
NOVEL
01
Lout of Count's Family
BY Yu Ryeo-Han

Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Prologue
Chapter 1: When He Opened His Eyes
Chapter 2: They Meet
Chapter 3: What He Picked Up
Chapter 4: Heading Outside Henituse Territory
Chapter 5: Seeing a Dragon
Chapter 6: Repaying Kindness
Chapter 7: Just Who Are You?
Chapter 8: Stay Still
Chapter 9: I’m Clueless, I Know Nothing
Back Cover
Newsletter

Lout of Count's Family

NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY

Yu Ryeo-Han

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

[Lout of Count's Family] (백작가의 망나니가 되었다) Vol. 1 © 2022 by Yu Ryeo-Han
All rights reserved.
First published in Korea in 2022 by Chungeoram Publishing Inc.
English translation rights arranged by Chungeoram Publishing Inc.
through Topaz Agency in Korea
English edition Vol.1 © 2024 Seven Seas Entertainment, Inc.
Cover illustration by LOKOnity

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent
to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available
from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Henry Shin (MiracleRifle Translations), Lauren Na
ASSISTANT EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella, H. Qi
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR DESIGN & LAYOUT: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Ami Leh
EDITOR: T. Anne
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-616-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: September 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS



Prologue

1 When He Opened His Eyes

2 They Meet

3 What He Picked Up

4 Heading Outside Henituse Territory

5 Seeing a Dragon

6 Repaying Kindness

7 Just Who Are You?

8 Stay Still

9 I'm Clueless, I Know Nothing



Prologue

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I was inside *Birth of a Hero*. This novel series centered around a boy from a different dimension. It was an account of the origins and escapades of numerous heroes. Now I'd entered it—and as a count's lout of a son, Lord Cale, with dominion over the very town the main character was first transported to.

The problem was, the main character got messed up after the town's annihilation. An even bigger problem was that this irredeemable lout hadn't heard about the town's fate. He picked a fight with the main character, and he got beaten to a pulp.

"This is tough..."

Something *very* serious had happened to me. Still, I thought I could make it all work out.

Chapter 1:
When He Opened His Eyes

SOMEONE TAPPED THE SHOULDER of the man in bed. The rough hand was warm; it reminded him of the touch of an exhausted parent.

"Young master, it is morning."

That voice, on the other hand, was imposing. Getting goosebumps, the man in bed instinctively opened his eyes. Rather than bright, warm sunlight coming through the window, he saw an old man staring at him with a pleased expression.

"I'm surprised you awoke after a single attempt," the old man said.

"Huh?"

"The master wishes to dine with you, since you two haven't done so in a while. That should be possible this morning."

As the old man spoke, the man in bed noticed a mirror past his shoulder. It reflected a bare-chested young man, not yet twenty years of age, with a bewildered expression. *Seems like that's me.*

"Young Master Cale?"

He turned toward the source of the worried voice to see the old man—who appeared to be a servant—eyeing him apprehensively. But the servant's worry wasn't the issue; it was what he'd said. *"Young Master Cale."* Strangely enough, the name was familiar.

"Cale Henituse?" the man in bed asked. The name flowed smoothly from his lips.

The old servant peered at him kindly, as if looking at his own grandson. "Yes. That is your name, young master. I take it you're still a bit drunk."

Hearing the old servant's confirmation, the man in bed naturally remembered an even more important name. "Vicross..."

"You mean my son?"

“The chef…”

“Yes, my son *is* a chef. Should he make something for your hangover?”

The man’s surroundings suddenly darkened, and the world spun. He lowered his head, resting it in his hands.

“Are you still drunk, young master? Should I call the doctor? Or would you rather have a bath?”

With his head hung low, the man glimpsed the strands of hair falling in front of his face. They were a vivid red, very different from his original black hair.

Cale Henituse… Vicross… Vicross’s father, Ron…

These were characters from the beginning of *Birth of a Hero*, the series he’d been reading before he fell asleep the previous night.

The man jerked his head up and looked around. The chamber, completely different from a Korean bedroom, reminded him of a private room in an old European manor. Every aspect was extravagant and luxurious.

“Young master?” Ron—the old servant—prompted, though his worry was merely a facade.

“Cold water,” the man in bed responded. He needed something to clear his mind.

“Excuse me?”

As the man in bed glanced up at Ron, he again saw Cale Henituse’s reflection in the mirror. His handsome face was perfectly smooth.

Still looks normal. I guess the main character hasn’t beaten Cale up just yet.

After opening his eyes, the man in the bed realized he had become Cale Henituse. He was now the very jerk the main character beat to the verge of death at the beginning of *Birth of a Hero*.

“I presume you will not *bathe* in cold water, young master. Are you asking for drinking water?”

Cale stared at Ron. He knew the old servant was pretending to be a benevolent old man, hiding his cruel and vicious character.

“Please get me some drinking water,” Cale said. His first priority was to sip on that; he figured it would help him think straight.

“I will prepare it right away.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Ron flinched, an odd expression flickering across his face, but the man in bed didn’t notice.

The water in the bedchamber was tepid, so Ron left the room to fetch cold water for him. Once Cale was alone, he hopped out of bed and headed to the bathroom. If he really was inside *Birth of a Hero*, a full-length mirror should be there.

He was right, as it turned out. The real Cale Henituse had demanded its installation, given his obsession with his own appearance and physique. The bare-chested Cale looked fairly fit. Any garments would have suited him.

“I really am Cale,” he muttered.

The redhead was indeed the minor antagonist depicted in *Birth of a Hero*. Since that series was unusually detailed when it came to each character’s appearance, he’d had to acknowledge that he was Cale Henituse as soon as he saw the face in the mirror. Wondering how long it took people to calm down after such a shock, Cale placidly recalled what had happened the day before—when he was still Kim Roksu.

It had started as a typical day off. He hadn’t leafed through a physical book in a while, what with how often he read on his phone, so he went to a book rental shop to borrow some. He checked out an entire series, planning to read all day long. The series was *Birth of a Hero*, and he’d read up to the fifth volume before falling asleep. When he woke up, he found himself in the body of an antagonist the main character mercilessly humiliated in Volume One.

Things are unfolding just like they did in that volume. Have I possessed Cale’s body?

Overcoming his initial bewilderment, he thought back to the beginning of the series. *Birth of a Hero* was about the trials and growth of heroes emerging from fictional eastern and western continents. The main character, Choi Han, was a Korean high school freshman who'd transmigrated into a fantasy world. There, his life span was as long as a dragon's. Despite being human, he never aged.

"This is bad..."

The protagonist would eventually pulverize him. Still, the key thing was that he hadn't had his ass handed to him just yet.

Tearing his eyes away from the mirror, Cale submerged himself in the tub of warm water. He tilted his head back, looking up at the undoubtedly expensive marble ceiling. Cale's family estate was actually *chock-full* of marble.

"It's not like I'm missing much," Cale mumbled, staring at the ceiling.

In his life as Kim Roksu, he was orphaned and broke. He'd lived by himself since both his parents passed away in a car accident when he was little. He wasn't head over heels in love, nor did he have friends he would've sacrificed himself for. He had no particular attachments at all. He'd only continued to live because he couldn't die.

No, he couldn't *bear* to die. He truly hated the thought of death, to the point that rolling in dog crap sounded much more appealing. And he hated pain to boot.

I need to make sure I don't get walloped.

Cale wasn't certain what part of the series he was in, but he was confident he hadn't yet met the protagonist. The reason was simple.

I don't have a scar on my side.

Cale Henituse was the lout of Count Henituse's family, but he hadn't gotten the scar in a fight. Rather, prior to meeting Choi Han, he'd thrown a public tantrum because his drink of choice tasted bad. Cale had hurled things around the room in a drunken rage—at which point a broken table leg had cut his skin, giving him the scar. Shortly afterward, Cale met Choi Han.

They bumped into each other a few times before the hero thrashed him in a mortifying beatdown.

He was quite a character.

Cale crossed his arms and hummed in thought. He didn't know what happened to the Henituse family's lout after his beating in Volume One. All he knew was that Choi Han had numerous fateful encounters and overcame lots of trials, eventually developing into a typical hero along with his allies.

The era of Choi Han's heroism was nearing. Many locations in the Eastern and Western Continents, including the Kingdom of Rowoon where Cale lived, would soon be war-torn. This would truly be an era in which heroes could spread their wings.

Cale frowned, scrunching his forehead. Kim Roksu had had a fairly simple motto: *"Live a peaceful life—a long, healthy life—for its small joys."*

"First and foremost, don't get beaten up," Cale said to himself. "The main character will take care of everything beyond that, as long as I let the storyline unfold like normal."

Since waking up, he could easily recall every single line he'd read in the series with uncanny accuracy. As the warm water washed his fatigue away, Cale soaked and relaxed. Now that his head was clear, he reached a conclusion.

"I can make this work."

It was possible to avoid the continental war and live peacefully. All in all, Cale's background and situation were far better than Kim Roksu's, and his estate was tucked away in a corner of the Western Continent—an ideal location to hole up in. In fact, many young nobles in the series had managed to steer clear of the war.

"Are you still in the bathroom, young master?"

Hearing Ron's voice from the other side of the door, Cale contemplated his true identity. The man was an assassin who'd crossed from the Eastern Continent by sea. Ron pretended to be a benevolent old servant, but in truth, he was merciless.

"Yeah. Be right out."

Realizing he'd spoken rather casually, Cale made his mind up on where to go from here. First, he needed to send the old man off with the main character. Ron could easily kill Cale with a single blow, though he shrugged off the count's son like he might a neglected puppy. Despite his gentle smile, he couldn't have cared less about Cale. Fortunately, Ron and his son, Vicross, would leave with Choi Han after Cale's epic defeat.

Pulling on a robe, Cale hurried out of the bathroom. Ron stood there with that same smile on his face; he cautiously extended a tray with a cup on it toward Cale.

"Here you go, young master."

Cale picked up the cup and walked past the old servant, not wanting to make eye contact with such a dangerous man.

"Great. Thanks."

Ron donned a complicated expression once again, but Cale had already walked past him.

There are too many powerhouses here, Cale thought, taking a sip of cold water. *Way too many.* No matter where Choi Han went, there were people—humans and beyond—who had ample power or hidden secrets.

I need the strength to at least protect myself. That would be necessary to live life to the fullest on a continent hurtling toward war. He couldn't be *too* strong, though, or other complications were bound to pop up.

He thought about the various fateful encounters at the beginning of the series—the powers that had strengthened Choi Han and his allies. As he mulled over how he could live a long life in good health, a couple of things came to mind. Now he just needed to narrow them down.

"We will dress you now, young master."

"Oh, all right. Thanks."

The door opened, and servants entered to help Ron dress Cale, who didn't notice the old servant's unusually stoic expression. He was too busy staring at the garments in the servants' hands.

“Uh…something simple for today,” he said. He hated elaborate attire, preferring simple clothes that were easy to lounge in.

“Of course.”

The servant in charge of his wardrobe quickly pulled out less formal garments, and Cale changed into the most basic of the lot. After getting dressed, he frowned. Even this “simple” attire was extravagant; he wasn’t a fan of it.

Still, the man in the mirror was downright dashing. *Cale really is handsome. He makes any clothing look good.* His face was the finishing touch that completed the look.

Cale peered in the mirror and tidied his clothes before turning to Ron, who was once again smiling like a gentle old man.

“Let’s go, Ron.”

“Yes, young master.”

Cale walked behind Ron through the estate. He didn’t know the layout yet, but he felt he would be fine as long as he followed the old man. The servants and maids he made eye contact with flinched and bowed respectfully before scurrying away.

Why are they so scared? Cale never hit people. He just liked to drink a lot and roughhouse. That said, he’d sometimes break things when he was drunk—he *was* a lout, after all. He didn’t treat people all that respectfully, aside from the few he liked.

Well, if nobody bothers me, even better, Cale thought without a care in the world. Living here in a model citizen’s body would’ve been tough, but as a trash human being, he could do as he pleased.

“I shall now open the door,” said Ron.

Cale nodded. “Sure.”

The books had mentioned that Cale treated Ron almost as well as he treated his own father, since Ron had raised Cale like his grandson—although Ron didn’t care one whit for him on the inside. At any rate, engaging with Ron was easy. He just needed to answer the servant’s questions and treat him politely.

“I hope you enjoy your breakfast.”

“Thanks, Ron. Make sure you eat too.”

Without hesitation, Cale strode past Ron into the dining room. There, he saw his father: Deruth, the current head of the Henituse household. Next to him was Cale’s stepmother, the countess, as well as her son and daughter. The four looked over at Cale when he entered.

His father was the first to speak. “You’re late again.”

Cale studied him. *Birth of a Hero* had described Cale’s feelings toward his father:

Cale’s father was the one person he listened to. It was thanks to his father, Count Deruth Henituse, that the lout remained within the family’s territory and got everything he wanted.

Unfortunately, unlike some other strong patriarchs in the series, the count didn’t have special skills or influence—only wealth. That appealed just fine to Cale, though. It was the perfect family environment for a relaxed life.

Cale’s stepmother believed he disliked her, so she avoided him. Her son, who was far brighter than Cale, found his much older stepbrother difficult to deal with. The cute youngest child was also shy of her elder brother. It wasn’t like Cale harassed them or vice versa; they just treated each other like strangers. Truly the ideal setting for a quiet, easygoing existence.

“Take a seat.”

“Yes, Father.”

Cale surveyed the feast on the table. It was much grander than his definition of “breakfast,” but he sat down obediently. Then, feeling that something was off, he lifted his head.

“Is there something you wish to say, Father?”

“No…there is not.”

Deruth and the others gaped at Cale. When he met their eyes, they quickly looked away and kept on eating.

I must really put them on edge.

Cale likewise returned his attention to the table, and what he saw brought a smile to his face. This luxurious feast was totally different from the meager meals he used to eat solely to quell his hunger. He halved a sausage with his knife, and the succulent juices flowed out.

Wow, it's so juicy.

He didn't know whether that was because it was handmade or because it was properly cooked, but the appetizing color whetted his appetite.

A loud clatter rang out. Cale glanced at his younger brother, Bassen, who'd dropped the fork in his hand.

"Excuse me." Bassen's calm apology fit his personality as described in the novels.

The servant in charge of the meal swooped in to hand Bassen a new fork and pick up the one on the floor. Cale watched, reflecting on how nice it was to be a noble, then ate his food with relish.

At that point, he confirmed the first advantage of having entered *Birth of a Hero*. This breakfast was extremely luxurious—so tasty, his stomach was practically singing. His broad grin never faltered as he indulged.

"Huh?!" Bassen blurted out, but Cale didn't even notice.

Having filled his stomach with meat, soup, and bread, he wanted to try something new. Cale surveyed all the dishes in front of him, then moved his fork toward a bowl of unfamiliar fruits. One looked like an orange, though it had a color closer to a green grape. Cale put the fruit in his mouth and gently bit down.

"Mmm."

Sweet juice filled his mouth instantly. He hated sour fruit, but the citrus's equally sweet aftertaste made him drool. Right then, he glanced up and happened to lock eyes with his father.

"Cale…" Deruth began, then hesitated. He said nothing more, just furrowed his brow and clenched his teeth.

Finding the awkward atmosphere uncomfortable, Cale tossed out an opinion: "It's delicious."

“Indeed, it’s revolti… Huh? Did you say it’s *delicious*?”

“Yes. Everything tastes wonderful.”

Cale tried a different fruit; tasting sweetness in his mouth once again, he smiled. He probably shouldn’t have continued eating while he spoke with his father, the head of the household, but it was too late for that. Loutish Cale Henituse had never cared for etiquette.

Nothing better than being the lout. No matter what he did, nobody would bat an eye. So long as he kept Choi Han from beating him up, he would lead a good life.

Just as Cale predicted, nobody criticized his lack of manners. Deruth even offered an awkward smile. “It really is delicious,” he said, nodding vigorously. “It’s nice to see you enjoy breakfast for a change.”

As in *Birth of a Hero*, Deruth seemed to be a doting father. He was apparently the only person who cared for Cale, and he even overlooked his son’s rudeness. Then again, if he loved Cale, he should have immediately addressed the lout’s personality. At any rate, *this* Cale wasn’t concerned about that, since he wasn’t the real Cale Henituse.

“You should eat plenty as well, Father.”

Bewildered, Bassen let out another, “Huh?!”

Cale, who heard the noise this time, glanced back down at his plate. He felt uneasy around Bassen. The fifteen-year-old was only three years younger than Cale. Unlike his loutish stepbrother, Bassen was smart, sincere, and responsible. The family was pushing to make him the next head of the household, and Kim Roksu—now Cale—was in favor of that.

Rather than living a count’s complicated life, I’d prefer to use my status as a count’s elder brother to laze around peacefully in one corner of his territory.

Cale opted not to comment on Bassen’s cry of shock. The younger boy was looking down on him, to be sure, but it didn’t make sense for him to get up in arms about it. Bassen’s gentlemanly personality suggested he wouldn’t kill Cale once he became count. Nevertheless, if Cale wished to retire to some

quaint village rather than face execution in the future, he needed to stay on Bassen's good side.

If that's not possible, I'll just take some money and go someplace the war won't reach. Pretending not to have heard, Cale continued to eat.

Once the meal was over, Deruth was the first to get up. He seemed satisfied with breakfast; a smile lit up his face. *He was right. It really was delicious.* If breakfast was like this every day, Cale would probably pass up sleeping in and come eat each morning instead.

After Deruth rose, the other family members followed suit. The count looked around before resting his gaze on his firstborn son. "Cale, is there anything you need?"

The sudden question confused Cale, but he answered frankly: "Could you please give me some money?"

"Certainly," Deruth said without missing a beat. "I'll ensure that you have more than enough."

The count's family really was well-off. The war hadn't yet begun, and Deruth's territory was rich in natural resources, from marble mines to vineyards. For the moment, they were making money hand over fist.

"Perfect. As much as you can spare."

Cale felt his two younger siblings staring at him. There was no need for him to be embarrassed, though. Wasn't it far better to mooch than get drunk and cause a ruckus? Either way, he needed money to proceed with his plans. He wasn't in dire straits, but he needed to figure out how to bolster his strength—to become just powerful enough to keep himself safe. Seizing such opportunities would likely require quite a bit of money.

"Plenty," Deruth promised. "Rest assured."

Satisfied, Cale smiled.

When he returned to his bedroom, a deputy butler named Hans gave him a check from Deruth. Cale was lost for words. The check—issued through a partnership with the treasury and magic department—made his heart beat wildly.

So much money!

Apparently, the count's family wasn't simply well-off. They were filthy rich. *Birth of a Hero* had mentioned that Cale received a large allowance but not the exact amount. As soon as he saw the sum written on the check, its excessiveness hit him.

Ten million galleons!

Having received a sum equivalent to about ten million Korean won, Cale could alter his plans. The gears in his brain quickly began to turn.

After delivering the check, Hans excused himself. "I'll be heading out now, my lord."

Cale did not respond. The deputy butler treated that as normal, heading toward the door. But when Cale shot to his feet, Hans stopped in his tracks.

"Ron, let's go to the study," the count's son suggested.

Hans was confused by Cale's words. So was Ron.

"D-did you say the study...?" The insidious old man's voice was unusually shaky. Cale found that odd. Was there a reason he couldn't go to the study?

"Yes," he replied.

He needed to go plan, but there was no desk or even paper in his bedroom. Just lots of expensive-looking bottles of alcohol.

"A word, my lord?"

Cale glanced at Hans. "What is it?"

The deputy butler looked anxious. "Um, we haven't been able to clean the study yet this morning."

"You haven't? Well, it's fine if it goes a day uncleaned."

For some reason, Hans was vehemently against that. "No, sir. We *cannot* let that happen." Then he beamed, holding up his pointer finger. "Just wait one hour, please! I will stake my reputation on ensuring the study is completely clean—as if we were accustomed to your using it daily, not one time a whole decade ago!"

"Sure. Whatever." Cale didn't mind waiting an hour.

"Thank you. I shall report this to the master."

"I don't see a need for that, but go ahead if you want to."

“Yes, Lord Cale. I’ll be off, then.”

“Okay. Sure.”

The well-trained deputy butler appeared resolute as he closed the door without a sound and disappeared. Cale knew that three deputy butlers were vying to become the head butler; perhaps that was why Hans seemed so passionate.

“Ron?”

“Yes, young master?”

“Why are you spacing out?”

“My apologies.”

“That’s fine.”

Ron had another peculiar expression on his face as Cale placed the precious check in his inner pocket. It dawned on him that with this whirlwind of a morning, he’d forgotten to ask what day it was.

“What’s today’s date?”

That question would’ve seemed odd to anybody else, but Ron answered in a gentle voice. “It’s the 29th day of the third month in the 781st year of the Felix Calendar.”

“Hmm. That is a problem.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

Cale pulled out the ten-million-galleon check from his inside pocket, clutching it in his hand. Money was the only thing he could trust.

The 28th day of the third month in the 781st year of the Felix Calendar—not today but yesterday—was the date when a group of unknown assassins murdered all the townspeople of Harris. The very town the main character, Choi Han, had gone to after escaping the Dark Forest. It was there that Choi Han felt human affection for the first time in this world. He’d met people whom he could call friends, creating a found family. Those people were slaughtered without mercy.

Even Cale, who’d read up to Volume Five, didn’t know the true identity of the secret organization that had murdered the

townsfolk. Reading about this situation, some readers might've thought something along the lines of, *I thought Choi Han was really strong. What was he doing while the townspeople were being murdered?*

Right—it was only natural to think that. Yet there was a reason this series was called *Birth of a Hero*, not *Strength of the Hero* or *War of the Heroes*. "Birth" was the key word. It was the story of a man who overcame all kinds of trials and tribulations, suppressed the pain of his past, and became a hero. Love and friendship emerged along the way as Choi Han made enemies and friends alike.

His awakening was the crucial element to the story. Choi Han may have had explosive talent and survived decades in the Dark Forest, but he was ultimately a gentle, innocent man who couldn't bear killing other people. Although he had no issues killing monsters, Choi Han was weak against his fellow human beings.

To turn someone like Choi Han into a hero, the novel created a scenario where he was forced to venture into the Dark Forest. Only there would he find the rare medicinal herbs to heal a woman who'd treated him like her own son.

He had to travel deep into the forest for the herbs. When he finally found them and returned to the town, all that remained were the townspeople's corpses, burning houses, and the assassins on their way out.

Seeing this, Choi Han went mad and killed people for the first time. The people he slayed were members of a secret organization, which clashed with Choi Han every so often throughout the series.

Choi Han only regained his sanity after killing all the secret organization's assassins. Unable to glean any information from them once they were dead, he fell into a pit of despair. He buried the townsfolk's bodies and made a vow to himself.

I will kill them all. I will kill every last one of them for what they did to the town.

At that moment, Choi Han discovered the sadness evoked by death and slaughter. It poisoned his mind and made him

twisted. Later on, he made allies and learned to care for mankind again, which helped him evolve into a true hero.

"Ron..."

"Yes, young master?"

"A glass of cold water, please."

"Certainly."

When Ron left, and Cale was alone in the room, he covered his face with both hands.

The problem was that the city of Weston, which the twisted Choi Han visited after leaving Harris, was right in the middle of the Henituses' territory. It was the place where Cale ran into Choi Han, annoyed the hero, and got the crap kicked out of him. At that point, Choi Han gained his first supporter and ally, the reliable chef Vicross.

I was going to head for Harris in advance and help them repel the assassins, but...

The best scenario to avoid Cale's beating was no longer possible. He had cared more about potentially saving the townspeople who'd loved Choi Han, but there was nothing he could do about that at this point.

All that was left was to ensure he avoided getting trounced by the furious Choi Han, who was moving at breakneck speed and would arrive in Weston by tomorrow.

Well, simply avoiding the main character isn't a bad strategy either.

The problem was, Cale *needed* to run into Choi Han for the hero, Ron, and Vicross to meet. That way, the three would leave this region and officially begin their journey. Which left just one course of action.

Have them run into each other, then get out of their way.

And, if possible, make the best possible first impression on Choi Han.

"Here, young master."

"Ah. Thanks, Ron." Cale sipped from the cup Ron had brought, then furrowed his brow. "It's not water!"

“It’s lemonade.”

Ron really was an insidious man. He knew that the original Cale hated sour things, just like Kim Roksu. Still, he’d chosen to bring lemonade out of spite, which required more labor than water. Cale wanted to lash out at the sour taste, but he couldn’t for fear of the old assassin. All he could do was drink the lemonade mechanically.

“Thanks. That’s good stuff.”

“My pleasure, young master. The study should be available soon.”

“Great.”

Ron’s benevolent smile gave Cale chills. He once again clutched the ten-million-galleon check.

Money really was the only thing you could trust.

Chapter 2:
They Meet

HOW COULD CALE think about anything else while food was in front of him? He couldn't even prevent a compliment from slipping out.

"Oh. It's delicious."

At his words, deputy butler Hans—who was standing off to the side—went stiff.

Cale was dining alone, so it was just the two of them in the room. A rather normal occurrence, given that the count's family tended to eat meals other than breakfast at their leisure. Each member of the family had their own duties, after all; nobody said it was easy to be a noble. The upper class had strict schedules to follow, particularly those in government or politics. They'd have to drop everything the moment an order came from someone above them.

Deruth's duties as lord of the region made him difficult to catch for a communal meal, while Cale's younger siblings' mealtimes were scheduled around their studies. The countess, meanwhile, was often busy interacting with the region's influential households and engaging in various cultural enterprises.

Now that I think about it... Cale set his fork down with a clatter.

Hans was immediately on edge. *That's the Lord Cale I know!* he thought. The deputy butler tensed, ready for Cale's fork to fly at his face any moment—but Cale paid the nervous man no heed. He was lost in his own thoughts.

There are lots of dangerous specialists hidden among artists and craftspeople, Cale mused.

The Kingdom of Rowoon boasted fairly advanced architecture and art, especially sculpture. There was lots of marble in Rowoon, for starters. With the Henituses' territory established as the fifth-best marble-mining region, they were raking in enormous profits.

Furthermore, a mountain range to the northwest took up most of the Henituses' region. The mountains had rich and fertile soil, so residents grew grapes between the peaks. Although the vineyards yielded small quantities of wine, the resulting vintage was regarded as one of the best in the entire continent.

Yet Cale's mind was far from the realm of artisans and vineyards, instead consumed with thoughts of powerful individuals. He had pondered the topic all day long in his study, brooding right through lunch.

Why are there so many "experts" in this stupid place? This isn't even a martial arts franchise.

But it may as well have been, given how many fighters were lurking among everyday people. Thus, Cale made his resolution: *Don't mess with just anybody.* An average-looking chef could be a poison expert. A repairman might viciously strangle people with his wires. That was just the sort of place this was.

Cale heaved a sigh. He'd just barely devised a plan to live peacefully and avoid dying in any kind of situation.

"Lord Cale?" Hans said warily.

Itching to sigh again, Cale turned to his attendant. "What?"

"Should I have them prepare you something else to eat instead?"

"Huh?" Cale's brow wrinkled, eyes going wide.

Hans suppressed a groan. *He's going to flip the table!* The deputy butler had no idea why the count had assigned him to look after Cale. He reined in his rising despair as he awaited Cale's response.

And Cale did respond. "Why would you replace such a wonderful meal?"

"Pardon?"

Cale picked his fork back up, then cut into his steak. This dinner was even fancier than breakfast had been. He had never enjoyed such lavish meals as Kim Roksu, certainly, but even the original Cale would have found it extremely tasty. Kim Roksu wondered how this "Cale" bastard had come to take issue with

anything less than extravagant, but he didn't mind it. Since everyone knew the redhead's character, they brought him only the very best.

He popped a piece of steak into his mouth. It was delectably juicy, with a perfect sear on all sides. "Hans, who made this meal?" he asked as he chewed, heedless of etiquette.

"Uh, Second Chef Vicross."

Cale suddenly lost his appetite.

Vicross was Ron's fastidious son. Unlike his father, who was an assassin, Vicross was an expert in bladework. He was also a neat freak. The man kept his weapon spotless and sharpened it daily, using it to decapitate his enemies.

He's also an expert in torture.

In the novels, Vicross admired Choi Han's sword skills and chose to follow him. Ron struck a deal with Choi Han, promising to help the hero if he could tag along for his son's sake. While Ron might not show it, he cherished his son.

Cale glanced down at the medium-rare steak, pink and dripping with juices, and gulped a few times. *I, for one, will not become an oozing hunk of meat.*

He returned his gaze to Hans, who was still staring at him. "Well, it's delicious," Cale said, taking another bite. "Vicross is Ron's son, right? I didn't know he was such a talented chef."

"I'll pass on your compliments. I'm sure he'll be very pleased to know you praised his cooking."

"Will he now? Tell him I truly enjoyed this fantastic meal."

Hans's face went taut. "Yes, sir."

Cale had made up his mind. He wasn't going to mess with Vicross; he would do his utmost to make a good impression on Ron's son. With that settled, he was able to relax and appreciate his dinner. Everything would work out once he helped Vicross bump into Choi Han and they left the region. Cale had already devised a plan to make that happen.

As he had at breakfast, the redhead completely cleaned his plate. He got up to leave, a satisfied smile on his face, then eyed the deputy butler at his heels.

“Hans, how *did* you end up suddenly assigned to me?”

Before dinner, Hans had mentioned that Deruth personally instructed him to wait on Cale. While Cale didn’t know what would become of the count’s family once Choi Han left—bringing Vicross and Ron along with him—he considered Hans exceptionally talented. Of all the deputy butlers, he probably had the best chance of becoming head butler.

“The count was concerned to hear that you worked all the way through lunch in the study,” Hans replied with a polite dip of his head. “He ordered me to oversee all matters relating to your meals.”

In short, Hans was responsible for Cale’s food.

“Really? That was unwarranted. I would’ve eaten just fine on my own,” Cale said. “Then again, I wouldn’t have realized it was time for dinner if you hadn’t come for me.”

He’d been busy writing out the fateful encounters in the first five volumes of the *Birth of a Hero* series in Korean.

On his way out of the dining room, Cale smiled at Hans. “Make sure I dine well, then.”

“Oh, uh, of course! I would be honored. I’ll do my utmost for you, my lord!” Hans stammered a bit as he answered, but Cale just let it be.

When Cale opened the door, he found Ron standing outside. Knitting his brow, he said, “Didn’t I tell you to go eat, Ron?”

Not wanting to see the old man’s face, Cale had sent him away—but he *just wouldn’t leave*. He stuck to the count’s son like glue. Annoyingly, he’d even waited by the door the whole time Cale was in the study.

“It is my duty to take care of you, young master.”

Seeing Ron smile benevolently at him, Cale clicked his tongue and threw a bit of a tantrum. “Enough! I don’t need anything, so go eat! Why won’t you leave for dinner, even when I tell you to? Don’t follow me! If you do, you know I’ll get angry!”

Cale glared daggers at Ron to reinforce his point, then stomped off toward the study. When he glanced back, Ron was

standing stock-still with a stiff expression. Hans studied him a moment before sighing deeply.

Should I not have made a fuss? Cale wondered. The old assassin's expression scared him, and he scurried back to the study.

His desk was completely empty. The document he'd been writing so diligently in Korean had already been burned in the fireplace—by Cale himself, that is. Nobody here knew Korean, but he still needed to be careful. He'd told all the servants not to enter the study without his permission.

I remember everything anyway.

Kim Roksu had always been good at memorizing things he liked. Comic books, novels, movies—as long as he enjoyed something, he remembered the characters' names and appearances for years afterward. If he *didn't* like something, he couldn't recall a single detail for the life of him. Perhaps it would be different if he actually made an effort.

Cale leaned back in the study chair, mulling over what he needed to do moving forward. *First, I need to meet Choi Han tomorrow.*

The corners of his lips slowly rose.

Then I need to pick up a shield.

He had no intention of fighting tooth and nail for his long life, but there were a few things he needed to survive. First, he had to boost his defenses. Second, figure out a method of healing. Third, be faster than anybody else. Fourth, gain the strength to kill without hurting himself. And most importantly, he needed to avoid battlefields and any other places there might be bloodshed.

Satisfied, Cale thought about each of these so-called strategies as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

At least I won't get beaten up when the time comes.

His best bet for extensive, intangible protection was the Unbreakable Shield. When he thought about that, his smile felt like it might never disappear.

Fateful encounters belonged to no one. They were first come, first served.

***

On such an important day, what could Cale do to calm his nerves and succeed? He figured the first step was to have a hearty breakfast. While he felt like the only thing he'd done since arriving in this world was eat, he opted to enjoy the meal before things got busy.

"Mm... Ahem! I heard you fell asleep in the study last night," Deruth said.

"I suppose I did," Cale replied half-heartedly, focused on his breakfast. It was probably rude of him to not so much as glance at his father, but that was fine by Cale. He *was* the infamous lout.

He finished eating before the others and immediately stood up. His chair screeched, prompting everyone's gazes to snap over to him.

"I'll be heading out first," Cale said in another violation of proper etiquette. But he needed to leave ASAP; he had a *lot* to do.

Deruth looked back and forth between Cale and his empty plates, then smiled. "Sure. Go ahead." The count seemed to favor his son no matter what.

"Thank you."

Before Cale could go, Deruth called out, "You don't need any allowance today?"

"I do, actually."

When his father said he'd send some money along with Hans, Cale bit back a smile. *This really* is *a rich family.* He turned and walked off without even thanking Deruth. The lout briefly made eye contact with Bassen, but he just continued to the door.

When Cale noticed Ron following him through the mansion, he shooed the servant away. "I'm going out. Don't look for me."

“Don’t look for me.” That was Cale’s code to let Ron know he was leaving the count’s estate, which was on the outskirts of Weston, to drink in the city. Whenever he said that, Ron smiled benevolently and told Cale to have a safe trip.

For some reason, Ron asked a rare question this morning. “You won’t be going to the study?”

Cale frowned. “I don’t think that’s something you need to worry about.”

“I understand, young master. I’ll be waiting for you.”

The wrinkles in Cale’s brow deepened. “No, I’d rather you didn’t.”

He crooked his finger to beckon over a servant standing at the main entrance, then walked out with him. The servant thought Cale still seemed angry, so he said nothing as he trailed behind the lout.

After exiting the residence, Cale could see the garden and the distant estate gate. He sighed, then braved a backward glance. He caught a glimpse of Ron’s wooden expression through the closing door.

Glad I shook him off.

While he was relieved that Ron hadn’t followed him, he still feared the old man’s terse look. Ron *was* an assassin, after all. Pushing open the gates, Cale decided he’d handle the old fellow with kid gloves next time.

Not one to walk when luxury transport was available, he took a carriage into the city.

***

Once Cale arrived at his destination, the carriage driver warily opened the door. He peeked over at the shop in front of them, clearly confused.

“Is this the right place, Lord Cale?” the driver asked.

“Yes. This is it.”

Cale emerged from the carriage. He wore an elegant ensemble that looked fancy but was actually the simplest thing in his closet. His path was clear; the townspeople had scattered as soon as they glimpsed the count's crest adorning the carriage.

Lifting his head, Cale checked the sign over the shop: POETRY AND TEA HOUSE.

Patrons of this establishment could enjoy poetry collections over a cup of tea. The three-story premises looked clean and expensive, and the owner was very wealthy. In fact, as the bastard son of the head of a large merchant fleet, he was even wealthier than Cale. He kept his lineage hidden, of course.

If I recall correctly, the shop owner goes to the capital around Volume Three and meets Choi Han. He then claims that—though he may be illegitimate—he'll become head of the merchant fleet!

The shop owner had cried while vowing this to Choi Han. Cale had only read the first five volumes of *Birth of a Hero*, so he didn't know whether the man ended up realizing his dream. He probably did, since he was one of the main character's allies.

Cale looked at the driver, who was sweating like a pig. "You can leave."

"Excuse me?"

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

"No! Um…don't I need to wait for you, my lord?"

"Well, I'll be here for a while," Cale said flatly as he opened the tea shop door.

The driver gulped audibly behind him, but the sharp, pleasant jingle of the shop's bell drowned it out. Its clear, soft tones announced Cale's arrival.

Cale stood at the front and scanned the shop. It was still early, so there weren't many patrons; the few who were there flinched at the sight of him. To be fair, the *Birth of a Hero* books *had* said that everyone in this region knew the redheaded lout. He was a merchant's greatest enemy, as he had a tendency to break everything in shops.

A piglet of a man acknowledged Cale warmly from behind the counter. "Welcome."

Cale stared at him. *That must be the owner.*

The shop's owner, Bilose, was the wealthy son of Flynn Merchant Fleets' head and his mistress. With his round face and plump body, he really did resemble a baby pig, just as the books described. His greatest charm was his extremely bright smile.

I've found myself a piggy bank, Cale thought.

"I'll be on the third floor all day," he told Bilose, leisurely placing a gold coin on the counter.

Bilose beamed even brighter, but Cale pretended not to notice.

"Any tea that isn't sour will do," the redhead said, then pointed to the bookshelf. "Do you have any novels?" He preferred those to poetry.

Clank! The sound of someone forcefully setting down their teacup rang through the shop. Wondering who'd done it, Cale looked back at Bilose.

"Of course, Lord Cale. We have plenty."

"Really? Send up the most interesting one, along with a cup of tea."

"Certainly."

Cale put his gold coin into Bilose's chubby hand, turning away as the shopkeeper counted out the change. "Just hold on to it. I'll drink more tea later."

"This is still far too much!"

A gold coin was worth a million galleons, equivalent to one million Korean won.

"I have lots of money. Consider it your tip," Cale said—something he'd always wanted to try.

He was splurging, squandering his wealth. Who cared whether Bilose was actually richer than he was? The lout would have many opportunities to earn a fortune.

Doing his best to play it cool, Cale jerked his chin toward the tables on the first floor. "Well, if it's too much, treat everyone here to a cup of tea on me."

It was an announcement worthy of ringing the bell—this round was on Cale. He'd wanted to do something like that at least once in his life. The count had generously provided him three gold coins to spend, the equivalent of three million galleons.

"Still, Lord Cale—"

"Agh, enough! Just bring my tea!"

Cale, ever the shamelessly rude customer, headed up to the third floor. It really *was* good to be a lout. He could pay no mind to manners or the whispers buzzing behind him. There were already plenty of rumors about the count's off-putting son; a few more wouldn't matter.

Nobody else was on the third floor, since it was still early morning, so Cale had it all to himself. "Just like I thought," he murmured, sitting in the far corner.

He looked out the window. *This is the perfect seat.* It had the best view of Weston's main gate. Cale's plan was to watch for Choi Han from this spot. After burying the beloved townspeople of Harris, Choi Han would head to Weston, going off his memories of the townsfolk's general directions.

When he arrives at the gate in the early morning, he's immediately chased away.

Choi Han had been transported to the Dark Forest as a high school freshman, and he lived there for decades. He'd spent most of that time trying to survive, which forced him to grow quickly—if a little distorted. Yet after the tragic incident in Harris, he was acting more rationally than anyone could have expected.

He's coming to the count's estate to report the town's annihilation.

Harris may have been remote, but it was under Count Henituse's jurisdiction. Thus, Choi Han set out for Weston, hoping the count would support a small funeral for the townsfolk. He also planned to track down information on assassins he'd killed. Mad with grief at the scene of the crime, he hadn't even thought to interrogate the culprits before slaughtering them all. But now, sending off the dead with a service would come before his revenge.

When you think about it, he really is a caring guy.

It was understandable that Choi Han's heart had hardened for a time. In one fell swoop, he'd lost all the people who first showed him love after his decades alone in the Dark Forest. This was roughly when Cale bothered Choi Han and touched a nerve.

He remembered what the book's version of Cale said to Choi Han: *"Why should we care whether some useless townsfolk are dead? The drink in my hand is worth far more than all their lives combined."*

Choi Han had grinned at that. *"Interesting. I wonder if you'll change your mind."* Then he thought to himself, *Shall I test it out?*

The "test" was beating Cale nearly to death. The amazing thing was, Cale *never* changed his mind, even after he was black and blue.

"Ugh. Remembering that gives me the creeps."

Cale rubbed his arms as they tingled with goosebumps. He slurped down some of the tea Bilose had brought, but the instant he looked back out the window, chills rippled through him all over again.

It's that punk.

As Weston's gates opened for the morning, a young man wearing scorched clothes approached them. It was Choi Han.

Cale didn't get up from his seat right away. Instead, he merely observed. The main character had run like a lunatic, making a journey in a single day that would've taken a week by carriage. Between that and the events in Harris, he was looking quite disheveled.

When Choi Han walked through the gate, clearly exhausted with his head hung low, the guards blocked his path. Cale couldn't hear what they asked him, but he saw Choi Han shake his head in response.

I'm sure they're asking whether he has any identification.

Weston's guards were generally easygoing, but they didn't budge on the law. They emulated their liege, Count Deruth, in that way. As Cale expected, Choi Han walked back through the gate.

“They kicked him out,” Cale muttered.

Choi Han had gone without a fuss. After running nonstop for a day, he must’ve regained a bit of his conscience. Right about now, it would be telling him not to kill innocent men.

He’ll wait till nightfall before jumping the city wall. At which point, the hero would run into an inebriated Cale.

Screech! The sound of Cale’s chair scraping the floor as he stood echoed loudly in the empty space.

He went downstairs and spoke to Bilose at the counter.

“I’ll be out for a bit, but I’ll come back soon,” Cale said. “Don’t clear my spot.”

“Of course not, Lord Cale. I look forward to your return.”

Ignoring the bright smile on Bilose’s chubby face, Cale strode out the door. Shortly thereafter, he heard someone cry from inside the shop, “He didn’t break anything!”

Cale shrugged it off; he had bigger fish to fry. Today, he needed to lay the groundwork to earn the Unbreakable Shield. Despite its name, the Unbreakable Shield wasn’t a physical item. The best comparison might be a mage’s mana shield. Only, it differed from a mana shield in that it was more like a superpower than a magical ability. The woman who’d created the Unbreakable Shield had been an acolyte in service of a god, but the temple had mysteriously excommunicated her. She had died shortly after.

Something weird definitely got tangled up with that shield.

As with any fantasy world, this world had its own history dating back to ancient times. Magic and weaponry hadn’t been particularly developed back then. Rather, innate talents produced by supernatural occurrences predominated in society. The strongest were superpowers and divine powers, which were essentially forces of nature. Although those powers originated during a very primitive time, some had made it into the present, hidden in specific locations and items. It was possible to obtain those powers for yourself under the right conditions.

Usually, heroes found these “Ancient Powers,” but some of them were too weak for said heroes to rely on. Those were the powers Cale aimed to obtain.

Excluding divine powers, of course.

Cale didn't want to get involved with angels, demons, or gods. Thus, he sought powers that other people had created or that came from nature.

That way, I won't need to put much effort into it.

Those types of powers lined up perfectly with his goals, whereas things like swordplay and magic would require loads of practice. He didn't want to do anything like that.

The ancient civilization depicted in *Birth of a Hero* wasn't as strong as those in other fantasy series. As civilization developed, spiritual arts and magic began to far outshine the natural powers the ancient civilization had left behind. They were stronger than superpowers too. A single hit from a present-day warrior's aura would blow away most lesser superpowers. That was the reason heroes didn't use these powers much.

And my goal is to collect these lesser superpowers to become decently strong.

It was a satisfying plan, and Cale even knew of an Ancient Power that could strengthen lesser superpowers. The first step toward his goal was to find the Ancient Power hidden in Weston. He remembered just how to get it.

To that end, he made his way to a bakery.

"Oh, L-Lord Cale! Welcome."

Cale just nodded at the baker, who bowed so low it looked like his head might touch the ground. The man gasped, but Cale pretended not to hear it. He felt a bit guilty about how violently the baker was trembling because of him—the lout.

He went ahead and made his order. "Give me some bread."

"Excuse me?"

Cale pointed at the loaves on display. "Everything from here to there."

He dropped a gold coin on the counter. *Clink!* It spun in place.

"And pack it all up," he added, though the baker was frozen stiff. "Two or three more gold coins should cover a week's worth of bread, right?"

The baker's eyes—which had been fixed on the coin, far too much money for the bread—moved to Cale.

"If you can't do it, I can go somewhere else," Cale said bluntly.

"N-no, it's nothing like that, my lord!" the flabbergasted baker cried. "I'll pack everything up in no time!" Now servile for a different reason than before, he moved with great haste.

After the bread was wrapped up, Cale heaved the sack of loaves over his shoulder. It was just bread, but it was still quite heavy; the weight made Cale scowl. Ignoring the baker, who had escorted him out of the shop, he stepped out onto the street.

As Cale strolled along, he noticed that anyone who locked eyes with him flinched and turned away. In fact, most passersby scurried into nooks and crannies to *avoid* doing so.

It really is different from Korea. This is a bona fide fantasy world.

Cale took in his surroundings as he walked through the market, which had a typical fantasy feel. Anytime he looked a merchant in the eye, they would wince, grunt, and avert their gaze.

Tsk, tsk. Cale really must've been a trash human being.

Cursing the character, he left the market behind. He had reached the western part of town, where the slums were. However wealthy a territory might be, it went without saying that there would be paupers. In Cale's shoes, most people would probably think something along the lines of, *Ah, sharing food with the poor could lead to a fateful encounter!*

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Cale felt eyes on him as soon as he entered the slums—where some of the most indolent and the most cutthroat people lived in one place. The poor might not know the face of their liege lord, but oh, they *knew* Cale. That was vital, since Cale wreaked havoc everywhere he went, be it market, pub, or plaza.

"Tch."

Although they were aware of how loutish Cale was, they couldn't help watching him. Or perhaps they couldn't resist the

savory aroma of the fresh bread he carried. Cale endured the gazes and quickened his pace, his expensive leather shoes sullied with each splash in dirty puddles. A strange stench hung around him, prompting him to scrunch his nose and walk even faster.

The slums' dilapidated houses were crowded together on one side of a small hill. Cale climbed toward the hilltop. The closer he got, the fewer people watched or pursued him. His sharp glare had also probably played a role in that.

It's better up here.

Cale stood atop the hill and gazed down at Weston, happy to be free of the stench. Interestingly, even the hill seemed to be on lower ground than the count's estate. Well, there was no way the liege lord would be at a lower elevation than the slums.

He stopped his idle musings and walked over to a tree that was completely walled off. The circular wall was made of waist-high stones, with a wooden gate serving as the entrance. When Cale gave it a push, the old wood practically splintered at his touch.

The large tree inside looked to be several centuries old. In the slums, people usually chopped trees for firewood or peeled their bark off, killing them. But they'd treated this tree differently. The reason for that was simple, and Cale was about to be reminded of it. Of all the eyes that had followed him through the slums, two pairs remained even now.

"D-don't go near that tree!" one of the onlookers shouted—a girl, by the sound of it. Cale ignored her warning, but she cried out again. "You can't go in there! That's a man-eating tree!"

Word had it that anyone who hung themselves on the man-eating tree would rot overnight, and any blood that landed on the trunk instantly disappeared. Around the tree, there was only dirt—no grass or wildflowers in sight.

This was the tree Cale had been looking for.

In ancient times, there had been a glutton who loved food so much that she was branded a "meaty goddess" and expelled from her place of worship. Afterward, she starved to death. This tree was said to have grown atop the meaty goddess's corpse,

and her grudges and strength were now embedded in it. Yes, this was the same woman who had created the Unbreakable Shield.

Carefully taking a loaf of bread out of his bag, Cale studied the head-sized hole at the base of the tree. He found it primitive and strange all at once. And to think this was just one of many mysterious Ancient Powers!

Before starting his task, he'd need to send away the girl who'd warned him—but he couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"You're going to die! Don't do it!" She was even louder this time, her voice noticeably shaking. Perhaps it was because she could no longer see Cale from outside the fence now that he'd crouched down.

Cale pressed his fingers to his forehead, sighing. This girl had stubbornly followed him to the tree even after the other citizens fell away.

There are nosy punks no matter where I go.

He glared behind him and saw a girl about ten years old. She gripped her younger brother's hand and watched Cale with anxiety.

Seeing him scowl, the young girl stumbled on her next words. "It's a man-eating tree. Y-you're going to die."

"No, I won't."

Taking two loaves of bread out of his bag, he threw them toward the little girl. It didn't matter if they rolled on the ground; the baker had wrapped each loaf.

"Take those and get lost."

The boy instantly grabbed the bread, but the girl continued to mumble in protest. Assessing her stubborn behavior, Cale decided to make use of his most reliable trait. He stood and thrust his head beyond the wall.

"Do you two know about Cale the lout?"

The girl's face paled, and her brother stared blankly at Cale. He picked up the second loaf for his sister and tugged her arm. "C'mon, Sis."

“Yeah, okay.” As her brother pulled her away, the girl glanced back at Cale and the tree. “I just didn’t want you to die,” she insisted.

Cale clicked his tongue at her again. Once he confirmed he was alone on the hill, he sat underneath the tree. No one outside the enclosure would see what he was doing unless they came right up to the wall.

“Now, let’s get started.”

He removed a loaf from its wrapper, then stuck it into the hole at the base of the tree. The loaf dissipated in the darkness, and a cold sensation crept into his fingers. Fearing his whole hand might be sucked in, he yanked it back. The darkness was unchanged.

“If someone died bearing a grudge, I should help resolve it.”

This man-eating tree wasn’t actually a *man*-eating tree. It would eat anything, a side effect of the only power left behind by the glutton who’d starved to death. This was comical for an Ancient Power but believable; it was part of the world’s folklore.

I remember you need to feed it until the darkness disappears.

The darkness in the hole beneath the tree wasn’t shade or shadow. It was a miasma produced by the woman’s resentment. You couldn’t feed the tree with help from other people; a single person had to provide a continual feast until the darkness vanished. At that point, it was said that a light hidden beneath the tree would appear.

Once Cale consumed that light, he could lay claim to the Unbreakable Shield.

“Eat up.”

Placing the mouth of his bag into the hole, he emptied out all the bread. The loaves should’ve filled the small recess, but when Cale pulled the bag away, only darkness remained. Still, it *was* a tad bit lighter than before.

“I think I’ll need about ten more bags.”

Ten bags. Only someone like Cale—who’d received three million galleons as his allowance—could casually say such a

thing.

An odd rumbling noise resonated from the tree, as though it were groaning in hunger. For a split second, Cale felt like the darkness might reach out and grab him. He shot to his feet.

“Oof, that’s kind of scary.” He wasn’t keen on sticking around for long. “Just how resentful were you, to linger like this?”

Gluttony is terrifying.

“I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Bidding the rumbling tree goodbye as if it were a person, Cale exited the enclosure. When he reached the slums, he spotted the siblings eating their bread. Despite the girl’s earlier agitation, she was savoring her food with relish. Her brother seemed very happy as well; perhaps the loaves were tasty.

Cale snorted at the sight, pointedly ignoring them when they looked his way. They weren’t peering at him but at the empty sack. They were probably curious, but they couldn’t do anything about it. After all, these children were too scared to go near that man-eating tree. *Are they really, though?*

He thought it best to be on the safe side. If they went up to the tree, stuck their heads into the hole, and got eaten, it would be terrible—for them, obviously. Not Cale.

The children of the slums had no fear; they felt more strongly about a single grain of rice than a blade coming their way. Since death surrounded them, they dreaded hunger even more so.

That was written in *Birth of a Hero*, Cale recalled. He relented and told the children, “If you want to eat more bread tomorrow, don’t say a thing.”

They obeyed, not uttering a word. The girl who’d dithered earlier clapped a hand over her brother’s mouth, pretending to not see Cale. *Bright girl,* Cale reflected, a smile spreading across his face as he speed-walked out of the slums.

The paupers who’d seen Cale climb the hill watched him go, wondering what crazy thing he was up to now. For his part, Cale

actually enjoyed their inquisitive gazes. The people outside the slums shot him odd looks as well, and their gazes didn't bother him either.

***

Once Cale returned to the tea shop, Bilose greeted him happily. "Ah, Lord Cale! You're back!"

"That I am. Bring me some tea," Cale ordered. "A refreshing blend this time."

He reclaimed his seat upstairs. The shop should've been busy at this hour, but there was nobody else on the third floor. It seemed they were all avoiding the lout of the count's family—which allowed Cale to relax.

"Your tea, my lord. I've also brought up a few desserts."

"Oh, great. Thanks." Cale continued to surveil the city gate as he took a sip of tea.

Bilose observed the lout's face with a complicated expression, then quietly went back downstairs.

Cale kept ordering tea and desserts, perched by the window, even as sunset painted the sky in warm orange hues. Night fell soon after. Only once it was dark did he get up from his seat. It was time to cross paths with the dangerous character who would scale the city walls.

What ticked a person off more—when they were hit by a strong, straight punch or by five or six jabs? It was, of course, the latter. In the book, Cale had thrown five jabs before Choi Han beat him to a pulp. But a single punch wouldn't be so bad in comparison.

"Are you off, my lord?"

"Uh-huh."

Few people remained in Bilose's shop. It was past nine—a time when more people visited bars than cafés. The bars would be teeming with people, especially since this was the hour when the quarry workers went for drinks.

“I look forward to your next visit, Lord Cale.”

Cale nodded. “The tea was great,” he told Bilose, who was still watching him. “The book was good too, although I only got through half of it. I especially liked the main character. His abilities and his development were interesting.”

Bilose’s eyebrows knitted for a moment before returning to normal. His eyes glinted as he observed Cale. The redhead didn’t notice these subtleties; he was too busy trying to remember the book’s contents. He hadn’t been able to focus on the volume, since he’d read it between bouts of stomach-churning anxiety caused by Choi Han. Despite the worry in his heart, it had still been fun to read.

Cale could comprehend this world’s language; perhaps this was a side effect of possessing the original Cale’s body. He’d had no difficulty understanding and enjoying the contents of the book.

He smiled at Bilose, whose expression was now blank. “I intend to pick that book right back up next time I’m here. Don’t let anyone else read it.”

Monopolizing someone else’s property was ordinary behavior for the lout. Bilose might not like it, but what could he do? He was a wealthy merchant’s illegitimate child; Cale was the eldest son of a count.

“Of course! I’ll reserve this book for you, my lord!” Bilose’s response surprised Cale; the shopkeeper smiled brightly, urging Cale to return soon. “You absolutely must come again. I’ll be waiting!”

“Sure, whatever.”

Exiting the tea shop left a bitter taste in Cale’s mouth, but he had to meet Choi Han. The bell jingled once again, and chatter in the shop seemed to pick up behind him. It was even louder outside, though.

The count’s territory may have been far from the capital, but it was hardly a backwater. It had prospered thanks to its many artists and makers of specialty goods. Workers looking to relax after a long day in the quarries roamed the streets in search of an evening drink.

The count's son walked the bustling street alone.

If you think about it, Cale really was a unique character.

In fantasy and martial arts series, the lout of a family normally hung out with neighborhood gangsters or bad influences. They drank, fooled around with women, and caused a ruckus in streets and shops. The funny thing was, the real Cale Henituse actually despised bullies and good-for-nothings.

He considered them insects.

The *worst* of insects to boot. By contrast, he'd seen the region's diligent citizens as more beneficial bugs, though they had no hope of a better future. He'd never beaten people at random when he was drunk; he was amazingly consistent about throwing things at gangsters, although his aim was terrible.

"Oh my. Lord Cale, you're here?"

Perhaps his terrible aim was the reason the bar owner seemed extremely frightened of the lout. That was to be expected. Last time Cale was here, he had destroyed pretty much everything within the vicinity of where he sat. In fact, he was probably number one on the blacklist of every bar in Weston.

Cale didn't respond to the owner, just threw a gold coin at him. "Bring a bottle of my usual. Oh, and a roast chicken breast. Don't salt it."

"Excuse me? Y-you don't want to find a seat first?"

Cale frowned, his forehead wrinkling.

The proprietor instantly waved his hands, bowing his head. "I'll bring you your drink immediately! Immediately!" He moved quickly, but he had a smile on his face. It must've thrilled him that Cale wasn't planning to sit down and pass the time in his establishment.

Cale glanced around the bar, which had gone quiet the moment he walked in. Everyone avoided his gaze or turned away, most likely wondering why he'd chosen *this* bar today. The gangsters and good-for-nothings hung their heads lowest.

He clicked his tongue. The sound resonated loudly throughout the otherwise-silent bar.

“Here’s the bottle you requested, Lord Cale.”

“Great.”

He grabbed the bottle, as well as the roast chicken breast. This wine, which he drank often, was probably the bar’s most expensive. He left the bar without hesitation, carrying the bottle. As soon as he stepped out, he popped open the bottle and drank half in one swig.

“Whoa.”

It was pretty tasty. Cale could handle his alcohol; drinking half the bottle at once didn’t affect him at all. He flushed easily, though, which made people think he was a lightweight.

Cale quickly doubled back the way he came, bottle in hand. As he walked past the tea shop he’d stayed in all day, the guards posted at the city gate noticed him and stiffened. Though he itched to stride right past them, he had another place to be.

“Ugh. My chest is burning.”

As the booze surged through his body, his stomach’s churning worsened. At length, he stopped beside the city wall, a little ways down from the gate. The tall wall started at the gate and continued on, extending above the roofs of a number of buildings and staving off intruders.

Well, that depends on the type of intruder. Cale recalled a detail from the book: *A hundred steps from the city gate.* That was where Choi Han jumped over the city wall.

Squeezing the bottle tighter, Cale trotted over to the spot. There were few people on the streets, since this was a corner of a residential area. He breathed deeply once he reached the location he’d pinpointed—by the city wall, exactly one hundred steps from the gate. The only light sources were the torches along the top of the wall and the glow from the residences’ windows. It would be enough for him, though. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dark, he crept closer to his destination.

Just as I expected.

He spotted something scrunched up at the foot of the wall. Multiple somethings, actually. Making a beeline for the shaking, miserable mass, Cale heard the distinctive cries of felines.

“Meow…”

“Meeeow!”

Two cats were curled up at the very bottom of the wall, meowing in an almost mournful way.

Cale smirked. He’d found it. *This is the place.*

This was a world where coincidence played a major role. The moment Choi Han jumped over the wall, the larger kitten had pounced on the smaller one, tossing it into the exact spot where Choi Han would’ve landed. Choi Han had lurched in midair to avoid it.

He really is a good guy.

In his squirming to protect the kitten, Choi Han had twisted his ankle. He normally wouldn’t have hurt himself due to a pivot mid-jump, but he’d raced to this city after burying numerous corpses and killing dozens of men for the very first time. His body had reached its limit, leading to the mistake.

“Meow.”

“Meeeow.”

Cale crouched and gazed at the shaking kitten and the bigger one licking it. They seemed to be littermates. Then he turned, looking down the alley opposite the one he’d come from.

Found him.

A man was slouched on the ground, looking like a total mess. He resembled any other vagrant or beggar you’d find in the city’s back alleys. His hair and clothes were unkempt and even appeared burnt, as did his sword.

According to *Birth of a Hero*, Cale and Choi Han would meet the next day. Tonight, Cale was supposed to get drunk and earn the scar on his side. Things were already going differently than they had in the novel—just minor things, granted.

Having crouched to look at the kittens, Cale stood. Feeling the lout’s gaze on him, Choi Han slowly lifted his head, his brown eyes focusing on Cale through his shaggy black hair.

Cale’s heart thumped in his chest. *Damn it. I’m shaking.*

It was too dark to see in perfect detail, but even through Choi Han's hair, Cale could tell his eyes weren't just cold. They were downright terrifying.

Downing that wine was a good idea, Cale thought. Congratulating himself for making such a smart decision, he tried to calm down. *Jab.* He needed to "launch a jab" and leave a good first impression.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "You look like you're hungry," he told Choi Han, who merely stared back at him.

Clicking his tongue, he took the chicken breast out of the bag. He tenderly offered the chicken not to Choi Han but to the kittens.

"You poor things. Go ahead, eat up."

Cale hadn't realized the kittens from the book would be *this* small. He wasn't sure they'd be able to eat it. Clicking his tongue again, he shredded the chicken for them, wondering what in the world he was doing. To be honest, Cale didn't like cats. Choi Han treasured small animals, though. The injured kitten—which had silver fur and golden eyes—bared its teeth and hissed, as if it could sense Cale's displeasure. The redhead stroked the silver kitten and spoke softly to it, although it must really not have liked that. It did its best to avoid Cale's hand.

"You guys have it tough. Eat this, and get better soon." He didn't bother glancing at Choi Han as he went on, knowing the hero was watching. "Hey. Do you have somewhere to stay?"

Although he didn't hear a response, Cale kept talking. Guards would patrol this area soon, and he needed to make a move before Choi Han limped away to escape them.

"Or a place to sleep?" Cale pressed, petting the hissing silver kitten while pushing away the red one trying to attack him. For some reason, the red kitten kept swatting at Cale. Its golden eyes, which matched its sibling's, shined brightly even in the darkness—but Cale needed to focus on Choi Han.

"And aren't you hungry?"

Still there was no response. Cale had expected this; Choi Han was probably observing him, and the guy was in desperate need of rest. He was exhausted in both body and mind. On top

of that, he'd undergone another huge shock. Weston was completely foreign to someone like Choi Han, who'd survived without human contact for years before meeting the townsfolk of Harris. He might already have lived for decades, but he was still young. A bustling place like this was a new experience.

"Aren't you going to answer me?"

"Hungry...?"

At last, Choi Han seemed to have determined that Cale was weak. Exhausted or not, the hero could easily end the count's son if need be. Secure in his judgment, Choi Han felt it would be all right to accept Cale's goodwill, though he had no idea *why* the redhead was being kind to him.

Since the guards would be here any moment now, Cale stood and approached Choi Han.

"Hey."

Now that he was closer, he got a better look at Choi Han's condition. The man was a mess, but his eyes flickered with life. *Maybe it's because he's the main character.* That said, his distinctly Korean black hair and brown eyes were quite a welcome sight.

Cale smiled and said casually, "C'mon. I'll feed you." Providing a delicious meal would produce the best first impression.

Choi Han, who had been resting against the wall, slowly pushed himself up. He favored his left side, probably because his right ankle hurt, but Cale didn't help him or say anything. There was no reason to be nicer than he already had been.

Having told Choi Han to follow him, Cale headed in the direction of the count's estate. His path was quickly blocked.

"Meeeeeow!"

The red kitten darted toward Cale and rubbed its cheek on his shoe. Cale grimaced. He definitely didn't like cats, but there was no getting around the fact that this one was acting cute. Suddenly feeling chills all over his body, he spun around to see Choi Han staring at him.

Damn it.

“Seems this little guy likes me.” Cale stroked the kitten awkwardly and told it, “I have to go, though. See you next time.”

Cale never understood why people spoke to animals, yet he’d become that exact person for this situation. He quickly stood back up and walked away from the kitten.

The silver kitten hissed as if calling the red kitten back—and telling Cale to get lost. The red kitten didn’t seem to want to return, though; it looked back at Cale on its way out. Cale did his utmost to ignore it.

“Meow!”

“Meooooow!”

The kittens’ cries faded into the distance. Cale ventured a backward glance; Choi Han was limping but keeping up with him. Their eyes met, and a shiver ran down Cale’s spine. He whipped back around, though he slowed to match Choi Han’s pace. He took another sip of wine as they walked through the residential area.

They passed the street lined with bars, the market, the plaza, and the wealthy citizens’ mansions. After leading Choi Han all the way to the outskirts of the city, Cale arrived at the count’s estate.

“What are you doing?” Choi Han asked.

Cale looked at the hero, who’d stopped in his tracks. He must have noticed that the soldiers greeted Cale on the way here, and that the citizens avoided him. He was probably wondering whether Cale really would be an easy foe to kill.

“Aren’t you coming?” Cale replied.

Choi Han resumed following him, as he’d expected—although at this point, he was probably accompanying Cale to get information and arrange funerals for the townspeople of Harris.

As soon as the count’s son stood at the estate’s main entrance, guards and knights greeted him, stumbling over their words. “M-my lord?”

Cale sighed. *I wish they’d stop that “m-my lord” business.* Since he was in the body of a lout, he was trying his best to act

like one. It was easier to be a loutish lord than a noble one. Still, he felt a little conflicted, hearing them stammer anytime they addressed him.

I was trying to go unnoticed.

He glowered at the stammering knights, who swiftly opened the gate.

“Please head on in.”

Cale again glanced back at Choi Han. The guards and knights eyed him with suspicion, probably curious about this beggar following their young lord.

“Follow me,” Cale ordered.

Choi Han would have figured out his companion’s status by now. The hero limped closer to Cale. Once Choi Han stood right behind him, Cale calmly turned and entered through the gate.

His heart raced. *I’m sure he’s considering taking me hostage if he’s in danger. That must be why he’s right on my heels.*

He was sure Choi Han wouldn’t *kill* him. Still, just thinking about being taken hostage gave Cale a headache. Frowning, he glared at the two knights trailing them. *Don’t follow me.*

Understanding the firm meaning of Cale’s expression, the knights faltered. They glanced back and forth between Cale and Choi Han. Ultimately, one continued to trail behind them, albeit with a stiff look. He apparently cared more about his creed than anything else, but that trait suited one of Deruth’s treasured knights.

Knights should be principled like that.

Pleased by the lone knight’s reaction to the young foreign beggar, Cale allowed the man to follow them as he led Choi Han to the mansion’s door.

“You’ve returned, young master.”

“Ron… Yes, I have.”

Shockingly, the scary old man *had* waited for Cale outside the door. It rattled him. Then again, it might have worked out in his favor; the moment Ron’s gaze landed on Choi Han, his kindly smile froze in place.

Ron should have the skill to gauge Choi Han's strength.

Choi Han stared straight back at Ron, but Cale didn't care whether the pair glared at each other. He wasn't yet done with his work.

"With me," Cale told Choi Han, resuming his walk.

Ron hurried after him as well. "What is going on? If you'll allow me, I'll attend to this guest."

"No need."

Someone else approached Cale as he walked. It was the deputy butler Hans.

"You've returned home despite drinking tonight, Lord Cale."

Ah, that's right. I'm his responsibility.

Cale clicked his tongue in lieu of a response, then lifted his bottle and aimed it at the butler.

"Augh!" Hans instantly covered his face with both arms, crouching down.

Silence filled the air.

The redhead clicked his tongue again. Hans raised his head, looking blankly at Cale with a bright-red face.

"Throw this away," the lout ordered.

"Yes, sir." Hans took the bottle, his expression still vacant.

"Next time, I'll throw it at you."

Hans's face turned white, but Cale completely disregarded him and strode off. Four people were following him now. He glanced backward every so often to confirm that, until he reached his destination: KITCHEN TWO. As soon as he saw the sign, Cale pushed the door open.

"Lord Cale?" came Hans's confused voice.

There was a wide smile on Cale's face; he'd almost finished. Vicross and Choi Han were about to cross paths. The door was already open, but Cale's heart thumped in his chest. Once he stepped into the kitchen, his face went taut at the scene in front of him.

Shiiing. Shiiing.

All alone in Kitchen Two, Second Chef Vicross sharpened his knife with a grin. He seemed to be enjoying himself, but his smile disappeared as soon as he saw Cale. It went without saying that dealing with a madman was frightening. You never knew what would trigger him. That thought had Cale on edge.

He put a hand on Choi Han's shoulder before Vicross could move, pointing him out to the chef. "Give this man something to eat."

"Excuse me?" Vicross shot back in a deadpan manner. The sharp kitchen knife in his hand flashed, reflecting the light.

Cale calmed his nerves and repeated, "Give him something to eat, I said. He's hungry."

The knight behind Cale breathed an amazed "whoa," but he didn't pay it any mind. He just anxiously awaited Vicross's response.

"I will do as you ask, my lord," Vicross finally answered, stone-faced.

It was done.

He'd finally connected Vicross and Choi Han—and, unexpectedly, even Ron—in one fell swoop.

A bright smile rose to Cale's face. He relaxed as he gave Vicross another order, his tone slightly more upbeat. "Prepare something for me as well. I'm hungry." Failing to notice Choi Han's stare, he added, "With only the highest quality ingredients, of course." He recalled the steak he had for dinner last night. "The steak you served yesterday was the best. You're a great chef."

The tip of Vicross's knife trembled ever so slightly.

"Anything like that will surely be a wonderful meal. Prepare it, and quickly!"

Cale turned without awaiting Vicross's response, leaving the kitchen and heading toward his bedroom. The knight and Hans followed suit.

"What should I do about that guest?" Hans asked.

"At the moment, he's my guest. But you take care of it."

Having connected Vicross, Ron, and Choi Han, he didn't want to bother with anything further today. Vicross and Ron would ascertain Choi Han's strength. In the novel, it was thanks to that strength that Vicross swore loyalty to Choi Han, so he should do the same thing this time—once he figured it out.

Cale *did* have a Plan B on the off chance Vicross overlooked Choi Han's abilities. He'd only have to make Choi Han beat someone or something up—without it being him—where Vicross could see it. That particular scenario might have some holes, but he'd thought over a number of different plans.

"Hans, don't breathe down my neck. Just bring the meal to my chamber when it's ready."

As expected, Ron hadn't followed him.

Cale shut his bedroom door in satisfaction, leaving Hans and the knight outside. He lay down in bed, and his exhaustion—along with the alcohol—knocked him out before his food arrived.

Thus, he had no clue that Vicross slashed at Choi Han's neck with the kitchen knife or that Ron hurled his dagger at the main character's heart. Both attacks ended in failure. With Cale soundly asleep, only those three would ever know what transpired that night.

Chapter 3:
What He Picked Up

LATE AT NIGHT, Hans stood before Deruth, giving his report as the count silently listened.

“He’s asleep in his room,” Hans concluded.

Although Hans’s report had been short, Deruth found it interesting. The count summarized what he’d heard of his son’s actions that day. “The carriage driver reported that he visited the Flynn bastard’s tea shop. Now he’s returned with a young man whose identity we cannot verify. He drank less than usual and even came home sober.”

“Should we have him tailed?” Hans asked.

The count waved his hand, rejecting the prospect. He didn’t want to know what Cale was doing to *that* extent. “No need. As long as he’s within the city, anything he does is under my jurisdiction.”

Deruth cherished Hans most of all the young deputy butlers. He did his job well, and he was a good person—a man worthy of his trust.

“Continue to observe Cale inside the house, as you’ve been doing,” he commanded. “Then report what you see.”

“I understand.” Hans bowed his head, not saying anything else.

Deruth didn’t have special abilities, nor did he have hold of any particularly powerful factions or networks. Like the previous count, however, he had increased his wealth through marble and wine while ruling the Henituse territory, and he’d managed to safeguard the region.

The count considered his son. *Cale has changed.* It wasn’t that he’d suddenly gotten smarter or stronger, but his actions were clearly different.

“Oh, and Hans?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Bring me information on that tea shop owner.”

Deruth already knew Bilose was the son of Flynn Merchant Fleets' head and his mistress. The merchant group was the Henituses' main trading partner for wine.

"I'll get right on it."

"Good."

With that, Hans vanished from the count's study. Now alone in the room, Deruth fell deep into thought. There were a number of things to think about besides Cale.

Something is shifting throughout the continent.

It was as if a volcano were about to erupt. While Deruth's territory was on the outskirts of the kingdom, he could still *feel* it. Moreover, he received a constant stream of information. The message he'd gotten from the royal capital today made him even more certain of the realm's stirring agitation.

The Henituse family protected their wealth and expanded their business with each generation. Every count passed on a single piece of advice to the heir: *"No need to go down in history. Just live for peace and happiness."*

Deruth wasn't always victorious in battle, and others might well outfox him. Yet he constantly thought of ways to protect himself and his family.

"I'll need to reinforce the city walls."

***

"Young master, you were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to wake you."

Cale had slept in—and to add insult to injury, Ron had brought him *lemonade* instead of cold water. Nevertheless, Cale's body was adapting to Ron's little mind games. He ignored the annoyance and studied the bandages wrapped around Ron's neck.

"Did you get injured?"

"Are you worried about me?"

"No. The bandages are just an eyesore."

“Well, it’s nothing much. I was merely scratched by a cat.”

Cale’s mind wandered to the innocent person Ron was alluding to. Surely Ron and that “cat” had a fateful, life-changing encounter last night. Ron was smiling at him. Avoiding the old servant’s gaze, the count’s son made for his bedroom door. Since he’d slept in, he needed to hurry.

“Will you be leaving right away?” Ron asked.

“Yes. I’ll eat and whatnot outside the estate.”

“I understand. But, young master…”

Cale let go of the door handle and glanced back at Ron, who had a sly smile on his face.

“How was the lemonade?”

“It was great.”

Ron’s voice dropped. “Is that so…?”

“Yeah.”

What a random question. Unable to shrug Ron off, Cale answered half-heartedly and turned the doorknob. The door swung wide open—and then Cale slammed it shut.

“Ron!”

The old servant approached. “Young master, were you startled?” he murmured with a warm smile. “Your guest from yesterday is waiting outside.”

Cale *was* surprised. The second he opened the door and came face-to-face with Choi Han, his heart had plummeted into his stomach. Slamming the door had been pure instinct. He reached into his shirt; the ten million galleons in his inner pocket calmed him.

Ron scrutinized Cale as he continued. “You opened it so quickly that I missed the chance to inform you. I told that young man to wait in his comfortable room, but he opted to wait out there. He insisted on seeing you.”

He didn’t “miss the chance” to say anything. The terrible old man had had ample opportunity to tell Cale, but he chose not to. That said, the lout couldn’t call him out on it. He cautiously stepped away from Ron and reopened the door.

“What is it?” he asked Choi Han, pretending he’d never shut the door in his face. Maintaining a blasé facade, he covertly inspected the main character.

The young man had taken a shower, fixed his hair, and was wearing new clothes. He emanated a pure, clean feeling. Still, that was difficult to focus on after seeing his eyes. Cale found them a bit frightening, since Choi Han was still beside himself.

Choi Han likewise stared at Cale before saying, “I’ll work it off.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll work to repay you for the meal.”

He spoke a bit stiffly, but Cale squinted at the words “work to repay you.” What a spine-chilling proposition. Who in their right mind would use Choi Han for manual labor? Still, the fact that he’d asked was proof of his virtue. Be that as it may, Cale’s only wish was for the hero to leave the count’s territory as soon as possible. He didn’t require anything else.

“Is that all you have to say? You don’t have to pay me back.”

Having hastily rejected Choi Han’s offer, Cale asked whether there was anything else he needed. Choi Han stared even harder at Cale, and visions of being beaten to a pulp flashed through Cale’s mind, giving him goosebumps.

“I’d like to request your help with something,” Choi Han said.

Cale closed his eyes at the word “help.” He didn’t want to get involved with Choi Han, but the man’s request no doubt concerned Harris. In the novel, Cale had his ass handed to him after calling Harris’s townsfolk useless.

Reflecting on that scene, Cale said, “Tell Hans your request. He’ll take care of everything.”

Cale opened his eyes again and met Choi Han’s gaze. The young man stood as still as a statue.

“He’s a talented deputy butler. He’ll be able to help with just about any request.” Then Cale placed a hand on Ron’s shoulder. He felt the old man flinch, but Cale had decided to get both men out of his sight at the same time. “Ron here is also very

competent. He can help you too. Ron, he's my guest—see to whatever he needs."

After giving this order, Cale removed his hand from Ron's shoulder.

"But you don't even know who I am," Choi Han protested.

Cale glanced back at the hero, who was still fixated on him. He no longer found the man's eyes frightening; perhaps he was used to them by now. Choi Han was still jaded, but there was no hiding his good-hearted nature.

"Why should I? Does one need a reason to show sympathy for the needy?"

Choi Han frowned. The expression was subtle, but Cale had been observing him closely; he definitely witnessed it. The hero might've been ticked off by Cale assuming he was poor.

"Based on your situation," Cale hastened to add, "I doubt you'll ask anything difficult. If your request *is* difficult, Hans will know where to draw the line." He pushed Ron toward Choi Han, then turned around. "Well, then. I have lots to do, so goodbye."

Cale briskly walked to Deruth's study; he would need a large sum today.

Behind him, Ron called out, "I shall do exactly as you command, young master!"

It didn't matter whether he did or didn't. That was something for the main characters to figure out, not Cale. He assumed they'd get close to each other much faster than in the books, since—thanks to him—they'd met four days early.

Ron watched Cale's quick retreat, then looked down at the empty cup in his hand. "How interesting."

Even now, Ron knew, his fearless little pup of a master didn't like sour things. Yet he drank every last drop of the lemonade.

Ron's fingers crept to his neck. He'd been injured for the first time in ages, but something more unusual than the wound nagged at him.

The once-fearless puppy was *afraid* of him. What did he know?

“Lead the way.”

Gazing at the source of the voice, Ron saw deep revulsion in Choi Han’s eyes. The punk seemed to have figured out that he was an assassin after their short skirmish the previous night.

“Of course.”

How dare he pretend he’s spotless when he also reeks of human blood? It amused Ron that a guy so twisted would act this way.

In their fight against this punk the previous night, he and Vicross had confronted the intensely violent stench of the Dark Forest. Ron knew it well. It wasn’t the punk’s own stench—just one that had rubbed off on him. Now that he’d washed, it was no longer discernible.

Well, there’s no way they *would have come over.*

By any measure, the young man seemed to have gone through a lot. Mulling over last night’s events, Ron told him, “Follow me.”

The old servant stepped forward to obey the pup’s orders, and Choi Han trailed behind him. The hero gazed momentarily in the direction Cale had disappeared, then turned back to Ron.

***

Carrying a bag twice the size of yesterday’s, Cale headed back to the hilltop in the slums. The siblings were there to greet him again. They didn’t say a thing as they peered at Cale, and he snorted at the sight. Smirking, he took out two small bags and thrust them toward the children.

“Take them.”

At his words, the girl slowly approached. Cale frowned as he watched her limp over, a hand pressed to her side. Her gray hair was matted and coarse.

“Hey.” Cale shook the bags at the boy. “*You* come here and take these.”

The redheaded boy darted over, snatched the bags, and ran a short distance away. His hair flopped along the way; it was shaggy and dark compared to Cale's bright-red locks.

Without a second thought, Cale turned and headed for the man-eating tree.

"Wow!"

"It's not bread—it's meat and cake!"

He heard the siblings discussing the bags' contents but paid them no mind, continuing to the tree's enclosure.

Groooooooong.

"That's mildly terrifying."

The leafless black tree moved its branches as if welcoming Cale. He grimaced at the eeriness of it as he poured the sack of bread into the hole. Instantly, the bread disappeared without a trace, and a woman's voice feebly cried, **"M-more… Give me more."**

This is insane!

It was exactly how the tree had reacted in the novel. The meaty goddess who'd starved to death had been a priestess. Unlike the present-day acolytes in temples and churches, ancient priestesses had been shamans, and many ancient shamans had superpowers or natural forces under their command.

Cale quickly grabbed the bag and moved away.

"Cale, come to my study tonight."

That was what his father, Deruth, had said when he'd gone to get his allowance. So he had to leave here before nightfall at the latest.

Half. Cale had come intending to sate half the tree's appetite today. He would have to go back downhill for more bread. When he returned to the slums, the siblings peered up at him, cake crumbs and whipped cream on their lips. Cale scowled, clicking his tongue as he went past them.

He walked down a street with a number of bakeries. He had bought virtually every loaf at the bakery he'd visited yesterday, and it would take them some time to replenish their offerings. He'd need to find another baker.

At that moment, someone called out, “L-Lord Cale!”

He spun around and saw a middle-aged woman pointing out her shop with both hands. Her fingertips quivered—proof of her fear—but she spoke confidently.

“We have lots of bread.”

Cale grinned. *Now this woman knows how to do business.* Other vendors observed them, curious as to how the interaction would go.

He threw her a gold coin, and the woman caught it. “Give me everything you have. Pack it up, and quickly.”

The woman’s smile instantly widened. She rushed into the bakery and immediately came back with a sack she’d stuffed with bread ahead of time.

“Here it is, Lord Cale!”

Wow. She really is a good merchant. This was someone who knew how to seize opportunities.

“I can get you another,” she added.

Cale liked this woman more and more every minute—and she already had competition.

“Lord Cale, we’ll bake even more bread than that!”

Hand raised, an old man crossed the street and rushed over from a block down. He wore a baker’s apron.

At the old man’s eagerness, Cale tossed him a gold coin. “I’ll head to your bakery next. Have a bag packed and ready,” he ordered.

“Thank you very much!”

Cale was amazed that despite their obvious anxiety around him, the bakers had no qualms about approaching him to make money. There was a time when they steered clear of the lout. They probably realized Cale never physically attacked anyone but gangsters. Still, from the shopkeepers’ boldness, he could see why the Henituse territory was doing so well.

The fact that Cale had spent a gold coin on a sack of bread the previous day had spread like wildfire. One gold coin—a

million galleons—would be a week's profit in one day. The prospect made people gasp, their eyes sparkling.

Tomorrow, I can revisit those three places to buy bread. Since he'd given the bakers one gold coin apiece, he'd be able to buy a second bag from each. Cale was glad things were going so smoothly.

One of the onlookers wasn't quite so pleased by the display. "Hm."

The chef, Vicross, peered at Cale from around a corner. His neck was bandaged, like his father's. He watched Cale buy the sack of bread, as well as some medicinal herbs, then head to the slums.

"Has he lost his marbles…?"

Vicross had never cared about the count's son, not even when his father claimed Cale was interesting. The more he saw, however, the more he agreed. The lout had seemed unbalanced ever since yesterday. Curiosity shimmered in Vicross's eyes; it seemed Cale would be just as fun to keep an eye on as that black-haired punk.

Elsewhere in town, Bilose—owner of the tea shop with the most floors in Weston—sipped his tea as he received his subordinate's report.

"Lord Cale's been visiting the slums?"

"Yes, Master Bilose."

"I see."

"There's also a message from the capital."

"Really now?" Bilose's round eyes, usually nestled above his chubby cheeks, went wide.

His subordinate flinched, then continued, "Yes. They say the royal family will be gathering people soon. They wish for you to return quickly and take up your duties."

Clink. Setting his teacup on its saucer, Bilose lifted his chin to his subordinate. "You may head out now."

The man disappeared from the room without a sound. Bilose stared blankly at the spot where he'd entered the shadows. A corner of his lips twisted upward.

“Do they think I’ll go back to being their guard dog?”

He gazed out the window, looking far into the distance, as if he could see all the way to the capital.

***

“Th-this isn’t bread. It’s not bread.”

“So?”

Seeing the gray-haired girl mumble that over and over, clutching the medicinal herbs Cale had given her, he snorted.

As he walked toward the man-eating tree, the boy blocked his way. “I don’t want you to die.”

Cale no longer scowled when he walked past the young boy. After all, Kim Roksu had been an orphan, and he hadn’t had anything to his name. A lot of people had been very charitable toward the poor Kim Roksu.

“Does one need a reason to show sympathy for the needy?”

That was something he’d heard when he was very young.

“Young beggar.”

“Poor orphan.”

“You needn’t justify pity.”

There was a time he’d taken the words the wrong way, but as he got older, he began to understand their true meaning. There weren’t logical reasons for the things your heart pushed you to do, nor did you need them.

“How annoying.”

The young girl was limping after him, the boy next to her. Cale absolutely hated seeing children in pain, yet he had no desire to nurse or console the injured.

Frowning, he told them, “I won’t die.”

At that, the siblings finally stopped following him. Still, it bothered Cale that by giving the girl those herbs, he’d done one of the things he hated most: He’d meddled in someone’s business without being asked.

Groooooooong.

“More… Give me more!”

“Sure. Eat it all.”

Cale emptied a new sack of bread into the tree’s hole, not caring how it landed. At this point, he was no longer afraid. As always, the bread vanished into the darkness. To be fair, it couldn’t technically be called “darkness” now; the space within had lightened to gray, although the change was only visible to him.

Guess all the money I spent is paying off now.

He dumped in a third sack of bread, then left. He didn’t see the siblings in the slums; that was for the best, though. As he walked down the alley toward the count’s estate, however, he saw two mewling cats and flinched.

Those are the kittens from yesterday. I doubt they remember me… Do they?

The two cats quieted as they stared at Cale, their matching golden eyes standing out amid their respective red and silver fur. Not wanting to bother with them, he ignored the kittens and briskly headed home.

Once he reached the estate, his father said something that almost made him faint.

“Could you please say that one more time…?” Cale asked, uncertain.

Bassen stood next to Cale as a pivotal moment—one not mentioned in the novel—occurred before Cale’s eyes.

“Yes,” the count replied. “Cale, you’ll go to the capital as our family representative.”

Cale immediately felt a headache coming on.

“Bassen was originally supposed to go. Still, you are our family’s firstborn, are you not?”

Cale’s mouth flapped open and closed without a word, whereas Count Deruth sat there with a gentle smile.

Visit the royal palace at a time like this?! Cale quickly dredged up the contents of *Birth of a Hero* while Deruth continued to

speak.

“The royal family is hosting a big event, and noble children representing each territory have been invited to come a day earlier. It will be your first time visiting the royal family. Bassen has been attending such functions for the last two years, but I’m hoping you’ll go this time.”

A formal event hosted by the royal family—that reminded Cale of a particular scene from *Birth of a Hero*:

The Plaza Terror Incident.

When numerous citizens gathered at a plaza in the capital, a secret organization launched a terrorist attack. The hero, Choi Han, managed to prevent the terrorists from enacting about half their plot. It was the fourth time in the series that Choi Han and the secret organization crossed paths. He saved a lot of the citizens in the plaza, met the royal family, and subsequently made friends with the crown prince.

Cale suddenly got chills.

The book hadn’t mentioned anything about the terrorist attack’s effects on the event the noble children were attending. It just described the situation from Choi Han’s point of view—how he gained allies before and afterward, building a stronger reputation.

Now I have to go to the scene *of a terrorist attack?!*

Of course, whether the children of the nobles would gather in the plaza was unknown. Cale began to recall the information in *Birth of a Hero*:

A crowd had gathered in the plaza, but the platform was still empty. That area was reserved for the royal family, who were due to arrive soon. Choi Han could see other people who looked to be important figures. A plethora of citizens—men and women, young and old—had turned out. Choi Han’s heart beat rapidly. He never wanted to see innocents die again.

Would the “important figures” include the young nobles? Cale turned to look at Bassen as their father carried on. Bassen

stood there stoically, watching his father without sparing Cale a single glance.

Bassen normally went to events like this. Should I suggest he attend?

Cale's mouth continued to repeatedly open and close. He didn't want to go anywhere dangerous, but he couldn't bring himself to offer up Bassen instead. Bassen and the novel version of Cale had basically been strangers. Their relationship was neither good nor bad, although Bassen found Cale hard to deal with.

Cale felt flummoxed. Would the lout in the original story have gone? Well, there was no way Deruth would've sent *him* to the capital. Why was he trying to send Cale now, then? He wondered whether he'd done something to trigger this.

"You'll depart in five days."

When Deruth said that, Cale knew that his counterpart in the book series definitely hadn't gone to the capital, no matter how the current story was progressing. Four days from now, in the novel, Cale would be pulverized by Choi Han and carried into the count's estate. There was no way he'd be able to go to the capital in that condition.

"Cale, you attended a number of social events before Bassen started doing it," Deruth said. "Just think back on those times and have a relaxing journey."

"Father!" Cale cried.

Deruth looked at him, as did Bassen.

"I'm a bit overwhelmed by this sudden announcement," Cale went on. "I haven't attended any events for two years. I don't understand why you're suddenly ordering me to go. Please give me some time to think about it."

The count agreed, then dismissed his two sons, and the siblings left the study.

Cale was busy trying to sort out the thoughts whirling in his mind. If he threw a fit and refused to go, Deruth would probably send Bassen, but it would leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Brother."

He turned at the sound of Bassen's voice. Although the boy had called out to Cale, fifteen-year-old Bassen's gaze was fixed straight ahead, his expression stoic. He never made eye contact.

"There's no reason you cannot go."

Cale heaved a sigh, and Bassen left for his own room without so much as a sidelong glance at his elder brother. The redhead stood staring at the retreating Bassen for some time. "I can't have this happen to me," he muttered.

His younger brother had virtually pushed him out of the position of heir. Two years ago, he'd successfully taken over Cale's duties as Deruth's successor, almost as if Bassen were the heir apparent. Even then, Cale hadn't shaped up, and he'd become the butt of countless jokes.

In other words, there were lots of reasons he shouldn't accept the royal family's invitation or attend an event on behalf of the Henituses. Yet Bassen was saying that there was no reason he couldn't, which meant he felt Cale was within his rights to represent their family.

If the plot continues down this road, it'll really get complicated. Cale scowled. He didn't like how things were going. Then again... *Actually, I think I could make this all work out.* Even the events that would unfold in the future. After all, the chances that he'd return without dying or getting hurt were pretty high.

And it'd mess things up if Bassen died before assuming the title of count.

For Cale to live an easy life, Bassen needed to survive. Their youngest sibling, Lilly, was too young to take over for Deruth. And once Cale obtained the man-eating tree's Ancient Power, he'd need to leave Weston to hunt down Ancient Powers outside the count's territory. The scale in his mind tilted, and he reached his conclusion.

He looked at Hans, who was heading his way. The deputy butler's expression was intense but not ominous; his eyes were bright, if a bit resentful.

"Lord Cale, your guest's request was—"

"Hans. Bring that guest to me."

Cale had decided to go to the capital, but he had no intention of being a pushover. If he obeyed Deruth, he might as well go in the way he found most comfortable and beneficial.

Going off Hans's expression, he determined that Choi Han's request had been settled without issue. In the novel, not only had Count Deruth taken care of the aftermath when Choi Han beat Cale to a pulp, he'd held a proper funeral for Harris's townsfolk. Under the current circumstances, that should still occur.

"Excuse me?"

"Ah, if he objects, just tell him this'll be repayment," Cale said.

"Pardon?!"

"Tell him there's a way to repay me."

Hans flagged down another servant so they could summon Choi Han. "Where is he?"

"Um, from what I understand, he's with Ron and Chef Vicross in Kitchen Two."

Cale was about to enter his study, but his heart leapt. Were those three getting friendly now, as he'd expected?

"I'm told Chef Vicross is teaching him to cook basic meals," the servant said.

"He's teaching him to *cook*?" Cale interjected.

"Yes."

One corner of Cale's lips went up. *Yeah, right!*

Even if they were calling it cooking, Choi Han was probably learning about torture. Or Vicross and Ron were admiring his swordsmanship. Cale didn't need to see that to know the truth.

He sauntered through his study and sat down at his desk. "What was his request?" he asked abruptly.

Hans, who was twiddling his thumbs, gasped in shock. "Uh..." Schooling his expression, he filled Cale in on the details. He couldn't hide his sorrow and pity when sharing what happened to Harris. He added that he'd gone with Choi Han to the count to deliver the mayor's plaque Choi Han had brought.

Cale had anticipated all of this. “Father met with him?”

“Yes. The count ordered that a funeral be conducted right away and that inspectors, knights, and soldiers be sent to the town to investigate the matter.”

Hm.

Hans hesitated. “However, your guest indicated that he will not be going back to Harris with them.”

The deputy butler thought back on the meeting between the count and Choi Han, during which the young man explained the incident in Harris. He had spoken dispassionately, but his hands trembled all the while. It was then Hans learned Choi Han was merely seventeen years old. He’d only survived because he happened to be searching for medicinal herbs on his own during the massacre. *To think he saw the corpses of his neighbors and friends at such a young age… How shocking it all must have been!*

That was why Hans had decided to ask Cale whether Choi Han could refrain from saying a final farewell to the late townsfolk. “Will that be all right?”

“It’s his decision.”

Cale already knew why Choi Han didn’t want to return. The hero had said his goodbyes as he buried the townsfolk. All that was left was to get revenge on the people who’d taken their futures away.

“Has Ron taken care of him?” Cale asked, changing the subject.

“Yes. He’s made sure the guest eats every meal, and he’s been very friendly with him.”

Ron and his son *did* seem to be getting along with Choi Han.

“Oh!” Hans seemed to remember something. “It appears Mr. Ron hurt himself again while working this afternoon. He had bandages wrapped around his wrist.”

“Really? Make sure to give him some medicine,” Cale replied, indifferent. Ron had probably killed someone again.

“I’ll be sure to recount your kindhearted order to him.”

“Sure, whatever.”

Looking at Cale's nonchalant expression, the deputy butler opened his mouth to add something. But at that very moment, a different noise resonated through the study.

Knock, knock, knock.

Choi Han had arrived. Hans opened the door, and Cale saw his guest standing beyond it. He waved his hand to send Hans away; the deputy butler bowed his head and quietly exited the study. Only Cale and Choi Han were left in the room.

Cale was keen on keeping the desk between them, and he pointed at the chair on the opposite side. "Come sit down."

Choi Han swept a glance around the study as he did so. Cale gave him enough time to look thoroughly.

Like the typical stalwart, clever hero, Choi Han liked books. One of the first things he'd done after leaving the Dark Forest and arriving in Harris was learn how to read from the mayor.

Once he'd gotten a good look at the study's interior, Choi Han's gaze finally landed on Cale. "How may I repay you?"

He got right to the point, which made Cale smile. Choi Han was thorough when it came to debts he owed.

Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu—realized that he had altered the beginning of *Birth of a Hero*. Even more things would change because of that. He was trying his best not to affect too much… but he had to go to the capital, so it was bound to happen.

Cale placed a sheet of paper on the desk and looked at Choi Han. "There is a way. But first, I need to determine whether you're capable. In essence, this is an interview."

"Please, go right ahead."

Choi Han gave Cale permission to evaluate his qualifications, and Cale began his questions.

"Do you know how to protect people?"

Choi Han flinched for the first time. He paused, narrowing his eyes at Cale. "What do you mean…?"

Cale looked down at the paper on the desk rather than at Choi Han. He'd changed his plans quickly, but they might benefit him more now. He could prevent Choi Han's party from getting those Ancient Powers and take them for himself. Any way you

looked at it, the powers would be useless to Choi Han and the others anyway.

Keeping his gaze on the paper, Cale said absentmindedly, “Simple. I’m asking whether you’re capable of protecting people rather than killing them.”

Silence settled over the room as Choi Han absorbed the question. Cale glanced up from the paper at the young man sitting in front of him.

Head lowered, Choi Han eventually answered, “I’m not sure.”

Cale clicked his tongue. This was why it was dangerous to provoke Choi Han in his current state. “But you can kill someone?”

The answer came easily this time. “Absolutely.”

“Then you should be able to protect people as well.”

Choi Han looked uncertain. “That would be difficult.”

“Difficult doesn’t mean impossible.”

There weren’t many things you could avoid just because they were difficult. Kim Roksu’s life had demonstrated that, so he was delighted to be a lout who did whatever he pleased. Unfortunately, there was now a mountain he’d need to climb to secure that damn peaceful future. Cale was looking for someone to climb that mountain for him while carrying him on their back.

Choi Han laughed dryly. “I guess that’s true.”

“Yes, it is. Now, the final question.”

“Please.”

Cale met Choi Han’s firm gaze. “What’s your name?”

“You don’t know my name?”

Of course I do. You’re the guy who was going to beat me up. “I’ve heard it from other people, but I want to hear it directly from you.”

“Choi Han.” He extended his hand. “My name is Choi Han.”

Cale shook it. “Great. I’m Cale Henituse.”

The short “interview” wrapped up quickly, and Choi Han had obviously passed. Cale slid the paper on the desk toward him. There were two names written there, as well as where these people could be found.

“The way you can repay me is simple: Go to the capital with these two.”

These were allies Choi Han would meet on his way to the capital. The two of them—as well as Vicross—grew alongside Choi Han until Volume Five of *Birth of a Hero*. Their names were Rosalyn and Lark. The former was the princess of a neighboring kingdom, returning there after surviving an assassination attempt. The latter was an injured kid—the Wolf King’s heir. Like his fellow tribe members, he had the ability to transform into a wolf.

The neighboring kingdom’s princess, Rosalyn, was tough and cold. She was the second strongest, next to Choi Han, and applied her strength in strategic ways. She was absolutely uninterested in the throne; instead, her goal was to create the continent’s greatest Magic Tower. In the future, as she neared her goal, she would be hailed as a hero.

An archduke of this kingdom attempted to assassinate Rosalyn. Eventually, he’ll be tortured by Vicross.

Cale’s heart hammered in his chest as he recalled how clear and descriptive the novel’s torture scene had been. His heart seemed to pound quite a bit these days.

Choi Han read the names aloud. “Rosalyn. Lark.”

Cale nodded. “Yes. Those two. I’m glad you know how to read.”

The hero stared at the paper until Cale’s gaze also fell on the name “Lark.”

This world had other races, such as elves, dwarves, and beastfolk—the last being the most secretive. Beastfolk included animals, birds, and even insects. They were different from monsters, since beastfolk had a higher level of consciousness.

Lark has the purest blood of all the wolves.

Indeed, Lark’s bloodline pretty much set him up to lead the wolves. The beastfolk with the purest bloodlines tended to look

relatively weak in their animal or human forms. But once they entered Berserk Mode, they became crueler and more violent than anyone. Lark was the only survivor of the Blue Wolf Tribe.

Cale retrieved a map from his drawer and opened it on the desk. “We’ll start the journey together, then separate at this midpoint.” He pointed to a location on the map. “And you’ll head to the place written on that paper.”

Choi Han didn’t ask any questions, just quietly listened. Cale observed him for a moment. There was a reason Choi Han had to go with him till that specific point. *I need to avoid that crazy dragon!*

As with any other series, new villains had to appear once the plot of *Birth of a Hero* picked up. Unlike Cale, a minor antagonist, those later villains weren’t easy pickings. The next villain was a marquess who led a noble faction. At the beginning of the series, he got in the way of the crown prince and Choi Han, and he was defeated around Volume Two. Choi Han would first run into the marquess during this trip to the capital.

That bastard raised the crazy dragon.

Yes, a dragon. It was still just a baby, but the marquess’s heir had secretly caged and tortured it, training it to obey the marquess’s every command.

They’re crazy too. Dragons are this world’s strongest beings. How do they think they’ll tame one?

It *was* doable, to an extent. Having gotten his hands on a dragon egg through the secret organization, the marquess chained down all four of its limbs and placed a mana-restricting gem around its neck as soon as it hatched. Cale couldn’t begin to fathom the power of a secret organization that could obtain a dragon egg.

But dragons weren’t called the world’s strongest beings for no reason.

Though the creature was less than five years old, it *was* still a dragon—and in the novel, it ultimately went mad. After living in a cave, tortured every day without seeing the sun, the young black dragon obtained freedom. By cutting into its own life force,

it produced a mana explosion that ripped off the gem. After escaping, however, the black dragon wound up losing its sanity.

At that point, the mad dragon endangered the village Choi Han was staying in, and he fought the creature.

Choi Han gazed at the small dragon, which was less than a meter long. That little thing had managed to blow up a mountain and put the villagers in mortal danger. Choi Han couldn't attack the dragon thoughtlessly, however. The creature's eyes had lost their reason, brimming with agony and sorrow...yet its lips curled in a smile. Choi Han found the contrast heartbreaking.

Choi Han had ended up killing the black dragon, freeing its spirit for good. Now, though, Cale would have to go to that village. *Either Choi Han defeats the dragon, or I find a way to release it and prevent it from going mad.*

There was no other choice, since the village was on the way to the capital. Cale would have to take an extremely long detour to skirt it. That would change the flow of the plot, not to mention waste loads of time—making him late to the capital.

Despite going mad, the dragon was supposed to be cute.

The novel had described the creature as an adorable black dragon with stubby legs, explaining that such a sweet creature losing its sanity and wreaking havoc was the most terrifying thing of all.

Putting his concerns about the dragon aside for now, Cale gave Choi Han the rest of his instructions. "Accompany those two to the capital. That'll be your way of repaying me."

"I just need to protect these two...?"

"If you want to."

Really, they'd be strong enough not to require Choi Han's protection. Especially Princess Rosalyn; she wouldn't have budged an inch if a truckload of Cales with Unbreakable Shields attacked her simultaneously.

"You may do as you wish in this regard, but *you* must come to the capital. Meet me there without getting hurt. You can at

least protect yourself, right?"

In the novels, Choi Han had another brush with the secret organization after encountering Lark; therefore, meeting Lark should position Choi Han to stop the danger in the capital, as he had in the novel. From that point, Cale and Choi Han would have no reason to meet again.

"Why aren't you answering?" asked Cale. "Can you do it?"

Choi Han's gaze sharpened. "Yes. Of course."

His tone seemed more respectful than before, but Cale let it be. Seeing Choi Han tuck the paper into his chest pocket, he relaxed a bit. *We should've had this talk over a drink,* he thought. Interacting with Choi Han in Cale's weak body exhausted him.

Cale waved Choi Han off. "You can leave now."

As the young man headed for the door, the lout leaned back in the rickety chair and watched him.

When Choi Han reached for the door, Cale spoke again. "To be clear, everything we discussed is to stay between us. You know that, right?"

Choi Han opened the door, answering without looking back. "Yes, I do." Cale could hear a smile in his voice, but he didn't care.

Once Cale was alone, he took out a sheet of paper and a pen and began to write in Korean. After a while, he left the room and headed for his father's study.

"Father."

"Yes?"

"I need money."

"All right. I'll inform the head steward."

He'd needed a significant sum. That night, he lay down in bed with another ten-million-galleon check in his chest pocket.

Ron approached and put a drink on the nightstand. "Warm honey-lemon tea. My son made it especially for you," he said. "Now, good night. I'm always at your service, young master."

Cale's sleepiness instantly evaporated.

No matter what, he needed to ensure Ron and Vicross went away with Choi Han.

***

Shortly after Cale woke up the next day, he headed to the slums.

“I heard everything about your father’s request from Hans this morning, young master. Though I may be lacking, I’ll do whatever I can to make sure you shine at the capital.”

His shoulders quivered as he strode away from the count’s estate, recalling the conversation he’d had with Ron the moment he awoke. He didn’t need to make an effort to do so; it popped into his mind unbidden.

“This will be your first time visiting the capital, won’t it? I’m good at hunting rabbits. I’ll find some for you while we’re camping.”

Ron’s calm, kindly voice echoed in Cale’s head. He felt as if he heard it through the thick fog, like a hallucination. Listening to Ron explain how to hunt rabbits first thing in the morning had horrified him.

“You need to be careful when hunting a small animal like a rabbit that balks easily. You don’t know when or how it could escape, so you must pay close attention to your surroundings and kill it in an instant. Oh, and you need to gut it too. I’m also very good at that.”

When Ron mimed slicing open a rabbit’s belly, Cale had to turn away. Ron had been far too enthusiastic. Preposterous as it may have seemed, Cale felt the old fellow was toying with him. Even so, he was relieved Ron had agreed to go to the capital with him.

And I can just take Vicross as my personal chef.

Cale had already told Hans as much that morning, preparing to bring the father and son with him. Of course, Ron had been there when he spoke to the deputy butler.

“Hans, I want to take Vicross on this trip as my personal chef.”

“May I ask why? He’s extremely busy running Kitchen Two.”

“I just can’t eat anything but Vicross’s cooking. I’ll be taking him with me, so work around it.”

Hans was caught off guard, but Ron seemed happy to have his son accompany them.

“Vicross will be very pleased, young master. I’ll tell him exactly what you’ve said. We happened to need to visit the capital anyway.”

At that, Cale finally relaxed; he had been worried they’d refuse. It seemed Vicross would also enjoy leaving Henituse territory for a trip to the capital.

Cale walked through the foggy Weston, mulling over the people he’d take to the capital. The story was progressing a little differently than it had in the novels, but he liked the idea of getting ahead of the game.

When he arrived at one of the bakeries in town, the baker nonchalantly greeted him. The two had met a couple of times now, so he was at ease. “Lord Cale, you’re early today.”

“The bread?” Cale said tersely.

“Of course. I have it ready.” The baker smiled as he handed Cale a sack of loaves. “Is today really the last day?”

“Why? Greedy for more sales?”

“Yes, I certainly am.”

Cale smiled. He appreciated the honesty. “I’ll come again when I crave bread.”

He patted the shoulder of the baker who’d seemingly figured him out, then set out for the slums. The baker watched longingly as Cale disappeared into the fog, praying that the count’s son would return—and drop a ton of money again.

Naturally, Cale was unaware of the baker’s prayer as he went. After he arrived at the slums, he came across the siblings once again, which made him frown.

Don’t these kids have a home?

He’d arrived much earlier than usual, yet the siblings were curled up together near the hilltop, as if they’d been waiting for him all night. The brother leaned into his older sister’s embrace. They peered at Cale, keeping their lips pressed tight. Their hair and clothes were damp, perhaps due to the humidity in the air.

Cale pretended not to notice. “Here, take these.”

He waited as the young boy took both siblings’ shares, then turned and made for the man-eating tree.

I’m glad it’s foggy.

That made it difficult to see. And since the hill was the highest point in Weston—not including the count’s estate—the fog was thicker up there. Nobody else would see what Cale was about to do…or more importantly, what he would receive from the tree.

As usual, he listened to the resentful soul’s eerie voice as he poured the sack of bread into the hole beneath the tree.

“More… Give me more. Please!”

The grayish color of the hole slowly lightened to white. Cale smirked, concluding that his efforts had paid off.

At that moment, the voice turned into a shriek. **“More, more, more!”**

What?! Cale flinched and stepped backward. The novel hadn’t mentioned anything about this.

“More! More! I’ll give you a present if you bring me more… A present, I tell you!”

The word “present” made Cale’s eyes sparkle. He was so close, he could almost taste it—though he hadn’t expected the soul to screech so loudly.

“Just wait,” he said.

The black branches swayed in acknowledgment. It felt like a scene out of a horror movie. Cale shivered and briskly walked through the fog. It was mid-morning now, but the sun was hidden behind the clouds, and the fog continued to get thicker. It looked like it would rain soon.

Since the siblings were nowhere to be seen, Cale assumed they’d gone somewhere to escape the rain. He retrieved the third sack of bread and hauled it over to the man-eating tree. The light inside the hole was now as white as the fog surrounding him. This would be the last batch. Once the tree consumed this final sack of bread, he should be able to see clearly into the hole.

He was full of anticipation as he dumped out the sack. Finally…

Groooooooooong.

The tree rumbled like never before. It was directed at him, but it didn't catch his attention; he was too fixated on the space inside the hole. The tree's shadow should have kept it shrouded in darkness, but now it was coming into view at last.

This was the Ancient Power.

At that moment, Cale heard the voice that had been crying out for food each day. **"It was so, so delicious! Oh, that soft bread! I especially liked the third sack you brought. There was no such thing as bread in my day, but I guess even new foods develop as years go by! Anyhow, that third bag was delectable. The wheat must've grown on rich soil! Not all wheat is the same, you know."**

The obnoxious voice was evaluating the bread's flavor. Apparently, the spirit tied to this world by its grudges was resolving them by evaluating the bread. As it talked Cale's ear off, he thought, *This wasn't in the novel either!*

His forehead wrinkles grew deeper and deeper. The Unbreakable Shield was the only Ancient Power in *Birth of a Hero* that no one ever claimed, and Cale was already reconsidering his pursuit of the shield.

No wonder nobody ended up taking it. But why would the author mention something so handy that was never actually used?

As this thought flashed through Cale's mind, the annoying voice chattered away, distracting him. **"That's why I'm so full! It was delicious!"**

The spirit went on and on and on. It seemed as though she resented being unable to *speak*, not eat. After she babbled on for a couple of minutes, judging the bakeries' loaves, Cale nodded and prepared to interrupt her.

"Things like bread weren't available in ancient times," the voice continued. **"The people of the Dark Forest claimed to serve a god, yet they only fed me tasteless meals."**

Hearing the spirit mention ancient times, Cale decided to wait a little longer. It was important to listen to stories about that

period, since he needed Ancient Powers.

“I was, of course, banished from that place. They said I was a glutton. Glutton, my ass! I left with my friends. We planned to put the world back on track.” The spirit’s story quickly ended, and she went back to blathering on about food. **“I don’t think I could give up this flavor, even if I got fat. It’s so unfair that I keeled over after having to eat all that dirt!”**

Cale seized his chance to interject. “Yes. That was an amazingly professional bakery review. But you’re a bit lou—”

“You understood my review! You’re a really good guy! Thanks!”

He wasn’t sure whether he could truly communicate with the meaty goddess. The situation bewildered him. At the very least, the voice stopped after thanking him.

Cale looked at the man-eating tree. “How interesting.”

The tree’s black bark had begun to turn white. Then it slowly started to sprout green leaves. Since he and the tree were surrounded in fog, the scene looked even more mystical.

Groooooooong.

The noise was deeper than before. Cale kneeled, then sat at the base of the tree. Bright-white light poured from the hole. He reached his hand into the light, closing his eyes. *This must be it.*

Warm, strong power engulfed his hand, and a smile spread across his face. He heard the voice again—and this time, it was pure and comforting. **“This will protect you.”**

Flash!

For a brief moment, bright silver light surrounded Cale, seeping into his body and gathering in his heart. Cale heaved a deep sigh as he opened his eyes. The silver light didn’t hurt. Rather, it was warm, and its pure power delighted him. He quickly pulled up the shirt he was wearing, looking at his bare chest.

I did it!

There was a small silver shield over his heart. It was different from a tattoo—more like someone had painted the

beautiful, ornate design in watercolors. The Unbreakable Shield prioritized its owner's safety above all else. It was in this spot because the shield would be with Cale until his heart stopped beating.

"How cool."

Cale felt the shield's power ensconce his heart. It didn't cause him any distress; in fact, it felt like the shield was doing its best to protect him.

Each Ancient Power functioned uniquely when activated, so Cale utilized the method written in *Birth of a Hero* to summon the Unbreakable Shield.

Flash!

The transparent silver shield appeared in front of Cale's eyes. It was just large enough to cover his upper body. There were two silver wings, one on either side, allowing the shield to move within a specific radius of Cale. He could also control its size.

Cale adjusted the dimensions of the shield, which already felt like part of his body. That immediate familiarity was one of the special traits of Ancient Powers, which was why heroes used them, even if just as support.

The redheaded lout had a big smile on his face.

Two maximum, he thought, using Choi Han—the strongest person around at present—as a reference. The shield could likely block two of the hero's sword attacks.

It's stronger than I expected. Why wouldn't the heroes have used it all the time?

Despite its name, the Unbreakable Shield *could* actually break, but it wouldn't disappear if it did. If the shield took an attack that overwhelmed it, it would store as much power as possible to protect its owner's heart before it was destroyed. Then, after a while, the shield would recover and could be used again.

The shield's power came from its owner's beating heart; the heart and the shield enhanced one another. So, what would happen if the *heart* got stronger? *The shield will get even tougher too.*

There were many ways to strengthen Ancient Powers, and Cale planned to reinforce this shield on his way to the capital. He thought he should be able to produce a shield that would last ten—no, at least *five*—minutes when someone of Choi Han's caliber tried with all their strength to kill him.

Ancient Powers, as this man-eating tree had demonstrated, were difficult to earn unless you encountered them "coincidentally." But the person who knew the most about the "coincidences" in the series' first five volumes was probably Cale Henituse—the *current* Cale Henituse, anyway.

Beaming, Cale reached out to touch the shield. It felt nice. Still, there was one thing he didn't like about it. "It seems too… divine."

At full strength, it looked like the sort of shield a holy knight would carry along with a sword into battle, like in the legends of yore. That being the case, this shield's former owner was a priestess tired of everyone hiding behind "divine" excuses. Its current owner, Cale, just wasn't a fan of the divine.

Well, it's not like there'll be many occasions for me to use the shield.

He planned on letting everyone else do the fighting for him, though he might have to use it if he got caught up in the terrorist attack in the capital. Still, he'd ensure the shield was small and faint so other people wouldn't notice it.

Cale returned the shield to his heart, idly patted the now-white tree, and walked away. Within the fog, misty rain dampened Cale's shoulders. Cale was fine with fog, but he didn't like rain. He picked up the pace on his way home, wishing he had a carriage.

As he reached the end of the alley leading to the count's estate, an icy chill pricked the back of his neck.

"Meoooooow."

"Meow."

He stopped in his tracks, frowning. Two pairs of round golden eyes peered up at him—belonging to two woeful kittens drenched by the rain. They meowed pitifully as they wobbled

toward Cale. Then, one at a time, they rubbed their cheeks on his ankles.

Cale huffed a sigh and resumed his walk. The two tiny kittens followed him, somehow keeping up with Cale despite their stubby legs.

***

"Lord Cale, what are *these*?!" Hans blurted out when Cale arrived home.

The deputy butler was beyond shocked; his eyes were wide as saucers, his mouth agape.

Cale clicked his tongue, thrusting both hands outward. "Just take them. Don't ask stupid questions."

Hans's eyes shimmered as he took in the sight. "Wh-what *adorable* little kittens!"

Cale carefully handed the two kittens to the delighted Hans. Already a butler himself, Hans was thrilled to be in service of the felines. The kittens continued to watch Cale, even in Hans's embrace.

"Lord Cale, may I care for these lovely kittens?"

"Whatever you want," Cale replied, and the giddy Hans grinned ear to ear. As the redhead walked past him, he added, "Uh, by the way, they quiet down if you feed them. And they're siblings."

The kittens flinched, then began to tremble. Their golden eyes widened as they looked at Cale.

"Excuse me?" Hans said, puzzled.

Cale swiftly came back, leaning over and petting the two kittens. He had wondered about it for the last few days; how could he *not* know by now, considering the silver kitten smelled faintly of the medicinal herbs he'd given the girl? Moreover, when he picked the two kittens up earlier, he'd smelled the steak and bacon cream pasta he'd given them just that morning. When he connected the dots of these recent encounters, it all clicked in Cale's mind.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know?” he asked them.

Although the two kittens continued to quiver, Cale smiled, gazing at the siblings he’d fed for the past few days. He petted them with large, rough strokes, but the kittens could only stare nervously at him.

He thought about the moment he’d met Choi Han next to the city wall. The injured silver kitten had hissed, while the red kitten mewled next to it. *The silver kitten should be the older sister with gray hair. The younger brother must be the red kitten.*

Cale was practically beaming as he told the cats, “We’ll talk later.”

The siblings—now outed as beastfolk—avoided his gaze.

“You and I will talk, Lord Cale?” Hans inquired.

“Not you.”

Hans looked at Cale and the kittens with even more confusion, then hugged the little things tightly as though protecting them from the redheaded lout.

Soon enough, however, he had to address Cale again. “Are you heading back out?”

“Yes.” Cale had changed his coat and was preparing to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“I have a promise to keep. And someone to meet.”

Hans was shocked anew. “Lord Cale, *you’re* going somewhere to keep a promise?”

“You’ve been pretty rude lately.”

“My apologies,” the deputy butler said quickly.

Cale wondered whether it was really true that Hans was the best candidate for head butler. The man seemed decent, judging by the way he’d handled Choi Han’s request. Still, as he watched Hans caress the kittens with a wide, foolish grin, Cale had his doubts.

I’m going to take him to the capital as well, but…

The fact that Cale was thinking along those lines was something Hans would never have dreamed of—indeed,

something Hans would've lamented if he *had* dreamed it.

At that point, Cale asked about someone he hadn't seen for a while. "Where's Ron?"

Hans smiled wider at that question, looking satisfied. "With Master Choi Han—who I hear will join you as a guard during the first half of your journey to the capital. Is that true?"

The deputy butler thought back to how Choi Han had defeated every member of the count's knight brigade that day. The young man was more skilled than Hans had expected; he would find it easy to serve as Cale's guard, which was precisely what the count's son wanted. Neither Hans nor the knights knew Choi Han had displayed only a portion of his strength. And not a soul knew he'd hidden his *true* power.

"After learning Master Choi Han would accompany you, Mr. Ron went out with him to purchase clothes and other necessities for travel. Oh, and Chef Vicross joined them."

"I see. That's a relief." As Cale determined that those three were getting along well, he donned a rare bright smile—one that suited his glossy red hair.

Hans studied him, then proudly continued, "Mr. Ron, Master Choi Han, and even Vicross seem excited about serving you, my lord."

The moment he said that, Cale's expression soured. Wondering why Cale suddenly appeared almost nauseated, Hans couldn't help making the same expression. Both men headed out of the estate's entrance with grim looks on their faces.

Nevertheless, Hans escorted Cale to the carriage. As the count's son got in, he said, "Hey, Hans—don't deputy butlers learn basic martial arts?"

"Of course."

"And you're the foremost deputy butler, aren't you?"

Hans's lips twitched. Count Deruth cherished him because he took care of things and had the best personality. "Yes, sir. I know the basics of three styles: martial arts, dagger arts, and spear arts."

A good butler needed to learn a few fighting styles in case something happened that endangered their employer's family and required them to flee.

"Amazing!"

"Well, I suppose I am." Humbled into a shrug and a smile, Hans didn't notice the way Cale looked at him. Instead, it was the two kittens watching Hans who shook their heads in dismay at the sly grin spreading across Cale's face.

"I'm leaving now." Before closing the carriage door, Cale made up his mind to bring Hans to the capital to take care of annoyances he didn't want to deal with.

The carriage pierced the fog, entering a downpour as it headed toward his destination.

***

Cale took one glance at the sign before opening the door to the Poetry and Tea House.

Jingle.

The clear ringing of the bell—and an empty establishment—welcomed Cale.

"Guess nobody's here because of the rain."

"Welcome, Lord Cale," Bilose said warmly, as though he and Cale were old friends.

Cale stood at the counter, facing Bilose. "I promised to come back, so I did."

"Of course. Promises have to be kept. Shall I prepare some tea and bring up the book you borrowed last time?"

"Yes. And make that three cups of tea."

"Which would you like?"

Cale ordered three different blends, told Bilose when to bring them up, and then turned and headed to the third floor. Meanwhile, the rain hissed loudly outside—it was getting worse.

Clicking his tongue, Cale sat in the same spot by the third-floor window, taking in the sight of the downpour. “It’s raining pretty hard, isn’t it?”

Bilose came upstairs and took a seat across from Cale, placing a single cup of tea before him. Cale unabashedly observed the shop owner.

Choi Han, Vicross, Ron…and Bilose.

Those were the characters who kept showing up in the series after Volume One. That said, the first volume only contained two or so sentences about how Bilose owned the tea shop Choi Han briefly visited. Starting in Volume Three, though, Bilose became a prominent character who swore loyalty to Choi Han and revealed his ambitions.

Revealed. That was the key word. *He was always a rather greedy character.*

Bilose was different from Hong Gildong, an outlaw and illegitimate son in Korean literature who craved recognition and respect. He wasn’t sad that he could not call his father “Father” or his brother “Brother.” He just wanted to get a leg up on them, to make it so they had no choice but to accept him. He wanted to *force* them to introduce him as their son or younger sibling.

How exhausting.

From Cale’s perspective, Bilose had lived a tiring life, but Cale didn’t mind that about him. In fact, Bilose’s greed made him seem more human. He couldn’t stand people who were completely capable but acted as if they were some Taoist hermit letting go of worldly desires, saying things like, “Ho-hum, I’m just giving up. Nothing will change anyway.”

Why would you give up on something attainable? Cale felt one should always take hold of what was within their grasp.

At any rate, Choi Han would have to meet this character at least once during the Volume One time frame, and it would have to be a very short encounter.

Bilose’s voice broke Cale’s train of thought. “I hear you’re going to the capital.”

“Are you going to keep sitting there?” Cale snapped. “Don’t you have work to do?”

His blatant annoyance prompted a smile from Bilose, who found the young lord fascinating. The merchant could tell that Cale had an unusual outlook, but he didn't think it was half bad. "I'm heading to the capital as well. I guess I'll be following you."

"And?"

Cale already knew that. Bilose and Choi Han would cross paths again in Volume Three, so Bilose would need to leave for the capital soon. Cale sipped his tea, looking out the window.

"Lord Cale, it seems as though you've changed," the tea shop owner told him with a stoic expression.

Cale turned and motioned with his chin for Bilose to continue.

"You don't seem like the person with that nickname."

"What nickname? 'Lout'?"

Cale's lips curled upward. This convinced Bilose that the count's son was different; this Cale wasn't the so-called "lout" he knew of. After all, *that* fellow hadn't known how to smile in that slightly bitter way.

Should I have gotten tipsy and broken a couple of chairs? Cale thought.

Oblivious to Cale's musings, Bilose replied, "Yes, that's right. 'Lout.' Weren't you always a lout, Lord Cale?"

Does this man have no fear? Cale couldn't help but wonder. Bilose had said this to the count's son, the firstborn of the lord of the territory. Was *Bilose* the one who'd had something to drink?

But Cale didn't want to fight with the man. Bilose was destined to take over a large merchant fleet. And he had been sincere, asking the question without a hint of a smile.

"Weren't you always a lout, Lord Cale?"

For Cale, that wasn't a difficult question to answer. It was easier than figuring out how to make money when you were broke, that much was for sure.

"Bilose," Cale said, just as deadpan as the somber tea shop owner, "you can't call your father 'Father' or your brother 'Brother.'"

Bilose narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing the young lord in front of him. Cale had ruthlessly touched his most painful sore spot—just as he'd brought up Cale's. For a few seconds, Cale silently held his gaze.

The rain came down even harder.

"Are you going to continue being nothing more than an illegitimate son?" Cale asked over the sound of the rain, smiling. "Are you satisfied with that?"

Looking into his eyes, Bilose felt like he was balancing on a razor's edge.

"I know you're not." Cale leaned back in his chair. With a faraway look in his eyes, he added, "I've been a lout for about a decade, since I was eight."

Wow. That's right—Cale had been raising hell since he was eight years old. And he started drinking at fifteen. What a guy. Recalling the original lout's backstory, Cale smiled. Bilose found it a little despondent.

At that moment, a noise cut through the rain and reached their ears.

Creeeak, creeeak.

Someone was coming upstairs.

Cale looked past Bilose's shoulder toward the third-floor landing. He spotted a mop of black hair. It was Choi Han, with Ron tagging behind him. This morning, Cale had ordered a servant to tell Choi Han to come to the tea shop.

Returning his attention to Bilose, Cale resumed his conversation. Choi Han and Ron looked at him as they reached the top of the staircase.

"Hey, Bilose."

The unsmiling Bilose wore a frigid expression; by contrast, Cale's eyes had flickered to life.

"If you've been doing one thing for ten years, it's all right to toss it aside now. I can't live as a lout forever."

He wasn't *really* a lout, but Cale still planned to enjoy life, spending all the money he wanted and living comfortably as a wealthy count's slothful son. And while his life was headed in a

different direction than Bilose's, what mattered was that neither planned to continue the life they'd been living.

"Isn't it the same for you?" Cale pressed.

A corner of Bilose's lips slowly crept upward. He lowered his head, and his shoulders shook as he laughed. After quietly chuckling for a moment, Bilose raised his head and looked at Cale. "I am indeed tired of it."

"See? I told you." Cale shrugged, beckoning Choi Han and Ron over.

Bilose got up from his seat. "Lord Cale?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll see you at the capital."

Cale scrunched his brow. If they met at the capital right away, it would complicate things. "Why bother?" He motioned with his hand, shooing Bilose away.

Bilose bowed respectfully, then left. Ron and Choi Han made eye contact with the tea shop owner as he walked to the stairs, but they ignored one another. *Good.* Cale welcomed the scene. Choi Han and Bilose had now briefly crossed paths—just like in the book.

Quite satisfied with himself, Cale smiled at the two people sitting down across from him. "I knew you'd come with him, Ron. Hans said Vicross joined you two as well, but I take it he's gone back to the kitchen, since he's so industrious."

"Are you close with that shopkeeper, young master?" Ron asked unexpectedly.

Cale shrugged. "No."

"I see..." Ron trailed off.

Cale had brushed his question aside, as if it wasn't worth discussing, but the old servant had definitely heard him tell Bilose that he couldn't keep living as a lout. The count's son looked grimly at Ron, then locked eyes with Choi Han.

"I guess you can't trust the rumors," Choi Han mused.

What's up with this *guy now?* Cale thought, then chose to ignore his comment.

Right then, Bilose brought the other two cups of tea Cale had ordered earlier. “Shall I serve the two gentlemen?”

“Yup.” Cale smirked, telling his companions, “I ordered these in advance.”

He plucked the teacups from Bilose himself, giving one to each man. In front of Choi Han, Cale set a tea he’d chosen randomly from the menu. As for Ron…

“I ordered this especially for you,” Cale said. “I’m assuming you really like it, since you bring it for me every day.”

It was warm lemon tea. Seeing Ron subtly purse his lips, Cale experienced the greatest satisfaction he’d felt all day. But when Ron drank it without a single complaint, a chill ran down Cale’s spine.

Clack.

Why did the sound of the teacup being placed on the saucer seem so loud? Thankfully, it wasn’t just Cale being paranoid; Choi Han, who had been quietly enjoying his tea, furrowed his brow at the noise.

“If you’re going to drink it, could you drink it a bit more quietly?”

Ron stifled a laugh when Choi Han chastised him disdainfully after peeking at Cale.

He’d procured Choi Han a decently useful sword earlier, one forged by the same blacksmith as Vicross’s kitchen knife. His son had nagged Choi Han endlessly to fight. Vicross had gotten a hint of Choi Han’s strength during their short bout before and wanted to assess it further. *“Shall we have a go at it?”*

Choi Han had continued to reject him. *“I won’t fight someone slashing with a kitchen knife.”*

“Hmph. You’re a funny punk. What’ll it take for you to fight me? Do I need to carry a bloodied sword like you?”

Upon hearing that, Choi Han had closed his eyes for a moment before reopening them. *“I-I protect people now,”* he’d told Vicross, as if confirming it for himself. *“He said even* I *could do it.”*

“What the hell are you saying?”

Ron had watched his son and Choi Han's foolish banter, then joined Choi Han to come see Cale, at which point he'd heard something important:

"I can't live as a lout forever."

Ron had been pondering that very statement rather than his lemon tea. Nonetheless, Choi Han had disapproved of his expression.

Cale was all too happy to witness their exchange. Ron and Choi Han's relationship had been just like this in *Birth of a Hero*. They were always at each other's throats, but they continued to travel together, since they were bound by a contract. That said, they never crossed each other's boundaries.

Although Cale had feared his efforts to avoid getting beaten up had set the plot way off course, Choi Han and Ron were forming a relationship similar to the one in the original series.

It's a pity the story got a little messed up, but my life comes first. I can't let the series dictate it, he thought.

Cale's life was his first priority. His second was to ensure that all those living within Henituse territory had peaceful lives. Once that was taken care of, what more would he need?

"Sweet teas are really the best," he said cheerfully, which made Ron flinch.

The trio's leisurely tea time ended during the heavy downpour. As Cale came down from the third floor afterward, Bilose acknowledged him.

"I guess I'll see you next at the capital."

Cale shook his head at the shopkeeper. "I'll visit every day for a while."

"Is that so? Will you be coming to read?"

"To do whatever I feel like doing."

"Well, you're welcome to visit whenever you'd like. This tea shop is open to you at all times, Lord Cale."

Cale strode by, pretending not to have heard, as the shopkeeper peered curiously at him. Ron observed the scene in silence.

Although Bilose was the illegitimate son of Flynn Merchant Fleets' head, he was extremely talented, earning him the ire of the legitimate heirs. Thus, Bilose had been relegated to the remote Henituse territory. While the region was profitable, he couldn't so much as use the surname "Flynn."

Cale's friendliness with the greedy Bilose made Ron click his tongue, though he wondered why he should care whether his little pup master was close with the tea shop owner. "I can't believe my distaste has grown into affection," he muttered.

"I don't actually *want* to start feeling affection for you, Ron."

Ron heaved a sigh at the clueless Choi Han's misunderstanding. "I'm not talking about you, punk." His gaze was fixed on Cale.

At any rate, Ron had to seize this opportunity to visit the capital—but he had a bad feeling he just couldn't shake. He'd felt it ever since Choi Han arrived with the Dark Forest's stench on him.

Ron had escaped the Eastern Continent and hidden in this territory, and it seemed to him like he would need to follow up on those responsible. Before then, as his final duty as a servant, it would behoove him to ensure his little pup master arrived at the capital and returned home safely. Ron had told himself he would stay by Cale because he found the young lord's nervous expression so humorous, but would an assassin ever admit the truth?

On the journey, I'll tell Vicross to make food that the pup will like.

He looked after Cale more diligently than he did his own son. Ron knew how terrible Cale's personality was and the awful things he'd done. However, there was something else he knew.

When Cale's mother died, Ron had seen the count's son console his father. He'd also seen how Cale hated his stepmother and her family yet never harassed them, even when drunk.

He's certainly still a lout, but... Tch.

Thirteen years. Ron had watched over Cale far too long.

***

Cale returned to his bedroom immediately after reaching the estate, only to be confronted by the two kittens. They looked up at him, sticking close to each other.

“Oh, I forgot about you two.”

He should’ve brought Choi Han, who appreciated small animals. But Choi Han had returned to his own room, saying that he’d need to strengthen his heart to protect others.

Cale had laughed and asked who Choi Han was going to protect. In response, the young man said he would let Cale know once he became stronger. That answer gave Cale chills. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why someone as tough as Choi Han would want to become even stronger.

Hans approached as Cale stared at the kittens. “Hello, my lord. What do you think? Aren’t they even more adorable now? They’re so standoffish, though. They wouldn’t even let me pet them. Ha ha!”

He crouched next to the kittens, looking up at Cale with satisfaction. His expression was so warm, even the kittens’ cuteness wasn’t enough to warrant it. Cale and Ron acted as if they didn’t see it.

“Don’t you agree that they’re cute?” he insisted. The deputy butler seemed to love cats intensely.

“Oh, um…yeah, I guess.”

The two kittens rescued from who-knew-where sat on an expensive-looking silk cushion. They definitely appeared plumper and healthier. What kind of magic had Hans worked in such a short time?

The two kittens purposely avoided Hans’s gaze, but such was the relationship between the deputy butler and his two fuzzy charges.

“I’ll be going now, my lord. Please call upon me if you need anything at all for the kittens.”

Cale felt like the deputy butler was taking his sweet time. “Hurry up and leave.”

After confirming that Ron had ushered him out, Cale avoided meeting the kittens' glittering eyes and made a beeline for the bathroom. When he did, the kittens' ears drooped immediately; it was just them and Ron in the bedroom now.

But then…

"Oho!" The old servant approached them. "You must be children of the Cat Tribe."

The kittens' golden eyes glinted sharply, but Ron didn't seem to care. Glancing over to make sure the bathroom door was closed, he sat in front of the kittens.

"That's great." There was a crooked smile on his face.

The Cat Tribe were beastfolk better known in the Eastern Continent than the west. They had keen senses and could gauge a person quickly. As an assassin, Ron couldn't help being familiar with the race.

Unlike most beastfolk, who became violent when they entered Berserk Mode, members of the Cat Tribe became stealthier and more vicious. They were intimidating, although not to the degree of the Wolf, Tiger, or Lion Tribes.

A thought popped into Ron's mind as he watched the two kittens. It was a whim, and they were still young, but…

I can teach them.

Ron again glanced over at the bathroom door Cale had gone through.

The Cat Tribe treasured relationships. Once they trusted someone, these beastfolk never betrayed them. And although they were suspicious by nature, like the Wolf Tribe, they valued personal connections. Since children of that race had come looking for Cale of their own accord, Ron felt it would be nice to give his little pup master a farewell present.

The old servant edged closer to the young members of the Cat Tribe. He reached out to caress the head of the slightly larger silver kitten.

Thup!

The silver kitten coldheartedly smacked his hand away. It retreated to a corner of the room, taking the red kitten along.

“Oh?”

Ron’s eyes brimmed with curiosity. These kittens seemed to have already figured him out. The Cat Tribe were the ultimate night-dwellers, stealthier than anyone else. Plus, they were notoriously hard to kill. Wasn’t there a saying that cats had nine lives? It made sense that to live a long time, they’d need to recognize people like him—people intimate with death—right away.

Ron smiled. “One child is mist, and the other one is poison,” he murmured.

The kittens were still too naive to conceal their abilities from him. The silver one had the power to use mist, and the red one had blood of poison. Even if they weren’t inherently killers, they had the makings of great assassins.

Hearing Ron, the silver kitten abruptly turned its head away; the red kitten snorted. The siblings had absolutely no desire to become killers reeking of blood, nor did they want to get close to a killer.

Although they’d scoffed at Ron, as if knowing his intentions, the kittens stuck to each other like glue. When Cale came out of the bathroom, they peered at him with eager eyes.

“Stop looking at me.”

They immediately looked elsewhere.

“Ron, go get my meal from Vicross.”

“Yes, young master.”

After Ron left, Cale sat on the couch and observed the two kittens, who were mewling in the far corner.

“You two are part of the Cat Tribe, aren’t you?” he asked.

The kittens nodded without making eye contact.

“Are you planning on following me?”

There was no response to this question. Instead, the red kitten slowly walked over and rubbed its cheek on Cale’s leg. The silver kitten also approached, tapping Cale’s foot tentatively with its front paw.

Making up his mind about the kittens, Cale nodded. He already had a plan for these siblings. “Then make yourselves useful.”

“Meeeow.”

“Meow!”

“Answer me in human language.”

The golden eyes of the older, silver kitten—the girl named Ohn—sparkled. “I want to eat meat. I’m still hungry.”

The red kitten—the younger brother, Hong—pawed at Cale’s leg. “I want to eat cake.”

“I’ll give you lots of meat and cake,” Cale told them. “So you know what to do, right?”

“Be useful!” the kittens replied in unison.

That was how the young heirs of the Mist Cat Tribe, siblings who’d been forced into exile, became part of Count Henituse’s household.

Chapter 4:
Heading Outside Henituse Territory

FOUR DAYS LATER, Cale joined his family for breakfast for the first time in a while. Count Deruth looked at his son, who wore even simpler clothes than before, and smiled.

"So, you're heading out." Today was the day the lout would leave the Henituse territory and make for the capital. "You don't look nervous at all."

Cale merely smiled in response to his father's statement.

The lout's complexion had gotten much better in the last few days. At least, you'd have to say it was better than in the book. *Since Choi Han didn't beat me to a pulp.*

Until today, it had been raining in the Henituses' territory. If the story unfolded as it did in the novel, Cale would have been thrashed on a rainy day—but he hadn't been beaten up yesterday.

He had also slept well the previous night, comforted by the Unbreakable Shield that enveloped his heart. Knowing the shield would allow him to survive at least once, even if he provoked deadly characters like Ron or Vicross, brought a smile to Cale's face.

Eyeing the breakfast spread, which was fancier than ever before, Cale addressed the count. "Father, it seems my entourage has grown again. I believe I asked that it be reduced."

He'd previously requested that his father pare down the number of servants who would accompany and attend to him, insisting Hans and Ron were enough. Hans had turned pale upon hearing it, but once he found out the kittens would be traveling with them as well, the deputy butler started packing in a flash.

"Ah. About that..." Deruth trailed off, which was rather unlike him.

Someone else took the opportunity to interject. "That was me."

The count's wife, Violan, looked down at her plate. Her tresses were perfectly arranged in her usual bun without a single stray hair. She had a demeanor similar to her son Bassen's—their stoic expressions and the way they avoided eye contact with Cale were the same.

"Too small an entourage would make our family look crude." Violan's voice was modulated and indifferent, yet she lifted her gaze in Cale's direction before calmly continuing, "Not that I'm saying *you're* crude."

"Even I can understand that."

Violan hesitated for a moment at Cale's reply. She took another bite of her breakfast, adding, "People care a lot about appearances—especially nobles."

Cale quietly watched Countess Violan. She was the eldest daughter of a poor artist and had dreamt of being head of a merchant fleet when she grew up. She came to Henituse territory knowing it was a place where nobles purchased luxury items. After she arrived, she developed a passion for sculpture. Then she met Count Deruth, fell in love, and became the director of his territory's cultural endeavors.

In Cale's—no, in *Kim Roksu's*—opinion, Violan was proud of the life she'd lived and took a lot of pride in her family.

Although she knew Cale was silently observing her, Violan continued as dispassionately as before. "That said, *art* is beyond the scope of what those scumba—oh…" Having worked in the merchant world for a time, the countess could speak rather coarsely. "At any rate, plenty of people think appearances reveal everything about someone."

That was her way of telling Cale to bring lots of servants. She didn't want a small retinue to reflect badly on the lout. Cale likewise wanted to bring a lot of people to do his bidding. *How nice and relaxing that would be!* He even found it difficult to change clothes without a servant now. He'd only been in this world about a week, but he had already latched on to this easy life.

The problem was that he would encounter a berserk black dragon in a few days' time. If he couldn't release it beforehand, it might go wild and kill people. Cale didn't care what happened to

others, but he didn't want to see anyone die before his eyes. Moreover, he didn't want to take responsibility for those the dragon injured.

Responsibility was a heavy burden. As someone who had been solely responsible for his own life since he was a young boy, Kim Roksu knew people's lives were the greatest and most frightening weight one could carry.

He spoke up, telling Violan, "'Art is the mirror of the soul.'"

The countess glanced up from her plate, looking at Cale. It was the first time in ages that their eyes had met. "You came across that, did you?"

"Yes, I did." For the last four days, Cale had roamed the territory, preparing things for the trip. He'd just recited something he'd seen on one of those errands. "'Sculpting isn't just chiseling a block of marble into what your eyes see. It's about reflecting what's in your heart.'" This time, it was Cale who looked down at his plate and ate while Violan studied him. "I read that on the plaque at the gallery."

The Henituse territory's gallery displayed the work of new sculptors, and Violan herself had authored the statement on a plaque inside.

"Well, do as you wish," the countess told him. "I shall reduce the number of people accompanying you. But, in light of that, your carriage and everything in it shall be of the highest quality—as it should be for a Henituse."

"That's fine with me. Please have them prepare an extravagant carriage."

"Certainly. I'll ensure it won't toss the passengers on their backsides as you travel over bumpy roads."

"Only the best," Cale agreed.

Cale didn't see it with his eyes fixed on his plate, but the slightest of smiles flitted across Violan's face before it disappeared.

Count Deruth, who'd watched this interaction, let out a forced cough. Covering his own growing smile with one hand, he asked his son, "Did Hans bring you that information on the personalities of the nobles who will be visiting the capital?"

The count's own network, as well as purchases at the information guild, had provided such details about other nobles. Deruth had handed it off to Hans to give to Cale.

"Yes. It was entertaining."

Deruth had likely paid a fortune to purchase the file. It contained only three or four lines on each person, but still, *any* information on the aristocracy was extremely expensive.

"It listed all sorts. Some of them are petty, some stupid, smart, scary—some even desperate for power." There had also been pushovers, villains, and other louts.

"I gather you read the file." The count cleared his throat. "At any rate, do as you please. But, Cale…"

"Yes, Father?"

"I heard a strange rumor."

Cale's shoulders flinched ever so slightly.

"Apparently that black tree—the man-eating one—has changed. It's now white, with freshly budded green leaves. There's even grass around the tree where nothing used to grow."

The hilltop in the slums had changed more than anywhere else over the last four days. Before, it housed nothing but the black tree and barren soil. Once Cale resolved the tree's grudge, it turned white and developed a lush mane of leaves. It was now beautiful, almost divine.

"Don't you find it interesting, son?" Deruth pressed.

"It sure is." Cale feigned ignorance. He had no intention of revealing his Ancient Power right now.

There was no way the count was unaware of his son's visits to the slums. He wouldn't know of the man-eating tree's Ancient Power, but he seemed to suspect that something had happened between Cale and the tree.

"It isn't that big a deal," the count said. "But no matter what you do, you should pay attention to the rumor mill. There is nothing more fearsome than human eyes and mouths. That said, members of our household shouldn't be troubled by anything that happens within my territory."

“I will keep that in mind.” Cale felt confident that as long as he remained within their territory, he really could live a peaceful life. *How great would it be to return quickly from the capital and live as a couch potato?*

They were finally finishing the luxurious breakfast prepared in honor of Cale’s departure. The count and countess said their goodbyes; they couldn’t see him off, as they had work to do. Cale then met the eyes of his siblings, who were standing around awkwardly.

“What?” he asked.

At Cale’s nonchalant question, his younger brother Bassen just nodded.

His younger sister Lilly, however, approached him slowly. The seven-year-old was Cale’s youngest sibling—eleven years younger than he was. “Um, please be safe on your journey,” she said.

“Thanks. You stay safe here too.”

Lilly’s shoulders twitched. “Right!” She nodded, then peered up at Cale.

Observing her gaze, Cale asked casually, “Want me to bring you back a present?”

“Would that be okay?”

I knew it. She wants a souvenir. Cale nodded, watching surprise, amazement, and happiness take turns on Lilly’s face. “Yes. What would you like?”

“A sword!”

“What?”

“Please buy me a sword!”

A seven-year-old wants a sword?

Seeing Cale’s shocked expression, Bassen spoke up. “Lilly’s dream these days is to become a swordfighter.”

“Is that so?”

Cale looked somberly at Lilly. His sister may only have been seven years old, but the count’s family all had long limbs and

physiques suited to swordplay. Lilly was tall for her age and could excel at it if she put in the effort.

"Well, I guess that'd suit her," Cale judged. Lilly's eyes sparkled as he added, "I'll buy you an expensive one."

She beamed. In lieu of a reply, she bashfully lowered her head.

Not noticing, Cale glanced at fifteen-year-old Bassen, who was looking at him. "You want something too?"

"A fountain pen."

"Got it."

Once his siblings had made their requests, breakfast came to an end.

***

Cale wore a complicated expression as he stood in front of his capital-bound carriage.

How strange.

He was staring at the soft, expensive cushion next to his—and at the two kittens sitting atop it. With that odd look still on his face, he asked Hans beside him, "How come their seat is better than mine?"

"Shouldn't our kittens travel comfortably, Lord Cale? They're so small and precious," Hans replied, putting the special treats he'd prepared for the cats into the carriage as well.

Like Cale, Ron stared vacantly ahead.

Ron must be acting like this because he's never seen a cat make mist or poison before, Cale thought.

Three days ago, Cale had taken Ohn and Hong to an empty corner of a garden where no one tended to go.

"What can you two do?" he'd asked the children, who were still in their cat forms.

Ohn created mist, while Hong used a drop of his own blood to poison the air. Ohn could control the poisonous mist, which

kept it from endangering Cale. Besides, Hong's poison was only strong enough to cause paralysis right now.

"You two are quite useful," Cale had told them.

Ohn and Hong answered proudly.

"That poisonous mist gives us the perfect getaway!"

"We're pretty good!"

From then on, Cale allowed Ohn and Hong to eat substantially more delicious food all day long. Hans was happy to serve it.

"I'll sit with the driver up top, young master."

"All right."

Ron hopped up next to the carriage driver. Cale was about to board the carriage too when Choi Han approached.

"Mr. Cale." Choi Han, not wanting to call Cale "young master" or "lord," had instead insisted on calling him that.

"What?"

"Shouldn't I be in the carriage protecting you?"

Cale's expression soured like he'd taken a big bite of an extremely bitter persimmon. "Is that...?" He trailed off, but the look on his face said, *Is that really necessary?*

Choi Han nodded firmly.

Cale narrowed his eyes, thinking, *How very strange.*

The hero's gaze was still clouded, and his mind was no doubt a tempest of anger and thoughts of revenge. When Cale mentioned yesterday that they'd sent people to Harris, he'd seen the rage in Choi Han's eyes.

Still, Choi Han seemed a little different. He wasn't in complete despair, as he had been in the novel, where his thoughts were along the lines of, *"How could they have killed all my loved ones?! The world doesn't want me to be happy!"*

That was what Cale found so unusual.

He's recovering pretty quickly.

Choi Han was calm on the outside despite being poised and itching to strike. In the books, he'd been at this stage while

traveling with Vicross, Rosalyn, and Lark. It wasn't all that bad, so Cale let it be, though it did leave an oddly bitter taste in his mouth.

The vice-captain of the count's knight brigade—the man who would be leading Cale's retinue—approached Choi Han. "I don't think that's *your* spot." He sized the hero up and smirked, perhaps looking down on him.

Observing the vice-captain's behavior, Cale clicked his tongue. *I knew we'd come across at least one person like this, even in the count's territory.*

Choi Han had been pretending his abilities were average so as not to be singled out. That said, he was still the first person Cale had brought to the count's estate as a guest, and Deruth had treated him like an important visitor. On top of that, he was heading to the capital as one of Cale's guards, so some people had it out for him. They didn't outright harass Choi Han, since he *was* Cale's guest, but they did inconvenience him discreetly.

At one point, Hans had reported, *"Lord Cale, I don't think Mr. Choi Han is getting along with the knights who will journey to the capital with us."*

"He isn't?"

"No. I think the vice-captain is at fault for that."

"Got it, Hans. You needn't concern yourself any further."

Recalling that, Cale pitied the man—not Choi Han but the vice-captain. *Soon enough, he'll sigh and say to himself, "My inability to judge people is pathetic." He'll regret all this bullying nonsense.*

As long as the vice-captain didn't do anything Choi Han would pummel him for, Cale wouldn't intervene. Once the vice-captain saw Choi Han's real skills, he wouldn't be able to sleep properly—he'd be far too afraid.

"Shall we depart now, Lord Cale?" the vice-captain asked.

Cale closed the carriage door. "Yes. Let's go."

His group consisted of a protection squad of fifteen soldiers, five knights, and one special guard, as well as a few others. They were finally setting out for the capital.

As was true of most fantasy-world travel, it wasn't a very smooth trip.

Cale's carriage didn't fly the Henituse flag, but the Henituse family's crest—the golden turtle—was emblazoned on the vehicle. It represented the family's love of wealth and their desire for longevity. Within Henituse territory, nobody dared accost Cale's carriage…but they were attacked as soon as they left the area.

Go figure. It really does happen.

The carriage was rushing through a mountain range to keep up with Cale's tight schedule. As they sped through a valley, dozens of people popped up out of nowhere and blocked their path.

"To cross this mountain, you need to pay a toll!"

"Give us everything you have! For every bronze coin we find hidden on you after that, we'll punish you with a slap across the face!"

That's right—these were bandits. One was bound to find such idiotic thieves anywhere, but the presence of *dozens* was surprising. They were probably relying on their numbers to attack the convoy, since it only had five knights.

Cale glanced at the kitten Ohn, who was yawning. "Think they can see the golden turtle symbol?" he asked.

"I guess not."

"Idiots. They're such greenhorns!"

Cale nodded at Hong's assessment. He wasn't afraid of bandits; why would he be?

Knock knock. The sound came from the small driver's seat window, which slid open a little.

Ron peeked through the opening. "Young master, it seems as though we'll need to take a short break before moving on. There appear to be quite a few rabbits here."

Rabbits? Cale looked perplexed for a moment.

"Oh!" Ron said, smiling as always. "Different rabbits from the ones I was going to catch you, young master. The others will catch *these* rabbits, naturally. Not me."

Cale found his entourage much scarier than the bandits outside.

As the count's son listened to the thieves scream and flee outside the carriage, he calculated the span of their trip. "A day and a half left," he muttered.

In about that time, they would reach the very place where the black dragon was being tortured. Since Cale had insisted they rush, taking no breaks except to camp, they would arrive earlier than Choi Han had in the novel.

***

To meet Cale's goal, the group had to camp outdoors. There were no villages along their route until one much farther away, near the black dragon's hidden cave.

"Meow."

Hong, the red Cat Tribe kitten, had followed Cale out of the carriage. A tantalizing aroma wafted around them, tickling the kitten's nose. Hong sniffed the air and flicked his tail in excitement.

Cale believed a day's true joy was in a hot, delicious dinner. It signaled the end of a long, tiring afternoon and the beginning of a relaxing night.

Tonight's main course was rabbit soup.

"Damn it," Cale muttered.

The soup wasn't Ron's doing, however. Cale glanced to one side. The hunter responsible for catching tons of rabbits—Choi Han—was eating his soup with gusto.

"Meeeow."

Tap. Tap. Ohn and Hong pawed at Cale's leg, begging for his unwanted soup.

Hans had a wide smile on his face as he cautiously tiptoed toward the kittens. "Would our precious kittens like to eat the jerky I made for them? It's very healthy, without any salt or preservatives."

Ohn and Hong ignored him. Not knowing they were part of the Cat Tribe, Hans found even their sass cute, and he continued to hover around them.

Despite the fact that the convoy had experienced its first battle, the atmosphere was very relaxed and peaceful. On the other hand, the knights were acting a bit strangely. They kept peeking at Choi Han, who was eating his soup next to Cale. The vice-captain seemed especially distressed.

Cale clicked his tongue.

The group had fought off dozens of bandits, and Choi Han had handled most of them. He hadn't killed the bandits, but he'd left deep scars on their arms and legs—even hacking off a few limbs. And he'd done it all with extraordinary speed.

"The battle is over, Lord Cale," the vice-captain had reported, eyes wide. He hadn't anticipated that it would end so quickly.

The bandits had likely been drummed out of a nearby territory. Cale's protectors had thought the thieves were just stupid, but they had actually been in dire straits. Because their group was three times the size of Cale's protection squad—five knights, plus the soldiers—they'd incorrectly assumed they had the upper hand. Unfortunately for them, they happened to target Choi Han's carriage first.

Needless to say, it wasn't the *bandits'* attacks that had turned the vice-captain ghastly pale.

Once it was over, Choi Han strode over to the vice-captain. *"It was a minor battle,"* he'd told the man. *"Not even enough for a warm-up."*

At that moment, Cale had seen the vice-captain's eyes waver. Choi Han saw it too, and a smirk rose to his lips. The hero wasn't the type to let people walk all over him. A man who had no qualms about beating up a count's son would never turn belly-up for his opponents.

"Did you lose your appetite?" asked Ron, approaching Cale with his usual benevolent smile.

Cale's face fell. He sullenly looked back and forth between the rabbit soup and Ron, realizing that the old man enjoyed making fun of him. "I'm not hungry at all."

“Are you feeling unwell?” asked Choi Han.

“Nothing like that.”

Cale would’ve had no problem eating if Choi Han had caught anything other than rabbits. He glanced over at Choi Han and waved, telling the young man not to mind him. Yet the somber Choi Han kept his eyes locked on Cale.

“Why are you staring at me?”

Dead serious, Choi Han replied, “Was that your first time experiencing a battle?”

“Battle? You mean the tussle with the bandits earlier?” Cale said casually.

“Yes.”

“Of course. I’ve never seen so many thieves in one group.”

“I see.” Choi Han nodded, then murmured, “Must’ve been your first time confronting death.”

A soldier gasped. Cale let out a loud gasp too, completely dumbfounded by Choi Han’s comment. *“First time confronting death,” my ass. Do you know how anxious I’ve been for the last few days about you beating me to death?!*

That wasn’t all that had Cale on edge. He began mulling over the moments he’d been struck by panic since they left Henituse territory: Ron smiling warmly as Choi Han brought back a heap of rabbit carcasses, the sight of Vicross sharpening his kitchen knife…

Now I’ve really *lost my appetite.*

The rabbit soup was completely unappetizing. Cale dropped the spoon he held, which plopped into his bowl with a *clang*. He didn’t realize his soldiers were gazing at him with deep sympathy, or that Choi Han had stopped paying attention to everyone around him as he reminisced.

Calming his heart, Cale thought about how he’d avoided a beating *and* obtained the Unbreakable Shield. He assured himself that he didn’t need to be anxious anymore.

“Mr. Cale,” Choi Han called, prompting Cale to look in his direction.

“What?” Cale snapped. *Why is Choi Han always bugging me?*

“The first time is always the most difficult.”

“What’re you talking about?” Cale asked gruffly.

Choi Han’s lips quirked up just a bit. His expression then turned grim as he said, “Do you not study martial arts, Mr. Cale?”

“No need.”

“Shouldn’t you at least have a way to protect yourself?” Choi Han replied, a concerned note in his voice.

Cale wondered why Choi Han was suddenly acting so serious about all this, but he answered the question anyway. “I have plenty of ways.”

Taking his gaze off Choi Han, he looked around. There were fifteen soldiers stronger than him and five knights who could hold their own no matter what they faced. Aside from them, there were only a few servants in his entourage, but Ron, Vicross, the two kittens, and even Hans were much stronger than Cale.

He made eye contact with each member of his retinue before turning back to Choi Han. “You see them too, right?”

This was the protection a wealthy count’s son had. Cale smiled. He was sure that any one of these people would keep him safe. He didn’t *trust* Ron or Vicross, of course, but they’d at least keep anybody from killing him.

And they aren’t my only security.

Opting to be a little more honest with Choi Han, who had his lips pressed in a thin line, Cale tapped his own heart. “I trust my heart. I’ll live.”

The Unbreakable Shield ensconcing his heart would protect him—as long as he avoided the likes of Choi Han.

As Choi Han eyed him skeptically, Ohn and Hong approached and began kneading Cale’s legs with their small paws.

“Meow.”

“Meow!”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Their sharp claws made him grimace, but the Cat Tribe siblings had stopped eating so they could rub their cheeks against him.

Choi Han set his empty bowl down with a *clack*, then stood abruptly from his seat. “I have to practice my swordsmanship,” he told Cale.

“Right after dinner?”

“I need to get even stronger.”

What a scary punk. Was he trying to get strong enough to destroy the whole planet? Cale turned away in disgust.

It was then that Vicross came and presented the count’s son with a new dish. “Enjoy.”

“Oh! Thanks.”

Cale looked at the plate Vicross had placed on the small table, smiling at the top-quality steak seasoned with the best spices.

“Sour foods and drinks are best to restore your appetite,” Ron told him, passing him a glass of lemonade.

It was the first time Ron had served him lemonade since their meeting at the tea shop. Cale just ignored the beverage; he was too thrilled about the steak.

“If everyone’s finished eating, we’ll start our evening training session,” the vice-captain announced in a booming voice.

Choi Han must really have motivated him, Cale thought.

Watching the focused knights and soldiers, the count’s son was able to enjoy his steak. He didn’t even hate the rabbit soup once he tried it. Of course, he adamantly declined the unseasoned jerky the kittens offered him. It was so bland, not even mice would’ve eaten it.

***

Three days, Cale calculated as they reached the village entrance. *The black dragon will cause that mana explosion in three*

days.

They were in a viscount's territory bordering the Henituse region. A few years back, the viscount had curiously had a villa built east of this village, near the base of a mountain. Outsiders considered the structure to be the viscount's property, but it actually belonged to Marquess Sten, who was responsible for driving the black dragon mad. This territory's viscount was no more than the marquess's dog.

And the mountain behind the villa contains the cave holding the black dragon.

That black dragon would eventually trigger the mana explosion that obliterated the cave and mountain. As Cale gazed at the small peak east of the mountain he'd crossed, he thought about Marquess Sten's second son, Benion, a psychopath who'd permanently injured his elder brother to make himself heir. Benion visited the viscount's villa every so often to torture the black dragon for fun.

Cale clicked his tongue.

Hans flinched and quickly brought Choi Han over. The carriage was currently stopped outside of the village entrance. "Lord Cale, I'll take Mr. Choi Han with me to find an inn right away. Please wait here."

"Whatever."

"We'll be right back."

Cale nodded, watching Choi Han, who had a faraway look in his eyes.

Unable to ignore the plight of this little hamlet, Choi Han would fight the crazed dragon that caused the mana explosion. It was similar to how he felt about Harris, where he had learned affection, acquired a thirst for vengeance, and everything in between. That was why he was willing to save villagers he had no relationship or history with.

Furrowing his brow, Cale called out, "Choi Han."

"Yes?"

"Hurry up and go with Hans. Then come back."

Choi Han grunted. Although he'd lived for decades, he still *was* a seventeen-year-old on the outside. "Yes, sir. I'll be right back." He nodded and flashed an innocent, almost boyish smile.

Cale waved his hand in annoyance, but Choi Han took the time to bow to him before speed-walking toward the village with Hans. The redhead preferred this alert Choi Han to the vacant, expressionless one. He watched the pair go, then frowned.

A carriage in the distance was speeding in their direction. *I've got a real bad feeling about this.*

Cale felt extremely uneasy, as though someone with clammy hands had passed him a poisoned apple. The cause of his unease was soon revealed. He couldn't believe it.

"Oh, come on!"

An old man, unable to avoid the rapidly approaching carriage, had fallen down in the road. As the carriage barreled toward him, out of control, Choi Han dashed over to the old man.

Such a cliché!

The carriage bore a flag with a red snake—the crest of Marquess Sten. Cale watched, knowing something was going to happen.

Thwump!

Choi Han flung himself at the old man to save him. Unable to control his momentum, he then smashed loudly into a building wall. Only then did the marquess's black carriage finally stop.

Cale heaved a sigh as he opened the carriage door. He apparently had no choice but to head to the site of the cliché event.

The moment he stepped out of the carriage, Ron sidled up to him. "Going over there, young master?"

"Who'll go if I don't?" Cale replied nonchalantly.

Ron and the vice-captain immediately followed as Cale made a beeline for the scene of the incident. The two flanked Cale, as if the world depended on their protecting him. To Cale, however, that wasn't what really mattered.

A man slowly emerged from the other carriage: Benion Sten. Seeing the marquess's son, Cale scowled. The file Count Deruth had given him on Benion Sten's personality only contained one line: *Typical authoritative noble.* But Cale—well, Kim Roksu—could also evaluate Benion through the details from *Birth of a Hero*.

Benion was your typical villain, and Cale found it quite a headache meeting him in real life instead of on the page. Unlike Choi Han, Cale couldn't beat up someone because he detested them or in retaliation without worrying about the consequences.

By the time Cale arrived on the scene, the situation had progressed a bit. In those few short moments, Choi Han had already become so angry that his shoulders shuddered violently.

"How could you block a nobleman's path like that?" one of Benion Sten's lackeys demanded.

"How can *you* ask something like that when you nearly ran this poor man over? And how dare you say I blocked your path! This only took place because you kept on going!"

"When you see a nobleman's carriage, you should move out of the way! That peasant was a buffoon for just standing there in the road!"

As Choi Han argued with the lackey, Hans—who'd been standing beside him—scuttled over to Cale. Looking hopeless, he whispered into Cale's ear, "Mr. Choi Han seems extremely agitated."

Hans appeared to have recognized the carriage and its connection to the marquess. Likewise, Benion Sten—the angry lackey's employer—seemed to have figured out who owned Cale's carriage from its crest. That was probably why the nobleman had deigned to come out of his carriage at all.

The young nobleman, who had striking blond hair, spoke gently to his lackey. "That's enough."

Only then did the man dash behind Benion, as if he'd never been angry in the first place. Choi Han was left panting as he reassured the bewildered old fellow.

Cale clicked his tongue yet again.

The lackey hadn't actually been angry. Although Cale's carriage had been fairly far away, the lackey had probably seen the golden turtle, as Benion had. He then deliberately exaggerated his rage when Choi Han demanded they apologize. Hans, understanding the lackey's intentions, had helplessly waited for Cale to arrive.

As Choi Han glared at Benion's lackey, Cale came up and placed his hand on the young man's shoulder. "You too. That's enough."

"But—!"

Cale knew Choi Han was upset because this village resembled Harris, his home away from home. He was furious that even though Benion's carriage had endangered someone's life, its passengers didn't show a trace of remorse, nor any sign of apologizing to the old man. The victim in all this, the elderly fellow, couldn't say anything because he wasn't anywhere near as powerful as Choi Han.

"They simply could've taken another route, but they didn't even bother, so they almost hurt someone. How can I just let this go?"

"Listen, Choi Han." Cale tightened his grip on the man's shoulder. "Calm down."

He watched Choi Han's dark eyes as the young man's anger —or rather, his potent memories of Harris—receded.

After ensuring that Choi Han had reined himself in, Cale turned to look directly at Benion Sten. The marquess's son had impressive blond hair and a slight smile on his lips. He wore perfectly ironed attire without a single wrinkle and boots without a single scuff. What caught Cale's attention, however, was the small red spot on the cuff of Benion's white dress shirt.

Some blood must've landed on him while he happily watched that black dragon being tortured. Crazy bastard. Benion Sten must have enjoyed a meal while a torturer whipped the dragon bloody in front of him.

"Pleasure to meet you," said the marquess's son. "Do you belong to Lord Henituse's household?"

"Yes. Nice to meet you, Lord Benion."

As Cale expected, Benion had identified him. The marquess's son had faced his fair share of challenges on his way to becoming heir, but he was still a malicious jerk.

"Mm. I haven't had reason to come to this area, so I've only heard stories, but evidently one of the count's children is an unaristocratically free spirit."

There were people in the world who could merely smile and somehow rub you the wrong way. Benion Sten was one of those people. Beaming brightly, he scanned Cale from head to toe. It was truly annoying, but not offensive enough to start a fight.

Benion went on, "I understand that since last year, Lord Bassen Henituse has been attending banquets on your behalf, as well as the Northeast Gathering of aristocratic children?"

He's asking about something he already knows the answer to! Cale wasn't skilled at this kind of small talk, so he smiled cheerfully and replied in a polite tone, "'Unaristocratically free spirit,' you say? Yes. I'm the lout you've heard so much about."

The moment the word "lout" came out of Cale's mouth, Benion's lackey flinched.

"Out of all the lousy louts out there, I am probably the lousiest," Cale added.

The corner of Benion's mouth twisted in a near scoff. His expression seemed to say that he'd never met such a lunatic before, but Cale couldn't have cared less.

Marquess Sten's family was powerful enough to drum up support in the form of a faction, but Benion couldn't yet do as he pleased with other nobles, since he hadn't yet been officially appointed Sten's heir. A marquess would normally proclaim their heir to protect them and increase their authority, but the marquess was coldhearted in that regard.

He does have five children.

Benion had two younger sisters and one younger brother, and the marquess enjoyed watching them compete with each other. He treated it like an exciting spectator sport, which had inevitably resulted in his eldest son sustaining a permanent injury. The stress of that environment had made watching the

black dragon's torture an enjoyable hobby for Benion. The Sten household was completely insane compared to the far superior Henituse family.

"You're a very interesting person," Benion replied, gently brushing off Cale's statement.

Wealthy Count Henituse had persevered and endured in the boondocks of the northeast without needing to align with any specific faction. After all, who would willingly make enemies of the Henituses? If anything, people would likely covet what they had.

On the inside, however, Benion probably despised Cale. Chances were he was well aware of the relationship between Cale, the eldest son and lout of his family, and Bassen, the count's clever younger son. That would remind Benion of his relationship with his own older brother.

Still, Benion—acting like a proper noble—made the most of their encounter.

"Although an unexpected obstacle caused me to waste some time, it allowed me to introduce myself and to make your acquaintance, Lord Cale. So I call myself fortunate."

By "unexpected obstacle," he was of course referring to the old man Benion felt inconvenienced by.

Seemingly wanting to end things on a satisfying note, the marquess's son continued, "It seems you need to educate your subordinate on how to distinguish meager folk lucky enough to have the privilege to travel across this land from people entitled to the right of way."

As the all-but-official successor of a high-ranking noble, Benion thought he should gently admonish the lout of the count's family. Though both men were lords, Benion felt that their statuses were completely different. Cale listened quietly, although he wasn't the type to pay much heed to a dog's yapping.

The marquess's son finished talking and glanced at the most uncomfortable-looking person in the group. Feeling Benion's eyes on him, the old man hastily fell to his knees with a *thump*.

He bowed his head. “M-my apologies, Lord Benion.”

The old man’s hands shook, and his head nearly touched the ground as he groveled. Watching this unfold before him, Choi Han’s hands also trembled.

Each liege lord’s personality influenced how the territory’s residents behaved. This area was overseen by a viscount—Marquess Sten’s dog—who clearly modeled himself after the marquess. Commoners were therefore oppressed and looked down upon.

Benion smiled shamelessly, pleased with himself. After watching for a few seconds, Cale called out to him.

“Lord Benion.” Once Benion turned his head, Cale asked, “Are you done now?”

“I am.”

Cale crouched, his expensive garments brushing the dirt. He looked blankly at the old man’s shaking hands.

“Haaaaaaaaah…”

Cale was certain that he heard it—the sound of Choi Han taking a deep breath, holding back his anger.

At this rate, things are going to escalate quickly.

Right then, a chill ran down Cale’s spine. He was absolutely certain that if this continued any longer, Benion would be the one Choi Han beat to a pulp. It was none of Cale’s business whether Benion got throttled, but at the very least, Choi Han shouldn’t hit a noble in public while he was part of Cale’s retinue.

Cale placed his hand on the old man’s shoulder, and Benion’s eyebrow twitched when he saw the noble touch a commoner.

“Hey, old man.”

The fellow flinched in bewilderment, then lifted his head to look at Cale. “Y-yes?”

“Where’s the tavern?” Cale asked flatly.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m asking where I can get a good drink. As you’ve heard, I’m a lout, so I don’t feel refreshed in the morning if I don’t drink

something. I'll need a glass of booze to make sure tomorrow is another great day. So—"

At the sight of Cale requesting alcohol, Benion huffed a silent sigh and shook his head.

"Lead the way." Cale tried to help the old man to his feet. Then, meeting the man's nervous eyes, the count's son abruptly frowned. "Aren't you going to get up?"

The old man hesitated, looking back and forth between Benion and Cale. The redhead ignored his worried gaze and stood straight, then extended the hand that had been on the commoner's shoulder toward Benion, requesting a handshake.

"It was nice meeting you today, Lord Benion."

Benion just stood there staring blankly at him. At that moment, one of Benion's servants hurried over to them and whispered to the marquess's son. It was loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Lord Benion, we've been delayed for far too long!"

"Do not interrupt a conversation between nobles." Benion stared down at his servant, unsmiling, and the servant quickly bowed. The lord then plastered on a smile and begrudgingly grabbed Cale's hand. "I'll be on my way, since I'm quite busy." He let go of Cale's hand; it was a very brief handshake.

Grinning almost drunkenly, Cale replied, "If we have a chance to meet up in the capital, let's get a drink together."

"I don't think we'd appreciate the same spirits, but sure." Benion's shameless smile now appeared slightly half-hearted somehow.

Cale seized the opportunity to rub it in. "Based on our meeting today, it truly seems that only *you* deserve to be the Sten family's future patriarch. You certainly are an amazing man."

The word "patriarch" made Benion's eyes glaze over. His shameless smile returned, just as Cale expected, and he similarly flattered Cale. "You also seem like a delightful and *very* free-spirited person. May we meet again."

No, Cale had no desire to see him ever again. Even if he did, it would be from far, far away. He nodded, hiding his true feelings.

Benion got back in his carriage and departed, looking to be in a hurry indeed. Cale watched the carriage disappear before patting Choi Han's shoulder.

"Half the nobles are just like him."

Choi Han winced at this blunt admission.

Cale crouched in front of the old man again. "Can't you get up? Did you hurt your leg?"

His questions sounded terse, but he studied the old man meticulously. Finding no injuries, his expression turned sullen once again. He stared at the old man, then called Choi Han over.

"Choi Han. Take this old man home."

Instead of responding, Choi Han stared at the back of the crouching Cale's head.

"N-no, I'm all right," the old man protested. "I-I'll take you to that tavern you were asking about."

"No need for a tavern. I'm in no mood to drink." Having declined, Cale looked up at the still-silent Choi Han. "Since you saved him, you might as well get him home safely."

Choi Han's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but he didn't say anything.

It was the elderly man who spoke next. "I sell drinks out of my home."

"Hmm? Your place is a tavern, old man?"

When Cale's eyes went wide in surprise, the old man smiled awkwardly. Looking a bit more relaxed, he continued, "Yes, sir. It's this village's only tavern, so it's an inn as well as a restaurant."

"Since it's the only one, it must be the best in town. Hans!"

Without another word from Cale, Hans swiftly approached the old man and helped him up, then inquired about the inn. Once the two got moving, everyone else sprang to life.

Ron strode over to Cale and brushed the dirt off his clothes. The old servant followed the vice-captain toward the village

entrance, where the rest of Cale's entourage was. The only people left at the location of the carriage accident were Cale and Choi Han.

"Mr. Cale…"

"What?"

"Aren't you angry?"

"About what?"

Choi Han faltered, and Cale shrugged.

"About the fact that he looked down on me? Or him making such a ridiculous statement about 'educating' you? Or about how he almost killed that old man and, instead of apologizing, saw him as an obstacle?"

Cale's voice was calm and firm. He didn't seem angry at all. In fact, he sounded indifferent.

"Why did Benion stay on course when he saw someone in front of him?" he continued. "Why didn't he try to avoid the old man? He could've been hurt! And after almost killing him, how could he unabashedly call that old man an *obstacle*?"

As Cale gazed at a distant mountain range, Choi Han hung on the redhead's every word.

"Why did the old man apologize to Benion? Benion should've apologized to *him*," Cale concluded. "I'm not someone who can confront Benion about all that, though. Nor would I want to. It didn't bother me."

Cale *could* have confronted Benion, as Choi Han had. He knew that was one of the things that made Choi Han look cool, and there had once been a time when Cale wanted to look cool like that. At this point, though, he didn't.

The old man hadn't been injured, and Cale hadn't done anything that would justify Benion pointing a blade at the Henituse family. It was even fine that Cale himself gave off a poor impression during his encounter with Benion, since that would benefit Bassen.

"I behave the way I do because I know it's the way to handle life," Cale said to no one in particular.

He would compromise with authority and nod along with complaints, living the life he wanted all the while. He smiled at Choi Han, who was gazing at him with a complicated look in his eyes.

“Also…that bastard will probably be kicked out of his house soon.”

Cale was *also* the type to always pay someone back, however long it took, if they looked down on him or did something he disliked to him.

“What…?”

Choi Han could tell the “bastard” Cale was referring to was Benion, and he looked uncharacteristically startled by it.

As Cale smiled mischievously, the two kittens—who’d been approaching him from afar—halted in their tracks. Cale’s smile grew as he turned his gaze on the mountain east of the village, thinking the thing he couldn’t tell Choi Han: *I plan on snatching that bastard’s dragon.*

Once the dragon was gone, Benion would face the marquess’s wrath, thus encountering a new *obstacle* on his road to becoming the family patriarch. If someone couldn’t recognize that they needed to stop on a road and just continued right along, shouldn’t they be confronted with a roadblock at least once in their life? Cale was eager to place a very large obstacle in Benion’s way. In secret, of course.

Choi Han peered at him with curiosity.

“If you’re curious, you can help me out,” Cale told him.

“I’ll help however I can.” Choi Han grinned as well—looking pretty villainous for a good-natured hero. The kittens drew closer, intrigued.

Cale regarded the mountain that was due to explode in three days. He felt rankled by the way Benion had looked down on him, the blood on his sleeve, and the sight of the old man groveling at his feet.

“You won’t regret helping me,” he mumbled. “I swear you won’t.”

It seemed Cale would pay Benion back for it all immediately.

***

“This is the best room they have, Lord Cale.”

“Seems acceptable.”

The old man had led Cale’s retinue to his inn. Its exterior was as rustic as the rest of the village, but it had everything they would need, probably because merchants visiting Henituse territory stayed there during their travels.

“This is the first time a noble has stayed with us. Please be patient, even if our inn is quite paltry. Just consider it a place where lesser beings stay.”

Cale stared at the old innkeeper, who seemed more comfortable than when they’d been talking to Benion Sten. Still, he was fretful about a noble staying at his inn.

It was fine for him to be a little apprehensive about a noble, but the palpable anxiety made Cale uncomfortable as well. *This won’t do at all.*

Cale patted the old man’s shoulder to calm him. “Relax, old man. I don’t like people who efface themselves like that. People who come and go from Henituse territory stay here. There’s no way such a place would be *paltry*.”

The old fellow nervously licked his upper lip. After some deliberation, he finally asked, “My lord, are there many good people like you in Henituse territory?”

“Give me a break!”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m the biggest lout in the territory! Almost anybody you find there will have a better personality than *me*.”

“Oh…” The old man heaved a sigh.

Ohn and Hong, who’d arrived in the room before Cale and taken possession of the couch, proceeded to meow and shake their heads in pity. Nobody seemed to notice.

“You can go back to what you were doing,” Cale dismissed the old innkeeper. He was annoyed that the man still seemed uncomfortable around him, but ignored it.

The innkeeper bowed deeply and left the room, closing the door behind him—but someone else knocked at that very same door only moments later.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Hans entered with a small box. “Lord Cale, you only asked for this box, correct?”

“Yes. Hand it over.”

As he did, the deputy butler couldn’t help showing his curiosity. The box was the only luggage Cale had personally carried with his own hands. Had it been a normal container, Hans would simply have assumed there were drinks or snacks inside—but this was a top-quality magic box with a magical lock. It was sealed with the logo of Flynn Merchant Fleets, which was one of the three largest merchant fleets and had a close relationship with the Henituse family.

“Aren’t butlers taught not to show their emotions?” Cale asked the gawking Hans. “Especially not curiosity?”

“Proper etiquette for a butler includes showing *all* emotions in front of one’s master.”

“That’s quite funny.”

“I *am* rather funny.”

Hans had only wanted to go to the capital for the kittens, and he was getting a bit impudent. Still, Cale thought he seemed much more personable than the other butler candidates did.

Since Hans seemed to be getting more comfortable around him, the lout responded as usual. “Get out.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Hans left immediately, also as usual. Before closing the door, he asked a quick question about their travel plans. “We’ll stay here three days?”

“Yes. You can take care of everything.”

“Yes, my lord,” Hans responded, closing the door.

Aside from the party's safety, which the vice-captain was in charge of, Hans was responsible for all other matters. He showed no sign of struggling with his duties, however; he took care of everything efficiently.

"He seems like an exceptional butler," said the silver kitten, Ohn, as she walked toward Cale. He nodded.

The red kitten, Hong, followed her lead. "Nothing seems hard for him either."

Cale agreed with that as well. Besides Ron, Hans was the only one who had relatively little trouble dealing with Cale. He was leery of Cale but didn't find him *difficult*. Hans was a very bold fellow.

Annoyed that the kittens had come near him, Cale brushed them aside and opened the box. Its magic lock was simple: Cale's fingerprint was the only key. Cale placed his index finger in the center of the magic seal.

Sssk. Click!

With a small noise, the box opened. Inside were items Cale had prepared four days prior, before leaving for the capital. The kittens murmured in interest.

"I'm really curious about what those are."

"Same here."

Cale ignored the two pairs of golden eyes locked on him. "These will help rescue a pitiful soul, screw over a douchebag, and keep me from getting hurt," he said offhandedly.

Ohn and Hong glanced dubiously up at him, but Cale just - caressed the items in the box with a smile of satisfaction. He recalled the conversation he'd had with Bilose, illegitimate son of the head of Flynn Merchant Fleets, before he left for the capital.

"Just where do you plan to use these items, Lord Cale?"

"I don't see why I have to explain that to you."

"I see... Well, it will cost an enormous amount of money to purchase all these."

"Is it possible to rent them?"

"For you, of course it's possible."

Most of the items in the box were magic tools. Cale had expected them to be expensive to purchase, but even renting them had cost an arm and a leg. He'd used up all the money his father had given him, *and* he had to return the items to Bilose once he reached the capital. It was such a bother. Cale didn't want to get entangled with the shopkeeper in the capital, but he had no other choice.

"Outsiders aren't allowed to rent these two items, so I rented them under my own name. You'll need to return these to me in person in the capital."

"Sure."

Cale was grateful that Bilose had acquired the objects on his behalf. He made a mental note to invite the shopkeeper to a grand drinking party once they met in the capital. After that, he lifted one of the items out of the box: a round black marble engraved with numerous symbols.

The red kitten, Hong, put his small front paw on Cale's knee. "I'm curious about that."

"It's a mana-disturbance tool worth almost a billion galleons."

Both Ohn and Hong gasped.

"It cost twenty million galleons just to rent it," Cale added.

Hong slowly lowered his paw from Cale's knee and scooched to a corner of the bed with his sister, Ohn. They were keeping as far away from the black marble as possible.

Cale recalled the information Bilose had provided about the tool after locating and bringing the exact items Cale was looking for.

"It disturbs the flow of mana within a certain range. All magic tools stop working. It's so sturdy, it wouldn't shatter even in an explosion powerful enough to blow up a mountain."

"Even something like a surveillance tool would malfunction right away, wouldn't it?"

"Of course. However, you need to install an object like this in the desired area twenty-seven hours in advance. To prevent detection by mages, it's designed to gradually permeate the mana path with

artificial mana, simultaneously disrupting the flow of genuine mana."

"How long will it last?"

"Forty minutes. Isn't that amazing? Of course, if there are mages nearby, they'll stabilize everything easily within five to ten minutes. It's a rare item indeed, but as mana-disturbance tools go, its performance is pretty standard."

"I'll keep that in mind."

The corner of Cale's lips slowly rose. This was the most expensive item he'd rented from Bilose, but it would have many uses throughout his trip. *More than anything, I like how durable it is.*

Flynn Merchant Fleets came very much in handy. Smiling in satisfaction, Cale threw the black marble—which was smaller than a toddler's fist—toward the kittens crouching in the corner. One gasped; the other meowed, avoiding the projectile. They crouched quietly in front of Cale, keeping a watchful eye on the black marble.

"You know how to read a map, right?" he asked them.

"Of course we know how to read a map." Ohn tapped her tail on the ground to emphasize this. "We may not look it, but we were once potential heirs to the Mist Cat Tribe."

"My sister's right," said Hong.

Cale took another important item—a map—from the box and spread it out. It wasn't very detailed; the map was mostly used by merchants going to and from Henituse territory.

"We're in this village right now," he said. He pointed to a mountain east of the village. "See the mountain?"

"I see it."

"It's very easy to spot."

"The tool's mana range parallels its durability." That was what Bilose had said.

"If you travel east from this village, toward this mountain, you'll see a villa in the distance. There's a cave behind it."

None of the people currently around the black dragon were mages. The people of the Magic Tower respected dragons as the greatest magic-wielding race, and the last thing they wanted was for humans to torture and domesticate them. They considered that an affront to magic altogether.

Those guarding the cave and villa were knights and soldiers Marquess Sten trusted. The people who did the marquess's dirty work were there as well.

"Don't get near it," Cale cautioned the kittens. "You can't get caught."

Since he'd heard about the kittens' situation, Cale was confident they could do this job. Still, he wanted to warn them, since it'd be bad if their curiosity led them near the cave.

"There's a kid being tortured in there. We're going to free it, so you have to be careful."

"A kid?"

"Yeah. Even younger than you, Hong."

"Younger than me?"

"Uh-huh. Four years old."

Of course, that "four-year-old" was strong enough to send Ohn or Hong flying once its mana restrictions were removed.

Ohn and Hong's eyes blazed with determination, their paws kneading the blanket on the bed. "We're going to rescue it?"

"'Rescue'? Not exactly what I'd call it. Just stay in your cat forms, and bury this marble in the mountain without getting caught."

In cat form, they'd be nearly impossible to catch. Cale placed the black marble in a small pouch, then put it over Ohn's neck like a pendant.

"Where should we bury it?" she asked.

"Anywhere on the mountain."

"Really? Anywhere?"

"Yes."

The siblings exchanged glances, then nodded.

“That’ll be easy.”

“We even escaped from the grown-ups in the Mist Cat Tribe.” The siblings had almost been killed by their own tribe for lacking specific abilities, despite never receiving the opportunity to learn them.

“It *should* be easy for you two,” Cale agreed. “You’re capable enough. Otherwise, I wouldn’t ask this kind of favor in the first place.”

He could see himself reflected in the kittens’ golden eyes. Their tails swayed in the air as they scrunched their noses.

Cale understood what they were thinking. “I’ll give you as much beef as you want once you successfully return,” he declared.

Both kittens sprang out the window, heading to the mountain swiftly and stealthily.

Ultimately, they pulled it off just as Cale expected. Having earned their keep, the cats were permitted a top-tier steak entirely to themselves.

Chapter 5:
Seeing a Dragon

THE NEXT DAY, drinking the lemonade he'd now gotten used to, Cale turned to Choi Han and asked, "Have you ever seen a dragon?"

"A dragon?"

"Yes."

"I've seen something *similar*."

Cale knew just what Choi Han meant by that. He was talking about vicious monsters deep in the Dark Forest. Among those terrifying monsters were creatures somewhere between lizards and dragons. Choi Han had killed one as soon as he advanced to the final stage of his Dark Destruction Sword Art.

"You have? What was your impression of it?" Cale asked, pretending not to know. At present, the two of them were the only ones in the room.

"It was a monster," Choi Han replied.

"How so?"

"In all aspects. Its appearance, strength, everything."

"It was, huh?" Cale nodded absentmindedly, but his next words contradicted that nod. "Then you haven't seen a dragon."

"Pardon?"

"Dragons are like people."

Clack. Cale placed his cup of lemonade—which now had a sweet aftertaste, despite the initial sour flavor—down on the table.

"Dragons, beastfolk, dwarves, elves—they're all like humans," he told Choi Han, who was looking at him curiously. "Why? Because they have complex emotions and rich inner lives." *That* aspect wasn't important to Cale; he had yet to reach his main point. "However..."

Choi Han noticed the sudden change in Cale's demeanor. He sat up straight, giving Cale his full attention.

“A being has been born and unwittingly dropped into a pit of darkness. It lives in the dark, relying on torchlight, not knowing what sunlight even *is*. What kind of life do you think it’s living?”

Tap. Cale tapped the table with his index finger.

“It’s being driven insane.”

Tap. He touched the table again.

“It’s had to endure loneliness without family or anything to rely on.”

Tap. Choi Han’s gaze lowered every time Cale’s finger touched the table. His hands, which were under the table on his knees, clenched into fists. As they did, veins bulged on his arms.

Not witnessing this, Cale continued, “It’s tortured and abused around the clock, to the point that it’s on death’s door.”

Choi Han’s face stiffened, and anger flickered in his eyes. Cale had known the young man would react that way. Obviously such a story would infuriate a good person like him. He should also have figured out why Cale brought the story up to begin with.

Cale took another sip of lemonade before concluding, “That being is near.”

A short silence filled the room. Cale glanced out the window, then slowly turned to peer at Choi Han. He didn’t know what Choi Han was thinking about, but he was radiating a bloodthirsty aura.

He’s such a nice guy. Perhaps he’s angry that the dragon is being abused.

Contrary to Cale’s guess, Choi Han was recalling the decades in which he’d fought for his life all alone in the Dark Forest. He didn’t speak up for some time.

Eventually, Choi Han met Cale’s eyes and asked, “Will you rescue it and take it under your wing?”

“Are you crazy?” Cale blurted out, shocked.

“Wait, what?” Choi Han replied, equally surprised by Cale’s reaction.

“Why would I take it under my wing?” Cale waved the suggestion off; it was out of the question.

There was no way a dragon abused by humans would willingly serve a human. In fact, it would probably be full of hate and disgust for humankind—even if a human saved it.

Dragons instinctively believed they were above not just humans but *all* living creatures. That belief came naturally to them; they felt it to their core without being taught as much. That was why dragons couldn’t live under human rule, and why it was impossible to domesticate or train them without breaking them through torture and abuse.

Dragons are extremely arrogant. And to raise a dragon, well…

Cale sensed that he’d get wrapped up in all kinds of annoyances if he raised the dragon. There were fewer than twenty dragons in the Eastern and Western Continents combined. Raising one would pretty much be saying, “I’ll be the star of every event in the world!”

Besides, this dragon was supposed to die. If it cheated death, it should go off and live in some remote place alone, like other dragons.

All in all, Cale was definitely against the black dragon coming with them. As long as he removed its mana-restriction chains, the dragon would surely live a much better life than Cale. Dragons weren’t called “kings of the world” from birth for no reason.

“Then what will you do with it?”

“What do you mean? Why ask something so obvious?” Cale laughed dryly, implying Choi Han’s question was trivial. “We have to let it go so it can live a free and peaceful life. Shouldn’t a dragon *live* like a dragon?”

“I see.” Choi Han’s fists unclenched beneath the table. “We’ll rescue that dragon, then?”

“We will indeed. I’ll need your help.”

“I will do anything I can to help you. *Anything*.”

Cale slowly shook his head, concerned that the enthusiastic Choi Han would exacerbate the situation. “What do you mean,

you'll do 'anything'? No need to go overboard. I don't plan on killing anybody. We'll just do it as quietly as possible."

Eyes full of emotion, Choi Han said, "As I expected, Mr. Cale, you're—"

Cale glanced at the clock. "Go tell Ron to buy booze on the first floor."

"Diff—what?"

Cale needed to arrange for drinks.

***

Although it was midday, Cale was already deep in his cups. Choi Han sat with a perplexed expression, his head on a swivel. Everybody else looked peaceful, and in the middle of that peaceful environment, Cale Henituse was drinking bottle after bottle. The deepening flush on his face made it clear to everyone that he was drunk.

"Is it safe to let him drink so much?" Choi Han asked Hans beside him.

The deputy butler was in the middle of feeding Ohn and Hong, who were in kitten form. Hans still didn't know they were from the Cat Tribe.

Hans cheerfully replied, "It's fine. He doesn't have anything else in his hand, does he? Then we're safe! He promised he wouldn't throw the bottles."

Choi Han had been talking about *Cale's* safety, but Hans was referring to their own. Realizing they weren't on the same wavelength, Choi Han pressed his lips together and turned away from Hans. It was best to leave the deputy butler alone while he was attending to the kittens. Instead, Choi Han kept a watchful eye on Cale.

Not knowing that Choi Han was looking out for him, Cale focused on praising his drink. "Innkeeper! Your booze tastes great! Much better than I expected."

His entourage had been drinking for two hours already. Some were abstaining, just in case something happened, but the

majority were enjoying the festive atmosphere.

For the first hour, they were all looking my way anxiously, but now... Tch.

When Cale ordered them to assemble under the pretext of a drinking party, the soldiers had shown up with their helmets on. Cale was aghast at their behavior at first, but he'd assured them he wouldn't throw bottles, which helped to dispel the leery atmosphere.

"Our village may be small, but it's surrounded by mountains," the innkeeper told him. "This is a special beverage I made with fruit and medicinal herbs from the highlands. That's why it's a bit expensive."

As the old man suggested, the drink really was flavorful. Cale lifted the bottle, admiring it. "Do you have a lot of this?"

"Quite a bit, yes."

"Then get more and distribute it to my entourage."

The flush-faced vice-captain hastened to interject, "Lord Cale, you needn't—" He stopped short, eyes fixed on the bottle in Cale's hand. The rest of the soldiers were staring at it too.

Naturally, Cale was well aware of what they were thinking. "Just drink. Consider it a gift from me. Got it?"

All of the soldiers—aside from the absent few who'd gone to report on the bandits, of course—lit up, their eyes sparkling. This was the first time they'd been *excited* to see a bottle in Cale's hands. The innkeeper was elated at the prospect of selling a lot of the pricey beverage. Cale watched intently as the old man brought drinks and snacks to every table.

The character Cale Henituse had a high alcohol tolerance. Everybody assumed it was low because his face flushed easily and he was a lout whenever he drank. The truth of the matter was that he also behaved like a lout when completely sober.

That high alcohol tolerance was the reason Cale's head was perfectly clear. He drank for another half hour or so, then looked at Choi Han.

"Choi Han. I'm going to go rest now. Come help me up."

"I'll do it, Lord Cale!" called the vice-captain.

“It’s all right, Vice-Captain. You should take it easy today—and the same for the rest of you. Didn’t you fight a battle yesterday? I doubt we need to worry further about dangers in this area. I pity the soldiers on guard duty, but the rest of you can relax and enjoy yourselves.”

“Lord Cale—”

“I’m tired. I’m leaving.”

Things would get complicated if the vice-captain or other members of his entourage followed him. Thankfully, none reacted after seeing Choi Han assist Cale—probably because Choi Han hadn’t drunk a drop, and he was the strongest person there to boot. With him guarding Cale, they had nothing to worry about.

Now there’s only one person left.

The last hurdle was Ron. Avoiding the guards at the gate and around the inn would be easy, but Ron was a different matter.

Neither Hans nor Ron would ever enter Cale’s room if he told them not to. The difference between the two was that Hans wasn’t skilled enough to sense whether Cale was still in the room. Ron would easily sense it.

It’s not like that old man cares *about what I do.*

As a rule, Ron didn’t worry about whether Cale snuck out or what he did. That being said, the old servant loathed any occurrence that was personally bothersome to him, so Cale decided to give him advance warning.

Noticing Hans and Ron trailing behind Choi Han, Cale told the old servant quietly, “Ron, I’m going out. It’s our little secret. You know that, right?”

The old servant liked to drink, but he hadn’t enjoyed a single drop that evening. He’d just stared at Cale all night. *He really is scary.*

Ron smiled benevolently, making him even scarier. “I understand. I’ll be waiting up for you.”

“No need for that.” *Waiting up for me, my ass.*

As Cale expected, Ron agreed without another word.

The count's son entered his room, still supported by Choi Han. "I'm going to rest. Hans, Ron—don't come in to wake me unless it's an emergency. You know what'll happen if you interrupt my sleep, right?"

Cale had once cursed out a servant who'd come instead of Ron to wake him up. Although Cale hadn't *hit* him, the servant went around the estate telling all the other servants that he felt like he'd been struck by an onslaught of expletives.

"Of course, Lord Cale. Please rest well."

"I'll be standing right outside your room, young master."

Cale's expression soured. He watched the two leave, then sneakily gave Choi Han—who was still supporting him—an order. "Use the window to enter my room quietly."

Choi Han nodded. He swiftly followed the other two out, closing the door behind him.

"Meeeeeow."

"Is it time now?"

Ohn and Hong had followed Cale up to his room. He nodded at them and immediately opened the magic box.

Click. The magic lock opened to again reveal the box's contents. Cale removed an outfit from inside. Once he finished changing, Choi Han entered through the window.

The young man's eyes widened in shock. "Mr. Cale?"

Cale tossed a black outfit at Choi Han. "You wear this too," he said, tugging on a black mask.

Thanks to the mana-disturbance marble the kittens had buried the previous day, the magical recording devices around the mountain would temporarily stop working. That wasn't going to be enough, though; Cale didn't want to get caught. That was why he'd prepared these outfits in advance and started drinking at midday.

"What's this?"

On the chest of each garment was a single white star with five smaller red stars surrounding it.

It's the secret organization's uniform.

Birth of a Hero had clearly and accurately described the outfit worn by the secret organization Choi Han encountered over and over. Cale had ordered this outfit from a tailor, following the books' details as accurately as possible. He'd personally added the stars after the fact, just to be on the safe side, so the details of the outfit were a bit crude up close. It looked decent from afar, though.

Anyone who saw this outfit wouldn't remember the unrefined stitching—only that the uniform was black, with one white star and five red stars. Unlike the marquess, Benion hadn't met members of the secret organization face-to-face. Trying to make heads or tails of the reports from subordinates who'd seen the outfits would confound and infuriate him, giving him a throbbing headache.

"Are we doing something bad?" Choi Han asked. When Cale failed to respond, he repeated the question.

"Yes, we're doing something bad." Cale smiled wickedly beneath the mask. With it on, he definitely looked like a villain. "From Benion's perspective."

"Ah." Choi Han extended his hand, reaching for the other mask Cale held. "I'll take that, then."

Even a good-natured person might have someone they detested and wanted to screw over. That was no different for this seventeen-year-old who'd come into the world after spending decades alone.

"Oh, and these cats are beastfolk from the Mist Cat Tribe."

Cale casually introduced Ohn and Hong as if it were nothing. Choi Han and the kittens exchanged relatively nonchalant greetings. The Cat Tribe siblings were sensitive to a person's true character, and they already had a good idea of Choi Han's strength. Meanwhile, Choi Han had noticed they weren't average cats during their travels.

"He's Choi Han, she's Ohn, and he's Hong. End of introductions. Now, everybody hurry up and get ready."

Cale gave them a short time to prepare. As soon as Choi Han came out of the bathroom wearing the same black outfit and mask, Cale told him, "Let's go." Then, standing in front of the

second-floor window, he added, “Carry me on your back when you go out the window. I don’t know how to jump from this high up.”

The redhead had most likely *never* jumped from that height before.

For the very first time, Choi Han heaved a sigh in front of Cale. Ohn and Hong approached the young man, patting him with their front paws.

“Let’s hurry,” Cale told them.

The group safely slipped out of the inn and headed toward the mountain with the viscount’s villa and the dragon’s prison.

***

The spot where Ohn and Hong had buried the black marble was beyond Cale’s expectations. The viscount’s villa was thirty meters from the dragon’s cave, and Ohn and Hong had sneakily buried the marble extremely close by—fifty meters from the cave, in an area full of trees and shrubs.

“You two are amazing.”

“It was a piece of cake,” Ohn replied, but Cale saw her nose twitch in joy.

Cale, Choi Han, Ohn, and Hong crouched around the area where the black marble—or rather, the mana-disturbance tool—was located. They surveyed the cave mouth fifty meters away, plus the viscount’s villa farther down.

“Remember the plan?” Cale asked. He’d explained it on their way over, but honestly, there *wasn’t* much of a plan. “Six people total are on guard right now.”

He recalled background information he’d read in *Birth of a Hero*. Like most dragons, the black dragon was smart. It had gathered a lot of information during its four long years of captivity, biding its time. That was why it made its escape two days from now.

Approximately thirty people resided in the villa. Originally, when the marquess first brought in the dragon, there had been

close to a hundred. Over the last four years, those dwelling in the villa realized that not a single outsider deigned to visit the area, and their numbers slowly decreased.

Thirty was a small group of people, but among them were three knights about as adept as the vice-captain, as well as seven moderately skilled knights. There were also soldiers, random laborers, and the torturer. They might have seemed like easy opponents, but the sheer number of people stationed at the villa showed how much attention the marquess paid to this place.

Still, Cale had Choi Han on his side—the same Choi Han who'd effortlessly trounced the Kingdom of Rowoon's strongest knight in ten moves.

"Let me say it one more time," Cale told him. "At the cave mouth, there's one high-level knight, two mid-level knights, and two soldiers. Inside the cave, there's just one high-level knight. The torturer's at the end of the cave."

Hearing the word "torturer," Choi Han flinched. Cale didn't give it a second thought. In fact, he paid no heed to Choi Han's inner turmoil. The important thing was that the black marble would soon activate, so they needed to move quickly.

"Thanks to the black marble Ohn and Hong buried, the magical recording devices between the villa and the mouth of the cave will malfunction for forty minutes. The same goes for alarms, magic traps, and everything else. None of it will work."

The marquess needed to domesticate a dragon, the greatest magical creature in the world, but he couldn't rely on mages for help. Thus, he'd filled the area with magic items, stowing them here and there around the entrance. He had faith in the ample quantity of items, which was one more reason that there were so few guards.

It was also why the dragon had no choice but to cause a mana explosion when it tried to escape.

An eye for an eye, and a coin for a coin.

The marquess relied on expensive strategies, so Cale was doing the same. He repeatedly touched the magic bag tied around his waist, which could store numerous objects. Inside it were all sorts of magic items, useful tools, and the like.

“I just need to take care of the guards?” Choi Han asked.

Naturally, Choi Han would do all the fighting. With such a strong man beside him, why would Cale even *attempt* to attack anyone? The lout thought even paper cuts were painful, and he figured being slashed with a sword would hurt worse.

Cale gazed at Choi Han, dead serious. “Yes. You’re the only one I trust to cover me.” That was true, at least for now.

Choi Han nodded. “I won’t let you down,” he said sincerely.

“Right. As I mentioned before, just show them our uniforms and knock them out. Don’t let them witness your sword skills. You remember what to do after that, right?”

If Choi Han used the darkness to his advantage, it could easily camouflage his unique translucent black aura. Cale had already told Choi Han that many times over, so he *should* have understood by now.

“Yes, I remember it all.”

“Good. I’ll leave it to you, then.”

Patting Choi Han’s shoulder, Cale handed him a voice-altering device. It’d be bad if Choi Han spoke during the fight and they recognized his voice.

“It’s expensive. Don’t break it.”

“Got it. Don’t worry.”

Cale looked at the kittens. Their raised tails swayed in anticipation, so he told them, “I’ll give you meat once we’re done.”

That didn’t seem to be the right answer, as the kittens snorted and turned away. Cale let it slide, not thinking much about it, and checked the time on his watch. Five minutes left. They already had the cover of night.

He recalled his conversation with Bilose.

“The mana-disturbance tool will instantly stop those magic items from working. Most will shut off to prevent them from blowing up. However, the highest-quality items will beep to signal that they’re malfunctioning. That magic doesn’t sound like a siren; it’s more like an alarm clock.”

“But it’ll probably be loud, right?”

“I don’t know where you plan to use the tool, but yes, the alarms should be loud enough for an enemy to hear.” Bilose grinned and gleefully continued, *“In fact, if a* lot *of magic items are installed nearby, all the alarms going off at the same time will probably get chaotic.”*

Chaos was good enough for Cale.

“Get ready,” he told the kittens, who’d covered themselves in soot to hide the color of their fur.

The kittens left Cale’s side and disappeared into the darkness, which made them invisible. They wouldn’t show themselves in front of the enemies, but Cale knew they’d tail him into the darkness as planned. Meanwhile, Choi Han carefully folded the handkerchief he’d cleaned his blade with and tucked it in his inner pocket.

Once their preparations were finished, Cale stood. Something vibrated beneath the ground where he’d been crouching. The black marble was coming to life.

Tick. Tock. The second hand of Cale’s watch slowly approached the right time, until… *Tick!*

“Let’s go,” Cale ordered.

Choi Han darted ahead as planned while Ohn created mist from within the darkness. That dense mist encircled Cale, making him tough to see. At the same time, the black marble finally activated.

Whirrrrrrr!

Only some of the magic items installed in the area began ringing loudly to announce that they’d malfunctioned.

“I guess not all the marquess’s magic items were top quality,” Cale mused.

Hidden in the mist, Cale chased Choi Han to the cave. Starting now, it was a battle against time. Following in Choi Han’s wake, he came across injured soldiers, knocked out cold, with deep wounds on their arms and legs. *Scary bastard.*

Choi Han was already fighting the knights in front of the cave.

“Who are you? How dare you come here!”

Choi Han easily flicked the high-level knight’s sword away. Stepping forward, he cut a deep gash in the man’s side. Ignoring the blood spurting from his opponent’s side, he struck the knight’s back with his elbow and his neck with his hand, knocking him out.

The high-level knight inside the cave soon showed up as well. “Damn it! What’s going on?!”

“Poison,” Cale said into the voice-altering device.

As the mist surrounding him expanded, Hong moved stealthily in the dark, rendering it toxic. Those soldiers who had fainted wouldn’t be able to move for a while, even if they woke up.

At that moment, Cale met the high-level knight’s eyes and said one more word. “Cover.”

Choi Han hurried in front of him, then darted toward the cave entrance. Cale followed.

“Block them!” the high-level knight shouted.

Two mid-level knights charged at Choi Han. Their swords glowed with their auras, but Choi Han destroyed both weapons instantaneously.

Clang. Claaang. The blades’ upper halves fell to the ground.

“I-impossible! Is he a swordmaster?!”

The high-level knight’s voice was heavy with shock and despair. Only a swordmaster’s aura blade could cut through a sword with an aura. Yet, using the darkness to hide his own aura’s color, Choi Han had instantly cut down his opponents’ swords. Then, using his sword and scabbard, he whacked the mid-level knights’ necks and stomachs.

“Ugh!”

“Guh!”

He only needs to hit them once. Cale couldn’t deny his amazement as he crouched as low as possible behind Choi Han, continuing ahead.

An uproar arose a ways behind them; it came from the villa. “Intruders!” someone cried.

Cale stared ahead, looking the mid-level knights in the eye as they staggered and collapsed—paralyzed by Hong’s poison.

“P-poison!”

“An assassin!”

Choi Han knocked those knights out too before charging at the high-level knight, swinging his sword. Cale seized the opportunity to rush toward the cave entrance. Even doing so, he remembered to ensure that the mid-level knight who’d called him an assassin saw the six stars on his clothing before passing out.

“Ugh! Where’d these people come from?!” cried the high-level knight.

“You’re too loud.” Choi Han brushed the knight’s mana-filled sword aside easily, purposely dragging out the fight.

While Choi Han acted as a distraction, Cale entered the cave behind the Cat Tribe siblings, who had darted inside a moment earlier. After verifying that Cale had entered, Choi Han immediately moved to the mouth of the cave.

“Come,” he called to the high-level knight. He wasn’t just sizing up the knight; he also took in all the enemies coming from the villa with torches.

“I leave it to you,” came Cale’s calm, altered voice from behind him.

That brought a slight smile to the young man’s face. In a flash, he focused on releasing some strength. The Dark Destruction Sword Art consisted of two forces: darkness and destruction. The latter force began to surround him.

“Nobody can get past this point.”

Choi Han always kept his word. But while he guarded the mouth of the cave, someone else was taking a different approach to protecting what lay within. That person was none other than the torturer keeping an eye on the imprisoned dragon.

By the time Cale arrived, the torturer was already in a panic. “Why? *Why?!* Why isn’t the magic crystal ball working?!”

The crystal ball in the torturer’s hands was an emergency backup Benion had prepared in case something went wrong.

“D-don’t come near me!” the torturer cried. “Do you know what’s in here?!”

He shook violently as he gaped at Cale. That was understandable. If he were struck by a stronger-than-average attack, the torturer would explode instantly. That was another of Benion’s safety measures. The explosion would also blast apart the prison key and the cell itself.

The torturer knew this all too well. “Don’t c-come any closer! Otherwise, y-you’re all going to die!”

Tch. Looking at the torturer shaking in his boots, Cale raised his hand. Mist materialized out of thin air, heading straight for the torturer. Ohn, the creator of the mist, hid unseen in the cave’s shadows.

“Aaaaaah! G-go away!”

The sounds of battle came from the cave entrance as the mist approached. As before, it carried a paralytic poison. The torturer was surrounded in no time.

“Just what—ugh! P-poison!”

He quavered as he fell to the ground, letting out a groan. He truly looked pitiful. The poison made it impossible for him to utter another word, but his eyes rapidly flicked to and fro.

Cale approached the man and rummaged through his clothes.

If you couldn’t strike the torturer with a stronger-than-average attack, you just had to hit him with poison. Or make a deal with him and have him hand the key over willingly, but Cale didn’t want to use that method.

Here it is.

Cale grabbed the key and closed the eyes of the poisoned torturer, who was losing consciousness. He wondered if they’d used too much poison.

I don’t think he’ll die… But if he does, oh well.

Cale snapped his fingers. Two little black bundles—Ohn and Hong—fell from the cave ceiling almost immediately. Once they moved under the torch closest to Cale, he could see the pair clearly.

Having confirmed that the kittens were safe, Cale walked to the far corner of the cave. There, he saw something black curled up inside the now-useless magic cell. It was the dragon. What shocked Cale more than the dragon itself was the slick blood oozing from between its scales and the metallic stench in the air.

Cale approached the cell. The dragon kept its eyes shut, though it had to know Cale was approaching. It was probably in a panic. He put the key into the lock and turned it.

Click.

Once the iron door was unlocked, Cale slowly opened it and entered the cell. Then again, the chamber seemed too large to suit the word. Nearby were whips and torture devices, as well as the luxurious couch Benion sat on to watch.

Cale went to the corner of the cell. The small dragon, only a meter long, lay on a stack of hay in the corner. Its eyes were closed, and its lashes quivered. All its limbs were chained, and the mana-restriction gem on its neck made it unable to use magic.

He crouched in front of the dragon. “Hey.”

Even after he spoke to it, the dragon didn’t open its eyes.

Cale checked his watch. It would be time to leave soon. Undoing the chains with the key he’d gotten from the torturer, he continued to speak to the dragon. “Let’s go.”

At that moment, the dragon’s eyes opened. Cale smiled upon meeting its gaze. There was still some ferocity in its eyes; the dragon hadn’t lost its will to live just yet. In contrast to the dying dragon Choi Han encountered in the novel, this dragon had a strong desire to live. It dreamt of freedom. Hence its eyes were full of wariness, animosity, and rebellion.

“I like that gaze,” said Cale. It was the gaze of a dragon.

He lifted the creature in his arms, as if it were a piece of luggage, then carried it out of the cell. He put the dragon down

in front of the two kittens. Ohn and Hong, who'd been silent until then, circled the dragon.

"That looks like it hurts."

"So sad."

Becoming alert, the dragon bared its teeth. This was probably the first time in its four years of life that it had seen anything other than humans.

Cale checked his watch again. They had just enough time to escape.

"That looks like it hurts," Ohn repeated.

She walked over to Cale and tapped his leg with her front paw, perhaps thinking of the potion Cale had brought in his magic box. She wasn't in a position to ask him to use it outright; she could only act this way.

"Hold on."

Cale intended to use that potion—that was why he'd brought it—but he needed to remove the mana-restriction chains beforehand. The potion would only work properly if the dragon's mana, which was practically as important as its heart, was no longer restricted.

He headed for the far side of the cell, to the spot where the torturer usually stood guard. He could hear Choi Han fighting in the distance, but he figured the battle would end soon enough.

"Let's see."

Cale patted the cave wall near where the torturer would stand, kicking the man out of the way to get closer to the wall. The dragon bared its teeth at the torturer, then quickly turned its focus back on Cale.

Benion's last line of defense should be around here somewhere.

Like all of Marquess Sten's family members, Benion was paranoid about someone intruding into the cave while he was inside. To prepare for that situation, he'd built a secret tunnel as an escape route. If the torturer had known about the tunnel, he would probably have used it earlier.

The book said there was an unusually flat area on this bumpy wall. Oh, here it is. On the cave wall was a flat spot about the size of a person's hand.

Benion had seemed too inattentive for anything like training, but in fact, every generation in the Sten family learned martial arts.

And if you use enough force on that spot, the wall opens. It wasn't a magic device; rather, the force of the impact triggered the mechanism.

Cale sensed someone approaching and glanced over. "Done?"

"Yes."

Choi Han flicked his sword to fling the blood off of it, then walked up to Cale. When his gaze landed on the dragon, he frowned. That was a natural reaction, seeing such a small creature covered in blood.

He glared daggers at the torturer, looking utterly vicious, so Cale called out to him. "Choi Han?"

Eyes still on the torturer, Choi Han reported, "I left the escaping workers alone, as you ordered. I also made sure to leave all those with fighting skills unable to do battle."

"Good job." Cale praised him, then pointed to the flat spot on the wall. "Punch that spot."

"As hard as I can?"

Are you planning to destroy the cave? "No. Control your strength. Just hard enough to make a roughly ten-centimeter dent."

"Mm. So, very lightly."

"Right." *Very lightly?*

When Choi Han implied that something *impossible* for Cale took only the tiniest amount of effort for him, Cale backed away. Choi Han took that as Cale telling him to hurry and immediately struck the wall with his fist.

Boom!

"Wow!"

“Ooh!”

As the kittens admired the attack, Cale picked the dragon back up.

Screeeeeeech! A chilling noise came out of the wall, and an opening the size of a grown man opened up to the side. Choi Han grabbed a torch.

“Let’s go,” Cale said.

At that, the kittens got on Choi Han’s back. He stepped into the tunnel first, and Cale trailed behind him. The dragon remained quiet in his arms, its breaths the only sound. However, the eyes that stared piercingly at Cale were extremely vicious indeed.

The dragon wasn’t grateful for its rescue. Rather, its gaze contained wariness at the possibility of being the target of new, unknown violence, as well as distrust and hatred of humans.

“Stop glaring at me like that,” Cale said to the dragon in his arms.

Whew. I’m a bit out of breath. Choi Han seemed to run effortlessly through the tunnel; Cale tried his best to keep up. *Should I have made Choi Han carry the dragon?*

The meter-long monster was heavy. Still, this would be a breeze if Cale got his hands on the Ancient Power called the Energy of the Heart.

Cale clutched the dragon tightly to keep himself from throwing it down in frustration. After doing all that work to rescue it, there was no way he could leave it here. The dragon continued to watch him as its blood seeped through his black clothes.

After sprinting through the dark, narrow tunnel for a few minutes, Choi Han called out to Cale, “There’s a wall in front of us.”

“Hit the center with another punch. Then we’ll continue fleeing as planned.”

“I understand!”

The kittens jumped off Choi Han’s shoulder to dash along the ground. Choi Han focused some strength into his fist, then

punched the center of the wall as hard as he had earlier.

Boom!

The wall instantly collapsed, and the night sky came into view. They had made it out of the cave.

This time, Cale took the lead, scanning the vicinity. Benion had put a magic recording device at the entrance of this secret tunnel as well; he was nothing if not thorough. Since he hadn't known exactly where the tunnel's entrance was, Cale had needed the mana-disturbance tool to work on the entire mountain.

They didn't have much time left; they'd need to get out of the recording device's range in the next few minutes. Still, Cale felt that would be enough.

Choi Han followed behind Cale, erasing traces of their presence as they passed and creating misleading new traces. After surviving in the Dark Forest on his own so long, he was an expert at creating and following tracks.

Only after they'd run in the opposite direction from the secret tunnel for about two minutes did Cale look at his watch. "Stop."

Whinnng. The alarms throughout the mountain suddenly stopped blaring. The mana-disturbance tool had stopped working.

"Whew..."

Cale took a deep breath, calming his thrumming heart. Every time his heart pounded, the Unbreakable Shield around it gathered strength in preparation for the worst.

I don't intend to use the shield right now, though.

After freeing this dragon and saying goodbye to Choi Han in the next city, Cale planned to strengthen the shield by gaining an Ancient Power called the Energy of the Heart. He'd only use the shield after that.

Now that he'd had time to look around, Cale glanced down at the dragon. He smiled. It looked up at the night sky in wonder, its defiance momentarily forgotten. This was the first time in the dragon's four years that it had seen the outside world. Cale

understood how it felt. He wanted to give it more time, but he couldn't.

He placed the dragon down on the grass, continuing to watch it. The dragon looked right back at him, its eyes once again full of resistance and wariness. It coiled up, looking ready to strike.

No wonder they tortured it constantly for four years. It won't back down at all.

Cale liked the dragon because it was so different from him. Growing up an abused orphan, Cale—well, Kim Roksu—had given up. After his childhood, he didn't want to be the main character of a story, like Choi Han was. And, after giving up in the place he called home, he felt too weak to fight against the world.

"Hey."

Making sure the dragon was looking at him, Cale took out a pair of electricity-resistant gloves. He put them on, then readied shears with magic seals on both blades. Those shears were one of two items Bilose had rented on his behalf; they weren't items anyone could lease for the right price.

"I don't know why you need these, Lord Cale, but I hope to see you alive in the capital."

"You think I'm going somewhere to die?"

"All I know is that you plan to cause a commotion."

"...Shut up."

Reflecting on his conversation with Bilose, Cale didn't immediately notice the dead silence that had settled over their group. He looked around. Choi Han was peering at the shears with bewilderment, while the kittens had moved away from Cale and hidden behind Choi Han. The dragon's eyes were blazing.

Clicking his tongue at their reactions, Cale approached the dragon.

The mana-restriction chain was made of something similar to rubber. They'd used that somewhat elastic material to fit the growing dragon; regular metal wouldn't have worked. Cale grabbed the dragon's neck.

The kittens gasped.

He ignored them and kept going. It would be best to do this as quickly as possible. As the shears headed for the dragon's throat, their sharp blades flashed in the moonlight. The dragon studied Cale's blank, emotionless gaze, then closed its eyes.

At that moment, they all heard the snipping noise of something being cut.

Bzzt, bzzt! The mana-restriction chain Cale had effortlessly snipped off sparked in his hands.

"What are you looking at?" Cale bluntly asked the dragon, which had opened its eyes to peek at him.

He took off one glove and handed it to Choi Han, who put it on. Cale passed him the mana-restriction chain, then removed a potion from his pouch. Even the potion had been quite pricey, since it was the highest grade. He'd felt guilty requesting more spending money from his father in the few days before he left.

Clicking his tongue, Cale stared sharply at the dragon. "Do you know how much money I spent on you?"

He'd heard those words often after he was born—almost daily, in fact. *"I've spent so much money on you. Why don't you listen? You need to be beaten."* Then he *was* beaten, as those beating him told him to stop thinking and simply obey them.

But he didn't raise a hand against the dragon; it would feel no pain.

"I dropped an arm and a leg on you. You better heal properly, you fool."

Cale poured about half the potion over the dragon's back and the rest into its mouth. Thankfully, the dragon didn't resist, swallowing it down.

Within minutes, the dragon's mana—which was as important as its heart, and the source of all of its power—coursed throughout its body. All its injuries instantly disappeared, and a blue aura that seemed to be the dragon's mana surrounded it like a gust of wind. All Cale could think was that this really *was* a dragon. The change occurred instantly, reminding him again just how unimaginably breathtaking a dragon's existence was.

The clever dragon appeared to have figured out that its body had healed and that there would be no reason for it to sustain injuries in the future. Its eyes lit up.

"Hey." Cale stepped toward the baby dragon, which curled up and continued to observe him. Ignoring its behavior, he asked, "What do you want to do now?"

The dragon remained silent.

Cale smirked at it. "I know you speak human language because you're a dragon—the proudest and most intelligent species in the world." Then he asked again, "What did you want to do once you got free?"

The dragon started to speak. "I..."

It—or *he*, as it turned out—really did know how to speak the human language. After all, he was much smarter than humans; there was no way he wouldn't have learned that language in those four years.

"I..."

The dragon sensed that at his current strength, he could easily kill the man in front of him. Of course, he was scared of the man in the back, but he could escape *alive*. He had gained the strength he had waited so long to obtain.

That was why he finally said the things he had thought to himself over and over for the last four years. "I will live. I will escape. I will not be tamed."

The dragon had revealed his inner thoughts. No matter what it took, he was going to escape from here.

"Yes. That's right," Cale agreed. "You're a dragon. A *dragon*. You have the right to live freely."

Even a four-year-old dragon was tougher than most living creatures. He had enough strength to survive on his own. Normally, dragons were extremely independent and prideful. They generally wanted to create their own lair at about two years old; their maturity at that age was far beyond that of a human toddler.

Peering into the dragon's eyes, which were still cautious and distrustful of humans, Cale vowed, "I will not tame you."

He had no reason to take responsibility for something stronger than him. Also, keeping the dragon to make rescuing him worthwhile could cause too many potential headaches. The dragon was different from Ohn and Hong—he was beyond Cale's limits.

The creature didn't believe Cale. "Liar. Humans always lie."

Anger now smoldered in the dragon's eyes, but it wasn't directed at Cale. Rather, it stemmed from years of being humiliated. Again, dragons were naturally prideful creatures.

"I guess that's true. I lie quite a bit as well." Cale took the dragon's words in stride, then said, "You should live however you want to live. What do you want to do?"

"I—"

The baby dragon lifted his head to look at the night sky. It was different from the blackness inside the cave. Although it was dark, there was still light.

"I hate humans. I want to be free."

"Good."

Cale stood up. He took some mid-grade potions from his magic bag, put them in a satchel, and placed it next to the dragon.

"Live freely."

The dragon's black pupils enlarged and started to quiver. He still doubted Cale, but the redhead was undaunted. *This should be enough.*

He'd freed the dragon, screwed Benion over, and saved the village. Thanks to the dragon, he'd also helped Choi Han understand what freedom meant. Most importantly, he didn't need to take responsibility for the dragon. The creature's gaze made it clear that he didn't want to follow Cale. The ideal outcome for Cale, really.

"Let's go," Cale told his companions, his tone satisfied and light.

He turned from the dragon and walked off with no regrets. Choi Han silently joined him, focusing on hiding their tracks. The

kittens hesitated for a moment, but seeing the dragon look away from Cale, they followed him as well.

Once even the Cat Tribe siblings had left it alone, the dragon lifted his head and watched them walk away.

“I hate humans. They’re bad.”

For some reason, the dragon was paying more attention to a retreating human—a race he knew annoyingly well and hated—than the night sky he was seeing for the first time.

As the kittens trailed behind Cale, Hong slowly approached Ohn. The two conversed with their heads close together.

“I think he’s going to follow us, Sister.”

“Uh-huh. I think so too.”

“Are we going to get a younger brother?”

“Looks like it.”

Hearing their conversation, Cale scoffed in disbelief. “Don’t hold your breath. Dragons have a strong sense of independence. They never let humans hold authority over them. Besides, *that* dragon abhors humans.”

If a cat could grimace, that would undoubtedly be the look Ohn gave him then. She shook her head and mumbled, “I don’t think so.”

Her little brother glanced behind him before agreeing with her. “Nope.”

Hong was certain the black dragon was still looking in their direction. The dragon would enjoy his freedom, but soon enough, he would be eating beef with Hong.

“Go get that marble back,” Cale ordered the kittens, who were still chatting with each other. The pair went to retrieve the marble so he’d let them eat meat. Not sparing them another glance, Cale patted Choi Han’s shoulder. “Good work.”

Today would be the first time Choi Han had ever saved anything. The battle against the bandits at the mountain pass had been more “protecting” than “saving.”

Of course, the actual event had changed—rather than saving the villagers from the dragon in the novels, Choi Han had

saved the dragon he would normally have killed. Still, the important thing was that Choi Han had saved something.

"Mr. Cale?" Choi Han called.

"What?"

Choi Han was silent for a while, then spoke again. "What would you do if following you *was* how the dragon chose to live?"

"That would never happen."

"What if? Just hypothetically speaking."

Hypothetically. Cale thought about that for some time before he replied lightly, "I don't think about what-ifs or things that haven't happened yet."

But, for some reason, Cale suddenly got chills. He looked behind him for the first time since walking away from the black dragon. Thankfully, he couldn't see the creature any longer. He sighed in relief.

After taking care of loose ends at the inn, Cale fell fast asleep. Thus, he had no clue that the dragon—who had used magic for the first time to become invisible—sat outside his window staring at him for ages before leaving, tightly clutching the satchel of potions.

Chapter 6:
Repaying Kindness

THE NEXT DAY, Cale had to deal with Choi Han's questions early in the morning.

"There's a city coming up in a few days, Mr. Cale. Is that the midpoint of our travels?"

It was nearly time for Choi Han to repay Cale, as discussed. That meant Cale was closer to obtaining another Ancient Power. In the novel, about a month from this point, Marquess Sten's eldest son—the one Benion had ousted—sought that Ancient Power as his last glimmer of hope…only to find it was useless to him.

Cale nodded indifferently at Choi Han and picked up the ice-cold cup of water Ron had brought. Holding the chilly drink, he suddenly recalled what Ron said when he'd brought the water earlier.

"It isn't good to take such long walks at night, young master. I was very worried about you."

Though he hadn't taken a sip of the cold water yet, his mind became crystal clear. He put the cup back down carefully and said to Choi Han, "You took care of the aftermath?"

"Yes."

After returning Cale to the inn, Choi Han had immediately gone back to erase their tracks and create a new set of fake tracks heading west.

"Meeeeeow."

Cale glanced at the kittens, who were yawning and drowsily munching on jerky. Then he began to tell Choi Han about the midpoint they'd soon reach. "The next city is called Perthle. That's our journey's halfway point."

Henituse territory was surrounded by mountains. Once you left it, all the roads were well paved, from this small city in the viscount's territory to the capital. *That's one of the things that has*

kept the count's territory safe, even if it's a bit challenging for merchants.

Although the region had lots of marble, merchants *did* struggle to traverse its rough roads. That being the case, the roads were paved as soon as one left the count's territory, so the merchants were willing to overcome the inconvenience to visit and trade.

Those paved roads made it easy for influential parties in the eastern half of Rowoon to gather quite frequently. Although no nobles higher than a marquess lived in the east, the eastern aristocrats were still better able to raise issues in the capital than those from other territories.

"My father's territory is so mountainous, it took a while to get this far. But our travels won't take long from here on out." Perthle would be the midpoint in terms of distance, not time.

"Mr. Cale…"

"What is it?"

"On my way back, I went to check on the viscount's villa."

"And?"

Choi Han looked unsettled by Cale's blasé response. "They seemed to be in a panic. I saw soldiers and knights leaving the village."

"I'm sure they went to report the news." Those who'd regained consciousness had most likely sent messengers to Benion. They were probably also busy investigating the area around the cave.

That wasn't the end of Choi Han's report. "However…"

"Just say it. Stop dragging it out," Cale snapped, frowning.

Despite Cale's tone, Choi Han was still fidgety. "The exit to the secret tunnel we used to escape the cave had been blown up," he said slowly. "Not just the exit—the trees, the grass, the ground, and everything else around it were a mess."

Plop. The kittens dropped the jerky in their mouths.

Still, Cale was indifferent. "I'm sure the dragon did it."

Choi Han sat there in silence. Seeing that, Cale rose with a scoff.

Even if the dragon was only four years old, he was extremely intelligent. He must've blown up the escape route in case one of his foes came through. And, since dragons were sensitive to mana, he had probably wrecked everything around the cave to destroy the area's magic tools.

"Thank goodness he didn't kill all the unconscious people there," Cale added. "He probably held back because he's still young and fearful."

"I see. I knew how strong mana was, but..."

"Don't look down on the dragon just because he's small. You'll regret it."

Dragons were said to be arrogant and extremely petty, and Cale patted himself on the back once again for leaving the dragon instead of bringing him along.

"You're dismissed," he told Choi Han. "By the way, are you planning to rest until we leave?"

"No. I need to help Vicross."

Who? Vicross? "Oh, I guess you two are close now!" Cale blurted out, delighted.

Choi Han's expression soured for the very first time. "No, we absolutely aren't close," the young man said firmly.

Cale's face went just as sour. "I...I see. You may leave."

Choi Han silently bowed and made to leave.

As he opened the door, Cale gave him an order. "Uh...on your way out, tell Hans to prepare a table on the first floor with drinks for me."

"Excuse me?" Choi Han glanced back at Cale, wide-eyed. He looked back and forth between his relaxed employer and the clock. It was only 7:00 a.m.

"Haven't you ever heard of hair of the dog?" Cale asked brightly.

Choi Han left without saying anything else, but Cale paid him no mind. Ohn and Hong gawked, likely wondering if he

really intended to drink this early in the morning, but he ignored them and checked the mirror.

"What a wonderful expression."

His face looked extremely tired, as if he were still drunk. Nodding in satisfaction, Cale descended to the first floor.

Just as I expected.

Seven in the morning was early, and for some, the graveyard shift wasn't yet over. The vice-captain, who was engaged in a serious conversation with someone, looked pristine—as if he hadn't drunk at all the previous night.

Cale spotted Choi Han nearby. He was behaving stiffly, which was understandable; the person the vice-captain was speaking to was most likely one of the marquess's knights Choi Han had knocked unconscious the day before.

The redhead walked over and kicked Choi Han's shin. "Why are you panicking like that?" he whispered.

"Ah!" Choi Han flinched. Then, laughing awkwardly, he murmured back, "I thought I'd used enough strength to incapacitate them for about a day. They're up and moving much earlier than I expected. I must've underestimated the human body. In the future, I think I can use more strength on other people."

Cale averted his gaze. The young man really was a typical main character who'd destroy anything in his path for the justice he believed in.

Two more unexpected guests popped up. Unbeknownst to Cale, Ohn and Hong had followed him downstairs. Flicking their tails, the kittens peeked at the knight, cunning expressions on their faces. Anybody could see they looked gleeful.

Am I the biggest coward here?

As Cale sat down at his table and fell into deep contemplation, the innkeeper brought him a bottle.

"I've prepared the same beverage you drank last night, Lord Cale."

"Every time I see you, something comes to mind, old man."

"Yes?" the innkeeper said nervously.

Cale flashed him a smile. “I think you’re a really good salesman. It’s a compliment. This is the perfect drink to be my hair of the dog.”

The bottle opened with a *pop*, and Cale immediately got to drinking. His face reddened right away. Purposely letting his eyelids droop, Cale glanced at the vice-captain, who was still speaking to the knight.

“Yesterday, we had a party to kick back after our long journey here. Everybody was drinking and relaxing, and no one left the inn,” the vice-captain said, perplexed. “I don’t understand why someone from the viscount’s estate would be curious about that.”

The marquess’s knight must have introduced himself as the viscount’s employee. He smiled at the vice-captain but pressed on. “A thief snuck into the viscount’s villa yesterday. A couple other knights and I were on guard, but the thief stole a few items. After hearing that visitors from Lord Henituse’s estate were in the village, we came to determine whether you’d encountered the thief as well.”

Thief? Yeah, right. Well, *I guess a dragon thief* is *still a thief,* Cale thought, gulping directly from the innkeeper’s bottle. At that moment, he made eye contact with the marquess’s knight.

“What are *you* looking at?” Cale demanded.

The knight quickly bowed and looked away.

Observing this, the vice-captain let out a fake cough. “Ahem!” He continued confidently and with excessive cheer, going above and beyond to defend Cale. “Lord Cale is drinking because his day turns out better if he drinks in the morning. That’s the only reason. Furthermore, it’s merely a little hair of the dog. Lord Cale isn’t behaving like a lout in that regard, I assure you! Rather, he’s ambitiously pursuing a true end to his hangover.”

Cale stared at the vice-captain, disgruntled, before taking another swig. He couldn’t tell whether the man was mocking him or coming up with excuses for him.

“I see. What an interesting person,” the visiting knight responded with admiration, bowing respectfully to Cale.

That should make them less suspicious of us, I guess.

Judging by the knight's reaction, Cale's retinue was in the clear. The dragon *did* happen to disappear while they were here, and they *were* leaving the morning after, but there were no solid reasons to suspect them.

Benion's subordinates who remained in the area would focus on the attackers' six-starred outfits. Those seemed to implicate a particular organization, as did the tracks leading west. Most importantly, they'd never think someone called a "lout," like Cale, could infiltrate the cave.

"Well, I wish you a safe journey as you continue on today," the villa knight concluded.

Without the marquess, Benion, or even the viscount backing him up, the knight couldn't possibly keep a count's eldest son from leaving. Especially not when he was heading to the capital on the royal family's orders.

And who would picture a count's son, drinking on his way to a royal summons, as a run-of-the-mill thief? It really was good to be a lout. Satisfied, Cale continued to drink. *I'm sure Benion won't suspect us even after learning what happened.*

Benion and Marquess Sten probably knew better than anyone that there was absolutely no relationship between Count Henituse and the secret organization, especially when it came to the dragon.

Cale watched the knight leave the inn, then drank the honey-lemon tea Ron put before him. "Hey, Ron."

"Yes, young master?"

"Honey tea really is the best hangover cure."

"It is, isn't it?" As Ron looked at him with a satisfied smile, Cale glanced away and tried to calm his stomach.

Once the count's son no longer felt hungover, the convoy resumed its travels. Their next destination would be Perthle, a transportation hub for goods in the east. The stone towers throughout the city were quite famous.

Cale's goal was to find Perthle's unfinished stone tower.

"Are we camping today?" Ohn asked, chewing some jerky.

Cale nodded. “Yes. Starting tonight, we’ll camp outside every so often.”

He’d put them back on a pretty tight schedule, since he wanted to have time to spare in Perthle. Turning away from the kittens, who were whispering to each other, he looked out the carriage window.

The Energy of the Heart.

That Ancient Power could strengthen the Indestructible Shield. It was focused on regeneration and life force.

That’s why Marquess Sten’s eldest son went looking for it.

Taylor Sten—the eldest son Marquess Sten had discarded—was the only decent person in the marquess’s family. Due to a malicious act by Benion, Taylor was injured and paralyzed from the waist down. Taylor had scoured all sorts of texts to find a power that would cure him. In the process, he happened to find an ancient volume in an old bookstore.

It was difficult, but after much effort, he deciphered a few words: “regeneration” and “stone tower.”

Those words embedded themselves into Taylor’s brain, and he headed straight to Perthle—also known as the City of Stone Towers. He was probably there even at this very moment. A month from now, he would find the Energy of the Heart.

But that’ll be a waste of time.

The Energy of the Heart couldn’t heal an already injured body, only injuries inflicted after one claimed the Ancient Power. Furthermore, there were limits and costs associated with its regeneration power.

Having learned the truth, Taylor fell into despair. His time was running out, since he didn’t know when Benion would come to kill him. That Ancient Power had been his last hope.

In the end, Taylor died a month after finding that power.

An unknown party assassinated Taylor while the capital was in chaos after the terrorist attack. Benion had ordered the assassination, of course.

The reason Cale remembered Taylor, a side character whose role seemed even less significant than the original Cale’s

in *Birth of a Hero*, was the strong bond and loyalty of his friend—the crazy priestess. She was the only bystander who survived Taylor's assassination. During that event, she killed half the assassins in anger, suffering a serious back injury in the process. She boldly told the temple at which she served what she'd done, and the temple ultimately excommunicated her for murder.

"I acted out of human loyalty and duty rather than following the will of the god. I believe that was the right thing to do," she'd said, then added, *"I am now free!"*

After that, people began calling her the "crazy priestess." Her specialty was using the God of Death's strength to summon curses. Although the temple had excommunicated her, her god did not abandon her. When war broke out in the novels, she became renowned as a generous, righteous soldier, despite not being a hero.

I think it'll be different this time, Cale thought.

There was a good chance Taylor wouldn't die in a month. Now that the dragon had been freed, Benion would be busy doing damage control and sucking up to the marquess. To maintain his now-shaky status as the heir, he'd probably need to focus on his younger siblings rather than his elder brother.

Since I'm taking Taylor's last hope away, I'll need to give him a new one.

Cale wasn't such a bad guy that he'd claim someone's sole lifeline for himself, regardless of Taylor's inability to *use* the Energy of the Heart. He was suddenly curious to know what Taylor and the crazy priestess could achieve if they survived longer. He suspected the two could alter the circumstances within the marquess's estate, which would be better for him in the long run.

He stiffened as something dawned on him. *The novel said even Vicross struggled under the crazy priestess's curse, right?*

Recalling what was in the books about torture expert Vicross's interactions with the crazy priestess, Cale quickly erased her from his mind. He also dismissed noble Taylor, who was known for being good-natured, easygoing, and compassionate toward his territory's citizens.

They won't mesh well with me.

The pair were completely different from Cale, since they were kind, loyal, and trusting of each other. Cale preferred Ron or Vicross.

Wait, no! How could I even have such a terrifying thought?! Cale rapidly erased the thought of Ron and Vicross as well.

Tap. Tap. Feeling something tap his thigh, he looked down.

The kittens spoke with shining golden eyes.

"We heard something from Hans earlier."

"Hans said..."

Hans still didn't know that the kittens were from the Cat Tribe, so he said all sorts of things in front of them. The kittens seemed to want to tell Cale something he'd mentioned.

"What?"

Ohn and Hong had apparently gotten used to Cale's blunt way of speaking. Without skipping a beat, they continued.

"He said if you make a wish at a stone tower, it'll come true."

"He said the stone towers were pretty."

"I want to go, but it's okay if it'd be a bother."

"We wanna go together! But yeah, it's fine if we can't."

Cale stared blankly at the mumbling kittens, then asked, "What do you want to wish for?"

Hong shook his red fur, which was now healthy and shiny thanks to excellent care, and shouted in excitement. "For everybody, including my new little broth—"

"Rejected."

Cale immediately turned away and tuned them out. At the same time, the carriage stopped moving. They'd arrived at their campsite for the evening.

"I take it we're camping again starting today," Hans noted.

"Indeed we are," Cale said.

The count's son scanned their campsite. The wind from the forest blew past him, and he spent that night with peace of

mind.

***

“Lord Cale!”

“What’s this?”

The next morning, Cale stared vacantly at a dead deer that had been dropped off at the edge of their campsite. It was a recent kill.

“Someone left it here,” Hans reported. He then pointed at a patch of earth beside the deer.

Cale was looking at the same spot. A fork and spoon had been drawn in the dirt, as if someone had left them the deer to eat.

An odd thought crossed his mind, and he glanced backward. The kitten siblings in Choi Han’s arms, as well as Choi Han himself, smiled at him.

“I have a bad feeling about this…” he muttered. Indeed, he had a sinking feeling about it *all.*

An individual who could communicate, but not write, had left them the deer. Choi Han had been on watch last night, so he’d clearly known the visitor was there but pretended not to see.

It had to be the dragon.

Looking back at Choi Han and the kittens, who were still staring at him, Cale said seriously, “We’re going to pretend we don’t know.”

“Meeeow.”

“Meeow.”

He felt as though the siblings were mocking him, but he acted like he didn’t notice.

New “meals” were delivered every time they camped out: wild boar, rabbits, all sorts of fruits. Now Cale was sure that the dragon was following him. He arrived at Perthle with that certainty in mind.

***

The Henituses' golden turtle carriage glided right through Perthle's gates, traveling to an inn as guided by Hans.

"It's smaller than Weston," said Ohn.

Hong agreed. "You're right. It's not very big."

Nodding at the kittens' words, Cale peeked out the carriage window. *He won't follow me into the city, will he?*

According to Choi Han, the black dragon was pursuing them from a distance. He dropped food off at their campsite early in the morning, then ran away.

"Isn't he cute? I guess the dragon hasn't lost his innocence, even after such a terrible life," Choi Han said with a bemused expression. "I think it's adorable."

Oh, please. Cale wasn't taking this lightly. If Choi Han had seen that dragon blow a mountain away, the guy wouldn't use words like "cute" to describe him.

Why was the dragon doing this, despite claiming to hate humans? That weighed on Cale's mind. This wasn't the way he'd expected things to go. The dragon was still young, so Cale assumed he would steer clear of the marquess's territory, build his own lair, and hone his strength. Frankly, Cale had been hoping the dragon would grow stronger and preemptively obliterate the marquess, who planned to ruin the kingdom, before war broke out. That would secure peace in Henituse territory.

Cale clicked his tongue. The kittens, who'd been gazing out the carriage window, flinched. They turned toward him, curious about something now that they'd caught a glimpse of Perthle.

"Each house has a stack of rocks."

"It's weird."

"That's because this is a city of stone towers," Cale replied indifferently.

Perthle's many stone towers made it a famous historic site. The small towers stacked at each home were famous too. Well, it was a bit of a stretch to call these *towers*, since they were cairns consisting of less than ten stones each. Still, citizens stacked stones on the ledges outside their windows. Each cairn's shape depended on the homeowner's personality.

It was only natural that the luxurious inn that Cale's entourage had reached also had a stone tower. As they followed the innkeeper, Hans gripped the kittens in his arms with an ecstatic look on his face.

"We're staying here?" Cale asked.

Hans hurriedly replied, "Yes, my lord. We've reserved two days for Mr. Choi Han, and we've agreed to pay for the rest of the group later, depending on how long we end up staying."

At Hans's words, Ron hesitated for a moment, then quickly followed behind them, holding the magic box.

"The room wasn't that expensive," Hans went on. "Perhaps it's because we arrived right before the Stone Tower Festival." Perthle was busy preparing for the festival next week.

"The towers are interesting, since it's not like there are a lot of stones here," Cale mused. "How odd."

"I know the reason for that."

What? Cale glanced over at Hans, who'd picked up on his mumblings.

"A sad yet moral story has been passed down through the ages."

Cale really didn't care to hear it. "If it's gonna be long, you can stop right there."

Even after he said that, Hans continued, having determined that the story was adequately brief. The group entered Cale's room in no time, watching their escort leave as they listened to Hans.

"This story—I mean, this legend—is about something that happened in ancient times."

"Ancient times?" Cale echoed.

Click. The attendant closed the door, and only Cale's group was left in the room.

"Yes."

"Go on."

The kitten siblings in Hans's arms curled their tails in interest, peering up at him. Without saying a word, Ron silently poured a cup of lemonade from the bottle he carried along with the magic box and handed it to Cale. Taking hold of the lemonade, Cale sat on the couch and crossed his legs. He jerked his chin at Hans, urging the deputy butler to hurry up and speak.

"Ahem! They say that at some point, this city was abandoned by the gods."

Abandoned by the gods? Cale didn't know anything about that. "This is my first time hearing about it."

"That's because you haven't studied history, my lord."

"You seem to enjoy talking back to me these days. Are you going to keep doing that? Hm?"

The deputy butler pointedly averted his gaze. "I do not know why the gods abandoned Perthle. Apparently, that's when a few citizens began to painstakingly build stone towers together. It was an act of prayer in the hopes of having their wishes granted by the gods."

"So? Were their wishes granted?"

"No." The gods hadn't listened to Perthle's citizens. "They say *none* of their prayers were answered. Thus, modern Perthle doesn't have a single temple."

"So they figured, 'There's no reason to worship a god who abandoned me' or something?"

"Right! You're truly clever, Lord Cale. You don't need to study at all."

"Will you stop that nonsense?!" Cale snapped.

Hans glanced away from him to look through the window at a distant mountain. "Ahem! Anyway, Perthle had stone towers instead of temples. Thereafter, the stone towers came to represent a promise between the citizens—as well as the citizens' promise to themselves."

“What kind of promise was it?”

Hans explained the odd rule Perthle followed: “When a person’s wish is granted, they destroy their stone tower.”

Cale smiled. “What an interesting place.”

“It is, isn’t it? Abandoned by their gods, they ultimately had to achieve their desires through their own power. In short, destroying a stone tower represents overcoming the odds.”

Cale liked the tradition very much. “So I guess they don’t build stone towers to seek the gods’ help,” he said, recalling the numerous cairns at each house.

“No, they’re more a symbol of the citizens’ determination.” Even if a citizen never got to destroy their stone tower, it held significance.

“And in the end, I guess the gods didn’t grant their wishes?”

“No—you’re right,” agreed Hans. “Although it’s sad that the gods abandoned Perthle’s residents, that story is also about tremendous hope.”

“Bend your head down,” Cale abruptly ordered.

“Excuse me?!” Hans replied, baffled.

Cale pointed at the deputy butler’s chest. “The kittens look angry.”

“What? Oh!” Hans glanced down and gasped, eyes widening. The kittens were baring their teeth in anger, their golden eyes flashing. “Oh my. Why are you so angry, kittens? Shall I bring more jerky?”

The deputy butler beamed as he lowered the kittens from his chest. He still knew nothing about their origins; he just assumed they were mad because they were hungry. The kittens weren’t annoyed because of that, though. Cale recalled what they’d told him:

“We heard something from Hans earlier.”

“Hans said…”

“He said if you make a wish at a stone tower, it’ll come true.”

“He said the stone towers were pretty.”

Tap. Tap. The irate Ohn batted the floor with her front paw, while Hong's tail smacked the floor ceaselessly. They were all but demanding to know why Hans had misled them about the stone towers.

Hans misinterpreted their behavior. "Oh my—our poor, precious kittens! I'll go get them some delicious snacks. Lord Cale, may I go and come back?"

"You can just stay out and *not* come back."

"I'll be quick!"

Despite saying he'd hurry, Hans diligently ensured the things he'd brought Cale were neatly organized—and only then did he run like the wind.

"Ron, you can go rest as well," Cale said.

The old servant, who still stood in the room, smiled graciously at him.

What an ominous feeling. Cale really hated that old man's smile; when Ron smiled, he seemed less stable.

Ron approached the couch Cale sat on. "Will Mr. Choi Han be leaving us in two days?"

"Yeah." Then Cale had a thought, and he smirked. "Why? You don't want him to leave? Or do you want to go with him, Ron?"

Ron's smile widened. "How could I go elsewhere, young master? I prefer staying with you."

That gave Cale chills.

"I just thought it would be good if Mr. Choi Han came to the capital with us, so I'm a bit disappointed that he won't," Ron continued. "I'll need to speak with him as much as possible before he leaves. Vicross will be truly dismayed to see him go."

Once Cale heard the rest, his expression brightened. He hadn't really been paying attention because it was too much of a hassle, but some sort of friendship had seemingly developed between Ron, Vicross, and Choi Han. Even if Choi Han generally had an acerbic tone when he talked to them, he wouldn't have even bothered with the pair if he truly disliked them.

Thinking about his plan, Cale smiled mischievously. “Well, you three can see each other again at the capital, since you’ll be traveling together.”

That’s how you three will leave this kingdom for Rosalyn’s. What do you think? Wonderful, right? Cale didn’t say that part aloud, just wore his sly grin.

Smiling even more benevolently, Ron responded, “I look forward to us all spending time with Mr. Choi Han in the capital. This old man’s wish is that everyone will reach the city safely.”

Cale didn’t believe a word Ron said. The old servant lacked the emotional capacity to “look forward” to anything, let alone express something as tender as “this old man’s wish.”

As if thinking along the same lines, the kittens snorted at Ron. Ohn and Hong found it annoying that behind Cale’s back, Ron kept trying to teach them basic assassination skills they already knew.

“You can leave now,” Cale excused Ron, who kept his fake smile plastered on.

After he left, the kitten siblings finally vented their anger.

“Hans is a liar!”

“I trusted that butler!”

Cale ignored them, looking out the window.

The Energy of the Heart was said to be located in the Stone Tower Ruins, an unfinished tower in a cave on Perthle’s outskirts. Within that cave was supposedly a small house where an ancient being had left the Energy of the Heart after dying naturally from old age. That ancient man had considered his power a curse.

Didn’t the books say he lived to a hundred and fifty?

Cale rose from his seat, fixed his clothes a bit, and opened the door. Hans, of all people, happened to be right outside.

“Oh my!”

Upon seeing the deputy butler, who’d run back with his arms full of jerky, Cale told him, “Let’s go see the stone towers.”

The kittens’ ears perked up. Cale suppressed a smirk as the pair ran after him as though they’d never been angry.

Deciding who would come with him, he told Hans, “It’ll just be us and Choi Han. Oh, bring Ohn and Hong too.”

The human who’d died at a hundred and fifty, and left behind the Energy of the Heart, had wanted to finish a stone tower in a cave where wind gathered.

Last time, it was a tree. Now it’s wind?

The old man had spent over a century struggling to build the tower in the center of a rough, thrashing vortex generated by winds from all four corners of the world. In the end, he failed. The stone tower was always destroyed before he could complete it. He’d repeated the process over and over until, one day, he died with the tower roughly half restacked.

What exactly had that old man’s wish been?

Cale didn’t really care. For now, he just planned to closely - observe a few things while they were out looking at the ruins. His first priority was the stone towers themselves. *If I’m going to build one, I might as well make it look good.*

His second priority was a couple of specific people. He needed to scope them out in advance, just in case.

***

A little while later, Cale, the kittens, Choi Han, and Hans - arrived at the edge of the Stone Tower Ruins. They hadn’t taken their carriage, so Cale wore a hat, claiming he didn’t like sunlight.

He located the people he was looking for at the entrance of the ruins, achieving one of his goals. *Just as I expected, they’re still here.*

Cale slipped behind Choi Han and Hans.

A casually dressed man and woman were a short distance away. The man sat in a wheelchair, which the woman pushed. They were coming out of the entrance to the ruins, which was also the only exit. Not noticing Cale’s discreet stare, they began to leave.

The man turned his head back toward the woman. “What made you want to come here of all places today?”

“I don’t know whether it’s a message from my god or just complete bullcrap, but I’ve been having the same dream for a couple days now,” she replied. “It was making me uneasy, so I felt like I needed to come here. According to my dream, if we visited the ruins, our future benefactor would show up. The dream said something about how even my god didn’t know how the benefactor would act, beyond the fact that they’d visit today.”

“There’s someone even a god can’t predict?”

“Who knows? Half the things my god says are complete bull,” the woman vented. She had short brown hair, and her face was full of annoyance.

“How can you say that? It’s the word of a *god*. And weren’t you keeping it secret that you hear messages from your god?” The man replying to her was Marquess Sten’s eldest son, Taylor Sten.

“It’s not like there are any priests in Perthle. Who cares about divine messages? Does my god feed us? Besides, how could people like us have a benefactor? That’s absolutely ludicrous. I’m hungry—let’s go eat.”

The annoyed woman was Taylor’s close friend, Kage, the same woman people would eventually call the “crazy priestess.”

Taylor’s expression turned dead serious. “Kage, I’m suddenly hell-bent on drinking beer.”

“All right. I’m craving smoked pork.”

They looked at each other with solemn faces, then burst out laughing.

“That’ll be a wonderful combination,” Taylor told Kage. He pointed forward. “Let’s go. Push! It’ll be my treat!”

“Oh, wow. Your treat?! This humble priestess will escort you there in a jiffy.”

They chuckled as they moved away.

Cale was too far off to hear their conversation. Still, he committed to memory the faces of the pair who could still laugh in the midst of terrible circumstances.

Now I know what they look like.

Since they didn't know who he was, Cale just had to make sure he avoided running into them. He planned to anonymously provide those two with a new kind of hope. Doing something for others on the sly was something he'd picked up from the dragon.

They shouldn't recognize me unless that god has nothing better to do than reveal my identity.

It would be impossible for Taylor and Kage to learn his identity. What a convenient plan! He should have done everything anonymously from the beginning. Cale stepped into the ruins feeling cheerful, like a massive weight had been lifted off his chest. He saw people praying all around the area.

At that moment, Hans stealthily approached him and whispered, "I just saw Lord Sten's eldest son."

"How do you know about him?" Cale was truly surprised.

Hans smiled and pointed to his eyes. "Pretty much any and all information about the offspring of the nobility is inside my head. I noticed a man in a wheelchair, and it seemed odd that only one person was with him. Then I picked out a red snake crest on the wheelchair, and that was when I knew for sure."

"Hans."

"Yes, sir?"

"You're a lot more competent than you look."

"I *am* rather competent." Hans rolled his shoulders back with a satisfied smile as he finished his report, then asked Cale, "What do you plan on doing?"

The left side of Cale's face was growing hot. He glanced over to see Choi Han staring at him, emanating ferocity.

Cale shook his head. "Ignore them," he told both men.

Hans and Choi Han nodded without another word.

At that point, their tour of the Stone Tower Ruins officially began. Cale was shocked at the ruins' sheer scale.

"How astonishing," he said with an austere expression. "There's *tons* of eyesores."

He didn't appreciate this ancient approach to beauty. He'd expected mountainous stone pyramids. Instead, the ruins were

full of random heaps of rocks.

I guess you could say they look interesting. They definitely weren't *beautiful*. Cale peeked to the side at the kittens in Hans's arms; they seemed extremely disappointed.

Someone else seemed more serious than Cale had expected, however. Like the other visitors, Choi Han had his head bowed. He seemed to be praying as well.

I'm sure he's praying to return to Korea.

Choi Han had grown up in a happy family, which made him different from Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu. It was thanks to the positive influences from his youth that he could survive at all costs—however disastrous the situation—and remain a good person.

Cale stared at Choi Han. The young man lifted his head, and their eyes met. "Mr. Cale?"

"What?"

"I have a question for you. And something to report."

Cale shivered. "Why don't you ask your question first?"

Choi Han appeared to be mulling something over. He looked at the stone towers scattered across the wide plain, then said, "Aren't you going to make a wish?"

That's what he wanted to ask?

"I don't do things like make wishes," Cale answered casually.

"Why not?"

"They give you expectations."

Choi Han, Hans, and even the kittens turned to peer at Cale.

Cale looked vacantly at the stone towers, as Choi Han had. "It's freeing to live without any expectations."

It felt great if you scratched a lottery ticket hoping for a hundred won and ended up winning five hundred. But if you scratched it hoping to win the jackpot, and only ended up with five hundred won, you were bound to get annoyed and lament that life treated you poorly.

Tap. Feeling a touch on his shoulder, Cale turned his head to see Hans smiling at him.

"I see you're well aware there's no such thing as hopes or dreams in this world, Lord Cale!"

"Just keep sightseeing," Cale snapped.

"Yes, sir!" Hans said. Looking a bit downtrodden, he took the lead along with the kittens.

Choi Han had yet to give his report. He approached Cale while the redhead sauntered leisurely behind Hans. "The dragon's entered the ruins," he whispered, quiet enough so Hans couldn't hear.

"Ignore him."

"All right."

For no apparent reason, Cale looked around. The dragon must've made himself invisible, since Cale couldn't see him. All he could see was people praying before the stone towers. The Stone Tower Festival was a week away, but the ruins were busy.

Cale turned his gaze away from the plain of stone towers, toward the upscale neighborhood where Perthle's wealthiest citizens resided. Beyond that area was a small mountain, and somewhere on that mountain was the grave of the man who'd died of old age at a hundred and fifty.

***

The next day, Cale was ready to head to the old man's grave. Naturally, he needed to get rid of the humans and kittens who wanted to follow him. To shut down any protests, he had to select a sole companion no one would object to.

"I'll only be taking Choi Han with me," he declared.

Once he'd appointed Choi Han—the strongest, most rigid person there—as his guard, neither the vice-captain nor Hans could say anything.

The vice-captain just furrowed his brow and said that he needed to train his knights, whom he then began to harangue.

As Cale watched, the vice-captain sent the stunned knights to the drill hall immediately.

Hans just said one thing before disappearing: “I’ll take care of our kittens.” He seemed very excited about spending time with the pair.

Turning away, Cale left the inn. Choi Han followed him. “We’re doing something again today?”

“‘Again’? You make it sound like I cause some sort of chaos - every day.”

Choi Han didn’t respond, but Cale couldn’t have cared less about his silence. He headed to the mountain beyond the wealthy neighborhood, adding, “I have to visit that mountain over there. You just need to wait for me at the base.”

“I understand.”

Choi Han said nothing more, which Cale found comforting. The young man didn’t try to elicit answers from him. He followed Cale but expressed no curiosity. Choi Han’s attitude was probably only feasible because he thought he could figure Cale out if he really wanted to, and because he doubted he’d be in danger, no matter what Cale wound up doing.

Passing through a stereotypical upper-crust neighborhood, Cale reached the small mountain. He stopped after hearing Choi Han call out to him.

“Mr. Cale.”

“What?”

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

“I know. I’m the one who told you to.”

Choi Han locked eyes with Cale, who stood restlessly at the base of the mountain. Cale had said that Choi Han was capable of guarding him alone. Staring at the count’s son, Choi Han was reminded of something he’d thought about constantly these last few days—the ability to *protect*. That ability had completely occupied his mind.

“I’ve been debating for a while whether to broach this subject before I left,” he said to Cale, “but I need to tell you something.”

The dragon wasn't what Choi Han had actually wanted to report the day before. He hesitated for a moment, then faced Cale and spoke, gazing past his shoulder toward a tree near the foot of the mountain.

"Mr. Ron is dangerous."

For a moment, Cale was bewildered by this comment, which had come out of nowhere. Should he admit to knowing or pretend not to?

Unexpected as it was, Cale quickly made his mind up and said in a measured tone, "Is that so?"

"You aren't surprised? There's a fearsome stench of blood coming off him. He's a strong fighter who has shed a *lot* of blood. At first, I thought you knew already and just allowed Mr. Ron to attend you regardless."

Choi Han assumed that if Cale *had* known, he would've brought Ron to rescue the dragon. He hadn't, which could only mean Cale either didn't realize Ron's strength or didn't trust Ron. Surely the count's son trusted someone who'd served him for thirteen years. Thus, Choi Han concluded that Cale was unaware of Ron's strength.

"Neither you nor anybody else seemed to notice," Choi Han said.

He'd vacillated for a while about bringing this up. In truth, after Cale's statement the day before that he avoided "expectations," Choi Han had decided not to say anything about Ron. However, being chosen as guard today had made him feel guilty.

"That's why I thought I needed to tell you, Mr. Cale," he concluded.

"Really? I didn't know Ron was that strong."

Hearing that calm response, Choi Han asked, "Will you keep him around? He has a dark energy."

Cale snorted. Keep Ron around? He planned to foist the old man off on Choi Han the moment they reached the capital.

"Same could be said for both of you," he muttered.

"Pardon?"

“You say Ron is dangerous, so why leave him be?”

“Obviously because—” Choi Han stopped short, unable to continue.

“Because he hasn’t done anything to you, probably?”

Choi Han couldn’t rebut Cale’s words. His initial misunderstanding with Ron had led to a small scuffle, but after that, Ron had helped him find a sword and even taken care of the arrangements for Harris.

Cale observed the speechless Choi Han. It wasn’t just him—Ron didn’t bother *anybody*, beyond giving Cale lemonade every so often or making fun of his dislike of rabbit meat. That was the worst of it.

“Ron’s been my servant for thirteen years.”

The bottom line was that Ron was dedicated to his duties. Even the vice-captain, who cared a lot about hierarchy, wasn’t perturbed when Ron—a servant—confidently walked side by side with Cale. Nor did Hans get mad if Ron did the deputy butler’s tasks for him. That was because Ron was skilled and sacrificed a great deal for the count’s estate.

“Do you hate Ron?”

After a moment’s contemplation, Choi Han shook his head. “No.”

“Then…?”

“I’m just reporting this because I thought it’d be best if you knew he was dangerous.”

“Well, that goes for both you and Ron.”

When Cale brought up this point again, Choi Han stared at him.

“To me, you’re the same in that regard,” Cale explained with a poker face. “You’re pretty strong yourself—which means *you’re* dangerous too.”

Choi Han gasped.

Not knowing the reason behind his reaction, Cale added, “It’s all the same to me.”

Cale wasn't sure why Ron, who hailed from the Eastern Continent, lived in Henituse territory and concealed his identity. But if someone like that harmed the count's son, the kingdom would be in an uproar. Ron didn't have a shred of compassion for others; he cared solely for his son and himself. Why would someone like that cause a ruckus? Cale was only wary of Ron because the old servant was dangerous. He did want to get rid of Ron as soon as possible, but it was merely for his peace of mind.

"As long as he's my servant, he's *just* my servant. Just like you're Choi Han, my debtor."

Cale checked his watch. The strength of the cave winds varied with the time of day, so he needed to hurry.

"You don't have anything else to say, do you? I'm going. Don't follow me."

Choi Han nodded, and Cale didn't even look back as he headed for the small mountain. Once he was out of sight, Choi Han again looked at the tree at the foot of the mountain, which he'd glanced at from time to time since he started speaking to Cale.

"I'm sure you heard," he said.

Ron hopped out of the tree, smirking—but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"I've wiped his snot and raised him since he was young," he said bluntly. He was right, so there was no need to explain further.

Standing in front of the path Cale had taken up the mountain, Choi Han told Ron, "Mr. Cale said nobody is to follow him."

"I know, you little punk." Ron turned his back on the mountain with no hesitation, muttering, "I shouldn't have come."

Upon hearing that Cale was coming here with Choi Han alone, leaving even the kittens behind, Ron had uncharacteristically followed out of his own fickle desire. They said that you got fickler with age, and Ron found the tendency quite annoying. He walked back to the inn much more slowly

than he'd left. Choi Han watched him disappear before sitting on a nearby boulder to await Cale's return.

***

Cale stood in front of a cave just off the mountain path, near a hill. Vines covered the cave entrance; it would be difficult to find unless you looked carefully.

"Darn it." He sighed, brow wrinkling.

The cave mouth was tiny. He looked down at the clothes he'd worn. They were on the simpler side but elaborate enough to be cumbersome.

He heaved another long sigh before crawling into the cave. Between the man-eating tree's meaty goddess and this cave's hundred-and-fifty-year-old man, Cale was convinced that everyone related to the Ancient Powers had been out of their mind. As he crept through the cave, he left a trail in the earth. Moments later, tiny reptile footprints dotted his trail.

About five minutes in, the tunnel widened.

Taylor really must've been desperate, he reflected. *He crawled all the way in here, even with his lower body paralyzed.*

You had to stack the stone tower with your own strength to obtain the Energy of the Heart, so the marquess's eldest son had to come here in person. The cave that took Cale five minutes to crawl through would probably have taken Taylor much, much longer.

Once the cave was large enough, Cale stood back up and started walking. The deeper he went, the clearer the noise in his ears became.

Fsssssssssh. Fsssssssssh.

It was the sound of the wind. As he walked, winds blowing in opposing directions became louder and louder. Soon, he located a plot and pillar that had probably been a mud hut a long time ago. After a single look at them, he proceeded farther inside.

Fsssssssssh. The sound of the wind became even stronger.

Bang! Bang! Gale after gale rammed the cave wall like giant fists.

Cale walked more quickly. *I wonder if the wind will sound like this when I get the "Sound of the Wind" Ancient Power later.*

His plan of action was to obtain the Unbreakable Shield first, the Energy of the Heart next, and the Sound of the Wind after that. Thinking about the next Ancient Power he sought to obtain, Cale finally stopped walking, but not by choice—he was *forced* to.

"Wow."

This was even worse than he'd expected. He now stood before a large underground chamber, and the vicious tornado within it filled his entire field of vision.

Bam! Bam!

The tornado was slowly crumbling the stone cave walls. Fallen rocks had created a large heap on the floor, which told Cale this chamber was growing ever larger. He looked back and forth between the enormous cavern a single step away and the tunnel he'd come through to get there. He suspected that if he tried to go into the chamber, the wind would push him back. Well, not just push him back—more like smash him against the wall and probably cause him grave injuries. The wind was just that strong.

"Hm."

The center of the tornado would be calm, since it was the eye of the storm.

I guess this would be impossible for Taylor without Kage's help. He now understood why the novel said the pair had struggled for a whole week.

The corners of Cale's mouth quirked up. This would be a battle against time. He stepped into the cavern's vicious tornado without hesitation, his clothes and red hair whipping in the wind.

Right then, the dragon appeared in the tunnel behind him. "N-no! You'll get hurt! You're extremely weak!" he shouted.

At the same time, the dragon saw a giant, silver-winged shield appear and protect Cale.

“Huh…?”

The silver wings extending from the shield shone so brightly, they seemed almost holy. They encircled Cale’s body, guarding him, while the large shield blocked the wind to keep him safe.

Cale turned around. When his gaze landed on the frozen dragon, his eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

The black dragon didn’t respond. Instead, he slowly retreated into the tunnel. As Cale watched in disbelief, the dragon’s quiet voice rose above the wind and reached his ears.

“I was just passing by…”

“Tch.”

The dragon’s back twitched when he heard Cale click his tongue. But Cale didn’t have time to pay attention to the creature. The cave winds followed a cycle, with three hours of strong gusts followed by three hours of lighter breezes. This was when the tornado would weaken—though the gusts would still be strong closer to the center.

Fsssssssssh.

“Pretty scary,” Cale admitted.

These winds seemed too powerful to be considered part of the weak phase. Still, the novel had mentioned that the hundred-and-fifty-year-old man had walked through these powerful winds to reach the stone tower.

Cale focused back on the center of the chamber, where the air was still. A half-stacked stone tower stood there, and lots more stones lay around it.

I need to stack all of those.

Stacking the stones wouldn’t be a problem; the issue was getting to the tower. Cale peered at the shield protecting his path forward, and at the wings encircling him, then took a step.

Bang! Bang! The gusts striking the silver shield sounded like they were hitting real metal, though the shield was nearly transparent. The black dragon, who sat on the tunnel path with his back toward Cale, peeked over at the noise.

“But you’re weak…” he mumbled.

The dragon saw that Cale was taking one step at a time even though the shield and its wings protected him. The wind the shield couldn't block ruffled his clothes, and the gusts that seeped past the shield's lower edge stopped him every so often. Nevertheless, Cale trudged forward one step at a time.

Then the dragon saw it: Cale was smiling.

This human who was nothing compared to the strong tornado, the human even weaker than the kittens who accompanied him, the human who was the weakest of *everybody* he traveled with, was smiling as he pushed through the wind.

The dragon had never seen such a silver shield or wings before. He looked at his own wings. They were very different from the shield's. The shield was extremely beautiful, and the dragon was curious about what its powers might be.

Rather than focusing on the magnificent holy shield and wings, however, the dragon then turned his full attention on Cale, whose smile never abated.

It's doable, Cale thought. *It's comfortable.*

Walking was a bit difficult and slow due to the wind, but it was actually quite feasible. Ron had almost killed Vicross teaching him his sword art; compared to that, Cale was hardly exerting himself to gain power. This cemented his belief that the best way to obtain something really was to take the easy route.

Using the Unbreakable Shield didn't cause physical or mental strain. If it broke, *that* would cause a brief strain, but he wasn't in danger of it breaking right now.

It's just being blown backward.

The mere force of the wind wasn't liable to damage the shield. In truth, Cale had visited the cave today expecting to be ceaselessly pushed backward. That was why he'd enlarged the shield and reduced its strength as much as possible. He'd planned to gradually shrink the shield whenever the winds pushed him back. As it turned out, the shield worked better than Cale expected. That made him a bit uneasy.

Roughly halfway to the eye of the storm, he had to clear his mind. The novel had said he'd hear a voice at that point—the

calm voice of an old man. He awaited the voice; once he heard it, the tornado was supposed to get stronger.

“I regret it.”

Cale heard the voice at last, but its tone was a bit odd.

“*Boohoo*… I regret it.”

The old man sounded miserable, his words coming in fits and starts between his sobs.

Cale clicked his tongue. None of these ancient powers were normal. Why had Taylor thought the old man’s voice was *calm*? Cale couldn’t make heads or tails of his reasoning. Cale ceased his tongue-clicking and briefly stood still.

“You have a power I am familiar with. My hope is that you do not gain *this* power.”

“Hm?”

“You have a power I am familiar with”…? That caught Cale’s attention. At the same time, the wind grew stronger, sweeping through the underground cave.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Gusts blew even more fiercely against the transparent shield, and Cale’s vivid red hair was again tossed about by the wind. The look of concern on his face had nothing to do with the wind, however.

Is he talking about the Unbreakable Shield?

That was the only thing Cale could connect to the old man’s mention of a power. In the novel, though, the old man hadn’t said anything like that to Taylor.

Does that mean he knows this Ancient Power and the Unbreakable Shield’s original owner?

Thoughts flew across Cale’s mind, but for the moment, he continued forward. The wind was now past the point of just buffeting the shield.

“I betrayed my comrades, all in all! I’m a terrible man! *Boohoo*… I alone survived and grew old. How shameful am I?!”

The wind was so intense, Cale only heard the old man’s voice every so often. It was difficult to walk forward, even one

step at a time.

“I always wished everyone would come back to life. But I couldn’t realize that wish—only lament and cry! That’s why I couldn’t complete my stone tower either.”

“Man, you’re so loud.”

The crybaby’s laments irritated Cale. Forget “calm”—this was more like a death wail. Cale hated that type. The bread critic had been way better than this morose geezer.

At that moment, the wind shoved him back a little. He tightened his core, channeling strength to his legs. Taking another step forward, he heard the voice again.

“This regenerative power was useless. I could only protect myself, not help in any other way. I am vermin!”

The old man’s cries rang through Cale’s mind, but he ignored them. The power to protect himself was what was most important to him. Who cared if it made him vermin? That didn’t matter as long as he could survive.

Just five more steps. The eye of the storm was right in front of him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of the wind—which had been beating lightly against the shield—became louder, as if someone were punching the shield.

It might break.

Cale was worried the winds could damage the shield at this point. They’d merely pushed him back until now, but it seemed that walking ahead would grow more hazardous. As he realized that the winds now might actually wound him, something else also occurred to him.

“Even when the winds slashed me like sharp blades, I didn’t die!”

All the Ancient Powers’ former owners were extremely chatty.

Cale hunched over, shrinking the Unbreakable Shield. *Thoom. Thoom.* The shield was smaller but much more durable. It

could now withstand even more powerful winds. He grasped the shield's handle as he pressed onward.

One step.

"Regeneration is a cursed power!"

Two steps.

"My heart was always racing. Yet I couldn't run away."

Three steps.

"I was afraid of death."

Four steps.

"I was afraid of pain because I was always injured. But I was even more afraid of the death that would come once the pain was over."

Cale took the fifth and final step.

Shaaaaa…

A sound akin to falling rain hit Cale's ears as he entered the eye of the storm. The whipping gales outside this quiet center were still audible, though—and Cale heard the old man's voice along with them.

"I threw everything else away so I could live."

After that, the crybaby lapsed into silence.

Who cares about anything else? Living comes first. That old man sure had a lot of useless crap to say.

Cale clicked his tongue and returned the Unbreakable Shield to his heart. The silver light encircling him instantly disappeared.

He headed toward the half-finished stone tower and crouched in front of it. It was a stack of stones similar to one you might find on any mountaintop. The stones were piled rather carelessly, with no rhyme or reason. All the stones were black, just like the man-eating tree had been. These particular ancient stones differed from "normal" ones, as did the cavern's winds.

"Whatever."

Cale had thought about making the tower aesthetically pleasing, but he decided against it. That would be too much of a

hassle. He pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket, tugged them on, and began picking up stones to finish the tower.

Clack. Clack. Clack. He stacked stones atop the tower one at a time.

It didn't take long. Even Taylor had completed this part fairly easily. Kage—who hadn't entered the eye of the storm and instead waited at the edge of the cavern—had been worried out of her mind. But this central area, like the locations of all the Ancient Powers, only accepted the person hoping to accomplish the task.

"This is simple."

Cale picked up the last black stone and gently placed it atop the tower. At that moment…

Flash!

The black stones slowly turned white. At the same time, Cale stood and looked around. The winds were dying down.

"Huh?" the dragon blurted, confused.

Ignoring the creature, Cale waited until the winds let up. Then, crossing his arms, he listened to the crybaby's voice. He had no choice.

"I tried to fight those bastards. I didn't know I was so weak to pain. They didn't serve the gods—I only realized that after we went our separate ways, and I ended up alone."

That complaint caught Cale's attention. He recalled the words of the Unbreakable Shield's original owner: *"The people of the Dark Forest claimed to serve a god, yet they fed me only tasteless meals."*

He had a gut feeling he'd just learned something he shouldn't have, plus a strong hunch that he would have to keep what he'd heard to himself for the rest of his life.

Cale furrowed his brow deeper than ever, but the old man continued to speak. His voice was confined to Cale's mind, so the dragon fidgeted as he watched Cale stand there in silence.

"I stacked the stones hoping I could turn back time, hoping I could be happy. But then I destroyed the tower. I hated how selfish I was to think only about my own

happiness after I betrayed my companions, ran away, and got caught."

This old crybaby really is stifling.

Cale huffed a long, frustrated sigh and said, "It's human nature to be selfish."

The voice did not respond.

Is it over? Cale's face lit up; he figured the old man had finally finished.

However, the old man's voice resumed. **"*Boohoo*... My older sister said the same thing. She was really wonderful. More reliable than anybody else. *Boohoohoo*... My older sister... *Hic!*"**

The old man really was *the* biggest crybaby.

"How annoying."

Cale angrily tapped his foot. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* His impatient posture made him look quite thuggish.

After crying for some time, the old man seemed somehow grateful. **"You—the one with the familiar power. Your rude personality makes me think of my older brother. I must say I envy that brashness of yours."**

At long last, the old man said the words Cale had been waiting for. They were the same final words he'd said to Taylor.

"Destroy it. Then you'll *overcome* your limits."

Cale's lips lifted into a smile. Without hesitation, he kicked the stone tower over.

Bang. Crumble. Bang!

White stones flew into the ground and walls. The dragon watching Cale flinched and gaped at him as though he'd gone mad. The scene that followed, however, made the dragon gasp.

"Wow!"

White light shone upward from underneath the demolished stone tower.

Groooooooong.

Under his feet, Cale felt a gentle vibration pulsate through the cave. The white light beamed down on him, and his hand reached out to grab it. At that moment…

Flash!

The light shot toward his chest like an arrow, pierced his heart, and dispersed instantly.

“Phew.” Cale let out a deep breath, then peered beneath his shirt. A red heart had overlapped the ornate shield tattoo on his chest.

His body was immediately invigorated by the Ancient Power within. The Energy of the Heart would greatly strengthen the Unbreakable Shield. Even if he were injured, he’d recover much faster than a normal person would.

The shield was basically a superpower, but his new Ancient Power was similar to the human body’s natural strength. Still, its regenerative ability was so strong it had lasted until now as an Ancient Power he could obtain.

Cale brought forth the Unbreakable Shield.

“Just as I expected.” He grinned.

There was now a heart on the surface of the shield; the only difference between it and his tattoo was that it was silver, not red.

Dismissing the shield, Cale made a beeline for the dragon. It was looking at the ceiling, pretending like nothing happened.

“Hey.” Cale crouched and stared at the dragon. Then, as though it was a waste of time, he asked flatly, “Want to come with me?”

“You’re so weak, you need protection…but I don’t like humans,” the dragon answered. With that, he used his magic to vanish from Cale’s sight.

Cale snorted at the disappearing dragon. “Fickle punk.”

He was being fickle himself, asking that question after telling the others to ignore the dragon, but the dragon was just as bad. Still, he couldn’t just ignore the thing after he’d jumped out to try to save Cale earlier.

Cale swept a glance around the cavern. It no longer contained a raging maelstrom, only white stones here and there. Turning back, he headed out of the cave. To leave, of course, he had to crawl through the tunnel once again.

He emerged from the cave mouth and arranged vines over it, thoroughly covering the entrance and returning it to its original state. Before walking away, he turned back and spoke, his gaze directed toward a grassy area nearby.

“I see you standing on the grass.”

He could pick out four imprints, each representing one of the dragon’s paws. The imprints quickly disappeared; the dragon had taken flight.

Cale shook his head. *In the end, I guess my family’s grown.*

A deep sigh involuntarily escaped his lips. The invisible dragon would obviously continue to follow him. Why was the creature so foolhardy when he could use ancient magic like invisibility—and was himself a product of ancient magic? Cale had thought all dragons were intelligent, but it seemed that might not be the case.

Descending the mountain, Cale met the waiting Choi Han and noticed his bitter expression.

Choi Han looked Cale up and down before finally asking, “Did you roll around on the mountain?”

Damn it.

The wind had disheveled his hair, and his clothes were a mess after crawling through the rocky, dirty cave mouth.

“Yes. I rolled around,” Cale declared.

Choi Han looked at him with pity, but Cale ignored it.

That night, Cale told the kittens to deliver a message. It was a letter created with magic that made identifying the writer’s handwriting impossible.

“Make sure they don’t see you.”

The letter was Cale’s lifeline for the priestess Kage and the marquess’s eldest son, Taylor.

***

Late at night, in a small two-story house on the outskirts of Perthle, the first-floor windows glowed with light.

Taylor Sten—who resided in the house—wore a grave expression. “What’s going on?”

“Damn it. Ugh! Hold on.” Kage clutched her head in pain. “Don’t talk to me right now.”

Clang. The beer mug in her hand fell to the ground. Taylor and his three attendants approached her.

“What? Is your god telling you something again?” Taylor asked, watching Kage with concern.

The God of Death had begun speaking to the priestess at some point and continued to talk to her from time to time. Kage hid this fact from the temple, and only Taylor and his three subordinates knew about it.

“Augh. How annoying!”

After struggling for a while, Kage jumped up and sped toward the back door. She stumbled, still gripping her head, but her gaze remained fixed on the door.

Taylor held up his hand, telling his subordinates to stay back, as he wheeled after her.

Did someone break in?

His house was small, but magic alarms were set up throughout the residence; he was too paranoid to sleep without them. After a hitman destroyed both his knees in his own chamber at the marquess’s estate, there was nowhere he considered safe anymore.

“Kage, what’s wrong?”

“Hold on.”

Whunk! She threw open the back door. Outside, Taylor could only see an average backyard. It was tranquil and quaint, as always. A couple of lamps lit the garden, so it wasn’t terribly dark.

Kage disappeared into that small backyard, with Taylor trailing after her. She walked toward the property's boundary wall. Once she reached it, she exclaimed, "Ha!"

Atop the wall, which was just out of range of the alarms, five small stones were stacked on top of one another. The tower was just tall enough that the house's single knight would notice when he patrolled later.

"It was real. Damn, that's crazy."

As Kage cursed, Taylor stopped his wheelchair next to her. He looked with confusion at the stone tower just above his head. "What's that?"

In response, Kage read the message written in chalk next to the tower. "It says 'Destroy it if you want your wish granted.'"

Confusion and suspicion filled Taylor's face simultaneously.

Looking at him, Kage heaved a sigh and pressed her fingers to her temples. "I say you break it. No, *that crazy god* says to break it."

"What?"

"This is the first time he's said something that wasn't complete crap. Why is he like this these days? He usually speaks to me maybe once a year."

"What does the God of Death have to do with that stone tower?"

Kage turned to meet Taylor's eyes. "He says this is 'the turning point in our lives.'"

The God of Death generally visited Kage while she slept. Sleep was similar to death, so it was a path of sorts for that god. This time, however, she'd heard him while drinking. She initially thought that the deity had shown up out of anger that she'd drunk so much beer. She welcomed the thought of irritating him, since she wanted the god to leave her alone. The God of Death, however, had a different message.

"'The decision is yours to make, but don't destroy the tower if you want a peaceful life.' That's what he said."

Kage studied the stone tower. There was something underneath. "There's a letter below the bottom stone. That's

probably the whole reason the stones are here."

She turned back toward her best friend. Sitting in his wheelchair, he could see the stone tower but not the letter underneath.

"I don't feel any strange energy surrounding the stones," Kage added.

She wasn't as sensitive as an actual mage, but the divine power made her perceptive to negativity. For instance, she could feel whether curses surrounded an item or a place. She was, after all, a servant of the God of Death.

Kage waited for her friend's response.

Taylor, who was peering at the night sky, faced her. "Destroy it."

Her hand shot out and knocked the stone tower over. *Clunk. Clatter. Clack.* The stones atop the wall fell off.

Taylor just watched it happen. *Don't break it if I want to live peacefully?*

He had never lived peacefully and had no desire to do so. He would find a way to heal his legs and continue pushing forward. And then...

I will depose that damned family of mine.

Taylor reached his hand out, and Kage gave him the envelope. When he tore it open, he found a letter written using magic that prevented recognition of the sender's handwriting. Nobles used that sort of magic frequently.

He unfolded the letter without blinking. Its first few lines, visible under the lamps in the yard, immediately caught his attention:

The crown prince possesses an Ancient Power called the Star of Healing that is useless to him. It is a single-use power that can heal any wound. He seeks to exchange it for a method to hold the second- and third-eldest princes in check.

Taylor's hands trembled.

Noticing that and his expression, Kage stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

She only relaxed when Taylor huffed a breathy laugh—something between a sigh and a gasp. He handed her the letter. “This certainly will be a turning point in our lives.”

“What do you mean?” Kage took the document and read it. She paused after the part about the crown prince and Ancient Power, then read to the end.

Your legs might not move, but your head, arms, eyes, and mouth do. The rest of you is still very much alive. The decision is yours to make, Taylor Sten, eldest son of Lord Sten.

Kage looked up at Taylor.

He gazed into the darkness in the corner of the yard and spoke. “Kage.”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s leave this place to the butler and head to the capital for now.”

“All right.”

Kage decided to follow Taylor’s lead. She had encountered death far more frequently than anybody else; that was why she knew the value of life. And this man was *alive*.

“I’m sure you’re smart enough to arrange that. You’re pretty good at planning and organizing,” she acknowledged, trusting Taylor’s abilities.

“Yes, I used to be pretty good.”

“Used to be.” Hearing Taylor use the past tense, Kage glanced at him.

“I should’ve known how to take care of myself.” Unfortunately, when he’d failed to do so and let an attacker catch him off guard, he’d suffered a permanent, debilitating injury.

Taylor looked up at the small two-story house. He had grown frustrated making no progress after being here the last few months, following a lead he wasn’t even sure was real.

Rather than continuing this futile effort, it might be better to step away for a bit.

It wouldn't be so bad to listen to the God of Death this once. The god treasured Kage and surely wouldn't lie to her.

He piped up, "We'll need to hurry to make it on time for the royal celebrations."

"All right. Let's be swift."

"We'll run into people from the temple if we go to the capital. Do you mind?"

"What can they do? Excommunicate me? That'd be great. I'm more worried about you."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Kage lifted the letter skyward. The pair stared at the thin piece of paper, then smiled and exchanged glances.

"It's from our benefactor," they said simultaneously.

Though they couldn't be sure yet, they both had a feeling the writer was helping them. Eventually, they would need to find their benefactor and return the favor.

Their gazes—no longer clouded from drink as they had been a few moments ago—were fixed firmly on the letter. These were the eyes of people who had found a turning point.

Watching this scene unfold from the roof of a neighboring house, the red kitten Hong whispered to his sister Ohn, "Can we go home now?"

"Yes. Since we're done, we can go home and eat a snack."

"Woo-hoo!"

The two kittens sprang from roof to roof, returning to their sleeping quarters.

***

The following day, Cale stood with his arms crossed and an extremely uneasy expression, scanning the person in front of

him from head to toe.

Cale's outfit was flashier and more formal than usual—an intentional decision on his part. He thought back on Hans, the vice-captain, and Ron chastising him earlier.

"Even if I was not with you, my lord, how could you go rolling around on the mountain?!"

"I should've escorted you, Lord Cale!"

"Oh dear, young master. This is heartbreaking."

The stares he'd received after he returned from his crawl through the cave looking like a beggar had annoyed him so much that he'd dressed to the nines today. The fancy outfit complemented his vivid red hair. Cale was far from lacking in the looks department, and he stood out anywhere he went.

At present, however, he was blatantly annoyed for a different reason. "You're going like *that*?"

He and Choi Han were standing outside the inn. Arms still folded, Cale glared at a composed Choi Han. The hero carried a small bag, and his usual steel sword was at his waist.

"Yes!" Choi Han replied.

They weren't holding a feast or farewell party for the departing Choi Han. Cale wasn't the type to prepare something like that, and the man himself didn't seem to want it. Thus, this farewell was small. It was only Cale, the kittens, Hans, Ron, Vicross, and the vice-captain. The vice-captain's presence was a bit unexpected, but he stood there frowning as he said goodbye, just like Cale.

Cale heaved a sigh before taking a small bag out of his pocket and throwing it toward Choi Han. Choi Han caught it with ease, and he recognized it right away. It was the exact same size as the satchel Cale had given the black dragon.

Choi Han opened it to find potions—reduced in size through magic—and various other items. He lifted his head and looked at Cale.

When their eyes met, Cale asked bluntly, "What? What's wrong? Just chuck it if you don't want it." Choi Han hadn't said

anything, but Cale was blurting out whatever came to mind. “Take care.”

After that short farewell, Cale whirled around with a stoic expression and marched back toward the inn. He planned to order Ron and Vicross to follow Choi Han and put an end to his ambiguous relationship with the young man.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Choi Han’s response had some mirth to it, which sent a chill down Cale’s spine. Still, he didn’t turn around. Choi Han felt it was very like Cale not to look back. He turned to face the rest of the group.

“See you in the capital!” Hans said.

“Ahem! I will hone my skills so I can *personally* guard Lord Cale in the capital,” the vice-captain hastened to say, clearly irked.

Vicross offered his own curt goodbye. “I’ll keep my blade sharp.”

“See you later,” Ron told Choi Han with his trademark faux smile.

The kittens said goodbye in their own way, batting Choi Han’s leg with their front paws.

Last but not least, the invisible dragon—who crouched outside the window of Cale’s room every night, as if guarding him—stood in the yard. He subtly blew some mana toward Choi Han, as if to say farewell.

“You’ve already given me so much, and I still seem to be on the receiving end.” Putting the magic bag in his pocket, Choi Han grinned joyfully. Although Cale wasn’t able to see it, the others did; it was the first time they’d seen the young man smile so brightly. “See you all in the capital.”

After respectfully saying goodbye, Choi Han departed from the inn. Having spent decades in solitude that felt worse than death, he now had somewhere to return to. He also had people whose generosity he had to pay back.

I need to complete this task and repay him, Choi Han thought.

Leaving Cale and the rest behind, he headed out of Perthle.

***

The next day, Cale and his retinue got in their carriages to leave Perthle as well.

“Young master, we’re ready to depart.”

Cale nodded at Ron’s words. “All right.”

The window Ron had opened quickly closed, and the carriage started to move. They were back on their journey.

The kitten siblings fidgeted, eyeing Cale. He fixed them with a bored stare. “What are you looking at?”

Both kittens flinched and shook their heads.

Cale smirked. “What? Did you meet a dragon or something?”

They gasped, but he disregarded it. The dragon was still following them now that Choi Han had left, but Cale didn’t have time to worry about that.

After a day’s worth of travel from Perthle, they got ready to make camp. As they did, another carriage arrived in the area.

A knight who appeared to be the driver got off and approached the vice-captain. “Excuse me. May we share your campsite?”

“May I ask who you are?” the vice-captain responded—though he’d sussed out the knight’s origins the minute he spotted the red snake on his armor.

The knight bowed to the vice-captain and Cale behind him. “My name’s Tom. I’m a knight from Lord Sten’s estate.”

Damn it. Choking back the curse that almost escaped his lips, Cale looked at the knight’s shabby, crestless carriage. Its window opened, and Cale saw Taylor Sten’s face.

“Greetings. I am Taylor Sten. Seeing the crest of Lord Henituse, I’d like to take the liberty of requesting your assistance. I do apologize for the imposition.”

Taylor probably assumed he would be safe for the night if he could stick close to the powerful retinue of Count Henituse. That was why he'd asked this favor of them.

For Cale, it was hardly ideal that he'd run into the marquess's eldest son and the crazy priestess. Thinking about the dragon, who'd be hunting a boar or deer for him right about now, he frowned. *Damn it.*

He'd just gotten rid of a follower, and now three more had shown up. And not just three average beings. One was a dumb dragon, another was a crazy priestess who wanted to be excommunicated, and the third was a loser from Marquess Sten's family.

Chapter 7:
Just Who Are You?

CALE COULDN'T HELP but sigh, dropping his head low. When he raised it again, he realized everyone had gone quiet. Thinking that the silence was odd, he looked at Hans, who wore an awkward smile. Looking a bit sad, he discreetly gestured to Tom the knight and Taylor, who was looking out his carriage window.

Taylor smiled bitterly. "If sharing the campsite would be uncomfortable for your retinue, we will leave."

The young man had been all but abandoned by the marquess. Once he lost the use of his legs, his circumstances turned upside down. He was demoted from a life of luxury and power to one where his family gave him the minimum support to survive.

Most nobles felt that anyone other than the marquess's favored heir was living on borrowed time. They started to avoid Taylor, finding him uncomfortable to be around. They even blatantly ignored him in front of Benion and his other siblings to curry favor with them. Taylor's current situation was worse than that of a paltry baron's son.

Taylor knew of Cale, the lout of Count Henituse's family. Only one young man with a shock of red hair was connected to the magnificent golden turtle, and it was none other than Cale Henituse. But even Count Henituse, who wasn't part of any faction, would find it uncomfortable to be associated with Taylor. All the nobles were like that now that Taylor had been maimed and ostracized. Hearing Cale's sigh confronted Taylor once again with the reality of his situation.

"Why would you leave?" Cale asked, walking toward Taylor's carriage with a bored expression. "This isn't my property. I wouldn't do something so childish as tell you to leave when we're both travelers."

The two men made eye contact through the carriage window, and Cale peeked inside. *There she is.* The "crazy priestess" Kage watched him from within. Cale had read that Kage could cast bizarre curses; some witnesses said she could

give the unholiest of individuals—the necromancers—a run for their money.

Cale returned his gaze to Taylor and extended his hand. “I’m Cale Henituse of the Henituse family.”

Taylor peered at the hand reaching toward him from outside the carriage, then back at Cale’s blank expression.

Click. He opened the carriage door. Proper etiquette indicated that the polite thing to do was to exit the carriage to return the greeting.

“It’s difficult for me to exit the carriage because of my legs,” he told Cale.

“I’m aware.”

Taylor looked once more at Cale, who didn’t seem to care about etiquette, and shook his hand. Cale let go immediately after.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Cale,” said Taylor.

Not nice at all. Cale wasn’t happy about encountering the marquess’s son. He tried to turn away, not wanting to be introduced to Kage.

Unfortunately, Taylor was far too polite. “This is my companion, the priestess Kage. She’s a follower of the God of Eternal Rest.”

“Eternal rest” was a term for death. Cale forced down another sigh, meeting Kage’s eyes once more.

Like a model priestess, Kage greeted him sanctimoniously. “Nice to meet you, Lord Cale. I’m the priestess Kage. May the peace of the night always be with you.”

That was the usual greeting those who served the God of Death used when meeting those outside the faith.

“Peace of the night,” my ass. Forget that; Cale didn’t feel like he’d even sleep soundly that night. Although Kage smiled gently at him, looking at her reminded him of drinking lemonade.

She’s acting nice and kind, but she finds priestesses’ behavior hypocritical and annoying. That’s the major reason she wants to be excommunicated. She was a good actress, though.

Smirking at Kage, who still had a priestess's characteristic smile pasted on her face, Cale calmly replied, "I don't believe in gods."

Kage's eyes flickered with curiosity, seemingly asking what kind of madman would say that directly to a priestess. Cale welcomed her reaction. He wanted to keep giving her the impression that he was a lout until she felt assured of it.

"You're an interesting person," she told him.

Cale just said, "I *am* rather interesting."

He looked Taylor's carriage over. It was extremely shabby for a marquess's eldest son. Furthermore, it only transported a knight serving as horseman, Kage, and Taylor.

I'm sure he's broke.

Taylor had probably spent a lot of money putting those magic alarms around his residence in Perthle. He didn't get much support from the marquess, so he couldn't fall back on emergency savings either. Given his lack of funds, he was most likely doing everything he could to reduce his expenses.

While Cale was studying the carriage, Taylor momentarily squeezed his eyes shut, holding back his shame. Cale didn't ascribe much meaning to Taylor's behavior, though. *He's probably going to the capital because of me,* he mused.

Taylor and Kage were obviously heading to the capital—to meet the crown prince.

"Hans."

The deputy butler approached him. "Yes, my lord?"

Cale gave an off-the-cuff order. "Give them a hand."

"Of course, my lord."

"Prepare them a separate meal, and set their camp up next to ours." He didn't want to eat with them or even share the same campsite. "Don't defer to me. Decide how to help them on your own."

The last thing Cale wanted was to get entangled in Taylor and Kage's lives, though he doubted he could steer clear of them entirely.

“Yes, sir. I shall serve them as I serve you, Lord Cale.”

Why’s this guy suddenly so enthusiastic? “Whatever. Go bring me a drink.”

Cale glared at the invigorated Hans, then dipped his head to say goodbye to the marquess’s son. “I’ll be on my way, Lord Taylor.”

“Thank you for your graciousness, Lord Cale.”

“Not at all. It was nothing of the sort.”

Cale spun away from Taylor, who had a strange look on his face. The redhead made a beeline for his own carriage, eyes fixed ahead.

Along the way, he gave the vice-captain walking beside him an order. “It looks like they only have one knight. Guard them as well, Vice-Captain.”

“Yes, Lord Cale.”

Before getting back in his carriage, Cale looked over to confirm that the vice-captain was speaking to Taylor’s knight. They were most likely discussing guard duties for the night shift. Seeing the knight’s expression brighten, Cale reentered his carriage.

The door slammed shut with a loud *clack!* Everyone near the vehicle glanced at the carriage door with its golden turtle crest, then returned to their duties. Only Taylor and Kage, who had nothing to do, kept on staring at the carriage.

Inside, the two kittens greeted Cale.

“I know those two people.”

“I’ve seen them before too, Hong.”

The kittens had watched everything through the window. They crept toward Cale and sat next to him, then chatted among themselves without sparing him a second glance. Still, it was obvious that their conversation and questions about Kage and Taylor were aimed at him.

Cale told the quick-witted kittens, “Pretend you don’t recognize them.”

“Like the dragon?”

"Yes."

Ohn and Hong nodded to show they understood. From here on out, they'd act as if they didn't know Taylor and Kage even though they'd seen them last night.

Cale crossed his arms and closed his eyes. *The Star of Healing…*

That was the name of the Ancient Power he'd written about in his letter to Kage and Taylor. He knew about it because of the Plaza Terror Incident. The Star of Healing was a single-use Ancient Power that healed any injury or illness and restored the body's original healthy state. The crown prince possessed this Ancient Power, which he had received from his late mother.

During the Plaza Terror Incident, the secret organization would make their move once the royal family arrived, detonating magic bombs in the plaza and across the capital. In the novel, Choi Han was only able to stop about half of it. That was in and of itself a major feat, and the kingdom's awed citizens deemed him a hero. Choi Han, on the other hand, was beside himself at the people killed by the bombs, which further fueled his hatred toward the secret organization.

The organization had installed bombs on a few people during that incident.

Choi Han and the genius mage Rosalyn had detached those bombs from people first, then helped others evacuate. But there was an old man whom Choi Han failed to save; he lost his right arm and leg when removing a bomb and tossing it away himself. That incident had deeply upset Choi Han.

When the crown prince saw the old man's damaged body, he thought about the Star of Healing. That was how the novel originally introduced the Ancient Power. Naturally, the crown prince didn't use it on the old man. He merely consoled Choi Han, who felt responsible for the old man's death, and raised him up as a hero.

In a way, that was normal.

Cale didn't condemn the crown prince's decision. Who had the right to judge him for wanting to use the Ancient Power, his

own property, as he saw fit? Choi Han or Rosalyn were different; they absolutely would have used the power on the old man.

"By the way, is our little brother the dragon still following us?" Hong asked.

Cale nodded absentmindedly. *Since it's come to this, I might as well use the dragon to my benefit.*

His original plan had been to save the dragon and be done with it, but if the creature was going to follow him around the country like a little puppy, Cale would put him to use. He'd already been thinking about how to do so for the past two nights.

Cale knew the locations of the five magic bombs Choi Han found in the novel, but he wasn't sure where to find the other five that were bound to go off. Choi Han had located the first five bombs using Rosalyn's brilliant mana-detection abilities to locate them one by one just in time. Now a creature who was worlds better than Rosalyn at detecting mana was following Cale around like a lost duckling.

"Guess I will put him to work," he muttered.

The kittens flinched, but Cale didn't see them. He was mentally organizing all the tasks he would make the dragon do in the capital.

The dragon, who had no idea about any of this, faithfully delivered a boar to the campsite early the next morning.

After planning out what he'd need to do in the capital, Cale slept in late. When he went out to check the newest "meal," he felt a strange energy in the air and turned to look. He'd eaten and slept in his carriage last night, doing his best not to interact with Taylor's group. That was why he couldn't understand the odd, somewhat dark atmosphere.

"What's going on, Hans?"

Hans greeted Cale with a hopeless smile. The deputy butler and the rest of Cale's retinue were quickly getting past their suspicions about the meat and fruit being delivered. While Cale had no idea what Ron thought about it all, the others just went along with it, since Cale and Choi Han had both said it was fine.

Vicross had also asserted that the ingredients were of the highest quality.

“Ha ha! You’re awake, my lord.” Hans slid his gaze over to Taylor and Kage before approaching Cale. “I think Lord Taylor got the wrong idea about something.”

“Wrong idea?”

The boar was there, with Taylor and Kage beside it. Kage gripped the handles of Taylor’s wheelchair, the two of them gawking at the dead animal.

Cale walked over to them and stood beside Taylor. “Is something the matter?”

As always, the boar was enormous. It was even larger than a tiger—the type of boar that would excite Vicross. And as with every other “meal” delivery, there was a drawing in the earth beside the carcass. The dragon must’ve found a fork annoying to draw; he had only drawn a knife this time.

“I’m sorry, Lord Cale,” Taylor said.

What kind of utter nonsense is this so early in the morning?

The marquess’s son was smiling, but misery was etched all over his face. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the boar, so he averted his eyes. “It seems my movements were discovered.”

Cale stared at him. *Movements? What movements?*

Behind Taylor, the priestess griped, “We left in secret, so how is this possible? Is there seriously someone powerful enough to escape *my* notice? This is outrageous!”

How would someone of your level detect a dragon?

Cale had figured out what was going on. It would be impossible for someone of average strength to kill this massive boar with such precision, and the hunter had demonstrated expert stealth by dropping off the boar without being detected by Kage. Then, after displaying their tremendous skill, the culprit had left a drawing of a knife. To Cale, it was a small table knife, but to Taylor and Kage, it was a menacing blade.

He turned away from Taylor, who looked at him with equal parts despair and regret. “Lord Cale…this incident—”

“Vicross!” Cale called out.

Marquess Sten's second son, Benion, was probably extremely busy right now. Why would he focus all his attention on the eldest son, whom he'd already maimed? It wasn't like *Benion* knew the Star of Healing was in the capital.

"Yes, Lord Cale?" Vicross responded coldly, his kitchen knife flashing in the morning sun. Despite his frigid demeanor, he was obviously excited.

"I take it we'll be eating steak for breakfast."

"It looks like we've received the highest-quality meat once again, Lord Cale."

Taylor, who was watching them with a vacant expression, spoke up. "Again...?"

Cale nodded. "Someone in our party delivers food for us."

"Who is it?"

Pfft! Cale snorted in disbelief. "He's surprisingly shy, despite how he looks. You won't be able to see him."

Seeing the leaves on a tree near the campsite shake up and down, he shook his head, exasperated. Taylor and Kage turned red in embarrassment.

"Ahem! I-I see," said Taylor. "It seems we had the wrong idea."

"That's understandable. Vicross is an excellent chef who makes wonderful meals, so please try some meat before you go."

Vicross stopped caressing the boar and glanced up at Cale, but Cale couldn't meet his eyes, given what Taylor said next.

"Lord Cale, I heard you're heading for the capital. Do you mind if we follow behind you?"

Cale had known this would happen; it was exactly as he expected. "Please feel free to do as you wish."

These two wouldn't figure out that he'd sent that letter just because they traveled to the capital together. Since it had already come to this, he might as well escort them safely to the capital so they would be indebted to him. With those two in his pocket, he could use them in any number of ways in the future.

“Thank you. We’ll be in your hands until we near the capital.”

Cale smiled slightly at Taylor’s words. *“Until we near the capital”? At least he’s got some tact.*

There could be all sorts of complications if Taylor and Kage entered the capital with Cale’s group, and it would put Cale in a difficult position if Benion and Marquess Sten learned he’d been with them. Taylor hoped to avoid that by parting before they reached the capital.

Cale had a different opinion. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” There were still a number of items in his magic box he was waiting to use.

“Of course, Lord Cale. Please allow us to travel with you to whichever point you’re comfortable with.”

“Sure,” Cale said casually. Taylor and Kage gave him a look, but Cale ignored them and addressed Hans. “Bring my meal to the carriage.”

“Yes, my lord.”

As Cale headed back to the carriage, someone called out to him. “Lord Cale!”

It was Kage. She seemed to have a headache coming on; her brows were furrowed furiously as she walked over.

Cale grew leery as she approached. “What can I do for you, priestess?”

“Do you really not believe in any gods?”

Now where is this coming from? “Nope. None of them.”

Kage paused. “I understand.”

Upon hearing her response, Cale strode off to his carriage.

Taylor came up beside Kage as she watched Cale walk away. “What is it?” he asked her.

Kage rarely engaged with people other than close friends or those from the temple. Taylor had found it bizarre to see her frown and pursue Cale.

She shook her head. “It’s weird,” she replied, uneasy.

“What is?”

“Well, it’s like…” She touched the back of her head. “I have this uncomfortable feeling that the God of Death is caressing the back of my head with a sympathetic look.”

“What kind of feeling is *that*…? Did you not sleep properly?”

“Maybe not.”

She kept feeling that sensation every time she looked at Cale. She’d felt it in the past. When she was young, the temple had forced strenuous manual labor on her in the name of building a new temple. She had plopped down from exhaustion at the end of the day, and she’d felt this kind of sensation as the God of Death looked down at her.

But there’s no way Lord Cale would order me around like that corrupt temple did.

Kage decided Taylor was right; she must’ve felt this way because she hadn’t slept properly. She shook off the sensation.

Thus, Cale’s retinue grew. They continued toward the capital peacefully and without any particular issues. Every time Cale got stiff from sitting and briefly stepped out of the carriage to stretch, Taylor’s group watched him. Neither they nor Cale struck up conversation, however.

They traveled like that until they were a day’s journey from the capital. For their last night, they checked into an inn. There, Taylor and Kage came looking for Cale.

“What can I do for you?” Cale didn’t let it show fully on his face, but he wanted to know *why* they’d come to visit him so late at night.

His demeanor made Taylor smile. “Lord Cale, you enjoy drinking, right?”

“Cale Henituse is the lout who can’t go a day without drinking.”

When Taylor was still the marquess’s heir, he’d committed information about all the nobles’ children to memory. Cale had been so unique, there was no way Taylor could forget him.

“I don’t think that’s all there is to you, though.”

The Cale he’d personally encountered was very different from the one whose details he had memorized. This Cale was generous enough to treat Taylor’s party as well as possible, and

he stayed in his carriage all day so they'd feel comfortable. His subordinates followed him with great trust, and most importantly, he treated Taylor and Kage like regular people.

"You're different from the rumors."

They had almost reached the capital. Starting early the next morning, Taylor and Kage would need to move carefully. Yes, the pair would stride into the royal palace with confidence—but before then, they'd need to discreetly research and prepare.

Having changed their original plan to move stealthily, however, they decided to talk with Cale. The Cale Henituse they'd been observing for over a week had made a deep impression on them.

"It should be all right to share a drink before we separate, right, Lord Cale?"

"Come on in." Cale beckoned them, and Kage pushed Taylor's wheelchair inside. Once all three sat at the table, Cale didn't even glance at the alcohol. "What is it that you want?"

As Taylor had expected, Cale's voice was cold enough to chill the air. Yet that only confirmed his suspicions that the man in front of him wasn't a lout at all. In fact, he was smarter than most people thought.

Taylor hadn't just come to share a drink with Cale. Alcohol was only good when you were comfortably drinking with people you could trust. Otherwise, drinking with others was just a ploy so you could make small talk and observe those who joined you.

"What kind of person do you think I am, Lord Cale?" Taylor asked.

Cale studied him for a second, then immediately walked to his bed. He picked up a pouch, returned to his seat, and placed the pouch on the table. The mouth of the pouch opened a little, and its contents shifted with a metallic *clink.* Everyone got a glimpse of the gold, silver, and bronze coins inside.

After that, Cale's confident voice rang through the room. "Well, I don't know why you're heading for the capital at a time like this, when everyone in the country—including the nobles—has eyes and ears there. But there can be only one thing someone heading into the lion's den would want from me."

Cale had expected this from the moment Taylor and Kage asked to follow him to the capital, as well as every time he'd stepped out of his carriage and felt their gazes during the trip.

"You want money from the wealthy Henituse family, right?"

Kage heaved a sigh that nearly sounded like admiration. Taylor had lived high on the hog before plummeting to the bottom rungs of society, but Kage had *always* been at the bottom. To her, Cale seemed unique.

He asked his deputy butler for alcohol at every opportunity. He paid no thought to what his subordinates did, and he only ate the finest food. He stayed in the most luxurious inns, and he always seemed relaxed. He was also decisive and didn't mince words. He definitely wasn't a lout.

Kage's friend, Taylor, understood that even better than she did.

"I see that you already knew," said Taylor.

"Obviously," Cale shot back, as if it had taken zero effort to deduce. "You're clearly low on funds, based on how you're traveling. To stay in the capital, especially if you want to be discreet, you'll need money above all else. I'm sure it wasn't your original plan, but now that you're traveling with the golden turtle, what's the harm in extending your hand for help? Can't fault you there."

Taylor had no room to argue; it was just as Cale said. The lout hadn't tried to avoid him, an eldest son pushed out by his family, so Taylor had nothing to lose by asking him for a favor and hopefully some money. Even if Cale refused, it didn't seem like he'd tell Benion about the request. Cale was apparently the type who hated complicating things. Taylor saw him as a hermit purposely hiding from others.

"Thank you very much, Lord Cale."

Cale didn't give some humble response like, "You're welcome." Instead, he was ready to execute the plan he had been formulating ever since they'd joined him.

"Will you be leaving early in the morning?" he asked them.

"Yes. We came here to see you before we left, but we were planning to slip away in secret. We need to take care of things

ourselves from now on." Taylor sat up in his wheelchair, eyes shining.

Sitting across from those bright eyes of his, Cale couldn't help feeling pessimistic. "Will you enter through the temple?"

Taylor's surprised expression seemed to ask how Cale could have possibly known.

It was then that Kage stepped in. "Yes, we plan to."

They would disguise Taylor as a temple acolyte and sneak him in. Doing so would alert the temple to Kage's location, but she was willing to take that risk for him.

This method of entry didn't guarantee secrecy, however. Cale pointed out the hole in their plan. "Benion or the marquess himself will hear about it within three days. Even in the Temple of the God of Death, there are sure to be people who dabble in politics."

"You…really are very well informed." The corners of Kage's lips quirked up into a smile. She'd realized something about Cale.

"Lord Cale, is there a particular reason you're so curious about our course of action?" Taylor chimed in.

Tap. Tap. Cale's index finger drummed a beat on the table.

"You and your party should stay here for one more day, Lord Taylor. Take that money and reserve another night's stay." Cale pointed at the pair. "The two of you will continue on in my carriage. The rest of your group will enter the capital a day later."

Screech! Cale scooched his chair back and stood up. He placed an item he'd removed from the magic box earlier on the table.

"This magic tool turns any beings in a specific area invisible for five minutes."

That was the second item he'd needed to borrow under Bilose's name.

"Lord Cale, are you planning to steal something?"

"Steal? No, I plan to break *something."*

"Break something, you say…?"

Cale had intended to use that item during the Plaza Terror Incident, but now he had a reason to use it sooner. He was thankful it wasn't a single-use item.

Once Cale stopped talking, silence filled the room. Kage and Taylor looked back and forth between him and the item. They opened and closed their mouths repeatedly but couldn't say anything. After some time, they finally managed to break the silence.

"Why…why are you going to this extent for us?" Taylor asked slowly. "Especially since you have nothing to gain from it."

There was plenty Cale could say to that. *Why? I caused this, so I should take some responsibility. Especially since there's no risk of me being harmed.*

Additionally, if Taylor managed to become marquess, Cale wouldn't need to worry about Marquess Sten's greed once they went to war with foreign nations. Henituse territory would remain peaceful, allowing Cale to live without a care.

"Must I answer?"

"Yes. I wish to hear the reason." Taylor was determined to know.

Cale's matter-of-fact answer was brutal and cold. "I pity you. I've come to wonder what makes someone like you—a cripple who doesn't know when he'll be killed, abandoned by his family despite being the eldest son—do all this. It's pitiful seeing a marquess's former heir struggle to the point of asking the lout of Lord Henituse's family for money."

Taylor's jaw dropped, and he huffed a silent laugh. He rubbed his knees with his hands. While his legs now lacked sensation, his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his hands, and the rest of him were alive. He smiled brightly. "Thank you for your sympathy. I needed that."

Cale paid Taylor's gratitude no heed. "There's one condition to all this."

"What's the condition?"

"Forget about everything." Pushing the bag of money toward the marquess's son, Cale repeated, "Forget about every single thing."

His tone suggested that he was willing to help but didn't want to be involved any further. Taylor had anticipated that; it was the reason Kage had come with him.

The priestess stepped forward. "Lord Taylor and I vow never to speak of this. I'm sure you're aware that anyone who breaks a vow to the God of Death will die?"

Cale smiled. "Yes, I am. Please make your vow."

He believed one of those famous vows to the God of Death would hold water, so he was willing to help the pair.

Seeing Cale smile at their offer to make the vow, Kage laughed. "I presume *you* won't be vowing, Lord Cale?"

"No. If things eventually go south for our side, I plan to reveal everything."

"To Benion?" Kage asked once her laughter ceased.

"Yes," Cale answered resolutely.

Watching the conversation before him, Taylor felt at peace. He liked the fact that Cale had blatantly admitted that he planned to reveal everything if it inconvenienced him in any way.

"Let's do it, Kage."

"Gotcha."

The pair had relaxed, dropping some of their formality in front of Cale. That signaled to him that they were revealing a bit of their true selves.

"We will now begin."

Tonight was the night of the new moon. On nights like this, when the moon wasn't visible, the God of Death's strength was at its peak. Kage closed her eyes and brought her hands together; it looked a bit different from when people clasped their hands to pray. Her two palms extended toward Taylor and Cale respectively.

Groooooooong.

A subtle vibration reverberated through the air. Threadlike wisps of black smoke emerged from Kage's fingertips and surrounded the three of them.

Is this the God of Death's power? An odd sensation filled Cale as he sensed the power around him. It was definitely different from the Ancient Powers, but it was still warm despite its ominous color.

"I, Kage, daughter of the eternal night, along with Taylor Sten, desire to borrow the name of the night to make a vow. The vow is made with our lives. Anyone who breaks it will descend into eternal darkness."

Kage opened her eyes and glanced at Cale and Taylor before continuing. "Taylor Sten and I vow to keep all that was discussed tonight a secret forever. Aside from this witness, Cale Henituse, we will not disclose it to anyone else."

"We will not disclose it," Taylor repeated.

Hearing his voice, Kage closed her eyes once again. The black smoke encircled her fingertips.

Groooooong.

There was another vibration, and then the smoke disappeared. The vow was complete.

"That was pretty simple." Even as Cale said this, a peculiar sensation enveloped his hand. The vow they had committed was tangible; it felt similar to obtaining Ancient Powers.

"What you feel right now is the vow's power. As our witness, Lord Cale, you'd sense our deaths the moment we broke the vow."

"I see."

Cale easily understood Kage's explanation even though it was short. He could *feel* the vow's undeniable power. Sensing the divine energy within his body, he assessed the difference between it and the Ancient Powers.

It was then that Taylor took out the bottle of alcohol he'd brought. He set it down in the middle of the table with a loud *thump*.

"Lord Cale, will you have a drink?"

"A drink?" Cale echoed, tamping down his desire for Taylor and Kage to just leave.

"Yes. Alcohol's essential on a good day."

Cale was different from what Taylor had imagined, and he didn't fully trust the count's son yet. Still, he wanted to share a drink with Cale. Kage grinned, having taken some sort of cue from Taylor. She reached into one of the wide sleeves of her priestess garb and whipped out three shot glasses.

"Ta-da!"

"Huh." Cale looked at the shot glasses, the bottle, and Kage with genuine disbelief. He couldn't believe a priestess stowed shot glasses in her sleeves. "Hey, priestess."

"Yes?"

"You're amazing."

She truly appreciated alcohol. Cale took the glass she offered, and Taylor filled it.

Once all three glasses were full, Kage said, "Lord Cale, isn't it strange that a priestess is drinking?"

Cale tilted his head. "Is that any of my business?" Whether she drank was of no concern to him.

"Wow. I really like you!" Kage marveled, smacking her knee with her free hand. Then she coyly asked, "Have any interest in getting to know a surrogate older sister with a great personality?"

"No."

Taylor slipped in his question. "What about a surrogate older *brother* with a great personality?"

"Even less so."

Instead of being disappointed by Cale's answer, Taylor and Kage laughed out loud.

Cale couldn't figure out what was funny about his response, but he lifted his glass anyway. "Cheers."

The three clinked their drinks together. On the night of a new moon, there was no moon in the sky—but this "moonshine" was just as satisfying, creating a fateful connection between the three of them.

***

Cale entrusted Hans with an update on the situation. The next morning—whether because he was dimwitted or because he thought it was funny—Hans pretended not to see the two additional guests in the corner of Cale's carriage.

"Shall we head out, my lord?"

"Yeah. Let's go," Cale said, equally nonchalant.

With a *clunk*, the carriage started to move. They would arrive at the entrance to the capital in two hours.

"Meow!"

Ohn and Hong huddled close to Cale as they peeked at Kage and Taylor, who sat across from them.

"Do you know anything about this event the royal family is hosting, Lord Cale?" Taylor asked, drawing Cale's attention.

Compared to the priestess, who was enduring a hangover, Taylor was completely fine. In fact, he was even better off than Cale. This fragile-looking noble had the highest alcohol tolerance out of the three of them.

"This is my first time going to the palace," Cale told Taylor, who continued to watch him. "So far, I've only been to the Northeast Gathering a few years back."

Taylor hadn't brought this up just for the sake of conversing. He wanted to share a piece of information with Cale as a show of gratitude. "I see. Well, this event will commemorate the fiftieth birthday of His Royal Majesty, our current king."

"Joyous festivities for the citizens' benefit."

When Cale spoke as if that group didn't include him, Taylor had a conspicuous glint in his eye. "It sounds like they won't be joyous festivities for *you*, Lord Cale!"

How could they be?! The impending terrorist incident made Cale's heart race, but he didn't voice these thoughts aloud. He was probably the only person who knew about that and the secret organization.

Knowing about the events to come was bound to instill a heavy sense of responsibility and worry. That said, there was a

relationship *between* Cale's sense of responsibility and his worries; he had to take some sort of action.

I'll try to prevent that terror incident, but I'll back off if it looks like a hassle or it seems like I'll get hurt, Cale decided. *I'll just do enough not to be inconvenienced.*

Since Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu—knew how frightening death was, he couldn't entertain the thought of pretending he knew nothing.

"Am I right to think this won't be a festival for you either, Lord Taylor?"

Taylor smiled at that. So did Kage, despite her hangover.

"I consider it my final obstacle before I can really celebrate." Despite his gentle appearance, Taylor was a risk-taker. Even with his strong moral compass, his boldness had put him leagues ahead of Benion before he was attacked. "Lord Cale?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful of His Highness the crown prince." Keeping his gaze fixed on Cale, Taylor continued, "I may have been cast aside, but I still have ways of gathering information through the marquess's estate. The king's fiftieth birthday celebration was always going to happen, but the crown prince was the one who suggested bringing all the noble offspring together." Taylor called to mind what he knew about the heir to the throne. "I'm not sure how to describe him to you."

When Taylor struggled to continue, Cale said simply, "He's very glib."

"Oh, you're right! Uh, I-I mean..." The flustered Taylor tried to retract his agreement but quickly capitulated. "Yes. You're correct. I see you already knew."

"Isn't that information anyone with enough of an interest could find out?"

"Of course." Taylor nodded. "But this is the first time I've heard anyone describe the crown prince so bluntly."

Observing Taylor, Cale thought about the crown prince's silver tongue. As "glib" suggested, the prince was exceptionally

good at doling out compliments and flattering people he'd make use of thereafter. Of course, the people he exploited had no idea.

In *Birth of a Hero*, one of the crown prince's victims was none other than Choi Han, whom the prince glorified as a hero and as his close friend. For a commoner, Choi Han thought well of the crown prince, who had befriended him and treated him with affection. But Cale—that is, Kim Roksu—had read the novels and didn't care for the prince.

The problem is, he uses people for the right reasons.

He didn't use people for his own benefit or for power. He used them for the kingdom, citizenry, and greater good.

I guess it's too much to call it using *people.*

It would be more accurate to say the crown prince requested people's help. He didn't pull rank and give them orders; instead, he asked them for favors as equals. He used that glib tongue of his to flatter them, giving them a sob story about whatever favor he was asking, which they then couldn't turn down. He'd done this to Choi Han. Rosalyn couldn't refuse the crown prince either. Frosty as she was, she was just as good-natured as Choi Han.

Even a man with a silver tongue had a weakness, though.

"Anyway, Lord Cale, His Highness is, um... Well, you know how he is. If you get involved with him, it'll be exhausting."

"You don't have to worry. I plan to remain as quiet as possible before returning home. I don't like being in the limelight," Cale replied, like it was water off a duck's back.

After he said that, however, the carriage went dead silent. Little Ohn and Hong, the hungover Kage, and even Taylor—who had a gentle smile on his face—stared intently at Cale.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Hm. Will it really be possible to remain quiet and...? No, never mind."

"Yeah, it's nothing," Kage added.

She and Taylor looked away. The kittens just shook their heads.

Cale's brow wrinkled at the atmosphere in the carriage. "Even if I get entangled with the crown prince, things won't proceed as you and the priestess imagine."

Taylor and Kage saw the corners of Cale's lips lift into a wicked, villainous smile. Whether Cale was aware of his expression or not, he added leisurely, "I *also* have an extremely glib tongue."

The crown prince avoided people similar to himself. It was a hatred of his own kind. Considering the crown prince was the type to flatter and exploit people, Cale just needed to act the same way.

Kage's complexion improved, and she appeared to have recovered somewhat from her hangover. When Cale noticed her looking in his direction, he made eye contact.

"That expression suits you, Lord Cale. You look like a very bad person."

"Better than looking like a good person."

Kage had expected that exact reaction; she nodded as if she'd confirmed something. Cale took no notice, however. Instead, he parted the window curtain and peered outside. The entrance to the capital was already before them. Cale's carriage was bound for a different gate than the one commoners used. They were heading toward the nobles' gate, which would allow them to enter much faster.

Observing the sights through the window, Cale blurted out, "The capital is very different indeed."

Taylor nodded in understanding. "Rowoon *is* the Land of Boulders."

The enormous wall surrounding the capital filled Cale's field of vision. There were many different sculptures atop the wall.

The Kingdom of Rowoon, a northeastern nation in the Western Continent, was unique to a degree. Not only was it the continent's main source of marble, but the kingdom's northwestern and western regions also contained lots of granite. That was why it was called the Land of Boulders. The kingdom contained quite a few stone mountains, and if you traveled north, you would find most of the peaks were granite.

Something appeared to dawn on Taylor, and he said, “If you look to ancient stories from before the founding of Rowoon, you’ll find that many are related to this area’s boulders. One says this land had a stone guardian protecting everything from any attack. When darkness descended on the continent, that guardian stood on the front line against it.”

In this world, there were myths about ancient times and beyond. They weren’t the same across the board; each region had its own version of the myths. Some said the ancient times ended when heroes managed to defeat the darkness that had descended. Others said they ended because people envied each other’s powers and fought for control. Others still said that a wrathful god had destroyed all living things. The myth Taylor had described was one of many such stories in Rowoon.

“You seem to like that story, Taylor,” Kage noted.

Taylor nodded. “Yes, I do.”

Cale, who’d been gazing out the window, turned to look at him.

Taylor rubbed his knees as he continued. He’d always been fragile, even before he was attacked. “The guardian is said to have stood firmly in place, like a stone, although his body was cracking into pieces. That was how he protected the people and land of this northeastern region surrounded by boulders.”

The myths often pertained to the darkness that once descended, first appearing at the center of the continent. The stories surrounding that event focused on the battle against the darkness. However, the protagonist of the myth Taylor recounted was focused on protecting the region’s citizens.

Taylor considered the character heroic. “That kind of person couldn’t survive today, unfortunately, but that’s why I like that myth so much.”

“You don’t seem to believe it, though.”

He shook his head. “It’s beyond rare to see someone protect something to the point of seriously injuring themselves.”

“I agree.” Cale nodded. It was one thing to protect *yourself*, but this guardian had protected others and the region. The lout

couldn’t make heads or tails of it. “This is my first time hearing that specific story.”

By reading up to Volume Five of *Birth of a Hero*, Cale had also read all sorts of legends and myths about the Ancient Powers. Still, this was the first time he’d heard about Rowoon’s stone guardian.

“Probably because it’s not that famous,” Taylor replied. “I only found that myth while conducting lengthy research into ancient texts and powers. I told Kage about it as well.”

Cale nodded again. Lowering the carriage curtain once more, he took a round pendant from his pocket and threw it toward Taylor. “Get ready.”

Taylor and Kage both nodded, each holding the pendant simultaneously with one hand. As the magic device activated, Cale sighed and grabbed a bottle from the corner.

A moment later, the carriage stopped outside the nobles’ gate. Cale heard the vice-captain’s voice, as well as someone else’s, coming from outside.

Knock knock knock.

“Lord Cale, the capital guards wish to verify the passengers.”

Bang.

Cale kicked the carriage door open. He came face-to-face with the unperturbed vice-captain and a bewildered capital guard.

With a bottle in one hand and a full glass in the other, Cale stared at the guard. “Go ahead.”

The carriage interior stank of alcohol. That stench, and Cale’s extremely red face, made it clear he’d been drinking since the previous night.

The festival was still a week away, but many nobles had passed through this entrance already. Every time a carriage arrived, two guards checked inside the carriage to confirm its passengers. Although it was a mere formality, they needed to go through with it.

Never before had the capital guard encountered such a sight. Witnessing the man's bafflement, the vice-captain smiled gently at him. "Our lord cures his hangovers by drinking more alcohol. He's at the top of his game as far as hangovers go."

Cale watched the bewildered guard as the vice-captain did his best to praise the lout. *Ugh, this is tiring,* he thought. Fatigued, he demanded, "Can't you hurry up?"

The capital guard called over his partner, who looked into the carriage full of empty, rolling bottles. He popped back out and hastily gave his approval. "Everything looks fine."

After that, the vice-captain slowly closed the door. As it shut, one of the guards told Cale, "Welcome to the capital."

Creak. Click. The door closed completely, and after a moment, the carriage made its way through the gate.

Cale pushed forward the full glass of alcohol in his hand and spoke. "They're apparently welcoming us to the capital."

Taylor, no longer invisible, laughed as he handed the pendant back to Cale and accepted the glass in his free hand. "It's been a while since someone has welcomed me."

Cale's party had made it to the capital at last. Once they passed the checkpoint, the carriage leisurely headed south.

Rowoon's capital—the city called Whis—was in the midst of decorations. All around the capital, people were hurriedly preparing for the king's birthday festivities.

Cale looked out through the slightly lifted curtain and thought, *Choi Han should arrive in about three days.*

Unless he traveled insanely quickly, that was how long it would take to reach Whis. He'd be bringing Rosalyn and Lark with him, since he ran into Lark at that point in the novel. Lark was a descendant of the Wolf King and the only survivor of the Blue Wolf Tribe. While meeting him, Choi Han would also encounter the secret organization again, delaying his party even further. After that, he'd run into the secret organization once more during the Plaza Terror Incident, for a total of four encounters with the group.

That secret organization had murdered everyone in Harris, Choi Han's first home after leaving the Dark Forest. Despite

having run into the group twice already, Choi Han didn't have much information on them.

That's because the assassins in Harris didn't have stars on their clothes.

The secret organization's goal had been to murder both the citizens of Harris and the Blue Wolf Tribe, so they'd sent their assassination squad. The assassins wore plain black clothing without their emblem in case something went wrong. If they were caught, they had orders to take their own lives.

Things would change starting at the capital. *That bloodthirsty punk will show up.*

While Choi Han and Rosalyn prevented the Plaza Terror Incident, they would come in contact with a leader of the secret organization. The leader and his subordinates would all have a white star and five red stars on their chests.

Cale recalled the crude yet impressive star outfits—a replica of the secret organization's uniform—he'd made them wear when they rescued the dragon. He had already come up with an excuse to give Choi Han regarding these articles of clothes. Cale stared outside, then shut the curtains again.

A festive mood brightened the streets as the happy citizens decorated, but this place would succumb to despair in only a week's time.

They were now in southern Whis, where the nobles' homes were located. Cale's carriage stopped in front of a residence, and Cale stood, getting ready to disembark.

"Lord Taylor, once we reach the residence, Ron will escort you. You just need to head that way." Keeping his eyes fixed on the door, he reminded Taylor and Kage, "Forget everything."

Cale heard their voices behind him.

"Thank you very much."

"Let's meet again under more pleasant circumstances."

Cale's lips quirked up at that. Kage and Taylor saw his smile, but neither he nor the two kittens looked at the pair.

Click. The carriage door opened.

“Lord Cale, we’ve arrived,” said Hans. Like Cale and the kittens, he avoided looking directly at Taylor and Kage even though he could see them.

Cale acted as though the pair weren’t even there as he alighted from the carriage. As soon as his foot touched the ground, he glanced at the driver’s seat. Ron feigned benevolence as always, smiling and nodding. Hans had explained the residence’s layout to the old servant, who would see Taylor and Kage out safely. Soon Ron and the carriage driver vanished, making their way to the stable at the back gate.

Once it was out of sight, Cale paid no more attention to the carriage. He turned around, then let out a short gasp of admiration. “Oh.”

Ohn’s and Hong’s golden eyes were as wide as saucers.

“It’s even better than I expected!” Cale said.

The count really was wealthy. A five-story residence towered beyond the large iron gate. The house wasn’t gaudy, but it definitely looked more expensive than the neighboring nobles’ homes; it had the “money well spent” aura of high-class construction. There was even a garden between the gate and the building, plus a marble sculpture of the golden Henituse turtle. All in all, the building oozed luxury.

Screech! The large gate with a golden turtle crest swung open. The guard who’d opened it lined up with the residence’s butler and servants to greet Cale.

“Welcome to the capital, Lord Cale!”

They bowed their heads so low, it looked like they’d reach the ground. It was an extremely respectful greeting.

The old man who appeared to be head caretaker shouted so loudly it sounded like he might go hoarse, “We shall do our utmost to serve you!”

Why is he acting like that? Cale looked to Hans, who shrugged. *Hmph. He definitely knows why they’re so over-the-top.* Hans’s disingenuous behavior was proof enough, but Cale didn’t want to even bother grilling him.

He approached the head caretaker and grasped his shoulders, helping him up. Then he looked over the rest of the

servants and said, “Everybody lift your heads.”

The servants quickly obeyed. They’d never met Cale during their time at the capital residence, but they’d heard stories about him from visitors to Henituse territory. Rumor had it that the lout categorized the estate’s residents as nobles, vermin, or worse. They anxiously awaited his next words.

“No need to be this respectful in the future,” Cale continued. “I’m not the type to nitpick about formality and obeisance if a person does their job well.”

The servants fixed their eyes on him. They were all still very stiff.

Seeing that, Cale furrowed his brow. “I hear my stepmother hired you all. She said you take a lot of pride in your work, so I’m sure you’ll do your duties accordingly.”

Unsure how to react, the servants watched him with odd expressions.

“Ask Hans if you have questions.”

Cale had enough to do already, so it was better to punt everything to Hans. Besides, there was no point in paying a lot of attention to running the residence when he would leave soon. Feeling a bit more cheerful, Cale surveyed the servants’ much brighter faces. Then he walked straight ahead.

“Let’s go.”

With that, Cale led the way toward the five-story building. When the head of a house entered the building for the first time, they had to personally walk from the gate to the front hall. That act symbolized that the house was his property.

When a royal heir ascended the throne, the crown prince—no, king—walked from the castle gate to his throne in the center of the palace. The traditions were similar.

The count and the countess had walked into this residence in that manner at one point, but now Cale was the primary occupant.

Screeeech. The large iron gate with the golden turtle crest closed. At the same time, nearby nobles were learning of the

Henituse lout's arrival. As usual, the gossip spread faster than if Cale had sent someone to the palace to inform the king.

This news deeply worried three northeastern nobles in particular. The trio had come to the capital early to attend the Northeast Gathering. They sat drinking tea together, looking glum.

One sighed. "Who could've known Lord Cale would really attend instead of Lord Bassen? What a headache."

"Still, we need to take care of him, since he's one of ours."

"That's true. Even if he's a lout, I'm sure he won't behave indecently in front of us, right?"

Most of the Henituse family was inoffensive; Bassen was nice, if inflexible. But then there was the lout. Regardless of how the nobles felt about Cale, they came from families allied more closely to the Henituses than any other northeastern noble family. Thus, they ultimately decided to do what was best for their future.

"We just need to guide and protect him so he won't do anything untoward. Let's meet the lad and talk to him first."

To them, Cale was like a toddler walking by the water—a boy who required their watchful eye. At the same time, he threatened to cause a scene at any time. Thus, the trio immediately sent an invitation to Cale's residence.

By that evening, it had been delivered into Cale's hands.

"Ugh!" Cale chucked the letter onto the table with utter annoyance.

"You won't go?"

"*Can* I not go?"

"No. It's a meeting for northeastern nobles."

"You're right."

Word sure gets around fast among those nobles. Of course, that was true of Cale too.

Hans handed Cale a document he'd received from the head caretaker. "This is a list of nobles currently in the capital."

"Good. Has Ron taken care of things?"

“Yes.” Hans’s short reply came in an absentminded tone, with no further elaboration.

Even so, Cale was satisfied with that answer. He’d prepared a wig, a robe, and a wheelchair without the Sten family crest, plus plenty of money for Taylor and Kage. Well, *Hans* had prepared everything other than the money. “Nice work. Get some rest.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll make sure I do.” Though Hans said as much, he seldom rested even when given an opportunity to do so.

As Hans tried to slip away, Cale said one more thing. “Uh, before that, have them send something up for me to eat.”

His statement indicated he wouldn’t be going down to the dining room. “I’ll see to it,” Hans replied.

Soon enough, a bountiful feast filled Cale’s chamber. Cale looked at the dishes—which included meat, desserts, and even wine—and smiled with satisfaction before heading to the terrace. His chamber was on the third floor and received more sunlight than any other room in the house. He opened the glass panel doors to the terrace.

“Come in,” he called.

Leaving the door open, he sat down at the table. Soon enough, as he looked toward the terrace, a couple of leaves floated through the air. They stopped across from Cale, then hovered atop a tall chair. The dragon had entered the room with leaves still stuck to him.

Ohn and Hong sat down on the chairs left and right of the invisible dragon.

Cale stared blankly at the trio, then opened the wine bottle and told them, “Go ahead and eat.” He filled his glass with red wine. “You gather food and bring it to us, but you actually never get to eat any.” He brought the wine glass to his lips as he continued, “I’m sure it wasn’t easy following us.”

At that moment, the black dragon lifted his invisibility magic and revealed himself. Ohn helped remove the leaves stuck to the dragon, while Hong stuffed a piece of the steak Vicross had cooked into the dragon’s mouth.

The average age of these three creatures was seven years. Cale watched them eat, then pushed more food toward them. His action made Ohn and Hong flinch, while the black dragon stopped chewing and simply observed him.

Cale took another sip of wine, thinking, *They'll be working very hard in the future.* Since they would need to do a lot on his behalf, the least he could do was feed them well. He relaxed for the first time in ages, perhaps because he was solely in the presence of the three younglings—though they *were* stronger than most.

"It'd be great if things just stayed like this," he mused.

A house about this size, with this delicious food and leisure time—Cale reflected on how great it would be to live life with those three things. Once Bassen became the count's official successor, Cale's goal would be to live this easygoing life of luxury.

He turned on the magic music box in the corner. An unfamiliar song played as Cale took another sip of wine. Beyond the terrace, the sky darkened.

"Fantastic," Cale said, a relaxed smile on his face. *This is the life.*

At that moment, a knock came at the door. *Knock knock knock.*

The black dragon turned invisible in a flash, and the kittens cleaned their faces. Cale rose to head to the door.

Crash!

"Ugh."

He'd accidentally hit the wine bottle getting up. It fell to the floor and shattered, red wine staining the opulent carpet.

I'm getting a bad feeling all of a sudden.

For some reason, a wave of unease washed over him. Walking briskly to the door, he fell into deep contemplation. Where was his apprehension coming from?

Is it Choi Han? No, it can't be.

Unless the hero raced like a lunatic, he couldn't possibly have reached the capital in less than three days. And there was

no way someone like Choi Han would force the injured Lark to move faster. Choi Han couldn't heal him either; although Cale had given him potions, the gods had disowned the wolf beastfolk, so they wouldn't work on Lark.

On top of that, Rosalyn had initially hidden her abilities in *Birth of a Hero*. Since she was careful and cautious, she would never use advanced magic to transport all three of them to the capital.

Most importantly, Cale had definitely told Choi Han that he needed to stay at a particular hotel in Whis. He would meet Choi Han there once, then use Ron and Vicross to communicate with him thereafter.

This ominous feeling was akin to a tension headache from hanging around people like Ron and Choi Han. *That's right.* Calming himself down, Cale turned the knob.

As soon as he opened the door, his heart sank. "You…"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cale," came his visitor's desperate voice. "You were the only person I could think of."

A distressed Choi Han stood at the threshold. He must've rushed over; he looked like a total mess.

Cale felt like he was seeing the most horrifying thing in his entire life. Hans stood next to Choi Han. The deputy butler's expression was similar to the hero's but with a bit of confusion mixed in.

When Cale saw the person who'd accompanied Choi Han—as well as the person on Choi Han's back—he opened the door wide. "Come in for now. Bring that kid over here."

The one on Choi Han's back was Lark of the Blue Wolf Tribe, the youngster who was also the Wolf King's heir. He looked to be in critical condition.

Lark was currently enduring the pain that came before Berserk Mode for the first time in his life. Cale couldn't understand why this was already happening; it should have occurred a year from now.

Nevertheless, he scanned everyone's faces and said, "Don't worry."

Choi Han and Lark entered the room, as did the other person Choi Han had brought: Rosalyn. Both she and Choi Han were somewhat panicked.

Cale began closing the door, not letting the deputy butler into the room. “Hans, go bring something to drink.”

“Pardon? Uh, right away!”

Then Cale pointed out the bed to Choi Han, who was looking at him. “Lay him down first.”

“Got it.” Choi Han carefully set Lark on the bed.

Cale slowly approached. The young boy before his eyes was definitely from the Blue Wolf Tribe and had the purest of pure blood. He looked like a weak, regular human, but he was pretty tall for a young boy.

Lark panted, trying his best to keep his eyes open. He had a deep frown, and his body was limp; all his strength had left him. It was already too late to prevent his berserk state.

Cale studied the tall boy fighting back his lowering lids.

“Just keep your eyes closed,” Cale told him. “No need to strain yourself.”

There was no coercion in Cale’s firm tone, yet he had a way of making people obey. Lark slowly closed his eyes as the voice of this unknown man flowed into his ear.

“Everything will be okay,” Cale told him.

Between his labored breaths, Lark mouthed a name: *Uncle.* The chief of the Blue Wolf Tribe—the man who’d died for the tribe even though he was one step from becoming Wolf King. His uncle had made sure Lark was hidden before rushing toward the invaders.

“Everything will be okay.”

That was exactly what his uncle had said to him. Lark’s face, flushed with fever, crumpled into a wretched expression. Cale, who’d been watching him coolly, averted his gaze.

Choi Han still looked anxious and flustered. “Why is Lark like this, Mr. Cale?” In the books, he’d only slightly opened his heart to Lark by this point—but right now, he seemed completely attached.

What could have happened?

Cale would've been a fool not to realize that Choi Han's situation had shifted because of him. That was why he was trying so hard to cut ties with the man. Stuffing down the thought, Cale met his eyes.

"Potions don't work on him," Choi Han said. "According to Rosalyn, they have no effect on the Wolf Tribe. Healing magic doesn't seem to work either. I just don't know what to do. I need to protect him! I'm supposed to protect him! But—"

"Calm down." *At this rate, you'll end up awakening.* That would be as scary as the dragon in the corner of the room going mad.

Since Choi Han had lived for decades in solitude—or perhaps *despite* living decades in solitude—he was a kind person weak to those he cared for. "Mr. Cale, I…"

"If you trust me, just leave him to me."

"I trust you."

"All right." Once Cale confirmed that Choi Han had settled down, he turned his attention to Rosalyn.

Rosalyn was the heir to the Kingdom of Brek's throne, yet this genius mage was ready to throw it all away. People associated Rosalyn with a red rose; she had red hair even brighter than Cale's, as well as red lips that curled up mysteriously at the corners. Though she resembled a rose in bloom, she'd grown into something more like the sun.

At present, she wasn't looking at Lark, Choi Han, or even Cale. Her eyes were fixed on something in the corner of the room.

"That aura… It's a huge amount of mana!" Rosalyn stumbled over her words, her fists clenched and trembling. She was staring at the very spot where the invisible dragon sat at the dining chair.

Cale sighed. It seemed the black dragon was curious about the mage. Without a doubt, he had sent some mana to Rosalyn specifically, showing off his incomprehensible magic skills. Throughout history, dragons had an affinity for mages, so the

dragon was probably behaving this way because he was happy she was there.

Glancing at the empty-looking seat, Cale quietly ordered, “Stay still.”

Almost instantly, Rosalyn gasped and returned to normal. The dragon must have stopped sending his mana her way. Unable to control her own shaky expression, Rosalyn looked at Cale. “Just what is—”

Cale cut her off, pointing to Lark. “He comes first.”

“Oh.” Rosalyn snapped back to her senses. Peering at Lark, who lay limp with his eyes closed, she asked Cale, “What’s happening to him?”

Cale eyed the small staff in Rosalyn’s hand. They’d probably been able to arrive in Whis in just three days because she had used teleportation magic. Contrary to Cale’s expectations, she’d already revealed the extent of her magical abilities.

“You’re a mage, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Have you heard anything about the beast tribes’ Berserk Mode?”

“Ah!” Rosalyn let out a small noise, then looked skeptical. “I’ve read about the Wolf Tribe’s Berserk Mode in books, but I’ve never read anything about them being feverish and agonized like this.”

“It’s because it’s his first time.”

“Excuse me?”

All eyes landed on Cale, who went on, “Beastfolk lose their sanity their first time entering Berserk Mode due to the physical pain of the bodily transformation. If they overcome the painful first transformation, they’re able to use Berserk Mode as a weapon.”

Beastfolk were at their strongest in Berserk Mode.

Cale checked Lark’s condition before adding, “We don’t have much time before he goes into Berserk Mode.” He turned to Rosalyn.

When he looked at her, Rosalyn nodded. “I don’t know what kind of person you are, but I understand. I’ve grasped the situation.” Although her tone was firm, her eyes were desperate. “He’s still so young.”

“I know.”

In a roundabout way, she was asking Cale for help, and Cale was agreeing.

“Meow!”

At that moment, the two kittens appeared between Cale and Rosalyn and jumped onto the bed. They stared piercingly at Lark.

“Ugh!” Lark bared his teeth and growled at the kittens. His instincts were in control right now, rather than his rationality, which made him react that way to other beastfolk. He looked so vicious, Choi Han gulped.

“Meeeow!”

Smack!

Hong’s front paw instantly smacked Lark’s growling mouth. The sharp attack warned Lark to behave. Then Hong looked at Cale, his eyes telling the count’s son to hurry up and help Lark.

“He’s fine,” Cale said tersely.

Knock knock knock!

There was a knock on the door right before it opened. Hans stood there with water, as well as a wet towel.

Cale gave Hans another order. “Hans?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Bring a stretcher.”

“Excuse me?”

Cale pointed to the bedridden Lark. “Put him on it and take him to the underground training arena. Make sure it’s clear of knights. I don’t want a single person in there.”

Hans gawked at him, taken aback. How could he suggest taking a sick boy to the *arena*?

Cale paid it no mind. “Hurry up.”

“Yes, my lord…” Hans clearly had loads of questions, but he did as Cale commanded, dashing off to grab something to carry Lark with.

After he left, Cale turned to the confused Choi Han and Rosalyn to explain things. “Choi Han and…you.”

“It’s Rosalyn.”

“Yes. Rosalyn.”

The two peeled their eyes away from Lark and faced Cale. Concern, worry, despair, and sincerity were plain on their faces—and it made the pair look more like good, simple people than legendary heroes.

“You two will need to take a beating,” Cale told them nonchalantly.

Rosalyn was floored. A few seconds passed before she said, “I beg your pardon…?”

Choi Han just waited for Cale to continue.

“When beastfolk with wild blood like the Wolf Tribe, Tiger Tribe, and Bear Tribe go berserk for the first time, their parents and siblings normally help take care of it. They endure all the berserk individual’s attacks and protect them so they don’t hurt themselves. That’s how they guide them through it safely.”

Gloom settled over Choi Han and Rosalyn. Lark didn’t have parents *or* siblings.

Cale peered at Lark. “I can tell that’s not an option for this boy.” He clapped his hands once, then pointed at Choi Han and Rosalyn. “That’s why we’ll pretend you’re his mother and father. Or, if you don’t like that scenario, you’ll be his older brother and sister. You two will protect him.”

While Cale had the Unbreakable Shield, he didn’t want to help coax Lark through his berserk state. Why should he step in when there were stronger people right here?

Rosalyn and Choi Han exchanged glances.

“He’ll tire out on his own. As soon as he does, the berserk state will weaken, and his rationality will return. This is the most important step for his first transformation. That’s the only way

for him to retain his sense of reason the next time he goes into Berserk Mode."

Ultimately, it was important for beastfolk to reach a state where their rationality could beat out their natural instincts.

Choi Han contemplated what Cale had said for a moment, then asked, "Mr. Cale, how long will he remain in Berserk Mode?"

"Well, he has the purest possible blood."

"So…it'll be a long time."

"Yes. Probably about two hours." Cale approached Choi Han, who stood beside Lark's bed, and patted his shoulder. "It'd be difficult for others, but it should be easy for you, Choi Han. I trust you."

"I'll succeed. I'm Lark's brother now."

Rosalyn shot Choi Han a look as she recalled him maniacally killing assassins and protecting survivors during their journey. Choi Han was always alert, observing his surroundings. Seeing someone like that so relaxed in such a dire situation was surprising.

Still watching Choi Han, Rosalyn heard Cale's composed voice. "All right. Let's eat something good after this is done."

He was thinking about the food and wine he hadn't gotten to finish.

The door opened, and Hans and Ron entered with something to carry Lark on. "The arena's been cleared, Lord Cale."

"That was fast." Cale ordered Choi Han to move the growling Lark onto the stretcher, then said, "Let's go."

He stuffed some things into a magic bag, and they headed for the arena.

***

The Henituse family was famous for its wealth, but their origins lay in military strength. Without that, how would they survive next to the Dark Forest and the dangerous monsters it

contained? Thus, their residences had underground training arenas that were larger and better than those belonging to dukes and marquesses.

As they entered the large arena, Cale told Ron and Hans, “Secure the area, and make sure no one comes down from the first floor. And you two stay out.”

“Yes, Lord Cale.”

“Understood, young master.”

Cale felt a bit leery about Ron’s extremely pleasant smile. Once the two servants disappeared without complaints, however, he brought the kittens into the corner of the arena. He also didn’t forget to shoo Choi Han and Rosalyn away.

“You two head to the center!” he called.

They moved as they were told. Choi Han carried Lark to the center of the arena. Rosalyn cautiously moved away from the boy, a serious look on her face.

“Grrrrr!”

Lark was convulsing now, his entire body shaking more and more violently. Neither Rosalyn nor Choi Han approached him. The boy’s nails grew long and sharp, looking like the claws of a wild beast.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Lark’s body, still on the ground, contorted as it curved like a bow.

Confirming that the large iron gate into the arena was shut tight, Cale crept closer to the corner. Ohn and Hong did the same.

This is no joke. Cale saw the tall, frail Lark start to change—and the boy screamed.

“Grrrrr... Aaaaaaah!” His bestial howling revealed his new sharp fangs.

He staggered as he got to his feet, then opened his eyes, scowling. Raising his face toward the ceiling, he let out another scream.

“Raaaaaagh!”

At that moment, a translucent barrier appeared. It was a shield.

As Ohn and Hong whipped around in shock, Cale said flippantly, “You really are amazing, dragon. Can you add some soundproofing?”

Another shield covered the existing one. Rosalyn glanced over and flinched in surprise upon seeing the two shields.

The voice of the black dragon, who must have been somewhere inside the shield, filled Cale’s ears. “You’re very weak. That’s why you need protection.”

Ohn and Hong were happy to realize it was the dragon, but when they heard what he said, they eyed Cale with pity. They seemed to agree with the dragon’s assessment.

Cale ignored their gazes. “Do whatever you want.”

“I don’t know why you aren’t using that power.” The dragon phrased his comment vaguely, realizing Cale didn’t want to reveal his Ancient Powers to others.

Cale shrugged. “You don’t need to know.”

A third shield appeared, for a total of three layers.

His skill’s growing exponentially, Cale mused.

Dragons and humans used magic differently. The former controlled it with their will. The speed of the black dragon’s growth surprised Cale, but it also made the dragon much more useful.

Cale plopped down on the ground to watch Lark enter Berserk Mode.

“Grrr... Aaaaaaah!”

The boy’s screams filled the arena. If it weren’t for the soundproof, shockproof magic, the residence’s knights would all have rushed down after hearing his cries.

Every time Lark yelled, he grew larger. New corded muscle appeared, and the boy’s eyes turned red—proof that he was on the verge of losing his mind. But why *was* that little boy from the Blue Wolf Tribe going berserk? In the novel, Lark had gone berserk a year from now in reaction to someone’s death.

Healer Pendrick, Cale remembered. That elf wound up dying in battle, and he'd reminded Lark of his dead uncle, the Blue Wolf Tribe's chief. Seeing Pendrick die drove Lark crazy; the boy wanted to tear apart everything and everyone in sight.

"Ohn. Hong." Cale looked down at the siblings, who were huddled together inside the shield. "You two haven't experienced Berserk Mode yet, right?"

The kittens shook their heads.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Not really."

"No grown-ups taught us about it."

Cale knew that was the case. Ohn and Hong were also purebloods, so their transformations would be rough too.

Facing the arena once more, Cale said, "The Wolf, Tiger, Bear, and Whale Tribes lose the most of their faculties of all beastfolk during their first transformation. That's why we say those four tribes are the beastfolk closest to monsters."

He didn't know much about the Cat Tribe, though.

"I don't exactly know everything there is to know about the transformation. But if you feel like you're going to go berserk, or your body suddenly hurts or heats up, come to me immediately."

It'd be a headache if they wreaked havoc, and who would have to clean it up? Cale, since he was the type to assume full responsibility for the people he brought into his circle.

When he didn't hear a response, Cale ventured a glance at the kittens. Their two sets of golden irises were locked on him, and though they'd appeared frozen in place, both scurried over to his leg and rubbed their faces on it.

Why are they like this?

Uncomfortable with their behavior, he scooched a bit farther away. As he did, one of the kittens said something that gave him chills.

"Do dragons go berserk?"

"No."

It would be crazy for dragons to transform. If a *dragon* went into Berserk Mode, mountains would disappear in an instant, at minimum. It was a terrifying thought. Cale's expression was stiffer than ever, but he continued to stare straight ahead—his way of saying he didn't want to hear any more about it.

"Tch."

He heard the dragon click his tongue. *What was that about?*

While Cale brooded about the dragon's fickle nature, Lark's transformation finally finished. The fierce beastman, who could no longer be called a mere "boy," was covered in the dark-blue fur unique to the Blue Wolf Tribe.

The wolfish Lark stomped the ground. *Thoom.* The entire arena shook. He drew his arm back, preparing to strike. His fingers ended in razor-sharp claws, and the muscles on his long arms far exceeded Choi Han's.

Choi Han and Rosalyn called out to him in earnest.

"Lark!"

"Lark! Snap out of it!"

Now that Lark had lost his sense of reason, he saw them not as friends but as targets to attack.

"Grrrrrr." The coarse growl of a beast came out of the wolf's mouth. He rushed toward Choi Han, now one and a half times the hero's size.

"Lark, don't! It's me, Choi Han!"

Choi Han couldn't attack his companion and thus only defended himself with fretful shouts. Would that do anything to help Lark return to normal? Cale shook his head and continued to watch.

"Just smacking him on the head and knocking him out would be fastest," he mused.

The kittens gasped and scuttled away from him.

Despite his claim, Cale had no intention of making Choi Han do anything of the sort. After all, a beastman who passed out during his first transformation would lose his reason again when he went berserk in the future.

“Wow.”

The berserk beastman’s attack was stronger than Cale expected. Lark was moving instinctively, using completely different muscles.

Cale called the kittens over. “Ohn, Hong—watch that Wolf Tribe kid’s movements.”

As he instructed Ohn and Hong to pay close attention, the werewolf Lark charged relentlessly at Choi Han and Rosalyn. There was no retreating for Lark; it went against the Wolf Tribe’s nature.

“Those are the instinctive movements of a beastman,” Cale told the kittens in hushed tones. “The fact that they can move like that purely on instinct, unlike humans, is part of the Beast Tribes’ beauty and might.”

Bang! Lark’s fist smashed the marble floor, breaking it. He was displaying tremendous strength.

“You shouldn’t fear or dread going berserk,” Cale continued. “That’s when beastfolk are at their strongest.”

Pat. He patted the two kittens’ heads.

“The Cat and Wolf Tribes are different, but you two are beastfolk as well. Watch him to see how a wild animal can move instinctively. And then…”

Their two sets of golden irises made eye contact with Cale.

“Make it your own. Or think up a way to kill the bears, tigers, wolves—the beastfolk considered the wildest.”

The two Cat Tribe children spun away from Cale, sitting up straight and observing Lark’s every move. Their fur stood on end as a tense energy enveloped their bodies. Cats were weaker than the wilder beasts, and since Ohn and Hong belonged to a tribe that relied on stealth, they understood Cale’s lesson.

Cale watched them for a while, then addressed the dragon. “Hey.”

The black dragon appeared from thin air. Rosalyn and Choi Han wouldn’t have time to look over, since they had to give Lark their full attention.

Cale pointed to the pair and told the dragon, “Look how Rosalyn uses her magic to avoid hurting her opponent. And how Choi Han carefully uses his aura to protect the wolf kid rather than go on the offensive.”

Tang! Tang! Tang! Lark’s lightning-fast punches pounded Rosalyn’s shield.

Absorbing Lark’s attack, Rosalyn desperately called out to the boy. “Lark, you remember me, right? I said you were part of my family now. Hurry up and snap out of it!”

Choi Han enhanced his aura’s intensity to goad Lark. “Lark, attack me! I will protect you!”

Responding to the aura, Lark swung his claws at Choi Han. He wasn’t using an aura, but his full physical strength was behind the attack.

Watching the scene from a distance, Cale went on, “It’s harder to *avoid* harm than to cause it. But I know you’ll pick it up quickly, since you’re a dragon.”

“I *am* a dragon,” the creature responded. “There’s nothing I cannot do.”

“Right. So watch them and make your own judgments.”

The dragon flew down to land next to the kittens and turned invisible again. Cale figured he would study the trio’s movements, as the kittens were.

Should I have at least brought some wine with me?
Suppressing his disappointment at the lack of refreshments, Cale quietly watched the boring battle between a single attacker and two defenders. For two hours—the duration of a typical movie—the three animal children also kept their eyes on the battle.

Gradually, Choi Han and Rosalyn became exhausted.

“Huff…huff…”

But the most exhausted one was Lark.

“Huff…huff… Choi Han…”

“Lark!”

Reacting to his name, Choi Han ran to the beastman, who was staggering on the verge of collapse. Since Lark's Berserk Mode hadn't yet abated, Choi Han's actions displeased Cale; he shot to his feet.

"R-Rosalyn…"

Lark had recognized her as well.

"Oh, Lark!"

Rosalyn rushed over to hug him too. Lark was still covered in dark-blue fur, but his eyes were finally focusing. He was unharmed, whereas Rosalyn and Choi Han had minor injuries. The two had protected Lark like he was family.

Through his panting, Lark said, "So…sorry…"

His rationality had returned. It was a perfect first transformation; he'd overcome all of Berserk Mode's obstacles. Laying his head on Rosalyn, who was half his height, thirteen-year-old Lark started to cry, his sobs mixed with bestial whimpers. As Berserk Mode abated, Lark slowly returned to his human form, then stumbled.

"Lark!"

Choi Han quickly swooped in, grabbing him to keep him steady. Lark felt his consciousness fading, but he did his best not to faint. He was afraid he'd return to Berserk Mode. As the boy fought to keep his eyes open, a man carrying two kittens stood in front of him. It was the man who'd said the same thing as Lark's uncle. *Uncle…*

The man spoke to Lark. "You can rest now." He smiled, urging Lark to close his eyes, like he had before. "It's all over."

Upon receiving his permission, Lark finally relaxed. He closed his eyes and passed out, leaning on Choi Han. Choi Han carefully laid him back on the stretcher. Cale took his eyes off the pair, retrieved a potion from his bag, and haphazardly tossed it to Rosalyn.

She caught the bottle, then pointed out, "Potions don't work on Lark, do they?"

Cale shot the confused mage an incredulous look. "Why would I give someone from the Wolf Tribe a potion? It's for you.

You've done well."

Rosalyn stared at Cale. She'd spotted his three-layered magic shield—a truly amazing sight—and had numerous questions for him. But gratitude came first, so she said, "Thank you very much."

"No need," Cale replied.

He turned to Choi Han, and their eyes met. *Just how did all this happen?* He needed to hear how the situation came about.

"Choi Han, we need to talk."

***

Leaving the underground arena with Choi Han in tow, Cale told Hans and Ron—who were waiting outside the first-floor entrance—to take care of Rosalyn and Lark.

"Hans. Ron. Escort the pair still in the arena."

With that, he returned to his room with Choi Han. With the table of cold, unfinished food between the two of them, Cale got right to the point. "Tell me."

"All right." Choi Han straightened up as he began, "Everything was fine until I met Rosalyn."

"Go on."

"I reached the city you mentioned. Once I got there, I found the merchant fleet heading for the capital, as you described. Well, it was just a small, five-person brigade rather than a fleet," Choi Han said, opting for a better descriptor. "They happened to be looking for two mercenaries to guard them, since the guards who usually accompanied them were wounded."

Choi Han and Rosalyn filled the two vacancies, which was also how it had gone in the books.

"That was where I met Rosalyn. She looked just like you described."

The Kingdom of Brek was across Rowoon's northwestern border. Rosalyn had originally been heading from Brek to the Magic Tower in the Kingdom of the Whipper, located south of

Rowoon. However, when she crossed into Rowoon, someone had tried to assassinate her.

She had been hiding about half her magic skills until that point, and she was able to escape the danger by using *all* her skills. At that point, since she didn't know anything about the people who'd attacked her, she thought it would be smart to head to Rowoon's capital to get intelligence from the information guild rather than go straight back to Brek.

She caused quite a scene when she got back to the Kingdom of Brek.

After confirming that he'd met Rosalyn as a mercenary for the merchant group, Choi Han continued, "She was also heading to the capital, and we felt that was fortuitous. We got to be on friendly terms."

What did he say? "Hmm? Friendly?"

"Yes," Choi Han said somewhat bashfully. "I'm generally not one to initiate conversation, but I thought we might as well get along."

"You didn't really need to," Cale replied, concerned. "You should just have acted like your usual self."

In the original books, Rosalyn and Choi Han hadn't gotten close to each other until they met Lark. Rosalyn's wariness of people had been heightened by the assassination attempt, so she would never willingly initiate friendship. Similarly, after the incident in Harris, Choi Han wasn't inclined to close the gap between himself and others to become friends.

Choi Han nodded, then smiled and added, "It definitely wasn't something I'd normally do, but I wanted to do it right. It's my way of paying you back."

Cale let out a sigh, shaking his head. Choi Han was unsurprised; he brushed it off and continued his story, his expression sobering.

"Before resuming their journey, that merchant group planned to stay for a few days in the village where you said I would find Lark."

That was indeed the case. The five-person merchant group had been formed by someone who'd received help from the Blue

Wolf Tribe. The group's injured guards had actually been Blue Wolf warriors. The merchants had deliberately taken the long way from Perthle to Whis, rather than a shorter route, to deliver daily necessities to the tribe in exchange for medicinal herbs.

Of course, going to the Blue Wolf Tribe's village deep in the mountains would've been arduous—not to mention expensive. Thus, the merchants met members of the tribe in a tiny, remote village at the foot of the mountains to do business quietly. One merchant, who was now sixty, had continued this partnership with the Blue Wolf Tribe for the past thirty years.

"Once we arrived at that remote village, something happened."

Cale became alert. The story from here on was important.

"Right around when we reached that village, I learned that the merchants' previous guards were from the Blue Wolf Tribe. I also found out that the village where they planned to trade with the tribe members was the one you'd mentioned."

Cale nodded. He knew Choi Han would figure it out pretty easily.

"I figured I'd just need to become acquainted with a tribe member who showed up at the village, then follow him to find Lark." However, Choi Han explained, the beastfolk didn't arrive. "When nobody from the tribe came to trade, the merchants asked us for extra assistance."

Cale guessed what the merchants' request would be: *Go to the Blue Wolf village with the injured Blue Wolf guard.*

Sure enough, Choi Han said, "He asked if we could visit the wolves' village with the injured guard."

"And you agreed?"

"Yes. Rosalyn did too."

Things had followed the original plot until this point, but where did they diverge?

In *Birth of a Hero*, Choi Han and Rosalyn arrived at the village with the guard, only to find it destroyed and the secret organization's assassins fleeing the scene. At that point, Choi Han flashed back to what had happened to Harris and

confronted the assassins head-on. The guard accompanying them also went berserk and began killing assassins; he sustained even more injuries in the process and ended up dying.

That was when Rosalyn learned of Choi Han's strength, Cale remembered.

At that point, Rosalyn—who'd been masquerading as a beginner mage—officially asked Choi Han to escort her back to Brek. She also offered exorbitant compensation.

Then they found Lark hiding in the destroyed village.

Until Choi Han found the wolf boy, Lark had been in hiding, as the Blue Wolf chief told him to. The young Lark was very much a coward, a weakling, and a tad bit slow. In a nutshell, he was a -character readers could easily find extremely frustrating. After his first transformation, though, Lark's innate abilities and physical prowess made him one of the top five characters in the novel.

But why had he transformed a year early?

"Mr. Cale?"

"Yeah?"

"I saw something familiar there."

"What did you see?"

Choi Han hesitated, then dipped his head. The tension in the air could probably have reheated the cold food on the table between them.

"A white star and five red stars."

Cale's expression sobered, and his heart sank. *Is he saying that the secret organization's official representatives showed up in the village instead of their assassins? But why?*

In the novel, they'd targeted the Blue Wolf Tribe for assassination, so the team should've been dispatched—not recognizable members of the organization.

Looking at Cale's cold expression, Choi Han recalled the past for a moment. His fists clenched, shaking in anger. Against his expectations, the houses in the Blue Wolf village deep in the mountains had been simple and small. All of them had been destroyed. Moreover, the Blue Wolf corpses on the ground were

completely black, burnt to a crisp. They smelled of charred meat, and blood oozed from their open wounds. Most of the tribe members had died with their eyes open.

"The mountain village was already destroyed when we got there," Choi Han continued. "Many of the Blue Wolves were dead as well."

The Blue Wolf Tribe was known for its strength. How had the secret organization killed its members?

Wolves put their family, pack, and friends before themselves, so the secret organization used weak members who hadn't yet experienced Berserk Mode as hostages. Then they used a divine relic to weaken the full-grown wolves. A few berserk adult wolves had tried to attack, but the secret organization used holy water against them. In the story, after killing the adults, the assassins had murdered their young hostages.

The secret organization was immensely powerful and even had access to a divine relic. They'd used the fact that the gods disowned the wolves to their advantage. The cruel bastards had no issues taking young children hostage to kill their mothers, fathers, and the rest of the tribe.

The novel didn't say what divine relic the organization used against the Blue Wolf Tribe, Cale reflected.

If he knew what the relic was, he'd get a step closer to identifying the secret organization. Unfortunately, the novel had only described how the item weakened the wolves, so he had no way to unmask them yet.

"Were all the wolves dead?" Cale asked quietly. Choi Han shook his head, and Cale's face stiffened again.

Observing Cale, Choi Han added, "They were trying to capture the young children."

Capture? In the books, they just killed them all. Why would they want young Blue Wolf pups? Cale thought, puzzled.

Choi Han locked eyes with Cale, who appeared to have fallen into deep anguish. "When we reached the village entrance, we saw the chief at death's door."

Cale was still lost in thought. The Blue Wolf Tribe had less than a hundred members. “And they were trying to kidnap ten children,” he muttered. *This is getting too different from the book.*

“The moment the chief was about to collapse, a young boy blocked the way of the attackers trying to kidnap the children.”

“Was it Lark…?”

“Yes.”

Why had Lark come out this time? In the novel, he’d stayed hidden even when the children were killed. Did he think kidnapping was worse? Was he instinctively protecting his young siblings and relatives, who were weaker than him? What would’ve ignited his wolfish instincts?

“I stopped the assassins. No—I tried to kill them.” As Choi Han said that, he stared straight at Cale.

The redhead showed no emotions as he urged, “Keep going.”

“I realized that, although they didn’t have the star emblem on their clothes, the attackers were using the same dark power as the assassins I’d encountered in Harris.”

“The same power as the people who destroyed Harris?” Cale asked, looking shocked.

“Yes.”

“Damn.” Holding his head with one hand, Cale heaved a sigh, acting as though it were his first time hearing about this. It *was* just an act, though.

“Only one person among them had the white star with five red stars on his chest—the one who killed the guard.” Choi Han teared up. “And that human trash was drinking the Blue Wolf Tribe’s blood.”

Cale closed his eyes. The blood-drinking mage—that crazy lunatic would lead the terror incident in the capital.

He kept his eyes closed as he heard the rest of Choi Han’s report. “In the end, I couldn’t capture or kill them. The ones I tried to take prisoner committed suicide, and the rest disappeared when the guy wearing the star insignia used teleportation magic.”

That mage has reached the highest tier, and he's crazy for blood. Why would he try to kidnap the Blue Wolf children instead of killing them, like in the novel? Cale wondered. The only things he could think of that had changed were things *he'd* changed. *I did save the dragon. Did that change the course of the plot?*

Choi Han pressed on, his controlled voice laced with bitterness and rage. "That mage said, 'How disappointing. They were perfect seeds. These young ones probably have even tastier blood.'"

Cale didn't know what the mage meant by "seeds," but he tucked the word in the back of his mind as he opened his eyes and asked, "And the children?"

The guard, chief, and other Wolf Tribe adults were dead, which left only the ten children and Lark.

Choi Han briefly averted his eyes. It was the first time he'd done so since they'd sat down across from each other at this table. Cale instantly figured out what must have happened.

"They're at the inn," Choi Han replied quietly.

Cale had thought as much.

Choi Han opened and closed his mouth a few more times before finally adding, "We brought them there using Rosalyn's magic."

At this rate, my social circle is going to turn into a zoo.

Cale felt a headache brewing. Choi Han should just have left the children with that merchant who'd been dealing with the Blue Wolf Tribe for years. Although he was far away from power right now, he was still a great merchant.

"For your information, Mr. Cale, that merchant is also at the inn."

Is this how the story will proceed?

Having finished his report, Choi Han finally leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"You must be curious," Cale noted.

Choi Han looked at the cold food. "Yes, I am." He didn't even need to say *what* he was curious about.

Who were these people who continued to take others' lives? Why were they doing such terrible things? And why did Cale know about them? Choi Han was curious about all those things.

Cale studied Choi Han's eyes, which were still fixed on the dishes. *That punk is really angry.*

Choi Han's anger wasn't directed at Cale, but he was sharpening his rage toward the secret organization, like a blade. First Harris, then the tortured dragon, and now the incident with the Blue Wolf Tribe—and Choi Han wasn't the type to rest on his laurels when such things arose. On the contrary, he *had* to attack these problems head-on.

Cale picked up a piece of bread. He ripped off a chunk and popped it in his mouth; though no longer warm, it was still delicious. "I plan to tell you two things."

"But not everything?"

"No."

Without sparing a glance at Choi Han, who was staring at him, Cale stood with his bread in hand. His chair pushed back noiselessly on the carpet.

"Stand up."

"Are we going somewhere?"

Once Choi Han had stood up as well, Cale checked his watch. It was long past afternoon and heading toward night, but the place Cale had in mind shone brighter as night fell.

On his way to the door, Cale answered, "The Temple of the God of Death."

Cale intended to go there with Choi Han. Temples of the God of Death appointed special priests who couldn't be found anywhere else on the continent: Deaf Officials. They couldn't hear anything, which was why believers in the God of Death sought them out. Cale didn't follow the God of Death, but he planned to visit the Deaf Official, just as most nobles had.

Cale turned back at the door and smiled at Choi Han, who still stood by the table. "I plan to tell you two truths…"

The next words out of his mouth weren't lighthearted at all.

"...with my life on the line."

Choi Han's eyes wavered.

Unlike Choi Han, Cale still had a smile on his face. "Follow me," he added.

Choi Han moved slowly away from the table toward the door. His gaze was calm once more, yet his face was grim.

Turning the doorknob, Cale repeated, "I'll tell you the truth with my life on the line."

With that, he made for the God of Death's temple alongside Choi Han.

***

Nobody seemed to find it odd that Cale suddenly wanted to leave. Ron was nowhere to be found, and Hans's only question was about Cale's destination.

"Where are you going, Lord Cale?"

"Don't worry about it."

"All right, my lord! But since this is your first day in the capital, can you come back without breaking any wine bottles?"

"Do you intend to keep stepping out of line?"

"Not at all. Please return safely, Lord Cale."

Boarding his carriage, Cale considered how to deal with Hans, who kept talking back.

When the carriage stopped, he stood to disembark. "Let's get off."

"All right."

Choi Han had been quiet since they first entered the carriage. No—actually, since they stepped out of Cale's room. He seemed lost in thought.

Cale was only familiar with Choi Han's personality up to the fifth volume of *Birth of a Hero*. That being the case, he was sure about one thing. Although Choi Han was a good person, he wasn't gullible at all; he was smart.

If I make unbelievable excuses, he might believe them at first, but he'll definitely doubt me later.

After living in solitude for decades, Choi Han was possibly very lonely, but the fact that he'd survived on his own was a testament to his intelligence and perseverance.

For the moment, Choi Han might appreciate and follow Cale. As Cale had read around Volume Five of *Birth of a Hero*, he would eventually strive to be a leader. He'd live to enact his personal views on justice.

When Cale alighted, he saw that the Temple of the God of Death was completely white. "It's *colorless*," he muttered.

Believers in the God of Death considered white the color of mortality. Every day, they cleaned everything to ensure there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere in the building.

What an interesting place.

Most humans feared the night. With this temple, acolytes of the God of Death hoped to show that there was nothing frightening about it. Once the sun began to set, the temple was open to both believers and nonbelievers.

Apparently, if you visit during the day, the priests are all sleeping. The temple really was intriguing, in Cale's opinion.

Two priests greeted them at the temple entrance. "May you be blessed with peaceful rest!" both said.

The God of Death's priests tended to be extremely upbeat. People might consider death to be the end, but the temple's philosophy was that it was important to enjoy life as you headed toward that peaceful rest.

Cale slowly approached one of the clergymen. "Priest."

The priest inspected Cale curiously. Based on his outfit, Cale appeared to be the son of either an affluent noble or a wealthy merchant. Yet the man behind him looked like a beggar—although he appeared to be a strong fighter with the sword at his waist.

"What can I do for you?" the priest asked.

"Is a Room of Death open?"

The two priests standing at the temple entrance grimaced.

The priest Cale was speaking to looked back and forth between him and Choi Han. “Whose death will you be offering?”

As he asked that, he peeked again at Choi Han, who looked like he’d rolled down a mountain and suffered a couple of days without a proper meal. The young man also looked quite kind and easy to scam, so the priest felt a bit leery about the pair.

The priest turned his gaze to the affluent noble. He had attractive red hair and a handsome face—not extraordinarily so, but enough to draw attention wherever he went.

Smiling, Cale raised his hand. “Mine.”

“Excuse me?”

Cale smirked wider at the bewildered priest. “I’ll be putting my life on the line.”

Choi Han placed his hand on Cale’s shoulder. “Mr. Cale?”

“What?” Cale turned around to see Choi Han’s grave, anxious expression.

“Even if you don’t go to these lengths, I’ll believe you.”

Cale’s smile turned exasperated. “I don’t think you will,” he responded in a low voice.

Choi Han would have no choice but to doubt him. How could he believe Cale, when the count’s son hardly planned to tell him anything? That was the reason Cale had broached risking his life to prove his honesty.

Why would I tell him everything? Things would just get messier.

Focusing on achieving a peaceful life, Cale had determined there was no need to get involved further with Choi Han. In his view, the situation had already gone too far; Choi Han had made more trouble for him by sheltering all those wolf children.

Later, this character rides whales with the Whale Tribe to fight mermaids.

In this human-centered world, embracing both humans and non-humans changed Choi Han. His encounter with the Whale Tribe initiated that. That tribe appeared at the beginning of Volume Five, and Cale honestly found them downright frightening.

They were the deadliest predators.

The whales were the strongest—and the most beautiful—beastfolk. They came in different shades of black, gray, and pink, and they were all stunning. In comparison, this world's mermaids had two legs and fins. They looked like humans covered in scales.

The whales are stubborn, though. They won't even humble themselves in front of dragons.

They were also fearsome, although few in number. A whale could easily and violently decapitate a human with a light punch. Even Lark couldn't raise a hand against them.

And they have ruthless tempers.

At any rate, Choi Han got involved with various other people besides the Whale Tribe and got into all sorts of trouble. Cale had absolutely no desire to remain connected to him.

"Is a room available, priest?"

"Yes, we have one. I'll ready it for you right away. Come to the basement, please."

"Thank you."

Cale followed the priest. Choi Han trailed behind him with a dubious expression. Taking note of Choi Han, Cale strolled to the innermost area of the temple. After a long walk, they reached a wall with numerous doors.

The priest opened one door, revealing a staircase leading down into the basement. "Death awaits you at the bottom."

"Great. Let's go."

The intrigued priest watched Cale stride downstairs without hesitation.

In this temple, "death" was synonymous with "vow." Death was guaranteed to visit you at some point; it wasn't something you could avoid. The temple believed that death, along with life that accompanied it, was one's fate—and, in short, one's vow. Thus, it was the temple officials' duty to bring about the death of those who went against their vows.

In light of that, people who headed to this Room of Death—sometimes called the Room of Vows—tended to be solemn

and serious. By contrast, this young man was wealthy and easygoing. Very unique, in the priest's eyes. *Reminds me of Kage,* he thought. The priestess was easygoing but cursed the temple frequently. Still, the God of Death loved her. Despite suddenly remembering her, the priest quickly erased Kage from his thoughts.

At the exact same time, Kage once again heard the God of Death's voice and threw a tantrum in frustration.

Repressing the thought of Kage, the priest reached the bottom of the steps. Standing before a door, he turned the knob. "Please wait a moment. I'll get things ready."

The priest entered the room, leaving Cale and Choi Han alone.

Cale eyed the closed door, then said, "If you really don't think we need to do this, I'll tell you one of the truths in advance. What do you think?"

"Yes. Please tell me," Choi Han responded immediately. "I trust you."

"Do you now?" Cale rubbed his chin with one hand before tossing out his next words. "Here's the first of the two truths." He looked at Choi Han. "I don't know the secret organization's identity or its goal."

Choi Han looked taken aback. "What are you—"

At that moment, they heard a *click* as the doorknob turned.

The priest reemerged. "You can enter now. Inside the room, the one putting his life on the line just needs to raise his hand for the priest to see."

"Thanks. We understand," said Cale, relaxed.

Compared to him, Choi Han seemed extremely conflicted and anxious. The priest tilted his head in confusion at that, then slipped away. It was none of his business.

Cale grasped the doorknob as he glanced back at Choi Han. "Hard to believe, wasn't it?"

"Well, that's..." In his fluster and disbelief, Choi Han struggled to answer. Though Choi Han had said he trusted Cale,

it just didn't add up. How could Cale *not* know about the organization? Did that make any sense?

Then Choi Han heard Cale's composed voice in his ear. "What you're thinking is understandable."

Choi Han stared at him. Cale's easygoing expression made him look more mature than usual.

"Let's head in."

Choi Han followed Cale into the Room of Death behind the white door.

As Cale had expected, the room was completely white, including the table, chairs, and walls. The only thing in the room that wasn't white as a sheet was the priest, who stood with his mouth and ears covered.

The Deaf Official. Cale wasn't really keen on that title, but those priests were quite respected in this world. Anybody needing to conduct a private conversation or sign a secret contract came to see a Deaf Official—including nobles and royalty.

Cale bowed his head to greet the priest, then raised his hand. The priest nodded and pointed to the two chairs by the table. Cale sat on the right side, while Choi Han sat across from him on the left. The priest moved to the head of the table and pushed a sheet of paper toward them.

To the person putting their life on the line: The God of Death will lay a hand on the one who came with you. Once that happens, say your vow. Should you break it, death will come to you.

That's one vicious set of directions, Cale reflected. Confirming that Choi Han had finished reading them, he nudged the paper back toward the priest. The priest lifted both hands, as Kage had done before. Right then, the white room shook.

Groooooooooong. Groooooong.

Black smoke curled around the priest right away, perhaps more potent in this house of worship. The smoke quickly

surrounded Choi Han and Cale, forming a single thread that connected them.

"Is this the power of the God of Death…?" Choi Han asked.

"That's right," Cale said, feeling the black smoke envelop him as it had during Kage's vow. He instinctively recognized the god's power and the meaning behind the black smoke. *I'll die if I break this vow.*

He was sure Choi Han felt that as well; it was likely why his face had grown wooden.

Feeling the God of Death's touch, Cale started his vow. "The priest in front of me swears that he cannot hear. If that is untrue, he will pay with his life."

That was the introductory phrase uttered whenever a vow was made in a Deaf Official's presence.

"Furthermore, I, Cale Henituse, vow to speak the truth to Choi Han in front of the God of Eternal Rest. If what I say is even slightly untrue, I will immediately pay the price by dying on the spot."

The word "immediately" made Choi Han scowl even deeper. He was tense.

At first, Cale debated whether to tell Choi Han everything.

"I'm Korean too, and I was transported into a novel I was reading. That's why I know what happens up to Volume Five. That secret organization goes on to cause problems throughout the continent. Due to various machinations, a war breaks out, and the continent soon falls into chaos."

Should he say all that? Or should he just say he'd been transported into a book he'd read and ended up a wealthy count's son? He was simply trying to live a peaceful life, but since he remembered what happened in the novel, he'd changed it around a bit. His goal was to live peacefully even if the continent was a war zone.

Should he tell Choi Han *that*? Whichever version he revealed, there was no question that the aftermath would be horrendous. The first version might involve him in the continent's war, so he would die on the battlefield. The second might lead Choi Han to kill him out of contempt.

Cale didn't like either scenario.

"First," he said, referring to the first of the two truths, "I, Cale Henituse, do not know the organization's identity."

Choi Han sucked in a breath, clapping his hands over his face. Once he lowered them, he saw that Cale was still alive.

"I honestly don't know their identity," Cale repeated.

It was the truth. Although Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu—knew some things the secret organization did in those first five volumes, he didn't know anything *about* the organization, including their goal or identity.

"The other thing I'm about to say is also absolutely true," Cale declared, then revealed the second truth: "I despise that organization and want it to disappear."

After saying as much, Cale was still alive. He *didn't* like these people who caused upheaval and who would probably take part in the continental war. He wanted them to vanish so he could live peacefully, on a peaceful continent.

Choi Han was lost for words. He looked at the black thread connecting the three of them, then repeatedly clenched and unclenched his fist. Cale hesitated for a moment at his fearsome expression.

That was when Choi Han spoke. "How can you despise it if you can't identify it?"

"Because I know about a few terrible things they were connected to. The black dragon's imprisonment and Lark's wrecked village are two of those things. Listen, Choi Han..." Cale pointed to himself. "I'm living my life as a lout. That's my dream."

Choi Han made a face when he heard that being a lout was Cale's *dream*.

"I have no desire to become my family's heir," Cale continued. "I'm hoping my younger brother, Bassen, will succeed the count." That was also true. Cale then posed a question to Choi Han: "Why would I come to the capital representing the Henituse family, then? Especially if I'm hoping Bassen becomes heir? My father, the head of the household, did tell me to. Still, I could've refused."

After a beat, Choi Han said, “I’m not sure why.”

“Because I know what the secret organization plans to do in the capital.”

Choi Han’s eyes went wide.

“I can’t tell you how I know,” Cale went on. “But they plan to kill a lot of people here, so I couldn’t send Bassen. I want to prevent that incident.” He *didn’t* plan to pull out all the stops risking his life for others, of course. “After taking care of this issue as quietly as I can, I’ll return to Henituse territory.”

“You can’t tell me how you know about all this?”

“No. I can’t tell a single soul in this world.”

Choi Han’s eyes were full of questions, but his mouth stayed shut. He reflected on what Cale had said so far. He wasn’t privy to the secret organization’s identity, but he knew a couple of things they’d end up doing. He also despised them and wanted them gone.

Letting his head droop, Choi Han thought things over. His mind was a mess, but the God of Death’s power surging through the black thread reassured him. He knew Cale would’ve died on the spot if he’d lied.

“For your sake, I’ll tell you one more thing,” Cale added.

At the words “one more,” Choi Han’s head snapped up.

“The last truth is that I have no desire to harm you.”

He said it confidently and remained alive, which meant it was true.

Choi Han’s face contorted, and his hand tapped his thigh. *Thump. Thump.* It wasn’t striking hard, yet veins bulged out of his tightly clenched fist. He glanced upward; Cale was still alive.

“I believe you,” Choi Han said.

Hearing that response, which took ages to come out, Cale repeated the words he’d told Choi Han before they entered the room: “What you’re thinking is understandable.” Then he smiled.

Choi Han sighed, still sitting at the white table. He lifted his head to look squarely at Cale. His gaze was gentle as usual—and

stubborn to boot. “Please make one more vow, Mr. Cale. Then I’ll trust you completely.”

Cale hadn’t anticipated this. He felt a bit uncomfortable with the request. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, since he’d find a way to twist anything to suit himself, but the phrase “trust you completely” didn’t sit well with him. It wasn’t like he could refuse now, though.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Mr. Cale.”

“Yes?”

“I must get revenge on that organization. I think this is the first time in my life I’ve reviled a person or group so much.”

Hatred flared in Choi Han’s kind eyes, lunacy visible within it. Choi Han was probably thinking of Harris.

Hmm.

Cale gulped. This was why he didn’t want Choi Han at his side, even if the young man obeyed him. Choi Han was a good person, but he always finished what he set his mind to. The redhead nervously awaited Choi Han’s final request.

Choi Han said calmly, “No matter what, once you find out their identity, you must tell me, please.”

“Uh… Well, sure.” *I thought he’d ask for something difficult.* With an acerbic expression, Cale vowed, “I, Cale Henituse, will inform Choi Han once I learn this organization’s identity. Should I break this vow, I will pay with my life. Is that good enough?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.” Choi Han finally smiled, looking relieved.

Observing him, Cale wondered, *How would I ever learn their identity?*

To find that out—in fact, to find even a sliver of a clue—he’d need to take the same route Choi Han did in the books. He’d have to be crazy to do that. Once Choi Han left Whis and the Kingdom of Rowoon, he’d run into all sorts of heroes, human and nonhuman alike. Just thinking about it creeped Cale out.

“Then we’re done, aren’t we?”

"Yes."

Cale lifted his hand and slammed it down on the table. *Bang!* The impact shook the table slightly. The Deaf Official opened his eyes and nodded, and the area vibrated once more.

Groooooong.

The black smoke disappeared into each of their bodies, which was slightly different from when Cale had seen the crazy priestess Kage do it. As he felt his vows melt into his body, he took a piece of paper out of his pocket. It was a check for ten million galleons. Cale put the money in front of the solemn, seated priest. Then he got up, bidding farewell to the Deaf Official before leaving the room.

Choi Han looked back and forth between the check and Cale. Then he followed Cale out and closed the door behind them, a quizzical look in his eyes.

Cale said matter-of-factly, "Nothing in life is free."

"I see."

They walked back upstairs. The priest who'd initially escorted them stood at the first-floor entrance; he greeted the *still very much alive* Cale. "May your life continue until its destined time." That line encouraged the recipient to live a long life by keeping their vow.

What a ruthless greeting. "Thank you very much, priest," Cale responded with a smile.

The priest found his smile and casual tone strange. Paying him no heed, Cale walked past him, exited the temple, and then got into his carriage. Once it moved, he spoke to Choi Han.

"For your information, that crazy mage who drank blood will spearhead the incident in the capital."

"May I kill him when I see him?"

"Why ask such an obvious question? Do as you like."

Killing him or not was up to Choi Han. That said, the blood-drinking mage's magic was at the top level, and he was a teleportation specialist. Choi Han was never able to kill him in *Birth of a Hero*.

“Then, yes, I’ll make sure to kill him.” An obsessive rage twisted Choi Han’s kind face.

Cale oh-so-casually turned away. Choi Han’s reaction was too vicious for him to handle. He was, after all, a self-proclaimed coward.

Chapter 8:
Stay Still

WHEN CALE TRIED TO REST in his room, another person he found difficult to handle came to see him.

"Young master," the assassin said with a benevolent smile.

"Ron." Cale stared at the teacup Ron had silently set before him. "Lemon tea before bed?"

"Yes, young master."

The redhead wasn't used to lemon tea at bedtime, and he didn't feel like drinking it. Still, he lifted the teacup without complaint. As he sipped the tea, he felt Ron's gaze on him.

"Young master, may I make a request?"

Cale choked on his tea, eyes flying wide. His head snapped up toward Ron. "What? A request?"

As usual, the old servant had a gentle smile on his face. Cale squinted, his mind racing. *This devious old man has a request for me? Someone he thinks is useless?* An overwhelming, ominous feeling washed over him, and Korean folktales from his life as Kim Roksu flashed through his mind. He felt like the man who'd tried to get rid of the lump on his face and ended up with two. Either that, or the greedy woodcutter who laid claim to golden and silver axes, only to leave empty-handed—without even his own steel axe. In short, he felt like he'd overplayed his hand.

He pulled himself together, then said calmly, "All right, what is it?"

"May I take two days' vacation?"

"Oh."

Cale felt like he'd had his lump removed and gotten the golden and silver axes all at once.

He put his teacup down and grabbed Ron's hand, blurting much more rapidly than usual, "Yes! That's a great idea! Ron, you've worked so hard for a decade. And the 'young master' you've had to care for is an utter lout! You can take as long a break as you want. You're more than welcome to."

Indeed, Cale would've loved for Ron to take a *very* long break. For Cale to hook the old servant up with Choi Han, however, Ron would need to return before the Plaza Terror Incident. A forty-eight-hour break was perfect. Cale was ecstatic at the prospect of not seeing the assassin's face for the next two days.

Ron made a face at Cale, who still clasped his hand. The redhead turned away for a moment and opened a drawer in his nightstand. He pulled out the pouch of money and held it up. While his checks and larger sums were stashed in the manor's safe, there were plenty of coins in the pouch.

Cale fiddled with it. As a man belonging to a wealthy family, he didn't really have anything to give other than money. "Here. This isn't much, but buy yourself some delicious food. Enjoy your time off."

Ron gaped at the pouch Cale placed in his hand. *Buy delicious food and enjoy my time off?* The suggestion made Ron reflect on how long he'd lived in hiding. He'd spent the whole time taking care of this lout, his little pup master. Now he was trying to step back out of hiding and restart his life.

However, his future would likely be chaotic. And if the people he reviled really had crossed to the Western Continent, it would be far worse than just chaotic.

Then I should leave my son here.

Ron glanced at his young master, who didn't have a care in the world. "Are you sure about this?"

Cale was jubilant. He hoped Ron enjoyed his break *so* much that he wanted to leave Cale the lout for good. "Of course, Ron. You have the right to enjoy a break."

"The right," he says...?

Ron's original plan had been to slip away in a few days, either alone or with Vicross. The problem was this damnable affection he'd developed for Cale. He had floated the idea of taking some days off to see what the kid would say.

Though Ron's expression was gentle, his gaze was cold. "Young master, this is too much money. What will you do if I take it and run away?"

Or do you want *me to run away, since you've heard I'm a strong and shady individual?* His little pup master now knew what kind of person Ron was, thanks to Choi Han. His age and forced smiles had deepened the wrinkles and grooves in his face, yet his eyes were as sharp and clear as ever.

Cale snorted a laugh. "You think I don't know your personality, Ron? If you were running off, you'd either leave without saying anything or just flat-out say you were leaving. Am I wrong?"

That was how Ron had left in *Birth of a Hero*. He hadn't said a word to Count Henituse. Whenever he needed to separate from Choi Han's party for a bit, he would discuss their contractual obligations first.

Ron nodded with a benevolent smile. "You are correct."

Now that he thought about it, this little pup master had seen him more often than his own son for the last dozen or so years. Cale might well be the person who knew the current Ron the best.

I'm getting quite old now too.

He accepted the fact that he was getting older. Like a tree growing rings in its trunk, he had experienced the gradual effects of time.

"I'll be back to serve you when you head to the royal palace," he told Cale.

"If that's what you want."

Glancing at the uninterested Cale, Ron tucked away the money pouch. He couldn't allow Cale to go to the palace looking worse than the royal family or other nobles. He didn't want to see others look down on the little pup master he'd raised.

Preventing that would be his last duty before he left.

"I'll be going, then."

"Sure, sure."

Sitting down on his bed, Cale waved Ron off. Once the old servant was gone, Cale had a wonderful night's sleep for the first time in ages.

***

When Cale awoke around lunchtime the next day, Ron had already left for his break early in the morning. Thus, Hans was responsible for attending to the count's son.

"Mr. Ron said he wouldn't be comfortable unless it was me looking after you. Ha ha! I must say, I *am* rather amazing."

"Can you just be quiet?"

Ignoring Hans, Cale looked over at his open bedroom door. Choi Han had been standing outside his chamber since early morning. Cale stared at him, wondering what was going on.

Choi Han answered without even needing to be asked, eyes full of trust. "Mr. Ron asked me to protect you."

What's that guy thinking, giving Choi Han an order like that? With a serious expression, Cale accepted the cup Hans extended —then grimaced. "Hans, why did you bring me *lemonade*?"

"Pardon? Don't you like lemonade, my lord?"

Heaving a sigh, Cale drank the lemonade. It was, of course, better than cold water in terms of waking him up and settling his stomach.

Choi Han watched Hans and Cale from outside the chamber as he recalled his conversation with Ron last night.

"You're going somewhere?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Nowhere a kid like you needs to know about."

"Did you come tell me because of Mr. Cale?"

"You decide."

Those were Ron's last words to him before he left at dawn. When the old man walked out of the Henituse residence, Choi Han felt he'd seen Ron the assassin rather than the servant.

"Choi Han."

Choi Han snapped out of his thoughts as Cale called him. The count's son had gotten up from the bed and was heading to

the bathroom.

"Is Lark awake?" Cale asked.

"Yes, sir."

Members of the Wolf Tribe really did have fast healing abilities.

Cale looked at the time. The "piggy bank" Bilose, the Flynn merchant's illegitimate son, would soon arrive in the capital. Cale had promised to drink with him, and he'd even decided on their meeting place: the same inn where he'd told Choi Han to stay after reaching the capital. Its bar was famous for its alcohol.

And something there at the inn will bring Choi Han and Bilose together.

Cale then thought of the merchant saddled with ten wolf children. "What of the kids and merchant at the inn?"

"I thought we could stop by on your way back from your meeting."

"Meeting…?" Cale had a suspicious expression.

Hans stepped toward Cale, adding, "You were invited to meet the northeastern nobles, Lord Cale."

"Ah."

Since he considered those nobles unimportant, he'd completely forgotten the invitation. Frowning slightly, he debated what to do. What kind of loutishness would he need to demonstrate at the event? It would be Cale's—well, Kim Roksu's—first time meeting the nobles, but regardless, he was a lout and needed to behave like one.

"Your guest wishes to speak with you as well," Hans said.

"Are you talking about Miss Rosalyn?" Cale asked.

"Yes. She says any time is good for her and that she'll work around your schedule."

Rosalyn was very astute. She probably already suspected that the mana she'd felt the previous day was a dragon's. Though it was doubtful she'd seen a dragon before, nothing else produced such powerful mana.

As Cale opened the bathroom door and went in, he told Hans, “I’ll eat breakfast in my room, so set it up in here. Then ask Miss Rosalyn if she’d like to have breakfast with me.”

“Understood, Lord Cale. It’s already midday, however, so it will be lunch.”

“Hans…”

“I’ll get it ready right away!”

Cale scowled after the retreating deputy butler, then gave him one last order before closing the bathroom door. “Uh…leave the terrace door open too.”

The black dragon needed to be able to enter at any time. Interestingly, the dragon seemed to be more at ease sleeping outside—specifically, on a tree branch by the window.

“I’ll summon Miss Rosalyn as well,” Hans said.

“All right.”

A short while later, Cale sat at the table; it was breakfast for him and lunch for his guest. He then sent Hans out again. Vicross seemed to have put quite an effort in. The dishes looked rather fancy, and the entire table was full of food. This was probably because Cale had asked that it be served all at once rather than in courses.

Choi Han approached. “I’ll go stay with Lark while you’re eating.”

“I guess you two are taking turns nursing him?” Cale replied.

Choi Han smiled, looking a bit bashful. Lark was making a speedy recovery, but he was still laid up in bed, and Rosalyn and Choi Han were taking shifts looking after him. Of course, Rosalyn did most of the actual nursing.

“Ohn and Hong are helping as well,” Choi Han said.

“I highly doubt that.”

With no rebuttal, Choi Han sheepishly peered at the count’s son. The two kittens *had* secretly told Cale they were staying in Lark’s room before heading over.

“I think we’re too weak to kill someone from the Wolf Tribe. We’d probably lose even in Berserk Mode. We need to figure out a way to squash people like him.”

“Yeah, we do. So we’ll go study him a bit.”

Ohn and Hong weren’t there to nurse Lark but to determine how to kill someone like him if they clashed with one in the future.

“Lark seems at peace with those two cute kittens at his side,” Choi Han said.

Cale paused. “If that’s the case, that’s great.” He had no desire to tell Choi Han—or Lark—the truth.

Choi Han inspected the chamber to ensure that the black dragon wasn’t present before saying quietly, “I didn’t tell Lark or Rosalyn that I brought the kittens along because you told me to.”

“Good job.”

“I promised you I would keep that a secret.”

Choi Han was much more open and reliable, probably because of yesterday’s vows. That being the case, he had no idea how disingenuous words could be or how a gap could exist between listener and speaker.

The God of Death would only act on Cale’s interpretation of the vow he’d made, since Cale was the one who’d put his life on the line.

That’s why nobles making a Vow of Death usually spend a week at minimum preparing what to say. They write at least ten pages of notes on average.

Cale considered how he could use Choi Han, who really seemed to trust him, in the future. “Choi Han, did you say you’d kill that blood-drinking mage if you saw him again?”

“Yes.”

The redhead nodded at his immediate answer, then said, “I’ll tell you how to find that mage.” The look in Choi Han’s eyes changed, but Cale wasn’t done just yet. “Of course, we’ll have to prevent that terrorist incident first.”

Choi Han’s expression implored Cale to tell him right away, but just when he was about to speak…

Knock knock knock!

The knock on the door was followed immediately by Hans's voice. "I've brought Miss Rosalyn, my lord."

Cale nodded at Choi Han and rose from his seat. Choi Han pressed his lips into a thin line, stood up, and went to open the door. Hans and Rosalyn entered, but the deputy butler lingered at the threshold.

"Lord Cale, Miss Rosalyn, please let me know if you need anything," he said briskly, then bowed and stepped out of the room.

Choi Han followed behind him. "Rosalyn, I'll be with Lark."

"Okay."

Once those two left, only Rosalyn and Cale remained in the chamber. Rosalyn appeared completely at ease, yet the frosty look in her eyes was difficult to miss.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lord Cale."

"It was nothing, Miss Rosalyn." Cale pointed to the chair across from him and said unceremoniously, "There's a lot of things we need to discuss."

"I guess you don't like to beat around the bush, Lord Cale?" Rosalyn asked with a furtive smile.

Cale looked toward the open terrace door and called, "Come on in."

Rosalyn whirled around to see leaves float into the room. Her fingers trembled at the sight. Still, she was able to steady herself more than she had the previous evening. All night, while nursing Lark, she had been mulling over the three-layered magic she'd witnessed and the skill with which its caster manipulated mana. There was really only one answer.

Her gaze slid from the leaves floating toward the table to Cale. "Is he a dragon lord?" Mages really did respect dragons; her demeanor clearly showed that.

Cale smirked as he told the floating leaves, "You should introduce yourself."

At that moment, the leaves floating above the table—or, more precisely, above the steaks—shifted, and a black dragon

appeared beneath them. He had lifted his magic.

Rosalyn didn't exclaim, or even gasp. Instead, she let out a heavy murmur. "Hmm."

Fewer than twenty of the black dragon's kind existed in the Western and Eastern Continents combined. They were known never to leave their territories or lairs, enjoying life gracefully as the most remarkable beings in the world. Dragons were known as the kings of mana and nature, and they were famously aloof.

Although twenty dragons were believed to inhabit the world, they varied greatly in color, personality, habits, and traits. The Magic Tower found that quite interesting. Why did dragons differ in color and personality, even if they shared the same parents?

There was only one explanation they could think of: Dragons placed a lot of importance on individuality. Throughout their lives, they wanted to distinguish themselves from all others, even their own tribe of dragons.

One such disdainful being was now in front of Rosalyn's eyes. He was young, but his indomitable gaze and powerful mana told her he really was one of these aloof dragons.

The motionless black dragon observed Rosalyn for a bit, then turned away. His behavior was nonchalant, but Rosalyn didn't know what to say.

The dragon sat in front of the steak. "I'm hungry."

"All right… Go ahead and eat," Cale answered, shaking his head. He offered Rosalyn a seat. "We should eat too."

"Ah… Okay." Rosalyn sat down with a dazed expression.

Cale ate his soup with grace. His handsome clothes were more formal than usual, since he needed to attend the Northeast Gathering. The young black dragon chowed down on steak between the two of them.

Nobody at the Magic Tower would believe Rosalyn if she told them about this. Still, she had faith in what she observed through sight, as well as her other senses. The five senses felt everything in nature.

“As a mage, I’m amazed to see this,” she said candidly. “I can’t believe a dragon has joined forces with a human.”

Cale didn’t care to respond to her comment, but the black dragon stopped eating to look at Rosalyn. Then he turned to stare at Cale. Though he had a reptilian face, his expressions were so readable.

Frowning at Cale, who just kept on eating his soup, the dragon informed Rosalyn, “He’s very weak. His fighting ability is no better than an ant’s. That’s why.”

“It’s true,” Cale agreed.

Rosalyn watched them with an odd expression, then nodded. “It’s an honor to eat a meal with you both, Lord Cale and Lord Dragon.”

As he ate his soup, Cale assessed Rosalyn’s behavior. She seemed calm, lifting her fork elegantly. *She really is courageous.*

Any other mage would quaver from head to toe, singing the dragon’s praises. Then they’d ask the dragon to teach them about mana or magic. Any mage on the continent would go crazy over draconic magic.

“Please feel free to stay as long as you like,” Cale told Rosalyn, who was beginning her meal with a salad.

“Lord Cale?”

“Yes?”

“I was curious about three things. One was already resolved, but I have two remaining questions. May I ask them?”

“Please do.”

Rosalyn’s first question was probably about the dragon. After hemming and hawing for a while, Cale had decided to reveal his existence to Rosalyn, since he felt that would benefit him. He suspected he could guess her other two questions as well.

“Here’s one question. Do you mind allowing an uninvited guest to stay in your residence?” Rosalyn asked, her manner relaxed but sincere. “Even if I am a mage, you must be sensitive about associating with strangers as a noble.”

“It’s fine,” Cale said lightly. “Choi Han brought you.” He glanced at the black dragon eating his steak, then looked back at Rosalyn and added, “Besides, I didn’t invite *this* thing.”

The black dragon didn’t react. He stuck his face into the plate of steak and, not lifting his head, tore into the meat at lightning speed.

Rosalyn watched the dragon for a long time before her red irises flicked back to Cale, who was eating a salmon fillet. “I see. Then…there’s one last thing I’m curious about.”

Cale stopped and looked up at Rosalyn. Their eyes met. In the novel, Rosalyn had used magic to change her hair and eye color from red to black when she entered the capital.

Rosalyn asked her question. “Why do you speak so respectfully to me despite your noble status?”

Cale lifted the glass of white wine next to the salmon and took a sip. “Red hair and red eyes. A mage. The name you gave us, Rosalyn.”

It was weird not to recognize—or, to be more exact, weird to *pretend* not to recognize—someone who was clearly revealing themselves.

Smirking, Cale asked, “Aren’t *you* the one being too deferential to *me*, Princess Rosalyn?”

Rosalyn grinned. “The merchant we traveled with called you a terrible lout. Guess that was a lie.” As Cale had expected, she was already far more direct now that her identity had been brought out in the open.

Most people might not know what Brek’s princess looked like, and minor aristocrats might struggle to gather information, but it was different for counts and the like. They deemed information on neighboring kingdoms’ nobles and royals to be basic knowledge. Being a noble wasn’t all fun and games.

“It’s true that I’m infamous for being a lout,” Cale said. “But a mage should make judgments based on their five senses.”

“You’re right, Lord Cale. We mages only believe the things we experience firsthand.”

Cale found Rosalyn's speech patterns quite odd. She was direct with him as a princess, yet polite with him when aligning herself with mages and their society as a whole. Her identity as a mage seemed very important to her.

"But, Princess—"

"Rosalyn." She really didn't seem to like being treated like a princess.

"All right, then. Miss Rosalyn, have I satisfied your curiosity?"

"Yes, you have." She smiled. "It doesn't seem as though you want to be involved with me, Lord Cale."

Although he knew she was a princess, he'd basically told her to enjoy her stay and then leave. It wasn't like Rosalyn balked at that or found it disrespectful, though. Had she wanted special treatment, she would've revealed her full name and identity immediately, but she didn't want that. Besides, Cale was her savior—the savior who'd told her about Lark's condition.

"Well, I'm simply acting the way a princess would prefer."

Liar. Rosalyn just saw Cale's statement as a good excuse. This human traveling with a dragon was known to be a lout, but he wasn't. He'd recognized her, and if he'd decided to, he could easily have come forward and revealed to the king that Brek's princess had entered Rowoon.

"I gather you haven't informed Rowoon's royal family that I'm here. I greatly appreciate that," Rosalyn said.

Cale smiled with feigned innocence. "No problem. News like that should be revealed when the person in question wishes."

If Cale had reported Rosalyn's presence to the palace, that crown prince punk would've jumped for joy at discovering the sitting duck, then barged into the Henituse residence.

"You're correct, Lord Cale. I don't wish to reveal myself. Should that cause you trouble in the future, please let it be known that I asked you not to report my presence. Or I can send a letter."

"Got it."

“Thank you for letting me stay here. I’ll take care of my business without inconveniencing you in any way.”

Rosalyn was giving Cale the assurance he most wanted to hear—that she wouldn’t be a hassle.

“Thank you very much.”

“Don’t mention it. That’s how it should be.” Rosalyn lightly brushed off Cale’s gratitude, continuing to eat.

Cale and Rosalyn didn’t need to speak further, so Rosalyn peeked at the dragon. She couldn’t help it, since she was a mage; her gaze was drawn to the creature. After ignoring Rosalyn’s glances for a while, the dragon stopped eating the homemade sausage originally meant for Cale, then turned to look at her.

“Eat your own food,” he finally said. “This is mine.”

The black dragon pulled the dish of sausage toward his chest. As he did, Cale leisurely piled more food onto another plate for him. The black dragon was growing addicted to various flavors besides raw meat and steak.

Rosalyn glanced at Cale, who stealthily raised four fingers without the dragon noticing. Her face brightened at the meaning of the gesture: *four years old.*

“Yes, Lord Dragon,” she responded. “I wouldn’t dare eye your food.”

The black dragon resumed eating, as did Rosalyn and Cale. It was a relaxing, peaceful meal.

After they finished, Cale headed for his carriage. It was time to meet the offspring of the northeastern nobles.

***

The Northeast Gathering consisted of just ten noble families. There were more northeastern nobles if you considered barons and below, but these ten families were the pillars of the northeast. The three people Cale would meet today came from families who had longstanding amicable relations with the Henituses.

That fact had Cale in a sour mood. “What a dilemma.”

“What is?” Choi Han asked warily. The young man had accompanied him as a guard. “If something’s worrying you, you can tell me. I’m willing to help in any way I can.”

“It’s nothing. You don’t need to know,” Cale responded tersely, then lapsed into thought.

Choi Han grew nervous just watching him. It was the first time he’d seen Cale truly fret.

And fret he did. To really come off as a lout, just what kind of chaos would he need to cause? After getting stuck with huge burdens like Choi Han and the black dragon, Cale had had a revelation, and now he was at his wits’ end about how to act like a lout.

The northeastern nobles’ offspring would’ve seen his past loutish behavior, and they would’ve heard about all Cale’s embarrassing misdeeds in Henituse territory. Now he had to be even more careful—well, no, he had to be even more *volatile*.

“Hmm.”

Cale looked down at his hands. Acting like a total asshole was one way to seem like the lout to end all louts. While he contemplated the best way to act out, his carriage stopped in front of a residence. The northeastern nobles all had residences in the same part of the capital, so the carriage hadn’t driven very far.

“Welcome, Lord Cale Henituse.”

Cale looked at the old butler who greeted him at the gate, then gazed briefly at the building beyond the man’s shoulder.

This was Count Whilsman’s residence. The family was neither very strong nor very wealthy. You could say they were average nobles. However, the Whilsman territory was on the outskirts of the northeast. The northeast lacked dukes or marquesses, and Count Henituse’s territory was in a far corner of the region, so knowing someone closer to the capital was beneficial. Thus, the Whilsmans and Henituses had built a close relationship. There were also various other reasons Count Whilsman welcomed the friendship.

Cale thought about Count Whilsman's successor. *Eric Whilsman.*

Before Cale left for this meeting, Hans had advised him, *"Lord Cale, while it's good that you're chummy with Lord Eric, you may not want to get too comfortable with him in front of the others."*

That told Cale that the original "Cale Henituse" was very close to Lord Eric. However, the report he'd received on the nobles had described Eric not as a lout but as a reliable, meticulous person.

"May I escort you inside, Lord Cale?"

"Sure."

Cale followed the old butler into the Whilsman residence. Eric Whilsman was inside, along with two other noble youths: Gilbert Chetter and Amir Uvar. As he walked inside, Cale was still considering how to act in front of them. In the end, though, he needn't have worried.

"You listen to me, right, Cale?" Eric pushed up his glasses.

Cale sat at a table, wearing a confused expression. *This is odd.* The three other noble offspring surrounded him as though this were an interview. The atmosphere, however, felt more like they were older siblings coddling him.

"This is going to annoy you, isn't it?" Eric pressed.

Count Uvar's daughter, Amir, and Baron Chetter's son, Gilbert, chimed in.

"He's right. I've heard you consider formalities exasperating."

"It's not wrong to find something irritating, Lord Cale."

The three were behaving as though they were indulging their little brother. Watching them, Cale responded, "Yes, formalities are annoying."

"See! That's it!"

Thunk. Eric tapped the table lightly—more a subconscious gesture than an angry attack. He studied the handsome Cale. Count Henituse's son was younger than Eric, and he had been a cute little kid until he grew up into a lout.

“That’s why you don’t need to say anything or even smile,” Eric continued. “Just stay still, and we’ll take care of everything. You hate annoyances and formalities anyway.”

“Well, I *am* good at doing nothing,” Cale said, intrigued.

“Huh? You are? Oh—yes, you are good at it.”

Eric was known to be meticulous yet easygoing. He was also a terrible worrywart, but not necessarily timid, which made his whole personality a contradiction.

Since yesterday, Cale had been Eric’s biggest concern. Amir and Gilbert gazed at Eric as he spoke, silently cheering him on.

“Other northeastern nobles will definitely try to pester you,” he warned Cale. “After all, the ones aligned with Lord Sten or some duke will have nothing to lose. But if you hang tight, we’ll take care of everything. What do you think?”

What Eric was most worried about was the fact that of the northeast’s ten pillar clans, only their four families weren’t aligned with a faction. Northeastern aristocrats allied with higher-ranking nobles outside the region would want to seize the entire northeastern nobility for their respective faction.

These four needed to be as cautious as possible. Their families had to maintain the northeast’s stability, and to do so, they would need to maintain firm neutrality within the region. To ensure they could do *that*, the offspring of the wealthy Henituses couldn’t cause a fiasco in the capital.

Eric and the other two waited cautiously for Cale’s response.

“That’d be great,” Cale said with a gentle smile.

As long as Cale wasn’t drinking, Eric reflected, there were glimmers of the good little kid he used to know. “We plan to have an audience with the crown prince as well,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll find that irritating and would rather get right to drinking, but that’ll be difficult. As long as you meet the crown prince with us, though, we’ll take care of everything else! Absolutely everything.”

Whoa. Cale smirked. This was awfully interesting. As he picked up the wine glass in front of him, he saw Lord Gilbert’s shoulders flinch, which he thought was odd as well.

He might be a troublesome lout, but since they were on the same side, Gilbert, Amir, and Eric's only possible course of action was to protect him.

He sipped the wine, then told the other three, "It's great."

"Isn't it?" Eric smiled brightly, and his glasses shone in the light from the chandelier.

Cale decided to accept the three nobles' offer of doing nothing in exchange for protection. He liked the plan quite a bit.

"All you have to do is sit there, then leave," Eric reiterated.

"Great. Sounds perfect." It was a fantastic offer that exceeded Cale's expectations. As he ate his meal, unperturbed, he mused that it had been a good idea to come here today.

Eric, Gilbert, and Amir, on the other hand, kept their guard up as they observed Cale. The lout had once chucked a bottle at a meeting between northeastern nobles' offspring despite seeming calm, as he did now.

The three were especially concerned because they were in the capital to convince the crown prince to invest in the northeastern coastline, where Gilbert and Amir's families resided. Thus, they kept a close eye on the lout.

"As I expected, this wine from the Henituse region is great."

Hans had already reported to Cale that those two families wanted the crown prince to invest in the northeastern coast, but the four families also shared information with each other. That said, Cale knew an investment from the crown prince wasn't viable. *How could he invest when war will soon break out in the Western Continent's southern regions? Well…he might invest in a navy.*

The four nobles chatted on and off as they continued their meal. When Eric, Gilbert, and Amir saw Cale make it through a whole meal for the first time without creating a scene, their worries diminished a bit.

All four were decently satisfied with the meeting.

***

Returning to his residence, Cale rested a bit, then began to get ready. Once he heard that Choi Han was back, he summoned him to his chamber.

“You asked for me, Mr. Cale?”

“How was the inn?”

“Everything’s fine. The children are energetic, thankfully.”

Cale frowned when he thought about the ten lively Wolf Tribe pups. Choi Han, on the other hand, seemed more relaxed and cheerier overall.

“You have nothing else to do, right?” Cale asked.

“Nothing at all.”

The redhead nodded, then stood. Only then did Choi Han notice Cale wasn’t wearing his usual garments or his pajamas; he was clad in commoner’s clothes.

Walking to his bed, Cale told him, “I’m going to lie down. Tell Hans he can stop standing outside the door and sleep. He’ll go without a second glance.”

Choi Han looked out the open terrace door. It was night outside. “Are you heading out?”

“Yeah.” Cale had a charming smile on his face. “I’m leaving the terrace door open. Come to my room just like you did before.”

“I understand.” Choi Han’s gaze changed as he remembered what Cale had told him the other day—namely, that he’d tell Choi Han how to find that blood-drinking mage.

“Will it just be us two, without Ohn or Hong?” Choi Han asked with a sober expression.

The answer came from elsewhere. “I’m going too.”

Lifting his invisibility magic, the black dragon entered through the terrace door. Choi Han looked at the dragon, then back at Cale.

“It’ll be us three,” Cale said more nonchalantly than ever.

As the black dragon peered at Choi Han, the hero asked cautiously, “Are we going to cause mass destruction?”

“No. Absolutely not.” *Why are his thoughts always so extreme?* Lying down on the bed, Cale waved Choi Han away. “Hurry up and go, then come back. Oh, and wear a hat.”

“Yes, sir.”

Choi Han left only the magic light next to the nightstand on, turning the rest of the lights off before leaving the room and saying something to Hans.

Cale kept his eyes closed and pretended to be asleep.

The chamber’s door soon closed, and Hans didn’t enter. The black dragon, who’d been invisible while the door was open, lifted his invisibility and landed on Cale’s bed, creating a dip in the mattress.

“You can’t *really* sleep,” the dragon warned him in a worried voice.

Do I look like a four-year-old to this dragon? Cale sighed and got up from the bed. A few moments later, Choi Han reentered the room through the terrace door, wearing a hooded robe.

“You’re here. I guess a hood’s better than a hat.”

Choi Han dipped his head as Cale packed a hat for himself. Then, looking at the black dragon, Choi Han asked, “Will you follow us in that form?”

“I’ll be invisible.”

“I heard dragons can shapeshift. Can’t you turn into a human? I think that’d be easier.” A dragon’s magic was an expression of their will, so Choi Han guessed that the dragon could easily shapeshift if he wanted to.

The black dragon snorted. “I don’t want to be a human. I hate them. He said dragons are proud and magnificent!”

“Who did?”

At Choi Han’s question, the black dragon snuck a peek at Cale, then quickly looked away. Turning invisible again, he flew upward. The sunken section of the mattress returned to normal.

“Dragons are indeed magnificent,” Cale said to Choi Han, who eyed him dubiously.

“That’s true.” Nodding, Choi Han followed Cale to the terrace. He peered down at the ground three stories below, then froze. “Um, Mr. Cale…”

“What?”

“Do I have to carry you?”

Cale snorted at Choi Han’s acerbic tone and pointed upward with his index finger. At that moment, his body slowly rose into the air, his feet lifting off the floor. At the same time, he became invisible from the feet up.

Cale watched his body fade before looking up and saying, “Dragons are superior.”

“That’s right, I’m superior!” the invisible black dragon responded.

Choi Han saw Cale’s lips twitch in the briefest of smirks. Realizing that Cale was manipulating the dragon, Choi Han chimed in, “Dragons are indeed superior.”

The dragon turned Choi Han invisible as well, and now they could leave the residence with ease. There were magic-detection tools around the walls, of course, but they were for preventing intruders. They didn’t react to people leaving the residence.

Standing in an alley a short distance from the residence, Choi Han said, “We’re good from here on out.”

As soon as he said that, the dragon lifted the invisibility magic on both men, plus the levitation magic on Cale. The count’s son, who’d been floating ten centimeters above the ground, enjoyed a gentle landing.

Though he didn’t show it, Cale was shocked. *The black dragon’s magic is much more awesome than I thought. I wonder if that comes down to his special nature.*

The creature’s magic was already beyond that of top-tier mages. No wonder they said a mature dragon could easily destroy an entire kingdom if it wished.

But once I get the Sound of the Wind, I won’t need the dragon’s help. With that, I can move around without the black dragon or Choi Han joining me.

The Sound of the Wind was the third Ancient Power Cale planned to claim. He'd need to head to Rowoon's northeastern shores to find it.

I'll have to go to Lady Amir's territory.

Cale intended to head there on his way back from the capital. His excuse to the others would be that he wanted to sightsee, since he was already traveling. The fact that the Ancient Power was by the sea made him nervous, but he opted not to think much about it, since it seemed to be a power he could acquire discreetly.

Choi Han and his allies won't be with me by then anyway.

Cale was certain that the whales and the mermaids appeared on the northeastern shores around the end of Volume Four. All he'd have to do was avoid those shores during the oceanic war between the Eastern and Western Continents, and he wouldn't get involved with them.

Covering his red hair with his hat, Cale pulled a map out of his pocket, then took the lead. "Follow me."

The invisible black dragon and Choi Han flanked Cale, following him out of the southern district where nobles resided to central Whis. The night became as bright as day as they got closer to the center. Brilliant lights glowed here and there in the streets, and well-lit shops sold their wares. The taverns were especially lively.

"The capital's nightlife is definitely brighter than other places."

"Sure is."

Cale was headed to the Plaza of Glory in central Whis. Eventually, they saw a circular plaza with fountains in all four cardinal directions. Citizens gathered around each fountain, relaxing and enjoying time with families or friends after a long day of work. It was around nine o'clock, and the groups would continue to kick back in the plaza until the guards began patrolling at eleven.

Looking to his left, Cale saw Choi Han watching a family talk and laugh together at the eastern fountain. As he peered

absentmindedly at Choi Han and the scene in front of them, Cale said, “Make it so nobody can hear us.”

Once he said that, a magic dome appeared around them. Only Cale, Choi Han, and the black dragon—who were inside the dome—could see it. It was then that Choi Han finally turned to look at Cale.

“There’s something called a magic bomb,” Cale told him.

“A magic bomb, sir?”

“Yes. It comes in many shapes and sizes. This Western Continent has a long history of war, as well as the use of war magic. All sorts of magic bombs have been used for that very purpose.”

Choi Han listened quietly.

“That said, there are lots of limitations on magic bombs. The challenges involved with figuring out where to put them and controlling their mana flow make them a hassle to use.”

That’s why mages were generally preferred over magic bombs during war. Still, modern magic bombs are much different from the ones people used in the past.

“Newly developed magic bombs will go off in multiple places in this vicinity in six days.”

Cale doubted the five bombs Choi Han and Rosalyn had located in the novel would be in the same places. The plot had changed, which meant that situation could easily change as well. Thus, Cale came up with a new plan. He was still certain that the Plaza Terror Incident would proceed as described in the novel.

After all, I was able to confirm that the crazy mage was in Rowoon.

That blood-drinking mage had created these new magic bombs, and he would eventually distribute them to different territories of Rowoon after the incident in the capital. Obviously, he’d keep the secret organization under wraps as he did so.

“Bombs will go off here?”

“Uh-huh.”

Choi Han looked around at the fountains and the people scattered throughout the plaza.

“A bomb could be buried anywhere or even planted on someone,” Cale said, his voice ice-cold. Choi Han looked over at him. “The victim wouldn’t know it was a bomb, though. They’d be holding it or wearing it, thinking it was something else. That’s why we need to prevent the attack.”

Cale wasn’t going to do it. Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the black dragon would be the ones to take care of it. Cale planned to stay *very* still, without reacting one bit.

“How can we do that?”

“Simple.” Cale crossed his arms and leaned against a tree in the plaza. “Magic bombs are essentially chunks of mana. So all you need to do is get someone sensitive to mana to inspect the area and search locations that seem to have lots of it.”

Choi Han flinched at Cale’s unsettling calm. Then he asked cautiously, “Do magic bombs contain such high levels of mana that they’re easy to detect?”

“No. Their mana levels are only slightly high, so they’re difficult for an average mage to pick up on. But those chunks of mana can instantly suck in mana in the surrounding area to create a large explosion.”

Choi Han frowned. As a sword and aura wielder, he could sense mana to a degree. Still, since he wasn’t as sensitive to mana as mages were, he couldn’t be of much help.

“I don’t think it’ll be easy, Mr. Cale.”

“It’s going to be very easy.” Cale paused. “Right?”

An answer came from above. “It’s doable. Just annoying.”

Next to Cale was the black dragon, who—beyond possessing magical abilities—was from the species said to be most sensitive to mana.

Choi Han quickly understood. He’d forgotten that this dragon was superior.

Cale handed the map in his hand to Choi Han. “I don’t know about the bombs on *people*, but the ones in specific locations will be in place at least two days before the incident.”

On the eve of the king’s celebratory address, twice the usual capital guards would be deployed. Thus, the secret

organization needed to plant its bombs at the plaza and elsewhere at least *two* days before the address, before the area became off-limits.

"I don't know about the other locations, but I'm certain at least one bomb will be near this plaza," Cale went on. "Most people will assemble here, so they'll use it as the center point."

"Yes, I agree."

Cale pointed at Choi Han, then into the sky. "You and the dragon will roam around the capital every night to look for the magic bombs."

"Just the two of us?"

Cale patted the young man's shoulder. "Yes, Choi Han. I know you can move stealthily and without detection because you're *very* talented." He was handling Choi Han the same way he handled the dragon.

Choi Han nodded warily, then asked, "What should we do once we find a magic bomb?"

"Leave it there for now."

"You don't want us to get rid of it?"

"We'll do that on the day of the incident."

"May I ask why?"

Cale smiled. "Don't you want to find that mage?"

He'd answered a question with a question, but for the moment, Choi Han nodded.

Cale scanned the plaza. Everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves, but members of the secret organization might very well be walking among them. He didn't know where that blood-drinking mage was; he could be hiding somewhere or possibly roaming around in disguise.

"To set off a magic bomb, a mage needs to be present. So the mage who made the bombs has to be in a central location."

A thought dawned on Choi Han. "Then..." He trailed off, studying Cale.

Taking note of his reaction, Cale said, "First, find the bombs. If you happen to get lucky and catch the people planting them

red-handed, follow them discreetly, and make sure not to get caught."

Since the black dragon would be with him, Choi Han could follow the culprits to their hideout and stop just shy of setting off their magic alarms. However, Cale thought Choi Han would have difficulty finding the actual terrorists while they searched for magic bombs.

They'll have to search far and wide for locations with slightly elevated mana. It'll be pretty cumbersome and tiring.

This was the true reason Cale had left this task to the two of them. He wouldn't have been any help, but more importantly, he didn't *want* to do it.

"Should we just roam around until two days before the event?"

"No. You two will need to secretly comb the area the day before as well."

"Even the day before?"

Won't that be difficult, since there will be way more guards? Choi Han thought, but he didn't say it aloud. While it would be a challenge, the task was still manageable for him. It would just be a bit trickier, and he'd need to be more careful.

At that moment, he noticed Cale's villainous smirk once again. Cale took a black marble out of his pocket and showed it to Choi Han.

"Oh!" Choi Han recognized the black marble—a mana-disturbance tool with a powerful enough range to affect an entire mountain. Once again, the marble was seeing the light of day because Cale was making use of it.

Cale, who knew when the mana bombs would go off, smiled calmly. "This'll shut down anything magical for ten minutes. That crazy mage will bring lots of other mages with him that day, so this marble probably won't even last ten minutes. It should help, though."

Ten minutes was enough. In that time, they'd just need to save the people with bombs planted on them, who should be easy to identify. By that point, Cale would have lots of other

humans and beastfolk to put to work in addition to Choi Han and the dragon.

Choi Han looked back and forth between the black marble and Cale, then gulped. “Mr. Cale, were you planning to do all this on your—”

Since Cale knew what Choi Han was going to say, he cut him off. “That’s why you need to do your part.”

Choi Han gaped at Cale.

In response, Cale pointed to the tavern famous for its beer and said, “I’ll wait for you there. Today, just look around and come back before eleven.”

Choi Han thought for a moment, then huffed a laugh and nodded. “Got it. For today, the dragon and I will check the plaza interior before returning.”

Initially, Choi Han considered asking why Cale wasn’t coming with them. He quickly realized Cale would be nothing more than baggage as he and the black dragon worked. Cale was weak. Not a trace of mana came from his body, nor did he have the musculature of someone who practiced martial arts. He seemed normal, though he wasn’t.

“I’ll put my nose to the grindstone. Buy me a beer when I come back.”

“Sure. Thanks for helping out too, dragon.”

As if in answer, the black dragon got rid of the soundproof dome. Choi Han dipped his head, then moved away from Cale.

***

Two hours later, Cale returned to the Henituse residence with Choi Han and the black dragon, who hadn’t managed to find anything.

They didn’t find anything the next night either.

Cale only woke up slowly at midday; he hadn’t been able to sleep the night before. Thanks to the Energy of the Heart, however, he seldom felt exhaustion.

“Are you up, young master?”

“Oh, Ron.”

Cale’s sweet, viscous slumber disappeared like a midsummer night’s dream as he came back to reality.

“I have returned.”

Ron was back, and he handed a letter to Cale.

The stationery featured Flynn Merchant Fleets’ crest. Cale opened the letter to find a single sentence:

Lord Cale, will you be treating me to a drink soon?

Bilose, the Flynn merchant’s illegitimate son, would soon arrive at the capital.

Seeing the letter, Cale gave Ron an order for the first time in a while. “Ron, wrap a bottle of our best wine.”

Reading the letter, Cale realized it wouldn’t be long before he met the crown prince at the palace. That place contained a lot of villains, so it was time for him to fly under the radar.

“I understand.” Ron nodded at Cale’s words, but added one thing before he left. “By the way, young master, you do remember that you’ll need to go to the palace the day after tomorrow, right?”

The noble offspring were scheduled to meet the crown prince before the king announced the start of the festivities in the plaza. That meeting would be neither a formal banquet nor a party but something in between. It was rumored that an entire palace, a place usually reserved for large banquets, would be the setting for the occasion.

As Cale thought about the crown prince and the palace, two names drifted to the surface of his mind. *I wonder if Taylor and Kage are all right.* He figured the marquess’s outcast eldest son and the crazy priestess were probably doing very well, based on their track record.

“Mm.”

A chill pricked the back of his neck, and he rubbed it on reflex. Enduring the chill, Cale made up his mind. *Don't think about those two.*

Cale would keep a low profile at the palace. Even if someone cussed him out, he'd just sit there in silence before returning home.

He glanced at the table; there was another letter.

Cale: You don't have to do anything at all. I'll take care of everything for you, like a big brother. Sound good?

Eric Whilsman sent Cale a fretful letter every day. Cale grabbed the one on the table and chucked it into a corner.

"I'll make sure to have them bring up a bottle of our very best wine," Ron assured him.

"Good."

As Cale idly watched Ron leave, two faces he hadn't seen in a while popped in the door. It was Ohn and Hong. Ron glanced at the pair before closing it. Then the two approached Cale and started to speak.

"I think I could kill one if they let their guard down!"

"Yeah! I see a way we can kill them!"

The kittens were excited; they had seemingly found a way to kill beastfolk as strong as the Wolf Tribe.

"Good job."

When Cale complimented the kittens, they came and rubbed their faces on his leg. Annoyed, Cale nudged them away.

Soon Ron entered the room once again. "Young master?"

"What?" Cale asked, anything but interested.

Ron peered at Cale before asking, "May I come to the palace as your personal attendant?"

"Why ask such an obvious question? Who'd go if not you?"

At that, Ron made up his mind to leave.

The group calling themselves “Arm,” which ruled the Eastern Continent’s underworld, had begun to expand their reach to the Western Continent. Arm was just one limb of the organization, and nobody knew their true identity.

The Molran family, one of many assassin groups, was a household of fifth-generation assassins who sought to rule the night in the Eastern Continent. Ron Molran, the family’s heir, hated and feared this “Arm.”

“Young master.”

“What?”

“You’ll look very dashing at the palace.”

Cale glanced at Ron, who—now that he’d returned from his break—was uncharacteristically flattering him. “Objectively speaking, I *do* have a handsome face and figure, don’t I, Ron?”

“Meeeow.”

The kittens snorted at Cale’s smugness, but they couldn’t disagree. He was a dashing and handsome, if languid, man with a somehow dignified air. For Kim Roksu’s part, his favorite aspect of the lout was his money, with his body and face vying for second place.

“Of course. You cut a fine figure, young master.”

Cale’s lips quirked up, then turned right back down. *What’d I hear just now?*

He’d been praised in a gentle, kind, adoring voice—and it came from *Ron*. Rattled, Cale peeked over the back of the sofa. Ron stood with a pleased smile that looked different from his usual mask.

Cale felt chills all over his body, but Ron ignored him and returned to his duties. “I’ll step out for now. I need to go let Hans know I’ll be your attendant at the palace.”

“Oh, y-yeah. Go on.”

Ron soon left. Staring at the closed door, Cale wondered, *Why’s he acting like that?*

He had no desire to find out the reason for Ron’s behavior. What good would come of getting involved in Ron’s life? Cale

stared at that closed door for a long time, and a suspicious expression filled his face.

Knock knock knock.

As someone knocked on the door, the red kitten, Hong, spoke up. “Smells like a wolf!”

Cale looked back at the door. “Come in.”

After a moment, the door clicked, and someone cautiously opened it. Through the gap, Cale saw the lanky wolf boy Lark awkwardly present himself.

Lark hesitated, then said, “Um, I-I came to thank you. But, well, I didn’t know when a good time to stop by would be. If it’s all right with you, may I come in for a bit?”

Tired of the boy’s awkward mumblings, Cale waved Lark inside. “Come in.”

Lark closed the door and approached Cale with a cautious, nervous expression.

Cale pointed to the couch across from him. “Sit.”

“Th-thank you.”

Lark sat on the couch, sneaking constant glances at Cale. Although the redhead’s words had reminded Lark of his uncle, this man named Cale Henituse had an aura that made him difficult to approach. Not difficult because he was strong, like Lark’s uncle; it was more like Cale’s composed air made him intimidating.

“Say what’s on your mind.”

“Well…” Lark looked upward, as if trying to recall what to say, before jumping from his seat and bowing to Cale. “Thank you so much!”

In Cale’s mind, the boy truly seemed naive and cowardly—and in some ways, pretty stupid. He definitely fit *Birth of a Hero*’s description. *In the books, his personality changed after he went berserk for the first time. Looks like it’s still the same, though.*

“Sure,” Cale replied. “It *was* definitely something to be thankful for.”

“Excuse me? Oh, right.” Lark’s face had a funny expression as he sat back down.

Cale watched Lark sit, then told him, “Since you’ve said thanks, you can go now.”

“Uh… Well, actually…”

The wolf boy squirmed in his seat, his lips slightly parted. He’d heard stories from Rosalyn, the kittens, Choi Han, and even Hans—who had slunk by every so often—that made him go back and forth on this. He still felt uncertain even now.

Cale quietly observed Lark. He already knew what Lark would do, which was why he’d quickly tried to kick the boy out of his room.

“Um… Lord Cale, you see…”

Lark didn’t know how to start. He peeked at Cale every so often, looking down at the floor and occasionally biting his lip. He detested his own personality, which tended to frustrate others.

“Spit it out,” came a cold voice from opposite him.

“Excuse me?” He lifted his head to look at Cale. It was the first time Lark had truly made eye contact with Cale since coming into the room.

Holding Lark’s gaze, Cale said, “Good. When you talk to someone, you should make direct eye contact like this.” He glanced at the clock, then met Lark’s eyes again. The wolf boy was looking at him with a blank expression. “Spit out everything you want to say. I’ll at least listen to you.”

“Oh!” Lark exclaimed. He clasped his fidgeting hands together and blurted, “I-I’m the oldest.” Though he kept his eyes on Cale, his voice was weak. Tall as he was, he was still a young boy. “I need to take care of my younger siblings.”

Lark knew he was lacking as a member of the Wolf Tribe. Nevertheless, he had ten younger siblings he needed to protect and care for right now.

“I was also a younger sibling myself. And a nephew.”

The Blue Wolf Tribe had loved and cherished the cowardly, stupid Lark. He couldn’t forget the family, friends, and neighbors

who'd cared so much for him.

"That's why I have to get revenge," he said. He absolutely *needed* to get payback on the people who'd stolen his loved ones, his home. Clenching his shaking hands into fists, Lark bowed his head. He could see his feet and the carpet.

"Young wolf boy."

Lark lifted his head once more. He had only lived in the boonies and never dreamed of even entering a huge residence like this. Yet Cale Henituse's family *owned* this place. Cale was someone Lark's friend Choi Han said you could bet almost your whole life on.

As if it were obvious, that man told Lark, "You're a wolf."

Memories flooded through Lark's mind as he pictured scenes from his life in the Blue Wolf Tribe.

"I've heard that wolves protect their families and put them first, even before themselves. I consider you a proud race." Cale's indifferent smile caught Lark's eye as he concluded, "I've heard what you wanted to say."

At that point, Lark saw this man—and everything in this room—in vivid color. The cute Cat Tribe kittens sat on either side of Cale, and the sunlight streaming in gave the room a peaceful glow.

Lark finally remembered the words that he needed—and wanted—to say. "Thank you very much for your assistance, and… please help me further."

"Thanking me once was enough," said the count's son at the center of this peaceful atmosphere.

Choi Han and the black dragon had Cale racking his brain on how to act appropriately loutish. The dragon was a concern all on his own, while Choi Han was a concern because of the people he tended to bring with him.

"I don't wish to help you," Cale told Lark.

Still, he knew the pain the ten wolf children were feeling after losing their parents—their foundation—since he'd experienced it himself. He also already had a finger in this pie. That said, he didn't want to be responsible for *everything*. He

planned to do the bare minimum so he wouldn't be at a disadvantage.

Lark's head drooped after he heard Cale refuse to help.

"However," Cale continued, "I'm open to making a deal with you."

"A deal...?"

"That's right. What do you need help with, and what can you do for me in return?"

Cale had no desire to *teach* this foolish wolf boy. The fact that Lark was inexperienced in everything was for Choi Han or Rosalyn to address.

Cale still had a couple of matters to take care of before heading to the palace. He stood and looked at Lark. "Come back once you're completely sure of your answers."

Lark thought for a moment, then stood and dipped his head. "I understand. I'll come back to see you once I figure those things out."

"Sure."

Cale ruffled Lark's hair. The wolf boy's gaze as he looked up was brimming with satisfaction.

***

Cale stepped out of his carriage with the crown prince's invitation in hand. Dinner was scheduled to start at 5:00 p.m. He gazed up at the palace, which outshone the Henituses' northeastern estate and capital residence combined. The name of the dinner venue was the Palace of Joy. It was a small palace the king had built to express his joy at the birth of the crown prince—although he now favored the third prince.

Cale planned to meet Eric, Gilbert, and Amir outside the palace and enter together. Taking in the sight of the entire palace, he wondered, *Am I in for another cliché scene?*

It just so happened that someone else arrived at the palace right when Cale did.

As the newcomer got out of his carriage, he called, “Wow, who’s this? Isn’t it our *famous* Lord Cale?”

Cale held back his sigh. The man approaching was Neo, Viscount Tolz’s heir. He could sense Neo’s distaste just from his tone. *Why did I have to run into one of Benion’s minions now?*

Neo Tolz was a crude, stereotypical villain who went around doing Benion’s bidding. The village where the black dragon had been tortured was in Viscount Tolz’s territory. In the past, the Tolzes had gotten along well with the Henituses. That changed when they aligned with Marquess Sten’s faction five years earlier. Viscount Tolz had never really liked Count Henituse. Geographically, they were only separated by a single mountain, but the difference between their wealth was astronomical.

Of course, the Tolzes wouldn’t go so far as to show their loathing for the Henituses outright. Instead, they’d sneakily try to take control of the Northeast Gathering.

Neo Tolz couldn’t help smiling as he stood in front of Cale. “Are you alone?”

They were still a short distance from the palace entrance; Ron and the vice-captain were getting permission to enter from the guards. Cale looked down at Neo. The redhead had brought the bare minimum number of people with him. Seeing that Cale was alone, Neo had his own subordinates step back.

“I’m going to chat a bit with Lord Cale. You guys go get us permission to enter.”

After sending his subordinates to the administrative officer, Neo took a step closer to Cale. Once he stood at arm’s length with a kind, friendly smile, he asked in a quiet voice only Cale could hear, “What’s a backwater lout like you doing coming to the palace, Lord Cale?”

Ugh. So childish. Cale sighed inwardly. *Is he acting like this because this world’s inside a book? Because it’s a fantasy world? Do punks like him really exist in the flesh? I guess so, since one’s provoking me. Still…a viscount’s heir dares speak this rudely to a count’s son?*

He figured Neo could only be so bold because he was a character in a novel. Still, dealing with him in person was

extremely annoying. Cale wasn't the novels' protagonist anyway; shouldn't he be able to avoid these clichés? He entertained the thought of telling Ron to kill these snide villains who didn't seem to know their place.

Cale stared Neo down, and the other young man's expression brightened. He saw Cale as a lout who just looked presentable on the outside. To Neo, who would need to suck up to Benion the entire time he was in the capital, Cale was perfect taunting fodder.

"What? Want to throw a bottle at me? Or hit me? Go ahead and try."

He was deliberately riling Cale up, since he knew the count's son wouldn't have a magic recording device with him. Magic items weren't allowed into the Palace of Joy. If Cale caused a ruckus here, people would deem it a mere fight between a lout and a viscount's dignified son, which would only benefit Neo. Hence his attempts to provoke Cale into dragging the Henituse family name through the mud.

Cale just stood still. As he did so, he heard a voice inside his head. The dragon, who had followed him while remaining invisible, was speaking through magic.

‹What a scumbag. Reminds me of that bastard Benion.›

He is *Benion's minion.* Although Cale couldn't say that aloud.

The dragon continued to speak in Cale's mind. *‹Should I kill him?›*

There was really no need to go to that extent, so Cale shook his head. The movement made Neo think he'd gotten under Cale's skin. There was no sign of the lout going off the deep end yet, though, so Neo decided to needle him again.

At that moment, Cale's gaze flicked to a carriage that had just arrived. As soon as the vehicle stopped, its door burst open.

Thunk!

Eric Whilsman stormed out. Gilbert and Amir were inside the carriage as well. Cale signaled Eric with his gaze, pointing to Neo with his index finger, and Eric rushed over with his eyes wide.

“Eric!” Despite his sincere greeting, Cale’s gaze was dull, which told Eric everything he needed to know. As Cale calmly stood still, he conveyed a silent message: *Get rid of him.*

Eric immediately moved between Cale and Neo, standing in front of Cale. “Ahem. Hm! Lord Neo, it’s been a while!”

Neo donned a look of resignation. He had thought he’d found excellent prey, but hunting it with Eric Whilsman around would be tricky.

“Yes, Lord Eric. It has.”

Hiding his displeasure, Neo greeted Whilsman, as well as Lady Amir and Lord Gilbert. And as he watched them come up to Cale, he suppressed a click of the tongue. *I guess they want to coddle the lout because their families are all on the same side.*

Seeing the three shielding Cale, Neo decided not to bother Cale any longer. Eric, sensing Neo’s decision, slowly turned to look at Cale. Neo’s gaze fixed back on Cale as well.

“Ungh…” Neo subconsciously let out a groan.

Arms crossed, Cale silently looked down at Neo with an extremely disdainful expression. He hadn’t said a word to Neo in a bit, but his eyes and body language said everything that needed to be said: *Crummy punk.*

Cale’s gaze reminded Neo of how Benion looked at him. It did anger Neo when Benion scoffed at him that way, but he submitted to and flattered Benion regardless, telling himself that it was simply the sneer of a high-ranking noble.

After watching Neo’s agitated face for a while, Cale turned and looked behind him.

He heard the black dragon’s report. *‹The sound-recording magic is ready.›*

This was a reason he’d brought the dragon with him today. He’d asked the creature to record everything that happened, although he’d have to be satisfied with sound recordings alone. Creating magic videos required too much mana, and the magic was difficult to maintain for long periods.

Cale originally wasn’t going to do this, since the palace would have lots of sensitive mages who could detect mana.

However, the black dragon assured him that they wouldn't detect sound-recording magic so long as he focused the recording range around Cale.

He headed toward the palace entrance, vowing to use those recordings in the future to put Neo through the wringer. The lout was the type who always paid back what someone dished out to him.

Eric Whilsman watched all this take place with great satisfaction. He felt that his "one letter a day" method had been successful. On the other hand, Gilbert and Amir watched Cale with curiosity. Cale Henituse normally wore flashy clothes, yet he'd chosen to wear a simple black outfit without accessories, and he'd arrived with neatly brushed red hair. They wondered if it was because he was sober.

Every step Cale took appeared leisurely and languid. Once he got to the palace entrance, Amir and Gilbert watched him turn around. His gaze was the most curious thing to them; it seemed to beckon them over with perfect calm.

"I'll see you inside at dinner, Lord Neo. Lady Amir, Lord Gilbert, let us go."

Pleased, Eric continued simply to watch Cale; Amir and Gilbert had an even stranger sensation when the three of them stood in front of the redhead.

Cale glanced at the proud Eric and his two confused friends, then told them, "Let's go."

The three followed Cale into the palace. Gilbert and Amir's odd sensation redoubled as they strode farther inside. Cale, for his part, wasn't concerned about what they felt. Instead, he was deciding he'd use these three people as much as he could today.

"Lord Cale of Count Henituse's household is entering the hall!"

As he strode into the hall, Cale heard the servant announce his companions' names as well.

"Not bad." He swept a glance around the large hall, then trailed behind Eric.

Lady Amir snuck a peek at Cale before matching his gait. "Lord Cale, the crown prince will sit up in the seat of honor in the

banquet hall. Below that, each region will have its own table. The reason for that is—" Amir stopped short of explaining when she noticed Cale's tranquil expression. "I probably don't need to explain the reason, right?"

"I know the reason, Lady Amir, but thank you very much."

Amir contemplated Cale more intensely, intrigue flashing through her eyes. Cale just glanced at her once and brushed past her, heading toward the table for the northeastern nobles.

The five tables set up inside the hall were divided based on each regional noble faction of Rowoon: northeast, northwest, southwest, southeast, and central.

The crown prince is good at things like this.

He subtly nudged the factions to compete but quietly made them rub elbows as well. In fact, that was the crown prince's specialty. He was very deliberate about his own placement too. His table was in the center of the other five, on a platform two steps higher than the rest.

The second- and third-born princes are seated lower.

Although the crown prince was hosting this event, it would be strange if the younger princes didn't attend a noble gathering. Thus, the crown prince ensured that they were invited, but he also made sure to illustrate the gap between their status and his own, positioning their tables one tier down.

He nitpicks over those tiny details.

The crown prince really wasn't Cale's type of person. Actually, none of these powermongers were.

"As I expected, our table is closest to the entrance," Eric noted, sounding dissatisfied.

Cale didn't respond. The Palace of Joy's eastern doors had been opened as the event's designated entrance, and the northeastern nobles' table was closest to that door. Northeastern aristocrats had a voice in the capital, but none of their households were strong enough to possess a *loud* voice.

Cale raised his hand to pat Eric's shoulder. "Well, it's great that our seats are close to the door—and that we won't have to bow our heads to anyone at our table."

Other regions were led by powerful people like Marquess Sten whom the local nobles had to be respectful and subservient to.

The second Cale finished speaking, the trio walking with him stopped in their tracks. Seeing that, Cale—who'd been following behind them—also stopped.

Eric turned around to look at Cale for a time, then said, "Lord Cale." Since they were in the company of others, he spoke more formally than usual. "I'm glad to see my efforts have paid off."

Efforts? What efforts? Cale gaped at Eric in confusion, not knowing what he was talking about.

Eric turned back around and trotted to the table closest to the entrance, none the wiser that Cale had never read his letters and had instead shoved them into a corner of the room.

"What's his deal?" Cale muttered.

Lady Amir shook her head in awe. Gilbert reacted similarly. Cale shrugged and went to the table—but the next announcement that rang through the hall stopped him.

"Lord Benion Sten of Marquess Sten's household has arrived!"

Cale realized why Neo Tolz hadn't followed his group inside the Palace of Joy. He waited to come in right behind Marquess Sten's heir, Benion. But Cale didn't care for chumps like Neo or Benion. He briskly walked to his seat.

"Cale!" Eric called out.

The redhead just waved him off and sat down. "Mm."

"Oh! Welcome, Lord Cale."

"Hello, Lord Cale."

Cale responded tersely to the respectful greetings. "Hello. Good to see you."

As silence suddenly fell on the table, Cale put his hand underneath the tablecloth without the others noticing.

I knew it.

He could feel the invisible dragon shaking.

‹I told you, I'm fine!›

Cale patted the black dragon as he listened to the voice in his head. The dragon's body shook in anger and fear. Experiencing trauma so young was terrifying, and the black dragon couldn't respond to Benion's presence appropriately; the physical trauma his body remembered didn't align with the rationality in his head.

‹I'm all right. I'm a superior dragon.›

When the black dragon said he wanted to follow Cale, the redhead had told him that Benion Sten would be here as well. He got the dragon to promise not to kill Benion today, although the dragon also promised one additional thing:

‹I'll definitely kill that bastard and the rest later. I'll rip them to shreds. I'll pulverize them!›

Listening to his furious voice, Cale had calmed him down. Luckily, the dragon's anger didn't seem to make his mana go wild. The dragon was more rational than Cale had expected. Thinking about the hell that awaited Benion and the idiots aligned with Marquess Sten, Cale stopped patting the dragon and retracted his hand from under the tablecloth.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like the dragon was going to run wild. If he did, he would blow this palace to pieces; Cale would probably die as well. Relieved to have prevented that, Cale glanced around and saw Eric coming their way, along with Benion's entourage. That made sense, since Benion's northwestern table was next to theirs.

Wsh. Wsh. The black dragon rubbed his head on Cale's leg.

"Mm." His actions worried Cale for a moment.

Simultaneously, Cale made eye contact with Eric, who was fervently signaling Cale with his eyes: *Be quiet! Stay still!* Cale ignored the signals, agonizing over how he could pretend not to know Benion.

All his contemplation was for naught, as Benion greeted him first. "Long time no see, Lord Cale."

Benion Sten's appearance had changed drastically since he and Cale last met; the man had grown haggard and wrathful. He

smiled gently in spite of that, embodying a model warmhearted noble. Neo Tolz nervously stood behind him.

Cale smiled brightly. “Hello, Lord Benion. This is our first meeting since we bumped into each other in Lord Tolz’s territory.”

Benion’s gentle smile deepened, while Neo’s face blanched.

Marquess Sten was one of the four most powerful figures in Rowoon’s politics, and thanks to Cale’s words, everyone at the crown prince’s event was now aware that his heir had visited the northeast. And not a northeastern territory one might expect; rather, he’d gone to the territory of the low-ranking Viscount Tolz. That obviously meant that Tolz was with the marquess’s faction.

Naturally, the northeastern nobles all frowned. The other aristocrats in the hall began to pay attention as well. The northeast lacked a leader right now, and all the nobles had feelers out regarding that region.

“Correct. I was heading home after visiting my good friend, Lord Neo.”

Benion Sten didn’t care about the gazes directed his way. To him, it didn’t matter whether he visited an insignificant place like the northeast.

He probed Cale with his gaze, keeping his tone affectionate. “When I saw you then, we agreed we would share a drink once we met in the capital.”

“We did indeed.”

This conversation was wholly perfunctory, but to the people watching them, it seemed anything but simple. Cale looked at Neo Tolz, who was constantly peeking at him, and smiled. Neo flinched.

“Ah, that’s right,” Cale went on. “The day after I met you, Lord Benion, one of Lord Tolz’s knights tracked me down.” He turned to Neo with an extremely worried expression. “I heard your villa was completely ransacked. Is everything all right?”

Neo’s shoulders jumped, and Cale saw the corner of Benion’s lips twitch.

“Did you hear about that, Lord Benion?” he pressed. “I’m sure you did, since you and Lord Neo are such good friends.”

After a moment, Benion finally responded. He spoke very naturally, but Cale felt the anger in his words. “Yes. That was very sad to hear.”

“It was. You don’t know how shocked I was to hear about it while I was enjoying some hair of the dog. My goodness. Completely ransacked, absolutely everything! Left with absolutely nothing! And I heard you lost something *very* important, Lord Neo.”

The most annoying people in the world were those who were loose-lipped and tactless, yet not malicious. Cale fell into all three categories right now. How delicious it was.

“Cheer up, Lord Neo,” Cale told him with utmost tenderness. “We’re bound to face such unbelievable misfortune at least once in our lives.”

“Uh, well, yes. I suppose so,” Neo said stiffly. He couldn’t even look at Benion, afraid he might give something away.

Cale offered Neo some advice with a friendly smile. “When something terrible like that happens, you need to drink to forget about everything. How about we get completely drunk tonight? Lord Benion, would you like to join us?”

Benion studied Cale. He had lost his father’s trust since the black dragon escaped. From the evidence left behind and the testimony of the knights who’d seen the events, Benion suspected the organization that had first given him the black dragon was behind it. Still, he couldn’t suppress his suspicion toward Cale’s group, who’d happened to be spending the night there at the same time. But he didn’t have any *logical* reason to suspect Cale. He’d spoken to the lout to confirm that one more time.

“After a day of drinking and a little hair of the dog to cap it off, all your bad memories will disappear.”

Seeing Cale Henituse continue to spew nonsense like this, Benion realized he did not need to press the point. “Thank you for the offer, Lord Cale. Maybe next time.”

“Ah. How disappointing. Next time it is, I guess.”

As Benion walked past Cale, he heard the redhead tell Neo, “When your knight called on my party, he was extremely pale. You should’ve prepared in advance for such a situation, Lord Neo. How could you lose all those valuables all at once? Well, hang in there. You may not recover what you lost, but what can you do about it? You just have to live on.”

Ugh. That lout. Benion plastered on a grin at the furtive glances of the nobles as he held back his anger. *And where did that stupid dragon and paralyzed idiot go?*

Benion looked straight ahead as he strode off, thinking solely of the dragon and Taylor. After glancing at Benion strolling away, Cale turned from the ghostly pale Neo without hesitation. Of course, he first made a final kind remark: “Cheer up.”

Cale knew Benion would rip Neo a new one.

“Lord Cale—”

Eric—who looked like he had a lot to say but couldn’t figure out how to say it—approached him. He sat back down in his seat.

‹Next time, it’s my turn.›

Hearing the black dragon’s voice, Cale carelessly nodded and looked around the table. The northeastern nobles were all staring at him. This was probably the first time they’d ever seen Cale behave so normally. To meet their expectations, Cale picked up the bottle in front of him, and they all looked away almost instantly.

That was the power of a lout.

The people at the other tables, however, continued to watch Cale out of curiosity. Cale savored their gazes as he handed the bottle to Eric. “I’ll drink it later.”

“Yeah, sure…” Eric said, speaking informally for the first time since arriving in the palace.

Cale looked away from Eric toward the clock at the hall entrance. It would soon be time for the dinner to start. The nobles who had been scattered throughout the room were somehow already sitting in their places.

The reason was obvious: Members of the remaining three powerful families had entered alongside Benion Sten.

“Lord Antonio of Duke Guiller’s household has arrived!”

Antonio Guiller, Karin Orsena of Duke Orsena’s family, and Marquess Ailan—Rowoon’s other marquess besides Sten—each entered the hall with their retinues behind them. Only after they had all entered were the doors closed. Despite the arrivals, however, no one casually rose to approach or chat with them.

Someone else was soon to make their entrance.

Cale lounged against the back of his chair and looked at the banquet hall entrance. It was getting close to five o’clock.

Tick. Tock.

When the clock finally reached five on the dot, the large door reopened.

Creeeak!

This gathering’s guests of honor had shown up with their entourages. The servant at the door was ready to shout louder than he’d shouted all night, but the person standing at the very front of the room lifted his hand to stop him.

The eldest prince of Rowoon, Crown Prince Albert Crossman, had arrived with his younger brothers. Enjoying the attention focused on him, the crown prince slowly headed without any introduction to the elevated platform to take his seat. All the nobles rose to greet him.

As soon as the crown prince stood in front of his seat, the door closed again. *Bang.* That meant everyone was present. Crown Prince Albert looked down at them all, including the two younger princes, as he began to speak.

“Welcome. Thank you for accepting my invitation.” There was no need for him to introduce himself at this gathering.

Albert regarded the other nobles from the highest point in the hall. Cale blankly stared at him, then glanced at the clock again.

It’s about time for them to get here.

The individuals who would create an uproar at this gathering, essentially becoming all the nobles’ source of gossip for a while, hadn’t arrived just yet.

The crown prince continued, “I’m so pleased that the precious individuals who will make this kingdom shine as future leaders of Rowoon accepted my invitation and joined me today.” He was slowly warming up his silver tongue.

Suddenly, his eyes flicked to the entrance.

“Hmm?”

The door, which had been closed, was being pushed open. By the time it stood ajar, the crowd was abuzz with chatter. Cale smirked, a gesture that went unnoticed by those around him. At that moment, a servant scurried from a side entrance to the crown prince.

They’re here. Cale was certain.

After listening to the servant, the crown prince seemed to think for a moment, then waved at a knight peeking inside the chamber.

Creeeak.

The enormous door opened again. Now that the crown prince had already entered, the servant couldn’t announce the latecomer’s name, but there was no need to. Any noble with even a passing interest in high society would know their identity at a glance.

Right on time.

A man in a wheelchair had entered the banquet hall. Taylor Sten, the abandoned eldest son of Marquess Sten, had arrived with the crazy priestess Kage. For the moment, Taylor and Kage shot glances at Cale without anybody noticing; that was enough for the three of them to touch base, however.

Bang! With that sound, the door closed tightly once more. There was a relaxed smile on Taylor Sten’s face; though he was in an unadorned wheelchair, he was dressed to the nines in formal clothing. Kage, meanwhile, wore the robes of a priestess of the God of Death.

I guess they decided to come out in the open.

Cale thought that was wise. Kage entering the palace as a priestess might cause headaches for the Temple of the God of Death, but it was no concern of hers.

“What is the meaning of this?!” someone cried, shocked.

Cale looked at the northwestern nobles’ table; Benion had jumped out of his seat and was staring at Taylor with astonishment. It was a reaction one would never normally see from Benion, one that violated noble etiquette. That being the case, Benion wasn’t in a state to care about etiquette right now.

At the top of the platform, Prince Albert opened his arms. “I didn’t expect to see Lord Sten’s eldest, Taylor Sten, here. Nor a priestess of the God of Death.” Albert truly looked to be enjoying himself.

Taylor paid his respects in a straightforward manner from his wheelchair. “I heard this was an opportunity for the offspring of the kingdom’s nobles to meet and converse with Your Highness. So I came today, although I lack an invitation.”

From Prince Albert’s mysterious smile, Cale could tell he fully understood what Taylor meant about “conversing” with him.

“I invited each household’s established representative, but if a household doesn’t have one, it really doesn’t matter who attends. I take it you were disappointed that I sent the marquess’s household only one invitation, Lord Taylor?”

“Just a bit, Your Highness.”

Cale peeked at Benion. By referring to households without established representatives, the crown prince was taking an offhanded shot at Benion, who had yet to be officially declared the marquess’s successor. Albert was probably sniping at Sten because of the marquess’s closeness to the third-born prince.

I do find that a little weird.

While Cale didn’t really care and hadn’t even looked into it, he did think it was strange. Even if the king cherished the third-born prince, he’d have difficulty replacing the crown prince as heir apparent. Despite that, in the novel, the anxious crown prince had seen his younger brothers as rivals. Marquess Sten had close ties to the third-born prince, and the other nobles all supported one of the princes as well. The only prince who wasn’t endorsed by a noble family of note was Albert.

I guess something’s up there.

Naturally, Cale didn’t want to know about it.

“I do regret to hear you were disappointed,” the crown prince told Taylor. “But I’m glad to see you after such a long time—and to see you in such good health.”

Taylor smiled. “Although my legs may not move, Your Highness, I still have my hands, head, eyes, ears, mouth, and everything else, which are very much active. In fact, they’ve become even stronger.”

“I see. You are indeed still alive and well. I had forgotten that the strongest person is the one who lives until the end.”

Cale could see that Taylor fascinated the crown prince. Meanwhile, although Benion’s expression was once again aristocratic, he still glared daggers at his brother. Cale found the situation entertaining.

It’s fun being a spectator.

The crown prince, Taylor, Benion, the nobles of the different factions—looking at the expressions on their faces made Cale long for some popcorn. Despite the fact that the gathering hadn’t yet officially begun, the tense atmosphere made it feel as though the hall would burst at any moment.

And Cale *especially* liked the fact that he just needed to sit still and do absolutely nothing.

“So is this lady the God of Death’s priestess?”

“I, Kage, a servant of eternal rest, greet Your Highness.” Pretending to be a model priestess, Kage came off like a saint, yet within her was an enormous knowledge of curses.

After hearing Kage’s greeting, the crown prince addressed Taylor once again. “Let us talk more later, as it’s time for this dinner to begin. I’m not sure where the best place for you two to sit will be.”

The crown prince’s words had, in short, confirmed that he would make time to chat with Taylor and Kage. Cale looked at the northwestern nobles’ table, where everyone was blatantly anxious. Neo Tolz, especially, seemed extremely nervous and fidgety.

Cale grinned at the sight. When Neo spotted Cale’s smile, he scowled back as if to admonish Cale for being an idiot unable to read the room. His frown deepened as he spun away.

Still grinning, Cale lifted his head and turned to look in Taylor's direction.

Hmm?

At that moment, Cale made eye contact with the crown prince. It was sheer coincidence; as Cale turned to look at Taylor, Albert was scanning the room to see where they could seat Taylor and Kage, and their gazes collided.

In that instant, Cale sensed it. *He'll seat them right here.*

The crown prince made up his mind. "Thankfully, there's a good spot for you."

Cale quickly confirmed where Taylor and Kage would sit. *This* was *the only available spot, anyway.*

This was the only table without a high-ranking noble, so—-although some northeastern families had chosen to serve different factions—there was still a balance of power between those seated there. Furthermore, one household at the table was strong and wealthy enough that even high-ranking nobles didn't dare poke the bear.

"Lord Taylor, you can sit at the northeastern nobles' table. There just happen to be extra seats."

Neo gasped. Eric couldn't help wrinkling his brow with concern. Absorbing their reactions, Cale turned his gaze on Taylor and Kage.

"Thank you for providing us seats, Your Highness."

"Thank you very much, Your Highness."

"It's nothing. It's wonderful that all the noble offspring who will contribute to the kingdom can gather in one place." As the crown prince said so, he looked at the northeastern nobles' table. Servants quickly rushed toward it as Albert asked, "Can we adjust the seating a bit?"

Who could say no to the crown prince? Even more so after Eric stood up to say, "Of course, Your Highness."

Eric's helpful, efficient behavior stemmed from the fact that he would soon need to ask Albert to invest in the northeastern shoreline, and he refused to be timid and subservient with another high-ranking individual. His actions prompted the other

nobles at the table to awkwardly stand as well. The servants quickly obeyed the crown prince, resetting the table with places for Taylor and Kage.

Cale was watching from the side; contrary to his expectations, the servants worked immaculately and at lightning speed. Still, Cale's expression grew inscrutable.

Eric, again filled with all kinds of worries, approached and stood next to him. "Cale, you remember, right?" he whispered in the lout's ear. "Stay still. Just don't react."

Ignoring Eric, Cale looked at his seat. The servants had placed the new guests next to him. The crown prince had probably decided that as well.

Well, it's not like he can put them next to some high-ranking noble's pet. And the Henituses are the strongest of these four households.

After the servants finished rearranging the seating, they bowed and departed.

"Everyone please sit."

As soon as Albert said those words, Cale strode to his seat and plopped down. There was no chair to his side, and Taylor's wheelchair soon filled that spot.

Taylor greeted the northeastern nobles' offspring with a smile as he joined them. "Nice to meet you."

Kage sat down naturally next to Taylor. The two of them—no, three of them, including Cale—pretended this was their first time meeting.

The black dragon transmitted his voice into Cale's mind. *‹This situation is entertaining.›*

Cale wholeheartedly agreed. He looked to the crown prince.

"Despite our slight delay, let us resume," the crown prince said, reannouncing the official start of the dinner. "I wanted to gather the individuals who will lead Rowoon in the future to share a meal. Thank you all for accepting my invitation. I hope you have a wonderful dinner."

As the crown prince finished speaking, servants entered with plates of food for each table, and an orchestra played music at the rear of the hall. This was definitely different from a normal dinner where food was simply *served*. The fact that it wasn't a traditional banquet created a natural atmosphere of discussion, making it easy to move from table to table.

"Lord Cale, we plan to go greet the crown prince in a bit," Amir told him.

Cale nodded, concentrating on the food before him, but he was still pensive. *What are his intentions?*

There was no way the crown prince had just called the nobles together as a show of appreciation. He definitely had a reason. Cale had a few different ideas about what it might be.

It could be about the war that will soon arise in the Western Continent's southern region. Or it could be that he caught wind of the civil war coming up in the Kingdom of the Whipper.

Whipper, the site of the Magic Tower, was where Princess Rosalyn was headed. A civil war between mages and anti-mages would soon break out there.

Myriad thoughts were circulating in Cale's head, but he shrugged them off immediately. *I won't react. What do I care what the crown prince's motives are?*

It was none of Cale's business, so he chose to enjoy the food.

‹Looks yummy. Really yummy. You weak humans are really good at cooking.› The black dragon disguised his whining with a gruff tone.

Enduring the dragon's gripes, Cale savored his meal. As he'd expected, the palace's food really was exceptional. His hand subconsciously reached for the wine glass a servant had left him, but it quickly disappeared.

"Cale, just wait five minutes," Eric pleaded.

At that, Cale withdrew his hand and went back to eating. The rest of the northeastern nobles at the table just watched him quietly. The northeast was already in an awkward situation, with its ten families broken into different factions. It made matters worse that this character, Marquess Sten's abandoned

eldest son and a magic bomb all on his own, was currently seated at the table too.

Despite this tense situation, Cale was calmly munching away, and people couldn't help but gawk.

He heard the black dragon's voice in his head. *‹By the way, there are magic video recording tools all around this hall.›*

"Oh," Cale said, a smile rising to his lips. Anybody watching would think his food was especially delicious.

I know at least one thing.

Cale felt that he'd figured out one of Prince Albert's goals. First and foremost, the crown prince was observing the noble offspring. The younger princes were probably aware of that as well, which meant it was something the entire royal family wanted.

His little smile widened to a smirk. At that, Eric nervously sprang out of his seat. Amir and Gilbert followed his lead.

Seeing those three rise, Cale slowly got up and brushed his hair back as he asked, "Shall we go?"

Cale walked behind the three nobles as they headed toward the platform. Many of the invitees had already gone to greet the crown prince, and soon Cale came face-to-face with him.

"Oh, our northeastern nobles!"

The crown prince welcomed the four with a bright smile. He'd risen from his seat earlier, and he was shaking hands with everybody who came to greet him.

Albert Crossman's blond hair and blue eyes made him look like a fairy-tale prince who'd jumped out of a book and joined the real world. His hair's golden shade was unique to the Crossmans, Rowoon's royal family; it was said to symbolize the God of Sun's blessing.

"I, Eric Whilsman, am pleased to greet Your Highness for the first time in a long while."

"Yes, yes, Lord Eric. Don't we have something to talk about?"

The crown prince had brought up the northeastern shoreline investment issue first. Eric lit up. “Yes! We are eagerly waiting for the moment when we can discuss it with you.”

“I, too, am quite eager for that meeting. How could I possibly delay it? You’re Lord Whilsman’s intelligent son. You’ve done an excellent job looking after the border of the northeastern region.”

The crown prince was slowly getting into it. Cale quietly stood watching Eric, who smiled brightly at Crown Prince Albert as he activated his silver tongue, praising Gilbert and Amir as well.

How entertaining.

Cale watched it all in silence until his turn came around. The crown prince extended his hand to Cale, who dipped his head in deference.

“Isn’t this Lord Cale of the Henituse family, the ones responsible for the edge of our northeastern region? It may be my first time meeting you, but thanks to Lord Deruth’s good work, we’re no longer afraid of the Dark Forest. You don’t know how reassuring that is for me. It allows me to sleep soundly at night.”

Cale had one goal for today.

“I hear that you’re a very free spirit,” said the crown prince. “I’m sure that’s because the artistic souls of the Henituse territory’s sculptors have inspired you deeply! My feeling is that your free spirit has common ground with the purity of those artistic souls.”

It was probably difficult to find such praise for someone as notoriously loutish as Cale. In that respect, the crown prince was amazing.

From the crown prince’s perspective, however, he could speak well of Cale as long as the count’s son didn’t wreak havoc at this gathering. Especially since the royal family probably wanted control of the northeast. Furthermore, no one in the royal family would despise Count Henituse, who silently ruled his territory very well.

That’s why favoritism won’t impact the family as a whole.

Cale grabbed the crown prince's hand. It was his turn to use his own silver tongue now. The two were in stark contrast—the blond crown prince in his white formalwear, and redheaded Cale in his black outfit. Both looked relaxed.

"I also have a feeling now that I've met Your Highness today," Cale began, his composed voice filling the area around them. "In addition to our sun, His Majesty, I've realized that we also have you to shine over the night and watch over the citizens. It is truly a wonderful sight to behold." Cale's light and fully self-possessed tone complemented his confident demeanor.

"Is that so…?" For a moment, the crown prince wore a bitter expression before reverting to his normal genteel self.

Cale didn't miss this change. He continued leisurely in a quiet but sincere voice. "Indeed, Your Highness. Now that I, Cale, have personally beheld the face of the prince who is tantamount to a star in our citizens' hearts, I may not be able to sleep tonight."

Eric's jaw dropped, while Gilbert and Amir couldn't help looking at Cale in disbelief. Seeing the acerbic glint in Prince Albert's eyes, Cale felt assured that his plan to repel the crown prince had moved forward.

At that moment, the black dragon's suspicious voice entered Cale's mind. *‹Why does this insignificant "crown prince" dye his hair with magic? And it's magic at a level only a superior dragon like me would detect! Did another dragon dye it? No, maybe it's some other type of power?›*

Damn. At that moment, Cale realized he'd learned another useless secret he couldn't reveal even the tiniest piece of to anyone else. *A secret about parentage this time?*

He really didn't want to know about it.

Chapter 9:
I’m Clueless, I Know Nothing

THE BLACK DRAGON kept babbling about how a mighty dragon would *never* use his magic for such a useless man—without thinking twice about the times he had done such things for Cale. Meanwhile, Cale tried his best to ignore every single word he’d heard.

I’m clueless, he told himself, smiling gently at the prince. *Completely clueless. I know nothing.*

‹Hmm? His eyes are magically dyed too,› the dragon was saying. *‹This insignificant man is definitely plotting something. Be careful, weak human!›*

I think I’ll be fine if you stop talking, Cale thought.

‹Hmm? This man isn’t weak either. Be extra careful, weakling. You’ll get killed!›

Damn it.

For the very first time, Cale was frightened of the black dragon’s detailed rambling. Gears whirred in his mind as he was forced to consider the identity of the crown prince’s mother. She hadn’t been queen—rather, she was a concubine who’d originally been a servant at the palace. Word had it that she died suspiciously when the crown prince was young. The current queen was the third-born prince’s mother.

Furthermore, the prince was known to be an average fighter. Even Choi Han thought as much in the novels. *But the dragon says he’s not weak?!* What was the crown prince hiding, and how had the dragon found all this out?

No… It’s not my business if the prince is hiding something.

Cale tuned out the black dragon, who was still mumbling about the crown prince now that his interest was piqued.

“You remind me a bit of myself, Lord Cale,” Prince Albert was saying.

Distracted, Cale tossed out a vague pleasantry. “Your Highness, such a statement is the greatest honor I could hope

for."

The crown prince let go of Cale's hand in an instant. Heedless of his shock, Cale stepped back and slipped behind Eric. When things got complicated, it was easy to use Eric as a shield. Prince Albert observed Cale with interest, then turned his attention to Eric, who smoothly resumed their conversation.

Watching him, Cale thought, *Something's up.* There was a reason the crown prince was wary of the two younger princes. There was also a reason why the king had suddenly favored the third-born prince. Cale could guess it all.

Is the crown prince not really the king's son? Or is there a different secret to his birth?

Cale recalled when Kim Roksu, after completing his SATs as a high school senior, took a part-time restaurant job to make ends meet. He thought back to an eight o'clock soap opera the restaurant's owner used to watch. Prince Albert Crossman could definitely have been the main character of that soap opera.

Stay still and don't react, Cale reminded himself. He decided he'd keep his nose clean from here on out and avoid discovering any more secrets.

And stick to his mantra he did. He didn't drink a drop during dinner, which prompted nobles from other regions who'd never met him to come over and chat. Every time that happened, Cale looked to Eric, who then intervened.

After he'd done so a couple of times, Cale said to himself, "Ahh, this is pretty nice."

Hearing his mutter, Gilbert and Amir stiffened and had a brief conversation with their eyes.

"Isn't this weird?"

"Yes."

The two began inching away from Eric and Cale. But Cale soon locked eyes with Lady Amir, who froze on the spot.

"By the way, Lady Amir..."

"Yes?"

"I heard the shoreline of your territory is stunning. Is it true?"

“Of course. The cliffs overlooking the coast are very beautiful.”

Beautiful? As if! Cale thought about the cliffs and how extremely difficult it would be to earn the Sound of the Wind.

In the novels, a member of the Kingdom of the Whipper’s anti-mage faction ended up finding the Sound of the Wind. It might seem strange that someone from Whipper ended up finding an Ancient Power in Rowoon, but there was a long storyline behind that.

Anyway, that power had been claimed by a mage slayer—an extremely brutal fool who appeared in the second half of the civil war arc. He was already so powerful that he didn’t put it to much use.

The Magic Tower will fall soon, Cale mused.

After the civil war, a new Magic Tower would be built on the site of the fallen one, and Rosalyn would end up in charge of it.

Choi Han, that mage slayer, and the empire’s imperial prince.

Those three people became involved in all of the incidents in the middle of the Western Continent and were thus lauded as heroes. The novels had also mentioned near the beginning that the queen of the Western Continent’s Jungle to the south wound up involved in unifying the southern territories as well.

The continent had been at peace for the last two centuries, aside from attacks by the secret organization Choi Han kept running into. Yet its inhabitants would soon break that peace and start fighting for power.

Cale glanced at Eric, who was handling everything for him, then checked the clock. The meal would be over shortly. There would still be time for conversation after the meal, which all the nobles were waiting for. Cale couldn’t care less about it, though. *Aristocratic gossip is none of my business.*

“Lord Gilbert, after the meal’s over, it’s fine for me to leave, right?”

Gilbert looked at Cale, who was chomping on fruit like he was at a picnic, and nodded. “Yes. We plan to meet the crown prince afterward, but you probably don’t intend to come with us, do you?”

“No. What good would I be? You three are better informed about the investment plan.”

Gilbert’s brows shot up in surprise. “You read the document?”

“Well, I skimmed it some,” Cale responded.

It was then that Prince Albert rose from his seat. He was about to announce the end of the meal. Cale hadn’t successfully discovered the real reason for today’s gathering, but he wasn’t disappointed. He didn’t plan to involve himself with the crown prince any further.

But Prince Albert’s next words made him grimace.

“It was a pleasure to share this dinner with you all tonight,” Albert declared, beaming. “I’ve arranged a simple wine tasting for those who may be interested. Please enjoy yourselves before you leave. Oh, and I’ve prepared places for you all at the upcoming birthday celebration. I hope you’ll all attend and delight in the joyous festivities of that day.”

Ugh.

Cale held back a sigh. Albert said he hoped they’d all enjoy themselves, but he was pretty much commanding them to attend.

Guess I’ll be in the plaza when the bombs go off.

That was to be expected, but Cale didn’t like it very much.

“Let’s wrap this up, then.”

Cale rose from his seat. Most people wanted to go to the wine tasting with the three princes, but only those approved to be in the crown prince’s presence could do so.

Kage pushed Taylor past Cale, leaning over to whisper in the redhead’s ear, “See you later, *kiddo*.”

Cale scowled after her, conveying his distaste at her playing up the “older sister” act. Kage just pretended not to notice and—acting like a good, pure priestess—headed toward the crown prince.

Amir approached Cale. “Lord Cale, let me walk you out.”

“Oh, Lady Amir.” Taking in Amir’s neat green hair and sophisticated calm, Cale shot back, “Are you worried I’ll cause trouble on my way out?”

“Well, unfortunately, I hear Lord Neo is leaving early as well.”

“Ah.”

She intended to escort him in case Neo tried to start something again. Cale made for the banquet hall door without any other questions, Amir walking beside him. The two reached Cale’s carriage without saying much. They found Ron waiting by it.

“Good job today, Lord Cale,” Amir said, and Cale nodded.

“It was hard. But you’ll have to go back in and work even harder, Lady Amir.”

Amir smiled. “That’s because we need good results from this meeting.”

Cale could sense despair in her voice. The northeastern coast was really a useless piece of land. It was full of cliffs, with no other points of interest. Moreover, the whirlpools around the cliffs were a problem. Those living in the territory had experience navigating around them, but they posed great danger to others.

The Sound of the Wind is responsible for the whirlpools.

No matter what, Amir and Gilbert wanted to make every effort to bring about investments in that useless coast.

“I believe we can do it,” Amir declared.

“Lady Amir?”

“Yes, Lord Cale?”

It occurred to Cale that it wouldn’t hurt to help Eric, Gilbert, and Amir, whom he’d manipulated today like the beastfolk under his command. Those three still needed more power behind them at the Northeast Gathering. Besides, according to the report on the noble offspring, Amir was tight-lipped.

“I believe His Highness will be fairly interested in this investment.”

“I think so too,” Amir agreed. After all, the crown prince had remembered the idea even without Eric bringing it up.

“You’ll be discussing investments in tourism, right?”

“Yes.”

In Cale’s opinion, tourism investments in the coastal cliffs would be completely useless. He sidled up to Amir and whispered in her ear, “If you’re in desperate need of investments, I’d say you should think about the value of your shoreline’s location relative to Whipper and other northern kingdoms.”

“Excuse me?” she asked, skeptical.

Cale shrugged. “I think it’d be best if you kept what I just said to yourself.”

“I’ll bear it in mind for now.”

He was satisfied with Amir, who seemed doubtful but stayed mum. He got in the carriage and waved gently to her. Amir dipped her head in response.

As Ron closed the carriage door, Cale said, “Let’s move.”

“Yes, young master.”

The carriage took off right away. Cale watched Amir through the window. She had yet to move as she absorbed what he’d told her.

His own thoughts turned to the northeastern coast. Most of Rowoon’s shoreline consisted of sandy beaches, but Amir’s and Gilbert’s coasts were comparatively complicated, with sharp cliffs and many small islands. There were only a few places where ships could safely weigh anchor. That being the case, the local fishermen were veterans who could avoid the whirlpools and fish safely without issues.

They’re only thinking about encouraging tours and sightseeing because the peace has lasted so long.

The crown prince probably already knew that the end of that peace was fast approaching.

Anyway, all I have to do is get that Ancient Power before the mage slayer takes it for himself.

With that, Cale decided to give it no further thought.

***

That night, after Cale returned home from the gathering, he received two reports. The first came from Choi Han.

“We found four of the magic bombs,” Choi Han told him. “They were all around the plaza.”

In the novel, *five* magic bombs had been planted in different locations; the other five were planted on people.

“Hand me the map.”

Cale reached out to Choi Han, who had returned alone. The black dragon was still at the site of the magic bombs. Choi Han must have run all the way back; his face was dotted with sweat, which was unusual for him.

“After we found the first one, I ran around with the dragon in my arms to do a thorough search,” Choi Han explained. “We ended up finding three more, but that was it. I’m sure we need to look someplace other than the plaza, but we haven’t found any in the places we’ve looked so far.”

Tunk. Tunk. Cale tapped the map. Were there only four bombs planted in the area this time, and six bombs on people? Or had something else changed? Worried, he stood up.

“No need to rush. Things will be safe until the celebration in two days.”

“They’re dangerous, so we should get rid of them as soon as possible!”

“No, let’s steal them on the day of. Early in the morning.”

“Pardon…?”

The magic bombs Cale was familiar with required their creator’s signal to detonate. However, anyone at the black dragon’s or even Rosalyn’s level of magic could easily cut the connection between the creator and the bombs—although doing so could take some time. That was why, in the novel, Rosalyn had been in charge of destroying the bombs attached to people.

We'll need to do that part on the day of the celebration. That would be the only way to make the blood-drinking mage think everything was going smoothly with the bombs.

"Steal them? We aren't going to destroy them?"

Cale thrust the map back toward the confused Choi Han. "Why would we destroy such useful things?"

Even if they couldn't detonate the bombs, the densely packed mana inside would be a useful ingredient.

"I've got a use for them."

To Choi Han, Cale's smile looked pretty wicked. The hero took the map in befuddlement.

"Keep looking—there may be more," Cale said. "Check back multiple times to see if they move the bombs too."

Choi Han and the black dragon would need to stay hidden and navigate the plaza for their investigation. It would be tedious, boring, and *very* mentally taxing, but it wasn't something Cale was going to do himself.

"Time to earn your keep," Cale told Ohn and Hong, who had just woken up from their nap. He turned back to Choi Han. "Go work."

Choi Han and the two kittens—who were rubbing the sleep out of their eyes—went to work as Cale had instructed. Lethargic, he watched them jump from the terrace. Then he drank the wine he hadn't had a chance to drink at dinner and fell asleep.

The second report arrived while Cale was sleeping. He heard the news upon waking: Bilose would arrive in the capital the day before the king's birthday celebration.

***

Cale rode in his carriage, bound for the inn where he planned to meet Bilose. It was the same place where the ten wolf children were staying. Ohn and Hong—and Lark, obviously—joined him.

Thinking about what Lark had said earlier, Cale asked him, “You want me to take care of your siblings?”

“Yes. That’s my condition for the deal.”

“And what can you do for me?”

Unlike before, Lark answered without hesitation. “It won’t just be me.”

“If it’s not just you, who else?”

“My siblings,” Lark answered brightly. “We’re even stronger as a pack.”

A chill ran down Cale’s spine. *No way!*

Lark ruthlessly hit Cale with another argument. “The Blue Wolf Tribe have been well-known as strong knights for years. Our history is—”

“Something I don’t need to know,” Cale snapped, turning away from him.

Although Cale wasn’t looking at him, Lark nodded to himself and said timidly, “If you don’t know, may I explain it to you?” Although he framed it as a question, he was clearly itching to talk about it.

Cale shook his head. “No need.”

“But—”

Cale stared straight at Lark. *He wants me to take him and the ten Blue Wolf Tribe children and form a brigade of knights?* This was the same Lark who, despite being afraid of the whales, was willing to attack their chief for his friends. *He wants me to take him, a crazy guy who blindly plows forward with more zeal than a religious fanatic, and make him my subordinate?*

“Enough nonsense.” Cale’s frigid voice made Lark’s shoulders droop, but it didn’t bother Cale in the slightest. “You want little kids to become knights? You asked me to *protect* the wolf children, but this condition of yours seems to go against that.”

If Cale trained such young wolf children into knights, they would become an invincible death squad *full* of wolves even more zealous than religious fanatics. Just the thought chilled

him. More importantly, Lark had made the decision for all of his siblings.

"What about how they feel? Why are you deciding for them?" Cale demanded.

Lark had a blank expression for a moment, then hung his head and responded, "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," Cale said, and Lark peeked up at him. "Since I know what you want from me, I'll think about what I want in return."

He'd already thought about that, of course. In about three months, a profitable Ancient Power would appear on a dangerous mountain. He didn't need it yet, but it would only exist for six months. Lark, in Berserk Mode, would be the best person to climb that mountain.

If I sell that Ancient Power to the Queen of the Jungle, then even if the Henituses go broke, I'll have enough money to indulge for the rest of my life.

Naturally, he'd increase the power's value to mark it up before selling it. He didn't see any problem with raising the asking price for someone with lots of money to spare.

"Will you need something from me?" Lark asked, withering once again.

Cale let out a sigh, which made Lark recoil even further. "Don't ask such obvious questions. Of *course* I'll need your help."

Lark gasped, then quickly nodded. "Yes. I'll do whatever you ask as part of the deal. Please let me know once you decide what it is."

"Sure." Cale took a small pouch of money out of his pocket and tossed it to Lark, who caught it on reflex. "You'll be hanging out with your siblings for the first time in a while. Take them sightseeing in the capital."

"Sightseeing…?"

"Yes. Isn't this their first time in a big city? Treat them to some delicious food too." After all, a comfortable conversation would only be possible without kids around. "Ohn and Hong will go with you so you won't get lost."

“Meeeeeow.”

“Meow.”

As if on cue, Ohn and Hong—who were sitting quietly in the carriage—made themselves known. They approached Lark, batting his leg with their front paws.

Lark caressed their heads. “Stop it, you two. That tickles!”

He thought the kittens were adorable, but Cale saw that they were seriously attacking him. As he watched, he thought, *I should get Hans to keep an eye on the wolf children later. I’ll need to find them a nanny otherwise.*

Cale mulled over the people who could serve as nanny other than Hans. He thought it’d be great if they were tidy and had a knack for cooking. He grimaced as Vicross came to mind. Vicross was definitely good at cooking, tidy, and ordinarily quite average. The Henituse family knew him to be respectful, but what did all that matter when he was a torture-loving lunatic? Cale couldn’t let him taint the wolf children’s pure minds.

Besides, I need to send Vicross off with Choi Han.

That wasn’t necessary per se, but for everything to flow according to the novel, Vicross, Choi Han, and Rosalyn needed to go to Brek to torture the grand admiral.

Cale was still debating who would take good care of the wolf children when the carriage arrived at the inn, and he disembarked.

“Follow me.” Cale patted the nervous Lark’s shoulder, and the wolf boy entered the inn with Ohn and Hong in his arms.

“Welcome to the Scent of Grapes!” a young employee exclaimed. “Are you with a party?”

Cale nodded and strode right for the back door. The people Choi Han had brought with him were all residing in a detached villa at the rear of the inn. The attendant tried to follow, but Cale stopped him and waved him off, then hurried to the villa entrance. As he stopped in front of the door, he looked pointedly at Lark.

“You open the door. These are *your* younger siblings.”

“Huh? Okay!”

Lark, who had been creeping closer, set the kittens down and grabbed the doorknob. This would be his first time seeing his younger siblings since he'd experienced Berserk Mode. Cale slowly moved back; he dreaded the idea of seeing what was behind the door.

Click.

Lark turned the knob, and the door opened to reveal the villa's interior. The entrance led to a cozy-looking living room. Still, Cale instinctively took two steps backward.

"Haah."

At that moment, the ten wolf children rushed over to Lark, crying out a chorus of "Brother!" and "Big Brother Lark!"

He ran toward them as well, and they joyfully embraced. An emotional reunion was happening in front of Cale's eyes, yet he looked away—the enormity of being confronted with ten wolf children was too much. Nonetheless, there *was* someone Cale was happy to see.

"Hello, Lord Cale."

"It's been a long time, Bilose."

Cale had told Bilose to meet him here. The merchant's smile was brimming with nervousness.

Another man came up from behind Bilose, drawing Cale's eye. "Nice to meet you, Lord Cale."

"Are you the merchant who came with Choi Han?"

The man was in his sixties, with a gentle demeanor and strong physique. He was the person who'd asked Choi Han to help with the Blue Wolf Tribe.

"Yes, and he told me a lot about you. It's an honor to meet you, Lord Cale."

"An honor? I wouldn't go so far as to say *that* about meeting a lout like me." Cale extended a hand, and the man shook it.

"The name's Odeus Flynn."

Cale smiled. Odeus Flynn had been a strong contender for head of Flynn Merchant Fleets, but he'd given up on the position. He now made a living managing his own small fleet. He was also

Bilose's uncle—his father's older brother, to be exact. He'd connected Bilose and Choi Han, and he was the person who'd brought out Bilose's hidden greed.

He's even more devious than Ron.

Odeus made a show of owning a small merchant fleet, but behind his kindly mask, he really ruled the underworld. He was the type who was nice to some but ruthlessly vicious to others. And right now, the only person who had the advantage of knowing both sides of Odeus's character was Cale.

As he greeted Odeus, he feigned blissful ignorance. "Flynn? You must be related to Bilose. Nice to meet you."

"I was shocked. I didn't know you knew Bilose, Lord Cale. I hadn't seen him since he was a little boy, so I was thrilled to meet him again. I feel I've had a lot of lucky encounters lately."

Looking at Odeus, Bilose couldn't hide his strong feelings. His uncle had thrown away Flynn Merchant Fleets and gone to live a simpler life. He was known to be gentle, and he was the only person Bilose had positive childhood memories of.

Well, Bilose sees him as a good person.

Letting go of Odeus's hand, Cale told Bilose, "Let's go upstairs and have a drink." The two-story villa had a small bar on the second floor. Before heading upstairs, Cale addressed Odeus as well. "Choi Han and Rosalyn will soon arrive, so you three can catch up."

"I understand. I hope I have a chance to drink with you in the future as well, Lord Cale."

Cale smiled. "Let's share a drink soon," he agreed.

As Bilose stood there with a complicated expression, Cale patted his shoulder and made to head upstairs. However, the ten wolf children blocked his way.

"Thank you, Lord Cale!"

"Thank you!"

Cale stared at the grateful wolf pups. *What a headache.*

The ten children radiated potential; Cale had a feeling they'd grow to be quite strong as time passed. While their parents, cousins, and other relatives had all been killed, the wolf

children's direct, intelligent gazes told Cale they still had their innocence and goodness. None were very young; they all looked to be between ten and thirteen years old.

I guess it'd be better to find them a training instructor rather than a nanny. As he waved Lark out, however, Cale decided against it.

He turned back around and headed upstairs. Behind him, he still heard the wolf children thanking him, although he didn't respond. Their voices gave him the shivers.

Bilose followed Cale to the second floor. As soon as they entered the room, he asked, "Just what have you been doing, Lord Cale?"

Cale responded without hesitation. "Doing what I can to live a comfortable, easy life."

Bilose wore a look of disbelief as he took a bottle and glasses out from the cabinet. Sitting across from Cale, he filled his own cup and drank from it.

"Do you not see me in front of you…?"

"I'm sorry, Lord Cale. I'm just a bit frustrated."

Bilose guzzled down about half the bottle before looking straight at Cale—no, *scrutinizing* Cale. This former lout had said that he would no longer live as such. Never in his wildest dreams, however, had Bilose expected to run into his uncle while coming to meet Cale.

As Bilose went to pour another drink, Cale stopped him. He took the bottle from Bilose and filled the shopkeeper's glass. "I don't know what's frustrating you, but you can't just keep drinking by yourself like that."

"Lord Cale…"

"What?" Cale filled his own cup as well.

"Mr. Odeus is my uncle by blood."

"Mr. Odeus," he says.

Bilose, who wasn't allowed to use the surname "Flynn," couldn't even call Odeus his uncle. Still, Odeus was the only adult who had been kind to Bilose during his childhood. In the novel, he'd told Bilose, *"I consider you my nephew and my family. You*

clear the bar." That sentence had been a starting point—and a *turning* point—for Bilose.

In the story, Bilose was awed by Choi Han's strength after Odeus introduced them. He decided to follow Choi Han, and he put himself in contention to lead Flynn Merchant Fleets.

"Lord Cale, aren't you curious as to why Mr. Odeus runs a small merchant fleet, even though he has the surname Flynn?"

Aren't I curious? Cale already knew why. Odeus was in full control of the northwestern and central underworlds.

Filling his glass, Cale replied, "Am I supposed to be curious about the Flynn name?"

He drank from the glass and set it down, only to see Bilose was smiling. "You're right. 'Flynn' isn't a grand name that would pique your interest."

"Nope. Besides, you're a Flynn too. It's no more impressive to meet Odeus."

"Well, I'm the son of a mistress."

Cale snorted. "That doesn't mean you aren't a Flynn. Everybody else considers you one."

The Flynns might not have given Bilose their surname, but everybody else considered him part of the lineage. That was why nobody dismissed him, even though he was illegitimate. Since the Flynns ran one of the world's three greatest merchant fleets, the truth was that they were a pretty significant family.

Bilose balked, then took the bottle back and filled Cale's glass for him. "Lord Cale."

"What?"

"I feel like you're good at saying the right thing."

"I *am* rather good at that."

"So, let me ask you now..."

"Yeah?"

"Just what did you steal with those things I lent you?"

Cale broke out into a smile. "So far, I've only stolen one thing," he said casually, picking up his full glass. "I'll steal the rest

soon.” He’d rescued the dragon, but the other thefts would happen tomorrow.

Bilose’s lips twitched. There were probably few nobles who would say they were going to steal something, but one such noble was before his eyes right now. “Can I help as well?”

Cale shook his head. “Unfortunately…”

Clack. He put his glass down on the table.

“All the open roles are full already.” In fact, his head was already chock-full with a list of humans and beastfolk to use.

“Ha ha ha!” Laughing, Bilose picked up his full glass, drank it in one gulp, and put it back down on the table with a *clack*. “Guess I should steal something else, then.”

Bilose had already decided what he would steal: the role of heir to Flynn Merchant Fleets. He was going to make that position his. That only made sense, since his greed ran deeper than anyone else’s.

As Bilose pondered this, Cale said, “Do whatever you want.”

Hearing that, Bilose laughed again, but Cale didn’t care one whit. The fact that Bilose had met Odeus today meant Cale had accomplished that day’s goal, allowing him to drink at his leisure.

That being the case, Cale only enjoyed himself for a little while. He then returned to the Henituse residence alone to prepare for the next day. Since he’d need to start moving in the middle of the night, he planned to go to sleep early in the evening.

Regrettably, that wasn’t going to happen right away.

“Ron?”

Ron bowed to Cale and greeted him. “Young master, I would like to make a request, if possible.”

“What’s that?”

The servant raised his head. “Please take care of my son.”

“Your son? You mean Vicross?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

For the very first time, Cale saw Ron's real face, without his benevolent smile—the face of an assassin. Ron had a blank expression; only the corners of his lips were slightly elevated.

"I need to go hunt some foxes," Ron said. Old as he was, he was still an assassin. "You know I kill people, don't you?"

Cale—who was mostly sober up to this point—felt the light buzz *whoosh* out of him all at once. Chills ran down his spine. Barely able to conceal his shivering, he shot back, "So?"

When the little pup master spoke in his usual blunt tone, Ron nearly resumed smiling benevolently. He suppressed it and continued, "So, I'm leaving to kill people."

"You're leaving your son behind?"

"Yes, young master."

"These 'foxes' are people, then?"

Cale had now singled out Ron the assassin's true smile. It was very faint—that upward quirk at the corners of his lips—and it made him think it would be better if Ron didn't smile at all.

"That's right," Ron replied, pleased. "I have to go kill an entire *skulk* of foxes." His voice was low. "Rip them to pieces."

Either Ron's body would be ripped into pieces or his targets' bodies would; it could only be one of those two scenarios.

The phrase "rip them to pieces" gave Cale goosebumps. He lapsed into thought, and Ron watched as Cale said nothing for quite some time.

After sighing several times and rubbing his face, the little pup master finally said, "Go and come back."

Ron's smile disappeared.

Cale, who was already in pajamas, lay down on the bed. "I'll tell Hans you're taking a leave of absence. Update me every so often. You'll be able to collect money from Flynn Merchant Fleets with your ID plaque. And why would you leave Vicross to a lout like me? He's an adult. He'll figure out what to do with his own life."

Cale had decided to think in simple terms. There was no need for the old servant to join Choi Han's group at the moment.

Now that Lark could enter a controlled Berserk Mode, Choi Han would be fine without Ron *or* Vicross. Still, Ron would be necessary to Choi Han a year from now. More importantly, he'd be necessary to keep northeastern Rowoon peaceful. He'd have his work cut out for him then.

Leaning against his pillow, Cale added, "Your sabbatical will only be one year, though. Enjoy your time off. Don't get hurt out there."

Thinking about the coming year of sweet dreams he'd arranged for himself, Cale stretched his legs out and peered at Ron—then flinched. The old man was silently laughing, his shoulders shaking.

That atrocious sight made Cale cower underneath the blanket. *What's going on?*

Ron didn't even notice Cale's expression stiffen as he guffawed in silence. *I thought this little punk was a pup—but I see I'm the* real *dog here.* Much like a dog, he was looking to his master.

Reflecting on that, Ron asked, "Will updating you once per month be sufficient, young master?"

"Yes. Do as you please."

Ron opened the door and left without a sound, as befitting of an assassin. Before slipping away completely, he said one last thing: "I'll see you when I return, then."

Not waiting for Cale's answer, he closed the door.

Cale fell right asleep in the early evening, relieved to be free from Ron for a year.

***

At dawn, six people stood before Cale. Some he had called upon, while others had been brought over by Choi Han.

Cale looked at Rosalyn. "Brown hair suits you too, Miss Rosalyn."

Rosalyn wasn't entirely sure of the plan, but upon hearing the words "magic bomb," she'd agreed to help. She understood the situation's severity; on top of that, Cale had promised her something in return for pitching in.

"Mm-hmm. I thought this hair color would make it easier to be out and about unhindered."

Ohn and Hong stood next to Rosalyn, who had magically dyed her hair and eyes brown. Lark was there too, restless as usual. Next to him were the black dragon and Choi Han.

"Lark, you can use your wolfish strength without transforming, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Cale divided the six into two teams. He'd already told Choi Han to bury the black mana-disturbance tool at the plaza the day before, so each team would only have to dispose of two bombs.

"Miss Rosalyn and Lark will be on one team. Choi Han, Ohn, Hong, and the dragon will be on the other."

Rosalyn and Lark looked perplexed by the teams' makeup.

"What about you, Lord Cale?" Rosalyn demanded.

Choi Han, the dragon, Ohn, and Hong chimed in one at a time.

"Mr. Cale's a bit…um… Well, his physical strength is…"

"Weak."

"We don't need him."

"He's useless."

Rosalyn gasped, staring wide-eyed at Cale. Lark was likewise shocked.

Handing Choi Han the items he'd borrowed from Bilose, Cale agreed. "I'm feeble. I'd only be dead weight. Besides, as soon as the sun comes up, I need to prepare for the celebrations. So it'd be tough to join you."

When the night-shift guards switched with the day shift, the teams would enter the areas with bombs and start dismantling them. Then, when the black marble activated and caused a mana disturbance, they'd all wait at their assigned

stations to observe the secret organization and the situation at the plaza. The king's birthday celebration was set to start at nine in the morning.

Cale checked his watch, then told the six, "All right. Head on out." Then he added, "Don't forget to bring back the dismantled bombs."

Rosalyn smiled at that. "You remember that you promised to give me one, right?"

"Of course."

"That should be enough to pay for my services."

It definitely would be.

Cale looked at the third-floor terrace, which they were now using as an entrance of sorts, and opened the door. A cool night breeze blew in, and the six teammates rushed out. Some left using invisibility magic, while others merely dashed off. Cale watched them go. As he closed the terrace door, he found himself thinking that they were all tough as nails.

They'd left him alone in the room.

Groooooooong.

Cale slowly stroked the large silver-winged shield that had appeared in front of him. Even if something unexpected happened, he wouldn't die as long as he had that shield.

"I'll use a tiny bit of its strength if I need to," he murmured.

He patted the shield, which looked even holier with its engraved heart crest. If push came to shove, he'd use it without anyone noticing.

Sitting down on the couch, Cale practiced using just a fraction of the shield's power, then noticed his reflection in the mirror.

This should go fine.

The color red was said to madden the blood-drinking mage. In *Birth of a Hero*, he became crazed upon seeing Rosalyn during the Blue Wolf Tribe incident. After that, he famously declared that he wanted to cut off Rosalyn's head so he could treasure her red hair and eyes.

Cale brushed back his vivid red hair, thinking, *What're the chances I'll run into him?*

Even if something like that *did* happen, he'd just have to tell Choi Han to kill the mage. Unperturbed, Cale relaxed and waited for Ron to come and wake him.

When Ron arrived at the usual time, Cale reminded him, "Today will be your last day attending to me."

"I can do it again in a year," Ron replied.

That sounded terrible to Cale, who planned to foist Ron off on Choi Han immediately upon his return. Regardless, the prospect of getting rid of two burdens today thrilled Cale.

"Let's get ready," he said lightheartedly.

After completing all his preparations, Cale headed for the palace. All the noble offspring participating were supposed to enter together. The black dragon would come to the palace to report on the bomb-hunters' progress midway through.

In front of the residence's main gate, Cale boarded a carriage. It wasn't the Henituse carriage; he was riding with someone else today.

"Why did you want to go together?" Cale asked as he got in.

Amir responded with an unusually calm smile. She was the one who'd invited him.

Since Cale had fired off his question as soon as he entered, not even greeting her first, she got straight to the point. "What are your thoughts on our territory building a naval base, Lord Cale?"

Cale smiled. *She's been quite patient, but to no avail.*

He'd already received a letter from Eric letting him know that the tourism investment discussion hadn't gone well. Eric had said both Gilbert's and Amir's hopes were dashed. Yet Amir didn't seem very disappointed; rather, she appeared to have made a huge decision.

"A naval base, you say? Haven't you already made up your mind on that?"

Amir nodded slightly. "Yes, but I didn't think it was a decision I could make on my own. I've contacted my mother, the

head of my family. I plan to discuss the idea with Lord Gilbert today as well."

The creation of a new military base in a territory couldn't be approved easily. Rather than the facility's costliness, it was the relationship between powers within the territory that complicated things—especially in peacetime.

The royal family would have an eye on the northeast. Eastern Rowoon possessed the kingdom's only coast, and more importantly, there was a stable balance of power among the eastern territories. Other regions' nobles would have trouble exerting their power over the area.

"So, Lady Amir, is your concern that a naval base would strengthen the royal family's influence in your territory?"

"It is. That's why I asked for this time with you today."

In short, she had something to discuss with him. Cale leaned back in the carriage seat, making himself at home. Once he was comfortable, he told Amir, "I'm curious to hear your opinion on the matter, but I should tell you something first." He knew just why Amir was speaking with *him* specifically. "Decisions regarding the Henituse family's funds are made solely by my father, the count. A lout like me has no sway."

Should the royal family grant permission to construct a naval base, and invest huge sums in the Uvar family's territory, they would naturally own the base. Whenever a military facility was built outside the capital, the crown and the local nobility had to negotiate various contracts relating to ownership and logistics.

Using the location as a military base would demand significantly more manpower and funds than simply encouraging tourism to the cliffs and seaside. Amir and Gilbert's families were, frankly, of average wealth. They lacked the funds and manpower to complete a naval base independently and keep the royal family from taking ownership. Amir *did* want to prevent that, however, and there was only one method: to borrow money from a wealthier noble.

"Is that really the case?" Amir smiled, her eyes sharp with intellect.

After Cale left the crown prince's gathering, Amir had attended the wine tasting with Eric and Gilbert. There, she'd learned that the crown prince was interested in their region's shoreline, though not at all in tourism. When she returned to her residence that night, she'd mulled over Cale's words and figured out what he meant.

"His Highness is wary of Whipper and the northern kingdoms," she said. "I could tell that clearly from our conversation with him, so I sought intelligence from the information guild."

That was as Cale expected. Judging by what Amir said, the crown prince and royal family were aware that Whipper would soon face a civil war, and they knew that those northern kingdoms were gathering their forces.

But I didn't expect Amir to pick up on that.

The young woman was making clever choices. Her family wasn't well-off, so they relied quite a bit on the Whilsmans—Eric's family—for help. Getting intelligence on foreign kingdoms through the information guild would've cost Amir an arm and a leg, and her willingness to invest that kind of money to verify a single lead proved her excellent decision-making skills.

Amir glanced at Cale, who was quietly listening, and went on, "I've heard the Henituse territory is currently fortifying its walls. I imagine your family will be extremely interested in a military investment, since the region has seldom tolerated any incursions in the past."

Cale nodded. "I'll speak to my father about it."

"We'll send a separate official request as well."

The two smiled at each other.

This naval base's creation would shift the balance of power in the northeast toward all four of their families—Cale, Eric, Amir, and Gilbert alike. If the Henituses' funding allowed them to maintain influence over the base, they would benefit by obtaining power, wealth, and a stronger foothold in maritime politics.

Amir hesitated. "I'm a bit worried about the whirlpools, but there are tried and true routes around them. Besides, the

whirlpools could actually serve as defenses to prevent foreign nations from invading. So I want to go ahead with this."

When Amir mentioned the whirlpools, Cale kept himself from smiling. Those whirlpools would soon be his to use as he desired.

Wouldn't it be great to build a house on one of those cliffs and enjoy the sunset?

Once Cale handed control of the Henituse estate to Bassen, it would be difficult for him to stay. His plan was to hide in some remote corner during the war, then head to Amir's or Gilbert's territory when peace was reestablished. There, he'd build a cliffside house overlooking the sea and kick back for the rest of his days. The cliffs were close to Henituse territory, which would be especially convenient.

"Thank you for your help, Lord Cale."

"Ha ha ha! To ask a *lout* for help! I have no power whatsoever. I'm just going to deliver your message to my father." Cale waved her off, laughing.

Amir, however, no longer took him at face value.

"Amir, when you lack power, you need to be cautious. Yet if you want to earn power, you need to be bold."

That was what Amir's mother, the ruler of the Uvar territory, had said as she agreed to proceed with the naval base. Amir was similar to her mother: She tried to be bold, even while remaining cautious. That was also her philosophy for dealing with people.

"It's enough for you to deliver our message." Amir reached a hand out to Cale, and he shook it. When she let go, she said, "Please come visit Uvar territory in the future. There are lots of interesting places to see."

"If an opportunity arises, I will." The Sound of the Wind would make Cale's feet faster and, at the same time, give him control of a whirlwind he could use for both offense and defense. Thinking about the Uvar coast, where that Ancient Power was located, he added, "I hope that the opportunity comes soon."

As he said that, their carriage arrived at the palace. Cale got out and looked around.

It was eight o'clock. The staff setting up for the king's birthday celebration would've arrived at the Plaza of Glory an hour before the event, but the royal knights would allow people to enter starting at eight-thirty, filling the plaza with people. It would be difficult for anyone to go in or out, and the celebration would begin thirty minutes after that.

Cale's group would start looking for magic bombs hidden on people at eight-thirty. The bombs could be any shape or size: a necklace, a bag, a pendant... Hopefully they'd find the people wearing the bombs. If they didn't, the bombs' locations would become self-evident.

"Oh, you're here!"

Eric and Gilbert greeted Cale, who stood beside Amir.

"Everyone came early," Cale commented.

"Of course. The procession starts at 8:05," Eric said. His eyes were sending Cale another message: *Don't react today either.*

Cale nodded, holding Eric's gaze. *I know nothing. No secrets at all,* he reminded himself.

No sooner had he thought that than Prince Albert appeared. The noble youths would follow behind the crown prince today.

Then, next to the crown prince, Cale saw another arrival. He covered his mouth with one hand to conceal his rising smirk. Eric gasped, shocked, and whispers rippled through the crowd.

"Oh my goodness."

"How is that possible?"

Ignoring them, Cale lowered his hand. Once his face was slack once more, he looked up and made eye contact with the person next to the crown prince. It was the marquess's rejected eldest son, Taylor Sten. He stood on his own two legs next to Prince Albert.

When their eyes met, Taylor discreetly motioned with his eyes. At the same time, Cale heard the black dragon's voice in his head. The dragon had entered the palace to report the current

situation; he would simply provide his report, then leave immediately.

‹I'm here.›

Cale nodded ever so slightly.

‹We're defusing all the bombs planted in locations we found. We'll have them completely dismantled at 8:55 a.m. as planned.›

Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

‹Since we're busy, weak human, I'll be leaving now. If it seems like you'll get hurt, use your shield.›

Cale couldn't hear the black dragon's voice after that; he must have gone right back to work. Surprisingly, whenever Cale gave him a task to complete, the dragon put all his effort into the assignment. That made Cale want to keep ordering the creature around.

The shield? Please! I should have no reason to use it. Cale felt that wouldn't be necessary if things kept going smoothly.

"All preparations have been completed!" a knight announced. "We may now proceed!"

The crown prince boarded the royal parade carriage and addressed the nobles getting into the carriages behind him. "Let's go!"

Cale boarded a royal carriage as well. It took off shortly after, and Cale sat with his arms crossed and his face taut. Taylor Sten, Lady Amir, and Benion's lackey Neo Tolz wound up sharing the same carriage. Cale wondered whether the crown prince had put them together purposely.

"Nice seeing you all again after that gathering a few days ago," the wheelchair-less Taylor said.

"Lovely to meet you. I'm Amir Uvar."

"Nice meeting you," Neo said reluctantly.

It was Cale's turn to introduce himself, but he sat with his mouth shut, looking out the carriage window. A lout was at least allowed to be *that* rude. Crossing his arms tighter, he gazed at the Plaza of Glory.

The chaos was closer than anyone realized.

Birth of a Hero

Ever dreamt of waking up inside a novel? For Kim Roksu, this dream becomes reality when he finds himself in the shoes of Cale Henituse, the lazy, wine-loving son of a count—and punching bag for the novel's destined hero. Determined to dodge his grim fate, this new Cale Henituse vows to rewrite his story, aiming for a life of leisure far from heroic deeds and inevitable beatdowns.

But the path to a peaceful life is twisted by irony. As Cale plots his escape from destiny, he inadvertently gathers a motley crew of magical allies—including a haughty baby dragon and two mischievous kitten shapeshifters. Every attempt to avoid heroism entangles him further in a whirlwind of unforeseen adventures, proving that sometimes the best heroes are the ones who resist the call.

The wildly popular Korean novel series that inspired the hit webtoon!

lightnovel
Seven Seas Entertainment
sevenseasentertainment.com



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter