



BRUNNHILD

T H E D R A G O N P R I N C E S S

Yuiko Agarizaki

Illustration by **Aoaso**



BRUNHILD

THE DRAGON PRINCESS

Yuiko Agarizaki

Illustration by **Aoaso**

Brunhild's is a strange and cruel fate—
she served the guardian dragon
and discovered his darkest secret.

*“As thanks for
your ceaseless
protection, I come
bearing offerings.”*

*“How good
of you
to come,
my most
beautiful of
priestesses.”*

BRUNHILD THE DRAGON PRINCESS

Sven

Famous as the most skilled with a long spear in the kingdom, he is Sigurd's servant. A devout knight, he has deep faith in the Divine Dragon, but his oath of loyalty to his lord Sigurd is even stronger.

Sigurd

A prince overflowing with a sense of responsibility toward his people. He respects his childhood friend Brunhild and cares for her deeply.

Brunhild

As the Dragon's Priestess, she attends to the Divine Dragon that protects the kingdom. She has a strong sense of justice, feeling passionately that she has a responsibility to reach out to the weak, as a member of the noble classes.

Fafnir

Skilled in artifice and stratagems, he is Brunhild's servant. He was born of the lowest class in the kingdom, but Brunhild employed him, saving him from his situation.



BRUNHILD THE DRAGON PRINCESS



*Ahhh, I
see...*

*...It was
surely for this
moment that
I became a
priestess.*

*—Brunhild
thought.*

BRUNHILD THE DRAGON PRINCESS

BRUNHILD

THE DRAGON PRINCESS

CONTENTS

Prologue



Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4



Epilogue

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THE DRAGON PRINCESS

Yuiko Agarizaki


New York

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Yuiko Agarizaki

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RYU NO HIME BRUNHILD

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



Prologue

All that could be heard was the sound of rain.

In a back alley was a young man, discarded like trash.

This man was, in fact, considered to be actual trash.

He had no feelings for others. Perhaps this was because he had been born in an environment where trust meant death. Showing consideration for others' pain had not been a function cultivated within him.

Perhaps that was why—the man was skilled at deceiving people, at entrapping people. That had to be because his heartlessness was compatible with his scheming.

The man had made a living by deceiving people, using them, and killing them. With death as his trade, he had amassed quite a bit of money.

And now his cruelty was being repaid in kind.

The man had always known that his time would come.

Someone who ruined the lives of others would one day experience his own downfall. Understanding this, he had avoided involvement with people as much as possible in life, always remaining on guard. But this unavoidable retribution had fallen upon him regardless.

The man had been sliced down the back. Red blood mingled with rainwater, spreading around him.

He'd thought it was winter right now. The rain of midwinter was supposed to be as cold as ice.

But he no longer felt the cold or chill.

His eyes could no longer focus.

The last thing he saw with his hazy vision was a black-haired girl racing toward him from afar.

Before he lost consciousness, a faint sweet scent blended in with the smell of the rain.

When he awoke, he seemed to be in the room of some estate.

This room was fancier than any place he'd used as a base before. He had been laid down on an immaculate bed. The blanket draped over him felt warm. He could tell, at a glance, that it was expensive. The room was warm, and he could hear the sound of wood crackling in a hearth.

For some reason, it seemed he had been saved.

When he tried to sit up, intense pain shot through him. Left without a choice, he craned his neck just enough to assess the situation.

There was the girl.

She had to be about nine years old. She was dressed like an aristocrat.

It was the same girl the man had seen in his hazy vision when he'd been in the rain.

She was sitting in a chair beside the bed, dozing.

That was when the man realized there was something warm touching his hand.

He looked to see that both of the girl's hands were laid over his own. While sleeping, the girl was gently holding his hand.

Just as if she were sharing her warmth with him.

The girl's hands were far warmer than the man's.

...How sickening.

The man swept her hands aside.

This gesture roused the girl from her peaceful slumber.

Her head swayed a bit as if she were half asleep, but noticing that the man was awake, her doll-like eyes opened wide. “What a relief! You’re awake.” The girl was glad to see him awake as if he were a dear friend. “My name is Brunhild. Oh, right, I was supposed to call for the doctor once you came to.”

The girl pattered out of the room.

Brunhild...

He knew that name.

In this kingdom, there was a priestess clan that was of a class close to the royal family.

He seemed to recall the name of their daughter was Brunhild.

I see. Then it made sense that the room where the man lay had nothing but fancy furnishings.

Brunhild brought a doctor over. When the doctor saw the man’s state, he delivered the diagnosis that he was to rest for three months. He said it was a miracle he had even survived.

After the doctor had left, the girl clumsily but earnestly explained to the man his situation. And then the man finally understood.

He had been saved by this girl.

The carriage Brunhild had been riding in had passed close by the alley where the man had fallen. Looking out the window, Brunhild had just happened to notice him lying there.

“If I hadn’t saved you, then you would have died.”

Brunhild puffed out her tiny chest.

She was a kind girl. Her mother had opposed her saving the man, saying, “Leave the poor wretch be.” But Brunhild had pushed through her mother’s opposition, saying “I can’t abandon someone who’s hurt,” and chosen to save his life.

He should have been thankful, but he actually felt angry.

So my life was saved for the amusement of some rich girl?

It wasn't as if this man was devoid of all feeling. Although he lacked kindness and empathy, he had negative emotions to spare.

He *loathed* good people.

"I shall take care of you. I made that promise with my mother. She was so unkind, saying that if I couldn't take care of you myself, then I wasn't to pick you up in the first place."

She was speaking as if he was an abandoned puppy or something. It wasn't like that part offended him, but the man had no reply for her. He wasn't about to speak with her at all.

But the girl must have misunderstood somehow, as she said with concern, "Once you've had something to eat, you'll have the energy to speak."

The girl began preparing his meal. She ordered a servant to make some vegetable soup and had them prepare some meats that were soft enough to dissolve into the broth. The girl spooned some up and brought it to the man's mouth. Since the man's whole body was immobile, he had no choice but to be fed.

And so, the tiny girl diligently took care of the man.

"A priestess should be kind to the people. Once I grow up, I'm going to be a priestess, too."

The man thought that she would quickly grow tired of it, but the girl came to take care of him every single day. In the evenings, she would become exhausted and sleep on the sofa in the same room. "It's scary to sleep alone, isn't it? I was like that when I was little."

Day in and day out, the girl took care of the man. Despite her small size, she was very earnest.

Thanks to her efforts, the man began recovering his strength.

"Why not at least say thanks?" the girl asked, very reasonably.

But the man had not changed, and he felt no gratitude toward the girl.

He had never been taught the words "thank you."

He knew what they actually meant. To show gratitude was to let your guard down. Having grown up in a poor environment, he knew that letting your guard down meant death.

Never mind thanks—the man had begun calculating how he could use Brunhild.

He had been living on the dark side of the kingdom. And being betrayed once had nearly cost him his life. If those who had betrayed him knew he was alive, they might come after him again.

But so long as he was in this house, he was safe.

Brunhild was the daughter of a priestess—the sole person who could receive divine messages from the dragon that protected this land. Since she held such a high rank, it would be hard for bad actors to make a move on this estate. The man schemed to stay in this estate for as long as possible.

But there was no need for him to scheme.

Brunhild was the one to present the opportunity to him. “Hey, why don’t you become my servant?”

There was a reason that she had brought this up. Finally, her mother had attempted to kick the man out. The man’s strength had returned, but not so much that he could move around freely. So Brunhild was trying to secure a long-term position for him by making him her servant.

What a foolish girl.

So he thought, but it would be foolish to not take advantage of this.

The man nodded, meaning to accept.

“Wonderful! Then starting today, you’re my servant.”

Brunhild’s eyes sparkled. The truth was, she had an ulterior motive as well.

Though the man had no way of knowing, Brunhild had been thinking for quite a while now that she wanted her own personal retainer. She had always watched with envy as her childhood friend had been served by one. That childhood friend and servant were as close as parent and child.

Brunhild wanted a master-servant relationship just like that.

“If you’re to be my retainer, then I have to ask your name.”

He wasn’t about to act friendly with her. But what she was saying did make sense.

“...Fafnir.”

That was the man’s name.

It was not his real name. It was an insult given to the man, who had been an assassin.

It was a name belonging to an evil dragon of legend.

Eventually, Fafnir was able to get out of bed. He had to use a cane, but he soon regained his ability to walk.

But his injuries did not heal perfectly.

Because of old wounds, Fafnir was no longer able to move as he once had. Part of his body was immobile, just like a doll. Fighting was out of the question. It would be impossible for him to return to his old job.

But Fafnir didn’t mind. It wasn’t as if he’d been doing dirty work because he liked it, in the first place. It was just that he’d had to do it, or he wouldn’t have been able to survive.

Right now, he had a servant’s job. So long as he could manage this, then his needs would be guaranteed. That was enough for him, so Fafnir solemnly fulfilled his duties as Brunhild’s retainer.

While living as a servant, he realized something.

Brunhild was such an incorrigibly good person.

There were other people at the estate aside from Fafnir who had been saved by her.

If someone in the city was starving, then Brunhild would share some bread with them, and if someone had collapsed, no matter how filthy they looked, she would help them up, without caring how it might dirty her dress.

The man gazed upon that brilliance as if looking upon distant scenery.

The girl was like a creature from a different world.

While Fafnir was a servant, he came to work as Brunhild's home tutor. He was knowledgeable and intelligent. He was versed in history, religion, kingscraft, military science, political science, biology, and various other fields, and his understanding of pharmacy, in particular, was exceptional. He was even an accomplished equestrian.

Every time he taught her something, Brunhild was surprised.

"Which university did you study at?"

"I studied on my own."

These were not things that one learned at a university. He had studied to falsify himself and deceive others, in order to kill. This knowledge had been acquired by wicked motives, but he was just as accurate as any scholar.

It was as if Fafnir knew everything.

But Brunhild said, "Even though you know about lots of complicated topics, you don't know simple things."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You've never loved anyone, have you?"

Children would on occasion be even more observant than adults. Most likely, the girl had noticed the invisible wall he had put up because she wanted to become as close to her servant as her friend was.

"I haven't. Such things don't concern me," the man replied dispassionately.

"Oh...," Brunhild muttered. "That's so sad."

Of course she had no deep intentions. It was a child's nonsense. But she was really hitting the nail on the head regarding Fafnir.

He couldn't come to love anyone.

And that was a lonely thing.

"It is, and I accept that."

He had been like this as long as he could remember. Born to the lowest social class in the kingdom, the Altatos, being forced into a life of poverty had most certainly influenced the formation of his personality. But that was not the only reason. Even if they were of lower class and even if they lived on the dark side, it was quite normal for people to be able to love each other.

Why couldn't *he* love anyone?

Every time he thought about this, he remembered his younger sister.

The time when his sister died.

She had died for the sake of a ceremony that was unique to this kingdom.

Their mother had still been around, back then. She had cried. She had loved her daughter.

But the man—a boy at the time—had never cried.

Mourning the dead wouldn't bring them back. He figured that what he could do was to learn from his sister's death what to do to keep himself from being caught up in that ceremony. He told his mother that was what he was thinking.

"You're heartless," his mother had told him.

She continued, "To not shed a tear, when your sister died! Aren't you sad?"

But the boy wasn't sad at all.

Never mind spilling tears, his eyes didn't even feel itchy. There was nothing welling up or whatnot, either.

He felt no pain or suffocation in his chest.

But if you were to ask if he hated his sister, that was not the case. At the very least, they hadn't had a bad relationship. In fact, he thought that he'd been thinking that he wanted his sister to escape her low station and attain an ordinary happiness.

So the boy didn't know why he couldn't cry or feel sad.

His mother cried, and in her sorrow, she said, "You need to fix that."

Then the boy understood.

That he had no human heart and that he was strange.

Surely, that had to be the case. Since those words had been spoken by someone who *could* cry and feel sorrow, they had to be the truth.

Loving others. That was a virtue written about in stories of chivalry and fairy tales.

So then, surely, he had never loved his sister.

Since not feeling sad about someone was the flip side of not having loved them.

That was when the boy gave up on his dream.

Since in order for his dream to come true, he would need to come to love someone.

That conversation with Brunhild brought those memories back. They were such irritating memories.

Fafnir was expressionless. At the very least, that's what he intended. But Brunhild said, as if she had picked up on some slight subtle emotion, "You should just learn to love me. Then you won't be lonely anymore."

In his head, the man cursed.

If only learning how to love was such a simple thing...

But at the same time, he thought.

If he really could come to love her...

He saw his little sister in Brunhild.

One day the following year, Brunhild's mother died. It was a tragic accident.

Brunhild had loved her mother very much. Her death came as a complete shock to her.

But during the funeral, and after it ended, Brunhild never cried.

For an instant, Fafnir thought she was just how he had been once, but he

quickly found that was not the case.

“Death isn’t something to be sad about.” The girl tried to restrain the tremble in her voice. “Death is God showing the way. Mother has just gone to the Kingdom of Eternity. So I mustn’t cry.”

It sounded like she was desperately trying to convince herself.

Now understanding that they were different, Fafnir said, “God isn’t real.” He didn’t believe in any transcendental beings. “There’s also no such thing as the Kingdom of Eternity. If you die, it’s over. Your mother will simply return to the earth.”

His words were beyond cruel.

“That can’t be...”

But seeing Brunhild’s despair, Fafnir continued, “So there’s no reason that you can’t cry.”

Seeing Fafnir, Brunhild’s eyes opened wide. Water brimmed in her eyes, and the drops began to spill over. It seemed there was something welling up within her. Her little shoulders also started to tremble slightly.

“Thank you, Fafnir.”

There was no reason for her to thank him. The man had simply stated the logical conclusion.

If you couldn’t cry because the dead had simply gone to the Kingdom of Eternity, then if the Kingdom of Eternity never existed in the first place, and that meant it was fine to cry.

...Besides, if she was able to shed tears, then she should.

The man’s words made the girl cry. She was able to bawl loudly, appropriately to her age.

Ever since that day, Brunhild came to be attached to Fafnir. Her mother had died, and there had never been a father in her household to begin with. Fafnir interpreted this as her searching for someone she could depend on.

The man still failed to notice her feelings were those of affection.



Chapter 1

Five years had passed since her mother's funeral, and Brunhild turned fifteen years old.

The girl had followed in her mother's footsteps and become the Dragon Priestess.

The kingdom where she lived was protected by a dragon that the people called the "Divine Dragon."

And it was the priestess's clan who offered tribute to this dragon and heeded his divine words.

The Divine Dragon was worshiped at a temple and lived a life of decadence. Only the bloodline of the priestess was granted the honor of audience.

On the morning of that day, Brunhild had reason to go see the Divine Dragon.

She changed into her priestess attire, which was a pure and unsullied white. But before heading to the temple, she went to a certain room in the estate.

In that room there was a girl. She was about eight years old.

Her name was Emilia.

Brunhild had picked up this little girl three months ago. Emilia had been at the edge of the town, starving and about to die, when Brunhild had saved her.

At first, she hadn't spoken. It wasn't that she hadn't learned to talk. Some terrible shock had rendered her speechless. She had been very timid, so much

so that it was difficult to even get her to eat. The servants of the estate had quickly thrown in the towel, but Brunhild alone had not given up.

Day in and day out, Brunhild had provided constant care for Emilia. The girl would throw a tantrum when Brunhild would so much as approach her. In no time at all, Brunhild wound up covered in bites and scratches. But even after suffering these injuries, she was very patient and delicate with the girl.

Brunhild's servant Fafnir did once offer the advice, "She isn't so valuable that you need be hurt to save her."

"Be silent."

At times like these, Brunhild could be unbelievably stubborn. There was no sign at all of her typical mildness. She felt almost threatening to Fafnir.

Brunhild was clearly hostile toward Fafnir at this moment, but Fafnir's feelings remained the same as always.

He was irritated to see Brunhild do-gooding.

Give it up already, he thought as he watched her.

But the result was most unamusing.

Emilia stopped attacking Brunhild.

No matter how Brunhild was wounded, she had not hit Emilia even once, and she had said not a single cruel word. And that was the result.

After that, things moved quickly.

Emilia came to eat food from Brunhild's hand, and she also slowly came to be able to speak.

Emilia came to be attached to Brunhild, just like a kitten. At this point, now she was the complete opposite of before, and wouldn't leave her.

She would cry for her "big sister" and wrap her arms around Brunhild. She would cling to her and not leave.

"I love you, big sister," she said in a sugary-sweet voice.

While running her fingers through Emilia's hair, Brunhild said to Fafnir, "See, look." She was proud. It was like she'd taken the head of an ogre. "You have to

be kind to people.”

Brunhild often said things like this. And Fafnir was irritated every time he heard it. She had proved that so-called kindness of hers by winning the heart of orphans. Since it had been demonstrated, he couldn't argue.

Once the girl had opened up, Brunhild and Emilia were truly like sisters.

Brunhild also apparently enjoyed her time with Emilia, and she visited Emilia's room whenever she had the time.

Often, a melodic voice could be heard from the room where the two of them were. Emilia was pestering Brunhild to sing.

Brunhild's voice held a mysterious power.

Whenever she hummed a gentle verse, it brought peace to listeners, and if she sang a cheery verse, then it brought the audience energy.

Of course, part of how Brunhild got orphans to open up to her was her kindness, but it was surely also due to the blessing of her mysterious vocal quality.

Brunhild always looked forward to visiting Emilia's room. But right now, her footsteps were heavy.

Even once she'd arrived at Emilia's room, she was unable to open the door, standing there.

After waiting quite a long time, she finally opened the heavy door. Inside was a girl wearing a dress that was simple but clean. The moment she turned around to see Brunhild, her smile bloomed like a flower.

“Sis.” Emilia ran up to wrap her arms around Brunhild's waist like always.

But Brunhild did not smile as she usually did.

Children are sensitive to the expressions of adults. Emilia quickly picked up that Brunhild was worried about something. “What's the matter?”

“No, it's nothing... Let's go to the temple today, as promised.”

“Yeah! I'm looking forward to it!” The girl's smile pierced Brunhild's heart. “Starting today, I'm going to be living in the Divine Dragon's temple, right? I was

chosen by the Divine Dragon.”

Brunhild fell silent for a while. But feeling she must not cause Emilia to worry, she continued, “...How about we don’t go to the temple? We’ll go on a journey through the kingdom, just the two of us.”

Emilia gave her a blank look and then asked, “Why?” Next, she chided Brunhild. “You’re a priestess. So you’ve got to take me to the Divine Dragon.”

“...Yes, that’s right.”

Even having suggested it herself, Brunhild knew it was impossible. Being the Dragon Priestess, she held special favor from the Divine Dragon. If she was to vanish, then the dragon would be angry. Besides, the priestess was a mediator between the dragon and people, so everyone would be in trouble if she was gone. It was also clear that she didn’t have the ability to protect Emilia as she ran around the kingdom.

Emilia peered at Brunhild’s face with concern. “Are you scared to go see the Divine Dragon, Big Sis?”

She was worried about her. She loved her.

But right now, that affection stung.

Brunhild squatted down and embraced Emilia tightly.

“I’m not afraid. It’s all right. I’m going to try making a request of the Divine Dragon. I’ll ask that we can meet again tomorrow. So I’m not scared.”

Emilia’s small hand gently rubbed Brunhild’s back. “Even once I’ve gone to live at the temple, come to see me, ’kay?”

Once she left the estate with Emilia, soldiers were already waiting for them. Beside the soldiers was a wagon. The soldier took Emilia’s hand and put her into the large wooden cage that was on top of the luggage rack. There were other children inside the cage, too.

The wagon began to move.

The soldiers carried the children to the temple.

Brunhild followed after the wagon in a different carriage.

The wagon wheeled up a gentle slope to arrive at the temple. The soldiers placed the wooden cage and some jewelry before the arch and then went back.

It was the law that only the Dragon Priestess could enter the temple.

Brunhild went through the grand arch and into the temple. There wasn't a single speck of dust inside. The priestess kept it immaculately clean for the dragon.

She walked down a long hallway that was lined with stone dragon statues.

Eventually, Brunhild reached the altar and closed her eyes and laced her fingers together.

<Divine Dragon, please show yourself,> Brunhild called for the dragon in an inhuman language.

It was a language called the Dragon's Tongue. This was the one language through which one could communicate with the dragon, and only the priestess's clan would acquire it, by heredity. It was because they could use this language that the priestess's clan was entrusted with mediating between dragons and humans.

As she continued to offer her prayers, a great creature appeared from within the depths of the great temple.

It was a giant dragon that seemed to be about fifteen meters tall.

The Divine Dragon. That was what the people called it.

It was a beautiful dragon, bearing scales that shone with the sunlight. Its hide was vibrant, revealing a sense of its vitality. But it was not at all a young dragon. Though its body appeared youthful, its body was in fact aged, having continued to watch over the kingdom for hundreds of years.

When the dragon saw Brunhild, its eyes narrowed gently. **<How good of you to come, my most beautiful of priestesses.>**

<It is the greatest honor to be permitted in your audience. As thanks for your ceaseless protection, I come bearing offerings.>

The world outside the kingdom was teeming with evil dragons, and the Divine

Dragon protected the people from them. That was why he was revered.

<As usual, the offerings have been left outside of the temple.>

<I shall accept them. And I vow to protect the people from evil dragons on the morrow as well.>

Brunhild was nervous. **<With all due respect, Divine Dragon...,>** she started, her eyes lowered.

<What is it, my dear priestess?>

<If needed, we will increase the offerings. I will gather gems from all over the kingdom. I will increase the number of spinning wheels, and we will sew even more clothes. So please, I beg of you...>



Brunhild lifted her head.

<Please...could you please pardon us from making human sacrifices?>

In this kingdom, there was a custom of offering seven children to the Divine Dragon every month.

They were offerings.

The Divine Dragon ate people.

Emilia and the others would be devoured.

The children were not told of the fact that they would be eaten. Since there was no need to tell them everything, this was hidden with the lie that they would live with the Divine Dragon at the temple.

When Emilia had been chosen as an offering, Brunhild had tried to avoid it every which way. Being of a special class, Brunhild had a very influential voice. She appealed at meetings and tried to remove Emilia from the candidates. But this was the one instance it hadn't gone well.

This was not the first time that Brunhild had exerted her authority in order to redo the selection of an offering. She didn't know how many times she had done it.

She had saved many orphans before. Offerings were chosen from the powerless, those of low station, so they inevitably were often orphans. Every time an orphan she had saved was selected as an offering, Brunhild had made them redo the selection.

But that had finally reached its limit. In the meeting of aristocrats and great merchants, they had said that no matter her special station, they could no longer allow any more selfishness from her.

<I am aware that this is selfish, when you protect us all from the evil dragons...>

She looked for the Divine Dragon's reaction.

The dragon wore a smile like that of a good-natured old man. **<Priestess. You are a kind girl.>**

The dragon did not get angry but continued in an admonishing tone, **<However, I cannot grant your request. The power with which I protect this land from evil dragons can only be gained from eating humans. It does pain me to consume your kind. But if you lose my protection, what would happen? You're smart—I don't need to explain, do I?>**

She had heard in the stories that if the sacrifices to the dragon were to end, then evil dragons would attack the nation.

About one hundred years ago, that had actually happened. There had been a time when they had stopped the sacrifices. And on the dawn of that day, the evil dragons had entered the capital. It was said that they had killed many humans, with scales that resisted any blade, claws that tore armor, and flames that melted iron. This was a historical fact that remained well-documented.

If they could prevent the intrusion of evil dragons with seven people a month, then that was a cheap price to pay. Those seven people were chosen from orphans and people of low status, so most people wouldn't complain. No one demanded they be saved. Many believed that even if orphans were to grow up, they would only become good-for-nothings anyway. They thought that before they became villains, it would be best to give them a meaningful death.

Brunhild was the exception for supporting these orphans.

<A friend of mine...has been included among the offerings today. So please...>

<Ohhh, that's awful. Let her out right away. And then bring someone in their place.>

<That's not what I mean...>

<Then what do you mean?>

<I'm saying I want you to decrease the number of offerings.>

Their exchange continued for a while after that, but the dragon dodged her words evasively.

But it seemed that gradually, the Divine Dragon had become irritated. **<Don't be so selfish.>**

The dragon brought its face close to Brunhild in a menacing manner. Overpowered by his eyes, Brunhild recoiled.

<If I so desire it, I can abandon my role of protector. If I do that, then it will be more than seven who will die.>

Hearing that, Brunhild was unable to reply.

<And why are you worrying about it now, after all this time? It's just one orphan. You've sent dozens to me before. Was it fine for them, but no good for this one? How do you plan to face those people you have pretended not to see until today?>

The Divine Dragon was entirely right.

Until today, Brunhild had been pretending not to see the offerings.

She had wanted to do something about the terrible custom. But she had resigned herself to it, since it was necessary to protect the people from evil dragons. In her desperation to at least protect those within her reach, every time someone she knew was selected as an offering, she removed them from the list of candidates. Still, thinking about how someone else would die in their stead pained her heart.

But no matter how much she hurt, that didn't change the fact that she had been pretending not to see the offerings.

Brunhild understood her sin. So she could no longer argue.

Seeing Brunhild in pain, the dragon said in a sympathetic tone, **<In the offerings today, someone important to you will die. But there's no need to be disheartened, since there's no one who is irreplaceable. There is a replacement for every person. This is my experience, having lived a long life, and it's unquestionably true. You are young, and you will live a few decades more. If you have that much time, you will find two or three replacements for that orphan.>**

Of course she could not reply, *You're right.*

To Brunhild, the Divine Dragon's way of thinking was beyond her, and completely incomprehensible.

All she did understand was that she'd failed to convince him, so Emilia would die.

She gave up and left the temple. Beside the arch at the entrance was the wooden cage.

Inside the cage, Emilia found Brunhild. And then she gave Brunhild a little wave. She certainly had to be uneasy, having been put in a cage.

It was unbearable.

After leaving the temple, Brunhild was unable to go down into the town.

She stopped on the slope between the town and the temple and worried.

Would she go back to the town now and return to her life?

No—but even if she returned to the temple, there was nothing she could do. She couldn't save Emilia. She couldn't think of any arguments against the dragon.

As she was wavering, the sun began to set.

...But I can't give up, after all.

Couldn't she try to get him to listen, one more time?

After all her vacillating, Brunhild decided to return to the temple.

And then she regretted it.

When Brunhild returned to the temple, it was right as the dragon was destroying the wooden cage and about to eat the children.

She could hear their screams.

The dragon didn't notice Brunhild, so intent was he on devouring the children. Their bones splintered and shattered between his jaws as he chewed. Both hands held children in their grasp. When the dragon squeezed lightly, blood and viscera spurted out from their mouths. The dragon slurped down their remains as if sucking on egg yolks.

It was such a sight, Brunhild was unable to make a sound.

Until today, she had done everything in her power to not be present for the sacrifice. Now she was forced to realize that that had been the best course of action.

She could hear a familiar voice crying for a *big sister*, but her body was frozen from fear.

If it was discovered that she was here, wouldn't she be eaten like the children?

It was no surprise that Brunhild would feel that way, since the dragon had been looking at the children with a fearsome look in his eyes. It was different from the look he had when talking with Brunhild. It was not the way one looked at a sentient being.

Her legs were trembling, and it was all she could do to stay on her feet.

Eventually, she could no longer hear Emilia's voice.

She didn't know how she got back to the town.

Without realizing it, she was standing at the town's entrance. It had long since grown dark.

"Brunhild. Hey, Brunhild."

Someone was calling out to her, so she looked toward them, dazed.

He was clad in smooth, ruby-red silk. Gold rings decorated his slim fingers.

His jet-black hair, like that of a crow, was proof he was of the royal family.

The boy was called Sigurd. He was Brunhild's childhood friend. He was sixteen, one year older than her. On the day when offerings were made to the dragon, he always came to pick her up at the town's entrance. He was concerned, since after delivering the offerings, Brunhild's mood tended to be unstable.

"Are you all right? You seem like your mind is elsewhere...," Sigurd murmured to Brunhild.

“I’m the worst.”

All the many offerings that she had sent off before, the sinfulness of having abandoned them, since they couldn’t be saved, since she hadn’t known them, and the pathetic feeling of having let Emilia die as she begged for help—

All of this was about to crush Brunhild.

Unable to take it, Brunhild wept. Perhaps she was relieved to see the face of her old friend.

Sigurd didn’t know what was going on, but though he was flustered, he rubbed Brunhild’s back and spoke words of comfort to her.

Thinking that he had to take her someplace where she could calm down, Sigurd decided to take Brunhild to the royal castle.

In a room at the castle, Sigurd asked her what had happened.

Brunhild began telling him, but it was very fragmented and vague. The Brunhild that Sigurd knew was an intellectual woman. And that manifested in the way she spoke, always concise and choosing straightforward language. If even she could only speak incoherently, then something pretty shocking must have happened.

Sigurd did not rush Brunhild, patiently continuing to listen to her talk. She repeated the same thing over and over, and she kept berating herself, so it took time, but he somehow got a grasp on what was going on. But even understanding it, it was not an issue he could resolve.

He could never get rid of the sacrifices to the Divine Dragon, after all. If they did, then the evil dragons that teemed outside the kingdom would attack the people.

So the only things that he could do was to say “there’s no helping the sacrifices,” and “it’s not your fault” to console Brunhild.

...But though I understand all that...

He couldn’t say it.

Brunhild was Sigurd’s dearest friend. So he didn’t want to be careless or

insincere with her.

He wanted to support her.

Besides, even Sigurd was hurt by the matter of the offerings. There was no way that tricking children into being eaten was forgivable.

Brunhild covered her face with her hands and said, crying, "I can no longer see the Divine Dragon as a great dragon. It's just a beast."

Sigurd could have written that off as a rash remark made because she was worked up, but he took it seriously.

"...If the Divine Dragon is truly just a beast...then it's not as if there's nothing to be done."

Brunhild lifted her head as he continued.

"Do you remember what you told me once? The story about what if there aren't any evil dragons outside of the country."

She had told Sigurd this once.

In the books and legends, it was written that the evil dragons had black wings and flew the skies. But there was not a single person who had seen the evil dragons flying over the sky of the kingdom. Could one not then assume that the evil dragons had been destroyed long ago?

Sigurd remembered that well. He had been surprised by Brunhild's powers of imagination.

"In order to see if your theory is true or not...let's leave the kingdom," he said.

Brunhild shook her head. "We can't. You know the Divine Dragon's law. They say that if we break the law and leave the kingdom, then the evil dragons will eat the people."

"Like I said, this theory is if the Divine Dragon is indeed just a beast. If it's a beast like you say, then there's no meaning in that law."

Sigurd understood that he was saying something outrageous. In this nation, the Divine Dragon was a being equivalent to God. Even if he wanted to support his friend, saying this felt heinous, like he was spitting on a holy figure. He was

sweating, feeling like divine punishment could fall upon him at any moment.

Hearing what Sigurd said, Brunhild considered.

It was true that in Brunhild's eyes, the Divine Dragon no longer seemed like a holy being. But even saying that didn't mean that he didn't have transcendental powers. If he did hold some terrible powers, then Brunhild breaking the law might expose the people to danger.

But Brunhild still wanted to leave the kingdom.

Emilia's voice, crying for help, had been burned into her ears.

If she could prove that there were no evil dragons, then there would be no more need to give offerings to the Divine Dragon, since the Divine Dragon eating people was the requirement to gain the power to protect the people from the evil dragons.

"Help me out, Sigurd." The faint light in Brunhild's eyes now lit with a powerful will. "I don't want to feed anyone to the dragon ever again."

Three days later, they went into action with their plan to leave the kingdom.

Brunhild's kingdom was surrounded by rows of giant dragon statues.

Between each statue were walls made of quicklime. So you couldn't see the world on the other side of the wall. Each and every one of the statues was about twenty times the height of an adult man, so you couldn't cross over them.

This was the boundary with the outside world.

The dragon had a number of secrets that humans couldn't know, and one of those was thought to be the making of these statues and wall, which served as a defensive barrier.

Brunhild and Sigurd each brought one servant that they could trust and gathered in front of the dragon statues.

The stone dragons looked down on the people from far above. Looking up at them, Brunhild felt something indescribably eerie.

The Divine Dragon had told her that the dragon statues had been made to protect the people from evil. But now, it felt more like the statues were watching them.

I wonder if it's because I saw the Divine Dragon eat children.

Maybe that was why, when she saw these things in the shape of dragons, even knowing they were merely stone statues, she felt afraid.

“Over here, guys.” Sigurd led Brunhild.

Walking a little ways, they arrived at an area where part of the wall was covered by an unnaturally large cloth.

Sigurd flipped up part of the cloth, and from below could be seen just a bit of the outside world.

“Is the wall broken?” Brunhild was surprised.

“Yeah. Just the other day, a city scholar broke it with explosives.”

That scholar had been insisting for some time now that the kingdom should be engaging with the outside world. They had been convinced that their development was limited if they only ever obeyed the dragon in their enclosed world, and so following those personal convictions, they had broken the wall.

“What happened to that scholar...?”

Anything other than the death penalty was unthinkable.

These dragon statues were holy, created by the Divine Dragon himself. For people below the rank of commoner, even just approaching warranted the death penalty. If they broke one, there wouldn't even be a trial.

“...Are you really going to go, Lady Brunhild?” asked Fafnir, Brunhild's servant. “Crossing beyond the dragon statues is, I'm forced to say, lacking in self-awareness as the priestess. Just how would your departed mother mourn if she were to hear of this?”

“It's too late to accuse me of being a failure as the priestess. I no longer have the confidence to even continue being the Dragon Priestess.”

She had found out how the Divine Dragon ate people. Now that she knew,

she could no longer put on a look of feigned ignorance and deliver innocent children to their deaths.

Fafnir offered no further remonstrance. He had no intention of disobeying his master's decision. He had offered some advice as her retainer, after a fashion, but if Brunhild decided she would go outside, then he should just obey.

The servant Sigurd had brought, on the other hand, was different.

"Prince, it's not too late. Let's stop here. I shudder to think what divine punishment might befall us the moment we venture beyond the dragon's statues!"

He was a man with sparkling golden hair and a muscular physique, tall enough to look up at. He had a long spear in hand.

His name was Sven. He was Prince Sigurd's servant, and eighteen years old.

Sven was a young man with respect for God. He had been born from a lineage of knights, and he had also piously followed the laws laid out by the Divine Dragon all his life.

"You should know just as well as I, Prince Sigurd. A hundred years ago, the evil dragons came into this kingdom. That was because the royal family at the time planned to expand their territory and left. We must not repeat history."

He was a pious knight, but he had a weakness.

"Please, Sven. I want you to come with me," Sigurd begged.

That made Sven wince. "Well, but..."

"If we do run into evil dragons, then by the might of your spear, I think we can get through them."

After waffling, Sven sighed. "...Good grief. Just this once."

Sven was a believer in the Divine Dragon, but more than that, he had sworn loyalty to his prince. Therefore, he was weak to requests from his lord.

Brunhild said her thanks to Sven.

"Thank you, Sven. They say that no man in the kingdom is your equal, as a knight. Having you with us is very heartening."

Sven chuckled shyly. He'd always been the type who liked to have people rely on him. "Understood. I swear by this spear that I will guarantee both your safety."

Once they had reached an agreement, Fafnir called out to them. "Let's get going outside the walls. Even if we are of a station that's allowed to approach the walls, it's best if people don't see us."

"Indeed. Let's hurry outside."

The four of them peeled back the cloth that covered the wall and left the kingdom.

"Wow..." Brunhild let out a cry of wonder.

The four of them all saw the horizon for the first time. The earth went on forever, without being obstructed by walls. Though the other three didn't sigh out loud, they felt wonder in their hearts. The sight was such that you would forget the divine punishment said to come.

They looked all around, but there was no sign of any evil dragons. There was no sign of any large animals.

Brunhild was about to take the lead and start walking when Sigurd stopped her. "Walk behind me. Since you're the most vulnerable among us."

Even Brunhild had learned fighting techniques. She was not defenseless, even now. The sword Falchion that hung from her waist was ready to be drawn at any time.

But with Sigurd gripping her arm so tightly, she was forced to feel her own powerlessness.

"Right," she said, then obediently stepped behind Sigurd's back.

With Sigurd and Sven at the lead, the four of them made their way along. Walking through grassy fields, they passed through a forest and crossed over hills.

There was no sign of any evil dragons, after all.

"The theory that they're extinct seems even more plausible now."

They explored until the sun was about to set. Outside of the walls, there was no source of light. Since it was clear that they would be enveloped in true darkness, they immediately went back to the wall's entrance.

As they returned to the kingdom, Brunhild said, "Next, let's arrange for horses."

"You still want to do that? We walked around so much. I think we can conclude, after today, that there are no evil dragons."

"It may just be that we happened to not run into any. At the very least, I'd like to investigate three times."

In the end, divine punishment did not visit them that day.

The next day, the four of them left the city walls with horses that Sigurd had arranged for.

They investigated three more times, but because Brunhild wanted to be very thorough, they ventured out twice more for a total of five different days. They covered quite a distance on horseback, but still there were no evil dragons. All that they encountered was the occasional wild animal.

A rabbit was hopping around on the grassy plain. Birdsong could be heard in the forest. Butterflies fluttered along. It was peaceful.

"If there aren't any after searching around this much, then at the very least there are no evil dragons living in this area."

"Yes, I think this is enough to prove that there are no evil dragons."

"Sigurd, I think I'm going to go report this to the Divine Dragon."

Since they had managed to prove that there were no evil dragons, they shouldn't have to bequeath any more offerings.

They had carefully investigated outside of the walls. Brunhild was confident that whatever the Divine Dragon said, she could argue it down.

But Sigurd seemed worried.

“...What if the Divine Dragon doesn’t listen to what you have to say? Even if you can prove that there are no evil dragons... More importantly, we’ve broken the law that no one is to leave the kingdom.”

The Divine Dragon said divine punishment would fall on those who broke the law.

“If you wound up being eaten...”

Sigurd’s words made Brunhild remember when Emilia had been killed. She broke out in a sweat, and her heart raced. Even if she did have the favor of the Divine Dragon, having now broken the law, she might be killed and eaten.

But Brunhild had made up her mind that she was going to speak to the Divine Dragon.

If it could be resolved with discussion, then that would be best. She had, for example, come up with the strategy of hiding from the Divine Dragon and making a base outside the kingdom and moving there instead, but if she spent too much time on that, she didn’t know many people would be sacrificed in the meantime.

“If I don’t come back...then that will mean at last that the Divine Dragon is a beast that can’t even be reasoned with. Sigurd, I’m entrusting the rest to you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Just for today, I have to go with you, after all—”

“No. You stay behind. This is something I began. If divine punishment does befall me, then I don’t want to drag you into it.”

Sigurd was quite fine with being struck with divine punishment as well, but Brunhild stubbornly forbade Sigurd from coming with her. At this point, it was impossible for him to convince her otherwise.

Sigurd sensed something difficult to oppose in Brunhild’s voice.

It wasn’t as if her voice was angry, or overpowering, or had a charisma. But for some reason, obeying that voice felt like something any living creature had to do.

But Sigurd resisted it. Since his dear friend might be killed and eaten, he stubbornly refused to back down. “No matter what you say, I absolutely won’t

back down on this.”

The two of them were completely at odds.

After quite some time had passed, finally Brunhild sighed. “...Fine, you win. Let’s go to the temple together tonight.”

And so Sigurd was finally convinced. He brought his spear to protect her, warming himself up on the training grounds to wait for the appointed time.

But Brunhild never came.

While she had appeared like she’d given in, that was a lie, and she’d gone to the temple alone during the day.

After passing down the hallway lined with dragon statues, Brunhild met with the Divine Dragon.

Brunhild started off by apologizing for having gone outside the walls. But she didn’t mention that Sigurd had gone with her. If divine punishment was coming, she wanted it to be for her alone.

<I can’t believe it...>

Before the speechless dragon, Brunhild explained things clearly and in order—that there were no evil dragons and that there was no more need for him to protect them.

And...

<There is no need for you to eat people.>

She swallowed.

If the Divine Dragon could be reasoned with, then perhaps that would be an end to the sacrifices.

The dragon’s expression was tormented. There was no sign at all that his glum expression would change.

Eventually, the dragon said, **<What a thing you have done, Brunhild. I didn’t think you were such a foolish girl.>**

<I searched around five times. I covered a very wide area on horseback. But

there wasn't a single evil dragon. I'm certain that they have perished.>

<It doesn't matter whether there are evil dragons or not. My lament is that you ventured beyond the walls.> The dragon brought his great reptilian face close to Brunhild's. **<The issue is that you broke the law.>**

The dragon's breath made Brunhild's hair and clothing flutter. **<You are smart but ultimately human. There are things in this world beyond human knowledge and understanding. The law that you must not go past the walls is one of those things. You should have just followed the law and not worried yourself over meaningless things. Tonight, the evil dragons will attack the kingdom.>**

<How will evil dragons attack the kingdom if there are no evil dragons?>

<But there *are*.>

<Where are they, then?>

<That is not for you to know, Brunhild. Stay in the temple tonight. If you return to the village, you will be attacked by evil dragons. I don't want to lose you.>

<No. I'm going back to the town. If, as you say, there will be an attack by evil dragons, then all the more reason—since it will be my responsibility if the town is attacked. I cannot run alone,> Brunhild said boldly and without timidity, even while facing the giant dragon.

With those strong-willed eyes before him, the dragon had no choice but to back down. **<Then you should spend tonight with whoever puts you most at ease so that you can get through the night of evil dragons.>**

The dragon departed into the depths of the temple, and Brunhild went down into the town.

Once night fell, Brunhild went to Sigurd. He had been preparing to head to the temple, but unfortunately, Brunhild had already met with the Divine Dragon.

"I won't let you get away with doing something like this again," Sigurd said,

anger in his voice.

Brunhild had always had this sort of sneaky side.

He was glad that she cared for him. But it hurt to be deceived so that he could be protected.

Sigurd was a man. He had a sturdier build than Brunhild. He was strong, and his body was healthy. He wanted to protect her. But despite his feelings, she always outwitted him like this and wound up protecting him.

“Am I so unreliable?” he demanded.

Brunhild hastily denied that. “Not at all. I just didn’t want you getting into danger...” But she dropped the excuse and decided to apologize honestly. “I’m sorry.”

Even she felt guilt for deceiving Sigurd.

Sigurd didn’t criticize Brunhild any further. It wasn’t like he wanted to be unkind to her. “...So what did you talk with the Divine Dragon about?”

Brunhild told Sigurd about her conversation with the Divine Dragon and his prediction that evil dragons would attack the village. Brunhild had come to Sigurd not to apologize for having tricked him but because she wanted to tell him about the evil dragons.

“I see. So the Divine Dragon made such a prediction...” Sigurd put a hand to his chin and considered. There was no time for him to feel relieved about Brunhild having come back safely. “What do you think, Brunhild? Basically, this is about whether we should let the people know about this or not.”

“There’s no need. I mean, we searched around so much, and there wasn’t a single evil dragon. So then if evil dragons came to attack tonight, we could only assume that they were born from dust.”

“That’s true...” Sigurd was counting on Brunhild’s wisdom. She was a lot smarter than him.

But.

“Still, there is the one in a million chance.”

Sigurd was not an atheist like Brunhild. Besides, his position was different from Brunhild's. Even if they were both of a privileged class, he was a prince. The priestess's mission was to speak with the dragon, but the prince's mission was to protect the people.

"Besides, some power beyond our human understanding might actually come into play," he added.

"Do you mean to tell them from your mouth as a prince that *evil dragons will come to attack tonight*? The nation will fall into chaos over dragons that aren't coming. You'll cause them stress and turmoil all night long, but when they find nothing happened by morning, the trust in the royal family will be shaken."

Brunhild was worried about Sigurd's position.

Sometimes what she said would seem unkind. This was perhaps inevitable, since she'd come to think in this logical way due to Fafnir's influence.

"Brunhild, I want you to lend me your wisdom. I need a way to protect my people from the worst-case scenario and, if possible, not lose their trust."

"If possible..."

"If you can't think of anything, there's no helping that. The lives of the people are more important than trust in me."

If Brunhild failed to come up with something, then he would likely tell them about the dragon's attack, prepared to lose their trust.

"Let's see, then..." After considering for a while, she opened her mouth. "Let's make it that some thieves appeared. Say to lock your doors and prepare weapons. And of course, to absolutely not leave your houses."

"I see. That way we can minimize the confusion and have them strengthen their defenses." Sigurd hummed like he was impressed. "That's a good plan. I knew you'd think of something," he said with a smile.

"Not really...this doesn't even count as a plan." She remained shy.

But despite saying that, Brunhild was not displeased to be praised.

Once night came, Sigurd dispatched knights to the town to warn the people that brigands were about. If the knights dispatched were used directly for the

city's security, they would not go to waste.

Sigurd told Brunhild, "I'll assign Sven to guard you."

"...Huh? Where's this coming from?"

"The Divine Dragon said so, didn't he? To spend tonight with someone who can put you at ease."

"I don't need it. I said the evil dragons aren't coming, didn't I?"

"Brunhild." Sigurd fixed a look on Brunhild. He was saying that he couldn't have the unspeakable happen to her.

Brunhild didn't know what to do about looks like that. A serious gaze like this made her feel like she might give in, no matter how logically and reasonably she spoke.

"...Fine. But not Sven."

"What are you talking about? Sven is strong. Even if he really does fight with an evil dragon, he wouldn't lose—"

"You just said it yourself, didn't you? *Am I so unreliable?* I don't think that at all. So I want to spend this time with you."

"...All right." If she was going to be like that, then as a man, he had to take on the role of her guard.

And besides, though he wasn't as good as Sven, Sigurd also excelled in martial arts.

"I doubt I'll be as reliable as Sven, but I'll do all I can to protect you."

Brunhild replied jokingly, "Yes, I'll do all I can to be protected."

Sigurd was glad to hear that joke. These past few days, Brunhild had been brooding, and watching her had been painful. Most likely, having the confidence that there were no evil dragons had gained her some peace of mind.

Night had come.

Due to the warning, there was nobody walking around town. There were only armed knights and soldiers doing their rounds.

Looking down from the castle on the soldiers doing rounds, Brunhild apologized silently, saying, *I'm sorry for making you work for nothing.*

But there was no need for her to apologize—since just as the Divine Dragon foretold, that legend showed itself.

Over the course of a hundred years, they hadn't appeared even once: black-winged dragons. Their height was more than twice that of an adult man.

And it wasn't just one or two of them. Countless dragons suddenly flew in and began to attack the city.

Even the knights were no opponents for them. The flames they spewed from their mouths melted iron, their claws easily tore armor, and their jaws crunched their helmets.

The town became an ocean of flame.

“No. This can't be...!”

Looking down at the city blazing up from her window in the castle, Brunhild was in a panic.

Just where did they come from? Even though we never found any, from all our searching.

The Divine Dragon's words crossed her mind.

There are things in this world beyond human knowledge and understanding.

Would the evil dragons appear only when punishing those humans who approached the walls?

Just like a divine will delivering his judgment...

Had she been wrong for attempting to make conjectures about dragons using human reason?

Would it have been best not to think too much, as the Divine Dragon said...?

No. Right now...

Now was not the time to be thinking such thoughts.

She should calmly consider what she could do.

With a glance at the Falchion hanging from her waist, Brunhild made to head out of the castle.

...I have to protect the people.

But Sigurd grabbed her arm and stopped her. “You can’t go outside.”

“But I...I have to fight. Because of me, the town, the people...”

Sigurd drew up Brunhild’s arm in his grasp and said, “What can you do with these thin arms? You can’t even scratch their scales.”

Brunhild had learned a clever court swordsmanship, but she was no stronger than any other human. There was no way her attacks would work on an evil dragon, with their entire body covered in hard scales.

“You have to calm down. What do we do if you don’t calm down?”

That remark finally made Brunhild become calm in the real sense. She realized that until just then, she had only *thought* she was calm. If not, then there was no way she would have considered fighting dragons herself, as powerless as she was.

Her strength lied not in fighting but in thinking.

The sound of her window glass shattering rang through the room.

She looked over to see an evil dragon coming in through the broken window to the room where the two of them were.

The royal castle could no longer be said to be safe.

“This way!”

Carrying a spear, Sigurd pulled Brunhild’s hand and left the room. The evil dragon’s sinister cry followed them.

Upon leaving the room, the two of them were shocked. Already, countless evil dragons had come into the royal castle.

The ceiling was gorgeously made, with wide halls and high ceilings. This had backfired, enabling the dragons to rampage about the castle quite freely. A dragon leaped up on top of the chandelier. Unable to take the weight, the chandelier fell. With a loud crash, a knight was crushed.

It would be better to leave the castle.

“...I know—outside the castle.”

Brunhild and Sigurd realized that at the same time.

“The temple. We’ll ask the Divine Dragon to drive away the evil dragons,” said Sigurd.

“I was just about to say that, too...” Brunhild’s voice trailed off near the end.

What is the Divine Dragon doing?

The Divine Dragon has protected us from the evil dragons thus far, so why isn’t he doing anything now?

Because this is divine punishment? Because it’s judgment?

No, this couldn’t be divine punishment or judgment.

Brunhild’s mind began to work coolly.

It was true that she had no explanation for the evil dragons appearing so suddenly. That might be some sacred mystery. Maybe they had appeared from thin air. But that wasn’t the issue.

The issue is the timing.

They had appeared today.

But that was strange.

If this were something beyond human understanding, like divine punishment or judgment, then it was strange that it hadn’t happened on the day when their party had left the walls.

God is said to always be watching us, so he should have judged us the day we went outside.

But when it had actually happened was after five different searches—or to go further, after she had reported those searches to the Divine Dragon.

The Divine Dragon had said, *Tonight the evil dragons will attack.*

Why tonight? Does that mean that the moment I reported it, God recognized that I went outside the walls? That was impossible. If God was all-knowing and

all-powerful, than that timing was too late. The attack by the evil dragons couldn't be divine punishment.

So then the conceivable possibility was...

The Divine Dragon is making the evil dragons attack the people...?

Brunhild couldn't guess as to why he would do such a thing or how he would do such a thing.

If that's the case...no, even if that was the case, then I have no choice but to go to the temple. The Divine Dragon is the only one with the power to stop this draconic disaster befalling the town.

The two of them headed to the temple.

Evil dragons were in combat with knights here and there in the town that was now tormented by flames.

They came to the base of the hill where the temple lay. Just a little farther, and they would be able to meet with the Divine Dragon, but...

“—!”

An evil dragon came for Brunhild. It was as fast as a black arrow. Brunhild envisioned herself being chewed up and was certain she was going to die.

But a spear was thrust from the side to stop the evil dragon.

Sigurd's spear pierced the dragon's wing membrane and held it back.

“Sigurd...!”

Sigurd began to struggle against the evil dragon. The urge to draw her sword and save him suddenly welled within her.

But a cry from Sigurd stopped her. “Go! Just go!”

Brunhild turned her back to Sigurd and raced to the temple.

I know...

Even if she was to wield her sword, she wouldn't be able to injure the evil dragon.

Rather than wasting her time with that, climbing the hill without delay to

reach the temple and pleading with the Divine Dragon to “please drive away the evil dragons” would be far likelier to be able to save him.

But even understanding that, she felt pathetic for only being able to run and get away from Sigurd instead of helping him fend off the dragon.

If I had strength—if I could fight!

With that futile wish in her heart, Brunhild raced up the hill.

She reached the temple, and then without any prayer or greeting, she cried out.

She raced through the hall that was lined with the dragon statues. Perhaps because of her panic, she felt as if the number of statues were slightly fewer.

<Divine Dragon! Divine Dragon!>

In response to her panicked voice, the Divine Dragon appeared. **<Ohhh, my priestess. I’m glad that you’re safe. Come closer and show me your face.>**

<You can see my face plenty later. More importantly, please. Save the people. They are being attacked by many evil dragons. Please...>

<Before that, I must ask. Have you understood your foolishness? Do you understand how dreadful it is to approach the walls? Can you swear that you will never choose to go there again?>

<Yes, of course,> Brunhild answered immediately.

But on the inside, her body was burning with frustration.

The timing of the evil dragons’ attack, and the way he’s speaking as if he can do something about the evil dragons of his own will...

This dragon was most certainly responsible for the attack. She didn’t know how or why, but that much was clear.

But even if Brunhild’s suspicion had become conviction, that didn’t make her any stronger than she was.

Being a powerless priestess, all she could do was apologize to the dragon and make her request.

<I will heed your request,> said the dragon. **<Though you must be sure to**

obey my laws from now on.>

<Thank you...very much...>

Brunhild wept. The dragon took those to be tears of gratitude and smiled—but this was not the case.

They were tears of frustration.

By the time Brunhild came down into the town, the evil dragons had already vanished.

Sigurd was lying there at the bottom of the hill.

“Ahh, Sigurd. No...”

Brunhild ran up to him and held him in her arms.

He had been wounded in a fight with an evil dragon but had fortunately survived.

“The evil dragon...suddenly flew away,” he said. “A little later, and I would have been killed.”

Sigurd thanked her, but Brunhild shook her head.

There was no reason for her to be thanked. If she only had the power. Of it she had not so thoughtlessly told the Divine Dragon that she had left the kingdom. Then he would never have been wounded like this in the first place.

The night dawned.

Considering the scale of the attack, the death toll was not as great. Having warned the people beforehand not to leave their houses had borne fruit. But still, no few people had been injured or killed.

For a while, the whole town was busy with treating the injured and repairing the town’s buildings. But once the end of that was in sight, the people started to argue about why this attack had happened.

“Someone must have left the kingdom.”

Brunhild was assaulted by a strong sense of her own wrongdoing. “It’s... because I made the suggestion. I should come forward. I should be the one to bear punishment...”

Sigurd immediately replied, “No. I will hush up this matter.”

That statement was very unlike Sigurd. He had an even stronger sense of responsibility than Brunhild. He was also the type to hate cover-ups and scheming more than anything else. But no matter what Brunhild said, he stubbornly just continued to say he would brush it under the rug.

If it had only been Sigurd who had left the kingdom, he would not have been so obstinate about trying to hide things.

Leaving the walls meant execution without a trial.

Sigurd didn’t want to lose Brunhild.

She was glad that he had protected her, too. And not only because he had saved her life. There was something that she needed to tell everyone.

The evil dragons, in fact, served the Divine Dragon, who had made them attack the people.

Looking back on the situation, there could be no mistake. But Brunhild also understood that that alone wasn’t convincing enough.

Where had the evil dragons appeared from?

So long as she could not uncover this, her theory that the Divine Dragon was behind it all would be treated as Brunhild’s delusion.

But it wasn’t as if she had no ideas as to how to uncover the truth.

She seemed to recall having heard a long time ago from her mother, the previous priestess, that the Divine Dragon was able to create minions for itself.

She had heard it a very long time ago, so she remembered only vaguely. She thought she hadn’t even been told in the first place how it was done.

But Brunhild’s mother may have known of a way for the dragon to create minions.

Brunhild headed to the estate’s study.

Stored in the study were documents about dragons. Among these, there may be something that talked about how they would create minions.

There was an immense number of books. Brunhild's clan had fulfilled the role of Dragon Priestess for two hundred years now, after all. Just by entering the study, she felt her head whirl, but she psyched herself up and decided to get to it.

She brought along Fafnir, her servant. He was able to do this sort of clerical work very efficiently.

The two of them cooped themselves up in the study. They had servants bring them meals.

They stayed there for many days.

Since the two of them didn't come out of the study, the servants circulated rumors that the master and servant had to be doing something suspicious. That was not wrong. Trying to expose the truth of the Divine Dragon, in this country, would count as "suspicious." Although when the servants talked about "suspicious things," they meant a more vulgar sort.

"Phew..." In the study, surrounded by books, Brunhild looked up at the ceiling. She'd read so many words she felt like she was going to lose it.

Brunhild was a reader. But this much reading at random for so many days continuously was unsurprisingly exhausting.

It wasn't just the volume of documents that made it tough. With the older books, just turning the pages would practically make them crumble to pieces, so you needed to treat them carefully. It wore down her nerves.

Let's rest a bit.

She caught sight of Fafnir a little ways away. He was flipping through the pages of a book carefully but with incredible speed.

She was about to call out, "Why don't you rest, too?" but stopped. He didn't need it.

Before, when they had been doing another task, she had recommended that he take a break, but he had replied to her, "Your concern is unnecessary."

He would not get tired. The way he silently continued to accomplish his task made her think of a doll.

Beside Fafnir was a mountain of books he had finished reading. He was already done looking over more than twice the books Brunhild had.

Looking at Fafnir, she sometimes wondered if perhaps he thought of himself not as a human but as a weapon or tool. So that was why he didn't even conceive of resting.

Maybe he doesn't take care of himself, since he feels disposable.

Thinking that made Brunhild grow antsy.

There was some food that a servant had just brought into the room. Bread and soup and some glasses with cold water were laid on the table.

She picked up Fafnir's glass. She felt a comfortable chill through the glass.

Brunhild approached Fafnir. His eyes were still down on a book.

She pressed the cold glass against his cheek.

"..."

There was no reaction. If this had been Sigurd, he would have reacted in an amusing manner, though.

"...Is there something?" Fafnir said.

He didn't even seem angry. This was no fun.

"...Rest a little," Brunhild said, pointing to the food.

"Your concern is unnecessary." Fafnir's gaze returned to the book.

"Take a break. This is an order."

Fafnir looked at Brunhild. "My resting will further you from your goal."

"Overuse of a tool only hastens its damage. Excellent ones must be used with care—in order that they be used for a long time."

After some thought, Fafnir was convinced. "You have a point. Then I shall rest."

Brunhild said quietly, "You really think of yourself as a tool..."

She had wanted him to reply, “I am not your tool.”

Fafnir went for the table, grabbed the bread, and tossed it in his mouth. He didn't even sit in a chair. He was so businesslike. He didn't even think about trying to enjoy the meal.

“Agh, good grief. Not like that.” Brunhild took a seat and then prompted Fafnir to take a seat as well. “Let's have a meal together.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to.”

This was an order from his mistress, so he obeyed. He sat in the chair. “Replenishing nutrients like this can be done in a couple of minutes.”

“At least take ten minutes. I want to talk, too.”

“This is not a good trend, my lady.”

Brunhild had grown up to be a rational woman. She didn't even believe in God. It was because Fafnir had once said there was no such thing. Those words had affected the formation of Brunhild's personality. She thought with her own head even in the face of divine mystery and oracle, which Fafnir felt was not so bad. She was far better than the ignorant people who would abandon all thought.

But she would be inefficient in strange ways.

This meal was the peak example. There was no point in spending time on nutrient intake. But when it came to discussions of this sort, Brunhild would abandon efficiency and attempt all sorts of pointless nonsense.

“You should not be engaging in pointless activity,” said Fafnir.

“It's not pointless. Since you're the last of my...family.” After losing both her parents, she thought of Fafnir as a father figure. “So let's eat our meal together—no matter how busy we are. We can't disregard things like this.”

“Understood.” Fafnir had thought of a number of different counterarguments, but he didn't say them. A servant would simply obey.

They had a slow meal.

There was no deep conversation. And Fafnir did not engage in idle chat.

In the long silence, they just exchanged occasional brief remarks.

But though that was all it was, Brunhild seemed comfortable.

Even without stimulating conversation, Brunhild was glad to be able to spend time with her family.

There was no way Fafnir would understand anything so difficult.

The affection that Brunhild had for him—he didn't know the right way to deal with that.

Finishing their break, they went for the bookshelves once more. Brunhild became visibly more efficient at the task.

Once about two hours had passed, Brunhild's voice echoed in the tranquil study. "Found it!"

After looking over a thousand books, she finally found the account that she had been looking for.

The evil dragons...in this document they were described as "black dragons," but it told of the way to create them.

Brunhild's excited eyes pored over the account.

But her expression quickly grew grim.

Fafnir came over and he also looked at the account. And he understood why his master was so dejected by what she saw.

"So the material is humans?" he said.

When you make a human eat a dragon's scale, they become a dragon.

The minion dragons would follow the orders of the one whose scale it was.

"So then the dragons that attacked the town the other day were originally human?" Brunhild asked.

"He may have transformed children who he hadn't eaten into dragons and had them serve him."

“No...such a cruel thing...” Brunhild squeezed her eyes tight. She looked as if she was bearing pain. “But now we have proof.”

And from the proof they’d gained, she was able to reason out a frightening conclusion.

Why does the Divine Dragon eat people, in the first place?

Brunhild carried the book under her arm and made to leave the study. If her deductions were correct, then they had to do something about the Divine Dragon immediately. But the issue was that the two of them alone could not resolve this.

“Let’s speak with Sigurd and Sven. If we have this proof, that should convince them.”

Fafnir was skeptical. “Do you think? With all due respect, many of the accounts of historical priestesses do not seem realistic...”

“But...this is all consistent.”

“But even so, without actual proof, it’s just an account.”

“Actual proof...how?” Brunhild gasped. “No way. You can’t be saying to make a person eat a scale to try it out?”

That was the sort of idea Fafnir would have.

“...No,” he said. “Through spending time with you, I have decided to be kinder to people. Though that is not at all my field of specialty.”

His reply was unexpected, but it made her glad.

For the unfriendly Fafnir to try to be kind to someone...

Tee-hee, he does understand.

“I have an idea,” he said. “If you can give me a day, then I could prepare for it.”

Brunhild nodded. “I’ll leave it to you.”

She could trust him now.

Two days later, Brunhild summoned Sigurd and Sven.

In a room in the estate, Brunhild told the two of them, “About the attack from the evil dragons the other day...the one behind it is the Divine Dragon.”

Sigurd and Sven’s eyes both widened. Sven in particular was a believer in the Divine Dragon, like the majority were in this country, so his mouth fell open, looking like it wouldn’t shut again.

“How can you say such blasphemy...?” he asked.

“Considering the timing of the evil dragon’s attack and the timing of their retreat, I can only assume that the Divine Dragon is pulling the strings,” said Brunhild.

“...Lady Brunhild. I apologize if my understanding is lacking. However, I would like to confirm,” Sven asked. “This is what you say, Lady Brunhild—that after the Divine Dragon learned that you left the walls, he had the evil dragons attack the town?”

“That’s right.”

“...Why would he do such a thing?” Sven’s question was entirely reasonable. “By that logic...then there’s no need for the Divine Dragon to protect us from the evil dragons, is there? Leaving aside what sort of methods he might use, he himself is making the evil dragons attack? If he didn’t have them attack in the first place, then he wouldn’t have to protect...”

“The Divine Dragon isn’t protecting us—he never was. That’s all a charade for the sake of gaining sacrifices.”

Sven had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. “The sacred sacrifices? What do the sacrifices have to do with it? The Divine Dragon eats the sacrifices in order to gain the power to protect the town from evil dragons, doesn’t he?”

“Listen, Sven. For many years, I have fulfilled my role of sending in tributes to him. We offer fruit and grains as well...but thinking back, I have hardly ever seen him put them in his mouth. If as the Divine Dragon says, his eating humans is in order to gain that mysterious power, then from what does the Divine Dragon gain his nutrients in order to live?”

“Well...doesn't he eat the mists?”

“Ha!” Fafnir, who was beside Brunhild, laughed. He was laughing like he viewed Sven with utter contempt.

This man knew no smiles other than sneers.

And he hated fools.

Sven's expression turned hostile. “Did I say something funny?”

“No. Your statement was merely charming to hear.”

“Even an idiot like me understands it wasn't that sort of laugh, though.” Sven tried to grab Fafnir by the lapels. These two had complete opposite personalities, which may have been why they clashed over every little thing.

“Now that it comes to this, let me tell you—you shouldn't even be here,” said Sven. “You're an evil man. Leave, before you bring harm to Prince Sigurd and the others.”

Sigurd restrained Sven. “No violence. You're too strong to be doing this.”

Brunhild looked at Fafnir. “That's immature, when you're the eldest.”

“I've brought shame to myself,” Sven said, backing off.

Fafnir remained silent, and neither did he apologize.

For the time being, the pair's quarrel had settled down.

“Let's get back on track,” said Brunhild. “I very much understand Sven's point. It cannot be said that there's no possibility that the Divine Dragon is a creature beyond reason and doesn't even need food in order to live. Many people in this land would agree with you. But I can't help but feel that we're being deceived by those sorts of sacred mysteries. I think he's been allowed everything simply 'because he's the dragon' and 'because he's holy.’”

If Brunhild were in the position of the Divine Dragon and trying to deceive humans, then she would not have them attack on the night when the priestess came to report and then have them retreat once she came to apologize. That was the same as confessing that she had the power to control the evil dragons. She figured that he'd launched the attack and retreated at those times because

those sorts of moves had worked all this time. After all, having showed off some supernatural powers and wrapped them in the veil of sacred mystery had clearly managed to stop people from thinking about it.

In an age where God and the supernatural had been blindly believed, that would have worked. But these days science had progressed somewhat, and there were more people who would think logically. It was not an era where you could have your way with a single divine mystery.

That's why Brunhild thought of the Divine Dragon as, ultimately, another living creature like them.

"The Divine Dragon eats people to live. It's not in order to gain the power to protect the town from evil dragons—he gains the nutrients to live from humans. Based on how he doesn't eat grains or fruit, he can likely only gain nutrients from humans."

Brunhild's expression was frustrated, with the thought that she should have realized this earlier.

Sven's face was pale. As a citizen of the kingdom, and as a pious believer in the dragon, it was a normal reaction. For the Divine Dragon to eat people in order to live—for him to eat people for the same reason that they as humans ate pigs and cows—they shouldn't even be thinking about such blasphemy. Even just considering it was a capital crime.

It's impossible that the Divine Dragon is a living creature just like us.

If you told a believer, it wouldn't be strange for it to be treated as heresy and be beaten to death.

"The Divine Dragon must eat people in order to survive," said Brunhild. "But openly killing and eating people is wrong. No matter how powerful the Divine Dragon is, being a living creature, he is not immortal. If he continued to attack people and eat them, then eventually he would be defeated. So he established a way to eat people without attacking. And that is this country."

Fafnir supplemented for her, "For that reason, there was a need to implant fear of evil dragons—so that people would offer up sacrifices of their own accord and so that they would not run off somewhere else away from him."

Brunhild nodded.

Sigurd pressed his temple uneasily.

“You mean to say...this country is the Divine Dragon’s stock farm?”

Brunhild’s eyes were filled with the intent to rebel against the Divine Dragon.

Realizing that, Sven hastily said, “Even if your theory is correct, Lady Brunhild...what can we do? The Divine Dragon can create evil dragons at will and make them attack people, can’t he? Those monsters are terrifically strong. Even I could only defeat two of them. Even if we did resist someone who can create evil dragons from dust, we could never win.”

“It’s not from dust,” Brunhild rejected that idea. “It’s from humans.”

“...Pardon?”

“It took time, but we managed to look it up. It’s one of the qualities the dragons’ scales have. He can turn people into dragons by making them eat a scale of his. It seems he can give them simple orders, too.”

“It was written in this book,” Fafnir said, and pulled out the book, showing it to everyone.

To that, Sven argued back, “It’s a very old book. There might be mistakes.”

Brunhild gave Fafnir a signal with a look. The servant gave a little nod. “I will prove it,” he said.

Fafnir left the room in order to prepare that proof. And then after about ten minutes, he returned.

He held a chain in his hands.

And at the end of that chain there was a human. The man was all tied up. Fafnir was dragging him along.

All of them were struck speechless, except for Fafnir.

Ignoring the others’ shock, Fafnir pulled out a little scale from his pocket. He held the scale up to show them and said, “This is a scale from the Divine

Dragon. Brunhild picked up one that had fallen in the temple. Now I shall have this thing swallow one.”

“Wait, Fafnir.” Brunhild wasn’t even listening to Fafnir’s explanation. “What is this?”

“As I told you, it’s a dragon’s scale.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Brunhild pointed to the man tied up in chains. “Who is this man? You said you wouldn’t make any person eat a scale.”

“Yes. So this is not a person.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“The lowest social class in this kingdom are of a caste called Altatos. They are not people. They are treated as if they will make you dirty if you touch them.”

The places where Altatos lived and their professions were extremely limited. They were not recognized to have various rights. In extreme cases, it was no crime to kill one. According to the customary law, the reason it was not a crime was because “They are not people.”

“Are you saying that since Altatos are not people, there’s no problem in turning one into a dragon?”

“That’s right.”

“No. You can’t do that. The law has nothing to do with that. Altatos are people, too. Of course you can’t turn one into a dragon.”

“Is that right? But I chose an Altatos who it would be particularly best if he die, though...”

“There’s no such thing as someone who should die. Even people who have committed grave sins have the chance to start over—”

“Lady Brunhild. Please look closely at this man.”

Brunhild’s eyes dropped to the man. And she was shocked.

There was something strange about him. Drool was flowing sloppily from his mouth, and his eyes were completely unfocused. He seemed to be muttering something under his breath, but it was inarticulate, and she couldn’t tell what

he was saying.

“Before coming to this estate, I was an assassin,” said Fafnir. “I’m from the Altatos class myself.”

The jobs that Altatos could take were limited. They couldn’t take on legitimate work, so they had to accept dirty work in order to survive.

“When someone of the dark side disgraces themselves, they pay with their bodies. This is the case with this man, too. I don’t know how he failed, but it’s unquestionable that this is what’s become of him after receiving punishment. I won’t tell you what it’s called, but this is what happens when you’re forced to take a drug that has a powerful hallucinogenic effect. It’s often used as punishment on those for whom their lives is not enough to pay for their failures. Once they’re like this, their minds are broken, and they will never come back. He will continue to have nightmares he can’t wake from until he dies.”

“So it’s better if he dies,” Fafnir continued. “If on the off chance I was to wind up like this, I would ask my acquaintances to kill me.”

This was the first Brunhild had ever seen of such a graphic dark side of this country. No, not only her—Sigurd and Sven, too. The three of them had been blessed in their births. No matter how Brunhild and Sigurd cared for the people as statesmen, the real darkness was beyond their imaginings.

“But even so, if you say to save him, Lady Brunhild, then I will not experiment on this man. But this man wishes to be killed.”

“That’s just what you imagine...”

“No, it’s not—since I have a proper understanding what the effects of this drug are.”

“...”

Brunhild looked one more time at the man bound up in chains. She hoped that she might be able to sense some way they could communicate. She thought that if she could sense that even slightly, then she could save this man.

But it was no use. The figure standing there was in the shape of a man but had had his personhood stolen from him. There was nothing in his eyes, and

their hollowness gave her a sense of something cold. She knew she should be ashamed of it, but he even gave her a visceral sense of disgust.

After a long struggle, Brunhild wrung out, "...Put him at ease as soon as possible," she said while averting her eyes from the man.

"Understood."

Fafnir pushed the scale into the man's mouth.

Instantly, the man began to change. His muscles bulged and undulated, and then he grew giant.

His arms and legs thickened, and wings sprouted from his back, and his jaw lengthened like that of a crocodile. His rows of teeth became sharp like knives.

The man had turned into an evil dragon. It looked just like the ones that had attacked the town the other day.

The evil dragon tried to attack them, but it couldn't move. Many layers of sturdy chains had been wrapped around it beforehand. From it having grown immense, the chains were biting deeply into the dragon's flesh. No part of the creature could move freely.

"With this, I believe I have proved the method by which the Divine Dragon makes evil dragons," said Fafnir.

No one could argue. It was beyond that point.

Sigurd called out, "Sven."

"Yes, my lord." Sven thrust his spear into the heart of the evil dragon. With that, the evil dragon died.

While wiping the blood off his spear point, Sven said, "I've thought this for some time, but now, I'm certain."

He glared at Fafnir. "Trash."

Sigurd was also looking at Fafnir with cold eyes. There was clear contempt in them.

But only Brunhild's expression was complicated. She wanted to hold her head in her hands.

Only she understood that this matter had been the result of him trying to be kind, in his own way.

If it were back when they had first met, then he would have considered it no problem to sacrifice someone for the sake of accomplishing his goal, and he may have been indiscriminate in his choice of experimental subject. But this time he had chosen, in his own way, to bring in someone who would be saved by death.

This was unquestionably kindness.

But it was terribly twisted.

Her eyes met with Fafnir's. Brunhild's eyes did not hide that she was upset. She understood this had come about since he was trying to be kind, but what had just happened right in front of her had been shocking.

Fafnir was clever. It seemed that he understood instantly from looking into Brunhild's eyes that he had failed.

Perhaps it was her own subjective impression, but his eyes seemed extremely sad.

It was frustrating that she was the one person who wanted to acknowledge his efforts, but she couldn't accept his actions.

"...Let's get back to our discussion." Brunhild somehow regained her poise in the conversation as well as in her mood.

"The Divine Dragon can turn people into dragons. He makes evil dragons with his scales, and he had them attack the town. We have to defeat the Divine Dragon, or this country will be under his control forever. People will continue to be devoured."

They couldn't flee beyond the dragon statues. The act of trying to escape the Divine Dragon's reach was all made to be against the law, so he would have evil dragons attack the town to teach them a lesson.

Uprising as a group would also be difficult. The Divine Dragon had been too deeply accepted as the kingdom's protector. Even with the evil dragons the other day, it had appeared like the Divine Dragon had driven them away with

mysterious power, deepening his influence even more.

“I will stop the Divine Dragon,” Brunhild said.

Sigurd nodded. Brunhild had known that he would agree. “I believed that the sacrifices were for the sake of protecting the people, but if it was all a plot...as a royal, I must stop it.”

They both wanted the same thing—to free the kingdom from the dragon.

Fafnir said nothing. He would simply fulfill his job as a servant.

Only Sven hesitated. This was because, of the four of them, he was the most exemplary citizen of the kingdom. Even with it proved that the subject of his worship was evil, he didn’t have the grounding to be able to accept it.

But though he was hesitant, it didn’t take that much time for him to reach a decision. “...Understood. If you’re saying you shall do it, my prince, then I must accompany you.”

It was not because he believed in Brunhild’s theory or because he’d been able to abandon his faith.

He had decided to fight with the Divine Dragon out of his loyalty to Sigurd.

And so, in secret, the plan to assassinate the Divine Dragon began.

Brunhild and Fafnir wound up dealing with the corpse of the evil dragon.

While wiping up the blood, Brunhild called out to him. “Fafnir.”

“Yes, I know. I will make effort to improve myself.” He understood that his method of proving the scale had failed. He was being rebuked for that.

But Brunhild did not criticize him. “...You did well.”

The unexpected remark made Fafnir’s small eyes widen. “I thought for sure that you didn’t like how I demonstrated that.”

“I didn’t. I cannot accept that way of doing things. It shouldn’t happen.”

She was clearly angry. Then that made it even more incomprehensible. Why had she praised him?

“...Still, it isn’t right that no one acknowledges your efforts. That’s just as wrong.”

“Times like these...” For once, Fafnir sounded unsure. “Would it be correct for me to reply with a thank-you? At having been acknowledged.”

“No...I feel as if that’s not quite right. Rather, I should be the one saying it. Since you did it for my sake.”

Brunhild said, “Thank you.”

Hearing that, Fafnir thought that those words really were complicated after all.

For the plan to assassinate the Divine Dragon, there was no choice but for the four of them to do the task.

Worst-case scenario, there was the risk of combat with the Divine Dragon. They would have liked to prepare for that by securing fighters, but it was difficult to gather people. The moment they spoke publicly about the defeat of the Divine Dragon, they would be defeated.

To face him with the four of them, then they would need a fair amount of preparation, but they weren’t able to secure lots of time.

One month had passed since Emilia’s death.

The Divine Dragon was already demanding seven new sacrifices.

Brunhild came up with some reasons to buy them a day or two, but that had reached its limit.

The dragon must have been quite hungry, as when Brunhild came to the temple to explain herself, he said imperiously, *“If you make light of me any further, then the evil dragons may well attack the town tonight.”*

So it doesn’t even matter anymore whether I broke a law or not, does it?

She wanted to spit that at the dragon, but she swallowed it.

On returning to the royal castle, Brunhild told her friends about the Divine

Dragon.

“If we just had one more day...,” Sigurd said in frustration. He was trying to convince those castle knights who were worthy of trust to join in with them. But it wouldn’t be in time. They had to produce sacrifices right away, or the dragon might go mad with rage. Having seen how the dragon was, Brunhild knew this well.

“There’s no choice but to do it. The four of us alone will go to defeat the Divine Dragon.”

“Lady Brunhild, I’m against it,” Fafnir admonished her. “Let’s obey the dragon’s demands. We’ll offer up seven sacrifices. If we do that, then we can get another month of time. It will become possible to convince the knights. Ensuring our assassination succeeds will ultimately lead to fewer sacrifices.”

“Fafnir. That’s the one thing I absolutely will not do.” Brunhild could not accept that admonition. “I can no longer pretend not to see.”

Fafnir obediently backed down. He would ultimately just present options.

“This is no longer the time for strategists,” Sven said cynically as he came to the front. “I would ask that you leave this to me. I may not seem so, but I have been granted the title of the number one knight of the kingdom.”

Clasping his spear, Sven’s hand was shaking. Brunhild thought it was because he was scared of the Divine Dragon. But that was not it. He was trembling with excitement.

Sven swung his weapon. It moved freely, like an extension of his limbs.

“I swear on this spear: I will take the dragon’s head.”

The assassination plan was carried out that night.

Brunhild headed to the temple leading the sacrifices, then offered prayers to the Divine Dragon as usual.

In response, the Divine Dragon appeared. Even in the dim light, his white scales glimmered faintly.

<I’ve been waiting, my priestess.> It was clear in his voice that he was

irritated.

<I'm very sorry for having made you wait. Tonight, I have brought you the sacrifices.>

The dragon's mood brightened. **<Good.>**

<The sacrifices have been left outside of the temple. But there's something I would ask of you...>

<Tell me.>

<There were disputes over the attack of the evil dragons the other day, and we were only able to arrange for three sacrifices.>

The dragon's mood clearly grew worse, but before he could say anything, Brunhild said, **<However, we will be able to offer the remaining four before tomorrow morning.>**

The dragon swallowed his argument, saying he would allow that.

<Also...while we normally offer the sacrifices locked up in a wooden cage, currently, since the town is rebuilding, we are lacking in lumber. We were unable to arrange for a cage. Instead, they have been tied hand and foot in sturdy rope. I hope we have your forgiveness...>

<Yes, if that's all, I forgive it.>

Compared with having few sacrifices, whether there was a cage or not was a small issue.

When Brunhild left, the Divine Dragon immediately left the temple and headed to where the sacrifices were.

Just as the priestess had said, there were three sacrifices, and they were not in a cage.

There were three young men, sitting there bound hand and foot.

This was unusual. The Divine Dragon was a little surprised that they were not children. The offerings had always been children, but that was not the Divine Dragon's demand. The offerings always being children was for the convenience of the humans. Children were weak and easy to deceive. They were apparently

convenient as sacrifices.

So the Divine Dragon did not mind at all if his offerings were adults.

All that mattered was that he devoured humans.

He selected a sacrifice appropriate for the first bite. He based his decision around who seemed like they would have the most succulent flesh. It was a young man with hair the color of sunlight.

The Divine Dragon opened his mouth and tried to eat the bound man.

But the dragon did not know...that this was the peerless knight Sven.

There was a squelch of piercing flesh.

The Divine Dragon didn't know what had happened.

He looked to see a spear had pierced the inside of his own mouth. The man he had tried to eat had thrust it into him.

Sven had only been pretending to be tied up, while in fact his arms and legs were free. The spear that was his forte had been hidden at his side, under sand and leaves.

The other two men were Sigurd and Fafnir. Seeing that the fight had begun, they hurried away.

They met up with Brunhild, who had been hiding in the thicket watching. The three of them did not fight. Sven had told them that with their perfunctory fighting skills, they would only get in the way.

The dragon's head was flung far back as he groaned. He couldn't even shriek properly from his pierced throat. It looked to Brunhild and the others as if the surprise attack had been a great success.

But Sven gritted his teeth.

He evaded the point. I had meant to pierce his brain in one strike...

That was because of a spell the dragon used. The accuracy of Sven's spear was unequaled, but the dragon had suddenly cast a bewitchment spell that had sent it astray. The spear, piercing the dragon's upper jaw, had only grazed the brain.

The dragon howled and attacked the knight.

What unfolded then was truly a battle of legend.

The dragon spat fire. He wielded claws and tail. Every strike had lethal force, but they were not what was truly to be feared.

The Divine Dragon was skilled in mysterious magic.

He would mislead the eye with illusions, summon snakes from thin air to tangle around limbs, and attack the mind with curses. An ordinary knight wouldn't stand a chance.

But Sven smiled boldly. Sweat beaded along his jaw and fell to the ground.

An ordinary knight, that is.

This man, in comparison, was not at all ordinary.

If he could not use his eyes, he would use the eyes of his heart. The countless snakes that tried to entangle his limbs he sliced in midair and tossed aside, and the spells that confused the heart he shrugged off with his clear and serene spirit.

And finally, this man's spear was no ordinary weapon.

It was a magic spear. They said in tales that it had pierced the heart of a great hero.

Even when clashing with the dragon's fangs, it did not nick, and when he waved it, it blew away the dragon's flame.

Man and the divine were still close at this time in history.

Weapons that held the blessings of spirits and angels yet lived.

The spear point flashed like a shooting star. Broken scales colored the night sky. Fresh blood blossomed.

Fierce attacks lashed out without pause. Brunhild and the others didn't have even a hair's breadth during which they could interfere.

The battle continued for about an hour.

Finally, the dragon fell face-first to the ground causing the earth to rumble.

Sigurd, watching from the shadows, let out a little cry of admiration.

Sven had defeated the Divine Dragon all alone.

Or so it appeared.

Sven staggered. Following the dragon, he fell as well.

“Sven!”

Sigurd leaped out. When Brunhild cried to stop him, “It’s dangerous!” he shook her off.

Sigurd rushed up to Sven’s side.

Even for a knight wielding a magic spear, fighting the dragon had been no easy task. There were wounds all over his powerful body, and he no longer had the strength to rise to his feet.

“The head...” Barely breathing, Sven said...“Cut off...the head.”

The dragon was not yet dead. Dragons had incredibly powerful regenerative abilities. It was only a matter of time before he could rise again.

Sigurd drew his sword.

The scales around the neck had been shattered by Sven’s struggle and the flesh was exposed. Like this, it wouldn’t be impossible to cut off the neck.

“Hah!” He swung down the sword with a scream. The sharp blade sank into the flesh. But the blade stopped halfway.

The force of the wound trying to close was trying to push it out. Sigurd’s strength alone wasn’t quite enough. He began to panic.

But a white hand laid over Sigurd’s, grasping his blade.

Brunhild had rushed to his side. She pushed the sword in together with him. She wasn’t that strong, but it was reassuring.

With her help, the blade began to sink in bit by bit. The two of them continued to push at the sword, like two blades locked in struggle.

Blood gushed from the dragon’s wound. It burned Brunhild’s skin like acid. It was cursed blood. The heat just about made her hand come off the blade, but

she restrained it with her will.

I have to do this...!

This was their once in a lifetime chance. If they let this go, then the Divine Dragon would certainly become wary of people. And they would be killed for the sin of having opposed the Divine Dragon. Then when would the people of this country once again be able to realize the truth behind the dragon? How many children would be eaten by the dragon and lose their lives before then?

Brunhild was rational, and for that reason, she could sometimes appear cold.

But at the core, she was the opposite.

She felt others' pain as her own, becoming angry and enraged on their part.

The blade was slow, but it was moving forward.

Eventually, she felt it.

The blade cut the bone, and the head was severed.

From the severed spot, black blood flowed out like a waterfall. The blood killed the vegetation growing on the hill as it sank into the ground.

Brunhild went limp, her hand falling from the blade. It was numb and painful. She couldn't hold it any longer.

But she had a comfortable feeling of accomplishment.

Now...no one has to be eaten anymore.

She felt like she would fall to her knees from relief. She staggered toward Sigurd. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry. I can't stand properly..."

In Sigurd's embrace, Brunhild looked up at him.

And then she saw something strange.

Sigurd was looking down at her. For some reason, those eyes were filled with clear anger and hatred.

He shoved her away. Brunhild fell on her bottom in a sea of blood.

"Wh-what...?!" Her words stopped there.

There was a swooshing sound, and half of Brunhild's vision went dark.

A moment later, and she was assaulted by a burning pain.

Her right eye was hot.

"Ahh!"

Unable to bear it, Brunhild pressed her right eye.

Her large eye, which had been beautiful like obsidian, had been mercilessly sliced vertically. Her hand covered it. Blood flowed between her fingers.

Sigurd's blade had taken a full swing.

She had been cut...by Sigurd.

Why?

"S-Sigurd...?" Brunhild was beyond confused.

Sigurd said coldly, "You've grown full of yourself...you dragon-killing sinner."

For the first time since she was born, Brunhild experienced her mind going entirely blank.

"Wh-why? How?" She could only repeatedly question him, like a child.

Sigurd raised his sword. Even seeing that... Even now that she was had already been cut, Brunhild couldn't imagine that he would swing down that sword on her.

The hilt of the sword was slammed into Brunhild's head. There was a dull sound.

Her field of vision dropped to ground level, and her consciousness was overcome by darkness.

When Brunhild regained consciousness, she was confined in a place that seemed like a dungeon. There were only stone walls and a coarse bed, and Brunhild was laying on top of that bed.

She was the only one in the cell. Fafnir, Sven, and Sigurd were not there.

Brunhild was confused, wondering why she was in a place like this.

Beyond the bars was a knight who seemed like her jailer. She could see him tuck a ring of keys in his pocket.

When Brunhild awoke from the bed, she called out to the jailer outside of the prison. "Hey, you. Let me out of this prison. I'm the Dragon Priestess, Brunhild."

She wanted to meet with Sigurd as soon as possible. She had to meet him and talk with him.

It was getting hotter. If she didn't hurry, the burning heat in her right eye would feel too hot to ignore.

But the jailer spat at her, "Shut up, dragon-killing girl."

He used foul language at her. It was rude when directed at Brunhild, who was of a special class. It was then that Brunhild understood that she was being treated not as the priestess but as a criminal.

"Call for Prince Sigurd. I'm not getting anywhere with you," she said.

The jailer laughed in scorn.

"The prince? He's the one who threw you into that cell."

"Impossible!" Brunhild cried. "There must be some mistake!"

"A mistake?"

The jailer got a nasty smile on his face as he pointed to Brunhild's right eye.

"Then what's that right eye of yours?"

Brunhild gasped, pressing her right eye.

She hadn't wanted it pointed out.

Because she had still been trying to believe that it was her own misunderstanding.

No matter how much it hurt, how hot it was, and even if her vision was halved.

Because there's no way that Sigurd would swing a sword at me.

"No! This is nothing!"

But it hurt. The wound hurt. Her having pressed it hard made red tears

overflow from between her fingers.

The pain made her face the truth. No matter how she would avoid acknowledging it, her body knew.

Pretending not to notice that, Brunhild cried,

“Please. Let me see Sigurd. He’ll understand if we talk.”

“If you want to see him that badly, you’ll see him—on your execution day in seven days.”

“Exe...execution...?” she said hoarsely. “Who...is going to be executed?”

“Who else would it be? You’re a stupid woman.” The jailer said, “Prince Sigurd will be personally executing you—for the crime of killing the dragon.”

Brunhild tore at her hair with both hands. Staggering, she backed up.

She didn’t understand.

She didn’t understand. She didn’t understand. She didn’t understand.

This situation—why had things become like this?

But even in her confusion, just one thing was clear.

She had been betrayed by Sigurd. She could no longer pretend not to realize it.

“No...”

She had trusted in him.

“No.”

She had thought of him as her dearest friend.

“—!”

A shrill voice rang out. It was a madness from Brunhild that was unimaginable, considering her typical calm.

Brunhild’s shriek could be heard as far as Fafnir’s cell.

But it immediately became quiet. He heard the muffled sound of a strike, so

the jailer must have silenced her with violence. But after a while, she screamed again. And then he heard more sounds of violence.

While listening like it was no business of his, Fafnir considered.

Lady Brunhild. If you could regain your ordinary powers of thought, then you would be able to think of any number of ways to get out of here.

But Fafnir thought there was no helping her frenzy.

Brunhild had cared deeply for Sigurd. And she had been betrayed by someone she cared for. That was unbearable, for someone with a heart. One couldn't at all remain calm in such a situation. Even being a heartless man himself, Fafnir was able to infer that much.

So then given the situation, since he was able to remain calm, he should consider in place of his mistress.

Three days passed. Brunhild's cries, which had been ringing out underground every day, stopped.

Had she run out of strength, or had they gagged her?

But Fafnir did not panic out of concern for Brunhild's person.

The day has been decided for her execution.

Put another way, that meant her life was guaranteed until the date it would be carried out. So rather than panic, he was actually relieved.

And so relieved, he waited for that time.

Four days passed.

The jailer came before Fafnir's cell.

There was no sign of Fafnir having touched the meals that were offered to him.

"Good grief. Causing me all this work," the jailer spat, then went into Fafnir's cell. "Why not learn from your mistress? You've got to make some noise, or it's no fun."

Fafnir had not moved at all since being thrown into jail. He had continued to lie like a corpse on the rotting wooden bed.

So the jailer had to give him his meal. Fafnir was to be executed on the same day as Brunhild. They couldn't let him die before then.

The jailer pulled Fafnir into a sitting position in his arms. Fafnir let it happen.

Looking down at Fafnir, The jailer thought, *He's done for.*

His eyes were dead. The jailer guessed that just like his lady, it had to have been quite the shock when he was betrayed by his friend. So he didn't even have the energy to move. At this point, he was a living corpse.

The jailer started his task of shoving food into Fafnir's mouth, as usual.

Fafnir had been waiting for this moment of carelessness.

He was good at putting on a dispirited look. He had seen lots of people like that since he was small.

After having been unmoving like a corpse, only Fafnir's right arm moved swiftly.

Fafnir's nail stabbed into the jailer's right eye and gouged it out.

Fafnir moved so suddenly, there was no way the jailer could respond.

A scream rang out in the jail. But it was quickly cut off.

Fafnir had drawn the short sword hanging from the jailer's waist and sliced his neck without hesitation.

The jailer fell, holding his neck. Fafnir hadn't been able to kill him instantly. Because of his old wounds, Fafnir wasn't very strong. If it were back when he'd worked as an assassin, he would have managed to kill the man.

He groped around in the clothing of the dying jailer and stole the ring of keys, and he was about to head for Brunhild. But before leaving the cell, he thought of the jailer, squirming on the floor of the cell. The jailer, writhing while blood gushed from him. He couldn't even cry out, never mind standing up. At this rate, he would just slowly wait for death.

He remembered the experimental subject who had been turned into a

dragon.

Sigurd's servant had dealt with that. So then this one, too.

Perhaps I should deal with it.

Fafnir squatted in front of the jailer.

And then with the short sword, he cut into his neck even deeper. The jailer groaned, then died.

He felt bad for him, for drawing out his pain.

Fafnir felt vaguely that he wouldn't have even considered this sort of thing before meeting Brunhild.

Leaving the cell, he searched for Brunhild.

Realizing that Fafnir had gotten out of his cell, some of the prisoners clamored. If they made too much noise, then another jailer was bound to come.

"Shut up. If you stay quiet, then I'll free you, too," Fafnir said, and dangled the keys in front of them. It was highly effective, and the rough prisoners quieted. This should be all right for a little while. But they were rough prisoners at the end of the day. You never knew when they might start hollering again.

Hurrying, but also calmly, Fafnir searched for his mistress.

And then he found her.

Brunhild was laying on top of her bed.

Fafnir stuck the key in the door. Though she had to hear the noise, there wasn't even any reaction. She had a spiritless look in her eyes, and it wasn't even clear where she was looking. It was different from the pretend living corpse look from when Fafnir had tricked the jailer. It was as if her spirit truly had been defeated.

He opened the lock and went into the cell. He picked up Brunhild in his arms.

Even though they had only been apart for four days, she was a shell of herself. Her body was as light as a withered bough. Her whole body was covered in wounds. You wouldn't go this far even when wielding violence in order to silence her. She had probably been made the jailer's toy.

This caused no anger to well up in him. Fafnir decided to think it was because he'd seen countless examples of this on the dark side of town.

He pulled out the cloth that had been stuffed into Brunhild's mouth in order to shut her up.

After he did that, Brunhild finally noticed him. "Fafnir...?"

"Yes. I've come to save you."

But Brunhild flailed. She tried to get out of Fafnir's arms. But she was so weakened, she wasn't even able to resist the disabled Fafnir. "Let me go! You never came to save me! You're going to betray me, too!"

Fafnir judged that she was confused.

Brunhild continued to resist. "I know you actually hate me!"

"That's not true," he answered instantly, and Brunhild's resistance stopped on the spot. "Though you might forsake me, the opposite is impossible."

Brunhild went silent.

And then she muttered weakly, "...Then can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"Can I count on you?"

"That is what I'm for."

Brunhild clung to Fafnir's clothing. Trembling, she said hoarsely, "Please. Save me."

"Understood, my lady."

The two of them left the cell.

Brunhild leaned on Fafnir's shoulder as they walked to the exit.

Before exiting the cell, the prisoners yelled at Fafnir. "You said you'd let us out!"

Fafnir threw the ring of keys outside the cell...in a spot where the prisoners would just barely not reach, even when they stretched their hands. The prisoners reached out for the keys with the desperation of starving dogs,

scrabbling at the floor. He had not thrown it in an unreachable place to be nasty.

He had a plan. They would be freed, but not right this minute. He needed a bit of time.

The two of them reached the stairs going upward. There was a jailer on the landing. Fafnir carefully placed Brunhild on the floor while he approached the jailer like a shadow and killed him silently. He slid the short sword he had stolen from the other jailer into the cracks of his armor and pierced his neck.

He did not hesitate to kill.

Brunhild came from behind. Brunhild took the weapon from the jailer Fafnir had killed. She meant to fight in order to escape. But it was fair to say at this was just for appearances now. She was exhausted and couldn't possibly endure battle. These days, Fafnir was very unsuited to physical exertion. Because of his old wounds, he was lacking in muscular strength and endurance. A weak man like him holding a blade to fight with his nearly dead lady would never escape the castle.

So then... Fafnir thought and bowed his head to Brunhild. "My lady, please forgive my rudeness."

Fafnir had thrown that ring of keys to a spot that the prisoners would just barely not reach, no matter how they stretched.

The prisoners continued trying pointlessly to get the keys for a while until another prisoner, finding it unbearable to watch, said, "A tool! Use a tool and you can reach it!"

"We'd be using one if we had something!"

The prisoners had absolutely no possessions in their cells.

But another prisoner said, "You have clothing, don't you?!"

At that, the prisoners suddenly got it. They stripped off their shirts to improve their reach. One of them reached for the key with his strip of cloth, and the end of the clothing in his grasp just barely reached the key. By using his clothing as a

a sort of snare, he drew the keys closer. By repeating this over and over, the keys came closer to the prisoner bit by bit, and eventually his hand reached it.

Finally, the prisoner had gotten the keys. “Heh-heh...”

When he opened his lock with a rattle, another prisoner cried. “Hey! Save me, too!”

The prisoner who’d gotten out of his cell figured he’d ignore that voice and run, but he reconsidered.

If a whole bunch of them ran at once, wouldn’t that up the odds that he could get away?

Saying, “This favor’ll cost ya,” he released the prisoners one after another.

A whole bunch of prisoners headed out of the castle all at once. It was fair to call this situation a riot. The royal knights quickly noticed and went to suppress them.

“Prisoners! Settle down!”

The knights captured the escaped prisoners one after another, dragging them away. The places they took the prisoners were not necessarily their original dungeon cells, since catching just one wasn’t enough, and they had to go straight to catching other prisoners, too. They would lock up prisoners temporarily in nearby small rooms or tie them up.

So it was not at all strange.

The sight of a man with dark eyes dressed like a knight escorting a thin female prisoner somewhere.

The two of them were headed neither to a small room nor a dungeon cell. They were leaving the castle.

The two of them strode openly past the knights to escape.

They passed through the royal gardens, heading through the gates. Being very careful, they aimed not for the front gates but for the rear. Fortunately, the gate guards had also left to secure the prisoners.

While walking, the man dressed as a knight whispered to the female prisoner,

“I’m sorry to be dragging you around like this, even if it is an act.”

The man dressed as a knight was Fafnir.

The female prisoner was Brunhild.

Fafnir had put on the helmet and armor of the jailer he had killed and pretended to escort Brunhild away to escape. Even if it was an act, Fafnir didn’t like the idea of treating his master as beneath him, but since Brunhild couldn’t wear the man’s clothing, Fafnir had been forced to play the role of the knight.

Behind the rear gates was an expanse of green, like a grassy field. The air was clean and cold. While defending Brunhild, Fafnir moved along.

They got a certain ways from the castle. Having gotten this far, it was fair to say they were safe. The soldiers of the castle would rarely come here. During the day, there would be lazy soldiers napping in the shade, but now it was night. No one should have been there.

But despite that.

“Hey.”

Someone called out to them. Fafnir gritted his teeth.

There were trees planted on both sides of the way they walked alone. A soldier rested in the shade.

Fafnir meant to move along while pretending he hadn’t heard that, but it didn’t work.

“Stop. You’re a castle knight. Where are you going?”

From the way he was talking, he was probably a higher-ranked knight.

Why is he out here now, of all times...?

No matter how sharp your mind was, there just wasn’t anything to be done about bad luck.

From behind, Fafnir heard the sound of footsteps and the clanking of armor.

“That woman is a prisoner, right? Why are you walking around with a prisoner?”

“...I was ordered to transfer her to a different prison.”

Even saying it himself, he thought it was a forced excuse. And no wonder. He was rattling off nonsense to avoid saying nothing. As Fafnir was talking, he was thinking of a way to get out of this predicament.

“I never heard about that. Even if there were such a thing...this late at night?” There was clear suspicion in his voice.

The footsteps stopped. That meant that the knight was standing behind Fafnir and Brunhild.

Fafnir sensed clear hostility from behind them.

Brunhild drew her short sword at her breast. She intended to fight. But they were up against a legitimately trained knight. What’s more, if he already had his eye on them, they couldn’t catch him unawares.

Brunhild’s hands were trembling. Fafnir thought that she was frightened.

“Turn this way, woman.”

The knight tried to put his hand on Brunhild’s shoulder.

“Watch out!” Fafnir cried. “That woman is very sick. If you touch her—no, even get close to her, you’ll catch what she has. We’ve been traveling at night to avoid contact with others so as to avoid further infection.”

Tension ran through him. If this didn’t work, it was over.

“...Hmm.” After some consideration, the knight said, “If that’s the case, you should have said so earlier. You take care not to be infected, too.”

The hostility from behind vanished. The footsteps faded away.

Fafnir relaxed, and he moved on together with Brunhild.

Brunhild tried to return the short sword in her hands to its sheath.

But she wasn’t able to sheathe it properly.

The tip of the sword collided with the sheath. And Brunhild’s hands couldn’t handle even that slight impact. The sword left Brunhild’s hands and fell to the ground.

The hand Brunhild had been holding the short sword with was trembling. Fafnir had thought that was because she was afraid.

But he was wrong.

It was because she was at the limit of her strength. Her arm, covered in wounds, was unable to hold a sword properly.

Fafnir tried to scoop up the short sword, but failed to reach it.

The sharp clang tore through the silence of the night.

Unluckily enough, the short sword hit a rock by the side of the road. And then while spinning around, it slid toward the knight's feet.

Fafnir sensed hostility once more. It was far greater hostility than before. He felt like he was going to be crushed by the pressure of the looming silence.

"...Why does the prisoner have a sword?"

Fafnir couldn't think of anything to say to cover that up.

Footsteps from behind. The knight was coming for the two of them.

I have to kill him.

Fafnir was wearing a knight's armor. So he also carried a sword. Drawing that while turning around, he tried for a slice.

But he was instantly blocked. The enemy knight struck Fafnir's arm with practiced movements. Fafnir was assaulted by such intense pain, he thought the bone might have been broken. He hadn't even been able to draw his sword.

Having turned around, Fafnir eyes met the knight's. "You're..."

The knight was Sven. Even in the darkness of night, his golden hair was sparkling.

"Why are you here...?" Fafnir tried to come up with a way to escape somehow while Sven was surprised, but none of his ideas seemed like they would work.

Their opponent being Sven was the worst conceivable case.

I had wondered why he wasn't imprisoned, but to think he's still a knight...

He was Sigurd's number one knight. His loyalty could be called blind and was

unshakable. If Sigurd told him to die, he would die. Since Sigurd had become Brunhild's enemy, then Sven was unquestionably an enemy, and winning him over would be impossible.

Forcing their way through via violence was out of the question. Not against someone who had brought a dragon to a draw.

"Is that woman Lady Brunhild...?" Sven asked.

Fafnir pushed Brunhild's back.

"...That's right."

Brunhild squatted down to try to pick up the sword. But that was all.

She didn't even have the strength left to stand anymore. No matter how she strained, her thin legs just trembled.

"You two are trying to run from Prince Sigurd?"

Sven glared at Fafnir.

The peerless knight raised his magic spear. The blade was wreathed with a merciless light.

It was over.

They would be returned to their cells. Or killed without being put back.

Fafnir tried to think of a way to at least get Brunhild away, but he noticed something strange.

Sven wore an expression of anguish.

After a while, Sven said something unbelievable.

"...There's a horse there, under the trees," he said, and turned his back to the two of them.

"Why...?" Fafnir understood that Sven was showing them mercy. But he didn't understand why Sigurd's number one knight would be showing them mercy.

"Right now, I have not received any orders from Prince Sigurd. Get out of my sight, now!" His hands clasping the magic spear were trembling. In anger.

There was no guarantee that he would not have a change of heart and attack

them. Fafnir judged that they would be in danger unless they got away as soon as possible.

While defending Brunhild, he headed for the shade. They got onto the chestnut horse there and fled to the nighttime town. It was dangerous to race on a horse at night, but they couldn't be wasting their time.

Sven had his back turned to them the whole time.

While galloping on the horse, Fafnir thought about Sven.

What had brought on that whim from Sven? Why had he seemed like he was suffering so badly?

Even if he had received no orders from Sigurd, he had to also understand that Sigurd would not benefit from letting them escape. What had happened between him and Sigurd?

...I suppose that's not what I should be thinking about now.

Right now, their greatest priority was securing a safe place.

Brunhild was behind Fafnir. She was clinging to him with both arms. Her grip was hard—even though there was no need for her to cling to him so tightly just to keep from being thrown off the horse.

“About now, the knights should be in a frenzy looking for us. I will take you to a hideout that they won't find. It's a doghouse, but please put up with it.”

There was no reply.

Only the sound of hooves rang out in the darkness.

The place Fafnir brought her was a restaurant for commoners.

On the rusty sign was written BEREN.

They went inside. It was a somewhat dirty business. It even looked like they didn't serve any decent food.

The owner came out to greet them. He was a large, broad-shouldered man, but not a friendly one. The old scar running across his forehead, and most of all,

the eyes without light like Fafnir's made him feel hard to approach.

"Oh? We've got an unusual guest." The owner narrowed his eyes at Fafnir. "Weren't you on the straight and narrow now, Fafnir?"

"I'd like you to hide us for a bit."

"...What can you do?" The owner agreed without so much as asking why.

The owner showed them to a dirty room. But it did have minimal furnishings, so it was far superior to the underground cell.

"Sorry, but this is the only available room. I can't give you special treatment just because of our history."

"The room is enough."

The owner left, and only Brunhild and Fafnir were left behind.

This place was not just a restaurant and inn.

It was a hideout for people in shady situations.

Most of the money was made here not through sales at the restaurant but through hiding people and back-alley doctor services, mediation with assassins, sales of unhealthy drugs, and buying and selling of information that couldn't be acquired in the outside world.

So long as they were here, they would not be found by the knights. The inn had it worked out so that a portion of the inn's revenue went to the head of the knights as personal income.

Fafnir didn't have any money, but that wouldn't be a problem. Back when he had been living on the dark side of the kingdom, Fafnir had done many things to the profit of this inn. He was cashing in his favor from back then. Strangely enough, people on the dark side had a tendency to value relationships of trust even more than honest folk. That was surely because the punishment they would receive on betrayal was far crueler than in the world of light.

Fafnir had thought that Brunhild would ask things like this about the inn.

But she didn't say anything.

It was as if she didn't have even a shred of ability to think left.

In her stupor, what he sensed from her was helplessness.

She tightly clasped the hem of Fafnir's clothes—like a child incapable of anything else.

It was just pitiful.

And so he began to spend his days nursing Brunhild.

Brunhild was like an empty shell. He wiped her dirty body, treated her wounds, and made her eat.

While spooning soup into her mouth, Fafnir thought, *Something like this happened before.*

Their positions had been reversed back then.

When he had been dying, the young Brunhild had cared for him.

He hadn't even dreamed that the day would come when their positions would be reversed.

When night came, Brunhild fell into a state close to derangement.

She was apparently scared to fall asleep. More precisely, it seemed that she was afraid that Fafnir would abandon her while she was sleeping. That fear of betrayal had become an intense trauma.

While her eyes were closed, Fafnir had to be touching her, or she would become anxious.

So in order to let Brunhild sleep soundly, Fafnir had no choice but to cuddle with her.

Fafnir didn't like the idea of sleeping in the same bed as Brunhild. He felt that someone like him should avoid touching her, and most of all, he didn't like physical contact.

But since he understood that doing this would bring her comfort, he decided to cuddle with her. He knew how to deal with the emotionally scarred.

No matter how addled Brunhild was, when Fafnir touched her, she was able

to calm down. Her peaceful sleeping face was just like that of a baby.

Fafnir carefully continued Brunhild's care. Brunhild hardly reacted at all, but he did not complain, or grow sick of her, or get fed up with her. But that was not because he was kind. It was just that he was good at monotonous tasks.

But what seemed from the outside like devoted care helped Brunhild regain her mental stability.

After about one month, Brunhild finally opened her mouth. "...You really did save me."

Without any signs of surprise, Fafnir answered, "I thought I told you at first—that I would help you."

Brunhild apologized. "I'm sorry. For not being able to believe in you. Even though you didn't do anything wrong."

Sigurd's betrayal had made Brunhild extremely distrusting of people—this girl who had once trusted people and reached out to help them without any hesitation.

"About Sigurd—I have an idea." Fafnir said what he had been thinking for this past month. "Let's get revenge."

Fafnir had come to this conclusion from considering Brunhild, in his own way.

"I won't let you get your hands dirty. I will do it myself," he said, in anticipation of what she would say. He understood that Brunhild could never kill a person. "If you simply give me the word, I will do it at once."

He could think of a number of ways to assassinate the prince. He had in fact secretly killed important people of the nation. Having lived on the dark side of the kingdom, this was his duty.

"Thank you. For being willing to go that far for me," she said.

Fafnir thought that finally, the time had come for his abilities to be useful to his mistress.

"But I will not give that order."

That was an unexpected answer. Most of the people he had seen, if they were hurt, would always seek revenge.

“Doesn’t your right eye ache?” he asked. Brunhild’s right eye had been crushed by Sigurd.

She touched the eye that was now hidden by a bandage. “My right eye does ache.”

“So then.”

“But.”

The words that came next, he could never have anticipated.

“But I still love him.”

Not understanding what she meant, Fafnir’s thoughts came to a halt. “He hurt you and tried to kill you. But still?”

Fafnir thought that it was the natural way of the heart to come to hate that person. “You don’t feel hatred or anger?”

“I do. But I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Because you love him?” Fafnir asked, and Brunhild nodded.

“I want to know why he betrayed me, and if possible, I’d like to speak with him one more time. But that would be dangerous now. So it’s fine.”

Brunhild had a troubled smile on her face. “From now on, I will live quietly on the dark side of town. I’ll have to learn some bad things, too. Will you teach me?”

“...Yes. Since it’s you, I’m sure you can learn it quickly.”

Fafnir thought that she would be able to learn it, but wouldn’t be able to actually do it.

That night, while gazing at Brunhild sleeping, Fafnir thought—about the reason that Brunhild would not get revenge on Sigurd.

Because she loved him.

She said because she loved him, she didn't wish to hurt him. She said even though she felt anger and hatred, she didn't want to get revenge.

That feeling was incomprehensible.

And there was one other thing that struck Fafnir as incomprehensible—

That he had saved Brunhild from that cell.

This past month, he had been thinking about why he had saved her. But he couldn't explain his own behavior himself.

If it were just that he didn't want to be executed, then he should have fled on his own.

So then why?

When they'd first met, he could have sworn her words and actions had been irritating to him. No, even now that was the case. He had gotten used to her kindness and all that, but he was still irritated by it.

Why had he saved a girl who irritated him?

Maybe this would explain the incomprehensible behavior.

If I love her...

They said affection was a feeling that didn't rely on logic. So it could explain incomprehensible behavior. It would, but...

If he really did love her, then wouldn't he have become upset when Brunhild had been hurt?

He couldn't deny that it didn't fit.

The food that was served at Beren couldn't be called nutritious even as flattery, but Brunhild's health improved. Her mental stabilization was a major factor.

Once it was two months since their escape, there was no longer any need to stay by Brunhild's side every waking moment, so Fafnir began gathering a variety of information through the innkeeper.

He also collected information about Sigurd.

This was because he had not forgotten that Brunhild had let slip that she wanted to know why Sigurd had set her up.

As a result, he learned that right after Brunhild had been thrown into prison, Sigurd had inherited the throne. The previous king had died a mysterious death.

Brunhild's house had been destroyed. Her servants were turned adrift in the streets.

"It seems that with your imprisonment as the priestess, he has become the highest authority in this country," Fafnir noted.

The priestess had had a special status. She was in a position where she could offer advice and admonition to the king through her oracles, fortune telling and prophecies. That priestess being gone made a dictatorship possible.

"To become the highest authority in the country—that may have been Sigurd's aim. So the priestess was in the way," Fafnir said.

"Is that why he accused me, the priestess, of being a dragon-killer?"

If that were the case, then Sigurd would certainly would have been adverse to her ever since they were young.

"I'm such a fool... I never even noticed," Brunhild said. Never mind noticing, she had even thought of him as one of the people she could trust most.

And even now...

"It's just, I..." Fafnir trailed off.

"Finish your remark."

"...It didn't look to me as if Sigurd was adverse to you. Although, that just means that I failed to realize it. He must have been much cannier than I imagined."

"...Yes."

I can't even imagine that what I saw of him trying to protect the people from the Divine Dragon was a lie...

"...Fafnir, can I ask the obvious question?"

"What is it?"

“The sacrifices to the Divine Dragon have stopped, haven’t they?”

Brunhild had killed the Divine Dragon. So it would be natural for them to stop.

But Brunhild herself had been sent straight into confinement after killing the dragon, so she hadn’t heard what had actually happened.

“The sacrifices stopped along with the dragon’s death.”

When she heard that, Brunhild’s heart was eased just a little.

That Sigurd had betrayed her and she had been imprisoned were both painful and sad.

But they had been able to stop the awful custom of the sacrifices, so their fight with the dragon seemed meaningful.

Brunhild’s expression softened, if only faintly. That’s why Fafnir hesitated to say the rest. But he had to say it.

“The sacrifices have stopped, but about seven people have been disappearing every month. Last month and the month before that, too.”

“...What did you say?”

“At the same time as we were confined, people began to disappear. I don’t know what this means, though...”

It couldn’t be that the Divine Dragon was still alive...

That wasn’t possible. None other than Brunhild herself had cut off the dragon’s head. She had seen the blood overflowing like a waterfall. If he had survived that, then it could be none other than a divine mystery.

But if seven people per month had begun to vanish at the same time as the dragon had died, it did not seem like a coincidence.

“By disappearances...then that means that no bodies have come up,” Brunhild said.

“That’s exactly right.”

“...So then then the great organizations of this nation must be involved. An organization with enough power to keep disappearing seven people every month. The knights, the church, companies, King Sigurd—”

“Aside from that, it’s just power brokers from the dark side. Whatever the case, I don’t know their goals, though.” Whatever organization was involved, he wouldn’t know the motive for disappearing seven people a month.

...It was just as if they were being moved by the Divine Dragon.

“No. Lady Brunhild.” Figuring out what she was about to say, Fafnir got ahead of her and stopped her. “You should not get involved in the matter of the disappearances. Please stop getting yourself into danger over complete strangers. You have done enough.”

Brunhild must have taken Fafnir’s words as praise. She smiled. It was an innocent smile, the kind he hadn’t seen for some time. “True...I do take pride in having worked hard, for me. But if there’s no results, then there’s no point.”

Fafnir thought that this sort of results-oriented process and quick thinking was like himself.

“I’ve made up my mind. Nobody is going to be sacrificed to the dragon.”

But Fafnir thought that she was entirely unsuited to living in the dark side.

“Can you investigate King Sigurd?” she said. “It looks to me that the disappearances and King Sigurd are connected by a thin thread. It’s a weak clue, but I think we can expect more from that than probing companies or the church at random.”

“Is that an order?”

“Yes, it’s an order.”

If he was ordered by his lady, then a servant had no choice but to obey.



Chapter

2

Going back to the night when they attacked the Divine Dragon—
Sigurd was only able to watch as Brunhild was cut down.

No, more accurately speaking, he was only able to watch as his own body cut down Brunhild on its own.

That night, Sigurd swung his blade into the dragon's neck.

His own strength hadn't been enough. But Brunhild had rushed up to him and laid her hand on his. That had encouraged him, and he'd felt strength well up from deep inside him.

His sword had sunk into the dragon's neck and finally cut it off.

Brunhild had staggered toward Sigurd. She was weak from relief. He caught her delicate body in his arms.

"I'm sorry. I can't stand properly..."

He'd tried to reply, "It's fine. Thank you for lending me a hand," and that was when it had happened.

Suddenly, his body was no longer his own.

At first, he thought he had contracted some disease and was having a fit. But that wasn't it. He clearly felt a strange entity enter his body.

Sigurd's arms shoved Brunhild away.

His arms moved on their own.

Collapsed in a sea of blood, Brunhild was stunned.

“Wh-what...?!” She looked up at him with confusion in her eyes.

His arms moved on their own again. The hand that was clasping his sword raised over his head on its own.

The something that had entered his body was forcing Sigurd’s arms to move. Sigurd tried to scream. He meant to scream “stop.” But no sound came out. His mouth wouldn’t even move.

His sword split Brunhild’s right eye.

“Ahh!” Brunhild pressed her hand to her right eye. Blood started flowing from the big, obsidian-like eye that Sigurd had always thought was beautiful. The stream of red was like tears.

“Si...gurd...?” Even after being cut, Brunhild showed Sigurd no hostility. He could feel that she trusted him entirely, and it hurt.

“Wh...y? How?”

As Brunhild repeated the question, Sigurd screamed.

Run. Get away from me.

His silent voice would never reach her.

He sliced at Brunhild’s nonresisting head. But that entity must not have been able to use his body quite right, as he mistook the distance. As a result, he wound up hitting Brunhild’s head hard with the hilt of his sword. Brunhild fell and stopped moving. She didn’t even try to defend herself, until the end.

Sigurd was assaulted by intense despair. He couldn’t even think. But despite that, his body stayed at combat readiness.

There was still someone else there.

It was Brunhild’s servant, Fafnir. He’d drawn the dagger he kept hidden on his person and was trying to resist. He was trying to save Brunhild.

Sigurd wanted Fafnir to save Brunhild, but his sword easily flicked away Fafnir’s dagger. Fafnir was poor at hand-to-hand combat now, so he couldn’t handle it. Sigurd also knocked Fafnir out with a punch.

The something inside Sigurd tried to finish off Brunhild and Fafnir by stabbing them.

But he wasn't able to do it. It seemed that the entity that had entered Sigurd's body was still not used to using it. He staggered as if he were sick. He could no longer hold a sword. The entity sat down with his back to the pillar of the temple.

After a while, Sigurd's personal knights came. They had realized the prince was not in the castle and had come looking for him. Right at the same time as Sigurd ordered the knights to kill Brunhild, he passed out. But the soldiers did not obey that right away. Even if it was the prince's order, the subject to be killed was the priestess. If they had misheard his order, there would be no undoing the deed. The knights decided to imprison Brunhild and Fafnir for the time being.

Sigurd could only watch like a stranger as the intruder did as it pleased with his body.

He didn't regain control of his body after that, either, and the intruder pretended to be Sigurd and began living his life.

Eventually, he realized who the intruder really was.

This was the Divine Dragon.

The soul of the Divine Dragon had entered him. And he had taken over Sigurd's body.

It was due to the cunning old dragon making use of his most powerful spell. It was a curse created by the tenacious desire to live. When his body died, his soul would transfer to a different body, and be able to control it.

At first, that was all Sigurd understood.

Perhaps because in his body, the two souls were in contact, without the mediation of flesh— The Divine Dragon's memories gradually flowed into Sigurd.

Where the Divine Dragon came from, why he ate humans, and why he had entered Sigurd...

Sigurd knew all these things, but even knowing them, he couldn't do anything about it.

Because he no longer had any control over his body.

No matter how he screamed and struggled, he couldn't move even a finger of his own volition.

But he couldn't give up.

Because the Divine Dragon was trying to execute Brunhild.

But all that came was the passage of time, and he wasn't able to regain any control of his body.

That's why when he heard that Brunhild had escaped her prison, he was terribly relieved, like a weight had been lifted off his chest.

His relief didn't last long.

Because the day came when the Divine Dragon ate people.

They were people who knew nothing, kidnapped by the knights of the royal guard. They were locked up in a dark room, and Sigurd began to eat them.

It was unspeakably disgusting.

The sensation of tearing blood vessels, the feel of raw meat, and the warmth of blood lingered in his mouth.

But Sigurd could not stop it. He could not vomit, and he couldn't even avert his eyes. He felt he was going to go mad.

Day and night, Sigurd struggled inside his own body. He struggled and struggled, but the Divine Dragon didn't so much as take notice of him. The Divine Dragon understood that his resistance was pointless.

But one night, it happened.

Sigurd was able to move his fingertip.

It was while the Divine Dragon was sleeping and also when the dragon was in

a deep sleep. For a few minutes a night, the dragon's soul would fall into a sleep he didn't wake from. During that time, it seemed like Sigurd could regain control of his body.

Sigurd fell off the bed where he was lying. For the first time in a long time, he felt truly alive, fully perceiving the world with all five senses. He was so glad he wanted to cry.

But there was no time to indulge in sentimentality. The time the dragon slept was short. He had to do what he could during that time.

In other words, he had to take his own life.

If he died, then the people of the kingdom would no longer be eaten. Fortunately, during its sleep the dragon could not use that possession spell. Sigurd knew from sharing the dragon's memories that quite a lot of preparation was needed for that death-defying spell. Right now was the best chance for him to kill the Divine Dragon.

His hand reached out to take a sword that decorated his room.

But it stopped then.

It was not because the dragon had taken control of him again. The Divine Dragon was in a deep sleep.

Sigurd stopped because when his own hand entered his view, it was not that of a human.

His extended right hand was that of a dragon, covered in scales.

Sigurd's body had become that of a dragon.

He was a pure white dragon, about three meters long. He was what could be called a smaller Divine Dragon.

Sigurd understood. This had most likely been caused by his possession by the dragon, transforming his body into that of a dragon. He must have only maintained a human form thus far because the Divine Dragon had used a spell to transform into a human.

And not being able to use that spell, Sigurd could not take human form.

When I finally got control, with this body...

His bad feeling had been on the mark.

In a dragon's body, he could not kill himself.

With a dragon's claws, he couldn't hold any type of sword properly. And even if he could, he wouldn't be able to pierce his body's hard surface. Every area that could be a weakness was protected by thick scales. Even if he were to somehow awkwardly injure himself, his powerful regenerative abilities would get in the way.

If he could get help from someone else, then maybe he could die. But a dragon's mouth could not speak human language. All they could speak was the Dragon's Tongue. His servant Sven would certainly be able to kill him with one stab of his magic spear, but there was no way to tell him, *please kill me*.

Sigurd struggled with this for days, but in the end, it just became clear that he could not die on his own.

Sigurd tried various ways of dying that night, too, but none of them worked.

He looked down at the saber lying on the carpet with weak eyes.

He felt ready to give up.

But he shook his head.

No. He couldn't give up.

The knights were searching for Brunhild under the orders of the Divine Dragon. Brunhild was managing to hide for now, but he doubted she could continue to run forever. If they found her, then she would not survive.

He recalled the memory of the time he cut her right eye.

He didn't want to hurt Brunhild anymore.

When thinking of Brunhild's face, Sigurd realized.

...That's it. Brunhild could do it.

Brunhild was the priestess. She could understand the Dragon's Tongue.

If he could communicate to her his situation, she might kill him.

He immediately thought to go out searching for Brunhild, but after approaching the window, he stopped.

I can't cause her any further trouble...

It was late to say this after destroying her right eye, but he didn't want to get her involved.

Besides, he didn't know how to face her. Even if he had been controlled by the Divine Dragon, Sigurd had still been the one to hurt her.

Brunhild had trusted in him. Enough that even after being cut, she hadn't even tried to protect herself.

But if she saw him now, she was sure to be afraid. She would certainly think he'd come to kill her.

I don't want to scare her...

Sigurd left the window. When he did that, he felt a little more at ease.

That was when he realized.

Oh, I see. It's not that I don't want to scare Brunhild.

He was the one who was scared.

He was scared to have Brunhild frightened of him, feel contempt for him.

Because he loved her, he couldn't bear it. Just imagining it brought pain to his chest.

But that was why Sigurd once again approached the window.

He didn't want to run away from this to protect himself rather than for the sake of protecting her.

Sigurd the dragon flew out the window in search of the priestess.

While leaping into the night sky, the dragon cried out her name.

<Brunhild!> he yelled out loud as he went high in the sky over the sleeping town.

But there was no sign of people awaking. That was because he had spoken in

the Dragon's Tongue. The only people who could hear it were other dragons like himself or the priestess.

<Brunhild!>

When he passed by a seedy alley, there was a reaction.

<Who is that?!>

It sounded very rattled, but there was no mistaking it. That was Brunhild's voice.

<Divine Dragon? So you were alive, after all.> It was no surprise she would think that, since the only dragon she knew who spoke the Dragon's Tongue was the Divine Dragon.

<No. I'm...> Sigurd told her, **<I'm Sigurd.>** **<Don't speak nonsense!>** She sounded very furious. This was the first time he'd ever heard Brunhild this angry. **<I won't forgive you for pretending to be my friend.>** He was glad, but it also hurt that she would still call him a friend.

<Please believe me. I'm Sigurd...> he said, even as he thought it was a bad idea. Who would believe something like that? And Brunhild was smart, so all the more so.

As expected, there was no more reply from Brunhild. She was probably wary that he would be able to find out where she was based on her voice.

<You don't have to say a word. Just listen to me.> But what should he say? Though he needed Brunhild to kill him, he couldn't be sure that she'd even show herself.

Sigurd considered for a moment, then made up his mind.

<Do you remember when we first met?> In order to have her believe that he was Sigurd, he told her something only the two of them knew.

But even so, Brunhild didn't say so much as a word in reply.

From her perspective, it would only sound like the Divine Dragon, who should have died, were speaking with her. She might be wary, thinking it wouldn't be strange for someone who had transcended death to also learn of some memory that only the two of them would know, through some spell.

It will be hard to get her to believe me, like this.

As he was feeling fainthearted, Sigurd sensed that the dragon's soul was about to awaken. It would be bad for the dragon to awaken within the town. Then he would find out that Sigurd had taken control of his body in the middle of the night.

<I'm sorry. That's all for today. But I swear I'll come tomorrow, too. So I want you to believe in me.> Sigurd flew off and returned to the room in the royal castle.

After that, Sigurd went to Brunhild every night.

The times when the dragon fell into deep sleep were varied, and sometimes he slept for over an hour, while others it was less than fifteen minutes. But even if there was only enough time for Sigurd to say one word, he always went to Brunhild. The information he shared was, he would admit, not very important. Even after telling her about memories that only the two of them knew, she still hadn't believed him.

The important thing was to continue visiting her.

He thought that if he wanted her to believe him, then going every day, even if he didn't have the time, would show his sincerity.

Brunhild said not one word in reply.

Sometimes, he worried that he was just continuously talking to himself, but he believed that she would listen, so he continued to speak into the night.

In order to have her kill him.

At first, the Divine Dragon that possessed Sigurd had meant to have Sven executed along with Brunhild and Fafnir.

But seeing the eyes with which the man looked at him—more accurately, at Sigurd—he'd reconsidered. Those were the eyes of devoted submission. They resembled the eyes of those who blindly worshiped the Divine Dragon.

So then with the thought that there might be a use for him, the Divine Dragon

had saved only Sven...

And making it that Sven was the hero who had killed the dragon-killing sinner along with him, he gave him the rank of attendant.

Sven came to be seen by the people as a hero.

People began to look at him with reverence—especially children.

When Sven headed out into town again that day, an innocent child said to him, “When I grow up, I’m gonna be a knight among knights like you, Lord Sven.”

Sven could only give the child a vague smile to cover his feelings. This charade made him want to vomit.

Just when had he become such a deceitful person?

The boy had called him a “knight among knights.”

There was no one further from knight than he was right now. A knight would protect the powerless, but Sven knew the powerless were being made victims.

Why doesn't King Sigurd say anything to me...?

Sven remembered well the night they had attacked the dragon. While Sven had been lying on the ground, he'd watched as Sigurd and Brunhild had strained to cut off the head of the dragon. He'd wanted to get up and help them, but wounded from his battle with the dragon, he'd been unable to move a single finger.

But even without his help, the two of them had sliced off the head of the dragon. Then he'd been relieved, thinking it would be okay now.

But then Sigurd had turned violent.

Just what had he been thinking? Sigurd had sliced Brunhild's eye, then thrown her into the dungeon along with her servant. Sven had tried negotiating with him many times to free the two of them, but Sigurd had refused.

Why did Lord Sigurd betray Lady Brunhild...?

Betrayal. That was how he thought of it now.

But he sensed that something was strange.

Sigurd had certainly betrayed them. But Sigurd's attitude before then—in other words, him killing the dragon with them to try to save the people of the kingdom—hadn't seemed like a lie to Sven.

Sven was aware that he was a stupid man.

But even then, though he felt himself that this idea was rather crazy...

Hasn't King Sigurd become like a different person ever since that night?

He couldn't tell anyone. They would just think he had lost his mind.

Sigurd's appearance hadn't changed. But he was someone else. Something was fundamentally different about him.

Eventually, Sigurd had ascended to the throne, but there had been no sign that he would tell the people of the truth of the Divine Dragon that they learned from their research. He'd enacted the very concealment and fabrication that he so hated, and he had treated Brunhild as a villain.

Maybe he should just go ahead and betray Sigurd.

Go to the dungeon, save Brunhild and Fafnir, kill King Sigurd, and tell the people the truth. That would be consistent with the justice that he believed in.

But he didn't do that, because he was Sigurd's knight. His pride as a knight chided him for thinking to betray his master. And besides, the king might be thinking something too deep for Sven to even imagine.

When Brunhild escaped prison, Sigurd summoned Sven and ordered him, "I planned to execute them immediately, but my mind has changed. Capture Brunhild. And then bring her to this throne."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With that order, Sven's mood brightened.

"If I'm to bring her to the throne, that must mean you intend to speak with Lady Brunhild, right?"

Sigurd hadn't had any contact with Brunhild in all this time. If they had no contact, there was no way their relationship would be repaired. Even if there

was some deep reason that he had betrayed Brunhild, she wouldn't know about it unless they talked.

Sven wanted the old Sigurd back. He wanted him to be friendly with Brunhild, like old times.

That was Sven's wish.

But—

"I don't intend to speak with her. I will simply have that woman bear me offspring. It will be her reward for having escaped me."

Sven was speechless.

That truly didn't seem like something Sigurd would say. Sven even knew that Sigurd had been in love with Brunhild. He had even asked Sven for advice about how to get Brunhild to notice him. For that same man to try to do something so cruel to Brunhild...

"I thought you loved Lady Brunhild," said Sven.

"...Of the priestesses of history, Brunhild resembles her quite particularly. But since she has defied me, there is no reason to let her live. Once she gives birth to the next priestess, I will execute her."

Sven didn't understand what Sigurd was saying. "What does that mean?"

"There is no need for you to know. A knight should just follow my orders."

Being told that, the knight Sven could not argue.

Sven's face twisted in distress. He was finally at his mental limits.

But despite his agonizing, Sven left the town to look for Brunhild. He did it for his lord. He did it for the chivalry he believed in.

There were no clues to follow, but he walked around town until late at night.

I don't want her to be found.

There was a part of him that couldn't help but feel, *I don't want to fulfill my lord's order.*

Sigurd continued to speak to Brunhild that night as well, wherever she was in the town.

The dragon was at the cathedral.

He spoke to Brunhild from the shadow of the great bell.

By speaking to the bell, he made the sound of the Dragon's Tongue louder. It would reach Brunhild, no matter where she was in the city.

<Tonight, I think I'll tell you about the Divine Dragon's true nature.> He had long since run out of things he had to say to her.

But even so, in order to have her trust him, he had to keep talking to her. He thought to talk about the Divine Dragon because he hoped to draw Brunhild's interest, even a little.

<The Divine Dragon came from an island called Eden. Eden is an island where creatures created by God live. The Divine Dragon was a dragon granted the duty from God to protect the island's creatures.> Sigurd shared a part of the memories he shared with the Divine Dragon. So he also knew things that others could not know.

<But the Divine Dragon turned his back on heaven's will. He fell in love with a woman. That woman also loved him, and they wished to be united. But another woman came, moving there from outside the island. Being the protector of the island, the dragon had an obligation to treat the creatures of the island equally. He should not see a single woman as special. So the dragon gave up on being united with the woman.> That night, the dragon had fallen into a deep sleep for quite a long time. It seemed Sigurd would be able to talk quite a lot.

<But the more they were apart, the stronger his love became. Eventually, the dragon and woman made up their minds. Even if it meant turning their backs on God, they would live for love. The dragon took the woman on his back and left the island. Having abandoned his divine command, the dragon was struck with a curse that forced him to consume humans or else his body would rot. That's why the dragon eats the people of this land. Making him eat the same race as the one he loved is the divine punishment that God passed on the dragon.> Sigurd worried. Was she actually hearing him? No matter how

he talked, if she wasn't listening, it would be in vain.

But his worries were groundless. Though she never replied, Brunhild was listening to him.

Under a sky where many stars sparkled, Brunhild was on a little terrace at Beren. That was because being outside, she could hear the dragon's voice better.

She was wavering.

It was the Dragon's Tongue that she was hearing every night. If he could use that, then he was a dragon. The odds were extremely high that he was the Divine Dragon.

But the way he talked was just too much like Sigurd.

It wasn't only his tone. The way he paused and took breaths, even those things were so much like Sigurd. She had loved to talk with him, so she knew it well. Even if the Divine Dragon was pretending to be Sigurd, she thought it was impossible to be this accurate.

So then wasn't the one talking to her really Sigurd?

Wasn't it the truth when he'd said the Divine Dragon had used a spell to take over his body? That would explain his sudden change.

But a spell...

That bothered her.

The dragon's spells were indeed mysteries. If he could conquer death, then it seemed to Brunhild that there was nothing impossible for him. She couldn't deny the possibility that his spells were even more enigmatic than Brunhild had imagined and that he was impersonating Sigurd. That was why she hadn't replied all this time.

She could still hear the voice, even now.

He was doing his best to cover it when he talked, but she could tell he was impatient. There was something he wanted help with, but he was desperately hiding that. Brunhild understood that much.

At this point, no longer able to just let him be, Brunhild picked up her hood and cape and left Beren.

She was headed to the square. There was a charming bell in the middle, and it was used as a meeting place for lovers.

Brunhild spoke into the bell, **<...You're so loud every night. Because of you, I can't sleep.>** Her voice rang out and reached him.

But there was a pause until Sigurd replied. She could imagine his surprised face.

<But you were looking for a reply every night.> He must not have thought that a reply would actually come.

When that felt somehow charming to her, Brunhild realized she also wanted to talk with Sigurd. Even if she was being deceived now, she found herself glad that they could talk.

<I'm thankful that you're willing to converse.> His strangely formal manner of speech made her want to laugh. Brunhild knew that he would get like that when he was rattled.

<You really are Sigurd?>

<I am.>

It was a meaningless exchange. Their earlier exchange had made Brunhild want to believe that this voice was Sigurd's.

<Then that night, the one who cut me was...> **<The Divine Dragon. But you could take it either way. Since it doesn't change that your right eye was cut.>** **<It's important to me.>**

<I don't want you to think deeply about it. Since I have no choice but to die now.> **<...You're eating people, right?>** **<I am. I can't stop the Divine Dragon, who lives in my body. I have to die before there are more sacrifices—together with the Divine Dragon.>** Finally, Sigurd could tell her the thing that he most wanted to tell her.

<Kill me.>

Right as he told her that, Sigurd sensed that the Divine Dragon was trying to

escape from his deep slumber. Hurriedly, he flew off for the castle.

There was no reply from Brunhild.

It was a coincidence that Sven found Brunhild in the town.

When he was passing by an empty square, he saw a girl. He approached her, about to call out to her to say it was dangerous for a woman to be walking around alone late at night, and he realized who it was.



The woman was dressed in a hood and cape, so he hadn't known who it was at a glance. But a mischievous night breeze made her hood flutter up.

Though one of her eyes had been crushed—no, because it was crushed, there was no mistaking her.

Her glossy black hair, and her left eye like a big gemstone.

It was Brunhild.

Have I...found her...?

For some reason, Brunhild had a happy look on her face. Even though there was no one around, it was as if she was spending the time with an invisible sweetheart. He felt like he couldn't interfere.

But for some reason, her face turned suddenly grim. That was why Sven was able to step out in front of Brunhild.

She noticed him. Intense impatience appeared on her face.

"Lady Brunhild," Sven said. "I am going to take you to Lord Sigurd."

While Brunhild recoiled, she drew the sword at her waist. "I would ask that you settle down. I don't want to be rough."

Sven also raised his magic spear. The blade was wreathed in a light that seemed to purify the night.

"Don't make me kill you," Brunhild yelled. "I can't hold back against you."

Sven thought that she truly was a kind person.

If she had intended to kill him, then she wouldn't have said such a thing.

The sound of a blade shattering came first.

By the time she realized what was happening, Brunhild's blade was broken by the magic spear. It was a special move. Only a slight bit of blade and the hilt remained in Brunhild's hand.

The fight was over in an instant.

But Brunhild did not give up.

Still holding the broken sword, she would not put it down.

There was determination in her eyes. It was the determination to get away, no matter what.

Sven thought that there had to be some reason that she couldn't let it end in a place like this.

And it was not in order to survive. And it was definitely not for revenge. Brunhild had always been like that. When she became desperate, it was always for someone else's sake. She wouldn't get angry about herself being hurt.

She most likely knew about how the king was now. Since she was a smart woman, she would certainly have noticed the shadow of the Divine Dragon. In order to fix things, she could not let this end.

But then what am I doing this for?

He tried not to think about it. That was not his domain.

He had been ordered to capture her.

He was Sigurd's knight. He should just obey what his lord said.

What do I do?

Let his lord kill Brunhild.

Even if it was his lord's order, just what point was there in it?

Would he be able to continue following his lord?

Would he be able to avoid thinking anything?

Still with the broken blade raised, Brunhild stepped forward. She moved decently enough, but from Sven's eye, she was basically stopped in place.

From her gaze, the movement of her hands, and the use of her muscles, he could even tell where Brunhild's broken sword was aiming.

The magic spear. She planned to knock it down. Even now, she had chosen a method that would not injure him.

It would be easy to avoid it or to block it. Sven chose to block it.

The dull sound of steel clashing rang out. It was a weak strike.

But the magic spear left Sven's grasp and fell to the flagstones.

It wasn't that he had lost in a contest of strength or in fighting technique.

His heart had lost...

I...cannot capture her.

Sven no longer understood the point of making Brunhild lose.

Sven hung his head weakly.

Brunhild's hands on her swords were trembling, and she couldn't muster her strength. Blood flowed from her broken nails to drip off the end of the hilt. She'd put everything she had into that strike.

But Brunhild was aware that it wasn't putting her all into that strike that had enabled her to win. That was why she asked, "Why...?"

He knew what she was asking.

Why had he yielded victory to her? That's what she was asking.

"I was all right with it. If I were to be killed by you, Lady Brunhild..."

Perhaps it was out of knightliness, refusing to point his blade at his master until the end, even if it meant losing his life.

Brunhild was no fool.

She inferred from that remark that Sven was in a painful position. It seemed that he had not had a sudden change of heart like Sigurd.

She thrust the end of the broken sword at Sven's throat and said, "Talk."

Bit by bit, Sven began to talk.

Of how Sigurd had changed.

Of his coldhearted order.

The discussion changed.

To how he had been the only one not been put in prison.

But then despite that, he hadn't saved Brunhild and Fafnir.

That he had believed in his king's orders over their freedom.

That he still wanted to believe in his king.

This was a confession now.

Sven cried. The knight who would not bend, no matter how badly he was wounded, spilled tears.

But Sven felt his heart being saved.

The black haze that had gathered in his heart this whole time from betraying Brunhild and Fafnir was clearing.

“So it doesn't matter about me—even if I fall into your hands now.”

Brunhild did not cut him off, listening to everything before she murmured, “... Fafnir will call me soft.”

Brunhild sheathed the sword. “Every month, seven people of this nation vanish. The shadow of the Divine Dragon is there.”

“Well...I feel that, too. But where is the Divine Dragon?”

“I think you should know, too.” Brunhild had been unsure, but she made up her mind to tell him. “Sigurd is the Divine Dragon.”

Brunhild told Sven about what she had been told every night.

Sven listened in shock.

“Sigurd wants to die. You are stronger than any other—if you lend him aid, then he will get closer to realization...”

“I...can't do it. Even if he is the Divine Dragon inside, I can't turn a blade on my lord.”

Despite the difference in status, they had spent their youngest years basically as best friends. Even if Sigurd was just a husk of himself, that wouldn't change the man in his memories.

Also having been childhood friends with him, Brunhild understood that. “I won't make you do such a thing. You should just arrange for a way in. If it comes that I have to kill Sigurd, then at that time, you should just close your

eyes. I will...manage somehow.”

Brunhild extended a hand to Sven.

...If that's it, then...

If he could avoid pointing a blade at Sigurd, he felt like he could lie to himself.

Sven laid his big hand over Brunhild's small one.

Brunhild pulled him firmly, bringing Sven to his feet.

Sven was sent straight back to the castle.

Brunhild had instructed him to act as a knight of King Sigurd until that time came.

She told Fafnir about having run into Sven and also that she had gotten him on their side.

She had privately expected Fafnir to praise her and say, *Impressive as always, my lady.*

But there wasn't much relief on Fafnir's face. In fact, he seemed quietly angry. "You should be thankful of your own luck," he said. "Lady Brunhild. That is dangerous. You must not relax your guard."

"Why? You know just as well as I do. He can be rather foolish in his honesty, but he's someone we can trust."

"Yes, while he's on your side."

"He's already on our side."

"No. That knight will not become our ally in the true sense."

"How can you say that?"

Fafnir fell silent. Unusually, it seemed like he was at a loss for words.

Next, Brunhild talked about the mysterious dragon that had been coming to contact her every night. She had already told Fafnir about the dragon, so the main subject was that King Sigurd had been taken over by the dragon.

"I see...so having been overtaken by the dragon, King Sigurd is eating people.

It fits with how his character has suddenly changed. That does make sense.” But Fafnir got a serious look on his face.

“That look...” said Brunhild. “You must want to say, how could I trust the word of some strange dragon?”

“Exactly so.”

“I think I can believe it, though...” Brunhild considered.

Brunhild already trusted Sven, as well as the dragon that called itself Sigurd.

But why did she trust them? It was difficult to communicate that to Fafnir.

I can trust Sven because he went down on his knees and cried? I can trust Sigurd because he visited every night?

That was not it. He could never convince Fafnir with explanations like that. Brunhild wouldn't have been convinced by those same explanations, either.

It wasn't only because of their behavior that Brunhild thought to trust them. The desperation in their voices and the atmosphere around them had also been a major factor. Those who were not lying and who spoke from the heart had a particular air, like they didn't care about appearances, but it was impossible to explain that in words.

But if we put our trust in them and take action, things are sure to work out...

Seeing Brunhild so troubled, Fafnir said, “Lady Brunhild. You may have forgotten, but I am your servant. I am neither your master nor teacher. If you give me the order to trust you, then I just have to obey.”

That was an expedient way to put it. Fafnir did not swear loyalty like a knight.

However, he had seen many people in the dark side of town. He excelled particularly in being able to tell whether someone was to be trusted or not. So he knew about “people who don't care about appearances” like Brunhild was having difficulty explaining. He figured that Brunhild was feeling stuck and unable to explain this properly because she was still young, so he had offered his help.

“...Thank you, Fafnir.” Brunhild was glad.

To believe, because it's the word of my master. Saying something so unlike me...

Fafnir was not the type to say anything so admirable.

She had realized that he was offering her help.

“So then, Fafnir. Trust in me,” his mistress ordered.

“Understood,” the servant replied.

They got in contact with Sven and had him promise to guide them so that they could sneak into the castle.

The night before sneaking in, Brunhild stood in front of the bell in the square.

She said to Sigurd, who was in front of the cathedral bell, **<Tomorrow, I will sneak into the castle—in order to kill you.>** Hearing that, Sigurd was relieved.

He was already at his limits, watching his body operate against his command and eat people.

<But before that, I want to ask you. Is there no way for you to survive? A way to drive out the Divine Dragon from within you and seal it away...> **<There is no way,>** he said with certainty.

<You don't know that. If we look for it, we might find something.> **<Just how many people would be eaten, then, in the meantime?>** Brunhild had expected everything he was saying now. Because she had known, she had avoided asking all this time if there was some way to save him.

But now that it was the night before the mission, she was getting cold feet. **<...I'm sorry. I'm a little unsure...whether I can truly kill you or not...>** Sigurd was glad of Brunhild's kindness. But right now was the one time he could not be taking advantage of that. **<When I first spoke to you in the Dragon's Tongue, you called me your friend. If you still feel that way, then please...I don't want to give in to the Divine Dragon anymore.>** After a long silence, Brunhild replied. **<...I understand.>** **<But then, before I kill you...>** Her voice became distressed. **<I want to see you one more time.>** He got a faint whiff of flowers. He had remembered Brunhild's scent.

The temptation was intense.

<I want to see your face one last time. Where are you?> He just about replied, *the cathedral*, but he somehow swallowed it.

He wanted to see her face, too.

But he couldn't show his face to her now.

He didn't want to show her his ugly dragon visage.

<I want you to remember me as I was.> Brunhild stopped trying to ask where Sigurd was.

It was the evening of the next day.

With Sven's guidance, Brunhild and Fafnir were going to sneak into the castle.

The three of them were to meet up at the edge of town.

That night, a gentle drizzle was falling.

While waiting for Sven, Brunhild muttered quietly, "Is there truly no way to turn Sigurd back to normal?"

Fafnir asked back, "You mean if there's a way to drive out the Divine Dragon's consciousness, leaving only King Sigurd's consciousness?"

"...It's nothing. Forget it."

She shouldn't have asked. This sort of question would only cause Fafnir worry. Even with his erudition, there was no way he could know.

But Fafnir answered, "There is one way."

Brunhild's eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"Call out to him. If it's your voice, then surely he will turn back."

"...Pardon?"

"The two of you love each other. In response to your voice, Lord Sigurd's consciousness may well be summoned back."

Brunhild was quite surprised by Fafnir's remark. "Wh-what...? Is that some kind of joke? It think that's beyond unrealistic."

“Indeed. Since it’s just that I once read that in a story, long ago.”

“I didn’t know. So you read stories like that, too. But stories are stories.”

“Yes, a story of another world.” Fafnir did not deny it. “So I think it’s good to have dreams.”

Fafnir did not mean that as a joke. He thought that sort of power beyond logic might actually work, if it was between Brunhild and Sigurd.

They lived in the world of light. There were of a different species from him. So then they wouldn’t be measured by the laws of the residents of darkness.

After they reached that point in the conversation, Sven came.

Fafnir and Sven glared at each other, their eyes keeping each other in check. It was nothing new that the two didn’t get along.

The three of them sneaked into the royal castle. There were no patrolling soldiers on the way to Sigurd’s sleeping chambers. Sven had cleared them out beforehand.

When they arrived before Sigurd’s bedroom, Sven came to a stop. “I...will keep watch here.”

It was an excuse to keep from going into the room.

Brunhild nodded.

Quietly opening the door, Brunhild and Fafnir entered King Sigurd’s room.

Brunhild tried to close the door. Fafnir found fault with that, whispering, “We’ll lose our escape route for the worst-case scenario.”

But Brunhild shook her head and closed the door.

She didn’t want to make Sven listen to the sound of them killing Sigurd.

The door was closed. The two of them went out of Sven’s view.

“Wait...” Sven weakly reached his right hand out toward them. The hand had unconsciously reached out to try to stop them.

Even at this point, Sven still didn’t want Sigurd to die. Even if the king had

been taken over by the Divine Dragon, he couldn't bear Sigurd's body being hurt. To put it in extreme terms, he thought it better to have Sigurd live controlled by the Divine Dragon rather than dying. That was why he wanted to stop them.

But he didn't stop them, despite that, because he had heard his lord's wish through Brunhild.

The wish that he be killed.

That was a wish that Sven could never accept, but to an equal degree, he also couldn't deny his lord's wish.

Unable to stop them, the door was shut completely.

His halfway-raised right arm fell weakly.

Sven turned his back to the door and cowered there, then pressed his forehead and groaned.

"Lord Sigurd..."

Brunhild approached Sigurd's bed.

Sigurd was sleeping peacefully. Even if he was the Divine Dragon on the inside, he still looked like Sigurd, who Brunhild knew so well.

Brunhild stared down at Sigurd's face and didn't make a move.

Dagger in hand, Fafnir whispered to his mistress,

"Leave this to me."

This was just what he had expected. There was no way Brunhild could kill someone, in the first place. If her target was the face of a friend, then all the more so.

But Brunhild shook her head.

No...I'm all right.

Fafnir saw Brunhild and was surprised.

Brunhild's profile, lit under the moon, was determined.

She drew the sword hanging from her waist. The blade was blue, wet with the moonlight.

The flash of the blade was mercy—in order to keep her friend from being forced to eat any more against his will.

Brunhild swung the sword up. There was no hesitation.

She knew that if she hesitated, it would just increase Sigurd's pain.

Things were increasingly unclear to Fafnir. He'd thought that Brunhild loved Sigurd. That was why she'd said she couldn't kill him. But then why was she able to try to kill him now?

She swung down the blade, touching Sigurd's neck.

But it stopped there.

A high sound of metal striking metal rang out, and Brunhild's eyes widened.

Sigurd's neck was covered in scales.

Even though an instant before, his neck had been skin, it was now protected by dragon's scales that had appeared suddenly.

Dragon's scales that even a polished blade could not penetrate.

The high-pitched noise and the impact made the dragon's eyes open.

When the Divine Dragon noticed Brunhild, he got up and attacked her. During that time, Brunhild swung her blade down on Sigurd over and over, but scales grew as if they were reacting to the blade to protect him. It ended with every strike of the sword being repelled by scales.

That was also one of the dragon's spells.

If someone would attack him while he was asleep, he would grow scales to protect himself.

Sigurd hadn't known about this spell. It wasn't as if all memories had been shared with the Divine Dragon.

He swung a sideways fist at her.

"Lady Brunhild!"

Fafnir shoved Brunhild out of the way. Brunhild avoided the Divine Dragon's fist, but Fafnir took the strike instead. There was the nasty sound of bones breaking, and he was slammed into the wall hard.

"Fafnir!" Brunhild tried to run to Fafnir, but the Divine Dragon was faster.

He stepped on the head of the unconscious Fafnir. There was a cracking sound.

"Stop it!" Brunhild cried.

The Divine Dragon looked at her angry face with cold eyes. "Is this man that important to you?"

The leg he was stomping with tensed. Underneath his foot, Fafnir groaned.

"No, not only this man."

The one the Divine Dragon was referring to was Sigurd. The Divine Dragon also shared Sigurd's memories—memories of Brunhild. That happy expression was something she would never show the Divine Dragon.

"Whore. When leaving the island, you said you would swear love that was forever unchanging. How dare you even attempt to kill me."

Then Brunhild realized just why the dragon had been strangely kind to her. He had apparently seen the woman he had sworn love with in Eden in Brunhild.

But that story had nothing to do with Brunhild.

"I've never sworn love to you."

"Silence," the Divine Dragon said in a low voice. "For what sake do you think I created the clan of the priestess? It was to have them love me once more when we met again someday."

It really felt like they weren't having the same conversation, but there was one thing that was clear.

"I am *not* your wife..."

The Divine Dragon, in Sigurd's body, came to Brunhild, then pulled her close and stole a kiss. His violence left her with no choice.

"Say that you love me. If you do it now, I will forgive you, in consideration of

your face.”

She was paralyzed by his show of force. But even if she couldn't shake off his arms, Brunhild glared back at him and said, “I don't love you.”

The man in her heart had the same face as the one before her, but he was a different person.

She was forced down onto the carpet.

“Then my only business now is with your womb.”

The dragon's tongue ran across Brunhild's neck. Visceral disgust drew a low shriek from her.

He stripped off her clothes.

She knew what was happening, but she could not resist. She could never oppose his strength. He decided to squeeze her eyes shut and bear it.

That was when it happened.

“U...gh...”

A groan came down on her from above.

She opened her eyes.

The dragon was scratching at his face with both hands as he writhed in agony.

Something was violently raging within the Divine Dragon.

That something had seen all of “King Sigurd's” inhuman acts until today. All of them had been unforgivable, but what he was about to do now was, to that something, an act he could never forgive. To do this with his own body, even if it was shared— The Divine Dragon held his head and writhed. The something had not managed to quite take back control of his body.

Brunhild hurriedly crawled out from under the Divine Dragon and rushed to Fafnir. She lifted him up and headed out of the room.

They stumbled on out. Sven, curled up there, stood up in surprise.

Understanding that it was an emergency, he said to Brunhild, “I'll carry him.”

Brunhild entrusted Fafnir to Sven.

Sven headed out of the castle carrying Fafnir. He was trying to get him to a doctor.

But Brunhild did not follow after them.

“What are you doing, Lady Brunhild? Hurry, this way.”

Brunhild did not respond.

“Take care of Fafnir for me,” she said, then returned to Sigurd’s room.

The Divine Dragon was still writhing in agony.

Brunhild picked up the sword that was lying on the floor.

She didn’t know what was going on, but this was the perfect chance.

The perfect opportunity to kill Sigurd.

She approached and swung up the sword.

The thing inside Sigurd saw that out the corner of his eye.

And that thing was relieved, thinking that this was for the best.

Fighting with himself, the Divine Dragon had no way to block the blade. With that single strike, he would vanish.

But Brunhild did not swing down the blade.

She recalled what Fafnir had said before they’d sneaked into the castle.

Call out to him. Your voice is sure to reach.

She knew. There was no way such a thing could happen. That was just in stories.

But it was emotion, and not logic, that propelled Brunhild’s body.

Even she felt—

That she wanted something dreamlike like that to happen in the real world.

“Sigurd. Can you hear me?”

The sword fell on the carpet.

“If you can hear me, then come back.”

She approached Sigurd, then embraced him, drawing him to her.

“You would never lose to the Divine Dragon.”

When his body began to assault Brunhild, the something within the Divine Dragon thought that he couldn't allow himself to remain in the dragon's control.

Sigurd had been the one to betray Brunhild. It was this body that had cut out her right eye.

But he didn't want to hurt Brunhild any more.

Perhaps his experience of taking control of his body secretly every night had taken effect. His consciousness had been able to obstruct the Divine Dragon. And then, he had managed to free Brunhild for the time being.

But that was as far as it went.

No matter how much he struggled, it didn't seem like he could regain control of his body. The dragon's soul was not asleep like before. Struggling for control head-on, there was no way he could win.

When it seemed like his consciousness would finally lose, he heard a voice from the outside.

It was calling to his vanishing consciousness to “come back.”

That voice drew Sigurd's consciousness to it and pushed the dragon's consciousness away.

Sigurd's pain stopped.

Until a moment ago, there had been two people in the king's chamber.

A dragon in a man's skin and the Dragon Priestess.

But that had changed.

The ones touching now were a woman and a dragon.

A human in the shape of a dragon and a Dragon Priestess.

A dragon with his eyes lowered sadly and a girl embracing him.

This was without question the dragon that had been talking to Brunhild every night.

<You're the one person I didn't want seeing me like this,> said Sigurd.

<How silly. But I'm the Dragon Priestess.> He wanted to remain embracing her forever, if he could. But they didn't have the time.

I don't have much time left.

Sigurd figured that he'd managed to win just now in that battle of wills because his desire to respond to Brunhild's call had brought about a sort of mysterious strength that came in times of crisis.

Before his body was stolen away again, there was something that he had to do.

<Brunhild. I want you to kill me.> **<That's what I came for. But my blade won't penetrate you. And on top of that, if another protective spell has been cast on you...>** There was a possibility that the body Sigurd had taken back was protected by some spell they were unaware of.

So Sigurd figured that they should choose a method that would be certain to kill him, even if it took more time.

<I want you to come with me.> Sigurd had Brunhild get astride his back, and they flew out from the window into the night sky.

They were headed to the temple.

<Do you know why the temple is here?> Brunhild shook her head.

<It's because underneath it, there is an ancient weapon—a weapon that must never fall into human hands. The dragon doesn't want people to approach it. That's why he cannot leave the temple.> **<That weapon must have the power to kill the dragon.>** Sigurd nodded.

<I actually wanted to steal it myself. But I couldn't do it. Since my body is that of a dragon, my body rejects it, and I can't approach.> The dragon crossed the sky over the soldiers who protected the entrance to the temple and landed

inside.

They reached the great hall where marble pillars stood in rows.

Sigurd touched the ground. The color of the floor was slightly different in that spot only. He moved the door, and it led to an underground entrance. Even Brunhild, who had come to this temple many times, hadn't known the hidden door was there. Only Sigurd, who shared memories with the Divine Dragon, was aware of it.

A vast space like a limestone cavern spread around them. It was big enough that Sigurd could fly and had a faint glow to it.

At the depths, it seemed there was some powerful source of light.

Brunhild proceeded, astride the dragon's back. She managed for a while like that, but...

After going a ways, Sigurd began to feel pain.

"...Guh...ngh..."

He could no longer fly and began walking on his legs.

As they went farther in, as the light got stronger, Sigurd's pain increased. The dragon legs that should have been stepping forcefully on the ground were now quite weak.

While supporting him, Brunhild headed farther in. The dragon's breath grew ragged.

The source of light grew closer.

The area was brightly lit. It was just like midday.

<Y-yeeeeek!>

That moment, Sigurd went into an indescribable frenzy. He was frightened as if he were before a monster, screaming.

No matter how Brunhild called out to him, even if she shook him, there was no point. It seemed her voice wouldn't reach him at all.

She somehow brought Sigurd into the shadow of a rock. With the light

blocked off, his frenzy calmed.

<If I could leap into the light ahead of here, then I could die. But I just can't get close. I can't restrain the fear my body feels.> What assaulted Sigurd was the primal fear that all dragons shared. It was a dread carved into him more deeply than instinct.

<What is that light...?> Brunhild asked.

<It's God's weapon. At the time before there was the heavens, the earth and stars, the original dragon rebelled to fight against God. At the time, the light of destruction, the Thunder, was wielded. Ahead of here is the remnants of that light.> The light that had caused the fall of the original dragon. With that, you could most definitely kill the Divine Dragon.

<I cannot die on my own. Brunhild, I want you to kill me. You are different from normal humans. You are closer to God than ordinary humans. I'm sure you are also compatible with God's weapon. So...> Brunhild glimpsed into the depths, but she didn't make to proceed farther.

Sigurd pressed her, saying, **<I want to be killed by you. I don't feel I can have you forgive me for what I did to your eye. I at least want you to avenge yourself for my having hurt you.>** Brunhild touched her injured right eye.

<It must hurt. Your wounded right eye. So hurry.> ...*The wound does ache.*

But even so, it was just her right eye that was destroyed.

If it was only me who was hurt...

Then she just had to forgive him.

<...It's fine. This doesn't matter.> Brunhild said that her injured right eye was nothing.

Sigurd was dumbfounded. **<Nothing? How can it be nothing? I did something awful to you. There's no way I should be forgiven. Not that easily...>** **<Never mind forgiveness, I'm not even angry. It wasn't even you who did it in the first place. It was the Divine Dragon.>** Brunhild gave him a troubled smile.

<But even so...I have to die. The Divine Dragon will soon steal my body. Once that happens, he will do awful things to you all. He will eat people, too. I

want to die before that happens. I have to die. You understand that.> The dragon pointed at the light with his snout. **<So burn me to death with that light.>** But Brunhild shook her head. **<I could never count on something like that. I'm sick of this talk of killing and dying.>** **<Then what would you have us do? How, if not killing me...>** She fixed the dragon with a look from her single black eye and said, **<Let's talk.>** Rather than exchanging blows with weapons... **<Let's exchange words. Tell me everything you know about the dragon. Let's search for a way for you to survive. It won't be too late if we give up after that.>** **<...If I tell you and then give up, promise me that you will make sure to kill me.>** Seeing Brunhild nod, the dragon slowly began to talk.

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Brunhild listened quietly to him talk about various things about the dragon.

She showed particularly strong interest in why the Divine Dragon started to eat people after abandoning God's will.

<The Divine Dragon needs to eat people, or he can't live, right?> she asked.

<That's right. He's cursed to have to eat people, or his body will rot and he will die.> **<The curse is the key point. That curse is a punishment for having abandoned heaven's will, right?>** **<That's right. If you're trying to undo it, it's no use. There's no spell to undo God's curse...>** **<That's not what I mean. Is that curse cast on you to begin with?>** **<...What do you mean?>**

<The one that God cursed is the Divine Dragon. It's not you. You're just in trouble because you share a body, but you yourself have never wanted to eat people, right?> **<...No.>**

What Brunhild was saying sounded like playing with words. But she had struck at the core of it.

God's curse was, so to speak, a state that was attached to the Divine Dragon's soul.

Even though Sigurd was in the form of a dragon, if his soul controlled the body, then he had no desire to eat people, and neither would his body rot from not eating people.

<But the problem is that there's no way for my soul to defeat the dragon's soul,> Sigurd said. **<Eventually, the dragon's soul will come to the fore. If that happens, the curse will take effect. He will eat people in the end.>** **<But right now, your soul is winning.>** **<That's...something like a miracle.>** **<Even miracles should have reasons for occurring.>** Mystic terms wouldn't fool Brunhild into stopping considering matters. **<When I called out to you, you were able to beat the dragon's soul.>** Sigurd felt his heart thud in his chest.

<Any thoughts about me?> Brunhild's big black eye looked at Sigurd.

Maybe it was because she only had one eye. It looked as if it sparkled even more than when she'd had both eyes.

Even when he was like this, her gaze on him made his heart pound.

<Well...uh...> As Sigurd became flustered, Brunhild attacked him, **<Why are you hesitating? Any trivial little thing works. I won't laugh, so tell me.>** **<But...>**

<Sigurd.>

She brought her face right close to him. With a serious gaze.

She had to know, doing this. Was she teasing him? Did she want to make him say it?

But it seemed that Brunhild would not back down until she heard the answer.

<Yeah, fine. Fine, I'll tell you.> He was going to die anyway. So then it didn't matter if he was embarrassed. It would be a relief to just tell her.

<I love you.>

Brunhild's eyes widened like those of a cat.

<Because I love you... That's why when I heard that you escaped from prison, I felt like I couldn't give in, and when you called me to come back, I felt strongly that I wanted to respond.> Sigurd's face was hopelessly hot. He felt like it would be easier if his soul would just vanish right this instant.

Brunhild was silent with that surprised expression. Sigurd was all in a fluster as he waited for her reaction.

Brunhild's mouth moved. **<That's not what I'm asking.> <Huh?>**

<I'm not asking about how you feel for me. I'm asking how the Divine Dragon feels about me.> <...What?>

<The element that brought you back was me. That's because I'm special to the Divine Dragon. Why am I special? If I could learn that, then we might be able to make it so your consciousness stays in control. That's what I meant by that question.> <Ah...> Sigurd hid his eyes with his dragon's claws.

<Ahhhhhhh...!>

Now that he thought of it, that was exactly the case.

Brunhild, who has no interest in romance...would never suddenly be interested in love. She would never have asked that, but I...

It's just because I'm so self-conscious about it.

Brunhild smirked. **<What? Did you want to say that because you love me, you were able to come back due to the power of love? You're quite the romantic.> <Just kill me right now...>**

It seemed like she finally couldn't restrain herself anymore, and Brunhild held her stomach and laughed.

Sigurd continued to hide his face, desperately bearing with the shame.

After laughing for a while, Brunhild wiped the corners of her eyes and said, **<It's been a long time since I laughed so much.> <When you said you wouldn't laugh, no matter what I said...>** Sigurd must have grown used to his embarrassment as he was no longer hiding his face. In fact, he'd even go so far as to say he was glad he'd accidentally confessed his love. He was glad the mood had relaxed. It reminded him that Brunhild had often laughed in the past, and it felt like they'd gone back in time.

<What you really wanted to ask was about the Divine Dragon and the priestess's relationship, right?> said Sigurd. **<The reason the Divine Dragon turned his back on God's will in the first place was because of your ancestor.> <My...?>**

<Your ancestor was a human who was born on Eden. Five hundred years

ago, your ancestor and the Divine Dragon swore their love to each other.> <... So that's what you mean.>

She had noticed the Divine Dragon had seen in her a woman he'd once loved, but she had never imagined that would be her own ancestor.

<But there was another woman on the island, and she was opposed to their wedding. So the two of them had no choice but to love each other in secret.> God had not forbidden a dragon and human to love each other. Even if he did love one woman, so long as he did not ignore the other creatures, that would not be against the laws of the island.

<But the Divine Dragon began to feel guilt over their secret loving. He couldn't stand it anymore, and the two of them decided to leave Eden. But protecting Eden was the dragon's divine duty...so as a punishment, he was cursed.> The "Dragon's Tongue" that Brunhild spoke was originally called the "True Language," a language that all creatures understood. But it had deteriorated throughout the ages and eventually had wound up a language only dragons understood.

<Even though they left the island together, my ancestor wasn't cursed?> <She was not. Since your ancestor was just a resident, with no duty to turn her back on.> Sigurd thought of something. **<The reason that my soul came back might be because of your ancestry.> <I'm sure my voice is related, too.> <Yeah. When I heard your voice, I felt a pull on my consciousness. The Divine Dragon is a cursed dragon, made so that he can never oppose God again. On the other hand, your ancestor was still in the 'likeness of God,' made by God.>** There were two types of humans in the world.

The humans who God made himself, and the humans who were born through evolution.

Most humans were the latter. Only the humans born on Eden were the former.

Although in this era, evolutionary biology was not that developed, so it had not been substantiated that humans had evolved from monkeys. All they understood was that there were humans who had been made directly by God, and humans for whom that was not the case.

<Having an ancestor who was made in God's image, your call might be a quasi-order from God. That may be why the Divine Dragon's soul withdrew.>
Many things made sense if that were the case.

The comfortable ring that her singing voice held and the sense of her orders being difficult to oppose.

If Brunhild's voice was a quasi-voice of God, then that made sense.

<So then doesn't that mean that if I continue to call out to you, then the Divine Dragon won't come out?> **<...That might be the case. But then you won't be able to leave my side. We'd have to be together twenty-four hours a day.>** **<True. Being together all the time would be a problem. It seems like you're in love with me, so who knows what you might do...>** **<You're still saying that...?>**

<Be prepared to be teased all year.> **<Then since we're talking about this, I'm going to say it. Though you make fun of me for being in love with you, it's absolutely not something to tease me about. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't have been able to come back.>** **<What are you saying? My call is a quasi-order from God. That made sense. I think your soul being able to come back has nothing to do with whether you liked me or not.>** **<It's not logic,>** Sigurd argued back. **<I'm sure you wouldn't understand because you've never been in love. When you love someone, it's like a really big energy. The things you make fun of, like not wanting to give in for your sake, wanting to see you again—they're like, um, really, you know...I feel them. So basically, that's why, it's a powerful energy, so it really is one of the reasons that my soul was able to come back. Though I guess you wouldn't understand.>** Now that he said it, it was all embarrassing stuff, but he was going to get continuously teased for a year anyway. He couldn't be any more embarrassed than he already was. So then he felt like, just go and say everything you're thinking.

When listening to that, Brunhild closed her eyes and smiled gently. It was a completely different smile from her earlier laughter.

She was just listening with satisfaction.

<...I really am glad we talked. Now we found a way where nobody dies.>
<Huh...?>

<I think we were talking about how this would be resolved just by me being by your side. Am I wrong?> If Brunhild were to be at his side and continuously calling Sigurd's name, then the Divine Dragon's soul would not come out. And if the dragons soul didn't come out, then Sigurd would not eat people.

Sigurd felt all his tension suddenly pop.

When he had been worrying alone, it had seemed like a hopeless dead end, and he'd never imagined that they'd find a way to resolve things this easily, just by talking together.

<Is it okay for me to be alive...?> **<I won't let you die. I told you, I plan to keep teasing you for a whole year.>** **<But, but I...>** Sigurd gazed at his body.

His body that had turned into a dragon.

<But I'm a dragon. It's true that if you're with me, I can hold on to control. But I'm stuck as a dragon. You can't want to be with me like this.> **<How silly. I just told you. I'm a Dragon Priestess. I'm used to seeing scales and fangs.>** Brunhild touched Sigurd's nose.

Ahhh, I see...

Brunhild thought.

It was surely for this moment that I became a priestess.

Brunhild went down into the town and searched for Fafnir and Sven.

Sigurd remained at the temple. He could not return to the royal castle. In addition to how he looked like a dragon, he couldn't speak human language, so he had no choice but to stay at the temple.

She sought out a back-alley doctor in the town. In order to treat the wounds that Fafnir had gotten from King Sigurd, being a fugitive, he would be cared for by an illegitimate doctor.

She quickly found Fafnir and Sven. As expected, they had gone to said back-alley doctor. Fafnir's bones were broken from the Divine Dragon's attack, but there was no threat to his life, and he was soon able to move again.

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Brunhild took Fafnir and Sven to the temple.

And then she had them meet Sigurd, now a dragon, and shared the whole situation with them.

Sven burst into tears.

“Even in the form of a dragon, I’m so glad you would come back, my lord. Truly...”

Sigurd faced his loyal retainer Sven and chirped in a kind voice.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, though...”

Brunhild giggled. She chose not to translate what Sigurd was saying. She felt that even without translating it, what Sigurd wanted to say to Sven would get across.

Sven didn’t stop crying at all.

“I didn’t know the number one knight in the land was such a crybaby,” said Brunhild.

“I’m so glad. Since...I thought it was no use. Seeing you smile by my lord’s side...I never thought I’d see that again. I thought we would never again gather like this, and I’ve been so sad.” Sven sniffled. “I thought for sure we would wind up killing each other.”

Brunhild lowered her eyes and imagined.

That sort of future had been possible.

If they had just pressed the wrong button.

A future where Brunhild and Fafnir had schemed together, making every effort to avenge Sigurd’s murder, and where Sven had not noticed that Sigurd was taken over by the dragon and fought for him had been possible. In that future, all four of them may have perished.

But they hadn’t reached that future. Most likely because there had been a girl who had been unwilling to use violence.

“...I’m glad that we talked.”

“There are still many things we should talk about. Like how to treat Lord Sigurd from now on, our future course... Isn't that what you called us here for, Lady Brunhild?”

“Yes. I want you all to lend me your aid.”



Chapter

3

They discussed many things—

Like how to deal with the sudden disappearance of the king now that Sigurd could not return to human form.

Fafnir said, “There’s nothing for it but to leave it. I’m sure there will be confusion, but it will be temporary. Eventually a new king is chosen, and it will settle.”

But Sigurd was against that.

<I want to tell all the people about it. Not only that I’ve become a dragon but also that the old Divine Dragon was eating people in order to survive.>
Brunhild translated what Sigurd had to say.

“How can we do that, when you can’t speak human language, my lord?”

“I will tell them.”

“Lady Brunhild. Have you forgotten that you are a wanted person? Being seen as a criminal, even if you did appear with a dragon and say ‘this dragon is King Sigurd,’ do you think the people would believe that?”

Brunhild and Sigurd knew that the people were not that gullible.

But even so, the two did not back down.

<It might be difficult to get them to believe us. But I am the king. I have the responsibility to tell the people the truth. I don’t want to leave the matter of all the people who died, eaten by the Divine Dragon, unsettled. I feel that if I

hide the truth, I really *will* wind up a dragon.> Brunhild nodded.

Fafnir didn't seem convinced, but then Sven added a helpful remark. "Even if the people rebel, I swear I will protect you both."

Sven seemed glad.

When he had been working under the false monarch, it had been nothing but orders that he struggled to fulfill without telling himself "this is for King Sigurd." But now he could feel like he wanted to fight for his king, without any hesitation.

The four of them headed to the royal castle and went around telling the ministers and vassals about the situation.

Of course, they were incredibly shaken and suspicious.

Just as Fafnir had anticipated, a lot of people did not believe them. But when they explained earnestly, those who believed began to appear. However, it wasn't that they believed because they had been deeply touched by their earnestness.

Most of them believed because they'd been convinced by their explanation.

Even among the vassals, some had felt that the Divine Dragon was dubious. The higher someone's position and the more educated they were, the stronger the trend to be suspicious of the Divine Dragon. They had just remained silent since if they had said that openly, they would be executed. These people didn't suspect Brunhild—hearing their explanation, it was as if their many years of suspicions were all coming together.

People in high rank becoming Brunhild's allies was a major boon, and they became able to spend time in the royal castle as they had before. It was good fortune, but having come prepared to take time to explain, they felt like it killed their momentum.

It was decided to cover up for King Sigurd's absence for a while by saying that he was abed with illness, and while they were buying time, they discussed what to do about the next king.

The number one topic of discussion was whether they should have Sigurd continue as a king of men now that he was a dragon.

Of course, many people were against it, and all the more so since the Divine Dragon had been fooling people. A dragon king couldn't be trusted.

But there were more than a few voices who recognized Sigurd.

“Regardless of how he has become a dragon, King Sigurd has returned to us. And he told us the truth. Even looking back on the history of the kingdom, there is no other king who has responded to the people with such earnestness.”

Opposition immediately came up.

“I will acknowledge that King Sigurd is an excellent king. But the real issue is that the king can no longer speak human language. What's more, his appearance is not that of a human. For a being like that to rule humans... Will the people even accept it?”

An experienced retainer offered a compromise. “How about we set up a regent?”

Many agreed with this. It seemed like a reasonable point of compromise. Many capable ministers and senior statesmen were brought up as candidates for regent, but a certain someone noticed something.

“Wouldn't there be no individual more appropriate than the priestess, who understands what the king says?”

The official notice came out.

The truth of the Divine Dragon was brought to light.

And it was proclaimed that Sigurd, who had defeated the Divine Dragon, was once again the king, while Brunhild would be the regent.

The people gathered in front of the bulletin board and read the announcement eagerly.

The simpler people believed the notice and accepted Brunhild and Sigurd and hated the Divine Dragon.

Those who didn't buy into the notice also accepted them. There was no reason for them to oppose it, since now there would no longer be any more sacrifices or disappeared people.

Over half of the people accepted their rule.

But even so, people who were intensely opposed to it were about 30 percent of the whole.

The Divine Dragon protected the people.

The roots of the legend that had been born so long ago were deep. It didn't seem that they could be ripped away so easily.

Having once again become king, there were, as expected, many who looked coldly at Sigurd compared with the kings of history. He had managed to continue as king because the majority of his ministers had acknowledged him, but put it the other way, and nearly half of his retainers did not think well of the dragon king Sigurd.

But even so, Sigurd was able to remain strong thanks to the retainers who supported him, and most of all, thanks to the regent who was always at his side.

When he looked at Brunhild, who was grappling earnestly with the public duties of a regent which she was unused to, it seemed to him like he shouldn't be complaining.

Hounded with governing work, Brunhild and Sigurd were very busy.

But no matter how busy they were, Brunhild did not leave Sigurd's side.

Especially at night, she always cuddled close to Sigurd as he slept.

Though Sigurd had blushed when Brunhild had brought up that they sleep together, after calming down, he said in a serious tone, **<Brunhild. Even if I have become a dragon, I still have that sort of desire. So if you sleep next to me, I frankly think I couldn't take it. And plus—this sort of thing is done after going through the proper steps first.>** Brunhild seemed to see right through him, saying, **<You regained control over your body from the Divine Dragon at**

first while he was sleeping. Why don't you consider that the Divine Dragon might do the same thing? While you're sleeping, you're defenseless, and it should be easier to steal control from you. I said we should sleep together in order to prevent that.> Sigurd covered his hands with his face like a dog. Brunhild watched that with a smirk on her face.

Brunhild had realized that it was fun to tease Sigurd.

Putting aside that Brunhild could be a little bit of a bully, what she had pointed out was accurate.

The soul of the Divine Dragon that was inside Sigurd had simply been sealed away, and it wasn't as if he had died. He was patiently waiting for the time when he could steal control of Sigurd's body.

He really was aiming for the time when Sigurd was sleeping, since Sigurd's consciousness faded then. Many times, the Divine Dragon had been certain that he could get his body back.

But every time, there came a woman's voice.

The voice called "Sigurd." With that, Sigurd's once-faded consciousness was called back, and it strengthened his control over his body. With things like this, there were no longer any openings for the dragon's soul to take advantage of.

If Brunhild would leave Sigurd for at least one night, then he could steal his body, though.

But the Divine Dragon no longer had a chance of winning.

Every time he heard Brunhild's voice, he felt his consciousness fade. It was because God's voice was ordering him to leave this body. Day by day, the Divine Dragon grew weaker. Now all that remained was to wait for him to vanish.

As they were busy with the ruling of the land, half a year passed.

It seemed that their continuous earnest efforts had borne fruit. Just a bit of leeway came about in their extremely busy days.

Brunhild and Sigurd had come to a farm.

There were lots of children there, and Brunhild was doing farmwork with them. She was feeding the cows and teaching the children how to milk them. Her work clothing was covered in dirt.

This place was not just a farm.

The other aspect of this place was as a shelter for orphans and Altatos. The farm was run with them as staff. Brunhild had created it, and it had only begun operations the other day.

Brunhild had been wanting to make a facility like this for some time. Society said Altatos wouldn't become anyone respectable. But they not only lived in a poor environment to begin with, the jobs that they could work were also limited, so inevitably they would get swept up into the dark side. This farm was an initial step in changing the structure of society, and a facility that she had been able to make by becoming regent.

Emilia and the man who had been horribly drugged, and Fafnir—Brunhild's encounters with them had led to her decision that she would seriously attempt to improve the plight of the Altatos. Brunhild had made up her mind that she would no longer give up just because they were out of sight.

This act from Brunhild was not welcomed by many people of the kingdom.

There were numerous government officials and aristocrats who thought that using money on Altatos and orphans was throwing it into the gutter. It had seemed like it would be rejected as just a girl's immature idealism.

But someone unexpected had argued down those aristocrats.

It was Fafnir.

You'd think he wouldn't like children, but he had strongly agreed with the operations of this farm.

Fafnir had preached the value of this facility. He said investing in people who had been disregarded would, over time, become a strength that supported the country. Since his words were logical, they were somehow able to convince the opposing faction.

When the operation of the farm won approval, Fafnir said to Brunhild, "Please

build the sort of place where those who work there can love each other like family.”

There were comparatively more children at the farm because of Fafnir’s suggestion. They had to be children, before their hearts went to waste and they were hurt, or it would be difficult for them to treat others as family, he said.

Accepting lots of children caused many problems. One of those was that the younger the child, the harder it was for them to help with labor, but Fafnir resolved such problems from behind the scenes.

He worked himself to the bone to manage the farm, but he never came out into the spotlight. That was due to his character—he couldn’t bring himself to love people, after all. He worried that without love, the children would see through him. He thought that that sort of evil should not be seen by the children.

That’s why the manager of this farm in name was Brunhild.

Most likely, Fafnir’s worries were on the mark. Right now, the laughter of the children was ringing out through the farm. Those were the voices of children who were attached to Brunhild. With Fafnir, things would certainly not have gone like that. While loving and guiding lots of children, Brunhild was like a saint alighted in the stable.

Sigurd was also in the vicinity, watching over Brunhild. He felt he wanted to protect this scene.

Inside, he was uneasy.

Opposition to Brunhild had silently grown at the castle. To them, Brunhild was a little girl who had grown conceited since she had become Sigurd’s regent.

He had to protect Brunhild.

Being at her side, he had to be the one.

Sigurd watched Brunhild from a distance as she carried feed for the cows with the children. Brunhild noticed his gaze and responded with a smile. And it was an attractive smile, one that made his heart pound.

But the children were not like that.

When they noticed Sigurd, they immediately hid behind Brunhild's back. They grabbed the hem of her clothing. There was even one girl who started crying.

It was because Sigurd looked like a dragon.

Adults wouldn't show open disgust from seeing Sigurd's appearance, but children were not like that.

So Sigurd could not help Brunhild, and all he could do was watch from a distance.

Brunhild finished her work at the farm around sunset.

She returned to Sigurd, having changed from her work clothes into a dress. Though she had to be sweaty from having done that physical labor, no unpleasant smell came from her. She smelled faintly of flowers. It was Brunhild's scent, which he had known since they were little. Now that he thought of it, that had to be because her ancestor was a maiden from paradise.

Brunhild sat astride Sigurd's back. Taking her to and from places was Sigurd's job, and he always carried her on his back.

His big wings flapped in the air, and the two of them jolted upward. Brunhild's arms wrapped around his neck and squeezed even tighter.

The town below, seen from a dragon's back, was an amazing sight.

The sun was setting. Above was indigo blue, and below was crimson. Those mingled to create a purple light. It was pale, but it soaked sharply into the depths of the eye.

Here and there, lights lit in the town—orange lights, like bonfires, the warm colors that human activity emitted. Under those lights were people, spending their time, living.

He could hear Brunhild sighing. She enjoyed this view. Brunhild very much loved seeing this with him.

They reached the castle. The dragon folded his wings and landed atop a terrace.

It had become entirely dark.

<Let's go to bed early tonight. I'm tired from playing with the children,> she said.

The two of them went from the terrace into the castle. It was connected to their bedroom.

But Sigurd's feet were heavy.

Sleeping together. She had been with him every night since she'd come up with that idea. Thanks to her, he had managed to drive away the Divine Dragon's consciousness until it was on the verge of vanishing.

They had to sleep together. If not, then the Divine Dragon that was within him might steal his body.

But Sigurd knew.

It had been six months since they had begun sleeping together. And he knew just what Brunhild was called in the shadows, for sharing a bed with him, a dragon.

The nickname "dragon's lady" was on the cute end, while some people might say "lizard's bride" or something even worse. There were even epithets he would hesitate to say out loud. She was treated like a beast with desire for the inhuman or like someone possessed by evil.

It was all because of his body. Never mind protecting Brunhild, just by being together, he was worsening her position.

Sigurd said weakly, **<Sorry. I will return to my original body as soon as possible.>** If he could return to a human body, then there should be fewer people calling her awful names.

Brunhild turned around and looked at Sigurd.

<I've thought of a way,> he said. **<I'll go to Eden. There, there is a fruit called the fruit of life, and it has the effect of curing any wound or illness. I think it can cure my body, too. So...>** He trailed off there.

Because just as Sigurd's big crocodilian mouth wailed weakly, something as soft as flower petals touched it. There was a sweet taste and scent.

Brunhild's lips gently pressed against Sigurd's.

With that act, Brunhild affirmed Sigurd's appearance—more eloquently than any words could.

<The other names aside...> Gently, the petals came away, and Brunhild smiled. **<Dragon's lady is rather stylish, and I like it.>** She saw through everything that Sigurd thought.

And there was no way that she couldn't know what she was called.

Just as she had acknowledged once, Brunhild loved Sigurd, even as a dragon.

If Sigurd had still had a human body, he would have been crying. She still accepted him, even if he was nothing like he'd once been. Nothing could be more reassuring to him.

A dragon's body wasn't capable of crying.

So words spilled from him instead.

<I love you.>

Endlessly, like tears.

<I love you, I do.>

His feelings overflowed and wouldn't stop.

He'd been in love with Brunhild for a long time.

But these past few months, his feelings for her had grown stronger every day.

She could be a bit mean sometimes, but she was actually concerned about him. Lately, even being teased by her felt pleasant. Just seeing her smile made him happy. That's why, though they were sleeping while cuddled, he wanted to see her even closer. Though they were together every night, he wanted to be with her even longer.

Brunhild affirming Sigurd's appearance didn't make their situation any better. In fact, there might be even more people looking at them coldly.

But Sigurd found himself thinking this.

"So long as you accept me, I don't need acceptance from anyone else."

It wasn't simply because he was ugly now that Sigurd wished to return to his

old body.

If he could return to human, there was something he wished to say to Brunhild.

His body now wasn't appropriate for saying such things.

But he couldn't stop himself.

"I want to make you my queen."

He thought this made him look bad. He had planned not to say it until he was human again.

Brunhild said, **<I will make you happy.>** *I should be the one saying that, properly speaking,* he thought.

Brunhild was a girl, and powerless, and fragile.

Her words felt like something to count on, but he was pathetic for having made her say that.

He always relied on Brunhild, had her support, and was constantly protected by her.

It was the day after the two of them swore their love.

Fafnir was alone in the cavern beneath the temple.

Before his eyes was the brightly shining Light of God. It was as if a giant flame was blazing up. Fafnir was contemplating before the Light of God.

He was thinking about his own heart.

...Would God be able to fix it?

Fafnir put a hand to his chest.

This defective heart.

No matter how he studied medicine, no matter how much he learned about drugs, he hadn't been able to fix this heart.

If I acquire God's blessings, then will I become able to like people? To feel affection for them?

Would he be able to love them?

Like Brunhild and Sigurd.

He wanted to love people normally, as any normal person did. That desire had become stronger than before.

That was because the Divine Dragon's history had been shocking to Fafnir.

Fafnir had an interest in the Divine Dragon.

The Divine Dragon was a hopelessly irredeemable dragon. If an evil like that existed, then the evil that was Fafnir would be forgiven. He could be at ease.

But they said the original reason that the dragon had fled from Eden had been because he loved a woman. He had even turned his back on God's command to martyr himself for love. And they said his favor toward Brunhild had also been because he'd seen the woman he'd loved in her.

So then.

If I'm even less than that, then what does that make me...?

It seemed as if he was the only living creature in the world who had this flaw, being unable to love people.

That was why he started visiting the space beneath the temple. The way he was now, Brunhild and Sigurd...the pair who had overcome difficulties and been united in love and friendship seemed so overwhelmingly bright to him, he couldn't look at them directly.

By order of the king, the area beneath the temple had been made so that no outsiders were allowed to trespass. It was a place where he could be sure to be alone, where he could feel at ease.

Although, him being in the presence of God's power was ironic for an atheist.

Fafnir raised his head and gazed at God's Light.

Staring at it with his blue eyes.

"Oh God. If you're there..." he called out to it. "Make my dream come true."

His voice penetrated the limestone cavern and vanished.

He tried waiting for a while, but nothing changed.

Of course. He didn't believe in God.

That didn't change even after seeing God's light for himself. He didn't think of this energy body as being that of God. His guess was that in the ancient past, there must have been some creature with powers beyond human ken, and this was a memento of that.

Even if I should concede that this thing before me is God...

It was impossible to save him. To think of saving him, who was less than even a dragon.

Fafnir turned away from the light and left the underground space.

When Fafnir returned to his office in the royal castle, he began to draw up documents regarding Eden. Comparing what he'd heard from Sigurd, through Brunhild, and the contents of old books, he crafted the latest documents.

As he was working, Brunhild came to the room. For some reason, she was in a very good mood.

"It seems something nice has happened," Fafnir said while assisting Brunhild with her duties.

"Tee-hee, can you tell? Listen, Fafnir. I think I'm going to get married soon."

"Oh-ho..."

Even as unemotional as he was, this was one time when Fafnir showed surprise. "Well, congratulations. So you've finally acquired the position of queen."

He knew, even without asking, who she was marrying.

"It's not particularly that I'm glad to become queen, though."

"Mm-hmm...?"

The standard by which Fafnir evaluated things was wealth and prestige. That always came first.

But he understood immediately.

Ahh, she's glad because she will be united with King Sigurd.

"Is it all right?" she wondered. "For me to be the only one so happy."

She was in such a good mood, it seemed like she might start humming. Right now, she was a maiden in love.

Fafnir watched Brunhild's giddiness for no particular reason.

Noticing his gaze, Brunhild said, "Mm. You look very lovely when you're smiling."

"Smiling? Me?"

Brunhild pulled out a mirror and showed Fafnir his face.

"I'm not smiling." Reflected there was the same cold man as always.

"Look closely. The edges of your lips have risen just a bit."

It didn't look like that.

"Perhaps only I can tell, since it's so subtle."

"That's not subtlety. I'm not smiling in the first place," he began to reply, but changed his remark. "...I see. It's true, it seems I'm smiling."

Brunhild was glad. "Isn't it?"

It wasn't that he had been able to see any subtle rise of his lips. The face reflected in the mirror held nothing other than a sour look.

But he wanted to believe that he was able to smile without even himself noticing it.

He was good at sneers. That was the one type of smile that he could do.

After having had nothing but those, if he could come to smile in a carefree manner...

Then even without relying on God, I could love...

When Brunhild made to leave the room, Fafnir stopped her. "Lady Brunhild."

"Mm?" She turned around.

"Six years ago, you said that I should come to love you."

“I did say that. Just remembering saying something like that makes me embarrassed.”

“Is it all right for me to truly come to love you?”

Brunhild giggled. “It’s fine. But that’s not something that you say to a girl who’s just become engaged.”

Soon enough, Brunhild left the room to go see Sigurd. It seemed that she didn’t want to leave him for even a moment.

Fafnir turned to the now-absent Brunhild and said, “Thank you very much, my lady.”

Thank you.

To him, those words should have just meant letting your guard down.

But now, he had the feeling he understood their meaning, just a little.

It happened when Fafnir was working alone until late at night.

Someone flung open the door.

He thought it was Brunhild, but it wasn’t. She had long since gone to bed.

It was Sven.

His face was bright red. Fafnir could tell that he was quite drunk. He had a ceramic pot with wine in it.

He was smiling and in a great mood.

But the moment his eyes met with Fafnir’s, his expression soured. “Those eyes. I don’t like those miserable eyes. Can’t you enjoy yourself a little more?”

Right after barging in suddenly in the middle of the night, all this rudeness.

Striding brashly into the room, he pointed at Fafnir. “Turn the other way. Don’t look at me.”

Fafnir replied in a hard tone, “There’s no reason for me to take orders from you.”

“Oh, really? I guess so. You’re not my servant, after all. Then I just have to

turn the other way,” Sven said, then he sat down on a nearby chair—with his back to Fafnir.

The way a drunk acted was never going to make sense.

“What did you come here for? You’re interrupting my work.”

“Don’t say that. It’s because you spend all your time on books that you’re so nasty.”

Sven set his wine down on a table to the side. “But I didn’t come to fight with you tonight. I came to spend the night drinking.”

“With me...?”

“Yes. My lord and your lady say they will marry. So it’s no good for their retainers to be doing nothing but quarrel.”

After considering what to talk about, Sven said, “I hate you.”

That remark did not make one imagine that he was trying to deepen a friendly relationship.

“I know,” replied Fafnir. “So don’t mind me, and get out.”

“...I hate you, but I acknowledge your superiority.”

That unexpected remark surprised Fafnir.

More accurately, Sven was far beyond acknowledging Fafnir’s superiority.

He was jealous.

Fafnir had played a focal role in supporting Brunhild when she had been in a tough situation, and he had even managed to bring her back to her current circumstances. He was flawless as a retainer. He was far more excellent than Sven, who had just followed the orders of the fake Sigurd. Sven even felt that he wanted to be just as useful to Sigurd as Fafnir was to Brunhild.

Their personalities and dispositions were incompatible, but if one was just talking about their consideration for their lords, then Sven thought that they were the same. So that statement from Sven was his own sort of concession for the sake of opening up to each other. He thought that they wall between them would thin just a bit if he acknowledged the other man.

“You care deeply for Lady Brunhild,” Sven said.

That sort of devotion would be impossible otherwise. So Sven thought.

But Fafnir’s voice just got harder. “That’s just you.”

“...What is?”

“I mean loving your master.”

“Don’t you, too?”

“I’m still not sure.”

He didn’t understand what Fafnir meant. Because it looked to Sven like everything Fafnir had done all this time could only mean that he loved Brunhild.

...Well, he’s a philosopher.

He had to be thinking about something difficult that Sven wouldn’t even consider. “You don’t have to think so hard about it.”

“So it seems. And it seems that you normally don’t think very hard about things. You can understand those sorts of feelings intuitively. That’s why talking won’t get us anywhere.”

“...Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m not... I still have work to do. If you’re not helping, then get out.”

That made Sven give up. He and this man just didn’t get on, after all. They couldn’t even get on the same page in conversation. Even though he’d even brought this alcohol, it didn’t seem like they’d be able to have fun.

“Yeah. I’ll get out.” He stood from his chair with a *tump*.

But he left the ceramic jar with the wine on the table.

“You should learn to enjoy yourself a little,” he said, then left the room. He had wanted to say, “Don’t focus so much on your work that you overdo it,” but it had wound up turning into an aggressive remark. Sven really hated this about himself.

He flung open the door just like when he had come in, then shut it again.

Sven left, and Fafnir was relieved. He could finally concentrate on his work.

He continued working for about an hour.

And then he finally realized—

The wine bottle had been left on the table.

Sven had forgotten it. It was just that he had forgotten it.

But Fafnir didn't take it that way. He figured that Sven had been trying to be considerate and had left it behind. That was because he had kindness for people other than himself.

He recalled Sven's remark before leaving the room.

"...Yeah. Just for a bit."

Fafnir got out a glass and poured himself some wine.

The wine was good.

A few days later, Fafnir came to Sven's room.

"There's something I want to talk about."

Fafnir had wine in his hand. It was one of which there was plenty in the castle's wine cellar, and the same maker as the one Sven had brought him.

He sat down opposite him at the table. It was kind of awkward. Thinking about it now, this was the first time that Fafnir had come to see him.

While pouring wine into a glass, Fafnir began speaking to Sven. "Did you know that Lady Brunhild is planning to attend the academy?"

"Yeah. She said something about exchange with envoys and students from other nations for the sake of diplomacy..."

The defeat of the Divine Dragon had been taken as an opportunity for the kingdom to have exchange with the world outside its walls.

"That would mean frequently going outside of the royal castle. But then I'm worried about the people of the anti-Sigurd faction."

Sigurd and Brunhild had many enemies.

For example, the believers in the Divine Dragon.

Even after the truth of the Divine Dragon had been exposed, there were still those faithful to the dragon. The roots of the faith in the Divine Dragon had grown deep in the land over a long course of time. That faith couldn't be changed over a few months. They didn't believe what Sigurd and company said about the Divine Dragon's evil deeds. They believed that Sigurd was making the Divine Dragon out to be a villain in order to secure his own authority. In history, the loser of a battle was always made out to be evil, so it couldn't be said that the believers' thinking was necessarily foolish.

Aside from those pure believers in the Divine Dragon, the families of the children who had been made sacrifices to the Divine Dragon also held antipathy toward Sigurd. As a rule, helpless orphans had been chosen as sacrifices, but the next in line to be chosen had been Altatos, so they did have surviving family. It would seem strange, at a glance, for families that were supposedly victims of the sacrifices to view Sigurd with hostility. They were angry that Sigurd had exposed the truth of the Divine Dragon. Their own children had died nobly. They'd had meaningful deaths. Such beliefs had been their only consolation, and now having the meaninglessness of their children's deaths thrust at them had stolen these people's final consolation from them. These people also stubbornly would not acknowledge that the Divine Dragon had been evil. Speaking the plain truth had been taken favorably by many people, but they had also earned resentment in these ways.

At the royal castle, these people were called the anti-Sigurd faction.

The most intense of the anti-Sigurd faction wanted nothing more than to make Sigurd suffer.

Ideally, they would like to kill Sigurd, but since he was a dragon, he looked to be strong.

Naturally, the brunt came to be directed at Brunhild. If they couldn't kill the man himself, then they wanted to rob him of his most dear, at least. They knew just how painful that was.

That's why it was convenient for the anti-Sigurd faction that Brunhild was starting to attend the academy, since they wanted to do her harm.

"...So then...will you advise Lady Brunhild not to go to the academy?" asked

Sven.

“That’s no good,” Fafnir replied. “If she gives into the pressure, then she will rapidly become unable to do anything.”

“So then what do we do?”

“I want to ask you to be Lady Brunhild’s guard.”

This was the reason that Fafnir had come to Sven’s room.

Sven made an incredulous cry. “You would be all right with me...?”

“You’re the most reliable person. There are no knights your equal, after all.”

“That’s not what I mean...” He meant, *Are you all right with leaving Lady Brunhild’s guard to me.*

But he didn’t bother asking that again.

He knew that Fafnir was disabled.

I’m sure he wants to guard her himself. But...for him to expressly come to me...

He wanted to meet Fafnir’s expectations. Fafnir treasured Brunhild more than anything. For him to leave her to him—as a fellow retainer, Sven understood well just how tough a decision that was.

Although he didn’t understand just why Fafnir would suddenly trust him.

“I will do it.”

But if Fafnir trusted him, then Sven would respond with all his soul. That was the way of chivalry that Sven believed in.

Besides, there was no mission more blessed to a knight than the guard of the noblest lady in the land.

Sven found himself yelling out. “I swear on this magic spear that I will protect my lady.”

Sven becoming her guard had an incredible effect.

Brunhild had begun going to the academy, but the anti-Sigurd faction couldn’t even touch her.

Sven was a peerless knight, famed throughout the kingdom. Rather than defeating that, you had better chances of winning if you attacked Sigurd himself.

Every day, the anti-Sigurd faction followed Brunhild around. But there was no sign at all of her separating from Sven.

Brunhild was aware that she was in a position to be targeted. Of course she wouldn't let her guard down.

She was on the way back from the academy. It was late at night. The town was long since asleep.

On the way carriage to the royal castle, Brunhild said to her guard, "Sven. Thank you."

Sven shook his head. "Your words are wasted on me. Protecting a lady is a knight's honor."

"Oh no. Not only that. You became friends with Fafnir, didn't you?"

Sven just about burst out laughing. "What a horrific suggestion..."

"Oh, are you not? I saw Fafnir bring wine to your room, though."

It seemed she was talking about that time the other day when he had come to request he guard Brunhild.

I see. If she saw Fafnir enter his room with wine in hand, then she might get that idea.

"I'm sorry to fail to meet your expectations, but we have not become friends. He just came to me to request that I be your guard."

"Is that right...? That's too bad."

Brunhild seemed clearly disappointed. As a knight, he couldn't be making his lady sad.

But it would not be the act of a knight to detract his previous remarks and say they were friends. "While he is not a friend, there are some things about him that I acknowledge."

This was the most Sven could say.

Brunhild clasped Sven's hand in both of hers. Her big single eye gazed into his. "Then be on Fafnir's side. Since he's easily misjudged." Brunhild's tone was very serious.

As a knight, he could not give his lady an insincere answer. "Understood. If there is anything I can help him with, then I will be of aid."

Brunhild looked satisfied. "It's backward for a master to be worrying about their retainer, isn't it?"

"...It is. It could even be said to be a shame for the retainer."

Brunhild touched her index finger to her mouth. "Then let's make this a secret just for us."

"Understood."

Causing worry for your master made you a failure as a retainer. But he didn't think of this as strange. Having seen their bond, Sven did, in fact, take it for granted that she would feel this way.

After that, the two of them continued their trivial chat. An amiable air filled the carriage.

But after a while, the carriage came to a sudden stop.

Sven asked the coachman what was the matter.

"There's someone standing in the way."

Sven told Brunhild, "Please wait inside the carriage," and with his magic spear in hand, he stepped down from the carriage.

A man was standing in the way in front of the carriage, blocking their path.

He had a hood pulled deep over his eyes, with his head hanging.

"Move. You're in the way of traffic," Sven said in a low voice, but there was no sign the man would move.

"If you won't move, then you will be moved by force." Sven thrust his magic spear at him.

The man suddenly lifted his chin. But it wasn't because he was afraid of the magic spear. The man gave an eerie laugh. "*Hee-hee.*"

He held in his mouth a scale. If Brunhild had seen, she would have immediately realized that it was a dragon's scale.

The man swallowed the dragon's scale. Sven didn't immediately understand what that meant, so he was slow to deal with it.

The man's body swelled up like it was exploding. In the blink of an eye, he had transformed into a black dragon.

Even Sven was surprised and panicked.

There was no intellect in the dragon's eyes. If a normal person were to eat a dragon's scale, they would only become an evil dragon that just rampaged around, and they could not return to human form again. But he was okay with it at this point, even if it meant throwing away his life—so long as he could rob Brunhild of hers. He had nothing to lose now.

The evil dragon attacked Sven. The evil dragon was an opponent that even seven strong soldiers together couldn't match.

But this was just what made Sven so fearsome.

He blocked its claws with his spear, repelled its fangs, and clashed blade with claw three times.

"Hya!"

The blade flashed. A flash of light thrust through the dragon's throat.

"Guh..." it cried out in frustration for the last time, and then the evil dragon's head hung, and it died.

This knight was stronger than even an evil dragon. Two years earlier, when under attack by the evil dragons, Sven had finished off two dragons, too. He had polished his spear skills even further and could destroy even the scales that were harder than iron.

A single dragon was no foe.

He pulled his spear out from the fallen dragon and then, when he was about

to return to the carriage where Brunhild was, it happened.

The carriage started racing off, leaving Sven behind.

The coachman had been swapped with someone from the anti-Sigurd faction.

“Lady Brunhild!”

Sven chased the carriage as it ran off, but even the number one knight in the land couldn't keep up with a horse's legs.

The carriage grew rapidly distant.

Inside the carriage, Brunhild had not simply been sitting on her hands watching. She had been quicker to understand the situation.

Brunhild drew the sword she wore for self-defense and thrust it against the coachman's neck.

“Stop this carriage. Or I'll kill you.”

Her voice was cold.

But the coachman did not stop.

From the coachman's manner, Brunhild realized something.

He sees right through me. I have to kill him.

Brunhild could not kill people.

Hating killing as she did, no matter how coldly she spoke, she couldn't make her voice sound threatening. Someone who was prepared to throw away their own life could easily see through that emptiness.

What should I do...?

Right as she thought that, something like lightning passed right by her side.

A sharp flash pierced the coachman's chest.

It was Sven's magic spear.

Understanding that he wouldn't catch up on foot, Sven had thrown his spear.

The spear, flung with all the strength in his body and magnificent

concentration, destroyed the body of the carriage to accurately pierce the coachman's heart. It was a godly feat that could only be demonstrated by a master martial artist beloved by the spirits.

The coachman's head hung, and the carriage went out of control. The body of the carriage swayed violently side to side. The shock of the sudden attack on the coachman had plunged the horses into a panic.

I have to control the horses...!

Brunhild immediately shoved aside the coachman and whipped the horses in an attempt to control it. She knew something of horsemanship. But even precise whip use was pointless when a horse was in a panic. In fact, it was fair to say it had the opposite effect. The two horses drawing the carriage went on a rampage, trying to go all over the place.

“Ah!”

By the time Brunhild cried out, her vision had already flipped over. The body of the carriage, where she rode, collapsed onto its side. Her fragile body was flung violently away.

The last thing that Brunhild saw was the night sky.

A heavy impact assaulted her whole body. She could tell that her head had hit the flagstones hard.

Unable to resist, Brunhild fell unconscious.

As Brunhild was unable to move, a man approached her. There had been one more enemy lurking inside the carriage.

The man wielded the deadly weapon in his hand on the unresisting Brunhild.

In order to make her experience a fate worse than death.

Sven immediately ran to Brunhild.

There was a suspicious man at her side. He was raising up Brunhild in his arms and doing something. Sven was unsure of the details, but the one thing that was clear was that he had to stop that man.

Sven picked up a stone lying on the ground and threw it at the man. The stone flew toward the man's head. With a *thunk*, the man's head was smashed in.

After killing the man, Sven finally reached Brunhild's side.

The small mercy was that no wounds stood out on her body. She just looked like she was unconscious from the shock of falling off the carriage.

But for some reason, there was lots of white powder stuck around her mouth.

"Lady Brunhild!"

He called out to her various times and shook her, but there was no sign that she would wake. Sensing this was something sinister, Sven became agitated.

I have to take her to a doctor... But there are no doctors at this hour... No, this is no time to be saying such things. If I have to drag a village doctor out of their bed... No, wait. The doctors at the castle are better than the ones in the town. Even if it takes a little time, I should have the castle staff see her.

Despite his confusion, Sven ran to the castle, Brunhild in his arms.

Seeing Brunhild when she was carried in, the doctor said. "Her head injury is no serious matter. She will wake up quickly."

But for some reason, the doctor's face was grim. "The problem is the powdered medicine around her mouth."

When Sven heard what that powder was, he was shocked.

Brunhild had been attacked by rebels.

When Fafnir heard, he headed straight to the doctor's room. Approaching the doctor's door, he could hear an incredible shriek from within. It was a woman's voice. He had a bad feeling.

Though his movement was limited, he hurried to open the door. "Lady Brunhild!"

What leaped into Fafnir's view was an unbelievable sight.

"Die! Die! Monsters!"

Brunhild was screaming. This was the first time he had ever heard her say such things.

In her hand was her knife for self-defense. She was flailing the bare blade about all over the place.

Brunhild was repeating "I'll kill you," threatening Sven and the doctor.

Fafnir instantly understood what was going on. It was a sight he had seen many times in the dark side.

She had been drugged. It was the nightmare drug that was used when granting a punishment more painful than death.

That drug had the effect of powerful visual and auditory hallucinations. Right now, Sven and the doctor would both look like monsters. Their speech would also not sound like human language.

Of course, me, too.

When Brunhild noticed Fafnir, she pointed the dagger at him and said, "Dragon monster!"

To Brunhild's eyes, Fafnir looked like the decomposed corpse of a dragon.

That look of hatred was one he had received many times in the dark side. He was used to it.

But to get that look from Brunhild, he felt a silent pain in his chest. It was a quiet and cold pain.

Nobody was able to stop Brunhild from raging.

The doctor wasn't strong enough to restrain her in the first place, and Sven was strong, but he was bad at holding back. It was because he had failed to protect Brunhild that she had wound up like this, so his feeling of indebtedness, like he couldn't get her hurt any further, kept him from acting at all.

Fafnir gave instructions to the doctor and to Sven.

"Doctor, please prepare a diuretic. And, Sven, restraints."

Without any sign of wariness, he approached Brunhild.

Sven cried, "It's dangerous!"

It was as if Fafnir didn't even hear that voice trying to stop him.

Howling like an animal, Brunhild thrust her knife at Fafnir.

There was the slicing sound of cutting through clothing and flesh. The dagger was stuck in Fafnir's stomach.

Fafnir had not tried to defend himself. He hadn't felt the need.

My body won't move right anyway.

Having more wounds now wouldn't make much of a difference.

The servant showed no hostility at all toward his mistress.

"Yeek...eek..." That must have in fact scared her. Brunhild released the knife, shrieked out and backed away.

"Help...me... Help me, Fafnir..."

As Fafnir approached her again, Brunhild scratched at him. Again and again. Like a little child.

I've seen a similar sight before.

From someone who picked up orphans. So she had endless scratch wounds all over her body. Because she tried to reach out to orphans, of all things.

Seeing you like that, I thought of you as foolish, from the bottom of my heart.

And that still hasn't changed.

It's irritating to see a girl who gets so many scratch wounds but then still tries to show children a smile and embrace them. One would feel from their heart that she was a fool.

"So..."

Fafnir chased Brunhild into the corner of the room.

And then he captured her in both arms.

"Please don't make me do something so foolish."

—This sort of thing is not my job.

When she was embraced by the servant covered in scratches, Brunhild

muttered, “Faf...nir...?”

Her resistance and frenzy stopped.

It wasn't that her nightmare had stopped. Even now, her eyes would be seeing a dragon monster. His words hadn't reached her, either.

But she no longer tried to attack the monster.





Chapter

4

Fafnir secured the restraints around Brunhild, and they began treating her.

The drug she had been made to drink would, if left inside her, destroy the faculties of her mind. And judging from her symptoms, Fafnir could tell she had been made to take quite a bit of it.

First, they removed the poison.

Fafnir was more familiar with removing poisons than the doctor. They would make her drink lots of water, then give her a diuretic. This was the general way of purging a poison that the doctor had indicated, but Fafnir declared with certainty that it was not enough to save Brunhild. He prepared a large quantity of herbal tea, which he knew had a powerful effect of removing toxins. Fafnir gave precise instructions about the amount he was making her drink as well. Having her drink a large volume of water all at once wouldn't have much effect on the poison. Having Brunhild drink the proper quantity would purge the poison more quickly. They also put Brunhild in a bathtub filled with melted perfumed oils. Then the poison would come out in her sweat. Even the doctor was astonished by Fafnir's knowledge and skill.

Of course he would know all about this type of poison. Since this drug had originated from a substance he had made in an attempt to cure his heart.

They spend a whole day trying to get out the poison and somehow got through the worst of it.

She wouldn't die of the poison for now, but the restraints were not removed. The visual and auditory hallucinations were still ongoing. They didn't settle for a

few days.

They continued to work at removing the poison. In fact, it was fair to say that the real process started now. If they relaxed now, then she would be tormented by hallucinations for her whole life, like that one-time experimental subject.

Fafnir didn't leave Brunhild for even a moment. When anyone else approached, Brunhild would go into a frenzy—even if it was Sigurd.

Sigurd. Right now, he had become a matter of concern just as grave as Brunhild's health.

He had not heard Brunhild's voice calling him for a whole day now.

Brunhild's voice would seal away the Divine Dragon's soul. That he hadn't heard her voice meant that it wouldn't be strange for Sigurd to be controlled by the Divine Dragon at any moment.

And Sigurd himself understood that danger more than anyone else.

Sigurd had fallen into self-loathing.

It's because I became king as a dragon that Brunhild got hurt.

He understood—this attack had not been plotted by people without money. The poison in question was expensive, so commoners could not easily afford it. The temple and the royal castle were normally not open to the public, so it would be difficult to pick up a fallen scale. In addition, there were only a limited few in the castle who were aware in particular that putting a scale in your mouth would turn you into a dragon. It wasn't difficult to imagine that the anti-Sigurd faction in the court had given some people a scale and put them up to it.

Sigurd summoned Sven to his room.

Sven wouldn't understand his words. Being a dragon, Sigurd could only speak the Dragon's Tongue, and Sven could not hear it.

I will most likely be overtaken by the Divine Dragon.

He could feel the Divine Dragon's consciousness had gotten stronger. Right now, Brunhild was not at all in a state where she could give him attention, since she couldn't recognize him.

So, Sven, I have a request for you.

Sigurd pointed to Sven's magic spear with his nose.

"...You're saying to kill you if the Divine Dragon takes control?"

Sigurd nodded.

"Impossible. For my lord to give into that foul dragon..." Sven said with certainty, because he wanted to believe it. He added with a frown, "Besides... isn't your wedding ceremony soon?"

Brunhild and Sigurd's wedding. The preparations were moving right along, and it was imminent, in two weeks.

Sven had brought up talk of the wedding ceremony now because he wanted to help Sigurd muster up his energy. Sven wanted to believe that if he had a strong heart, then he wouldn't lose to the dragon's spirit.

Sigurd won't want to lose to the Divine Dragon, either. His life was saved by Brunhild. He wants to live with Brunhild. I know he does, but the king will not retract that order. If Brunhild's recovery makes it in time, that's for the best. But if it doesn't, then I'm the only one he can count on.

Without Brunhild's voice, Sven was the only one who could defeat the Divine Dragon.

"Why do you always give me such cruel orders?" Sven asked.

But Sigurd continued to gaze at Sven's spear.

The king's desire not to hurt this country, its people, and those dear to him, was stronger than anyone else.

The retainer had no choice but to obey.

"...Yes, my lord."

If that was the king's order.

Brunhild regained her senses five days after they began drawing out the poison.

The first thing Brunhild was worried about was Sigurd.

They immediately summoned Sigurd to her sickroom. And she tried to call out to him.

But it was no use. Due to the aftereffects, she was speaking inarticulately.

“It’s a temporary state. It should resolve within a month, at most,” the doctor said.

If she couldn’t speak articulately, then she also couldn’t properly speak the Dragon’s Tongue.

I want you to arrange writing tools.

She tried to tell that to Fafnir with gestures and body language, but Fafnir handed her the parchment and quill he had prepared beforehand. He had anticipated these aftereffects.

The quill pen ran across the page.

Sigurd. Are you all right? Your consciousness hasn’t faded?

<I’m all right.>

Truly?

<Yes. The Divine Dragon’s consciousness has grown stronger. But it seems that’s all. I apparently have control over my body now. The Divine Dragon can’t come out as long as I don’t want to yield control of my body.> *Could that be the result of having spoken to you every day?*

<Plus...> Sigurd looked at Sven and then said, **<I have ordered Sven to kill me if the time comes.>** Brunhild hung her head.

Don’t give up on living.

Intellectually, Brunhild understood. The best plan would be to kill Sigurd if he was taken over by the Divine Dragon before her ability to speak returned. The Divine Dragon used uncanny spells, so they couldn’t leave him be.

But even understanding that, she wanted to avoid Sigurd’s death, no matter what.

<I understand,> Sigurd said. **<I won’t give up until it really is no use, either.>** Hearing that, Brunhild was a little relieved.

It seems that the situation isn't as bad as I thought.

Next, Brunhild apologized to the three of them for having worried them and causing them trouble.

She bowed her head particularly deeply to Fafnir. Even if she had been confused, she had stabbed him. It was fortunate that Brunhild was weak, and she had only given him a shallow wound, so he was fine, but if she had injured his organs, it wouldn't have been odd for him to die.

“Don't worry about it. My body was immobile to begin with.”

Fafnir wasn't bothered about it at all, but that did not satisfy Brunhild.

The wedding ceremony was looming, in five days.

The ceremony was to be held at the temple. Perhaps they decided that the dragon temple was appropriate since Sigurd was the dragon king. It was an old custom that all the people of the kingdom would come out to celebrate the king's wedding ceremony. In order to enliven things, the king would serve food to the people for free. Many cooks came and set up stalls to treat the people to food. So long as you were celebrating the wedding, you were allowed to eat as much as you wanted. And so the participation rate was very high, creating a bustling spectacle that could truly be called a free-for-all. This event was beloved by many people.

As the wedding ceremony approached, Brunhild began to feel doubts.

...I'm just not sure.

This was about whether Sigurd could still remain himself.

Sigurd had said he already had control over his body, so she wouldn't be controlled by the Divine Dragon.

But Brunhild's mind had been unable to avoid thinking about just one...very awful possibility.

Isn't the dragon's spirit pretending to be Sigurd?

What if, when they had been reunited the other day, the Divine Dragon and Sigurd's souls had already changed places?

I'm a horrible person, if I may say so of myself...

While she would feel the agonies of love as any girl of that age, she would also get strangely intellectual in situations like this. So even with someone who she loved, she couldn't help but look at them with suspicion.

She also thought she had to be thinking too much.

Supposing he was the Divine Dragon on the inside, then she didn't know why she would be pretending to be Sigurd. Why would he act as Sigurd, without showing hostility toward Brunhild or fleeing?

As she was worrying, Fafnir's face rose in her mind.

Should she tell him?

But she didn't want to. If she was just thinking too much...

Talking to him about this might cause another rupture in the relationships between the four of them.

If she talked to Fafnir, then Fafnir would without a doubt look at Sigurd as something akin to an enemy.

Most of all, I want to believe what Sigurd says.

Brunhild worried, and decided.

"I have had the very same thought as you, Lady Brunhild."

People rarely came into the wine cellar that was beneath the castle. It was a perfect place to have a secret conversation. In the shadow of rows of wine barrels, Brunhild opened up to Fafnir about her worries.

Brunhild ran a feather pen over a piece of parchment.

"Why didn't you say anything to me when you realized that?"

She wasn't accusing him. She thought it was unlike him.

Fafnir should be far more of a realist than Brunhild. He was the very person who had made Brunhild a realist. And being that kind of man, if he realized it was possible Sigurd was an enemy, then he would report to Brunhild at that time and pull her away from Sigurd.

Fafnir said, "The two of you love each other."

"What about that?"

"Like I said, it seems there is a mysterious bond between you, what might be called love. I thought that through love, you might know that what King Sigurd says is true."

She was dumbfounded. What Fafnir was saying was just too unrealistic.

"Love aside, there's no such thing as a superpower like that. What do you think we are?"

"People nothing like me."

His eyes, gazing at Brunhild, also seemed somehow faraway.

Brunhild had spent many years with Fafnir, but there was something she'd learned recently.

He was a realist, but he had an intensely romantic side.

She'd sensed a bit of it once before. It was the night they were to assassinate Sigurd. When she'd asked what she should do in order to maintain Sigurd's consciousness, he had answered, "Call out to him." Even a child wouldn't have given such a pure answer.

Maybe he wants to believe in love and justice.

Maybe he had some fantasies about love and justice.

Fafnir said, "Let's get back on topic."

"Right now, based on what you've told me about, Lady Brunhild, I can make general estimations about the power of love. Love is not almighty. That is why you're worried the dragon is pretending to be King Sigurd."

"If that's the case, then what do you think the dragon's reason is?"

"I would guess that he is after your life."

If that were the case, I would already be dead. Since there have been many chances for him to kill me.

"There may be a reason why he cannot kill you yet. For example, revenge.

Someone obsessed with revenge will not let someone they sincerely despise die an easy death. That goes all the more so if they could be killed at any time. They will get revenge by violating what their victim holds dear. What I think..."

Fafnir imagined what the Divine Dragon would be thinking.

"His aim would be to cause trouble at the wedding ceremony. He would be able to humiliate you the most by killing you before the eye of the public, while you're making your oath of a kiss. There could be no more unsightly end."

Brunhild considered.

...Revenge.

It didn't seem impossible. The Divine Dragon had very much liked her. Though it was disgusting, he may have loved her. And having been betrayed by her would certainly have made his feelings of hate powerful.

There would hardly be any soldiers stationed at the wedding ceremony, and Brunhild would be wearing a heavy dress, so it would be harder for her to move. She thought that would be a moment to aim for.

So then should we put off the wedding ceremony...?

"Exactly. We say the poison is lingering, and so we put it off. Time is on our side. We just have to wait until your voice returns."

If Brunhild's voice returned, then she just had to give the order. That would resolve matters, whether it was Sigurd or the Divine Dragon in control right now.

The next day, Fafnir made it out that Brunhild would need some intensive treatment to remove the poison, to draw her away from Sigurd. They had figured that the Divine Dragon would not attack Brunhild until the day of the wedding ceremony, but it wasn't like they could be certain.

A few days passed after Brunhild had begun to spend her time hiding from Sigurd.

Sven was in his quarters, focusing on training. Normally, he would be training himself out on the practice grounds, but it was already nighttime.

Sven was in the habit of moving his body whenever he had things to worry about. When he was exercising, he could avoid thinking too much.

On Sven's mind now was his own incompetence and worthlessness.

If only he had a sharp mind like Fafnir, if he could speak the Dragon's Tongue like Brunhild.

He had been forced to face that just being strong and being able to handle a spear would do nothing. But even so, all he could do was train himself.

Someone knocked on the door to his room.

For a moment, Fafnir's face popped into his mind. But he quickly realized there was no way. He would never leave Brunhild's side right now.

When he opened the door, there was Sigurd, in dragon form.

"What is it this late at night?"

Sigurd said something in the Dragon's Tongue. Sven couldn't understand what he was saying.

"Where is Lady Brunhild...?" asked Sven.

Sven just about looked around for her, but of course she wasn't there. Brunhild was off somewhere being treated.

Sven looked into Sigurd's eyes. To Sven, they looked lonely.

It had been one year since Sigurd had returned to them in a dragon's form. Brunhild had been with him that whole time—even more than Sigurd's retainer, Sven.

"It's lonely, huh, when Lady Brunhild goes away all of a sudden? If you would have me, I'll be with you."

Sven invited Sigurd into his room.

But though he invited him into his room, Sven knew he could do no more than that for his lord.

If I could speak the Dragon's Tongue, at least then I could be someone to talk to...

It was right when he thought that.

<Sven, can you hear me?>

Hearing that voice, Sven just about leaped up in the air.

What was that voice? That voice speaking into my mind.

Him and Sigurd were the only ones in the room.

It couldn't be that now His Majesty can...

<If you can hear me, then reply. Right now, I am speaking to you in the Dragon's Tongue.> That was a lie. That was something called the "True Language."

The True Language was a language that had been used long ago, before people had been divided into different races and came to speak different languages. It made it possible to communicate with all living creatures. The intellect or knowledge of the listener made no difference—it was a universal language that could communicate what you wanted.

This was something only the residents of Eden could use. It was not a language Sigurd could use.

The only one in this land who could use that language was the dragon, who had fled from Eden.

Brunhild's deductions were correct.

This was no longer Sigurd. His consciousness had been driven into the depths.

What lay before Sven was the Divine Dragon, pretending to be Sigurd.

But there was no way Sven would realize that.

He was filled with emotion. "I can hear you, my lord."

He was glad to have heard the voice of his lord.

"But why have I suddenly become able to hear the Dragon's Tongue?"

Sven had never heard the Dragon's Tongue or the True Language. So if he were told that the True Language was the Dragon's Tongue, he had no way of telling them apart.

<Brunhild brought back my consciousness with the power of love. So there's nothing strange about it if you came to understand my words through the power of loyalty.> The dragon's words were cunning. Having been so stricken by his own powerlessness, those words sank in deep. Who would blame Sven for feeling so euphoric?

"Oh, my lord. So I... So my loyalty wasn't mistaken?"

It was only natural that Sven was shedding tears.

Oh, I haven't heard the voice of my lord in so long.

The last time Sven had heard his lord's voice was that night one year ago. The night when they had gone to defeat the Divine Dragon had been the last time. Ever since that day, Sigurd had no longer been Sigurd.

It had been six months ago that the four of them had reconciled and been able to spend time together again. But by that time, Sigurd was in a dragon's body and had become unable to speak in a human voice. His words had been communicated through Brunhild's mouth, as his priestess.

It had been a very long time since Sven had last been able to hear the voice of the lord he loved and respected.

If not for that year long gap, would he have been able to notice?

That even the voice of his lord who he thought he was finally hearing was a fake.

<Sven. I have a special request for you.> "I'll do it. No matter what it might be."

Right now, he felt like he wouldn't lose, even if the giant dragons told of in legends were to stand in his way.

<It's about Brunhild and my wedding ceremony, coming up in three days.> "I've heard about it. Won't it be put off?"

Talks of putting it off had come up suddenly the other day. Fafnir had reported that Brunhild was not in good health.

<No, we'll have it on the day, as planned. I've given the order to my vassals.> "As planned...?"

Something felt odd.

Sigurd cared deeply for Brunhild. Would he force the ceremony to be held when Brunhild wasn't feeling well?

Sigurd said, **<The people are looking forward to it. The wedding ceremony is a festival that's only held once every few decades, after all. I don't want to take away their joy.>** "I see. You're quite right, my lord."

Sven was a little convinced. For the sake of the people's joy. That did seem very much like something Sigurd would think.

However, he offered his advice, nevertheless. "With all due respect, I say this. I very much understand your feelings for the people, my lord. But even so, shouldn't you prioritize my lady's health? The ceremony will not run away."

Sigurd hung his head like he was pained. **<...Brunhild isn't actually unwell.>** "What did you say?"

<I saw Brunhild speaking with Fafnir, in full health.> Sigurd continued, **<Thinking about it, the timing of her saying she feels unwell is strange. It's as if she's running away from me.>** Sven had also felt that was strange. Brunhild was supposedly being treated at a royal villa, but it hadn't seemed like she would need intensive treatment now. Plus, Sven had gone to visit Brunhild in the villa, but he hadn't been allowed to see her. At the time, Sven had felt rather like he was being avoided.

"It could be...that my lady is already feeling well. So then why would she avoid you?"

<Brunhild...may not want to be married to me. It seems like there's someone else she has feelings for. I wonder if Fafnir's actually the one she wants to be united with.> "That's impossible!" Sven shot back reflexively.

It was true the two of them were connected by a deep bond. But it didn't look at all to Sven as if they cared for each other as man and woman.

<I'm not sure. When Brunhild was in a frenzy from the poison and couldn't see around her, she only recognized Fafnir—she didn't recognize me.> "That's..."

Having that brought up as an example left Sven at a loss for words. But Sven still didn't think Brunhild was in love with anyone other than Sigurd.

<I don't mean to blame Brunhild for being drawn to Fafnir... I don't have a human body, after all.> Hearing that, Sven felt like something clicked.

My lord is just anxious. I also heard that he expressed before that this form of his isn't worthy of Lady Brunhild.

Sven had heard that from Brunhild. She had divulged to Sven that "I don't mind that he's a dragon, but it seems like Sigurd feels like he's not enough."

<Should we put off the ceremony, like you say? Brunhild might not attend the ceremony in the first place...> "No, let's have the ceremony. I will make sure Lady Brunhild attends," Sven said reassuringly. "Please leave it to me. I'll make sure to dispel all your anxieties."

Sigurd's expression brightened. **<Okay. You'll bring Brunhild to the ceremony for me?>** "Definitely. I swear on the loyalty in my heart."

After that, Sven enjoyed chatting with his lord to his heart's content.

There were so many things he wanted to say, wanted to ask.

Sven talked and listened to his lord's voice until night dawned.

The next day, three doctors came to the villa where Brunhild was. They had been sent in order to check on her health.

Fafnir tried to drive them away, saying that he was seeing to her, so there was no need, but he wasn't able to. The doctors had received orders from the knight Sven. Sven's rank was higher than Fafnir's, and on top of that, Fafnir not being a licensed doctor also affected the situation. Though he was more knowledgeable than a doctor, it was only things he had learned through self-study.

In the end, the doctors gave Brunhild a physical exam and declared that she was well enough to come to the ceremony in two days.

Their request to postpone the ceremony had been refused.

After the doctors had left, in the sickroom, Brunhild scrawled with her pen.

If he's this fixated on the ceremony, then does that mean that our deductions are on the mark, after all?

"I'm sure they are. It's fair to say it's certain that Lord Sigurd is no longer Lord Sigurd. And that he plans to try something at the ceremony."

With this, Brunhild was forced to attend the wedding ceremony. Up against someone who would resort to such forceful measures, Brunhild lying in bed with fake illness wouldn't work.

Brunhild wrote:

How about running away until my voice returns?

"Of course we should do that. However..."

Fafnir looked out the window.

There were multiple knights outside, and he locked eyes with one.

"It seems we're being watched."

It seemed it would be difficult for Brunhild to go outside before the wedding in two days.

Fafnir mentally ground his teeth for being so naive in his predictions.

He had anticipated that the Divine Dragon would act cautiously in order to hide his identity. Though his bold move had made them certain that Sigurd had already become the Divine Dragon, they had wound up completely on the defensive.

But there was still a way.

We just have to kill the Divine Dragon.

It was almost certain that they were up against the Divine Dragon. So then they should just kill him. If they were considering only Brunhild's life, then that would be enough. But if they just killed him, the situation afterward wouldn't be good. They would wind up as the rebels who had killed the king. There was no proof that it was the Divine Dragon inside Sigurd.

If we're to kill him, we have to expose him first...

As Fafnir was pondering, Brunhild held a sheet of parchment under his eyes.

Are you trying to kill Sigurd?

Her upturned eyes were uneasy. That startled Fafnir.

Fafnir had already been looking at the king as purely the Divine Dragon, but to Brunhild, he was still Sigurd.

Fafnir was still very unsure that he understood the feeling that was love.

But he could guess, at least.

“I will not kill my lord. I will think of a way to avoid killing him. So I would ask you to leave this matter to me.”

Hearing that, Brunhild decided to leave it to him.

I will trust you one more time, my retainer.

The wedding ceremony was coming up the next day.

Sven was headed to the villa. There was something he wanted to check with Fafnir about.

He reached the door of Fafnir’s quarters at the villa. It was right as a maid was coming out of the room. The maid seemed to be in a good mood.

That’s unusual.

The maid coming out of his room smiling meant that she must have had a pleasant conversation with Fafnir. But Sven doubted that Fafnir was capable of that sort of sociability.

No, he may have changed, in his own way. He’s the type who’s easily misunderstood, but you can’t say for sure that he’s a bad guy. He could make friends, too.

Sven knocked on Fafnir’s door.

When Fafnir came out to meet him, Sven said, “Do you have a minute?”

They sat down opposite each other, a table between them.

Once, they had drunk together. The room had been filled with a comfortable air at that time.

But there was none of that here. And it was not because the furnishings in this villa room were different from those of the royal castle.

It was clear that Fafnir was wary of Sven. He was skillfully hiding any signs of it, so an ordinary knight wouldn't have noticed, but Sven managed to pick it up.

Fafnir already saw Sven as an enemy. Fafnir knew very well that Sven was Sigurd's knight. So then even if the man himself was lacking self-awareness or hostility, he should consider him a spy for the Divine Dragon anyway.

"...What's your business?" Fafnir asked, slight tension in his voice. It had seemed as if their friendship had deepened, but now they were back at nothing again.

But from where Sven stood, it didn't make sense why Fafnir was so wary of him.

"Why have you hidden Lady Brunhild? She's already largely recovered her health, so why go so far as to lie and say that she's still ill?" There was no hostility in his voice. There was also no edge of blame.

One of the reasons that Sven had come here was his vow to his lady, Brunhild.

She had said Fafnir was the type to be easily misjudged. That was why Sven thought he would make clear the truth of what had happened, in his own way, to avoid misunderstandings.

"Isn't there some reason? You're not someone who would do things for no reason, are you?"

When Fafnir heard that, he realized that Sven was trying to meet him halfway. That was why an impossible idea crossed his mind.

If I could get Sven on our side...

The next day was the wedding ceremony. Fafnir had planned what he could. But he really couldn't say it was enough, the way things were. It would be one thing if they could just kill the Divine Dragon, but it would be fairly difficult to win while keeping him alive.

But if Sven was on their side, that would completely change things.

Even one year ago, Sven had reached a draw against the Divine Dragon. Now

that he was more polished, it would even be possible to completely shut down the dragon.

But it would never happen.

Fafnir couldn't think of a way to make Sven fight the Divine Dragon. Even if it was a different person on the inside, this knight would not point a blade at his lord.

Don't overthink things. It's no use to think about impossibilities.

What he should do now was to drive Sven away. Ultimately speaking, he shouldn't say a word to this man. It was fair to assume that everything would be repeated to the Divine Dragon.

Folding his fingers, he glared at Sven across from him.

But that was when the scent of wine wafted in from somewhere.

That was his imagination. He had just remembered the scent from seeing Sven's face.

But even knowing that it was a fantasy, his lips moved on their own.

"...The odds are high that Lord Sigurd is not Lord Sigurd."

He wanted to trust people—as his lady did.

Sven failed to understand what Fafnir meant, looking at him blankly. "...What are you talking about?"

"I mean that the Divine Dragon is pretending to be Lord Sigurd. That's why I drew Lady Brunhild away from him."

After a while spent seemingly digesting the meaning of those words, Sven burst out, "That's impossible!" His face was bright red with anger. "I spent the whole night speaking with Lord Sigurd of memories from when we first met until today... Those are memories the Divine Dragon couldn't know about!"

"Have you forgotten that the Divine Dragon and Lord Sigurd share a part of their memories? And more importantly, if you spent all night talking—how?"

"I've become able to speak the Dragon's Tongue, too."

"How can you speak it?"

“My feelings reached him. My feelings of wholehearted devotion to Lord Sigurd...”

Sven ground his teeth and glared at Fafnir. “You’ll laugh, won’t you? Telling me it’s impossible.”

“I won’t laugh. I don’t think it’s impossible.”

Sven was taken aback. This was Fafnir, so he’d thought for sure that he would reject that with logic. So joy welled up in his heart. He thought that Fafnir understood him.

But that wasn’t it.

“But I can think of a more convincing case than your feelings having reached him.”

“...Tell me.”

“The True Language.”

Brunhild had told Fafnir various things about Eden because he had interest in the fruit of life. In the process of gaining information about a fruit that could heal all ills, he had also learned about the True Language.

“The Divine Dragon came from Eden. We should assume that he can also use the True Language.”

“No. That’s the Dragon’s Tongue. That’s what Lord Sigurd said.”

“How can you tell them apart? You’re being deceived by the Divine Dragon...”

“Shut up!” Sven cut Fafnir off. He roughly grabbed Fafnir’s collar and yanked the man toward him. “Choose your next words wisely. If you insult my lord any further, I don’t know what I might do.”

Fafnir was certain.

This was not a threat.

Sven had lost his cool. He was not the type to kill thoughtlessly, but if he became emotional, he couldn’t be stopped. And even without that, Sven had inhuman strength, while Fafnir, on the other hand, was frail. Just a stroke from Sven might break his neck.

...I knew things would wind up like this.

But despite knowing that—

Despite knowing that no matter what he said, he couldn't convince Sven—

“...Sven. I want to save Lord Sigurd.”

“Don't lie. The only thing you care about is Lady Brunhild.”

“That may be the case. But If Lord Sigurd dies, it will make Lady Brunhild sad. So I can't kill Lord Sigurd.”

Fafnir lowered his eyes and said, “Because I love Lady Brunhild.”

Sven's eyes widened and he looked at Fafnir.

He had thought that the word “love” was completely out of Fafnir's realm.

“In order to save Lady Brunhild, I need your help.”

Sven remembered the conversation he'd had with Brunhild in the carriage.

“Be on Fafnir's side.”

...Isn't now exactly the time?

Sven understood, too—what Fafnir was saying might be right. At the very least, it made sense. That was why he'd gotten emotional.

Besides...

Sven looked at Fafnir with troubled eyes.

Fafnir was looking to him for help. Sven did feel like he wanted to respond to that.

He knew that Brunhild was number one in Fafnir's mind. And he was counting on him in a matter relating to her. That meant...

It's because he trusts me...

Sven liked to be relied on.

But right now, being relied on was a heavy weight.

There was a long silence. It was an agonizing moment.

But in the end, Sven said, “I am Lord Sigurd's knight. I cannot betray him.”

Sven decided to keep his promise to his lord.

He thought that Fafnir's deductions made sense. But deductions were ultimately no more than deductions.

"Being his servant, I must be on my lord's side at least. It would be too sad if nobody would believe what he says."

"I see... Of course."

The two of them separated in silence.

Sven released the clothing he'd been grabbing and made to leave the room.

But before leaving, Sven offered something.

It was a beautifully decorated gladius. It was given only to knights of the highest rank.

"If you're holding this sword, then you can give orders to my knights. I will entrust it to you. You should use it to help protect Lady Brunhild... I think you can make good use of it."

A knight could not betray his lord.

But abandoning those who relied on him was also not the act of a knight.

After pushing the gladius at Fafnir, now Sven left the room.

Finally, the day of the wedding ceremony had come.

People had gathered from all over the kingdom to celebrate the king and his lady. The people thronged in, since they could eat for free. It was fair to say that most of the nearby citizens were participating. Though they had ulterior motives for gathering, having people there enlivened the event. Having a full stomach and wine as well made you want to celebrate the king and his queen for giving you that food.

"Long live King Sigurd! Glory to our great king and his queen!"

The happy voices of the merry people rang out. Various people celebrated the wedding at the ceremony altar. Dancers danced, and musicians played their instruments. Along with the songs, a play was performed. The story of the play

suggested a bright future led by a great dragon king guiding the nation. The people sang loud and joined hands to dance.

When the festivities were at last reaching their peak, the guests of honor appeared.

They were set to kiss on the decorated altar.

Sigurd appeared from the sky above. The majestic sight of him landing on stage while whipping up a wind around him made the audience grow incredibly excited.

“Dragon King! Dragon King! Our Dragon King!”

After the dragon king landed, it was time for Brunhild.

The lady came, escorted by her servant Fafnir.

A path decorated with flowers led up to the altar. This was a path made only for the bride. The servant could not go with her, for this part.

Just once, the lady looked at her servant with unease. The servant responded with emotionless eyes. Then the lady stepped onto the bridal path.

With graceful steps, she trod down the path to the altar.

The dragon’s lady was beautiful and dressed up in an elegant dress. Her ruby necklace stood out. It was an heirloom of the royal family, given to her the night they swore their love.

A veil like dim light descended from the tiara on her head.

The very modest and mysterious veil wreathed the priestess’s face.

Upon arriving at the stage, the lady slowly climbed the steps.

After both of them swore eternal love, the time for the kiss came.

The dragon hung his head and waited for his wife to approach.

The wife approached the dragon, parted the veil with her slim fingers, and let her lips peek out.

The lips approached the dragon’s forehead.

That instant, the dragon lifted his head.

The dragon moved fast. The lady may not have even noticed her own death.

The audience would say that by the time they realized it, the lady's head was gone from her shoulders.

First came the violent sound of something tearing off.

The dragon king's great jaws had ripped off the queen's head, veil and all.

"My lady!" one in the audience cried out in fear.

The lady's body crumpled. At the same time, the veil that had covered her face slid down like a feather.

The face that was clasped in his jaws was not Brunhild's.

It was a body double.

The servant who had been a ways away raised up the blade he'd had hidden.

The gladius sparkled under the light of the sun.

"Get him!" Fafnir's blue eyes fixed coldly on the dragon.

The audience had been merrily dancing until then—now, some of them obeyed the order by the gem sword and charged the dragon king all at once. They were not the common folk. They were the proud elites of Sven's knights. They had been pretending to be commoners as they waited for the order. With weapons that they'd been hiding under their disguises in hand, they went to attempt to take the Divine Dragon alive.

Fafnir had been the one to arrange for his lady's body double.

He had tempted a maid who looked like Brunhild from behind with gold. Brunhild didn't know about this part. He had deliberately not spoken of it. If she had known, she would have stopped him. She wouldn't approve of anyone aside from herself being in danger. But this plan meant the fewest sacrifices of anything Fafnir could think of and was also the plan with the greatest hope of victory. Fafnir figured that if Brunhild found out that he hadn't explained any of the danger to the body double in order to keep her from doing anything strange, Brunhild would certainly look at him with scorn.

When the head of the body double fell, that line written on parchment crossed his mind.

I will trust you one more time, my retainer.

This was different from last time. Fafnir understood that this time, his plan had betrayed his lady's trust. But even so, this was the only way he could choose.

I do nothing but betray my lady.

The countless swords wielded by the elites made to pierce the tyrant dragon.

No matter how tough the dragon was, it should be impossible for him to handle all of them.

However, the knights hesitated just slightly. Their hesitation was caused by the order to take him alive. That was fatal.

The dragon howled. The people didn't know what he was saying. But if there had been a priestess there to understand the dragon's words, she would have been able to tell.

The dragon had cried, **<Kill them.>** Suddenly, the altar swayed wildly.

The people who had come to the festival looked all around in shock.

"No, that can't be..."

The dragon statues that were surrounding the altar—the dragon statues that lined the temple— With a rumble of the earth, they began to move. Just as if life had been breathed into them.

No—they had been living creatures to begin with. They were the private army that the Divine Dragon had been hiding.

They were people who had been made into evil dragons long ago.

They had been ordered to "be still" by the Divine Dragon. An evil dragon could fulfill simple orders. And if it was a simple order, then they could carry it out forever.

Continuously still over many months and years, the color of the evil dragons' scales had faded and weathered, and they had become like statues.

And now, on receiving new orders, they began to move...

In order to fulfill the extremely simple order to *“kill them.”*

The now-mobile dragons attacked the people all at once.

The sudden appearance of dozens of dragons shook the elites. They hadn't been told of such a situation beforehand. Fafnir hadn't anticipated it, either.

Seeing the dragon statues moving, though Fafnir thought they'd been had, he also thought it was quite a fine move by their enemy. *He'd never hidden his ambush—they were in front of us the whole time.*

The Divine Dragon had aimed for the wedding ceremony not only because Brunhild's security would be thinner. Fafnir thought that it was also to make sure that this ambush would kill Brunhild.

The dragon statues surrounding the kingdom...are most likely the Divine Dragon's servants.

When the elites flinched, the Divine Dragon made use of that opening. With his powerful tail and claws, he cut through the knights to escape his predicament. The advantage of the surprise attack had been completely lost.

Because this was supposed to be a celebration, the civilians and knights were hardly armed. It was fair to say that aside from the elites that Fafnir had set up, there were no real fighting forces.

The Divine Dragon began to trample the people along with the evil dragons.

With the scene of overwhelming power before his eyes, Fafnir understood.

He would die here. He did not have the sort military prowess where he could cut through a swarm of dragons.

But he was also relieved. Brunhild hadn't been brought here. In just one respect, the most important respect, he had gotten ahead of the Divine Dragon. It was frustrating that he had failed to read the Divine Dragon, but it was fair to call the result a victory.

There was a bit of time before the dragons would move from the temple into the town. He could have some of the wedding-goers escape and tell the town of the situation. Brunhild was smart. She would certainly find a way to get out of

this. And so long as her voice came back, then the kingdom should be able to recover.

Fafnir's role was over. There was no longer even a reason to resist.

But if it might be granted...

Fafnir raised the gladius.

Going back a little earlier—about an hour before, when the kiss vow was held.

Brunhild was at Beren. Fafnir had arranged for it. She pretended to change into her bridal outfit and put on a maid's outfit instead, then slipped out of the castle.

Fafnir said to leave everything to him and wait, but...

He hadn't told Brunhild anything of the ploy that he had come up with. Brunhild had hounded him quite a lot, telling him to tell her about the plan, but he never spoke, with unusual stubbornness. That's why Brunhild had given in, saying, "I'll trust you."

But she felt uncertain.

She was worried. She trusted Fafnir, but if something were to happen to him...

Unable to restrain her restlessness, Brunhild was walking around the room. She just couldn't settle down.

Someone opened the door of the room.

"Lady Brunhild?"

It was Sven.

Sven? Why is he here?

That day was to be Sigurd's wedding ceremony. Being Sigurd's retainer, it would be strange for Sven not to participate. Plus, Fafnir was the only one who knew about Brunhild being at Beren.

"Lady Brunhild, why are you here? The ceremony has already begun."

She couldn't even make a sound of protest. It was far stranger that she was here in the commercial area of the city.

Brunhild pulled out the parchment and feather pen that she carried around and tried to communicate in writing. But before she could, Sven grabbed her arm.

“Lady Brunhild. You should head to the ceremony right now.”

He took Brunhild to the ceremony.

Sven was trying to fulfill his promise to his lord.

He had guessed that if Fafnir was going to let Brunhild escape, then he might have her disguise herself as someone of a different rank. That was because one year ago, Sven had seen with his own eyes as the two of them had become slave and knight to escape the prison. Sven had been deeply impressed by that plan. With the thought that he should go beyond wielding his spear and also learn to strategize, Sven had studied Fafnir's methods without telling anyone.

He hadn't even dreamed it would be useful in a situation like this.

Of course, he had realized that the bride was a body double, but he chose not to point that out. If he did, that would mean everyone in the castle going out to look for the lady. If they did find her like that, it would embarrass her. That was not the act of a knight. For the sake of her honor, he had to keep it secret as he made her go to the ceremony.

Being that it was a festival day, many maids and lady knights had left the castle, and it took some time to pick out Brunhild. But from asking around, he found a strange maid who was headed to the slums despite it being a festival day, and he somehow managed to reach Beren.

“Being in an inn with such bad air will make you ill again. If you get some air outside and have fun, it should make your wounds heal faster. Come on, I'll bring you.”

Ignoring Brunhild's bewilderment, Sven pulled her hand. Brunhild couldn't hope to match his strength.

I can finally be useful to Lord Sigurd.

That was Sven's dearest wish.

But he had never been useful.

Sven had never realized it when Sigurd had first been taken over by the Divine Dragon. Even after learning about it, he had been unable to kill him like Brunhild. And on top of that, he hadn't even been able to properly carry out his bodyguarding of Brunhild, Sigurd's beloved.

So being able to be useful to Sigurd was a joy beyond what he had hoped.

Because I love Lady Brunhild.

That thought threw cold water on Sven's mood, and he came to a stop.

Sven believed in Sigurd. He wanted to be useful to his lord, and he didn't want to betray his lord.

But he just couldn't get Fafnir's words out of his head.

If Lord Sigurd truly has become the Divine Dragon...

Sven wouldn't accept that possibility. He'd even been trying not to think of it. Doubting one's lord was an act unbecoming of a knight. Most of all, he didn't want to think about it.

But the nasty feeling he got from his escapist thoughts had become quite a bit stronger now.

If he is the Divine Dragon, things will get bad.

Sven wasn't smart enough to figure out just what the Divine Dragon was trying to do. But he did understand that he was trying to lure Brunhild to the temple and do harm to her.

So then wasn't he trying to drag Brunhild helplessly into danger?

"Lady Brunhild..."

He just about said, *Please stay behind at the inn.* But he couldn't say it. After this much hesitation, he really couldn't turn his back on his lord's order. The arm grabbing Brunhild's slim wrist—that could not let go.

"I...have to take you to the altar."

It hurt so much, the words slipped out on their own.

With gently consoling hands, Brunhild touched Sven's free hand.

And then she made him open his palm.

She stroked her fingers across his palm to write letters.

It'll be okay. I was just planning to go to the temple anyway.

There was anger in her.

It was anger toward the dragon that had faked being Sigurd, who was forcing Sven to listen to his orders.

I'm worried about Fafnir. You come with me.

Brunhild picked up Falchion and hung it at her waist.

Her wrist was still in his grasp, but Brunhild pulled him instead.

I'm sorry, Fafnir. I can't leave everything to you, after all.

She would not be taken by Sven.

She ultimately decided of her own will to head to the temple.

By the time the two of them reached the temple, an incredible number of people had already gathered.

It was enough that they were jostling around and couldn't move. Everyone was merry and seemed to be having fun. The wedding ceremony was the day when the kingdom was most filled with energy.

Sven walking along with her was reassuring.

Brunhild alone would certainly have been jostled around in a heartbeat, but Sven protected her. Sven's burly arms parted the waves of people as they moved forward. He was the very knight from chivalrous tales, who would protect his lady.

It happened right when the two of them were about to reach the altar.

<Kill them.>

Only Brunhild heard the dragon's voice.

...That was the Dragon's Tongue.

Brunhild faced Sven and tried to tell him that she wanted to reach the altar as fast as possible, but it didn't work when she couldn't talk. She couldn't write to communicate in this crowd. And Sven being unable to hear the Dragon's Tongue was also fatal.

Before long, shrieks came up from ahead.

"Dragons are here! It's a swarm of dragons!"

A swarm of dragons! This can't be happening. Where did they come from...?!

Now Sven understood the situation.

The confused wedding guests rushing for the temple entrance caused people to fall like dominoes all over the place. Young children, women, and the elderly were the easiest to knock over. The fallen were trampled, kicked, and killed by the people running in confusion. If Sven hadn't been there, who knew what would have become of the fragile Brunhild. The knight among knights repelled the surging people like he was cutting through a tsunami. But even with Sven, they couldn't move forward. If he were alone, that would be one thing, but right now he had to protect Brunhild.

After enduring this for a while, the number of people fleeing from the temple decreased, and it seemed like they could somehow make it forward.

When Brunhild and Sven once again tried to head to the altar, they encountered countless dragons. The dragons were attacking the unarmed people.

Brunhild gave Sven a look. Her eyes were saying, "protect the people." In response to that, Sven began slaying the dragons.

The altar had become the picture of hell.

Even the elites who Fafnir had gathered had been helpless in the face of so many dragons.

The last of the knights fell, letting up a spray of blood.

Fafnir's shoulders were heaving as he watched this tragedy.

His wounds were also grievous. Blood from his cut forehead was flowing red over his face. Having been hit with strikes from dragon's claws and tail, his body would no longer obey him.

A dragon came before Fafnir.

It was Sigurd—no, the Divine Dragon.

The great fanged jaws approached threateningly. Facing off against him, all Fafnir had was a chipped gladius.

He had no hope of winning. He had fulfilled his duty. He understood the situation calmly.

“—!”

But even so, he swung down the gladius on the Divine Dragon's head.

He didn't want to die.

He wanted to continue watching over Brunhild.

Because for the first time, he was able to love someone.

The gladius struck the Divine Dragon's head.

It just made a clanging, metallic sound. It didn't even nick the scales—even though he had swung the blade with the intention of splitting open the dragon's skull. This was all that the powerless Fafnir could do.

Fafnir smiled in derision at himself.

It really is a lie that strong emotions give you strength.

Or perhaps because he was evil, he was just not granted the blessings of pure and clean strength.

The Divine Dragon's jaws opened to bite and shatter Fafnir's head. Finally, Fafnir gave up and closed his eyes.

With a *thud*, Fafnir felt himself being shoved from the side.

In surprise, he opened his eyes.

Someone who shouldn't be there was there.

Lady Brunhild.

Of all people.

Brunhild had rushed up to him to defend him. She had thrust Fafnir aside when he was just about to be crunched in the dragon's jaws. She had run to him quickly—fast enough that Sven's attempt to stop her hadn't made it in time. In the place that Fafnir had been a moment ago, now Brunhild was there.

That meant, in other words, Brunhild was about to meet the dragon's fangs.

Brunhild understood this, too. She had leaped out knowing that this would happen.

She had no hesitation. She wanted to save him.

Just how much has Fafnir helped me before today?

Just once, she would save him. She had made up her mind.

The sound of slicing flesh.

Brunhild's right arm flew through the sky.

The great jaws bit Brunhild's shoulder and even ripped off a part of her right breast.

While spraying blood like a fountain, Brunhild collapsed.

Fafnir was stunned, looking down at his lady lying still on the floor.

"Lady...Brunhild...?"

The clamor around him receded.

Instead, the sound of pattering rain approached, like it was sneaking up to him.

"Lady Brunhild."

Fafnir rushed up to Brunhild and held her in his arms.

There was no light in her eyes. They were unfocused, and you couldn't tell where they were looking.

Her face was pallid, and her lips were purple. Gushing blood was dyeing her

clothing crimson. Broken ribs were poking out from where her right shoulder had been cut.

He could hear the wheezing breaths coming from her mouth. So if the question was if she was alive or dead, she was still alive.

But with a fatal wound this bad, it was crueler for her to be breathing.

The sound of rain became stronger—the sounds of that winter, heard seven years ago.

Fafnir was crushed.

But it was not because his lady was going to die.

Now he suddenly understood the answer to everything.

Just now, Fafnir had thought that he didn't want to die—that he wanted to keep watching over Brunhild.

Now he understood the real reason he had thought that.

What he had truly wanted to watch over was not Brunhild's life.

He had wanted to watch over her death.

In the depths of his heart, he had been expecting her to die.

If, one day, the time came when he could see his lady's death, then wouldn't he be stricken with powerful lamentation, this time, for sure? Then wouldn't he know? If he was able to love someone. Just like that time she had pointed out that he was smiling.

He would know if he, too, had a human heart.

But there was not a single ripple in Fafnir's heart.

He remembered the time when he had left the underground prison in order to save Brunhild. He had killed the jailer. The jailer had looked up at Fafnir, pressing his neck as blood flowed out, but still alive. Seeing that, Fafnir had thought— *It might be better to finish him off.*

Looking down at Brunhild, he was thinking the same thing.

It might be better to finish her off.

The gladius in his hand now reminded him of that short sword from back then. If he cut deep into her neck, she would groan and then die. Just like that jailer.

These six years since meeting Brunhild, he'd been dreaming the whole time.

In the dream, he was capable of loving people. He could become indignant from their pain and could cry. He could be glad of others' happiness as if it were his own.

Perhaps that was simple, for many people. But for Fafnir, there was nothing more difficult.

That was why Brunhild was a woman from a dream.

It had been irritating to watch because she had everything he wanted.

A shred of dreams—if he had that at his side, then he felt like he could be kind, too.

He'd thought that if he cared for it, if he treasured it with his life, then maybe he could come to love it.

...Oh, I see.

I never did love Lady Brunhild.

I just wanted to believe I did.

Even with her at death's door in front of him, no tears or sadness welled up.

Just like his sister, who had died from being eaten by the dragon.

Fafnir was filled with an unchanging emptiness.

He had his answer.

It was only in stories that puppets gained hearts.

No matter what you did, trash would never change from trash.

I keep hearing the old sounds of rain.

So this moment, the point and value in protecting Brunhild had vanished.

No matter how I treasure this now, there's no point.

So then...

Rather than dragging out her suffering, I should kill her.

So he thought.

So...he thought...

But despite that, Fafnir sheathed the gladius.

He had never been more disappointed in himself than now. He didn't want to obey that side of himself.

Even if I'm still that trash abandoned in the rain.

Even so, I don't want to give up on this dream...on her.

It was a vain struggle.

Scooping up the dying Brunhild in his arms, he ran. His body could hardly move, but right now, he could carry Brunhild and run.

He ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

As if pursuing this fading dream.

The warmth in his arms was quickly being lost. It was as if the sounds of the rain that only Fafnir could hear were stealing away her body heat.

He knew where he was going.

There was only one place he could think of, if he was to save his dying lady.

He opened the hidden door to the underground.

He went down, and down, and down the stairs.

An underground space like a limestone cavern.

The light from its depths lit the two of them. He hoped that the heat there would bring back even a little of Brunhild's warmth.

When he arrived, Fafnir called out, "Lord."

Now only God could save Brunhild.

“I offer my soul.”

These words from an atheist were more like a spell to summon the devil.

He didn't believe in God.

But even so, he was certain.

If there was a god, he would be sure to save Brunhild.

Because she was from a different world than him.

She was a resident of a world that was just as distant as God's.

Fafnir held up Brunhild to the ball of light—

To the light of destruction that had made the original dragon fall.

The Divine Dragon's wish had been to see his dead wife once more. That was all.



That was why he had given his wife's bloodline the special rank of priestess and treasured them. He had seen the shadow of his wife in his wife's children.

Of those descendants, Brunhild had looked even more like his wife than any of the priestesses of the past. She was just like her reincarnation.

But Brunhild was no longer useful to the Divine Dragon.

She had someone else in her heart, and most of all, she was aware of the power of her voice. The Divine Dragon no longer had Brunhild at his mercy. He had thought he had no choice but to vanish at this rate.

So when Brunhild had lost her voice, he'd thought it was the perfect chance. The Divine Dragon had taken control of Sigurd's body once more and pushed for the wedding ceremony to happen.

Since she resembled his wife, he'd wanted to do the kiss of love.

He knew the kiss of love was not for him. But that was fine. Before dying, he'd wanted to dream.

Since he'd been cursed by God, after his death, the Divine Dragon would most definitely not go to the same place as his wife.

So the Divine Dragon hadn't become fixated on the wedding ceremony in order to kill Brunhild. He had planned to vanish quietly away, if he could just get that kiss.

But the bride who had come to him was not his wife.

She had shrewdly hidden her face with a veil, but the Divine Dragon had understood immediately—especially since there was no way he would mistake his wife's face.

So before he could be kissed, he killed her with a bite. It was a reflexive action. This incredible mockery had made his head go red with anger.

Next, the cry of "Get him" came, and hidden knights came to attack him. It seemed that they had arranged a surprise attack on him to begin with.

So then the Divine Dragon would show no mercy, either. He also felt indignation at his final, naive wish being denied.

And indeed, that wish had been naive. But considering the atrocities this dragon had committed, Fafnir and the others would never have realized such a possibility.

The Divine Dragon summoned the dragon statues and fought back. He had also abandoned himself to his anger, biting the knights to death.

So the Divine Dragon had not wanted to fatally bite Brunhild.

She truly had been fast, leaping out to defend her servant. By the time the Divine Dragon realized what was happening, it was already too late.

When he ripped off Brunhild's right arm, the Divine Dragon stopped.

But he immediately reconsidered. There was nothing left to it but to kill her.

He thought of Brunhild as an impudent little girl. He had no more love for her. But as she resembled his wife, he hadn't wanted to hurt her for no reason.

Brunhild's servant fled, taking the dying girl with him. The dragon snapped his fangs in pursuit, meaning to kill them.

But his fangs were repelled by a blade. There was the intense sound of colliding iron, but Fafnir never heard it, as focused as he was on heading underground.

A knight bearing a magic spear swayed as he came to stand before the Divine Dragon. His eyes were glaring at the dragon.

The Divine Dragon knew from personal experience that this knight was stronger than him. But there was no fear at all in him.

Since the Divine Dragon knew.

He's a fool.

Now the Divine Dragon lived in Sigurd's body.

So this knight could not kill him. He was a fool who, even knowing that it was the Divine Dragon inside, could not point a blade at something that had once been Sigurd. For a time, the dragon had acted as Sigurd and seen the man's foolish honesty for himself, so he was certain.

Cruelty grew in the Divine Dragon's heart. One night some time ago, he had

nearly been killed by this man. He felt it would not be so bad to rid himself of that humiliation.

The Divine Dragon's body swayed like heat haze and then suddenly split into many countless beasts. It was a spell of illusion.

The many dragons swung their claws all at once. The frightening thing was that these illusions generated by this superior spell had real substance. Dozens of claws came at once. If any of them were to connect, the knight's body would be easily sliced up. If they hit, he would die, but there was nowhere to run.

But in the end, was the Divine Dragon the only one to have used a spell of illusion?

His opponent had used illusion as well. That was all the Divine Dragon could assume.

By the time he realized it, the knight had vanished from the claws encircling him.

"As you wish."

The dragon heard that voice coming from behind.

Feeling a shiver, he turned around.

The magic spear was red with blood.

He had already been sliced up.

All the illusions the Divine Dragon had created had been pierced, to become mist.

Looking at the spewing blood, he realized he had been cut.

By the time he realized it, the magic spear vanished again.

He heard a whispered voice. "As you wish."

His wing was sliced up.

The Divine Dragon understood—this was no spell of illusion. The man was just wielding his spear that fast.

Faster than he could see, faster than he could feel the pain, his body was sliced up.

Through accumulated training, Sven had polished his skill with the magic spear even more, and now it was faster than sound.

Every time the dragon's body was sliced, he could hear "As you wish," being said. The voice was quiet and small, but it sounded terribly frightening to the Divine Dragon. Everything from the magic spear was lethal, but in being able to bear it, the Divine Dragon was also uncommonly strong. But that wouldn't last long.



Why...?

The Divine Dragon didn't understand. It wasn't why this man was so strong.

What he didn't understand was why this knight could wield his blade on him, when he was using Sigurd's body.

He shouldn't be able to point a blade at me, so how...?

While wielding his spear, in his head, Sven was remembering his lord over and over.

"If the Divine Dragon takes control of me, kill me."

The night that Brunhild had been attacked, he had been given that order. He had never heard his voice. At the time, Sigurd had been unable to speak.

He had just started fixedly at Sven's spear.

From that gaze, he had been reminded of his lord's voice. That was truly a fake voice. Since it wasn't a voice he had really heard, but just a voice Sven had heard in his head. But when he heard that order, Sven was able to act. He felt he had to fulfill his lord's order.

The Divine Dragon crumpled and fell. There was no longer any unwounded part of his body.

Now there was only to end his life.

Sven raised his spear and replayed his lord's order one more time. "As you wish."

The Divine Dragon came for him in a flash.

The blade sank into the Divine Dragon's breast. In order to pierce his heart.

Right before it could, the Divine Dragon's remark made it in time. *"Will you betray me?"*

His blade stopped.

It had sunk into his breast, but then stopped.

Caught between loyalty and an order, the knight stopped.

But the knight's expression did not twist in remorse or anger.

He understood, in his own way that things would most likely wind up like this.

The knight heard the sound of flesh being deeply severed—inside his own body.

Just a stroke from one claw left the knight's body severed in two to fall to the ground.

It was the death of the knight.

"Ha...ha-ha."

Looking down at the knight sliced right in two, the Divine Dragon laughed loud.

I won. I've won!

I had been close, but in the end, he had won.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The Divine Dragon's wounds rapidly regenerated. The spear that had been thrust in his chest fell regretfully to the floor.

The joy of victory that filled the dragon quickly turned to anger at the knight. He was enraged at having been wounded, for having been brought that close to death. When his body regenerated, he approached the knight's corpse. It had already been cruelly cut in two, but he wouldn't be satisfied until he crushed it into a ball of flesh.

But the dragon was unable to defile the knight's corpse.

Because he felt a sudden chill.

No—calling it a chill would be underplaying it.

What ran through him was a primal, instinctual terror.

The Divine Dragon didn't know it. The one who had actually witnessed that light was not the Divine Dragon.

But the original dragon had seen it, and his body had been burned. That was why it had been carefully embedded in the memories of all dragons.

The light of destruction. The fear of divine thunder...

Sensing that, he turned around.

Someone was looking down on the Divine Dragon. It was a woman, from far above.

She had no wings or feathers. But she was clearly flying.

She needed no wings or feathers.

God and angels do not use such things for flight, after all.

The woman was looking down. She had black eyes and black hair.

Her right arm was gone. A golden glow like sparks was spilled out from that place instead.

The moment he saw her, he understood.

That would be his death.

His frightened instincts struggled.

He spat fire up into the air. It spread like a fan, and it couldn't be dodged. The flames were of an incredible temperature, hot enough to melt iron like candy. Any creature caught by it wouldn't stand a chance.

The woman cut right through the flame.

If that body belonged to God, then it would not be injured by the laws of the world.

By the time she came into view, she was grasping something like lightning in her hand.

Thunder.

The war between dragon and God had ended in ancient times.

So this wouldn't even be a contest—

He was burned by the lightning. Even while being tortured by intense pain, the Divine Dragon tried to escape. Flapping his wings, he quickly made use of an illusion spell to trick his pursuit and flee.

But no matter how quickly he moved, God caught up at the speed of light, and the illusions didn't work. Her divine eye picked out the real thing from the

countless illusions and attacked it.

Unable to even leave the temple, the Divine Dragon fell. The impact cracked the floor open.

With the Divine Dragon being literally unable to move beneath her, the woman descended.

The Divine Dragon glared at her with eyes of hate.

Even the beautiful face that was just like that of the woman he'd loved brought only hate now that she was an enemy.

But when the woman approached the Divine Dragon, she released the thunder that was held in her right hand.

Instead, she moved her lips. The sound wouldn't come out right. "...Ih...uh..."

He thought she was trying to call Sigurd's name in order to make him go away. But because of the poison, her tongue wouldn't work right.

Touching the fallen dragon, she looked as if she were clinging to him.

Serves you right, he thought.

The Divine Dragon's wish had not been granted, but the current situation wasn't all that bad to him, either.

He had killed many of the people with Sigurd's body. Many humans had witnessed the savagery of the Dragon King. Even if, after this, Sigurd were to regain control and explain the situation, he doubted that Sigurd would get away without consequences. Even if he was the king, the opposition would be intense. If Brunhild tried to protect him, then she would be in danger, too. And this foolish girl would certainly do that for her lover.

They may be driven from the country. Just like us.

Inside the Divine Dragon, on the verge of death from Brunhild's thunder, hatred for her was swirling around.

Suffer to the utmost.

<Foh...ih... me. Ur...> Thinking about the suffering that awaited Brunhild, even her attempts at repeating her lover's name were as pleasant as a lullaby.

But as the Divine Dragon was listening, he realized.

She was not calling Sigurd's name.

<For...ive me. Urgi...> She was trying to say, "forgive me." Most likely for having wielded the thunder. Even if she had to do it to stop him, she was apologizing for having hurt him.

He was assaulted by pain like gouging in his heart.

It had been a very long time ago—

When he had fled from heaven's will and left the island of Eden.

When he had learned that he had been cursed, she had cried.

"Forgive me."

She had blamed herself, thinking he had been cursed because of her. Even though there had been no need. Since he had made up his mind to leave the island knowing that he would be punished.

But no matter how many times he'd said it, she had never stopped blaming herself.

She'd kept repeating, **<Forgive me.>** While nestling close to the dragon, clinging to him in tears.

He had loved her, however she looked.

But he hadn't been able to take seeing her like that.

That was why he'd forgotten all this time. Because he'd only wanted to remember the parts that he'd loved.

No feelings of sympathy for Brunhild welled within him. Tears shed for another man were only repugnant to him.

But even so, the Divine Dragon could not bear the sight of Brunhild.

She truly looked so much like her—

So unhappily, more like any priestess of generations past.

He had finally found the wife he had been searching for all this time...

In the most undesirable form.

So the Divine Dragon's consciousness vanishing was not because of God's order or out of pity.

The Divine Dragon had decided to erase his own consciousness for his own sake.

Having his wife continue to apologize to him any further was more painful than death.

So before vanishing, the Divine Dragon thought.

If he had been his old self. If it had been back when he'd been able to love all the creatures of paradise— Maybe he would have been able to choose his own death for the sake of this girl.

If he'd done that, then maybe he could have vanished with more peaceful feelings.

At the end, the Divine Dragon looked at his own body—the youthful body that had maintained without rotting by eating people and its stainless, pure-white scales.

But...

It wasn't only my body that was rotting.

With that, the Divine Dragon's soul vanished.

<**Brunhild.**> She could hear the Dragon's Tongue.

Brunhild could immediately tell that it wasn't the Divine Dragon that had called her name.

<**Si...ur...**> She didn't know why Sigurd's consciousness had come back, but nothing could make Brunhild gladder.

But she couldn't just be happy about it.

In the distance, she could hear many footsteps. There was also the clanking of armor. The knights had heard about rampaging dragons and were rushing over.

Shielding Sigurd behind her back, she faced the footsteps. Between the fingers of her right hand, sparks crackled.

Brunhild was prepared.

She planned to fight.

No matter how many knights attacked, no matter what magic weapons they might attack with, Brunhild would fight to protect Sigurd.

Sigurd sensed a deep determination from her small back. The woman who had been kinder to him than anyone. The woman who had loved him. That kindness, that love was about to turn the other direction.

Most likely, she would kill people, if it was in order to protect someone she loved.

She was capable of that now.

He couldn't let her do that.

Sigurd didn't know anything more sorrowful than the reversal of that kindness.

Still, there was no way to convince the knights or the people. There had already been plenty of people to begin with at the royal castle who viewed Brunhild with hostility.

So Sigurd could only think of one way out of this situation.

Sigurd's eyes gazed at Falchion, at Brunhild's waist.

He would not discuss it. She would obviously be against it, and most of all, there was no time. Of course it would be bad for Brunhild to fight the knights, but it would even be bad if she was to be seen by them trying to protect a dragon.

Sigurd moved his right arm and drew Falchion.

Brunhild turned around in shock.

<Wha...?> Sigurd's arm was that of a dragon. Even if he could clasp a sword, he couldn't wield it well.

But fortunately, the scales of Sigurd's breast were broken from the shock of his fall.

The sword would get through.

Falchion's point was drawn into Sigurd's chest.

Piercing his heart, he died. The sword was thrust in him like a grave marker.

Brunhild acted immediately. Thinking to save Sigurd, she tried to pull out the sword.

The knights came to them.

“My lady!”

“Are you all right?”

The knights looked at the dragon.

It was right as Brunhild was pulling the sword out from Sigurd’s breast.

Seeing the queen draw out Falchion, someone said, “Dragonslayer.”

That word reverberated within Brunhild.

“Lady Brunhild killed the dragon for us.”

If she had been able to speak, maybe she would have been able to deny it immediately.

Saying—*no. I never wanted to kill him.*

But she couldn’t articulate her words, so she couldn’t say it.

But thanks to that, she had just a bit of time to think.

Brunhild quickly understood that Sigurd had died in order to protect her.

I see. If he made her up to be the dragon-killing hero, then he could protect her.

But Brunhild could not forgive him.

For the first time since she was born, she sincerely hated Sigurd.

It was a feeling she hadn’t even had when he’d cut her right eye.

She had been fine, no matter how many times he had caused her trouble.



She had been fine, even if they made enemies of the people of the kingdom and the knights, everything.

And she had never cared that he had the body of a dragon.

She had wanted him to live.

She wanted to cry, and she wanted to yell at him.

But she was not so foolish that she would abandon herself to emotion and throw away what her husband had left to her.

Brunhild raised up the sword that she had drawn from the dragon's breast and raised it to the heavens.

The energy returned to the knights and people there. The despair that had filled the temple evaporated.

Amid the destruction the dragon had wrought, the majestic figure of the dragonslaying lady lit hope in the people's hearts.

And the girl resigned herself to the disgrace of being called dragonslayer.

If Sigurd had been alive, he surely would have wanted this.

She was thankful that she couldn't speak. If she had been able to speak, then she certainly would have spoken of her husband's innocence.

It was hard not to cry.

The Falchion blade that she raised up then would come to be told of in tales as the dragonslaying sword.

There were countless bodies scattered about the temple.

One among them still breathed.

It was Sven.

His body had been cut in two, leaving only his upper body, but he was alive thanks to the blessings of spirits.

But he would soon die. Blessings were blessings, and not healing.

His body would no longer move. Only his mouth, just barely.

As Sven was waiting to die, a man came to him.

It was Fafnir. In his hands he clasped a broken gladius.

Sven looked up at Fafnir, and while spitting blood, he said, "I envied you."

He looked at the dragonslaying goddess that had unquestionably been Brunhild.

"You saved your lady, even from the brink of death."

He envied that.

In the end, he hadn't been useful to his lord, even once. Not only that—he hadn't even been able to commit to his loyalty.

In the end, I am a disloyal man.

But even so, if there is still something that I can do...

Sven's eyes looked at the broken gladius.

"Kill me with that sword."

Even without that, he would soon die. But Sven felt a clear difference in being killed versus dying of his own will.

Even if he had been able to kill the Divine Dragon, Sven had planned to die.

He had never planned to make his lord go to the Kingdom of Eternity alone.

So being killed by the Divine Dragon and suicide meant completely different things.

If his own arms could move, he would have died himself, but he had no strength left.

Looking down on Sven, Fafnir said, "I envy you, too."

Fafnir didn't understand Sven's feelings, the desire to follow one's lord since he had died. Even after just about losing his lady, no feelings had come up inside him at all.

So he envied Sven, who could feel for his lord from the bottom of his heart.

He thought that the one who truly should survive was not himself but Sven, since he could love and adore people.

Fafnir squatted down and put the gladius to Sven's neck.

Then his hand stopped—even though he should have been used to dealing with this.

Draw the blade to the side, and Sven would die.

Even knowing it was useless, he looked at the man's shredded lower body.

He got a whiff of wine.

Fafnir froze, continuing to stare down at Sven.

It looked to Sven as if Fafnir, frozen there, was trying his best to cry for him.

Even though it wouldn't be anything admirable if he could cry... If he could mourn.

But telling Fafnir that wouldn't save him. Since to him, being able to shed tears, to mourn, was the most important thing of all.

Sven let out a weak breath and said, "There's no more time."

Fafnir started to move. "I will deal with you."

He drew the blade of the broken gladius to the side.

Fafnir was able to properly handle the gladius that had been entrusted to him.

When Sven felt his life running out, he said, "Thank you."

After Fafnir was done, he muttered, "...Your thanks are mistaken."

Gently touching the eyelids of the corpse, he closed them.



Epilogue

Many people had died because of the Divine Dragon.

However, the unprecedented draconic disaster had been kept to the minimum by Brunhild, who wielded a portion of God's power.

The people called her the dragonslayer and revered her.

Having lost their king, many of the people wished for her to rule the land.

And she met their expectations, with the determination to make a country where the people would never again be threatened by dragons.

The queen's fight continued.

That was because there were still many dragons lurking throughout the kingdom. The rows of dragon statues were the greatest examples of those.

The queen went around slaying dragons in order to keep from making more people mourn due to dragons.

Always in her heart as she rushed around were Sigurd's words from when he had first challenged the Divine Dragon.

She wanted to free the kingdom from the control of dragons and create the land that her late husband had wished for.

It was fair to say that her hard work bore fruit.

The queen's rule was peaceful. Historians look back on it as the gentlest era in the history of the kingdom.

After the queen herself destroyed all the dragons within the kingdom, she

was able to live a peaceful life.

And Brunhild, who had been a priestess, was given a new family name appropriate to the new royal line.

It was, in connection with the legendary dragonslayer: Siegfried.

Very often, the name Brunhild was given to daughters of the Siegfried family. They were named after the great queen.

Eventually, the queen came to the end of her life.

Since she wielded the power of God, her lifespan was shorter than that of a normal human. It was the price to be paid for holding such power beyond her position.

Right before her death, she called for her servant.

“There is no one less appropriate than I to attend you on your deathbed.”

There were many kind people around Brunhild now. They were those who had been drawn by her character. Fafnir thought that such people were worthy of seeing her at her last.

Fafnir had continued to serve the queen as her retainer, but he had endeavored to keep his distance from her—ever since that day that he learned he felt nothing, even when just about losing Brunhild.

Fafnir left the room and tried to go summon another servant. But the queen stopped him.

“Be with me.”

He thought that he should ignore that and call for someone. But this could well be the queen’s final request. So then Fafnir would be unable to shake it off.

Fafnir returned to Brunhild, lying in her bed.

“I cannot mourn your death or cry for you,” he said.

And then he confessed. “I wasn’t able to love you.”

He told her because it was the end. This was what he had never said, because he didn't want to disappoint her. He knew she had much affection for him. He hadn't wanted to let her know that was all in vain.

With that, Brunhild realized: "You must resent me."

The innocent words that the young Brunhild had said—*"You should just come to love me. Then you won't be lonely anymore."*

That had been no more than a child's nonsense. But those words had always kept Fafnir tied down, like a curse.

It was something Brunhild could do easily, but Fafnir could not. Being so young, she hadn't understood something so simple.

Brunhild wept and apologized, "I'm sorry."

Without even being able to have his eyes water, Fafnir replied, "There's nothing you need to apologize for, Lady Brunhild."

"But you worried and struggled because of me, didn't you?"

Fafnir recalled the day of the draconic disaster and what he had felt with Brunhild before him, on the verge of death.

"Yes. I worried and struggled. And I despaired and was disappointed."

"But," Fafnir continued—

"Without your words, I wouldn't have followed my dream."

It had been a dream too warm for discarded trash left in the rain.

"So I'm glad that I met you."

The dream had been shattered. But it was still here, cobbled back together.

"If I'd never met you, then..." she trailed off.

Her thanks were from the heart. The powerless young girl had been able to keep having reckless dreams because there had been someone there to support her.

But her thanks did not reach Fafnir, after all. Because he thought of himself as no more than trash. He certainly thought that Brunhild's thanks was misplaced. She wanted to use every word at her disposal to tell him that it was not, but Brunhild no longer had that much time, so she had no choice but to give up.

She decided that, at the end, she would ask something that she just had to know.

"Fafnir. What sort of dream were you chasing?"

After a silence like he was shy, Fafnir answered, "Paradise."

His silver hair, looking down at the girl, rustled. "Creatures of paradise. Everyone loving and feeling affection for one another. No conflict and not even any hatred. Building that sort of paradise was my dream when I was young."

It had been a dream that he'd given up on when he'd realized that he had no heart.

Since in order to make it come true, he would need to love someone.

The long bangs of the silver hair that filled his head, the blue eyes that peeked out between them gazing at Brunhild— Brunhild thought that they were a beautiful color. They looked to her like an ocean that went on forever.

"I wish you would have told me about that dream earlier."

"I'm not qualified to talk about it, after all."

Most of all, it didn't suit him. That was why he never said anything.

Brunhild got a faraway look. Fafnir could tell that she would die very soon.

Her eyes looked as if they were gazing somewhere that was not here.

"I'd like to go, too—to your paradise."

They were the thoughtless words of a dead woman. But he decided to play along, since this was his lady's last moments.

"I'd welcome you there, my..."

The servant was about to call her "my lady." But he hesitated, since it didn't seem right at that moment. He used a different expression.

...My queen.

That was what the man called her.

“I will go to see it. Most definitely.”

A silence fell.

“If we ever meet again...”

...This time for sure, I will love you.

He was about to say that but stopped.

Because Brunhild had passed away.

Fafnir looked down at her dead face for a long time.

...So this is the face of the dead.

Having lived on the dark side, he had seen many bodies. But now, the face of the corpse before him was different from any of those.

It was a peaceful face, as if she would wake the next day and they would meet again.

Even when she died, the man did not shed a single tear, after all.

But now was the one time when that was fine.

With such a peaceful sleeping face in front of them, even someone who wasn't heartless wouldn't feel sorrow.

It was as if she had made it so that he wouldn't feel obliged over being unable to shed tears over someone's death.

She really is such a good person... It's difficult to understand her.

Fafnir immediately began dealing with postmortem matters—without even feeling upset.

The priority was to dispose of God's power.

The dragonslaying power was no longer necessary. Brunhild had spent her whole life killing all the dragons across the kingdom.

So then God's power should be consigned to oblivion so that it would never again be seen by the eyes of man. Power would lead to conflict.

That was what he thought to do.

But then he stopped.

Since it seemed like the final kindness that Brunhild had left.

A future.

On the off chance that this kingdom was attacked by dragons, that kindness would be necessary— As a power to resist dragons, as a power to protect people, as a power for the sake of peace, as a power to open the future.

The queen's greatest wish had been that there never be any more sacrifices made because of dragons.

Fafnir decided that he would entrust God's power to Brunhild's successors only.

So then I have to name this.

He came up with a name immediately. He was well-informed in history and legend.

*

Balmung. It was named after a dragonslaying sword.

He named it with consideration for the queen's wish that she wanted to protect people from dragons.

Not long after the queen died, her servant died as well.

After that, many long years and months passed, but the kingdom was never again threatened by dragons.

Perhaps the queen's prayers were heard.

Balmung gradually vanished from the people's memories.

Only the Siegfried family succeeded the memory of Balmung continuously, as a secret.

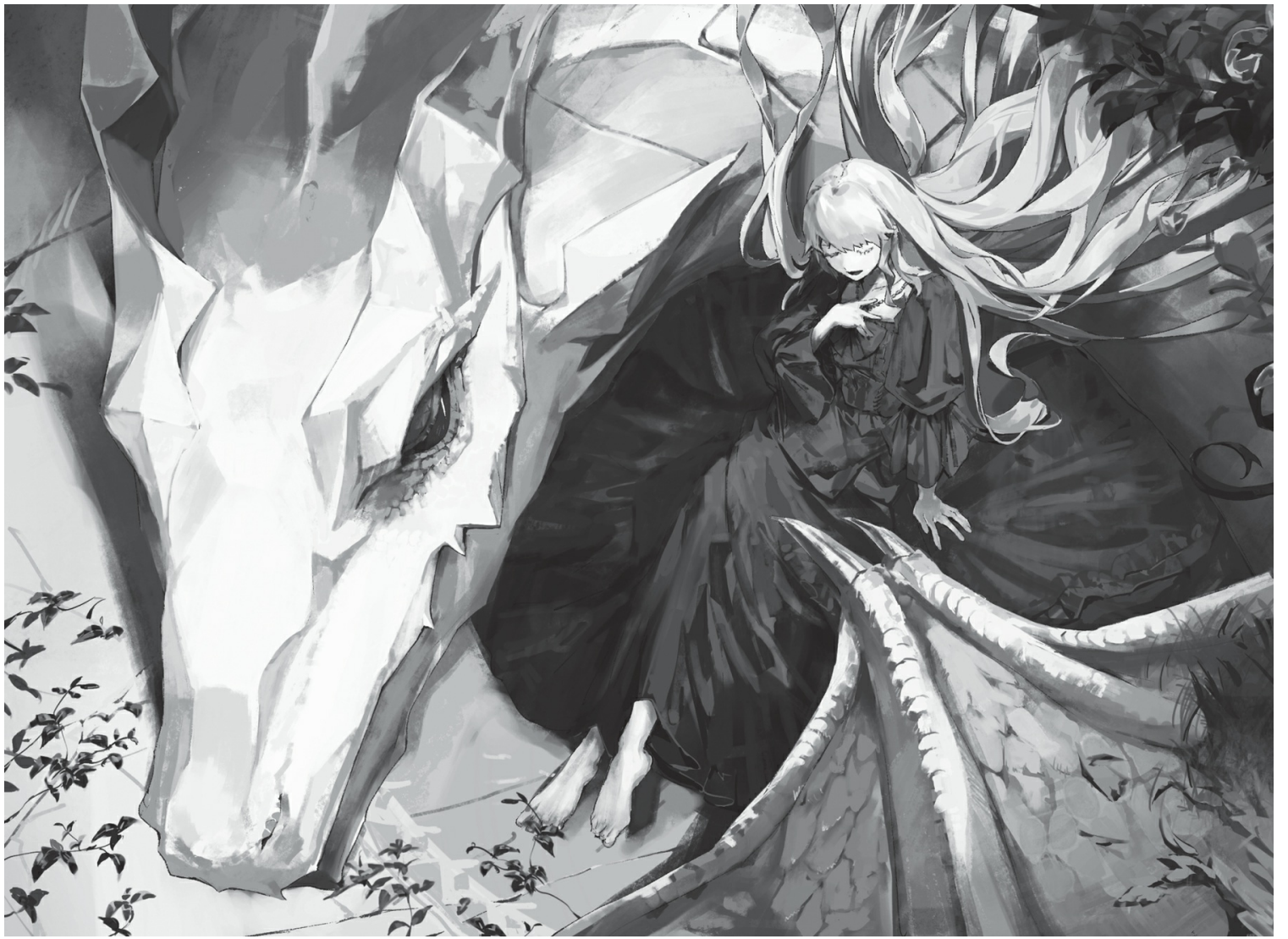
A long time passed.

When the kingdom became an empire...

Balmung would once again be revealed to the world.

But it was not to protect the people from dragons.

But as a weapon to steal the island's treasures from dragons.





Afterword

When writing a story, I endeavor not to hold out on things.

I write everything about the lives and attitudes about life that the characters have. I don't leave more for the sequel. I throw it all in with such full force when writing it all that I can't write a sequel. That's my own sort of courtesy to the story and to the people who read it. When I heard that *Brunhild the Dragonslayer* would keep going, I think maybe people worried thus:

Won't that be superfluous?

Please don't worry about that. The story of the Brunhild who was prefixed with Dragonslayer ended there. To be honest, I did have the urge as the author to change the ending and write a sequel where she is saved. But nobody wants that. Of course the readers don't, and most of all, Brunhild herself would reject that. Changing her story would be the same as rejecting her attitude to life and her life itself.

Just, please forgive me for the side stories that I wrote about in the bonus. Thanks to all the readers' support, *Brunhild* was blessed with the opportunity for five side stories, but of those, four of them were what-if stories with some saving going on. But side stories are side stories. They're not the main story, so please be merciful.

Getting back on track.

I've written everything about the Brunhild who was a dragonslayer. But I felt that there were still things remaining that I could write about in the world she inhabited. It seems that I like Brunhild's world more than I expected.

But I struggled very much.

I had the feeling that no matter what I wrote, I wouldn't be able to do better than *Dragonslayer*. I finished writing *Dragonslayer* in ten days, but it took me over a year to write *Dragon Princess*. Many stories were born and then binned by me. (That among those was included a story where Brunhild actually travels around hell and returns to the living world is a secret between you and me. I know I was just talking so coolly, saying that I wouldn't write a sequel. Being that the creature that is author has the ability to change things thoughtlessly, sometimes we will do foolish things, even knowing that it's a mistake.)

Dragon Princess was also just about discarded as well. At the time, everything I wrote looked boring to me.

But my editor read the first draft of *Dragon Princess* and said this:

"This story is worth making into a book."

I figured I would try trusting what they said. And I think I'm glad that I did. At the time, I was uneasy, but now that it's been brushed up, I agree with my editor.

Most likely, this book was the first time that I wrote a story in full cooperation with my editor in the real sense. And so I will conclude with the typical remark, which might even sound like flattery due to how sincerely I feel that way.

Thank you to my editor, who helped me in writing this book.

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