
Lout of Count's Family
BY Yu Ryeo-Han
NOVEL
03

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Lout of Count's Family

NOVEL

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WRITTEN BY

Yu Ryeo-Han

Seven Seas Entertainment

[Lout of Count's Family] (백작가의 망나니가 되었다) Vol. 3 © 2022 by Yu Ryeo-Han
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First published in Korea in 2022 by Chungeoram Publishing Inc.
English translation rights arranged by Chungeoram Publishing Inc.
through Topaz Agency in Korea
English edition Vol. 3 © 2025 Seven Seas Entertainment, Inc.
Cover illustration by LOKOnity

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ISBN: 979-8-89160-896-2
Printed in Canada
First Printing: March 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 18:
We Meet Again, Part Two

CALE HENITUSE STOOD atop the roof and surveyed the area. “The weather’s perfect,” he said. “As is the time.”

It was a hot, foggy morning, already sticky and humid even though the sun had yet to rise. Next to Cale, Hong was still half asleep, nodding off despite his attempts to stay awake.

“Not many people around either,” Cale added.

Locals were unlikely to venture out into the muggy dawn—especially because this was the back alley, where people stayed up all night to feed their vices and were only just heading to bed.

Cale looked down at the ground. *I heard there were quite a few routes, but there’s at least a 70 percent chance that he’ll use this one today.*

Recalling Odeus’s report, he glanced to one side. Raon Mir sat calmly on the railing, gaze fixed on the path below. Cale stroked the black dragon’s head.

“Stop that!” Raon growled at Cale with a glare, though he allowed the petting to continue. “You won’t do anything today, weak human.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll just watch.”

“And be careful when you do!”

“All right.”

Raon seemed satisfied with that. He opened his black wings and flew into the air. Choi Han, Ohn, and Hong took that as their cue to move.

“I’ll leave it to you, Ohn.”

“This is my time to shine!” Ohn swished her tail as she disappeared into the fog.

Hong looked at Cale. “Ready for the poison?”

“Yeah.”

The red kitten nodded and approached Raon as the dragon floated downward. Hong patted Raon's flank with his paw, smiled, and vanished into the fog as his sister had.

"I'll be on my way too," Choi Han said, sneaking off to a nearby roof.

Raon approached Cale, waiting in midair.

"Hey, Raon."

"What?"

"Do whatever you want."

Raon grinned. "You don't need to tell me that." And then he likewise slipped into the fog.

Cale leisurely crossed his arms, eyes fixed on the ground. Three robed figures entered the alleyway; Benion Sten was bound to be one of them. The 70 percent likelihood Odeus had mentioned was on point. Cale leaned on the railing, watching the trio from above.

Unaware of the lout's attention, Benion rushed through the alley. He was swearing internally, although that didn't suit a noble. *Crazy bastard!*

Yesterday, Benion's formerly paralyzed brother Taylor had said something absolutely ludicrous: *"I won't kill my siblings. I only plan to rule over them."* Those words had caused a huge reaction: namely, chaos at House Sten. Thanks to that, Benion had only reached this place at daybreak.

Taylor was gaining too much power. Benion needed to suppress him. While the younger Sten wouldn't normally have made the trip here himself, the subordinate he'd planted in this area was struggling to act. The northwest's most influential black-market merchant had been getting in the way.

All these useless fools keep tripping me up. Benion clicked his tongue as he hurried through the fog. He was thankful that it was already foggy and that it was getting thicker; it would keep witnesses to a minimum. *The weather's on my side today.*

Two of Benion's subordinates followed him, but since they'd pulled their hoods fully over their heads, they missed something

as they walked: The fog above them was slowly growing darker.

“Meow.”

Benion clicked his tongue again at the cat making a racket this early in the morning. There were all sorts of useless people and stray animals lurking in the alleys. The authorities needed to round them up and either teach them to be useful or kill them all.

“Meeeow.”

The chilling yowl brought to mind the creature Benion blamed for his suffering. He scowled, thinking, *I should’ve killed it.* None of this would’ve happened if he’d slaughtered that damn black dragon. But he’d made a stink about taming it, and that had led to his downfall. Annoyance surged inside him.

“Meeeooow.”

“So noisy,” Benion grumbled, frustrated.

Just then, someone gasped behind him, and something fell to the ground with a heavy *thud*.

“M-my lord!”

With an ominous feeling, Benion spun around. “Wha—?!”

One subordinate was on the ground, clutching at his neck. The other, who had called out to Benion, staggered and crumpled to his knees.

“C-can’t breathe—agh!”

The man’s face turned blue. Then he collapsed, his hood brushing the tip of Benion’s boot. The sudden turn of events alarmed Benion. He scrunched his brow, completely taken aback.

Another caterwaul echoed through the alley. Benion quickly realized that the meowing was getting closer.

“Meeeow.”

Above! It’s coming from above! Benion lifted his head. That was when he saw it.

“Huh?!”

Unlike the milky fog around them, the fog overhead was black and red. It gave off a distinctly dangerous impression.

Benion retreated a step, and something tapped his back. He froze, then grabbed the hilt of his sword and whirled around. Yet all he could see was fog.

“Wh-what the…?” he blurted out.

Behind him, his subordinates groaned in pain. A faint breeze whispered as it flowed past. Right as Benion made to turn his head, a voice called out to him.

“Hi there.”

Benion spun back around but didn’t see anything. At least, not initially. A jet-black creature then materialized in front of Benion, taking his time emerging from the fog.

“Uh…” Benion stepped backward. *Thump.* His path was blocked by one of his fallen lackeys.

The obsidian beast revealed himself completely. His eyes blazed with intense hatred for Benion, who hadn’t seen him for a very long time.

“We meet again.”

The black dragon, Raon, had appeared before Benion with a reptilian smile.

“Wh-what the hell’re you doing here?!”

The rough words, which didn’t suit a noble, spilled out of Benion’s mouth. His hood shifted away to reveal his entire face; it was utterly pale.

Raon flapped his wings as he stalked toward his tormentor. His childish, mischievous voice reached the young nobleman’s ear. “Why are you so surprised? Oh, is it hard to recognize me without all the blood?”

The dragon’s deadpan expression contrasted with his playful tone. He approached Benion gradually, deliberately, his black mana fluctuating in the air around him. Benion moved back another step, tripping over his lackey’s prone form.

“Urgh!” the man cried out as Benion continued to retreat.

The dragon spoke his name. “Benion Sten.”

During the four years Benion had possessed the dragon, he'd never heard the creature speak. The dragon staring him down now was different from the one he'd beaten and bloodied with clubs and whips. Still tiny, yes, but *far* more powerful.

"I guess you never expected me to come back," the dragon said.

That was an understatement. Benion had just decided he needed to find the dragon, return with it, and teach it a proper lesson. What a foolish plan that had been. He took yet another step back, his foot trembling fiercely. He couldn't hold it still.

"Wh-what in the world…?"

The dark-red fog billowed forth and curled up his leg, starting with that foot. It was like a snake coiling around him, but he couldn't run away.

"Nice to see you again," said the dragon.

The creature's mana had bound Benion, and the snakelike fog reached his neck. One of his lackeys grunted, then went quiet.

Fssssh. The wind sounded like a serpent hissing in Benion's ear.

Compared to his usual self, the marquess's son looked downright rattled. "N-no…" He'd never been on this end of fear.

The dragon's magic had petrified him from head to toe. He couldn't move a muscle as the dark-red fog reached his upper lip. It slowly covered his face; he tried to hold his breath, but the fog entered his nose. He couldn't breathe.

At that moment, he glimpsed the dragon's face through the fog. "I'm very happy to see you, Benion Sten."

"Ugh!"

Raon watched Benion's expression. The nobleman's body shook from absorbing the poison-tinged fog Ohn and Hong had produced. Raon retracted the mana restraining Benion, whose poisoned body toppled to the ground with a *whump*. He'd already lost consciousness.

As Raon stared quietly at the fallen Benion, a hand petted his head. It was Cale, who'd used the Sound of the Wind to hop down from the rooftop. He looked down at Benion, then heard the dragon's upset voice.

"It's vexing how weak he is."

Cale smiled bitterly. "So? Want to stop?"

"No," Raon replied without a moment's hesitation. "I'll treat him the same way he treated me."

Still patting the dragon's round head, Cale scanned their surroundings, then spoke up again. "Go ahead."

Ohn and Hong, who were atop an adjacent building, leapt down on light feet. *Tap. Tap.* Ohn then created a path for Choi Han through the fog.

Upon seeing Raon slowly turn invisible, Cale told Choi Han, "Summon everyone waiting at the end of the alley."

"Yes, sir."

Two small carriages soon rolled down the alley, filling the narrow space. A figure emerged from one of them: Kage, the "crazy priestess."

"Good morning, Lord Cale."

"Take them away," Cale ordered.

Kage gulped as she registered Benion's unconscious subordinates on the ground, as well as Benion Sten, whom Choi Han had picked up. She hadn't seen what transpired in this alley. The fog had played a part in that, but it was mainly because Choi Han had been guarding the alley entrance. Kage noticed that despite the trio being unconscious, Benion's lackeys were grimacing and Benion was pale with fear.

"We don't have much time," Cale warned her.

"Hm? Oh, right!"

His tone snapped Kage back to her senses, and she quickly instructed her two companions to move Benion's men. Then she approached Cale, who was about to leave in the other carriage with Benion.

“You still remember, don’t you?” she said. “You’ve got four days.”

“Yes,” Cale confirmed, brimming with confidence. “That’s plenty of time.”

The lout was perfectly collected, as was Choi Han as he threw Benion into the carriage. It gave Kage chills. Cale seemed so different from the young nobleman who’d stepped up to protect everyone in the capital—the same nobleman who’d helped her and Taylor. Nevertheless, she offered a small smile. She’d have to focus for the plan to succeed.

“All right. I trust you,” she replied. “You set the date, so please keep it in mind, Lord Cale.”

Four days. Thinking about what would happen over those days, Cale responded clearly to the banished priestess, who was racked with anxiety. “Mm-hmm. Don’t worry—it’ll be impossible for me to forget. Unfortunately, it’ll be unforgettable for him too. Each day will feel like a year.” Cale paused to study Benion, then turned to Kage and nodded. “We’ll be off now.”

“Okay.”

Kage would never forget the way he stared at Benion. She watched his carriage until it disappeared out of the alley. *It should be fine… He promised not to kill Benion.*

Cale had said he’d hand Benion over alive, and Kage and Taylor trusted him. He wasn’t the type to break a promise. On top of that, he was the reason that they could hatch this plan in the first place.

“We should trust him. We said we would,” Kage muttered, buckling down. Starting today, she needed to act quickly. “They’re all loaded in the carriage?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

Her carriage left the alley too, heading in the opposite direction.

Driving away from Marquess Sten’s estate, Cale’s carriage moved toward the luxurious district where nobles, knights, and

rich citizens lived. The streets were clean, and the buildings looked fancy.

Click. Click. The carriage moved through the early morning fog and stopped in front of one of the residences. Its strong iron gates slowly opened. *Creeeeak. Clunk.* The carriage immediately made for the rear of the house. The building looked unexceptional from the front, but around back, it had a door that led underground.

“Nice place,” Cale observed as he disembarked the carriage.

He glanced at the driver, whose hood fully covered his face. When the man lifted his head, his features came into view. It was Odeus Flynn.

“You can go,” Cale told him.

Odeus dipped his head in acknowledgment, then slipped out the residence’s back gate. He wanted to turn and look at Cale once more, but he refrained from doing so. Odeus had come himself because he couldn’t leave this to his subordinates. *I was wrong about him,* the man reflected. He understood now why Cale had insisted that Odeus personally provide this “service.” They weren’t doing things anybody else could know about.

A torture chamber, eh? Odeus mused.

Although Cale Henituse was inarguably known as kind and self-sacrificing, that wasn’t his true nature. Yet even Choi Han, a good and righteous person, followed Cale’s orders. Odeus also recalled that his nephew, Bilose, had said he would serve the lout.

Despite Odeus’s weathered face, his eyes were sharp. He picked up the pace. For the next four days, he’d need to carry out Cale’s orders.

“The problem is that I obey him as if it’s natural,” Odeus mumbled, disappearing into the fog.

When Cale could no longer see the merchant, he opened the door heading underground with a chilling *creeeak*. Vicross—who’d arrived the previous evening—stood at the threshold.

“Ah, Lord Cale. You’ve arrived.”

Vicross had many titles: blademaster, chef, son of Ron the assassin. The title he would be embodying today, however, was "torture specialist."

"That I have," replied Cale. "Let's get him inside."

Choi Han hoisted Benion and descended the stairs. Vicross followed with a grimace, peeking at the black dragon hovering at Cale's side. Cale ignored Vicross's stare. He'd revealed Raon's existence to the torturer yesterday, and Vicross had taken it in stride with a simple *"I see."*

As soon as Cale told him about Raon, Vicross had understood that it was the dragon who'd brought them food while they traveled to the capital. Still, Cale hadn't explained anything about Benion, and Vicross now seemed displeased with whatever they were up to.

At least he follows orders, Cale reflected. Vicross was very thorough about that.

Stepping into the spacious underground chamber, Cale looked around. "Nice job."

On one side of the room were various types of torture equipment, all prepared by Vicross. Looking at the vicious tools, Cale sucked in a breath, then turned to Raon.

"The room is the same," Raon noted. They'd set up this underground torture chamber to resemble the cave he'd suffered in during his first four years of life.

As Choi Han placed Benion on a chair, Vicross addressed Cale. "Is that who I need to work on?"

"Yes."

"What should I do to him?"

Raon answered that question. The dragon flew up to Vicross, forcing the torturer to stand face-to-face with him. "Return everything I suffered."

Vicross didn't know Raon's story. "What you suffered…?"

"I was imprisoned in a cave and abused, bearing torture and beatings day after day. For the next four days, I want to retaliate

for my four years of suffering."

As the young dragon's calm voice echoed in the chamber, Choi Han rubbed his face. Ohn and Hong didn't know what to do. Cale crossed his arms, peering at Raon. In his opinion, it was difficult to speak with composure about your own pain as Raon was. The dragon really was great and mighty.

"I'll tell you *exactly* how I was abused," Raon declared. "First of all, I was whipped until my tough dragon flesh was raw." He launched into further details of what he'd endured, and Vicross listened carefully. The dragon sounded passionate; he wanted to pay Benion back for everything. "Of course, he beat me in spots that were already bloody and injured."

Bang!

Raon stopped talking, gaze snapping toward the source of the noise. Cale had kicked the chair the unconscious Benion sat on. Benion plunged to the ground but remained unconscious, which made Cale wonder how strong a sedative Hong had used.

Cale fixed his shirt as if nothing had happened. "Keep doing what you have to."

"I will, human." Raon resumed talking about his past—just the gist of it, since he didn't have much time left.

Once he finished, silence filled the room. Cale looked at Vicross, lips lifting in a smile. Vicross had taken a pair of white gloves out of his pocket. He wore them often out of a strong distaste for filth. Then he took out a second pair of white gloves and pulled them on over the first pair. Cale had never seen or read anything about Vicross putting on *two* pairs of gloves.

"There's going to be a lot of blood," Vicross said.

"Hey, Vicross," Cale interjected.

"Yes, sir?"

"Prepare some food before we start."

Vicross gaped at Cale as if the lout had gone mad. "Food? Really?"

Cale pointed to the dragon. "Raon needs something to eat."

Raon stretched his wings in agreement. “That bastard beat me while he ate. He said that seeing my blood was appetizing.”

Choi Han balked. “That crazy son of a…”

Taking out *another* pair of gloves, Vicross told Raon and Cale, “Looks like I need to prepare a feast.”

Cale suspected that beneath his stiff expression, Vicross was really softhearted. Despite being a torture specialist, Vicross seemed easily swayed by children and gestures of affection, be it the wolves’ or Raon’s.

Heading upstairs to cook, Vicross casually asked, “Shall I break his limbs?”

“No need,” Raon responded.

“All right. Will you be staying down here as well, Lord Cale?”

Cale considered it and frowned. *I don’t really want to see this, but…*

The reason he’d been hoping to live in peace was that he hated seeing blood or violence. Still, this was a special occasion. He could only watch in secret, since it’d be complicated if his identity was revealed, but they’d set up an invisibility magic device in the corner.

I don’t think I can watch torture and enjoy a feast. I should just stick with wine, Cale decided. He knew this would be brutal; he’d probably want to retch and roil. Under those circumstances, alcohol would be preferable to food.

Cale opened his mouth to ask for wine, but Raon spoke first. “I understand, weak human. Don’t even think about whether you should watch. You don’t need to.”

“True, it might be difficult for you, Mr. Cale,” Choi Han agreed.

Even Ohn and Hong nodded.

“What are you talking about?” Cale asked, incredulous. He stroked Raon’s head, then walked past him. “If I don’t stay, are you going to watch *alone*?”

Some things you needed to see, however hard it was.

Cale pulled a potion out of his magic bag and handed it to Vicross. “Use this if he looks like he’s going to die. That way, he’ll survive all four days.”

“Of course.” Vicross didn’t understand Raon and Choi Han talking the lout out of it, having accompanied Cale across the former battlefields of the Kingdom of the Whipper. He accepted the potion as though Cale’s offer was only natural. “I’ll go make preparations.”

Vicross prepared the best feast possible underground—a feast just for Raon.

***

“Ugh…” Benion groaned and tried to move. His body felt heavy. His limbs weren’t bound tightly, but he was exhausted and breathless.

As he stirred, he tried to figure out what had happened. Opening his eyes, he gasped in shock. In front of him was a feast grander than most nobles’ banquets. Atop the table laden with dishes, the black dragon stared him down.

Clang!

The chains on Benion’s limbs and neck rattled as he whipped his head around. “M-m—” He wanted to speak, but the magic restraints around his neck kept him from doing so. He couldn’t say anything, just as Raon hadn’t been able to.

Clatter! Bang!

The tail of a whip dragged across the floor. It was long and embedded with metal and glass, very similar to the whip Benion had used on Raon. The masked man wielding the whip slowly approached Benion.

“Begin,” Raon ordered.

The masked man, Vicross, cracked the whip. It flicked through the air and struck Benion.

“Augh!” Although Benion’s body felt heavy, he could still feel pain.

Lash after lash seared his skin. The simple noble’s attire beneath his robe tore, the skin underneath bleeding as the sharp additions to the whip cut his flesh. Shards of glass flew off and pierced him. This was the same way Raon had been abused when he was just a newborn.

“Agh! Gah, ghk—!” Benion tried shouting something, but the words didn’t come out. He tried to struggle, but his body was still paralyzed. Just as Raon had suffered under mana-restriction chains in the cave, Benion couldn’t do anything now but suffer, tremble, and sluggishly curl up. He glared up at the black dragon atop the table, just as Raon had glared at his own attacker. It was a glare that proved that he wouldn’t give in.

As Benion continued scowling, the whip cut his cheek. *Thwack! Thwack!*

“Aaahhh! Urgh!”

Benion trembled in pain as blood seeped into his clothes, but Vicross had no reaction, steadily continuing to whip him. He whipped Benion’s open wounds repeatedly, showing no emotion even as blood sprayed into the air.

Hearing a gasp at his side, Cale turned. Ohn and Hong were in the invisible area with him, huddled up next to each other. Hong seemed to find this difficult to watch. He looked down at the ground, then back up at Benion. Raon had cast noise-suppressing magic in that invisible spot to keep Benion from realizing that there were observers there. It wouldn’t matter if Benion heard them, though.

“Ugh! Ah! Gah! Agh! Aaargh!” Cheeks completely bloody, Benion groaned and screamed unintelligibly.

Every time he did, Vicross just cracked the whip even harder. *Hold your tongue. Stay still. Stop glaring.* That seemed to be the message, since the whip cracked whenever Benion reacted.

“I should watch… I need to,” Ohn said, lowering her head.

Cale understood that viewing this was painful for them. The basement where Benion was chained was slowly turning red with blood, but the kittens weren't struggling to watch because they were scared or because they pitied Benion. It was because they knew what Raon had gone through and that this was only just the beginning.

Cale stroked their heads. "If you can't watch, you don't have to."

As he said that, he turned to see Raon sitting atop the table alone, eating steak—his favorite food.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Raon stuffed his mouth with more and more food as he listened to Benion scream. The dragon had looked forward to this moment for a very long time, envisioning this exact scene again and again. He couldn't skip a bite of this meal—this *feast*. Half a year ago, he couldn't even have imagined these precious dishes, let alone his freedom and healthy body. Savoring all the things he'd gained, Raon continued to eat.

"Hrk!" Wolfing down too much food at once, the dragon coughed for a moment, but he didn't stop. Cale, who was keeping an eye on Raon's face as well as his actions, noticed that he was crying. "Mm…ngh!"

Although Raon was choked up, he didn't stop stuffing himself with food as Vicross lashed Benion. Ohn and Hong couldn't bring themselves to keep watching the dragon, but Cale made sure to.

"Ah! Ugh! Gah! Aaah!"

Benion's body spasmed as Vicross snapped the whip at spots he knew would hurt. By this point, Benion couldn't even look up at the black dragon anymore. Expression blank, he slowly lost consciousness, surrounded by his own blood.

Swsh! With a loud crack, the whip struck Benion's head, finally knocking him out.

Raon stuffed more steak into his mouth. His eyes were open, but he didn't see Benion; what he saw was his past self. That was why he couldn't stop.

A warm, solid hand patted his back. “You’re going to choke.”

Raon was familiar with that voice now. He turned his head.

“Tch. It’s all over your mouth.” Cale’s voice was as indifferent as usual, but Raon took note of the redhead’s expression as he wiped the dragon’s mouth with his sleeve. Raon slowly swiveled back around. Benion lay on the ground, unconscious.

Gazing at him, Raon said, “I’ll keep watching.”

“Sure,” Cale replied. “Let’s watch together.”

Raon put his head on the table, and Cale continued to stroke his back as he regarded Vicross.

Upon seeing his boss’s frown, Vicross asked, “What is it, Lord Cale?”

“Why are you giving him that now?” Cale lifted his chin, indicating the potion in Vicross’s hand.

“Won’t we need to heal him?” Vicross replied indifferently.

“Yeah, but use it when he’s about to croak.”

Although Benion had fainted, he was still groaning. His entire body was coated in blood, painting his skin red.

Vicross eyed Benion, then nodded. “Well, he won’t die just yet. I admire your stipulated procedure.” He put the potion back down.

Cale heaved a sigh before lifting Raon in his arms. He frowned. The dragon was heavy—very heavy. Raon hadn’t gotten bigger over these past few months, but his weight seemed to have increased exponentially.

Cale’s arms wobbled a bit, but he kept Raon in his hold. He couldn’t just leave the dragon here. Feeling sweat trickle down his shoulders, he looked at Ohn and Hong, who were pacing around him.

Arms growing numb, Cale quickly said, “Let’s rest a bit.”

Nobody objected, but Vicross posed a question. “What should I do when he wakes up?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Continue,” Raon chimed in.

“What he said.”

“I understand.”

Cale pushed open the door with a slight *creak*. Choi Han stood there with anger and sorrow written on his face, looking back and forth between Cale and Raon.

“There’s an unopened bottle of wine in there. Bring that and a glass,” Cale ordered. He’d decided that he needed to drink tonight. Heading upstairs into the residence, he asked Raon, “Did you get bigger? You’re heavier than last time.”

“Your arms are just feeble, weak human.”

“I can’t deny that.”

Raon, who’d stuffed himself since early morning, raised his head. He could see outside the residence: The fog had lifted, and morning was fast approaching.

“Well, it’s good that you’re growing,” Cale told him. “Keep it up.”

Hearing that, Raon buried his face in Cale’s shoulder. Cale’s arms were shaking, but Raon pretended not to realize, and Cale let him be. The dragon was only four years old; it was fine for him to act that way.

***

Three days afterward, late at night, Raon flew up from the table and landed in front of his former tormentor. Benion was breathing heavily. The arrogant noble had glared daggers at them initially, thinking that someone would save him, but his face had become a mess over the last few days, and he now wept and begged for his life. He’d grown weary, unsure how much time had passed. All he knew was that Raon kept devouring meals and watching him suffer.

“Benion Sten.”

Raon stared down at Benion. The nobleman had his face to the ground and didn't dare look up. Raon remembered others abusing him, but Cale already planned to punish them as well—the marquess included. Although the marquess hadn't injured Raon in person, he'd been responsible for his imprisonment in the first place, so even he would pay for it soon enough.

That was why Raon didn't plan to kill Benion Sten. "I'll let you live," the dragon told him.

Seeing the weak, stupid, hateful being shudder, unable even to look at him, Raon felt that even the term "human" was above Benion. He remembered what Benion had said about him: *"Seeing that dragon bastard's blood really helps when I'm annoyed. It always whets my appetite."*

Raon was still planning to do the same things Benion had. The dragon's steady voice reached the nobleman's ear. "Whenever I don't have an appetite, I'll come find you."

Benion shuddered at those words. Dark-red fog surrounded him again. He continued to shake in fear as he gaped at the fog, trying not to pass out. In the end, he succumbed and fainted.

"Seems like he's asleep," Vicross told Cale.

Cale stared back at him, slightly taken aback. In three days, Vicross had struck fear into the haughty Benion's mind. Cale had expected him to put Benion's entire body through the wringer, but he'd gone so far as to scare the man out of his wits.

They wouldn't need to call Kage at all. *There's no need for her psychological torture with him here.* Vicross had tortured Benion so brutally that it was often difficult even for Cale to look on. Yet he had to watch, as promised.

Choi Han approached them. Standing next to Cale, he looked down at Benion. "He seemed to hope that someone from the Sten household would come save him. What a pity."

That hope alone had kept Benion going. After all, even if he wasn't the official heir, one of the marquess's potential successors had disappeared. People needed to find him, if just to save face.

"A pity? Do you mean that?" Cale asked.

“No.” Choi Han shook his head. “I feel like we ought to torture him more. But this is Raon’s business, so I’m holding back.”

“Good.”

“Raon saying he wouldn’t kill him probably instilled some hope in his heart, though,” Choi Han said with a complicated expression.

House Sten *was* frantically looking for Benion, as he’d assumed. But Kage had caught two of his subordinates, and they’d revealed that Benion worked within the Sten territory’s underworld doing all kinds of illegal deeds. That revelation shocked the citizens. The marquess and his family were tyrannical, but people had still considered them noble.

It was the marquess’s eldest son, Taylor, who’d made them aware of House Sten’s search—and of the fact that Kage and her crew had caught Benion’s injured subordinates after he abandoned them.

“Get ready,” Cale told Vicross and Choi Han.

After putting on a fresh pair of white gloves, Vicross pulled out a potion. Benion Sten would end up trapped, uninjured, in his own secret back-alley base.

It was time for him to feel despair despite having survived. Watching that despair would be Raon’s right.

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“Fancy place,” Cale said, then instructed Choi Han, “Sit him on that chair over there.”

“All right.” Choi Han chucked the unconscious Benion onto the luxurious leather seat. When Cale glanced over, Choi Han avoided his gaze. “Sorry… Looking around this base made me even angrier.”

They were in Benion’s back-alley hideout, which was full of extravagant, valuable items. The crazy priestess Kage had told Cale about this location two days ago. Although she’d been

excommunicated, she was still a priestess serving the God of Death. She specialized in curses and psychological torture, so getting information from Benion's subordinates had been easy for her. Kage could only use curses in situations she considered just, since she exercised her abilities on a god's behalf. Under the circumstances, she had enough justification to use them.

She's amazing, Cale thought.

Nobody else serving the God of Death was better at curses than Kage. It made sense that people called her the spawn of a necromancer, saying she was a far cry from a priestess.

Necromancers are a different breed, though.

If you looked hard enough in this world, you were bound to hear about professions said to be obsolete. That was true of many fantasy stories. For instance, it wasn't uncommon for a protagonist to find out that an elderly neighbor had once been an aura-wielding swordmaster. That was part and parcel of making a story interesting to readers.

This world's the same, Cale mused. In fact, *Birth of a Hero* had been known to incorporate many plot devices of that type.

He observed the unconscious Benion slumped in the chair. "I understand why you'd want to throw him, but we need him in a different position. Vicross?"

"Yes, sir." Vicross heaved a deep sigh before approaching Benion. He propped the nobleman up, ensuring that Benion looked tidy by fixing his outfit and hair. No one who saw the well-dressed noble now would think he'd suffered any problems or wounds over the last few days.

Benion's back still had a few small scars that the potion couldn't negate, but most of his injuries had healed. His face, hands, and other exposed areas showed no sign of injury at all.

"We'll be on our way, then."

"Sure."

Vicross and Choi Han snuck out through the base's back door. Cale approached Raon, who'd curled up quietly in the corner earlier.

“Shall we start?”

“All right, human.”

“You guys come here too.”

“Meeeow!”

Ohn and Hong jumped over and sat next to Raon and Cale. Making sure they were all in the corner, Cale glanced toward Raon. Black mana appeared from the dragon’s paw.

It was time to watch the show.

With a quiet *whoosh*, Cale’s body started to disappear. Soon, he and the others were no longer visible.

Shortly thereafter, a terrible moaning filled the base. “Ah… Aah…”

Grimacing as if he were awakening from a nightmare, Benion gasped and opened his eyes. At that point, he observed his surroundings with a blank expression. He blinked a few times and tried to work out where he was.

“How did I…?”

Benion touched his throat in shock. He could speak! Real, human speech was coming out of his mouth. Realizing that his neck was unshackled as well, he frantically looked to see that his limbs weren’t bloody or torn. There was no blood on his fancy outfit, and he wasn’t in any pain.

“Am I dreaming?”

He couldn’t tell which was the dream: this or the torture in the basement. The latter had been so terrible and painful that it was seared into his memory, but eventually he decided it couldn’t have been reality. He warily reached out and touched the desk in front of him; it definitely felt real. *Yes. I’m awake now.*

Benion furrowed his brow, wondering whether the torture had been a product of his imagination. Perhaps rather than being abducted on his way to the base, he’d arrived and fallen asleep.

“Ha ha!” A smile began to form on his lips, though myriad emotions flitted through him. “That’s right. It was only a dream.”

He could still feel the whip cutting his body, as well as the torturer's cold gaze and that damnable dragon's glare, but it *had* to have been a dream. It didn't matter that he was still afraid; it wasn't real. Otherwise, there'd be no way to explain how he was here in the hideout now. Benion put his hands on his neck; he could feel their warmth. "Ha ha!"

At that moment…

"Meeeow."

Benion flinched, and his shoulders began to shake. Cale, who'd been watching from the invisible space to one side, stroked Hong's head once with an indifferent expression.

Hong let out another chilling mewl. "Meeeow."

As Benion paled, his hands trembling, something suddenly popped into his head: *"I'll let you live. Whenever I don't have an appetite, I'll come find you."*

His hands clutched his desk, white-knuckled. "Son of a…!"

He looked down, his tremors growing fiercer. Dark-red fog was coiling up his legs like a snake. *Whoosh.*

Benion's face turned tearful, like a baby's. "Th-that crazy dragon bastard!"

He tried to smack away the fog, but it didn't dissipate—just slinked further up his body. Benion felt like he would go mad, then realized something: This was different than last time. Unlike then, he could move now. He swept a glance around the room, eyes - landing on the door.

Cale looked up at the clock. If Benion hurried just a bit, he'd create a picture-perfect moment. Cale patted Ohn's back this time.

Swisssh. Fog moved even faster up Benion's leg.

The kittens became louder still. "Meeeeow!"

Despite the wobbling of his legs, Benion sprang up from the leather chair, which fell backward with a *crash*! Benion paid it no mind as he rushed toward the door. Despite his fancy clothes and slick hair, which befit a noble, he was wild-eyed with fear.

He grabbed the doorknob with shaky fingers. “G-gotta hurr__”

Click. Someone turned the knob from the other side.

Is that one of my subordinates?!

It had to be his two lackeys from that morning. Benion was relieved to think that he no longer needed to face this frightening situation on his own. The person on the other side of the door pulled it open for him; he didn’t need to lift a finger. It opened ever so slowly. *Creeeeak.*

Benion didn’t notice that the fog surrounding his legs had disappeared. With the door now open at last, he gawked at the sight backed by light spilling in from outside.

Taylor Sten—the older brother Benion had paralyzed—was the first to greet him. “We finally found you,”

Benion stepped back. “Wha…?”

Behind Taylor, the path to his base was full of people, both Taylor’s retinue and personnel from the Sten estate.

“Wh-what’s this?” Benion asked, face taut with terror.

Confirming that Benion had no visible injuries, Taylor looked at his face, then past his shoulder into the base. He didn’t see anybody there, but he knew Cale was inside. He was even more certain of that because he’d used Cale’s invisibility device himself.

“I-is this a dream too?” Benion muttered to himself.

Staring at his brother he detested, Taylor answered, “It looks like you had a long nightmare.” He turned and gave an order to House Sten’s knights: “Arrest him.”

In truth, this was only the *start* of Benion’s nightmare. Not only was he now off the table as the marquess’s successor, but he’d also have to pay for his crimes. He’d bear the brunt of all the Stens’ anger over his ruining the family reputation.

“Th-the dragon did this. The dragon did all…”

Taylor didn’t care one whit about Benion’s mumbling, instead listening to Kage as she stood beside him and said a single word.

“Tonight.”

This evening, Taylor would meet his benefactor again. It’d been quite a while.

“My lord, should I search the base?” a knight asked.

Taylor shook his head. “The most important thing is to move Benion to the castle, and quietly. There’re too many people milling about.”

“Won’t that be difficult?”

The citizens of the Sten territory had gathered outside, which set the knights on edge. They were only here because Odeus had spread the word, on Cale’s orders. Taylor realized that, but he pretended to be concerned; he was capable of such deception now.

“It will, but we still need to transport him as discreetly as possible. We can’t allow any further damage to the Stens’ reputation.”

“Understood,” the knight responded with a grim expression.

“For now, search his other hideouts for evidence. We’ll leave some soldiers here to guard the entrance.”

“Yes, sir!”

Having made it a bit easier for Cale to leave the base unnoticed, Taylor turned away from the entrance. From here, he’d have to go to the castle and undermine the supporters of Benion and the marquess one by one.

A few knights remained to guard the empty hideout; the rest went to capture Benion’s other lackeys, who were likely in his additional bases.

“Hey. Stay alert.”

“It’s not like anybody’s in there. We haven’t been able to rest for days. Let’s take a breather.”

“We can’t.”

“Why such a wet blanket? We just have to keep people from going in.”

The two knights whispered so that the soldiers couldn't overhear. A breeze passed behind them, but they paid no attention. No breeze should've come from underground, but they didn't care, and they couldn't see anything anyway.

Cale, the source of that breeze, got into the carriage he'd arranged for near the base. Following him, Raon removed the invisibility magic from everyone but himself.

"Shall we head out now?"

"Yes."

Having received Cale's permission, Odeus closed the carriage door and hopped into the driver's seat. The carriage rolled off toward the residence. Cale leaned back in his seat; the soft leather's embrace soothed him. He looked down and made eye contact with Raon, who lay in his lap, no longer invisible.

When he did, Raon smiled. "I'm fine. I'm a great, mighty dragon!"

"Good. Their hell's only just beginning."

"Right!"

Cale turned to the other passengers. "Let's all eat well and get some rest today."

Despite his words, Cale himself would have to enjoy his dinner without them.

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"I guess you have some free time now."

"Oh, I had set some time aside to see *you*, Lord Cale."

Taylor and Kage had tracked Cale down late at night, bringing along alcohol and glasses, so Cale was having dinner and drinks with them.

"I'll probably get busier after today, though," Taylor said.

"Naturally." Cale nodded and faced Kage, who smiled and lifted the bottle, pouring him a drink. He emptied the glass with no

change in expression.

“Most of the people you told us about were Benion’s lackeys,” Taylor told him.

“Is that so?”

Taylor couldn’t look Cale in the eye. The count’s son had given him the file on Benion’s bases and cohorts. That alone was a surprise, but an even *more* surprising development had occurred.

“Some of them were my father’s people.”

Cale pasted on a look of genuine shock. “I didn’t know that.”

Marquess Sten had ordered Benion to torture the black dragon, so some of the marquess’s people had been guarding the cave. A few were also connected to Benion’s dirty deeds. They’d receive life sentences, at least—maybe even executions. Marquess Sten’s territory had ruthless laws. The marquess would probably want them *all* dead to hide his own involvement.

“I’ll trust that you didn’t,” Taylor replied, as though convincing himself.

Looking to change the subject, Cale gestured to the bottle between them. “How about we empty this for now?”

“Sure. Let’s drink.”

“Sounds good.”

The three took turns filling each other’s glasses, draining the bottle. Once it was empty, Taylor and Kage needed to return to work.

“Will you be leaving tomorrow, Lord Cale?”

“Yes.”

“I hear you’re taking the western route to the capital. Is that your final destination?”

Cale merely smiled in response.

Taylor didn’t pry, instead opting to express his gratitude. “I’ll certainly repay you for your help with this—and for last time too.”

“I look forward to it.”

This time, Taylor met his gaze head-on. “Please do.”

Observing the marquess’s son, Cale reflected on his new northwestern connections. Taylor, Odeus… He had quite a few people to put to use in the near future.

Chapter 19:
I Suppose It's a Gift

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Cale finished his preparations and looked in the mirror.

"Have you figured out Crown Prince Albert's magic?" he asked Raon, who was peering into the mirror as well.

"Yes, I know what it is, human. I'm great and mighty!"

Cale let his eyes linger on his reflection a bit longer, a smile on his face. Soon enough, he left the bedroom and made for the back door, where he ran into Odeus.

"I'm quite satisfied with how well you carried out my orders," he told the man.

Although Odeus didn't know whether to laugh or cry, he decided their results were something to be happy about. "The pleasure was mine. I'm thrilled with the generous compensation I received."

"I'm sure." Cale didn't deign to downplay Odeus's compensation as insignificant amid their pleasantries. After all, their deal was that Cale would eradicate Benion from the underworld. "I'll contact you next time."

Odeus frankly never wanted to see Cale again. The gut instincts he'd built up through his long life told him that this was dangerous and that he'd suffer a great deal. Yet his vast experience also indicated that it was unavoidable; he'd have no choice but to see the lout again.

"Of course. And I'll get in touch with you every so often."

"Good."

Cale got into his carriage. The driver who had brought the carriage to Sten territory had already gone back, so Vicross held the reins.

"Odeus."

"Yes, sir?"

“You know what to do about the basement, right?”

Odeus looked nervous. His eyes darted toward the spot where the basement entrance near the back door had been; it was now just a pile of rubble.

“I’ll take care of everything,” he assured Cale.

“Excellent.”

Before the bloodied basement was destroyed, Odeus had seen the remains of Raon’s feast as well as the broken torture devices. *Cale Henituse being a “good person” is a total crock.* There were no decent or self-sacrificing nobles. They were all vicious and sly.

“I don’t want you to tell Bilose what happened,” Cale added.

“Secrets are integral to a commission like this.”

“Yes, I know. They definitely are.”

Both men smiled kindly at each other, but it was all for show.

“I’ll be off, then.”

“Have a safe journey.” Odeus’s goodbye was heartfelt—as though he never wanted Cale to darken his door again.

Smirking, Cale slammed the carriage door shut. *Thud!*

As soon as he did, Vicross drove off. The carriage left Sten territory and headed toward Rowoon’s central region, where the capital was. They went along at a brisk pace for a few days, stopping only to rest at night.

“Bored?”

Choi Han’s gentle voice prompted Cale to peel his gaze away from the window during the current leg of their journey. The hero was offering Ohn and Hong snacks, giving them his trademark pure smile.

“Nope! Not bored!”

“I love sitting around doing nothing.”

Choi Han laughed. “You two sure are similar to Lord Cale.”

Cale studied Choi Han, then looked over at Ohn and Hong. He couldn't tell whether that was a compliment or a dig.

The carriage was still in western Rowoon, traveling between the northwestern and southwestern regions. If the northeastern region—where Henituse territory lay—was famous for its marble, the western regions were known for their granite. The mineral was abundant in the area's mountains.

"I came through here last time too," Choi Han continued. "There's really nothing besides mountains."

Choi Han passed through here before? Cale thought, and then it clicked. That was probably when Choi Han and Lark went to Brek to help Rosalyn. "You came through on your way to Brek?" When the hero hesitated, Cale grew suspicious—but he pressed on. "Did you cause trouble out there?"

"Not really…"

Cale let the matter drop there. He didn't want to know more than what Crown Prince Albert had told him about the results of that visit. There *was* something else he needed to ask, though. "Did you pass through the Ten Finger Mountains while you were traveling west?"

"Hmm? Is there a mountain range with that name? I've never heard of it before."

Ohn, Hong, and Raon seemed interested in the unique name as well. Their bright gazes entreated Cale to elaborate, which made him second-guess broaching the subject.

Raon put his paw on Cale's knee. "Human, explain! I'm curious!"

In the end, they browbeat Cale into describing the place. "There's a lot of strong stone called 'granite' in the west. Not *everything* is made of that stone, but there are ten granite peaks in a row on the border between southwestern Rowoon and the lands out west." Those granite peaks had a unique shape resembling ten fingers or towers.

"Huh. I don't think we saw those last time, sir," said Choi Han. "We cut through Rowoon's northwestern region, not the

southwest. We did the same coming back. And I'm sure I would've remembered seeing such a mountain range."

"I see. I was just curious about it. They say the view from there is magical."

Cale's comment piqued Raon's interest. Remembering how Cale had told Ritana that he enjoyed traveling, the dragon opened his mouth to insist they go there right now.

But Cale was faster. "I'm thinking of going there in about a year. That's why I asked."

"A year from now?"

"Yes."

Cale would definitely have to visit the Ten Finger Mountains at that point. *The last Ancient Power will reveal itself there.* He needed to obtain that final power, an aggressive one akin to lightning or fire.

"I thought it'd work if we all traveled together," Cale said nonchalantly. That got the previously disappointed Ohn, Hong, and Raon to light right up.

Choi Han also had a small smile. "That sounds good. There probably aren't any villages near there, though."

"Why wouldn't there—no, you're right. There aren't." Staring at Choi Han and the children, Cale sternly reiterated, "There are *no* villages, as far as I know."

None at all. At least, no human *villages*.

There was a village of elves who passionately loved nature and practically worshipped dragons. This magical race lived apart from humans, hiding their villages with illusion magic. They had a beauty all humans admired, and they were the beings closest to nature after dragons, which allowed them to handle elementals. They were distinct from dark elves, who were just as beautiful but had an affinity for darkness instead.

In *Birth of a Hero*, Choi Han and Lark passed through the Ten Finger Mountains on their way back from dealing with the issues in Brek. They happened to find an elven village and got involved with an elf healer named Pendrick. Pendrick had the ability to heal

others, unlike Cale's self-restoration abilities. He joined Choi Han's group and traveled with them. Fantasy stories always seemed to include at least one elf in the main character's party; in this series, that had been Pendrick.

The thing is, he ends up dying.

Pendrick's death was what originally triggered Lark's Berserk Mode for the first time. The elf died while Lark was protecting him, an incident that changed Lark's personality. If this version of Pendrick didn't meet Lark or join Choi Han's entourage, he wouldn't die.

And they've already missed their opportunity to bump into each other.

Pendrick hadn't even encountered Cale, Choi Han, or Lark yet. If a year passed like this, he'd have survived longer than in the novel. That could be the biggest change to *Birth of a Hero*'s plot.

"Nope… There're no villages," Cale mumbled once more, resolving to avoid the elves when he visited the Ten Finger Mountains next year. He'd taken on too much baggage, not thinking things through and simply doing whatever he thought was easiest. He wouldn't let the same thing happen again after this year.

"I don't care if there are no villages!" Raon shouted, drawing Cale's eye. "I want it to be next year already!"

Cale couldn't possibly take the dragon to the elf village; Raon would be treated like a god. Thinking about it already gave Cale chills. He spun away from Raon, reminding himself that he wouldn't even set foot out west until he returned a year later with Crown Prince Albert's golden plaque to find the last Ancient Power.

He opened the small window to the driver's seat. "Let's speed up a bit," he told Vicross.

"Yes, sir."

The carriage rushed through western Rowoon and arrived at the capital.

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“It’s been too long, Your Highness.”

Cale wore a simple yet stylish outfit that would catch anyone’s eye, his lips curved up in a tender smile.

“Yes, I’m glad to see you again! How was your recovery?”

Blond-haired, blue-eyed Albert was just as handsome as Cale. He beamed as he embraced the count’s son. They stood in front of the crown prince’s palace as Albert warmly welcomed the hero of the long-past Plaza Terror Incident. Although people didn’t talk about the attack much anymore, the plaza was still being rebuilt. Knights patrolled the area. Many of the citizens were upset that the palace kept a tight lid on the terrorists’ identities.

“Thanks to Your Highness’s concerns and the royal family’s generosity, I was indeed able to rest well and recover.” Cale smiled amicably and with an air of total honesty. He certainly *looked* healthy.

Albert gazed upon Cale, seemingly happy that his guest had healed, then gestured to the palace. “Come in. Since it’s been so long since your last visit, I should at least give you some tea.”

“Of course. I’ll only take a bit of your time. I’m sure you’re busy with work.”

‹I don’t know why this happens every time.›

Cale had the same thought, but there was nothing he could do. They entered Albert’s office and closed the door with a *click.* That same moment, the two men practically sprang away from each other.

“You must be tired, Your Highness.”

“I’m sure you feel the same way.”

Albert sighed and pointed to a table on one side of the office —but Cale had already walked over and sat on the most comfortable couch.

“Keep that up, and people will think you’ve been here plenty of times,” Albert muttered.

Cale had no problem providing a glib reply. “It’s my first time here, but it feels very welcoming.”

Albert regarded Cale, who’d sat on the couch by choice, keeping the chair at the head of the table open for the prince. He sat down. “I thought I told you to come as quickly as possible.”

“That’s why I lost sleep to rush here, Your Highness.”

The prince snorted. He didn’t know what Cale had been up to. The count’s son was supposed to be in northeastern Henituse territory, yet he had arrived from the west. Albert knew exactly what was happening out there—in the northwestern region, to be exact.

“You’re a very suspicious person,” he told Cale.

Albert sipped the tea his servant brought over, simply observing Cale as he waited for the servant to leave. There was much to discuss with the lout today, and he had a number of requests.

‹The crown prince has a sneaky look on his face.›

Although Cale pretended not to notice Albert’s expression, he agreed with Raon’s assessment. The prince’s gaze was expectant, demanding—but today, their roles would be reversed. Once the servant shut the office door with a quiet *click*, the two men were alone at last. Albert made to speak, but his guest beat him to the punch.

“Your Highness.” Cale locked eyes with Albert, who appeared intrigued by him.

Meanwhile, Raon remarked, *‹After dealing with both, I’m certain now. He really is strange.›*

Cale took a magic bag out of his pocket. “I’ve prepared a gift for you.”

“For me…?”

“Yes, for the star on the minds of our kingdom’s—”

“Enough.”

Albert wasn’t happy to hear that Cale was offering him a present. In fact, given the things that had happened around Cale

thus far, the crown prince looked at him with even more suspicion. He had to admit he *was* a little curious, however. The prince had already received one of Cale's so-called presents a few weeks ago, delivered by a representative of Flynn Merchant Fleets.

"Let me have a look at it first."

Following Albert's instructions, Cale opened the magic bag.

As he pulled out a small glass vial, Raon's voice rang in his mind again. *‹He has an affinity for darkness.›*

Cale placed the vial on the table. *Clink.*

"What's that?"

Instead of answering, Cale demonstrated by leisurely tugging out the stopper. It squeaked, the vial's black liquid sloshing inside. Once the vial was open, the scent of dead mana permeated the room.

‹I know that smell from the black swamp.›

Cale had received this vial from Seakeller on the way to the Kingdom of the Whipper; it was one of three items the king had given him. Unlike the other vials, this one contained only dead mana; there was no poison inside it.

"You…"

Seeing that Albert was lost for words, Cale slowly resealed the bottle. "Obviously, this present isn't *free*."

There was no way Cale would hand off such a valuable item without receiving something in return. To humans, the bottle's contents were poisonous rather than precious. But Cale remembered what Raon had said about Albert last time they were here.

‹Why does this insignificant "crown prince" dye his hair with magic? And it's magic at a level only a superior dragon like me would detect! Did another dragon dye it? No, maybe it's some other type of power?›

Some other power. As a dragon, Raon could tell that Albert hadn't used natural mana to dye his hair, but he hadn't been sure how the prince accomplished it. At the time, Raon had yet to

encounter the substance Albert used. Now that he'd experienced it firsthand, he knew just what it was: dead mana.

"Probably not a demon, practitioner of dark magic, or necromancer," Cale said in a low voice, as though talking to himself.

Those with the darkness affinity used dead mana to cast spells. It was very different from regular mana. Mana-detection devices couldn't pick up on it, for one, especially if the dead mana was being manipulated by a powerful race.

"I've heard that the late consort was mostly unremarkable, though people thought she was part southerner because her skin was tanner than most."

Raon had mentioned that the crown prince had naturally dark hair. His real hair and eye colors were commonplace, but Albert was known for his looks throughout the kingdom. People also said that the crown prince's mother had been a beauty.

"Dark elves have dark skin, but I've heard that children who are only half dark elf have skin tones similar to southerners'." Staring at Albert, Cale finished with, "What if you're the child of a half-blood dark elf?"

The crown prince delivered his response more calmly than Cale had expected. "You'll be the death of me."

"Guess I was right."

Cale and Albert observed each other.

The crown prince's response at the end of the silence was fairly confident. "So?" he asked, face placid.

Cale shrugged. "As I said, I can give you this, but not for free."

Albert couldn't believe Cale wasn't demanding something significant after dealing him such a strong blow. He laughed, wondering what would've happened if the office hadn't contained soundproof magic, or if he hadn't sent away his servants and subordinates. The thought alone gave him chills.

"I planned to put you to work, but I shouldn't have told you to come," he admitted.

Cale's face was as relaxed as usual. Sick of looking at his companion's expression, Albert flicked his gaze to the vial of black liquid.

Mother. The weight of that word was a burden on his heart.

Cale didn't say anything else, just sat there studying the crown prince. Dead mana flowing from corpses made up the root of dark elves' power. Their affinity for darkness repulsed the people of the continent. In the past, dark elves were typically found near grave sites or settled near villages destroyed by illness. People came to hate them for this, even though dark elves never harmed living people or desecrated corpses. Consequently, they were better at hiding than the other elves.

Albert looked back at Cale. "Will you keep your mouth shut?"

Cale smiled. "Of course."

"But not for free?"

"Most definitely not."

Albert let his honest thoughts loose. "You sly bastard."

"Why, thank you."

The crown prince hated how Cale didn't even flinch at what he'd said. At the same time, he was relieved that the count's son had come directly to him instead of going to the second prince or the favored third prince, both of whom were aiming for his position. That meant Cale wanted to strike a deal with him, which put him a little more at ease. After all, he and Cale were two birds of a feather.

Still, Albert did have a question. "Are you really not one of us?"

If Cale wasn't a dark elf as well, how could he know Albert's ancestry? The crown prince couldn't figure that out. The only people who knew were his mother's relatives. They were sympathetic toward Albert; they'd helped him so that his father the king wouldn't find out his mother's lineage.

"I'd die if I drank that," Cale answered, pointing to the vial. Dead mana was toxic to humans.

‹Don’t worry, human. This mighty dragon will save you, no matter what.›

Disregarding Raon as usual, Cale pushed the vial toward Albert. “Don’t you need this?”

Albert at last tipped his cards toward Cale. “It’d certainly come in handy. It would make me stronger. Seems clean as well. No traces of poison.”

“Obviously. This is one precious item.” Cale added matter-of-factly, “I mean, it *is* from a dead dragon.”

“What?!” Albert couldn’t hide his shock. Seeing Cale’s grin, he heaved a sigh. “This is goddamn ridiculous.” The crown prince wasn’t speaking as someone in his position should; at the moment, he didn’t really want to. Instead, he spoke as he would to his relatives. “You truly have no plans to blab about my identity?”

Finding dead mana was already difficult these days, but a *dragon’s* dead mana? The amount in the bottle was minimal, granted, but if it came from a dragon, it would make Albert at least three or four times stronger. The crown prince couldn’t understand why Cale would hand over something so precious, even for compensation. He’d thought the lout was similar to him, but this made him difficult to understand.

“Why’re you asking something so obvious?” Cale asked.

Albert was lost for words.

To Cale, there really was an obvious answer: *Rowoon needs to get stronger.*

When he assessed the current power struggle between kingdoms, Brek and Rowoon were at the bottom. The Kingdom of the Whipper was on a one-way train to hell under Tunka’s leadership, but that was another story.

Meanwhile, the jungle was slowly regaining its strength now that its fires had been extinguished—sooner than in *Birth of a Hero*. Since Ritana had brought Cale to the jungle to put out the fire, the other continental powers probably respected her even more.

Beyond that, the northern alliance was planning its invasion. Albert was gathering the Kingdom of the Whipper's mages to expand his influence and prepare for that invasion, but that wouldn't be enough.

There's also the wyvern knight brigade and the Mogor Empire.

Cale didn't know what happened after Volume Five of *Birth of a Hero*, but like everyone else, he possessed the power of imagination. He predicted the wyvern knights would dominate the skies. Once Mogor's imperial prince showed his greed and reached for control of the entire Western Continent, Brek and Rowoon would be sitting ducks.

That's a given.

To live a peaceful life, Cale needed Rowoon to acquire enough strength to defend itself. Its people required a strong leader to guide them toward that end.

Dead mana is toxic to me. Might as well use it to help Rowoon hit the ground running.

That said, Cale didn't want Albert to be *too* powerful. The crown prince was already stronger than in the novel. Furthermore, now that Taylor controlled the Sten family, they would side with the crown prince.

Cale brought up one more thing. "Do you still need the Magic Tower?"

"It must be hard to feign ignorance when you already know about everything," Albert retorted. "The summoning device of the Magic Tower's ruler *was* useful." Thanks to that, he'd amassed far more mages—and quickly.

Cale had given Albert an item he'd found in the hidden chamber on the Magic Tower's twenty-first floor, called "Floor Zero." That item had belonged to the mages' ruler; it allowed the holder to send all of Whipper's mages short messages.

The Magic Tower's ruler was the individual who'd risen to the highest rank of the kingdom's mages, the same person who guarded the Tower. It only made sense for there to be a way for the ruler to get in touch with the other mages.

Because the device had been hidden on Floor Zero, Tunka and his people never found it. Cale had delivered it to Albert via Bilose, and Albert had immediately sent a single message to all the Kingdom of the Whipper's living mages: "Come to the Land of Boulders. Its heir will protect you."

Albert, who'd benefited a lot from the Magic Tower, wanted Cale to either move it someplace in Rowoon or restore it. Yet he was no longer in a position to ask such a thing.

"I can't give you orders or commands at this point, beyond politely making a request," he began.

"I don't plan to restore the Magic Tower," Cale told him point-blank.

Albert had seen that coming. He realized the count's son despised anything bothersome, so he had to coax Cale into it.

"I *could* give you partial blueprints to reconstruct it, though," Cale added.

Albert covered his face with his hands. "What do you want?" There was no reason to beat around the bush anymore; he wasn't in control of this discussion.

"I need something to happen in two years."

To live the slacker life of his dreams, Cale required power in addition to money. Why was it great to be a rich but jobless slacker? Because you didn't need to walk on eggshells around your boss or clients. Cale didn't want to report to anyone. If people saw him as a lout, it didn't matter. He just wanted to live however he wanted: eat, sleep, laze, repeat. He'd still have to be careful around his family, but otherwise, how great would that be?

Cale handed the prince a contract. As Albert read the contents, his expression changed. He initially looked at it with confusion, then frowned, then snapped his head up in shock. "Just what in the world is this?"

Cale's answer was short. "I believe that's for you to determine, Your Highness."

Albert sighed in frustration, but Cale was able to leave the office with the contract signed by the crown prince.

“I’ve never felt so uncertain after signing something beneficial to me,” Albert complained on Cale’s way out.

“You ought to just enjoy it. It’s a win-win for us both, Your Highness.”

For Albert, it definitely *was* a win. Cale would keep his identity a secret, give him the dragon’s dead mana, and provide a portion of the Magic Tower’s blueprints in a couple of years. But while he’d received priceless compensation, Albert felt uncomfortable; Cale was smiling too much. It was like he lived in a world all his own.

“I’ll be on my way, Your Highness.”

“Yes, yes. Hurry up and go.”

Albert said as much, yet he didn’t really want to send Cale away. He was itching to keep him there and beat the information out of him—but he couldn’t. *The Dark Forest, the northwestern route, and the sea…* Albert couldn’t figure out Cale’s intentions in requesting something that was neither money nor material goods.

On the other hand, Cale didn’t care whether the crown prince knew his intentions or not. Having addressed his reason for coming to the capital, he quickly got back into his carriage. There was no reason to stay in the city any longer.

“Back to Henituse territory, my lord?” asked Vicross.

“Yes.”

Vicross closed the carriage door and drove off right away.

“We’re going home to rest now, human?”

“Yes. I plan to rest quite a while this time,” Cale told Raon, leaning back in his seat. He anticipated twiddling his thumbs and doing nothing for at least six months, maybe a year. As long as he made it safely through the war, a nice, relaxing slacker’s life would await him.

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As soon as they returned home, Cale noticed something was off. “What’s wrong?”

Hans had come out to greet him, but the deputy butler seemed worried. “You see, Lord Cale…”

“Tell me. Now.”

Unsettled, Cale kept his eyes fixed on Hans. Choi Han, Vicross, and the kittens waited behind him. *Will I not be able to rest?* Dread crept up on him, and it took just five short seconds for his mind to start racing. Something must’ve happened; the servants and knights around Hans had the same expression as the deputy butler.

“Mr. Ron returned, Lord Cale.”

“Ron’s here?”

“My father?”

Both Cale and Vicross stared at Hans in shock. Ron wasn’t supposed to be back for a couple of months.

Hans squeezed his eyes shut, which gave Cale an even worse feeling. He reopened them, avoiding Vicross’s gaze as he said, “He came back injured.”

“Lead me there,” Cale ordered.

Seeing his stiff expression, Hans whirled around to escort them into the Henituse residence. Cale followed, Vicross right beside him. The rest followed after them. Guiding the group as swiftly as possible, Hans stopped in front of a room—not Ron’s room but a luxurious bedroom reserved for high-ranking guests.

“Open the door.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Hans did as asked. No sooner had the door creaked open than a rotten stench assailed Cale’s nose.

“Ah, Young Master Cale.”

Cale froze up completely for the first time since coming to this world. “Ron…”

The sly old assassin lay in bed. He had returned earlier than expected—and one of his arms had been cut off.

Vicross rushed past Cale into the chamber. “F-Father!”

Cale peered into Ron’s eyes. “What happened to your arm?”

“Oh, this and that.”

Ron’s mock-benign smile was the same as always, but his face was pale, marred by countless scrapes and scratches. His left arm was missing from the shoulder down. As Cale approached him, the odor of rot grew stronger.

“Hans.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Get out.”

“Excuse me?”

Cale glanced at Hans, as well as the Henituse servants and his father’s subordinates. “Everybody except Vicross and Choi Han, get out.”

Hans hesitated, but the look on Cale’s face prompted him to usher everyone out of the chamber. Even Ohn and Hong slowly retreated from him.

“Meow.”

“Meeeow.”

The kittens peeked anxiously at Ron several times before heading out of the bedroom, which seemed much bigger after everyone had left.

Cale directed a calm question at Ron. “Do you have enough strength to speak?”

“Yes, young master.” With his gentle smile, Ron hardly seemed in pain at all.

“Then explain. How did you return from hunting foxes like *this*?”

Ron looked over at Vicross. His son was kneeling by the bed, eyes glued to his wounded shoulder. *Maybe I shouldn’t have come back,* Ron mused. But this was the only time retreat had come to

mind. If he was going to die, he wanted to see his son and a few other people one last time.

With that, Ron began his story. “I’m from the Eastern Continent. I came here when Vicross was very young.” He’d needed a place to take care of his son. “As you already know, I’m an assassin. The Eastern Continent’s underworld contains five famous assassin families. One is our family, the Molrans. I was raised to become the next head of the household.”

“Father!” Vicross cried in protest.

“An organization called Arm destroyed our family. Everyone else died, while I alone managed to avoid Arm and escape to the Western Continent with my son. I’ve hidden my identity in order to survive.” Ron heaved a deep sigh, his face very pale. “Although Arm ruled the Eastern Continent’s underworld, they were just a low-ranking chapter of the greater operation. Its core lay elsewhere. The organization’s strength struck fear into me. It was beyond what I could fathom. That’s why I’ve been living as a lowly servant.” Ron frowned. “Recently, however, I caught Arm’s scent for the first time in decades.”

Vicross flinched. Ron gazed past Cale to the kind but somewhat warped Choi Han, who stood there with a look of disbelief. “When Choi Han first came to the Henituse estate, Arm’s stench was all over him.”

That was the reason Ron and Vicross had attacked Choi Han when he showed up from Harris.

Choi Han’s eyes wavered. “Then the assassins I killed in Harris…”

“Yes. There’s a good chance they were from Arm.” As Choi Han glanced at Cale, Ron continued, “I figured out their reach had stretched to the Western Continent when I went to investigate in the capital. While I was looking around, I ran into one of Arm’s attack squads and figured out what they were doing. But my ‘fox hunt’ was more like a wild dog walking into a den of tigers.”

Although Ron wondered what had given him the confidence to attack Arm, he knew he’d have done the same thing again if given the choice. He needed to know what they were planning,

and by destroying their attack squad, he'd gained a bit of information.

"I ended up losing my left arm," he concluded, smiling bitterly. "I barely escaped with my life."

At his age, he was now a pathetic mess. His lost limb was a severe blow to his strength, since he practiced a double-dagger style that required both hands.

Cale, who'd been listening intently, spoke up. "So you weren't able to determine the identity of the organization Arm belongs to?"

"Unfortunately, no." Ron was no closer to that information than before.

"Ron."

Ron looked toward Cale. The young man's aura had become more intense while they were apart; the assassin now felt a pressure from Cale that urged him to bow down.

"Who cut off your arm?"

"A young mage who seemed to be cutting *all* his enemies' arms off."

Choi Han flinched, whirling toward Cale.

"Crazy bastard," Cale snarled.

Arm was probably the secret organization Cale had encountered—the group responsible for massacring Harris, giving Raon to the marquess, perpetrating the Plaza Terror Incident, and attacking the Blue Wolf Tribe.

Furthermore, Cale felt he knew who'd cut Ron's arm off. Choi Han probably knew too. There was a good chance it was Redika, the blood-drinking mage who'd spearheaded the Plaza Terror Incident. Thanks to Choi Han, Redika had lost his left arm and eye. Cale didn't know how the mage could cast spells or cut off people's arms with only one good arm left, but it was most likely him.

"H-how could something like this happen?" Choi Han seemed to be at loose ends as he stood there, fists clenched.

Cale needed to verify something else. Ron's specialties were assassination and stealth, and he was strong—stronger than Redika. There had to be a reason the old man had gotten his arm chopped off and needed to flee.

"What's that rotting smell?" Cale had to figure out the source of the odor filling the room; it smelled like decomposing flesh.

In lieu of an answer, Ron smiled gently. That frustrated Cale, who immediately walked over and yanked off the old man's blanket. Choi Han gasped, and Vicross's face fell.

"I was poisoned," Ron explained.

A slimy fluid coated his thigh and torso, which were turning black. Choi Han had never seen anything like it before, but Cale had.

"Mermaid poison," he said.

Ron looked up at Cale.

"They were the ones helping the mermaids." Cale sighed as he realized that, covering his eyes with his hand.

In truth, when the whales first told him about the Dark Forest, he'd suspected that the secret organization was involved. Discovering that ingredients from the Dark Forest had strengthened the mermaids only increased his suspicions. Still, he'd chosen not to think about it. Why? Because it was bothersome.

He hadn't wanted to get involved with the secret organization. If he somehow found out their identity, he would need to tell Choi Han, which would complicate things even further. Instead, he'd let it go. The organization had nothing to do with his future safety.

But that didn't mean he would let them run wild in his territory.

"Damn bastards."

Cale didn't like the sly assassin Ron, but seeing him like this made something dawn on him: Ron was one of his people. Cale—or rather, Kim Roksu—was oddly affectionate toward those within his circle. After all, he could only survive with the help of others.

Vicross, Ron, and even Choi Han were speechless. They'd never seen such a wrathful look on Cale's face before.

Cale laid the blanket back over Ron. "Did it happen at sea?"

"No, on an island."

There were a number of islands between the Western and Eastern Continents.

"Choi Han."

"Yes, sir?"

Cale faced Choi Han, who couldn't take his eyes off Ron's shoulder. Choi Han felt incredibly guilty. He believed the blood-drinking mage Redika had done this because of what *he'd* done to Redika.

"What're you doing?" Cale asked.

Hearing Cale's apathetic voice, Choi Han tore his gaze away.

"Stop thinking about useless things. Go get Müller."

Hearing the words "useless things," Choi Han knew Cale understood what he was thinking. He bit his lip. "Just bring Mr. Müller?"

"Yeah. Tell him to grab the ship blueprints and hurry over."

Cale gave the order with indifference, expressing no anger, but Choi Han ran faster than ever as he left the bedroom.

It confused Ron that Cale had suddenly mentioned a ship. "What's this about?"

"You're coming with me. Be ready," Cale responded with that same indifference. Then he grumbled, "How could an assassin come back injured?"

"I'm still alive."

Cale recalled Ron's message to him: *I'm still alive. You're alive too, right, young master?*

"That *mouth* of yours is still alive, at least." Cale let out a disbelieving laugh. "Vicross."

"Yes, sir?" Vicross responded listlessly.

Cale put his hand on Vicross's shoulder. "Hurry and repack our bags. Get everyone else as well. First and foremost, we need to get the mermaid poison out of your father, don't we?"

Vicross snapped his focus over to Cale. Mermaid poison was a thing of darkness, and there was no known antidote. Vicross, who specialized in torture and assassination, knew that better than anybody. The same went for Ron. That was why he'd returned to the Henituse estate, his second home, to see his son one last time before he died.

Ron's immunity to a number of poisons had helped prevent the spread and further shriveling of his flesh, as had the Henituses' highest-grade potions. It was the Henituse family's wealth that had given Ron access to those potions, which granted him some strength and staved off the pain.

"Th-there's a way to cure him?" stuttered the usually composed Vicross.

Cale repeated his order clearly, adding, "Hurry up."

In the novels, Rosalyn was the one who'd figured out the cure, but Cale had already used this knowledge once to save Faseton. "Don't worry. Your father still has many years ahead of him."

Though he'd said it in jest, he didn't seem at all amused. His expression was stiffer than ever.

Damn it.

He'd planned to rest, but that wasn't on the table now that he faced a totally unexpected situation. The story had pivoted in a direction he hadn't anticipated.

Once Vicross left, and it was just the two of them, Ron addressed him. "Young master?"

"What?"

"They—Arm, that is—seem to be aiming for the sea route alongside the mermaids."

When Ron shared that important information, which he'd just barely been able to obtain, Cale immediately responded, "I know."

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s obvious.” It was. It had been even more obvious once Cale heard that Arm came over from the Eastern Continent. “I know it’s hard, but can I ask one more thing?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Did anyone see your face?”

“Only that mage…” Ron didn’t look happy as he admitted the misstep he’d made as an assassin. On the contrary, Cale’s eyes glinted. “Say, young master.”

“Hmm?”

“You aren’t going to war against that organization, are you?”

“What do you think?”

Ron saw what Cale was planning, and although he was struggling with the poison, his lips lifted in a grin. “I’m sure it will be to your benefit.”

“You know me all too well.”

Cale didn’t plan to do anything that would complicate his life. He’d achieve his goal, then run. He planned to make a ruckus first, of course, but he knew that he didn’t have the strength to make a ruckus like the high school student who’d been transported to this world.

Annoying bastards.

The mermaids and Arm were both powerful. Going up against them would be difficult. At the very least, Cale had a good sense of his companions’ abilities—be it Raon, Choi Han, Rosalyn, or the rest.

In his head, he heard Raon’s determined voice. *‹Don’t worry, weak human! The great Raon will be with you.›*

Cale quickly began formulating a plan. He needed to protect himself and the people around him. That was the only way his future self could relax in mind, body, and soul.

“Rest until we leave,” Cale told Ron.

He left the assassin’s bedroom and made straight for the video communication chamber. He needed to travel to the northeastern shoreline—to Uvar territory.

Chapter 20:
While I'm Already Moving

A FEW DAYS LATER, Cale stepped out of his carriage and into the salt-laced sea breeze. The ocean spread out before his eyes, a few fierce whirlpools still roaring throughout. Three managers were stationed here to contribute to the naval base's development: one on behalf of the royal family, one for the Uvars, and one for the Henituses. The latter came up to welcome him.

"It's an honor to meet you, Lord Cale."

"You're the one in charge?"

"Yes, my lord. Regarding the status of things, development's picked up. As whirlpools disappear, it grants us access to more islands."

"Oh yeah?"

"Indeed. Thanks to that, progress on the ships has been swift."

Since the Uvar family wanted to minimize the crown's involvement in this naval base, the Henituses had invested a lot of money into its creation. They wanted a couple of things in return, including rights to part of the shoreline—free of charge.

"Shall I escort you to the residence?"

"No. Hold on." Turning back to the carriage, Cale crooked his finger.

Creak. The door opened and a small, pale individual stepped out. It was the half-dwarf, Müller.

"Hurry up."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Müller rushed over and stood between Cale and the manager. The half-dwarf was now chubbier and wore fancy clothes. The countess was doing a good job of using luxury goods to keep him in line.

Cale put his hand on Müller's shoulder. "Why don't you show him the phase one exterior blueprints?"

Müller gasped. "Y-yes, sir!" He hurriedly handed the blueprints to the manager.

Given that the manager was one of those in charge of the naval base's creation, he was an expert on both construction and the sea. He studied the blueprints for a moment, then joined the pale half-dwarf in staring at the redhead beside him. "Huh? Lord Cale, these are…"

"Mm-hmm."

"I've never seen a ship shaped this way before."

Cale flinched and glanced down at Müller. In reality, when he first saw the blueprints, Cale was shocked as well. *This bastard isn't someone else who transmigrated from Korea, is he?*

Seeing Cale's irritated expression, Müller clutched a gold ring he wore for support; he'd received it from the countess, his patron of sorts.

With a sigh, Cale refocused on the manager. "Don't you think it'll be nice once we build it, though?"

"More than nice…" The blueprints couldn't be reduced to "nice." The design was *incredible*.

"Won't it at least be durable?" Cale ventured, holding the manager's gaze.

The man couldn't muster a real answer. "Yes. It'll be very *durable*,
but…"

While its durability was assured, the manager was itching to ask, *Is this ship really for transportation? It looks more like a battleship.*

He wouldn't have a chance, as Cale put a swift end to the conversation. "That's all that matters."

At that point, the manager could no longer raise the question, so he just accepted that Cale wanted a hardy transport ship. Then he realized there might be a different problem. "It looks

like it would cost an arm and a leg to build. Especially this golden turtle sectio—”

“What’re you worried about? I’m loaded with money.” It was of no consequence to Cale. A satisfied smile that could only stem from wealth appeared on the young man’s face.

“Then I’ll do my best to create this masterpiece!”

Averting his eyes from the man’s abruptly passionate expression, Cale got back in the carriage. “I’ll head to the residence with your subordinate. Stay here and chat with Müller.”

“Yes, sir. As you wish.”

“Please rest, Lord Cale!” Müller said, bowing at a perfect right angle.

Cale closed the carriage door. As the vehicle rolled toward the residence, the manager watched Müller straighten up again.

The half-dwarf cleared his throat. “You’ll notice that ship design won’t even be destroyed by a magic bomb.”

“It certainly looks like it could withstand that. Still, we can probably only make one.”

“That’s fine. We’re only looking to craft a single ship.”

Müller let out a fake cough. He knew that there was a good chance that he’d get stuck aboard that ship, just like he was stuck at the Henituse estate. He’d put everything he had into the blueprints so he would survive.

“Truth be told, the second set of blueprints for the ship’s interior is almost complete as well.” Müller shrugged, exuding arrogance.

“Goodness. Even the interior blueprints?”

“Yep. I have yet to show it to Lord Cale, but I’ve settled on the concept.”

“And what would that be?”

“The greatest defense is a strong bomb!” Müller answered confidently.

If conflict was unavoidable, Müller felt it was best to strike first. Not that he'd received Cale's permission quite yet.

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"It won't be easy this time," Cale warned the group gathered in the office, sweeping his gaze over them.

Everybody other than Ron, whom he'd sent to rest in his room, and Vicross, who was caring for Ron, was present. The three little ones averaging seven years old, Choi Han, Rosalyn, Lark, and even Vice-Captain Hilsmann and the ten young wolves had shown up rather quickly. Cale had essentially assembled everyone in his arsenal.

He felt like it might've been excessive. *It's not like I'm destroying a kingdom or something.* Yet he didn't have enough information about the enemy, so it was best to overprepare.

Rosalyn was the first to speak up. "Are we taking a ship to the Hais Islands, Lord Cale?"

"Yes. I'm planning to go somewhere near Hais Island Five."

The Hais Islands were an archipelago between the Eastern and Western Continents. The islands' respective numbers represented the order in which they'd been discovered. Cale's destination, the fifth, was also the largest. It was also the closest island to the Western Continent, so it was a straightforward journey by ship. Even Ron could accompany them.

"I heard there's a mermaid base underneath it."

"That's an odd place for them to have a base."

"It's probably one of *Arm's* bases," Cale explained. "So our first destination will be Hais Island Twelve." Cale had already decided where they would go. The twelfth island was very small, but it was the closest to Hais Island Five.

"Um, excuse me, Lord Cale?" Vice-Captain Hilsmann warily interjected, and Cale motioned for him to continue. "Didn't you say

we'd be battling mermaids? Aren't the whales currently fighting them?"

"Yes."

Hilsmann was somber, unlike his usual goofy self. He knew Ron's life was on the line. Observing the vice-captain, Cale recalled something Deruth had said: *"Assassin or not, Ron is one of my people. Save him. You can worry about what sort of man he is afterward."*

Deruth wished to save Ron. To others, the old man might've appeared to be just another servant—but Ron had kept an eye on Cale for over a decade while the lout shunned the rest of his family. Deruth had issued his instructions as Cale's father, not as count.

"Well, will we be all right?" Hilsmann asked. "I've heard that mermaids are creatures of the dark—and that they're even stronger due to dead mana and poison."

It was Rosalyn who addressed his concerns. "We'll be fine. Lord Cale knows how to counter mermaid poison, and we just need to suppress the dead mana with stronger power."

The usual strategy when fighting dark creatures that could use dead mana was to overwhelm them with a single attack, keeping the battle short. To suppress dead mana, they could use a more potent mana or aura, or an unusually powerful attack. Cale knew of a power that was *extremely* strong against dead mana.

There's one stupid method that'd work very well.

The counterforce to darkness was actually pretty simple: *life*. Living creatures were stronger than the dead. Demonstrating living beings' power would be the solution.

"Blood is most effective when fighting dark creatures that use dead mana," Rosalyn continued, "but it's dangerous."

Yes, blood—and lots of it. Even a weak human could stave off dark creatures for a short while if they sprayed their foes with blood. But one couldn't hope to fight such creatures with so little blood, so chances were the human would die from blood loss.

And blood is useless against dark elves and vampires.

Dark elves were children of nature, flesh-and-blood beings despite using dead mana. Meanwhile, vampires drank blood routinely.

Ancient texts described demonic races soaking human hearts in dead mana to make them beat even after the humans had died. That sounded ludicrous to Cale. *What nonsense.* At the same time, he had a sudden thought.

"*My* blood would probably be extremely effective," he blurted out.

The Energy of the Heart powered his body; its regenerative abilities would imbue his blood with exceptional life. Given that the Ancient Power would resupply him with blood to heal him, he could also bleed for ages without his blood draining altogether.

More importantly, Ancient Powers stemmed from nature and humans, so the Energy of the Heart held both "nature" and "life" attributes. It would stand formidably against the darkness. Simply put, nothing would be more effective against dark creatures than Cale's blood. He'd need to test it to be sure, but he'd probably last quite a while against the mermaids.

Cale started brainstorming. What if he covered himself in blood and shot it at his enemies during a fight?

"Hm. If I sprayed my blood…" He grimaced. *That would be an eyesore.* It sounded disgusting.

Noticing the office was silent, he looked around.

"What a crazy idea!" Raon shouted, his furious voice filling the room. "Why would a weakling like you think such a thing?! We don't need your weak blood!"

Ohn and Hong stared at Cale like he was mad.

"I wish you'd stop having such weird thoughts."

"Yeah, that was a *very* weird thought."

That prompted Cale to turn to Rosalyn, who was shaking her head. She rarely glared at people, but she glowered at him with absolute refusal written all over her face. "No need for that."

After seeing Hilsmann's face, which glowed with admiration for some strange reason, Cale stopped surveying his audience.

"Obviously I wasn't *planning* to do that," he said in disbelief. *Why would I spill my precious blood for this?*

He had many other cards to play, so why would he use his own blood when he hated pain? He'd rather run away. If he just grabbed a mermaid corpse and fled, he could still heal Ron. Besides, how likely was that scenario?

Flying near the couch Cale was sitting on, Raon told him angrily, "I'll make *sure* you don't do such a thing."

Nobody believed Cale. He scoffed at their reactions but quickly dismissed the subject. There was no way such a thing would happen, so he didn't feel the need to waste more energy thinking about it. Instead, he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Raon asked him.

"The Cliff of Winds."

Once Cale reached the steepest cliff along the shoreline, he peered down to the sea below. A whirlpool churned at the base of the cliff, and the coast was bustling with the construction of the naval base. Soon, his gaze slid toward the horizon.

"What're you trying to do, Lord Cale?" Choi Han asked, having followed him all the way there.

Cale shrugged, reached into his magic bag, and took out a conch resembling a gemshorn. Choi Han had seen the instrument before. This seashell horn was one of the three items Witira had given Cale when they met the Whale King on their way to the Kingdom of the Whipper.

Choi Han had an idea of what Cale was about to do. "Are you thinking of—"

Just then, Cale put his mouth on the shell's smaller opening and blew.

Kweeeeeet.

A subtle, high-pitched note pierced the air, and the conch shell glowed blue. It was so quiet that the people below couldn't detect it, yet there were others far away who heard it clearly.

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Two days later, Cale returned to the Cliff of Winds. He watched the sun slowly sink over the horizon, then whipped the still-glowing conch shell up to his ear. He heard something inside it.

Geeeeeeeee…

"They're here," he murmured.

Raon pointed to the horizon, likewise shouting, "They're here!"

Despite knowing this might be the case, Choi Han gasped.

"Wow…" Rosalyn breathed, amazed.

Splash. Splash.

Ripples emerged where the sea met sky, the source being two large whales and a smaller one. Cale turned back to look at the rest of his group. The redhead drew more of their attention than the red sunset beyond him, and they watched him smile.

"Time to go," he said.

Their guides had arrived. *If I have to travel, might as well ride the whales.*

The large whales swimming in from the distance promptly vanished, and a single person appeared in front of Cale.

"Lord Cale. It's been a while."

"Good to see you, Faseton."

Indeed, it was the half-blood whale Faseton. The small humpback had taken his human form to appear in front of Cale and company. Raon, Choi Han, and Rosalyn were the only ones with Cale on the now-dark cliff.

Faseton flicked his gaze to the conch shell in Cale's hand. "Why did you call us so suddenly?"

The whales had been in the middle of fighting mermaids, yet they dropped everything to approach Cale upon hearing his call. He'd sent an urgent signal that only the whales could hear.

"Do you need our power already?"

One condition of Cale's deal with the whales was that he could make use of their strength.

To answer Faseton's question, Cale got right to the point. "I found the organization helping the mermaids."

His unexpected answer made Faseton's face stiffen. "Excuse me?"

The people who'd taken over Hais Island Five and covertly helped the mermaids were already giving the whales major headaches. Not because the interlopers were especially strong but because the mermaids had *help*.

"One of my subordinates was badly injured—poisoned by mermaids—while identifying them. I contacted you because we need to heal him right away, and I thought you should know this information."

Upon hearing Cale's explanation, Faseton asked, "Why were you looking into that, sir?"

Cale closed his mouth for a second, a rare awkward smile on his face. "I was merely concerned."

Raon wasn't invisible, but he spoke into Cale's mind anyway. *‹You're doing it again.›*

Cale ignored that, assuming his usual annoyed expression. "I know you're powerful enough to take care of the mermaids, but they're stronger now because of the Dark Forest near *our* territory. I wanted to help somehow."

Faseton assumed Cale's expression was one of embarrassment. The human's face had looked similar when he helped remove the mermaid poison from Faseton's leg. Several emotions flitted through the handsome whale's eyes. Those

beautiful eyes shone so clear, even beneath the night sky. Cale turned away from them.

"I see."

"It's not like we're strangers," Cale added before meeting his companions' gazes.

Rosalyn and Choi Han stared at him, silently demanding, *Aren't you, though?*

"Thank you very much, Lord Cale. You saved my life once, and here you are helping us out again."

Cale still didn't look back at him. Rosalyn and Choi Han kept their stares fixed on Cale, seeming to ask, *When did you save this guy?* Cale disregarded them, and his companions didn't pose their questions aloud.

Rosalyn chimed in with something else. "Lord Cale came here as soon as he learned that information. We needed to take care of the mermaid poison immediately, but he felt we also needed to notify the Whale Tribe as fast as possible."

Cale shot her a look of gratitude. This was the first time someone had actually helped him pull off a ruse. Choi Han just kept his mouth shut, stepping backward.

"I understand," said Faseton. "I guess we'll need to bring a mermaid corpse to treat that poison."

"We'll accompany you."

"Excuse me?"

At last, Cale faced Faseton head-on. "We'll come as well." There was something he needed to do. "There aren't many of us, and we're probably too weak to participate in the battle. But we want to help, if just a little." What he said and what he thought were worlds apart. Really, Cale was planning a hit-and-run; that would be enough.

Faseton's eyes wavered. The Whale Tribe was locked in a fierce battle with the mermaids. They'd gone into the fight knowing about the poison and dead mana in advance, which gave them somewhat of an advantage. Yet the mermaids were more numerous, and the whales had to protect weaker sea creatures

during the conflict. They would need overwhelming strength to clinch victory.

Lord Cale says they're weak, but… Faseton sized up the black dragon.

The cute, short-legged dragon wrinkled his nose and struck a pose to seem mighty. "What're you looking at, little whale?"

Faseton had beheld the dragon's strength before; he'd seen that overwhelming power with his own eyes. It didn't matter whether the dragon was in a landlocked area, on an island, or even in the sea. "Nothing, Lord Dragon."

Raon snorted at Faseton's respectful response, looking away. "Hmph! I'll be joining them as well." At the same time, he spoke into Cale's mind. *‹Did I do a good job, human? Was I mighty?›*

Cale nodded at Raon. He had done well for his age. Ignoring Raon's excitement over his own swagger, Cale told Faseton, "I'll explain more on our way there. I want to move as quickly as possible. What do you think?"

Faseton answered as he expected: "We can leave right away."

"Good."

Late that night, Cale prepared to leave quietly. They weren't departing from the port, since many soldiers were currently patrolling that area. Cale's group was now on the island farthest from the coast; everyone had moved there earlier that day.

Faseton was in awe as he looked at Cale's full entourage. He'd expected Ohn and Hong, but more had joined them. He sensed that everyone was fairly strong. At first, Faseton thought he might have overestimated that strength, since he was one of the weaker whales. But based on the reactions of the two killer whales who'd come with him, he seemed to be right.

"Whoa."

"Wow."

"Archie," said Cale, "long time no see."

Archie, the killer whale who served as the Whale King's guard, bowed to Cale with a stiff expression, then whirled around.

Cale's and Raon's stares bored into him from behind.

Raon piped up, "Are we riding this killer whale?"

"Probably."

Archie frowned. *Did I hear correctly? Did he say "riding"? Riding what? Me?!* He snapped his gaze over to Faseton.

The humpback quickly looked away before declaring, "Ahem! A large ship would be easily spotted, so we'll use a medium one to ferry everyone out to sea. Since we'll have limited space and an injured passenger aboard, Lord Cale and Lord Dragon—"

"I'm *Raon* now!"

"Right! Lord Raon, as well as a few others, will follow us. They'll use levitation magic before, ahem...landing on the killer whales' backs."

"Ha!" Archie couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"But killer whales are smaller than humpbacks," said Raon. "Will there be space?"

Killer whales *were* the smaller of the two, but they still grew to be at least seven to ten meters long. Archie's frown deepened, while the other killer whale soldier who'd come with them seemed confused.

"Thanks in advance, Archie." Cale patted Archie's shoulder, smiling. The killer whale felt like Cale was mocking him.

It was then that Faseton added, "Oh, and just so you're aware, you two will need to pull the ship as well. It has a magic engine, so you'll only really be guiding it. We made a point of not hiring any crew."

"Why should *I* have to deal with this crap?!"

"Father said to do anything and everything."

Hearing Faseton's answer, Archie shut up. Seakeller was extremely irritable these days from fighting against the mermaids. If Archie made the wrong move, he might really get beaten to death.

Looking up to the sky, he swore. "Damn it!"

Cale stood there and gave Archie's shoulder another pat. "Please swim safely. I'll be on your back."

The killer whale had become a living taxi.

***

Splash. Splash.

It was comfortable on the killer whale's back. Cale regarded the seascape at night, listening to the lapping waves. Ohn and Hong were with Ron aboard the ship. They'd said they were afraid of water, but they also wanted to be near the elderly assassin. The kittens seemed to worry about him even more than Cale did.

Raon tapped the whale's back. "The whale's slippery, human."

"It's supposed to be."

"I see." With a dazed expression, Raon lay down on the whale's back, like Cale.

Archie, who was known as the strongest killer whale, was larger than most of them—approximately twelve meters from tip to tail. Thus, this ride felt like sitting atop an undulating building.

Cale glanced over at the other killer whale keeping pace with them. Between the two whales was the medium-sized ship they towed with mana ropes. Faseton was in front, guiding them.

They were moving fast. *This is like a high-speed taxi.*

Cale looked back at the other killer whale. Rosalyn and Choi Han sat on his back with complicated expressions, while the seasick Hilsmann had both hands clapped over his mouth. Turning away from the uncomfortable trio, Cale admired the night sky full of shining stars. *It should be okay to destroy just one island, right?*

As he enjoyed the peaceful scenery, they reached Hais Island One. They'd gone there first because Hais Island Twelve was close to Arm's base on Hais Island Five, and they didn't want the whales to be seen. From this island, they'd carry on to Hais Island Twelve.

Faseton's expression was taut. "I'll go get my sister," he told Cale.

On their way over, Cale had informed Faseton that the organization helping the mermaids was large and that it had even had the gall to enact the Plaza Terror Incident in Rowoon's capital.

"Sure. Make it quick."

"Yes, sir. Hais Island One is part of whale territory, so mermaids will steer clear."

"All right."

Faseton bowed before rushing away from the island. Archie and his subordinate followed him without looking back.

"Should I set up the tents, Lord Cale?" asked the wolf Maes.

"Yes. Once you're done, move Ron."

"Yes, sir!" Maes answered confidently, heading over to Lark and Hilsmann. The Wolf King's successor was patting Hilsmann on the back as he vomited profusely.

Soon enough, Rosalyn, Maes, and the rest set up a couple of tents near Hais Island One's shoreline. Naturally, Cale didn't lift a finger to help, simply watching them do all the work. Uncharacteristically, Choi Han stood still in front of them.

Cale called him over. "Choi Han."

"Yes, Lord Cale?"

"I think it's better to be selfish than allow any of our people to get hurt." Cale's goal was for his group to quietly withdraw from the whales' battle without casualties. "But this time, there's something we've got to do." He needed to explain it before the whales returned. "Remember the mage from the Plaza Terror Incident?"

Choi Han's expression stiffened. He'd severed the arm of that blood-drinking mage, Redika.

"He's the only one who managed to see Ron's face," Cale whispered. "In this operation, two things are paramount."

Choi Han met Cale's eyes.

“First is curing Ron of the mermaid poison. Second is getting rid of potential threats to Ron—or any of us—in the future. Do you know what I mean?”

“I’ll either destroy that mage’s other eye or kill him,” Choi Han said without any hesitation. “Vicross will want to do it, but I think it’s best for me to. At the moment, he’s too emotional to be rational.”

Ron had ended up this way because he hadn’t managed to kill Redika during their last fight, so Choi Han knew exactly what he had to do. He had no qualms about killing people anymore. It wasn’t that he felt apathetic about it, but those bastards were better off dead.

“No, you don’t have to go so far as to kill him. I’m not looking to get his blood on our hands.”

“It wouldn’t be hard.”

Cale understood that Choi Han had no qualms about killing, despite being a good person. Still, Cale didn’t want him to bear that sin if it was possible. He didn’t care whether that was unfair. “Choi Han, my plan is—”

A loud splash interrupted their conversation, and the stench of blood filled Cale’s nose. Pressing his lips tight, he turned toward the water.

“Wow.”

Someone really *had* used that ridiculous “blood” method to fight. Well, not a person but a whale—the large humpback whale Witira, future Whale Queen. She rose above the water, drenched in her own blood. Evidently, she’d been using it to fight the mermaids.

“Nice to see you again, Lord Cale.” Her voice was measured.

Raon’s voice filled Cale’s mind in a huff. *‹I’m great and mighty, so I don’t want to use blood like that! And you definitely can’t! Hurry up and get me magic stones, human. If you want, I’ll make a hundred magic bombs!›*

Cale had Raon, Rosalyn, and hundreds of the highest-grade magic stones, which were said to be extremely destructive.

Approaching Witira, Cale spoke in a quiet voice that only Choi Han could hear. “How’s your stealth?”

His plan, nicknamed “Reflection,” entailed paying back everything they’d endured. There was nothing worse, or more annoying, than receiving what you’d dished out in equal measure.

Cale didn’t wait for Choi Han’s answer, moving to stand in front of the bloody whale. *Those injuries are self-inflicted.* There were no major wounds on Witira’s body, only small ones. After chugging a few potions, she’d heal up without a single scar.

“Looks like you used some blood.” Cale’s calm voice didn’t betray a hint of worry.

Witira cocked a brow. “A bit. I’m in the vanguard, so I thought that’d be better.”

She fought ahead of the killer whales—who were known for violence—and she wasn’t precious about getting hurt. That mentality was sometimes necessary during war.

While the Whale Tribe, other oceanic beastfolk, and creatures of the sea fought against the mermaids, she was on the front lines, shedding her own blood to repel their foes and their dead mana. How awe-inspiring would that seem to other soldiers? It would certainly raise their morale.

But I have no plans to do such a thing. For Cale, not getting hurt was still the most important thing. He would do *anything*, even if it meant deceiving others, to remain unscathed.

“Shall we go into the tent and talk?”

“Sure.”

Hsssss.

Steam appeared as Witira took her human form and landed on the ground. Her blood-soaked body looked terrifying as she transformed.

Scary. Cale slowly backed away from Witira, making for one of the tents—not the one Ron was in. “Follow me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Upon entering, Cale got right to the point. “Have you heard an overview of the situation from Faseton?”

“I have. We’ve been having some trouble, considering that the people helping the mermaids seemed strong. Still, we had no idea that they were part of such a large organization.” Witira paused to swig a potion. As she did so, her injuries disappeared. “For the last few days, a swordswoman and spearman aboard a ship have been getting on our nerves. Whenever the whales or members of our tribe come up for air, they attack us.”

Cale froze. *What? For the last few days?*

Heedless of his reaction, Witira went on, “That mage using fire magic is annoying too, but the swordswoman keeps blasting her aura down into the water. That’s the real issue.”

That’s a surprise. Aren’t aura blasts limited to those at a swordmaster’s level?

“The spearman’s also annoying. Seems like he practices the Eastern Continent’s spear arts. His aura is weaker than the swordswoman’s, but he uses it pretty efficiently. He seems like he’ll soon reach spearmaster level.”

A second attacker at a level almost equivalent to a swordmaster’s? Cale was taken aback. His eyes wavered; these enemies were stronger than he’d anticipated.

Cale regarded the ever-calm Witira. The humpbacks from the Whale King’s bloodline were stronger than Choi Han, who was about as capable as the killer whales. Yet the other whales were weaker than him, and the Whale Tribe’s population wasn’t large.

“The mermaids have received some pretty strong reinforcements,” he acknowledged.

“Right. But once we get rid of a good number of mermaids, I think fighting will get easier.” Witira then briefed Cale on the current situation. The warrior mermaids who absorbed dead mana were avoiding the whales, going around attacking other sea creatures and oceanic beastfolk.

“But the swordswoman, spearman, and mage are focused on attacking whales?”

“Yes.”

The Whale Tribe, as well as actual whales, needed to surface every so often—even during battles. The secret organization wouldn’t miss that opportunity to attack.

“They haven’t injured any of *us*, but a lot of young whales have been hurt,” Witira said, anger visible on her face. Whales themselves might not have been beastfolk, but they were strong and intelligent creatures. They were working with the Whale Tribe to fight on the front lines against the mermaids. “And many whales have left this world.”

That was why Witira was trying to kill those assisting the mermaids. Since the mermaids kept attacking weaker sea creatures and beastfolk, she couldn’t go to Hais Island Five yet. Seakeller was contemplating when to attack that island.

“I see.”

Cale had contacted the Whale Tribe during Seakeller’s deliberation. They were extremely grateful for Cale’s tip about the organization allied with the mermaids—and for Cale’s declaration that he would help them, even if just a little. If Cale’s group could fight the ones attacking the whales above the water, that would make things easier for the Whale Tribe.

“I know we shouldn’t ask this of you, but it would be a great help if you lent us a hand.”

Witira assumed that Cale’s “help” would involve fighting alongside them. But no, his plan was slightly different. After thinking for some time, Cale made his intentions clear.

“Witira.”

“Yes?”

“I might destroy an island.”

“Wait, *destroy* one…?”

With his front paw, Raon opened a map in front of the confused Witira, pointing to a location.

“I’m thinking about wiping Hais Island Five off the map,” Cale said seriously.

Hais Islands One through Fifteen were all about two to three hours apart, and according to Ron, there were no life-forms aside from members of Arm on Hais Island Five.

“Ships could just sail a bit farther to Hais Island Seven,” Cale explained. For those using the sea route, that would become the new spot for landfall.

“Is that even possi—ah.” Witira stopped short. The black dragon was staring at her.

“It *is* possible, whale!”

“Yes, I’m sure it is as you say, Lord Dragon.”

It was definitely doable. Although Hais Island Five was much larger than the black swamp, they were here to destroy the area, with no need to keep it under control. It would probably be easier.

“To destroy it,” Cale went on, “we’ll need two things.”

“And what might those be?”

Witira’s unruffled response to the plan spoke to her aquatic nature. Hais Island Five was a piece of land, so she didn’t care about it disappearing. Cale, on the other hand, would’ve given up on destroying the island had there been any other creatures living there.

“Actually, we’ll also set a condition.”

“A condition as well?”

“Yes. We plan to fight without revealing our identities—especially while we battle that organization.”

Witira understood what Cale was saying. It would be a sorry state of affairs if he ended up in some terrible situation because he’d antagonized the enemy organization while helping her tribe. Besides, so long as Cale destroyed Hais Island Five for them, the need for secrecy among his group was inconsequential.

“I understand.”

“Good. First, we’ll need transportation.”

“I’ll call some whales for you.”

“Small ones.” He only needed those for the wolf children.

“Got it. I’ll pick the ones that are agile and stealthy.”

“Second…” Cale locked eyes with Witira. “I need you to go wreak havoc.”

“That’s your other demand?”

“Mm-hmm. I need the whales to run wild as a distraction. I’ll use that moment to destroy Hais Island Five and the mermaid base underneath.”

“You want us to draw them out? Could we draw out that swordswoman, spearman, and mage in particular, then?”

“Sure.”

“Oh!” Witira suddenly remembered something. “That mage hasn’t left Hais Island Five since the swordswoman and spearman arrived. He doesn’t emerge unless we get really close to the island.”

“He doesn’t?” That was perfect. If Cale could blow Redika away along with the island, it would be even better.

“No. He…seems a bit crazy.” Witira frowned.

Cale felt like he knew why. “Did he laugh and rush at you when you used your blood during the fight?”

“How did you know?”

“The intel we gathered said the color red drives him mad.”

“Ah.”

Witira eyed Cale with concern, and Raon snapped his head around to gawk at him so quickly that it made a whishing noise. Seeing their expressions, Cale brushed back his red hair.

“That’s why it’d be an issue if he saw me,” he added casually.

Both the whale and the dragon understood.

“So that’s it, human!”

“I see your point,” Witira replied, then mumbled, “That swordswoman was strange too.”

“She was?”

“Yes. She seemed cut from the same cloth. Well, no need to worry about it because you won’t have to deal with her.”

Witira smiled, and Raon donned a look of determination.

“No, I suppose not.”

Cale decided not to think about that. He discussed the other details with Witira before saying goodbye.

***

The next morning, Cale met with Hilsmann and the wolf children.

“The whales will take you to Hais Island Twelve. Be as quiet as mice out there. You have the outfits I gave you, right?”

“Yes, Lord Cale! We packed them all up,” Hilsmann replied. “I’ll take good care of the children!”

Cale ignored him, shifting his focus to Lark and Maes. Both boys nodded their heads. Lark was usually shy, but he was reliable around his younger siblings. A sense of responsibility seemed to change his demeanor.

“Then go and stay there. Shoot the signal flare if something goes wrong.”

“Yes, sir.”

The twelve of them packed their weapons. Climbing onto a teenage whale and a baby whale, each less than four meters in length, they headed toward Hais Island Twelve.

Cale watched them disappear before speaking to Vicross. “I know you aren’t happy, but you ought to stay with your father.”

“I understand, Lord Cale.”

“Good.”

“Please save him.”

Cale understood how Vicross felt—wanting to fight, yet not able to do so. “Don’t you worry.”

He patted Vicross's shoulder, then surveyed the rest of the group: Rosalyn, Choi Han, Ohn, Hong, and Raon. They would come with him.

"All right," he said, pulling several black outfits from his magic bag. "Put these on."

Choi Han grimaced. "We have to wear those again...?"

"Yep."

Upon hearing Cale's brusque response, Choi Han got to changing. The black garments resembled the secret organization's uniform, though they weren't a perfect match; they had a white star and five red stars over the heart. Cale provided the group with black masks as well. They'd worn the same outfits when they rescued Raon. As soon as the three humans had put on the uniforms, Rosalyn and Raon began to gather mana.

"We're leaving now," Raon announced.

The group floated into the sky, flying toward Hais Island Five at lightning speed. There, Cale heard a loud cry.

"Roooooooar!"

"Attack!"

Looking down, he saw that the water was turbulent.

Splaaash!

A killer whale with an X-shaped scar on his back shot above the surface before vanishing beneath again, causing a large ripple. The Whale Tribe and the whales were doing an excellent job of wreaking havoc, as requested.

"Whoa. They're really giving it their best," Cale marveled. The whales were definitely following through.

"Roooooar!" A great cry accompanied another breach by a killer whale. In its mouth was a mermaid—limp and lifeless.

"Make sure you don't go down there, human."

"He's right, Mr. Cale. Please stay away."

"Our youngest is right! But, if you go, don't go alone!"

Cale snorted at his companions' concern. "You think I'm crazy? Why would I go down there?"

At that moment, Choi Han looked below them. "Hmm?"

Cale followed his gaze. *Nope. I'm steering clear.*

Two ships surrounded by magic shields were approaching the whales. Someone stood on the bow of each ship. A blonde woman—likely the swordswoman mentioned earlier—pointed her blade at the ocean. A golden aura cloaked the weapon. Swinging her sword, she shouted something Cale couldn't make out.

"What's she yelling?"

As usual, Raon answered Cale's question. "She said, 'I wonder how beautiful a bloody ocean would be?'"

She was a lunatic.

Witira needs to draw as many of the secret organization's members as possible from Hais Island Five, Cale reflected. That would allow him to retreat safely and easily.

Boooom! The golden aura rushed from the swordswoman's blade and crashed down, creating a few meters' gap in the water.

Cale, who'd been waiting for the whales' antics to lure people away, flinched at the motion. "Raon."

"What is it, human?"

"Let's hurry."

His heart throbbed painfully. Witnessing the enemy's strength firsthand wasn't good for him.

Raon picked up speed, speaking into Cale's ear. "That whale's pretty strong too."

Which one? Cale peered down again.

"The small one."

A woman darted through the parted water, with a man close behind her. Siblings Witira and Faseton had joined the fray, wielding a whip and a sword respectively. Witira rushed toward the swordswoman, while Faseton charged the spearman. As Cale

expected, the pair were spraying their own blood as they hurried ahead. They leapt out of the water and dashed forward.

“Choi Han.”

“Yes, Mr. Cale?”

“Watch them carefully.”

Choi Han kept quiet as he continued to observe.

Crack! Witira’s whip snapped against the swordswoman’s blade, which was still ensconced in her golden aura.

Boom!

The whip glowed with a blue light. It was an ability unique to the Whale Tribe, who could weaponize the ocean’s power. Her blue aura was just as strong as the swordswoman’s golden one, which made it obvious that Witira’s battle with Tunka had been child’s play.

“Don’t worry. Choi Han won’t lose. Neither will Rosalyn,” Raon said, flying even faster.

Cale looked over at Choi Han and Rosalyn, who both smiled back at him.

“Don’t worry,” Rosalyn said. “Choi Han and I won’t get hurt, even if things don’t go as planned.”

If their strategy went off the rails, Cale still intended to take care of this situation alongside his masked companions. After all, one of his goals was to get rid of potential issues that could endanger them in the future.

If they learned about Raon, things would get tougher.

Cale didn’t know the location of the secret organization’s headquarters right now, so he couldn’t eradicate them completely. If one of their enemies spotted Raon and lived to report his existence, they would have a much harder time from here on out.

“She’s right, Mr. Cale. I won’t get hurt.” Choi Han and Rosalyn had misunderstood Cale’s look; although he didn’t say as much, Cale was more worried about getting hurt himself.

Held in Cale's grasp, Ohn shook her head at Choi Han and Rosalyn, then tapped on Cale's arm. "I don't think you'll get hurt. You don't need to worry."

Ohn knew what Cale was concerned about, but he wasn't happy with the ten-year-old's pitying gaze either. He just pretended not to hear Ohn, instead urging Raon on. "Faster."

"All right, human."

A moment later, they floated above Hais Island Five.

"There are magic traps and alarms around the coast, as Ron mentioned," Rosalyn said. "The flow of mana is focused on those areas as well."

"There aren't any in the air," added Raon. He had a proud look on his face, perhaps thinking that Rosalyn was smart for a human mage. That was ironic, given that he'd learned human magic *from* Rosalyn.

"Can we get past the magic and barge into the building?" Cale asked, opening the map he'd drawn based on Ron's descriptions. Due to the mermaids' poison, Ron had been too weak to map the area himself. Cale had created the map based on what Ron said, the old assassin verifying details as they went.

"It might be tricky."

"That mage bastard secured their base with layer upon layer of magic."

Choi Han coughed awkwardly. Redika was probably fixated on security because Choi Han had almost killed him.

"Really?" In that case, this would be simple. "Then do as we planned. But don't touch their base as you plant the bombs."

Raon had created the ten magic bombs with his own mana as the trigger, so he would need to focus solely on the bombs to detonate them. Since they'd only deployed two bombs in the black swamp, he'd been able to use magic in addition to detonating them. These bombs were much stronger, as Raon had made them using the highest-grade magic stones and thus they required his full attention to control. It didn't help that he'd needed to make the explosives on the fly.

“Then where should we put the ten bombs?” Raon asked.

Cale showed the group his map, on which he’d marked ten points. “Plant one in each of these spots.”

Looking at them, Rosalyn opened her mouth and then closed it again. She stared at Cale and Raon, thinking, *Goodness. They’ve got magic stones of the highest grade…*

Magic stone quality determined the strength of magic bombs. Since Raon’s were made with the highest-grade stones, they were terrifying weapons many times stronger than the bombs used in modern warfare.

As heir to Brek’s throne, Rosalyn had once been privileged enough to encounter a magic stone of this grade—and she’d found its mana awe-inspiring. *Just where did Lord Cale find those stones?*

Cale had retrieved those precious items without comment and handed them to Raon, even though ten magic stones alone would’ve been enough to make him *very* wealthy. She was shocked by his willingness to use them, but that was because she didn’t know that Cale had hundreds more like them. Thanks to the items in his possession, he was probably worth more than most decent merchant guilds.

“We’ll split into two groups to do this,” Cale continued.

Riiiiip. He tore the map in half and handed one side to Rosalyn.

“You two take care of this half.”

Choi Han and Rosalyn nodded, and Cale looked at Raon.

They landed on a quiet cliff opposite where the whales were fighting. Standing with that cliff to his back, Cale saw a vibrant forest. He tugged on his mask and took a step forward. *Rustle.* All they could see were his eyes. The same went for the others.

“We’ll gather back here.”

The group dispersed across Hais Island Five.

‹Nothing nearby.›

Rustle. Cale ran through the island's vines and tall grass; they'd grown tall and thick without any animals to damage them.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Ohn and Hong jumped through the trees next to him. Ohn was already creating mist around them, just in case they needed it.

‹It's here.›

Raon's comment brought Cale to a halt. He took a magic bomb out of his pocket and buried it in the ground. He was responsible for the eastern side of the base, and he moved with utmost caution.

I'm dead if this blows up on me.

The bombs they'd used in the black swamp had already been extremely powerful. These were made of even more potent materials, capable of destroying both Hais Island Five and the mermaid base underneath.

A coward couldn't do this, Cale reflected. Yet as he carefully nudged the bomb, he felt avoiding the battlefield this way was the right call.

‹Hurry up, human!› Raon shouted into his mind, but Cale remained meticulous as he buried the bomb.

Once they started moving again, two whirlwinds surrounded Cale's feet.

‹There're humans nearby.›

Cale stopped and motioned to Ohn and Hong. Ohn made the mist thicker, and Cale leapt from the ground into the tallest tree nearby. He looked around; they were beside the base's food storage warehouses. Two secret organization members were engaged in idle chitchat but seemed tense, eyes darting around in search of intruders.

"What's with this mist?"

"Who knows? We're by the water, so the weather changes constantly."

‹Should we fight them, human?›

Cale shook his head. *Don't think that's necessary.*

Everybody else always seemed to want to fight when they came across enemies like these, but Cale felt otherwise. He didn't even want to get the foe's attention. Descending the tree without a sound, he pulled out the invisibility magic device.

Raon sighed. *‹You live such a difficult life, weak human.›*

Cale didn't care what Raon said. He activated the device and gingerly dug into the earth. Ohn and Hong heaved sighs, then helped him.

At that moment, an alarm blared in the distance. *Beep. Beeeeep.*

"Huh? Isn't that the emergency distress signal? Do we have intruders?"

"Hurry up and look. I need to stay put."

"All right!"

‹Were Rosalyn and Choi Han discovered?›

There was no need to ask such an obvious question. Cale let out a deep sigh. A main character's life revolved around fighting. Pitying Choi Han, *Birth of a Hero*'s protagonist, he continued planting bombs.

Ohn and Hong dug faster, but Cale continued at his measured pace. *I'm sure they'll be fine.* If all their enemies' attention was focused west of the base, that would make it easier for him to move.

‹Hurry up, human!› Raon urged him. *‹They might find us too!›*

Nevertheless, Cale slowly and leisurely finished planting all the bombs he had. He owed it to Choi Han and Rosalyn having caused a ruckus—although Cale was pretty sure that it was just Choi Han who'd done so. *It's fine as long as their identities aren't revealed.* And those two would make sure to keep it that way.

Putting down the last bomb, Cale returned to their original location. A familiar figure lurked beneath the cliff.

"Long time no see, Archie."

The killer whale flinched. He was caught off guard by Cale's outfit, which resembled the garb worn by the mermaids' allies.

“Why’re you wearing…? Never mind. Get on, please.”

Cale hopped down from the cliff. Raon would’ve struggled to keep Cale and the kittens floating in the air while controlling ten bombs *and* ensuring nothing else was harmed. To avoid that, Cale had called this high-speed taxi.

“The others will be coming soon,” he told Archie.

Archie glared at him, trying to discern whether they were really going to destroy the island. He didn’t get a chance to ask, though.

“Catch them! We have to kill them!” came an enraged scream.

Hearing the familiar voice, Cale winced and made sure his hair was fully concealed.

“No! Don’t let them jump!”

Two people wearing the same outfit as Cale jumped off the cliff. People in similar clothing soon appeared atop it—real members of Arm. Cale spotted Redika among them. The mage was supported by his underlings; his left eye was bandaged, while the right was bleeding.

“You pulled it off,” Cale told Choi Han, who smiled awkwardly.

“I ran into him while installing a bomb, and—”

“Tell me later.” After cutting him off, Cale commanded Archie, “Hurry up and go.”

Seeing Redika and the others from Arm, Archie moved swiftly. He seemed ecstatic about the blood-drinking mage’s injuries.

“Faster,” Cale urged. “Get as far away as possible.”

They needed to at least reach a point where they could see Hais Island Twelve, the closest island to Hais Island Five. It was still a good distance away.

“I think someone found the bombs,” said Raon.

Choi Han hung his head. Arm’s members had probably come across them while looking for the intruders.

Cale patted Choi Han’s shoulder as he said, “Let’s begin.”

“All right.” Raon began gathering mana in his front paws.

“Put up the strongest shields you can,” Cale told Rosalyn. “Make sure to keep Archie inside.”

“Of course.” Rosalyn created two shields.

To the east, Cale saw the whales continuing the battle, Witira on the front lines. Although she was far away, Cale felt he’d made brief eye contact with the humpback. Witira cracked her whip at the water’s surface. *Splash!* Great waves raged to life, and Witira used that opening to retreat. The whales previously wreaking havoc were now making a hasty retreat. Finally, everybody was out of range of the bombs.

“We’re all set.” Cale locked eyes with Raon, who was waiting for his order. “Go.”

Thrummm.

The black mana in Raon’s paws shot out like arrows, all ten rays rushing toward the island like streaks of light. Cale covered his ears.

Boom! Boom! Booooom!

Rumble. The ocean churned—and then a large wave surged toward them.

“Ngh! Everybody hold on to me!” Archie shouted. They weren’t in range of the bombs, but the resulting waves were still dangerous. Everyone flattened out and clung to the killer whale. Cale looked toward the source of the cacophony beyond the tall waves.

Booom!

Rumble.

Splaaash!

In the midst of those noises, bright light shone from the island. By the time Cale had squeezed his eyes shut and reopened them, black smoke had taken the light’s place, and all kinds of debris flew from within it.

Cale’s jaw dropped. “Whoa…”

It looked like the whole island was floating away, the land crumbling into dust.

“It’s way stronger than I expected…”

He might’ve known that the bombs would be more powerful than average, but he’d never anticipated explosions *that* big. While he had claimed he would destroy the island, the explosions’ impact on the ocean itself was huge.

Unlike the others, Raon was calm and composed. He tilted his head in confusion. “Didn’t you want this, human? I thought you meant it when you said you were looking to destroy the island. That’s why I fortified the bombs a couple times.”

This was the result of a miscommunication. There hadn’t been any need for Raon to fortify those strong bombs. Cale gripped Archie’s back as he gaped at the destroyed island. All he saw where the island had been was a plume of black smoke.

“Move farther away,” Raon instructed. Archie flinched before quietly doing so. Cale still couldn’t take his eyes off the ocean. The smoke slowly dissipated, and the island reappeared.

Rumble. Rumble. Rumble. Rumble.

The cliff on Hais Island Five was falling apart. Its destruction had a domino effect, and soon the entire island was sinking into the water. The faint screams of humans and mermaids alike pealed across the sea.

“Aaaahhh!”

“Skreee!”

At the same time, the ocean rippled, and Witira shot into the air. “Attack!”

Following the large humpback’s command, the Whale Tribe, whales, and oceanic beastfolk rushed toward the crumbling island. Enemies making their escape were greeted by Witira’s whip.

“What a terrible sight,” Cale muttered.

Selfish as it was—considering he was the one who’d caused this—the mess of it all made him uncomfortable. Witnessing the gruesome spectacle reinforced his desire to live a peaceful life.

Turning pensive, he looked out over the sea with a complicated expression.

"Your compassion is a problem," Raon piped up. "But it's also one of your best traits."

What? My compassion? Cale was shocked. Would a *compassionate* person consider destroying an island?

"We did the right thing for that old human—and for Vicross, who helped with my revenge."

Vicross helping Raon didn't necessarily mean this had been the right thing to do. Then again, Cale didn't always take the high road.

‹Besides, didn't you say they were part of the organization that handed me over to the marquess?› Raon added in Cale's mind. *‹Even if those weren't the actual ones who did it, they're all the same.›*

After hearing as much, Cale looked up at the sky, then patted the killer whale's back. "Let's go."

Archie wordlessly moved toward Hais Island Twelve.

"I guess there was no need to involve Lark or the children," said Choi Han.

"Nope," Cale responded as Hais Island Twelve came into view. There, he spotted the wolf children with the young whales.

Choi Han eyed the wolves with curiosity. "Did you order them to stay like that, Lord Cale?"

"I did."

Cale's curt reply led Choi Han to fall silent, though he continued to watch them. He was just thankful that they hadn't needed to involve the youngsters.

Hais Island Twelve was about one-third the size of Hais Island Five, and Archie was approaching it quickly. Cale was pretty satisfied with the operation's results. *Now I just need to wait for Witira to bring me a mermaid corpse.*

Right then, there was a sudden turn of events.

"I'm going to kill you!"

Hmm? Cale looked around.

‹I'm turning invisible,› Raon said immediately.

"That bastard," Choi Han growled.

Wait, what? Cale thought, and then it clicked. "What the…?"

A red mass was hurtling toward them with levitation magic, roaring, "That's right, I'm going to *kill* you! You're all going to die!"

Redika was flying straight at Archie. Despite the damage to his right eye, the mad mage hadn't gone completely blind. He was drenched in blood, and his flight was very unstable, probably because he was controlling his mana with only one hand.

"Hmm. He seems to be in a state of mana explosion," Rosalyn informed them.

"What?"

A "mana explosion" was a technique magic users could implement by putting their lives on the line. Redika seemed to have truly gone crazy.

"An arm and an eye weren't enough for you?!" Redika cried, glaring daggers at Choi Han. "You crazy bastard! I'm seriously going to kill you!" Bloody tears streaked down his face as he closed the distance.

"How pathetic." Choi Han sighed, standing up on Archie's back.

Just what the hell is going on? Cale wondered, sighing as well. He wasn't the least bit afraid of Redika. Choi Han could've fought a *dragon* setting off a mana explosion, so the mage didn't concern him. In fact, it would be great if they got rid of him completely. What had him perplexed was the force looming behind Redika.

"What's *that* doing here?"

A ship with a damaged hull was encroaching on Hais Island Twelve—or more precisely, Cale's group. The swordswoman with her golden aura was on board. *Your subordinates and colleagues are either escaping the island or dying. Why aren't you going to help them?* Cale wanted to ask.

"Who are you?!" the swordswoman yelled.

Cale had no reason to respond. Looking around, he saw that nobody else was approaching them. The whales were busy dealing with the mermaids.

“Should I fight, sir?” Archie asked, suddenly polite.

Cale gave the killer whale’s back a placating pat. “I’ll do it.”

Rosalyn stood, blue mana swirling just above her hand. Choi Han bit his lip and pivoted from Redika to the swordswoman. Since she was essentially at a swordmaster’s level, she was the better opponent for him.

“Choi Han, you take care of the mage,” Rosalyn interjected. “*I’ll* handle the swordswoman.”

She didn’t know why Raon had gone invisible, but it suggested the dragon would have too hard a time aiding in this battle. In that case, she needed to step up. She was a virtuoso in her own right, already nearing the pinnacle of power among mages.

“I don’t think I can defeat her, but I’ll be able to hold her back.” Ignoring Choi Han’s gaze, she looked to Cale. “That should be enough, right, Lord Cale?”

“Hmm. Fighting together will be easier, Miss Rosalyn.”

“Excuse me?” *He’s going to fight too?* Rosalyn stared at him in shock, but she’d misunderstood; Cale hadn’t meant that *he* would be the one fighting alongside her.

He faced Hais Island Twelve and shouted, “Go!”

A resounding chorus rose up from the wolf children on the island. “Yes, sir!”

All twelve clambered onto the small whales, which then swam toward Cale and his group. The two larger whales waiting by Hais Island Twelve followed suit. They whizzed past Archie, making a beeline for the ship.

“Y-you crazy bastards!” one of the vessel’s crew members cried out in surprise.

When Choi Han gawked at Cale, incredulous, the redhead shrugged. “They’re not the only secret organization around here.

Starting now, we've got one of our own."

The wolf children—who wore black masks and black outfits with one white star and five red stars over their chests—rushed toward the ship. Cale didn't know when the wolves had gotten used to riding whales, but they seemed able to move freely. That was fitting for the agile Wolf Tribe.

"Join them," he told Choi Han. "You too, Miss Rosalyn."

Choi Han and Rosalyn exchanged glances, then turned to him.

"I'll be back soon. Please stay safely hidden, Mr. Cale."

"Be careful, Lord Cale."

Then they were off. Archie watched them in disbelief, but he kept his mouth shut. Choi Han sprang onto one of the two larger whales to engage Redika, while Rosalyn used levitation magic to approach the ship.

"I'm going to kill you! You're dead! Who the hell are you?!" Redika spat, shooting magic at Choi Han as he flew unsteadily. Choi Han's aura destroyed the attacks before they reached him.

The swordswoman's voice reached Choi Han's ears as well. "Really, who *are* you?" She swung her sword down, and an aura blast resembling a boomerang shot toward Rosalyn.

"Shield. Blink." Rosalyn deflected the attack, dodged, then launched a fireball. The swordswoman dodged, but the orb crashed into the ship's deck.

Bang! A section broke off.

Rosalyn used the moment to toy with the swordswoman cloaked in her golden aura. "I'm not sure. Who do you think we are? Can't you tell?"

Jeez. Hearing Rosalyn tease her foe, Choi Han squeezed his eyes shut and shouted at Redika, "We're a secret organization!"

Cale sighed. He hadn't meant for Choi Han to say it out loud. But it didn't matter as long as they kept their identities secret. "Archie, let's get closer to the island."

"Yes, sir."

Making his way to shore, Archie watched Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the wolf children on the whales as they all fought with members of Arm. *They're strong.*

Something broke with a loud *bang!* Someone screamed, but it wasn't one of Cale's people.

Why are such powerful fighters serving under this man?

Redika must've been having trouble with his levitation magic. He floated just above the water, unleashing offensive spells on Choi Han. "I'll make you bleed too! Augh! I'm going to *kill* you!"

Choi Han's aura continued to negate the mage's attacks.

"Show me what've you got. I'll take you on," Choi Han declared, inching closer to Redika. He cautiously cornered the blood-soaked mage, who was losing his mind to the effects of the mana explosion.

"Ugh! *Die!*"

Redika's mana shot out in an enormous blast. Choi Han jumped off the whale to dodge.

Boom! Redika's explosion struck Hais Island Twelve, rocks shooting into the air. Choi Han didn't care; he was already chasing Redika.

Rosalyn was likewise holding her own.

"Damn, you're strong."

"I *am* a rather strong mage."

She and the swordswoman fought with a casual air, but their battle was tearing the ship apart. For Archie's part, he was amazed that such powerhouses had gathered in one place. His astonishment grew as Cale shifted above him. "What are you doing?"

Cale pretended not to hear the killer whale as he slid into the water, which rose to his chest as they neared the shore. *Splash. Splash.* He repositioned himself, hiding behind Archie while the invisible Raon clung to his back.

‹Is there a reason you need to hide behind this whale, human?›

Of course there was: If Cale hid behind something this big, he wouldn't be seen. He didn't bother responding to Raon's question and only said what he needed to say. "Let's destroy it."

Archie winced. *You're going to destroy something else?!*

Raon was still calm, however. "All right, human."

Archie balked again. He couldn't see the small dragon, but he'd definitely just heard the creature agree to destroy something. There was so much the killer whale was itching to say, but he just kept his mouth shut.

"Let's give them a taste of their own medicine." Raon was determined to punish the organization that had allowed his abuse for the first four years of his life.

Thrummm. A plethora of thin mana arrows filled the sky.

Though he'd planned to stay quiet, Archie blurted out, "Holy crap!"

At that same exact moment, Choi Han hacked off Redika's right arm and watched it fall into the sea.

"Aaaaaaaugh!"

The blonde swordswoman glanced skyward. "You've got another mage?!"

"Didn't I tell you we're a secret organization?"

In lieu of a response, the swordswoman concentrated her golden aura as much as she could.

Rosalyn scoffed at her, then said just one word: "Retreat!"

The whales quickly withdrew, but there was no need once Cale uttered his next command.

"Fire."

Raon's countless mana arrows flew straight at the swordswoman's ship.

"Fall back!" the swordswoman yelled. Her golden aura shot out to meet the arrows, but it wasn't strong or wide enough to fully defend against hundreds of projectiles.

Awed, Cale watched the arrows strike the ship. “Dragons really are mighty.”

Bang! Whoosh! Boooom! The exploding arrows produced an array of sounds that filled Cale’s ears.

“That’s right. I *am* mighty!” Raon responded.

“Damn!” Archie swore, bewildered.

The secret organization’s ship had taken heavy damage, though it hadn’t been obliterated.

“That swordswoman’s pretty strong,” Raon noted.

His assessment was spot-on—she was amazing. She’d sent out golden aura “boomerangs” that managed to neutralize a number of Raon’s mana arrows. Still, enough of them had struck to virtually destroy the ship.

Redika shuddered, grunting in pain.

Choi Han observed the armless mage. “He’ll die soon.”

Cale kept an eye on Redika, whose mana explosion was nearing its end. He assumed Choi Han wouldn’t do anything further to the mage, since he was dying…but he was wrong.

Spurt!

“Aaaah!”

Blood splattered everywhere. Choi Han had swung his sword once more at Redika’s right eye. Cale turned away, not wanting to see, but now he was facing the ship as it fell to pieces.

Boom. The ship was breaking apart, starting from the bow.

Watching the destruction, Cale clicked his tongue—but he couldn’t suppress his amazement. “I thought there was another one left. I take it he was a magic spearman?”

“You didn’t know, human?”

“No.”

“I see.”

As the name implied, a magic spearman could wield magic in addition to spears. While the secret organization’s spearman didn’t

seem to be at the spearmaster level, he could use magic. He hadn't done it much on the island, but now he flew over the foundering ship, using his levitation magic to save one other person. The blonde swordswoman soared from the wreckage.

Surviving members of the secret organization shouted at the spearman.

"Aaaah!"

"Please! Save us too!"

He didn't even turn to look at them, just peered at Redika.

"Talk about tough," Cale muttered as Arm's strength dawned on him.

If this magic spearman could cast levitation magic on himself and someone else simultaneously, he was at least an upper-middle-tier mage in addition to being near the spearmaster level.

"Don't worry, human. He's still weaker than Choi Han."

"I know. It's just that he's stronger than *me*."

Silence fell between them.

Eventually, Raon said, "Stronger than you? Hmm. Don't be too upset. It's kind of obvious that, well...many people are stronger than you."

Cale wanted to say something back, but he couldn't.

A golden aura slammed into Redika's body. *Bang!* The blood-drinking mage exploded on impact.

"Horrifying," Cale said.

Choi Han struck out with his black aura as he retreated on a whale, but it didn't reach the magic spearman and swordswoman in midair. With a frown, Choi Han swung his sword one more time; Rosalyn floated into the sky. The pair glanced at Cale, but they couldn't call out to him.

The silent standoff continued—although the screams of those aboard the burning boat rang out around them. Rosalyn and Choi Han were ready to attack the magic spearman and the

swordswoman at any moment. The seconds that ticked by felt like an eternity to the four combatants.

Splashing from the sea broke the silence. Witira and other members of the Whale Tribe were swimming their way, and the quartet's standoff evaporated.

"What a shame," the swordswoman said.

"That's why I said we should just run," the spearman replied, sounding annoyed. He glanced at Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the wolf children, who all still wore masks. "I can't tell who they are."

"Maybe you'll find out if we fight some more," Rosalyn needled him.

Seeing the blue mana swirling atop her palm, the spearman shook his head. "It'd be a draw at best."

Flick! Bang! Witira's long, blue whip landed on the water's surface, and she used its recoil to propel herself into the air. Without missing a beat, the spearman summoned an iridescent magic scroll—one shimmering with dust from magic stones of the highest grade. It was a long-distance teleportation scroll.

"No!" Rosalyn cried.

She followed Witira, heading for their two foes; Choi Han's black aura also shot toward them like a bullet. Before their attacks reached him, the spearman ripped the scroll in half. He and his companion began to vanish into thin air.

The woman grimaced as she parried Choi Han's aura with her own. It caused a small explosion, and she used that moment to wave to Choi Han and Rosalyn.

"Bye-bye, unknowns." Turning to the enraged Witira, she smirked. "So sad."

Witira scowled even harder.

The magic scroll activated with the usual *crackle!* Their two opponents were almost completely gone now. The stereotypical villains' escape had Cale lost for words. But there was something that everyone had missed.

"Ghk!"

Out of nowhere, the magic spearman coughed up blood. An arrow had pierced through his stomach. The small mana arrow had flown in from behind him, and it drilled into his flesh to widen the gash.

The blonde woman's composure gave way to rage. "No! Y-you bastards!"

It was then that the magic scroll completed its job. *Crackle!* The pair disappeared, leaving the battleground dead quiet.

Rosalyn gasped. Witira's whip cracked through the air where their two enemies had stood. Choi Han bit his lip, staring at Redika's pathetic remains. As Cale peeked past Archie, he heard a voice behind him.

"I did that," Raon said matter-of-factly. "A trace of my mana will remain in that magic spearman's body, even if his injury heals. Only another dragon would be able to locate it, but if he comes near us again, I'll kill him."

Everybody gawked at Raon. Archie flinched, but Cale broke into applause. "You really are mighty!"

If Raon could tell when the spearman was near, it would give them a way to prepare against Arm. Since the organization had no idea who they were, there shouldn't be further interactions between them—but a little extra protection didn't hurt.

"Yes, I'm amazing," Raon shrugged.

There was a reason the dragon had made sure to leave a trace of mana in the spearman's wound. He and the swordswoman had demonstrated that there were plenty of strong people within their organization—and dragons enjoyed conquering the strong.

"I'll wait until I'm a bit bigger," Raon murmured.

"Hmm? What'd you say?"

"Nothing, human."

Cale hadn't heard Raon, but Archie definitely had. A chill ran down the killer whale's spine. The black dragon in front of him was young, but Archie recalled stories he'd heard about adult dragons who could use their breath as a weapon. Stories the whales had

passed down through generations said that if an adult dragon became completely and thoroughly enraged, it would change the course of the continent's history.

Cale trudged to shore. *Splash. Splash.* Once the water had receded to his ankles, Witira approached him with her two subordinates in tow.

"I'm sorry, Lord Cale. Dispatching the mermaids was our number-one priority, so we couldn't focus on them."

"That's all right. It wasn't like we couldn't handle them."

"We'll take care of the rest," Witira assured him.

"Good." Cale nodded, taking another step toward the island.

His disgruntled expression had sent a pang of remorse through Witira, as though she'd dragged him into an unnecessary mess. She urged her subordinates to hand over the object he'd asked for. "Here's what you requested."

"Oh. Hmm. Okay."

It was a mermaid corpse. It was very clean, just as it had been when it was alive. Cale had asked Witira to bring the strongest mermaid that had absorbed the dead mana.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"A member of mermaid royalty."

He'd never expected the humpback to bring a royal mermaid's remains. "Okay. With this, we can heal Ron right away."

Any mermaid's remains could've counteracted the poison, but a strong mermaid's blood would work faster and make Ron's recovery much easier. The poison might not have spread everywhere in his body yet, but he'd been suffering for some time. Cale wanted to do whatever he could to heal Ron without leaving scars behind. His group had needed to hide their identities, so rather than them tracking down the corpse themselves, he'd asked Witira to find it.

We don't have a way to give Ron his arm back, he reflected. *But we should take care of the poison first.*

They could've reattached the limb if it was still around, but Ron didn't have it. Even if he did, the limb was probably rotting by now; many days had passed since it was cut off. Restoring Ron's real arm might've been impossible, but they could attach a *similar* one. *There is a way. Although…*

They would need a necromancer. These people, who dealt with corpses, were also anatomists and technicians. It would've been weird if they weren't, since they regularly employed corpses for their own uses.

Cale was certain that a necromancer whom everybody believed had disappeared was still on the Western Continent. *The problem is, I don't know where.* Unsure of the necromancer's location, Cale shelved the thought for later.

"Commander Archie and the other whales will take you to Hais Island One."

"All right. You'll stay behind?"

Now that the mermaids' allies were gone, the Whale Tribe probably didn't want to miss this opportunity. That was why the Whale King wasn't here; he was out hunting down mermaids.

"Yes. They're escaping to the east, so we'll chase them to the end."

The phrase "to the end" sounded vicious, but Cale didn't think much about it. "Will you exterminate the mermaids?"

"No. This might sound ironic, but if they were all gone, that would also wreck the balance of nature. We need to keep them alive—but we'll rein them in."

"The Whale Tribe is a force to be reckoned with."

Witira didn't respond, instead just smiling at Cale. Though he didn't have a leg to stand on after blowing up the island to help the whales, he didn't like her smile much. The Whale Tribe tended to think that they were the greatest beastfolk alive, but it made sense that the mermaids would hate them ruling the ocean in the name of peace. Cale couldn't help thinking that there were two sides to every story.

Well, it's not my problem.

He only acted based on how he'd benefit from a situation. Thinking about this didn't benefit him, so it was pointless.

"I'm going now," he told Witira. "We're in a bit of a hurry."

Now that they had what they needed, it was time to heal Ron.

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Arriving at Hais Island One, Cale pushed a tent flap aside and entered. "Ron?"

Vicross stood, lips parting as he faced the count's son. "Lord Cale…" Upon seeing Choi Han and Hilsmann come in as well, carrying the mermaid corpse, he closed his mouth.

Ron was sleeping, unaware that people had arrived. A pile of top-grade potions sat next to the assassin's bed.

Cale heaved a sigh. "Vicross, remove the covers."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you lend me a glove?"

Vicross froze midway through moving the blanket. "Are you going to do this yourself?" he asked, back still turned to Cale.

Studying his father's face, Vicross recalled something Ron had told him. Back when he was awake, Ron had emphasized constantly how strong of an organization Arm was.

"That's right. I am."

Vicross took a white glove out of his pocket and handed it to Cale, who put it on and inspected Ron's infected areas. Dousing it with top-grade potions had slowed the spread. Cale motioned to Choi Han, who quickly brought over the royal mermaid's corpse. The cadaver cast a shadow over Ron's body as Cale took out a dagger and cut it open.

Drip. Drip.

Mermaid blood trickled out, one or two drops at a time, before gushing forth. Cale moved the corpse above Ron, ensuring

that blood landed on his sides and thigh. He cut into the mermaid elsewhere to hit all the infected areas.

“Vicross, pour on a top-grade potion.”

“Yes, sir.”

The potion, mermaid blood, and mermaid poison mixed and sizzled. Combined, the blood and potion were visibly evaporating the poison.

“Augh… Urgh…” Ron groaned, his eyelids trembling as the mermaid poison deep in his body diminished. His eyes slowly fluttered open. “Young master.”

“Stop talking. I’m busy.”

Despite Cale’s order, Ron pressed, “Are you healing me right now?”

“Yes.” Cale verified that they’d counteracted the viscous poison adhering to the assassin’s body, then met Ron’s gaze. “The poison’s gone. Now you just need to recover.”

“I see.”

Cale peeled off the bloodied glove and threw it into the fireplace, watching the flames. “Ron.”

Ron looked back at Cale, as did Vicross. “Yes, young master?”

“Nobody left in that organization knows your face. You know what I mean, don’t you?” Facing the old assassin again, he said, “It’s time to head home.”

Since Ron was no longer poisoned, and since the person who’d taken his arm was no longer in this world, Cale felt they could return to the Henituse estate.

The word “home” prompted Ron to close his eyes once more. “Of course.”

Cale nodded and patted Vicross’s shoulder. The young man had been holding his father’s hand for some time now. “Ron can start recovering as soon as we get back.”

With that, Cale left the tent. The sky and sea spread out before him, vast and endless. They’d worked hard all day long, and

now night had fallen at last. The evening seascape had a way of putting one's heart at ease.

Cale smiled. "Guess I'll finally get to relax for a bit." They would need to accommodate Ron's recovery, but at least he was still alive. Cale was confident that upon his return, he could enjoy the slacker life at home for a while.

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"Lord Cale!" Hans greeted Cale with a bright expression. "You're back!"

"Good to see you, Hans."

"Um…what about Mr. Ron?"

"The poison's gone."

"Oh, goodness. Thank you so much!"

"Why are you thanking me?" Cale snapped, then changed the subject. "Was everything fine while I was gone?"

"Yes. There's nothing to report."

Cale noticed that Hans didn't seem at all worried, which suggested that Cale could kick back again, if only for the year.

At least, that was what Cale thought.

Chapter 21:
A Gut Feeling

ONE MONTH. Cale got to relax for exactly one month. He enjoyed himself plenty, but the others didn't see it that way.

"Is he bored?" Raon wondered aloud, watching Cale from the sidelines.

How could the dragon *not* be worried? Cale had been glued to the rocking chair, eating grapes and looking out the window, for the past two hours. The man never said a word, never even frowned. He just plucked the fresh summer fruits off the stem and popped them in his mouth one at a time. Now he stared blankly at the scenery outside, hand frozen partway along its journey to deliver his next grape.

"Strange," muttered Raon. "Very strange."

Hong—now a bit bigger than his sister—swished his tail beside Raon. The two were loafing around on the bed some distance from Cale's rocking chair, so he didn't hear what the dragon was saying.

"He wakes up later and later every day. He also eats less and less, then goes to sleep earlier and earlier. He's barely moving these days." Raon told Hong with a serious face. Then he grimaced. "He's sleeping again!"

Plop. The grape in Cale's hand fell to the ground. The lout had once again fallen asleep in the rocking chair.

Raon looked at the clock; it was six in the evening. Cale had slept for more hours than he'd spent awake today. The dragon began to look nervous. Cale was sleeping more, eating less, and not moving! That had to mean...

"Is he sick?"

Hong's ears perked up as he too began to fret. "No! He can't be!"

To them, Cale seemed paler than usual. Of course, that was only because he kept sitting inside while everybody else tanned beneath the summer sun.

The silver kitten, Ohn, shook her head as she listened to her younger siblings. “I don’t think that’s it.” It seemed to her that Cale just found everything annoying.

“Actually,” Raon said, “this reminds me of something I read in a book Rosalyn gave me a while back!” Having learned all the continent’s languages, Raon was now reading fairy tales that Rosalyn brought him. “There was a story about a prince who fell victim to a curse that made him sleep all the time!”

Hong was shocked. “Whoa!”

In hushed tones so as not to wake Cale, Raon hastily continued, “Yesterday, I checked to see whether he was cursed or poisoned. Thankfully, he wasn’t, but that means he’s probably sick.”

Goodness. Ohn was amazed that Raon had tried to detect those things in the first place.

Not noticing her reaction, the dragon went on, “He got worse when he came back to Harris after visiting the Dark Forest. It might be a side effect of spending time there!”

The group was currently in Harris, and Cale was idling in a two-story house that had been constructed after their last visit to the Dark Forest. In truth, the reason he’d gotten “worse”—as Raon put it—was that he could only really start lazing about once he was away from Deruth and the others in charge of Henituse territory.

There were people in Harris, but they were mainly specialists restoring the town and completing its cemetery. There was no reason for Cale, who made sure to stay inside, to run into them.

“Father, since I’ve taken responsibility for Harris, I want to personally see how its restoration is going.”

“They’re still far from completing the villa you wanted, Cale.”

“There are plenty of houses for the specialists to stay in. I’ll just need one of the two-story ones. At any rate, I think it’d be best for Ron

to recover quietly in a remote village."

"All right. I understand."

Having gotten his father's approval, Cale had rushed to Harris, filled with joy. Clueless to all of this, the black dragon couldn't help but worry.

Someone rapped on the door. *Knock. Knock. Knock.*

"Lord Cale!"

It was Hans. At his call, Ohn and Hong stretched. Raon opened his wings, then folded them back.

Click. The door opened, and they heard Hans sigh as he stopped in his tracks.

"Hello, Hans."

"Nice to see you, Deputy Butler."

"Deputy Butler, I'm hungry!"

Hans furrowed his brow at their responses. His cheeks twitched as his nostrils flared. Clutching at his chest, he cried, "I feel like my heart's going to stop!"

The deputy butler had learned the truth about Ohn, Hong, and Raon as soon as they arrived in Harris. He'd been astonished at first, but he quickly recovered.

Awoken from his nap, Cale opened his eyes and sighed immediately.

Hans whirled to face him. On the verge of tears, he said, "I never knew such adorable, gracious beings existed! I'm so lucky to serve you, Lord Cale!"

What the hell is he talking about? Cale ignored Hans's nonsense. The deputy butler spent more time caring for the younglings, whose ages averaged out to just seven years old, than Cale. The fact that Hans came to Cale's room at every meal seemed directly connected to the animals' presence.

"What is there to eat, Deputy Butler?!"

"We have your favorite tender steak, Mr. Raon—as well as a sweet vanilla ice cream Miss Rosalyn and Vicross made together."

Dang. Those were right up the children's alley. As they chatted with the deputy butler, Cale rose to his feet and let out a groan. *Should I have stretched some?*

After sitting in the rocking chair for so long, his body was stiff. Still, Cale was willing to deal with a little discomfort for the sake of this idle lifestyle. His eyes fell on Raon and Hong, who wore serious looks, then moved to Hans. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes, my lord. Their training must've ended early today."

Nodding, Cale headed downstairs to the first-floor dining room to sit at the long table.

"Young master," Ron greeted him.

"You look healthy now, Ron."

"That I am. Here's your lemonade."

Hmm. Cale sized up the beverage. Ron was pretty efficient even with one arm. Cale lifted the glass of lemonade, which he hadn't drunk in a while.

A dish slammed down on the table. *Bang!*

"Why don't you wash up first?" Vicross growled.

Cale flinched at the scathing criticism—then realized that he *had* showered recently. He looked up at the others present. *Oof, that* is *pretty bad.*

Lark, his siblings, and Vice-Captain Hilsmann were dirty, disheveled, and drenched in sweat.

"Please understand, Chef. We're so tired after training, we need to eat something first!" Hilsmann laughed as he made the excuse, glancing at Cale.

Cale nodded. "Don't mind me. Eat."

With his permission, Hilsmann and the wolves dug right into their meals. Choi Han watched them with satisfaction.

"You do recall that I told you not to overdo it, right?" Cale asked him. He'd been wondering about that, considering the wolf children and Hilsmann trained daily with him in the Dark Forest.

Hilsmann and the wolves jumped, then waited for Choi Han's reaction. Elegant as the vice-captain was in his etiquette, the fork in his hand trembled.

"I do, Mr. Cale," Choi Han replied with a tender smile. "And I'm not pushing them too hard. We're taking it slow."

That satisfied Cale, who didn't want to know any more about it. The wolf children looked at Choi Han as though he were a drill sergeant from hell, yet they sought him out every morning. Rather than children, Cale thought they seemed more like knights—or rather, special forces. Drinking his lemonade, he dismissed the useless subject.

"Will we stay here until winter, Lord Cale?" Rosalyn asked.

He nodded. "Probably. I'm thinking about going home in the spring. Feel free to go wherever you like for your research—and tell me whatever you may need."

Rosalyn was researching and experimenting with magic in the basement. Cale was giving her his full support, since she would be the Magic Tower's ruler in the future.

"Thank you."

"It's nothing." *It'll be good to have lots of people I can ask favors of later.* Networking was a vital skill in his arsenal.

After the meal, Cale returned to his room and sat right back down in the rocking chair with a happy sigh. He wanted to spend the next seventy years sitting here, watching the sunset.

Raon and Hong resumed theorizing about his condition in whispers.

"Did he sigh because he's so bored?"

"I think so. He probably wants to travel."

Ohn shook her head, then saw something light up in the corner. "The communication sphere is glowing!"

Hmm? Cale was confused. *Why would that be? Is someone calling from home?*

"It's red!" Ohn said.

Cale scowled. He'd programmed the device so that any caller who might have an annoying request would trigger a red glow. At the moment, there was only one person it could be: Crown Prince Albert Crossman.

"Oh! It's the crown prince!" Raon flew to the device, peppier than before. "I'll connect him to you right away!"

I'd rather you didn't.

Cale sighed at the dragon's quick reaction and turned his rocking chair to face the device.

"I'm connecting him!" Raon declared.

As he finished his sentence, blue light surrounded the device, and a small screen soon appeared atop it. Albert's beaming face materialized therein.

"Lord Cale! Our kingdom's treasure! Did you have a nice day?"

What's wrong with this guy?

"Why are you acting like this?"

"Why wouldn't I, given our relationship?"

Just what is our "relationship"? Cale finally understood how Albert must've felt when Cale called him "Your Highness, Star of Rowoon."

"Well, we have a pretty good relationship, I guess," Cale replied. Despite what he said, his expression was as indifferent as before.

On the contrary, Albert was still smiling delightedly. "Of course. And since we do…"

Something was off. Cale could *feel* it. His past month of blissful inactivity played like a movie in his head. *I'm sure it's nothing…*

"I was hoping you could do me a favor."

"That's going to be difficult. I'm really busy."

Brushing Cale's lie aside, Albert said, "If you don't help me, I'll be deposed as crown prince and perish."

Cale winced. What Albert spoke of was no laughing matter.

The crown prince had been strengthening his forces, gathering mages from the Kingdom of the Whipper. Bolstered forces meant better protection for Rowoon, so Cale had agreed to lend him a hand. That way, his kingdom and the Henituses' home sweet home would be safe places for him to live peacefully.

Cale studied Albert's face. Although the crown prince's smile was bright, his eyes swam with concern. He hadn't even looked this worried when Cale figured out his identity.

"Let's hear what you have to say," Cale said, sitting up in the rocking chair. "What's happening, Your Highness?"

A chill ran down his spine; he hadn't felt such dread in a long time. Meanwhile, Raon and Hong—who weren't visible to the crown prince—sat next to each other, their eyes sparkling.

"It's the dark elves."

I knew it. Cale had thought he might say that. Closing his eyes, he saw his relaxed life waving goodbye before it disappeared.

The crown prince, who was one-quarter dark elf, continued to speak. "Can you go to the dark elf city?"

Cale didn't open his eyes, but Albert didn't scold him. The prince was well aware that asking Cale to meet with a dark elf was a lofty enough request, let alone sending him to their city.

"There's an item I need you to retrieve," Albert explained. "The dark elves assisting me can't go there at present, nor can I."

Albert was busy honing his own power with the dead mana Cale had given him. His dark elf subordinates were in disguise, attending to their own undercover missions.

"The one who goes needs to be human."

The object he required was expertly crafted, but it was still single-use, and it would activate as soon as someone with even a little dark elf blood touched it. Thus, it could only be transported by beings who lacked the darkness affinity, like humans or animals.

Cale slowly opened his eyes and leaned back in the rocking chair. "What kind of item is it?" The king would probably have

considered his casual posture treasonous, but Albert merely frowned.

“How come I’ve only got a bastard like you on my side?” the prince asked, sighing.

“Excuse me?”

“Just marveling at how I’ve got a heartthrob like you in my corner.” Albert chuckled at his own quip. He’d noticed that the more time he spent with Cale, the more his true personality slipped through. *He knows my weakness, but…* Ironically, that made Cale the only person he could trust. The count’s son had kept his secret for the past two months, at least.

“If it’s too much for you to go now, fine. You sure you can’t send one subordinate to pick it up later?” Cale asked.

Albert had many dark elves under his command. In fact, he was using the communication sphere secretly with the help of a dark elf mage rather than a human mage from the palace.

“I wish I could,” Albert huffed. “Besides, I need to go to the Empire.”

The Empire? Rowoon’s crown prince needs to go to the Empire? Cale made eye contact with Albert.

“The imperial prince invited me to a festival held by the Sun God Twins.”

A festival?

The celebration hadn’t occurred in *Birth of a Hero*’s first five volumes, so Cale wasn’t familiar with it. Even so, it didn’t take long for him to understand Albert’s situation. The Sun God Twins were a saint and saintess, figures who were part of any decent fantasy world. They were said to embody the God of Sun.

Words failed Cale, and he hummed in thought.

Most people would expect a fantasy world’s saint and saintess to be extremely benevolent, acting as symbols of self-sacrifice. Saints and saintesses in *Birth of a Hero* were relatively unique, however. Their standards for good and evil depended on the god they represented.

“The Church of the God of Sun opposes dark elves. I’m worried that there’s a good chance they’ll figure out that I’m a quarter dark elf. If that happens, well…”

“A fiasco would ensue.”

“Indeed.”

Dark elves were despised throughout the Western Continent. Someone with even a distant dark elf relative would immediately be removed as heir presumptive—and might even lose their head—so Cale could see what Albert meant.

“Those twins will try to kill me.”

Cale had no response to that.

The God of Sun was a symbol of light. He hated creatures of the dark, who roamed the shadows where he didn’t exist. The god dealt with those creatures he reviled by burning them to death.

The twins carried out the God of Sun’s teachings, so if they ever found out Albert’s identity, they would come for his life. That was their definition of justice.

I have a bad feeling about this. Cale’s shivers were worse now than when he’d first heard mention of dark elves. Goosebumps covered his entire body. Anticipating the worst, he said pointedly, “Have a nice trip.”

Albert let out a good-natured laugh. “I wasn’t planning on taking you.”

“But why did the imperial prince randomly invite *you* to the Sun God Twins’ celebration? He probably had to contact all the other kingdoms too.”

“Maybe he’s crazy.”

Cale was taken aback. “Aren’t you being too nonchalant in front of me, Your Highness?”

Albert shrugged. “I find it strange as well. From what I heard, the emperor and imperial prince were trying to *eliminate* religion.”

That was correct. The reason Cale had an ominous feeling was that he knew that the imperial prince disliked the Church of the God of Sun. To secure his future control of the Empire, he’d

increased his power through alchemical studies. Why would someone like him be acknowledging the church, which was outside his control? Moreover, the Church of the God of Sun *knew* that the emperor and imperial prince were trying to push the faith out of the country.

"Now the prince wants to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Church of the God of Sun becoming the Empire's official religion," Albert continued. "Does that make sense to you?"

"Not at all."

"You know what's even funnier?"

"What?"

"It's apparently also been five hundred years since the Alchemist's Bell Tower was built, so they're commemorating that as well."

"Ha!" Cale barked a disbelieving laugh. "They're allowing a festival dedicated to alchemy at the same time?"

"They must be. The imperial prince went around inviting people to attend."

Cale and Albert held eye contact.

"It smells fishy," Cale admitted.

"Definitely fishy." Albert smirked. "Don't you get the feeling something will unfold during the celebrations?"

It did feel that way. Or perhaps the celebration's organizers had a hidden agenda. Cale feigned ignorance, however. "I'm not sure."

Religion was a common theme explored in fantasy worlds, but it didn't appeal to Cale; he didn't think much about it. *And I just don't want to get involved with this. It'll be annoying.*

On the other hand, helping Albert would probably be fine as long as the church didn't give Cale grief. He looked past the video screen at Raon, who tilted his head quizzically. *If some religious figure tries to boss me around… No, that's not happening.*

Nothing like that would happen as long as he was with Raon, Choi Han, and Rosalyn. If all else failed, he figured he could just

blow up the problem, as he had Hais Island Five. He was a bit braver than before.

His facade hadn't worked on the prince. "Liar. Regardless, I need your help. I'll reward you in kind."

Cale didn't respond immediately to Albert's sincere request. The crown prince had probably accepted the invitation because his temperament didn't allow him to send one of the younger princes in his stead.

"Your Highness, Star of Rowoon…"

It sounded like he was going to refuse. Albert held back a sigh—but Cale's next words made him grin.

"Where is their city?"

No matter how much Cale thought about it, he was the only one Albert could trust to do this, beyond those few people helping the crown prince behind the scenes. Cale had no choice; he couldn't let the crown prince die.

Albert chuckled. "You'll need to head west."

That answer reminded Cale of a specific location—one of the Five Wonders. "The dark elves live in the Land of Death?"

"You really are very clever."

Although the Land of Death was named similarly to Death Canyon, another one of the Five Wonders, it was unique. While the other Wonders were natural, the Land of Death was a product of history. It was where the necromancers of the past waged their final battle using skeleton armies. Located in the desert, the Land of Death had red sand during the day and black sand at night. New dunes formed daily.

"Yes, the dark elf city is there," Albert confirmed. "You just need to get the item from the mayor."

The Land of Death—also called Death Desert—was said to be so hot that even plants couldn't survive. Moreover, it was *summer*.

"Hmm. Say, Your Highness…?"

"What is it?" The hint of tenderness in Albert's voice was genuine. He wasn't posturing or strategizing.

“Can I *not* go?” Cale asked cautiously. Silence filled the room for a moment, then Cale shook his head. “Never mind. I’ll go, since I said I would.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ll give you a guide. You’ll need to be accompanied by someone who knows how to navigate the desert.” It was obvious the guide would be a dark elf. “The only dark elf who can go right now is my aunt. My mother’s sister. She may be just one person, but she’s in charge of all the dark elves under my command. You can trust her abilities.”

Cale nodded somberly. He looked so sincere that Albert even felt sorry for him. “Another thing, Your Highness.”

“Yes, Lord Cale?”

“I can ask you to cover any travel expenses, right? Could I stock up on magic ice? I really hate the heat. And can I choose my reward again? This time, I’ll opt for money.”

Once Cale finished his rapid-fire questions, Albert studied him a moment. “Sure. Do whatever you want.”

Cale grinned. “I’m sure you’re aware, but I always complete tasks with unbelievable efficiency, so I’ll expect a greater reward to match.”

“I know. That’s why I said to do whatever you want.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Please leave it to me.”

“All right. I’ll put my faith in you.”

Cale and Albert discussed a few more things, then ended the call. The communication sphere’s light winked out, and Raon and Hong approached Cale.

“Are we traveling again, human?”

“The desert’s scorching hot! You can’t pass out!”

When Hong said as much, Raon stared at Cale like it was already over.

Cale didn’t pay that any mind. Pointing to the communication sphere, he ordered Raon, “Connect it.”

“Again?”

“Yes. To somewhere else, though.”

“Where to?”

Cale smiled at the dragon. This world had another powerful religion besides the Church of the God of Sun. Not worship of the God of the Moon, or the God of Darkness, but of eternal darkness —
a state that kept people from seeing the sun ever again.

Death. Death was stronger than the sun.

“To the Sten estate.”

The crown prince probably couldn’t speak to acolytes of the God of Death despite recognizing the deity’s power. He wouldn’t be able to trust them, lest he risk exposing his identity.

But Cale knew a priestess many people hadn’t heard of. Even after being excommunicated by the Temple of the God of Death, she was still treasured by the god himself. Meanwhile, the God of Death currently lacked a saint or saintess. Why was that?

When the call connected, the crazy priestess appeared on-screen. “Hello? Lord Cale?”

“Hello, Kage. It’s been a while. Any chance you’ve got an abundance of free time?”

Kage observed him for a beat before shaking her head in exasperation. “I had a bad feeling about today. I don’t remember what I dreamed about, but I woke up with a real bitter taste in my mouth. Luckily, Taylor doesn’t need my help now that he’s gonna be named the official heir.”

Cale had heard that Taylor Sten had regained his position as successor and would soon be announced as such.

“So, yeah, I have nothing to do,” Kage admitted, smiling. “How can I help you?”

As if her answer had been a foregone conclusion, Cale quickly responded, “You need to come with us to the Land of Death.”

“On it.”

Even when Cale name-dropped the destination, Kage didn't hesitate one bit. This was the same woman who had put her life on the line for Taylor, her best friend. Now Cale understood why the God of Death continued to bless her despite her excommunication. She embodied something even greater than death.

"I owe you for everything you've done for us."

Cale smiled in response. "See you soon, Kage."

The call ended, and he shot to his feet.

"Good, human! To be healthy, you need to move around!"

"What're you talking about?"

He strode past the baffled Raon and opened the door. Hans was coming down the corridor with a tray of fruit.

"Hans."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Tell everyone except the wolves to gather."

"Mr. Ron and the chef as well?"

Cale hadn't realized that the dark elf city was in the Land of Death, where necromancers had last been seen. He thought he might find some there, but he was only half sure. *Wouldn't it be better to prepare, just in case?*

"Yes, get everyone. We're heading out."

Two days later, Cale left Henituse territory. He'd only gotten to enjoy slacking for a month. Now, his party's two carriages were headed toward the capital.

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Cale didn't enter the capital; he just stayed in the closest village.

"The Land of Death…and dark elves?" Kage repeated, processing what he had told her.

“Yeah. What do you think?”

The relaxed Cale was cooling himself with an elegant fan; one might think he was here to enjoy a spot of tea rather than strategize for their dangerous plan.

“What do you mean, what do I think? Of course I’ll go, Lord Cale.”

She was feeling much more at ease. *I couldn’t remember my dream, so I figured this might be something major,* she thought. The plan Cale had described didn’t sound like anything big.

“I just need to bless the item you get from the dark elves?” she asked.

“Yes. I want you to bestow the God of Death’s blessing on it once a day until we reach the capital.”

Between the dark elves and the God of Death’s blessing, Cale’s thoughts were a complicated mess. Although dark elves were weak against the God of Sun, the God of Death outstripped him. The God of Sun had significantly more worshippers, but devotee numbers didn’t determine a god’s strength.

“Lord Cale.”

“Yes?”

“Is someone going to assassinate a priest of the God of Sun?”

“You don’t think *I* would do that?”

“You have no reason to antagonize the church. If anything, they’d welcome you. You’re wealthy, you have an Ancient Power, and—most importantly—you’re a good person.”

Cale didn’t argue. The part about him being a “good person” notwithstanding, he *was* definitely the type the Church of the God of Sun approved of.

A knock came at the door, followed by a strong, husky voice. “Let’s go! Hurry!”

Hearing that voice, Cale stood. “Kage, I have someone I’d like you to meet.” He went over and twisted the door handle.

Outside was the woman Cale had met two days earlier. She was about his height and visibly slender, although she wore a robe. “Oh my! You have a guest, Lord Cale?”

“She’s part of my group.”

“Is she now?”

Kage scrutinized the woman, who seemed to switch between speaking to Cale formally and informally.

“You told her everything?” the woman asked him.

“That I did. I explained where we’re going and what we’ll bring back.”

The woman smiled; that was *all* Cale had told Kage.

Cale also went back and forth between formal and casual speech with this woman. As Kage wondered who she was, the woman trotted over and extended her hand. She was refreshingly beautiful.

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Tasha.”

While Kage shook her hand, Cale closed the door with a *click*.

Tasha leaned in to whisper in Kage’s ear. “I’m a dark elf—the guide for this trip.” Their eyes met, and she continued, “I just changed my skin color now.” Tasha watched Kage, gauging her reaction.

Smiling, Kage introduced herself as well. “Nice to meet you, Tasha. I’m Kage, an excommunicated priestess of the God of Death.”

The words “God of Death” prompted Tasha to glance over at Cale. He shook his head to indicate that he hadn’t told Kage about the crown prince.

“Since we have a new party member, how about we celebrate later?” Tasha said.

“Ooh! Have you got booze?” Kage asked.

“All kinds!”

Before the women could get too carried away, Cale said, “Let’s go, Tasha.”

She met his gaze. Everybody in Cale's group knew Tasha was a dark elf, but only Cale, Raon, and the cats knew she was the crown prince's aunt.

"Will we use the capital's teleportation office?" Kage asked.

Tasha shook her head. "My disguise magic might get detected. We'll have to take a carriage."

"Ah."

"I have an identification card." Tasha held it up, confirming that they could cross the kingdom's borders. "Everything but my name and age is fake."

Kage found the honest Tasha odd but likable. She read the ID. *Tasha. Twenty-nine years old.*

The dark elf chuckled. "Oh, go ahead and add a zero to my age." She was two hundred and ninety.

Kage peered back at her. "Mind if I call you my older sister?"

"I knew I liked you! You're only the third human who didn't call me *Grandma* after finding out my age. Refer to me however you'd like."

"Okay, Big Sis."

Arms crossed, Cale waited for them to wrap it up. Kage was composed right now, but on the whole, she was a free spirit who loved to drink. Tasha seemed to be the same way. *Things will be fine...won't they?*

The two women already had their arms around each other. "Hurry up," Cale said, prompting both of them to look his way. "It's so hot."

‹Liar! Thanks to temperature magic, you aren't hot at all! I even made you a cooling artifact, weak human!›

Raon was right; Cale *was* lying. He felt like he was standing outside in mid-autumn.

‹Anyway, I'm going to stay invisible and follow you. I'm always by your side!›

That meant Cale could ask him for magic anytime it got too hot. It was even better than an air conditioner.

“Guess we’re off to Karo, then.”

Soon enough, Cale boarded his carriage. It was bound for the Kingdom of Karo, which was south of Brek and northwest of the Mogor Empire. The new golden plaque the crown prince had given him was tucked away in his pocket.

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The carriage door opened with a small *click*.

“This heat’s no joke,” Cale muttered.

A dry breeze rushed through his outfit, which had been tailored for desert use. The sun was setting, but the area was still hot.

“Would you like a cold lemonade, Lord Cale?”

“No, thanks. You can drink it.”

Ron, Vicross, and Choi Han—who carried Ohn and Hong in his arms—got out after Cale.

“Tasha,” Cale called.

Tasha jumped down from the driver’s seat. Cale’s group was at the Kingdom of Karo’s western border, in a village in Deburri territory right next to the Land of Death.

“Is the Land of Death right outside the western gate?”

“Uh-huh.”

Raon’s excited voice filled Cale’s mind. *‹The desert! This is my first time seeing it! I’ve read about it, but it really is different firsthand! You need to travel to experience everything for yourself, human!›*

Although Cale ignored the concerning things Raon was saying, he winced.

Tasha noticed his movement. With a wry smile, she asked, “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

No human had ever returned from the Land of Death. That, along with the legend about necromancers, had earned the area its name.

“And it’s weird that there’s a gate, right?” Tasha said, her smile twitching. “Nobody would want to go out there.”

“It’s definitely weird,” Rosalyn chimed in, emerging from the carriage.

“I agree,” Kage said.

Before Tasha could reply, Cale said, “I think I know why it’s there.”

He pointed to the castle wall, though the shabby old structure barely deserved that title. Several people were trying to climb it.

“Capture them!”

“Catch them—and kill them!”

They heard people scream as the soldiers laughed.

“What’s going on?” Choi Han asked.

Smile souring, Tasha checked for potential eavesdroppers before she replied, “The ruler of the Deburri territory taxes his people at a very high rate. The villagers here have an immensely hard time paying. But there’s another kingdom past the desert—not to mention the sea, which would enable them to go wherever they wanted.”

The people scaling the wall very clearly looked like peasants, so there was no need for her to explain further.

“They made the gate to catch anyone who tries running away, then,” Cale said.

“And the ones trying to sneak out. Not many people attempt it, mind you. But since the Deburri family began ruling this region, hiking tax rates up and up, you consistently see a few.”

There were always bound to be far more bad rulers than good ones.

“Let’s go to the gate,” Cale said, walking toward it.

It was small for a castle gate, but two knights and several soldiers were stationed there. A stiff knight examined Cale’s group, taking note of their high-quality garments. “What can we do for you?” he asked, keeping his tone respectful.

Cale looked over at the soldiers. They were mercilessly beating the two people who’d failed to escape to the desert.

“Aaaugh! Let me live! Please!”

“Stupid bastards! You thought we wouldn’t be here because it’s dinner hour? If we went to eat a little earlier, maybe you’d have made it, idiots!”

“I-I’m sorry, sir! I’m very sorry! I did it because I have no m-money! Aaaah!”

Cale heard the sound of blows. “We’re trying to go through the gate,” he said, handing the knight a gold coin minted in Karo.

Initially taken aback by Cale’s unruffled demeanor, the knight assumed a twisted smile and shoved the coin in his pocket. “Open the gate!” he shouted to the soldier beside it. Then he looked at the man who’d bribed him—seemingly a wealthy noble—and sneered. “May you return safely.”

That was the best thing to say to people entering the Land of Death.

Creeeak. The sound of the gate reached Cale’s ears.

As it slowly opened, the knight added, “I pray your blood doesn’t stain the sand any redder.”

Cale could see that sand, a brighter crimson than the sunset or his own hair. The rolling dunes were like mountains of blood droplets.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t,” Cale responded, chucking another gold coin his way.

The knight caught it. “Huh?”

“Let them go.”

“Oho…”

That nasty smile had returned to the man's face. A proper knight wouldn't have opened this gate without the appropriate authorization. But these knights and soldiers were all the same: They didn't care much about the rules of the region. Bad rulers always gave rise to bad subordinates.

"Heh heh. Guess you're a real benevolent lord."

"I'm just being nosy." Seeing the two peasants stagger away, Cale made for the gate. He left the knight with a parting promise. "I'll give you another gold coin if I return alive."

"Heh heh heh! Looking forward to it."

Having heard the knight's superficial answer, full of mockery as it was, Cale entered the desert alongside his companions.

Creeak! Bang! The castle gate shut without giving Cale the time to change his mind. His entire entourage was staring at him.

"What're you looking at?"

Cale disregarded Choi Han's complicated expression. He was already unhappy with what he'd just done; he didn't want to get wrapped up in others' emotions as well.

"Hurry up and lead us there, Tasha."

Someone else might've balked at Cale's icy tone, but Tasha stood next to him with a bright smile. "Of course, of course! You're such a good person, Lord Cale."

"'Good person'? No, just irresponsible." Seeing that Tasha was about to say something else, he added, "Quickly."

"Gracious. I understand." Tasha moved ahead of him. "Let's go for a bit of a run!"

She darted forward, kicking up sand. Cale kicked off the sand after her, and his body shot forward. Choi Han followed, still holding the cats, while Rosalyn used haste magic on herself and Kage to pursue them.

"Need me to support you, Father?"

"Nonsense. Your father's still just as nimble."

Ron and Vicross moved last, but Ron was as fast as Choi Han, moving through the desert with lighter steps than anyone.

“Isn’t it a blast to run in the evening? Ha ha ha! Let’s get as far as possible from that gate!” Tasha shouted as she zoomed across the desert. Cale was in awe. She wasn’t running using magic or even her physical strength.

She’s got an elemental.

Dark elves lived according to the laws of nature. Being elves, they could also handle elementals. That was what kept them tied to nature despite their darkness affinity.

Pssh. Pssh. Sand sprayed into the air as Cale and his companions ran. The red grains amazed Cale; they really looked like blood.

The group ran behind Tasha for a while longer. Once they were a good distance from the castle gate, she finally stopped. Peering at the sunset, she instructed them, “Take a gander at what’s in front of you, please.”

Huh? A gander at what? As Cale tried to figure out what she meant, the last sliver of sun sank over the horizon. A dark ripple surged forth, turning all the red sand black. It was a breathtaking sight.

“Wow.”

“Meow!”

“Meeeeeow!”

“It really is a Wonder.”

The vast sea of black sand glittered all around them.

Raon was especially enthralled. *‹It’s the same color I am! This desert is handsome, just like me!›*

Cale followed up with his own sentiments. “It looks like the night sky draped over the desert.”

“Right?” Tasha grinned. “And if night descends to the earth, where will the earth go?”

Cool gusts blew past them. *Fssh. Fsssh.* The sand skittered about in the wind, creating dunes.

Cale sighed. He understood her question. Watching the black sand move in the breeze, he answered, “If night descends to the earth,” he said, gaze sliding to Tasha, “then the dark elves must’ve gone *deeper* than the night.”

“Correct!” Tasha tugged off the necklace she wore and threw it to the ground.

Rosalyn gasped.

Tasha’s appearance changed in a flash. She had black hair, dark eyes, and rich umber skin that glowed like the black sand. She was a black pearl personified. Previously, Tasha had looked like a typical citizen of the Western Continent—but now they were in the middle of the desert, away from prying eyes. Having returned to her true appearance, she shouted, “Without further ado, I’ll be taking you to the dark elves’ city!”

Wind swirled in Tasha’s hand as her elemental cycled the sand even faster, and a large hatch appeared in the ground where one dune had stood. Using all her strength, Tasha lifted the circular hatch.

“It’s underground!” Rosalyn exclaimed, awestruck.

If night had descended on the earth, the earth and its residents likewise needed to descend.

“I’ll go first. Could the last person please pull the hatch closed?” With that, Tasha gracefully jumped into the hole.

“I’ll close it at the end,” Choi Han told them.

Hearing that, Cale took a step backward. The hole was so dark, he couldn’t see anything. *I won’t fall to my death, will I?*

‹Let’s go, human!›

It should be fine. Raon is with me. Cale looked back at his waiting companions, then jumped into the hole.

“Whoa!”

To his surprise, the hole led to a *slide*. He felt something on his back; Raon was clinging to him as he slid.

‹This is fun, human! I want to do it again!›

He continued sliding down into what felt like an endless abyss. Finally, he saw a light at the end. It was very bright.

Poof.

Cale landed on a pile of soft cotton, and the dark elves' city spread out before him. The ceiling was supported by large pillars, with tons of brilliant lights floating overhead. The beautiful underground settlement also contained elements of nature, like water and trees.

Someone reached out to help him up; it was Tasha. "Welcome to the City of Death."

The City of Death. Cale took her hand and stood. "It's nice."

His concise remark made Tasha grin.

Poof. Poof. Poof.

Cale's entire group likewise slid down, fell into the cotton, and stood back up. As they did so, they all had the same reaction.

"Wow."

"Meeeow!"

"Jeez."

They were amazed. They'd imagined a dark, gloomy place, but the cityscape shone ever so brightly. Dazzling lights roamed the extremely high ceiling. There were tall trees, a creek off to one side, and fields of grain on either side of the water.

Rosalyn was in disbelief. "How can there be such a place?"

She had no bias against the dark elves, but still, learning that their hidden community was in the Land of Death had given her a negative impression. Furthermore, Rosalyn drew upon mana from nature. She couldn't help feeling leery of dark elves, who gained their power from the dead.

Next to Rosalyn, Kage mumbled, "Death's part of nature too."

Rosalyn glanced at the crazy priestess, who was taking this sight in stride.

This made sense to Cale. He turned toward Tasha. “Elementals?”

“The power of nature,” she replied, but she *was* referring to the elementals.

As dark beings who also belonged to the nature-adjacent elven race, dark elves could handle elementals while also using dead mana.

Seeing a trio of dark elves approach them, Tasha opened her arms. “Hey! Good to see you!”

When they heard her voice, the three dark elves broke into a run.

“Punk!”

“You didn’t send us a single letter for five years, and now you pop up with a ‘good to see you’?!”

As two of the dark elves berated Tasha, the third greeted Cale respectfully. “Nice to meet you. I’ll guide you to your accommodations right away.”

“Shawn! Long time no see!” Tasha greeted the dark elf.

He paid her no mind, telling Cale, “Please follow me.”

“Aw, come on, Shawn. Are you mad at me?”

Again, he flat-out ignored Tasha. “Do you have luggage? If you do, we’ll transport it for you.”

“No luggage,” Cale replied. “Lead the way, if you would.”

Shawn observed Cale, who was smiling gently. “I’ve heard you’re a nobleman. Feel free to speak with me as you would a friend.”

“Sure. I’ll do that.” Cale wasn’t one to reject such an offer.

His group, along with the three dark elves, entered the stronghold—otherwise known as the City of Death. It gave them a clearer view…and even more reason to be shocked.

“It’s better developed than most places, isn’t it?” Tasha said, preening. The City of Death *did* seem about as well developed as most of Rowoon’s large cities.

Cale didn't reply to that, too fixated on something else. "There are humans here too."

Tasha simply beamed at him.

As he'd expected, they had spotted other dark elves as soon as they entered the city. Yet for every ten or so dark elves, there was one human.

If the gruesome stories were to be believed, no one who ventured into the Land of Death made it back alive. Rumor had it that it was their blood that dyed the sand red. Some even thought that the necromancers' curse had caused their deaths.

Aha, Cale thought. "Now I get why the people who ran off into the desert never returned."

The dark elves with them smiled, and Tasha shrugged. "We couldn't leave them to die. We know what it's like to be on the run."

As a people who had once fled for their lives, the dark elves empathized with the ones who'd escaped to the Land of Death. These humans had been so desperate that they'd retreated into the desert despite knowing it would spell their doom. The dark elves had felt the same way at one point.

Cale was truly in awe now. "Amazing."

It really was. The places where dark elves lived were associated with death, so although they'd never harmed humans, people had chased them out. Yet even after receiving such treatment, they had welcomed humans into the fold. A stark contrast to regular elves, who hated getting involved with humans. It was probably the very reason that nature and the elementals hadn't left the dark elves.

"I see why nature's so fond of you."

Rather than shunning dark elves, nature had created a space in its embrace for them. Cale didn't miss the fact that the humans in the City of Death looked cheerful and bright.

"Well, it's all thanks to this land's unique nature," Shawn told Cale, who turned toward him. Pushing up his glasses, the dark elf continued to speak, his gaze landing on Rosalyn momentarily.

“This desert is called the Land of Death. We don’t know the reason, but death’s aura is present here. And we’ve noticed a phenomenon that occurs twice a year: a small amount of dead mana rises from the sand.”

Cale glanced sidelong at Kage, who nodded. “This desert is full of the aura of death,” she said. “It isn’t evil, though. The aura follows the laws of nature. It just lingers here for a bit before dissipating.”

“You must be a priestess of the God of Death,” Shawn said.

“I was excommunicated!”

Her bubbly response gave Shawn pause, whereas Cale nodded along.

“Maybe the God of Death bestowed this land upon the dark elves,” Cale said, gesturing to the dark elves around him. “Just because you need dead mana as creatures of darkness doesn’t mean you’re evil. Why, there are countless mad and malicious humans out there, and most of them don’t even *have* an affinity for darkness.”

“Right you are, young master,” Ron agreed, drawing Shawn’s attention. When the old assassin smiled at him, Shawn awkwardly smiled back.

Surveying the group, Tasha finished the conversation with a short and sweet conclusion. “At any rate, the City of Death is a great place to live.” That was the bottom line.

Cale and his entourage soon arrived at their accommodations, which proved to be a decent inn.

“This is the first time we’ve had guests here,” Shawn told him.

“Really?”

The dark elf nodded. “We built this inn for visitors in case we found other dark elf communities. We haven’t managed to find one yet, and the others who come here really aren’t in any state to stay at an inn.”

“What kind of state are they usually in?” Choi Han asked, curious.

Shawn answered without missing a beat. “Malnourished, or close to death. Some are even terrified at coming to the Land of Death and meeting dark elves like us. We immediately move them to a hospital ward.” He approached the innkeeper, who was human. “You have your first guests.”

“Oh my! Finally, some patrons!” The old man, who appeared to be in his seventies, clapped as he welcomed the group. “Well, well! Welcome, esteemed visitors! I may not look it, but I’ve been in this city the longest among the humans here! I know the layout as well as my dark elf brethren!”

“For the record, Shawn and I are the same age,” Tasha whispered to the group.

Cale shook hands with the innkeeper. “Take good care of us while we’re here.”

“Of course! Welcome to the City of Life.”

“Sorry, the City of Life?”

The old man grinned in the face of Cale’s confusion. “Yes, sir! That’s what we call it.”

“That name suits it much better,” Cale replied. Then he told Shawn, “Now that we know where we’re staying, I want to go shopping right away.”

“They’re already waiting for you.”

The dark elves’ market was in a three-story building. Tasha and Shawn led Cale and Choi Han there; the invisible Raon came with them as well. The others hung back at the inn.

“This building is for the city’s administrators.”

Dark elves were different from elves in this respect as well. Elves lived like hermits in the wild, whereas dark elves seemed to have an economic structure similar to humans’. Plenty of human youths were working in the administration building right alongside them.

Tasha noticed what Cale was looking at. “Few humans who come here know how to read or write. Most want to learn technical skills or farming techniques. But all the human children born in this city receive the same education as young dark elves.”

At times, Cale wondered which part of the Western Continent was most similar to Earth. *This is probably the one.* This underground city, where people gathered after fleeing the oppressive world in which they lived, reminded him most strongly of it.

"This is the mayor's office," Shawn said, pointing at a simple wooden door. "The eldest dark elf usually manages the city. Our current mayor is 521 years old."

Click, click, click!

The doorknob rattled urgently. Then, *bang!* The door to the mayor's office burst open, and an old dark elf came flying out. He was a well-dressed, tidy-looking fellow with a white beard and white hair, which should have stood out amid his rich brown skin—but his complexion was downright pale.

"I-I know this energy!" he shouted.

"Sir?!" Shawn blurted out, already anxious. He glanced at Cale's group before rushing to the mayor. "Sir, what's going on?"

Tasha hurried over as well, her demeanor a bit different than Shawn's. "Grandpa, what's wrong?"

Grandpa? That word gave Cale pause. Was Tasha calling the mayor that because she was close to him? Or was she actually related to him? If they were family, Cale would finally understand why Crown Prince Albert seemed to have a deep connection to this city.

"Your granddaughter's here for the first time in ages!" Tasha declared. "Why do you look so surprised?"

She really was related to the mayor. *I knew someone like the crown prince would have a fairly noble background.* Albert's dark elf relatives also gave off a highborn impression.

As Cale looked over at Tasha and the mayor in shock, he locked eyes with the old dark elf.

"Um, I-I…"

His voice was shaking. It gave Cale a bad feeling.

The mayor pulled out a handkerchief with a trembling hand and wiped his forehead, then took a deep breath. “My good lord, I heard you had a dragon’s dead mana on you.”

This was strange. While Cale was a noble, his rank wasn’t so high that the dark elves’ mayor ought to treat him with such respect.

“If I may, Lord Cale,” the mayor continued, “are you perhaps… a dragon?”

Shawn and Tasha froze, while Choi Han’s eyes wavered.

“No,” Cale said flatly. “I’m not a dragon.”

Hearing his reply, Shawn and Tasha were relieved, but the mayor felt differently. “So you say, yet I feel a great dragon’s aura in your vicinity, my lord! The power that presides over nature is positively emanating from you!”

This elf wasn’t half a millennium old for nothing. His remarks amused the invisible Raon, who floated behind Cale. *‹That old dark elf is pretty smart.›*

Cale didn’t care; he was answering the mayor honestly. “Again, I’m not a dragon.”

“That’s very odd.” The dark elf finally calmed down a bit. Mopping his brow some more, he said, “When I met a great dragon in the past, I had the same feeling as I do now. My elemental, who was by my side when it happened, agrees that it’s similar.”

This time, it was Cale’s turn to balk. *What did he say he met? And his elemental met it with him?* Elementals were the most difficult beings to mislead.

‹What? A dragon?› Raon said, fascinated.

At five-plus centuries old, the mayor had definitely lived long enrequestedough to see a dragon at least once.

A low, robotic woman’s voice broke the tension. “I am here as you .”

For a second, Cale thought he was hearing a GPS navigation system.

“Shall I wait here, sir?” the woman asked the mayor.

Cale turned around, only to see a person covered head to toe by a black robe. In his head, Raon said, *‹Hmm? She’s a human. Why does she have the darkness affinity?›*

I knew it. Humans could only obtain the power of darkness in a few ways; Cale’s intuition had been right. Regardless, he had other priorities at the moment.

“You really, *really* aren’t a great dragon?” The mayor was still having a hard time believing him.

“No, Mr. Mayor.”

With a sigh, Cale entered the office, and his group followed him inside. He looked meaningfully at Choi Han, who picked up on the signal and quickly closed the door.

Inside the quiet office, Cale said a single word: “Raon.”

Chapter 22:
It's Real

R*AON?* The dark elves were confused. They weren't familiar with the word Cale had uttered with a somber expression.

"Are you sure I can come out?"

Shawn flinched; he could hear a young voice coming from beside Cale, but he didn't see anyone.

"Ho ho ho!"

Hearing the mayor laugh, Shawn whipped around. The mayor chortled on nervously, wiping sweat off his palms with his handkerchief.

Is he really a dragon? Shawn wondered.

He heard the young voice again. "Here I am."

Seeing something behind Cale, Tasha clapped her hands over her mouth and let out a muffled cry. "Goodness!"

"Why aren't you coming out?" Cale asked.

None of the dark elves paid him any heed; they were focused on the face peeking out from behind him. Raon wouldn't budge, so Cale huffed and stepped to the side, revealing the dragon to the dark elves.

Tasha was so shocked, she struggled for words. "What the…?!"

She turned to look at Shawn, itching to ask her friend if she was hallucinating. Shawn was frozen solid, as though sleeping with his eyes open. Doubting that she'd get any confirmation from him, Tasha turned to her grandfather. The mayor—who had seemed like the person this revelation would shock most—was calm, albeit sweating profusely.

"Grandpa—"

With a pious expression, the old man fell to his knees. "I wouldn't dare greet a great dragon standing on my feet."

Cale heaved a sigh at the mess in front of him. He knew elves revered dragons, but he hadn't expected the same of dark elves. *Eh, it's not like I had a chance of misleading him if his elemental already met a dragon.*

As creatures possessing a strong affinity with nature, elementals were sensitive to mana and thus rarely wrong. If the mayor's elemental had really seen a dragon and confirmed that Cale had a draconic aura, the mayor would never have believed there wasn't a dragon in Cale's group, despite his claims to the contrary. Elementals were accurate enough to identify an aura they had experienced only once. Since this one was familiar with a draconic aura, Cale's hands were tied.

Choi Han stood at the door like a guardsman, an awkward smile on his face. The mysterious robed woman was also standing there, stiff as a scarecrow.

Meanwhile, Raon approached the three dark elves and puffed out his chest. Cale watched him with interest. *What's he trying to do?*

"I am the great Raon Mir!"

Jeez. All things considered, he was doing a decent job of introducing himself.

"This year, I am a grand total of four years old!"

Did you have to tell them your age?

"Oh, great dragon!" The mayor prostrated himself before Raon, treating the dragon's every utterance like the declaration of a god.

Cale was getting a headache. *How should I handle this?*

Raon's introduction wasn't over yet. "I'm guarding Cale Henituse because he's a weakling!"

I don't think that's the case...

The dragon seemingly intended to continue sharing irrelevant information. Heaving a sigh, Cale walked over and stroked his head. Raon finally stopped talking, and Cale glanced at Tasha. "Looks like you'll need to help the mayor get back up."

Tasha gasped, finally coming to her senses.

At the same time, the mayor piped up, “No, I can’t do that. The dragon I met last time said that standing in front of him was asking for a fight. I don’t wish to be attacked by a dragon!”

What kind of dragon did he meet? Cale was beginning to think the mayor was more terrified of dragons than he was deferent.

“You can stand,” Raon assured him. “I don’t like people kneeling!”

Hearing that, the mayor jumped to his feet.

Cale lifted his hands and gave a loud clap, which drew everyone’s attention. “Let’s all calm down.” He then gestured to the couches as though this were *his* office. “Everybody, please sit.”

Avoiding the chair reserved for the mayor, Cale walked to a couch and sat down.

The mayor followed him with a placid expression, no longer sweating. He then indicated his own chair, the one Cale had left for him. “Please sit over here, great dragon.”

As Cale gaped at the mayor in disbelief, Raon responded, “I don’t want to. You sit there!”

The dragon flew over to sit next to Cale, then put his head on Cale’s knee as if it belonged there. All too keen to obey, the mayor trotted over to his seat.

Feeling as though things were settling down, Cale asked Shawn, “Could you bring me a glass of water? I’m thirsty.”

“Right away.” Shawn was thirsty as well. And although he appeared to be the calmest person in the room, he was also the palest.

Cale put a hand on Shawn’s back. “The dragon is a secret.”

“A secret!” Raon echoed from behind him.

Shawn dipped his head. “Your secret is safe with me. I swear it on my connection to the elementals.”

For a dark elf, that was similar to a Vow of Death. An elf who couldn’t interact with elementals had to live in despair for the rest

of their life.

Raon pivoted to the mayor and Tasha, who made the same vow.

“I swear on my connection to the elementals that I’ll keep this secret, great dragon.”

“I won’t say a word. I’ll also swear it on my connection to the elementals.”

Relief washed over Cale at last, and he leaned back on the couch.

Shawn soon returned with water, as well as a tray of fancy refreshments. The mayor took a sip of tea, then said, “My name is Obante, my lord.”

“Cale Henituse.”

The mayor was still being very formal with Cale. He must have felt obliged, considering Cale was with a dragon and they seemed to have a fairly close relationship. The dragon Obante had met previously had been temperamental and egotistical; that was Obante’s only experience with the creatures.

“Does Albert know, Lord Cale?”

Hearing the mayor use the crown prince’s name so casually confirmed Cale’s suspicions that they were related. “No, His Highness isn’t aware.”

“Whew. I was afraid he’d kept me in the dark about this precious being. I assume we must keep it a secret from him also?”

“I’ll take care of that.” Cale was implying that Obante had better keep his vow.

Obante’s face fell, but he nodded. “Of course. You do have my word. By the way, I heard you didn’t receive a thorough explanation of the item he requested.”

“That’s correct.”

“For your reference, it looks like a bracelet.”

Unlike Tasha and Shawn, who still seemed wary of Raon, the mayor was getting right to the point. His five centuries of

experience truly added up.

Unfortunately, Cale had no intention of learning more. “I don’t need to know, Mr. Mayor.” His face was so devoid of desire, let alone curiosity, that it rendered Obante speechless. “Will it be all right if multiple humans touch it?”

The mayor furrowed his brow in suspicion. “Why do you ask?”

“One of my companions can bestow the God of Death’s blessing.”

Obante’s expression brightened right away.

Noticing this, Cale smiled. “I hope to bless the bracelet every day until I can hand it over to His Highness. At least two humans will need to handle it.”

“If that is why you ask, I must thank you. Those blessings will reduce the risk of Albert being caught. They may also give him an opportunity to escape if he finds himself in danger.”

Though no one among the God of Death’s acolytes was at the level of a saint or saintess, Kage’s blessing would be anything but weak. Cale figured it would be just as effective as the Sun God Twins’ blessings. “Might as well be thorough,” he said.

“Absolutely. I’ll leave it to you, Lord Cale.” Obante went on to explain where things stood. “The item will be finished tomorrow.”

“We should be able to leave anytime afterward, then.”

“That may be difficult,” Obante said stiffly.

“Hmm? Did something happen, Grandpa?” Tasha asked. She wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, Lord Cale, but dead mana rises through the sand twice a year. The date always changes, to the point that we only detect it as it gets close.”

The roof of the underground city was directly beneath the desert, allowing the dark elves to predict the dead mana’s arrival a few days early.

“Is now that time?” Cale asked.

The mayor nodded. “We expect it in two days and for three days straight.”

During that time, the desert would be dangerous to humans. It would be fine for Tasha to cross, but for the rest of Cale’s group, it wouldn’t be safe to leave for about a week.

“Does the dead mana manifest as liquid?”

“Gas.”

That was even worse. It would be floating around everywhere. Breathing that in would be more than unhealthy; if someone inhaled the dead mana and it entered their bloodstream, it could prove deadly.

Cale hummed in thought, contemplating the situation. Obante looked deeply apologetic.

“Guess we’ll have to kick back for a week, then.”

“Yes, thank you for understa—excuse me?”

“Do you have a tourist map of the City of Death?”

Obante gawked at the casual Cale, then nodded. The dark elves had indeed created a tourist map when they built the inn. “That we do…and I’ll have Shawn guide you.”

Cale dipped his head in acknowledgment, then faced the woman in the black robe sitting in the corner. “By the way, who’s that?”

“Ah, that girl. She’s the one creating the bracelet.”

Upon hearing that she was crafting a dark item, Cale had to hold back a smile. He’d found what he was looking for: a human expert on the body and on death.

“I summoned her to explain the item,” Obante said, then faltered. He peeked reluctantly at Tasha, which told Cale that he had something to discuss with her.

“What seems to be the problem?”

From the tone of that question, Cale thought that a god or an emperor had spoken. He bowed his head—only to see Raon

sitting there with his head raised, trying to look majestic. He was far too tiny for that, though.

"Y-you see, great dragon…" Obante trailed off, not daring to continue.

"I am curious about the outside world."

The woman wearing the black robe had spoken. Her voice was devoid of emotion, like that of a GPS. Cale's gaze slid over to her.

"I wish to see it."

Obante let out a breath and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief, looking like he'd aged another century. Shawn and Tasha stared at the robed figure, wide-eyed.

"What?!"

"Mary, what're you talking about?!" Evidently, Tasha knew the black-robed woman, whose name seemed to be Mary. Fuming, Tasha turned on Obante. "Grandpa."

Irritated as she was, one glance at Cale and Raon had her biting her lip. She realized that to their visitors, it would seem as though the dark elves were hampering someone who wanted to leave the City of Death—though it wasn't exactly untrue.

Shawn spoke up. "You know how dangerous it is, Mary."

"That's why I plan to go alone," the black-robed woman responded.

"That's even worse!" Tasha cried, jumping up. Mary could be in danger even with Tasha as her escort, so how could the dark elf let her go on her own? *Absolutely not!*

After that outburst, silence fell over Obante's office. No one spoke.

Eventually, Raon's confused voice broke the silence. "Why can't she go? That human's very strong. Even stronger than a mage I know."

Huh. Cale was amused. *This girl's stronger than Rosalyn?*

Mary raised her head, though they couldn't see her face beneath her large hood. Turning to Cale and Raon, she began to pull up her sleeve.

"Mary!"

A flustered Shawn reached out, but Mary was faster. She tugged one sleeve up completely before Shawn stopped her, then held her arm under the light.

"Whoa!" Choi Han said from the door.

Shawn sighed and put his head in his hands. Tasha anxiously looked back and forth between Cale and Choi Han.

Cale's eyes flashed as he took in Mary's exposed arm. It was covered in what looked like burns or black lines resembling spiderwebs. The terrible scars would make anyone flinch, but Cale stared hard at the injury. He was now certain that Mary could make a new arm for Ron. She really was a "black-web bearer"—the term people once used for necromancers.

"Mary, you can't do that in front of people you don't know!" Miffed, Tasha grabbed Mary's arm and carefully pulled her sleeve back down to cover the scars. At the same time, she kept a close eye on Cale and Choi Han.

"You see, this..." Tasha gripped Mary's hand, losing control of her fraying nerves. Her mouth opened and closed repeatedly without a sound. She'd been in shock since Raon appeared, but this was more akin to despair.

"Tasha." Cale met Tasha's eyes and spoke to assuage her fears. "I don't plan to tell anybody, so don't worry. We're already all in the same boat."

Tasha pressed her lips in a thin line. She remembered what Albert had said about Cale.

"Auntie, he may be rude, but he keeps his word. I can't completely trust him, but I can at least rely on the bastard."

In the end, Albert *did* trust Cale, even if he wouldn't say it outright. The more Tasha interacted with Cale, the more she felt the same.

It was then that Mary spoke up again. “I won’t talk about the great dragon either. I can’t vow on my connection to elementals, so I will vow on my life instead.”

A smile flickered across Cale’s face and disappeared. Since Mary was putting her life on the line, he wouldn’t have to worry about Raon’s secret.

“Lord Cale, do you know about necromancers?” Obante asked.

“I know as much as the next person.”

Given what he’d read in *Birth of a Hero*, he actually knew more than average. “Necromancers” used dead mana to control corpses in battle. They bore scars that were impossible to hide even with magic. Like Mary’s arm, necromancers’ entire bodies were covered with black veins that looked like spiderwebs, thus earning them the nickname “black-web bearers.”

The scars were side effects of manipulating dead mana, which living beings shouldn’t have been able to use. That ability, along with their use of corpses in combat, played into the necromancers’ persecution.

Their usefulness was ignored, Cale reflected. But there were no useless occupations in the world. Anything could be valuable in the right circumstances.

Mary then introduced herself as Raon had. “My name is Mary. I will be twenty-five this year.”

Cale listened quietly as Raon peered inquisitively at her.

“I have lived in the City of Life for the past fifteen years,” Mary continued. “I remember running away into the desert with my family when I was ten.” As Cale had anticipated, she was one of the people who’d fled the village nearby. “That is the only thing I remember.”

Huh? Cale didn’t understand what she meant right away.

“We found Mary fifteen years ago, the same day dead mana rose to the surface.”

Cale turned to see Shawn wearing a stiff expression.

“I was the one who came across her,” Shawn went on, recounting what had happened fifteen years earlier. “As we mentioned, dead mana rises into the Land of Death twice a year. When we know that time is near, we go to the surface every night to quickly bring down any humans fleeing into the desert. Most are malnourished, so even a trace of dead mana can be lethal.”

“But we can’t get everyone,” Tasha added, frowning. She’d been there when Shawn found Mary.

“Fifteen years ago, a huge quantity of dead mana rose into the Land of Death. It was the most we’d seen in the past few centuries—about twenty times the norm.”

Hmm. One girl in the Land of Death, plus twenty times as much of the already deadly mana. Cale could imagine what had happened and how Mary became a necromancer. “That must’ve been when you found Miss Mary.”

“Yes. By the time we did, she’d absorbed quite a bit of dead mana.”

“Yet she survived?”

Shawn made to answer, but Mary beat him to it. “Yes. Even though it was extremely painful.” Despite her words, Cale didn’t sense any emotion in her. “It felt like all of my veins were popping at once. To survive, I needed to learn to control the dead mana while enduring the intense pain shooting through my body. Given the choice between becoming a black mage or a necromancer, I chose to become a necromancer.”

The ten-year-old Mary needed to do so in order to pull through.

“I am happy that I am now in less pain.”

Tasha hung her head, finding it difficult to listen. *“In* less *pain,”* Mary had said. Necromancers lived painful lives, absorbing dead mana the gods hadn’t permitted to humans.

“I have no memories of my life before that.”

Cale now understood what she’d meant when she said fleeing was all she remembered.

“I was running across the desert. My family members fell one by one behind me, but I kept running. That’s all I remember. Not where I used to live, nor even my family’s faces.”

All she could dredge up was the feeling of sand beneath her feet as she ran, along with her mother’s voice. *“Mary, keep running! Don’t look back, just run!”* That was the only reason she knew her own name.

“I’ve been in pain,” she continued in that dispassionate voice of hers. “But I’ve been happy, and very thankful.”

Mary was grateful to be in the City of Death—no, the City of Life. She also appreciated Obante, who was trying to shelter her within the city, as well as Shawn and Tasha, who’d saved her and looked after her for the past fifteen years. Still, she heard her mother’s voice every night.

“I know humans don’t like necromancers, yet I’m curious about the human world.”

Most of the City of Death’s citizens called the human world hell, saying that humans despised necromancers. Even so, Mary was curious. She felt an emptiness she needed to fill.

“I don’t want to cause anyone harm, so I’ll go alone.”

The forgotten first decade of her life continued to haunt and wound her. She wanted to figure out what had happened during those ten years—to recover her memories. Something told her she needed to go to the human world to do so.

Mary pulled up the sleeve on the arm Tasha wasn’t holding, revealing her ugly scars again. “I’ve heard that people find these scars disgusting, so I’ll just have to make sure I don’t reveal them. I will also avoid places of worship. I’ve prepared a lot for this trip.”

Mary’s head—well, the hood of her black robe—was turned toward Cale and Raon, but she was talking to the three dark elves. Unable to take hold of Mary’s other arm, Tasha merely stood there. She recalled the child who’d struggled to breathe that night in the black desert full of dead mana.

“I need to run! Ngh... I need to run!”

That was what the little girl had muttered as black lines streaked down her body. Lifting the struggling child from the sand, Tasha had seen her parents dying in the distance. The little girl had run quite far. Then she survived against the dead mana.

"I'm curious about the world," Mary insisted.

Obante couldn't say anything. He knew Mary wasn't actually curious about human society; she just wanted to find the forgotten memories that haunted her every night.

Suddenly, he saw something move. It was Raon. The tiny dragon flew toward Mary and stopped in front of her. He inspected her for a while, then shouted, "You're incredible for surviving! You aren't great and mighty like me, of course, but you're still incredible!"

Cale agreed with Raon. In a measured tone much quieter than Raon's excited shout, he told Mary, "You're really something. What matters is that you made it out alive."

"Yes! I accept that you're a slightly amazing human!" Raon said. "Still, if *this* weak human somehow grew as strong as my front paw, went on a journey saying he wouldn't get hurt, and came back injured, I'd destroy the world!"

Isn't that a bit much? Wouldn't you heal me first? While Cale had a plethora of follow-up questions, he shared the dragon's sentiments enough to refrain from asking.

Mary wouldn't have wanted the people around her to get hurt either. She understood Raon's reaction and why the dark elves didn't want her to leave. After turning twenty, she'd waited five years in the City of Death—yet it did nothing to diminish her urge to visit the human world.

"I won't go until I get permission. And once I do, I will come back within a year without getting caught." She sounded somber and trustworthy.

Obante wiped sweat off his palms. "Later," he said weakly. "Let's talk about it later."

Mary was the only necromancer in this city—no, in the entire Western Continent. Obante had opened that path for her. Back

then, he couldn’t bear to watch her die, so he’d taken out a relic he’d found and given it to her.

“Yes, sir. I understand,” Mary answered.

The old dark elf shifted his gaze to Cale and Raon. “I’ll notify you when the dead mana is gone. Please let us know if we can do anything to improve your stay during this period.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor.” Cale shook hands with Obante, then got up. Shawn and Mary rose as well, but one person was still sitting.

“Tasha.”

“Oh! Yes, sir!” Hearing Obante call her name, Tasha rose in surprise. She seemed to have a lot on her mind.

Ignoring that, Cale left the mayor’s office. Raon became invisible again, and the dark elves and Mary pretended not to know anything about his presence.

The mayor stayed in his office while Tasha and Shawn led the way for Cale’s group. Naturally, Choi Han walked right behind Cale. Mary strode wordlessly beside him, her robe dragging on the ground.

“Mary?”

The hood of her black robe lifted as she turned to look up at Cale.

“Can you make me an arm?” Cale asked, maintaining his pace.

“You mean, for a human body?”

“Yes. A left arm.”

“Do you need it for something?”

“That I do.”

“I understand. I’ll make you one.” She didn’t ask about compensation or a reward.

Glancing over at her, Cale asked, “What is it you want to see in the human world?”

Shawn and Tasha flinched at his question.

“I’m not sure,” Mary replied without hesitation. She really didn’t know. “I can’t imagine the human world, since I have no memory of it. I’ve only read about it in books. But I feel like once I get there, I’ll want to see a lot of things.”

“You will indeed.” Cale felt Mary’s logic held water. How could she want to see something specific if she didn’t know what was there? Maybe once she traveled to the surface she’d learn what she wanted to see.

Raon spoke up in Cale’s mind. *‹I know how that feels.›*

During Raon’s four years in the Stens’ cave, there hadn’t been something specific he wanted to see because he hadn’t seen *anything* yet. He’d just wanted freedom; he wasn’t looking forward to anything else.

‹She’s an amazing human.› Raon had been praising Mary for some time now. *‹And she seems like a good person.›*

Raon’s request to Cale was that Mary come with them. The dragon wanted her to see the world.

‹Obviously she isn’t as good as you, weak human. She’s similar to us, though. She’s a nice lady, and she managed to live through awful pain. She’s amazing.›

As usual, Cale pretended not to hear him.

***

Two days later, Cale lay on a couch in the inn’s restaurant, staring at the ceiling.

“This is no joke,” he muttered.

Rumble, rumble. The loud noise accompanied what felt like an earthquake, though not a severe one.

“I take it the dead mana is about to rise, young master.”

“Sure seems that way.”

Cale sipped the lemonade Ron had given him. Despite being underground, this city had lemons and all kinds of other fruits.

Vicross had made some ice cream, which he set on the table in front of Cale and the invisible Raon. The innkeeper watched Vicross as though eager to hire the young man as the inn's chef.

Just then, Raon shouted in Cale's head, *‹I'm getting restless!›*

Ignoring the dragon, Cale looked toward the inn door. "Go get me another lemonade, Vicross."

"Excuse me?" Vicross asked, confused.

Ron stepped in. "I'll do it, young master."

A bell tinkled as someone entered the inn.

"Sit down, Ron," Cale ordered.

The person coming in was completely covered in a black robe. Mary had entered the inn to visit Cale. She walked up to him without hesitation.

"Oh, and Vicross, bring a glass of lemonade for our guest too," Cale insisted, but Vicross stared dubiously at their unexpected visitor. To help him understand, Cale added, "This woman is going to make your father a new arm."

Vicross stiffened. Even Ron, who had worn his usual benign smile, let his genuine shock slip onto his face.

Eyes fixed on the black-robed figure in front of him, Cale got right to the point. "Mary."

Cale liked money, getting goods on the house, and taking from others, but he wasn't an outright scam artist. Kim Roksu believed he needed to appropriately reward people who helped him, and Cale planned to give such a reward to the necromancer making a new arm for the dual-dagger-wielding Ron. She deserved generous compensation for helping one of Cale's people.

"I'm going to give you a place to stay for six months."

‹All right! › Raon shouted in Cale's mind. *‹Good job, weak human!›*

"What do you mean?" Mary asked, her mechanical voice wavering.

“I’m saying I’ll give you someplace to stay until winter. But it won’t be in a human village or city, as you’d wished.”

The innkeeper shuffled over to the door and locked it, watching Mary with concern.

Cale spared him a glance, then continued, “Even so, you can see the real sky and admire the beauty of the surface.”

Mary’s accommodations would be in the Dark Forest. It was full of monsters, but out there she would find lush, untamed nature and breathtaking skies—something missing here in the underground city.

After a long silence, Mary replied, “I don’t wish to burden you.”

The very idea tickled him. “You’re only saying that because you don’t know me yet.” He sat and tried to meet her gaze, only to realize that she wore a black mask beneath her hood. And though they never made eye contact, he conveyed to her clearly, “I never do anything that’ll burden me.”

Why would he do something crazy like turn religions against him? He was offering Mary this opportunity precisely because she could live aboveground *without* any institutions catching her.

“As for the six months after that,” Cale went on, keeping her one-year travel plans in mind, “I’ll help you escape from the Church of the God of Sun at least once.”

Mary jerked back in surprise, hood and all.

“Is that possible?” the innkeeper asked in a shaky voice. According to Shawn, this old man had treated Mary like family ever since Tasha left. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm,” Cale replied. Then to Mary, he said, “I’ll provide a dragon’s dead mana.”

If she needed to avoid the God of Sun’s priests, and she was already as strong as Rosalyn, all Cale had to do was give her a boost. Doing that much for someone who’d make Ron a new arm was only fair.

For the first time, Ron spoke up. “Young master, wait!”

Cale raised a hand to stop him. “Be quiet.”

“Draconic dead mana is far too precious. I’m fine with staying as I—”

“Vicross,” Cale called, turning away from Ron. Vicross was still in a daze. “Didn’t I tell you to get some lemonade?”

“Ah.”

“Hurry it up.”

“Yes, sir.” Avoiding his father’s gaze, Vicross rushed toward the kitchen.

After that, Cale offered Mary a seat. “Sit wherever you like.” He was so relaxed, one might’ve thought he owned the place.

“I will think it over after making the arm.”

Her hood swiveled toward Ron. The old assassin stood there, enduring the eerie figure’s attention.

Mary’s emotionless, GPS-like voice spoke again. “Your muscles seem well developed. Based on the balance between your right arm and the rest of your body, I’d say you tend to use both arms, so I will need to pay special attention while making the left one. You’ll probably need to put it on and test it a couple of times to get it just right.”

“How long will it take?”

“Probably a month or two.”

Cale lazily sipped his lemonade, looking every bit like a man relaxing in a lounge chair on the beach. “Then we can work on it in your residence on the surface. Your accommodations will be near where Ron’s working anyway.”

“My mind is overwhelmed at the moment,” Mary admitted. “This is a complicated dilemma. I don’t wish to be a burden, but I also feel like things will be fine. You’re very strong.”

Cale assumed she was referring to Choi Han and Raon.

‹She’s right! This good lady is smart! As long as I’m around, she won’t be a burden! I’ll just destroy anything in our way!›

As usual, Cale let Raon's words go in one ear and out the other. Dragons were destructive by nature.

"I'll…return later," Mary concluded.

"Sure. I'm leaving in a few days, though. Come back before then with your bags packed." Satisfied, Cale stood and headed toward the stairs to the second floor. "Oh! Before you go, drink some lemonade. You should know our chef's abilities, since you'll be seeing one another quite often."

Mary didn't react to that, continuing to watch him. Paying her no mind, Cale made for his bedroom. Ron trailed after him.

"Young master?" It was rare to see the assassin without his benign smile. "Who is that woman, and what's going on with—"

"Ron." Cale had reached his room. He turned the doorknob and stepped inside, saying, "It's fine. No need to refuse this."

He didn't even look at Ron before closing the door. Eventually, a question rose up from the other side.

"Shall I bring up some snacks?"

Cale chuckled. "Yeah, sure. Bring me something to drink too." He paused, then added, "Anything but lemonade."

He was tired of that.

***

In the Kingdom of Karo's Deburri territory, one very agitated knight guarded the gate leading to the Land of Death. The other knight had pulled rank to make his junior take early guard duty that day.

"Crazy bastard. Bossing me around because he's been a knight just three years longer than me."

The soldiers kept quiet, avoiding the angry knight. If they dared to chime in with their own complaints, they'd probably end up dead.

He takes all the money too.

The senior knight laid claim to any money they made off people while guarding the gate. He bought the others drinks once in a blue moon, but how good was the booze in a small village like this?

"He also kept those two gold coins he got the other day," the knight muttered. "That asshole. He'll be in big trouble one day for taking—"

Thud!

"Ow!" Something had struck the knight's head. Rubbing the back of his skull, he shouted, "Damn it! What the hell?! Who threw —huh?"

He stopped short as he spotted the offending projectile on the ground. It was small and round—a gold coin. The knight quickly picked it up and looked around. Nothing nearby. Nothing above. The money had seemingly dropped from the sky.

What the...? He tucked the gold coin in his pocket, then glared at the soldiers, telling them to keep their mouths shut.

***

"I guess you kept your promise in the end," Tasha remarked.

Boarding the carriage they'd left with the village innkeeper, Cale replied, "I'm disappointed that it wasn't the same knight as last time."

"I'll give you another gold coin if I return alive." Unfortunately, the knight he'd told as much wasn't here at this early hour.

"I should've just jumped the wall back then too."

"If you'd done that, you probably wouldn't have saved those two peasants, right?"

Cale pretended not to hear Tasha, annoyed at her attempts to keep a conversation going. She gazed warmly at him.

"It's nice and cool in here."

The carriage, chilled by magic, was exceptionally comfortable. Cale leaned back in his seat and turned his head. A black blob was pressed against the window, peering outside with the giddy black dragon.

“Isn’t it great?”

“Yes, Mr. Raon. It’s jaw-dropping. Is that the village I used to live in?”

“Even I don’t know that!”

“You don’t? But I’ve never seen a village like that one. It is astounding.”

Mary’s monotone praise had Raon puffing up with pride.

“The real sky is magnificent. It does not seem to have an end,” she continued. “I find it difficult to fathom.”

“You can look forward to the night sky too. That’s even more magnificent! Especially when you see it from our house. I’ll show you around the Dark Forest too.”

“Thank you, Mr. Raon.”

After watching the pair chat, Cale turned back around. Tasha was staring at him, gratitude written all over her face.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” Avoiding her awkward stare, he shouted out the door, “Let’s go!”

And with that, they were off.

Pulling up his sleeve, Cale motioned to Kage. “Miss Kage.”

The former priestess beside him cautiously extended both hands and placed them around his wrist. “The God of Death’s power shall come forth to bring despair and annihilation to those who wish to harm you,” she said, sounding oddly cheery. “Your enemy shall wander eternally in the darkness, unable to stop you. They shall lose their eyes, legs, ears, and senses, blundering aimlessly for all eternity.”

Listening to her vicious chant, Cale gazed outside. An unnerving sensation enveloped his wrist—well, the bracelet on his wrist, to be specific.

“All done!” Kage announced.

“Is the Blessing of Death always…like that?” Cale asked her.

“You bet! It’s a blessing from the God of *Death*. Did you expect it to be all sunshine and roses?”

That made sense, but Cale feared the bracelet might wind up cursed after a few days’ worth of that particular “blessing.” A curse would likely only benefit the crown prince, though, so he would let her continue her work.

“Are there stronger ones?”

“Well, I plan to increase the blessing’s strength every day.”

“Got it.”

She really was a crazy priestess. Relieved, Cale watched the scenery pass by as the carriage rolled toward the capital.

***

Cale’s group stopped at the same village inn near the capital as last time.

“Is this my room?”

“Yes, Lord Cale. You can stay here tonight.”

Still avoiding Tasha’s excessive shows of gratitude, Cale opened the door to his chamber. Then—*bang!* He immediately slammed it shut.

With one backward glance at Tasha, who was grinning at him, Cale heaved a deep sigh and reopened the door. He dragged his feet as he entered the room. Tasha swiftly closed the door behind him.

A familiar voice addressed him. “This isn’t actually your room.”

“Clearly not, Your Highness.”

Crown Prince Albert Crossman smirked at Cale. He’d had a luxurious feast prepared to welcome the count’s son.

“I didn’t think you’d come all the way out here to meet me,” Cale said.

“Well, I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

A hurry? Cale thought, studying Albert.

“Tunka has become the Kingdom of the Whipper’s commander-in-chief,” the crown prince said lightly.

After lying low for the past few months, Tunka’s group had made their move. The fact that the barbarian was commander-in-chief meant the kingdom’s monarchy had ended up in his hands.

“They’re going to hell in a handbasket.”

Albert smirked at Cale’s indifference. “Indeed. But that has nothing to do with us right now.”

“I assume Tunka doesn’t know you poached all the kingdom’s remaining mages?”

“Of course not. Why would someone all the way out in Whipper be privy to that? Even our own people don’t know much about it.”

Cale and Albert held each other’s gazes. Then Cale removed the blessed bracelet and dropped it in Albert’s palm. *Clink.* Once the prince affixed the piece to his wrist, smoke billowed all around him with a sizzling *hiss*, like water droplets landing in a roaring flame.

“You cut a fine figure in this form as well, Your Highness.”

Albert had revealed his true appearance in front of Cale. His blond hair and blue eyes had been replaced with brown hair and brown eyes. His skin was a richer, duskier shade than most. He was only one-quarter dark elf, but his dark elf traits were striking.

Probably because of the dead mana he absorbed.

Thanks to that, his dark elf nature would be more developed than his human side.

“Must you state the obvious? When you’re handsome, *everything* looks fine.”

He had a point there.

“So this is the blessing of the God of Death,” Albert murmured. “What a relief.”

The prince could feel the power inside the bracelet. He could also detect the weight of the blessings Cale had arranged for as a gift. Appreciating the potency of it, Albert shared one piece of information with Cale. “They say Tunka will be visiting the Empire in place of Whipper’s previous heir.”

Cale frowned. “Sounds like a mess.”

“I agree,” Albert said. “Will you be spending time at home?”

“Yes, Your Highness. That’s the plan.”

At that moment, Raon piped up, *‹Oh! Hearing about that idiot Tunka reminded me! The seed’s starting to sprout!›*

The seed from the Magic Tower had taken root.

“What will you do there?” Albert inquired.

“I plan to rest—and do a little farming.” The seed, his network, his coffers—he planned to grow them all. Though he’d just be giving orders, not doing actual work.

“No one would believe you intend to *farm* with that look on your face.”

The redhead’s expression gave Albert pause. He could tell lots of different schemes were forming in the lout’s head. Nevertheless, he had to hurry to the Empire. He quickly returned to his blond-haired, blue-eyed appearance and said goodbye to Cale.

Cale himself soon set out for Harris, deep in the Dark Forest.

***

After over a month in Harris, Cale woke up one morning to a message Albert had left him. The prince had called in the middle of the night, so Cale hadn’t picked up.

“What the hell have you been up to?” The crown prince’s tone was harried. “Why does Commander Tunka call you his friend?

How did you become the hero of the jungle? Even one of Brek's princes asked about you and his sister Rosalyn! Everybody snuck over to me to inquire about you before leaving. This is ridiculous!"ZIt was still early morning, so Cale stared vacantly out the window as he listened to Albert rant. Then Ron appeared, handing him a cup of water and a few written messages.

"We've been contacted by the Whale Tribe."

The letter was from Witira.

The ocean is peaceful for now. The Whale King would like to show you the sea route, Lord Cale.

Her correspondence came from the north…when temperatures were just beginning to drop.

"I don't feel like going," Cale muttered.

Ron pretended not to hear it. "We also received a message from the Henituse estate. They're asking if you can come home so they can see you, as festival season is just around the corner."

A chorus of excited voices filled the previously quiet bedroom.

"A festival?"

"Did you say 'festival'?"

"Festival!"

Raon, Ohn, and Hong—who'd all been asleep in the corner—shot up and rushed over.

Cale ignored their pleading eyes and plopped back down on the bed. "Eh. I'm feeling lazy."

Right then, he heard the last part of Albert's recording. The crown prince sighed before adding one final thing. "Anyway, I'm returning with one of Brek's princes. Oh, and the Pope of the God of Sun is dead."

"Huh?" The part about the prince from Brek was of little importance; Cale would have to pass it on to Rosalyn. But what

Albert said afterward caught his attention.

“The culprits are those twins—the church’s saint and saintess. They’re said to be on the run, but nobody knows where they went.”

What?

Albert sighed again. “What a mess. A complete and total mess.”

Click.

That was the end of it. Cale and Ron made eye contact.

“Contact Miss Rosalyn. Let’s just ignore the rest.”

“You’re getting wiser as you age, Lord Cale.”

Chapter 23:
The Forgotten

"ARE YOU IGNORING the festival too, human?"

Raon, Ohn, and Hong grinned up at Cale.

Not even looking at the smiling trio, Cale continued his conversation with Ron. "I'll go home two days from now."

"Yes, young master. You'll need to hurry if you want the children to see the festival."

"Stop talking nonsense and fetch Miss Rosalyn."

"As you wish." Ron's benign smile turned mischievous as he left the room. Cale rose from the bed, ignoring his excited companions.

"Are you getting ready to leave, human?"

"We aren't going anywhere yet."

"All right! I'll go tell people we're leaving and then come back!"

Raon flew through the open window, and Ohn and Hong jumped out behind him. They were headed for the Dark Forest, though Cale didn't care one whit.

Rosalyn arrived soon enough, and Cale relayed Albert's message. He started with how one of Brek's princes had asked Albert about her, then mentioned that they'd asked about him. After that, he warned Rosalyn that Albert was returning with the prince in tow.

"I asked you to come so that I could share that news, Miss Rosalyn."

Once he finished, Rosalyn smiled gently. "It must be the fourth prince."

"You think?"

"Mm-hmm. He's a real bastard who probably dumped off his manners in some dragon's lair."

Left what where now? Cale had never heard Rosalyn talk so crassly.

“He’s whined about everything since he was a little boy.”

“Has he now?”

“Indeed. I always had to get on him about it. Maybe that princely little whelp didn’t realize this, but we don’t live in a world where you get what you want simply by whining. I made sure to teach him *thoroughly* about the reality of things.”

There was a frightening smile on Rosalyn’s face. Whatever she’d “taught” the prince, her lessons were surely burned into the boy’s memory even now.

“Anyway, whether it’s the fourth prince or not, I’ll send him back and take care of it.”

Rosalyn’s statement that she’d “take care” of the prince was also scary, but Cale opted not to ask for details. He knew she’d have it handled one way or another.

A knock came at the door, and a black blob zoomed in through the window.

“Open the door, human!”

Cale examined Raon, who was now covered in leaves and dirt, then sighed. “Come in!”

He already knew who Raon’s guest was.

Click. The door opened, and a being even darker than Raon walked in.

Mary greeted him in her usual robotic voice. “Hello, Lord Cale. It is a wonderful morning.”

The necromancer had adjusted well to Harris. Cale had kept a close eye on her at first, what with her staring at the sky all day and night. She was doing better now. For one thing, she was getting along with Raon.

“Listen, human. This nice lady and I found something!” the black dragon exclaimed.

Rosalyn grinned, sipping the tea in front of her.

“What?” Cale asked, face blank. “Another interesting rock? A leaf with a bunch of holes?”

Raon had been showing Mary around the Dark Forest. Cale had been skeptical about the dragon introducing Mary to the surface world, but he’d let it be; he found it too bothersome to deal with. Every time Raon and Mary saw an interesting rock or leaf, the dragon made sure to report it. Cale recalled how excited he’d been the first time the dragon made such a report, thinking they’d found some sort of treasure.

“No! Just something normal.”

If their discovery was more normal than a rock or leaf, Cale guessed that it was probably dirt or something. He nodded and pointed to a seat where Mary could rest. The necromancer dragged her black robe over and sat down.

As Rosalyn offered her refreshments, Raon said, “We found *bones*!”

Bones?

“I think there were hundreds!”

Cale’s eyes flicked over to Mary.

“There appeared to be at least two hundred corpses there,” she confirmed. “Most were buried intact and within the last two years. The skeletons are in very good condition.”

“Choi Han thinks that they fought in the Dark Forest and killed each other!”

“I’ll need to put the skeletons together to know for sure, but I think there was a battle between flying monsters and those on the ground.”

Cale’s lips quirked, and Rosalyn wore a dubious expression.

Having reported everything they’d found in the Dark Forest, Raon and Mary asked for permission to use the bones. Mary had been practicing necromancy on dead monsters and animals she found in the forest every so often, though she didn’t use human or elf corpses.

“Can this nice lady use those bones, human?” pleaded Raon. “She won’t make a mess!”

“I promise not to damage them,” Mary said.

Rather than responding to the black-scaled and black-robed duo, Cale lifted his teacup. He was about to take a sip when a thought struck him.

Why didn’t I think of that?

The corners of his lips continued twitching as he held back his grin, which kept him from drinking his tea. He gave up on the drink and asked Mary, “The flying monsters’ bones are in good shape, you say?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll need to put the skeletons together and restore some broken sections, but they are in pretty good condition.”

“How many are there?”

“There are fewer of those than the rest. I guess around seventy.”

“How large?”

“Well, they seem to have been mutant monst—”

“The size of wyverns?”

“A bit smaller.” Mary didn’t know why Cale had brought up wyverns, but she answered him dutifully.

At her response, Cale laid a hand over his heart. He’d been fretting about how to deal with the northern wyvern knight brigade in the future. Attacking with an Ancient Power or a spell would risk serious damage to the area, but this? This would do.

“Mary.”

“Yes?”

“Are you thankful to me?”

“Very thankful,” Mary answered, not finding the question odd. Though her voice lacked emotion, she meant it. She wasn’t living in a human village or in Karo; still, Cale let her visit the Henituse estate every so often to enjoy the surface’s beauty in peaceful surroundings. She felt that one day she would miss the

gorgeous nightscape, the azure sky at daytime, the vibrant nature all around them, and even this house.

"Good," Cale said with a faint smile. "If I were in trouble, I'm sure you'd want to help me and repay the favor, right?"

Watching this unfold, Rosalyn was skeptical of Cale's questions. The problem was that she was the only one who felt that way.

"Yes, sir," Mary replied. "I would definitely want to repay you."

Cale brightened. "Then in the future, when I contact you, come back to Henituse territory."

"So I shall. I wish I could be here all the time."

A vivid image was taking shape in Cale's mind. Focused on that, he told Mary, "You can practice as much as you like with those monster bones, but you know you'll need to give them back to me before you leave, don't you?"

"Of course. Prior to my departure, I will make sure they're clean and return them."

"I knew you'd let her use them, human!"

Rosalyn regarded Cale with a look that said, *What kind of deal are you striking?* Yet Cale was still fixated on Mary, who was about to leave with Raon.

"Can the skeletons of flying monsters fly too?" he asked.

"They can. This will be my first time using necromancy on the remains of flying monsters, though. I'll need a lot of practice."

Cale was still imagining the defenses he could create in the future. If the north had a wyvern knight brigade, he could form a flying skeleton brigade. Even the name sounded cool. His heart pounded; there was something else making him so excited about these skeletons.

He suppressed his exhilaration, adding gently, "Let me know once you're used to working with those flying monsters, Mary."

"That I will. I'll be on my way now."

"We'll be back soon, human!"

With that, Mary and Raon made their exit. Cale watched out the window as Raon flew straight for the Dark Forest. *A dragon can kill wyverns, right?*

Cale had an adult dragon corpse on hand—a full set of dragon bones he'd found in the Dark Forest. It thrilled him to picture the skeletal dragon and flying monsters making their grand appearance. Daydreaming about it had him giddy, and an impish grin rose to his face.

"Miss Rosalyn."

Rosalyn maintained a stoic facade. "Yes?" The man in front of her really was upstanding, she reflected, but he tended to have these odd thoughts every so often.

"How strong is Brek's military?"

"Excuse me?"

Cale's mischievous smile faded. "What I'm about to tell you is extremely confidential."

Albert wouldn't travel alongside a foreign prince without reason. Spending time with such dignitaries would force him to keep his guard up, especially since he had to hide his identity as one-quarter dark elf. In truth, he was most likely assessing whether Brek and its fourth prince were decent. While he would have to be careful about sharing important information, he could gauge whether the other prince could provide him an opportunity to initiate his plan. The crown prince was self-interested, but he still put Rowoon first.

Cale, on the other hand, prioritized himself and his companions. He'd do anything to keep them safe and sound.

"The three northern nations formed an alliance," Cale told Rosalyn.

"What…?"

"It's a secret. Only a few people know about it."

"Lord Cale, how—"

Clink. Cale set his full teacup back down, lips tugging up once more. "Despite that, Miss Rosalyn…"

Like Lark, Rosalyn was part of Cale's entourage—yet she hadn't forgotten her former position. She'd escaped from Brek's royal family, but she smiled while talking about her younger brother. Cale was saying this for her benefit. Rosalyn might've thrown away her position as princess, but she had family in the Kingdom of Brek.

"Who says they're the only ones who can form an alliance?"

Rosalyn's expression changed in a flash, and their teatime ended without further conversation.

Later that evening, Cale inquired, "Is Brek's fourth prince coming here, Your Highness?"

Albert looked anything but pleased as he addressed Cale through the communication sphere. "You damned fly on the wall. There's nothing you don't know! Yes, he's heading there."

He scrutinized Cale, trying to figure him out. Cale hadn't yet told Albert that he knew about the northern alliance, biding his time for the right moment to mention it. This was that moment.

"Your Highness...the three northern kingdoms formed an alliance, didn't they?"

The prince didn't respond right away. He sat there, studying Cale. Then he smiled. "I knew you were just feigning ignorance. That's why you helped me with the naval base—and with sheltering those mages from Whipper."

Cale offered no response to the accusation, but Albert was unfazed by it.

"All right, then. What do you think we should do about it?"

"Miss Rosalyn should meet with her younger brother."

"I suppose she's been appraised of this as well?"

"She's my companion."

Albert scoffed. "You know that keeping this secret is the most important thing, don't you?"

"That's why I didn't even mention it to you until now."

Upon seeing Cale's sly smirk, Albert felt there could be no worse expression in the world. Rattled, he sought to end the conversation quickly.

"Till next time."

"Contact me whenever you wish, Your Highness."

Thus, their call came to an end.

***

A carriage with the Henituses' golden turtle crest left the family's castle, heading for the grounds behind it.

"It really feels like a festival's coming up," Choi Han said.

Nodding, Cale looked out the carriage window. The entire castle was being decorated; it was positively bustling. Even the entrance, which was usually empty, was packed with a long line of people.

"I've never seen so many people outside the castle."

"Me neither!" Raon chirped.

Cale could tell that Choi Han was secretly just as excited as Raon and the kittens. This was probably his first real festival as well.

"It's my first time too!" Hong exclaimed. "I want to go stand in line!"

Cale smiled, patting Hong's small head before returning his attention to the hustle and bustle outside. The territory's festival would include competitions in cooking, art, and sculpting. With Countess Violan in charge, those contests had hefty prizes.

"Why're those people standing in line, weak human?!"

"I think they're here to register for a contest or take part in preliminary rounds."

Understanding seemed to dawn on Choi Han. "No wonder I saw a few talented warriors!"

Huh?

“There must be a fighting tournament too!”

No… People should only be competing over stuff like food and art.

“A fighting tournament, you say…?”

“That’s right, Mr. Cale.”

Cale had a bad feeling about this.

Not noticing the redhead’s stiff face, Choi Han surveyed the crowd at the gates with keen interest. “I don’t know which contest they’re entering, but those two look tough. I bet they’ll reach the finals. Hmm… I can’t tell exactly what weapons they used. I take it you don’t need to use a sword, though. From the look of that guy’s shoulders, his weapon of choice might be a bow.”

Cale stared pointedly at Ron, who grinned. “Who says warriors can’t be artists or cooks?” Ron asked. “After all, there’s an assassin working as a butler.”

For a moment, Cale had forgotten that this was a fantasy world. An average-looking cook could be a poison expert, or a neighboring tailor could murder people brutally with wires. He’d forgotten how frightening this place was.

“Choi Han.”

“Yes, Mr. Cale?”

“The festival only includes cooking, art, and sculpting contests.” Cale wondered how Choi Han would respond to that information.

“Oh, okay! They must hone their fighting skills as a hobby, then.” Choi Han shrugged it off like it was nothing, a response Cale found very protagonist-esque.

“Those humans still aren’t as strong as my front paw!”

“Hey, Sister, should we go win the contests?” Hong asked Ohn. “I want to compete!”

“You don’t know how to do any of those things!”

With one look at his company, Cale had to admit that this certainly *was* a fantasy world.

As the carriage passed from the castle to the grounds, Cale asked Ron about the competition. “What’s the schedule?” If Henituse territory was filled with strong experts, that *could* work in his favor.

Ron handed him the schedule, as requested. Cale looked it over, then asked Choi Han, “Do you remember their faces?”

“Yup.”

Fantasy worlds really were astounding. Still, did there have to be so many experts? Weaklings like Cale had a hard time surviving in places like these.

He turned to Rosalyn, who sat in the corner of the carriage, seemingly lost in thought. She hadn’t said anything since he told her about the northern alliance.

Yesterday, she’d asked him, *“Lord Cale, may I request a meeting with you after I speak with my little brother—er, with the fourth prince? I won’t tell him about the alliance right away, of course.”* He’d told her to do whatever was easiest.

“Whoa, whoa!” came Hilsmann’s voice from the driver’s seat.

The carriage came to a stop in front of the Henituse estate gates, where his little sister Lilly stood. As Raon turned invisible, Cale opened the door with a sigh. “Where do you think you’re going…?”

The seven-year-old had a deep tan; she must’ve been spending lots of time outdoors. “Hi, Brother!”

“Looks like you’ve been training pretty hard.”

“Yep! I’ve been giving it everything I’ve got!”

Lilly had no doubt improved quite a bit. If she’d trained enough to get that tan, it went without saying that she’d honed her skills. Cale peered at the wooden sword at her waist, as well as the longer wooden blade on her back.

His probing gaze made her jump. “I made the one on my back! I was curious about using a wooden longsword!”

“Really?” *But it’s got so many scratches. Like you chopped firewood or something.*

“Yes, sir! That’s all there is to it!” She answered respectfully, avoiding Cale’s eyes. Then she quickly added, “I finished my knight’s training for the day, so I’m gonna go play! Mother gave me permission to go for one hour. I’m just heading to the restaurant alley nearby, so I’ll be safe!”

The seven-year-old was explaining the situation in minute detail. She must’ve felt guilty about something, considering Cale had merely looked at her without asking for an explanation.

“All right, have fun. See you at dinner.” Cale motioned for her to go.

“O-okay! See you!”

Lilly made a beeline for the restaurant alley, throwing a few glances over her shoulder. The estate staff ate there frequently, and the area was both cheap and clean.

Getting back in the carriage, Cale thought, *Something’s off…*

In stories, sometimes the youngest child of a wealthy family would stumble upon a hermit in the woods who turned out to be a great warrior. Said child would then train under the hermit in secret…which seemed exactly like what Lilly might be up to.

Cale locked eyes with Ron, whose left arm wouldn’t be finished for about two weeks.

“Look into it.”

“As you wish, young master.”

He didn’t need to explain for Ron to understand. The sly old man had spent many more years in this world than Cale had, and he appeared to have the same suspicions. Countess Violan had probably checked up on Lilly already, but it’d be best if Cale did his own investigation.

After confirming the details of the cooking contest, Cale returned to the castle, still holding the festival schedule. Someone unexpected greeted him at the door.

“Bassen.”

“Brother.”

“Um, were you waiting for me?”

In lieu of a response, Bassen opened the file in his hands. “I heard you’ll be staying here during the festival, Brother.”

Cale couldn’t even walk through the door, so he stood there, waiting. “That’s right.”

“Could you possibly present the contest awards?”

That brought a smirk to Cale’s face. The file Bassen held contained documents on local administrative tasks. Bassen was now capable of doing those duties on his own, whereas Cale hadn’t so much as touched the territory’s paperwork. This was a good sign. And yet, Cale had to wonder…

“What about Father?”

“Father is giving the opening remarks, but he says he’s too busy to deal with the small competitions. He’d like you, Lilly, or me to do it.”

“And Mother?”

“She’s head of the commission of judges, so she’s giving out the Commissioner’s Award. You’d present the awards to the winners, though.”

“Why don’t you do it?” Cale didn’t feel like distributing prizes, and if Bassen did it, people would remember him better.

“I’m busy with work for the territory. I should be attending the competition to present the awards, but I don’t have time. I’m learning to handle the region’s bureaucratic tasks.”

Cale’s smile grew. *Oh well. If Bassen’s busy learning to run this region, it should be fine for me to hand out the awards. Will people really remember me doing that just once?*

Bassen could take over during the next festival after he mastered those regional duties.

“Fine. Since you’re busy, I’ll do it. Study hard so you can take on your half of the governing responsibilities in the future.” *Lilly’s keeping her nose to the grindstone so she can take charge of the*

military side. Cale patted Bassen's shoulder, giving him a few parting words of encouragement. "You're very reliable."

Bassen pressed his lips tight, resolute. "Yes, Brother. Leave it to me."

You bet I will. This territory is for you and Lilly. Cale nodded, donning a rare full-on grin. "Don't push yourself too hard. I'll be heading in now."

He strode past Bassen toward his chamber, his steps light.

Bassen watched his brother go for a few moments, then exchanged greetings with Cale's group and headed into the castle as well.

Unlike Lilly, Bassen wasn't good at swordplay. He'd made up his mind to study the estate's administrative tasks as thoroughly as possible, becoming an expert. Fifteen-year-old Bassen Henituse had a goal now, and his entire family was cheering him on. Thinking as much made the usually stoic Bassen beam with pride.

If Cale had known of Bassen's true goal, he'd probably have fainted. At the very least, he certainly wouldn't have offered his support.

***

Cale's expression was bored; he looked drained of all life.

"Why don't you stop pulling that face?"

"You have the same expression, Your Highness."

Crown Prince Albert *was* giving Cale a similar look. After speaking via video communication every day, they were sick of each other. Yet they needed to touch base; there was work to be done.

"The fourth prince said he'll head to Henituse territory with three knights. I'm leaving the Empire tomorrow, so you can assume that he'll leave around the same time."

"I see. I'll let Miss Rosalyn know."

Brek's fourth prince would arrive next month, at the latest.

"Tell Count Deruth as well."

"Will do."

Did his father know Rosalyn was a princess? Cale had never told him, but he assumed Deruth would know, since Hans did. *He's the leader of the Henituse family, which is pretty esteemed. I'm sure he recognized the princess.*

As he lapsed into thought, Albert asked him, "Want to hear something funny?"

Cale accidentally told the truth. "Not at all."

"I'll tell you anyway." Albert was ignoring his feelings, as usual. "Know how the pope of the Church of the God of Sun died?"

"Can you discuss that while you're still in the Empire?"

"I used noise-canceling magic already. Did you forget who I am?"

He was a crown prince with tons of mages under his command, so of course he had plenty of magic devices too. Cale dipped his head in acknowledgment.

"Once the emperor announced the start of the festival, the pope launched into an opening address—understandable, considering the festival was connected to the God of Sun. He was making his speech at a podium in front of the church in the capital."

Thinking back on the incident, Albert assumed a bitter smile. The pope had been on a platform lower than the emperor's yet higher than the imperial prince's, which was adjacent. The platforms had been constructed that way to honor the pope; it wasn't anything to smile bitterly over. There had been a different issue, however.

"Then his podium went flying."

"What?"

"His podium, the church itself—it *all* went flying."

Cale was suddenly reminded of Hais Island Five. “There was an explosion?”

“You’re a sharp one. Yes, something exploded.”

That’s crazy. Cale almost said it aloud. At this point, he was confused. He’d thought that the imperial prince arranged the pope’s death, but the man wouldn’t have done something so obvious. And hadn’t Albert already said that the Sun God Twins were the culprits?

“It was similar to what happened to us,” Albert noted.

Cale’s face hardened at the word “us.” Albert could only be referring to the Plaza Terror Incident in Rowoon’s capital.

“The Sun God Twins, people in black outfits, magic bombs as strong as the ones in *our* capital… Are you putting two and two together?”

Cale sat there, stiff.

Gleaning enough to know what Cale was thinking, Albert went on, “I survived thanks to a mage’s shield, but the pope wasn’t the only casualty. Churchgoers in the front row were massacred. I am going to find and crush the organization that did this. They were planning to do the same in our kingdom! There was a different mage involved this time, but I’ll find the mage who helped attack Rowoon and see to it that he’s punished for his crimes.”

Albert still hadn’t forgotten Redika.

“Um, Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

“That mage is no longer in this world.”

“What?”

Cale averted his eyes. “He’s dead.”

“Did you kill him?”

“*I* didn’t.”

That was true. Although Choi Han had cut off both Redika’s arms and blinded him, it wasn’t Cale’s group who had killed the

mage. It was that mad swordswoman.

Cale heard Albert sigh deeply but dismissed it. He had enough to worry about. *Something's fishy about the Sun God Twins and the magic bombs.* Be that as it may, he had no way to investigate. This was a recent incident, so he had no leads, and he couldn't send Ron or anyone else to find out about the explosion. Mainly, Cale was hoping he wouldn't get dragged into it.

"Tell me these things sooner from now on."

"You got it."

Cale's devil-may-care attitude was giving Albert a headache. He sighed again. "Contact me when Brek's fourth prince arrives. He seems calm and respectful. I'm sure you'll get along."

I thought he was a rude whiner, Cale thought, remembering Rosalyn's words as he nodded.

He and Albert soon ended their conversation, and Cale tucked the communication sphere in his magic bag. They wouldn't be chatting for a while.

***

The next day, Cale sat on a platform, looking down. Below was a large area where spectators sat in a circle. On the platform, which was the area's highest, Cale unfolded the paper he held.

‹Are the contests starting now?›

Cale nodded to Raon. Today was the first day of the festival's competitions.

‹Will we go to the night market later too, human? Will you buy me everything I want?!›

He nodded again. He'd taught Raon about money that morning. Buying the dragon things from the night market wouldn't be too expensive.

Hearing Raon giggle in his head, he dropped his gaze. Ohn and Hong both wore pouches around their necks that contained

spending money. Mary, who still wore her black robe, had a black pouch of spending money as well.

"I can be *very* generous sometimes," Cale said, a proclamation that would've shocked Rosalyn had she been present.

‹Right! You're very good, human!›

Cale held up the document, waving it at Ron and Choi Han. "So, it's these three?"

The paper listed a specific chef, artist, and sculptor.

Choi Han explained their identities one by one. "Yes. They're a former knight commander, an archer, and an assassin."

You're kidding. Cale couldn't believe it. A former commander, an archer, and an assassin? *Maybe I can create my own covert fighting unit.*

How shocked would the enemy be if a flying skeleton brigade *and* a chef, an artist, and a sculptor—who were actually combat experts—showed up to fight them? Baffling as the idea was, Cale found himself grinning.

"They're all stronger than average?"

"Yes. All three are around Vice-Captain Hilsmann's level."

‹Why're you smiling like that, human? Is something fun going on? Tell me, tell me!› Raon demanded.

Cale didn't answer. Instead, he pivoted to Ron. Choi Han was slow on the uptake about these sorts of things, but Ron was not.

As they made eye contact, Ron smiled. "This territory is a better place to live than you expected, isn't it, young master?"

"Seems that way."

Ever since Cale told Deruth about the northern alliance, the count had been fortifying the castle walls. This large-scale construction project was based on Müller's blueprints. The count had also been busy expanding his armed forces and honing their skills. He wasn't taxing his citizens to do so, of course; they wouldn't have come out in droves to celebrate if he were. No,

Deruth was putting his own money to work—but there was still room for improvement.

"Very good."

Cale leaned into the very soft couch. This position would make it easy for him to fall asleep, but it was fitting for Cale.

"That man over there is the archer," said Choi Han.

The art contest was underway, though it was more like an exhibition than a competition. The artists had already gone through a first round of judging; the second and final round was part of the festival. At present, the contestants were showing off their paintings of the crags and quarry behind the Henituses' castle. Once the round concluded, it would be time to announce the winner.

The artist Choi Han had pointed out was a long-haired man with a long beard. Jumping to his feet, the man swung his brush back and forth across his canvas in a big X.

"That's not it! Why am I so terrible?" he cried. "How could I put up such trash in an *art* contest?! My hands are talentless!" Paint flew everywhere, and the man clutched at his hair. "I'm total, utter trash! That's not art at all!"

But it's really good, Cale thought, examining the man's painting. He turned to Choi Han, who was avoiding his gaze.

Although Choi Han wouldn't make eye contact, he did note, "The man's quite sensitive. He's kind of a newcomer—only been living here about three months. They say he built a house by that white tree on the hill in the slums. He says that's the source of his inspiration."

Wait, what's the source of his inspiration?

Looking down, Cale saw Ohn and Hong mewling out little laughs. The man-eating tree, where Cale earned the Unbreakable Shield—his first Ancient Power—was in the slums. Thanks to Cale, that tree had turned white with blue leaves.

"Th-this isn't it! I can't show people this trash!" the artist wailed.

"Let's pass on that guy," Cale told Ron.

The white tree in the slums reacted to Cale, since he possessed the Unbreakable Shield. What if it did that when he visited the archer?

I might end up becoming his muse.

That was a far likelier outcome than he would've preferred.

"What about the sculptor?" he asked. "Will she come to the next round tomorrow?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"She didn't make it through."

Hmm.

Choi Han reflected for a moment, then added, "She actually came in last place. It would appear she has no talent for sculpting."

"But she *is* a skilled assassin," Ron interjected. "Shall I make a reservation at the restaurant, then, young master?"

"Yes."

Debating whether to meet with the chef first, Cale watched the art competition. The artist-archer continued to lament his ineptitude before fleeing from the area, drawing a deep sigh from Cale.

***

Cale entered the restaurant, A Place of Warmth. Lilly was there beside the chef, looking anxious.

"Brother!" she cried, though Cale ignored her agitation.

"Welcome, Lord Cale."

With the count's son visiting, the chef had come out to greet him personally. The man was in his seventies; he was fit, but the years had definitely taken a toll on his body. When Cale first learned about the old man, he had been surprised but not put off.

“I’ll show you to the room you reserved.”

The restaurants by the castle frequently prepared a private dining room when people from the castle brought guests. Cale stared at the elderly chef, who picked up on his pointed gaze. Lilly glanced back and forth between the two of them, visibly nervous.

Finally, Cale extended his hand to the old man. “It’s an honor to meet my mother’s teacher.”

“What?!” Lilly blurted out. “Master, you’re Mother’s teach—eep!”

Lilly covered her mouth with both hands, realizing she’d called him “master” aloud. Her eyes darted around the room as she tried to figure out what to say. Cale grinned; he’d caught her.

No! This was a secret from the family! Lilly wasn’t aware that Countess Violan had known about her “master” for quite some time.

“I came to meet my mother’s teacher,” Cale said. “And my sister’s master.”

The chef, Edro, kept quiet as he observed Cale. Then he laughed. “You flatter me. I don’t deserve to be called the countess’s teacher.”

Edro was a former knight commander. Cale recalled what Ron had to say about the man: *“Everyone who’s been here more than a decade knows who he really is. He arrived with the countess.”*

Violan was from a fallen noble family. She’d arrived in Henituse territory to trade for luxury goods back when she ran a merchant guild. During that trip, Edro had been responsible for protecting her group. When Violan said she wanted to enter the cruel world of merchants, Edro had given up working for her family, becoming a mercenary to protect her.

He was reportedly her sword instructor when she was younger too, Cale mused.

The Henituses were military-minded folk. Like most nobles, Deruth—and even Bassen—could handle a sword. Violan was no exception; she knew the basics of swordplay as well.

When the countess wed, Edro stayed here, saying his dream was to be a chef. The original Cale, Lilly, and Bassen hadn't known that, since it happened more than a decade ago in the story. Deruth had built Edro this restaurant.

"I hear the food here is wonderful," Cale said with a smile. "I came with high expectations."

Edro stiffened. *No lout's worse than this bastard.* The chef had seen Cale drink and kick up a fuss in the past—enough to feel he needed to give the young man some tough love. He wasn't one to tolerate such a spoiled youth.

Guiding Cale into the private room, Edro declared, "It should be up to your standards."

‹Enjoy the meal with your sister, human.›

While Cale and Lilly ate in one room, the rest of the group would dine in a different one. That way, Raon and the cats could have their meal in peace.

"I shall serve you," Ron told Cale. Trailing behind his young master, he locked eyes with Edro.

Violan had told Edro that the old butler was an assassin. As if that wasn't shocking enough, Ron's skill level was beyond his comprehension; Edro couldn't even discern the man's strength.

"You sly bastard," Edro said.

"Ha ha! Right back at you."

With a wary glance at Ron's benign smile, Edro turned toward Lilly and Cale sitting in their dining room. He slowly pulled the door closed, with Ron poised to follow once they left.

"He's a talented swordsman," Cale said to Lilly. "Study hard."

The chef turned back to Ron. "Our young master's all grown up."

Ron noticed Cale staring past Edro, straight at him. The lout had grown up well indeed—into a *very* crafty person.

The door clicked shut, and Ron mentioned some things he and Cale had discussed in advance. "Chef, our young master wanted to see you not only because of Miss Lilly but also because

he wished to meet the person who once served the countess. We didn't tell her about this visit, so please keep it secret for us." He paused, then added an observation of his own. "Our young master seems to want to learn about his mother's life now."

Edro, the old fellow who'd sacrificed everything for his lady and student, lapsed into thought. Through the door, he could still hear Cale and Lilly chatting.

"I believe you'll be an amazing swordswoman, Lilly."

"Thank you, Brother. I'm gonna become the warrior who protects this territory!"

The chef cleared his throat, then made for the kitchen.

At his heels, Ron thought back to what Cale had told him to do. *"Ensure that Edro will step up if Henituse territory faces any threats in the future. Given his age, the front lines would be difficult for him—but having a man like him come to our defense is bound to stir the people's hearts. Don't you agree?"*

Cale had become a shrewd and cunning man, and Ron was all too pleased by it.

With this, they had set bait for one member of the trio.

***

After dinner, it was time to approach the second member. In reality, that was the *last* member, since Cale had decided to pass on the artist-archer.

‹Human! There're a lot of people here even though it's nighttime! And it's very bright!›

"It's beautiful," Mary said. "Things shining in the dark make my heart beat faster, unlike in the underground city."

Cale wore a brown cloak, and Mary walked beside him in her black garb. They were accompanied by the invisible Raon and Choi Han, who held Ohn and Hong in his arms. Hood up, Cale strode quietly through the bustling night market.

‹Something smells delicious, and I have ten silver coins! Buy me that chicken skewer! I'll give you the money!›

With a sigh, Cale spun around. Hans jogged up, chasing after them.

"Hans."

"Yes, sir?!"

"Add three chicken skewers to your shopping list."

"Y-yes, my lord! I'll go purchase them for our lovely trio!" Hans already had several bags of food in his arms—all things they'd eat back home.

Cale shook his head at Hans's excitement and walked on. He stopped in front of one of the many trinket stalls, and a bewildered woman sprang up to greet him. "W-welcome!"

He gaped at the stall's ominous sculptures, lost for words. Then he looked at the woman in front of him. She was the sculptor they believed was also a talented assassin. *This is serious.*

"I couldn't figure out her true identity, so she's definitely skilled," Ron had reported. *"Half an assassin's acumen lies in hiding their identity, young master."*

Cale pointed to a sculpture. "Is that a demon?"

The amiable woman, who seemed to be in her forties, had the presence and bearing of a sweet next-door neighbor. Yet her sculptures were quite…unique. Cale couldn't tell what they were, but they struck him as cold and eerie, reminding him of things like demons, swords, and eternal darkness.

"Goodness no!" the woman exclaimed. "It's a flower. A forsythia."

A forsythia?

‹I can't believe it. That is not *a forsythia, human!›*

Cale picked up the sculpture he'd thought was a growling demon. *Well, she's…got her own kind of talent.* "Right, a forsythia. I'd like to buy it."

"R-really?"

“Yes. I want to give it to someone special.” He told her whatever nonsense came to mind, perplexed by the challenges of building a new relationship.

‹Ahem! If you really want to give me that eyesore, human, I’ll even accept it!›

“Is th-this one a tiger?” Cale asked hesitantly.

“It’s a lovely rabbit!”

“Right… Give me the rabbit too.” The so-called “rabbit” looked like it could be the demon’s hellhound.

“Thank you so much!”

“Don’t mention it. These sculptures are wonderful.” Picking them up, he added graciously, “They’re just my style.”

“I’ve never received such praise. I’m touched!” she told him, eyes shining with gratitude.

The woman’s behavior had Cale certain of one thing: *She’s really a good actress.* People would think she was a talentless artist who nevertheless loved to sculpt; her passion would touch them.

He recalled what Ron had told him. *“It’s amazing that she hasn’t been noticed until now. She’s one of two things: an assassin or a spy.”* Their investigation had determined that she wasn’t the latter.

They didn’t know why the woman had come to Henituse territory, but she’d posed as a sculptor here for the past three years. Ron said he’d never seen her before, and when he *did* see her, he only detected her hidden identity because Choi Han had alerted him to the woman’s strength.

She handed over the demonic rabbit and forsythia. Cale took a gold coin out of his bag and dropped it into her palm.

“My! I don’t have any change,” the poor sculptor said, unsure what to do.

“Consider it a tip for all the toil you went through.”

She looked moved by the gesture. “You’re the first to recognize my hard work.”

Cale shrugged his hood back, revealing himself as the count's son.

"Huh?!" Taken aback, the sculptor hastened to curtsy. "M-my lord!"

She really *was* a good actress. Cale stepped closer and whispered in her ear, "It's my donation to your struggle while you're on the run."

"Excuse me?"

"Isn't it hard to live in hiding?"

Her gaze hardened. Before anything could come of it, someone materialized behind Cale without a sound.

"You take care of the rest, Ron," Cale told him.

"Yes, young master."

Cale again addressed the sculptor-assassin, who wore a bewildered expression that didn't reach her eyes. "A gold coin should be enough profit for you to close up shop for today. You'll have plenty of time to chat with Ron."

The sculptor-assassin on the run—Frizia was her name—hadn't noticed Ron's approach. She couldn't believe the man standing before her had eluded her sharp assassin's senses.

Putting on a gentle smile, Cale asked Frizia, "Isn't fleeing just so burdensome?"

They'd cornered their second target, as planned.

"I'll take care of the rest, young master," Ron said.

Cale left it to him; an assassin would be best at conversing with another assassin.

Earlier, Ron had asked Cale if he needed information. Naturally, he did. Cale had survived thus far by relying on what he'd read in *Birth of a Hero*, but what he knew of the world was dwindling. His current knowledge would only cover a year or two at best, so he was desperate for intel about the future.

"I'll pay you back—for my arm and my life," Ron had said, even when Cale told him that wasn't needed.

“Meow.”

“Meeeow.”

Ohn and Hong felt instinctively that the sculptor was, like them, on the run. That fact alone endeared them to this woman, who might very well become Ron’s student or subordinate.

‹It will be difficult for my heart, human, but if you give me both those sculptures, I’ll still accept them!› Raon declared.

They safely moved the sculptures, which even Ohn and Hong found disgusting, to the treasure chest in the dragon’s subspace.

A few days later, on the last day of the festival, Cale signed off on a file.

“Frizia.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’m happy to sponsor a promising sculptor like yourself.”

The gentle Frizia clasped her hands, exuding humility and admiration. “I’ve only been practicing for three years, but I promise I’ll make a name for myself in the art world!”

Cale, Ron, and Frizia herself smiled at this nonsense. Ron’s conversation had provided some very interesting details on the would-be sculptor, which he’d passed on to Cale.

“She murdered the assassins’ guild leader, apparently.”

“How come?”

“The guild had a policy of only accepting jobs from nobles targeting other nobles. But the new leader agreed to kidnap a young child. She called him a crazy bastard for taking the job, killed him, and ran away.”

“Is the guild chasing her?”

“No, but she also tried to kill the noble who commissioned the kidnapping.”

This sculptor was bold. *“Who was it?”*

“Someone from a vassal household of the family overseeing the southwest.”

Cale had hit the jackpot. Rowoon bordered the Kingdom of the Whipper, but southwestern Rowoon bordered the Empire. That little tidbit would be useful in the future.

"I'm looking forward to seeing lots of your sculptures, Frizia."

"Yes, sir! I'll only show you the ones you'll like."

Frankly, Cale couldn't have cared less about sculptures.

"She said others are on the run too. Her former followers."

Hearing that, Cale had responded, *"Well, tell them to come here,"* as though it were obvious. If he was going to establish a unit of undercover fighters, shouldn't he do it the right way?

Cale dismissed Frizia and Ron, then checked the calendar in the study. Specifically, he gazed three weeks ahead.

It'll be soon.

***

Three weeks passed quickly, as Cale expected.

"R-Rosalyn!"

Rosalyn let out a sigh.

Fenn, the fourth prince of Brek, sobbed and clasped Rosalyn's hand. "How could my sister live in such an awful, shabby place?! My sister, the best in the world! Why would you stay somewhere like this with nothing but rocks? A lowly count's territory?! Why?!"

Cale picked up a cookie as he listened to the prince. He'd never seen Rosalyn look so angry, and a water orb whirled violently in her palm.

‹Who's that wimp? Our house is good because *there's lots of stone. What a stupid crybaby.›* Raon's voice was cold.

This was none other than the whiny, immature prince Rosalyn had described. For the moment, the prince didn't dare look at Cale.

‹By the way, human, you look as strong as my toe today.›

To deal with the prince, Cale had assumed his Dominating Aura for the first time in a while. The first thing Fenn had said when Cale greeted him was "*A lowly count's relative without power or influence wants to serve my sister?*"

Cale had employed the Dominating Aura from that moment on.

Crunch. The sound of Cale munching on his cookie echoed around the room, making the fourth prince stiffen further; he was now *determined* to avoid Cale's eyes. *Crunch. Crunch.* Cale continued eating with a patient expression, although in truth, he hated immature crybabies more than anyone.

Nonetheless, he sat in an inarguably respectful way, looking like a proper noble as he snacked. *Crunch. Crunch.* He endeavored to consume the treat quietly for the sake of proper etiquette, yet the crunching was audible to everyone.

Raon gulped behind him. *‹Is that cookie tasty, human?›*

"Need something, Your Highness?"

Fenn whipped away from Cale. "N-nope!"

Albert had told Fenn that Cale was talented and respectful. *"I believe Cale Henituse will eventually become one of the kingdom's treasures,"* he'd said.

Fenn didn't think that entitled Cale to serve his older sister. Rosalyn had been celebrated in Brek. Yet when Fenn first met Cale, the redhead seemed like a struggling noble. Henituse territory was also a mess, mainly because they were fortifying the castle and its walls.

And what is this? Fenn had noticed immediately that Rosalyn and Cale's relationship was different from what he'd expected. They almost acted like *equals*.

The thought made him bawl all over again. "Seriously, why are you suffering in this awful place?!"

"Don't expect me to give you a shoulder to cry on." Rosalyn spoke gently with a smile on her face, but her tone was vicious. "Why did you come here?"

“I wanted to see you! You were the pride of our kingdom!”

Rosalyn was beautiful, smart, and awe-inspiring. She was a shining beacon within Brek’s royal family, which was otherwise nothing special. The crown prince—their eldest brother—worked hard, but he wasn’t exceptional beyond his diligence. That didn’t sit right with Fenn. In his opinion, the only person who deserved Brek’s golden crown was the woman in front of him with crimson hair and matching eyes: his sister.

“You suddenly showed up with some weirdos and destroyed everything!” Fenn whined. “How could you just disappear after that?”

Rosalyn flinched and glanced over at Cale. She hadn’t told him this, but during their trip, she and Choi Han had blown up one of Brek’s palaces. The lout was somehow more intimidating than usual. He looked back at Rosalyn with an odd smile.

“I wanted to see you each and every day,” Fenn said, weeping. “Why, oh *why*, would you stay in this pathetic hamlet with nothing but rocks?!”

For the record, Fenn and Cale were the same age. That made this crybaby also eighteen. Cale found his attitude shocking, especially since Fenn belonged to a royal family. The prince, who should’ve been instilled with responsibility and dignity, was really just an immature brat.

Why would Albert say this idiot was sincere and decent? Cale questioned the crown prince’s judgment.

Meanwhile, Fenn continued to run his mouth. “I took care of the palace you destroyed. I had it cleaned up and even restored! Don’t worry about the cost. I used funds allocated to *my* palace to take care of it.”

Huh. I guess he’s a bit handy after all.

Once Fenn finally stopped crying, he looked fine. “A lot of people are still waiting for you to return.” That was the truth. Many *were* waiting for their shining star to come back to Brek.

“You’re telling me to take back the heir position I don’t even want? Are you trying to step on your big brother’s future?” Rosalyn

retorted, her expression growing completely cold.

Her younger brother, the current crown prince, hadn't wanted the position. When Rosalyn was still crown princess, he'd always told her that he wished to help her improve Brek. His purity of character was the reason Rosalyn felt he was better suited to being the heir and why her parents had respected that decision.

"No… That's not what I'm saying, but…" Fenn trailed off.

Cale regarded the fourth prince, the youngest of his six siblings, as he mulled things over. *He's just a kid.* He was certain of that after what Fenn said next.

The prince held Rosalyn's gaze. "Seriously, what're you doing out here in the sticks? I thought your dream was to be a mage. Shouldn't you at least aim to be an *archmage*? It doesn't make sense for a former princess to live as the mage of a count's tiny territory. Are you satisfied with that? You don't rule a Magic Tower or anything."

Rosalyn had originally left Brek saying she was going to visit Whipper's Magic Tower. Fenn couldn't accept the current situation from a person who'd had such grand aspirations. His eyes bored into hers; he could tell that she was thinking.

At that moment, an indifferent voice broke the tension. "Who knows whether she'll eventually become ruler of a Magic Tower?"

Rosalyn slowly turned her head. Her eyes slid from Fenn to the relaxed man off to one side.

"It's definitely possible," Cale added, as though just sharing his thoughts. "I'm not sure if it'll happen, but the Miss Rosalyn I know is more than capable."

In fact, Rosalyn would soon reach the highest level among mages and go on to rule a Magic Tower. And, although this was only Cale's opinion, he felt she was the only one who could lead the mages once Brek and Rowoon formed an alliance.

My group's safety comes first, of course, Cale thought. Still, he was at least certain of their strength and abilities.

"Miss Rosalyn will keep advancing in any environment," he told Fenn.

Their eyes met, and Fenn's shoulders jumped. He had a similar feeling to the time he'd met the Empire's imperial prince—like he was becoming smaller.

"Don't you believe in her?" Cale asked, his eyes seemingly full of trust.

Fenn was speechless.

Cale studied the whiny crybaby of a prince. "You *do*, right?" he asked, a tender smile on his face.

"Of course… Of *course* I believe in my sister." That was the only answer Fenn could give. He had more faith in Rosalyn than anyone.

Cale's lips tugged upward. He definitely came off as respectful toward Fenn, yet the prince was overwhelmed by him.

Frowning, Finn clenched his fists without thinking better of it, raising his voice to escape his intense fear. "A lowly noble's son like you dares question me about my sis—augh!"

Splash! Water from above drenched Fenn; the orb in Rosalyn's hand had exploded atop his head.

Rosalyn spoke coaxingly to her younger brother, who seemed flummoxed by the sudden attack. "Looks like we're overdue for a nice, long conversation. Get up, Fenn."

"What did I do wrong for you to suddenly—ugh!"

Splaaaash! The moment Fenn spun toward Rosalyn, an even larger ball of water landed on him. He choked and spluttered. The orb in Rosalyn's hand had been tiny, but Fenn was as drenched as if a wave had crashed over him.

‹I don't like him,› Raon complained. *‹That crybaby doesn't know how great a mage Rosalyn is. He even dared to mock our house. And he looks down on you, weak human!›*

Hearing the dragon's voice in his head, Cale plastered on an awkward smile.

‹To bring him to his senses, I used very cold water! I did a good job!›

Rosalyn looked at Cale, who shrugged. The second water bomb had been much bigger than hers.

Assuming his sister had launched both, Fenn coughed, gaping at Rosalyn. “Ugh! Sister, why would you—”

“Shut up, Fenn.”

Her cold glare subdued him to silence. She then faced Cale again. Fenn, who’d turned to follow her gaze, quickly looked down. He was inexplicably daunted by the count’s son.

“May I borrow the training grounds, Lord Cale?” Rosalyn asked.

“What’re you planning to do?” Cale replied. “Your brother turned white as a sheet at the words ‘training grounds.’”

She smiled pleasantly. “I plan to chat and spar with Fenn for the first time in ages.”

Cale was more than happy to play along. “Then I’ll ensure it’s completely empty for you siblings. I hope you have a wonderful time catching up.”

Rosalyn snickered. She knew Cale wasn’t fond of her brother at this point. *Neither am I.* Donning her frigid mask once more, she stood—but a knock at the door stopped her.

From the other side, Hans called out, “Lord Cale, the mage in charge of video communications has come by. He says Crown Prince Albert is looking to reach you.”

Cale met Rosalyn’s eyes; she glanced at Fenn, then nodded.

“Come in,” Cale said.

The door opened, and the mage Hans mentioned walked in with the video-communication equipment. Hans followed. Both were appalled at the scene; Fenn looked like a total mess.

“Um…shall I connect you?”

“Yes, please do,” Rosalyn cut in. With a wave of her hand, Fenn was instantly dry and no longer resembled a drowned rat. Seeing her magic in action, the Henituses’ mage paused, then swiftly connected the equipment. Albert’s face soon appeared on-screen.

Fenn addressed him first. “Thank you, Crown Prince Albert. I met my sister safely thanks to you.” Cale had to admit that the fourth prince now seemed mannerly and decent after all.

“Glad to hear it,” Albert replied.

“I plan to stay here for a couple of days.”

“Do you now?”

As Albert chatted with Fenn, he could see Cale standing behind the fourth prince. Though Cale wore a normal expression, he and Albert were like-minded enough for the crown prince to know the lout didn’t exactly feel neutral toward Fenn. He met Cale’s eyes.

Didn’t you say he was well mannered? Cale’s gaze seemed to demand. *Where did you even find such a useless idiot?*

Albert looked away quickly. *I guess he is a mess.* The crown prince, who trusted Cale’s judgment, deduced that Fenn wasn’t the person to talk to about the alliance.

“I hope you have a wonderful stay in our kingdom,” he said to Fenn.

“Thank you very much.”

The second the call ended, Rosalyn told Fenn, “Change into sparring clothes and go to the training grounds.”

Fenn huffed and pouted, but he listened to Rosalyn nevertheless.

“I look forward to seeing you again, Your Highness,” Cale said lightly.

The fourth prince jumped, aware of his own poor manners. When Cale smiled at him, he felt a chill skitter down his spine.

“Since our territory has nothing but *rocks*, the training grounds have a stone floor as well. We like it. *Very* sturdy.” Cale chuckled.

Fenn whipped his head away from the lout’s cheery grin—only to see his sister with a cold smirk on her face.

Only then did Fenn realize, *They’re similar!*

Cale and Rosalyn traveled together because they were two peas in a pod. Seeing how they both smiled at him, he'd finally figured that out. And Fenn still wanted to get away from Cale as soon as possible; the count's son made him even more nervous than the imperial prince had. Ignoring everything Cale had said, Fenn darted out of the room.

Rosalyn approached Cale. "To be honest, I think my eldest brother would handle this discussion better than Fenn."

She must have thought a lot about the alliance. For their group to meet with Brek's crown prince, she'd need to pull strings personally. Yet she'd left home claiming she didn't need her title anymore. She couldn't help worrying about whether she could go back to Brek without issues.

Cale had an idea as to what was going through her mind. "Miss Rosalyn…"

He did want her to pull strings. That would increase the likelihood of everything remaining secret and progressing well.

"Do you think you need to give up more things you care about to achieve your dream?"

To Rosalyn's eyes, Cale seemed confident as usual. Sometimes, that confidence made him difficult to talk to, and today, she found him especially challenging to handle. Even so, she could feel the warmth deep in his heart, as she had many times before.

"You could go visit your family as a mage," he added.

Not as the crown princess, in other words. His suggestion had her awash with relief.

Just then, Raon appeared in front of her. "He's right! You're a pretty amazing mage. Everybody will tell you you're incredible!"

Rosalyn smiled. "All right. I'll go and come back."

"You'd better," Raon replied. "You *have* to come back home!"

Lips quirking at the dragon's words, Rosalyn turned to Cale.

"It'll be even better if you bring souvenirs back with you," Cale said.

Rosalyn burst out laughing. She remembered something Choi Han had told her once. *“I have a home, but I can’t go there anymore. Now I have a new home. It’s hard to explain the feeling of no longer being constantly alone.”*

She knew the feeling now that she also had a home with people who believed in her skills.

“Of course,” she replied. “I’ll have to come home with lots of souvenirs.”

Cale didn’t realize this was the first time Rosalyn had used the word “home.” He was too preoccupied with the comforting thought that the alliance would most likely go off without a hitch.

***

A week later, Rosalyn left for Brek with one extremely pale Fenn.

Once they were gone, Cale ordered, “Let’s go back.”

They’d stay in Harris, in the Dark Forest, until next spring.

“Will it snow here in winter, human?”

“Probably.”

“Then will there be lots of flowers in the spring?”

“Probably.”

Cale answered the dragon halfheartedly, but true to his words, Raon saw snow that winter and flowers blooming that spring.

***

Time went by, and Cale turned nineteen years old.

“Time to wake up, young master.”

Ron did his best to rouse Cale, who was curled up beneath his blanket, head and all. Ohn and Hong, who’d grown quite a bit,

pressed down on him with their paws.

Raon, now about ten centimeters bigger, urged Cale to get up as well. “You’ve slept thirteen hours, human! Are you hibernating? You aren’t a bear! Besides, spring is over. You can stop sleeping!”

Cale ceased tossing and turning, heaving a sigh with his eyes still squeezed shut. “Time goes by so fast.”

It was already late spring—time to head to the Ten Finger Mountains, the location of the final Ancient Power.

Chapter 24:
Scary

BEFORE SETTING out on his journey, Cale needed to confirm some things.

“This isn’t very comfortable,” he complained.

Mary nodded and handed him a pillow. Placing the additional cushion beneath himself, he faced forward.

“The view is killer, though.” As long as he wasn’t worried about the bones falling apart, that is.

“Is it fun sitting on those bones, human?!”

“It is, actually,” Cale admitted.

Raon snickered, and Cale looked down at the skeleton he was seated on. Seeing the forest through the bones, he contemplated the fact that falling from this height would kill him.

Cale was soaring high on a flying monster’s skeleton.

Mary had resurrected all seventy-two of the flying monsters, ground the two top-grade magic stones Cale had given her, and sprinkled the powder over the bones. With that, the flying skeleton brigade was complete.

“Can you control them all at once?”

“Yes, sir. But I cannot have them all fly at once right now. People might see them. I’m disappointed.”

Cale was being cautious, just in case.

“The deputy butler is here, human.”

Below, Hans waved at Cale. The large bone wings angled downward, and the skeleton Cale and Mary were riding on descended to the ground.

Thump!

The vibrations from their landing prompted Hans to take a step back. “Goodness!” Upon seeing Cale’s blasé expression, he

hurriedly said, “The count and Mr. Müller have both sent you messages.”

Cale hopped off the skeleton and opened them, quickly getting the gist.

We will finish soon, one read.

I am decorating the interior as I outlined to you, the other said. *I’m working as hard as I can without growing taller!*

Both the castle walls and the ship that Müller had proposed based on his “the greatest defense is a strong bomb” mentality were almost complete.

We’ll see Rosalyn shortly. Witira will get here before long too.

Rosalyn was personally handling the alliance between Brek and Rowoon, which would be established sooner than later. Some of Brek’s mages were visiting Albert in connection with the arrangement.

The Whale Tribe had said they had something to deliver to Cale because he’d delayed his trip to the north. Witira herself was going to visit, but she wouldn’t arrive for several days, so Cale was making his move.

“Is everything packed?”

“Yes, sir!” Hans said vigorously.

Cale turned to the black cloak beside him. He had yet to see Mary’s face.

“It’s time for me to leave as well,” she said.

“That’s right,” Cale lamented. “It’s too bad we aren’t going in the same direction.”

He meant that; Mary would’ve been one more strong lackey in his entourage. But she wasn’t going to travel the continent. Instead, she was heading back to the underground city earlier than planned. Then she would set out again.

When Cale voiced his disappointment, the black cloak shifted a bit, and Mary’s robotic voice spoke again. “I will definitely come back, so please care for my babies until my return. I’ll want to see this place often.”

Cale made a face, then schooled it into calm with a nod. “Mm-hmm. Of course.”

The “babies” Mary mentioned were the skeletons. She and Raon had found plenty of bones in the Dark Forest. To Mary, the forest chock-full of mutant monsters had been a treasure trove of wonders. She’d returned the approximately three hundred skeletons to Cale. Now those bones—those “babies” of hers—were stored in a cave in the Dark Forest.

Hidden in the cloak though Mary was, her posture emanated maternal concern.

“Let’s go right away,” Cale ordered Hans.

After some nine months, he was finally leaving Harris.

***

“Long time no see.”

Cale leaned back on the couch, feeling out the leather armrest. “This is great-quality leather.”

“I actually changed it to a cheaper type.”

Cale stared at the man before him. “Give me a break.”

Odeus Flynn, the kingpin of Rowoon’s northwestern underworld, looked younger and healthier. The old merchant was even lighting his office with a radiant chandelier.

“Life must be good,” Cale quipped.

A smile rose to Odeus’s lips, his demeanor stereotypically villainous. “Of course. Life’s been *great* since Benion Sten was imprisoned for good.”

Cale smirked back. Sten territory, and the northwest, had undergone a significant amount of change in the past nine months.

Benion Sten was in prison. At first, Cale had heard that there were no plans to punish him severely. But because Benion was

once a noble family's unofficial heir, they had to make an example of him. Chances were that the Stens would kill him off in secret.

Thinking about Benion, Odeus smiled wider. Yet there was fear in his eyes as he looked at Cale. Benion Sten had gone mad. Word had it that he couldn't keep any food down in the underground prison. The person who'd driven Benion to that state was smirking in front of Odeus right now.

Cale asked, "So, is the marquess losing lackeys one by one?"

"Lord Taylor's very talented," Odeus replied pointedly.

Once Taylor became the official heir, he'd declared that he wouldn't kill his siblings. Doing so dissolved the incentive for his siblings to follow the traditional Sten approach and try to usurp his position. He'd even called priests from the Temple of the God of Death and made a Vow of Death with his siblings.

"Yes. I'm sure he's doing a great job," Cale agreed.

Odeus was wary of his guest. "May I ask what brings you here today?"

Cale didn't respond right away, merely tapping out a beat on the sofa's armrest. Then, instead of answering, he asked Odeus, "You have normal income streams too, right?"

The merchant was upfront about it. "If you mean clean ones, yes, I have a couple. I make lots of legitimate deals as well."

"Hmm. Is that so?" Cale stopped tapping, took a plaque from his pocket, and placed it on the table. The crest of the Crossmans of Rowoon was displayed upon it.

Odeus gawked at it. "A golden plaque...?"

The man was already reeling, and Cale hadn't even stated his demands yet. "Silver," he said. "Bring me two hundred thousand silver coins."

Each silver coin was worth ten thousand galleons—less than a gold coin, which was worth a million galleons.

"Two hundred coins, is that right?" Odeus ventured.

Cale made it very clear. "Two hundred *thousand*."

“Two *hundred* thousand?!” Odeus said, switching up the emphasis.

With a confident nod, Cale went on, “Yes. Prepare two hundred thousand for me.” Two hundred thousand silver coins were worth two billion galleons.

Instead of reeling about the value of Cale’s request, Odeus just asked the question on his mind. “You don’t want gold?”

“You want to bring me two hundred thousand *gold* coins? That’s fine too.”

That many gold coins would be worth two hundred billion galleons. Odeus wondered whether he’d misheard, but Cale seemed completely at ease, which suggested the redhead had said exactly what he meant to.

Odeus accepted the situation. *All right. He just needs two hundred thousand of one or the other.* Preparing two hundred thousand gold coins would be difficult, but not impossible, for the merchant who helmed the northwest underworld.

However…

Odeus’s gaze moved to the gold plaque, and Cale lifted the lid of its case to show the prince’s signature inside. It would be better to get caught by the crown prince with two billion galleons’ worth of coins than two *hundred* billion.

“Two hundred thousand coins will be heavy,” Odeus warned.

“No problem.”

Finally, the merchant couldn’t hide his curiosity any longer. “Just what are you planning to do with them?” He was itching to know how Cale would use two hundred thousand silver coins.

Cale’s smile brightened. His complexion was glowing, since he’d been eating well and relaxing for nine months. “You want to know?”

Odeus quickly waved him off. It’d be better *not* to know what the man in front of him was thinking. “Not at all. I don’t need to. It was just a knee-jerk question.”

“Fine. Well, prepare the coins in the next hour. You can do that, right?”

“Huh? In one hour? What could you possi—never mind. I’ll get them ready.”

Cale saw that Odeus was still curious. His eyes seemed to ask, *Really, what* are *you going to do with two hundred thousand silver coins?*

What was Cale’s plan? Why, to make a path of silver coins, of course.

***

An hour later, Cale was in Odeus’s underground warehouse. The merchant himself was notably absent.

Cale pointed at the two hundred thousand silver coins inside. “Raon, store all those.”

“All right, human!” In a flash, Raon stored the coins in his subspace. Cale handed him five coins. “You’re giving me some too, human?”

“Yes. We need to share our spoils.”

Beaming, Raon took a piggy bank from his subspace. “Put it in here, human!”

Clink! The five silver coins went into the bank.

Raon was saving up his allowance money, and he was thrilled to get something beyond his usual ten silver coins for the first time. Cale checked that Raon was invisible, then opened the warehouse door.

Odeus stood at the threshold, gaping at the now-empty room. “Huh.”

Cale patted his shoulder, saying goodbye.

“Where are you—never mind. I won’t ask anything.”

“A wise decision. Send Bilose my regards,” Cale said, satisfied. “Let him know I’m enjoying life, throwing money around.”

“Of course. Have a safe journey, Lord Cale.”

“I will.” Flashing one last devilish grin, Cale left the area—and soon, Sten territory as well.

Odeus was happy to see him go.

***

Cale’s carriage headed for Rowoon’s northwestern border, stopping at a village near the unmistakable Ten Finger Mountains. While this was the closest settlement to the mountain range, Cale and his group wouldn’t reach it for a few more days.

“Our lovely kitties seem to like this inn, my lord!”

Cale looked at Ohn and Hong, who were in Hans’s arms.

“Meow.”

“Meeeow.”

The pair had Hans at their beck and call now. Cale scoffed at them, then exited the carriage.

Ohn and Hong had gotten much bigger. Beastfolk grew at the same speed whether they were in human or animal form. Normal cats would’ve finished growing by now, but as members of the Mist Cat Tribe, Ohn and Hong were still kittens.

Choi Han, Lark, Vicross, and Ron trailed behind Cale.

“Will we be waiting for Rosalyn here?” Choi Han asked.

“Yes.”

The village of Block, near Rowoon’s western border, was almost the size of a city. Many tourists and merchants traveled through it. And despite its proximity to the Ten Finger Mountains and the elven village, Cale was relaxed. Calm.

The elves detest humans. There’s no way they’d come all the way down here. The elves in *Birth of a Hero* made it a rule never to venture out to human settlements. *They’ll only visit a human settlement if their own village faces extinction.*

Comforted by this knowledge, Cale strode into the inn.

"I'll get us rooms right away, my lord!"

"Sure. Take your time, Hans."

Ohn and Hong had selected a nice, clean inn. Cale swept his gaze around the first-floor dining room, where plenty of people milled about or stood near him at the counter. Most were merchants. Cale's eyes fell on five hooded figures sitting in one corner. He was about to move on when he spotted the food on their table: all vegetables, nothing more.

"Huh?"

Elves only ate vegetables and fruits. A chill ran down his spine.

His dread intensified when Raon said, *‹Hey, weak human. They don't seem human.›*

Is the elf village facing extinction? Cale wondered. And could an elf or elemental here have seen a dragon at some point, like the dark elves' mayor had?

One of the cloaked individuals dropped their fork with a *clatter*, hands shaking.

Damn it. They must've run into one before!

Quickly, Cale whispered so that the elves in the corner couldn't hear. "Raon, fly around without stopping. Don't show yourself to anyone. I don't know you."

‹Hm? Sure. Got it! I'll do as you ask, human!›

Cale closed his eyes, trusting Raon to circle the dining room while remaining invisible.

Bang!

His eyes snapped open at the loud noise. The one who'd dropped their fork—whom Cale suspected was an elf—had jumped up to scan the room, knocking over their chair.

Cale had to admit he'd let his guard down after resting for nine months; he'd gotten less careful. He tore his eyes away from

the five cloaked figures. Lots of people were coming into the inn, and the place was already crowded. That worked in his favor.

I don't know anything, he told himself. First and foremost, he had to play dumb. He posed as just another guest, idly looking around the room.

At the same time, another member of the cloaked group rose and grabbed hold of the standing one. "What's going on?" the figure asked in a young man's voice.

"L-let me go!" cried the other. His voice, which sounded older, echoed through the dining room. Cale caught a glimpse of his anxious face beneath the hood, then snuck a peek at the ceiling.

‹I'm going in circles, human!› Raon assured him.

It sounded like Raon was flying rings around the dining room overhead. Lowering his gaze, Cale surveyed the group again. The pale, delicate hands of the one Cale assumed to be an elf were trembling fiercely.

"My goodness!"

The elf—who must've met a dragon in the past—trudged forward. His weathered face swiveled this way and that beneath the hood. *Thump. Thump.* He bumped into people as he walked.

"What the…?"

"The hell?"

The elf ignored all the disgruntled comments. No, it was more like he was too shocked to speak. The second cloaked elf apologized to everyone as he chased the first.

Cale began to fret. *Don't come over here.*

Watching the elves out of the corner of his eye, he tapped Hans's shoulder. He didn't know what the deputy butler was discussing with the innkeeper, but the tap told Hans to hurry up.

‹How long do I have to circle the ceiling, human? I'll keep it up!› Raon sounded excited, presumably enjoying the task.

Cale ignored the now-five-year-old's exuberance. *Revealing Raon to the dark elves was a different story. They're related to Prince*

Albert, and we're the only ones who know of their presence. It would've been tough to hide him from them.

Under these circumstances, he needed to conceal the dragon as fully as possible. *Birth of a Hero* had described how much elves revered dragons in a single line: *Seeing a dragon flutter its wings even once, elves would break out in raucous cheers.*

Enough said. Dark elves were probably three times better at handling dragons than regular elves were. With one wingbeat, Raon could make one of these elves collapse in pure joy.

That'd be a pain in the ass. Cale's face tightened. *Why's he coming this way? Raon isn't even over here*. His heart beat faster.

Right then, a welcome voice reached his ear. "Lord Cale!"

"Yes! Hans!"

As Cale whirled around, Hans saw the bright smile on his face. The deputy butler had never known Cale to be so ecstatic about seeing him. Though suspicious, he proceeded with what he had to say. "The good rooms are restricted to the third floor and higher. Is that all ri—"

"Very good!"

Cale's tone made it very clear that he wanted to head to their room *quickly*. Catching his drift, Hans flitted back to the innkeeper to work out the details.

"Want the special rooms on the third floor?" the innkeeper offered.

As soon as Hans answered, Cale could flee and disappear to those third-floor rooms.

"Lord Cale! Where're you going?"

"The third floor!"

Cale was already striding toward the stairs. Choi Han followed with an odd expression. He assumed Cale must be exhausted, since his face was drawn.

‹Where're you going without me, human? You look pale! Are you sick? Should I come over?›

No, don't. Please don't. Cautiously shaking his head, Cale stepped onto the staircase.

At his back, someone said, "Uh, hey! Sir, are you drunk? Why do you keep bumping into people?"

"I'm so sorry. He's usually not like this."

Yes, the exchange took place right behind Cale. As if on cue, someone loudly bumped into something. Cale gripped the railing.

Why is he approaching me when he has an elemental?

He found that strange. An elemental should've recognized the circling Raon, so why was the elf heading toward *him*? Had Raon's scent rubbed off on him because the little dragon was always glued to his side? He hastily took another step upward.

"Excuse me!" This time, the voice came from directly behind him.

The hairs on Cale's neck stood on end. Should he turn around? He pictured himself and his companions surrounded by elves praising Raon while he could do nothing but stand there in disbelief. As he agonized, something else happened.

"Who are you?"

"What do you want?"

Choi Han and Ron had gotten between the cloaked man and Cale. The corner of Cale's mouth lifted. *Right. I've got those guys.*

He slowly turned around. Choi Han and Ron were at the foot of the stairs, blocking the elf. Cale couldn't make out any distinctive pointy ears, but the hood was nudged back enough for him to see the elf's eyes.

Peering down into those eyes, he asked, "Yes, what is it you want?"

The elf paused, and the elf chasing him grabbed his arm. "Sir! Why're you acting like this?"

When the second elf's hood slid backward, Cale saw his face. *What the…?*

The elf was so beautiful, he made everyone else look like pumpkins—but that wasn't what surprised Cale. Rather, he'd been taken aback by the Z-shaped scar near the elf's eyes. This was the healer Pendrick, renowned as the handsomest elf of all.

Why's he here? Cale already wanted to go home. His thoughts were a complicated mess. *And what elf would Pendrick call "sir," but still be traveling with?*

It was hard to identify elves via facial features, since *Birth of a Hero* said that all elves were good-looking. Cale could pick out the mayor and Pendrick, who were both described in detail, but he couldn't distinguish other elves that way.

The elf who'd stopped Cale didn't budge at Pendrick's interruption. He stared at Cale with wild eyes and asked in a trembling voice, "Uh, d-do you believe in mana?"

Cale laughed in disbelief. The elf now reminded him of a zealot on the street asking whether he was religious. His reaction made the middle-aged elf flinch. The lout's demeanor was utterly unruffled, and his cruel eyes looked down on anything other than himself. Just like a dragon would.

And a dragon's presence is floating in the air, the elf thought.

No dragon would be playfully flying in circles. The elf was certain that Cale was spinning his aura around the dining room, toying with the other beings there. That was something a dragon would do. In that case, the dragon had to be him.

This man gives off the most potent scent of nature. There were plenty of powerful patrons in the dining room, but the scent of nature differed from that of strength. The elf's hands shook harder. After dragons, elves were the beings closest to nature; they were much more sensitive to mana than dark elves were.

He smells of wind, wood, and water. A human can't possess all those scents at once.

The elf racked his brain. There was no way a human could find multiple Ancient Powers of different affinities. A human would be lucky if they found *one* in their entire life. Only one creature gave off such a strong natural smell, so the elf was sure of his judgment.

And yet, he didn't dare say that aloud. *If only my elemental were with me!*

If he had the elemental he'd left back in the village, he'd know for sure. The elf lamented its absence, but it was too late to summon it. The elemental was hard at work at the village in his stead.

The elf didn't know that a human here *did* possess multiple Ancient Powers with different affinities—and hadn't needed any luck to find them.

"I don't believe in anything like mana," snapped Cale, the owner of those Ancient Powers.

A dragon would've responded that he believed in mana, but Cale hadn't; he locked eyes with the elf and made his disbelief clear.

The elf slowly lowered his head. "I'll proceed as you wish."

Hmm? That's a weird response. Proceed to what? Cale also found it odd that the elf had bowed his head respectfully. He was starting to feel uncomfortable with this conversation, but it wasn't like he could just say, "I'm not a dragon, I'm human." The elf really should've had an elemental, so Cale was still clueless as to why he was acting this way.

"Sir, what's going on?" Pendrick asked again.

"It's nothing. We just need to forge ahead with what we were doing."

"Huh? What else would we do?"

"Let's go."

Cale watched the middle-aged elf talk to Pendrick. He smiled; the older elf was handsome as well.

Glancing back at Cale, the elf added, "We should just go about our business quietly."

Cale scowled, perplexed. *Why're you saying that while looking at me?*

The elf jumped, then bent into a perfect right-angle bow. "I apologize for disturbing you. I'll pretend not to recognize you in

the future, sir. I pray you aren't upset."

This was strange. The elf was definitely treating Cale like a dragon on an excursion in human form. *An elemental that's seen a real dragon would tell this elf I'm human. What's the deal?*

For now, Cale pretended not to understand what the elf meant, although this incident left a bad taste in his mouth. "Well, we should go our separate ways, since you seem to be finished." Keeping his expression frigid, he turned back around.

Choi Han and Ron stared at the unknown cloaked figures, then moved to follow Cale.

‹Human! Human! I'll come find you, but I'm going to fly in circles for ten more minutes first! This is fun!›

Raon was now flying in figure eights, like a bee. His speed picked up, and the middle-aged elf felt increasingly fearful as the dragon's aura whizzed around the restaurant faster and faster.

"What was that about?" Pendrick asked.

"Nothing. We should get going."

Pendrick tamped down his frustration with a sigh, then leaned closer to the other elf and whispered, "Are you all right, Warrior Guardian, sir?"

The warrior guardian—the older elf—nodded with a serious expression. This episode had been disappointing, but he couldn't do anything about that. "Yes, I'm fine. Come, we need to support the village."

"Yes, sir." Pendrick looked back at their table, and the rest of their group, with a stiff expression.

The other elves got up. They'd come to the human world but had nothing to show for it. Now they needed to hasten back to their village and protect it.

"Sorry for the delay," said the elven warrior guardian. "Let's hurry."

The elves hurried out of the restaurant and into the Ten Finger Mountains. Their village, located within those ten varying peaks, was in grave danger.

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Around dawn a few days later, Cale was climbing the Ten Finger Mountains' third peak. Only Raon was by his side.

"Taking a stroll is fun, human!"

Stroll, my ass. Cale wiped sweat off his face as he used the Sound of the Wind to climb.

True to their name, the Ten Finger Mountains resembled fingers. The third and eighth were tallest, like the middle fingers of someone's hands. Their summits were shrouded in clouds, and their snowcaps didn't melt until midsummer.

But that *peak is melting,* Cale mused.

The final Ancient Power was the Fire of Destruction. Other people didn't know about it yet, but within a fortnight, that Ancient Power would melt about half the third peak.

"Human! It's hot! What is this?"

Cale groaned as he reached the top.

"Isn't this lava? I read about it in a book! It's hotter than that fire in the jungle! This is an interesting power!"

A caldera appeared in front of Cale and Raon. It wasn't huge, but its size was considerable. This wasn't a real volcano, yet the lava in the crater was melting the mountain; intense heat radiated from the fire within. It felt less scorching to Cale thanks to the Permeating Necklace's Fire-Suppressing Water, as well as the Energy of the Heart.

Cale peered into the caldera. "Ha!"

He couldn't believe it. In the center of the lava pit, a golden pig sculpture spun in circles. The black dragon likewise stared at the fascinating sight.

Cale thrust out his magic bag. "Raon."

The dragon noticed the bag. "What is it, human?"

"Hand over the money."

Raon blinked a few times, then put the silver coins in Cale's bag.

A smile rose to Cale's lips. It'd been a while since he'd done something this novel without harming anyone. Besides, showing off your wealth was the best form of stress relief.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

"Human… Why're you laughing?"

Raon backed away—but not because of Cale's laughter. Although seeing him cackle like this was odd, it was nice enough. What Cale *did*, however, struck the dragon as bizarre. Scooping up a handful of silver coins, he tossed them into the lava.

Clang. Clang.

"Human! Do you know how many chicken skewers those coins would've bought?! How much candy?! Why are you doing this?! If you have issues with me, tell me! Human!"

"Ha ha ha ha!" Cale wasn't listening to Raon.

Something even stranger followed.

Thrummm.

They heard a noise, and the silver coins—rather than melting—rose from the lava, creating a path. Since its onetime owner had been a wealthy, greedy warrior, this last Ancient Power required money to obtain. And Cale really enjoyed pouring out that money as if it were water.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Laughing with all the majesty of some great heroic figure, he continued chucking silver coins into the lava, and a silver path of money took shape.

It was then that Cale heard a voice, the owner of the Fire of Destruction. **"I didn't expect someone like you to appear!"**

Its tone suggested the speaker was looking at a madman, but Cale's silver coins fell like snow. *Clatter.*

Ah, Cale thought. *This is bliss.* The coins being someone else's money made it even better. He'd never get a chance like this again.

“All right! Let’s dump it all!”

Silver coins continued to fly as Cale grabbed fistfuls, hurling them at the golden pig.

Young Raon was beside himself. “Th-this can’t be! I don’t know how to feel! I shouldn’t feel this way, but…this is so neat to watch!”

Cale didn’t care. He watched the silver coins float up and add on to their path. You really couldn’t call the Fire of Destruction lava, nor an actual blaze. It was more like liquid flame.

In *Birth of a Hero*, the Fire of Destruction that appeared on the third peak didn’t go out till it destroyed the whole place. Nobody could do anything about it until an elf with a fire elemental laid claim to the Ancient Power. No one had earned the power the proper way in the novels. After reading them, however, Cale knew what to do.

No one thought about throwing money into the lava. As it turned out, the flowing fire couldn’t burn coins.

Why not? Because the Ancient Power’s owner had been a money-hungry miser.

“Ah, the aroma of money!” he crowed. **“I haven’t smelled it in a long time! Keep throwing it! I’ve never seen anybody but my crazy friend waste silver like this! Mwa ha ha ha ha!”**

“Ha ha ha!”

Both Cale and the Ancient Power’s owner were cracking up, silver coins plunging into the lava all the while. Raon took his piggy bank out of his subspace and held it close, looking between Cale and the bank with a somber expression.

Suddenly, Cale stopped laughing. His abrupt switch to a deadpan expression was jarring. “What are you looking at?”

The path of silver coins shone atop the boiling lava, its gleam complementing the redheaded lout.

“Weak human!”

“What?”

“If you don’t have enough, let me know! I’ll give you my piggy bank!”

Cale snorted. He’d never steal money from children; snot-covered cash didn’t appeal to him. Besides, thanks to the crown prince, he had two hundred thousand silver coins.

“Money! Let me smell more of it!”

“Here.”

Cale was coming off as very benevolent right now. He remembered what *Birth of a Hero* said:

Most importantly, the elf couldn’t fully control the Fire of Destruction and thus considered it useless. He would’ve lived to regret that, had he discovered that spending a lot of money would’ve gotten him closer and closer to the Fire of Destruction’s full power.

The ancient warrior who owned the Fire of Destruction had reputedly been very greedy. He hadn’t wanted power or fame; living in poverty during his childhood made him yearn for money above all else.

“I wanted to throw money away like garbage too! Those assholes stole it all—my money *and* my friends’ money! Those sons of bitches! The cruel bastards treated us like slaves!”

The golden pig had begun cursing up a storm, but Cale ignored that as he walked toward it. He was now taking out entire bags of coins and dumping them out in front of him as he went. He sighed. “Such a hassle.”

“Y-you wonderful human being!” the power’s owner said, voice shaking.

Thrummm. Thrummm.

Cale’s lips tugged upward. The golden pig sculpture shone even brighter, and red mist rose from the lava. *Hisss.* Raon flew higher to avoid the scorching vapor.

Whoosh. The Unbreakable Shield and its wings covered Cale's body.

Cale was getting tired of this repetitive process. Even throwing money around got boring after a while. *This is pretty much manual labor.* Clicking his tongue, he shook the coins out even faster. The pit wasn't wide, so he soon arrived in front of the golden pig sculpture in the middle.

"Hmm."

Once he was in front of the sculpture, the voice spoke again. **"I approve of you! You have the right attitude to gain this power! If you're at the point of willfully throwing money away, you'll overcome every obstacle in your path!"**

Won over by Cale, the power's owner told him to seize the pig sculpture. Yet the redhead's next actions momentarily stumped him.

"Hmm?"

Clatter. Clatter. Cale dumped out even more silver coins. "So many," he muttered. He was still far from using all two hundred thousand.

"M-my goodness! I've never seen such a lunatic before! You must be an angel!" The Ancient Power's owner couldn't hide his admiration.

As he cried out with glee, the pig sculpture vibrated even more violently. *Thrummmmm.* The entire peak shook. *Hiss. Hissss.* More red vapor rose through the air toward the sculpture.

Indifferent to all that, Cale burned through all two hundred thousand silver coins. The Ancient Power's owner was lost for words.

After finally dumping all the coins out, Cale stood up straight, sweating. "That was hard work," he said, taking in the shining pig sculpture. It was surrounded by red vapor.

"I like you," the Ancient Power's owner declared. "**I debated for a while, since I felt my friend's power in you."**

His friend's power? Was he on good terms with that thief who had the Sound of the Wind? Cale felt like he'd learned something

useless again.

“No *normal* people really hold Ancient Powers.”

Cale frowned at that.

“But here, take the Fire of Destruction! It has the power to burn everything! Obviously, the money’s mine.” The Ancient Power started to float toward Cale.

“Nice.” *Cheaper than I expected.* Cale hadn’t been certain he could achieve this with only two billion galleons.

The golden pig wreathed in red vapor was now right in front of his nose. He slowly reached toward it. Once he gained this Ancient Power, he’d have abilities for defense, offense, regeneration, and escape.

The owner added, **“It’s interesting that you’re from the Land of Boulders, yet you don’t have *that* Ancient Power.”**

That brought Cale to a halt. *The Land of Boulders’ Ancient Power?*

“To be honest, money’s not the only thing impervious to my flames. There’s a stone I can’t destroy as well. You helped resolve my resentment, so I’ll tip you off.” He was dropping a hint about another Ancient Power.

I don’t need it, though. Cale was fine with the abilities he had already. After all, he also possessed the Fire-Suppressing Water and the Dominating Aura. No other human being could possibly have so many Ancient Powers.

“The ultimate rock—the Scary Stone—is in the Land of Boulders.”

Cale grimaced. The nickname “Land of Boulders” fit Rowoon and all, but why did it have to be a *Scary* Stone? Even the name was off-putting. The Ancient Power’s owner didn’t say anything else, and Cale didn’t respond, just touched the golden pig sculpture.

Hisss. His hand made contact with the vapor, but it wasn’t injured. *Swsssh.* When Cale’s fingertips touched the sculpture, a blend of red and gold light rushed toward him.

“Use it to melt anything in your way. You’ll survive it.”

The voice faded, and Cale lifted his shirt. There was now a rose-gold thunderbolt on the silver shield on his chest. *It’s not a pig.* That was a relief. The pig sculpture earlier had been cute, but he didn’t want a tattoo of it. He reached his hand out.

With a loud sizzle, the silver coins turned into silver vapor. At the same time, the boiling red lava formed an orb in front of Cale’s hand. He clenched his fist as if grabbing the orb. It disappeared with a feeble *pssh*, leaving only a wide pit atop the third peak.

“Ooh!” Raon said, impressed. “Is that power yours now, human?”

“I guess so.”

“Then you’re slightly less weak! You’re half as strong as my pinkie talon now!”

Cale smiled at Raon’s approval, and a cool breeze swept past him. Now that the lava’s heat was gone, the peak was growing chilly again.

Raon drew near, his piggy bank still in his paws. “But, human…”

“What?”

“You seemed so focused, I waited to tell you.” Raon grinned.

Cale had a bad feeling about this. What was the dragon up to?

“That magic spearman is nearby,” Raon said.

Hmm? Who? Cale had no idea who that was.

“He just arrived recently, but I sense his location.”

Oh. Cale finally remembered the secret organization’s spearman. They’d met at Hais Island Twelve, where Raon’s mana arrow had marked the spearman before he fled with the blonde swordswoman. *Why would* he *be here?*

After getting a year older, Raon was stronger, but he still had short, stubby legs. He pointed between the seventh and eighth peaks. “He’s over there!”

Cale covered his face with both hands.

Between the seventh and eighth peaks was a village hidden by illusion magic—the elf village. It was said to be lifted straight from fairy tales, with a small lake and trees that were centuries old.

Now what?

As Cale had anticipated, *Birth of a Hero*'s first five volumes hadn't described this incident. Still, he knew *someone* had put the elf village in enough danger for five of its residents to venture down to Block. And would that spearman have come here for no reason?

Then it clicked: the elves must have been fighting against Arm.

"Oh, and the guy from last time is coming!" Raon added.

What guy? Cale lowered the hands covering his face. He didn't know who Raon meant; there were too many "guys from last time."

‹He's coming really fast! He's near this peak already! I'm hiding!›

Cale wished Raon would tell him things like this sooner. The dragon had stayed quiet to avoid interrupting Cale while he gained an Ancient Power, but this was more important. Unfortunately, Cale had an idea of who it was. This sort of thing always happened.

Rustle. When he heard them coming, he couldn't help but sigh as he reluctantly turned around. Standing in the center of the pit, he peered up at the interloper.

The figure looked around in shock. "But right here, there was…!"

He'd seen lava on the peak only a few days ago. Since the elves were already dealing with a serious problem, the lava was one added headache, but he'd also seen a ray of hope within its power.

He made eye contact with Cale. The lout's red hair made it seem as though the lava itself had transformed into a human.

"Y-you're—"

The interloper, Healer Pendrick, remembered the red-haired man in front of him. The warrior guardian had stopped him back in the inn's dining room.

"Who was that? Why'd you stop him?" Pendrick had asked.

"I'm not certain," the warrior guardian had admitted. *"But we'd better keep our distance from him."*

It was the first time that the warrior guardian had said something like that about a specific human, and Pendrick had fallen silent after seeing the redhead's indifferent face.

The man now standing tall in the center of the pit addressed Pendrick in an icy voice. "Who are you? Do you know me?"

Cale was playing dumb harder than ever.

The one who responded was Raon, not Pendrick. *‹I know who he is, human! Want to know? He's the elf who stood behind that first elf who talked to you at the inn! I remember perfectly, because I'm a great, mighty dragon!›*

I already know who he is. Cale furrowed his brow as Raon trumpeted the unnecessary explanation into his mind. *But what's up with him?*

Pendrick's reaction caught Cale off guard. The elf adjusted his hood; his ears were still covered, but Cale noted the Z-shaped scar near his eye.

"We met at the inn, sir. I remember making eye contact."

That was true. Cale had been startled to see Pendrick's scar.

"I see." Cale kept his response as brief as possible, feigning ignorance until the end. He'd learned from his experiences. *I can't say too much.* The more he talked to people, the more messes he found himself dragged into.

Turning away from Pendrick, he walked off in the opposite direction, toward the edge of the pit. *Crumble. Crumble.* Black rocks disintegrated as he stepped on them. His red hair fluttered in the wind.

He'll shrug me off now.

Cale was wrong.

“Did you gain an Ancient Power?”

Even after the elf spoke, Cale continued walking. “Yes,” he answered curtly.

Pendrick flinched at the man’s cold, detached voice as he watched him move away.

Why had Pendrick come here, even though his village was in trouble? Because of the ominous feeling he got from the lava. As an elf who couldn’t even handle an elemental, he was well aware of his status. The only things he had going for him were his healing and fighting abilities.

To someone like Pendrick, that fearsome lava possessed tempting power. He’d wanted that power to help his village. He thought that the caldera’s fire might burn away the current threat to the elves. But obtaining an Ancient Power required substantial luck, to the point that the powers were said to have destined owners.

“Excuse me!” Pendrick cried, making a mad dash for Cale.

Cale winced at the sound of the elf running toward him. *Why’s he following me?* He picked up the pace. “What?”

“Could you please lend me your Ancient Power’s strength?”

Cale frowned, regretting his decision to reply. How could someone blurt out such a daring request? He wanted to sigh, but just turned around, still frowning.

Yikes! He reeled. Pendrick stood behind him with his hood lowered, face and ears on full display.

The novels had mentioned that Whale Tribe members were so beautiful that they put elves to shame. But Pendrick—one of the main character’s party members—had a different beauty from other elves. Unable to use an elemental, he lived in despair, but he still had purpose as a healer. Cale couldn’t deny that Pendrick also possessed a pallid sort of handsomeness.

‹Is that elf sick? He seems very pale.›

Pendrick was pale but not sick, and he certainly was handsome. Cale gawked at him.

He really isn't a regular human, Pendrick thought. Cale hadn't even flinched upon seeing an elf. And, although he wasn't speaking, his gaze seemed to order Pendrick to hurry up and explain. Since Pendrick had stopped him, the elf needed to account for why.

"I'm an elf, and I live in the elven village," Pendrick began.

Cale held back a sigh, looking off into the distance as Pendrick told his story. He lamented his poor luck. Whenever he left home, things fell apart.

Then something Pendrick said caught his attention. "An organization has invaded our village, trying to steal our World Tree branch."

"What? Wouldn't losing the branch destroy your village?" Cale said, too shocked to think better of it.

The World Tree was legendary, and many fantasy worlds were said to be supported by such a tree. It wasn't really that grand, but it grew in a special location and helped the creatures of nature live peacefully.

As for the elves, they were permitted to use the branches to build their villages. Each settlement was made with the help of the trees and the power of nature, and the World Tree branch provided illusion magic that kept the elves safe from danger. If the branch disappeared, so would the village.

"Yes, it would," Pendrick replied, masking his surprise. He observed Cale more closely. *He knows a lot about elves.*

There was a reason this human hadn't been astonished to see that Pendrick was an elf. Most humans were simply curious about elves, just enough to speculate about them, but the man in front of Pendrick had actual knowledge of elves and elementals.

"That's why the elves and elementals are fighting the organization," Pendrick added.

Cale maintained a blank expression as he asked, "What organization is it?"

“We aren’t sure. The members wear uniforms with a red star and five white stars, but we couldn’t determine their identities beyond that, even after investigating.”

Crazy bastards. Cale couldn’t imagine why that organization—Arm, or Um, or whatever it was—was doing these things.

‹Those bastards must be punished! They’re terrible people! They want to destroy the elves’ homes?! If our house were destroyed, I’d destroy the world*!›*

Tuning out Raon’s rant, Cale voiced the question on his mind. “Why do you need my Ancient Power?” He wanted to know what it had to do with the elves’ battle.

Pendrick answered with a question of his own. “Do you know what substance is most toxic to elves?”

Cale heaved a sigh. He did know; he hated to admit it, but he definitely knew the damn answer. Elves and dark elves were at odds because of dead mana.

“I’m not sure the Fire of Destruction can destroy dead mana,” he hedged.

Dead mana was poison to elves. That was why the warrior guardian had left his elemental in the elf village when he visited Block. Dead mana didn’t affect elementals, so the elves themselves were the ones protecting the village.

Pendrick considered him more thoughtfully than before. This man knew a lot about elves, and it was difficult to find such a human. “I’d still like to test it. Please help us. They’ve been spraying us with water infused with dead mana. Even the elementals couldn’t ward them off.”

“Why should I help you?”

That caught Pendrick off guard—but Cale had spoken with someone in mind. A woman who was always in pain but who carried on because the pain wasn’t *agony*: the necromancer Mary. He planned to rely on her quite a bit, so wouldn’t it be great to erase part of his debt to her, especially if things were unfolding like this anyway?

“Well, we’ll reward you for your assistance,” Pendrick said haltingly.

“What reward?” Cale shot back.

Pendrick squirmed in the face of Cale’s interest. What should they give a human? The elf village was poor by human standards. All it had was wood—no money, treasures, or jewels.

“You see, sir… Um, as for your reward—”

“No need.”

“Excuse me?”

“There’s no way elves living in the middle of nowhere have money or jewels to give me.”

While Healer Pendrick and the elementals *could* reward him in a different way, Cale didn’t mention that. Why?

Elves prefer humans who aren’t greedy.

Pendrick’s people were minimalists. Besides, Cale had already made up his mind about this, and Raon had been urging him to help for a while now.

‹I want to punch that spearman in the face!›

If the strongest of his companions was saying so, what could he do? Moreover, Pendrick was still alive because Cale had changed the plot, and he didn’t want the elf to die here. He also needed to verify something.

“I’ll help you.”

“Really?”

Pendrick saw the human smile for the first time. “It’s not like I can just ignore someone in trouble.”

Despite the man’s nonchalance, Pendrick was grateful. The elf knew he’d made a difficult request of a stranger out of nowhere, so he was touched. He opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could say anything, the man continued, “Plus, that organization attacking your village sounds like those punks I met before.”

“What do you mean?”

Gazing out at the other mountains, Cale spoke as if reminiscing. “At one point, I went to help the Whale Tribe. It turned out some organization had given the mermaids dead mana to spread poison throughout the ocean.”

Pendrick recoiled. “How terrible!” How could someone try to poison the ocean and everything in it?

“They also tried to kill people by bombing Rowoon’s capital city. We barely stopped them.”

Right then, Pendrick recalled the disaster: Rowoon’s Plaza Terror Incident. He’d learned while investigating the organization that its members were seemingly behind it. He’d also heard the name of a nobleman who rose to popularity after the incident. The man was said to possess an Ancient Power, which he’d reportedly used to save the capital’s citizens before collapsing from exhaustion. Word had it that the nobleman in question had red hair.

“Cale Henituse…?”

“Hm? You know my name?” the man said, gentle smile still in place.

The elf gasped. He really *wasn’t* an average human.

‹Why’re you smiling like you do with the crown prince, human? Are you scamming someone?›

Cale ignored Raon’s voice, instructing Pendrick, “Give me directions to your village. I’ll head over with my companions right away.”

Pendrick bowed his head. “Thank you very much.”

Cale Henituse—whom Pendrick had found very cold at first—continued to smile softly, as if Pendrick’s thank-you was compensation enough for helping the elven village.

In truth, Cale was smiling because he was mulling over how to fleece the elves as thoroughly as possible.

***

Rustle. Rustle. Leaves brushed Cale's face as he hurried forward. *Tap. Tap.* Ohn and Hong jumped between trees to keep pace. The group was heading for the valley between the Ten Finger Mountains' seventh and eighth peaks.

Choi Han caught up with him. "Mr. Cale?"

"What?"

Choi Han winced at Cale's cold response, then asked awkwardly, "Do we have to dress like this?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

"To hide our identities, for one thing."

Ron, Vicross, and Lark, who were trailing Cale and Choi Han, listened in on their conversation. Not slowing down at all, the pair continued their exchange.

"And the other?"

Cale grinned. "To annoy them."

Choi Han closed his mouth. In his opinion, Cale's main reason was more to annoy Arm than to stay anonymous. He wasn't wrong; Cale resented the secret organization that repeatedly got in the way of his peaceful life.

‹Should I just stay far away, human?›

Cale nodded. Raon was soaring high in the sky, but since he was a dragon, he'd see the nod. They were going to the elf village, so Cale had told him to stay out of the elementals' range. Raon would hover nearby just in case something went wrong.

"I see it, young master," Ron said.

Cale raised his head. Something odd was visible in the distance.

Clang, clang! Bang! Swords clashed amid the crack of explosions.

"How strange," Lark said, and Cale agreed.

The valley between the seventh and eighth peaks shimmered, and as it did so, they saw another location flash

through—the elf village.

Looking at the village entrance, Cale shared his sentiments. “What a mess.”

Elementals that had materialized into physical bodies, as well as some elves, were defending the village against the secret organization.

“Let’s go.” Smirking, Cale dashed to the village outskirts. When he reached it, he called out, “Ohn!”

Mist surrounded him. He didn’t need to say anything else for Hong to immediately spread poison inside it. Soon Cale was shielded by the toxic mist.

Vicross pulled on one white glove as he stepped forward.

Choi Han was in front of him already. “I’ll take the lead.”

“I’ll follow quietly behind you, young master.” Ron melted into the forest without a sound.

Shing! Cale whirled around at the noise, only to see that Lark had brandished his claws. Lark smiled bashfully; he was still very shy. Cale faced forward again as they approached the noisy elf village.

Bang!

“Argh!”

Screeech!

The screams of humans, animals, elves, and elementals rose in a great cacophony. Suddenly, the strong forces holding the line froze, all eyes on the seventh peak. They could see people on the mountainside heading their way, and *fast*.

“M-more enemies?!” one elf shouted in disbelief, then paused.

“Aaaaaugh!”

One of their enemies’ arms had been cut off. The assailant was none other than the leader of the group the elf had deemed enemies.

As they got closer, the elf could see them clearly. “Huh?”

“Wh-who are you?!” demanded a member of Arm.

The new group wore black outfits with five red stars and a single white star, prompting some of the elves’ foes to cry out in confusion. The elves could tell that the new group’s uniforms matched the enemy’s, but the star patches had been shoddily attached. They looked like a beginner had stitched them on.

The shabby-uniformed group neared the village.

“It’s them!” Pendrick told another elf.

Upon hearing the healer’s words, the other elf’s eyes widened. “What was that, Pendrick? It’s *them*?!”

Cale reached the battlefield right behind Choi Han and Vicross, then spotted a familiar face: the magic spearman.

“Won’t they be angry?” asked Choi Han, who was in the lead. Cale’s group was impersonating the secret organization, just as they had at the Hais Islands.

“All the better,” Cale replied casually. “Right?”

“Right.”

At Choi Han’s response, Cale looked over at the spearman. It was the same man who’d thought he could escape the Hais Islands safely, then ended up injured by Raon’s mana arrow.

“Huh?!” The spearman gripped his weapon in disbelief. He stared at the people who’d forced him to flee the islands, then sighed. “What the hell?”

Hearing a *villain* question the *heroes’* antics was new to Cale.

“Just who are you?” the magic spearman asked.

“We’re the secret organization!” Choi Han declared, brimming with confidence. His eyes crinkled as he smirked beneath the mask. Cale couldn’t believe *Choi Han* of all people had made a face like that. It was completely out of character.

“What a bunch of lunatics.” The spearman’s every word was dripping with irritation, making his feelings on the matter blatantly clear.

Cale smirked even wider than Choi Han. The spearman had been a pain, and he'd caused others harm; this was karma.

"Who are they, child?"

"What do they want?"

Two people seemed to be working with the magic spearman: a young boy roughly twelve years old and a middle-aged man.

‹Neither is as tough as the spearman,› Raon told Cale, acting as their handy power detector. *‹But the boy is special.›*

Pendrick had already described the pair to Cale. *"The child is a tamer. From how he speaks, it seems he only* looks *young. He entranced animals into spreading dead mana against the elves. As for the swordsman, he protects the tamer."*

Beyond those two, hundreds more members of the secret organization were attacking the village. On the other hand, two hundred adult elves at most were present; it was no wonder they were struggling, even with the elementals' help. Especially since the secret organization had deployed dead mana against them.

"Who are you?" the tamer boy demanded, staring at Cale. "Why are you pretending to be with us?"

Cale met his eyes. Tamers had special abilities. They could befriend living animals and monsters, then fight alongside them. On the other hand, they could also take away an animal or monster's will, reducing it to a zombie. Such a creature never returned to normal. If released, it would go berserk until it died.

"Grrr..."

Around the boy, animals held bottles of dead mana in their mouths. There seemed to be at least two or three hundred. Black veins bulged over their bodies, meaning the animals had likely been poisoned with dead mana as well.

Pendrick had told Cale about this. *"When that boy's eyes turned white, the wolves living in the valley all lost their wills. Right now, the most pressing problem is that the boy is directing his animals to release the dead mana. Each time he does, he has his subordinates retreat so they aren't affected. The elves have no choice but to do the same to avoid the onslaught. The tamer's organization controls the*

timing of those attacks, so we can't launch a proper counterattack ourselves." The elf had added that two strong individuals protected the young tamer.

Out of nowhere, one of the tamer's animals blew up. *Boom!*

The wolf could no longer handle the dead mana it was releasing. Black smoke rose from its corpse, which disappeared without a trace.

"I-I can't forgive this," Lark stammered.

Cale turned and saw Lark's eyes turning red. Of all the animals out there, the tamer boy had chosen only wolves, foxes, and similar beasts.

The tamer's eyes widened. "Huh? There are claws on that guy's fingers. He must be from the Wolf Tribe. Wow! I want him!"

Crunch. Lark's teeth sharpened, face contorting with rage. Choi Han stood in front of Lark, his aura engulfing his sword. That aura—which revealed Choi Han as a swordmaster—startled both the tamer and his middle-aged defender.

"Are these the ones who messed with the mermaid strategy?" the swordsman asked.

"Yes," the spearman replied. "It was these crazy bastards."

As the two men exchanged glances, a cold voice interjected, "You weaklings sure have a lot to say."

The men spun toward the source. Cale chuckled and told the speaker, who was watching him, "You can attack."

To avenge Ron, Vicross had put on *four* pairs of white gloves. There was a longsword in his hand, yet their foes' first scream wasn't his doing.

"Aaaaaugh! My arm!"

One of the attackers from the secret organization had suddenly lost their left arm. They clutched their shoulder, screaming, but couldn't see who'd landed the blow.

A moment later, Cale heard a quiet voice behind him. "This is a cruel sight, young master. Do you feel all right?"

It had been Ron. *What a sly old man.*

This was the reason Cale was so confident today. He looked past Arm's forces at the low defensive wall around the village.

Pendrick and the other elves were staring blankly at his group. Shifting his gaze to them, Cale ordered his team, "Let's get to the edge of the village for now."

With the Sound of the Wind, his body shot forward.

"Blocking them is our first priority!" the magic spearman yelled.

Arm's hundreds of soldiers and animals charged at Cale's group. Watching them, Cale grinned. The magic spearman flinched as they made eye contact.

Cale asked him, "You think this mist is just for show?"

The mist enveloping his body spread in an instant. Ohn and Hong were much stronger than before.

"Meeeow."

"Meow."

The kittens' chilling mewls echoed in the valley.

As Cale charged into the countless approaching enemies, the white mist reddened. Cale wasn't afraid at all, but Arm's invading vanguard clutched at their throats.

"Ugh!"

"Aaah!"

Although it was difficult to use deadly poison against a large group of enemies, it *was* possible to paralyze them. The ones who managed to approach Cale despite their paralysis lost their left arms.

"Don't push yourself too hard as you run, young master."

"I won't."

Ron was using the left arm that Mary had created for him. The grayish limb had no trouble keeping up with his right arm. Holding a dagger in each hand, he sliced every enemy's left arm off without hesitation. He was being merciful by not killing them.

A whirlwind formed in Cale's hand.

"Lift the mist," he said, and it disappeared. "Add poison to the whirlwind."

As the whirlwind turned red, a black-dyed kitten jumped out of a tree, landing on Cale's shoulder. It was Hong. Cale shot two poisonous whirlwinds into the sky as he charged forward. Ron guarded him. Lark growled behind them, baring his fangs.

"Grrrr..."

Lark hadn't entered Berserk Mode, but the zombified animals shrank backward regardless. The growl of the Wolf King's heir frightened them instinctively.

The wolf boy swiftly caught up to Cale. "Can we heal them?"

"In that state? Probably not."

"They can't go back to normal?"

"No."

Lark paused. "I understand."

The way to save those animals so they could rest was to kill them quickly and remove the tamer's control. If they only did the latter, dead mana would drive the animals berserk.

Cale glanced at Lark, who was splitting off, before continuing forward.

In the distance, the spearman snarled through gritted teeth, "Where do these bastards always pop out from?!"

Vicross wasted no time attacking him. "Shut your mouth. I plan to wear *all* my white gloves today."

Clang! Vicross's longsword struck the man's spear.

With his free hand, the spearman cast a spell. "Fireball!"

Thump! Lark punched the fireball, breaking it easily.

"This is why I didn't want to come here, damn it!" the magic spearman shouted in exasperation.

Lark's hand burned for a moment, but he ignored it. That was how wolves fought; they didn't think about defense. That said,

the spearman wasn't Lark's target. He was aiming for the one the man was protecting.

The spearman's alarm kicked up a notch. "Aw, hell! Mister, protect Bellad!"

Lark's sharp claws were aimed at the tamer, and there was no one to block him, since the middle-aged swordsman was currently in a fierce battle.

"Shit!" the swordsman swore. "Seriously, where'd these bastards come from?!"

Choi Han swung his sword at a leisurely pace. "So, you still have enough energy to talk. How 'bout we get a little more intense?"

He cut the swordsman again and again with nonlethal blows, surveying the battlefield as he pushed the man to his limit.

The tamer was laughing, unworried—when Lark's sharp claws appeared in front of him.

"Wow! Time to catch a wolf!"

His eyes glowed an unnatural white, but Pendrick had warned Cale about this in advance. *"When that boy's eyes turned white, the wolves living in the valley all lost their wills."*

The moment his eyes changed, something covered them.

"Meeeow."

A black kitten had appeared. Her natural silver color concealed, the kitten stalked toward the tamer, shrouding his eyes with mist.

"Huh? What's this?!" the tamer said, flustered.

Cale's first goal was to keep any more animals from succumbing to his spell. Lark's claws struck out at the tamer's mist-covered eyes.

Clang! A dagger parried the attack, wielded by an assassin in white. The man, who resembled a mummy, had darted out from cover in the nearby grass. His dagger twisted, aimed for the back of Lark's hand.

“I’ll have to cut your fingers off,” the assassin muttered.

Lark smiled.

Pendrick had mentioned that two people seemed to be protecting the tamer. But when Cale was climbing to the mountaintop before they’d met the elf, Raon told Cale that the magic spearman had just arrived. In that case, which two people had Pendrick seen?

Someone called out to the assassin, “Number One! Dodge!” The man addressed as “Number One” instantly jerked to the side.

A much colder voice followed. “You’ll have to cut off what now?”

It was Choi Han. His sword sliced through the assassin’s flank.

“Argh!”

The assassin managed to shield the tamer’s neck with his arm, then hopped back. Lark’s claws had only scratched the boy’s cheek.

“Ow! Number One, I’m hurt!” The tamer’s tears dripped through the mist. “I’m going to kill that wolf!”

Lark clicked his tongue. Carrying Ohn in his arms, he rushed toward the edge of the village without looking back.

“Kill those young mutts!” the tamer shouted, his boyish voice now husky and aged as it echoed across the valley. The animals’ eyes flashed red.

Choi Han was supposed to head for Cale, but he immediately rushed to Vicross, worried that he would lose his reason in the battle.

When he did, Vicross asked with a steely expression, “Why aren’t you going with Lord Cale?”

Vicross was weaker than the magic spearman, which also had Choi Han concerned. Looking at the spot where Vicross had been fighting, Choi Han asked in bewilderment, “What’s with those gloves?”

Vicross had thrown eight white gloves at the spearman. He smiled, his face still stoic. “I was annoyed.”

Falling silent, they chased after Cale, who had reached the village wall. Ron’s protection and Hong’s poison had allowed him to make a beeline for the structure, as if running a hundred-meter dash.

“Good to see you, Pendrick.”

Pendrick nodded in a daze. “Y-yes, sir.”

Cale gazed past Pendrick, only to see another familiar face—Jeet, the middle-aged elven warrior guardian he’d met at the inn. “Good to see you again too.”

Jeet couldn’t believe what he’d witnessed. Adult elves were strong, since they could handle elementals, but they weren’t at this man’s level. He was protected by a swordmaster, a member of the Wolf Tribe, poisonous mist, and an assassin of unknown strength. On top of that, the other swordsman with him seemed as powerful as Jeet. How could all those individuals have shown up at once? They were as strong as royal knights.

Staring at Cale Henituse—the man leading these brilliant fighters—Jeet managed to say, “Yes, sir. It’s been a while.” He still addressed the young man respectfully.

As soon as he’d seen Cale, Jeet had asked his elemental, *“Is he a dragon?”*

“No, he’s human. But nature’s power is strong in him.”

This noble wasn’t a dragon, but Jeet had now heard about him and his accomplishments. Pendrick had explained all that. The healer elf also mentioned that Cale had agreed to help them without asking for any compensation. Elves didn’t like humans, but they did like beings who were purehearted and possessed a sense of moral responsibility.

Behind Jeet, Cale saw an old elf with white hair and a beard walking toward them. It was the village chief. Unfortunately, Cale didn’t have time to greet her.

“Everyone’s arrived, Lord Cale.”

Having seen as much, Cale climbed up onto the wall, with Choi Han and Vicross following suit. He walked confidently atop the structure, as if striding on the ramparts of the Henituses' castle—
although the village wall was too shabby to be called a rampart. Below the wall, animals rushed toward them.

An old man's gruff voice made Cale turn around. "Kill them! No matter what, make sure you kill them first! How dare they do that to my precious, youthful skin!" The tamer really *wasn't* a child.

All three-hundred-some animals with bottled dead mana in their mouths ran after Cale and his allies with mad fervor. The elves and corporeal elementals flinched. This looked much worse than the preceding attacks.

"Lord Cale, is this all right?" Pendrick blanched at the dead mana dripping from the animals. The moment the liquid splashed on the ground, it turned black.

Not a beat later, Cale said, "I provoked them on purpose."

Pendrick jumped and whipped his head around. "Excuse me?!"

Cale gave off a peaceful air as he stood on the wall, the elf village behind him. He resembled the lord of a castle. Noting that only the animals were attacking them, he added, "But he's still coolheaded."

Although veins bulged from the tamer's forehead, he wasn't letting the dead mana poison the soldiers. Arm's forces were stationed behind the zombified creatures. The tamer and his three protectors were way behind them.

Pendrick noticed that as well. His eyes glinted, but he also looked sad. "You're getting rid of the animals and dead mana first?"

If Cale could use the lavalike Fire of Destruction to burn the animals *and* the dead mana in their mouths, this battle would turn in their favor. Logic told Pendrick that was the correct decision.

The warrior guardian and other elves kept their mouths shut as they watched Cale. This was the reason they'd asked for his

assistance. They had lived in harmony with these animals, but now they had no choice. It was best to release them from this pain as quickly as possible.

"No," came Cale's calm reply.

He wanted to judge the Fire of Destruction's strength before deploying it in his own territory. He was curious to know the limits of the true Ancient Power, not the useless one the elf in the books had gained. He'd go for broke, just this once.

Smiling at the elves, he added, "I plan to attack *all* their forces."

He stretched his arm out. *Thump. Thump.* His heart pounded as rose-gold light appeared in his palm.

The magic spearman flinched, seized with dread. "Everybody, attack! Mister! Number One! You two attack as well!"

"You want us to go through the animals and the dead mana?" the middle-aged swordsman asked.

The spearman's face fell, but then he said icily, "It's an order."

At that, the swordsman, the assassin, and the reluctant soldiers bit the bullet and charged Cale.

"Yes, kill them! Scratch up all those bastards' faces!" the tamer bellowed.

Something rumbled overhead. The elves looked up at the sky.

Raon, who was in midair, addressed Cale. *‹Human! What's that? Is it all right for me to stay up here?›*

Then a red bolt shot down from the sky.

‹Wow...› Raon said, amazed.

"Damn it!" the magic spearman shouted. "Blin—"

Boooom!

For a moment, no one saw anything but red. The thunder had been so loud that their ears rang too. When the bolt disappeared, they all heard something else.

Cale coughed, hunched over, blood spurting from his mouth. *Crap! They never said this Ancient Power had a recoil effect!* The novels had omitted that.

He remembered what the power's owner had said. ***"If you're at the point of willfully throwing money away, you'll overcome every obstacle in your path! Use it to melt anything in your way. You'll survive it."***

Damn it. Couldn't he just have said it'd hurt? Then again, Cale hadn't paid much attention to the owner's remarks. He covered his mouth with one hand.

Drip. Drip.

One drop after the next, his blood seeped out.

Chapter 25:
Great and Mighty

CALE HEARD Raon's voice in his head. ‹*Cale!*›

He was in pain. Nothing had hurt this much since he came to this world.

"Ngh…"

Dark blood dripped through his fingers onto the wall below. Unable to stand up straight, he continued to cough up blood.

"L-Lord Cale!"

A hand grabbed at his hunched form. It was Choi Han. Cale looked like he might fall off the wall at any moment, so the young man instinctively tried to help him stand.

Someone else prevented it. "Stop."

Choi Han locked eyes with Ron. "Why?"

"What'll you do if the blood runs down his windpipe?" Ron asked. He wore a frigid expression, but the corners of his lips were pale.

Choi Han released Cale—only for Cale's bloody hand to grip his arm. The lout looked at Choi Han and Ron with a face full of pure anguish. "H-hurry up and—ngh!"

Damn it! Blood flooded his mouth, preventing him from speaking properly. *Why isn't it stopping?*

Once his fiery thunderbolt landed, he'd been in such agony that he immediately doubled over. After about a minute, the Energy of the Heart started to heal him, and the pain faded. Still, there were two problems. First, he kept coughing up blood. Second…

I'm so hungry!

He was famished, as if he'd used all his body's energy. He felt like he'd been starving for days. It reminded him of the hunger

pangs young Kim Roksu had felt before he got used to going without food for long periods.

“Choi Han! Hurry and go!”

“What’re you saying?! We need to take care of you first!”

Bring me some bread! I’m starving! Cale was dying to tell him that, but Choi Han’s intense gaze made him say something else. “Go and…take care of the tamer! Now!”

A scream tore through the air.

“Aaaauugh! M-my skin!” It was an old man’s voice.

Cale knew it was the tamer. Regrettably, he’d survived the thunderbolt. Cale couldn’t see what was going on specifically, since he was huddled over and hacking up blood. Yet he could hear the tamer’s screams and smell the odor of burnt flesh.

Choi Han, on the other hand, saw everything. The spot struck by the bolt was charred black, and a large fire blazed atop it. He couldn’t see anyone around the fire. The bolt’s range had been wide, and the other members of Arm bringing up the rear had vanished without a trace.

“M-my baby-soft skin! Aaah!”

Choi Han’s gaze frosted over. The tamer and magic spearman must’ve squeezed in a Blink spell, as they stood outside the bolt’s range. Even so, the lightning seemed to have affected them. The spearman’s brown hair was singed, and his weapon was gone. His right hand was also burnt, but he was less badly hurt than the tamer. Their Blink spell had likely gone wrong; the tamer had a deep arm wound, and his face was scorched.

“K-kill them all! It hurts! It hurts, goddamn it!”

It was then that Choi Han remembered what Cale had said before they came to the village. *“I claimed an Ancient Power, and I want to try it out. Once we get to the wall, everybody retreat.”*

That new Ancient Power was astonishing. Even Choi Han couldn’t inflict such damage with a single blow, so he understood why the elves were standing there with vacant expressions.

“What’re you doing? I said go.”

Feeling a tug at his arm, Choi Han looked down at Cale. The redhead seemed calm enough, and although he continued to bleed, his eyes were clear and rational.

As he coughed, he again ordered Choi Han, “Hurry up and *go*. Are you really going to let these animals suffer?”

The veins in the back of Cale’s hands bulged with effort, yet there was no power in his grip. Choi Han’s face tightened further.

He was like this in the capital too.

Cale always put himself in danger to save others, Choi Han reflected. He tried to do difficult things on his own even if he would suffer because of it. Who cared about gaining a fearsome power if it caused this much agony? Yet somehow, Choi Han understood Cale’s feelings.

At that moment, he heard Cale’s voice in his ear. “Only you can do it.”

Choi Han’s hand rose from Cale’s shoulder. He really *was* the only one who could do this. Cale had thought about giving Raon the task, but the dragon was acting a bit odd now, spluttering on repeat in Cale’s mind.

‹Y-you… Bl-blood!› Raon couldn’t get out any more than that.

What’s he trying to say?

“I’ll come back soon,” Choi Han said. He didn’t wait for Cale’s response before disappearing.

“Aaaah!”

“Argh!”

Soon, Cale heard a lot more screams—Choi Han’s work, no doubt. He wiped the blood off his hands and channeled strength into his legs, then rattled off an order. “Ron. The dead mana.”

Ron stiffened. “Yes, sir.”

The assassin’s left arm, crafted by the necromancer Mary, wasn’t alive; therefore, it could collect dead mana. Cale planned to sell that precious substance to the dark elves and the crown prince.

Can't give up the money. He hated working for free.

Cale had to put in a lot of effort to turn his head; he was so hungry, even doing that was difficult. When he did, he saw Lark and the kittens.

"Go," he told them.

Though his bluntness might have normally made them flinch, Lark sprang right off the wall and ran after Choi Han. Ohn and Hong, who'd been in Lark's arms, headed toward Cale.

"Meeeow."

"Meeeeeow."

They rubbed against his legs, but he pulled away. *What if that black dye comes off?* Tapping them with his now-clean hand, he urged them on.

Ohn and Hong meowed a few more times, bared their fangs, and followed Lark. Cale watched them leave, then slowly straightened up. He could finally see the bottom of the wall.

Hmm?

His vision went blurry and he faltered, staggering to one side —though whether it was because of his exhaustion or the shocking sight before him, he couldn't say.

The Fire of Destruction was that strong? Seeing the flames above the scorched ground, he recognized that the Fire of Destruction's full power was beyond what he'd expected.

That Ancient Power's pretty good, he thought, wobbling. It had been worth two hundred thousand silver coins. But despite Cale's satisfaction, he couldn't drum up any strength. He didn't even have the ability to keep himself from reeling backward.

"Lord Cale!"

"Damn!"

Pendrick and Vicross moved to catch him. They couldn't reach him, but he didn't fall. Something was supporting his back.

‹No! Cale! You can't fall down!›

It was Raon’s head. The dragon had descended at last. As Raon’s round head held Cale aloft, his back grew damp. Raon seemed to be crying.

Cale furrowed his brow. *This is bad.*

He glanced at the elves beyond Pendrick, at the foot of the wall. Most were still gaping at him from afar, but two elves—the warrior guardian and the village chief—had come much closer. They slowly faced Cale. Meanwhile, the translucent blue elemental and white elemental beside them shook with fear.

“Are you all right, Lord Cale?” Pendrick’s hand glowed white; it was his healing power. He reached for Cale’s back, but his hand bumped into something invisible.

“What…?” Pendrick mumbled in surprise.

Oh, nothing. It’s just a dragon.

Cale wasn’t bleeding as badly as before, but a little still trickled from the corner of his mouth. He addressed Pendrick to distract him. “Once we get rid of the tamer, I think it’d be best for the elves to take care of the animals. They lived with you for a long time, after all.”

Pendrick froze as he looked at Cale. The human’s tranquil attitude in the face of everything that had happened stole any words he could manage. He finally understood why Cale hadn’t struck the animals with that red thunderbolt, the power he’d sacrificed his own strength to use.

It was out of respect. Cale had proceeded with this strenuous, painful method so that the elves, who’d lived in harmony with the animals for ages, could say goodbye to them in peace.

Ignoring Pendrick’s gaze, Cale began brooding about all he had to do in spite of his protesting stomach. He looked back down the wall at the battlefield below, then huffed a laugh. “I picked a difficult path,” he mumbled.

Choi Han and the rest were fighting well, though. Cale spotted Choi Han’s black aura cutting through the tamer’s stomach.

“Bl-blood! Brown! Come protect me!”

“Damn it!”

Thunk!

Choi Han nimbly dodged the magic spearman’s sword. After his spear was burned to a crisp, the spearman had snatched the blade off a dead subordinate.

“Why do these bastards always get in my way?! Those gold twins are already running me off my feet!”

The spearman swung his sword wildly in frustration but still couldn’t land a hit on Choi Han. Cale looked away from the unperturbed Choi Han to see the others fighting their own battles. Without him there, Lark, the kittens, and even Ron were in their element. Actually, “were out for blood” might’ve been a better phrase. They all fought without holding back, especially Choi Han, and blood indeed soaked the battlefield.

The sight unnerved Cale. *I went and got involved for nothing.*

There had been no need to do this; he’d chosen this difficult path for no reason. Looking at what had unfolded after he set out to test the Fire of Destruction, Cale regretted his actions. All he’d needed to do to help the elves was use these experts under his command.

Cale was so weak, even standing there was a challenge, although he was no longer in pain. He was yearning to sleep, and he *really* wanted to eat. This was the first time since obtaining the Energy of the Heart that he’d felt like he was going to faint.

Pendrick misunderstood Cale’s bitter smile. He second-guessed himself several times, a complicated expression on his face, before finally saying, “We’ll…never forget you and your companions’ benevolence, Lord Cale.”

Cale didn’t get the chance to respond.

Vicross was suddenly beside him, swinging his longsword. “Crazy bastard!”

Whirling around as quickly as he could, Cale came face-to-face with a flash of white bandages. It was the assassin Number One. He must’ve raced ahead without a backward glance when

that red bolt struck. The man was so stealthy, he'd escaped Vicross's notice. Cale met the man's eyes, visible beneath his bandages.

An angry voice, hoarse from crying, shouted in his head, *‹I'm going to kill him!›*

Number One was thrown backward. Cale stared vacantly at the assassin, who'd seemingly gone flying without anyone even touching him. Vicross didn't even need to use his sword now that Raon had stepped in.

The bandaged man floating in the air squirmed in surprise, but he wasn't going anywhere. "Wh-what is this? You're a mage?!"

Not keen on saying it aloud, Cale thought, *No. That's a dragon.*

Raon's vicious voice raged on. *‹I'll never forgive any of them!›*

Who's "them"?

‹As you asked, human, I'll stay invisible. But in return, you shouldn't look. This will be difficult for a weakling like you to watch.›

Cale happily obliged. "All right. I'm going to take a nap." He made sure to explain that in case Raon assumed he was dead and went on a rampage.

He closed his eyes, bereft of the strength to keep them open a second longer. Feeling Raon's round, reptilian head and paws cushion his body, he began to drift off.

A pitiful scream echoed in the valley.

"Aaaaaugh!"

Bang! It sounded like something had exploded. A human body, in fact.

Cale debated whether he should open his eyes and watch, but he'd given all his companions orders before they made it to the village. With victory in their grasp, he knew his allies—all stronger than him—would take care of everything.

"A great and mighty being's protection!"

As he heard this new voice, Cale lost consciousness. Feeling like his body was being slowly laid down, he prayed and prayed that he could have at least one slice of bread when he woke up.

***

When Cale finally stirred, he felt as though he were rising from a swamp. He tried to recall what had happened. *I fainted.* He'd had no strength left and passed out.

He realized it was time to open his eyes when he heard a voice in his head. *‹Three, two, one…one half…one quarter… Human, I will count down from a hundred again. Wake before I reach zero, or I will destroy this continent! One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight…›*

Cale's eyes snapped open, and he leaned his head forward. He was stunned by what he saw. *A flower field.* It was beautiful, almost overwhelmingly so.

Fsssh. A gust of wind blew past, scattering petals in the air that seemed to giggle as they fell. Cale's red hair billowed in the breeze. Atop his crimson locks, which were more vibrant than any flower, was a crown of tree branches and blossoms.

He was lying in the middle of this blooming meadow, wearing a flower crown. He sucked in a quiet breath, still in a daze.

Raon's count reached his ear this time, barely more than a whisper. "N-ninety-five!" It sounded like he was in shock.

Cale dropped his head back to the ground. The dragon's voice had come from just above his stomach. He raised his hand and felt something invisible crouching on his belly—Raon.

Has he been here the whole time?

Picturing the black dragon reciting that countdown the entire time he'd been unconscious made Cale nervous. He patted Raon's back, feeling the dragon's naturally cold scales. To others, it'd look like he was patting thin air.

Then he turned his head.

Mmgh…

Why did the first face he saw have to be Ron's? The assassin's benign smile was missing; he looked grim as he stopped what he was doing and focused on Cale.

What Ron was doing unsettled Cale. *Why was he sharpening his blade?*

Near the edge of the field, Ron had been sharpening his dagger. He had cleaned all the blood off as well, and the blade shone under the refreshing blue sky. Cale sensed that merely touching it would cut his skin. He stared numbly until Raon spoke in his mind again, prompting him to shift his gaze back.

‹Why'd you pass out for three days, human?! Never do that again! I could make hundreds of thunderbolts like that, but weaklings should live like weaklings!›

Three days? I was out for three days*? Me?*

"Mr. Cale!"

"He woke up! Finally!"

"Meeeow!"

Cale spotted Choi Han, Ohn, Hong, and the rest of the group running toward him. He frowned. *How come they're still a mess?*

Raon said it'd been three days, but Choi Han and Lark still wore their black uniforms. They hadn't even cleaned the dried blood off themselves. Ohn and Hong were still dyed black.

Cale looked down at himself. Though he was still wearing the black outfit, he was pleased to see he didn't have a speck of blood or dirt on him.

‹My magic cleaned you up!› Raon crowed. *‹I'm a clean dragon!›*

The dragon really was the best. Cale stayed put, dreading the bothersome effort of getting to his feet.

"Finally, you're awake! *Finally*." Choi Han spoke on everyone's behalf, equal parts relieved and elated.

For the past three days, he and the others had stayed by Cale's side without budging. The elves had told them that this field was safe and to trust them. No member of the group was so

willing to fold, considering that they'd all grown up with *some* sort of trust issue.

Choi Han made eye contact with Cale, interpreting the lout's inquisitive gaze as a question of where they were. There was truth to that. As Cale stared at his companion, he was dying to ask, *How come I'm here in this sorry state?*

"This place supposedly has the most life force and natural power," Choi Han told him. "The elves said it was the best spot for you to recover."

Cale swiftly understood that this was the elf village's flower field, which had been described in the novels. The elves' World Tree branch would be nearby. He feebly moved his hand up to his head, curious as to what he felt resting on it. His fingers brushed the crown of leaves and blossoms, likely from the World Tree.

He smiled. *They rolled out the red carpet for me.*

The elves had provided a human with a crown of World Tree leaves and placed him as close as possible to its branch. It was beyond the treatment they would've provided just for his help in the battle, so there could be only one reason for that. Cale remembered the bewildered shout he'd heard right before he fainted.

"A great and mighty being's protection!"

The elf village's chief seemed to have picked up on the presence of a dragon. The problem was whether only she knew about Raon or if everyone else did as well.

Cale pointed meaningfully to the air above his stomach, but Choi Han avoided his gaze. The redhead frowned, feeling something was off.

Touching the nearby flowers, Choi Han cleared his throat. "No one's seen Raon," he said in a rushed murmur so no one else would hear. "The chief and the warrior guardian know he's nearby, though."

Only those two? Cale asked with his eyes.

Choi Han shot a look at Cale, then glanced away again as he answered, "The others probably suspect it."

‹I-I never showed myself!› Raon griped. *‹I kept my promise! I stayed quietly next to you, human! I even ignored the chief when she tried to talk to me!›*

Three days was far too long for Cale to have been unconscious. He had no idea what these fools might've gotten up to in the interim. He looked past Choi Han—who wouldn't meet his eyes again—and examined each of his companions. He started with Ohn and Hong, peered at Lark and Vicross, and ended with Ron.

"Do you have the strength to speak, young master?" Ron asked.

The group watched him, waiting. He'd fainted after coughing up blood. They knew he was a good person who loved to help others, but they also realized he didn't enjoy running around or getting hurt. The fact that Cale had exerted himself to the point of fainting had rattled them all so much, their minds had gone blank.

They focused on Cale's lips, which slowly parted. "Nobody got hurt?" he asked with his usual icy nonchalance.

Ron smiled, and Ohn and Hong mewled as they rubbed their faces against Cale. All the black dye on their bodies would probably end up on his clothes.

"No, young master. No one was hurt. You needn't worry."

Worry, my ass, Cale thought, flabbergasted. "Of course. Nobody *should* be hurt."

It was only natural that they were unscathed. To so much as scratch Choi Han, the enemy would've needed power rivaling Whale Tribe royalty. When Cale caught Choi Han smirking, annoyance bubbled up within him. His irritation grew as Vicross peeled off his bloody white gloves and his father resumed his facade of a kindly old man.

"Ahem!"

Hearing Choi Han's fake cough, Cale looked back at him. He *did* need to get up, and he felt he'd recovered enough to do so… but the ground in this flower field was softer than he'd expected.

"So, Mr. Cale…"

Choi Han needed to report the results of the battle three days earlier. They had certainly taken care of things, but they might've gone a tad bit overboard in their anger.

"After the battle, the enemy retreated. The assassin Number One is dead. The magic spearman won't be moving from the waist down any longer. As for the tamer—"

Cale thrust a palm in his face, stopping him. Choi Han fell silent and gave Cale's face a quick once-over. The lout looked healthy, if tired.

"I'm hungry," Cale said.

"Pardon?"

"Meat."

"Huh?!"

Before he fainted, Cale had only hoped for a piece of bread. Now he craved meat. He'd recovered his strength, but his hunger pangs hadn't disappeared. Yet he was asking for meat in the elf village, where they ate only fruits and vegetables.

"Tell them to bring some meat," Cale urged the confused Choi Han. His voice cracked, raspy after three days without use.

Vicross stood. "I'll get you some."

That's our chef for you, Cale thought. For the first time, Vicross struck him as reliable. He watched Ron's son put on fresh gloves and head off to cook, then slowly lifted himself. His flower crown plopped down onto his thighs.

The twigs between its blossoms were interesting. The World Tree's leaves weren't the green of a normal tree's. These twigs might've looked like they came from an average needleleaf tree, but based on the aurora of light they emanated, they'd definitely come from the World Tree. Its greenery was said to have that faint glow.

Cale was weirded out by the notion that he'd lain there for the past three days, wearing that fancy, holy-looking flower crown. He picked the crown up reluctantly with two fingers, then looked toward the entrance. No one had been there originally, but just as Vicross left, a group of people arrived.

Facing them head-on, Cale declared, “I wish to lie down in a bed.”

The elf leading the bunch was Chief Canaria. Along with Pendrick, she’d been a recurring character in *Birth of a Hero*. Her white hair was neatly combed, and her wrinkly old face smiled as she bowed.

“We will provide a house suitable for our esteemed guest, who has received a great and mighty being’s protection.”

Her demeanor was extremely respectful. Choi Han had witnessed that reverence for the past three days, but it still overwhelmed him a bit. Although they’d helped the elves, this deference seemed beyond what they deserved. A frown made its way to his lips as he turned back to Cale. Even at the palace the lout didn’t enjoy this degree of reverence. Yet Choi Han kept mum at Cale’s subsequent response.

“Sure, lead the way,” Cale said lightly, twirling the flower crown in his hand.

The elves might’ve thought Cale was a dragon, but Cale didn’t care; he accepted the situation as it was. That said, he felt a bit awkward when they showed him to the house. The residence had been carved into the largest tree in the village. It looked magical.

“Here it is,” Chief Canaria declared, and Cale’s eyes fell on her. “It’s my house.”

Since it was the best in the entire village, Canaria was allowing him to use her own home.

Cale paused, then asked with confidence, “May I?”

He had no reason to reject such a nice spot.

***

Sitting down on a soft couch made of leaves, Cale ate bread and listened to the rest of Choi Han’s report on what’d happened over the past three days. Taking a glass of fruit juice from Ron,

Cale surveyed each person present in turn: Choi Han, Canaria, Jeet, and Pendrick—all of whom sat in front of him.

"So, the tamer lost his eyes, fainted, and wound up teleporting away with the magic spearman," Cale said, repeating the battle's results. "The spearman lost his weapon, and his lower body was wounded to the point that he can no longer use it. Only those two managed to flee. That older swordsman and a few other members of the secret organization are in prison. As for the rest…"

They were dead, including the animals.

Cale met Canaria's eyes. The chief's many, many years in this world were apparent in the wisdom behind her gaze.

"We can leave now, then," Cale said flatly. With everything settled, they didn't need to be here any longer.

Yet Cale's group had gone above and beyond what the elves had expected. Flustered by his quick dismissal, Pendrick hastened to say, "We need to compensate—"

Cale raised his hand to interrupt the elf. "No need. You'll have enough trouble restoring the village and its surroundings. How could I ask for anything? I'm just happy none of my companions were hurt."

Pendrick's eyes grew misty. He had wondered about this when he spoke to Cale before, but how could there be such a good person? He'd heard that nobles were greedy and sought power, but all those rumors seemed wrong.

The chief spoke up. "I can see why a dragon would protect you."

Pendrick flinched. The chief and the warrior guardian hadn't breathed a word about it to the suspicious elves, but as he'd suspected, the great and mighty being with Cale was a dragon. Hearing the chief's remark, everything made sense. The overwhelming natural power that destroyed their enemies had belonged to a dragon.

Although other gods existed, elves believed that dragons were unique deities that lived in the world alongside them. *The*

being protecting Lord Cale is a god of all living creatures, Pendrick reflected, looking at Cale with fresh eyes.

Canaria did the same. “I’m sure that there’s a reason a great dragon is roaming by your side without revealing himself.”

The dragon was hiding his identity, but he had revealed his powers. Someone like Canaria, who’d lived a long time, understood his wishes. *He doesn’t want us to worship him, but he probably wants us to treat the person he’s protecting as we’d treat the dragon himself.*

When Pendrick said a human was coming to help them, Canaria was initially skeptical. But someone with a dragon’s love and protection, especially someone like Cale, who’d protected the elves and World Tree to the point of coughing up blood…

We can treat him with that level of respect indeed.

“Since you have that great dragon’s protection, I believe you’re qualified to hear everything.”

Qualified? Cale frowned. *That’s not good. I just want to take what I can from the village and leave.* He hurriedly began, “Wait—”

“They seem to be looking for the World Tree.”

Before he could even finish, he’d heard something useless again. His eyes wavered.

Taking note of his reaction, Canaria smiled. “The World Tree’s location is a secret,” she said. “To humans, at least.”

And yet, Cale knew. The World Tree was within the last of the Five Wonders, the Lake of Despair. People steered clear of the site out of fear, and only a few elves knew the tree was there.

“As it should be,” Cale replied. He was feigning ignorance of the location, and he didn’t want Canaria to reveal it either.

The chief must’ve misunderstood. She smiled wider. “You’re right. Many greedy humans have gone hunting for it—like that attacking organization did. Though humans of stronger moral character worthy of the knowledge are bound to exist as well.”

She felt this benevolent man should know everything. He’d been willing to sacrifice himself without demanding anything in

return. Besides, he had a dragon with him. Dragons were known for their selfishness; the fact that a dragon was willingly using his power for a human meant that man was the best of his kind. He'd be a hero spoken of for ages. There was a reason that human heroes of ancient legend always had a guardian dragon with them—but sadly, humans had forgotten all about such tales.

Dragons tended only to help talented and resolute humans. *This dragon, though, seems to have joined someone talentless. That said, to gain multiple Ancient Powers, this human must've had a number of fortunate encounters. There may be no one as lucky as him again.*

The chief got to the point. "We plan to send Pendrick to the great gold dragon to address the situation. The great gold dragon's magic now controls the defenses around the World Tree."

Cale balked. *What'd she just say?*

Raon was equally shocked. *‹A gold dragon?!›*

Unlike the dark elves' mayor, Chief Canaria seemed to know where to find another living dragon.

No, no. I want to keep acting like I'm in the dark.

Obviously, Cale very much preferred *not* knowing the other dragon's location, especially because it was connected to the World Tree. Not that anything big would happen if the World Tree disappeared from the Western Continent.

Heedless of his reluctance, Raon was already intrigued. *‹Human! I'm curious! I'm curious about the gold dragon! Ask her!›*

Why was this dragon so interested in another one? The creatures were known to be self-centered. Cale deliberated for a long time, then finally asked, "Where will Pendrick be going?"

He didn't outright ask the whereabouts of the gold dragon's lair, and he was hoping that the chief would avoid answering and say it was none of his business.

Her response was immediate. "He's in the Kingdom of the Whipper."

Cale's shoulders jumped.

In his mind, Raon was shouting now. *‹Human! Don't we need to go sell the seed to that idiot? We have to destroy the Magic Tower too!›*

The dragon was right. They needed to meet Witira, then head to the Kingdom of the Whipper to meet Tunka. There were benefits to gain and a Magic Tower to blow up.

‹Oooohh!›

Raon was over the moon, but all Cale could think was, *What did I get myself into?*

To think he might meet another dragon aside from Raon… Cale wished for anything but. In most fantasy novels, old dragons served as helpers, providing the protagonist with some essential thing at a critical point in the plot. In *Birth of a Hero*, however, they were just egotistical and arrogant.

Didn't the novels say all the dragons here were really selfish? Raon had been an exception, but Cale grimaced as he started to fret.

‹I know no dragons in the world are as great and mighty as I am. I'm curious, though! Everybody knows other members of their race except me!›

Raon's "except me" made Cale hesitate.

‹Well, you're *one of a kind as well,›* Raon acknowledged. *‹Nobody else is as weak as you. But that's all right. I'll stay with you!›*

A deep sigh came out of Cale's mouth. Rubbing his face with his hands, he continued to think. *Seriously, how did I get here?*

He'd been following a plan, so how come all these other factors kept impeding him? Was it because both a dragon and the series' protagonist, Choi Han, had joined him?

Raon's worried voice resounded in Cale's head. *‹Are you sick again, human?›*

Jeez. Both hands still covering his face, Cale asked the chief, "Can you tell us where the great gold dragon is?"

‹Woo-hoo!›

At Cale's request, Canaria lit up like a fan about to watch her two favorite celebrities meet. Lowering his hands, he saw her smile—and the doubts seeped in.

"And does this dragon have a good personality?"

"I dare not judge the personality of such a revered being," Canaria replied. "All dragons are great and mighty." He kicked himself for asking a dragon-worshipper such a question.

"Is it an *adult* dragon?"

"Yes. An ancient one. Fortunately, the great gold dragon is sociable."

‹Ancient!› Raon exclaimed upon hearing her description.

Cale, on the other hand, didn't look too thrilled. *A sociable dragon could still be selfish.* It *was* a small relief, though. The gold dragon would at least be somewhat curious about Raon, from the sound of it.

‹I'll prove the greatness of Raon Mir to this ancient dragon!›

Hearing that, Cale held back a sigh. Would the goofy black dragon *survive* in front of this ancient creature? He was actually a little concerned—but not for long.

With a bittersweet smile, Canaria added, "I do worry that as an ancient dragon, the great gold dragon is in poor health. I hope seeing another great dragon will cheer him up and help him recover some strength."

That suggested the gold dragon was weak, which eased Cale's worries. Even if Raon did end up in a fight with this gold dragon, they could flee.

If all else fails, we'll book it.

If he took Choi Han and the others, Raon probably wouldn't be at a disadvantage. Cale debated how to ensure that he took a strong enough group to have the upper hand over the ancient creature.

Canaria's eyes crinkled as her smile grew. "It will be a beautiful sight when the dragon brethren meet."

A beautiful sight? Cale was afraid it'd be a bloody one.

Then an even more troubling matter arose. The warrior guardian looked pointedly at the chief. Canaria's face tensed beneath his gaze, and she turned to look Cale in the eye. "Lord Cale, would it be possible…"

That collection of words gave him an unpleasant gut feeling. He picked up another piece of bread and gnawed on it.

"…for you to speak with the secret organization's swordsman?"

Damn elves. Cale ate another hunk of bread, swallowing the things he wanted to tell the elves in the process. These elves hadn't given him anything, yet they kept asking more of him. Even if Cale said he didn't need compensation, wasn't it only right to give him something if they were going to make requests?

They were like this in Birth of a Hero *too. Chief Canaria was always putting Choi Han to work.*

The chief was sneaky and devious; she reminded Cale of a raccoon. She wouldn't dole out rewards, holding that greed was a shortcoming, but she still asked for lots of help.

Cale didn't plan to be swindled by her. He looked at the chief with a bland expression. "Why do *I* need to meet him?"

Absorbing his disinterested face and cold voice, Canaria cautiously explained. She'd never walked on eggshells around a human, but this one was protected by a great and mighty dragon. She assumed the creature was nearby, watching them.

"However long we interrogate him, he won't say anything. You mentioned that you don't know his organization's identity. Still, we thought you might get more out of him than we can, considering you've dealt with them three times already."

Still chewing on a piece of bread, Cale observed Canaria. The young nobleman gracefully finished the slice before smiling, his expression similar to the chief's. "I'll help with this, but only because it's to everyone's benefit."

Canaria's smile faltered, but Cale didn't react to that. Instead, he looked toward the others.

“As long as it’s within our abilities, we need to help each other so everyone can live well,” he continued. “Don’t you agree, Pendrick?”

“Yes, you’re right, Lord Cale.”

“Uh-huh. Helping each other without compensation in mind is praiseworthy indeed. You agree too, don’t you, Warrior Guardian?”

Cale’s sudden question took Jeet aback. “Ahem! Yes, absolutely,” he responded, standing up tall. “I’ve never met a human who knew the value of a good deed. You certainly deserve a great dragon’s protection, huma—ahem, Lord Cale. ”

“That’s right. As you suggest, such help can only be repaid through *actions*.”

Despite presenting himself with a tender smile and a most affable demeanor, Cale was calculating in his word choice. Yet the two elves took his statement as one more example of his benevolence.

“You’re right!” Pendrick cried. “The heart mustn’t be filled with greed!”

He was reacting as Cale wished. *Good, good. Next time, you’ll all need to bend over backward helping me out.*

Rather than sharing those inner thoughts, Cale looked at Canaria, his smile now even warmer and friendlier than hers. There was nothing in the elf village Cale could ask for other than the elves’ manual labor. But putting them to work would earn him their elementals’ help as well. Since he’d helped them all out, shouldn’t he put them to use? After all, the village was in a great location between Rowoon and Brek.

‹Why’re you smiling like you do around the crown prince, human? Did the elves do something wrong?›

Instead of responding, Cale rose from his seat. “Let’s go right away.” Meeting Canaria’s eyes, he added, “Shouldn’t I act quickly to help you, if need be?”

The chief’s expression faltered again. She felt as though the human facing her was pressuring her to do as he said, and she

identified the pressure's source. An unknown ability emanated from him, attempting to subdue her.

What a unique Ancient Power, she thought to herself.

She found Cale interesting. He had unparalleled luck and an Ancient Power like no other. *He's eloquent as well.*

Canaria rose to her feet, as Cale had. She could see approval in the eyes of Pendrick and the warrior guardian as they gazed at Cale. The other elves would likely feel the same. She wondered why this interesting human was trying to earn favors from the elves, but curious as she was, she couldn't stay in his company.

"Unfortunately, I need to return to the rebuilding site," she said. "Pendrick will guide you to the swordsman."

"I see." Cale glanced at Pendrick. "Shall we?"

"Yes, sir!" Taking the initiative, the healer opened the door.

Cale and the others moved out, but then Cale stopped in his tracks. "Uh…"

"What is it?"

Cale rummaged through his magic bag. "Masks on, everybody."

The mask Cale had taken off to eat had returned. His companions heaved a collective sigh before taking their masks out as well. Once everyone was masked, Cale gave them a few commands. Pendrick watched in a daze until the orders themselves startled him.

At length, Cale told him, "We can go now."

"Y-yes, sir." At Cale's urging, he walked off.

Cale followed Pendrick to the back of the chief's residence, and they headed in the opposite direction from the flower field. Soon they came across a large boulder. As they entered an underground room hidden beneath the boulder, Cale's expression turned inscrutable. *Birth of a Hero* had never described this place.

He had assumed that the elves had conducted simple interrogations after imprisoning the swordsman. *This isn't what I was imagining.*

The underground room before him was covered in blood. It seemed most accurate to define this as an underground *dungeon*. Cale hadn't expected elves to torture the swordsman; this reaffirmed his belief that stereotypes were useless.

He looked at Pendrick. "How can we chat when he's like *that*?" he asked, pointing with his chin.

"Well…" At a loss, Pendrick smiled awkwardly. The elves guarding the dungeon did likewise.

Sitting there with his legs twisted and his body covered in blood, the middle-aged swordsman was almost unrecognizable.

Choi Han said he was paralyzed. Cale glanced at the elf with the torture devices, then crouched, muttering, "Elves, humans, they're all the same."

His criticism sent a jolt through Pendrick. Coming from this human—who lacked greed and wished to save everyone—the words were sharp and cold as a blade.

"Could you send the other elves out, Pendrick? You can stay. I want to chat in private."

"Yes, sir. I understand." Pendrick motioned to the guards, who made a swift exit.

Cale examined the bloodied prisoner. The middle-aged swordsman, former comrade of the tamer and magic spearman, had seemed talented for his age. "Know his name?"

"No. He hasn't said anything."

Cale found it odd that a healer like Pendrick could stand around calmly in this dungeon. He turned back to the swordsman.

Suddenly, the man laughed. "Heh heh heh heh…" His cackle was scratchy, like his throat was full of phlegm.

Peering at him, Cale said simply, "I'm glad you aren't pretending to be asleep."

"His name's Belbud," Vicross chimed in.

The middle-aged swordsman, Belbud, stopped laughing instantly.

Cale turned toward Vicross and cringed. He'd pulled on fresh white gloves at some point, and his hand held a sharp dagger.

"The magic spearman called him that during the battle," Vicross explained, misinterpreting Cale's alarm. "I think he was supposed to be protecting the tamer. His name is similar to the tamer's—Bellad—but he just seems like a pawn."

The moment Vicross finished speaking, Belbud laughed again. "Heh heh heh heh!" He still didn't say anything, though.

The swordsman had his eyes fixed on the ground, but Cale's voice reached him. "You aren't going to speak?"

Contrary to his expectations, Belbud did exactly that. "Just…"

The swordsman slowly raised his head. He didn't care about the elves, but he *was* curious about these other people. They were still dressed in those annoying masks and fake uniforms, practically mocking him.

"Just who the hell *are* you? Who dares to stand against us?!" He ground his teeth, waiting for the answer. These fighters had outclassed him to the extent that it all felt unfair. Before he died, he wanted to know who they were.

Cale smiled beneath his mask. Belbud figured that this man, who'd fainted after launching the red thunderbolt, was the group's leader.

The man said only a single word. "Arm."

Belbud's eyes widened. He tried to avoid Cale's gaze by lowering his head again, but a hand yanked his hair. Not Cale, but Vicross. The blood in the swordsman's hair stained his white gloves. With Vicross holding his head in place, Belbud had no choice but to look at Cale.

As the swordsman tried to squeeze his eyes shut, Cale said slowly, "I guess the Eastern Continent wasn't enough?"

Belbud's face tightened with anxiety. "Wh-what the hell are you—"

"The God of Sun," Cale continued, speaking at his leisure. He was going to ask all his questions while he had the chance. "Rowoon, the Wolf Tribe, the mermaids, and the Empire… You

probably helped the mermaids for the sake of the sea routes, but why target Rowoon and the Empire?"

He held Belbud's gaze. Mentioning the Eastern Continent had the swordsman on edge.

Belbud scowled. He had no idea who this man was or how he knew about Arm, the Eastern Continent, or the organization's actions within the Western Continent. He worried at his lip before his eyes flashed with acceptance, and he sneered.

"Heh heh... You think I'd tell you anything?"

His tongue fished out a bitter capsule tucked away in his mouth. As soon as he bit down on that capsule, his heart would stop. Picturing how he'd kill himself without revealing a lick of information, he broke into another fit of laughter. His fiery gaze taunting Cale, he prepared to bite down.

"I'll never tell—ugh!"

The eyes behind Cale's mask had turned into crescents. "You're selling me short if you think that'll work."

"Meeeeow!"

Hong materialized in front of everyone as he lifted his stealth. He and Ohn had accompanied Cale. With Vicross holding the swordsman's head up, Belbud couldn't look down and see the mist wreathing his legs. Hong had used a paralyzing poison.

"Urgh!" As Belbud coughed and shook, white-gloved fingers probed his mouth and pulled the capsule out.

‹That's a magic device! I'll analyze it!›

After Vicross wiped his glove and tucked the capsule away, Cale turned back to Belbud. The swordsman was slowly passing out from the paralyzing poison.

Cale smiled. "You couldn't expect me to fall for such a common tactic."

He'd read lots of novels in which the protagonist couldn't gain information from a captured enemy because their foe committed suicide with a hidden device or poison capsule. Not

being the protagonist, Cale didn't want to suffer such a frustrating loss of intel.

Once Belbud finally lost consciousness, Cale stood and addressed Pendrick, who was staring at him. "Isn't it great that we saved him before he died?" he said in a gentle voice. "All life is precious."

Pendrick completely forgot what he was going to say.

Cale approached him as he stood rooted to the spot, unable to speak. "Have you figured out what to do with Belbud?"

"Well…"

"Difficult to decide?"

Pendrick nodded. The elves' justice system dictated that they execute Belbud and the rest of the prisoners, but killing them without gaining any information at all would be disappointing.

Cale's smile grew. "I'd like to make a suggestion."

"What's that?"

Despite his confusion, the healer also had a guess as to what Cale would say. The man had mentioned Arm and the Eastern Continent, so Pendrick had tucked those details away in his memory. Cale hadn't shared the information in the chief's presence—and Pendrick wanted more, if possible.

No other race takes revenge as thoroughly as elves, Cale thought.

The elves considered themselves elegant beings, superior to others. For instance, they believed they surpassed humans by living among nature, spurning materialistic greed. Maybe that was why elves were thorough in taking revenge on any enemy who provoked them. They probably worshipped dragons because they believed dragons were *their* superiors.

Cale turned his gaze on Belbud. Vicross was carefully tightening the chains around the swordsman's arms and legs. "Why not hand him off to someone else?"

Pendrick made a face; it wasn't exactly what he was hoping for. "You mean to put him in your custody, Lord Cale?"

The elves knew they'd already asked a lot of Cale, but they hoped he'd pitch in somehow. Their village didn't even have enough elementals to restore the surrounding valley. Furthermore, they had to prepare in case Arm attacked again. Although they lacked manpower, they wanted revenge.

Pendrick awaited Cale's response. Though he didn't voice his assumptions, he was counting on Cale's help to a degree. One couldn't find such a righteous human anywhere else in the world.

Cale's answer was unexpected. "No."

"Excuse me?" Pendrick asked, visibly puzzled. If Cale didn't intend to take custody of Belbud, who did he have in mind?

"For now, just discuss my suggestion with Chief Canaria. If everyone decides to go along with it, I'll explain the details."

"Would it be...someone trustworthy?"

Cale nodded without hesitation. "Yes, very trustworthy."

That was because Cale had this person's weakness in his grasp. He recalled the communication sphere buried deep inside his magic bag. He hadn't had to think about it for a while.

Cale was annoyed with the secret organization; in fact, he loathed them. That didn't mean he wanted to step up and deal with them directly. Doing so would lead to a *lot* of headaches.

"Think about it, and give me an answer by this evening," he told Pendrick. "I'll be leaving tomorrow. There're things I still need to do." He patted the healer's shoulder and started walking away.

Pendrick stared after him. *Wouldn't it be all right to hand Belbud over to somebody this righteous man trusts?*

Although he couldn't be certain, Pendrick still felt he could trust Cale. The human was once again helping with a situation from which he had nothing to gain.

"Oh. One more thing."

"Yes?"

Cale turned back around. "Are you going to the Kingdom of the Whipper alone?"

“Uh…yes, sir. I believe so.”

“Let’s go together, then.”

“Sorry?”

Cale smiled kindly at Pendrick. He thought it’d be best to have an elf from the village connected with the gold dragon when they went to meet the creature. Besides, he wanted to bring anyone that he could. Pendrick would be bringing up the rear in their group—maybe even hiding behind Choi Han.

“The Kingdom of the Whipper is a dangerous place to travel alone these days,” Cale replied. “We have things to do there anyway, and if you come with us, you’ll be safer.”

Whipper was a mess indeed. It had been coming apart at the seams ever since Tunka became commander-in-chief the previous autumn. Not that the kingdom’s residents realized they were heading down a path of despair.

Cale studied Pendrick, who looked apologetic. “I can’t burden you so m—”

“You’re doing no such thing. Don’t stand on ceremony. It’s probably best that you see where the prisoner ends up anyhow. Just think about it.”

Pendrick hesitated. “I… Thank you very much.”

“No need to thank me. Shouldn’t we all help each other out?”

The elf smiled. His handsome face elevated the expression to something truly pure and bright. Yet Cale didn’t see it, as he was too preoccupied with Vicross; the man was giving him a dubious look.

“You’re right,” said the healer. “You’re definitely right, Lord Cale.”

“Mm-hmm. *Everything* I say is right,” Cale joked.

As Cale strode out of the underground dungeon, Pendrick told him, “I’ll discuss this with the chief as quickly as possible.”

That was precisely what Cale wanted. He walked faster; he needed to discuss this with someone as well.

To be specific, I need to tell the person I'll be dumping Belbud on.

***

Returning to the chief's house, Cale immediately ordered Raon to check their surroundings. There were no bugs or recording magic in the house, though—probably because the elves knew Cale was with a dragon. Cale entered the guest room that Canaria had prepared for him, telling his companions to guard the door.

"Go ahead, Raon."

Raon revealed himself in the air. "All right, human!"

Cale put the communication sphere on the table and sat on the couch. At his signal, Raon connected the device. Shortly after, someone's face appeared on the sphere. It was Albert.

The crown prince's eyes shimmered with the slightest hint of happiness upon seeing Cale. "It's been a long time."

"You remain the most vibrant star in the citizens' hearts, Your Highness."

Albert's face immediately soured. "What do you want from me now?"

"You've really begun to understand me. I'm filled with admira__"

"Enough."

Closing his mouth, Cale grinned. Albert grimaced, as if he found the smile nauseating. The pair hadn't seen each other for about three months. Since chatting about the Kingdom of the Whipper, they'd had nothing to discuss.

"Are you getting in touch about traveling to the Kingdom of the Whipper?" Frown as he might, Albert's eyes burned with curiosity. He knew what Cale planned to sell in the Kingdom of the Whipper and how he planned to do so.

"Unfortunately, no. It's not about that."

“Then…?”

“I managed to capture a member of the organization behind the Plaza Terror Incident. A swordsman somewhere in their middle or lower ranks.”

Albert blinked a few times to assess whether he’d misheard Cale. His astonishment was clear. “How? No, never mind. That’s not important.”

“It *is* important. We captured him in Rowoon.”

The prince’s face hardened. *He took the bait,* Cale noted.

Albert had seized on this news, and Cale hoped *he’d* no longer have to deal with the organization. The bottom line was that he didn’t want to take care of them himself. How could a count’s son fight the group rocking the entire continent? Even with a dragon by his side, it’d be a tall order.

That was why Cale had thought of Albert. Neither the secret organization nor the elves could reach the crown prince easily, and he’d attend to this even more carefully than Cale would. Albert resented the organization and wanted to get rid of them. And above all else, Cale knew his greatest weakness.

Cale couldn’t hand Belbud over to anyone *other* than the beloved crown prince.

“I can give you more details once discussions wrap up, but we caught him in Rowoon’s Ten Finger Mountains.”

“Why’re you telling me this?”

In lieu of a response, Cale merely smiled.

Albert clicked his tongue. “Hand him over to me.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The prince’s scowl deepened in annoyance. “You seem keen on foisting irritations off on me.”

“You don’t like that?”

“No, it’s great. It’s *so* great.”

The prince’s eyes shone in spite of his surly expression. Rowoon hadn’t yet discovered the organization’s identity, and

finding no answers after a year of investigation was humiliating for the kingdom. Cale knew Albert would do anything and everything to extract information from Belbud. He'd make the most of the prisoner.

"Your Highness."

"Yes?"

"You're going to use him to test the waters, aren't you?"

Albert grinned. "Of what?"

He's asking, but he knows exactly what I'm talking about. "The Empire's mettle, naturally."

"Ha ha ha! Yes, I certainly will."

The Empire still hadn't captured any members of the secret organization, nor had they found the twin saint and saintess who'd killed the pope. That didn't sit well with Cale. They'd stated that they were looking fervently for the twins but that dealing with the Kingdom of the Whipper made it difficult to focus on the search.

At first glance, it might've seemed like the Empire was dragging its heels in hopes that the Church of the God of Sun's power would decline even further as time passed. But hundreds of imperial citizens had been killed in that incident as well. *And the imperial prince cares a lot about saving face.*

It made no sense that the Empire hadn't figured out anything about the incident. They'd even rejected Rowoon's offers to work together multiple times. Even Albert was curious about their doings.

Cale had other thoughts on the matter. *The imperial prince is so callous, he set the jungle on fire to gain control. He knows that the north will march down to invade, and he's waiting for Rowoon and Brek to exhaust their resources in the battles to come.*

That guy was leaving the secret organization alone? It didn't add up, so Cale figured it had to be for one of two reasons. *Either the Empire wants to find the organization on their own to outshine everybody else, or they have a secret agreement with Arm.*

While killing time in Harris, Cale had kept an eye on something. Well, "kept an eye on" had entailed ordering others to

do some work. He'd told Ron to gather a group including Frizia, the assassin posing as a sculptor, to create an intelligence brigade.

Soon Tunka will head from the Kingdom of the Whipper to the Empire.

Cale knew they were reaching the end of the plot as written in *Birth of a Hero*'s fifth volume. His interference had twisted the story in many ways. Tunka, who should already have been at war, was delayed. The jungle was quickly unifying under Queen Ritana's rule.

Regardless, I have to do what I have to do. Cale still planned on going back to Whipper to turn a profit. There would be a lot to take care of once he got there.

"Hand the prisoner over to my aunt," Albert instructed. "And report everything that happens."

"You got it, Your Highness." Cale nodded as if that were a given, then calmly continued, "Oh, I'm also selling dead mana."

"What?"

"A lot of it. I think I'll need to offload it in the City of Death."

This bolt from the blue had Albert tongue-tied.

"I'd also sell it to you for the market price. But there's no discount, and I'll only accept cash."

Albert gaped at Cale in disbelief. Slowly, a serious expression on his face, he asked, "How much is it?"

"Well, I'll sell it to you at a fair price, Your Highness."

Cale smoothly concluded the dead mana sale. He also finished explaining the issue of Belbud to Albert, though the crown prince was still reeling from it all. Their conversation had gone on for quite a while, but the results were satisfactory.

After another long chat that evening, this time with Chief Canaria, the elves also let him take Belbud. Maybe Cale was on a lucky streak.

***

The next morning, Cale faced the unconscious Belbud. He sat down in a chair, crossing his legs as he peered at the swordsman.

Vicross approached them. “Should I wake him up?”

“Yes.”

Grabbing Belbud’s hair, Vicross splashed him with a bucket of water.

Pendrick—who stood behind Cale with the warrior guardian—asked cautiously, “Are you going to tell him what’ll happen? Wouldn’t it be better to take him while he’s still unconscious?”

“I’m not sure,” Cale said, unbothered. “But I think it’d be best to explain at least some of it to him.”

Pendrick fell silent at that.

Belbud groaned as he came to his senses. The cold water had done its job in waking him up. Pendrick stood straight, taking a step back to observe the interaction. He recalled Cale’s conversation with Chief Canaria the previous night.

“If we work with the crown prince, won’t the kingdom learn about our village?”

“One of the conditions we set for the crown prince will be keeping this village secret. At any rate, wouldn’t this be difficult on your own? None of the other elf villages will help you. They’ll just focus on protecting their own World Tree branches, especially if you explain what happened.”

What Cale said had shocked Pendrick, but Cale knew that elves were selfish and had no sense of community.

Belbud opened his eyes and looked up at Cale, closing his mouth. “Argh! What the hell…?!”

His voice was hoarse due to Hong’s poison the previous day. Cale grinned at the swordsman, who barely understood what was going on. He bit his lip and glared at Cale.

“I don’t like that look in your eyes,” Cale said in a calm and measured voice, upping the swordsman’s anxiety.

“Wh-what’d you do to me?”

“Nothing yet. But there’s plenty in store for you.” The phrase “in store” made Belbud’s shoulders tremble, but Cale continued to look down on him and speak in a casual manner. “You’ll leave this village with me, and then your life will be in my hands.”

Behind Cale, Pendrick exchanged a look with the warrior guardian. He hadn’t known Cale would share those details with the prisoner. Cale’s next words made Pendrick snap his gaze back to him.

“That’s why I’m going to share my itinerary with you.” Cale, who’d sat down again, uncrossed his legs and lowered his head to look Belbud in the eye. “What do you think is the strongest race after dragons? Hmm? Take a guess.”

Cale didn’t miss Belbud’s gaze starting to waver. He saw his smiling face reflected in the swordsman’s eyes. *Damn. I look so cool when I smile.*

After that moment of narcissistic reflection, he noted that the swordsman’s expression was full of panic and fear.

“I plan to visit the Whale Tribe,” Cale continued. *The same Whale Tribe that hates the secret organization and wants to kill you all.* “In fact, I’ll be meeting with their royalty.”

Studying Belbud’s pale face, Cale recalled Raon’s report. *‹The swordsman isn’t equipped with any surveillance magic, human. That capsule was the only thing he had on him.›* That meant nothing Cale said would leak to the secret organization.

“After that, I plan to go meet a dragon. You know about dragons, don’t you?”

Belbud’s face darkened as the knowledge that this man was going to drag him along sank in.

Cale’s smile vanished. “They’re infamously selfish and violent.”

‹H-hey! That’s not true!› Raon cried in protest.

“...With a few exceptions.”

‹Right! I’m a very good dragon who likes to save things!›

Witholding a sigh, Cale locked eyes with Belbud, who stared fiercely back at him. “This dragon is an ancient one who cherishes the World Tree and the elves.”

Cale rose from his chair. Belbud, who was turning even paler for a number of reasons, saw the young man look down at him with a gentle expression. Cale tidied his clothes, then said one last thing to him. “Look forward to it.”

He directed his next words to Vicross. “Blindfold him and knock him out.”

“Should I incapacitate him as well?”

“Yes.”

Black cloth slid over Belbud’s eyes. The swordsman debated whether to flail or scream—yet Cale’s indifferent gaze had him pinned in place. Even the option of suicide had been snatched from him.

When the torturer finished blindfolding him, Belbud heard the man ask Cale something else. “What about gagging him?”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Will do.”

“You take care of the rest. Just make sure he can’t kill himself or relax. Don’t overdo it, though. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Right away, Vicross placed a gag in Belbud’s mouth.

Cale briefly watched Vicross attend to Belbud, then turned around. “Shall we?”

Pendrick and the warrior guardian slowly nodded, gawking at Cale as though he were an alien. Cale just shrugged. All he’d done was intimidate Belbud enough that he could enjoy a quiet journey until they met with Albert’s aunt, Tasha.

Besides, it’s not like I lied.

“Did you pack your bags?” Cale asked Pendrick, who’d been standing there with a blank expression until their eyes met.

“Yes, sir.”

“I guess we can go, then.”

Indeed, Cale's true new party member was not Belbud but rather Pendrick the elf.

***

Cale's journey was briefly delayed by a different group: the village elves he'd managed to avoid during his stay.

"D-do you really have a great dragon's protection?"

Thrummm. Translucent elementals made a ruckus as they flew around in front of Cale.

His gaze fell on the elf who'd asked the question. The cluster of elves behind that one were waiting for his answer with bated breath. *What a pain.* He felt a headache brewing.

Elves rarely approached humans. They didn't really have a reason to do so. Yet the elves in this mountain village *had* a reason, and they were stubbornly persistent once they approached the human in question. It went without saying that the human was Cale.

"Is it hard to answer?"

Cale avoided eye contact with the two elves at the front of the group. Why did they have to be a grandmother and grandchild? He stared pointedly at Canaria. *I thought I made it clear that I wanted to leave quietly.*

Canaria gave him a rueful smile. While the smile annoyed him, this wasn't her fault.

"I'm sorry, Lord Cale. I only told my family."

Turning toward the source of the apology, Cale saw one very remorseful Pendrick. He was the reason the elves had learned the time and place of their departure. Still, Cale couldn't blame the elf for telling his family he'd be going on a journey.

Well, in that case…

Cale figured he'd at least avoided the worst-case scenario of Raon revealing his presence and subsequently being revered. He

decided to use this situation to his advantage. If he made a good impression on the elves, wouldn't it be easier to get them to do his bidding?

"No, no. It's nothing to be sorry about."

His benevolent smile elicited a relieved sigh from Pendrick, though the young nobleman's companions awkwardly averted their eyes from him.

Cale addressed the young elf holding his grandma's hand. "No, it's not hard to answer." Acting warmly toward the child, he thought about the young elf's question: *"D-do you really have a great dragon's protection?"*

All the elves and elementals were on tenterhooks for the answer. Some elves looked directly at him, while others secretly peeped from a distance. The elementals sparkled and gushed among themselves. Cale couldn't hear them, but the elves picked up on their voices:

"There's a strong aura protecting that human!"

"It must be a great dragon's aura. I've never felt that before! I'll remember this forever."

"Goodness! A human with that many natural auras?! Fire, water, wind, and wood… He has all four, in different forms!"

"And he has another natural power *without* an affinity!"

The elementals babbled over one another. Their words had the elves even *more* interested in Cale. Chief Canaria and Jeet, the warrior guardian, were no exception.

"I've never seen such a human. He's not an elementalist, nor is he an elf!"

"I understand why a great dragon likes him! He must appeal to Ancient Powers—no, to nature!"

"What an interesting human."

Only Pendrick was unaware of the elementals' excitement, since he couldn't hear them. Cale was in the same boat; not detecting the elementals' frenzy, he answered the child's question.

"Yes, a dragon protects my weak self."

People gasped throughout the crowd.

At the same time, Raon—invisible and clinging to Cale's back, as usual—spoke in his mind. *‹I'm glad you know, weak human.›*

Cale ignored the comment, smiling at the elf child—but the boy's reply made his lips twitch.

"Wow, I'm so jealous! You're the best! That's so cool!" As Cale processed the young elf's heaped-on flattery, the child added, "When you were in that the World Tree's flower field, I wanted to go meet you! But your followers were so strict, I couldn't. I'd never met such sca—I mean, um, *strong* people before! They seemed even tougher than the humans' royal knights!"

As the boy said that, he snuck a peek at the rest of Cale's group, then hid behind his grandma as if frightened. An elf, afraid of humans?

How the hell did they protect me for those three days?

Cale began to suspect it wasn't that he'd managed to avoid the elves. Rather, the elves had been avoiding *him* due to his companions' conduct during the three days he was unconscious. He had a feeling they'd just gathered here today to say goodbye to Pendrick.

After responding to the child's question, Cale received a few more. Most came from other children.

"What's a great dragon like?"

Raon's front paw tapped Cale's back. *‹I'm mighty.›*

"He's mighty," Cale relayed for Raon with a gentle smile. Under the circumstances, he figured, it'd be good to be known as the lucky human who received a great and mighty dragon's protection. He felt as though he could literally see the elves' interest level going up meters in a video game.

"Wow! Is he cool?"

Raon gave him the answer again. *‹Cool and handsome.›*

"Yep. He's cool and handsome."

"Wow!"

The children's admiration and the adults' approving nods continued. Cale wanted to shake his head at the display. If a real dragon had appeared in front of them, they'd all have gone weak at the knees and screamed their heads off.

"The great dragon's really strong, right?"

‹Nothing in the world is stronger than me!›

"Of course. He's the mightiest being in the world," Cale answered like a ventriloquist's dummy.

Raon's voice rose in his head. *‹Yes! I'm the great, mighty Raon Mir! And I'm a year older now!›*

Cale's head was throbbing from the hubbub around him. He caught Ron's eye, and the old assassin stepped forward with Choi Han to open a path for Cale. He followed the pair to the entrance of the village.

An old elf with the children following Cale asked tentatively, "Would it be possible to meet the great dragon?"

‹I can show up right now!›

Cale didn't intend to let the elves meet Raon. He'd play that card in the future, when it would benefit him. For now, it was best to cement his reputation as the human closest to a dragon. He stopped walking and opened his arms. The elves trailing after him, as well as those watching from a distance, listened intently.

"Don't you feel the aura of that great, mighty dragon around us? As the beings closest to nature, I'm sure you can sense his power."

The older elves and elementals *did* sense the aura around Cale. It felt as if a dragon were casually wandering around him. Still, they didn't think there was any way a dragon would follow a human—particularly not while staying invisible—unless the dragon was mad. Thus, they believed that they sensed the dragon's aura deliberately protecting the human in front of them.

When the elves nodded, Cale continued, "I'll speak with the dragon and see if I can give you an opportunity to speak with him in the future." The elves jerked their heads up, only to see a gloomy expression on his face. "But as you probably all know, your

village is in crisis. And a number of frightening things are happening around the continent. I need to leave right away to deal with a few of them."

The elves watching Cale from afar nodded. Their village was a mess, and they'd barely fended off the invaders targeting their World Tree branch. The elves keeping their distance found it distasteful that the other elves were crowding around the human to fawn over him in this trying time. After all, it wasn't like the great dragon was *here*. It was fine to accept and respect someone a dragon was protecting, but they didn't welcome the excitement while things were dire.

Although they harbored such thoughts, Cale's words got through to them, and they were well aware that the human had saved them from despair.

Cale maintained his grave demeanor, and the elves sensed the responsibilities on his shoulders. His next words cemented that feeling. "Those are the tasks I've received, so I have a lot to do."

The adult elves' faces stiffened. They felt they knew what he was about to do, even without hearing it. It was probably something just like saving their village, or like the other time when he'd saved Rowoon's capital, which they'd heard about from Canaria. Chances were that Cale would again sacrifice himself without seeking material gain.

The crowd focused on Cale was now calmer. Observing them, he started to think. *I definitely* do *have a lot to do.* He needed to trick Tunka and turn a profit. He needed to connect with a number of people. Of course, he didn't know what order he'd do those things in, but he still needed to look after them all in the near future.

"It was nice meeting you, friends of nature, but it's time for me to leave."

The elf children wilted, disappointed that they couldn't ask all their questions. But the adults consoled them and made way for Cale. The lout glanced back at his group, who were waiting for him to finish. Pendrick wore a look of open admiration, but Vicross,

Ron, and the kittens were doing their best not to shake their heads. Choi Han and Lark nodded in agreement with Cale.

‹This is why I can't leave you alone, you uselessly weak—but very useful—human!›

Cale was now used to ignoring Raon's nonsense. About to start walking again, he hesitated. *Hmm?*

The translucent elementals, which had been floating around aimlessly, were lining up to create a path for him. Their orderly glow reminded him of streetlamps. And though they spoke, Cale had no way of understanding. He strode down the path out of the village.

"He's a decent person, although it's disappointing that he isn't an elementalist," one said. "I wanted to introduce him to my friend."

"He reminds me of ancient heroes my mother told me about. They were said to be similar."

"I really think he's got good intentions. Earlier, I couldn't tell for certain, but he seems very pure."

Cale would've scoffed if he'd heard the elementals' comments. None of the elves did, though. Only Canaria had a dubious look as she greeted him at the village entrance.

"I'll be on my way now, Chief," he told her.

Instead of saying goodbye, Canaria asked, "You said your family's in the northeast, Lord Cale?"

"Yes..."

The chief read the wariness in his eyes and smiled. This Cale was much easier to deal with than the valiant one earlier. "As you're no doubt aware, you lack the power of earth. Yet Rowoon is the Land of Boulders, where the earth's power is strongest. Stone, you see, is earth's most powerful embodiment."

Meeting her gaze, Cale made his thoughts clear. *And...?*

He didn't plan to claim more Ancient Powers. Gaining an earth power would mean he possessed powers drawn from all five

elements, and he had an ominous feeling that it would bring about some complications.

Taking note of the tension in his face, Canaria carefully offered him the book in her arms. He didn't take it, simply looking at her in confusion.

The chief explained what the book was about. "This book contains an ancient legend pertaining to the earth. Being so old, the legend's meaning has escaped us. Yet something tells me you may need this in the future."

Cale looked at the book Canaria pushed toward him. *An ancient legend?* That only amplified his desire to turn it down; he didn't need it. Her next words made his eyes widen, though.

"It's a funny legend. There was supposedly a hero with strong destructive powers who was quite money-hungry. Once he died, this legend's hero is said to have found and safeguarded his friend's wealth." Canaria snorted. "But would a hero be greedy for money? Especially one who supposedly kept the world from freezing and didn't seek power, influence, or fame? How could someone like that be avaricious? Isn't it far-fetched?" She eyed Cale, waiting for confirmation.

He also snorted, nodding. "Of course. How could a *hero* be like that? Anyway, lots of ancient legends mix lies and truth."

"That is often the case. At any rate, this book is about the second hero, who was both the friend and enemy of the first greedy one. That second hero could use the earth's power."

Canaria examined Cale, who had lapsed into thought. He gradually extended a hand, and she set the book in it.

"To be honest, I doubt you'll find the Ancient Power the legend describes," she acknowledged. "But we don't need this book, and it'd be great if it helped you even a little, since you assisted in saving our village."

"It isn't precious to you?"

"Truthfully, no," she said, although she thought it might disappoint Cale. "The elves gather things we don't need in a

storehouse. I remembered that the book was in there and brought it over."

Canaria still didn't expect that this book would help him much. She herself had visited the location it mentioned and hadn't found anything.

But since he's lucky…

One needed a lot of luck to find even a single Ancient Power, to the point that the heavens themselves were said to determine who owned it. This human standing before her had been fortunate enough to gather *five*. That was why she'd brought him the book.

After accepting it, Cale assumed an awkward expression. "Um, I'll take it for now, since you say that the village doesn't need it. It's difficult to decline such generosity. That said, Ancient Powers aren't something one earns on desire alone."

"Of course not. You need a divine mandate. Still, this is a funny little tale. At least give it a read."

"Thank you. I will." Cale tucked the book away, then shook hands with Canaria. "Let's meet again, gods willing."

"That we should. When we reunite, I hope the great dragon will be present."

‹Chief! I'm right here!› Raon shouted.

Cale ignored him. Having said goodbye to Canaria, he touched the book in his pocket. *There's a reason the Fire of Destruction appeared near this village.*

The Ancient Power had likely spawned nearby because the elves had this book. While it might've been a coincidence, he suspected a connection there.

He recalled what the chief had said. *"But would a hero be greedy for money? Especially one who supposedly kept the world from freezing and didn't seek power, influence, or fame? How could someone like that be avaricious? Isn't it far-fetched?"*

On the contrary, it made complete sense. Why wouldn't it? Not long ago, Cale had dumped money down the drain for such a hero. He was almost certain that the greedy hero in this book was the Fire of Destruction's owner, and he also had a hunch that the

hero's legendary frenemy had owned the Scary Stone. Stones were only one manifestation of earth, but they were still of the element.

So the Scary Stone's owner took the riches of the Fire of Destruction's owner?

Cale's heart was pounding—not over the Scary Stone but over the money the second hero had laid claim to. Earning that Ancient Power didn't matter to him, but could he just take those riches?

Holding back a smirk, he said his final farewell. "Till next time."

"Have a safe trip."

Cale walked into the see-through hut that marked the boundary of the illusion magic concealing the elf village. His companions followed. After all his days in the village, he was finally leaving. No sooner had he stepped outside the boundary than he stopped in his tracks, heaving a sigh.

His companions stared off into the distance. Choi Han and Lark cleared their throats and ducked their heads, while Ron and Vicross remained calm. Ohn and Hong meowed in Choi Han's arms, then looked at the distant mountain as well.

‹See the glorious evidence of our battle, human? We destroyed it all!› Raon said proudly.

Yes, they really had destroyed everything. Cale had initially wondered why Canaria needed to personally help out with restoring the village, but seeing the damage firsthand made it clear. Numerous trees had been destroyed, and the ground was overturned in various spots. Some boulders appeared to have been cut in half by a blade or an aura.

Cale had no room to criticize.

‹Your thunderbolt left the deepest mark, human! See it? That power is *pretty helpful. But don't ever use it again!›*

He was speechless as he recognized that *he'd* done the most damage to the land. The giant crater in the ground made it look as though a meteor had landed. Everything inside that crater was charred black. He fixed his eyes on a distant mountain peak.

“We should go.” Before activating the Sound of the Wind to leave the valley, he asked Vicross, “He’s not too heavy, is he?”

Even though Vicross had the big swordsman over his shoulder, he made it seem like the man weighed nothing at all. “No, sir.” Belbud’s eyes, mouth, and ears were covered, and he was still out cold.

After verifying that everyone was ready, Cale zoomed out of the valley toward Block. The village came into view fairly quickly. Cale stopped at the foot of the mountain, since they were carrying Belbud.

“My lord!” Hans greeted him, bowing. The kittens jumped out of Choi Han’s arms into the deputy butler’s.

Cale walked past Hans, extending his hand to someone else. “Has it really been three months?”

Rosalyn, who’d returned from Brek, smiled at him and shook it. “Yes, Lord Cale.”

His gaze seemed to ask her how things had gone; in response, she took a piece of paper out of her pocket. It indicated that should war break out, Rosalyn would lead Rowoon and Brek’s mage alliance.

Cale chuckled. “Welcome back, Miss Rosalyn.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear.”

Cale released her hand, then gave Hans an order: “We’re going to head to the capital first.”

He needed to reconvene with the dark elf Tasha.

Chapter 26:
Nice to Meet You

CALE MET TASHA at an inn outside the capital.

"The basement's unrecognizable," he remarked.

This was the same inn he'd stayed at last time he came to the city, when he delivered the bracelet to Albert. He'd heard that the crown prince had purchased this inn. Its main floors were serving as accommodations, as always, but its basement levels were being used to house mages.

There are certainly lots of them.

The inn had three basement floors total, and approximately thirty mages were running around getting things done. When they saw Cale's group, they flinched, bowed respectfully to Rosalyn, then disappeared.

The mages' preparations were being done in secret, and there were a lot of advanced magic devices here and there. Cutting-edge defensive magic had been purchased to fortify the basement.

Tasha, who was as tall as Cale, stuck her nose in the air. "Isn't this place *wonderful*, Lord Cale?"

He could tell she was being coy, so he played along. "The supply here pales in comparison to the Henituses' castle."

"Really?" Laughing, Tasha waved off his claim. There was no way it was true. Talented mages from the Kingdom of the Whipper had helped to create this space, and their homeland was known for its magic devices, so no place in Rowoon could measure up to the basement in front of them. That was how Tasha knew that Cale was joking too; he'd probably just said that because he had a soft spot for his home.

"Come, Lord Cale. This must be much nicer. It may not be the best location, but it does have the newest magic devices! And as you already know, the number of such devices is dwindling. That

said, there *is* an anonymous merchant with a monopoly on the things. I wonder where he got them all."

Tasha was correct, and in the future, Rowoon would benefit from the fact that Albert had established a site for mages to develop magical tech. That was why his aunt emanated pride upon showing Cale around the space. She slowly realized something was off, though.

Cale's joke might not have been such a joke after all.

Hmm? Tasha glanced at Rosalyn, whom she'd seen frequently over the past few months.

Rosalyn was standing there with an awkward smile. Tasha winced and surveyed Cale's other companions: Ron, Choi Han, Lark, Ohn, Hong, and Vicross, who still carried the incapacitated Belbud. They were all scanning the basement with utter indifference.

Their unexpectedly blasé reaction prompted Tasha to turn back to Cale, who was smiling. Feeling uncertain, Tasha said, "Uh… um… Really, Lord Cale?" *Did* his family's castle contain more magic devices than this basement?

Although she hadn't gotten the whole question out, Cale replied casually, "No joke."

Rosalyn nodded, and Tasha sighed. Rowoon wasn't known for magic, yet Henituse territory—the region in the continent's most remote corner—had all the newest magic devices?

Then Cale drew close to Tasha and whispered in her ear, "His Highness told you he'd get you part of the blueprints for the Magic Tower, didn't he?"

That was top-secret information. Tasha's eyes widened, but she calmed herself. She laughed, her stiff expression melting in an instant. "Ha ha ha!" She brushed her long hair back. "I was wondering where he'd get that. You're providing it?"

"Why ask such an obvious question?" Cale shrugged it off as if it were nothing. He really didn't feel it was a big deal. He was going to destroy the Magic Tower, so it made sense to keep the blueprints.

The renovations of the Henituse castle and ramparts were almost finished. While Rosalyn was ostensibly in charge of the magic devices, the majority had been made by Raon.

I don't give him a ten-silver allowance for nothing.

Cale wasn't spoiling the black dragon on a whim. He was compensating Raon, knowing the black dragon would end up making *all* the magic devices for the castle and Cale's ship. Besides, it was better to learn to save money when you were young.

"I'd sure like to visit your castle, Lord Cale."

"We're still renovating. Come visit when it's complete."

"You mean it?"

Cale nodded. "Yes. Bring Mary too," he added, hoping the necromancer would come back to work for him.

Tasha bobbed her head vigorously and loosed a breathy laugh. "Well, let's not beat around the bush, then." Her gaze slid to Belbud. Seeing the swordsman's blindfold and earplugs, she turned back to Cale. "We've spent a ton of money on an underground cell so he can't run away."

Though Tasha had on a magic necklace to make her look human, her dark eyes and black hair were on display.

"Is that so? We're building a prison as well. I wonder what yours is like."

Cale spoke of prison cells as though it were completely normal. He followed Tasha down to the third basement level, and they entered a cell.

"It's pretty nice."

"Isn't it? It'll be a good place for him to stay."

Cale looked around the cell. There were several on this floor, but this one seemed more luxurious than the others, like your average room at an inn. What set it apart from those typical accommodations was that every object in the room had been rounded off at the corners. Cale understood that it was built that way to prevent prisoners from harming themselves.

“Looks like you’re planning mental rather than physical torture.”

Tasha nodded. Belbud wasn’t just any criminal. He held a certain degree of esteem within the organization responsible for the Plaza Terror Incident. There was no way they’d treat him like a common crook.

Clicking his tongue, Cale motioned to Vicross, who sat the swordsman on a couch and removed his blindfold and earplugs. Belbud couldn’t stop trembling from the paralyzing poison.

“Open your eyes.”

Vicross’s cold instruction prompted Belbud to do just that. With some effort, he cracked open his eyelids. He found himself in a room that looked nice, if a bit odd. He was sitting there, tied up, with several pairs of eyes staring down at him.

Tasha glanced at Cale, perplexed. Belbud seemed to be in decent condition, but she’d heard he was seriously injured.

Upon seeing her confusion, Cale explained, “He’s immobile from the waist down, but we healed his minor wounds.”

Tasha shook her head. “You really are too kind, Lord Cale.”

Belbud couldn’t believe this. They’d tortured him with any number of poisons every day, bringing him to the brink of death. Vicross’s excuse had been that he wanted to study various toxins. Cale had pretended not to notice the motivations of a son who hadn’t forgotten how his father lost his left arm.

Cale avoided Tasha’s gaze, which seemed to ask how such a softhearted person could exist. As the dark elf turned to Belbud, he asked, “If you plan to use psychological torture, should I introduce you to an expert?” The excommunicated priestess Kage excelled at it.

“No, thank you. We have our own methods.”

As Tasha smiled at Belbud, Cale looked away. She really wasn’t an average dark elf. There was a reason she took care of anything in the shadows on Albert’s behalf.

“I look forward to chatting with you in the future,” Tasha told Belbud. Her gentle voice gave Cale chills.

As Belbud blanched, Cale gestured for everyone to leave the cell. Tasha rose and guided them out. Once Belbud was alone again, she ordered the guards to keep a close eye on him, and she and Cale's group headed back to the surface.

On their way upstairs, she asked, "How were the elves?" He heard both curiosity and wariness in her voice.

Knowing that elves and dark elves had a complicated relationship, Cale had left Pendrick with Hans at a different inn today. He feigned ignorance of those tensions as he answered, "Typical elves."

"Hmm. Really? You must be their eternal benefactor now. You protected their branch of the World Tree."

"There's also Raon."

Tasha understood how the dragon factored into it, and she nodded in admiration. "They must've treated you like a saint."

Cale couldn't think of anything to say in return. Taking his silence to mean she was right, Tasha added discreetly, "Just what are you selling to the Kingdom of the Whipper? Albert keeps laughing to himself for no reason at all."

"He does…?" Cale felt the scene was plucked straight out of a horror movie. He didn't want to see it.

"Yes. Whenever I report to him, he's cracking up, saying he's looking forward to what you're going to do."

"I guess he could be."

Tasha saw that Cale's smile was similar to Albert's. The pair really were like-minded, and that made her certain of one thing. "It's not something that'll benefit the Kingdom of the Whipper."

"Of course not. I'm a citizen of Rowoon."

His indifferent response reassured Tasha. Hiding her relief from Cale, she opened the door to the surface and wished him luck.

"I hope everything goes well. Next time you're here, let's get drinks."

"Sure."

Emerging from the basement, Cale heard Raon's voice in his head. *‹Is what we're going to do considered a scam?›* The dragon had heard everything Cale and Albert discussed, and he'd witnessed all of Cale's prep work.

Technically, it's not. He wasn't going to run a scam. He was just going to sell *half* of the item.

‹Either way, I just need to destroy the Magic Tower as you asked. If I do, will you give me ten more silver coins?› Raon asked in anticipation.

"I'll give you a gold coin," Cale whispered back.

‹Oh, wow!› The dragon was shocked.

Cale pictured the show that would play out as they destroyed the Magic Tower. It would be quite entertaining, no doubt.

Raon snapped himself out of daydreaming about the gold coin. *‹Are we going to go meet that big whale and little rat?›*

The question made Cale pause midway to boarding his carriage. He considered it, then nodded and stepped inside.

Hans and Pendrick soon joined them in the vehicle, and they headed to Rowoon's northeastern coast, the location of Uvar territory's naval base.

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Cale surveyed the Uvar coast, which he hadn't seen for a few months. He'd sent Ron and Vicross to the Cliff of Winds to meet Witira while he continued with Choi Han, Lark, and Pendrick by his side. Ohn and Hong had gone to their accommodations with Hans; they didn't like water.

‹Human.› Raon was with Cale, of course. *‹Human, that…that thing's—!›*

Despite calling out to Cale a few times, Raon couldn't finish his sentence. The black dragon wasn't the only one.

"Lord Cale!"

“Um, Mr. Cale…”

“Oh my…”

Lark, Choi Han, and Pendrick were speechless as well.

As he took stock of the naval base, Cale couldn’t help staring at the same thing they were. *I’m glad we stipulated that only those with proper authorization could enter the base.*

Thanks to Albert, who was extremely wary of spies from the northern alliance, the naval base had multiple layers of security. Cale was relieved that no outsider could see what was in front of him.

Choi Han pointed to the Henituse portion of the coast. “Sir, th-that’s a ship, right?”

“That it is.”

This was Cale’s first time seeing it as well. So far, he’d only received construction updates via video communication. Choi Han was dumbstruck, muttering to himself at the gargantuan ship before them.

“Anybody will be able to tell that’s a Henituse ship.”

Despite Cale’s confident nod, he—or rather, Kim Roksu—was relieved upon seeing the nearly finished vessel. It differed a bit from the Korean turtle ships he was familiar with. Unlike the ship he’d imagined, no “shell” covered the deck of the craft. Instead, the deck was open with curved walls on either side. The plan was for the walls to enclose various magic devices that could fire into the air. And although Choi Han wasn’t thinking about Korean turtle ships as Cale was, he was flabbergasted by the sheer size of it.

Observing the vessel, Cale let out a sigh. He’d underestimated the way the Henituses went about things.

Raon, who’d been quiet for a while, spoke up again. *‹H-human, is that all gold? Is all that yellow actually gold? Are all those shiny things on the ship* gold*?!›*

“It’s a golden turtle!” Choi Han exclaimed.

The shells flanking the deck were gilded. There was a dashing turtle figurehead on the ship’s bow, and the mast

featured the golden turtle symbol. All that gold shone brightly under the sun.

Even Pendrick, who wasn't one to covet material goods, couldn't help gasping at the huge amount of gold aboard the ship. "I didn't know you were from such a wealthy family, Lord Cale."

Based on their reactions, Cale knew he had to clarify things before they got the wrong idea. "I want to say something so that we're all on the same page."

It was then that Müller came running from the shore, with Witira, Ron, and Vicross approaching from the Cliff of Winds. Cale looked back at his companions, who were all waiting to hear what he had to say.

"It's only gold-*plated*," he noted. The ship's ornamentation wasn't *solid* gold.

Choi Han and Pendrick gaped at him, but Cale had said what he needed to. Ignoring them, he said hello to Witira, who'd arrived before Müller. "Good to see you."

"And you, Lord Cale. Have you been well?" Witira greeted him warmly, but she looked somewhat distressed.

"Yeah, but you don't seem too good." Cale pointed it out right away; he didn't like to beat around the bush.

Witira didn't want to waste time either. Nodding as if she'd expected this, she got right to the point. "We got tangled up in the affairs of the Eastern Continent, no thanks to the mermaids."

Ron and Vicross glanced at her. The Eastern Continent may have been *their* homeland, but Cale didn't know much about it.

"We wound up acquiring a lot of intel because of it," Witira continued. "But there's something we're struggling with. I came hoping you might be able to help us."

"You want to ask me a favor?"

"Not exactly. I'd like to exchange information."

Cale had seen this coming. The Whale Tribe wouldn't have sent one of their own to speak with him if it hadn't been

important. He couldn't play dumb or avoid them; he needed to know what was going on to avoid headaches.

He was convinced that Witira's intel pertained to the secret organization. If it was too difficult for Cale himself to deal with, he would hand it off to someone else—the elves, Albert, or even the gold dragon.

"Go ahead," he said with a wave of his hand.

She did so cautiously. "We received this information from members of the formerly strongest race on the Eastern Continent."

The strongest? The description did catch Cale's attention, but "formerly" suggested they had been bested or culled in some way. There was no sea breeze, but he shivered regardless.

"That secret organization was on the verge of obliterating the Tiger Tribe. We happened to run into their shaman and…"

The Tiger Tribe. The moment Witira said that, Cale tuned her out. He blinked a few times, not hearing another word of her explanation. "Did you say 'the Tiger Tribe'…?" he asked, checking whether he'd heard correctly.

Assuming Cale hadn't heard her fully, Witira paused to confirm, "Yes. The Tiger Tribe."

That name alone made them *sound* like one of the Eastern Continent's strongest races, and they had a shaman to boot.

Have I got some unknown link to beastfolk tribes? Cale wondered. He couldn't understand how he kept getting tangled up with so many beastfolk—and always when they were struggling or in danger. *Not like I'm running an animal hospital.*

He looked around. Ron and Vicross were positioned beside him and Witira so they could spot anybody approaching. The father-son duo really was sharp.

Cale turned back to Witira. "What information do you want to trade?"

She met his gaze, and her tongue snaked out to moisten her lower lip. Her mouth had gone completely dry at the sight of Cale's

apparent disinterest. In reality, his mind was simply in turmoil. *What a mess it'll be if I get mixed up with tigers too.*

As he pondered how horrible the future might be, Witira said at length, "Actually, you don't necessarily need to give *us* information. We're going to share information with *you*."

Cale made a face. Nothing in life was free, he reflected. He stared at Witira, then declared, "I'll at least *listen* to what you have to say."

With a dip of her head, she told him what she'd learned while patrolling the Eastern Continent's shoreline. "The organization you mentioned before, Arm, has seized full control of the Eastern Continent's underworld."

Ron's eyes shifted to Witira's lips as he focused.

"The Tiger Tribe discovered that some of Arm's members had crossed to the Western Continent. During their investigation, they found out that a number of Arm's expert fighters had already arrived here."

Cale nodded. That made sense. The magic spearman and the blonde swordswoman had both been exceptional.

Witira took note of his reaction as she went on, "The Tiger Tribe also discovered that Arm's First Battle Brigade—one of a number of brigades—will be moving en masse in the near future."

Hmm? Cale stopped idly nodding. "What'd you say?" He wondered if he'd heard correctly. *Who'll be moving?*

"The First Battle Brigade. The tigers are certain that entire group is getting ready to move."

"Where to…?"

"Here."

"To the Western Continent?"

"Yes, the Western Continent."

Huh. Cale lapsed into silence. Witira's news was much weightier than he'd expected. He raised his hand to warm his neck, which was prickling with a fresh chill.

Witira saw how concerned he was. *I knew this would upset him.* It warmed her heart to see him so worried about the continent.

But no, Cale was only worried about himself.

“In light of that, Lord Cale…”

Wait, there’s more?! Cale peered at Witira—who’d brought him news he didn’t want—as though she were a ticking time bomb.

“We and the Tiger Tribe are running around to find out what we can,” she assured him. “The tigers expect the brigade to move this winter.”

Cale pursed his lips. Witira had said that the Tiger Tribe was near extinction because of Arm, so why were they poking around, digging up information? To take revenge?

“When the tigers shared this news with us, they had a suggestion.”

Cale’s gut told him he needn’t hear the details, so he cut in, “A suggestion. I see. Anyway, what information do you want from me?”

His effort to brush this off was for naught. With another nod, Witira described the tigers’ proposal. “They suggested that the moment the First Battle Brigade has traveled halfway across the ocean…”

He grimaced, gaze dropping to Witira’s waist. *Shf. Shf.* She was caressing the whip wrapped around her torso.

“We kill them all.”

Cale heaved a sigh. He finally understood why the secret organization had worked with the mermaids in hopes of taking control of that sea route. It was to relocate their members to the Western Continent safely.

Witira tapped her whip, every word she said thundering in Cale’s ears. “The Tiger Tribe thinks we should get rid of them, leaving no traces behind. Doing so at sea will give us an edge. We’ll reduce injuries on our side, and it’ll be easier to capture prisoners and pry out information.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s a thrilling plan. Hee hee!”

Her laugh echoed in Cale’s head. *They’re so scary.*

Arm was one branch of a greater secret organization, so the First Battle Brigade would be tough. Cale didn’t want to get involved in this oceanic fight against them. He repeated his earlier question. “What information do you want from *me*?”

“Um…” Witira didn’t respond right away. She looked furtively at Cale for a moment, then ventured, “In return for spying on Arm until winter, the Tiger Tribe is looking for some information. Frankly, we want to give it to them if possible. We’ve got our own axe to grind with that secret organization.”

Cale stared wordlessly at her.

“This knowledge actually wouldn’t be *difficult* to get. Still, I think you’d be better informed than we would.”

Knowledge? Cale didn’t hide his wariness at the way she’d used the term to replace “information.”

Witira slowly explained what “knowledge” was required. “They’re in search of a large area without many people. The cooler the better. It also needs a forest. It’d be best if no specific power ruled the area, but it does need a connection to the human world so they can trade necessities.”

Cale couldn’t understand why the Tiger Tribe needed to find such a location. “How come they’re looking for that?”

“So they can move there.”

“Ah. In that case—” Cale stopped short, gaping at her. *Wait. What?*

“They want to relocate. That’s why it makes sense that they want that information, and why I hoped you might know a suitable place.”

Cale couldn’t say anything. Could he think of one? A place with neither people nor a ruling power. Cool, but probably not cold. Forested, but close enough for trade with humans.

‹There is *such a place!›* Raon shouted, sounding like a game show contestant about to answer the winning question. *‹The Dark Forest!›*

Naturally, Cale ignored him. “I’m not sure I do. I can’t think of anywhere that fits the bill at the moment.”

Why was he hedging? Well, would Witira really have asked if she hadn’t known a suitable location? She’d posed the question because she wanted *Cale* to bring up the Dark Forest.

“Not even one?” The humpback’s face suggested she knew Cale was aware of such a location. She seemed desperate for him to say it.

‹You don’t know, human? I do! Repeat after me: The. Dark. Forest!›

Nope. Not doing it. “No, none come to mind.” He made a real show of being genuinely stumped.

Witira bit her lip, then nodded. “In that case, next time we meet, could you let us know if you’ve thought of a place like that?”

“Sure. I will.” So he said, but he had no plans to do so. *If I mention the Dark Forest, she’ll ask me to let the Tiger Tribe live there.*

The Whale Tribe wouldn’t request that favor without compensating him, and they’d probably do so fairly. But that wasn’t enough to tempt him. The Tiger Tribe wanted revenge on the secret organization; taking them in would be like jumping in front of a train.

Then again, it might help to have the tigers with us when the northern knights come south. He didn’t think sheltering them was the right call, though. Besides, he already had a wolf battle squad.

By the time he’d organized his thoughts, Witira was saying something else. “Oh, the secret organization will start by sending a couple people across the ocean to find a sea route to avoid us.”

She sounded casual about it, but he blurted out, “You’re just going to let them do that?!”

“We are. We’ll just observe them.”

The reason was obvious. “You want to see where they go,” he concluded right away.

“Yes.”

That had to be the case. The whales would want to know where Arm’s scouts were headed. While the scouts probably wouldn’t go straight to Arm’s base on the Western Continent, the whales could still glean a few things by tracking their movements.

“All right. Good lu—”

His “good luck” died in his throat when he realized everyone’s eyes were on him. *Yikes.*

Hans, Ohn, Hong, and Rosalyn were absent, but Ron, Vicross, Choi Han, Lark, and even Pendrick—the individuals who provided most of his strength in battle—were staring hard. They all despised Arm.

They’re acting a little too *intense, though.*

Cale found it odd that they appeared increasingly angry. Even after noticing Ron and Choi Han’s cold glares, he told Witira, “Right, good luck. You’ll keep me apprised of this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.”

Choi Han kept his eyes locked on the two of them, looking ready to whip out his sword and run wild. Ron gripped his dagger.

Is that old man still nursing a grudge over his arm? Their expressions forced the cowardly Cale to say one more thing to Witira. “Ahem… As soon as you find out where they’re going, let me know.”

He looked around once more. Choi Han nodded in satisfaction, while Ron smiled and murmured, “I need to make sure they’re coughing up blood and starving to death.”

Cale shivered. *That’s horrifying.* He himself had coughed up blood and felt ravenous after using that fire thunderbolt. *These people really are too much for a coward like me to handle.*

“Um, Lord Cale?”

“What?”

Witira pointed behind him. He turned around, only to see the golden turtle vessel’s “shell” shining in the sun.

“Is that your ship?” Witira asked, voice trembling.

Pretending not to notice, Cale nodded. “Yes. It belongs to the Henituses, to be exact. You figured it out right away.” He gestured to Müller, who was fidgeting off to one side, unable to approach them. “He designed it.”

Cale crooked his finger, beckoning Müller over.

The dwarf-rat half-blood darted over. He was still short, but he’d gotten a bit plump. “Nice to see you again, Lord Cale. Have you been well? Hee hee!”

Müller smiled as he greeted Cale, much less frightened than before. Cale was thrown by it, but he approved; it was better than Müller being scared of everything. “Yes, I’ve been well. Ohn and Hong want to see you. The four of us will have dinner together at some point.”

“Hic!” Müller suddenly hiccuped, hunching his shoulders. “D-did those two esteemed kittens come with you?” he asked cautiously.

“Yes. They keep talking about you. They must be really excited to see you again.”

While Müller paled, Cale indifferently introduced him to Witira. “Müller is a dwarf-rat half-blood, and he’s extremely talented. Right, Müller?”

He and the whale turned to the rat. Müller balked in the face of Witira’s beauty, then bobbed his head vigorously. “Yes, sir!” he shouted. “This ship’s designed to have the strongest offensive capabilities possible. It’ll dominate the seas in time. You’ll never come across another vessel like this one!”

Witira nodded. Even she could tell that the golden ship in front of her had extremely strong defenses. And while she couldn’t discern how strong its offenses would be, she knew Cale would pull out all the stops to see it completed.

Lord Cale is truly a visionary. It amazed her that he was almost ready for naval warfare already. “You’re incredible.”

“I am…?”

“Indeed.”

Once Müller saw that Witira and Cale were chatting again, he stopped talking. He wanted to explain that this ship would have the greatest defenses in the world and that attacking preemptively was the greatest possible defense. Yet he couldn’t get a word in edgewise, so he sagged in disappointment.

Out of the blue, Cale sprang a question on him. “What’s happening with the villa blueprints?”

“Uh, they’re almost complete, sir!”

Cale grinned. He’d been referring to the blueprints for his new villa to be built on the Uvar coast. The residence would allow him to enjoy an indolent lifestyle safely, even during a war.

Müller described the details of his dream house. “I plan to make the basement as spacious as I can while keeping it as sturdy as possible. The structure will *also* have extremely strong defenses!”

Cale leaned over to pat the short Müller on the shoulder. *Thmp. Thmp.* “You’ll need to give your all to building it.”

“Of course, sir! I certainly will! I’ll see it done!”

“Good. I trust you.”

Müller turn even paler at that statement, but Witira was blown away. *He called it a villa, but it sounds more like he’s making a secret base.*

A sturdy building with an expansive basement would be a perfect base. The humpback glanced at the people standing behind Cale. Choi Han continued to nod, smiling. The others seemed relaxed as well.

They really are special. Rather than sharing that thought, Witira turned to Cale, who’d finished speaking to Müller. “Will you leave tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan.”

It had been almost a year since Cale last visited the Kingdom of the Whipper, but he had one thing left to take care of first.

***

Just before one full year had passed, Cale returned to the Magic Tower.

“Glad to see you again after so long, Lord Cale.”

Cale shook the hand of the person in front of him. This was Herol Cordien, the secret son of the Magic Tower’s former ruler. Born to a mage and a citizen of the Kingdom of the Whipper, the unfortunate fellow couldn’t use mana. Now the madman was one of Tunka’s top advisors.

“Nice to see you, Herol,” Cale replied. Herol, who despised magic, seemed much better off than a year ago. “Where’s Tunka?”

“I’m right here!”

Cale released Herol’s hand, looking in the direction of that cry.

Screech! The rusty iron gate opened, and the enormous Tunka strode out of a building—the Magic Tower. That structure, which reminded the kingdom’s citizens of the terrible past, was overgrown with weeds.

“I hear you’ve become commander-in-chief.”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, I have,” Tunka replied with enthusiasm. His eyes sparkled as he looked at Cale. “So, before I start performing my duties, I want to destroy this reminder of the past.” Tunka definitely had the air of an unhinged despot. Jabbing a thumb back toward the Magic Tower, he asked, “Here to destroy it like you promised?”

Part of last year’s deal had been that Cale would destroy the Magic Tower, and Tunka seemed like he’d kill Cale if the lout backpedaled. Not that he would get the chance, thanks to Choi Han and Cale’s other companions. But he’d certainly want to.

“Well…” Cale trailed off, then finished with his usual indifference, “I’m a man of my word.”

Neither he nor Tunka had changed much over the past year. Both smirked.

“I’ll make it quite a sight,” Cale said. *And turn a profit to boot.* The value of the documents and the seed he’d found in the underground lab had risen quite a bit.

Tunka laughed loudly, seemingly pleased with Cale’s reply. “Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!”

‹Human! Human! You know…›

Cale flinched at the dragon’s interjection. He always got nervous when Raon acted like this. What would he say this time?

‹Honestly, I enjoy breaking things, so I’m excited! Let’s blow the Tower to smithereens!› Raon was eager to demolish the historic monument.

His declaration made Cale smile. *We’re actually thinking the same thing for once.*

They were on the same page. Cale was keyed up as well, ready for the show that would soon commence. Tunka laughing like a lunatic did put a bit of a damper on things, though.

“Are you gonna destroy it tomorrow?” Tunka asked with the giddiness of a child anticipating his birthday gift.

Cale decided to raise his expectations. “No.”

“What?” Tunka stiffened, as did Herol and his other advisors.

Faced with their tense expressions, Cale gave an unexpected answer. “‘Destroy’ is too light a word. I’ll demolish it completely.”

“Huh? Ah ha ha ha ha!” Laughing maniacally, Tunka walked to the base outside the Magic Tower, his arms open wide. As soldiers came to greet him, he bellowed, “Did you hear that? This symbol of hatred will soon disappear! The kingdom’s new history is about to begin!”

Thud. Thud. Thud. The soldiers stomped and cheered.

Their barbaric ways exhausted Cale. *I’m getting tired of this.*

Right then, Herol approached. He peeked past the young nobleman at Choi Han, Lark, and Rosalyn, who stood behind Cale. “The number of soldiers here must’ve shocked you, Lord Cale. But we were training nearby, and after learning that you were heading our way, we brought everyone over.”

“Training nearby”…? What a load of crap.

He didn’t believe for a second that they were here for anything but the Magic Tower’s destruction, which would boost their morale. Not that he cared. “I guess that makes sense… Well, the more the merrier. This’ll be quite a show.”

Cale spared no effort when put to the task, even on things he cared little about.

‹Everybody’s gathering to watch the explosion? Ooh, they’ll know the greatness of my magic bomb!›

The more people who were around to witness that, the better.

Herol studied Cale and his calm affect. The young nobleman knew his secret, but a whole year had passed without Cale blackmailing him or even asking for anything. And he’d come back to hold up his end of last year’s deal.

“By the way, how will you destroy the Magic Tower?” Herol asked him.

“Magic.”

“Excuse me?” Cale planned to use magic in front of people who reviled it?

The man’s shock drew a smirk from Cale. “What? How else would you destroy it?”

Herol looked at Cale’s hand, which was now patting on his shoulder. *Thmp. Thmp.*

Hand going still, Cale went on, “And won’t it be satisfying to destroy the Magic Tower, the symbol of magic, *with* magic?”

Hearing his jovial tone, Herol stared at him.

“Don’t overstep. Part of our deal was that it was my choice what I did with the Magic Tower and how I destroyed it.” Cale’s

tone implied that he wouldn't let Herol undermine him further.

In his periphery, Herol could see Cale's entire group. The last time they were here, Choi Han had made short work of Tunka. The others seemed almost as strong, and those combat virtuosos were intently watching their exchange.

"You're not in a position to tell me what to do," Cale whispered in Herol's ear.

Tunka's advisor sighed. Having come back after a year, the man who knew the secret of his birth was shoving it in his face, telling him to stay in his lane. Slowly, Herol's gaze turned icy. This was the Kingdom of the Whipper—*his* territory.

Just then, Cale added, "You have this kingdom under your thumb. Live however you want. I'm doing the same thing."

Herol's eyes ceased going frigid, widening in confusion. *"I'm doing the same thing."* That sentence echoed over and over in his ears.

He looked up and met Cale's gaze. "I'm giving you free rein," the lout said. "I'd appreciate it from you as well."

Though Herol had a benevolent sort of appearance, a roguish smile rose to his lips. He began chuckling, which lasted until Tunka returned to them.

When the barbarian arrived, he flashed a grin at Cale. "You're the same as always! I'm happier than ever to see you."

"Of course. I'm still a lover of peace."

‹You're doing that smile you put on around the crown prince again.›

Ignoring Raon, Cale tried to catch the exuberant Tunka's eye. But the barbarian's gaze was directed behind him, at Choi Han. "Up for another tussle?"

Choi Han brushed aside the provocation, visibly annoyed. "It'd be child's play to beat up a commander-in-chief."

That didn't scare Tunka in the least. On the contrary, he seemed even *more* excited, mumbling, "He smells like he's gotten even stronger..."

Cale's shoulders jumped. *Choi Han's even stronger?* He glanced sidelong at Choi Han, who dipped his head.

"I train hard so I can protect everyone."

Why? You're super strong already. What's the point?

"Considering what Miss Witira said," Choi Han went on, "I think that's the right decision."

Cale quickly looked away from the hero's pure yet cold smile. *This gives me a bad feeling.* He was worried that Choi Han would want to join in the joint effort by the Tiger and Whale Tribes to ambush and decimate the secret organization's First Battle Brigade.

To verify that, Cale knew, he would only have to turn and ask Choi Han. But he couldn't do it; the dread kept him from doing so. Instead, he changed the topic by casually asking Tunka, "How about a celebration tonight?"

"A celebration...?"

The fool didn't get it. Feigning enthusiasm, Cale responded, "Yes, before the Magic Tower's destruction. What do you think?"

"Ha ha! Sounds like a plan! You really aren't like the usual rotten nobles! You know a thing or two!"

Know a thing or two? I guess I know you're doomed. After all, this buffoon planned to charge against the Empire rather than attacking the jungle first.

Cale watched as Tunka happily ordered his advisors to plan a celebration. Then, finally, he turned to his companions. "Let's rest a bit."

They needed to rest now so they could take action that night.

***

Night soon arrived. Cale looked down with a doubtful expression. On one side of the tent, Choi Han and Rosalyn were

discussing which bombs they'd use the next day, but Cale just kept his head low with his arms crossed.

"I'm not sure about this," he said.

"Don't worry! We'll do a good job!"

"She's right! Raon, my sister, and I are the best!"

"I'm great and mighty!"

Ohn, Hong, and Raon piped up one after the other. It only served to deepen Cale's grimace. He didn't know whether they were up to this. *Still, it's not like I can reassign the people joining the celebration.* He, Choi Han, Lark, Vicross, Rosalyn, Ron, and Pendrick were all supposed to celebrate with Tunka.

The red kitten, Hong, stepped forward confidently. His chest swelled as he stood in front of Raon and Ohn. "The three of us could even destroy a castle!"

That was technically true. In fact, Raon alone could do that. Yet Cale was worried that they'd just do things wrong and make a mess.

He kicked the crate beside him. *Thud.* It sounded full.

Inside were things they'd found last year in the underground research lab: research documents and a special seed. The research pertained to causes of magic resistance, as well as a mana-storage device based on the principles of Ancient Powers. All told, these were only half the things Cale had taken from the lab—the useless half, to be precise.

"You'll need to put these back in order. Got it?"

Five-year-old Raon clicked his tongue in a huff. "Stop nagging, weak human. We're stronger than you."

Ha! Cale thought, incredulous, but Ohn and Hong nodded in agreement.

Raon flicked his front paw, and the crate floated into the air and turned invisible. "We'll be back. Don't drink too much, human. You're weak."

Cale was too flabbergasted to say anything.

Hong padded up to him and tapped his foot with one paw. “We’ll be back really soon! Once we’re done, can I play hide-and-seek with my sister and this little guy?”

“Sure…”

Hong and Raon giggled as they snuck out of the tent. Ohn patted Cale’s thigh, assuring him that she’d take care of their task, then slipped out after them. Cale swept his hands over his face. He knew that those three would take their mission seriously, so why was he so unsettled?

The next person to enter the tent unsettled Cale in a different way. It was Pendrick.

“Excuse me, Lord Cale.”

“Yes?”

“Will we be heading to the lair after this?”

The gold dragon’s lair, where the ancient dragon lived. Just thinking about that had Cale struggling for breath.

“…Of course.” He *had* to go there. How could he avoid it if Raon, their group’s strongest member, wanted to go?

“I’ll contact the great gold dragon in advance, then. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

“All right.”

“Um, Lord Cale, once we get there, do you think…?”

“What?”

The handsome elf seemed embarrassed. As Cale grew impatient, Pendrick cautiously continued, “Once we get there, do you think I could meet the great dragon protecting you as well?”

“Yes… You can meet him.”

“Wonderful!” Pendrick exclaimed. “I’m sure I’m the only elf who will get to meet two great dragons at once!”

Cale nodded carelessly. He really didn’t mesh well with people as energetic and pure as Pendrick. “Y-yeah.”

“Oh, and will we meet the person I’ll be healing on our way back?”

Cale's face hardened. "Yes. We'll meet them afterward."

"Understood, sir."

When Cale met Tasha in the capital, he'd asked her to contact Mary. He had also told her it was connected to eliminating Mary's pain, which prompted the dark elf to gaze at him with the utmost warmth. Cale shoved the memory away; he found Tasha's approval to be annoying.

"I won't disturb you any longer, since it's already so late," Pendrick said.

Rather than using transformation magic, the elf pulled his hood forward to cover his ears as he left the tent. Cale sighed and looked at the two people remaining. Noticing that, Choi Han smiled awkwardly.

"How's it going?" Cale asked.

"Well..."

It was rare to see Choi Han hesitate, but Cale didn't give him time to answer. "You need to do this right."

"Yes, sir," Choi Han responded weakly.

Cale motioned to the tent's entrance. "I guess it's time we join in the drinking."

"Okay."

"As you say, Lord Cale," Rosalyn added.

Moving the tent flap aside, Cale headed out. Although it was late at night, he heard laughter and singing throughout Tunka's base.

He glanced in the opposite direction for a moment. The three children—now an average of eight years old—were probably hard at work. As Cale strode toward Tunka's group, he hoped the soldiers would carry on celebrating.

***

It was the morning after the celebration. The day when the Magic Tower would vanish into history had finally arrived.

Cale looked up at the Tower, his arms crossed. The Magic Tower was widely known to have twenty floors above the ground and three below. It no longer possessed the magnificence it had in the past. All that stood in front of him was a weathered structure full of the aura of death.

“Heh heh heh… This is gonna be good.”

Glancing to his side, Cale met Tunka’s eyes. The commander-in-chief looked a bit hungover, but he was smiling. Though one might suspect he was crazy, his gaze was sharp.

“That tower got a lot of our fellow citizens killed. I’m kinda bummed about you destroying it with a magic bomb, but eh. That’ll be satisfying in its own way.”

“You’re right, Commander Tunka. This marks a fresh start for the Kingdom of the Whipper,” Herol said from beside him.

Soldiers stomped and thumped their spears on the ground in anticipation.

Choi Han came up to Cale. “We’re ready.”

“Got it.” Cale looked back at the Magic Tower. They’d planted a couple of black-magic bombs around it.

‹Those are the great, mighty Raon’s newest magic bombs!› The dragon had created *this* type of bomb as a five-year-old.

“When you give me the signal, I’ll detonate them,” Rosalyn said, gathering her mana and waiting for Cale’s command. The redheaded mage, who’d disguised herself with magic since coming to the Kingdom of the Whipper, was perfectly composed.

“We’re doing it soon,” Cale told Tunka. “Shouldn’t you tell the soldiers?”

“Heh heh heh… Think so?” Tunka moved over to address his troops, opening his arms. He once again looked as though he had something crucial to say.

Cale, who couldn’t care less about Tunka’s speech, made to give the order to Rosalyn—only Herol sidled up to him first.

“You must be disappointed, Lord Cale,” the man said softly, watching him.

“About what?”

“Well, you didn’t get anything out of the Magic Tower. To add insult to injury, after doing nothing with it for a year, you have to blow it up.”

“I’m definitely disappointed.” *Not really. I’m pretty excited.* With a bitter smile, he added, “I’ll just look back on it as a waste of money. You know I’m rich.”

“When you say that, you definitely come off as a noble.”

“You bet I’m a noble. Don’t forget it.” No sooner had Cale said that than the ground began to shake.

Rumble. Rumble. Rumble.

“Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!”

The soldiers stomped their feet as they chanted. Cale turned toward them and locked eyes with Tunka. Seeing the barbarian’s eager expression, he raised his hand and gave the order.

“Do it.”

“Starting the five-second countdown!” Mana oscillated in Rosalyn’s palm. “Five!”

As she counted down, the soldiers stomped even harder.

“Four! Three! Two!”

Rosalyn, Cale, Choi Han, Ron, and Vicross exchanged glances. Mana shot out of Rosalyn’s palm, rushing toward the magic bombs.

“One!” she shouted. “Explode!”

Boom! Boom! Boooom!

Blasts cracked through the area. They were so loud, they even drowned out the soldiers’ stomping.

‹This is so exciting! Incredibly exciting! We can blow the Tower to pieces! No one will get hurt!› Raon was over the moon.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

‹The Magic Tower's coming down!›

The crumbling tower stirred up a dust storm that rushed toward the group, although they stood out of range of the explosion.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha! It's being wrecked! It's done for!"

Cale heard Tunka's laughter and the cheers of the citizens the mages had oppressed. He looked to one side again. *Crazy bastard.*

Try as Herol might to stuff down his joy, he grinned so wide that it looked like his mouth might rip. He faced Cale, elated. "You're smiling, Lord Cale!"

"Yes. That was refreshing."

Cale *was* smiling, and he did so while watching a sight that would've made most mages cry and lament. How could he not? It was fun watching the Tower crumble.

Rumble. Rumble. The Magic Tower tilted from the second floor up. Toppling completely to the side, it crumbled to the ground. *Booooom!*

Cale coughed and hacked, covering his mouth with a handkerchief to block the dust. *Damn. There's so much of it.*

‹Did you catch a cold, human?›

Ignoring Raon's nonsense, Cale waited for the dust to clear. The rubble was gradually becoming visible.

Thud. Thud. Thud!

"Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!"

The soldiers were going wild. Cale sensed the commotion behind him as he paced up to the wreckage. Choi Han and the others were ahead of him.

Catching up to Cale, Herol smirked. "Are you trying to see the ruins?"

"Yes, I want to take a look." Cale smiled and moved over, as if inviting Herol to walk with him. Both in good spirits for completely

different reasons, the two men walked slowly into the dust cloud. At last, they saw the remnants of the Tower clearly.

"Pfft!" Herol closed his mouth to hold back his laughter. The imposing, twenty-story Magic Tower was gone, and only rubble remained.

"You must be pretty happy."

Herol nodded, transfixed by the sight. He was so overjoyed, he couldn't articulate it. He'd yearned to see this for such a long time. Magic would never exist in the Kingdom of the Whipper again, which brought him immense delight.

"So am I."

Cale's measured comment took Herol aback. It didn't seem like the nobleman was just humoring him; he really *did* sound happy. Turning, Herol saw Cale smiling beside him.

Right then, the two of them heard Choi Han's voice. "Huh?"

Cale's eyes flashed. The show was about to start.

Choi Han pointed to the basement levels, now visible through the wreckage of the first floor. Down in the secret fourth basement level—which peeked out ever so slightly from underground—was the crate Raon and the kittens had positioned last night.

Cale waited to hear Choi Han's line, the opener for their performance.

The words Choi Han had practiced for days came out slow and stilted. "What. Is. This? This. Is. Odd. Should. I. Report. This. To. Mr. Cale?"

Ugh. What a terrible actor. Cale wanted to grab him by the collar and shake him.

Meanwhile, Vicross pushed Choi Han back, peering down at what he'd spotted. "Yes, there's something there."

Vicross's acting was fabulous, like an adept assassin's. He glanced back at Cale. The explosion had destroyed most of the Tower's documents, leaving behind only the smallest amount of research. Cale had arranged it that way on purpose.

“My lord…”

Now it was Cale’s turn.

‹Human! Careful! Careful! You’ll fall and die if you trip!›

Tuning out Raon’s nagging, Cale walked toward the section of ruins Vicross was pointing out. “What’s going on?”

“Take a look, please.” Vicross showed him the dark area below the demolished first floor.

Cale looked down and saw a crate that had seemingly exploded in several directions during the demolition of the Tower. Feigning shock, he shouted two words: “My goodness!”

Vicross nodded at that. *Our lord is an excellent actor, as expected.*

“How far down is it?” Cale asked him.

“It seems to be under the third basement floor.” That was supposed to be Choi Han’s line.

“It. Seems. To—”

Vicross blocked Choi Han with his left arm and answered for him. “It seems to be under the third basement floor.”

“Really…?”

Rustle. Rustle.

Hearing footsteps get closer, Cale asked with a somber expression, “Was there a *fourth* basement level? Didn’t they say that the Tower only had *three* underground floors?”

“I. Think. So. That. Is. What. I. Heard.”

At this point, Cale started ignoring Choi Han completely. Not even looking at him, he turned to meet the eyes of the people approaching.

Rosalyn chimed in, wearing a mask of equal severity. “To be honest, Lord Cale, I’ve heard that the Magic Tower was conducting secret research—oh!” Flustered, she covered her mouth with her hands and looked past Cale, as if she’d said something that the man behind Cale shouldn’t have heard.

What a star. Admiring Rosalyn's acting skills, Cale pivoted. "Chief Advisor Herol…"

Herol was staring hard at Rosalyn with an odd look on his face. When Cale said his name, he turned back to the young nobleman, an enigmatic passion burning in his eyes.

"What an unexpected turn of events, Chief Advisor. Wouldn't you agree?"

"It…does seem that way." Herol did his best to answer calmly, but he couldn't suppress his inner greed.

Tunka and his subordinates soon arrived, along with the other chiefs. "What's going on?" the barbarian demanded. "How come you're all gathered around the rubble?"

Cale put a hand on Herol's shoulder. "Tunka."

"What?" Tunka asked, wary. Cale had never spoken his name so seriously yet so gently.

"We seem to have found a hidden level in the Magic Tower."

"So? Was it not completely destroyed?"

You stupid idiot… Cale was itching to smack Tunka on the head, but he held back. Instead, he ordered his companions, "Go figure out what's down there. And, Herol…"

"Yes, Lord Cale?"

Cale faced him head-on. "You'll help us, right?"

"Absolutely."

Like I don't know what you're thinking. Cale wanted to laugh in Herol's greedy face. He focused on his acting as he played along. "All right. Go."

Everybody nodded, their expressions grave over the unexpected situation.

Choi Han joined Cale and acted believably for the first time. "It'll be dangerous down there in the wake of the explosion, Mr. Cale. Wait here while we go look."

‹Yes, human. You're weak. Go sit in the shade!›

Why're you both stating the obvious? Cale stayed silent, unwilling to dignify their repetitive, banal statements with a response. Really, why *would* he go somewhere so dangerous?

"He's right," Herol chimed in. "But you don't need to worry, Lord Cale. Our soldiers and warriors will go with your companions."

"They will?"

"Yes, sir." Herol was raring to go as well.

Cale nodded, looking unconcerned. "You *do* know everything down there belongs to me."

Herol smiled. "Of course. But if you find something you don't need, won't you sell it?"

"Obviously," said Cale. "What, are you hoping to follow my companions so they don't hide anything good?"

"That's part of it," Herol admitted. He *was* worried about Cale's group hiding things—but he was also eager to see everything the underground lab contained.

"I see. Well, I don't want such mistrust between us, Herol. Go ahead."

‹You're fibbing again, weak human! You're great at it! That's your strength!› Raon said, deciding Cale had a talent for hoodwinking people.

"Thanks for understanding," Herol replied. "I'll do my best to assist them."

"Sure, sure. Just don't get hurt."

At Cale's final comment, Vicross had to hold back a snort. Ron patted his son's shoulder, and they headed down to the half-destroyed basement. Herol and his subordinates brought up the rear.

Cale retreated a bit, then observed them from afar.

‹Too bad, human.› What could Raon be talking about? *‹We worked so hard to put all those traps down there and make that level messy last night.›*

Cale recalled what he'd just told Herol: *Don't get hurt.* Oh, how he wanted to laugh. He was the one who'd instructed Raon to install a bunch of traps in the first place. Then he'd told Ron where to find them so the assassin could serve as Herol's guide. Wouldn't they think that the information down there was more valuable if they suffered a bit to get it?

‹You've got an evil smirk on your face, human! Give me my gold coin. I did the work!›

Evil smirk? Touching the corners of his lips, Cale quickly hid his smile. Then, while Herol and the other advisors were gone, he approached the commander-in-chief. Two of the barbarian's subordinates—the ones he trusted most—stood behind him.

"Tunka, you told the crown prince you and I were friends?" Cale asked in hushed tones.

The barbarian coughed loudly. It was rare to see him so caught off guard.

Cale seized the opportunity and kept talking. "I presume they'll find some of the mages' research on that hidden floor. If any of those could help you all, I plan to hand them over to you."

"What…?"

As Tunka stood there, slack-jawed, Cale somberly continued, "And if they find something that could harm you…"

Tunka's face tightened at those words. Even an unthinking fool like Tunka knew that some of the mages' research could probably harm them. The thought had him on edge.

Yet Cale surprised him. "I'll definitely hand that over to you too."

The word "definitely" rang in Tunka's ears. He thought back to how Cale had found him a ship and come to say goodbye when they first met.

"Should you be saying that?" the barbarian responded. "Shouldn't you at least pretend you wouldn't sell something so precious so you can nab a higher price for it?"

Cale donned a look of horror. "You think *that's* the kind of man I am?"

“No. It’s not.” Cale Henituse wasn’t that petty.

“You said I was your friend,” Cale continued. “I believe two people must see eye to eye to strike a fair deal. And I don’t think you’d try to cheat me.” Jokingly, he added, “You aren’t a crafty bastard like those mages.”

Tunka grinned, doubt fading from his features. “You’re right.” He began to laugh out loud. “Heh heh heh! Nope, I’m not like that at all! Ha ha ha ha!”

He laughed for some time, yet his gaze stayed fixed on Cale. He’d never met such a noble before. The young man was worlds apart from those noble bastards who’d essentially been the lap dogs of Whipper’s mages.

No one—really, *no one*—had supported Tunka and his subordinates. But now he’d found someone who was cheering him on. A friend. When Tunka described Cale as such to Rowoon’s crown prince, even *he’d* been shocked by it, but now he felt he’d done well to use the word.

“You might be a pipsqueak, but you’re still a good guy.” Tunka had approved of a weakling for the first time in his life.

“Don’t say something so obvious.” Cale was willing to accept that as truth. *Now his chief advisor can’t trick me, no matter what he discovers.* He slyly reiterated, “We’ll make a fair deal. Sound good?”

“Hell yeah! I’m no swindler! Don’t you two agree?”

Tunka’s two subordinates nodded.

“You’re right, Commander-in-Chief.”

“Absolutely. The deal needs to be fair.”

They couldn’t argue with Cale. They felt it was only right for people on the same wavelength to strike a fair deal. Cale agreed; hence he was simply waiting for Vicross and the others to retrieve the mages’ research. Once they came back to the surface, he would share the results with everyone.

In the basement’s hidden fourth floor, Cale’s companions inevitably located the half-destroyed crate. Some of the documents inside were still intact, and the contents revolved around two topics: a mana-storage device based on the principles

of Ancient Powers, and the causes of magic resistance. Both had the potential to taint the reformed Kingdom of the Whipper.

***

"I'm sure your government knows the value of these documents better than anybody," Cale remarked.

No one replied right away. They were in the advisors' tent; Tunka, Herol, and the barbarian's other advisors had all gathered to meet Cale. His group stood protectively beside him.

"Yes, we're…well aware."

Cale suppressed a snicker at how slowly Herol responded.

A mana-storage device employing the qualities of Ancient Powers.

Herol was a poor soul who hated magic because he could feel mana but couldn't store it, and therefore he couldn't become a mage. Now he was face-to-face with a mana-storage device, as well as portions of research on mana. Through these, he might find an opportunity to use magic.

Considering Herol's love-hate relationship with magic, I'm sure he wants to get his hands on the device. Cale touched the small cloth pouch in front of him. "This is the mana-storage device, I guess."

At that, Herol's eyes started to shine.

‹That's right, human! I raised it!›

The "seed" that Cale had handed off to Raon a year ago had turned out to be a mana-storage device. The cloth pouch Cale was currently touching didn't contain *that* exact seed. Once the mana-storage seed had sprouted and grown into a plant, Cale had simply taken it and harvested another seed. He'd modified it too.

"Is this functional right now, Rosalyn?"

"No. It's currently in seed form, too dry to use. You might be able to use the seed and research documents to create a new mana-storage device, though."

Rosalyn stopped talking and peeked at Herol. Cale observed his reaction as well. Herol couldn't hide his longing for the seed and research documents, regardless of whether the explosion had damaged them.

Having verified that, Cale moved on to the next topic. "The mages did some incredible research on the causes of magic resistance as well."

This time, Tunka and the other chiefs flinched. Their defeat of the mages had largely rested on their magic resistance, so they needed this research on its causes—and they couldn't risk it winding up in anyone else's hands.

Cale glanced at Tunka, who smiled. Turning away, he told Tunka's group, "But this is only a portion of their research. And it probably isn't that important. I can just throw it out, right?"

The table jolted. Someone had kicked it in their anxiety.

"I'm joking."

One of Tunka's companions let out a sigh.

"We may only have a portion of the research, but it's valuable."

Cale thought back to his discussion with Rosalyn and Raon earlier.

"Drawing conclusions from these files alone would take at least ten years, Lord Cale. And that's if skilled mages lead the research."

"You need the ability to control magic to research this subject, human."

Cale had focused on those words. Herol would do whatever it took to continue the research, but mages had to be part of the process. He'd need to hire some. Rosalyn had correctly pointed that out to Cale.

"We might have Whipper's weakness in the palm of our hand."

"I knew it. You and I are so often on the same page, Miss Rosalyn."

If the kingdom acquired these documents, their leadership was bound to use mages for magic research, despite claiming

their goal was to get rid of magic. Cale would just need to find an informant to gather proof of that. As Raon had poked his head into the crate, Rosalyn and Cale had traded smirks, imagining what it would mean to have the evidence in their arsenal.

The "broken" crate only held the scraps of what we found, Cale reflected. The original seed was also safe in Rosalyn's lab, where Raon liked to visit it.

"Tunka."

"Uh, yeah?"

"I'll hand these documents over to you."

Tunka's expression changed in a flash. "D-do you mean that?"

Sneaking a look at Herol, Cale nodded. "I do."

He tapped the cloth bag on the table a few times, and the dry seed made a dull noise as it struck the tabletop. Tunka and his companions flinched with each tap.

Unmoved by the display, Cale went on. "I spent ten billion galleons on this Magic Tower without gaining anything from it, so now that I *have* found some things of value, I plan to sell them all to you. What would you do under those circumstances, Tunka?"

"...Try to rake in as much as possible."

"Right."

Chief Advisor Herol grimaced. The Cale he knew would make as much money back as he could; Herol would've done the same in the lout's position, especially since the Magic Tower was gone and no longer an asset.

Our finances aren't great right now, Herol thought.

There wasn't much money to spare, what with their preparations for war with the Empire. Still, Herol wanted what Cale had found, no matter what.

We can't fight him, though.

Cale was pretty powerful. If they attacked him, it would delay their strike against the Empire. Putting that conflict off any longer would hurt the soldiers' morale.

He bought the Magic Tower for ten billion, so he'll try to go beyond breaking even.

The Empire would happily pay ten billion galleons for the Tower if Cale offered it to them. Both Herol and Tunka were well aware of that.

"This is what I'm thinking." Cale opened his left hand: five fingers.

Herol groaned.

"Fifty billion galleons?!" Tunka blurted out, dumbfounded.

Despite his knee-jerk reaction, Herol smiled. *Now that we know the starting price, we can negotiate.* When you set about striking a deal, you always began with a higher price than what you really wanted.

Before Herol could start negotiating in earnest, Cale quickly clarified, "Fifty billion galleons? No. Just give me five billion."

"Pardon?" Herol asked, flummoxed. *Did he really say five billion?*

Cale assumed a pure, gentle smile. His kind gaze swept over the authorities in the room. "Right. Five billion."

He'd already agreed to sell the crown prince the rest of the documents for a tidy sum. It would be great if Rowoon's mages managed to consume the Kingdom of the Whipper once the Empire weakened it.

Cale recalled his conversation with the crown prince the previous winter.

"Sell the Magic Tower to those poor souls for five billion. It's not like you're *the one who paid ten billion galleons for it in the first place."*

"I planned to ask for ten billion, but I'll do as you command, Your Highness."

"Good. It'd be great if you positioned yourself as their benefactor, wouldn't it? I assume that's what you're really aiming for."

"Of course."

“Bastard,” Albert had sworn, laughing. Cale had chuckled too.

“The Kingdom of the Whipper is struggling,” he now reminded Tunka. “Given your current situation, I feel like this is a fair deal.”

“Y-you… Damn, really?! I’ve never met a noble like you!” Tongue-tied, Tunka looked tearfully at Cale. Irritating as it was, Cale maintained his smile. Finally, the barbarian rose from his chair. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

No one had ever thanked Cale after paying him five billion galleons for scraps. Yet he responded easily, “As long as you don’t forget about this.”

Herol couldn’t make heads or tails of Cale’s unruffled demeanor. *“As long as you don’t forget about this”…?*

Cale was in possession of two items that could harm the Kingdom of the Whipper. This had been a chance for him to earn a significant profit, yet he wasn’t going to extort them over it?

Incredulous as Herol was, he had no choice but to believe it. He’d heard it with his own ears. *This* is *the man who purchased the Magic Tower for ten billion galleons, then didn’t even investigate it.*

When Cale made that purchase, he’d said he was interested in the Magic Tower’s twentieth floor. He hadn’t sent anyone to look it over afterward, though. Over the past year, Herol had arranged for subordinates to surveil the Tower around the clock, just in case Cale found something. Yet the man had ignored his purchase completely.

“You’re not interested in money…?” Herol couldn’t help asking.

Cale shrugged. “Know how much money the Henituses have? More than you could ever imagine. And I’m the count’s eldest son.”

Right. Herol had forgotten. To the point, Cale had handed over ten billion galleons like it was nothing.

The lout then offered the confused Herol another reason to accept the situation. “I realize that any one of this continent’s powers might want what I have here. I don’t want to wind up in the eye of a storm.”

He didn't really mean that. The eye of a storm was the safest place to be. He wanted peace, even if everyone else was waging war. That was why he was selling what he'd found to both Tunka *and* the crown prince.

"You mean you're selling to us to avoid danger? Is that it, Lord Cale?"

"Right. As you know, I love peace and quiet."

Herol thought that held water. After all, Cale didn't even seem interested in exposing his parentage.

Turning away, Herol glanced around the tent. The other advisors still appeared to have questions, but Tunka and the warriors were openly in awe of Cale.

At any rate, I need that mana-storage device. The object, which could supposedly mimic an Ancient Power, was tantalizing. Herol and the others in the Kingdom of the Whipper considered Ancient Powers the greatest of abilities.

"That sounds good to me. What do you think, Commander Tunka?" Herol asked.

Tunka didn't respond. Instead, he extended his large hand toward Cale. His sober expression, far different from his usual idiotic look, reflected his sincere gratitude. "You have my thanks."

Cale stood and shook Tunka's hand. "If you're grateful, then remember this."

"You know it. There's no way I'd forget your kindness."

Representing the Kingdom of the Whipper, Tunka ultimately paid Cale Henituse five billion galleons for the contents of the crate found in the Magic Tower's secret lab. The sale was made quickly; Tunka's side rushed it.

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Having signed off on the sale, Cale returned to his tent. He looked at Choi Han, who'd followed him in. "Why'd you come in here with me?"

Choi Han held the bill of sale and a note for five billion galleons. “You know, Mr. Cale…”

“What?” Paying very little attention, Cale undid his top button, which had been practically suffocating him all morning.

“You’re amazing, sir.”

“Huh?” Choi Han’s answer took him aback.

“Your abilities are top-notch. I doubt anyone’s as good as you at carrying out this kind of sca—I mean, strategy. Personally, I’m terrible at this stuff.”

Were you going to say “scam”? Cale wondered. Choi Han was right about one thing, though: His acting *had* been terrible.

“That said, we’d better keep our guard up in our next meeting.”

Cale finally realized why Choi Han had followed him to his tent. With the Magic Tower business done, they would soon be off to converse with the gold dragon.

“You might always be looking two steps ahead, but that dragon will be strong, sir. It’s possible he could overpower Raon and me put together.”

‹He doesn’t think I could withstand that gold dragon?! I’m much stronger than he thinks!›

Raon’s protest resounded in Cale’s mind. For once, Cale was in agreement with Choi Han, who quietly awaited his response.

“Yes, Choi Han. You’re right.”

Hearing Cale agree, Choi Han brightened a bit.

Cale didn’t care about that, though. He’d mulled over this meeting with the gold dragon countless times already. His priorities for the occasion were safety first, safety second, and safety third. That would be the only way to keep himself from getting killed.

“What if I put you in front on your own this time?”

Choi Han nodded vigorously. That was what he’d wanted; he was the best choice to protect Cale from the front line. “Yes,

please. Leave it to me. I'll protect you and everybody else. No matter what it takes, I'll make sure of it."

That was what Cale had been hoping to hear. If Choi Han would protect them as carefully as he said, it was worth trying to talk to this gold dragon. Cale had never seen Choi Han use his full strength in a fight. The same went for Raon.

‹I'm here, weak human. Another dragon can't even compare to me.›

As usual, Cale ignored Raon's boast.

"I'll prepare for our departure tomorrow, then," said Choi Han.

"Good. Get some rest afterward."

"Yes, sir."

Once Choi Han left the tent, Cale felt at peace, though he wasn't alone. "Here." He took a gold coin from his pocket and tossed it into the air.

"Ooh!" Raon materialized overhead, catching the coin between his two front paws. "Th-this is a gold coin!"

That was Raon's reward for his part in destroying the Magic Tower. He was enamored with it despite the fact that it wasn't worth any more than ten silver coins.

Cale stroked the dragon's round head. "Isn't it great?"

"It's great, human! Wonderful! Thank you! I'll work even harder!"

"Good." His voice dropped to a whisper as he carefully added, "Now, as for Ohn and Hong…"

He wanted to tell the dragon not to mention it to them, to keep his promised payment a secret—but peculiar cries outside the tent flap brought his warning to a halt.

"Meeeow! Hee hee!"

"Mee hee heow!"

The mewling was mixed with laughter. Then two kittens barged into the tent without even knocking: Ohn and Hong, of

course.

You sharp kids. Seeing the sparkle in their eyes, Cale grumbled, “Fine. Here.”

Two more gold coins flew across the room. Ohn and Hong caught them out of the air, showing more agility than ever.

Cale watched the trio giggle, clutching their gold coins. He lay down on the bed. *I just hope the gold dragon isn’t crazy.* Ideally, the creature would turn out to be predictable.

As Cale slept, Raon and the kittens stood guard. They averaged just eight years old, yet they were far stronger than a standard knight brigade.

***

Early the next morning, Tunka and the other chiefs came to bid Cale’s group goodbye. Tunka looked almost sheepish; Cale had never seen such an expression on his face before.

“You’re going sightseeing for a bit?”

“Yes. I told Chief Advisor Herol my itinerary, so you needn’t worry about me stabbing you in the back.”

“I wouldn’t. I trust you, Cale.”

Hearing Tunka speak his name tenderly like that disgusted Cale. His revulsion became stronger as the barbarian cleared his throat and continued, “As long as you’re in the Kingdom of the Whipper, you can relax. And let me know if you’re ever in trouble.”

Cale didn’t mind a crazy Tunka, but this unusually thoughtful version made him uncomfortable. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. I hope you’ll beat the Empire.”

Tunka nodded as if that were a foregone conclusion. “You bet we will.”

Watching, Cale thought, *His kingdom has no chance of winning that war.*

But the opinions of forces around the continent differed from Cale's. The Empire was in chaos after the destruction of the Church of the God of Sun, and a tight-knit group specializing in offense now ruled the Kingdom of the Whipper. Many found the outcome of a war between them difficult to predict. From the outside, Whipper didn't seem interested in a full takeover—only seizing a few castles. Yet it was the logical move, considering that the Empire's development of alchemy meant it had a stronger connection to magic than most other kingdoms.

Still, it's the Empire *they'll be going up against.*

Convinced that the barbarian's foes would win the war, Cale reached out to clasp Tunka's hand. Tunka shook it immediately, assuming this was a goodbye handshake.

Taking a step forward, Cale whispered in his ear, "Alchemy is sneakier than magic. Protect your warriors with magic resistance."

Tunka's shoulders twitched.

Cale smiled at the onlookers, who were visibly curious about what he'd said, and added in an undertone, "I'm certain that the Empire has a mole in your army. You've probably looked into it, but if you haven't found them, look again. Start with people close to you. That's the imperial prince's usual method. Make sure you find the mole." He withdrew, his eyes fixed firmly on Tunka's. "And kill them."

The barbarian's gaze wavered.

Cale let go of his hand and asked gently, "Don't you trust me?"

"...I do."

That response satisfied Cale. Although the Empire would win, he hoped Whipper would annoy them for as long as possible. That would give Rowoon time to get stronger and develop its alliance with Brek. *We've got to prepare before the north comes.* The moment the northern alliance made a move, Albert would take control of Rowoon and fight against them.

"Have a safe trip, then. See you next time."

Cale smiled at Tunka. “*Next time,” you say? There’s no reason for me to see you again.*

He walked to the carriage where Pendrick waited with his hood pulled over his ears.

“Let’s go.”

It was time to head for the ancient dragon’s lair.

***

Cale clutched his collar. It was summertime, yet the mountain was freezing cold. The snow crunching beneath his shoes was proof enough.

“Didn’t you come here before?” he asked Lark, who was in front of him.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t expect the dragon’s lair to be here, though.”

Cale coughed and sniffled, his nose running. Rosalyn chuckled and handed him a handkerchief, and he blew his nose into it.

“Is this the place, Pendrick?”

“Yes, this is it.”

Cale hadn’t pictured the gold dragon residing here either. His thoughts drifted to the Permeating Necklace, nestled beneath all his layers, which could store a power of any affinity inside. He’d sent Lark to Mount Yelia to find that necklace. He remembered how the young wolf brought it back for him, and how he’d subsequently used its power to extinguish the fire in the jungle. The gold dragon lived in the same place Lark had found the necklace.

Standing on the snowy peak, he looked down. Mount Yelia was known as one of the most dangerous mountains in the entire continent. *Who knew a dragon’s lair would be here?*

“What do we have to do now?” he asked. They’d reached the summit, but he couldn’t see the lair.

“We just need to wait.” Pendrick was jubilant, but he also looked weak, like he might fall over at any moment.

“How long?”

“Until the great gold dragon wants to see us.”

“Wait, what?” *We’re just going to wait in this freezing snow?*

Cale looked around. Everyone was bundled up in furs, and Vicross was glaring daggers at Pendrick, infuriated by the elf’s nonanswer. He didn’t like the cold, it seemed.

“When may I meet *your* great dragon, Lord Cale?” Pendrick asked tentatively. “Will he teleport here when you tell him where we are?”

Cale grinned. “No.”

“How will he get here, then?”

‹I’m right behind you, elf. Why didn’t this not-so-great dragon come greet us?›

Raon’s vicious voice cut through Cale’s thoughts, and the lout was tempted to repeat his words to Pendrick verbatim. “Pendrick.”

“Yes?”

“Behind you, the great dragon you want to—huh?”

The mountain was shaking. *Rumble, rumble.*

‹Good. He should *come greet us! The great and mighty Raon Mir is here!›* Raon said triumphantly.

Cale’s hand snapped out to grab Choi Han’s shoulder.

Bam, bam, bam!

The summit’s snowcap shot into the air. No, not the snow—the summit itself.

“What the…?”

“Aah!”

They barely managed to keep their balance. Everyone stared at the center of the peak.

Pendrick clasped his hands, taut with nerves. He really looked like a devout believer. “Oh! We can finally meet the great

gold dragon!”

Cale zipped behind Choi Han, motioning for Rosalyn and the others to stand beside and behind him. *Things will get bad if the dragon releases a breath attack.*

The dragon was fully grown and therefore capable of that. Once the others had surrounded him, Cale felt relieved.

Boom!

The peak that had shot up stopped in midair, revealing a large cave. An avalanche surged down the mountainside, everywhere but the spot in which they stood.

It stopped snowing.

“Huh?”

Indeed, the snowfall that had blanketed the mountain ceased to fall from the sky.

Was the dragon making it snow? How could a creature be so powerful? Could Raon do that too? Cale wondered if he’d underestimated the black dragon’s usefulness. Yet he didn’t have time to dwell on the matter, as he heard someone approaching.

Click. Clack. As the footsteps got closer, Cale’s group held their breath. *Click. Clack.*

The rhythmic footsteps were coming from the newly revealed cave. A doll-like figure emerged from the darkness and into the light: an elf with beautiful blond hair. He was so stunning, he made the whales look homely. The elf smiled.

Pendrick fell to his knees with a *thump*. “Oooooh…”

That all but confirmed it; this had to be the gold dragon. *Elves are seriously crazy.*

Then Raon abruptly shouted, *‹Me first!›*

Cale flinched and Pendrick gasped as a small black blob rushed past them. It was Raon, of course.

“A-a great black dragon!” Pendrick called after the blob, reeling.

With a sigh, Cale watched Raon fly toward the blond elf, not giving Cale time to stop him. The small black dragon stopped in front of the elf almost instantly.

Surprised, the elf sucked in a breath, then gave Raon an odd look. “Oho…”

Raon opened his wings wide. “Nice to meet you!” he declared excitedly. The elf’s expression became even stranger, but Raon carried on. “I’m the great and mighty Raon Mir! Who are you?” His round eyes brimmed with anticipation.

After a moment’s silence, the blond elf said, “What the hell? Are you really a dragon? What kind of dragon is happy to meet another dragon?” He seemed to be asking how such a strange creature could exist.

That cemented Cale’s suspicions that this elf was indeed the gold dragon. And as a bona fide dragon, he had to know their kind was infamously selfish and egotistical. Rather than rejoice at meeting one another, dragons were more likely to scrap over who was superior.

Cale poked Choi Han’s back, and the hero immediately set a hand on the hilt of his sword. If the dragon proved to be trouble, he would be ready.


Elven Encounters, Above and Below
Much to Cale's chagrin, Prince Albert has tasked him with traversing a treacherous desert in search of the dark elves. Yet what he discovers in the ill-rumored crimson wasteland is unlike anything he's ever imagined! Later, after a brief respite for a festival back home, he treks onward to the Ten Finger Mountains. Among the peaks, another band of elves is locked in a fierce battle against an all-too-familiar foe. With Ancient Powers, masterful allies, and a mighty dragon on his side, there's no harm in Cale joining the fray—or is there?
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