

LITTLE PRINCESS

IN FAIRY FOREST

STORY BY
TSUBAKI TOKINO



ART BY
KONNO TAKASHI

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Little Princess in Fairy Forest

Tsubaki Tokino

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Takashi KONNO

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Title Designer: KC Fabellon

Editing by Ingrid Chang and AMP

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Little Princess in Fairy Forest

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SIEGFRIED

Siegfried is known as "Lord Designs" due to his ambitious schemes. To become king, he marries woman after woman, burying them after their marriage advances his career. Eventually, he is the man who revolts against the crown. Lord Designs plans to marry Princess Lala Lilia, whereupon his position as the heir and Blessed Royal of Reverfeat Kingdom will be secured.



LADY MEGAN

Lord Designs' daughter. Though possessing doll-like beauty, she lost all of her emotions when her father offered her soul to the Devil.



PRINCESS LALA LILIA

Lala is a lively young girl with red hair and freckles. She is the heir to Fairy Kingdom Reverfeat. During Lord Designs' uprising, she loses her parents and subsequently becomes the last Blessed Royal. Lala is always brimming with curiosity and cowers at nothing.



INEZ MOLI

Inez is a mysterious witch who controls silver thread and is obeyed by a gigantic spider. She seems to have been born in lands to the far south. Hired with Lord Designs' money, she hunts Princess Lala Lilia.



SPIKE SCALE

With ruby scales and golden eyes, Spike Scale is a dragon endowed with profound knowledge and exceptional intelligence. He possesses a gentlemanly demeanor and is always courteous. For certain reasons, he has refused getting involved with humans for ages—until he meets a certain little princess in a forest caught in a downpour.



GIDEON THORN

Known by the nickname "Thorn Knight", Gideon is a middle-aged knight past his prime. He is the sole survivor of the King's Knights. As his best friend entrusted him with Princess Lala, Gideon swears to protect her with his life. Though a gruff and frank, cynical nihilist man, he has a heart of gold.

Prologue: Beginning of the Beginning

I'M the Princess. My kingdom is gone. Father and Mother are dead. I didn't see their bodies. But I know, because the giant hole in the middle of my chest says so. It whispers, "You're the only one left."

We had so many knights, servants, and friends, and now all of them... Everyone, everybody, is gone. Only two are left. One is Captain Rob. His name's actually Robert, but he goes by Rob for short, so they call him Captain Rob. I do too. Everybody does.

Everybody...*did*.

He was with me ever since I was a baby. He's kind, strong, big, and I love him.

The other knight is...umm...what's his name again?

"How's it look, Gideon? Where's the enemy at?"

"Not good. They're pretty close."

That's right—Gideon. They call him the Thorn Knight. He's a blunt, gruff old man with mean eyes and a scruffy beard. He's wearing black shoes, black pants, a black shirt, black tunic, black gloves, a black hat, and a black cloak. Everything he's got on is dark-black. His hair and beard are also dappled with black. If only his eyes were black too...

I don't like his eyes. They barely have any color to them at all. Are they gray? Steel-blue? If I use my imagination a little and think of them as aquamarine, I might like them a bit more.

"Hey, knock it off, Princess! You can't stomp around like that!"

His favorite words are don't, no, stop, and some other way of telling me off. Honestly, I can't stand him. I puff out my cheeks and quiet my steps, sulking. If Captain Rob didn't pat me on the head I would've stomped on Gideon! That would've showed him!

Now would be the ultimate chance for attacking him. After all, Thorn Knight

has been lazily spread out with his ear pressed against the ground and his eyes closed for some time. I wonder what he's doing. I take a peek and his eyes snap open!

Oh, he's looking at me.

I knew it—I can't handle his grayish eyes. I'm pretty positive this person doesn't like dealing with me either.

"...!"

See! He quickly looked away from me! Now he's sluggishly pushing himself to his feet and swatting the dirt off his clothes. He stinks of dirt—I mean, obviously, but still.

Unlike the castle gardens, the dirt here's damp. It's very heavy and smells like a bunch of things are mixed in. Stinks of muddy water. And smelly weeds. Nasty smells come up from the dirt and scratch roughly inside my nose. It's a weird scent that's a strange mix of random smells. I can't recognize it.

We're in the middle of a wasteland. Everything is different, from the sights to the smells, nothing is familiar. This is the first time I've been this far away from the castle.

"This is it, Rob. I can't go any farther with you."

"Let's hear why."

Aw, another's gonna leave us. Just like all the other knights.

The flat ground goes on forever. There's nothing around as far as I can see. Sometimes there are tangled branches poking out of a tree's husk. Other than that, I see rough patches of dry weeds, dirt, pebbles, and that's it. I'm sure we can be spotted from faraway right now. I mean, we stick out like sore thumbs. Two adults, two giant horses, and one me. We can try to squat down on the ground as much as we want, but we still won't look like weeds or trees or rocks. We can't even hide behind them.

There's just one hope.

A black forest spreads out where the dried-up wasteland meets the sky full of gray clouds. *You must never, ever enter that place. It's where our world and the*

spirit world intermingle. The person who taught me that is no longer around.

I'm glad it's Captain Rob staying behind with me. I'm just a tad bit relieved.

"Rain's fallin' soon," Gideon warns.

"Must be a sure thing for you to say so."

"It'll be a strong downpour. Visibility will suck. Take this chance to get Princess outta 'ere."

"What'll you do?" Rob pointedly questions.

"You know what." Gideon smirks. His white teeth shine through his lips that are turned up like a crescent moon.

I knew it! He's...scary.

"I'm gonna ambush 'em first."

Captain Rob stares at Gideon's face long and hard. He does this every time. Maybe Captain Rob wants to memorize what they look like before they go away. His eyes are just as soft as Mother's when she looked at me.

"No, Gideon. That's my role."

"What? Wait. Hold your horses, Rob."

Captain Rob doesn't say anything.

"Robert! Captain ROB!" Gideon's yelling.

Gideon goes stiff. I can't move either. What? What's going on? Don't tell me... Captain Rob...is going away too? It's a joke, right? I misheard them. See, Gideon looks confused too. He's blinking like his eyelids are broken. He's staring at the ground pressing his hand against his forehead. Then he jerks his face up.

"What...did ya just say?"

"I'll stay behind. You go on ahead with Princess, Gideon Thorn."

NO WAY!!

"Don't be ridiculous. C'mon, however you look at our situation, this is where I get to die a glorious death, yeah? Take a hint, Robert!"

Captain Rob is quiet. Smiling. His smile's so bright it crushes me.

Gideon yells again, "You take Princess!"

But he just shakes his head.

There's no way out now. A large hand rests on Gideon's shoulder. *This is reality.*

"You've got the most strength and greatest skill with a sword. That's what you need to survive this. Teach our princess that stubbornness—that's my final request."

"...! That's not fair!"

"I'm sorry."

Everything after that felt like I was stuck in a dream. A sad dream I never want to remember.

Captain Rob's warm arms wrap around me in a hug.

"Princess, Gideon is my most trustworthy knight. I am certain he will protect you till the end."

"Don't go..." I say, "Don't leave me, C-Captain...Rob!"

"This is farewell, my princess. Please grow up happy and healthy."

No. I don't want this. I don't want to say goodbye. I don't want to let go. I don't want to lose anyone else! Not now, not ever! But I am the Princess. I'm royalty. So I nod and see him off. What other choice do I have?

"I pray you have good fortune on the battlefield, Sir Robert," I say, like Mother taught me.

"You honor me, Princess." Captain Rob takes my hand and kisses the tips of my fingers. "This is goodbye, Gideon. If luck is on my side, I hope we meet again."

"Don't die, Robert."

Captain Rob and Gideon pat each other on the shoulder, then Captain Rob mounts his horse and gallops away.

What should I do? I wanna cry.

“...Come here, Princess.”

“Eek!”

Rough hands covered by black gloves drag me up in the air. It’s not nice, like being picked up or held! Then he slams me down on the big saddle, like a sack of potatoes! The saddle is sturdy and smooth, but has no decorations.

“Hang on tight. Don’t worry yourself, this horse’s well-behaved. Far more than I’ll ever be.”

His horse really is well-behaved. It didn’t flinch, just accepted me suddenly on its back.

Its body is as large as a boulder. Four thick legs like logs support us. Its yellow hair sorta reminds me of buttercup flowers. Someone’s carefully brushed its fur and taken perfect care of its hooves and leather harness. If only this man took care of himself at least one percent of how well he cares for his horse! Maybe then he’d be a little more tolerable!

Thump! A huge body mounts the horse behind me. His black cloak spreads out like dark wings and wraps around me. I hate admitting it, but it’s warm.

“Let’s go, Princess.”

“Whenever you are ready, Thorn Knight Gideon,” I say politely.

The horse neighs and the body below me slightly shakes. Then the yellow horse takes off in a full gallop. Cold winds whip past us. But they don’t sting. It’s not dry.

I can hear the sound of water coming closer and closer. Or is that the sound of tiny animals running in a giant herd? A single raindrop splatters on my face. Instantly, the sound of a downpour surrounds us and we’re swallowed by a curtain of water.

“Rain...”

It really came.

“Yeah, it’s rain.”

BEFORE them is a black forest. Their horse gallops on. With each rhythmic beat of its hooves hitting the ground, a merciless truth is carved into the princess' young heart. Reverfeat Kingdom fell in a single night. If they glance behind them, all they will see is the enemy's flag soaring over the castle. Flying on the banner is the coat of arms of Lord Siegfried, the king's cousin and a man possessed by his ambitions. Crows swarm the skies, merrily pecking at the bounty of dead flesh strewn about the green lawns.

Under hot pursuit, Princess Lala and her black knight have no choice but to advance on...on to the forest, where their world and the spirit world intermingle; a place held in legend and mythology where only demons and beasts call home.

It was on this day that Thorn Knight Gideon became Princess Lala Lilia's last knight.

Chapter 1: Princess and Knight Meet the Dragon

WHITE puffs escape my lips. The chain mail armor I'm used to wearing weighs heavily on my body. The shield I always shoulder on my back is cumbersome. But I've donned this gear for many years, until they became extensions of my body. I've never been bothered by their weight before.

I'm fatigued. I'd hate to admit it, but either my age or this rain is taking its toll on me. Or it's because... *I let Rob leave.*

The endless downpour's heavy raindrops pelt my cloak, splashin' into beads as they hit the fabric and roll off. Drop after drop. Rain ceaselessly batters my cloak. Almost none of it manages to seep through the oil-soaked wool. But Princess' clothing ain't the same. Sure, her clothing is of the highest quality with precious material and meticulous stitching, but it's not like the tailors sewed her clothes thinking she'd be trampin' around through the woods or wastelands in her dresses.

The rain still hasn't let up. White fog sticks to the air, closing off the surroundings. I can't even see my horse's ears. Fog rolled in just as we—me, my horse, and the cheeky pipsqueak princess—galloped into the forest.

Really is a bizarre fog. It came gushing out of the overgrown trees like it'd been belched out by the forest itself. Our pursuers quickly lost their bearings and stumbled around blindly through the dense growth. In the end, fear got the better of the cowards and they scampered away with their tails between their legs, just like the dogs they are! All hail Lord Designs Siegfried's cheapskate nature! He didn't even issue our heads a high enough bounty to help his hounds overcome their instinctive fear of the forest.

Damn straight! That's what you get with hired soldiers. They'll only work as hard as the gold you fork over. Fine with killin' on the battlefield but scared witless by the unknown.

"Gideon."

Princess sticks her head out from where I clasped the sides of the cloak together. The soft red curls she inherited from her mother spill out around her face. Her eyes, that shine like new spring leaves greeted by the sun, are a gift from her father. Freckles are scattered across her chubby cheeks and button nose. Maybe these features make her charming when she smiles, but I haven't had the good favor of seeing this kid smile, ever. At least not yet.

Her tiny body is excessively warm and ticklish. When's the last time I've been in direct contact with such a frail living thing?

"Did we...enter the forest?" she asks.

"Yeah, we're inside."

I'm secretly relieved, to be honest. My heart almost jumped out of my mouth, thinkin' she'd ask, "*What happened to Captain Rob?*" It's the worst possible question to think about. Answering or even hearing it would stir darkness in my chest.

"I'm surprised you noticed," I comment.

"It sounded like we did."

Guess that makes sense. The forest distances us from the sound of rain. Thick, tightly wound branches and the countless leaves disperse the raindrops before they reach us. Not that none of the rain passes through the leafy canopy—cold trickling water is slowly but surely zappin' away our heat. And tiny children grow cold fast.

The fog still won't let up. My horse has been nervously snuffling the air for a while now. Making a hard choice, I remove my cloak and hold it out to Princess.

"Wear this."

"Ooof. Why?"

"Don't move around. Hang on tight." I leave her on top of my horse and dismount. Then, dropping my voice an octave, I murmur, "Good boy, Buttercup. Settle down. No worries here. Fog's just a wee bit thick. Let's take it slow."

"...So its name *is* Buttercup."

"Huh?"

“Never mind.”

I take the reins and stand in front, since who knows what’s waiting for us in the forest. You can think you’re walkin’ on the trail when suddenly a swamp or a pit will open up below your feet and swallow you whole. It’s no joke. People and their horses tumble into the unknown because of carelessness all the time. Taking cautious steps, I lead Buttercup by the reins. A person’s eyes are closer to the ground than a horse’s.

Princess does as I ask and covers herself with the cloak, stayin’ perfectly still in the saddle. At a glance, you’d think she was luggage. And that’s how it oughta be. Groping through the thicket, I push our way through, choosing sparse patches of undergrowth as our path. Something—man, beast, or something else, I’m not entirely sure—had taken this path back and forth enough times to trample the shrubs and soil.

“Oh?”

We’re in luck. Dark-purple tiny fruit are danglin’ from one of the branches I cleared away. Straining my eyes, I locate bunches of the fruit here and there on other branches. I pluck a handful’s worth and offer it up to Princess.

“Here. You can eat these.” Tossing three into my mouth, I devour the blessing granted to us by this *tasteful* forest. “...It’ll help ease your fatigue.”

“Blackberries! They grow in the forest too?”

“They come *from* the forest.”

“They were in the castle gardens though?”

“Those plants came from the forest.”

“...I don’t get it.”

Oh bother. There she goes, turnin’ her lips down at the corners into a little pout. *I’m* the one who doesn’t get it, Little Princess. What ‘n the world just soured your mood?

“I mean that the trees growin’ in the castle gardens originally came from this forest,” I try to explain.

“How did they come to the castle?”

“Birdies ate the fruit, flew to the castle gardens, and dropped the seeds.”

“How?”

A weird sound comes from my throat. The corners of my lips twitch. I think I just laughed—in this situation and place, of all things.

“Well, can’t tell ya that...”

“You’re making fun of me.” She pouts, yet she still goes on to pluck a blackberry and bring it to her mouth. Her eyes instantly squeeze shut. Her lips pucker, and she shivers. “So SOUR!”

I laugh, “Because they’re wild.”

“But they’re yummy.”

“Good to hear.”

“What about Buttercup’s share?” Princess asks on behalf of her mount.

“Not a problem. He eats on his own.”

Mostly leaves, that is.

I throw the last blackberry from the handful I picked into my mouth. Princess stares at me.

“...What?”

“Your mouth turned purple.”

“Ah. That’s what happens when you eat raw blackberries.”

I casually wipe my lips with the back of my hand. Black gloves are convenient in times like this, since dirt and grime won’t stand out.

“...!”

Oh, she’s noticed. She’s looking at her fingers. Now then, how’ll she handle this?

Heh, she’s catching the rain in her palm...and rubbin’ it on her lips. Clever girl. She repeats the action several times. Then she takes a moment to think, before readjusting my cloak around her.

I know you’re wiping your lips on it, Princess. While pretending to adjust how

you sit.

Did she not want to dirty her own clothes? Well, I kind of get why. She's a girl after all. Props to her for not wiping her lips on Buttercup or the harness.

"Shall we move on?"

"I am ready whenever you are."

Guiding the horse once more, I walk onwards. A single thorn pierces through my armor and stabs my chest.

Oh, right. The tiny thorn is immaterial. *I didn't even have the time to bring a single handkerchief with me.*

"Ah-CHOO!"

A tiny sneeze chills me to the bone.

I need to hurry up and find us cover from the rain. Before the sun sets. While this sassy little princess still has enough energy in her to prattle.

LUCKILY, I immediately find a place to take shelter from the rain. A gargantuan tree suddenly appeared in our path, in the middle of the fog. The closer we got, the bigger it became. It wasn't just that one tree either: the thicket, shrubs, trees, and even the mushrooms growing in the shade were now all one to two sizes bigger.

By some freak chance, were we the ones who shrunk? It's not completely implausible. This is the Black Forest. Principles way above human understanding are at work here.

Ah, it's like—it's similar to how a child sees the world. I've been reduced to kid size.

My heart is unusually restless. I can't calm myself. But if I show that I'm afraid, it'll only scare Princess. I stifle my unease and approach the giant tree roots.

As I had thought, the rain reaching us drastically decreases. What a huge tree. Big enough to make an instant log cabin by carving out the trunk. There's moss growing along the roots that're bulging outta the ground. Each giant root is like

a big snake.

Is this one of those millennial trees?

Though its actual age is anybody's guess, I've heard stories where trees that've lived for many, many years are called such things. They say the area surrounding one is filled with the power of life and infuses vitality and energy into the other trees, flowers, animals, and whatever else is around to benefit from it.

I gotta admit this place is warm. At the same time, it feels austere, almost like we're in a cathedral or a graveyard. While none are in sight, I'm betting a lotta living creatures enjoy the blessings of this Millennial Tree. But the question is: will we also be accepted? I reach a hand out to touch the trunk—

...!

I feel it. It's intense. *Danger.*

This place is trouble. Dangerous. It's here. It's here. It's here. Somewhere extremely close. Something incredibly dangerous lurks. Lord Designs' hired hounds? No, can't be. They're a speck of dust in comparison. It's something so powerful that one breath would erase us from the face of the planet.

Every pore on my body contracts. I tense.

Crap. CRAP. Crap. It's here. It's definitely here—*the only mortal enemy I have in this world!*

FLAP! FLAP! Something spreads open. It sounds like the popping of old leather when you spread open a tent. But it's tens of thousands times louder, and far more violent than that of a noise from some puny tent. Worst of all, it's *ALIVE*.

Blocking both the rain and light, it stands at the base of the Millennial Tree. There's no way in hell I'd mistake this sound. The sound of a dragon spreading its wings...

I spring to action, removing the shield from my back, and hold it at the ready. I place myself between **it** and Princess on top of Buttercup.

"Well." A low, rumbling voice spits a puff of steam. Its voice reverberates deep in my gut, as if I were standing beside ringing cathedral bells.

A dragon is right before my eyes.

Luck's not on my side. We're in the middle of the Black Forest at dusk. Rain's pouring down, fog's enshrouding the area, and on top of all that a dragon's come. If there's anybody unluckier than me, I'd like to meet 'em—if they're still alive.

His sharp scales gleam ruby, flawlessly shielding his dense body. The dragon's 'bout twice the size of my horse—no, three times? Its claws could easily shred through steel; a single swing of its long tail would likely shatter a crag.

He's a big one all right. Over 200 years old.

Rain drips through the Millennial Tree's foliage. The moment the droplets touch those ruby, razor scales, they vanish in thin trails of steam. That's the nature of the creature we're dealin' with.

How am I gonna go about this?

High chances of success—if I was alone, that is. No matter fight or flight, I'd probably survive one way or another on my own. I've overcome far more dangerous situations than this more times than I can count. But the circumstances are different. I've got somebody I must protect. A life I hafta protect at any cost.

“What...is it you desire, O Knight?”

What irony. By putting my protective shield up on the spur of the moment, I gave away who—what—I am.

“...A peaceful retreat.”

“I do not trust such a claim.”

Needlelike pupils expand in the center of his golden eyes. He's on guard against me. Red light rushes along his scales in ripples, sending steam rushing out from his body.

“I wouldn't...either.”

Knights and dragons are mortal enemies. Once we've crossed paths, we're destined to fight until the death. Dunno who made the rule, but that's how it is.

This is it then. I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth and place my hand on my sword's hilt. *Sorry, Robert. Doesn't look like I'll keep my promise...*

But at least Princess. I must at least protect Princess!

"Gideon." She stirs on Buttercup's back. "Gideon. I'm cold."

"Stop, Princess! Don't come out!"

"Princess?"

ARGH, AAAH! The dragon's stretching his neck out to look behind me. Don't screw with me! I hold my shield up and take a step back, but of all the Godforsaken things! A flexible little rascal crawls between my legs and slips by.

"You always tell me to stop."

"PRINCEEEEESSSS!"

"Upsy-daisy." The little princess stands up in front of me and fixes her eyes on the dragon. Then she tilts her head and quietly murmurs, "Pretty cowie."

Cow.

.....Cowie.

My killing intent is draining away.

The dragon blinks.

"Ah, a cow, is it?"

She probably just slapped the name of the closest living creature she knew of onto this dragon. He's huge, has horns, and a long snout, so it works for her.

Blast it all, in the short seconds I took to think, this princess goes and?! Ignorance is something else all right! She walked right over to him, and now she's touching his scale-covered stomach with her tiny hands!

"Red and silky."

Silky? My eyelids peel back, my jaw drops—I do a double take.

Whoa, whoa! Wait! Wait! Wait just a damn minute!

Those razor-sharp scales that had just been standing on edge smoothly lowered their spikes and flattened down!

“You’re very, very pretty, big Mr. Cowie.”

“You honor me, little lady. But I am not a cow.”

Looks like my opponent completely lost the will to fight as well. Princess lies on top of the dragon and rubs her cheeks against his scales.

“So warmmm...”

“The primordial flame flows through my very veins, pumping from my heart, after all.”

Oh yeah, dragons have a soft spot for young maidens. How could I have overlooked that? My thoughts never even went there.

“Er, well...” I venture. Golden pupils glare at me. “I’m a knight, yeah, but I’m a knight without a kingdom. I’m currently living to protect Princess.”

“Hmm. Then I suppose our objectives align... Nay, rather, it suggests it is possible for us to coexist in the same space.”

Overemphasizin’ every little stinkin’ detail! This pair of boots with wings thinks he’s an intellectual or something?!

I sigh. “Yeah, that’s how it is.”

This is a thousand times better than a dragon that’s ready to fight. I lower my shield and remove my hand from the sword hilt.

“My name is Gideon Thorn. I propose a truce with you, Great One.”

“Hrm...” The dragon glances at Princess and then back toward me. “I accept, Knight Gideon.”

The red dragon fondly looks at the princess through partially closed eyes. He changes the angle of his wing to block the rain. To keep Princess from getting wet. From freezing. Our eyes meet.

“For the princess.”

“For the princess.”

The dragon’s wings shield us from the rain, and the soft, dense moss nearby is surprisingly warm. Princess swiftly falls asleep. Wrapped in my cloak, she snoozes against the red dragon’s body. She must’ve been dead exhausted... I’m

real close to my limits too. Right after I confirm that she's asleep, my consciousness abruptly gives away.

WHITE, dry light. The morning light filters through my eyelids, and its shine stirs me. Cracking my eyes open, I reflexively grope around beside me. My fingers brush along a thick fabric. It's on the ground.

"Princess!" I sit up—jump up. My consciousness snaps awake in an instant. "Princess! Where are you?!" I shout. "PRINCESS!"

Only rustling trees answer me. Flustered birds fly away from their perches.

"Restrain yourself, Knight. Your voice is grating."

"Princess isn't here!"

"What?" Dragon rises, sitting on his hindquarters.

His movements are swift and agile for such a massive body. Boy, am I glad I didn't have to clash my sword against his claws yesterday. No, now's not the time to be thinkin' 'bout him!

"Why did you not notice?" Dragon accuses me, "Protecting the princess is your duty, is it not?!"

"...I was asleep." Like a log. This is why aging sucks. "What about you? What were you doing?"

"...Sleeping."

"Then get off my back! She was clingin' all over ya too!"

"The little lady is too tiny and light. Therefore, I failed to notice...that she had moved."

"Hah...if you say so..."

Knight and Dragon, facing each other, yet standing dead still, since early morning. The flock of birds flies back to their perch once they determine the danger is gone.

"Let us find Princess."

“No objections here.”

I throw my cloak over my shoulders and put my hat that'd slipped off back on. I latch my shield on my back, my sword to my waist. Didn't take me long to get ready since I'd kept most of the clothes I was wearing on.

“Don't you come with me,” I say to the dragon.

“Why not?”

“You're too big.”

“Hmph. Foul biped!”

He fancies himself an intellectual all right. A sharp glint flashes through his golden eyes when he shoots me a glare, but he shows no signs of preparing an attack. But he hasn't let his guard down either, as his scales are sticking up, sharpened to a spike. They're less menacing now than when I ran into him yesterday, but it'd be a stretch to call his scales silky smooth now.

“If you go slitherin' and stompin' 'round with that hulking body of yours, you'll erase any tracks Princess left behind. You get it, don't ya?”

“Hrm. You do make a valid point.”

The dragon shifts. My arms itch to jump into action. My instincts yell, “*Draw your sword! Hold up your shield!*” I desperately fight the urges that years of battle have seared into my muscles. Calm yourself, Gideon. He has no bloodlust. Watch and wait.

See? He isn't lunging for your neck. His foreclaws aren't sinking into your fleshy neck...

“Hey! Why're you groomin' yourself here! Quit groomin' your scales!”

Dragon pays me no mind. He gracefully manipulates his claws and peels off a single scale. Those are some dexterous claws he's got there.

“Take this with you.” Dragon's foreclaws thrust out in front of my eyes. Or should I call it his hand instead?

“Doesn't that hurt?”

“It doesn't. If I were to put it into terms your barbaric mind can comprehend,

it is a sensation akin to removing a strand of hair.”

Interesting.

I rip the scale off the large dagger-like claw. The scales look small when they’re attached to a dragon, but it’s surprisingly large holdin’ it in my hand like this. ‘Bout double the size of a silver coin. The red color gradually dulls as it spreads from the root to the point, and the edges are partially transparent. It’s still slightly warm. It was spiky when he plucked it from his back, but now it’s round. Is it because the scale’s been removed? Is this its base form?

“So? What do I use this for?”

“Hold it in your bare hand. And then close your eyes.”

“Sure, sure. In my bare hands. Whatever ya say.” I remove my glove and rest it directly on the palm of my hand.

What in the seven kingdoms am I doin’? Obediently following what a dragon—my mortal enemy—is asking of me.

There’s only one reason for it. For the princess. In order to find the princess.

I close my eyes.

There should be a limit to how foolish I can be. There’s no guarantee he won’t take a bite outta me in a second. For all I know he was askin’ me to add a bit of seasoning before he eats me. Naturally. He’s a dragon. But there’s one thing I know for sure—he’s trying to protect Princess. He’s takin’ action for her. At least that much is the same as me.

“Whoa!”

Light flickers behind my eyelids. Scattered ruby sparks fill my sight and spread through my body. My blood boils and gooseflesh prickles across my skin. Even my hair stands on end. To be short, something like a tremendous, gigantic wave washed over and through me.

“What...is...this...?”

“Hm. It appears you have what it takes. Open your eyes, Knight. Slowly.”

I lift my eyelids like he said.

“Hh...haah...hh...haah.”

Sweat soaked through my clothes and I didn't even realize. But I feel strangely comfortable. Actually, the fatigue that was weighing down my body's core—frankly put, the exhaustion I haven't been able to get rid of these past few days—has been removed.

“Oh, my body feels light.”

“Probably so. You just resonated with me.”

“Scuse me?”

Resonated? What the heck is that?

“Never remove that scale from your person. Oh, but you are not required to hold it directly against your skin anymore.”

“Wait. Wait. Wait a sec'! Explain what just happened in a language I can understand.”

“Did I not already do so? I told you, we resonated.”

“Please, Dragon. I'm a knight. A KNIGHT! Swingin' around a sword and riding a horse is my job. I haven't a jot about magic or curses or whatever ya did.”

Dragon silently narrows a single eye on me and suddenly spews a single hot breath from his nostrils. Warm steam brushes past my cheek.

“...My apologies,” he says.

Did he just sympathize with me? This stupidly huge brute of a bright-red, golden-eyed dragon pitied me?! You gotta be kiddin' me! Without a doubt, this has gotta be the greatest humiliation in the world!

Suck it up. This is also for Princess. To find her.

“Our senses have been connected through that scale. Through our resonance, I'll be able to see what you see, and hear what you hear, no matter how far you go. We can even converse.”

“...I see.”

“Now I will not have to worry about you ransacking the forest.”

The more eyes and ears we can get on the lookout the better. Even if they're the eyes and ears of a lizard with horns and wings.

"Hang on. In other words, as long as I've got this on me, everything I hear and see will be leaked to you around the clock?"

"As long as you desire it so."

"Relieved to hear that."

"Do not fear. I'm not so bored as to spy on you at all times. I am fully aware you bipeds have an excessive need to rut."

"...Then you will watch if you *are* bored?! I didn't need to know that, stupid lizard!"

PRINCESS wasn't being cautious at all. She doesn't have any experience being hunted by someone after all. Consequently, tracking her was disappointingly easy. Footprints left in the ground, traces of branches broken in the thicket, leaves shredded underfoot everywhere. And her little hands had picked white flowers. They're white clovers. I didn't notice them when we passed through yesterday, but I should've considering how hard I kept my eyes trained on the ground.

"She's walkin' pretty far for someone raised in a castle."

"She is quite the active little princess. Truly a promising start for a hatchling of high breeding."

I stored the resonance scale in my left chest pocket. Usually it's where a knight keeps his lucky charm, something like a handkerchief he's received from a fine lady or a lock of his lover's hair. For better or worse, the spot closest to my heart has been empty for a long time now.

"How's my horse doing?"

"You needn't worry. He's leisurely munching on grass and fertilizing the forest."

I left Buttercup at the base of the Millennial Tree, since it's the safest place here. He's not as big as the dragon, but he's a large horse with thick legs.

“Tch.” Princess’ tracks end abruptly. Her footprints disappear so suddenly, it’s almost as if she disappeared into thin air.

“What is wrong?”

“Her tracks are gone.” I lift my head and scan the area. There has to be a reason for this. “She stopped here once. Stayed here for a long time too. And then from there—ah.”

My eyes stop on a blackberry bush. Several branches are broken, and the breaks are still fresh.

“Birdies ate the fruit, flew to the castle gardens, and dropped the seeds.”

“How?”

“Well, can’t tell ya that...”

“You’re making fun of me.”

Chances are, that banal conversation was the only fun memory that kid made yesterday.

“Take a closer look at those branches.”

“These? She probably ate the blackberries. I taught her that they’re edible yesterday.”

“She’s a clever child. But that is not what is important right now.”

I shove my face into the branches and carefully examine them. Ugh, as much as I hate to admit it, Dragon is right. Several strands of hair are entangled around the broken branches. Curly, long, golden hairs.

“These are definitely not Princess’.”

“Indeed. They are not even human hairs.”

“They aren’t?”

“Let me show you what I see.”

My vision blurs. A transparent vision instantly ripples across my sight,

spreading and transforming the world as it thickens.

“What is this?”

Around the golden hair—or more like around the broken branches and in the shredded leaves—a peculiar smoke is coiling. The color changes when I adjust my point of view. It looks like every color and no color all at once. But it feels far too suspicious and sinister to call rainbow-colored. If I gotta liken it to somethin’, it’s like oil floating in water. That’s the closest example I can think of from what I know. Runnin’ with that analogy, it’s like oil from a tailor’s shop after a long commission of dyeing clothes being poured into a muddy, grotesque puddle of water.

“It’s the traces of a Daemon. A Daemon kidnapped Princess. Their kind can soar through the skies, you see.”

“That’s not funny!”

Right when I’m thankful it’s not our hunters, it’s the Daemon Clan?!

“You needn’t worry. I know them. I have an idea of where he’s going.”

“I’m grateful then.”

I clench my fists and gnash my teeth together. Else I couldn’t hold back my violent feelings. I’m *FURIOUS!*

“Then, we’re gonna crash his place right this instant and drag Princess outta there by the scruff of her neck, yeah?”

“Precisely.”

FLAP! I hear wings spreading. A gigantic shadow obstructs the sunlight, soaring towards me. When’d he take flight? When’d he arrive? Apparently, I was too enraged to notice.

“Get on. Your steed is a fine specimen, but he doesn’t have wings.” Dragon bends his legs and lowers himself to the ground.

“You okay with that?”

“We are in a race against time.”

“.....”

Now this is one funny joke. Tavern goers and wenches would burst out laughin' to hear about a dragon letting a knight ride on his back. He's clearly also unhappy with the idea. The scale next to my heart is conveying displeasure with an indescribable irritation.

"It's for the princess, Knight."

"Yeah, for Princess."

We say it aloud to convince ourselves—both me and him.

Chapter 2: All for the Princess

ELSEWHERE, Princess uses every muscle in her face to display her disapproval.

“.....”

Deep creases form in her brow as she narrows her eyes to slits. Clenching her teeth, she turns the corners of her lips down, and tightly, tightly balls her tiny hands into fists. Her hair and clothes are a mess. Not even a shadow of her former appearance remains in her current disheveled state. On top of that, blackberry leaves and juice are sticking to her hair and dress.

“Pardon me,” a voice had said.

She had been engrossed in eating blackberries when a bag suddenly pulled down over her head. Her captor paid no attention to her feeble struggle and screams. They carried her away without listening to a single peep, and then, just moments ago, tossed her on the ground with a thump.

I’ve had enough of being stuffed in bags! Princess thinks, and quickly squirms out of the bag on her own. She grabs the twigs stuck in her hair and pulls. They’re too entangled to remove just by tugging.

“I won’t pardon you!” She pushes against the ground and stands, whipping her head sharply to glare at the person before her.

“Ooh. Ooooh! Beloved Princess! Please don’t be angry. Your charm simply pierced through my heart at first sight. You see, these hands of mine just couldn’t help taking a tiny bit of action.”

Her captor is a man with golden curly locks and jet-black eyes. His facial features are accentuated by a straight nose, which some may find handsome. His beard is cleanly shaven as well; the complete opposite of her uncouth black knight. He’s a man with a soft nasal voice who uses honeyed words. The entire time he had her stuffed in the bag, he tried placating her with sweet nothings.

She didn't find him scary. Even though his skin is blue, his ears are pointy, horns jut from his head, and batlike wings sprout from his back. More than fear, she just can't help being offended by how he treated her.

"Do you always walk around with this on you?" She kicks the bag across the floor.

"Of course I do, adorable Princess." The blond, horned man gives her a sophisticated nod. "I must have it on me in case I come across my soulmate!"

"What're you gonna do then? Lemme guess, put the bag over their head and kidnap them?"

He doesn't answer. He merely ogles her and laughs with a crooked smile. Princess Lala thinks his face looks just like the masks worn at the castle festivals.

He's kinda scary even though he's smiling.

"I have everything you'd ever need here. Take a look. Isn't it a marvelous room?"

He isn't lying. Everything in the room is flowery and pink. Though the shade varies per the object, nothing is anything other than pink. It's altogether PINK. The curtains, the bed canopy, the throw blankets, and the pillows. Everything, *everything*, is made from ample amounts of shimmering, smooth silk, with lace carefully lining the rims and edges. The rug is also dark-pink. Blooming flowers from every possible season are woven into the rug with striking gold silk.

Pink-painted wooden tables, chairs, footstools, closets, and the dresser have elegantly curved feet with golden vines patterned along their sides. Embedded pearls outline the shapes of flowers, grass, and butterflies. A dreamlike flower garden is sealed within each of the furniture's wooden surfaces.

And on top of a small round table lies a crystal bowl full of candied fruit. The skins had been peeled, the fruit chopped up and pickled. She doesn't even know the names of the fruit, their shapes even less. Flowers she's never seen before sit arranged in the matching crystal vase beside the bowl. The loose, hanging thick flower petals vaguely remind her of the bodies of living creatures. Flowers, fruit, sugar, and spices mix together, creating a sticky sweet smell that fills the room. Just by inhaling, the sweetness encroaches upon her body.

I don't like this smell.

Princess Lala instinctually blocks the smell with her hand. She covers her freckled nose and her mouth, where a new front tooth stands out. Her purple-dyed hands smell tart from the blackberry juice. But it's a much better smell than the alternative.

This is a birdcage. A pretty, large birdcage.

The room only has a single window. And that one window is sealed off by thick iron bars.

"You are absolutely charming. Just beautiful! But it's too bad that you are just a tad too young."

"I don't get it."

"BUT! My aesthetic senses are absolute! Besides, you're human, while I'm of the Daemon Clan. The passage of time is but a trivial thing."

"I don't get you at all."

"It's simple, Princess. I'll raise you. Until you grow into a beautiful lady."

Daemon. Dae-mon. Dae? Mon? The unfamiliar word repeats in her head. Over and over again. She doesn't know what it means, but she knows one thing for sure. *This person...is seeing something I'm not. Even though we're standing in the same place, we will never see the same thing.*

"Now then, you are to live in this room today forth. I shall give you whatever your little heart desires."

This is a birdcage. I'm gonna be locked in.

"No."

"Come now. Strip out of those filthy clothes and change into this dress."

The golden haired, horned man snaps his fingers. The closet doors spring open, sending pink fabric dancing off the hanger into the room, rustling as it does. The dress features balloon-like round sleeves and a generously puffed out skirt. It fits Princess perfectly, but the hem is clearly too long. The dress gracefully drags along the floor as it cuts in front of her small steps towards

escape.

Princess Lala stomps her feet on the floor and turns her back on the dancing dress.

“I hate it here. I’m going home.”

“Home?” The horned man swivels around her, closing in without a sound. His golden hair flutters and his batwings spread out, effectively blocking off her path. “Your castle is no more, Princess Lala Lilia.”

“Why...do you know my name?”

“Of course I know you, Lala Lilia. Princess of Reverfeat, the kingdom that fell in a single night.”

Princess Lala freezes in place. Her cheeks stiffen; her arms, chest, legs, and feet grow heavy like lead. It’s as if she’s being swallowed whole underneath an invisible layer of ice and sinking fast below its surface.

“Where do you suppose you will go home to? Poor, poor, little Lala Lilia. Didn’t your dear father and mother already die on you?” A kind smile is plastered on his blue face that draws nearer. He coos in his soft nasally voice and blows his sweet breath on her. Hands caress her cheeks.

Princess Lala squeezes a hoarse voice out through her frozen, trembling throat, “Why do you say that while smiling?”

“Because I’m kind.”

Lies! Lies! He lies!

He offers his hand to her like a proper gentleman. His palm faces down, perfectly covering her face from above. Sharp, pointed claws curve out from his fingertips.

“Come, take my hand. Become the bride of this great Daemon King. That’s what is best for you.”

“N-No! I’m...going home!”

His batwings close around her. They close in on the tiny body that trembles with rage, sorrow, and regret.

“It’s futile to fight against me, Lala Lilia. No one is coming to rescue you.”

“...!”

Nobody is coming to rescue me. Nobody is left. Father, Mother...Captain Rob...

A dark-black, cold lump buries inside her tiny chest. It’s the first time since Princess was born that she has ever tasted despair.

KA-BOOOOOOOM!

A thundering explosion smashes the walls into a thousand pieces. Gold and white chalky fragments of its fancy remains are violently blown away, burning and steaming in the searing heat. The splinters pelt down like flaming hail on the batwings ensnaring Princess.

“HOT! HOOOOT!” The Daemon King screams as the scorching hot fragments burn his blue flesh and cut deeply into his wings. He faints in agonizing pain. Still, he doesn’t release her.

“Who is the Daemon King?” A well-mannered voice booms, “is that what you’ve arbitrarily started calling yourself?”

Not a second later another grumbled out, “A ‘self-proclaimed’ Daemon King, huh? What a joke.”

Razor-sharp scales glitter brilliant ruby against the sun. Valiant wings slice through the blue sky. Wisps of white smoke rise from his snout and mouth, remnants of the fireball he spat at the wall. Landing on all four claws on the balcony, Dragon glares at the self-proclaimed Daemon King.

“To begin with, Daemons have never had a king. As a species, they are obstinately set on preserving their individual principles and positions of power.”

Standing on the dragon’s back is a man completely covered in black: from his black hat resting on his black hair, his black clothes ending in black gloves, to his cloak, which is also black. The only whites are those of the outer canthus of his eyes and the seven old winter stars decorating his shield. They form the shape of the hunter racing through the night sky.

“Everyone hates persistent men, self-proclaimed Daemon King.”

They blew open the doors of the locked birdcage, and now outside winds howl through the room. They’ve blown away the sickeningly sweet, poisonous air. It’s only now Princess realizes this room stands at the highest floor of an absurdly tall tower.

“Thorn Knight Gideon!”

“Yo, Princess. You unhurt?”

“I’m oka—AAH!”

A hand shoots out and wrenches her wrist backwards. Though his batwings are now smoldering bloody wounds, his curly golden hair is in frizzling tatters, and blue blood gushes from his broken horns, the self-proclaimed Daemon King still refuses to relent.

“Let go! Lemme go!” Princess struggles with all her might in a wild frenzy. Flailing her tiny arms, she desperately stomps with her slender legs.

“I won’t let you escape. Stay here, Lala Lilia. Former Princess of a destroyed kingdom. It’s what’s best for you.”

Suddenly, Princess stands still. Daemon King smirks, thinking he’s won.

“...Release me.” The sun illuminates her piercing verdure eyes. She doesn’t back down. She doesn’t falter in fear. Instead, she locks those eyes on the blue man. “Reverfeat isn’t ruined as long as I live.”

Everything in the burning room freezes—Dragon, Princess, and the self-proclaimed Daemon King.

Not letting this opportune chance escape, the knight makes his move.

“BEGONE!”

He kicks off the dragon’s back, soaring high into the air. He lands on the self-proclaimed Daemon King’s burnt back. Driving his momentum and the weight of his body, sword, shield, and chainmail into his feet, he strikes the enemy’s back with a violent dropkick!

“GRUAH!” Suffering a direct blow, the self-proclaimed Daemon King loses his

grip as he's sent flying head over heels, turning somersaults on the ground before crashing into the wall. His agonized shriek sounds like the last cries of a dying frog, a dying cicada. "My WIIING! It's...BROKEN!" One of his already crispy wings limply dangles from the joint.

The knight stares down at his defeated enemy and resolutely declares, "Keep yer grubby hands off our princess!"

"Damn you. Damn you, human trash! You've gone too far!"

The Daemon stumbles to his feet. His mouth suddenly snaps open and rips his flesh back to his ears, exposing jagged fangs. His refined, gentlemanly features disappear as if they never were.

"Whoa, now that's a looker for you." Knight Gideon blocks the path with his shield, utterly unafraid, as he stands protectively before the little redheaded princess. "Let me guess, this is what you really are?"

"SHUT U—huh?" Flames interrupt him, slamming a fireball into his gut. The self-proclaimed Daemon King goes flying. He crashes into the ground and heaves blood. "DAMN YOU ALL! What the hell is this—"

"It is me."

Dragon's breath finds its mark. An extremely thin, but extraordinarily hot flame shoots right through the blue man, slamming him against the wall in the process.

"Ooh, way to ventilate the room," Gideon remarks, "Now I can breathe better."

The destroyed pillows and blankets scattered burning feathers into the air, which softly flutter around the room like fireflies. The crystal vase, mother-of-pearl table, candied fruits, and the dainty, cutesy pink dress made for whoever was held captive in the birdcage are all smashed and torn to smithereens.

"...We did it," Princess mutters. She clenches her fists and stomps her feet defiantly.

"Ah! Aah! Aaaaah! What're you gonna do to make this up to me?! You put a hole in my wings!"

Dragon shoots a steamy breath at the bawling Daemon King to finish him off. Though it contains little flame, it's scorching nonetheless. Glaring down at the collapsed Daemon, Dragon sternly warns, "Do not go near my little lady. This will be the only warning I grant thee."

This time, the blue-skinned, golden-haired horned man falls completely silent. Princess throws her arms wide and dashes over.

"Mister!" she calls excitedly.

"Uh, that's a bit much...though I am an old man."

She passes right by the bashful knight, leaps onto the dragon, and hugs him tight.

"Oh, you meant him..."

She's smiling. Princess is smiling. The deep creases that'd made their home in her forehead are gone. Joy glimmering in her eyes, she flashes her awfully large front tooth as her whole mouth gives way to her smile. Her freckles stand out even more now that she's regained a healthy complexion.

Dragon snorts away a few smoldering feathers.

"Well, that works too," Knight mutters.

Seeing her dimpled cheeks, the knight inwardly agrees, *At least this curly-blond, horned-head bastard has eyes for beauty.*

I'M flying in the sky for the first time in my life! I cling to the giant, ruby back. Mr. Sun is so close. I can touch the clouds. The thick Black Forest below my feet looks like a green rug. At first, it reminded me of the tapestry decorating the castle's great hall. I wondered if the person who made it also flew through the sky. Then it made me think of the morning I first climbed to the very tippy-top of the castle tower. I saw the sky spread past the horizon like this then too.

But the images in the tapestry weren't real. The castle tower didn't move with me on it. Right now, I'm moving. Everything I see is real. The trees, ground, water, wind—all of it is real. Wind hits me. It whips at my face, plays with my hair, smacks my arms and chest. My entire body is in the middle of racing air.

It's so strange to touch something you can't see. I forget how to use my voice.

Gideon and Mister Dragon have been chitchatting since we took off. Wind whooshes and howls in my ears. But Mister Dragon's voice is deep and rumbles through it. His voice gently shakes my body. Listening to it relaxes me.

Gideon firmly holds me in his lap. His arms are much tighter around me now than when we rode the horse.

"Think that blond horned bastard is all right?"

I'm tucked close to his chest, so I can easily hear his gruff voice.

"Resistance to getting squashed is the Daemon Clan's forte. Like the persistent roach he will be back to normal after a hundred years or so."

"Good to hear."

"You're an intriguing fellow. Why do you worry about a Daemon's wellbeing?"

"...He's not our enemy. He's an incorrigible piece of trash, but he's not a problem as long as he keeps his grubby fingers off of Princess."

"Hrm. There's an element of truth to that."

"You gotta wonder why he went and built such a massive tower. It was in plain sight from all directions."

"Even among the Daemon Clan, he especially craves the limelight."

"Ahh. He's a show-off then."

"That is putting it simply, but you are correct... Now then, it's time to land. Hold on tight, Princess."

"Okay."

He's so big, but Mister Dragon softly lowers from the sky like a petal drifting on the wind. The forest treetops come closer, then rush past us, and the ground grows larger.

His wings expand and catch the wind. His feet hit the ground, rocking us, and then he stops.

PRINCESS, Knight, and Dragon have returned to the base of the Millennial Tree together.

“I’m back, Buttercup!” Princess calls.

The amber horse welcomes the little princess back with a whinny. However, Buttercup isn’t the only one waiting for them. Sparkling, blinding purple lights dance between the branches.

“Oh?”

They suddenly draw near, almost as if they have a will of their own. Then, they surge together and a figure appears from within the coalesced lights. A woman, donning a dress and light-purple hair the color of dawn, steps forth. Her trailing hem is a deep indigo. Her short hair spreads out like the wings of a baby bird, gradually turning transparently clear towards the tips before melting into the sky.

“I’m so glad to see you are safe, Lala Lilia.” Her soft voice sounds like tinkling bells. A smile touches her bluebell-colored eyes. One glance at her face, and Princess brightens enthusiastically.

“Fairy Godmother!”

“Why if it is not Lady of Dawn.” Dragon bends his forelegs and lowers his head into a respectful bow. “It’s been a long time.”

“Pleasure seeing you again, my noble ruby dragon, Spike Scale.”

Knight turns to Dragon. “Someone you know?”

“An old friend.”

So I’m the only one who doesn’t know her? Knight thinks.

“How do you do, Knight Gideon?”

“Pleased to meet you, Lady of Dawn.” Knight Gideon removes his hat and brings it to his chest before bowing his head. Whether human or something else, one must always pay respects to a lady. Such is the way of the knight.

This is a Fairy Godmother, and as such, Lala Lilia’s guardian. All of the Blessed Royals have their very own Fairy Godmother.

“I’ve wanted to see you ever so badly, Lala Lilia.”

“I’m so happy! Very happy!”

Godchild and Godmother embrace, rejoicing over their safe reunion.

Meanwhile, Knight is sullen-faced, grimacing. His dry lips twist as he spits out in a gruff voice, “Now you show up? Come out sooner if you plan to show up at —Whoa!” Fairy Godmother appeared right in front of his face before he could finish the last word. “When did you—”

“Fairy Godmothers are like that.” Dragon nods with a self-satisfied look.

“We are like that.”

“Are you now?”

Finding his question ignored, Knight cuts to the chase. “So? What’s the plan of action from here? We supposta take Princess to the Land of Fairies?”

“How wonderful it would be if that were possible.” Lady of Dawn casts down her eyes and blinks once. The light enshrouding her weakly flickers. “The instant Lala Lilia crosses over to the fairy realm, even momentarily, she will be thrown out of sync with the realm of humans. Distortions that cannot be corrected will take root, and she will be unable to live in this realm again. Even if it looked as if she returned home here, in the end she would always go back to the other realm. She would eventually lose what made her human.”

Her long, slender white fingers lovingly comb through Princess’ hair. “What I desire is for Lala Lilia to live in happiness as a child of mankind. Is it not the same for you?”

“...Pretty much.”

“Then allow me ask you, Lady of Dawn, how should we protect the princess?” Dragon asks with an air of dignity.

“Hey! That’s supposed to be my line!” Knight snaps.

“Show us the way, oh Lady of Dawn!” Dragon continues over him.

“C’mon, you stupid lizard! Stop acting like a knight on a quest!”

Lady of Dawn gracefully lifts her right hand, pointing toward the green

treetops. “Hide in the forest.”

“In the forest?” both Dragon and Gideon ask.

The lady dances through the air and places her hand on the Millennial Tree’s trunk. “O tree. O tree. Rooted in this land since antiquity, thou hast grown large with the great passage of time. Please lend me thy strength to protect and raise this tiny life,” she beseeches with her chiming voice. The Millennial Tree shudders as it answers her prayers.

“Whoa!”

“Wow!”

The branches, leaves, and even the trunk begin to creak and snap as they change. They lengthen, expand, and close together, eventually weaving into one shape. The soil rises as even the buried roots start to move.

By the time silence returns to the forest, the Millennial Tree has transformed into a single cabin.

Gideon gapes. “What can I say...I wasn’t expecting that.”

“A splendid display of your skill, oh Lady of Dawn.”

Bells tinkle in the distance. “Thank you...”

“Whoa, where are you, Lady of Dawn?!”

Although they heard her voice, she’s nowhere in sight. Gideon quickly surveys the area.

“I’m right here,” she says softly. She must have exhausted her power, because she’s shrunk so small that she rides on the palm of his hand.

“Well, haven’t you become awfully cute.”

“Fairies change form according to the power they hold within.” Tiny Lady of Dawn weightlessly floats up to Gideon’s eye level. “Raise Princess Lala here. Join hands with Spike Scale to do so.”

“Spike, huh?” Gideon scoffs. “You had that kinda name, you overgrown pair of boots?”

“Do not refer to one such as I so disrespectfully. I only allow those who are

close to me to call me by my name.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Knight Gideon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Spike Scale.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“My barrier will protect you both and the princess. However, it won’t last forever.”

“How long should we hide out here for, Lady of Dawn?”

“You will know when the time comes.” Tiny Lady of Dawn kisses Princess on the forehead. “Lala Lilia, my beloved godchild.”

“Wait, Fairy Godmother! Don’t go!”

Her body turns transparent and incorporeal before Princess’ eyes. At the same time, her tinkling bell of a voice grows fainter and thinner...

“I am always praying for your health and safety. For your...happiness...”

Her words mix with the wind’s melody, the notes of the rustling leaves, then fade away. Dragon and Knight turn to one another as they both watch over Princess, who now stands there alone.

“Looks like our truce is gettin’ an extension.”

“It goes against my wishes, but we have little choice.”

Dragon lifts his foreleg and Knight his fist—they quietly knock them together.

“For the princess.”

“For the princess.”



Chapter 3: One Year and a Day Later

I'M the Princess. I live in the forest.

I live with two old men in the cabin Fairy Godmother made out of a big old tree. One old man is Mister Dragon who I love! The other is a sourpuss but strong knight. I no longer have a castle. I still don't wanna go back yet. Lord Siegfried lives there now. He's the meanie who revolted and stole Father and Mother from me.

He's Father's relative in name but isn't related by blood. I'm glad he isn't. I'd be super unhappy if I resembled somebody like him. But I did want to become better friends with my older cousin Megan. She has perfectly straight blonde hair and blue eyes. She's a pretty girl without a single freckle to ruin her white skin and is much more of a princess than me.

I wonder what she's up to now. Is she living in my room?

"What's the matter, my lady?" Warm breath softly tickles my ears. Mister Dragon peers down at me with worry in his eyes. His breath tickles.

"Nothing's the matter, Mister Dragon. I just kind of..."

"Kind of...?" His long slit pupils contract in the center of his honey-colored eyes.

"I just kind of remembered something." I didn't need to say anymore. Mister Dragon crouches down and quietly leans his face in. I stretch up and plant a kiss on his broad forehead. His silky smooth ruby scales are warm.

"Meh-eh-eh-eh!" Our light-brown goat, Daisy, raises her head and bleats.

Warm sunlight shines down on us. Under my feet, there's a thick, green meadow growing in a round shape. Plenty of three-leaf clovers, white flowers, and white clovers sprout up in the grass. Bumblebees busily fly around the flowers. Shaking their fluffy yellow butts, they wriggle into the petals.

I'm pretty sure this place has the most flowers in the entire forest. The forest,

deep and dark, opens to this secret place like magic. A softly sloping meadow spreads out from the base of the oak trees, and a small brook is bubbling through it. And then there are the flowers. Red flowers, yellow flowers, blue flowers, purple flowers, white flowers. They bloom within the green grass. They don't look all that numerous up close, but if you look at the meadow from far away, they're actually everywhere. It's different from a garden.

"Meh-eh-eh-eh!"

"Good girl. Good girl."

Daisy nuzzles me with her face. I use my fingernails to lightly scratch the base of her horns. That's her favorite spot. I came here today to let her eat the grass, so that she'll give us lots of milk. Grass grows all over the place around the Millennial Tree, but Gideon told me, "The goat'll eat everything up if ya only let it graze in one spot. Including the tree bark and roots!"

I wonder why Gideon knows how to take care of goats. He's got a lotta other skills too, but out of all of them I was the most surprised that he's a master at sewing! He mended the holes in my stockings and the tears in my jackets lickety-split. He's not just fast, he's skilled too. He even shortened the sleeves of the secondhand clothes he bought in town for me and raised the hemline to match my size. Once they got too short, he undid the stiches, lengthened it, and added new cloth.

"We have no need for tailors and seamstresses on the battlefield," he'd said, trying to make himself look cool, but I guess it means he didn't have a wife or lover to do it for him.

I'm just about to casually flop down on top of the grass, when—

"Princess, would you mind waiting a moment before sitting there?"

"Why?"

"Look closely. There's a tiny flower." Mister Dragon points with his claw to a lone, teensy-weensy flower.

Wow! How did he spot that? The flower is smaller than my pinky finger's nail. The edges of its four petals are a deep royal purple that grows lighter towards the middle, until it reaches its yellow center.

“Mister Dragon, what’s this flower called?”

“Wildflower,” a gruff voice says behind me.

I lift my face towards him. When did he come over? The all-black knight is looming over me. But he isn’t wearing his heavy armor, or carrying his round shield either. Right now, both are hanging on the cabin walls like precious decorations. In their place, he has a large bow strapped over his shoulder, a quiver full of arrows, a knife dangling from his belt, and a bulging burlap bag in his hand. Inside it is probably birds or rabbits.

“Ain’t it a wildflower? I see ‘em popping up on the roadside pretty often.”

Hot breath blows out of Mister Dragon’s nostrils. A single puff of steam comes out, and he closes his right eye. “Every flower has a name. No flower is merely just a ‘wild’ flower.”

“Who cares if you know or not?”

“Princess, that flower is called the Morning Star Flower. It earned its name for sharing its color with the dawn sky. Or it may also be due to its shape, which resembles a star.”

“The dawn sky...” I repeat.

He’s right. The edges and tips are the color of the night sky, while the white towards the center is the light of daybreak.

“It’s Fairy Godmother’s color.”

“You are absolutely right, Princess. This is Lady of Dawn’s color.” Mister Dragon seems happy. His throat rumbles like he’s purring as he nods repeatedly. “Ladies are truly splendid creatures. They take the time to cherish the world with their open minds and hearts—”

“Hmph.” Gideon turns his face to the side and snorts. “I don’t care about some flower I can’t eat.”

WHOOOOM!

Hot wind shoots above my head. His interruption sure upset Mister Dragon all right. Mister Dragon lifts his long neck off the ground and shuts Gideon up with a fierce glare. Or maybe he’s just disgusted with Gideon.

“Whew.” Gideon’s used to it. He swiftly drops to the ground and waits it out.

“Use discretion when you speak. Your interjections already leave unfavorable impressions on Princess and influence her sensibilities poorly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Frankly put, you are turning her wild and uncivilized.”

Shoot... Did he see me? Was he watching me practice roundhouse kicks? Or when Gideon was teaching me how to win a fight? (The basics of winning a fight is stomping on your opponent’s foot and making them flinch.)

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” Gideon’s laughing. With his gruff voice while showing his teeth. He’s being really brash. “Wild is good. More than good—it’s great. Look here, Dragon, I’m teachin’ our little princess how to survive.”

Mister Dragon’s wings loudly snap open, blocking the sunlight. But he doesn’t unfurl them all the way. Instead, he starts to close them right away—slowly and sneakily. Then Mister Dragon completely moves his line of sight away from Gideon. He’s looking at only me.

“...Listen to me well, Princess. All plants have names. Please grow up as someone who will not step on flowers just because their names are unknown to you.”

I look at my feet—at the little, tiny flower representing the dawn sky—at the Morning Star Flower. It shares the same color as my dear Fairy Godmother. Until Mister Dragon told me, I didn’t even notice it was there. What a weird feeling. It’s no longer just a wildflower. I can’t do something like step on it.

So I nod. And look up into those honey-colored eyes.

“I will, Mister Dragon.”

Gideon stares at me with his mouth hanging open. Mister Dragon seems to have noticed him too. He tilts his large neck to the side and observes Gideon closely. Puzzled, he restlessly blinks. Gideon awkwardly scratches his head. A smidge of red appears under Gideon’s eyes.

What’s this reaction? Is he possibly embarrassed? Old Man Gideon’s being bashful?

“I agree with that sentiment. As much as I hate to say it.”

“You agree, eh?” Mister Dragon’s giant tail whips back and forth. Then his tail draws a red arc through the sky as it comes to coil around his body in one smooth motion. He does it without displacing a single flower, a stalk of grass, or even the frailest of leaves. Every time I watch him move his tail I’m amazed. “You do know that you could applaud my childrearing in a more honest manner?” He prompts.

Gideon doesn’t answer. He simply folds his arms against his chest and turns his face away again.

“You truly are not an honest man.”

“Meh-eh-eh-eh!” Daisy bleats loudly. It’s almost like she’s agreeing with him.

“Hmph. C’mon. Time to go back!”

“Head back ahead of us. Princess and I will stay here a little longer.”

“Yup, we’ll stay here.”

“Ah...fine.”

Gideon’s black back disappears into the distance. He always slouches, his shoulders slumped forward, walking bowlegged. He should walk with his shoulders held high and his back straight.

Today marks a year since I came to this forest. Tomorrow will make it a year and a day. It might not look like it, but I’m on much better terms with that man than before. Things were horrible at first.

“Now’s not the time to be goin’ on about that sentimental and sanctimonious crap about being virtuous or compassionate! What this child needs right now is the power to survive!”

“Then I will be the one to undertake what you deem as sanctimonious. You just need to instruct her in the skills and knowledge you possess.”

“I’d do that without ya tellin’ me to, ya stupid lizard.”

“...Vulgar Knight.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Gideon had put his hand on his sword’s hilt, and Mister Dragon had sent his scales on edge, red light rushing along them, as he bared his teeth. So I quickly jumped between them with my arms open.

“Fighting is bad.”

“...Yes, m’lady.”

“You are correct, Little Princess.”

It really had been a rough time.

I come to a gargantuan wooden house. The roof, walls, and even the hinges on the door are all made out of a living tree that not only grows leaves but flowers. Answering the Lady of Dawn’s prayer, the Millennial Tree had transformed into a house perfect for us in every way. Granted, I made the animal pen for our livestock.

Half of the bottom floor goes underground so there’s a wide-open space Dragon can go in and out as he pleases. The stairs to the upper floor leads to a space with four human-size rooms—the living room, kitchen, Princess’ room, and then the room I sleep in. The rooms came equipped with all the necessary furniture, from a bed and dresser to tables and chairs. Kitchen’s even stocked with a stove. Princess’ room has even more to it. The magic didn’t forget to include the charming aspects a girl’s room needs while stayin’ functional. Each and every piece of wood, dirt, and stone must’ve been polished by Lady of Dawn. She spent herself perfecting this place until she shrunk down to doll-size.

All blessings and gratitude go to the noble lady!

I go to the basement and empty the stuff in my bag on the worktable. I could do this work in the kitchen, but the stench’s a bit acrid. Today’s hunting resulted in three partridges and one rabbit. Silently, I slide my knife through them. I remove the guts and skin them. I’ll sell the partridges. And I’ll add their tail feathers as fletching to my arrows to increase their effectiveness. We’ll eat the rabbit meat. Although I wonder what I should do with the pelt? Use it? Sell it?

I'm good with the bow. I'm used to the process that goes into preparin' the spoils as food or useful tools. Generally speaking, making sure ya got food is key to survival in the great outdoors. That said, never thought I'd have such talent as a hunter.

At the beginning, I just thought it'd be amazing if I could at least secure enough food for Princess and me. It all started when I heard that wild boars had devastated the fields of the village I went shopping at, so I got rid of the problem for them. In a blink of an eye, they went around callin' me a "Skilled Hunter", so I happily assumed the new identity.

They handed me an excellent goat that produces plenty of milk and a pair of chickens as a reward for offing the troublesome boars. Thanks to our new furry and feathered friends, our eating habits ended up more heavenly than I coulda hoped for!

Now I go to the village once a week to sell my hunting spoils. "A hunter who is raising the daughter that was left behind when his younger sister and her husband died last year." That's my current identity. Having these complicated and sensitive circumstances is crucial to our cover. People won't get suspicious that I know nothing 'bout babies because I took the child in once she was past that age. Pretendin' to be uncle and niece is easier than parent and child.

With the money from my hunts I buy salt, bread, clothes, shoes, needles, thread, and the like. Occasionally I'll purchase arrowheads too.

There's a reason why I go alone to the village despite knowing the danger of possible discovery that comes along with it.

We can't bake bread in the forest. If it was me alone, I could survive on hard-baked acorn biscuits and rabbit stew. But that doesn't work for Princess.

Fortunately, Lord Siegfried doesn't know my face. Most of the time I was away on expeditions, fightin' skirmishes, huntin' monsters, and doing whatever else my knightly duties required of me in the field. Thanks to that, I barely showed my face around the castle.

Aside from my skill for hunting, I've had another surprising discovery. I, of all people, have been able to keep a truce with the dragon for over a year. You heard me. *A whole damn year!* Since we started living in this forest, I've been

keeping track of the days by markin' the house walls. At first I tried carving the marks with my knife, but Princess threw a full-on fit, so I ended up using cinders instead to draw the lines. A line a day, a group every five lines. This morning made the seventy-third group.

A year.

Slight vibrations shake the floor. The front door opens and closes. Looks like their lesson on flowers is over.

"...Apologies. Were you in the midst of work?" Dragon pokes his head in.

Yes, indeedy, it's a miracle if I do say so myself! *Me!* The man dubbed the Thorn Knight because I shredded every enemy who touched me to pieces—has been sleepin' and wakin' up under the same roof as this gigantic, bright-red, egghead lizard monstrosity for over a year! I still can't believe it!

"I'll be done soon. Want the guts?"

"I wouldn't mind dining on them."

Just like that, the bucket filled with bird and rabbit guts and blood is sparkling clean. This soft-spoken, gentle intellectual giant is as carnivorous as they come. Thanks to that appetite of his, I'm saved the effort of having to dispose of the leftovers.

"Where's Princess?"

"She went to the animal pen."

I close my eyes and listen carefully. Pitter-pattering little feet move overhead. "You're right."

"She's remarkable."

"That's how she's survived."

I wash the skinned pelt in brine, hang it on the pole, and a hot puff of breath hits it with impeccable timing. This'll purge any tenacious mites and fleas that might've clung to it.

"Thanks a bunch."

"You are welcome."

“Say, do ya think we should hold onto this rabbit fur?”

“What for?”

“How about for Princess? Could turn it into a muffler, mittens, or as an addition to her sleeves. Rabbit’s fur is warm, y’know?”

“How far do you plan on mastering your sewing hobby?”

Suddenly feeling a little embarrassed, I rub my face, pretending to wipe away the sweat. “...Forget it. I’ll sell it after all.”

“Nay, keep it. Tis not a bad idea.”

“You think so too?!”

Should we allow our forest living to drag on long enough to need to prepare for another winter? Preparing for the cold won’t be a waste because temperatures drop to freezing with the constant rains just after June. Just like the chill in the air that day last year.

“Heading to the village tomorrow?”

“Yeah. It’s market day after all. I wanna replenish my supply of arrowheads too.”

“Hrm. Your knightly mettle still burns strong to this day.”

“Naturally. I *am* a knight.”

Dragon quietly looks at me. He doesn’t let out a steamy sigh, furl in his wings, or scrutinize me with one eye closed. He’s serious.

“Don’t worry. I’m just a hunter in front of the village people.”

“...A lonely, single, middle-aged male hunter who took in the daughter of his deceased sister a year ago?”

“Yes, a single hunter.”

The corners of my lips twitch. Why does this stupid dragon always throw in an extra jab?!

“That’s a fairly clever and elaborate setting you came up with. Less of a chance that you will blow your cover that way than if you had tried to recklessly

pretend you were knowledgeable about children, or tried to impersonate a father and daughter relationship.”

“Glad you approve,” I say sarcastically.

I can’t stand him, but he gets my plans. I’m grateful for that. Since we’re fighting on the same side, it’d be a big problem if we couldn’t even start off on the same page.

I wash the knife and run it along the whetstone while we talk. It’s advisable to sharpen the blade right after using it to cut meat and tallow. *Aaah, he’s right, old habits die hard.*

“I have found it strange for quite some time now...”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“A year has passed since the uprising. Yet, why has Lord Siegfried not ascended the throne? He will continue to be labeled a traitor so long as he lives in the royal castle and controls the kingdom’s territory without taking the crown. You said it yourself, that he’s going exclusively by the name Lord Designs now.”

I share everything I see and hear with this lizard whenever I go into the village. Not through the scale, but I speak directly to him about it.

“Seems like he used to be called Lord Pretty Beard before.”

“Oh? He was?”

“Heard he has his very own barber spend an hour groomin’ his vaunted beard... Or was it two hours?”

“Gideon. Answer my inquiry.”

“Sure, sure.” Sheesh, this lizard can’t take a joke. “...Even if he wants to take the throne, he can’t.” I press the sharpened knife against my finger. It’s coming along nicely. If I apply even a little force, the point will go right through my fingertip. “He amounts to nothing more than the husband of the king’s younger female cousin. In other words—”

“He does not carry the blood of a Blessed Royal.”

“There you have it. Hence why he’s searchin’ for our princess.”

If somebody other than a Blessed Royal ascends the throne, the kingdom will perish. Even if they change the name, change the flag, and bring about a new country, the result will be the same. You can’t become a king if there’s no kingdom.

“I heard Lord Siegfried has a daughter though.”

“...You heard from Princess?”

“Indeed. She calls the girl her Princess Cousin and made her out to be quite the beautiful princess, with lapis lazuli eyes and long, flowing blond hair.”

What bitter irony. I’ll bet that the princesses got along fairly well. But all because Siegfried’s possessed by his ambitions, one princess is on the run and the other is now the daughter of a traitor.

“Lady Megan is Lord Siegfried’s daughter from another marriage. She was born from his first wife. Seems like her mother died right after giving birth to Lady Megan.”

“What about the king’s younger cousin?”

“She passed away seven years ago from illness.”

“To have not one, but two wives pass on before him...what an unfortunate man.”

“You can say that again.”

His first wife left him with her noble title, and the king’s cousin bequeathed him with her royal status. However, lineage through blood is not something you can do anything about. So—

“Lord Designs needs a third marriage to ascend the throne.”

“...I don’t want to think about it.”

“Yeah. I’m firmly against it.”

I bump my raised fist against the dragon’s outstretched foreleg.

“For the princess.”

“For the princess.”

GIDEON built the animal pen. Not with the help of Fairy Godmother’s magic, but with assistance from Mister Dragon. He rambled on and on about reasons that were hard to understand like, “a horse is the same as gold to a knight.” Now a goat lives there. Inside the pen is a big yellow horsey and a little light-brown goat. It’s warm being inside with them. I sit on a small wooden stool and milk our goat. We don’t need too much. A cup’s worth is good.

“Thanks, Daisy.”

“Meeheh!” I’m lightly scratching the base of her horns when she rubs against me—

Someone’s watching me. I feel eyes on me. It feels like somebody is waiting in anticipation.

“Kyawawawa. Kyawa. Kyawawa.” Sounds like soft fur balls rolling across the floor.

“Wait a moment, okay? I’ll give you some soon.”

I can’t look at them. I can’t chase them. I won’t be able to see them if I try to look. I first noticed them the very first morning I woke up in this house. Something had moved in the corner of the room when I groggily took a look around my bed.

“Kyawawawa. Kyawa. Kyawawa.”

“What’s that?” I glanced around, but no one was there. Nothing was there. I thought I spotted a tiny shadow run across the floor with light steps.

That *something* has always been inside the house. I wasn’t scared. The opposite actually—I was relieved to hear their voices. But Gideon is UTTERLY indifferent to them.

“Something’s here, isn’t it?”

“Nah, nothing’s here?”

Is he dense, oblivious, or a mixture of both?

“It is too here...”

“Look, Princess, there are two types of sounds a living creature makes.” He fixed me with a glare and suddenly thrust his hand out, holding up two fingers in front of my face. “Dangerous sounds and not dangerous sounds. If you’re sensitive to every single little sound that’s not dangerous, you won’t last mentally or physically.”

And that was the end of it.

But Mister Dragon was a different story. He immediately knew what I was talking about.

“That’s a Brownie.”

“A Brownie?”

“Brownies is more like it. They are also known as Brùnaidh. Is it easier for you to understand if I call them ‘The Tiny People’?”

“Oh! You mean the tiny people you can’t see even if you try to look at them?”

“Indeed. They are a household fairy that lives with humans. As a species, they generally inhabit human villages and homes, but...it appears they followed you here from the castle.”

“They followed me? Why?”

“Because you are the master of the castle, Princess.”

I was thrilled to hear that.

“Reverfeat isn’t ruined as long as I live.”

The little Brownies presence means that the words I said on top of the Daemon King’s tower that day weren’t wrong. They affirm my conviction. They whisper it to me. That’s why I can say this: I am the princess. I live in the forest. Reverfeat isn’t ruined as long as I’m alive.

I go inside the house with a bowl full of goat milk. I add a spoonful of honey in the kitchen and thoroughly stir it in.

“A spoonful of sweet, sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~ ♪

Round, round, fluffy-uffy roly-poly Brownies~ ♪ Tiny people, protective spirits of your sweet, dear home...”

You don’t forget the songs you learned when you were little.

“You look like you’re having fun, Princess.” Gideon calls out as he comes up the stairs.

“Yup, I’m having fun.”

“Gonna drink some milk?”

“Nuh-uh. This isn’t for me.”

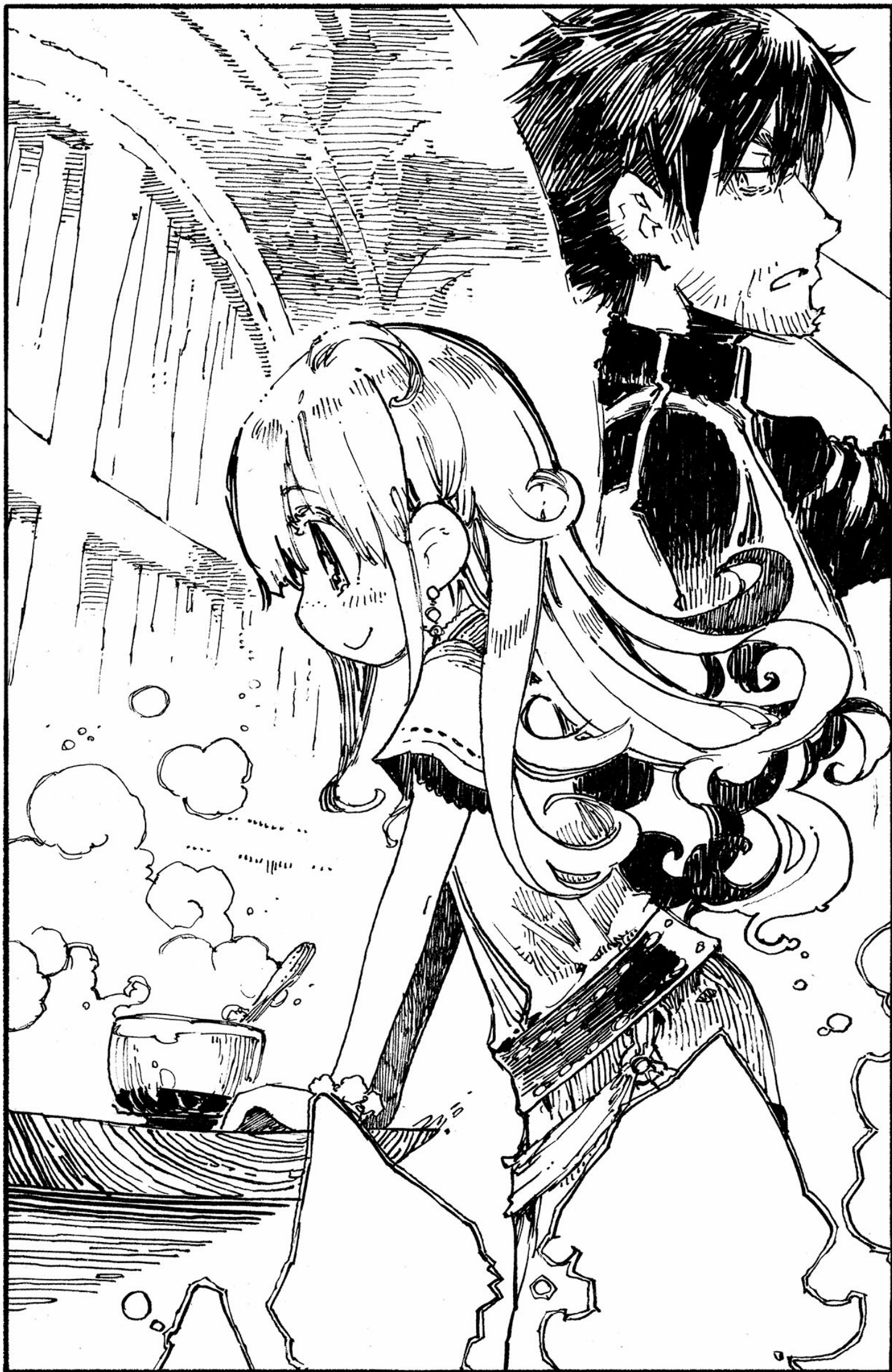
His eyes widen. I’m having a real blast with this.

“A spoonful of sweet, sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~ ♪,” I sing on the way to my room. I shut the door behind me and leave the cup in the usual spot. Excited, anticipating eyes are watching me. But I can’t look at them.

“Sorry for the wait. Go ahead and eat now.”

“Kyawawawa. Kyawa. Kyawawa.”

I hear them. I hear them. But I can’t see them. I quietly leave my room without looking back.



Chapter 4: Market Day in the Village

“**I’M** heading out.”

“Come back safe.”

I don’t use my horse when I go into the village. I go without taking my sword or shield either. They’re all things unsuitable for a simple hunter. Wearin’ a dagger on my belt is the most I can get away with and keep my cover. Besides, the village isn’t so far away that I’d hafta travel by horse. Things now are completely different from that first day when I fearfully and carefully fumbled my way through the accursed fog-enshrouded forest. I’m more than used to traveling this unbeaten path now. I know shortcuts too.

The barrier weakens the farther you travel from the Millennial Tree, and eventually the fog between the trees lets up. The border is poorly marked, but it’s definitely there. Fairy Godmother’s blessing protects Princess from the outside world like this.

ATTEGRUNE is a village directly south of the Black Forest. A quick count of the villagers gives you ‘bout five hundred. The number increases on Market Day. Up for trade are mostly quality woolen goods, cheese, cattle, horses, and sheep; all bounties from the forest-blessed pastures that are cultivated far and wide so that the livestock grazing there grow nice and fat. Before the recent months, this land wasn’t significant to those aside from merchants, livestock handlers, herdsman, and farmers, but...

Over the past year, the number of soldiers has increased drastically. So now men dressed in armor openly carry around swords, spears, and other deadly weapons.

The reason for their presence is obvious—they’re searching for Princess. Word has probably gone out that her last known whereabouts was near the Black Forest. But these days the number of regular soldiers has decreased.

Hired ruffians and mercenaries have come in droves to replace them. They're the kinda scum who quickly swap from soldier to thief when they ain't gettin' their pay.

Don't glare at them. Don't get involved with them. Don't start a fight. I carefully proceed while reminding myself of these three rules. Villagers in this area live by the same mantra. Wearing the borrowed mantle of authority from their employer Lord Designs, these cutthroats steal everything they want without payin' for it. Solider and outlaw: those who maintain public order, and those who destroy it. You gotta be cautious when dealin' with brawny men who easily switch roles as it fits 'em.

See, they've gone and shown up while I've been minding my own business. The scumbags fan out across the entire road's width flaunting their armor and swords, makin' clanking sounds as they go. I pull my hat low over my face and keep to one side of the road to let them pass by. Their equipment is excessively extravagant. Looks like Lord Designs dropped his cheapskate ways and is givin' quite generous payouts now. How long will we remain safe within the forest?

I continue straight down the main road and head for the inn. This is the biggest inn in the village, and it's got multiple services. The first floor's a tavern, as you'd expect. The rooms are clean and the food is appetizing. And most important of all, they're good on their payments.

I circle around back and call out, "Are you in, master?"

A genial red-faced man greets me, "Oh, I thought you'd show up soon."

I've heard he's not much older than me, but we're polar opposites. He's always got a big smile on whenever we meet. I've never actually seen him get mad before. Would I have become such a kindly old man if I'd walked another path in life?

"Here's this week's spoils."

This inn took my first kill off my hands, and I've been sellin' everything I catch to them ever since. To this day, they decorate the spot over their hearth with the mounted wild boar head.

I hand over the woodcocks, pheasants, and partridges. The innkeeper weighs

them, calculates their value, and gives me the equivalent in gold. I take it and store it in the pouch at my waist. Our usual exchange goes by without a hitch.

“Looking forward to your next visit, Hunter.”

“Many thanks for your business.”

“You’ll have some lunch before you go, yeah? Soup’s just finished boiling.”

“Much obliged.”

I circle around to the tavern and sit at a corner table. Before long, the innkeeper’s wife carries over a tray with a steaming hot bowl and mug on it. The bowl has a hearty soup of beans, turnips, and lamb stewed in plenty of milk. Rye bread accompanies it on the tray.

“Thanks for waiting. Go ahead and dig right in, hon!”

“Thanks.”

In contrast to her husband, the innkeeper’s wife moves briskly through the inn with peppy energy. She’s got a quick wit too, and she’s also an amazing conversationalist with the customers. Not to mention, she’s terribly caring.

She knows I’m raising my niece (in other words, the princess), so she always gives me a little something to bring home as a present. Usually it’s something small that won’t burden my journey back. Today’s present is a bright-green ribbon.

“...Thanks.”

“It’s just an afterthought, an afterthought! I bought the ribbons because my daughter was pestering me for some, but then I realized I bought one too many.”

She doesn’t try to force her goodwill on us or make me feel indebted—she does it because she likes to and that’s that. And she understands when to push and when to back off. She’s a fine woman, in every sense of the word.

“This place’s awfully crowded today.”

“Ah...yeah, you can say that,” she mumbles, which is unlike her. I follow her gaze to some dangerous-looking men, camping out among the usual customers.

They're downin' some hard ale even though it's still midday. A bunch of empty mugs are tipped over on their table.

She continues, "The money's good. Just the money..."

"I'll bet it is."

"I can't be picky about our customers. Recently, taxes have skyrocketed as well..." She catches herself. "Oh dear, I'm sorry. I had to go on and spoil the mood with sobering talk."

"It's fine. Doesn't it feel better to get it off your chest?"

"You can say that again." Someone calls for her from a table across the way. "Okay! I'll be right there!" She turns to me one last time. "Alrighty, you take it easy and enjoy that soup, hon." Her breasts slowly jiggle as she walks away.

Is the size of a woman's chest proportional to the size of her heart?

"Time to eat." I tear a piece of the bread and dip it in the piping hot soup. I blow on it before placing it in my mouth. It's hard bread with a sour bite to it. Soaked in the savory broth, it smoothly melts away. "Good stuff."

Being able to eat something that somebody else made, especially good food, is unquestionably one kind of happiness.

Lamb has a strong, distinct smell. At least, that's what I thought until now. Compared to the rabbit and deer I've been eating lately, it's much mellower. In other words, it doesn't have much of an acrid stench and isn't as gamey. Goes to show that how close you are to a human settlement is obvious in what food you eat.

Next, I dip the spoon into the soup. Basil, sage, and rosemary make the base flavor, topped off with a big ol' dash of ginger to give it that bite. Then the milk envelops all of the flavors, makin' a taste that can definitely only come from stewing a buncha ingredients in a huge pot.

Hot soup spills down my throat, flowin' into my once-empty stomach. My face eases into a satisfied smile. The tension in my stiff, rigid muscles is undone from the inside out. I chew, savor the flavor, and gulp down the soup, then reach for the ale mug to wash it down. I guzzle down the frothy bronze ale. This tavern's

ale's got a tingling bitterness that packs a punch. That's the good part. Luckily, I'm not one of those guys who get wasted after one or two mugs' full, but I make sure to eat when I drink just to be safe. The tavern's treating me, and let's face it, it's suspicious if a single adult male eats in a tavern without havin' a drink.

I listen attentively to what's goin' on while I eat and drink. It just so happens to be mealtime, so the tavern is bustling with just the right number of customers. The more customers there are, the noisier and livelier the surroundings are, and the more people are lulled into a false sense of security. They start lettin' little truths slip, ones they'd never utter in a quiet room. And rumors have a way of trickling to rural villages.

"The Atbridge's bridge was washed away again."

"Again? Must be because the rains haven't let up lately."

"Prospects are slim for gettin' it fixed any time soon."

"Then we have to go without a bridge now?"

Aid, assistance, and permission from a ruler are indispensable necessities for repairing large bridges. None of which has been granted. So the bridge they're talkin' about will remain unfixed no matter how much time passes.

"Can't laugh this one off."

"Damn straight about that."

Damn straight they are.

When I first started eating here, most of these customers had no fear of Lord Designs. Some of them even welcomed him, since he slipped in to power by entirely ignorin' all the systems and institutions our king had put in place. He left those who obeyed him alone and purged those who didn't. He offed the nobles, government officials, knights, and soldiers at a mad pace, but didn't directly lay hands on civilians. At least not yet...so far.

Everybody who was loyal to the king was slaughtered indiscriminately, or they made a run for it and are scattered about the kingdom now. It's not a guarantee anybody actually survived.

Things became increasingly more suspicious after not one or two, but three months after the kingdom's ruler switched unnaturally. Lord Designs' first major action as the new ruler was mass renovation of the castle. Then came an increase in personnel in his private army. After all, he couldn't trust the king's soldiers or any of the knights who were loyal to the king. Rapidly ridding the castle of them, he filled the holes in with men he hired with money.

Nevertheless, the castle's savings are finite. Cue Lord Designs throwin' the weak to the wolves to balance his accounts. Fires burned down towns, droughts dried up wells, rivers surged and washed away bridges, infectious diseases wiped out large populations. But it doesn't matter to him—Lord Designs has decided to ignore the plights of the people.

From everything I've overhead, he'll give the same reply, without fail, to any entreaty that doesn't catch his fancy: "It'll be dealt with appropriately in the near future."

That near future will never come. Terrifyin' thing is that many hands rose in support of this policy. Primarily the hands of the strong, young, and wealthy. Typical.

"Hooray! Now the dregs of society will be out of the picture!"

"Second-rate citizens are happier dead."

"If we've got money to coddle them, we should get some too."

Start chippin' and castin' away the bottom of the pyramid, and you'll eventually find yourself on the bottom next. Might not be today or tomorrow, but someday your turn will come. Before you know it, you'll fall to ruin, endin' up on the very bottom. By the time you know to panic about your head on the next chopping block, it'll be too late.

"It wasn't supposed to turn out this way!"

You'll be runnin' 'round like chickens without heads until ya take the final blow, and bam, that's it for you. But no one thinks it'll ever happen to them.

To make matters even worse, Lord Siegfried is showing the people how to take advantage of each other. Want something? Plunder it, even if it means you gotta kill to have it. He's gone and turned into a role model, advertisin' doing

wrong is the right way of doing things. He's officially given permission to the scum to let loose with his policy of taking "appropriate action in the future."

But this is all typical stuff for any usurper. The real bad stuff came afterwards.

After letting all hell loose, Lord Designs simply turned his back on the chaos. He won't even try to demonstrate his power to keep things in check because he only cares about his own greed. He charges headlong without lookin' back. In a sense, he's doing something different from others cut from the same cloth that preceded him.

"I'll make Princess Lala Lilia my wife!"

Now he goes around shouting that off the rooftops without givin' a jot about what other people think. A man past his forties with a daughter of his own is openly announcin' his desire to marry a young girl of seven. It's a *must* for him! Well, if these rumors of his desires have trickled down to rural parts in the middle of nowhere like this, then it's gotta be known throughout the kingdom.

Yet for all of that, Lord Designs Siegfried is currently this kingdom's ruler. He stands at the top and tightly clutches the money and power. Ergo, nobody challenges or criticizes him. They can't stop him.

"I'll make Princess Lala Lilia my wife!"

Chaos has befallen the kingdom as a result. Criminals run rampant everywhere, pillagin' and lootin' in broad daylight. Breaking down walls and boldly walking into homes, and taking to the streets to surround any ol' random passerby and beat them senseless. And control over the public order has been on a one-way street to lenience. Moreover, Lord Siegfried's private armies have taken a page out of his book and openly take whatever the hell they want. Plenty of men are happy to join in the pillaging.

This kingdom is already in tatters and full of bug-eaten holes. The outer walls that the late king left behind are barely holding together. Once the next large-scale disaster hits...the base of this shaky kingdom will give way. Like a house built on sand or ash.

Look, I'm an ignorant man when it comes to government, but even I understand what's going on.

Lord Designs Siegfried just wants the title of King. He doesn't care for governin' the kingdom, no way no how. He'll devour this country until it falls apart around him. And then he'll move on to his next prey like the parasite he is.

Just how he hopped wives to climb the ladder of social status.

...Enough of these ill thoughts. It sours my food.

Putting my thoughts aside, I concentrate on the food before me.

Protect the princess till the end. That's our last hope.

"Thanks for the meal. It was delicious."

TAKING the back roads is the shortest route to the blacksmith. Though we refer to them as the back roads, when you consider when they were made, they're actually the original main roads. As the village grew with more people, they built wider roads. Hence why this road runs parallel to where people live. Stagnant water, eroded soil, moldy grass, withered trees, rusty metal, damp half-dried cloths. Whether it be at the castle, or a town, or a village: wherever people live, this kinda stench follows. There's a difference in how noticeable it is, but the stench of habitation never goes away nevertheless.

Sound is another thing you can bet on. You'll hear far more voices spillin' out onto the winding back roads compared to the main road.

"Officer, please spare me with this amount."

The voice startles me—it's a child playacting. Out of the kids playin' behind the blacksmith's shop there are two boys who catch my eye. One is holding open a filthy bag, while the other picks up a bowl sitting on the porch, from which he pours a measured amount of sand into the bag.

"No, no, it's not enough. Doesn't even reach half of what ye owe."

"Forgive me, but you are asking for double what I paid last month, my lord."

"This is the cost starting this month. It's what the men on top have decided. Go on then, dump it in. Pour it all in. Otherwise a rope'll go around yer neck 'n ya'll hang!"

Both kids crack up laughing. They toss aside the bag, bowl, and sand to start chasin' each other 'round the yard. Child's play is like a magic mirror—it reflects the cruel reality of the world.

I wait for them to noisily run by me before entering the blacksmith's shop.

I can shave the shaft of an arrow. I can attach the fletching. But arrowheads are one thing I can't make on my own. And there's nothing suspicious about a hunter buyin' arrows.

I buy just what I need and thank the blacksmith as I take my leave. The blacksmith's thrivin'. Just goes to show how dramatic the increase in the number of people wantin' weapons has been.

A woman is beside the shop when I step outside. She's still young. She wears the hood of her cloak low over her face, but it does nothing to hide her seductive curves. Her perfectly supple and voluptuous breasts are pressed tightly together by her corset and still jiggle. It's a feast for the eyes. Her intent to cover up has the reverse effect of makin' her stand out because of the cloth.

And she's clearly not used to the roads 'round here. She's restlessly dartin' her eyes around, and just when I think she's passed by me, she turns back. Does she not know where to go?

She's asking for danger at this rate.

"Ah!"

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, she bumped into a man arrogantly striding down the middle of the narrow road like he owns the place. Though they lack any uniformity to the clothes they wear, each and every one of these sleazebags sports expensive armor and weapons—he's from Lord Design's personnel army.

"YOW!"

Bang! Clang! Metal hits metal. The grating sound pierces through the oppressive air and rings in my ears. Sounds different from the blacksmith's regular beat by striking his mallet against metal.

"What're ya doin', walkin' 'round with yer head in the clouds, lady?!"

Oh c'mon, there's a limit to how far you can stretch a false accusation. No matter which way you look at it, he's obviously the one who walked right into her!

"I'm terribly sorry. It was careless of me."

"Careless? Think that'll make it all go away, huh? If yer gonna apologize, ya gotta show yer sincerity!"

None of his fellow soldiers stop him. Worse yet, they form a circle around the woman. Things are going in a bad direction.

Trouble is trouble. Don't get involved. Don't butt your head in. Don't take action. Forget your knightly mettle and noble sentiments, Gideon!

I know what I need to do, but my feet won't move. I don't turn and walk away.

"C'mon, guys, you're troubling the lass." One of the older bearded men mumbles out from the back of the group, but is ignored. "Let's just go get a drink!" he tries again, but a glare from their apparent leader silences him.

The man who started it all turns back to the woman, "Lemme teach ya the way outta this plain and simple. Leave yer entire purse and go."

I've never seen such a bold and open highway robbery before!

"Money... Is it all right if I just pay you money?"

"That's right, girly, obediently put out ev'rythin' that can be put out!" The first man crassly reaches for her.

"What are you doing?!" The woman retreats in fear. The momentum knocks her hood back.

"Oooh, whatta we 'ave 'ere? Ain't you a fine woman!"

She's definitely a looker. Curled eyelashes sweep over beautiful almond eyes rounding off a rather attractive face. A straight nose offsets her amber eyes and smooth long silver hair. Her vibrant, almost luscious chocolate skin gives away that she was probably born in another country. One to the far, far south of here. All of this adds to the lady's rare and highly exotic beauty.

“Know w’at, I ‘on’t need no money after all.”

“Got that right. Don’t need no money with this. Join us for a bit, lady.”

“I refuse,” she boldly declares.

“We’ve got money.”

The silver-haired woman knits her thin, plucked eyebrows together and turns her chin up defiantly. She glowers up at the man through narrowed eyes and firmly closes her coral lips. She’s smiling. “Unfortunately for you, I am not *that* kind of woman.”

The prey they had supposedly cornered boldly attacked back.

“Bitch!”

This is where people with any decent sense of shame would walk away before they embarrassed themselves further. But these men were given weapons and power they hadn’t earned, and they didn’t have that kinda head on their shoulders. Rather, they’ve got a few screws loose.

“Don’t ya dare make a fool outta me!”

One of the men snaps. His face contorts and he violently grabs the woman by her bertha collar.

“Stop it! What are you doing?!” She writhes painfully under his hold.

Her cloak slips off. Still, the man isn’t satisfied. He forcefully tears off the fasteners keeping her dress together. The threads rip apart, exposing her chest. Round and heavy, dark voluptuous breasts bigger than an adult man’s hand sway out from her busted corset. She is a stunning, beautiful exotic woman with an amazing body.

“No! Let go of me!” The woman’s shrieks shoot through me. She’s terrified.

My body moves faster than my brain.

“C’mere. I’ll slowly beat the insolence right outta ya. I’ll teach ya that women exist to obey w’at men tell ‘em to do!”

“Yeah, you tell ‘er! Do it—ARGH!”

I sweep the legs out from under one of the men surrounding her. As he

tumbles onto the ground, I step over him to reach for the man standing next to him. There's nothing to it. They must've let their guard down, assuming nobody would dare to get in their way.

I grab the outlaw's wrist above the joint and tightly clench the bone just under the skin. "Let the lady go. She's not interested," I growl. All I've done is grab hold of him—for now.

"Hmph! Don't go buttin' in! Ya ain't no knight."

"True, I'm but a hunter. But I at least can tell the difference between what you should and shouldn't do."

"Ow! Ow! OW!"

I dig my fingers in and squeeze. His skin bends under my fingers and the bone cracks. The man's face distorts and his eyes roll back. I tighten my grip.

"EEK! Yer 'urting me! *It 'urts!*"

"Release the lady. Else, guess you can say goodbye to your wrist?"

"Don't! Anythin' but me good hand!"

I can feel the bone wrench under my fingers. Pain must've gotten to him, because he releases the woman's hand. Without a moment's delay, I twist his arm behind his back.

"URGH!"

Didn't take much effort. I slam my left hand into the back of his knees and shove the collapsing body right into the middle of where his comrades are standing stupefied.

"Now then, gentlemen." I add a theatrical bow. "Would you do me the honor of this dance?"

"Bastard!"

Pisses ya off, don't it? As I hoped.

Tons of junk lies around in the back roads. Add in the fact that it's Market Day, in front of a blacksmith's shop, and you can count on all sorts of objects lyin' around. I dunno whether this handy wooden pole at my feet is kindling

that tumbled off a carriage or an axe's hilt before carving, but either way, I already had my eyes on it before I stepped forward. I kick it into the air with the tip of my boot, grab it, and immediately slam it into the back hand of a cutthroat dressed up as a soldier about to draw his sword, pinning it against his body. I firmly twist the tip of the pole without easing up on the pressure.

"Just a moment. It's game over if you unsheathe that pretty lil' thing you've got there." Digging the pole in even deeper, I close the gap between us. "Take a look over there. You've got eyes, don't you? It's a government official. What're you gonna do? Unsheathe it right here and now? Hmm?"

"You! You—"

Corrupt as the officials are, they can't ignore a dispute if a weapon is drawn in front of them in the middle of a village that continually meets their tax quota. You can only look the other way for so long, and failure to meet the higher taxes is a death sentence for an official. And let's not forget we're in the boondocks out here. Corruption hasn't permeated as deep as it has at the center of the kingdom.

"The officer in this village is thickheaded," I continue, "Bribes from your fancy lords don't work all that well on him yet... Ya understand what I'm getting at, don't'cha? It means you better pack your bags 'cause they'll chase you outta this village. You wanna bet on whether there's a nice, comfy pile of rocks for you to camp out on outside the village?"

His allies stagger to their feet. The man who tried to draw his sword averts his eyes and pensively steps back. I swiftly withdraw my sword (otherwise known as the conveniently placed pole). The victor has been decided.

"You'd better remember this!"

"Sure, sure, if I've got the spare time to."

What a cliché line. They turn their backs on me as a group and briskly trot away. I watch them go before lowering the pole's point.

"Are you unharmed, miss?"

"Thank you." The silver-haired lady has already pulled her cloak back on. Looks like I don't need to be polite and look away from her. "You saved me,

lad.”

“I’m not young enough to be a lad.”

“All right then, how about I call you this then?”

Uh-oh.

“O.L.D. M.A.N.”

Supple, warm skin squishes against my upper arm as she presses her chest against it.

“Won’t you join me for a drink as thanks? My treat.” She gazes up at me from under her hood with an extremely enticing smile. Her honeyed voice tickles my ears. If I were ten years younger, I would’ve jumped at the chance. Probably would’ve gotten my hopes up that I’d be lucky enough to be treated to something other than a drink...but things are different now.

“Tempting, a very tempting invitation, miss. But this old man is busy right now.”

“With work?”

“Nah, childrearing.”

“Aw, you have kids.” Her soft, jiggling breasts and their warmth quickly drains away. “Too bad.” She shrugs her slender, round shoulders.

“Sincerest apologies, miss. At least let me escort you to the main road.”

“Thank you.”

“...This way.”

She walks side by side with me. Luckily, she doesn’t cling to my arm this time.

“The roads here are really complicated. It’s like a maze,” she complains.

“They’re pretty useful once you get used to them. You can take a lot of shortcuts.”

“I don’t plan to stick around long enough to get used to them.”

On the way to the main road, a familiar song stops me.

“A spoonful of sweet, sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~♪”

Six girls are standing in a circle playing ball. They throw a ball that's one-size bigger than their hands to the beat of the song.

"Round, round, fluffy-uffy, roly-poly Brownies~♪. Tiny people, protective spirits of your sweet, dear home...♪"

Apparently, they have a set pattern to throw the ball around in. Sometimes they bounce it once on the ground. Or one of them will toss the ball straight up in the air, clap, and catch it again. Some sorta unspoken rules seem to be regulatin' their movements. And because they're matchin' it to a song, the timing and speed's all set too. Looks pretty difficult but fun.

"But, but, be careful. If you forget the milk...♪"

What happens if you forget the milk?

I'm straining to hear the next line when a small voice shouts, "Oh no!" and the ball rolls over to my feet. Looks like the girl couldn't catch it. I bend over and pick the ball up. It's surprisingly light. Its exterior's probably made from lamb or goat skin. The seams are minute, thorough, and there are signs that it's been mended many times.

"Here you go. Catch!" I lightly toss it back with one hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Hunter!" A girl with her black hair tied in braids catches the ball. Bright-green ribbons sway from her braids. She must be the innkeeper's daughter. She quickly bows her head before returning to the circle.

"A spoonful of sweet, sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~♪"

They restarted the song. Must be a rule. I didn't get to hear the rest of the verse.

"Round, round, fluffy-uffy, roly-poly Brownies...♪" Six voices sing in chorus. Princess sings this same song alone.

"Maybe she's lonely."

"Your daughter?"

"Nah, my niece. I took her in 'cuz my younger sister and her husband passed away from an infectious disease."

“Oh no. That must be rough.”

“Yeah. I still can’t get used to children.” I shrug and move on.

“Are you thinking about buying her a ball as a present?”

That startles me. The silver-haired lady is peering up at me, the corners of her lush pouty lips curl up. She saw through me and managed to guess the idea that had just randomly crossed my mind.

“I wouldn’t if I were you. That’s not a game you can play alone.”

And then she quickly shuts it down. I was that obvious, huh?

“The most she can do is toss it up in the air and catch it when it falls back down.”

“...Yeah? I guess you’re right.” This kinda game is impossible for Dragon and me. Our physique’s way too different—especially Dragon’s. “Maybe I can sing along with her.”

“Can you sing?”

We exchange glances for a long, hard minute.

“...Probably?”

She shrugs.

“I think it’d be nice if I could sing.”

She snorts. “Best of luck to you.”

Sunlight shines in the direction we’re going. I can hear the clamor of people, the creak of carriage wheels comin’ and goin’ to and from their destinations. The main road is just ahead.

“Thank you. See you next time, old man.” A slender and lithe black finger glides down my cheek. A feeling of slight warmth and silky smooth skin stays on my cheek as the finger leaves.

“Huh?” I completely freeze for a second. The lady gracefully pulls her hood over her head and walks off.

Meanwhile, I stand still in the middle of the road, with a hand on my cheek

like an idiot. It takes until she's gone for me to finally realize: she was stroking my cheek.

HER words don't leave me, even after I return to the forest.

"I wouldn't if I were you. That's not a game you can play alone."

Yeah, it's not.

Princess is alone. She's only got me and Dragon with her. Both of us are old men. As for other companions she can talk to, she's got the goat, horse, and chickens. Besides them, there's just the Tiny People. Since other kids were singing about 'em, they're not just a figment of Princess' imagination. That at least eases my worries just a smidge.

How long should we keep this lifestyle up for? How long should we stay hidden in this forest? When will the right time Lady of Dawn spoke of come? Today? Tomorrow? Ten years from now? Will Princess be stuck singing all alone until then? That's far too sad.

Can I sing? Me?

Dragon can probably sing. He's got a curiously nice voice...for a lizard. Even though he's a fire-breathing lizard...

Something rustles in the thicket where I'm headed. My head jerks up. And just what do I see?!

"GI! DE! ON!" Princess comes sprintin' full-speed along one of the Millennial Tree's massive horizontal branches.

Crap! I've got a bad stance! She's headin' this way! I hurry to drop my bags and quickly plant my feet. I make it by a hairbreadth—just as Princess dives off the branch with her tiny feet.

"Woohoo!" Red hair flutters, trailing behind her with her shout of joy as she comes flying at me. I spread open my arms and catch her.

My back pops. Princess' weight and momentum send shockwaves down my spine. But I won't let go. Who'd ever let go of her? Not me. Not ever. Princess giggles loudly in my arms. Freckles plainly stand out on her rose-colored cheeks.

“Welcome home!”

“I’m home, Princess.”

In the meantime, my number one worry is how long my body will hold out. Primarily, how long my lower back will.

“**THANK** you for the food! Oh geez, was it delicious!”

“Glad you liked it.”

She jumps up and down, balls her hands into fists, crouches down, and leaps. The bright-green ribbon tied into her hair flutters behind her like a butterfly.

Princess’ reactions when she eats are as honest as they come. And how do I put it? She’s got a real appetite. She’s had one since she first devoured blackberries that cold rainy day we entered this forest. Fortunately, tonight’s meal consisted of warm soup and bread toasted with cheese. The soup’s broth was made from rabbit meat, goat milk, nuts, and turnips. I tried to recreate the flavors I tasted at the inn with the ingredients we have at home. My experiment was a success—Princess emptied her bowl down to the last drop, which she soaked up by rubbing her bread along the rim to cleanly finish off the soup.

“Now this’ll be an easy bowl to wash.”

“Yours will be too, Gideon.”

We have two bowls and spoons carved from polished wood. Princess was perplexed the first time she was faced with havin’ to use them last year. I don’t blame her. Until then, she’d eaten off of porcelain tableware with silver utensils. Now she’s completely used to it.

“I like wooden spoons. They’re soft inside your mouth.”

“I see, I see... Glad to hear.”

Carry the tableware you used yourself—she’s grown used to this routine as well.

“Wipe down the table.”

“Leave it to me.”

She soaks the dishcloth in water, wrings it, and trots over to the table. From what she's told me, she learned everything, from how to clear the table to how to clean it, from watchin' me do it. After observing me a few times, she eventually offered to help. "I'll do it too," she volunteered. It was curiosity that got her to participate, but things really are great 'round the house once a kid starts helpin' out.

"Hey, Princess, want to have some after-dinner tea? The mint and chamomile one..."

I don't hear an answer. I look over my shoulder. Oh boy. She's fast asleep on top of the table. Her little hand is still gripping the dishcloth.

"Kids really do fall asleep just about anywhere..."

She skips and bounces around the room all the time, so I get why she'd fall asleep like that. I pick her up and ascend the stairs to the second-story, carrying her to her room.

It's poor manners, but I open the door with my foot and shoulder anyway. The wreaths she's diligently weaved together with acorns, twigs, herbs, flowers, and ivy rustle and swish as the door pushes open. She really struggled making the first tiny one, but her skill's increased with each new one she's made. Now, I'm amazed by their colorfulness and size.

The biggest surprise of all, though, was learning that Dragon taught her how to make 'em.

How extensive is that lizard's knowledge?

I roll down the throw blankets and lay Princess on her bed. I remove her shoes and pull the blankets back up.

"Good night, Princess."

Time to lock the doors. Better securely lock up the animal pen too.

Dampness is in the wind. The air is heavy. Tonight will see rain before long.

THUNDER rumbles. The loud, crashing booms shake the shutters. Princess Lala Lilia snaps awake and curls into a ball, hugging her pillow on the bed. She

can't remember when she fell asleep or got into her bed.

The Millennial Tree's leaves and branches bend and yield to the wind, but the trunk doesn't budge an inch. The home protecting her is solid.

It's okay. It's okay. It's safe here. I know. I know, but...

White light flashes through the gaps in the shutter.

"Eek!" She holds the pillow over her head and buries her face in the bed.
"One, two, three, fou—"

BANG!

"...!"

She shoots up in bed, swinging her feet onto the ground. Barefoot, she flies from her room, hugging her pillow, and fearfully descends the staircase.

Don't roar. Don't roar right now!

Light flashes outside the windows again.

"Aaaah!" She runs as fast as her little legs will carry her down the stairs.
"Mister Dragon! Mister Dragon!" She charges into the huge cellar where Dragon sleeps.

"Hello there, Princess." Dragon is waiting for her. His honey eyes, his pleasantly deep, resounding voice, and his warm breath all envelop her. "What might be the matter?"

"Thunder...is scary. Can I sleep with you?"

"Of course. Come here, hatchling."

"Thank you, Mister Dragon."

Dragon invites her over with his foreleg, his wings spread out. Princess lunges for him, hugs his big body, and clings to his stomach.

"So warmmm." She burrows under his gentle wings and dreamily shuts her eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"I love you..."

Her repeated “I love yous” gradually drawl into lisps and transform into the peaceful breaths of deep sleep.

“...Did she fall asleep?” Knight asks a short while later from where he hides in the shadows of a support pillar.

“Aye. She’s out cold. You needn’t worry any longer.”

“...Is that so?” He quietly steps back upstairs. He knows this is Dragon’s job, after all.

“Good night, Princess.”

Chapter 5: The Hunt for Little Girls

THERE is a castle where the three rivers flow into one and pour into the sea. A secure castle, surrounded by the torrential waters and protected by two layers of walls. Reverfeat's king once lived here. Now Lord Siegfried, the man possessed by the designs of his own ambitions, resides within. With his first marriage: he became a noble. With his second: royalty. And now the man aims to become king with his third.

Deep inside the throne room, colorful light spills through the stained-glass windows, illuminating the king's chair atop a step higher than the rest of the room. It's an impressive, gorgeous throne, crafted from ivory, gold, and scarlet-dyed silk and furs. One year and a day ago, Lord Designs obtained this castle. However, to this day, he has been unable to get his hands on that special chair—due to some ancient laws.

Though he may outwardly mock the ancient laws as superstitions of archaic tradition, behind his façade, he intimately fears it. He believes in them. Because it is none other than Lord Designs Siegfried himself who is trying to benefit from the blessing granted by the intricacies of those very same archaic laws.

Therefore, Lord Siegfried has an objective he must achieve. He has an obstacle he must overcome. He will make whatever sacrifices it takes to get there. No matter how much the commoners and lesser people insult and ridicule him!

"I want to marry Princess Lala Lilia. I have to marry her!" Lord Designs shouts yet again today. Clenching his fists, he shakes his comely beard that has been scrupulously trimmed by his personal barber. "I swear on all the stars in the heavens that I will make Princess Lala Lilia my wife!"

The girl standing in wait beside him coldly looks up at her father. Her eyes are such a deep, dark lapis lazuli that it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between her irises and pupils. However, it is not the blue of the heavens but that of a bottomless abyss.

“You will make her your third wife?”

“Yes, my third wife.”

Her clear, flat voice does not tremble. It does not waver or lose its composure. It hadn't done so since the day her father revolted against the king. Nor will it in this moment, when he confesses his selfish desires without fearing what those who overhear will think.

There is a reason why this girl, who just recently turned ten, is unthinkably calm, cool, and collected. An open secret everyone whispers, murmuring it in the shadows when asked, before suddenly and abruptly holding their tongue.

“A seven-year-old girl?”

“Yes, a seven-year-old girl!” Does his ability to brazenly assert his desires without shame come from his chagrin or self-abandonment?

“Your idea is proper for royalty, Father. But the masses will see it as...”

“The masses will see it as?” he prompts.

“You being a lecherous pervert.”

“It's not like I want to marry a child! The kingdom will fall to ruin if someone other than a Blessed Royal takes the throne. I can't become king without a kingdom.”

“I am aware.”

“Ooh, Megan! My precious daughter. Beautiful pearl!”

Lord Designs throws open his arms and embraces his daughter. Her blue dress, crafted from the most lavish materials and sewn into many frills and pleats, scrunches against him. A great number of pearls, sewn on to suit her name, rub against each other as they clatter hollowly. Her slender golden eyebrows slightly knit together before quickly returning to their place.

“Lend me your wisdom. Every other person out there is incompetent. Worthless oafs. Since the day I started squandering money like water to send soldiers out in droves, today marks a...uh...”

“A year and a day since.”

“Yes. A year and a day since! I’ve futilely wasted that much time. And still, those men have yet to grasp Princess Lala Lilia’s whereabouts. They can’t even find a lone seven-year-old girl!”

Lady Megan smoothly wriggles out of her father’s arms. That’s how superficial his embrace is.

Lady Megan was born through her father’s first marriage and earned the title of noblewoman through his second. She has long, straight golden locks that refuse to bend or lose their perfection even after being braided. Her blue, lapis lazuli eyes are offset by porcelain white skin. Not even the most skilled artisan can chisel her sweet beauty’s likeness into stone or capture her breathtaking appearance in a mural. Anyone who takes a single look at her beauty forgets to breathe. But this girl, who has been blessed with impeccable good looks, lacks one crucial thing.

Just before the birth of his daughter, Lord Designs conducted a supplication ritual. Yet, instead of praying to the gods of the heavens, he prayed to the Devil of the Abyss.

“Grant me kingship! I offer you the soul of my newborn child as payment!”

Though it is questionable whether the ritual succeeded as he desired, his daughter was born without a soul. She sheds no tears, no smile turns her lips, no anger furrows her brow. No matter what she sees, hears, touches, or experiences, she lacks any heartstrings to be pulled.

Thus, he believes it was done. He was going to become king!

Nevertheless, he cannot find Princess Lala. He has not heard any rumors or glimpsed any trace of her whereabouts.

“The mourning period for the king and queen is over. There’s nothing left to hinder my marriage with Lala Lilia,” he bemoans.

“Father.”

“All that’s left is the princess. All is resolved as long as we find the princess! As long as I have the princess! I’ll take her in my hands and—”

“Father,” Lady Megan’s icy voice slices through the air. Her narrowed blue

eyes coolly bore into her tortured, impatient father.

“Ah...ahem.” He clears his throat and rushes to regain his dignity. “Let me hear what you have to say, O daughter of mine. You may speak.”

Now that her father has regained his calm, Lady Megan slowly elucidates, “If you cannot find a single four-leaf clover, why not cut down the entire clover hill?”

At first, Lord Designs struggles to understand the meaning of his daughter’s words. He listens with his mouth hanging open, until finally he blinks twice, then thrice...he smirks wickedly.



“I see. I see! That’s it. That was it all along!”

“Yes, it was, Father.” Lady Megan bows before quietly and passively withdrawing into the tall, trailing shadow of the throne basked in sunlight.

“Someone! Is anyone here?!” he demands.

Then she watches. Inconspicuously from the shadows, without making a sound.

Imperial guards and private soldiers hurry into the room, their hands on their swords. She watches Lord Siegfried order the soldiers who don matching white surcoats that are bright on the eyes and decorated with great pomp.

“Capture all the seven-year-old girls who live within our domain. Bring every single one of them to the castle regardless of their social standing.”

Thus, the hunt began.

By the command of a single man.

YOU can cut away however much of the white clover hill as you want yet still fail to locate the four-leaf clover that was never there in the first place. Needless to say, girls were seized from farms, ranches, fields, and the roadside, from their mother’s chest, their father’s arms, from under the table, and from their beds. Little girls were suddenly kidnapped away from their peaceful lives. Their cries of alarm fell upon deaf ears and blind eyes as they were shoved into carriages and carted off to the castle.

Given little to no food and water, some died before ever reaching the castle. But such manhandling of the goods during transport is a severe mistake. It would spell hell if their employer happened to find out—he’d cut their wages. So the senior members of the private army donning white surcoats would quickly carry away the corpses to dispose of them on the side of the road.

“Hurry! Hurry! Our lord is waiting!”

Not wanting to waste the time it would take to bury them, they left the corpses to the wild animals, crows, and bugs.

Even arriving at the castle gave them no time to rest. Having cried their hearts out over their journey, the girls who no longer had any energy left are mercilessly forced to their feet and lined up in the banquet hall like cattle.

“C’mon, look this way.”

They support each other, trembling because they do not know how to escape.

“Is this hair a wig? ...Hmm, doesn’t pull off. Are these eyeballs real?” Lord Designs grabs the chin of each one, forcing it upwards to eagerly scrutinize every little detail. “Shut up. Don’t cry. Don’t sob. I’ll rip out your tongue. Hair and eye color can be changed as much as someone wants! I won’t be tricked! I *won’t* be deceived!”

Fear, anxiety, starvation, thirst, and fatigue weigh upon the girls. Lord Design digs his nails into the young cheeks that heave with gasps and strangled breathing as he yanks them this and that way.

“Open your mouth. Don’t close your eyes. Hey! Don’t you run away! LOOK! AT! ME!” After his hair-curling, horrendous inspection is done, he spits in their faces without fail. “Wrong. WRONG. This one’s not her either!”

And then he cruelly throws the girl on the ground like a used rag. “I’ve no use for this. Take care of it.”

Young bodies lay weakly collapsed on the ground. Junior officers run over to them as soon as they are tossed aside, grabbing them by their slender limbs or by their raggedy hair, and violently drag them away.

“He...l...p...m...e”

“Yo...u’re...hu...rti..ng...me...”

The girls scream between gasps. No one answers them.

“Mommy...”

Be that as it may, the officers left with orders to get rid of the girls after Lord Designs is done with them are in a bind as well. Little girls were brought to the castle in droves. Each and every inspection ended futilely, for none were who he was looking for. He tells the officers to remove the discarded from the room and to dispose of them, but the officers have nowhere to carry the girls off to

right away. As a stopgap measure, they created an enclosure in the courtyard, indiscriminately stuffing the girls inside.

“I wanna go home.”

“I wanna go back home.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“We haven’t done anything wrong.”

Feeble sobs and cries of hunger come from the enclosure. Each girl’s voice is tiny and quiet, but each of their words overlaps and unite as one, echoing to the deepest corners of the castle. Several fade away never to return overnight. But not enough die for the number of newcomers brought in every day. Their numbers do not decrease no matter how much time passes—it only increases.

“What do we do?” the officers gripe.

“What do we do?”

“What should we do?”

“Those kids are still alive. This is different from dumping bodies.”

“Damn straight. Even I have issues with indiscriminately murdering children... Feels like I’ll get cursed for this.”

“Wanna put them in the dungeons for now?”

At this very moment, four imperial guards and private army officers gather in the castle corridors, putting their heads together to generate the answer to their problems. Rejecting each and every idea that pops up, they fold their arms as they rack their brains.

“We can shove ‘em into the dungeons and just wait it out until they grow weak and die.”

“Oooh, nice idea.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Can’t happen. It’s outta the question—the dungeons are already full.”

“Why don’t we just return them to their parents already?”

“Wait, wait. Can’t happen. Outta the question. We haven’t a jot about who we collected from where.”

“What should we do?”

“What should we do?”

As a group, they grimace with their folded arms. Then sounds of rustling and trailing skirts draws nears. A sweet smell drifts through the air.

“The answer is simple,” offers a voice. “Why not discard them all in the forest? Good idea, is it not? All you have to do is leave them there. They will die on their own.”

“Lady Megan!”

“There is nothing to hesitate over. Your hands won’t be sullied.”

Successfully tempted by those blue eyes, the men in white surcoats nod in agreement. *That’s the smartest way to go about things*, they think without hesitation.

“We shall do as you say.”

“We shall act as you see fit.”

We were only following orders. We haven’t done anything wrong, they foolishly believe.

“Do not let your guard down, Gideon.”

“I know, Dragon.”

The fog is thick this morning.

An eerie premonition leaves me uneasy, so I leave our hideaway at daybreak. The vague feeling in my gut grows more real the closer I get to the forest’s edge. The undergrowth’s been trampled under careless feet. Leather boots have left deep marks in the damp soil.

Somebody’s come here. *Several* somebodies prowled the outskirts of the Black Forest. But they also departed hastily, without setting foot deeper into the woods. What in the world did they come here for? Tryin’ to appease Lord

Designs by nearin' the forest for appearance's sake?

But I was naïve.

The stench of coagulated blood and rotting flesh hangs in the air. It's the putrid smell of corpses. Following it, I push my way through the shrubs and brushwood.

"...!"

I was a naïve, optimistic old fool.

They came here to do something far more heinous.

"Damn it all!" Curses wrench from my throat in a hoarse, trembling voice.

They discarded them—*children*—like trash. And they're all young girls. Their clothes and appearances greatly vary. But every single one of them's the same exact age...as Princess Lala Lilia.

"DAMN IT ALL!"

They abducted every seven-year-old in the land because they couldn't find Princess?!

Undernourished, haggard little girls are huddled together, hugging each other. I cut my way through the underbrush and run over to them.

"Oi! Stay with me!"

A murder of crows takes flight in a flurry of wings. Their black wings disturb the white fog.

"Gideon. It is too late," Dragon tells me through the scale.

Through our shared vision, I borrow Dragon's eyes to perceive what was hidden from my own. The heaps of small bodies are no longer breathing. No traces of life are left. Crows have pecked their soft flesh and gouged out their tiny eyes. Hasty bugs have already laid their eggs and spawned their young.

"What the hell!"

Then I see it amid the decaying, altered corpses. I notice a sole bright-green ribbon dangling from disheveled black hair tied back into braids.

“AAAH! What the *HELL!*”

It’s her. The innkeeper’s daughter.

“Damn it! Damn it! DAMN IT!” I gnash my teeth back and forth, cutting my tongue and filling my mouth with blood. “If only I had noticed sooner!”

I slam my fists into the ground. I punch and kick the trees. It’s not enough to contain my rage. Bitter heat rushes up from every limb in a single second, searing and piercing my brain. I can’t stamp it out.

But this kinda shit happens all the time so why can’t I deal with it? It ain’t the first time some scumbag has done this, so why can’t I take it? Why can’t I suck it up and let it go with a small smile? Can I give up? Can I stay quiet? Isn’t that what everyone else does? Isn’t that why these atrocities have continued for millennia?

I won’t accept this. Whether I’m an adult, child, or an elderly man—whether I live for decades or centuries—I will *never* accept this!

“Gideon Thorn.”

“...What?”

“Do not place blame upon yourself for the predation of hatchlings by others. They appear to have already been very weak before they were left here. They did not last long after they were abandoned.”

“That ain’t the problem!”

I couldn’t save ‘em. I couldn’t save this girl even though I watched her sing just the other day. She was havin’ a blast, playing with her friends by tossin’ around that ball. We even spoke. She was undeniably alive and well. I know that.

“...lp...me...” I hear the ghost of a voice. “Help...me...”

I’m not just hearing things. A faint, strangled voice comes from the huddled girls.

“Hang on. Just hang on. I’ll help you right now.”

I dig through the heaps of cold corpses. A small girl with light-brown hair is

stooped over. Her heart expands as far as it can go and contracts. Through Dragon's eyes I can see it—the faint light given off by all living things...

“She’s alive!”

“Indeed. That hatchling still clings to life.”

But she’s weak. The light representing her life seems like it could go out at any moment. I lift the chilled body in my arms and wrap my cloak around her.

“Stay with me. Can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?”

Her eyelids shudder slightly and crack open. “I’m cold.”

I clasp her body tightly to my chest to share my warmth. Her tiny hand clings to me like her life depends on it.

“You’ll be okay now. I’ll get you to safety right away.”

“Where...?”

“To a safe place.” I stand up with her in my arms. She can’t stop shaking. “I’m bringing her back with me.”

“I concur with your decision.”

I can still see the bright-green ribbon amid the milky white fog. I wanted to at least give them a decent burial, but...

“...I’m sorry.”

“The dead can wait. Make haste, Knight Gideon.”

“I know! I’ll be back soon!”

Geez, I don’t even have time to wallow in mourning for ‘em?

“You can still do something for that hatchling.”

Right you are, stupid lizard. It’s frustrating, but his judgment is correct right now.

“I’M back.”

“I’ve been waiting, Gideon. Bring her to my room!” Princess calls.

Warm, damp air is fillin' the inside of our Millennial Tree Hideaway. A roaring fire burns and crackles in the hearth, where a pot is boiling. Steam densely billows out from it. But that's not the only source. Dragon's steadily keepin' the air heated from his room in the cellar. They prepared this much as I was on my way back? Smart choice. We gotta warm up the girl's chilled body, but it's not like we can introduce a dying child directly to Dragon at this point—she might not survive the shock.

I race up the stairs and jump to the second-floor. Princess throws her door open without hesitation. She springs over to her bed and rolls down the blankets.

“Put her here!”

I lay down the small body. Dragon's heat has sufficiently warmed the upper floors. Cheeks, arms, and hands that've been soaked in the frigid fog are warmin' up. Water can either leech your body heat away or return it.

Make it in time. Please.

“It's warm...” A little color returns to her icy cheeks.

“You're okay now. It's safe here.”

The girl unsteadily reaches out a trembling hand as if she's trying to cling to something. Princess reaches out and envelops the girl's hand between her palms. The girl's cracked lips quiver.

“You're...in danger. Run. Run.”

“I'm okay.”

“No...no...no...RUN, you have to RUN!” the little girl cries out, panic gripping her worn features.

Her entire body trembles and shakes irregularly.

“Why must I run?” Princess asks.

“You hafta flee. They'll th-they'll come and get you, t-take you to the bad place. Th-They'll catch you...and drag you to that evil castle.”

Tch. The bad feeling I had was on the money.

“All of them...all...seven-year-old girls—that is what the bad men kept saying over and over, all are taken away. Some die on the way. Some have the hair torn from their heads.” She sniffles, but the girl is so absorbed and panicked that she just keeps talking as if in a dream. “Some have their arms broken, and others have worse than worse stuff done to them...AHH!” Her eyelids peel back and her face spasms. “...Then they get thrown in the forest. Because he says so. Because he says, ‘wrong, wrong, this one’s not her either!’”

Princess grips her hand and pulls the frightened girl to her chest, “Don’t worry...no one here will do anything bad to you.”

“AH...aah...aaah...” the girl screams out and gasps for air as she clings to the only lifeline she has.

Tears run from her wide-open eyes. I can do nothing more than wipe them away for her. She exhales a long, long, long breath. Wheezes, soundin’ like she breathes cold wintry winds.

“Who said those things?” Princess asks in the coldest tone I have ever heard from her.

“Th-The most i-important p-person at the c-castle,” is all the girl stutters out, before closing her eyes.

“Did she fall asleep?” Princess asks.

“Yeah, she’s asleep,” I answer, confirming that her chest under the blanket is slowly moving up and down with her breathing.

“She must’ve been scared,” Princess whispers.

“Yeah. Must’ve been frightened to death.”

We leave the room and close the door.

On the way down the stairs, Princess quietly asks, “Is it my fault?”

“No.” I turn around and hold her hand, just as she had done for the girl. Princess is a step above me, and we’re at just the right height to be at eye level. Holding her hand with both of my palms, I slowly and carefully pronounce each word to persuade her, “You’ve done nothing wrong, Princess.”

“I’LL leave the forest. I can’t allow any more children to die in my place.”

Princess takes me by surprise. It’s the first thing she says on our way down to the cellar after my assurances. Not that I didn’t have a hunch it’d come to this.

“It’s too dangerous.” My response comes out pitifully, with a disgusting lack of strength behind it. The bright-green ribbon is burned into my mind and won’t go away. The sister ribbon is tied into Princess hair; the brave girl who stands with her head held high and her back straight in front of me.

“Relax. I don’t plan to go to the castle. I’ll just let those people know. Know where I am.”

Problem here is that she’s actually making a reasonable argument. She’s looking at things objectively and as thoughtfully as she can for a seven-year-old girl. She understands the reason behind Lord Designs’ actions and his end goal. Her intuition’s mostly fillin’ in the gaps for the things no one’s told her—but wait, forget that!

“No, no, no, no, no!” Now’s not the time to be impressed by her. “I absolutely cannot relax if ya go sayin’ that!”

“If they know where I am, they’ll lose any reason to continue kidnapping girls at random.”

See! This princess does understand everything after all!

“Little lady, are you intending on making yourself bait?!”

Looks like I’m not the only one who’s upset. Dragon’s rolling his eyes and shaking his head back and forth. He opens his wings partway, closes them, opens them again, and then closes them again. Moreover, as he said that, his voice cracked... It’s the first time I’ve heard shrill nervousness in the overgrown lizard’s deep tenor. But even when faced by two flustered old men, Princess won’t budge at all.

“I am.” She nods, keeping her cool. “Only I can stop him.”

“But—”

She goes as far as to raise her tiny hand to interrupt Dragon. “Mister Dragon,

weren't you the one who told me to become someone who won't trample flowers whose names I do not know? Doesn't that mean I should also be someone who does this?"

"Hrm..." Having had his own words thrown back at him, even Dragon's holdin' his tongue. He lowers his head and shuts his eyes.

Where'd your usual calm and composure go? C'mon, lizard, don't go silent on me now. Find a way to persuade Princess outta this bad idea, Mister Dragon!

"The time has come. The 'time' Fairy Godmother spoke of."

Whoa. Well, I can't object anymore if you bring that up.

Her ambiguous and mysterious prophecy fits this turnin' point in our lives to a tee. Since the prophecy's been fulfilled, we've got no choice but to move on to the next stage.

"....."

Dragon looks at me.

"....."

I look at Dragon too.

We see the same thought in each other's face.

"She got us."

"It's our complete and utter loss."

"But before we do that, I'll go bring some soup to that girl," Princess announces, and scrambles up the stairs.

"Oh, I see, I see. I did think the house smelled awfully yummy. So she was boilin' some soup, eh?"

In the short time it took for me to get home, she planned that far ahead. She not only thought about it, but put her thoughts into action.

"She is a remarkable hatchling. I look forward to the day she freely steps into the light of the world." Dragon's solemn gaze follows Princess as she heads up the stairs, bowl in hand. "A fine dragon...no the beginning steps of a queen who will one day rule."

She completely blew away my insistence on how sentimentality and sanctimoniousness 'bout being compassionate is unnecessary, and went straight for the heart of the matter instead. She puts what she learns into practice.

Of course she will. Princess always sees through to the true nature of things. She will make an amazing queen.

She truly possesses the intelligence and obstinacy not to impulsively sacrifice herself or others.

Princess said she was only going to let them know of her whereabouts, and she has no intention of goin' to the castle. Put another way, she isn't going to needlessly hand herself over to Lord Designs. She couldn't have made this decision without unshakable trust in us.

Yes, she fiercely trusts that even if she leaves this forest, Dragon and I will protect her.

"Well, how do I put it? She's gone an' grown into quite the thick-skinned big-shot, our princess. Hasn't she?"

"Hrm, she was always inherently a 'thick-skinned big-shot'. You just drew it out of her."

"I see, I see." I say, casually ignorin' him. And then I come to a start.

Hey now! Did this lizard just compliment me?

"Don't be stupid. We did it together, yeah?"

Dragon's eyes expand and tightly contract. His scales stir and the light reflecting off of them sways. Straining my eyes, I can see his scales are slightly spiked.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask.

"How may I describe this? To be openly complimented by you is... disconcertingly disturbing."

Aah, yup. This is how it's gotta turn out every time.

"Tch. That goes for both of us." I turn my head aside and spit.

All of a sudden, I feel shaking. It's slight, but an unusual tremor. Something that's never existed in our house before just came into existence.

Gooseflesh ripples across my skin. Dragon's scales rise to a complete razor-point this time. A scream rises from inside, just as we exchange looks.

"Princess!"

"Go, Gideon!"

"On it!" I run upstairs. I snatch my sword and shield off the wall on the way. They're necessary now.

Our home is no longer safe.

The ceiling overhead creaks and bulges. It's heavier. Something huge is weighin' down the second-floor.

When did it appear? Where did it come from? There were no signs of it moving. It just suddenly appeared! Out of nowhere, in Princess' room!

I kick open the door and charge into the room.

A monster is inside. A ridiculously large, eight-legged spider is straddling Princess' overturned bed lookin' like it owns the place and everything in it. A single glance tells me this freak of nature ain't a living creature from this world or the next one over. Thing looks like it was pieced together with fragments of colorful gems and jewels to create the shape of a spider. It's almost like stained glass just jumped out of the window one day and took on the physical form of a real spider. There's a certain kind of godly feeling it gives. If it weren't for our circumstances, I might've even found it beautiful. If it weren't for Princess dangling from one of its eight legs, wrapped up in its oddly colorful fabric-like web.

"PRINCESS!" I draw my sword. Wait, I already drew it before I even charged into the room.

"Gideon!" Princess struggles. The web entangles her further.

"I wouldn't struggle if I were you, Princess?" a voice advises. The spider spews out thread. It spreads into a cloth and attaches to Princess' mouth, sealing it.

"Mm! Mmph! Mmmph!"

“See? I told you so.”

“YOU BASTAAARRRRRRD!”



“You’re too late, Sir Knight.” The spider’s master is elated with success. She snuggles against the rainbow-colored body and lovingly strokes it with her right hand.

“Damn you!”

My mouth turns dry. Tremors run through me. Ridiculing and sneering at me is that girl. The sole survivor of the Little Girl Hunt. The little girl I picked up with these very hands and carried here!

“Who...are you?”

She laughs. Her shoulders shake with amusement.

Anger, frustration, humiliation, and regret jumble together, squeezing my heart in a vise. I choke down the bile making its way up my throat and go to cut her with my sword.

“You still don’t understand?” The girl looks at me. No, she’s looking at *him* through me. “Spike Scale, noble and strong ruby dragon.”

I feel like I’ve been ripped in half. How the hell does this thing know Dragon’s name, when only those closest to him are allowed to say it?

“I’ve been calling for you all this time...” she whispers.

The girl’s form shifts. In the blink of an eye, her appearance wavers, like a shadow reflected in the water. Her skin turns black, almost raven-like in color. Her light-brown hair is replaced by silver. Even the clothing on her back changes. The shabby skirt and blouse fall off her, and in their place, a black, thin silk material with spider webs on it clings to her body. Her skin looks transparent through it. She looks like a foreigner in striking clothing. I thought—I felt—that we had met somewhere before.

“Why didn’t you save me?” Tears mist her amber eyes. They fill her eyes, quiver, and threaten to spill over at any moment. “Like you did this child.”

Then her wide-open eyes transform. Black paints over each eyeball and red pupils burn in the center and stab at me.

Dragon roars. His rumbling cry rattles my eardrums and violently shakes the floors, walls, and the damned entire treehouse.

“GUH!”

That’s not all—it’s not just the sound. Dragon’s thoughts surge through the scale. His emotions shoot into my head like a jet of water, penetrating my mind. They gouge at me from the inside. Ransack my mind. Sparks fly within my eyes. The world distorts.

“Agh...grrr...nggh...”

Regret.

Panic.

Sorrow.

Frustration.

Self-resentment.

The pitch-black emotions pouring into my mind through the scale are exactly the same as the ones I felt myself several hours earlier.

“Damn it. Damn it!”

“Why? Why?!”

“Why did I—”

“How could I—”

Our identical emotions collide and rebound off each other, tormenting us twice as much.

“It’s hot!”

The scale I left in my left pocket is boiling hot. My fingers blister as they try to tear it off of me. Flames—bluish-white flames are burning my fingers. In a flash, they spread across my entire body.

“AAAAHHH!”

I’m being burned alive by bluish-white flames on the outside while my inside is hacked open by a heavy, cold, dull blade.

I can’t stop it. Even though I’m aware it’s my very own arm swinging that blade.

“PRINCESSSSSSSSS!”

My words crumble in my mouth and my thoughts shatter.

I’m going to be swallowed alive by the dragon’s raging emotions.

I can’t fight against it.

I’m being dragged along with it.

“Prin...cess...”

My consciousness cuts off in the roiling turmoil of overwhelming emotions.

Chapter 6: Dragon and Princess

ONCE upon a time in a land past the forests, past the lakes, and past the ocean to the far, far south of Reverfeat was the Winterless Kingdom.

What the heck is this?

The sun's rays were blindingly bright and the shimmering ocean was a striking deep-blue. Blessed by an abundance of fresh water along with the seas, the land's air was deeply humid. All the people who lived there possessed ebony skin, black hair, and amber eyes.

I get it. This is his memories. I'm in Dragon's head right now.

The kingdom was ruled by a beautiful and benevolent queen, and the princess, her heir, grew quickly, showered with unfettered love.

This girl! The color of her hair and eyes are different, but it's gotta be her. The Spider-tamer Witch who kidnapped Princess...!

The world I'm seeing through Dragon's eyes is incredibly vivid and detailed, it's flooding me with an overload of information. I'm so dizzy. What's going on? It's like he's inexperienced? He lacks the same calm he has now.

One day, a red dragon who had embarked on a journey from the Northern Woods alighted in this land. He entered the forest and admired the flowers blooming in profusion. He savored the sweet tastes of unfamiliar fruits and berries growing there.

It was in this forest that he unexpectedly came across the raven-skinned princess who snuck out of the castle. So different were her features from those of the land he came, that she immediately drew his attention. Just as the flowers were different in this land, so too were the bipeds.

“Where did you come from, pretty red scale dragon?”

Since ancient times, the people of the Winterless Kingdom had lived as friends

of the dragons.

“I came from a freezing kingdom to the far north, adorable little hatchling.”

Wow, I knew it. He’s green with inexperience—even though he’s a red dragon.

“I’m Inez Mou. My name means the blessing of the sun.”

“You may address me as Spike Scale. My name comes from my spiked, sharp scales.”

“Are you jesting me? Your scales are silky smooth. They’re very nice to touch.”

“Only because I’m with you, Princess Inez Mou.”

Thus, Princess and Dragon became friends. The dragon let the princess ride on his back as he flew over the forests and ocean.

“It’s pretty. Very pretty. You always get to see this view?”

In time, the day came for the dragon to embark on his journey once again. The young dragon wanted to fly all around the world. He wanted to see and learn about many things out in the vast wide world.

So he was born the intellectual type.

“Don’t leave, Spike. Stay with me forever.”

“You have my word, Inez Mou. I will return to you without fail once this journey comes to an end.”

The words of promise they exchanged were undeniably true—at least at the time. As proof, the dragon gifted the princess with one of his very own scales.

“Keep this on you, Princess. By doing so, you and I will be connected no matter how far apart we are.”

“Thank you oh mighty dragon. I’ll treasure it as the dear gift it is.”

Thus, the dragon embarked once again toward the distant horizon. The princess wasn’t the least bit lonely or sad. For through the scale, they were always connected.

“Your scale is very thick and I couldn’t put a hole in it.” The princess had inlaid

the dragon's scale into a golden pendant. "It's the same color as your eyes."

"I'm pleased to hear that, Inez."

The seasons changed during the dragon's journey.

Then a time came when invaders crossed the ocean to arrive at the Winterless Kingdom. The invaders were ingenious. At first, they pretended to be friendly. But after gaining the queen and her people's trust, they abruptly bared their fangs.

"Help me, Spike!" Inez Mou sought help from the dragon. "A war has broken out. Someone is watching me carefully from the other side of the dark night."

"Wait for me, Inez Mou. I'll be at your side soon, my wings will carry me at my fastest!"

The dragon took flight. Forgetting to sleep and eat, he continued to fly. But where he flew from was simply too far away. Meanwhile, violent, intense skirmishes were taking place within the Winterless Kingdom. And then the queen's life was shattered by her enemy's blade.

"I'm so sad, Spike. Mother died."

"Do not cry, Inez Mou. I'm heading to you now."

"Come faster. Please. Someone's watching me. They're slowly coming closer. I'm sure it's nothing good."

Before long, the enemy toppled the castle and the princess' knight escaped with her.

I've heard this story before. These hackneyed events have taken place throughout the world hundreds of thousands of times. Even so...it's the greatest tragedy to my princess. And to this princess too.

"I'm scared, Spike. Someone's calling to me. They watch me from the dark of night and whisper to me."

"I'm almost there, Inez Mou! Do not lose hope, my wings carry me at my fastest. I shall not rest until I arrive!"

The dragon flew with desperation. He continued his flight though his scales

fell shredded from his worn exhausted body. Without resting his wounded wings, they grew weaker by the day. Time and time again, he nearly fell into the ocean below. Still he flew on regardless.

It is unfortunate, but even with his great strength of body and mind he didn't make it in time to save his dearest friend.

"Princess, we should move on to a new hiding spot. I am confident it's safe there."

Yet what awaited her at the location her knight had suggested, of all things, was the very enemy that was hunting them down.

"Here, I've brought you a present. You'll keep your word and spare my life now, yeah?"

"Why?! Why did you do this?! Why did you betray me, my knight?!"

"I ain't your knight anymore."

"Ah...aah..."

Beaten down to the point of no return by her despair, the princess heard it. She accidentally listened to it—to the voice that had forever been calling her from the darkness of night.

"Come here, Inez Mou. Princess blessed by the sun. Let me inside you."

"You mustn't listen to its voice! It is a siren that will bring you nothing but misery! Do not be deceived, Inez Mou!" Dragon warned her through the scale, his voice and the darkness fought inside her head.

"I can't trust anyone anymore!" The princess ripped off her golden pendant and threw it aside. And in that moment she was swallowed by the darkness through her own choice and became one with it. Into her, she accepted the evil thing wriggling in the darkness of night.

"I won't forgive them!"

When the exhausted dragon finally arrived, his honey eyes were filled with the sight of his princess dyed in the blood of her enemies and the knight who

had betrayed her. Her black hair lost all its color and had turned silver. Blackness of the abyss colored her eyes instead, and her pupils shone red. Shedding jet-black tears, the witch cackled loudly.

“I won’t trust anyone anymore! Knights *or* dragons! No good exists in this world!”

“NNGH...UGGH.”

My eyes snap open feeling like they’ve been torn off. I feel like someone piled rocks on top of my body. Scrunching my brow together, I strain my blurry eyes. A flipped over soup bowl is right in front of my face.

“Princess! Princess!” I slam my elbows into the floor and force my face up.

Gone. Princess, the silver-haired witch, and the rainbow mosaic spider are nowhere in sight.

“Damn it all!” Anger lights a flame under me, clearing my mind with its blaze. “How the hell did they leave this room?” The windows and staircase are too narrow for that monstrous spider to fit through. Nothing’s broken either. “I’m goin’ after ‘em!”

My body...can my body move? I can make do with my hands. The feeling is still left in my feet too. I just can’t put any strength into them.

“C’mon you piece of crap body! Is this all you’re made of? HUH?!”

Stabbing pain shoots through the left side of my chest. I clench my chest, unable to take it, and double over.

“Damn it! What the hell is goin’ on?!”

I grit my teeth and withstand the pain long enough to realize: my body isn’t burning. Nor is the room. But bluish-white flames had undeniably enveloped me. The sensation of searing heat consuming my body, suffocating it...is still fresh in my mind and flesh. Was that a dream? Illusion? No, wait, wait, just wait a minute! Something smells burnt.

“Hot! Hoooot!”

My tunic! My shirt! Are smoldering! Smoke is rising from them. I frantically sit up and beat it out with my hands.

The heat still won't go away. Not able to bear it anymore, I tear off the brittle cloth.

"What the hell is this?!"

Muscles in my back constrict and my skin prickles with gooseflesh. This is the first time in my life I've been terrified to death lookin' at my own body.

Dragon's scale is seared into the left side of my chest. Not only is it lodged in my chest, it actually burned the flesh and the skin around it has hardened together as one horribly burned wound. I gingerly run my finger along it...it's completely integrated into my body. I'd have to gouge this thing outta my flesh if I want to tear it off now.

"What's goin' on here? Hey, Dragon!" He doesn't answer. "You givin' me the silent treatment now?"

It's no use talking to him. An ominous presentiment gnaws at me. Maybe I wasn't the only one who got burned alive by those flames?

"Sheesh, you're one troublesome big fat lizard." I reach out and pick up my sword. "You've asked for it! I'll personally whack ya awake!"

The sword's blade is broad and the hilt is long. I can swing it around with both hands or just one. It's not engraved by a famous blacksmith, nor has it earned a name, and it holds no legend. But the steel was forged through the hard labor of a blacksmith who was skilled. I thrust the sword into the ground, shove my body's weight onto it, and plant my trembling feet on the ground.

"HRRRAHHH!"

I pull myself up on my feet and brace my legs. Cracks, pops, and snaps come from all over my body, but why should I give a damn? As long as I'm standing! Standing!

"A'ight, I can do this. I'll do this!"

Okay, where's my shield?

A figure enters my line of vision as I search around the room. Nobody was

here a second ago. They just appeared out of nowhere without warning. Without a sound. Without a word. Without color. They don't even cast a shadow on the ground.

Chapter 7: From the Shadows

I can't believe it.

"Rob..."

It's Captain Robert. The best friend I gave up on ever seeing again.

"I'll stay behind. You go on ahead with Princess, Gideon Thorn."

I haven't forgotten him for a moment since the day we parted ways in that faded wasteland.

"You survived?"

Rob doesn't answer me.

"I'm sorry. Princess was kidnapped. I'm gonna go rescue her now—" He doesn't even let me finish my empty apology. He answers instead with a ruthless swing of steel. "Rob?"

I must've subconsciously heard him draw his sword, because I instinctively swung my sword up to catch his blow. Vibrations run from the hilt into my hands, up my arms to my shoulders, shaking my body.

We glare at each other behind our interlocked blades. Not even a muscle or an eyebrow on Rob's face tenses. I'm staring into emotionless eyes, empty like glass marbles.

"Why're you doin' this?!"

Did the witch disguise herself? Or is this some sorta sick illusion? No, this is undeniably Robert's swordsmanship. He's an opponent I've clashed swords with many times during training. So I know.

His blade scrapes down mine...towards me. This is bad. He'll win by overpowering me at this rate. I take the plunge and boldly jump backwards in an attempt to unbalance Rob, but there's nothing skillful or nimble 'bout my movements. My reaction's slow and Rob easily overcomes the sudden lack of

resistance in my blade. I'm in deep—the burns are taking a toll on me. I can't even get the upper hand by putting distance between us!

A series of fast jabs drive me into a corner. I quickly fend them off to the right and left. Each hit is unbelievably heavy and one wrong move will cripple my already weakened body. A sudden shift in his tactics manages to swipe my sword out of the way; he'll land the next hit on my body. I try to counterattack, but it takes everything I've got just to match his movements. Unlike me, Rob is fighting beyond anything I have seen from him before—I can't throw him off balance. I'm stuck retreating, and I can't seize the initiative.

Our swords clash to a rhythm I can barely match. But even then, I can't hear any of those sounds. Only the pantin' and puffin' of my own breathing that wheezes out from my throat and scratches at my ears.

“Guh! Ngh!”

This ain't fair. My opponent's not even short of breath.

My heel collides with the wall. He's cornered me. My back's against the wall and I've got nowhere else to run. Losing your presence of mind gives an opportune chance to your enemy. Panic makes you forget how to move correctly, clouds your eyes, and misleads your ears.

He'll come from the left next...

“Wha—”

He got me. I missed the timing. The sword entangled with mine pulls away and he brandishes it high overhead. Suddenly losing the long sword it was strugglin' against, my sword hovers hesitantly out of position. Where will it come from? Above? From the side?

In that split second, I hear it—the sound of a sword's tip skimming over dry grass. I duck down in the spur of the moment.

Right as I do, Rob's sword slices through the air with a whoosh, missing its target. It went right through where my head had been. It was a slash meant to sever my head with a single swing. He's trying to kill me with everything he's got. I'll die if I don't face him usin' all the skill, power, and technique I'm capable of.

Flowers shredded into pieces flutter through the air. Acorns shattered into pieces hit the ground with a dry clatter. I was saved by a flower wreath of herbs, ivy, and tree nuts. It's one of the wreaths Princess made and hung up on the wall.

I can't die. Princess is waitin' for me.

My shield is lying overturned on the other side of the room. He just unleashed a huge attack, so it'll be a moment before Rob can make his next move. Not long, but long enough. I'll change the space between us. Get some distance!

"Whew!"

I toss myself between Rob's legs, sliding past him across the floor with the help of the numerous scattered acorns. Did that stupid, unknightly move shake his guard? The "moment" before his next attack is takin' too long. And his movements are sluggish as he turns around. As I scramble to my feet, I stomp on the rim of my shield with every ounce of my strength to send it spinning.

WHISH!

The round shield pops up, flipping straight into the air between us and hiding the movement of my blade. Back, front, back, front...back.

Rob is a first-rate knight. And a serious man. He's too serious, so he can't read my erratic actions. When the shield comes back down, I swiftly slip my left hand into its strap, snatching it out of the air to hold it at the ready. Rob moves towards me slowly, as if he's swimming through toffee. Not to say that I'm movin' fast myself. My blade sweeps out from his blind spot.

My sword deflects his own, but through inhuman strength he overwhelms my attack.

Vibrations and the ringing impact of steel echo through the room. His sword exchanges blows with my shield. Shields are equipment built to defend, so they outdo swords when you're on the defensive. This time we're evenly matched. I'm not overpowered by his sword. At eyelevel, I confirm that the face behind the gleaming blade is devoid of expression. At least furrow your brow a little, man. Show me a bit of your rage!

"Why're you doin' this, Robert? ...Weren't you the one who told me to take

Princess Lala Lilia ‘n run?!”

Silence followed by the jarring friction of a sword scraping across the surface of a shield are the only replies. I inhale, releasing the tension from my muscles. Twisting my upper body, I swing my shield to the side, displacing the sword’s momentum. Rob pitches forward and loses his balance. Now that’s what I’m after!

“TAKE THIS!” I roar.

I muster up the remaining embers of strength from my drained limbs, gut, and chest to shove the entire weight of my body behind my shoulder, and ram straight into him. It sends him and the sword he holds flying. I drive him right through the open door, short hallway, and slam him again through a second door. The momentum doesn’t stop there, because he tumbles backwards—but just him. I rammed into the enemy myself, and I wouldn’t make the mistake of falling with him.

That’s right. He’s the enemy.

He gets to his feet and slams against me—it’s a battle of bodies this time. These tremors of impact rushing through me are nothing compared to his sword’s weight. And I’m prepared to take the hit. I’d already grabbed my trump card off the ground by the time he rammed me.

Moving with the momentum of swinging my sword, I plant my feet and twist my body to the right forcefully.

“YAAH!!”

It knocks him off his feet. Rob hurries to regain his footing, but he’s lost his balance, and the momentum of the attack knocks him completely off kilter. His arms and shoulders go slack, and the sword in his hand can no longer be used as a wall to protect him.

My sword hacks into him, slipping through the joints in his armor and cutting through flesh to sever the bone.

Robert was the man I was proud to call my friend. He was a man I could trust to have my back under any circumstances. The captain of the knights who had stuck to his noble motives so bravely before, is sliced right down his chest and is

defeated with surprising ease.

I thrust my sword into him and stare down at it. Not a single drop of blood spills from the gaping wound.

“As I thought...you died...”

Why the hell did I let myself dream for even a second that you were still alive?

I've been drained dry.

Annoying.

Tears won't even come out.

How empty.

Somebody steps on a single acorn.

It's a dry crunch. My sword's too far out to swing back in time. I pivot on my right foot to spin my body to the left, but I'm not fast enough. A sword cuts through my arm, spraying red into the air. And I know the face splattered with red that's starin' emotionlessly down at me.

“Greg...is this a joke?”

Lightning Greg—no one could withstand the quick repetitive blows he dealt with his huge frame.

“Did you lose your pride as a knight too?” My lips twist ruefully. My eyelids tremble. “How could you cut me from behind?!” My strained voice is drowned out by the sound of meat being skewered. The edge of my sword slips through his armor's joints, piercing through the heart to the back.

“This can't be happening. It can't be happening...”

I looked after this man on his deathbed. I'm dead certain I heard his last moments with my very own ears—the whistle of him taking his final breath.

Lightning Greg turns to black dust around my sword and crumbles away.

No, no, this thing is different. Whether he's alive or dead, he's a copy of the

man I knew.

Like ashes, like falling leaves, his skin peels off and his eyes roll, falling out of their sockets, leaving behind bare bones that soon turn to dust as well.

It's a pointlessly exact duplicate. It's a fake. Vacant eyes stare at me just like they had in his last moments of life. *It's a fake!*

"It's not like I didn't already know...that I'm the last one left..."

Somebody steps on a second acorn.

It's a dry crunch. A blow hits me in the back.

Something grave just happened to my body.

Laid bare to the outside air, the flesh exposed under my ripped-open skin burns. I was cut—from behind. My body hasn't processed the pain through the searing heat and the shock yet. The clothes covering my back are soaked. It's blood. I gotta land a blow on 'em before I lose my strength!

Over my shoulder, I see the continuation of this damned nightmare. Gripping the blood-soaked sword behind me is my good friend Robert. My face twists and my throat tightens.

Damn it all!

He's standin' up like nothing happened.

Did I go too easy dealing the finishing blow?

I should've ended him there and then. I shouldn't have let down my guard until this guy turned to dust and disappeared.

Somebody steps on a third acorn.

It's a dry crunch. Darkness weighs heavier in the room. Before I knew it, three familiar faces showed up.

“Didn’t anybody...teach ya to...knock?” The pain slowly sinks in as the red stain on my back expands. “Not yet...I can’t be...defeat—” My consciousness is swallowed by the floor and my knees give out. Right as I bite down to grit my teeth, the strength leaves my jaw. Everything goes slack of its own accord.

“Haah! Haaah! Haah! Haaah...!” My shield is heavy. Sword is...heavy. No matter how much I strain, I can’t get the point up in the air. “Ugh!” My knees hit the ground, dragging my line of sight down.



What the hell? Am I on my knees?

The energy to live is pushed out of me with each beat of my heart. Sticky liquid soaks my entire back. What's trickling down isn't sweat—it's all blood.

Crap. Stand. Stand this instant.

"Haah! ...Haaaah!" Only ragged pants come out.

I've barely managed not to fall over. I should be able to stand. C'mon, get on your feet already! The enemy is still here!

That's right—they're the enemy.

Everybody died. I'm the sole survivor.

Princess was kidnapped right in front of me before I could fulfill Rob's last wish. I wasted my comrade-in-arms' sacrifices. I've wasted the lives of the men who died so that I could live. In front of me now are my proud and noble friends who lost their pain and their hearts to become puppets that only exist to fight. Worse yet, they struck me from behind, even though they're knights. They have been defiled and dishonored... Even though they were far more respectable knights than I ever was.

Simply because I survived. Only me. Because somebody like me is all that's left!

"Haah! Haaah! Haah! Haaah...!"

I couldn't save the little girls.

Wallowing in that remorse, I let the witch's invasion happen. And then I collapsed in a heap right at the most crucial time. Princess cried out for me so much too. She was calling for me and I did nothing!

I inhale and exhale shorter, ragged breaths. I forget how to close my wide-open eyes. My eyeballs sting. My lips are dry and cracked. Bitter saliva fills my mouth. My chest has collapsed in and my throat is crushed. Breathing frantically jolts my shoulders up and down, only bringing me more pain instead.

Coldness fills me inside. My cut-open back is hot.

"Ah...ahhh..." Robert is right in front of me. He jerkily raises his sword

overhead. “Sorry.” I hang my head.

I can't see your face anymore. A small puddle of blood is growing bigger on the floor. And it's about to get a lot larger.

“I’m sorry, Rob...”

ROAR!

Red blankets my vision. But it’s not blood—it’s fire.

White-hot flames slam down the walls, searing through the house. They pierce through the treehouse in a straight line, rushing through the doors and hallways and beyond, to the outer wall of the room across the way. All four Shadowless Knights are violently blown away. What accurate aim. The torrent of flame swallows their upper bodies. The remains turn to dust and crumble to pieces. They don’t smell of burnt flesh.

I’m the only one left.

No, that’s not right.

Dragon’s head pops in from the giant hole in the scorched wall.

“...Yer late.”

“My apologies.”

“Ya just had to go ‘n destroy Princess’ room too.”

The giant hole punched through the Millennial Tree is way too big to call a window.

“It was an emergency.”

“Yeah, you’ve got that right.”

ATOP the high tower overlooking the entire castle’s grounds, where the three rivers flow into one and pour into the sea, is Lady of Pearl’s chambers. With the windows and curtains thrown open, bright sunlight shines in on the stylish

room. A mirror sits on one of the walls draped with blue silk. The elliptical mirror stands taller than any adult, and its frame is made of polished gold and silver. Tightly carved patterns depict multitudes of deceased souls suffering in agony. Young and old, rich and poor; all equally fall prostrate before death.

Gold is on the frame's right, silver on the left. An elaborately decorated skull is inlaid at the top where the ellipse's halves meet. It's a masterpiece cut out from a large sapphire. Lady Megan's hands rest on the edge of the mirror as she intently gazes at the surface. A hint of a callous smile touches her flowerlike lips.

Suddenly, a flash flares across the mirror's surface. The mirror bends and creaks as if a tremendous force is pushing against it from the inside...but the mirror does not give. Groaning, Lady Megan covers her eyes with her white palm. On her finger glints a sapphire ring, the mirror's complement.

When the flash fades, nothing is reflected in the mirror any longer. All that remains is jet-black darkness.

"You struggle in vain," Lady Megan murmurs in her monotone voice as she twists her ring in irritation. She rotates the perfectly clear sapphire, which is engraved with a finely detailed skull. "...But the deed is done."

A single thin crack runs horizontally across a corner of the mirror—it doesn't catch Lady Megan's attention.

IT'S gone. Something I always sensed is gone. It's the barrier. The Fairy Barrier that protected us morning and night has completely vanished.

"Can you move, Gideon?"

What an odd feeling. The feeling of sharing all five senses with Dragon ain't letting up. We shouldn't be "connected" right now, but a thin thread runs between us.

"Gideon?"

"Yeah. This is nothin'. As long as I...rest a smidge..." Contrary to my words, the strength seeps from my limp legs when I try to stand on them. "Err?" I fall flat

on my face. If I take another blow to my back, I'm finished.

"Do not attempt to cover your weakness with lies." Dragon shoves his body through the hole in the wall, but only his front half makes it inside. Feeling his overwhelming presence over my back, up close, triggers instinctual fear and sends gooseflesh prickling across my skin.

"Hey, what're—" Breath hits my back. "Ah...."

Feels so nice. The pain is dissipatin'. Next his breath makes contact with my left arm. As I'm casually watching him— "WHOA!" My wounds disappeared. "Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why?! What's going on?!" Shocked, I jump to my feet and the world spins. "Whoops..."

On the spur of the moment, I cling to the nearest support—Dragon's ruby scale-clad neck. Going right past warm, his scales are hot. But it's comfortable. Just touching him helps blood pulse through my stiff body, putting an end to the nasty shakes.

"Settle down. I merely sealed the wounds. The blood you lost hasn't returned."

"No, no, no, I'm more than satisfied just being free of pain!" I look over to Dragon, examin' him—his left foreleg is bleeding! How in the world did that happen? I haven't seen even a nick on his body over the past year!

"It can't be...is that..." I touch my left arm. Aside from the blood, there's no trace of the gaping hole. "Mine?" I nervously ask.

"Indeed. I transferred your wound."

An instant reply.

"Hey! Don't be reckless!"

I can't see it from where I'm standing, but it's likely that my back injury transferred to his back as well.

"It's a small cut to me. It skinned a layer of skin at most."

My jaw drops. "Excuse me, but that hurt like hell for me."

"...I possess a larger body."

That's what it comes down to? In short, it's a matter of relativity? In any case, I'm grateful just to be able to move.

"You're capable of pullin' a stunt like this too, huh?"

"I became *capable* of it. Because my scale is embedded in your body."

I place my hand against the left side of my chest. The red scale, burned in and solidified with my flesh, is completely one with my body now. Nothing 'bout it feels strange anymore. I've grown accustomed to it, like it'd always been there.

There aren't any traces of burns on Dragon's body. But I'm certain about one thing— "You were the one burning."

"...She's right, I didn't make it in time."

"Don't blame yourself," I assure him.

"I think about it to this day. I can't help thinking about it. What if I had never left her side back then? Had I been with her, would that child not have lost her mother? Would she not have been chased out of her castle...?"

PIERCE! PIERCE! Ice needles jab at my heart. Is this Dragon's pain? Or is it mine?

"My decision turned that child into a witch."

"LIKE! I! SAID!"

SMACK!

I whack Dragon's shoulder with my palm. His thick scales don't even twitch, and instead I'm the one in pain. A while after I wordlessly clasped my own wrist, tremblin' in pain, I feel an oddly worried pair of eyes on me. I jerk my face up.

"I'll listen to your woes later," I summarize.

Unable to fulfill a promise. Not making it in time. Failing to protect someone. We share the same exact pain. We bear wounds that can't be erased. But even so...no, *because* of that— "We have to overcome this and move forward. You can move your limbs even if uneasiness is writhin' in your gut, right? If you've got the strength to withdraw into yourself, then you've got the strength to move... You can do it. If not, we can't save Princess. Am I wrong?"

“...You recover fast.”

Aah, he thinks so too?

“I commend your positive attitude.”

“Thanks.”

Just like his grief burned me, my despair was conveyed to Dragon as well. It must've stabbed him.

“Let's go, partner.”

“Shall we get going, partner?”

And so we stand. We bump our clenched fists amid the burnt and smoldering debris.

“For the princess.”

“For the princess.”

Chapter 8: Spider's Thread

SOMEONE steps on a single acorn.

Who in the world is behind you?

Someone steps on a second acorn.

Who in the world is beside you?

Someone steps on a third acorn.

Who in the world is holding your hand? ♪

Lady Megan sings as she descends the tower's staircase. She sings in a voice that sounds like two crystal-clear icicles rubbing against each other. The tinkling noise of wind passing through an icy cave, with the grinding crack of hardening ice fills the empty stairway.

She has no memory of the mother who gave birth to her. Singing and dancing were taught to her by her second mother—the mother who had raised her.

"Adorable Megan, you are the greatest treasure in this world."

Her stepmother was the only person in the world who had showered Megan with love. She died seven years ago. And all she left behind was an empty hole. Whatever Megan tried, she could never fill the hole.

No, no! Nobody is here.

I'm alone. For-ever alone.

All alone in the darkness...♪

Descending from the last step of the long, long staircase, Lady Megan opens the door. A sapphire skull sparkles on her finger that is whiter than the billowy

clouds outside. It shimmers under the light, shining through the opening in the door, briefly casting a tiny rainbow.

“I have just returned, Father.”

“Ooh, Megan! My precious pearl.”

Lord Designs Siegfried is waiting for her in the throne room. In this room with ceilings so high that it could easily encompass a hundred-year-old oak tree, whose walls span so large from side to side that it could fit twenty horses and a flock of sheep, no one is around but a father who is possessed by his ambitions and his cursed daughter. It was the father himself who put the curse on his daughter. To satiate his endless thirst for the throne, he sold his daughter’s soul to the Devil of the Abyss.

“Rejoice! The time has finally come!” Lord Designs shouts, his fists clenched dramatically, his eyes shining. His ecstatic voice echoes inside the massive, empty room. “We’ve found her at long last. She’s been found!”

“My congratulations, Father.” Lady Megan takes the hems of her blue skirt in her hands, bends down, and respectfully curtsies. Softly and quietly, she moves to take position next to her father. Silver light flashes in the center of the room.

“Oooh, she’s here...”

Before their very eyes, dots of light form into lines and unfurl outward, growing in size as they link together to draw the shape of a spider’s web. Suspicious letters have been skillfully woven in the middle of the stretched threads.

It’s a magic circle.

CLICK-CLACK! CLICK-CLACK! Mechanical sounds reverberate through the room. A gigantic spider crawls out of the magic circle strung in the air. Its eight legs are like thick logs, and its torso exceeds the size of a black bear. Shimmering rainbow, the spider looks as if it has been pieced together with fragments of colorful gems.

A girl bound in thread dangles from the one leg the spider holds up high. The girl has red hair, green eyes, and freckles scattered about her nose and cheeks. With her mouth covered and tight threads restraining her from her neck down,

she shakes with rage. Lord Designs visibly frowns and twists his prized beard.

“Oi, Witch, don’t you think you went a tad overboard tying her up?”

“I wanted to avoid doing anything too horrible if possible, you see.” The voice comes from a silver-haired girl, who has elegantly draped herself across the spider’s back. She alights onto the floor like a waterfall spilling into a pool of water. “This princess struggles and fights back so much that I was forced to increase the amount of thread every time... Aww, don’t glare at me so much. I will let her loose right now.”

SNAP! The witch snaps her fingers. CLACK! With a dry noise, the leg holding Princess lowers her to the ground. At the same time, the spider’s thread softly releases, floating into the air as it fades, before vanishing completely. All that remains on the princess is the thread woven around her mouth as a gag.

“How’s that?”

“Isn’t there still some left? Gagging a noble princess is inexcusable! Can you get any more vulgar?!”

“Oh dear, my bad.” The witch shrugs her obsidian shoulders, her dark skin contrasting with her gleaming silver hair. “However, I believe you are better off not removing this last piece.”

“I haven’t authorized you to lecture me. You only need to obey your orders.”

Witch knits her silver eyebrows together and snaps her fingers once more. Threads of the woven cloth gently fall apart and melt into mist.

“Oh, Princess Lala Lilia! How I have eagerly awaited this day!” Lord Designs beams with his whole face, running over to her with his arms spread wide. Without a moment’s delay, Witch raises her right hand.

SCREECH!

The rainbow spider vehemently snaps its jaws shut, then reopens them and hunches forward with its legs raised overhead. Clearly, it displays unabashed hostility and ferociousness. Even Lord Designs stops, his face twitching.

“Sorry to impose, but please pay the remaining bounty.”

The sound of annoyed, dry lips smacking together echoes throughout the

throne room. Lord Siegfried removes a pouch from his belt and tosses it over. Witch Inez Mou gracefully tilts her hand forward. But that's all she needs to do, for a thread shoots from her fingertips, catches the pouch swiftly, and retracts to bring it into her smooth hand. Metal jangles inside. Gold coins are tightly packed inside the pouch. Witch prudently inspects their quality and number. A few minutes later, she nods and stuffs the pouch inside her dress.

"Thank you for your business. I hope you purchase my services again." The pouch disappears into her dress without causing the thin cloth clinging tightly to her skin to sag or loosen. Where exactly did the pouch go?

"Now then, come to me, Princess!"

Princess fearfully looks over her shoulder at the witch. "No, don't give me to him."

"Sorry, Princess. This is my job."

The spider heartlessly steps back. Lord Designs walks over to where Princess is left alone and forcefully snatches up her wrist.

"We'll begin preparing for the wedding ceremony at once."

"No! Let go! Let go of me!"

"Let's send an official notice across all the land!"

"I'm saying I don't want to!"

Struggling doesn't have much effect when you're a little girl no older than seven. There's no hope of winning against an adult man's strength.

Watching Princess be dragged away, Witch Inez Mou mutters, "A happy marriage to you."

Lady Megan silently steps forward in her father's place. She comes out of the shadows into the downpour of light. Though the father leaves the throne room in ecstasy, the eyes of his daughter observing him are penetratingly cold. She walks to stand beside the witch, her skirts swishing.

"Take appropriate measures to ensure *that thing* does not enter this place. You will comply with this request, yes? On another note..." Blue light flickers. Lady Megan's white hand deposits a pouch into Witch Inez Mou's hand. "That

mirror came in handy. Thank you.”

Just like she had earlier, the witch opens the pouch to inspect the contents. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds, amber, and jade—the finest gems in the world are packed inside.

“Thank you for your business,” she replies. Then, when Lady Megan turns on her heel to leave, Witch Inez Mou calls out to her back, “With all due respect, my lady...” Lady Megan pauses and looks over her shoulder. “The Mirror of the Departed is a dangerous toy for humans. Be especially careful in how you handle it.”

Delicate flowery lips tightly curl upwards to form a crescent moon. It is a magnificent smile, one a master artisan would carve into a sculpted face through gentle, careful scrapes.

“There is no need to warn me, for I am already cursed.”

Lady Megan walks away then. She moves as if she is gliding along ice. The witch watches her until the hem of her blue dress disappears past the gilded doors. Afterward, Witch sighs and pets her spider’s back. Her shoulders droop, and a crease forms in her brow.

“You’ll meet a painful demise if you get carried away, Princess...”

Lady Megan’s faint singing dies away in the distance.

Someone steps on a single acorn.

Who in the world is behind you? ♪

Witch and her spider vanish with a flash of silver light. No one is left in the throne room to witness their departure.

HOW long has it been since I last put on chain mail? My body remembers its feel despite the length of time. Not a single day has gone by where I haven’t trained with the sword, but heavy armor isn’t necessary for forest living—it’s inconvenient if anything. But now the Fairy Barrier has been broken. I’ve no choice but to clad myself in metal and take steel into my hands in order to

protect myself.

“By means of the sword, my body becomes a shield,” I recite internally, as I fit the armor to my body. In the past, I devoted my body to the king and to the lives of the weak, whose names I never knew. Today, I do it for Princess. I finish pulling the chain armor on over a padded vest. Then I don my black surcoat, leather breastplate, leather gloves, and cloak. The sole coat of arms imprinted on my armor is the Hunter of the Winter Star on my shield.

I leave the forest dressed in the same attire I wore when I first arrived. Perhaps this is a sign that “the time has come”?

I put my favorite wide-brim hat that had miraculously survived the fire on my head and yank it down. Black powder flutters off the brim. Did it get a little burnt? Well, shouldn’t be much of a problem. Shield goes on my back, sword sheathed at my waist. Last but not least, I grab the bow, arrows, and knife that have supported our lifestyle over the past year. With this, I’m done outfittin’ myself. It’s his turn next.

“Whoops.” There’s something I gotta do first. I place my hand on the wall made from the Millennial Tree. “Thanks for everything until now. Sorry we tore a hole open in you. He was desperate to save me...oh?”

Buds are already sprouting along the edges of the scorched hole. Remarkable tree. Not much time has passed since the fire went out either.

“You’re strong, aren’t you?” I praise the tree sincerely, the corners of my lips slightly turning up.

Interesting. I can still smile?

“I can still keep goin’. Yeah.”

“HOW’S the strap feel?”

I’ve wrapped a belt around the base of Dragon’s neck and fastened it. To make it, I used whatever rope and cloth we had lying around to lengthen Buttercup’s harness, turnin’ it into an impromptu Dragon Harness and Saddle. Dragon’s the one who brought up using one.

“This is going to be a long flight. It is imperative that we reduce the strain on you. Preserve your strength for the battle ahead.”

“Err, what I mean is, it’s not rubbin’ against any weird spots or too tight, or anything, is it...?”

“There are no issues. Want to check for yourself?”

“No...” I was about to ask if it irritated his wounds, but I swallow the words as they reach my throat. “It’s fine as long as it won’t hinder your movement.”

My resonance with Dragon’s five senses has grown stronger. I experienced it firsthand during all that preparation—I couldn’t avoid being linked to him. The connection is much deeper than before...it can’t even be compared to when I didn’t have the scale burned into my flesh. Just by concentrating, I can sense the leaf falling onto his shoulder and the twig breaking under his claw.

“Hey, Dragon, why couldn’t you sense when Princess woke up?”

“What you perceive from me is only possible through your very own talents, Gideon.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Your own senses are what deciphers and interprets the information I take in. That is where your skills come in to play.”

Meaning that we receive twice the information but have two different sets of senses to examine it? I can detect and see through the things he can’t. And the opposite is also possible—probably.

“...That’s how it works?”

“Yes, that is how it works.”

I’ve realized we can get the point across to each other with fewer words now. Or maybe we were slowly becoming like *this* over the past year. And it’s just taken me until now to notice.

“For example, you currently have something in your chest pocket, yes?”

“Good guess. I do.”

“...Is it ale?”

“You can tell that much?!”

“The guess comes from my observations of your behavior.”

I shrug and pull out the bottle. It’s a flat, square glass bottle that can fit in the palm of my hand. Perfect size and shape for secretly carryin’ it ‘round on your person, which is what it was made for. Takin’ a good swig every night before bed has been a meager pleasure of mine.

“It’ll liven things up before we sortie.” I hold up the bottle. Dragon nods.

I pull out the stopper and throwback a mouthful. The sweet yet savory tang of the fermented barley followed by bitterness and thick heat engulf the inside of my mouth. The enriched water of life burns down my throat, tingles the inside of my nose, and slides into my stomach.

“Whew...that hits the spot...” I slowly exhale. “Say, Dragon, tell me...”

“What is it?”

Borrowing the alcohol’s stimulus, I ask the question I’ve always wanted to ask but couldn’t. “Did you save Princess Lala Lilia ‘cuz of what happened with the other princess?”

The sound of rain echoes in my ears. Rain pelts my hat, armor, and shield, making distinct musical tones. Steam rises from where the raindrops touch Dragon’s body.

“Nay, quite the opposite actually.” He opens one of his wings partway, then closes it. “I made up my mind at the time to never get involved with the human world again.”

Oppressive gloom creeps over my heart. A lump is stuck in the back of my throat. He still has something more to say. He’s hesitating. Then I’ll just hafta bring it out of him.

“But you didn’t do that,” I prompt.

“Indeed.” His long, vertical pupil expands into a circle in the center of his golden eyes. “On that rainy day over a year ago, my thoughts changed the moment I heard Princess Lala Lilia’s voice. I decided then that I would obstruct the rain pouring down on her with this body of mine. I would not let this

princess be soaked by the rain further... That was all there was to it.”

For that simple reason, he had ceased battle with a knight, his mortal nemesis. Then he even allowed that same knight to ride on his back to the Self-Proclaimed Daemon King’s tower, and then he went and lived together with the knight for a whole year—all for that simple reason.

And now he’s about to go raid Lord Designs’ Castle.

Not to mention, for how brutally he’s been betrayed, this dragon doesn’t harbor even an ounce of resentment towards the witch. Hatred and wrath are absent too. Just how good-natured is he?!

I drop my gaze to the bottle in my hand. Half of the amber liquid is still left.

“How about it? Want to have a drink?”

Dragon turns his long neck toward the bottle, “I shall take part in it.”

His red mouth pulls open. White fangs line the inside. Each and every single dragon fang is as sharp as a dagger. I dump all of the remaining ale into that mouth.

“Hrm...it has got quite the...profound flavor.”

“Did’ja like it?”

“It is not half-bad.”

That’s the greatest praise anything will ever get from him.

“Yeah. It’s gone already.”

I pull back my arm, about to chuck the bottle and our bad luck with it at full force, when, suddenly, Dragon holds his foreleg out in front of me.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Lend it to me.”

“Here ya go.”

I tuck the tiny bottle in between two claws of his outstretched foreleg. He’s a nimble creature. Impressed, I watch him bring his mouth to it, purse his lips, and blow a careful breath into it.

“Take it with you. My present, in return for your offering.”

“Oh, thanks.”

I accept it from his claws. I can feel the heat through my thick gloves.

“Make sure you take a sip before using it. Do not forget.”

“Okay.”

I put the stopper back in place and stash the bottle into the small bag hanging from my belt.

“**BUTTERCUP**, Daisy, and you two chicken, I’m gonna be leavin’ the door open for you.”

I decided to leave behind the horse, goat, and chickens. The Fairy Barrier has disappeared, but the Millennial Tree’s blessing is still going strong. Whether they live out their lives in the forest or are adopted by someone, they’re better off staying here.

“...Thank you for everything until now. Good luck to you.”

I didn’t have the nerve to confidently insist that we’d meet again.

“Are you ready to go, O knight?”

“Whenever you are, Dragon.”

It’s been a while since I last rode on his back. Guess the last time was when we raided the Self-proclaimed Daemon King’s tower? Princess rode him pretty often though.

“Then let us depart...for the princess.”

“For the princess.”

I tighten my knees against his flank and grasp the straps. I see, this is easy.

Dragon runs, the earth trembling below him. His four legs kick off the ground and his wings spread out. The flexible membranes catch the rushing air and expand.

Oh?

The weight bearing down on my arms disappears. His forelegs float in the air. Flapping his wings once, he kicks off the ground, hard, with his hindquarters. Wind howls around my ears as my body is held down by invisible arms.

Flapping his wings even more, we rise up, up, diagonally up. The forest's treetops approach but disappear below my legs in the blink of an eye.

The grand forest that had surrounded and hovered over us is now a green carpet fanned out below my eyes.

His fully spread-out wings catch the wind's current. With a flap, the pressure on my body whisks away. The howling wind and the sounds of his wings all disappear.

For a moment, time stands still.

The clear blue sky stretches beyond. It's frighteningly serene. There's nothing to block my view. I can see so far away that the horizon is out of sight. It's too much freedom. But I'm not afraid. There's nothing to support me, but I'm not the least bit worried about falling.

Ah, now I get it.

I'm looking at the world through the eyes of a creature that was born with the capacity of flight. These are Dragon's senses. He can fly, so he isn't scared to fly into the highest reaches of the sky.

FLAP! RUSTLE!

The sounds his wings make are similar to those of a leather tent popping open. The flow of time resumes.

"I just need to head to the southwest, correct?"

"Yeah, that's the way."

Dragon knows the direction of the castle we're headed to. Probably the result of his extensive knowledge superimposed onto mine.

To the southwest we fly—and nowhere but the southwest.

Vibrant green pastures are below us. Are the scattered specks people or

cattle? I can see the rooftops of AtteGrune as we quickly soar past them. Before I can get a good look, they're far behind us.

To the southwest we fly—and nowhere but the southwest.

Green pastures give way to a very long stretch of faded wasteland. Below lies the road I once traveled as I lost friend after friend. Now we traverse it in the opposite direction. Even if my heart aches, I don't have the time to lose myself in sentimental feelings right now. Who did I see off for the last time here? Whose final moments did I care for here? We've already flown passed by the time I remember. Those places that hold so many memories fly farther and farther behind me, racing away. What's the difference? Whatever they hold, my objective remains the same.

Everything is for the princess.

Chapter 9: Witch's Temptation

PRINCESS took in her private chambers, gazing at the once-familiar room. Under normal circumstances, it would have been the safest place in the world for her. But she's not the least bit happy to be here. Her canopy bed has a fluffy silk-down comforter with gold embroidery. Green velvet damask drapes the walls, and a plush rug with the night stars woven into it decorates the floor. Inside her dresser drawers are her brushes, ribbons, hairclips, and a small jewelry box containing her prized possessions. Stored away within her closet are stools, a table with a potpourri bowl on top, and her unfinished embroidery work. Not a thing has changed since the day she left the castle over a year ago. Nothing—

“Open this door!”

Aside from the fact her bedroom door is firmly locked and she isn't allowed outside! She kicks the door. SLAM! WHAM! It doesn't even creak. “Open up...”

She tries again. This time, she retreats back to the opposite side of the room, takes a running start, and leaps at the door, ramming her body into it. “Open up this instant!” The door creaks slightly. But that's all it does. “Ooowwwie...”

Princess Lala Lilia clenches her throbbing shoulder and squats on the floor. The door she had once opened freely with her hands is now securely locked and won't open for her. Frustration, sadness, and dread whirl around within her.

“I want to go home...”

When Princess lived in the forest, this nostalgic place always showed up in her dreams. But now she clearly understands: *I want to go home to our treehouse in the forest.*

Despite being in her own room surrounded by her own possessions, she isn't happy at all. Regardless of how familiar you may be with a place, even if that place is your home or your room, if you aren't allowed to leave whenever you want, it is no different from a prison. In reality, it becomes nothing more than a

jail cell.

“I won’t lose.” Princess Lala Lilia drags a chair to the window. “Upsy-daisy!” She vigorously hoists it up and is about to swing it at the window when—

“A spoonful of sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~ ♪”

She hears singing.

“...!”

The singing she wanted to hear again; voices she wished she could hear again. She soaked her pillows many nights when she was alone, remembering their voices.

“Round, round, fluffy-uffy roly-poly Brownies~ ♪ Tiny people, protective spirits of your sweet, dear home...”

She jerks her head to look over her shoulder. Someone is standing in front of the door. They’re who she wished on a star to see again, even if just their shadows or in a dream or a phantom illusion. Standing there are the two people she wanted to see so badly that the sense of loss had clawed at her heart.

“Mother...Father!”

They stand there looking just like they had the day they hugged goodbye. They’re smiling.

“Come here, Lala Lilia.”

“You must have been so lonely.”

Mother holds her arms out.

“We can stay together forever now.”

“Ah...ahhh...Mother. Mother...!” Her expression torn with emotion, Princess runs over to her parents, tripping along the way.

“You must’ve been lonely.”

“We can stay together forever now.”

Princess falters, slowing down until she comes to a complete stop. The queen stretches her hand out farther, inviting her confused daughter as she sings,

“But, but, be careful. If you forget the milk... ♪”

Princess stomps her feet. The light of her noble, stubborn will shines in her verdure eyes. “You people *aren’t* Father and Mother!” she yells, the force of her voice rising from the pit of her stomach. “AWAY WITH YOU!”

In a blink of an eye, the king and queen fade to faint shadows and softly crumble away. They disappear far too quick and easily, like ashes whisked away by the wind.

“Aww, that’s not very endearing. And here I was, kindly reuniting a child with her parents.” A willowy figure steps forward. Kinkless golden hair shrouds her shoulders and flows to her waist, and her blue eyes match the sapphire adorning her finger flawlessly. Her pearl-embroidered blue dress rustles as her skirts shift.

“Megan!”

From the very first line, Princess noticed a slight difference in the song. It was what told her something was off. Her mother had taught her the Tiny People Song after all.

“A spoonful of sweet milk every day for the tiny people to feast~ ♪” sang the shadow.

“A spoonful of sweet, *sweet* milk every day for the tiny people to feast~ ♪” was what her mother had taught her.

It was different from Mother’s song.

If that were her real mother and her real father, they wouldn’t have stood unmoving, waiting for Lala Lilia to leap into their arms. Mother would have run to her. Father would have knelt down to match her height as he welcomed her into his arms, so he could catch her no matter how much speed she lunged at him with.

At the very least, the parents she remembered would have done that. But they didn’t.

Tears blotting her verdure eyes, Princess balls her fists, stands her ground, and shouts, “Liar!”

“There is such a thing known as kind lies, Lala Lilia.”

“I don’t need that.”

“You really aren’t an endearing child.” Knitting her thinly manicured brows, Lady Megan’s lips curl downwards. “And yet why—”

“Why’re you doing something like this, Megan?”

The slight downturn of her lips disappears, a smiling mask plastering itself onto Lady Megan’s face in its place. “You needn’t be lonely. You will live with them once again soon, anyway.” She turns on her heel to leave. “Good for you, little cousin.”

“Wait!” Princess runs after her, but the door is ruthlessly shut on her face. KER-CLACK! The cold sound of the door being firmly locked echoes throughout the room. “Why? Megan! Why?”

Princess turns from the door and totters over to her bed on shaky legs, as if she herself is changing into shadowy ashes.

“They really did die...” She falls prostrate on her bed and buries her face in the cold pillow. “Father...Mother.....”

Her cries for her lost parents dissolve into disjointed, hiccupped sobs. No one is around to hear her cry. Nor is there anyone to wipe away her tears.

“Uuh...uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...”

I want to see you. I want to see you, Mister Dragon...Gideon...

The sounds of her feeble crying gradually weaken and eventually fade away.

After crying as much as she could, Princess fell asleep for a short time. Upon waking up, she immediately goes to pour water from the ewer into the basin and washes her face. Then she fetches her favorite handkerchief from her closet to dry herself without the help of servants, friends, or family.

“...I won’t lose.”

Living for more than a year in the forest changed Princess Lala Lilia. She’s grown up—into a princess capable of wiping away her own tears.

WE kept flying for a whole entire day.

Southwest, southwest. To the castle Princess is waiting for us at—the land where the three rivers meet.

“Just a little farther. Let’s charge right into the castle at this speed.”

“Nay, you should rest soon,” Dragon warned as he caught an updraft and glided like the swiftest of birds through the air.

“Tch! What the hell are you sayin’?! I’ve withstood military marches more strenuous ‘n backbreakin’ than this!”

“You are not as young now as you were then.”

I’m speechless. In truth, my shoulders, neck, and back are sore and stiff, like an iron rod’s been crammed between the bones. For crying out loud, time is cruel.

“Rest for now, Gideon Thorn.”

“Hmmm...”

“Rest so that you can take on the coming battle in perfect form.”

“Bah!”

There’s only one reason why the witch would go outta her way to blend into the Little Girl Hunt’s victims and kidnap Princess—to deliver her to Lord Designs. In which case, Princess is safe until the wedding ceremony ends. It’s a marriage between royals, so they’ll really hafta put on a show if he wants to legitimize his reign. Besides, there’s no way a man who spends an hour gettin’ his beard groomed every dang morning would *secretly* hold his wedding. I’ll bet he wants to throw the flashiest wedding of the century. And he’ll invest all the money and power he has to make it happen! He probably finished preparing the wedding clothes while searching for Princess, but the banquet food can’t be made on the spot. Nor can he expect guests to arrive as soon as he invites them.

My thoughts get ‘bout that far when Dragon steadfastly lectures me once more to make sure I listen, “I am not telling you to sleep a whole night. Just rest

for a little bit. A little bit.”

“...Fine, for a little bit.”

This stupid lizard spoke to me after seein’ through everything I was thinkin’.

“There’s a forest over there. It’s the perfect place to hide.” Dragon tilts his wings and angles downward before I even have time to agree.

“No objections here.”

It’s pretty cute and quaint compared to the Black Forest. But only when you look from above. The forest runs deep and thick enough to swallow anyone traveling on foot after leading them astray.

We steadily head toward land. The ground comes ever closer. Partway down, the bottom of my feet cut through the clouds. It feels like insanely thick fog.

“COLD!”

Dragon’s body instantly turns hot. Thanks to him, I get through it without freezing to death.

FWUMP!

My body lifts into the air for a split second, then is immediately shoved downwards. This is what happens when he lands on solid ground. I slide from his back without a moment’s delay.

“Ouch...uggh...”

I really wish my body would give me a break and stop creakin’ here and poppin’ there right after I move. Sheesh. I didn’t notice it during our constant flight, but I finally understand after we’ve come to a stop. I’m aware of it now: this fatigue, exhaustion, and zapped strength can’t even begin to be compared to what I’ve felt after a long military march out on a horse. Resting was the right choice. Considering the current state of my body, I wouldn’t have been capable of moving right away, forget launchin’ an attack on the castle.

The first thing I do on land is stretch out my stiff limbs.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m all...right...I think.”

PSSH! A line of steam puffs from his nose. The white heat floats visibly in the forest's air, but darkens by the second.

"You are forbidden from pushing yourself beyond your means, O Knight. Oh, and will you align your vision with mine if it isn't an impediment to you? It's almost the hour when there isn't enough light for human eyes."

"Alrighty, alrighty."

I shut my eyes and concentrate on the left side of my chest. PING! The sound of someone plucking a taut string echoes inside my head as beads of light blur behind my eyelids. Obviously, that sound and these lights aren't actually happening, but the scenery is completely changed when I open my eyes.

"Wow, how bright."

It's as if I'm seeing the forest under two or three full moons. A transparent indigo veil covers everything projected into my eyes, keeping the original colors and shapes vivid.

"So this is the world at *night* as you see it."

"Indeed."

Chirping bugs and birds sound like music to my ears. Even the noises of the babbling brook in the distance chimes in. Until now, all of it sounded like nothing more than white noise.

"You've always heard so many different sounds, huh? ...This is fantastic."

"I have. I find your appreciation quite gratifying."

The forest rests on top of a slightly elevated plateau. I look to the west through the tree leaves and branches. With the setting sun at my back, I can see the distinct, black castle to the far southwest.

Princess is waiting for us there.

"Hm?"

Is it just me? The shape of the castle's a tad different from how I remember it...yeah, for some reason it looks jagged. It's tapered into a point.

What's going on?

Wrinkling my brow, I squint and strain my eyes. But the castle oddly flickers and doesn't come into focus.

"It's dangerous."

Out of nowhere, a silver-haired, barely visible raven skinned girl sticks her face out in front of mine. Her face is upside-down to boot! She's danglin' from the end of a thread extended from a tree branch! If not for her silver hair glimmering in the moonlight, I would barely have made her out even with Dragon's enhanced sight.

"You! What did'ja come here for?!"

My hair stands on end. This girl tricked me. She kidnapped Princess.

And what I can't stand most of all is that she used the corpses of the girls who had grown ever weaker with despair until they died to her own gain!

"I won't forgive you." The vein in my temple bulges. It's going to split open at any moment.

"Oooh no, how scary-wary." Witch pulls the corners of her eyes downwards with her finger into a fake, upside-down crying face. Or so I thought, but she simply winks and laughs. "There's *no way* a kind lord knight would raise his hand against a fragile young maiden, is there?"

"Tch... Shut it."

Dragon sighs behind me. "It is our loss. She has the upper hand. She was here first and likely prepared an ambush well in advance of our arrival."

Grinding my teeth, I lower my fists. Witch snickers, releases her thread, then does a backflip so that her feet land on the ground and her head is right-side up. She tosses back her gleaming silver hair and smooths it out. In contrast to her young appearance, her gestures are truly that of a refined woman. Her obsidian features granting her a rare exotic beauty not seen in these lands, still—it'd be hard to call any of her actions ladylike.

Just how many years has she lived for? How long has it been since she took the darkness into herself and became Witch?

"Say, Gideon? You are called Gideon, aren't you? Princess refers to you as

such.” Her face is close. She instantly closed the gap between us. I flinch.

“Y-Yeah.”

“I haven’t done anything to those girls. I just slept between their corpses,” she clarifies, leaving the implications unsaid.

“...Hmph.”

Not a single child had been alive by the time I arrived. I couldn’t save them. But she’s sayin’ that she wasn’t the one who dealt the deathblow.

You can say whatever ya want, but that doesn’t make it true. What’s the truth? Even if she didn’t raise her hand against them, hadn’t she abandoned the children to their deaths?

...No, I don’t think she did.

I’ll believe in the glimpses I caught of her past self. I won’t deny that she’s different from the past, but the past is what makes you who you are in the present.

“Have you calmed down? I’m about to tell you something very important, so both of you listen to me, okay?” She smoothly holds a single jet-black finger up. Dragon and I do as she says and look at her fingertip.

Damn! She’s taken complete control of the situation!

But she’s solemn enough that I can’t defy her.

“There’s a barrier around the castle. A barrier meant to make sure Dragon absolutely can’t go inside. The stronger you press against it, the stronger the power that rebounds at you will be. You won’t walk away unscathed if you try to force your way in,” she coolly lays out the horrifying truth without hesitation. I can only wordlessly listen to what she has to say.

“You can’t get any more foolish than trying to launch a suicide attack by going up against Lord Designs’ private army. It’s the same as knowingly charging to your death. Oh, and as a side note, your resonance with the scale will be cut off too, okay?”

Dragon raises his neck and carefully observes the castle. I imitate him and strain my eyes, but I’m stuck with the same problem as before—it won’t come

into focus.

“...She is right. I would not have been able to tell without her warning, but now that I am looking for it, there is a distinct ward against my presence tied into the ley lines...”

“Seriously?”

“Aye. With the power of the ley lines supplementing it, an intricate current of power has been ingeniously braided together into a series of wards. It’s almost like a spider’s web...the prey can’t see it until they are ensnared. It is truly a masterpiece in warding.”

Red flushes Witch’s cheeks and she holds her hands behind her back. She bashfully sways from side to side.

“Ehehe, thanks.”

I glare at her through narrowed eyes. “Why are you getting all shy about it?”

“The person who made that is moi.”

“What?!”

What the heck has this witch gone and done?! My eyes peel back and my hand shoots to my sword.

“Okay, okay. Settle down. Don’t jump to conclusions.” Her slender black finger presses against the middle of my forehead. She’s only touching me and I can’t move. A knight can’t defy a young maiden—that’s the rule. “I created the barrier, so I also know how to undo the spell. Understand?”

I nod compliantly. The fact she exposed her advantage means that she was ready to tell us how to defuse it.

“A protective barrier is meant to block attacks from the outside. They’re easily destroyed from the inside.”

“Just like how you destroyed the Fairy Barrier?” Dragon asks blandly.

“Pretty much like that.”

Interesting. She’s definitely well-informed on it.

I hum in thought, wondering how it compares to some of the other barriers

I've dealt with on missions before.

"It's a large-scale barrier. Seeing as you, the caster, are here, that must mean there's a mechanism in place that allows it to be controlled from the inside. Am I right?" Dragon points out.

"You're as quick to catch on as I'd hoped!" Witch cackles. Her coral lips narrow and curl into a woman's smile on a child's face. It's extremely mismatched and unsettling, it disturbs me.

"You see, there are two black magic items supporting the barrier inside the castle." She withdraws her hand from my forehead. She waves it in the air, then swiftly holds up her fingers—two this time.

"Are you listening? There are two. TWO. The barrier will disappear as long as you destroy both."

How are we supposed to take this?

There's no question 'bout it, she's not our ally. But she's also no longer our enemy either. At the very least, she's informed us about the existence of the barrier and how to remove it.

"...Okay, I've got it. I'll go."

We've no chance of winning without Dragon sieging the castle. Then all I've gotta do is make it so he can get inside.

"It originally belonged to my king. I know the layout like the back of my hand."

"Now, just a minute."

Rustling comes from behind us. Grass and twigs are being brushed right and left. Wondering what the ruckus is, I notice Dragon with one eye shut, swinging his tail in small waves.

"Now, wait a minute. Why would you inform us of these things?"



Witch shrugs. "I just can't stand those people for some reason. Especially that noblewoman with the blue eyes."

"...Lady Megan?"

"Yup, that's the one."

Bad rumors circulated through the court about her as if people believed them to be true, but as far as I know, she never seemed like such a bad girl... Is this one of those things where only another girl can tell?

"My contract is finished with them, so I have no obligation to Lord Siegfried."

Now *that*, I can understand. So I silently nod along.

"Also, I've taken a liking to you."

"...What, that's a reason?!"

Witch clings to my arm while I'm stricken with shock. "Hey, Mis-ter~ want to have some fun together?"

I pull my hat over my eyes and turn my face away. "Nah, this old man's busy right now."

Strange, I feel like I've had this conversation before.

"How about with this form?"

BOING! Something supple and soft presses against my arm. No, she's pushing them against my arm.

"...!"

"Come on, mister?" she invites through a honeyed nasally voice. She's much closer than she was a second ago. Fighting off a gnawing bad hunch 'bout what I'm gonna see, I awkwardly turn my neck and look at her.

"You're the lady from the market!"

My bad hunch turns out to be true. As I thought, we've met before. She's the hooded woman I met in AtteGrune Village. The one I saved from scumbag ruffians.

"Hey, Mis-ter~ won't you have some fun with me?"

The soft, squishy breasts pushed against me swallow my upper arm into their plush embrace. Even when she's not pressing her boobs against something, the black lace of her spiderweb dress fits snugly to her body, clinging to her breasts and emphasizing her seductive curves.

Silky ebony flesh is laid bare before my eyes, and the beauty of her silver luscious hair is unlike anything I've ever seen. While the form she held before was exotic, now I'm gazing upon a singularly unique beauty without compare. I see, this is truly a fine view. Very nice touch.

Well, I am a man too, right? Claimin' that it didn't make me waver even a little would be an outright lie. Damn, I would've jumped her like a dog in a kennel! ... If I were eight years younger.

"Enough."

But now's not the time for such things either.

"Aww, you always give me the cold shoulder."

"Sorry." She has no idea just how sorry I am.

The soft, ample breasts engulfing my arm release some of the pressure they hold me with. Luckily, it's enough for me to slip away.

"Then here's a bonus prize. Or should I call it a token of my apology?"

The silver-haired witch swishes her spiderwebbed dress. A light-brown goat suddenly appears from the transparent hem fluttering in the wind.

"Meh-eh-eh-eh!"

"Daisy?"

"Whoopsies, wrong one."

The spiderwebbed dress swishes again, and the light-brown goat disappears. In its place appears four thick legs covered in bushy tufts from the ankle up, and a burly body that looks as if it's been carved from stone. A white line runs down his snout, while the rest of his hair is amber. My favorite horse is here.

"Buttercup!"

Witch chuckles. Her lips turn up in a different kinda smile from her

dangerously seductive smirk earlier.

“...Cute!”

“What is?”

“An old man saying two flower names in a row.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I didn't think about how Buttercup and Daisy are both flower names.

“That's just the kinda names they have!”

Buttercup whinnies.

“Oh my gosh! You're so cute! Your cuteness makes me want to add on to the freebies I'm giving out.”

“Hello? Anybody home? You listenin' to what this old man's sayin'?”

She waves her black wrist and a silver thread shoots into the air. It slaps onto Buttercup's cheek, then stretches and expands while I stare on in blank amazement.

“What's this?”

Witch spreads her fingers wide and multiple threads dance in the air. Though she's not touching them directly, they move according to her fingers. They weave down from Buttercup's cheek to around his forehead, following his snout to his nape, ending where the mouthpiece goes, forming a familiar shape.

“You're making a harness?!”

“I'm weaving one together.”

The reins are weaved last. From the length to the thickness of this harness, there's nothing I can complain about.

“And we're all done.”

“...Thank you.”

“As you might expect, a saddle was out of the question.”

“I'm fine without one. I don't have far to go.”

“My, that's promising.”

I kind of expected Dragon to lecture me about not pushing myself beyond my limits, but he doesn't say anything.

"So, what shape are these black magic items?"

"Look at me. Don't forget me. You'll discover them right away if you do so."

"...A riddle?"

Witch spreads out her arms without answering. Silver light pulses through the black lace spiderwebbed dress adorning her body.

Chapter 10: Castle

LORD Siegfried's mood was at its best. Humming—an act rarely committed by individuals of high rank—echoed from him in chipper tones as he stroll merrily through the corridors. Fires burned throughout the castle, lighting the way for servants shuffling in every direction like chickens with their heads cut off. Inspectors' bellows echo about as they scold servants for whatever blunders may have occurred.

"You there! That doesn't go there! Bring it here, halfwit! Hurry, carry it!"

Furrowing his brow, Lord Designs twists his beard. *For the devil's sake, they're all useless. It's almost as if they don't understand their orders or what must be carried out. They'd ditch their work if they could weasel out of it... Some even go as far as faking illness.*

"For crying out loud, they're all slackers. Ignorant fools presuming upon my benevolence."

Ignorant fools—such a title is perfect for them.

"Go on! Hop to it! Move! Move already! What? You feel like you're gonna die? Then die! There are millions of replacements from where you come from!"

Lord Designs had the wedding attire prepared over a year ago. The wedding dress was crafted extravagantly using luxurious amounts of silk, pearls, lace, and gold. Right about now, the maids are frantically retailoring the dress to fit Princess Lala Lilia. They're hard at work, not stopping to drink, eat, or sleep. Naturally, as it's the sole purpose of their existences.

"...Oh?" Lord Designs suddenly stops and scrunches his nose. "Smells like some kind of meat is being burned. Did they burn the meat for the banquet?"

"No, they did not, Father."

When did she get here? Did his humming distract from the sound of her swishing skirts, of her light footsteps? Or were they drowned out by the

bellows? Either way, Lady Megan is now silently standing at her father's side.

"That is the smell of burnt children," his daughter informs him in a neutral voice.

"Wh...at?"

Lord Designs doesn't immediately comprehend what she said or what it meant. Or to be precise, he does not want to comprehend it. He freezes, his eyes rounding, and blinks twice, then thrice.

"Megan, Megan, my precious pearl. Did you say children? Or did I mishear you?"

"No, Father, you have not misheard me. That is the smell of burning children." Her frosty voice doesn't waver, nor do her words contain any hesitation. "I locked them in the enclosure and lit it on fire to ensure they will burn to death without a single survivor. Those things are no longer needed now that we have obtained the princess. Taking the time to get rid of them in the forest is a waste... Is it not, Father?"

Lord Siegfried's hands and legs tremble. His teeth chatter. Unconcerned, Lady Megan lifts both of her white hands and shows them to him.

"Honestly, those soldiers are all useless deadbeats. Every last one of them simply chickens out, freezing when they see the children. Hence why the fire was set with these hands. I accidentally burnt several of the incompetent soldiers as well, but I believe it to be a trifling loss."

"Terrifying child!" Lord Designs cries out, his twitching cheeks turning blue. "You are cursed after all. Aaah, what a nightmare. All because I went and made a deal with the Devil of the Abyss!"

"No, Father, there was no deal."

The daughter's ruthless words pierce her father's chest, wrenching it open to reach in and crush his choked, fearful heart between her bare fingers.

"There was no...deal?" he asks in a dead voice.

"Exactly, Father. I was born without a soul. This is the real me." Lady Megan stares directly into her father's eyes and gracefully raises her right hand. She

lifts her index finger and thrusts it at him. “Rejoice, for you have accomplished everything you desired with your own power. From the mother who birthed me, to His Majesty the King, and the queen, and to...”

Her lips twist slightly.

“Adorable Megan, you are the greatest treasure in this world.”

Those had been the words of the sole person in the entire world who had accepted Lady Megan as she was. For learning the truth about her stepdaughter only made her wrap the child in even more selfless love. Her stepmother was the one and only person who had hugged Lady Megan with her warm arms and kissed her lovingly on the cheek.

“...And to the stepmother who gifted me with the status of noblewoman, you killed them all with your own hands!”

“Oooh! *Oooh!* STOP! STOP IT!”

Lord Designs had always closed his eyes to the truth. He looked away from his deeds, from the piles of corpses left in his wake. He never felt even a twinge of guilt for killing hundreds of thousands of inferior, ignorant commoners.

He wrote it off as a necessary expenditure, telling himself, “There’s a limit to how ridiculous people can be, you can’t kick up a fuss over every little murder.”

But people change their tune when it endangers nobles and royalty. He had his excuses prepared for those murders too. “This is happening because I pleaded with the Devil. I’ll get my hands on the kingship in return for selling my daughter’s soul. You’ll see. Everything is the Devil’s work for the price of my daughter’s soul.”

That was the justification he had clung to until this moment. But now, the wall shielding his heart from his own cruelties is mercilessly smashed to smithereens. *Everything* was just an illusion. What he told himself was a valid justification hadn’t existed from the very beginning. And it’s none other than his own daughter who delivered the news.

“DON’T SAY IT! *Don’t say it!* I don’t want to hear it!” He covers his ears as he runs away.

But an icy voice is hot on his heels, saying, “You no longer have anywhere to run. Go on, marry Princess Lala Lilia just as you have always desired.”

Lord Designs flees. He keeps running, blind to how he must look, tearing at his ears as he shrieks down the corridors. In no time, he turns the corridor corner and disappears.

Watching him go, Lady Megan finally lowers her hand and mutters, “And then please die immediately after.”

Long golden hair without a single stray hair hangs smoothly down her back. Lady Megan calmly looks up at the throne room spilling out dazzling light from the illuminating lamps inside.

“It is only then that I shall take my seat on this kingdom’s throne as the Blessed Queen.”

She had decided everything seven years ago. Ever since the day her father killed the only person in the world who loved her. She still had the option to imitate the mother who raised her, to live life peacefully as a kindhearted princess. However—

There’s no reason to be a good girl now that Stepmother is gone. I’ll live the way I want to, pursuing my desires.

Now there were only two paths before the soulless princess: to become an Evil Witch or to become an Evil Queen.

“In which case, I choose to become Queen.”

White fingertips brush over the sapphire skull resting on her right hand—that moments ago started the blaze that consumed hundreds of living girls.

“I’ll eliminate everyone who gets in my way. Yes, everyone.”

“...**ALL** right.” Knight slowly rises beside the open-air fire.

Witch calls out to him indolently from her perch on a tree limb, “Wouldn’t it be better to rest up a little more?” She’s already reverted back to her child form.

“Nah, I’ve had enough.”

He drinks deeply from his waterskin and plops the blackberries he harvested from the forest into his mouth, which helps clear the drowsiness a bit. Though he isn’t aware of it, it’s a curious coincidence that Princess woke up at the exact same time from her slumber in the castle. Habits from living together die hard.

“Saaay, old man, sorry to toss cold water on your burning hot enthusiasm, but didn’t you say you were going to enter the castle by way of a secret passage?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that the same passage you took when you escaped with Princess last year? Won’t they be lying in wait for you to stroll in there off guard?”

Knight quietly listens to her while he cuts the hem off the cloak he set to dry before bed. He wraps the strips around a thick branch rubbed in resin. Witch shrugs, raises the palm of her hand, turns her wrist, and blows on it. Threads shoot from her fingertips and mend his torn cloak.

“I’ve got everything under control,” he replies, “There’s more than one secret passage... Oh?” Faint, silvery-thread embroidery now decorates the hem of Knight’s all-black cloak. “Thanks.”

“It was so tattered and ugly I couldn’t stand looking at it. You should pay a little more attention to your appearance, old man.”

“...Thanks for the warning, young lady.” He douses the wrapped cloth in oil, completing his improvised torch. Then he fastens the torch to Buttercup’s back and mounts him, skillfully keeping his balance without a saddle by squeezing his knees against the horse’s muscular flank.

“Heh. Looks like all your boasting wasn’t just tall tales after all.”

Knight shrugs before informally dropping into a bow by removing his hat and bringing it to his chest. Then he turns to Dragon and says, “Just you wait, partner. I’ll bring down that pesky barrier in no time!”

“I pray for your success, friend.”

Knight waves and spurs Buttercup into a gallop. Mighty hooves shake the ground. With each kick, the moving shadow of the horse and its rider melt into

the dead of night.

“He really is someone who’s easy to understand,” Witch loudly sighs, rolling her shoulders to work out the stiffness. “The way you thank someone earnestly and out of courtesy are supposed to be totally different...”

SUSPENDED in the indigo night sky is the nearly full moon. It’s as white as top-rate cheese, appearin’ just slightly larger than the size of a half-moon. With each hoof’s kick off the ground, with each of Buttercup’s gallops forward, the brightness increases and illuminates our way. But we’re headed for darkness ungraced by the moon’s light.

Grass rustles in the wind. Water babbles from a nearby creek. Chirping insects and crows noisily make their presence known. Shrieking unhappily, the crows take flight in a flurry of wings to perch on nearby branches, watching my passage through their territory.

“Sorry for the intrusion. I’ll be done soon.”

Here lies a neglected monastery that’s been left to decay. Not a trace of its former glory can be found now. The roof’s caved in, the windows are smashed, and its crumbled stone walls stand forlornly like old tombstones. In fact, graves are here too. The names engraved in the stones have long since worn off and are thickly covered in moss now. There’s no way to tell who they belong to once they’re in this state.

Who’s buried here? When it really comes down to it, is there really that much of a difference between having or not having a gravesite once enough time passes?

“I’m here, Dragon.” I slowly look around...to show him the area. “You can open the entrance from here.”

“Understood. I must say, this was not what I expected, the area is considerably, um...”

“Creepy?”

“Aye. Not a very pleasant place—Oh? Are you perhaps laughing at me?”

He can tell that much now? Honestly, I can't suppress the laughter risin' inside me.

"Nah. Was just thinking 'what's scary's still scary,' even when you've lived for over a hundred years."

"I'm sensitive. Unlike you. In my travels I have come across sights and mysteries you would not believe. Some were dangerous and others quite bedazzling. One should always respect the resting place of the dead."

"Sure, sure."

Broken pillars. Numerous stone statues remain hidden in the cover of the collapsed wall. If you stretch the imagination, you can kinda see them as the past saints they were modeled after. Penance is unavoidable for a saint, but the guy carved into this one statue looks more like he takes after the deceased suffering in hell. Agony twists his face, his hands grasp nothingness. Feels like I should be hearin' anguished screams coming from his gaping mouth anytime now.

"Ah, I see now."

"What's up?"

"I finally understand the source of uneasiness radiating from this place."

"Yeah?"

"The stone statues here have all been curiously sculpted off-balance. As a result, they arouse uneasiness when gazing upon them—without the viewer realizing it."

"Bingo." I grin, flashing my teeth. He can't see, but the effect should come across. "This place was made to be like that." I hit my fist against a stone gargoyle's snout. "The old ones are a pretense. All the uncanny stone statues were added later."

"Why do such a thing?"

"To scare people, Dragon. Humans are cowards. Since long ago—well, not that long since it's only about fifty years—there've been rumors that ghosts haunt this monastery."

“Those were added later on as well, yes?”

“You bet.”

“I am beginning to comprehend the actions of humans even less now.”

“They were installed to make people forget what this place was originally built for... Scary stories double as a form of entertainment. Even if somebody ignores the complicated history, they’ll jump on an interesting ghost story.”

“I see. You make a valid point.”

“Plus, night is dark...far too dark for humans.”

Bluish-green lights fly around the gravestones, over the grass. Fireflies. Being close to the river with few people around makes this the perfect nesting ground for them.

“Fireflies look like will-o’-wisps to frightened people. The loud caw of a crow sounds like the dead’s screams. Before long, your mind starts seein’ the statues walking ‘round... And that’s why the townspeople rarely set foot here to this day. Travelers also avoid this land.”

“...I see. So they look like fireflies to you, eh?”

“...Hello? What did you just say?”

Bluish-green lights hover by my face. They seem a lot bigger and brighter than the ones I’ve seen before. Chills crawl up my spine.

Are these actually fireflies?

“Pft.” I can sense his faint laughter.

“Dang it... You’d better be prepared for payback later!”

Irritated, I pop my shoulders. I retract the lower lip that stuck out unconsciously and gnaw at it.

A dark-black castle towers beyond the rushing river. Where the three rivers meet, a water fortress floats over the center of the estuary. Once the drawbridge is raised, no boats can get inside without the help of wings. At least that’s how it appears from here.

“Sure enough, it’s a spider’s web all right.” Even I can see it, having come this close. A silver, flickerin’ and flashin’ barrier is surrounding the castle. “Grr.”

I furrow my brow and squint. Concentrating my energy into my eyes, I try to bring the castle into focus.

“What seems to be bothering you?”

“Hmm, how do I describe it? It’s a weird feeling. The castle is floating.”

“Floating?”

The skin around my eyes tingles and cramps. Dryness stings my eyeballs and I can’t stop blinking. Bizarre. No matter how I strain my eyes, I can’t see right.

“I know I said it’s floatin’, but I don’t mean it’s hovering in the air.”

“I know that much.”

“It wasn’t like this when I last saw it. It blended into the surrounding landscape more. The castle was as much a part of the landscape as the rivers, trees, and rocks. Now it’s kinda...” I lick my dry lips. Closing my eyes, I scour my entire vocabulary. I try to put my vague thoughts into words. “It looks like an extremely huge mammoth monster crouching. Something alive that shouldn’t be there, that shouldn’t exist is...”

Was it humans who made this?

Is it humans who live here?

“Maybe it’s due to the barrier. Or is it because the overall outline of the castle looks like it’s been tapered to a point for some reason?”

“I just tried comparing what you see to your memories. You are correct. Sharp garniture has been added to it. Primarily to the roof and parapet.”

“Aah.” These castle renovations are where all the tax money squeezed outta the people went to. “Makes sense to me.”

“The new owner of a nest or den always wishes to erase the prior owner’s lingering smell.”

I hope that doesn’t apply to the interior too.

Deep within the monastery that's fallen to ruins, I arrive at a collapsed mausoleum. Although the door is sealed shut, it's easy to climb over the wall's wreckage.

"Okay, Buttercup, hold down the fort here for a bit." I stroke my favorite horse's snout and release his reins. "Lucky for you, there's plenty of grass to graze here. Take it easy waiting for my return." The amber warhorse whinnies and nuzzles me with his snout. "I'm off then... Up we go!"

Moonlight shines into the mausoleum, casting sharp shadows. There's a clear separation between the places with light and the places without. Following along the wall, I count the systematically lined-up sarcophagi. One, two, three... Five of the six sarcophagi belong to successive generations of abbots. But the final one is—

"...This is it."

Originally, it was meant to be opened from the other side. It's backbreakin' work to open it from this one. A statue of a peacefully sleeping abbot is carved into the thick stone lid like the other five, but in reality the designer fashioned the secret guardian based on his own appearance.

"Then, this person is not eternally resting here?"

"Nope. They say he was as fit as a bill—at least at the time he finished making this."

"He has quite the demented smile aesthetic."

"Yeah, he...does." I place my hand on the sarcophagus lid. "I feel like I could... have a good drink with...this...guy...umph!" I put my whole body into pushing the lid.

SCRAPE! SCRAPE! SCRAPE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

"Ooof!"

Centering my strength in my lower back, I give it the final push.

SCRAPE!

The heavy stone lid turns horizontally by using one of the four corners as a fulcrum. It absolutely won't fall. It won't break.

“I raise my claw in salute to the designer’s talents. However, this is...”

Total darkness waits inside the sarcophagus. Moldy, humid air blows up from the hole, hitting me square in the face. Tastes like a grave and smells like one too.

“A staircase,” I answer for him.

I knock flint together. Sharp scraping sounds reverberate through the mausoleum. Sparks fly and catch my improvised torch, lighting it on fire—it’s come in handy, just like it’s supposed to. Lifting the torch up to illuminate it, the descending staircase looks exactly like some kind of endless road to the center of the world.

Step by step, I cautiously make my way down. Barely any traces of past use are left on the stone staircase. Lifeless moss clings loosely to the bottom of my boots, but less and less of it appears the farther down I go.

Not even moss will grow where the stairs end.

A stone passageway extends straight in front of me. Torch held aloft, I head deeper into the abyss. Thanks to my shared vision with Dragon, it’s pretty bright. But even he can’t see anything where no light exists. And our connection will be cut once I enter the barrier. It’ll be too late to panic once it happens. Nothing but unfathomable darkness pervades the castle’s underside.

“I am finding this somewhat difficult to comprehend. Why are you going underground? Is the castle not surrounded on all sides by water? Are the drawbridges and boats not the only ways in?”

Smart guys get hung up on what they see at times like this because of their incomplete knowledge. All the more so if they’re a smart lizard with wings.

“This castle exists because humans excavated the ground. After a great deal of digging they drained the water, and created an artificial wall to keep the water out afterwards. It looks like an island floating in an estuary, but it was originally a peninsula.”

“Oh!”

“Ya catch on fast, partner. This side’s a thousand times shallower than it

appears to the blind eye.”

“This is quite the novel surprise.”

“Why didn’t you know that already?”

A long silence.

“It was not a scene from your memories.”

“...Well, yeah. Not like I was around to see ‘em actually build it. Just knowledge I’m aware of.”

Water drips down from the arched ceiling. The height of the pillars increases dramatically compared to where I just came from.

“I’m under the river right now.” The water I was looking down on earlier is now flowing over my head.

“Astonishing structural skill must have gone into the design of this marvel of human ingenuity.”

“Yeah, gotta wonder how they excavated it... Makes me dizzy just thinking about it.”

“Now that is surprising to hear from the man who easily built an animal pen and a tiny stool for milking without many tools.”

“I had your help for that. Besides...”

“Besides?”

Water trickles down again. Many droplets cling to the wall’s stone framework as well. The tunnel’s dampness makes it chilly, like staying out under a drizzle or in the fog of a mountain storm blowing in off the coast. Trenches dug on both sides of the floor drain the water seeping in, directing it away from the actual tunnel.

“I’m a knight. Not a stonemason.”

I sense his faint laughter. What’s so funny? I’ve yet to figure out what makes him laugh.

“OH?”

“Something wrong?”

“My breath’s coming out white. Now it’s like yours.”

There’s a reason why we’re chattin’ casually to each other while I walk: to ascertain how close I’ve come to the barrier.

How much time has passed since I first began walking this underwater tunnel? Dragon’s voice is beginning to sound distant.

“Your voice is getting quieter.”

“Aye. It appears the barrier is already affecting our bond.”

“Just goes to show how much closer I’ve gotten to the castle. Pretty soon I can stop shakin’ in my boots worrying ‘bout when the ceiling’s going to collapse in on me...”

“Gideo...be caref...”

“Spike?” Dragon’s voice breaks off right after I pass the nth pillar I’ve seen today. “Our link was cut?”

My visibility suddenly darkens too. I forgot how limited the range of the torchlight is. Was human vision always this dark?

I look over my shoulder and up at the pillar I just passed by.

What to do? Turn back?

...No.

“Sheesh, he’s such a worrier.”

I predicted this would happen. It just happened sooner than I expected is all. Now then, it’s time to advance onward. Princess is waiting.

My thoughts keep returning to Dragon. It’s one of those things that linger after you lose something that has been with you for so long. Things have only returned to the way they originally were, but I feel strangely helpless...or to be more precise...

“I’m lonely.” I can admit it because I know he’s not listening. I can’t let my

worrywart partner hear my idle complaints.

“**RAH...**” Dragon opens his eyes. “Our shared connection through the scale has been cut. It appears he entered the barrier.”

“I see. Good for him,” Witch answers.

Her fickle and vague tone is just like a willow bending to the wind. Her amber eyes, turned to the sky, are looking towards a distant time. Searching for a place that’s not here. Witch narrows one eye, distorting the inner canthus, as she responds mechanically, displaying little care for the conversation. Dragon’s pupils contract vertically.

“Why are you siding with us?”

Raising a silver eyebrow, Witch looks up at Dragon. “Didn’t you hear me earlier?”

“You have not informed us of everything. Have you?”

“Don’t be silly. You should sincerely accept favors from others, Spike.”

“I have aged as well. Time has worn on my past naiveté and caused me to grow a tad more doubtful since those days.”

The distortion around her eyes spreads to the rest of her face, screwing with her expression. “...I’m going to test him. Does he really plan on rescuing the princess?”

Her smile is both fearless and pained. She bares her white teeth and grabs her chest, clenching where the golden pendant, inlayed with Dragon’s scale, once decorated.

“My knight wouldn’t protect me. He offered me on a platter to the enemy in return for his own safety.” Dragon lowers his head and lets out a long sigh as she continues, “This is a test. There are actually *three* black magic items supporting the barrier. The third is at the heart of the castle, in the middle of the throne room!”

Her eyelids peel back wide enough to split open and her eyes change color. Jet-black paints over the whites of her eyes, her pupils, and dark irises. Red

beads burn in the center.

Witch sneers while shedding tears that are darker than black, almost as if the darkness dyeing her eyes is overflowing. She cackles in a shrill, demented voice, shaking her entire body.

“I wonder if he’s capable of seeing it through until the end...” She shrieks, laughing. “Will he be the type to give it all up for a chance at victory? Will he succeed where my knight so utterly failed?”

Dragon spreads his wings, blocking out the poignant moonlight that illuminates the tears drenching her cheeks. “You underestimate the kind of man he is, and his dedication to Princess. No matter what may happen,” Dragon’s body begins to glow a blinding red that illuminates the shadow enshrouded forest, “it is all for the Princess!”

As the light dims, Witch’s cackles fade, and a hint of hope creeps in at the edges of her ice-cold soul.

Chapter 11: A Way Out

THERE'S a lotta good things about torches, but what I'm especially fond of is that they don't blip out right away if you drop 'em on the floor.

"Go figure."

I run smack dab into a problem right when I'm almost outta this damp and moldy underwater tunnel. Sheesh, they didn't even gimme time to get too comfortable.

Someone steps on a single acorn ♪

Bathed in the light of my torch stands a troop of silent, shadowless men. I spotted their feet first. They lumber towards me, the light illuminating their knees to their waists, their stomachs to their chests, before finally revealing their faces. I know every single one of these faces. The allies I once trusted to protect my back. Now they don't speak or breathe out white mist or suffer like me in the icy cold of the tunnel. I kick the heel of my boot against the floor to break the silence.

"...I knew it."

The corners of my lips turn up. The sound echoin' between the walls and pillars informs me that this passageway doesn't have far left to go. The exit's right in front of me—if I can break through these guys!

I raise the torch. In total, there are nine knights in five rows. One stands at the front, while the remaining eight are lined up in rows of two. They've formed a dense protective wall. The knight at the vanguard has the role of holding the enemy back at first.

"That's right. That's your position."

Fighting a drawn-out battle with an enemy who doesn't feel pain or exhaustion is disadvantageous. They know that too, so they intentionally went for a defensive formation.

"Ain't that right, Captain Robert?!"

I run. Brandishing the torch, I chuck it at them. With my now free right hand, I draw my sword.

ROBERT repels the incoming torch with his sword. Even after it hits the ground, the torch's light does not extinguish. Gideon takes the chance to get within range of his blade.

"Oorah!"

Gripping his unsheathed sword with both hands, Knight Gideon slashes down. CLANG! Steel blades clash against each other, sparks flying with each impact. Though evenly matched, Gideon has a slight advantage from wielding his sword with two hands. At this stage the textbooks say Gideon's next move should be to push or pull back! Then unleash a two-pronged attack to take control of the distance and cripple his enemy. Well, that would be true if Gideon ever paid attention in training or played by the rules.

"Urrah!"

Gideon goes for a kick. Keeping his long sword locked against Robert's sword with all his might, Gideon raises his foot and kicks Robert hard. It's a complete surprise attack. But only as much as one can be landed from the front. It's an erratic move, but not foul play. Robert falls backwards and is sent tumbling across the floor.

The rest of the knights behind him get a late start in taking action due to Gideon's nonsensical offensive. This is where a living knight would have been taken aback and sighed disdainfully before making a bitter smile.

"Oorah! Oorah! You're slow to react, guys!" Have some of their past memories and experiences remained, even after they were raised from the dead? "Yer freakish adherence! To takin' everything too seriously! Is still there!"

Gideon lunges to cut down his enemies before they can switch from defense to offense. But the tunnel is narrow, and he doesn't secure a hit good enough to turn his opponent to dust. Thrusting with a series of jabs is by far the most suitable fighting technique in confined locations, but it simply takes too much time to draw the sword back before thrusting again for another hit after landing the first one. What happens in that gap is critical.

Holding the sword near the tip of the hilt, Gideon makes full use of the muscles from his elbow down to shove the weight of the sword behind each hit. He's aiming for their arms. They might not feel pain, but they can't hold a sword without fingers. If their wrists aren't stable, they can't swing their swords.

Muscle severs; skin splits open. The sounds of fingers falling are like drops hitting the ground. An arm is dangling the wrong way after being slashed. Two Shadowless Knights in the first row drop their swords. The scraping sound of metal slamming into metal continues without delay.

Gideon pivots and blocks the third attacker's slice against his back. Shadowless Knights can only reproduce and imitate their former skills. One can no longer hope to find a knight's nobility in them.

"Sorry, Greg." He leaps back for a boost and slams into the passageway wall, using the recoil to quickly get to his feet. "Spare me from gettin' cut down the back a second time."

Gideon knows every single face here. They look exactly the same as the moment when they had parted ways over a year ago. Their appearances are exactly as he remembered, all the way down to the clothes they were wearing that fateful night they fled from the castle.

"I'm happy to get to see your ugly mugs again...but..." Was he capable of being sarcastic now because he's moved on? Or was he pretending, just so he could push through this macabre reunion? The dead can be recalled as many times as desired, but the living change. "I can't live in the past forever."

His right hand brandishes his sword as his left shoots towards the small pouch on his belt.

He pulls out a square flat ale bottle. Filling it to the brim is Dragon's breath; the bottle almost seems to be glowing. It's as if the breath itself is alive, swirling

around inside the transparent bottle.

“I’ve got somebody waiting for me.”

Gideon absolutely won’t apologize to them. Nor will he complain or whine. Once he starts talking to them like that, he won’t be able to stop. For in a blink of an eye, the seam will burst open and tear throughout him until he breaks from the inside. Mourning their loss can be done anytime. But now is not the time.

Gideon, once a knight at this very castle, stands straight right in the middle of his enemies. He pulls the stopper out of the bottle with his teeth and puts it in his mouth. Immediately after, he reverently tilts the bottle.

His stubble-covered mouth spasms; he grits his molars tightly. His eyes, from the inner to the outer corners bulge, and the skin around his eye sockets sharply retracts. His Adam’s apple moves up and down as he swallows Dragon’s breath.

In an instant, his narrowed eyes stretch open to the furthest limits. His pupils contract, suspending his pale eyes in white.

Suddenly, he flicks his wrist and throws the glass bottle to the floor. Without any resistance, it shatters into tiny fragments against the stones.

FLASH! ROAR! WHOOSH!

His gray-streaked black hair and his silver-embroidered black cape whip up.

Fire bursts forth.

Thrusting his broad double-edged sword into the ground, Knight Gideon goes down on his knees.

And from around his body crimson flames roar.

It spirals outwards around the broken bottle and engulfs the stone passageway. The flames lick the stone walls, generating tremendous heat.

Swallowed whole by the unleashed ferocity of the Dragon’s Breath, the Shadowless Knights instantly disintegrate into dust. All but one.

Gideon had held nothing back with his kick, which threw Captain Robert’s

body back into the depths of the passageway. There, the maelstrom of flames narrowly missed him.

ROAR!

Scarlet flames surge right in front of Robert's eyes as he jerkily gets to his feet.

"Urrah!"

Robert is cut down without warning—by a mundane sword, that lacks any inscription, legend to its name, or embellished decorations; by steel, forged through the dedicated toil of a master blacksmith; by flames, which dwell in the slashing blade. In a sweep from left to right, Gideon threw his momentum into a slash by releasing his left hand's grip and focusing all his weight with his right hand, in a smooth spin of his body...

The flames trail into a helix behind his blade following the elliptic of his spin.

From the deep green of the forest to the purple of dawn, to the occasional light pink of flowers, Knight Gideon's aquamarine eyes reflect varying colors of all he's seen.

Before shifting to red—the vivid red of raging flames.

...His right hand is joined by his left at the very last moment as his body completes a 360 degree turn, drawing on all his strength and the momentum of the turn for a deft, brilliant shift—a seamless integration following the rotation of his body behind the sword's weight. Exerting every ounce of his strength, he swings the sword diagonally from the upper left to the right. It's a stroke without hesitation.

"I won't forget you guys. Ever."

The blade runs through Robert's forehead, face, chest, and torso. For a brief moment under the aslant blade, the slashed and the one who slashed him stare into each other's eyes.

"But...you...aren't him."



Consumed by crimson flames, Knight Captain Robert collapses, crumbling to dust from his split skull as he falls.

“Come back however many times you want. No matter what...” Shaking his sword free, Gideon brandishes it once more and thrusts it through his former friend. “I’ll cut you down every time.”

It’s an oath with himself. One to separate him from his old self.

A single drop of liquid shimmers amid the blaze.

Contrary to his brave words, Gideon allows the tears to fall freely. Screwing up his face, he snuffles uncontrollably, shedding tears. One by one, the tears disappear into the flames and turn to steam.

Thanks to taking a full drink of the Dragon’s Breath, not a single hair on his head has been singed.

Ah, I see... It’s no longer a part of me once it spills out...

Watching until he ascertains that the final specks of his enemies have faded away, he gives his sword a clean swing and returns it to its sheathe. Gideon roughly wipes his face with his fist. Then adjusts his hat to hang low over his eyes and steps forward, continuing onwards before the flaming breath that lights his surroundings burns out.

“For the princess.”

CLAAANG! He swings open the heavy door and enters the castle that holds his princess captive.

LADY Megan is peering into the mirror in the room at the tower’s peak, where she’s gathered beautiful, pretty things fit for a princess. Her thinly groomed eyebrows knit together, forming creases in her porcelain brow.

“Ungainly—” The next instant, a maelstrom of flames envelop the mirror surface and pounds against its backside. “No! How can it be?!”

The elliptical mirror, framed in a gold and silver rim held in place by a sapphire skull—the Mirror of the Departed—warps from the inside-out. Lady

Megan merely finds it disturbing; she thinks it will withstand, just as it had the last time.

But the castle underground is the battlefield this time. A location much closer to her than the hideaway in the forest.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

“What? What’s happening?”

Emitting a deafening shriek, the mirror splinters sideways—the hidden, fine crack from before now webs out in hundreds of directions, shooting across the entire mirror’s surface in the blink of an eye! Lady Megan thrusts her ring out over it, trying to keep the power restrained—but she can’t make it in time.

Sharp, painful, clear, and crisp sounds ring forth as the Mirror of the Departed mercilessly shatters into countless fragments.

“AAAHH!”

Flying shards assail Lady Megan. Her slender arms and her thin fluid dress can’t protect her; she can’t run away. The largest jagged shard pierces her white, unblemished forehead. And not a single mirror shard falls to the floor. As if the pieces have a will of their own like living creatures, shard after shard stabs into Lady Megan as if unnaturally drawn to her. Hauntingly, they pierce through her hands, through her feet, through her face, mouth, throat, and through her eyes.

Lady Megan screams for the first time in her life from unimaginable pain. But no matter how desperately she screams, no voice comes out and no one comes to her aid.

THE dampness lessens the farther up the stairs I go. The water-laden stones give way to dry ones, and the air pressure eases up with every step.

Slipping out of the underground tunnel, I return aboveground. There, the stairs come to an end with a flat slab of stone sealing off the overhead exit. Crouching on the highest step, I listen intently.

No signs of movement. Nodding to myself, I descend four steps.

“If memory serves me right, should be ‘round here...”

I grope about the wall and reach right for what I’m looking for, since I know what and where it is. Couldn’t have known where exactly to feel without prior knowledge. I twist the one special stone that’s embedded among thousands of others.

THUMP! CLANG! CLANK! ...SCRAPE! SCRAPE! SCRAPE!

Something rotates inside the wall, clankin’ and creakin’. I can hear chains pull back, something heavy moving up and down. A good many things engage and converge. Then, the stone overhead slides sideways, spilling dim light inside. As the stone recedes, the line of light grows wider and brighter. The movement’s timed so it’s neither too fast nor too slow, but just the right speed for gettin’ your eyes used to the light. After confirming that the stone has opened all the way, I exit.

Just as I’ve heard, it leads right behind the cathedral’s altar. I pull down on one of the lined-up candlesticks. The pedestal inclines, extending the hidden chains. The mechanisms rotate once again, closing the stone slab.

Moonlight bathes the cathedral sanctuary, which is as still as death. There are no candles lit for delivering prayers or incense for purifying the room. Instead, there’s something that shouldn’t be there.

“Whoa!” My inadvertent exclamation loudly bounces off the high-rise ceiling, echoing off the walls and the pillars that support the many arches. I quickly clamp my hand over my mouth. This is where the priest is supposed to stand. Even the slightest sounds will resound to the farthest recesses of the room, since that’s what it’s built to do.

Silver spider thread densely covers the altar. That alone’s a serious issue, but the real problem only begins there. The spectacular web is actually stretched across the entire room, encompassing not only the altar but the ceiling, floor, and walls. Just how far does it extend overhead?

I carefully approach it. Water’s been crystalized into the spider’s web as it trickled down. A strange feeling comes over me the closer I get. My cloak is drawn to it, tugging towards the spider’s web as if being pulled on by invisible fingers.

Is this one of those cases where things made by the same power are drawn together?

I boldly touch the spider web with my fingertips. The silver-embroidered cloak and crystalized web react. Silver light rushes inwards in waves from the spot I touched, heading for the center of the web. There, no spider awaits me, but an orb, now faintly glowing, placed in the middle and supported by the crystal thread.

“Look at me. Don’t forget me.”

Found it, I silently mouth. Light pulses inside the orb like it’s breathing, cycling through flashes of red, green, yellow, and ending in a clear almost-transparent white. Throwing every color together, the colors alternate and cast an unstable rainbow that shouldn’t be here. Looks like the orb’s small enough to fit in the palm of my hand.

I take the bow off my back and string it. *I’m gonna commit quite the sacrilege by shootin’ an arrow off in a cathedral.* But it’s the best plan of action. *I’ll apologize later with prayer or charity or whatever’s needed. Right now, I gotta do what I gotta...*

The orb is positioned where I’d never be able to reach just by stickin’ my arm out while standing on something. And you couldn’t call my target big by any standard. But thanks to living in the forest for over a year, my skills with a bow have increased tenfold.

I brush the spider web again. This time, I bring the silver thread of my cloak directly to it. The wave of light is much brighter than the first time. I nock the arrow, take aim, and draw the bow, straining it to its limit. The ash-tree bow bends, its shape evolving from a third day moon to a seventh day.

All the job needs is a single arrow. I quietly inhale, hold my breath...and let the arrow loose towards the center of the light. The bowstring lets out a thwisch, and the bow snaps to its former shape. The arrow flies in a gentle arc, then pierces the orb’s lower half in the blink of an eye.

The tension in the web breaks. I didn’t miss my mark. A rainbow bursts out of the orb. But there’s no sound.

Is there really nothing?

My ears hurt.

Small tremors from the center ripple out to the tips of the web, a growing crescendo of vibrations cause a deafening pain.

My ears hurt.

“...Crap.”

The next second, the spider’s web crumbles to pieces, creating both beautiful and dreadful music as it goes.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I move farther into the now web-free sanctuary. Normally, the sanctuary is open at all times, and few notice the hidden door that blends in with the wainscoted walls. When they learn about it for the first time they end up searching for it themselves. I know I spent many drunken nights with a woman to keep my company in the various hidden passages scattered throughout the castle in my younger years. It was an excellent hiding place to escape the abbot’s constant patrols.

I swiftly open the door, slip inside, and hide within the narrow passage that only those who clean and polish the sanctuary know about. Or only those who are trusted by the pope, his followers, and the king.

On the other side of the wall, I can hear the threads shattering into pieces and smashing onto the floor. Soon afterwards, the main double doors are thrown open and slam hard into the walls, shaking them. Talk ‘bout a thuggish and uncivilized bunch...not that I’m one to speak.

Heavy footsteps stomp inside, crushing crystal fragments underfoot. I count six armored men wearing metal boots.

“What happened?”

“This looks bad.”

“Shit.”

“Someone inform Captain right away!”

Crud, this isn’t good. The muscles in my face tense.

“No, don’t! Wait, wait, just wait a damn minute. Things’ll get even worse if we go n’ kick up a fuss. They’ll blame it on us!”

“Not ‘us’. It’s yer fault!”

“Don’t’cha turn on me now! Think ya can escape blame alone?!”

“Ain’t the front of the sanctuary yer station?”

“That goes for you too!”

“Wait, wait. Calm down. We won’t get punished if we don’t say nothin’.”

“All hell will break loose when they find out though.”

“Won’t be a problem if it happens after our shift is over, yeah?”

“...Now, that’s good. We just gotta blame it on the guys on the next shift.”

The footsteps move away and the sanctuary doors close.

All right, now’s the time to go. Their self-preservation bought me some time.

I take off, my back now to the sanctuary.

“One more to go!”

GAZING up at his throne, Lord Designs whispers in a giddy voice, “Soon... Soon it will all be mine! All that is precious, all of my dreams, everything... Soon!”

Upon the throne, lacking someone worthy enough to sit upon it, lies a red velvet cushion. A gold crown rests atop it. With a single red gem set in its center as its sole decoration, the crown shines with majestic gold sparkles and reflects the lamplight.

Lord Siegfried thrusts his hand out toward the red swaying light. “Soon. Soon, it’ll be mine: the kingship, the crown, the castle, the kingdom...all of it...all of it will be mine...”

Just then, he hears the piercing noise of glass cracking—or maybe it’s a young child screaming. Spinning around, he looks to where the third black magic item rests. The smallest, yet most intricately woven spider web supports the three

orbs, one of which just broke. It loses its color, weakens, and disintegrates like ash. Or to be more exact, it turns into real ash and flutters through the air before melting away.

“Oh? OH, NOOOOO!”

Lord Designs’ face convulses; he tears at his hair. Yet that isn’t enough, so he claws at his temples and cheeks, then furiously drags his hand down to his chin. Without noticing that he’s ruining his precious beard, he rips it apart, scratching deep into his skin.

“I *won’t* let anyone get in my way...EVER!”

And then he sprints off. A gentleman of lordly status shoots down the corridors flinging his shoulder-length hair into utter disarray. The officers, private soldiers, and servants either look over their shoulders to gawk at him or avert their eyes from the bizarre spectacle and tremble in fear.

His mad dash’s destination: Princess Lala Lilia’s room. Lord Designs reaches for the bunch of keys hanging from his belt with quivering, sweaty hands, fumbling.

“Which IS it? WHICH is IT? ARGH! Maddening lot of keys!” Scratches and gashes mar the keyhole as he shoves each inside before finally arriving at the correct key. The miserable keyhole looks as if someone tried to wrench it open with a small knife. “WHERE’S THE PRINCESS?!”

He throws the doors open, violently kicking down the modestly placed partitioning screen following it. Beyond the screen stands a frozen, frightened maid and seamstress...and Princess Lala Lilia. They were in the middle of retailoring her wedding dress; they’ve already been at it all night. Tiny blood vessels have filled the whites of the maid and seamstress’ eyes from the endeavor, and their fingers are covered in nicks and bruises. Recklessly rushing through needlework under swaying candlelight will do that to any experienced seamstress.

Princess had just stripped out of the dress and is standing there in a sleeveless, short-hemmed, white silk underdress. On her legs are white stockings sheerer than a butterfly’s wings. Decorating her feet are white shoes with glistening silver beads sewn tightly together, ending in a spiky heel unfit

for a girl her age.

The maid hastily throws her arms open and stands between them. "You mustn't! Please withdraw from the room," she flatly demands, her voice trembling. "Her Majesty is in the middle of changing."

"Move!" Lord Designs' balls his hand and swings. His hard punch smashes into the maid's face, sending her sprawling with a yelp. "Come with me, Princess."

He rudely crosses over into the inner room and seizes hold of Princess' wrist.

"NO! Lemme go!"

From the ground, the maid grabs the ankle of the man who is forcefully dragging away a protesting Princess. "You...mustn't... At least...let her be dressed..."

"Damn pestilence!"

Lord Designs has completely lost it. He lifts his leg violently and madly stomps on the maid's body, face, and hands, trampling her underfoot without listening to her feeble screams.

"DON'T get in MY way! DON'T DEFY ME! You've just been demoted to kitchen maid, wench! Run to the kitchens and live the rest of your life on your hands and knees on oil-stained floors, good-for-nothing leech!"

"STOP IT!" Princess shouts. Sending her loose, wavy red-hair flying in her white, airy underdress, *she* stomps her feet. "I'll go with you. So *don't* kick them anymore," she commands.

Lord Designs awkwardly swings his head back to ogle Princess. His eyes are that of a man staring at his impassioned dream; though there are many night it is actually his nightmare. His eyes devour her, drilling a hole through her.

"OOH! OOOH! *My* princess! You will come with me?" His mouth widens into a complacent smile, his lips raising until all his gums are revealed, so that it almost splits his face in two. "Good girl. Good, good girl. Off we go then. Why don't we go straight to the throne room? You just can't wait for the wedding ceremony, can you? Ooh, adorable princess..."

TUG! My cloak pulls in a specific direction, as if tiny fingers are pinching its hem. The force is so weak that I wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't concentrating.

"This way?"

Moving 'bout the castle without being discovered takes work, but it's not impossible. Sometimes I move into the space between a wall and hanging tapestry. On other occasions, I slip into a narrow passageway between two walls, or take one of the servant corridors.

Considerin' what I saw in the sanctuary, in this castle, the farther down the food chain a person is, the more they want to hide anything *troublesome*. The tighter ya clamp down, the more likely resentment will fester. It's a great bit of luck for me right now.

I progress through the castle, letting the cloak lead me with its tugs. The force has grown weaker. Did breaking one of the orbs shift the load to the other?

If memory serves me right, up ahead is...

I head down the kitchen corridor where the pillars have become bare. Smells of meat and freshly baked bread waft from around the corner. Cracking open the small door, I peer inside. As I thought, it's the banquet hall. The dazzling light from the candles hanging from the ceiling and the walls blinds me.

Plates, knives, forks, and cups are set on the enormous table, which is placed imposingly in the center of the banquet hall. Countless flowers decorate the walls. The banquet preparations are under way at a brisk pace.

Over the king's chair hangs a tapestry embroidered with the kingdom's landscape, centering on the royal family's crest.

"...Hm?" I rub my eyes.

Funny—something's off about the pattern I'm used to. Alien objects are mixed in here and there—they're floating there, out of place. The difference between my memories and what's actually in front of me stings my eyes, tearing at them from the inside. It's *seriously* uncomfortable. It's the same feeling I had when I looked at the castle outside.

"I knew it, that part's different." Another pattern arises like a phantom

illusion the second I speak. It's a spider web. A silver spider web has been woven above the tapestry. Pulsing in its center is a rainbow orb. "Jackpot."

Now how am I gonna handle this? Unlike the last, this one's in a tricky spot. I think an arrow jutting outta the tapestry's gonna stand out.

Well, I've got a trick up my sleeve.

Remaining hidden, I wait with bated breath for a pause in the steady stream of servants busily coming in and out of the hall. They're preparing for the banquet, but they're all exhausted men and women limping and staggering; not one of them's without some sorta injury. Given any kind of opportunity, they'll stop to take a break.

And there definitely will be a moment where that timing overlaps—see, it's happening now.

I open the door and stick half my body through it. I remove the shield from my back, hold it aloft, and...

At what angle and with what strength should I throw? The pause gives me more than enough time to lock on to my target.

...I chuck it. The shield flies, spinning horizontally, directly into the tapestry, right where I was aimin'! My shield breaks the orb, collides with the wall behind it, and bounces back. I catch the shield as it plummets to the ground, snatching it out of the air just before it hits, sending a pleasant vibration running up my arm.

"Huzza!" Watching the orb until it fully crumbles, I pull back into the kitchen corridor.

Whoa.

I spot someone turn the corner. I hide behind a pillar posthaste.

It's a woman. She looks like she's in a lot of pain for someone so young...she's dragging her leg behind her, walking unsteadily. In her shaking hands, she carries a pitcher filled to the brim with ale. The flickering candlelight illuminates her face, and I sharply suck in my breath. Her left eye is painfully swollen shut. Somebody hit her.

Cruel scumbags!

In contrast to the banquet hall, the kitchen corridor is dark, barely lit. What's more, since this place is outta sight, they've used it as an excuse to leave junk lying around. They've thrown trash on the ground and left stains from spilled food and puddles of oil and soup on the floor.

"AH!"

The woman's foot slips and she loses her balance. Her hand shoots out and catches the wall, keeping her upright. Unfortunately, her left hand can't support the cumbersome pitcher alone, and it falls to the floor and breaks into pieces. Wine splatters everywhere like blood spraying from a cut vein. The smell of rich grapes fills the corridor. Honestly, I would've been enticed by it if not for the time and place.

"EY! What the 'ell did ya do, brainless wench?!" bellows a man, who comes thundering over. "How dare ya waste expensive wine! Yer life doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of w'at this liquor is worth! Die! DIE! Make it up with yer death!!"

He raises his fat hand, which is wrapped around an equally fat cudgel. The woman screams, falling onto her rump. She throws her hands up in front of her face in a last-ditch attempt to protect herself.

"DIE, damn bitch!"

My body moves faster than my mind.

CLANG! Metal strikes metal. Vibrations from the impact transfer from the shield into my hand. Her head would've been split like an egg if she'd taken that hit.

"You make it a hobby to hit the defenseless?"

His dirty eyes bulge and he flaps his mouth open and closed. His breath reeks of liquor. No wonder he's so familiar with how expensive this wine is.

"Then how about you try it on me?" I invite.

After absorbing the blow, I step forward, shaking his cudgel off by swinging my shield to the left. He tumbles with it, goin' down so easy it's shocking. Big

difference between him and the abominations I faced underground.

He's not even worth cutting down.

Cudgel Man staggers backward like a sapling in a torrential storm. I clench my right fist and punch him off his feet.

"GUAAAGGH!"

The man hits the wall and slides down onto the floor, his cudgel rolling away from his limp extended hand.

"You all right?"

The woman nods through her trembles. I offer her my hand and help her to her feet. What the hell? She's covered in injuries all the way to her fingertips.

"This outrageous treatment ends today. I'll put an end to it."

"Hunter of the Winter Star..." Her one open eye fixes on my shield. "Are you Gideon?"

"What?"

"You're Thorn Knight Gideon, aren't you?"

She says it just like Princess. From the rising and falling of her voice, to the vowels she stresses when she speaks.

"How do you know that?"

"I heard about you from Princess."

It's confirmed: she's an ally.

"Where's Princess?"

"In the throne room. He said the wedding ceremony will be held there."

The throne room, huh? That fop just has to go outta his way to be bombastic. Hang on, did she say *wedding ceremony*?!

"AS IF I'LL LET YOOOU!" I bellow.

Blood boils in my veins. Even knowin' that was his goal all along, hearing it aloud pisses me off!

“Um...Sir Knight?”

Cool down, Gideon. You are before a lady. Take a deep breath and release that unnecessary killing intent.

“You have my gratitude.” I take her hand once more. Wrapping both my hands around it, I drop a kiss on her fingertips. Couldn’t think of any other way to show my gratitude and respect for her courage.

“Please...save the princess.”

“Without fail.”

“God be with you, Sir Knight.”

“Thank you.”

I part ways with her and advance down the kitchen corridor. Great, finally got a little room to breathe.

“Figured out where Princess is, partner.” I speak to the scale embedded in my chest as I walk at a brisk pace. “She’s in the throne room on the castle’s highest floor. It’d be fastest for you to fly in from above...” No answer. “Oi? You listening, Spike?”

I stop.

Impossible. There’s no way that dead serious worry-wart dragon wouldn’t have something to say to me in this situation.

“Giving me the silent treatment? Not cool.” I concentrate the flow of energy to my eyes, but my visibility doesn’t change. I can’t connect to Dragon’s eyes. “No way... Oi, it can’t be...it can’t be... This is all some sorta bad joke, right?”

I want to believe that I’m just a little rusty with our connection, but my mind already understands there’s only one reason why I can’t connect. Only one reason why I wouldn’t hear Dragon’s voice now... The barrier that should’ve vanished with the second orb’s destruction is still...here.

Why? I should’ve destroyed the two black magic items. So why didn’t it work?

“What’s going on here...?”

Cold sweat covers my hands.

What should I do? What can I do? Oi, what should I do?!

I clench my fists and my teeth. The answer is obvious. If I stand here wasting time panicking, Princess will be forced to marry that fop! I have to stop them! No, I *will* stop them. I'll definitely prevent it! Absolutely!

Moving my stiff legs, I get ready to rush headlong into danger.

"What's the problem?" I tell myself, "You know where to go."

All that's left to do is move. Isn't that easy? C'mon, let's do this, Gideon Thorn.

"Princess is waiting."

Chapter 12: Throne Room

BANG! BANG!

The echoing ring of battle comes from the other side of the double doors. Rattling, the thick doors creak as they strain against an unseen force, bending inward from outside pressure.

Color drains from his face and cold sweat coats his hands, but Lord Designs still won't let go of the key to the throne that he clutches tightly in his right hand—the wrist of Princess Lala Lilia, a seven-year-old little girl.

“You're hurting me.”

“Soon. Very soon, Princess. Once the wedding ceremony is over, it'll be time for the coronation.”

The throne room, occasionally called the audience chamber, is wide enough to easily fit an army of giants positioned in formation. Stained-glass windows, painted with landscapes from the four seasons, are set into every wall. The image of a gargantuan tree serves as the focal point of all the scenes. Summer landscapes decorate behind the throne; to the right is autumn's harvest season; to the left is blooming spring. And inlaid above the creaking double doors is a winter landscape, cloaked with frost and snow. It is set up in such a way so that everyone who enters the room through winter must then confront summer.

Throne room. Audience chamber. What the room is called changes with the person's subjectivity. In the end, it comes down to what they see. Does it hold the king's throne or the king himself?

In the case of Lord Designs Siegfried, the wedding ceremony serves as nothing more than the opening act. He shifts his greedy glare from the throne to the gold crown, then to the rainbow orb supported by a spider's silver thread. There had originally been three orbs. Now only one remains.

The instant the second orb disappeared, Lord Designs grabbed his throat and

moaned hideously, like a frog letting out its final death croak. His fingers dug into Princess' wrist. Tighter, tighter, he dug until his nails sunk into her young, soft fair skin.

"You're hurting me." Princess clenches her teeth against the pain. Tears well up in her verdure eyes, but they don't dampen the flame of her burning will.

BANG! BANG! The double doors violently shake. CREAK! CREAK! CRACK! Wood grain bursts from the door frame as it continues to warp towards them.

"Yeesh! SHUT UP! You're being too noisy! Finish off that knave already!"

PIERCE!

A steel blade is forcefully thrust through the crack where the two doors connect.

"Eeeek!" Lord Designs covers his face and retreats back.

"Stop! Let me go!" Princess yells.

SLICE!

A broad double-edged sword swings down through the door. In a single stroke, its weight and the strength carried in its point severs the bar sealing the doors shut in two!

To Lord Designs, the bar is vital for his defense. To Princess, it's the lock to her jail cell.

"Oooh. OOOOH NOOO! What madness! He's crazy. That man is CRAZY!"

BANG! A man dressed in all-black kicks the door open and charges inside.

"Insolent fool!" Lord Designs screams, "Who are you?!"

"Knight Gideon. I came for Princess Lala Lilia."

Princess' face lights up. "Gideon!"

"Sorry for making you wait, Princess."

"You're laaaate!"

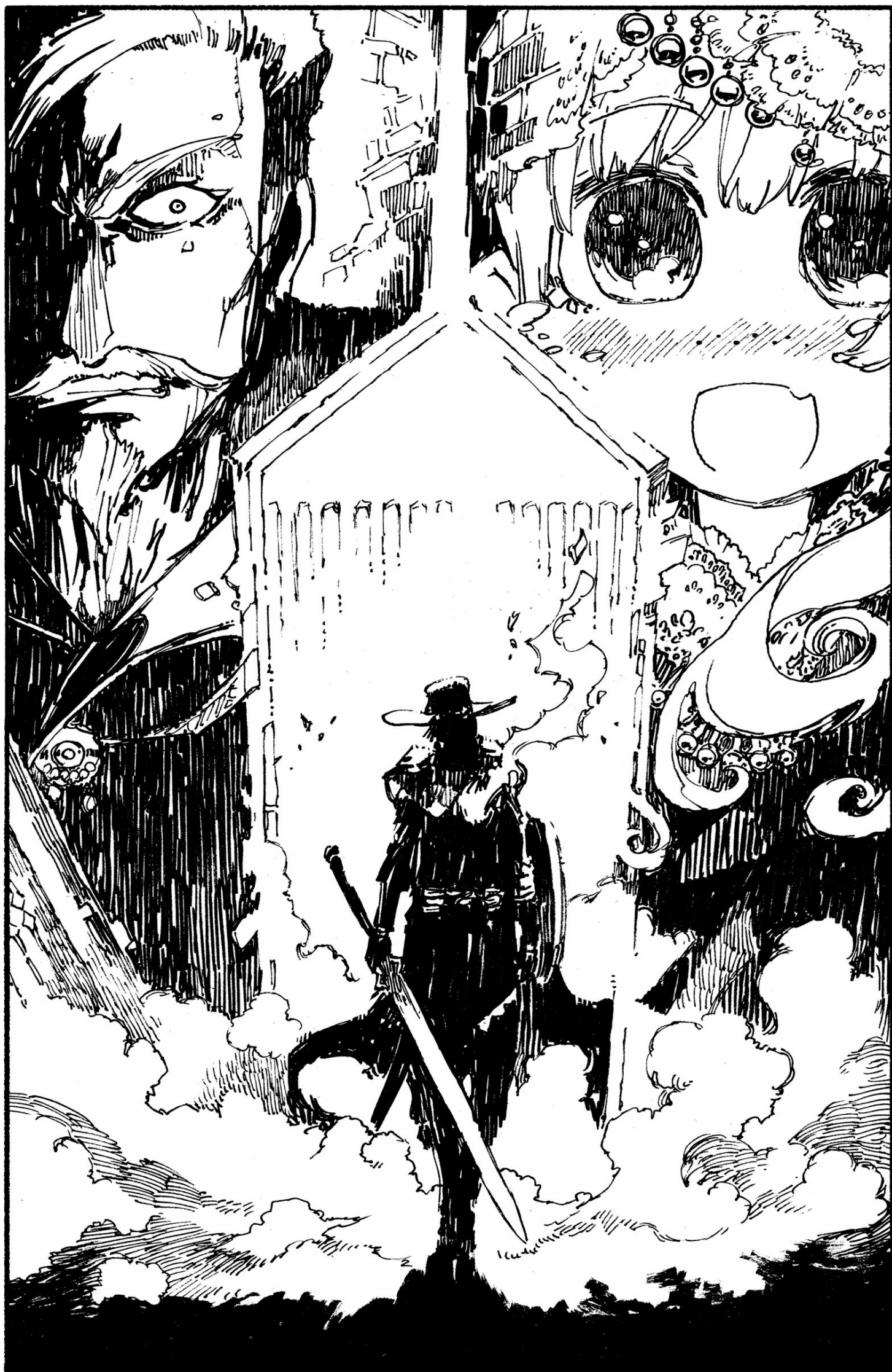
"...Sorry."

Though she puffs out her cheeks, a twinkle is glimmering in her eyes. A smile

mixes with the sullen expression she wears on her soft and full young visage.

Meanwhile to her right, Lord Designs' entire face twitches as he scoffs, "That's it? I was wondering what kind of brave and fearsome warrior would cut his way inside from the front, but..." Looking down on the man calling himself a knight, Lord Designs' erupts into mocking laughter. "It's just a deadbeat, senile old mouse who escaped death!"

"...No objections here." Knight Gideon smirks, deeply creasing the lines between his eyebrows and nose as he bares his teeth. His shoulders move up and down heavily as he pants.



How much carnage did he have to fight through in order to make it this far? He's out of arrows, his sword's blade is chipped, and his clothes are full of rips and holes. Fresh bruises swell on his face. Innumerable cuts have been carved into his shield. Damage carries over to the clothes and armor he's wearing as well. Is the trickle of blood under his feet from his enemies or himself?

"Don't make me laugh. Drop dead, ignorant fool! GUARDS! Come forward!"

At his command, the private army standing at the ready advances forward from hidden corridors scattered throughout the throne room. Wearing matching white surcoats, chainmail that's been polished to a sparkle, and a steel helmet, each wields the same glaive—a type of polearm good for cutting and piercing. They're convenient weapons for chopping an enemy apart from a distance. Gideon's lips turn down and he clicks his tongue.

"Blegh. The whole lot of you are carryin' something nasty there."

"At the ready!"

They move to the side in unison without disrupting their formation and hold the glaive-blades up by the end of the pole. They form a wall of glinting blades between Princess and Knight.

"ATTACK!"

But that's as far as their formation will hold. Though they raise a unanimous war cry, they each attack as they see fit instead of as a unit. While their equipment and appearance are uniform, they're nothing more than an angry mob dressed as soldiers. Still, their numbers are large. Gideon would not last long at his peak and he most certainly was not at his peak right now.

Still, he doesn't just resign to his fate and wait to be skewered. Gideon charges forward to meet the enemy up close. Deflecting the glaive coming straight at him with his shield, he closes the distance and smoothly swings his sword in a slash, trying to cut down the chaotic line of spears in one strike—

"Wha—"

It broke.

His sword...broke. The sword's blade cruelly snapped in half and now rolls

onto the floor before him, resounding hollowly with the sound of his demise. His aquamarine eyes stare at the remaining fragment of a blade left in his hand.

Was slicing the door in half the final straw of the compounding recklessness and madness that broke the camel's back?

"Ha! HAHAHA! This is it for you, Gideon something or other!" Lord Designs Siegfried throws his head back, laughing to the heavens. "Vanish with the remains of the former king...*trash!*"

Having lost his weapon, Knight Gideon finds himself desperate and cornered. On the opposite hand, the guards are gaining morale. He swats away one blade after another with his shield, but it doesn't do much because the next line swiftly takes their place. Glaive-wielding soldiers take him on in twos and threes. In the blink of an eye, the black knight is buried under the assault of white soldiers.

They aren't this kingdom's soldiers. They are a private army who moves at Lord Designs' will. Perhaps that will become his sole salvation?

"Gideon! Gideon, stand up!" Princess' shouts are absorbed by the clash of weapons and the creak of armor. They can't reach him. "PLEASE, GIDEON!"

"HA! HAHAHAHA! HAHAHA! HAAAAH! KILL 'IM! KILL 'IM! Kill him, my men! Whoever takes his head will be rewarded to his heart's desire!"

The kin slayer turned tyrant convulses with laughter, flaunting his mad joy spawned from the peak of his gratification. The sight retriggers Princess' determination.

I'm the only one who can save Gideon now. She deeply inhales and stops struggling. Lord Designs is tickled pink beyond measure by her lack of resistance.

"Ooh," he coos, "good girl, Princess."

But it's just a step towards her next action.

"...I won't let you..."

"Huh?"

Princess gracefully lifts her knee. Clenching her teeth, she locks on to her

target and stomps down with all her strength. She crushes his foot and twists in the thin, pointed heel of her wedding boots! Her heel grinds into the top of Lord Designs' foot, just as he was about to reach the climax of his arrogance and self-conceit!

“GYAAAAH! OOOWW!”

Feet are unquestionably a vital weak point for the human body. His soft shoes that prioritize looks over use aren't much defense against her solid heel. As a result, he screams wretchedly and nearly faints in agony. His grip loosens, and Princess fiercely shakes him off without delay. Misfortune fell upon him because he underestimated her, thinking her to be a weak and helpless child. Caught by sheer surprise, Lord Siegfried stumbles backward, then all too easily tumbles onto the floor.

“Where does her strength come from...?!” he gasps from the ground. He frantically reaches out, but doesn't even come close to touching her fluttering skirts—she's made a run for it.

Sending her wavy red hair flapping behind her, she dashes away like she had in what felt like a lifetime ago between those tightly packed trees of her forest refuge. Like the times she had raced down the thick Millennial Tree branches that jutted in all directions. Her sights are set on the orb supported by silver spider's thread. She doesn't know what it is. But she understands its value by just how important it was to her captor.

I'll break that! Princess always sees through to the true nature of things. *I'll break it and save Gideon!*

“OOOOOORRAAAHHH!” she roars from the pit of her stomach, much like her black knight had. Behind her, Lord Designs' face spasms as he holds his foot in agony.

“Wai—Princess?”

“URAAAH!”

Princess kicks off the ground with perfect timing and rotates her body to unleash a flying kick. Putting her whole body into it, she sends the most delicately and intricately woven silver thread pedestal flying!

“STOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!”

A procession of shattering noises drowns out his shrieks. Like the clean, clear music of a crystal string harp being played by feather tips, the tonal purity holds everyone who hears it captive. But the name of the song is “Destruction”.

Pieces of the smashed threads break into fragments. The final orb drops on the floor and bursts open before disappearing.

“Ah...aaaahhhh...”

Princess lands on the floor, firmly planting her feet.

The swarm of soldiers stops moving. Princess holds her head high and calls for her knight, “Gideon!”

Immediately after, the swarms of soldiers are sent flying, like a pop of an opening lotus flower. Standing in the center of the easily knocked-over soldiers is the black knight. Clenching both his fists around his shield and broken sword, he turns his back on them, then abruptly looks up at the ceiling and howls. Tearing out of his throat is the overwhelming roar of a valiant dragon. It splits the air and shakes the stained glass.

“Eep! Eek! Eeeeeek!”

All of the white surcoat soldiers and their employer Lord Designs scream, clamping hands over their ears as they writhe in pain. Conversely, Princess throws her arms open and embraces it with a smile. She’s not the least bit afraid of the howling man or the roaring voice.

Gideon opens his eyes, slowly raising his wrinkled eyelids. Below are not two aquamarine eyes, but the slit pupils of dark honey—Dragon’s eyes. Princess smiles; Lord Designs moans through gasps.

“MONSTERRRR...”

“It’s too soon for ya to be paralyzed with terror, Mister Siegfried.”

A giant shadow passes overhead. Obstructing the moonlight, something gigantic casts a black shadow over the stained glass.

“See, I’m just the opening act.” The shadow follows his raised, broken sword. Gideon points to the autumn landscape to the right of the throne. “Now it’s

time for the main act to come on stage!” he announces.

Out of nowhere, fire bursts through, burning bright-red! A massive hole opens in the wall, widening as it burns, until not even a splinter remains. The indigo sky at his back, Dragon grandly swoops in. Cutting through the billowing steam, his flexible limbs cross the wall and land on the floor, shooting tremors across the room. His glimmering ruby scales are tapered into razor-sharp spikes; waves of light are rushing along his entire body. He looks down with his golden eyes.

“Mister Dragon!!!” Princess dashes over to him, nearly tripping.

Gracefully bending his body, Dragon meets her halfway, smoothly catching the little body that jumps onto him. He pulls her in with his gently extended foreleg, hugs her close, and wraps her up in his wing. Where she touches him, his spiked scales instantly transform, rounding off into a smooth, flat surface so as not to injure Princess’ soft skin.

“Princess.”

Princess and the red dragon embrace. Gideon plods over to them, dragging his foot behind him.

“Glad to see you again, partner.”

“Me too, my friend. You completed your mission most admirably.”

“Nah, not at all.” Knight shakes his head and looks to Princess, showering her with pride. “Princess is the one who finished it off.”

“I would expect no less of our princess.” Dragon bends his long neck and kisses Princess on the forehead. “Brave Lala Lilia, my beloved little lady.”

“I love you, Mister Dragon!” Princess clings to Dragon with both arms and rains kisses on his scales.

“Ah... Yup, that’s the way it goes, isn’t it? Yup.” Knight Gideon clears his throat and holds his shield at the ready once again. Standing in front of Princess and his friend, he becomes their protective shield.

Holding strong, Knight Gideon’s voice echoes as it demands, “Annul this marriage, evil scum! Reverfeat’s rightful ruler is Lala Lilia and Lala Lilia alone!” His gold, blazing dragon eyes glower with unnerving conviction at the man

hugging the ground. “There’s no room for you to come on the scene, sleazebag.”

Following suit, Dragon raises his neck and quietly looks down on Lord Designs. “Your time is up, Lord Siegfried.”

Knight and Dragon roar in unison:

“DON’T YOU LAY A FINGER ON OUR PRINCESS!”

“YOU SHALL NOT COME NEAR MY LADY!”

Struck by the two booming voices, Lord Designs jerkily jumps up like a puppet on a string. “I won’t allow IT. I WON’T forgive you BLIGHTERS!” he rants and raves. He rakes his hands through his disheveled hair, cursing, “Every last one... of you IS a FILTHY inferior SERVANT!”

“You’ve got that right—I’m nothing more than a mere servant,” Gideon answers. “A man with no other talents besides waging war. But who the hell are you?”

“I inquire the same thing. Who are you, lord?” Dragon asks mockingly.

“I am...”

Knight and Dragon do not move from their position. Nevertheless, Lord Siegfried shakily retreats. Losing the mental battle, he backs up in fear. Dripping sweat soaks his skin. His vision blurs.

“I am...”

That’s when he sees it.

He sees the blue pallid figures standing beside Knight and Dragon. The king and queen stand on either side of Princess. And crowding around them are hundreds of little girls. His two wives are at the front of the ashen-faced group. Every last one of them raises their right hand, thrusting it at him; their bloodless fingertips are just like frozen needles.

“AGH!”

His ambitions were modest in the beginning. Currying favor with his appearance and skill with words, he secured his position as the husband of a

noblewoman. Then, relying on the gold, power, and private army he obtained, he rose higher and higher in the kingdom.

“I am...”

His ambitions eventually compounded in him, driving him to conduct a supplication ritual in exchange for his daughter’s soul. Depending on the Devil’s power, he wished for kingship. Reaping moral support from that one deed, he no longer shunned any method, no matter how inhumane; everything was done so that he could achieve his goal.

He was supposed to obtain the crown. The kingship was to be his. The kingship was his!

“I was born without a soul. This is the real me.” But sapphire eyes had burrowed directly into Lord Designs; a porcelain finger had thrust out at him. *“Rejoice, for you accomplished everything of your own power.”*

Who desired the kingship? Himself? His daughter? What did he want to do once he became King? The lies he had painted over and over again with the sticky red paint of those he crushed underfoot now cracked and peeled away. In truth, he may have already realized it long ago.

Was I nothing more than a puppet manipulated by my own daughter??

“Uff...uff...URRGH!” Clenching his jaw so tight his teeth cracked, he pursed his flattened lips, the sticky sweat trickling down his body. “UURGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGH! UGYAH!”

His mouth closes off his cries; his throat won’t move to make his screams. Seething a bright-red, he backs away, shaking—quivering—trembling.

His eyes are bulging, stretched beyond their limit. Around his contracted pupils, blood vessels pop and run red. His whites strangely look larger than they should. Did his face distort because his very bones were twisted? Or was it that they became disjointed? Or did they break? Veins bulge from his temples and nose, twitching and writhing like earthworms.

The stained glass towering behind him is too ironic—the spring of life budding

and blossoming in an idyllic scene.

Fingers, fingers, fingers, hundreds of thousands of fingers. He can't escape them. There's no scapegoat this time. Unable to endure it any longer, he turns his back to them and just as soon...

...is swallowed whole.

Into the fangs of the gigantic jaws that smash right through the glass facsimile of spring, he disappears without a peep or a cry. His end comes all too anticlimactically.

"Ah."

Dragon and Knight both emit a sound of recognition.

"What?"

"You shouldn't look." Dragon blocks Princess' view with the tip of his wing to shield the young princess from the gruesome sight before them.

Chapter 13: Flying through the Dawning Sky

A shark came out of *nowhere*—a ridiculously huge shark is slitherin' over the wall fragments.

It took a significant amount of time for it to squeeze through the hole it made. Or maybe that's just how it felt. In the meantime, it took all the nerve I had to pick up one of the glaives that'd fallen on the floor.

WRIGGLE! The point of its tailfin makes it out of the hole, and now the gigantic carnivorous fish's whole body is inside the throne room. Sour spit fills my mouth when I see the entirety of it with my own eyes. I realize the revolting truth about its form.

These are *people*. *It's made up of human bodies!* Hands, heads, torsos, faces, feet, eyes, noses, ears, mouths—every part of the human body has been chopped into disconnected pieces and stitched together in the shape of a shark. Worst yet, each piece is still alive. *They're moving!*

Crap, crap, crap! This is bad—very bad!

“Get back, partner. Take Princess with you and withdraw!”

“Affirmative.”

This is an absurd monster chaotically pieced together with human bodies as if it were made out of some kinda grisly dough and kneaded by some mad genius' whims. Disgust overwhelms my fear of looking at it. Revolting, disgusting, appalling, grotesque—none of these words can even begin to describe this monstrosity.

“Princess, climb onto my back.”

“Okay!”

Princess climbs up Dragon's wing and scrambles onto his back.

“Good!” I nod.

Hands down, that's the safest place here.

The monster chomps the empty air with vengeance. Jagged teeth crash together as it snaps its jaws again and again. Its teeth are packed next to each other, growing in rows after countless rows, without any gaps between them. Its slithering tailfin is freakishly long. Haphazard and crudely formed are the only words I can think of to describe how the fins are affixed to its body. There's no way it's taken on this form to survive as a creature of this world. Foam is constantly spewing from the surface of its body, while innumerable pustules have swollen, bursting from its flesh. The shark's body is blue—a distinctly deep sapphire blue. The vibrancy of its impossible color stands out unnaturally from the rest of the scene. From its bursting boils, it spews the same sapphire-blue liquid. Beautiful yet repulsing in the hue of color. The most disturbing part is that for how fresh and raw it is, it gives off no smell at all.

“UWAAAH! WAH! AAH! MONSTEEEEER!”

“SAVE MEEE!”

“BUGYAAAH!”

“DOOON'T LOOK AT MEEEE!”

Private soldiers in their white surcoats scream, their eyes bulging out of their sockets...yeah, I understand how they feel. Now that their employer is gone, there's no work to be done or money to earn. They crawl away from the monster on their hands and knees, or topple forward as they scatter in confusion like mice. Every man for himself, they flee for the exit while madly flailing their arms. I definitely understand how they feel.

“**KIIYAAAAAAAAAAAH!**” The monstrosity unlocks its enormous jaw and unleashes a high-pitched shriek. Oddly enough, it sounds like the innocent voice of a little child. A part of my mind twists strangely as the noise ransacks my thoughts, the shriek piercing my heart and tearing at it.

The monster tramples the floor with its hind legs—no, that's not quite right. They're attached like hind legs and are the size of legs, but these are arms. It's a huge pair of human arms, growing backwards. Wait, did it *just now* grow from that spurting body? Somehow, this abomination is changing its very shape before my eyes. All the while shrieking and flailing about.

BAM! The floor shakes.

“Whoa!”

Its tremendous flailing shakes the ground! My feet are thrown from the ground. I did my best to brace myself for the impact, but I couldn't hold out against its force. Just as I'm dangerously close to falling over, something supports me from behind.

“Are you all right?” My friend's red scale-covered foreleg caught me.

“...Thanks for that.”

The blue monster drops the upper half of its body on the floor and slithers. Beneath its skin, the body parts making up its muscles are twitching and wriggling in a weird rhythm.

Oh yeah, isn't there a hairy caterpillar that moves like this?

It's fast. Despite its massive size, it's fast.

The white surcoat bunch are tossed like beans into a piping-hot frying pan. They pop into the air, flip over, and crash, writhing and struggling. They're fodder for expanding the blue monster's ugly form.

Before they have the time to scream, they're crushed to bits, dragged around, and scattered as pieces of meat. Mouths open across the monster's body and swallow every gory piece. The soldiers' numbers are decreasing in a flash and the rumbling tremors shaking the room won't stop. Is this literally what they mean by taking out enemies in a clean sweep?

This abomination is damned fast!

As I watch, ten arms, then hundreds of arms spurt from the monster's neck and belly, following a line to its chest. It runs by moving the arms like the legs of a centipede.

“Yuck, that's disgusting.”

“...But corpses are fine?”

He's talking in my head to protect Princess now? How much of a gentleman does this dragon gotta be, actin' considerate in a ridiculously chaotic situation like this?!

“Seeing the living meshed into that monstrosity brings things to a totally different level of madness!”

“KISHA! KIISHAAA!”

The blue monster pounds every last member of the white surcoats into mincemeat as it wails. Bits of flesh splatter as it devours them. Then, while eating, it begins to tremble in short bursts. Tremors spread through its body, foam covers its surface, and cracks develop. It’s growing at a much larger scale than before.

“That thing’s replenishing its ‘materials!’”

The shark’s head inflates immensely. Its flesh bulges, body fluids splatter, and it grows as it twists on itself. Before my eyes, bones assemble and flesh twines around it like string. Just as I’m wonderin’ what kinda disgusting component’s going to burst outta this monstrosity next— “What the hell is that?”

A beautiful girl pops out of the slime. Her body sprouts from the monster’s head from the waist up. Her skin is slick and smooth with the texture of glass—and noticeably blue. The blue of her skin is far more vivid than the monster’s main body and is partially transparent, revealing a faint light emitting within her. Foam restlessly bubbles from her scalp, and thin tendrils of light sprout. The lights fade, leaving long, perfectly straight golden hair.

What kinda sick joke is this? Her looks are almost that of a master sculptor’s handiwork—is what I’d like to say, but this part of the monster is deformed too. Countless flat, clear fragments stick out of her closed eyelids, where her eyes should be. And each shard is sharpened to a point. Touching them would make your fingers fall off. Plus, her arms are illogically long, though the size of her palms and the balance of her fingers match a little girl’s. From her shoulders to her elbows, from her elbows to her wrists, her arms are stretching longer and longer. That must be so painful. There’s a limit to how far a person should go in experimenting on children, no matter how morally bankrupt they are. There’s still no smell, but just watching this disgusting birth makes me want to puke.

“Megan,” Princess says.

“Huh? That thing is?”

Princess looks right at me from Dragon's back and nods. "That's...Megan."

I don't want to believe it, but if Princess says so, it's gotta be true.

CRREEEEAAK...

Contorting its neck, the blue demon beast stares down on us. Did it respond to the name? More foam erupts from the surface of its body, this time gushing from thousands of closed eyes. Eyes, eyes, and more eyes sprout from its body like tumors. The eyelids open at the same time. All of them are glowering at Princess!

"UUUUWAAAAHHH!"

"What's it doing now?!"

Mouths are submerged in the cracks of every eye. Teeth and tongues are growing inside each one, and every freakish mouth screams, **"So *that's where you were, Lala Lilia!*"**

An arm extends towards us. A gigantic eyeball is embedded in the surface of its palm. It's such a deep blue the pupil and the iris are indistinguishable. The eye's whites are bloodshot and blazing with hatred.

"Don't you come here!" I heave the glaive at it. Without straying from my mark, it pierces through the eyeball and out the backside of the hand.

"KIIIIYAAAAAH!" The girl's face contorts. The infinite number of open mouths on the body flap their lips, each speaking a different line.

"Aah, yet again. You are being protected yet again."

"It's always that way around you. People surround you. So many believe in you."

"Why? Why is that? You aren't cute. You're nothing more than a bratty, stubborn, and annoying little girl."

"That red hair of yours is always an unsightly mess. That face of yours is covered in freckles, it's ungainly."

"I'm much prettier than you."

"I'm much, much smarter than you."

“Yet, why is it? Why is it, Lala Lilia? Hey, hey? Something just has to be wrong with the world.”

“Why is it always you who benefits? Why is it always you who finds happiness?”

“Why? Why? Why is it?”

“Why, when I’m so unhappy? Why is it always me who loses out?”

“Ugh, shut up! Shut your traps!”

The monotone voices continue to grumble malicious statements. They're made all the more unbearable by their charming, enchanting sound. Between every word, blue liquid spurts and gushes out. Uncomfortable smoke puffs up from my shield and Dragon's scales when we block the fluids. But we won't let a drop land on Princess.

Dragon's nose creases and he growls from deep inside his throat. "Gideon, this is poison."

"Blegh, I just had to be right, didn't I?"

So then, these are literally poisonous words?

“Not good.”

Spinning my broken sword, I smash in the closest poison-spewing mouths I can reach. They're surprisingly weak. But more and more appear from the foam than I can crush, overwhelming me. I can't keep up!

"I'm the more beautiful one too."

“Why is it? Why are you the only one who’s loved? Why are you the only one promised the Blessed Crown?”

“Everyone comes to love you. Everyone hates me. It must be your fault.”

“I won’t forgive you. I’m envious. I’m jealous...”

“You make me unhappy.”

"You stole all my happiness from me."

"If only you never existed. As long as I eliminate you, I...! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !

!! !! !! !! !! ..”

Its malice coagulates and transforms into a pure killing desire.

"l-l-l-l-llllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll! aaaAAAHH!"

Person or monster, this thing's planning on killing Princess!

“Get on, Gideon!”

I jump onto Dragon without hesitation. I wrap my arms around Princess from behind and grab the reins wrapped around Dragon's neck.

“Go, Spike!”

The higher he vaults, the shorter the distance he needs to run before jumping into the air. Dragon leaps from wall to wall to build up momentum and spreads his wings.

“Aaack!”

“Hang on, Princess!”

A short drop. Momentary suspension. The contents of my stomach float up-and-up as we gradually rise into the air. Dragon's wings flap powerfully and he flies high. We've succeeded in our escape. His ruby wings cut through the biting cold air and soar. It's just before dawn, and the sun is still far below the mountains. Only slight tips of light dye the clouds on the horizon, where it meets the ground. The indigo of night fades to white the lower you go. The top of the sky is still thick with darkness. It's the half-light stage before dawn where light and darkness fight for supremacy. Normally, my visibility would be compromised as my eyes struggled to adapt, but it's a different story now. Dragon's vision reaches as far as the ever-distant throne room. I can see inside.

“That thing’s coming after us!”

"It should not be able to fly," Dragon answers.

"It's growing the ability by sproutin' wings!"

Blue monster. An undefined, demon beast that constantly changes its shape. Its sporadic trembling and quivering back becomes even more deformed and swollen. Something is wriggling inside the round, balloon-like, stretched thin

membrane. Raging winds howl past my ears, yet I can still clearly hear it—her monotone murmur.

“I won’t let you escape.”

With a viscous pop, wings made of blue bones with a tensed thin membrane the color of blood stretched over them burst through the body and spread out. Convulsing, the demon beast sprints in a quick spurt and tosses its body out the hole in the wall. For a second, it disappears from view.

“It’s coming!”



It ascends behind us, almost vertically into the air, while slightly swaying left and right. Three pairs of wings on its back recklessly cut through the sky, and a single horn jutting from its forehead forcefully breaks the wind. Though I call it a horn, it's not a pretty horn, like what you'd find on goats or bulls or rams. There are weird spikes protruding all over it, creating a warped silhouette. Reflecting the dying starlight, the light it emits blinds me.

"It's got a lotta wings," I groan.

"But it is not used to flying."

Dragon is right. Wings that have been hastily pieced together can't catch up to a creature born to soar through the skies. That abomination can have as many wings as it wants, but its wasteful movements only make it flounder in the air. Nevertheless, its persistence for pursuin' us is terrifying.

"KISHAAAAAAAAA!" the demon beast howls. Mouths open all over its body, blue light flickers inside their gaping maw.

"It's actin' like a dragon before it breathes fire!" I cry out.

"Hold on!"

Dragon nimbly folds his wings. Losing its support, his body sinks under the weight of gravity. Except, my body is yanked up. The contents of my stomach lurch and the inside of my ears pop loudly. Crud! I'm gonna get blown away! Holding on to Princess, I cling to Dragon's torso with all my might.

I can hear the disturbing sound of a living creature bursting open. Next second, a blue shining mass zooms by directly over my head, bringing an onslaught of fine, blue poison spray with it.

"Princess, shut your eyes!" On the spur of the moment, I cover Princess with my shield and my body. "Holy crap that's hot!"

Sizzling, my skin burns. So this is what the demon beast's fluids do. What the hell? This is insane! That **THING** is attacking us by using pieces of its own flesh and blood!

"Gideon!"

I stop the little hand from reaching up to touch me. "This small attack only

tickles. Are you unharmed, Princess?”

“I’m fine!”

“I...see...”

A stinging sensation from the heat floods our wings. This is not my pain, but Dragon’s. His body is huge, so there’s more of him doused in the spewed blood attack. I can’t protect all of him with my shield.

SIMMER! SIMMER! I can hear something coming to a boil!

“Shit! It’s gonna attack again!”

We’re at a lower altitude than before. There’s no more room for us to escape by descending.

“H-a-n-g o-n!”

WHOOSH! The world abruptly flips over.

“WHOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!”

“WOOHOO!”

I scream; Princess whoops. The ground is above my head. Blue light shoots across the sky, between the ground and us. The tip of Dragon’s tail is hot. We couldn’t avoid it completely? Are those flames? Light? The ground rolls back below us again. It’s the first time I’ve ever done a flip in the sky. My heart’s still hammering in my ears.

“My apologies. Times like this are best dealt with by doing something the enemy won’t expect.”

“You can say that again. You completely threw it off. In a big way!”

And almost threw me off.

The demon beast’s speed is decelerating as it goes. Makes sense. It’s attacking us by chiseling away at its own body, and there aren’t any “ingredients” in the sky for it to replenish itself.

“Let’s take this opportunity to escape!” I yell over the roaring winds.

“Although it is much to my ire, that sounds like the best plan...”

“We can’t,” Princess replies calmly.

“Princess?”

“Look!”

In the partial darkness before the sunrise, I can see that the demon beast has changed directions. It’s no longer chasing us. Its sights are set on the sleeping town. I sharply inhale.

“...! That thing’s plannin’ on attacking the town!”

“We won’t let it. Mister Dragon, go after it!”

“As you wish.”

That abomination has nobody to protect, but Dragon has us riding on his back. He has to protect us.

“Gideon, take care of defense.”

“...Sure thing! You can count on me!”

Dragon roars. The demon beast—or the face of the girl sprouting out of the demon beast—jerkily rotates her neck. She “looks” at Princess with the glass fragments sticking out of her closed eyes.

“KIIIIYAAAAAAAH!”

Good, our plan works. It turns its attention away from the sleeping town and comes after us. Dragon doesn’t run away this time either. He flies straight at her.

“HAAAAAAHHH!”

Is it me or him who’s screaming? My belly is hot. My throat is hot. Waves of heat pulse throughout my body. At exactly the same time, red light ripples in waves across Dragon. We’ve become one in body and soul. He attacks, I defend. I swing the shield in front of us to protect Princess.

“Don’t leave the safety of the shield, Princess.”

“I won’t!” She clings to Dragon’s back in the tight boundaries of my shield’s shadow. I sure am fond of how well she’s assessed the situation.

As opponents, we soar ever closer to each other. Blue lights welling inside the demon beast's gaping maws combusts into searing heat.

"GOOOO!"

Red flames collide against blue light in the sky. Dragon and Demon Beast close the gap between them while breathing their attacks. It's a tight battle between the primordial flames surging from Dragon's heart and the vicious burning of the ever-changing Demon Beast. They clash head-on, struggling intensely for supremacy.

"ROOOOAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!"

"KISHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Demon Beast doesn't even flinch when the fangs inside its mouths have been scorched hideously to the point of melting off. This is really bad. An enemy that doesn't care about destroying itself in the process of destroying you is formidable. Even if you're evenly matched, the party that isn't fighting to the death will eventually be overwhelmed.

If, right now, we are connected...if my life is connected to this dragon, then—

Dragon's life force flowed into me when I was on the verge of death right when the barrier collapsed. I should be able to do the same thing for him.

"Spike, use my power."

"Don't be rash, Gideon! You are—" Dragon hissed in his mind, concern flooding his words even as he fights the Demon Beast to a stalemate.

"It's fine! Don't hold back! Accept another's generosity!"

His panic means it's possible to do. I concentrate on the scale seared into the left side of my chest. My heart beats noticeably harder than usual. Accompanying the dizziness I typically associate with blood loss, I can feel something flow out of me. It's pouring into Dragon's body.

"Take it!"

Red and blue—the deadlock between the two fighting forces breaks. It's only by a slim margin, but the red flames push back the blue lights!

“Yes!”

But our joy is fleeting. Countless more mouths open on Demon Beast’s body to shoot the blue light! Narrow but innumerable attacks flow out of its body! There are too many of them! We can’t dodge at this range!

“Guh!”

My shoulder is hit with a brutal impact and pain courses through it. Dragon’s body pitches forward. We’ve been hit critically! A gaping hole has ripped open at the tip of his wing!

Meanwhile, that Demon Beast monstrosity drops its humongous jaw again, sucking in the entirety of Dragon’s flame. I can almost see its disintegrating mouth twisting in a sneer.

“Damn it! It can do that?!”

Demon Beast’s flank burns red from the inside and melts away like treacle. Yet, it shows no signs of being in pain. That’s disturbing. This is a battle between two flying, creatures, but only one of us seems to follow the laws of the living. We take greater damage because we’re the only ones who feel pain. We’ve no chance of winning if we clash again. Do we just make a run for it for good? Is escape the only option? I gnash my teeth.

“Gideon, don’t give up. You are a stubborn man.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment...”

Stupid Dragon! Is that really somethin’ you should say in this situation? Even his usually eloquent choice of words has become sloppier. There should be a limit to how much you can catch somebody off guard during battle. The tension eases from my clamped jaw.

“You are the most stubborn creature I’ve encountered in the past hundred years,” he adds.

The creases in my brow loosen. Whoa, am I smiling right now? In this extremely desperate situation with no possible escape?

“...What an honor.”

Dragon circles around and faces Demon Beast once again. That’s right, I’m a

knight. By means of the sword, my body becomes a shield. My sword broke, but my heart hasn't yet.

Abandoning sleeping townspeople, who believe that morning will come because they don't know any better, is never an option... Never. Princess is well-aware of that. Her intentions are the same. And that's exactly why—

“Let's do this, partner. For the princess.”

“For the princess.”

I glare at the demon beast blocking the path in front of us. Illuminated by the rising morning sun, the horn on its forehead glows.

“...! Do you see that, Spike?!”

“Aye, I see it, Gideon.”

Through Dragon's vision I can see it clearly: the gigantic, warped, razor horn jutting out of the blue girl's forehead is a mirror. It's a cluster of mirror shards. Reflected light bounces from the mirror-like horn, as if stitching together every nook and cranny of the demon beast.

That's it: the source of sinister blue light that's been madly firing at us like it's got no end to its energy.

That's the core of this thing!

“Gideon, it's the horn. Break that horn!”

“Gotcha! Leave it to me!”

Having said that, all I've got on me is a broken sword. This hunk of metal is ridiculously inadequate for the job. And I can't remove my shield; I have to keep protecting Princess with it.

Is there anything heavy around? I need something heavy and long. Is there anything? Anything at all? Something somewhere?

I can see the castle spire from where we're flying. Looking like a humongous spear, it's an overdone, excessively pointy metal spire affixed to the top of the roof. It's an addition from Lord Designs' massive castle renovations. Was it built to ward off evil spirits? As a weather vane? Repellent against lightning? Or is it

simply a decoration for showing off his might? Dunno what it's for, but it's about to come in handy.

"Spike, fly close to that spire."

"You ask for the impossible."

"You can do it, can't you?"

"Of course."

Steering his wounded body with his swishing tail, Dragon tilts diagonally. The tail end of his sizzling and singed wing throbs in pain. Holding onto the harness strap, I lean forward.

It's coming closer. Just a little more. Just a little closer—now!

Standing on the tips of my toes, I grab hold of the weather vane. I channel the speed of Dragon flying past into my arms. Mustering all the strength in my body, I twist it. My knees buckle and my body lifts into the air. Icy sweat permeates my skin. Will I or the weather vane break first?

"I absolutely won't...let go!"

SNAP!

My shoulder is saddled with a definite heft. I won. The spear-like weather vane snapped and broke off its base. Praise be to lazy workers with a slipshod work ethic!

"Yes! GOOOO!"

We fly around the spire and confront the demon beast again. Now, this is the moment of truth!

"Princess." I take her tiny hand and wrap it around the shield's strap. "Protect yourself with this, my princess."

Her freckle-covered face looks up at me and nods powerfully, her red hair bouncing. "I will, my knight."

That's my girl. My face unconsciously softens into a smile. I find her precious from the bottom of my heart all over again. Reverfeat's Lala Lilia is a brave little lady with a fighter's spirit.

“I’m off then.”

“Incoming, Gideon!”

“Got it! Once I jump—”

“I know.”

“Okay!”

The moment they fly past each other is when the distance between the red dragon and blue beast shrinks the greatest, and we come as close as possible to making time stand still. Tightly grasping my makeshift weapon in both hands, I kick off Dragon’s back and jump for it. From the perfect location at the perfect angle. Demon Beast will come at me of its own volition from here! For a moment I am left without my great dragon steed and float in the air. Dragon swoops away, and Demon Beast charges at me.

Blue light brushes by me. I’m lucky—it seems to struggle with aiming the smaller its target is.

Swinging the weather vane overhead, Demon Beast crashes into me and I slam my makeshift spear down into the beast’s horn and slice through from the tip to its root. The blue girl’s jaw drops and she shrieks. I can’t hear her voice. From the top, the horn crumbles and scatters away in very small pieces. A blue lump buried at the base of it is revealed. It’s a sapphire skull embedded in the girl’s forehead. Landing my feet on the beast, I smash the skull with all I’ve got without easing my grip. The sensation of crushing bone vibrates through my weapon to my hand. Without caring or pausing, I continue bashing the weather vane against it.

“Aaah...”

The shards sticking out of the girl’s eyes tremble, then vanish into powder. Her injured eyelids open. The light of life twinkles momentarily in her blue eyes until it’s extinguished.

I reach out my hand to close her eyes. I can’t find any words to offer her. A beautiful and cherubic face with a grotesque body kneaded together with corpses; everything she’s done is engraved in this body. Creaking, thin cracks start to form throughout it...

“Huh?”

The body begins to fall apart. Glowing sand ripples away. The beast I once stood upon falls apart like ash from a burning log.

“WAAAAH!”

Losing my footing, I fall. I flail my arms and legs, but there’s nothing for me to grab on to. Dragon is flying full-speed in the opposite direction, since that’s exactly what we decided he should do just before I leapt from his back onto the demon beast. He won’t make it in time even if he notices and turns back now. I went through with the plan well-aware of the risks. Wind howls in my ears. The ground is incoming, inevitable. So this is what they mean by sayin’ time slows down before death, like trying to chew hard toffee. The speed is all the more cruel.

Ahhh, damn it all. Is this how it ends for me? What an idiotic way to die... Well, at least I accomplished what I needed to do. No regrets here.

If I look up, I can see the dawning sky. It changes colors from indigo to purple to light-crimson. How pretty. Not a half-bad final landscape to see before it’s all over...

SLAM! My descent stops. I am jerked sideways as if by some unseen force. My body swings through the air and toward the castle. “WAAAAH!” I scream out in panic.

“Oh?” a voice says calmly, almost as if it were secretly laughing at me. “It appears to be rainin’ black knights...”

A gargantuan spider is clinging to the castle walls. And the silver-haired witch is on its back. A hand covers her lips, but I can hear her giggling even as my momentum slows while I swing back and forth at the edge of the castle wall.

“There you go.” The silver thread connected to her ebony fingers is firmly secured around me. “You need to think through your endgame better, old man.”

“...I’ve got no excuses there.”

“GIDEON is safe, lady,” Dragon whispers.

“I’m so glad...”

Bringing the shield to her face, Princess lets out a sigh of relief.

A bright-green ribbon flutters in her hair. Sparkling dust mixed into the wind is all that remains of the blue demon beast that crumbled away. Blown away, the remains disappear into the dawn sky. Princess watches them go, shedding a single tear.

“Farewell, my cousin.”

DANGLING from the rampart and bathed in the morning sunlight, I absently watched the last fragments of the demon beast vanish until the very end.

“What a funny feeling. Don’t feel nothing. No resentment, anger, or hatred.”

“Perhaps she felt the same way?” Witch offers.

“Is that how it works?”

“That’s the path she chose, after all.”

“...Am I interrupting something?” A puff of warm steam caresses my face. Dragon descends from the sky right before my eyes.

“Nah, just enjoyin’ the lovely view. Besides, I was waiting for you, partner.” I push off the wall and swing over to Dragon’s back with the help of Witch’s thread. Princess immediately jumps on me. Puffing out her sullen cheeks, she glowers at Witch.

“Oh dear.” Witch shrugs her shoulders in an exaggerated way, but she looks like she’s having fun.

“He succeeded,” Dragon informs her.

Witch answers, “But he was saved by his princess.”

“He’s the one who raised the princess.”

“...So it appears.”

Her big eyes going round in my arms, Princess asks them, “What are you

talking about?”

“About how you have the greatest knight on your side, Princess Lala.”

“Yup, I know!”

Now, that’s another fine answer outta this girl.

“Oi, hang on a sec. Am I the only one outta the loop here? What’s goin’ on?”

Dragon doesn’t answer and instead releases a puff of steam from his nostrils. Why that overgrown pair of leather boots! He’s laughin’ at me, I just know it!

Epilogue: This is the End

REVERFEAT Castle returned to the hands of its rightful heir.

“The time has come,” a voice chimes.

“Fairy Godmother!”

“I am pleased to see you again, Lady of Dawn.”

Just like her name, Fairy Godmother appears with the dawn. She always surprises us. She’s still tinier than the first time we met, but has grown significantly larger than when we parted. Her size barely changes even after fixing the devastated ruins of the throne room.

“This is a simple feat compared to weaving the protective barrier.” Next, she runs a pliant finger along my broken sword and it returns to normal.

“Many thanks...” I mumble.

From this day forth, this kingdom will no longer cast away the weak. Taxes will be used to repair bridges and restore homes that have been razed to the ground. Guess you could wrap it all up by sayin’, “and then everything returned to normal,” but in reality it’s gonna take a long, long time for things to “return to normal”.

Summoning back the vassals and maids who had scattered silently throughout the land helps the castle slowly regain its former liveliness. Just like when a new sapling buds from a burnt tree.

Princess will likely inherit the crown and become the new queen.

Before that can happen however, Dragon and I, having fulfilled our duty, will exit stage left.

A man who becomes one with a dragon cannot afford to stay in one place. Needless to say, the same applies to Dragon. Our excess power brings about distortions in the world of men.

“Don’t go, Gideon. I want to stay with you, Mister Dragon.” About to cry, Princess alternates between hugging me and Dragon. “I want to return to the treehouse in the forest.”

“Don’t make that face. This is your home. Isn’t it?”

“Kyawawawa. Kyawa. Kyawawa.”

I hear indistinct, faint voices. Ticklish voices that make me want to duck my head just by hearing ‘em.

“Hey, did you say somethin’ just now?”

I look around, but there’s no one else here. Dragon nods with a self-satisfied look and speaks with stately pomp, “The Tiny People did.”

“Tiny people?”

“They probably clung to you in order to return here.”

“To me?” I’m befuddled.

“Because Princess is here.”

Princess smiles. “I see... The Tiny People will be with me here.”



“Where are they?” I ask, scanning the area.

“You won’t be able to see them if you try to.” Tears welling up in her eyes, Princess gives us a broad toothy smile as she steps back. She stands ramrod straight, her face becoming serene. “I entrust my knight to you, Spike Scale, oh mighty dragon of the ruby scale and protector of the Black Forest,” she speaks in the august manner of her royal lineage.

Her freckles stand out all the more on her flushed cheeks, but Lala Lilia stands firm. Servants move behind her and the surviving loyal soldiers who fled after her father’s death stand in protective formation around us.

Ahhh. Just rememberin’ this face will keep me from freezing for the rest of my days. No matter how dark or frigid the night I face, I’ll make it to tomorrow.

“Oi! Why is he responsible for me?!” I shout after her statement registers a little later.

Dragon glances down at me. “I am the responsible one, so of course I would be the one in charge.” He turns his snout up. “The immature should listen to their elders.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean!”

Lala smiles serenely, tiny tears spilling down her cheeks. “Be safe both of you.”

I ignore Dragon’s huff and gaze upon the future queen. “We’ll come back on the happiest day of your life, to gift you with the most beautiful bouquet in the entire world.”

“Do you promise, my knight? Do you promise, Mister Dragon?”

“I promise, my princess.”

“You have my promise, my little lady.”

I mount my amber warhorse and nudge my spurs against his flanks to bring him to a gallop. Dragon runs alongside us. I glance one final time behind me at Lala as she gazes forlornly at our departure. I won’t look back again...

“Want to race?” I remark to Dragon, trying to distract from the nagging desire

to return to her side. To continue watching over the child I raised for a year. The child who taught me just as much, if not more, than I did for her.

“I accept your request to duel, friend.”

He flaps his wings once and rushes up into the cloudless blue sky.

“Hey! C’mon! Flying is against the rules! No flying!”

“Woow, how immature.”

SQUISH! Round, bouncy breasts are pressed against my back.

“WHOA! When did you—”

“Hey, since your childrearing days are done with, want to have some fun together, Mis-ter~?”

Witch had plopped down on the saddle behind me. In her coquettish adult form to boot. A tiny little rainbow spider is riding on her shoulder, awaiting its orders.

“Nah, this old man’s busy right now.”

“Booo. Your reaction is weak... Am I right to think you prefer this form?”

“Shrinking in size doesn’t make it any better! Agh! Hey! Don’t hug me! Stop clingin’ to me!”

“Not~ Happening~! We’re sitting on a galloping horse’s back, you know? I’ll fall off.”

“Uggggh.”

Knights can’t defy a maiden. That’s the rule.

“So? Where are you going, mister?”

“Good question... To the edges of the kingdom for now.”

“The edges of the kingdom?”

Lord Designs’ final moments made it clear that divine punishment awaits those who plunder and tyrannize. But often that punishment doesn’t come soon enough to protect future victims.

“It takes a considerable amount of time for change at the center to travel to

the edges.”

And I should be capable of speeding it up.

“Doing it for the princess?”

“Yeah, for Princess.”

Witch’s eyebrows knit as she narrows her eyes and sighs. “Awww. You seriously amaze me, old man.”

I can hear Dragon chuckling in the distant skies overhead.

I won’t forget:

The weight of the crown I’ve inherited; the fact that every lost life had a name and face; the reason why there are barely any little girls the same age as me left in this kingdom.

I won’t forget.

I won’t forget no matter how commonplace it is or how many times these acts will repeat throughout history. No matter how much the world wants to laugh it off as “only natural” and something that “happens all the time”. I boldly declare from the rooftops: I don’t like evil things!

I have the power now to stop them from happening. With the crown once more in the hands of my bloodline, the power that my father should have used when his kingdom was threatened now rests upon my shoulders. So I won’t hesitate.

I am the princess. This is *my* kingdom, and I will do my duty no matter the cost. I will be the queen Reverfeat needs! And I will make Spike and Gideon proud!

“**HOW** do I process this...?” Witch shrugs. The hooded cloak that she normally dons properly on the road is currently gone without a trace. Where it came from and where it went is only known by the spider riding on her shoulder. “After flaunting all that bravado of yours, you’ve returned to where it all

started?”

“I did a buncha other stuff along the way, didn’t I?”

“Ah, sure, sure. You sure did.”

On my way back, I took the time to squash out absolutely every last “parting gift” Lord Designs left behind. I put an end to the pillagin’, plunderin’, lootin’, kidnappin’, and whatever crimes, big and small, that were still running rampant on the streets. As a result, it took me close to a month before I arrived back at the nostalgic Black Forest. Dragon’s already returned to our former home ages ago. I stopped relying on his help and our connected hearts.

I can hold my own against the crimes committed by humans—is what I wish I could say, but I’ll acknowledge that Witch kinda lent me a hand.

“This place...”

“Yes, this is the place.”

I dismount my horse and tread carefully. The remains of those short-lived little girls have been swallowed entirely by the forest soil and brush, making it impossible to figure out where they once were. This is the Black Forest after all. Not to mention, it’s also summer. This is the season where plants, birds, insects, animals, and other living things burn with as much energy as they can expend.

“Mister, you’ve been thinking about them all this time?”

“In my own way.”

“Hmm?”

She’s not convinced. Raising an eyebrow, I add, “Even if it was just a little, I have some connection with one of the girl’s after all.”

“...Liar.”

“Did ya say something?”

“Not really?”

Inside the forest cloaked in indigo darkness, it’s a complete coincidence that I find it. Or maybe it’s good luck that led me to it? A ribbon is fluttering and flapping from the branch of a sapling that has grown to the height of my knees.

The ribbon's color has thoroughly faded and its edges are frayed. It's in tatters, making me realize how much insurmountable time lies between it and its owner.

Sky-blue lights rise from the brush and flicker. How long have they been here for? Since we came? Before we came? I don't know.

"...I see. They really aren't *just* fireflies."

Dragon suddenly peaks his head out of the grove of trees.

"Yo, partner."

"Welcome back, Gideon."

I walk over to him and put my hand on his snout. A nostalgic touch. A nostalgic being.

"Did you bring me what we discussed before?"

"Yup, didn't overlook anything."

I lift up my lantern. It's a rectangular box with a handle and glass embedded in its metal frame. I had the folks over at AtteGrune Inn light the candle inside.

THE innkeeper and his wife already suspected that their daughter had died.

"Why? Why our child? She was just born in this kingdom, and just happened to turn seven this year."

"Why did they abandon her in some forest? Just a little longer and she could have returned home..."

Their mumbles were as dry as fallen leaves and just as unsteady.

THE lights that lit their nostalgic homes burn in the lantern—I carry the light the girls couldn't return to. I open the lantern's lid and hold it out under Dragon's snout.

"I'm counting on you, partner."

"It will be done." Dragon blows his breath gently.

From his pursed lips, it comes out thinly, thinly...quietly, quietly. The breath mixes with the light inside the lantern. I shut the lid, creating a tiny orange vortex inside.

“Your turn now,” he prompts me.

“Leave it to me.”

I lift the lantern and slowly swing it left and right. The blue lights float towards it. The first bead of light brushes my cheek—it’s cold.

“...It’s okay. Don’t worry.

One, then another, then another. They look like they’re moving in slow motion to the blind eye, but I end up surrounded before I know it. The air around me feels as cold as the dead of winter. My breath comes out in white puffs.

“You’re far from okay! Frost is sticking to your face!” Witch shouts.

Now that she mentions it, my brow feels heavy.

“Come now...let’s go home,” I say soothingly to the lights.

Holding the lantern up, I walk. The grass and brush below my feet freezes, crunches underfoot, and sticks to my boot soles. Frost covers my beard, hair, clothes, and everywhere else without exception. By the time I’ve come to the forest edge, I feel like a doll wrapped in frosting.

“Here you go, girls. You’re back home.”

I slowly swing my arm; the ice coating my clothes breaks and crumbles off. The blue lights following me scatter.

“The night road is dark. Take the light with you.”

I open the lantern’s lid and blow on it once. The dragon breath whirling around inside spills out to envelop the blue lights.

Encircled in a cocoon of warm orange light, the blue lights—the will-o’-wisps—vanish into the sleeping homes that stand quiet in the night.

“...Good night...”

I see them off. Standing at the boundary between the forest and the village, I

stay until the last light vanishes...

“WHAT are you showing off for, blockhead?!”

BAM! Something hits me from behind the knees. Suddenly getting kicked knocks me over. Ice crunches and peels off me.

“How can you get all sentimental and say, ‘good night’, while you’ve got icicles dangling from your beard?! Huh, you stubborn old cow! Half-wit! Monkey that’s too proud to give up! You’re the epitome of an old man’s indiscretions!”

Why does it feel like I’m being unreasonably bashed here?

“Do you understand what’ll happen, being in contact with so many dead souls for so, so, SO LONG?! It’s a miracle you’re still alive! You’re absurdly lucky! You were nearly the idiot who froze to death in the middle of summer! Hey, do you understand how stupid you were? Do you want to be the frozen knight people whisper about? The idiot who somehow turned into an ice statue in the middle of summer?”

“Uh, yeah, now that you mention it, it was a tad chilly.”

“What part of growing icicles is a ‘tad’?!” Witch grabs my gorget and pulls me to my feet. Just as I find myself thinkin’ that she’s sure got a lotta strength, I realize she’s turned into an adult.

“And don’t think *you’re* off the hook either!” She whips her head around. “Why did you stay quiet and let him do it, SPIKE?!”

“Do you think he would listen if I tried to stop him?”

She turns back to me and mutters, “...Look how purple you’ve turned. You’re freezing. You are seriously...”

I’m stuck in the embrace of something excessively warm and soft. Having a faint idea of what it is, I try to pull away, but my body is too weak to move. I can’t escape.

Dragon heaves a long, loooong, sigh...and wraps me in a cloud of steam.

“Oh, that’s nice and toasty...”

Blood flows to my numb, frozen limbs. Taking that extra boost to get to my feet, I stretch as far as my arms can reach.

“Thanks, you two.”

“Seriously, you two are...” Witch folds her arms over her chest and sighs with a shrug. “Hopeless idiots.”

INSIDE the deep, dark, dense forest where even starlight casts shadows, a faded, fluttering ribbon wound around a sapling comes undone and disappears into the wind. All that remains is a bead of light, and eventually, even it melts into the branches.

Time passed and stories spread far and wide of a great and noble queen who ruled the Fairy Kingdom of Reverfeat with wisdom and grace. Stories of the great ruby dragon and his black knight would eventually fade to myth and legend. No one noticed their appearance at the queen’s happy wedding or how they watched over the kingdom from the shadows.

Yet, even with the great passage of time, the descendants of the land would forever remember the legend of the red-haired little princess who rose to be queen against all odds under the protection of her great dragon and mighty knight in the legendary Black Forest, now known as the Fairy Forest.

THE END



Afterword

WELCOME, welcome. Come on in. I just finished boiling some water. Now then, let's have a cup of tea.

It's an unusual smell, you say? As a matter of fact, this tea is slightly different from the black, green, and oolong tea you are all accustomed to. This is tea I've made by specially picking the leaves of herbs to dry them with flowers and fruit. I've also roasted barley to extract its flavor for tea, which is quite delicious as well. Regrettably, I lack any chocolate or coffee. But we might be able to pick some up from Fairy Forest... For you see, *Little Princess in Fairy Forest* is a story that takes place in such a land.

A young princess, ruby-red dragon, and a black knight are the key characters. A wicked nobleman who hunts them to obtain the throne; a beautiful young noblewoman with blue eyes and golden hair; an exotic witch from a distant land who controls a spider's silver threads are just as important to the story. And lastly we have a light-purple fairy known as Lady of Dawn, a large yellow steed, and brownies that restlessly run amok in the story.

But this land isn't just pretty and fun. Winters are freezing, and it hurts if you cut your hand. It hurts even more to get punched or kicked. And the strong win. Yet, here you can resolutely declare, "I hate what I hate!" You can take up your shield and shout, "I won't accept it!" This land is filled with people who stand against injustice because they long to do so. (Naturally, there are also beings who aren't "people" per se).

In following the story courses taken by games, novels, manga, movies, anime, and dramas, you will find that they contain different elements. *Little Princess in Fairy Forest* borrows parts from each medium to create its own world and story.

In 2016, I read a book titled, *The Hero Came to the Demon Lord's Employment Office*. I guzzled down the book like a glass of ice-cold water. Then, when I happened to take a glance at the back cover, I noticed the paper wrapper said, "Accepting New Book Submissions!" ...That was what triggered my first step toward this book. Afterwards, a bunch of things happened, I came to be under

the care of Japanese publisher Hakkou Shuppan, and here we are. I was able to write this book thanks to the guidance of that novel's author, Tomoyuki Fujinami, and illustrator Ryo Sasaki, as well as the heroine Holic. So a big thank you to all of them.

Now then, it's time for me to explain several aspects of this story. For those of you who like to start reading from the afterword, there aren't any spoilers here, so feel free to read on.

Reverfeat, the main kingdom's name, is an anagram for "ever after". I came up with it because I wanted to write a story that began with "Once upon a time" and ended with "Happily ever after". However, I didn't use either phrase in the end. I kind of wonder why. Fairy tales are relatively unforgiving. Hands and heads are chopped off left and right. It happens so fast and out of nowhere, like someone was simply cutting up paper dolls. Moreover, when the fairy tale moves on to the next scene, no one seems to mind what happened previously. Wanting to bring about that same effect, and through much trial and error, this story became one that couldn't be finished off with, "...and they all lived happily ever after."

Maybe it's because one of the main characters is a middle-aged man.

You know, I love middle-aged men. They're the product of salty experiences, while being calmer and more...hmm, rusty compared to their younger days. But in some respects, they're men who are still incomplete somehow. They're in the middle years of their lives, where they still haven't found enlightenment and can't give up on life yet. There's also the other type of middle-aged man, the ones who can't control themselves and run wild because they have reached the peak of their power. Hence, here we get middle-aged man versus middle-aged man, fighting over the throne.

I also adore monsters. Since this story has a dragon as a main character, I really wanted to have a flashy air battle...so I rewrote the plot I'd already finished composing down to the last details to fit it in. I'm glad I added it in. It took a lot of work to do it, but it was even more fun to write.

Interestingly enough, the thing I wrote *after* the roaring climax and subdued ending was actually the title. There wasn't even a hint of the words "Little

Princess” in the title at first. The phrase came up through an email exchange with the editor, and the moment I read it, I thought, “This is it!” and so this title came into being. This is weird to say considering that I’m the one who decided on the title, but it was exhilarating in a sense to see the phrase “Little Princess” steadily fill the schedule book.

So then, where did the story start from? I refined the idea for it in 2016 at the venue of Japan’s largest analog game convention, the Japan Game Convention (JGC). I’m more than thrilled to have had inspiration for this story sparked by the creator of Nobinobi TRPG (Novice-Novice Table-talk Role-Playing Game), Konno Takashi, who also serves as this book’s illustrator! When I saw the character designs for Princess, Dragon, Knight, and the others, I trembled with joy thinking, “So this is what they look like!” and “Oh yeah, I remember writing that they should look like this.” Basically, when a writer sees the sentences they wrote manifest as illustrations, they faint from an overstimulation of sheer delight.

Oh, it looks like we are just about out of tea. So please allow me to once again thank you from the bottom of my heart for picking up a copy of this book. I hope you enjoyed the story while you flipped through the pages. Hopefully, we shall meet again in the pages of another book someday...



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