

The EPHEMERAL SCENES of SETSUNA'S JOURNEY

The Bonds of the Dragon
and the Kingdom in Crisis



3

Rokusyou • Usuasagi
Illustration by sime

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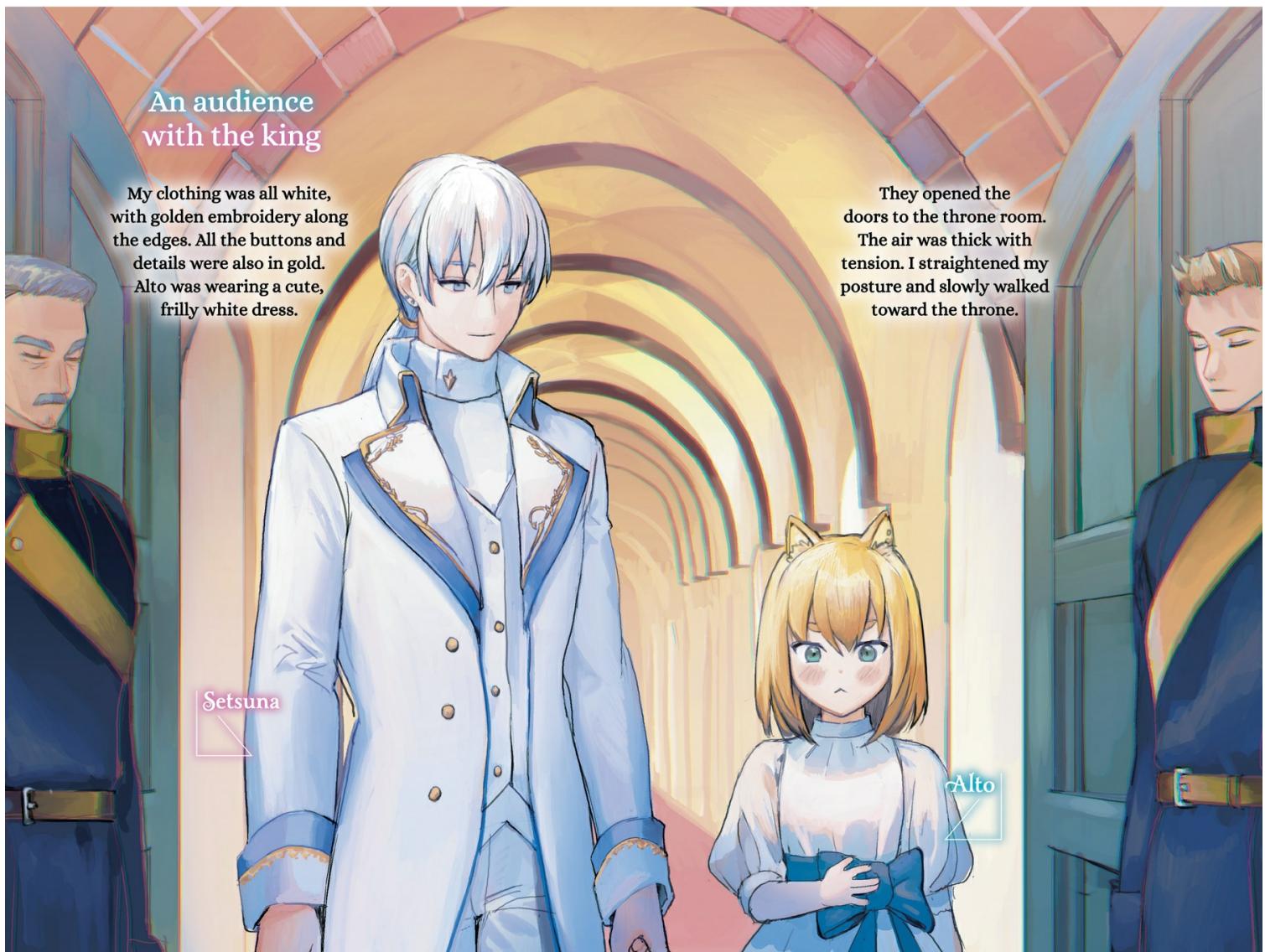
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An audience with the king

My clothing was all white, with golden embroidery along the edges. All the buttons and details were also in gold. Alto was wearing a cute, frilly white dress.

They opened the doors to the throne room. The air was thick with tension. I straightened my posture and slowly walked toward the throne.



Setsuna

Alto

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YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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The EPHEMERAL SCENES of SETSUNA'S JOURNEY

Vol. 3

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Translation by Andria McKnight

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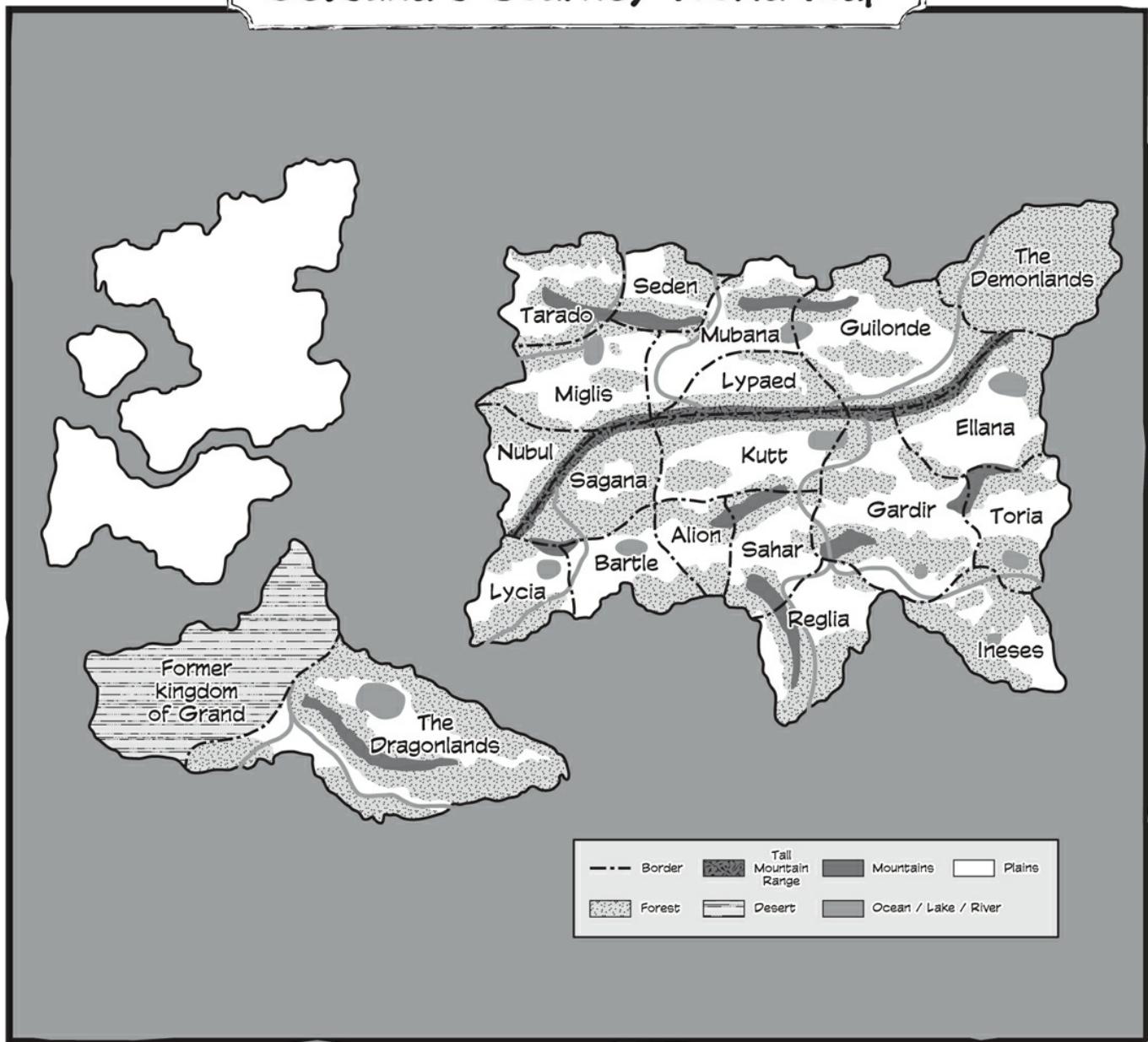
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Prologue



I've heard there's something called the hourglass of happiness. It's an hourglass filled with beautiful sand and gems.

Every time you experience happiness, the amount of sand in it grows.

Every time you experience misfortune, the sand falls along with tears and cries of anguish to flush out the sadness.

The gems are formed from encounters with loved ones and reduce the amount of sand that falls.

If a loved one departs, then the gem will break in two.

If you can't protect your loved ones, then the gem will change its shape.

When someone you love dies, whether they are a family member, a friend, or a romantic partner, the gem becomes a fragment and falls away with the sand.

“What was it like for those falling fragments at the end?”

I rested my back on the bare rock to try to ease the pain in my body and looked up at the cloudy sky through the hole in the cave.

My mind filled with past images of my younger brother and sister.

Ever since that day, the sand in my hourglass of happiness had been falling without being replenished.

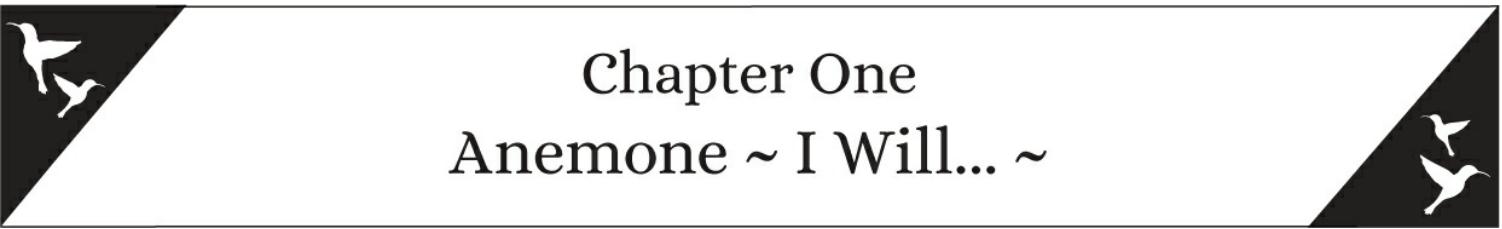
One of the gems was deceived and turned into a fragment.

One of the gems shrank because of a punishment.

One of the gems broke in two due to uncontrollable anger.

“How can I stop the sand from falling...?”

A man with violet eyes and an air of audacity reminded me of the answer.



Chapter One

Anemone ~ I Will... ~

◇ Part One: Setsuna

I was in a place called the Zeghur Forest. As I reflected on the past few months, I realized my life had changed considerably. It was hard to believe that I'd once been bedridden due to illness. Since then, I'd become an adventurer and had gone on various quests. Despite having spent much of my previous life being alone, I'd found companions in my apprentice, Alto, and Tuuli and had entered into a contract with a spirit named Kukka. Even though I wished nothing more than for us all to be together, I'd been forced to leave Tuuli behind due to circumstances beyond my control. Alto and I had descended to this forest at the foot of Mount Zeghur, where we began gathering herbs.

Even after coming this far down the mountain, I had to suppress the urge to look back. Tuuli was probably crying right now... But I wanted to respect her efforts to keep a smile on her face when we'd parted.

I probably can't see her right now anyway.

I squinted as I gazed up at the mountain where Tuuli was, muttering to myself in an attempt to convince myself not to go back. A part of me still wanted to take her along with us, so I honestly wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. However, I'd made the calculated decision to avoid using Wind magic to return to town. I believed that the journey down the mountainside would be beneficial to Alto.

My apprentice silently followed me, perhaps sensing my feelings.

"Aren't you tired, Alto?"

“No, I’m fine.”

He didn’t seem to be tired or having trouble. In that case, we might be able to head straight back to Kutt without stopping in a nearby village for a break.

“All right. Then let’s pick up the pace a little. But let me know if it gets too hard.”

As we spoke, I sensed the presence of a medium-sized monster up ahead. I considered changing our route, but when I sharpened my senses even more and searched the area, I confirmed that there were four more monsters in the vicinity. Most concerningly, I also detected a human up ahead, probably fleeing from the monsters.

Alto won’t make it in time, and leaving him behind isn’t an option. Should I ignore it? I can’t be sure whether they’ll need help or not...

I hesitated for a moment, but then I sensed that the person had stopped moving. I stopped in my tracks, unable to brush aside the urge to help them.

“Master?” Alto called out curiously.

By that time, I’d already activated my magic, which slowed down the monsters’ movements. This consumed a significant amount of mana, since the creatures were of medium size and a decent clip away from us. That would be a heavy burden for an ordinary sorcerer, but it wasn’t anything to worry about in my case.

“We’re going to hurry down the mountainside now, so make sure to stay close.”

I waited until Alto nodded to acknowledge my instructions and began to run down the slope of the overgrown forest, which was covered with thick grass and low bushes. To ensure Alto could keep up with me, I used Wind magic to trim the vegetation, then Earth magic to level out the uneven terrain. I continued down the path I created while Alto chased after me with all his might. This way, we’d be able to reach the human who was being pursued by the monsters before the creatures could get to them. Feeling slightly relieved, I switched gears and began formulating a plan to immobilize the monsters once I caught up to them.

For the time being, I would prefer to avoid revealing to anyone that I could use Time magic. I wanted to reserve that power to travel quietly with Alto, and developing a reputation as a sorcerer who could use rare magic would only complicate things. Consequently, I decided to merely slow down the monsters, even though I had the power to stop them completely.

I figured that the human wouldn't notice I was using Time magic so long as the creatures didn't freeze abruptly. Plus, it seemed like they were in a pretty desperate situation.

But they would surely notice I was using magic when I showed up and they regained their composure. To avoid that, I'd have no choice but to dispel the magic once I revealed myself. But if I did that, then the monsters would surely attack the human who was in front of them, so I would need to come up with a way to avoid that. Frustratingly, it seemed like I wouldn't be able to use Wind magic to restrain the monsters.

If I only needed to restrict their movement, I could surround them with barrier needles. But in a combat situation, it would be too difficult to situate the barrier between the monsters and the human. Although it was possible to instantly construct a barrier around an isolated target by improving the ancient magic part of the spell, this would require a kind of modification that far surpassed current knowledge of ancient magic. For those reasons, I thought it best to avoid saving the human that way. Besides, I wanted to travel quietly. There wouldn't be any problems if I could rescue this person by using a Wind magic construction enhancement similar to the one I'd used in front of Agito before.

Those thoughts ran through my head as I kept an eye on my surroundings. For now there were no other signs of monsters approaching. Alto clutched his bag close to his side so he could run more freely. I was grateful that he'd been able to stay so close to me, and seeing him like that gave me an idea.

As the scene came into view, I saw a man who was on the verge of being eaten by a monster known as a gosylina, which resembled a monkey with bat-like wings. They were about two mers in length. Unlike most monkeys, the

creatures were too large to swing around on branches, so they had to move about on land.

Thank goodness we're in the forest.

If there hadn't been any obstructions around, the gosylina could've quickly taken to the sky with its wings; at that point, simply slowing it down might not have been enough to prevent it from harming the man. I thanked my good fortune and dispelled the magic, then immediately hurled the box containing the magical tool I'd just created. It struck the monsters and shattered, releasing countless iron chains.

This magical tool was my solution to the problem. I'd gotten the idea when I'd seen Alto's bag, which was also a magical tool I had crafted. I realized that if I couldn't openly use magic in front of the man, I could instead use a spell to craft a tool to save him with.

Since items like this were actually sold at the Adventurers Guild, I figured it wouldn't look too suspicious. Despite its high cost of seven silver coins, this item could only impede the movements of intermediate-level monsters, so it wasn't used very often.

As the chains immobilized the monsters like I'd hoped, I nodded to Alto, who'd just caught up to me, indicating that he should stand back. The man had wounds on his arms and chest. His clothes were torn and stained a deep red. Blood was dripping down the tree he was leaning against, so it was clear that he also had injuries on his back.

"Can't you fight?" I'd figured there was a story behind how he'd gotten into this predicament from the moment I laid eyes on him, but I kept my questions to a minimum so as not to cause any problems. The man was clad in pale-green and yellow finery, which definitely stood out in this place, and he had no weapons on his person.

"Just leave me be..." he replied, sounding drained. He had a sad look of resignation on his face.

"Are you sure you've done everything you want to do in your life?"

He just silently looked down in response.

"I'll ask you one more time: Are you sure you truly want to die?"

If the next words he uttered were an affirmation, then I would release the monsters from their restraints. If this was where he had chosen to die, I had no right to interfere. Maybe I should've even asked why, but I knew that if I did that, I would only want to help him against his will. I certainly had the capability to do so. Therefore, I believed it best not to ask. I understood the pain of both forcing assistance on someone and seeking death all too well.

"I'm sorry. I'd appreciate your help," he muttered with his gaze still lowered, not making eye contact. It seemed that he was having second thoughts about dying here after all. I drew my sword and attacked the monsters. Since they were unable to resist, I slayed them without issue. That must've filled the man with relief, because he leaned back against the tree, smiled faintly, then collapsed to the ground.

"Master, this man has injuries on his back, too," Alto said with concern as he moved closer to the man. He had a pained expression on his face as he told me that.

"It seems that way, doesn't it? Alto, put the monsters into the Cube and set up a barrier. Other monsters might be attracted to the scent of their blood," I instructed, cutting off the man's coat so I could assess his condition. His arm and chest were covered in claw marks that were still leaking blood, but the wounds weren't too deep. He didn't have any other major injuries. His clothes were torn and ripped all over, but that seemed to be a consequence of them getting snagged on the trees while he ran away from the monsters.

Now that I had surveyed the situation, I guessed that one of the gosylinas had swiped him with its claws when they first encountered each other. The monster's arms were specialized for combat, its long limbs having greater destructive force than whips the same length. The man must have jumped backward in the nick of time to avoid a fatal wound and then fled; otherwise, he would have sustained much more severe injuries.

"I think those are his only wounds on the front," I murmured. Alto, who had been silently watching, voiced his agreement.

Next, I sat the man up so I could look at his back. Those wounds were deeper

than the ones on his chest and arm. He'd been out of the gosylina's reach when I found him, so I suspected that he must have received them right after fleeing. On top of those injuries, he had others that resembled the ones on his front.

During my examination, I also found a deep scar on his arm. It was on top of a magic pattern known as a magic emblem, which knights from the kingdom of Lypaed carved into their arms as a pledge. In light of the man's situation and wounds, the sight of that significant symbol marred by a scar gave me a sinking feeling.

I needed to take care not to get involved in any sort of trouble.

Still, I couldn't abandon the man, so I began to treat his wounds. I debated over whether to use my healing on him. His injuries weren't life-threatening, but ultimately, I just couldn't bring myself to leave him here like this. I decided to heal him just a little bit to speed the recovery of his wounds.

"Will he be okay?" Alto asked.

"His injuries are severe, but they won't kill him. He'll be fine."

Alto let out a sigh of relief once I finished the treatment. Now that I was feeling less anxious, his own anxiety seemed to have abated as well.

I guess we'll be sleeping outdoors today, even though I had plans to return to town...

I wanted to get as far away as I could from Tuuli to make the separation easier, but there wasn't anything I could do about it now. I let out a sigh.

We decided to search for a more suitable location to camp out for the night, so I dressed the unconscious man in some of my spare clothing and carried him. After walking for a while, we found a place that would do. I gently laid the man down and took out our camping gear. Alto set up a barrier with the barrier needles and started a fire.

"You're not even gonna ask me anything?" the man suddenly asked, just as the fire began to crackle. Actually, I'd noticed that he regained consciousness a while ago. But I avoided talking to him because I didn't want to pry. I hoped he

would leave us without an explanation.

“Here’s some medicine. Go ahead and take it.” I handed him some sanitizing ointment and medicine for the pain to indirectly signal that I didn’t want to know any specifics. He gave a self-deprecating chuckle and looked up at the sky.

“In my country, people look down on you if you get scars on your magic emblem...”

“People have different ways of living. I wouldn’t judge someone solely based on appearances.”

“That so?” The man, who was still lying down, turned to me as he spoke. There was an indescribable sadness on his face, and even though I knew it would be better not to talk to him about it, I just couldn’t resist.

“Yes. But the way the scar has formed on your magic emblem is a little strange.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I can actually remove that scar.”

My words seemed to surprise him, and he abruptly sat up, as if forgetting about his injuries. Despite groaning in pain from the wounds, he grabbed my shoulders and questioned me, a serious look on his face. “What do you mean, remove?!”

I was taken aback by the strength of his grip and replied, somewhat bewildered, “Well, I don’t know the specifics of how you got that scar, so I can’t say for sure, but...”

Though I wanted to heal him, I also didn’t want to get caught up in any sort of trouble, so I just trailed off.

“The magic emblem on my arm is a symbol of knighthood. When a knight pledges fealty to their lord, he inscribes the emblem on the knight’s arm. A lord can only mark a scar on his own knights. A scar on a knight’s emblem is a symbol of lifelong banishment. It’s a sign of dishonor for the knight. Are you saying it can be healed?”

“Yes, that scar can be removed with Wind magic. It doesn’t seem like your

emblem was actually destroyed with Destruction magic. The scar was created by some other means, which is why I believe it can be healed.”

“How...?”

“Of course, I can’t possibly know the reason. But you should really stop talking and rest.”

Instead, the man continued muttering, as if venting his frustrations. “He was my closest friend, my only lord. That’s how I thought of him. But he trusted others over me. No matter how much I begged him to believe in me, he wouldn’t listen! Eugene didn’t hesitate, he just tore my knight’s emblem apart! He even said, ‘Why don’t I carve anemone flowers on top of it?’ What, was he telling me to throw down my sword and become a gardener or something?!”

He lay on his back and stared into space as he muttered. I couldn’t read his expression, but his words conveyed a deep sense of regret. Still, I repeatedly reminded myself not to get involved and added more wood to the fire.

“Why did he have to crush me like that?” The man’s voice faded weakly into the air. Perhaps noticing the despair in his tone, Alto, who’d been writing in his diary while occasionally glancing over at him, looked at me. Tears welled in his eyes; I wondered if he was thinking about his time as a slave. After he stared at me like that, I couldn’t hold back any longer, so I decided to share my thoughts with the man.

“Do you know what anemone flowers symbolize?”

This world had many of the same plants as my old world, and surprisingly, the meanings of each flower were the same as well. I noticed this when Alto and I would read through the botanical encyclopedia together while I taught him about the language of flowers. Coincidentally, anemones symbolized the same thing in this world.

“I wondered if he was referring to what the flowers symbolize, too. But anemones mean ‘abandoned’ or ‘cast aside.’ That doesn’t make any sense.”

So then he was familiar with the language of flowers. That was probably why his lord had suggested carving an anemone onto his emblem. But unfortunately, I couldn’t discern the true intent of his suggestion.

"I don't think that's what it means."

He sat up angrily and bit his lip, glaring at me sharply. "Then what else could it possibly represent?! He...he damaged my emblem without even listening to me!"



The man panted heavily, as if he was trying to endure the pain in his heart.

"I'm not sure how you got into this situation, but there are two things I can tell you. First, as I said before, I can remove that scar."

I used Wind magic on his arm. The scar disappeared cleanly. He stared at it in shock and amazement.

"See, just like that. And the second thing is, when it comes to symbolism of flowers, the meaning of anemones isn't limited to what you mentioned. You do know that the meaning can change depending on the color or number of flowers, don't you? With that in mind, what other things can anemone flowers symbolize?"

The man gave me a skeptical look and furrowed his brow as he listed them off. "Love, truth, expectation, and..." Suddenly, he lowered his head. Then he continued speaking; his voice was barely above a whisper, sounding as though he was reflecting on some kind of memory.

"'I trust you...and I'll wait for you.' I trust you and will wait for you."

"I'm glad that you chose to live, because your master has faith in you and is holding out for you."

I turned my gaze away from the man as his shoulders began to tremble. Alto and I left him there at the campfire.

◇ Part Two: Setsuna

I remember that my feelings during this time were very complicated. It was all because of the country of Guilonde. That was the kingdom where the descendants of those who had once captured Tuuli's brother lived, and the descendants of the kingdom that Tuuli had accidentally cursed. She didn't hold any grudges against those people, so I didn't have any anger toward the kingdom itself. Nevertheless, I'd once thought about someday bringing down the ruling family of the country, who had callously raised a flag emblazoned with a dragon, symbolizing their salvation by one of those great creatures, and continued to invade neighboring nations.

But I quickly suppressed that thought when I recalled what Kyle, the man who'd given me life, had said to me: *"If you get tired of traveling, find a place you like and protect it. Become a demon king. Live the way you want to live."* But I wasn't tired of traveling yet. I wanted to continue my journey with Alto.

I'd met this knight under those circumstances, so I desperately wanted to put distance between us. That was because the kingdom of Lypaed, which this man had served, was being threatened by Guilonde. However, in the end it was Alto who convinced me to turn back and talk to the man again.

◇ Part Three: Setsuna

Once I was nearly done making that night's meal, I called out to the man.

"Dinner's almost ready. Do you think you can eat?"

He responded immediately to the word *dinner*, but not with words—his stomach growled, telling me that he was hungry.

"If it's too difficult for you to move, I can bring it over there."

I'd healed all his injuries, but I knew he would be sore and fatigued for a while. I thought it might be difficult for him to stand up, hence why I'd offered to bring it to him.

"Nah, I'm pretty strong. I can walk." He looked around and spoke with caution. "I've been wondering... What are you two doing in such a dangerous place?"

"We're on our way back from collecting medicinal herbs at Mount Zeghur."

"Mount Zeghur? Is that a name of a mountain in the Demonlands?"

"The Demonlands?"

"That's where we are, right? I heard it's a region of certain death, but I guess there are places like this here, too. Honestly, I didn't think there were any humans around. I guess I'm lucky."

"We're not in the Demonlands. They're more to the northeast than here."

The "Demonlands" he spoke of was a forested area north of Ellana that was so thoroughly infested with monsters that it was too dangerous for humans to live there.

"Huh? But that's ridiculous..." the man muttered, looking stunned.

I decided to explain the local geography to him. "This is the Zeghur Forest, which is at the foot of Mount Zeghur. Right now we're northwest of the castle town of Kutt."

"Kutt? Are we really in Kutt? That can't be true!"

Even in the dim light of the campfire, I could see the blood draining from his

face.

“He wouldn’t lie.” I noticed Alto frowning as the knight expressed his disbelief. He must not have liked that my honesty was being called into question. I gave Alto a reassuring glance, then took out a monster guidebook to help clear up the man’s growing suspicion and anxiety.

“The monsters from before were called gosylinas, and they only inhabit the Zeghur Forest.” I opened up to the page about gosylinas and showed it to him. Everything I had just said was written there, plain to see.

The man looked around and let out a deep sigh. “So this isn’t the Demonlands after all. Then why am I here? Why was I sent to Kutt?”

Naturally, I didn’t have an answer for that. “I still have a bit of cooking to finish, but please come over when you’ve calmed down.”

Alto’s stomach growled, so we left the bewildered man for a moment to finish up dinner.

By the time we were done preparing the soup and bread by the fire, the man came over. He apologized to Alto and me for keeping us waiting, then took a seat.

“Go ahead and dig in, Alto.”

Alto still seemed wary of the man, but he picked up his spoon and stared eating.

“I’m not sure if it’ll suit your tastes, but you can have as much as you like.”

The man looked straight at me and lowered his head before even picking up his bowl. “Forgive me for not expressing my gratitude sooner for saving my life and healing my injuries. I really appreciate you saving me.”

“There’s no need to thank me.”

“My name is...” The knight trailed off just before he was about to introduce himself. He must have been hesitant to reveal his true name to someone he didn’t know, especially when he was caught up in something he didn’t entirely

understand at the moment. I would have done the same if I were in his situation, even if I were speaking to someone who saved my life.

"You can use a fake name if you want," I offered, but he shook his head and started telling us about himself.

"My name is Cyrus, and I was a knight who served the kingdom of Lypaed. No—if the meaning of the anemone is to 'trust and wait,' then I'm probably still a knight."

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself of that last point.

"I'm sorry for not asking sooner, but could you tell me your names?"

"I'm Setsuna, and this is my apprentice, Alto." Even before I said his name, Alto was staring at Cyrus suspiciously. Maybe it was because the man's demeanor had suddenly changed. He was showing me respect because I'd saved his life, but I didn't think Alto quite grasped the subtleties of the situation yet.

Still, after I introduced Alto, he bowed his head deeply. But then he lost interest in our conversation and was once again absorbed in his bowl of soup. I couldn't help but let out a wry chuckle, thinking that I couldn't blame him for acting that way since he'd been mostly left out of this conversation.

"Go ahead and eat before your soup gets cold," I encouraged the knight. I started eating my food to try and make him more comfortable. Seeing that, Cyrus also picked up a spoon.

His eyes expressed more than he did in words, and he seemed to like the soup. He concentrated on his meal and ate very quickly. However, his mannerisms were far from unsightly—they were quite polite, in fact. Even though he was a knight, I guessed he belonged to the upper class.

Alto finished his first bowl and got up to get seconds, but before he did, he looked over at Cyrus. His bowl was empty, too.

"Would you like more?" he nervously asked Cyrus. Evidently, Alto had remembered what I'd told him about asking others before getting a second helping.

"If I get seconds, won't that leave less for you?"

"It's okay."

"Sure, I'd like another helping, then."

Alto poured some soup into Cyrus's bowl and handed it back to him, then turned to me. "How about you, Master?"

"I'm full. I want you to go ahead and eat more. Would you like some bread, too?"

"Yes!" Alto's tail wagged as he emptied the pot, determined not to leave anything behind. I took the pot off the fire, then replaced it with a smaller pot and filled it with water to make tea, which I hoped would ease some of their fatigue.

Both Cyrus and Alto seem exhausted. Maybe if they drink some tea and get a good night's sleep, they'll have more energy tomorrow.

With that in mind, I put some tea on while I started cleaning up.

Usually, Alto and I would chat about all sorts of things while relaxing after dinner, but he wasn't saying anything today. I looked over at him, wondering if he was holding back because of Cyrus, but it seemed like he just wanted to sleep. He was staring blankly at the campfire. Just as I was about to tell him it was okay to go to bed early, he shook his head slightly as if to try to wake himself up. I guessed he wasn't ready to call it a night after all.

"Master," Alto called in a small voice, probably because he didn't want to disturb Cyrus, who seemed lost in thought. It looked like the knight was trying to process the situation he'd ended up in.

"Yes?"

"Where is Lypaed?"

I understood that he was interested in a country he'd never heard of, but I was surprised that his curiosity was so intense that he'd chosen to ask me about it over going to sleep.

"It's one of the nations on the northern continent. Would you like to know more about it?"

"Yes!"

I stepped away from Cyrus and took out a drawing board, then placed a piece of paper on it. "You wanted to know where Lypaed was, right? I'll show you by sketching you a map."

Cyrus suddenly perked up, perhaps because I'd mentioned the name of his country. He moved himself to a position where he could see what I was drawing. "I won't disturb you. Would you mind if I also listened in?"

"Sure."

I understood why Cyrus was eager to watch. Most people didn't get to look at maps in their everyday lives, especially ones of a wide area. That was because maps were valued differently in this world than my own.

Although each country created its own maps, they didn't distribute them outside of their domain for defensive reasons. Every adventurers guild was allowed to map the area around their particular facility, but that was because they had been granted special permission to do so to enable adventurers to complete their quests. They were prohibited from sharing these maps with the guild headquarters.

That was the kind of world we lived in, which explained Cyrus's curiosity. Suddenly, I thought back to what Kyle had once said to me: *"This isn't our world. And the values are completely different. Honestly, it's not easy to live here."*

"Are you ready, Alto?" I asked him once I snapped out of my reverie. He tapped the ground a few times with his tail, looking a little dissatisfied. That was his habit of silently protesting. It wasn't because he was warning me it was wrong to teach about maps, but simply a childish expression of the fact that he didn't want other people to intrude on our time together. I gazed at him, and he finally relented, saying, "All right."

“First, let’s review. What is the name of the continent we’re on right now?”

“The Sibling continent.”

“That’s right. The Sibling continent. It’s a long rectangle that looks like this.” I drew the shape on the piece of paper. “Do you remember the name of the mountain range we climbed yesterday?”

“The Baudal mountain range.”

“Correct.” As I spoke, I drew a diagonal line from just below the center left of the rectangle to the upper right corner.

“The Baudal mountains are so long that they divide the Sibling continent. This large region from here all the way to the upper right corner is called the Demonlands, a forested area where lots of monsters live. The place north of the mountains is called North Sibling Continent, or just the northern continent, while the south side is the South Sibling Continent, or the southern continent. Do you follow?”

“I understand. So which part are we on, Master?”

“We’re on the southern continent. Kutt is right here.” I drew a rectangle near the center of the southern side of the mountain range, with the mountains at the top edge. “And now, to answer your question, Alto—Lypaed is here. Directly opposite Kutt, separated by mountains.”

This time, I drew a trapezoid on the northern side of the mountain range. Alto let out an impressed sounding “Ohhh...”

“Is there a country between the Demonlands and Lypaed, Master?”

“Yes, that area is the kingdom of Guilonde.” I pointed to the right side of Lypaed and sketched a region from there to the upper edge of the Sibling continent. Cyrus looked at the Guilonde section with some unease. Alto noticed the change in his demeanor but quickly returned his attention to the map.

“What about here?” This time, Alto pointed to the empty space between Kutt and the Demonlands. I explained that it contained the kingdoms of Gardir and Ellana while drawing them on the paper.

“I see. So, to get to Lypaed from here, you’d have to go through Gardir, Ellana,

the Demonlands, and Guilonde.”

I didn’t understand why he was suddenly talking about going to Lypaed, so I asked him in a slightly flustered manner, “Why are you thinking about that, Alto?”

“Because you always say we should help out people who are in trouble, right? I don’t really want to, but...”

I wasn’t expecting Alto to bring up what I’d told him like this. I believed that Cyrus had some sort of significant mission to fulfill. Getting involved in it would likely throw a wrench in our plans to explore the world. I wanted to tell Alto that, but somehow, I just couldn’t bring myself to. For now I just gave a noncommittal “I see” and decided to steer the conversation back on track.

“As I said before, the Demonlands are filled with monsters, so it’s impossible to pass through there. So how would one get to Lypaed in that case, you might ask? Well, there are several ways. The usual method is to take a ship across the western sea and then travel there by land.”

Alto knew about ships but hadn’t seen one in person yet, though I’d always wanted to show him. Whether that time would come sooner or later, I couldn’t say.

“How else would you get there?”

“Well, if you have the money, you could get there in an instant. You can use the teleportation circles set up by the guild. But you’d have to pay a very hefty fee, along with obtaining permission from both the departure and destination countries.”

“A very hefty fee... So basically, it’s the same as not being able to use it?”

“Pretty much.” I nodded in agreement. In reality, money wasn’t the biggest problem with that method of transportation. Since you needed approval from both countries to teleport, that meant you needed to have a significant connection to both places. While the guild could facilitate communication between the countries, as a rule they preferred not to get involved with interactions between governments and adventurers, so it was more common for them not to intervene.

“How else can you get to Lypaed?” Alto asked.

I slowly pointed to the Baudal mountain range. “You’d have to cross here.”

“Wow, just climbing this mountain was tough enough,” Alto muttered, having recently experienced mountain climbing for the first time.

“That’s right. The name of that mountain range—‘Baudal’—means ‘boundary of sorrow’ in the ancient language. So it seems like the people back then felt the same way as you do now.”

“‘Boundary of sorrow’?”

“That’s right. I suppose it’s meant to communicate that it’s an impassable mountain range.”

“.....”

“There are much taller mountains in this range than the one we climbed. The ground there is frozen year-round and is devoid of vegetation. The weather is often unstable, and blizzards are frequent. On top of that, large flying monsters are known to roam there.”

“Couldn’t you use teleportation magic to cross it?”

“That would be difficult. The range of teleportation magic is limited by the amount of mana you have. Not only that, but the more people you teleport, the more mana it consumes. So even if you used teleportation magic, it would take several days to cross the mountain. Besides, using up all your mana will kill you, so I don’t think there’s a sorcerer alive who would be willing to do something so reckless.”

“Oh...”

You might be able to get past the Baudal mountain range if you had a party of several talented sorcerers who could use teleportation magic and an Earthmaster who could secure a place for everyone to recuperate. But that was assuming you wouldn’t encounter any monsters along the way. I doubted anyone would choose that option, unless they had an incredibly important reason for doing so.

“Essentially, only beings with an immense amount of mana, such as spirits or

dragonfolk, can cross those mountains. So it's best not to even attempt it if you're human." As I spoke, a nagging thought came to mind. I didn't voice it aloud since Cyrus was listening, but I realized that I would certainly be capable of crossing the Baudal mountain range. Did that mean I wasn't human? But then again, Hanai had tried crossing them during his time as the hero. So although I was human, I would probably be classified as a hero. Just then, Alto called my name.

"Yes?"

"I want this map."

"Okay, but what do you want to do with it?"

"I'm going to turn it into a treasure map!" Now that Alto mentioned it, I remembered how he'd recently read a book with an illustration of a treasure map, and his eyes had glittered when he told me he wanted one.

"I'm going to write down all the foods I want to eat in every country!"

Alto, that's not a treasure map. It sounds more like a foodie map...

I wanted to laugh, but I didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm, so I agreed. "Yes, I bet it'll become a very valuable treasure map." I heard nothing in response, however, because Alto had drifted off to sleep.

Cyrus waited for me to tuck Alto in, then said, "Lord Setsuna, may I speak with you?"

"You don't have to address me so formally. You can speak to me like a regular person."

I was sure he was only trying to be polite. But he gave me a wry smile and said, "Right. My apologies. I'll stop being so stiff," and then he got straight to the point. "I want to figure out exactly how I got into this situation. I want to know what my lord wants from me and what he wants me to do. But I can't figure it out alone. Would you help me?"

"I see. All right, let's sort through the situation together. I'll throw out some questions for you to respond to. If there's anything I ask that you aren't at

liberty to answer, it's fine to just say so."

Cyrus nodded, a serious look on his face.

"First of all, why did you think you were in the Demonlands? And why were you banished?"

"I was accused of plotting to assassinate the prime minister. As punishment, I was stripped of my sword, armor, and other belongings and placed into a teleportation circle. As you might know, that type of teleportation circle is only used to send criminals to the Demonlands."

"Ah, I see. No wonder you're surprised that you're in Kutt."

Cyrus took a breather after he explained, but it was too early for him to calm down yet, so I asked him the next question.

"Forgive me for asking this, but are you guilty of this accusation?"

Cyrus glared at me, but I kept my eyes on him while I waited for him to answer. He took a deep breath as if trying to release the anger inside of him and said, "It's a false accusation. I'd never kill the prime minister." I didn't know him well enough to say whether I could completely trust him or not, but the conviction of his stare and the way he answered without hesitation made me think he was telling the truth.

"They might have chosen you because you were close to the prime minister. Maybe there was some situation that required a drastic measure such as this, and they thought you would return without harboring any grudges."

"I see..." His expression seemed to soften slightly.

"All right, so we've sorted through that. Now let's try to figure out the purpose behind what's happened to you. I know that you're still confused, but try to remember anything that could be helpful, even if it's a small detail."

Cyrus stared into space as he desperately searched his memories. "I think the prime minister said something, but honestly, I can't remember what it was. I was just shouting that I was innocent, and no one around me said anything. But what I do remember is..." He fell silent for a while. Then he murmured, "That's right," and continued speaking. "He told me, 'I've heard that walking through

the Demonlands is torture. As an act of mercy, I'll give you some poison. If you take this, you'll depart for the Waterside right away. Drink it as soon as you get there.' And then he put it in my pocket."

Cyrus handed me a wrapped package with a surprised expression on his face. The quality of the paper was quite good, and it was intricately folded. I unwrapped it to find a small bundle inside. When I opened it, I discovered a packet of poison. The paper was inscribed with a delicate depiction of a sweet pea flower. I wondered why it was double wrapped.

As I carefully unwrapped the paper containing the poison, I found something written inside. I transferred the poison to another container to prevent it from spilling and tried to decipher the text. There appeared to be a date, but I couldn't wrap my head around the intention behind it, and the meaning of the sweet pea flower symbol remained a mystery.

"That's the prime minister's handwriting," Cyrus remarked as he looked at the paper.

"Do you understand what's written here?" I asked for clarification about the date, which was roughly one month from now, but he wasn't sure.

"The sweet pea symbolizes 'promise,' 'coming happiness,' and 'eternal sorrow,' but none of those meanings seem to fit. Please give me some time to think it over."

I asked him about the watermark, but he seemed perplexed. While we thought about it, I created a magical tool to analyze the poison. It was definitely lethal, but its nature didn't align with what Cyrus had mentioned earlier. My ill feeling about this grew stronger.

"Cyrus, the prime minister said that if you drank this, you'd die immediately, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. What about it?"

"I have knowledge of alchemy, so I examined the poison. It's a kind primarily made in Guilonde. It's designed to kill the victim slowly and is used either to make a target suffer for an extended duration or to ensure that someone dies in a certain window of time. Someone can live for approximately one month

after ingesting the poison. The silver lining is that it's not an instant-death poison—if you take the antidote in time, you can recover.”

Cyrus frowned. “Guilonde? My mission must be related to this poison, then.”

“I think so, too. Someone has almost certainly been poisoned with this substance, and the date written on the package might be when they’re expected to die from it. Do you know anyone who might have been administered it?”

Silence settled in for a while as Cyrus desperately racked his brains. “...Yes. The king. I remember that his expression was...terribly grim when he sentenced me. But that might have been because he was concerned about me. It can’t be possible... Why?” His voice sounded hoarse.

“So then my role is to prepare the antidote by the date mentioned on the package and return with it? Did they do all this because it was the only way to keep Guilonde from realizing that I was searching for the antidote? Keith, is that really what’s going on? I’m sorry... I’m sorry for suspecting all of you.”

Cyrus closed his eyes and pressed a fist against a tree trunk. There was no trace of resentment in his words. As I watched him, I couldn’t help but think that both the person entrusting him with this mission and the person taking on the responsibility were in great pain.

“My role is to acquire the antidote and deliver it to the king before the deadline. There’s no room for delay. I need to accomplish this as soon as possible. I need to think—I must think! About what’s needed, what’s to be done...,” Cyrus repeated in a low voice, as if sorting through his thoughts. It was like he was trying to engrave the words onto his soul.

“Yes, I must first head to a town from here to acquire the antidote, then return to Lypaed.” He slowly lifted his head and gazed steadily at me. Although his complexion was pale, it was slowly regaining some color, and his eyes were filled with determination. I could sense that he was about to reveal something important.

“I know this is a brazen request, but aren’t you adventurers? Would you be willing to take me to a town or a village with an adventurers guild? I know that I’m asking for a lot.”

He must have inferred our status as adventurers from the guild emblem on Alto's clothing, which is why he was making this request.

"I know that you two probably have plans of your own. But right now I don't have weapons or armor, so it would be impossible for me to get out of this forest alone. So I'm swallowing my pride and asking for your help to take me to a guild somewhere."

I'd already decided how to answer. The guiding principle of the Adventurers Guild was to protect people's lives, regardless of their status. If there was an opportunity to help someone in need, especially someone weaker than us, then we should take it. I constantly reiterated this belief to Alto.

"I agree that I can't let you pass through such a dangerous forest without weapons or armor. We're planning on returning to Kutt's castle town. Is that acceptable for you?"

"Yes, I'd appreciate that."

"Then we'll have to submit a special postrequest to the Adventurers Guild. Normally, the guild only recognizes prerequested missions to prevent clients from unjustly lowering the payments. However, for incidents that occur suddenly and require immediate action, there's a special postrequest system. If both the adventurer and client agree, then the request will be accepted, as long as it's registered within two weeks of when the incident occurred."

The reason for the time limit was to prevent people from knowing about an incident well in advance and bypassing the guild's official channels. However, I didn't share that detail with Cyrus because it wasn't relevant.

"I see... All right, we'll go to the Adventurers Guild and do that as soon as we arrive in Kutt. You're a lifesaver. Thank you so much. Now I'll be able to help the king." He lifted his face and smiled happily, but I couldn't imagine that his journey back to Lypaed would be a smooth one.

However, I concealed those feelings and discussed our immediate plans. Since Cyrus said he was feeling fine, I decided that we would leave for Kutt in the morning. I told him he didn't need to stand guard and gave him a blanket, and he immediately drifted off. He must have been exhausted. I tried to rest as well, but I couldn't fall asleep, so I just looked into the distance for a while toward

the direction Tuuli was.

I woke up at my usual time and was in the middle of doing my daily training when Alto woke up and joined me. Though it would be a while before he could defeat a monster without my assistance, he didn't mind fighting. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it. Perhaps that was a product of his beastfolk instincts. He picked up on what I taught him of combat very easily and was growing stronger by the day. I was looking forward to seeing what he would do in the future.

Cyrus must have really been exhausted, because he was still asleep. After I finished training and got started on breakfast, he finally woke up, looking stunned that he had been out for so long. Considering that he had lost quite a bit of blood and was both mentally and physically exhausted, it couldn't be helped. I suggested that he rest for another day, but he insisted on leaving because he didn't want to waste any more time. We decided to keep an eye on his condition as we headed to Kutt.

“What kind of weapon did you wield, Cyrus?”

“A one-handed sword.”

I thought the blade I currently used would work for him, so I took it off my belt and offered it to him. “I think you’ll feel better going through this forest with a weapon since there are monsters about, so go ahead and take this. I can use magic.”

“All right, then. Thanks, I appreciate it. Mind if I test it out?”

“Not at all. But first...” I straightened my posture, looked directly into his eyes, and then said, “My name is Setsuna. I’m a scholar, and my guild rank is blue.”

Once I formally introduced myself to him as an adventurer, Alto, who had been listening quietly, looked up at us. I gestured for him to introduce himself as well.

“I’m Alto. I’m a swordsman. My guild rank is yellow.”

After that, Cyrus also reintroduced himself. “I’m Cyrus, a knight of Lypaed. I might not be able to fight at full capacity due to my injuries, but I’m very

grateful for your help.” He gave us a refined knight’s bow. Alto watched him without blinking. Since he had experienced such harsh treatment from humans, he harbored a deep mistrust of them and viewed them all as enemies by default. He always took care to keep his distance from unfamiliar humans.

That was why I’d decided to watch over him until he could protect himself and make his own decisions. He was the only one who could determine if he felt safe or not. Although he might dislike humans, I knew he understood intellectually that they weren’t all his enemies. He was shy toward strangers, but I believed he could learn to get along with them in time.

“Is something wrong?” Cyrus asked with an awkward smile, noticing Alto’s intense gaze.

“I saw it in a book.”

“A book?”

Ah, now I get it.

“The knight in the book bowed gracefully just like Cyrus did, huh?” I said to him.

“Yeah.” Alto nodded.

Cyrus scratched his head shyly. “I’m sure it’d look even better in my uniform.”

Alto tilted his head in confusion as a self-deprecating smile crossed Cyrus’s face.

Since we were now on a quest, we headed straight to Kutt without taking any detours. It would take a few days to get there even if nothing happened, but more time if we encountered any monsters. Consequently, I tried to avoid getting close to any monsters if I sensed their presence up ahead. When we did have to fight, however, Cyrus bravely stepped forward and led the battle, so we progressed faster than I expected.

When we finally made it out of the Zeghur Forest, we set up camp early to recover from fatigue. We hadn’t spoken much and were constantly on guard inside the forest, but now there wasn’t a need to be so cautious.

“When we were discussing the reward for the quest, I realized that I don’t have any money. And obviously, I can’t do anything without money, so that got me thinking about why Keith would entrust me with this mission without giving me coin to pay for anything.” Cyrus took out a dagger from his pocket and handed it to me. “But while we were wandering through the forest, I remembered this. It’s all I have right now, but I think it should fetch a pretty good price if I sell it.”

The dagger did look quite valuable. The person who’d sent Cyrus away must have assumed he would sell it for the money. Now that I had gotten a glimpse into the mindset of the people who’d planned this, I felt a bit more confident.

“So I wanted to ask you what you think I could do with the money. Do you know how much the quest will cost me to post once I’ve registered it at the Adventurers Guild?”

“It depends on the quest. If the type of work I usually do matches with your quest, then I can give you a rough estimate. The guild’s brokerage fee is usually ten percent.”

“Can you let me know once you figure that out? And do you know how much the escort from Kutt to Lypaed will cost?”

“I’ve never been there myself, so I don’t have any idea how much it would be.”

He looked disappointed that I didn’t have an answer for him.

“All right, then my next question is, do you know how much it will cost to make an antidote for the poison? The guild can make it for me, right?”

“No, it would be pointless to ask them for it. The poison itself can be obtained through the black market, but not the antidote. That’s because Guilonde holds the secrets to manufacturing both the poison and the cure. They release a certain amount of poison on the market to spread the word about how effective it is, but since there’s no advantage in distributing the antidotes, they keep it to themselves.”

“Wait, so then there’s no way for me to help the king?!” Cyrus leaped to his feet. The sudden movement startled Alto, who quickly scurried over to my side.

“Please calm down, Cyrus.”

He choked up, and tears welled in his eyes. “I can’t save the king? Even though I’ve never been able to repay him?” he murmured to himself as he began to cry. I felt Alto tugging on my shirt. Turning around, I saw that he had a sad look on his face, and his ears were lying flat against his head. I patted him on the head and told him it was okay, then turned to Cyrus and spoke to him quietly.

“I was planning on discussing this matter with you once I completed the escort quest to Kutt. But since things have changed, I’ll tell you now. I want to make it clear right away that there is a solution. But please sit down. If you won’t do that, then I won’t continue.”

Cyrus looked anxious but took a seat.

“There’s another problem, and that’s how we’ll return to Lypaed.”

His face grew even more tense.

“Alto, can you lend me the map I drew yesterday?”

My apprentice timidly handed me the map from behind me, and then we spread it out in front of Cyrus.

“Kutt is here, and Lypaed is here. We can’t cross these mountains. I’ve never journeyed there myself before, so this is just secondhand information, but if you add up the time it takes to go from Kutt to Lypaed over land and sea, it comes out to about four months. So no matter how hard we try...we won’t be able to get there in time.”

“So then, what’s the solution?”

“Both of the ordinary methods might be difficult, but I suspect this was why they teleported you to Kutt. This plan would involve relying on Kutt’s royal family. As I said, the antidote isn’t available to the public. I have heard, however, that there are several antidotes kept for research purposes in a medical facility reserved exclusively for Kutt’s ruling family. Apparently, their investigations aren’t going well. Perhaps if you got permission from both royal families, you could obtain one of the antidotes. This is just a hunch, but I suspect that this whole plan was devised between the ruling families of your

kingdom and Kutt."

Once I finished my explanation, Cyrus muttered, "Ah, I see now..." Then he shared some information with me. "Kutt's crown prince visited Lypaed once. While he was there, I heard my master tell him, 'I can't make any guarantees, but I'll do anything I can to help.' As proof of that promise, he received a piece of paper with a sweet pea flower on it. I remember him saying to write down the request on paper and send it." There was a hopeful expression on Cyrus's face; I couldn't help but feel it was incredibly bad timing and averted my gaze.

"I see... I understand their plan now. Unfortunately, the crown prince you mentioned is currently on an official visit to the kingdom of Reglia. I haven't heard that directly, though, so I'd like to confirm first, but word is that he left Kutt three weeks ago and will be back in two months."

Cyrus's eyes wandered, and then he grabbed me by the shoulders and asked, "You're lying, right?!" I shook my head, and he fell to his knees, muttering, "What should I do, what should I do?" over and over again.

Suddenly, I saw an image of Cyrus, overcome with grief and still trying to cross the Baudal mountains to get back to Lypaed. Honestly, I had already figured out how to solve the situation, since I knew how to make the antidote. That was because the poison and cure hadn't been created in Guilonde but in the former kingdom of Grand on the Dragon continent. But now that there was no longer any contact with Grand, the only nation on the continent who knew how to make the antidote and the poison was Guilonde.

A dragonfolk or I could make the antidote, but it would be practically impossible to return to Lypaed in time without using teleportation magic.

Putting the antidote aside, I felt that the kind of teleportation magic we would need was beyond the scope of human ability, so I didn't think it was a good idea to use it. I was afraid that if I lent Cyrus a hand, I would lose sight of myself as a human. But when I saw how much pain he was in, I started to think perhaps this was the right thing to do.

Still, the fact was that he hadn't yet reached out to me, so I ultimately chose to fall silent for a moment. I was too anxious to suggest doing anything myself.

After a while, Cyrus's mood improved. He was deep in thought, his face pale and a hand on his forehead. "Why didn't I remember this sooner?!" he shouted all of a sudden. "There is one way to get back to Lypaed quickly. There's a cave inside the Baudal mountains. If things go smoothly, I can use it to get back to Lypaed in about two weeks."

"How do you know that?"

As I listened to him speak, I searched my memory database to see if such a cave existed.

"I heard about it from the prince of Kutt. He came to Lypaed to search for that cave in the first place."

"Why did he have to look for it?" Just as those words left my mouth, I found information in my internal database about the cave. It had existed since even before Hanai's time, but neither he nor Kyle had ever gone into it because it didn't contain any treasure.

"Kutt's historical records claim that a giant monster took up residence in those caves around eight hundred years ago, stopping trade between Kutt and Lypaed. However, since the exact location of the cave is unknown, Kutt's scholars started to question the records. That was when the prince decided to search for the cave himself."

The term *giant monster* caught my attention, and I searched my memory for that information but came up with nothing. It wasn't because those memories of Kyle's were locked but simply because no information was available. That puzzled me—nothing like this had ever happened before. I wondered why, but then I realized that if Kyle or Hanai didn't have a relevant memory about it, I wouldn't be able to find the answer anyway, so I decided to focus on Cyrus's story.

"At first, the prince tried to locate the entrance to the cave on Kutt's side, but there were so many monsters that he had to give up. He tried his luck in Lypaed by journeying there to find the entrance, but he came up short there, too. However, he discovered a reference to a cave in Lypaed's historical documents,

which was enough for him to consider his trip a success before he went back to Kutt. So the cave definitely exists. He planned to return to find the cave. So I'm thinking I can find that and head home through it. And if there is some giant monster, I can just hide and make a break for it when I get an opportunity."

I was inwardly relieved to see both how happy he was and that he wasn't trying to think of crossing the mountain range to come home. However, if the monster was strong enough to have ground trade between two kingdoms to a halt, then evading it would be easier said than done.

"I'd like to confirm the location of the cave before I go to Kutt so that I don't have to double back. Although the details of the quest have changed a bit, is that all right with you?"

"What about the antidote?"

"When I get to Kutt, I'll go to the royal castle and show them the paper that was entrusted to me."

Honestly, I thought the chances of this plan working were slim since the prince wasn't there, but I supposed it wouldn't hurt to try.

"What will you do if he refuses? To be honest, I doubt there are many people who have the right to give away such a valuable antidote."

"If they won't give it to me, I'll figure something out," he said quickly, averting his gaze. That gave me a bad feeling.

"I think that the security around the royal medical facility is extremely tight. Additionally, it's quite possible that they employ the use of defensive magical tools to guard the valuable antidote."

I didn't outright tell him it would be impossible to break in. The exchange went over Alto's head, but I could tell what Cyrus was thinking by the severe look on his face. Considering the situation he was in, however, he would probably try even though he knew it was impossible. Of course, I hoped that would work out for him, but the odds weren't on his side. And so with all that being said, there was just no way I could ignore his plight.

"I can make the antidote."

His eyes widened with surprise. He stood there stunned for a few seconds, and then he flushed with anger. “Did you enjoy seeing me panicked?”

“Not at all. Don’t you think it would take a lot of courage to confess that you could make an antidote that was so difficult to obtain? Guilonde would think of such a person as nothing more than a hindrance. Putting the Kutt royal hospital aside for a moment, Guilonde would have no choice but to assassinate a meddling adventurer like me. So I couldn’t just come right out and tell you.”

Half of that was true. The main reason I didn’t tip my hand immediately was because I didn’t want to get involved, and I didn’t want to put Alto in danger. I couldn’t risk making myself an enemy of Guilonde just because Cyrus was in such a predicament.

“I apologize. I wasn’t taking your futures into consideration.” Cyrus’s response was strained.

“It’s all right. It’s true that I didn’t let you know I was capable of making the antidote.”

“I’m pathetic,” Cyrus muttered, smiling weakly. But then he raised his face and looked straight at me. “I have nothing right now. And I’ve given my life to my lord, so I can’t even offer you that. I know this is a selfish request. But please make the antidote for me. And please help me find that cave. Please help me...”

“That’s a pretty hefty request.”

He’d asked me with so much honesty that I couldn’t help but answer honestly in return with a laugh. Cyrus gazed at me and said, “I agree,” then furrowed his brow as he smiled. Right now it was hard to see that man I’d first met who was ready to give up on life. The light of determination twinkled in his eyes as he stared at me. I let out a small sigh and told him my conditions for accepting the quest.

“I’m considering your request as a formal quest. If you agree to my terms, then I will make the antidote for you and promise to return you to Lypaed.”

“What? But all you have to do is help me find the cave.”

“The cave might be safe. But is it so on the Lypaed side as well?”

“I’ve never been, so I can’t say for sure...” He trailed off, then looked at Alto behind me with a frown. “You’ll have to risk your life and Alto’s to fulfill my request. An apprentice’s life is tough when you have to follow your master everywhere...,” he murmured, an impassive look on his face.

“My conditions will be stringent, too,” I said. “First, we have no intention of serving any specific kingdom. That includes yours. That’s the first condition. Next, you can’t try to take advantage of us. And finally, there’s the matter of payment.”

“Payment... But I have nothing to give you, Setsuna.”

“I know. So in lieu of payment, you must do me a favor. Those are my conditions.”

Cyrus narrowed his eyes in suspicion. It was only natural, given the circumstances. After all, if I asked him to kill his master, he’d have to obey. Under normal circumstances, he would never agree to that, so this was a critical decision that might come back to haunt him later. It could endanger what he wished to protect. I had given him these conditions for a simple reason: I wanted to make sure that he trusted me.

Now that I had decided to cooperate, I was going to see it through until the end. But if Cyrus and I didn’t have a minimum level of confidence in each other, then we wouldn’t be able to trust each other with our lives during an emergency. You never knew what could hinder or undermine you if you didn’t have complete faith in who you were working with. Everything would depend on whether or not Cyrus considered me an ally. If he didn’t trust me, he wouldn’t be able to get the antidote to the king, and if there were opposing opinions, he wouldn’t be able to override them. And if that was how things were going to be, it would be better not to go.

“What request would you make of me, Setsuna?”

“It’s a secret.”

To be honest, I hadn’t thought of anything yet. All sorts of ideas must have been running through his head, because it took him a while to answer. “As long as it won’t cause harm to my master, I will accept your conditions.”

“And you won’t regret it later?”

“No,” he answered quietly and forcefully, as if shaking off his hesitation. Seeing him like that convinced me. Even if he betrayed me, I would return him to Lypaed alive.

“Thank you very much, Cyrus.”

“No, thank you.” His entire body relaxed with relief. Then he muttered with some regret, “I feel like I’ve strayed quite a bit from Keith’s intentions. Maybe he chose poorly when he picked me for this mission.”

He looked quite depressed, and I told him exactly what my grandfather used to tell me when I was feeling down.

“Cyrus, have you ever heard of the saying ‘Every cloud has a silver lining?’”

“No, I haven’t.”

“It means that the bad and the good often come together, although sometimes it might be difficult to see the good. If you’d realized the prime minister’s true intentions and left the Zeghur Forest alone, you might not have ever met us and then gotten into more trouble.”

“It means things might work out for the best in the end, huh? I guess I was just lucky.” He stared at his hand, then squeezed it lightly, like he was trying to bring himself good luck. “The person who ended up saving me knows how to make the antidote. That’s a miracle on top of a miracle.”

“It might seem like a series of miracles, but maybe that’s what happens when you’re rescued. It’s like you’re being guided by something.”

Just like how I was able to live and meet another Japanese person in this other world. Like how he’d saved me from a place where I could’ve been killed at any moment. Sometimes, good fortune and miracles overlap.

“Although maybe it would have been better if someone else had saved you.”

“Why?”

“They might’ve treated you more kindly.” Perhaps someone else would have wanted to help Cyrus without any reservations—my stance toward him was considerably more complicated.

"No, that's impossible. If that happened, the other person probably would've just gotten angry and abandoned me," Cyrus said as he let out a deep sigh. "Honestly, I'm grateful to you. You didn't lie or try to deceive me. In order to guide me, you not only listed out all of my options but also told me which wouldn't work so I could avoid making a grave mistake."

"You're exaggerating."

He laughed. "No, you really are kind."

"I'll just say you're wrong and leave it at that."

I'd warned him, but not because I was kind. A genuinely kind person would have tried to help him without hesitation. If Cyrus hadn't shown that he trusted me and was determined to carry out his mission, I would've left him after escorting him to Kutt.

"In fact, maybe you're too kind," he said, but I didn't reply.

Instead, I thought about our next move. "It's a waste of time to go all the way back to Kutt to prepare. We don't need to go there anymore, so let's head to a nearby village to get ourselves in order."

"You don't have to go back to Kutt? Weren't you on a quest?"

I immediately pictured Rayna's forced smile, but I brushed it off. Surely, it would be fine if I was a little late. Hopefully.

"It's fine. There isn't an adventurers guild in the village, though."

"Then it might be too late to get the special postrequest for the quest."

"Well, if I can't make it in time, I'll try crying. That could work."

I didn't really want to use that as a bargaining chip, but if I brought up the fact that I was supposed to be teaching the guild how to compound medicine for free, I was sure we could work something out.

"I'm sorry."

I told him there was no need to apologize. Alto was rubbing his eyes sleepily, so I decided to let the conversation subside.

After the two of them went to sleep, I took out the ingredients and tools needed to make the antidote from my bag. I had plenty of ingredients. I used magic while crafting the antidote to finish it up before dawn. I decided that I would give it to Cyrus the next day. While I was cleaning up my equipment, I heard someone call my name, so I turned around.

“You’re awake already?” Cyrus had crept over to me quietly, so as not to wake Alto.

“Yes. I was making the antidote, and I just finished it. I’ll give it to you now so I don’t forget. This antidote will cure the poison you were given. And if it turns out there’s another poison involved, I’ll be at your side; I’ll be able to craft any cure you need, as long as I’m not dealing with something too rare.”

“Why are you giving it to me now?” His voice trembled with emotion as he looked at the packet of medicine in his hand.

“We might have to split up during the journey, so I figure it’s best if you keep it, just in case, especially as you navigate through the castle. After all, I don’t know who’s your enemy and who’s your ally. You have someone you can trust though, right?”

“Yes... Keith is on my side.”

The conviction in Cyrus’s eyes when he declared him an ally was impressive, even though Keith was the one who had banished him.

“Well then, let’s get you home to the person you trust.”

“...!”

Cyrus looked down to hide the tears that spilled from his eyes. He had the antidote in his possession and had discovered a way to return home, so I was sure he was overcome with emotion.

“I can afford to hope now, can’t I?” he murmured. “I don’t have to imagine my kingdom being destroyed?” It was like he wanted reassurance. “I’ll make it back in time, won’t I?”

Every word was spoken to convince himself. I wanted to give him some space to be alone, so I walked away and began to prepare breakfast. After a while, the

aroma lured Alto out of his slumber. He didn't seem as cautious of Cyrus anymore, perhaps because the knight was no longer as tense as he was before, and because I'd softened toward him.

Cyrus seemed to notice the change in Alto, too, but he didn't use this as an opportunity to attempt to get closer with him. He just treated Alto with the same friendliness as always. He'd shown consideration for my apprentice from the very beginning, which was one of the reasons why I'd continued to sympathize with him.

We had a much more relaxed breakfast than the one we'd had the day before. I informed Alto that we were going to Lypaed instead of Kutt but would first prepare in a nearby village. This took him by surprise and caused his tail to puff up, but ultimately, he didn't object to the change in plan. Instead, he seemed to be contemplating the northern continent.

◇ Part Four: Cyrus

“Prince Eugene, I swear that I’ll kill you if I have to.” Keith put his glasses back on and spoke quietly, suppressing his emotions.

“Keith...,” Eugene, my friend and master, replied.

“But no matter what happens, I want you to remember that I love this kingdom,” Keith said earnestly. Eugene nodded, a bitter and reluctant expression on his face.

“I understand,” Eugene said.

“Please. Please live, for the sake of this kingdom.” Keith spoke slowly, as if trying to let the words sink into himself as well, then pulled his gaze from Eugene. “Once I leave here this evening...I will become your enemy.” There was a spark of tragic determination in his eyes as he said that.

The relationship between the two was that of uncle and nephew; Eugene’s father, the king, was Keith’s older brother. However, since Keith was closer in age to Eugene, the two of them had grown up like siblings. They would have never wanted to think about killing the other. Keith had always protected Eugene.

“Cyrus, protect Prince Eugene to the death. I won’t show any mercy to you, either. Whatever you do, don’t die. I can’t stay with you. From now on, you’ll have to observe people’s actions carefully to discern their true intentions. Don’t run away just because it’s difficult. You’re Prince Eugene’s first knight.”

“I know.”

Keith shot me a glare that pierced my very core, then turned around.

“At this point, our paths will diverge, but we’ll share the common goal of acting for the sake of our kingdom and our people. Believe that someday I shall walk beside you and Prince Eugene again, Cyrus. No matter what...”

Believing that we would walk together again meant believing in each other regardless of the circumstances.

“No matter what...”

"Yes, no matter what." Keith's shoulders trembled slightly before he straightened his posture. Then he left the room, without looking back. Tonight, our paths would diverge...

That's right. We made this pledge together.

No matter how difficult the paths we would walk, we would continue to have faith in each other. An unpleasant groan came from my mouth as I gritted my teeth. Both Keith and Eugene were desperately struggling to survive.

So how could I be the first to complain? How dare I be the one to contemplate an easy death!

All I could think about was pleading for them to trust me while they were fighting for their lives. I'm sure it must have wounded their hearts.

Dammit. Why couldn't I just trust in my lord? Was my loyalty really so shallow?

I woke up feeling angry, cursing my lack of strength.

It was quite early in the morning, because the sun was just beginning to rise, when I heard a rustling noise. I heard a light pattering of impatient footsteps, which I assumed belonged to Alto, so I pretended to still be asleep to avoid startling him. After a while, his footsteps grew distant—he must have finished getting ready. Once I no longer felt his presence, I opened my eyes and looked around. Then I realized Setsuna was also nowhere to be found. When had he gotten up? I couldn't sense his presence at all. For a moment, I thought that this was because I had been feeling off, but then again, that probably wasn't the case. Setsuna was more powerful than me, so it was likelier that I was simply incapable of detecting him.

He didn't look like an adventurer at all. If anything, his appearance and mannerisms were more princely than Eugene's. I'm sure no one would doubt him if he told them he was a royal from another land. He'd told me he was a scholar, but he was also a skilled sorcerer. I wondered if his life would've been easier if he could make a living as a sorcerer for a royal family somewhere, but then I thought about Alto, and everything clicked about Setsuna's lifestyle.

Since Alto was a beastfolk, he couldn't be left alone on the southern continent; in all likelihood, Setsuna had become an adventurer to ensure he could stay by his apprentice's side.

"He wouldn't want my sympathy anyway."

Everyone had their own way of living, so it was presumptuous of me to think I knew better than him. At any rate, it seemed like Setsuna and Alto got along just fine and were happy, so it was none of my business. I stood up and moved around, both to test how my body felt and to banish those thoughts. I seemed to be improving day by day. Just then, I heard Setsuna's voice, so I got curious and followed the sound.

"Let's start now, Alto."

"Okay."

Even though I approached as quietly as I could, Setsuna looked directly at me. I let out an inward sigh, once again reminded of the fact that he was more skilled than me. But then he immediately flicked his gaze back to Alto. It would be rude to interrupt, so I just decided to quietly observe their training. Setsuna drew a large circle of about two mers centered on himself.

"I won't leave this circle. If you step outside it, the mock battle will end. As long as you're inside it, I won't stop attacking. I won't force you out. If you don't think you can go any longer, then you can leave the circle yourself. Do you have any questions?"

"No." Alto shook his head, took a deep breath, and then stared at Setsuna. The two of them were now in the center of the circle.

"Then let's begin."

With those words, Setsuna's expression vanished in an instant. Without hesitation, Alto raised his double swords, showing no fear toward his master. After gauging the distance between them, he made up his mind and launched his attack. At first, Setsuna let him strike, but then he started to counter little by little. The blows grew faster.

Alto was putting up a good fight, but he had no hope against Setsuna's attacks. That was partly because his body wasn't fully grown yet but also

because of the significant gap in the quality of their techniques. Still, Alto launched an attack whenever he found an opening. Setsuna was deliberately leaving openings to teach his apprentice to exploit weak points, but this was lost on Alto.

After a while, Alto's breathing grew ragged. When Setsuna saw him struggle, he encouraged him and said, "You can still move, can't you? Come on, keep going." A pained expression came over Alto's face as he mustered his last bit of strength and swung his sword. Setsuna dodged his final blow and struck him on the chest with the palm of his hand, sending him flying.

Alto rolled backward on the ground, stopping only once he came to the very edge of the circle. Then he lay there motionless.

"Alto!!" Setsuna called his apprentice's name in an intimidating tone, and Alto startled, reflexively somersaulting out of the circle. Just then, Setsuna's blade pierced the ground.

That last move...was serious. One that separated life from death. In the midst of battle, there had been many times where I was glad to have taken a step back, for it saved my life. I had lost friends who had been unable to take that step. Even though I prayed for them to live, to hang on for just a few more seconds, they hadn't made it in time. They couldn't take the step that separated life from death.

Alto had been prompted to evade by Setsuna, but I knew how hard it was to do that when you felt like you were completely drained of strength. I was thoroughly impressed with how well Alto had fought.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. That was so exciting." Alto smiled as he clutched his chest.

"That's enough training for today."

"Awww..." Alto looked disappointed, and Setsuna had a troubled smile on his face but cast a recovery spell on him.

"There may be times when you can't avoid attacks, just like how I pushed you away today. In those cases, you need to be conscious of how to minimize your injuries. So it's essential to understand the importance of split-second

decisions."

Setsuna joined Alto on the ground and went over where his apprentice had succeeded or failed in their training session, freely praising his last move.

"Yes, Master."

They treated each other more like brothers than master and apprentice. If they were both human or both beastfolk, no one would have batted an eye if they said they were siblings. But now that I had watched them spar, I could see that they were indeed a master and an apprentice. Setsuna didn't go easy on Alto.

During the training, his words seemed polite and kind. Even though I knew he hadn't fought to kill, the tension between him and Alto had been so thick that my breath had caught in my throat. I wondered if it was necessary to go to such lengths, but then I realized that such thoughts were misguided. Some beastfolk out there wouldn't be able to survive unless they were taught how to fight like this.

"Good morning, Cyrus. How are you feeling?" Setsuna asked.

"Still a little sluggish, but I'm fine."

"You must have recovered quickly because you were already in good shape."

"Nah, I think it's because Setsuna's such a great healer," Alto interjected. I glanced over at him, and he greeted me politely.

"Good morning, Cyrus."

He must have been exhausted, but that wasn't stopping him from walking on his own.

"Morning, Alto. That training looked pretty rough."

"It wasn't so bad."

"You've got to practice hard to get stronger." I exchanged a firm handshake with him, and he nodded.

"I'll do my best."

And he will grow stronger...so I can't back down, either. I asked if I could train

with them, but Alto made an unpleasant face.

“Don’t you realize you need to be in better shape for that?” Setsuna asked, so I decided to give it up for the moment. Hopefully, I would grow closer to Alto by the time I was fully recovered so I could train with them. It wouldn’t be fun to participate if he didn’t want me to.

“Well, we shouldn’t waste time. Let’s eat breakfast and head to the village,” Setsuna said, effectively ending the conversation.

Alto’s tail wagged as he cried, “Food!” and began tugging Setsuna by the hand to go back to the campsite as soon as possible.

By the time we arrived at the village, the sun had completely set. We quickly found an inn and secured a room. I didn’t have any money, so I suggested getting only a single room, but Setsuna insisted that he would pay for me. So we ended up getting two rooms after all. I thanked him and then went to my lodgings. As I sat on the bed, all my strength seemed to drain away at once. The sensation of the sheets, which I hadn’t felt in a long time, was so comfortable that I was irresistibly drawn in, and I collapsed into the mattress.

I never thought I’d be able to sleep in a bed again.

I’d been camping out in the wild ever since I was banished, so I felt both nostalgic and grateful for the sensation. I felt so cozy that I wanted to drift off right away, but instead I looked up at the ceiling and tried to sort through my thoughts.

That day when Eugene stripped me of my knighthood and banished me from the kingdom, I had no idea what was going on. I wandered aimlessly and fled from monsters I encountered, questioning my lord Eugene and Keith all the while. *Why? How could you? and Why won’t you believe me?* These phrases kept swirling in my brain. I was more distraught about Keith not believing me and Eugene abandoning me than the fact that I’d been teleported to a monster-infested area while I was unarmed.

I walked and walked, trying to avoid running into monsters, but it brought me no closer to a populated area. I had been told that I was going to be teleported to the Demonlands, so I thought trying to find other humans would be pointless. Still, I couldn't give up because I wanted to clear up this misunderstanding with Eugene and the others. I wanted to shout for help, but I suppressed the urge to avoid alerting monsters to my location. So I just kept on walking. But even then, I couldn't get out of the forest. The sun had set, and night had fallen on the Demonlands. The cries and shrieks of monsters cut through the darkness, frightening me. At that moment, I wished only to be free of that inky-black world.

The next day, I climbed down from the tree I'd slept in and continued walking. I was too exhausted, both physically and mentally, to think straight. Prior to this, I had been able to get by just fine staying up all night, even during times of war. But things were different now. Sometime last night, I'd lost consciousness and been attacked by a medium-sized monster. Luckily, I'd avoided a fatal wound, but I had no means to fight back. I reflexively began to run, just as the monster attacked my back. The pain was so intense that I almost passed out again. My only comfort was that I was still alive. I gritted my teeth and ran for my life. I ran and ran as fast as I could, but the monsters kept chasing after me.

I was running out of breath, so I leaned against a nearby tree, sinking down to the ground. Suddenly, I recalled what Eugene had told me when he revoked my knighthood, and the words Keith whispered to me before I was transported to the teleportation circle. I couldn't help but wonder why I still drew breath.

"I'm so tired," I muttered.

My mind and body were utterly fatigued. I felt so worn out from carrying around all these emotions that I started to think it would be easier for me to die right there. Then I wouldn't have to ruminate or run for my life anymore. The monsters caught up to me and approached, poised to attack with all their might. I steeled myself for what would happen next. My fear vanished.

Just then, the monsters roared in a frenzy of anger, but they didn't charge at me. Puzzled, I felt the presence of two people beside me. However, I'd already given up on life at that point, so it was too late. One of them asked me if I was able to fight, but I didn't look at him. I no longer had the will to live, and I knew

that if I interacted with them while I was dying, it would leave emotional scars.

“Just leave me be...”

The man paused for a moment, then asked in a voice that seemed to grab my heart, “Are you sure you’ve done everything you want to do in your life?”

The image of Eugene’s face instantly sprang to mind.

“I pledge my unconditional loyalty to you.” I thought back to the day I made that oath. Although that pledge was now unilaterally revoked, my loyalty hadn’t disappeared. It hadn’t gone away, which was why this whole experience was so painful.

“I’ll ask you one more time: Are you sure you truly want to die?”

Obviously, I didn’t want to go out like this, so I found my voice and said, “I’m sorry. I’d appreciate your help.” The man nodded, unsheathed his sword, and killed the monsters. The brilliance of his blade was so vivid that it made me feel like I was in a dream—a very convenient dream, for that matter. And that was when I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I discovered that my injuries had been treated, and I was lying down. I saw two people busily preparing something, probably because we were going to camp here. The man who had slain the monsters and a beastfolk child. As I spoke to the man, I realized he was trying to avoid getting involved in my situation at all costs. But perhaps because of his seeming disinterest, it was easier for me to open up to him about everything.

Despite my self-deprecating monologue, the man responded calmly. Through our conversation, I realized that my knight’s testament hadn’t been revoked and the banishment was just a farce—I had actually been entrusted to carry out a mission. I wasn’t sure what the mission entailed, but I did know that Eugene and Keith believed in me. The thought brought me joy and suffering in equal measure. I’d almost thrown my life away when I thought they abandoned me.

As I wallowed in my feelings, the man asked if I wanted to eat something. Since I’d been wandering before this, I’d only eaten what I knew for certain was

safe. During my time as a knight, we had camped out often, so I had learned to identify edible items; but this forest was filled with plants I'd never seen before. The man's question abruptly reminded me that I was famished.

I nodded in response. I had no idea what the future would hold. But there was one thing I knew for certain—Eugene and Keith were waiting for me. And in that case, I had to do anything I could to survive. I decided to check whether there were monsters nearby so that I could move away from here.

Just then, a nagging question crossed my mind. Why was this man in a place like this with a child? And his answer was beyond surprising. He informed me that we were in Kutt, on the southern continent. I was in disbelief. He patiently explained we were in Zeghur Forest outside of Kutt. His explanation convinced me that he was telling the truth.

However, if this was really the southern continent, then why had I been teleported here? The magic teleportation circle should have whisked me away to the Demonlands. So then why? My head was filled with nothing but that question. The man could tell that I was confused, and he told me he was going to go finish up cooking with the boy and for me to wait a bit longer.

"Master, can I put this mushroom in?" the beastfolk boy asked the man.

"Which one? Oh, that's an egg mushroom. Where did you find it?"

"I looked it up, and it's supposed to be edible. The book says they're delicious!"

The conversation seemed slightly...off, somehow.

"You did a good job researching it."

"Thank you, Master!"

The man petted the boy on the head, and the beastfolk child's tail wagged. The way the man looked at the boy was very kind. They seemed like brothers, or maybe a parent and child. But since the boy referred to the man as "Master," I gathered that they were probably neither, most likely master and apprentice. I'd never heard of a human taking on a beastfolk apprentice, but perhaps there was some reason for it. I noticed a guild emblem on the back of the child's hand and learned they were adventurers.

"You can throw the mushrooms in after you wash the dirt off them."

"Okay!"

The boy never explained where he found the egg mushrooms. But as I absently listened to their conversation around the campfire, I had no choice but to accept that this really wasn't the Demonlands.

I remembered they were waiting for me, so I hurried over to the fire. The boy was sitting next to it in anticipation. I apologized to them and took a seat, and the man told the boy to eat, then gave me food as well.

It seemed like the child was very cautious of me. I suppose I couldn't blame him for that, seeing as how a strange man was suddenly in his camp. As I was about to take a bite of my soup, I realized something. Even though it was the very first thing I should have done, I still hadn't thanked them for saving my life. I felt ashamed, wondering what in the world I had been thinking. I quickly thanked the man for saving my life and tending to my wounds.

Just as I was about to reveal my true name, I stopped myself. It occurred to me that perhaps I shouldn't reveal my true identity. Keith and the others had entrusted me with a mission even at the cost of me being wrongfully accused, so there must be something secretive going on. If that was the case, it would be unwise to tell them who I was.

"You can use a fake name if you want."

The man seemed to read my thoughts, or maybe he just understood my concerns. But then I made up my mind to uphold my honor to him, since he had saved my life. I spoke honestly about my thoughts, and the man only gave me a wry smile in response. I wasn't sure what to take from it...

Perhaps it was to put me at ease? Regardless, the man began eating first. His appearance and mannerisms were so refined that I couldn't help but question if he was an adventurer. The child had an emblem on his hand, but the man had gloves on, so I couldn't tell if he had one himself. But I did have a faint memory of being impressed by the man's build and swordsmanship as he fought the monsters before I lost consciousness.

While I pondered this, I took a sip of the soup. It was delicious. I certainly hadn't expected to eat something so good, and with so many ingredients, at a makeshift campsite. I wasn't sure what kind of meat they had used, but it melted in my mouth. It was so good that I devoured it in no time. I hoped I didn't look too sloppy. I didn't intend to ask for seconds but was slightly pleased when Alto, despite his suspicion of me, asked if I wanted more.

On the way to Kutt, I swung my sword to rid my body of anxiety, impatience, anger, guilt, and everything else that made me want to scream. Setsuna was a perceptive person, so he must have picked up on this, but he didn't say a word about it. For that, I was grateful. I was incredibly overwhelmed by a lot of things just then. If I hadn't been able to find a release for those emotions, I might have just started screaming.

When Setsuna pointed out the holes in Keith's plan, I thought that I could still manage somehow by stealing the antidote from the royal hospital. But then he made me understand how dangerous that would be. After that, I was at a loss. Still, things were so urgent that I felt if I stopped here, I wouldn't be able to get going again, so I asked him for his help.

"That's a pretty hefty request."

Setsuna laughed in exasperation. I couldn't help but laugh and say that I agreed with him. For as long as I lived, I wouldn't forget that I'd gotten innocent, unrelated people involved in this affair. The least I could do was protect them on this journey.

I opened my eyes and let out a gentle sigh. I was so glad to be alive. I genuinely felt that, from the bottom of heart. If I'd given up and died right then, I would have never understood the words Eugene had spoken to me. I would have gone out thinking I'd been abandoned, that my lord had betrayed me. I couldn't imagine anything emptier than that.

"Every cloud has a silver lining, huh?"

I repeated the phrase Setsuna had told me. My fortunes had taken a turn for the better the moment he saved me. I tried to sit up with those thoughts in mind. However, I just didn't have the strength; my eyelids grew heavy, and I dozed off. I'd accrued more fatigue than expected from defeating monsters and being on such high alert. Now that I'd reached a place of relative safety, the tension in my body had eased, and the dam holding back my exhaustion had dissipated.

"I'm sure you must be tired, so get as much rest as you need to." The words Setsuna had conveyed to me before we parted came to mind, and I stopped resisting the drowsiness and closed my eyes.

◇ Part Five: Setsuna

After we ate breakfast at the inn, we returned to our room and got ready to go shopping for the things we would need for our journey. Alto diligently wrote down the items we needed as we discussed what would be necessary. I helped him spell the words and checked to make sure he hadn't left anything out. Once Alto looked satisfied with the completed list, I heard a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"You ready?" Cyrus asked as he entered the room. Ever since I told him he didn't need to speak formally with me, his manner of speech had been getting more and more casual. Yet his every gesture was still elegant—perhaps because he was a knight who'd sworn to protect the royal family of Lypaed?

The outfit he'd worn yesterday was in terrible condition, so I'd given him a bag of fresh clothes. He'd walked in wearing them, his beard freshly shaven. Alto blinked a few times; he must have been surprised that Cyrus was younger than he'd first seemed. Or maybe it was because he looked less tired and was standing tall. I surmised the knight was quite popular with women.

"Oh, right. Here's this back," he said, handing me the sword I'd lent him.

"Thank you. Please go ahead and buy a blade for yourself."

"Huh?"

"You'll need to protect yourself, won't you? I want you to be fully prepared." I handed him some money with a smile, not pressing the issue.

"If you insist." Cyrus let out a small sigh and bowed before taking the money.

"And please, get some armor, too, along with anything else you think you'll need. We'll take care of the meals and water until we reach Lypaed, but you should get some water and preserved food for after that, just in case."

Cyrus looked like he wanted to say something, but then he sighed and nodded again before heading toward the door. As I watched him go, I remembered what I'd wanted to ask him about and said, "Wait a moment."

"Is there something else?"

“May I ask you a question?”

He paused and turned to me.

“Are you famous in Lypaed?”

“More or less.”

“Then you may want to disguise yourself. People probably won’t think someone who was sent to the Demonlands would still be alive, but you never know what could happen. It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate. You can just alter your appearance. What do you think?”

“How in the world am I supposed to do that?”

Seeing the troubled look on his face, I offered up a solution. “I think changing the color of your hair and eyes would be enough.”

I knew from Kyle’s memories that people from Lypaed usually had golden hair and blue eyes. Cyrus had golden hair, but his eyes were dark. If we changed those two things, he would look much different.

“I have a magical tool that could make your hair a deep blue and your eyes gray. Would you like to try it?”

Although I could manipulate the color of his hair and eyes with my magic, I thought it would be best if he could change it at his discretion, so I recommended the magical tool.

“You really have everything, don’t you?”

“I borrowed it from someone.”

“And you’ll lend it to me?”

“Yes. If you take this ring off, your hair and eye color will return to normal, so please be careful.”

I handed him the ring. It automatically changed its shape to fit his finger. He put it on and walked toward the mirror.

“.....”

“Yes, you look much plainer now. Honestly, I don’t think anyone would recognize you.”

It wasn't a bad look, but he didn't stand out as much. Cyrus seemed to be uncomfortable with his new appearance, because he stared at himself and let out a sigh.

"Oh, cheer up. It's about time to leave. Go finish up your preparations."

I pushed him out the door, ignoring his protests. "And don't cheap out on what you buy. Get something fit for your abilities."

I reminded him not to purchase shoddy equipment.

As he left through the door, I could hear Cyrus muttering, "I'm certainly not going to hold anything back from Setsuna anymore!" and then his quiet footsteps retreated.

"Why do you think Cyrus is feeling so glum?" Alto had been silently observing the situation, but now he spoke up in confusion. "He looks cool. Maybe he doesn't like looking cool?" He tipped his head to the side in confusion. What he said was so funny that I couldn't help but laugh.

After Alto and I went out to buy everything we needed, we went straight back to the inn without gathering any information. Since the cave we needed to find had been closed for some time, I didn't think it would be a good idea to spread rumors about it.

"Was that the best armor you could find, Cyrus?"

"I didn't choose it out of frugality. It was the only thing they had. It should be fine for the time being. And there's no use in complaining about it."

I chuckled at his shabby iron armor before he showed me the sword he purchased. It was also made of iron, and it looked thin and unreliable. I was sure that the equipment would probably suffice since the local monsters weren't particularly strong, but I still felt uneasy.

"I'm a bit concerned about this. Hang on a moment, I have something better."

I recalled that I had a magical tool inside my bag that could adjust the size and quality of weapons and armor. Kyle had used it as a part of a magic performance during a friend's wedding party a long time ago, to make the

bride's wedding gown more extravagant.

I took out the rod-shaped magical tool and immediately grew self-conscious. It had a somewhat silly, toy-like appearance. Cyrus stared at it skeptically, while Alto let out an exclamation of awe for some reason. But despite the tool's appearance, I was confident that it would work. And if it turned out to be a failure, I could figure something else out.

With that in mind, I brandished the rod, and a faint light emanated from it, slowly altering the armor and blade.

“.....”

Everyone was left speechless as we watched the armor and sword shapeshift before our eyes. The armor now had a faint silver sheen, and beside it lay a finely crafted broadsword.

Wait, this—it didn't just change the appearance but the material, too. This isn't iron, it's steel!

I panicked inwardly as Cyrus and Alto were letting out gasps of astonishment. I imagined that the guests at that wedding back then had reacted similarly. Kyle must have been incredibly proud.

After a moment, Cyrus snapped out of it and hesitantly tapped on the sword and armor, then struck them harder to test their toughness.

“That magical tool is amazing...”

“It is. This was the first time I ever used it, so it surprised me, too.”

“Where did you get it?”

“A friend left me this bag with all the contents inside.”

Cyrus avoided pressing me for more information. I was secretly grateful for that but then switched gears and handed him a cloak that could provide protection against cold weather.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“This must be ungodly expensive. I just keep racking up the things I owe you

for."

"You can just repay it little by little, so don't worry about it."

"How could I not worry about it?!" Cyrus grumbled as he put on the cloak. Then he turned to Alto and asked, "How do I look?" They'd gotten a lot closer since arriving at the village.

"The cloak is cool."

"The cloak? But what about me?"

"You look normal? Knightly?"

"Huh? Knightly?!"

That seemed to hurt Cyrus's feelings a bit, but I decided not to push the conversation further, because comforting him straightaway might make it worse. Alto seemed more interested in the outfit than Cyrus himself. However, I did think it looked good on him.

"Is it hard to move in? Is there anything you don't like about it?"

"No, it's more than adequate."

He moved around a bit to test it out, and I was relieved by his response. I told him that he needed to keep his lips sealed about the magical tool. He looked disappointed but agreed. That was a close one. I could tell by the look on his face that he was itching to spread the word about it.

Two days had passed since we'd set out for the cave. Even though we'd been taking breaks, we were exhausted from all the walking. Alto went to sleep right after dinner. Normally, he would turn into a wolf and sleep with me, but since Cyrus was with us, he slept alone.

I wondered if he slept with that creepy rabbit plushie next to him because he was lonely. It must have given him peace of mind. Personally, I thought it would be terrifying to wake up in the middle of the night and lock eyes with that thing. As I was gazing at Alto, Cyrus addressed me abruptly in a low voice, so as not to wake him.

“If I hadn’t asked for your help in the forest, what would I have done?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I just wondered what you would’ve done had I given up right then.”

For some reason, he was gazing at the campfire as he spoke.

“If it were just me, I probably would’ve seen you off to the Waterside, but since Alto was there, I can’t say for sure.”

“But even if you were alone, wouldn’t you have helped me anyway?”

I raised my eyebrows, slightly surprised by his question. “If you decided to die, it wouldn’t be my place to interfere.”

I lowered my gaze to my right glove, which hid my emblem of the camellia flower. “If you can’t live freely, then you should at least be able to choose the way you die. Don’t you agree?”

I wanted to live with purity and die with purity, just like a camellia. I wanted to fall like camellia petals. I was just sharing my own philosophy about life and death with Cyrus at this point.

“I used to think my life belonged to my lord, Eugene, so I’ve never really thought too deeply about the subject. That’s why I didn’t know what to do when my life was finally my own. But if there’s even a slight chance I might be happy someday, I want to do whatever it takes to stay alive.”

He spoke quite earnestly. I couldn’t help but smile softly. “So you’re saying you’re glad to be alive right now.”

A guilty look crossed Cyrus’s face before he nodded, giving a self-deprecating chuckle. “Yeah. I’m glad I didn’t die back there.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The dry branches crackled in the campfire by our feet. I watched as the flames slowly lapped at the twigs, then heard his quiet voice again.

“Don’t you think so, Setsuna?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not following.

“Don’t you think that if you keep living, good things are bound to happen?”

I grinned vaguely in response. Even if that was true, I knew the feeling of indelible despair.

"I think it's wonderful to live like that. I think we should live life to the fullest, even if we have to struggle desperately to survive. I also think it's okay to choose how your life ends. Because going on when you don't want to live is the same as being dead."

I couldn't help but think that Kyle would be sad to hear me say that, but I suppressed the feeling of conflict I still felt inside of me and continued. "At the time of our meeting, you were present, but you weren't really living, right? So I decided I would respect it if you chose death. If you didn't have the will to live, I think things would have been very hard for you, even if I had saved you."

But if someone like Cyrus showed even a sliver of the will to live, if they desperately wished to break free from the chains of despair like Kyle had helped me to do, then I would want to be able to help them.

"If I run into a similar situation in the future, I think I'll ask, 'Do you really want to die?' because I believe that a person has the right to choose for themselves. It's their decision, not mine. And if they choose to keep going and reach out for help, then I'll do everything in my power to save them."

"I see..."

"You wondered what would happen if you'd given up, but you chose to live. And that's why I helped. That's all there is to it. I know that the situation you're in right now is very tough, but if you're willing to fight for the chance to change the future, then I want to help you."

Cyrus processed my words and nodded. After a moment, he murmured, "All right."

At that point, I thought the conversation was over, but then he started speaking again.

"Thank you. Honestly, I'm still pretty scared. I'm preoccupied with what will happen to my kingdom if I don't return. The more I think about it, the more I fixate on the worst possible outcomes. There's no way I could've been able to bear it alone, and then I would've died, leaving behind a friend who is still

desperately fighting. That's why I wanted to believe that even if I'd given up, things would somehow still be okay. I want to believe that there's still hope even if I'd made a mistake."

The fear of how an individual's choices could determine the future of many was something I still couldn't fully comprehend. Maybe my words didn't hold much weight in the face of such a serious decision.

Still, I wished for Cyrus's safety, and for the success of his mission.

"You chose the present, Cyrus. And that will lead to the future."

"You're right." He repeated it to himself several times, trying to make it sink in, and then nodded in agreement.

The next day, we entered the forest depths. Up until this point, the journey was filled with terrible monsters, which wore down Alto's and Cyrus's strength. Still, Alto didn't complain. He actually seemed happy to fight the monsters.

Occasionally, I cast stamina recovery magic on the two of them to ensure that they didn't get hurt while we fought. There were many monsters I saw for the first time, but they wouldn't all fit in the Cube the guild had given me, so I had to put the rest inside my magic bag. I had a feeling we wouldn't be needing to buy meat anytime soon. Every time I stowed away meat that we'd never eaten before, Alto smiled happily.

"Hey, is it just me, or are there more monsters around here?"

"It does seem that way," I replied to a suspicious Cyrus.

Just then, I noticed the reason for that.

There was an overwhelming concentration of magical energy in this area, and the monsters were naturally drawn to it. On top of that, we were heading straight toward the source of that magical energy. I had a feeling a monster emitting that magic was inhabiting the cave.

"Well, there's no point in worrying about it. Let's just keep going."

Cyrus regained his determination and led the way. Before long, we arrived at

the entrance of the cave we'd been searching for. The way in had clearly been dug by humans, and it was larger than I imagined. The area surrounding the cave was even more choked with vegetation than I'd expected, and it looked completely untouched. Wondering if the overgrowth was a consequence of mana, I activated my Detection magic.

"Should we just go in?"

"...Yes. I'll remove the barrier."

"Barrier? There's a barrier?"

"Yes, it's to prevent entry."

"I see. Still, I wonder how long ago that thing was put up. The people at the time erected it because it was dangerous inside, right?"

"I'm not sure. At any rate, I've removed it."

The barrier that had been placed over the entrance to the cave was actually seven hundred years old. The mechanism behind it was fairly complex, but the amount of mana used to construct it was relatively low, so removing it was fairly easy. Whoever had cast this spell must have wanted to preserve their mana at the time.

But for what?

"Hey, Setsuna. We going in or what?" Cyrus's question snapped me back to reality.

"Master?" Alto looked puzzled as he gazed up at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got lost in my thoughts for a moment. Let's go."

We exchanged glances to make sure we were all ready, then cautiously stepped into the cave.

Six days had passed. We continued our trek through the cave, using a Fire magic tool to light the way. The journey had been smooth so far, but it was difficult to determine whether we were really getting closer to Lypaed. The cave was a mix of human-dug paths and natural tunnels. In the natural sections, the

path would suddenly ascend or descend, or abruptly change direction, making it feel like quite the labyrinth.

Fortunately, the interior was surprisingly spacious, wide enough for the three of us to walk side by side. I supposed that made sense considering it had been used for trade; the passage needed to be wide enough for a carriage to fit through. It had taken me half a day to make that realization.

We had been anxious at first, but once it became clear there weren't any monsters around, we relaxed enough to engage in casual conversation. Alto was getting bored of the tedious exploration at this point, but Cyrus was keeping him in good spirits by telling him various tales. I used Detection magic, but I still couldn't find any monsters. Cyrus suggested that the giant monster could have died, and Alto remarked that he was sad we wouldn't get to eat it. The two of them had gotten close enough to engage in lighthearted banter like that.

"So? Did you run away, Cyrus?"

Currently Cyrus was regaling him with stories from his childhood. His teacher had been very strict, and his friends would often try to run away.

"Me? Of course not."

"Because studying is fun!"

"It sure is."

As the two of them chattered happily with each other, my Detection magic finally picked up on a monster. It seemed to be straight ahead, so there wasn't a way to avoid it. I didn't want to get the two of them involved, so I just said, "I think there's something up there," and went on ahead by myself. After a while, I reached the spot where I'd sensed the monster and found a man wearing long, ancient-looking purple robes. He was standing there quietly, with his back turned to me. For a split second, a feeling of *déjà vu* washed over me; it was like I'd met him somewhere before.

He turned around slowly, like he had just noticed me—no, he'd probably been aware of my presence from the very beginning. He was handsome, with shiny silver hair that reached down past his shoulders. But unfortunately, his eyes

were sharp, and they didn't seem friendly at all. He held a cane in his right hand but also wore a sword on his belt, so it was difficult to predict what he might do. He had on a black shirt and pants beneath his robes that looked easy to move in, so I figured I ought to be wary of him using his blade.

Tuuli's words echoed in my mind. *"Did you come to kill me? Even if you did... Will you at least give me some time to talk with you?"*

I couldn't help but grit my teeth. I was deeply concerned that Tuuli's life might be in danger. I hadn't mentioned this to her to avoid scaring her, but there was something that bothered me—her collected magical power. She'd said that her power would be used to lift Grand's curse. But the only thing I had been able to confirm about the collected magical power was that it was being sent elsewhere.

And I didn't know what it was being used for. Even after a thousand years, Tuuli's punishment might not be over. If the dragon king needed to use her magic for something else, he might've just kept her in that prison to use her. And once he was done, he might want to keep her silent. I didn't entirely trust him, since he'd put her in that situation in the first place. The man who was watching over her might be the same one who would take her life.

No, he's not necessarily out to kill her, I told myself, suppressing my anger. I'll just have to make sure he's not involved in her life in the future. And if he doesn't agree, then...

"Setsuna."

"Master."

Suddenly, Cyrus's and Alto's voices pulled me from my reverie.

That's right, I have to avoid getting the two of them involved. For now I just need to get them through here. Then I can turn back by myself. But that's only if we get out of here safely...

"What are you two doing here?"

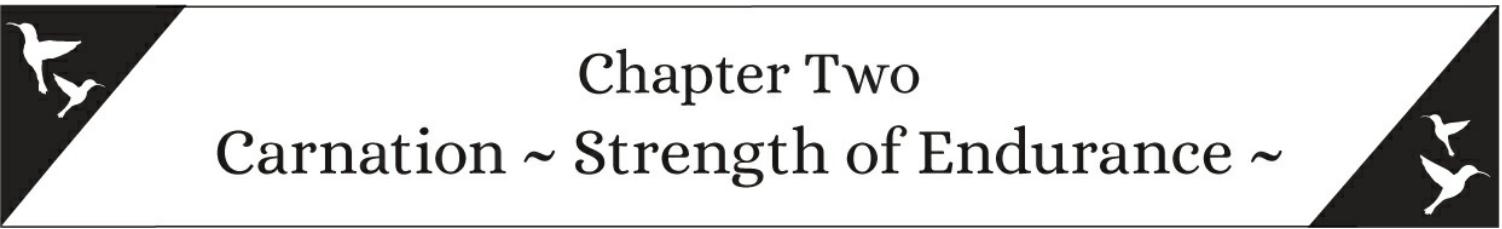
"You didn't come back, Master."

"Yeah, and we got worried. Who's that?"

Alto looked beside himself with anxiety, and I realized that Cyrus must've been alarmed as well.

"I don't know. Let's talk to him first."

I didn't have an inkling as to the identity of the man, but I had a good idea of why he was blocking my path. The cave had been sealed with dragon magic that had been active for seven hundred years. Although I'd never fought against dragonfolk before, I knew from Kyle's memories that I could defeat them, so I was prepared for the worst. The man narrowed his eyes at me and looked displeased, but I returned his gaze without looking away.



Chapter Two

Carnation ~ Strength of Endurance ~

◇ Part One: ???

Although many years had passed, the cave itself was still strong. No creature had used this cave since I started living here. I had a hunch that it was probably due to the monsters who'd lived here seven hundred years ago, but for someone who wanted to avoid contact with others like me, the place was very comfortable.

But six days ago, things changed. That was because the barrier I placed on the Kutt side of the cave had been broken. I'd thought about going out and getting rid of whoever had done it myself, but I decided to just stay here, figuring they'd bump into me eventually. And today, I decided to surprise the people who broke the barrier to keep them from approaching the spot where I lived in the cave. Standing in front of me now were two humans and a beastfolk child, a somewhat odd combination.

One was a young man who appeared to be a swordsman. He wore basic armor and wasn't carrying any belongings. He was alert and on guard against me. The beastfolk child tensed up when he saw me, freezing in place.

The last one was a gentle-looking young man. There was a sword at his hip, but he wore only regular clothes, without any armor to speak of. He didn't seem to be a swordsman. Was he carrying the other man's things for him? A run-of-the-mill, old-fashioned coffee-colored bag was slung over his shoulder. It looked too small to carry three people's belongings, but if it was some kind of magical item, there would be more than enough space inside. However, the

beastfolk child had a similar bag, so perhaps they were both in charge of the luggage.

Then who broke the barrier? If one of the humans or the beastfolk child were sorcerers, they'd need a ring or a staff to use magic...

Upon closer inspection, both the young man and the boy who had the bags were wearing rings. It was possible they were both sorcerers, but since the beastfolk child was frozen with fear, that seemed unlikely. His job must have been carrying their belongings, while the young man with the coat was the sorcerer.

"If you turn back now, I won't kill you," I called out to the cautious trio, drawing a line with my staff on the ground. "But if even one of you crosses this line, I'll end your life. I recommend you turn back now."

The young swordsman and the beastfolk child cautiously put their hands on their swords. They were on high alert, ready to respond immediately if I were to launch an attack. However, the young man in the blue coat remained calm.

"Are you the master of this cave, who has lived here for eight hundred years?"

At first, I thought he was a fool who couldn't read the room, but I was wrong. He'd guessed that I'd been here a long time, although it hadn't been quite that long.

"No. I've lived here for seven hundred years. There were monsters here before that, but they were evil, so I slayed them."

He didn't seem surprised to hear that, even though the other two looked confused. Where did this man's confidence come from?

"I see. So does that mean you're in charge of this place?"

"Yes."

"We need to get to the kingdom of Lypaed as soon as possible, but in order to do that, we have to pass through this cave, which I recognize is your home. Would you please allow us to go on our way?"

He was making a request, although it was clear that he intended to push his

way through.

He's awfully brazen.

"I refuse. I have no intention of allowing anyone through here. If I let one person pass, then every human will think they have the right to go through here. That's too much of a nuisance."

"What if we swear to keep the existence of this cave a secret?"

"I hate humans. You should turn back before I take your lives." I warned him with as much malice as I could muster. The swordsman's knees trembled, and his face went pale. The beastfolk child's ears lay down, and his tail went between his legs before he fell right to the ground. However, the other young man looked as calm and cool as always.

"Alto, Alto," he said to the boy, who was panicking from my intimidating threat. The boy didn't respond, so the young man sighed and pulled him close. He whispered something into his ear. The child's body went limp, and he lay on the ground. It seemed he'd used some kind of sleep magic on him.

"Setsuna... We should really...turn back..." the swordsman said to the young man, his face pale. His jaw was clenched so tightly that he could barely get the words out, but he still seemed to be in his right mind. I was impressed that a human could bear it. On the other hand, I felt disgusted by the other man's abnormal reaction.

"Don't worry. I think you should go to sleep, too, Cyrus. The man's malice is too dangerous; it'll damage your psyche."

The swordsman looked surprised. The young man whispered something to him, too. "What are...? Setsu..." Before he could finish his sentence, the man in the coat put him to sleep. Then he erected a barrier around them. He'd probably done it to protect the pair, but it might also have been a declaration of hostility toward me.

"It seems you won't turn back after all," I said antagonistically, irritated that this human wouldn't back down.

"The situation has changed."

Still, the man didn't look frightened as he finished constructing the barrier and turned around.

"What are you talking about?"

"Things are different now that I've put the swordsman to sleep. There's something else I wanted to ask you in addition to getting permission to pass through here, but I didn't want him to know. So I'd given up on asking you. But thanks to your threats, I was able to put him to sleep, so that's no longer a concern."

"Well? What do you want to know?"

"I want to learn why you're here." His words had more presence than mine. I thought him awfully brazen, so I glared at him with as much malice as I could muster.

"Why must I tell you? I'm free to do whatever I please, am I not?"

The man replied to me casually. "My wife's life is on the line, so I can't just let this one slide. Would you please tell me?"

"Your wife's life and my purpose have nothing to do with each other."

He narrowed his violet eyes and shot me a piercing stare.

"If you don't tell me why you're here, then I won't agree. Are you refusing to tell me?"

"And what if I am?"

"I'll use force."

"Against me?" I asked with exasperation.

"Is it that strange, for a human to threaten a dragon?" He glared at me coldly, infuriating me.

So he does know I'm a dragon. That's why he's been directing such hatred toward me. How presumptuous for a human to act this way!

I had no desire to keep this man alive after he'd continued to treat me with such disrespect. I knew what he really meant, but it didn't matter. Yet I couldn't afford to attack him from here. That was because unlike humans, we dragons

could not go back on our word. To my frustration, I couldn't attack him unless he crossed this line.

Perhaps sensing that I was getting serious, the man doffed his bag to prevent it from getting in the way in combat. He slowly and carefully set it on the ground. There were many openings in his movements, but I couldn't let my guard down. He could attack me by surprise or use magic. Also, the sword that hung at his hip seemed out of place for a sorcerer, and there was something eerie about it. It might have been some kind of magical item, like this staff I had gotten from a friend. With that in mind, I let go of my staff and grabbed my sword.

However, contrary to my expectations, he drew the blade from his waist.

"So you won't try to convince me that you're not a dragon, despite using dragon magic on the barrier?"

I flinched at his impenetrable stance. The immense amount of mana emanating from him overwhelmed me, and I felt a cold sweat run down my back. He was using magic to boost his physical abilities.

"I hate to say this, but you won't beat me in your current form. And if you transform into a dragon, you won't have enough room to move inside this cave. That means you'll lose either way. So would you please tell me why you're here?" he asked.

I remained silent, unwilling to reveal my true purpose. I had never expected that a single human could intimidate me so.

"A-are you a monster?" I stammered, my voice filled with disbelief. Still, I made up my mind and began to gather my magic.

Then something shocking unfolded before my eyes. The man, who had displayed such hostility only moments ago, suddenly averted his gaze and fell silent as though he had lost his will to attack. I didn't understand why, and then I reflected on what I'd just said.

Monster.

The man is human, but deep down, does he not think of himself as such?

There were no humans who had power that could rival dragons, except for those beings called heroes. But did those people consider themselves humans? When I'd asked my friend that same question, he replied that he was human. Had the man in front of me begun to question his own identity?

"Don't tell me you don't know what you are?"

I took his lack of an answer as confirmation. He must've been doubting himself on this matter so intensely that even the slightest mention of it shook him. The young man suddenly went slack and froze, as if proving my theory. However, I wondered if it was just an illusion, because he hadn't shed his carefree demeanor even though he had been exposed to my malice.

I didn't feel sorry for the immobile man, though. I kept talking, wanting him to take responsibility for making me feel uncomfortable, wanting to corner him emotionally somehow. After all, I couldn't lay hands on him physically, so this was the only way to get to him.

"I see. You told me earlier that you had reasons for putting the swordsman and the beastfolk boy to sleep. But are you sure it's not because you didn't want them to see that you're different from everyone else when you fight? You didn't do it to spare them but because you were afraid they'd realize what you truly are."

He slowly lifted his face in response but avoided eye contact. His gaze flitted around, as if he were asking himself the same question.

"Are you really human?"

"...Am I human?"

When he finally answered, he had to squeeze his voice out. There was no tone to it; it was devoid of emotion. And his eyes were bereft of feeling as well. There was an emptiness inside them. Something about his presence struck me as eerie, and suddenly, my whole body was tingling.

"If I die here, what kind of excuses will you make to those two?"

"....."

The man swayed, and he slowly looked up. The moment we made eye contact, an indescribable sense of anxiety took hold of me, even though he hadn't raised his sword, and his arms were still at his sides.

"I have no intention of hiding the fact that I am dragonfolk, so I might revert back to my dragon form once I perish."

"....."

Would he come charging at me in a state of despair? I watched him vigilantly as I drew my sword and enveloped myself in magic. I boosted my physical abilities while channeling mana through my body. This was a fundamental skill for dragonfolk, yet a perilous gamble for me at the moment.

"They might flee in terror, thinking you're a monster for killing someone like me."

I couldn't predict when this man might charge and whether he would use a sword or a magic attack, so I had no choice.

"....."

His eyes, devoid of even a hint of light, suddenly shifted to the right. I couldn't resist following his gaze. Just then, a white blade traced an arc right in front of my eyes. He'd closed the distance between us without exuding any malice at all, filling me with an inescapable sense of impending doom.

"....."

I jumped backward, anticipating his next stroke. However, contrary to my expectations, he did not pursue me.

It seems his spell failed. I realized this as I saw the puzzled expression on his face.

"In that case..." The moment my feet hit the ground, I lunged forward and raised my blade. Once again, a bewildered expression showed on his face for a split second, and he retreated. But he'd reacted too slowly, so the tip of my blade grazed his abdomen, staining his torn clothes with crimson. I kept pursuing him and immediately swung downward.

However, the man blocked my attack with his blade, pushing me backward

even though I was putting all of my strength into resisting.

Where does this mana come from...?

I dodged his strike, in awe of the extraordinary amount of mana he possessed, which was far beyond that of a typical human. The mana flowing throughout his body must have exceeded mine by twofold. The power he harnessed through his magic control was a product of the combination of his physical strength and vast mana pool. Even though I was a dragon whose physical attributes far outstripped those of humans, the difference between us was painfully evident.

If only I were in better shape...

My illness had robbed me of my strength. Honestly, I couldn't even revert to dragon form. I could no longer generate mana. The mana that remained inside me was my only lifeline. Still, that should've been more than enough to take on a human.

Maybe he's not a human after all.

Not even giving me a moment to catch my breath, the man closed the distance between us in a single stride and slammed his sword down from the left. I parried it, but then the next strike came from the right, then straight above me, in a relentless rain of sword attacks.

Next is left, left, right...

Since I couldn't match his strength, I had no choice but to deflect his blows rather than parry. But to accomplish this, I needed to predict the movement of his blade. I couldn't rely solely on my eyes to track its movements. Instead, I had to sense the subtle flow of mana as he moved.

It's strange... The rate at which the man's mana is decreasing is totally abnormal.

I finally realized why this was the case after I parried a dozen strikes and the wound on the man's abdomen healed right before my eyes.

He's been using magic all along?!

I staggered as I realized that the man's mana had been decreasing so fast because he'd been casting spells with every blow. My staff was a magical tool

designed to block magic 90 percent of the time. Was he aware of this, and had he simply decided to keep using magic anyway? Or was he attempting to cast spells over and over again, wondering all the while why they were failing, trying to figure out what was going on? No, none of that matters.

The problem was that he had been doing this at the same time as he attacked me.

That's impossible!

It was hard for me to accept. But the stark reality of the situation told me it was true. I desperately tried to deflect his attacks, but the worst-case scenario suddenly flashed through my mind. The first spell he cast was Wind magic, meant to heal. But his second was an offensive spell, I was certain of it. He was attacking with blade and magic at the same time. It was like I was having a nightmare.

Don't back down now. You just need to keep up with his sword strikes!

Just as I directed my attention upward, I felt a sharp pain race through my chest. The next thing I knew, gusts of wind blew past my ears, and an invisible blade slashed my chest from the lower left. Now it was clear to me why he'd been raining down so many blows from above; he was trying to pull my attention away from attacks coming from below.

I have to do something, or else...

Fortunately, I hadn't sustained a life-threatening wound, but I was bleeding so much that my sword hand was losing strength. I wouldn't be able to defend against the man's next magic attack. To think that a human could inflict such agony upon me!

I have to escape...

But unfortunately, his sword attacks were relentless, leaving no opportunity for me to use teleportation magic. Not only that, but my body began to tingle, and I felt my freedom of movement slipping away.

Paralysis? That's odd...

Just then, it occurred to me that something very strange was happening to my

body. Bleeding alone didn't cause paralysis.

"You... What have you done..."

"I added a paralysis poison to the Wind blades I cast earlier. I figured that even a mighty dragon's resistance to poison wouldn't hold up if I shot it directly into your bloodstream. And judging by your reaction, it seems my hypothesis was correct."

The moment those words left his mouth, I lost all my strength. My sword dropped from my hand.

"It's all over now. Even if your body reverts back to your dragon form after you die, I'll take care of it, so there's no need to worry." His voice was emotionless as he prepared to deliver the final blow.

Has there been any other human who could stand toe to toe with a dragon? I thought as my consciousness faded.

◇ Part Two: Revale

“Big Brother Revale, is your training over already?” my sister asked as she carried a basket, arriving with my younger brother, who was holding a thin carpet.

“Yes, it’s over,” I answered as I helped up my friend, who had fallen to the ground.

“It’s not over yet.”

My sister looked troubled by those words, and my brother was about to put the carpet back. Seeing this, I glared at my friend.

“Fine, let’s take a break, then,” he said, and helped my brother spread out the carpet and then sat down.

I gave a wry smile and then joined him. My sister started giggling, although I wasn’t sure what was so funny, and she sat down as well.

“Mother said she’d bring us lunch in a while. Until then, will you tell us about the souvenirs you brought?” my sister asked with a smile as she passed out tea to everyone.

I expected my friend to say, *“In that case, I should’ve kept training more,”* but I was surprised to see him take various things out of his bag and arrange them on the carpet.

“Is that even possible?” Most of the things he told us were highly suspicious, but he was a good storyteller and had a nice voice, so I couldn’t help but listen. My brother’s and sister’s eyes sparkled as they hung on to his every word.

“And so, I bought it in that town because I wanted to give it to you guys. You can pick whichever one you like.”

My siblings thanked him and began choosing their items from the carpet. My friend had a teasing grin on his face as he handed me a staff.

“I’ve already picked this out for you, Revale.”

“That’s not a souvenir at all.” I reluctantly accepted the staff.

“Nah, this isn’t an ordinary staff. It’s a magical tool, and it can nullify magical attacks ninety percent of the time.”

“Oh yeah? Where’d you get it?”

I lowered my voice so as not to disturb my siblings while they chose their souvenir.

“I made it,” he revealed nonchalantly, much to my amazement.

“You said you wanted to just fight with a sword and not magic, and I’ve trained with you every time you’ve asked for a year,” I said.

“That’s because I couldn’t believe there was so much difference between a human and a dragonfolk’s body. I thought just boosting my physical abilities with mana would be enough.”

“My human form was made by the gods. Of course normal humans can’t beat me.”



“Still, I have so much more mana than you, so surely I could manage, right?”

“I don’t think so. Besides, you could beat a dragonfolk in dragon form if you used both magic and weapon attacks in the first place, so I don’t even understand why you’re doing this.”

“Why do you make me keep repeating the obvious? I want to push my combat skills to the limit. So next time we train, I’ll use magic. And I want you to use that and fight against me.”

“This is so ridiculous that I can’t even deal with it.”

My little brother stifled laughter as he lifted up a small carving knife. Apparently, he’d been listening to what we were saying.

“Are you sure you want that? This one’s pretty interesting, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t tell if he wasn’t pleased with what they had chosen, but he was offering my brother some strange item instead. His sense of aesthetics had always been a bit questionable. At any rate, I had no intention of bailing out my brother, who sat there frozen, with a forced smile on his face. After all, I’d gotten stuck with this strange staff, so it was probably better than my gift. I silently willed my brother to tough it out and shifted my gaze to my sister.

“This is cute, too... Which one should I choose?” She picked up a glass figurine of a puppy. She was torn between that and a gold ring. It was clear that it was going to take some time for her to decide.

“It looks like this isn’t over yet.”

Once my friend was done speaking with my brother, he turned his attention to my sister as well.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you one thing. This staff has another effect.”

“I don’t know what you’re going to say, but I’m not listening to this anymore. It’s not like it has any benefit to me.”

To be honest, I enjoyed sparring with my friend, but his whimsical behavior was getting on my nerves, which prompted my spiteful response.

“Well, if you want to talk about benefits, there’s no other magical tool in the

world that can block magic like this. The things I bought as souvenirs aren't even magical items, so I think you won bigtime."

I knew that a magical tool like this would be nearly impossible to obtain through ordinary means, and I had to question if it was even the only one like it in the world. Still, I didn't like the idea of giving in and proving him right.

"What are you talking about?" my sister asked politely. I was grateful that she'd interjected and turned toward her.

"Is that what you decided on?"

She was holding a necklace connected to an amber pendant shaped like a teardrop.

"Is that what you want? Try it on for size," my friend said.

My sister smiled as she started to put it on. Just then, a mirror summoned with Earth magic appeared in front of her.

He can be so considerate when it comes to things like this.

I was equal parts exasperated and cautious.

But my sister gazed at her reflection in the mirror and nodded with satisfaction.

"Looks like you're pleased with it. I think it looks nice on you."

My sister's cheeks turned a faint pink in response.

"Don't you think you're a little young to wear that? That necklace looks like it's for an adult."

"That's not true," she protested. She turned to our younger brother for his opinion, but he was uninterested. Then he said he needed to check on our mother and ran back inside the house. Or rather, escaped into the house.

"Even if it is meant for an adult, I think it looks good on me."

"I know it makes her look grown-up and mature, but don't forget she's still a minor."

"Then doesn't that mean it looks good on her? You're acting like a father who's against his daughter marrying, Big Brother," my friend quipped.

This made my sister laugh, which struck a nerve. I wasn't amused, of course.

"We're not talking about getting married. Plus, I'm not sure who would want to marry a tomboy like you, even when you do grow up."

I said this to get back at her, but it was enough to put her in a sour mood.

My friend grew exasperated and said, "Come on now, that's going too far, and you know it. Anyone with eyes can tell that she's beautiful. She'll be fighting off people to marry her."

"Oh? Are you trying to say you'll be one of them?"

My friend had made my sister blush, so I probed further.

"Of course not. I already have a wife and children."

My sister looked at my friend with a curious expression, but I was too busy lecturing him.

"So then, mind your own business, stop worrying about my sister, and go back to your wife." The words came out naturally. After all, dragonfolk valued the love and protection of companions of their own species above all else.

"I'd like to. But they're no longer in this world."

I was speechless—I hadn't expected that response. Unlike dragonfolk, humans were not long-lived. For a moment, the forlorn look on my friend's face made me wonder if his family had died. And he'd said he had children. If they were dead, the fact that he'd still said he had a wife and kids meant he loved them deeply.

My sister must have been thinking the same thing, because she lowered her gaze.

"Enough about me. Why don't you get married already, huh?" he asked jokingly, as if trying to banish the somber mood. I decided to play along with him.

"I won't do that until my sister comes of age. Who will protect her if I go get married before that?"

"I'll keep her safe. Don't you worry about that."

I chuckled wryly and was about to argue, but my sister spoke before I could say anything.

“Please do so, Brother Kyle. Then maybe Revale will finally be able to let his little sister grow up.”

Kyle let out a peal of laughter, satisfied by my sister’s retort.

“I win this one, Revale!”

“I win this one, Revale.”

A familiar voice brought me back to consciousness. In a stupor, I opened my eyes a crack and saw the man standing there with an impassive look on his face. Growing curious as to what he was staring at, I followed his gaze and arrived at the tip of the sword in his hand. A tiny, strange-looking doll was sitting on it, repeating the same words over and over again in a loud voice.

“Shut up, Kyle!” Annoyed by that triumphant voice, I woke up and yelled angrily. Then I instantly came back to my senses and remembered that I’d been on the verge of being killed. Yet I didn’t feel any pain.

Didn’t I die?

I looked around suspiciously and saw that my magical staff had been snapped in two. The man covered his eyes and took a few steps back, trying to distance himself from it. I remembered I was in the middle of a fight and tried to get up and brace myself.

But I couldn’t find the strength to do so, only managing to struggle to a sitting position. As soon as I moved, the man took his hands off his eyes and let out a deep sigh as if giving up on something, then looked at me and spoke. His eyes and voice no longer possessed their earlier emptiness—it was like he’d regained his emotions.

“You’re a friend of Kyle’s, aren’t you?” he said, as though he was certain of it.

I remained silent. I wasn’t going to let my guard down just because this man knew Kyle. I silently glared at him, trying to pierce through him with my gaze.

"Did Kyle make this magical tool? As soon as I started slashing you with my sword, your wounds closed, and all the damage transferred to the staff, which shattered. Then a doll that looks just like Kyle appeared on the tip of my sword and started yelling, 'I won! I won!' Were you two having some sort of competition?"

His words reminded me of what Kyle had said before, with that serious look on his face. *"I want to push my combat skills to the limit."* My heart burned at the thought. We'd faced each other in battle many times, but not since I acquired this staff.

I had to stop myself from getting lost in my memories, so I narrowed my eyes and focused on glaring at the man. He seemed to sense my caution and deactivated his Boost magic, exuding a calm and nonhostile energy for the first time since we'd met.

The next moment, I gazed at him in disbelief. The thick layers of mana that had been shrouding him disappeared, revealing a presence beneath that was very familiar to me. I shook off everything that had happened up until this point, forgetting my hatred of humans, and my distrust and wariness of this man, and shouted...

"That blessing!"

His eyes widened slightly, but I ignored him.

"Is she alive? Is she still alive?"

He seemed bewildered by my response but answered me quietly regardless. "Aren't you here to keep an eye on her?"

That confirmed everything. She was alive. Tears flowed down my cheeks.

"My name is Revale. I'm the older brother of the dragon girl you met..."

His shoulders trembled, and the emotion that had been fading away returned to his eyes once he heard my confession. Then he took a deep breath, like he was exhausted.

"Tuuli would've hated me if I'd killed you here."

Without answering my question, he removed the now silent doll and put the

sword back in its scabbard. Then he bent over and set the doll on the ground. After that, he gingerly placed his hands on me. Something entered my body, but it wasn't magic.

“.....”

As the sensation coursed through my being, I felt an unbelievable weight lift from me. Even my fatigue disappeared.

“I believe your illness is gone now. What do you think?”

He'd cured all the abnormalities in my body with something other than magic. I stared at the man, but he didn't meet my gaze. I was tired of answering his questions, so I asked again.

“Who is Tuuli?”

This time, he looked away while answering. His voice was filled with emotion, a far cry from how he'd spoken during our fight.

“It's the name I gave your sister. It means 'wind.'”

“.....”

“Should I call you Brother?”

As he spoke with a smile, I couldn't help but feel a different kind of hostility toward him.

◇ Part Three: Setsuna

I was seriously going to kill him. I had two choices—either turn back or be killed. And turning back wasn't an option. Cyrus's mission was important, but if Tuuli's life was at stake, I couldn't back down.

"Are you really human?"

His words triggered a sensation of loneliness and despair that spread inside my heart. It was the feeling I had before I met Kyle. The feeling of standing on a fragile foundation of sand, where even the slightest movement could cause the edges to crumble beneath my feet. I'd been contemplating this recently—what was I becoming? I was something other than human in human form.

Despite trying to rationalize this, I couldn't accept it. The more I tried to think about it in those terms, the more self-aware I became. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to believe that I wasn't alone in this world and that there was a place where I could belong. I wanted to believe that I was human.

As I raised my sword to deliver the final blow, something incredibly unexpected happened. The magical staff suddenly snapped in half, and the magic I'd imbued my sword with spontaneously activated. My blade grew heavier, and a familiar voice reached my ears.

"I win this one, Revale!"

The voice that resounded in my ears didn't take me by surprise as much as it made an incredibly strong sense of nostalgia flood over me, even though I'd said good-bye to him only a few months ago. My desire to kill the man in front of me warped into something else. I absently followed the source of the sound and saw a doll perched on the end of my sword; it was the spitting image of Kyle.

He was repeating those words over and over again, triumphantly. It must have been so annoying that the unconscious dragonfolk man woke up and shouted, "Shut up, Kyle!"

He and Kyle had to be close friends if he talked to him like that. Maybe he'd even had to yell at him like that every day, for that matter.

“My name is Revale. I’m the older brother of the dragon girl you met...”

As soon as he said those words to me, I heard a high-pitched sound in my brain, and all sorts of information flooded inside of me.

“I’ll just lock up some of those memories of mine.”

I remembered what Kyle had told me when we parted. I must have unlocked the first part of his memories just now. Information about Kyle was flowing inside of me. I tried to search through them, but I couldn’t do it like I usually did. I wasn’t sure why, but maybe I needed to unlock another portion of his memory to do so. He mentioned there being two locks, after all.

Suddenly, I realized that I would have never broken the first lock if I’d killed this dragonfolk. Or maybe he would have stopped me from killing him anyway. I wanted to learn more about the locks, so I tried to search my database, but even the information about the locks itself was a secret. This vague way of providing information—or rather, of accessing the information—was quite unsettling. The lack of consistency on the subject and my inability to access the knowledge I truly desired was frustrating.

“Tuuli would’ve hated me if I’d killed you here.”

Once I received the information that had been locked, I could tell that my opponent’s feelings were changing, even though this was the first time he’d started to cry. As I thought about Kyle, I gradually felt myself calming down. Sighing, I revealed that I was glad that I hadn’t killed the dragonfolk man. I meant it from the bottom of my heart. I couldn’t help but think I probably should have explained my intentions from the beginning, but given the circumstances, I’d had little choice.

The whole experience was emotionally agonizing, but I tried to put it aside. After all, we were the ones who had lifted the barrier and entered the cave to begin with.

“Tuuli?”

I ignored the man’s question for now and started to heal him. Wind magic

alone might not have sufficed, so I used my special healing abilities as well. By using them, I could heal the disease he was suffering from. The man kept staring at me like he wanted to say something, but I ignored him, avoiding his gaze. Intuiting that I didn't want to answer, he repeated his question.

“Who is Tuuli?”

“It’s the name I gave your sister. It means ‘wind.’”

Naming dragonfolk was tantamount to proposing to them.

“Should I call you Brother?”

I rolled up the sleeve of my robe and showed him the bracelet that matched Tuuli’s. He stared at it silently. After a while, he heaved a sigh, shook his head a few times, then looked up at me.

“Definitely not.”

He looked disgruntled. I remembered how he’d tried to corner me mentally, so I repeated in a teasing tone of voice, “Okay, Big Brother.”

His expression turned to one of outright disgust, and he blurted out, “I told you not to do that! Call me Revale.”

“All right. You can call me Setsuna, then.”

My concern for Tuuli was dispelled as I spoke to him more. Although I hadn’t asked why he was here, I had a hunch. Dragonfolk greatly valued their families, and that was why I decided to steer the conversation back to its original purpose.

“Revale, we need to get out of here quickly and head to Lypaed.”

“Understood. In that case, you can use the teleportation circle I carved a long time ago to send you to the cave entrance on the Lypaed side. But in exchange, please spend some time with me. It’s a four-day journey on foot, but I can have you there in an instant. Not a bad deal, right?”

That was true. If it took him four days, then it would have taken us even longer. We would be able to get there much sooner by cooperating with him.

“If you promise not to harm us, I’ll keep you company for as long as time

allows. There's something I want to ask you as well."

I agreed with a smile, but for some reason, Revale clicked his tongue.

"I still have an urge to kill you for a different reason, but I'll try to contain myself."

His frank confession made me chuckle. But I got how he felt. If Kyoka had brought her fiancé around, I might've also gotten the urge to punch him.

"There's no use in staying here, though. I have a simple residence inside the cave. Shall we go there?"

"This isn't where you live?"

"Isn't that obvious? This is just a passage."

If Revale didn't actually live here, then why didn't he just let me pass? Those doubts must've been showing on my face, because a moment later, he added, "Just the thought of humans passing through here makes my skin crawl."

"....."

Revale motioned for me to follow, so I slung Cyrus over my shoulder. Just as I was about to grab Alto as well, I heard an exasperated, somewhat puzzled voice come from behind me. "Why aren't you using magic to carry them?"

"Oh, right."

I used magic to make the two of them levitate. Why hadn't I thought of that? I chalked it up to the fact that I had been born in a world without magic, so it wasn't second nature to me.

"I really can't make sense of you..." Revale muttered under his breath as he walked ahead of me.

I did my best to make sure that Cyrus and Alto didn't bump into each other as I followed him.

He led me to a place where the ceiling was open, and you could see the sky. It wasn't cloudy outside, but it was slightly chilly. The space was abundant with nature, and a waterfall poured in from up above, flowing into a crystal-clear

underground lake. So clear, in fact, that I thought I might be able to see the bottom. Light from the sky reflected off the water, creating an enchanting atmosphere.



“Hey, over here.”

“Okay.”

“You can put those two down there.”

He pointed to an area that was carved out of the rock wall, a smooth, flat surface that looked like a comfortable sleeping space. The presence of blankets indicated Revale used it as his bed. After cleaning Alto and Cyrus with magic to make them comfortable, I laid them down there.

I took my gaze off the two of them and looked around. The space had only the bare essentials. I wondered how Revale had lasted seven hundred years in this small section of the cave. He stared at me intently as I walked over to him and sat down in a chair.

“I’m sure it’s pointless to ask what you’ve been doing for seven hundred years.”

“Nothing more than self-indulgence,” Revale said. He tried to pour me some water, but I stopped him and borrowed a cup. I added tea leaves from my bag and handed it to him.

“Even though you’ve been here, you couldn’t know anything about Tuuli, right? That barrier conceals everything about her.”

“How were you able to meet my sister? How is it possible?”

“Please call her Tuuli. That’s the name I’ve given her.”

“.....”

“Fine, then.” I filled two cups with water from the flask with a wry smile on my face. I waited for a while, stirred it with a spoon, and handed it to him.

“Wait until the tea leaves have settled a bit before drinking.”

“You’re lazy, too, huh?”

I knew who he was comparing me to.

“Usually, I’m more careful, but I think this is fine for you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just what it sounds like. I don’t think you like me very much.” I ignored his look and changed the subject. “You know, it doesn’t seem like this is the first time we’ve met. It feels like I’ve known you for a long time.”

It had been the same way with Tuuli, but the difference was that Revale only began to grow familiar to me after I unlocked Kyle’s memories. In Tuuli’s case, it had felt like I’d been frantically trying to protect her for a long time. That wasn’t the case with Revale. But for some reason, I felt relaxed in his presence, and I didn’t want to keep him at a distance. I wondered what the reason for the difference could be.

“Probably because Kyle told you about me, right?”

“...Oh, I see.”

Kyle hadn’t told me anything—it was more like I’d been abruptly exposed to an immense amount of his information. The amount of knowledge was so large, in fact, that it might have created pseudo-emotions within me that felt stronger than my actual emotions.

“Hey. What did he tell you?”

“There was a pitfall he made and—”

“Shut up!” he commanded, thrusting a dagger right at my throat, which seemingly appeared out of nowhere. “Erase that memory from your mind this instant! And don’t you dare tell my sister about it. Understood?!”

“Do you really think I could tell her about that?”

He let out a deep sigh, then withdrew the dagger, muttering, “Kyle, why do you always cause so much trouble?” He took a sip of tea and stared into the cup, then slowly began to drink, savoring the taste.

“It really is delicious.”

“I bet it tastes amazing after not having drank it in seven hundred years, huh?”

“.....”

“It’s almost impossible to live on this continent as a dragonfolk. There’s no dragonwater here.”

"You certainly seem to know a lot."

"I've also noticed that your mana is very low. You must've been in tremendous pain."

"Well, thanks to you, the pain is gone, and my illness is cured. My mana will recover eventually."

"Even dragonfolk who have entered a pact come back to drink dragonwater. You're quite reckless, aren't you?"

"....."

Dragonfolk needed to drink dragonwater to maintain their bodily functions. They didn't have to have it every day, but the longer they went without imbibing it, the more harm their body sustained. How exactly this harm manifested varied from person to person. In Revale's case, he'd lost his ability to regenerate mana.

He must have lived trying to use as little mana as possible. Mana was absolutely essential to life, and once it decreased, fatigue set in, and eventually pain came with it. It was a warning from the body, demanding regeneration of mana. Revale lived alone in this cave, thinking of Tuuli and enduring that pain.

"Where did you get this dragonwater?"

"It was among the things Kyle left me."

I showed Revale a flask containing dragonwater, and he stared at it with deep emotion. After a while, he spoke.

"You can't keep dragonwater in a normal container. I remember that frustrated Kyle, so he tried and tried to figure out a container that would hold it, but then he gave up. Does that mean...he's alive?" he asked me in a very, very quiet voice. It was clear he already knew the answer but needed to ask anyway.

"No."

He looked at my bag and sword, then covered his eyes with his hands and looked down, falling silent for some time.

"May I have some more water?"

"You can have as much as you like. It seems to be an endless supply that doesn't diminish when you drink it."

"You...you stopped being hostile toward me once you realized I was Kyle's friend, didn't you?"

"Yes. I didn't want to kill someone who was important to him."

I took a letter from my bag and placed it on the table.

"This is from Kyle to you, Revale."

I'd discovered the existence of this letter when I unlocked the new memories.

Revale silently gazed at the missive, let out a sigh, then took it and placed it in a drawer. "I'll read it later."

I nodded in response and sipped the tea once the leaves had settled.

"The world is a strange place," Revale murmured quietly. "Someone I was trying to kill ended up having a letter from Kyle, whom I broke ties with, and now I find out he's my sister's fiancé."

It seemed like he didn't want to acknowledge my and Tuuli's marriage. We hadn't completed all our vows, so I suppose we weren't truly married yet, so he wasn't entirely wrong to say that we were engaged. But I had no intention of agreeing with him, either.

"Kyle..." Revale muttered forlornly, pain etched on his face. Hearing his voice like that, I began to picture Kyle as well. This was only a guess on my part, but I wondered if there had been a falling out between Revale and Kyle over the incident with Tuuli. But then why did Kyle entrust Revale with a key to his memories? What had he been thinking? He cared about Revale enough to leave a letter with me, yet he didn't want to see him one last time...

"I don't think it's strange at all."

"I'm not sure I agree."

"I think that my encounter with Tuuli was fate."

Revale frowned. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm serious."

“Then do you consider meeting me fate as well?”

“No, I think that’s more of a simple coincidence.”

He gave an exasperated chuckle and then sighed faintly. “Don’t try to console me. You’re about five thousand years too early for that. Besides, I already know your true nature, so stop pretending. You’re probably no different from him.”

I didn’t say anything. Now that my thoughts had calmed down, I was my usual self. But I might as well be frank with him, because I had an inkling we were going to have a long relationship.

“Honestly, I think that even if we hadn’t met today, we would’ve crossed paths eventually.”

And that was also because of Tuuli. I firmly believed I would’ve met her brother eventually.

“Why do you think that?”

“Right now I’m an adventurer who’s just doing his best to survive, but I’ve always wanted to visit the places that Kyle traveled someday. It would only make sense for me to run into the people he knew.”

Unlike me, Kyle was extroverted, so it was safe to say he’d met and interacted with a lot of people over the course of twenty-five hundred years. And when we’d said good-bye, he’d told me he wanted me to connect with people.

“You might be right. Kyle had many friends regardless of their race, but he also caused quite a bit of trouble along the way...”

“.....”

I didn’t want to hear about it. And I definitely didn’t want to run into the people Kyle had trouble with.

“So I guess if I think about it that way, it’s not that strange after all.”

“Well, I have a limited life span, so I’m sure the chances of me running into those people will decrease as I get older.”

Most humans who knew Kyle would have died in three hundred years. From that angle, the more people you are close to, the harder it is to say good-bye.

Would I be able to bear losing people who I encountered over the course of my long life?

“Dragonfolk have a long life span, too,” Revale said, a serious expression on his face. He’d read my mind. I possessed an enormous amount of mana, so he must have been worried about how I would handle living a long time. He reminded me of Tuuli in some respects.

Suddenly, I realized that dragonfolk must have been a wonderful source of support for Kyle because of their long life spans. Although the humans in this world lived longer than in my previous world, they certainly didn’t stick around for over a thousand years. And since Kyle had lived for over twenty-five hundred years, he must have naturally gravitated toward dragonfolk.

Being left behind is lonely, after all. *But then why did Kyle cut ties with the dragonfolk?* I contemplated.

Just then, Revale said rudely, “Kyle didn’t have a lick of common sense, and he wandered around all kinds of places normal humans wouldn’t even think of going. And since you seem to be crazy enough to come to a place like this, I’m sure we would’ve crossed paths eventually.” He nodded, finally accepting it.

I gave him a puzzled look. “I’m actually quite normal, unlike Kyle.”

I would certainly never create a doll of my likeness and have it dance on the tip of someone’s sword to declare victory. I considered Kyle a good friend, but I had to draw the line somewhere.

“.....”

“I think I’m pretty normal.”

Revale ignored me and took a sip of water, not retracting his statement. That left me no other choice.

“It’s not true, Brother.”

“Stop calling me that!” he protested, looking at me with disgust. Then he heaved a sigh, but he still didn’t take back his words.

◇ Part Four: Setsuna

It felt like time was passing so slowly that it was hard to believe we'd been trying to kill each other only moments ago. I couldn't be sure how my revelation about being Kyle's friend had affected Revale's feelings, but it seemed like he had softened a bit toward me.

"Is my sister...doing well?"

"Now she is, yes." That was the truth. I briefly considered whether or not to keep my mouth shut and just leave it at that, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to solve a thousand-year-old problem on my own. I wanted to hear the truth from Revale. Maybe it would help me truly assist Tuuli.

"Revale, Tuuli said that she deserved her punishment, but do you really think it was fitting?"

"What do you mean?" He narrowed his eyes and spoke in a threatening tone.

"She was punished for casting a curse on the land, forcing the people of Grand from their kingdom. But the issue was resolved once Grand's populace was given a new place to live while their lands were purified over the course of a thousand years. It's true that was a result of the help of those around her, but the punishment imposed seems much too harsh for me."

Tuuli had been stripped of her name, banished from her kingdom, and sealed all alone in an empty cave without light, food, or a place to sleep. Her existence was hidden from everyone. Not only that, but her magical powers were taken away from her. What lay ahead was a future that didn't lead to freedom, but death.

"Tuuli had so much mana taken away from her that she went blind."

"What? Why? That's not what I was told!" Revale shouted, all the color draining from his face. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, his expression filling with anger and deep distress. Then he groaned and asked, "Why would she be subjected to that?"

"Apparently, she was imprisoned for a thousand years because supposedly that was how long it would take for the land to be purified. After that, she was

pretty much given a death sentence. The premise of her punishment was not the death penalty, however, but her release. So then why was she stripped of her name? She hadn't even learned to control her magical powers yet, so she wouldn't be able to survive without her name. Any dragonfolk would know that, wouldn't they?"

"Hang on a second," Revale said in confusion. He closed his eyes and stayed still for a moment. He might have been comparing his memory to my account.

"I heard her punishment would be less severe because she confessed to her crimes. Besides, cursing people or land—even in the case of humans—usually wouldn't incur such a significant punishment. It's a trivial matter for us dragonfolk. Of course, if you do anything to make an enemy out of the kingdom or the dragon king, you'd face death, but we don't care about lands governed by humans. There was once a dragon who wiped out an entire island nation and its inhabitants, but for that, they were only barred from drinking dragonwater for six months."

I couldn't help but wonder if that was just as problematic.

"But the punishment that was announced was name-stripping, followed by a thousand years of imprisonment and banishment from the kingdom. Most people at the time thought it abnormal. I still remember how they reacted at the time. 'What happened to the dragon king?' they asked. 'Why would he banish a child who hasn't even reached adulthood?'"

"....."

"I didn't want her to go unpunished. My family and I believe that people should atone for their crimes. However, the sentence was so unreasonable that I begged the dragon king to commute it. But as you already know, he refused to listen."

"....."

"So in that case, I asked him to at least allow my sister to live comfortably while the land was purified and for her to be able to practice magic control. He was supposed to have agreed to those terms."

"Are you certain of that?" I asked, and Revale nodded firmly.

“I remember what he said in response, word for word. ‘Her treatment during her imprisonment will be no different from that of other underage prisoners. Meals and dragonwater will be provided, as well as a comfortable bed. If the prisoner wishes to learn magic control, it will be allowed. All the necessities will be provided. If she wants to learn, she may make the effort.’ Initially, I had assumed that if she were to receive the same treatment as other underage prisoners, then she would be allowed visitors, but that wasn’t the case. Thinking something was wrong, I continued to plead on my sister’s behalf, but that only angered the dragon king. As a result, he forbade me or my family from leaving the kingdom.”

“He sounds like a tyrant.”

“My family and I had made a dragon knight’s pact with the dragon king. So we couldn’t disobey his orders even if we tried.”

“.....”

“Did my sister...really live in such conditions?”

In his question was a mixture of suspicion and a desire for what I’d said to be a lie. So I used my magic to project my memories of the moment I came across Tuuli, when she was in the empty cave with her unfocused gaze, trembling and asking, *“Did you come to kill me? Even if you did... Will you at least give me some time to talk with you?”*

“.....”

He spoke, but I couldn’t hear him. I thought he called Tuuli by her former name, but it was a sound that could no longer be recognized.

“That’s horrible...,” he muttered in a stifled voice, blood dripping from his clenched fist. Despite his desperate attempts to suppress it, his fury went out of control, manifesting as a torrent of mana that shook the ground, cracked the walls, and caused the table to collapse.

“Revale... I understand how you feel, but please hold back. You’re going to start a cave-in.”

He closed his eyes, which had been wide with anger, and at last the rumbling ceased. As I observed him, my sympathy for him and my hostility toward the

dragon king increased in equal measure. I simply could not accept how that tyrant had hurt, neglected, and trampled people's wills, no matter how justified.

"Didn't Kyle say anything?" I asked Revale, who had finally calmed down.

"He told me he would try to negotiate with the dragon king, because he could lift the curse my sister had cast. He wanted to lighten her sentence. But Kyle only ended up breaking the curse on the humans, not the land. I was furious. I wondered why he only helped the humans and not my sister. If he could lift the curse on the land as well, then my sister's crimes would be nullified. And Kyle had said he could do it! But he didn't."

He quietly opened his eyes. There was sadness in them, but no anger.

"When I asked him if there was a reason why, he didn't answer me. He just said he was sorry. He didn't even say what he was apologizing for. At that moment, he was no different from the dragon king to me. I punched him mercilessly, kicked him, and sent him flying. He still didn't say anything. He just silently let me beat him. He didn't give me a reason or make any excuses. I told him never to show his face in front of me again and that I'd kill him if he ever set foot on this continent again. But thinking back on it now, something was clearly wrong. I should have known that as his friend. But I was so absorbed in trying to save my sister that I couldn't think straight, and I ended up losing my dear friend as well."

Revale looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes.

"After that, Kyle never returned to the Dragonlands. And I've always wanted to apologize to him. I wanted to go look for him, but I was unable to leave the kingdom for three hundred years."

After that, he fell silent. He must've released so much emotion that he was rendered speechless. I quietly waited for time to pass, hoping that his regret would somehow reach Kyle, who lay sleeping inside of me.

Eventually, Revale regained his composure, and I decided to ask him a question. "So how were you able to leave the Dragonlands?"

“About seven hundred years ago, a new dragon king rose to power. Normally, dragon pacts can’t be terminated, but during a change of leadership, all pacts are temporarily dissolved, allowing the knights to form pacts with the new sovereign. That was a rare opportunity for me, so I chose not to enter a pact with the next dragon king and came here instead,” Revale explained.

“I didn’t realize that it was so rare to break a dragon pact.”

Revale nodded, then shared some information on dragon pacts. “The reason a dragon king can break a pact is because his soul is special. Forming a bond between souls is easy, but severing that connection inflicts unbearable pain upon the souls involved, always leading to death. However, the dragon king’s soul is enchanted by the magic of the gods that allows him to break the pacts without experiencing pain, albeit only during a change in leadership.”

A soul pact. It was like the contract between a hero and a summoner, which was also a connection between two souls. When I’d tried to remove the Hero’s Testament, it caused intense physical and emotional pain. I wondered if that was what Revale described. It had been so painful that I’d wished for death. I realized that dwelling on these thoughts wasn’t productive, but Revale spoke before I could get too lost in them.

He sounded truly disheartened. “Anyway, I came here to apologize to Kyle and to search for my sister, but unfortunately, I couldn’t find either of them.”

I told him it was probably for his own good that he hadn’t found Tuuli. When I’d discovered the cave and tried to help Tuuli, her life had disappeared before my eyes, thanks to the cruel magic embedded in the barrier.

“Are you saying my sister would’ve died if I’d gotten any closer?” he asked.

I nodded and explained the effects of the barrier that had imprisoned her, including how I rewrote the magic contained in it.

He was speechless, unable to understand why the previous dragon king had done that to his sister.

Revale was lost in thought for a while, so I gazed absentmindedly at the

waterfall flowing into the underground lake. Occasionally, small animals came to drink from it. I imagined that Alto would rush over to check if there were any fish in the water after he woke up.

Just then, Revale spoke again, pulling me away from my thoughts. “You said my sister is doing well now. Is that true?”

“Well, I can’t speak to her mental state, but physically, she’s healthy,” I answered.

I projected images into Revale’s mind, memories of Tuuli gently smiling as she watched Alto and Kukka run amok around the room as they played with stuffed animals.

“I thought she’d gone blind?”

“I healed her.”

He didn’t ask how, but he breathed a sigh of relief. The way he looked at Tuuli was the gentlest thing I’d ever seen.

“I owe you for that.”

“No...”

“Is the beastfolk the same boy sleeping over there? What about the girl?”

“The beastfolk boy is Alto, my apprentice. The girl is Kukka, a spirit I made a contract with. She’s staying with Tuuli.”

Revale smiled softly, the first time I’d seen such an expression on his face. He sort of resembled Tuuli when he smiled.

“So she’s not alone. And all that furniture, did it come from you as well?”

“It was all in the bag Kyle left for me,” I said. In reality, I’d created most of it, but I didn’t feel like revealing the whole truth just yet.

“What a ridiculous bag...,” Revale muttered. He looked at the bag with exasperation. “And what’s that field-like area?” he asked.

“That’s where the herb garden will be. Kukka is skilled at growing them, so I thought I’d send her herbs I collect to cultivate more. I’m good at making medicines.”

“I thought you were an adventurer?”

“I am.”

He gave me an odd look. Privately, I wished he would stop doing that.

“If you can send them herbs, can you send letters, too?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Could I send Tuuli a letter through you?” he asked happily.

“I could, but I won’t.”

He frowned and narrowed his eyes at me.

“I have no intention of telling her that I met you.”

“Why not? Tell me why!”

“Do you know what the thing she wishes for most right now is?”

He brought his hand to his mouth and thought about it. “It’s not to live?”

“No.”

He pressed his mouth in a hard line, his expression tense.

“It’s to see her family.”

“Then why—” he started, but I interrupted him.

“That was why I wanted to get her out of that place, even by force if necessary. I told her several times that I could break the barrier. But she wouldn’t allow it. She said that she would atone for her crime and that she had no intention of leaving until her punishment was up in two years.”

“That sounds like something she would say.”

“Despite how sad she is, and despite how much she wants to see her family, she won’t change her mind. I think she’d be very happy if I gave her a letter from you. It would greatly encourage her. But at the same time...”

“It would make her feel guilty.”

Tuuli was refusing to see her family because she considered being separated from them part of her punishment; if she saw them now, she wouldn’t be able

to rejoice whole-heartedly. Instead, she'd be plagued by her guilt and feel even worse.

"Tuuli doesn't wish for happiness," I added.

Revale was silent, and his eyes darkened.

"Plus, if I were to tell her about you, it would lead to questions about where and how we met." I had told her contact had been severed with Grand after the curse.

"How do you think she would feel if she learned you'd been searching for her without taking care of yourself?"

"She would blame herself."

"I think so, too. So please just hold out for two more years. I'm bearing with it."

"Hmph. You don't have to. You won't marry her."

"....."

Revale snorted at my feelings, and we exchanged irritated glances for a few seconds. But I knew it wouldn't help anything to belabor this point, so I moved on to the next topic.

"Anyway, since you won't be able to see her for another two years, please go back to the Dragonlands. Oh, but before you go—could you listen to one request from your little brother?"

"Stop calling yourself that! What kind of nonsense are you spouting? I have no intention of leaving here."

"You will leave."

"And why should I listen to you?"

I pretended not to notice the angry tone in his voice and continued.

"Because I defeated you," I answered with a triumphant smile. Suddenly, Revale's mood went cold, as if the temperature in the cave had just dropped several degrees. But it didn't matter. The smile vanished from my face, and I looked straight at him. "With your current mana levels, you wouldn't be able to

protect Tuuli if something happened. You were weak even fighting against me. Your mana levels are too low, and you couldn't focus on the battle. The pain impaired your thinking," I told him bluntly.

Revale glared at me with hostility.

"On a serious note, there are two reasons why I want you to return to the Dragonlands. First, I want you to recover your health. I cured your illness, but I think it'll take some time for your mana to build up again. Surely, you don't want Tuuli to see you in this situation two years from now? She'll cry. The second reason is, I want you to confirm whether Grand's land was purified as promised. This is very important. If what the former dragon king said was true, then it should be nearly purified by now. But if it hasn't..."

I deliberately trailed off. If the curse hadn't improved, I would have to investigate the former dragon king's motives, but I would worry about that once I found out about Grand. Revale nodded, understanding what I was getting at.

"Your mana is almost entirely exhausted. You should recover it as soon as possible."

"Exhausted?"

"Yes. I'm sure it'll be difficult to move in your condition, so you can have this staff back."

I handed him the staff that had been split in two during our battle.

"When in the world did you fix it?!"

"It has a function to repair and enhance itself when mana is channeled through it."

The truth was that I had completely remade it with my Materialize ability and greatly enhanced its capabilities. Obviously, I couldn't reveal that, so I'd just told a believable lie.

"Like I said, I also enhanced it during the repair process. Now it will block magical spells one hundred percent of the time, and the area of effect has changed from a thirty mer radius to a five hundred mer radius."

"I don't need it. That thing has gotten me into trouble far too often because it prevents me from activating magical tools. It's too inconvenient to bring with me."

It seemed he didn't understand just how good this staff was.

"All right. I'll make it so that all your registered magical tools will still activate."

"There have been times when I've almost cried because that staff was still working."

I modified the staff and handed it over, along with a special bag.

"That's okay. Kyle must've forgotten to give you this, but its effects won't activate while it's in this bag."

"Just take it home with you."

"Fine, then. Someday I'll give it to Tuuli. Try not to keel over."

Maybe if Tuuli used it, he might want it.

"Fine by me. She's the one who has suffered the most."

I'd intended to give Revale a witty response, but it rebounded, so I put the staff in my bag, vowing to get back at him.

"Enough with the banter. Do you have any other requests?"

"Just let me know how things have changed, even if it's anything minor. I just need some information."

Perhaps what he told me could trigger more of Kyle's memories and unlock more knowledge. It was frustrating not to have access to it, but I just had to accept it wasn't something I could do on my own.

"You're going to see the people who will be my mother and father-in-law, too, right? Don't tell them about me and Tuuli just yet."

"They'll never be your in-laws! So don't even worry about me mentioning you. Why shouldn't I mention my sister, though?"

He must have wanted to put his parents' minds at ease about Tuuli.

"I know how you feel. I also want to reassure your parents. But someone might be deceiving them."

"I doubt that."

"I can't say that with certainty since I don't know why the two of them won't leave the Dragonlands. Love between dragonfolk is deeper than that of humans, right? Just like you're torturing yourself by stubbornly staying here."

He didn't say anything else, like he had something on his mind.

"Two years... Should I say there's only two years left, or there's still two whole years left? I suppose in your case, you only have two years to let that weak body recover, Brother."

"I'm not your brother. And don't call me weak."

Things were starting to get a bit too heavy, so I'd decided to tease him again.

◇ Part Five: Cyrus

I heard someone's voice... Who was speaking?

"...that..."

"...yourself..."

My consciousness was hazy, so I tried to focus on the voices, but I couldn't make out anything meaningful. Maybe I hadn't slept enough yet. I could hear voices, but since no one was waking me up, perhaps it was okay to drift off again. I decided I would and went to roll over in bed, only to realize that I was on something very hard. I thought I might've had too much to drink and passed out on the floor, so I tried to rack my brains and sort out where I was.

What happened?

I was still half-asleep as I tried to remember what happened the day before. Suddenly, a voice resonated in my mind. It was gentle and reassuring.

It's all right. But please get some more rest, Cyrus. His aura is affecting your mind.

Setsuna? Setsuna?!

My consciousness suddenly snapped awake. That instant, everything that had transpired came back to me, and I was overcome with anxiety and urgency. I hastily sat up from where I'd been sleeping and shouted, "Setsuna!"

The two men sitting there were startled by my sudden cry and turned toward me.

"Oh, Cyrus. Good morning," Setsuna replied in his usual calm and gentle voice as he smiled at me.

The way he responded almost convinced me that our trip into the cave had only been a dream. My anxious shouts had woken up Alto, who'd been sleeping beside me. He also rushed over to Setsuna.

"M-Master..."

He sat down and clung to him. Setsuna looked at his apprentice with a wry

smile and gently patted his head a few times to reassure him.

“Good morning, Alto,” Setsuna said in a calming voice.

“G-good morning, Master?” Alto returned the greeting like he’d probably been taught to, although he looked slightly confused. Setsuna beamed warmly back at him, which seemed to calm Alto down. Suddenly, the boy noticed the man who was silently watching the two of them. He gasped, and his tail instantly stood on end.

I didn’t feel very relaxed, either. But I knew that Setsuna wouldn’t be sitting around chatting if he were truly in danger. That made me feel a little better as I turned my gaze toward him.

“Cyrus, Alto. This man isn’t our enemy, so you don’t need to worry.”

Despite what he’d just told me, the incredible sense of malice that had emanated from the man before I was put to sleep still lingered in my mind and body, so I found Setsuna’s statement hard to believe. Alto clung to Setsuna, not moving a muscle, tail still standing on end. Setsuna chuckled with chagrin when he saw that we were both still on guard, and the man remained silent.

“Alto, this is Tuuli’s older brother.”

Tuuli? I didn’t know who that was. But Alto recognized the name, and he stared at the man who sat across the table from Setsuna with eyes as wide as saucers.

“.....”

The man didn’t seem to mind Alto staring at him as he sat there. His demeanor was so calm now that it was hard to believe he was the same person who’d exuded such a terrifying aura earlier.

“Her older brother?” Alto murmured, but the man didn’t respond. “He has Tuuli’s eyes.”

At this, the man’s expression finally relaxed. “You think my sister looks like me?”

Alto nodded nervously. The man seemed satisfied by the answer and happily turned to Setsuna.

“So she looks like me!”

This was rude of me to think, but I was surprised that such a terrifying man was even capable of smiling.

Setsuna frowned and replied, “Huh? Alto, take a closer look. Their eyes don’t look at all alike. Tuuli’s are much gentler, aren’t they?”

“What do you mean by that?!” the man demanded, not bothering to hide his displeasure as he glared at Setsuna.

“It means exactly how it sounds.” Setsuna returned his glare.

Alto, caught between the two of them, looked so pitiful that I decided to intervene.

“Setsuna.”

They both stared at me simultaneously, and I slowly lowered my gaze toward Alto. Setsuna smiled awkwardly before nodding slightly.

“Alto.” The boy blinked a few times when Setsuna called his name, then smiled happily.

Huh? Why did he smile?

“You look happy, Master.”

“What?”

Oh, I see. He’s smiling because he’s happy seeing Setsuna have fun, which is why he’s watching them. But how does that seem fun?

“You’ve been so sad since we left Tuuli.”

“I’m sorry for making you worry.”

Setsuna patted Alto on the head, and he happily moved his ears and wagged his tail. He looked around, and then his eyes sparkled when he found something of interest.

“Master!”

“It’s okay, you can go take a look. Just be careful not to fall in.”

“Okay!”

Alto bounded off enthusiastically without looking back. He ran toward a beautiful sight, enough to make my breath catch in my throat—a waterfall that poured into an underground lake. As I was captivated by the scenery, I heard the man speak.

“Are you sure he’s okay alone?” He was watching Alto.

“There aren’t any monsters around, and I don’t think he’ll get up to anything dangerous.”

“I see. I suppose our conversation would be boring to a child anyway.”

“I agree. He’ll come back as soon as he gets his fill of investigating.” Setsuna turned to me. “This is Revale.”

“Is he a friend of yours, Setsuna?”

If that was true, then why had the man seemed like he was going to kill us earlier?

“In name only. This was my first time meeting him in person, though.”

In name only. I wondered if he was a famous adventurer, but he had no guild emblem on the back of his hand. *Wait a minute—didn’t Revale say that he’s been here for seven hundred years?!* I tried to remember the conversation before I’d been put to sleep, but Setsuna interrupted before I could, saying something that made my jaw drop.

“He’s my wife’s brother. So he’s my brother-in-law.”

“What? Wife? You’re married?!”

“Well, yes I—” Setsuna started to say, but then Revale interrupted.

“They’re not married yet. They’re just engaged, that’s all.”

He emphasized the word *yet*, which made me think there was more to the story here...

“We did make a vow to each other.”

“That was just a provisional vow. Something like that can easily be revoked.”

“I consider Tuuli my wife.”

"Thoughts don't make a marriage," Revale said firmly.

Setsuna looked at him with disgust. Evidently, there were some complicated circumstances going on here, but I knew it was none of my business, so I kept silent. However, I was surprised that Setsuna could look so hostile. I couldn't help but smile at glimpsing this unexpected side of him.

"Why are you grinning, Cyrus?" Setsuna asked, sounding somewhat cold.

"No reason. I was just thinking that you two seem close."

"And what makes you think that?" Revale didn't seem to like my observation, and Setsuna gave me a smile that was truly dazzling...in a frightening way.

"Because you're my wife's dear brother. It's only natural that we'd get along."

I could tell that not even a fragment of that was true.

"You're not my brother in any way!"

Now that the two of them were glaring at each other again, I thought it would be troublesome to continue this pointless argument. I apologized for my observation and asked the question I wanted to know the answer to the most.

"Setsuna, how long was I asleep for?"

To be precise, I'd been put to sleep, by none other than Setsuna.

"You've been out for one night."

"I see..."

I felt relieved that not as much time had passed as I thought. Setsuna intuited how I was feeling and quickly explained our plans.

"It will take us about four days to walk from here to the entrance on the Lypaed side, but Revale says he can send us directly to the teleportation circle, so we will be able to reach Lypaed sooner than we expected." Now his smile was warm, which made me feel a little relieved, but also embarrassed. I was relying on Setsuna more than I thought. If it took Revale four days, then it would surely take us humans longer. I was grateful that our journey would be shortened, and I would be able to return to Lypaed with plenty of time to spare.

"Master!"

Just as I was doing calculations in my head, Alto came rushing back to us, looking upset.

What happened?

"There weren't any fish!"

"Well, the water seems cold..."

"But I wanted to catch some!"

Come to think of it, I recalled that Alto liked fishing.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I'm starving!" His ears lay back on his head, and he clutched his stomach. His desire for food outweighed his desire to fish. Since I'd traveled with the two of them for a bit, I already knew what Alto looked forward to eating the most. Setsuna stood up and took out a table and two chairs from his bag, then told me and Alto to sit down while he got something to eat.

"We already ate, so go ahead and start," he told me.

"Thanks for everything," I said. Alto was already digging in.

Setsuna must have taken the chairs out so we could take our time eating. After getting us situated, he sat down with Revale again. But they were still close enough that I could hear their conversation.

Alto seemed to be quite hungry, and he was fully absorbed in his food. I gently placed my portion of bread on his plate, and he grinned at me. I thought we'd become pretty good friends lately. As I ate the food Setsuna prepared for us, I absentmindedly listened to their conversation.

"Revale, about my earlier request..."

"I refuse." Revale scoffed. Even though he flatly refused, Setsuna continued the conversation calmly.

"Why? Because it would use a lot of mana?"

"It doesn't. It didn't with my sister, right?"

"Come to think of it, you're right."

I had no idea what they were talking about, besides that Setsuna was asking Revale for something. Were these two friends or not? Neither of them held back during the conversation, and they spoke to each other harshly. Yet at the same time, there seemed to be a deep connection between them for some reason. Setsuna said he'd never met Revale before, but it certainly didn't look like it to me.

"I don't understand why I should give him my protection," Revale said, gazing straight at me.

Protection? For me? For what?

I stopped eating and listened carefully to their conversation. "Setsuna? What protection are you talking about?" I asked, since it seemed they were talking about me.

"The dragon's protection."

"What?"

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Revale is dragonfolk, so he can bestow his protection upon you."

"Huh?"

"Haven't you ever heard of the dragon's protection?"

"I have, but..." I could feel my face getting hot. I was sure it was bright red by now.

Dragonfolk? Surely he's joking!

A dragonfolk was right in front of me? I hadn't even heard rumors about there being one on this continent. Dragonfolk lived even longer than humans, with powers that far surpassed theirs as well. They claimed to be the strongest race, and people often feared them because of their abilities. More importantly, dragonfolk were supreme beings, servants of the gods who had the sacred duty to protect this world. How could such a being end up in a place like this?

I hastily stood up and started to kneel, but both Setsuna and Lord Revale stopped me. Setsuna smiled at me awkwardly when he saw how nervous I was, and Alto stopped eating and looked at me. Lord Revale put a hand on his face

and shook his head.

“Oh, that’s right. Dragonfolk are supreme beings, servants of the gods who are meant to protect the world,” Setsuna said, as if just remembering.

“This is normal human behavior. You’re abnormal. Kyle was just the same as you.”

“Everyone is different.”

That’s not the point, Setsuna.

“It’s fine, there’s no need to kneel to me. Act just as you were before.”

“Thank you so much for your generosity, Lord Revale!” I was torn between whether I should sit or remain standing, but then another terrifying thought came to mind. If Lord Revale was dragonfolk, that meant his sister was, too. In that case, was Setsuna...?

“S-Setsuna...? A-are you also dragonfolk?”

“There’s no way this guy could be a dragon!” Lord Revale exclaimed.

“I’m human. I can’t emanate the kind of malice that instills people with fear.”

As soon as I heard Setsuna was human after all, the strength left my body, and I fell back into my chair. Setsuna was smiling as he spoke, but I remembered how composed he’d been in the face of that malice, and at once I understood he was no ordinary human.

“Cyrus.”

“What is it? Do you want some more?”

Alto called out to me, pulling me back to reality.

“No, I already got seconds. The rest is yours.”

“I see. What is it, then?”

“What is the ‘dragon’s protection’?”

Oh, Alto doesn’t know? If I recalled correctly, there was a famous beastfolk hero who had received the dragon’s protection before. Considering everything else he’d learned on this journey, I was surprised Alto had never heard of it.

Since he was interested, I started to explain it to him.

“That’s right, the dragon’s protection is...”

One of the abilities said to have been given to dragonfolk by the gods was their divine protection, which we called “the dragon’s protection.” It allowed dragonfolk to bestow a part of their power on individuals of their choice. The abilities they granted varied depending on the dragonfolk. For example, they could bequeath enhanced physical strength, boosted magical power, and so on.

I explained this to Alto while incorporating various stories and legends I’d heard as a child. Alto’s eyes shone as he listened eagerly, which made me even more excited to tell him. I always had an admiration for dragonfolk, both as a child and even now. Many people longed for the dragon’s protection. I’d loved dragon tales since I was a child, and I’d always hoped that one day, I might meet a dragonfolk myself.

And now one of those dragonfolk was right in front of me!

Once I finished my explanation, I noticed it was incredibly quiet. I wondered why, so I glanced over at Setsuna and Lord Revale, who were both staring at me with wide eyes. It was very embarrassing.

“Dragonfolk are amazing!”

“.....”

“.....”

Alto looked at Lord Revale with admiration, but he quickly averted his eyes. I couldn’t bear the awkward silence any longer, so I forced a smile on my face as my shoulders trembled. I turned toward Setsuna and said, “Why are you trying to make him give me his protection?”

“You need some sort of justification to return to your post as first knight of His Majesty Eugene Lypaed, crown prince of the kingdom of Lypaed, do you not?”

“Going back to being Eugene’s knight has nothing to do with my mission, though.”

"What are you talking about? What mission?" Lord Revale asked.

"My mission is just to make an antidote for the king and return to Lypaed, right?"

"Yes, that's why I've said from the beginning that I would return you to Prince Lypaed." Setsuna gave me a knowing smile.

Lypaed... It was both the name of my kingdom and the surname of my master and friend who would become king.

"Is that what you intended from the very beginning?"

Returning to Lypaed... I thought my mission would be complete once I arrived at the castle town, but I never realized how much meaning this word held.

"I won't allow you to change the terms of the quest at this point. I want you to receive the dragon's protection right here, right now." Setsuna stared at me soberly. I was speechless. All I could do was nod. His sentiments filled my heart with warmth. How could I ever repay him? How could I ever make it up to him?

Lord Revale watched our exchange silently and then let out a deep sigh.

"Just so you know, I haven't agreed to give Cyrus my protection. Why would I do a favor for someone I don't like by giving my protection to his friend anyway? I won't allow it unless it's someone I share the same values with. Plus, I don't even know the first thing about this man. I have no reason to give him my protection."

His words made me feel uneasy. However, I couldn't let all of Setsuna's efforts go to waste. I gathered up my courage and took a step forward toward the dragonfolk.

"Lord Revale, I know this is very presumptuous of me after just meeting you for the first time today, but please bestow your protection upon me. I may be inexperienced, but I am willing to risk my life to become the knight you desire."

He stared at me for a moment, then spoke with clear disinterest. "My protection enhances physical abilities. If you can control that power, you could become the strongest human in the world. However, I have no interest in your kind. Therefore, I have no image of an ideal knight in my mind. But if certain

conditions are met, I might consider bestowing my protection on you.”

“And what are those conditions?”

“I want Setsuna to enter a knight’s pact with me.”

Stunned, I stared at Lord Revale with wide eyes. I’d read about a dragon knight’s pact in stories! They were said to be soul pacts that dragons only made with people they truly trusted and relied on. Despite all the things Lord Revale had said, this had to mean that he really did like Setsuna, and he was coming up with an excuse to get Setsuna to enter into a pact with him. If I could serve as a bridge between the two of them, there was nothing I’d rather do than that. I opened my mouth to say I was happy to hear that but then shut it immediately when I saw a cold expression on Setsuna’s face.

Why is he looking at his brother-in-law with so much disgust?

“Why should I make a knight’s pact with someone who could strangle me in my sleep at any moment?”

Strangle him...

“Generally speaking, a knight’s pact is made with someone dragons are fond of, right? Revale, you don’t even like me!”

Lord Revale gave a deep chuckle in response. “That’s why! I’ll enter the pact with you so I can kill you whenever I please!”

His words left me speechless. Under normal circumstances, this might have been an exciting moment, the climax of this story. Yet it felt like the air was being sucked out of the room.

“.....”

Setsuna suddenly started speaking in an unfamiliar language, and Lord Revale replied in kind. I couldn’t help but wonder what they were talking about, but I refrained from prying. I couldn’t do that, after all. Still, countless questions were nagging at me.

Why was Lord Revale here in the first place? Why was Setsuna traveling alone with Alto when he had a wife? Why wasn’t Lord Revale referring to her as Tuuli? Why did they seem so sad and determined talking about her? And now

they both looked sorrowful in a different way as they contemplated something. Setsuna lowered his head, deep in thought. All I could do was watch him. There was little I could do to help...

"I understand. I'll accept your conditions, Revale," Setsuna replied, looking at him. Lord Revale nodded.

I never thought I'd witness a dragon knight's pact in person. Of course, I wasn't the one participating, but it was impossible not to feel moved at witnessing a scene I'd yearned for since childhood.

"Cyrus? What's a knight's pact? How does it work?" Alto stood up from the chair excitedly and came over to my side. Lord Revale and Setsuna also got up and moved somewhere with more space. We followed them, staying at a bit of a distance.

"I've actually never seen one before. I've only read about it in books."

The dragon entering the pact would unsheathe his sword and hand it to the dragon who would be his master. The master would take the sword by the hilt and complete the pact by returning the blade to its sheath. At that point, the dragon would hear one of his master's wishes. It was usually something like wanting him to protect his life, wanting him to be by his side until he died, or wanting him to be his figurative sword and fight for him.

I relayed the details of the story to Alto as we watched the pact being carried out between Lord Revale and Setsuna.

I thought the wish would be related to my protection, but Lord Revale had only suggested this as his condition to agreeing, so he would probably give Setsuna another wish. I wondered what it could be. I tried to suppress my nerves and watched the pact unfold beside the crystal-clear underground lake, amid the sound of the flowing waterfall and the smell of the crisp air.

"By my name of Revale, I hereby enter a pact with Setsuna. What do you seek from me?" Lord Revale asked as he unsheathed his sword and handed it to Setsuna.

Setsuna gripped the hilt with both hands and lowered the blade of the sword to his forehead. "By my name of Setsuna, I request that Revale and I be equals."

With that proclamation, he returned the weapon to Lord Revale's sheath. The dragonfolk was rendered speechless by Setsuna's wish. I was also astonished enough that words failed me. Setsuna's wish for equality meant that their relationship would not be one of master and servant.

"What were you thinking?!"

"It's not like I wanted to have a master-servant relationship with you. You're my older brother, after all," Setsuna replied with a kind smile.

"I'll never accept you as my younger brother!" Lord Revale retorted, and Setsuna laughed.

Then he drew a dagger from his belt and cut his right palm. It seemed the pact was still going on. Lord Revale also cut his right palm, and then they shook hands with each other.

So that's how the dragon knight's pact really goes...

I trembled as I witnessed the real live pact, which differed from what I'd read about in books. However, the tension between them brought me back to my senses. Under normal circumstances, this scene should have been moving. The books said it was a pact that was made in joy and happiness with someone you trusted. So what was happening? The sound of the waterfall brought a chill to the air that seemed to reflect the two men's innermost feelings.

The air between them was frigid and hostile. Seeing that, I took a deep breath. I was slightly resentful that the ritual I'd dreamed of had ended up looking like this. At any rate, the two men's bodies began to glow faintly. It seemed the pact was complete. After Setsuna healed Lord Revale's wounds with Wind magic, they both sighed simultaneously. Alto seemed to have enjoyed the whole thing, as he was wagging his tail incessantly.

"....."

"....."

"Hey. Cyrus, was it? Come here." Lord Revale called out to me, looking a little

tired. I nervously went to his side and knelt before him. He hadn't told me to kneel, but I thought it was appropriate. There could be only one reason why he called me over. He remained quiet as I bowed my head, and then he finally spoke in an indifferent voice.

"By my name of Revale, I grant you, Cyrus, my dragon's protection," he murmured, lightly touching my forehead. My body glowed faintly, and I felt a hot sensation in my arm. It all happened so quickly that I didn't even have the chance to think about it.

"Look at your left arm."

I rolled up the sleeve of my shirt and saw a pattern engraved there that was an intense blue color, like that of a gentian flower.

"That is the dragon emblem. It is engraved on those who have entered into a dragon knight's pact or a dragon protection pact," Lord Revale told me.

Alto ran over to look at it, eyes sparkling.

"Hey, I received protection from Tuuli, too, you know?" Setsuna interjected.

"When granting protection, it's up to the dragon whether or not to engrave the emblem on someone. Tuuli was probably embarrassed to grant it to the likes of you. So isn't it better that Cyrus has it?" Lord Revale retorted.

And with that comment, sparks began to fly between the two of them again. I managed to stop it by performing a knight's bow in front of Lord Revale. I bowed deeply, feeling gratitude and determination from the bottom of my heart. It was disappointing that I hadn't earned the honor by proving my strength first, but I would keep working hard to be worthy of his safeguarding.

"Lord Revale, thank you so much for granting me your protection. I will use this power with care."

Lord Revale gave a firm nod, and I turned to Setsuna. "Setsuna... Thank you..."

I wanted to express my gratitude to Setsuna, who'd given so much to me, but I was just at a loss for words. It took me a while to even look at him.

"You can thank me after the quest is finished."

He'd told me something similar before. All I could do was bow at his kindness.

◇ Part Six: Revale

Early the next morning, I took the three of them to the magic teleportation circle to send them to the entrance on the Lypaed side.

“Well, then. Thanks for your help with the teleportation, Big Brother.”

“Yeah, yeah. You can just call me Revale, Setsuna.”

Setsuna seemed surprised that I hadn’t yelled at him this time. “You agreed to enter into the dragon knight’s pact with me. Isn’t it your desire to be my equal?”

Setsuna’s eyes widened, and then he laughed. “That’s right. Until the day when you accept me calling you Brother,” he answered.

I could feel my brow furrow. “I’ll never accept you as my sister’s partner.”

Setsuna stopped laughing and looked down once, then back up at me. “I have plenty of time to earn your approval. Starting with your parents.” I couldn’t help but smile at his determination.

“I think you’ll have a tougher time with my father than even with me.”

He continued staring straight at me, resolve shining in his violet eyes. “I have plenty of time.”

I read the various meanings contained in his words and nodded deeply. Our relationship would continue beyond the two years. It wouldn’t end then. We wouldn’t let it stop there. I began infusing mana into the teleportation circle; it didn’t require much.

“Thank you so much, Lord Revale.” Cyrus expressed his gratitude once again and bowed deeply.

“Work hard,” I said, nodding at the man I’d granted my protection. Next, I turned my gaze to Alto. The humans had filled his mind with such nonsense that he wouldn’t stop gazing at me. I’d told Setsuna to do something about it, but much to my irritation, he just said, “I can’t crush a child’s dreams...” and refused to do a thing.

Alto was staring at me, his eyes filled with purity and yearning. I was certain

my sister had looked upon him so kindly because she was drawn to his genuine, clear eyes.

“Once you become strong enough to use your power, I will grant you my protection.”

“Yay!” Alto clenched his fists and wagged his tail. Seeing that expression of joy on his face reminded me of my brother and sister when they were little. I thought back to the days when we found happiness in even the smallest of things.

“Revale.” Setsuna called my name, pulling me from my sentimental reveries. Ah, my emotional fluctuations were affecting the magic.

“Well, then.”

I shifted my gaze from Alto to Setsuna, and after confirming that, he nodded, and I activated the teleportation circle. The three of them disappeared, and I returned to my abode, looking back on the past two very hectic days.

“I can’t believe I gave my divine protection to a human and even entered into a dragon knight’s pact with him...,” I muttered with self-derision.

I still couldn’t forget the shock of hearing my youngest brother had taken his own life. It had been falsely reported and concealed, and my brother’s life had been used for someone else’s gain—not the actual person involved in the pact. I’d even considered destroying the entire kingdom when I found out. But my brother had chosen the pact himself. It was his decision. I’d tried to suppress my desire to scream. I had to make sure my brother’s choice wasn’t in vain.

However, my sister had strayed from her path, and I destroyed my relationship with my best friend... Everything slipped through my fingers all at once, as easily as the sand in an hourglass.

In the past, dragons frequently destroyed human kingdoms without consequence. They faced no punishment for such actions. So my sister’s misdeeds hadn’t struck me as a big deal. There were dragons who had sunk entire islands into the sea, and not even they were given such a harsh punishment. Not only that, but dragons had never gotten so involved in human affairs before the incident with my sister. Breaking curses on humans and

finding new land for the people of Grand was unprecedented.

I understood that my sister needed to be punished for her crime. But I didn't agree with how she was judged. And because of that, I began to doubt the dragon king, especially when he prevented me from leaving so he could surveil me.

But as soon as the dragon king was replaced, I broke my dragon knight's pact and left the Dragonlands against my parents' wishes, journeying to this continent to find my sister. I'd only had a vague idea of where she was. I didn't even know if she was alive or dead.

Still, I believed she was alive, and I wanted to be by her side while she paid for her crimes alone.

I searched tirelessly without anything to show for it, but I wouldn't give up. I settled in a place that I thought might be near my sister and found a suitable cave as my dwelling. But without dragonwater, my health deteriorated, and the pain in my body increased. Still, I couldn't bring myself to return to the Dragonlands.

When Setsuna healed my wounds, he also cured my illness. I had many questions about what that ability was and why it was so powerful, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him about it after I'd cornered him emotionally. I suddenly remembered the terms of my pact with him, and a faint smile came to my lips.

Equals, huh?

I would absolutely need a knight's pact to return to the Dragonlands. That was why I'd only granted Cyrus my protection after Setsuna agreed to my conditions. He and I spoke in the language of my kingdom so no one would understand us while we discussed him making a pact with me.

"I was only half-serious when I suggested it, but I have a feeling that when I return to the Dragonlands, I'll be pressured to enter into a pact with the dragon king," I said.

"I'm sure that'll be the case."

"So I think I should already be in a pact by the time I get there. It might as well be with you."

"Is this for Tuuli?"

"For who else would it be?"

"Won't you regret it? Dragon knight pacts lasts until one party dies."

"If you get tired of it, I can just kill you."

"Do you really think you're capable of that?"

There was no way I'd be able to kill him.

"Because I can't kill you," Setsuna added.

I already knew that.

"That's fine. All I care about is that my sister lives."

"....."

"Why didn't you destroy Grand's royal family?" Setsuna asked, his violet eyes brimming with emotion.

"I considered it many times. I wanted to kill them. But I couldn't destroy what my brother gave his life to protect, and the lives that Kyle connected. Not in the past, not now, nor in the future."

"....."

"The same goes for my sister. She tried to curse them, but she had no intention of killing anyone."

Setsuna's breath caught in his throat, and he lowered his gaze. "I'll do the same, then." That was what he muttered with resignation after a while. I had a feeling that I'd placed one more shackle on his heart. The more he loved my sister and saw her hurt, the more his emotions came into alignment with my family's feelings of the situation. I'm sure it would never end, but I did tell him I'd forgive him for venting his frustrations a bit, so there was probably nothing to worry about.

This was just my imagination, but I thought that perhaps the feelings Setsuna held for my sister were something other than love. I could tell that he cared for her, but there was something more there, like he was being held captive to something.

When he spoke about my sister, there was a heat in his eyes that seemed closer to determination than love. Maybe it was premature of me to decide that he was being shackled by another emotion. But at the same time, it was unavoidable. Setsuna had seen the condition my sister was in with his own eyes. Perhaps he had a faint affection for her, but his desire to save her had grown stronger than romance or love, which was only natural.

It wasn't pity or mere admiration. Still, whether she was aware of this or not, my sister must have been in danger if he'd needed to go so far as to resort to marriage. But the vows of a pact of companionship were a deep bond. If there was something wrong with her, he would definitely know. In other words, that vow was a commitment to be bonded with her life.

"Tuuli, eh?"

That was the name he'd given to my sister. I'd never admit it to him, but I liked the name. My sister had always smiled like a light breeze.

Well, it didn't matter the reason why it began. Love could be nurtured. I decided I would treat these two years as a sort of grace period, which would benefit me, too. After two years, if the essence of Setsuna's feelings toward my sister, which I could see in his eyes, remained unchanged, then I would do whatever it took to annul their engagement. Until then, I would acknowledge Setsuna as my sister's companion.

I looked down at the letter Kyle had left Setsuna to give to me and sighed. I opened the envelope and read it.

See ya later, Revale.

Take care of my little brother Setsuna for me.

Kyle

The entire message was only those three lines. My hands began to tremble, and my shoulders shook.

“Ha-ha...”

Laughter welled up from inside of me.

“Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

My stomach hurt. From beginning to end, the letter screamed “Kyle.” No apologies, no excuses, no words of resentment toward me, no words forgiving what I’d done, either. Just his usual farewell. It was so funny that I laughed until I cried.

That’s the kind of guy he was. All sorts of thoughts crossed my mind, but I no longer felt guilty toward him. He was saying he didn’t care. He was saying he still considered me his best friend. And if that was the case, then so be it.

“‘Take care of my little brother Setsuna,’ huh?”

I still had my suspicions about Setsuna, but if he was someone like Kyle, then I knew I could address them. It might be difficult while he battled with his humanity, but he was still young. It was only natural that he would feel conflicted.

I spoke to Kyle with a smile on my lips. It was vexing, because I’d used to swear up and down that I would never enter into a pact with a human. And now here I was thinking it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“I hope your little brother will become my little brother someday...”

I tucked Kyle’s letter into my breast pocket as my mind swirled with thoughts.

◇ Part Seven: Setsuna

We were sent through the teleportation circle to a slightly open forest. I saw a cave entrance just nearby. There wasn't any grass around the teleportation circle, but there was lush vegetation farther out from it.

"Ah... For some reason, the feeling of this air on my skin just feels right," Cyrus commented as he looked around.

"The smell here is completely different! I guess because it's a different continent." Alto observed his surroundings excitedly, his ears and tail moving restlessly as he compared it to the southern continent.

"It's true what they say—the mana in the air is thin on this continent," I said.

"I don't really get it."

I'd heard before that the northern continent had less mana than the southern continent, although no one knew why this was the case.

"I think the only people who can tell the difference are sorcerers. It feels like mana recovery will be slower here, and there are many books that warn about this."

"I see."

"Shall we be off?"

"Sure. I'll lead the way. Is this the right direction?"

"Yes, Revale said we should start heading north from the cave entrance."

Cyrus sighed and started walking, brushing away grass and branches to make a path for us. Revale had told us it would take about a week to get to Lypaed from here. If his memory served correct, that was...

Right after we left the cave, Cyrus started participating in my and Alto's morning training. The dragon's divine protection had endowed him with newfound strength, and he wasn't used to wielding it. If he fought a human, let alone a monster, he would end up accidentally killing them, so I'd been sparring

with him to teach him to control his new powers.

“H-hey, wait!”

I prevented Cyrus from leaving the circle by using Wind magic to blow him to the other side, then thrust my sword at him as he was about to lose his balance.

“It’s impossible to move right after casting a spell!” he panted as he blocked my strike.

“Good luck, Cyrus!” Alto had clearly warmed up to Cyrus, because he no longer frowned when the knight asked to join our training.

I followed largely the same basic training with Cyrus, although I changed the rules slightly to let him step out of the circle without surrendering. I drew a circle with a diameter of two mers. I wouldn’t leave its bounds, but while he was inside it, I would attack him mercilessly. On the other hand, if either he or Alto needed to step out of the circle to adjust their stances, I would hold off. When I trained with Alto, I would not try to stop him from leaving the circle.

But I didn’t do the same for Cyrus. I had no intention of letting him leave our arena. Unless he learned how to take it easy when he was at his limit, the chances of him accidentally killing someone were high. And it would be very difficult for him to hold back against an enemy who came at him with pure malice. But Cyrus needed to learn how to capture people without killing them, and he didn’t want to take lives by accident, so I pushed him as hard as I could. I had a feeling a knight who could do nothing but kill wouldn’t leave a very good impression.

“A regular person would have been killed by that attack you just threw at me. Take it easy.”

“I—I can’t help it!”

“Remember why we’re doing this training, Cyrus.”

“You should be the one holding back!”

He could still fight back against me, so I thought it was fine. A few minutes of sparring later, he fell to his knees, and I decided to end the session.

“You’re better than you were at first.”

Back when we'd first started training, his attacks were so uninhibited that they would have created a pile of corpses were we in a real battle. But today, he'd curtailed his strength to the point where perhaps only one in five would die.

"Why are you so damn strong?" Cyrus panted. Alto offered him some water. "Thanks, Alto." He gulped it down as he took a breather. He took a seat and looked up at me with a smile. "Thank you for sparring with me today."

"You're welcome."

After expressing his gratitude for the match, he revealed his true feelings. "Dammit. I couldn't escape today, either." Cyrus was totally candid with me now, which was fine with me. It was easier than having to worry about formalities. I had a feeling that being back home on the northern continent, having more time than he originally thought to do his quest, and the dragon's protection must have given him a lot of emotional support. His mood was much brighter than when we'd first met.

Our journey continued smoothly in that manner. The fourth night after leaving the cave, Cyrus grumbled about not being able to sleep at the campsite and went off somewhere. I figured he was restless, thinking of his hometown or loved ones. There were no signs of monsters around, but I wasn't worried anyway, since he had Revale's protection now. He'd probably come back soon.

I glanced over at Alto, who was sleeping with his rabbit plushie again. I picked up his journal and started reading.

Master gave me this plushie. His name is Jackie. He's very strong.

He had given it a name. Initially, there had been an ax in its head, but Kukka and Tuuli didn't like the looks of it, so he removed it. It probably wouldn't be coming back. However...I couldn't help but wonder what Alto liked so much about this plushie. Whenever he had the time, he would take it out of his bag, read books with it, study with it, or just keep it by his side.

Could that be because he doesn't have friends his own age?

Unfortunately, I couldn't give that to Alto. Adventurers around his age weren't common, and child beastfolk adventurers were exceedingly rare, so making friends in these circumstances would be challenging.

"Maybe we should go to Sagana..."

If we went to Sagana, the place where beastfolk lived, Alto might make friends. That would also give him the opportunity to talk with others about the unique anxieties that came with being a beastfolk. I was able to be by his side, of course, but I couldn't help him in that regard.

Plus, I wanted to create a place where Alto felt like he could go home to. He needed a place where he could relax and be himself. Those thoughts went through my mind as I continued reading his journal. The entries had been getting longer recently, and the number of words he could spell had increased significantly.

Jackie has big eyes, long arms, long ears, long legs, and has black fur. There is a bit of white on his tail.

A diary entry observing the plushie, I supposed? I continued reading with a smile.

Today, Jackie told me there were beautiful flowers over there. I went to see and saw that he was right! There were beautiful flowers over there! I wonder when Master made it possible for Jackie to be able to speak?

"I didn't do any magic like that," I blurted out. A cold sweat trickled down my back. I glanced at the plushie lying beside Alto and recalled the magic I enchanted it with. I hadn't enchanted it with spells that would enable it to speak, just put some magic on it to prevent it getting dirty or breaking. Jackie should be an ordinary stuffed animal.

"....."

Images of cursed dolls, stuffed animals that wandered about in the night, and other scenarios that feature in summer horror TV specials crossed my mind. Perhaps those thoughts were induced by Jackie's appearance. There was a lot I didn't know about a world where magic existed. It was possible there was something that could possess dolls or stuffed animals here. I sorted through the

information in my mind as a precaution and confirmed the absence of such entities.

Nevertheless, anxiety crept into my psyche, prompting me to go over to Alto and pick up Jackie for a closer inspection. It looked and felt like a regular stuffed rabbit.

“Hmm...”

I was hesitant to speak to a stuffed animal, but since Alto had it in his possession, I needed to make sure. I took a deep breath and tried addressing it in a low voice. “Jackie? Can you talk?” I asked, but there was no response.

“.....”

Was there some kind of signal to make him speak? I remembered Alto often patted him on the head. So I patted Jackie on the head and tried talking to him again. “Jackie, can we talk?”

Maybe only children could hear his voice? I thought about several possibilities to explain the phenomenon, when I suddenly heard a stifled laugh. I looked at the stuffed animal in surprise. Did it just make that noise?! I stared at Jackie for a while, but...

“Keh-keh-keh-keh!”

The laughter wasn’t coming from the stuffed animal, but from behind me. And I knew who it belonged to without even turning around.

“Oh no, I’m gonna die... I’m gonna die... I’m gonna die from laughing too hard!” With that, Cyrus, who had been trying to keep from laughing until now, burst out into a cackling fit. I quickly returned Jackie to Alto’s side and cast a sound-shielding barrier around him, because I had a feeling this was going to get noisy.

“Cyrus? How long have you been watching me?” I asked without looking back.

“Hmm? Since you started reading the diary, I guess?”

I knew it. He was watching the whole time. Maybe it was a lie when he said he couldn’t sleep.

“You were the voice Alto heard, weren’t you?”

"Yeah, I told Alto that I thought you cast a spell on Jackie or something," he said with a chuckle. He was in a pretty good mood because his prank had succeeded.

"....."

"I never thought I'd see you look so serious, talking to a stuffed animal! That inner conflict you were having... Ha-ha! It was the funniest thing I've ever seen!"

I turned around slowly, then moved toward Cyrus, who was doubled over with laughter. I made eye contact with him and smiled warmly.

"....."

Then Cyrus froze, as if he were paralyzed.

"You wanted to see my reaction after reading that diary, didn't you?" I still had the smile plastered across my face, and my voice was the same as it always was. I didn't sound intimidating or hostile. Yet all the color drained from Cyrus's face, and he slowly stepped backward.

"Um, Setsuna...?"

"You sure look like you're having a good time, Cyrus. If you can't sleep, I don't mind sparring with you. Maybe the exercise will help you sleep better."

"Uhhh, I should probably just go to bed. Tomorrow's another early day, right?"

I suspected he had been dealing with pent-up energy since receiving the dragon's protection, hence why he'd thought up such a ridiculous prank.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll revive you with magic later. Didn't you mention something about...dying just now?"

"There's no such magic! And I didn't mean it like that!"

Cyrus went as pale as a ghost, and his voice took on a different tone, but I ignored him.

"You'll be fine, Cyrus. It would take a lot more than this to kill you, right?"

"You wouldn't want to wake up Alto, right?"

"Oh, don't worry! I cast a soundproof barrier around him, so he won't wake

up. Feel free to scream as much as you want.”

“Scream?! What do you mean, scream?!”

Taking that as my cue, I unleashed a Wind spell on him.

I looked down at Cyrus, sprawled out on the ground, and chuckled.

“I think you should be able to sleep without issue now.”

“.....”

Cyrus seemed too exhausted to sleep. Staying true to my promise, I cast a healing spell that overwrote the memory of his prank to take revenge. Lacking the energy to move, he muttered, “Childish...,” then fell silent. I had a feeling he wanted to say something, so I gazed at the stars in the sky while I waited.

“Hey.” He called out to me. His voice sounded heavy, like the mood in the air had shifted.

“Yes?”

“You don’t have to answer. Just pretend I’m talking to myself.” After this preface, he continued, choosing his words carefully.

“The reason Lord Revale made the dragon knight’s pact with you was to accomplish something, right? And you agreed to the pact for my sake, to aid him somehow?”

“.....”

“I don’t know why you did that. I may have received the dragon’s protection, but I’m not sure I can accomplish anything with it. After all, I couldn’t believe in my master to whom I pledged my loyalty,” he said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Cyrus.”

“Despite me being like that, I care about you and Alto a lot, Setsuna. The journey here from the southern continent was exhausting even for me. Yet you and Alto walked with me without complaining once. And Alto in particular—even though he hates humans, he shared his candy with me. He also let me

train with him. And...he opened up to me and let me be his friend."

When Alto first shared his sweets with Cyrus, he'd accepted them. But ever since we'd left the cave, he would tell him, "That's okay. You should eat them yourself," probably thinking about the remaining journey and realizing Alto was looking forward to eating them. Alto insisted that it tasted better when he shared it with friends, but Cyrus wouldn't yield.

"Cyrus, you understand Alto, and you treat him well. But I'd appreciate it if you refrained from filling his head with things that are inappropriate for children."

"All right. He's just so earnest, so it's hard not to tease him." Cyrus glanced at Alto and laughed quietly, then fell silent for a moment. "Just remember this. If there's ever a time when you have to journey alone, I'll take care of Alto, regardless of the circumstances."

"What?"

"I can't leave Lypaed, but I can get time off. I know it might be impossible depending on your location, but please keep that option in mind. Alto is my friend, too, after all."

"Thank you."

"Well, all that is assuming that I go back to being a knight."

"You will."

"If you say so, then surely I'll be able to make it happen."

I smiled at him in return.

"We have an early day tomorrow, so let's get some sleep."

"....."

"Cyrus?"

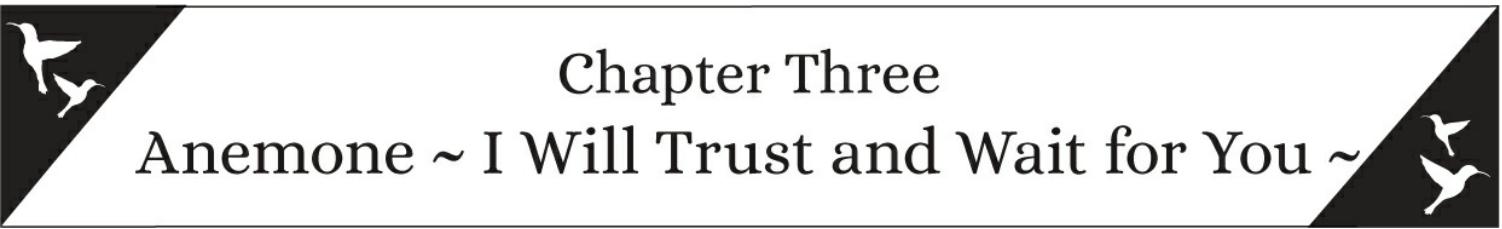
There was no response, except the faint sound of him snoring. He'd reached his limit both physically and mentally. I created a barrier around him, then went back to my usual spot and quickly wrote a response in Alto's diary, reflecting on what happened. I was feeling a little drowsy myself.

Dear Alto,

The name Jackie does sound very strong. If Jackie ever speaks...please tell me immediately without writing it in the diary.

Although the prank was troublesome, I appreciated Cyrus's concern for us.

"Thank you," I said as I looked toward Cyrus before peacefully falling asleep.



Chapter Three

Anemone ~ I Will Trust and Wait for You ~

◇ Part One: Setsuna

We continued walking without stopping at any villages along the way. I thought we would reach Lypaed by the end of the day if we kept up this pace, but I had something on my mind, so I decided to just camp for the night. Cyrus was eager to return to his hometown, which was just a stone's throw away, but I didn't want to just barge in there without any information. For now I wanted to get a good idea of the current state of the castle. We had an early dinner, and while Alto and Cyrus were spending some time together, I searched my internal database for a magic spell that would be suitable for gathering information.

Surprisingly, it seemed that Hanai had been better at using information-gathering magic than Kyle. That showed the difference between their two personalities in a subtle way. Kyle was already mysterious to me, but I didn't understand much about Hanai, either.

I wonder what the two of them thought about their lives.

I'd often found myself troubled by the question of who I really was lately. Would those two have had the answers to that question? Had they thought of themselves as humans? Would there come a time when I could confidently say that I was human? My thoughts inadvertently wandered. Suddenly, I realized a considerable length of time had passed. I scolded myself for getting distracted and refocused on what I needed to do.

I resumed my search and managed to find several spells suitable for

information gathering. Among these, the enchantment that most caught my attention was one that Hanai had excelled at. My first impression of it was that it seemed downright evil.

The spell released magical energy corresponding to the attributes of Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, Light, and Darkness and used them all to gather information. The magical energy manifested as a transparent and luminous origami crane visible only to the caster, about the size of a ten-yen coin. It could gather information in places with fire, water, wind, earth, light, and darkness. On top of collecting data, it could also delve into the thoughts and feelings of its target. Incidentally, Hanai seemed to have used his abundant mana to create numerous origami cranes and scattered them all over the world.

I thought this spell would be ideal for searching Lypaed, so I plucked it out of my memories. Since reading thoughts and feelings felt like an invasion of privacy, I decided not to include that aspect of the spell and transformed its shape from that of an origami crane to a bird.

I activated my magic without Cyrus noticing. A hundred magical birds appeared around me, flying silently. For now I decided to send sixty birds to the town and forty to the castle. *Go!* I silently commanded them, and they took off all at once. After a while, the birds began to gather information, which endlessly streamed into my brain. Even though the data was completely silent, it felt cacophonous in my mind. Despite having chosen to activate the spell myself, I began to grow numb.

The amount of information was so overwhelming that I wanted to clutch my head. I had to wonder how Hanai had managed this. From what I could gather from the memories, I would get used to the deluge of data in about thirty minutes, and it would stop bothering me. As I continued investigating various aspects of the spell, I realized that I could specify the type of information I wanted. Additionally, I learned that once the information entered my mind, I could retrieve it at any time. Now I understood why Kyle and Hanai had such huge internal information databases. I discovered it would be beneficial to separate a part of my brain's processing area for this purpose to keep the information flowing constantly.

Using what I'd just learned, I quickly started adjusting the enchantment's

settings. I narrowed down the information I wanted to Guilonde, the prime minister, the prince, the king, and so on. Though I'd initially used this spell without much thought, I realized it was quite complex; it would take quite some time to figure out all its intricacies.

I get that information is crucial, but this is crazy...

Whether it was because I hadn't partitioned off that part of my brain yet, or because I wasn't yet used to it, I started to get a headache. *If Hanai and Kyle were able to do it, I should be able to as well...*, I thought. I continued to endure the headache, but I must've looked quite sick because Cyrus called out to me.

"Setsuna? You don't look good. What's wrong?"

"I have a bit of a headache. Do you mind if I lie down for a bit?"

"Are you okay, Master?"

"I think I'll be fine if I rest."

Upon hearing this, Alto quickly put his picture book and other items back into his bag and quickly came over to my side. He looked anxious, so I lightly patted him on the head. But he didn't move from his spot and simply lay down beside me.

As I battled the headache, I finally managed to get control of the spell after about two hours. Now I could process the information I was taking in while doing other things. Once again, I felt like I was becoming less and less human, but I decided not to worry about it for now...

I focused on the information the birds brought me and found many interesting things. My first impression of Lypaed was that it was a generous country. Gardir and Kutt felt quite busy, with lots of people going in and out, but life in Lypaed seemed to have a more relaxed pace. The citizens were generally supportive of the royal family, and they especially liked the king and queen. People mostly smiled when they talked about their rulers.

Support for the king was unanimous in every section of the kingdom. The populace was deeply concerned about his current state. Some people even

worried about Cyrus and offered up prayers for him. It was a relief to know he would have a place to return to. If he'd faced unfair treatment here, I might have considered bringing him along on the journey with us. However, it seemed that my fears were unfounded. The magic birds had given me a good overview of the current state of the country, and it seemed like a decent place.

As I carefully combed through the information regarding Guilonde, I noticed talk about forming an alliance to confront some sort of threat. There was supposed to be some kind of secret signing ceremony held in a few days, but the poison was causing the king to decline faster than expected, throwing a wrench in the plan.

As information continued pouring in, I stopped paying attention to it, and it ceased bothering me. I wondered how magic truly worked, and I recalled hearing an explanation in Gardir: "Magic is created to have meaning. That's how it works."

Yet this didn't prevent some uneasy feelings from surfacing in my mind. I sighed inwardly to dispel the feelings and resigned myself to the fact that some things would just have to remain unknown.

There were a few things we would have to be careful of going forward, one of which was that Guilonde's agents were present in both the castle and the town below. I opened my closed eyes. Alto had fallen asleep, so I shifted closer to the fire so as not to wake him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry I worried you."

My complexion must've returned to normal, because Cyrus nodded and looked relieved. I reassured him once more, and he resumed sharpening his weapons.

"What are you thinking about?" Cyrus asked without looking at me.

"I was wondering how we can get you to the castle," I answered, and he suddenly froze.

"If we go with the plan Keith had in mind, we should be able to contact him through the Adventurers Guild and give him the antidote without any problems,

but I wonder how we would be able to deliver it to the king now. It's a bit challenging. We can't just meet anyone, especially since you're supposed to be exiled and can't even enter the castle town."

"I was thinking of passing the antidote on through the soldiers in the castle town. I have several friends there."

"Even if you trust those people, our efforts will be in vain if one of Guilonde's agents intercepts the cure somehow before it reaches the king."

"You're right."

"I've been devising a plan, but it's not complete yet. However, we can't afford to just stay here. Alto and I will enter the town as adventurers for the time being, and you'll be one of our companions. We'll claim you're from a village near Nubul and explain that we rescued you after you were attacked by monsters on the way to your relative's home in Lypaed. That should explain why you're here."

"If that's what we're doing, then I can't wear my equipment."

"Yes, you'll have to take off your armor. Tomorrow, Alto and I will be your bodyguards."

"Haaah..." Cyrus sighed, looking upset as he explained that going without weapons made him anxious.

"When we enter the town, I'll cast a mild spell on both you and Alto that will disguise you."

"Why?"

"Well, it would be odd for someone who was rescued to go straight to the castle. And we need to avoid the Adventurers Guild until we get that settled."

To be honest, I had received information that Guilonde spies were monitoring the Adventurers Guild, but I kept that hidden from Cyrus to avoid making him even more anxious.

"So they'll hear that someone who was rescued is passing through, but the details will be vague. Don't give any answers that will leave a strong impression. Alto stands out quite a bit, too, so I'll have him wear a hood to make him blend

in.”

“Okay.”

“After that, think about how to deliver medicine to the king once things settle down. It’ll work out best if we hand it over directly. For example, if we request an audience by saying we obtained a rare magical tool and wanted to present it to the king, then we might get the chance to give the antidote to him, right?”

“Ah, I see. What about that magic rod?”

“No, that one is a precious memento.”

I thought a magical tool would be easy to create, which was convenient, but I wanted to keep the ones Kyle had made if possible.

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t want to give that up. Well, something else should work. I’m just thinking on the spur of the moment, but if it’s a magical tool, there might be a delay while they check to see if it’s safe or not. We might run out of time before reaching the king.”

“Ah, good point. That could be problematic. I’ll try to think up something else. You try to come up with something, too. It might be pointless if both of us are spinning our wheels in the same direction, though... So why don’t you think up a plan for us to deliver the medicine through Prince Eugene? Maybe you know something that would pique his interest—like a hobby only his close friends would know about? If you do that, he might be willing to meet with you.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.” Cyrus nodded in agreement and resumed sharpening his weapons.

“Oh, the scenery looks so different here!”

We entered the castle town of Lypaed without any issues and walked slowly. Alto wore his hood down low, and I was concealing his ears and tail with magic. But since discrimination against beastfolk was unusual in Lypaed, I planned on exploring town in our usual appearances once everything was settled.

The castle town of Lypaed was livelier than I’d expected, and the people here didn’t seem to be afraid of Guilonde’s looming shadow. Although they were

experiencing their own struggles behind the scenes, they seemed to be taking measures to keep the citizens calm.

“Yeah, it’s quite different from Gardir and Kutt.”

“I like it here. It’s more laid back!”

“It’s nice of you to say that.” Cyrus must’ve been genuinely pleased with that feedback, because he ruffled Alto’s hair.

“Hey, stop that!”

The two bantered back and forth as we walked, but suddenly Cyrus came to a halt before a shop with a sign reading Community Pub. He began to step toward it, but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Russ? Are you planning to go to a pub in the middle of the day?”

Russ was the alias I was using for Cyrus. Calling him by his real name in Lypaed could cause issues. After much thought, he’d decided on Russ. After both Alto and I pointed out how uncreative it was, he retorted, “You got a better idea? I can’t think of anything!” and sulked.

“That pub...”

I cut him off before he could finish. “We should go to an inn and unpack our things first.”

“Oh yeah. You’re right.”

Cyrus lowered his gaze for a moment, then quickly looked up to meet my eyes.

“Remember last time? We went to the pub before we checked into the inn, and we couldn’t find a place to stay. We need to book our rooms first before we have a drink.”

“You’re being awfully serious, aren’t you? One drink isn’t gonna hurt.”

“No. It’s not going to happen.”

“Sigh... Fine, let’s go to the inn first.” Cyrus reluctantly played along, and we left the area.

We went inside an inn that was about twenty minutes away. According to Cyrus, it wasn't very popular since it was on the outskirts of town, but it was known for its delicious food. We rented a room for three and set up a soundproof barrier. Now there was no need to worry about anyone overhearing our conversations.

"Alto, do you want a snack before dinner?" I asked, turning to my apprentice, but he was already sound asleep in the bed.

"I'm sorry. The journey must've been hard on him." Cyrus directed an apologetic look at Alto, gently stroking his head. Alto hadn't complained or protested on our journey here. Even when I offered to go easy on him during training or take a break, he wouldn't say yes. He'd been keeping up with our pace and had made sure to take frequent breaks, along with eating properly and getting enough sleep. But that didn't change the fact that travel was exhausting. After covering Alto with a blanket, Cyrus and I sat down at the table in the room, taking a moment to relax.

"Oh, right. Why did you suddenly get the urge to go into that pub?"

"Keith goes there incognito sometimes, and it has good drinks. I saw the pub and remembered that."

"Oh. But don't you think it's risky, considering people might be watching?"

"I didn't notice anyone tailing us. And even if there were spies in the pub, you would stop them. I was just trying to take advantage of the opportunity." Cyrus flashed me a mischievous smile, and all I could do was give him a wry one of my own.

"Well, in any case, we found out the pub is not an option. So let's go back to our conversation from last night. I've been thinking about Prince Eugene's hobbies..."

"Did you land on anything?"

"Eugene's always been focused on national affairs, so he didn't have much time for recreation, so I thought about the time when we studied abroad together."

Cyrus poured water from a pitcher into a glass and handed it to me. “I can’t recall the exact circumstances, but I remember we were having a conversation with a wandering bard, and Eugene said, ‘The sound of the lyre brings peace to my heart.’”

“The lyre...”

“Yes, and after that, he invited bards to play for us several times during our studies. However, he never did it again once we returned.”

“Why is that?”

“Eugene wanted to start helping the king right away. He’s a hard worker who doesn’t know how to take a break. He’s been dedicating himself to the kingdom ever since he was little. I’m not sure if you know this or not, but the previous king was quite a spendthrift, which put our kingdom in a precarious economic situation. Taxes were high, the people could barely make ends meet, and there was a lot of civil unrest. Eugene grew up witnessing his father try desperately to rebuild the kingdom after ascending the throne. He always wanted to grow up quickly for the sake of the kingdom.”

“I see. I heard the prince was popular with the people. Now I see why. He must be working tirelessly for this nation.” Cyrus nodded proudly at my statement.

“And we’ll continue to make even more progress. We won’t let Guilonde take it all away,” he muttered, lowering his gaze to the floor.

“Yes. And to achieve that, we need to deliver that antidote quickly.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time with Eugene, and the only thing he ever seemed interested in besides politics was the lyre. He’s tried various pastimes like hunting and such, but he never seemed to enjoy any of them enough to actually take a break.”

I pondered this for a while, trying to formulate an excuse to enter the castle.

“The lyre might be the key.”

“What do you mean?”

“A wandering bard will request an audience with the prince.”

“Are you going to hire one?”

“No, I’ll pose as one myself.”

“...Can you play the lyre?”

“Well, I can figure something out. I won’t actually play it, and my musical ability won’t matter if I can meet the prince.”

Cyrus didn’t seem convinced, and I could tell he had doubts about whether this would work out. “I understand your idea, but getting into the castle won’t be that easy.”

“I’ll definitely get in with you there, Cyrus.”

He chuckled, tension releasing from his shoulders as he looked at me. “I have no idea where your confidence comes from.”

“Well, if it doesn’t work, we can think of another way in. There are more drastic measures we can take, but those should be a last resort.”

“At least tell me before you choose the last resorts.” The knight laughed.

“Of course.”

He sighed and muttered, “Sounds fishy!”

“Now that that’s decided, we should get some things ready. I want to go to the castle tomorrow.”

Cyrus narrowed his eyes at the word *tomorrow* and straightened up.

“What should I do?”

“We’ll say you’re a bodyguard traveling with us.”

“All right.”

“Now the problem is Alto...”

I glanced over at Alto, who was still sleeping soundly in bed. We decided to talk to him once he woke up. I asked Cyrus to keep an eye on him so I could go shopping. I wanted to get back before he woke up. After finishing up my outing, I hurried back to the inn to find Alto still asleep. He woke up about ten minutes later.

When I informed him of our plan, he responded exactly how I expected. “I’ll come, too, Master!”

“Of course. In that case, let’s say that you’re my attendant. You and I should change the length and color of our hair. Maybe even our eye color.”

“But why?” Cyrus asked.

“For our safety. We could cause trouble by catching Guilonde’s attention if we go as we are now.”

“Beastfolk children are rare, after all...” Cyrus must have been feeling guilty at the prospect of putting us in danger, and his expression darkened.

I spoke up to encourage him. “Don’t look so glum! I decided to stick by you until you could go back to being a knight, remember? And Alto agreed!”

My apprentice nodded.

Cyrus visibly relaxed and gazed at me. “Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

The next morning, I started disguising myself using magic and magical tools. I lengthened my hair until it reached my waist and tied it in a ponytail. I changed my hair color to silver and my eye color to blue. I put on white trousers made of fine fabric, a light blue silk shirt, and a slightly darker blue cape. After all this, I checked myself from various angles in the mirror.

“Do I look like a bard?”

“Yeah, you do. I think that look fits you more than being an adventurer.”

“.....”

“You could make a pretty fine living with your face, you know. You wouldn’t even have to play the lyre. Just sit there, and women will flock to you and offer you money.”

“Cyrus, please don’t say such things in front of a child.”

“Whoops...” Cyrus glanced briefly to the side, but Alto was so busy struggling

with his new, unfamiliar clothes that he hadn't been paying attention. I'd also cast similar enchantments on Alto. I had already changed his hair and eye color to begin with, so he didn't mind that. His hair was now shoulder-length, and I placed a white, frilly headband on his head. His hair was now a golden blond, and his eyes a light green.

"Alto, are you done changing?"

"Master, this is..."

"Ha-ha-ha! That looks pretty good on you!" I laughed.

Cyrus gave me a bewildered look. "No matter how you look at it... Don't you think he looks like a girl?"

"I did that on purpose."

Alto's outfit was a very cute light blue dress, designed for girls. He was wearing a pair of thin gloves to hide the guild emblem while he carried the lyre.

"But Master, I'm not a girl!"

"I know."

"And this is girls' clothes!"

It was like he had puffed out his chest and said, *I'm a man!*

"It's a disguise. Beastfolk children are rare, you know. But if I change your appearance this drastically, no one will ever recognize you as Alto. If you really don't like it, I can think up something else."

Alto's ears perked up, and he nodded seriously. "It's okay. I've read about this in a book. In times like these, um..." He desperately tried to remember something.

Meanwhile, Cyrus muttered something under his breath. "Hey, Setsuna. If you're going this far, why not keep using that magic you used before to hide his ears and tail?"

"Well, I think hiding the fact that Alto is a beastfolk for too long might be bad for his self-image, so I'd rather not," I said in a low voice.

Cyrus seemed to accept that and nodded.

Alto still wasn't concerned about our conversation, but then he suddenly blurted out something incomprehensible just as we finished talking.

"I know! I'll dedicate myself to the pursuit of acting!"

What book did he read that in?!

"Alto, you're pretending to be a bard's attendant, but don't forget your true calling is as an adventurer..."

"You know what they say, go big or go home! That's what acting is!" he declared.

Honestly, what in the world was he reading?!

"Alto, can you walk behind me with this? I want you to carry the lyre."

He looked at me with a determined expression, but I wasn't sure if he'd heard me. A wry smile on my face, I handed him the lyre.

"Yes, Master. I mean, my lord."

"....."

I chose not to say anything to Alto, who had fully immersed himself in his role.

Cyrus muttered to me, "Kids are pretty funny, huh? Even the children in town used to play pretend like this." He smiled and gazed at Alto.

It reminded me of some of my younger sister's playful moments. Kyoka used to mimic the tone and gestures of characters from anime. The only difference was that in Alto's case, although he was enjoying himself, he approached it with a serious attitude like it was his job. He was trying to find something he could do to the best of his abilities. That was why neither Cyrus nor I said anything.

If he went too far, I'd give him a warning, but I thought it was unlikely that he'd do that.

We teleported to the front of the shop I'd gone to earlier to avoid anyone seeing us leave the inn. Apparently, there was a reception desk for requesting an audience with the royal family a short distance from the castle entrance, so we decided to walk there. Cyrus said that it was possible they would turn us

away in light of the current situation. I agreed that it would just be a matter of luck. I noticed glances on the way there, but I ignored them as we headed for our destination. Once it was our turn, we were led to a private room. I answered various questions and stated the purpose for the audience.

"I am a wandering bard who had the honor of being noticed by Prince Eugene Lypaed during his studies abroad. I have come to present a rare anemone flower, along with a song of my country," I explained.

The receptionist wrote our names and the number of people in our party on the documents. We decided to use false names for everyone. I was Sena, Alto was Alice, and Cyrus was still Russ. Of course, I mentioned the anemone as a nod to Cyrus, but I couldn't tell the receptionist that, so I took a wooden box from my bag and opened it. Inside was a single purple anemone flower. Hopefully, I would be able to present it to Prince Eugene.

The anemone was enchanted with magic. Since I'd told Cyrus I could only use Wind magic, I used a specially crafted dark magical tool to cast the enchantment. However, dark magical tools were quite expensive, so his expression turned grim at this revelation. But he reluctantly accepted it due to the time constraints.

The spell worked on the subconscious, making the recipient want to deliver the flower to Prince Eugene. Cyrus had frowned, mentioning that something like this could be misused for assassination, and I agreed that it was a possibility. I hoped that he would consider countermeasures for that when he returned to being a knight.

"Please present this anemone to Prince Eugene."

"It will take a few days for a response. Is that acceptable?"

"I apologize, but we have plans to depart for the next kingdom. Would it be possible to receive a response now?"

The receptionist shook her head, but after a few seconds of contemplation, she said, "Please wait a moment." And a few minutes later, we received permission to have an audience with the prince. After we deposited our weapons at the reception desk, a soldier escorted us into the castle.

We were led to a room occupied by not only Prince Eugene but also a person who seemed to be the king, watching us from the throne. A group of knights around the same age as the king and others observed us attentively and cautiously.

I mentally addressed Alto, who tensed and took a step forward. Cyrus lowered his gaze and walked behind us with an impassive look on his face. The only reason I was able to stay calm and not be overwhelmed in moments like these was because of the experiences Hanai and Kyle had passed on to me. If not for that, it would be impossible for someone with as little experience in such matters as me to be so confident.

We were silently welcomed. Alto whispered, “I’m scared,” but I soothed him while we walked. As we moved, I realized that the room was enchanted. I used my Analyze Magic spell to discreetly determine its nature. It turned out that the room had been enchanted with soundproofing spells to prevent eavesdropping, along with a spell that prevented the use of magic.

Under normal circumstances, staffs and rings would become useless upon entering this room, and magic would be rendered unusable. That was why we’d been prompted to deposit our weapons at the reception desk. Although I didn’t mention I had a ring, I had said that I could use Wind magic. By the way, the reason I could still use magic was simply because the particular spells here were not strong enough to seal my power.

As we walked forward, the faces of the people in the room grew clearer. Since Cyrus had described to me what Prince Eugene and Prime Minister Keith looked like beforehand, I recognized them immediately.

I used Telepathy to convey instructions to Alto: *We’ll stop soon, and when we do, bow immediately.* Alto repeated, *Bow after the signal* in his mind, which was both amusing and somewhat adorable. I decided not to comment on this to avoid confusing him.

I walked slowly, trying to appear elegant. When I reached a spot away from the stairs leading up to the dais, I stopped and knelt, giving a bow. From beside me, I heard Alto respond in kind. I delivered a speech to the king, who sat on

the throne, and after receiving permission, I lifted my head to look at Prince Eugene.

◇ Part Two: Eugene

The condition of my father, the king, had been worsening by the day. Despite that, efforts to form an alliance with surrounding kingdoms to counter Guilonde's aggression were progressing. The date for the treaty-signing ceremony was already set, and it could not be changed. We'd been mediating this for a long time, and the original plan was for the king to attend the signing ceremony, but it was beginning to look like I would have to attend as his proxy.

If that happened, we would need to disclose the king's illness to the public, which would not only damage the morale of our kingdom but damage the morale of the nations we were attempting to ally with as well. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. Gazing at the sky through a nearby window, I gave an involuntary sigh.

Is Cyrus still alive somewhere under this same sky?

It had been almost two weeks since I had sent away Cyrus, my knight and friend. The idea of banishing him had been unthinkable to me. And from Cyrus's perspective, my and Keith's actions probably seemed like nothing more than betrayal. I still vividly remembered the look in his eyes when I wounded his knight's emblem that day.

Since I'd sent him to the teleportation circle, I prayed to the gods every day for the safety of my knight and my dear childhood friend. As I prayed, many thoughts went through my mind; I wondered whether he'd remembered the protective magic of his dagger, whether he'd understood the note Keith gave him, whether he would be able to find the antidote, and so on.

The mission we assigned to Cyrus was incredibly difficult, and the guilt of entrusting something so important to a single knight continued to plague me. One mistake, and he could lose his life. And he would need to unravel a complex web to achieve his goal, all on his own, beneath a distant sky. I inadvertently clenched my fist, lamenting my own helplessness.

"Prince Eugene."

"Do you need something?" Evidently, I'd gotten too absorbed in my own thoughts, even though I was taking a break.

A soldier knelt before me and spoke. “Yes! There is a bard requesting an audience with Your Highness.”

“I’m in the middle of a meeting now and must return. Please have them come back later, and I can listen to what they have to say.”

The soldier bowed hesitantly. Just as he was about to leave, however, I saw something in the wooden box he carried, so I called out, “Wait! What is that?”

“The bard wishes to present this to Your Highness.” The soldier knelt again, presenting the wooden box.

“Is there any other message?”

“Yes. The bard said he came to present a rare anemone flower and songs from his homeland, Mubana, to Your Highness.”

My heart pounded in response to those words.

“Anemone...”

It was the name of the flower I mentioned when I damaged Cyrus’s emblem. Had he returned?

“Allow everyone in the bard’s party to enter.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

I had the soldier step back while I examined the contents of the box. “I trust you and will wait for you.”

That was the meaning of the purple anemone in my hands. Although I could only tell him the name of the flower at the time, the color of it meant that Cyrus understood what I wanted to convey. And he’d made it back to Lypaed. I didn’t yet know if he’d obtained the antidote, but I was so relieved that he had returned.

I hurried back to the conference room and loudly announced, “Cyrus has returned!” The ministers all looked astonished. They were all aware of the situation, of course. The king’s condition had gradually worsened, and because it was impossible to conceal, I had gathered only the most trustworthy

ministers to explain the situation.

"Your Majesty, please rest in your room," Keith urged, but the king shook his head.

"No, I shall go as well. If I am not there, the barrier cannot be activated."

The barrier he spoke of was a magical tool passed down through the generations that only the king could use. Within the barrier, soundproofing magic was employed to prevent eavesdropping, and magical rings and staffs were rendered useless, preventing anyone from wielding magic. Since Guilonde's spies were lurking everywhere, we wanted to avoid being overheard at all costs. From the king's complexion, however, I could tell he was pushing himself quite hard. Hence, Keith must have advised him to return to his room.

In the end, he was unable to convince the king otherwise, and we moved to the throne room, awaiting Cyrus's entrance. I was filled with expectation and anxiety, which I'm sure was a sentiment shared among everyone in the room. Had Cyrus fulfilled his mission? And would he forgive me for wounding his heart—the heart of my dearest friend—by damaging his knight's emblem, even though it was for the sake of the kingdom?

Such things went through my mind as I stared intently at the door. A soldier asked if he could let the visitors in, and the king nodded. Keith gave his permission as well. The door slowly opened, and an incredibly handsome young man entered the room.

Everyone present, myself included, was captivated by the person who passed through the door. He walked some distance away from the stairs leading to the dais, knelt, and elegantly bowed to the king. He had long, shining silver hair and eyes that were reminiscent of a serene, clear blue lake. His demeanor as he walked was beautiful, flawless. How in the world had Cyrus managed to seek assistance from such a person?

"At ease."

With the king's permission, the young man lifted his face and stood up. He was every bit the picture of impeccable manners, exuding an elegance that no

ordinary human could possibly possess. If someone were to claim he was royalty, no one would bat an eye. I shifted my gaze from the young man and looked behind him. It was Cyrus. His hair and eye color were different, and he was thinner than he had been two weeks ago, but I felt great relief at seeing that he was unharmed.

But why isn't he lifting his face?

Even though Cyrus must have been aware that everyone was staring at him, he didn't try to meet anyone's gaze. His fists were tightly clenched. A sense of impatience spread inside of me as I became absorbed in observing him. Meanwhile, the king and the young man exchanged greetings. After he finished greeting the king, the young man turned his gaze to me and leisurely began to speak.

"Thank you so much for allowing us to have this audience. I am the bard Sena and—"

The king interrupted the young man. "No need for theatrics. You've gone through a lot, Cyrus. Welcome back."

Upon hearing that, Cyrus lifted his face in surprise and met the king's gaze. He seemed to be trying to say something but was unable to speak. He lowered his head again in silence. My heart ached seeing him struggle so. Unable to bear it any longer, I nearly spoke, but the young man interjected and asked the king, "Everyone here knows everything, don't they?"



“That is correct.”

The young man who introduced himself as Sena turned to Cyrus and crouched, placing a hand on his shoulder to offer him some comfort. After a while, Cyrus seemed to calm.

He lifted his face, looked at the young man, and grinned gently. His smile struck me deeply. Even after being together for many years, I’d never seen such a genuine smile on his face. I turned to Keith and saw that he was surprised, too. It wasn’t the resigned, somewhat regretful smile he used to wear. I asked myself if it was because of me, and the only answer I could find was yes.

“.....”

Murmurs spread through the room, and the air trembled.

Cyrus stood up, took a deep breath to calm himself, and gave a knight’s salute with the utmost respect.

“I have returned to the castle,” he announced in a very quiet voice.

The king squinted ever so slightly and nodded. Although he looked noticeably different due to his hair and eye color, his voice was unmistakably that of my knight and friend.

“I’m glad you’ve returned safely.”

“Thank you.”

“.....”

The king tried to smile faintly, but he seemed to be struggling with his words. He furrowed his brow as if enduring pain and closed his eyes, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. Though Keith and I tried to approach, he raised his hand to stop us, ordering us not to come closer, so we withdrew accordingly.

“Sir Cyrus, greetings and reports can wait; let’s give the king the antidote first,” Sena said.

Cyrus momentarily frowned but then took out a water flask and what appeared to be medicine from his bag. After briefly requesting permission to approach, he went up and offered those things. Keith tried to intervene, but the

king restrained him with a glance and took the medicine without hesitation. The king had put his utmost faith in Cyrus, who had risked his life to return to his kingdom.

Even after taking the medicine, the king exhaled with apparent discomfort. Both Cyrus and I anxiously watched him. The atmosphere in the room was extremely tense. Just then, a strangely calm voice echoed.

“May I approach the king?” Sena asked.

Keith and a minister were about to say no, but after brief consideration, the king nodded, allowing him to come closer.

“Pardon me for the intrusion.”

The young man approached the king and placed his hand on his chest. A nearby knight attempted to draw his sword, but the young man paid him no mind and spoke, looking only at the king.

“Your Majesty, would you please release the barrier here for a moment?”

“No, he will not!” Keith raised his voice in response, and those around him expressed their displeasure at the young man’s request. The room immediately filled with tension, but the young man refused to move or take his eyes off the king. My father looked over at Cyrus. He stared back at the king, unfazed, as if he had firm trust in the young man.

The king dispelled the barrier. Keith began chanting a spell, and the knights, spurred by their commander, drew their swords. If the young man showed any signs of harming the king, they could quickly kill him.

Although both magic and swords were trained on the young man, he didn’t even bat an eye. Cyrus turned toward Keith and the knight’s commander to protect the young man, as if he was prepared to become the young man’s shield, reminiscent of a knight safeguarding his lord.

“I am going to use recovery magic on you now, Your Majesty.” After the young man declared this, he chanted quietly. The king’s complexion improved before our eyes, and his breathing calmed down. The whole room was abuzz with murmurs.

"You may put the barrier back up."

And with that, the young man stepped back, putting distance between himself and the king. Cyrus also stepped back simultaneously with him. Just then, Cyrus smiled faintly at the little beastfolk girl whose side he had left. The girl wagged her tail casually. I wondered if the two of them were also friends.

"But this poison isn't curable by Wind magic," the king murmured, staring at his own hands. He had mentioned numbness before. Had it been cured? The king shifted his gaze back up to the young man, who nodded in response.

"The antidote Cyrus gave you cured the effects of the poison, Your Majesty. The spell I just used was only intended to enhance its healing properties. I would recommend resting quietly for a few days. Recovery through magic alone won't bring you back to your full strength. Please make sure to eat well and get plenty of sleep."

"I see. You are indeed a skilled Windmaster. You have my gratitude."

"Your Majesty is too kind. Thank you so much."

Once again, the young man knelt.

With that, the king addressed the two of them. "Cyrus, Sena. You both have done a great service to this kingdom. I hereby declare that Cyrus will be reinstated as first knight. In commemoration of your efforts, we shall hold a grand feast for the next five days. We shall prepare you some rooms here at the castle, so please take some time to rest from your journey. I shall present you appropriate commendations at the feast."

One would expect everyone to be delighted by the king's words, but contrary to my expectations, Sena declined the offer and said he wished to continue his journey. Although Cyrus tried to stop him, the young man was already leaving. Keith intervened in the awkward situation. "I'm sorry, but we can't allow you to just leave."

"What do you mean?" Cyrus questioned Keith with an edge in his voice, but Sena remained composed and simply gazing at him. The beastfolk girl showed no particular interest, not even looking at Keith.

"I can't discuss the details as it pertains to national security. However, I am

grateful that you cured the king. I sincerely thank you. It pains me to say this, and I am sorry for the inconvenience, but you must stay at the castle for a while."

"If you're keeping us in the castle, then at least explain why," Cyrus pressed.

"I can't. You may trust those two, but I cannot."

"That's not fair, Keith!" Cyrus's voice was low with anger. "He is my benefactor! When I was banished and clueless, he took pity on me, suspicious and penniless as I was. He healed my injuries, provided me with clothes, armor, weapons, meals, and even lodging at an inn before he journeyed from the southern continent all the way here with me! And this is the thanks he gets?!"

"My answer will not change regardless of what you say." Keith's gaze wavered slightly, but he didn't back down. After all, this was on the king's order, and there was no room for argument. Though Keith and Cyrus glared at each other and argued, the young man didn't seem surprised or angry. He just quietly observed the two of them, contemplating something. The beastfolk girl, perhaps accustomed to situations such as these, looked bored and discontent.

After some time, once his thoughts seemed to have settled, the young man spoke. "Cyrus, it's all right. I don't mind."

"You..."

"Do you believe the prime minister's stance regarding national security is correct?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Thank you for everything you've done for us."

"No, I haven't done anything. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

Cyrus sighed and clenched his fist. I watched on with mixed emotions. I felt a sense of irritation, like the relationships I'd built up now were being destroyed.

"In that case, I must add a condition, assuming you can accept it," the young man said to Keith.

Keith narrowed his eyes. “A condition?”

“Yes.”

“And if we don’t accept?”

“I’ll depart immediately.”

“I have no intention of letting you leave.”

A smile came to the young man’s lips, but not his eyes. Just before Keith was about to glance over at the royal guards, Cyrus shouted to stop him. “Hold on, Keith!”

Just then, Cyrus rolled up his left sleeve, showing his left arm. We all saw the pattern on his flesh and gasped in astonishment.

A dragon emblem?!

There was a gentian blue colored pattern engraved on Cyrus’s left arm, from his wrist to his elbow. Although this was my first time seeing it, I somehow knew it was a dragon emblem.

“Cyrus! Where did you get that dragon emblem?!” The king rose to his feet, raising his voice. I couldn’t believe it, either. Cyrus turned to the king and knelt.

“As I told the prime minister, I was dying in the forest when Sena saved my life. Looking back on it now, I believe that my meeting with him was the work of the sun god.”

“.....”

Although Cyrus’s words were simple, he wore a tormented expression on his face. I inadvertently averted my gaze. I was reminded of the unpleasant sensation of cutting through his flesh to scar his knight’s emblem.

“Sena provided for me and came up with a plan to reach the northern continent, and we ended up coming here through the cave connecting Lypaed and Kutt.”

“But that can’t be...!” I blurted out, looking at Cyrus. Did he not return using Kutt’s teleportation circle?! He’d passed through that cave?! Where monsters that even seasoned warriors couldn’t handle were said to lurk? Why, why

would he take such a reckless path? I suppressed the urge to voice those questions.

Keith and I recalled the words of Kutt's crown prince, and we had assumed that Cyrus would remember and seek out the prince for help...but it seemed we were wrong. A bitter feeling settled in my chest.

"I see. Continue." The king let out a deep sigh, his voice very tired as he settled back on his throne.

"Yes... I knew I would be facing a battle with monsters, but I still went through the cave. However, we found no monsters there. But there was a dragonfolk. I don't know why he was in the cave, but he was very hostile to us and said he had no intention of letting us pass. I regretted involving these two in such a dangerous situation..."

No one could utter a word. They just silently listened to his story. The reason why he considered the young man to be his benefactor and why he was so willing to protect him became clear. This young man had also risked his life for the sake of our kingdom.

"In the face of the hostile dragonfolk, Sena patiently negotiated, trying to communicate why we had trespassed. The dragonfolk admired his courage and granted him power. In exchange, Sena asked the dragonfolk to give me his protection. I was given it because Sena asked the dragonfolk to grant it to me, not because he recognized my power."

Cyrus's voice contained a hint of regret. Everyone held their breath, staring at the young man. Negotiating with the servants of the divine, the supreme beings tasked with the protection of this world? Not only for himself but for a man he'd just met?! I couldn't fathom what Sena had done.

"Cyrus..."

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to fight you, Sena. And I don't want you to have to fight, either."

If the young man had also received divine protection from the dragon, we wouldn't stand a chance against them. No wonder Cyrus tried to stop us. I still couldn't believe it, but the dragon emblem on his arm told me it was the truth.

Even if he had fabricated the story, if dragonfolk were involved, it would be better not to inquire too deeply about it.

"If you must keep him here, Your Majesty, please accept his conditions." Cyrus bowed sincerely, and the king chuckled wryly.

"Cyrus."

"Yes?"

"You don't have to bear this alone. This is all my fault, since I was the one who was poisoned. I was unable to provide you with anything or inform you of anything. I sent you away, saddled you with a false crime, and entrusted the fate of this kingdom to you. It's not hard to believe you chose the best course of action at each moment on your way to Lypaed. In the process, the people you met along the way supported you. I understand why you want to protect them to repay that kindness."

"....."

"This is only a conjecture, but you must not have wanted to tell us the reason why you received the dragon's protection. Perhaps there is something you have to hide from us. But even though you were caught between loyalty and kindness, something happened that made you desperately try and stop us."

Cyrus neither confirmed nor denied this. He just looked at the king.

"I won't disregard your warning. You may be at ease. I have indeed acknowledged your loyalty," the king said, directing a comforting gaze at Cyrus. "You've been through so much. I'm truly glad you came back."

"Your Majesty..." Cyrus bowed at the king's words and remained motionless. I could only look away as his slightly bony shoulders trembled and teardrops fell to the floor.

After the king sighed deeply, he addressed the young man. He was negotiating with someone who had the divine protection of dragons, someone who didn't back down against dragonfolk.

"Our kingdom and the surrounding kingdoms are in a state of tension at the moment. Those entering and leaving the castle are under surveillance not only

by Guilonde but by spies from other nations as well. If you were to leave the castle, those individuals might approach you. We cannot let them know that I have been cured. Similarly, I don't want other countries to know I was poisoned in the first place. But you are a bard and storyteller who travels the world, singing songs of heroes. It would be troublesome if word about the encounter between the dragonfolk and Cyrus were spread to other nations."

Sena gave a somewhat troubled smile.

"As I've mentioned to Cyrus, I am sincerely grateful for what has happened. I believe that someone Cyrus trusts so much wouldn't easily leak information. However, I want you to understand that the welfare of the nation cannot rely solely on personal trust. Therefore, I have concluded that I cannot let you go back. But I acknowledge that you are Cyrus's benefactor. So I shall do what I can. First, please state the conditions you mentioned."

The young man nodded and began to state his conditions for staying at the castle.

"First, I want you not to involve me and my companion, whose name is Alice, any further in the issues of this kingdom. Secondly, I want you to let go of the possibility of me serving this kingdom. Third, after everything is over, you must promise there won't be any attempts on our lives. Fourth, I want a life without restrictions. I want us to be able to move freely through the castle. Finally, I'd like you to provide meals and accommodations for me and Alice. Those are my conditions."

The king contemplated this for a while. "If you agree that freedom of movement within the castle includes assigning personnel who will surveil you, then I shall accept your conditions."

"Yes, that's not a problem."

Cyrus, who had been listening as he knelt, had a clear look of relief on his face. Then he lifted his head to look at the king, realizing something. "Your Majesty, may I stay in the same room as Sena?"

"Why? Wouldn't it be easier to return to your own room?"

"I think it would be better if Guilonde didn't know I had returned."

“Indeed, that might be true.”

“As of this moment, I am serving as the bodyguard of the bard Sena. So I will refrain from being reinstated as a knight until Sena leaves the castle.”

“Very well, then. I shall make arrangements accordingly.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The king granted Cyrus permission to rise.

However, the young man spoke up. “Cyrus, I think it would be better if you and I were to act separately.”

Keith couldn’t hide his displeasure at the young man’s words and interjected without hesitation. “I’d appreciate it if you refrained from intervening in His Majesty’s decisions.”

The man nodded, acknowledging Keith’s warning. “I’m not trying to intervene, and I apologize if I gave that impression.” The man apologized openly. Despite being clearly disgruntled, Keith chose not to say anything further.

However, Cyrus was intrigued by what Sena had meant and stared intently at him. The way he was so focused on Sena suggested that he attached considerable importance to the young man’s words. Sena lightly tapped his left arm a few times to get Cyrus’s attention.

He offered his answer in a slightly mocking tone. “It might be good to be quiet, but boasting about the dragon emblem is an option, too.”

Both the king and Keith turned to look at him in unison.

“Boasting? Don’t you think it’s better to keep it hidden?”

“That’s just my opinion.”

“Boasting or not, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Don’t you want to show it off?”

Cyrus shot Sena a bitter look. “I don’t feel like it. Unlike you, I haven’t mastered its power yet!”

“That’s not my fault.”

"Yeah, well... I don't know what to say about boasting..."

"You don't want to?"

The two of them bantered back and forth, showing the camaraderie they had built up in this short time. As they both turned away, the king seemed to be deep in thought, while Keith stared at Cyrus's left arm.

"Cyrus's arm... The dragon emblem!"

I felt a shiver down my spine. Did Sena somehow know about the signing ritual, and was he suggesting that the king take Cyrus there? No, surely that was reading too much into it. He'd just told Cyrus to boast, after all. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but I was very curious. However, it seemed like I was the only one feeling so uncertain.

Now that they had both let their guard down and were at ease, Cyrus received amused and exasperated looks from the king and ministers, but they also looked at him with kindness and understanding. Cyrus was doing something that would usually warrant reprimand, but he had risked his life to come back to his kingdom, so nobody dared call him on it. He had surpassed our wildest expectations. Everyone seemed relieved that Cyrus, who rarely smiled, was now openly laughing. And perhaps that was the most significant result.

The king gave them permission to leave, instructing the soldiers to guide them to their rooms. After bowing deeply, Cyrus and his party confidently strode out. I could only watch them go.

Was Cyrus choosing Sena over me? I had damaged his knight emblem for the sake of the kingdom, but as long as there was a scar on it, he was no longer my knight. Cyrus had been chosen as a knight candidate as a child in recognition of his potential and had been raised alongside me. He was my friend and protector who always supported me. Was I going to lose him? The fact that Cyrus hadn't once looked into my eyes weighed heavily upon my heart.

◇ Part Three: Keith

The young bard, his beastfolk companion, and Cyrus all exited the throne room. The soldiers closed the door, but tension lingered in the air. The general broke the silence, voicing his concern to the king.

“Your Majesty, are you really feeling all right?”

“I seem fine now. There’s no numbness in my hands, and I am no longer short of breath. The fatigue is gone as well.”

Although my brother’s complexion had visibly improved, the general and the ministers, who were all former classmates, couldn’t help but be concerned. They had been beside themselves with worry since the king had been poisoned.

“I thought relying on Cyrus was a big gamble, but if we hadn’t done what we did, then today’s outcome may never have happened,” the general said.

The king nodded and let out a deep sigh. Everyone was relieved that he was cured. But nobody had been pleased about sending Cyrus away. The general verbalized the sentiments of those around him.

“Cyrus must have suffered greatly,” he said.

The king muttered, “I can’t believe he returned without relying on the crown prince of Kutt...”

“Passing through that cave was nothing short of madness. Even if he managed to pass safely through, think about how dangerous the journey must have been from there to the castle! It was totally reckless!”

The area around the cave was a forest inhabited by ferocious monsters.

“I apologize. My assumptions endangered Cyrus more than I expected.”

I was the one who’d thought Cyrus would remember what the crown prince of Kutt had said.

“I permitted it. I never thought things would turn out like this.”

“But the most crucial part of our plan...turned out to be useless.”

“Yet things still played out in our kingdom’s favor.”

The decision to pass through the cave resulted in Cyrus receiving the divine protection of the dragon. Still, as I thought back on Cyrus's slightly emaciated figure, I clenched my fists. It was my fault that he'd been put in such a difficult situation. That fact weighed more heavily on me now than it had before our reunion. I remembered the days when I relied on my friendship with Cyrus to save the kingdom.

Guilonde had waged war for several decades to unify the northern continent, and its influence had finally reached Lypaed and our neighbors. We had acted to stand up against their dominance. We prepared ourselves, understanding that things would not be simple. We strengthened alliances with various nations, and the formation of a coalition with the surrounding nations was just on the horizon.

Alone in my study, I sighed as I sat before a letter from Guilonde that was addressed to me. Although I held the position of prime minister in this kingdom, I was also the younger brother of the current king. However, because there was such a large age gap between us, our relationship was more akin to father and son. The letter from Guilonde read as such:

Overthrow the king and the prince and take control of the kingdom.

Guilonde wanted me to usurp the throne to make Lypaed become its vassal state. My stomach churned, and I thought of burning the letter. However, I decided to report it to my brother. He began to see the opportunity in this situation.

“Keith.”

“Yes?”

“Creating the alliance will require a bit more time. So we must consider what to do in case it doesn’t pan out.”

“Brother...”

“If that happens, you must kill me and guide the kingdom by pretending to submit to Guilonde. I’ll leave Eugene in your hands. You must decide based on

the circumstances at the time.”

“What are you suggesting?!”

“Keith, we must protect our citizens. We cannot allow them to be harmed.”

I wanted to scream, but I desperately restrained myself. I could tell my brother was suppressing his anger at the situation as well.

“So you want me to establish ties with Guilonde?”

“Yes. And kill me if need be. It won’t be easy, of course. And I want you to buy as much time as possible, for the future of this kingdom.”

I gritted my teeth. Fury toward Guilonde built up inside me, threatening to overflow. My teeth grinding gave way to a strained groan that echoed throughout the room.

“There are spies infiltrating the kingdom as well. If you are in collusion with them, you should distance yourself from me and those close to me.”

“.....”

“Guilonde will lay traps and schemes upon schemes. You’ll have to face them alone.”

“Very well.”

“Keith, I know I’m putting you in a difficult position. But please be strong.”

My heart ached at my brother’s tired voice and agonized expression.

“I shall do my best.”

And with that, I bowed and left my brother’s room. I then informed Prince Eugene, my dear friend, and Cyrus that I would align with Guilonde. Prince Eugene opposed this out of fear for my safety.

Due to the age gap between me and my brother, he left me with the responsibility of educating Eugene. Although there were times when things got a bit out of hand under Cyrus’s leadership, my nephew, who was serious by nature, had the potential to be as wonderful a king as my brother. I had been looking forward to the day when he would ascend the throne. I could not allow him to be killed.

By saying I would become Guilonde's lapdog, I would invite surveillance. I would no longer be able to converse casually with my friends, Cyrus and Eugene. I couldn't afford to provoke suspicion.

It will be a lonely battle, but still...

We'd vowed to protect this kingdom together. The three of us pledged to make it prosper and bring happiness to the people. The prince gave me a worried look, and I conveyed my determination and loyalty.

"Prince Eugene, I swear that I'll kill you if I have to."

"Keith..."

"But no matter what happens, I want you to remember that I love this kingdom."

"I understand."

He looked like he wanted to say something in protest, because he had a bitter, troubled expression on his face.

"Please. Please live, for the sake of this kingdom."

"Once I leave here this evening, I will become your enemy."

A dark light shone in Prince Eugene's eyes. A mixture of anger and resentment toward Guilonde.

"Cyrus."

"....."

"Cyrus, protect Prince Eugene to the death. I won't show any mercy to you, either. Whatever you do, don't die. I can't stay with you. From now on, you'll have to watch people's actions carefully to discern their true intentions. Don't run away just because it's difficult. You're Prince Eugene's first knight."

"I know," Cyrus responded shortly to me. However, I could see the concern in his eyes. Shaking that off, I turned and swore a new oath as a parting message. "At this point, our paths will diverge, but we'll share the common goal of acting for the sake of our kingdom and our people. Believe that someday I shall walk beside you and Prince Eugene again, Cyrus. No matter what..."

Yes, I would fight to protect our kingdom and what was dear to me. Even if we could not walk the same path, as long as we believed in each other, I would not be alone. I reminded myself of this as I sent a reply to Guilonde. *I will aim for the throne.*

Once I sent that letter, my life changed dramatically. Guilonde responded by saying they would welcome me but warned that they would show me no mercy if I were to betray them. That didn't surprise me. I'd known that from the beginning, of course. But having Guilonde's agents close meant even stricter surveillance than I imagined, robbing me of my peace of mind.

I felt the pressure from the surveillance to make attempts to plot and execute an assassination upon Eugene, but Cyrus and his knights thwarted every attempt. I distracted Guilonde's attention while my brother progressed toward signing the alliance. It was crucial for us not to attract Guilonde's attention now. So we should have been even more cautious.

But then my brother informed me he had been poisoned by Guilonde. The country's poison was notorious for spreading through the body, killing its victims slowly. They also strictly controlled the antidote. When I heard this, my vision went dark. It had taken a year to negotiate the treaty, and we were on the verge of signing it, only for my brother to get poisoned.

If news of this spread to the other nations, they might back away from the alliance entirely. I clenched my teeth. If only we had that secure alliance with the other five nations, even Guilonde, with all its power and influence, would find it difficult to intervene. Had they found out about our plans somehow? This sinister, mysterious deed certainly suggested so.

Only Eugene, the queen, and I were aware that my brother was poisoned. And it seemed like Guilonde thought we didn't know we were being surveilled. I couldn't imagine what they intended on demanding from my brother, and it seemed the only reason they wanted to use me as a pawn was to manipulate Lypaed, because they had nothing to gain from me.

That night, I used a secret passage known only to the royal family to enter my brother's bedchamber. I found my brother, the queen, and Eugene inside.

"You've come, too, Prince?"

"Yes..."

My brother, who looked very pale, waited for everyone to take a seat on the sofa, then spoke. "Have you figured out a plan to get the antidote?"

There was only one kingdom with the antidote. However, we couldn't openly dispatch someone to retrieve it. Doing so would provoke suspicion from the nations we were hoping to ally with against Guilonde. Although Guilonde was our biggest threat, we needed to be cautious about our neighbors as well.

No one wants to board a sinking ship. If we aren't careful, they could decide to exclude us from the alliance entirely.

"Kutt is the only other nation I know that has the antidote."

"Kutt... If we use the teleportation circle in the Adventurers Guild, we might make it in time, but the risk of interference is quite high. We'd have to keep a low profile and use as few agents as possible."

"I agree. Moreover, we can't use the teleportation circle unless Kutt gives us permission. And if we used that as a negotiation tactic, Guilonde might interfere."

"True."

I turned away from my brother as he sighed deeply, feeling angry at myself for planning to drag my dear friend through such an ordeal. But I reminded myself there was no other way. Even if it was a gamble with slim chances of success, we had to do something, or our kingdom would be destroyed.

"Prince Eugene... Strip Sir Cyrus of his knight's emblem and use a teleportation circle for his punishment to send him to the southern continent."

"What?" The prince widened his eyes with disbelief.

Then I explained a plan that no one would ever consider under any circumstances. It was a gambit that entrusted the fate of our entire kingdom to a single man. But these were desperate times, and we had no choice but to

cling to it as our last resort.

“We’ll falsely accuse Sir Cyrus of a crime and exile him as his punishment to deceive Guilonde. He can secure the antidote in Kutt and use the Adventurers Guild teleportation circle to return to Lypaed. That is our only option.”

“But using the teleportation circle for punishment means he would be transported without weapons and armor! And he would be sent to Zeghur Forest, where powerful monsters are said to reside! Even if he manages to get out of that forest, I doubt he has what it takes to negotiate with Kutt. What would he even have as leverage to negotiate with?!”

“Prince Eugene, you know the crown prince of Kutt.”

The northern and southern continents were divided by the Baudal mountain range. Our historical records contained accounts of a cave that was created long ago in those mountains to connect the two continents. The entrances to the cave were located near Lypaed and Kutt respectively. About eight hundred years ago, the two kingdoms used it as a trade route.

As chance would have it, the crown prince of Kutt had shown an interest in the cave mentioned in those records. He’d tried to travel to the Kutt side entrance but was thwarted by strong monsters in the forest. So he had attempted to uncover the entrance on the Lypaed side as well, but that also turned out to be too dangerous. At that time, Prince Eugene had welcomed and hosted him here at the castle.

“He mentioned that his kingdom has a special royal hospital, where they conduct research on Guilonde’s poison and the antidote.”

“So we would seek help from him?”

“I believe that’s our only option. He told us to rely on him if we were ever in trouble.”

The crown prince was a cheerful and caring man, and I thought he had a sense of camaraderie for Prince Eugene, since they both worked so hard for the sake of their kingdom. He’d been considerate in many ways, so it seemed unlikely that he would ignore Prince Eugene’s request.

“I can’t promise anything, but I’ll do what I can to help. Lypaed and Kutt are

quite far away from each other. If ever you need my help, send me a letter with this enclosed. Thank you for your hospitality, Prince Eugene.”

And with that, the crown prince of Kutt presented Prince Eugene with a paper bearing a watermark of sweet pea flowers as a token of his promise. Sir Cyrus had been present when that happened. If we remembered that moment, then surely Sir Cyrus would as well.

“Do you still have the paper with the watermark of the sweet pea flowers?”

“Yes, I’ve kept it safe.”

“Give it to Sir Cyrus. Even if he can’t obtain the antidote, the prince will surely grant permission for him to use the teleportation circle to return if he sees the paper.”

I had a fleeting feeling of anxiety inside of me, but I brushed it aside.

“Is sending a letter not enough?”

“We can’t be sure a letter wouldn’t be intercepted on the way to Kutt, or how long it would take to get there. And we only have one of those papers, so we have to make sure it reaches the prince.”

He would only help Prince Eugene once with that paper. It was, in a sense, our trump card.

“But why Sir Cyrus?”

“I trust him above all others. Plus, he is your first knight, Prince Eugene. He would never betray his lord.”

“I see...”

“Also, the crown prince of Kutt may remember Sir Cyrus, so surely the negotiations would proceed smoothly.”

The crown prince of Kutt had sparred with Sir Cyrus many times, and he’d praised the knight’s swordsmanship. Although Sir Cyrus never defeated him, the prince saw something in him and mentioned he would like to have a rematch someday.

“But accusing him of a crime means he’ll be stripped of his possessions

without explanation. Don't you think it would be too dangerous for him? Why don't we explain the reason and then transport him secretly?"

"Sir Cyrus is Prince Eugene's most trusted confidant. If he just disappears without a trace, people will get suspicious."

"....."

"We can't send Sir Cyrus with his weapons and armor. However, I think we can leave him with the dagger that Prince Eugene gave him."

The dagger was enchanted with a protective spell that, when activated, could nullify most attacks. The drawback was that it could only be used once per day.

"That's true. Perhaps he could use it to exit the forest unharmed..."

"He should be able to reach the village in a day. Then he could sell the dagger to get some money. Conveniently enough for us, Guilonde's spies are already attempting to frame Sir Cyrus, so we could use that to our advantage without raising suspicions."

"....."

"The main issue is that we can't provide detailed information about why we fabricated the charges. All we can do is include Guilonde's poison, claiming it's a poison for him to take as suicide, along with the paper with the sweet pea watermark, and give it to Sir Cyrus."

Sir Cyrus would no doubt be greatly confused after being stripped of his knighthood. He was the kind of man who would lay down his life without hesitation if Prince Eugene ordered him to. That was why I knew we could entrust him with this. For a moment, the possibility that he would despair and consume the poison flashed through my mind, but I quickly dismissed it. My friend was not such a weak man. Even if he momentarily wavered, he would be able to overcome. I believed that.

"But will Guilonde be convinced?"

"If we say it's a poison that kills instantly and hand it over, they'll be thrilled. They firmly believe no one has any access to the antidote. Once they think Sir Cyrus has succumbed to the poison, that should lower their guard, no?"

“It’s terribly cruel.”

I didn’t respond to that murmur.

“Prince Eugene, do not write anything on the paper.”

“I understand. I know I can’t, but...”

We had to make sure Guilonde didn’t suspect a thing about Sir Cyrus’s banishment. And it was important that the paper be blank in case it fell into the wrong hands, so that our intentions would remain hidden.

“It feels like something precious is about to slip through our hands forever... I’m scared,” the queen, who had been listening quietly, suddenly murmured. Our path ahead was dark and uncertain. But we had to trudge on by sacrificing our lives and our spirits, to become the light that would illuminate that unseen darkness. If we hesitated in the face of this darkness, we would be swallowed whole by it in an instant, and nothing would be spared. Not our kingdom, or my brother’s life. We had to move ahead, even if it meant weaving a single thin thread instead of cutting it. There was no other way but forward.

“Prince Eugene, when you strip Sir Cyrus of his knight’s emblem, please do it without using a destruction spell. That way, we can erase the scars that mar the emblem later. And please convey these words to him: ‘Maybe I should engrave an anemone flower on top of that emblem.’”

Sir Cyrus regularly researched the meaning of flowers to give to women, so he would likely understand the symbolism. Prince Eugene must’ve heard about it from Cyrus, because he seemed to understand what I wanted to convey. After we calmed down the queen, who adored Cyrus just as much as we did and had begun to tearfully oppose the plan, we finally reached an agreement late that night.

From then on, I set a trap for Cyrus’s false assassination attempt, conducted a trial with the king as the judge, and delivered the verdict. Normally, someone attempting to assassinate a royal would face execution, but we decided to show mercy, stripping him of his knighthood and banishing him to the Demonlands using the teleportation circle.

I was the one to deliver the punishment. It was a lonely place, with only the necessary people there. We took Sir Cyrus's weapons, armor, and magical tools just like we planned. The only thing we left him with was the dagger, which matched one both the prince and I had, which we concealed in the sole of his shoe.

Prince Eugene looked pale as he gritted his teeth and pressed the dagger against Cyrus's knight's emblem. Another knight held Cyrus down to restrain him, following instructions with an impassive expression on his face. He was also close to Cyrus. I watched without looking away as despair filled Cyrus's eyes. My heart felt like it was being torn apart. I desperately suppressed the urge to stop all of this, even though I was the mastermind of it all.

Why must we be forced to make such painful choices? Anger at this irrational reality welled up inside me. Cyrus shouted frantically at us while he was carried away to the teleportation circle. There were Guilonde spies here, so I couldn't speak too much. I tried to say things that could subtly guide him after he arrived at his destination, but he didn't seem to hear them, which only added to my anxiety.

Please hear me, Cyrus!

"I've heard that walking through the Demonlands is torture. As an act of mercy, I'll give you some poison. If you take this, you'll depart for the Waterside right away. Take it as soon as you get there."

"Keith! I didn't do it! These are false charges!"

I know. There would be no reason for you to plot to kill me.

I suppressed the urge to respond to his desperate pleas and placed the packet of poison in Cyrus's pocket.

"I didn't do it!"

Please figure out our plan and come back alive.

I silently prayed for Cyrus's safety.

"....."

Cyrus realized nothing he said could change the situation, and his shoulders

dropped with disappointment. He fell silent and remained motionless, staring down. Despite my attempts to silently will him to look at me or Prince Eugene, in the end, he didn't meet eyes with either of us.

"He's not the type of man who would smile like that," the general said, interrupting my thoughts. Indeed, I thought the same thing. Cyrus was the type of man who only smiled confidently or cheerfully. He was not someone who would grin with a sense of resignation and regret. He must have struggled so greatly in these past two weeks that this type of smile had become natural...

"I never dreamed he would side with the bard to oppose Lord Keith."

"It makes sense. He can't make an enemy out of the bard."

"Is it because he has the divine protection of dragons?"

"No, that's part of it... But Sena seems very powerful," the general remarked.

All eyes turned toward him.

"That powerful, you think?" my brother asked.

The general rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Even I might not be able to take him in a fight."

I was about to dismiss it as a joke, but the expression on the general's face made it clear that he was serious.

"Sir Cyrus is a sore loser, yet even he admitted the bard's strength and told us that unlike Sena, he hadn't mastered his power yet. So he definitely sees the power of protection as his own. Sena wasn't fazed when we announced our intentions to attack, either. He was confident enough that he could protect the beastfolk girl that he walked away from her."

"If what he said is true, that means the bard negotiated a dragonfolk. I know he's strong, but what price did Cyrus pay him?"

"We should try to discover that."

"Who is Sena, really?" my brother murmured with a deep sigh, and everyone else agreed.

“Why would someone skilled in both swordsmanship and magic be a bard? Make sure to have at least two people monitoring him, and treat them with the utmost courtesy.”

“Understood.” My brother nodded at the general’s suggestion.

“Now, Keith. What do you think of the exchange between Cyrus and the young man?”

“Well...”

Sena had subtly conveyed that he thought it was best for Cyrus to stay near the king.

“Cyrus seemed to take him literally, but I took it to mean he wanted you to take Cyrus to the signing ceremony.”

“I interpreted it the same way.”

“But if that’s true, how did he find out about it?”

The whole thing just didn’t add up. That was the only way I could describe it. And yet the young man hadn’t shown any reason to think he’d put us at a disadvantage. He showed he was willing to comply with our requests, under certain conditions. Was he truly just helping Cyrus? I wanted to ask about the signing ceremony, but I doubted he would give me a straight answer. He’d just mentioned that boasting was one way to handle it. Cyrus hadn’t seemed enthusiastic about the idea, so I decided not to press any further.

“I really can’t tell what he’s thinking.” My brother let out another deep sigh.

“So what will you do?”

Ruminating over these matters wouldn’t solve anything, so we decided to move on.

“I’ll take him with me.”

“All right, I’ll make the arrangements.”

“No, let me tell Cyrus myself. Then I can talk to him about it.”

“About the signing ceremony?”

“Yes, depending on the circumstances.”

“All right.”

My brother nodded, and just as we were about to conclude our meeting, the door reserved for use only by the royal family burst open. All eyes turned in that direction.

“Your Majesty!”

In walked the queen, her eyes filled with tears. My brother waved lightly upon seeing her, and everyone bowed and excused themselves from the room.

“What is it?” he asked as she rushed over to him.

“Cyrus looks terribly thin.”

“You saw him?”

“Yes. I heard that he’d come back.” Apparently, she had been watching from the small viewing area that the royal family could use to peek into the throne room. “I’m so relieved that the poison is out of your system, Your Majesty! You look so much better.”

“I know it caused you much worry.”

The queen smiled a little, looking pleased.

“So, you went to see Cyrus?” the king asked.

“Yes, I wanted to get a good look at him. But since I didn’t know who might be watching us, I passed by without saying anything. He didn’t try to look at me at all. He kept his face down, never meeting my gaze.”

“I see.”

“I wonder if he resents us,” she said tearfully, voicing the fears I was trying to avoid. I was afraid the reason he wasn’t making eye contact with us was because he harbored resentment.

“I can’t say. Only Cyrus knows what’s in his heart. We should give him some space for the time being.”

“All right.”

My brother extended this suggestion to me and Prince Eugene as well, instructing us not to visit Cyrus until he’d settled down.

Alone in my room, I drank a glass of alcohol. I reflected on the day's events and felt relieved. Despite our many problems, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope now. Cyrus had returned alive, and my brother had been cured of the poison. If he continued to recover, he might be able to still attend the signing ceremony.

Guilonde had been spreading rumors about the king's poor health, but since he was looking so much better, the other nations would think those were lies. And if they found out that Cyrus had been granted the divine protection of the dragons, the morale of our allies would surely rise.

"I feel like the scales are tipping in our favor."

Cyrus had risked his life to make this happen. And I needed to sharpen my focus and handle this issue delicately to hold on to that good fortune. I wasn't sure whether it was due to the alcohol or a slight improvement in my mood, but I couldn't gather my thoughts. I thought about going to bed soon, but my mind drifted to the matter that concerned me the most.

"Who is Sena, really?"

If not for the bard, the tides might not have turned so significantly. I was grateful, but I was still unsettled by what the queen said earlier: "*I wonder if he resents us.*" Cyrus's declaration that he would serve as the bard's bodyguard also troubled me.

"I wanted to heal the wounds on his knight's emblem as soon as possible..."

I drained my glass, as if dropping my various emotions into my stomach along with the alcohol.

◇ Part Four: Setsuna

It was decided we would have to remain at Lypaed castle for a while, and so we were led to the room where we would be staying. The only other castle I'd ever been in was the one in Gardir, and I'd only been there for a week before I collapsed and was taken to the medical ward. Those memories flashed back in my head again, now that I was back in another castle. However, the Gardir castle had been impeccably maintained, which contrasted starkly with the Lypaed castle.

It truly seemed Lypaed had suffered greatly under the previous king's disastrous reign. The current king had decided not to burden the citizens with excessive taxes in his efforts to rebuild the kingdom. He'd sold off all his nonessential assets and only left what was necessary for running the kingdom. Although the difference between the fancy castle of Gardir and the humble one of Lypaed was quite noticeable, I found I liked this one much more.

Since my mind had wandered back to thoughts of Gardir, I began to feel a bit upset. But my mood lifted when I was led to our spacious quarters. The room was simple but well taken care of, so I could tell they were treating us with hospitality. I began to feel calmer and more optimistic about the situation now.

I had been planning on leaving Lypaed immediately if they treated us unfairly, so I was relieved that my worries had been unfounded. I hoped things would wrap up smoothly, and I really hoped I could witness Cyrus's knighthood being reinstated.

Speaking of Cyrus, he was still silent and expressionless as he walked through the hallway. Even when we entered the room, he still kept his head down and refused to speak. Alto shot him a worried glance. I wondered if he was upset about our previous exchange, but I also had a feeling there must be more to it than that. I'm sure he was battling a lot of complex emotions right now.

On the other hand, I was coming to terms with living here at the castle. I thought the prime minister's stance was understandable considering I'd gotten significantly involved in the internal affairs of the kingdom. They would have no

doubt been uneasy if I'd just left. If this were Gardir, they might have sent assassins to silence me without any explanation.

So from that angle, Lypaed had been quite accommodating and reasonable. I didn't think I was weak enough that any assassination attempts could succeed, of course, but it was wise to avoid any unnecessary trouble. In a way, this was for the better.

Alto called out in a somewhat gloomy voice, "Master, what about the lyre?"

I thanked him and took the lyre, placing it on the desk. "Are you tired?"

"I'm fine. Maybe a little hungry."

Alto had at first been bewildered in the throne room, surrounded by all those adults. But since I was communicating to him in Telepathy the whole time, he relaxed as time went on. It was a quite serious discussion, and it seemed to bore him, but he hung in there until the end.

"Would you like a snack?"

"Yes!"

Though we'd been told to request anything we wanted, I wanted to rest quietly for a while, so I decided to take out various snacks from my bag and arranged them on the table. Alto sat in a chair, eagerly waiting for it to be ready.

Once I had everything set, I called over Cyrus, who had just been standing there quietly.

"Want to take a break with us, Russ?"

Since I'd immediately erected a soundproof barrier over the room, no one would be able to hear us. But I decided to continue using the pseudonym, thinking calling him by his real name would just make him more upset. He let out a heavy sigh and took a seat.

"Are you okay?" Alto asked, and Cyrus responded with a wry smile, then finally replied.

"I'm sorry."

Alto looked surprised by the sudden apology. “For what?”

I watched over Cyrus, who was clearly trying to control his emotions, and placed a cup in front of him. I told Alto he could go ahead and eat. He happily wagged his tail and started digging in. Alto’s reaction seemed to put Cyrus at ease, and he relaxed his shoulders before continuing calmly.

“I’m fine. I pledged my loyalty to this kingdom, and Eugene is my lord, so risking my life for him was only natural. But you’re different, you know? It’s completely inappropriate they’re treating you like this when you willingly lent me your power in such a dangerous situation—especially when you had no obligation to do so. I understand that they don’t want you to reveal state secrets. But they could just politely request that you remain silent. There’s no need to treat you with such distrust. I know you set those conditions, but it’s not too late to change your mind. Why didn’t you speak up?”

“I think they’ve been quite polite, Cyrus. There are some kingdoms who might have killed me when I said I wouldn’t meet their demands.”

“It’s too dangerous, Setsuna. You shouldn’t be just going along with all this.”

It wasn’t that I was going along with it. I had been summoned to this world without my consent.

“The room they’ve prepared for us seems comfortable enough. Please don’t worry so much.”

“.....”

I chuckled when I saw that Cyrus didn’t seem to be buying it.

“It touches me that you care so much about us, Cyrus, but you’re showing too much affection for us.”

His eyes widened, and his breath caught in his throat.

“You’re the first knight of the prince of this kingdom. You need to prioritize your kingdom over us,” I said quietly to him.

He lowered his face and smiled with a hint of sadness. “That’s true, but I care about you and Alto very much. Just like I said before, Alto is my comrade, and I consider you both my friends. Maybe it’s confusing to you, though.”

“.....”

I was genuinely bewildered. Honestly, I hadn't intended on becoming friends with Cyrus, and I never dreamed someone would approach me to become friends.

But Kyle's words echoed in my mind. “Get out there and interact with people, Setsuna.”

I knew there were people who cared about me, and that feeling was truly heartwarming, but there were two reasons why I couldn't face those emotions.

One was that I was afraid of always having to say good-bye in the future. I hadn't been conscious of that fear until speaking with Revale. So I wanted to treat the people in my life as just passing acquaintances. If I didn't have friends, I wouldn't have to feel sad about losing them.

The other reason I couldn't face my feelings was because I didn't know who I was. Were a hero and a human just summoned beings, or friends? Were humans and beastfolk masters and slaves, or friends? Were dragonfolk and humans master and servants, or friends? I'd witnessed many instances of humans refusing to befriend members of other races. And here I was, not entirely human, so could Cyrus truly consider me his friend?

But I knew pondering this was useless. If I could have just made those distinctions from the start, I wouldn't even have to think about it. So my answer was practically decided already. But this was the first time anyone had outright told me they wanted to be friends with me, and I honestly didn't know how to respond.

“I'll go back to being a knight. And you'll continue traveling the world as an adventurer, right?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, we may never meet again. It's sad to think about that after all we've been through together. Connections can be so easily severed. But if we're friends, it'll be easy to keep in touch. You could let me know how you're doing. But most of all, if you or Alto are in trouble, I might be able to lend a hand.”

Cyrus's sincerity resonated inside of my heart. Connections are so easily severed. That was definitely true. I'd probably run into Agito and Beet again along the way, but Cyrus and I would be very far apart, so if we went our separate ways now, we would probably never meet again, just as he said.

"I..."

Just before I could respond, there was a knock at the door. "Come in," I said, and a maid entered the room with a bow. Our conversation naturally stalled there, and in the end, I lost my chance to respond to Cyrus.

That night, I took a bottle of alcohol out of my bag after Cyrus and Alto had fallen asleep. I sat on a chair out on our balcony and gazed at the clouds hanging over the blue moon. I thought back on the events of the day and remembered Cyrus's words.

"Friends..."

My answer was practically a given. I sighed softly and sipped my drink. I wondered what dragonfolk thought when they formed dragon knight pacts with humans. I remembered what Tuuli had said when I wondered what they felt about humans, who had shorter life spans. *"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."* That's what she had said. I thought dragonfolk who could boldly assert that must be very strong. Would I be able to genuinely feel happy in the end?

Then I suddenly wondered, what if Tuuli were human? What would I have done then, if I had known I would lose her first? I felt bad for Cyrus, but I wanted him to wait a bit longer for my answer. Right now I lacked the courage to connect with people.

The next day, Prince Eugene came to our room while I was relaxing. He told me the king wasn't feeling well and wished to be comforted by the lyre. We were told there would be no need for formalities. Alto and I were asked to wait in a separate room, where we enjoyed tea and snacks while we waited for

Cyrus and the others to finish their conversation.

“Master.”

“Hmm?”

“Are we going to say good-bye to Cyrus after this?” Alto asked seriously, and I nodded.

“Yes. Once this matter is resolved, it will be time to say good-bye.”

“Oh.”

“Does that make you sad?”

Alto thought for a moment and then frowned, shaking his head. “He always tries to eat my food, so I won’t be sad.”

“I see.”

Alto was so earnest that I fought the urge to tease him. But he was right. I remembered the time when Cyrus had told him, “If you can’t finish it, I’ll eat it for you!” while reaching his fork for Alto’s plate. Alto had bitten him for it.

“Aw, c’mon, Alice! You’ll miss me, won’t ya?” Cyrus said as he opened the door.

“Cyrus.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Have you really been stealing food from innocent girls?”

“.....”

With that, the king and some others entered. I stood up, prompting Alto to do the same, but the king told us to stay seated. I noticed he was giving Cyrus a stern look. Cyrus avoided eye contact, attempting to ignore the situation. The king sighed once he saw he was silent and took a seat on the sofa.

“I have something I want to ask you, Sena. You may speak freely, but I ask that you give me an honest answer.”

“All right.”

“I’ll get straight to the point: How much do you know?”

I guessed he was trying to figure out whether I knew about the signing ceremony. But even if I told him I was aware of it, there was no way I could tell him how I'd obtained that information. Just as I was about to claim I didn't know anything, Cyrus abruptly spoke up.

"Lord Revale must've told you everything, right?"

"Lord Revale?" the king asked, and Cyrus answered before I could.

"He's the dragonfolk who bestowed his protection upon me."

"...You were permitted to call him by name?"

"He didn't speak much to me, but he told Sena to address him without honorifics."

"So the dragonfolk favors you to that extent..."

The king seemed surprised, but Revale wasn't connected to this at all. After all, he disliked humans, so I doubted he had any interest in the politics of the northern continent. He was solely concerned with Tuuli. The king asked more questions, which Cyrus answered enthusiastically, but the Revale he spoke of seemed like a completely different person to me. I kept silent, thinking intervening would only complicate matters.

"It wouldn't be strange for a dragonfolk to know about the situation in detail."

"Yes, I agree."

"....."

I found it puzzling how they could easily accept this, but explaining my magic might raise their suspicions, so I figured it would be for the best if they were convinced I had learned everything from Revale. It seemed like the least troublesome and most straightforward resolution, after all. For me, dragonfolk were just a different race, but I had to remember that in this world, most people still thought of them as beings who were closest to the gods.

"There's one problem I have with taking Cyrus with me."

"What's that?"

"I believe the Guilonde spies would be suspicious if Cyrus were to suddenly disappear from your presence."

"I agree."

"So Sena, please stay at the castle for a while. We'll say you released your bodyguard from his duty, and he'll pretend to leave the castle."

"All right. But then how will Cyrus return to the castle?"

"After the surveillance is lifted, he won't return directly to the castle but to the house of a knight who is close to him."

"I see."

"Since he'll be leaving the castle soon, if there's anything you want to say, you should do it now, since he won't be able to return for a while."

"Thank you for your kindness."

The king nodded at my words, then stood up. After speaking to Cyrus, he left the room, followed by the prince and the prime minister. They didn't utter a word. They seemed concerned about Cyrus but were hesitant to speak. If they had an opportunity, they might quickly return to their previous relationship, but I knew that was unlikely if a third party intervened.

Now that only the three of us were left in the room, Cyrus spoke with a conflicted look on his face. "So I've decided to go with the king. I'm sorry."

"No, I think that's for the best."

"Yeah..."

Alto handed some snacks to Cyrus, who sat down on the sofa, looking exhausted. Cyrus must have sensed that Alto was feeling quite sad, despite having claimed otherwise.

After resting for a moment, the knight gazed at me with a serious expression on his face.

"Sena, is it okay if I tell the king about your true relationship with Lord Revale?"

“Why?”

“I thought it might reduce your troubles if he knew the real story.”

I didn’t understand what he meant, so I gave him a puzzled look. “You’re too exceptional, Sena. Not only did you create an antidote to counter the poison, you’re courageous, an incredible swordsman, and a skilled sorcerer. You’re quick-witted, and on top of that, you have the protection of a dragon. So it only makes sense that they would want to keep you here, right? Although they don’t know about your swordsmanship and knowledge of medicine yet.”

“Some of that is because of your loose lips, Cyrus.”

I hadn’t intended on disclosing that I’d made a pact with Revale.

“I’m sorry. I just thought telling them about the protection could smooth things over. There’s still a lot of suspicion and wariness about you. It would cause a commotion if people knew who you really were.”

“And telling the king about my relationship with Revale would avoid that?”

“Definitely.”

“Then you can tell the king, and only the king, that information.”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you. But why do you want to tell just the king?”

After all, Cyrus’s lord was the prince.

“I want to see his surprised expression. And I’m sure once I explain it, that’s all he’ll see you as.”

“What do you mean?”

“They won’t see you as an individual or for your personal qualities but solely as something beneficial to the kingdom.”

“Isn’t that normal?”

“Maybe, but that’s not very interesting, is it?”

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s interesting or not.”

Cyrus didn’t say anything. He just smiled as if enjoying himself. “I might tell

him someday, but not now. When that time comes, I'll check in with you again."

"All right."

After that, the three of us talked awhile, but the conversation naturally died down. Breaking the pleasant silence, Cyrus said, "I..." His voice was serious as he turned toward me and Alto.

"I never want to experience the despair I went through again, but meeting you has expanded my world. I've looked up to the dragonfolk all my life, and I finally got to meet one. I also received the divine protection of dragons, even though the dragonfolk who bequeathed me with it wasn't exactly how I imagined."

He continued with a somewhat disappointed, yet happy smile.

"And on top of that, I learned how immature and weak I am. Leaving the country on your own and being separated from your loved ones is incredibly challenging. That's why I have new goals. And thanks to you, I didn't end up resenting Eugene or Keith."

I never believed he would have lingering resentment toward the two of them.

"My journey with you let me come to terms with my feelings. And I really think I needed to go through this whole thing to grow as a person." Cyrus looked into the distance as he earnestly spoke those words. Then he rose from his seat and smiled at us. He removed the ring that kept his disguise on, and his hair and eyes returned to their original color. Standing tall, he slowly and carefully performed a knight's salute to both of us. In that moment, time seemed to stand still, and I could tell his gratitude for us was heartfelt.

"As of today, I will return to my position as Prince Eugene's first knight. Thank you so much for returning me to my kingdom and returning me to my lord. I will never forget your kindness."

I offered a polite reply in response. "You're welcome. May the light always shine on the path you walk, Sir Cyrus."

He gave a bittersweet smile and nodded in response. Then he put the ring back on his finger.

“I want you to have this.” I took something out of my bag and handed it to him, but before I could open my hand, Cyrus covered it with his own, preventing me from opening it.

“I only asked you for two things—curing the king and returning me to Lypaed.”

“I’ve gone too far to turn back now. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if you or the king got caught in some kind of surprise attack after this, so please, take it.”

“It’s okay. I have protection, and if I need it, I can bring a few Windmasters with me to escape,” Cyrus said with a laugh, gently pushing my hand away.

“Escaping would mean the signing ceremony has failed.”

“The success or failure of the signing ceremony is beyond the scope of the quest you signed up for. Don’t worry about it.”

And with that, Cyrus headed for the ceremony.

◇ Part Five: Keith

The previous day, Cyrus left the castle while the young man and beastfolk girl who had come with him stayed on. I wanted to give Cyrus a break after his journey upon returning to the castle, but since he had received the dragon's protection, it would make a huge difference in morale for our allies, so I made him agree to participate.

And today, my brother secretly left the castle using a hidden passage. He should have met up with Cyrus along the way and headed for the signing ceremony. Fortunately, the Guilonde agents hadn't yet realized that my brother had been cured, and we excused his absence by pretending he was sick in bed. Nobles who were unaware of the situation had been coming to the castle since this morning delivering get-well gifts, but I informed them the king would not meet with anyone and sent them away.

Since my brother wasn't even in the castle, obviously he couldn't meet with them. But only those whom my brother trusted the most were aware of this. So until my brother returned, I had to be careful not to let Guilonde's agents and the other nobles realize the king was gone.

However, there was a tense atmosphere in the castle. Those who knew what was going on were trying to behave like usual, but we couldn't hide everything. Even though the king was said to be bedridden, it felt like a bit too much. The Guilonde spies who were monitoring me seemed to think the same way, questioning me suspiciously.

"Don't you think the mood in the castle seems tense today? Is something happening?" Their manner of speaking and their gazes sent a cold sweat running down my back.

"It's because the king is ill."

"People have known about his poor health for a while though, haven't they?"

Anger welled up inside of me in response to the spy's faint smile. It wasn't just because they had poisoned my brother. I'd been harboring intense resentment toward them for some time because they'd spread rumors about the king's poor health among the people. But I couldn't confront them about it

in my current position. I suppressed my rage and continued the conversation, plastering a wicked smile on my face.

“Did you spread the rumors?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He denied my words, but his expression told me otherwise. I restrained the urge to kill the spy right on the spot and clenched my fist out of his sight.

“Lord Keith, what do you think of the mood in this castle?”

He seemed determined not to let it go. I struggled to come up with a response and suddenly heard laughter. I turned and hurried toward the source of the chuckling in order to escape the conversation.

The laughter was coming from the central courtyard. On sunny days, people often gathered there for casual conversation and breaks. The lush lawn was often used for tea parties. There sat a handsome young bard with stunning silver hair, a beastfolk girl with golden hair, and five or six young women around them. They were engaged in a lively conversation, and they appeared joyful and content, their cheeks flushed.

“Please have some of these sweets, too, Alice!”

“Sena, would you like some more tea?”

The women seemed completely captivated by Eugene’s two guests. The beastfolk child stuffed her cheeks full of sweets, the sight so adorable that it brought smiles to the women’s faces.

“Thank you, but I’m fine for now.” The bard declined the tea, beaming gently. He had a soothing voice, and his grin captivated all who laid eyes on it, causing the women to flush and avert their gazes.

I felt a frown come on as I witnessed that scene. Surely, those two were aware of how dire things were in the kingdom right now? I was grateful that they’d risked their lives to bring Cyrus here and heal my brother, and we’d had them confined to the castle due to those circumstances. Although the future of this kingdom may not have concerned them, their behavior was beginning to

get on my nerves.

“Oh! Did you injure your finger?”

Oblivious to my feelings, Sena took a woman’s finger and began examining her apparent injury. The woman blushed a deep crimson at the sudden contact, while the other ladies looked on with jealousy. Even though other people were watching, he gently wrapped the woman’s hand in both of his and muttered a few words. “It doesn’t hurt anymore!” she cried; he had somehow healed her injury.

“Please be careful. It would pain my heart to see a scar on such beautiful fingers.” With saccharine words, he released the woman’s hand.

The other ladies protested, “No fair!” and “I’m so jealous!” which only added to the lively atmosphere. Several ministers who had also heard the commotion approached, but most just frowned and left. I heard a suppressed chuckle from behind me.

“Isn’t this a sight to behold! The king is ill in bed, and the prince’s guest is frolicking in the courtyard with women! Quite disrespectful, considering the king’s condition, don’t you think?”

“.....”

“Those ladies are daughters of nobility, aren’t they? Maybe he’s cavorting with them because he wants to get hitched?”

The spy seemed pleased to see such an embarrassing scene within the castle, not even bothering to conceal his laughter.

“I understand now. I’ll return to my duties. Pardon me, Lord Keith.”

I was glad he’d finally left, but now I had mixed feelings. I was relieved I had managed to divert attention from myself, but the scene in front of me filled me with discomfort. As I mulled over what to do, a voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“What’s all the commotion about?”

I turned around to find Prince Eugene and two bodyguards standing there. I bowed and returned my gaze to the central courtyard. The women were now

asking the young man to play the lyre for them.

“Aren’t they aware of the situation we’re in?” Disdain and anger were evident in Eugene’s tone of voice. I was surprised to hear him speaking so sharply, but I didn’t comment on it since I shared the same feelings.

“Cyrus...” He trailed off and lowered his gaze. “He might leave my side.”

The knight had barely looked at us since returning to the castle. Even though I’d felt I had no choice, I had harmed him. I couldn’t blame Cyrus if he decided to distance himself from me.

“Even though it was for the kingdom, and even if it was all a sham, I still broke the bond between me and Cyrus, who believed in and protected me. Has he chosen that man as his new master?” The prince glared at Sena, who was chatting happily with the ladies, while he revealed his inner thoughts to me.

“He’s just too exceptional.”

Prince Eugene took his eyes off the young man, looking exhausted. There wasn’t much to say since I had been the one who had planned all this from the beginning. But Cyrus would probably have distanced himself from us even more had we not believed he’d come back.

“Please have faith in Cyrus, Prince Eugene. He will not leave your side.”

Eugene just silently nodded. I smiled sardonically, hoping he wouldn’t realize that I was also directing those words toward myself.

The guards who were monitoring the young man noticed Prince Eugene and bowed. Upon seeing this, the young man stood up and offered a graceful bow of his own. The ladies around him quickly followed suit and curtsied. Prince Eugene muttered, “Well I guess I should go over there now that they’ve noticed me.”

He assumed his princely demeanor at once and slowly approached the young man. “Sena, everyone else, please be at ease.”

They all looked up, yet no one moved to sit.

“Sena, are you in need of anything?”

“No, I’m having a very pleasant stay. Thank you for your concern.”

The young man and the beastfolk girl bowed again.

“By the way, it seems I haven’t yet had the pleasure of hearing you play the lyre, Sena. The ladies seem to want to hear it as well. Would you mind playing a piece for us?”

“Your Highness is correct. Although I originally came to share the sound of my lyre with you, I have not yet played. Please allow me to offer you a humble performance.”

The guards brought over chairs for me and the prince, and we sat down, urging the ladies to do the same. They quietly returned to their seats. The prince and I listened attentively as the young man held his lyre and began to pluck its strings. The quiet and delicate movements of his fingers produced bright, clear melody. Everyone’s eyes fell on his effortlessly moving fingers, and we were all drawn into the sound. The beautiful, gentle tune made even the sound of one’s own breath feel obtrusive. Not a single person stirred, utterly captivated by Sena’s performance.

Prince Eugene was no exception, of course. He closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the melody. The young bard’s tune was poignant, tugging at one’s heartstrings. Some of the ladies had tears in their eyes. As the last note faded into the blue skies overhead, Prince Eugene quietly opened his eyes and spoke without making eye contact with the young man.

“That was beautiful. I’d love to hear it again sometime.”

“If my performance was up to Your Highness’s standards, then I’d be delighted to.”

The prince nodded in response and gestured for me to follow him as he left the courtyard. As we walked away, I heard the excited voices of the ladies behind us, urging the man to play another song. The prince and I walked in silence.

As I looked at Prince Eugene’s back, I thought about Sena. Using Wind magic, negotiating with dragons, flawlessly playing the lyre, not being intimidated at all

in the throne room. He was an exceptional person, without a doubt.

I understand why Cyrus is so moved by him.

Prince Eugene must be pondering the same thing. The melancholy that had disappeared a moment ago was once again evident on his face. As I looked up at the blue sky outside the window, I prayed for my brother and Cyrus to return soon. It was approaching midday, and the day without the king had only just begun.

◇ Part Six: Setsuna

After Prince Eugene and Lord Keith left, I played another piece on the lyre for the ladies and then decided to explore the castle with Alto. It would be a hassle if the ladies followed us, so I used a bit of magic to divert their attention from us. Although I knew we were being monitored outside the room, we walked through the castle without concern. The corridors were adorned with many splendid paintings.

“Weren’t there any beastfolk in the northern continent long ago?” Alto asked curiously, noticing the conspicuous lack of beastfolk in the paintings.

“Long ago, humans and beastfolk lived separately, with humans in the North and beastfolk in the South. The paintings you see here depict that era, so that’s why there are no paintings of beastfolk.”

“Oh.”

“Would you like me to give you a brief explanation of the history of this continent while we’re at it?”

“Sure!” Alto’s eyes began to sparkle with curiosity.

“As I mentioned earlier, the humans and beastfolk lived separately in the North and South. We don’t know much about this era, and the only clues we have about it are the surviving records and relics found in the northern continent. For unknown reasons, humans from the North began to migrate to the South.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Roughly ten thousand years ago. Ellana was founded eight thousand years ago, and it’s believed the migration happened before that. Gardir was founded seven thousand years ago and Kutt six thousand years ago.”

“What about Lypaed, Master?”

“It was founded eight hundred and fifty years ago.”

After that, I told Alto all sorts of stories related to history. Whether it was a historical account or a whimsical tale, Alto listened with rapt attention and

expressed fascination.

But from my perspective, the history of this world was quite strange. It might not have been odd to people from this world, of course, but where I came from, there was no magic, no spirits, no beastfolk, and no dragonfolk. It was inevitable that I would feel some cognitive dissonance due to the common sense I'd grown up with in my old world.

According to Kyle and Hanai's memories, the era when Hanai lived was full of intense battles with monsters that overflowed from the Demonlands. Kingdoms like Ellana, a religious state south of the Demonlands, and Gardir continued the battles from that era. Moreover, the lands on the northern continent besides the Demonlands were said to be inaccessible due to some kind of mysterious force. No one knows why those nations couldn't be entered. I briefly considered asking Revale, since he might have knowledge about that as a dragonfolk, but I quickly abandoned that idea, figuring he wasn't the type to tell me.

Next was the era during which Kyle had lived. The competition for territory on the southern continent continued for a long time. Although these territorial disputes seemed to have calmed down for now, and the war between beastfolk and humans had subsided, it had only been a few decades since the last conflict. Two mercenaries from one of those destroyed nations popped into my head, and I let out a sigh. The reasons people went to war seemed not to be much different in any world, whether it was over a struggle for land, differences in values, or discrimination against different races or species.

About two thousand years ago, the mysterious force that had prevented interaction with the northern continent disappeared, leading to its colonization. Kyle, who'd experienced the history of people migrating to and establishing nations in the northern continent, eagerly traveled to the newly accessible land, exploring various ruins. That was where he discovered numerous ancient magical artifacts that were now stored in the bag I inherited from him. I wasn't sure whether Kyle had been able to unravel the mystery of how that civilization had been destroyed, because that information was inaccessible.

"Master?"

“Oh, sorry. I was lost in thought.”

“Yeah.”

I changed the topic while I touched the patterns carved into a nearby pillar to divert Alto’s attention away from the history of the beastfolk.

“Alice, it’s said that the old ruins on this continent were created by races that are now extinct. There seem to be plenty of those ruins on this continent, and powerful magical artifacts called ancient magical tools can often be found there. Yet for some reason, the mana in the southern continent is stronger.”

“Are ancient magical tools strong?”

“Strong...? Yes, weapons enchanted with magic are powerful.”

“Oh, can you make them?”

“Many of the technologies those ancient races used are gone, and it seems like there are more things we can’t make than we can.”

“Ancient races? Sounds cool!”

I had to admit that the idea had a certain allure about it.

“It’s said those ancient peoples even had wings.”

In this world, none of the currently living races had wings. There weren’t any birdlike beastfolk, either.

“Wings!!”

There were many different races besides those with wings on the northern continent. However, when they migrated from the North to the South, only the humans moved. After their migration, they began to pose a threat to the beastfolk, but I wondered if they had been the cause of the other races’ demise. Or had they simply perished because they couldn’t adapt to the environment?

“Could they fly in the sky?” Alto’s question pushed away the dark thoughts that began to creep into my mind.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh. Why did they die out?”

“I’m not sure about that, either. But we do know that they had very high mana due to the magical tools they left behind in their ruins. Maybe there were stronger monsters back then?”

“So it’s a mystery!”

“Yeah, it is.”

The enigma of the civilizations that had perished and the ruins and ancient magical tools that survived them were enough to stir up anyone’s adventurous spirit. How many races and civilizations had existed? And what wiped them out? Natural disasters? Divine judgment? Revale mentioned that some dragons had destroyed countries.

Back when I was on Earth, I used to talk about things like this with Kyoka. There were monsters here, and beings that could wipe humanity off the face of the world. So these mysteries wouldn’t be easy to unravel. Once again, it occurred to me that I would like to investigate the legends, myths, and mysteries of this world one day.

“Excuse me, but are you a historian?”

A voice interrupted my thoughts. I’d sensed the presence of several soldiers who had been monitoring us for a while but pretended not to notice. I slowly turned around and looked at the person who had spoken. She wore a crown engraved with the crest of Lypaed that was adorned with deep blue gemstones. Only the queen of this kingdom would wear such a crown.

I bowed before answering her question. “I travel as a bard and unravel history along the way.”

“I see. I’ve heard your skill with the lyre is quite magnificent.”

She didn’t seem interested in whether I was a historian or not. Her eyes told me her focus was not there. Whatever her reason for doing so, the fact that she’d approached me was quite convenient. There was something I needed to do, and I needed her cooperation to accomplish it, but I’d been contemplating how to arrange it.

I moved closer to the queen, knelt before her, and took her hand, pretending to lean in for a kiss. I looked up at her and spoke. “If it pleases Your Majesty, shall I play a tune?”

One of the queen’s guards drew his sword in the face of such impertinence, but she raised a hand to stop him.

“.....”

“It would be my humble honor if my lyre could comfort the king’s heart.”

The queen narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the mention of her husband. She was probably wondering why I was asking this, since I knew the king was absent.

She sighed. “Very well, I shall take you to his chamber.”

The soldiers who were monitoring us and the knights guarding her tried to intervene, but I silenced them with a glance and gestured for the queen to lead the way.

When we reached the king’s chamber and were about to sit down, the door violently burst open. Upon seeing me, Prince Eugene shot me a hostile gaze and grabbed me by the collar. “What are you thinking!?”

Keith, who was behind Eugene, locked the door behind us. Before I could respond, the queen tried to calm Eugene down.

“Eugene, you mustn’t treat the king’s benefactor so roughly.” Despite her words, it was clear she wasn’t genuinely trying to help me. Nevertheless, the prince complied and released me. I raised my index finger to my lips before he said anything. He continued to glare at me, but I ignored his gaze, quickly surveyed the room, and then chanted the necessary spell. I had cast a soundproofing enchantment on the king’s bedroom and one to render the use of magic impossible.

Keith gasped and looked at me. “You can use the king’s magical tool!?”

When they heard this, the color drained from the queen’s and Eugene’s faces.

“No, I cannot. If I’m not mistaken, that magical tool can only be used by the royal family.”

“But the sensation of magic being sealed is the same as when the magical tool is used.”

Keith attempted to use magic, but his ring did not respond.

“I was paying close attention when the king activated his magical tool, so I merely analyzed it and crafted a similar spell.”

“.....”

The queen was shocked by this but recovered relatively quickly. She gestured for me and Alto to sit. Eugene and the others sighed and took their seats.

“Your goal was to set up a barrier in this room, wasn’t it?” The queen poured some tea for herself and began serving tea and refreshments to everyone.

“Yes. Since a barrier is always set up where the king is present, I thought it would look suspicious not to have one. There was eavesdropping magic being used on us.”

Since I’d continued sending out the magic birds to gather information, I had a comprehensive idea of what was going on inside this castle. I could discern what kind of magic was being used where, allowing me to occasionally interfere.

“That was my goal, but could it be there was something Your Majesty wished to talk to me about as well?”

The queen must have wanted to speak with me; otherwise, she would have no reason to invite me into the king’s bedchamber during such a delicate time. Not only that, but the king was absent. Even though Alto was present with me, she wouldn’t want to risk rumors of letting a man be alone in the room with her. Yet she had invited me nonetheless.

“I wanted to see what kind of person you were.” She sighed lightly, sipping her tea.

“.....” I wasn’t sure what she meant by that. Why would she wish to know such a thing?

“You immediately tried to charm me when I approached you. I briefly wondered if those rumors about you being a ladies’ man were true, but then I

realized there was no warmth in those eyes of yours. You were merely acting. Still, when you suggested coming to this room, I grew too curious about what you were plotting to resist.”

“Mother!” Prince Eugene reprimanded the queen in a scolding tone.

“Eugene, I won’t hear any complaints. I was certain you and Keith would follow me in here, so there shouldn’t be a problem, correct?”

Despite being told to calm down, Eugene continued to scold his mother. Although I thought what he was saying was valid, I wanted to use that behavior to my own advantage, so I refrained from saying anything. His lecture continued for a while, but in the end, the queen stood her ground, an expression of clear displeasure on her face. Then she said something that surprised me.

“I was hoping to expose your true colors to reclaim my precious Cyrus while he’s gone!”

Expose me? Her precious Cyrus?

“Pardon? Is Sir Cyrus of royal blood?”

“No, Cyrus isn’t a royal,” Keith said as he pressed a hand against his temple.

“I’ve always thought of Eugene, Keith, and Cyrus as my own. I’ve taken care of all of them since they were children,” she explained.

Now Keith covered his face with his palm, and Eugene sighed, saying, “I’m the only one who’s your real son.” The queen seemed a bit peculiar. That was my impression, in any case.

“Back in the throne room, Cyrus was smiling like I’d never seen before. He’s never made that face,” she continued. She hadn’t been present during the audience, though. Perhaps she had been observing from a hidden room. “Ever since he was banished, I was so worried I could barely sleep at night. Once I heard he had returned to the castle, I wanted to make sure he was safe with my own eyes. I wanted to be reassured by hearing his voice. Yet he hasn’t even made eye contact with me once...”

Her eyes quickly filled with tears. It was evident that Cyrus was dear to her and that she loved him like her own child. Eugene and Keith were speechless in

the face of her sobs.

“But he’s changed. He only opens his heart to you while in the castle. It’s so very sad...”

She must have realized that Cyrus hadn’t made eye contact with Eugene or Keith, either, and was only open with me. Eugene gently stroked the queen’s back as tears streamed down her face.

“I think it’s only natural,” I said, causing Eugene and Keith to show signs of discomfort.

“Indeed! We put Cyrus in a terrible position. No wonder he would choose to be with you over us, since we hurt him so much. Still, I would appreciate if you didn’t put it like that!” Keith said.

Eugene added, “I’m sorry for doubting you,” sounding very much like Cyrus in that moment.

I absentmindedly envied Cyrus. *His best friend is right here, still alive.*

I closed my eyes and shook off those sentimental thoughts.

“No, that’s not what I want to say. I think Cyrus isn’t meeting the queen’s gaze because he can’t risk revealing his true identity.”

She wiped her tears away with a handkerchief and looked at me.

“We don’t know who may be watching and from where. I am, in a way, Prince Eugene’s guest, but Cyrus is publicly known as my bodyguard. It would be disrespectful of him to even make eye contact with the queen. Plus, the moment he locks eyes with you, you might rush to embrace him.”

I must have been right on the mark, because the queen quickly looked away from me. I’d expected her to do that, since she’d revealed she thought of Cyrus as her own child.

“Then why won’t he look at me, either? There’s no need to worry about being monitored inside the throne room,” Prince Eugene said, sounding somewhat tired.

“I’m not sure whether I should say...”

I pondered this for a moment. Cyrus wouldn't want Eugene or Keith to know. But Cyrus was also an awkward guy, and I had a feeling that if things continued like this, they would never reconcile. So I decided to tell them.

"I know that both the prince and the prime minister feel guilty over Cyrus. And it's the same for him."

"Why should he feel guilty?" Eugene asked, with a look that said lying wouldn't be tolerated. It seemed he was trying to separate fact from fiction.

"When I found Cyrus, he wanted to take his own life."

The queen suppressed a scream.

"...That can't be true," Keith, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, muttered in disbelief.

Eugene impulsively grabbed my collar again.

"Cyrus is not that weak!"

I struggled before Eugene's anger. I couldn't show them the memories with magic. Things would be much easier if I could, but I needed to pretend I could only use Wind spells right now. I stared back at the prince. He released me, and his hands fell limply at his sides. His gaze remained on the floor. "Why would Cyrus need to feel guilty? He might resent us, but what is there to feel at fault for?"

Keith spoke weakly. "If you know the reason, would you please tell us?" He didn't look at me.

"His faith in you was shattered. He hadn't realized the meaning of the items you entrusted him with. He fought desperately, but he was contemplating choosing death. He couldn't make sense of what you did to him."

"....."

"Cyrus is ashamed and blames himself. That's why he can't look you in the eye. Because you're all so precious to him."

They all quietly listened to me.

"Cyrus said, 'I couldn't even give my lord my life.'"

Eugene couldn't bear it any longer, and his shoulders began to shake.

"Please wait until he comes to terms with it himself. Cyrus was frantic to get here, holding what Prince Eugene communicated to him via the anemone close to heart. 'I will trust you and wait for you.' I'm sure the day will come when he'll be able to open his heart again."

Keith turned his face away. Then the queen clung to me, crying, her voice choked with gratitude. "Thank you, thank you for helping Cyrus. Thank you for bringing him here and protecting him."

I didn't embrace her in return but simply replied, "You're welcome."

She calmed down after a while and moved away from me. Then, tears still glinting her eyes, she added with a hint of dissatisfaction, "Wouldn't someone normally hug back in that situation?"

Why should I hug someone I only just met today? Plus, the king could very well behead me if he discovered I'd hugged his wife in his absence.

"I only hug my wife."

The three of them fell silent, staring at me. "Is something wrong?"

"Wife?" the queen muttered.

"Yes..." I showed them the bracelet on my right arm. All three of them stared at it in shock.

"I heard you were flirting with the daughters of nobles in the garden! Don't you think you owe your wife an apology?!" the queen exclaimed in disbelief.

"I had no other choice! It was the only way to deceive the Guilonde spies!" I explained, feeling sweat drip down my back.

The queen stared at me seriously and said, "All right, but cheating is wrong."

I thought it was unnecessary to say that. But when I reflected on the plan I'd devised, which definitely seemed suspicious, and thought about Dahlia, I had to laugh inwardly.

"You're quite unique, Your Majesty."

Her eyes softened happily as she proudly declared, "I was a commoner. I'm

not good at behaving like a queen.”

I nodded. “This castle feels very warm and friendly. That’s probably due to the queen’s influence.”

She gave me a beautiful smile in response.

Our conversation seemed to bore Alto. He was contentedly resting his head on the table and sleeping, probably because he’d eaten nothing but sweets since this morning. The queen looked at him with shining eyes. Keith briefly explained the details of Cyrus’s exile. Now it was my turn to tell them about my journey with Cyrus. They seemed to be uneasy about the fact that we’d met deep in the forest.

“What was a bard like you doing in the Zeghur Forest?”

I figured there was no longer a reason to hide my identity, so I answered honestly. “I’m not a bard. I’m an adventurer. I was in the forest that day gathering herbs.”

“An adventurer who plays the lyre?”

“The lyre is a hobby. I’m an adventurer, but I had to pretend to be a bard out of necessity.”

“You’re just pretending?!” They all seemed skeptical, so I took off my glove and showed them my guild emblem.

“An adventurer... I can’t believe an adventurer can play such beautiful music.” Prince Eugene seemed to be very fond of my playing. It was more of a gift from Kyle, but it was still gratifying to be acknowledged.

“So that’s why you were smiling so awkwardly,” Eugene said, as if recalling something.

“When?”

“When my father said it would be quite inconvenient if songs about Cyrus and the dragonfolk made their way around the continent.”

It was true I had only been able to smile at the king’s words.

"Yes. I'm an adventurer, so of course I won't be going around singing Cyrus's story."

Both Keith and Eugene let out a deep sigh, which I didn't quite understand. Only the queen, seemingly impressed, commented, "Adventurers these days must be very versatile." I didn't know many other adventurers, so I answered that it might be true.

"Still, Cyrus remembered the crown prince of Kutt. It was my fault for not being as familiar with the situation there," Keith muttered quietly as if remembering something.

"It's not your fault. Information about the southern continent is hard to come by. Thanks to that, the signing ceremony should go smoothly, so don't be discouraged," I said with a faint smile.

◇ Part Seven: Cyrus

I woke up a few hours before sunrise, got ready, and waited for the king in a place I'd never wanted to set foot in again. To avoid taking in the scenery, I tried to keep my eyes away from the carriage window. Three horses and two royal guards stood outside the carriage, ready to announce the king's arrival. Despite my efforts, I couldn't resist peeking out. With each passing landscape, my heart pounded harder and harder.

A knight suddenly knocked on the carriage door, almost echoing the thumping in my chest. When I opened the door, I suppressed my dizziness and saw the king walking toward me with a cane, surrounded by his attendants from inside the prison at the end of the teleportation circle. Though it was inevitable, I noticed that his complexion wasn't looking as good as it did before, which was only natural since the exit of the secret passageway from the castle was connected to the prison.

"Cyrus, are you all right?" Despite his prolonged battle with the poison, the king was concerned with my well-being.

"There's no need to worry. It's embarrassing to be disturbed by a sight like this." Although I was allowed to speak somewhat casually inside the castle, I made an effort to choose my words more cautiously than usual.

"I understand. We pushed you too hard." I tried to help the king inside the carriage, but he brushed me aside and took a seat across from me, then put his cane in the bag. "I want to avoid drawing attention to you as much as possible. I've left the carriage's protection to the sorcerer that's accompanying us, so you can sit here with me."

As the king spoke, the door closed, and he banged on the wall to signal the driver to start the carriage.

"Finally, we can relax." The king turned to me and let out a deep breath, his usual calm expression returning. "After all, there are concerns that your return will lead to problems between the nations."

I had a feeling he wasn't referring to the signing ceremony, and I asked, "What do you mean?"

He smiled and responded.

“You wouldn’t have been interested in such matters before. Is it the influence of the young man?”

I told him I didn’t know what he was talking about and continued. “In my eyes, this mission was a failure. The only reason it went smoothly was because of Sena. I wasn’t able to accomplish anything you expected of me. I didn’t know anything about the Demonlands. If I’d been able to think rationally, I wouldn’t have acted recklessly in the Zeghur Forest. That’s why I want to learn more about the world now.”

“You’ve grown. It seems it was a valuable encounter for you.” He smiled happily before turning serious again. “Cyrus, what I’m about to tell you has been verbally passed down through the royal family. Keep it in your heart and exercise caution with how you act in the future.”

I solemnly nodded.

“Before Lypaed was founded, several teleportation circles were discovered in the northern continent. One thing these circles had in common was that their destinations all led to the Demonlands. However, the teleportation circle discovered by those who founded Lypaed was different. That one was connected to the Zeghur Forest.”

I committed what the king said to my memory.

“Our ancestors saw potential in this and decided to establish the capital of Lypaed in this location. Publicly, we said that this teleportation circle also only led to the Demonlands. Can you imagine why?”

I made a wild guess. “For escape purposes, since the teleportation circle was near the secret passageway in the castle?”

The king nodded deeply, confirming my hunch. “Back then, surrounding nations like Guilonde had already been established. It was possible that those countries could crush the new kingdom of Lypaed at any time, so we wanted an escape route. If word got out that we could teleport to the Zeghur Forest, they might have sealed the teleportation circle to prevent our escape. But since the Demonlands are essentially a dead end, they wouldn’t bother sealing the circle

if they thought it led there.”

I inwardly congratulated myself on the correct answer and responded, “I see,” with a nod.

“However, that doesn’t answer why it could lead to problems between the nations. So there must be another reason why our ancestors obscured where the circle connected. Can you guess why?”

I thought about it for a while, but I couldn’t come up with an answer.

“There’s still time to think about it until we reach our destination. You should take your time to think about it while we talk about something else,” the king said, then changed the subject. *It’s impossible to think about that while we move on to a different topic*, I thought, but the king looked like he was having a lot of fun.

The carriage left Lypaed just before dawn. Of course, the king wouldn’t be safe with so few people in his entourage, so the plan was to have five additional knights join us later. We would follow the road to the west, leave the road as night fell, then head south, arriving at the venue in the forest at the foot of the Baudal mountains at midnight. On the way back, the king and I would be able to return home using the teleportation magic of two Windmasters, so we would only be away from the castle for about two days.

By the time we reached our destination at midnight as planned, I was so bored from the carriage ride that I was eager to get outside. But when I tried to get some fresh air, I was told, “There’s a barrier in place to keep out monsters, so please stay inside just to be safe,” so I had to stay put. I tried claiming that I would be fine because of my dragon’s protection, but the king said, “Think about your position.”

Since I had no choice, I just looked out the window, but all I could see were knights working in the middle of an empty forest, which did little to relieve my boredom. In the end, there was no way to kill time other than sleep.

The next morning, we stepped out of the carriage and were greeted by a thick fog. We were in a totally open area that had been completely cleared of trees,

surrounded by a wooden fence and covered with a white carpet. On top of that was a long red carpet that split the area in two and extended straight from the entrance to a small hill to the south. It led to a beautifully crafted wooden desk, which I assumed would be used for the signing ceremony.

Beyond the hill was a lush green forest, and the rugged Baudal mountains loomed in the distance. I imagined that the brilliance of the sun rising would illuminate the faces of participants from the various nations as they exchanged handshakes at the end of the signing ceremony, creating a solemn atmosphere. The setting for the ceremony was so impressive that I felt like praising the knights who'd worked tirelessly through the night to set it up.

"We decided to clear the forest to avoid prying eyes. Surprisingly, it turned out not to be a bad choice," the king said, sharing my opinion. He rose with his cane supporting him. I helped him out of the carriage and nodded in agreement. "I'm fine. But I'm more tired than I thought, even though the only thing I did yesterday was sit in a carriage. I'm glad I brought the cane for support."

I returned the king's wry smile. It seemed the queen had insisted he bring it. No wonder it looked familiar. The queen would often show off things she liked to us, whether it be clothes, umbrellas, or hats. I thought back to the time she tried to dress me up in some clothes she liked, and I laughed out loud. I was grateful from the bottom of my heart to be back home.

"We can't just stand here forever. Let's have breakfast and then take our seats." The king had a somewhat dismayed expression on his face, so I stopped laughing and called over a nearby knight to show us to the place where breakfast had been prepared.

By the time the sun was peeking through the mountains, all the representatives from the various countries had taken a seat in chairs arranged on the white carpet. It was easy to tell how they thought about the alliance based on the looks on their faces. Mubana, located north of Lypaed, was directly exposed to Guilonde's threats, so their expectations for the treaty were high. The younger brother of their king was in attendance.

On the other hand, Nubul, which was the farthest nation from Guilonde, had

sent their third prince to the ceremony, indicating a lower opinion of the event. As I considered these matters, my mind turned toward the future, and I tried to memorize the faces of those gathered here while I sat by the king's side.

At the top of the hill, the king expressed gratitude to the dignitaries from Mubana, Seden, Tarado, Miglis, and Nubul. Just as he was about to make my presence public, the situation took a sudden turn. I was the first to notice the appearance of the groups of attackers in threes standing near the base of the surrounding forest as I stood in front of the king.

I could instantly see that half of the groups had someone readying a bow. They must have used teleportation magic to get here. It seemed they'd planned to attack, then retreat using the same way they'd gotten here. In that case...

"Royals, gather in the center! Attendants, create magical barriers or shields!"

I shouted the contingency plan we'd created in case of emergency. If they were planning a direct assault, we would order a retreat using teleportation magic. If they showed signs of immediate retreat, we would fortify our defenses to endure the attack and continue the ceremony. Dignitaries gathered in the center while knights with shields protected their lords. Each country's sorcerers activated their magic. But then their faces turned pale. I wasn't sure whether their magic had been blocked, or if something had happened. But the swirling wind sound that usually signaled a magical barrier being erected was clearly absent. In an instant, I concluded that our magic was being blocked.

Please let the enemy's spells fail, too!

Just as that thought crossed my mind, our foes began their attack. They shot arrows right where the dignitaries gathered, varying in trajectory from upper targets and lower targets. Some arrows shot straight toward the shields, while others soared above, aimed directly at the center of the formation. The knights put their bodies on the line to stop the shots, holding shields overhead to protect their lords.

Upon seeing this, I moved instinctively to do what needed to be done. I drew the dagger from the sole of my shoe and hurled it toward the ground where the

royals were gathered. The moment it pierced the earth, a faint yellowish glow spread out in a hemisphere centered around that point, deflecting all incoming arrows.

Eugene, Keith! I will fulfill my mission! My determination was renewed when I saw the scene before me. I supported the king and pulled him into the barrier.

“Physical attacks won’t reach inside the barrier. So please, nobody leave!” I shouted to reassure everyone, then extracted myself from under the king’s shoulder. The king staggered, and I realized I’d left the cane behind. I spotted it leaning against the desk. Perhaps due to my heightened focus from the tense atmosphere, I suddenly became aware that the reason I knew about the cane wasn’t because the queen had showed it to me. I remembered where I’d seen it before, but I needed to take care of that later, so I banished the thought and apologized for leaving it behind.

“Don’t worry about it,” the king said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a knight moving. He was clutching his scabbard with one hand and the hilt of his sword with another.

I can’t let them draw their blades in this confined place!

I didn’t have time to respond to the king. I turned toward the knight, gripped the scabbard with my right hand, and pressed down on the hilt with my left hand. I saw the knight was larger than me. But I was able to hold down his sword like it was nothing, despite his muscular arms. He tried to push my hand away, and the blade jostled in its scabbard, making a metallic clinking sound.

At that moment, everyone turned their attention to us.

“Why would you do such a thing?!” A knight clad in Mubana armor, similar to what that man wore, shouted. I looked around and realized what the knight had been trying to do.

The assailants were being captured or slain by knights from various countries who were waiting outside the barrier. The sorcerers in charge of the teleportation magic must have been unable to escape, since the magic was blocked. This man had realized that if the people who’d been captured squealed, then his life would be in danger and, as a final gamble, attempted to

take the life of one of the royals and then escape. I thought he probably had a magical tool hidden somewhere so that he could flee.

It all came to me in an instant, and I tried to yell for him to be restrained so that he wouldn't get away. But even before waiting for that instruction, some were already moving to detain the man. However, the one who moved faster than anyone else was our king.

"Ah, right. I forgot to mention something," he said in a low, commanding voice that made the ground rumble, freezing everyone in their tracks. He moved slowly and rolled up the sleeve of my left arm to reveal the dragon emblem engraved on it. It emitted a purple glow, showcasing its majesty.

"As you can see, we have received the divine protection of the dragons. This marks the acquisition of our second check against the threat of Guilonde. The first one is, of course, the unity of this alliance. Those assailants were sent to break that unity. This will not be tolerated, but I intend to deal with them without delving into their backgrounds. At first glance, you might think you can discern their origins from what they wear. However, that may be part of Guilonde's scheme. Do you really think everyone would trust the revelation of their true identities after an investigation in our kingdom? I assure you that we would only fall under doubt and suspicion. And that is Guilonde's real trap. That's why we should punish the people here without listening to what they have to say. Let me repeat this once again: The most crucial point here is the unity of our alliance! Let us pledge on this dragon emblem recognized around the world that our unity will endure forevermore!"

The king's dignified presence, his unspoken authority, and the forcefulness of his lengthy speech silenced the surroundings. The royal families of the other nations immediately expressed their agreement.

Afterward, just as the attackers were rounded up outside the barrier to be punished, I remembered the thing I had pushed out of my mind.

That's not a cane but a staff I saw Lord Revale use. Only Setsuna could have given it to the king.

When I heard the king mention it earlier, I thought at first he had been pressured to bring it by the queen. But that was a complete misunderstanding on my part. I wasn't sure why Setsuna had Lord Revale's staff, but there must be a reason why he'd given it to the king. Setsuna wouldn't do something without a good reason. I had a feeling something was up. Reluctantly, I figured I had no choice but to think about why Setsuna made him take the staff, even though I wasn't good at such things.

I went through the events in order. Setsuna had mentioned he feared a surprise attack, but I'd declined the assistance. Setsuna must have given the staff to the king after that. We were attacked during the ceremony, and we repelled the assailants.

The part about the attack is too brief, so let's dig in deeper there...

The assailants who teleported here had come in groups of three, which consisted of an archer, someone wielding offensive spells, and someone in charge of escape via teleportation magic. We responded accordingly to their attacks. The knights used shields to block the arrows, the sorcerers attempted to create a magic barrier to deflect the arrows. The enemy used magic to interfere with the defensive spells, so our magic was blocked and couldn't be activated. I used my magical tool to form a barrier instead, which prevented the enemy's attack magic from activating. Finally, we disrupted the activation of the enemy's teleportation magic, capturing them all.

But something still doesn't feel right...

A strange sense of discomfort came over me. That seemed to be an unusually high frequency of magical interference.

Does it have something to do with canceling the activation of magic with the same attributes? I think I heard that somewhere...

The word *interference* kept nagging at me, so I thought deeper about it and recalled a conversation I'd had with Keith. I wasn't sure why he'd shared such information, but that didn't matter right now.

Let's focus on the Wind magic.

We had twenty-one Windmasters on our side; I confirmed this when we met

to create a Wind magic barrier. Of those, eighteen had formed a magic barrier. Since there were twenty sets of attackers, there should have been at least twenty enemy Windmasters. And if all the enemy sorcerers who wielded offensive magic were also Windmasters, that would make a total of forty.

Hang on, those numbers don't add up at all...

It made sense that we couldn't erect a magic barrier. The issue was that the enemies' teleportation magic wasn't working. Unless all our Windmasters had interfered with the enemy's escape magic, that wouldn't be possible. I suppose it could happen if some of them weren't paying attention to the meeting, but they wouldn't do that. Therefore, there was only one conclusion I could arrive at: The staff was a magical tool that completely blocked Wind magic.

It was my conversation with Keith that brought me to that revelation—“*I've never seen nor heard of any magical tools that can completely nullify all magic.*” Although that made sense if the magical tool belonged to the dragonfolk Lord Revale, it was Setsuna who was currently in possession of it. If news of that spread, it would draw interest from various nations.

Surely, he considered that and has taken precautions..., I thought, but I couldn't just leave it up there. I had to do something before the royal families tried to return using teleportation magic. I wasn't sure how long the effects lasted, but I had to assume it was indefinite, just to err on the side of caution.

If I destroy it, the effects might be broken... But I didn't want to do anything that might expose me to Lord Revale's wrath, so I thought it wiser to refrain. In that case, the easiest way to free up our magic would be to take the staff and get as far away as possible from here. But how far should I go...?

“Cyrus.”

Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted.

“I have a favor to ask you.” The king's voice was hushed. I had a bad feeling about this, so I nodded toward him without turning.

“Go to the carriage and retrieve the staff bag.”

I was confused as to why he suddenly mentioned the staff and attempted to step away, thinking it an odd request, but the king stopped me.

"No, Cyrus. Don't bring me the bag. Go get the staff and put it inside the bag. And keep watch over it until the signing ceremony concludes and I return to the carriage."

Finally, it dawned on me.

"I'll use the sword on your waist as a cane. Give me the scabbard as well."

I removed my sword as he said it and handed it to him, then silently walked away just as the king instructed.

I retrieved the staff from near the desk and took it to the carriage, where I put it inside the bag I found there.

I concealed myself in the carriage and watched the signing ceremony through the window. I'd been prepared to spring into action with the staff at any moment if there was a second attack, so I breathed a sigh of relief as the ceremony came to a close without incident. Achieving our objective filled me with great relief and satisfaction. Meanwhile, the king watched the royal family members from the other nations leave safely using teleportation magic.

Once they all left, the king took a seat across from me and said, "At last, it's over," and sighed. "By the way, that magical tool from the dragonfolk is truly remarkable," he continued.

I didn't know what Setsuna had told him when he let him borrow the staff, so I just feigned ignorance instead. "What do you mean?"

"Ah, that's right. He said he didn't tell you anything about it. Still, you seem to have something about it on your mind. Would you like to talk about it?"

"All I know is that the staff belongs to Lord Revale." I couldn't lie to the king, but if I just told him I knew that, it should be fine.

"I see. You didn't even know it was a magical tool?" he asked, and I shook my head. "Try guessing what I find impressive about it, then." He had a slightly mischievous grin on his face as he told me to speculate. It occurred to me that Keith must have faced similar guessing games often, and I momentarily sympathized with him. Pleading silently for the king to go easy on me, I

explained the effects I had worked out earlier.

The king chuckled and praised me. “You’re becoming surprisingly thoughtful.” He confessed he hadn’t guessed it himself but had learned about it from Setsuna. “He told me that Lord Revale said, ‘I don’t really want to show favor to humans, but I don’t like the idea of the homeland of those I’ve granted my protection being trampled upon. I shall offer assistance just once. This staff is a shield to repel magic. A knight blessed with the divine protection of dragons wields a powerful sword. Protect the kingdom with these two powers. But you must return the staff once you use it.’ That was how he came to possess this staff. I asked why he hadn’t told you about it, and he said you seemed reluctant to accept help, so he offered it to me instead.”

I see. So if anyone asks about it, we can just say that it belongs to the dragonfolk Lord Revale and that it must be returned. Then it won’t draw too much attention to me, I thought, admiring how cunning Setsuna was. I continued to listen to the king while keeping up a poker face.

“I was skeptical, given the circumstances, especially since I couldn’t fully comprehend the staff’s abilities. However, I understood his true intent once we were attacked. Like you speculated, it likely has the power to nullify all magic. That alone makes it very hard to give up...”

“Don’t tell me you intend on stealing it from Lord Revale? I’d advise against that...”

“I’m only joking. I have no intention of crossing a servant of the gods.” The king burst out laughing, but I could only manage a wry smile. “Well, I’ve had enough rest. Let’s head back.”

I opened the door and summoned the Windmaster. Though I was relieved that I could finally return, my peace of mind didn’t last long. The king suddenly asked, “Oh, by the way—did you figure out why the teleportation circle’s destination would be a problem between the nations?”

Just as I was about to complain about the abrupt change of topic, I realized that the unexpected question might in fact be the answer. It had to do with this recent surprise attack—being able to slip into the enemy’s territory unnoticed.

Additionally, the destination of Lypaed’s teleportation circle didn’t transport

the user to somewhere nearby, but rather straight across the Baudal mountain range. No enemy would anticipate that. If used strategically, Lypaed could move an entire army into the Zeghur Forest and launch an attack on Kutt. And even if Lypaed didn't do such a thing, who could say if Guilonde would after defeating Lypaed?

"It puts Kutt at a major disadvantage," I replied.

"Precisely. So, Cyrus, be very discreet about where you were sent via the teleportation circle. Although someone who looks into your exploits very carefully might eventually catch on to it, never speak of it," the king said with a serious expression, and I nodded.

◇ Part Eight: Setsuna

The day after the signing ceremony, the king was occupied with many things to wrap up. The entire castle buzzed with activity. But the hustle and bustle meant that people of this kingdom were now filled with hope. And Cyrus was no exception. Since returning to the castle, he'd retreated to his room and maintained a low profile to avoid drawing attention to his connection with us. His hair and eye color was now back to normal. Although we were free to depart because the signing ceremony had been a success, we had a scheduled audience with the king before we were to leave. Alto and I began to change into our outfits.

“.....”

I silently stared at the clothing that had been provided for us and let out a deep sigh. My clothing was all white, with golden embroidery along the edges. All the buttons and details were also in gold. Alto was wearing a cute, frilly white dress. I dismissed the maid who'd been sent to help us change and reluctantly picked up the clothes. Alto struggled to fasten the buttons up his back since he was unable to reach them. I hung my outfit over the chair and went to go help him.

“I like picking out my own clothes,” Alto said.

“Me too,” I agreed.

I sighed once more and then changed into my ensemble. I put my silver hair into a ponytail and checked my appearance in the mirror.

Quite flashy...

“I think you look nice,” Alto said.

I smiled vaguely and complimented his appearance, too, but he just frowned. Alto had gotten more expressive since traveling with Cyrus. Perhaps the knight's pranks had been good for Alto in the long run. I felt a bit of gratitude toward him for that.

“I think we'll return to the inn today.”

Alto looked somewhat disappointed when I said that.

“Don’t you want to go back to the inn?”

“The sweets here at the castle are so delicious...”

“Oh...”

The queen had been very considerate, providing various unusual sweets for us. Alto ate them every day and never tired of it. He must have been sad to know he wouldn’t be able to have them once we left the castle.

“Perhaps there will be some sweets you’ve never tried before in Lypaed’s castle town?”

“Really? Oooh, I can’t wait!” It appeared Alto had been thinking about trying new foods, because his tail swished back and forth happily.

As we discussed which sweets were our favorites, there was a knock at the door.

“Yes, come in.”

The door slowly opened. Standing there were the soldiers who had been monitoring us, who had come here to guide us to the throne room for our audience. As we followed them, I reflected on the events that had led up to today. After a while, we arrived at the throne room, and they opened the doors. I straightened my posture and slowly walked toward the throne.

There was a thick tension in the room. I stopped just before the stairs that led up to the dais, just like before, and I bowed to the king and queen. As soon as I was granted permission to lift my head, I gazed up at them. The queen’s eyes glinted as she regarded me and Alto. When I realized she was staring at us, I felt my smile grow tense.

Now I was certain that it was the queen who had chosen our outfits. I looked away from her and noticed Cyrus was standing behind Prince Eugene. I knew he had reassumed his role as first knight, but actually seeing him there was a relief. As those thoughts ran through my mind, I also sensed that the king had used his magical tool to create a soundproof and antimagic barrier. Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room shifted.

“Please be at ease. You may speak normally; there’s no need for formalities,”

the king said, and I relaxed my shoulders a bit. Both the king and queen were quite peculiar people. My thoughts turned briefly to the nobles of Gardir, but I quickly pushed them from my mind.

“If you insist,” I replied.

The king now exuded a confident and imposing aura that had been absent when he was poisoned. “First, I’d like to express my gratitude for the efforts you’ve made for our kingdom.”

Everyone bowed in unison at us, then slowly raised their heads. I was surprised, but I continued staring straight at the king.

“Cyrus told us of everything that happened since he left here. Although some details shall remain private, everyone here recognizes the lengths you went to for our kingdom.”

Cyrus had been staring at me the whole time, but I avoided looking at him.

“I would like to reward you with anything you desire, so long as it is in my power. What would you like?”

We’d discussed this already. I had already declined any reward, saying I’d received it from Cyrus, but I was told that for the sake of appearance I should accept something. I’d been pondering what sort of humble request to make. But once I’d seen how sad Alto was at the prospect of no longer being able to indulge in the castle’s sweets, I decided to ask for some.

“May I request that the castle chef send us home with some sweets?”

Everyone gawked at me.

“Sena, do you really want to ask for confections as your reward?” the queen blurted out.

“Yes. Being able to eat sweets from Lypaed will bring us joy during our journey,” I responded with a wry smile.

“You’re leaving on another journey?”

“Yes. I’m planning on doing some sightseeing first, and then we will depart.”

The queen looked dejected, but the king urged me to stay as he gave her a

sidelong glance. “Please stay a bit longer. You’re welcome to remain in the castle if you’d like.”

Although it was an incredible offer to an adventurer to be allowed to stay here, I decided to decline, considering the formalities involved. Besides, I was eager to move on to a more relaxed place.

“I truly appreciate your gracious offer, but I can’t stay too long because I have a guild quest in process.”

I’d already completed the medicine kits for the guild. Now all that was left for me to do was deliver them. I used that as my reason for leaving.

“If you’re worried about the Guilonde spies, I summoned them during the audience before this one and told them to go back home, so I think the atmosphere here will improve.”

Despite resolving one concern related to Guilonde, the king still wore a slightly dark expression. I realized what must be on his mind, so I smiled. “I’ve never considered serving a kingdom, so please don’t worry. I dislike Guilonde anyway, so there’s no need for concern.”

“We hate Gardir, too!” Alto chimed in. I’d told him before we must never forget that, but it wasn’t exactly the same thing... Nevertheless, the king’s expression softened in response. Perhaps Alto’s comment had been the correct thing to say.

“I see. Well, in that case, I’m sad to see you go, but we shall see you off warmly. I also think the reward you asked for is insufficient considering all you’ve done for this kingdom, but I won’t press the issue.” Finally, the king descended from the dais and handed me Revale’s staff.

“Thank you.” I expressed my gratitude, then left the throne room.

We went back to our room and began preparing to return to the inn, when suddenly the door burst open, and Cyrus entered. Alto’s tail puffed up. Then he placed a hand over his heart and said, “That scared me!” Evidently, he was quite startled.

Cyrus was panting and out of breath, so he must have run straight here. A few moments later, Prince Eugene and Lord Keith arrived, similarly out of breath.

“Cyrus, what do you think you’re doing, leaving me behind?” Prince Eugene lectured him as he panted. Meanwhile, Cyrus glared at me angrily.

“Prince Eugene, Lord Keith, Sir Cyrus, please come in.” Since I didn’t know who was listening or watching, I addressed them politely and prompted them to enter. The moment Keith closed the door behind him, I cast a barrier around the room.

“Sena, Keith and I would appreciate it if you could address us like you do with Cyrus.”

“All right, then. Please have a seat and I’ll make some tea.”

“Sena! What’s going on?” Cyrus demanded, remaining on his feet. His blue eyes were filled with anger. “I haven’t even paid you yet, but you’re leaving?!”

He tried to confront me, but Keith placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him. Cyrus roughly shook it off and came closer. “Answer me! Did you pretend this was a quest out of pity and never counted on getting paid in the first place?” His emotions swerved from anger to sadness, and his expressions were incredibly transparent. “Am I really that untrustworthy?”

Now that he had gotten it all off his chest, Cyrus stared down at the floor dejectedly. Silence fell over the room, and Eugene and Keith just stared at Cyrus, not saying a word.

“I’m not the one who will receive the reward,” I said mysteriously, but Eugene and Keith looked confused.

“I am here, but I am not me.”

Cyrus gave me a bewildered look, but Keith seemed to understand what I meant. He shot me a wry smile and sat down next to Eugene.

“I am not a bard, Cyrus, but a scholar.”

“...What are you saying?”

Keith muttered, “He still doesn’t get it,” and Eugene nodded, saying “That’s how it is.”

“What do you two understand that I don’t?!” Cyrus asked, but they’d already lost interest in us and had started talking to Alto.

“Cyrus, I am here as Sena. But my real name is Setsuna.”

Upon hearing this, Eugene and Keith exclaimed with surprise, “Did you use a false name to seek an audience?”

“You could get arrested for treason for that!”

The two looked at me in disbelief, and I said, “Please overlook it this time.” They reluctantly nodded while chuckling. I turned my gaze back to Cyrus and continued. “While I am here as Sena, I am a guest of Prince Eugene. I have no connection with you as Sena, Cyrus. This is the only place we can talk freely, right?”

“Right...”

“I want to return to my original form as soon as possible, and then we can talk freely.”

“Yeah, there are things I want to talk about, too.”

Cyrus finally wrapped his head around things, and Eugene and Keith smiled in relief.

“Besides, I need to return for the reward. I have to submit a special post application to the Adventurers Guild. I’ll definitely get compensated for my quest,” I said with a mischievous smile.

“Yeah,” he responded firmly.

“I’ve never had a drink with a friend before, so I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be your treat, of course.”

Cyrus widened his eyes, then gave me the calmest smile I’d seen so far. “Leave it to me! I know a place that has some great drinks.”

“Do they have good food, too?”

“Both the food and the drinks are delicious,” Cyrus replied firmly. Now that the tension in the room had subsided, he took a ring from his pocket as if just now remembering it and handed it to me.

“Thanks. Sorry for not returning it sooner.”

“It’s all right. I’m glad it could be of help.”

Just as I was about to put the ring back in my bag, Cyrus asked if he could keep it. I asked why he wanted it, and he said he wanted to walk around the castle town in disguise. I realized going around with Cyrus would attract a lot of attention, so I created an identical ring from the one he’d given back to me and handed it to him. I didn’t want to give him the original ring, because I had received that one from Kyle.

As we sipped our tea and chatted for a while, I felt it was about time to ask for permission to leave. I preferred not to attract too much attention as a bard, so I wanted to quietly leave the castle in the middle of the night using teleportation magic, which was how we agreed I would return to the castle town.

“Well then, we’ll be going soon.”

Alto and I changed into our usual clothes and finished our preparations. Cyrus gazed at us with a somewhat nostalgic look in his eyes. Then he closed his eyes for a bit and opened them, as if to switch his mindset. He stared straight at us, his expression serious. He stood up tall and took a quiet breath, then spoke slowly. “Setsuna, Alto. Thanks to both of you, I was able to return home. I’m sincerely grateful to you.”

Clad in the attire of Prince Eugene’s first knight once again, he respectfully gave us a knight’s salute. Eugene and Keith didn’t bow their heads, but they expressed gratitude toward us with a nod. He’d returned home...

“.....”

I was truly happy for them. I knew they still had many trials ahead, but I thought they could overcome them.

“I’m glad to have completed the quest. Please take care of yourselves.”

“Cyrus, Keith! Do your best!”

They nodded in response, and I began chanting a teleportation spell. Cyrus gave me a sad grin, so I paused to say one last thing.

"Well then, Cyrus. Until we meet again."

Upon hearing that, he gave me a bright smile just as the magic activated.

Two days had passed since we left Lypaed castle. Alto and I were leisurely sipping tea in the dining room of the inn after lunch. Keith had checked us out of the inn Cyrus and I had initially gone to, and we were staying at a different one. The weather was changing, and it seemed the end of the third month of Salkis—Summer—was approaching. It had been roughly three months since I'd first met Alto.

In that short time, we'd traveled from Gardir to Kutt, encountered Kara and Rudol, encountered Tuuli on Mount Zeghur, come across Cyrus in the Zeghur Forest, and met Revale in the cave connecting Kutt and Lypaed.

I'd initially intended for my journey with Alto to be leisurely, but it had been quite busy. Looking back on it, it felt like time had moved very quickly, as if I'd been pulled along by the threads of fate. In the beginning, I'd thought frequently about my family, but those thoughts gradually diminished during this busy time. In fact, it was only just today that I realized it had almost been six months since I'd said good-bye to Kyle.

Being able to live without feeling lonely was something to be happy about. But that was only because of Alto, who sat beside me enjoying his cake. He'd followed me without ever complaining. Even having to dress as a girl in an unfamiliar castle must have been challenging, but he'd never raised a fuss.

Suddenly, I realized it would be good to take a break, for both our bodies and minds. When Alto and I had walked around the castle town earlier, we hardly got any unpleasant glances. Most people had smiled warmly at the sight of a beastfolk child. Lypaed might be more comfortable for Alto than Kutt.

I recalled the kindness the royal family and prime minister had shown to him back in the castle. And considering those were the people in charge of the kingdom, I figured the general attitude of the country must have been gentle as well.

Now what should we do?

The only thing I had planned was to disclose the method of making my medicine to the guild's medical facility and send the medicine Agito had requested. I'd also intended to save up some money by taking on quests for a few months in Kutt.

I could do all that in Kutt, but it was equally feasible in Lypaed. Perhaps Alto would have a better time staying here while I completed some quests. I made that decision and decided to consult with him about staying put.

“Alto.”

“Yes?”

He stopped eating and looked at me.

“I’m thinking about taking on some quests for a while to save up some money for our journey. What do you think?”

“What do I think?” he repeated, looking confused.

“Yes, I want to save up for our journey. I think we should stay in one kingdom for a while to take on quests. But should we go back to Kutt or stay in Lypaed? Or move on to another kingdom? What do you want to do, Alto?”

“Hmm... What do you want to do?”

“Personally, I’d like to stay in Lypaed to do the quests.”

“Why?”

“Cyrus can show us lots of place to get yummy food and drinks if we stay here, right?”

“Oh! Then I think Lypaed is good, too.”

“Is that really okay with you?”

“Yeah! There are lots of tasty treats here!” Alto said happily, his eyes sparkling. He’d marked down his favorite food from the previous day on his treasure map.

“Also, Alto...”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to give you a challenge.”

“A challenge?”

“Yes. I think you’re ready to handle a yellow-rank guild quest alone.”

“Me? Alone?” His eyes wavered with anxiety at the mention of taking on a solo quest.

“Yes. Our training has improved your stamina, and you’re strong enough to defeat yellow-rank monsters on your own.”

“.....”

“So I want you to try to take on a yellow-rank quest by yourself.”

“But...”



I didn't want him to think he was helpless without me. Alto had rarely left my side since we'd met. He was always looking around for me and moving in sync with me. Right now, I was his entire world. That might have been appropriate for a kid his age. But Kyoka had had her own life at a similar age, and she would often do things alone. I wanted Alto to prepare for independence, even if it was slowly. Taking on a quest alone would be the first step to creating a world of his own.

“.....”

Alto's ears flattened on his head, and he looked so forlorn that it made me feel bad, but I had to be firm.

“Everyone's scared of doing things by themselves at first. Even I was nervous when I took on my first guild quest,” I gently reassured him as he stared at me anxiously. “I won't ever leave without you, Alto. I will always wait for you to come back. Try to work up the courage to take on a challenge, okay?”

His ears twitched, and then he nodded with determination. But when our eyes met again, his gaze wavered for a moment. He gritted his teeth to suppress his weakness and nodded. Alto had such a strong heart. He stared straight into my eyes and voiced his determination.

“I'll try taking on a quest by myself.”

“That's my apprentice!”

He blushed and smiled shyly, then nodded again. “What about you, Master? What will you do?”

Well, I'll probably follow behind you secretly. I'll be worried about you going out all alone, and a beastfolk child is quite noticeable and vulnerable. So I won't take my eyes off you. I guess this is what it feels like for a parent to send their child off on an errand and watch them from behind.

“I'm going to be taking on guild quests, too. Like I said, I want to save up some funds for our journey. And I'm curious to learn about the history and culture of this kingdom.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah. Some days you’ll take quests alone, and then some days we will take quests together. We can explore, play on our days off, and make time for your studies. You haven’t studied much lately.”

“I want to read a lot more!”

“I’m glad. You’ve learned how to read quite a lot of words thanks to your hard work.”

“I want to learn words from other countries like you!” Alto’s curiosity was still unwavering, and his hunger for knowledge inspiring.

“Studying all the time can be tiring, so we have to make time for relaxing, too.”

“Fishing! I want to go fishing, Master!”

“Fishing, huh? I wonder if there’s a good spot around here. Let’s ask Cyrus next time.”

“I hope he knows!” Alto’s eyes sparkled, and he wagged his tail, excited about the prospect of catching and eating a big fish. Then he chattered eagerly about trying new fishing methods, his hands, ears, and tail moving busily as he did. His enthusiasm was utterly endearing. He’d once been in pain and despair, but now he could genuinely smile.

“Master?”

“Yes?”

“Did you have fun here?”

“Yeah. I’d been hoping our stay in Lypaed would be enjoyable.”

“I see. Oh!” he exclaimed as if just remembering something. “Cyrus never finished telling me the story of Sagana’s hero!”

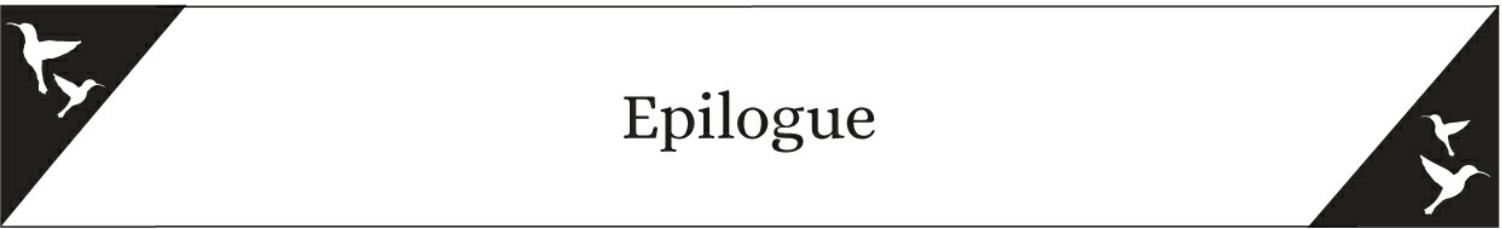
“Oh, right. It turned out to be different from what I mentioned before, so I’m looking forward to it, too.”

“When can we see him again?”

“I’ll get in touch with him once things settle down.”

“I can’t wait!”

The leisurely atmosphere was a stark contrast from two days before. We chatted about our rough plans for the future. The chapter of our lives in Lypaed was only about to begin.



Epilogue

◇ Part One: Revale

I gazed at the clear blue sky through the opening in the cave. After I finished preparing to return to my homeland, I carefully erased all traces of my existence from the cave. I dismantled the teleportation circle I'd used to leave the cave and removed all magical traces of it in the direction of Kutt. I deactivated the barrier on the Lypaed side and erased all traces of magic from there as well.

I wasn't sure how humans would use this cave in the future, but judging by the attitude of that human Cyrus toward me, my instincts urged me not to leave any traces of my presence here. It took time, but thankfully my strength and mana had recovered enough for me to return to the Dragonlands. Just as I was about to leave...

A magical bird created by sorcery flew to me. As far as I was aware, only two people had the ability to use the foolish magic required to create something like that. The first was my dear friend Kyle, who had now departed to the Waterside. The second was Setsuna, Kyle's brother and my sister's guardian. I extended a hand to the beautiful blue bird, and it vanished after leaving two letters in my hands.

Kyle's messenger had been a fish that swam through the sky. I still remembered the day I received the first letter from Kyle, who'd roamed freely through the Dragonlands. My younger sister had rushed to me in tears, saying there was a flying fish that followed her and wouldn't leave her alone. Initially,

I'd thought it was some kind of monster, but upon closer examination, I felt Kyle's mana emanate from it. When I caught the fish, it transformed into a letter.

Once I told her it was from Kyle, she widened her eyes and stared intently at it. From that moment on, my sister eagerly awaited the arrival of the flying fish. And since Kyle was the kind of guy who disliked going to too much trouble, the letters were a rare occurrence.

I let out a little sigh as I looked at the missives. One was from the human named Cyrus, and the other was from Setsuna. Cyrus's note detailed the events since returning to his homeland. He expressed gratitude for the protection and mentioned fulfilling his mission. He thanked me for the blessing and...the staff? What on earth had that man used Kyle's ridiculous staff for?

As I continued reading, it became clear that the staff had proved useful in defending from a surprise attack from the Guilonde forces. It had been a gift from Kyle, but since I had no fond memories of it, I gave it to Setsuna. Although I felt a little conflicted being thanked for it, I was happy that it had helped throw a wrench in Guilonde's plans.

"I bet every sorcerer there had a chill down their spine, ally and enemy, once their spells were sealed," I mused, and suddenly a memory surfaced of my sister. She had been practicing magic in the forest and began to cry when she suddenly found herself unable to use it. These memories were unpleasant. I worried that continuing to dwell on them might invite more, so I shifted my gaze back to the letter. The closing words were *Even if I have to struggle desperately to survive, I want to wield this power for those I must protect. I will strive to earn your approval someday, Lord Revale. Thank you so much. I hope that we will meet again one day.*

Struggle desperately to survive...

If he could master the protection I bestowed on him, he would be difficult to take down in battle. But it also seemed unlikely that Guilonde would ever gain true dominance as long as Setsuna drew breath.

At any rate, this human named Cyrus was quite a proud man. I remembered the regretful look on his face when he'd learned he would only receive the

protection based on Setsuna's recommendation, and I smiled. As things were now, I had no intention of reuniting with him, but if I heard about Guilonde again, I might consider it.

"Struggle desperately to survive...no matter what waits beyond." It almost sounded like advice to myself, and I had to chuckle.

I opened Setsuna's letter next, but it contained only a single line: *I've decided to stay in Lypaed for a while.*

Was he going to inform me each time he changed locations in this manner? Was he really Kyle's brother? He bore no resemblance to my impulsive friend, whose whimsies must have given Setsuna trouble from time to time as well.

"Ah, I wish I had a drink right now."

The image of an impudent younger brother being strung along by Kyle would've made for a nice toast. I gazed up at the clear blue sky through the opening in the cave, the blue blurring my vision. The three-faceted gem, once meant to stop the flow of the sand, now lay shattered in fragments.

"Mom, if something precious disappears, does the gem disappear, too?"

The voice of my younger brother distantly echoed in the recesses of my mind, along with my mother's gentle voice.

"Yes, darling. The gem turns into fragments and falls away."

Ah, yes. I remembered. While the sands of sorrow are drawn into the dark, they disappear, but the fragments of the gem...

"It becomes a star inside the hourglass of happiness..."

Even if their faces and voices are forgotten, even if their memories have faded, the time spent with loved ones never disappears. The stars in the hourglass of happiness are always with us.

"I see. It didn't disappear. It became a star within me. My brother and Kyle, too."

Even if sorrow flowed like the sand, the stars did not fall.

My mother had been speaking of a book. I believe the version for children was called *The Hourglass of Happiness*, while the adult version was titled *A Star to Embrace You*. My mother and sister loved reading fairy tales for children.

The story featured two animals, Silwa and Layus, who had the ability to hear the sound of gems in the hourglass breaking. They would comfort and support those who had lost their gems. When the two animals faced troubles or were feeling down, another creature named Revale guided them.

The name Layus meant “strength and support” in the dragon language, while Silwa’s name meant “gentle companionship.” The name Revale meant “guiding to hope.” My younger brother and sister may not have realized it, but that’s where our names came from. Despite my name meaning guiding home, I’d been unable to do that for my siblings.

One memory after the other flooded through my mind, but I had to cut them off and take a deep breath. In the past, I’d been unable to remember the ending to this story, but now it was coming back to me. I remembered there was no way to stop the sand from falling. In the children’s version of the tale, there were lines about gathering courage and moving forward, and back then I really thought such things would work and no one would have to struggle.

When animals my siblings had nurtured departed for the Waterside, I watched them gradually recover by washing their faces with cold water as Layus and Silwa suggested, holding hands with someone when they felt sad, and offering flowers at their graves. So perhaps it had been effective for children after all.

A Star to Embrace You had a similar premise, but the characters were replaced with humans. The ending was different, though. Even if one drowned in sorrow or wailed with loneliness, those left behind had to continue living. It

said that there was no way to erase sorrow and loneliness, but we had to live alongside the stars that had become memories.

“It’s the same...”

Layus and Silwa didn’t try to stop the tears of those who had lost their gems. They comforted and supported them, saying *“You don’t have to force yourself to stop crying. But just try to eat a little.”* They were telling those people they should continue living, even in times of sorrow.

Why had my mother read this book to us over and over again? As I pondered this, I looked up at the sky, where wishes were embedded. Perhaps because she had a deep love for the dragonfolk. Perhaps because dragons, in the grief of losing someone important, might choose to end their own lives. That’s why my mother repeatedly emphasized to us that she wanted us to live no matter what happened.

“We were terrible children to her...”

Were our parents well? I couldn’t bear to think about such things right now.

“I suppose it’s time to head home.”

Now that my sister was alive, my desire to stay here was even stronger, but I knew I couldn’t protect her here.

“*Do you know what her greatest wish is right now?*”

If Setsuna had been telling the truth, then I needed to return to the Dragonlands and fulfill my sister’s wish to protect her future, so that we could meet again and reunite with our parents.

I wondered about my sister’s hourglass of happiness. Setsuna had mentioned that she said she didn’t want to be happy. I could understand why. But even so, I wanted her to be happy, and I was sure he felt the same. I didn’t want the sand to just fall—I wished for more sand. I wanted more gems, and I prayed that the sand would stop falling even a little. And I wished for her to smile again, like a gentle breeze.

I cast a concealing spell on myself and transformed into a dragon. I spread my

wings and flew into the sky, looking toward where I thought my sister was and calling out her name like a howl. The air trembled, the earth shook, and creatures scattered all at once.

Then I shifted my gaze in the direction of Lypaed. Setsuna wasn't a man who would easily die, but unlike Kyle, he was young, and he still had some insecurities, which worried me.

"Well, life has its limits, and those opportunities decrease as you age."

For the first time, I thought about the difference in our life spans. I recalled how Setsuna's complexion had changed in that moment. Back then, I'd tried to comfort him.

Maybe Setsuna needed to read the book.

I thought I would send him *The Hourglass of Happiness* instead of *A Star to Embrace You*. I thought he would like that. I pictured him reading it with a frown on his face, looking dignified.

Hiding a smile, I flapped my wings and aimed for the wind. The clear wind gently touched my scales for the first time in a long while. As I gazed far in the distance toward my homeland, I thought there might be some new gems added to my hourglass yet.



Another Chapter Japanese Iris ~ Tidings ~

◇ Part One: Tylera

My first reaction when I heard the story was that it was troublesome. It was a request from my master, who was the captain of Gardir's first knight's brigade, asking me to boost morale. The problem was that the knight brigade led by the hero would be heading to Ellana for the parade held in our honor for slaying the monsters. It seemed like the first knight's brigade was dissatisfied with that arrangement, and their morale was suffering as a result.

I could understand why. Although my unit was referred to as the Hero's knight's brigade, there were only around three hundred people in it. The majority of the ten thousand total troops sent from Gardir for the parade were from the first knight's brigade. But considering that the Hero's Brigade wasn't actually participating in the parade but would only be there to form a guard of about fifty people for the hero, it might not be such a big deal after all.

But even when they tried to frame it that way, they didn't seem motivated. And that's why they sought my help. Honestly, I wanted to refuse, but it was only thanks to my master that I became the commander of the Hero's Brigade, so I couldn't just decline.

The problem was that there wasn't much time. We had to leave Gardir the day after tomorrow for the parade. And taking last-minute preparations into account, that only left today to do something. But I couldn't think of anything that would sufficiently boost morale besides training them. So I put on my gear and headed to the training grounds.

“Oh, Sister!”

I heard a voice calling out to me, and I turned around.

“Lady Yueltena. What are you doing here today?”

My younger adopted sister, who was usually in the Endia temple, was here for some reason.

“Father summoned me. What are you doing?”

“I have some matters to attend to with the first knight’s brigade, so I’m heading there.”

“Why the first knight’s brigade?”

“I received a request from the captain.”

“Oh, I see. I thought the hero might have been troubling you again. He’s quite crude and lacks the understanding to behave. Proper discipline is crucial.” She frowned slightly and hid a cold smirk with her hand. She seemed unaware of the resentment and anger I felt toward her as she continued. “Or even better, why not renounce your position as a knight and come to the temple?”

She knew that I couldn’t use magic, which meant I couldn’t become a priestess. And for that, she looked down on me. I smiled politely in response. “That’s an excellent suggestion, but I think I’ll pass. Though even if I did visit the temple, I don’t think I could serve alongside you.”

“What do you mean? You don’t have to be a priestess to work in the temple.”

I maintained my composure and tried to discern her true intentions. Was she suggesting that I should do a menial job at the temple? Her true colors were evident in how increasingly arrogant she’d gotten since becoming an adopted daughter of the king. Her ego was huge now that she’d been elevated from the daughter of a lower baron to her current rank for successfully summoning a hero. The words hinting at her arrogance did carry some persuasive power.

But I thought that wasn’t the only reason. Instead, I believed that the condemnation and pressure she received for having summoned an ineffective hero who had lain bedridden with illness was why her personality had warped. The twisted nature of her disposition, which was rooted in vulnerability,

seemed to echo what I'd read about in the report.

"Are you worried about not being hired on at the temple at all? I can put in a good word for you on your behalf."

"No, it's because you're getting married to the vice commander of the second knight's brigade."

Upon hearing this, she questioned me with wavering eyes, seeking the truth. Having once been on the verge of being married off for political reasons, I'd been collecting information about marriages within the royal palace. Among this information, I learned that the king had rewarded the vice commander for his recent defeat of the monsters by arranging for my adopted sister to be stripped of her duties at the temple and be married off to him. There was no other information, but there was no doubt in my mind that her wedding was imminent. However, since I couldn't reveal my sources, all I could do was say, "You're free to believe it or not, that's up to you."

That seemed to fluster her, and she left. I couldn't blame her. The vice commander of the second knight's brigade held the title of viscount. Marrying him meant a step down in social status. Arranged marriages like that were uncommon, but it seemed our father had reached his limits with her behavior. Nevertheless, as I watched her walk away and reflected on my own hypocrisy, I realized I had no right to criticize others.

Once I arrived at the training ground, I saw that I had an unexpected visitor. All I knew was that I was supposed to go there at my master's orders, so I hadn't anticipated him being here.

"Oh, Tylera... Do you have business here, too?" The hero, who had been talking to the knights, noticed me and called out.

"I thought you were supposed to be training in magic today. Did I misunderstand?"

He finished up his conversation and came over to me.

"Not at all. I'm leaving for the parade the day after tomorrow, so I wanted to

thank everyone who has helped me first.”

“I see. Well, please try to avoid changing your plans so abruptly. It makes it difficult to find you in case an emergency arises.”

“Tylera, you worry too much...,” he started to say, but then corrected himself. “All right. I’ll be careful.”

I wondered if my expression had been too stern, judging by the hero’s reaction. The Hero’s Testament on his arm signified that he was enslaved to the Gardir royal family, and that he was powerless before us. It was undoubtedly written all over my face. My encounter with Yueltena had made me more sensitive than I realized.

“No, I was too harsh. I apologize.”

“You were just worried about me, right? It’s okay.” His smiling face washed away any lingering concerns I had. “So what brings you here?” he asked, gazing intently at the gauntlet on my right arm.

“Oh, are you curious about this?”

The curved diamond-shaped gauntlet was a magical tool made of bluesilver, called the Azure Dragon of the Black Flames. Carved on its surface was an overhead view of the image of a dragon with its wings spread, embracing the moon.

“You probably didn’t get a good look at it during the last battle. No wonder you’re so interested!” I sensed his eagerness to examine it and raised my right arm so he could see it better. The hero grinned and leaned in to look at it.

“I’d love to hear the origin of the Black Flames.”

“Sure. Want me to give you a demonstration?” I couldn’t help but smile.

“Yeah!”

Excited, the hero stepped back to a safe distance, and I focused my mana through my body while I explained. “The Azure Dragon of the Black Flames is a treasure of Gardir, a gauntlet sword said to be used by the first king. No one’s used it in recent times because it’s difficult to wield, so I was granted permission to avail myself of it.”

The hero loved things like this. “Oh, I see.”

I concentrated mana on my right arm to excite him even more. The gauntlet sword absorbed the energy, and from the tip of the diamond-shaped point carved on the dragon’s chin, it emitted a flame-like magical power coated in jet black, which formed a blade.

“This is the basic function of the gauntlet sword. It’s quite a powerful weapon. It can cut through steel. I could demonstrate it, but how about showing you a more advanced way of using it?”

The surrounding knights also seemed intrigued, so I called over a knight who held a steel shield and asked him to stand in front, ready for action.

“Watch carefully. This is just a regular thrust.” I extended the sharp sword, but the shield deflected the blade with a clang and was untouched.

“Now, here’s the second level move.” I stepped back about twice the length of the blade, creating some distance between myself and the shield. “Here goes.” I cranked up the mana and focused it on my right arm, thrusting the sword. The blade shot out like lightning, striking the large shield once more. Another clang!

“That one’s a sneaky surprise for anyone who saw the first move,” I said while pulling back the blade and returning to my original distance.

“Now it’s time to get creative.” I asked the knight in front of me to place the shield onto the ground and step back. I pumped up the mana and thrust the sword. The device’s speed and extension did the trick, piercing the shield with its reddish-black blade.

“Ah, so that was the move you used when you cut through that monster’s shell before,” the hero murmured in admiration amid the surrounding chatter. His reaction encouraged me.

“All right, time for the big finish.”

“The big finish?”

Since the technique I was about to show him was more about being clever than wielding brute force, it wasn’t effective against dumb monsters, and I

didn't use it much. But I thought it'd be just the thing to thrill the hero. I took his hand and led him in front of me.

"Ready? I'm going to swing down the gauntlet sword, so you block it with the hero's staff, okay?"

"What if the staff breaks?"

"It can take a hit. Come on." Without waiting for a response, I slowly swung the sword downward. The hero held his staff in both hands and blocked it. There was no risk of the staff breaking.

"Here we go. Stay still and watch closely."

I controlled the mana with a lighter touch now and swung the sword. The blade passed through the hero's staff, waving like a haze. Just then, I returned the mana back to its original state. Before the hero could even sigh with relief, the reddish-black blade hardened right before his eyes. He let out a startled gasp and stumbled backward.

"That was mean, Tylera!" he protested as he stood up. I could only apologize to try to calm him down.

"I'll forgive you if you let me borrow the Black Flame!"

That's what you're going to call it? I think the Azure Dragon is a better name..., I thought, but I didn't say it out loud. I felt apologetic, and despite it being a weapon strictly prohibited for anyone outside of the royal family, I handed him the gauntlet sword as an apology.

"All right! Now I want to try it out!" He put it on eagerly, and the knights, who had been watching with bated breath, suddenly burst into laughter. Apparently, it was an act after all. Still, they seemed to be having fun, so I thought it was a good outcome.

"How do I make it spew flames, Tylera?"

"Concentrate your mana into your right hand and it'll respond to you," I instructed, and the reddish-black blade was ready. I admired the quick response, but it was short-lived. As soon as the hero raised it, the blade dispersed into a mist.

Hmm, so moving does mess up the mana control.

As I calmly analyzed the situation, the surrounding knights cheered him on, and the hero responded with a smile, swinging the sword back and forth. And each time, the blade vanished.

The next day, the determined hero borrowed the Azure Dragon of the Black Flames from me and practiced. Although he was slower than a snail, he managed to perform a few swings without the blade disappearing. For some reason, my master even praised me for it.

On the day of departure, the prime minister and others escorted us as we left the castle. As we went down the sloping main street toward the north gate, people who had been eagerly awaiting this day cheered as we went by. As we passed through the Endia temple, which was built across the main road and intersected with the other road that ran east to west, the hero's expression suddenly darkened as he waved to the people. Still, the festive atmosphere continued as we approached the city gates.

"Larutas," I said, addressing him while the soldiers opened the barrier.

"What is it?"

"Can you lead the troops in my stead to the campsite today? I'll catch up later."

He glared at me, wondering why I was making such a request, and asked me to explain.

"I can't tell you. But I promise I'll make it to camp by nightfall... Yes..." I pretended to think for a while and then spoke the words I'd prepared. "Let me borrow the hero, and we can catch up to you after using his teleportation magic. Sorry, but can you take both my horse and his horse along with you?"

His expression grew even more stern. "Do you intend to march the troops without their commander? What if something happens?"

"I'll place my faith in your leadership."

I dismounted and signaled for the hero to follow suit.

“I didn’t agree to this yet!”

“You don’t have to. This is a direct order from your superior.”

The hero dismounted without fully understanding what was going on.

“I won’t take responsibility if something happens!”

Larutas started leading the troops, shooting a resentful glance in my direction. Now that that was taken care of, I spoke to the hero. “Shall we go?”

“Go? Where? What’s going on?”

“We’ll go wherever you want to go.”

The hero dashed off, grasping the meaning of those words.

Our destination was the stall of a slave merchant who sold beastfolk on the east side of the main street. There were ten beastfolk children wearing collars and chains lined up on the roadside, and behind them was the merchant, who smiled and called out to us.

“Um. I want to buy those kids.” The hero approached the merchant, his voice slightly shaky, as if his heart was in pain.

“Which one do you want?”

“How many people can I buy with this?”

The man took the bag of gold, looked inside, and began to assess. The bag contained around one hundred gold coins that the hero had received as a reward for defeating monsters. It might be enough to buy five beastfolk, but I knew the merchant wouldn’t respond honestly. That’s because the hero had said “kids” and “people” instead of a more derogatory term used to refer to beastfolk, “heads.”

Beastfolk slaves were typically not referred to as “people” here—if you wanted to buy a beastfolk, you’d ask how much they were “per head.” So the hero’s language had made the merchant suspicious. It was obvious that the hero felt for the beastfolk. Plus, the hero had guaranteed he’d be swindled by showing the merchant all his money upfront.

“Up to three. Any that you like.” He gave the response I expected.

“R-right...” The hero’s face darkened visibly. He surveyed the beastfolk, trying to determine who seemed the weakest. Upon noticing this, I couldn’t suppress my hostility toward the slave trader.

“Hey, you.”

“Y-yes?” The man seemed startled when I suddenly addressed him.

“We’re going to buy everyone here with that amount of gold. Got it?”

For a moment, he looked puzzled, but then the color drained from his face, and he shouted angrily. “Don’t play around with me! You can’t buy all of ‘em for such a low price!”

“Oh, really? Who was the one playing around in the first place?” I glared at the man with intense hostility. The hero quickly tried to intervene, but I ignored him and continued. “I’m not going to let you say you don’t know who this is.”

In Gardir, wearing light green clothing indicated the status of a hero.

“W-well, I thought so, but...” The man’s anger disappeared in an instant, and his face contorted with fear. True, travelers from other nations could wear the color of a hero, so he might’ve assumed he was an ordinary human since he treated the beastfolk like humans. But I couldn’t care less about such a misunderstanding. After all, deceiving the hero and making him sad meant he deserved nothing less than death.

“Would you rather face judgment at the royal palace, take the gold and get lost, or be sentenced by me here and now?” The Azure Dragon spat out black flames as I brandished the sword. The hero hastily tried to intervene, but the slave merchant fled from the scene before he could do it.

“C’mom, Ty. This is practically robbery!”

“It’s fine. He was the one who was in trouble.” I dispelled my mana and sheathed the blade. “Deceiving the hero is a serious crime. If we proved he tricked you with bad intentions, he could become a slave himself. He should be grateful and bear no grudge, considering I let him escape with a hundred gold coins.”

“Deceived?”

“The market price for a beastfolk slave is around twenty gold coins per ‘head.’ Remember that.”

“Okay, but... I don’t like the idea of referring to them as ‘per head’...” He gave me a sad look, and I softened my tone.

“I know, but if you don’t use the correct term, people will be suspicious. You want to save as many slaves as possible, right? So it’s unavoidable.”

“...Okay.” He suppressed his emotions when I mentioned saving the slaves. But even if the hero saved these beastfolk, I knew that wouldn’t eradicate slavery from this land. Their labor was indispensable for the survival of this nation. But I refrained from voicing those thoughts and changed the subject.

“What do you plan on doing with these children?”



“Hide them in my room or something?”

“I’m not sure that will work. What about meals?”

“O-oh, right. What should I do?”

Apparently, he hadn’t thought this one through. As he mulled it over, I sighed. That certainly was one of his good points, though.

Now, what to do...

Just then, I noticed a building near the east gate and felt relieved. “Leave it to me. I know someone.”

With that, I headed toward the building with the relieved hero and the frightened beastfolk children in tow.

The hero waited outside while I took the children in. It was surprisingly spacious. Even with around thirty people in the room, it wouldn’t feel crowded, although no one was there at the moment. That was convenient for me, so I followed the signs, headed to the reception, and addressed the person there.

“Hello, I have a request.”

I’d seen this middle-aged man a few times before.

“Why are you here? I thought you already left the city?”

“I had business and came back.”

“Is your business those beastfolk children there? We don’t accept quests involving the buying and selling of slaves.”

I hadn’t had time to remove their collars, which made this man suspicious. That might have saved me from some unnecessary trouble.

“No, it’s the opposite. I want you to send these children to a secure place and protect them.”

He raised his eyebrow in surprise.

“Gardir’s general wants to protect these beastfolk? Don’t tell me pigs are going to fly next!” He gave an exaggerated laugh, but his eyes didn’t share the

amusement.

“I’m not trying to deceive you. I’m doing this in accordance with the hero’s wishes.”

“Oh? The hero must be compassionate. The previous one—no, the one before that—never paid attention to slaves.”

I remembered 67, who focused on mastering combat and was indifferent to all else. Perhaps that was why he hadn’t been well-liked by the people. Comparing him to the current hero wasn’t a pleasant thought, but I couldn’t afford to think about such things now.

“Well? What’s your answer?”

“We have fees for quests. I can send them to Kutt and leave them at a shelter, but if I include various expenses, that’ll cost about a hundred gold coins. How about that?”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Huh?! You really shouldn’t joke about such things, you know!”

“I’m not joking. I don’t have any money. Figure something out on your end.”

“Headquarters would never hear of it! Don’t you have any common sense?”

“Listen, I just don’t have the money, and that’s it. Don’t you people preach emancipation and equality among beastfolk and humans? But you can’t lend a hand to slaves who are standing right in front of you?”

“That’s an awfully extreme argument, isn’t it?” The man seemed stunned as he looked at me, and I presented the compromise I’d been considering from the start.

“Fine, then. I’ll designate a representative for the quest. He’ll cover the entire cost.”

He gave me a confused look, and then I revealed the name.

“Agito, rank black. He owes me a favor. I want you to give him a message.” I leaned close to the man’s ear and whispered, “Tell him ‘Gardir’s princess has come to collect on the debt regarding Setsuna.’”

The man fell silent. Thinking that my trump card had proven quite useful, I placed a key to the slave collars on the desk and straightened my posture.

"I'm expecting a favorable response. Regardless of your answer, I'm leaving the children here. I'm counting on you, Nestor."

The beastfolk children looked thoroughly confused as I began to walk out the door, and the guildmaster gestured as if he wanted to say something, but I left.

I wanted to quickly rejoin the troops, but the hero had fallen silent, so I continued walking with him until we reached the northern gate. I wondered if he was unable to sort through his feelings. He turned to me with an anxious expression once we left the city.

"Are you sure that was okay?"

"Do you have concerns about not paying in gold?"

"That too, but you really forced things through. The guildmaster didn't do anything, unlike that slave trader. Aren't we making enemies of him, just making that request and leaving the children without even paying?"

He's really concerned about not paying.

Sometimes, the hero's sensitivity went beyond my imagination. And I found myself struggling for an answer.

"They may harbor some resentment for a bit, but they'll get over it. I know it's hard to believe sometimes, but I am the general of this nation."

I couldn't be honest and tell the hero that I used the bargaining chip of overlooking an adventurer's lie to pay for it. I knew I could trust him with the information, but I decided to keep it hidden just to remain consistent.

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

However, the hero glared at me. I sensed he wouldn't back down unless I gave him a satisfying answer. I reluctantly decided to come up with some fabricated reason.

"It's complicated, but they're not going to resent us that much because they

have something to feel guilty about. It's a bit convoluted, so let me explain. Do you know which place on this continent is least affected by monsters?"

"Ellana is the most affected, and then Gardir, but I don't know about other kingdoms."

"The place least affected is a country called Lycia in the southwest. That's because the farther you get from the Demonlands, the weaker and less numerous monsters become. And the headquarters of the Adventurers Guild is also in that country, which connects to the background of this story."

"How so?"

"Well, before I explain, I need to change the topic a bit. I have a different question for you this time."

He gave me a puzzled look, but I continued. "Do you know what Gardir spends most of its money on?"

"Again, I have no idea."

Although the conversation was meandering, the hero still listened earnestly. I felt apologetic for getting him wrapped up in this nonsense, but I continued nonetheless.

"Defensive measures to protect the kingdom from monsters. That accounts for half of this nation's expenditures. Not only that, but half of that sum is allocated to the Adventurers Guild for their efforts in subduing the monsters. So in essence, a quarter of the country's funds go to the guild. And ten percent of that money is the guild's fee for dispatching adventurers, all while they stay safely in Lycia, exploiting us."

"....."

Although most of my explanation was factual, I did dramatize it a bit by saying they exploited us, as if they were guilty of something.

"On the other hand, we have to somehow scrape together that money while we fight against the monsters. So we had to do other things like grow crops and construct buildings with minimal funds. That was why we had to resort to using beastfolk as slaves. Essentially, the root cause of beastfolk slavery is our hefty

payments to the Adventurers Guild.”

There was no concrete evidence of that, of course. According to records regarding beastfolk in historical texts, their slavery began with the deity Endia harboring disdain for them, citing their imperfections compared to humans. That led to the belief that all beastfolk needed guidance, which then evolved into the idea that they were inferior to humans. Eventually, that contributed to the belief that beastfolk needed to be enslaved.

Although those accounts were during the reign of the first king, it was in the expansion of the royal palace during the second king’s reign that there emerged descriptions of extensive beastfolk slavery for the construction. That suggested that beastfolk slavery had gradually permeated into society. But it was a fact that without the beastfolk slaves, it would be very difficult for us to make the payments to the guild.

“Considering those circumstances, don’t you think they’re responsible to protect the beastfolk slaves? Don’t you think it’s hypocritical when they consistently condemn slavery, to abandon beastfolk children who are right in front of them? When I said that to the guildmaster, he readily agreed.”

“I see... Well, I’m not sure that completely settles it, but if you say so, then I’ll trust you.” He nodded with a smile and accepted my explanation.

Although I suspected he wouldn’t be easily deceived by such a lie, I thanked him anyway.

“Well, now I understand why you don’t like the Adventurers Guild and Lycia. What’s that country like anyway?”

I felt a little vulnerable now and just answered the questions without discussing my feelings.

“It’s a prosperous nation.”

“I see.” I saw an unspoken thought in his eyes—“*There must be more you want to say, right?*”

I sighed and continued. “I think I’m the only one thinking such things, so don’t repeat this.”

He nodded and urged me to share my thoughts.

“As I said before, the Adventurers Guild collects money from all over the world. The headquarters is in Lycia. Not only that, but the majority of the highest ranked adventurers, the black rank, reside there. They receive one-tenth of the adventurers’ total income, so think about all the money they collect. It’s considered extremely wealthy and is said to be a thousand years more advanced than other nations.”

“.....”

“So I believe that Lycia and the Adventurers Guild might be connected behind the scenes. If you consider that, everything falls into place. Whoever devised the Adventurers Guild is a genius.”

“Okay. But why wouldn’t that information be made public?”

“I don’t think anyone discusses the relationship between the Adventurers Guild and Lycia like this, and there are no books on the subject. Maybe those who speak up get silenced, who knows? Keeping quiet about it is just a precautionary measure.”

The hero tipped his head to the side before speaking. “I feel like there might be another explanation for that.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe there’s no writing on the subject because no one else views it that way. You said whoever thought up the guild was a genius. If that’s true, then you must be a genius, too, for noticing their intentions, right?”

“Definitely not.” I chuckled with amusement.

“I’m serious. Well, never mind. Thanks to that mind of yours, we managed to save the beastfolk children, which is truly a relief. I appreciate it, Tylera.”

I gave him a wry smile in response.

“I can’t help but feel sorry for you the most, because you’re the one who lost a hundred gold coins. That’s not the end of the world to a slave trader or the Adventurers Guild, but it’s a lot of money to you.”

“I think I gained something from it since I saved the children with the money. I

have my reasons for losing, so maybe I'm the one who gained the most."

"I find it hard to believe there could be such reasons," I said, confused.

"It's because I always make you be the bad guy, Tylera. Sorry about that."

I wasn't sure how to respond to the hero's uncanny sensitivity, so I just smiled at him with chagrin.

◆ Afterword ◆

ROKUSYOU

“Struggle desperately to survive...no matter what waits beyond.”

This is a line spoken by Revale that appears in this volume. This time, I found myself struggling quite a bit while writing Volume 3. However, for every struggle I experienced, I hope it resulted in a more enjoyable story for you. While the focus in Volumes 1 and 2 was mainly on the perspective of adventurers, Volume 3 tells a story set against the backdrop of the world’s history and political landscape.

The tone might seem different, but I hope you’ll continue to watch over Setsuna and Alto.

USUASAGI

Thank you so much for purchasing the third 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, or even better yet, read Volumes 2 and 3 before diving into this afterword. If you don’t mind spoilers, then please continue.

Now, regarding the content of Volume 3, as with previous volumes, I made additions and revisions, perhaps even more so this time. Although during the process of serialization, I tried not to make significant changes from the web version, the content of the web version for this volume was already quite close to this plot. Still, I reluctantly had to make additions and modifications to resolve inconsistencies in the story. I won’t specify where these changes

occurred, but if you compare it to the web version, I'm sure you'll enjoy the story even more.

This time, I won't share behind-the-scenes anecdotes about the main text, but I will share some insider info about the subtitle. Each time, I decide on the subtitle in consultation with Rokusyou. The subtitle for Volume 3 is *The Bonds of the Dragon and the Kingdom in Crisis*. There's a hidden meaning that I haven't even shared with Rokusyou. The answer is that the subtitles for Volumes 2 and 3 are meant to be connected. This is because I consider them parts one and two of a story arc. So, as mentioned earlier, if you could read Volumes 2 and 3 again in their entirety, I'd really appreciate that.

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.

March 3, 2022

Rokusyou & Usuasagi

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