag. I made a simple foundation for cooking, set the pot down on it, then stuffed the twigs under the platform and lit them.

Alto asked if there was anything he could help with, but there really wasn’t anything, so I told him he could just relax. He took a blanket from his bag and spread it out on the ground, then lay down on it with his encyclopedia and notebook. He began to copy sentences from the encyclopedia into his notebook. It made me happy to see him scribbling his own thoughts alongside the sentences. I had a feeling that beside his day’s entry on gooseberries, he wrote about how sour they were.

As I watched over Alto, I began to make jam out of the gooseberries we'd picked earlier. I washed them in the pot to get the dirt off, removed the stems, then added sugar and put them on the fire. I remembered reading in a book somewhere that very sour fruits could be made into delicious jams. If all went well, hopefully that would make Alto happy. If it didn't, well, then I would take responsibility and eat it all by myself.

The jam bubbled, and Alto, who had finished his studies, came over to see what I was doing. He peeked into the pot expectantly, but once he saw there were gooseberries inside, he frowned. He was still curious, though, because he asked what I was making.

"Master, what is that?"

"Jam."

"Jam?"

"Yes. It's a delicious spread you put on bread like you do with honey. We're going to eat it on our bread for dinner tonight," I told him. He frowned and stared at the pot with a suspicious gaze. His ears lay flat on his head as though they didn't want to hear another word about it. At times like this, his ears and eyes told me exactly how he was feeling. *"I don't want to put that on bread and eat it!"*

I smiled at his behavior, but at the same time, I felt a bit sorry for him. I took the lid off, scooped a bit of the jam up with a spoon, and held it out to him. Then I took a spoonful for myself and tasted it. I thought the bittersweet flavor that spread throughout my mouth was delicious.

I looked at Alto, who was holding the spoon in his hand but was hesitating to put it into his mouth. But then he finally made up his mind. His tail puffed out a bit as he took a bite... But then his eyes lit up, and he looked at me.

"It's yummy!"

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Can I have another bite?"

He must have really liked the new sweet flavor. I couldn't say no to those

pleading eyes. I took his spoon and washed it, dried it with magic, then handed it back to Alto. When he realized he could take as much as he wanted, his tail wagged like crazy as he dug his spoon into the pot. He scooped up a big bite and happily popped it into his mouth.

Once that bite of jam was gone, he stared at the pot and handed the spoon back to me, his ears perking up.

“The jam by itself is good, but it’s even better once you spread it on bread,” I said.

“Really?” He looked up at me with hopeful eyes. I patted him lightly on the head. He looked up at the sky, checking the position of the sun as if to say he hoped it would be dinnertime soon.

There was still some time left before dinner, so I was looking around to see what we could do to kill time when I saw something splashing in the river. I didn’t sense any monsters nearby, so I thought it might be fish. Thinking it would be a great addition to our dinner, I reached into my bag. As expected, there were lots of rod-shaped items inside, so I took out two of them and handed one to Alto as I headed toward the riverside.

He watched with great interest as I handed him a shrimp in a small bottle. He mistook it for food and tried to eat it. I quickly stopped him and told him they weren’t meant to be eaten. He stared sorrowfully at the shrimp inside the bottle.

We could cook it and eat it, but since it wasn’t fresh, we couldn’t consume it raw. Also, they had another purpose. They were going to serve as bait for fishing, so I didn’t want Alto to eat them. That’s right; we had time, so I figured we might as well try to fish. I took out a barrier needle from my belt and raised a magical barrier to protect us from monster attacks while we fished, then began making the necessary preparations. Alto stared at my hands curiously.

“Master?”

“Hmm?”

“What is that?”

"This stick is called a fishing rod, and the shrimp inside the bottle will be the bait."

"Fishing rod? Bait? Is that a tool for something?"

"Yes, it's a tool for catching fish."

"Fish?! There are fish here?" He looked all around with wide eyes. When I told him they were in the river, he leaned over to peek into the water, but I told him to be careful because there might be monsters in there, and he immediately pulled back. "Are you sure there are fish?"

"Yep."

He'd never seen a fish that was alive before. Honestly, neither had I. Although one didn't have to go to the river or the ocean to see fish, and you could see them in an aquarium or a restaurant, I'd never had the occasion to.

Apparently, Kyle liked to fish, because there were all sorts of fishing rods and bait inside the bag. I was surprised there was a reel on the fishing rods, but I had no idea what they were made from, or how they had been made.

Alto and I finished our preparations. We put some water in the bucket that we were going to keep our fish in and set our net next to the bucket. Finally, I searched up how to fish, and we were all set...or at least, we should have been. I had to teach Alto the basics of fishing and do some final checks.

"Alto, let me explain. This is the fishing line—this thread here. This is the reel—the round thing attached to the rod. The fishing line is wound around the reel. The thing in the middle of the line is called the bobber. It floats on the surface of the water, and you can watch how it moves to see if a fish is eating the bait."

Even though I had the necessary knowledge, this was still my first time, so my heart was pounding. I just hoped I'd be able to catch something.

"And that thing farther down is called a sinker. It's necessary to sink the bait down into the water. Now, the thing at the very end is called the fishhook. You can stab your fingers, so be careful when you handle it. That's what you put the

bait on. This time, we'll use shrimp..."

Alto put the bait on his fishhook while watching how I did it.

"And then..." I swung the rod behind me. "You swing the fishing pole!"

I swung it vigorously forward. The sinker and the fishhook sailed through the air with a high-pitched sound. *Pretty good for my first time*, I thought. With Kyle's experience, I probably wouldn't fail, and as expected, it sank right into the water. It made me kind of happy. Alto looked back and forth between me winding the reel and my bobber floating on the surface.

A while later, I began to feel a slight tug on my fishing pole. The bobber kept sinking and floating back up. I wondered if a fish was nibbling at the bait. I held my breath and quietly waited for it to bite. Why was I so nervous? For some reason, I felt even more anxious than when I had fought my first monster. I glanced toward Alto, whose gaze was fixed on my bobber.

Just then, it plunged into the water! My hands felt a sensation I hadn't experienced before as I tried to steady the fishing pole.

"I got one!" I blurted out, and Alto stared at my fishing line. My fishing pole was arched up into the air. "It must be really big," I muttered.

Alto's ears and tail moved around excitedly. "Did, did you catch a fish?"

"The fish ate my bait. So now I have to catch it," I explained as I slowly started to reel it in. This was when the true battle began. I slowly and steadily pulled it toward me. This was pretty thrilling for my first experience, and I could tell the fish was resisting with all its might. My hands could feel the tension.

After a breathless battle, the fish must've run out of stamina, because I was able to easily reel it close to the shore. The bobber returned to the surface, and before long, I could see the fish right below it.

"Alto! I caught it!" I scooped the fish up and laughed. Alto grinned with excitement as he watched the fish jump around in the net. I wanted to reach out and pat his head, but I realized my hands were sweaty. This was so fun. I really thought that from the bottom of my heart. I understood why Kyle had

caught fish like this instead of with magic.

“The fish is jumping! It’s alive!” Alto shouted.

I took the fish off the hook and put it in the water-filled bucket. Alto’s eyes opened wide as he peered down at it swimming in the water. He was so adorable.

“Alto, look up what kind of fish this is in the encyclopedia.”

I knew what it was, but I thought it would be nice if we could look it up together. I was sure he would find the fish encyclopedia interesting.

He nodded and returned his gaze to the bucket. He hesitantly touched the fish then lifted it out of the water. It squirmed in his hands. He stared at it with a serious expression.

“Alto. Fish breathe through their gills, so if you don’t put it back in the water, it’ll die.”

He didn’t seem to know what that meant, but he understood the fish couldn’t breathe out of the water. He hastily returned it to the bucket.

“Anyway, it looks like we’ll get to eat fish for dinner.”

“Eat it? We’re going to eat this fish?!” He stared at me in disbelief, then fell silent. Apparently, he’d already become fond of the fish, and I can’t say I didn’t understand.

“Yes. It’s going to be our dinner.”

“Ugh...”

Honestly, I wanted to release it. But we’d have plenty more opportunities to fish, and I had to steel myself. Just then, I thought I made eye contact with the fish, but I was sure it was my imagination. Alto’s ears flopped down sadly, and his once-lively tail froze.

“Do you want to eat something else, then?”

“What?!”

“Freshly caught fish is delicious, though...”

My words must’ve intrigued him because he stared at me.

"If you don't want to eat the fish, I will. You can just have bread and soup."

"What?! No, I wanna eat the fish, too!" he declared firmly.

It seemed his hunger had won out over affection.

"In that case, why don't you catch one, too? I'm not giving you mine."

He stared at me, stunned, then reached for his fishing pole.

For a while, I put my hands over Alto's and practiced casting the line with him. At first, it hit the ground, wouldn't go straight, or would fall right in front of him, but as we practiced more, he was able to cast it out into the water. I smiled as I watched him stare intently at the bobber. I cast my line to catch another fish, too.

However, Alto was gradually getting grumpier. He was frowning the whole time. By the time I'd caught my third fish, he still hadn't even caught one. He'd gotten better at casting his line, but nothing went his way after that. His fish just kept getting away.

It was partly amusing and partly sad watching him. As I stared at him, he frowned and said, "Master. Let's switch."

"What? You want to switch fishing poles?"

He nodded. Apparently, he thought the reason he wasn't catching anything was because of the pole. I laughed at his childlike logic and said, "Here you go," as I exchanged fishing rods with him. Alto must've thought he would catch a fish for certain now, because he breathed roughly through his nose as he cast his line. In the end, I caught four fish, and he still hadn't caught one.

When I saw how down he was, I thought he probably didn't want to continue fishing anymore. I'm sure he would've been happier had he caught the fish on his own, but I hated seeing him so upset. I decided we should fish together at least once so he could get a feel for it, and put my hands over his. Together, we waited for a fish to bite. Alto focused intently on the bobber.

"Not yet. Fish are shy, so we need to be very still and wait for them to come to us. Relax your body and slowly exhale. Look, there's a fish. No, not yet. Right

now the fish is trying to see if the bait is safe to eat.”

The bobber swayed back and forth teasingly. I could feel Alto desperately suppress his urge to pull the fishing pole.

Just then, I realized a mistake I’d made. I wanted Alto to learn, so I had him watch me fish. But what Alto needed now was for me to physically take his hands and show him how to do it. With little life experience, he found it difficult to learn things on his own. I remembered Dahlia’s gentle criticism about Alto’s study methods. I reminded myself not to forget that and lightly adjusted my grip on the fishing pole.

“Not yet. The fish hasn’t taken the bait yet.”

Alto was eagerly awaiting the right moment.

And just then, the bobber sank, sending up a splash from the surface of the water.

“Now!” I shouted, pulling the rod with my hands over his. I felt resistance at the end of the line!

“M-Master! Master!” It seemed like Alto realized the fish had taken the bait, too. He was so excited that he could barely speak, but his grip was firm on the fishing pole. We pulled it up together, and I taught him how to reel it in.

“Alto. Don’t reel it in while the fish is tugging on the line. Wait until the feeling of it pulling on the line has weakened.”

He nodded slowly and started reeling it in. I could tell from the quivering fishing pole that his excitement was at its peak.

“Don’t panic. Just take it slow. That’s right, slowly...”

The long battle between Alto and the fish was drawing to a close as he pulled the weakened fish up onto the shore. He grabbed the net and scooped it up, felt its weight for a few moments, then yelled, his body trembling, “I did iiiiiit! Master, I caught a fish!”

He proudly held up the net to show it off to me. I was a bit surprised at the excitement and joy in his voice, but it made me happy. I felt like this was the first time I saw him expressing his happiness in an age-appropriate way. Not

much time had passed since Alto became my apprentice. I knew that sometimes Alto felt guilty because he was sensitive to my feelings. I had the impression that he thought he didn't belong by my side.

The slavery laws weren't something that would change overnight. And Alto and I would grow closer over time. I already thought we were slowly closing the distance between us. The castle town of Gardir was too dangerous for us to walk around together, so I didn't spend much time with Alto when I prepared for the journey or when I took guild quests. But from now on, it would be different.

That's right; from now on, I would laugh, rejoice, and have fun with Alto while I mentored him. I smiled alongside him, hoping that as we continued on, his smile would grow.

After that, he must've gotten the hang of fishing because he caught three more. I caught two more myself, and we sat side by side as we cleaned the fish. I decided that we'd eat two of the ones I caught for dinner, then grill the rest and turn them into flakes, which we'd put into bottles and carry around. I knew how to do that from Hanai and Kyle's experience, which I was very grateful for.

Once I was done cleaning the fish, Alto wanted to do some more fishing, but I told him that we had to make dinner, so we couldn't. I pulled out the barrier needle from the ground and put it back on my belt, then put away our fishing tools. Alto was looking at me mournfully.

"We can fish together another time, okay?"

"Tomorrow? Can it be tomorrow, Master?" His tail wagged happily, and I nodded in response.

"Sure. If we make camp near water tomorrow, we can go fishing again."

Alto nodded in agreement, then handed me his fish. After I cleaned his, we went back to the campsite. I skewered the fish with a stick, salted them, and stuck the sticks next to the fire. I chuckled as I looked at Alto, who refused to take his eyes off the fish for even a second, and began to fill jars with the cooled-off jam. Come to think of it, fish and jam wasn't the most appetizing

combination, so I thought we could save the jam for breakfast.

Alto said he wanted to eat all four of his fish, so I was grilling six in total. After the fish were done grilling, I watched as he happily stuffed his face with them.

“Is it good, Alto?”

“Ish gnd!”

I knew it was bad manners to talk with one’s mouth full, but I decided to let it pass just this once. His ears, tail, and facial expressions were clearly telling me how happy he was and how delicious the fish were. I was eating fish I’d caught myself for the first time as well. From Alto’s perspective, I probably had the same expression on my face.

After dinner, all that hard work must have caught up to Alto; he began dozing off while sitting up, so I decided we should go to bed early.

◇Part Two: Setsuna

That night, I was jolted out of my sleep by a sensation that felt like someone was squeezing my heart. I was about to scream, but I stifled it. Ever since I came to this world, nothing good ever happened to me when I spoke out, so I never raised my voice no matter how much pain I suffered.

Phantom pains and memories that I didn't want to remember were forcefully laid bare in my dreams, so even after I woke up, they triggered memories of other unpleasant things.

"You're not in Gardir anymore," I told myself quietly, trying to hammer it into my heart and brain. I tried to push aside the bad memories and think about something else, but I was driven by the urge to surrender myself to the indescribable feelings that bubbled up.

Now, though, I was able to put a name to those feelings. Leaving Gardir had brought to the surface the dread that I'd subconsciously had inside of me, and the hidden resentment, hatred, and anger were beginning to emerge.

But I hadn't understood that at the time. Perhaps the reason why a gentler world had opened up to me was because I faced those feelings. But since I hadn't realized it, I was trying to bear it, curled up in a fetal position. I held my breath, conscious of the fact that my pulse had quickened. That didn't help the situation at all, and I began to feel desperate, looking around for a place I could escape to. The sight of the blue moon hanging in the center of the sky just made my heart beat even faster.

Suddenly, I heard a slight whistling noise. I searched for the source of the sound as if seeking sanctuary, when I saw that Alto was fast asleep, snoring slightly. He was in his baby wolf form, curled up at my feet. The moment I saw him, the tension left my shoulders. I quietly exhaled.

"Aha-ha..."

That sound was almost a symbol of peace itself, and I couldn't help but laugh. I rolled to the side and gently began to pet the sleeping baby wolf. My nerves began to ease as I ran my fingers through his soft, fluffy fur. He flopped over in his sleep onto his back, so I stopped petting him. Sometimes, his legs would

move through the air, so I thought he must be dreaming about running.

Dawn was still far away, but I decided to give up on trying to go back to sleep. I thought maybe I could read a book, so I quietly stood up so as not to wake Alto. I took the small pot and conjured magic to fill it with water, then set it on top of the simple brick stove I'd made. As the water began to boil, I took out a book from my bag.

It was a romance novel that Dahlia, the owner of the inn in Gardir, had given me. The title was *The Farthest Ends of Love*. According to Dahlia, it was a sad love story, and since I hadn't read any books like it since coming to this world, I was kind of looking forward to it.

But the more I read, the more I realized the book was the cause of the commotion at the inn. I glanced at Alto as he snoozed away, and I remembered what he and Dahlia had told me...

◇Part Three: Alto

A few days after Dahlia began taking care of me, we were eating lunch together after I finished my morning studies. She had made sandwiches filled with colorful vegetables and flavored meat. They were very yummy.

“Is it good, Alty?” she asked with a smile, and I nodded. She smiled happily.

We chatted as we ate, but just then, I noticed the calluses on her hands and remembered that Master had mentioned Dahlia had been an adventurer. He said she was strong, but it was hard for me to believe as I watched her wriggle around while she talked to me. So I decided to ask her if she was strong.

“Are you strong, Dahlia?”

She gave me a surprised look. She muttered Nestor’s name in a low voice—he was the guildmaster—and she said something else, but I didn’t understand the word she uttered.

“Dahlia?” I called, and she gave me a troubled smile.

“You shouldn’t ask ladies if they’re strong, Alty!”

“Really?” There were female adventurers, so I didn’t understand what was wrong with asking that question. “Why not?”

“Because women are weak, and men protect them.”

“Hmm...” This was new information, and I didn’t really understand it.

“So when you get older, you need to protect women.”

“Hmm...”

“I guess it’s too soon for you to understand,” she said with a laugh.

But I wondered how I would ever be able to protect such a large person. I mean, she was bigger than me, and I didn’t know how strong she was exactly, but I thought she was probably stronger than me. Maybe if there were two of me, I could protect her. I tried imagining it but couldn’t really picture it. Maybe Master would know.

As I thought about Master, Dahlia began to speak in a very serious voice. My

ears naturally turned toward her.

“But sometimes women must become strong.” She stared directly at me, and I felt myself tense up a bit as I waited for her to continue. I had a feeling she was about to tell me something very important. “When a maiden falls in love, she becomes stronger.”

“A maiden?” I’d never heard that word before.

“That’s right, a maiden. That’s what you call lovely, weak young girls like myself. This is how you spell it.”

I hadn’t asked her how to spell it, but she opened my notebook and wrote it down, perhaps because I always asked her to teach me things every day. I thanked Dahlia, then copied the word down several times in my notebook.

I had a hard time understanding the things Dahlia told me, but I did understand that women were different from men, and it was good for a man to protect maidens like Dahlia.

After we were done eating lunch, she asked me to help her out in the garden. The garden was a fun place, with a vegetable patch and an area where animals called chickens and mini pigs were kept. We went to the animal shed, and Dahlia led the mini pigs out to the fenced-in area on the edge of the garden.

I asked her if we were going to move the chickens, and she said, “Make sure you don’t let the chickens out, because they’re very hard to catch!” I asked her what I should help her with, and she said, “Go ahead and play with the pigs while I clean out the shed.”

So I played with the mini pigs with all my might. Once we were tired from running around, we sat down together, and Dahlia gave me a glass of cold water. As I drank it, I wondered what quest rank this task would be.

Meanwhile, Dahlia rubbed her arms and murmured, “It’s so difficult for weak maidens to do these chores.”

Since she kept calling herself weak, I thought she really must not be strong. But then again, Master told me she was, so I was confused.

"Look, they pecked me. See how red it is?"

Dahlia's skin was so sunburnt that I couldn't really tell. "Are you scared of chickens?"

"I am. They're ferocious, so they're scary."

Sometimes, I would watch Dahlia as she cleaned the chicken coop, and personally, I thought it was the other way around. They only pecked her when she said, "Maybe I should fatten them up a bit more?" and picked them up to examine them. The chickens probably thought she was trying to eat them.

As Dahlia spoke, she wrote down the words *miniature pig, chicken, chores, tend, scary, ferocious, and difficult* in my notebook. *Oh, right, now that I'm better at writing, I can write about the pigs in my diary every day.* Just as that thought crossed my mind, I heard a voice coming from the entrance of the inn.

"Hmm? I wonder who that could be. Alty, you stay here, okay?" Dahlia said as she left me behind and ran to the reception desk. After a while, she returned clutching something made of paper.

"What's that, Dahlia?" I asked, curious because I'd never seen something like it before.

"This? This is a letter."

"A letter?"

"That's right. This is an envelope. It's made out of paper, and there's another piece of paper folded up inside of it. That's called a letter. You write a letter to someone you want to talk to but can't see in person, and you send it to where that person is. They read it, and that's how you can express your feelings to them."

I didn't really understand what Dahlia meant by all that.

"Hm, let's see. You know how you write to Setsu in your diary?"

I nodded.

"You can tell him the things you want to say in your diary even when you can't talk directly to him, right?"

I nodded.

“Letters are how you communicate with people just like that, but people who live far away.”

I understood and nodded. Dahlia patted my head, then she blushed and said, “There’s another way of using them, but you’re still too young to understand.” I didn’t know what she meant by that, but I learned there was another use for letters. She didn’t seem to want to tell me what it was, though, so I was a bit disappointed.

“I’m going to read this letter, so you go do whatever you want for now.”

I was very curious about what was in the letter, so I watched as Dahlia pulled it from the envelope and read it. At first she had on a smile, so I thought something good must be written in it. But then gradually, her smile disappeared, and even the look in her eyes changed. I was starting to get scared...

As she finished reading the letter, Dahlia began muttering something under her breath, and her eyes—her eyes were bloodshot. To me, it almost looked like her hair was standing on end with anger. My instincts screamed that I should run, but my body wouldn’t move. I felt myself trembling as she finished reading it, then suddenly, she shouted something so loudly that I thought I felt the earth shake.

“...this!” Her voice made all the blood drain from my face.

“...for this.”

“.....”

“You’ll pay for this!”

My entire body was genuinely shaking as I watched her utter a scream from the depths of her belly in a mad fury. I wanted to call out for Master, but no words came out.

“How dare you play with a young maiden’s heart! You’ll pay for this!!”

I was completely frozen. In a flash, Dahlia retrieved an ax as big as she was and wielded it with one hand, then she ran out into the garden. I somehow

managed to turn my head to look in her direction and watched in horror as she swung the giant ax around and roared.

“Raaaaaaaah! Don’t underestimate a womaaaaan!”

“.....”

She finally stopped swinging her ax when the shoulder of her clothing ripped from her bulging muscles. She slung the ax over her shoulder and exhaled. Then her eyes met mine. I could see her hold her breath. I held mine, too. Just when I thought she was about to kill me and eat me up...

“.....”

“.....”

I wasn’t sure how long we stared at each other like that, but her weapon dropped to the ground, making the earth quake. All the tension seemed to have left her body, and she let out a deep sigh.

“Shall we make dinner, Alty?” she asked with a smile as she came back over to me. I silently nodded. I thought it best if I didn’t say anything to her right then. Who knew what might trigger her into doing that again. I prayed that nothing else would happen and decided to remain quiet. But when she caught sight of the letter on her desk, her face twisted, and I was so scared that I thought my heart would stop.

“I’ll make you regret ever angering a maiden like me...”

“...”

“He-he-he... He-he-he...” She laughed in a voice that made my hair stand up. I curled up my tail and just waited for her to stop.

Then a thought crossed my mind. Were men really supposed to protect women? Because as far as I could tell, women and maidens were all pretty scary. I curled up on a chair, thinking that was the only thing I could write about in my diary that day.

◇Part Four: Setsuna

I left Alto in Dahlia's care as I finished up a quest at the guild, and I returned to the inn after buying some necessary supplies for the journey. When I looked over at him during dinner, it seemed like he wasn't his usual happy self. I was concerned, so I asked Dahlia about it, and she said all they did while I was gone was play out in the yard. I told him that if he was tired, he should go to bed, but he shook his head and said he wanted to study. I made him promise he'd go to sleep if it got to be too much, then began his studies.

After a while, he was satisfied, then transformed into a baby wolf and curled up on top of the bed. Sometimes, he cried in his sleep as if he was having a bad dream, so I wondered if he was really okay. I watched him for a while, trying to figure out if I should wake him or not, then opened his diary. And what I saw there was a very shocking sentence.

Women are scary. Maidens are scary, too.

I was very confused when I read his entry. I wondered what in the world had happened. I looked at him, but of course he didn't answer. I returned my gaze to the diary and read it again. It was the same sentence; I hadn't read it wrong.

I stared absently at the diary. I was impressed by Alto's attitude toward studying. He was already able to connect words and form sentences using the method I'd taught him the night before, and he quickly memorized letters. But how should I respond to this entry? It was a mere two sentences, and although a child had written it, it was incredibly deep... I had no idea how to reply.

Perhaps if I'd had a little bit more life experience, the answer would've come to me more easily? I'd never really talked in depth with a woman before, so I'd never thought they were scary. But this was no time to lament that. I had to give a response. And so I decided once again to figure out the meaning behind his sentence.

I figured the woman he was referring to in the entry must be Dahlia. I was fairly certain of that. But in that case, who was the maiden? Well, I didn't have to think too much about that, either. There was only one person it could be. But what kind of ridiculous conversation had they had to make him refer to Dahlia

as a maiden?

“Haaa...”

I sighed. I was extremely curious and concerned about what had happened in my absence. But I wasn't sure if I should pry about what he had written in his diary, either. Those two sentences were the result of his hard work that day, and what he'd chosen to convey to me out of all the events that had happened.

A response... I had to write a response. I tried to analyze the sentences again.

Women are scary. Maidens are scary, too.

First of all, I didn't know the circumstances behind the two sentences. Why were they scary? Dahlia always doted on Alto. So it was hard for me to believe he'd written that because she'd gotten angry at him and therefore frightened him. I thought maybe there was some clue in something he'd said earlier, but he hadn't mentioned a word about it. He didn't seem like he was avoiding her, either. In the end, those short sentences didn't bear any clues at all.

Then I realized there was another problem. Even if I did learn the truth, I wouldn't be able to write about it because the woman referred to in Alto's entry was Dahlia. In which case, my only two options were to write either Dahlia was scary or that Dahlia wasn't scary.

But it wouldn't make sense for Dahlia to be scary, so I couldn't write that. Alto had spoken to her normally, and his ears and tail also seemed normal. He'd eaten all of his dinner. And if he'd looked at her and shrunk back in fright, I certainly hadn't noticed.

So my only option left was to write that Dahlia wasn't scary. Alto had written to me that she was, but he didn't seem scared of her. His sentences didn't line up with the current situation, and that made it even more difficult for me to just brush him off and write that she wasn't frightening.

I was lost in a maze of thoughts once again, wondering what could have happened. It seemed the answer would be very difficult to find if I assumed Dahlia was the one he was referring to.

Dahlia and women... Dahlia and maidens... Maidens... Maidens... Maidens... What was the definition of a maiden?! I spent the rest of the night worrying about it.

I didn't end up getting to sleep until close to dawn, and the response I came up with was very basic.

Dear Alto,

Let's both work on overcoming our fears.

When I told him we should work on it, he went pale and told me what he had witnessed and what he was scared of, so I gave him a simple definition of the word *maiden*. Although Dahlia had told him that men should protect women, I explained that adventurers should protect those who can't fight for themselves regardless of whether they're men or women.

I wonder if my answer to him in the diary was way off base? But I wanted to make sure that when he grew up, he wouldn't be frightened of women he was attracted to, so I left it at that. His idea of women and maidens would probably change as he grew older. In fact, I sincerely hoped that they would.

◇Part Five: Dahlia

I asked Setsu to watch the inn for me during the morning, while I took my favorite ax and finished some minor business I had to attend to, then went home. After we finished eating lunch, Setsu asked me to look after Alty and then went out. Before Setsu left, he looked at Alty with concerned eyes, but Alty puffed out his chest and said he was fine, so Setsu didn't say anything. He just bent down to gently tousle Alty's hair. I wondered what the two of them had been through, because it was clear they loved each other very much. That was just wonderful.

Setsu stood in the entrance of the inn and let out a sigh when he looked at my ax. I wondered what that was about. At any rate, I needed to put it away, so I grabbed it with one hand and picked it up. I took a step forward to carry it to my room. Alty looked up at me, so I smiled at him. He smiled back, but his expression seemed tense. I'm sure it was just because he was forcing himself to smile since Setsu was gone.

I decided to ask him to help me with dinner to get his mind off Setsu. Setsu had said he wouldn't need dinner tonight, so we might as well make something Alty liked.

I invited Alty out to the garden, and we began harvesting the vegetables together. In just these past few days, he'd gotten very good at it. I looked at him, as he was clearly pondering whether or not to take a bite out of a tomato, and thought back to the first time Setsu had left him here alone with me.

"Please take care of Alto," he'd said as he left early one morning to go to the guild. We both watched him leave. Alty shut the door sadly and didn't move from the spot.

My heart ached seeing him like that, but I couldn't just let him stand there all day. So I told him that I had to keep my promise to Setsu. His ears lay flat on his head, but he looked up at me and nodded, then sadly walked off to his bedroom.

I kept checking up on him in between chores, but he was sitting at his desk

each time, which was heartbreaking to see. I decided to put more effort into making lunch than usual to try to cheer him up.

It was time for lunch, so I called him to the table to eat. He gobbled it up, so I assumed he thought it was good. I cleared the dishes and came back with some tea. I saw that Alty was standing still by the closed front door, staring at it. He was probably waiting for it to open and Setsu to walk through it. I thought it must be bothering him very much that Setsu had left him behind.

“Alty? Setsu isn’t home yet.”

With his ears flat against his head, he turned around, a sad look on his face.

“Alty. Did you finish the assignments Setsu gave you?”

“Yes.”

I’d thought as much since he hadn’t moved from his desk all morning, but I was still impressed at what a hard worker he was.

“Bring it to me, and I’ll check it for you.”

He didn’t move from the spot in front of the door, either because he didn’t want to take his eyes off it or because he was embarrassed about the contents of his notebook. But I knew I had to get him away from the door to distract him from his sadness, so I said the magic words.

“I’ll help you get so good at it that Setsu will be surprised!” I suggested. And Alty happily jogged off to his room and immediately brought back his study materials. It was so adorable that I wanted to hug him, but since he wasn’t quite used to me that well yet, I restrained myself. I set him down in the chair and placed a cup of tea on the table, then sat down next to him.

I looked at the book and notebook he handed me, and they were so rigorously written in that it made me dizzy. Apparently, Setsu had told him to write down ten letters and copy each of them five times. Setsu was stricter than he seemed...

But it had become a mishmash of characters Alty couldn’t write very well, some distorted, some backward. Still, I could spot a few that were written well, so I wondered why there was such a difference.

“I’m not very good,” he said, seemingly concerned that he didn’t write as well as the examples. So that’s why his eyes had sparkled when he heard me say I’d help him improve. There were some problems with Setsu’s teaching methods, but that couldn’t be helped. Setsu was doing the best he could in this situation. I’m sure he was doing everything he could just to survive.

Setsu couldn’t bear to see Alty get killed, so he made him his apprentice. That’s what Nestor wrote in his letter. Setsu had just become an adult, so it was probably very difficult for him to raise a child all of a sudden. I smiled at Alty as he stared at me. Then we looked at his notebook and found the letters he was having trouble writing.

“Oh, this word is nice!”

“That’s...my name. Master...taught me,” he said, happily opening his notebook and writing *Alto*. He was very good at writing the letter A. I was certain Setsu had practiced it a lot with him.

“I can...write Master’s name...too.”

As I quietly looked at his notebook, Alty wrote Setsu’s name and showed it to me. He must’ve been proud of the way he wrote it because he wagged his tail happily.

“I practiced...today, too.”

He flipped through the notebook, and I saw pages filled with both his and Setsu’s name. I almost cried. Alty hadn’t succumbed to his loneliness; he’d gone above and beyond Setsu’s instructions. I deeply respected his hard work.

“I want...to get...better.”

Yet he still wasn’t satisfied with the result and wanted to work even harder. When he told me that with such a serious expression, I smiled and nodded and, as promised, helped him.

“Alty, can I show you something?” I took his notebook and used water magic to create a ball of ink in the air, and lightly wrote his assigned letters down on a blank page. I also wrote down the stroke order of each letter. Once the magic ink had dried, I set the notebook down on the table and pointed to each letter as I demonstrated how to write it.

"Now, take your pencil and follow the stroke order I showed you to trace the letters. If you do that, you'll get better at writing them."

I had written ten letters in magic ink five times each, for a total of fifty letters. I made my ink lighter and lighter as I went on. Alty stared at the letters, looking puzzled, but once I explained the process, he seemed to understand. He gave an enthusiastic reply and immediately began practicing. I quietly stood up from my chair so as not to disturb him and headed outside to do the laundry.

Once I finished the laundry and returned, Alty showed me his notebook. He had not only traced the letters I'd made for him but had written more in the white space next to them. They were still a little sloppy, but they were so much of an improvement from before that I couldn't believe my eyes. He was such a hard worker. I patted his head and praised him, and he gave me a bashful smile.

"You did a very good job. Now, are you done with your studies for the day?"

"Yes."

"Well, in that case, will you help me with my chores?" I was sure he just wanted to wait by the door for Setsu to return home, but I thought it would still be a while, so I invited him to help me around the inn. Plus, it wasn't good for him to stay cooped up inside all day, so I wanted him to get some sunlight.

"Okay." He nodded obediently. I smiled at him and led him out to the garden.

"That's a good boy. Now, let's go out to the garden and look for some vegetables."

"Vegetables?"

"That's right. Setsu will be hungry when he gets home, so we're going to cook a delicious meal with fresh vegetables for him."

"For Master?"

"Yes. I'm going to pick some for you and Setsu, so help me, okay?"

He nodded enthusiastically, his entire body the embodiment of willingness as he walked beside me.

The garden I had at the inn was quite small, but I was very proud of my vegetable patch, which was growing quite robustly.

“Alty, pick that tomato and put it in this basket for me, will you?”

“Tomato?”

“That red fruit there. Remember how it was in your salad this morning? You can cut them up and put them in salads, and they’re also quite good in soups.”

“Dahlia... How you...write *tomato*?”

“Right tomato?”

“No, write. Letters.”

“Oh, I see. You’re so enthusiastic about your studies, Alty.”

I took a stick that had fallen on the ground and had him hold it along with me, then wrote *T-O-M-A-T-O* in the dirt. I let go of the stick, and he began to write the word *tomato* in the dirt. I watched as I picked a tomato, and he lifted his face as if remembering something. He looked at me and stopped practicing. He had on a guilty expression and came to ask me the correct way to pick the fruit.

“It’s all right, Alty. You can keep practicing.”

“I want...to help.”

I told him he could just do what he wanted, but he stared at me, waiting for instructions.

“Are you sure? Well then, Alty... Can you go pick some peppers?”

He reached out and was about to touch a pepper that was almost the size of both of his hands, but then he stopped.

“Alty?”

“I...hate these.”

“Goodness! You mustn’t be picky, Alty. If you’re picky, then you won’t be able to grow up to be beautiful like me.”

“But I don’t...like them.”

It’s true that children probably wouldn’t like the bitter flavor of peppers, but I tried to think of something that would convince him to eat them.

“Alty, vegetables are a gift from the god of sun, Saadia, and the god of earth,

Gladia."

"Gift from the gods?"

"That's right. See how the vegetables here are glistening? That's because the gods Saadia and Gladia give so much of their love to vegetables."

Alty looked confused, but he was listening intently to my story.

"And vegetables, which are packed full of love from the gods, are also filled with the power of the gods! So if you're picky and don't eat your vegetables, you won't become strong."

Alty's ears twitched when he heard that. He frowned as he stared at the pepper, deep in thought.

"Dahlia. Vegetables are gifts...from the gods? They're gifts so...you become strong?"

"That's right. They're gifts."

"If I eat...vegetables...can I be like...Master?"

I was surprised that he connected strength to Setsu right away. Impressed, I patted him on the head.

"That's right. Setsu is very strong, so as long as you're not picky and eat plenty, I'm sure you'll become just as strong as him."

I was keenly aware of how powerful Setsu was. Nestor had said in his letter that Agito from Moonlight had invited Setsu to join his team, so I knew he was the real thing. And Agito disliked scholars, so that must mean something, I thought as I looked at Alty.

"Master is...strong. I'll be like...him." A strong resolve was reflected in his eyes as he looked up at me. But then his eyes widened with surprise.

"What's wrong?"

He stared at me for a moment, then whispered "...Beard."

I was speechless as he continued staring at my chin, looking utterly baffled. Just like the previous day, an awkward silence filled the air, but it seemed like he didn't notice at all.

“Dahlia. How do you...write *beard*?”

“.....”

I knew he didn’t mean any harm. So I tried to smile gently at him, but even I could feel that it was tense. Alty, again, didn’t seem to notice and handed me the stick. Apparently, he wanted me to write the word *beard*. I could see myself reflected in his eyes, and my own eyes looked vacant. I had no choice but to kneel and write *B-E-A-R-D* in the dirt.

He innocently thanked me, picked up the stick, and wrote the word several more times while I quietly watched over him.

I wished I hadn’t remembered that and shook my head to push it out of my mind. Alty stared blankly at me, so I headed into the kitchen to make dinner.

I was going to put pasta in the soup that night. Apparently, he had never eaten pasta, but he gobbled it up. He really seemed to like it, so I should probably teach Setsu how to make it. But on second thought, it was a bit complicated, so I should teach him simpler recipes he could use while camping. Still, it was filling and would warm them up.

Setsu had said he wouldn’t be home until late, so once we were done eating dinner, Alty was still by my side. He put his notebook on the table and practiced reading his letters aloud. I sipped tea while I relaxed with a book. It was such a sad story that I ended up crying. I sniffled, and Alty turned toward me with a surprised look on his face.

“Are you all right, Dahlia?” he asked with concern.

I looked up from my book and dabbed my eyes with my favorite lace handkerchief, then blew my nose.

“I’m fine. I just cried because of this book I’m reading.”

“Book?” He gave me a puzzled look.

“That’s right. This book is a sad love story. A tale of unrequited love, just like mine...,” I told him, then I felt sad all over again and began to sob. Alty gently rubbed my back. “Thank you. I just remembered the letter I got yesterday...”

Suddenly his hand froze. His expression was frozen, too. I regretted my slip of the tongue and suggested he have some tea. “I’m fine now. Why don’t you drink some tea, too, and take a break?”

He nodded obediently and stared politely at the cup of tea in front of him that I poured. There was a splash of brandy in mine, but his was just tea, of course, so I added some sugar and milk so it wouldn’t be so bitter. As we both drank our tea, he looked curiously at the book on the table.

“What’s...written in the...book?”

“You’re awfully precocious, Alty.”

“Pre...cocious?” he repeated, sipping his sweetened tea happily.

“*Precocious* means you’re acting grown-up. But...do you know what romance is?”

“Romance? I don’t know.”

“Yes, well...it may be a bit too early for you...”

He looked upset to hear that, so I decided to give him a simple explanation. After all, you never knew when you might come across love, so he should be emotionally prepared for it.

“Do I love Master?”

“You love Master very much!” That was the truth, after all. I thought perhaps he would understand a bit better if I explained the story using him and Setsu as the characters. “I’ll explain the story in a way that’s easy for you to understand,” I said, and he sat up a bit straighter in his seat.

“Alty loves Setsu very much, and Setsu loves Alty very much. So he promised that they could go on a journey together.”

“And then what?!” He seemed very interested in the story now. He wagged his tail happily and smiled.

“Well, Alty and Setsu went out on their journey, but then Alty got attacked by a monster and became injured. He had to stop by a town on the way in order to get his wounds treated.”

“I’m gonna get...hurt?”

“No, this is just a made-up story. I’m telling you the plot of the book using you and Setsu to make it easier for you to understand.”

“.....”

He was becoming anxious as if it were really happening to him. I gently patted his head and continued.

“Setsu waited for Alty’s injuries to heal and encouraged him to continue the journey. But Alty’s injuries just wouldn’t heal completely, and that made him feel very anxious that Setsu would go on without him or abandon him entirely. At first, Setsu came to check on him every day. But gradually, he began coming only every other day, then every third day. That made Alty grow more and more anxious. He asked Setsu about it, and he just said he was busy with guild quests.”

“.....”

“Finally, Alty’s injuries healed, and he ran to his beloved Setsu.”

“I’m so glad...he got better!” he shouted with excitement when he heard that part of the story.

“That’s right. It’s a good thing he got all better, hmm?”

“Yes.”

“Now that Alty’s injuries had healed, he went to the Adventurers Guild to search for Setsu, but Setsu wasn’t there.”

“Master was...gone?”

“That’s right. Alty went to several different places looking for him. He looked and looked and looked, and finally he found Setsu at an inn.”

“Thank goodness.”

He breathed a sigh of relief as if this were happening to him, so I thought he must have been very interested in the story. I was having fun telling it, too.

“But next to him was...”

“Was...?”

"A beautiful woman named Dahlia! Setsu and Dahlia were chatting in a friendly manner outside her room. The two had become so close that Setsu decided he was going to take her along on the journey."

Suddenly, Alty's tail stopped wagging, and his eyes begged me to continue. "What's going...to happen to me?"

"Alty was abandoned..."

"?!" Alty's eyes became so big that they looked like they might fall out of his head. That's how invested he had become in the story. As had I, so I decided to put a little more oomph into it.

"Seeing this, Alty said to Setsu, 'Who is that woman?!" Setsu replied, 'This is my new lover.' 'So then what will happen to me?!" asked Alty. And Setsu coldly said, 'I have a new lover whom I adore, so I don't need you anymore, Alty.'"

"....."

"Alty desperately tried to stop Setsu and yelled, 'That's terrible! Was I nothing but a game to you?!" Setsu didn't even look at Alty but smiled at Dahlia. 'I was serious about you, but I've found someone I love more,' he said. Then he bade farewell to Alty. 'Please don't leave me!' Alty pleaded, but Setsu wouldn't change his mind. 'I don't need you anymore. Because I have Dahlia with me now.' Setsu left Alty and went into Dahlia's room with her..."

Alty was quietly listening, so I ramped up the drama. "Then, the next day, Setsu and Dahlia left the inn together and set off on their journey. Seeing this made Alty so sad that he took his dagger in both hands and screamed, 'If you won't stay with me, then die!' and ran toward Setsu. Setsu was surprised and said, 'Calm down! I understand how you feel!' trying to calm him down, but Alty said, 'No you don't! Since you won't stay with me, I'm going to kill you!' And he looked tearfully at Setsu."

"....."

"Setsu frantically tried to convince Alty to stop. 'What will killing me accomplish? Even if you kill me, I won't be yours. Dahlia is the one I love!' he shouted, expressing his love for her. However, once Alty realized that Setsu wouldn't change his mind, he said, 'If I'm so worthless that you replaced me

with another woman, then not only will I kill you, but I'll die, too!' then gripped his dagger firmly."

"....."

"Then Setsu cried, 'Wait, Alty!' Alty gave a fleeting smile and said softly, 'I can't wait. Will you die with me?' and he stabbed Setsu. Alty lay beside Setsu and waited until he was no longer moving, then he said, 'I love you.' Finally, he stabbed himself with his dagger and died."

"....."

"That's the end of the story. Alty?"

I let out a deep breath once I finished telling the story. He snapped back to reality once I called his name, and his face went pale. I wondered if my story was too intense for a child.

"Why would I...kill Master? Why wouldn't I...kill Dahlia?"

I nodded several times in response. Getting rid of your rival was definitely a valid choice. However, it wasn't the ultimate expression of love.

"Well, Alty thought that even if he killed Dahlia, Setsu could just find another new woman and abandon him. But if he murdered Setsu and committed suicide, they could be together forever. That's the ultimate love, being prepared to kill the person you love and dying yourself, feeling like you can't live without that person."

Just when I wished I could find someone I wouldn't mind risking my life over, a certain someone flashed through my mind. I looked down and let out a sigh so that Alty wouldn't notice, then shook my head to get the thoughts of that person out of my head.

"I can't...live without...Master." I lifted my head when I heard Alty murmur that. He opened his notebook, and with a serious expression, asked me to help him with writing practice. I nodded that I would, wondering if there were specific words he wanted help with.

All he wanted was to practice writing *kill* and *die*... I copied down the words for him and watched as he wrote them over and over again, muttering them to

himself.

◇Part Six: Setsuna

A few days had passed since Dahlia had begun hosting us at her inn. One night, I was reading Alto's diary. And all I could do was wonder what in the world had happened. I wanted to ask him, but he'd fallen asleep before I got home.

Dahlia had gone out that morning, and during that time, I'd watched over his studies. She returned in the afternoon, and so I asked if she could watch Alto while I went to take a quest at the guild and buy some things we needed for our journey.

I was relieved that we'd finally be able to leave the country. Part of my daily routine was checking Alto's diary, so I reached out to read it. I opened it right away, and perhaps that contributed to my shock. Perhaps I should've opened it more carefully, especially after worrying so much about yesterday's entry...

The moment I saw the words on the page, I immediately closed the notebook. I wanted to just forget all about it. At first, I thought perhaps I'd read it wrong, so I checked the notebook again, but it wasn't a mistake at all.

Kill, Master. Alto, die.

He'd written those words with such intense pressure, expressing his agitation...

"What in the world happened now...?" I muttered, and who could blame me? I tried to remember how he was before I left for the guild, and I remember him being in high spirits. He was a little sad when I left, but he didn't seem incredibly upset. Yet...why would he be thinking of killing me, then killing himself? I had no idea. No matter how much I thought, I couldn't find the answer. I closed the diary again and tried to switch gears, then looked at his study notes. My breath caught in my throat when I saw a certain page...

The page was filled with the word *kill* over and over again. The next one was filled with the word *die* crammed into every blank space.

It was terrifying...

I reflexively closed the notebook, my pulse racing violently. I didn't even get

this frightened when I faced off against a monster. I never thought it would be so scary to see the words *kill* and *die* written repeatedly on a piece of paper. I felt the beginnings of a breakdown...

“I need to ask Dahlia about this...,” I murmured quietly. I slipped out of the room so as not to wake up Alto and knocked on Dahlia’s door.

“Yes?” I heard a deep voice from the other side of the door, and Dahlia opened it. “Hmm? What is it, Setsuna?”

“I’m sorry to bother you in the middle of the night, but I need to ask you something about Alto.”

“That’s a shame... So you’re not here for a nighttime rendezvous?”

I wasn’t in the mood to play along with her jokes, so I just repeated myself.

“Well? What about Alto?”

“Today...” I was about to ask her about the diary but suddenly felt someone behind me and turned around. It was Alto. Apparently, he woke up and saw that I was gone, so he’d come to find me. I asked if I’d woken him up, but he looked into my eyes and didn’t respond. It was very unusual. He stared at me intensely, and he was clutching a dagger in his hand... “Alto?”

“...Kill.”

The resolve in his voice made my breath catch in my throat. At first, his gaze was on me, but after thinking about it for a moment, he turned toward Dahlia, who was behind me.

“Kill, Dahlia.”

When I saw how serious he was, I decided to take his dagger away and talk it over with him, but then I heard Dahlia’s blithe reply. “Oh? Aren’t you supposed to be killing Setsu, Alty?”

Why? I looked over at Dahlia, and she was smiling at Alto.

“No. Can’t, kill...Master.”

“No, Alto. You shouldn’t kill Dahlia, either,” I said quickly, and for some reason he gave me a shocked look. His ears lay sadly flat on his head. I had no idea why

he looked so depressed.

“Master... Dahlia... take sides...”

“Goodness, Setsu. I had no idea you cared for me so much.”

“I don’t.”

Dahlia wriggled bashfully, but I denied it firmly.

“You’re no fun.”

“Master. I...I...” He looked down with frustration, then looked back up with resolve.



“Die, Dahlia.”

“Alty. Even if you kill me, Setsu won’t be yours!”

I wanted to say I wasn’t hers, either, but I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do...my best.”

“Setsu loves me!”

“It’s not about loving or hating anyone here...!” I finally managed to say, and they both glared at me.

“Quiet, Master.”

“That’s right. Be quiet, Setsu.”

“What?”

“This problem...is between...me and Dahlia.”

I had no idea what was going on, but their argument just intensified. I told them I wanted them to calm down, but neither of them would listen.

“The problem...will be gone...if Dahlia dies.”

“He-he. Do you really think you can kill me, Alty?”

“If you resist...it’ll hurt... I’ll stop.”

Alto was serious, but I realized Dahlia was enjoying this somehow. In that case, I’d stay quiet and keep watching. She was an ex-adventurer, so she wasn’t the kind of person who could get killed by a mere child.

“Does Setsu need me?”

“Master...needs me!”

“Does he?”

Alto seemed frantic, and Dahlia gave him a teasing look, egging him on.

“He doesn’t...need Dahlia!” Alto yelled with irritation, stomping one foot. It seemed like Dahlia was playing with him. I wondered if I was being played by her as well...

Anyway, one thing I learned from their conversation was that this strange fight had something to do with his diary entry. And if I could add one more thing, it was that this was a huge game to Dahlia. It didn't seem like she was taking Alto seriously. It looked like she was almost acting. Once I realized that, I was able to relieve the tension in my shoulders.

Thinking back on the conversation, it was easy to see that Alto and Dahlia were arguing over me. Dahlia was saying it was the right course of action to kill me, and along with Alto's diary entry, the conversation should have gone like this: "*I'm going to kill Master!*"

"Why me?!"

"Master, it'll hurt if you resist, so just stay still."

"Alto, calm down."

"Don't worry. I am calm. I'm going to kill you, then I'm going to die."

"Wait! Wait, Alto!"

"I can't wait! I'm going to die along with you, Master!"

Then Alto would stab me, and it would all be over. I was glad I didn't play along. I didn't want Alto to be like this. Although what did it say about me, since I had imagined it...?

As I thought about all this, their exchange kept unfolding. I thought perhaps I'd let down my guard after realizing that Dahlia was just playing. I stared absently at them, wondering when it would all end, then suddenly, they both spoke to me at once.

"Master, will you pick me, or Dahlia?"

"Setsu, you love me, don't you?"

"....."

I never dreamed that those two would be asking me that question. I wished a woman was asking me. I felt somewhat exhausted as I answered.

"I care about Alto, and I'm very grateful for you, Dahlia."

I thought that was a safe answer, but inside I was panicking. Meanwhile, Alto

had on a very happy smile. That must've been the right answer. I hoped that meant I could relax now. I wondered what I would've done if he said I should only love him, but thankfully it ended. I was so relieved. Meanwhile, Dahlia said, "I don't appreciate such an indecisive answer!" but then she smiled at Alto.

"Alty, why did you try to kill me instead of Setsu?"

"Because, if I killed Master...we wouldn't be able to journey...and I'd be sad."

The hostile atmosphere immediately vanished, and Alto obediently answered. Apparently, the reason he tried to kill Dahlia was because it was a means of staying with me, not because he hated Dahlia.

"Ahhh, I see."

"Yes."

In the end, I thought that perhaps the way Alto and Dahlia were able to have such a conversation spoke to how close they had become. He had become close to Dahlia, which was why he could speak so freely with her. I wasn't thrilled to see how much Dahlia was enjoying it, and I didn't like him walking around carrying a dagger, so I'd have to scold him about that later.

Still, now that I saw them getting along so well, all of a sudden my fatigue overwhelmed me. I'd now gotten into two commotions between them in the past few days.

Alto looked confused to see how tired I was, and Dahlia commented on how exhausted I looked. *You're the reason I'm so tired*, I thought, but there was no point in even saying it.

"Master? Do you want...to sleep?" Alto asked with concern. I just nodded and headed toward the bedroom with him. His diary entry was no longer worrying, so I'd just ask Dahlia for details about it in the morning. I was certain she'd thoroughly enjoy telling me about that little skit she'd just put on.

Honestly, I hadn't slept much the past few days. I wasn't physically tired, but I was mentally exhausted, and it was only exacerbated by what had just gone on. I thought I should go to bed early that night. Alto turned into a wolf and immediately fell asleep. And I did as well after watching him for a while.

I only wrote one sentence in his diary that day.

Dear Alto,

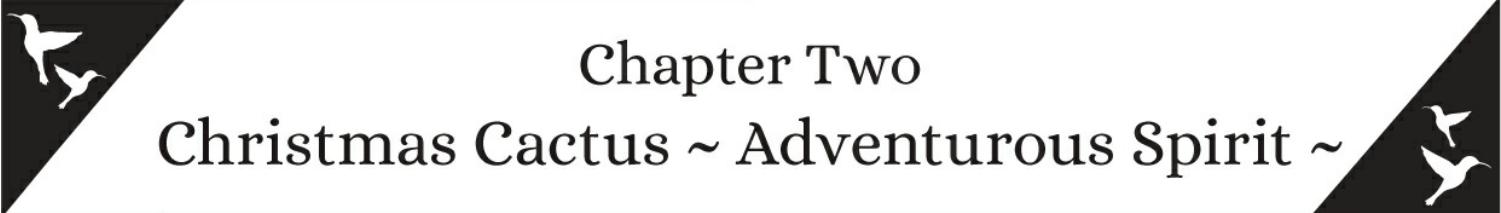
Let's make sure to value life.

My friend had said, "I want you to really prioritize your life. Kill before getting killed. This isn't our old world. You need to accept that this isn't Japan. You'll have it a lot easier here if you cast aside your values from our old world..."

I'd lived these past few months with that in mind, so it was difficult for me to tell someone else to value life. And since Alto was beastfolk, his life was in more danger than mine. So at the very least, I wanted to tell him that his life and the lives of those close to him were precious. That's what I wanted to say to him anyway.

I didn't want Alto to become the kind of person who would kill enemies indiscriminately, and I didn't want him to not value the lives of those who weren't close to him, either. Alto showed interest in all sorts of things. But I thought he probably had some amount of hatred for humans. Knowing him, however, at some point he would show an interest in them.

I wanted him to become the kind of warmhearted person who would help those who were in trouble. Maybe I was being naive, but that's why I chose the words I did in my response.



Chapter Two

Christmas Cactus ~ Adventurous Spirit ~

◇Part One: Setsuna

After I finished my morning training, I was getting breakfast ready when Alto woke up. He got dressed, then quickly came to help, so we were able to eat earlier than I expected. My heart felt light when I watched him spread the jam I'd made the day before on the bread, open his mouth wide, and gobble it up.

"I wanted you to save up your stamina until we crossed the Gardir border, but starting tomorrow, I'd like you to train with me."

Alto's eyes sparkled as he stared at me. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Let's start tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes, please!" he replied enthusiastically.

Since we decided to begin Alto's training the next day, we began to clean up after ourselves. While we were in the middle of it, Alto asked once again if we could go fishing. He really must be fond of it. Since we were in no particular hurry on this journey, I told him it was okay to fish for one hour and handed him a fishing pole. Alto sat down on a large rock in a place where I could see him. As I watched him, I felt at peace, as though the nightmare I'd had last night had vanished completely.

Alto was joyfully casting his line and turning the reel. Seeing him fish from a distance made me feel like the fishing pole was abnormally long, so I searched the memories of Kyle, who lay sleeping inside of me. I found that different fishing poles suited different people better, based on their height and strength.

The previous day, I'd thought that Alto's request to switch poles was very childlike and innocent, but now that I did some research, I inwardly apologized to him for being so ignorant. Since Alto was so fond of fishing, I searched through my bag to find a pole more suitable for his size. But there were only fishing poles Kyle had used himself. So I used Materialize to make a small fishing pole so Alto would have more control over it.

I called him over and gave him the fishing pole. He was thrilled and clasped it to his chest and didn't move for a while. I decided that if we found a store that sold fishing poles, we would buy a proper one just for him.

He went back over to his fishing spot and resumed the activity, so I decided to plan out his training for the next day. But a few moments later, I heard a scream breaking the silence. “Aaagh!” I quickly looked over and saw Alto there, so I ran over.

“Are you all right?”

He looked up at me with a pitiful expression.

“M-Master... The hook...stabbed my tail.”

I didn’t even have to listen to his explanation because I’d wondered if he’d gotten the fishing hook caught in his tail. I picked up his tail and looked at it, and thankfully it was just wrapped up in his fur.

“Stay very still or else it might hurt. And be quiet.”

He nodded and held his breath.

“Pfft...” I almost burst out laughing, but once I saw his frantic expression, I suppressed my laughter. I took the fishing pole and planted it upright in the ground so that the line was hanging down. I stood between the line and Alto.

“You don’t have to hold your breath. Just stay still.”

“Master, get it out! Get it out!”

I bent over and held in my laughter as I tried to get the fishing hook out of his tail.

But at that moment, a sword filled with malice swung down toward my back. Alto screamed, and I sensed two people coming down from the animal trail. I never thought that they’d be able to reach this spot so quickly and that one of them would be able to jump across the riverbed and land behind me. Not only that, but the attacker got in a swing of a sword.

However, since I had been vigilant, I had enough time to deal with their attacks from the blind spots. The moment their sword cut through the fishing line, I grabbed the fishing pole and picked up Alto, moving away from the attacker. At the same time, I put up a magical barrier around Alto so that he wouldn’t be harmed.

Once it was safe to do so, I put him down and gave him the fishing pole. Then I confronted the person who was attacking me. They had a hood pulled low over their eyes, so I couldn't see their face. But I could tell they intended to kill me.

I immediately wondered why. Murder was a very serious crime in this world as well, but I knew there were many people who didn't care about the law. So perhaps it would be futile to think about it. Still, it was my natural inclination as a Japanese person to want to know their motive. Was it a personal grudge against me? No, I'd done nothing to warrant someone wanting to kill me. Were they after our equipment? If that was their motive, then I certainly couldn't let them get away with it.

My belongings were mementos of Kyle. I had no intention of letting go of even one of them. I'd had so many things taken away from me since being summoned to this world. I wouldn't let anyone take one more thing from me.

That's right—*they* had taken everything from me. No matter what their reasoning was, I would never forgive them. And so I didn't need to know this person's motive. If they were going to break the law, I should let them know who they were facing.

I was caught up in those thoughts when I suddenly heard Alto's frightened voice saying, "Master!" I turned and saw him clutching the fishing pole, standing frozen to the spot. Then I changed my mind. I didn't want Alto to become that kind of person. And I shouldn't be that kind of person in front of him.

The person in front of me was covering their face with a dark gray hood, and I thought they were hiding it on purpose. They stood at the ready but didn't speak one word, so I spoke first.

"What do you want with us?"

Perhaps they were irritated with my attitude, or they didn't like what I said, because I could faintly hear them grinding their teeth.

"I don't need to respond to filth."

I was annoyed and wondered why they were calling me that. “I think it’s rather crude to call someone filth when you’ve never met them before.”

That must have really pissed them off because the air between us felt even more tense.

“What else would you call a slave trader who abuses beastfolk children? Kidnapping, buying, and selling beastfolk is illegal in this country. No one will care if I kill you right now.”

They turned toward Alto. “Hang in there a while longer, and I’ll save you.”

I finally realized this person had come running when they heard Alto scream earlier. When I was trying to get the fishing hook out of his tail, it must have looked like I was hurting him. I wasn’t sure if I could trust this person, but I knew that they meant what they said to Alto...

If they were trying to help him, then that meant I couldn’t harm them. And I realized I might run into this kind of misunderstanding even more in the future. I had a feeling it wouldn’t be right for Alto to keep seeing me fight people over this. If they ignored our intentions, I wouldn’t hesitate to use force, but for now I decided to try to clear up the misunderstanding as much as possible. So I tried to tell them that they had the wrong idea.

However, the moment those words began to come out of my mouth, they thrust their sword toward my face. I thought they aimed at my face instead of my torso, which would be much easier to hit, so they wouldn’t accidentally hit Alto, who was behind me. I used Wind magic to create a gust to deflect the sword’s trajectory. The tip of the sword grazed my cheek, and their right hand, which held the sword, stretched in front of me.

“I think it’s wonderful that you have a sense of justice, but your actions aren’t much different from a bandit’s, who attack civilians indiscrim—”

Before I could finish talking, they vanished. No—they just vanished from my field of vision because I sensed their presence to the left of me, on the ground. Before I could look down, I had a feeling they were going to try to attack, so I lightly jumped. The moment my body floated, I spotted my opponent.

They put their hand on the ground, using it as a fulcrum to support their body.

They tried to kick my leg but missed, making a full turn. Then, unexpectedly, they raised their body into a handstand using their abdominal muscles and the momentum of their spin. *Uh-oh*, I thought, and this time I blew a gust of wind down toward the ground. My opponent was about to jump up using the strength of their arms, but the wind caught them, knocking them off balance, and they fell to the ground. Meanwhile, I landed, grabbed Alto, and put more distance between us.

“Don’t you think it’s rude to attack someone in the middle of their sentence?”

My opponent gripped their sword and shouted in response, “I have no reason to be polite to a slave trader!”

“I’m not a slave trader, though.”

“Liar!” There was enough hostility in their voice to make someone flinch. But I let it roll off my back and tried talking to them again.

“Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Because there are a lot of people who lie because they don’t value life.”

I could only see their mouth because of their hood, but I could tell they had on a scornful smile.

“Then show me proof that I’m a slave trader, and he’s my slave.”

“His screams from earlier are more than enough proof!”

I didn’t agree, but it didn’t seem like they were going to change their mind. Their attitude toward me was horrible, but I could tell from their beliefs that they were probably a kind person deep down, so I really wanted to clear up this misunderstanding. There was someone else who had been hiding behind a tree this whole time and seemed much calmer, so I decided to talk to them instead.

“Is that person who’s hiding over there your friend?”

Apparently, they hadn’t thought I’d seen them, so they muttered “You’ve got to be kidding me...,” as they emerged from behind the tree. “Kara, put down your sword.”

“Hey! What about the child, Rudol?!”

The person called Rudol shrugged and said, “I don’t think that kid is a slave.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Kara looked angry.

“He’s not wearing a collar.”

“There’s still the chance he was kidnapped!”

“There’s nothing I can do about it. The kid’s got Wind magic cast on him, so my magic can’t do a thing to help.”

“Knock it off already!”

“I’m telling the truth.” Despite Rudol’s carefree tone, he had a serious expression as he stared at Kara. Kara’s eyes widened. “Anyway, the reason why the kid screamed isn’t because that young man was abusing him. It’s because of his tail.”

Kara squinted and examined Alto closely for the first time. She saw that Alto was holding a fishing pole, then looked at his tail, and a very strange expression came over Kara’s face. Her hostility faded.

Perhaps because of this, Alto’s adrenaline ran out, and he began to tremble, so I hugged him tightly. I patted his head to reassure him. Seeing this, the two of them held their breath.

“Can you show me your tail, Alto?” I said in a gentle tone to calm him down. He hesitantly stepped away from me and turned around. I knelt and took the fishing hook out of his tail. I checked it just in case, but he wasn’t hurt. “There, all better,” I said as I rose to my feet.

Alto turned around and said, “Thank you, Master!”

“You’re welcome.”

I picked Alto up again and rubbed his back, then turned toward the other two. “Let me ask you again. What do you want from us?”

I was surprised at the words that came from my mouth. I knew now that they weren’t after me, but were trying to make sure Alto was safe, so I should’ve asked if the misunderstanding had been cleared up. I wonder why I’d chosen words that sounded like a threat. I was slightly bewildered, but one of them began to introduce themselves, so perhaps I didn’t come off as threatening as

I'd thought.

"Sorry about all that. I'm Rudol. And this hothead over here is Kara."

"Hey..." Kara must not have appreciated that introduction, because she was about to complain, but Rudol interrupted her. She snatched a bag back from Rudol and fastened it over her shoulder.

"We were just walking past and happened to hear a child screaming. Once we saw it was a beastfolk child, we thought a slave trader must be abusing him. It's only a natural assumption, don't you think?" Rudol said in a lighthearted tone. "Can you tell me your name?"

"I'm sorry, but I have no obligation to tell a stranger my name."

Rudol fell silent for a moment, then I heard a faint laugh. He didn't sound amused, but ominous instead. "Oh, right. I forgot I was wearing my hood," he said, and slowly removed it. I stared at him. He was beastfolk, with ears that looked like a leopard's. It made sense now why they had overreacted so much about Alto, who was a beastfolk child. Still, I wasn't going to apologize since they immediately tried to kill me. Perhaps my words had been a bit harsh, though.

"Hmm? You're not surprised? That surprises me!" he joked. But despite his words, he didn't look like it at all. Now that I knew Rudol was beastfolk, my gaze turned to the movement of his ears as I held Alto.

"I'd like to know why you thought I should be surprised?"

The slavery policies Gardir made in regards to beastfolk made them hate the kingdom. Therefore, retaliation from beastfolk was occasionally seen in the vicinity of Gardir, and traveling humans feared contact with them in the area because of this.

Still, it was rarer than coming across bandits because beastfolk did not usually attack in an organized group. Furthermore, as long as you didn't show any kind of malice toward beastfolk, they probably wouldn't do anything bad to you, so ordinary people and solo adventurers didn't take any particular precautions when traveling. Personally, I didn't dislike beastfolk, and I was confident I could deal with them in an emergency, so it had never bothered me.

“Are you really a human?” He was still speaking in that lighthearted tone, but his eyes were sharp now, expressing the wariness he felt.

“Yes, I’m human.”

“Most of them scream or run away when they see us.”

“Run away? If I ran away when I saw beastfolk, why would I make one my apprentice?”

The look on Rudol’s face changed to surprise. “Apprentice?” Kara asked Alto, who nodded.

“Why?” Rudol inquired. His tone was no longer calculated but revealed his true emotions. He was staring at me in astonishment.

“Why? Because Alto said he wanted to be my apprentice.”



“Is that true?” Rudol asked. Alto silently nodded.

“Rudol! Why are you just believing them so easily?! It’s clear that he could be threatening this child!” Kara shouted, lowering her hood, probably to show Alto that she was beastfolk, too. She also had leopard ears. She crouched and looked straight into Alto’s eyes, saying, “You don’t have to lie to us.”

Alto was frightened but answered clearly.

“Master is my Master.”

A gentle feeling enveloped my heart.

I looked at the two beastfolk again.

Kara had a piercing stare, so she gave the impression of being a harsh person. Her ears looked exactly how I imagined leopard ears to look, and she had golden hair and eyes. She didn’t seem as malicious as before since she was talking to Alto, but she still hadn’t let down her guard around me. She had a hand on the sword at her hip at all times and had her body facing me.

Rudol had dark hair and black eyes. His eyes were also golden, but a slightly duller color than Kara’s. I guessed from the color of his hair and ears that he was a black leopard. His voice and mannerisms made him come off as a friendly, lighthearted young man, but I could tell he also had his guard up.

He only carried a dagger for protection, and I guessed from the ring he wore on his right middle finger that he was a sorcerer. I figured the ring was what he used to cast magic, which would explain why he told Kara that his magic wouldn’t reach. Generally, beastfolk didn’t have large amounts of mana, but I sensed more from him than most sorcerers I’d seen at the guild in Gardir.

He must have been wondering about me, just like I was wondering about them. He shifted his gaze to me, and we locked eyes. He let out a low chuckle and said, “I just want to know where that tough attitude of yours comes from.”

“Tough?”

“Aren’t you afraid of us? Any normal human would be frightened at the mere sight of us.”

When I heard the word *frightened*, I thought maybe it would have been easier to pretend I was afraid so that they wouldn't be cautious of me. Maybe the conversation would have proceeded a little more smoothly if I'd done that. But it was too late for that to be an option. It was the only thing I needed to feel afraid about. They seemed very confident, but if it came down to a fight, I knew I wouldn't lose. And worst-case scenario, I could use Wind magic to escape. So I didn't feel threatened at all.

"Or are you just underestimating us?" He sounded displeased. "Don't you think it's strange to be so calm in front of an enemy? Kara drew her sword right away, and I can cast magic on you at any time. Yet you're not even trying to defend yourself."

This was my first time speaking with beastfolk other than Alto, so I had to wonder if this was just the way they treated humans. Curious, I searched Kyle's memories, but he knew several cheerful beastfolk. So in that case, why were they acting like this toward me? I could only think they were trying to provoke me, to give them a reason to kill me.

Even though their strong hatred of humans disgusted me, I couldn't break off the conversation with them when I considered Alto's future as beastfolk. So I had to try to befriend them.

"You two seem to understand each other, and you understand what I'm saying, right? If you're having any trouble following me, I can speak in Beastian if that's easier for you."

There was a lot I wanted to say to them, but I wanted to confirm things before we started.

"Ha-ha-ha. Wow, you're really fearless, young man. That seems polite, but it's actually pretty rude."

The malice in his voice was palpable now, as if he was testing me. Kara unsheathed her sword in response, taking a fighting stance. I figured they were trying to read how serious I was. But I didn't see the two of them as threats, so it had little effect on me.

However, something unexpected happened. Alto had a hostile reaction. He had been frightened and clinging onto me, but now he pulled out his sword and

faced the two of them with a serious expression. Rudol and Kara looked stunned.

“Alto.”

“Any enemy of yours is an enemy of mine.” His body was slightly trembling in the face of Kara and Rudol’s hostility. He must have been terrified, but he drew his sword for me. For me! It was then that I knew I had to do everything I could to prevent Alto from attacking one of his own kind.

“Alto. Put your sword away.” He stared at me, trying to see if I was serious, so I smiled reassuringly at him and patted him on the back.

“How can you be so confident, young man?” Rudol gave me a wry smile, as if he thought we were acting in an immature manner.

“You’re here trying to kill me without any reason. And I don’t want to die, so that means I’ll do everything in my power to resist you.”

“.....”

“But if you acted to protect my apprentice, then we have the same goal. Because I want to protect him, too. If we just talk this out, I’m confident that we can clear up any misunderstandings.”

Kara still hadn’t put her sword away. She swung it, glaring at me. It was as if she was saying there was no point in talking to humans.

“You’re still insisting that you’re not a slave trader?”

“I’m not,” I said clearly.

Kara opened her mouth to say something, but Rudol stopped her. He sighed deeply and knelt to Alto’s eye level. Alto still looked frightened.

“Are you sure this human isn’t a slave trader?” Rudol asked with a serious expression.

Alto gripped his sword tightly and glared at Rudol. “My master...saved me from a slave trader.” He glanced at Kara and shouted. “I never asked you to save me! Nobody asked you to do this!”

Kara’s breath caught in her throat, and Rudol muttered under his breath

before standing up. Alto had completely rejected them; his words were a mixture of fear, irritation, and anxiety. This time, I knelt to talk to him.

"Alto. You got the fishing hook stuck in your tail and you screamed, so that's why Rudol and Kara were worried and came over to help."

"But they tried to hurt you!"

"That's true, but that's something I should be angry about."

"But!"

I appreciated his feelings. He was angry that they tried to hurt me and frustrated that they thought I was a slave trader. He seemed more upset about it than I was. I tucked those feelings carefully into my heart to cherish, and I continued. "Just like you're angry because you're worried about me, they were angry because they were worried about you."

Alto bit his lip and hung his head, not yet convinced.

"I'm not mad at you. I'm happy that you were angry at them on my behalf. Thank you. But I want you to remember that everyone has their differences."

"Their differences?"

"That's right. Right now, you think of Rudol and Kara as your enemies, right? Because they tried to kill me."

"Yes." He nodded, looking straight at me.

I nodded back and said, "But if you look at this situation from a different way, there were many hands stretched out trying to help you."

"....."

"There's mine, and Rudol and Kara's. You're free to take whoever's hand you want. But I want you to remember that they were all offers to help you."

"But!"

I knew Alto understood what I was saying, but his emotions just couldn't catch up. I smiled at him. "Alto, try to remember. Did I ever try to attack them?" My words weren't only directed toward Alto, but toward Kara and Rudol, who looked surprised. "If the two of them had attacked me with murderous intent

for no reason, then I would have fought back. But I knew that they were fighting for you—well, all beastfolk, so that's why I didn't harm them."

"....."

"So don't you think we owe it to them to try to clear up any misunderstandings while it's still possible?"

"You may not have physically attacked us, but you were definitely verbally provoking us!" Rudol muttered, but I ignored him. *Just shut up for a minute.*

"I do," Alto said after pondering it for a moment, looking straight into my eyes.

"I'm angry at what Kara and Rudol did, just like you are. It's difficult to judge a situation correctly, but if someone else on the outside looked at it, they would immediately realize that I wasn't abusing you."

Rudol chuckled wryly, and Kara gave me a bitter look. Alto nodded solemnly.

"Now that all that's said and done, the only thing left is for you to give your answer."

"Answer?"

"Yes. What do you want to do?"

Alto stared into my eyes. "It was nice of them to worry. But I can't forgive these people." He glared at Kara, who glared at me in turn. She probably wasn't very pleased with the direction this was going.

"I see. Well, if that's your answer, then I have no complaints about it."

"That's all? Wouldn't a normal person be angry that their apprentice wasn't doing what they said?"

I stood up and asked Rudol a question in return. "Let me ask you something. If you had thought long and hard about something to come to a conclusion, only to have your master deny you and force his own opinions on you, how would that feel?"

Rudol's eyes widened as he stared at me, then he sighed and answered in a reluctant tone. "It wouldn't feel very good..."

“Alto’s answer was true to his feelings. So it can’t be wrong. He’s grateful to you and Kara for your concern, but he won’t forgive anyone who tries to attack me. He was merely telling you how he felt and has no intention of pointing his sword at her. Isn’t that right?”

Alto nodded.

“I don’t want Alto to blindly obey me. I want him to think carefully, learn everything he can, then decide how to react to something. I think that’s very important. Of course, if he does something bad, I’ll guide him along the way. But in general, I respect his wishes.”

“Hmm. So does that mean you take responsibility for everything your apprentice does?” Rudol asked, running his fingers through his hair with a mischievous smile.

“Yes, because I’m his mentor.”

I wasn’t sure why the focus of the conversation had shifted from Alto to our relationship, but I also had no intention of asking. I noticed Rudol’s face clouded over for a moment, but I wasn’t going to think too deeply about it. The most important thing right now was to end the conversation so I could continue my journey with Alto.

“We’d like to get going now.”

“I still don’t trust you!” Kara yelled.

Alto frowned in response to Kara. Meanwhile, I thought the environment beastfolk found themselves in must be very harsh indeed, given that they were so wary of me. Even though I knew they lived in human society, apparently I had underestimated the pain beastfolk experienced. Still, it was irrelevant to the current situation after proving myself to them as not dangerous, so there was no need for me to become sentimental about it.

“As I have said many times, Alto is my apprentice and not my slave.”

“I don’t trust you!” Kara shouted, speaking over me. At this point, it was just a circular argument, and I didn’t know how to stop it.

I suppressed a sigh. If I sighed, it would just upset Alto more.

"Now, now. Calm down, Kara. Where are you all headed?" Rudol intervened and gave me a friendly smile.

"We're headed to Kutt." The capital city of Kutt was also named Kutt, and I thought that might be confusing, but they seemed to understand.

"Not Gardir?"

I understood what they were trying to say. If I was a slave trader, it was only natural that I would be headed to Gardir.

"We came from there and have no intentions of ever returning."

"I see. Kara and I came from Reglia, and we're also headed to Kutt. If we're going to the same place, why don't we travel together?"

Reglia was a kingdom farther to the south than Gardir. And as far as I remembered, it didn't have a good relationship with Gardir.

"Because you want to keep an eye on us?"

"No, no! I'm just curious about you as a person, that's all." He was smiling, but he wasn't speaking in his usual lighthearted tone. Kara was giving him a puzzled look.

"Rudol?"

"It's fine, right? You're concerned about the child, too, aren't you?"

"Yes, but traveling with a human is—"

"I don't recommend you traveling with us."

"Because you're guilty of something?"

"We promise we won't interfere with you! I think we're compromising quite a bit here," Rudol said with a wry smile. I had a feeling he'd misunderstood me and assumed I didn't want them coming along. It was too much of a pain to correct him, so I just told him to do whatever he wanted. Honestly, I was thinking about just running away, but I didn't want Alto to think badly about beastfolk because of this experience.

Alto wasn't pleased with the idea, and Kara seemed hesitant. Meanwhile, Rudol looked thrilled. All I could do was just shrug and mutter that there was

nothing I could do about it.

Alto was disappointed that he couldn't fish anymore, so I comforted him as we cleaned up and finished getting ready to depart.

Even though I hadn't planned on traveling with Rudol and Kara, I realized I hadn't told them my name, so I introduced myself. Although I doubted they cared that much.

"I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. My name is Setsuna. I'm a scholar, and my guild rank is blue."

"I'm Alto. I'm a swordsman, and my guild rank is yellow." Alto looked reluctant but introduced himself after I urged him to.

"So you two are adventurers? Aren't you actually a sorcerer, though, young man?" Rudol kept referring to me in that way even after I told him my name. He had a terrible personality. It was the Adventurers Guild's custom to introduce yourself in such a manner, but since they didn't do the same, I assumed they weren't adventurers. Or, since they didn't react to my rank, perhaps they were adventurers and were so powerful that they didn't blink twice at a blue rank. It was possible this was all an act.

"No, I'm a scholar."

"Huh? A scholar?" Rudol looked at me incredulously.

"What a great scholar you are." Kara snorted in a patronizing tone. I guessed she didn't believe I was one, but at this point, I didn't care whether she trusted me, so I ignored her and gave Alto a gentle push to start walking.

We walked through the forest for about two hours. Alto had finally stopped focusing so much on the beastfolk and began to look around him. Meanwhile, Kara kept a close eye on him while still being cautious of me. She stayed silent the whole time. As a result, my natural conversation partner was Rudol. He brought up all kinds of topics, but I got the feeling his goal was just to get information out of me instead of having a pleasant chat.

“Being an adventurer seems fun.”

“You two aren’t adventurers?”

“We’re mercenaries.”

“I see.”

“Hmm? That’s all?”

I gave Rudol a puzzled look, and he smiled at me, narrowing his eyes. “You’re not going to say ‘Beastfolk are violent, just as I thought!’ or ‘Beastfolk are only interested in killing!’ or something like that?”

I wondered how many times people had said those things to him to make him assume I would think that.

“I think there are human mercenaries, too...”

“Hmm...”

“Also, the best way to become strong is through fighting other strong people.”

“Why do you think that? We never told you the reason we’re fighting is to become stronger.”

As we talked, I began to get the feeling that Rudol disliked me even more than Kara, who had made it obvious from the beginning. The reason being because I could sense that feeling in every word he said. I would catch glimpses of his hostility toward me, then it would fade, then become apparent again. His attitude and his manner of speaking seemed to be intended to irritate me, in an attempt to get me to say something that would insult the pride of all beastfolk. I had no intention of playing into his attempts of provoking me, so I let them roll off my back, but maybe I said a bit too much.

“It’s just a guess.”

“Why, because we’re beastfolk? So you assume we’re battle crazy?” He had on a dark smile.

“No, that’s not it. I just assumed you had a reason for fighting.”

“And what about us made you guess that?” He gave me an amused look, and I

wasn't quite sure how to answer. Should I tell him the truth or not? When I didn't answer right away, he must have assumed I thought beastfolk were only capable of fighting or that it wasn't a guess at all, which was irritating. I was tired of listening to him trying to provoke me, so I just decided to speak freely. No matter what I said, he was going to come up with a reason to attack me anyway.

"I have a general idea of the goals mercenaries have. For example, money, glory, strength, or, as you said—they simply like to battle."

"And?"

"From what I can see, you two don't seem to be very interested in money, so I excluded that from the possibilities."

"What's your reason for that?"

"You never tried to extort money from me. That's enough for me."

"And what else?"

"As for fame, it's either something you get from being incredibly strong or a means of showing yourself off to gain power. Either way, you have to rely on your name, and excuse me for saying so, but I've never heard of either of you. So I don't think you're in it for fame."

I had searched Kyle's memory for mercenaries named Rudol or Kara and had come up empty, but of course I didn't tell them that.

"So if you don't think we're battle hungry, then why do you think we want to get stronger?"

"Everyone has their own reasons for wanting to, so I'm not sure if my guess would be correct or not. But I'd say it probably has something to do with revenge."

"And?"

The light tone had vanished from his voice again. Kara seemed to notice because her ears perked up in our direction.

"You're training to get revenge on someone. The target of your revenge isn't a fellow beastfolk but a human. And given their strength, you two can't fight

them as you are right now. You could have chosen to become adventurers to hone your skills, but the reason you didn't is because your opponent is also a mercenary."

The more I spoke, the narrower Rudol's eyes got. "Who *are* you?"

"Was I correct?"

The two of them froze and backed away from me cautiously. Sensing this, Alto ran over to me. Rudol stared at me, urging me to continue.

"I'd like to say that the revenge part was just a hunch, but I noticed a crest on Kara's sword. And I'm fairly sure it's from a kingdom that was destroyed."

"...!" The two of them glared at me, but I ignored them.

"And after that, I just filled in the details. At first, beastfolk founded a kingdom called Sagana. Other races formed several smaller territories that became independent as well. Today, only the first kingdom of Sagana remains. The others were destroyed by humans, including the one where that crest is from—the kingdom of Eln, which was wiped out several decades ago."

They probably never dreamed a human would know so much about the crest of their kingdom, or that it was destroyed. They were clearly flustered.

"One human mercenary that was active around that time was someone named...Sledea." The moment I uttered the name, Kara put her hand on her weapon, and Rudol stood behind her, ready to cast a spell.

"You know a little too much, young man."

"You bastard... You already knew all about us when you approached us!"

I let out a sigh. "What in the world are you talking about? You're the ones who approached us. *You're* the ones who chose to tag along."

It was nothing but a pain to me, so why were they acting like I was the one who had forced them to come with me?

"Young man... How do you know about this crest?" I could tell by Rudol's expression and tone that he wouldn't let me get away without answering. He was brimming with such hostility that it was clear that he intended to kill me if I lied. Alto sensed their bloodlust and stood on guard.

“I told you, I’m a scholar. History is my specialty.”

The moment I saw the crest on Kara’s sword, I searched Kyle’s knowledge of them and matched it. So, of course, I didn’t know about it on my own.

“How do you know Sledea’s name?”

“Because Sledea is a famous mercenary, known to be drawn to blood and brutality. There aren’t many records describing his first battle, but one history book I have says it was the war against the kingdom of Eln.”

The history contained in Kyle’s knowledge was quite grim. Eln was burned to the ground, and all the beastfolk were killed. It was said the one who used the most brutal methods and killed the most beastfolk in the war was Sledea. He even cut down women and children who were trying escape, giving them painful deaths.

“So when I saw the crest of Eln, I thought it wouldn’t be strange if you two were thinking of avenging the destruction of the kingdom. And so you became mercenaries to get stronger and carry out your revenge.”

“Why are you traveling, young man?”

“To see the world and to learn more about it.”

“You sure it doesn’t have something to do with Sledea?” Rudol asked suspiciously.

I looked straight into his eyes. I was sure he was trying to see if I was telling the truth, so I didn’t avert my gaze even for a moment. “Please think carefully. Let’s say I did have something to do with him. Would I be standing around here chatting with you two if that were the case?” I answered.

After that, I urged Alto to start walking again. He kept his attention on the two beastfolk, but he put his sword away and began walking. After the two of us turned our backs to Rudol and Kara, Rudol called after me in an exhausted voice. “Why did you tell us that, then?”

“Because I got tired of you provoking me. It’s that simple. I knew this would happen if I told you what I know, in light of my observations. I could have talked about it in relation to the revival of your motherland, but I thought you

probably wouldn't be convinced anyway. So I told you everything to try to get you to believe me. That's all."

"....."

"I'm not a slave trader, and I have nothing to do with Sledea. And I didn't approach you two, either. Maybe it's only natural that you can't trust or believe anything a human says. But I'd like it if you could stop making assumptions about me based on your own past experiences."

"Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha!" Rudol started laughing. He no longer sounded hostile or suspicious, and he spoke to me in a friendly tone. "I can't win against you, young man. It seems I've underestimated humans. I really thought I'd be able to provoke you and kill you."

"You were able to anger Alto, and that's why I was able to remain calm."

"Well, this still doesn't mean I trust you. But I will stop provoking you."

"Please do that," I said simply, and walked alongside Alto. Rudol was discussing something with Kara. I ignored them, thinking they were probably just going to keep following us anyway.

◇Part Two: Rudol

I purposely speak in a lighthearted tone to give the impression to others that I'm friendly. I also always have on a warm smile for the same reason, to prevent them from being wary of me. It just came about naturally since my partner, Kara, is by nature very aggressive. If both of us were like that, we'd never get any information out of anyone, so it was just a matter of convenience to split up our roles. However, our methods didn't seem to be working on the young man who was walking ahead of us. Getting information out of him was proving to be very difficult.

"Rudol... Are you sure we shouldn't kill him?" Kara asked, looking at the young man's back. It was always my job to keep these feelings of hers in check. Since we lost our homeland, we had the urge to kill everything and everyone, especially humans, but I was able to suppress it by playing my role of the friendly traveler.

"We've failed so far. Plus, I don't feel comfortable killing him just because he's human."

Kara let out a small sigh in response. The young man hadn't called us battle hungry, but he had done something even worse, which was ignore us as a threat altogether. Kara was probably sighing because she was trying to suppress her anger over it.

"Plus, if we kill him, Alto will hate us."

"Maybe once we kill him, Alto won't be brainwashed anymore?"

"I don't think he's brainwashed." I knew Kara understood that, since she'd been watching him the whole time. But just because she understood it, that didn't mean she believed it.

"Well, let's just accompany them for a while."

"It's unusual for you to want to spend time with a human."

"I meant what I said before. I'm curious about him. I've never met a human like him."

“I’ve never met anyone as suspicious as him before.” She relented and smiled faintly, but it didn’t last for long. “I’m surprised there are humans out there who recognize the crest.”

“Not many beastfolk even know it anymore.”

Kara didn’t respond, so I decided not to talk about this subject anymore.

“Anyway, let’s go before they get too far ahead.”

“I don’t think we’ll have a problem catching up,” Kara said. I followed her gaze and saw that the other two weren’t that far away from us. Still, it didn’t seem like they were waiting for us or going slow on purpose, either.

“Well, at any rate, let’s go.” I reverted back to my fake persona as we walked toward the young man and the boy.

Several hours later, as we followed behind the master and his apprentice, who walked so slowly that we barely made any progress at all, I found myself thinking about the two of them. The young man had been strange from the very beginning. Or maybe he was just crazy. That was my first impression of him anyway.

He dodged Kara’s surprise attack. Even though she had taken it easy on him, he used Wind magic, which is based on healing, to dodge it. And he was talking to her. I’d never seen a person willing to speak to someone who tried to attack them, unless it was because they were trying to subdue them.

Another thing that changed my impression of him was that he called out to me. Kara and I had concealed ourselves from the beginning as we advanced to that place. It was obvious that he knew we were there when we tried to ambush him, but he ignored us. That meant he thought we were insignificant to him. That’s when my perception of him changed, and I saw him as a threat.

Then when he said the beastfolk child who was with him was his apprentice, my image of him turned into something indescribable. I thought he was underestimating us, but even when I directed pure malice toward him, he remained calm. In fact, he wasn’t the one who reacted to us, but the beastfolk child he claimed was his apprentice. Although Alto’s body trembled in response

to our hostility, he drew his sword to protect the human, which was truly surprising.

I could easily imagine the reason for his awkward manner of speaking—he'd never been in the kind of environment where he was allowed to speak freely. I wondered how he could still side with a human even after going through such an experience.

There were some beastfolk and humans who were friends or even partners, but I'd never seen or even heard of a human taking one on as an apprentice, or vice versa. Of course, each species was different, but we beastfolk didn't think kindly of hierarchical relationships, and we had a strong sense of independence. Sometimes, we wouldn't even obey the orders of our clan's chief. So no beastfolk would ever become the apprentice of a human.

That was why, honestly speaking, neither Kara nor I believed what the young man and Alto had said. Plus, what kind of eccentric human would give beastfolk anything to begin with? Taking someone on as an apprentice meant you provided for them. It gave them the right to inherit things you'd cultivated. A human, willingly giving a beastfolk child something so important? Absolutely ridiculous. Something wasn't right here, but I wasn't sure yet what that something was.

So ultimately, I decided that the young man was dangerous. He had guessed the name of our country and the goal of our journey. I hadn't let any information about us slip during our exchanges, either. It was a conversation we'd had dozens, even hundreds, of times, and this was the first time anyone had guessed who we were and what we were doing. He said he was a scholar, but I didn't believe him. If he was one, I knew his knowledge and insight could be deadly if he turned against us.

I was thinking of exposing the man and killing him once we got to Kutt. But I had to suppress the urge to murder him right away. Alto was clearly very attached to the young man, so I couldn't just eliminate him only because I suspected him. Worst case scenario, Alto could suffer some serious psychological damage because of it. So in order to avoid that, I needed a strong motive to kill him. If I could get the young man to attack me, I could make an excuse to Alto that it was self-defense.

Alto excitedly spoke to the young man, who regarded him with a tender gaze. I couldn't detect an ounce of negativity toward beastfolk in his eyes.

"Master." Alto tugged on the young man's sleeve. He'd done this several times now. They looked more like brothers who were close instead of master and apprentice. But of course, that wasn't possible, I thought as I tore my gaze away from them. I wasn't sure where to look now, so my eyes drifted over to Kara, who was scowling. She looked like she was about ready to explode any moment with anger.

"Enough already..." Her mood was just getting worse and worse. She was showing more patience than normal, but I could see that she was approaching her limit, and I stopped her from interjecting into their conversation. I couldn't say I didn't understand how she felt... We'd been walking for several hours now, and we'd barely made any progress toward Kutt.

"You shouldn't interrupt them."

"Why not?! At this rate, we'll never get to Kutt!"

"Didn't you figure this was going to happen, when you saw how long they were just relaxing there fishing?"

Kara's shoulders slumped, and she muttered, "I guess so..."

"Also, if Alto wants to study, then we shouldn't interfere with that."

Kara reluctantly agreed. She sighed and looked at the two of them. Apparently, the young man had finished his explanation, because Alto had a book open and was comparing the plant in front of him to a drawing inside the book. I remembered that book in particular was quite expensive, so I was surprised he was allowed to use it so freely. And now that I took a closer look at Alto himself, the quality of his clothes and equipment made me doubt my sanity. For a moment, I wondered if perhaps the story about them being master and apprentice was true after all.

Every time they smiled happily at each other, I felt impatience and anger burning in my chest. I tried to control my feelings by letting out a dramatic sigh at both Alto, who had his nose buried in a book even though there could be

monsters on the path, and the young man, who was letting him do as he pleased.

The young man, who was a distance away from Alto, didn't pay any mind to it and instead looked around and put a small tree branch into his bag. When the young man walked away from Alto, he would use Wind magic to create a barrier around the child to protect him. I walked over to the young man as he continued gathering branches and asked him what he intended on using them for.

"Why are you putting those branches in your bag?"

He didn't seem to be bothered by the question and answered me openly as he started walking back toward Alto.

"I'm going to use them for tonight's firewood. I like to gather the branches while Alto is occupied with his studies."

Hmm, firewood. Come to think of it, back when we were novices, we would gather branches for camping, too. But ever since we got better at combat, we pretty much stopped lighting fires at our campsites. The risk of humans being attracted to the fire was greater than the effect of it warding off monsters and animals. Instead, we put up a barrier that kept monsters out, hunted wild animals that came too near, and either ate them or made them into dried rations. That lifestyle was now ingrained in us.

"Do you always do this?"

"Basically. If you're bored, you're free to go ahead."

Kara, who was beside Alto, glared at the young man and snapped, "You're just saying that so you can try to run away from us again!"

"We're heading to Kutt, too..." the young man muttered, as if he'd given up trying to reason with her.

"Master."

"Yes?"

Kara rolled her eyes when she heard Alto call out to the young man again.

"What's that bird?"

Every time Alto asked the young man a question, he would smile and answer him. His attitude toward Alto never changed, and he never looked irritated with him. I would've gotten fed up with the questions a long time ago. The young man followed Alto's gaze and answered him, unbothered by it all.

"That's a *kitsutsuki*... I mean, it's a woodpecker," the young man corrected himself after he got the type of bird wrong.

"A woodpecker?"

"That's right."

"What is it doing?"

"It's getting food."

"It is?"

The young man explained to Alto, who watched the bird with a confused expression. It seemed like any time Alto expressed an interest in something, he didn't hesitate to ask questions. And the young man would carefully answer each one. Surprisingly, many of his explanations contained knowledge that I didn't know and were therefore quite interesting. Kara and I had devoted our lives to fighting. Even if we had an interest in something, we never thought of asking for anyone's instruction in decades. That's right; I used to love learning new things just like Alto. I began to remember the wise old man in the village, and suddenly all kinds of emotions flooded my heart.

I paused before I started getting lost in those dark thoughts. If I didn't, I would've wanted to kill the young man who had his back to me solely because he was human. I put a lid on my emotions and focused on his explanation. Kara acted like she wasn't interested but I knew she probably was, because she was listening intently. I could tell as her ears were perked toward the young man and Alto.

"There's food in the tree?"

"There are bugs inside the trees."

"How does the bird find food inside such a large tree?"

"Would you like to watch?"

Alto's face was very serious as he stared at the woodpecker. I followed his gaze and looked at the bird. The moment we looked at it, we heard it pecking at the tree. Its beak struck the tree, then it changed angles and pecked at it again. It kept doing that and finally started violently drilling at a particular spot, poked its beak inside the hole it made, then quickly flew away.

"Master?" Alto looked bewildered, his gaze flitting from the flying bird to the young man.

"Did you see how the bird pecked at the tree several times?"

"Yes."

"It was searching for cavities inside. It can detect whether there are any inside based on the change in sound when it pecks."

"Why are they looking for cavities?"

"As bugs grow, they eat through the trees, which create spaces inside," the young man explained, picking up a branch and drawing a diagram in the ground. "So then what do you think are inside the cavities?"

"The bugs?"

"That's right."

Alto smiled happily when the young man praised him. "But Master. Their beaks are short."

"That's right. The woodpeckers don't catch the bugs with their beaks. They use their long tongues to catch them and eat them."

"That's amazing!"

The young man smiled in agreement with Alto's surprise, echoing, "That *is* amazing." Alto would ask questions earnestly, and the young man would think about it, then answer them. If there were any points he didn't completely understand, Alto would ask for further clarification, and the young man would ponder that, then respond. That cycle repeated over and over again.

I kept it a secret that I had to restrain myself from saying "Oh, I see," after hearing some of the explanations. "You sure know a lot, young man."

He chuckled. "I just happened to know about that."

I didn't really believe it, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. Because if I did, I felt like I would have to admit something that I really didn't want to acknowledge.

Alto was satisfied with that explanation and started walking again. He was walking slowly but gradually making progress. I wondered how long it had been since I'd taken a stroll like this and glanced over at the young man, who seemed to be searching for something as he walked. I looked at his hand and saw that he was holding a mushroom. I watched his behavior and realized Alto was also looking around, searching for mushrooms. Kara and I had planned on eating dried rations, but I wondered if the two made their own meals.

First the firewood, now mushrooms... The young man was quite the hard worker. We made our way down to the path toward town, veering off it occasionally. Alto was in high spirits, but in contrast, Kara was the personification of a bad mood. I figured the only reason she was holding it in was because we were slowly making our way toward the city.

However, there was a limit to her patience. That was when the young man turned toward us and abruptly said, "We're going to make camp here for the night." Alto stopped walking, his tail wagging and his eyes glinting as he began talking to the young man. That's when I had a bad feeling. There was plenty of time until sunset, and we hadn't made much progress today.

Kara just couldn't comprehend the young man's behavior and suddenly lost her temper. "You've got to be kidding me!" she shouted at him.

"I'm not joking."

"We still have plenty of time to walk! We've barely walked at all today, in fact!"

"Now, now. Calm down, Kara!" I said, despite secretly agreeing with her. I tried to quell her anger, but that didn't mean I approved of the young man's action, either. "Young man, can you tell us why you want to camp here?"

I knew it was because of Alto. But I wasn't sure exactly why we had to camp in

this particular spot. The young man didn't answer me. Instead, he called for Alto, who had run off. "Alto, when you fish, make sure there aren't any monsters around, and use a barrier needle."

"Okay!" Alto replied enthusiastically as he ran toward the river. I then understood why we were making camp here, and both Kara and I were speechless.

"Don't you think you indulge Alto a bit too much?" Kara blurted out. "Who knows when we'll get to Kutt at this rate."

"Yes, I wonder when we'll get there?" The young man replied as if he didn't particularly care how long it took.

Kara raised an eyebrow, her tail wagging with irritation. "Don't you have any intention of going to Kutt?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then why?! Why are you harassing us?!" Kara howled.

The young man sighed. "That's why I told you beforehand that I didn't recommend following us."

"Grr..."

"Well, we didn't think you'd be *this* slow!" I said with a wry chuckle when Kara fell silent. The young man reached into his bag and pulled out two fishing rods. I thought it was strange that he could fit them in his bag, but sometimes I'd seen humans carrying strange items before, so I didn't ask him about it.

"Do you have enough food to last you until Kutt? You can borrow my fishing rods and go fishing with Alto if you like."

"....."

I honestly didn't understand this human. Kara must've been thinking the same thing—it was written all over her face.

Not only was he upsetting us, but he was worried about how much food we had? It made me want to snap his fishing rod and kill him. I wanted to kill the *human* right in front of me. Looking at him started to make me feel ridiculous. I knew that he put Alto before his own feelings and was trying to mediate the

relationship between us and Alto as much as possible. Maybe his kindness was noble. But for twisted people like us, that virtuousness was heartbreaking. Even though we knew that not all humans were our enemies, we suppressed those feelings and survived off our hatred...filling us with the impulse to want to extinguish that light.

"I can feel your hostility right now, Rudol."

"You're funny, young man."

I had no other option but to withdraw when he pointed it out. He was unusual and showed no vulnerability at all.

"I'm going to get the camp ready, then read," he said.

I just sighed inwardly at his plans and said, "You're going to let your apprentice take care of dinner?"

"No. The fish you catch belong to you, so Alto will eat the fish he catches."

"Fine. I'll borrow your fishing rod and bait."

"Go ahead."

I turned my back to the young man and began walking with Kara. She looked straight in front of her and said, "How did you manage to restrain yourself? I thought you were going to kill him."

That was how filled with bloodlust I had been. Yet the young man didn't seem bothered at all.

"I'm surprised I was able to hold back, too."

"It's been a long time."

"Since what?"

"Since you held yourself back like that," Kara murmured.

"...Well, that human throws me off," I responded. "I don't want to stay with him very long," I said, expressing my pain. She nodded emphatically. She already knew why I didn't want to be with the young man any longer than we had to. But she didn't want to admit it. There was no way she could admit it...

◇Part Three: Kara

I couldn't describe what I was feeling as I went fishing with a fishing rod we borrowed from a human. I didn't want to be here in the first place. Alto gave me a grumpy look and said, "Kara, stop being so hostile."

He didn't like the fact that I wanted to get rid of the human who took care of him. Our relationship was in shambles. The only reason he was beside us and didn't run away was because the human had allowed us to stay, so he must have felt safe.

"I'm not directing it toward you. You've got nothing to do with it," I snorted in response. He frowned, his tail puffing up in anger.

"The fish are swimming away!"

Rudol, my partner, looked surprised to hear that.

"Why are you so surprised, Rudol?"

"Oh, well..." Rudol gave a vague answer, and I looked over at him, wondering what he wanted to say. But he was watching Alto fish, so he didn't notice my gaze. I gave an inward sigh. Just moments ago, he'd been filled with malice, ready to kill that human. Yet there was no trace of it now. Although I was impressed by his emotional restraint, it just reminded me of my own shortcomings. As I thought that, I noticed Alto was glaring at me again.

"What's your problem?" I didn't understand why he kept scowling at me after the faintest bit of hostility showed up on my face.

Rudol chuckled. "The fish are picking up on your hostility and running away. So that's why none of us can catch anything."

"Oh... I see." I finally realized why Alto kept glaring at me.

"I wonder how much thought the young man had put into that?"

"Why, is something bothering you?" I asked, and Rudol glanced at Alto, who was fishing with a serious expression.

"Alto's just a beginner at learning how to conceal his presence, but I can tell he is being trained to do so."

I looked over at Alto and realized he was aggressively trying to conceal his presence.

"We never had the time to try such leisurely methods when we were taught how to do it, right? So it's surprising."

"That's true." I remembered when we had been dumped in a forest filled with monsters lurking everywhere for a week under the guise of "training," forced to learn with nothing but our bodies to rely on.

"I think when that young man was fishing the first time, he had concealed his presence."

"And he's adding in training while they play?"

Rudol nodded in response. He said from Alto's perspective, fishing was a fun game, but actually he was practicing concealing his presence. So if this was part of Alto's training, it would be wrong to interrupt him. I wasn't entirely convinced, but I quietly concealed my presence along with Rudol. I muttered that it would be easier to catch fish with our claws rather than using rods.

"Humans can't use their claws to catch fish because they don't have any," Rudol said with an amused smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. I had a feeling it was because he was uncomfortable with Alto's relationship with a human that we just couldn't accept. That's why we wanted to know how Alto truly felt. Perhaps he would open up to us here, where the human was away from us. So I tried talking to him.

"How old are you, Alto?" I thought it would be best to start with questions that were easy to answer. Even though he was a child, his impression of me wasn't favorable, so I needed to stick to the basics of gathering information.

"....." His tail twitched and froze, as if to say he was irritated that I'd suddenly spoken to him, and he glanced at me. He seemed to be pondering whether he should answer or not. I put some bait on my fishing hook and cast it into the river. I thought it would be best to fish along with him while I talked to him.

"Twelve," he responded after a short silence. I was surprised at his answer. Rudol shook his head, too, probably thinking the same thing. He was very small for his age. I had to think that was because of the abuse he suffered at human

hands.

“Do you like humans, Alto?” He had been forced into this situation. There was no way he liked it. I asked simple questions to show my empathy, while expressing my disdain for how the humans treated Alto. Showing empathy was the most effective way to get people to open up to you honestly.

“I hate humans.”

I expected that answer. Now there was a commonality between the three of us. I asked the next question, which was my true purpose in all this. “So then why are you with that human? Just because he happened to save you before you got killed by a slave trader doesn’t mean you have to feel indebted.”

“.....” Alto didn’t answer.

I tried to appeal to our commonality again to draw out an answer. “Don’t you want to kill humans?”

“Kara, you shouldn’t ask a child that,” Rudol cautioned me with a wry smile. But I knew that when Rudol was twelve, he thought about killing humans, so he didn’t mean what he said. This was our usual method. If one thought they had an ally, it was easier for them to talk about their feelings. It was the same with beastfolk and humans. Rudol pretended to be someone who understood Alto in order to take advantage of this and bring out the boy’s true intentions.

“I always think about killing them,” he answered quietly without looking at us; apparently Rudol’s tactic had worked. At this point, I thought he would continue being honest with us, so I continued questioning him, hoping he would reveal some kind of blunder the human had made.

“Is that human threatening you?”

“No!” The moment I brought up the human again, Alto fiercely glared at me and shouted.

“He’s not here right now. We can save you.” I ignored his shouts and sincerely told him that we could save him.

He looked down sadly and murmured, “Master would never threaten me to follow him. I’m sure of it.”

“And why do you think that?”

“Because he promised me.” He looked down at his arm. I followed his gaze and saw a silver bracelet. “He said once I found my path, I can take this off and leave him if I want.” He said it quietly as if reminding himself as he stared at the silver bracelet.

“Well then, you have nothing to worry about. Why don’t you come with us, and we can take you back to your parents? That’s better than staying with a human.”

Alto’s shoulders trembled in response to my bringing up his parents. I thought that meant he missed them, so I pressed him for an answer. “You do have parents, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Before I could say “Well then, you should go back to them,” Alto looked up at me. And when both Rudol and I saw the look in his eyes, our breath caught in our throats. The innocence we’d seen before had vanished, replaced by a gleaming hatred. This young boy was showing us the same emotion we’d felt when we had our hometown stolen away from us.

“I ran away from them. They tried to sell me like livestock. You want me to go back to them?”

Both Rudol and I were speechless at Alto’s confession. I’d never heard of a beastfolk couple selling their child to human slave traders before, so we were both shocked.

“They called me a monster. And you want me to go back to them?”

I didn’t know why Alto’s parents hated him, but now I regretted ever suggesting he return to them.

“I hate my parents, and I hate humans.”

I realized Alto had nowhere to call home. That’s why he decided to accompany the human. If that was the case, I could tell him of a place that welcomed beastfolk—somewhere away from his parents.

“Where do your parents live?”

"I don't know. They never let me outside. The only things I could see from my window were people and fields."

"Then you should go to Sagana. It's a kingdom where beastfolk live. I'm sure they would welcome you there. Only beastfolk live there, so it's not like your hometown. Your parents aren't there. You don't have to travel with a human you despise or go on dangerous adventures. You can live in peace."

Alto stared at me with uninterested eyes. "You're the ones who are trying to take me away from him. So why are you trying to abandon me, too?"

That's not what we were trying to do. But I felt myself wanting to avert my gaze once he said that. I didn't want to drag a child along on our journey for revenge against his will and involve him in brutal killings. That's why his life after we rescued him from the human wouldn't overlap with ours. We'd go with him to Sagana and drop him off at a place for orphans there.

"That's not it at all. I don't know if you have any interest in becoming a mercenary, so that's why I didn't ask you to come along with us on our journey. But you can come if that's what you want." I wasn't sure what else to say, so Rudol joined in on the conversation.

"What's a mercenary?"

"Basically, there are two kinds. When a large group of monsters appears, it's someone who answers a request to slay those monsters for money. The second type is when a kingdom or domain is at war, and they hire people to kill their enemies."

I knew Rudol wasn't serious about inviting him to join us. His explanation was too basic, even for a child. Being a mercenary wasn't as simple as slaying beasts. The stronger a monster was, the more dangerous it was. And during times of war, we had to kill not only humans, but beastfolk as well. He hadn't touched on any of those serious issues. I wasn't exactly sure what he was doing here.

"....." Alto silently considered this, then came to a conclusion. "I like Master and Dahlia. I don't want to kill them. So I won't become a mercenary. I want to stay with Master."

I figured Dahlia was some other human. I remembered we both had a human

like that, too.

"I bet. But how can you be so sure that the young man won't abandon you, Alto?"

Alto narrowed his eyes and glared at Rudol. The hand that held his fishing rod began to tremble. I wondered if Alto had been scared that day would come. Rudol continued, pressing the boy. That was when I finally realized what he was getting at. The reason Alto didn't want to come with us wasn't because he feared we would abandon him but because he'd chosen to stay with the human. Rudol wanted to take him away to Sagana before the human betrayed and hurt him.

"He might hate you once he sees your true form, Alto."

His true form... Beastfolk had the ability to turn into animals. Most humans wouldn't be able to accept that. You couldn't blame them for being afraid to see someone transform into a dangerous, carnivorous animal, but as a beastfolk, seeing that reaction from humans could hurt. They'd say, *"But we're not animals, and we'd never attack someone like an animal would...!"*

"Master says it's cute."

"Huh?" I blurted out, my eyes wide. I certainly wasn't expecting that answer.

"Master says he still loves me even after he saw my true form. He hugged me. He let me sleep in his bed." As Alto looked at Rudol while he spoke, a smile spread across his face, as if he was remembering something. I could tell that memory was a very happy one. Neither of us could find the words to say what we needed to, and we just watched him in silence. But then his smile vanished, and he raised his voice as if all his emotions were spilling out to the surface.

"Master gave me a name. Master carried me. Master hugged me!!" His eyes wavered slightly, and he gritted his teeth. He balled his hands into fists and stared right at Rudol. "No one else ever did that for me before. But Master did it."

I could see Alto's heart quietly crying out through his sadness and anger. It felt directed at his parents who had abandoned him, the slave trader, the passersby who ignored him, and us—who were trying to take him away from

the human he adored. His heart was bleeding, and I had no idea how to respond to that.

“Alto, did you catch any fish? We should hurry up and make dinner before it gets too late.” The human’s calm voice resounded through the forest, breaking the spell over us. Honestly, we had met beastfolk like Alto several times. But the only thing different was that the people who saved the children were beastfolk and not humans. They never directed their rage at us, and even if we took them to Sagana, it was because they wanted us to, and they never refused. I never imagined the circumstances could change so much just because a human had saved him. I had a feeling Rudol felt the same way, and that’s why he was speechless.

“Master!” Hearing the human’s voice calling out to him, Alto stashed his fishing pole in his bag. All his negative emotions vanished in an instant as he ran straight toward the human. The joy of hearing his name called was evident throughout his entire body. All we could do was watch as he passed by us. Alto threw his arms around the human, who warmly accepted his embrace. He looked down fondly at Alto and patted his head. Alto’s eyes narrowed happily, and he wore a satisfied smile.

“Master, I didn’t catch any fish, and it was all Kara’s fault.”

“What? It’s not nice to blame others, Alto.”

“But it’s true!”

He was telling the truth. I’d interrupted his fishing first with my hostile gazes and then with our discussion. It was no wonder he felt that way.

“I’m sorry. What Alto said is true. I’ll catch a few fish to make up for it. Go on ahead,” I said.

The human chuckled wryly. “I see. Well then, I’ll leave you to it. I’m going to make some stew, so please try not to be too late.” That was all he said before he held hands with Alto and walked away.

I picked up my fishing rod again and turned to Rudol. “Are you sure you shouldn’t go watch him? He’ll run away.”

“That’s not necessary. The young man’s a Windmaster. He could have run

away whenever he wanted. If he didn't already, he's not going to now."

When we were in between missions, it was customary to communicate about the situation to make sure we were on the same page. I'd thought this time was no different, so that's why I'd said that to Rudol. In the tensest situations, Rudol would use telepathy to relay messages, and since he didn't, I figured he was telling the truth and we were in no danger of having the human run away.

"Why are you still using a fishing rod when you can catch the fish on your own, Kara?"

I looked down at the fishing rod in my hands. I laughed and remembered I'd said it would be faster to catch them with my claws.

"I wonder how many years it's been since the last time I held a fishing pole?"

"Yeah..."

"We started fishing because of Zest, remember?"

I hadn't heard that name in a very long time. I closed my mouth, then opened it again to speak. "Yeah... Zest loved fishing."

"But he wasn't very good at it. He always got the fishing hook stuck in his own clothes..."

"Yeah..."

I chuckled, reminiscing. I wondered when we'd last talked about our old friend, but then I realized it had been too long to recall. Zest, Rudol, and I were all friends. But Rudol and Zest were especially close. I could still vaguely recall our friend's warm smile. I reached down to lightly caress the hilt of my sword.

"You and I have been together for a long time."

"Where'd that come from, all of a sudden?" Rudol gave a deep chuckle and brought his hand to his chest. Our friend's memento was tucked away there, inside his breast pocket. I didn't say anything else, and neither did he. We sat there in silence and caught four more fish. We felt night approaching, so we headed back to camp.

“Master, smoke! Smoke!”

When we got back, we found Alto covered in smoke, crying and coughing.

“Alto, when you gathered branches, you picked ones that were still wet, and that’s why it’s so smoky.”

I’d felt a little sentimental after remembering our friend, but I felt myself relax when I saw Alto racing around the camp with the human. They were so carefree. The human used his Wind magic to keep the smoke away from Alto. The boy was still coughing but continued preparing dinner.

“Oh? Alto’s cooking?”

“That’s what it looks like. He said he would make my share, too, so I let him do it.”

For a moment, I thought maybe the human had forced Alto to cook, but once I saw how happily the boy’s tail wagged while he made dinner, and how anxious the human seemed as he watched over him, I shut my mouth. The human was clearly trying to teach Alto how to cook, but the boy wasn’t very skilled at it yet.

“Young man... Has Alto ever cooked before?” Rudol asked as he watched Alto cut the meat.

“I think this is his first time doing it on his own.” When I saw how both men had their eyes glued to Alto, I wanted to laugh for some reason. Apparently, I was the only one who wasn’t worried unless Alto hurt himself. Rudol had waited until the boy was done cutting the meat to look away, then sighed and muttered that had been emotional torture.

I gave them a sidelong glance and took out some salt and four metal skewers from my bag. I was going to skewer the fish. I’d already gutted them down by the river, so I went ahead and stuck the skewers in through their mouths and out their tailfins.

After I finished, I sprinkled salt on them. By that time, the commotion around me—specifically caused by the two men—had died down, and the mushroom stew was finished. Alto was beaming while the human looked slightly exhausted as he brewed some herbal tea. I stuck the skewers in the ground with the fishes’ backs facing the flames.

The human handed Alto a cup of tea and explained it had a calming effect, then tried to give Rudol and me some. I said we could make our own and refused, but he said it was to thank us for the fish and insisted we take it. Meanwhile, Alto ladled some stew into a dish and set it out in front of the human, then began to prepare his own serving. The fish had finished grilling, so we ate those. We drank our own water and didn't take one sip of the tea the human had prepared.

"Try it, Master!"

"You should go ahead and eat first, Alto."

I wondered why the human's voice sounded a little firm, but his expression hadn't changed. I thought maybe it was my imagination, so I looked at Alto, who seemed slightly disappointed at the human's attitude. Nevertheless, he scooped up a spoonful of the stew and began to eat it. I thought the very least the human could do was taste the food the kid had cooked for the first time, but I didn't say a word.

Alto looked disappointed as he ate, but the human quietly stared at him and didn't take a bite of his share. I felt like something was off, so I glanced at Rudol, who was watching Alto with a dark expression. I looked back at Alto, and the human still wasn't eating, so I was confused. I was just about to say something when suddenly, Alto groaned and dropped his bowl. "Ughhh..."

When the human didn't move a muscle after Alto let out that painful groan, I began to see red. He knew this would happen if he ate the stew! That's why he hadn't eaten it! He knew it was dangerous, yet he didn't stop the boy!

"Rudol, you take care of Alto! What the hell did you do, you bastard?!" My voice came from deep in my belly as I shouted at the human, grabbing him by the collar. I tightened my grip to try to choke him, but Rudol stopped me.

"Kara! Kara, no! Calm down!"

When I didn't loosen my grip, the human looked at me. There was no light in his eyes. That made me even angrier.

"Do you have any idea how much he adores you?!"

Maybe that wasn't something I should've said since I was trying to take Alto

away from him. It was unbelievable such a thing came out of my mouth since I despised humans so much. But I couldn't stop myself. I'd seen Alto's happy smile. I'd seen the way he treated Alto! Yet he'd betrayed him!

"Yes... I do." The man's face twisted with pain as he replied, pouring more fuel onto the flames of my anger.

"If you know, then why didn't you stop him? First you act kind to him and don't let him out of your sight, but then you torment him? Is that your way of doing things?" Rudol got behind me and pinned my arms behind my back, pulling me away from the human. "Rudol! Why are you interfering?! Killing him right now would be the best thing to ever happen to Alto!" I directed my anger at him after being pulled away, but Rudol looked into my eyes and told me to calm down again.

"Kara. Calm down. Look at Alto."

That's right, Alto! It was very likely the reason he'd been in pain was because of poison. I panicked, wondering why Rudol didn't give him an antidote. I looked at Alto and saw that his ears were flat against his head, and he seemed upset. His tail didn't move, and I could tell he was depressed.

"When did you give him an antidote, Rudol?!"

Alto looked pale, but it didn't seem like his life was in danger.

"I didn't give him anything."

So then how had Alto recovered? I wondered suspiciously.

Alto suddenly spoke. "I'm sorry, Master."

"Why are you apologizing? It's *his* fault!"

Alto shook his head, and he had on a pained expression. "It's my fault."

His response just made me angrier, and I reached out toward the human again.

"Calm down," Rudol said in a gentle voice. The human had been staring at Alto the whole time. He let out a small sigh then knelt, looking at Alto at eye level.

“These are the mushrooms you picked today. And these are the ones I gathered,” the human said, taking two kinds of mushrooms from his bag and showing them to the boy. So he knew they were poisonous ever since he picked them?! I was about to say that out loud, but Rudol elbowed me to keep me from interrupting.

“Remember how I taught you that when you find something you’ve never eaten before, you have to either ask me or look it up first? You’ve never eaten either of these mushrooms before.”

Alto hung his head and nodded.

“It’s important to watch how I do things and learn from them. But you can’t forget to be careful and check before you do things. If you had asked me to check your mushrooms beforehand, this never would’ve happened.”

“I’m sorry.”

The human’s lecture continued.

“If you had watched carefully, you would have seen that I avoided picking those mushrooms.”

Alto looked up with a gasp, remembering.

“That’s right. The mushrooms you gathered were the ones I’d left alone. Did you think about why I might have left those there?”

Alto shook his head in response.

“That’s because I knew, as you just discovered, that those mushrooms were poisonous. Remember how I warned you about the poisonous flower? I told you that there are some plants that are poisonous.”

“Yes...”

“What would have happened if I hadn’t noticed, and you served the stew to Kara and Rudol?” the human asked.

The color drained from Alto’s face, and I realized now why the human hadn’t offered either of us any stew. He had offered us the herbal tea he made, but not the stew Alto prepared. He would have if it had been edible.

"Alto, food is very important. You will die without it. But when you gather ingredients and cook, you must remember that you hold your friends' lives in your hands."

Alto wept when he heard the human say that. I thought it was rather harsh to say such things to a child.

But Rudol must have had the same opinion as the human, because he said quietly, "I think the young man is right." For once, he took off his mask and spoke in a serious tone, agreeing with the human.

"But why wait until after he made the stew? Why not tell him this before he picked the mushrooms?" I asked.

"It might seem harsh, but it's nothing compared to how we were raised. It appears this has happened before, so it seems Alto doesn't learn his lesson just from being told something."

"But..." I didn't hide my discontent.

Rudol looked at Alto while he cried and continued. "How many times have you heard of beastfolk like us cooking food and causing humans to fall ill because of it? And what happens to those beastfolk? They get beaten by humans, don't they?"

"....."

"Even if it's not our fault, it's an everyday occurrence that we get blamed for it anyway. Plus, you have to cook a lot on a long journey. You can never be too careful."

That was true. We had to be cautious living among humans.

"He's teaching Alto how to survive. And he wants him to know how important it is to be careful of things."

"But why?"

"First, for Alto's sake. If he doesn't properly check things, something like this can happen." He continued to look at Alto as he spoke, suppressing his emotions. I realized Rudol had figured something like this would happen. "And the other reason is because it's Alto's job to stop the young man from making

mistakes. If the young man makes the wrong decision, Alto could die. And the same can be true the other way around. So it's important to be able to check the facts surrounding things regardless of the other person's decision so you can make the *right* decision. If you can do that, then even if one person is wrong, the other can realize it and correct it, possibly saving lives. That's how we live, right? Adventurers risk their lives to make money, just like us."

Rudol stops me from making mistakes, and I do the same for him. Sometimes we're both wrong, but most of the time, one of us realizes it before anything bad happens.

"But he's just a child..."

"We were younger than him when we started training," Rudol sighed deeply. I remembered when we were children and how we trained back then, and I shook my head. I didn't want to think about it.

"Compared to that, the young man's methods of teaching are much gentler. We suffered a lot more than this, remember? Alto hadn't been neglected for half the day to suffer by himself like we were. He was taught how to handle poison on his own."

"Is that true?"

"Alto took an antidote from his bag and drank it. It was one the young man had given him. We were only told which herbs to use for antidotes and were left to search for them on our own while vomiting from the poison. The young man watched him the whole time to make sure Alto would be safe and taught him how to survive on his own," Rudol explained.

"How to survive?"

"It would be one thing if he were in a beastfolk kingdom, but we can't let our guard down in other kingdoms. There are some that welcome and accept beastfolk, but those are very scarce. He's teaching him how to be independent and live on his own."

"You mean the human's going to abandon him?"

But that didn't seem to be the case—Rudol shifted his gaze from me to the human. "It's so if something happens, and the young man ends up dying, Alto

will be able to survive on his own. He doesn't have anywhere else to go, right?"

"....."

"I think the young man understands our circumstances, and that's why he's teaching Alto these things." It was very rare for Rudol to say that he understood and accepted a human's way of thinking.

"What's with the change of heart?"

Normally Rudol rejected humans, yet here he was trying to calm me down and accept the situation.

"I don't want to admit it. I really don't..." Rudol said, looking tired. The two of us watched the human gently embrace Alto as the boy sobbed. The human gave him unconditional kindness without seeking anything in return, and Alto accepted it. We silently watched the scene unfold. I had my hand on the hilt of my sword, and Rudol's hand rested against his breast pocket. Both of us were remembering a faraway past. Seeing this sight reminded us that there was no one left to give us the same care. It filled us with a burning urge that we had to suppress.

Rudol and I were the last remaining members of the Eln clan. We could count the number of beastfolk who reached out to help us on one hand since the kingdom of Sagana gained its independence. Even those people, whose kingdom had been destroyed by humans, told us to give up on our vengeance.

Even Zest, our human friend who had harbored and saved us, had told us to give up on revenge. But even though he was a human, he was murdered by his fellow humans. The last thing he said before he died was "Right now, your vengeance is the only thing that can keep you alive. You've got no choice but to continue down that path."

He tried to say something else after that, but he died before he had the chance. I would never know what those lost words were, but his parting words had pushed us to choose a path down which no one would accept us, help us, or even take notice of us.

These past few decades, all Rudol and I could do was carry hatred in our hearts for humans. We had to hold on to that anger so we could achieve

vengeance. We kept running forward, burning with hatred. We relied on it and were used to being hated in return. Ever since the day we vowed to get revenge, humans had become our enemies.

Even though we knew we wouldn't be liked and were used to it, hatred was exhausting at times. Sometimes, hesitation made us feel like we could open ourselves up. But we'd been betrayed by humans we'd almost let in even in the midst of a bloody battle.

Yet this human was different. He knew our goal and neither accepted nor denied it. He didn't talk about his own sense of justice. He just accepted us as we were. I let out a small sigh and glanced at Rudol. He had a faraway look in his eyes as he watched Alto and the human talk to each other. I had a feeling he wasn't really seeing them, but someone from long ago.

The aura this human evoked was very similar to the aura Zest had projected. And I knew Rudol was more affected by it than I was. The reason he wanted to kill this human was for Alto's sake, but also for his own as well. But when the human extended his kindness to both of us, I thought perhaps Rudol grew afraid that his resolve for vengeance might disappear because of it.

We had come to a standstill in our journey. We were without clues and had just been killing time. We had been in a spot of frustration, and that was when we happened to come across these two. We assumed Alto was being abused, and even after we realized we'd been mistaken, we couldn't admit it. Our hatred for humans had driven us so much that we'd been blinded by it. We felt the urge to get rid of this sight before us and end it. That's why we wanted to kill him. We wanted to kill Setsuna, this human who reminded us so much of Zest.

Once Setsuna's lecture was over, and Alto had been thoroughly cured of the poison, he put the boy to sleep. He cast Wind magic to relax him and began cleaning up the inedible stew. Once he was finished with that, he adjusted Alto's thin blanket and sat down next to him, quietly staring at the fire. I watched as Setsuna absently gazed at the flames, and I realized he looked pale. Rudol's fake smile vanished, and he spoke to Setsuna with his true expression.

“If it’s that painful, why did you do it in the first place?”

Setsuna grabbed his left arm with his right hand and squeezed out a response. “When I made Alto my apprentice, I decided I wouldn’t stop him unless his life was in danger.” He looked up and met Rudol’s gaze. “I wanted him to eat those mushrooms today.”

“Why?”

“I heard that part of a beastfolk’s characteristics is that once they taste poison, they will be able to sense things that contain that same poison afterward.”

“To be more precise, we’re able to recognize its scent. But sometimes when we’re not feeling well, our noses don’t work properly, so we might not be able to tell. That’s why it’s best not to be overconfident in those abilities.”

That was common sense among beastfolk, but since most humans didn’t know that, it made sense that he didn’t have the correct information.

“How do you know that anyway?”

“It was written in a book about how to kill beastfolk.”

“How to kill beastfolk? Why would you want to read such a book?” Rudol didn’t seem anxious, so I thought that meant he trusted Setsuna now.

“Well, if you know how to kill something, then you’ll also know how to keep it alive, right? Those were the only kinds of books about beastfolk available in Gardir. But obviously, the information was inaccurate. Thank you for clearing that up for me.”

His words were simple, but I was impressed with his way of thinking. Any ordinary person reading a book about how to kill something would only focus on that aspect and not think beyond it. It’s a difficult thing to think abstractly like that.

“The book said the number one way that beastfolk get assassinated on a journey is by poison.”

“That’s true.”

“And the thing that’s most commonly used to kill beastfolk on the road

between Gardir and Kutt are the mushrooms Alto ate tonight.”

“Can you show them to me?” Rudol asked, and Setsuna took them out of his bag.

“These mushrooms won’t kill humans, but they can kill beastfolk. They won’t poison you unless you swallow them, though.”

“I’m not surprised, but I’ve never seen these mushrooms before. They must be a new variety. Well, this *is* Gardir. They were probably cultivated for this very purpose. Why are they only used around Gardir, though? Couldn’t you just pick them and use them anywhere?”

“This mushroom’s poison loses its toxicity a few hours after being picked.”

“I see...”

Rudol took out an antidote from his pocket. He chewed the mushroom, spat it out, then quickly drank the antidote. Then he handed me the mushroom.

“Why force yourself to do that?” Setsuna asked.

“Isn’t that why you gave it to me?”

“I thought you’d be more prepared and eat it more carefully.”

As Setsuna talked, both Rudol and I took another bite of the mushroom, spat it out, and drank the antidote.

“Our poison resistance is much higher than Alto’s. We don’t need to use medicinal herbs that weaken the poison.”

“So you noticed I put them in the stew.”

“I had a feeling, but I wasn’t certain. Those medicinal herbs are known for soothing the stomach, so I kept thinking about it. Poison was only a slight possibility in my mind. Still, if it’s not poisonous to humans, why didn’t you eat the stew? That was the first meal Alto had ever cooked for you.”

“I thought about that, but even though it wouldn’t affect me, it was still technically poisonous. I imagined Alto would feel bad if he thought he’d fed that to me, so that’s why I didn’t eat any. Although it’s a shame that happened during Alto’s first cooked meal...”

"Why didn't you do this some other time, then? You could've put those mushrooms into any meal Alto cooked."

Setsuna shook his head.

"That would've been too difficult. When we were gathering mushrooms, he really wanted to go fishing. He was distracted by that, and because he was so nervous about cooking for the first time, I figured he would forget to inquire about the mushrooms. Generally, Alto is very good about checking things first, so if I'd tried to give him those mushrooms any other day, he would've asked, 'What are these?' Then I wouldn't have been able to lecture him about inspecting mushrooms." Setsuna sounded tired.

"Well, at any rate, it was for Alto's own good, so all's well that ends well. Under normal circumstances, he might've died without ever having been taught about poison. Still, you sure know a lot about medicine, young man." Rudol was being so kind to him that I thought pigs might fly. But I secretly agreed with him.

"Herbology is one of my specialties. Most of the quests I took from the guild involved herbs, actually."

"Past tense?"

"I was thinking of branching out from now on."

"To give Alto more experiences?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Why? I understand why Alto's so attached to you, but why are you going to such lengths for him?" Rudol asked the one question we'd been wanting to know the answer to the most.

Setsuna thought for a moment, then answered. "Before Alto became my apprentice, I was alone. This may sound arrogant, but since I could manage everything by myself, I lived alone. But after Alto became my apprentice, I realized how fulfilling it is to be with someone. I found it rewarding. Him being a beastfolk and me a human doesn't really matter to me."

Having him talk about how important Alto was to him just made the wounds on his heart from making him eat the poison even worse. The anger I'd felt

vanished. We were both able to accept that these were his true feelings.

“I’ve heard what you had to say, and I understand, young man. There are many things I’d like to talk to you about, but I can see you’re exhausted, so let’s go to sleep so we can have more energy tomorrow.” Rudol tried to bring the conversation to a close, but Setsuna shook his head and began to speak again.

“Actually, there’s something else I have to talk to you both about.”

Rudol glanced at me. I thought surely there was nothing else he could say that would shock us and shrugged, so Rudol nodded.

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea about something. I think Alto was telling you about his parents down by the river, but his parents are human. So he wasn’t abused by beastfolk parents.”

Both of us were shocked. We’d heard of a beastfolk child being born from a couple if one of them were beastfolk, but never between two humans.

“You mean if someone has an ancestor who’s beastfolk, a beastfolk child can still be born from two humans?”

“That’s right. I looked into it when I took Alto on as my apprentice. It seems there have been only two examples of such a situation in the past decade.”

Once we learned Alto’s parents were humans, my hatred of them was revived. But then I thought about how Alto must feel about the whole thing.

“Why did you tell us this, young man? It was a misunderstanding that benefited you.”

“Because whether someone is human or beastfolk doesn’t matter to me. I just didn’t want you getting incorrect information because of me and making some kind of decision based on that misunderstanding. At the very least, despite the methods used, you both spent your valuable time here for Alto’s sake.”

If he hadn’t said the last part, we would’ve been able to genuinely thank him. I had a feeling Rudol was thinking the same thing.

“I see,” he said with a wry smile, and that was all.

“Well, I’m very sorry, but I’m a little tired, so I think I’ll be going to bed. I have a barrier up, so there’s no need for either of you to stay up and keep watch.”

Setsuna ignored the look on Rudol's face and turned his back as if talking anymore would be physically painful, then lay down. He immediately fell asleep, without any hint that he was cautious of us. I thought perhaps he was a bit too trusting, but after all, neither Rudol nor I wanted to kill the human anymore.

We didn't have anything else to do, so Rudol and I took turns napping. I wanted to block everything that happened today out of my mind and try to emotionally move on from that by sleeping. It was a necessary skill for a mercenary, and tonight it was very handy. I slept for a while but opened my eyes when I sensed someone had woken up. Out of habit, I looked around for Rudol and spotted him taking care of the campfire.

He noticed me and shook his head. He was telling me to be quiet. I wondered what was going on, so I closed my eyes and strained my ears. I heard faint voices talking.

"Alto? What's wrong? Can't you sleep?"

"Can I sleep with you, Master?"

Setsuna chuckled at Alto's request and said, "Sure." I heard Alto's tail thumping happily, then heard Setsuna ask, "Are you hungry?" Alto quietly answered yes, and Setsuna sat up, then took something from his bag.

The effects of the poison on Alto's body must've completely worn off. He didn't have an appetite right after he drank the antidote, so I was relieved that he was feeling better.

"I'll cut it up for you, okay?"

"Thank you. Master, what is this?"

"This is a fruit called elga."

When I heard Setsuna say that, I wondered if he was in his right mind. Elga was a fruit with high nutritional value and was mainly eaten by rich people when they felt ill and couldn't eat a proper meal. They were very expensive, costing two silver coins each.

In the silence of the night, the only sounds that could be heard were those of

Setsuna cutting up the fruit and Alto's tail thumping. Once Setsuna finished, he offered it to Alto. "How is it?" Setsuna asked, and Alto immediately answered, "Delicious!"

That came out louder than he intended to, and Setsuna chided him. "Eat it quietly so you don't wake up Kara and Rudol." Though I was certain he already sensed we were awake. Alto didn't doubt him, however, and he nodded obediently.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to eat it?" Setsuna asked, sounding puzzled. Alto must've stopped eating.

"But what about you, Master?"

"Me? I'm not hungry. You can eat all of it."

"Really?"

"Yep, really."

Setsuna was lying. He hadn't eaten dinner, either, just like Alto. But he didn't show it. Letting Alto eat it all wasn't the behavior of a master toward his apprentice, but more like a parent. At the same time, I figured he'd probably kept the fruit in his bag for a day like this, when Alto wasn't feeling well.

"Are you sure I can eat it?"

"Go ahead," Setsuna urged him, his voice incredibly kind. It was a very calming tone, one that let the other person feel comfortable enough to express how they truly felt, no matter how bad. The kind of voice that made you want to open up to someone. Now I understood. Setsuna didn't just remind us of our human friend, but he reminded us of the happiness we felt in our childhood. Seeing the two interact forced me to remember something I didn't want to—being surrounded by family and being happy while we talked and laughed.

Once Alto was full, he lay down next to Setsuna, and they talked in hushed voices. Apparently, he wanted to talk before he went back to sleep, and Setsuna allowed him to do that. He began to tell him a story about a beastfolk who was the hero of Sagana. Not long after Setsuna began talking, Alto fell peacefully asleep. I had a feeling Setsuna knew he was exhausted and would fall asleep right away, so he chose a short story. That way Alto wouldn't force

himself to stay up so he could hear the ending.

It was time for me to take over watching the fire. I quietly stood up, then Rudol did the same and slung his bag over his shoulder.

“Shall we go?” He put on his usual fake smile and carefree tone. I knew he was asking me if we should resume our journey. I nodded and cast another brief glance at Setsuna’s and Alto’s sleeping figures. I was sure the human could sense us, but he didn’t turn toward us. Rudol and I left and began walking.

Behind us, I heard Setsuna murmur, “Safe travels.”

That was all he said. Rudol and I exchanged sheepish smiles. What a strange human. But it was all for the best. He might be unusual, but I knew he would carefully raise his beastfolk apprentice. And that was also for the best.

Around sunrise, I opened my bag to take out some rations when I saw an envelope inside. I was baffled that the human had been able to slip it into my things without us noticing. I opened it, and sure enough, it was a letter from him.

I’ll try to gather information about Sledea as well. I don’t know how it will turn out, but go to the Adventurers Guild and tell them your name, and I’ll let you know about any information I found. If they ask who sent you, tell them Alto did, just in case. Setsuna.

Rudol and I muttered to each other about how Setsuna was too kind, how he was a fool, and other such things. I doubted we would ever come to like humans again, but...I wouldn’t mind if we happened to come across Setsuna and Alto again.

◇Part Four: Setsuna

Rudol and Kara left without a word early in the morning. I had sensed they were awake and figured since they didn't say anything, that was their answer. They had finally accepted my relationship with Alto.

I had searched my internal database for information regarding Sledea, but there wasn't much. However, I thought perhaps on my journeys, I might come across information, so I left them a letter. I had no other reason for helping them except for the fact that they had cared for Alto's future. I had no intentions of supporting their vengeance, but rather, I was hoping to find clues that would lead me to Sledea, so I could figure out a way to persuade Kara and Rudol to not do anything too reckless. I wasn't sure how I would do that yet, though.

If they tried to get revenge at some point when I couldn't intervene, there was nothing I could do about that. So maybe I should've tried to stop them while they were here. At the time, they seemed so hell-bent on revenge that they probably wouldn't have listened to someone they'd just met, so I kept quiet.

"Master?" Alto woke up with a big yawn. I stopped immersing myself in my thoughts and looked at him. He seemed puzzled to see that Kara and Rudol had disappeared, since they'd declared they would come on the journey with us. I told him they went on ahead to Kutt since the misunderstanding had been cleared up, and he let out a relieved sigh. After that, he never really asked anything about them again.

Honestly, I had intended to start his training today, but I decided not to because I didn't want to put a strain on his body after he'd ingested that poison. I wanted to fix him something for breakfast that would be easy on his stomach, so I soaked some bread in milk and made him bread porridge and added a little honey. At first, I thought he wouldn't like it, but he seemed to enjoy the flavor because he asked for seconds. I told him it would probably be best if he didn't have seconds today, though. After breakfast, I decided to be cautious and let Alto rest a little before setting out. While he rested, I slowly cleaned up the campsite.

As Alto and I walked along the road to Kutt, we discovered several places where it looked like a battle had taken place. We hadn't come across anyone since we parted ways with Kara and Rudol. It was obvious that they had been clearing the way of monsters for us. They hadn't said my name even once, but it seemed the two were concerned with our journey in their own ways.

Since we didn't come across any monsters, our journey went smoothly. I figured we would reach the capital city of Kutt in a few days' time. I watched Alto happily walk along the path and recalled everything I knew about the kingdom of Kutt.

Unlike Gardir, where beastfolk would be subject to abuse for just walking around, that didn't happen very often in Kutt. However, Nestor the guildmaster had warned me that beastfolk children were unusual to see in Kutt, so people might stare.

He said Alto would be fine as long as I was with him, so I thought it would be okay to let Alto do things along with me we hadn't been able to do in Gardir, such as walk around town and go shopping together. That's when I realized I should probably explain how to shop to Alto.

When I had seen Alto's past, I hadn't ever seen him go shopping. I hadn't seen all of his memories, of course, but I assumed he didn't know how to purchase things. I decided to check with him just to be sure and that I would explain how if he didn't know. If something happened to me and I wasn't able to go shopping, he needed to be able to go on his own.

"Alto." His ears perked up when I called his name, and he turned around.

"What is it, Master?"

"You know we use money to buy things, right?"

Alto looked surprised and thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. Ten gold coins."

"....."

Ten gold coins... Alto was referring to the price his father had sold him for. I

continued talking, trying to suppress the sadness I felt.

“I’m going to ask you some questions. Will you answer them for me?”

“Sure!” He nodded happily, and I smiled back at him.

I asked him simple questions to see how much he knew about shopping.

“Let’s say when we’re in Kutt that you feel very hungry. And you want to eat a big hunk of meat. Now, how would you get that meat in Kutt?”

“Kill someone and take their meat?” He answered so quickly that I had to scratch my head.

“No, no. We shouldn’t kill people.”

Alto had answered so confidently that he seemed shocked that was the wrong answer. I was the one who was more shocked, though...

“Dahlia said when something’s important to you, it’s okay to even kill in order to get it!”

Dahlia again...

“Wouldn’t you just find a place that sold meat and buy some?”

“Meat’s important. They don’t sell really important things.”

I realized Alto was just remembering things that he’d been taught, digesting them, and answering in that fashion. I wanted to lament that it was too extreme, but at the same time, I had to laugh at Alto’s obsession with meat.

Still, I felt like I had to correct him, so I continued my questions. “What if I had meat? Would you kill me and steal it?”

“I would never kill Master! I don’t want the meat!” he answered immediately. I was happy to hear that, but he looked so pale that I felt guilty. I reached out to pat his head.

“You don’t have to give it up. I’m happier when you tell me the things you want.” Once he was calm, I said, “Also, I don’t want you to kill me, either.”

He nodded frantically. “But what if someone else had meat? And what if they had an apprentice like you? How do you think they would feel if you killed their master?”

“I don’t think they’d feel very good.”

It seemed I was able to get him to think of the situation from another person’s perspective, and he looked quite down. But at least he understood what I was trying to say. He reconsidered his answer.

“I won’t kill anyone. I’ll buy it with money. And if I can’t afford it, I’ll give up on it.”

I was relieved that he understood what I was trying to teach him, and I smiled at him. Alto grinned happily back at me. After that, I asked him various questions. He seemed to know you could buy goods with money, but he didn’t know *how* to shop, so I explained it to him.

I’d already taught Alto simple math and how to write. He knew that you bought goods with money, so I thought it’d be easy to teach him about currency. At least, I hoped it would be. But how could I teach Alto how to shop? Should I just let him watch me go shopping? I thought back to when Kyoka was young. She had set out toys in front of her and pretended to be a storekeeper.

She took play money out of her wallet that had cute drawings on it and lined up the various goods: a tiny stuffed animal, a doll’s head, a shiny marble, and a plastic bottle cap. I could understand the stuffed animal and the marble, but to this day, I couldn’t understand why the doll’s head and plastic bottle cap were lined up, too. I played the customer, and for some reason, she would always give me a sales pitch to buy the doll’s head.

“.....”

I wondered how she was. As she grew up, she put different goods out in her shop. But I felt like most of them were pretty odd, up until the end.

“Master.”

“Hmm?”

Alto called my name, and Kyoka’s smiling face vanished from my thoughts. I felt a splitting sadness inside of me, but right now I had to focus on teaching Alto how to shop. I had found a good place to camp, so although it was a bit

early, I decided to settle down for the night. Alto was disappointed there wasn't a river nearby, but I said, "There's something more important for us to do today." He had absolutely no idea what I could mean, but I told him he would have to wait and see until after dinner, and we began to make camp.

Once we were done eating dinner, I called Alto's name. He rushed over as if he couldn't wait. He'd been fidgeting around ever since we got here, which was both funny and adorable. I took out my wallet and lined up the money I had. Alto looked at it curiously. I held up each piece of currency one by one and explained it to him. Once I was done, I handed him a copper coin.

"This is your copper coin, Alto."

"Thank you." He looked mystified as he took it. He was happy he'd received a gift from me, but he didn't seem very interested in the coin itself. It seemed that even though he understood you could buy goods with money, it didn't strike him that *he* would be able to buy something with it.

While Alto gazed at the coin in his palm, I took out a canteen with Alto's favorite fruit juice and a cup, and an apple.

His attention easily drifted from the coin to the food. His body trembled as he wagged his tail. It was very cute, but this time, they weren't gifts. I poured the juice into the cup and set it down next to the apple. He noticed I was acting different than usual, so he gave me a puzzled look.

"Now. I want you to use the coin I gave you and practice shopping."

He stared blankly at me. "Practice?"

"Yes."

He looked utterly baffled. I told him that I thought it would be easier to experience shopping himself rather than have me tell him about it.

"Both the apple and fruit juice cost five copper dimes. Which one would you like?"

"I want the fruit juice!"

"All right. Please give me the money for it."

He handed me the copper coin. I took it and handed him the fruit juice. He

happily took it and thanked me. I had to chuckle because that was exactly the reaction I'd expected.

"Are you satisfied?" He nodded cheerfully, and I said, "Are you sure?" and made him start over. He reluctantly handed the fruit juice back, and I returned the copper coin with a smile.

"Now, let's do something different. Let's exchange your copper coin for ten of my copper dimes."

"Okay, Master."

I had just explained to him that ten copper dimes was equal to one copper coin, so he didn't put up a fight.

"All right, let's try shopping again. You want the fruit juice, right? It costs five copper dimes. Count your money carefully and hand it to me."

Alto counted out five copper dimes and handed them to me. I took them and gave him the fruit juice.

"Do you understand what's different now?"

"I have fruit juice and five copper dimes." He blinked happily.

He didn't *quite* understand it entirely, so I handed him the copper coin and took back the fruit juice and remaining copper dimes.

"But Alto... Both the apple and the fruit juice cost five copper dimes each. So what should you have done?"

Alto hesitantly handed me the copper coin. I pretended not to catch on and handed him the fruit juice back.

"Are you satisfied, Alto?"

He tilted his head and thought long and hard about it. Suddenly, the answer came to him, and he shouted, "Master! Juice is five. I need five more dimes!" His tail thumped against the ground as he overflowed with confidence.

"Correct. When you give a shopkeeper more money than the cost of your item, they give you the remainder back. That's called change. Make sure you remember that."

I handed him five copper dimes. "Change, change," he muttered again and again as he took it. He stared at the copper dimes, then looked at the apple. Apparently, he finally realized he could also buy the apple with his change.

"Master! Can I buy the apple with the leftover money?"

"The apple also costs five copper dimes. Will you buy it?"

"Yes!" he shouted energetically with sparkling eyes.

I laughed and nodded. "All right. Go ahead and pay me five copper dimes."

Alto handed me the five copper dimes and took the apple. He looked very happy to have fruit juice in one hand and an apple in the other. I took a little pouch from my bag that was filled with five pieces of candy and set it in front of Alto.

"This candy costs three copper dimes."

Alto's gaze was locked on the candy. Both candy and honey were Alto's favorite foods. He looked surprised when I told him the price, and he shouted, "Three?!"

"Yes, three."

"I'm out of money! I can't buy the candy!" His ears flattened sadly against his head. I thought I was going to burst out laughing but I managed to suppress it.

"That's right. You bought the fruit juice and apple with a copper coin, so you don't have enough money to buy the candy."

He looked at the items in his hands dejectedly.

"Most shops won't let you return items once you buy them. So you need to think carefully about what you plan to purchase before you buy something, or else you might not be able to afford something you really want later on."

"....."

"And just because you want something, it doesn't mean you should buy whatever you want, either." I told him he shouldn't waste his money, then put the candy back in the bag. His ears were still flat on his head as he began nibbling the apple. He looked so sad that I thought I would laugh, but I managed

to hold it in.

“Alto.”

He stopped eating the apple and looked up at me, ears still flat. “From now on, we’re going to take quests from the guild and make money.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m going to take two-thirds... no, nine-tenths of the amount you make for living expenses. The rest will be your allowance, so use that money wisely.”

Taking on quests with me meant that he would get paid—and more than someone his age would usually make. So I’d thought about hanging on to his money and managing it for him. But I wanted Alto to learn how to be responsible with his money from a young age.

I wouldn’t actually use the amount I took from him for living expenses; I would save it for his future, for when he had a dream and needed a large sum of money to accomplish it. I was certain he would object to me paying outright for it.

Alto asked me a few questions, then seemed to accept the arrangement. I’d already told him when I took him on as my apprentice that I would provide everything for him, and he hadn’t seemed to realize that I just contradicted myself. That was how little sense he had for money, so I knew I’d made the right decision.

“Let’s take a look at your wallet. It’s in your bag, so go ahead and take it out.”

I showed him my wallet and glanced at his bag. He rummaged around in it and pulled out the wallet, his eyes wide. I had a feeling he realized there was a copper coin inside it. I gazed at his changing expressions and busy tail.

“Master!”

He took the coin out of his wallet and happily called my name. Just seeing him smile like that made all the fatigue of the day disappear.

“Would you like to buy the candy?”

“Yes!” he replied energetically.

I gave a wry chuckle and took the candy from my bag, exchanging it for the copper coin. Alto seemed satisfied with the candy, so I called his name to draw his attention back to me.

“Alto. The candy costs three copper dimes. You gave me a copper coin. You have to make sure you get your change, or else it’ll be your loss!”

“Oh! Please give me my change, Master!”

“Is your change four copper dimes?”

Alto thought for a moment, then vigorously shook his head. “No! Seven!”

“That’s right. Here’s your change.”

I handed Alto seven dimes and took another pouch full of candy from my bag.

“I’ll give you another bag of candy for not making a mistake. Good job.”

Alto took it with sparkling eyes. He put it in his pocket and the other pouch of candy into his bag with his wallet. I watched him with a smile.

He seemed to have gained an interest in shopping now, because he wrapped himself in his thin blanket and began interrogating me about the kinds of things I’d bought in the past. I lay down next to him and answered his questions until he fell asleep.

Alto and I arrived in the capital city of Kutt a few days later. I had him practice shopping several times afterward, and it seemed he’d gotten used to it. He didn’t forget to ask for change anymore, and I thought he was capable of shopping alone now. I decided to let Alto do all the shopping while we were in the city.

Kutt was very different from Gardir in that it felt like a very bright place. Looking at the town made my heart feel lighter. I had a feeling Alto felt the same, because he was swinging his head to look all around him. He wasn’t wearing a hood anymore, and he wasn’t receiving cold glares like he did in Gardir. But beastfolk children must really be rare here, because I noticed lots of people gawking at him. So I thought maybe it would be best if he wore a hood in town after all.

I wanted to walk around and look at all sorts of things in the new city, but first, I ought to decide on an inn so we could relax for a while. I wanted Alto to sleep in a proper bed. He certainly looked energetic, but this was his first long journey, and I figured he must be tired.

We walked into an inn on the main street and checked in. The innkeeper didn't really say much as he handed over the key, and that made it even more obvious how much people in Gardir were prejudiced and discriminated against beastfolk. I couldn't be sure there wasn't any of that here in Kutt, but as of right now, this place was much better than Gardir.

Alto wanted to unlock the door, so I let him, and we went inside. I was relieved that it was a clean and comfortable-looking room. It was a bit expensive, but I'd chosen a room with a bath. We both took a bath and washed the grime of our journey away, then lay down in bed. It had been so long since I'd lain in a soft bed that I could feel all the tension leaving my body.

I put up a barrier around the room just in case. Alto turned into a baby wolf and fell asleep next to me.

"You walked all this way without one single complaint."

It was a hard journey even for an adult, so it must have been harder on a child's little legs. He always seemed like he was having a good time, but I worried he was pushing himself. Alto hadn't complained to me yet... I stroked his soft fur, and as I listened to his peaceful breathing, I began to feel pleasantly drowsy. I rolled over and hugged Alto, then pulled the thin blanket over us.



Chapter Three

Lady's Purse ~ My Companion ~

◇Part One: Setsuna

I felt the sunlight on my eyelids and drowsily opened my eyes. *Morning already?* I thought, and stayed in bed for a while...then realized we'd slept through the whole night without even eating dinner. *Apparently, Alto wasn't the only one exhausted from his first long journey,* I thought as I stretched. I glanced over at Alto. He was still curled up and sleeping. He was probably more tired than he was hungry. He was sleeping so peacefully that I wondered whether I should wake him, and I ultimately decided to do it. We hadn't eaten anything since lunch yesterday, so I wanted him to eat and drink something.

"It's morning, Alto."

Alto's ears twitched in response to my voice, and he woke up, his body trembling. He stretched out on the bed on his tummy first, then on his back. He opened his mouth wide to yawn and finally opened his eyes all the way. He really reminded me of a dog when he did that, but I guess wolves and dogs were closely related, after all.

Those silly thoughts ran through my head as I started getting ready to train. Alto didn't seem drowsy at all. He changed his clothes and got ready as well.

I could move however I pleased out in the open during our journey, but obviously I couldn't do that in the room of an inn, so Alto and I went outside and trained for a while, then came back in. Since it was Salkis, we got pretty sweaty, so we washed off and put on some new clothes. Just as we finished changing, Alto's stomach growled loudly.

"I'm hungry. Are you?"

"Yes!" Alto agreed, holding his stomach as his ears lay flat on his head. There was a dining room on the first floor of the inn, so we decided to eat there. Alto and I went downstairs, where I ordered bread and vegetable soup, and Alto ordered the same dishes along with sausage and fried eggs. While we waited for our food, we discussed our plans for the day.

"We should go to the guild today."

"Are we going to make money?"

“That’s right. Your wallet will get lonely if we don’t make some.”

“That’s true.” The novelty of buying things he liked with money was still fresh in his mind.

We took our time eating breakfast. I asked him what kind of quests he wanted to do, and he shouted, “I want to fish!” I laughed and said it would be nice if we could find a quest like that, then we finished eating and headed to the guild.

The Kutt Adventurers Guild was quite far from the town entrance, so it was harder to find than the Gardir Adventurers Guild. I opened the door and went inside. The combination of a human and a beastfolk child must’ve been unusual because everyone’s stares pierced me like daggers. Alto was completely oblivious to the rude gazes and looked curiously around the guild.

“What’s a noble like you doing, coming here with a beastfolk slave? You two want a quest? Don’t you know slavery is illegal in this kingdom? No one’s going to commission you!” a man sitting in a chair stood up and said to me. He spoke as if he represented everyone’s opinions here. All the people inside, especially those who were beastfolk, were very harsh.

“I’m not a noble, I’m an adventurer. And he’s not a slave, he’s my apprentice.”

The man was speechless. The beastfolk whispered among themselves and looked back and forth between me and Alto. I quickly went up to the desk before they could say another word and spoke to the woman who sat there.

“Hello, I’ve just come from Gardir. My name is Setsuna. I’m planning on being active in this guild for a while. This is my apprentice, Alto.”

According to guild rules, when an adventurer went to another kingdom or town, they had to stop by the guild before they became active and were required to disclose their whereabouts. There were several reasons for this. For instance, if a large group of monsters appeared, they could be dispatched by the guild to protect the citizens of the town.

“It’s nice to meet you, Setsuna. I’m the guildmaster here, and my name is Rayna.” Rayna’s gaze traveled to Alto, and she smiled warmly at him as he

stared at her. “Hello, Alto.”

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you. My name is Alto.”

Rayna smiled again, then looked back at me. “I received word from the guildmaster in Gardir that an adventurer was coming here with his beastfolk apprentice. I heard you achieved blue rank in a matter of three months, so I’ve been looking forward to your arrival!”

The other adventurers began whispering again when they heard Rayna say that. Not only did they hear proof from the guild that Alto was my apprentice, but they were shocked by how I’d achieved such a high rank in a short amount of time. I had a feeling Rayna offered up that information to get the other adventurers off my back and so that they wouldn’t harass me.

“I think I was just lucky.”

“Now, that kind of humble attitude is rude to other adventurers. There are some who can never become rank blue no matter how much time they spend,” she said as she shook her head.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go check the bulletin board for quests now.”

I didn’t have anything else to talk about, so Alto and I started to walk toward the board, but Rayna stopped us. “Oh, Setsuna? Actually, I already have a quest just for you.”

“You do?”

I could count the number of acquaintances on one hand. My rank wasn’t *that* high, so I thought it was unlikely someone had requested me. I looked at Rayna in confusion. She responded with a mischievous smile and revealed the name of the client.

“The quest is from Agito, leader of team Moonlight. What will you do?”

All the adventurers inside the building now looked at me with curiosity, but I was the most surprised of all.

“What kind of quest is it? I’m not acting alone anymore, so I might have to turn it down depending on the content.”

But since it was from Agito, I really wanted to take it... Even if I could do it alone, I didn't want to involve Alto in anything dangerous. So I would just have to decline.

"All I know is that it has something to do with medicine. I don't know any other specifics." Rayna gave me a wink and grinned. Unlike guild quests, which were posted on the bulletin board, private requests were given directly to the adventurers by the guild from the client, but the guild didn't intervene. The Adventurers Guild was politically neutral, so they didn't examine the content of the quests upon principle.

For example, let's say a Gardir slave trader asks a Kutt adventurer to bring them a beastfolk slave for their quest. Although the quest is morally objectionable, it's legal in Gardir but illegal in Kutt. If the Adventurers Guild were to inspect the content, they would be put in the middle of a legal matter between the two kingdoms, so for that reason, they stayed out of individual quests.

"Anyway, you can always look at it and decide what you want to do," Rayna said as she gave me the envelope from Agito.

I opened it and read the letter. Alto stood on his tiptoes to see what was written, but there must've been too many hard words because he gave up on reading it.

Seeing that, Rayna giggled and said, "So adorable... So what kind of quest is it?" She was very curious and eagerly awaited my answer.

"I thought it was best if you didn't know the content of the quest?" I asked, and Rayna pouted a little.

"I was only curious because Agito almost never gives out individual quests! The other black rank adventurers don't really do it, either."

I had to laugh a little. The other adventurers were eavesdropping in on our conversation, too.

"He wants me to prepare some medicine." There was no reason to hide it, so I just told her.

She looked slightly confused. "Prepare medicine? Why doesn't he just buy

some from the guild's medical clinic?"

"Because he needs twelve medicine kits from me."

"Medicine kits?"

I took out something from my pocket that resembled a leather wallet. "There are five packets of five different kinds of drugs in here: antipyretics, antibiotics, antidotes, and medicines to treat headaches and stomachaches. Agito wants twelve of these kits."

Alto had one of these in his bag, too. I had color-coded each packet so that he wouldn't use the wrong one. I also included a label indicating what kind of medicine it was, just in case. I handed Rayna one of the kits so she could see for herself. She took the packets out of the leather case and examined each one.

"Did you come up with this?"

"Yes. Is there some kind of problem?"

"Most adventurers only carry antibiotics and antidotes with them. Antipyretics and headache and stomach medicines are all too expensive for most people to have on hand. I'm just curious how you were able to make them, that's all. It doesn't look like the powdered type I'm familiar with."

"That's right. You can make powdered medicine from herbs, but there's a cheaper method..."

I trailed off because it was a skill only I could use. I had been advised to keep secrets about crucial skills like that to myself. For example, sorcerers hide their magical techniques, swordsmen don't carelessly show their special moves, and scholars don't easily share their extensive knowledge.

Rayna seemed to understand and gave me a knowing look. She thought about it for a moment and handed back the medicine kit. I waited for her to speak.

"Setsuna... Do you think the guild could sell these kits?" she asked with a smile, looking up at me.

"What do you mean exactly?"

"I think that if adventurers carried these around with them, it could increase their chances of survival." Rayna looked very serious, and she chose her words

carefully. The other adventurers were listening to her intently.

“Antipyretics, antibiotics, and antidotes. Even if it were just kits with those three medicines, I think that could hold an adventurer until they could get to a city. Medicine is so expensive these days, so there are a lot of adventurers who end up having to take many quests before they can afford traveling with any on hand... Think of how many lives we could have saved with these kits up until now...” She looked down sadly. As I listened to Rayna, I thought about what Zigel had told me. He said most adventurers were only able to scrape by.

“So you want me to make a bunch of these kits and sell them to the guild wholesale?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. I have no idea how many people are registered with the guild, but there’s no way I can make enough. Also...if I had to make that much medicine, I’d have to quit being an adventurer.”

That would mean a complete change of occupation. Although being a pharmacist might be a good idea... I already decided I wanted to travel and see the world. I didn’t know what the future held, but right now I wanted to be an adventurer and explore. I didn’t want to give up on traveling. After all, I’d promised Kyle.

“I thought you’d say that. So I thought of an alternative... Do you think you could teach the people at the guild’s clinic about the necessary ingredients and how to prepare them?”

The clinic was essentially a hospital. In general, the clinics in this world were either run by the kingdom or run by its citizens. The kingdom’s clinics prided themselves on their advanced techniques, and royals or nobles could visit them free of charge. Whether other people could receive care there varied from kingdom to kingdom, but if they were allowed, they were forced to pay very high medical bills, so only the rich could afford it.

On the other hand, the ones run by the citizens gave care to ordinary people and were relatively inexpensive. But in exchange, the quality of medical care was poor compared to the kingdom’s clinics, where a lot of medical research was conducted. That was not the case at the citizens’ clinics.

The Adventurers Guild sponsored medical research at the citizens' clinics, but Rayna was specifically talking about the guild's clinics. Authorized medical clinics provided the Adventurers Guilds with cheap medicine. If an epidemic occurred, the guild was responsible for cooperating with each of them to provide care.

This is a tangent, but the Adventurers Guild's medical research is done with the cooperation of all the clinics in Lycia's capital. This was because the ones in the city were all run by the guild, so in a way the guild clinics referred to the Lycian clinics. However, in this case, the compounding method I'd teach would spread to the medical clinics in various places through the guild, which was kind of the same method.

"Sure."

"I understand. I know it's a difficult request, so I don't blame— Wait, what?!" Rayna stared at me in shock, then let out a deep sigh. "Nestor wrote about you in his letter... No wonder he was so worried about you."

What in the world did he write about?

"Setsuna, you seemed reluctant before. So what's with your sudden change of heart? Not many people would be willing to teach their methods to a clinic. You need to protect your skills more!" She used a joking tone that made me smile.

"You're right. Let's just pretend this conversation never happened, then."

"Well, I can't have that."

"What? But you just lectured me."

"Those are two separate things. If you're willing to make it happen, then I want to let you do it."

I wasn't sure if enabling me was the best thing to do after chastising me, but everyone around us was laughing as though they expected this kind of behavior from Rayna. I suppose that was just her personality.

"The way I make medicine is quite unconventional, so as long as that's okay."

"How is it different?"

“I use magic to make my medicine, so it’s not easy to teach. So I need to think about how to teach it very carefully.”

“Well, I’m relieved to hear it. Although I’m a bit disappointed at the same time.” She really did look disappointed, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Her expression grew serious, and she continued. “But of course, you’ll charge a fee for the lessons on herbs and how to compound them?”

“No, I can do it for free.”

“What?!” She raised her voice, and it seemed like the other adventurers were quite shocked as well. Honestly, so was I...

I looked over at Alto, and he was covering his ears with both hands with a frown.

“Setsuna! Are you sure there’s not something the matter with you?! You’re supposed to fight back against unreasonable demands!”

“All right, then, as you wish...” I was about to protest, but she interrupted me.

“No! Please do it for free.”

“Which is it?” I asked with exasperation, and she blinked at me as if it were my fault for reacting the way I did.

“I was going to negotiate the price with you until I could get you down as low as you’d go!”

I heard someone in the background mutter “Scary!” Rayna narrowed her eyes and looked around, searching for the owner of the voice. Everyone averted their gazes.

“Nestor said you were a strange man, but now I know what he meant.”

“I’m really curious about what he told you.”

Rayna said it was a secret and giggled. “So just to check one more time—you’re fine with doing this for free? This was your chance to strike it rich!”

The fact that she was using past tense wasn’t lost on me, so I figured there was really no point in her “confirming.” I didn’t think she had any intention of going back on the deal now. I told her I was sure, and she said “I see... You’re

really not a greedy person, huh?"

I replied with a vague smile. The reason I wasn't charging anything was because I'd remembered my old dream. I remembered how Rayna felt about the adventurers, and her face when she thought they could be saved. I wanted to become a doctor like my mom and dad so I could save people's lives.

Except, in this world, I was an adventurer. There might be times in the future like this where I could save people's lives. But that wasn't what I was specializing in. I wasn't going to become a doctor. I'd chosen a different path from that of my past dream. I didn't necessarily regret it. I was just remembering Setsuna Sugimoto's dream, and I wanted to cherish the feelings I felt right now.

Plus, being sick and injured took away people's freedom. I knew how painful it was to sit there and wait for death. It was more agonizing than I could describe.

"If I ask for money, it will raise the price of medicine. And if the medicine is expensive, that makes it no different from one of the kingdom's clinics. Also, if they're costly, then that further defeats the purpose of the guild's clinics."

Rayna was listening to me with wide eyes.

"The Adventurers Guild exists to protect people equally. And its mission is to save everyone's lives equally. I'm just keeping those two things in mind."

I liked the idea of using one's powers to protect and save people. The difference between reality and ideals was large, but still, the guild tried to abide by those convictions. I truly felt that when I saw guildmasters like Rayna and Nestor.

"I'm surprised. It's been a long time since I heard anyone speak of the guild's mission," Rayna said, beaming at me. "Setsuna. I'm glad you became an adventurer."

Her words made me feel a little shy. All I could do was laugh bashfully in response.

"This is the least I can do to repay you, Setsuna. Here's information the guild's

collected that hasn't been made public yet," Rayna said, and gave me a map of all the places where medical herbs grew naturally.

Once I was done talking to Rayna, Alto and I left the guild. I would teach the clinic how to make the medicine a few days from now, and I decided to accept Agito's quest. Since I didn't have enough ingredients on hand, my first job would be to gather enough herbs.

I had read the letter again before accepting it. The quest details weren't the only things written down. There was also a letter addressed to me.

Dear Setsuna,

How are you? The medicine you gave me was really effective, so the other members of Moonlight want some, too. Do you think you could make twelve medicine kits? I'd really appreciate it if you'd accept this quest. I know it's a lot to make, so you can take your time. I told them to use up the medicine they have already while they wait.

So please don't feel the need to hurry.

They're nagging me and Beet to hand over our medicine, but it's nothing we can't handle. Knowing you, you're probably working really hard on your own, so I just wanted to write you this letter. If you ever run into trouble, don't hesitate to rely on me and Team Moonlight.

—Agito

I wondered if they really wanted the medicine. But I was touched that he'd reached out to me, even though he was so far away. And I felt grateful for that.

I put the letter from Agito into my bag.

"Sorry that took so long. Shall we go sightseeing around town, then head back to the inn?" I asked Alto.

"What about the quest?"

"I have to gather ingredients for it first. Sorry it's not a fishing quest."

"It's okay."

"Let's go shopping now for some supplies we need for tomorrow. Can I ask

you to buy the items we'll need?"

Alto's ears perked up, and he wagged his tail. He clenched his fists. "I'll do my best!"

Alto was very excited to go on his first shopping trip in Kutt. He was a little nervous, but his excitement had won out. I hoped he had a good time.

I looked at the mountains outside the window, fretting. The herbs and ore I needed for Agito's quest were near the peak. But the road to the top was frozen all year round, and not only that—since there weren't many people who wanted to wander up a dangerous mountain, it wasn't even really a road, but more like a game trail. Rayna told me I'd just have to look for a viable path and climb it myself and pointed to the area on the map.

"Alto."

"Yes?"

"Gathering the materials is going to be very dangerous. Will you stay here at the inn?"

It was just too dangerous for Alto.

"I'll come with you," he answered immediately.

Even though we were in Kutt, I was anxious about leaving a beastfolk child alone at an inn. When he saw how worried I was, he must've thought I was going to leave him behind, because his ears went flat against his head and he murmured, "I want to go with you, Master."

"....."

So I decided to respect his decision. Also... it might be safer to have him with me, just in case.

"Mountain climbing is very tough. Are you sure you want to come?"

"Yes!" he answered happily, and so I made up my mind.

We'd been climbing the mountain for several days now, making slow progress

as I answered Alto's various questions. He walked in front, and I walked behind him. I used magic to detect enemies within a wide radius of us to make sure we wouldn't get ambushed by monsters.

I wasn't sure how high the place we were headed was. It was a gentle slope the first few days, then we camped for a day to save up our stamina before the path got too steep. We made sure we had all the supplies we needed before climbing the mountain. We would take small breaks for food and water, and if we found a suitable place to camp, we would rest early for the day so we didn't overexert ourselves. We went up and down the crests and valleys of the mountain heading for the peak.

We were currently traveling down a precipitous cliff, a path so narrow only one person could pass at a time. To conserve our strength, we were walking silently when I noticed Alto was acting odd. He had a hand pressed against his head, and I wondered if he had a headache.

"Are you okay, Alto?"

"I'm...fine." He turned around and answered me cheerfully, but I could tell from his complexion that he wasn't okay at all.

"Let's go back down."

"What?! I'm fine."

"Your symptoms won't get better if you ignore them and climb higher. Let's go back down a ways so your body can get used to the altitude."

He stubbornly kept protesting. His ears were flat against his head, and his tail twitched with irritation.

"We're in no rush to finish this quest. Understood?"

"...Okay."

We turned back and found a place we could sit down and rest. I thought maybe it would be better if he could lie down, so I considered using earth magic to open a hole in the face of the mountain to create a bigger space. But before I could do that, Alto turned into a wolf and sat down—it must've gotten too painful for him. I abandoned my plan. Since he was smaller now, he wouldn't

take up as much space and would be able to rest properly.

I smiled faintly at him and sat down as he looked up at me. I patted my lap, and he happily wagged his tail and climbed on top. He turned in circles a few times before he found a comfortable spot, then curled up and went to sleep.

I stroked his fur as he slept and cast recovery magic on him. I'd already done so several times today, but it was just a temporary fix. Still, it was better than nothing. He let out a little sigh in his sleep.

It must have been tough to climb at a high altitude for his first mountain-climbing experience. After all, he was only a child, and this was a mountain not even many adults wanted to climb. I offered to use magic to create conditions like those on the ground, but Alto said he wanted to make it to the top using his own strength, so I'd respected his wishes.

But there was no reason for him to push himself so hard until he got sick. He'd already done a fine job. He hadn't complained even once on the way up. But I decided that until we got to the peak, I would use magic so it wouldn't be a burden on his body.

I silently apologized to him and looked up. Just then, I noticed the scenery in front of me. Why hadn't I noticed it earlier? The lush green of the mountainside and valley below spread out before me. I hadn't realized because I was nervous. After all, it wasn't just Alto's first time climbing a mountain, but mine too. I gazed at the beautiful scenery, almost forgetting to breathe.

It was unbelievably stunning. I didn't have the words to describe it. The view was full of the colors of nature. Various shades of green extended as far as the eye could see. The word *majestic* came to mind. I felt like I finally understood the meaning of it for the first time.

“Brother!” Kyoka's voice calling me rang in my ears. *“Once you get better, there's something I wanna show you!”*

“What is it?”

“The Swiss Alps! The only way to describe the view is majestic!”

“Hm, that sounds beautiful. I'd love to go there.”

I said that, but I knew I wouldn't be able to go. I knew I'd never be able to experience it my whole life. Even then, I understood she wanted to take me there, and I wanted to go as well.

Although it was a different world, and this wasn't Earth... *Kyoka... I finally understand the meaning of the word majestic.*

“.....”

I realized, in this world without the people I wanted to talk to the most, I would come to understand the meaning of many more words. And what was it? Something that came to mind vanished before it took form. Whatever grazed my cheek took away my senses with it.

I looked down at Alto, who was on my lap, and realized he was licking my cheek. I wondered what the matter was and was about to say his name when I realized I was crying. Then I heard his voice.

Master, Master...

Apparently, he'd been calling me for some time now. My mind was somewhere else, so I hadn't noticed. I looked closer and saw that Alto was crying, too. It was painful for so many reasons. I held him in my arms and hugged him tightly. His soft fur eased my heart.

Are you hurt, Master?

“No, I'm fine.”

You're not in pain?

“No.”

I saw how worried he was, so I smiled to reassure him, and he relaxed. I had put an emotional burden on him because my heart had wavered.

“Look around, Alto.”

Still in wolf form, he looked around at the mountain scenery for the first time. And...

Wow...

I heard his voice resound inside my head. He wasn't talking to me, instead

expressing his feelings about nature. I just quietly watched him without responding as he sat there enraptured by the scenery.

Master, this is amazing. It's amazing!

"It is, isn't it?"

His eyes sparkled as he looked at me.

We worked so hard to get up here, and this view is our reward!

He looked so satisfied that I was glad I hadn't used magic. His eyes were sparkling because of the confidence he felt from reaching this far on his own. Only a short time had passed since I met him, but I was impressed each time he showed me how positive he was.

"Do you feel better now, Alto?"

Yes, I do. He replied energetically and returned to his human form.

"Shall we start walking again?"

"Yes!"

I sneakily cast magic so that the altitude wouldn't be a burden on his body, and we resumed climbing. I watched as he walked ahead of me, his tail wagging happily, and thought back to a few moments ago. Alto was surprisingly sensitive to my feelings.

When I felt emotional, Alto felt emotional and uneasy. I vowed to be more careful in the future and swore to myself to never cry in front of him again.

As we got closer to the mountain's peak, the path became narrower. One wrong step and you'd fall off the cliff. But I wasn't scared. However, I could tell that Alto, who was walking in front of me, was scared. He would pause and cling to the rocky wall. His body would tremble, and he would squeeze his eyes shut, dealing with it until the fear passed. I suggested we turn back several times, but he stubbornly refused.

And if that was his decision, then I wouldn't stop him. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't conflicted, but if we had to turn back, I could use Teleport any time.

That's what I kept telling myself as I silently watched over Alto until he was able to walk again.

After a while, he opened his eyes and turned his face toward the wall as he took a step forward. He slowly and carefully took one step after the other.

“.....”

I wondered where he got his courage from. The sight of him taking that first step even as he trembled with fear was inspiring. Our progress was very, very slow, but we were steadily making our way toward our goal. Once we made it past the narrow pass onto a regular trail again, I grabbed Alto by both of his shoulders and praised him wholeheartedly on what a good job he had done.

However, I was worried about his stamina. Although there was still some time until sunset, I decided to set up camp early for the night. Since there wasn't a place big enough to camp, I did as I'd planned before and used Earth magic to open a hole in the side of the mountain so we could spend the night there. Since we were in such harsh conditions, I wanted to make sure we had proper sleep and plenty of food to eat.

To relieve our fatigue, I tried to make the space inside the barrier as comfortable as possible, and I cooked a dinner that would warm us up. After dinner, we drank hot milk, and I felt like we'd regained some of our stamina. Alto started to read a book but immediately fell asleep. I cleaned up and put a blanket over him. That must've been comfortable, because he burrowed deep inside it. I could hear him sleeping peacefully. I took a book out of my bag so I could read, too, but I suddenly felt so tired that I decided to just go to sleep as well.

The next morning, I told Alto that we would be proceeding very carefully today. He nodded, and we set out. The path was wider than yesterday, but we still had to be careful. One wrong step, and we'd fall headfirst onto the valley floor. But the moment the mountain scenery from the ridgeline came into view...

I felt like I lost control of my body. My heart pounded wildly, my consciousness grew distant, and my thoughts were cut off.

I felt a swirl of sorrow, grief, astonishment, rage, disgust, hatred, regret, and a broken heart.

I wondered what that was about and took my eyes off Alto for a split second. At that exact moment, he leaned over to pick something up by his feet, and he slipped...and fell off the cliff.

“Alto!”

I wasn’t sure if I screamed out loud or just in my head. I didn’t know, but I kept screaming and used Wind magic to reach him. In the next moment, as I felt myself falling, I grabbed him and pulled him toward me.

“Alto!”

He didn’t answer me, but he was breathing. There weren’t any visible injuries, so he didn’t seem hurt. My heart was pounding loudly in my ears. Why had I taken my eyes off him? I didn’t know. I didn’t know, but a cold sweat ran down my back.

This wasn’t the time to be thinking about that. I looked down and saw a grove of trees about three hundred mers away. The cliff wall stretched vertically beside me, with no ledge to stand on. Should I teleport? Should I just keep falling? Those were my only choices. No, on second thought—returning to the spot we had just been was the best option. And the only option. I’ll teleport there and...

Yet I couldn’t understand my feelings for some reason. Why did it feel like I was being called from down below? I couldn’t shake the feeling, and it bewildered me. But this wasn’t the time for that. If I planned to continue falling, then I should let ourselves fall and use magic to help us land.

I frantically constructed a Wind magic spell in my mind and activated it. I created a wind barrier to slow down our descent. I found a gap in the trees directly below us and passed through them to try to land on the ground. I positioned the barrier beneath me to reduce the impact and to prevent injuries as we fell. As the barrier broke, I placed my feet on the ground.

As soon as we landed, I lay Alto on the ground. I kept telling myself he was fine, but I wondered if I was just overwhelmed with anxiety. After I carefully examined his body and confirmed he wasn't injured, I suddenly lost all my strength and collapsed onto the ground.

"I'm so relieved..." I blurted out. I took a deep breath and looked around. I was surrounded by trees, so I had no idea where we were. Still, I felt like my gaze was being drawn to a certain direction. There was a cliff on the opposite side, and an entrance to what looked like a cave was partially obscured by the trees.

It must be a natural cavity. There were no trails around it nor traces that anyone had ever been here. Still, I thought it would be a better place to let Alto rest than out in the open. Even if we were to go back to the spot where we were before, that would have to wait until he had regained consciousness. So I picked him up and carried him over to the cave.

I hoped it was big as I stepped inside. It was dark, and I couldn't see within. I used Light magic to light up the space. I wasn't able to see the whole cave at a glance. But it was definitely a cavern because the path was wide and curved. I activated Detection to make sure there was nothing dangerous lurking deeper inside.

But once my spell progressed to a certain extent, I sensed a strong barrier set up, which nullified my magic. I could break it, but I decided against it just in case something dangerous was sealed back there. It was more important that I lay Alto down, and it seemed the area was safe. I put a barrier needle into the ground for extra protection.

"Who's there...?"

Suddenly, I heard a voice that didn't belong to me or Alto. I had to be cautious in this situation, but I still wanted to hear the voice again. I had no idea why I felt that way. Perhaps because it just felt so nostalgic, but my emotions were so jumbled I couldn't understand why I thought that. It was like I'd just come across something very important.

Because the one central emotion amid it all was...joy. And the moment the

anger welled up and threatened to take control, my emotions strangely calmed, like water pulling back from the surface, and I regained my composure.

The whole situation was extremely confusing. But I used my bag as a pillow and lay Alto down, then slowly walked in the direction of the voice—toward the barrier. That was the place I'd been blocked from reaching before. The voice was coming from the other side of it.

I saw a woman with long platinum hair standing there. The moment I saw her, my heart skipped a beat, and I was captivated by her. And my heart was captivated as well. Her eyes were a blue gray. I would describe her features as more lovely than beautiful. That word seemed to fit her better. She was probably between the ages of sixteen and eighteen? I was sure that once she became an adult, the word *beautiful* would suit her more.

"Setsuna. Love is something you just fall into. It's not logical. You'll know it's love the moment you meet that special someone."

For some reason I remembered something my mother had told me.

"And you'll fall in love over and over again. That's how you know she's your soulmate. And in my case, your father was mine."

She told me that without a hint of embarrassment. Kyoka had been listening intently, her eyes sparkling. Meanwhile, I just gave a vague smile and a nod. Back then, I thought it was probably more common to slowly get to know each other first, then fall in love, but I didn't say so. Mom just looked so happy, and I didn't want to crush Kyoka's dreams.

I tried to get my breathing under control as I faced the girl and spoke. "I'm sorry if I frightened you. We fell from a cliff and are just resting here."

I stared right at her and told her the truth. I was looking straight into her eyes, but for some reason, she wasn't making eye contact with me. She just looked in my general direction. I wondered if she was blind.

"A-are you all right?" At first, she seemed surprised by my answer, then appeared concerned. The moment I heard her voice, I felt relieved for some reason. I didn't know why, and I was confused by these emotions. I pushed my

mother's words out of my mind and focused on my conversation with the girl.

"Thank you for your concern. My apprentice is unconscious, but he doesn't seem hurt."

"That's good..." She crossed her arms over her chest, and I could tell she meant it.

"I'm sorry if this causes you trouble, but do you mind if we stay here for a while?" I thought about saying we could leave if she didn't want us here but decided against it. I wanted to get to know her more, and something inside of me was telling me not to leave.



She gave this some thought and then looked down. Her head shook slightly, a pendant around her neck catching the light. I felt like I had seen that pendant somewhere before. It looked familiar, but I couldn't remember where I saw it. It felt like I'd forgotten something very important. Even though this was my first time meeting her, she felt so familiar. Why was I so concerned about her? I tried searching my memories, but her voice interrupted me.

"I can't do anything to help, but please go ahead and rest here." She hung her head, and I wondered if she felt guilty for not being able to do more. It wasn't like Alto or I were hurt, and we weren't in any kind of danger, so there was no reason for her to feel sorry. I thought maybe I should ask if there was anything I could do for her, so she wouldn't feel so bad, but for some reason, those weren't the words that came out of my mouth. Instead, they conveyed my desire to continue hearing her voice a little longer.

"If it's all right with you, do you mind talking with me until my apprentice wakes up?" I immediately regretted it the moment I finished my sentence. Asking a complete stranger to stand here and talk with you would only trouble the other person. I thought for sure she was being wary of me, but I waited for her answer.

She was staring at me, but for some reason her expression seemed tense and her body began to tremble slightly. I heard her gulp.

"Did you come to kill me? Even if you did... Will you at least give me some time to talk with you?" she quietly responded.

Apparently, she thought I was an assassin, yet she still wanted to talk with me. I was reminded of how I felt the night I met Kyle. I thought he was there to kill me, but I still wanted to talk to someone.

"Kill you? What reason would I have to kill you when we just met?"

She let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Can I ask why you thought I was going to kill you?"

"No one has ever come here before, and I can't think of any other reason why someone would come here."

“I told you, we fell from the mountain.”

“I don’t think coincidences like that really happen,” she said sadly. My heart ached, and once again I was struck by her beauty as she lowered her gaze. But at the same time, I was also struck by a sense of regret that she couldn’t possibly notice. I couldn’t pull my gaze away from her. Why did I want to look at her so much? It was strange, but I didn’t have the answer.

I thought for a moment that perhaps this was love. But I pushed those foolish thoughts out of my head and wondered if there was some kind of magic in the barrier that was supposed to enchant people. I activated my magic to investigate the barrier. Hanai had invented this magic, and it took a lot of time to master. Since I hadn’t perfectly mastered it yet, it would take some time before I could fully analyze the barrier.

“Um... Did I upset you?”

I had gone silent, as I was busy analyzing the barrier. Her voice made me come back to myself, and I felt bad when I saw how apologetic she looked. But I wanted to know why she thought that. Then I realized she probably felt bad that she had dismissed the idea that we’d fallen and thought she offended us.

“No, that’s not it. I was trying to think of a way to make you feel better,” I answered.

I couldn’t tell her I was investigating if the barrier contained any enchantments, so I said that instead. I wasn’t sure how she took it. But she had on a faint smile.

“So if you’re okay with me...shall we get to talking?”

Again, there was something that nagged at me about her smile, but I couldn’t remember what it was.

“That’ll be great. Thank you.” I pushed aside those thoughts for now and thanked her. “I’ll go get my apprentice,” I said, and walked away.

Alto was still fast asleep, so I picked him up and put him down nearby. I covered him with a blanket and stuck a barrier needle into the ground, then returned to the girl.

“Is your friend all right?”

“I think he’s just sleeping now. He’s very tired from climbing the mountain, so he probably won’t wake up for a while.”

“I see...”

She let out a sigh of relief once she heard Alto was okay. Then she blushed as if she just realized something. “Um, pardon me... I wasn’t expecting company, so please excuse my appearance,” she said shyly. But she didn’t look messy or bad in any way. I remembered girls of a certain age tended to be overly self-conscious, as Kyoka was when she was younger, so I wanted to reassure her.

“Don’t worry. I think you look very nice.”

She smiled shyly and murmured, “I’m glad.” Then she didn’t say anything else. Silence fell between us. I wasn’t a very talkative person to begin with. I was mostly a listener. I suddenly wished I’d read the books Kyle had recommended to me. As of late, I’d mainly just been answering Alto’s questions, so I wasn’t sure what to say in a situation like this.

I was the one who asked her to converse with me, yet I had no idea what to say. There were many things I wanted to ask her, but for some reason I was hesitant.

She was the first one to break the silence. “Um... May I ask your name?”

Then I realized of course she was silent. I hadn’t even told her my name, and she was probably waiting for me to introduce myself. What was wrong with me, sitting here trying to figure out what to say when I hadn’t even told her my name? I felt my face flush with embarrassment. I was glad she didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Oh, right. We haven’t introduced ourselves yet.”

“That’s right...” She trailed off a bit, and I waited to see if she would finish her sentence, but she just shook her head and looked at me.

I wondered what that was all about but decided to introduce myself. “My name is Setsuna. I’m a human adventurer.”

Since I thought she might be blind, I decided to give her more details about

myself. The moment I said I was human, I thought I saw a shadow fall across her face.

“Are you all right?” I asked. She said she was and fell silent. I wondered why she stopped talking. She must have a very complicated reason as to why she lived in a place like this, and I realized that must have something to do with it. In that case, I shouldn’t pry. But before I could change the subject, my analysis of the barrier had finished, and the results took my breath away.

The barrier was indescribable. It was dragon magic that was activated by her mana and by the power of the sun, moon, and stars. Nine hundred ninety-eight years had passed since it was activated, and there were seven parts to it in total. One was that she could not leave the barrier, and no one else could enter. Second, it absorbed her mana, leaving her with very little left. Third, the drained mana was transferred to the barrier. Fourth, the cave’s existence was removed from the perception of all living creatures. Fifth, the barrier would eliminate targets that sought to harm her or tried to break it. Sixth, the barrier would supply her with nourishment. Finally, if anyone approached the cave with the intention of helping her, it would rob her of her mana.

And once someone lost their mana, they died. After learning about the barrier in front of me, I felt an immense amount of anger toward whoever had created it, and at the same time, I became aware of the emotions that welled up inside me. In that moment, I reflexively modified the barrier.

“.....”

She didn’t react. She remained quiet, so I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d been consumed with a strong desire to help her. I’m glad I had modified it in time. If Hanai hadn’t studied dragon magic, I might not have been able to handle it.

But why had I wanted to save her? To think that she had been imprisoned inside such a terrible barrier for 998 years, how could I not pity her? But why would I want to help her? Was this feeling love after all? I felt like I should confirm it, but I pushed away the thought and focused on figuring out why she was so quiet.

“You’re dragonfolk, aren’t you?”

Dragonfolk referred to the dragons of this world. They had an incredibly long

lifespan and normally assumed human form. They didn't live on this continent, but on a separate one far across the western ocean. It was said they very rarely visited this continent. The reason she was in this situation must have something to do with that. With certain exceptions, only dragonfolk could use dragon magic. So the fact that she had been held captive inside this barrier for 998 years meant there was a very high possibility that she was dragonfolk.

She didn't respond. She just stared at me, looking astonished. But when I remained silent, she finally spoke.

"Why...do you think...I'm dragonfolk?"

"Because I analyzed the barrier."

She gave me a look of disbelief, then covered her mouth with both hands. I figured it would be a long conversation, so I said, "Would you like to sit down? We're both still standing. Aren't you tired?"

She nodded and unsteadily sat down. I would have reached out a hand to help her, but because of the barrier, I couldn't, so I just slowly sat down myself.

"Will you tell me about yourself? I might be able to help you somehow."

She seemed scared. I figured she was here against her will. If she wanted to escape, then I wanted to help her. It had to be bad if she thought I was here to kill her.

"I don't want you to save me. I can't wish for anything as long as this barrier is here."

She shook her head as if she'd given up on everything.

"That's not true. I can nullify its effects. The proof is that you're still alive, right? One of the barrier's effects is that if someone shows up and tries to help you, it'll absorb all your mana, but it didn't do that. Or did you not know that about the barrier?"

Now that I'd mentioned it, she must've noticed the change, because her dark eyes widened.

"What do you want?" I asked. A single tear ran down her cheek.

"I want to see my family. My father, my mother...my older brother." The

emotion in her voice seemed to pierce me. I knew all too well just how she felt. I felt momentary empathy. There were those who understood it, and those who couldn't.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be able to see them again. I’ll help you.”

I still didn’t know why I wanted to save her so badly, but the feeling of wanting to grant her wish grew inside me. I wondered if I’d ever been this moved before. This situation was still quite baffling to me. I knew nothing about this girl. Absolutely nothing.

“I’m sorry I’m such a mess.” She calmed down after a while and bashfully bowed.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, can I ask you some more questions?”

I thought maybe she’d tell me more, but she remained quiet and didn’t say anything. She kept staring at me, though, so it wasn’t as if she was fully rejecting me. I wondered what was keeping her from talking.

“Can I at least ask your name?” The moment I said it, I realized this girl was a complete stranger, yet I felt like I’d known her for a long time, which confused me even more.

“My name...”

I looked at her and realized her eyes were clouded over. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, repeating that several times. “I don’t have a name,” she said in a voice so dark it shocked me.

“What?”

“When the dragon king put me inside this barrier, he took away my name and banished me from my family,” she said, her head down. She looked so lonely. She reminded me of when I first met Alto. I felt a slight sense of irritation welling up from deep inside.

“But you’ve mastered how to control your mana, right?”

“I only came of age this year. I still haven’t learned how to.”

“.....”

I was speechless.

Like blood, mana was produced every day and stored in a vessel. These vessels were called magical vessels, and in the case of humans and beastfolk, they existed as a physical organ. But for dragonfolk, it was the human body itself. And of course, one can't live if the vessel is broken.

Normally, magical vessels break when physical force is applied, but dragonfolk collapse from the inside due to the overproduction of mana. The production of mana doesn't stop even when the vessel is full. Thus, it overflows. In the case of humans and beastfolk, it is not an issue because the body absorbs the excess mana and converts it into energy. As for dragonfolk, the excess mana can destroy their body from within.

In order to prevent this from happening, they use various abilities and techniques. Ability refers to the power possessed by the king of dragonfolk, the dragon king. He is able to forcibly compress mana and keep it in a dragonfolk child's body until they reach adulthood. For techniques, they stop the flow of mana and compress it, using it to improve physical functions. That is how they control their mana. Dragonfolk would have learned these techniques by the time they reached adulthood. But while they were children, they were protected by the king's ability, and once they were an adult, they would control it on their own to protect themselves.

Conversely, if a dragonfolk could not control their mana, they'd die. Their bodies were their vessels, and if they maintained their dragon form, their vessels wouldn't break. But for some reason, dragonfolk couldn't continuously exist in that form. They would always revert back to human form and die. I wasn't sure why.

So, if she left this barrier, she would die. It was so unbelievable that I had to ask her about it. "Can I ask why that is?"

She hesitated again, opening and closing her mouth several times, staring at me with her blank eyes. Then she smiled faintly as if relenting and said, "Because...I was foolish..."

She trailed off as if remembering something specific, then began to talk again.

“I was born as the youngest of three siblings and was cherished by my family. My family was very normal, and I wanted for nothing. I had a good childhood. I lived with my parents and two older brothers. My father was strict yet kind. My mother was warm and caring. And my brothers were overprotective. But we all were happily living together. I thought our lives would continue like that forever...”

She paused for a moment, and I could tell she still wasn’t over the situation.

“But when my second-oldest brother became an adult, he met a human woman. She was the princess of a kingdom, and she and my brother got on very well. They even exchanged the dragon knight’s pact.” Her eyes looked cold and sharp as she said that.

“The dragon knight’s pact... That’s a master-servant relationship bound by blood and name...a soul pact only dragonfolk can do?”

“Yes. But to dragonfolk, it’s a cursed pact.”

“Cursed?” I asked, and she nodded. Her eyes were filled with darkness.

“The pact is binding until one party dies. So the only way to break it is if you kill the other person or you die.”

A pact that can only be broken by murder or death. That definitely sounded cursed to me.

“Normally, the dragon knight’s pact is done with the dragon king. He enters it and vows to protect the kingdom. But there are some dragonfolk who are drawn to people outside the clan and enter pacts with them.”

I quietly listened to her.

“The dragon knight’s pact is the only way to make dragons obey classes of lower ranks, such as humans...”

I could tell by the way she spoke that she didn’t have a high opinion of humans...

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said.

“There’s no need to apologize. I’m aware dragons are seen as the highest beings. They’re servants of the deities, tasked to protect the world,” I replied.

That was the opinion of most humans in this world. Humans both feared and respected dragonfolk. They admired them, but honestly, I didn't understand why. Maybe my opinion would change if I saw them in their true forms, but I still didn't think I'd worship them.

"That's what human legends say," she said.

That must mean that wasn't the whole truth. But that wasn't the topic we were discussing right now, so I didn't press her any further. I just urged her to continue.

"A long time ago, there were many humans who wished to enter a pact with dragonfolk. They wanted to become the dragons' masters and control their immense power."

Dragonfolk boasted strength that set them apart from all other living creatures. There were legends that they had turned an entire kingdom into scorched earth, or sunk an entire continent. There was no way for humans to ever match the dragonfolk.

"However, we shouldn't enter pacts with humans just to please them, but to link their hearts with ours. Not to become pawns for war and power."

Tears fell from her dark eyes. I could feel her quiet anger as she wept, not bothering to even wipe away her tears.

"We will not hesitate to act as a sword or shield for the sake of our pactmaker. We will do anything it takes to protect them, even if that means destroying an entire kingdom and taking many lives. If the pactmaker wishes for it, we will try to grant their wish. But that's because we entrust our hearts to them, not because we want to become a pawn of war."

A pawn of war... If it was true that dragonfolk entered pacts because they wished to forge a bond, I didn't blame her for being angry at the humans who used them. But still...there was a way to break it.

"So if they don't like the pact, why not kill the pactmaker? Then it will be broken. Like you said, it doesn't seem as if they care about taking human lives."

"Because it's a cursed pact." She bit her lip. "For dragonfolk, once we enter one, it's very difficult for us to kill the pactmaker. Even if they betray us, it's an

instinct embedded upon our soul. Dragonfolk will not betray their pactmaker unless they do something very egregious. We were made that way by the deities. I can't tell you how or why that is, though."

They were made that way by the deities? It seemed everyone in this world believed in them. They believed we all lived in a garden created by the deities.

"There are many dragonfolk who are happy with the pact they've made with humans. Everyone has different opinions on the matter, but those who have had good experiences will speak fondly of their memories with the humans and become the envy of all dragonfolk. I was the same way. And so was my brother."

"Different opinions?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, then answered. "There are some dragons who think of protecting weak humans as their duty. Some seek the pact because of the bond between hearts. Most dragons enter them to protect weak humans, and fewer do it because of the bond. The minority are dragons who are intensely drawn toward humans and are thought of as eccentric. They're fascinated by the fleeting lives of humans and deeply care for them. Even though humans have much shorter life spans, those dragonfolk live with their pactmaker as close friends and partners. They find happiness in this."

Eccentric... For dragonfolk, who regard humans as weak, they would never be able to leave the mind frame of being the protector. So the dragonfolk who seek the bonds with humans did seem a bit weird. Because they regarded humans as their equals.

"I spoke about instincts before... I think you could also call that love. And that means a dragonfolk's love is much deeper than a human's. That wouldn't be a problem if they directed that love to a fellow dragonfolk. They never betray their partners, after all. But when their partner is a human, the modality of it changes."

I gave an inward sigh and said, "Your brother didn't have a happy pact, did he?"

"My brother..." She sighed and closed her eyes. She slowly opened them again, then finished her sentence, "...chose suicide."

“What?”

I was speechless.

“My brother met the princess of Grand and became friends with her. Then he made a dragon knight’s pact with her. At the time, he was very happy. And I think the princess loved my brother then. She brought him back home to her kingdom and announced to her father, the king, that she had made a pact with my brother. The king of Grand gave them his blessings and wrote a letter.”

She paused for a while to calm herself, then took a deep breath before continuing. “Peace continued for a while after that. My brother would occasionally return home overflowing with happiness. I was also happy that he had been able to make a bond. And I hoped I would be able to do the same someday. I dreamed of it, actually.”

She smiled faintly, making my heart ache for some reason.

“But then Grand declared war on the neighboring kingdom, and everything changed. I don’t know what triggered the war. All I know is that it was the turning point. The king ordered the princess to make my brother fight, and so she asked him. My brother wanted her to reconsider, but once she wept, he couldn’t bear to tell her no.”

“.....”

“My brother thought of humans as his friends, so it pained him greatly to fight against them. But the dragon knight’s pact requires the dragonfolk to protect their pactmaker, and they will do anything to make them happy. To achieve that, we have destroyed many human kingdoms to fulfill a pactmaker’s desires.”

It was true that there were humans who would abandon themselves to love and loyalty and live for that purpose. But in the case of dragonfolk, almost all those who entered a dragon knight’s pact made the same choice, so it was hard not to feel their intense love.

“Because my brother entered the pact with the princess, Grand’s kingdom prospered. They conquered other kingdoms one after the other, expanding their own. Grand’s king was delighted and praised the princess, who smiled

brightly. I think my brother was happy to see that.”

I imagined for the enemy kingdoms that it must’ve been a nightmare, but I didn’t say that out loud.

“My brother’s love grew stronger by the day, to the point where he wanted to ask the princess to enter a contract of marriage with him. He didn’t doubt her love.”

A contract of marriage was just a formal way of saying he wanted to marry the princess. That should’ve been a happy thing, but she stared into the distance and had a vacant look in her eyes as she told the story.

“This wasn’t particularly surprising. If the pactmaker is of the opposite sex, they will fall deeper in love with them the longer they spend together. And most dragons will want to marry them. This is because a marriage within a dragon knight’s pact binds their souls even more deeply together, until the point that they share a life span. That way, they can live the rest of their lives together. It offers an escape from the sadness of losing a human to their fleeting life span. You could almost say it’s inevitable.”

Her voice kept growing more sorrowful. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I quietly kept listening to her talk.

“One day, my brother came home, smiling happily and saying he’d come to make her a present. My brother was very skilled with his hands, and he made a magical tool. He said he was going to give it to her when he proposed. My parents and my other brother were against him marrying a human, but I think I gave him words of encouragement.”

She clenched her fists so tightly that they turned white, as if expressing her anger.

“I should’ve been against it, too, then. Even though I know it wouldn’t have worked, I just wish I could’ve stopped him. I knew a marriage between dragonfolk and a marriage between humans were completely different things.” She choked up for a moment as she expressed her feelings. “Marriage between dragonfolk is something that’s very deep. Dragonfolk were made incapable of betraying their partners, after all. But humans are different. They can betray their partners very easily. My family was worried about that, and that’s why

they were against it, but I..."

Her shoulders began to tremble.

"My brother finished the magical tool to his satisfaction. I was choosing a ribbon for him to wrap it up with, when suddenly a messenger from Grand arrived. They said the princess had collapsed from an illness. The moment my brother heard that, he rushed back to Grand."

Tears came to the girl's eyes, wetting the ground below her. She spoke haltingly, her voice filled with pain.

"That was...the last time...I ever saw...my brother."

She fell silent and looked down, reaching out her hands as if to grab something. Then she turned her hands toward her, bringing them toward her chest in a stabbing motion, as if to carve out her heart. She was sobbing, and it was difficult for her to speak. Or perhaps she didn't want to say the words out loud, and that's why she mimed them.

"....."

A dragon's heart was said to contain medicine that could heal any illness. The knowledge I had affirmed that was not a lie, but a fact. Her brother exchanged his own life to save his beloved princess.

"At the time, I managed to calm my turbulent emotions, thinking that my brother had protected the person he loved. If the same thing happened to me, I would have chosen the same path as him."

She spoke as if that were only natural, and I wasn't sure how to respond. If Kyoka were suffering in front of me, and sacrificing my life was the only way to help, I would do it without hesitation. But if she were to try to do the same thing, I would never allow it. The girl had said the dragonfolk were created by the deities to be that way, and I thought I understood a little better now.

"However, it wasn't the princess who had fallen ill. It was a human man she had fallen in love with. And she had plotted with the king to deceive my brother."

My eyes widened in shock when I heard that.

"The princess's marriage was announced not even three months after my brother died. She was wed to her longtime love, and the power of her love had healed his illness!"

I heard sadness, pain, frustration, and anger in her voice.

"It was lies, all lies! All of it was lies! There wasn't one bit of truth to it! The princess had never loved my brother! She never thought of marrying him! She approached my brother and used him from the very beginning so that he would sacrifice his life to save her true love! She was after my brother's heart from the start! She planned it all from the beginning, in order to marry her true love..."

I just listened in silence to her heartbreakin cries, embracing the anger that bubbled up inside me.

Her shoulders shook as she silently tried to suppress her emotions. Silence reigned over the space until she had calmed down a bit. She resumed speaking with an impassive face. "And that's not all. As I said, the king was in on the princess's plan. He knew my brother was planning on asking the princess to marry him and began thinking about how he could stop them. That's because humans and dragonfolk can't have children with each other, so if she became my brother's wife, the royal bloodline would end. And the king couldn't allow that to happen."

I wondered how she knew all this, but I figured she wouldn't lie about it, so I began searching for information within my internal database about that time period.

"However, if she turned down my brother's proposal, then the kingdom might be destroyed. The king feared my brother. So once he learned the princess was planning on stealing his heart, he joined forces with her."

While I listened to her, I pulled up information on Grand. Perhaps because this had happened over a thousand years ago, there were a lot of vague records like court poetry and other traditional poems. But the common theme among all of them was that the lush, fertile land of Grand turned into the land of the dead overnight, and the cause remained unknown.

Kyle was alive a thousand years ago. So surely he knew what happened. I tried searching his memory, and just as I expected, lots of information popped up.

There was a wide range of information about dragonfolk, but even so, I was unable to find any specifically related to that event.

On the other hand, an overwhelming amount of abusive language popped up about dragonfolk. Something must have happened between them and Kyle. I wondered if it had anything to do with this event. If it did, I wouldn't be able to discover what it was unless I found the keys he had mentioned.

"But he would never do that. He would never destroy the kingdom he loved. He wouldn't even think about it. My brother was a very gentle person, and I know he would have accepted the fact that she had a companion."

As I watched her cry, I wondered what I would have done if I was in the same position. What if the woman in front of me approached me in order to use my powers, then tossed me aside once she was finished with me, running off into the sunset with the man she truly loved? But before I could answer my own question, she quietly continued.

"As retribution for deceiving my brother, I traveled to Grand on the day of the princess's wedding and sang a song cursing the both of them." Hateful tears wet her eyes. "I didn't want them to be happy. So I sang a song to curse them... the king, the princess, and her new groom. But it didn't go as planned. Since I was a child, I made a mistake. I needed the magic of Earth to perform the curse, but when I tried to draw out its mana, I couldn't control it, and I ended up draining all the mana of Grand's land in the process. The mana swelled, and the curse consumed not only the king, princess, and her groom, but Grand itself and every human who lived on its land."

"How had you wanted to curse them?"

"I wanted the king to grow very old, and I wanted to curse the couple so that they couldn't have children. But that curse extended to everyone who lived in Grand..."

So the legend about the kingdom turning into the land of the dead overnight was true.

"Despite how happy my brother was, and how much he had loved the princess, I couldn't forgive her for stealing his life and deceiving him. I didn't want her to be happy. I hated the thought of the two of them smiling and

laughing, blissfully living out their lives. So...I thought about killing them, but I couldn't. I couldn't take away the lives my brother had worked so hard to protect."

The hatred was still in her eyes, but she hadn't been able to kill them because her brother had loved them. She couldn't take the princess's life.

"Because of that, I thought I could curse them instead to end the royal family's bloodline. I don't regret singing the cursed song..."

She stopped speaking, and her body trembled, then she continued with a pained expression.

"But I dragged innocent people who had nothing to do with any of this into my revenge. I cursed the entire kingdom of Grand."

"And that's why you were imprisoned here."

"Yes. I committed a crime, so I was stripped of my name and banished from my clan. I was sentenced to stay here for a thousand years. But I will be free in just two more years."

Although she said she would be free, it didn't sound like she believed that at all.

"I'm here because of my mistakes, so I do not wish for anyone to help me."

So then why had she told me all of this? I didn't understand, so I asked her. She gave me a sheepish smile.

"I don't know. I just wanted to talk to someone one more time before I died. I hadn't intended on telling you all that. Honestly, it was probably because you were so kind and listened to me."

She gave a forced smile, and I was overcome by the sensation that she was drawing me in. I felt something inside me about to break, so I asked her a question to try to stop it. "But don't you hate humans? It was a human who deceived your brother, after all."

She was quiet for a while. She held both hands to her chest and looked down, clearly conflicted. I felt bad, thinking I had just asked her an insensitive question.

"It's true that I hated humans for killing my brother. But the entire human race wasn't the one who killed him. A voice inside me told me that. When I sang the song that cursed the princess, I told you I couldn't kill her because my brother had loved her. But the other reason was because I had admired humans, and I hesitated to lay a hand on her. The memories of growing up with my brother weren't easily erased from my heart. So every time I saw a human, I was reminded of those painful events."

I thought perhaps that was because of the dragonfolk's instincts, but I was relieved to hear she didn't hate all humans. As if doubting her own memory, she murmured "No... That's not it... I don't think I met any humans after the incident with the princess. And when I saw her, I didn't feel any affection for her."

My relief only lasted a few moments before it turned back to unease. I wondered why she had suddenly changed her mind, and I asked her that. She then realized something. "That's not it, I'm sorry. I don't hate all humans. My memory was hazy, and so I just wanted to correct myself. I'm sorry if I made you feel bad."

I breathed a sigh of relief and felt foolish that my emotions changed every time she said something. But I didn't miss the shadow that crossed her face.

"Do you wonder what happened to the people who were cursed, and the kingdom of Grand itself?"

Her body jerked, and she unsteadily rose to her feet. "Do you know?" she asked. I felt the wind blow as she walked toward me and came close. She then sat back down.

"When I was brought here, I heard it would take a thousand years for my mana to break the curse over Grand. So I think it's mostly gone by now. But do you know what happened to the people who were cursed?" Her eyes wavered with anxiety. She seemed desperate to know, so I obliged.

"All communication with the kingdom of Grand was cut off the moment it was cursed. So I don't know the status of it now."

All the color drained from her face, and she placed her hand on the ground. I realized she had misinterpreted what I said and I quickly apologized.

"I'm sorry! Don't worry. I worded that poorly. The curse on the people of Grand was broken, and they're alive."

Once I said that, she slowly looked up and tearfully asked, "The curse was broken?" Her voice was filled with hope, and I nodded.

"That...can't be."

I looked right into her eyes and told her it was the truth. I could feel her frustration at not being able to feel my gaze.

"It's true. The land of Grand has indeed become infertile, but the curse on the people and animals there has broken."

"But who...? How?"

"I don't know the answer to that."

That was a lie. I knew. Kyle was the one who broke the curse. And he had done it easily, when not even the dragon king could. But I couldn't tell her that. If she and Kyle had known each other, then I would have to tell her about my relationship with Kyle as well, and I couldn't do that. I wasn't even sure how to explain anything about myself.

"But what I can say is that the people whose curse was broken received help from the dragonfolk and settled in a new land and built a new kingdom. That happened within two weeks of your curse. And that kingdom still exists. So your curse didn't lead to the path of destruction that you think it did."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that the princess and her lover were the first king and queen of that kingdom. But I hoped she was happy to hear the news about Grand.

"Is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and they rolled down her cheeks. She silently wept. I could feel all the pain and regret she'd held in all these years. After a while, she stopped crying and whispered, "I'm so glad... I'm so glad."

She gave me a peaceful smile. I felt an uncontrollable fondness for her indescribable beauty, and the urge to embrace her washed over me, even

though I knew that smile wasn't directed at me.

Something was growing inside of me. The feelings were both light and dark. I honestly didn't know where they came from. But when I heard her voice, I was captivated by her, and I couldn't help but pity her situation. I was drawn to her. I never thought I would have such feelings for someone.

I knew the feelings I was having were strange, but a sort of impatience overruled my thoughts. The feelings inside me were different from anything I'd ever felt before, and I wondered if maybe Kyle's emotions had an influence on them. But Kyle had said, "My soul, and the old man's, will be transformed into information. They won't have any influence on your personality." So then that must mean the feelings I was experiencing were my own.

I tried to calmly analyze what was driving the change in my heart, but I couldn't. There was a warning inside my heart that told me to hold her hand and not let it go. Was this feeling love? And this desire to protect her, was it possessiveness?

At that moment, the word *protect* kept repeating inside my head. Something felt off. I'd spent so much time looking inward that there was something I had overlooked.

Why had Kyle left the curse on the land? Kyle was involved in the incident and had broken the curses upon the kingdom except for the one that cursed the land. It couldn't be that he didn't have enough mana for it because he had both his and Hanai's. So then why?

There was something else mysterious about the story. After the incident, Kyle never returned to Grand. The people of Grand were important, but why wasn't the land? I searched for information about the people of Grand, but for some reason, I couldn't find any connection between him and the citizens. And he had nothing but bad things to say about the royal family.

He didn't like dragonfolk or the people of Grand, but I didn't know why. I tried to search for more details, but I realized he started disliking both of them after

this series of incidents. He didn't particularly dislike them before that, though.

I still wondered why he had locked information regarding this incident. I tried to see if I could learn more from her point of view, but the information about her was also locked, like there was just a gaping hole where her story should be. She must have been an important person to Kyle, then.

Once I reached that conclusion, most of it fell into place. He hated the royal family for the same reasons she did, and he hated the dragonfolk for doing this to her. I think the reason he lifted the curse from the people of Grand was to lessen her guilt. But he couldn't tell her he had broken the curse because of this barrier. If he came in here with the desire to save her, she would be killed by the magic embedded in the barrier.

"You want the curse on Grand's land to be broken, right?"

I asked her the one question I didn't know the answer to. She looked happy and at peace now that she knew the people of Grand had been saved. She came back to herself once she heard my voice and answered "Yes, I do."

I thought she would say that, so I wasn't surprised. So then why hadn't Kyle broken the curse on the land? If he couldn't break the curse, then I certainly wouldn't be able to. That was disappointing, but before I knew it, my rational thoughts ceased, and my impulsive thoughts returned.

"Is something the matter?" She looked up at me with confusion when I suddenly fell silent, and once again, I was filled with the urge to touch her. I had no choice but to admit this feeling was love. Even though I had just met her, my heart was shouting that I wanted to form an intense bond with her and protect her.

And if I thought rationally, there was no way a woman I just met would agree to such a thing. But on the other hand, my impulsive thoughts took over and said that wasn't true. I asked myself again and again, what if I charged my way into her weakened heart and presented her with what she wanted? Even though it left me with a guilty conscience, my answer was that I still wanted her.

In that case, I would surrender to my feelings and try to win her over. Even though I knew the methods were wrong.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“Thinking?”

She gave me a puzzled look. She was probably wondering if there was anything she could do to help me. I felt my heart waver when I saw the look on her face, but I turned a blind eye to it.

“I think it’s senseless that you were punished so harshly for your crimes even though you feel this much remorse. And I was wondering if there was anything I could do.”

I shoved my conscience aside and forcibly switched my thoughts to her circumstances. I knew how much she would be tormented by this, and I was about to go down the path of no return.

“This is my punishment,” she said simply, her voice devoid of emotion.

“But is it a just punishment? It’s true that you cursed the kingdom of Grand and its citizens. But the curse had no effect on the people. So the only crime of yours that remains is the curse upon the land and the forced emigration of its citizens. The land will be purified after a thousand years. So then why should you have to wait for death? It’s too harsh. They need to take the extenuating circumstances into consideration.”

I truly meant that. I was trying to revive her desire to live, so that I could have her, but I honestly thought the punishment was too harsh.

“You said you want to see your parents and brother. I want that for you, too.”

“That wish...is long gone.” She hung her head, perhaps because it was too painful for her to look at me.

“I don’t think so. That’s why I thought of a way to make your wish come true...” I trailed off, and it was for my sake more than hers.

Her head was still lowered, and she remained silent. I spoke to her gently. “Will you enter into a pact with me?”

“A pact?”

She gave me a look of disbelief, directing her unfocused gaze at me. I could tell she was shocked.

"I want you to enter into a pact with me," I repeated, and she clenched her fists and looked down. I could feel her anger toward me.

"I have no desire to form a dragon knight's pact with a human. I will not become anyone's knight." Her voice was filled with emotion. And for the first time, I realized she'd misunderstood, and I chuckled wryly. She must've heard me laugh because she glared at me with her unseeing eyes.

"No, I don't mean that kind of pact. Not the dragon knight's pact." I stopped talking for a moment then extended my left hand to her. I couldn't touch her because of the barrier, and she couldn't see me, either.

"I don't want you to be my knight. I want you to be my companion. It seems I'm in love with you."

For a moment, she showed me a completely vulnerable expression. Her mouth hung open with shock. "What?"

"I said, I'm in love with you."

She continued staring at me with her mouth slightly open. I wanted to touch her. She gazed at me in astonishment.

"Will you become my companion?"

"But why? You don't even know me. And I don't know you."

Why? I wondered why, too, but it was because I wanted to.

"If you're teasing me, please stop it."

"I fell in love with you at first sight." This had never happened to me before, but if I had to put it into words, that was the closest way to express it.

"Love at first sight...?"

"It seems that way."

"Stop joking..."

"I understand you may not trust a human like me, but I'm not the kind of person who would joke about something like this."

“You’re not...?” She finally understood what I meant, and her face began to turn red.

“I guess that wasn’t quite right. When you ask a dragonfolk to marry you, you have to say it like this: I wish to gift you a name.”

“...!”

“When dragonfolk get married, they cast aside the name they received from the dragon king and gift new names to each other, right? Then they vow to spend the rest of their lives together. So I’ll gift you a name. And once a dragonfolk and human get married, they share each other’s mana and life force, so you’ll be able to avoid death.”

“If we do that, then your mana will get drained as long as I’m inside this barrier.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. I modified the barrier, remember?”

“.....”

“Anyway, will you answer my proposal?”

“I ref—”

Before she could finish talking, I interrupted her. “Don’t you think you could fall in love with me?”

“What?”

“I know we just met, and this is very sudden. But I love you. I told you how I felt, and I asked you to marry me because I can’t imagine myself with anyone else.” My heart was impatiently screaming out that I wanted her.

“Um...”

“If you hate me, then I’ll leave right now.”

“Ah...” At that, her expression changed. For a thousand years, she had struggled with severe loneliness. And I had decided to take advantage of that loneliness. I knew it was cowardly. But I knew better than anyone what it was like to have a light that suddenly appeared in front of you taken away, and the fear and anxiety that accompanied it. It was a cowardly move, but that was the

only means I had to win her.

“Do you think I’m not suitable to be your husband?”

I gave an inward laugh, knowing there was no way to know if a complete stranger was a suitable husband. But I couldn’t describe my feelings, and my heart was a mess.

“.....”

She was extremely pale. Her eyes darted all around, and she was hesitant and unsure. That must mean she didn’t completely hate me. At any rate, she was at least thinking about it.

“Or...is there someone else you love?”

“No,” she answered immediately, and I felt relieved.

I stood up and took a few steps away from the barrier.

“W-wait!” I felt guilty from hearing her frantic voice, but I suppressed those feelings. “L-let me think about it.”

“I want an answer right now.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, now.”

“.....”

“I swear I will cherish you and devote my life to you.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked toward me. Her eyes were wavering unsteadily. “Wh-what if we start off with just dating...?”

Although it was a nice answer, it was not the one I wanted.

“I don’t want to leave you without some kind of connection.”

I honestly meant that. I doubted she would come with me. The most important thing to her was atoning for her crimes. But I couldn’t stay here. So, I wanted some kind of guaranteed connection. Something no one could break.

“If we get married, we’ll be able to feel any kind of subtle changes through our mana. I can use the power granted by our marriage to teleport back to you

right away."

Her expression grew even more tense. "Is that true?"

"Yes..."

If you entered a marriage contract with dragonfolk, you were able to teleport to your spouse's location immediately. I tried using that to negotiate with her. Honestly, I could teleport here without that power anyway, but I didn't want to tell her that. She grew pale and appeared to be at a loss for words, so I continued.

"How can I get you to believe me? I can even break this barrier. I can break it and save you, if that's what you want."

"I'm here to atone for my crimes. I have no intention of leaving this place," she answered in a firm voice.

I thought she would say that. I knew she was right, but I was irritated that anyone could lock her up in such a place. There was nowhere for me to direct those feelings, so they just burned inside me, holding me captive to a feeling like I wasn't even myself. I felt my consciousness growing faint...

"Shall I kill the dragon king?" I blurted out without even realizing it. I hated the dragon king so much for putting her inside this barrier that I felt malice toward him. Since I had fallen in love with her, my feelings of wanting to protect her couldn't tolerate those who would try to take her life away from me. It was no wonder I had reached that conclusion.

"If you try to kill the dragon king..." she started to say, then she took a step back from the barrier, perhaps because she noticed the change in me.

My mana had responded to my anger and was violently churning. *This isn't good...* I reflexively stood up as well, both of us jumping away from the barrier. I started raising a barrier around myself so that I wouldn't break everything in this place. I wasn't sure if I would make it in time, though. I managed to finish putting up the barrier just as a crack appeared in the ring Kyle gave me. An incredible amount of mana burst forth from my body, and the ring that was supposed to control it broke and fell to the ground.

It seemed like when my emotions got out of control, my mana would run

rampant. The mana I released caused the cave to shake. I stared absently at the broken ring and immersed myself in my mana. But because it was in such a disarray, I felt drunk and couldn't organize my thoughts.

The magic that was etched onto my body influenced me, and various emotions rose to the surface and then disappeared. It flowed through me without leaving a single piece in my memory. A regret popped into my mind—that I should have just taken her away by force, but then the thought disappeared.

“Nngh...”

I heard Alto groaning and immediately snapped back to reality. I was so worried about how he was that I cast aside all the emotions I was about to drown in and looked over toward him. Within the barrier, I confirmed he wasn't hurt and took a deep breath before looking away from him.

I wasn't sure what the trigger was. Had it been created inside of me just now, or had it been there from the beginning? I wasn't sure. But I heard a sort of madness awakening inside me. I shook my head to ignore the voice, to get it to sink deep within my heart, and pretended not to notice it. The quiet voice that had been continuously whispering to me now simply vanished and became quiet.

I took a deep breath and focused on controlling my mana. It seems my mana had been increasing this whole time without my knowledge; since I always wore the ring, I wasn't aware of it. But now it was gone, and I would have to use my own power to compress my mana into its vessel. It took a lot of effort. I wished I had been more grateful for the ring Kyle made for me.

But as I was doing that, the mana was beginning to destroy my body. Any living creature, including dragonfolk, who had an extremely large amount of mana burst forth from their body would be destroyed and die. Of course, if you controlled it to release from a part of your body like when you cast a magic spell, you'd be fine. But it is a problem when it bursts forth from everywhere at once. And that was happening to me right now.

It was pouring out of me faster than I could compress it, and I felt cracks appearing all over my body, and blood started spilling out. A warning bell rang

in my head, telling me I wouldn't make it in time. I was in trouble, so I needed to come up with a different plan. If I couldn't stop it from flowing out of my body in time, I needed to use it first.

I activated my healing abilities and simultaneously compressed my mana. The spell healed my deteriorating body within moments, consuming mana at the same time. My body began to break down again, and I cast the spell again. I continued this cycle for several minutes until the amount of overflowing mana decreased. Finally, I managed to compress it inside the vessel and successfully returned to my usual state.

Along with that, the incomprehensible impulses that swirled inside of me disappeared somewhere. Although the animosity toward the dragon king remained in my heart, it was not murderous. Why were my emotions all over the place? My head was a jumble, but I came to my senses when the girl called out to me.

"Are you...really a human?"

I thought she finally spoke to me because she realized my mana levels had returned to normal. She had noticed my body was being destroyed due to the explosion of mana. I had no idea what was going to happen to me, but now that I was back to normal, I let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry if I scared you. But as I said before, I'm a human."

"I wasn't that frightened. I'm not sure why, but I was just intimidated by the amount of mana that burst forth, so I had a hard time believing the source of that was a human. But if you say you're a human, then you are an odd one, indeed."

I wasn't sure how she could be so calm, but I didn't want to strain our relationship any further, so I continued talking.

"What I said before... I was only joking, so please forget about it." I was still confused as to why that murderous intent had welled up inside me and why I'd blurted out all those things. I didn't *think* I was joking, but it was true that I wanted to pretend it never happened. She didn't seem to think it was a joke, either.

“I’m reflecting on my actions,” I said.

“It’s impossible for the dragonfolk to lose their king. I cannot overlook any malice toward the dragon king...”

I gave a sheepish smile. The dragon king was the one who had threatened her life, yet she wouldn’t back down from that. I thought the loyalty people in this world had for their kingdom and tribes was quite strong, but I had no idea it was *this* strong. I was trying to seduce her, yet now she was wary of me, and honestly, I thought it was impossible now.

I thought perhaps I could take advantage of her loneliness and her feelings regarding her life, but instead all that remained in my heart was regret and self-hatred. Staying here would only cause her more pain. I picked up the broken ring, and I took a step toward Alto to check on him.

“W-wait!” she called out, perhaps sensing I had moved away from the barrier.

“I’m just causing trouble for you. And it seems you’re going to say no anyway, so...”

“Y-yes, but... Please wait.”

She placed a hand on the barrier and begged me to wait. When I saw her, I silently pleaded with her to stop. I wished she would just quietly walk away. Because every time I talked to her, my heart screamed out not to give up, to go and take her by the hand.

“I’ve been rejected and I’m heartbroken. Staying here is too painful,” I said. I saw her body stiffen. Why did I say that? I didn’t want to bargain like this.

“Brokenhearted... N-no, I...”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about it. Just forget my proposal. I’m an adventurer. Once I leave here, I’ll never see you again. I’m sure my broken heart will heal with time. And I know that what I asked of you was totally unreasonable.”

She looked like she was about to burst into tears as she frantically searched for my presence. I looked away from her and cursed myself for not being able to give up on her.

"No, I..."

Beautiful tears fell from her eyes. I wanted to know why she was crying, but at the same time, I didn't. I told her I would make her wish come true, but I also had no idea how she was feeling. The only thing I knew was that I was cornering her. I let out an inward sigh. If I was really suffering from a broken heart, time would heal it.

I went back over to her as she wept and said, "There's something I can't give you even if you wanted it. Since I'm a human, we can't have children together. So if you wish to have them, I can give up on you."

Dragonfolk and humans couldn't have children together. I wanted to give her a chance to run away from me. If she said she wanted them, then I'd give up on her. My heart was twisting with resistance, but I managed to suppress it. If she didn't want a future with me, and if she wanted kids, then I couldn't hurt her anymore.

"Don't worry. Even if you don't enter into a pact with me, you won't die. I promise..."

"Th-that's not what I want..."

Even if you don't want it, I couldn't bear the thought of you dying. I whispered that in my heart and increased my mana to cross the barrier and sent it into the amber necklace she wore around her neck. I did this to enchant the necklace with the power to control her mana.

The magic lifted the amber, and when I was about to pour mana inside it, I suddenly felt Kyle's presence. My mana destroyed the concealment magic that had been cast on the amber, and Kyle's mana emerged, as he had already cast the enchantment spell to contain her mana.

Ahh, I see. That makes sense. My friend Kyle had been the embodiment of kindness, so there was no way he would just abandon someone he cared about. Once I felt Kyle's magic, my heart—which had felt like it was being tossed about in a storm—calmed down like a peaceful forest with a gentle breeze flowing through it.

I needed to stop. I would tell her one more time how I felt. If she rejected me

again, then so be it.

“I love you. All I need is you. That’s enough for me.” I put my whole heart in those words. She slowly looked down and thought about it. I continued. “If you want to leave this place, then I can break the barrier immediately.”

Even though she had experienced unimaginable loneliness, she probably wouldn’t say she wanted to leave.

“I have an apprentice who I vowed to raise as we travel together, so if you want to remain here, I can’t stay here with you. Although I wish I could until you are set free.”

She slowly lifted her head and looked at me with her unseeing eyes. They were serious, as if she was trying to measure my feelings.

“But I can give you anything else you want. With my mana, we can talk to each other without worrying about the barrier. I can even talk to you every day so that you don’t get lonely.”

Her eyes wavered for a moment, and her hands began to tremble. She clasped them together to stop them from shaking.

“And I swear I won’t leave you alone, even after you get out of here.”

She was squeezing her hands together so tightly that they turned white—that’s how conflicted she was.

“If you want to see the world, I’ll guide you. I’m sure everything I see with you would be beautiful. We might see things that will move our hearts...if we’re together.”

“.....”

“Will you let me gift you a name?”

She shook her head, though it was a weak shake.

“Will you let me call you by your name?”

She gritted her teeth and refused to open her mouth. But I could tell her heart was wavering.

“I want you to live with me.”

That's right. If you put all my desires together, that's what it boiled down to. Even though it was selfish, I wanted her to show me a bright smile that was full of life.

After a long silence, I wasn't sure how she'd respond. I didn't know, but then she finally murmured in a quiet voice... "All right."

The moment I realized what she said, I let out the breath I'd been holding in. I infused my mana into my words—the vow of the dragonfolk.

"Upon my name as Setsuna, I give you a name. Your name is Tuuli, which means 'wind.' Like the wind dancing around me, I want you to always be by my side."

"Tuuli?"

"Yes. Do you not like it?"

"I like it...it just sounds strange. Like your name."

I was glad she liked it.

"Then if you like it, please say the words."

She hesitated for a moment, then looked down. She lifted her face in my general direction. "I accept the word 'Tuuli' gifted to me by Setsuna as my name, and...I will be the wind that dances by your side."

With that declaration, her body glowed with a pale light. It seemed to have succeeded. She realized that as well, and she let out a sigh of relief.

I took a deep breath, then moved on to the next part of the contract.

"I vow upon your name Tuuli that I will protect you always and be a good partner to you."

She looked hesitant. "Tuuli." I called her name gently, urging her to continue the vows.

She shook slightly at my voice, then slowly said, "I vow upon your name Setsuna that I will always support you and be a good wife to you."

"This I swear."

“This I swear.”

“I hereby enter into a contract of name and of blood with you.”

“I hereby enter into a contract of name and of blood with you.”

I thought I should seal it with a kiss, so I created a small scratch on my lips. And I carefully erased a tiny part of the barrier—cautiously so that the dragon king who was probably watching over her wouldn’t sense it—then took a step inside the barrier. Tuuli must’ve sensed that, because her unseeing eyes looked slightly confused, and she raised her face. Then I pressed my lips against hers.

I created a ring and put it on her left ring finger. Then I scratched her finger and transferred the blood that flowed out onto my ring finger. I suppressed the urge to embrace her, healed the wound, and backed away. The barrier turned back to normal, separating the two of us.

It all happened within a matter of seconds. I sucked her blood and said, “Now the contract is complete.”

She pressed the top of her hand against her mouth when she realized what I’d done, her cheeks turning crimson. A silver bracelet appeared on her right arm, and one appeared on my right arm as well. It was the dragonfolk’s symbol of a contract of name and blood.

While she was still standing there bewildered, I used magic. I set the amount of mana that had already been stolen from her as the upper limit, and added another feature to the barrier that wouldn’t steal any more mana from her. Even if she received mine and her amount changed, the dragonfolk shouldn’t notice it. To stabilize the amount of mana inside Tuuli, I carved a spell on my body that would control my mana so that too much didn’t flow into her, and so that hers wouldn’t flow into me.

Now Tuuli would not die. Once I knew that, the impatient feeling inside me seemed to vanish. My emotions, which had been so turbulent, suddenly calmed down. I had a feeling the fact that I had now forged such a deep connection with her was what had helped me calm down.

“Wha— How...?”

The fact that she still hadn’t recovered from her bewilderment was adorable.

She stared in astonishment at the silver bracelet on her arm.

“Tuuli. I think your eyesight has healed now... Has it?”

“Huh? But...how?”

“I healed you when we kissed.”

“.....” Once she heard that, she blushed. She was so adorable. I couldn’t take my eyes off her and kept staring at her.

“Setsuna...” She called my name for the first time. The sound of it filled me with happiness I’d never experienced before, and I felt my heart pound. The fact that I felt such joy over a small thing showed me just how much love can affect someone...

“Do you...have a lot of experience with women, Setsuna?”

“What?”

I wasn’t expecting her to ask that. I wondered if the reason why she didn’t say anything about the kiss was because she liked it. That made me happy, but I wasn’t sure how to respond to her question. If it came across like I did, it wasn’t because of me but because of the memories and experiences Hanai and Kyle had given me. Even though that made me feel inwardly disappointed, I tried not to let it show on my face.



“You’re the first woman I ever loved, Tuuli. You’re the first woman I’ve ever kissed, too.”

In my past world, it was everything I could do to stay alive. I’d never had the chance to meet any girls. I smiled tenderly at her, and she froze. I chuckled and once again thought about how much the barrier was in my way.

The ring on her finger caught my eye, and I pretended to take something out of my bag while I made a ring that would control mana and then put it on my ring finger. I thought I could control it without one, but when I thought about how much my feelings had exploded before, I thought I should probably keep wearing one for the time being. Once she saw me put the ring on, she looked down at her own left ring finger.

“Setsuna, what is this ring?”

“Proof that you are my partner. Only you or I can take it off.”

I had enchanted her ring with magical defense, physical defense, and the ability to detect her location, so I could be sure she wouldn’t get hurt.

“Setsuna... Are you sure you want me? I...,” she murmured as she stared at the ring. Apparently, she was beginning to recover from the shock and confusion.

“You’re the only one I want.”

I interrupted her before she could say anything else and stared into her beautiful blue-gray eyes. She hesitated for a moment then smiled back at me. That smile told me everything about how she was feeling right now. Her feelings were not the same as mine at all. It had been too sudden, so how could I blame her? I let out a heavy sigh.

I would take things slowly from now on. Just as I decided that, I suddenly sensed an uneasy presence behind me and turned around to see Alto standing there, his face pale.

“Master! Who is that girl?!” he shouted.

I felt like covering my face with my hands and hanging my head.

That was the first thing he said after regaining consciousness, and I suppressed the urge to sigh. "Morning, Alto. How are you feeling?" I asked, looking at him. Suddenly, I realized he was weeping, and my eyes widened in shock. I had no idea why he was crying.

Tuuli looked back and forth between Alto and me with concern.

"Alto, why are you crying? Are you in pain?" I walked over to him and knelt so I could look at his face. It didn't seem like he was hurt, but I was worried that I'd overlooked something. I caressed his head and waited for his answer.

Finally, he said in a choked voice, "Because...I'm the one...who's in love with you, Master."

"Huh?" My body froze with shock. Love? Alto was in love with me?! I looked over at Tuuli, whose eyes were wide with surprise as she watched us.

"Alto, what do you think being in love means?" I asked gently, trying to keep my composure. I wished it was just a misunderstanding, but I could feel sweat dripping down my back while I waited for him to answer.

"Being in love is when you don't want to leave someone...and you want to stay with them forever. Dahlia told me," he said firmly, his words interrupted by sobs.

I couldn't believe I was still hearing Dahlia's name after all this time. But I was relieved to hear that his idea was a misunderstanding. I looked at Tuuli, who was on the other side of the barrier, and she was looking at Alto with a very tender smile. An expression she never showed me when we were alone. Apparently, seeing a childlike Alto had eased her anxiety. I was happy to see that change in her. Although I was the one who had made her anxious in the first place...

"Tuuli, what are you thinking about?"

"I was just wondering if he's my rival."

I wondered what would happen if she *did* have a rival for my affections, but I pushed those thoughts out of my mind. I switched gears and looked away from Tuuli back at Alto when he spoke.

“Master... You don’t want me anymore?” His ears lay flat on his head, tears in his eyes as he stared at me earnestly. I remembered the book Dahlia had given me and then decided to answer Alto. I felt like this was all Dahlia’s fault, and I couldn’t believe we were still experiencing the aftereffects from that incident.

“Alto, I would never feel that way. I would never ever dislike you. You’re my precious apprentice.”

He didn’t respond right away. He glanced at Tuuli. “What about that girl?”

“I want to tell you something first. Is that okay?”

Alto looked at me sadly and nodded.

“When you think about me, does your heart pound very fast?”

“No. When I think about you, I feel happy.”

“I see. Then I think your feelings are something different from being in love.”

He wanted something else from me. Something that his parents should have given him.

“So then what is it?”

“The love you feel for me is the kind of love you feel for family.”

“Family?”

“That’s right. To put it simply, I’m acting as a mother and father for you.”

“Dad...”

Alto stopped crying, clenched his fists and looked down. To him, fathers were cruel. So maybe he wouldn’t understand this analogy. Still... I wanted him to know the warmth of a family someday. He wasn’t just my apprentice, and someone just as important to me as family.

“Would you like to be my family, Alto? Because I want you...and Tuuli over there to be my family.”

I meant every word I said. I had been all alone in this world. I was an outsider here. Alto was beastfolk, Tuuli was dragonfolk, and I was human... But I wasn’t normal. Because a normal human wouldn’t be able to live here for thousands of years like I could.

The only ones who could, would become heroes. And even though I'd been summoned here as a hero, I hadn't been able to become one. So no matter how you looked at it, I didn't fit into any one category. I was all alone in the world.

Perhaps that was why I felt such a strong attachment to Alto and Tuuli as family. We weren't blood related, and we were all from different races. But even then...I wanted our hearts to be connected.

Alto slowly looked up and stared into my eyes. "I don't really know what family means. But I want to be with you. So I want to be your family."

"It's okay if you don't understand right now. We can slowly become a family together." I looked into his eyes and smiled. He smiled in return, and I nodded, then stood up. I glanced over at Tuuli, who was crying. "Tuuli?" I called her name, but she didn't answer. "Tuuli."

"Ah..."

It seemed she couldn't speak. She just looked down at the ground and wept. Alto appeared concerned and tried to walk over to her, but the barrier stood in his way. He was surprised at the transparent wall and looked at me.

"Tuuli can't leave that place."

"....."

Alto became sad and gazed at her. He must've been thinking of when he was a slave and locked up in a cage. I caressed his head and felt his body relax.

"What's wrong, Tuuli?"

"I'm...sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. Just tell me why you're crying."

I studied her blue-gray eyes and said this as gently as I could.

"I thought...I'd never...have a family again..."

When I wished to become family with her, I had a feeling Tuuli gained hope for a future. I wished I could hug her. But the barrier stood in the way. It was frustrating not to be able to comfort her.

Alto crouched and looked at Tuuli with a worried expression. She noticed and smiled tenderly at him.

“Hello. My name is Tuuli. Who are you?”

“I’m Alto.”

“Alto? That’s a nice name.”

He must’ve liked his name being complimented, because his tail thumped against the ground. Tuuli casually looked at his tail and smiled again.

“Master gave it to me,” he said happily. Tuuli looked surprised, and there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. Perhaps it made her heart ache that his parents hadn’t given him his name. But she didn’t say anything about it.

“I see. He gave you a very nice name. Setsuna gave me my name, too. Just like you.”

He looked at me as if to say “Really?” I nodded. There was a gentle air about Tuuli as she tenderly looked at Alto while she spoke to him. A completely different feeling than when she spoke with me. Maybe the way she was when she spoke with Alto was her true personality. I wished one day she would speak to me that way, too.

“The origin of my name is ‘wind.’ What’s yours, Alto?”

“Origin?”

“Hmm... What does your name mean?”

Alto’s ears moved busily around, and he looked at me expectantly. “Master, what does Alto mean?”

I covered my mouth with my hand and chuckled, then answered, “Hmm? It doesn’t mean anything.”

Of course it had a meaning. He looked at me in disbelief.

“Setsuna...? You shouldn’t tease Alto.” Tuuli gave me a wry smile and lectured me for teasing Alto, so I stopped laughing.

I took a harp and a magical tool out of my bag. Tuuli didn’t seem surprised that I’d taken such a large object from my bag. I wondered if she’d seen Kyle’s

bag before.

“Alto has two meanings. The first is a word that refers to how high a woman’s singing voice is. A high singing voice is a soprano, and a low singing voice is called alto.”

“High and low?” It seemed Alto didn’t understand this concept.

“That’s right. Tuuli is a woman with a high voice, and Rayna is a woman with a low voice. Do you understand?”

Alto looked confused, but then he gradually seemed to understand, because his tail started wagging in circles and he shouted, “I get it! Tuuli is a soprano, and Rayna is an alto! Dahlia is also an alto!”

“Huh? Ah, yes...”

I felt a little uncomfortable, but I didn’t correct him and just gave a vague answer. Tuuli gave me a puzzled look, but I decided I’d have to tell her later.

“Anyway, when sopranos and altos sing in an ensemble, the sopranos often sing beautiful melodies, like this...”

I played a simple tune on the harp. Alto and Tuuli looked surprised, staring intently at me. I’d never played the harp before in my previous life. But my fingers moved so naturally that it was like the music loved my body. I had a feeling that either Hanai or Kyle had been a good musician. It always managed to surprise me day to day when I discovered all the other experiences they’d gone through besides just combat. They really gave something special to me. And I gratefully etched it onto my heart so I wouldn’t forget.

“And now I’ll play the alto melody for that song.”

The sound was so different from the soprano that they both looked a little confused. I gave an inward laugh at their reactions.

“And when you put the two together, it sounds like this.”

I used the magical tool to play back the recording I made of the soprano section, then I played the alto melody along with it. It was a simple arrangement, but they both looked shocked.

“Well? The soprano part was lovely, but do you see how much better it

sounds with the alto part playing along with it?”

They both nodded.

“This is just my own personal interpretation, but I feel like the alto part assists the soprano’s melody.”

“Assists?”

“Yes. It supports it.”

“Oh, is that the other meaning?”

“The other meaning is the name of an instrument. It’s the kind that tends to be in the background, but it plays a very important role.”

“An important role?” Alto gave me a puzzled look.

I nodded and continued. “That’s right. It’s an instrument that has the role of supporting ones that make the loudest sounds. Although it’s rarely the star of the show, it’s tasked with a very important role.”

“Important...”

“So the origin of your name has to do with ‘sound.’ I wanted you to grow up to be the kind of adult who can support the people you love, and that’s why I named you ‘Alto.’”

Both meanings derived from words that originated on Earth, but I didn’t need to tell them that. Alto silently digested what I’d just said, and he seemed to be trying to understand. I quietly watched over him.

“Setsuna...,” Tuuli called to me in a quiet voice, so as not to interrupt Alto’s thoughts.

“Yes?”

“You’re a very good musician.”

I was surprised that she complimented me, but I hid it and joked, “Have you fallen for me a bit yet?”

“Honestly...”

She turned away in a huff and pouted, which was very adorable. I felt my

heart melt and was once again reminded that I had it bad for her. Did love really take effect so quickly? There were so many things I found bewildering about the way it could sway someone's feelings, but at the same time, I wanted to cherish it because it was my first time.

"Master." Alto's voice brought me back to reality.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for my name." His eyes looked very serious, and I just smiled and nodded. I would cherish the fact that he thanked me. I was happy because it felt like he was saying he would cherish the name I gave him. I felt warm inside as I started to put the harp back inside my bag.

The two of them blurted out at the same time, "Ah!"

I was surprised at their reaction and paused, looking at them. "What?"

"More, Master!"

"Will you play some more, Setsuna?"

They both asked me the same question. I grinned and replied, "No."

They looked astonished. They probably hadn't expected me to turn them down. I had a feeling they were thinking the same thing. I put the harp away and called Alto's name. "Alto."

"Yes?"

I got his attention and then formally introduced Tuuli.

"Tuuli is my wife now."

"Huh?! Not your girlfriend?!"

"Sort of. She's my wife."

Tuuli had a bit of a conflicted smile. I pretended not to notice it. I knew Dahlia had taught Alto what a girlfriend and a wife were, so he easily understood what I meant. At least I thought he did. If he asked me the details, I'd tell him about it. Alto looked back and forth between Tuuli and me and then at the matching bracelets on our wrists. His face clouded over.

"What's wrong, Alto?"

He looked depressed all of a sudden, and Tuuli guessed the reason. "Setsuna, I think Alto is feeling left out and is sad about that."

Alto's ears lay flat on his head, and he nodded weakly.

"Yes, but I can't let him wear a bracelet on his right hand."

"I know, but..."

A bracelet on his right arm should be reserved for Alto and his partner, so I couldn't just have him wear one now. But as I saw how depressed he seemed, I felt bad for him. I stuck my hand into my bag and made a ring and put it on his left ring finger. There wasn't any kind of deep meaning to rings in this world. Alto looked puzzled when he saw it.

"Master?"

"Look at my and Tuuli's fingers."

His gaze shifted to my ring finger, and Tuuli's ring finger.

"This is proof that the three of us are a family. We're wearing matching rings."

Alto stared at his ring, then looked at my ring and Tuuli's ring. Then he looked at his own ring again and grinned. Tuuli also smiled happily when she saw Alto smiling.

"Master, Miss Tuuli. Congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you."

"Thank you, Alto. You can just call me Tuuli."

I watched as they chatted happily with each other, and I vowed to myself to protect my new family by any means necessary.

We'd become a family for many different reasons, but despite all that, I was very happy. However, there was one problem. I wanted to be able to live with Tuuli and Alto together somewhere, but I knew I couldn't. I doubted Tuuli would leave this place. And Alto and I would return to our journey.

I was anxious about leaving Tuuli alone. As I contemplated, I looked around the cave again. She was all alone in this big place. Even if it was the punishment

she'd been given, I didn't want her to be by herself. Just then, I heard Tuuli ask Alto something.

"What's that sticking out of your pocket, Alto?"

"My pocket?"

"Is it a doll? I see a little hand sticking out."

A doll's hand sticking out of his pocket? Alto didn't own a doll. I was curious about what he had, so I looked over at him. My eyes widened when I saw something jutting out. Come to think of it, right before Alto fell off the cliff, he had reached down to pick something up.

"Alto... Why did you do something dangerous that caused you to fall off the cliff?"

"I'm sorry, Master."

"I know. Just be more careful next time."

His ears lay flat on his head as he apologized, and I could tell he felt badly about it, so I stopped lecturing him.

"So why did you fall?"

"I saw this walking and it was almost about to fall, so I picked it up," he said, taking it out of his pocket and handing it to me. He must've tucked it away right before he fell. I stared at the object. It did look like a doll. Even though Tuuli was behind the barrier, she was looking at it with interest.

"What is this?" I showed the strange object to Tuuli.

"It's a spirit, although it's unconscious."

"A spirit? This thing?"

Alto's eyes sparkled when he heard the word *spirit*. He stared at the doll.

"Yes. She'll regain consciousness if you give her some mana," Tuuli said, so I decided to try it out.

"Oh, but when you... Ah!"

Before Tuuli could finish, I had already given the doll mana. I had a bad feeling

about this...

“What were you saying?” I asked her.

“Master!” Suddenly I heard a voice that wasn’t Alto’s or Tuuli’s. I thought it was just my imagination, but then Tuuli said without a hint of remorse...

“When you give it mana, you enter into a contract with the spirit.”

“Tuuli... Why didn’t you say that sooner?”

“Because you already gave it to the doll before I could finish!” she said with a wry smile.

“Master!”

“You should’ve interrupted me...”

“Master!!”

I’d tried to pretend I didn’t hear it, but I had to give up on that idea once it started shouting. I looked down at the spirit and resisted one last time. “Who are you talking to?”

“Why, you of course, Master!”

“It’s already decided that I’m your master?” I wish we could pretend like that didn’t happen...

“Of course!”

But I guess that wasn’t going to work.

“Alto was the one who saved you,” I said, looking in Alto’s direction.

The spirit grinned at him. “Thank you so much for saving me from danger, Mister Alto!”

The tiny spirit gave an elegant bow of gratitude to Alto from the palm of my hand.

“Sure. I’m glad I was able to help.” Alto smiled softly, happy that she was safe.

“Tuuli, are spirits always this polite?”

The information I had about spirits didn’t match up with the one I saw in front of me. I found a memory showing Kyle having entered a contract with a spirit,

but for some reason information about them was very scarce. And the information I did have portrayed them as quite rude with big attitudes. There wasn't much about what happened once you entered a contract with them, either. It seemed Kyle wasn't very interested in spirits.

"Newborn spirits' personalities are determined by the mana of their pactmakers."

"What does that mean?"

"Originally, only spirits of this size existed. But they develop their reason for existence once they are given mana."

Now I understood why the spirits in my database were all rude and headstrong—it was because Kyle had given them mana.

"She's acting this way because I gave her mana?"

"That's right," Tuuli said with a giggle. That was the first time I'd seen her laugh, and I was entranced. She noticed my gaze and looked at me, but I shook my head and turned my focus back to the spirit.

I held my breath and put the spirit, who was staring up at me, onto the ground. I thought for a moment and asked her what she could do.

"I am a water and earth spirit. So my specialty is growing plants!" the tiny spirit said proudly. *Hmm, her specialty is growing plants.* But how could she grow plants when she was so small?

"Will you grow bigger?"

"I can grow bigger if you give me a name, Master."

"Another name..."

The spirit looked at me expectantly. I could feel Alto's excitement. Tuuli looked at Alto and the spirit and smiled at them tenderly. I watched her and thought of a name for the spirit. Since her specialty was plants, I tried to think of a name that would fit that. *Hmm, plants, plants...*

Alto's and Tuuli's names both came from my previous world. I wasn't sure

why, but I just didn't like the idea of giving them names from this world. So I chose a word from my old world for the spirit, too.

"Kukka. Your name is Kukka."

"Kukka?"

"That's right."

The spirit repeated the name *Kukka, Kukka...*over and over again seriously.

"Setsuna, what is the origin of Kukka's name?" Tuuli asked.

"Flower. It means 'flower.' Perfect for her, isn't it?"

Kukka listened to our conversation, and after she heard the meaning of her name, she smiled rapturously. I wondered if I had made a mistake.

"Thank you, Master!" She ignored my suspicious look and thanked me, then declared, "I have been gifted the name Kukka by my master! Upon this name, the contract is complete!"

Her body glowed, and her form became clearer. Once the light subsided, a little girl who looked about three years old stood in front of us. The spirit had been the size of my palm, so her sudden growth had Tuuli and Alto staring at her in surprise. However, I was preoccupied with something else.

Contract...complete?

"Hey, Kukka? What do you mean by 'contract complete'? What would've happened if I hadn't named you?"

"I would've died naturally."

She got me. She was calling me Master before I gave her a name, so I thought the contract was already complete after I gave her mana. But apparently, that wasn't the case. I regretted not doing more research before I gave her mana.

But it was too late for that now, so I thought about seeing if there was any way to break the contract, but I decided to give up on that. I could tell Tuuli and Alto were already fond of her. Although I had some reservations, I decided to just accept the new situation.

Plus, it would be good to have Kukka around. Then Tuuli wouldn't have to be

alone. I had a feeling, however, if I said I would leave Kukka here, Tuuli would feel guilty and think it was her fault. I didn't want that to happen, and an idea came to me.

"Well, now that I've entered into a contract with a spirit, I'll have to find a place for you to work, Kukka," I said with a smile. She looked away with a guilty expression.

"I'm sorry," she said in a quiet voice.



I knew she was apologizing because of the underhanded method she'd gone about getting the contract.

"It's too late to apologize. The contract is complete after all, right?" I said, and she looked depressed.

"Master, don't tease Kukka!" Alto shouted. Tuuli smiled faintly because that's what she had said to me about Alto.

"Well, I guess this means Alto has a little sister now. The bigger our family is, the more fun it'll be. So don't worry about me being mad."

Now that Kukka knew she had been forgiven, she gave me an adorable smile. I made a ring for her just as I had done with Alto and put it on her tiny finger. I etched another spell on it. She looked at me sadly, but I had no intention of breaking the spell.

Now that we were family, I told Kukka to call me by my name, but she stubbornly refused. She had tears in her eyes as she continued to protest, so I figured I wouldn't be able to change her mind and just accepted that was the nature of a contract between a spirit and their master. Tuuli told me that Kukka was just like me, but I refused to accept that.

Alto and Kukka showed off their rings to each other and began chatting about all sorts of things. Even though they had just met, they seemed close already. Tuuli looked very happy to see that. I wondered if she liked children.

I cast a sidelong glance at the three of them and began constructing a magic spell. Normally, I cast Wind magic, but this time I constructed spells using other types that weren't Void or Time magic.

I was trying to create a patch for growing herbs in the cave. I checked the distance from the entrance up to where Tuuli's barrier started. For fertile soil, I used Earth magic, and for a constant supply of water, I used Water magic. I also needed to create a suitable climate for growing medicinal herbs from the entrance to the barrier, so I used Wind, Light, and Darkness magic. I made sure the temperature difference didn't affect the surroundings. With that, we'd be able to grow medicinal herbs from cold regions as well as warm regions.

Finally, I put a barrier up around the entire cave so only those who were given permission could enter. Then I added magic to it that I thought would be needed, and it turned into a wonderful herb garden.

I decided this was where I would leave Kukka. It was troublesome to have to go pick herbs for every quest, so if I told Tuuli this was my reason for leaving Kukka here, she might accept it.

Once I was finished with everything, all the various spells I'd cast activated, and the cave glowed brightly, filled with light. Tuuli and Kukka thought it was beautiful and let out gasps of wonderment. Alto was interested in the finished herb garden and asked what I made.

“What did you make, Master?”

“This is an herb garden.”

“Herb garden?”

“That’s right.”

He nodded, and I turned toward Kukka.

“Kukka, your specialty is growing plants, right?”

“Yes!”

“I’ll send you seeds and bulbs, so can you grow them here for me? That way I won’t have to travel so far every time I need to pick herbs for a quest.”

“Of course!” Kukka stared at me and nodded, then gave me an enthusiastic reply. She came over to me, and I patted her head. She snuggled up against me happily, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Setsuna...”

Tuuli placed her hand against the barrier and called my name. I looked into her eyes and walked over to her, placing my hand on the barrier as well. We stared at each other in silence for a few moments.

“I’d like you to let Kukka stay here with you. You won’t be as lonely with her around, right? I know how lonely it is when you’re all by yourself.”

Tears streamed down Tuuli’s face. Alto and Kukka quickly rushed over when

they saw she was crying. They looked up and scolded me.

“Master!”

“Master!”

Tuuli spoke before they could say anything else. “No...I’m crying because I’m happy.”

Alto and Kukka had been chatting, so they hadn’t heard what I said to Tuuli. They seemed confused by the fact that she was crying out of happiness, but since she said it was all right, they didn’t say another word. While they tried to comfort her, I looked around the space on the other side of the barrier.

“Tuuli, where do you sleep? Is there a bed over there in a place where I can’t see?”

Tuuli looked away. “Y-yes...”

She was lying. It was so obvious I had to sigh.

“Really?”

“...No.”

I didn’t press her any further. I looked behind her again and wondered what to do. I made a list of all the things she needed in my head and decided to use Materialize to create the items. That ability was extremely handy because I could make anything I needed.

I was grateful for Kyle’s ability. With it, I made a carpet, a bed, a low table, and cushions, and transferred them over to Tuuli’s side. I might have missed some furnishings, but it became more like a bedroom. I also made a decorative box, and inside I put envelopes, stationery, and pens, then placed it down on top of the table. Then I made a magic circle and engraved it onto the table so that Tuuli would be able to send me letters which would transfer to my bag.

“S-Setsuna?”

“Yes?”

“Where did all this come from?!”

“You’re amazing, Master! Please make some for me, too!” Kukka asked

cheerfully with no hint of shame or hesitation at all. But I was planning on making some for her even if she hadn't asked.

I looked at Tuuli and responded, "It's a secret." She pouted a little, but when she realized I wasn't planning on telling her, she didn't press me further. I knew she wanted to know who or what I really was, but I wasn't sure how to answer her. Because not even I knew the answer to that.

"Please make some for me, too, Master!" Kukka interrupted my thoughts and was hopping around near my feet. She looked happy, but I could see a hint of worry in her eyes. I wondered if spirits shared the emotions of their pactmakers. I pushed that thought aside. When I'd made her ring, I'd cast a spell on it to stop the flow of emotions from me to her, but I must not have been able to stop it entirely. I told her I was all right and used Materialize to make the same items for her.

I engraved a magic circle on her table, too, so that she could communicate with me as well. Now I'd be able to send her herbs, bulbs, seeds, and letters. I thought for a moment, then decided to make it so that Tuuli and Kukka could also send each other things.

"Master. I want a tea set! It's necessary to make this cave comfortable to live in!" Kukka said brightly. The bleak cave had become a double room with a barrier in between, so although it looked a lot more comfortable, there was nothing to pass leisure time with. Although she had the appearance of a three-year-old, from what she had said and done so far, she seemed much older than that mentally. I didn't know much about spirits, but I was going to find out from now on.

"Would you like one, too, Tuuli?"

"What? There's water inside the barrier, so I'm fine..."

"Fine isn't good enough. You like drinking tea, don't you?" At first, she shook her head, but finally she relented and decided to be honest with me and nodded. I made four tea sets with different designs on them and two shelves to put them on. She could decide which one to use depending on her mood. I thought little details like this would be nice for them. I put the tea sets on the shelves with four cups and sent them over to Tuuli's and Kukka's sides of the

room respectively. I put everything else they'd need for tea on the shelves, too.

"When you put water inside the teapots, it'll automatically boil." Kukka looked surprised to hear that and happily hugged my leg.

"Thank you, Master!"

She was so happy that I thought spirits must really like tea. I was glad she liked it so much. Tuuli went over to the shelf and gently took a cup in her hand, holding it like it was a treasure. She seemed to be enjoying the feel of it.

That's right... This cave was completely empty, so she had no possessions except for the clothes she wore and the amber pendant. The only other things inside her barrier had been earth and rocks. I watched with serious eyes as she touched the cup, then turned to Kukka.

"You can get your own water, right?"

"Yes!"

"Well then, I'll send you different herbs and leaves that you can use for teas, as well as seeds so you can plant your own. For today, you can drink the tea I have. Will you make it, Kukka?" I handed her some tea leaves I had in my bag.

"Yes! Leave it to me. I shall take the used tea leaves and return them to the earth!"

"All right, then."

Kukka nodded, and I took a cup out of my bag. Alto took out the cup he'd bought in Kutt and handed it to Kukka. She happily put the tea leaves in the cups and immediately set to work making the tea.

"Will you send yours over here, too, Miss Tuuli?"

"I put a magic circle on your table that will send objects. Just set it on top," I explained, and Tuuli set the cup she was holding down on it. The magic circle activated, and it appeared on top of Kukka's table. Kukka was focused on making the tea, and Alto was focused on her. He must've been fascinated by the new magical tool, or he really wanted to drink tea.

I took several different kinds of snacks out of my bag and handed them to Alto, asking him to put them on plates.

“There are so many! You want me to put all of these on plates?”

“Yes, let’s all eat together. Will you do it?”

“Yes!”

He took the plates and the snacks, and carefully counted the snacks out evenly so everyone got an equal amount.

“Do you need anything, Tuuli?”

“What do you mean?” I figured she would say she didn’t need anything, but I wanted to ask anyway.

“I was just wondering if you wanted anything else for your room. It still feels a little empty.”

“...I’m fine.” Her eyes softened as she looked at me. I could tell she was happy that I was being so considerate of her. But I could see that deep within her eyes, her emotions were different from mine. Even though I knew this was my own selfishness, I decided not to comment on it for now, and I thought of how else I could furnish Tuuli’s room.

I’d given her the necessities, but it still felt rather bare. I guess that couldn’t be helped seeing as how it was a cave, but I thought I should make some decorations. I wondered what women would like, and I suddenly remembered a conversation I had with Kyoka when she was in junior high.

“Brother! This room is lonely, so I brought you some stuffed animals!”

“It’s not lonely at all. Take that back home.”

“What?! But these are the best! They’re super popular at school right now!”

She pulled a colorfully wrapped package out of her bag. It was a stuffed rabbit. I told her I didn’t want it and asked her to bring it home, but she put it in my room anyway. She said it was popular among the girls at her school. I wondered if all girls liked stuffed animals like that.

I decided to make a stuffed rabbit just like the one Kyoka had given me, but I wondered how big I should make it. What did Kyoka say...? Oh, I remember.

“I want a big stuffed animal! So big I can hug it!” A stuffed animal big enough

to hug. But how big was that? As big as me? No, that was too large. Maybe around the same size as Tuuli? I used Materialize and created a stuffed rabbit identical to the one Kyoka had, but around the same height as Tuuli.

Alto, Tuuli, and Kukka were all surprised when they saw the huge stuffed animal suddenly appear in my arms. The first one to move was Alto. His tail began to wag busily, and he came over to me.

“Master! What is that? What is that?!” He was very curious because he’d never seen a stuffed animal before. Meanwhile, Kukka was staring at me coldly. What was that all about?

“Master. Don’t tell me you plan on giving that creepy stuffed animal to Miss Tuuli?” Her words were merciless.

I looked over at Tuuli, and she looked hesitant. “...Setsuna?” She called my name, and sounded troubled. I realized I’d totally missed the mark. But Alto seemed to really want the stuffed animal I’d created. I failed to mention that the stuffed animal Kyoka thought was so adorable was a rabbit whose eyes were rolled back, with a bloody ax stuck in its head. Anyway, I pulled out the ax and made the blood disappear, but Kukka still glared at me.

I suppose it did look rather creepy. But Kyoka thought it was cute, and she told me it was the most popular stuffed animal at school. There must be something I didn’t get because I was a man. Suddenly, it struck me...what if Kyoka just had really strange tastes? Then again, I didn’t want to think such a thing about my own sister...

I’d gone to the trouble of creating the stuffed animal, but neither Kukka nor Tuuli seemed crazy about it, so I dangled it in front of Alto. He looked at me with glee and took the stuffed animal, then hugged it. But since the stuffed animal was taller than him, he ended up dragging it on the ground...

Now that I had given Alto the stuffed rabbit, I decided to make Tuuli a stuffed bear the size of Alto. I thought it was pretty cute, and finally Tuuli and Kukka agreed.

I made Kukka a tiny stuffed horse. If you held something small in front of its mouth, it would eat it. And to get the object back, you just had to pull on the reins, and the stuffed horse would spit it back out. I thought maybe I should

make Kukka a bag like mine and Alto's, which could fit any amount of objects inside it.

Magic and abilities really were so handy. I knew I was unique, but right now I pushed that thought out of my head. My family was showing their stuffed animals to each other and chatting happily. I watched them as I sipped the tea that Kukka made us. I quietly listened to their conversation. A few moments later, Tuuli quietly slipped away from Alto and sat down near me. The barrier was still in between us, of course.

"Setsuna...thank you," she said with a smile. I looked into her eyes and smiled back. But...there was no happiness in her eyes. "Setsuna, I..."

"Tuuli. Let's talk about that after Alto and Kukka go to sleep." I shook my head as I looked into her eyes. I had a feeling I knew what she was going to say. She closed her mouth and glanced over at them, then nodded.

After a simple dinner, Alto and Kukka began playing with the stuffed rabbit. At first, they were playing very quietly, but eventually they got wound up, and it seemed like they were rampaging rather than playing toward the end. The stuffed bunny with its white eyes went sailing across the room, its neck flopping around at weird angles. I wouldn't be surprised if the rabbit got destroyed in no time.

To Alto, the stuffed animal wasn't to love but to throw around and play with. As I watched them play with it, I thought of a dog and a child playing with a toy. A puppy... Well, he *was* a baby wolf, so I suppose that made sense. At this rate, the stuffed animal was about to rip apart, so I cast a protection spell on it. I cast one on Tuuli's and Kukka's stuffed animals as well, just in case. Now they wouldn't get destroyed or get dirty.

After they had played for a while, it was quite late, and Alto and Kukka looked exhausted and fell asleep. They lay side by side in Kukka's bed, but Alto had turned into a baby wolf and was curled up. I was a little worried about him showing his wolf form to Kukka and Tuuli, but I hadn't hidden my magic or abilities in front of them, so Alto probably thought it was okay. Tuuli looked at Alto in his baby wolf form, her eyes sparkling. It was really adorable. If not for

the barrier, I'm sure she would've wanted to hug him.

They had played so wildly that I had a feeling Alto and Kukka would sleep until morning without waking up. Still, I made a magic barrier around their bed so that they wouldn't hear us talking or interrupt us.

"Now...shall we talk, Tuuli?"

After the two of them fell asleep, she looked very depressed and wouldn't talk to me.

"....."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

She was lost in thought for a while, and I waited for her to speak. She wrapped both hands around her teacup and lifted it to her mouth. It seemed like she couldn't muster the courage to go through with the talk. I had an idea of what she was thinking about, so I decided to start the conversation for her.

"You don't want to be with me, do you?"

She looked up at me for a moment, then quickly averted her gaze.

"The reason you think that is because you feel guilty for being happy, don't you?"

She didn't answer, but I could tell that was the case by the way her body trembled.

"I can understand why you feel guilty and regretful. I think you'll probably be dealing with that for dozens, maybe even hundreds of years. You won't ever forget the crime you committed."

"....."

"I can't empathize with that. But I want you to enjoy your life from now on. I know you won't forget it, and I know you shouldn't forget it, but I want you to cherish your own life."

She didn't look up or answer me.

"When I asked you if you had a bed, you said you did. The reason you said that was because you thought you didn't have the right to sleep in a warm

bed."

She quietly listened to what I had to say, her shoulders flinching.

"Every time I made you a new piece of furniture, your eyes clouded over even more."

She began to weep, probably because of all the emotions swirling inside her.

"You pretended to be happy in front of Alto and Kukka, but honestly, every time I gave you something, you were filled with guilt. I could tell. You don't think you should be happy. But I don't want you to sleep on the ground."

She looked down, her tears falling and wetting the ground. Her shoulders were shaking with every sob, and I wished I could comfort her, but I suppressed the urge. I told myself I couldn't break the barrier and focused on controlling myself.

"Tuuli. This is all my selfishness. Even if you feel guilty, I'm going to take you by the hand and force you. It'll be all my fault."

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and shook her head. Her eyes were dark, as if she were staring into an abyss of despair. Instead of continuing to live to pay for her crimes, to me, it seemed as if she was about to give up on everything.

"But someday... Yes, someday, if you feel like the pain of living with your crimes is too much, then I'll go with you. After all, we made a pact together, and our lives are entwined now."

"What?"

"You're such a crybaby...and I know how lonely you are, so I'll die with you so that you won't be lonely again."

"....."

"I hope you'll at least wait until Alto comes of age, though. But I'll work hard to make you glad that you met me. I hope you can come journey with Alto and Kukka and me."

Tuuli looked at the children and smiled. I wondered if she was imagining Alto's future or thinking about traveling with us. I felt a little relieved when I

saw that. All I wanted was for her to accept happiness.

“Setsuna...”

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Maybe it wasn’t much at all, but she said my name in a calm voice.

“Yes?”

Her blue-gray eyes looked straight at me as she spoke. “Even still...I shouldn’t see you until the thousand years are up.”

I knew that’s what she wanted from the beginning. I understood why, and I was fond of her for thinking that way. And I wanted to support her.

“I want to serve my time until the end.”

“I know.”

But whether I could accept it was a different story. She looked relieved to hear my answer, though. *Hey, what are you relieved about? That I accepted your suggestion? Or that you won’t have to see me for two years?* I didn’t ask her. It was pointless to, after all.

“And...”

She started to say something, but I interrupted her. “You’re going to say not only will you not see me for two years, but you don’t want to talk to me for two years, either.”

I understood what she was thinking. I stopped talking, but I knew what she was going to say. “Please don’t worry about me for the next two years.” But I couldn’t do that. Even though Kukka would be with her, I didn’t want her to be in pain, and I didn’t want her to be lonely.

But even if I voiced my concerns, I knew she wouldn’t change her mind. Even though she knew I would worry, it was clear she’d tell me not to. That was why I decided not to touch on that matter. I didn’t like it for another reason.

“I think of you as my wife. So I want you to tell me... How do dragonfolk spend their honeymoons?”

“What...?”

Her face turned bright red, but then all the color drained from her face, and her body began to tremble.

“Because...I have feelings like that for you,” I said frankly.

She trembled and continued listening to me. “I want to break this barrier so much I can’t explain it. The woman I love is sitting next to me crying, but I can’t even hug her. Right now I’m desperately suppressing the urge to touch you,” I said with a smile. But for some reason she had a frightened expression. Maybe she realized my smile wasn’t genuine. Once I saw that she was scared, I regained my composure. I let out a sigh to calm my emotions.

“I know you want to serve out your sentence. If I were in your shoes, I’d probably make the same decision. But not being able to see you for two years is just too sad. I’m going to want to hear your voice. Because I love you,” I told her honestly.

She didn’t nod. But she didn’t look away, either. I knew she wasn’t rejecting me. But I also knew she didn’t love me. She didn’t hate me, either. Even so, I let out an inward sigh.

I knew I’d want to see her while I was traveling. However, I knew that coming here would be ignoring her wishes. So I had to stay strong.

“I’ll promise not to see you for two years. So could you at least listen to one request?”

The color came back to her face. I felt sad, but I continued. “Do you know how this barrier was made?”

“I still haven’t learned how to control magic, so I wasn’t taught any magic before I came here,” she said, shaking her head.

“Then I’ll explain it. This barrier is Dragon magic, but that doesn’t mean it’s supported by your mana. I’ve never seen a barrier like this before, but it uses mana from the sun, moon, and stars. So the barrier thins during a new moon, and its effects are temporarily weakened.”

Dragon magic is naturally replenished by nature, so the mana of the sun,

moon, and stars are often used for long-term magic spells such as this one. As long as the light of the sun, moon, and stars shines down upon this world, they will supply mana.

“So Tuuli... Please let me hear your voice on the nights of the new moon.”

Her eyes widened. I looked down and created an earring, then gave it to her.

“If you pour mana into this, you’ll be able to talk to me when the barrier is weak during the new moon. Even if it’s just one night, that’s fine. I’ll call you... and you can call me, too...”

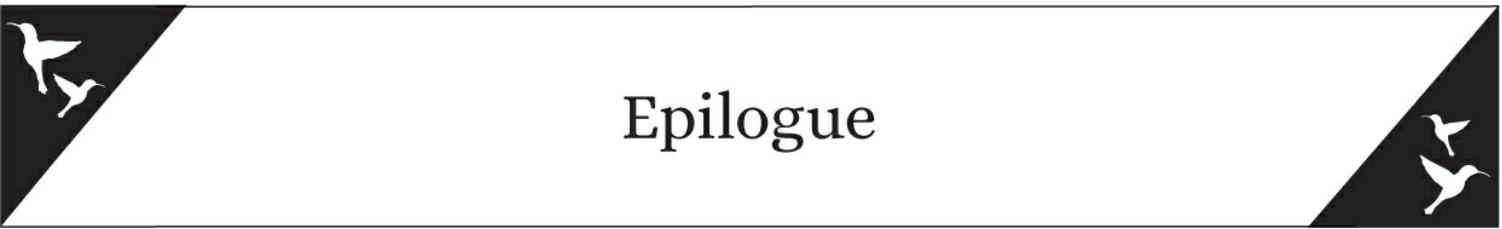
Call my name. She stared at the earring in her palm and then put it in her ear.

“Are you sure, Setsuna? Are you sure you want me to be your wife? I can’t bear you a child...even though you love children so much.”

I wasn’t expecting that response, and I was surprised. I had taken advantage of her weakness to make her mine, yet she seriously listened to my request.

“Yes. I apologize for hurting you when I asked you to marry me, but I don’t regret it. Because I’m so happy right now.”

“Setsu...” She whispered my name. Tears flowed from her eyes. And she nodded again and again. I quietly watched as she smiled faintly at me. I didn’t know what had changed her mind, or why she decided to call me by that nickname. But I couldn’t help hoping it was because she had grown fond of me.



Epilogue

◇Part One: Tuuli

I could hear Setsu's breaths growing deep and even, and I knew he had fallen asleep. He quietly stayed by my side until I stopped crying. He waited until I had calmed down and said, "You should get in bed and go to sleep," but for some reason, I found it hard to leave his side. So I went to my bed and got my blanket, then returned to the spot where I had been sitting. I wrapped it around me and sat back down.

He didn't say anything. He took a blanket out of his bag, then said, "Good night, Tuuli," and lay down on the ground and closed his eyes. I think he went to sleep before me out of consideration...

In just half a day, my circumstances had changed drastically, and before I knew it, the day had ended. Just half a day...in such a short time, he had changed my entire life.

I was ashamed of not being able to resist Setsu's words and actions, but at the same time, I felt relieved that I was no longer alone.

I stared at his sleeping face. Ten out of ten women would definitely turn to look in his direction—that was how handsome he was. He was handsome even when he slept. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd met him somewhere before, even though I knew it couldn't be possible. When I first heard his voice...when I first felt his mana, I was overcome by a bittersweet, nostalgic feeling... Like I had reunited with someone I hadn't seen for a very long time. I was consumed by the urge to open up to him. I could still remember it vividly.

“What a strange person...,” I blurted out, and was suddenly worried I’d wake him, but he didn’t open his eyes. I breathed a sigh of relief and reflected on the day’s events.

Nine hundred and ninety-eight years had passed since I was imprisoned in this cave, and there were only two more years to go until my crimes would be forgiven. Even though I was guilty of those crimes, a thousand years of solitude was much lonelier and more painful than I had ever imagined. The dragon king had put up this barrier, and it absorbed mana to a certain limit, leaving me just enough so I wouldn’t die—and that was how I was to atone for my sin. And I had lost my vision three hundred years earlier as a result of becoming significantly deficient in mana.

There was no light in the cave. I never saw anyone, and I couldn’t go anywhere. There was nothing to do. There was nothing I *could* do but live. That’s really all I did...live. So losing my vision honestly didn’t affect me much. Because I was just being kept alive here.

Once I heard that the only way to atone for my crimes was through my mana, I couldn’t object and accepted my punishment. When I was first imprisoned here, I was told that after a thousand years, the barrier would naturally disappear, and my crimes would be forgiven. But even after it disappears, I would still be stripped of my name and banished from my clan, so I would have nowhere to go home to.

After I was freed, I could go live anywhere I pleased as long as it wasn’t the dragon kingdom. But both I and all the dragonfolk knew that wouldn’t happen. Because I had been stripped of my name.

To dragonfolk, names were something special, given by the dragon king upon birth. It was proof that you belonged to the clan, and a point of pride. And it was the key to the dragon king being able to suppress a dragonfolk child’s mana until they came of age.

When the deities gave dragons human forms, they made the human forms the vessels for a dragon’s mana. As a result, dragonfolk’s magical vessels and

their production of mana was abnormal. Both humans and beastfolk produce mana that overflows from their vessels and is absorbed by their bodies to give them power. Dragonfolk are the same when they're in dragon form. However, when in human form, their bodies cannot contain it from overflowing. As a result, mana leaks out from the vessel, and if it continues—the dragonfolk's body will crack, and eventually it will shatter and die.

A living creature's vessel is not instantly replenished. As for dragonfolk, the vessel is gradually filled with magic until they become a child. But that results in death. To solve that problem, deities created the ability to suppress a dragonfolk's mana in their body until the dragon reached adulthood. They gave this power to one dragon. And when that dragon neared its death, the deities would create a new dragon with those abilities.

This dragon protected the dragonfolk children and suppressed their mana inside of their bodies. Ever since then, the dragonfolk have respected the dragons who possessed that ability by calling them the dragon kings, and that power to control their magic has continued to be passed down.

Therefore, since I was stripped of my name, my body would eventually break down and die if I left this barrier. I'd been trying to learn how to control my magic so that wouldn't happen, but since I was only given the bare minimum of mana to survive, it was nearly impossible. I didn't have the confidence I could control my mana once the barrier was destroyed.

But I didn't hold a grudge because of it. I reaped what I sowed. I don't want to leave here, and I don't want anyone to help me. If I had just one wish, it would be to see my family—my father, mother, and brother—again. I was afraid of my body breaking down, and I was afraid to die. But I was even more frightened of dying alone.

I embraced those feelings and tried to endure the loneliness, fear, and sadness. I quietly sat in the darkness, not knowing whether it was morning or afternoon or night. The millennial wall clock ticked once for each day I spent there, counting down the thousand years of my punishment. It was almost coming to an end. There weren't many days left now...

Today started like any other.

I stood up to drink some dragonwater. I drank only the necessary amount of water every day to keep me alive. Dragonfolk only needed to drink this dragonwater to maintain their bodily functions. Under normal circumstances, it could only be found on the dragon continent, but when the dragon king imprisoned me, he put a strange water pitcher in the cave that would fill up automatically with dragonwater.

I slowly poured the water into a cup and suddenly sensed mana. I had been imprisoned for more than nine hundred years, and that had never happened before. Not only that, but I sensed mana from three separate entities, with one having much more than the others. For some reason, it felt familiar. For a moment, I wondered if one of my family members had come to visit me. But then I realized the mana was not the same as my father's, mother's, or brother's.

Still, for some reason, I thought of my other older brother—the one who had died. I tried to remember how his felt, but it was different, too. I wasn't sure why I had thought of him, though.

I thought long and hard about it and came to the conclusion that someone from my hometown must be here. That was why it felt familiar. But why did someone come now? The only reason I could think of was that they came to kill me. And I wondered if my scant mana had been useless after all, and if the crime I committed resulted in irretrievable damage. The worst-case scenario flashed through my mind.

I was afraid someone had come to kill me. Even so, my legs took me toward the entrance. So what if someone came to kill me? They might be from my hometown. Maybe they would tell me something about my family before I died. And even if they didn't, at least I could talk with someone for a little while before I died. I didn't care who it was, as long as I could talk to them.

Although I couldn't see anymore, I could still walk after over nine hundred years of imprisonment. I felt the presences growing stronger and nearer. I wondered if it was a monster or an animal, but realized that couldn't be so since the mana felt familiar. I mustered up my courage. Since I couldn't see, I

wasn't able to check for myself, which was frightening, but no one could enter the barrier, so I didn't think they would kill me suddenly.

Maybe it was better to be killed than to die alone. I touched the barrier that prevented me from running away. "Who's there...?" I said out loud. It felt like a very long time before I heard a response, but perhaps it wasn't that long at all.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you. We fell from a cliff and are just resting here."

The moment I heard the man's voice, the mana I felt emanating from inside him grew even stronger, and I was overcome by a bittersweet, nostalgic feeling. As if I'd just been reunited with someone I hadn't seen for a very long time. I was overcome with the urge to open up to him, but I desperately held back. I thought that if I let down my guard, I would cry.

I thought perhaps it was someone I knew, but I didn't recognize the voice. So then why did he seem so familiar? I wondered. I asked if the person on the other side of the barrier was hurt.

He spoke in a very polite manner, like a gentleman. At first, he apologized for frightening me. And then we introduced ourselves. He didn't try to suddenly approach the barrier, and he was very respectful. It was comforting to hear another person's voice after almost a thousand years. His voice was so gentle and kind that I felt myself wanting to talk with him even more, even though I knew that wouldn't happen.

Yet he seemed to sense my feelings, and he told me that he would like to continue talking until his apprentice woke up. So I wanted to make sure he hadn't come to kill me. Because if he had, I couldn't bear to talk to him any longer.

He told me he had not come to kill me, and he was here because of an accident. So I accepted his request. He wanted to know about me, which made me feel very shy, and I wanted to hide. But he kindly answered all my questions. After that, he fell silent for some reason, so I decided to ask for his name.

He said his name was Setsuna. I had a feeling he knew I was blind, because he

told me he was a human. The moment I heard that, my hatred and resentment toward humans was revived. But at the same time, I remembered how I had tried to cast aside my affection for humans. Maybe that's why I didn't stop talking to him. And maybe why I didn't want to leave his side.

I was deep in thought when he called out to me, but all I could say was that I was fine. I wanted to talk to him. But now that I knew his name, I wasn't sure what to say. I still remembered my name, but I had been forbidden from telling anyone. So even when I tried to say it, the word wouldn't come out. I thought it was very sad that I didn't have a name to tell him, or for him to call me by.

I remained silent, and suddenly he said something very surprising. Even though I hadn't said a word about my clan, he guessed that I was dragonfolk. I asked how he knew, and he told me something even more unbelievable.

I thought he was being considerate of me since I had been so nervous. He urged me to sit down, and I could hear him sitting as well. He spoke in a very serious tone and offered to save me.

I thought he was a very nice person. He asked why I was here and offered to help me. But I knew I couldn't accept his offer. Yet when he asked what I wanted, I couldn't help but give him an honest answer. I wanted to see my family.

He told me that I would definitely see them again someday. But I knew better than anyone that it wouldn't happen. Still, I appreciated the thought. He asked me once again how I was doing in a concerned voice.

I was afraid to confess my crimes, and I was consumed with fear at the possibility of getting him involved.

Yet the urge to open my heart and tell him everything welled up inside me. So when he asked for my name, I told him I didn't have one. I heard him gasp, so I knew he understood the meaning of a dragonfolk having been stripped of their name. I told him I had been banished from the dragon kingdom.

“But you've mastered how to control your mana, right?”

I wished I could tell him yes, but I had to shake my head. He must know what would happen to an adult dragon who hadn't mastered control of their mana,

because a heavy silence filled the air. Then he asked me in a worried voice why not.

And suddenly all the anxiety and emotions I'd bottled up inside came flowing out.

After I told him everything, he told me about Grand. I had been sentenced to prison for a thousand years because I cursed the kingdom of Grand, along with its citizens, its fertile land, and the royal family. I often had dreams about the grudges its citizens must hold against me. In my dreams, I saw people weeping, moaning, enraged, and in pain. My mana was being used to break the curse on the land. So I wondered what happened to the curse I'd put on the people of Grand.

I hoped it was broken, but since the dragon king hadn't told me anything about it, I wasn't expecting anything. So when he told me that there hadn't been any contact with Grand since then, I thought the citizens had died from my curse, and I was devastated.

He was probably watching me standing there in shock. He quickly told me that wasn't the case and said the curse had been broken and the citizens were still alive. I couldn't believe it, so he explained. He didn't know who had done it or why. But they hadn't been led down a path of ruin. The curse had been broken, and they survived. I prayed to the deities and thanked them with all my heart.

I could never thank the person who broke the curse enough. If I was able to leave this barrier alive someday, I wanted to find that person. Or at least find out who they were, and if they had passed away.

“Wuff, wuff...” I heard a happy muffled barking noise, which brought me back to my senses. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw that Alto, who was sleeping in his baby wolf form, had been talking in his sleep. He told me earlier how much he loved delicious food, so I wondered if he was dreaming about eating something delicious. I couldn't help but smile, but then it turned into a sigh. That was because I looked down at the bracelet shining on my wrist...

Once I had confessed everything to Setsuna, he didn't shame me or pity me. I

wouldn't have blamed him if he had, since he was human. I wondered if he was angry, but it didn't seem that way. Well, he *was* angry, but not at me. At my punishment. He said that it was senseless.

He told me he wanted to grant my wish of seeing my family. But I said that wish was long gone, and he asked if I would be his partner. He sounded as if he was pleading.

I was stunned by his sudden proposal. I had no intention of accepting. A dragonfolk's idea of marriage was different from a human's. And since he was a human just like the woman who had stolen my brother's life, I knew they were mercurial creatures. So I didn't take his proposal seriously at all.

After that, honestly, he said many dubious things, and he didn't give me much time to think. He just kept asking me over and over again. I wanted him to stop and was overcome with the urge to cover my ears with my hands, but I didn't move.

Because I knew he understood me better than myself and knew what I yearned for deep in my heart. I didn't want him to say another word, because I didn't want him to say my true wishes out loud. My heart screamed that, but I couldn't say it. Perhaps the reason why I couldn't stop him was because I wanted to know how I truly felt, too. I wanted to know if I still desired to live.

But instead, I put on a brave face and told him I didn't want to. The moment I said that, I felt him attempt to cast a spell on my amber pendant. I didn't know if he succeeded or not, but the mana that rose from the pendant was very familiar, just like his, and it almost seemed like it was a bridge between the two of us.

His voice was frighteningly serious when he said he wanted me to be his wife. He told me he wanted me to live. And I realized he could see everything I had held inside my heart. He even knew I was desperately trying to suppress my true feelings. For a fleeting moment, I thought that perhaps if I became his wife, I wouldn't be alone and could endure these last two years of my sentence.

"I want you to live with me."

In the end, my answer was yes. But it wasn't because of the nostalgic feeling I'd gotten from him at first, and it wasn't because I loved him. It wasn't even

because of my wishes. It was because of the loneliness I felt from his words and because I'd experienced the same thing.

After I gave him my answer, he acted very swiftly. He gifted me a name and said the marriage vows. He urged me to say them in return, and I did. I could feel a connection being made between us. Even though it was for just a moment, I could feel his mana inside me. No matter how I looked at it, his mana seemed too great for a human. But it only lasted for a moment.

Even though I had just gotten married to someone I wasn't even sure was human, I didn't hate it. He had been pushy in getting me to marry him, but I knew that if I had said no, he would've respected my feelings and backed off. Just the thought of that made my heart ache a little. If I was being honest, I think I was attracted to him, too.

I looked at him as he slept and thought about how I felt toward him. The name he gave me sounded strange, but it meant the same thing as his ability—Wind. I was happy to receive a name from him, and although it was sudden, I liked it when he kissed me, too.

I wanted to say his name, and I wanted him to say my name. Just when I thought about that, I remembered something my friends had said. *"When you want a man to call your name, that means you're fond of him. It's a sign of love."* My friend blushed when she said that.

Love? I shook my head, but honestly, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I loved his voice. I loved the way he talked, and I also liked his looks. He was very gentle and kind with Alto and Kukka. I loved the tender way he smiled at them.

I remembered when Alto told Setsuna that he was in love with him, and I laughed. He had been so shocked. He looked uncomfortable and panicked at the same time. It was really adorable.

When we first talked, I thought he was a bit aloof. But once I saw him interacting with Alto and Kukka, my opinion of him changed. I didn't hate him. If I had to choose between love and hate, then I liked him. However, my feelings stopped there. I was glad that for now, there was a barrier between us. Because I realized I didn't want him to make love to me. I didn't want to be his wife in

the true sense of the word yet.

When he asked me about dragonfolk honeymoons, I felt embarrassed and afraid. Consummation of the marriage would make the contract complete and real. That was what a contract of blood meant. It was the deep connection joining two souls together. You couldn't call it one just by exchanging blood. That was only a temporary contract.

And if it was only temporary, either one of us could nullify the contract at any time. In other words, it wasn't official until we had physical relations. Under normal circumstances, the pledge would have been finalized by the next day. I wasn't sure if I should have mentioned it, but there was no set time for how long the temporary contract would last, and that's what saved me. Because I could keep my feelings for him ambiguous.

Did he know this contract was just a provisional oath? I wasn't sure. And I didn't think I should explain it, either. No, I couldn't. Because what if he said he wanted to make it official right now? What would I do? Would I be able to define my feelings for him? If I believed what my friend had said about this being a sign of love, then perhaps I was in love with him. Or maybe I felt the same kind of love that Alto did.

Not romantic, but familial love. Or maybe it was just a distraction from my loneliness. If he found out I felt this way, would he hate me?

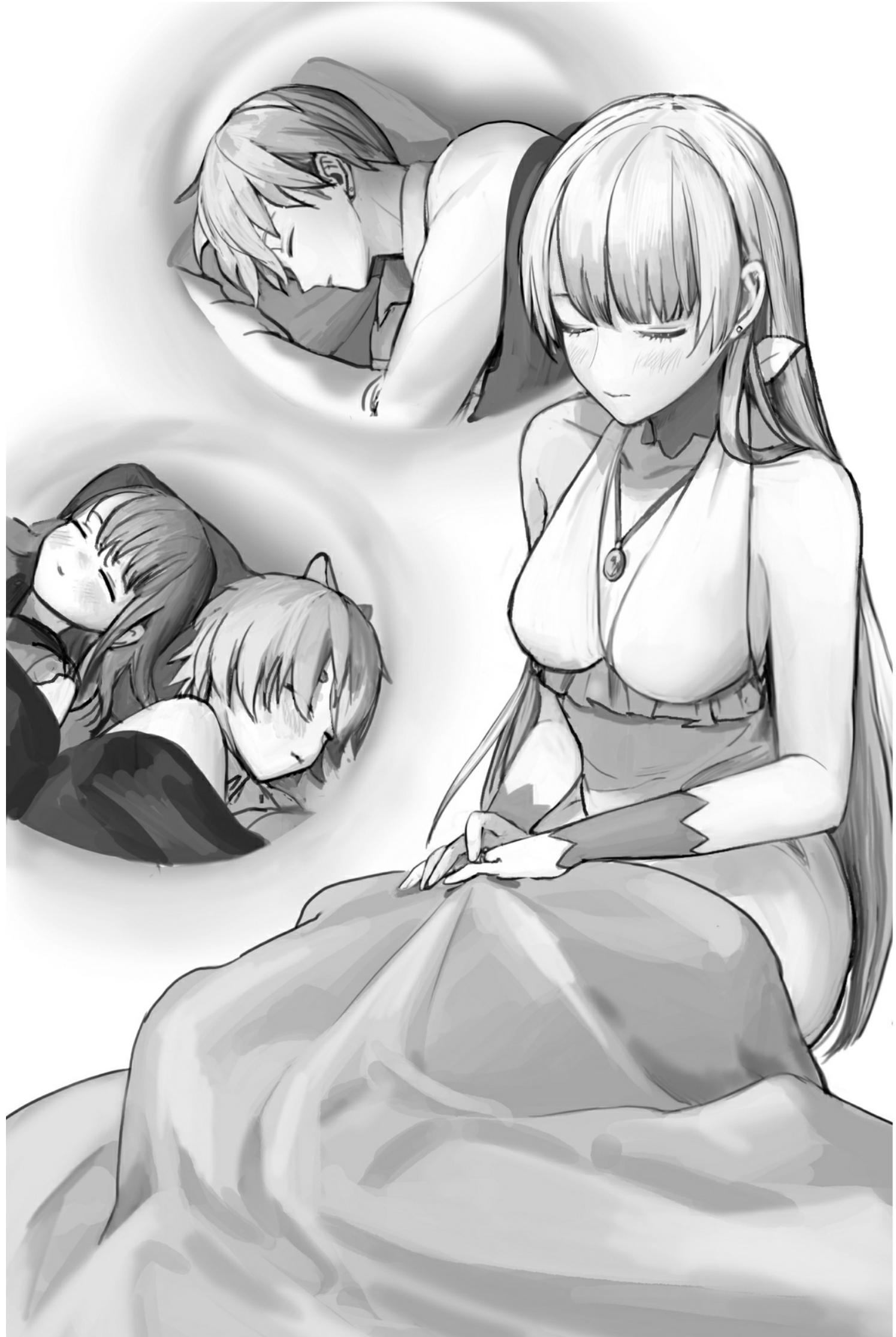
What if he fell in love with another woman? I didn't want that. I didn't want him to look at someone else. And that surprised me. That feeling was definitely possessiveness. What did I want? My conflicting feelings tormented my heart. I didn't know what love was because I'd never experienced it before. I didn't know what a special kind of love was.

His gentle violet eyes and his light-brown hair... I couldn't see his eyes right now because he was sleeping, and I couldn't touch his hair that looked so soft. I reached out my hand, but the barrier stopped me. I had no choice but to return my hand to my lap and gently stroke the ring on my left ring finger, which he had given as a token of our family bond, to calm myself.

Alto and Kukka wore the same rings, and so did Setsuna. Even though we

weren't related by blood, and we were all from different clans, he said he wanted to be a family with us. He looked so serious when he said it. The word *family* had made my heart ache. I was so happy to become a family with them, but a voice inside my heart shamed me for it.

Even though the curse on the people of Grand had been broken, I hadn't fully atoned for my crimes yet. If I got used to the things he gave me, I would become spoiled. That feeling of danger ran through me. After Alto and Kukka went to sleep, I told Setsuna how I felt. I didn't think I deserved to be happy, and I couldn't accept happiness. When I said that, he told me that wasn't true. I stubbornly shook my head, and he said, "I'm going to take you by the hand and force you. It'll be all my fault," even when it *wasn't* his fault.



He had opened his heart to me and listened to my story. I told him that while I atoned for my crimes, I didn't want to see him or even talk to him. But then I realized I was being insensitive to his feelings. Once he saw how frightened I was of his frank confession, he immediately hid his feelings from me.

He suppressed his feelings and didn't shame me. He said all he wanted was one thing, and he would respect all my wishes except for that one. I thought he was going to argue with me more. After all, he had been so forceful in asking me to marry him, but he tenderly listened to my requests. I felt like I was seeing his true personality now. I still feel like he would have stopped if I had rejected him. So I wondered why he was acting so different now, and a possibility crossed my mind.

He had said he wanted me to live. He said he would make it so I would live no matter what I said. He seemed desperate when it came to protecting my life. Although I couldn't say I agreed with his means...

Still, why had he gone to such lengths for me? I couldn't think of one merit he would get out of this. The dragonfolk might even declare him an enemy after this. He wanted to save my life despite all the risks. Why, though?

I heard his voice echoing in my head. He'd only asked for one thing, and that was to hear my voice on the night of a new moon. He asked me to say his name. *"Even if it's just one night, that's fine. I'll call you...and you can call me, too..."*

I'd never forget the look in his eyes when he said that. They were filled with desire, to a bittersweet degree. I put on the magical tool he gave me to communicate with him and called his name. *"Setsu..."*

Under normal circumstances, I would have gifted him a name just as he did for me. But when you gifted someone a name, you had to put mana into it, and I couldn't then. He must've known that, because he didn't ask me to give him one. So...I thought the least I could do was call him by a nickname.

I still couldn't name my feelings for him, but I pushed that matter deep into my heart and decided to grasp the hand he had reached out toward me.

I imagined the color of his eyes as he slept in front of me and remembered

the words he said. *“You’re such a crybaby...and I know how lonely you are, so I’ll die with you so that you won’t be lonely again.”* He swore to be with me no matter what happened, and I saw kindness and sadness hidden in his eyes. He didn’t want me to die. I was certain of that. He gave his life to me. He promised that even if my heart fell into darkness and despair, he would be there for me, despite being a lonely crybaby and all. He truly valued my life.

Maybe that was why I’d never felt any resentment toward him. He apologized for hurting me, but I was the one who took his hand. If I blamed him, I had to blame myself, too.

I tried calling his name quietly so I wouldn’t wake him. I stared at him so that I wouldn’t forget his face when he left here the next day.

“Setsu, who are you?” I blurted out as I gazed at him. Because I didn’t know anything about him. There were so many things I wanted to ask him, but he wouldn’t tell me anything about himself. Even when I asked, he dodged like the wind. Of course he couldn’t answer me now. He was sleeping. I pushed all the questions deep into my heart and thought about what I could do for Setsu. There wasn’t much I could do in my current state, but I wanted to help him somehow.

Then I came up with an idea. I remembered an ability that made humans respect dragons, who were said to be servants of the deities who protect this world. The thing humans wished for most besides the dragon knight’s pact. Honestly...I didn’t think Setsuna particularly needed it, but that was the only thing I could do. And so I decided to give him one of the abilities bestowed upon the dragons, the Protection of the Dragons.

I clasped my hands in front of my chest and concentrated. I’d never given anyone the Protection of the Dragons before, so I was a bit worried, but since I had a deep connection with Setsu due to our marriage contract, I thought it would probably work. That’s what I told myself as I said the vow.

“Upon my name as Tuuli, I give Setsuna the Protection of the Dragons.” I prayed with all my heart to be of help to Setsu. His body glowed faintly, and I was relieved to see that the divine protection now resided within him. Even

though it was for my own self-gratification, I hoped it would make Setsu's journey a little easier.

Just then, the millennium clock ticked, as if calling me as I prayed.

“.....”

I felt tears running down my cheeks. I'd cried countless times now since meeting Setsu, but it seems my tears hadn't dried up yet. The moment I thought he would be gone tomorrow—which was now today—selfish thoughts swirled inside my mind. *Don't go. Stay with me. Don't leave me alone.* If I said that to him, would he stay here? Even after I told him I would refuse to see him for two years?

I cried in silence so as not to wake him up, but then I heard a gentle voice that melted my heart.

“Tuuli, don't cry. If you cry over there, I can't reach you to wipe away your tears.” He was still lying down, looking up at me. I wondered how long he had been awake.

His soft violet eyes gazed at me. Ahh, he must've known exactly what I was thinking as my tears flowed down my face. Even so, he chose not to say anything. Because he knew my intentions and turned a blind eye to my moment of weakness.

“I'll send you letters. So write letters to me, too, Tuuli.”

“Okay.”

“And if I find anything rare, I'll send it to you.”

“Okay.”

“I'm sure Alto will find all kinds of things and send them to you along with letters. Do you think you'll be prepared to see shed snake skin?” he said with amusement, and I couldn't help but laugh.

I told him it was fine because when I was younger, my brother would always pick up snake skin. He laughed and said that was good, because then he didn't have to stop Alto.

Our quiet voices faintly resounded through the cave. We both smiled at each

other, and he continued.

“Kukka will stay with you.”

“I know.”

“But if you still think you’ll be lonely, just tell me. I’ll come back to you no matter where I am.”

“...Okay.”

I started crying again, my tears wetting the ground.

“I love you, Tuuli.”

When he smiled at me, he had the kindest expression I’d ever seen. But I...I just couldn’t say the same words back. That became a thorn in my heart and pierced deep into my chest...

He just laughed softly at me, even though I didn’t reciprocate his feelings.

At the very least...I wanted Setsu to remember me with a smile on my face. So I decided not to cry when he left on his journey. Because I didn’t want to worry him.

I didn’t know if I was exhausted from talking or from crying, but before I knew it, I fell asleep. When I woke up, Setsu and Alto were in the middle of Alto’s sword training. After that, Alto ate an incredible amount of food for breakfast for it being first thing in the morning. Kukka and I stared in shock while Setsu watched with a wry smile. The time for the two of them to depart was approaching, moment by moment. Even though I had decided not to cry, my heart suddenly felt weak, and I was on the verge of tears.

Then it was time for Setsu and Alto to go. I couldn’t speak because I was so lonely and nervous. Setsu said cheerfully, “We’re off.” He gazed at me with his tender violet eyes, smiled, and waved as he walked off without looking back once.

He must’ve known I wanted to see him off with a smile. And that was why he didn’t turn around—because if he did, he’d see that I was crying.

Once he disappeared, I murmured, "Be safe."

That's right. I didn't say good-bye.

"Miss Tuuli! I'm here with you, so it won't be lonely!" Kukka said, trying to cheer me up. I smiled at her, then looked off in the direction Setsu and Alto had gone and closed my eyes.

"That's right."

I would stay here to atone for my crimes. I had to remind myself of that...



Another Chapter Japanese Iris ~ Tidings ~

◇Part One: Tylera

I decided to pretend I hadn't seen the report and put it back. Putting aside the hackneyed considerations in the report, I was able to determine that the contents of the treatment should not be seen.

Luckily, because the reference room was in the corner of the royal library, there was no one else around. And no one saw me entering the room, so if I left early, they wouldn't think I had seen it.

Still, it was dangerous to return to the library through the front door, so I went through the side door reserved for staff and entered the office. I knew very well that the office was rarely occupied and that it was the most secluded space in the library. This was because the royal library staff had very few responsibilities. It was a "do-nothing" job. The staff consisted of only royal family members, but most of the appointed people only came to the library when it was opening or closing time, and after that, they were free to wander around the palace.

As I stepped into the office, I looked around to make sure no one was there. As expected, it was empty. I sighed when I saw that the books I was working on had been left out, and there were no signs of anyone having touched them. I approached the bookshelf, thinking that I had to hurry before someone found me. I held back from wiping the dust off the book jacket and read the title.

"Founding of the Holy Brother" by Shreihar Fulkerna"

It was about the history of Gardir, a written record of the reign of the first

king of Gardir—who was the younger brother of the Holy Emperor of Ellana—all the way up to the third king.

It was one of their duties to make copies of history books, and add annotations and explanations, such as changes in the language usage, meaning of words, places and buildings that have ceased to exist, and so on. Since it was essential to make a copy to preserve it, this was done once every century. This book was the thirty-sixth edition, and the first thirty-five were kept in the office, while the original was kept in the king's room along with other official historical records.

Even though it's just a copy, I should've told them to treat it more carefully.

I was a little sentimental, because the work I'd done from the age of twelve on had been neglected for three years. No, from the very beginning, I realized it was a useless task. Because there were still twenty-eight years until the one hundredth anniversary. My gaze, which had stopped on the author's name, traveled down to the last annotator for the thirty-sixth edition, and I stared at that name with a feeling of helplessness.

“Tylera Fille Gardir.”

Just like when I had entered the library, I was subjected to a body search by the guards as I exited, and afterward, they returned my weapons and magical tools.

It was a place that I had often used when I worked in the library. Since it was located in the back of the courtyard, it was unlikely that anyone other than those who used the royal library would visit it. I thought it would be the best place to collect my thoughts, so I opened the door and went inside, then sat down on the chair in the back of the room. I reflected on the events that had happened so far to organize my thoughts.

In the morning, I'd gone to visit the grave of the 68th hero. The tomb was on a small hill on the east side of the royal palace grounds, along with the other graves of previous heroes. There were two entrances, one from the royal palace and one from the castle town. The entrance on the castle town side was only opened on important holidays such as the Founding Festival, and only a limited

number of people could enter from the royal palace side.

When I saw the gravestone of the 68th hero in the cemetery, I felt a little troubled. There was no name on it. Just the number sixty-eight.

It made sense that when the hero saw this, he would ask why there wasn't a name. It would be easy for me to say I didn't know, but I thought if I did, then the hero would try to figure it out on his own.

And I felt it would be a little too dangerous to let him do that. There had been several precedents for graves where the heroes' corpses weren't buried; however, the grave of a hero without a name was unheard of. I just couldn't help but feel suspicion and a sense of danger.

I thought they could have engraved a pseudonym on it rather than just the number sixty-eight. I wondered if there was a way that I could learn the hero's name when I remembered the royal family was in charge of treating him. A report should have been submitted, so I headed to the royal library to check. I found it, but the hero's name wasn't written down.

The report began by saying the 68th hero was summoned using the traditional summoning ceremony, but was weakened from a preexisting illness upon arrival, so the proclamation ceremony could not be performed, and he would receive treatment. Continuing on, it was written that a hero's name is declared during the proclamation ceremony, so from the very beginning, the treatment team had only referred to the hero by "sixty-eight."

At the ceremony, the hero only needs to swear an oath in their name to save all people, then carve it onto a stone. But the fact that they couldn't even do that must have meant the 68th hero was very ill.

That was only the beginning of the report, so I continued reading it, expecting the hero's name to be revealed later in the text. The contents of the report included the initial treatment method, how they gave up on a complete cure, another review of the treatment, and the details of its progress later on. However, I still couldn't find the hero's name.

In the end, all I learned was the cruel and indescribable treatment method that I didn't even care to know about and, frankly, in my opinion, was full of mistakes.

As I thought back on what happened, I couldn't help but sigh, because my concerns had been for a good reason. What had been forbidden wasn't the name, but the treatment. They were among Gardir's secrets, so the hero must not ever find out about such a thing or his life could be in danger.

What should I do, then? If I'd known this, I wouldn't have promised him we could visit the grave. I would've glossed over the topic...

I was furious with myself for making that promise, but being angry won't solve anything, so I had to switch gears. It wasn't enough to worry about visiting the graves. I had to be vigilant against the hero asking too many questions about the treatment. I wondered in what situation would the hero be interested in hearing about it.

I couldn't think of anything other than trying to find a report to look up the name, as I had already done. If the hero found out the 68th hero's name, that wouldn't necessarily mean he'd be interested in the treatment method, so maybe he wouldn't explore the topic. But if he pitied the 68th hero and wanted to know about his condition and how it was treated, perhaps he would be satisfied with the explanation that he was unable to receive any special treatment because it was an incurable disease of an unknown cause.

Better yet, I could give him a pseudonym...

Officially, he had died before the proclamation ceremony, so his name was kept secret and not listed on the grave marker, but I could say the medical personnel had asked for his name behind the scenes, because it was difficult to keep using a number while treating him. That would make sense, so I doubted he would think I was lying. If the news became public, the people involved would be punished, but if I tell the hero not to tell anyone, he won't discover it was fake.

It's not a bad idea. But what should his pseudonym be? I wondered. Just then, I heard footsteps approaching, so I looked toward the entrance.

"Tylera. There you are," the hero said, opening the door and coming inside. "It's been a while, but wanna play?" he asked happily, pointing to the wooden board game in the cabinet.

"I don't mind, but didn't you need something from me?"

"No. I'm not in a hurry." He opened the glass cabinet door and took out the board game, placing it on the desk.

"Have you improved at all?" I asked while preparing the board.

"Yes. And if the match goes how it did last time, you'll be in for a world of hurt."

When I saw how confidently he spoke, I remembered he had said the same thing when we first met.

As the first child of the king's legal wife, I would've been the next king if I had been born a man. Since I possessed mana, I could've become a priestess of the goddess Endia if I knew magic. However, I didn't have either of those qualities, so the only use for me was as a pawn in a political marriage, despite what I wanted. That was because in this country, unless you were a priestess, men were more respected than women.

That was said to be a result of gaining independence from Ellana, where women were given preferential treatment. In Ellana, only a priestess who served Endia, the goddess of the moon, could become Holy Emperor and succeed the throne, so the status of women there was high. Men, on the other hand, had a lower status.

The first king of Gardir was the younger brother of the holy emperor of Ellana, but he was treated badly and kicked out and sent on an expedition to the southern continent. A messenger of the sun deity Saadia appeared, telling him to build a kingdom in that land. So Gardir was founded independently of Ellana. Perhaps as backlash to the misfortune he had experienced in Ellana, the brother appointed only men to important posts in the kingdom, and he did not place women in positions of power, which became a custom and continued until the present day.

On this day, I had received a marriage proposal from the second son of the prime minister, but I would not agree, and so my mother interceded and canceled it for the time being. "I can't protect you forever, so at least find

someone you like,” she whispered.

I silently left the room without replying. I didn’t know what to say. It was said that the emperor’s brother was overjoyed when Gardir was founded, and I understood his feelings. There were few things I was free to do; of course there was a big difference between choosing a partner for marriage and conquest, but we were still like birds kept in a cage.

Despite being unable to use magic, I excelled in academics, military strategy, and martial arts. I was proud to say that regardless of age, there was no one who knew the ancient language as well as me, could also plan military strategy brilliantly, and was skilled in martial arts. However, the official position that was bestowed upon me was the honorary title of chief librarian of the royal library.

Still, it was fun to translate old books into modern languages using the ancient languages I’d learned. And if I wanted some exercise, I just got in touch with the captain of the knights, who was a master swordsman, and he would let me join their training. This day, too, I was at the knights’ training ground until I was summoned by the king. Talking about matchmaking didn’t help clear my mind, so I decided to get some exercise and returned to the training grounds.

I saw a soldier wearing light-green armor who hadn’t been there earlier. The commander was instructing him at the edge of the training grounds. In this country, that specific light green, the color of young leaves, was the exclusive color for heroes, and it was forbidden to use that color not only for armor but also clothing, so it was immediately clear to me that this person was a hero.

My first impression was that he was as green as his armor. His body swayed back and forth as he raised the hero’s sword with both arms, and his movements were extremely slow. He lacked all the muscles to wear the hero’s armor.

The commander, who was also my teacher, noticed me and walked over to me. Perhaps he told the hero to keep practicing, because he remained, swinging the greatsword with all his might.

“What’s with him?” I asked my teacher boldly.

“I’m in the process of training the hero. Still, the sixty-ninth hero is a sorcerer, so he’s not good at swordsmanship.”

He was terrible at it. It wasn't something that could be improved with physical training. And the commander probably didn't know this, but heroes have muscles that surpass the limits of a regular person. So if he was swinging the sword around like that, he was hopeless.

"Normal training won't do any good for him. If he's a sorcerer, it would be best to use magic to boost his physical abilities."

"I thought that too and taught him, but when he moves his body, the flow of mana seems to be disrupted somehow, and it ends up like that."

"Then, can he control mana when he's not moving?"

"That's right. He's so talented that there's nothing else to teach him when it comes to mana control and spells. It's said he's among the five greatest sorcerer-type heroes in history."

"He's that good?" I muttered.

My teacher was surprised, and I couldn't blame him.

"That's why it's even more of a shame. I know he won't be on your level, Master, but if he was at least as strong as a soldier... Well, under normal circumstances, sorcerers don't fight on the front lines anyway, so this will be a peculiar problem for the hero."

Sometimes, the hero must step forward and fight to inspire his army. It was written in history books that successive generations of sorcerer-type heroes had fought in the vanguard, albeit with escorts. But they weren't as helpless as the hero in front of me.

"Anyway, the formation of the hero's knights need to be given a second thought. We can let the hero take care of monsters with his magic, but we'll need knights who can act as escorts and protect the hero."

I nodded in agreement, but then remembered I had yet to ask my teacher why he had come over to see me. So I asked if he had something to say.

"Ah, that's right. As you can see, I won't have time to train you for a while. So I want you to try training by yourself. I'll arrange things so that you can participate in the knights' training without any problems. I'm sorry that I can't

train with you.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I figured that would be the case.”

To be honest, I’d already learned everything he had to teach me, so it wasn’t that big of a deal to me if we couldn’t train together.

“I have another favor to ask of you. When you’re free, could you help the hero with his training? I know there’s no one better than you at mana control.”

“Sure, I’ll teach him when I’m free. But don’t you think that you should give him a wooden sword instead of a real one, just in case? I understand his armor hides his face from the public eye, though.”

The teacher nodded and said he’d take it into consideration and returned to the hero. However, even after a few days, the hero was still holding a real sword. I thought it would be useless to teach him if he didn’t change it, so I didn’t say a single word to him. Even from the sidelines, it didn’t seem like he had improved. He’d merely gotten used to swinging his sword without staggering too much. I knew he wouldn’t benefit from physical improvement through mana control, so I didn’t feel any obligation to help someone who wouldn’t listen to another’s advice.

As of late, I’d been practicing my swordsmanship after my lunch break, but the fatigue had built up. I went to the break room to rest for the day. Unusually, there was already someone there. He was lying facedown on the desk with a blue bandanna on, so I took the game board out from the cupboard quietly. Then, I used the game record I borrowed from the library and reproduced the game accordingly.

“I see. With this move, black can close in on white’s territory from the right side, cutting off any chance of help from the white pieces on the top part of its territory...”

I put the seventy-first black stone on the board and couldn’t help but mutter aloud at the beauty of that move. Because there was usually no one around, I had a bad habit of talking to myself without paying much attention to it. Today, however, I was not alone. I sheepishly cast a sidelong glance to the other side of

the desk.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, don’t worry about it. Anyway, what are you playing?”

“This is a game called Go.”

“Go?”

It was only natural he hadn’t heard of it. It was a game passed down from the fifth hero, Shigeto, from his homeland. It was one of his favorite ways to spend his free time, but it was so difficult that it was only played within the royal palace grounds, and soon after his death, it fell into disuse. However, there are many phrases from the game that have spread around the world that were still in use in the present, such as using “black” or “white” when referring to things as good or bad.

I only knew the game because I found it by chance while searching through various literatures in order to decipher an old book. Once I placed the stones in the order written in the game records, I was able to understand the strategy of the players and was impressed by the depth of their thoughts. Ever since then, I’d continued playing Go.

“That looks interesting. May I watch?”

I wanted to spend the rest of my break alone, but I was the one who had woken him up, so I reluctantly nodded.

For several days after that, the person (whose name I didn’t know) just silently peered at the board as I played and occasionally muttered “Hmm,” or “Heh!” I didn’t feel the need to strike up a conversation, either, so I continued to place the stones on the board in silence. By the way, the stones I’m talking about are Go pieces. They’re made from shells. The board is called the Go board, and it’s made of wood. I loved the dry sound the stones made when I placed them on the board, and it was one of the reasons why I continued to play.

Although it wasn’t exactly correct to say that I was playing. Originally, the

game of Go was played with two people. So basically, I was doing nothing more than arranging the stones while looking at the game records. That couldn't be helped since I was the only player.

I thought several times that maybe I should invite him to play with me, since he showed such interest in it, but every time, I hesitated, and the break would be over before I knew it. I had been looked down upon since birth, so I didn't have any friends, and my brother wasn't the kind of person I was comfortable around, so I didn't want to talk to him. In the end, while thinking that maybe things would have been a little different if I had sisters instead, I put away the board. I was about to leave the room when I suddenly heard an angry voice.

"Tylara, are you in there?"

My second oldest brother, Prince Kalmas, entered the room.

"What's wrong?"

I could tell my brother was extremely angry, but I spoke to him like normal.

"You're what's wrong! You made me lose face!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You declined Sargel's proposal!"

When I heard that name, I finally realized the cause of my brother's anger. Sargel was the prime minister's second son.

"You trampled on my best friend's kindness when he said he'd even marry a woman like you!"

Rather than a show of kindness, it seemed to me like a political move. Because that man has never once been kind to me. I tried to calm my brother down, but he wouldn't hear of it, and he forcibly grabbed my arm.

"Be quiet! I don't care about your excuses! Let's go to Sargel so you can apologize!"

He caught me off guard and grabbed my wrist, but I didn't move a muscle even when he yanked on me. I immediately shook off his grip.

"Are you going to defy me?"

He raised his hand to slap me, but I bent down to avoid it. However, before that hand could cut through the air, another stopped it.

“Stop.”

“Who the hell are you?!” My brother shook off the man’s grasp and shoved him. The man yelled “Oof!” and tumbled backward, then landed on the floor, groaning in pain.

“That’s going too far, Brother!”

“He’s the one who laid a hand on me first! Look. It’s the hero! How amusing.”

I gasped and went over to the man my brother called a hero. It was said that if the hero tried to rebel against a member of the royal family, he would experience a crushing pain in his heart that would spread throughout his whole body.

“Are you all right?” I asked, kneeling by his side.

But the hero didn’t respond. He just kept groaning in pain.

“How long are you going to sit there?! Hurry up and let’s go see Sargel!” my brother said impatiently and approached me. I stood up and turned toward him.

“I’m going to take the hero to the infirmary.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Leave him. You need to go apologize first.”

“Are you sure? If anything happens to the hero, not even you will get away with it. I’m sure you know what will happen if they have to perform the summoning a third time.”

My brother scowled at the mention of a third summoning. “Fine, but I’m coming with you. And after that, it’s Sargel’s place.”

I left the room carrying the hero on my back. My brother followed me, but I ignored him and talked to the guards waiting in front of the library entrance. I said I was going to take the hero to the infirmary, and in a quieter voice so my brother wouldn’t hear, I added, “Please get my mother and ask her to come as well.”

Because it was officially my mother who had turned down the proposal, I thought I could use that as an excuse to get out of apologizing. And if my brother ignored my mother, she would flaunt her power as queen. In spite of the low status of women, my father favored my mother. Unless it was a sensitive political matter, he always took my mother's side. So if that happened, my brother would have no choice but to pull back without saying a word.

I walked as fast as I could to the infirmary, hoping I wouldn't cause too much trouble for my mother.

The next day at lunch, I was in the break room.

When the hero was taken to the infirmary, the doctor said he would be fine the next day. I was fascinated by how used to this procedure he seemed. Perhaps he had dealt with this several times. With that thought in mind, I told him to come see me when he recovered, and I left the room. After that, I talked with my brother and mother, and as I expected, I did not have to apologize.

In the morning, I went to the infirmary before work just in case, but they told me the hero had returned to his room last night, and so I went straight to the library. Now that it was lunch break, I sat there arranging the Go pieces as I waited for the hero to show up.

That's right, I was waiting for the hero. It was a strange feeling. As I placed the Go stones, I wondered why I was so worried about him, and realized that no one else had ever protected me before, and that's why I was so interested in him.

"Are you sure you want to put that stone there?" someone said, jolting me back to reality. I stared at the piece I'd just set down. I realized the hero was there, peering at the board.

"No, I was lost in thought, so I made a mistake. Anyway, are you feeling better?"

"Yes. It happens all the time. I'm fine."

He sat across from me with a smile, waiting for me to place the stones on the board. He stared at the board, but I continued speaking without placing any stones. "When are you going to play with me instead of just watching?"

“What?!” he blurted out. “I thought this was something you played alone!”

Originally, Go was played with one player taking the white pieces and one taking black, and you alternated turns until the one who secured a larger territory won, but it probably didn’t seem that way to him. Since he had no prior knowledge of this game, it made sense that he would be surprised to learn it was a two-player game. I went ahead and picked up the Go pieces. It was also his first time, so I wouldn’t be able to play with him normally.

When there was too much of a difference in ability, there was a method of playing by placing the stones of the person whose abilities were inferior in advance. Those pieces were called handicap stones. It was my first time playing against him, but since there was such a difference in experience, I placed about twenty-five stones for the hero and let him take the lead.

“If you let your guard down because I’m a beginner, you’ll be in a world of hurt,” he said gleefully as he picked up a black stone and placed it down. I placed a white stone in response.

“Why are you training with the hero’s sword?”

“What? That’s the first topic you’re going to bring up? Shouldn’t we introduce ourselves to each other first?”

That’s true, I thought as I placed a stone. I wondered what I was thinking, and realized I was too hung up on my first impression of him.

“Hmm...”

I didn’t know if he was worried about my move, or about how to answer, or maybe it was both. But he puffed out his cheeks and glared at the board, then set down a black stone and began to talk.

“Because the hero’s sword is cool.”

“Are you serious?”

I put a white stone down to make a wall in the black territory, but then he placed a black stone to escape to his own camp. The white piece relentlessly chased after him.

“I figured out your strategy.”

“What? Huh? Waaaah!”

I had captured a part of the hero’s black territory.

“Just like with the hero’s sword, that black stone was a bad move.”

I removed the black stone from the board and told him that I thought he should switch swords.

“You’re right. I think that would be the right decision if I were just trying to get stronger. But I’m the hero.”

He didn’t give up and set a black stone on another part of the board.

“What do you mean?” I immediately answered his move with my own.

“The first day I started training, I knew the equipment didn’t suit me. But the knights kept coming up to me wishing me luck. They saw me using the hero’s equipment.”

The hero continued speaking without placing any stones.

“And that’s when I understood that for the knights—no, not just for them, but for the people of this kingdom and the whole world—the hero is a symbol of hope. And that’s why, when I appear in front of people, I don’t want to lose the appearance of the hero.”

When he was finished speaking, he finally put down a black stone. Even though I knew what he was saying was right, that didn’t change the fact that the black territory was going to suffer complete annihilation.

“This white stone is a sacrifice piece. You get so attached to the little things that you overdo it and lose sight of the big picture.”

“Are you talking about Go? Or the sword?”

“Both.”

With my single move, I cut off the black stone’s escape route and he lost.

“I can’t help it. I was awakened as a hero.”

The hero put a black stone in a new location. I felt as if he was hiding his true feelings behind his words and that if I wanted him to be open with me, then I shouldn’t hide anything from him, either.

“We haven’t introduced ourselves,” I said, immediately placing a white stone.

“That was sudden. Fine. My name is...”

He placed his stone so loudly it drowned out his voice. He must be quite confident in that move.

“My name is Tylera Fille Gardir. I’m the fifth child of the king of Gardir.”

I didn’t place a stone but just looked at the hero.

“You’re a member of the royal family?”

Just as I expected, he had a dark expression. He must have been forced to do many things by my family, and he must have suffered. He didn’t speak of his own origin as being summoned, but awakened, after all.

His reaction was only natural. The Hero’s Testament punished him for anything he did that was wrong, including rebelling against the royal family. It was the same thing as denying the hero’s personality. It wasn’t unreasonable for him to be wary of the royal family who forced him to do such things. That was why I didn’t want to reveal my identity.

“It’s true that I’m a member of the royal family, but I’m just a pawn. I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but what you saw yesterday is how I’m regularly treated. But I have it a little better than you, since I can escape from it without sanction. So there’s no need to be wary of me.”

Although I explained that, it didn’t seem like the hero’s suspicions had disappeared. If it were me, I don’t think I could have accepted it and opened my heart, either.

“All right. I’ll trust you, then.” The hero nodded cheerfully as if his expression just now was a lie.

“Really? I didn’t expect you to believe me so easily...” I blurted out in a dumb voice, overwhelmed by his unexpected reply.

“I look at people’s eyes to see if they’re telling the truth.”

It didn’t seem like that’s what he was doing.

“Besides, you didn’t have to reveal your identity. So the fact that you did means you have nothing to hide. I think that means you want me to speak frankly as well, so I thought I’d do it.”

I see. I take back what I said. Perhaps I had been too harsh.

“You’re right. I want to know your true feelings. You were summoned to this world, not awakened. Why are *you* the hero? I don’t understand it.”

“Is it really that puzzling? Anyway, can you please put down your stone, Princess Tylera?”

I hadn’t placed any pieces because I figured he wouldn’t want to continue playing. But when I did, he answered my move gleefully. I could tell that his expression was natural and not an act. He was sincere when he’d said he believed me.

“You said I was summoned, but I’m grateful I was able to come back to life. Because there were many things left undone when I died. Although it would’ve been better if I’d been reborn back into my original world.”

He seemed to find a way out for the black stone, and it became my turn.

“What did you leave unfinished?”

I played it safe with my next move.

“I wanted to be a hero. But I was weaker than I am now, and I didn’t have any magical powers, so all I could do was watch tragedy unfold in front of me. That’s why I thought it would be nice to have the power of a hero.”

Despite the heavy content of the hero’s story, he was more focused on the board than his story. He had reacted immediately to my move earlier, but this time he was putting more thought into it.

There were so many things I was curious about, such as what happened in his previous life and what kind of life he lived, but I thought perhaps I shouldn’t pry too much, so I asked questions with my original goal in mind.

“However, your wish wasn’t granted when you became a hero of this world?”

“Every world is the same. If there are people who are suffering in the place you live, you want to be someone who can save them, right?”

Honestly, I'd never thought such a thing in my life. I hadn't grown up in the best environment, but perhaps to the hero, this world was a place that should be loved. Maybe I had expected the hero to be more like me. And I was a little disappointed that he was different.

"Certainly, I think I would have been happier if I could have become the person I am now in my original world."

The hero must have finished collecting his thoughts because he made a move. I guess he changed his mind from his quick move earlier.

"You're kind, aren't you," I said after placing a stone. But I knew firsthand that you couldn't survive on kindness. I hid my true thoughts, that kindness was equal to foolishness.

"That's not a compliment to me. Kindness isn't something a hero needs." He put down a black stone right away. I wasn't expecting that answer.

"What do you mean?"

I responded immediately with my own move.

"A hero needs to be impartial. Even if your relatives are suffering and looking for help right in front of you, you might have to abandon them to help a large group of people. So even if you say I'm kind, I can't really be happy about that."

While answering, he put down his black stone without hesitation.

I couldn't help but wonder if the ideal hero was even a person. Even the deities and spirits I knew of didn't act like that. It was hard to say if it was the quality of the hero's soul that was required in the hero summoning ceremony. Among the successive heroes, there were those who disliked saving people they weren't fond of, and for that reason, some were forced to work by the royal family.

"I know you're bound by the kingdom of Gardir, but if you were to just accept that, would you still be able to live freely? Why should you have to do such unreasonable things? Even if you're a hero, it's your life. So you should live as you please."

Since I had figured out my plan of attack, I placed the stones while wondering

about the hero's answer.

"If I lived as I pleased, I wouldn't be a hero. And I don't want to become a fake one. In my world, it's said that a hero is someone who has the courage to stick up for what's right and make decisions even if they're not the most popular ones. Even if you possess immense power, if you use it for your own greed, you will never be called a hero," he said without hesitation, just like his move that must've been thought out in advance. I felt his firm determination. At the same time, my suspicion that he was inflexible because he refused to change his sword turned into certainty. And that told me that the hero's fate would not be a good one.

As long as the hero didn't rebel against Gardir, he would be able to live without any issues due to his overwhelming power. Conversely, the heroes who couldn't accept Gardir's ideas were forced to live unhappy lives. Such unfortunate people were too numerous to count on both hands. For some reason, I was irritated that the name of the hero in front of me was about to be included on that list. Whether it was fairness or kindness, in any case, he was stubborn, and I knew he wouldn't have a happy life. And for some reason, I couldn't forgive that.

Instead of making the final move, I decided to sort out my own feelings and then finish the game, so I stopped playing. He gave me a strange look. And it was no wonder—my next move was obvious. The two black territories were connected, so it was certain that he would survive.

But that was just on the board. Can the hero be happy? I kept asking myself these questions. I decided no, he wouldn't, and I wondered why I was so preoccupied with his happiness. And that was because I *wanted* him to be happy. I finally realized my feelings.

Since the hero started coming here to look at my Go board every day, he'd ceased being a stranger to me. The hero had protected me and become an irreplaceable existence to me. I was astonished at my own simplicity and innocence, and I couldn't believe it...but it was true.

"Is being kind selfish? Did you help me to show impartiality?"

With a hope that it wasn't true—no, I was confident it wasn't—I placed the last stone.

"Because..." He didn't make his move. He was stammering. "Because we're friends," he said as he put down his final black stone of the game. "I'm sorry, I just assumed that..." he whispered.

"I don't mind. I have no other moves. Do you?" I answered with a warm smile.

His face was tense, and he said no. I wondered why he had that reaction. "Thanks for playing with me," I said.

His expression returned to normal, and he thanked me in response. I told him that he had lost and that we could talk about what had gone wrong. I removed the black and white stones and laid them out again to reproduce the board at the point where he had taken a long time to think about his move.

"Why did you change the black stone's defense here?"

The hero glanced at me restlessly and sighed. I didn't know what that meant, but that seemed to make him feel better, because he started placing the black and white stones alternately while he explained.

"At first I thought I should move here..."

If he had made that move, that would've expanded black's territory on the top of the board, and honestly, I thought that was the correct move.

"But if I did that, then I'd lose the black territory on the left."

He put the pieces back and then placed the black and white Go stones alternately again. The resulting board was the one left at the end of our game, where the two black areas in the upper center and upper left were connected, and he barely survived.

"But when I did this, both territories survived."

"Yes; however, your territory would've been bigger if you went with the other move. I think the previous move was better. Why did you want to connect the left part?"

I knew the answer, but I wanted to see how he responded.

“Because I felt sorry for it,” he said simply, and I burst out laughing. “Why are you laughing?!”

He turned bright red and protested. I couldn’t help but think I wanted him to continue living like this. Above all, I didn’t think the kind person in front of me could embody the ideal hero he desired.

“It’s strange to look at a part of the board and say you feel sorry for it! It’s not normal to be so emotionally attached to the pieces. That’s just being way too empathetic. There’s no way you can be an impartial hero. I swear it!” I told him, trying to suppress my laughter.

“Oh... Well, that’s a shame. I finally thought I became a hero...,” he said, looking thoroughly disappointed.

“In that case, you should be a hero unlike any in your old world or this one,” I said, meaning it with all my heart. I didn’t want him to be those kinds of heroes.

“What kind of hero is that?”

“A kind hero who continues helping people.”

“I’ve never heard of one like that!” He pouted, and yet he told the truth.

“Of course you haven’t. That’s *my* ideal hero.”

His eyes went wide with shock. “I suppose an impartial hero won’t work... But I can’t allow my personal desires to get mixed up in being a hero.”

“While you’re saving the person in front of you, there are dozens of other people in the world waiting for help. Knowing that, would you be able to help the person in front of you? If you’re doing it out of kindness, then it’s not for your own self-interests.”

Those were my honest feelings, but I looked at the hero to see if he understood.

“Maybe you’re right. Okay, I’ve decided to become a kind hero!” he said after thinking about it for a while. “Since I’ve acquired such great power, I want to help people who are suffering as much as possible. I wouldn’t like it if I couldn’t help the person in front of me if I was preoccupied with being impartial. I want to help everyone.”

“I think that’s wonderful.” I let out a sigh, feeling like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

“Still, I’m surprised you can laugh like that and have such frank conversations.”

It was only when he mentioned it that I realized how I had behaved. I hadn’t felt like this since I was a child, with my mother. I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks.

“Well, uh... You said we were friends, so I guess I let my guard down. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

He beamed at me. “No, I’m happy! When I said I thought of you as a friend earlier, I was a bit disappointed by your reaction because I thought you didn’t think the same. But I’m glad we can be friends from now on, Princess Tylera.”

I was struck by an indescribable feeling, half laughing at the strangeness of the hero’s mysterious actions and half feeling guilty. Even so, I pretended to be calm so that he wouldn’t realize I had no idea how to react:

“Those who are close to me call me Ty, so if you’d like to call me that, too, I wouldn’t mind.”

But honestly, it was only my mother who called me that when I was a child.

“You can call me by a nickname, too. It’s—”

I interrupted the hero. “As long as you continue to be a kind hero, I will always support you, *Hero*.”

“I did it, I finally won!” the hero exclaimed happily after we counted out the black and white stones and confirmed the size of his territory.

“That’s right. So starting next time, you can begin with nine stones.”

The number of handicap stones I gave him had decreased from twenty-five to ten. As usual, the hero couldn’t seem to make moves that served only to expand his territory, but I could tell he was improving. If he made moves rationally, he would probably be able to reduce his amount of handicap stones even further. But I didn’t say that because I had no right to.

That was because of the rare move he made on the day we were still playing with twelve handicap stones. He had placed a black stone on another part of the board, essentially sacrificing it. When I commented that it was unusual, he gave me a wry smile.

"You told me I could improve if I used my sacrifice stones effectively, so I thought about it for a bit. And at first, I couldn't do it, but when I imagined myself as the stone, I didn't really feel sorry for it anymore and managed to use it. I just can't seem to do it more than once in a single game, though."

When he told me that, I went pale and became enraged, shouting, "Don't attack with the thought of sacrificing yourself again!" But then he retorted, "Then I can't play with sacrificed stones," to which I responded, "Then you don't have to play them at all!" After that, I decided not to give him any advice on how to play rationally.

"May I ask why you came here, Hero?" I asked as I cleaned up the board, changing the subject.

"Oh, right. About that. The king says he's been looking for you because there's something he wants to talk to you about. He said it could wait until tomorrow, but he told me to pass along that message. I think you'll hear about it from others, too."

I didn't have to wonder what it was about. I had a feeling it was regarding the parade in honor of Ellana's army triumphantly returning home. The other day, Gardir held a ceremony celebrating our soldiers after they defeated a group of monsters, and a messenger from Ellana came to the royal family. They asked that the hero attend the parade in Ellana, so I presumed the schedule had been decided. But I was curious as to why the hero had been tasked to find me, so I asked him.

"That's easy. It's because I know most things about you!"

"Um, could you explain that more, please?"

His responses were always conclusions. And since he usually communicated in this fashion, I often didn't understand how he reached his answers. They definitely didn't derive from intuition, but because the hero processed his thoughts so quickly, he was unaware of this habit of his.

That might be suitable when acting alone, but it was not ideal for acting in a group setting, which was why I took on the role as general of the hero's knights.

"Whenever you're researching something difficult, you always go to the library next door as a last resort."

"Why do you assume it was something difficult?"

"You didn't come to my place this morning. That only happens when you're doing something related to me. And the fact that you were gone so long that people were raising a fuss about your whereabouts meant you were probably facing a difficult problem."

I was impressed with his insight, but I began to think about how I should explain my absence earlier.

"I don't think you're going to tell me what you were looking for. But you're not doing something dangerous, are you?" he asked in a worried voice, but I told him I was fine.

"Good. Even though you always tell me not to sacrifice myself, you seem to always be willing to sacrifice yourself, so I get worried. Please don't do anything reckless."

Having said that, since his life and my life were in danger, I considered it easier to simply tell him not to ask about the 68th hero.

◆ Afterword ◆

ROKUSYOU

“I don’t know...”

That’s a line the main character and the heroine Tuuli have uttered many times in regard to their feelings. This thought may be applicable to the readers. Why did Setsuna pursue her so aggressively? What was the reason for his unusual behavior?

In addition, this was Tuuli’s first appearance. Even though Setsuna met her for the first time, why did he feel like she was familiar, and why did he get involved in her affairs? The answer to these questions, such as Kyle’s place in the mystery and the thoughts of the dragon king, will be revealed in the two’s love story in the next volume.

It’s a love story involving complicated feelings between two people that had a twisted and distorted beginning, but I hope you will patiently watch over them and support them. We look forward to your continued support of Setsuna and Alto’s journey through a world with different logic and principles, and where values are greatly different among the various clans.

USUASAGI

Thank you so much for purchasing the second volume of *The Ephemeral Scenes of Setsuna’s Journey*. My name is Usuasagi. There will be some big spoilers from here on out, so if you started reading from the afterword and don’t like spoilers, please go back to the main story.

By the way, in the afterword of the first volume, I wrote that I would be making major changes to the web version of this story. So what was your

impression of Volume 2? When I finished writing the last book, I thought nothing could be more difficult, but writing the second one was even harder and more troublesome.

One of my worries was the Daisy chapter. When the web novel version was published, we were in the middle of searching for ways to expand our writing style. So as practice, we wrote that chapter from the third-person point of view. And that became the only one written in third person, so I was conflicted about whether or not to include the Daisy chapter in this volume.

The other concern was the Lady's Purse chapter. At the time it was published on the web, we received many harsh comments from readers saying they did not find it relatable. We wrote it using information that could only be revealed within the progression of the story. But when I look at it now, I think it could've been presented a little differently, so I was equally conflicted about this one.

As a result, we decided to rewrite those two chapters. This was because we decided it would be more interesting for *The Ephemeral Scenes of Setsuna's Journey*. For that reason, you might feel that it is quite different from the web novel, but we hope you thought it was more amusing. For readers who have only followed the book version, we hope you will take the opportunity to read and compare the two.

ROKUSYOU & USUASAGI

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—for buying this book. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

June 5, 2021

Rokusyou & Usuasagi

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