
NOVEL
02
Lout of Count's Family
BY Yu Ryeo-Han

Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 10: Somehow
Chapter 11: Into the Whirlpool
Chapter 12: In Thought
Chapter 13: Just Destroy It
Chapter 14: Not Like This
Chapter 15: Different Than Intended
Chapter 16: A Kind Person
Chapter 17: Taken by Surprise
Chapter 18: We Meet Again, Part One
Back Cover
Newsletter

Lout of Count's Family

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY

Yu Ryeo-Han

Seven Seas Entertainment

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CONTENTS



10 Somehow

11 Into the Whirlpool

12 In Thought

13 Just Destroy It

14 Not Like This

15 Different Than Intended

16 A Kind Person

17 Taken by Surprise

18 We Meet Again, Part One



Chapter 10:
Somehow

THINGS WERE ALREADY hectic inside the carriage.

Rattle, rattle.

Cale Henituse glanced over at Neo Tolz, whose knees were knocking, and suppressed a click of his tongue. Neo seemed frantic and deeply concerned. To be fair, most of the nobles were equally bewildered.

Benion looked unhinged too, Cale thought. Before boarding the carriage, he had caught a glimpse of Benion Sten's expression—and the man was rage incarnate.

After all, who could've expected this?

Taylor Sten, the Sten family's abandoned eldest son, was walking on his own two feet without a wheelchair. Furthermore, a representative of House Sten stood next to Crown Prince Albert. This development was beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

Anyone but Cale, that is. *So he managed a trade for the Star of Healing.*

Cale was curious as to what Taylor and Kage had traded the crown prince to obtain the Star of Healing, but he didn't look Taylor's way. Meanwhile, Neo sat there with his legs aquiver, avoiding Taylor's gaze.

At that point, Amir ventured, "Lord Taylor, have your legs completely healed?" Her cautious question voiced what everyone had been asking themselves.

Taylor smiled. "Yes. It was a blessing from heaven."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Neo Tolz coughed awkwardly, glancing between Taylor's face and legs, then said hesitantly, "Now that your legs have healed, I suppose you'll return to the marquess's estate?"

Taylor's paralysis was the main reason the marquess had passed him over. The other nobles—particularly Neo, given that he was one of Benion's lackeys—were probably wondering whether Taylor would return to the Sten estate and fight to reclaim his succession.

Taylor looked at Neo. "You wish to know if I'll return?" His voice was gentle but had a firm, cold undercurrent. "That's always been my home. Isn't it obvious that I belong there?"

Neo shriveled at Taylor's iciness and gave a cowardly nod.

Despite the chaos, Cale didn't watch the pair, although he met Taylor's eyes in the carriage window reflection every so often. Taylor didn't make it obvious to the others that he and Cale were exchanging glances either. He gave the impression that he was just looking out the window, as Cale was.

When they made eye contact, Cale understood Taylor's unspoken message: *I wish to tell you everything, Lord Cale! It's quite a story.*

Even when faced with Taylor's sparkling gaze, Cale remained stoic. All he wanted was for Taylor to become marquess and prevent any harm within his territory. He didn't want to chitchat.

But Taylor soon received an opportunity to loop Cale in. As soon as the carriage reached the Plaza of Glory, Neo cleared his throat and said, "I'll step out now."

With that, Neo rushed out of the carriage to get away from them. He had made it obvious that he was in Benion's pocket, so the ride had been quite awkward for him. That, and he likely wanted to report Taylor's condition to Benion right away.

Amir disembarked next. "I'll come back with Lord Eric," she told Cale. She was worried that Cale might start something if he ran into the other northeastern nobles, who happened to be in a carriage with Eric and Gilbert, so she left to retrieve them.

Nothing should happen, she thought, hunting for Eric and Gilbert. *Lord Taylor and Lord Cale have scarcely interacted with each other. And knowing Lord Cale, he won't start a conversation.*

Amir's departure forced Cale to bear Taylor's bright smile.

“Finally! Now it’s just the two of us!” Taylor cried, and Cale grimaced in distaste. Yet this only served to amuse Taylor, who chuckled before saying frankly, “I got my legs fixed by promising to become marquess.”

“And did you promise loyalty?”

“No, I cut a deal.”

Cale nodded. “Good. Congrats on your healed legs.” He turned away from Taylor, implying he had nothing more to say.

Taylor, who found that reaction so very like Cale, handed the lout a small envelope from his pocket. “Here are the details.”

The redhead kept his expression stoic. “No need to give this to me.”

“You’ll find it helpful, Lord Cale.” Matter-of-factly, Taylor added, “Kage is being excommunicated.”

“Because she does whatever she wants?”

“Indeed. Anyway, she’s thrilled about it.”

Kage was finally starting down the path of *Birth of a Hero*’s “crazy priestess,” a character reputed to be courageous despite having been defrocked.

“Great.”

Taylor bobbed his head happily, then frowned, perhaps enduring whiplash from his whirlpool of emotions. “This is just the beginning. We’ll be victorious, won’t we?”

Why include me in that victory? For now, Cale answered, “Of course.”

“Much appreciated. Well, I’ll alight first.”

Taylor rose to his feet, looked down at his legs, and bid Cale goodbye. On his way out, he said, “After that victory, the three of us should drink together.”

“Henituse wine *is* delicious.”

At that, Taylor finally closed the carriage door and left. Once Cale was alone, he opened the envelope immediately.

The crown prince wishes to avoid civil war.

“Tch.”

He lightly clicked his tongue, ripped up the note, and shoved the pieces deep inside his inner pocket. So there was a secret to the crown prince’s birth. Shaking his head, Cale stepped out of the carriage.

“Cale!” Eric called.

Cale turned his head; behind his companions’ shoulders, he could see the full Plaza of Glory.

“Let us go, Lord Cale. It is our turn to enter the plaza.”

In *Birth of a Hero*, Choi Han had been curious about these people, who ranked above the kingdom’s citizenry. Today, Cale would spend time with such aristocrats, though he ranked at the bottom compared to the royal family and holy priests.

He gazed up at the bell tower at the plaza entrance. Its giant clock displayed 8:25 a.m.—time for the nobles and priests to enter. Citizens were denied entrance to create room for the aristocracy.

“Let’s go.”

Cale let Eric and the others walk in front of him. Following them to the plaza, he scanned the crowds. There were so many people that their faces blurred. The onlookers weren’t stuffed in like sardines, at the very least, since the Plaza of Glory was so large. Palace personnel were doing crowd control as well. Some people had decided to wait in shops around the plaza and on nearby rooftops to get a glimpse of the king and the commencement of the festival.

“Is this your first time visiting the Plaza of Glory, Lord Cale?” Gilbert asked, and Cale nodded languidly.

“It is. I briefly passed through in my carriage, but this is my first time seeing all of it.”

As Cale said as much, he looked around the plaza. He honed in on the tea shop to the south, the inn to the west, the flower shop to the east, and the top of the Ceramist Association building to the north. These were the spots in which magic bombs had been planted.

“The plaza’s enormous,” Cale said. He peered at a fountain to the south. A young man was waving a flag, as if trying to welcome the king. It was Lark.

Things are going as planned.

Cale knew that Choi Han and the black dragon would be watching him now. He looked at the bell tower again. It was 8:30 a.m.

“We’re closing the entrances!”

As soldiers shut all the gates to the plaza, Cale subtly touched his index finger to his thumb.

Rustle.

The gesture was so inconspicuous that no one would question it, but Lark saw it and promptly vanished. It was a signal to find the hidden items… Not that searching was entirely necessary.

The source will appear at 9:01 a.m.

Still, it would be easier if they knew where the items were in advance. Besides, Cale didn’t have to do any of the labor himself.

“Have a seat over here, everybody.”

All the attendees’ names were posted someplace among the seating arrangements. The king and the royal family hadn’t made their entrances yet. Nor had the crown prince, who would come with them.

Reaching his seat, Cale frowned.

“We run into each other a lot, Lord Cale.”

“That seems to be the case, Lord Taylor.”

Cale and Taylor had also been put together during the feast. Taking his seat beside the marquess’s son, Cale looked down at the people below the platform, then up at the bell tower.

He recalled a relevant passage from *Birth of a Hero*.

For the first time, Choi Han saw them—five red stars on one white star. People with that emblem over their hearts had emerged in the plaza. The one seemingly in charge looked down on everyone, even the king, from the bell tower roof. Mana

glowed in their hand. The moment they swung it down, a bloody scene unfolded in the plaza below.

The novel had named the bell tower as the highest point in the plaza. Cale apathetically studied its roof, contemplating the various deviations he'd experienced from the story. For instance, the one site where Choi Han had found a bomb in *Birth of a Hero* hadn't been one of the locations this time. Still, at least no one would die crushed beneath buildings and rubble, unlike in the novels. The mana-disturbance tool was buried beneath the tower.

It was now 8:40 a.m. Hearing Eric call his name, Cale turned to his left. "Yes, Eric?"

His tone made Eric nervous. "Stay still, Cale, all right?"

Two years ago, Cale was known to wear fancy clothes and enjoy showing off. Yet out of the blue, he began wearing more modest garments and displaying a completely different demeanor. All this had Eric on edge.

"Oh, I'll stay *very* still today," Cale replied. "In fact, I plan to do nothing at all."

Eric found himself nodding, and Cale seemed satisfied with that reaction. Smiling, he checked the clock again: 8:45 a.m.

He heard the black dragon's voice. *‹Fifteen minutes left.›*

As Cale had expected, the dragon was watching him. Dragons really were capable of everything; there was nothing their magic couldn't accomplish. Praising the black dragon internally, Cale rose from his seat. At this point, only the northern plaza gate was open.

"The Crossman royal family is now entering!"

The crown prince was in front, flanked by the second and third princes. Other royal family members entered behind them; every last one of them had beautiful blond hair. This was the royal family blessed by the God of Sun, the pride of the Kingdom of Rowoon.

Citizens' cheers filled the plaza, almost loud enough to make the ground quake.

Cale recalled something the black dragon had told him. *The crown prince has magically changed the color of his hair and his eyes. They're actually brown.* The least exceptional color for those features.

Clapping, the lout watched the royal family. The time was now 8:50 a.m.

"His Majesty King Jed Crossman, Sun of the Kingdom of Rowoon, is now entering!"

Another roar rose up from the crowd as the hardy fifty-year-old king appeared in his formal carriage. Cale peeled his gaze away from King Jed to another spot in the northern part of the plaza. A flower pot sat atop the Ceramist Association building, looking oddly out of place. It was 8:55 a.m.

They disarmed it, Cale noted, smirking. Rosalyn, Ohn, Hong, and the black dragon would now slip into the crowd.

King Jed was making his way to the plaza now. He had assumed the crown at the age of twenty after the former king's sudden death. He'd used peacetime to his advantage, killing off all his siblings to solidify his power.

The hoots and hollers for the king were tremendous as he passed through the plaza entrance, heading for the high platform prepared for him in front of the bell tower. He and the queen waved to the crowd before climbing to the platform. The queen stood in front of her seat as King Jed approached the magic vocal amplifier.

Cale looked at the clock again: 8:58 a.m.

King Jed lifted his hand, and the cheers died down. Once the plaza was completely quiet, the king spoke. "It has already been thirty years since the sun gave me its blessing to rule over this kingdom."

The king seemed elated—but unfortunately, it was officially nine o'clock on the dot.

Eric squinted at something in the distance. "Huh?!"

"What is *that*?!" Taylor asked.

Cale raised his head nonchalantly to look at the top of the bell tower.

“Huh?!”

“Who’s that?”

“What’s going on?”

The crowd’s disconcerted cries grew louder. King Jed glanced behind him, then gazed up at the bell tower. Cale too looked at the belfry, starting to smile.

“Who are you?!” King Jed shouted.

His knights and mages hurried toward the tower. At that point, the citizens had no choice but to grow nervous about the situation.

Someone had appeared atop the bell tower, and other individuals wearing black attire emerged onto nearby roofs.

“Get them down this instant!” a knight ordered.

“Head to the roofs immediately!” said another.

Cale focused on the man on the bell tower in his black attire and a mask. That was the blood-drinking mage, Redika.

Good. I was worried this would also go differently than it did in the novel.

If Redika hadn’t shown up as he did in *Birth of a Hero*, Cale would’ve needed the black dragon to reverse the flow of mana to the magic bombs to ferret out Redika so Choi Han could kill him. Cale was relieved that he wouldn’t need to do that. He remembered this scene from the books:

Choi Han heard the words of the mage, which triggered the gruesome sight that followed.

“This should be fun.”

Red mana enveloped Redika’s hand. He swung his arm, declaring as he had in the novel, “This should be fun.” His chilling voice emerged in a raspy screech, like pieces of metal scraping against each other. His red mana shot out to different spots.

It was exactly 9:01 a.m.

Rumble, rumble.

A vibration started below the bell tower.

Beeeeep. Beeeeep.

Magic devices sounded in a number of locations. The red mana flying toward the detonators inside the magic bombs suddenly lost strength, spinning aimlessly in place. These were the effects of the mana-disturbance tool.

Four spots in the plaza were ringing louder than the others.

Beeeeeeep! Beeeeeeeep!

“Track them down,” Cale said. The magic alarms drowned out his quiet voice.

Just as he’d anticipated, the magic bombs had alarms that sounded if there was an error, so someone within range of each alarm had a magic bomb on them. He could see Choi Han, Rosalyn, and Lark heading toward the locations. Even if they couldn’t dismantle those bombs in ten minutes, they had plenty of time to move the devices far away from the capital. Thanks to Rosalyn and the black dragon, they could carry the bombs into the skies above the mountain, where they’d go off without hurting anyone.

‹Found one, human.›

Hearing the invisible black dragon’s report, Cale smiled. The ten-minute countdown had begun.

Choi Han grabbed someone—an individual the dragon had determined was carrying a magic bomb. Cale spotted a pendant around their neck.

That must be it.

As Choi Han ripped the pendant off, Cale’s body jerked. Someone had yanked on his arm; it was Eric. “Cale!”

Cale slowly swept another glance around the plaza, starting with the bell tower. The blood-drinking mage, Redika, was cackling with glee. His loud laughter was imbued with a metallic shriek, creating a truly cacophonous sound.

The royal knights and some mages were with the king and royal family, helping them evacuate. “Please get to safety, Your Majesty!”

With one look at the crown prince, Cale confirmed he was still blond. But wasn't his hair colored by magic, which required mana to maintain? Cale recalled the black dragon's theories: *‹Did another dragon dye it? No, maybe it's some other type of power?›*

Although he was curious, he disregarded the matter and continued surveying the scene. Half the remaining knights and mages were calming the crowd and searching for the mana-disturbance tool, while the others rushed toward the members of the secret organization.

Redika, who'd been laughing for a while now, finally spoke again. "How annoying."

With that, all the secret organization members who'd shown up with Redika launched long-range attacks. Spears, daggers, throwing knives, magic—all sorts of things rained down on the knights.

Boom! Rumble. Beep.

Cale found it all too loud.

Right then, the black dragon continued his report. *‹Found one more human... Found another.›*

It was 9:04 a.m. They'd found the third bomb-carrier.

"We should go too, Cale! Let's hurry!"

"Lord Cale! Quick!"

Cale looked at Eric, Amir, Gilbert, and Taylor, who'd gathered around him in a hurry. Eric was looking back and forth with a frenzied expression. Cale followed his lead, taking stock of the plaza.

Nobles were fighting to get out as quickly as possible.

"What's going on? Hurry up! Let us past!"

"Let us out right now!"

A couple *were* calm, of course—but the situation below the platform was different.

"Why're you blocking the exit?!"

"Clear a path!"

Citizens rushed toward the exit, screaming for the knights to open the door. The knights and soldiers shouted back at them.

“Everyone, please calm down!”

“Wait just a moment!”

“You expect us to wait in a situation like this? Get out of our way!”

“What the hell?! The nobles are trying to leave now! Let us leave too!”

In the midst of the chaos, Cale watched for hands raised overhead.

“Wh-what’re you doing?!”

Choi Han pulled a bag off an old man’s shoulder and thrust it into the air. That was the third bomb. Cale craned his neck, looking at the people around him.

The gate the nobles and priests would use was already open, with many of the aristocrats and clergymen heading out as fast as they could. It looked more peaceful than the gate for commoners down below, since there were fewer people, but it was still a mess: Each priest and blue blood was trying to escape before the rest.

“What a mess.”

It was complete pandemonium. Eric paced back and forth; Cale put his hand on the other man’s shoulder to calm him—and gripped it hard.

“Hey, Eric.”

“Ack!”

Once the pain had snapped Eric out of his turmoil, Cale said, “Calm down.”

Cale’s serenity prompted Eric to collect himself and look around. Knights were fighting the unknown attackers; meanwhile, the royal family was in the process of escaping. The common folk looked to be in complete disarray. After Eric absorbed the events unfolding around him, he turned back to look at Cale.

“That’s more like you,” the redhead told him.

“Thank you… I believe I’ve cooled my head.”

Shrugging, Cale turned away.

Having heard all that, Gilbert and Amir had likewise settled down and fixed their eyes on Cale. Even if they headed for the aristocrats' gate, they'd just get swept up in the chaos. The head families of other regions were busy gathering and calming their retinues while trying to pick out a path to escape.

Gilbert watched them, then glanced around. Fellow aristocrats from the northeast were headed toward them. They were all staring at Eric, but he and Gilbert were gazing at Cale.

The redhead himself, meanwhile, turned his attention to Taylor. "What the…?"

Taylor was different from the other nobles; his current concern was that the citizens' gate still hadn't opened wide. It was opening very slowly, likely to control the flow of people rushing out. Since Taylor was altruistic and high-minded, he was more worried about the citizens than himself.

Cale glanced back and met Eric's eyes. The young man was essentially this group's leader, after all.

"Let's go," Cale told him.

Eric nodded and led the northeastern nobles to the gate. Cale looked at the clock; it was 9:08 a.m. The mages were busy - stabilizing the mana, so the mana-disturbance tool would peter out in a few minutes. It had only lasted this long because there were so many people in the plaza exacerbating the pandemonium. Now that all the royal mages had flocked to the plaza to get things under control, the mana-disturbance tool was no longer necessary.

‹One more bomb removed.›

With four bombs found, only two remained. They had two minutes, which Cale felt would be enough time.

Redika's red mana still spun in midair. The moment the mana-disturbance tool stopped working, his mana would whiz toward the magic bombs and detonate them. Cale checked the clock once more, then walked off.

At that point, the black dragon made another report. *‹That's all of them.›*

"What?"

“Lord Cale, what’s wrong?” Taylor, who’d been walking next to Cale, glanced at him in confusion—but Cale didn’t have time to focus on him.

There were only four?

Cale remembered there being ten bombs in *Birth of a Hero*. Had that changed? He stopped walking and looked around. The mana-disturbance tool had a range wide enough to encompass a sizable mountain. If there were magic bombs buried elsewhere, their alarms would’ve gone off in those locations. Yet the only alarms they’d heard were within the plaza.

Did the number of bombs change because the story changed?

Regardless, 9:09 a.m. came and went. Only a few seconds remained. Just then, a royal mage’s amplified voice rang out in the plaza.

“Activate mana stabilization!”

As soon as he gave that order, royal mages in eight different directions chanted a spell in tandem. Eight balls of light shot into the sky.

Boom!

The balls of light exploded in midair, then spread like a thin canopy to create a barrier. Finally…

Creeeak.

The ruckus quieted down. At 9:09:55 a.m., the mana in the vicinity stabilized.

Cale saw four items shoot into the sky, courtesy of Rosalyn and the black dragon. Those items—the disguised magic bombs that had been hidden on unsuspecting citizens—would follow the flow of stabilized mana, flying toward the mountains south of the capital. As both Rosalyn and the dragon were mana-sensitive, this level of mana disturbance didn’t impede their task.

The citizens watched blankly as the four objects flew like shooting stars toward the mountain—an area people generally couldn’t traverse, given its harsh terrain.

“Mana stabilization complete!” a royal mage shouted.

The time was 9:10:05 a.m.

Redika's red mana chased after the flying items, and when at last it made contact…

Boooom!

A big explosion occurred in the sky, so bright that it temporarily blinded everyone watching. That explosion was soon followed by a wide pillar of black smoke rushing up into the sky. Although the mountain was far from the plaza, the resulting shock wave whipped a fierce gust at the crowd.

The plaza fell silent. The royal mages blanched as they realized what the red mana's function had been and why it lashed out the moment they had things stabilized.

"Those were magic bombs," Taylor murmured in shock.

Any noble with even a passing knowledge of magic would understand that only one item had such destructive force: magic bombs. The king and some of his sons, who were still retreating, stopped in their tracks. No one could help thinking about how those magic bombs had shot up from the crowd before they flew toward the mountain.

Cale fixed his hair, which was windswept from the gust. *Guess there* were *only four bombs.* Nobody had died, and Cale heard the black dragon's voice in his head.

‹We saved them all.›

In lieu of a response, Cale just listened. The once chaotic plaza was now very calm—almost somber. Those present were probably thinking about the disaster that could've unfolded in the plaza. They were likely overwhelmed by both relief and fear.

‹I saved them!›

By contrast, the black dragon sounded ecstatic. This was the first time that the young dragon, who had pined for his own death after a life of despair, had saved something with his own power. Sensing the dragon's exhilaration, Cale fixed his gaze on the spot where the magic bombs had shot into the air. The knights and mages were heading to that location. Choi Han and the others had already left that area, using the invisibility-magic device Cale had borrowed from Bilose to hide in the farthest corner of the plaza.

Cale looked at the top of the bell tower. *Now Choi Han will hunt that mage down and kill him.*

Eric and the rest had stopped moving already. From what the mages said, the young aristocrats had figured out that the magic bombs were meant to detonate in the plaza despite exploding in the mountain to the south. How could they not have realized that? Redika had said it himself from the bell tower.

"Too bad nobody died. Wonder why they went off over there?" Redika continued in his metallic voice. "Guess this one was a failure."

The king whirled on the blood-drinking mage. "What is the meaning of this? Who are you? Do you really think you'll get away with attempting something so heinous?!"

King Jed's attitude had shifted after he realized that it wasn't just an attack on the royal family. Trying to set off magic bombs was tantamount to declaring war on the kingdom.

But Cale had a different thought. *He said* "this one *was a failure*"?

Cale's expression stiffened. He was afraid that the group had something else up its sleeve. Taylor had been on his way over to tell Cale that things were all right, but upon seeing the lout's face fall, he froze on the spot. He looked at the belfry, as Cale was.

"Oh well!" Redika's metallic screech rang throughout the plaza.

The blood-drinking mage didn't bat an eye as the king and royal knights shouted at him, nor as Rowoon's mages approached him using levitation magic. He snapped his fingers, and two people appeared next to him. The pair wore completely black attire that lacked the red and white stars on the chest. Each wore a backpack.

Cale grimaced. *Those are the remaining bombs.*

Those two were likely members of the secret organization's assassination squad. People whose lives didn't matter. Now Cale knew the location of those other two explosives. Each assassin took out three scrolls and simultaneously ripped them, triggering magic for shields, acceleration, and combustion.

“Go!” Redika ordered. Their bodies now burning, the pair rushed toward the citizens below the bell tower. Redika shot two balls of red mana toward the assassins.

“St-stop them!”

If the magic bombs weren’t disarmed right away, they were guaranteed to go off. Unfortunately, Redika was closest to the suicide bombers, so the red mana reached their backpacks.

The bombs were about to detonate.

Having used acceleration magic, the bombers zoomed to the plaza at breakneck speed. One streaked toward the royal family, while the other made for the nobles.

He’s coming this way.

It had all happened in less than ten seconds.

‹I’m coming!›

Hearing the dragon’s voice, Cale raised his hand.

“Aieee!”

“R-run!”

“Dodge them!”

It was too late to dodge. One couldn’t get out of the bomb’s range with a few seconds’ sprint.

“C-Cale, let’s go!”

“Lord Cale, hurry!”

Eric, Taylor, Gilbert, and Amir didn’t dart away immediately like the others. They tried to save Cale as well, but all their efforts were in vain.

Cale was *extremely* perturbed. If he ran, and the bomb exploded, he’d likely lose an arm. The Energy of the Heart would help him recover soon enough—but the people trying to protect him would lose at least a limb, however fast they ran. And the damage would be permanent.

Heaving a deep sigh, Cale opened his palm in midair. *Time for a change of plans.*

Right then, Rosalyn—teleported by the black dragon’s magic—created a two-layer shield around herself and Cale.

“Explode!” Redika screeched with joy.

“Huh?” Rosalyn stared with a blank expression at what was going on in front of her.

As large wings framed the suicide bomber headed their way, a silver shield shot into the sky, as if protecting the people in the plaza. Instead, the wings and shield enveloped the bomber.

‹I’ll block it too,› the black dragon announced in Cale’s head. The silver glow meant that the dragon’s shield, though strong, wasn’t very easy to see.

Beneath the sun, a holy-looking man with a silver shield stood in the plaza. A strand of silver light connected that red-haired man with the shield in the sky.

As Cale’s hair fluttered in the wind, he cursed. “Damn it!”

Then the bomb went off.

Boom! Boooom!

You couldn’t compare the two simultaneous blasts that went off in the plaza to the earlier explosion. Everybody crouched, covering their heads with their hands.

“Aaaah!”

“Argh! M-my arm!”

“Aaargh!”

The screams of people in pain and fear filled the plaza. Then…

Wssssh.

A gust that sounded like falling rain whooshed overhead. Those in the center of the plaza were covered in the dust it kicked up, while those near the fountains were drenched by water.

They slowly looked up.

The first thing they saw was the platform in front of them, north of the plaza. None of the royal family were injured; a shield had been summoned to protect them. The people around them, however, were hurt—the individuals who’d arrived at the plaza earlier than anybody else to receive the king. The casualties also

included servants, low-ranking officials, and the low-ranking knights, plus mages who hadn't had enough time to cast shields.

Some were injured. Others were dead. The black smoke made it impossible to glimpse the royal family's blond hair. The survivors raised their heads, then looked to where the nobles and citizens had stood.

Crack!

The silver shield slowly shattered, like a pane of glass. The silver wings crumbled as well. As they did, black smoke billowed from within their folds. There had definitely been a person within them before, but now nothing—not even a single scrap of flesh or drop of blood—could be seen. The sight conveyed the explosion's strength to those who witnessed it, and the onlookers shivered. Their gazes naturally moved to a single location: the end of that silver strand of light.

One of Cale's knees gave out, and he staggered.

"Lord Cale!" Rosalyn quickly helped him back up, looking between the lout and the slowly dissipating silver shield. Then her eyes searched for the royal family. Those had been two very strong explosions, after all.

Rosalyn knew that the black dragon's shield had absorbed most of the explosion. Still, Cale's silver shield had done something amazing—which meant that the recoil Cale suffered from using the shield would be severe as well.

Cale was standing still, his head lowered. Rosalyn grabbed his arm, keeping him upright, and cried out, "Lord Cale, are you all right? Lord Cale!"

Damn, that stings.

Since the black dragon had created a second shield right before the explosion, the impact the silver shield sustained hadn't been too violent, which in turn lessened the severity of the recoil. Still, Cale's palms were throbbing. When it came to pain, Cale—well, Kim Roksu—tended to exaggerate things. As far as he was concerned, even a slight twinge was painful. He had to fight to lift his head.

"Cale!"

"Lord Cale!"

Cale heard voices calling out to him as they got closer. He raised his head fully.

“Are you all right, Cale?”

“Yeah, I’m oka—*cough!*”

“Bl-blood!” Eric went pale, almost falling backward.

Having coughed up a mouthful of blood, however, Cale began to feel better.

The Energy of the Heart is pretty useful.

He felt like himself right away, his pain ebbing. In fact, as the Energy of the Heart got to work, his body grew healthier than ever. The refreshing feeling that surrounded Cale was similar to the one he had after Ron went on vacation, allowing him to sleep peacefully. He slowly closed his eyes and took stock of his body.

My arms and legs are still attached. My palms were throbbing a little earlier, but it was less than a paper cut. After that single cough, my body’s healthier than ever.

He understood why heroes never threw Ancient Powers away, even if they weren’t very useful. There were benefits to using one, and doing so had hurt less than he expected. He felt great now.

Cale closed his eyes and smiled in satisfaction. As he did, chaos exploded around him.

“How can you smile right now? Don’t smile!” came Taylor’s shocked, sorrowful voice.

Having confirmed that everything felt great, Cale opened his eyes. However, the sun was shining so bright that it made him squint.

“No need to force your eyes open either!” Taylor shouted.

What is his deal? Staring at Taylor in confusion, Cale sat down with Rosalyn’s help. In fact, the lout pretty much just plopped down on the ground, not caring what people thought. Though it was anything but noble, Cale felt it was all right under the circumstances.

The black dragon yapped away in his ear.

‹You cannot die, weak human! You are so feeble! If you die, I'll kill everyone! I'll destroy everything, including your corpse, then kill myself as well!›

The dragon *did* seem concerned, but his words were vicious.

"I'll bring a priest, Lord Cale!" cried Amir.

"I'll go with you!" said Gilbert.

Cale wrinkled his nose. The two nobles ignored their disheveled garments and dashed over to a priest entering through the gate. Seeing them hurry forward, Cale didn't have the heart to say he was uninjured.

Well, it won't hurt for a priest to give me a look over. But I should act like I'm hurt.

In fact, it would be great for Cale if the priest showed up.

Eric Whilsman stood beside Cale, glaring daggers at the murmuring northeastern nobles nearby—as well as nobles from other factions—to keep them from approaching. Cale didn't take note of that, however; he was watching a conversation below grow increasingly ferocious.

"Please…get out of my way."

"Not happening. Civilians aren't allowed inside."

"*Civilians?* Who came up with that crap?"

Choi Han was arguing with the knight seeing to the nobles, his eyes cold. Earlier, Cale had told Choi Han to hang back. Frowning, he waved Choi Han—who'd gone against his order—away from the knight.

Upon seeing Cale's reaction, Choi Han bit his lip and bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

To Cale, Choi Han's disobedience wasn't so extreme that he had to apologize. Behind Choi Han stood Lark, with Ohn and Hong on his shoulders. Cale smirked at them, signaling that he was fine, then turned to those gazing at him blankly.

"Lord Cale…are you all right?" Rosalyn asked.

Cale nodded, wiping the blood at the corner of his lip. "I'm perfectly fine."

His movement had been nonchalant, but Rosalyn noticed him wipe away the blood as red as his hair. Could a princess like her have acted so calmly in this situation?

"I really can't figure you out," she mumbled.

When Cale faced her, she just stared in silence. The lout's expression turned serious as he realized she wasn't looking at him but *past* him. Turning around, he followed her gaze. "Oh."

The blood-drinking mage was floating in midair, looking down on them. "I never expected something like this to happen, but this is pretty fun too," Redika said, watching the royal family. The mages were once again casting levitation magic, and even the capital guards rushed over, aiming arrows toward Redika.

Redika turned his attention to the nobles. He and Cale locked eyes for a moment before he spotted Rosalyn next to the lout. Although Rosalyn's hair was dyed brown, Redika probably recognized her from the Blue Wolf Tribe's village.

His metallic screech rang throughout the plaza again. "Ah! So many attractive hues of blood!" His expression wasn't fully visible under his mask, but his eyes narrowed to crescents. "I want to stuff you all in my display case!"

Right then, countless mages launched attack magic at Redika. "Fire!"

Cale was still disgusted by Redika's words. "Is he crazy?" Characters that unbalanced tended to die quickly. Tucking that thought away in his mind, Cale looked at Choi Han.

Choi Han nodded and disappeared. He was preparing to capture and kill Redika, but he wasn't making a beeline for the mage.

Just before the royal mages' attacks could hit their target, Redika spun toward the king. "I'll see you next time, then!"

He disappeared, taking his cohorts with him. That blood-drinking bastard's specialty was teleportation magic, and the people fighting him off had no way of knowing where the interlopers had gone. *Birth of a Hero*, however, had mentioned where Redika teleported to after vanishing from the plaza. Choi Han, Ohn, Hong, and Lark were all headed there, so if Redika

and the secret organization members really had gone there, Choi Han could probably kill them.

I'm just worried he'll go mad. That was why Cale had sent the cats and Lark along; they'd help him remain rational. Choi Han had a soft spot for the young and feeble.

Cale rose from the ground.

As the king returned to the podium, the people in the plaza began chattering once again. The attackers had disappeared, but they'd left a cruel sight behind. King Jed reassumed his position to try to calm the crowd. "I shall strive to take revenge for this terrible, ruthless incident. I want you all to follow the Crown's edicts—and focus on getting rest. We shall delay the festivities."

Cale turned away from the king to look at Rosalyn. She'd originally intended to hide her presence today, but she'd revealed herself for Cale. *She probably stepped in because the dragon can't reveal himself.*

Meeting Cale's eyes, Rosalyn smirked, mouthing, *It's our secret.* He smiled back, pleased that they were on the same wavelength.

Cale had given his six allies some instructions before the day began.

First, the dragon and the beastfolk trio weren't to reveal their identities, no matter what. That was his most important order.

Second, even if Choi Han and Rosalyn were discovered, they were to claim they were there by coincidence. It was within the realm of possibility, given that the attendees had no way of knowing about the magic bombs hidden around the plaza, nor any way of identifying those who'd disposed of the bombs that had shot into the air.

Third, Cale's allies were not to cause each other harm.

With a single shared glance, Cale and Rosalyn knew what they had to do. Cale casually brushed dirt off his clothes, tidied himself off, and then smiled at the priest walking his way.

"Lord Cale, are you okay?" the priest asked, huffing and puffing. Amir and Gilbert might as well have dragged him over.

As Rosalyn withdrew, Cale extended his hand toward the priest, replying, “It hurts a lot. Please take a look.”

He noticed Crown Prince Albert also heading toward him. The prince would definitely recognize Rosalyn, and he’d probably already seen her two-layer shield. He would question the relationship between Cale and Rosalyn. It’d be best to exploit the circumstances.

In a voice loud enough for the surrounding priest and nobles to overhear, he declared, “It sure is hard to protect something.”

I had to let the cat out of the bag by using my Ancient Power, so I should milk this to no end.

Self-sacrifice for fame rather than material gains wasn’t Cale’s style. He prized money over notoriety, believing it was better to be rich than heroic.

“Uh, y-yes, indeed,” the priest said, gulping. “I saw your silver shield, Lord Cale. You did something marvelous.” He grasped Cale’s hand to inspect him.

At his words, nearby nobles peered at Cale with curiosity and doubt. Cale Henituse was an infamous lout, so the fact that he’d revealed such strength astounded everyone. Then there were his actions just moments ago: He’d protected people from the explosion before collapsing, spitting blood. Now he stood there as if nothing was wrong.

Not only were the nobles observing Cale, but now that the king had left, many commoners were watching him as well. They couldn’t forget that silver light.

Cale regarded the inquisitive nobles’ faces. Each time he made eye contact with someone, they had a different reaction. Some still looked curious; others avoided his gaze. A few just smiled at him.

Having swept a glance around his audience, Cale turned back to the priest. With utter nonchalance, he said, “I guess this was your first time seeing an Ancient Power.”

The priest gasped.

Ancient Powers were relics of the past that could only be acquired through a fortuitous encounter. Each was said to have

unique skills and strength.

“Aha,” came a familiar voice from behind Cale, along with a hand on his shoulder.

Prince Albert Crossman had arrived. “Your Highness,” Cale said politely.

He turned and looked the crown prince in the eye—then realized that this moment was similar to a scene in *Birth of a Hero* that revolved around the hero of the Plaza Terror Incident. To calm citizens’ complaints about being put in danger, and to minimize the fact that the royal family and nobles had tried to run away, the crown prince turned Choi Han into a beacon of hope. Prince Albert, the man in front of Cale, had first declared Choi Han a hero in the books.

As soon as he saw the look in the crown prince’s eyes, Cale realized that the moment he’d been expecting was here. He had seen this coming as soon as he used the Ancient Power, and he’d quickly formulated a plan. He intended to use this situation to his advantage immediately.

The crown prince, on the other hand, had realized that Cale was very similar to him. He embraced the lout with dramatic shock and admiration on his face. “Thank you! We’re astounded by what you did.”

Anyone could see that the crown prince was highly impressed; his emotional reaction was atypical for royalty.

Then the prince whispered in Cale’s ear, “Are we cut from the same cloth?”

They were, of course. And Albert’s tone suggested he was a bit on edge at discovering someone like himself.

“I’ll reward you handsomely and ensure you aren’t hassled. What do you think?”

That seemed fine. Cale lifted his arms and smiled, hugging Prince Albert back. “It was nothing, Your Highness. I only did what any citizen of the kingdom would do.”

The young dragon’s voice echoed in Cale’s mind. *‹Something is very odd here.›* Though young, the dragon was pretty sharp. He’d seen it all happen.

After enduring the crown prince's mock embrace, Cale was invited to the palace. The purpose of the visit was for him to receive treatment and get caught up to speed, but Cale figured he would request a tidy sum while there.

All the while, the crown prince's face was beyond stiff.

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Cale prepared to board a carriage with Prince Albert, who wanted to give off a distinctly positive impression until the end. The carriage was the crown prince's, driven hurriedly to the plaza.

"Please enter first, Lord Cale. Today, you deserve that honor."

The crown prince's smile was completely different from his taut expression from before. He knew that others were watching and that he needed to keep up the act.

"How could I get on before you, Your Highness? You're the star that shines down on citizens like myself."

‹Is your head all right, human?›

Cale ignored the black dragon's question.

Prince Albert patted Cale's shoulder—a bit too forcefully. *Thump. Thump.*

"Your boarding first represents my respect for you. Go ahead."

"In that case, this common citizen shall do so."

The crown prince was the only member of the royal family still at the site of the Plaza Terror Incident. He'd stayed behind to take command of the knights handling everything and to demonstrate his care for Cale.

At his side was Cale Henituse, the man of the hour and the one who would remain etched in people's minds when it came to this incident. The sight of the pair standing together was like a beautiful painting and raised observers' opinions of them both.

Entering the crown prince's carriage, Cale peeked out the side window. Nobles flanked the carriage, the common folk right behind them. With his eyes, Cale bid goodbye to Eric, Gilbert, Amir, and Taylor. Then he smiled at Neo Tolz, who was staring blankly at him.

His smile prompted Neo to flinch. Benion, who stood next to him, likewise stiffened.

It wasn't just them staring at Cale. Virtually all the high-ranking nobles present were observing him, wondering, *How could that lout gain such power? More to the point, how could he behave so heroically?*

Their gazes held unspoken questions, but Cale ignored them, staring at Neo until he winced and turned away.

Guess I can get rid of one minion, he mused as he sat in the carriage. His smile disappeared as soon as he was inside.

Entering behind him, Prince Albert ordered a servant, "Treat that lady over there as a VIP." He was, of course, referring to Rosalyn.

The carriage door slowly closed. Before it shut completely, Cale made eye contact with Rosalyn. Her smile seemed trustworthy.

Click.

Once the carriage door was shut, Cale leaned back in the seat. *The royal carriage is in a league of its own. Where did they get such leather for the upholstery?*

Appreciating the comfortable seat, he turned to Albert. The crown prince had also wiped off his fake smile and now looked as stoic as Cale.

"Do you need any healing?" he asked.

Cale's response was frank. "My body seems healthy, but shouldn't the best doctors and priests take a look? I'd just like to lay around for three or four days."

"Hah." The crown prince's laugh sounded like a sigh, but he nodded. "That's fine. You're right. The nobleman who saved everyone was hurt, so the Crown is giving him the best treatment possible, nursing him back to health. Very nice."

Now knowing that he and Cale were of the same ilk, the crown prince didn't stand on ceremony. He got right to the point.

"Are you involved with them, Lord Cale?"

By "them," Albert meant the attackers who'd appeared in the plaza. Cale held Albert's gaze. As he did so, it occurred to him that the black dragon was probably following him in his invisible state.

The dragon had said something when Cale boarded the carriage: *‹Why didn't the crown prince do anything when other humans were dying? He's strong.›*

Prince Albert had hidden his strength. He hadn't lifted a finger even when one of his servants died and a young knight lost his arms and legs. He'd just hidden, pretending to be weak.

I thought he was a good person in spite of his tendency to use people, Cale reflected. That wasn't the case, however, so he responded easily with a bright smile.

"Why would I involve myself in something so demanding, Your Highness?"

"Indeed," the crown prince agreed. Someone posturing as a lout would never do such a thing. At any rate, Albert could tell that Cale had only stepped onto the scene because there had been no alternative. "The Crown may open a pointless investigation against you."

"But you'll protect me, right, Your Highness?"

"Why ask such an obvious question?"

So Albert would protect him. The crown prince parted the curtains to see the crowd of citizens outside. Assuming his benevolent smile again, he continued to speak.

"Let's finish this conversation when I visit you later to see how you're doing."

The crown prince would be visiting a recuperating noble and would want to chat. There was a lot to talk about. Cale thought about Rosalyn, the Ancient Power, and his reward.

"Your Highness?"

"Yes?"

“I’m always available to converse with the crown prince, the leading light of the Kingdom of Rowoon.”

Albert’s smile faltered.

“I don’t want you to exaggerate my actions when you praise me in public.”

“I’ll only dress them up a bit. Just so people aren’t griping about the Crown.” The crown prince spoke his next words casually. They sounded a bit glib, but they were true. “Anyway, thank you. We had fewer casualties than we could have, thanks to your help.”

Cale found it difficult to tell whether Prince Albert was a good person or an evil one. He didn’t even know whether the man was human. The lout didn’t care about any of that, however. He just said what he needed to say: “I look forward to my reward.”

“Ha!” The crown prince shook his head—but he didn’t say anything like, *“Don’t get your hopes up about that.”* That meant he would ensure Cale was rewarded handsomely for his efforts, as promised.

When Cale entered the palace once again, he received vastly different treatment than before. The fanciest, most luxurious guest chamber, one set aside for foreign royals, was provided to him.

Choi Han’s group stayed here in the books too.

Cale lay down on the extravagant bed, worlds softer than his own, and began eating grapes one by one.

At that point, someone else staying in the palace came to visit.

“Lord Cale.”

It was Rosalyn. As Cale had expected, she wasn’t alone. Choi Han was with her.

“Mr. Cale.”

Ohn, Hong, and Lark stood behind Choi Han, looking anxious. Cale frowned as soon as he saw the figure behind them.

“L-Lord Cale!” It was deputy butler Hans. He looked like he wanted to cry.

Hans, Choi Han, and Lark had entered the palace by presenting themselves as Cale's servant and guards. Hans looked like he was going to rush toward Cale, so the latter raised a hand. "Stop."

The deputy butler paused, giving Cale time to get up from the bed and tell the others, "Come on in." He seemed so at ease, it was like he owned the place.

Cale caught up with Hans first. The servant checked Cale's condition before reporting matter-of-factly, as if his stricken expression moments earlier had never existed, "I have contacted the Henituse estate. I thought it would be better to notify them of what's unfolded before the Crown did, so I hired a mage to report to them directly. I wound up spending hand over fist to do so."

"Good job."

"And…" Hans peeked over at Rosalyn.

Of course he knows. Cale smirked ever so slightly. Hans was an excellent candidate for head butler; he knew more about the other nobles than Cale did. There was no way he wouldn't have further information.

"Go on," Cale said.

Once he'd been granted permission, Hans said, "I've told the residence's servants to remain quiet about Rosalyn for now."

"I appreciate that," Rosalyn said.

"You did well," Cale told him.

They hadn't had any time to discuss Rosalyn's situation yet, so it was better for them if that information wasn't revealed.

"Excuse me, Lord Cale."

"What?"

"While I did report in, I think you should use a communication device to contact home personally soon. If you don't, I imagine the count will travel up here himself."

Cale's father, Count Deruth, certainly *would* do that. Racking his brain for how to handle this situation without jeopardizing Bassen's position as heir, Cale simply nodded.

The deputy butler stood. Hans was sharp; he knew he needed to leave before Cale could speak freely with the others. “I’ll go ahead and seek out the palace caretaker to discuss a few things.”

“Sure.”

Hans left the room, and the black dragon finally revealed himself. He headed over to Cale’s bed and ate the fruit displayed alongside it as he began his report. The dragon really did a good job of whatever Cale told him to do, though he didn’t *look* especially obedient.

Cale noted as much as he looked around the room. Considering these were quarters for foreign royalty, the chances of there being recording devices inside were slim. To put them in such private chambers risked inciting international conflict. Instead, the royalty of all nations endeavored to hide such devices in common areas, like the dining room. That meant that they could say anything they wanted in here. Still, Rosalyn cast a noise-cancellation spell.

“Better to be safe,” she said.

“You’re amazingly careful, Miss Rosalyn.” Cale supported her cautious decision.

Cale next turned to Choi Han, who’d been hanging his head since he entered the room. That gave Cale a pretty good idea of what had happened: Choi Han hadn’t managed to kill Redika.

“Tell me,” Cale urged.

Choi Han lifted his head. “The mage did appear in the location you described, and I tried to kill him, but his subordinates rushed me.”

“I’m sure they were ready to die for him.”

“They were.”

For whatever reason, the secret organization valued Redika quite a bit.

“So he escaped?”

“He did.” Choi Han hung his head again. “I only managed to cut off his left arm.”

What…?

“I burned the limb in case he came back to reattach it. Oh, his left eye should be wounded too.”

Cale would have assumed that was a death sentence for a mage. Mages needed to cast spells with both hands to keep their mana balanced. Losing an arm would have quite an impact on that. He gaped at Choi Han in disbelief.

The hero stood with his head down and fists clenched. “I was supposed to kill him. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. You did well.”

Cale glanced at Lark, Ohn, and Hong, who sat beside Choi Han. The cats didn’t move toward the black dragon as usual. They were stiff in Lark’s arms, and the wolf boy was giving Cale a desperate look.

Did Choi Han go mad after all?

Facing Choi Han once more, Cale asked, “And the mage’s subordinates?”

“I took care of them. I thought it was better to kill them.”

The red kitten, Hong, frantically buried his face in his sister Ohn’s flank. Choi Han had used his black aura to eradicate the attackers without leaving a trace. That was the first time Hong had realized that an aura could *melt* someone.

“It was best to be thorough to prevent future issues,” Cale assured Choi Han. “You didn’t damage any buildings or anything, did you?”

He was worried that Choi Han might’ve gone wild and destroyed some things. The events in Harris and the Blue Wolf Tribe’s village had traumatized Choi Han. Once the instigators of those events were standing in front of his eyes, he might’ve seen red.

If he did, I may have to clean up the mess.

Choi Han was part of his retinue, so Cale would be saddled with the aftermath. He *really* didn’t want to handle it.

“No, of course not. As you said, I made sure not to damage anything nearby.”

At the same time, the kittens remembered what Choi Han said to the mage’s subordinates as he slaughtered them: *“You’ve*

killed—or almost killed—all my loved ones, right up to today!"

Although the buildings were unscathed, the look on Choi Han's face as he melted the secret organization members alive had been terrifying, and that made it all the scarier that he *hadn't* gone mad. Ohn and Hong approached the black dragon. They wanted to comfort themselves by the dragon's side; the creature was the strongest, cutest, and kindest being in the room.

Cale watched the kittens head to the bed. "I see. Good work." Choi Han peered up at him. Cale met his eyes, then looked at everyone else in turn. "You all did something amazing today. Thanks to you, those people lived. Miss Rosalyn, you did your utmost as well."

Choi Han's clenched fists loosened a bit. Rosalyn looked at Lark, Choi Han, and the kittens, whose tails were swishing back and forth, before her gaze finally landed on Cale. She emanated tranquility.

The black dragon chimed in, "You did well too."

Cale grinned, then nodded. "I sure did. That's why I'll be rewarded."

Soon, it was time to start discussing his reward.

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"You can leave now."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The priest had just been sitting there, killing time, not actually healing Cale. After dismissing him, Prince Albert turned to make eye contact with the young nobleman. Until the door closed behind the priest, Cale looked completely in awe over the crown prince's visit.

Then Albert said, "That expression of yours makes my skin crawl."

"Thank you very much." Cale's usual relaxed expression returned. Albert seemed to find that more bearable. He took a chair beside the bed where Cale lay like a patient.

“I’ve stated that you’re currently resting—that you came forward at the plaza, although it was daunting, to help calm the situation like a proper noble.” Albert smirked. “Since you revealed at the plaza that you possess an Ancient Power, I played along and said it’s defensive and not very strong. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“Hmm.” Cale pretended to mull it over. “A weak young noble who stepped forward for the kingdom? How nice.”

“Indeed.”

Cale did prefer that people not think of him as especially strong. That wasn’t misleading; he really was weak.

“I’ll have intelligence on any rumors about you and the situation delivered to you through your butler by tomorrow. Be sure to take a look.”

Prince Albert was definitely treating Cale differently than he’d treated Choi Han in the novel. He didn’t have even a hint of a warm smile and was just completely deadpan. It was a sign of his reluctance to deal with someone he really didn’t want to out of sheer obligation.

That was how Cale wanted it.

He faced the crown prince again and found him staring. Upon seeing Cale wholly at ease, Albert scowled and thought for a bit before finally broaching the subject on his mind. “By the way…”

His hesitancy suggested he was expecting something. Cale waited patiently; it was rare for the crown prince to be so reserved.

While Cale was waiting, the black dragon—who had awoken from his nap under the bed—spoke to Cale in his mind. *‹Now I’m sure of it. He’s not human.›*

Just then, the crown prince posed his question: “You *are* human, right?”

What is going on? Cale was getting it from all sides. He suddenly wished he really was hurt.

“Yes…?” Cale replied.

Albert could tell that his expression was disengaged; it seemed to ask why the prince was posing such a stupid question. The crown prince sighed before he could help himself. “Right, of course you are.” He pointed between Cale and himself and added, “We both are.”

The black dragon instantly spoke into Cale’s mind. *‹That’s a lie. He’s not fully human.›*

Cale desperately wished the dragon would pipe down. He was having trouble maintaining his composure. The dragon had a critical advantage over him; he could talk to Cale whenever he wanted, but Cale couldn’t respond. It was one-way communication, but that was Cale’s fault for lacking magic skills.

‹It’s my first time encountering a being with such an aura in my four mighty years of life.›

That said, in the dragon’s four years of life, he had seen only himself, humans, and the Cat Tribe and Wolf Tribe members he’d recently met. Apparently, the crown prince didn’t belong to any of those races.

Prince Albert kept his eyes fixed on Cale.

“Of course,” the lout responded. He’d made up his mind to forget what the black dragon had said. “Is there really much to being human? We’re all essentially human if we live among one another.”

The prince studied him, then replied, “You’re right. There really isn’t much to being human. However…”

“However,” “but”… When can I start tuning out these words?

“At the banquet hall, I thought I was mistaken, but there’s an odd smell around you,” Prince Albert continued, sounding pensive.

“Smell…?” Cale responded, stone-faced. “I just showered.”

The crown prince’s mouth flapped open and closed a few times, but no words came out. Wrinkles formed on his forehead as he frowned in contemplation.

Erasing any trace of perplexity from his face, Albert got to the point. “I don’t think there’s any need for two like-minded men

to sugarcoat things, so what do you want as your reward?" he asked Cale, crossing his arms.

The reason Albert had taken so long to visit largely had to do with the aftermath of the Plaza Terror Incident, but the prince had also needed to look at files on Cale Henituse. However, the files had contained virtually nothing on Cale. Well, there were a few things, but they were useless:

Infamous in the northeast for being a lout…

Pushed out of the heir role two years ago but hasn't objected to the decision…

No signs of power struggles at home…

All he learned was that Cale Henituse was a degenerate who liked to fool around and drink. That was worse than having *no* information because the Cale in front of Albert hardly lived up to his loutish reputation.

The way he answered the prince was an excellent example: "First, Your Highness, could you please explain what I'll need to do to claim that reward?"

A real lout would never ask something like that.

Albert was honest. "I don't want you to discuss the attack in the plaza with other nobles."

That would be extremely challenging, which was why the Crown posed the request as a condition of Cale's reward. Today's events had embarrassed them, and they couldn't let the attack shake the foundations of their power. Albert reasoned that he could ask this of Cale because the lout belonged to the Henituse family, which wasn't aligned with any one faction.

"I'd also like you to praise the Crown every so often if asked."

"Including praising your generosity?"

"Absolutely."

Both men donned identical smirks.

"I imagine that today's little display was the extent of your abilities? It was an Ancient Power, after all."

Cale shrugged at Albert's open scrutiny. "Of course. And that power's useless for anything else."

From what Cale had read in the books, the crown prince knew more about Ancient Powers than most people.

Come to think of it, his mother gave him the Star of Healing.

As that memory popped into Cale's mind, the crown prince asked for his desired reward again. "What is it you want? House Henituse? For me to invest in the northeastern shoreline? The power struggles in the northeast decided?" Albert's casual tone made it sound as though he'd probably agree to anything, and that had Cale feeling quite comfortable with where they stood.

"None of those are under my purview, Your Highness."

"They aren't?" Albert gaped at him.

Cale pointed to himself. "I'd like you to give *me* a reward." He wanted something he'd require for his own sake.

Albert fell silent for a moment, then scoffed. He'd all but figured out what this lout was angling for. Despite Cale's lack of dignity, humans—no, all living beings—aimed for greater heights and more control. An individual always valued themselves over family and loved ones.

"What do you want, then? A higher rank? A medal? Your own faction in the capital?" Albert asked, his expression becoming odd.

Contrary to the crown prince's expectations, Cale shook his head; none of the guesses were correct. Then he said a single word: "Money."

"What?"

"Give me money. I don't want a medal or higher rank."

Cale had put his cards on the table for Albert. Money mattered most to someone like the Henituse lout, whose greatest desire was a peaceful life. Cold, hard cash was always best. What would a title or medal do for him with war on the horizon? It would be much smarter to take cash and buy food, land, or other material goods.

Moreover, the final Ancient Power Cale was after—the Sound of the Wind—would become stronger the more money he

spent.

Albert pressed a hand to his forehead. After staying in that position a while, he slowly lowered the hand and looked at Cale. “To buy alcohol?”

“How did you know?” Cale replied immediately.

Grinning, Albert agreed to Cale’s request. He rose and explained the details of how Cale could obtain his reward. “Once you receive that report tomorrow, take a look, then let me know how much money you want.”

“You won’t visit me again, will you?”

“Why? You don’t like it?”

Cale plastered on a look of sheer joy. “Seeing you again would be the highest honor, Your Highness!”

The hairs on the back of the prince’s neck stood on end. He gestured toward Cale’s bed, encouraging him to rest, and then left the room as quickly as possible. Cale quietly observed the door the crown prince had closed behind him.

‹What else besides mana could enable him to color his hair? Answer me, human! I’m curious.›

Cale ignored the dragon’s question and immediately took a nap. From this moment on, he was a patient.

***

In spite of Cale’s plan, he couldn’t convalesce peacefully. First thing in the morning, Hans arrived to hand Cale a letter. “Mr. Ron left as scheduled.”

Cale nodded and opened the letter.

Young Master,

I will report to you once a month. I didn’t know you were hiding such a power. Choi Han told me what the mage looks like. I will remember him. I have informed Vicross about him as well.

Redika was probably a goner if he ran into Ron. Thinking as much, Cale surveyed his next visitors.

Eric Whilsman was among them. “I heard you were seriously injured…”

Cale had never seen Eric look so worried, but he made no effort to assuage the man’s concerns. He needed to be loyal and play his part as a wounded warrior.

“I’m feeling so weak,” he said, sighing.

Full of sympathy, Eric murmured, “Oh, Cale…”

In fact, he was feeling weak because he’d slept all day long.

“My stomach’s upset too.”

When Cale wasn’t sleeping, he just lazed around eating. He was so full, there was no room for anything else.

Eric was fretful, Gilbert was stiff, and Amir was resolute about something or other. The kittens glanced between the three visitors and Cale, then shook their heads.

“Let me know if you need anything.”

“Yes, please do. We’ll get whatever it is.”

Cale just nodded. “You aren’t here just to check in on me, are you?”

The three nobles exchanged looks, and Amir and Gilbert nodded. Eric took a document out of his pocket and gave it to Cale. “This is the updated proposal for northeastern shoreline tourism investment,” he said. “We brought it along since we were heading to the palace to see you.”

Cale looked at the cover page. The first word on the next page was “NAVY.” It seemed the nobles had made up their minds about the project. Cale peeked at Amir, and she smiled at him. Judging by Eric’s words, Amir was keeping their plan secret as Cale had suggested.

“News of this will soon reach Henituse territory, along with our proposal.”

“I see,” said Cale. “And will you meet with the crown prince?”

“Yes, tonight. We can only go ahead with the plan if he shows interest.”

With his eyes on Amir and Gilbert, Cale said, “I bet it’ll work out.” His voice was full of certainty because he *was* sure.

It came as a relief to the others.

Then Cale flapped the proposal in front of them. “You can send documents like this along with a servant in the future. I know it’s difficult to come visit—you don’t need to.”

“No, we’ll keep visiting. You need to be kept in the loop as well.”

Cale dipped his head in acknowledgment, then shooed them out. It was difficult to greet people propped up in the bed wearing a patient’s robe. He kicked the blanket away to sit up comfortably and welcome the next group.

Choi Han stood there, looking remorseful.

“Go,” Cale said.

Rosalyn bit her lip. She had lifted her magic and now stood in Cale’s room with her natural red eyes and hair. She’d also gotten rid of her robe and dressed in formal attire. “I’m sorry, Lord Cale, but I *need* Choi Han and Lark.”

Now that Rosalyn had revealed her presence in the palace, she needed to return to Brek as fast as possible. Once her would-be assassins found out she’d survived, they might start covering their tracks. Rosalyn couldn’t go back on her own, however. The Plaza Terror Incident had proven she was a skilled mage, so her enemies would come at her with more power next time. She needed strong companions at her side.

Lark was standing by the door, fidgeting. He didn’t approach Cale. With only a passing glance at the wolf boy and Choi Han, Cale said, “What’re you sorry about? You helped us out with a very difficult situation, Miss Rosalyn. We should do the same.” He smiled, his demeanor suggesting her request was par for the course. “You’re Choi Han’s friend, and you’re like a sister to Lark.”

“Thank you for putting it that way.” Although Rosalyn had barely survived the assassination attempt, she was certain that these recent events in her life would be a turning point for her.

Cale stepped forward and faced Choi Han, who said, “But I have to protect you.”

“Choi Han.” For Cale to get peace and quiet—and to secure a hiding place for the impending war—Choi Han needed to go. The redhead kept his smile casual. “I won’t die.”

I plan to make a fortune, then get just strong enough to run away and safeguard my peaceful life. I’ll do everything I can to live as long as possible.

Also, there was no reason Choi Han needed to protect him. Now that he had the dragon with him, Choi Han was merely an extra.

“I see.” Choi Han looked relieved. “I was worried for no reason.”

Cale turned away from him to address Lark. He crooked his finger to summon the wolf boy. Lark flinched at the gesture before slowly approaching. *Why’s that coward so scared?* Cale wondered, though he didn’t plan to give much thought to the wolf’s over-the-top reaction.

“Lark, I’ll take care of your younger siblings. Go with Rosalyn, then come to Henituse territory in three months.”

“Pardon?”

“What do you mean, ‘pardon?’ Did you forget our deal?”

“Uh…”

As Lark stared blankly at him, Cale mulled over the task he was giving the wolf, then handed Lark a map of the northeastern territory he’d gotten from Hans. “Come to Henituse territory,” he repeated. “You have to. I’ll be there with your siblings.”

“Come to…”

Cale didn’t care for Lark’s mumbling, so he grabbed the wolf’s shoulder. He needed to reconvene with Lark down the line to make his own life easier. “Yes. That’s your destination. Remember, be there in three months.”

Lark nodded vigorously. “Y-yes, sir! I definitely will!”

After explaining Lark’s instructions so thoroughly, Cale felt relieved. *Birth of a Hero*’s plot had gone a bit off-track already, but he wanted the major elements to proceed as normal. Only then

could he predict the future. He was disappointed that he couldn't send Vicross with Lark and Choi Han; still, he could always foist him off on Ron after the old servant returned from his vacation.

Cale plopped back down on the bed, more relaxed than ever before, and looked at the people in his chamber. His eyes flicked to Hans when the deputy butler came in through the door.

Hans glanced at Choi Han standing guard by the door like a knight, then Lark playing with the kittens, then Rosalyn leisurely reading a book on magic, and finally Cale relaxing on the bed.

Shuffling over to the lout, he whispered, "There's a rumor going around that His Majesty wants to provide you with a medal for your service, my lord."

Everybody froze, and Hans handed Cale a document. It contained the rumors circulating about the Plaza Terror Incident. Cale reacted after reading only the first line:

The young noble Cale Henituse did the Henituse family proud by protecting Rowoon from the Dark Forest.

Cale heaved the deepest of deep sighs. He'd expected this, but it was one heck of a mess.

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A week later, Cale stepped out of a carriage emblazoned with the Henituse golden turtle.

‹It's been a while,› the black dragon said inside his head.

Cale agreed. He was at the Plaza of Glory. There was a tall fence around the northern section of the plaza, which had been destroyed in the explosion. Cale strolled forward, focused on the spot where his seat had been on the day of the festival. The Henituse family's knight brigade, led by their vice-captain, flanked him for protection.

As Cale was walking, he heard some shouts that gave him chills.

“Oh! Lord Silverlight!”

“It’s the Shield Lord!”

Cale immediately grimaced.

A smirk rose to the vice-captain’s lips, but he forced a scowl and a few fake coughs. “Ahem!” He leaned over to whisper in Cale’s ear. “I take it they call you ‘Lord Silverlight’ now, sir. Ahem! Hrm! Widely admired people like yourself are bound to acquire *enviable* nicknames.”

Damn it. Much as he itched to curse, Cale held his tongue. He didn’t want to hear people call him cheesy, embarrassing nicknames like “Lord Silverlight” and “Shield Lord.” Still, he had no room to protest; the gossip would’ve been much worse if the crown prince hadn’t subdued it.

All he could do was stoically address the vice-captain, who was shrugging it off. “If I drink and conduct myself as usual, they’ll stop using those names, won’t they?”

The vice-captain whirled away, coughing a few more times. That made Cale smile, but it didn’t last long.

“I daresay you’d better avoid alcohol, since you’re still recovering.”

Cale was in perfect health, but he *was* still officially recuperating. The story was that he’d been injured straining to use his Ancient Power beyond its intended capabilities, miraculously shielding the crowd from the blast. It went without saying that this narrative was spun by the crown prince. The “injured” Cale’s ostensible convalescence was why the Henituses’ capital residence staff were busy attending to him.

Actually, that didn’t just go for the staff at the capital. Cale thought about his father, Count Deruth, who had been planning on coming to the capital a few days ago.

“Cale, did you get a glimpse of those bastards’ faces?” Deruth had demanded via a magical video call. *“I’ll kill them all for you. How dare they harm a young man who can’t even swing a sword!”*

Deruth knew that Cale had earned an Ancient Power, but given that even Cale's younger sister was better at using a blade, the count considered him weak.

"The Henituse family doesn't refrain from taking action because we're weak. Remember this, Cale—we've held back till now because we're strong. People will give you a wide berth in the future!"

That was what Countess Violan said as she calmed Deruth. It must've been true; no nobles sent Cale any messages or came to look for him once he left the palace and returned to his residence. Not even Eric and company had shown up.

Peace and quiet, Cale reflected. He'd used his free time very efficiently.

Staring ahead as he walked through the plaza, Cale saw a knight and soldier guarding the fence gate.

"Ah, Lord Cale."

"Do you need to verify my identity?" Cale asked.

The knight shook his head and opened the gate respectfully. Cale had to continue alone from here on. Entry was more restricted now than it had been during the celebrations, but Cale was an exception.

"Please enter, Lord Cale."

Cale patted the knight on the shoulder, recognizing his efforts. "Great, thanks. Keep up the good work."

"Yes, sir!" the knight shouted with a deferential bow. He continued to watch Cale for a long time after he entered.

The redhead strolled through the Plaza of Glory. Today, the king intended to pay homage to the fallen and distribute medals to people for their actions during the incident. The recipients were entitled to stand on the second-highest platform, right below the king.

Cale arrived at his spot. He wore a neater black outfit than usual.

"Hey, Cale!"

Cale smiled at Eric, who'd called out to him on his way over. "You're here early, Eric."

Eric, Amir, Gilbert, and the other aristocrats could only stare at Cale in pensive silence. This was the nobles' section, so it wasn't as though Cale didn't belong here, but they were perplexed about his attendance. They'd all heard some news regarding the lout: He had declined the medal of honor, yielding it to someone else. Yet he'd dragged his still-recovering body to the ceremony to participate.

Amir watched as Cale peered up at the sky. "It's a beautiful day to pay respects to the fallen," he said. His red hair fluttered in the wind, creating a stark contrast to his black outfit.

Seeing that Cale was his usual wry self, Amir smiled. "That's probably because of your kind heart, Lord Cale."

"Mine?" Cale eyed Amir with confusion, but her warm, calm smile only grew. Cale found that odd but still asked what he needed to. "You're leaving today, Lady Amir?"

"Correct. And I believe you're heading out tomorrow? I'll see you in Uvar territory."

"That's right," Cale said. He'd be visiting after this ceremony. "I'd like to see the ocean."

"So I hear. For the sake of your recovery, if I recall correctly?"

"Yes. It'll be nice to get some fresh air." *Recovery, my ass.* He was completely healthy; with his visit, he was hoping for a different kind of strength. He agreed with her nonetheless, nodding. "Of course, that's not the only reason."

"Ah. Of course not." Amir smirked—as did Eric and Gilbert, who were listening. Their smiles were similar to Cale's.

After today, all the nobles would hear word regarding the investments in developing a military base on the northeastern coastline. That was why Amir and Gilbert would hurry out of the capital tonight—to prevent misinformation from leaking and because the Crown wanted things to progress as quickly as possible.

The base had only become a reality because the Henituse family had agreed to loan Amir and Gilbert's territories significant sums of money. That was the other reason Cale needed to visit those areas.

“We plan to send someone as well,” Count Deruth had told him. *“But if you’re going anyway, Cale, take a look while you’re there.”*

“Wouldn’t it be more helpful for an expert to go?”

“The more pairs of eyes on it, the better.”

Cale had agreed to do as the count asked.

“I look forward to my visit,” he told the other young nobles.

“As do we, Lord Cale.”

Cale waved off their pleasantries and turned his attention to the platform. King Jed had arrived, so the memorial and medal ceremony began. The king spoke in a loud voice that was stronger than ever. There were still a number of people in the plaza, but the atmosphere was completely different. Aside from the king’s voice, it was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop.

King Jed called out to the crowd once again. “We are gathered here once more to show that we won’t cower in fear!” That was a warning to enemies as well as a platitude to rally the crowd. The king looked down from the highest platform to the plaza grounds as he continued, “Many people showed heroism during the Plaza Terror Incident. We were able to protect Rowoon, as in the past, thanks to their bravery.”

At that point, King Jed seemed to make eye contact with Cale. Hoping that wasn’t the case, Cale stealthily turned away from the king to the sky behind them. He thought about something the black dragon had said.

‹Blessing of the God of Sun? I don’t feel any god’s power in those weak humans. The only special one is the crown prince.›

So, there was no truth to the belief that the God of Sun had blessed the Crossmans. Having learned another useless truth, Cale had—as usual—pretended he was none the wiser. When Cale told the black dragon to keep the revelation a secret, he’d seemed excited and happily agreed.

“On that note, we’ll now distribute medals to those heroic individuals!” As King Jed started the ceremony, those individuals receiving a medal ascended the platform one by one.

Cheers filled the plaza, as if it had never been quiet at all.

The black dragon's voice echoed in Cale's head once again. *‹Humans are interesting.›*

Through the dragon's voice, Cale could hear the crowd cheering for a knight who'd just received a medal. Cale could imagine what the dragon found interesting, but because he was human, he understood the survivors' feelings better than the dragon did. There were times to be sad and times to be excited. Thus, he applauded the medal recipients as well.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The atmosphere was now much lighter, with everyone enjoying the ceremony as if *were* a festival. That jovial environment made it possible for anyone to approach Cale.

Plenty of aristocrats had headed home after the Plaza Terror Incident, concluding that the capital was dangerous, so there were fewer nobles in the city than before. But one of those remaining approached and called out to Cale.

"Lord Cale."

Cale turned toward the quiet voice. "What is it, Lord Benion?"

Benion Sten was still here. So were the heads of each region.

"I hear you declined a medal," said Benion. "Won't you regret that?"

His gentle smile and his question perplexed Cale. The nobles gazing up at the platform shifted to look at them.

‹I want to kill him.›

Cale hoped the black dragon would calm down; he was worried Benion's body might spontaneously combust. He thought about the medal he'd rejected. The reason he'd declined it was simple: He didn't want to be "recorded" for his deed.

The top floor of the royal library contained a record of all Rowoon's kings. The floor below held a record of all the heroes decorated with medals of honor throughout the kingdom's history. The Crown used the fact that they needed to keep providing those heroes with reward money to justify keeping tabs on them.

That might sound like fame and honor to others, but it just sounds like chains to me.

Cale didn't want to be recorded anywhere. Someone who never made it into the history books was easier to forget. The incident in the plaza would be overshadowed by the upcoming war. Even if someone *did* remember the details, his involvement wouldn't be chief among them. That was part of the reason he had stepped forward during the attack—and why he wanted to avoid being mentioned in documentation.

He smiled at Benion. "What would I regret?" Cale had nothing to regret. He'd received a handsome reward, and most importantly… "It's enough that we survived."

He'd lived without being seriously injured. That was the most important thing to Cale—no, Kim Roksu. The area around Cale went quiet.

After some time, Benion broke the silence. "I see."

"Mm-hmm. Besides, I'm too cowardly and timid to receive a medal."

Benion made a face at that, but Cale just shrugged, turning to clap as someone else received a medal.

Meanwhile, the black dragon was debating how to kill Benion quickly and simply. He looked at Cale and the attendees surrounding him, then shook his head. Too many people were watching Cale right now, both nobles and other attendees further below. The dragon suspected that if he killed Benion immediately, things would get very complicated and annoying for Cale. He decided to act like Cale and stay still—*very* still—as he watched the event.

"That concludes today's ceremony, but I shall not forget this moment!" King Jed declared. "I shall recall it day after day to remember these valiant heroes!" With his closing remarks, the ceremony ended.

Wssssh. A gust that sounded like rain swept the plaza. Cale brushed back his windswept hair.

The crown prince had said that Cale didn't need to attend today, yet he'd still shown up. He knew the weight of death.

Finishing his own memorial of sorts, he put his right hand to his heart.

That alarmed Eric, who cried, “Cale! Did you push yourself too hard? Does your heart hurt?!”

Cale shot Eric a look of disbelief. His composure elicited an awkward smile from Eric, who backed away in embarrassment. Grinning at Eric’s reaction, Cale patted his chest twice. As he did so, he felt the golden plaque in his inner pocket. That was the reward he’d received from the crown prince.

Prince Albert is more generous than I expected.

The golden plaque entitled Cale to purchase two things regardless of the cost. He could buy two slices of bread or two mountains; all that mattered was that he could only use it twice. Cale was planning to make the most of those two opportunities.

I’m sure the crown prince assumed I couldn’t possibly go overboard when he gave me this.

Either that, or he’d given it to Cale just to see what the lout would manage to buy with it.

Too bad he lowballed that figure. Cale smiled. You could buy lots of unique things in this world as long as you knew how.

‹What are you planning now, weak human? Just be careful.›

The black dragon had seen the smirk on Cale’s face. Cale ignored the creature’s scrutiny, sweeping his gaze around the plaza. Though he met many eyes, he trusted that the attention he’d drawn would dissipate once he left the capital.

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That evening, Cale finished making preparations to leave his capital residence. Tomorrow morning, he would depart. He placed three identical objects on the table, along with a steak for the black dragon.

“What are those for?” the dragon asked, clutching the plate with the steak on it.

The other three objects were the remaining magic bombs. Their detonators had been removed, but they still contained compressed mana. For now, Cale planned to use just one of them.

A mischievous smirk appeared on the lout's face. "Destroying whirlpools."

Cale planned to change Rowoon's northeastern sea dramatically without anyone knowing. His plan was viable, given that neither the mermaids nor the Whale Tribe were currently there. He hadn't originally planned to destroy the whirlpools; he'd intended to take them on using the Unbreakable Shield and the Energy of the Heart.

That was before I had the black dragon, though. With the dragon on his side, there was no reason to run himself ragged.

Cale stuffed the black dragon, Ohn, and Hong full of food, then ushered out the creatures—which averaged seven years of age—and greeted his first guest, Bilose.

"I don't know what you stole," said the tea shop owner, "but I hear you did something big."

"I *am* rather famous these days."

Bilose shook his head at Cale, who didn't seem at all hurt. He watched as the lout began drinking despite his alleged injuries. "You are indeed famous, Lord Cale, but should you hit the bottle?"

"There's no reason to keep up pretenses in front of you."

Smiling, Bilose filled Cale's empty cup, then handed him a magic box. "Here are the items you requested. Thank you for returning the ones from last time." Cale had sent those items to Bilose via Choi Han.

Glancing at Bilose, Cale caressed this new box. He'd already decided on one of his two golden-plaque purchases: time. Yes, he needed to buy time now that the northern knights, who presented a risk not just to Rowoon but also Brek and other central northern kingdoms, were heading south.

In addition to the northern knights, other threats existed: specifically, the empire in the center of the Western Continent, the mage slayer, and the Queen of the Jungle. Cale would buy

time to get away from all of them. It would've been one thing if he were on his own, but now he needed to look after others.

"Bilose."

"Yes?"

"Do you deal in property too?"

"I don't. But I've been staying on top of things." Bilose was a merchant through and through; he had his finger on the pulse of commerce. "The Western Continent's on the verge of collapse, so it's a great time for merchants like myself to make money."

"Merchants will flock to anything profitable."

Bilose liked that Cale understood merchants thoroughly—and that the lout didn't beat around the bush.

"The Kingdom of the Whipper will unravel soon," Cale continued. "I'm sure you're already expecting that?"

Bilose nodded. Anti-mages and mages could no longer coexist in that kingdom. "That's why I'm trying to figure out how to make money off the chaos. What do you think the most profitable investment there will be, Lord Cale?"

Cale answered Bilose's question easily. "People."

The Kingdom of the Whipper was the Western Continent's main supplier of magic devices. Many mages there stayed far away from power and politics, but once they lost the civil war and the Magic Tower was destroyed, there would be nowhere for the survivors to go. What would happen to them then?

In the novel, Prince Albert had addressed that issue. As for the destroyed Magic Tower, Rosalyn—one of the highest-tier mages—decided to create a new one elsewhere.

"You think the mages will look for a new home," said Bilose.

He was sharp, but Cale didn't give him a direct answer. The mages *did* need to lose the war in the Kingdom of the Whipper. It was the only way for the kingdom to move toward a better future. Cale didn't place much importance on that, though. He was in pursuit of something else. Since that kingdom supplied most of the continent's highest-grade magic devices, Cale needed what remained in the Magic Tower after the war.

“Let me know immediately once the Magic Tower’s destroyed,” he told Bilose.

“May I ask why?”

Cale shrugged, responding lightly, “You’ll find out when it happens.”

He planned to purchase the Magic Tower, which would be full of irreparably broken magic devices after the conflict. He knew how to buy it, and Albert wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Cale nodded. He was looking forward to it too. Buying the Tower would also buy him time to protect himself from danger. It would be eye-wateringly expensive… *But it’s not like it’s my money.*

His evil smirk raised Bilose’s expectations.

“I’ll contact you once I’ve handled that, then.”

“All right. I look forward to it.”

Cale said goodbye to Bilose, then greeted his second and last guest. Or rather, that guest charged into the room. Cale, gazing toward the open terrace window, flinched at the thing that rushed through it.

“What is that?”

A clay doll the size of his palm had climbed into the chamber. Frightened, Ohn and Hong sprang into Cale’s arms. The doll’s expression was terrifying. It looked like a zombie.

At that point, the black dragon used his magical telepathy. *‹I feel divine power.›*

“Oh. Kage.”

The moment he said the crazy priestess’s name, the clay doll—which lacked eyes and ears, but had a mouth—spoke. “I knew you’d detect me, Lord Cale. I’m linked to this doll. It’s a single-use item that can only listen and talk.”

Kage was skilled enough to be called a necromancer, as she had been in the books.

Cale glanced sidelong at the black dragon. Although the creature was speaking telepathically, he hadn’t turned invisible.

He seemed to have figured out right away that the doll could listen and speak but not see.

Just how capable is this dragon? Cale suddenly wondered.

Kage's clay doll resumed speaking, preventing him from thinking about it for long. "We're leaving the capital today. I'm sure you don't like us contacting you this way…"

Absolutely correct.

"But Taylor had something he wanted to tell you." Kage then quoted House Sten's eldest descendant. "'Lord Cale, when I reclaim my position—no, when I hold the title at last—I'll return to repay you for your help.' That's what he wanted me to pass along."

"Well, there's no need for him to."

"I know." Cale peered into the ugly clay doll's empty eye sockets as it went on, "Still, when Taylor and I get what we desire, we'll both need someplace to share the news."

"Do whatever you want," Cale replied.

The clay doll smiled at that, then melted. Ohn and Hong dug into Cale's clothes to hide.

"Please take care, Lord Cale." With those parting words, the doll disappeared completely.

For a few moments, the black dragon stared at the empty spot where the doll had stood. Then he looked at Cale. "Can I get my revenge then?"

"Yes," Cale assured him. "At that point, you can do as you like." Once Taylor returned to power and became Marquess Sten, the current marquess and Benion would both face the black dragon's wrath.

"Great!"

Having heard about the Stens' current situation from Cale, the black dragon settled on when to take his revenge. The creature would go after Benion and the marquess at their lowest point. He'd show them true despair, and they'd die hopeless deaths. The dragon flapped his wings happily; he really was vicious.

As Cale drifted off to sleep, the dragon's mutterings detailing his revenge plan filled his head. All the bloodthirsty murmuring made it one rough night.

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The next morning, Cale stood in front of the carriage as Rosalyn, Choi Han, and Lark saw him off. Cale fixed them with a deadpan expression.

"Please, Mr. Cale—if you think you spot that bastard mage, tell the dragon to slaughter him right away. Just have him blow the mage's head up so his efforts aren't as useless as mine were. I only managed to cut off an arm."

It was still early, and Choi Han was already out for blood.

Surrounded by his ten younger siblings, Lark gave them all the guidance he could. "I'll build my strength and come back for you, so while I'm gone, make sure you listen to the lord. Think seriously about what I told you all last time, for the sake of your future. We need to get stronger now."

Inside the carriage, Rosalyn whispered to the black dragon so quietly that even Cale couldn't hear. "Lord Dragon, this book - covers Rowoon's alphabet, and this one is on the continent's common language."

"Thank you, human. I am great and mighty, so I will learn it quickly."

"You are indeed great and mighty, Lord Dragon. I pray you come up with a robust name for yourself."

"I'll ask *him* to come up with my name."

"I...see how much Lord Cale means to you."

"Hmph!"

Cale didn't know what they were talking about. Still, he got a bad feeling as he watched Rosalyn smile warmly at the dragon. He frowned and turned to Choi Han, who was still going on about how Cale could stay alive without him.

“You’re more likely to survive if you blast something in one hit and run away, Lord Cale. Also—”

“Enough nonsense,” Cale cut in. Choi Han immediately shut up. “Make sure you don’t get hurt either.”

“Right. I won’t.”

Not wanting to see Choi Han’s innocent smile anymore, Cale boarded the carriage. As soon as he did so, Rosalyn got out. Cale felt the weight of the invisible black dragon—in addition to Ohn and Hong—on his lap as he looked out the window at Hans. “Let’s go.”

The staff, all standing outside the residence, bid Cale goodbye. He didn’t understand why they’d delay their work to come see him off. He’d told them it was fine, but they insisted.

“Please return home safely, my lord!”

“It was our pleasure to serve you!”

“We look forward to seeing you again!”

That sounded more like a curse to Cale, who had no plans to ever return to the capital. He waved casually and closed the carriage curtains—his signal to depart. With two more carriages than when they arrived, Cale’s group left the capital and traveled northeast to Uvar. Cale was headed to the sea full of whirlpools that had spun for centuries.

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Hong looked out the carriage window and sniffed the air. “It smells salty! Is that the sea?”

Cale nodded as the black dragon passed him a small, round item. “Is this condensed mana from the bomb?”

The dragon nodded. “Yes. We can make another magic bomb now.”

Cale’s spirits lifted, and he opened the carriage window wide. As the cool sea breeze blew in, he gazed out at the seascape. He could see some of the many islands dotting the ocean.

The silver kitten Ohn was thrilled too. “Ooh! Look how sharp the cliff is!”

Since they were driving along a clifftop road, the drop inspired both awe and fear.

Cale studied the Cliff of Winds, the most beautiful sight in Uvar territory. Beside the cliff was a series of small islands. Several whirlpools raged between the islands and the cliff. They were the reason Uvar territory’s seas were so perilous.

After the whirlpools shipwrecked the mage slayer, he wound up on one of those islands. He ended up finding the Sound of the Wind.

The mage slayer was known as an intelligent barbarian. He was even stronger than Lark, member of the Blue Wolf Tribe and the future Wolf King. In fact, the mage slayer had the distinction of being the strongest individual in the Western Continent. His name was Tunka—also dubbed Tunka the Tyrant.

I just need to get it before he does.

If things went as they had in the novel, it would still be too early for Tunka to turn up here. Looking out at the sea with satisfaction, Cale decided he stood no chance of running into Tunka. And as long as he avoided Tunka, this journey would be smooth.

Just as Cale was feeling smug, he spotted something in the distance. “Hmm?” He rubbed his eyes a bit, but the scene hadn’t changed. “Whales?”

A pod of great big whales sprayed water into the air as they crossed the sea, heading farther north. A foreboding feeling came over Cale, and his hand clenched the condensed mana for the magic bomb. Whales tended to live in the northern seas, as did the Whale Tribe. Only during the war with the mermaids did the Whale Tribe come south.

I’m sure that’s just a random pod passing by. Tons of whales head north. There’s absolutely no way, right?

The black dragon’s voice echoed in Cale’s ear. “I feel a strong presence.”

That remark pierced straight through Cale’s peace of mind. By the time they reached a small village adjacent to the Cliff of Winds, he was frowning deeply.

“Did you get sick on the way?” Hans asked as Cale disembarked his carriage.

Cale shook his head. “No, I just have a bad feeling.”

“Ah. The cliff’s steepness was frightening, I’m sure. But our driver is experienced. You have nothing to fear.”

Cale ignored Hans’s useless comments and faced the person approaching him. “It’s been a while, Lady Amir.”

“Hello, Lord Cale.” Amir welcomed Cale and his retinue with her uniquely calm smile.

This small seaside village was in Uvar territory. There was nothing special about it, which had allowed the residents to live in peace and quiet. But lately, the village had experienced a sudden crop of visitors, so it was changing every day. Furthermore, it would soon face an opportunity that could change its course forever: Tomorrow night, Cale planned to detonate a magic bomb deep in the ocean.

However, something that never should’ve occurred was about to happen.

The terrible situation began when one of Amir’s knights rushed over to make a report. “My lady, the man we rescued has regained consciousness.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Rescued? The word made Cale think of someone. His brow furrowed in doubt.

Noticing Cale’s expression, Amir explained, “When we inspected the shoreline and nearby islands for the new naval base, we rescued someone who’d been shipwrecked. It seems he’s just come to.”

Cale was feeling anything but positive about this revelation.

“We debated what to do when we saw him unconscious, being dragged into the whirlpool, but I remembered how you acted in the plaza, and I decided we needed to save him.” Amir paused. “A person’s life is precious, right, Lord Cale?”

After a long moment of silence, Cale responded, “Of course.”

“I knew that’d be your answer.”

Cale couldn’t even think about Amir’s smile right now. He was too busy mentally poring over every detail of Tunka’s situation from *Birth of a Hero*.

Chapter 11:
Into the Whirlpool

AMIR HAD NO WAY of knowing what Cale was thinking. She assumed he looked so somber out of sympathy for the victim of the shipwreck.

"Based on his outfit and physique, he seemed to be from the Kingdom of the Whipper," she said.

It was definitely Tunka. Cale's pallor worsened the more Amir spoke. The anti-mage faction in the Kingdom of the Whipper were looked down on by their mage adversaries, who thought they were barbarians.

There were no barbarians in this world; all humans had the same brain. It was just that as time went on and history was created, humans had grown and developed in the ways that suited them best.

The Kingdom of the Whipper's anti-mages were strong individuals who'd subdued the kingdom's harsh mountains and shores without magic. And to that end, they had honed their physical prowess. They'd rebelled to overturn the Kingdom of the Whipper's modern hierarchy—which was designed solely to make life easier for mages—and roll back societal structures to their original state.

The kingdom's citizens were on the anti-mages' side. Outsiders might assume barbaric anti-mages were trying to take over the kingdom, but they weren't barbarians to the average citizen—just free people. They would use instinct to take down the mages' kingdom of logic.

Problem is, Tunka's an idiot.

There were some who said Tunka was an intelligent barbarian, but Cale felt Tunka was just a simpleton who happened to be strong. To Cale, buffoons were the scariest people of all because it was impossible to get through to them.

"You needn't worry about him, Lord Cale. He seemed to recover very quickly."

Face taut, Cale waved away Amir's concern. "I'm not worried at all. In fact, I'd prefer he keep recuperating for ages."

He hoped Tunka would remain on the mend until he left. Amir and the retinue of knights who'd accompanied her to the capital fixed Cale with compassionate gazes.

The redhead himself had no time to address all that, however. He'd have enough of a headache figuring out why Tunka had arrived so early. "Lady Amir, could you please show us to our rooms?"

"Of course. You aren't at full strength yet, are you?"

"No. I'm still wounded."

"Oh no... We should hurry, then."

Looking grim, Amir briskly set off before slowing back down to Cale's speed. Meanwhile, Cale only had one thing on his mind: *Bilose may be part of Flynn Merchant Fleets, and extremely talented, but why was he so sure about the civil war? How did he find out so early?*

Since he'd read *Birth of a Hero*, Cale was aware of Bilose's abilities. Within Flynn Merchant Fleets, however, Bilose was still being ostracized as a bastard. That had to hamper his information gathering, so the fact that he knew about the civil war meant the story was changing.

The civil war must be happening earlier than it did in the books. That made everything else fall into place. But what would've provoked the conflict?

Cale didn't have to think long about it. If Tunka had been shipwrecked, it meant that mages had destroyed his ship and he'd returned from the north after gaining strength, so the story itself hadn't changed.

His physical prowess instilled fear in the mages; he sat at the pinnacle of what the human body could do. Through strength alone, Tunka had survived sea, mountain, desert, jungle, volcano, and glacier alike, meaning he'd conquered nature's harshest elements. There was no way mages could defeat him with mana, a power drawn from nature.

A dragon might be able to kill him.

With a single attack, even.

As soon as Cale arrived at Amir's residence, he said he needed to rest. He shooed everyone away from his chambers, then looked at the ceiling.

"Hey."

The black dragon revealed himself. "What is it, human?"

"Stick with me for a while."

Cale was being completely serious. He'd realized something through his entanglements with Choi Han and the dragon. If he tried to avoid Tunka, he could end up inadvertently adding the lunk to his baggage. He needed to be prepared.

"I'll do whatever I want," the black dragon said with a snort, turning away from Cale. Still, the way the dragon's wings flapped told Cale the dragon was more than happy to oblige. His movements contradicted what he'd said.

After giving the black dragon that order, Cale felt much better. He looked around his room. The Uvar family head had built this residence in the village a while back.

It doesn't really fit with the rest of the village.

Such a luxurious residence was a mismatch. Still, it suggested that Amir's mother—the head of Uvar territory—had already planned to develop this area during her initial construction. That vision was finally becoming a reality a decade later.

It probably took her a while to involve Gilbert's family and get the Whilsmans' protection.

Cale was scheduled to meet with Amir's mother before leaving her territory. Around that time, she'd leave the family's main estate in the city to see him. He mulled their impending meeting over for a bit before moving to the large window. From here, he could see the entire village—as well as the Cliff of Winds.

For hundreds of years, whirlpools had churned the waters in front of the Cliff of Winds, causing the Uvar citizens great pains when they headed out to sea. Nevertheless, there was a reason Amir's family considered this area important. There were

two other local seaside villages, with this one between them. The northeastern shoreline was shaped like a crescent moon, with this village in the center and a cliff on either side, making this the only area boats could easily set out from. Islands of different sizes were visible from the village, so it was scenic as well. Even better from a military perspective.

Tomorrow morning, Cale was due to visit the smallest island. The Sound of the Wind that produced all these whirlpools would be right beside it. When speaking of the Sound of the Wind in the books, Tunka had said, *"It's a quiet but chaotic power."*

That was exactly what Cale was looking for—a power that allowed him to quickly and quietly flee while wreaking havoc on the strong. He smirked, anticipating the following morning. That smirk soon blossomed into a smile of satisfaction.

Soon enough, the ten wolf children came padding into the room with his meal.

"Uncle Vicross prepared this seafood just for you, Lord Cale!"

"Uncle's very excited about the sea!"

"Right! Please eat up, Lord Cale!"

Cale gazed upon them, feeling content. He'd told the others that they were Lark's cousins and that they'd all been living in the same village when bandits killed their families. His smile grew even wider, but not because he liked the ten young wolves—his eyes were locked on Vicross, who carried in trays of food behind them.

Ron's son was a chef and torture expert. He usually wore crisp, pristine clothes without a speck of dust. The same held true at present—though he had visible dark circles under his eyes.

"Please eat, Lord Cale," said twelve-year-old Maes, the eldest of the wolf children.

"This is great, thanks. It was smart to have you all help Vicross in the kitchen," Cale said before picking up his fork.

"We want to work, Lord Cale! Lark told us we can't mooch off you!"

During their journey to Uvar territory, the wolf children—Maes in the lead—had rushed into his carriage and asked him to put them to work. That was when Cale told them to assist Vicross.

“Um…we think it’d be better if we trained with the knights. Still, we’ll do our best!”

Unlike Lark, Maes was confident and calm. The young boy was also very aware of the strength of the Wolf Tribe. That made Cale even more insistent on them helping Vicross in the kitchen.

“You’re still children. It’s too soon for you to do something dangerous like train with knights. Help the chef with kitchen tasks.”

“You really are exactly how Lark described. Okay, we’ll give it everything we’ve got!”

True to their word, the children put their little noses to the grindstone. Maybe that was why Cale couldn’t help sneering at Vicross, who seemed more exhausted every day. He just stood there as the wolf children set Cale’s table and made for the door.

“Aren’t you coming, Uncle?”

The bright, pure wolf children called Vicross “uncle,” treating him like family.

“…I’m coming.”

After hearing his response, the children left Cale’s room. All were dressed in clean garments, their hair tidy, as if they’d never lived in a remote village. That was inevitable, given how meticulous Vicross was with his own appearance.

He makes a great nanny.

Cale avoided Vicross’s eyes, guessing that the chef would come at him with a cooking knife if he knew what Cale was thinking. Since Vicross was presenting himself as a clean, respectful chef for now, he couldn’t be cold toward the wolf children. All he could do was glare at Cale every so often.

The redheaded lout picked up his fork and knife, watching Vicross head for the door.

“Thank you for always preparing such delicious meals.”

“…You’re welcome, sir.”

Vicross left the room, closing the door behind him.

Click.

Staring at the door, Cale muttered to himself, “Now that Ron’s gone, I don’t know why Vicross is trying to do his dad’s job.”

The chef had no reason to bring Cale his food, but Vicross was beginning to carry out Ron’s tasks any chance he got. Sadly, that prevented Cale from enjoying the breathing room that had resulted from Ron’s departure; the wolf children or Vicross always showed up in Ron’s stead.

Cale glanced toward the corner of the room. “Come eat.”

His fellow diners—Ohn, Hong, and the black dragon—rushed to the table and chowed down right away. Cale savored his own food, watching the sun set over the sea.

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“Hello.”

“Nice to meet you, Lord Cale.”

Cale was exchanging greetings with an old man—a fisherman who’d roamed the Uvar sea for decades, battling the whirlpools as he went. He was known in this small seaside village as the most seasoned local fisherman. His deep tan showed just how much time he spent at sea, and the corners of his eyes were wrinkled with age.

“You can trust me,” the man assured Cale. “I’ll get you safely to the central island.”

Standing at Cale’s side, Amir nodded. “Right. He’s an amazing sailor. You’ll be able to get anywhere in the Uvar sea as long as he’s with you. I’m sorry I can’t come even though I was supposed to show you around. I have some work to do.”

“That’s all right. It’s enough that you introduced me to an expert fisherman.”

In fact, Amir coming along would’ve made things more complicated; Cale had already determined who’d go with him today.

“It’s just you three?” the fisherman asked.

“Yes. We should get a move on.”

“Of course, sir. Come on up.”

Cale stepped onto the small but sturdy boat, which had a little cabin area with walls and a roof. The vice-captain of the Henituse knight brigade boarded behind him; his presence meant Cale wouldn’t need to bring any other knights. Their sojourn was unlikely to be eventful, considering the islands were uninhabited.

“Do be careful, Lord Cale.”

Hans held Ohn and Hong in his arms as he saw Cale off. The kittens squirmed to escape his grip when he stepped closer to the water. Although Ohn and Hong liked the smell of the ocean, they didn’t like water one bit.

“Sure thing,” Cale replied.

Naturally, the black dragon planned to follow them while - invisible. *‹I’ll be flying.›*

Vicross, who’d wound up joining them on Cale’s orders, boarded with a dubious expression.

“I hear the nets near the island catch lots of rare fish, Vicross,” Cale teased. “Those should broaden your palate.”

“...Your thoughts are appreciated, my lord.”

Once everyone was aboard, Cale ordered the fisherman to set off.

“Yes, sir!”

The fisherman—captain of this small boat—began rowing alongside his son. Neither a large ship nor acceleration magic were important in this whirlpool-filled sea; it was safest to sail with a veteran fisherman and rely on their years of experience on the water.

“The boat may rock quite a bit. Hold on tight!” the old man announced as the boat departed.

Soon after they left, Cale cursed, “Damn it.”

The boat was rocking *hard* and just barely avoiding the whirlpools, which seemed as though they would suck everything

in. The choppy waters jostled the old man's craft, kicking up all sorts of swishes and splashes around them.

"Ha ha ha! Aren't the whirlpools grand, Lord Cale?!" the fisherman shouted, brimming with courage.

The vice-captain, on the other hand, clutched Cale's clothes with a deathly pallor. Cale pried off the man's fingers, feeling seasick. He looked out through a small cabin window. The violent waters weren't crystal clear; they were white and blue near the surface, then deeper and darker blue closer to the center of the whirlpool.

If you got caught in that, you'd probably die.

Cale thought about the new magic bombs in the magic box back home, then gazed over the front of the boat toward the smallest of the islands clustered ahead.

"It's the island over there, Lord Cale! The whirlpool by that one's the worst! Get caught in that thing and you can kiss this world goodbye! Ha ha ha!"

The fisherman was quite gutsy. He didn't see the vice-captain's face grow paler as he spoke. Quashing the urge to vomit, Cale focused on the fisherman's words.

"Legend says the whirlpool appeared because a thief stole something from a god—ack!"

The boat heaved to one side. Cale gulped, watching water crash against the window.

"Jeez, we almost tipped over. Hey, boy! Row the right way!"

"Sorry, Dad!"

Both father and son had nerves of steel.

"That, Lord Cale, is why—"

"Excuse me." Cale raised his hand to stop the old man, saying sternly, "Let's talk after we land."

"Lady Amir said that as well! We're almost there."

The old man kept rowing skillfully. As he did, the boat twisted and turned to avoid all the whirlpools. Cale observed each and every one they passed. *Those are remnants of gales spewed by the Sound of the Wind.*

The Sound of the Wind was an Ancient Power that created "spinning tops" of wind, then spun them as hard as it could. Those cyclones created new "spinning tops," producing the numerous whirlpools visible today.

"L-Lord Cale, I-I'm supposed to protect you—urp!"

Cale ignored the vice-captain, clutching the boat's handles. He didn't want to drown.

At long last, the boat made landfall on the island, and Cale once again felt the ground beneath his feet.

"We're here. That was easier than usual!"

The fisherman's son nodded at his father's words. Looking past the pair, Cale saw the vice-captain lean over and heave loudly. The man was suffering such intense seasickness, Cale wondered if he might drop dead on the spot. When Vicross joined Cale at his side, he tapped the chef's arm and then pointed to their companion. Vicross frowned, taking a pair of white gloves out of his pocket and tugging them on as he headed for the vice-captain.

Seeing the white gloves, Cale winced. *Aren't those the gloves he uses during torture sessions to keep his hands clean?*

Vicross must've had an endless supply. Having seen them for the first time, Cale looked away from Vicross and the vice-captain and surveyed the island. Its shores were rocky rather than sandy. A forest began further inland. Well, it was probably more accurate to call it a copse than a forest; Cale had been told he could walk around it in less than an hour.

"Hey, old man."

"Yes, Lord Cale?"

"Continue your story from earlier. The one about the thief."

The old man stopped watching his son anchor the boat. He pointed to the route they'd sailed, past the large whirlpool off the island's coast. "A long time ago, there was a thief faster than anybody else. The thief's steps were so light and cautious, she could walk on water without the smallest ripple."

The thief's powers had stemmed from the Sound of the Wind. To call it walking on water was a bit of an exaggeration.

“Anyway, that thief supposedly stole something that belonged to a god. Story goes that the thief jumped off the Cliff of Winds with it. You know which cliff that is, right? That’s how the divine item and the thief disappeared from this world, as well as how the whirlpools came to be.” The old man smiled gently, his aged eyes crinkling when they met his tanned cheeks. “Hence why there used to be sacrifices for the divine item.”

“Not anymore?”

“Well, if that item really was a god’s property, why would that god bother us humans instead of just reclaiming it?”

Cale agreed. The item’s power was human rather than divine—that was why a god couldn’t take it. “I’ll look around the island now, then.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll await you here.”

As the old fisherman headed toward his son, the vice-captain jumped up. “Lord Cale, allow me to—hrgh!” He grunted mid-sentence, doubling over.

Cale clicked his tongue and motioned Vicross over. Once the chef arrived, Cale whispered in his ear. “You’re Ron’s son, so I’m sure you aren’t normal either.”

“And…?”

Cale patted the composed chef’s shoulder. “Keep the vice-captain here.”

“Will you be all right on your own?”

“What on this island could be dangerous? Besides, I’ve got my shield.”

“Just keep an eye out.”

Vicross acquiesced without much fuss. Cale had brought him along for the extra muscle—and his lax attitude toward Cale’s protection. He was also easy to boss around, making him the perfect companion.

“I’ll be back soon.” Cale headed toward the copse of trees in the center of the island.

“Oh, and shoot your shield into the air if you’re in danger, got it?”

“Lord Cale! I’ll be right behind—urp!”

Only half-listening to Vicross and the vice-captain, Cale strode into the woods. As soon as he was away from the others, he murmured, “What do you think?”

“Like you said, there’s something underneath the whirlpool next to the island,” came the black dragon’s reply from thin air. “It’s similar to the power from that cave.” He was referring to the Energy of the Heart.

Cale continued his stroll through the trees. There was no reason to look around; he’d really just come here to look at the whirlpools. *I need to know a bit about the terrain, though, since we’ll fly back here at night.*

He asked one more thing. “Nobody’s here, right?”

“No one.”

Cale’s group had their run of the island, then. He breathed a sigh of relief at last. That pod of whales yesterday had worried him.

“But there are corpses.”

“What?” Cale froze, then glowered at the air.

The dragon made himself visible. “When I checked out this island from overhead, there were three corpses near the other shore.”

That blindsided Cale completely. He took three steps back toward the boat. He had a bad feeling that if he continued toward the far shore, he’d be cursed with terrible luck.

“They weren’t *human* corpses,” the black dragon clarified.

Cale clapped his hands over his eyes. If the bodies weren’t human, they were bound to have distinctive features. However, the fact that the dragon hadn’t mentioned any animal traits could only mean one thing: *They’re similar to humans, but not the same.* That left only one species.

“Were their hands and feet weird?”

The dragon nodded eagerly. “Right! Their hands and feet looked weird, like fins!”

Fins were a characteristic of mermaids. Mermaids? And a pod of whales? Cale fretted, full of doubt. They weren't supposed to show up just yet. *No.* He corrected his train of thought. The battle between the Whale Tribe and the mermaids predated even the oldest human wars. However, *Birth of a Hero* had revealed that conflict at the point when Choi Han became involved with the Whale Tribe.

"Hey, you," Cale called to the dragon.

"Don't call me 'you.'"

"Then what should I call you?"

"You'll figure it out soon."

What the hell is he talking about?

Cale just assumed that since the black dragon had been studying human tongues, he'd pick a name for himself. He jerked his chin at the other side of the island. "You're sure nobody else is there?"

"No living presences. It's the same in the water."

"Lead the way, then." He had to examine the mermaid corpses, just to verify things and keep himself safe. "You go in front of me."

Cale followed the black dragon toward the opposite shore. The moment he stepped out of the grove and spotted the corpses, his brow furrowed.

"There really are mermaids."

As he'd expected, they were mermaid corpses. Three bodies, as the dragon said—all with broken necks. Their legs and arms were twisted as well. Now that Cale could see the dead mermaids with his own eyes as opposed to reading a passage about them, his frown deepened.

The corpses were dried out, as if they were mummies. Mermaids really did look different from humans. They had webbed hands, fins instead of feet, and much of their skin was covered in scales. They also had gills instead of ears.

"Why aren't you getting closer?" the black dragon asked Cale, who was observing the dead mermaids from a distance.

"It's scary," Cale responded without blinking.

“Right. I forgot you’re a weak human.” Nodding, the dragon approached the mermaid corpses. “Looks like they were crushed,” he mumbled to himself. “They seem to have died pretty recently. And I can see red blood under their fins. I think their blood was drawn in battle.”

It had to be a whale who killed these mermaids.

Like the dragons, the whales were few in number, but they were the strongest beings in the ocean. That was how they protected the sea from the mermaids, who wanted to create a kingdom underwater. The Whale Tribe refused to split the ocean into territories, since their species needed to migrate with the seasons.

The Whale Tribe is small but too strong for the mermaids to do as they please. The mermaids suddenly got more powerful in the books, though.

When the mermaids became stronger, it put the Whale Tribe in a difficult position. That was when Choi Han appeared and assisted the whales. At least, that was how Volume Five of *Birth of a Hero* played out.

Turning away from the corpses, Cale told the black dragon they should head back.

“Can we just leave them like this?” the dragon asked.

“Yeah.”

A mermaid corpse wouldn’t rot on land. On the contrary, it would dry out almost entirely. To rot, it needed to be underwater. The odor would spread through the ocean, alerting other mermaids to come to get the corpse. That was why the Whale Tribe had purposely left them on dry land like this.

I should wrap up my business and get off this island.

Most likely, only one whale had fought these mermaids. If there’d been two, they wouldn’t have left the corpses on land; they’d have thrown the bodies into the water to draw even more mermaids and pick a fight. The whale had done this because they were alone.

Cale returned to the boat. “Let’s get going,” he told the others. “There’s not much to see.”

The vice-captain, who had only just recovered from his seasickness, turned pale again.

Vicross seemed to have bought a lot of fish from the fisherman. “We’ll have grilled fish for dinner,” he declared immediately.

“Sounds good to me.”

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Cale returned to the Uvar residence, then killed time with his belly full of grilled fish. Once darkness descended on the small village, he pulled scuba gear from the magic box Bilose had given him.

Standing on the windowsill facing the Cliff of Winds and northeastern sea, he told Ohn and Hong, “Keep a good watch.”

“We won’t let anybody in.”

“Have a safe trip.”

He nodded in response to the baby kittens, then looked at the black dragon.

The dragon returned his look with brimming confidence and casually cast a spell: “Flight.”

Cale’s body floated into the air. “Let’s go,” he said.

The black dragon took the lead. Cale followed, carrying the magic bomb the dragon had made with condensed mana. They flew high into the sky to avoid notice. His plan tonight was to commit a perfect hit-and-run. By the time people emerged and balked at what he’d done, he would’ve already vanished without a sound—much like the wind. The magic bomb was scheduled to go off in ten minutes.

“It looks even worse at night,” Cale said, looking down at the largest whirlpool below him. *Tunka really is a crazy bastard.*

How had Tunka gotten the Sound of the Wind in the novels? After getting shipwrecked on the island and recovering a bit, he became curious about the whirlpools. Volcanoes, glaciers, the desert—the man liked to challenge the elements

unprotected, so he couldn't help his interest in the fierce aquatic vortexes. Tunka enjoyed dangerous situations—no, he was obsessed with them. Hence the reason Cale considered him a "crazy bastard."

"This is my first time in the ocean, but it looks fun!" Tunka had said before jumping into the whirlpools without preparation.

Cale certainly didn't plan to do the same. He'd already packed everything he needed in the scuba gear's pockets.

"Is this it?" the black dragon asked.

Surveying the sea below, the redhead nodded. With the area being so remote, it was very dark at night. The ocean was even darker. It was loud, though; the whirlpools caused most of the noise. There would be a whole lot more noise soon enough, but it wouldn't be enough to alert the villagers. They'd just assume the whirlpools were being strange and shrug it off.

Cale peeled his gaze from the sea and over to the Cliff of Winds.

Tunka discovered a hidden cave below the cliff and entered out of curiosity. He discovered something at the end of the cave and barked a laugh. "Didn't expect to find a treat like this here!"

Despite that, it was a fateful encounter.

Setting aside what he'd read in *Birth of a Hero*, Cale told the black dragon, "Let's start."

"All right, human."

Black mana emerged from the dragon's small front paw.

Thrum.

The magic bomb in Cale's hand vibrated, reacting to the mana. It wasn't the same type of magic bomb the secret organization had used in Volumes One and Two of the series.

It's a much better explosive.

Around the second half of Volume Three, the Kingdom of the Whipper's mages—who'd been pushed to the brink—developed new tools to fight the anti-mages. One of those tools

was similar to this magic bomb. Its main component was condensed mana, which reacted to the wielder's mana and split into fragments before exploding. That chain of explosions helped kill even more enemies, although the bomb wasn't as strong as the ones from earlier.

"You're amazing to create such a thing," Cale complimented the black dragon.

"Yes. I'm a great, mighty dragon!" Even more black mana flowed from his short paws, seeping into the bomb.

Thrum. Thrum.

The magic bomb hummed even more. Cale was waiting for the darkest moment possible, when the moon would be concealed behind the clouds.

"Be careful. Don't get hurt." The black dragon rose into the air, casting a shield around Cale.

The magic bomb made a slight *click*.

Cale dropped it, then tugged on the scuba mask. This magic tool would enable him to breathe underwater for five minutes. A few moments later...

Boom! Boom! Booooom!

The bomb went off. Cale summoned the silver shield, then plunged straight down. Night winds streaked past his face. Hit by a series of smaller blasts, the whirlpool weakened and lost its fearsome spin.

Cale opened his shield's wings. *Splaaash!* The shield struck the ocean as he dove underwater. Pulling on swim goggles, he headed to the ocean floor, body descending as quickly as an arrow thanks to the shield.

Boom! Boom!

Even more explosions went off, enfeebling the whirlpool further. Shock waves touched Cale's shield and silver wings, but he reached the ocean floor safely.

Boom.

Cale withstood the next blast thanks to his shield, then began walking across the ocean floor.

The large whirlpool closest to the small central island was caused by a small “spinning top” of wind underneath a large boulder. That top had spun nonstop for centuries. Cale could see the boulder in front of him now. It was so massive, he imagined it would easily crush a person.

Once Tunka realized that the boulder was atop the source of the whirlpool, he grabbed hold of it. Though it was smaller than the great boulder he’d lifted up north, he couldn’t pick it up.

Then I’ll just break it, he thought.

And thus, Tunka destroyed the boulder with his bare hands.

Cale stared at the boulder. *Tunka, you crazy bastard. You destroyed that thing?*

Shaking his head underwater, he headed toward the top underneath the boulder. The huge rock reminded him of the one that birthed the Monkey King, Sun Wukong.

Then—just as it had every time Cale gained an Ancient Power—the former owner’s voice piped up.

“You assholes!”

Whoa. This one’s got quite a dirty mouth.

“Why is it a sin to steal something they sacrificed people to create? Especially since I was just going to return it to the people? You bastards! Why do scumbags like you have such power?!”

The owner of the Sound of the Wind was the same thief said to have stolen something from a god. She hadn’t really stolen a divine item—just something from a temple. She’d met her demise after becoming trapped underneath this large boulder, where the silent thief with the quickest feet had suffocated. Her power to control the wind didn’t rely on mana; the thief herself was the wind. After death, she became a spinning top continuously spitting out whirlpools.

“This stupid water! If only my friend were here. Their light would make it all evaporate!”

As Cale took out the objects he'd brought to claim the top, his expression turned odd. *Light? Could that be…?*

"Know why lightning's so scary? Because all it takes is a single bolt. Just one bolt!"

Cale thought about the last Ancient Power on his list, the Fire of Destruction. He would have to pass through fire to reach it—and he'd need to have a ton of money on him too.

A sudden thought crossed his mind. The Unbreakable Shield, wood. The Energy of the Heart, wind. The Sound of the Wind, water. The Fire of Destruction, fire.

An ominous feeling came over him, and he debated whether he really should take this Ancient Power. However…

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The alarm in his scuba gear informed him that he only had three minutes left. He opted to think more on it later.

I need to hurry and get it out. He took out a hand hoe and dug into the floor, trying to create some clearance between the large boulder and the top. The hoe, reinforced with magic, was so sharp that the ocean floor gave way easily.

No reason to be an idiot like Tunka and destroy the boulder. He just had to dig. Cale smirked.

After digging a bit longer, he finally saw the entire top. He reached out and grabbed it.

Swsssh.

Top spinning in his hand, Cale moved a couple of steps backward. The boulder, which had been perfectly balanced above the top, tilted to one side with a *thud*.

"If stealing it was sinful, why did they claim they weren't sinners when they lied to humans? This is a rotten world! Those in power can do whatever the hell they want!"

The world had always been rotten. Cale ignored the thief's rant, placing the top on the ocean floor. There was only one thing the Sound of the Wind's owner wanted: freedom. The only way to provide that was to destroy the top. He raised his foot and stomped on it.

Ka-crack! It broke into pieces under Cale's foot.

As the top cracked, a sharp screech echoed underwater. Wind gushed forth from the broken top and surrounded Cale.

“You have the power of recovery, I see. Don’t get caught like I did, got it?”

The power of recovery? Is she talking about the Energy of the Heart?

As Cale frowned, the thief said her final words: **“Be free.”**

Swoosh. The milky winds enveloped Cale’s head, moving downward. He expected it to continue to his feet and stop there.

Hmm?

Instead, the wind roamed around his chest.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Cale’s heart hammered in his chest.

Augh!

The throbbing was awfully painful. He patted his chest with his right hand as he choked out a groan; air bubbles spilled from his lips.

What’s going on?! Agh!

He held back another moan, doubling over. At that moment, the wind flashed and whisked down to his feet, drawing on his ankle. In the gap between his wet suit and scuba shoes, Cale saw the image of a whirlpool. It was silver too. Once the image was complete, his heart finally stopped racing.

Did the Energy of the Heart strengthen the Sound of the Wind too?

He was curious but didn’t have time to check into it.

Beep! Beep!

The alarm sounded again. He was running out of time, but he’d done what he came to do. Cale activated the Sound of the Wind, and a gust swirled around his feet. He lightly moved one foot forward.

Swsssh!

His body cut instantly through the water. The large whirlpool by the central island was gone, but the other

whirlpools remained; Cale breezed right past them.

Those other whirlpools will naturally disappear in a week. Cale planned to keep them spinning for about a year, however.

Recognizing their master, the Sound of the Wind, the whirlpools made way for Cale. He zoomed toward the Cliff of Winds. He rapidly approached the cliff face, then kicked off the ground before he got too close. His body shot upward.

Swssssh. The ocean breeze welcomed Cale as he broke the water's surface. He yanked off the scuba mask and threw it aside.

Beep! The alarm went off, indicating that his five minutes were up.

Looking over at the village, Cale saw quite a few lights coming on. "I need to move fast."

Hans probably wouldn't come wake him up; Cale had said not to bother him unless it was a matter of life or death. Still, it would be better to return quickly.

As he swam to the Cliff of Winds, Cale noticed large and small boulders dotting the foot of the cliff. Anyone who fell from the clifftop wound up dead, dashed on the rocks. He looked for the boulder that resembled a lion's head. It was easy to find, since it was the largest of the rocks. Upon spotting the mouth of a cave behind it, Cale smiled.

Found it.

After earning the Sound of the Wind, Tunka had a fateful encounter in that cave. It had been useless for Tunka, but Cale could claim an "ingredient" he'd put to good use in the future. If he combined it with another ingredient that Lark would eventually acquire for him, the Queen of the Jungle would have no choice but to make a deal with Cale.

She'll need to save the jungle.

Cale swam past the boulders and slipped carefully into the cave. The cave mouth was dark, since the moon had already set, but that didn't matter. Once inside, he hopped out of the water and gazed skyward. The black dragon had arrived.

About time he got here.

As if he'd read Cale's mind, the black dragon piped up, *‹You aren't hurt, weak human.›*

There was only one reason the dragon would opt for telepathy, and that was when a stranger was nearby. Cale shivered. He turned his head slowly toward the cave interior.

‹There's a being inside this cave, but it's almost dead, thankfully. It's not one of those corpses you feared.›

Ssk, ssk.

Cale could hear something being dragged inside the cave, and he second-guessed himself. *Should I jump back into the water?* He could also ask the dragon to take him back.

Ssk, ssk, ssk.

The dragging noise grew louder and louder. Before Cale made up his mind to flee, the being emerged. As Cale put one foot back into the water, the being spoke in a quivering voice.

"Please, s-save me."

Cale sighed. The life-form was humanoid, with a salty smell just like the sea. *No way.*

"There's something I have to do. I can't d-die here!"

The humanoid being approached Cale, dragging his horrendously wounded leg. Blood gushed ceaselessly from the wound—clearly the work of a mermaid.

"Pl-please..."

This beautiful man with tousled hair dragging himself toward Cale was a whale.

‹Your face is pale, weak human. Did you catch a cold?›

The black dragon prattled on in Cale's mind, but he couldn't hear it. This whole scene of the bleeding, dying member of the Whale Tribe revealing himself to Cale may as well have been lifted straight from a horror movie.

Chapter 12:
In Thought

S*HOULD I RUN?*

Cale considered it, but the injured whale was looking directly at him. The Whale Tribe man was relying heavily on his hands, clawing deeply into the rocky ground. Although he appeared close to death, his strength was unbelievable—which begged the question:

How could mermaid poison hurt a Whale Tribe member?

An answer quickly surfaced in Cale's mind—the whale was a human-beastfolk hybrid. A "half-blood." That was the only possibility. Cale thought back to the contents of *Birth of a Hero*. The whales were as few in number as the dragons, and there were no half-blood members among the tribe. *Well, there was one who died.* Cale furrowed his brow in contemplation.

The whale coughed. His whole body shook, unable to crawl or move another inch.

At that moment, Cale heard the black dragon's wary voice in his head. *‹Human, are you not going to help?›*

Cale stood up in lieu of an answer. He hated useless pity and thought little of reaching out a helping hand without reason. Yet he approached the half-blood whale and crouched in front of him. "Hey."

The whale quaking on the ground slowly lifted his head. With his otherworldly appearance, he lived up to the tales that whales were so beautiful, they made elves look like squids.

That strikingly gorgeous man stared at Cale. "Please save __"

"Yes, I'll save you," Cale said flatly. He knew it might be more painful for the half-blood whale to live on than to die in the next few moments. The whale had to know that as well. Cale recalled the Whale King's conversation with Lark in the novel.

"You're a pure-blooded wolf."

“So?”

“That sets you apart from my child.”

“Huh? She’s not a pure-blooded whale?”

“Not my daughter. I had a son who was a half-blood, so he…had a lot of difficulties. He was too weak to live in the ocean.”

“Does he live on land?”

“No. That terrible son of mine left this world before me.”

The Whale King, mediator of the ocean, had blue hair and blue eyes. Cale couldn’t tell for sure in the dark, but the whale before him now seemed similar to the novel’s description of the Whale King.

Cale met the whale’s marine-blue eyes. “Sleep a bit. When you wake back up, everything will be fine.”

Those blue eyes blinked a couple of times before slowly closing. Cale watched the unconscious whale for a moment, then approached to inspect his wound. “What do you think?”

Once the whale passed out, the black dragon revealed himself and flitted over, summoning a magic ball of light so they could get a better look.

“What a mess,” the dragon said.

Although whales’ skin looked flawless and beautiful, it was also extremely thick and tough. Sadly, this half-blood didn’t enjoy that trait, which was why the mermaid’s attack had injured and poisoned him. As Cale inspected the whale, the black dragon watched with a peculiar expression.

“You’re a very strange human. Weak, but strange nonetheless.”

“Enough nonsense.” Cale pointed to the whale. “Put him in the water.”

“You said you would save him, human! Were you lying?!” The black dragon was flummoxed, dead serious in his shock. “You’re weak, but you’ve kept all your promises until now! Why are you telling me to put him in the water?! To drown him?!”

Cale heaved a deep sigh, then grabbed the ball of light floating in the air. It wasn't hot to the touch. "I'm doing it to save him," he explained. "Just place him in the water. You remember those corpses earlier, right?"

"What are you trying to make me do?"

"Nothing much. Go and bring me back one of the mermaid corpses' arms."

The black dragon's jaw dropped, but Cale didn't care; he headed deeper into the cave. Astonished as the dragon was, he hadn't refused Cale's order.

"I will do as you ask—*for now*," he declared.

The dragon sure was obedient. Cale walked onward without looking back. He needed to take care of this and head to the village before things got rowdy. The cave wasn't deep, and he reached the back quickly.

Found it.

The fateful thing that Tunka had come across was a small pool of water. Cale took out one of the items he'd brought along: an alarm device that would let him know if someone else came near. Then he scooped a bit of the pool into a small glass bottle.

I just need to take this with me before I leave. It's Fire-Suppressing Water.

Water was always strong against fire, but this water's strength was a bit different. If Cale dunked the item Lark was going to procure for him in it, it would produce something very precious. A treasure that would save the drying jungle.

His business done, Cale returned to the cave entrance. The black dragon had already fetched the arm. He handed it to Cale with a dubious expression, the drenched whale beside him.

"Let's go."

The black dragon sighed before levitating the half-blood whale, mermaid arm, and redheaded lout. They all floated back home.

As soon as Cale returned, he received an overwhelming welcome from Ohn and Hong.

"You came just in time!"

“The butler’s been banging on the door for a while!”

Even without the kittens telling him, Cale could hear Hans’s voice outside the door. He sounded ready to cry. “Lord Cale, I dare not enter! You said you’d kill me if I woke you! I can only continue to knock on the door! Oh, won’t you please open up?”

Cale peeled off the wet suit, chucked it into a corner, and took a device out of the magic box—which he tossed to the black dragon. Then he shrugged on a robe and opened the door.

“Lord Cale! Lady Amir asked me to check that you were all right! Please, wake up and open the—”

“What do you want?”

“Oh! My lord! Were you bathing?”

Cale swept back his wet hair and answered languidly, “I couldn’t sleep, so I took a saltwater bath.”

“Ah! You were in the bathroom. Since you weren’t sleeping, I needn’t fear for my life.”

“You don’t think?”

“My apologies, Lord Cale.” Hans let out a few fake coughs. He gave his charge a once-over and added, “Are you hurt? It’s quite a mess outside right now. There were a few loud explosions earlier. I believe something’s happened at sea.”

Cale peered out the window he’d entered through. The village was now completely lit even though it was the middle of the night. He saw lights heading out to sea. Amir must’ve made the brave decision to send people out despite the dangerous whirlpools, since the development project was right around the corner.

“There was a loud noise and they haven’t determined its cause?”

“I believe they’ll figure it out soon enough. Lady Amir said people are on their way to investigate.”

Cale suspected that Amir would be happy that the whirlpool alongside the central island had disappeared; that alone would increase this shoreline’s value exponentially.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you can leave now.”

Hans bowed respectfully to Cale and trotted off. At the same time, the invisible black dragon revealed himself and the unconscious mixed-blood whale, plus the mermaid arm on top of him. Seeing the arm, Ohn and Hong froze in the corner of the room. The kittens were irrationally afraid of a lot of things.

Cale headed to the bathroom and scooped some seawater from the bath. The dragon watched with curiosity as Cale dunked one end of the arm into the water.

Hissss.

He heard a sizzling noise, but the parched arm quickly returned to normal. The swift change in the limb made Ohn and Hong scurry beneath the bed. The arm expanded some more, then began to dissolve. Cale glanced over at the whale’s leg. The green fluid had since been diluted with seawater.

Cale took out a knife. The unconscious man’s eyelids fluttered, and his body twitched.

“It looks like he’s going to wake up! Put the knife away, human!” the black dragon shouted—but it was too late.

The man opened his eyes, only to see Cale lifting the knife overhead. As they made eye contact, Cale smiled at him, telling him to relax. The whale shook as the blade whooshed down.

Shkt!

Cale’s knife pierced the mermaid arm, digging into the skin. Fluid poured out of the wound. Rehydrating the arm had restored its blood as well.

“See? It’s all good,” Cale told the trembling whale.

Mermaid blood poured out, dripping onto the man’s leg. *Fssssh.* When the green fluid coating his injury came in contact with blood, it evaporated.

Cale handed him the bleeding arm. “Drink the blood before it congeals. That’s the best way.”

Rosalyn had used this treatment in Volume Five to heal Lark, who’d been injured after a fight with a mermaid. The world had yet to discover it. The whale, who seemed to be in his early

twenties, shook harder—as did Ohn, Hong, and the black dragon. Yet when the whale saw his wound closing up, he recovered from his terror enough to drink.

Seeing the despair on the whale's face, Cale spoke up. "What? Weren't you the one who killed this mermaid?"

The man stiffened in shock, and Cale scoffed. The whale's surprise was amusing. He poured the remaining blood onto the whale's leg, then put the mermaid arm back into the water. It dissolved, melting as Cale watched. While he waited for it to rot away, Cale said, "If you're a whale, you'll probably need to return to the ocean by morning to recuperate. Get some sleep and head back on your own."

At that, the man's face went stone-cold. His viciousness was different from Choi Han's. This was someone who'd always been looked down upon, who'd always been reminded that he was inferior to the rest of his tribe. His bitterness stemmed from being a half-blood.

"How did you know I'm a whale?"

"Who else could kill three mermaids?"

"I need to return home—"

Cale cut the whale off with a sweep of his hand; he had a feeling he'd end up having to listen to a pointless story otherwise. "I have no desire to hear you uselessly explain your circumstances." That was precisely why he hadn't asked the whale's name or let Hans see him. "I only saved you because I said I would when you asked me to."

Having said as much, he lay down on the bed. He needed to shower, but he was too tired right now. "I'm going to sleep. Be quiet on your way out."

He closed his eyes. With the dragon here, he didn't need to worry about his safety. Then he remembered the Whale King's last words to Lark in the novel: *"I don't wish to lose any more family."*

In truth, *that* was why Kim Roksu had taken action in the cave. He'd experienced losing all his family members himself. At the same time, he planned to benefit from this encounter.

“If my boy were still alive, I’d pass the throne to my daughter and live in the human world with him. I think that would’ve made him happy.”

“Hmm. I think she’d do well as queen. But wouldn’t she want to live with you as well, Your Majesty? She’s pretty affectionate herself.”

“Indeed. When my son disappeared, she searched the entire ocean.”

“I’m sure she would’ve left no stone unturned. Hey, Your Majesty, what was your son’s name?”

“...Faseton.”

Cale had saved the king’s son. Whether with the current Whale King or the future Whale Queen, he could use that to his advantage, couldn’t he? And most importantly, the Whale Tribe had to win the war against the mermaids.

He fell asleep with a calm mind. When he awoke the next morning, Faseton was already gone.

“He said he’ll come back tonight,” the red kitten Hong reported.

“There’s really no reason for him to...” Cale trailed off, shrugging. *Was this really necessary?*

Soon enough, Amir came to visit with a few others in tow. She wore a dazzling smile, which brightened up her normally composed face. Given that she was still wearing a raincoat, she must’ve come straight from the sea.

“Lord Cale! I’m sorry to come by so early, but I need to share amazing news with you! Can you guess what it is?”

“I have no idea.” Next to the elated Amir, Cale was calm—almost emotionless.

“The whirlpool! That big whirlpool by the central island disappeared. Overnight! There’s not even a trace of it!”

Cale had caused that, but since he couldn’t say as much, he averted his eyes.

Next to Amir stood the veteran fisherman and some knights, as well as Tunka. Just as *Birth of a Hero* had said, Tunka had long brown hair like a lion's mane. The man emanated danger; he seemed like he could and would send an orc flying with a single slap.

Tunka clicked his tongue. "How disappointing," he mumbled. "I wanted to jump into that whirlpool. Should I try a different one?"

He definitely is a crazy bastard.

Amir whirled back to Cale, exuberant. "In return for the Henituse family's investment, Lord Cale, I want to show you the peaceful Uvar sea. Will you visit the central island with me?"

Cale would need to show commitment to this project until someone else from Henituse territory arrived. He smiled gently at Amir and asked, "Is everybody here going over?"

"Yes."

At her quick answer, Cale's lips twitched.

Amir, who saw only Cale's gentle smile, pointed to Tunka. "Right! Lord Cale, this is your first time meeting him, isn't it? This is the man who was nearly sucked in by the whirlpools. Mr. Bob, this is Lord Cale Henituse."

Bob? Cale grimaced.

Tunka plastered a smile onto that scary mug of his. Cale found it more terrifying than if an ogre had grinned at him instead. "Nice to meet you. The name's Bob!"

Bob. Tunka had chosen a fitting alias; the name was as stupid as he was.

"Bob is from a small seaside village in the Kingdom of the Whipper," Amir explained, although Cale didn't want to see Tunka's smiling face. "He went out to fish and somehow wound up shipwrecked."

"Yes. I was just living a simple life fishing near that village. Dunno how I ended up like this! Ha ha ha ha!"

A simple life. Unbelievable.

Not knowing Cale's thoughts, Amir continued, "Last night, he got on a boat and helped us investigate what happened."

Amir's eyes shimmered with gratitude as she looked at Tunka, but Cale noticed that many of her companions were glaring at him. Their gazes showed their true feelings toward this barbarian from the Kingdom of the Whipper. Cale switched his attention from the locals to Tunka, and their eyes met.

The barbarian smiled wider. "I heard you launched a huge shield in the capital to save everyone. I asked this lady to bring me with her because I heard you were tough." His eyes narrowed.

This is getting dangerous. Cale suddenly had an ominous feeling, which led him to respond quickly, "That's why I'm currently recuperating."

"Recuperating...?"

"Yes. That shield isn't a strong power—it's actually quite weak."

"Exactly," Amir chimed in. She gazed at Cale with sympathy and admiration, among other emotions. "Lord Cale overexerted himself to save everyone. He's touring our territory while he recovers."

Tunka's response was different. "Oh, is that right?" He scanned Cale from head to toe, then looked away. He'd seemingly lost all interest in the lout.

Good. That's how Tunka should be.

Self-sacrifice for others? Heroics? Tunka wasn't interested in anything like that. All he cared about—to the point of obsession—was strength. He was the type who ignored his own allies if they were weak, even killing them if necessary. That had earned him the nickname "Tunka the Tyrant."

"Shall we get going?" Amir asked.

Cale nodded.

Beside them, he heard Tunka mumble, "That's strange. I smell somebody strong nearby."

He's seriously insane. Cale looked up at the empty ceiling and heard the invisible black dragon's voice in his head.

‹I do not *smell.›*

Tunka's instincts were even stronger than those of beastfolk. Cale made up his mind to act the weakest he ever had around Tunka today.

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"We're currently trying to figure out why the whirlpool suddenly vanished," Amir said. "My father and Uvar territory's mages will be here soon to assist."

Looking out at the sea from the central island, Cale played along. "Are they? I'm glad. I hope we figure out what happened quickly."

‹You're such a good liar.›

Cale ignored the black dragon's remark, his expression schooled into calm. Things were quite chaotic offshore. All the village's fishermen were out, as well as the new arrivals who'd come to support the construction of the naval base. They poked around, discussing the situation. The remaining whirlpools still going strong nearby made things even louder.

His eyes on the commotion, Cale said, "I hope all those other whirlpools disappear soon."

‹You're lying again, human. Didn't you say you'd keep those whirlpools going for another year?›

As ever, Cale let the dragon's comment go in one ear and out the other.

Amir nodded, looking determined. "Definitely. We have every intention of working out what happened, then stilling the rest of the whirlpools. There's such an opportunity before us, and so many people are helping—we need to strike while the iron's hot."

Her passion made Cale feel a bit guilty. "I'm sure you and House Uvar will accomplish that, Lady Amir."

"Thank you. Your reassurances lift my spirits, Lord Cale." Amir's warm gaze moved to Cale as she stood with a calm smile on her face.

“I’m a bit dizzy from all this sunlight,” Cale replied, his face wooden. “May I go rest a bit in the shade?”

Cale could feel Tunka staring at him from one of the boats. The barbarian kept glancing over every so often, as though he was still searching for the source of that scent of strength. There was no way he’d find the black dragon, though. That was beyond someone who couldn’t sense auras or mana.

“Ah. Of course,” Amir replied. “Please stay well rested—you’re still in recovery. Don’t overdo it.”

“Thank you.”

Cale ambled to the central island’s copse of trees. Amir watched quietly as he made for the shade. This Cale, who conducted himself well even when he was in recovery, was definitely different from the lout of the past. And although he claimed to be injured, he didn’t seem hurt at all—just tired.

“That’s what makes him so amazing,” Amir mused.

Since she dreamed of presiding over Uvar territory in the future, Amir felt that she needed to be more dependable, like Cale. Her eyes flared with renewed resolve as she hurried to help the investigators.

On the other hand, Cale was heading across the island. Nobody was over on the far shore, so it would be a great place to kill time.

‹Aren’t you afraid of the corpses there? You are *a coward.›*

Disregarding the black dragon once more, Cale reached the island’s opposite coast. After taking a look around, however, he froze.

“What the…?”

The black dragon fervently denied any blame. *‹It wasn’t me! I didn’t do it!›*

Cale didn’t have the luxury of listening to him. He rushed toward the area where he’d found the mermaid corpses the other day, then stopped in his tracks. The boulder had shattered into pieces. *Did Faseton do this?*

“How did the mermaid corpses end up like *that*?”

The bodies had been completely pulverized. Cale could only tell the dust was the mermaids' remains because he'd seen them here the other day. Anyone else would've assumed it was debris from the boulder. That immense strength definitely belonged to a whale. An *angry* whale.

The water churned, kicking up a series of splashes.

‹Something's shooting up from the bottom of the sea! It's moving really fast!›

Cale's head snapped up; he flinched and took a step back.

No sooner had he done so than a gigantic mass breached the water—a dark-gray beast with its eyes fixed on Cale. It was a whale. A humpback whale, to be precise. Humpbacks were known as the ocean's guardians, protecting weaker beings. For generations, the Whale Tribe's ruler had been a humpback whale.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Cale's heart pounded. The whale's gaze was both murderous and observant, mixing instinct and rationality. This was the first time Cale had made eye contact with something so mighty that also seemed furious with him. The humpback peered down at Cale, scrutinizing him.

At that moment, the black dragon's angry voice barked in Cale's head. *‹That stupid whale must've lost her wits!›*

At the same time, immense power reverberated through the air. The whale's eyes swiveled toward the source.

‹How dare you look at my weak human like that?!›

The sea grew choppy as the mana in the air fluctuated, but the humpback didn't move a muscle. Instead, the fifteen-meter beast raised its tail and slapped the water. With a great splash, waves cascaded out from the impact.

That convinced Cale that this was a member of the Whale Tribe.

Thump. Thump.

Cale did his best to calm his heartbeat, but the Energy of the Heart had detected danger. Its strength coursed through his

body, and the Unbreakable Shield shot out. Ancient Powers prioritized their owner's life; they were ready to go at any point.

He faced the empty space where the dragon was gathering mana. Before he could speak, someone else piped up.

"I'm not looking to fight you."

The voice was as beautiful as those of sirens in Greek mythology. Cale watched the humpback lift its head completely above the water.

"Wow!"

He had a feeling that whale's head alone could kill him with a light tap. It was enormous and terrifying.

‹Why are you lifting your stupid head? You're telling us you weren't asking for a fight up till now? Puny whale!›

Cale sighed in exasperation. An angry four-year-old could be pretty dangerous. He reached toward the mana that seemed primed to destroy anything and everything in sight. It gave way to his hand. This development appeared to surprise the whale.

Finally, Cale's hand reached something round—the dragon's head. He patted it a few times. "Don't get mad at it. You'll get hurt."

The mana quickly dissipated, and a quiet voice echoed in his mind. *‹I won't get hurt. I'm strong.›*

"I know, I know. Still, you have to be careful." It was hard to calm a four-year-old child.

‹You should be careful, weak human.› The dragon, however, seemed to understand what Cale was saying. His mana vanished completely.

At that point, Cale turned toward the whale, who slowly lowered her large head. Cale flinched at its size but managed to stand still, since the murderousness had disappeared from the whale's gaze.

Once the humpback was face-to-face with Cale, she began, "I have something to ask—"

Just then, a smaller whale appeared on the horizon, rapidly swimming their way. This one seemed weak compared to the fifteen-meter humpback. "You can't crush him to death, Sister!"

The humpback in front of Cale spun around frantically. *Splaaash!* Seawater churned with the whale's movements, drenching Cale.

He had other things on his mind, however. Closing his eyes, he thought, *She must really be* that *humpback whale.*

The tiny whale nearing them was probably Faseton. There was only one being he would call "sister." The reigning Whale King's daughter and future queen of the whales, a humpback who—alongside Choi Han and his companions—was in the vanguard in the battle against the mermaids. Now that she was facing the other way, Cale could make out the X-shaped scar on her back. It was definitely Witira.

The whale's huge mouth pulled into a frown. Cale crept backward, not wanting to get involved in this humpback-sibling reunion.

"You absolutely mustn't kill him!" the smaller whale reiterated.

The black dragon piped back up in Cale's mind, sounding confused. *‹What's that small whale talking about? We aren't fighting.›*

Cale wasn't sure either. He was thankful that everybody on the other side of the island was too focused on the ocean to pick up on all the shouting. If they'd heard it, they would've come flocking to this shore.

The small whale was fast approaching. *‹By the way, just so you know, one more person is coming,›* the black dragon added.

What? One more person? Cale stopped backing away from the whale and spun toward the forest.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha! I smell it! I can *smell* it!"

A wild man whose brown hair resembled a lion's mane broke through the trees. It was Tunka. He had a frenzied look in his eyes.

He rushed out of the copse, bellowing, "I smell someone strong!"

As soon as Cale saw the barbarian, he shrank down, allowing Tunka and the humpback to make direct eye contact.

Then the lout crawled out of the way before he—a small shrimp—could get in the way of the battle between the two big fish.

Tunka held a cudgel that cut through the air with a vicious sound. Cale had no idea where the barbarian had gotten such a thing.

"Are *you* the strong one?" Tunka licked his lips and approached the humpback. In front of the creature, even the nearly two-meter barbarian looked tiny. "Heh heh. This is my first time fighting a whale."

Tunka didn't seem to realize that the humpback was a member of the Whale Tribe. He just wanted to fight it because it seemed strong; strength and fighting were all that filled his head. The humpback looked down at him with disdain.

Cale just squatted nearby, keeping an eye on them.

‹What are you doing?› the black dragon asked, curious.

The redhead had withdrawn to a safe distance before crouching down. Shrimp got hurt when big fish fought, and Cale was weaker than a shrimp. He didn't want to get hurt.

"Can I just beat you to death?!" Tunka's eyes sparkled. He kicked off the ground, his body shooting into the air.

"Wow." Cale scuttled even farther back as he watched in admiration.

Tunka's cudgel swung toward the humpback, and Cale saw a whale sneer for the first time as the corner of the humpback's lips rose. Her fifteen-meter body twisted, and her large tail clapped downward toward Tunka. The barbarian managed to change direction in midair, landing safely.

Boom! The whale's tail destroyed the boulder Tunka had jumped from.

Splaaash! The attack produced a huge wave that drenched Cale anew, along with the rest of the shoreline.

Damn it. He probably looked like a rat caught in the rain. Still, he kept his mouth shut, daunted by both the crushed boulder and the crazed barbarian.

"Mwa ha ha ha! Great! Just great! Come on!"

Tunka jumped up and down, urging the whale to attack again. He dashed toward its tail and swung his cudgel down once more. Instead of avoiding the blow, the whale raised its tail and aimed at Tunka.

Boom! That wasn't a noise that contact between a human and whale should produce. With a crash, Tunka fell back to the ground. The cudgel in his hands had disintegrated into dust.

"I knew I shouldn't use something like that," the barbarian declared. "Fighting's best when you use your fists! Ha ha ha!"

At this rate, everybody will come running, Cale thought as he watched the lunatic continue to attack the whale. People were probably already aware that something was going on. What could Cale do about it? How could he slip away quietly? He didn't care whether these two fought.

It was then that the tiny whale finally reached the island. "Sister! If you keep fighting, you'll hurt that nice man!"

Tunka stopped. "That puny whale can talk...?"

His comment earned him a glare from the humpback. In her beautiful voice, she said, "Did you call my little brother 'puny'?"

Even more shocked, Tunka shouted, "This one can talk too?!"

The whole situation was in shambles.

Tunka's shoulders shuddered in excitement. "Oho! You must be beastfolk! This'll be fun!" The barbarian was no longer laughing aloud, but his grin showed that he was utterly thrilled.

Cale saw the humpback glance in his direction, and her eyes wavered. There he was crouched in his hiding spot, covered in seawater and gravel as he peered up at her. Witira of the Whale Tribe was a guardian of the sea and protector of the weak, and it made her heart ache to look upon him.

Faseton jumped between Witira and Cale in his fully whale body. "Sister! I'm still alive!"

The humpback's face crumpled, and she teared up. "Faseton!"

Faseton looked at Tunka, then jerked his fin out of the water, pointing at Cale. The movement splashed Cale in the face. “This is the man who saved me from dying when the mermaids poisoned me!”

Witira’s eyes widened.

Faseton got as close to the island as possible to check on Cale. “Oh no. You’re drenched! Sorry about all that gravel too. I was planning on visiting you tonight to say thanks.”

Cale brushed the gravel off. “That’s fine. Are you all better now?”

“Yes, sir. I’m almost fully recovered, thanks to you.”

Witira’s jaw dropped. At that moment, Tunka jumped toward the humpback, swinging his fist. “You can’t get distracted fighting against me! Do you wanna die?!”

He couldn’t strike the humpback, however, because Witira disappeared. *Hiss.* A cloud of steam filled the area where she’d been. A woman emerged from within, stepping onto the island. Her heels clicked on the rocky shore. It was Witira in human form.

“Sister!” Faseton called out to her.

Cale was a bit taken aback. *She doesn’t just make elves look like squids!*

Witira was what you’d call *explosively* beautiful—so striking, she made elves look like cockroaches. Cale wondered how someone could be so stunning. If there had been an oceanic beauty contest, the blue-haired, blue-eyed woman in front of him would have come out on top.

‹Dragons are even cooler than that. When a dragon becomes human, I’m sure they’re even more beautiful. Dragons’ human forms are probably the best in the world!›

Brushing him off, Cale stepped backward. Beauty aside, the Whale Tribe was just as strong and violent in human form.

As he started to fret, Witira spoke. “Please don’t run away. I won’t hurt you.”

“My sister keeps her word,” added Faseton, who had transformed and approached Cale as well.

Witira saw that Faseton's pants were ragged around his calves, his scars visible underneath. Fresh anger blazed in her eyes.

Tunka trudged over too. "Stop focusing on someone so useless. Hurry up and fight me. That'll be more fun!" At that moment, Cale and Tunka made eye contact, and Tunka scoffed. "Looks like this punk is going around saving people."

At the term "punk," Cale clicked his tongue. Tunka seemed to have given up his stupid "Bob" act; this was the *real* barbarian. Regardless of whether his opponent was noble or strong, he acted as he pleased. Cale was actually more accustomed to that version of Tunka, since it seemed like the novel character had come to life. Of course, the lout still had no intention of shrugging this off.

He'll only learn his lesson once he's mad about me buying the Magic Tower.

Cale felt confident. He knew what would happen soon—no, what he would personally make happen. "Bob" was indeed a great alias...because soon Tunka would be bobbing up and down the ruins Cale left behind.

Telepathically, the black dragon exclaimed, *‹A rescue is a glorious deed! It's something to be proud of! And trash-talking someone is mean. This guy's as bad as Benion!›*

How had the dragon ended up like this when his kind were only supposed to care about themselves? Wondering what could've shifted his attitude, Cale slid behind Witira. He was a teensy bit afraid that Tunka might kill him simply for being annoying and weak.

"Don't look down on such heroic actions." Witira was fuming; hearing her snap at Tunka, Cale backed away from her again. Noticing his actions, she told Cale gently, "Thank you very much. I'll have to convey my gratitude in the future."

Her gaze was still flickering with rage, however. This woman had served in the vanguard in the battle against the mermaids. She wasn't the type to shrug off even a minor provocation.

“Ah. I like the look in your eyes. Are you finally ready to fight?” Tunka asked mockingly, licking his lips again. Relaxing his arms, he moved his weight onto his front foot. This was the barbarian’s battle stance.

“You think I’d fight someone like you?” Witira’s smile was scornful. While it gave off a soft glow, Cale found even the glow frightening.

Witira opened her right hand. Water jets shot from her palm, and a long water whip appeared in her grasp. She snapped it toward the ocean. *Splaaash!* The whip, which looked to be at least a couple of meters long, cut through the water and conjured fierce ripples on the surface.

She fixed Tunka with an icy glare. “How absurd. This isn’t a battle.” She wagged her finger at him. “This is a lesson.”

“You’re going to teach *me*? Ha ha ha!” Tunka roared with laughter that seemed strong enough to cause an earthquake, then gave Witira an emotionless look. “I guess I’ll need to rip that mouth of yours off.”

He charged at the whale. As he approached, Witira waved her left hand at Cale. A water shield surrounded him and Faseton, protecting them. The whip in her right hand shot viciously toward Tunka. *Swish!*

Tunka’s fist made contact with the whip. *Boom!*

Witira smiled. “Good. It seems I’ll enjoy teaching you this lesson.”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh!”

The whale cracked her whip again. It coiled around Tunka’s body like a snake and hoisted him into the air. Tunka grinned as he grabbed the water whip.

“Mwa ha ha! A battle of strength is my specialty!”

Tunka’s hands snapped the snakelike whip, prompting Witira to raise an eyebrow. Still, the barbarian was no match for the future Whale Queen. Witira flicked her right hand, and the whip lashed out at Tunka. The impact sent him flying toward the woods.

“What’s going on?!”

Amir Uvar, the investigation squad, and the knights appeared outside the copse of trees. As Tunka hurtled toward them, Witira's eyes went wide. She hastily shot a water jet from her left hand, but the barbarian was moving too fast.

Deeming it impossible to dodge Tunka in time, Amir ordered the knights, "Your shields, everyone!" Her knights deployed their shields in no time.

Seeing them do so, Tunka yelled, "You'd better block me good! My body's a powerhouse—you might get hurt! Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

It *did* seem likely that this collision could injure the knights, since they wore only leather armor. Faseton watched all this in bewilderment, then heard a sigh behind him.

"How annoying." The voice sounded simultaneously irritable and calm.

As Faseton turned toward the speaker, he gaped at the sight before him.

Boom! Tunka struck the shields. He didn't crash into anyone, though. Nobody got hurt. Twisting around, the barbarian saw a holy-looking silver shield touching his back and wings gently surrounding him. The shield then faded away.

"What the…?" The water jet Witira had intended to create a shield with dissipated, and she spun around in shock.

The disappearing silver shield had been linked to the man hanging his head as he heaved another sigh. Brushing back his drenched hair, Cale looked mostly at ease—aside from his vexed frown. The shrimp hadn't gotten hurt during that fight between big fish, but it had needed to interfere and use its powers.

Feeling everyone's eyes on him, Cale slowly got up. While he was all in favor of Witira sending Tunka flying, he'd hurriedly released his shield to keep the Uvar knights safe. And since Cale created the shield, its inner side faced him rather than the knights. The knights hadn't been injured, thankfully; still, he'd unintentionally saved Tunka in the process.

Though he'd risen to his feet, his legs were numb from crouching too long.

"Oh."

The lack of sensation caused him to stagger, and his face fell.

Flustered, Amir rushed over. “Lord Cale!”

Faseton, who was equally startled, grabbed Cale’s arm. Cale pushed him away, standing tall on his own.

By the time Amir reached Cale, she looked distraught. “You didn’t need to expend your power, Lord Cale! Why would you do such a thing?”

Why? It wasn’t like Cale had *wanted* to do it.

But if the fight had injured Amir’s investigation squad, that would’ve complicated things. Thanks to Cale, Tunka and Witira’s tiff was only a small issue. If Tunka had hurt the Uvar knights, the situation would’ve escalated quickly. Tunka might’ve been confined to Rowoon for a while, but Cale couldn’t let that happen. The barbarian had to return to the Kingdom of the Whipper at the right time.

Otherwise, I’ll miss out.

Amir inspected Cale, concerned. “Also, why are you soaking wet? Are you all right? You’re still in recovery—what will you do if you catch a cold?! My goodness, Lord Cale!”

Her words made Faseton and Witira flinch—particularly the latter, who bit her lip and inspected Cale as well. She recalled how her tail had drenched him and the expression on his face as he looked up, crouching.

At that point, Cale addressed the three. His words emerged sluggishly, and he seemed very tired. “Isn’t it fine, since nobody got hurt?” The flatness of his voice betrayed his exasperation. Of course he was; his waterlogged clothes were anything but comfortable. He wanted to get away from these people and rest as soon as possible.

Faseton lowered his head as Witira looked around. Seeing the shoreline she’d destroyed, she worried at her lip.

After a moment’s hesitation, Amir said, “Lord Cale, it’s difficult to understand you. Truly.”

Recognizing that they were on the brink of a situation similar to what happened in the plaza, Cale just shut up.

Everything annoyed him.

Amir fixed the whale siblings with a glare. “Who are you?”

This territory was part of Rowoon, but it belonged to Amir’s family. She had no intention of letting such an incident pass without consequences in Uvar territory.

“And just who are *you*, Bob?” Amir looked sharply at Tunka, who stood off to the side at a bit of a loss.

No one answered her. Tunka seemed distracted, whereas Faseton was considering what to say. As for Witira, after absorbing what she had done, she could only hang her head.

The sole response came in the form of a loud noise.

“Achoo!”

Cale’s itchy nose had brought on a sneeze. He pushed back the red locks that had fallen in his face and looked up, uncaring as to who or what surrounded him at this point.

With little regard to their gazes, he spoke in his usual deadpan voice. “Let’s go back for now.”

Nobody could refuse.

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After explaining the situation, Cale emerged from Amir’s estate. He glanced back at the three people behind him: Witira, Faseton, and Tunka. Then he locked eyes with Amir, who was coming out behind them.

She scrutinized Cale, then told Tunka, “You must leave by tomorrow. You should be thankful that all you’re getting is banishment from Uvar territory.”

Amir had demanded that the barbarian leave their holdings once it became blatantly obvious that he wasn’t a fisherman and that he’d instigated the battle with Witira.

“If you two cause more issues here, you’ll be slapped with similar punishments.”

The whale siblings acquiesced, bowing to Amir. Cale noted that they were hiding their connection to the Whale King, but he

didn’t let his gaze linger.

“I fear you’ll truly catch a cold, Lord Cale. Please head inside.”

“I will.”

Amir’s eyes narrowed as she faced Tunka, who was still in a daze. “You repaid our generosity with *this* debacle?”

“That’s why you’re banishing him,” Cale coaxed her. He’d told Amir to mete out that punishment to Tunka.

Faseton had told Amir that Cale saved his life and that the count’s son wasn’t at fault. He had merely gotten dragged into the mess. “Lord Cale, you—”

“It was nothing, Lady Amir.” Cale had a kind expression.

‹Didn’t you ask me if I could defeat Tunka?›

As usual, Cale ignored the black dragon.

Reassuring Amir again and again he was fine, Cale looked at Tunka. The barbarian had been staring at Cale too. He’d had a blank expression—no, more a complicated expression—for a while now.

Ancient Powers were the only supernatural abilities that Whipper’s anti-mages—who focused on physical strength—admired. Through Ancient Powers, pure human might was passed down, so the anti-mages considered it a blessing to obtain one.

Cale kept his face blank, reflecting on Tunka’s role in the story. The wild barbarian ended up becoming a hero, but he’d also shown signs of self-destructiveness in Volume Five.

The whales approached Cale.

“Is it truly all right for us to go with you?” Witira asked cautiously.

“It’s not like you have somewhere to go. I can give you a place to stay for a night.”

Instructing the whale siblings to follow him, Cale boarded his carriage. He closed the door and thought, *At least Tunka will be going back to the Kingdom of the Whipper.*

Cale's—no, Kim Roksu's—style was to avoid people for two reasons: Either he couldn't communicate with them or getting involved with them would make things complicated for him.

Should I contact the crown prince?

How would Albert react if Cale suggested retrieving the windfall left after the Kingdom of the Whipper's civil war? He could anticipate the crown prince's response, given how similar they were. Albert would be very happy. For his part, Cale was dreaming of bringing that windfall back and living a nice, relaxing life.

When he returned to the Uvar residence, he ran into quite a crowd: Hans, Vicross, the vice-captain, the ten wolf children, Ohn, and Hong.

Hans's demeanor was initially normal as he jogged over. The moment he saw the whale siblings, however, he gaped in surprise. He quickly regained his composure, asking Cale, "Are you all right? I heard what happened."

"Yes, I'm all right. Oh, and show these two to a room."

Cale nudged the whale siblings toward Hans, then turned to Vicross. The chef was dressed impeccably as usual, and he grimaced when he saw Cale. Observing the mess left behind by the gravel and seawater, Vicross ordered Maes, "Heat some water up."

"Yes, sir," Maes said obediently, then walked up to Cale. "Lord Cale, I heard you got dragged into their battle and almost got hurt!"

Cale surveyed Maes and the other wolf children watching him. "Not at all," he replied. "There was no chance that I'd get hurt."

"I see."

The perky, innocent wolf children seemed a bit gloomy, unlike their usual selves, but Cale brushed that aside. The wolves hurried away to heat bathwater with almost martial diligence. Cale looked back at Vicross, and their eyes met.

"Wash up first, my lord."

Cale could tell his filthy appearance revolted the chef, so he just nodded. He made to head to the bath, but a voice called out, “Lord Cale.”

It was Faseton and Witira.

“What is it?”

Faseton was the one who’d called out, but Witira spoke first. “May we visit you after you rest a bit?”

Since these two were the Whale King’s children, they essentially held the same rank as Rowoon’s royalty. They were hiding their kinship with the Whale King, but there was frankly no reason to. It wasn’t like the humans would know the Whale Tribe was a monarchy. Few people knew the tribe existed.

“Come tomorrow,” Cale answered curtly, turning back around.

He heard the black dragon’s voice in his head; the creature must’ve been holding in his thoughts for a while. *‹You sneezed. Will you be able to move tonight? Shouldn’t you rest? Why’re you so weak that I have to worry this much? It’s so frustrating, human!›*

Cale was the frustrated one, but he wanted to take advantage of the fact that people believed he was feeble. He barred anyone from visiting him that night so he could rest.

Later on, Cale told the black dragon, “Let’s go.”

‹Fine.›

Ohn and Hong saw them off as they headed to Uvar territory’s islands. Today, Cale needed to extend the whirlpools’ life spans another year.

‹I don’t know why you’re doing this before you’re well. My clever dragon brain can’t make sense of it.›

“It has to be done today,” Cale languidly answered the grumbling four-year-old.

The Uvars’ mages would arrive tomorrow, making it more difficult for him to act. He had to take care of the pool of Fire-Suppressing Water and the whirlpools before then.

Seeing that there were still lights on the central island, Cale landed on an island farther away. Beside it was the next-strongest whirlpool to the one that had already dissipated. Now

that he had a better look at the scene before him, he heaved a great sigh.

There was nobody *on* the island where he and the dragon had landed. However, someone *was* in the whirlpool next to the island. That whirlpool was so turbulent, it was impossible to see the person swimming from the air.

‹Why is that punk swimming?› the dragon asked in disbelief. *‹Wait, why's that punk even* here*?! I don't understand!›*

"He must really be a lunatic," Cale mused.

Tonight was the night of a new moon, and it was quite dark. Considering Tunka had jumped into the whirlpool on such a night, Cale wondered what went on in the barbarian's mind.

At that moment, Tunka leaped out of the whirlpool and rushed to the island. "I knew it! I knew it!" His eyes were locked on Cale as he drew near. "I knew you weren't just some visitor. I *knew* I smelled someone strong nearby! How'd you fly across the sky? Are you a mage?"

As Tunka said "mage," his eyes flashed. If Cale confirmed that he could use magic, Tunka planned to fight him—kill him, should he prove weak. The barbarian felt that mages were a poison to the world.

He continued to stride toward Cale. "Are you ignoring me because you're a high-and-mighty mage? Hmm?"

Cale sized him up and sighed again. "I'm thinking." Specifically, he was considering how to deal with this fool. *Do I put him in his place or put him to use?* As Cale weighed that decision, he observed Tunka, who looked ready to throttle him.

"What thoughts have led you to ignore me?!"

The moment Tunka asked that, Cale reached a conclusion: He'd do *both*. He acted on that choice immediately. "You're a part of the anti-mage faction, aren't you?"

Boom!

"Ugh!"

Cale's attack caught Tunka off guard, blasting him into the water. A whirlpool gobbled him up.

"What's going on?!"

Despite Tunka's high magic resistance, he found it difficult to withstand the endlessly swirling wind and seawater—they sucked him down like quicksand.

Cale created whirlpools with both hands as he approached Tunka. His steps through the water made the lightest of splashes. The redhead stared down at Tunka, who'd been yanked into the sea. No matter how big someone was, you always had a chance to look down on them.

"Mages can't use Ancient Powers."

Tunka felt the gusts around him ebb away as he looked up at Cale.

"A warrior like you understands what I mean, right, Bob?"

The moment Tunka heard "warrior," his expression changed.

Tunka had heard about Ancient Powers—abilities that stemmed from humans' innate strength—but this was his first time seeing one in action. He remained silent for a while before finally asking, "Then you aren't a mage?"

"No."

At Cale's blunt reply, Tunka posed another question. "How do you know about the anti-mage faction, then?"

The more Tunka thought about the noble in front of him, the stranger he seemed. *Yeah. He's weird.*

The man didn't care that Tunka had ditched the usual formalities. He'd worked hard to save others while still recovering from an injury. He had a strong person's scent, although he wasn't strong. He revealed unique powers every time Tunka saw him. *And* he'd tried to protect the barbarian. This was Tunka's first time meeting a man like him.

In lieu of an answer, Cale asked a question of his own that rattled Tunka once more: "Are you thinking about destroying the Magic Tower?"

"What? What'd you say?"

Tunka gaped at Cale in shock, incredulous. Destroying the Magic Tower had been one of the anti-mages' goals from the beginning.

“If you’re planning to,” Cale continued, “please don’t demolish it completely.”

“What’re you talking about, idiot?!”

“Oh, but please do kick all the mages out.”

That request only solidified Tunka’s impression of him.

Cale smirked. The anti-mages who won the civil war would lead the Kingdom of the Whipper to progress before it quickly broke down. Their natural instincts took down the rational system of magic, but beings without rationality were no better than animals. Cale planned to take control of the benefits those “animals” would miss out on.

“I plan to purchase that Magic Tower,” he told Tunka. “What do you think?”

Tunka flashed a grin of his own as he peered up at Cale. He’d made his mind up about the other man. “You’re a crazy bastard.”

Cale didn’t bother denying it. Instead, he pointed at Tunka. “Aren’t you and your friends crazy too, trying to overturn everything?”

Tunka burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha ha!” His cackling was so loud, it echoed around the islands. After a while, the barbarian finally stopped laughing and shook his head at Cale. “No. Not at all.” His eyes narrowed into a chilly glare. “We aren’t crazy.”

Cale knew Tunka would respond like that. The barbarian was certain that anti-mages should hold the reins in the Kingdom of the Whipper in the future, and he was going to prove that.

“Of course not. Neither am I.”

When Cale echoed Tunka’s claim, the barbarian observed him for a bit. “Well, come buy the Magic Tower, then.” What Tunka *didn’t* say was that he couldn’t destroy the Magic Tower, nor that he had no plans to destroy it.

“That was always the plan.” Cale didn’t imagine Tunka’s subordinates would object to his solo decision to have Cale come purchase the Magic Tower.

The Kingdom of the Whipper was the Western Continent's main source of magic devices. It wouldn't be wrong to say that mages and magic devices produced most of the kingdom's wealth. Once the anti-mage faction won the civil war, money would be their biggest issue. On top of that, they'd want to get rid of each and every trace of magic in the kingdom. Cale was waiting for that moment.

The crown prince will like the purchase for his own reasons, though.

Tunka and his allies would assume the Magic Tower contained nothing of value, but it would actually hold a treasure the anti-mages were dying to obtain.

"How'd you know I'm part of the anti-mage faction, though?"

Cale let out another long sigh, which gave Tunka pause. Cale didn't miss that opportunity to answer. "You're from the Kingdom of the Whipper, which is on the brink of civil war. And it looked like you'd kill me if I said I was a mage. Who *wouldn't* think of the anti-mages?"

"I guess..."

The redhead just turned away, marveling that Tunka could be so stupid in life yet so sharp in battle. Tunka seemed even more interested now; he moved closer to Cale.

"Why're you coming over here?"

The question didn't stop Tunka. "Seems like you're about to do something fun. I want to watch." He really did have ridiculously good instincts.

Cale waved him off. "Just go over and play in the whirlpool. I'm busy."

"Are you really a noble?"

Cale continued to amaze Tunka. The barbarian thought Amir was quite open-minded for an aristocrat, but that was nothing compared to the punk in front of him now. Speaking so frankly to a noble would normally have led to major trouble, but Tunka couldn't help it.

“I am indeed, just like you’re a warrior,” Cale responded curtly. He looked around; there was a lot that he needed to do today.

At the same time, Tunka’s voice came from behind him. “Interesting.”

Cale just frowned and pretended to not hear it. He released his silver shield. The silver wings appeared alongside it and fluttered gently in the air.

Just then, the black dragon piped up, *‹I’m very observant.›*

The dragon used his magic right on cue, and Cale floated upward. He opted to take care of the other whirlpools first.

“Bob,” Cale called out, making sure to use the alias everyone knew him by.

“What?”

“You know all this is secret, right?”

“Of course. I prefer keeping fun things to myself.” Tunka smirked. He genuinely struck Cale as crazy, and in the dark of the moonless night, his physique, his hair, and his smile looked even more intimidating.

Drifting higher into the air, Cale said, “You need to return home quickly, right? I’ll find you a ship and sailor.”

“Nice. Thanks!”

Cale waved to the still-baffled Tunka and rose into the clouds. “Win. You can do it,” he murmured. The anti-mages had to win for Cale to benefit from the civil war.

As he turned toward another island with a whirlpool, he heard Tunka’s laughter. It was louder than ever.

Did that bastard always laugh so much? Cale wondered, heading to the next island.

Tunka watched Cale fly away, then decided that the whirlpools were no longer fun and returned to his quarters. Cale, however, had no way to know what Tunka was doing.

Instead, he spoke to the black dragon. “Know when I get most frustrated?”

The dragon studied the relaxed smile on Cale's face. *‹When?›*

"When I throw something away because I think it's trash, but it ends up being worth its weight in gold. Especially if I really need that gold."

The corner of the dragon's lips twitched. *‹Good to know.›*

"There's more."

‹More?›

"Yes," Cale continued in an indolent voice. "It's even worse if I need to pay more than that thing's worth to buy it back."

‹That would be really annoying.›

Cale responded with a villainous smile. Then he got back to what he needed to do, landing on the next island.

"No one's here," the black dragon confirmed.

Once he did, Cale put both palms on the ground. *Thump. Thump.* His heart hammered in his chest.

The Energy of the Heart really did strengthen the Sound of the Wind.

Cale felt the gale-force winds rush up from his feet to his palms in a split second.

Swssssh.

Whirlwinds roared from both Cale's palms. He combined the two winds into one.

Hsssshhh...

They clashed with a sizzling noise, generating heat. Since they stemmed from the same master, they eventually intermingled, becoming a much larger, spherical whirlwind. Cale sent that orb into the air, then slammed the Unbreakable Shield down on it.

Boom!

The orb shot toward one of the whirlpools and underwater, joining the spinning top at the whirlpool's base.

Swssssh.

Cale looked away, floating back upward with the black dragon's magic. The top would last at least six months now. If it disappeared in less than a year, he would feel it; he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Let's go to the next island."

The black dragon flapped his wings, flying faster. Cale kept hurling wind orbs into whirlpools, then went to gather the rest of the cave pool's water.

***

Early the next morning, Cale was at the port.

"Bob."

He introduced Tunka to a ship and a sailor, as promised. Tunka stared at them, then told Cale, "Come in two months. The world will be different."

Cale felt that he absolutely mustn't go to the Kingdom of the Whipper before then. Seeing the excitement in Tunka's eyes, he knew the barbarian was going to run wild.

"Hurry back home." He moved slowly away from Tunka, looking toward the crew to urge them to leave. Tunka watched Cale and hesitated, then finally asked, "*Are* you weak?"

"Yes."

Tunka seemed extremely confused by Cale's sharp, clear answer. Nevertheless, he stepped aboard the ship. "Remember, two months from now. Make sure to come."

"Yeah, yeah." Cale waved casually at Tunka and turned away from the ship.

Then the barbarian shouted from behind Cale, "My name's Tunka! Don't forget it!"

Cale whirled back around. The midsize ship was leaving port, sun shining down on it, while Tunka waved from the deck. It felt like an anime protagonist's departure scene. Wishing he really hadn't seen that, Cale strode off without a second thought.

Tunka kept shouting for Cale not to forget his name, but the redhead made a point of not looking back. Still, he felt content just thinking about what would happen in two months. He'd earn enough money for a lifetime, and a mighty castle as well.

Cale returned to the residence to greet the others. He stroked the kittens, who'd had been hiding inside since they arrived, and spoke to his visitors. "You didn't need to come to see me."

"I needed to come thank you, as well as apologize for scaring you."

Ohn's and Hong's jaws dropped as they gaped at Witira. The kittens hadn't even reacted much when they saw Faseton—who sat at her side—but they had a completely different response to her.

Witira eyed Cale and asked cautiously, "Are you feeling all right, Lord Cale?"

"Eh, same as usual." Cale was healthier than average, thanks to the Energy of the Heart. It allowed him to feel perfectly fine even after sleeping only one or two hours.

He then told Witira—who'd suddenly stopped talking—and Faseton, "That's enough thanks. Thanking me any more wouldn't feel genuine. Same goes for your apology."

"Of course. Thank you very much."

Cale stared at Witira, who was being unusually deferent. The Whale King's bloodline was different from that of any other beast tribe's leader, because the Whale King ruled half of the ocean. That made him nothing less than the monarch of a kingdom. In spite of all that, Witira addressed Cale formally and respectfully. She hadn't done so with Choi Han in the novel.

Why is she hiding her identity even though she revealed that she belongs to the Whale Tribe? Cale thought, scrutinizing her. He didn't voice this question aloud, though. After all, he was trying to conceal how much he knew about the Whale Tribe.

"You just thanked me again. I said no more." Cale then addressed both siblings, who looked straight out of a piece of art. "I'm glad you two could meet back up. You can go now."

He'd sent Tunka back already, and he wanted to meet the head of Uvar territory before returning to the Henituse estate. Of course, he had stuff to complete back home, but he could at least rest until he traveled up to the Kingdom of the Whipper.

Yet Witira cut in, "Excuse me, Lord Cale."

Her voice—as with all members of the Whale Tribe—was as beautiful as that of the legendary siren, a dangerous being whose song lured people to jump into the sea. Thinking about that myth gave Cale chills. He slowly turned to look at Witira, getting a bad feeling about it.

"We have a very old enemy," Witira went on. "The mermaids. Since you healed Faseton, I'm sure you already know that."

He did. In fact, he knew very well.

"Faseton figured out how they suddenly got stronger."

Cale frowned. *What the hell is she talking about?*

Faseton spoke up. "The mermaids were chasing me because I found the source of their sudden strength."

In *Birth of a Hero*, the half-blood whale Faseton was killed while fleeing from mermaids. There was a reason they'd chased him: He had intelligence that would be pivotal in the war between the mermaids and the whales.

"I also hear you're from the Henituse family," Witira said.

"And...?"

The whale siblings didn't respond right away. They exchanged glances; the action made Cale even more dubious.

Eventually, Witira faced Cale head-on and declared, "I wish to go—no, I *must* go—to the Dark Forest."

Cale had never expected to hear that. Before he could think better of it, he blurted out, "In my territory?"

The Dark Forest, where Choi Han had lived for decades, was one of the Western Continent's five most dangerous and mysterious locations—the Five Wonders. The Henituse family had guarded the border between the forest and the rest of the kingdom for a very long time.

“I beg of you, please let us accompany you to your homeland. We’ve even prepared exorbitant compensation.”

The whales regarded him earnestly. Ohn and Hong batted Cale’s knee with their front paws—their way of asking Cale to bring the whales along.

There was a knock at the door, and the wolf child Maes entered. “Here’s your tea and snack, Lord Cale.”

Two more wolf children came in with a tray and teapot. Vicross stood outside the door, supervising them.

‹I’m much more handsome,› Cale heard the black dragon mumble.

He closed his eyes, feeling like he was in the middle of a chaotic whirlpool.

“Um, Lord Cale?” Witira ventured.

Cale lifted his hand; she fell silent.

Once the wolf children left and the room became quiet again, Cale reopened his eyes. He looked cool and collected as he sat there with his attractively tousled red hair. Despite his languid demeanor, however, Cale’s dark-brown irises were unfathomable. Gazing into his eyes, Witira and Faseton heard his calm voice.

“First, explain everything to me.”

“We’ve had many battles, large and small, with the mermaids over the years,” Faseton began. “We control the north, and they control the south.”

Cale leaned back on the couch, and Faseton shot him a questioning glance. The redhead motioned with his chin for Faseton to continue his story. Ohn and Hong peeked at Cale’s face, then slowly moved away from his knee toward the corner of the room, next to the black dragon.

“We’re fighting to keep the mermaids from creating a kingdom that includes the entire ocean. However, something changed six months ago.” Faseton’s expression darkened. “The mermaids began to act strange.”

Strange? Cale recalled the sections on mermaids in *Birth of a Hero*.

“They crossed the accepted border between our tribes and began to provoke us.”

This part Cale was familiar with. The mermaids were harassing the whales to seize control of the ocean. Hearing information he already knew was a relief.

“I figured out the reason behind that,” Faseton continued.

It’s because they want to establish their kingdom.

In Volumes Four and Five of *Birth of a Hero*, the Whale Tribe knew of the mermaids’ plan, which was why Choi Han helped them in their fight.

“They’re trying to take control of a sea route that connects the Eastern and Western Continents.”

“What?” Cale sat up straight and stared at Faseton. “Isn’t that sea route for *humans*?”

A couple of routes connected the two continents. Humans had mapped them out, but they were lengthy and dangerous, which prevented an “official” route from being established.

Moreover, there was a mutual understanding between sea beings and land dwellers. Underwater beings would steer clear of sea routes, and in exchange, land dwellers wouldn’t meddle in aquatic affairs. Choi Han had thus run into trouble when he got directly involved in the whale-mermaid war.

Are the mermaids breaking that agreement?

Witira spoke up next. “At first, we thought the mermaids’ new king was spearheading their charge to create a kingdom. But Faseton brought back different information.”

Cale sighed and took a sip of his now-lukewarm tea. *I learned something I shouldn’t have again.*

The problem was, this was bigger than anything else he’d learned thus far. It was even more impactful than the revelation about Crown Prince Albert.

“And we’ve made one more strange discovery.”

“Hold on,” Cale interjected. “Just tell me why the Dark Forest is relevant.”

He felt like she'd involve him in something huge if she said anything else—and he was already pretty uncomfortable. Witira smiled. Why did the beautiful whale's smile look so terrifying to Cale?

"Yes, we were just getting to that!" Witira answered brightly while Cale's expression darkened. "As we mentioned, the mermaids got stronger a month or two ago. We figured out that a specific ingredient allowed for that."

Cale closed his eyes, then gradually opened them. "That ingredient's in the Dark Forest?"

"Yes! You're a quick one!"

The lout was flabbergasted. What the hell was going on? How could something from dry land—the Dark Forest—make sea beings stronger? More importantly, how had mermaids *reached* the Dark Forest? Cale was skeptical about it all.

Faseton's eyes sparkled as he continued, "I heard them speak of a swamp there. That's why they chased me. We need to go to that swamp and figure out what the ingredient is!"

Cale didn't need to hear anything else. He thought about the Dark Forest; Harris, the town from which Choi Han hailed; and the ten wolf children, who were probably right outside the door. He peered into the corner of the room, where Ohn and Hong were. There was an odd gap between them—probably the invisible dragon.

‹What are you looking at, human?›

Cale had been thinking about building him a villa.

‹Are you looking at me because you think I'm stupendous? Fine, you have my permission to keep looking.›

"That's too complicated," Cale declared.

The whale siblings' eyes boggled. "Pardon?"

Cale didn't meet their gazes. He started to think. *How can I benefit from this?* To determine the advantages, he needed to understand a few things. "Humans can't interfere in underwater affairs."

"We're aware," Witira responded immediately. "But we plan to ensure this won't disadvantage you in any way. We'll claim we

did everything in secret without your permission. Furthermore, the mermaids broke that agreement first, since they would've needed help from individuals on land to reach the Dark Forest."

"It'd still be risky for me. You know that, right?"

"Yes."

Then came the second thing Cale needed to know. "So, what's in it for me?" He'd reminded them of the danger first, then asked about his compensation.

Witira grinned. Cale knew what would come out of her mouth: the same thing the Whale King offered Choi Han in the books. "A sea route."

Cale's lips quirked up.

"The mermaids have prioritized a specific sea route during this conflict," Witira continued. "One that humans haven't yet found. It's the safest route possible."

He already knew of that route, but he still asked, "Where is it?"

Unaware of Cale's knowledge, Witira answered confidently, "Our ocean." The Western Continent's northern sea. "It's in the Whale Tribe's territory."

The lout smirked. "Isn't whale territory the most dangerous? That's where the ocean's strongest life-forms live."

"It'd be a safe place for you at that point, though. We'd give you the right to use that route."

Though she'd declared it so proudly, Cale rained on her parade. "I don't need it."

"Excuse me...?"

That reward would be superfluous to Cale. It wasn't like the whales would give him the route entirely—just the *right* to use it. Cale didn't need that sea route to live peacefully.

"Let me add one more condition," he said.

While not of immense benefit to Cale himself, the sea route would make his family wealthier and stronger. It would require Bassen to work even harder as the head of the territory, of course.

Even so, Cale posed his request to the curious whale princess. “When I need it, lend me your power.”

“You want to borrow our power?”

“That’s right. Twice.”

Nothing mattered to Cale beyond keeping the northeastern territory safe when the northern knights headed south to the continent’s warm, bountiful regions. Why else would he have involved himself with the naval base and Uvar territory’s whirlpools? The books’ storyline had already gotten so twisted, he had to prepare for unknown variables.

“We can’t interfere with issues on land.”

Cale took in Witira’s apologetic expression, then said casually, “You want me to go out on a limb, but you won’t do the same?”

“We’re a peaceful tribe.”

“I don’t think you can say that when you’ve been fighting the mermaids for so long.”

Witira fell silent. The stronger mermaids rattled the Whale Tribe, which had never encountered such a threat before. They probably wanted to maintain peace by eradicating that danger completely.

“The Dark Forest is one of the Five Wonders—the most dangerous, mysterious places in the world. It isn’t somewhere you can traipse through just because you’re strong. Especially not for someone who doesn’t know much about land.” Cale was planning to head to Harris anyway. “I’ll help you.”

Choi Han had lived in the Dark Forest for many years. Yet even he didn’t know everything about the Dark Forest—just bits and pieces. The human who knew the most about the Dark Forest after Choi Han was, of course, Cale.

“I think I know which swamp it is,” Witira said.

Cale smiled and said softly, “The Whale Tribe wants to live peacefully as the strongest beings in the ocean, don’t they?”

Witira’s approach was starting to change. She was slowly shifting from making a request to negotiating a deal. “That’s right, Lord Cale.”

The whales were known as protectors of peace, but that was only possible because they were strong. In the novels, the Whale Tribe did anything and everything to fight the mermaids who'd become a threat.

"As the Whale King's heir, I, Witira, accept your conditions."

Having revealed her identity, Witira noted that Cale was unaffected. He merely seemed happy to sign off on their agreement right then and there.

"You're the heir? Great. We can finalize our deal without delay." Cale reached a hand out as he asked, "Should I address you as crown princess, then?"

"No need to do that, Lord Cale. I've got to hide my identity."

"So only I should know about it?"

"Right."

Cale shook hands with Witira, which was enough to confirm their deal.

Once the whale siblings left, he plopped down on the couch and looked at the ceiling. "Hey, you."

The black dragon appeared. "Don't call me 'you.'"

"What should I call you, then?"

Cale watched the dragon land on the other side of the couch and scrunch up his nose. "You figure it out, human."

"If you want me to address you politely, shouldn't you start calling me Cale instead of 'human'?"

The dragon snorted and did not answer. Cale watched him with mild interest, then glossed over his prior question to ask another. "Want your own house?"

He had been mulling this over for a while. If he was going to live alongside this black dragon, wouldn't it be great to give the "greatest being in the world" a suitable house?

His wings flapped. "A house?"

Dragons normally had a strong desire for independence; this one seemed a bit different, but that desire should still have been there. Cale nodded, but things took an unexpected turn.

“Are you kicking me out?” The dragon’s wings shuddered, and mana pulsed frantically around him. He seemed furious.

Cale immediately responded, “Mm…it’d actually be more of a villa.”

“A villa?”

“Yes. Someplace you, me, Ohn, Hong, and the wolves can have fun visiting.” Some of that “fun” would involve culling the Dark Forest’s monsters, of course.

The dragon’s wings stopped. He lay down comfortably on the couch, replying, “I’ll pick the villa’s location.” He blinked sluggishly, perhaps a bit sleepy, then looked sharply at Cale. “In return, you pick my name for me. You have one month to figure it out.”

Not caring about Cale’s flabbergasted look, the dragon closed his eyes to nap with a satisfied smile on his face. Hearing some giggles, Cale turned his head and saw Ohn and Hong freeze mid-snicker. Acting as though nothing had happened, the kittens piped up one after the other.

“I like fish but not the sea.”

“When are we going home?”

“Soon enough,” Cale told them.

***

Two days later, Amir and the others came to see Cale off. He boarded his carriage without much fanfare.

After the carriage left, he closed the curtains and said, “You can turn it off now.”

The invisibility magic device shut off, and the two whale siblings appeared from thin air. The black dragon likewise revealed himself. Faseton froze at the sight of the dragon, and Witira’s eyes narrowed.

The black dragon set his head on Cale’s leg and looked coolly at the whales. “What’re you looking at?”

“The mana fluctuation back then was you,” Witira realized.

She and the dragon had a stare-off, recognizing and assessing each other's strength.

It was then that Cale patted the black dragon's head. "Let's go home quietly."

The black dragon obediently closed his eyes and dozed off. Quiet settled over the carriage.

After a few days' journey, Cale arrived back in Weston in Henituse territory. And right away, he had a deep frown on his face.

"Lord Cale!"

"Whoa! It's him!"

When had news from the capital reached here? Feeling conflicted, Cale watched the locals cheering for him and his companions. Had they forgotten that he was a lout? Then again, there *were* still people who froze or ran off as soon as they saw his carriage.

Just then, he heard a fresh bout of cheers.

"Lord Silverlight!"

"It's the Shield Lord! He's got that shield!"

Cale's frown deepened to a scowl. Was there a way he could avoid those cheesy nicknames?

Shortly after, the vice-captain appeared within his line of sight. The man was on horseback, protecting the carriage. As soon as he met Cale's eyes, he puffed out his chest with pride and said, "Knowledge of your heroic deeds has spread, Lord Cale! Ha ha!" Guiding the horse close to the carriage, he added, "The nickname 'Lord Silverlight' is impressive. I'm rather envious!"

Clack. Cale slammed the carriage window shut in his face.

He closed his eyes and crossed his arms, not caring that the whale siblings were eyeing him with curiosity.

The black dragon tapped Cale's knee with his paw. Opening his eyes a little, Cale looked down. Seeing Cale's expression, the dragon cautiously asked, "Are we home?"

"Yes, we're home," Cale lazily replied.

Ohn and Hong stretched, and the black dragon flapped his wings. Just then, Cale heard the vice-captain's voice through the closed window. "No need to be embarrassed, Lord Cale!"

Another unwelcome cheer overlapped the vice-captain's voice. "Ooh! It's Lord Silverlight!"

That lousy dolt.

Cale didn't open his eyes again until they reached the Henituse estate. The lout who'd left for the capital was returning home for a visit.

Chapter 13:
Just Destroy It

BACK HOME, Cale's family members were the first to greet him.

Swish. Swoosh. They wrested Cale's body left and right against his will. *Pat. Pat.* They thoroughly inspected his shoulders, arms, face, and hands. Cale had a blank expression throughout the entire process.

Count Deruth examined Cale for a long time before finally smiling in relief. "Doesn't look like you have any serious injuries."

Putting on a soulless smile, Cale fixed his mussed sleeves. Count Deruth was still strong; he trained with his sword every morning.

"How are you feeling? Are you tired?"

"I'm fine."

Once Deruth finished, Countess Violan approached. "I hear there are more people with you now."

She was talking about the wolf children and whale siblings. The latter looked different now, thanks to the black dragon's magic.

"Yes, it ended up that way somehow."

"I see." Violan looked pristine and flawless as always, but her eyes were frigid. "And I hear they still haven't caught those terrorists."

"That's what I hear too."

"All right. That'll do for now."

Violan's gaze moved to Deruth, and they had a silent exchange. It seemed like they had plans of some kind. A chill ran down Cale's spine, but he pretended not to pick up on their little conversation.

Deruth smiled gently as he addressed Cale once more. "You can tell us about your Ancient Power and the incident in the capital later. Go rest for now."

“Yes, Father.”

With the count’s permission, Cale could finally head to his room. More people were holding him back, however: his younger stepsiblings, Bassen and Lilly.

“Brother, how are you fee—”

“Oh, right.” Cale turned away from his siblings and motioned to Hans.

The deputy butler swooped in, handing Cale two items. “Here you go, my lord.”

“Thanks.” Cale hadn’t forgotten about his siblings’ requests. He gave the items to Bassen and Lilly—one each. “A fountain pen for you, and a sword for you.” They accepted the gifts in silence, prompting him to ask, “What’s wrong?”

Bassen’s face was stiff. “The capital must’ve been chaos.”

“I still had to keep my promise.”

Bassen stared at his carefree brother, then clutched the package containing the fountain pen and declared, “I’ll hit the books and work really hard to govern and develop this territory!”

“Good, good.” Bassen would be the next count, so it was good for him to study administration. Pleased by his little brother’s mindset, Cale smiled with satisfaction.

Bassen hesitated a moment before adding, “I won’t do anything that’ll bother you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” He didn’t say anything else after that.

Cale glanced toward Bassen with curiosity before eventually turning to look at his little sister Lilly Henituse. The expression on the little seven-year-old’s face was oddly determined. What was she up to?

“Brother.”

“Lilly.”

“I’ll get strong enough to lead our knights and protect our territory. I’ll protect everyone!”

“Good. I’ll be cheering you on.”

The two of them—Bassen as administrator, Lilly leading the knights—would help the territory run properly. Their commitment was fantastic. Cale stroked Lilly's head, looking pleased.

"You'll make an amazing knight," he told her.

"Thank you. I'll keep anyone from getting hurt."

"Good, good." Cale stopped patting her head and began to walk away. "I need to go rest now."

"Please rest well, Brother."

"You've got to rest up to get better!"

Cale waved to the children, heading to his room. Unbeknownst to him, his two siblings watched him for some time.

It had been a while since Cale last entered his own bedroom, but it didn't feel like it had been empty at all.

"Meow!"

"Meeeow!"

The two kittens rolled around on the bed in excitement, but Cale couldn't focus on them when he saw who awaited him outside his chambers. He furrowed his brow. "*You're* going to be serving me?"

It was Vicross. *Is he stepping back from his duties as second chef to do Ron's job?*

Vicross ignored Cale's questioning gaze and handed him a letter. "This is from my father."

"Ah. Ron."

"He told me it's a report."

Cale saw that the letter was unopened. When Ron left, he had sent a letter through Hans, but now it seemed he'd make his reports through his son. "Great. Thanks."

"You're welcome, sir."

"I've arranged for Maes and the rest of the wolf children to help with cooking and serving."

Vicross flinched and lapsed into silence for a few solid seconds. “I understand,” he managed.

He walked away, seeming suddenly tired. Still, Vicross had done a good job with the wolf children so far.

Cale closed the bedroom door with a *click*.

The black dragon appeared right away. “Our house is great! Our house is magnificent!”

Elated, he jumped up and down on the bed with Ohn and Hong. Cale snickered at the actions of the three children, whose average age was only seven years old. With that, he lazily opened the letter…and almost dropped it.

I’m still alive. You’re alive too, right, young master?

It was only a single line. How could someone write such a frightening letter? Yet the sheer ominousness of it convinced Cale that it was from Ron—to say nothing of the distinct handwriting and the seal they’d agreed upon.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Lord Cale, may I enter?” came Hans’s voice.

The kittens stiffened, while the black dragon vanished in a flash.

“Go ahead.”

Hans entered with his arm full of snacks for the kittens. “The mage said it’s fine to visit anytime!”

“Then I’ll go now. You needn’t follow.”

Cale left Hans in the room as he made for the administrative building.

‹Where are you going? To meet a mage?›

Cale gave a subtle nod. Considering that the black dragon had followed instead of hanging back to play with the kittens, the word “mage” had likely piqued his curiosity.

Once Cale entered the building, a slew of people greeted him.

“Welcome back, Lord Cale.”

“Thanks.”

“Hello, Lord Cale.”

“Ah, long time no see.”

“I hear you did something great. You’re amazing, truly!”

“Not really.”

The fawning vexed him. He walked faster, tossing out careless one-liners in response. The invisible black dragon observed everyone, then flapped his wings a bit faster to keep up. His ears flicked, his reptilian grin widening as more and more people appeared to greet Cale. Not seeing his reaction, Cale opened the door to his destination. He’d knocked, of course.

“Lord Cale?”

“I haven’t encountered you before. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s my honor.”

This mage was responsible for the territory’s magical video communication, which was generally handled by a mage between the beginner and intermediate levels.

“Can we connect right now?” asked Cale.

“Of course. Where shall I connect you to?”

As the mage prepared the video communication device, he snuck a few glances at Cale. The territory was buzzing with stories about Cale Henituse. Maybe that was why the mage couldn’t help feeling curious about who Cale would want to contact as soon as he arrived home.

Unaware of the mage’s interest, Cale casually answered, “The palace.”

“Ah, yes, the palace… Sorry, the *palace*?!”

“That’s right,” Cale said, then went into specifics. “Connect me to His Highness, the crown prince.” When the mage reeled in shock, Cale frowned. “What? It’s not possible? Can I just leave a message, then?”

The palace received so many magical video calls that they couldn’t always pick up—thus the utility of leaving a video or voice message.

“Uh, no. It’s possible,” the mage said. “Of course it’s possible.”

This world’s quite comfortable, aside from the way you need mages for things now and then.

The mage seemed flustered as he connected the device to the palace. “It looks like it’ll be difficult to speak with His Highness right now, but you should be able to leave him a voice message.”

Cale nodded. He preferred to talk face-to-face, but it wasn’t strictly necessary. The mage started the device, then left the room. Once Cale was certain that the mage had exited, he spoke into the device.

“Your Highness, it is Cale Henituse.” He got straight to the point. “I plan to buy the Kingdom of the Whipper’s Magic Tower.”

That would be his first use of the golden plaque. Cale could imagine the look on the crown prince’s face when he heard this message; he also knew Albert would have no choice but to approve the purchase. And, although the prince might act incredulous and annoyed, he’d be amused by Cale’s daring act.

He’d also be curious, so Cale added, “For the record, I won’t be able to do a video call in the coming week. I need to head somewhere for a bit. Just wanted to let you know in advance.”

With that, Cale hit the button the mage had told him to press once he finished. A blue light appeared on the device, signaling that the voice message had been delivered. He summoned the mage, who glanced at the light.

“Your message saved, Lord Cale.”

Cale smiled. “Good.”

“Some good news, I imagine?”

“Well, I suppose so.”

The crown prince would probably hear the message tomorrow, and Cale was smirking because Albert would have to wait a week for his return.

‹I pity the crown prince,› said the black dragon, who suddenly felt remorseful.

Ignoring the comment, Cale left the communication room and ventured to the estate to find Deruth. While he was here, he hoped to take care of everything.

***

"You want to go to Harris?" Deruth asked.

Cale nodded. "Yes."

The redhead had told his father about Harris and the Ancient Power, but Deruth was focused on the former. He looked down at the report Cale had brought regarding the incident in town, then peered up at his son. Cale's serious gaze proved he really meant it.

After hearing the investigation squad's report, Deruth had headed to Harris. When he saw what had happened, he felt rage and sorrow in equal measure. The village was completely destroyed, and there were no signs of the perpetrators. He'd requested aid from nearby territories and asked the information guild to keep their ears open.

"Is that because you're concerned about that young man Choi Han?"

Deruth had found evidence of the battle in Harris, giving him an idea of Choi Han's strength. His son had spent quite a while with Choi Han; Cale had to have realized how powerful the young man was.

"I guess you could call it that."

"Is that truly the only reason you want to go to Harris?"

Cale dipped his head. "More or less." That was the only excuse he could give, at any rate.

He couldn't say he wanted to go so the wolf children could achieve Berserk Mode and train their wild instincts. He couldn't say it would help the black dragon's growth. He *definitely* couldn't say he was going to the Dark Forest to calm the Whale Tribe's war with the mermaids.

Cale saw that Deruth was contemplating his request, so he pressed on. "The investigation squad already finished, but I want

to see Harris with my own eyes. And I won't even need to worry about monsters. It's not winter."

"That's true."

There were monsters in the Dark Forest, but the man-made stone wall between Harris and the forest kept them at bay. None had attacked for the last hundred and fifty years. People were leery of the Dark Forest, since there were plenty of stories about how you'd die if you went in, but actual monsters seldom appeared.

The problem was, any monsters that actually did emerge were extremely strong mutants.

Deruth actually found it odd that no monsters had appeared in ages. He'd sent multiple investigation squads, but they could only circle the Dark Forest, not actually go in.

At length, the count said, "There are still soldiers in Harris. It should be safe." He'd seemingly made up his mind. "You have to care for people you take in."

Cale slowly shook his head. *Take in that guy? I'd never do such a thing.* This was an unbelievable misunderstanding.

"I didn't *take in* Choi Han."

Deruth nodded, smiling. "Sure, whatever you say. You've come of age now."

"Of course. I'm eighteen years old."

"You grew up so quickly. All right—you can go now."

Cale bowed to his father, then turned toward the door.

"Cale," the count called out from behind him. As Cale spun back around, Deruth continued, "The golden turtle hasn't always been a symbol of wealth. We're a family of warriors sworn to safeguard others. Our mission is to protect—be it family or otherwise."

In that moment, both father and son locked eyes.

"A strong shield can protect anything. But remember that the most important thing is protecting yourself. That's why the Henituses use a turtle emblem."

A turtle protected itself with its strong shell.

Deruth, whom others knew as mediocre in every regard, reminded his son, “It signifies that you should always remember to put yourself first.” Smiling gently, he added, “The Ancient Power you earned is quite something.”

Cale mirrored his father’s smile as he replied mischievously, “Isn’t it? Amazing to behold, that’s for sure. And I always put my own safety first.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

With another nod, Deruth looked back down at the report on the desk. Cale took that as his cue to go and exited his father’s office.

As soon as they’d left, the black dragon had a question for him. *‹You two are family, right?›*

Cale nodded.

As the lout boarded his carriage the next day, he told the whale siblings, “Not bad for my new guards.”

Witira, her whip in her hand, and Faseton, who held a sword, both smiled at Cale. They were still under the black dragon’s disguise magic.

At that point, Cale left for Harris—or rather, the Dark Forest.

***

Once they reached Harris, the town closest to the Dark Forest, Cale got out of the carriage. His first impression of the location was simple: “It’s black.”

It had been a little over two months, but Harris was still dark. Cale looked down at his feet and saw that there were still black ashes on the ground.

He heard Vice-Captain Hilsmann’s sorrowful voice. “Everything burned down.”

Cale turned to look at the vice-captain. “Where’d they say the graves were?”

“I’ll go find out.”

It had been a while since the vice-captain had been so quiet around Cale, but his silence wasn't his fault.

Harris, the town next to the large stone wall bordering the Dark Forest, was no more. The crumbling ruins of homes were all that was left, besides the dark ashes showing that something had once existed in that location.

"I sense fire here," Witira noted.

"You can pick up on something like that?"

"Well, I'm from a sea tribe." She smiled, but her eyes held a flurry of emotions.

Cale didn't have time to pry further. He headed over to the wolf children, who seemed loath to alight from the carriage. Faced with the ruins of Harris, the eldest wolf child—Maes—was stiff. Cale figured he and his siblings were thinking of their hometown.

"Hey, Maes."

"Yes, Lord Cale?"

"Do you know why I brought you all here?"

The young wolf couldn't answer; Cale hadn't told him why. This was such a small group that not even Hans and Vicross had joined them, yet the wolf children had been included. Maes looked quizzically at the noble, whom Lark had ordered him and his siblings to serve.

Cale spoke as languidly as ever, his arms crossed. "A lot of money is about to fall into my hands."

"Pardon?" The sudden talk about money threw Maes and the other wolves for a loop.

For his part, Cale didn't pay them any mind. He'd be rolling in dough after dealing with the Magic Tower and the Queen of the Jungle. He'd also pass the rights to a peaceful sea route to the Henituses.

"I plan to use some of that money to rebuild this place."

His declaration to rebuild the settlement caught the children's attention.

“And I intend to build a villa here for me, all of you, and the rest of our group to hang out in together.”

“I heard the Dark Forest is dangerous,” Maes said haltingly.

“Are you serious?” Cale replied. He looked around. Ohn and Hong were getting out of the carriage; the black dragon was probably flying around somewhere. The whale siblings were walking toward a well dusted with ash. “It won’t be as dangerous as all of *you* when you grow up.”

That blunt answer made an impression on the wolf children.

“I promised Lark I’d take good care of you, so I have to give you someplace to live like wolves.”

His smile made it seem so effortless. The breeze picked up, carrying away some ash with it.

Cale broke the silence. “I’ll create that place for you, so grow into great wolves before Lark gets back.” Watching the wolf children, he frowned. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Y-yes!”

“Yes, Lord Cale!”

Dissatisfied with their reactions, Cale walked away. Maes watched him stride to the stone wall, then turned around. The younger wolves peered up at him.

“We’ve got to grow,” Maes declared.

He scanned the blackened town, thinking that it would one day be an inviting place, like the hometown he remembered. And though his siblings didn’t say so, he knew they felt the same way. They were all wolves.

Ignorant of the wolves’ determination, Cale tapped the stone wall. “Pretty thick.”

He checked out the only way through, a stone gate that served as the sole access point to the Dark Forest. Needless to say, Choi Han hadn’t used that gate when he first arrived in Harris; he’d entered by jumping the roughly ten-meter wall.

“The Dark Forest’s past this wall?” asked Witira as she made her approach.

Cale spared her a glance. “Right.”

Her blue hair and irises were both dyed brown with magic that also toned down her facial features. Her voice, however, was still just as beautiful.

“I can’t see past the wall, but the forest must be unique. It’s one of the Five Wonders, isn’t it? Does that mean this wall’s strong enough to match?” Witira smiled, giving the wall a light poke with her pointer finger. It crushed the stone, creating a divot in the wall. She awkwardly laughed it off.

Cale averted his gaze, pretending not to have seen it. Whales were a frightening force, and the long-haired siblings still weren’t used to controlling their strength on land.

He quickly changed the topic. “It’s similar, actually.”

“Hm? What is?”

“The forest past the wall. You said it probably looks unique.”

“Oh.”

The redhead shrugged. “The Dark Forest is a regular forest like any other.”

He peeled himself away from the wall and marched off, but Witira caught up and matched his pace.

“What lies inside it is different, though,” Cale admitted.

The Dark Forest was home to a number of mutant plants and monsters, though no one knew why. It was easy to pick out mutant monsters, since they looked different, but it was more difficult with plants. Although a mutant herb might look similar to its healing counterpart, it could turn out to be poisonous.

There are monsters that usually only live on the Eastern Continent too.

In fact, the Dark Forest was the only place in the west that held traces of the Eastern Continent. That made it a forbidden region, one of the Five Wonders.

“Lord Cale!” called out Vice-Captain Hilsmann.

Cale nodded to him, then addressed Witira. “Please take care of those wolf children.”

“Of course. There are lots of young beastfolk.”

Witira quietly watched Cale sigh, as if all the kids got on his nerves. Ignoring the whale, he walked over to Hilsmann. “Let’s go.”

“Yes, sir.”

Taking Hilsmann with him, Cale headed elsewhere.

“Here it is.”

Their destination was a clearing with numerous graves. Choi Han had buried the townspeople of Harris here. Hilsmann slipped away to rejoin the soldiers before glancing back at his lord. It surprised him that Cale Henituse had visited Harris’s ruins, but the fact that Cale went looking for the townspeople’s graves as soon as he got off the carriage was even more surprising.

The vice-captain had drawn back to give Cale privacy. For his part, Cale didn’t notice or care about the vice-captain’s actions; he just started talking to himself. “The fact that he didn’t go crazy is amazing,” Cale muttered, astounded that Choi Han had remained sane after the incident.

Choi Han had put a lot of effort into digging those graves. Still, they were basically just dirt. None had headstones. Instead, Choi Han had written the townspeople’s names on flat rocks. Cale counted the graves; Choi Han had personally buried all the bodies within.

Every so often, Cale had an intriguing thought. The reason the townspeople of Harris had died remained a mystery in *Birth of a Hero*. In fact, it had seemed like a plot device to develop the main character. But was that really it?

I think there’s more to it.

These days, he got the sense that the story extended further than he’d assumed. The reasons for that were clear: the Dark Forest, the mermaids, and the destruction of Harris. Those three things had put the thought in his mind. Still, this was something he’d tell Lark to share with Choi Han. Or, if Choi Han wound up returning with Lark, Cale would hand it off to the hero himself. Harris wasn’t Cale’s problem but Choi Han’s.

Cale merely did what he needed to as a member of the Henituse family.

“Hilsmann.”

“Yes, Lord Cale?”

“Arrange proper graves for the townspeople. These are too shabby.”

“Yes, sir!” Hilsmann responded, more energetically than usual.

Cale patted the vice-captain’s shoulder, then turned his attention to the soldiers, who slowly stepped backward. Keeping his hand on Hilsmann’s shoulder, Cale whispered, “You know what to do, right?”

Myriad emotions flashed across Hilsmann’s face as he recalled what had happened two nights ago. They’d been camping when Cale called Hilsmann over to his tent.

“I’ll be heading into the Dark Forest.”

“What?! Why would someone in recovery go somewhere so dangerous?! The culprits won’t be in there! Do you have to do so much for Choi Ha—”

As Hilsmann spoke, a tiny black dragon appeared. That had been enough to shock the vice-captain, but it wasn’t the end. Cale’s two kittens had meowed, then transformed into people; they were *beastfolk*. To top it all off, the woman who’d recently joined them pulled out a long water whip, and the man beside her drew a sword with a whirlpool at its tip. The sight of this had made the vice-captain’s skin crawl for the first time in his life.

In the midst of those strong monsters, Cale had worn a relaxed smile. *“No need to worry.”*

The fact that he seemed so unfazed had stunned Hilsmann even more, but he’d gradually come to grips with the situation. Though he was single-mindedly focused on becoming captain, he wasn’t a fool.

“Yes. Understood, Lord Cale.”

“Great.” Hilsmann raised no complaints, and Cale moved away. The vice-captain followed directly behind him. “I trust you.”

Hilsmann clenched his fists. Previously, he assumed he’d be satisfied with reaching the rank of captain within the Henituse knight brigade. That mindset had changed in the past two days.

He shared his thoughts with Cale. “I plan to get stronger, my lord.”

“Do whatever you want,” Cale replied with disinterest, feeling only relief that Hilsmann would take care of some hassles for him.

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Thanks to Hilsmann, there were no guards where Cale stood in the quiet of dawn. The vice-captain had changed the patrol routes.

Facing the stone wall, Cale touched his magic bag and spoke. “There are two swamps in the Dark Forest.”

Only two, despite the size of the forest.

Meeting Faseton’s eyes, Cale lazily continued, “Monsters live in one. Nothing can live in the other. Faseton, you said the mermaids’ poison seemed stronger, so which swamp do you think contains the source of their power?”

Faseton answered nervously, “The one nothing lives in.”

“Right. There’s a good chance it’ll be that one, so we’ll head there first.”

If it wasn’t there, they could head for the swamp with the monsters. This would actually be easier in terms of location as well.

At that moment, Witira—who’d been standing there in silence—looked to either side of Cale with concern. She hesitated before finally asking, “Won’t it be dangerous for the children?”

Ohn and Hong dangled at Cale’s sides.

“Lord Cale, you said the Dark Forest is dangerous,” Witira went on. “And if nothing can live in that swamp, either there’s poison everywhere or the swamp itself is harmful.” As she spoke, Witira felt something odd—the silver kitten Ohn’s tail tapping her as it swayed happily.

“Dangerous places like those are our specialty!” the kitten declared. Cat Tribe members *were* good at tracking things down, thanks to their cautious nature. “More importantly, he says we won’t get hurt.”

Ohn’s response wasn’t what Witira expected. She looked up at Cale, and her eyes widened. Cale was smirking, as was the red Cat Tribe kitten. Both smiles seemed villainous.

Hong was animated as he piped up, “It’ll be fine! I’m going to get stronger today!”

It was time for him to strengthen his poisonous mist. The kittens wanted to get stronger, while Cale was after security and peace. For all three, a relatively safe opportunity had arrived.

“This is a great chance,” Cale assured Witira.

If they were lucky, Hong might develop poison mist strong enough to impact even the Whale Tribe. Cale didn’t care that Witira and Faseton were eyeing him with uncertainty. They’d soon find out about Ohn’s and Hong’s skills.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The black dragon took off to the top of the stone wall. Cale’s body floated into the air, trailing behind the dragon. Ohn and Hong were in Cale’s arms as he rose.

“Faseton!”

When Witira called his name, Faseton nodded, and the whale siblings raced up the stone wall. Water engulfed their feet, shooting them upward with each step.

Swish. Cutting through the wind, Cale reached the top of the wall.

“Wow.” Hong’s voice was full of admiration.

The vast woodland that was the Dark Forest spread out before them. This was the second largest of the Five Wonders. It started at the tip of northeastern Rowoon, extending in an oval shape to the eastern shoreline. It was two or three times the size of an average noble family’s territory. That was why, although Rowoon wanted to take control of the area, nobody had been able to do so until now.

Choi Han or the black dragon might be able to, though.

“It’s big,” Cale said casually, locating the stone mountain at the center of the forest.

Despite its name, the Dark Forest wasn’t actually dark all the time. The forest looked beautiful in the glow of the rising sun.

“Heading down,” said the black dragon.

“Sure.”

The dragon slowly lowered Cale and the kittens to the ground. Both whale siblings were down there waiting for them already.

Crunch. Cale landed lightly, stepping on some leaves.

“You said that the Dark Forest is split into regions?”

Cale nodded at Witira’s question, lowering Ohn and Hong onto the ground. As he opened his magic bag, he told her, “The inner region and the outer region.”

Of the two, the outer region wasn’t that dangerous. Only a few mutant monsters prowled the area, and most were small. Conversely, the inner region with the stone mountain at its center was extremely dangerous.

Even Choi Han needed decades to move around it with ease. Or “safely,” rather. Choi Han had become stronger than all those monsters to do so. The monsters were of little concern to Cale’s group, though.

“We’re heading to the swamp on the border between the inner and outer regions. It shouldn’t be too dangerous.”

Though the outer region was big, that mostly applied to its width. They could cut through to the middle rather quickly. The oval-shaped inner region was much larger.

“I plan to avoid as many monsters as possible. Still, I don’t see any reason to slow us down by taking a roundabout route.”

The two whales smiled upon hearing that Cale didn’t intend to take a detour around monsters. So long as they weren’t facing a dragon, there was nothing the Whale Tribe—rulers of the ocean—had to fear.

“I’m lifting my magic,” the black dragon declared.

The whale siblings' appearances returned to normal.

Witira grinned, looking rejuvenated. "Ah! How refreshing. It was a bit stuffy under that magic. Thank you."

"Thank you very much, Lord Dragon."

The dragon flapped his wings, accepting their thanks, then flitted over to Cale. He pulled a face. "The mana here is dark."

"Dark?"

The dragon nodded, looking around the forest. "There's a smell too."

"What kind?"

"Something familiar. But I can't tell what."

The scent's familiar, but he can't identify it? Cale looked at the dragon, puzzled.

The dragon looked away, adding, "It's not a dangerous smell. Just a very old one."

Did dragons have especially good noses? Cale was curious, but he couldn't delve into that for long. "Where do we go from here? How do we get to the swamp?"

Cale took a piece of paper out of the magic bag and unfolded it.

"Is that a map?" Witira asked.

It definitely was, although it was pretty terrible. It showed the stone mountain in the center of the region; several other areas were also marked.

"Yes, it's a map." Cale had used information from *Birth of a Hero* to create it.

Choi Han decided to explore outward from the stone mountain. Starting with the north, he'd eventually make his way through the whole Dark Forest.

Once he was finally familiar with the inner region, he ventured into the outer region. When Choi Han saw the tall stone wall, he started to weep. The southern part of the outer region—the last section he had to explore—was where people lived. It had taken him too long to get there.

“It’s not very accurate,” Cale admitted. “We need to experience the Dark Forest ourselves to get a lay of the land.” He glanced at the whales, who were watching him quietly. “Go on. Take the lead.”

Peering at the whale siblings from behind Cale, the black dragon was already flapping his wings. Witira smiled and reached out to Cale. He took a water bottle out of the magic bag and handed it to her.

Witira drank the water, then reached back out. *Swoosh.* A three-meter whip appeared in her grasp.

She cracked it once before wrapping it around her arm. “I shall get you to your destination safely,” she told the others in a playful voice.

Cale found her reliable. People said that humpback whales, aquatic royalty, could handle killer whale beastfolk—the troublemakers of the sea—easily. Cale didn’t plan to do as Witira said, but there was no need to tell her that now. He pointed to the edge of the Dark Forest. “That way.”

With that, Cale ventured into the Dark Forest. It wasn’t loud, but various noises echoed all around them: buzzing insects, chirping birds, roaring beasts and monsters in the distance.

“Aren’t dangerous places usually quiet?” Faseton asked Cale, his sword cutting through bushes.

“Only when there’s a single ruler in the area,” Cale replied. The Dark Forest didn’t have a ruler, just an eat-or-be-eaten status quo. “Careful of your shoes. Make sure your skin isn’t bared.”

“Got it.”

Faseton glanced down at the extra layer of cloth between his pants and shoes, then looked back up at Cale. The redhead’s bag really was magical. It had all sorts of items inside, each necessary to their travels.

“You need to be careful of your ankles here. The insects are dangerous too. Getting bitten can poison you.”

Recalling what Cale told them, Faseton wondered how the man knew all that. He couldn't easily ask, since Cale was still very busy.

"Look forward," Cale said bluntly.

"Oh! Uh, yes, sir!" Faseton quickly faced forward again, following his sister as he cleared their path through the waist-high bushes.

Cale was furiously jotting new information onto his map. *This might be useless.*

He debated whether there really was a good reason to map out the Dark Forest. It wasn't like he planned to conquer it. Still, he had a gut feeling he could sell the map in the future. His modus operandi was to do things right once he set his mind to them—so he could make money off them if possible.

"We're almost through these bushes," Witira announced.

"The area with small monsters is next," Cale said.

Witira flicked her whip, relaxed. The group was so strong, they didn't need to be nervous. Their collective strength was likely the reason for Witira's calm even after they emerged into the monsters' domain.

Crack. A branch broke under her foot.

"We should keep quiet," Cale told her.

At that moment, they heard something moving through the air, swishing toward them in succession. *Swoosh! Swoosh!*

Witira gracefully waved her hand, and poisonous darts appeared between her fingers. She smiled over her shoulder at Cale. "I will take care of these enemies quietly."

Monsters had begun to emerge from behind the trees.

The whale princess studied them, unruffled. "Are they mutated goblins?"

"Keeek!"

"Kirik! Kirik!"

The monsters seemed larger than average goblins. Their faces looked different, and their skin was purple and red.

"No, those aren't goblins."

Witira looked at the hand on her shoulder. Cale stood next to her, watching the approaching monsters.

“It’s dangerous to be on the front lines, Lord Cale,” she warned.

“Those are honta,” Cale said. “Monsters from the Eastern Continent.”

“Oh!”

The Dark Forest *did* contain monsters from the east, and Cale had encountered the first ones. “They’re similar to goblins, but they’re dumber. And they tend to be crueler and more violent.”

Witira nodded. “No wonder they seemed so unfamiliar,” she said coolly. “I’ll take care of them.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“Excuse me?”

Witira stared dumbfounded at Cale until Ohn and Hong jumped over him, landing on the ground. The kittens brushed themselves off, preparing for battle.

“We can do this much,” Cale said.

The whale princess saw about a dozen of the small honta heading toward them. She looked back at Cale; mist was surrounding his body. At the same time, Ohn was slowly disappearing.

“I have to test something.”

Cale needed to know roughly how strong he was. This was the perfect time to figure that out—he had the black dragon to the right, Witira to the left, and Faseton behind him. That formation meant he could run wild without worrying about being harmed.

“Step back,” he told Witira.

“But, Lord Cale—”

“How can I get hurt with all of you here? If I’m at risk, save me.”

Cale’s confident gaze seemed to show full trust in the three of them. Witira stepped back to join Faseton in the rear, ready to

jump in at any moment.

A shield appeared around the two whales, and the black dragon moved in front of them, saying, “Their poison is stronger than you’d think.”

Poison? Faseton glanced at his sister in confusion, but Witira was equally baffled. She just shook her head and looked forward, only to let out a gasp of admiration. “Not bad…”

Mist enveloped Ohn, Hong, and Cale. Its color was strange; it was closer to red than the normal white. Now Witira understood why the dragon mentioned poison.

“Kirik! Kirik!”

“Kiriririk!”

It was noisy. Surrounded by mist, Cale created gusts of wind with one hand and both feet. Feeling the Energy of the Heart thrumming in his chest, he said, “Let’s go.”

His body shot forward. At the same time, thick white mist rolled into the area.

“Kirik? Kirik, kirik!”

“Kiiii!”

The mist was so dense, visibility was limited to a mere few inches. Two strands of red mist moved within it.

Whoosh!

A whirlwind shot into the sky, slicing off a monster’s arm in the process.

“Kegh! Kirik! Kek!”

The red mist swallowed the monster. Cale sprang up beside it and called forth his shield. The shield—which was almost twice Cale’s size—floated through the red mist, then suddenly dropped straight to the ground.

Boom! Something was squashed beneath it.

As soon as the shield touched down, a whirlwind of red mist appeared right next to it. It sucked up two monsters, which vomited blood as the whirlwind blasted them into the air.

“Kegh!”

“Agh! Kek!”

The poisoned monsters began bleeding from every orifice.

Faseton watched the scene with a wholly blank expression, then blurted out, “I thought you said he’s weak?!”

“He *is* weak.”

Hearing the black dragon’s confident answer, Faseton thought to himself, *The honta may be small, but there are at least a dozen of them. And they’re tougher than goblins.* He looked to his sister.

“Looks like this’ll end soon,” she said, beaming.

Boom! Another loud noise reverberated through the air as the mist slowly dissipated. The fight had finished, as Witira said. Faseton could see Cale now.

“They must’ve been weak because we’re still near the forest edge,” Cale said confidently. He stood on top of his symbol, the silver shield. Beneath it were two monsters no longer recognizable as honta.

“Meeeow.” The mist vanished, and Ohn reappeared.

Hong also returned, his tail swishing. “Was the poison weak, Sister?”

The ground where Hong had been was completely black. Hong used his back paws to cover the blackened patch with dirt.

Peace had returned to the area. Yet after seeing the corpse of a poisoned honta, another poisoned honta in its death throes, and the honta crushed by Cale’s shield and whirlwinds, Faseton couldn’t help asking, “Lord Cale, you didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“I did.”

“You did?!” Faseton cried in shock.

Cale pointed to the back of his hand. “I got scratched.”

Faseton pressed his lips together. Witira patted his shoulder before approaching Cale, who lifted his shield and put it away. Since it was an Ancient Power, he didn’t even need to wipe it clean of blood. It would be spotless when he summoned it again.

“Will you keep taking on these small monsters, Lord Cale?”

“Probably.” Cale recalled his shield and whirlwinds, then washed the blood off his hand. “But I can’t push myself too hard. I’m still recuperating.”

Witira couldn’t help but grin at his self-assurance—and at Ohn and Hong, who were getting feedback on the battle from the black dragon.

“We should get a move on.”

Cale urged Witira and the others on. They still had a lot of ground to cover.

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Two days later, Cale lowered the map in his hands, looking ahead. “We’re close now,” he told the group.

It wouldn’t take much longer until they reached the boundary between the Dark Forest’s inner and outer regions. Cale tucked his corrected map back in his pocket and faced his entourage. “We should get there in about an hour.”

Drip. Drip. Blood droplets fell from Ohn’s sharp claws.

“Grr…” A small vulpine monster twitched on the ground, poisoned, as the black dragon came over to report.

“All done.”

They’d killed close to twenty of these foxlike animals.

Everyone really is getting stronger with experience, Cale reflected.

Since Ohn and Hong had fled their tribe, they hadn’t been able to hone their skills. They had been living in hiding until just recently. Similarly, the black dragon lacked experience due to his early years in confinement. Cale was using the Dark Forest’s monsters to quickly fill those gaps in their training.

“Should I have fought too?” Cale muttered to himself. Where else could he gain experience safely?

The dragon and kittens whipped their heads toward him.

“Seems like a useless idea!” Hong said.

“It’s too much for you at this point, weak human,” the dragon scoffed. “One day of fighting was enough.”

“Our youngest member here is right,” Ohn chimed in. “Last time you fought, you spit out blood from overusing that shield!”

Faseton sighed, but Cale saw that Witira was smiling brightly. Then he saw the elder whale caress her whip, her eyes sparkling with determination. That was the look of someone who wanted to fight.

She’s a real terror.

Cale hastily opened his magic bag and gathered the others around him. “Everybody put these masks on before we go any farther.”

“Because of the swamp poison?” Faseton asked.

“That’s right.” Cale put a mask on the black dragon, who’d stuck his snout forward.

“There’s a weird smell, human.” The dragon had said this several times over the last few days.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s stronger here. And it’s something I’m familiar with.”

“It’s probably poison. Or plants rotting nearby.” Shrugging off the smell, Cale approached Ohn.

Left behind, the masked dragon tilted his head. He mumbled something, but the mask kept Cale from catching it. “No… It’s not something so trivial.”

The odor posed no danger, though, so the dragon remained relatively quiet as Cale put a mask on Ohn.

Even Choi Han avoided this swamp, Cale remembered. Choi Han had a significant resistance to poison. That being the case, he’d had no reason to go through the swamp when there were many other paths in the Dark Forest. Routes through the swamp were messy and annoying.

Faseton approached Cale. “It’s fascinating that there’re only two swamps in a forest this big.”

“Really? I don’t think so.” Cale smirked beneath the mask; Faseton found the expression pretty sly. “You’ll understand once you see it.”

Two swamps were enough. Cale verified that everyone had their masks on, then studied the looks on their faces. Since entering the Dark Forest, they’d only slept a few hours a night, yet no one appeared to be tired.

“You look so healthy,” he said. “You’re all amazing.”

Faseton wrinkled his nose. He looked over at his sister, gaze asking, *Is he fishing for a compliment?*

Witira shrugged in answer. Faseton glanced back at Cale, who seemed to be the healthiest in the group. Then he watched the dragon and kittens, who rushed to attend to Cale whenever they thought he was tired. Cale’s stamina was thanks to the Energy of the Heart, of course, but no one else knew that.

The whale princess caressed the whip looped around her arm. “Is it our turn now, Lord Cale?”

Rather than responding right away, Cale stepped forward. This was the boundary between the Dark Forest’s inner and outer regions.

“Grrrr.”

“Caw!”

Rustle.

A cacophony reached Cale’s ears as soon as he stepped past the border. Then he told Witira, who’d stepped past the boundary as well, “Yeah. Go ahead.”

Humpback whales were peaceful, but the ruler of the sea wasn’t the timid sort. Witira cracked her whip with a loud *snap*, and *boom*! It left a huge crater in the ground.

“Grk.”

“Kee.”

Whoosh.

The noises disappeared.

Witira, whose strength sat somewhere between Choi Han’s and the black dragon’s, was itching for a fight. Her heart had

pounded wildly when she saw the others' unexpected skills.

She smiled at Cale. "Shall we hurry on?"

The mysterious young nobleman responded with a completely relaxed grin. "Yes. As fast as possible. I want to go home and rest."

Hearing that, Faseton sighed and took out his whirlpool sword.

Enemies slowly revealed themselves in the now-quiet forest. The monsters near the boundary between the outer and inner regions were weaker than those in the inner region proper. Regardless, the ones in front of them were much stronger than the supposedly weak monsters outside. Mutant ogres, mutant trolls, and spiderlike foes native to the Eastern Continent appeared, as well as some high-level monsters.

"The monsters here really are different. They still want to fight, even after seeing Lord Dragon." Faseton stepped forward, glancing back and forth between the black dragon and Cale.

Cale nodded. "Hurry up and attack them."

"Yes, sir."

Faseton leapt forward, and the battle between the stronger monsters and whale siblings began. The Dark Forest's monsters were undaunted by even powerhouses like dragons and whales. In fact, they charged at tougher foes even more viciously. It was like they were fighting for survival, thinking that they couldn't allow something capable of conquest to show up in their territory.

Cale sat back and watched for a bit—until he saw a shield being cast. Then he asked the black dragon, "Why don't you attack?"

"Dealing with those weaklings is too annoying."

"Okay. I'll go." Cale plodded forward with the shield.

Boom! An ogre's body split in half, and blood spurted onto the shield. *Snap. Boom!* Witira's whip cracked, and a giant spider exploded. One leg flew over and hit the shield before falling to the ground.

“Watch and learn,” Cale said nonchalantly, crossing the battlefield in a straight line. Ohn, Hong, and the black dragon pretended not to care, but they were watching the battle seriously.

Thanks to Witira, all the monsters that appeared in front of Cale vanished just as quickly. He looked as though he were just on a stroll through the forest. Once he saw a boggy area in the distance, he stopped and said, “This is the edge of the swamp.”

Thump. Thwump. The mutant troll’s head fell to the ground, followed by its body. Witira flicked its fluids off her whip as she responded, “Let’s keep moving.”

Faseton let out another sigh as he followed his sister to Cale’s side. Then the whale siblings suddenly stopped walking, pressing their masks tightly. A noxious, rotting smell stung their noses. They gaped at the swamp, which had been hidden behind the Dark Forest’s huge trees until now.

“What do you think? It does the Dark Forest justice, doesn’t it?” Cale turned away from the shocked Faseton and surveyed the swamp, which was pitch black and wide as a lake. “It’s the size of a fairly large lake—big enough for more than one huge ship. Compared to other swamps, the black color’s also unique.”

This place made the Dark Forest true to its name, since the swamp was the only literally black area it contained.

“I didn’t expect it to be so big.” Voicing her admiration, Witira eyed the swamp and gulped.

Cale understood her reaction. All the swamp plants were either black or brown, but they weren’t dying; rather, they were extremely vibrant.

“It must be poison,” she said.

Adjusting his mask, Cale nodded. He also tightened his shoelaces and pulled on some gloves. The rest of the party followed suit.

“The plants growing around the poison here have mutated to survive the environment,” Cale said through his mask. “They might not be deadly, but they’re all toxic to some extent. Be careful, and make sure they don’t touch your skin.”

His instructions reminded Faseton of the mermaids' poison. The young whale made sure he was completely covered. Then he picked up on something strange. "Hong...?"

The red kitten swept past him and looked at Cale. When Cale nodded, Hong dashed into the swamp. Witira tried to grab him, but it was too late. "Hong!"

Hong wasn't wearing a mask or anything. Witira gaped at Cale in shock, but he seemed unfazed.

Then Witira heard Hong's voice. "Delicious!" The kitten swished his tail, chewing a black plant.

Cale stepped into the swamp as well and approached Hong. "How is it?"

"The poison just causes paralysis, but it's tangy!"

"Slow down. You might choke," Cale chided the excited kitten. "Take it slow. Eat a lot, though."

"All right! I feel like I'm getting stronger."

Cale turned to the whale siblings, who still stood outside the swamp, flummoxed. "Aren't you coming?"

Both whales crept into the area with bewildered expressions, and Cale slowly led them farther into the swamp. Thankfully, the brown earth and black swamp water were easy to tell apart. There was almost no danger of falling into the water, so Cale could inspect their surroundings quickly.

"Faseton."

Faseton stood with a wooden look on his face, as though he hadn't been reeling moments ago. "Yes?"

Cale pointed to an area nearby. "It looks like someone was here recently, doesn't it?"

There were marks on the ground, including several tracks. Monsters didn't visit this area, so there was only one explanation for that.

"I'll investigate."

As Faseton hurried to the spot, Cale turned away from him. An ingredient from the swamp had made the mermaids stronger, and the evidence they'd left behind gave Cale a good

idea of what that ingredient could be. “There’s a good chance it’s the swamp water itself.”

Since the ground next to the swamp was trodden, the mermaids probably hadn’t cared about hiding their tracks, taking it for granted that nobody would visit here.

Tap. Tap.

Feeling a touch on his leg, Cale moved his gaze from the swamp to the ground. The giddy Hong rubbed against Cale affectionately, his mouth stained black.

“I want to drink the swamp water too!” the kitten declared.

Next to them, Witira flinched. Cale paid it no heed, telling Hong, “Not now.”

Hong’s ears flattened. “I want to get even stronger, though!”

“Why?”

Hong peeked over at the black dragon and Ohn.

Cale’s large hand patted his head. “Take it slow. Don’t get ahead of yourself. You’re already stronger than I am.”

“That’s obvious!”

Gently patting Hong’s head again, Cale told him to go and eat more poison. Turning away, he considered how he could strengthen Ohn and Hong in the future. At the sight of the black dragon, however, Cale frowned.

What’s wrong with him?

The black dragon was acting odd, continually tilting his head left and right.

Faseton came to Cale’s side. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s dug up any plants recently, but there are lots of signs that they’re doing something to the actual swamp. Based on the marks they left, I’d say they were here two weeks to a month ago.”

Cale looked at the wide swamp. “It seems like they gathered some of the swamp water.”

“That does seem to be the case.”

He was about to address the somber whale siblings when the black dragon approached. “Why’d you take the mask off?” Cale asked, scowling.

“The scent wasn’t something in the swamp. It was mana.”

That can’t be. Cale’s skin started to crawl.

The black dragon’s small front paw pointed to the swamp. “I recognize the mana’s scent here too.”

Cale’s scowl deepened.

“It smells like a dragon’s mana.”

That was enough to inspire visions of an adult dragon or even an ancient dragon in Cale’s head. He swept a nervous glance over the vast, black swamp. It was massive, its depths unfathomable.

“Of course, there’s no sign of life in the mana,” the black dragon added. “It’s just a very weak trace.”

Those words were the final blow. The unbelievable thought in Cale’s mind quickly became reality. He guessed that a dragon corpse in the swamp helped the mermaids increase their power.

“How can you smell dead mana?” Cale asked the black dragon immediately.

Mana was a power that existed in nature. In some respects, it was similar to an Ancient Power created in a specific location. However, there was a major difference between the two: whether they could be left behind. You could do so with an Ancient Power, but mana disappeared as soon as its controller died.

The black dragon didn’t bat an eye. “Because of the swamp, I think. It’s dominating the mana and stopping it from going away.”

Dominating it? Cale’s expression turned odd, but the black dragon didn’t add on to that. Ohn, Hong, and the whale siblings approached Cale and the dragon.

‹I’m very perceptive,› the black dragon said into Cale’s mind, and their eyes met. *‹I feel a power similar to your shield and wind inside the swamp.›*

“Ha!” Cale impulsively let out a gasp of a laugh. The unmasked dragon smiled, and Cale cracked one in return. There was an Ancient Power in the swamp, and there was a good chance it was related to the concept of “domination.”

This is a first. So far, Cale hadn’t found any Ancient Powers the novel hadn’t mentioned. He had no idea whether someone had left that Ancient Power behind or if it developed naturally in the swamp.

“You’re so smart,” he told the dragon.

“You’re right. I am smart.”

Seeing Cale and the black dragon smirk mischievously, the others became even more curious.

“Lord Cale, can you tell me what is going on?” asked Witira. “What’s this about the scent of a dragon’s mana?”

Cale faced her. Despite her question, she seemed to have a decent idea of what was going on.

“I’m sure you’ve put this together, but there’s a good chance that there’s a dragon corpse in the swamp.”

“A dragon corpse, you say…?”

“Yes. Most likely very old, though. Probably mummified.”

Cale only knew about the Dark Forest from Choi Han’s experiences in *Birth of a Hero*. Still, the series did contain lots of important information.

Creatures in the Dark Forest had to fight for survival because none ever dominated the area. There was no ruler. It was also probably true that there hadn’t been any dragons in the Dark Forest while Choi Han was there. The novel characters had never mentioned one, nor a dragon’s lair.

That must mean this is a really old corpse, he thought.

Tap. Tap.

Cale looked down to see Hong pointing at the swamp with a resentful expression. “So I can’t drink the swamp water?”

He seemed to have lost his appetite upon hearing “dragon corpse.” Cale watched him head over to the black dragon to apologize without waiting to hear Cale’s answer.

“Sorry,” said Hong. “I thought it’d be delicious.”

The dragon gave him a questioning look. “I don’t care. The thing inside the swamp and I aren’t related.”

Dragons really didn’t seem to care about their “tribe.” They considered themselves to be individuals distinct from everything and everyone else in the world.

Cale watched the completely unruffled dragon, then said, “I thought the swamp poison gave the mermaids an edge. Their specialty *is* poison, after all.”

Faseton and Witira paid close attention.

“But now I’m thinking it’s probably dead mana from the swamp increasing their power, not the poison. That, or it’s both dead mana *and* poison.”

He observed the siblings. *If it’s poison, they’ll just need a sample to find an antidote. But if it’s the dragon’s dead mana, this is a whole different story.*

Witira frowned, while Faseton looked at the black swamp and nearby area. A demoralized comment came out of the younger whale’s mouth: “It’s too wide.”

His sister spoke up as well. “I’m not sure what we should do.”

They had singled out the mermaids’ source of strength but couldn’t figure out how to address it. It would be one thing if the mermaids were only using the swamp’s poison, but the other issue was too complicated to solve right away.

Surveying the swamp herself, Witira said, “It’s not like we can prevent anyone from entering the Dark Forest or stay here protecting this swamp all the time.”

A dragon corpse was an unexpected problem. The fact that this swamp was deep enough to completely submerge an adult dragon made things even more complicated. A normal dragon went through three growth spurts. Adult dragons that had completed all three were enormous—at least five meters larger than a humpback like Witira.

It was then that she heard Cale speak again. “It’s simple,” he said, unperturbed.

Witira turned her head. Cale had walked up to the swamp edge with a smile on his face.

“First, take as much swamp water as you need.” He faced Witira directly. “Then we make another deal.”

“A deal? Now?”

Cale’s smile widened as he watched confusion spread on Witira’s face. *I didn’t plan on this, but…*

Originally, he’d just intended to figure out what had strengthened the mermaids before getting out of here. But the situation was different now.

A pool of dead mana is dangerous.

The mermaids could probably absorb dead mana because they were creatures of darkness, but it was just dangerous poison to natural creatures like whales or humans. If something helped an enemy while posing a threat to Cale himself, there was no reason to keep it around. Yet he’d also run into something that might be beneficial. After all, even if the corpse was mummified, the dragon’s bones would still be present. Furthermore, there was the Ancient Power.

“Uh-huh. We’ll strike another one.”

“What does that have to do with fixing this?” Witira’s fingers found her whip again. She was surprised by the anticipation that filled her heart.

Cale justified that anticipation completely. “Well, I’ll take care of this situation for you.” Cale’s excitement was palpable to Witira; she’d never seen such a look in his eyes before. He pointed to the swamp and said tersely, “I’ll just destroy it.”

“What…?” Witira looked at the black swamp. The *very large* black swamp. *He’s going to do what to it?*

As she stared blankly at the swamp, Cale went on, “No need to overthink it.” She looked back at him. He still wore a grin, brimming with elation. “I’ll get rid of it for you. Strike a deal with me.”

Cale mulled over what he was about to do. This was the Dark Forest; nothing he did would come off as unusual. He could

call anything that happened an accident, feigning ignorance of its cause.

Witira couldn't possibly turn him down. "Yes, let's strike a deal, Lord Cale."

Once they'd agreed to a second deal, Cale assured her, "I don't need anything from you right now."

"Well, do let me know whenever a condition occurs to you. I'll accept it as long as it's reasonable to both parties. I, Witira, promise you that personally—so no need to fret."

Cale nodded casually. Even if she didn't do anything for him, that would be fine. The dragon's bones and Ancient Powers were enough reason to try this. "By the way, anything that comes out of the swamp belongs to me."

Handing over the dragon's bones disappointed Witira, but she decided not to be greedy. "All right."

The Whale Tribe ruled because they were strong both on land and in the sea. However, water was also their weakness. They'd have difficulty surviving in the swamp if the water and mud were poisonous.

Hearing Witira's response, Cale decided to proceed right away. He stood at the edge of the swamp and waved at the rest of the group. "Back up!"

That only served to confuse them.

Since his companions wouldn't listen, Cale sternly repeated himself; he wanted to get to work right away. "Back into the forest and stay there! Don't come out until I tell you to." Opening the magic bag, he added, "If you shrug me off, you could get poisoned or hurt."

Faseton, who'd been listening quietly, asked, "Are you going to do this alone, Lord Cale?"

"He's not alone," the black dragon replied on Cale's behalf.

Faseton turned toward the dragon's voice, then flinched. He could clearly see mana vibrations surrounding the creature, floating around him like waves. The dragon had found the perfect opportunity to show off his strength.

"The two of us will take care of it. Go wait over there."

“I really can’t figure you out, Lord Cale…”

Cale let Witira’s comment go in one ear and out the other. He patted Ohn’s and Hong’s heads. The red kitten’s ears and tail drooped.

“You two stay over there as well. Ohn, take good care of him. I’ll bring you some swamp poison, Hong. Just wait for me.”

Hong bobbed his head, then approached the black dragon. “Don’t get hurt. Be careful.”

The black dragon nodded, keeping still as Hong’s front paws patted him. “I will.”

Cale noted that the kids were getting along well. He took an empty bottle from his magic bag, throwing it to Faseton. “Fill that bottle with swamp water. It’s magic, so it won’t break.”

Faseton gazed at Cale in admiration. “How’d you prepare for this?”

Cale ignored the whale’s fawning and rummaged through the magic bag. It looked small on the outside, but it was very spacious.

Once Faseton had filled the vessel with mud and swamp water, he brought it back. “The bottle’s full, Lord Cale.”

“Wait over there, then.”

As Cale told Faseton and the others to move back, Witira hesitated. At the kittens’ urgings, though, she retreated to the forest.

The black dragon confirmed that everyone was far enough away to be safe, then flew up to Cale. “What are you planning to…?” Seeing what Cale removed from his magic bag, the dragon fell silent. When Cale smiled gently at him, he remarked, “You look a little smart right now, human.”

“Nah.”

In Cale’s hands were two magic bombs. These were different from what he’d used on the Uvar territory coast, which had been designed to explode several times. The ones Cale now grasped were the stronger, more destructive devices the Kingdom of the Whipper’s anti-mage faction used in the novels when they launched their final attack.

“I was debating when to use these. Guess the opportunity’s finally here.” Cale handed the two magic bombs to the black dragon. “Go nuts.”

“Can I really?” The black dragon’s mana visibly fluctuated, showing how badly he wanted to use his full strength.

“Don’t ask something so obvious,” Cale said curtly. “Make sure you don’t hurt *me*, of course.”

The black dragon smiled. *Swiiish.* A gust of wind picked up, the dragon at its center. It was natural power; the mana was triggering the air nearby.

Feeling like the gale would push him backward, Cale quickly summoned the Unbreakable Shield. At the same time, shields appeared around him one by one, for three shields in total.

“You need at least that many to make sure you aren’t hurt,” the black dragon said with confidence, eyes sparkling.

Dragons’ personalities really were completely different from whales’. Rather than loving peace, dragons preferred to rule through fear and destruction. They were self-centered, violent creatures.

Once the dragon finished preparing the bombs and looked over, Cale pointed at the black swamp. “Destroy it.”

Chapter 14:
Not Like This

THE MANA IN THE BLACK SWAMP fluctuated, and the air around them rippled in kind. The black dragon was in the sky, looking down. He really *was* a dragon.

A violent, ominous aura overwhelmed the swamp. Cale glanced back at the boundary between the black swamp and the forest. Though the dragon was keeping that boundary under control, their companions were pale-faced as they watched and waited.

Cale recalled the description of an average dragon's strength in *Birth of a Hero*.

The Whale Tribe was said to be capable of surviving their encounters with dragons, but survival was the most they could manage against those greater beings. There was nothing a dragon couldn't kill if it really wanted to. One only needed to witness their strength firsthand to see why dragons declared themselves supreme.

Hearing explosions, Cale returned his attention to the sky. Strands of mana clashed as they gathered around the black dragon. The dragon himself calmly surveyed the swamp, bearing no resemblance to the four-year-old raised in a cage. *A dragon doesn't need to dominate. It* is *dominance.*

Cale felt goosebumps form on his arm.

"Hooooo!"

"Kyaaak!"

Wsh!

"Kiririri!"

A clamor broke out in the forest. Cale didn't see any other creatures, but their cries sounded from within the woods. While the monsters hadn't feared the black dragon before, they now screeched at the top of their lungs in fear.

‹They're so loud.›

Hearing the black dragon speak his mind, Cale locked eyes with him. The two magic bombs already floated in the air, but the black dragon's eyes were empty; this was all trivial to him.

"Ha!" The corners of Cale's lips rose higher and higher. The black dragon's tiny body was emanating an overwhelming dominance that far outstripped that of the Whale Tribe's great humpback, Witira.

"Do it quickly!" Cale called out. "They're loud to me too!"

‹I knew you'd say that.› The black dragon finally smiled, his unique black mana surrounding him.

Rumble, rumble.

The ground undulated, creating vibrations underfoot. *Incredible.* Awed as Cale was, he didn't have the luxury of watching it for long. The black mana disappeared, replaced by a large, bright orb looming above the black swamp.

Crackle!

Rays as bright as the sun shone from the orb, making the air around it shimmer. Cale gulped.

Fssssh.

The wind whooshed as the dragon's black mana flew into the two magic bombs. *Click. Click.* The devices' countdowns started. The two bombs were designed to cover as much ground as possible, and the orb looked like a giant meteor. *Rather than destroying the swamp, they'll obliterate it.* Cale wondered whether the dragon corpse would be intact but couldn't bring himself to ask.

‹I'm doing it.›

Once the black dragon said that, Cale couldn't see anything else.

Booooom!

He clapped his hands over his ears as the Dark Forest rumbled. "Ugh!"

The ground shook; Cale stumbled, but he didn't close his eyes. The world turned black. Swamp water shot into the sky,

which shone with a dazzling light.

A bone-chilling screech rang in his ears. As the light touched the black fluid, it seemed to crack. Light and liquid engulfed each other. Raising his head, Cale saw a luminous black pillar soar into the sky, making it look like night and day all at once. Yet it was over as quickly as it had come, as the light and pillar turned to dust and vanished like the wind.

Crackle. Cale's final shield cracked. The other two had already done so without a sound, but Cale was unhurt.

The black swamp had dissipated, but everything else remained the same. Cale turned to see that Faseton had fallen on his behind with the kittens in his arms. Witira gripped a tree trunk to climb back to her feet. There was deep fear in both whales' eyes. The forest was unharmed; only the swamp had disappeared. That showed the dragon's amazing degree of control, which was why wariness hung on in the whales' expressions.

Cale faced forward once more and saw the dragon where the black pillar had disappeared. He was watching Cale, waiting.

"You did well," Cale told the tiny creature.

In that moment, all five of the dragon's senses were on high alert; he could see that Cale had goosebumps on his arms despite his smile.

"Really well."

The dragon also noticed the calm look in Cale's eyes, which brought a grin to his reptilian face. "That was refreshing," he said honestly.

That sobered Cale right up. The dragon really did look refreshed; Cale swore never to anger him. Even Ron, Choi Han, and Vicross weren't this dangerous. Cale had too many powerhouses in his circle to be proud of trouncing a couple of small monsters.

Grasping the dragon's dominant nature only reaffirmed Cale's desire to live a peaceful life. He scrutinized the newly visible base of the swamp. Most of the black water was gone, although some remained here and there. Nestled at the bottom

was a heap of black mud the size of an adult dragon, looking like a clay sculpture.

"It's shaped like a dragon," Cale muttered. He noticed a white crown on what would've been the creature's head. It was the Ancient Power. "Mind if *I* run wild?"

"Don't ask something so obvious," the black dragon retorted.

"Thanks."

Not noticing the black dragon flinch, Cale headed toward the draconic mud heap. If he cleared that mud away, he'd probably find the dragon's bones. *If I get those* and *the Ancient Power, now that's the jackpot!*

He grinned, palms itching with excitement.

Fwoosh! The Unbreakable Shield appeared in front of him. Whirlwinds roared to life in each of his hands. They grew as large as they could, with gales swirling below his feet as well. These winds—generated by one of Cale's Ancient Powers—gathered together.

With a loud *splurch*, black mud shot toward Cale as if seeking to swallow him whole. It was then that Cale heard the owner of the Ancient Power. This wasn't a location-based Ancient Power after all; someone had left it behind.

"Do you know what it means to dominate?"

The cold voice seemed to pierce Cale's skin, making his heart race. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Suddenly, his body zoomed forward. *Fwoosh! Fwoosh!* The whirlwinds in his hands zipped out like arrows, blazing a path through the black mud. Cale hurried down that path, his shield and wings warding off the black mud.

"To dominate is to take away everything, even the enemy's breath."

Thump. Thump. His heart pounded madly every time he heard that voice, as though fearful of it.

His heart's wild beat made Cale bite his lip. "Ugh!"

Fwisssh.

Those arrow-like whirlwinds cut through the black mud again. The dominating, mature voice of the Ancient Power's owner continued speaking in his mind.

"Do you know the easiest way to take away your enemy's breath?"

Fssssh. Fwisssh.

Whirlwinds poured out of Cale's hands, clearing the way for him. The black mud surrounded him, enveloping him in darkness. Still, Cale strode down the whirlwinds' path.

He heard the voice again. **"The answer is fear."**

Cale smirked. *Fear? Yeah, right.* Cale—no, Kim Roksu—had overcome all sorts of fears. He'd needed to because he wanted to live. Moreover, he wanted to live a happier, more peaceful life than anyone else. Humans already lived in dread over the mysterious future.

A combined whirlwind bigger and stronger than all those before it extended the path.

Fwisssh!

"Nonsense."

Domination? Fear? Cale didn't care about those. All he cared about was how things benefited him. He rushed down the path he'd created.

"Mwa ha ha ha! You're right. It is nonsense. You already knew."

Then Cale spotted it. He could see the white dragon's skull, as well as the white crown on its head. He reached out toward the crown, and his fingertips touched the tip of a jewel set in it.

Flash!

"Use it well!"

Bright light shot out of the crown, evaporating the black mud. The crown flew over to Cale. He closed his eyes, only to hear a different, more reassuring voice.

"Sometimes even bluffing can save your life. Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!"

Cale felt another power wrap around his heart, which was thrumming something fierce. *Thump. Thump*. He could immediately tell what the power was, and a flabbergasted look stole across his face.

"What the hell is this…?"

He opened his eyes. All the black mud covering the dragon had disappeared; its corpse had revealed itself.

The black dragon rushed over to Cale, seeming utterly confused. "Why do you seem as strong as the tip of my claw, human? You're still weak. What's going on?"

Cale smirked. "My charisma increased."

"What are you babbling about now, human?" The black dragon was incredulous, but Cale spoke the truth.

Cale had learned this Ancient Power's name: *Dominating Aura.* Cheesy, yes, but that was what it was. Only the user's aura became stronger—pretty modest, given the ornate crown that had contained it.

"It's a perfect power for scamming people," he mused.

"Scamming people is bad," the dragon admonished him, frowning.

Cale ignored the black dragon and faced the rest of their group. They stood far away, hesitating to approach him. Lifting the Dominating Aura, he beckoned them over. The entire forest was quiet and still, as if all the creatures' shrieking had never occurred. Cale broke the silence. "Come over here."

His deep voice made the kittens, who were covering their ears and faces, turn their heads abruptly. They scurried over—and ran right past Cale to check on the dragon. Once they got near him, they slowed down.

"H-he doesn't look injured!"

"We were so scared! We couldn't let our youngest friend get hurt!"

The kittens circled the dragon, confirming he was fine, then approached him and patted his back.

"This little guy is the best!"

“You’re so strong! So cool!”

Cale made sure that the dragon would stay gentle with the kittens, then looked toward the whale siblings, who still hadn’t moved. The dragon drew closer, and he patted him with a smile on his face. Simultaneously, he asked the whale siblings, “You can’t move?”

His quiet question echoed in their ears. Witira unclenched her fists. The moment the black mud covering the dragon bones had disappeared, Cale had looked very different. He didn’t look like that now, of course; he was most certainly a weak human she could kill with a single lash of her whip.

It’s not his strength that changed.

Though it had only been for a moment, Cale had reminded her of her father, the Whale King. Not in terms of his strength but rather a demeanor that belonged solely to those in power.

“Lord Cale…”

The whale siblings finally approached him, and Cale examined them carefully. “I trust you two aren’t hurt?”

“We aren’t.” Seeing that Cale was back to his usual self, Witira said nothing about her observation.

Cale looked away from them to the black dragon. “Detect any traces of mana?”

“Not anymore.”

Since the black liquid and mud had disappeared, the stagnant mana had gone along with them. All that was left were the sturdy dragon bones, which were both highly resistant to magic and capable of it.

“You can store these bones, then,” Cale told the dragon.

“All right.”

Cale looked down toward the kittens rubbing their faces on his calf. Once they made eye contact with him, they batted Cale’s feet with their paws.

“We thought something bad would happen. Why do you always step up when you’re the weakest?”

“You just have to leave things to our little brother. He can’t get hurt either, though!”

Tuning out the kittens’ scoldings, Cale told the group, “Let’s go home.”

They had to return to the Henituse estate.

***

Cale returned home a few days later—two days later than expected.

As soon as he made it back, Hans had a message for him. “Lord Cale! His Highness the crown prince reached out to you. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Cale answered vaguely, but he couldn’t hide the smirk on his face. “Something mutually beneficial.” This would be a great chance to steal the biggest treasure possible during the Kingdom of the Whipper’s civil war.

Hans delivered another piece of information. “Oh, and Choi Han sent word that he’s coming back from Brek.”

Huh?

“Lark’s returning with him. Miss Rosalyn as well.”

“What?”

This soon? Did they just destroy the Kingdom of Brek?

Though he’d only just made it home, Cale was already frowning up a storm.

“What of your guards, my lord? I hear that the vice-captain and the wolf children will remain in Harris?”

Cale wrinkled his nose at Hans’s endless barrage of questions.

The deputy butler paid it no heed. Picking up Ohn and Hong, he pressed, “You said the vice-captain is hanging back to investigate the Dark Forest?”

Vice-Captain Hilsmann knew what caused the explosion in the Dark Forest, since Cale had explained it to him. But the

official story was that he'd taken up his post there to look into the explosion. They were keeping Cale's involvement a secret.

"I'll take care of these minor duties for now, Lord Cale, but I won't stay in this role forever."

Cale quickly put Hilsmann's comment out of his mind. It had been useless chatter, anyway.

"I don't need that brother and sister anymore either. I let them go at the estate entrance."

The whale siblings had split off from him there. Naturally, they'd brought the swamp water bottle with them, although Cale had taken half its contents.

Hong and Ohn's tails swished in anticipation; they were going to get stronger soon.

"Hans?"

"Yes, my lord?"

With some reluctance, Cale asked, "Did the crown prince say when to contact him?"

"Immediately," Hans replied firmly. "That was what he said."

The redhead smirked. *Albert must be really anxious.*

"Then let's get to it," he said coolly.

***

Cale sat down on the couch and crossed his legs. Henituse territory's video communication mage peered at him.

"Is it ready?" Cale demanded.

"Uh, y-yes!" The mage gulped. "You can speak with His Highness now." He studied Cale—the very person the nation's crown prince was looking for. Compared to his own nervousness, the lout seemed very serene.

"You can head out now, then."

The mage hurriedly bowed and left, glancing back a few times in curiosity. As soon as he exited, Cale started the call. A face appeared on the translucent orb before him.

Cale launched into his greetings right away. “It’s my great honor to speak with the leading light of the nation, the wonderf—”

“Enough.” The crown prince cut him off, as if Cale’s words chilled him to the bone.

With a sly smirk, Cale acquiesced. Albert calmly observed him. The count’s son was sitting in a leisurely yet respectful way.

The crown prince got straight to the point. “They made an absolute mess in Brek.”

Cale’s smile widened. He’d been waiting for this conversation. Why else would he have rushed to make the call? It wasn’t like he enjoyed seeing Albert’s face. *I know the crown prince’s information network is the most accurate, though.*

He sat there quietly and kept on smiling, as if nothing were amiss. Things would take care of themselves.

“Since you aren’t saying anything, I guess you’re aware of what happened.”

As Cale expected, he didn’t need to utter a word for Albert to clarify.

“Princess Rosalyn seems to have buckled down,” Albert continued. “How else could she obliterate a grand duke’s entire family in a single day?”

Cale’s heart somersaulted at the word “obliterate,” but he didn’t let it show. He could tell that Albert was watching him carefully, needling Cale to see what he’d find out.

“She gave up her claim to the throne too,” the prince added.

Rosalyn had abandoned her claim to the throne, as she had in the novel. It was time for her to show her true nature as a mage.

“I heard that two very strong individuals were with her,” Albert went on. “No one else might know who they were, but I do.” The crown prince had excellent deductive skills. His sharp gaze locked on Cale. “Aren’t they your subordinates?”

Cale answered truthfully. “My *subordinates*? No.”

Rosalyn's companions were Choi Han and Lark. They weren't Cale's subordinates. Choi Han had nothing to do with him, and he'd merely struck a deal with Lark.

The prince's lips slowly curled into a smile. He leaned back on his own couch in a similar fashion to Cale and murmured, "You sly fox."

Cale couldn't disagree.

Albert shook his head at Cale's lack of reaction before asking, "Why do you *want* the Magic Tower?"

The crown prince no longer tried to beat around the bush or cajole him.

Cale donned a somber expression. "Your Highness…" He sat up, which prompted Albert to sit up in kind. "Every so often, I'm reminded that you and I are very similar."

The crown prince grimaced. "What a terrible thought."

"Agreed." Cale brushed aside the crown prince's disdain. "Now, I would argue that Rowoon as a kingdom lacks distinction."

Silence settled over the room. Had the mage outside heard what Cale said, he might've fainted. Yet Albert smiled, as Cale had expected. The crown prince seemed to have taken the bait.

"No longer going to watch your tongue?"

"Aren't you smiling, though, Your Highness?"

"Well, it is the truth."

The crown prince didn't disagree with Cale's criticism of Rowoon. Neither the knights nor the mages of the kingdom were very strong. Although the nation had a long history, it was average in every respect. While that would be fine during peacetime, that unfailing mediocrity would fall short during times of chaos. They needed at least one strength.

Still, that wasn't something they could easily create in a short time. Addressing such a major issue would take decades if they were lucky—perhaps even centuries, as the evidence suggested. That was why he had made up his mind to take it from someone else—take another kingdom's strength away, and make it Rowoon's. And tempting prey had appeared in front of

his eyes, since the Kingdom of the Whipper had been synonymous with mages in the past.

Cale and Albert held each other's gazes, wearing similar smirks.

"You astute bastard," Albert remarked.

It was Cale's turn to speak. "The Magic Tower for me. And for you, Your Highness..."

"Mages," they said in unison.

After a few moments of dead air, Albert covered his eyes with his hand and laughed.

"Ha ha! Interesting. At first, I was appalled that there was someone else like me." He continued to snicker for a while before removing his hand and adding, "I'll give you whatever you need."

He waited for Cale's response, which wound up being rather short. "Thank you very much."

Cale's confident attitude piqued the prince's interest. "But why do you want the Magic Tower?" he pressed, scrutinizing Cale again.

He really is tough to handle, but he's got no reason to be so worried, Cale thought. *I'm sure he wants to know if I've found out about the north.*

In *Birth of a Hero*, the northernmost kingdom and its knights were a source of concern for Rowoon. Albert was wary of that kingdom, preparing for its invasion.

War was a time of chaos, and chaos provided opportunities to those who were prepared. The mages fleeing the Kingdom of the Whipper created one such opportunity. The crown prince, who didn't have much influence in Rowoon, could use them to bolster his power and increase his influence in the kingdom.

If Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu—had read past the fifth volume of *Birth of a Hero*, he probably would've known more about two powerful characters who seemed to be developing into new heroes. One was a knight from the north.

The other new hero is probably going to be this crown prince right here. Especially since the black dragon had told him Albert

wasn’t human.

Cale smiled. The crown prince was trying to figure out whether he wanted the Magic Tower because he knew of the north’s movements. “I just want to own a Magic Tower,” he insisted.

Albert saw the look on Cale’s face and shook his head. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Why do you need those mages?”

The prince’s smirk was the spitting image of Cale’s. “I just want to give them a home.”

Both excuses were terrible, but neither called the other out. Both men reclined casually like they were posing for a painting, just continuing to chat.

“When will you head out?”

“I plan to go in about a month.”

One month from now, Cale would finish his preparations and set off for the Kingdom of the Whipper. By the time he arrived, the civil war would be nearly over. Tunka’s stupid face seemed to shine gold in Cale’s mind.

“How will you get there?”

“By ship.”

“And your guards?”

Guards. That word made Cale smile wider.

Albert realized his mistake. “I suppose that was a useless question. Your body’s still weak, Cale. Make sure you’re careful. You know what to do, right?”

“Bring back anything and everything good.”

“Sometimes we really are on the same page for no reason.”

Although Cale and Albert were very different, the smirks on their faces were still so similar.

***

Three weeks later, Cale slowly opened his eyes and wriggled. Rolling across his large bed, he yawned. It was 3:00 p.m., but he was just getting up. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the ceiling.

“He woke up an hour later today! I win!”

“The little fella wins again. I really don’t know why he keeps waking up later and later.”

The black dragon and Hong looked back and forth between Cale and the clock, chattering away. Cale’s right hand rubbed his belly. He was only getting up because he was hungry.

“Ah… To be rich enough not to have to work.”

This was the definition of happiness.

For the past three weeks, Cale hadn’t really gotten anything done. He’d thought up a name for the dragon but asked for another month to consider it. He’d ordered other people to prepare everything he needed for the trip. He slept early and woke up late every day, then loafed around the house. It was great that his family kept telling him to rest and recuperate. He listened to them and did absolutely nothing.

Then his idyllic days abruptly came to an end.

“It looks like Choi Han is back, human,” the black dragon whispered in Cale’s ear.

“Great. I’ve been so bored lately.” He smiled, then sat up in bed with a stoic expression.

Choi Han’s group *was* supposed to arrive today. It was already three o’clock, so they were probably waiting for him by now. Cale stretched, then got out of bed. These past three weeks of doing nothing had made him even more dead set on his goal. *I’ll make enough money to do nothing forever.*

His eyes shimmered with resolve. He’d take care of the Kingdom of the Whipper and the Queen of the Jungle all at once so he could sit around doing nothing again. Mind made up, he headed into the bathroom.

Once the black dragon saw the door close, he approached Hong. “The weak human’s eyes are only full of spirit when he’s going somewhere.”

“You’re right. I’m glad I’m stronger now. I can make sure he doesn’t get hurt!”

Ohn, who’d been listening in, pulled a face. She thought about how Cale smiled as he rolled across the bed and muttered, “Are you sure his eyes are full of *spirit*?”

“Yes. I’m right.”

“They definitely are, Sister.”

“Hmm. I guess so,” Ohn relented, grooming her fur. Both her and her brother’s coats were much brighter now.

The three sat around, waiting for Cale to reemerge. They were looking forward to leaving the house again after being indoors for so long. Contrary to their expectations, however, Cale headed to the study with a stoic expression. He pushed back his damp red hair as he sat and faced his three guests, then sipped the tea that Hans had given him.

“It’s been some time,” he said, looking at the ever-deadpan Choi Han and the ever-shy Lark. After greeting them, he faced the redheaded girl. “Princess Rosalyn. It’s been quite a long time, Your Highness.”

Rosalyn smiled, sounding refreshed as she said, “You can’t call me ‘Princess’ anymore. I’ve been disowned by the royal family.”

“Is that so…?”

“Yes. I’ve even been removed from the family records!” she replied, delighted. “I no longer have a surname.”

Cale turned away from her, casually responding, “I guess I can just keep calling you Miss Rosalyn, then.”

Her red eyes were fixed on Cale. Although she’d *chosen* to give up her claim to the throne rather than being written off, people still gave her looks of pity these days. Seeing Cale act so normally around her gave her room to reply at ease.

“Yes, just like before,” she agreed. “You can keep treating me as you have too.”

Cale nodded without even looking at her. That was enough to convince Rosalyn she’d done the right thing by coming back with Choi Han. Cale didn’t catch her smile, since he’d already

directed his attention to Choi Han and Lark. Choi Han was sitting bolt upright, yet he seemed quite happy.

It feels like he's become even more of a "good guy."

Choi Han's eyes were so bright, he looked quite righteous. In fact, he appeared to have taken another step toward becoming a hero of justice. That good-guy vibe didn't sit well with Cale, so he focused on Lark instead. Unlike Choi Han, Lark seemed to have something to say, but he was too timid to say it. He could only sit there, fidgeting.

"Mr. Cale?"

"What?" There was no need for him to turn around. Choi Han was the only person who called him as such.

"Should I report on what happened in Brek?"

Rosalyn's gaze flicked over to Choi Han in surprise, but the hero kept his eyes locked on Cale. The lout, meanwhile, shook his head. "No. I don't think I need to know what you did for a friend."

Upon hearing Cale's response, Choi Han donned a tranquil smile. Then he said, "Yes, that's true. But please let me know if you're curious about anything. I'll tell you right away."

"No need."

Cale felt like he'd just get a headache if he knew. He didn't want to learn how they'd caused such a ruckus in the Kingdom of Brek in such a short time, nor how Rosalyn gave up her claim to the throne.

Instead, he called out to the wolf boy. "Lark."

"Um, yes?"

Although Lark was even taller than Choi Han now, he was still a bit awkward. Cale knew why the wolf was so fidgety at the moment. Hans had said that Choi Han's group arrived an hour ago. Choi Han and Rosalyn probably had a lot to do now that they were here, but it was obvious what Lark was thinking about in this unfamiliar place.

Studying Lark's bewildered face, Cale told him, "Your siblings are somewhere else right now."

Lark's face went slack. "What? All of them?"

“They’re in Harris,” Cale answered without hesitation.

Choi Han stiffened at that. Cale paid him no heed, pausing to take a sip of warm tea. As he did so, someone else interjected—deputy butler Hans. “We’re currently rebuilding Harris. It used to be a beautiful small town at the base of a mountain, but something terrible happened not long ago and burned it down.”

Mountain. Beautiful small town. Rebuilding. Burned it down. As Lark heard those words, a single image filled his mind—his village, which had likewise been reduced to ash and rubble.

“We’re creating a proper cemetery too.” That got Choi Han’s attention. Hans looked at Cale and added, “The young master was adamant about that.”

Scowling, Cale set his teacup back on the table with a *clink*. “I wasn’t *adamant* about it.”

“Was that not the first thing you’d ever asked of the count regarding Henituse territory, Lord Cale? It was the first time I ever saw you concern yourself with the area’s administration.”

“It was nothing,” Cale said, gesturing for Hans to drop the subject.

Hans shut up quickly yet seemed antsy, as though he still had a lot to say.

Cale ignored that. He looked at Lark, who was deep in thought. “Lark.”

“Yes?”

“Go see your siblings and where they’re living right now.” Cale turned away again. Lark was gaping at him, but he knew the young wolf would understand. He was a sharp kid. Cale then called out to Lark’s still-stiff companion. “Choi Han.”

As usual, Choi Han was observing Cale in silence. A lot had happened in Brek, but he’d taken care of it all quickly in order to return home. Cale’s voice echoed in his ears.

“Lark doesn’t know the way to Harris, so guide him there. Go give your regards as well.”

Regards. He didn’t need to ask whom to direct those to. Choi Han gently clenched his fists, then reopened them. He had

to quell his turbulent emotions. Harris, which had been razed to the ground, would be very different now.

Cale told the trio one final thing: “You may go. And it’s fine for you to leave now, Miss Rosalyn.”

After dealing with them for the first time in a while, Cale was exhausted. It felt like his delicious three weeks of leisure had vanished into thin air.

Lark and Rosalyn slowly followed Hans out of Cale’s study. Choi Han waited until they’d all left before rising to his feet. He bowed deeply. “Thank you very much, Mr. Cale.” After lifting his head back up, Choi Han chuckled at Cale’s annoyed sneer.

“I don’t need your thanks. Just get out.”

Choi Han did as he was told and headed for the door. Watching him go, Cale picked up his teacup. He heard Choi Han stop, doorknob in hand, and ask, “I hear from Mr. Hans that you’re heading to the Kingdom of the Whipper?”

“Yes,” Cale said curtly. “We’ll be going right away once you’re back from the village, so pack your bags.”

“Yes, sir.”

Choi Han wore an invigorated smile on his face, but it disappeared as he turned the doorknob.

Click.

As the door opened, he added, “Bob, was it?”

“How do you know about Bob?”

It had been a while since Cale heard mention of Tunka’s alias, “Bob.” Had Hans told Choi Han about Tunka? Cale eyed him with curiosity, but he could only see Choi Han’s back as he stood at the threshold.

In that distinctly sincere voice of his, Choi Han replied, “Mr. Vicross told me he almost hurt you.”

Why would Vicross say something like that? Recalling the incident, Cale responded, “*Hurt* me? I didn’t get hurt. Just hit by water and gravel.”

“I see.”

Choi Han said nothing else as he walked out of the study. Hans crossed paths with him on his way back in. Upon making eye contact with Choi Han, Hans stopped in his tracks and stood there blankly.

“What is it?” Cale asked.

“Huh? Oh, uh, nothing. Nothing at all.” Frantically waving it off, Hans watched Choi Han depart before entering the study. “Lord Cale…”

“What?” Cale replied, observing Hans’s pale face.

“Did you fight with Mr. Choi Han?”

“Me?! What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ha ha! Of course you didn’t! It’s nothing.”

Cale stared at Hans, who was acting strange, but said what he needed to say regardless. After all, he still had to give Hans orders. “We’ll leave in about ten days, so get everything ready.”

“Understood, my lord. I’ll work hard!”

Cale continued to gawk, but the newly invigorated Hans rushed out of the study. Now left alone in the room, Cale looked at the calendar.

The Magic Tower’s last guardian, he remembered, had abdicated his position and fled.

“This will be my first time seeing a dwarf,” he murmured.

To buy the Magic Tower while it was still intact, he’d need to meet the dwarf whose family had protected it for generations. Cale smiled.

That dwarf wasn’t just any dwarf, but rather a half-ratfolk man named Müller. The small rat had the worst, shabbiest death in *Birth of a Hero.* The rats’ unique nature meant he was as short as a dwarf and looked feeble, without any muscles. He really was tiny.

Cale left the study and made for his chambers. Thinking about how to catch that runaway rat, he sought out Ohn, Hong, and the black dragon, who were probably playing in the bedroom right now.

Ten days would pass very quickly.

***

Just as Cale expected, the week flew by. As he had been a week ago, however, the lout was lazing on his couch, sinking into the back cushions. He sighed openly as he reclined there, frowning. Choi Han and Lark had just returned from their one-week trip. And though the two of them had left Rosalyn here, they'd come back with company.

"Lord Cale."

Vice-Captain Hilsmann had tagged along, and he looked quite different. The man usually dressed to suit his position, yet he now wore shabby leather armor and had a few facial injuries. *I told him to focus on restoring Harris,* Cale thought. The vice-captain had seemingly gone beyond the call of duty.

"I've returned," he declared.

Cale didn't know why Hilsmann was speaking with sheer admiration. He avoided engaging with the vice-captain, since Hilsmann wasn't the only one who'd come back with Choi Han and Lark.

"We wanted to see you, Lord Cale!"

"Lord Cale! We're here too!"

"Hello, Lord Cale! Have you been well?"

Ten wolf children spoke to him all at once. Maes and the others peered at him with innocent eyes and wide smiles, but they gave off a very different impression than before. Multiple bandages wrapped the children's various injuries. Something outside Cale's expectations had clearly happened in Harris.

"You never mentioned when we should come back, so we came with Lark," Maes said on his siblings' behalf.

Cale held back a sigh. *I didn't tell you because you didn't* have *to come back.*

Since the wolf children had already arrived, Cale couldn't tell them to leave. He just nodded and turned to Choi Han and Lark.

“Pack your bags,” he ordered the pair. “We’ll leave in two days.”

The response came from elsewhere.

“Yes, sir!”

The vice-captain and wolf children—eleven people total—responded energetically, making Cale feel as though he were looking at a veteran knight brigade. Choi Han and Lark watched the young wolves with satisfaction—particularly Choi Han, who wore the look of a proud mentor.

Cale grimaced. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

***

Cale’s unease hung on until he arrived at the dinner table. There, he said but a single sentence: “I’ll be visiting the Kingdom of the Whipper for a bit.”

Clang!

Lilly’s spoon fell to the ground. Cale turned to look at his seven-year-old stepsister, only to see her face was pale. The corners of her lips quivered.

She didn’t even think about picking up her spoon as she mumbled, “But my teacher said the Kingdom of the Whipper’s really scary right now, and people die every day… Nobles have to hide, and it’s hard to even find good food!” Her emotions grew stronger the more she spoke. Staring at Cale, she scowled. “You can’t even sleep in peace! That’s what my teacher said!”

“You may not,” Deruth sternly interjected.

Cale gaped at Deruth in confusion. Albert had promised to assist with his travels to the Kingdom of the Whipper so he could arrive safely and stealthily.

“We’ll tell your family you’re doing my bidding. There’s no need to inform them about anything like the mages or Magic Tower, is there?”

“Of course not. Secrecy’s best. I only want my family and Uvar territory’s ruler to know I’m traveling.”

“Naturally. I’ll prepare everything.”

After that conversation, Albert had immediately informed Deruth that he’d tasked Cale with a secret mission.

“Father, it’s an order from the crown prince.”

Good-natured, average-looking Deruth grimaced deeply. “That doesn’t matter.”

Cale looked at Bassen—who was stiff, as though time had frozen—and then at the only person who seemed calm: Violan.

Once they made eye contact, she asked casually, “Is this your decision?”

“Yes. I wish to go.”

“Cale.”

“Yes?”

Violan put her spoon down. “You know that it’s dangerous there?”

“Yes,” Cale replied lightly.

He would be fine with Choi Han, the black dragon, Rosalyn, and Lark in tow. Even Hilsmann and the ten wolf children were begging to accompany him. He doubted he’d be in any danger.

“Cale, just remember one thing. I’m always worried about you, my son. We all worry about you. However…” Violan’s gaze sharpened. “We don’t care about this kingdom at all.”

Deruth let out a fake cough. “Ahem! Dear, we need the kingdom to be safe for our family to be safe as well.”

Violan ignored him, repeating her question. “*Is* this your decision?”

“I’m a golden turtle,” Cale responded immediately.

The count recalled what he’d said to his son not long ago. *“A strong shield can protect anything. But remember that the most important thing is protecting yourself.”* He looked at Cale, who seemed at ease.

“Using my sturdy shell to protect myself is my priority,” Cale continued. “I am a Henituse, after all.”

Cale would put his own safety first. He'd only step onto a battlefield if he had the strongest person on the field next to him and victory was assured.

"You don't need to worry." His voice was full of certainty, his eyes brimming with confidence.

Violan smiled. "All right, I understand. But I don't think I can stop worrying. That's what it means to be a parent."

There really wasn't a reason to worry, but Cale nodded anyway.

As they resumed their meal, Deruth kept his mouth shut. Since he wasn't telling Cale that he couldn't go, it seemed he'd accepted this as well.

"They think the fact that we've been lying low for a while means we'll do anything they order us to," the count muttered to himself, roughly chewing a piece of meat now and then.

Seeing that his family no longer opposed him, Cale peacefully concentrated on his meal once more. He focused so intensely, in fact, that he didn't notice what happened next: Deruth and Violan exchanged a meaningful look. He also didn't know that after dinner, the count ordered Hans to secretly gather any and all information related to the crown prince and the Kingdom of the Whipper, no matter the cost.

Cale finished the fine meal and left the dining room. Then he heard someone running after him, although that violated noble etiquette. Bassen and Lilly had chased after Cale.

"Bassen?"

"Brother, must you go?"

"Essentially." He didn't *need* to, but he'd simply prefer a decade of peaceful days over a single year. His siblings remained quiet as he added, "You two need to focus on your studies and training. I can only travel around because you're here holding down the fort."

Cale was always content to know that Bassen would be the territory's next count and Lilly the commanding officer of its military. At least then they wouldn't act out the typical drama of the eldest son and more talented younger son fighting for the heir position.

He turned away from his siblings; he still had a lot to prepare. As he walked off, he spoke to the pair again. “I’ll bring you both souvenirs from the Kingdom of the Whipper.”

Cale didn’t see Bassen and Lilly focus their gazes on him, then exchange glances with each other and nod. He had no idea that his younger siblings had already made their own decisions about their future occupations.

***

A few days later, Cale was happy to be boarding the ship at exactly the time he’d planned.

Someone called out to him. “Lord Cale!”

Cale looked toward the source of the voice. “Lady Amir.”

Amir observed Cale, who was relaxed as ever. The head of the Uvar family had already boarded the same vessel as the crown prince, so as soon as she’d received Prince Albert’s orders, Amir had ordered them to prepare the largest, strongest ship.

“I hope you’ll return safely without getting injured this time, Lord Cale.”

“Same here.” He had absolutely no plans to get hurt.

Still, Amir frowned as though she didn’t believe him. “I don’t understand why His Highness would send you to that dangerous place when you just finished recuperating. But perhaps he’s sending you because he trusts you.”

Trust? His expression went stiff. The crown prince wasn’t the type to trust anyone. Cale had no qualms about voicing his thoughts. “You think? I’m not so sure. He didn’t seem to trust me much at all.”

At Cale’s bitter smile, Amir cried, “Of course! If it means anything, Lord Cale, *I* trust you.”

“Uh, yes, well… Thank you very much, Lady Amir.”

Despite her usually calm demeanor, Amir responded so fiercely that Cale couldn’t say anything else. He started walking;

they had to leave on time, since he had people he needed to meet.

"Lord Ca—"

"I'll be on my way now, Lady Amir."

Amir had other things to say, but she pressed her lips together. The sight of Cale standing there, coolly pushing back his locks tousled by the ocean breeze, was reassuring to behold. When Amir didn't delay him further, he boarded the ship in a pleasant mood.

From the deck, he saw that the village was very busy with construction. More whirlpools had disappeared to boot, creating a safe path wide enough for a large ship. *The other whirlpools are still the same, though.*

Cale turned his gaze back to the deck and heaved a sigh. How had he ended up saddled with so many people? First there were Choi Han, Lark, and Rosalyn. Then Ohn and Hong, who were trembling above the water, yet they'd been adamant about coming with him. Hans was next to the kittens. Finally, there was Vice-Captain Hilsmann, whose pallor had worsened the moment he stepped aboard the ship; Vicross, who observed Hilsmann in silence; and the ten young wolves, who surrounded Vicross.

With this group, it'd be shocking if I got hurt. Right now, someone might even think he'd assembled them to destroy a kingdom.

‹I like the smell of the ocean.›

Why would he fear anything, especially with the black dragon coming along?

When the whole group looked at Cale, he said, "Let's go."

The blaring horn sounded their departure across the Uvar Sea. Their vessel was disguised as a trade ship—well, it wasn't *really* a disguise.

I am making a trade, after all. Not a fair trade, of course. He'd benefit and rip off the other party.

‹Don't smile like that, human. You look like you're going to scam someone again.›

Cale chose to ignore the black dragon, instead enjoying the refreshing ocean breeze. Just like that, the ship headed for the Kingdom of the Whipper's smallest port.

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Later that night, Cale was wide awake, standing on the deck. It was close to midnight, so nobody else was there. The full moon illuminated the deck, keeping the darkness at bay.

Cale planned to meet some guests here tonight. Leaning on the railing, he calmly gazed out at the sea.

"Human."

The black dragon revealed himself and approached Cale. He didn't need to stay invisible with no one else around.

"What?"

"I was just wondering..." The black dragon seemed pensive—no, *suspicious*—as he looked Cale up and down. "Is the name you're leaning toward just a single word?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The dragon seemed very concerned. "I feel like you'll pick something like 'Black' or 'Dragon.'"

"Oh, as your name?" So *that* was what he meant. Cale kept a straight face at the four-year-old's anxious question. So much so that the dragon had never seen him this serious. "Would a name like that be bad?"

The dragon's eyes widened. "Not at all!" he blurted. "I'm fine with anything! As long as you give me a name, it's fine! Don't worry!" His wings fluttered, his tail trembling as he reassured Cale emphatically.

Cale's expression instantly brightened, as though he'd never looked somber at all. "I'm glad." Then he casually added, "Ohn and Hong would've been sad if they heard you say that, Raon."

Silence settled over the deck.

"What'd you just say, human...?"

Contrary to the black dragon's expectations, Cale had actually thought a lot about his name. A name was a gift. Since Kim Roksu had to live alone, his name was the only thing his parents had given him.

"Your name is Raon," he replied.

"Raon" was a pure Korean word for "joyful."

"And your last name is Mir."

"Mir" was a pure Korean word for "dragon."

"Joyful Dragon" was a funny name, but Cale had come up with it in full sincerity. He was worried that a pure Korean name might make Choi Han suspicious, but he'd come up with an excuse for that as well.

Cale wore a calm smile the likes of which the dragon had never seen. His placid voice reached the dragon's ears. "I came up with that name in hopes that you'll be happy and live a joyful life."

"What does it mean?" the black dragon asked.

Cale pointed at the dragon. "You."

Neither "Raon" nor "Mir" were words that existed in this world. Here, those two words would only refer to one thing.

"It's you. Those are words just for you and only you."

"Only me?"

"Yes." Cale smiled as he patted the dragon's head. "Since you're a great and mighty dragon."

"Only me..." The black dragon mumbled to himself for a while, then swatted Cale's hand away from his head and stretched out his wings. They flapped wildly as he snorted. "I guess it's a useful name. I'll do you a special service and use it."

"Sure, Raon."

The dragon wrinkled his nose, the corners of his lips twitching as he flew into the air. "I'm the great and mighty Raon Mir!"

"Yes, Raon."

"Right. I'm Raon."

After four years of life, the black dragon had received a first *and* last name. Now something other than his body belonged solely to him.

The creature raised his head. He could see the darkness of the night sky; it was different from the cave's dingy interior. On a night just like this, Cale had rescued him from the cave. The black dragon—Raon—would never forget that moment, nor this one.

Like the dragon, Cale raised his head. The night sky was the same no matter where he went. As he stared blankly at the heavens, he heard Raon's voice.

"Thank you, Cale."

He whipped toward Raon in surprise. "What...?"

Raon was already back to normal, however. "How is it that you can't understand the first time, human?"

"Why not say it once more?" Cale chuckled, trying to pat Raon's head.

The dragon refused, headbutting his palm. "No! I really, truly, absolutely won't! Go inside and sleep, weak human! You'll catch a cold."

In spite of his disgruntled demeanor, Raon's wings fluttered and his tail wagged like the kittens' would. Cale snickered at him. And as he did, he was easy to make out through the darkness at sea.

"I think it'll be difficult to go back in," Cale said.

"Why will it be diff—" Raon suddenly stopped talking, looking out at the ocean. He stared at a spot far from the ship.

Splaaash.

The water parted as a large being slowly showed itself. It was a whale.

"Mr. Cale!"

At that moment, someone raced from inside the ship, running toward Cale at full speed. It was Choi Han. The young man inspected the surfacing whale with a worried expression, then made a mad dash up to Cale. Then Choi Han saw it—Cale waving him away, looking *very* annoyed.

“Hm?”

“They aren’t enemies,” Raon told Choi Han, scoffing.

“What?” Choi Han looked back at the ocean.

At the same time, Cale stopped leaning on the deck railing, bowing his head toward the ocean.

It wasn’t just one whale; three were approaching them. Cale’s guests had arrived. One was Witira, the humpback whale. Another was a killer whale. Finally…

“Greetings to the venerable Whale King.”

Cale welcomed the other humpback, the largest of the three—the Whale King.

The large eyes of the Whale King, Seakeller, fixed on Cale.

Cale smiled. *He’s overwhelming.*

Seakeller was the king of the ocean. You couldn’t compare his presence to that of the king of a small region in the Western Continent. That was why Cale was starting to grin even wider. As he smiled, Seakeller’s eyes flashed.

Cale took a step back, opening his arms. “How about we chat on deck?”

Hiss. Mist filled the air as the three whales reached the ship. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* They landed gently on deck.

At that moment, Cale heard Raon’s voice in his head. *‹Dragons are even more astoundingly beautiful and glorious!›*

Understanding Raon’s feelings, Cale patted his head. These three pure-blooded whales *were* extremely beautiful. Choi Han, meanwhile, had stiffened upon seeing the Whale Tribe members.

That guy’s completely frozen.

Following Choi Han’s gaze, Cale eyed each of the three people in front of him. The future Whale Queen, Witira, looked the same as usual. The white-haired killer whale was probably Archie, the whales’ greatest warrior. In the series, he’d had an important role during the Whale Tribe arc; he was the one who gave Lark a thrashing. Archie was violent and had a repulsive personality, but he was quite loyal.

“It’s been a while since I came down to the southern ocean.”

That mature yet striking voice made Choi Han turn his head.

Seakeller, the Whale King, wore a gentle smile. He’d been the novels’ most handsome middle-aged man. The author had poured everything into writing about the character; *Birth of a Hero* devoted no less than four passages to describing Seakeller’s appearance.

I can see why the author did that.

Still, it wasn’t like the Whale King’s appearance was worth anything to Cale. He opted to take what he could get. “The south’s much warmer, isn’t it?”

Seakeller’s eyes flashed. *He’s just as Witira described.* The Whale King’s daughter had said that Cale was weak yet strong. The young man was the least powerful person on deck, as she’d described, but he put on a convincing display of confidence.

“The south is nice as well,” Seakeller agreed. “Thank you for saving my son. I joined my daughter because I wanted to thank you personally.”

“No need. I just did what I needed to do.” With a gentle smile, Cale reached out respectfully. “Since we’re both busy people, shall we get right to the point?” After all, he thought, what would be the point of a long discussion so late at night?

“Certainly. But first…” Seakeller let out a small sigh.

Cale sighed as well, then patted Choi Han’s shoulder. “Choi Han.”

Seakeller did the same to the killer whale. “Archie.”

Archie and Choi Han had been staring each other down. What sort of beef could these two have, despite meeting for the very first time? Cale put some pressure into the hand on Choi Han’s shoulder, and the hero’s gaze flicked over to him. The Whale Tribe’s beauty had mesmerized Choi Han a moment ago, so what had him so infuriated now? If he started fighting on deck, a single slash of his sword could sink the ship.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Cale…” Choi Han bit his lip.

At that moment, someone answered Cale. As usual, it was Raon. *‹That killer whale sized you up from head to toe! How dare he!›*

Turning away from Choi Han, Cale heard Raon huff. He looked toward the white-haired man, Archie. Archie was even worse than Tunka. There were always characters on the “good” side who caused trouble, and Archie was that type of character. He only pledged his allegiance to Seakeller and didn’t care about anybody else, not even other Whale Tribe members. He was the chief mischief-maker among the whales.

Finally, Archie and Cale made eye contact. Cale held back a groan. Archie’s glare really was vicious. Why was the punk acting like this?

The answer was pretty obvious. *Probably because Seakeller had to come meet me personally.*

Archie didn’t care that Cale had saved Seakeller’s son or that he’d helped the whales with the mermaids. Peering into the spiteful eyes of someone stronger than Witira, Cale stiffened. Seakeller took note of this and whirled on Archie with a glare. He’d warned the killer whale about this multiple times, but Archie never seemed to listen.

“Archie, enou—” Seakeller stopped mid-sentence and turned his head. Looking at Cale, he recalled what Witira had said.

“Lord Cale is different, Father. It was only for a moment, but he really seemed formidable.”

Although Cale had resumed a casual posture, as if he’d never tensed up in the first place, the atmosphere around him was different. Seakeller finally understood why his daughter had called Cale strong. The count’s son fixed Archie with a gaze of unfathomable depth. Choi Han, who’d been watching from the side, unconsciously stopped scowling and called out to Cale.

“Mr. Cale…”

Cale didn’t look at him, but oddly, Choi Han felt as though that was natural.

He was staring forward, gaze dominating. Cale's aura captured everyone's attention. His demeanor was gentle and reassuring rather than powerful and threatening, yet he was still difficult to approach with the scowl on his face.

My body's reacting on its own, he noted.

The Energy of the Heart had responded to the threat Archie presented, triggering a portion of the Dominating Aura as well. Together, the two powers enabled Cale to ward off Archie's threatening pressure.

"Who are you?" Cale asked slowly.

At this rate, he might as well squash Archie now. Cale didn't like the look in his eyes. He advanced, the deck planks creaking with his every step. The Dominating Aura was operating at about half its power.

"Just who do you think you are…" he asked, stopping exactly half a step in front of Archie, "…that you dare stare at me that way?"

Archie couldn't speak. He had a bit of height on Cale, yet he felt like the redhead was looking down at him. Cale had definitely seemed weak, and Archie still figured he could kill the young man with one flick of his wrist, but he couldn't move. He saw the corner of Cale's lips rise in a smirk.

Confirming that Archie's glare had weakened, Cale said flatly, "If you can't even answer that question, don't get caught with that look in your eyes."

Archie could tell that the man in front of him was shrugging him off. He and Cale stared at each other in silence for several seconds until Archie stepped backward. Then Cale reined in the Dominating Aura, smiling as he looked over to Seakeller. "Right, Your Majesty?"

Cale didn't want to fight with the whales. They'd cross paths a few more times in the future, and they still needed to come to agreements with each other. That was why he'd only used half of the Dominating Aura's strength and now gave Seakeller the brightest smile he could muster.

"Indeed," Seakeller answered after a few moments. He grabbed Archie's shoulder in a viselike grip. "Apologize and

introduce yourself."

Cale knew how Seakeller had subdued the troublemaker Archie: He'd beaten the living daylights out of him. Seakeller thought corporal punishment was the best medicine for a troublemaker and administered such beatings repeatedly. Turning over a new leaf, Archie had become Seakeller's loyal subordinate. That was how Cale knew that Archie wouldn't hurt him, despite the way he'd been glaring.

Archie bowed his head without looking at him. "...I apologize."

His voice was very quiet. He really hadn't wanted to apologize. At least, that was what Cale thought as he glared at the killer whale. When their eyes met, Archie quickly averted his gaze.

"The name's Archie."

"All right, then, Archie. I'm Cale Henituse."

He heard Raon's voice in his head. *‹Human, you seemed almost as strong as the tip of my claw just now. Great job!›*

Cale held back his sigh as the four-year-old complimented his Dominating Aura. He politely reached out to Seakeller, who stared at Cale as though he didn't know what to make of him. "Please give me the package."

"Uh, right." The oddly frazzled Whale King seemed to have lost a bit of his majesty, turning into more of a regular old man from around the neighborhood. Well, that *was* his personality once you got close to him. Seakeller nodded at Witira, who stepped forward.

"Lord Cale."

"Long time no see. The package?"

Witira was relieved that Cale was the same as ever. *Relieved? Me?* Surprised for a moment, she calmed herself before handing over the package.

A total of three items were now in Cale's hands. One was a small bottle containing the swamp dragon's dead mana, the poison having been removed.

Dead mana was very dangerous to a living person without an affinity for darkness, which made Seakeller curious. “But why do you need this? No humans should require dead mana. Well, maybe the necromancers of old would’ve found it useful, but none are left. I can’t guess what you plan to do with that small bottle of it.”

Cale smiled mischievously. “Who knows?” He only needed that small quantity. He put all the items in his magic bag and discussed a couple of things with the royal whales before saying goodbye.

“Until next time,” said Seakeller. “I apologize again for Archie’s actions today.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, I’m sorry. That damned punk has a lot more to learn.”

“Father!” Witira cried, looking to calm Seakeller as he cursed outright. She then turned to Cale. “Until next time, Lord Cale.”

“Indeed.” He *would* see the whales a few more times, since he could still use them in numerous ways.

Cale waved lazily at the departing Witira and Seakeller—as well as the restless Archie, who forced himself to bow. Then he turned back to his companion.

“Choi Han, what are you doing?”

Choi Han had been standing there with a blank expression on his face for a while. When Cale called out to him, he jumped in surprise and shook his head vehemently. “Uh…nothing.”

Cale strode past him, heading into the ship. “I’m going to go sleep now.”

Following Cale, Raon abruptly looked back to speak to Choi Han. “I’m the handsome, beautiful, great, mighty being Raon Mir! Remember that!”

Choi Han stared at the jubilant dragon before scrutinizing Cale, who was his usual relaxed self.

Once they went belowdecks and Choi Han stood outside alone, he muttered, “I need to get stronger as well.” His voice disappeared into the ocean breeze.

Had Cale heard that, he would've been astonished enough to ask whether Choi Han planned to destroy the entire continent.

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The next morning, Cale saw Hong grumbling next to the black dragon, whom they would all call Raon from now on. Choi Han, Lark, Rosalyn, the dragon, and the kittens were in Cale's cabin.

"I like the name Raon. It's cool," Hong said. "But I think Ra*hong* would've been nice too."

By contrast, the usually quiet Ohn was giddy with excitement. She prowled happily around Raon. "Raon Mir! The little guy's name is awesome! It's the best!"

Cale, who'd watched this from his bed aboard the ship, turned away as Raon shouted, "Hey, wolf human! I'm Raon Mir! Hey, mage! I'm Raon Mir! Hey, Choi Han!"

It was so much that even the kind Choi Han sounded exasperated. "I know your name already."

Raon swooped close to Choi Han. "Then say it!"

"Sure, Raon."

Raon's lips quirked up in a smile.

Choi Han turned to Cale. "'Mir…' How did you come up with that surname?" He wore a perplexed look, which Cale understood. Choi Han didn't seem to know the pure Korean word "Raon," but he seemed to know "Mir."

"It's just something I made up."

"You made it up?"

"Yes. When I was looking at Raon, I suddenly thought of that word. It just popped into my head. A very interesting experience," Cale replied lazily, eating grapes in bed. "Why do you ask?"

"Nothing. It's just strange." Choi Han's gaze was full of nostalgia at the pure Korean name. Nodding, he told the black dragon, "Your first and last names are wonderful, Raon."

Raon pretended not to hear, but his wings flapped with joy. Cale watched absentmindedly, then looked out the window toward the ocean. He hoped to reach the Kingdom of the Whipper soon.

Sure enough, they arrived at the kingdom's smallest port in a few days. Someone was there to greet them—the most important player in this transaction.

"Lord Cale!"

Bilose, the illegitimate son of the head of Flynn Merchant Fleets, had called up to Cale to welcome him. Bilose was chubbier now and resembled a piggy bank even more than before. His spirits seemed lighter than usual. When the ship stopped, he deftly jumped aboard near Cale with a grin.

"Goodness, Lord Cale. I hope you didn't get seasick."

At that, the invisible Raon weighed in. *‹He acts like your minion.›*

Cale actually enjoyed Bilose's behavior. Patting the man's shoulder, he whispered in his ear. "Time to catch a big fish?"

Bilose smiled so wide, his eyes almost disappeared. "I'll put all my faith in you, Lord Cale."

The Magic Tower would be destroyed. Tunka would rip its ruler to shreds, and all the mages inside would be killed. The ruler of the Magic Tower, however, was a greedy person.

Cale peered toward the busy port, rather different from the ports in Rowoon. "Treasure hunts are so fun."

As long as you found the treasure, that is.

Chapter 15:
Different Than Intended

CALE PATTED BILOSE'S SHOULDER. "If you really need treasure, work hard."

The merchant's eyes shone with anticipation. It had been a simple, careless command, but he responded with confidence. "I'll work as hard as you need me to. Heh heh!"

Bilose *was* acting like his minion. Cale shook his head, but he knew Bilose was just putting on a brave face despite everything going on in his mind. *After all, I haven't explained this fully to him.* All he'd provided Bilose were the words "magic device," and it was enough to get him hooked.

Cale watched Bilose head off to work, then looked for the person who would need to be most cautious in the Kingdom of the Whipper: Rosalyn. To avoid getting hurt or even killed, the mage needed to be careful.

Finding her on deck, Cale approached her to offer a warning. "Miss Rosalyn…"

It appeared no warning was necessary, however. Cale stopped, momentarily lost for words.

"What is it, Lord Cale?"

Hearing her calm voice, Cale had to ask. "Is that a club in your hand?"

As Rosalyn swung the club, it created strong gusts of wind; she seemed used to that. Cale also spotted light leather armor beneath her robe.

"It is indeed," she answered with an easy smile. "It doesn't make a difference whether you have a club or magic staff if you're using it to hit something."

"That's quite wise." He gave her a thumbs-up, honestly impressed. She certainly didn't need to be cautioned on moving through Whipper as a mage.

"You're too kind. I just want to make sure I don't make things difficult for everyone else. I may not look like the sort, but

I learned several basic martial arts when I was young."

Rosalyn tapped her club with her other palm. As a royal and the eldest in line to the throne, she'd learned not just martial arts but self-defense as well.

Her gaze turned icy in an instant. "I want to take a look at this place with my own eyes too."

Cale smiled. Many thought Rosalyn should be the Magic Tower's new ruler. Like Choi Han, she was very just, which enabled her to grow alongside her companions. At the same time, she possessed cold rationality and ambition. The Kingdom of the Whipper would give her an opportunity to learn and do some soul-searching.

He followed her gaze to port. As the Kingdom of the Whipper's smallest port, it was the least damaged. It was also relatively safe, since people used it regularly. Still, not many ships were sailing in and out of the port, and the faces of those disembarking were gloomy. On the other hand, the locals' faces were bright.

Many of the people the Tower mages treated like slaves live here.

Pillars of black smoke loomed in the distance. Civil wars always left destruction in their wake.

"We can move now, Lord Cale," said Bilose. "The carriage is ready."

"Great." Cale nodded and left the ship. Taking his first step into the Kingdom of the Whipper, he remarked, "It doesn't smell the best."

The pungent smell of burned buildings and rubble lingered as his carriage headed to the residence Bilose had arranged for him. Upon his arrival, he met Bilose inside and complimented him.

"You handled the preparations well."

Bilose had procured him a carriage disguised with Flynn Merchant Fleets' crest, prepared the port's quietest living quarters, and taken care of all the other tiny details. Yet he shrugged as if it were nothing.

Cale asked one more thing. “Did you make sure to prepare this quietly, without others finding out?”

“Of course,” Bilose replied solemnly. “Why would I share my windfall?”

Seeing Bilose’s greedy gaze, Cale smiled. “I knew I liked you.”

“I like you too, Lord Cale.”

Cale reclined on the couch. “Victory?” he asked, his tone casual.

Bilose nodded with an assured expression. “Yes. It was as you said, Lord Cale.”

“I see.”

The anti-mages had triumphed, as it turned out—or rather, as Cale had expected. He’d arrived exactly at the end of the civil war. One thing in particular had signaled the end of the conflict: the destruction of the Magic Tower. The fall of the mages’ last fortress meant the strife was over. Though there were still plenty of things to take care of after the war.

“The anti-mages were wilder than I expected.” Bilose grimaced as he described the civil war. “They didn’t seem afraid of death. It was like they were solely focused on killing.”

He shuddered. He’d seen the land before the civil war and immediately after. Those two periods *had* been the best times to make money in the Kingdom of the Whipper, but Bilose had observed a number of horrors in the process.

“It was scariest when magic-resistant fighters showed up en masse and took the vanguard,” he said.

Magic resistance had been the decisive factor in the battle between the mage and anti-mage factions. Individuals resistant to magic had been born now and then over the last few generations. The fact that there were so few of them—and that they couldn’t learn magic—had made their lives difficult in the kingdom.

During this generation, however, a large number of magic-resistant citizens were born, which ended up giving the anti-mages an edge. The kingdom’s citizens saw the increase in

magic resistance as a sign from nature to kill the arrogant mages who believed they ruled nature with their mana.

"Especially Tunka, the one in charge of the anti-mages," Bilose continued.

Cale listened in silence.

"He and his lackeys really seemed to move on instinct. I saw him just once, from a distance—he was decapitating a mage with his bare hands. It was terrifying to witness." Bilose heaved a sigh as he shook his head. "That night, I couldn't even sleep. Just thinking about Tunka and his henchmen still makes me sick."

Bilose was dead set on avoiding that group. He didn't think words would get through to them. Fortunately, the anti-mage officers besides Tunka seemed intelligent and approachable.

"I suppose it was very cruel," Cale mused.

Bilose nodded furiously. "Yes, it was! The mages were torn to shreds while they were still alive. Their corpses are hanging outside the castles."

Though what Bilose had witnessed frightened him, he didn't decry it as *bad.*

"From the citizens' perspective, I'm sure even that wasn't enough."

The merchant understood how the locals felt. Besides, as someone profiteering off the civil war, he wasn't in a position to say that either side was right or wrong.

Bilose smiled as he cautiously went on, "But, Lord Cale…"

"What?" Cale's blunt responses could come off as cold, but Bilose never seemed to mind.

"Where are we headed now?"

He was very curious about their destination, as well as what the "treasure" was. Having quietly absorbed everything the merchant said, Cale smirked. The expression filled Bilose with anticipation.

Then Cale announced, "To meet Tunka."

"Excuse me? Who?" Bilose thought he'd misheard. He hadn't slept well in ages, which could've affected his hearing.

It was the first time Cale had ever seen the man look so confused. “We’re going to the Magic Tower.”

“What?”

Cale had chosen this small port for multiple reasons: It was a fair distance from all the battlegrounds, it was in an area where many citizens still lived, and it was the port closest to the Magic Tower.

“Just trust me,” he drawled.

Across from him, Bilose had a blank expression and seemed to be thinking about a lot of things. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before jumping up and heading to the cabinet for a bottle of alcohol. He chugged it, only stopping once he’d emptied half of the bottle into his mouth.

“I will trust my instincts!” he declared.

“What do your instincts say?”

Bilose brought out another bottle and handed it to Cale. “Well, they tell me to follow you.”

Relaxed as ever, Cale took a lazy swig straight from the bottle. “You have pretty good instincts. Perfect for a merchant.”

Clenching the bottle, Bilose looked past Cale’s shoulder through the window. The civil war was officially over, but there were still screams throughout the kingdom; not all the mages had been caught just yet. A miasma of madness, despair, and sorrow lingered in the air.

“This tastes great.”

Even after hearing Cale nonchalantly praise the liquor, Bilose decided he would follow his instincts.

***

A few days later, Cale stepped out of the carriage marked with Flynn Merchant Fleets’ crest. There were three more carriages behind him.

“This is as close as a carriage can get to the Magic Tower, Lord Cale.”

Cale saw the destroyed Magic Tower in the distance. More of the structure was standing than he'd expected. *He really listened to me about not demolishing it.* Tunka was unexpectedly obedient. "It's a beautiful tower."

Next to Cale, Bilose seemed dazed. Cale retrieved something from his pocket and gave Bilose a peek at one corner. The merchant gasped—it was a golden plaque. He'd only caught a glimpse, but it was definitely a golden plaque from Rowoon. Being a merchant, Bilose instantly viewed Cale in a new light.

"Lord Cale, I respect you very much."

Cale ignored Bilose as Hans approached. "What do you plan to do now, Lord Cale?" the deputy butler asked, looking around.

They were currently beside the entrance of a base built in front of the Magic Tower. A number of huts and houses were visible; in fact, by size, this seemed more like a village than a base. Cale and his companions could see people with unique and distinct skin tones as well: citizens of the Kingdom of the Whipper, among others.

Hans's eyes wavered. "Mmgh!" Gagging, he clapped a hand over his mouth.

A blood-drenched group of people resembling warriors were chopping up corpses. From the fabric of the corpses' clothes, they seemed to be wearing robes. They were mages. Behind the bodies, the mages' severed heads rolled on the ground.

As the stench of blood and rotting flesh assailed Hans's nose, he heard the corpses burning and crackling behind him.

"If it's too much, take a break."

Turning toward the unperturbed Cale, Hans realized that everyone around him was composed. Even Maes and the children, whom he'd recently learned were from the Wolf Tribe, observed the situation in front of them placidly.

"Hans."

"Yes, Lord Cale?"

"This *is* a battlefield."

Upon looking into Cale's eyes, which coolly observed the entire battlefield, Hans felt the weight of those words.

Cale dispassionately beheld the tents as well as the warriors, merchants, and others moving to and from the camp. It reminded him of being Kim Roksu, working his job. He suddenly felt tired, wanting to relax and read a book at the Henituse estate. Still, his face was calm as usual.

Facing Hans, he asked, "Do you need to rest?"

"No, I'm all right!"

"Then let's get to work."

Hans noted that Cale had spoken to him in his usual manner; that made the deputy butler feel better.

After ensuring that Hans had collected himself, Cale gathered his companions in front of him. Since the civil war was over, they'd been able to enter the base by the Magic Tower once they showed identification. The base was currently full of fighters resting after the long war.

The reason Cale's group had been able to *reach* the entrance, of course, was that Bilose had traded with the warriors several times during the conflict. Cale and his companions had come under Flynn Merchant Fleets' name—but from here on out, they would pivot their approach.

"We've come to meet someone named Tunka," Cale told the others. "Until we do, make sure not to provoke anyone into a fight."

"Who is this Tunka?" asked Choi Han, who'd been listening intently till now.

"Uh... That 'Bob' guy from before is Tunka. Bob was an alias," Cale replied indifferently, then turned to look at Bilose.

At the same time, he heard Choi Han mumble, "So it is him."

"Hm?"

"Nothing, sir," Choi Han responded with an unruffled expression.

Cale just let it go, asking Bilose, "You said you could get to the officers' tent?"

“Yes, but only a half dozen people can come, including me.”

“I take it you made quite a profit.”

If Bilose could chitchat with the officers, he’d raked a lot of money in through the civil war. Bilose merely smiled without saying anything more.

At that moment, the invisible Raon spoke in Cale’s mind. *‹Fun.›*

Cale furrowed his brow. *What’s that supposed to mean?*

‹I feel like something fun will happen!›

I sure hope not. Disregarding Raon’s words, he rubbed his neck to quell his skin-crawling, then quickly selected the four who’d come with him and Bilose.

“Choi Han. Lark. Hilsmann.”

Next, Cale made eye contact with Rosalyn. She hadn’t said a word since looking around the residence upon their arrival. Cale wondered whether she was angry about her fellow mages’ deaths. What he saw in her eyes, however, was the gaze of a royal princess. Rather than feeling anger over the deaths, she was reflecting on the stupidity of this kingdom’s royal family in keeping the status quo until the citizens revolted.

“You’ll be coming, right, Miss Rosalyn?”

“Yes.” Rosalyn fixed her large club over her leather armor.

Having chosen his entourage, Cale left the rest to Hans.

“We’ll go somewhere quiet and stay there,” Hans assured him. “I’ll keep everyone safe!”

Ohn and Hong snorted at the deputy butler’s declaration. At the same time, they asked Cale with their eyes, *When will we go to the Magic Tower?*

Cale responded with a pointed look of his own. *Just wait a bit.* Soon they’d reach the location where the kittens could run wild.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, sir!”

Bilose put on a large amulet with Flynn Merchant Fleets’ crest, taking the lead. Cale followed him. As soon as they walked

into the base, several sharp gazes fell on them.

"Keep your eyes forward," Cale said, and everyone did.

The kingdom's anti-mage faction consisted of citizens, knights, and magic-resistant individuals. Given that they were all covered in blood after their victory, Cale's group stood out like a sore thumb. Cale saw more of them ahead as well.

I guess they haven't had enough.

The anti-mage faction wanted war. Cale felt madness and chaos in the air around him. He recalled how Tunka had taken control of the Kingdom of the Whipper's royalty in *Birth of a Hero*, making them his puppets before rushing to fight the jungle and the Empire.

He also took a moment to examine the soldiers under the command of Tunka the Tyrant. They didn't come up to Cale's group to provoke or fight with them, but they didn't back away either. These fighters were captivated by Tunka, who ruled with fear. They stared viciously at Cale, who resembled a noble.

Bilose stopped in front of a tent. "We're here."

It wasn't as far into the base as Cale had expected, being only a short distance from the entrance.

"Actually, the officers—"

"Bilose." Cale cut him off, knowing what Bilose was going to say.

The anti-mage faction was believed to have destroyed the Kingdom of the Whipper's "rationality," but really, a different rationality that magic had suppressed exploded in its place.

Mages weren't the only smart ones, nor were they the only educated people. In this world, there were countless teachings and varieties of knowledge, as well as numerous experts. The academics supporting Tunka had tired of the mages' suppression.

They hate magic even more than Tunka does.

"Crazed" was a good way of describing the anti-mages' state—and crazed intellectuals were the most frightening of all.

"Let them know we're here."

"Yes, sir."

As Bilose neared the largest of the officers' tents, a warrior approached to guide and supervise him. The warriors here at the officers' tents seemed more orderly than in other areas of the base. It was interesting that Tunka had no problem abandoning weak warriors but looked after these officers.

That's why he couldn't become a real hero, Cale thought.

Shrugging off the guards' sharp-eyed supervision, Cale waited for Bilose to return with an officer. He just needed to ask to meet with Tunka; they'd probably welcome that with open arms.

But how come the back of my neck's so cold?

Cale looked around to see what might've caused the odd feeling. Bilose was taking longer than he expected. Fetching one person shouldn't have taken this long.

‹Human.›

As Raon's low voice rang in Cale's mind, the entrance flap of the large tent Bilose had entered moved. It looked as though a hulking figure was trying to shove others out of their way and run out.

It can't be.

Choi Han—who'd been standing behind Cale—zipped in front of him with a stiff expression, guarding him.

"What is it, Choi Han?"

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Huh?"

Rrrip! The tent entrance tore open.

"I smell it! The scent of somebody strong! Mwa ha ha ha ha! Perfect! I was so bored!"

A large man covered in blood emerged. Behind him were a man and a woman, slightly smaller than him but still quite large.

Cale sighed. The loon covered in mage blood, as if he'd showered in it, was Tunka. As usual, Tunka had pinpointed a specific location. His eyes were locked on Choi Han, who was protecting Cale.

“It’s you!” Tunka bellowed. He didn’t seem to see Cale behind Choi Han. “The others smell strong too, but your odor’s the strongest! I can’t sleep with a scent like that in my nose!”

Cale needed to intervene—now.

“Is that Tunka?” Choi Han whispered in his ear.

“Huh. You recognized him right away,” Cale replied without thinking.

Tunka pointed at Choi Han. “Aren’t your hands just itching too? Fight me.”

That brought another sigh out of Cale. Tunka really never changed. Choi Han would obviously decline; he wasn’t someone who’d fight without a good reason, and he definitely wouldn’t fight someone he’d just met. Cale made to walk past Choi Han—until the man’s response threw him for a loop.

“Sure.”

What?

Raon’s voice echoed in Cale’s head. *‹Just as I, the great and mighty Raon, expected. I’m clever!›*

In contrast to Raon’s excitement, Cale frowned. Meanwhile, Choi Han’s glare had Tunka licking his lips. He was focused completely on Choi Han; he didn’t see anybody else. After all, Choi Han had the most potent “scent” of strength around. The young man’s strength reminded Tunka of the Whale Tribe.

“Heh heh heh! Yes, I like that look!” Tunka was thrilled. He felt he and Choi Han could have a spectacular fight—one that didn’t rely on filthy magic.

Seeing the madness in Tunka’s eyes, Choi Han put his hand on the hilt of his blade. He was calm, but his gaze suggested he yearned to chop Tunka in half. *Shiiing.* He drew part of the blade out of its scabbard.

At that moment, Choi Han felt a strong grip on his shoulder. A chill ran down his spine. He’d encountered this aura of gentle yet undeniable charisma once before; it had caught everyone’s attention at sea the other night. As he turned slowly around, a quiet, emotionless voice reached his ear.

“Choi Han.”

Cale was staring at him. He wasn't chastising him or giving him orders, yet the look in his eyes was utterly grave. Choi Han instinctively let go of his blade, and it slipped back into its scabbard with a *click*.

"Are you trying to fight him?" Cale's Dominating Aura surrounded his entire body. He strode past Choi Han and stood in front of him. The stench of blood filled his nose. "Tunka."

He needed to overwhelm Tunka now. That made the visit to the base a little more complicated, but he figured he might as well use the opportunity. Pushing back his red hair, Cale greeted the dazed barbarian. "It's been a while."

"Y-you're...!"

Tunka didn't recognize him right away. As soon as he saw Cale's red hair, he remembered *someone*—but this person in front of him was too different from the man he'd met. He clenched his fists. The lout in front of him gave off an inexplicable aura. It *was* Cale Henituse who'd thrown Tunka into a whirlpool and looked down his nose at him to boot. His gaze was the same as it had been two months ago.

The man he'd seen two months earlier asked, "Do you want to fight?" He posed the question with a soft smile but didn't wait for Tunka's response. "Choi Han."

Choi Han couldn't help but nod anxiously at Cale's indifferent voice. "Yes, sir...?"

"Fight him if you want."

After a moment of speechlessness, Choi Han replied, "I'll win no matter what." He put his hand back on the hilt of his blade. His tightly clenched fist expressed stronger desire than before.

Cale turned to Tunka. The barbarian slowly smiled, then let out a laugh. "Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!" It was so loud, it echoed throughout the base. Tunka's body still hadn't relaxed, though. The person in front of him was definitely weak, so something didn't add up.

A daunting aura dominated the base, but Tunka ignored it, shouting even louder. He was excited. His body ran hot. *Blood.* He needed to see blood. "Let's fight! Great! Very good!"

Raon scoffed. *‹He's yearning to be beaten. What an idiot. Our side is much stronger!›*

Tunka's inevitable trouncing was as plain as the nose on his face. Choi Han wasn't the type to go easy on his opponent. Cale eyed the somehow even crazier-looking Tunka, who was cackling like a maniac, and told Choi Han, "No need to hold back."

Choi Han grinned. His smile was a far cry from pure and innocent, which satisfied Cale.

"Bob," Cale called out.

Tunka stopped laughing at the sudden sound of his alias from two months earlier. Cale glanced at Tunka's subordinates, the warriors slowly approaching the officers' tents, and the bystanders too scared to move.

Then he looked back at Tunka and ordered, "Set it up." If they were going to fight anyway, they might as well do it right.

"Get it ready! Now!" There was an excited expression on the barbarian's face.

In no time at all, a ring for the battle formed in the center of the base. There was nothing special about it. The bystanders, who went crazy for such fights, had merely moved some tents near the training ground to create a large circle.

‹Weak human. The chubby human's staring at you.›

When Raon said as much, Cale looked to see a pale Bilose gaping at him from a distance. Cale lazily gestured for him to shoo. The officers were next to Bilose, but now wasn't the time to worry about that. A shadow appeared in front of Cale, prompting him to turn back around.

It was the towering lady, Felia. She was Tunka's right-hand woman, his sergeant, and a master of the spear. "Allow me to guide you to the front."

As Felia pointed toward the ring's front row, Cale's expression soured. "No need for that."

The last place he wanted to be was the spot closest to the fight. If Choi Han sent Tunka flying or launched his aura at the wrong spot by accident, Cale would be the first to die.

“I must take you to the best spot,” Felia insisted, peering ahead of them.

The soldiers snapped into position with astonishing speed, creating a path straight to the center of the ring. Felia really deserved her position as sergeant.

Sighing, Cale followed the path to the ring’s front row. Although he’d hidden Dominating Aura already, Felia and the soldiers couldn’t take their eyes off of him. His slow pace made him look like he was on a casual stroll, and the young man and woman walking behind him seemed threatening.

‹Why are you walking straight into danger?! You can’t do that—you’re weak, regardless of whether you got as strong as the tip of my claw!› Raon’s nagging echoed in the back of Cale’s mind.

He was only walking slowly because he didn’t want to sit ringside. Behind him, Rosalyn and Lark didn’t look too happy either.

“Lord Cale.”

“What is it?”

Rosalyn warily glanced at the arena where Choi Han and Tunka would fight. “What if this angers them?”

Angers them? Cale thought, bewildered.

Sidling up to Cale, Lark whispered, “As Rosalyn said, won’t it be bad if Choi Han ends up winning? What if they’re angry? Don’t you think Tunka will be furious and refuse to trade with us?”

Neither Rosalyn nor Lark doubted Choi Han would win. Cale was of the same mind. Yet he *was* thinking a little differently than the pair.

He slowly sat down in one of the chairs provided to high-ranking officials. His two companions stayed standing, so he pointed to the seats on either side of him. *Are you going to stand the whole time?!* Rosalyn and Lark sat in the chairs, concern still on their faces.

Cale’s voice reached their ears. “No need to worry.”

Tunka wasn’t that strong. He was tough compared to the average person, of course, but outrageously weak next to whales or dragons. Either way, he’d never have been in this

position if he hadn’t been depressed about meeting a stronger being and vowed revenge on them all. And Tunka wasn’t the only one like that.

“Just look around.” Cale pointed to the open space, and Rosalyn’s gaze followed.

At the same time, raucous cheers rose up in the cleared area. Their hoots and hollers rang in Rosalyn’s ears—and those weren’t the only sounds.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The stomping of countless boots filled the ring. Lark felt the vibrations underfoot. Once some people started to stomp, the soldiers and knights joined in as well.

“Woo! Woo! Woo!”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

All the sounds grew into a great cacophony, like the world itself was shouting.

“Lord Cale! Wh-what’s going on?” Lark timidly looked at Cale, white as a sheet.

Cale smiled. The lout’s eyes flashed as he explained, “Winning or losing doesn’t matter to them.”

Felia came to sit behind Cale at that point; she’d also heard what he said.

“The Warriors’ Ritual,” Cale said, drawing Felia’s attention. Yet he stared straight ahead, heedless of her gaze.

The two fighters, Choi Han and Tunka, made their way into the ring. To Tunka’s people, fighting—rather than victory or defeat—was valued above all else. If one’s opponent wasn’t a true enemy, the fight between warriors was rather sacred.

Watching the pair, Cale added, “Fighting’s the only thing that matters.” He then leaned back in his chair as much as possible. Seeing Tunka and Choi Han made him leery of being injured.

‹Don’t worry, weak human,› Raon said, his voice full of pity. *‹I’m stronger than those two! You won’t get hurt.›*

Frankly, Cale wasn't happy about the dragon's tone. Continuing to lean back, he twisted around—and saw Felia sitting behind him.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

Cale looked forward once more. He also sat up straighter so his back didn't touch the chair. He didn't want Felia, who was strictly loyal to Tunka, to attack him from behind.

‹Yes! Don't sit pathetically, sit up proudly! Human, you're doing well!›

Ignoring Raon's ramblings, Cale observed Hota—another subordinate of Tunka's—step forward as referee. *Not that they really need one.*

The rule among these people was to fight until your opponent gave up or passed out. They also considered losing consciousness in such a battle an embarrassment.

"I don't need to be worried, do I, Lord Cale?"

"No, Miss Rosalyn. You can just relax."

He watched Hota shout for people's attention, then blow a small flute. *Tweeeeet!* With that, the battle began.

It would've been exciting if Choi Han and Tunka rushed each other and fought right away, but they just stared each other down. Cale watched without thinking too deeply about the battle.

A moment later, he heard Tunka's voice. The ring was large, but since Cale and his companions were in the front row, they could hear the fighters' voices. It helped that Tunka was naturally loud.

"Why do you care what the weakling thinks?!" the barbarian demanded.

The weakling? Cale had a hunch Tunka was referring to him. *Choi Han worries about what I think? Why?*

Though he was curious, he couldn't mull it over with Rosalyn and Lark sneaking peeks his way. Still, Tunka had definitely meant Cale when he said "weakling."

Then Choi Han asked in a low voice, “What did you just say?”

Tunka grinned mockingly at him. “I asked why you care what the weakling thinks! Weaklings deserve to die first on any battlefield. I’m sure you know that!”

Rosalyn and Lark frowned, then heard Cale sigh. At that, Lark pressed his lips in a thin line, his claws growing longer and sharper. Rosalyn’s fingers rubbed her temples. But Cale’s next words made them both freeze.

“Poor bastard,” Cale muttered.

Poor bastard? There was confusion on both Lark and Rosalyn’s faces as they looked toward Cale. He stared at the ring with an indifferent expression, as if he’d never sighed in the first place.

The Choi Han that Cale was familiar with had been transported to the hell known as the Dark Forest in his first year of high school. For ages, he was the weakest being there. Cale felt bad for Tunka, who’d just told such a person that the weakest should die first.

“Lord Cale, who are you calling a poor—”

“Take a look for yourself.” In lieu of an explanation, Cale pointed to the ring again.

Choi Han took the sword strap off his waist. He tossed his iron sword lightly into the air; it landed in the corner of the ring with a *clank.*

Cale nodded and said, “It’s definitely better to beat someone up with your bare hands.”

Lark and Rosalyn flinched, watching as Cale’s comment became reality.

Wham!

“Ugh!”

Now Rosalyn could tell whom Cale had called a “poor bastard.”

Pow! Pow! Thud! Whump!

The ring was silent. Nobody could speak.

In Cale's head, however, Raon exclaimed, *‹He's being beaten to a pulp!›*

Raon was right. Choi Han was pulverizing Tunka.

"You punk!"

Tunka dashed at Choi Han and threw a punch. For someone his size, he moved very quickly.

Ping!

With a cute noise, Choi Han's palm blocked the blow. Then he closed his fist around Tunka's hand and rushed the barbarian. All that happened in an instant.

Boom!

Choi Han flung Tunka's body to the dirt. The ring was filled with dust from the impact. Cale's view was briefly obscured, but he could hear the battle.

"Argh!" Tunka was having difficulty breathing, but when the dust settled, Cale saw that the barbarian was still smiling. "Great! This *strength*! A battle of human bodi—krrgh!"

"You talk too much."

Choi Han didn't let Tunka keep that smile. Cale watched the barbarian raise his arms and stand, attempting to block Choi Han's kick, but it flung him into the air.

"Ugh! Ha ha ha!"

Even as Choi Han sent him flying, Tunka was laughing. He twisted his body to counter, but the results were the same. Choi Han landed blows on him again and again.

Soon, all Cale saw were Tunka's bloody clothes; the barbarian's face, which had swollen past the point of recognition; and the dust the fight constantly stirred in the air.

"Ha ha… Ah ha ha! I won't fall!" Tunka got up, staggering to the side.

At that moment, Cale heard Raon's serious voice. *‹How come he's laughing after getting hit? Does he* enjoy *it?›*

Cale looked skyward, then heard what sounded like a punching bag being pummeled. There was no way that Choi Han, who could hold his own against whales, would have trouble

beating Tunka up. Only Choi Han had the strength to fight both Raon and the Whale King, Seakeller. He really deserved the title of “main character.”

Pow! Pow!

When would Choi Han finish thrashing Tunka? When the barbarian’s stamina wore out, probably. Tunka, however, was just too energetic. Cale kept looking at the sky contemplatively.

“Shouldn’t we stop Choi Han, Lord Cale?” Rosalyn asked, cautious.

“We can’t get involved,” Cale replied somewhat brusquely. “It can only end early if they so choose. All we can do is watch this sacred ritual from the sidelines.”

Cale didn’t notice all the high-ranking warriors looking at him as he said that. He just looked back down as he heard another punch, followed by a *thud*.

“Heh heh heh. You are a really strong bastard. Ptooey!” Tunka spit out some blood, continuing to laugh. Choi Han looked at him with disgust. He’d seemingly realized how crazy Tunka was. However banged up he got, Tunka kept on smiling. Even after being beaten to a pulp and then some, he got back on his feet. He’d never give up; he was reminiscent of a character from an action comic.

That’s what makes him such a crazy bastard.

Cale could see Tunka’s morale sinking, however. The barbarian’s eyes were so swollen, Cale couldn’t even tell whether he had them open anymore. With a determined expression, Tunka darted forward again—then soared away.

“Aaahhh!”

“He’s flying off…”

Choi Han’s translucent black aura had flung Tunka high into the sky, sending him gliding through the air.

“Huh?!”

“W-watch out!”

“Everybody move!”

Soldiers rushed backward to dodge Tunka's body as the barbarian hurtled their way.

Boom!

A huge crater appeared in the ground, as if a meteor had struck and caused an explosion. Tunka lay inside it, unconscious. Passing out was, of course, what Tunka found most mortifying.

Choi Han strode over to Cale as though he didn't even need to check on Tunka. Cale got up quickly; this was the moment he'd been waiting for. Rosalyn and Lark, who also rose to their feet, froze in place. The same went for Tunka's subordinates, who were heading toward him.

They were getting that feeling they'd gotten earlier—gentle, yet nerve-racking.

Cale reached his hand out to Choi Han. "Good job."

Choi Han shook it with a smile. "Thank you, Mr. Cale."

Wreathing his body with Dominating Aura, Cale scanned the crowd. The looks Tunka's companions were giving him and Choi Han now were worlds apart from the looks the group gave them when they first arrived.

A leisurely smile appeared on Cale's face. Now this was set up properly, exactly as he'd wanted.

Tap. Tap.

Tunka awoke to someone patting his cheeks; Felia was trying to rouse him. He looked past her shoulder at Cale.

Staring down at the splayed-out barbarian, Cale ordered, "Take me to the Magic Tower."

The barbarian's expression changed. He blinked a few times and frowned, perplexed by his defeat. Yet his voice was steady when he spoke. "I lost."

"It was still a warriors' battle."

Tunka gaped at Cale, then slowly smiled. Cale felt he looked hideous with that expression. Given the beating he'd just received, his face already resembled an orc's. Now that it was full of blue bruises, the man looked like a mutant troll.

Cale averted his eyes from the ugliness. As he turned, Tunka shouted to Felia, “A new warrior appeared today!”

At that point, soldiers approached them. The people’s faces were etched with anticipation. They didn’t seem to look down on their leader for passing out, nor to bear Choi Han a grudge for beating him up. In their view, “warrior” was a mighty title that was beyond those stupid mages, and someone deserving of the title had graced their presence.

“We’ll celebrate tonight! Get ready!”

Boom. Boom. Boom. People stomped all over again, cheering for both Choi Han and Tunka. This was precisely the sort of behavior that earned them the moniker of “barbarians,” but Cale didn’t care. Tunka’s loss would definitely lower some soldiers’ morale, and various members of the upper ranks would resent Cale’s crew. *But that’s none of my business.* Cale just needed to take what he needed to take.

Behind him, Tunka told Choi Han, “I’ll definitely kill you next time, warrior! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Choi Han glowered at him in exasperation. In *Birth of a Hero*, Choi Han had disliked Tunka deeply.

“I didn’t demolish it, as you asked!” the barbarian exclaimed, prompting Cale to face him again. That meant they could now go look at the Magic Tower.

Cale rose and patted the pale Bilose’s shoulder. “Bilose.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Go get everybody outside the base.”

Confused as Bilose was, he acquiesced. “Of course.” Then he pointed to someone else. “I need to introduce you to someone first, though.”

Cale looked to the man in question. He had brown hair and brown eyes, along with an extremely average face. He looked commonplace, but to an extent that made him appear unique.

“This is Chief Officer Herol, Lord Cale. He’s in charge of the entire faction.”

Herol was a crucial member of the anti-mages. “Nice to meet you, Lord Cale. Herol, at your service.” Commoners in the

Kingdom of the Whipper didn't have surnames.

Extending his hand, Cale said, "Nice to meet you. I'm Cale."

Herol shook it cautiously before whispering, "I guess you're the one Captain Tunka said he'd sell the Magic Tower to?"

Cale didn't say anything, just smiled as he released Herol's hand.

Herol was neither strategically gifted nor physically strong. The man had no unique abilities. He was a talented scientist but lacking compared to the other anti-mage officers. Still, he was one of the faction's founding members. The mages considered themselves above the citizens and even royalty, thanks to their magic abilities. Herol was the one who'd proposed saving the people from tyranny. To them, he was a hero. People followed him *because* of how average he was. The partnership between Tunka and Herol gave the Kingdom of the Whipper's citizens hope.

"I'm honored to meet you," Herol said. "I suppose we have a lot to discuss." The anti-mages needed money; he probably wanted to fleece Cale.

At that moment, Cale heard Raon's voice in his head. *‹What a liar.›* Raon was sharp—as dragons were.

"Indeed," Cale responded kindly.

His unfair trade with the anti-mages would start from Herol, not Tunka.

***

Standing in front of the Magic Tower, Cale looked up. The twenty-story structure was the continent's second tallest. The tallest was the Alchemist's Bell Tower in the Empire.

It looks better than I expected.

Tunka *had* demolished less of the Magic Tower than Cale anticipated. Only a few outer walls had been destroyed. That said, the windows and interior were a total mess.

But those aren't all there is to the Magic Tower. Cale turned away from the building to Tunka. "Are you coming in as well?"

Tunka wrinkled his nose. "You think I'm crazy? Why would I go into that dirty place?"

The barbarian had called a famous building known throughout the Western Continent a "dirty place," but it *was* dirty to him. The citizens' blood, sweat, and tears had been shed inside this building.

"Herol will guide you."

He snuck a peek at Vicross, Hilsmann, the wolf children, and Lark; they smelled strong to him as well. He also glanced at the two kittens in Cale's arms, then looked to Choi Han, who was talking to Rosalyn.

"You're interesting because you're weak," Tunka said flatly. Cale ignored him, but the barbarian continued, "A weakling who seems oddly strong."

Tunka couldn't say anything further, as Choi Han was glaring daggers at him. As he did so, Tunka offered a toothy grin and stepped closer to him. "What? Want to fight again?"

Choi Han sighed, paying the comment no heed. After watching their interaction, Cale took a look at Bilose and Herol conferring with one another. He stroked the kittens in his arms, singing quietly, "Rat-a-tat-tat. Who is that?" He paused, then added, "How many rats?"

Ohn's front paw shifted, batting him once. *Tap.*

"Don't hurt it," Cale replied. "Life is precious."

Hong snorted, then moved his own front paw. *Tap. Tap.* He batted Cale twice before his tail started to sway back and forth. His and Cale's villainous smiles were becoming more similar the longer they spent together. Seeing their grins, Ohn shook her head—but her tail was swaying too.

A stealthy voice filled Cale's mind. ‹*Should I go too, human?*› Raon sounded like he really wanted to join them; he'd even asked Cale for permission.

However, Cale sternly shook his head. As if cooing to the kittens, he whispered, "You have to catch something else with

me."

Cale's expression as he said "something else" quieted all three. That sounded fun as well.

Soon, Herol and Tunka walked up to Cale. "Our chief officer here will guide you," Tunka declared, pointing to Herol amiably. The barbarian seemed fond of him. "Felia will go with you too." She would be Herol's guard.

Cale nodded. "Did you clean up the mage corpses in the Tower?"

"I left a few there."

Though Cale already anticipated as much, he kept a straight face.

At that moment, Raon spoke up. *‹I guess you're only afraid of mermaid corpses. Don't worry, I'll make sure mermaids can't get to you in the future.›*

Cale wasn't exactly *afraid* of mermaids either. He didn't say that aloud, however, since he probably wouldn't run into any.

Noting Cale's calm demeanor, Tunka continued, "Those bastards don't need their souls consoled."

"Consolation of the soul" referred to cremation. The anti-mages burned mage corpses whenever possible. Some decapitated mage corpses remained outside, their heads rolling on the ground, but the anti-mages would soon burn those as well. There must've been a reason they hadn't burned the corpses left behind.

Those were probably the mages who killed the most citizens.

What was vital to developing magic devices? Experiments. Who was experimented on? People. Many mages had probably experimented on humans in secret.

"I'll get rid of those corpses when no more mages are left in this kingdom. There'll be no trace of them," Tunka muttered, more quietly than usual.

Cale didn't pay much attention to his words. All the mages in the Magic Tower were dead, but not all of the mages in the *kingdom* were.

The Magic Tower's mages were just part of the mage faction, Cale recalled.

Those mages were hierarchical and greedy. A tower naturally had a top and bottom; the people on top enjoyed looking down on the people below. That said, some mages kept their distance from power and greed, preferring not to take part in politics or hold authority. Those mages were currently hiding, trying to find a way out of the Kingdom of the Whipper and determine where to go next. In the novel, Crown Prince Albert had shielded them, taking those interested solely in magic research under his wing.

"Can I go in?" Cale asked.

He put the two kittens in his arms down on the ground. As long as the door remained open, they could snoop around on their own. Cale looked back at Vicross and Choi Han standing behind him; Vicross's presence in particular confused him. Vicross, however, was staring straight at the bruised and battered Tunka with revulsion.

"Herol."

"Yes, Captain. I'll guide you, Lord Cale."

The Magic Tower's door creaked open.

Cale furrowed his brow. "It reeks in here."

As soon as the door opened on the Magic Tower's first floor, Cale saw a decomposing corpse wearing the golden robe that denoted the Tower's ruler, plus the smashed remains of magic devices inside.

"Leave the door open for ventilation. I can't stand the odor," Cale said with distaste at the madness of those who had done this. Then he told Tunka, "Cover the corpse too. I'm a weakling—I can't stand looking at a corpse for long."

Tunka snorted but motioned to a soldier guarding the entrance. Cale made sure the pale yet collected Rosalyn was all right, then left her and the others behind as he entered the Magic Tower.

Choi Han quickly walked ahead of him, Vicross behind him.

"Shall I guide you floor by floor?" Herol offered.

“Chief Officer Herol.”

“Yes?”

“Just guide us to the top floor.” There was no reason to look anywhere else.

“The top floor...?”

“I’m curious about what it’ll feel like to look down from the top. The ruler’s chamber—let’s go there.”

“I understand.”

They got on the transportation device, the only magic device still functioning in the Tower. It didn’t require a mage to operate. Once Cale stepped onto it, it would take them straight to the twentieth floor. “You somehow managed to not break this,” he remarked.

“Just in case we needed it,” Herol replied placidly.

Cale had to hold back a snort.

Thrummm.

The tower’s last magic device vibrated gently, and the platform that Cale and his companions stood on slowly rose. Once they got to the top of the Magic Tower, it stopped.

In the anteroom on the top floor, Cale looked at the single door and asked, “That’s the ruler’s chamber?”

“Yes, it is. Oh, and Lord Cale?”

Cale didn’t respond to Herol’s call. He left the transportation device first, striding forward. The others quickly followed him. Cale walked to the door and turned the knob.

Click. The door opened, revealing the ruler’s chamber.

“What a mess.”

Cale’s blunt assessment echoed around the room. The ruler’s chamber was spacious—it took up the entire floor—but it *was* a mess. Everything inside had been destroyed, and there was blood everywhere, as though they’d splashed it around the chamber on purpose.

“It’s filthy. Chief Officer Herol, may I look out that window over there?”

That large window was the only remaining symbol of the ruler's chamber. Its panes were the sole things that hadn't been destroyed.

"Certainly. I'll show you over."

"I want to think in silence. May I go alone?"

"I'm not sure about that..."

At Herol's discomfort, Choi Han moved away from the door to the ruler's chamber, standing instead in front of the transportation device. "I'll be right here."

Vicross joined him, looking thankful that he didn't need to venture into such a dirty, messy place. Left alone, Felia looked uncertain.

In the end, Herol spoke as if he'd made up his mind. "Felia, I'll take him in there. Will five minutes alone with me be fine, Lord Cale?"

"Absolutely," Cale replied. "And keep the door open. That way, she can feel at ease."

"Thank you very much," said Felia.

Cale returned her thanks with a smile.

They left one of the double doors to the ruler's chamber open as Cale ventured inside. The room was massive, and the ruler had occupied the entire twentieth floor by himself. Most people wouldn't hear Cale's voice once they reached the window at the far end of the room.

Choi Han might hear me, but it won't matter if he does.

Cale picked his way across the destroyed items in the room. Tables, chairs, books, carpets—everything was now trash. Standing in front of the window farthest from the door, he said, "You broke everything."

"Of course," Herol replied confidently. "This was the chamber of the worst man in the Magic Tower. The room of a monster spawned from mana."

A monster spawned from mana. A mage.

‹*What a liar,*› Raon grumbled in disbelief.

Cale disregarded that and leaned close to Herol's ear, exposing the man's deepest secret in a whisper. "You say that, but you're a mage as well."

Unbeknownst to anyone, Herol was the child of a mage and someone with magic resistance. He could feel mana, but his heart resisted it—the unluckiest of all mana users.

Anywhere you went, there would be secrets about people's origins.

"'Chief Officer Herol.' Or rather..." Cale set his hand on the completely pale Herol's shoulder and said clearly, "Herol Cordien."

"Crazed intellectuals were the most frightening of all" definitely applied to Herol Cordien.

"You want to erase all traces of your father, don't you?"

The Magic Tower's ruler, Pfister Cordien, was unaware of Herol's existence. That son had been born without his knowledge, a real monster that the "monster spawned from mana" had created.

"How did you know?" that real monster asked with a smile on his pallid face.

"Let me hear your answer to this first," Cale replied lightly. He didn't need to mention *buying* the Magic Tower; instead, he brought up what he knew Herol desired. "I'll get rid of the Magic Tower for you. What do you think?"

"How did you know my identity?" Herol pressed.

"The mana told me."

At that, Herol's smile twisted. That expression, "the mana told me," was famously a favorite phrase of the Magic Tower's ruler. Herol Cordien's parents had been a mage and a native tribeswoman, so he had both sides' unique traits. However, he didn't look anything like a native.

"Do you plan to use my bloodline as blackmail?"

Rather than responding to Herol's question right away, Cale gazed down from the twentieth floor.

There were lots of memorable side characters in *Birth of a Hero*. Herol Cordien was one of them. His mother had passed

away while giving birth to him all alone, and his father hadn't even known of him. That was the root of Herol's anger.

There's something Herol never knew, though.

Only the author and readers would know, and that one line in the series was enough to make Herol's anger devastating.

Herol Cordien was the product of his parents' love, but unfortunately, he never knew the truth.

The novels hadn't gone into detail about that. All they said was that the Magic Tower's ruler met Herol's mother while out training as a young mage and fell in love.

Cale kept his eyes on the world outside the window. He then posed a question to Pfister Cordien's son, who had aided in the Magic Tower's downfall with his own hands. "Why would I use it to blackmail you? Being someone's flesh and blood isn't a sin."

Herol didn't have a response.

Cale looked back at him. "Besides, you *are* in a rush, aren't you?"

They were currently on the cusp between spring and summer, so the fall harvest season was right around the corner. All the anti-mages had rebelled against the Magic Tower because they couldn't handle the taxes the mages levied any longer. Herol needed to fulfill the people's desires for a different madness to rise up and take hold. In reality, he wanted war even more than Tunka did, wishing to destroy the seeds of mages worldwide.

"There's a mage among your crew," Herol noted.

"Yes, there is."

Although Herol couldn't use magic, he could feel mana, like his father. There was no way he wouldn't know that Rosalyn was a mage. Still, he probably didn't sense Raon's presence; a dragon was a special case.

Observing Cale's laid-back confidence, Herol asked, "What does Rowoon plan to do with the Magic Tower?"

Cale frowned. "The Magic Tower is going to be *mine*." Peering out the window, he said proudly, "I don't share my things with anyone else."

He'd have to be crazy to give the Magic Tower to Rowoon. Cale thought back on all the time he'd spent getting here; there was no way he'd give this up. The tower would be a component when he built the sturdiest castle possible for his territory.

Herol's eyes swam with ambivalence and confusion. *He's probably going through all kinds of possibilities in his head. He's incredibly smart—yet this crazy bastard's ultimate goal is to destroy all the mages in the world.* Herol idealized and hoped for a world where everyone relied on strength or things like Ancient Powers. That struck Cale as funny, since the world Herol was trying to create would have even worse inequalities between people with powerful abilities and people without. *He sure is a crazy bastard.*

"You want the Kingdom of the Whipper's mages, don't you, Lord Cale?"

"Me?" Cale scoffed in surprise. After all, he already had the black dragon, Raon Mir. "I don't need more mages around me. An even greater being is by my side."

‹The great Raon is right here, human! I like the view from up here!›

Cale heard that, but he paid it no mind.

Herol wore a complicated expression. Crown Prince Albert intended on smuggling the mages out, at least, but Cale didn't care whether Herol figured that out. It wasn't part of Cale's plan, so Herol knowing—or not—was of no consequence to him. *I'll give the crown prince some help, of course.* "Some" meant he'd provide a *lot* of help, indebting the prince to him.

"All right, Chief Officer Herol Cordien." Cale gestured toward the door. Herol could see that unlike him, the young nobleman seemed to have no worries at all.

Their time alone was up.

"Lord Cale, it's been five minutes!" Choi Han announced, poking his head through the open door. "Others have arrived as well."

That prompted a puzzled look from Herol.

"You can hear the details from my companions," Cale told him.

As soon as he said that, two people entered through the door: Bilose and Hans. The latter had a large bag of files in his arms. Why had Cale instructed Bilose and Hans to come with him? To put them to use in this exact fashion.

Cale gave Herol's shoulder another pat, telling him, "Have a nice chat."

Herol chuckled at the redhead's relaxed tone, and his usual gentle expression returned. "I will indeed," he said shortly, hurrying over to Bilose and Hans.

While Herol consulted Hans, Bilose walked over to Cale and whispered cautiously, "Lord Cale."

"What?"

"Should I strike this deal under my name for now?"

Due in part to the differences between this kingdom's currency and Rowoon's, they'd transfer the funds with Bilose as the middleman. He would take Cale's money, delivering it to the anti-mages. Of course, Bilose would be handling the Crown's money—not Cale's—but the anti-mages had no way of knowing that for now.

"Yes."

"Then I'll make a deposit and settle up within the month."

"All right. You take care of it."

"I do have a question." Bilose licked his lips. It looked so strange that Cale motioned with his chin for Bilose to hurry up. "Well, you see… How much are you thinking of spending?"

The great Magic Tower held a lot of history within its walls, but everyone believed that all the magic devices inside had been completely destroyed except for the transportation device. Moreover, the citizens of the Kingdom of the Whipper hated this building.

Cale raised one finger in front of Bilose, who gave it a dubious glance. "One…hundred million?"

"No."

"One billion?"

The redhead nudged his finger upward, which led Bilose to guess even higher.

“Ten billion?”

Cale nodded at his uncertain response. “Take care of this within that budget.”

The sum seemed small compared to the tens of billions of - galleons that went into feeding the army each month, but it could ease the citizens for now. After all, people’s needs determined how far a specific quantity of money would go. At any rate, this was the crown prince’s money, not Cale’s.

Brow wrinkling, Bilose hissed, “Even if the Magic Tower is virtually destroyed? The original tower would’ve cost more than a hundred billion galleons, but none of the magic devices work right now.”

“That’s why ten billion galleons is the cap. Negotiate the cost down based on the fact that it’s a skeleton of what it used to be. Oh, and more money’s available, so buy a big chunk of nearby land as well.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s worth shelling money out on the Magic Tower. There’s something we can sell.”

A short silence descended upon them.

Bilose heaved a sigh. “I have no idea what you’re planning, but I guess we should always aim to turn the largest profit possible.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll get the lowest price I can, then.”

Finding Bilose’s answer satisfactory, Cale smirked.

The merchant seemed lost for words but soon gave Cale the grin of a devoted minion. “My heart’s racing after discussing such large quantities of money, Lord Cale.”

“In joy, I’m sure.”

Bilose didn’t deny it. He bowed respectfully, then strolled back to Herol. The anti-mages had no use for the Magic Tower—and to satisfy the rebelling citizens, they’d needed to do

something big, like destroying it. Since it would be worthless now anyway, they might as well make money off of it too.

“Mr. Cale!”

Choi Han and Vicross approached him.

Looking around the ruler’s chamber, Vicross asked, “Are you going to clean it once you buy it?”

“I’m going to get rid of everything,” Cale replied quietly.

As Vicross let out a sigh of relief, Cale stopped leaning on the windowsill and walked away. There was no need to look at anything else right now; he’d be back later this evening.

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Cale frowned deeply.

“You don’t feel well?” Tunka asked him.

“No.”

Tunka was crestfallen at Cale’s indifferent answer. Their surroundings were very loud; the citizens were enjoying this celebration to welcome a new warrior. Tunka understood the anti-mages’ current financial situation, but his reputation took precedence. Besides, using the term “warrior” let them draw people in. That was why the anti-mage officers had agreed to the feast.

The swollen-faced Tunka seemed disgruntled. “You weakling.”

Cale pointed at Choi Han. “The guest of honor is still attending, so it shouldn’t be a problem. I just need to rest because I’m weak.”

Choi Han wasn’t pleased either, but Cale nudged him toward Tunka and the crew.

Hilsmann joined Choi Han. “Ah ha ha! A celebration! Great! I’m witnessing the traditions of this kingdom’s warriors firsthand!” The vice-captain was quite a social butterfly.

“Goodbye, then.” Cale left the feast area without any regrets, with Vicross joining him as a guard.

They were headed to their encampment, quite far from the local soldiers. “I just need to stand guard outside the tent?” Vicross asked.

“Yes. I’ll be sleeping.”

“Mm. That’ll be the cover story.”

With no need to explain further, Cale appreciated how easy Vicross was to talk to.

Inside the tent, Cale had gathered three others—although he needed to crouch down to look at them. Ohn, Hong, and Raon were all sitting on the ground.

“Did you find the rat?”

Ohn and Hong grinned.

“We have a good guess about where it might be!”

“We pretty much know where!”

They were very excited.

Cale swiftly changed into nighttime camouflage, then looked at Raon. “To the ruler’s chamber, please.”

Raon cast invisibility and flight magic on Cale and the kittens to keep them safe from prying eyes. Then they made their way to the ruler’s chamber on the Magic Tower’s twentieth floor. It wasn’t very difficult, given that the anti-mages had broken all the magic alarms. They’d left only one guard at the Tower entrance, since Tunka was adamant that as many people as possible take part in the celebration. He had proved oddly useful under these circumstances.

“Woo-hoo!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Laughter, applause, and even singing echoed through the night. Cale saw soldiers and citizens gathered by a bonfire, dancing. They seemed excited to celebrate for the first time in a while.

Cale secured his magic bag to his waist, then looked at the kittens, who slowly guided him through the Tower. They slipped stealthily down the stairs, living up to their reputation as

members of the Cat Tribe. He couldn't employ any magic devices because they'd leave evidence of their use behind.

Stopping on the stairs to the fifteenth floor, Cale frowned. "Where is he?"

This was how *Birth of a Hero* described Müller:

Müller used his small size to hide in a secret chamber behind a wall along the Magic Tower's staircase. Only Müller's family and the Tower's ruler were privy to its location. The coward ended up stuck in his hiding spot, too afraid of the guards to step out.

Which wall would it be? Where would Cale find Müller?

Hong swished his red tail. "The first underground level!"

Damn it. The Magic Tower consisted of twenty stories aboveground and three underground; the twentieth floor had been the wrong entry point. Holding back a sigh, Cale quietly picked the kittens up, activated the Sound of the Wind, and told Raon, "Follow me."

He zoomed downstairs. *Tap. Tap.* His footfalls were so quiet, the guards outside wouldn't hear them.

"A-amazing!"

"We got down here in an instant!"

"You're weak but as fast as my claws, human!"

Cale listened to the compliments of the three, who averaged only seven years old, as he stood at the top of the stairs to the underground levels.

"Around here?"

"Yes!"

The kittens were adamant that they smelled ratfolk, but even they couldn't pinpoint where. Since Cale had read the novels, however, he could open the secret door once he knew the location.

Those books really described a lot of useless details.

The author had taken time to describe all the minutiae and minor characters with at least one line. Cale only knew Müller's location because of that. He took a small steel rod from his magic bag. Ohn and Hong flinched, but he didn't care. Step by step, he tapped the wall.

Clunk. Clunk.

"Where could it be?" Cale asked himself in sing-song as he walked down the staircase. Glowing rocks lit the stairs one by one.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

He was pleased that he'd be able to save Müller. In the novel, the rat was caught just before starving to death, and he had to watch the anti-mages dig up his family's bodies from the grave before they killed him.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

The kittens and dragon trailing Cale didn't look nearly as self-satisfied as he did. He stepped down again and struck the wall.

Thump.

"Found it."

This section looked just like the rest of the wall, but there was hollow space beyond. Cale grinned. Taking a magic stone from his bag, he touched the wall's surface. He was quite focused; this task required him to be thorough.

There's a spot on the wall with five holes in the shape of a star.

Cale managed to find them, then put the magic stone in the middle of those five holes. Instantly, they heard a small noise as the wall moved, swallowing the magic stone.

Creak. Cale stepped back. *Creeeeak.* Producing an odd noise, the wall slowly opened. A very small person lurked behind it. As Müller came into view, Cale meant to offer a friendly greeting. Something was off, though.

"Hmm?"

"Waaah!"

The tiny coward shook violently, his face pale. It was as if he'd seen a ghost—no, a serial killer. This was different from what Cale had expected when he'd decided to heroically save Müller.

"Waaah! Hic!" Müller cried so hard, he was even hiccuping.

Cale smiled as gently as possible and greeted him. "Hi."

That only made Müller tremble more. Ohn, Hong, and Raon looked at him with pity, but all this did was confuse Cale.

What's wrong with this punk?

He asked his three companions a silent question with his eyes. *What's going on?* They just shook their heads, sighing.

"Waaaah!"

Müller continued to cry. Cale turned back toward the rat. Why was he sobbing?

Both dwarves and ratfolk were very short. Having inherited both sets of genes, Müller was smaller than both ratfolk *and* the dwarves of this world. He resembled the dwarves of fairy tales, with round, adorable features that would make almost any adult want to protect him. However, it didn't work on Cale.

Ohn and Hong swayed their tails back and forth, approaching Müller with pitying eyes. As they got closer, Müller shuddered even more. He was sobbing even louder now, his hand over his mouth.

"He looks so pitiful."

"He's making me feel bad for him."

Cale suppressed a snort. There was no need to feel bad for Müller. He was thirty years old, and he lorded it over others that he was part of the family that helped create the Magic Tower. He knew the Tower's last line of defense but hadn't used it, since that would've meant revealing himself to Tunka and his allies. He'd been so terrified, he'd simply ignored his father's last wishes. If it weren't for that, the mages would never have lost so badly.

Of course, this actually benefited Cale. Although Müller looked like a cute little boy, inside his body was a thirty-year-old man who knew the ways of the world. He understood that his

own life was what mattered the most. Naturally, Cale preferred such people.

Müller sobbed again. Tired of watching a grown man bawl, Cale dropped his good-guy act. “Hey.”

Müller flinched at his voice and, seeing the steel rod in Cale’s hand, quivered again. He feared his days were over.

Rustle. Rustle.

As Müller crouched inside the wall, Cale placed two things in his arms: a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk. He’d taken them out of his magic bag. Müller’s eyes wavered. He warily looked up at Cale, only to see an annoyed look on the man’s face.

“Eat.”

Hearing what sounded like a command, Müller quickly took a bite of bread. Watching Müller eat the loaf drenched in his tears made Cale skeptical of his abilities.

He seems useless.

The half-blood came off like a total fool, and it had Cale second-guessing this whole interaction. Müller ostensibly had both the dwarves’ technical skills and the rats’ stealth and meticulousness. That combination was said to have given him the potential to become an exceptional builder and architect.

So why…?

“Th-thank you very much.”

Why does he seem like such an oaf?

Cale had a bitter taste in his mouth. Ohn, Hong, and Raon continued to regard Müller with pity, inching toward him and trying to shield him. He seemed afraid of Cale.

Despite their best efforts, Müller’s fear rendered him unable even to taste the bread he was chewing. Approached by two pure-blooded Mist Cat Tribe kittens and a dragon, Müller stopped eating, feeling like he was going to choke. Then he heard a noise that sent chills down his spine.

Clank. Clank.

Cale tapped the wall with his steel rod. There was no reason behind it; he just did it randomly. He looked at Müller

again. He still had a bad feeling about the ratfolk man, but he decided to bring him anyway.

Henituse territory was home to a number of sculptors, as well as various other skilled artisans. There was an especially large group of architects, since the area had quite a few quarries, so Müller would be useful.

“Do you want to live?” Cale’s low voice reverberated through the stairwell. He was getting annoyed with Müller, who looked ready to cry again.

Clank. Clank.

Cale distracted himself by tapping the wall. It occurred to him that he probably needed to be gentle with Müller, since the rat was such a coward.

He plastered on a kind smile. “Should I save you?”

Müller nodded vigorously. The motion was so energetic that it flung breadcrumbs off him.

Satisfied with his eager response, Cale adopted a relaxed tone. “Then you have to listen to me. Got it?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“First, eat your bread.”

Müller did so right away.

Pleased, Cale asked the rat, “You know where the Tower ruler’s treasure room is, don’t you?”

The bread in Müller’s hand fell to the ground. *Plop.*

“Dropped your bread,” Cale pointed out kindly. “You should pick it up.”

Müller snatched it back up. He was still huddled inside the wall, with Cale, the kittens, and the dragon blocking off the entrance.

“I know you’re aware of the secret room,” Cale continued. “The ruler’s *real* chamber.”

There was more to the Magic Tower than met the eye. For one thing, the chamber on the twentieth floor was a decoy of sorts.

Müller’s eyes bulged. *How does he know about that?!*

Only the ruler of the Tower and the family who had developed it knew of the secret chamber.

“You know how to get into the fourth basement floor too, right?”

Naked shock took over Müller’s face. The Magic Tower was known to comprise twenty floors aboveground and three underground. Müller eyed him with trepidation, still wondering how Cale knew what he knew. It gave Cale an odd feeling—as though he’d become a criminal, kidnapping and interrogating someone. He hadn’t had any plans to do that. In fact, his goal was to give Müller a safe haven.

He smiled patiently and switched gears to console the quivering rat. “First of all, I *will* save you if you do as I say.” Naturally, he didn’t plan to *free* Müller. He needed to take the rat home and put him to work.

Müller hastily replied, “Anything! I’ll do anything you tell me to do!”

“Good.”

Müller’s eyes were still wide as he stared at the man who’d brought the scary cats—even scarier, *pure-blooded* cats—as well as a black dragon.

“In that case, eat the bread, then guide me to the fourth underground floor.”

“But you need a magic stone to go—”

Cale took a bag out and tossed it to him before he could - finish. It was full of magic stones. Müller scarfed down the rest of the tear-soaked bread. After that, he was forced to go all the way down to the third underground floor, surrounded by Cale’s group.

At the base of the stairs to the third underground floor was only the door to the floor itself. No more stairs headed downward. Müller took out a magic stone and approached the wall, exposing a mechanism therein.

Creeeak.

The wall shifted, revealing a cave. That was the pathway to the fourth basement floor.

“You go in first,” Cale ordered.

Müller mechanically stepped forward. Cale was excited as they headed down the descending pathway. The cave was dry, with light stones illuminating the path.

The fourth underground floor was an area that only the Tower’s ruler and mages secretly experimenting belowground knew about—as well as Müller, as a member of the architect’s family.

Cale strode down the path for a while and found a small door.

“There’s a magic alarm.”

As Müller stood there mumbling, Raon stepped forward. With one gentle wave of his paw, the small door opened. Naturally, no alarm went off. Müller was shocked, but Cale just stepped in through the door. *Found it.* He’d located the first treasure.

What was hidden in the Magic Tower?

Its greatest secret was twofold—that is, the two research projects that the mages were conducting behind closed doors. The subjects of those projects were simple: One was a storage device based on the principles of Ancient Powers, and the other was the cause of magic resistance. It was research that Herol would desperately want to acquire, as well as research that would take away the citizens’ greatest advantage.

Cale could see the research files inside two large, round containers under layers of security. “Amazing.”

The anti-mages only respected Ancient Power; Herol hated magic but also wanted to be able to use it. How overjoyed would they feel if they found the fruits of the mages’ research?

That won’t happen now, though. The joy belonged to Cale.

He approached a large orb between the two circular bins. It was transparent and looked like a giant egg. He spotted a seed within the sparkling fluid inside it.

“That looks interesting, human!” Raon approached the egg, squishing his face against the glass to get a better view.

Cale moved closer to Raon and patted his head. “Want to try raising it?”

“Is that all right, human?”

“Yes. It’s mine once it’s done growing, though.”

“Deal!” The four-year-old happily accepted an arrangement in which he’d do all the work, only for someone else to benefit.

Cale beamed in satisfaction. “Let’s pack up everything in here.”

“Of course! I’m curious about everything!”

It seemed Cale would have to give Raon a lab of his own. He smiled wider, knowing how valuable the seed and research materials were. “Müller.”

Müller gasped. “Y-you even know m-my name!”

Cale approached the rat, who cowered at the entrance, not coming in. Müller looked back and forth between the dragon, who’d made the documents and egg disappear into another dimension, and Cale, who was drawing near. He couldn’t help shivering.

“Let’s go to the ruler’s chamber now.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“Raon.”

“What, human?”

“Set a magic alarm here. And a few magic traps.”

Once the Magic Tower was demolished, this floor would be exposed. If Tunka and the anti-mages found the items there, they’d get even tougher. Cale didn’t want that, obviously. *Although they’d self-destruct faster this way.*

That wasn’t Cale’s problem, though. He watched, unconcerned, as Raon happily created his traps.

“Other humans mustn’t take all the interesting things down here,” the dragon declared. “I need to see to it that they’ll die the moment they step in here!”

Müller’s face paled another shade, but Cale observed the excited four-year-old with pride. He had no regard for Müller’s mental state. On the contrary, he waited until the rat resealed

the room—now full of Raon's magic traps—and picked him up by the scruff of his neck.

"The ruler's chamber."

Müller had curled up in Cale's arms, but that demand made him reply, "We'll need to go to the twentieth floor first."

Ohn and Hong jumped into Cale's arms as well, sharing the space with Müller. Feeling Hong's front paw on his back, Müller feared he would be killed right then and there, which helped him work up the courage to say "I-I can walk—ack!"

He had to cut himself short as they whooshed up the stairs. Cale had used the Sound of the Wind to rush to the twentieth floor. Once they got to the twentieth floor and Cale set him down, Müller staggered, then tried to stand. He was dizzy and needed some support, so Ohn helped him.

"Th-thank you very much."

"Meeeow."

Ohn gave him a smile, but Müller trembled, avoiding her eyes. Then he saw Cale's gaze, which seemed to be telling him to explain how to reach the secret room. "The Magic Tower actually has another floor."

"So the ruler's real chamber is on the twenty-first floor?"

"No. And we don't call that floor the twenty-first."

"What do you call it, then?"

The real chamber of the Magic Tower's ruler was a room the anti-mages had never managed to find. Cale only knew about it because of something written in the novels.

The anti-mage faction did end up finding the fourth basement floor, but they never discovered the ruler's chamber. If they had discovered it, the Kingdom of the Whipper's strength would have greatly increased.

Cale heard Müller's voice in his ear. "Floor Zero. We call it Floor Zero."

"Get ready."

“Yes, sir.”

He watched Müller—who was now sprightly and no longer crying—with contentment. As soon as Cale cracked a smile, Müller’s movements grew even more rapid. He did look like he was shaking a bit, but thanks to the unique traits of both the dwarves and rats, he was quick.

Cale expressed his awe with a single sound. “Whoa.”

Thrummm.

“I didn’t expect it to be here.”

Müller moved a few things around the floor of the twentieth-story ruler’s chamber. All sorts of devices popped up, and the whirring of gears filled the air. Finally, Müller used a magic stone—and the resulting sound was loud.

Boom!

The anti-mages’ noisy celebration freed Cale from worrying that they’d hear the sound. Nonetheless, he was full of confusion. Following the sound, there was no change in the room at all. “Müller, explain.”

“Yes, sir.” Müller pointed not at the unchanged room but elsewhere. “It’s over there.”

“There…?” Cale looked to where Müller was pointing. It was the window—the large one he’d gazed out earlier that day.

“You just have to jump out.”

“Out the *window*?”

“Yes, sir. Then you’ll be on Floor Zero.” Müller raised his head, gazing at the owner of the shadow that covered him. He could see into Cale’s eyes.

“You know what happens if you’re lying, right?”

The steel rod twinkled in the light. Cale stared down at the shaking Müller, who nodded. Then the lout grinned and picked Müller up.

“Oh my! What are you doing, sir? You told me you’d l-let me live!”

Cale ignored Müller’s cries. He looked over at Raon and the kittens, then out the window, sighing at all the eyes fixed on him.

“You first.”

“What?!”

He chucked Müller out the window. They didn’t see him fall to the ground, so Cale quickly followed him. Fortunately, he didn’t need to plummet twenty stories. *Tap!* There was a platform right underfoot.

“I guess magic is magic,” Cale observed.

As he did, the ruler’s real chamber appeared. At the same time, Cale heard the younglings’ voices behind him.

“I can’t tell what I’m looking at right now, Sister.”

“My eyes are fine, Hong—but this *is* weird.”

Raon just had a single word of admiration. “Oh.”

Cale’s lips twitched, then spread into a wide grin. *The Magic Tower’s ruler was avaricious. Something in his past filled him with greed.*

The entire room shone with treasure: gold, jewels, magic devices, coins. A veritable sea of wealth beyond one’s wildest dreams. The ruler’s greed rivaled that of an average adult dragon.

“This really reminds me of a dragon’s lair,” Cale noted, heading toward a heap of magic devices. None of the items in the chamber were cheap. The magic devices were adorned with jewels, so they’d obviously been made for nobles or royalty; the entire room was full of items like that.

The mages’ ruler hadn’t used these devices even as he faced ruin. Using them like that would have benefited not just him but everyone in the Magic Tower. Cale covered his face with both hands, seeing the indolent ruler’s life flash between his fingers.

“Ha ha ha ha!” He didn’t hold back his laughter; he let it all out.

Müller watched Cale for a bit, then swept a glance around the room. He’d known about it for a while, but this was his first time actually seeing it. He reached out and nicked the golden brooch closest to him—but the second he did, he heard a chilling sound.

“Meeeow.”

Ohn and Hong swished their tails, watching him, and the black dragon stepped closer. Müller quickly let go of the golden brooch. The thirty-year-old rat couldn’t do a thing.

Cale, on the other hand, grinned at his companions. “We’re rich.”

Listening to Cale’s voice—which was much more measured than his expression—Ohn, Hong, and Raon smiled as well. A jovial atmosphere much like the one at Tunka’s celebration filled the room.

The rat watched all this with fear in his eyes.

Chapter 16:
A Kind Person

AFTER LEAVING THE MAGIC TOWER safely, Cale ran into Vicross, who was still guarding his tent. The chef ignored him, and Cale likewise said nothing as he entered the tent. Müller was hanging from Cale's side, of course. Releasing him, Cale sat down on the couch—and without so much as a word from Cale, Müller knelt in front of him.

There was no need for that, though; Cale didn't care. He just got straight to the point. "I'll give you a warm bed and a safe place where you definitely won't get killed. Eventually, I'll also give you your freedom."

"Really?"

"Yes." Müller was still kneeling, so Cale crouched down and continued, "First, I'll let you leave the Kingdom of the Whipper."

Müller's eyes shone. He was afraid of both the mages and the citizens who'd rebelled, so just leaving this country would delight him.

Cale leisurely pinned a brooch on Müller's collar—the golden one the rat had tried to steal. Müller blanched; Cale had seen it happen.

"I'll give you treasures like this too," Cale continued. "So you'll do a good job of whatever I ask, right?"

"Yes! Yes, sir! I certainly will!"

"Then create blueprints for a castle and a ship." Müller was said to have the potential to become the greatest architect, so Cale wanted him to help with development. He needed a safe, sweet home and a sturdy method of transportation.

"Excuse me...?"

"Something along the lines of the Magic Tower will work for the castle."

"How should I make the ship?"

Müller's question made Cale think of his family crest, the golden turtle. Between that and the concept of a ship,

something came to his—Kim Roksu's—mind: the turtle ships from Korean history. He chose not to say anything about that, though. All he wanted was a ship for transport and protection. A turtle ship wasn't necessary, despite the vessel's exciting history.

"My family crest is the golden turtle. Figure it out from there." Müller would take care of it. Not knowing what the end result would be, he made sure he was stern with Müller. "Work hard. As if your life depends on it. Ohn, Hong, keep an eye on him."

"Meeeow!"

"Keeping watch is fun!"

Müller was weak to children. *Very* weak. "I-I'll work hard!"

Listening to Müller's desperate voice, Cale mulled over how satisfied he was with the evening's expedition. He could hear the citizens singing by the bonfire. Although it was close to midnight, the celebration was still going on.

It was one loud night.

***

The festivities continued until dawn, but the morning that followed was quiet. Time wouldn't stop to let them enjoy the peace and serenity, however.

"Are you feeling better?" Herol asked.

Cale wagged his hand. "So-so." In reality, Cale was always in the best possible condition, thanks to the Energy of the Heart. "Aren't you the ones who should worry about your health?"

Herol and the other anti-mage officers looked tired, as did Bilose. Tunka, who was drunk in the corner, was in the same boat. "I'm not weak!" he cried.

Without sparing him a glance, Cale continued his conversation with Herol. "Things are moving faster than I expected."

One day was all it had taken to cut the deal for the Magic Tower. That was no small feat, but the urgency of the matter had

sped things up.

"There was no point in drawing it out."

"And since you're in a rush to raise money, it makes sense, right?"

The anti-mage faction was composed of the poor. No matter what they did, they were always going to lack postwar funds. The royal family had funneled all their money to the mage faction, but as far as the anti-mages knew, nothing left inside the Magic Tower was worth anything. It wasn't like they could sell the kingdom's magic devices; that would go against their mission.

Above all else, Herol likely wanted to get rid of Cale as fast as possible.

"Did you get a chance to read through the contract, Lord Cale?"

"I read it as soon as I got it," Cale confirmed. "Don't worry. I'll destroy it within a year."

The total cost of the Magic Tower would be just over ten billion galleons, since it included some nearby land. The contract also stated that although Cale was purchasing the Tower, he would demolish it within twelve months. He couldn't move the building to another location, and finally, he couldn't gather mages under his own name. Those were the conditions.

Tunka glowered at Cale as though he'd come to flaunt his wealth. "I just don't get you."

Cale shrugged. "I just want to own the highest view aside from the Empire's Bell Tower."

Tunka looked at him incredulously, but he pushed the contract toward Cale—perhaps fed up with thinking about complicated matters. "Just sign it. I promised to fight your lackey Hilsmann today. Mwa ha ha ha!"

Cale was bewildered by Tunka bringing up the vice-captain. Hilsmann was apparently excellent at schmoozing, and he'd had a ball chatting with everyone the previous night. Choi Han had reported how surprising it was to witness.

Herol handed an ink pad to Cale. “You just have to stamp here.” At that moment, they made eye contact. Herol gazed into Cale’s eyes, trying to read his intentions. Cale just smiled back.

Given that Cale was acting quite suspicious, Herol probably didn’t *want* to sell the Magic Tower. He had no choice, however. The anti-mages had a lot to gain from selling it, and the benefit was impossible to ignore.

Tunka good-naturedly—or, to put it bluntly, like a true fool—stamped his thumb on the contract without hesitation. “Here. I stamped it, so you do it too.”

Cale also stamped the two copies of the contract with his thumbprint, then slipped his copy inside his pocket.

It was Bilose’s turn. “As a member of Flynn Merchant Fleets, I, Bilose Flynn, will serve as witness and intermediary for this transfer of funds.”

Tunka nodded and reached his hand out. Cale shook it.

“Let me know if you need my help knocking down the Magic Tower,” said Tunka. “Happy to pitch in with wrecking that eyesore.”

“Sure.”

“Take pride in making a deal with us. We’ll go on to do great things.” Cale met Tunka’s eyes as the barbarian put more strength into their handshake, letting out a loud guffaw. “We’ll make a mark on this continent’s history! You might wanna go around saying you know me! Ha ha ha!”

History? Well, if they’re defeated later on, they’ll make a mark on history as well. Cale would soon reach the end of Volume Five’s contents, and he didn’t know what came after that.

At any rate, Cale responded politely, “I look forward to it.”

Now that they’d finalized the contract, Cale left the officers’ tents to return to his own. Bilose followed him. The merchant was leering as they entered Cale’s tent. There, Cale took the promissory note Bilose handed him, then removed the golden plaque from his pocket. He gave it a twist, and with a *click*, the top opened like a lid.

As a stamp with the royal crest appeared, Bilose couldn't help but admire it. "Oh!"

"What's got you so impressed?"

Cale laughed at Bilose and stamped the note. The next time he used it, the royal stamp would disappear. He passed a magic bag to Bilose, who was greedily peering at the golden plaque.

"Isn't that the bag I gave you?"

"Open it."

Bilose opened the magic bag he'd sold Cale. "Wow…"

There were a number of magic devices inside. They seemed to have shrunk, but they were all clearly intended for nobles and royals.

"You'll receive a few more of those bags, at least," came Cale's voice. "Slowly start selling them off in about a month."

Bilose clutched the bag and ventured, "How much do I get?"

"Thirty percent."

"That much?!" He couldn't contain his shock. It wasn't that 30 percent was high, but the Cale that Bilose knew was pretty thrifty when it came to things like this. Bilose had assumed he'd get 20 percent at most, especially since these magic devices would no longer be on the market.

Cale's voice reached Bilose's ear again. "The position you wanted, leader of the merchant fleet. You need to take it quickly. The north and the sea routes will soon be nothing like they are today."

"Another war?"

"Don't tell anyone else."

"Why would I share such precious information?" Bilose gingerly tucked the magic bag away in his pocket. "Please feel free to pass along whatever you wish in the future."

"All right. If it's possible, stay in touch with your uncle."

Bilose's uncle, Odeus Flynn, controlled Rowoon's northwestern underworld.

"Why my uncle?"

Before long, Raon would take his revenge. “There’s a reason. No need to pry, though.”

“I understand.”

The merchant didn’t ask anything else. Instead, he handed Cale a magical video communication device. Bilose had worked hard to acquire this precious item, but Cale just chucked it onto the bed. It was so like him.

On his way out of the tent, Bilose said, “I’ll contact you through video next time, Lord Cale.”

“Sure.” As soon as Bilose left, Cale addressed Ohn and Hong. “Bring the children here.”

“Meeeow.”

Soon enough, Cale faced the wolf children Ohn and Hong had rounded up.

“The time span will be—” He stopped mid-sentence and sighed, his forehead wrinkling as deeply as it could. “Hilsmann.”

“Yes, sir!”

Having enjoyed the anti-mages’ celebration until the wee hours of the morning, the vice-captain was disheveled and smelled like alcohol. He seemed fine, however. Vicross had reported that Hilsmann was escorted joyfully back to his tent, arm-in-arm with the partygoers.

“Did you enjoy the celebration?”

“Of course! I made a lot of friends!” Hilsmann was the competitive type, yet a social butterfly.

Is sending this guy with Lark really a good idea? Cale had some concerns, but he couldn’t do anything else at this point.

Looking at Lark, the wolf children, and Hilsmann in turn, he resumed his speech. “The time span will be one month.” Cale planned to resume his deal with Lark now. Unfolding a map atop the table, he pointed to a mountain at the southern end of the Kingdom of the Whipper. “This here is Mount Yelia. There’s an item here I need, and you just have to go find it.”

This time, the Ancient Power was embedded in an object.

“Uh, Lord Cale…?”

“Yes, Vice-Captain?”

“I’ve heard about that mountain. It has a very high summit, and the peak is said to be snowcapped all year long. I also hear it’s one of the three most dangerous mountains on the continent.”

“And?”

Hilsmann couldn’t answer.

Cale shifted his gaze to Lark instead. “Can you do it or not?”

“I can do it,” Lark replied immediately. He was still timid and naive, but he’d changed since he had first met Cale.

“Maes.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You don’t all need to head up to the peak. Just support Lark around the base.”

Maes and the other wolf children exchanged glances, then voiced their vigorous assent.

“Yes, sir! You’ll see us complete this mission successfully!”

“No need to flip out about it.”

Cale waved them off, then told Hilsmann, “You’re chaperoning them. Guide them well, feed them well, and make sure they rest.”

“So I don’t have to climb the mountain?” Hilsmann scratched his head, mumbling, “I *am* a bit afraid of heights.”

Why the hell is this guy a vice-captain? Cale suddenly had a lot of questions about the Henituses’ knight brigade. “Do what you want.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll be a great guide and guard for the children! Oh, Lord Cale—where should we return to?”

At Hilsmann’s question, Cale pointed out a location on the map.

“Over *there*?”

“Yes.”

“Uh…are you certain you’re pointing to the right spot?”

Hilsmann couldn't look away from the location Cale had singled out. It was one of the Western Continent's Five Wonders: a place called No Way Out. The path was located in a rainforest where it poured year-round. Many travelers braved the path and never came back. Still, the rainforest was located between the Kingdom of the Whipper and the southern coast of the Western Continent, so Cale *had* pointed to it.

"There's a village called Hoik adjacent to No Way Out, Vice-Captain. It's small, and it's the path's only entrance."

Hoik was a tiny settlement in the southernmost region of the Kingdom of the Whipper, built at the entrance of the rainforest's No Way Out.

"Head there," Cale insisted.

In about a month, the Queen of the Jungle and her followers would be running wild in the rainforest where No Way Out was located. Cale planned to intervene and serve as her guide.

Choi Han, who'd been standing off to the side, approached Cale. "Hoik is our next destination?"

"Yes."

Cale was looking forward to finishing up the first step toward his luxurious slacker life—the financial step. He smirked. Once he took care of this business with the Queen of the Jungle, he'd return to Rowoon to exact revenge, take care of some trivial things, and build a sturdy house.

"Once things here are looked after, we can go there right away."

The future beyond *Birth of a Hero*'s Volume Five was just around the corner, and Cale was pulling out all the stops to prepare for it.

***

Three weeks later, Cale reached Hoik amid light rainfall.

"Why are there so many gravestones?" Rosalyn asked.

Cale peered at the markers, which stretched to the village entrance. “Hoik was created by the waiting families of travelers who went into the rainforest and never came back.”

Those families’ desperate pleas that their loved ones return safely, and the lingering hopes that they one day still would, led them to remain here and build this village. The people who’d taken No Way Out did so for many reasons. Since they never reemerged, their families moved as close to them as possible.

“People here will eventually give up,” Cale said. “These gravestones are a symbol of their transition from hope to acceptance.”

The villagers had erected them for loved ones who could never come back, so Hoik had become more a village of sorrow than of hope.

Cale looked toward the large rainforest beyond the village.

“This is a melancholy place,” Choi Han said. “What are we doing here?”

“Restoring hope,” Cale replied lazily.

“Pardon?”

“We’re going to be the hope of the jungle.”

His unexpected response confused Choi Han. “The jungle?”

Cale strode forward without further explanation, cutting through the village. There wasn’t much of anything other than gravestones around Hoik. It was very quiet.

“Your umbrella, my lord.”

Hoik was next to a rainforest, where rain fell more often than not, so it also rained quite frequently in the village. Carrying the umbrella Hans had given him, Cale made for the far end of the village. Hans and a few others followed him.

This is it.

No Way Out’s only entrance was right there before Cale’s eyes. The trail into the rainforest looked dark and ominous, perhaps because of the rain and the clouds above. At the entrance of the path was a large slab bearing the words NO WAY OUT. Choi Han grunted in contemplation.

Cale observed the scene in front of the slab. Even on this rainy day, people waited at the start of the path, either wearing raincoats or simply letting the rain hit their skin. These were villagers who still had hope that their loved ones would return. An old man nearby leaned on the slab, looking toward the forest. Then their eyes met.

The man's eyes suddenly widened, and he got up. "Don't go."

Cale merely watched him.

Rosalyn approached, gazing with pity at the old man and at the others waiting at the start of the trail, as if in prayer. "Lord Cale," she called.

At that moment, Cale moved. "It's raining, old man. Don't catch a cold." He put his umbrella next to the old man standing in the rain, then extended a hand to Hans.

"What is it, my lord?"

"Your umbrella."

"Wait, what about me?!"

"Share with Vicross."

Vicross and Hans exchanged glances. Vicross glowered, but Hans kept his mouth shut, handing his umbrella over to Cale. Before Cale could take it, Rosalyn moved her umbrella to cover him instead.

"We can share mine," she said.

"Thanks." Cale turned away from the entrance to No Way Out. "Let's go."

His companions followed him back into Hoik. The villagers at the beginning of the path watched them for a moment, then returned their attention to the forest.

"Hans?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"Go find an inn. There are a lot of inns, but I'm sure none are great. Just find a decent one."

For its size, Hoik did contain quite a few inns. They were all shabby, however; the people who came here looking for their

loved ones had little money.

The moment they entered the inn Hans had chosen, Choi Han asked, “Just why *did* all those people enter that rainforest?”

Cale sat down in the first-floor restaurant, then gave his answer. “For hope.”

“Hope?”

“Mm-hmm. There’s a legend about No Way Out.”

That was why people went down the infamous path every so often, although no one ever came back. And it wouldn’t matter if the old man tried to stop them, as he had Cale’s group earlier.

“A dragon supposedly lives along that path.”

‹What are you talking about, human?!› Raon, who had been quiet all this time, suddenly shouted in Cale’s mind. *‹There are no dragons here. The only dragon around is me!›*

Cale knew that there were no dragons on the path because of what he’d read in the novels. “That dragon will grant a wish to whoever finds his lair,” he continued. “Any wish, whether it’s to become rich, cure an incurable illness, or even to live a completely blissful life.”

‹A dragon can’t do that! Dragons are great and mighty, but we aren’t gods! What nonsense!›

Raon’s complaints held water, but such legends tended to catch the interest of the desperate.

“That legend draws people in,” Cale concluded.

He saw a rare frown on Choi Han’s face. The young man apparently didn’t like that. The village’s atmosphere and residents—such as the old man—probably saddened him, given his kind personality. That was why Choi Han had no problem making a wild, impulsive suggestion: “Couldn’t we just raze the rainforest to the ground?”

Cale pretended to not hear him. A fire *would* start in this forest, of course. That was precisely how the Western Continent’s Five Wonders became the Four Wonders at the end of Volume Four.

Choi Han pressed on with his dangerous idea. “Wouldn’t it be fine to just burn it down?”

“We just need to demonstrate that that legend isn’t true,” Cale replied. “Then people will have no reason to go into the rainforest.”

Vicross then entered the inn, heaving a sigh. “I’m back, Lord Cale.”

There were a number of people behind him.

“We’ve returned, Lord Cale!”

“Lord Cale, we’re here!”

Hilsmann and the wolf children looked dirty as they came inside. Looking at the group, Vicross took out a pair of white gloves.

Lark was the last one in. “Lord Cale!” He approached Cale and tried to hand him a magic bag.

Cale raised a hand to stop him, then turned to speak to the group. “You all worked hard. Go rest.”

Everyone smiled. At that point, Cale reached out to Lark, who cautiously offered him the magic bag again.

“Part of our deal is that what’s inside is mine,” Cale told Lark.

“Yes, sir.” There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation in Lark’s voice. Lark probably knew that it was an Ancient Power, but he expressed no envy.

Cale opened the magic bag to look at the contents, then declared to the group, “I’ll be entering that rainforest.”

‹What?›

“Meow?”

“Pardon?”

“What the—?!”

Having gotten an unexpectedly strong reaction from the others, Cale glanced around. “What’s wrong?”

Choi Han expressed his disbelief with an even deeper frown.

“Lord Cale…” Rosalyn gaped at him. The kittens started thumping the table.

For his part, Raon sounded very stern. *‹I’ll go too. Listen to me, weak human—do not go without me! This is a warning. If I get angry, it will take me less than five minutes to destroy this rainforest!›*

Listening to Raon’s vicious threat, Cale finally looked at Hilsmann, whose eyes were fearful.

“Um, Lord Cale…are you talking about No Way Out? I’ve heard that everyone gets lost in the—”

“Says who?” Cale challenged, though he kept his voice quiet so the innkeeper wouldn’t hear. “That won’t be the case for me.”

Beside Cale, Ohn and Hong were sitting oddly apart from each other. Cale’s hand reached between them, touching the curled-up, invisible dragon. He stroked Raon and Ohn before adding, “I’ll be fine as long as I have them.”

Ohn’s eyes widened as she looked at him.

Cale met her gaze, then whispered, “Know why No Way Out is so dangerous, Ohn?”

“No.”

“Fog.”

Ohn’s eyes flashed.

Cale had actually been somewhat surprised when he first met Ohn and Hong. Pure-blooded cats all had their own specialties. Of those, poison was rare, but mist was even rarer. If he’d been asked to name the most unique member of his entourage, he would’ve picked not Raon but Ohn.

He began to share the secrets of the rainforest with the little girl whose mist powers would enable her to control the fog. “This rainforest is full of fog,” he explained, looping in Raon as well. “Something in that fog shakes up both people and mana, and it’s much stronger than a mana-disturbance tool. It makes using magic in the rainforest difficult.”

The fog covered the area completely.

“It’s why following a single path is difficult too.”

Cale could handle the rainforest as long as he had Ohn and Raon. Those extremely rare companions would allow him to strike a deal with the Queen of the Jungle.

“As long as you two join me, I can do anything I want in there,” he concluded.

Ohn’s tail swayed, and Raon’s wings seemed to flutter; there was a small gust of wind across the table.

***

Early the next morning, Cale stood at the edge of the rainforest. Ohn was in his arms, of course. On Cale’s orders, nobody else was present to watch him enter.

The old man from the previous evening gave Cale a weak warning from his spot beside the slab. “You’ll die if you go in. You can’t come back.” He seemed to have spent the night there. Someone he cared about must’ve gone into the forest, desperate to find the legendary dragon.

“I’ll put that legend to rest and return, old man. You can wait for me if you want.”

Cale smiled at the man’s nervous gaze, then strode right into the rainforest. Walking quickly, he soon found that he couldn’t see far. The fog had surrounded him.

“Hmm,” said Raon. “It does seem like I’ll need to use a paw’s worth of strength to cast some magic. And you’d need to be at least at my level to use magic in this fog, human.”

“You really are amazing, Raon.”

“Yes. I am great and mighty. But what does the queen want?” Having heard a brief explanation last night, Raon wanted more details.

“She wants a fire in the jungle put out,” Cale said flatly.

“A fire?”

Ritana, the Queen of the Jungle, ruled this wide southern territory. Her rainforest was even larger than the Empire.

She's like a more powerful version of Tunka, Cale mused. Ritana never showed any vulnerability to the strong. Unlike Tunka, however, she was very gentle with the weak. She was secretly in this rainforest because she was desperate to find a solution, grasping at straws by searching for the legendary dragon to have her wish granted.

Instead of saying as much to Raon and Ohn, whose heads were tilted in confusion, Cale declared, "Starting today, I'm a good person." His expression was serious.

Raon scrutinized Cale, even more puzzled. "Why are you suddenly describing yourself?"

Ohn did likewise, her gaze seeming to ask why Cale was stating something so obvious.

That briefly took Cale aback, but soon he said to the silver kitten, "Ohn. The path."

"Got it."

Ohn's eyes sparkled. Her front paw moved, and the fog cleared.

"The fog here is interesting," she noted, curious. "It doesn't seem like regular fog. It's like it's poisonous."

Listening to her words, Cale walked deeper into the fog, although he couldn't see anything ahead of him. The fog didn't disperse completely even when rain began falling. Cale brushed drops off his raincoat.

"Can you see the path through the fog?"

"Yeah, I can."

Cale followed the kitten's directions into the rainforest, seeming as laid-back as if he'd come for a stroll.

"It'd be great if we could meet her today," he said to himself.

However much Cale hoped to reach the Queen of the Jungle quickly, night soon fell.

***

Ritana, the woman who'd earned the title of Queen of the Jungle, peeked out of the cave. It was dark, and she heard only the hiss of rain.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No need for you to apologize, Your Majesty!"

"It's fine, Captain!"

Her five followers reassured her. Still, looking at their conditions, Ritana couldn't help cracking a bitter smile. They'd been stuck on this No Way Out for two weeks. There were no monsters or enemies, but they couldn't see anything in the foggy forest, and their food supply was dwindling. They didn't dare eat any of the unknown rainforest plants, so they'd survived off one meal a day for the last week.

Ritana knew what frightened her subordinates. *If this keeps up, we might just die here.* To warriors like them, nothing was worse than a helpless death. *Why did I overestimate my own abilities?*

She was angry with herself. *That damn fire.* She'd come here because part of the jungle was burning. The flames hadn't spread, yet they hadn't subsided. She stroked the glass bottle in her chest pocket, which contained some of those flames.

If nothing else works, I'll have to burn my way out of here. She shouldn't damage the rainforest, but it wasn't as precious as the lives of her followers or those awaiting her back home.

Ritana glanced around the cave they'd happened to find. They would need to spend the night there. Calming herself, she resolved to make her decision soon.

Just then, something rustled in the brush.

"Hm?" Ritana grabbed her spear, sensing someone outside the cave.

She heard footsteps amid the rainfall. Someone was headed their way. Huddled around the fire, her followers donned grim expressions.

Rustle.

The footfalls grew closer. Soon, a shadow loomed close to their flames.

Swish!

One of her followers pointed a spear at the strange person's throat. "Who are you?"

"Well, you see..."

They heard the continent's lingua franca as the fire lit the man's face.

"I was thrilled to see light, so I rushed over."

The redheaded man—elaborately dressed but kind-looking—smiled awkwardly at the spear at his neck. He gulped, then asked cautiously, "Would you mind my sitting by your fire tonight?"

"Meeeow."

There was a wet kitten in the man's arms, and both were shaking. "My raincoat ripped," he added, "so we're freezing after getting caught in the rain."

Wary as Ritana was of the ragged man and his kitten, she ordered, "Get him a blanket." She couldn't help the regal mentality that compelled her to protect the weak.

The red-haired man, Cale, trembled as he approached her group.

Although it required the dragon to use a paw's worth of strength, his voice reached Cale's mind from afar. *‹Beware of catching a cold, weak human. Why is your face different from usual? Are you sick?›*

Cale didn't respond to Raon, however; he simply accepted the blanket with a gentle smile and respectful attitude, concealing his scheme. "Thank you very much." In doing so, he looked not like a lout but an upstanding nobleman. Ohn gaped at him, astounded.

He'd set the bait, and now he was reeling them in. Ritana's group watched with dubious expressions as Cale shuffled to the back of the cave and sat down.

"I greatly appreciate you giving me a place to stay tonight." This kind, respectful voice belonged to none other than Cale Henituse himself.

Ritana shook her head at the red-haired man, who clearly hailed from the middle of the continent. “That’s normal between travelers. I can see how cold you are from the rain. Please, rest by the fire.”

Despite her generous response, she and her followers remained on their guard. No matter how pitiful the drenched interloper looked, he was still a stranger.

‹What rain? He wasn’t hit by rain at all! And I used warm water!› Raon took issue with Ritana’s comments. After all, Cale had ripped his own raincoat close to the cave, and Raon hadn’t just showered him with warm water; he’d cast heat-retaining magic on Cale before the man made it to Ritana’s shelter.

Cale patted Ohn’s back for acting her part well.

Ohn seemed anxious as she looked up at him. “Meeeow.”

Ritana watched the pair with a stealthy, sharp gaze. *He doesn’t seem normal.*

She hadn’t sensed it when her follower held the stranger at spearpoint, but looking at him now, she could clearly tell that he was different from a traveler or adventurer. He had a solid build, yet his posture and stride made it apparent that he didn’t practice any martial arts. At the same time, he didn’t seem like a mage or any other type of powerhouse.

Ritana’s intuition was spot-on.

‹You seem as strong as the tip of my claw again.›

Dominating Aura emanated from Cale’s body. While Ritana observed him, Cale was likewise observing the Queen of the Jungle out of the corner of his eye.

The people of the southern jungle, referred to as “southerners,” were known for their bronze skin and firm physiques. As they called the jungle home, they were very close to nature, which resulted in a very different culture than that of the Kingdom of the Whipper. Whereas the kingdom’s citizens had become fiercely competitive and valued survival of the fittest, the southerners had developed a sense of mutualism and a society divided into leadership and followers.

Awkward silence filled the cave until Cale’s casual voice broke it. “The rain seems to be picking up. We should leave the

forest tomorrow, right, Ohn?"

As he cooed to the kitten, his expression was as warm as the fire. She, however, gawked at him incredulously.

Raon was equally confused. ‹*Why are you acting like this?*›

Ritana and her followers watched Cale, their faces stiff. She'd gleaned a bit of insight into Cale's personality from the way he spoke.

"Um…"

"You can just call me Cale."

"All right, Cale."

The man had a magic bag with him but no sword or any other weapon, as if he'd just come into the rainforest for a stroll. He appeared to know his way around, and he had a most peculiar aura. Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. *Is he a dragon?*

She recalled the legend about the dragon that would grant your wish. It didn't include the dragon's appearance, nor how it showed up. Despite knowing her thoughts were probably ridiculous, Ritana couldn't help feeling eager. At that moment, she made eye contact with this man named Cale and saw him grin.

"I'm not a dragon."

She gasped, shrinking back.

Cale brushed back the wet red locks that had fallen in his face. "I do know the way through the rainforest, though."

"How?"

Ritana and her subordinates, who had no issues navigating the complicated, irrational jungle, were lost in this forest. Yet this man in front of them was familiar with it?

Seeing her confusion, Cale smiled. "This girl here is from the Cat Tribe." He stroked Ohn with a gaze befitting a saint. "In the past, I happened to run into her in the slums on a rainy day just like this." He looked out of the cave and beyond, seemingly nostalgic over the day he met the kitten.

Ohn recalled that day as well, and she knew it didn't warrant nostalgia. Yet she kept her mouth shut, tail trembling with uncertainty.

"Ohn can control mist."

"What a rare power," Ritana marveled, thinking of how it might apply to the fog that covered the rainforest.

"That it is," Cale replied. "I learned about this place while traveling outside my territory. Then, in an ancient text I'd come across, I read that this rainforest is deluged with fog."

Ritana's eyes slid from Ohn back to Cale. The longer she spent with him, the more elegance she noticed in his actions and tone. He was definitely a noble.

"That's why I brought her here with me."

Cale's eyes sparkled in the flickering flames; Ritana and her subordinates could see it.

His calm yet passionate voice filled the cave. "We thought we could use her power to give hope to the people who'd lost their way, as well as the family members desperately waiting for them."

‹That wasn't it,› Raon mumbled to himself.

Ohn just swished her tail quietly.

When Cale noticed the change in Ritana's eyes, his lips quirked up. "Fortunately, once Ohn cleared some of the fog, we made out the path." Quickly, he explained the fog's secret to Ritana—how it caused hallucinations and mana disturbances.

"I see." Ritana couldn't hide her bitterness. "So the dragon I heard about…probably doesn't exist."

If the rainforest's uncanny conditions stemmed from its fog and mana disturbances, then the tale of a dragon behind it all was a lie. Disappointment filled Ritana's and her followers' faces. At the same time, Ritana thought this might be for the best. The current situation was much better than when she'd debated setting the rainforest alight.

"Could we ask that you guide us to the rainforest's edge when you leave tomorrow?" she asked.

"Of course. We have to help each other in times of need."

She regarded Cale with more warmth and tenderness. He was as good a man as he appeared. His goodness had probably *caused* that odd aura she'd felt around him.

As she looked at Cale, he remained sympathetic. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you had a heartfelt wish too."

"That's all right. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm just glad I don't have to start a forest fire to escape."

The word "fire" made Cale's eyes gleam for the briefest of moments.

"'Fire' is quite a scary word. I can imagine the dilemma you faced as a southerner who treasures nature."

"Are you familiar with the south?"

"Not really, but I've read about it in books. I enjoy traveling, and I love beautiful sights."

‹Oho! I see, I see, weak human.›

Raon's response gave Cale chills, but he continued as brightly as possible. "I read about how beautiful the mountains, lakes, and everything else are in the jungle. Now that we can get out of this rainforest, I plan to visit it."

"Right..."

Ritana's bitterness warred with her pity, her remorse. She couldn't lie or feign ignorance with this man who anticipated the jungle's beautiful scenery. Her followers' faces turned gloomy as well.

"Unfortunately, once you escape this rainforest, the jungle you see won't be beautiful."

"What do you mean?"

The jungle was about a day's journey from the rainforest. It was vast, encompassing most of the south. Yet why had Ritana come to this rainforest? Because it was close to the site of the fire.

"There's a fire in the jungle," she said.

"What? Then shouldn't you extinguish it right away?"

"It's a fire that doesn't spread...but also can't be put out."

Cale's confusion prompted her to explain further.

“One day, Sector One—the section of jungle closest to this rainforest—suddenly burst into flames. Nothing extinguished them, not water, magic, or incantations. We were beside ourselves, but the fire stayed in Sector One without spreading.” Grimacing, she murmured, “For better or worse, I’m not sure.”

It was a mysterious fire indeed, but Cale knew its source. The fire that couldn’t be extinguished with magic or incantations had been ignited using alchemy.

Alchemy was more science than magic. There was a nation with very sophisticated alchemy, although it hadn’t developed anything else: the Mogor Empire. That empire, the site of the Alchemist’s Bell Tower, had caused this fire.

To be more precise, the Empire’s imperial prince caused it. Wary of Ritana, who’d unified the jungle’s fifteen sectors both large and small, the imperial prince had ignited this fire on the sly.

However, no secret could remain secret forever. By the end of Volume Four, Ritana—having lit a fire herself in the rainforest—found out that the imperial prince was responsible for the relentless blaze. In Volume Five, she teamed up with Tunka to take on the Mogor Empire, though the barbarian’s “survival of the fittest” philosophy didn’t match hers. Riding a black panther instead of a horse, the queen led her warriors to protect the jungle.

But that isn’t my problem.

Cale didn’t want to take part in all that. He was just going to extinguish the fire and get paid for it, take care of a few other things, and return to Henituse territory. He didn’t want to meet the imperial prince of the Mogor Empire.

We wouldn’t get along.

Crown Prince Albert and the Empire’s imperial prince were similar people, so Cale *could* have deemed them one and the same, but the two did have their differences. Albert cared about the greater good; that made it easy for Cale to talk to him and put him to use. Mogor’s imperial prince wasn’t like that. He only cared for himself, and he was very sly and insidious. He was similar to Cale, yet they weren’t on the same page.

Cale pushed away the thought of the imperial prince, who longed to control everything from the center of the Western Continent. He hastily plastered on a concerned expression. “Is it a big fire?”

“I’ve never seen such a large fire in my life… It blazes sky-high day and night, like a constant explosion.”

“Then it’s probably difficult to approach.”

“Neither animals nor humans can get close. Just going near it makes you feel like you’ll burn.”

“How terrible. That’s devastating.”

Ritana was grateful for Cale’s display of genuine sympathy. It was rare to meet a citizen from the central region who cared so much about the south or nature. “Well, we’ll do our best to put it out.”

“Understood.”

Cale nodded, then lapsed into a state of deep contemplation. It didn’t last long, and soon his eyes were brimming with conviction.

“I…” Cale sighed, wiped his face, and looked at Ritana with determination once again. “Please take me to the fire.”

“Pardon me?”

The Ritana that Cale knew from *Birth of a Hero* was vulnerable with the weak and tried to be as charitable as possible. Although she avenged any wrong with ten times the pain, she repaid any grace with one thousand times the generosity.

Keeping an open, amiable expression on his face, Cale spoke in a purposefully shaky voice. “I may be able to put out the fire.”

“What?”

In Cale’s head, Raon started to shout. *‹What are you doing, weak human? What are you trying to do?! You are weak—and* very *weird today!›*

Cale didn’t care one whit. With great resolve, he repeated, “I believe I’ll be able to put it out.”

Silence filled the cave. Trying to figure out whether she'd heard correctly, Ritana turned to her followers. They had the same expression she did.

"May I ask you to explain, Cale?" Ritana, who had been leaning on the cave wall, now sat bolt upright. The fire had dried the leather armor that showed off her toned warrior's body.

"I'm a citizen of the Kingdom of Rowoon."

"So you're from the northeast. We're southerners working in the jungle as warriors."

"I see. Well, I'm from a small territory in the corner of Rowoon. Um…" Cale scratched his cheek, as though he found it awkward to hear Ritana refer to herself merely as a warrior. He timidly added, "I'm from a small noble family. Thanks to that, I don't lack travel funds. I also have a retinue that travels with me."

"You have additional company?"

"Yes. Ohn and I came into the forest alone, but there are people who trust and follow me."

Ritana's gaze softened. She and her subordinates valued the leader-follower hierarchy.

"Anyway, as I traveled, I had a stroke of luck."

"Luck, you say?"

With a bitter smile, Cale squinted as though recalling a difficult memory. "That's right. I was caught in an ocean whirlpool and barely got out. Once I did, I entered a cave and had that stroke of luck—I found someone injured and helped them. I was relieved to think that might be the reason I'd ended up in the whirlpool." His smile turned bashful. "Sorry. That wasn't the story I was trying to tell."

Ritana looked over at the calm Ohn, then back at Cale. "It sounds like you've saved a lot of people."

"No. I just couldn't walk by without doing anything."

This respectful, courteous noble didn't act arrogant due to his rank. He seemed very modest and kind.

"In the cave, I managed to acquire a power."

“What kind?” Ritana asked, realizing Cale had gotten to the point.

“Fire-Suppressing Water. It extinguishes any and all fires.”

The southerners’ eyes flashed. This water certainly sounded unique. And indeed, it *was* different from normal water. It suppressed flames of any kind, including alchemical fires. In *Birth of a Hero*, Tunka would’ve had that “stroke of luck,” drinking the Fire-Suppressing Water and rendering his body fireproof.

Though not fire-resistant himself, Cale wasn’t afraid of getting burned thanks to the Energy of the Heart. A burn would hurt a bit, but the Ancient Power would let him recover right away. Since he could heal himself already, why would he use the Fire-Suppressing Water for protection? Instead, he had soaked it up with the Permeating Necklace—the Ancient Power that Lark had brought back for him.

“However, there’s a limit to how much I can use that power,” Cale warned them. “I’m not sure it’ll be enough.”

“Oh!” Ritana opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, then finally asked, “Are you all right with using that Fire-Suppressing Water for us? It sounds like an invaluable power.”

Cale suppressed a grin. There *was* a limit to how much Fire-Suppressing Water he could use. *Putting out a fire burning across the entire Western Continent would do it.* As long as Cale didn’t try extinguishing a blaze of that size, he had enough Fire-Suppressing Water to last a lifetime. Still, it wasn’t like he’d lied to Ritana. The power wasn’t inexhaustible.

“How should I address you?” he asked Ritana abruptly.

“You can call me Rina,” she said, and one of her followers flinched.

Pretending not to see, Cale used Ritana’s fake name. “Miss Rina.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t categorize powers based on their value. I believe the important thing is how you use them.”

Ritana and her followers saw that his eyes shone clearer than ever.

“If I can use the Fire-Suppressing Water to save nature, animals, and plants—to say nothing of people and their livelihoods—I need to.”

Heart racing, Ritana found herself clenching her hands into fists.

“Of course, since the power has recognized me as its master, I’ll need to go to the jungle personally to use it,” Cale said. “That might take a while and be a hassle.”

“Do you need to go *into* the fire to use it?” Ritana asked.

“It sounds like entering the flames might be difficult. I’d probably have to at least get near them,” Cale admitted.

Ritana frowned. She looked both grateful and apologetic, as did her followers. A few were still wary of Cale, but even they were appreciative.

Cale polished off his spiel with, “If my power is of assistance, I’ll be thrilled. I want to help everyone.”

‹This isn’t the weak human I know. You’re a good person, but this isn’t like you. Still, saving people is a great deed!› The four-year-old dragon grappled with his confusion, then opted to focus on the positives.

Ohn, on the other hand, just yawned and looked elsewhere.

“Thank you very, very much,” said Ritana.

Cale put a gentle smile on his face, but his eyes were impassive as he observed Ritana and her followers. Ritana had come to the rainforest with a single ray of hope, leaving behind the jungle and people she needed to protect. She and her followers had been here two weeks to no avail. To them, Cale was no different than the dragon of legend.

“How can we repay your kindness?”

“Kindness? No. I haven’t done anything yet. I feel like I was drawn into this rainforest for this exact reason.”

Ritana felt awed by Cale, who showed no greed whatsoever. He had a good heart through and through. And while she punished wrongs tenfold, she returned kindness to the best of her abilities.

“I’d still like to pay you back somehow,” she said. “You’ll be guiding us out of this rainforest, then accompanying us to the jungle to use your limited power. We can’t accept all that without giving you anything in return.”

“No, it’s really all right.” Cale assumed an awkward expression. He seemed to contemplate for a moment, then clapped as though he’d thought of something. “Ah!” Looking sheepish, he told Ritana and her followers, “I read about Sector One in a book on the jungle. Apparently, the vibrant foliage and clear coastline make the area very scenic. The book said the view of the sunset there is just phenomenal. When I read that, I remember thinking that it’d be great to have a villa in Sector One.”

The eastern shores of Sector One—the area currently on fire—were full of rare materials like gold. According to *Birth of a Hero*, in about a month, a shaman from the Eastern Continent would end up just barely extinguishing the fire. Heading to the shore to gather seawater to douse it, that shaman would happen upon some gold ore.

That ore was just the tip of the iceberg. What the shaman discovered wasn’t actually a vein of gold; rather, it was a pile of buried magic stones of the highest quality. The shaman kept the stones secret, then gathered them and fled.

“Once the fire’s out, may I go to Sector One to watch the sunset?” Cale asked.

Ritana was lost for words. Sector One’s shoreline was beautiful, to be sure, but it was on fire as well. The man in front of her should’ve realized that once he extinguished the fire, the scenery would be terrible. Still, the fact that he hadn’t asked for land or money—and merely wanted to visit—surprised her. She was the first to announce, “I don’t think looking at it will be enough.”

“Pardon?”

“I’ll build you a villa there,” Ritana said. “If you aren’t satisfied with Sector One, I’ll build it anywhere in the jungle for you.”

“N-no need for that! That’d be too much. It’s really okay.” Cale strained to keep his lips from cracking a smile.

“But I insist! I’ll build a villa for you.”

“Ah, well…” Cale donned a deferential expression. “If you’re intent on rewarding me, a villa is too much, even if I *do* help put out the fire. May I just ask for a small plot of land where I can build a villa myself?”

Although Cale said he was from a small noble family, Ritana could tell that might not be the case. Judging by his elegance, the fabric of his clothes, and his visible magic bag, he could easily afford things like land and residences.

“Of course. As much land as you want. In fact, I’ll make sure of it. I’ll only be at ease once you’ve built one.”

Great. Cale held back his joy, heaving a sigh as he nodded. “All right. I’ll make sure I do so.”

He tried to look as though he had no interest in the jungle land and had only agreed because Ritana insisted. Thus, Ritana decided that if everything went well, she’d give him *more* than he wanted to repay this debt of gratitude. His thorough understanding of her character made this possible.

Cale met Ohn’s eyes as he petted her. *Your goal is the land, right?* hers seemed to ask.

He pretended not to notice, opening his magic bag. “Would you and your companions like something to eat, Miss Rina? You all look famished.”

“Oh, we…”

Cale pulled the food he’d had Vicross prepare from the bag. The fastest way to a person’s heart was through their stomach. That was how he’d earned Choi Han’s trust too.

Stroking the blanket Ritana’s follower had handed him, Cale added, “Take this in exchange for the blanket. Let’s share a meal and get moving tomorrow. We’ll return to the village to rejoin my retinue, then cut through the rainforest to the jungle. But please, eat first.” As the atmosphere went from casual to truly amicable, Cale laid it on thick for Ritana and her followers. “You can’t use your strength to save the jungle if you don’t eat.”

His words prompted the others to think about the people waiting for them. As for Cale, the magic stones on the shore were waiting for *him*.

Ritana looked at the food. It was still fresh and warm, thanks to the magic bag. Grabbing the fork Cale handed her, she mumbled, “The legend wasn’t too far off.”

Though Cale had heard her, he feigned he hadn’t. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing. This is delicious, Mr. Cale.”

“I’m glad.”

That night, Ritana and her subordinates ate their fill and relaxed for the first time in two weeks. Ohn peeked at Cale, who was watching them with satisfaction, and let out a sigh.

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“This is amazing, Cale.”

“Right? Ohn *is* rather amazing.”

Cale glanced at Ritana and her followers, who were trailing behind him. Seeing the six in daylight, he knew for certain that they were strong warriors.

There were two types of warriors on the Western Continent. Tunka was a typical “fists first” warrior who polished his skills in actual combat, whereas the knights in the north trained diligently to hone their martial arts prowess. The jungle’s inhabitants mixed the two approaches. They were skilled when it came to brawling as well as studying martial arts and weaponry.

“We’re almost at Hoik, Miss Rina.”

Ritana and her subordinates tightened their raincoats when they heard his words. They had ended up crossing the border unexpectedly, so they were using their dark-blue raincoats to blend in as much as possible. Ritana in particular made sure to cover her jet-black hair, a trait characteristic of the jungle’s royal family. Since she was on the small side for a southerner, and working hard to hide her identity, it would be difficult for anyone to tell that Ritana was a strong warrior.

Cale knew the truth, however. *She’s one notch beneath Choi Han.* That meant Ritana was exceptionally tough. In fact, she could’ve overpowered Tunka. Riding her black panther and

armed with her spears, she was indomitable. As she slipped through the shadows of the trees, she was the grim reaper to her enemies—even in broad daylight. That was how she became Queen of the Jungle. The jungle's ruler needed to both be empathetic and strong to protect their people.

"We're almost there." Cale resumed his stride, sensing Ritana's group behind him.

As Ohn redirected the fog, it started to roll away, clearing a path for them.

"Goodness."

The fog's movements impressed Ritana's followers. They could tell that they were finally escaping No Way Out. Cale just kept walking in silence. As they watched him stroll down the path, they trusted him even more.

Drip. Drip. Droplets fell on the new raincoat Ritana had given Cale.

‹We're here.›

Finally, the fog lifted, and they saw the entrance to Hoik. They had returned.

"Ha!" A gasp-like laugh escaped Cale's mouth.

Ohn jumped out of Cale's arms and ran. "Meeeow!"

Hong dashed toward her too. "Meeow!"

The siblings sprinted to each other, then affectionately rubbed their cheeks together. Cale crossed his arms as he observed their reunion. Then, seeing the people idling next to the slab, he furrowed his brow.

"How come you're all out here in the rain?"

Hans, Choi Han, and Rosalyn were awaiting him. They pretended they hadn't heard his question.

"I haven't slept a wink, my lord."

"It's freezing out here. And who are those people behind you?"

"Did you have a good trip?"

Cale uncrossed his arms and headed toward his companions. Standing in front of them, he announced, "I'm

back.”

Not wanting to see their smiles, he turned around, and his gaze fell on the other people staring at him. They were the families of those who’d gone into the rainforest and never returned. Cale approached the old man crouched over the slab—the same man who’d warned him against entering the forest. He leaned over the old man, who gaped at him in disbelief.

“Hey, old man.”

Cale—no, Kim Roksu—knew what it was like to wait for someone who would never come back. At one point, despite knowing his parents were dead, he’d hoped they would return if he waited long enough.

He looked directly into the old man’s eyes. “There was no dragon.”

The legend was no more. The old man teared up and cast his eyes down to the ground, nodding over and over.

Cale walked past the old man and the other villagers before adding, “I did see some clothes and skeletons in the rainforest, though. I can retrieve them if you like.”

That was the only thing Cale could do for them. He rejoined his group and addressed Choi Han and the others, who were looking back and forth between him and Ritana’s followers.

“Pack your stuff.” He pointed toward the rainforest. “We’re heading to the jungle.”

It was time for Cale to single-handedly suppress the fire enveloping all of Sector One.

Chapter 17:
Taken by Surprise

TWO HOURS LATER, Cale's companions gathered at the entrance of No Way Out. They weren't the only ones, however.

"Get a list of names," Cale ordered Hans.

"Yes, sir." Hans glanced at Cale before moving away to confer with the villagers. The deputy butler would probably find out the kittens' secret during this trip.

Maes, his siblings, and Hilsmann were lined up in formation, as disciplined as a brigade of knights.

"Ohn will lead us and then return with Hong. At that point, all of you will be responsible for finding remains in the forest."

Maes and the young wolves nodded vigorously.

As Cale watched them with satisfaction, a timid voice squeaked from below, "L-Lord Cale, why are you including me? I need to create those blueprints." Müller quivered as he peered up at Cale, surrounded by him, Hilsmann, and Vicross.

Cale thought the rat looked idiotic, but he couldn't leave such a foolish creature at loose ends. "Just do as I say while I'm being nice." He didn't want to have to collar Müller or drag him somewhere again.

He wasn't sure how Müller interpreted that statement, but the rat paled and bobbed his head. Müller hefted his large bag, which was chock-full of papers and pens for drafting blueprints.

Donning a gentle smile, Cale closed the gap between himself and Ritana. "Looks like we can head out now. Sorry to make you wait for two hours."

"No, it's all right," she replied, observing Cale's group. *He's very interesting.*

Since Cale was of average strength, with no martial arts training, she'd expected the same of his retinue. That had been an error in judgment on her part. There were several strong people around Cale, as well as one individual whose strength she couldn't even assess. Although Cale and his companions had

been too far away for Ritana to eavesdrop on their conversation, Cale *did* seem very charismatic when he spoke to them.

On the other hand, his crew's reactions to how tenderly Cale treated Ritana varied, although they didn't let that show. Cale had told them in advance, "Match my demeanor." They were all astute enough to comply.

"Let's go, Ohn."

"Meow." Ohn took the lead while everybody else followed.

Choi Han approached Cale, who was walking in front with Ohn. He seemed to have something to say. "Excuse me, Mr. Cale."

After looking back to confirm that Ritana's group was some distance behind Rosalyn, Cale turned his attention to Choi Han. "What is it?"

"Was the jungle fire *their* doing as well?"

Choi Han's gaze was cautious yet sharp. Cale immediately knew whom he meant; he was talking about the secret organization that had instigated the Plaza Terror Incident.

"No. Not this time."

In the books, Choi Han had run into the secret organization in the capital and then again in Brek. This time, however, it seemed he hadn't come across them in the latter.

"I see," Choi Han replied. "I thought that might be something else you were privy to, like the plaza attack."

"I still remember my vow," Cale reminded him. "When I identify them, I'll let you know. Don't worry."

"No, sir." Choi Han watched Cale cut through the fog, his usual confident self. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before finally telling him, "Don't shoulder the burden on your own."

What is he talking about? Cale shot him a quizzical look.

At that moment, Rosalyn—who was midway between Ritana's group and Cale—smiled. "I agree with that."

Perplexed, Cale shifted his gaze to her. He couldn't understand them. *Me? Shoulder a burden on my own?*

“I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about. That’s the last thing on my mind.”

In Cale’s view, the pair were being ludicrous. Why would *he* tackle the hard stuff when he was surrounded by so many others he could use?

Choi Han and Rosalyn exchanged glances, then smirked, thinking that Cale never changed. That threw him for a loop. He stopped asking questions and just started walking again. Time was of the essence.

After walking all night long aside from a short break, they emerged from No Way Out the next day. Once they left the rainforest, Cale’s companions were shocked.

“Hmm.”

“Gosh…”

Black smoke billowed up into the sky. They would need to travel another day for the jungle to truly come into view, but plenty of smoke was visible in the distance. Now that they’d entered an open plain, they could even see some of the flames.

Ritana bit her lip—not because the jungle was her land but because her family and people were still struggling with the fire.

“We should hurry,” Cale said.

The queen turned to look at him. This journey was probably difficult for Cale; he certainly seemed like a man with a sheltered upbringing.

“Right. We’ll guide you from here.” Even if Cale was uncomfortable, Ritana needed to act fast. She was grateful for his urgency.

With a sweep of her hand, five followers stepped forward. Ritana stood ahead of them; the leader of a tribe was always at the vanguard.

“This might be a rough trip,” she warned Cale. “We’ll need to move as quickly as possible.”

“That’s fine.” His response was gentle yet firm. “Let’s go.”

Instead of thanking him, Ritana moved forward. Together, they headed toward the black smoke.

After traveling another day, the exhausted group saw the huge fire before their eyes. A number of tents surrounded it, but none of Cale's companions paid them much attention.

"What the…?" The wolf boy, Lark, instinctively stepped back. The fire was blazing so high, it looked like an erupting volcano already coated in lava. None of them had ever seen anything like it.

Choi Han suddenly coughed, then struggled to suck in a breath. Even this powerful man, who'd lived in the Dark Forest for years, had never witnessed such a massive fire. It covered Sector One of the jungle entirely, as tall as a castle.

The human mind couldn't comprehend the power of nature.

"That's the fire?" Rosalyn asked, looking toward Ritana's group. Her eyes were disbelieving, which was understandable.

It was raining, and the sky was cloudy. Summer was approaching, so the jungle was in its monsoon season, during which it rained more than once a day. The rainfall did nothing to diminish the fire, which remained a source of light in the cloudy weather. It was bizarre.

"Yes. This is the one." Ritana looked toward the fire with a bitter smile. As it had up till now, the fire remained confined to Sector One, not spreading at all.

"The jungle is dying…" murmured Lark, whom Ritana had seen take a step backward earlier.

She bit her lip again. This natural disaster beyond human comprehension terrified everyone. Even the southerners were too afraid to approach it; they could only stay near the jungle's borders. She turned toward Cale, who was observing the fire quietly. After seeing how strong it was, would he still approach it? She couldn't bring herself to urge him to go.

At that moment, she heard Cale speak. "It's hot."

He shrugged off his raincoat and the simple yet luxurious jacket that made his nobility apparent, then rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, turning around to look at the group—at Ritana, to be precise. "Come on. I think I'll need to get as close as

possible to the fire. I may even have to go *into* it." He seemed relaxed, as if he were going on a stroll.

Ritana glanced at Cale's retinue; they appeared to have expected this reaction. She turned to her followers, then looked back at Cale. "I'll take you there."

"I can go on my own." Knowing already how Ritana planned to transport him, Cale felt he'd *much* rather go alone.

"No. It's dangerous." Craning her neck, Ritana saw a few people from the tents rushing toward them. She heard them calling her from afar.

"Your Majesty!"

"Our queen!"

"Captain!"

Ritana gently smiled at Cale, who seemed shocked at their calling her "queen." Of course, Cale was just feigning his astonishment. He *was* also truly shocked, but definitely not because Ritana was a queen. A large animal was bounding straight at her.

Whoa. It's huge.

"Growr!"

"Ten!"

At Ritana's call, the giant black panther rushed over as though he had wings. He stopped in front of her, and she jumped fluidly onto his back. Cale understood why this pair—the Queen of the Jungle, Ritana, and her black panther, Ten—were together deemed a grim reaper. The black panther, whose coat was really a deep navy blue, was two or three times the size of a grown man.

Sitting atop the panther, Ritana said, "Ten and I will take you there."

The southerners who'd run over from the tents looked back and forth between Ritana and Cale. One of them asked, "Your Majesty, who are these people?"

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she looked toward the people—and some animals as well—who were slowly emerging from the safe zone after hearing that she'd returned.

They used to live in Sector One. Presumably they'd been waiting for her, holding out hope. That was why she'd needed to come back with the dragon from the legends.

"He's a dragon," she declared.

The person who'd spoken looked at her with confusion. "Excuse me?"

She smiled back, then extended her hand to Cale. "Please get on, Cale."

"Grr..." The black panther, Ten, glared at Lark. Hearing him growl, Cale was reluctant to mount him.

At that point, one of the southerners who'd accompanied Cale and Ritana stepped forward and explained to the denizens of Sector One, "We escorted this man here because he may be able to douse the fire."

They gaped at Cale. "Can he really put it out?"

Choi Han and Cale's other companions gathered in front of him.

"This is dangerous, Mr. Cale," Choi Han declared. "I'll escort you."

Cale shook his head. "No need. If you get close, that heat will burn you. It's dangerous. All of you stay in the safe area."

If they came with him, they'd just be baggage, and extinguishing the fire didn't require anyone else.

"Miss Rosalyn, a shield, please."

"Sure."

Sighing, Rosalyn placed a shield around Cale, Ritana, and Ten. The mage had already known Ritana's true identity, although Ritana didn't seem to know hers.

"She's the Queen of the Jungle, so she can escort you by the safest path. Have a nice trip, Lord Cale."

Cale still didn't want to ride the panther, and he could just have rushed over using the Sound of the Wind. He looked at Ritana, whose hand was still outstretched; his companions; and the curious southerners. At length, he sighed and grabbed her

hand. He climbed onto the black panther and clutched his fur, terrified of falling off.

"Let's move," he said.

Ritana sat up straight, then turned away from Cale, whose eyes were fixed on the fire in the distance. She crouched and told the panther, "Ten, take us to the fire."

"Growr!"

The moment Ritana sat tall again, Ten surged forward. Black panther and black-haired woman rode as one toward the fire with their redheaded charge in tow, soon crossing the safe zone at the edge of the blaze.

"Your Majesty!"

"Ten!"

"What's going on?"

As they rushed past the tents, Ritana saw people calling out to them. Everyone was haggard. She bit her lip.

"Let's go even faster," came Cale's voice from behind her.

"Faster, Ten!"

At her command, the panther sped up. Cale's companions and Ritana's followers were trailing them, but they were too slow.

Rustle. Rustle. Drip. Drip. Leaves, grass, and rain landed on Cale's shirt, although any dampness disappeared instantly.

Once they reached the fringes of the burning area, Cale dismounted. The intense heat warmed his skin, and sparks flew like sea spray up to five meters outside its bounds.

"It's enormous." Seeing the fire in person, Cale realized that the imperial prince really was nuts. *Unhinged bastard.*

He heard Raon's voice in his head. *‹This fire is strange...›*

Ritana approached him. "Miss Rina, please step back," Cale told her sternly.

"But—"

"I think I'll need to get closer."

Seeing it firsthand, Cale could tell that this was leagues beyond a normal mountain fire. Extinguishing it would probably

require about a third of the Fire-Suppressing Water. *I'm not sure how strong the water stored in the necklace will be, so I'll need to use a good amount.* Cale's thought process was simple: If it didn't work, he just needed to use more.

"So please, step back," he repeated. From here on, Ritana and Ten would get in his way.

Ritana hesitated in the face of his firmness—but Ten yanked her clothes to move her back. "Grr..."

She looked at the panther with an odd expression. "Ten?" Ten didn't retreat from anything, so she found it strange that he was trying to make her stay and let Cale go.

At that moment, she heard Cale's voice. "Looks like that panther cub trusts me."

"Excuse me?"

The man with hair as red as the flames smiled, seeming utterly relaxed. "I'll return after I put the fire out, and I won't get hurt. I only ask that you stay here and watch. If it looks like I'm in danger, you can always jump in to save me."

With that, Cale strode into the burning area. Ritana watched him go, then retreated a few steps. When Ten crouched, she got on his back so they could rush in to rescue Cale if needed.

Unaware of their precautions, Cale went right up to the fire. *This would be dangerous if I didn't have the Energy of the Heart.*

Its heat was intense, but he didn't feel scorched. The strength of the Fire-Suppressing Water inside the Permeating Necklace allowed it to absorb any natural force, and thanks to the Energy of the Heart, Cale himself could recover.

‹That fire is bizarre, weak human! It goes against the laws of nature!› Raon cried in his mind.

Cale stood directly in front of the fire, then turned around. He could see Ritana and Ten, as well as the tents in the distance. A few people emerged from one of them. He was certain those were his companions, though he'd told them not to come.

With a click of his tongue, Cale opened his arms wide.

Ssssh. Fwoosh!

“Boohoo…”

Listening to the rain and fire, he used the Permeating Necklace’s power. A mysterious crying emanated from him, and the necklace glowed blue. Closing his eyes, he felt the water’s power inside.

If the sparks from the fire are like hail… Then he just needed to create *real* hail to overpower it. Cale generously withdrew a third of the Fire-Suppressing Water from the necklace. It shot from his hand into the air.

Splash!

As the weeping got louder, a giant wall of water appeared above Cale. Keeping his eyes closed, he envisioned a hailstorm.

“Goodness.”

Ritana let out a gasp of admiration. At the same time, Ten instinctively stepped back. Watching the huge wave rise up in front of them gave Ritana chills.

“Boohoo… Boohoohoo!”

Ssssh.

The rain and crying seemed to harmonize with each other as dark-blue water gushed forth from Cale’s hand. The people rushing toward the fire’s edge, as well as those watching from the tents, stopped to stare blankly at this water wall.

The fire in Sector One blazed ever higher, but the water rose to match it. Eventually, the airborne wave was so gigantic that it seemed poised to flood anything and everything.

Cale opened his eyes and lifted his head. “Hm.” *Was a third too much?* He was a bit flustered. The wave he’d created looked amazingly strong even to him.

At that moment, he heard Raon’s voice. *‹Good idea! Let’s douse this crazy fire, human!›*

Cale smirked. Yes, he *would* douse it.

The crying noise suddenly stopped.

Boom! The enormous blue wave crashed to the ground, the wall of Fire-Suppressing Water covering the flames and the earth. Stones from a violent hailstorm littered the ground as the

water engulfed the fire, along with everything else. The water devoured Cale as well.

"Mr. Cale!"

"Lord Cale!"

Choi Han moved quickly, but Rosalyn used speed magic to rush past him. They couldn't see Cale, as the powerful wave collided with everything, heedless of friend or foe.

Kssh!

A huge steam cloud rose from Sector One. The copious amounts of steam obscured everyone's vision. It could mean only one thing: The fire was dying.

Lark watched blankly as the white steam shot into the sky, taking the place of the black smoke from earlier. Feeling a cool sensation on his feet, he looked down. The flood that covered Sector One was flowing out toward Lark and the safe zone as well, but the water that lapped at his feet was weaker than the wave had been.

Someone gasped, prompting Lark to turn around. It was one of the southerners heading over to Ritana. Like him, they gaped at the water in awe. All the southerners, both those who'd been standing outside already and those who'd peeked out from the tents, were standing outside now. It was raining, but they stood under the rain, staring at their home.

Kssh.

Steam was still rising into the sky. The southerners couldn't see in front of them, but they also couldn't see the fire any longer.

"L-Lord Cale!"

Lark snapped back to his senses and followed Choi Han and Rosalyn, running toward Sector One. Rosalyn and Choi Han had already reached the spot where Ritana and Ten stood. By the time they arrived, Ritana had finally collected herself. She was already drenched in water; she had definitely seen what happened to Cale.

Choi Han and Rosalyn cried out for him. Before dousing the fire, the wave had swallowed him whole; he'd been the first thing

to get pummeled.

"T-Ten!"

Hearing Ritana's call, Ten zoomed to the edge of the steam cloud. At that moment, beneath the hiss of the rain and whoosh of water vapor, they suddenly heard a new sound.

Fssssh.

It was a gentle wind that reminded them of spring. The breeze softly brushed past Ten and Ritana, then reached Choi Han and Rosalyn, which brought them to a halt.

Rosalyn let out a breathy laugh. "Oh, right!" She hadn't had her wits about her; she'd become flustered and forgotten about this. Once she rubbed her eyes, she saw something else.

Choi Han watched the gentle wind create a path through the steam. At the end of that path was a silver light, and he knew just what it was. "Mr. Cale…"

This opening provided them a glimpse of Sector One. The land was black. They also saw the ashes of things the fire had burned, as well as someone standing atop those charred ruins. It was a man with hair as red as the fire that had only just vanished. He was enclosed by a large silver shield and wings. Ritana, mesmerized by the sight, didn't even notice that Ten had stopped.

Swoosh.

The silver wings unfolded before disappearing with the shield. With them gone, all that remained was Cale. He staggered on his feet.

Ritana's eyes widened, and Ten began to move. Choi Han and Rosalyn crossed into the torched Sector One to reach him.

Cale put a hand to his head, frowning. Raon's voice filled his mind. *‹I was enjoying the water and forgot about the shield! That's why it was a little late! Sorry, human!›*

Cale had likewise forgotten the Unbreakable Shield; he'd been busy admiring the wave he created. Only after hearing Raon shout *‹Ah! Right! The shield!›* had he come back to his senses and deployed it. The huge wave had crashed into his head just briefly, making him dizzy.

A third of the Fire-Suppressing Water was overkill. Now he was drenched and cold for no reason.

‹I'm really sorry! I-I wasn't great or mighty.› The four-year-old's frustrated voice filled Cale's spinning head.

"I still survived thanks to you," Cale whispered.

‹Y-you weak human! I'm an idiot!›

Cale wanted to stop Raon from blaming himself, but he couldn't with Choi Han and Rosalyn—as well as Ritana and Ten—coming his way.

Choi Han swooped in to support Cale. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, are you okay?!" Rosalyn asked, rapidly warming up the drenched Cale with magic.

"You know I didn't get hurt, Miss Rosalyn."

Hearing Cale's casual tone, Choi Han and Rosalyn exchanged looks. It was only now that the two remembered that Cale had both a dragon *and* the Unbreakable Shield along with him.

Cale continued in a flat, almost bored voice, "Why did you keep yelling my name? You rushed me." As he grumbled, he fixed his wet hair and clothes. Although he looked very calm, he was standing on land that had been razed to the ground. Only ash remained.

Maybe I don't have much affinity with water? Cale recalled what had happened when he met Witira earlier. He definitely didn't enjoy getting soaked anytime he was around water. Wet, clingy clothes were annoying.

Cale stepped out of Choi Han's support and stood up straight. It wasn't like he had gotten hurt; thanks to the Energy of the Heart, he was in good shape.

"Let's go."

He walked off, and Choi Han and Rosalyn followed. The pair were grinning, but Cale shrugged that off as he approached Ritana. She stood stiffly a short distance away, having gotten off Ten already.

"Miss Rina."

Hearing Cale's gentle tone, Ritana collected herself and looked at him head-on. The moment she had realized Cale was all right, she had stared at Sector One in a daze. Before the fire, stepping out of the Kingdom of the Whipper led people to lush forest and jungle. Yet now Sector One, a place so beautiful that they described it in books, was completely burned black. That sight made it difficult for her to breathe.

"Grrrr."

Hearing Ten growl, Ritana turned from Cale to the panther. Ten was examining the black ground and the entire area that had been reduced to ashes, rubbing his head on the ground. Ritana bit her lip.

At that moment, she heard Cale's voice again. "Looks like you should go."

"Excuse me?" Looking back at him, she saw where he was pointing. "Oh."

Seeing her followers, the southerners, and their animals in the safe zone, she realized where she *should* be looking right now—over at them, not at the blackened jungle.

"Seems like my job here is done," Cale added.

Ritana met his gaze once more. Cale struck her as calm and tender, yet strong. He was the one who'd summoned the water that doused this fire. She had seen it firsthand. Steam was still rising as the water extinguished the small fires that lingered.

She'd been wrong. Cale wasn't a weak person—he was stronger than anyone else.

"How much of the power did you have to use?" she asked, curious. Cale had mentioned that the ability wasn't inexhaustible.

"I have a decent amount left," he replied.

Although he'd enjoyed deploying the Fire-Suppressing Water, Cale now felt irked, thinking that he'd overused it. Bothered that he'd wasted some of the power, he smiled bitterly despite himself.

"Understood."

Seeing Cale endeavoring to smile and hide his sadness, Ritana turned her attention to the followers who hadn't dared cross the boundary, as well as the southerners approaching from the safe zone.

"Shall we go back together, Cale?" she asked him. He was the hero today; his actions deserved the onlookers' praise and applause.

His response, however, wasn't what Ritana expected. "No, Your Majesty."

"Rina," she corrected him.

"What they need right now is you, Miss Rina. Their queen."

Cale faced the safe zone. Ritana did the same. The southerners were weeping in joy as the rain soaked them from head to toe. Through the dissipating steam, they could see the charred ground. Still, they embraced each other, elated.

The thought of standing in front of them, receiving their praise, exhausted Cale. He just wanted to end this event on a high note here and now.

"This was thanks to all your persistence over the last two weeks. I don't want to be the center of attention," the drenched, pale man said. "I just want to go to that beautiful shore and see the sunset. Right now, actually."

He'd exerted himself more than usual over this jungle situation, and he was itching to dig up the magic stones and leave.

"I'm jealous of Rowoon."

Cale didn't hear Ritana's words clearly, so he shot her a questioning look. "Pardon?"

She smiled gently and shook her head. "Nothing."

Hopping on Ten's back, Ritana rode out of the charred area. Sitting bolt upright on the panther, she was taller than the other southerners despite her short stature.

Taking a deep breath, she shouted, "I'm sure everyone here has seen it—the fire is out! Nature is fair, and so is time! As time goes on, our forest will recover! So today, we'll celebrate a new beginning!"

Ten roared as if agreeing with Ritana.

For a moment, the pitter-patter of rain filled the silence.

Then people's cheers cut through the void. "Wooooo!"

Even now, the water that Cale had created was rushing toward the edges of Sector One, putting out any small fires along the way.

‹You'll catch a cold, human! Hurry up and rest!›

Cale ignored Raon's nagging as Ritana's followers took him to a clean, quiet tent that they'd prepared in a hurry.

"Please let us know if you need anything."

"I don't. I just want to rest quietly. And if possible, I'd like to leave tomorrow."

The southerners who'd followed Cale through No Way Out had astonished expressions on their faces. Still, they obliged him. "Yes. We'll do our best to prepare whatever you need."

Once they left, Cale looked around the tent. Choi Han and the others had been guided to other tents, but someone had followed Cale.

"Raon."

Once Cale acknowledged him, the dripping-wet dragon revealed himself. Cale clicked his tongue, picked up a towel, and got to drying Raon. The dragon had been so mesmerized by the giant wave that he'd forgotten to put a shield around himself.

"Dry *yourself* off, human! You'll get sick!"

Snorting at the four-year-old's orders, Cale wiped Raon's face. As Cale toweled him off, Raon just sat there huffing. Cale chucked Raon's towel to one side after he finished, then used another to dry his own hair. He pulled one of the magical communication orbs he'd received from Bilose from his pocket.

"Connect me."

"All right, human."

Raon seemed smug about something as he obediently connected the device. Cale sat in a wooden chair, the device floating in front of him, and opened a call. The recipient soon appeared on the device. It was Crown Prince Albert.

“Huh? Why do you look like a drowned rat?”

Seeing Albert’s sneer, Cale put on the gentle smile he’d used around Ritana.

“How about you *not* smile like that?”

Predictably, that smile didn’t work on Albert. Cale immediately switched to his usual smirk, leaning back in the chair. Albert was used to this relaxed, apparently lazy Cale.

“Your Highness, Star of Rowoon, what happened to House Sten?” Cale had been incommunicado while traveling to Hoik. Yet a lot had taken place during those past three weeks, including upheaval within the Sten estate.

“The head of the household is in the process of changing, obviously. But why are you so curious about that?”

At that moment, Raon’s voice filled Cale’s head. *‹Is it finally time for my revenge?!›*

Marquess Sten and Benion had tormented Raon. For the dragon to completely overcome his abuse, he needed to take revenge on those involved. He subjected Cale to his plans for revenge, as if singing a lullaby, every time the two were alone. Raon’s instinct to avenge his lost time and tarnished pride was part of his draconic nature. They were the violent rulers of the world and never forgot any wrong done to them.

Albert inspected Cale. “I let you know because you’re providing something in return. I really can’t understand why you’re curious, though.”

“Only so that I can act in your interests, Your Highness.”

Albert snorted. He assumed Cale was lying through his teeth.

Cale was being honest, however. “I’m telling the truth,” he insisted. It would be good for Albert as well to keep Cale appraised of things.

The prince was skeptical of that statement, but he needed to take care of business with Cale soon. “Hurry back to the castle.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cale readily agreed, since he'd planned to go there anyway. Of course, he wouldn't rush over. He'd rest and finish planning before he left.

He chatted with Albert about a couple of different things, then ended the conversation. After a modest meal, he fell asleep. As usual, he had to listen to Raon's vengeful lullaby.

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The next morning, Cale told Ritana, "Miss Rina, I'd like to leave."

Cale was currently inside Ritana's tent. He'd slept in for the first morning in a while, then taken his time getting out of bed to go visit her. Now that there was no reason for him to stay, he wanted to go to the shoreline.

In response, Ritana exclaimed, "Bin!"

On cue, one of her followers moved in front of Cale. He'd met Bin inside the cave, but *Birth of a Hero* had also contained details about the man—one of Ritana's toughest, most loyal subordinates.

"Bin will guide you to the shore," Ritana told Cale, handing him a document.

Taking it, Cale worked hard to maintain his poker face. "You can't do this, Miss Rina. It's too much."

Seeing Cale refuse the document point-blank despite firmly stating his desire to leave, Ritana smiled. He really was an incredible person. "No, it isn't. Not by a long shot."

The document was signed with the queen's name and thumbprint. Once Cale added his own signature, it would be an official contract. In addition to the spot for Cale's signature, one other spot had been left blank: the location and size of the parcel of land the contract would grant him.

"Someone else owning personal property in Sector One would be complicated, but if it's elsewhere, claim as much territory as you wish. I'll take care of everything." Her declaration

sounded like the song of an angel to Cale's ears. The sound of profit was always beautiful, and Ritana was a generous person.

"How can you offer me a contract like *this*? What if I said I wanted the entire shoreline or something?"

"I knew you'd ask that. It wouldn't matter. Take it, if you like."

She really was the type to repay any gratitude as lavishly as possible. At that point, Cale realized why Ritana was sending Bin with him rather than an officer or treasurer. *She really does plan to give me whatever I want, I guess.*

He assumed a guileless expression. "I think it'd be cumbersome to own a lot of land here. I'd just like an area big enough to rest in whenever I long to see the jungle."

His protests made Ritana rethink how she could compensate this saintly nobleman. She figured Cale had even told his companions to help restore Sector One, since they'd awoken early to do so. In reality, Cale had just slept in; he had no clue what the others were doing.

"May I ask your family name, Cale?"

Goosebumps pricked the back of his neck. Giving her the wrong answer would complicate things. Instinctively, he replied, "I'm sorry, but I wish to leave quietly. Forget about what happened yesterday and look toward the future instead."

"You really aren't giving me any way to repay you."

In Cale's opinion, Ritana didn't need to pay him back. She couldn't reward him with anything more valuable than the magic stones hidden on the shore, which were already refined and of the highest grade. Cale had no idea who'd buried them in the jungle, but the novel noted that they'd been there for centuries, which meant no one owned them.

Ritana peered out of the tent. "Ten!" she shouted.

Ten? The panther?

"Grr..."

"Please take Ten along. He'll find the quickest route for you."

Cale whipped around, his blood running cold. He couldn't tell whether the panther was smiling or snarling, but the creature's expression revealed fangs the length of Cale's forearm.

"Ten seems happy to guide you, Cale. You can ride him to your destination. Please accept that much, at least. Consider it a token of my appreciation."

"...Thank you."

"Growr!"

As if pleased, the panther bounded toward Cale, who dodged to the side. A moment later, however, he was on Ten's back.

Ritana was amazed. "This is the first time Ten's crouched down for anyone but me. He really is a good judge of character!"

"I see..."

Despite Ritana's words, the panther's growl didn't make Cale feel welcomed. He was fine riding the panther with Ritana, since she was the panther's master—but doing it alone felt like throwing himself into the lion's den.

"We'll follow you soon, Lord Cale."

Cale nodded at Rosalyn's words. "I'll leave it to you."

The only people joining him were Lark, Bin, and Vicross. Raon would also follow invisibly, as usual.

"Rest assured, we'll help rebuild Sector One until Hans and Ohn show up. Then we'll head over too."

Cale had asked Rosalyn and Choi Han to wait for the deputy butler and the kittens, who'd been tracking down lost travelers' remains along No Way Out.

Good. I can't have Rosalyn with me. Since she was a great mage, it would be complicated if she discovered the magic stones.

"Let's go, then."

At Cale's order, the rest of the group urged their horses forward. All their steeds carried plenty of baggage.

Ritana bid them goodbye. “Have a safe trip. Thank you for everything.”

“Don’t mention it,” Cale responded kindly. He couldn’t drop his guard until the end.

“See you next time!”

That’s a scary thought. If he saw Ritana again, there was a very good chance it would be on a battlefield. For that reason, he had no desire to see her ever again.

He offered her a smile, then asked the black panther respectfully, “Ten, shall we go?”

The panther moved out, leading the horses while Ritana watched from behind.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” one of her followers asked.

“I’m fine,” she murmured. Ten was the first being whose life she’d ever saved. Since then, they’d always been together. Although it was only temporary, this was the first time Ritana had left Ten with someone else.

Blissfully unaware of this, Cale rode to Sector One on the panther’s back. The southerners paused their rebuilding work and greeted him as he went by. Each had their own way of doing it, but they all bowed to Cale in some fashion. There was no fanfare or passionate cheering, however; Ritana must’ve warned them against it.

It really is best to leave quickly, Cale realized. Taking action and then fleeing the scene was the optimal way to avoid annoyances.

He hastened across the black-ash remains of Sector One.

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Sliding off the black panther’s back, Cale heard Raon’s voice in his head. *‹Wow! There’s really nothing here! Even the sea is black!›*

Sector One’s shoreline had been annihilated, and ashes really had blackened the beach. Cale gazed out at the stunning

sea as a cool, salty breeze blew by. Bin, the follower the queen had sent with Cale, studied his behavior. Ritana had told him to report back on everything Cale did.

"I bet this was a really beautiful place," Cale said.

Bin went still. He was right; it had been a sight to behold.

"The sun will set soon. May I look around a bit? I'll let you know once I choose a plot of land."

"Yes, sir."

As Cale said, it was almost sunset.

Mussing Lark's hair, he whispered, "Play with Ten a little. Don't follow me."

"Okay." Lark now listened to him without asking questions.

Cale walked over to Vicross, who stood there frowning, repelled by all the ashes in the area. The chef hadn't taken his white gloves off for a couple of days now.

As soon as Cale approached him, he said, "I'll keep that Bin or Bee or whatever his name is occupied."

"I knew you'd understand what I wanted." Cale followed up with an unexpected question. "Vicross, have you been to northwestern Rowoon?"

"I haven't."

"Really? Don't you want to see it?"

Vicross tilted his head at Cale. "My duty is to the Henituse estate's kitchen."

Cale grinned. He'd need a torture expert soon—someone skilled in breaking a target both physically and mentally. When it came to the former, Vicross was the best. *That crazy priestess can take on the mental torture. She's probably with House Sten's eldest son right about now.*

He patted the bewildered Vicross's shoulder a few times, then headed to the area's highest hill. Ten and Bin watched him go, but they soon had to deal with Lark and Vicross instead.

Cale's steps were light as he went along—not because his minders were occupied but because he was thinking about the magic stones. He'd felt the same way when they found the ruler's

chamber in the Magic Tower. Every time he got a step closer to living as a layabout, Cale's heart jumped for joy.

‹You look excited, weak human!›

Raon was correct; Cale *was* excited. He checked everyone's location, then made his way to the hilltop that was the shoreline's highest point. After the fire, only ashes were left there.

‹Huh?›

Cale smirked at Raon's abrupt reaction.

In *Birth of a Hero*, the magic stones had been found by chance. This place was normally so full of tall trees that you couldn't tell what was underneath. Once all the trees burned down, leaving behind only ashes and dirt, rain had washed those away to reveal the magic stones.

"Right around here, maybe?" he muttered.

‹There's something five steps left of you, human!›

Cale took five steps left, obeying his amazing navigation system—the omnipotent black dragon. Dragons had the keenest sense for mana in the world. He crouched in the spot Raon indicated and took out the hand hoe he'd used to earn the Sound of the Wind.

Thud. Thud. The hoe dug through black ash and dirt with ease, since the ground was a bit mushy from the rain. Still, Cale dug painstakingly, as though seeking the most precious thing in the world. Finally, his wonder took hold.

"Wow!"

He'd found a large, nondescript metal box. That rusty box looked like gold to Cale, who began doing his best to dig around it.

‹Why are you working so hard, human? I've never seen you do that before.›

Ignoring Raon, Cale dug until the lid was visible. He was feeling giddy, but the box itself was so big that he'd need to race to finish before sunset.

‹All you had to do was ask me to clear it out.› Raon chimed in, and Cale stopped. *‹I'll take care of it!›*

Psssht. With a subtle noise, black mana floated through the air, removing the mud and ashes around the box.

Cale realized he'd been *too* excited. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then pointed at the lock. "Break that."

‹All right, human.›

The dragon effortlessly broke the lock.

Cale drew another breath before gripping the lid. Money was good, but these top-grade magic stones were vital to his sturdy, safe, sweet home and equally sturdy transportation. He'd use them as components until he died.

Creeeak. Click. He lifted the lid slowly. All sorts of vibrant colors shone before his eyes.

"Mmh!" Cale hummed in delight, thrilled.

These top-grade magic stones hadn't changed at all, even after centuries. Their colors were vibrant and beautiful. The corners of Cale's lips twitched and rose.

Removing his invisibility, Raon landed next to Cale. "Whoa! Good stuff! We found another treasure, human!" He got on tiptoe to peek inside the box.

The dragon's actions made Cale check to ensure that no one was nearby. Then he lifted one of the stones. These magic stones were basically bundles of cash. The Kingdom of the Whipper's magic devices usually used low- or middle-grade magic stones, which indicated the worth of these top-grade stones used by royals and the like.

These magic stones would increase in value as the continent's wars grew more violent, and there were all sorts of places Cale could sell them. Crown Prince Albert would definitely be one of his main buyers.

"Human!" Raon lifted his head from the box to look at Cale, wings fluttering. "I want some too!"

Cale flinched, but he decided to be generous. Patting Raon's head, he pointed to the box filled with a couple hundred magic stones. "I'll give you the one you like most."

"Really? Thank you, human! You're a very good person!"

Cale was happy to see that the four-year-old was delighted just to get one stone. “Hide it well in that subspace of yours, got it?”

By “subspace,” he was referring to the invisible pocket dimension dragons used to access and store things.

“All right! The seed and one magic stone are mine!”

“Sure, sure.”

Raon replaced the wet dirt and ashes, tidying up the scene with almost practiced ease. Cale then watched the sunset for a while before heading back to the coast. The setting sun over the sea behind him was picturesque. Putting a gentle smile on his face, he pointed to the hill and told Bin, “I had a great view of the sunset on that hill. Could I get a small plot of land up there?”

“Of course.”

The size of the plot Cale asked for amazed Bin. It would only fit a small villa.

Holding his copy of Ritana’s contract, Cale added, “I’ll just stay here until the rest of my group arrives.”

Bin, Vicross, and Lark quickly unloaded supplies and put up tents. Cale would stay onshore and wait for the other members of his entourage.

***

A week later, everyone was present. Cale, who’d been lying in a chair in the shade of the tent, opened his eyes once the others had gathered.

“Shall we head home?”

Hans couldn’t help thinking that Cale sounded as indifferent as usual. Still, he felt happy when Cale said “home.” That could only mean one thing—going back to Henituse territory.

“Will we go through the Kingdom of the Whipper?” the deputy butler asked.

“If we were, why would I tell you to come here?”

“How are we getting back, then?”

Hans wasn’t the only one confused by Cale’s relaxed attitude; the others were as well. Only Bin—the sole person there who would bid farewell to Cale—listened quietly.

Cale sat up in his chair and pointed, drawing everyone’s attention to the sea.

“Oh! Could it be…?” Rosalyn looked to Cale, her gaze questioning.

As the group stared at him, Cale said, “This *is* the ocean.”

At that moment, a horn blared in the distance. *Toooot.* A single ship was approaching the group. They were familiar with the vessel; it was the same ship they’d taken to the Kingdom of the Whipper.

“Will you be leaving now?” Bin asked.

“Yes. Thank you for everything.”

After exchanging casual goodbyes with Bin, Cale walked past the group peering at the ship and headed toward the coastline.

Bilose waved at him from the prow of the rapidly approaching ship. “Hello, Lord Cale!”

Cale smiled at the ingratiating expression Bilose had assumed once again. He shook his magic bag in return. As soon as the ship anchored near the shore, Bilose boarded a small boat to reach Cale.

“Here,” Cale said.

“Ha ha! Thank you very much!” Bilose was extremely happy to receive a second bag of magic devices. Cale turned to his companions, and their eyes met. “Let’s go.”

At that moment, he heard Raon’s ferocious voice in his head. *‹Human, is it time for my revenge now?›*

Cale nodded. He climbed aboard the ship, feeling the cool wind and warm sun, and blinked. The ocean breeze was nice. He was finally heading home to Henituse territory.

***

Cale, who returned quietly without informing Deruth that he'd be back, immediately went to the count's office to report to his father.

"Welcome back!" Count Deruth said warmly.

"I've returned safely, thanks to your warnings."

"I'm glad to see you unharmed." Deruth was grateful and happy that his son had sought him out first. He then made a face, his gaze sliding down and to the left of Cale. "Hrm... Who's this?"

"Greet him," Cale ordered his companion.

A loud voice rang through Deruth's office. "Hello! Nice to meet you!" Müller had evidently eaten well for the last few days. He looked much better than when Cale found him in the Tower. "My name is Müller Hon. I'm the scion of the Hon family, which has specialized in architecture for over two hundred years. I'll do my utmost to complete any task you give me!"

The noisy introduction confused Deruth. *Architecture?* He looked to his son, puzzled.

As he did, Cale addressed him. "My lord."

He didn't call Deruth "Father," or even "Count." That sobered Deruth as well, since Cale was now addressing him as the ruler of the territory.

"I hear you've been reinforcing the castle walls. I'm sure you have a good reason for that."

In fact, Deruth had started buttressing those walls around the time Cale set off for the capital.

Cale pressed on, stating the reason for it. "You also anticipate an era of war, don't you?" Seeing his father's eyes darken, Cale pushed Müller in front of him. "This rat descends from the family that built the Magic Tower."

Noticing the count's expression freeze for a moment, Cale knew Deruth understood the connection between reinforcing the castle walls and the Magic Tower.

"Let's give it a try, Father."

Chapter 18:
We Meet Again, Part One

"GIVE WHAT A TRY?" Deruth asked, though he already knew the answer—and Cale understood that.

"What are you afraid of?" Cale countered.

Deruth couldn't answer the sudden question.

A moment later, his son said, "*I'm* afraid we'll get hurt."

The count's gaze softened. He feared the same thing as his son. However selfish it might be, Deruth was worried that his territory and his family would suffer.

"I'm sure you've realized that the Western Continent is a powder keg," Cale continued.

There was no way that the count *wouldn't* know that, since he'd suddenly begun reinforcing the castle walls and invested in a naval base. In *Birth of a Hero*, Henituse territory wasn't involved in any wars until the end of Volume Five, but there was no guarantee that things would unfold that way now.

"I'll only tell you this," Cale said. "The crown prince had his own reason for sending me to the Kingdom of the Whipper."

He was deliberately vague to keep Deruth from peppering him with questions. The count wasn't going to pry into the crown prince's affairs. He cherished his son and wouldn't make him reveal what Albert had sworn him to secrecy about.

Cale added one word. "Northerners."

Deruth and Müller went stiff, watching him.

"The northerners forged an alliance."

"What?!" Count Deruth grimaced.

Cale understood his reaction. Such an alliance would have a major impact on the state of the Western Continent. There were three kingdoms in the north, with the Kingdom of Faern being northernmost. Faern's Guardian Knight wanted to march the brigade into the south's fertile lands.

Deruth rubbed his face and sighed, mumbling, “It isn’t the Kingdom of the Whipper or Mogor Empire?”

That surprised Cale. Although Deruth was cooped up in Henituse territory, he was aware that both the Kingdom of the Whipper and the Mogor Empire sought control of the continent. Why Mogor? Because the east and the north were changing.

“How would the northerners cross the canyon, Cale? Not to mention the Dark Forest.”

Only one of the Five Wonders, Death Canyon, was at all traversable. Still, the area’s landscape made moving large groups of people almost impossible, so it earned its place among the other Wonders. As its name indicated, the canyon was the most dangerous in the Western Continent. It was the dividing line between the continent’s northern and central regions. At the end of that border was the Dark Forest, which made land travel from the north to the central region generally difficult. Yet Cale, the Mogor Empire, and even Crown Prince Albert knew of a way around all that.

“There are more ways than just overland, Father.”

At that moment, Cale heard the voice of someone he’d forgotten was there. “By ship…?”

It was Müller. Looking pale, the half-dwarf, half-rat yanked off his knapsack. Two rolls of parchment stuck out of it. One was the blueprint for Cale’s castle, the other for his ship. The anxious thirty-year-old looked back and forth between Cale and the blueprints.

Cale nodded at him. “Yes, sailing is an option.”

Deruth heaved a deep sigh and sat on his office couch. Cale sat down on the other end.

But that isn’t the only alternative.

Cale knew something that neither Deruth nor Albert were privy to. Why had the other two northern kingdoms allied with Faern? The latter kingdom’s Guardian Knight had given up battling for warmer lands, instead seeking to hone his military’s martial arts. In doing so, he had made something from legends a reality: a wyvern knight brigade.

Put simply, Faern had found a way to dominate the sky. The wyverns were a means to cross both Death Canyon and the Dark Forest without issue. Aside from the long-distance levitation magic someone at Rosalyn's or Raon's level could cast, that was the best transportation you could find.

Following that development, the three kingdoms began discreetly building ships to conquer the seas as well. They'd already been doing so for half a decade, and all their work would come to fruition in less than two years.

Why had Cale agreed to help Uvar territory build a naval base? Because the north's invasion wasn't far away. At that point, a future Cale knew nothing about would unfold.

I'm just worried because Birth of a Hero *never dropped plotlines. Everyone and everything only got stronger.*

Things in those books always snowballed. It was the kind of story in which an egg would be a chicken as soon as you turned to the next page. To survive in such a world, Cale would need to prepare.

"Cale."

"Yes, Father?"

After a long pause, Deruth faced his son head-on. "As your father, I trust your words. However, as lord of this territory, I must ensure those statements hold water. I'm sure they won't be easy to verify, since you heard about this from the crown prince."

Cale knew confirming what he'd said would be difficult. He knew about these events from reading *Birth of a Hero*, but they weren't things an average noble would have insight into.

Still, Deruth would do his best to get the lay of the land. "I'll try to confirm things as quickly as possible. And if I don't have the means to obtain a piece of information, I'll choose to trust your words." The count got up and headed to his desk. "You know, son, there's something I came to realize when I began to handle money."

The Henituse family had gathered wealth for generations. They spent it too, of course, but their expenditures were minimal compared to what they'd accumulated. In fact, Count Deruth had never felt as though he'd dipped significantly into their funds.

“What I learned,” he went on, sharing his revelation with his son, “is that when you find something to spend money on, you usually have to invest a surprising amount.”

Having wealth to one’s name didn’t help much during a war, but it was a time when prior investments could prove fruitful.

“I will contact you soon,” Deruth concluded.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Cale replied nonchalantly, heading toward the door.

“Cale.”

He turned around. “Yes, Father?”

Deruth thought back to a conversation he’d had with Bassen. “Have you ever considered the matter of my successor?”

“Not at all,” Cale said immediately.

The count laughed at that. Cale had offered the same response as Bassen. “Well, there’s no need to.”

“No, Father.”

Cale definitely wasn’t planning to pay it much heed. If it were offered to him in the future, he would decline the position and leave the territory. Moreover, there was no need to reflect on it, since Count Deruth would likely remain lord of this territory for at least fifteen more years.

“Bassen spoke to me,” Deruth added. “He said he won’t do anything to worry you.”

“Of course he won’t. And Bassen will benefit our territory.” He’d be a perfect fit as the next count.

“Yes,” said Deruth. “Well, go get some rest.”

Cale checked to ensure that the count looked content, then smiled and exited the office.

“Excuse me, Lord Cale.”

“What is it?”

Müller looked around before cautiously asking, “Are you building that ship and castle because of what you discussed insi __”

“Yes, exactly.” Cale quickly cut the rat off to avoid listening to him ramble. His goal was to build that castle and ship to avoid the war. He didn’t want to fight. People called life a continuous war, but he didn’t want to live through a real one. “Just build things that’ll let us survive.”

As Müller’s eyes wavered with uncertainty, Cale placed a gift around the rat’s neck: a golden necklace.

“Then you’ll get more presents like this.”

“I-I sure will, sir!”

In front of Cale, Müller turned even paler than he did around the kittens or the dragon. Cale, however, was satisfied with the rat’s confident response. One really did catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

***

One week later, Count Deruth wore a look of disbelief. “I couldn’t find out anything about the north’s plans.”

His inability to gather that information—at any expense—meant either that it was intel that couldn’t be purchased or that it didn’t exist. Deruth decided it was the former.

As if it had been inevitable, Deruth told his son, “Let’s give your plan a try, Cale.”

I have tons of money piled up either way, the count reflected. You could only save so much money.

Cale smiled, then looked to the side. Deruth hadn’t just called Cale over. Although Cale’s little sister Lilly was still too young to get involved in Henituse territory’s dealings, someone else could take that on.

“I’ll work hard on this too, Brother!” Bassen declared.

“Good. You, our parents, and Lilly will live there, so let’s give it our best.” Cale didn’t include himself in that list, since he planned to retire to a small village.

Bassen nodded vigorously. “I will. I want to work on behalf of our family and our territory until the end of my days.”

Cale, who only cared about living for himself, just nodded.

***

Immediately after that, a secret document bearing the golden turtle crest was delivered to the relevant parties. This new undertaking would take a year, perhaps two.

Countess Violan sat next to Cale as he covertly watched Müller meet with some of the territory's local construction workers to put their plan into action. Yet Cale was already looking weary.

"Are you really half-dwarf and half-rat?!" a construction worker asked Müller.

Loudly clearing his throat, Müller stood on top of a chair. "Yes, I am!"

"Jeez! Bet your agility's something else!"

"The Rat Tribe's meticulousness *and* the dwarves' technical skills... Whoa."

"Show us what you've got!"

With all this praise, Müller was practically preening.

"They're talented and know how to keep their mouths shut," Violan assured Cale. "We should be able to trust them. They signed contracts too."

She was in charge of the territory's artisans, so she was aware of the architects; they were the midpoint between artists and sculptors. The two Violan had meticulously selected were the best of the best, experts in their field. Even they were currently amazed by Müller.

"His family developed the Magic Tower? I'm disappointed that we can't show off such a talented individual!"

"I know! My god, I never thought I'd see a dwarf at work with my own eyes. Give this property everything you have, sir!"

Müller let out a few fake coughs. "I'm thirty this year, and I have twenty-nine years of experience. I've been looking at

blueprints since I was an infant, and I've been holding hammers since I was five. That's typical of the Rat Tribe and dwarves!"

Cale scoffed. He'd never seen the rat look so confident; he even wore his best clothes and golden brooch. At that point, Violan weighed in. "He should be easy to handle."

Her levelheaded observation put Cale at ease. "Well, take good care of him."

"Sure. You needn't worry." Violan looked coolly at the rat.

As the saying went, when the cat was away, the mice would play. Unaware of their presence or their conversation, Müller was definitely enjoying himself.

"Will you leave after checking the blueprints?" Violan asked.

"Yes. I'll return as quickly as possible, though."

"All right."

Cale just responded to Violan's worried expression with a smile. He did have to leave again.

***

After taking care of business, Cale returned to his room and lay on the couch. He glanced at Choi Han, who was across from him. "Choi Han."

"Yes, sir?"

"Let's head out."

"We've only been here for four days. We're going already?" Choi Han hesitated, then continued, "I'll gather everyone up."

"No." There was a reason Cale had summoned Choi Han alone. "Only we will go this time."

At that moment, the creatures that always loitered in Cale's bedroom revealed themselves.

"Meeeow."

"It's been a while since it was just us!"

Hong and Ohn jumped gracefully off the bed and approached Choi Han.

Raon removed his invisibility and sat on the table beside the couch. “I’ll come too, obviously.”

As Choi Han looked at the three, Cale added, “Vicross will follow us later, but we’ll move out first. There’s something we need to take care of. *Alone*. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about.”

“Is it linked to House Sten?”

The corner of Cale’s mouth lifted. Choi Han really was a smart guy. “I knew you were sharp. Get ready to go.”

This was the team that had originally met and rescued Raon. They were joining forces to act in the dragon’s interests once again.

That night, a plain carriage with no crest left stealthily through the back gate of the count’s estate, bound for northwestern Rowoon.

***

It was a fairly long journey from Henituse territory to Sten territory in the middle of Rowoon’s northwestern region.

“Can’t we just teleport over there, human?”

Raon had been nagging Cale to travel there using magic. The dragon’s abilities with human magic seemed to have grown exponentially after being around Rosalyn for a while.

Cale remembered what Rosalyn had told him. *“Dragons really are amazing, even before their first growth spurt. His abilities and cleverness are intimidating.”*

Raon’s species had long life spans, so he probably still had plenty of time before his first growth spurt. That stage could come earlier if a dragon received a shock or sought power desperately enough.

Dragons went through three growth spurts in total. The first was more internal and involved minimal physical changes. It laid the foundation for the second and third phases, in which their bodies grew dramatically. After the third growth spurt, the mature dragon would be twenty meters long.

Cale looked at Raon, who was rolling the large, round transparent egg in the corner of the simple yet spacious carriage.

His attention prompted Raon to shout again, “Human! Let’s teleport!”

“Even if we got there right now, we’d have to wait,” Cale replied indifferently.

Raon scrunched his nose and refocused on the seed inside the glass egg—the one they’d found in the Magic Tower. After using magic to shrink it, Raon took it with him everywhere, along with the seed. He was working hard to observe and nurture the seed, but Cale was thinking about reclaiming it from him once it sprouted.

“But, Lord Cale…” Choi Han began.

Cale faced him. “Yes?”

“Is this plan really possible in Sten territory?”

Choi Han had also been subjected to Raon’s lullaby of revenge plans for the last few days. Although the dragon was only four, the plan included violent words like “imprison,” “attack,” and “torture.” All things Raon had experienced in his first four years of life.

“Why? You don’t like it?”

At Cale’s question, Raon whipped his head toward Choi Han.

Choi Han’s response was straightforward. “I think the plan’s passable. I’m just wondering how we’ll deal with the marquess and Benion Sten.”

Hearing that his plan was “passable,” Raon frowned.

Not knowing that the dragon was now brainstorming how to make his revenge more extreme, Cale said, “The newly recovered Taylor Sten is increasing his sway in Sten territory.”

Taylor Sten had recovered the use of his legs with Crown Prince Albert’s help, and his influence was growing at a frightening rate. Albert’s assistance played a big role in that, but Taylor’s newfound assertiveness and cunning were important factors too. And Taylor was doing something Benion would

never even have thought about: taking aim at the territory's current ruler, Marquess Sten.

"His influence isn't limited to his house," Cale explained.

"Some northwestern nobles are choosing to support him?" Choi Han really *was* smart; he quickly understood what Cale meant.

Cale nodded. "Even the number of vassal families who prefer Taylor has increased."

The reason they supported Taylor was simple: They probably felt they'd live at least slightly easier lives under him. In the past, Taylor's demure temperament made them think he'd drag down the glory of House Sten. That weakness had disappeared, however, and Taylor was now on good terms with the crown prince to boot. The people were slowly starting to trust that he could be the next marquess.

Considering Cale hadn't contacted the crazy priestess Kage or Taylor for a while, he didn't know all the details. He'd just heard the gist from the crown prince.

"The marquess is just allowing that to happen?" asked Choi Han.

"If he stopped Taylor, he'd no longer rule the territory." That confused Choi Han, so Cale explained why House Sten was known as cruel and cold, but efficient. "The Sten family motto is pretty much 'survival of the fittest.' They believe the strongest child has to be the heir. Once they are, they must kill their siblings."

To the Stens, strength didn't mean physical prowess or intelligence. The strongest person was the one who *survived*. Thus, even when Benion destroyed his own brother's legs, the marquess hadn't done a thing about it.

"The marquess can't kill Taylor just to quash his ascent when he isn't going for his father's throat."

Marquess Sten could only sit back and observe as Taylor grew in popularity. He'd help Benion on the sly, of course. Still, he couldn't do much, lest he break his house's rules.

Choi Han peered at Cale. "It's difficult to understand…"

“No need to. We just have to do what we have to do.”

“What *do* we have to do?”

Hong—who was next to Raon—suddenly shouted, “Kidnap someone!”

Seeming to think nothing of such a vicious strategy, Choi Han nodded.

“First, we need to prepare,” Cale interjected quickly.

“Prepare?”

“Yes. We need a location and someone’s help.”

“Whose?”

“Someone you know.”

Choi Han thought about the nobles who’d been at the capital when Cale tracked down the bombs. He remembered that Taylor Sten had been there; was Cale talking about Taylor himself?

Then a completely unexpected name came out of Cale’s mouth. “Odeus Flynn.”

“Who?” It was a foreign yet familiar name. Choi Han recalled his meeting with Lark and the merchant who’d hired him. “The merchant?”

“Yes. We need to see him.”

Bilose’s uncle, Odeus, had passed up inheriting control of Flynn Merchant Fleets, and now he secretly controlled the northwest’s underworld. To Choi Han and the others, he was just a good man who’d taken care of Lark and the Blue Wolf Tribe survivors. Cale was off to meet Odeus, which would get them started on the right foot.

“We won’t work with him long, though,” Cale added.

Seeing him smirk, Choi Han shut up. He’d learned that when Cale had such a devious smile on his face, it was best to just follow him meekly.

The simple carriage, which resembled that of a well-off commoner at most, slowly left the northeast and entered northwestern Rowoon.

***

Tat. Tat.

The breeze rapped at the window. It was a windier night than usual here in Sten territory. A man whose work began at nightfall reclined leisurely on his couch as always. On his face was a gentle smile that he wore every so often. The man in question was Odeus Flynn.

“I’m really curious,” he murmured.

His interest was piqued by the recent turn of events. He tapped the couch’s armrest, and the window rattled along with his tapping. The wind was picking up. Just as he started listening to it, he heard a knock at the door.

Odeus jumped up from the couch and opened the door with that bright smile on his face. “Goodness. If it isn’t Lord Cale and Choi Han! I didn’t expect to see you two. I was shocked to get Bilose’s message.”

As Cale listened to Odeus’s friendly greeting, he entered the room. “No need to be shocked,” he answered indifferently.

Not even looking around, he went to sit on the couch. Odeus watched him quietly, then turned his gaze to the open door, where Choi Han stood like a guard.

“I’ll wait outside.”

“You aren’t coming in?”

“No.”

This was the second floor of an inn in Sten territory. There was a corridor outside the door and a loud bar downstairs. This location, which was busy night and day, was where Cale had instructed Bilose to tell Odeus to meet him.

“Come in if you get tired,” Odeus told Choi Han.

“I will, sir. Enjoy your conversation.”

“Sure.”

Odeus slowly closed the door. Cale was the only other person in the room, so Bilose’s uncle casually walked over and sat down across from him, back to the door, then struck up a

casual chat with the count's son. "It's my pleasure to see you again, Lord Cale."

"Really?"

"Yes. I never expected you to visit me here."

"Oh."

"Actually, I couldn't believe it, since even Bilose didn't know where I was. How did you learn that I was in the Stens' territory?"

Cale didn't respond to the question right away, instead leaning forward on the couch. He locked eyes with Odeus, who scrutinized him in return.

He didn't want to waste time feeling each other out. "Odeus, let me commission you for something."

Odeus smiled, his eyes narrowing. "So you know about that, do you? Bilose has one terrifying employer."

How does *he know? Do his abilities really extend so far?* Odeus wondered, although he didn't place much weight on Cale's discovery.

Cale would know that better than anyone from watching the man's expression. *He really is different from the others,* Cale mused. Unlike everyone else whose secrets Cale had revealed, Odeus wasn't taken off guard at all. He just considered this unexpected.

"What kind of commission are you talking about?" asked the underworld merchant, seasoned by all his experiences throughout his sixty years of life.

"I knew you'd be easy to talk to."

The count's son looked so relaxed, he might as well have been sitting in his own bedroom. Odeus stifled a chuckle at that, but the laughter died when Cale spoke next.

"Don't you want to get rid of House Sten?"

Odeus planted an amiable smile firmly on his face. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"To be specific, isn't House Sten stopping you from taking full control of the northwestern underworld?"

The merchant just sat there quietly and smiled, although his smile was slowly fading.

Cale was as unruffled as if he were speaking about the weather. “I’m sure the citizens would be shocked to hear that in the territory of arrogant House Sten, which claims to value noble etiquette, someone is terrorizing the underworld. Right?”

“Lord Cale…” Odeus looked just as relaxed as Cale. His years of experience didn’t flag easily. “What can I provide you with?”

“Your service.”

“Excuse me?” Cale’s answer finally flabbergasted Odeus. *Service?* Was Cale using the definition of “service” that *he* was familiar with?

“Like I said, I need your service,” Cale repeated. “I’d like you to sweep everything I do in the Sten territory under the rug, as well as supply anything I need, including room and board.”

Odeus smiled again. “Are you trying to exploit my identity in the underworld to use me as a servant?” Although he asked this calmly, his tone was frigid. The look in his eyes had shifted from surprise to anger.

Cale’s reply was nonchalant. “Do you even know what I want?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know what I’m trying to do?” Cale pressed.

Just then, Odeus heard another knock at the door. He couldn’t tear his gaze from Cale, however.

“By the way, a third party is joining this discussion today,” the count’s son added.

In other words, someone else was here.

Creak. The door slowly opened even though nobody had told the visitor to enter. Odeus rose from the couch and turned around. *Creeeak.* The door opened all the way. Someone in a robe entered; as soon as they’d come inside the room, they lowered their hood.

“Ha!” Odeus couldn’t help exclaiming in surprise. This arrival was someone central to the news he considered top

priority lately.

Unlike the startled Odeus, Cale greeted the newcomer with composure. “It’s been a while, Priestess Kage.”

The Stens’ abandoned eldest son, Taylor, was now attempting to take the reins of the House. This was the woman who was always next to him. She had short hair and usually wore a priestess’s outfit, although it lacked the crest of the god she served. While that garment wasn’t visible under her cloak tonight, it was indeed the “crazy priestess” Kage.

“Oh, right. You aren’t a priestess anymore.” Cale modified his greeting. “It’s been a while, Miss Kage.”

“Hey, Lord Cale. Nice to see you again.”

Cale turned to look at Odeus, who stared at him. The older man’s eyes glimmered with greed.

Birth of a Hero’s “black dragon” arc had contained a few lines about Marquess Sten and Benion. Two sentences were about how Benion wrested power from among the marquess’s potential heirs:

Benion Sten put up a front of nobility but committed all sorts of dirty deeds in secret. Thus, he was inextricable from Sten territory’s underworld.

Those two sentences explained to Kim Roksu how Benion could’ve injured Taylor Sten’s legs, then eventually killed Taylor himself. They’d also inspired Cale’s current plan. The lines were short, but they contained a lot of information about Benion’s personality and past.

“So?” Cale asked Odeus. “Aren’t you curious about my commission now?”

Bilose’s uncle sat back down across from Cale without a word. Kage perched on the remaining seat. Now was the perfect time to discuss the operation.

As the most curious person present, Odeus started the conversation. “I had no idea you two knew each other.”

“I’m assuming you want to know more about that?”

“Not at all,” Odeus answered, as if it were self-evident.

Cale took that reply in stride. Someone like Odeus would prefer to investigate Cale’s connection to Kage personally. After all, what kind of merchant earned information from his client?

“When will Benion visit this spot, Odeus?”

Working in the underworld for the past five years, Odeus had figured out that someone was preventing him from taking control. But he’d never found out who that was.

“You mean the back alley?”

Cale spoke of information Odeus had only learned recently. It seemed the young nobleman in front of him already knew that Benion would soon grace the back alley. Of course, Cale was just repeating what he’d read in the novel.

Sten territory’s underbelly was called the “back alley.” Gambling, booze, prostitution, illegal auctions, trafficking, and violence—all those indecencies happened daily there. Only Odeus steered clear of slavery and violence, creating conditions for his dealings that protected both client and merchant. That was why Cale had come to find him. Taylor Sten, the marquess’s eldest son, probably had the same train of thought.

Well, it might’ve been slightly different. Taylor was aware that Benion was responsible for paralyzing him. Still, Benion was so sneaky that Taylor didn’t know where his resources originated. Thanks to communications with Cale, though, Taylor had figured everything out—and he’d found that information very important. As soon as Cale had brought Kage and Taylor up to speed, they’d asked him to connect them with Odeus.

The defrocked priestess announced Taylor’s desire now: “Lord Taylor wishes to know everything about House Sten’s territory and the northwest.” She met Odeus’s gaze. “As a noble, and a member of the family ruling over the region, Lord Taylor hates the underworld.”

“I agree. I hate it as well,” Cale said loudly.

Odeus nodded. “Yes. A noble who values their citizens should feel that way. Henituse territory doesn’t have an underworld, does it?”

He was right. Although Count Deruth's territory contained dissidents and gangsters, there was no underworld or black market. Count Deruth might have seemed run-of-the-mill, but he was devoted to the noble way of life. He had a strong sense of duty and enough money to prevent such activities from taking root. Furthermore, his territory's rural location meant there wasn't much demand for them there.

"Lord Taylor probably wants to get rid of the underworld, right?"

"Yes," Kage responded firmly.

Odeus smiled, then looked at Cale. "Sounds like a true noble." His next sentence was the more important one. "He wants to keep his sense of justice."

In *Birth of a Hero*, House Sten had fallen for many reasons. The family had ended up in terrible circumstances after a dispute with Choi Han. That, and the black dragon had gone berserk in the novels. Odeus also played a role in their downfall, revealing Benion's identity in the underworld to prevent him from taking control of the back alley. That was the nail in House Sten's coffin. The family that had seemed noblest had done something dishonorable and hurt the citizens.

Of course, Odeus had to expose himself to bring that news to light, which put him in a lot of danger. And although Choi Han knew him from the Blue Wolf Tribe situation, he hadn't been able to do anything to help. Now, however, Odeus would have no reason to offer himself up.

"You two can bicker about it later," Cale said, putting a clear end to their conversation. "We need to get rid of our common enemy first."

That confused Odeus and Kage. Both had the same question: What reason did Cale Henituse have to hate Benion?

"Pardon me, but what do you plan to do to Benion?" Odeus asked, eyeing Cale with uncertainty.

Cale's answer was simple. "Kill him."

The crazy priestess was shocked. "That's—"

"Or something worse than death," Cale continued.

“Huh?”

Kage had a blank expression as she thought about what he’d just said. *Something worse than killing Benion?* Shivering, she looked back at Cale. He seemed utterly at ease, yet Kage knew Cale was someone who kept his word. He’d lent her and Taylor money, snuck them into the capital, and had them make a Vow of Death to protect the secret.

“Ha ha ha!” Odeus started to laugh, nodding. “Of course, many things are worse than death.”

“Mm,” Kage grunted. “How do you plan to do that?”

In lieu of a response, Cale turned toward Odeus. That look told the merchant exactly what he needed to do.

“I’ll take care of things for Lord Cale. You needn’t worry.” Odeus was happy and willing to serve Cale in this—it was his only option, really.

“I’ll see to it with Odeus’s help,” Cale agreed.

Cale had made it clear that he’d take care of Benion himself. *Well, not me, but the dragon.* From Cale’s perspective, he wouldn’t do anything beyond making arrangements. Raon would be the one in charge.

“Goodness me. Looks like I’ll be busy for the first time in a while,” remarked sixty-year-old Odeus. Although he pretended to be feeble, he had a bright expression on his face. He looked ready for a celebration.

“Move quickly, then,” Cale instructed him. “I’ll stay in this inn.”

“Oh. Sure.” Odeus had almost reached his golden years, yet he sprang off the couch and zipped toward the door.

He then heard Cale’s voice behind him. “Odeus, find me a house.”

“A house?” He turned back to look at Cale.

“Yes. And since I expect you to serve me well, let me emphasize that I only accept luxury.”

Cale’s calm demand that Odeus wait on him didn’t bother the merchant. “I’ve never had a request like that in all my years, but I’ll consider it my honor.”

“You’re getting paid enough for it. I’m getting rid of an obstacle for you.”

“That’s plenty,” Odeus agreed.

He opened the door, and Choi Han smiled gently at him. Odeus now understood why Choi Han had guarded the door. Someone needed to keep an eye out during a discussion like this.

“See you next time, Choi Han.”

“Of course, sir.”

Once Odeus left, Choi Han closed the door again. Now only Cale and Kage were left in the room. Alone with the crazy priestess, Cale had a question for her. “Miss Kage?”

“Yes, Lord Cale?”

“Tell me, why can’t I kill the marquess’s heir?”

Her response was swift, as if she’d anticipated this. “In two days, Taylor will make an announcement to his siblings.”

Cale had a feeling he already knew what it would be. “That he won’t kill any of them?”

“I knew you’d figure it out.” Kage held back her admiration as she continued, “Although it seems to contradict House Sten’s way of life, that announcement won’t wholly go against it. After all, the heir only needs to render their siblings unable to wrest the position away.”

Anyone else might’ve asked how one could ensure nobody would be tempted to usurp a successor without bringing murder into the picture. Kage had planned to explain that to Cale.

However, Cale already knew the answer. “You can use a Vow of Death.”

“…Correct. I guess I don’t need to explain anything to you, Lord Cale.”

“I guess the God of Death hasn’t really abandoned *you*, Miss Kage.”

The Temple of the God of Death might have cast her out, but her god certainly hadn’t.

Kage cracked a smile. “I’d be thrilled if he stopped bothering me, actually.”

The conversation had grown lighter after Odeus’s departure. Kage had no problem saying whatever she liked, though her fellow priests and priestesses might’ve fainted had they heard.

“We can’t always get what we want, right?” Cale didn’t care at all about her irreverence, which was shocking in itself. He ended the discussion with Kage, declaring, “Let’s chat again next time. I’m tired today.”

He ensured that Kage left the inn, then addressed Choi Han and the invisible Raon. “Let’s sit back and wait.”

Though he said as much, they wouldn’t be waiting for long.

Deep Secrets: Can Cale Turn the Tide of Fate?

When Kim Roksu mysteriously awakens inside an action-packed fantasy novel, he decides to make the most of it. Now living as the rich noble Cale Henituse, our protagonist collects flashy abilities and unexpected allies in his pursuit of a cushy life! After foiling a mad mage's terrorist plot in the capital, he travels to a coastline of vicious whirlpools to find his next Ancient Power. There, he meets siblings from the Whale Tribe who are as beautiful as they are deadly. For ages, the whales have kept their sworn enemies at bay—the blood-thirsty mermaids—but an unknown power from the depths of the Dark Forest has made their foes stronger than ever. Will the mermaids, monsters, and magic of this vibrant fantasy world be enough to derail Cale's ambitions of a luxurious, carefree future?



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