
NOVEL
04
Lout of Count's Family
BY Yu Ryeo-Han

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Lout of Count's Family

NOVEL

4

WRITTEN BY

Yu Ryeo-Han

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 27:
I'll Do It!

RAON MIR WAS PERFECTLY CALM, unlike the nervous Cale Henituse.

"I am indeed a dragon!" he declared.

When the gold dragon masquerading as a blond elf heard Raon's response, his face twisted in surprise. Here he'd gone and questioned whether Raon was really a dragon—which was pretty much asking for a fight—yet Raon had responded with utmost cheer.

"Yes…you are," the gold dragon agreed, his tone a hint weaker than before.

Raon nodded. "Uh-huh! And so are you. And that's why it's nice to meet you! Jeez, don't you even know how to greet someone else?"

"I do, but…"

Dragons didn't offer each other greetings, per se. If they met, they might exchange snarky comments, but never *pleasantries*. The gold dragon had not gone through an encounter like this before. Compared to a fight, it was almost anticlimactic.

Raon extended his front paw to the handsome "elf." Looking at it, the gold dragon inquired, "Are you asking to shake my hand?"

"Yeah!"

Unbelievable, the other dragon thought. *What the hell?*

"Hrm. In almost a thousand years of life, I've never experienced something like this." The gold dragon sighed, eyeing Raon's paw with ambivalence. A few seconds later, he asked with a deadpan expression, "Are you…really dumb?"

Raon's flapping wings suddenly stopped moving, his paw still hovering between them.

Jab. Jab. Cale poked Choi Han's back even harder than he had previously. The dragons looked like they might start fighting at any moment. In response, Choi Han nudged his sword from its scabbard with a *shiiing*.

Right then, the gold dragon's gaze flicked to Choi Han. Or rather, Cale initially thought it was directed at Choi Han, but that wasn't the case. The dragon was staring straight at Cale, whose head peeked the slightest bit above Choi Han's shoulder.

Hmm? Why's he looking at me?

When Cale met the dragon's gaze, the creature's lips lifted in a smile. The gold dragon could feel a distinct aura—an aura that once emanated from a set of practitioners who had disappeared long ago. They had been the only enemies of the great and mighty dragons. That aura could have only come from members of the one family who had carried on their bloodline.

Nobody alive should have that aura... That power. As memories flashed through the dragon's mind, his eyes swirled with a strange light. *Ah!* His reptilian irises turned gold.

Instantly, Cale felt as though he was surrounded by a surging tsunami that threatened to crash over him. *Is this Dragon Fear?*

The draconic power known as "Dragon Fear" reputedly instilled terror in all life-forms, so at first Cale assumed that was what had caused the sensation. Yet this was different somehow. He didn't feel *fear*, but his body was reacting to some sort of draconic power.

His heart beat wildly. *Thump. Thump.* Then the Dominating Aura—the Ancient Power Cale had gained from the dragon skeleton in the swamp—joined with the Energy of the Heart and shot out from his core.

"Hm?"

The sensation of that rearing tsunami dissipated into something like a warm breeze. The abrupt change startled Cale, but his shivering ceased, and his drippy nose likewise stopped running.

What had that power been? *Was it thermal magic rather than Dragon Fear?*

While it seemed the dragon had done him a kindness by warming him up, the occurrence kept Cale on his toes, and his aura continued to expand.

Choi Han whirled around with a gasp. Cale was standing up straight, eyes locked on the gold dragon's. The lout now exhibited

impeccable composure, as if he'd never been shivering in the first place.

I expected as much, Choi Han reflected. *That's the Lord Cale I know.*

From his point of view, Cale always *pretended* to be cowardly but faced challenges with confidence. Cale's demeanor amazed Choi Han once again, and he noted that a person's aura definitely didn't just stem from their strength.

A round black blob covered Cale's eyes. It was Raon. "Hey! Gragon!"

Cale wondered for a moment whether he'd heard Raon correctly. *Gragon? Is that a combination of "gold" and "dragon"…?*

"You can't stare at my weak human like that! Do you understand what a coward he is?"

Inside Cale's mind, Raon continued, *‹You looked as strong as my front paw just now, human. No need to be scared, though. I'll protect you. I considered attacking that gold dragon after he glared at you! But he* did *use thermal magic on you, so he seems like a decent guy.›*

The gold dragon, who hadn't heard any of that, stared at Raon in disbelief. "He is indeed weak. More importantly, did you say he's *your* human? Are you an idiot after all?"

Raon's wings paused mid-flap again. He looked back at the gold dragon, who'd already called him stupid twice. Would they start fighting now? Cale felt cold, even with the thermal magic surrounding him.

Then Raon smirked. "I'm not an idiot—just very sociable! I'm not a socially awkward gold dragon who doesn't even know how to shake hands!"

Gold dragon? This "elf" really is the gold dragon, then.

Cale knew Raon didn't back down in an argument, and it brought him an odd sense of pride. Raising Raon to be tough had paid off.

As Cale reflected on that, he heard Pendrick's voice in his ear. "My goodness. Two great dragons chatting peacefully without coming to blows! Why, I should be making a magical record of this! I never expected to have such luck. I always thought of myself as

cursed, since I can't see elementals. I cannot believe I get to witness the marvelous sight of two great dragons, the stars of nature…!"

The elf fell to his knees anew, hands clasped together. Cale watched Pendrick prattle on under his breath where he knelt in the white snow. *This guy isn't normal either.* There was something odd about *all* the beings around him, which reminded Cale how harsh and treacherous this environment was for normal, peaceable people like himself.

Stepping slowly away from Pendrick, Cale once again saw the gold dragon, whom Raon had been blocking from view. Still in his elven form, the dragon seemed completely incredulous.

Staring him down, Raon boldly shouted, "Has my greatness shocked you, gold dragon?!"

The gold dragon chuckled in exasperation, then nodded, looking relaxed. "Yes, I'm astounded by—ghk!"

His sudden coughing fit caught Cale off guard. *Huh?*

The dragon hurriedly covered his mouth, hacking up fluid that spilled forth between his fingers.

"Wh-what's wrong?!" Raon cried, shaken. "That's blood, gold dragon! Don't cough that up!"

Indeed, a dragon was coughing up blood. *Drip. Drip.* Droplets trickled down his elven hands and dyed the snow red.

Cale was taken aback by the sight. *With that much blood, it's got to be something serious.*

"Ugh!" The dragon was coughing so violently, he had to double over. Raon flew to him, propping him up. "Ha ha ha…"

"Don't laugh, gold dragon!"

The gold dragon chuckled at Raon with a wry expression. Through his coughing, he muttered, "A dragon worrying about another dragon…"

"Stop talking, Gragon!"

The elf's golden irises flashed for a moment. That golden light caught Cale's attention even though he was a short distance away.

Pendrick darted toward the gold dragon. "Lord Erhaven!"

Only then did the dragon formally introduce himself to Raon. “My name isn’t ‘Gragon,’ youngster. It’s Erhaven.”

“Really? Well, nice to meet you. I’m not a youngster, though!” Raon pouted as he supported Erhaven. The other dragon gazed at him with a complicated expression.

Watching the two dragons interact, Cale was no longer worried about them fighting. He patted Choi Han’s back. “Let’s go over there too.”

Cale still had Choi Han walk in front of him, of course. Soon, they reached the mouth of the cave that jutted out of Mount Yelia. Just beyond the fairly wide cave mouth was a descending staircase.

Pendrick supported the gold dragon with one hand, healing him at the same time. “Are you all right, Lord Erhaven?”

Erhaven nodded. “Yes, the coughing seems to have stopped.” He took a handkerchief out of his subspace to wipe blood from his mouth. “My, I haven’t seen you since you were little, Pendrick.”

“That’s right, sir. It’s an honor to see you again.”

The gold dragon’s treatment of Pendrick struck Cale as rather warm. That surprised him, and he quietly observed the pair. Erhaven’s gaze moved to Cale’s companions. It swept over all of them—Lark, Rosalyn, Ron, Vicross, Ohn, Hong, and Choi Han—before settling on Cale.

Cale grew flustered. He couldn’t figure out why the dragon was scrutinizing him. *What now?* He really hadn’t done anything this time.

Raon zipped over and blocked Cale from view once more. “Stop looking at him! I already told you, my weak human is a coward! You can’t give him such an intense look!”

I may be a coward, but not such a coward that I’d faint because he looked *at me.*

Much as Cale itched to stand up for himself, he didn’t. Frankly, he didn’t want to meet Erhaven’s eyes anyway. He just listened to the gold dragon mumble, “He’s a coward, is he?” Though he couldn’t see the dragon’s expression, Erhaven sounded amused by it. “How interesting.”

Anxiety prickled at the back of his neck. *What's so funny? Can't he tell me too?*

Shiiing. Choi Han partially drew his sword again. Cale also noticed Rosalyn warming up to cast magic should the need arise. A strange nervousness filled the air.

It didn't last long, however. Standing up straight, Erhaven addressed Cale's group. "Follow me." Walking toward his home, he added, "I suppose this is fate."

Erhaven had invited Cale into his lair. Cale positioned the fascinated Raon and somber Choi Han in front of him, and they entered the dragon's lair.

***

"They're targeting the World Tree?"

"Yes. From what Lord Cale's heard, they may have support from another kingdom or a similarly influential group."

In a chamber decorated in the same fashion as a reception room, Erhaven and Pendrick were having a serious conversation—one Cale was hardly listening to. They all sat around a large oval table. The gold dragon was on a chair one level higher than the others, but Cale didn't care about that either. Something else had his attention.

He's definitely a gold *dragon, huh?*

Cale looked down at the table and at his chair. Aside from its cushion, the chair was solid gold; the table was made of gold and shining jewels. A fancy chandelier hung from the ceiling. Since Erhaven's lair was inside a cave, Cale had expected a plain stone ceiling, but he'd been wrong.

His expression turned thoughtful. *This dragon must be rich.*

At that moment, Erhaven's voice reached his ear. "You don't know the dolt who runs this secret organization?"

Wow. "Dolt"? The dragon's word choice was astonishing—if fitting for a dragon.

Pendrick shook his head solemnly. "Regrettably, we don't."

Erhaven's finger tapped the table. "Odd…" Cale snapped his gaze over to the gold dragon upon hearing his questioning tone, after which Erhaven explained what was on his mind. "There's no way such an organization hasn't been around for a long time. If they managed to take control of the Eastern Continent's underworld, they must've prepared for decades. Something feels fishy."

"Could you please share your thoughts, great dragon?" Pendrick asked.

Erhaven crossed his arms and obliged. "I don't know the continent's political situation, since I haven't left my lair for about a century. Still, it would be impossible for an organization made up only of humans to make such a ruckus in both the Eastern and Western Continents."

"Then you think there are nonhumans in the group?" Pendrick ventured.

Erhaven didn't answer, just rubbed his chin with his hand in thought.

Watching him, Pendrick recalled everything that had occurred up till now: the cruel events that had thrown the world into chaos. As he reflected on that chaos, a specific race occurred to him. "Lord Erhaven…could there be demons involved?"

Demons? Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the rest turned grim. That was the typical reaction when demons were mentioned. They turned toward Cale with wide eyes, then immediately relaxed. Cale was staring at Pendrick, clearly seeking answers.

Choi Han, already reassured by Cale's reaction, noticed Erhaven giving Pendrick a similar look. "Pendrick…you've always had a vivid imagination."

"Is that a no?"

"Of course not. When demons go on the move, the gods give us a revelation."

"Then what could be behind this?"

Erhaven's response was matter-of-fact. "As you all suspect, either a particular kingdom built up this organization over the years, or the organization is working with unknown forces of nature. Possibly both."

Hmm.

"How curious," Erhaven added, his interest piqued.

Cale just happened to make eye contact with the dragon at that moment. *Why'd he say that while looking at me?* Suppressing his discomfort, he hastened to pat Raon's head.

"That feels nice, human!"

He busied himself with stroking Raon's head as the black dragon stretched out on the comfortable couch next to him. Raon, Ohn, and Hong had all picked their own spots to enjoy its luxury.

This'll keep that gold dragon from making me do anything else, right? Hoping Erhaven would remember that Raon was on Cale's side, he kept petting the black dragon. He figured he *needed* to, really. In fantasy novels, dragons usually made humans who found their lair do their bidding. Erhaven might give him a command like "Go find out the secret organization's identity." Wanting to avoid such a demand, he just kept petting Raon.

‹Will my villa be like Erhaven's lair, human?› Raon piped up in his mind.

Crap. A new danger had surfaced: The young dragon had seen a dragon's real lair. Cale gaped at Raon.

The black dragon must've seen something in Cale's eyes. He sighed, then fluttered his wings. *‹Never mind, human. Don't worry about paying for that. I'll earn the money to build it, just you wait.›*

Cale regarded him with pity, not paying much thought to Raon's claim that he'd earn the money himself. How would a young dragon, whose allowance was ten silver coins, earn *that* much money? Besides, that wasn't the problem at hand.

Peeking over at Erhaven again, Cale was startled to find the gold dragon staring at him. *Is he actually going to order me to do something?*

Feeling anxious, Cale watched Erhaven slowly open his mouth to say, "Well, it's not my problem."

Huh?

"I'm getting very weak in my old age, and it would be an annoyance to step in. It isn't my business if those outside my lair

argue, fight, or kill each other."

Oh. I like this dragon. Erhaven had made a good impression on Cale for the first time. The gold dragon's personality wasn't bad, it turned out—maybe because he was ancient.

Looking over at Pendrick, Erhaven continued, "That aside, it seems we'll need to strengthen the magic shield around the World Tree."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll also make a magic device for you to take with you and install in your village."

Pendrick's face lit up with wonder. "Thank you very much, Lord Erhaven."

Receiving the elf's thanks as if it were a matter of course, Erhaven looked away—yes, back at Cale once again.

Why does he keep staring at me? Now both Cale *and* Raon were wondering that.

"Erhaven! I already told you, my weak human's a coward!"

"You will call me Lord Erhaven, youngster. I've lived centuries longer than you."

The black dragon scowled at being called "youngster" again. Cale began to fret; Raon was looking at Erhaven as if he were about to pull a fast one on the older dragon.

Once he heard Erhaven's next words, though, he didn't need to worry about that anymore. "What an odd human. No, should I say amazing?"

I'm odd? No, amazing? Cale gaped at the gold dragon, confused.

"How did you survive after obtaining so many Ancient Powers?" the gold dragon asked impassively.

Hmm?

"Most people would explode and perish."

What?! Cale honed in on that with such focus that all thoughts of Raon causing trouble vanished from his mind.

"Huh?! Hey, Gragon! What'd you just say?!"

The black dragon was just as shocked as Cale. In fact, that was true of everyone. Ron had been quietly standing to one side, and Hong had been half falling asleep, but both now looked at Erhaven in astonishment.

"Did you say 'perish'...?"

"Meeeow?"

"None of you knew?" Erhaven responded so casually that it rendered Cale speechless.

I could die? Naturally, he'd never heard *that*.

Clicking his tongue at Cale, the gold dragon spoke again. "They say that Ancient Powers are so rare that to acquire one, the heavens must bless you. And their strength is another matter. You know that much, don't you?"

"We know!" Raon exclaimed. "Hurry up and explain the rest, gold dragon!" *Thump!* His paw slammed down on the golden table, leaving behind a paw print.

"A *dragon* doesn't know more than that and needs an explanation? How ignorant." Erhaven scoffed at Raon with open contempt, then waited for the younger dragon's reaction.

"I'm not ignorant," Raon insisted. "Now explain!" Rather than getting angry, he patiently stared back at him.

Erhaven smiled faintly at Raon, then began, "Many old texts and legends mention the humans who held the Ancient Powers' strength in the past. But..."

Cale already had a bad feeling about this.

"The majority had only *one* Ancient Power," Erhaven continued. "Why do you think that was the case?"

He'd directed the question at Cale, who felt like he knew the answer. *Did everyone with multiple powers die? Is that why there're no records of them?* Now that he thought about it, nobody in *Birth of a Hero* had wielded more than one Ancient Power. He'd never questioned that before.

Seeing the contemplation in Cale's eyes, Erhaven knew that the human had drawn a conclusion. "Most people with more than two ended up dying," he continued. "Thus, the records don't

mention them. They could survive if the heavens granted them more than one Ancient Power with the same elemental affinity. But if the powers had *different* affinities, like yours…" Erhaven gracefully flexed his pale fingers. "Their human bodies stretched—like my fingers are now—until they blew up, leaving nothing behind."

"No!" Raon shouted in anguish. He slowly faced Cale, then smacked the golden table with his paw again. "Why do you keep sucking up to those useless things, weak human?! Hm?" The veins in the dragon's short neck bulged. "You suffered so much! You even coughed up blood! I want to know what goes on in that head of yours! Pah! Don't cover my mouth!"

Cale calmly stroked Raon's face, his gentle touch shutting the dragon up for now. He surveyed everyone's worried expressions, then turned back to Erhaven. "But I'm still alive."

He hadn't died despite claiming so many Ancient Powers. He had a total of six now, if he included the Fire-Suppressing Water in the Permeating Necklace.

"Yes, you're still alive," Erhaven agreed.

"Will he die soon?" Raon asked.

Ugh. Did he have to say something so scary? Cale once again caressed Raon's face and head as the black dragon continued to huff and puff.

Erhaven watched this curiously, then snorted. "Die? No. He's odd and amazing because he *hasn't* died yet." He pointed to the pendant around Cale's neck. "There's water in that, right?"

"Yes." The Permeating Necklace contained Fire-Suppressing Water.

Erhaven shook his head in disbelief as he looked at Cale, his slit pupils inspecting the human's body. "I detect the powers of wood, wind, and fire." Those were the Unbreakable Shield, the Sound of the Wind, and the Fire of Destruction respectively. "There's a human power too."

"Human power" made Cale think of his only other Ancient Power. *The Energy of the Heart.* He made eye contact with Erhaven, who then described the last Ancient Power this unique human possessed:

“The power of restoration.”

At that, Cale responded, “That power must be keeping me alive.”

“Yes. The healing abilities of that Ancient Power—the strong vitality that belonged to an ancient human—are tempering the other powers, slowly fusing them together.”

The Energy of the Heart. Cale had claimed that Ancient Power to strengthen the Unbreakable Shield, and he recalled that it had influenced the Sound of the Wind as well. It hadn’t been *strengthening* them like he’d thought; it had been *combining* them.

“I presume the Energy of the Heart was either the first or second Ancient Power you picked up,” Erhaven added.

“Yes, it was the second.”

“That’s how you survived.” Erhaven observed Cale as if he were an interesting research specimen. “You possessed the power of restoration before any two affinities clashed. That kept anything from happening.”

The gold dragon made a mental note of the name of the human in front of him. *I believe he said it was Cale Henituse.* Erhaven wasn’t interested in Choi Han or Rosalyn. In fact, the pure-blooded wolf boy—and the kittens, who also seemed pure-blooded in some respect, although mutated—piqued his interest more than those two humans did.

Still, they aren’t as interesting as this human.

If Cale had been fortunate enough to gather six Ancient Powers, that couldn’t just be ascribed to a blessing from the heavens. It would make more sense if a god had granted him a divine revelation. Yet the only divine power Erhaven sensed within Cale came from a Vow of Death.

What a madman. In the dragon’s mind, Cale was a crazy, lucky bastard. Gazing at the human, who had no problem looking him square in the eye while they spoke, the dragon felt more interest than anger.

“I guess I don’t need to worry, then,” Cale replied. His calm expression impressed Erhaven even more. The human didn’t seem

at all shocked to learn he would've died had he claimed the Ancient Powers in a slightly different order.

Despite Erhaven's impression of Cale, though, the lout's heart was pounding. *If I'd grabbed another power first, I could've been on my way to the afterlife.* Goosebumps rose on his back.

"You can relax for now, but…"

"But?"

"Well, your body's a ticking time bomb. If your power of restoration flags even a little, you'll blow up."

Thump! Raon's front paw slammed the golden table again.

Erhaven was amused to see a dragon despairing over a human's life. Upon seeing the little dragon's vicious glare, he added, "But there's a way to fix that."

Cale had a solid guess as to what it was. *Is it the power of earth?* Why was it, he wondered, that the Scary Stone came to mind?

"The power of the water in your necklace is functionally a part of you," Erhaven said. "If you acquire the power of earth and create harmony in your body, you'll be fine. Once you've collected each of the elements, they'll balance each other out."

So, I really do *need to go find that Scary Stone.* Thinking about that Ancient Power, its name already daunting, Cale glanced at the stubby front paw on his shoulder.

"Let's go find the power of earth right away, human!" Raon cried.

Erhaven scoffed again. However lucky a bastard Cale was to have gathered six Ancient Powers, collecting all five elements would be almost impossible. "You need divine luck to find Ancient Powers, youngster."

"A great, mighty dragon can create something as stupid as divine luck! Don't you know the might of a dragon, Gragon?"

"Why'd he grow up like this?" Erhaven asked Cale.

Why indeed? Cale didn't have a clue.

‹Human! Let's use that book the elf chief gave you to find the power of earth! I'll definitely track it down for you—don't worry! You'll live a long life!›

As Raon's voice resounded in his mind, Cale tried to hold back a sigh—but he heaved one anyway, no thanks to Erhaven. "Didn't you say your name was 'Cale'? Do you perhaps belong to a dragon-slaying family?"

"What…?" *What kind of nonsense is this?* Cale barely held himself back from asking that. The dragon didn't have the pompous attitude he'd expected, which led him to speak almost openly, as he did with the crown prince.

"No?"

"Of course not." Cale laughed, waving it off. Yet Erhaven's emotionless stare gave him chills, and he turned to the others for a lifeline. "Ron, my family is just a small noble house, isn't it?"

Ron avoided the dragon's gaze for a few pointed moments. "… Yes, young master."

Cale frowned. *It seems even more suspicious when you don't meet his eyes.* Confused by the old assassin's demeanor, he changed his target to Choi Han. "My family members are physically weak, aren't they?"

Erhaven likewise faced Choi Han, and the pair made eye contact. Thankfully, Choi Han's answer was more relaxed than Ron's. "Yes… They're weak."

The Henituse family was wealthy, but their physical strength wasn't exceptional. Satisfied with that, Cale returned his attention to Erhaven.

As if he found Cale's confidence endearing, Erhaven asked gently, "So you're not from a dragon-slaying family?"

"No, sir. How could someone kill a dragon?"

"Why couldn't they?"

There are people who can kill dragons?

"There was a family of dragon slayers once." Erhaven put his chin atop his clasped hands and slowly continued, "They were crazy. Even under the influence of Dragon Fear, they weren't frightened. They could stand against it. That power was passed down solely through their bloodline."

The gold dragon was entertained by Cale, who'd had no problem making eye contact with him from the beginning. Mature dragons had a uniquely intimidating air, even without using Dragon Fear. Erhaven was reining it in for Pendrick's sake, so it made sense that Cale's beastfolk companions were all right. Still, the humans should have had trouble handling the pressure Erhaven gave off; after all, it was their first time seeing a fully grown dragon.

That was the reason Ron and Choi Han's responses had been a bit delayed, and why nobody had spoken up except when Erhaven mentioned that Cale could die. It was also why the group regarded Cale differently than before.

Erhaven continued speaking to Cale, who didn't seem to have noticed any of this. "The dragon-slaying family's final successor disappeared, and their bloodline ended." Learning of the heir's disappearance made Cale uncomfortable, but his doubts disappeared when he heard what Erhaven said next. "A dragon slayer's power stems from courage."

Cale grinned at the word "courage," which had no connection to him whatsoever. The only courageous power he had was the ability to bluff, thanks to the facade of Dominating Aura he used to deceive others. "I see. Well, I assure you I'm not descended from dragon slayers."

Hearing Cale's firm response, Erhaven nodded in acceptance. *I guess he doesn't know yet.* Realizing that, the gold dragon didn't say anything further about it.

In the past, people willing to challenge dragons would run and hide if they saw a dragon dozens of meters long. But one human never cowered, taking on huge dragons without batting an eye. He was the greatest dragon slayer, one of a kind. Dragons both hated and enjoyed his aura, since he was the only one powerful enough to go toe to toe with them.

"I suppose it must be true if you say so." Rather than explaining everything, Erhaven smiled warmly. While his expression didn't sit right with Cale, the lout brushed it off; he knew full well he had no powers related to courage. "More importantly…"

Not again. Realizing that Erhaven was about to say something else, Cale fought back another sigh. The gold dragon had already

told him that he was a ticking bomb, informed him about dragon slayers… What could possibly come next?

"Youngster."

Cale relaxed when Erhaven spoke to Raon, not him.

"What is it, you old geezer?"

Raon's sass made Erhaven scoff. "Ha!"

‹Did I do well?›

Yeah, that's good. You can't just let him look down on you. Cale stroked the black dragon's head.

Shaking his head, Erhaven casually voiced an observation he felt he ought to. "You haven't even reached your first growth spurt yet."

"I'm still strong!"

Erhaven stared at Raon. There was a reason he was more benevolent than other dragons. "Yes, in the future, you'll certainly be strong. But if you met another dragon now, they'd flatten you into a pancake."

"What? Flatten *me*? Like a pancake?! That wouldn't happen!" Raon objected, but his eyes gradually slid away from Erhaven and fixed on the ceiling instead.

Watching him, Erhaven said, "You're really the furthest thing from a dragon. How cute."

Raon glared back, shouting, "What? I'm not cute!"

"I'll help you."

Hmm? The black dragon tilted his head in confusion, then shot a questioning look at Cale. The lout was equally perplexed.

Then the duo heard Erhaven's voice again. "Stay in my lair."

In order to make his mark on the world before he perished, the ancient dragon wanted to pass everything he knew on to someone else. Erhaven knew he was dying; he had five years at most. He was running out of time. His legacy could only be carried on by another dragon. Now that he'd met one who was good-natured and cared deeply about friendship, he was paying kindness to Raon.

“I’ll teach you everything I know,” Erhaven told him.

Any normal dragon would’ve been annoyed by the offer and declined. They wouldn’t want to carry on some other dragon’s legacy. But Erhaven felt that this young black dragon was different enough for him to make the proposal. *He may still refuse.* That worried Erhaven. The youngster *was* a dragon, after all.

“If you’d rather I didn’t, you can decline. I’m a generous dragon, you see. I won’t seek revenge like other dragons might. Feel free to say—”

Erhaven stopped mid-sentence when he caught sight of the pair, who wore distinctly different expressions. Cale was bewildered, whereas Raon looked excited. *Wait, he’s excited?*

As Erhaven tried to make sense of that, Raon said to Cale, *‹He’s going to teach me all his skills for free, human!›*

The black dragon grinned, the same way Cale did whenever he sold something to the crown prince.

“Gold dragon!”

“What? As I said, you can decline if you like. Still, I think you could learn everything in about three months—”

“Will I eat and sleep here for free too?” Raon asked, beaming.

Erhaven blinked a few times, wondering whether he’d misheard. Finally, he managed to ask, “What…?”

“If you’re gonna teach me for free, do I get to eat and sleep here for free as well?”

“Erm, yes?”

Raon pointed at Cale and the others. “Is it free for *all* of us?”

“I guess so…?”

Thump! Raon again slammed the golden table in delight, blurting out, “Then I’ll do it! I’ll do it!”

He also started to shout in Cale’s mind. *‹Now I’ll get even stronger! If I learn all the gold dragon’s skills, I’ll be at least twice as strong! And it’ll all be free!›*

Cale smiled awkwardly when he noticed that Erhaven, unable to understand Raon’s energetic response, was looking toward him instead.

“Ha ha ha…”

Yes, this is good. Cale stroked Raon’s head, feeling oddly proud and satisfied. Raon had an excellent grasp on how to bargain. In contrast to the elated black dragon, the gold dragon felt displeased, despite having gotten the response he wanted.

“Teach me everything! Teach me everything you know!” Raon cried.

Absorbing the younger dragon’s excitement, Erhaven murmured back, “I plan to.”

“It’s a great idea! Don’t you agree, weak human?”

“Yes, yes.”

Erhaven had lived nearly a thousand years, but he’d never seen a combination like the human nodding his head and the young dragon flapping his wings.

I’m in my final days. Am I making the right decision?

He second-guessed himself for a moment, then stopped. He didn’t have the luxury of hesitating. It was fate that, in his twilight years, he’d happened to meet a young dragon—and that the young dragon wasn’t a normal one. What else could it be, if not fate?

Erhaven chuckled; he’d never expected such an odd situation. “I might as well pass everything on. I’m going to die soon.”

Although the gold dragon laughed as he said that, a heavy silence settled over the room. Everyone’s attention focused on Erhaven.

Flying up to his face, Raon yelped, “What?! What’d you just say, Gragon?!”

“Excuse me? Wh-what’re you talking about, sir?” Pendrick’s eyes wavered, as if he’d heard that the end of the world was coming.

Raon zoomed around Erhaven’s body, examining it. “Are you poisoned? Did someone curse you? Did you get hurt in a fight?”

The little dragon’s shocked, concerned tone gave Erhaven a peculiar feeling. He pushed Raon away with his hand. “Would it make sense for a dragon to suffer from such things, youngster?”

“Not at all!” Raon said, and Erhaven flinched. “So why are you dying? Don’t die! You’re the only other dragon I know!”

The gold dragon’s expression was unreadable then; he seemed about to laugh but also incredulous. He avoided Raon’s passionate gaze only to end up catching Cale’s eye.

“May I ask why you’re dying?” the human inquired.

Erhaven waved him off. “I’ve just grown weak with age.”

Cale mulled that over. *Well, since we’re getting something from him…* He sifted through his memories, wondering whether an Ancient Power could help.

Erhaven patted Pendrick’s head. The elf was beside himself at the news. The gold dragon recalled when Chief Canaria first brought this elf, who couldn’t see elementals, to his lair. He’d been so curious about Pendrick’s unique circumstances that he’d saved the dying elf for his own satisfaction. After that, the boy had begun following Erhaven around. Recognizing Pendrick’s sincerity, Erhaven had developed a soft spot for him beyond surface-level interest.

“Everything in the world is bound to get old and die, Pendrick. Nothing can overcome death. Well, there *are* ways of controlling death.”

“H-how?”

Pendrick sounded frantic, but Erhaven was calm. “You’d need to follow the darkness, like a lich.”

The elf gasped. Necromancers eventually died, as did dark elves, but liches didn’t feel pain or die of old age. The difference was significant.

“Not that I have plans to do so,” Erhaven hastily added. Some dragons *had* gone down that path, and he understood why, but he didn’t agree with the decision. “My death is still a ways off. No need to worry about it now.”

Pendrick nodded, teary-eyed. “I understand.”

Just then, Erhaven heard Raon again—and his tone was serious. “Hey, gold dragon.”

Erhaven turned toward him. “What?”

“Since I’m great and mighty,” Raon explained, “I’ll be able to find a way for you to live a really long time. Just wait!”

Erhaven simply gawked at Raon, paying little heed to what the tiny dragon had said. Then, to keep the corners of his mouth from rising, he addressed Cale. “Can you all stay here about three months? You’re a noble, aren’t you, Cale Henituse?”

“Hmm. I don’t have to return to my territory right away, but…” Erhaven’s question made Cale think about his promise to Ritana, the Queen of the Jungle. She’d wanted to meet with Cale to repay his help.

“Human.”

“Hmm?” Cale pivoted to the black dragon, then winced; Raon’s eyes looked vicious.

“Human…I don’t want to be here alone.”

Not even waiting for Cale’s reaction, Raon whirled to Erhaven. As Erhaven met his eyes, he let out an intrigued gasp at Raon’s now *very* draconic glare.

“This weak human only sleeps on the softest, most luxurious beds. He likes fruit and only eats top-quality meat.”

“And you want *me* to prepare it…?”

“Isn’t this your lair? And didn’t you say everything would be free? A great and mighty dragon just needs to flick one paw to get those things ready.”

“That’s true…”

At this point, Erhaven was questioning why he’d have to do all that at his age. *I’ve grown too old.* And he’d become too nice. He used to thrash arrogant dragons till they were bedridden for a month, licking their wounds. How had he ended up like this?

Raon didn’t care what Erhaven was thinking about. He asked Cale, “Don’t you need to go meet the Queen of the Jungle, human?”

“Yes…?”

“Hurry back, then. I’ll give you a week.”

“All right.”

Only after hearing Cale’s response did Raon grin and return to the fluffy couch to lay down next to him. Cale sighed, as did

Erhaven. At that point, their eyes met again. Although they were almost a millennium apart in age, they felt a shared connection.

"I'll be back in a week," Cale said.

Erhaven sighed again. "Sure." As Cale rose from the couch and his companions got ready to follow behind him, the gold dragon added, "Whatever your comings and goings, keep quiet while you're here. I'm a bit sensitive. I'm accepting you all, since the youngster demanded it—but be careful."

When Cale and Raon stared at him with the same odd expression, he asked, "What're you looking at?"

Cale slowly shook his head. "Nothing at all."

At the same time, Raon remarked, *‹The gold dragon doesn't* seem *that sensitive.›*

Cale agreed. Erhaven didn't seem sensitive at all. Like Raon, he came off as an unusual dragon.

Erhaven must've felt uncertain about Cale's reaction, since he briskly went on, "Also, I'm only going to teach the youngster. I won't teach anybody else anything, however much they beg and plead. Well…I'm a bit curious about the beast children, but… No."

At that point, Cale realized, *If we beg and plead, he'll totally teach us.*

His gaze moved to Rosalyn and the young beastfolk. Rosalyn met his eyes and grinned; as he expected, she'd understood as well. He smirked slyly.

"Why're you smiling like that…?"

"To show that I agree, Lord Erhaven."

Erhaven found that suspicious. Meanwhile, Cale was picturing how Raon and the rest would glean whatever they could from this dragon for the next three months. He'd thought that this gold dragon would be scary, but Erhaven had just ended up being a kindly old geezer who, despite all his grumbling, kept helping them out.

"I don't know why you're smiling like that again, human, but you need to hurry back," Raon emphasized.

“Got it. I’ll only bring a few people with me, and we’ll be back soon,” Cale said lazily.

Thinking of the ones who would accompany him to the jungle, he suddenly felt nervous.

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The next day, Cale figured out the source of his nervousness.

“Enjoy your trip, human! Don’t go and tackle anything that’ll get you hurt again!”

Everyone stood in front of Erhaven’s lair. Cale wasn’t paying attention to any of Raon’s concerned directions; he was deep in thought. *I knew something was off.*

His gaze swept over the group that would be joining him. First and foremost, he’d need Ohn with him to go through No Way Out, one of the Five Wonders. She was currently saying goodbye to Hong. Cale walked past the kittens toward his other companions: Choi Han, Vicross, and Ron. He groaned inwardly at the combination. *Should I have brought Hans instead?*

Cale thought about the deputy butler, whom he’d left back in Uvar territory. At the same time, a shiver ran down his spine.

Ron approached him, posing as a nice old man. “Are you all right, young master?”

“Yes… I’m fine.”

“Glad to hear it. Please let me know if you start feeling ill.” Ron assumed a benign smile. “In a way, it’ll be nice to travel with just us few. It’s been a while since we’ve done that.”

It won’t be nice at all. Watching Vicross pull on his usual white gloves, Cale considered his entourage. *They seem like the perfect team for getting up to no good.*

Vicross must’ve noticed Cale’s uncertain look. He brushed his hands off and drew near. “We should be able to head out now, Lord Cale.”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

As Raon and the others said goodbye, Cale and the group headed to Hoik, a village at the southern end of the Kingdom of the Whipper. That was where they'd find the entrance to No Way Out.

***

It just *had* to be raining.

"It's like last time!" the silver kitten, Ohn, exclaimed. Sitting in Cale's arms, she hummed as she controlled the fog.

As Cale's group walked through No Way Out, even the rain couldn't clear the odd fog. *Psssssh.* Yet the downpour was so loud that Cale couldn't make out Ohn's humming. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* The droplets landing on his raincoat were starting to annoy him.

Vicross sidled up to Cale. "It's getting late, and the rain's coming down hard. It'd be best to spend the night in the rainforest."

Cale nodded. "Ohn, let's head back to that cave from last time."

"It's close."

With Ohn controlling the fog, Cale nodded at the others to follow. Ron, Choi Han, and Vicross clutched their raincoats, trailing after them.

Eventually, Choi Han walked up to Cale. "Are you heading to the cave where you met Queen Ritana?"

"Yes. That one." That was the memorable location where Cale had pretended to be a good person. He'd acted like all sorts of things that he wasn't.

"I have some good memories from that place."

Ohn must've been recalling a memory as well; she shook her head to focus on controlling the fog.

The cave soon came into view, likely owing to their swift pace.

"It's over there!" Ohn, who had pointed out the cave, went still. "Hmm?"

Ron came to Cale's side. "Someone's inside."

The faint light coming out of the cave did indeed suggest that somebody was already inside.

Cale debated it for a moment, then said, “It’s too late to go elsewhere. Let’s go for it.”

Looking for another location would be annoying. It was dark, and they were in the middle of a downpour. Moreover, Cale was hungry and sick of walking. There really wasn’t anywhere else to go, so they might as well spend a night with strangers.

“Yes, sir,” said Choi Han. “Thankfully, I don’t sense a strong aura in there.”

If Choi Han didn’t sense anything, there was no reason not to approach the cave. “Let’s go,” Cale ordered.

Psssssssh. Rain pummeled them harder as they hurried to the cave. The light from within grew brighter, and they could make out the entrance.

We can finally rest.

Cale was about to walk even faster when Choi Han commented, “That’s a familiar aura.”

What? As Choi Han spoke, Cale caught a glimpse of the cave interior. Two people were huddled around a small fire.

Cale rubbed his eyes. *Son of a…*

“Wh-who are you?” one of the pair—a blond man—asked in a shaky voice. The man stared at Cale and the others. He came off as weak and innocent. Not only were his eyes pure but they looked wet as well, making him appear pitiful. That wasn’t the problem, though.

Why is she *in there?*

A woman lay on the ground next to the harmless-looking blond man. Cale had seen her before. It was the blonde swordswoman—the one at swordmaster level—who belonged to the same secret organization as the deceased blood-drinking mage, Redika. The woman was unconscious, her body stained black in several spots.

Shiiing. A quiet ringing reached Cale’s ear. Choi Han was unsheathing his sword.

Cale felt like someone had slapped the back of his head. *What the hell’s going on?* He glanced back at Ron.

What’s wrong, young master? Ron’s gaze seemed to ask.

At that point, Cale's mind cleared. *Oh, right. She doesn't know my face.* The swordmaster didn't know any of their faces, for that matter. She'd only seen them with their masks on. *Nice.*

Cale put a hand on Choi Han's shoulder. "Choi Han, put your sword away."

"What? But—"

"Hide your aura," Cale whispered. The woman might feel it if she woke up later.

Instead of watching the confused Choi Han, Cale turned toward the unconscious swordmaster and the blond, innocent-looking man next to her. He smiled gently at the man, and Ohn mewed in his arms.

"Meeeow."

Cale got the impression she was saying this was reminiscent of how they'd met Ritana. He didn't care about Ohn's opinion right then, though. Choi Han had said clearly that he didn't feel a strong aura inside the cave, which meant that—unlike the swordmaster—this man was weak.

Lowering the hood of his raincoat, Cale said to the blond man, "I'm sorry. Did we scare you?" His voice was gentle and sincere.

Choi Han flinched at his tone, and Ron stepped forward. He, Vicross, and Ohn hadn't interacted with the enemy during the battle Cale's group had fought alongside the Whale Tribe, so they didn't know the swordmaster's face. Still, Cale wasn't worried about what Ron would say.

"I apologize. Our young master's guard is very dedicated to his job," Ron told the blond man with warmth, masterfully embodying his role as Cale's servant.

Cale made eye contact with Ron, then Vicross. The father-and-son duo subtly nodded back, ready to play along even if they didn't fully grasp the situation.

They're so solid. Cale suddenly felt as though they were very dependable.

All told, it was the first time he'd actually liked this group.

Chapter 28:
Truly a Good Person

ANYBODY WOULD'VE ASSUMED Cale was a normal young nobleman traveling alongside his servant and guards. *Well, that actually* does *describe our group,* Cale realized; he'd forgotten that fact. He smiled kindly at the blond man, but things didn't go as he expected. The stranger seemed to become even warier of him. *What the…?*

The man's eyes wavered wildly as he stared at Ron's left arm, the one made by the necromancer Mary. It wasn't visible beneath Ron's usual long-sleeved shirt and black gloves, but the man gawped at it nonetheless, his face full of uncertainty, wariness, and panic. It was as if, just by looking at the arm, he knew it was artificial and had a darkness affinity.

Oh? Feeling a hunch forming, Cale scrutinized the flaxen-haired pair in the cave. They looked different yet oddly similar at the same time, like siblings. He suddenly thought of the magic bombs, then something else—the saint and saintess of the Church of the God of Sun.

Damn it… Really? Why was this unwanted suspicion coming to mind? Cale repressed it, making a firm resolution: *We'll quietly go our separate ways.*

Evidently, the strange man didn't feel the same.

"I w-won't be tricked!" he cried. He rushed to the swordmaster and drew her into his arms, staring at Cale's group—specifically, at Ron. His innocent eyes looked like those of a rain-drenched foal, pathetic rather than intimidating.

Ron wore his trademark kindly smile as he paced toward the man. "I'm not sure what you're talking about. We aren't tricking you in any fashion. We just happened to be walking by." To Cale, the old servant was the villain of the century.

"K-keep your distance!" the man cried, not listening. He picked the woman up and crept backward.

The unconscious woman let out a moan. "Ugh…"

“Oh!” The blond man stopped backing up. He quickly laid her back on the ground, then whirled on Ron. “You evil creatures!” He glared down at the woman’s body, brimming with anger and resentment. “First you use dead-mana bombs, and now you’ve brought in a necromancer?!”

Hmm? He seems to have the wrong idea. The blond man—who Cale suspected was the saint—didn’t understand the situation.

Ohn tapped Cale’s arm twice, and Cale lowered his head. *Don’t we need to clear this up?* the kitten’s gaze seemed to ask.

Cale shook his head. *Not yet.* His intuition told him to wait. In these situations, the side with the wrong idea tended to spew useful information. Besides, he had to figure something out. *“Dead-mana bombs”? Is it* possible *to make bombs with dead mana?*

He had a suspicion that the secret organization might’ve created such devices, but he needed more information, so he didn’t do anything—just observed the situation.

Ron moved exactly as Cale wanted him to, smiling gently as he took another deliberate step toward the man. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about, sir. You seem to have misunderstood.” He waved it off, denying any association with the things the man had mentioned.

That got the man hollering. “I’m going to protect Hana! How could you do such terrible things in the Empire’s name?!” His glower seemed to say he wouldn’t be deceived again, and he sounded as though he’d accepted he could die soon.

What?

“The God of Sun’s mace won’t let you get away with this!” Veins bulged on his forehead as he shouted, “The Sun will know of our grievance!”

Cale was flummoxed. *What the…? What’s this punk talking about?*

Now that the blond man had gotten over his initial fear, he unleashed his yells in a torrent. His face looked innocent, but his voice blared as loud as a train whistle. “I may only have healing abilities, but I won’t stand still and—”

“Hold on!” Cale said, having to intervene in the end.

“Ha! I won’t stop, even if you try to shut my mouth—”

“Hey! Wait a second.”

The low but powerful voice shut the blond man up for a moment. He noticed that the red-haired man, who seemed annoyed, was now giving off a strong aura; the pressure from that aura petrified him.

The cave was quiet aside from the hiss of rain, and Cale could finally make sense of the situation. He quickly processed it all. *He’s basically saying the Empire produces these “dead-mana bombs.”* And that it was currently after him and the woman.

Cale’s gaze moved to the swordmaster. The blond man must’ve noticed, since he hastily clutched her close, but Cale had already verified what he needed to know. He felt there was a good chance that dead-mana exposure had produced the black marks on her body.

This is bad... He’d never expected the Empire to develop such a bomb. The novel had never mentioned it.

“Young master.”

At Ron’s interjection, Cale gathered his thoughts and faced the blond man once more.

The man flinched, bit his lip, then raised his voice again. “I-I won’t surrender!” Yet he couldn’t hide his anxiety as Cale stalked toward him. He hadn’t felt an aura as strong as the red-haired man’s in a long time. It was the aura not just of someone strong but of a true ruler.

Cale’s wet shoes squeaked against the ground as he neared the stranger, and soon they were face-to-face. *No!* The man needed to protect his little sister, Hana. He’d always burdened her, and now he’d been used by the church. Not only had he been framed, but the Empire was also chasing him. He was disappointed in himself.

The red-haired man looked down at him, his gaze giving the blond man chills. His next words emerged slowly, deliberately. “Was she poisoned by dead mana?”

“Wha—”

Before he could demand to know what the redhead was talking about, Cale handed him something. “This is a top-grade

potion. It should prevent the dead mana from spreading, shouldn't it?"

The blond man had lost everything, and that top-grade potion was what he'd desperately been praying for. It seemed to be the genuine article.

This man—the saint of the Church of the God of Sun—couldn't use his healing abilities on his dying sister because the sun's power burned darkness. Rather than healing her, his abilities would expunge *her* along with the darkness inside her.

Cale smiled gently at the saint. "I know a bit about dead mana. My servant here has suffered its effects before." He pointed to the man he'd introduced as his servant, then gestured toward his left arm. "Isn't that right, Ron?"

Ron answered without the slightest change in expression. "Yes, young master. My left arm and body were severely injured. We barely managed to heal them."

The saint made a face. *Heal them?*

Pretending not to notice, Cale removed more top-grade potions from his magic bag. He had tons—Raon had filled the bag with a ridiculous quantity—but he only took out ten, then put on an awkward smile as he turned back to the saint.

"These potions are all I have on me. Oh, but they were made by Rowoon's Temple of the God of Death. Why not treat the lady as we resolve this little misunderstanding?"

The saint hadn't seen such a genuine smile in a long time. His gaze wavered.

Then the red-haired man added something that really struck a chord: "Isn't human life the most important thing?"

The saint stared quietly at the proffered potion, its topper removed. His little sister had often told him, *"Your problem is that you trust people too much and too easily, Brother. You're open and honest without suspecting anything at all. You shouldn't keep acting like that. Then again, I guess it's one of your strengths. Don't worry. I'm strong, so I'll protect you."* He needed to save her.

Just then, the redhead added, "Uh, by the way, my name's Cale Henituse. I'm from Rowoon." He showed the saint a small badge

with a golden turtle crest.

"Cale Henituse…?"

"Yes," Cale answered in a gentle yet firm voice. He needed to identify himself so that this man, as well as the woman who'd eventually wake up, would see him as a noble who'd happened to be passing by. He definitely didn't want them to piece together that he'd once pretended to be from the secret organization. Posturing as a clueless young nobleman, Cale eyed the man he suspected was the saint.

The man's reaction was startling. "You're him!"

Hmm?

"Yes! That red hair! Now I understand why you came to No Way Out!" The blond man grabbed both the potion and Cale's hand.

Cale slowly pulled his hand away. "Do I know you?"

"Uh, you see…" The blond man assumed an innocent smile, and Cale wondered how his demeanor could change so quickly. "The villagers of Hoik told me about you. They said you taught them the rainforest's secrets and gave them closure."

"Well, I did do that," Cale acknowledged. Hoik was the village by the entrance of No Way Out. He'd bypassed it this time, going straight into the rainforest.

"Ever since then, whenever a new traveler comes to Hoik, the villagers share the story of Lord Cale Henituse. I overheard it as I hid—uh, I mean, I happened to hear about it." Evidently, the man had gotten wind of Cale while hiding out in the village. "They described you as a wise, charismatic noble with a warm heart."

"That's…high praise," replied Cale, who didn't want that reputation at all. When he went to deal with the jungle fire, he'd left Hans and Hilsmann to take care of things. At this point, he seriously wondered *how* they'd done so. Still, he had to focus on the man in front of him for now.

The saint had calmed a bit and was beginning to babble, his expression relaxed. "Yes! Whenever Queen Ritana talks about good people, she always brings you up."

"Who?" *What the hell is he talking about? Why does the saint know Ritana?*

“Oh, uh…” The man realized his mistake. With no small amount of awkwardness, he made up an excuse. “The Queen of the Jungle. Last time I was in the rainforest, I had a chance encounter with her. So she’s just someone I know.”

It definitely didn’t sound like they’d merely crossed paths.

The saint hastened to add, “My younger sister and I are just commoners, but the queen helped us.”

How could he tell such a bald-faced lie? Holding back a sigh, Cale nodded. “I see. Well, let’s heal her first.”

“Ah, yes!”

“Ron, help him.”

“Yes, young master.”

The saint flinched as Ron approached, but seeing Ron carefully take out a cloth to assist him, he bowed his head.

After watching the two, Cale stood up. “I’ll step outside for a moment. Choi Han?”

“Yes, sir?”

Cale pointed to the mouth of the cave. “Stand there and protect them.”

“…All right,” Choi Han answered, deflated.

Seeing more trust in the saint’s eyes than before, Cale couldn’t imagine how a man so willing to believe in others would survive in this world. He patted Vicross’s shoulder. “Let’s look around the area. It’d be awful if a wild animal or a monster showed up while these two were tending to the patient.”

“Of course,” Vicross replied with the air of a dependable guard, then followed Cale.

As Cale walked by Choi Han, who stood at the cave mouth, he whispered, “Keep an eye on them.”

Choi Han finally seemed to understand. He nodded with a somber expression. “Yes, Mr. Cale. I. Will. Do. My. Best. To. Guard. Them.” His bad acting reared its head once again.

Ignoring him, Cale and Vicross exited the cave. The rain had slowed to a light drizzle, so they could stand outside with their raincoats on.

“Vicross.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I don’t have a mage to help me send video communications, so I’m giving you a message to deliver.”

“For Tunka?” Vicross asked stoically.

Cale was a little impressed. Vicross had grasped what was on his mind without needing him to explain. Cale couldn’t keep this information about the Empire’s dead-mana bombs to himself; if Tunka’s group stayed in the dark about it, they would be at a huge disadvantage.

“Yes, pass it along to Tunka. His army will need this information to hold their own, don’t you think?”

Vicross’s reply defied expectations. “You seem worried about him.”

“Who? Tunka?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cale was silent for a moment, then declared, “Enough talk, just go.”

Vicross’s lips quirked up in a smile, and he dipped his head in acknowledgment. His expression seemed to say that this young master of his was really beyond help. And though Cale registered it, he offered no further explanation.

Cale knew Tunka’s tactics in battle. The barbarian would shove his wounded soldiers aside and advance. He assumed it was natural for weaklings to be left behind, injured, or killed.

Herol was the same way. Both he and Tunka did whatever they felt like, although Herol’s ambitions revolved around ridding the entire continent of magic, whereas Tunka was focused on fighting and getting stronger.

The people under them shouldn’t suffer just because their leaders are a mess.

If Cale was worried about anybody, it wasn’t Tunka but the soldiers following his orders. After all, who would those bombs usually hurt? Furthermore, it was difficult to recover from dead-

mana poisoning. One needed top-grade potions to keep the dead mana from spreading.

Would Herol use top-grade potions on their soldiers? What about Tunka? Absolutely not.

Had Cale acted like a weakling, for example, Tunka would've completely ignored him.

Vicross was waiting for further orders, so Cale told him, "You don't need to go all the way to Tunka. Rosalyn's nearby. Deliver the message to her, and she'll relay it. That'll be fastest. Oh, and tell Crown Prince Albert too." Together, Rosalyn and Vicross would take care of everything.

"Understood." A bit curious, Vicross asked, "Who are they, sir?"

"I presume they're the twins from the Church of the God of Sun."

"The two on the run?"

Cale observed Vicross for a moment. "Yes. That woman in there is also the swordmaster from the secret organization we fought at the Hais Islands."

"She is?"

"Uh-huh. So hurry back. I'll take care of excusing your departure."

The chef grimaced. That secret organization had brought his father to death's door.

As Vicross's demeanor soured fast, Cale added, "Hurry back, but you can trust me and Ron."

Vicross nodded. "That's very reassuring."

His father and Cale would be fine. They had the powerful Choi Han with them; they shouldn't be in any real danger.

"Meeeeow." Ohn mewed to remind Vicross that *she* was there as well.

Vicross smiled and reached out to Cale. "Please give me the message."

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After sending Vicross off with that message for Tunka, Cale returned to the cave.

He was greeted immediately by Choi Han. “Oh, Mr. Cale! You’re back.”

“That I am,” Cale said as he entered.

Ron still had a benign smile on his face. Neither he nor Choi Han said anything further, though Vicross’s absence was clear.

Cale hurried up to the saint, who was fretting over the blonde swordmaster. “How’s the lady doing? A bit better?”

His face lit up. “Ah, yes. The dead mana in her body is gradually—”

“Mgh…” the swordmaster moaned, lashes fluttering as she stirred.

“H-Hana!” The saint called what Cale presumed was the swordmaster’s name as the woman opened her eyes.

“Brother…”

“Hana!” the saint cried again, embracing his sister.

As the twins had their moment, Cale traced a quick note on Ron’s palm with his finger: *From Arm.* Ron’s gaze turned icy, but Cale feigned ignorance. When the saint turned to face him, he smiled back.

“What a relief,” he remarked.

“My sister’s awake thanks to you, Lord Cale. Thank you so much!”

Receiving a grateful look from the saint, as well as a confused one from the swordmaster, Cale put on his noblest smile. There was still a lot he needed to find out from this pair: the siblings’ situation, the saint’s relationship with Ritana, and why the Empire was using dead-mana bombs despite the risk to their own forces.

“Brother…” the swordmaster Hana repeated in a groggy voice. Her eyes were focused on Cale, Choi Han, and Ron.

Cale assessed her condition in turn. *She’s in the beginning stages of dead-mana poisoning.*

The wounds on her body had turned black. Cale guessed that the dead mana in the bomb that struck her had been in a liquid form, poisoning her when it touched her injuries.

She must've survived because she's a swordmaster.

Swordmasters were tough; her aura probably prevented the dead mana from spreading throughout her body. Nevertheless, she'd been weakened.

Cale plastered on a kind smile by default, which made the woman wary. "Who are these people?" she asked. She'd barely regained consciousness and was having some difficulty communicating. Sweat dotted her entire body, and she could barely speak. "I—" Her shoulders jerked as she coughed up black blood.

The saint quickly tried to cover her mouth. "Don't speak, Hana!"

"Didn't I tell you not to let strangers in…?" Glaring at him, the woman made to sit up.

At that moment, a white cloth touched her mouth, and a warm voice reached her ears. "You're bleeding. Please relax. I'll explain everything."

Wiping the black blood off the swordmaster's mouth, Cale reflected, *As soon as I've collected some of this stuff, I should ask the gold dragon about it.* Once he'd made up his mind to show Erhaven the substance on his return, he resumed speaking softly to his cagey enemy. "I was touched by your brother's desperation as he tried to save your life. So, please, focus on your recovery for now."

Ron handed Cale a fresh potion right on cue. "Here's a potion, young master."

Glancing at him, Cale was awed; Ron was acting just like a caring old man, as if his earlier frigidity had never existed. *Wow. He's so good.* He was acting completely different now than when Cale had been traveling with Choi Han, Rosalyn, and the three children. Maintaining his composure, Cale handed the potion to the saint.

Watching all this, Hana didn't know what to think. It was already strange that a young nobleman and his servant were in No Way Out. "Who the hell are these people?"

“Hana, be respectful,” the saint chided her. “This man and his companions are no threat.”

His scolding prompted her to face him. She was worried about what her brother—who was naive to the point of stupidity—had done while she was unconscious. Yet she found him brighter than he had been in ages.

“This is actually someone you’re familiar with, Hana. Remember hearing about Cale Henituse in Hoik? This is him, and he’s brought his manservant and guards.”

“Cale Henituse?” Her eyes darted to the red-haired man.

“Yes,” the saint continued, sounding excited. “You told me about him, remember? You said he was the great hero who stepped up to protect Rowoon during the Plaza Terror Incident!”

Hana wore an indecipherable look. Cale ducked his head slightly, as if her stare embarrassed him. *Great hero, my ass,* he thought. *To her, I was an annoying enemy.*

To members of the secret organization, Cale was a pest who got in the way rather than a hero. From the saint’s statements, though, Cale was able to confirm one thing: *Her brother doesn’t belong to the secret organization.* If he did, he wouldn’t act so foolish.

“Lord Cale gave us these potions, and he’s asked his guard to protect us.”

“This man is *the* Cale Henituse?” Hana asked, skeptical.

Cale assumed a bashful smile. “Yes. Your compliments have made me shy, but I am indeed.”

“Lord Silverlight…?”

It had been a long time since Cale heard the embarrassing nickname that came out of the swordmaster’s mouth. But right now, he needed to instill faith in her. *Swoosh.* A small shield appeared, glowing silver.

“Oh!” The saint was amazed by the display, and the swordmaster relaxed a little.

“Do you trust me now?” Cale asked her.

“Well…I guess so.”

“Please get some rest, then. You’re still in bad shape.” His expression trustworthy, Cale continued, “My companions and I will stand guard tonight. I don’t know how you wound up in this situation, but it is a noble’s duty to protect the weak and troubled.”

Where the saint was all admiration, his sister was visibly relieved.

Ron played along. “You’re right, young master. We’re different from those evil bastards who perpetrated that incident in the capital. We need to do our utmost to save others and distinguish ourselves from those who mean people harm.”

The swordmaster nodded. “You’re right.”

Huh. I didn’t think she’d agree. Cale hadn’t expected her to approve of that, and her next words gave him an odd feeling. “Those…those bastards should have their blood sucked out till they die.”

Yikes. Cale guessed that she’d been betrayed by the secret organization. With a casual air, as if he hadn’t heard what she’d just said, he asked, “How’d you end up in No Way Out? This is a dangerous place to get lost.”

An abrupt silence took hold of the cave. The saint glanced anxiously at his sister, who stared fixedly at the ceiling. *They must be en route to meet Ritana,* Cale guessed. That seemed obvious, since the Queen of the Jungle’s name probably hadn’t slipped out of the saint’s mouth for no reason.

Cale’s assumption soon proved true.

Ohn, who’d been guiding Vicross to the edge of the rainforest, scurried back into the cave. “Meeeeow.” She darted over to Cale and batted his arm urgently.

At the same time, Choi Han called out to Cale from the cave mouth. “Mr. Cale! There’s a light approaching from the distance.”

“What?” Surprised, Cale moved to the entrance.

It was the middle of the night, and the rain had picked up again. Despite the terrible downpour, a light was coming close to the cave. Cale finally understood why the saint, who’d needed to hide with his injured sister, had lit a fire inside.

The hissing rain kept Choi Han's voice from being overheard as he whispered to Cale, "I heard something during our battle at the elf village." Recalling what the magic spearman had said while they fought, he repeated those words to Cale: "'Why do these bastards always get in my way?! Those gold twins are already running me off my feet!'"

Cale patted Choi Han's shoulder, then turned back to the siblings. "Am I right in assuming that light belongs to your guests?"

The saint glanced at the swordmaster. She struggled upright and met Cale's gaze, her face blotched jet-black with damage from the dead mana. "Yes, that's probably them."

As soon as she answered, Cale could make out the people approaching the cave.

"Lord Cale!"

"Long time no see, Miss Rina."

Ritana, Queen of the Jungle, stood there with a glowing orb in hand. Rather than meet her eyes, Cale examined the crest on the orb: It belonged to the God of Sun. The light inside the orb was shaped like an arrow and pointed toward the saint.

Cale slowly peered back at the saint. "That's the God of Sun's crest. How come the arrow is pointing at you?"

"You see, Lord Cale, that…"

"Come to think of it, you two look like siblings. No, like twins." The saint stood there awkwardly, not saying another word, and Cale sighed. "I think I understand how Miss Rina reached this cave without getting lost. I also think I know who you two are."

Registering his stony expression, Ritana approached him. "Lord Cale…" She'd never seen Cale make such a face before, like he was trying to hide whatever complex thoughts were running through his mind.

Cale didn't look at Ritana. Instead, he muttered as though speaking only to himself, "I helped you because I thought it was the right thing to do. But the people I helped…" His features were etched with sorrow. "How could they be the terrorists who attacked the Church of the God of Sun? How could you…?"

The saint's shout tore through the cave. "No!"

“Brother, calm down,” the swordmaster coaxed him.

Cale made eye contact with the saint—whose gaze seemed full of frustration, as if he felt wronged somehow—then shifted back to Ritana. “There must be more to the story.”

“Lord Cale…”

“The Miss Rina I know wouldn’t help the perpetrators of a horrible tragedy.” Cale gestured to the siblings. “I also think—no, I *want* to think—that siblings who care so deeply about each other would never do such a thing.”

The saint teared up with admiration, as did Ritana. Nodding vigorously, Ritana replied, “Don’t worry, Lord Cale. You’re right about me.”

“Indeed, Lord Cale, we didn’t come here with bad intentions,” one of her loyal subordinates chimed in.

Cale dipped his head in kind, struggling to smile. His actions appeared to relieve Ritana, who approached the siblings. Simultaneously, Cale made discreet eye contact with Ron. The old servant gave him a subtle thumbs-up, looking satisfied.

For his part, Choi Han stared at Cale in a daze. Cale shot him a look that said, *This is nothing.*

Then Cale turned to Ritana, who was saying, “Join me and listen to their story, Lord Cale.”

“That’s all right… I think it’d end up being burdensome.” His polite refusal made it sound as though he didn’t want to get involved.

“Not because we need your help,” Ritana assured him. “I planned to tell you when I saw you next anyway.”

Once he heard that Ritana wasn’t expecting his assistance, he nodded. “All right. Is there something I need to be aware of?”

“Do you remember the fire in the jungle?”

Why’s she bringing that up? “Yes…I do. It was terrible.”

“It really was. But we found out who’s responsible.”

Cale quickly sussed out how the twins had connected with Ritana. Mogor’s prince had caused the jungle fire, he knew, so they must have used that information to convince Ritana to meet them

here. Still, he pretended to be clueless. “I presume these siblings weren’t the culprits?”

“No, they weren’t. They’re the ones who told me who the culprit was.”

Cale gaped at the twins in disbelief, and the swordmaster turned to her sibling. “Explain everything to them, Brother.”

“I will.” Determined, the saint launched into their story. “We’re known as a saint and saintess, But I only possess half a saint’s divine abilities, and my sister Hana has none. She was raised as a swordswoman because of her skill with a blade.” The saint then explained his anger toward the Church of the God of Sun. “The church used us, proclaiming that we’d been blessed with divine talents, and made us live as a saint and saintess. We were never allowed to venture out into the world.”

Cale held back his smirk. *What lies.* Hana—who now sat against the cave wall, her pose dignified despite her pain—had traveled all over as a member of the secret organization. Her unashamed expression astonished him.

“Some unknown organization threw a magic bomb into a church and demolished it,” the saint went on. “Then the Empire claimed that we were in league with that organization and started chasing us down!”

“You’re saying *you* didn’t cause that incident?” Ritana asked.

The saint nodded. “Right. It was someone else. But the Empire claimed we’d done it because they wanted to get rid of us.”

“Why?”

After a few seconds of silence, he said, “Because of the information the church planned to reveal during the festival. The bomb killed everybody else who knew it.”

“What information was that?” Ritana prompted, as if this were the revelation she was waiting for.

The swordmaster answered in his stead. “The Empire used alchemy to make bombs from dead mana. And they were responsible for that giant jungle fire.”

“The church wanted to take advantage of this reveal to undermine the throne,” the saint added.

Cale at last understood why the Church of the God of Sun had agreed to hold their festival alongside a celebration of alchemy. They'd been scheming all along.

"But a bomb went off right before the announcement, and we were blamed for it! The Empire must know that we also have that information. That's why we're being unjustly hunted, and why Hana ended up hurt! Ugh!" The saint's eyes reddened as though he wanted to cry.

Cale stood quietly listening to everything that they said, swiftly processing the information. *This matter seems like it's between the Empire and the Church of the God of Sun. Why is the secret organization in the middle of it?* He wondered if one side was involved with them. Furthermore, what was the role of this swordswoman, who was part of the organization?

His gaze drifted back to Hana as the saint vented his frustrations. "We were used! It's unjust!"

"Yes," Hana muttered. "We've been used by everyone, betrayed by everyone we considered family." Her use of "everyone" told Cale that she also meant those outside the church and Empire.

"Are you asking us to protect you in exchange for that information?" Ritana asked.

The saint nodded. "We are. We know more about the Alchemist's Bell Tower, and I'll tell you, so please find us a way to the Eastern Continent." Apparently, the twins wanted to flee the entire continent.

At that moment, Hana's voice filled the cave. "Just send my brother."

Her brother spun toward her, bewildered. "Hana, what're you talking about? What about you?!"

The swordmaster's expression was somber. "I'm going to die anyway." Her poisoning had effectively ended their original plan. She would die on the way to the Eastern Continent.

"No! Don't say that, Hana! I'll save you!"

The saint's desperate voice did nothing to dissuade Hana; she sat there, wordlessly looking at the ceiling. Ritana watched the twins with a complicated expression.

A calm voice broke the tension. “Are you going to get revenge?”

It was Cale. The blonde swordmaster looked back at him.

Meeting her eyes, he continued, “Seems like that’s your plan.”

“And if it is?” The woman sneered, not hiding her intentions. Her body might’ve been dying, but her eyes were alight with anger and betrayal.

“Revenge on the Empire?! Hana! You told me not to try!”

“That’s right,” Hana snapped at her brother. “You can’t.”

“If I can’t, then why would *you* do it?!”

Hana pressed her lips tight. Cale understood her intentions, though. After all, he knew her other identity. She wasn’t planning revenge on the Empire but on another party.

Cale recalled what Choi Han told him: *“That spearman claimed twins were running him off his feet. He must’ve been talking about these two.”* In short, the secret organization had betrayed this woman as well.

“Hana, say something! We need to survive together! There’s no point in living alone!”

Even the great sorrow in the saint’s voice didn’t convince her to speak. She closed her eyes again, only to hear Cale say, “Excuse me, um…Miss Hana?”

The swordmaster wanted to ignore the voice of Rowoon’s hero, the upstanding and sincere Cale Henituse, but couldn’t.

“Want to make that revenge a success?”

When her eyes flew open in shock, Cale smiled. Yesterday’s enemy didn’t always have to be today’s.

“What?”

“You’re dying from dead-mana poisoning, but I’ll help you live longer.”

The entire cave fell silent until Hana replied, “Just *what* in the world are you talking about?”

Seeing her agitation, Cale smiled even wider. Then he said something to her that neither Ritana nor the saint would

understand: “You can’t die like that blood-crazy mage did, right?”

Hana’s eyes turned misty, and Cale didn’t miss it. He couldn’t befriend yesterday’s enemy, but he could definitely put her to use.

Queen Ritana interjected, “Blood-crazy mage? Who’s that?”

“What an ominous nickname. A mage crazy about blood?” the saint chimed in. “By the way, Hana, do you want another potion? You’re very pale.”

The swordmaster had turned white as a sheet. She was keeping her mouth shut, but the corners of her lips trembled.

Cale casually handed the saint a new handkerchief. “Looks like you’ll need to mop Miss Hana’s brow. Goodness, look at all that sweat on her forehead,” he said tenderly, then caught Ritana’s eye.

Hana feigned ignorance, hiding her quaking hands behind her back. “There *was* some mage known to go mad at the sight of blood. I’ve only heard stories about him, and he’s dead now.”

“There was such a mage?”

“Yes. And I heard he died an extremely cruel death.”

Cale shivered in revulsion. “He died at the hands of a comrade of his.”

“Hrm… How terrible,” one of Ritana’s subordinates said.

Cale nodded, and Hana turned even paler. The contrast between her pale skin and jet-black poisoned areas was jarring.

“Just hearing a story like that makes my heart sink,” Cale continued. “I don’t like watching people die.”

“Of course not. I’m familiar with your temperament, Lord Cale. I’m sure seeing someone die is difficult for you,” Ritana agreed, then asked what was on her mind. “Still, what do you mean about making her revenge a success?”

Ritana didn’t think of Cale as the sort of person who would help someone enact their vengeance. She understood the twins’ resentment, yet Cale’s personality didn’t seem to mesh well with such cruel designs.

As if reading Ritana’s thoughts, Cale asked a question in return. “Do you know what the greatest revenge is, Miss Rina?”

“The greatest revenge…?”

Though Ritana was visibly confused, Cale turned away from her and toward the pale Hana. “Miss Hana,” he began, his tone considerate yet firm. “I don’t know whether I should butt in like this, but I’ll just say one thing.”

What’s he going to say now? Panic and anxiety filled Hana’s eyes.

Pretending not to notice, Cale continued, “Real revenge is living a long, happy life. And you need to do so alongside your big brother.”

That was hogwash. In reality, Cale felt that real revenge was returning whatever pain you’d endured to those responsible. That was the only way to live contentedly after being wronged. What he espoused to Hana was the opposite of his true feelings.

Ritana was awed. “Ah, that’s what you meant. Unlike me, you truly have a big heart.”

The saint teared up.

“Meeeeow.” Ohn jumped from Cale’s arms, landing on the ground as she started to mewl.

Ritana stroked the cute kitten’s head. “Ohn seems to agree with you, Lord Cale.”

In fact, Ohn had sprung away from Cale in disbelief. As for Choi Han, he was ignoring the conversation, staring vacantly outside the cave.

Ron, however, played along with Cale. “Yes. That is the best revenge indeed.”

Cale didn’t care about Choi Han and Ohn’s skepticism. “It’s already so late, and a member of this group is seriously injured. How about getting some sleep for now?”

“Shall we?” Ritana said, peering outside. It had gotten quite dark.

“The siblings here are probably very tired, Miss Rina,” Cale pointed out. “Why don’t our parties take turns patrolling the area?”

“Oh. In case an enemy shows up?” Her face hardened as she broached the subject of the Empire’s soldiers.

“Yes. Just in case.”

“Good idea. Let’s do that.”

Once she agreed, Cale addressed the twins—Hana in particular. “You two can get some rest.”

“Thank you so much. You don’t know how long it’s been since I slept peacefully. Yet I feel as though tonight will be restful,” the saint said, touched.

Meanwhile, Hana’s face crumpled.

“Hana? Do you feel another cough coming on?”

“Brother, you…” Hana sighed. “Never mind.”

Though the saint tended to her carefully, Hana looked as though her mind was a jumble. Cale shrugged that off, telling Ritana, “We’ll patrol first.”

The long conversation came to an end, and everybody began to relax. When Cale’s group got back from the initial patrol, the saint and saintess were fast asleep. At that point, they switched with Ritana’s group, who prepared to patrol with the fog-controlling Ohn.

“You spent quite a while out there, Lord Cale.”

“We went all the way to the edge of the rainforest.”

“We should do the same. It ought to take about two hours.”

“Be careful, please.”

Ritana smiled at Cale—who appeared to be preparing to sleep—before heading out with Ohn and her subordinates. As she did so, she nodded at Choi Han, who was still standing guard at the mouth of the cave.

It was quiet, the only sounds coming from the pattering rain and crackling fire. Only once Ritana’s group was gone did Hana break the silence.

“Who are you?” she asked Cale, her voice reverberating through the cave.

Cale opened his eyes, turning his head toward her. “That’s my question.”

The swordmaster had gotten up. She leaned on the cave wall, glaring at Cale’s group. Cale sat tall, holding her gaze. They stared at each other for a moment until Hana spoke up again.

“Are you…one of *those* people?” She continued to peer at Cale, half-certain of his identity.

“Who are ‘those people’?”

“The secret organization,” she answered, discomfited. Her demeanor struck Cale as odd; she was talking about the secret organization as though it were unfamiliar to her, despite being a part of it.

“In which case, you should be running,” Cale replied. “Why aren’t you?”

He smiled, but it wasn’t friendly. It gave Hana chills. She glanced over at the saint before returning her gaze to Cale.

The moment their eyes locked again, Cale said, “You seem worried about your big brother.”

“Are you threatening me?” Hana’s eyes began to glow, and the black patches on her body faded as a golden aura enveloped her.

Choi Han drew his sword with a *shing*. Ron rose and moved behind Cale.

Hana bit her lip and grabbed her brother’s hand. The saint was still sleeping peacefully. *What should I do?* All kinds of thoughts raced through her mind till she felt she might explode.

The church had used the twins, and the pope had treated them like dogs. When she was seeking a way out, the secret organization had approached her and treated her like family. She’d felt as though she and her brother could escape the church with their help, but the secret organization had betrayed her as well. Now she’d effectively been cornered on the edge of a cliff, face-to-face with another enemy.

She was at her wits’ end. What should she do?

Just then, Cale spoke again. “I don’t make threats.”

“What…?” Hana scoffed. Her body was in agony because of the dead mana, yet she raised her aura to the highest level possible. “So you’re *not* threatening me right now?” It seemed like her aura could blow at any moment.

Then Cale’s nonchalant voice reached her ears. “It felt right to show you respect.”

Hana didn't understand him. "Huh?"

He shrugged and tossed out, "You were betrayed by Arm as well, I take it."

This man knew Arm's name? Hana grew worried, surprised that his network could provide such information.

"That magic spearman seemed to be looking for you and your brother."

She grimaced at that. The Empire, the church, and even the secret organization were after her. Her chest felt so tight, she struggled to breathe.

Hana scowled at Cale. "Why're you telling me all this?" Her lips lifted in a sneer, and she went on, "Are you hoping I'll obediently spill my guts just because I'm cornered? I bet you're being treated as a hero by the kingdom because you *pretended* to do all kinds of selfless acts."

Although Cale Henituse presented himself as a respectful young nobleman, Hana felt he was more of a villain. His two-faced nature made her shiver. Arm had been the same way; its members treated her like family while planning to stab her in the back.

"Other people don't know you're such an awful bastard, do they? The queen didn't seem to," she huffed, glaring daggers at him.

"But *you* know," he said calmly.

"Excuse me?"

"You know my true nature. I've shown you both sides of my character. Doesn't that answer your question?" Wholly unconcerned, Cale added, "I thought that was the bare minimum respect I ought to show someone who's been betrayed, like yourself."

Hana was suddenly lost for words. *"It felt right to show you respect."* She finally understood why Cale had claimed he wasn't threatening her.

Cale quietly watched the swordmaster's formidable aura diminish. He really wasn't interested in threatening people; he preferred to make deals.

At length, Hana said, "You want to talk with me?"

“Yes. I want to strike a deal with you, and it looks like you’re ready.”

Now that Hana had subdued her aura, Cale smiled at her; his unsettling smile from earlier was gone, and a much warmer one had taken its place. She unconsciously unclenched her fists.

“I’m not sending you or your brother to the Eastern Continent.”

“Why not?” Hana demanded, frowning again. She’d thought things were headed in the right direction, but Cale was just going to get in her way.

“Well, I don’t understand why you’d want to go there.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you know that Arm controls the Eastern Continent’s underworld?”

She stiffened, staring at him in stunned silence. After a long pause, she managed, “I had no idea. You seem to know more about them than I do.” His robust information network had her reeling once more. The fact that she’d been in the dark about this infuriated her. “They told me they were a small organization working with the north.”

Cale froze. *Hm? Wait, what?*

Hana hung her head. Although she pretended to know a lot about the world, she hadn’t really experienced it. She scolded her brother for his naivety, but she was pretty innocent as well. “They said they’d send my brother and me north, and that they were working with one of the northern kingdoms. Since they betrayed me, I thought we’d be safe if we went to the Eastern Continent.”

Cale flicked his gaze to Ron, silently asking, *Did I hear her correctly?*

Ron nodded with a serious expression that said, *That seems to be the case, young master.*

When Cale returned his attention to Hana, she slowly lifted her head. Though she was a swordmaster, she was just another poor soul who’d been cornered with nowhere to run. Studying her face, Cale thought, *She definitely said the secret organization’s involved with*

the north. His mind was racing, but he kept his composure as he met her gaze.

"Right, exactly. The northern Kingdom of Faern is working with Arm." He waited for her response, his heart pounding.

"Yeah," Hana said eventually. "That's why there's nowhere for us to take refuge in the Western Continent."

Oh, damn it. Faern is seriously backing that secret organization? They're in league with each other?

"Ahem! Ahem!" Choi Han coughed a few times, seeming to have something stuck in his throat. Cale ignored him.

Struggling to keep her emotions in check, Hana said, "I can't believe the north and the Empire are working together too."

Seriously?! Cale fought the urge to swear. *Birth of a Hero* mentioned that the Empire knew about the northern alliance's wyvern knight brigade, so he'd assumed they just had a good information network. That wasn't it, though. *This is crazy.*

Yet Cale was all too conscious of Hana's eyes on him, so he merely said, "Indeed."

Hana nodded. "You really did know about all this. I-I didn't know anything." Despairing, she covered her face with both hands.

"I don't know *everything*," Cale replied. "That's about the extent of my knowledge as well."

He certainly hadn't known they were on the verge of a disaster involving the northern alliance, the secret organization, and the Empire. Everything was about to go to hell in a handbasket.

What should we do? Choi Han asked Cale with his eyes.

What else? They needed to make this an even bigger mess.

Hana looked toward Cale, feeling lost. "Where do we go from here?" Her tentative gaze begged him for answers.

Unfortunately, she'd chosen the wrong person to ask. Cale had reached the point of saying whatever came to mind. He didn't have the availability to deal with the twins.

"Just a moment ago, you were suspicious of me. Now you're asking me what you should do?"

"B-but you're fighting Arm!"

Fighting them? Absolutely not. Cale shook his head and said the first thing he thought of: “For the time being, you two should get help from Miss Rina. She ought to be able to help you easily enough. The jungle’s huge, so there are plenty of hiding places.”

Hearing how calm he was, Hana likewise relaxed. His next words resonated in her mind.

“Heal yourself first and foremost. You’re the only one who can protect yourself. But you already know that, right?”

“I know. This situation helped make that clear to me.”

Her brother had been born with the God of Sun’s healing abilities. Perhaps owing to that, he wasn’t very athletic. By contrast, Hana was spry and talented at swordplay, so it was her responsibility to protect them.

“Right. Don’t trust anybody,” Cale said, drawing her eye. “Don’t trust Miss Rina, and don’t trust me either. Just rely on each other.”

Here he was, telling her not to trust him with an utterly dispassionate expression.

Hana’s thoughts drifted to the magic spearman. *“Think of me as your brother. Trust us. We’ll set you two free.”*

Then she thought of the pope. “*I took you two worthless whelps and turned you into something great. Trust me, I’ll help you shine in the God of Sun’s light.”*

Everybody else had told the twins to trust them. She nodded at Cale, whose eyes were fixed on her. “All right. I *won’t* trust you.”

Once she’d confirmed it, Cale nodded back. The woman before him had made the right decision. All she had to rely on were her dying body and a brother with no abilities beyond healing. She had nowhere to run, so she needed someplace to hide. Yet after she’d been betrayed by the Empire, the secret organization, and the church, she couldn’t find a hiding spot.

That was why Cale said, “I’ll bring you someone who can heal you too. Just wait.”

“Can I really survive?”

“You can.”

Life sparked anew in the swordmaster's eyes. She touched a black spot on her arm, then fixed her gaze on Cale. "What do you want in return?"

Cale grinned. "You're smart, Miss Hana."

"Well, you told me you were going to make a deal with me." Hana remembered everything Cale had said. Unlike others she'd worked with, he'd told her upfront that he wanted something in return.

He didn't argue. "We need to strike a bargain, yes. And of course we'll lock in our deal with a Vow of Death when I bring you to the one who can save you. Let's discuss the details once we get there."

I can recover. I can keep on living. After hearing what Cale said, Hana believed that was possible. She instinctively glanced at her brother, who was sleeping with an innocent expression. He was innocent to the point of stupidity, but he put her above all else. She bit her lip to keep herself from crying.

Then Cale said something that brought her even more hope. "Hide well and wait for me. Once you heal, I'll give you an opportunity to get your revenge."

Hana gaped at Cale in shock. "Will *revenge* really be possible too?"

Cale nodded. *Absolutely.* He thought about the Tiger Tribe and Whale Tribe's upcoming battle, which Witira had warned him about. It would be a joint attack on Arm's First Battle Brigade, and Witira had mentioned that it would take place in winter.

It was difficult to know whether the three northern kingdoms that had aligned themselves with Arm had a separate agreement with the Empire, or if the north, Arm, and the Empire were working together. Cale needed to sweep them all away when he had the chance. The northern alliance was eyeing Rowoon, where Cale's home was. It was only right that he get rid of anybody who'd help them take over his homeland.

Resolving to screw things up for the enemy, Cale observed the twins. One was a swordmaster, while the other was the saint of the Church of the God of Sun, even if he only had half the usual power

of such a figure. They'd been framed, but the God of Sun's faithful would rally behind the saint if his innocence was proven.

To really get Hana's attention, Cale declared, "I'll give you a chance to drench yourself in your enemies' blood."

Hana loved seeing blood. Cale recalled her comment about how beautiful a bloody ocean would be. Her eyes were now sparkling, he noted. *She's not right in the head either.* He brushed back his red hair as he surveyed Hana, who seemed to be suppressing whatever exciting image had popped into her mind.

"You're weak, Cale Henituse—but you're also kind."

Cale didn't correct her. "If you think I am, I suppose it's true."

She snickered. Her poison-racked body was still in pain, but the woman herself was bursting with energy. Cale got the sense she was picturing the perfect chance for her bloody revenge.

"Now, how about we stop talking and get some sleep?" Cale gently advised.

"Sure."

At long last, Hana lay down with a peaceful expression. She cast a glance at Choi Han and found him watching Cale, then quietly closed her eyes.

Seeing that, Cale looked back at the cave ceiling. He wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight. *Why is everybody so eager to fight?*

Unable to drift off, he wanted to cry.

***

The rain stopped early the next morning. Cale gazed at the foggy forest, then strolled out of the cave and into the crisp morning air. He sat on a round boulder and heaved a weary sigh.

"What's got you sighing this early?"

Cale turned toward the woman standing behind him. "Miss Rina."

Queen Ritana approached, perching on a boulder next to Cale. She looked at him with concern. "It doesn't look like you got any

sleep, Lord Cale."

Cale hesitated. "I had a lot on my mind." He lamented the fact that the self-indulgent life he envisioned had moved even further from his grasp.

Ritana sucked in a breath, then gazed at Cale with both pity and respect. "Of course. Knowing you, you're probably struggling with this situation and everything you've learned."

"Yes, this is all too much for me."

Hearing the fair, good-hearted Cale sound so weak saddened Ritana. Yet his virtuousness was also the reason she had to discuss something with him. "Lord Cale, you mentioned last night that ignoring one's enemies and living a happy, healthy life is the greatest revenge, didn't you?"

Cale glanced at Ritana. He had a pretty good idea of why she'd come to see him. *It must be time to create a mess.* "Yes, I believe that," he answered quickly. Not that a word of it was true.

"I see. Personally, I have a different perspective."

Cold fury shone in Ritana's eyes. She hadn't forgotten the fire that torched the jungle a year ago. Thankfully, nobody had died, but humans weren't her only subjects. The jungle contained countless living beings, and the humans there believed in living harmoniously with nature.

Ritana continued to speak in a measured voice, like the calm before a storm. "That fire killed an untold number of trees, plants, and animals. We've had to put in a lot of time and effort to restore Sector One, and the people who lived there are forced to wait until that restoration is finished."

She hadn't become queen of the jungle on a whim. A leader needed to know how to care for their followers; more importantly, they needed to defend their followers from danger while fighting off their enemies.

"As a citizen of the jungle, I must take revenge on their behalf."

She wondered what kind of face Cale would make now that he'd heard her thoughts. Before she dared to look, he replied, "I imagine that there's only one reason you'd suddenly bring up what we discussed last night." Since it was obvious why Ritana had

sought him out in private, and so early in the morning, he told her, “I’ll contact His Highness on your behalf.”

Ritana smiled. “You really are as wise as you are good, Lord Cale.”

She was different from Tunka. The jungle fire and dead-mana bombs gave her a reason to fight the Empire. Still, she knew that doing so alone would be difficult.

“I’m sure Crown Prince Albert would welcome a conversation with you, Miss Rina.”

“Thank you for saying so, Lord Cale. I doubt we could handle this by ourselves with the Empire involved. At any rate, we should soon prepare to reveal what we know of those bombs.” Though she said as much, Ritana didn’t seem to be in a rush.

“Are you planning to do that after the Empire’s war with Whipper ends?” Cale asked casually.

“Yes.” Ritana touched the tip of the spear, eyes shining. Then she murmured, “We need to be ready for war as well.”

She was so vicious, it sent a chill down his spine.

The moment he made to turn away, Ritana added, “Oh, and Lord Cale? Here, I’ve got your compensation.” She then offered him a piece of paper.

Hmm? Cale glanced at the paper, then back at Ritana. *This?*

The queen of the jungle merely smiled, pushing the paper toward him. He took it and unfolded it to see the contents.

Oh!

“The parcel of land you wanted to build your villa on was too small,” Ritana told him. “I thought it’d be nice to give you the hill and the stretch of shoreline next to the area you picked.”

She meant the coast of Sector One. According to the deed she’d given him, she would hand over the entire hill where he’d discovered the magic stones, as well as about half the sector’s shoreline. Cale’s heart pounded with excitement.

Ritana chuckled. “We aren’t done restoring that area yet. Thankfully, that land was under the jurisdiction of the monarch—so

it was mine. Though I should add that my subjects *do* agree with my decision."

"Giving me half the coast is excessive," Cale said, though it was just a show of modesty.

She shook her head. "No, not at all. You travel by ship, so this should make it easier for you."

"Hmm… But still…"

"Please accept it as a symbol of gratitude from Sector One's citizens."

Cale sighed, then tucked the paper in his pocket. "If that's what this deed is, I'll accept it."

"Thank you very much." Ritana gave him a satisfied smile; he'd accepted the large plot of land with hardly any issue. But when their eyes met, her smile faded.

Then, as if things had worked out for the better, Cale said, "You *could* meet His Highness in that location, I guess. I could sneak him there aboard my ship."

Ritana gasped, awestruck by his plan. How did Cale always keep the future in mind, in addition to thinking about other people and Rowoon itself?

Seeing her reaction, Cale added cautiously, "Oh, and Miss Rina…what happened to those twins is just awful. Please look after them until I return with someone to heal the young woman."

"I will forever admire your caring nature, Lord Cale."

Putting on an embarrassed smile for Ritana's benefit, Cale mused, *His Highness is going to say I'm driving him nuts again.* It went without saying that this development would irritate Albert.

Some time later, Cale's group accompanied Ritana and the twins to the entrance of No Way Out at the edge of the jungle. Along the way, Cale sneakily handed Hana a communication sphere.

"Meeeow."

Cale nodded at Ohn's prompting cry. "Right. Let's go."

With that, they headed back to Erhaven the gold dragon's lair atop Mount Yelia.

***

As soon as Cale reached Mount Yelia's peak, he jerked backward; a black streak was rushing toward him.

"Human! Human!" It was Raon, as expected.

"Meeeow!" Hong and Lark came out of the lair behind the black dragon.

How'd they know I was coming? Cale stepped to one side. Raon was barreling toward him so fiercely, he suspected he'd die if the black dragon rammed into him.

"Human!"

"What?"

Raon brightened at Cale's indifferent reaction. "Human! You haven't changed!" He flew in circles around Cale, asking question after question. "Are you hurt? Did you miss me? Do you know what I learned?!"

Cale felt as though Raon would never stop, so he stroked the dragon's head and said, "I'm sure *you're* doing well, since you're the great and mighty Raon."

Raon grinned. "You're right! The gold dragon said I'm a genius!"

"Uh-huh. You're a great, mighty genius."

"Know what I learned yesterday, human? I can—"

"I want to use the communication sphere," Cale interjected, nipping the dragon's rant in the bud.

"Huh?"

"Connect me to the crown prince."

"Got it!" Raon chirped.

He swiftly linked Cale to Albert, and the crown prince glowered at Cale for the first time in a while. "What?" Albert asked. "Is this about what Miss Rosalyn told me yesterday?"

"No. I have something else to tell you."

Albert made a face. Cale had gotten right to the point for once, as opposed to pointlessly waxing on about Albert being the

star of the kingdom. “What is it? And where are you? How come everything there is so shiny?”

Erhaven was letting Cale use a luxurious chamber covered in gold—a boon of Raon’s request that the elder dragon treat Cale as well as possible. As the prince took in the room, which looked even fancier than the king of Rowoon’s, he wondered, *Where the hell is he?*

Cale didn’t tell him. Instead, he said, “Apparently, the organization responsible for the Plaza Terror Incident is working with the northern alliance.”

“What?!”

While Albert reeled at the reveal, Cale filled him in on everything: how the Church of the God of Sun was linked to the Empire, what the Empire had done, the revelations from his meeting with the twins, and the state of affairs between the jungle and the Empire. He also mentioned his encounter with the Whale Tribe, and that the whales planned to oppose the secret organization’s First Battle Brigade.

Albert blinked a couple of times. “You’re telling me that the Queen of the Jungle wants to meet with me? And that the Empire did all that? *And* that they’re working with the northern alliance to boot?”

Cale’s response was simple. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Cale Henituse.”

Albert replied just as Cale had predicted. “Ugh. You’re driving me nuts.”

“This is about to turn into a firestorm, isn’t it?” Cale asked.

“Well, given the messes above *and* below Rowoon…”

“All the more reason we should be stirring the pot ourselves.”

Albert ceased his grumbling, merely observing Cale.

“Aren’t we allied with Brek, Your Highness?” Cale pointed out. “And think about who else we have on our side.”

The corners of Albert’s mouth lifted. “The jungle, the whales, and the Kingdom of the Whipper.”

“The framed twins as well. And don’t forget the dark elves. They can handle dead-mana bombs.”

Cale didn’t mention the other advance preparations he’d made: He had enlisted a dragon who would help with everything and tracked down a second dragon they might convince to assist them.

He and the prince wore similar smiles.

Raon, who was waiting just out of view of the communication sphere, spoke up with glee. *‹I haven’t seen that smile of yours in a while, human! What’re you planning to do?! I want to feel excited too!›*

Cale was planning to catch the Empire, the northern alliance, and the secret organization unawares. What else?

“It may be worth a try,” Albert said.

“Right?”

Chapter 29:
Not Scared

"YES, IT'S *definitely* worth a try." Albert seemed a little excited. "This update was a shock, but still, you've brought me some good news for the first time in a while."

"True," Cale nodded. "I don't *only* pass headaches on to you."

Albert scoffed. He'd never seen anyone wind up in the midst of chaos more often than Cale Henituse. At this point, it pretty much seemed like fate. But rather than voicing those thoughts, the crown prince shared some new information. "My aunt is interrogating the prisoner you sent over."

Cale knew Tasha was likely *torturing* the prisoner more than interrogating him, but he opted not to mention it. "Is it going well?"

"I imagine he'll be forthcoming soon enough. My aunt brought in an expert to help."

Cale wondered who that "expert" was. Though he had a rough idea, he feigned ignorance and nodded.

"There's a lot to do," Albert mused aloud, working through his thoughts. "I'll contact the Queen of the Jungle and the Kingdom of the Whipper's chief advisor. At the very least, we can divide the Empire and the northern alliance geographically..." He stopped mid-sentence to look at Cale, who was smiling warmly at him. "Why're you looking at me like that?"

Cale had no problem answering. "Because I'm proud to call you my crown prince. I have so much respect for you, Your Highness."

Speaking with Albert had been a good decision, he reflected. The prince was diligent as well as smart, and he was willing to look after annoyances in Cale's stead. It pleased him to no end.

Albert sighed. "What do you plan to do now?"

Cale didn't even blink. "Gather information."

That was a lie; Cale fully intended to kick back and relax until autumn. How would *he* help prepare for war, after all?

A strange, scheming smile rose to Albert's handsome face. "Oh yes, I'm sure you'll bring me something useful." *I expect he'll get tangled up in yet another affair.* Cale alone produced more intelligence than Albert's entire information network.

Not liking Albert's smile one bit, Cale averted his eyes. "Right, Your Highness."

He asked the crown prince to deliver a message to Mary, then wrapped up the conversation. Their farewells were friendlier every time they talked:

"I always have nightmares after we chat, you bastard."

"May you live to a ripe old age, Your Highness."

"You're ludicrous."

Click. Albert hung up on Cale.

Right when Cale thought he could take it easy, he heard something fly through the air. *Wshhh!* The black streak raced toward him like a bullet, frightening Cale. *Why's he acting like this?*

Raon stopped right in front of his face. The black dragon's eyes burned with passion, which worried him. "Human!" Raon shouted. "Let's go find the power of earth!"

Oh, right. I forgot about that. Already weary, Cale pushed the floating Raon away with a sigh. "What about your lessons?" The young dragon needed to keep learning from Erhaven.

When Cale asked that, Raon's wings froze for a moment. Then the dragon confidently declared, "I can ask him to take me on a trip to get firsthand experience!"

Ha! He wants Erhaven to come with us to find the stone? Does he want to destroy a continent or something?

Sighing at this unbelievable suggestion, Cale waved Raon off. He wasn't crazy enough to bring two dragons with him to locate the Ancient Power. "Stay here and focus on your lessons. I can bring Choi Han."

Something was off, though; Raon was quiet. Cale turned to look at him.

"Human… Listen to the words of the great and mighty Raon." The dragon lowered his voice, puffed out his chest, and spread his

wings. “You *need* me, weak human.”

He was trying to look formidable, but that didn’t change the fact that he was a five-year-old whom Cale had known since he was four. *Did Erhaven skip the lesson about how to drum up a dragon’s awesome, dignified aura?*

Arguing would’ve been too bothersome for Cale, so he caved in. “Okay, then.”

Raon grinned from ear to ear. “Good! You’ve made the right decision, human! I’ll go tell Erhaven!”

The black dragon left the chamber of shiny gold and jewels, flying away to find his teacher. Watching him, Cale thought, *Shouldn’t he ask Erhaven for* permission*, not just tell him?* The dragon’s choice of words made him skeptical.

After that, he took out the book he’d received from the elves, figuring he might as well look through it once. It was an old book, but the pages were in such good condition that it must’ve been imbued with magic.

He flipped to the first page, which contained only a single sentence:

Someone claimed that humans have rocks for brains, but I shall show them a pebble’s power.

Cale snapped the book shut with a *whump.* Only further weirdness awaited him. Still, his desire to live *without* the ticking time bomb of his Ancient Powers won out, and he eventually reopened the book. He frowned as he reflected on all the hoops he had to jump through to protect himself.

He turned the page.

The earth underfoot is sturdier than anything else. It sacrifices itself to provide a place for all beings to live. And the strongest form of earth is stone.

That part seemed a bit less strange. *Flip. Flip.* Cale turned the pages slowly, skimming through, and his frown faded away. Every so often, a sentence caught his attention.

The guardian earned his moniker when he stopped an ogre from encroaching on his village.

He was the Land of Boulders' hidden guardian; he appeared wherever there was darkness, confidently warding off anything and everything.

People respected the guardian's noble spirit.

Cale recalled the ancient legend Taylor had shared about the guardian who saved the Land of Boulders. The legend held that a hero had safeguarded the northeast when the continent was covered in darkness. *Is this linked to that story?* Keeping the legend in mind, Cale read on, a smile tugging at his lips.

The guardian knew another hero who was both a friend and an enemy. Though this hero had freed the north from the freezing cold, he was a cheapskate whose hobby was gathering coins.

That had to be the owner of the Fire of Destruction. As the book told it, the guardian had snatched away the money he'd amassed.

Seeing the hero's riches, the guardian said, "You crazy bastard! You saved and saved without ever spending, and you've accumulated so much!"

Reading the words "accumulated so much" pleased Cale, though he made a face as he read further.

The guardian was skilled in both offense and defense. Even a pebble had devastating power when he threw it.

The Ancient Power this book was describing *did* seem to be the Scary Stone, but that wasn't the problem.

Just before saving the world from darkness one last time, he left all his belongings—as well as his friends' belongings—in his hometown.

Cale flipped through the pages faster. *Fwip, fwip.* After reading the last page, he slammed the open book down on the golden table. Heaving a sigh, he considered what he'd just read.

The strongest stones were located in the Land of Boulders.

That likely referred to Rowoon, where both granite and marble existed.

He hailed from a dangerous place where all sorts of monsters roamed wild—a place that allowed people to move between continents. That was where he left everything.

"Damn it." Cale scowled again. "Sounds like my backyard."

The book definitely seemed to be describing Henituse territory—the Dark Forest, specifically—so he had a good idea of how he'd need to claim the Scary Stone.

The guardian was just and truthful. He was said to have marked his house so that his friends' descendants could reclaim what he'd left behind.

The Fire of Destruction would show Cale the way. Yet while he now knew the Scary Stone's approximate location, as well as how to get it, Cale felt oddly uncomfortable.

At that moment, Raon burst in the open door. "Human! Human!"

“Wha—” Cale lifted his head, and his expression turned quizzical. “Hmm?”

Raon whizzed up to him, his short forepaws carrying a tray of fruit. “Don’t you eat fresh fruit when you read, human? I brought you some!”

He put the tray on the table in front of Cale, who wordlessly stared at him.

“I heard you got drenched by rain on your way to that cave, human,” the dragon added. “You suffered a lot. You need to eat delicious food so that you can grow up strong!”

“Oh my,” came a voice from behind Raon. “In my thousand years of existence, I’ve never witnessed a dragon serving a human. Now I’ve seen everything!”

Erhaven, who’d trailed in behind the other dragon, clicked his tongue and shook his head.

Raon seemed to finally remember Erhaven. He pointed at the older dragon. “I brought Gragon Gramps so that we can talk about the field trip!”

The gold dragon gaped at him.

When did Erhaven become “Gragon Gramps”? Although Cale was curious about that, he just pointed to a chair for Raon’s elderly teacher. “Please sit, Lord Erhaven.”

Huffing a sigh that hardly suited him, the gold dragon plopped onto the couch across from Cale. “Why did I welcome such a troublesome youngster at my age?”

“I’m not troublesome, Gragon!” Raon retorted.

Popping grapes into his mouth one at a time, Cale watched the dragons bicker.

Erhaven scoffed. “Not troublesome? You’re already thinking about skipping your lessons!”

“I’m not trying to skip them! I wanna help this weak human get strong! And get real experience with you, Gragon!” Raon banged on the golden table. *Thump! Thump!* “And I want *you* to come!”

Cale didn’t miss the brief twitch at the corner of Erhaven’s mouth. Yet the ancient dragon—who’d lived alone for close to a

thousand years—matter-of-factly told the five-year-old, “I don’t feel like going with you.”

“Don’t stay here!” Shaking his head vigorously, Raon again made his stance clear: “I want you to join us, Gragon!”

Cale spied the edges of Erhaven’s lips twitching again; the lout was catching every little aspect of their interaction.

Still, the gold dragon maintained his indifference. “Whether I go with you is my decision, youngster.” He then coldly addressed Cale, saying, “It won’t be easy to find the power of earth, Cale Henituse—let alone doing so with no information to go off of.”

The longer Cale watched this ancient dragon, the more softhearted he seemed.

Not knowing Cale’s thoughts, Erhaven continued, “Therefore, we’ll first need to find a book that discusses that power.”

A loud *thud* interrupted Erhaven, who looked down at the table. An old book sat there, one that looked very much like a tome of ancient lore.

Erhaven paused for a moment before continuing, “Once we find such a book, we’ll need to figure out the Ancient Power’s location as well as how one claims it.”

“Already got all of that.”

“All of it…?”

“Yes, sir.”

The gold dragon observed the confident human sitting before him. The young man already had six Ancient Powers, so Erhaven had no choice but to take him at his word. “You must be astonishingly lucky.”

Cale grinned, and Erhaven snorted in turn.

A short paw tapped the older dragon’s arm. “Gragon! Let’s go!” Raon cried excitedly.

Erhaven looked back and forth between Raon and Cale. The black dragon had explained everything to him, including his hellish upbringing and how he’d met Cale.

“I’ll do whatever I please,” Erhaven told them, his tone icy. “That’s what a dragon does.”

***

A few days later, Cale returned to Harris. From here, he would head into the Dark Forest and earn the Scary Stone.

The knight standing guard greeted him. “Welcome back, Lord Cale.”

“Thanks.”

Taking in Cale’s entourage, the knight noted politely, “Only a few people have joined you today. I don’t see your usual companions.”

Cale nodded nonchalantly. “We’re just going to rest here for a few days. Right, Hilsmann?”

Hilsmann, who was part of the small group, snapped out of a daze at the sound of his name. “Y-yes! Th-that’s right!”

The knight examined the pale Hilsmann with concern until Cale’s stern but warm voice reached his ear. “The vice-captain here has suffered a bout of motion sickness. I assumed he was just prone to seasickness, but I guess he gets nauseated in carriages as well.”

“Ah, I see. Are you doing all right, sir?”

Hilsmann nodded vehemently. “I’m fine! Right as rain!” Cale patted his shoulder, and the vice-captain continued, “I’ll be guarding Lord Cale with th-th-this—”

Unable to go on, Hilsmann looked at the only other person who’d come with them: a handsome man with blond hair. When the man met his eyes, Hilsmann gestured to him with both hands.

“This man and I will guard Lord Cale,” the blond man said. “We’ll be moving around quite a bit, so there’s no need to follow us.”

“Yes, sir!” the knight responded brightly, then glanced at the man next to Cale. Everyone Cale brought to Harris was intimidating, but this blond fellow seemed even *more* unapproachable.

“Keep up the good work,” said Cale.

“Yes, my lord.”

The knight and soldiers saluted the count's son, then watched the three men—Cale, Hilsmann, and the stranger—walk into the village.

Cale clicked his tongue at Hilsmann. "How come you're so anxious? Doesn't he seem nervous, Lord Erhaven?"

"Indeed." Erhaven eyed the vice-captain. "You've been making me comfortable, human."

Hilsmann bobbed his head again. The vice-captain was part of Cale's inner circle, so Cale had informed him about the gold dragon. Most of Cale's companions were back in Erhaven's lair; only three had followed him to the Dark Forest. One was the vice-captain himself, who would look after all the chores and necessities. The other two were the dragons.

"The human world hasn't changed."

The ancient dragon's words made Hilsmann grab Cale's shirt, as he had when he was seasick. Cale automatically pushed his hand away.

Raon spoke up in his mind. *‹I'm not scared of this supposedly "Scary" Stone! Our group has two dragons, after all!›*

Indeed. Cale wasn't afraid either. There was no way he could be.

***

Without fear to hold them back, things progressed smoothly. Soon, they reached the Dark Forest.

When the tree line came into view, Hilsmann strode forward. "L-Lord Cale, I'll take the lead!"

Two people gave him blank looks. One was Cale; the other was Erhaven. Yet the final member of their merry band fixed Hilsmann with a determined gaze and helped instill him with confidence.

"All right!" Raon shouted, making himself visible. "Let's go, Vice-Captain!"

As he urged Hilsmann forward with a grin, the vice-captain broke out in a smile as well.

“Hilsmann, have you been to the *center* of the Dark Forest?” Cale quickly cut in. The vice-captain had trained there last winter with the ten wolf children, but only in the outer regions.

“I followed Choi Han there once! Please trust me,” Hilsmann insisted.

“Fine.” Cale gestured for Hilsmann to hurry up and move.

Nodding, the vice-captain walked on. Cale followed behind him at a leisurely pace, then glanced to the side. The gold dragon had been quiet since earlier.

“Is something wrong, Lord Erhaven?”

Erhaven stared at Cale. “You’re also sheltering ten children from the Blue Wolf Tribe?”

“Yes.”

Hans was staying in Harris with the young wolves, having returned from Uvar territory. They’d all welcomed Cale’s unexpected visit.

“Six Ancient Powers, any number of beastfolk, and several strong humans to boot,” Erhaven muttered under his breath. “What an exhausting life.”

Cale was lost for words. Now that he thought about it, it *was* exhausting.

Erhaven tut-tutted, shaking his head. Watching Cale’s face pinch with uncertainty, the gold dragon thought, *When you think about it, this punk’s actually quite unlucky.*

Now that Erhaven had heard everything about the secret organization, he wondered whether a god had given this human so many Ancient Powers to help him out. Cale seemed to get involved in all kinds of messes wherever he went. The dragon pitied the human beside him a little.

What he *didn’t* know was that gathering so many powers and people had been the product of Cale’s own decisions rather than divine intervention. He’d rounded up the beastfolk, Ancient Powers, and skilled humans himself. The gold dragon would never have guessed that.

As Erhaven drew the wrong conclusions about the human's life, Raon piped up, "It's fine. This weak human has me! The great and mighty Raon Mir!" The young dragon seemed very pleased with himself.

Ignoring Raon, Erhaven addressed Cale, who still seemed deep in thought. "You're running yourself ragged."

Cale nodded. "It does seem that way. But I need to finish everything quickly." That way, he could relax, roll around in bed, and sleep all he wanted. He pined for the slacker life more and more.

While the human considered his fate, the nearly thousand-year-old dragon remarked casually, "You can tell me about what's bothering you."

"Really?" Cale's eyes lit up, but only for a second.

Erhaven clicked his tongue once more and nodded back. "Yes."

This means he'll help me with at least one thing. Cale smiled. Assuming that the human was happy about his offer, the gold dragon felt better.

By contrast, the other human in the group was feeling something else. "Lord Cale…"

"What is it?"

"The monsters are acting strange…"

Indeed, the creatures at the forest edge were behaving erratically.

A goblin dashed out of the forest and into the grass, huffing and puffing. "Keee! Keeeee!"

Thump! Thump! Thump! A group of ratlike creatures shuddered and banged their heads on the ground.

Hilsmann watched this display in confusion, only for Cale to point at the newest addition to their party. "There's an adult dragon with us," he reminded Hilsmann, clearing things up for the vice-captain.

"Ah." That made sense.

Erhaven peered over at Raon. "Do you recognize my greatness now, youngster?"

"No!" Raon looked away flippantly and flew over to Cale.

Even without using Dragon Fear, adult dragons had an overpowering aura. Monsters that were primarily creatures of instinct were the first to react to it.

‹I'm superior, human! I'll go through my first growth spurt soon!› Raon whined.

Whatever you say. Ignoring the voice, Cale gave an order to Hilsmann, who stood there with a blank expression. "Keep going."

"Once you reach the center of the Dark Forest, will you pinpoint where the Ancient Power is, Cale Henituse?" asked Erhaven.

"Yes, sir. But I think I'll need to use one of my Ancient Powers to find the Scary Stone."

Cale expected that locating the guardian's house, which contained the Ancient Power, would require the Fire of Destruction.

"Human! You're going to use that firebolt?! You'll get hurt!"

"I'll use a weak version."

"Don't you dare cough up blood again! If you do, I'll get rid of all the rocks in the world! I'll destroy them!"

"Yeah, yeah," Cale responded impassively.

Erhaven watched the pair in disbelief but didn't voice his incredulity. Instead, he asked, "Did you say you found a dragon corpse in the black swamp here?"

"That I did, sir. You mentioned that you've never been to the Dark Forest, right?"

"Correct. I didn't want to look at these ugly monsters."

A wise choice, in Cale's opinion.

"Want to go to the swamp after we find the Scary Stone?"

"No need," Erhaven said, annoyed. "Too much hassle. And I couldn't care less how another dragon died."

Flying up to the older dragon's face, Raon tilted his head in confusion. "Really? I'm curious about *your* story, Gragon!"

The "Gragon's" lips twitched, then returned to normal. "Ahem! If you really want to know, youngster, I'll tell you about that next time."

“All right! I can’t wait!”

Clearing his throat, Erhaven smoothly changed the topic. “This ‘Dark Forest’ is rather unique. It’s worth at least a visit, which is why I’ve come along.”

“You think it’s unique?” Cale asked, and Erhaven nodded.

“Humans have spoken of the Five Wonders for centuries. The Dark Forest, No Way Out, and the Lake of Despair in particular have been around since ancient times.”

Cale had never heard as much. “Really? That long?”

“Yes. Those three places have existed for over ten thousand years. That’s a long time, even to a dragon.”

When it came to “ancient times,” the term referred to anything more than ten thousand years old. Cale felt like asking more about Erhaven’s intriguing story, but something prevented him from doing so.

“Grrrrr!”

Shing! Hilsmann took out his sword. “L-Lord Cale!”

Cale looked ahead of them. The group was at the border between the inner and outer forest; Hilsmann was already past it. Cale had reached this boundary before, but this would be his first time stepping into the inner forest.

I did fly *over the entire forest before.* Still, he hadn’t traveled through the region on foot. Mary’s cave of skeletons was in the outer forest, since they didn’t want to risk random encounters with strong monsters.

Cale stepped across the boundary line.

“Grrrr.”

As he entered the inner forest, he spotted a large monster. It emerged from between the trees, looking like an exceptionally bloodthirsty ogre. It was even uglier than an ogre, with blackened skin and fangs the size of Cale’s arms. The club in its hand appeared to be made of stone.

The monster’s eyes were focused; it seemed somewhat intelligent.

“Get behind me, Lord Cale!” Hilsmann aimed his sword at the monster as if he’d never been frightened of it.

“What are you doing?” Cale asked the brave vice-captain.

His quizzical look confused Hilsmann. “Excuse me…?”

Just then, the monster dropped its club. *Thud!* The creature then began banging its head on the ground. *Thump! Thump!*

Hilsmann finally took a moment to look around. It was quiet—too quiet. Then he heard someone say, “Oh. It’s somewhat intelligent.”

The comment came from Erhaven. Hilsmann flinched, then witnessed something he’d never seen before.

“Hey.”

“Grr.”

“Lead us to the center of the forest.”

“Grrr.”

The monster got up so fast, it reminded Hilsmann of a rookie knight with something to prove. It grabbed its club once again and smacked the short tree beside it. *Bang! Crack! Boom!* The tree fell.

Though the creature’s strength made Hilsmann gasp, its next moves were even more surprising. It guided them onward, destroying any obstacles in their path. Trees, small boulders, tall weeds—nothing survived the creature’s desire to blaze a trail for Erhaven.

“Come,” the gold dragon said.

Hilsmann sheathed his sword, recognizing the dragon’s innate majesty. Yet when his gaze slid over to Cale, he froze. “Lord Cale…?”

Erhaven likewise stared at Cale in confusion. “Hey. Why are you doing that?”

Raon was getting anxious. “Human! Isn’t that tiny thing in your hand a firebolt?!” As he said, a small flame floated atop Cale’s palm. “Why’re you using that without asking me? You can’t faint again!”

Cale didn’t hear Raon’s rebukes. *Thump. Thump.* His heart had been pounding wildly ever since they entered the inner forest. He lowered his head to look at the ground. Some unknown aura was rising from the earth, which was what had caused the flame to

spark to life in his hand. The aura was making the Energy of the Heart run wild too. *Thump. Thump.*

"Huh?" Cale murmured, confused.

Whissshhh. Gusts gathered at his feet as the Sound of the Wind created a small cyclone. Finally… *Whoosh.* The Unbreakable Shield appeared on his left hand.

This is strange… Very strange. Cale recalled something he'd read in the elves' old book:

Just before saving the world from darkness one last time, he left all his belongings—as well as his friends' belongings—in his hometown.

The other three moved closer to Cale. Erhaven examined the human as if looking at some interesting, unfamiliar creature.

Raon fretted, shouting, "Human, what's wrong? Did your Ancient Powers break?"

"I'm…getting a feel for where it is," Cale said slowly.

This was basically a light bulb moment.

He glanced at Erhaven. "Let's go." He then set off at a rapid pace.

Shaking off his fascination, Erhaven strode in front of Cale. "I'll take the lead." The dragon had already gestured at the ogre-like monster to stop clearing their path, and the creature had fled. "Follow me."

Cale nodded at his command, and they made for the center of the Dark Forest. Erhaven moved quickly, and Cale used the Sound of the Wind to keep up. Raon cast haste magic on Hilsmann so the vice-captain could walk at the same pace. Cale gave Erhaven directions as they went.

"Turn left."

Thump. Thump. It was impossible to articulate, but the Ancient Powers in his body and the earth beneath his feet were telling him where to go.

"Northwest… Now northeast."

After a while, Cale finally stopped. They were near the northern boundary of the inner forest. There, he saw a rock about three times his height. It looked like the average boulder one might find anywhere in Henituse territory.

Erhaven glanced at Cale. “Is it here?” he asked, though he didn’t need to hear the human’s answer. “I guess it is.”

Cale grinned as the four Ancient Powers inside his body raged. *They’re running wild.* Had the owners of the powers he’d already gained really been friends with the Scary Stone’s owner?

As his smile grew, the flame atop his right palm flew toward the boulder, and fire met stone. *Fwoosh.*

The boulder trembled from the impact. *Rumble, rumble.* Cale felt tremors underfoot, and the boulder cracked all on its own. At that moment, an unknown voice reverberated in his mind. It sounded profound, as if it belonged to someone righteous. Cale felt giddy; he’d come to the right spot.

“Friend of fire, you’ve finally arrived. My eternal enemy and friend, I… Hm?” The Scary Stone’s owner paused, seemingly caught off guard. Then its voice resumed, this time carrying a note of confusion. **“Huh? What’s going on? Why is the cheapskate with the thief, the crybaby, and even the glutton…?”**

A cheapskate had possessed the Fire of Destruction. A thief had owned the Sound of the Wind. A crybaby had held the Energy of the Heart. A glutton had likely owned the Unbreakable Shield.

“Who are you?” the owner of the Scary Stone asked, clearly surprised.

“My name’s Cale Henituse.”

Eureka.

Hilsmann watched, bewildered, as Cale introduced himself to thin air. Suddenly, someone grabbed the vice-captain’s shoulder and yanked him back. “Stand still.”

“Excuse me?” Hilsmann asked, then realized it was Erhaven. “Eek! Yes, sir!”

Next to the gold dragon, Raon observed Cale with his head propped up on his stubby paws. *My human’s in an odd state.* All sorts of powers of nature surrounded Cale, while the power of earth

emanated from the cracks in the boulder. Noticing the same thing, Erhaven backed away.

Ancient Powers had to be earned independently, without assistance from others. They could protect the person seeking power, but Erhaven didn't think a dragon should stoop down to that level.

Of course, there were always exceptions. "Let's guard him, Gragon!"

Erhaven ignored Raon, who sighed before escorting Hilsmann over to Cale. As they flanked him to stand guard together, the boulder continued to split. *Krrraaaaaack!* It was uncanny to see the fissure appear out of the blue.

Meanwhile, the voice addressed Cale inside his head, full of shock and disbelief. **"A human earned all four of their powers?"**

Cale focused on the boulder. Through the crack, he saw a dark space leading down to an underground area. *This is an entrance.*

"Take my friends' belongings. You've earned the right."

Stepping into that pitch-black darkness might've proven difficult, yet Cale didn't hesitate to walk inside. There was no *reason* to hesitate, since the owner had given him permission.

Watching Cale disappear into the gloom, Raon mumbled, "Should we follow him, Gragon? My human is extremely weak."

"Goodness. What did I do to deserve this?" Erhaven heaved a sigh, then tackled Raon to the ground.

Raon flailed. "Stop it! How dare you do that to a great and mighty dragon?!"

"I'm also a dragon, youngster. Be a good boy and wait here."

Raon wriggled out of Erhaven's grip with a pout, then calmly examined the cavern that had appeared when the boulder cracked. Cale had vanished within.

Inside the dark cavern, Cale had no issues going in the right direction. *The earth's showing me the way.* Every time he stepped forward, an unknown language seemed to guide him, allowing him to keep walking fearlessly. It was a fascinating experience. *I wonder*

what possessions got left behind in this cavern. They'd been here since ancient times.

Clack. Clack. He walked deeper into the darkness, his feet as light as feathers.

Then he heard the Scary Stone's owner again. **"I led a very difficult life. I was orphaned at a young age and had to survive on my own. All I could control was the earth beneath me, and it gave me strength. Ah… I remember how my dream was to eat three hearty meals a day and sleep without worries."**

Cale stopped.

"But I realized I'd been given a power by the heavens, and I thought I needed to use it for good. Thus, I always looked for ways to help people. I wanted to protect the downtrodden, who reminded me of my past self."

Listening quietly, Cale crossed his arms.

"I don't regret the life that I chose."

At that, Cale's lips pressed in a thin line.

"However, if there's something I do regret, it's that I stuck too rigidly to my ideals. I chose to stay and protect the weak, even knowing that my friends were in danger. I *did* protect the weak, but my friends ended up dying. Once they were gone, all I could do was find and safeguard their possessions. In the end, I left this world before I could pass those possessions on to the people who'd earned their powers. Still, I'm happy I could protect this land."

Cale resumed walking. There was no reason to pay the voice any more attention. Its owner was *very* different from Cale, who prioritized himself and his companions. He had no inclinations toward something as noble as dying to protect someone else.

We have nothing in common.

"I was happy. Yet it saddened me that I couldn't see my friends before they died, nor pass on their belongings to their successors. I also mourned the fact that I couldn't give my power to anyone before I died."

Seeing a faint light at the end of the darkness, Cale picked up the pace. Soon, the light was right in front of him.

Flash! He could see once again.

“This is what I left behind.”

A wide space came into view, lit entirely by orbs on the ceiling.

Cale was shocked. “Damn…” He’d struck it big.

“Ahem! I wasn’t materialistic, but I did pay attention to this place’s decor. I couldn’t let my friends’ successors visit a hovel.”

The chamber contained a grand, five-story villa. Its walls, roof, and marble pillars were simple, but their arrangement gave the structure a certain grandiosity. The window frames, doors, and doorknobs looked as though a craftsman had spent countless nights carefully carving them. It was fancier than the Henituses’ castle—fancier than even the crown prince’s palace.

In front of the villa was a garden. While it had no trees, it did contain numerous eye-catching sculptures. There was also a marble fountain, although no water flowed from it.

“Wow.”

The Scary Stone’s owner cleared his throat again. **“My house is a little luxurious.”**

A little? This is extreme. Huh. He was surprisingly hedonistic. Cale grinned, but it faded when he saw something to one side of the villa.

“What’s that?”

The large stone pillar he’d spotted gave him an ominous feeling. It was wrapped in metal chains, with papers resembling talismans scattered around it. A magic circle ringed the pillar, glowing dark red. If anything, it looked like the pillar sealed a demon, a ghost, or even a Demon Lord. Cale slowly backed away from it.

At that moment, the profound voice spoke again. **“There’s a sad truth about this place.”**

Cale didn’t want to know—but, as usual, he couldn’t stop the Ancient Power’s owner from speaking.

“When I was alive, I saw monsters here that I didn’t encounter anywhere else in the Western Continent. They were

from the east."

The same went for the Dark Forest; Cale knew it contained monsters from the Eastern Continent, as well as any number of mutants.

"Upon entering this cavern, I figured out the reason behind that."

Could it be? Cale turned toward the ugly stone pillar.

"**A mysterious path in this cavern connected to the Eastern Continent. Monsters that accidentally took that path ended up crossing to this continent. Along the way, they mutated, becoming stronger and more violent."**

Cale swept his hands over his face.

"But the path wouldn't admit humans, elves, or even dwarves. Only monsters could use it. My friends and I couldn't decipher its mysteries. All we could do was barricade either end of the path to prevent the strongest mutants from taking it. I protected the western end."

Yet again, Cale had learned something useless.

"The strong seal on the entrance should last at least a hundred thousand years. Only someone in possession of my power can remove the seal before then."

Cale's frown softened a bit. The seal was from ancient times, meaning it had been created ten thousand years ago; given how long it would last, it was still relatively new.

"Hmm." He looked around; there was a lot of space next to the villa and garden. With a hint of a smile, he headed toward the villa. He had no choice *but* to do so, really. *Whoosh!* The Fire of Destruction had been pointing toward the villa ever since he'd reached this chamber. As had the Sound of the Wind, the Unbreakable Shield, and the Energy of the Heart.

"Enter," the villa's owner likewise urged him.

Creeeak. The door was at least ten thousand years old, but it still worked. As he entered the villa, Cale wondered how that was possible.

The floor inside was marble. In contrast to the relatively simple exterior, Cale now walked past an elegant lamp and all kinds of extravagant sculptures. He scanned the empty, ground-level hall, then looked up. A staircase ran all the way to the fifth floor.

“It’s on the third story.”

Cale stepped onto the stairs. They were covered with dust, but that couldn’t hide their beauty. On the second floor were empty rooms and a beautiful terrace. He hurried to the third floor, which contained multiple rooms as well.

“It’s in one of the four innermost rooms.”

Striding toward those rooms, Cale stopped in front of the first door. When he pushed, it opened, allowing him to see inside. “Holy…”

The room contained a glass display case of glimmering jewels.

“The glutton was only interested in eating. When she received jewels as a reward, she just pushed them into a corner. That’s why I’ve kept them safe.”

Cale headed to the next room.

“The crybaby was such a coward—yet he had the power of regeneration, and he always collected weapons. Those weapons are basic, but I’ve safeguarded them all.”

After looking through the crybaby’s room, Cale opened the door to the next one. *Creeeak. Thud.*

“The cheapskate hoarded this money. I don’t know if the same currency is still used, but these coins should be useful regardless. They’re gold and silver. I’ve looked after them on his behalf.”

Cale chuckled and opened the final door.

“The thief kept records about everything. Things she stole, her strength, her own secret base. I kept every last one of those records.”

This guy took care of all *his friends’ things? How could there be such a good person?*

For the first time in a long time, Cale laughed wholeheartedly. “Ha ha ha!” He momentarily forgot about the northern alliance,

Arm, and everything else.

Why, though?

Cale gazed eagerly toward the three remaining rooms on the third floor, then hurried to open the doors. *Creak. Creak. Creak.* Once all three were open, he could see inside.

“Mm. These are things *I* collected. Whenever someone gave me something as thanks for saving them, I kept it.”

Cale swept his hands over his face again. *I couldn’t be happier.* The items the guardian had casually collected included jewels, gold coins, and some unexpected oddities. *Was collecting things his hobby?*

He clapped, his singular applause echoing throughout in the ornate yet dusty villa. “You’re amazing! How’d you collect all this?”

“Ahem! Well, I guess I was a bit of a pack rat.”

Cale continued to clap in admiration as he ascended to the fourth floor. It was empty, but the interior was fancier than even the Henituses’ home. That was enough to raise Cale’s spirits as he climbed to the fifth story. There was only one room there.

“This is my room.”

The chamber encompassed the entire floor. It was a study, a bedroom, and an office all rolled into one, with no dividers between them. In the center was an altar about as tall as Cale’s waist. Many beautiful images were engraved on the smooth marble, which was also decorated with plenty of jewels. A rock half the size of a baby’s fist sat atop the altar.

“The Scary Stone…” Cale muttered. No matter how he looked at it, this was obviously the stone he was looking for.

“That’s my power,” the voice confirmed.

I can earn the Scary Stone just like that? Apparently, all he had to do was grab the rock. It felt too easy.

Just then, the profound voice boomed out as though in reprimand, **“Do you wish to gain my power?”**

Yes…?

“**Then chew it!”**

Hmm? Cale stopped walking toward the altar.

“Although it’s easy to lay claim to my power, it will only activate if you’re protecting something. I only want it used for the sake of nobility and justice! Justice and goodness keep the world safe!”

The demeanor of the Scary Stone’s owner had completely changed; he was now shouting vigorously.

“Demonstrate the will not to back away from any danger! Chew it!” Louder, he bellowed, **“You’ll gain my power if you chew up this rock!”**

I really have to chew *it?* Cale thought, resuming his approach.

“The power can only be used for good!”

The ominous voice was practically warning Cale that if he earned this power, he’d get dragged into all kinds of annoying endeavors. But Cale wasn’t thinking about that. *I just need the earth affinity.* He could absorb the affinity without needing to *use* the power, and that was his goal.

He picked up the rock.

“Chew it! Chew it!”

All these Ancient Powers’ owners are freaks. Should I seriously chew it? Cale debated that for a moment, but he didn’t have to mull it over for long.

“If you take my power, I’ll give you this villa too! Whoever possesses this power is essentially my heir!”

Cale popped the rock in his mouth and bit down on it. At first chew, it crumbled like a potato chip.

Boom! A vibration surged beneath Cale’s feet, after which the Scary Stone’s power rose up inside him.

“Anybody could lay claim to my power,” its former owner repeated, **“but it can only be used in certain circumstances.”** His voice grew fainter, fading into the distance. **“Guard. Protect. Sacrifice. That’s the power of earth, which gives everything to those who exist upon it.”**

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Raon spotted someone approaching from within the darkness. It was Cale.

“Human!” the black dragon shouted, zooming toward him. “Human! Human! I feel the power of earth in you! You’ll be fine now!” He sniffled, gazing at Cale with admiration.

Erhaven sighed at him, then strode up to Cale with a pleased expression.

“Stop doing stupid things now, human!” Raon cried, delighted. “Just travel the continent!”

Cale cut him off. “Raon.”

An odd feeling came over Raon. Cale was smiling. Brightly, in fact. “Why’re you grinning like that, human…?”

“I found you a lair,” Cale replied.

“Hmm?” Raon cocked his head.

“Lord Erhaven,” Cale began, then addressed all three of his companions waiting outside. “Everyone, please follow me.”

With that, they walked back into the dark cavern. When they arrived at the end of the path, Cale studied the trio’s expressions. Raon gaped at the five-story villa, which looked more luxurious than most palaces.

The black dragon whirled toward Cale. “Human, this is…!”

“It’s our villa.”

“Do you mean that, human?!”

Cale nodded. “Yes.”

Ecstatic, Raon flew in a circle. “All right!”

Cale watched him with satisfaction before catching Erhaven’s eye.

“You have strangely good luck,” the gold dragon noted.

Apparently so. Cale had no reason to deny it.

Chapter 30:
Together

T*AP. TAP.* A small paw kept batting Cale's side.

"Human."

Cale glanced down toward his waist, only to see Raon smiling at him. "What?"

"I like this place. You deserve praise. Good job!"

"Thanks…" Cale didn't look thrilled about receiving compliments from a five-year-old. Erhaven's expression was similarly blasé.

"Isn't this villa better than your gold-covered cave, Gragon?" Raon went on. "Our house looks nice, but it's humble too."

"Sure…" the gold dragon muttered, content to merely agree. When he made eye contact with Cale, he huffed a sigh and pointed off to the side. "You may want to give that stone pillar a closer look."

Once Cale explained the story behind the ominous pillar, everyone had a different reaction. Cale opted to ignore Hilsmann, who'd been standing there vacantly for a while.

Raon ventured closer to Cale. "If it'll be fine for a hundred thousand years, let's just ignore it," he said cautiously, echoing Cale's own thoughts.

Cale regarded Raon like a proud parent. *I feel like the older he gets, the more he takes after me.*

Erhaven reacted a bit differently. "How interesting."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yes. I'm intrigued." The gold dragon's eyes were full of curiosity.

At the sight of that, Cale quickly added, "Then why don't *you* investigate a bit, Lord Erhaven?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Only the great Erhaven could figure out the pillar's secrets."

Erhaven scoffed; Cale's intentions were obvious. "Trying to foist it off on me?"

"You're the wisest of all of us, aren't you?"

"What a useless question." Cale was certain that he saw the corner of Erhaven's lips twitch. The dragon really did like flattery. "Very well. Since I *am* the wisest, I'll pretend to fall for your scheme."

In the end, Erhaven agreed to take a look at the pillar—but not because Cale had flattered him. He was genuinely curious about the aura coming from beneath it.

How peculiar.

While he wasn't sure of the aura's affinity, it was definitely worth examining. He saw it as a means to unravel the secrets of an ancient mystery.

Walking up to the gold dragon, Cale said, "Then you'd better stay here to investigate, right?"

Before Erhaven could respond, Raon chimed in, "Yeah! Let's get practical experience here!"

Erhaven ignored Raon and stared at Cale, who had an awkward smile. Based on what Cale knew of Erhaven, he figured the dragon would play along with a ruse even if he grasped the ulterior motives.

Seeing Cale's wooden smile, Erhaven smiled back and shook his head. "Fine. My, you really are foolhardy. I imagine you'll want to bring your subordinates here too."

"Well, wouldn't it be best if everyone got this firsthand experience together?"

It was obvious to Erhaven that Cale wanted Raon's lessons to continue here, not in the gold dragon's lair. "Bring your subordinates, then," he conceded. "But *I* don't wish to remain here."

Raon, who'd been using magic to fill the fountain with water, whipped his head around at Erhaven's comment. "Gragon! How can you leave?! I need you!" Erhaven heaved a sigh as Raon flew quickly from the fountain to the older dragon's side. "Stay here with us, Gragon!"

“Ugh. Goodness.” Erhaven eyed Raon with disbelief. “Youngster, are you really a dragon?”

“Are you picking a fight with me?”

Cale, who stood between the two dragons, interjected, “Are you thinking about installing a teleportation portal?”

“Yes. It’s easy if you know the coordinates.”

Upon hearing their exchange, Raon quietly flew back to the fountain and splashed around like nothing had happened.

“My word. What am I doing? What has this world come to?” Erhaven sighed again.

Meanwhile, Cale’s heart pounded with excitement as he looked at the gold dragon. *I’ll have a portal directly to his lair.* That would be perfect if something happened in Henituse territory and he needed to ask for help.

As if it were no big deal, Cale said, “I’m sure you know your lair’s coordinates, Lord Erhaven, so we’ll just need the coordinates to this place for you to set up the portal. Then the group at your lair can come through.”

“Right,” Erhaven agreed. “That’ll be bothersome, so I’ll take care of it quickly.”

Cale cast him a grateful look. By handling the task right off the bat, the dragon was definitely making more work for himself.

“I’ll help!”

“Is there anything I can assist with?”

Cale watched lazily as Raon and even Hilsmann stepped up to help. He thought about the group that would soon join them at the villa.

Since it’s time for their training anyway…

He felt it would be great if they went above and beyond, but they might need some motivation.

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Once everybody had gathered, they sat in the five-story villa's great hall on the first floor. Cale had sent Hilsmann to fetch Hans and the ten wolf children, and after Erhaven created the portal, everyone aside from Pendrick had teleported to the villa. The elf was left alone to protect Erhaven's lair. Taking in their destination, the others couldn't hide their shock.

Cale addressed everyone with his usual nonchalance. "Look around and pick a room on either the second or fourth floor. The fifth floor's mine."

"Are we moving in to this place?" asked Hans.

"Yes."

The deputy butler's eyes sparkled.

"Meeeow."

"Meow."

Ohn and Hong padded up to Cale, with Raon tagging along as always. The black dragon looked up at Cale and said, "Our room's on the fifth floor?"

"Why's it *our* room?" *They're just kids, averaging out to eight years old. When did they become my roommates?*

"Hmm? Is our room on a different floor, human?"

"Choose whatever room you want."

Dealing with the kids would be a hassle if they were confused, and sharing the fifth floor with them would be fine; it was big enough.

Cale turned away from the kids and scanned the group. Vicross dragged his finger through the dust on the railing of the staircase, then immediately pulled out a white glove. For some reason, he exuded intense determination.

After watching everyone wander around, examining the villa, Cale approached Choi Han. He seemed the most surprised out of everyone who'd teleported here.

"...I didn't know a place like this existed in the Dark Forest."

Cale understood his bewilderment. *He lived here for decades and suffered quite a bit.* It made sense that he was rattled to learn that such a peaceful place existed in the Dark Forest.

Since Cale stood between Choi Han and Rosalyn, he could hear the latter's sentiments from the other side as well. "How is this building still in good shape after ten thousand years? It looks like it's only been vacant eleven or twelve months."

"I'm with you there, Miss Rosalyn. It really does seem that way. Doesn't it feel as though time's been frozen for ten thousand years?"

"Indeed, Lord Cale. It certainly does," Rosalyn agreed, smiling brightly. The building being frozen in time was an accurate description.

Seeing her smile, Cale smoothly went on, "Know what happened here?"

"Did you earn the power of earth?"

"That's right."

Cale glanced around once more. Erhaven stood off in the corner; Ron and Vicross were heading upstairs. He could see the rest of the group too. *They're all within earshot.*

After ensuring that everyone could hear him, Cale said something that would light a fire in all their hearts: "The Scary Stone's former owner was known as the stone guardian."

The wolf children, who'd been admiring the first-floor sculptures, flicked their ears toward Cale.

"Legend has it that he protected the northeastern territory."

"Really?"

Lark and Choi Han, who were next to Rosalyn, were interested in Cale's explanation. As was Vicross, who stood at the top of the stairs. They were curious about the former owner of this place.

"When the continent was shrouded in darkness, he didn't hesitate to stand on the front line and protect the people."

"What an amazing person."

"Wasn't he? And when he left me this place, he told me…"

He paused. Naturally, everybody wanted to know what the guardian had said when he gave Cale this extravagant villa.

Noting that he had their full attention, Cale finished, "…to protect others."

He'd also been told to stand guard—and make sacrifices to boot—but Cale saw no need to tell them so. He only needed to bring up the thing that would benefit him.

Cale then assumed a bitter smile. "I'm not sure why, but when I heard that, I thought about the current situation."

Rosalyn sucked in a breath. With enemies crawling out of the woodwork, the continent would soon devolve into chaos.

"Mr. Cale…" Choi Han gazed at him, visibly concerned.

Cale met his eyes and smiled. "What is it?"

"Well, the thing is…" Choi Han faltered, unsure how to answer.

Looking past Choi Han, Cale locked eyes with Lark at his side. "Anyway, after hearing what the villa's former owner said, I thought it'd be good for everyone to stay here together."

He spoke indifferently, but the others understood what he meant. He didn't need to say aloud why he'd brought them here: *To protect.*

"Oh, Lord Cale…" Rosalyn chuckled, gazing at Cale in appreciation of his warm heart.

He stared back at her, confused. *What?*

Rosalyn's smile widened at that. The rest of the group had similar reactions. Erhaven scrutinized Cale especially closely, wondering how there could be such a pitiful human in the world.

"Anyway…"

The Kingdom of the Whipper and the Mogor Empire seemed ready to go to war with each other. This conflict would revolve around the control of several castles along the nations' border. It would probably conclude around autumn at the latest. Arm and the northern alliance were still quiet, seemingly awaiting the outcome of that war.

There wasn't much time left, as all of Cale's companions knew.

Cale shrugged, then said tersely, "I'm sure we're going to face many difficulties."

Choi Han saw a hand come to rest on his shoulder. It was Cale's, and it stayed there as Cale surveyed the first floor. Then his calm voice filled the hall. "I trust you all."

Silence settled over the chamber.

How many people in the world can admit their trust in others so casually and lightheartedly? Choi Han thought. Cale had to be the only one. As the lout's hand squeezed his shoulder, Choi Han felt its weight; it carried the gravity of his words.

In truth, Cale was just leaning on Choi Han to stay upright.

At that point, a voice reverberated through the hall—Raon's. "I'll get stronger!" The dragon fluttered his black wings. "Don't worry, human! If a great being like myself grows stronger, it'll mean I'm even mightier!" There wasn't a trace of uncertainty in his lively declaration.

Choi Han clenched his fists in determination, as did Lark and the wolf children. Cale looked around and saw that everyone's excited expressions had turned rather serious. A smile appeared on his face before quickly vanishing; he'd *wanted* this atmosphere.

"I lack strength," he said.

"That's right, human! You just hang back! Don't stick your neck out and cough up blood again!" Raon said, dead serious.

The dragon's severity gave Cale an odd feeling, but he continued to address his audience as though nothing were amiss. "There's only one thing I can do: pull out all the stops to support all of *you*."

"I'll do well on my own!" Raon shouted. "I'm great and mighty!"

Ugh. He keeps ruining the moment. Cale was trying to create a grave atmosphere, but he realized that would be difficult with Raon around.

Choi Han—who'd been listening quietly—said, "I'll get stronger to protect everyone."

Cale patted his shoulder, and Choi Han felt Cale's trust in him. He clenched his fists, his eyes focused and his expression resolute. In fact, *all* Cale's companions looked determined.

Observing that, Cale thought, *Whether Raon gets stronger, I'm sure they'll protect me too.*

He'd lit a fire inside them, and it burned with even more passion than he'd expected. In fact, it was burning quite

dangerously—like a wildfire that couldn't be stopped.

Two days later, Cale regretted his actions. The training ground was covered in dust and blood.

"Ugh!"

"You're going to fall just like that?!"

"No! I won't fall!"

Choi Han and Lark's commentary as they trained sounded like quotes from the heroes of a children's cartoon. Lark was in Berserk Mode and covered in injuries. Choi Han, meanwhile, wore heavy metal spheres from head to toe.

"Come on!" he shouted at Lark. "You *can't* fall if you want to get stronger!"

"Auuuuugh!" With a roar, Lark rushed at Choi Han.

Similar scenes unfolded throughout the area, with everyone training like their lives depended on it. Blood, dust, sweat, and wounds were visible everywhere.

I didn't expect this much of them. Cale was slightly flustered by how hard everyone was working. *Will they be okay?*

He had a hunch they'd get much tougher if they kept this up.

***

Sitting down on a bench near the villa's fountain, Cale looked around. All of his companions had gone off the deep end.

First of all, Choi Han was sitting on a boulder, meditating in a lotus position. A black aura emanated from his body.

This is like a martial arts fantasy novel.

"Hans?" said Cale. "How long has he been doing this?"

"Nineteen hours, my lord. Ah, that passion! Isn't he making you proud?"

Not at all. Cale was more scared than proud. He lifted his head and met Hans's eyes. "How long are *you* going to stay like that?"

“I’m not sure.”

Choi Han was training Hans as well. Since the butler was always at the house, Choi Han thought he should at least know some basic defense moves.

But staying in an “invisible chair” pose… The deputy butler’s legs were shaking.

Hans must’ve noticed Cale’s gaze. He smiled awkwardly. “Ha ha! I’m set on getting stronger to protect you, my lord. That’s a butler’s duty!”

“Sure,” Cale replied for lack of anything else to say. “I believe in you.”

“Yes, sir! I won’t let you down!” Hans responded, brimming with energy.

Cale turned away from him only to spot Erhaven, who stood next to the chained pillar. Though Cale had initially found it odd that the gold dragon wasn’t with Raon, Erhaven had picked up on that and given him an explanation. *“A dragon’s way is to figure things out on their own once they have a sense of direction.”*

Thus, Raon was training in Cale’s room on the fifth floor. Cale had given him permission once Raon promised he wouldn’t destroy anything.

“I’ll go through my first growth phase by fall, human,” he’d declared before he began. *“I know you’re already aware of my greatness, but that’ll impress you even more!”* He seemed utterly self-assured.

Recalling the way the tiny black dragon had confidently surged up to the fifth floor, Cale held back a sigh. Then he smiled at the sight before him.

“Meeeeeow.”

“Meeow.”

Hong and Ohn mewled as they crept toward Erhaven. Hong was still a baby, but Ohn would also have a growth phase soon.

“Ahem! Ahem!” The ancient dragon let out some fake coughs, pretending not to notice them, but a smile rose to his lips regardless.

I bet he'll start teaching Ohn and Hong too, Cale mused. He thought back to what Erhaven had said about the kittens: *He said they're pure-blooded cats who mutated.*

Erhaven seemed knowledgeable about the Cat Tribe, which was only natural for an ancient dragon who'd lived around a thousand years. Cale figured he might as well leave the kittens in Erhaven's hands, as nobody else had knowledge to assist them.

Same goes for the Blue Wolf Tribe kids. Cale turned toward another area of the square.

"Aaahhh!"

"Gaaah!"

"Eeeeek!"

All the wolf children were training together. Some were on the cusp of entering Berserk Mode for the first time, after which they'd get even more powerful. *Lark's also working with Vicross and Ron.* Cale watched in a daze as the young wolves trained like main characters in a TV drama.

It was then that someone approached him. "Lord Cale."

"Miss Rosalyn."

Rosalyn peeked over at Hans, then walked to the bench and sat next to Cale. She surveyed the square before commenting, "Everybody seems hard at work."

"Indeed. They're really something. Is everything going well for you, Miss Rosalyn?"

Cale's gaze slid toward her. She was focusing on research, and she was only one step away from reaching the highest echelon of mages.

"Just so-so. Still, it helps that I have the most amazing teachers." Rosalyn grinned. While Raon and Erhaven were around, she could learn a lot merely by watching them, even if she didn't ask for guidance. Rosalyn was bright, so she was putting that opportunity to use.

Cale nodded. "As teachers, they certainly are amazing." With that, their small talk was done; they could get down to business. "Have you heard anything from Tasha?"

The dark elf and Mary were on their way to this location. Once they arrived, Cale would need to get moving again.

“Yes. Miss Tasha and I have a message for you.”

“Message?” Cale asked, dubious. Tasha represented the crown prince, while Rosalyn was a de facto envoy for Brek. There was only one thing they’d both need to tell him at once. “So everyone’s decided to meet,” he guessed.

“I knew you’d figure it out right away, Lord Cale.” Rosalyn smiled, nodding, then explained the details. “Brek, Rowoon, and the jungle all agreed to a meeting. There’s one problem, though.”

“No response from the Kingdom of the Whipper?” Considering Rosalyn hadn’t mentioned it, Cale figured Whipper was the source of the issue.

They needed the Kingdom of the Whipper to join this meeting. Whipper’s cooperation would cut off the Empire’s escape route via the eastern shoreline. Not only would that stop the Empire from connecting with the Eastern Continent, but it would also let the whales move more easily.

“Actually, we received a response from the Kingdom of the Whipper. Commander Tunka responded personally.” Tunka was, in essence, the voice of the kingdom—though Chief Advisor Herol was usually right there to assist him.

“What’d he say?”

“Well, Lord Cale…”

“Yes?”

“He wants to chat with you.”

“Tunka does?”

“That’s right.”

Why me?

Though Cale wore a look of open confusion, Rosalyn merely smiled. Tunka’s request made sense to her. *He and Herol haven’t dealt with Rowoon at all—nor with any other kingdom, for that matter. Having someone they trust at the meeting is a means of protection.* Cale was the only person from Rowoon whom Tunka trusted. The

Queen of the Jungle had asked Cale to connect her to the crown prince for similar reasons.

"I could probably connect you two right away," Rosalyn told the puzzled Cale. "What should I do?"

"Well…"

Rising from the bench, Cale noticed that his legs were slightly numb. The cries of all the people training had woken him early, and since he'd had nothing else to do, he'd just sat on this bench and watched them train. He found it fun to watch, reminiscent of scenes from cartoons and TV dramas.

"Are your legs okay?"

"They're numb because I sat there for so long. I feel like I'm getting weaker by the day."

Do I need to start stretching every day? That'd be a pain, Cale grumbled internally, stretching his legs.

As he did so, Rosalyn said, "You don't know how much your presence motivates them."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Rosalyn shook her head, her smile one of light dismissal.

She scanned the training grounds. Everybody was sneaking glances at Cale, who'd watched them since the crack of dawn, only leaving to eat. His companions already knew Cale had no reason to train, as Ancient Powers couldn't get stronger—they only had one level. Thus, they also understood how Cale must've felt as he watched them, and they kept up their energetic shouts all morning long.

Cale gestured at the villa. "Shall we?"

"Aaahhh!"

Hearing another loud shout, Cale flinched; the screeching unsettled him. He briskly walked into the villa, with Rosalyn following behind.

***

“Haven’t seen you in a bit,” said Tunka.

This was Cale’s first time chatting with Tunka using a communication sphere. “You’re alone,” he said, surprised.

“Yeah.”

Cale didn’t see Herol or any of Tunka’s subordinates. The barbarian was indeed chatting with Cale one on one.

I understand why there might not be many people around him. He can’t let anyone in Whipper know he has a communication sphere. After all, one needed a mage to use the technology.

To communicate with other nations, the Kingdom of the Whipper was relying on a mage and video communication device sent by Albert. They had no choice; they were facing an emergency. Still, Cale found it odd that neither Herol nor any of Tunka’s other officers were with him.

Cale could see the barbarian’s face clearly through the device. He frowned. “You don’t look so good.”

Tunka winced at the observation, but it was true; he didn’t look good at all. Whipper and the Empire were only fighting small-scale battles at the moment. Tunka’s countrymen weren’t charging the imperial capital, just aiming for a few castles along the border. Yet even that wasn’t going as they’d envisioned.

Cale didn’t think Tunka was one to settle for small skirmishes, and he quickly figured out what was going on. *There’s only one reason the idiot would be this upset.* Staring at the fidgeting Tunka, he asked, “Did you find the traitor?”

Tunka flinched, then scowled. “Yeah.”

“From that reaction, I’m guessing it was one of your direct subordinates.”

“It was…”

Cale thought about Tunka’s underlings. His left-hand woman was Felia, a talented strategist who wielded a spear. Then there was his right-hand man, Hota, who was roughly as strong as Tunka.

“I didn’t know Hota was like that,” Tunka began, sounding agonized. “How could he fall for the Empire’s plots?! I never would’ve guessed he wanted to steal my position!”

His hands shook with rage at Hota's betrayal. A hole had torn wide in his heart. While he'd been itching to share those feelings with someone, he hadn't known who to confide in. That is, until he thought of Cale.

Chief Advisor Herol had located the traitor—though Tunka didn't know how—and a magic device had been found amid Hota's belongings. It wasn't a communication sphere, but it sent a similar type of signal.

Tunka shared those details with Cale. As Cale listened to the barbarian, he clicked his tongue quietly. *I guess even the Empire doesn't know that Herol's a half-mage who can sense flowing mana.* That was probably why they hadn't concealed their communications with Hota. But Herol would never have missed the magic device Hota had stashed away.

"Last night, I…I beheaded that traitor."

Cale finally understood why Tunka had slowed down his attacks on the Empire. "You figured out that he *was* the traitor before that, didn't you?"

"A week ago, yeah."

It really looks like he struggled with that decision. Tunka must've been deliberating what to do with Hota for a while, Cale realized. In turn, Whipper's forces had been attacking less proactively.

"I thought that Hota—that the rest of my people—at least agreed with my vision for the kingdom. And I trusted him so much." Tunka looked down at his hands. He'd personally beheaded Hota; he'd thought he needed to do so himself.

Right then, Tunka heard Cale speak through the communication device: "That must've been hard on you. Good job."

Tunka clenched his fists a bit. No one had ever said such a thing to him before.

"Thanks to you," Cale continued, "a lot of soldiers ended up surviving."

That was the truth, and he wanted to praise Tunka for staying strong despite his friendship with Hota. Tunka slowly raised his head, meeting Cale's eyes through the display.

Assuming his usual relaxed smile, Cale said, “Did you tell Herol to find the traitor because of what I said? It seems you trusted me, then.” He’d expected Tunka to take him at his word and look for the mole, yet recognizing Tunka’s trust in him gave him the strangest feeling. “Thanks.”

Although Cale’s tone was light, his words hit Tunka pretty hard. At the same time, the barbarian thought about Hota’s face.

Cale’s next words snuffed that image out. “Don’t trust me. I’m not on your side, and I’m not a good person.”

He was being honest. He hadn’t really thrown his weight behind the Kingdom of the Whipper. While he now hoped that Whipper would win this war, he didn’t want it to be a sweeping victory. That would skew the balance of power between Whipper and Rowoon, Brek, and the jungle. So he wanted Tunka to win—but only by a hair.

How could anyone who thinks like that be a good person? Cale reflected. He decided it was about time to end the chat. “Anyway, Tunka, this isn’t like you at all. Weren’t you going to wipe out the Empire?”

Tunka’s brows twitched. “You’re right… I need to wipe them out.” He hated the Empire even more after what had happened with Hota.

As the barbarian’s eyes regained their usual glow, Cale told Tunka one last thing: “Be yourself.”

Be myself. The corners of Tunka’s lips lifted, and he soon wore his usual grin, which made him look like a simpleton. He rose from his seat. “Yes. I need to live a life that’s true to myself,” he agreed, eyes fixed on Cale.

The young nobleman nodded, and Tunka’s grin widened.

“Do pay some attention to your soldiers as well, though,” Cale said flatly. “Maybe it’s because I’m a weakling, but it hurts me to see other weaklings die.”

That comment made Tunka think, *He says he’s not a good person, then tells me something like that?* The barbarian had resolved to live a life true to his mindset, and it wasn’t his style to take care of weaklings. Nevertheless, he told Cale, “I’ll think about it.”

Cale was startled. *Think about it? Tunka can think?* He'd assumed the barbarian would either ignore his request or refuse it.

His shock didn't faze Tunka, who said one last thing before ending the conversation: "Chief Advisor Herol will attend the meeting in my place."

Cale nodded. In attending, Herol would also be representing Whipper at the meeting. He was an appropriate choice for a delegate. Though Whipper's current focus was war against the Empire, Herol was no military strategist; he'd been appointed chief advisor due to his leadership of the citizens alongside Tunka. His brief absence wouldn't hamper their operations.

"Got it," said Cale. "Get some rest. You've been through a lot."

Tunka burst out laughing. "Bwa ha ha ha ha! Rest? All right, I will!"

Cale grimaced at the whiplash of Tunka's ever-changing mood.

Indifferent to that look, Tunka said goodbye. "See you next time." With that, he turned off his communication device.

Cale stared at the suddenly dark screen. *Why would I see you next time?* He had no desire to deal with Tunka again. Sighing, he leaned back on the couch.

At that moment, he heard a knock on the door of the video communication room.

"Lord Cale," came Rosalyn's voice. "Miss Tasha and Miss Mary have arrived."

Cale rose from his seat. It was time to reconvene with the half-saint and fake saintess.

Click. The door opened, and Cale met Rosalyn's gaze.

"Lord Cale…"

"What is it, Miss Rosalyn?"

Rosalyn saw that Cale had a very mischievous smile. She didn't know where it had come from, but it tugged a smile from her as well. Her smirk was similar to Cale's.

"I hope you'll return safely once you've taken care of things."

"Much appreciated. I can do so thanks to you."

Raon descended from the fifth floor. “Human! Human! Hm?” Raon paused to take in the expressions on their faces. “That smile of yours means that you’re up to mischief, human. What’re you planning now?”

Cale actually didn’t have much planned for this trip. “I’m just going to help heal someone in pain.”

No one in the room believed him, especially not Raon.

***

Cale immediately ushered Tasha and Mary into the villa. “Oh, um… You haven’t changed,” he told Mary.

It had been a while since he’d seen the necromancer, and her black cloak still covered her from head to toe. Having spent enough time with Mary before her departure to judge her mood, Cale got the sense that she was quite content.

“Hello, Lord Cale. I am very happy to see you again.” Mary’s voice was stiff and emotionless, to the point that it reminded him of a GPS. Yet a warm, black blob of energy seemed to radiate from under her cloak.

Raon was the most delighted to reunite with the necromancer. “I’m happy too! I checked on those bones now and then for you, nice lady Mary!”

“Thank you very much.”

“This’ll be your first time visiting the jungle, right? I’ve been there. I’ll tell you about everything.”

“You’re amazing, Mr. Raon. Is the jungle sky beautiful as well?”

“Of course! And we’ll cross the ocean to get there. It’ll be difficult this time, but let’s try and sightsee on that killer whale Archie’s back!”

“All right. I’m looking forward to it.”

While Cale watched Raon and Mary chat, someone poked him in the side. He frowned at the hard jab and turned around; what he saw explained the person’s forcefulness.

“Hey, wh-wha…?” The dark elf Tasha gaped in shock, completely lost for words. Naturally, her gaze was fixed on Erhaven. The gold dragon stood beside Raon, speaking with Mary.

“I haven’t seen a necromancer in some time,” he said.

“You’ve met a necromancer before, Gragon?”

“Do you think I’m a youngster like you?”

“Mary, don’t listen to the Gragon calling me ‘youngster.’”

Such petty banter was beneath the two dragons, but that clearly didn’t matter to the dark elf. Cale gave her shoulder a gentle pat. “Miss Tasha.”

“Lord Cale! How…?!”

“Please remember your vow on the elementals,” he whispered in Tasha’s ear. “This is a secret from His Highness.” As usual, his tone was half-respectful and half-casual.

Tasha’s shoulders jumped. Calming herself, she met Cale’s eyes.

He smiled as he added, “Actually, your vow was just about Raon. If you made a new vow that included Lord Erhaven, that’d be more watertight. Do that now, please.”

A grin appeared on Tasha’s face. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Will you make that vow?”

“Of course.” She couldn’t decline; the dragon called Erhaven had been glaring at her during the exchange.

What Cale said next came as a relief. “Good. Don’t worry, I’ll tell His Highness eventually.”

“I trust you.”

Tasha gazed at him with gratitude. Although Mary lacked a certain “human” quality, she’d changed in the short time she’d been apart from Tasha. *“Lord Cale, Mr. Raon, I like them all,”* she’d told the dark elf. *“I want to go back. It was fun.”* Tasha had never expected the word “fun” to come out of Mary’s mouth. She was thankful to Cale. Mary was as much a family member as her nephew Albert was.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” Cale asked bluntly. The dark elf’s expression had flitted from flustered to wary to grateful in no time.

Tasha merely chuckled in lieu of a response.

After that, Cale joined Erhaven's side. "What're your thoughts after seeing Mary?"

"Do you want Pendrick to heal that child?"

"Yes, sir."

The gold dragon lapsed into thought. "Hmm."

Cale had heard that it was Erhaven himself who had healed the weak Pendrick. "Lord Erhaven," he said slowly.

"Yeah?"

"Is that beyond Pendrick's skill level?"

"It is."

"What about yours, sir? As a great being, you've come across necromancers before. Don't you know a lot about them?"

Erhaven's gaze flicked from Mary to Cale, who was not-so-subtly trying to saddle him with healing the necromancer.

I can't say I disagree with his way of handling things, Erhaven reflected. The reason Cale didn't irritate him was simple. *His requests are never truly selfish.*

Cale never asked him anything out of self-interest. He first came to Erhaven for help in finding the power of earth, but that was at Raon's request. The only other favors Cale had asked of Erhaven were that the gold dragon help strengthen his companions and that he investigate a stone pillar that might endanger the whole region.

What an oddball.

Cale complained incessantly about his life, yet he always acted to help others. Erhaven couldn't resent that. The gold dragon was self-centered, but that was why he had a soft spot for altruistic humans.

Studying Cale, Erhaven said bluntly, "I'll take a look at the child—to satisfy my own curiosity, not because of your request."

"Thank you so much."

"Ahem!" Loudly clearing his throat, Erhaven looked away.

Now that Erhaven was involved in healing Mary, Cale felt he could relax. As he turned his attention away from the dragon, he

felt Tasha's eyes on him. The cloaked necromancer was also drawing near. "Lord Cale..."

"What?" Cale snapped.

Tasha couldn't hide how touched she was as she sidled up to him too. "You really are a kind person."

"Yes, thank you," came Mary's dispassionate follow-up. "You are a good and righteous man."

Cale simply nodded at them. He was only doing this so that Mary would get stronger. *Only then can she play her role during our battle with the northern alliance.*

When the wyvern knight brigade flew over the Dark Forest, Mary would be the key to their defenses. Winning the first battle was vital in war. As soon as the northern alliance left their own realms to march on Rowoon and Brek, Cale planned to crush them in Henituse territory. A mere defeat wouldn't be enough for them, really.

I'll obliterate them.

Doing so was necessary to make Arm and the Empire hesitate —to say nothing of the northern alliance itself. He and Albert had already discussed what measures they planned to take, depending on the enemy's actions. And to that end, he had to heal Mary.

"Hurry up and recover," he told her. "If you're grateful to me, build up your strength."

"Yes, sir. I certainly will."

Sensing passion in Mary's robotic voice, Cale smiled with satisfaction and turned his head—then recoiled. While he was distracted, Ron had appeared at his side without a sound.

"I must only do the same as last time, right, young master?"

Suddenly, Cale felt at ease. Ron was the most reliable of his companions. Facing the old assassin, he said softly, "Exactly like last time."

"Understood."

The group heading out on this foray included both dragons, Ron, Mary, and Tasha. Cale was headed to the jungle with yet another new combination of people.

***

“This land belongs to you, Lord Cale?”

“Well, yes.”

Cale answered Tasha in a blasé fashion as they reached Sector One’s shores. Tasha—who’d transformed to resemble a normal human—was shocked. She stared blankly at the scenery before alighting from their ship.

They had traveled to the jungle by sea. Despite having two dragons with them, they’d opted not to fly, as the dragons had to be undercover. Cale needed to hide Tasha and Mary’s identities as well—though Tasha could potentially reveal herself, depending on how things went.

“Lord Cale.”

Looking at the person who’d come to greet him, Cale assumed an awkward smile. As a show of respect, Queen Ritana had dispatched her right-hand man and most trusted subordinate, Bin… as well as her closest animal companion, Ten.

Bin politely dipped his head to Cale. “It’s been a while.”

Cale acknowledged Bin’s greeting, then glanced to one side of him. The black panther bared his fangs in a sort of grin. “Grrrowr.”

Damn it.

Sending the creature she trusted most *did* prove how much Cale mattered to Ritana. Still, Cale didn’t want to ride the panther again.

‹I’d like to try riding him, human! But I have to stay hidden, right?›

Ignoring Raon, Cale asked Bin, “Do we all need to ride? It looks like you brought horses.”

“Well, we also have a carriage.”

“I see. Then I’ll—”

Ten padded over and rubbed his face on Cale’s leg. “Growr!”

Bin smiled. “It looks like Ten missed you. Her Majesty said he’d be willing to let *you* ride him.”

“Right…”

In the end, Cale’s group split up, some entering the carriage and others mounting the horses. Cale himself got on top of Ten. The panther seemed happy with this, letting out little growls as Cale clutched his fur.

Then Cale asked Bin another question. “Where do I need to meet them?” He didn’t need to specify who; Bin knew that he was going to convene with the saint and saintess.

“The two of them are in Sector Seven of the jungle.”

The jungle contained fifteen sectors total. Sector Seven was in the center, notable for its large lake. The jungle monarchs’ palace had been there for generations.

Glancing at Bin, Cale joked, “She’s hiding them in plain sight?”

“Something like that.” At any rate, Ritana was definitely taking good care of the twins.

“Let’s hurry,” Cale urged him.

“Yes, sir!”

Bin’s horse rushed to the front of the group, with Ten behind him. Jerking at the surge in speed, Cale held on for dear life.

***

Even going at the fastest possible pace, it took them a couple of days to reach Sector Seven. Once they arrived, Cale couldn’t help admiring the location. *I didn’t think the word “city” could describe a spot in the jungle, but this certainly qualifies. Amazing.* The buildings and trees appeared to intertwine, yet the structures were no less sophisticated than those of other realms.

“What do you think?” Bin asked as he walked along one path.

Cale looked at the animals and people weaving through the trees, then the buildings around them. “It’s very cool,” he said bluntly.

“You’re right. It is.” Bin seemed proud of this jungle city. He pointed to the heart of the sector, which was surrounded by trees.

“You can’t see it right now with the trees in the way, but that’s where the palace is.”

“And I’ll see Her Majesty at dinner?”

“Correct. But before then, well…”

Cale understood what Bin was trying to say. “I’ll meet *them* as soon as we arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bin escorted Cale and the others to the center of Sector Seven, and soon the palace came into view. Ron brought his horse up to Cale to share his sentiments, humming thoughtfully. “It’s magnificent, young master.”

Cale agreed. *That palace is part of nature, and nature is part of the palace. Is that the gist?* The structure was built among trees that had to be centuries old, towering over them like a giant mountain.

‹This kind of house is nice too, human! Should we get one?›

Ignoring Raon’s nonsense, Cale faced Bin again.

“Please follow me,” Bin said as they approached the palace.

The warriors standing guard moved aside the moment they caught sight of him, and Cale’s group entered without any issues.

“It took two hundred years to construct this palace without damaging the jungle around it,” Bin explained. “That is the reason for its unique structure.”

As Cale listened, they moved to the far side of the palace. There, they encountered two of the centuries-old trees, which grew upward until they intertwined into one. The small building sat beneath them, right in the middle.

When Bin stopped walking, Cale understood that they’d almost arrived.

“We’ll be going underneath it,” Bin said.

“Let’s do it,” Cale replied.

Bin approached the structure. The guards in front looked tougher than those posted in other areas, but at a wave of Bin’s hand, they opened the door.

“Will all of your companions accompany you?” Bin asked Cale.

“Yes.”

Cale’s entourage exited the carriage or dismounted their horses, then stood behind him. With everyone assembled, they entered the small palace. It only had one hall, which was guarded by multiple warriors—another indication Ritana was taking great care to protect the twins.

Bin approached a door in the middle of the hall, then opened it. *Creeak.* The path descending underground was clean and bright.

“It’s down here.”

Cale nodded and followed Bin through the door. *Tap. Tap.* Hearing their footsteps as they descended below the palace, Cale noted that the stone steps went a *long* way down.

“Is this underground area the heart of the palace?” he asked.

“Yes. We dug a large chamber to avoid harming those two trees by constructing aboveground. Only one servant, one top-class guard, and the two guests are down here. Though I was stationed here as well before I left to escort you over.” In short, this chamber was more than safe.

“I feel like we’ve been descending for a while,” Cale said. “Is it much farther?”

“We’re almost th—”

Before Bin could finish, a woman’s scream sounded from the base of the stairs. “Ugh! Aaaaahhh!”

It was Hana the swordmaster; she sounded as though she was about to be killed. Everyone stopped in their tracks.

Something touched Cale’s shoulder. *Pat.* Turning his head, he flinched; the black sleeve resting on his shoulder belonged to Mary’s cloak.

The necromancer spoke up with uncharacteristic emotion. “She is having a seizure.”

“What?”

“She’s in danger. This is a sign that her dead-mana poisoning is progressing to its middle stages. It is agonizing.”

The screaming continued. “Gaaaaah! Augh! Aaaaaugh!”

“She seems to have reached her limit,” Mary added quickly.

Instead of replying to Mary, Cale spun and gave Bin an order: “Hurry.”

Tap. Tap. Tap. The sound of their feet rushing downward reverberated in the stairwell, but Hana’s occasional screams drowned them out.

“Bin, didn’t you say she was still in the *beginning* stages of dead-mana poisoning?” Cale demanded. He and Ritana had left plenty of top-grade potions with Hana to keep her poisoning at bay for as long as possible.

“She was, sir,” Bin answered quickly. “According to the message I received last night.”

Behind Cale, Tasha spoke up. “She’s *reaching* the middle stages—she isn’t there yet. But she’s still at risk.” There was urgency in her voice.

As he hurried downstairs, Cale recalled a conversation he’d had with Mary while they were traveling aboard the ship.

“You said there’s a way to help her?”

“Yes. If she is a swordmaster, then it’s possible.”

“Mary…I don’t just want her to barely pull through. I need her in better shape than that.”

“I know, Lord Cale. I will help her recover until she’s back to normal.”

Mary had sounded confident. The necromancer could come off as a bit disconnected, but Cale knew she meant the things she said.

Tap. Tap.

They could now see a door at the foot of the stairs. It was ajar, hence Hana’s screams leaking into the stairwell. A servant stood beside the door, unsure whether to close it or leave it open.

“What’s going on?!” Bin asked, and the servant’s face brightened.

“Oh, Bin!”

Cale and Bin made a beeline for the door. Through the gap, they glimpsed a hallway and a chamber. The screams were coming from within.

“Aaaaaaah!”

The servant launched right into a report for Bin. “The guest’s seizures started about two hours ago. The guard is on standby in the room in case things escalate. I couldn’t decide who to report to.”

The “guest” the servant referred to was the swordmaster, Hana.

“She’s held on for two hours… Her endurance is amazing,” Tasha mumbled in shock.

As Cale pivoted to Tasha, he found himself staring at Mary instead. “She’s barely holding on,” the necromancer warned. “We must get inside quickly.”

Cale didn’t respond. He glanced at the door; beside it, Bin was speaking with the servant.

“The seizures are so serious that we can’t calm—”

“Move.”

“Excuse me?”

The servant scuttled backward in surprise as someone strode between him and Bin. This interloper with an oppressive aura was none other than Cale.

“Lord Cale,” Bin called, trying to intercept him. The moment their eyes met, Bin froze.

Cale shoved the large door open with both hands, and it loudly swung open. *Creaaak! Bang!* He walked inside, with Mary, Tasha, Ron, and the dragons hot on his heels.

Bin watched them go, then told the servant, “Inform Her Majesty that an important guest has arrived.”

“Uh, y-yes, sir!”

After making sure the servant had left, Bin rushed through the door after Cale.

Cale had already reached the door in the hallway. He stood on the luxurious carpet in front of that door, which was also wide open. The room beyond was well lit, making it easy to see.

Ron, who stood right behind Cale, grimaced as he peered inside. *How awful,* he thought. It was a terrible sight, even to him.

“Ugh! Aaaahh!” Hana lay on a bed, writhing in pain. “Aaaaahhhh!”

She was nearly unrecognizable. The black veins all over her body looked ready to burst. Every orifice on her face—her nose, eyes, and ears—was bleeding, and black smoke rose from her form.

“Augh! Aaaaahhh!”

Hana screamed herself hoarse. Her lip bled where she’d bitten it, and her eyes were red; she must have tried to hold back her screams for some time.

“Hana! *Hana!* Please, oh, Lord!”

The saint was crying at the edge of her bed, unable to even utter a prayer. He *couldn’t* pray, in fact; he was worried that the God of Sun would harm Hana now that she’d been poisoned with dead mana.

“Please, Hana, just a little more strength! Please!” he begged her. If she hung on a bit longer, they’d have a way to save her. He wanted to believe that.

Dozens of empty bottles rolled around on the floor. They’d contained top-grade potions, but those hadn’t helped. Hana had suddenly started convulsing about two hours earlier.

The saint sniffled and wept as he met the reddened eyes looking at him. His eyes were red too, and he felt like he was about to go mad.

I want to purify her!

He watched his little sister produce plumes of black smoke, struggling to reconcile his thoughts as both her brother and a saint. As a saint, he wanted to use his healing powers to eradicate the dead mana—but in putting an end to its victim, he would be killing his own sister. He clasped his hands tightly as he looked into her eyes, pleading, “Hana, hold on a little longer! If you do—”

“Then she’ll get better.”

Pat. Someone placed their hand on the saint’s shoulder. Feeling that, the saint realized something. He’d thought that his sister was looking at him, but she’d been looking *past* him. When he heard that familiar voice, the saint slowly turned his head. The one who’d spoken was Cale Henituse.

Studying Hana, Cale added, “Good job resisting so far. Hold out for just a bit longer.”

The saint heaved a sigh of relief—until an overwhelming pressure clenched his heart in a vise. His gaze flicked over to the door. When he saw the pair standing there—a black-robed figure and an unfamiliar woman—his hands started to shake. His intuition, a power he’d received from the God of Sun, told him about them: *That’s a human who can use dead mana. There’s a dark elf too.*

To someone who’d grown up in the church as the saint of the God of Sun, they were his enemies. Although he was weak for a saint and only possessed healing powers, his instincts consumed him. *I must get rid of them. I must purify them!*

The divine power the God of Sun had bestowed on him enveloped his body, and his eyes reddened for a different reason than before.

Suddenly, the hand on his shoulder clamped down. The saint whipped his head around to see Cale, who was gripping him so forcefully that he nearly grunted in pain.

Holding the saint’s gaze, Cale told him, “They’ve come to save your sister despite knowing the risks.” The saint took note of Cale’s somber tone. “Don’t you want to save Miss Hana—your sister?”

The saint clenched his fists and bit his lip, then slowly rose to his feet and backed up. His body trembled as he moved away, not looking at Mary or Tasha.

“I can handle it,” he told Cale. He could fight his instincts and avoid acting on them.

The saint saw Cale smile for the first time today. “Keep it controlled,” he said tersely, then immediately ordered Tasha and Mary, “Begin.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Got it.”

The pair headed straight for Hana’s bed, and Cale followed suit. He bent down to the poisoned woman, who was still watching him.

Mary had said that a specific treatment was possible because Hana was a swordmaster. *“It is impossible to get rid of the dead mana*

completely, but her aura should be able to fuse with it. Once it does, she will have the darkness attribute. She will need to maintain the balance between the two constantly. There may be side effects. But she will live, and I can be the one to fuse the mana to her aura."

Getting close to the swordmaster's ear so she'd hear him better, Cale said, "Hana, raise your aura to the highest level. You'll sense a power that'll help you fuse the dead mana with your aura. Follow the path that power creates."

Hana opened her mouth as if to say something, but only blood and black smoke came out. "Urgh, hrk!"

Cale stared at her, then added, "Make sure you survive."

At that point, Hana closed her eyes, and her body radiated with a golden aura. Mary pulled up her sleeves, revealing her hands. They were covered in what looked like black spiderwebs, and a black aura rose from them.

Tasha propped Hana up, and Mary placed both hands on the swordmaster's back. "Please manipulate your aura according to my instructions," the necromancer directed.

As Tasha created a dark smoke that surrounded both Hana and Mary, Cale stepped back. There was nothing left for him to do. Ron and Bin had already left the room with the guard right when Mary pulled up her sleeves.

Cale glanced over at the saint, who trembled in the corner as he watched them. Erhaven stood beside him, arms crossed.

‹The gold dragon and I will watch the saint, human.›

Since Erhaven and Raon lacked the darkness attribute, they had nothing to do. Cale didn't possess the attribute either, so he walked over to join the saint. He and Erhaven now flanked the young man.

"I haven't seen a bona fide necromancer in a long time," Erhaven said.

A dark aura slowly filled the room. Unlike dead mana, it wasn't poisonous, so Cale wasn't too worried. The same could not be said of the saint, though. He panted, his breathing ragged. This *would* be difficult for a devotee of the God of Sun.

Cale watched the young man for a bit, then said to Erhaven, “She’s the first necromancer since the last of them died.”

“I see. She’s truly something. But guiding the dead mana in someone else’s body will be painful for her.”

Hearing Erhaven’s words, the saint flinched.

During Cale’s trip through the jungle, Tasha had sidled up to him to say, *“The fusing process will be most painful for Mary. It’ll be even harder on her than the saintess. Still, she’s adamant about helping. I’m sure you’re aware of her kindness, Lord Cale.”*

Cale spoke up again. “That necromancer, Mary, was poisoned by dead mana while crossing Death Desert with her poor family. The rest of her relatives died. She was the only survivor.”

The saint gradually turned to face him.

“Absorbing the darkness attribute was the only way for her to survive her poisoning,” Cale continued. “That’s how she ended up a necromancer. And she came here to save Miss Hana.” To the saint, his words were loud as thunderclaps.

Meanwhile, the black-cloaked woman began shouting at Hana. “You need to persevere! Push all the dead mana toward me!” Her scarred hands shook violently. Beside her, Tasha continued to produce black smoke. The saint couldn’t take his eyes off them.

Cale addressed the young man once more. “If Miss Hana survives, Saint Jack, she’ll also have the darkness attribute.” With that, he pressed his lips together and said nothing further.

Hana’s screams, Mary’s shouts, and Tasha’s desperate cries formed a cacophony that assailed the room.

Through all that, a quiet voice reached Cale’s ear. “Lord Cale,” murmured the saint. “Thank you so much.” Cale looked at the saint, who was trying very hard to smile. “I know how to tell good intentions from nefarious ones.”

Erhaven interjected, “That’s what it *means* to be a saint.”

Those words throttled the saint’s heart. He closed his eyes and clenched his hands together. His nails dug into his skin, drawing blood, but he didn’t let go. He’d learned that some things were more important than the justice the God of Sun had taught him.

A cold sensation enveloped his hands. Unclenching them, the saint saw a potion flowing over his fingers.

"It's good that you can rein it in. You can't get hurt in the process, though," Cale said, pouring out the potion.

Suppressing the emotions rising inside him, the saint nodded. "Here I thought goodness was far away, but I was wrong." It was very, very close. He felt as though he finally understood what *true* goodness meant, which reassured him.

Since the saint seemed all right, Cale turned back toward Hana and Mary.

Raon spoke up in his mind, sounding a little hesitant. *‹I'm sorry, human.›*

Cale furrowed his brow. *What nonsense is he going on about now?*

‹When you said you'd heal her, you had your scammer smile on. I thought you were lying. But you really are a good person, human. You're strange sometimes, but your essence is good.›

Cale ignored him.

‹I was wrong,› the black dragon continued. *‹That swordmaster will get better, right, human?›*

Of course.

Hana, the fake saintess, needed to live. A saintess who was poisoned by a dead-mana bomb, overcame the darkness, and continued using her golden aura—alongside a just saint with healing powers—would invoke admiration in the God of Sun's believers. The saint and saintess would become significant figures capable of shaking the core of the Empire.

Cale heard Mary cry out again. "Yes, just like that! Use your aura to create a path!"

Tasha encouraged Hana from the side. "Keep it up! You can do it!"

Cale recalled the promise he'd made to Hana within the cave in No Way Out. Regardless of her involvement with Arm, her standing as saintess, and the fact that the Empire was chasing her and her brother, he'd assured her of one thing:

“I’ll bring someone who can heal you too. Just wait.”

And Cale was someone who kept his word.

***

An hour passed, and a sizzling sound filled the room. *Hisssss.*

The necromancer Mary began to moan. “Mmnngh… Urrrgh…”

So this is how her scars appeared. Cale bit his lip.

‹That looks like it hurts,› came Raon’s sad voice in his mind. The little dragon was talking about both Mary and Hana.

Initially, the black veins on Hana’s body had looked like they might burst any second; now they were gradually shrinking. The agitation had calmed all across her skin, including her arms, face, neck, and calves. Black lines like tattooed spiderwebs appeared in place of the angry veins. The lines were ugly—indeed, grotesque—and they spread over her body like cracks in a riverbed during a long drought.

The saint stared at his sister, wide-eyed. “Hana…”

Out of the blue, Hana doubled over. “Mmgh! Ugh!”

Surprised, Tasha caught the swordmaster as her eyes opened. They weren’t focused at all.

“W-wake up…” Mary tried to speak, but she couldn’t manage much. Her entire body was shaking, and she looked exhausted.

Hisssss.

The necromancer’s hands were on Hana’s back, absorbing the churning black smoke and creating a path for dead mana to flow through the swordmaster’s body.

Hisssss.

Both hands had been scorched black. Mary had maintained that dead mana channel for an hour now, *and* inside someone else to boot. Such a task was beyond difficult. Mary was the only person who could do so, as she was the one human who knew how dead mana flowed through other humans’ bodies.

Just then, a voice said, “Hana.”

Cale had walked back to the swordmaster's bed. He peered into her unfocused eyes.

"Wake up," he said.

Hana's fingers twitched. A golden aura still surrounded her body, showing that she wasn't completely unconscious.

Watching him interact with Hana, Tasha bit her lip. "Lord Cale…" As a dark elf with the darkness attribute, she couldn't assist Mary in creating the dead-mana path through Hana's body. Had she been able to do so, she would've helped Mary years ago. Without any other way to assist, she'd given Mary the book that let her choose the path of a necromancer.

"Hana, you have to be the one to defend yourself."

Hearing Cale's remark, Tasha propped Hana up. She wanted to save this woman, although she'd initially been hesitant after hearing about Hana's relationship with the Church of the God of Sun.

Tasha gasped. Hana's eyes had closed—but her gaze had sharpened first.

Thrummm. The dark elf unwittingly let go of the swordmaster, whose body was producing a rumbling noise.

Hana sat up straight on her own. She breathed raggedly as she spoke through bleeding lips. "I'm not going to die."

Cale grinned and backed away once more.

Flash! Blinding golden light shot from Hana's body, as if produced by the last ember of her life.

To one side, Cale heard Erhaven say, "She's putting everything on the line." Hana was risking life and limb to resist the dead mana and pull through.

Mary groaned and laughed all in one breath. "Haah… Ha ha!" Her black cloak completely concealed her expression, but Cale could tell the necromancer was happy. She must've been thrilled to see Hana doing her utmost to survive.

The sizzling *hiss* continued; it was a horrifying sound. Even more black smoke poured out from Mary and Hana. Yet Cale's smile didn't falter. *She'll survive.* His intuition, which was usually correct, told him Hana would live. He continued to look quietly at the bed,

though it was no longer visible due to the golden light and the black smoke. Standing next to the saint, he put a hand on the young man's shoulder. The saint sobbed. *He's so fainthearted.*

Cale patted the shoulder of the emotional saint, who'd come to the same conclusion as Cale. The man could see his younger sister striving to overcome this hurdle, and since they were related, he knew she would.

"Thank you so much. Thank you so, *so* much," the saint repeated, though it wasn't obvious whom he was thanking. He even seemed to be praying, in a way. Cale listened, waiting for the process to end.

After another hour, Hana lay on the bed with a relaxed expression. Mary rose and looked at Cale. "She…survived."

Cale shook his head at that. Mary, who was heading toward him, immediately flinched. Then he said, "*You* saved her, Mary."

Mary smiled, though nobody could see it beneath her black hood. At the same time, the shocked Tasha blurted out, "Mary!"

The necromancer had no strength left. She could tell that she was leaning to one side, but she noticed that she wasn't falling over; someone had grabbed her before she collapsed. Over her cloak, she felt their touch. *Pat. Pat.*

"You worked hard," Cale said. "Get some rest."

Mary closed her eyes without hesitation. *I saved her.* That was her last thought before she fainted.

Cale peered down at the cloaked woman in his arms. He'd managed to keep Mary from collapsing, but… *I don't think I can lift her.* He wasn't strong enough. Besides, after standing for two hours straight, his legs ached.

He slowly turned to meet Tasha's eyes. The dark elf—who'd been rushing to Mary when Cale caught her—stood there with a blank expression.

"Tasha."

"Uh, yes…? Yes?"

"You can move Mary with the wind elemental, right?"

“Ah, yes.” Tasha nodded. The wind elemental could certainly do that.

Smiling, Cale pointed at Mary with his chin. Unable to do so himself, he instructed, “Then move her.”

Hana and Mary had passed out after the procedure, but it had been a success. Both women had survived.

***

“Lord Cale,” called a cautious voice.

Cale turned toward the source. “Yes, Saint Jack?”

The saint faltered. He looked down at Hana, who was sleeping peacefully, then asked, “Will the necromancer be all right?”

“Yes, she should be fine. Miss Tasha will look after her.”

“I’m glad… Really, I am.”

Jack had a saint’s holy demeanor as he clasped his hands together and smiled. Yet his smile turned rueful as he looked back at his sister. Only the siblings and Cale—who’d come in to check on Hana—were in the room. They’d made a mess of the chamber where they healed Hana, so they had since moved her into the room next door.

The saint felt both admiration and trepidation as he regarded his sister under the bright light. Scars like black spiderwebs stretched across her face. Anyone could tell at a glance that she’d survived dead-mana poisoning.

If we want to stay out of the Empire’s clutches, we’ll need to live someplace isolated.

They’d absconded from the church only to be chased by the Empire’s forces. Even if they escaped completely, they would need to avoid people altogether. He couldn’t help sighing at their situation.

“Things will be difficult from here on out,” he muttered.

“You think?” Cale asked.

The saint nodded. “I do. People are wary of the darkness attribute—and of dead mana.” So he said, but he didn’t sound terribly defeated. “Now it’s my turn to protect Hana.”

Jack would have to protect and hide his sister from the world’s prying eyes and the judgment that came with them. His expression held bitterness and joy in equal measure.

“We’ll have to spend our whole lives in hiding. From the scars on Hana’s face, people could easily recognize that she has the darkness attribute. Still, it’s enough that she’s alive.”

“Why do you have to live in hiding?”

“Pardon?” The saint thought he’d misheard. He turned away from Hana toward the redheaded man, who radiated confidence.

Inside Cale’s mind, Raon remarked, *‹The swordmaster has awoken, human.›*

Cale dismissed that and said what he needed to. “Dead mana is a severe poison for humans. It’s miraculous that she overcame it.”

When the saint saw Cale look at Hana the same way he always had, a thought crossed his mind: *Does Lord Cale’s unique kindness extend to necromancers?* A dark elf, a necromancer, even a servant with an artificial arm—Cale didn’t seem to have any issue being around those with a darkness affinity.

As the saint mulled that over, Cale went on, “Just as hard workers have callused hands, I’d say the scars on your sister’s face are symbols of what she’s overcome.”

The saint let out a small gasp.

“I think someday people will appreciate and celebrate those who can endure so much. Just like how you’re thankful toward Mary.”

The saint’s heart was pounding. He hadn’t purified Mary, despite his instincts from the God of Sun, and now he was thankful to her. That was because he knew her story. He understood that she’d been poisoned by dead mana, and he recognized everything she had been through. Even after undergoing so many hardships in her personal life, she’d been willing to suffer to save a stranger.

The God of Sun had told his believers, *“Goodness is like bright light. However long a human wanders lost in the darkness, a single ray*

of light will help them live on."

Jack, this half-saint who'd lived under the oppression of the church, was coming to understand what he'd been taught. "Having the darkness attribute doesn't necessarily mean someone has no good in their heart," he said. "People are also a source of light, right?"

He wanted Cale to confirm that, and Cale had no problem responding, "A world where that's common sense is in our near future, Saint Jack."

‹Human, look! The swordmaster's eyelids are fluttering! I was right about her waking up. I really am great!›

Cale ignored Raon's commentary, continuing to address the saint. "If we try hard enough, I believe we can make it happen."

"You're right. I agree." Jack nodded, filled with determination. "I'll work to make that world a reality. Hana and the necromancer have darkness within them, but they're still good people—willing to be a ray of light to benefit others. I'll strive to ensure that people understand that."

A smile played on Cale's lips as he looked past Jack's shoulder to the bed behind him. Hana was opening her eyes. Once she'd stirred, she glanced over at Cale.

He held her gaze. "People who overcome difficulties must be applauded. Those who survive it all earn that right."

Hana understood exactly whom Cale meant. She smiled at him, difficult as it was. But her smile wasn't one of warmth; her joy at being alive was tinged with a cold thirst for revenge.

"You're right!" Jack said, excited. "What a deep fellow you are, Lord Cale."

Cale smiled humbly at him. Gazing at the now full-fledged saint, as well as the fake saintess who hadn't forgotten her goal, he thought, *That's one more thing off the list for us to take the Empire by surprise.*

Preparations for a show that would rattle their foe were gradually coming together.

***

Such a show was still a long ways off. Cale had a slew of things to take care of in advance. *Those aren't my problems to handle, though,* he mused.

He was drinking tea and chatting with Queen Ritana. He took a leisurely sip of the jungle's signature blend, then put his teacup down with a *clink*.

The second he did, Ritana said, "According to the saint, the Alchemist's Bell Tower conducted a lot of research on warfare and killing." She looked disgusted, and Cale had a solid idea as to why.

"They probably needed to do a lot of experiments to conduct that kind of research," he said.

Ritana nodded, gulping down her tea. *Isn't that hot?* Cale wondered, worried about her scalding herself. He thought of saying as much—until Ritana slammed her teacup on the glass table. *Thwack!*

The queen's eyes blazed with anger. "I can't forgive them. How could they kill so many animals and humans in such a cruel manner?!"

Watching the enraged Ritana, Cale took another sip of tea.

Creating deadly weapons and instruments of war through alchemy or magic required extensive experimentation. Such experiments were generally performed on orcs or goblins. Cale didn't think too highly of that, but according to what the saint had told them, the methods used in the Alchemist's Bell Tower were far worse.

The Empire was one of the few nations that still allowed slavery. They'd used slaves and slaughtered animals for their experiments. The jungle's citizens—who didn't have slavery and lived in harmony with animals—couldn't help feeling incensed by that.

Ritana asked Cale, "It's downright awful, don't you agree?"

"Yes."

"Right. That's why we need to save them."

Hmm? Teacup halfway to his lips, Cale looked at her anew. For some reason, her fierce gaze chilled him to the bone.

"I have bad blood with the Empire and the Alchemist's Bell Tower," she said. It made sense, as the imperial prince and the alchemists were responsible for the fire in Sector One. "That being the case, I have no plan to conquer the Empire's territories, nor do I wish to kill its citizens. I just want to kill the basta—no. Hmm. I want to *get rid of* the person in charge and prevent future experiments like this."

"Should I deliver that message to Crown Prince Albert?"

Ritana smiled, nodding. "Yes. Please inform His Highness that this is our position."

Cale nodded back.

Rowoon served as a central hub connecting the rest of the nations. There was no other source of information, as only Cale and Albert had a full grasp on the current state of the continent. Only Brek, the Whipper, and the jungle knew that the Empire was working with the northern alliance. And only Cale, Albert, and their people were aware that Arm was involved with the northern alliance as well.

With a dip of his head, Cale lowered his teacup. "I'll deliver the message. By the way, Miss Rina…" He set his cup on the table, clasping his hands with a somber expression.

Ritana met his gaze with a similarly stiff look. "Yes?"

"Wouldn't it be best to destroy the Alchemist's Bell Tower while you're at it?"

"Sorry…?"

"Ah, I guess 'destroy' might be too strong a word. How about 'topple'?"

"Um, excuse me?" Ritana stared at Cale as if she couldn't comprehend what he was suggesting.

"It's just a thought I had after hearing of their cruelty," Cale replied in a measured voice. "Aren't you thinking the same, Miss Rina?"

“Of course I am… But it wouldn’t be easy to topple that tower.” It was called the Bell Tower because of the large bell atop it, but it was actually a fortress more durable than the Magic Tower.

“You’re right, it wouldn’t be.”

Ritana felt uncertain, but upon hearing Cale agree with her, she picked her teacup back up. “Dismantling the Alchemist’s Bell Tower will be a real challenge. It’s stood for centuries.”

“I suppose it has,” Cale acknowledged.

“I want to do it, though.”

Well, then, Cale thought. *Looks like I’ll be able to take a couple warriors from the jungle when I go destroy the Bell Tower.* He had already planned on that. He needed to destroy the Alchemist’s Bell Tower, a pillar holding up the Empire. If alchemy was one pillar, and the church was the other, then the imperial family served as the structure’s roof.

People claimed the church was headed for destruction, but Cale planned to knock down the Empire’s other primary support—alchemy—and replace it with a new and improved Church of the God of Sun.

Better to call that church a foundation than a pillar. After all, pillars were placed atop foundations, and Cale envisioned recreating *everything* from the foundation up. He didn’t have to do it himself, though. He intended to have others destroy the Bell Tower, then observe what happened next. He’d already formulated a strategy, so he was working his ass off to put the pieces in place.

Ritana brought up two of those very pieces. “You’re going to look after the saint and saintess, then?” Cale had told her that he was taking Jack and Hana with him.

“Yes, I’d like to if it’s all right with you, Miss Rina.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.” A real saintess and saint could’ve helped them put pressure on the Empire in the future, but the siblings were a fake saintess and a half-saint. The saint had already supplied Ritana with everything he knew, so she no longer needed the pair.

“Then I will.”

Ritana peered quietly at Cale, who planned on taking that baggage—those ticking time bombs, even—with him.

Cale offered her a gentle smile. “And about the woman in the black cloak… You know what I’m saying, right?”

“I know. I swear to keep her secret.”

Albert had told Ritana that they had someone capable of dealing with dead-mana bombs, and Cale had brought that person with him—which was, of course, something that needed to be kept secret. Ritana hadn’t told anyone but Bin and a few other direct subordinates.

Staring at her empty teacup, Ritana said, “We should get to it.”

She rose from her seat; Cale did likewise. He didn’t have anything else to say either.

“Will you leave right away?” the queen asked him.

“Once the saintess heals, I plan to move as quickly as possible.”

Ritana nodded and smiled as if she’d expected that answer. “I feel like she’ll recover quickly with you by her side, Lord Cale.” *And I think she’ll manage to take the greatest revenge possible,* the queen thought. She expected that Cale would help the twins take the sort of revenge he’d spoken of—namely, living happily ever after. *How can someone always put others before himself?*

She didn’t have the strength to live like Cale, but she resolved to do her best in her role. “I’ll take point in safely escorting you to shore.”

“Great. Thank you kindly.”

Cale had accepted her offer despite his urge to refuse, if only to avoid the annoyance of having to explain why. After all, his group would be perfectly fine without an escort.

We’ve got two dragons with us.

***

Clunk. Clunk. A single carriage wobbled up the dirt road, heading to Harris. The driver’s side window clicked open, and Ron—

who was serving as coachman—peeked inside. “The road is rough after the last few days of rain. I ask for your understanding, young master.”

“It’s fine. The seat’s soft,” Cale replied.

He looked around. Erhaven sat opposite him, legs crossed and looking out the window. Tasha was sitting on top of the carriage; she’d claimed that the vehicle’s seats were tiny and that sitting with the two dragons was suffocating.

The people surrounding Erhaven and Cale were a real mess. Hana took up a large section of the seat; dressed in a white robe, she leaned back, holding Mary’s hand. Raon and Jack sat next to them.

“Hey, little saint,” Raon said. “Ever been to the Dark Forest?” He sounded like an emperor speaking to one of his subjects.

“No, great dragon,” Jack replied respectfully. “I’d never been outside of the imperial capital until just recently, when we went on the run.”

“Got it! Well, I’ll show you around. I’ll give you a tour of the town too!”

Mary, who had been listening quietly, spoke up as well. “I too had never seen the world until the great dragon gave me a tour. There are so many wonderful places.”

She and Jack—two innocent souls who knew nothing of the world—seemed to fit right in with Raon. Cale clicked his tongue internally at the sight of them, then met Jack’s eyes. Jack bowed to Cale, his hands wrapped in bandages.

Cale had introduced Jack and Hana to his companions, including the two dragons, when he brought them to the cave. At the time, Jack had responded in a voice full of admiration: *“Of course such a big-hearted person would be surrounded by light.”*

Though Cale didn’t really like that response, he’d appreciated Hana’s: *“Great. We can take them out with a bang.”* He hadn’t needed to ask whom she was thinking about “taking out.” She’d seemed thrilled about the two dragons’ presence, eager to get her revenge. Cale preferred that reaction to Jack’s.

“Haaah.”

Cale initially thought *he'd* heaved a sigh, but it wasn't him.

Erhaven stared at Raon, then resumed gazing out the window. "Goodness, I've never seen a dragon act as a tour guide," he muttered. "I'm definitely getting too old."

The gold dragon said that sort of thing often these days; Cale was used to it by now. He leaned back in the carriage seat to rest until they reached the underground villa.

They soon arrived at the villa, new party members in tow. Those who'd been waiting at the residence walked over to welcome them, but when they saw the saint and saintess, there was no warmth in their eyes.

Cale took stock of the group's faces. Wholly oblivious to the tension, Hans wore a cheery expression. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "New family members!"

The wolf children watched Vicross and Ron, gauging their reactions. Vicross noted, "It looks like we'll need to cook for two more."

Seeing that the saint and saintess didn't faze the chef, the wolf children relaxed. Cale turned toward Choi Han and Rosalyn. Choi Han was staring off into the distance; Rosalyn smiled as she and Cale made eye contact.

Rosalyn and Hana had once fought over the ocean. Their conversation from back then rose to Cale's mind:

"Damn, you're strong."

"I am *a rather strong mage."*

"You've got another mage?!"

"Didn't I tell you we're a secret organization?"

Cale smiled awkwardly back at Rosalyn, recalling how the golden aura and magic had filled the air.

Hana lowered her hood, revealing the weblike scars on her face. Some of Cale's companions couldn't help gasping.

"Hmm?"

"Oh…"

Looking at them, Hana dipped her head. "Thank you for your hospitality."

A hand extended toward her, and she lifted her head. It was Rosalyn. The swordmaster made to reach out in turn, but she faltered upon seeing her own repellent flesh.

Rosalyn grabbed hold of her hand before she could pull away. “Welcome.”

The mage met Cale’s eyes. He nodded; Rosalyn really was the person who best understood him.

At that point, he stepped forward and addressed everyone. “Let’s get some rest for now.”

Frankly, he was tired and just wanted to lie down.

***

A few weeks passed. It was now the middle of summer, and sweltering at that. Cale was splayed out on the marble floor of his fifth-floor chamber, having pushed aside the rug to relax on the cool stone surface. *Marble is the best when it’s hot.*

“Aaaaaugh!”

“Whoooooaaa!”

Outside his window, energetic voices were still shouting; his companions were in the middle of training. Of course, that had nothing to do with Cale, who was eating grapes one by one. *Pop. Pop.*

“It’s about time for them to contact me,” he said to himself.

An icy sensation beyond the chill of the stone pricked the back of his neck, and his gaze snapped over to his desk. The communication sphere glowed red; Albert was trying to contact him.

His Highness is calling.

Sighing, Cale lifted himself off the floor. He’d been awaiting this call, lazing around doing nothing to gather enough energy for this moment. Now it was time to put that energy to use. He headed toward the door to track down either Rosalyn or Raon so he could answer the call.

He didn’t need to go very far. The door opened with a quiet *creak*, and Raon entered.

“Ra—”

“Don’t talk to me.”

Cale paused. *Hmm?*

Raon’s shoulders slumped as he flew in. His wings fluttered feebly, and his eyes were practically drooping. He was more floating than flying, his paws dangling as if he was exhausted.

Why is he like this? Cale had never seen Raon so lethargic before.

Then, another person—no, another *dragon*—entered the room. It was Erhaven.

“Lord Erhaven,” Cale greeted him.

Erhaven glanced at Raon, then at Cale. “A-ahem! I’m not saying this as his teacher, but…”

“Huh?”

“He’s pretty clever. He learned things in just one month that should’ve taken three.”

Where’s this coming from? Cale didn’t understand Erhaven’s spontaneous comment or Raon’s depressed demeanor.

As though wholly unaware of Cale’s visible confusion, Erhaven added, “He’s not growing, though.”

“What?” *Now what is he saying?*

It was then that Cale noticed that Erhaven seemed equally confused—bewildered, in fact. “He’s not entering his first growth phase.”

Cale’s brows shot up.

“It should be time, so what’s going on?” the gold dragon continued. “He must be prepared to grow.”

The situation clicked for Cale, and he turned his head to meet Raon’s gaze.

“Human…don’t talk to me.” Raon crawled under a blanket, then added, “I *am* great…so I’ll still do what you need me to.”

With that, he connected the communication sphere, and the device glowed blue with his magic. Cale watched the bed, where a Raon-sized lump stuck out in the middle of the blanket.

Sighing, Erhaven left. On the other side of the room, Cale soon came face-to-face with Albert via the communication sphere.

The moment the crown prince saw Cale, he demanded, “What’s with that look? Did the heat finally get to you?”

Chapter 31:
In the Middle of the Night

"IT MUST BE BECAUSE I'm so delighted to see you, Your Highness," Cale answered, sitting down on the couch in front of the communication sphere.

"If you're spewing crap like that, I guess you're fine," Albert retorted.

Cale paid no attention to Albert's brusque choice of words. Instead, he focused on the crown prince's complexion. Albert was very pale; his blond hair and blue eyes were bright as ever, yet he seemed fatigued.

"You look worn out, Your Highness."

"Want to help me?"

"All right. I'll send you some medicine."

Albert snorted, then raised a hand to his forehead.

The balance of power in Rowoon had changed drastically over the previous year. The northwestern Sten territory was now loyal to Albert rather than the third prince, as were most of the northeastern territories. And with the in-progress northwestern naval base being Albert's personal project, he was amassing significant amount of power that way too. Last but not least, the king was aware that Albert had brought over the Kingdom of the Whipper's mages and absorbed them into his faction. Some of Rowoon's top strategists knew that as well.

I'm the driving force behind the upcoming meeting too, Albert reflected. He had organized the discussion between four realms: Rowoon, Brek, the jungle, and Whipper.

All in all, he felt like Rowoon was slowly falling into his grasp. It needed to be that way. *We've got to band together to win.* They had to come together as a united front to survive the war and ensuing chaos. Albert was taking the right steps to achieve that.

His gaze settled on Cale. *It's all thanks to this bastard,* he thought, amazed.

He'd heard about how Cale had helped Taylor Sten. Amir Uvar had told him that the naval base was Cale's suggestion too. The Kingdom of the Whipper relied a lot on that bastard as well, as did the four-kingdom meeting on the horizon.

Albert impulsively voiced the question he'd been mulling over: "What the hell do you even go around *doing*?"

Despite feeling guilty, Cale touched upon his efforts. "Well…it may *seem* like I'm slacking off, but I'm working hard to gather information."

Albert didn't believe him, instead pivoting to more important matters. "Miss Rosalyn hasn't come back from Brek?"

"No, sir. She's been gone for two weeks now."

The crown prince nodded. "The four-kingdom meeting's coming up. You're going to join me." Although he worded it like a command, he waited intently for Cale's reaction.

Cale smiled. "I would be honored to go on this first of many trips with you, Your Highness."

"Now I *really* don't want you to come."

The lout nodded. He felt the same way.

Albert thought only Cale would treat the future king so nonchalantly. "You've already prepared everything, right?"

They'd hold the four-kingdom meeting in the territory Ritana had given to Cale, and she'd agreed to handle the preparations, so Albert was talking about "preparing" something else.

"Don't worry, Your Highness. I'll deliver it right on time."

In response to that, Albert made no effort to hide his eagerness; his smile mirrored Cale's. "I'm looking forward to it. Everybody will be surprised. Anyway, we'll be moving in secret, so keep your retinue as small as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness. The prospect of traveling with the star of Rowoon, learning from your wise—"

Click. Albert hung up.

Cale snorted. The easiest way to cut short useless chatter with Albert was to flatter him. Turning away from the disconnected

device, he moved to the bed and patted the lump under the blanket.

"Don't make me talk," came Raon's sad voice.

I never asked, Cale thought, although he could tell Raon was pretty upset.

Dragons underwent three growth phases to fully mature. The first didn't involve physical changes; it laid the groundwork for the second and third phases. Rather than altering a dragon physically, that first phase expanded the amount of mana they could store and use. Then, after the second phase, they were capable of feats like breath attacks.

Dragons could live up to a thousand years, so Raon's first growth phase would normally have been quite a ways off. However, this phase could arrive earlier if a dragon went through an extreme experience or had a burning desire for strength.

Raon and Erhaven were aiming for that, Cale recalled. Erhaven had taught Raon everything he needed to know to trigger that first growth phase, and Raon had expressed his yearning to get stronger.

Cale sighed and patted the blanket again. "This growth rate is normal. Even if you're great and mighty, that doesn't make your first growth phase arrive faster."

The blanket twitched. Shortly after, the dragon who'd asked Cale not to make him talk asked, "It doesn't?"

"No. You're great and mighty already, though," Cale answered casually. He'd wasted time talking to the crown prince, and now he had to waste *more* time consoling a five-year-old. The exasperating hoops he needed to jump through didn't even shock him anymore.

Raon lapsed into silence. Cale had nothing else to say either; he just patted the dragon's back.

After a while, Raon finally replied. His voice was so quiet, Cale wouldn't have heard him had there been any other sound in the room. "What if I meet a dragon who's really awful?"

Cale frowned. *Why are you thinking such scary thoughts?* In his opinion, there was no way that would happen, since meeting

dragons wasn't easy. But he'd figured out why Raon was upset—he was worried that he might have to fight another dragon.

Holding back a sigh, Cale stopped frowning. "I thought you were smart."

Raon's wings fluttered under the blanket. "I am smart!" Voice faltering, he added, "No... I can't even grow—"

"You'll just have to run."

"What?"

"If you meet a nasty dragon, just run away."

"But—"

"Being *alive* is what makes you great and mighty."

Raon fell silent again.

"You survived that cave," Cale pointed out.

The dragon, who'd been covering his face with his forepaws, slowly lowered them. He thought about surviving the cave. It had been even darker in there than it was beneath the blanket.

"Surviving? That's true strength," Cale said from the other side.

Raon stared down at his paws. His eyes shimmered.

Cale had no way of knowing; he continued to say whatever came to mind. "Besides, you could always get that awful dragon back later."

Under the blanket, Raon trembled.

Cale didn't pay any mind to that. He was getting tired of comforting this dragon. "If you survive and return to settle the score with that dragon—or whatever your enemy is—you'll win."

Having nothing else to say, he rose from the bed; Raon had calmed down in his hiding spot.

"I'll tell Vicross to make you some ice cream," Cale remarked. "So come out."

Raon paused, then repeated, "Don't make me talk."

Noting that Raon sounded more energetic, Cale left the fifth floor feeling satisfied. He headed down to the first-floor kitchen and gave Vicross, who wore his usual white gloves, an order: "Get me ice cream and some fruit."

Soon enough, Cale was enjoying the fruit Vicross had given him. The torturer seemed more focused on cleaning the villa than on training lately. That said, he *had* gone out of his way to place the ice cream beside Cale.

The kitchen door creaked open, and Raon slipped through the crack. The little dragon peeked at Cale, then flew cautiously to the chair beside him. Cale didn't even spare him a glance. Upon seeing as much, Raon began eating the ice cream.

Munch. Munch. The sounds of Cale chewing fruit, Vicross washing dishes, and Raon eating ice cream filled the kitchen. That is, until a loud *clack* shattered the calm atmosphere. Cale had practically thrown his fork down on the plate. Raon reluctantly looked toward him; when they made eye contact, the dragon flinched.

His attention focused on Raon, Cale said, "Come with me."

"Who else is coming?"

"It'll just be the two of us."

Raon's wings fluttered, and the corners of his lips twitched. "Just us?"

"Yes."

"All right…" Raon licked his ice cream again, his lips still twitching and his wings still fluttering.

Staring blankly at him, Cale thought, *Albert said to bring a small group with me, so I'll just take an invisible dragon.*

One dragon should be enough to protect him. It wasn't like he could have a lot of guards in tow while he met the movers and shakers of the four realms.

***

Despite Cale's plan, someone else signed on for the trip.

"I'm going as well."

"You are, Lord Erhaven?" Hearing that a second dragon would join him, Cale tried to keep the corners of *his* lips from twitching.

“Yes. It sounds interesting, and I have nothing left to teach the youngster.”

Erhaven gazed at Raon—who was by the fountain, playing with the kittens—with satisfaction. In a mere few weeks, the young dragon had learned three months’ worth of lessons. *He might grow into one of the dragon lords that haven’t been seen since ancient times.*

Although dragon lords had disappeared, Raon could very well become one—thus possessing overwhelming strength unrivaled by any other dragon. Wherever Raon went, Erhaven wanted to tag along.

The ancient dragon turned back to Cale. The young man had neither a smile nor a frown; his lips twisted in a peculiar way. Seeing his face made the gold dragon wonder, *Will it be troublesome if I tag along?*

The upcoming meeting would be between the leaders of the four realms. As a noble, Cale Henituse had to be cautious around them. Erhaven was arrogant, but it wasn’t as though he didn’t understand how to adapt to that situation. Thanks to his thousand years of wisdom, he could suppress his instincts.

“Cale Henituse.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t worry.”

Cale looked at Erhaven. “Pardon?”

With a twisted smile, the dragon pointed to himself. “I’m a tactful dragon. I won’t act like my normal self. I’ll play along.”

Play along with what? Cale wanted to ask.

Before he had a chance to do so, Erhaven continued, “I’ll protect you. Treat me as you would a guard.”

“Sorry?” The word “guard” etched itself into Cale’s mind. *What’d this dragon just say?*

Light appeared atop Erhaven’s palm, slowly taking the shape of a sword. Then the glow ebbed away, leaving a luxurious blade behind. Erhaven grabbed the hilt and faced Cale with a look that said, *Feast your eyes on this.*

Raon zoomed over. “You know how to use a sword, Gragon?!”

“I’ve lived a thousand years, youngster. I can use *any* weapon. I’m actually a swordmaster.”

Hearing the two dragons’ conversation, Cale had to work hard to keep himself from smiling.

Seeing the look on his face, Erhaven clicked his tongue. “Don’t worry. I’ll follow you like a proper guard.”

“How could I possibly treat you as such, Lord Erhaven?”

Erhaven shook his head at Cale’s tentative question. “Just do as I say. Do you think this is the first time I’ve played a role? Treat me like one of your guards, I say.”

“If you insist,” Cale said, his lips tugging upward after all. With that grin on his face, he added, “I’ll do as you ask.”

An odd gut feeling put Erhaven on alert; he’d never seen Cale smile so brightly.

Then Raon blurted out, “You’re smiling like that again!”

Again? What does he mean? Erhaven was itching to ask, but Raon whirled around and flew back to the fountain.

Apparently, Raon had *expected* Erhaven to declare he was accompanying them. The strange feeling that had come over him intensified, but he focused on what Cale was saying.

“A guard it is, then. Raon can stay invisible and follow us.”

Erhaven nodded. “Sure.”

When Cale saw that, his smile turned mischievous. What did he have to fear now that a dragon had volunteered to protect him?

***

The naval base on the Uvar territory’s northeastern shoreline was almost finished. There, Cale greeted someone he hadn’t seen in person in a long time. “Your Highness, Star of Rowoon, it’s been ages since I was graced with your presence!”

Albert, who was wrapped in a cloak, extended his hand with a smile. “Ah, it’s Lord Cale—the one who will brighten Rowoon’s future! It has indeed been a while.”

He and Cale shared a friendly handshake, as if they were close.

Later that night, both men and their entourages stood before a large ship. The head of the territory was there along with them, joined by two loyal subordinates.

Approaching Albert, the woman explained, “I had a teleportation portal installed aboard the ship.” They planned to make it look like Cale was leaving on a trip, then use the portal.

In Cale’s mind, Raon said, *‹I know where your lands are in the jungle! I’ll teleport there on my own!›*

Scarcely paying attention, Cale met Albert’s eyes. The crown prince looked behind Cale and noted, “You brought a guard. I’ve never seen him before.” The handsome blond knight had a very strange aura.

Putting a hand on the knight’s shoulder, Cale introduced him. “Yes. This is my guard, Haven. He’s an excellent and loyal knight.”

Hearing Cale’s comments, Erhaven—who now answered to Haven—felt ill at ease. Yet he played his part as he’d told Cale he would. “It’s an honor to meet you, Your Highness.”

Albert examined Erhaven, whose demeanor struck him as regal, then told Cale, “You certainly have a knack for attracting good subordinates.”

Beaming, Cale pointed to the ship. “Shall we depart?”

Albert agreed, and both groups boarded the vessel. They approached the teleportation portal.

The Uvar territory’s ruler bowed to Albert. “Have a safe journey, Your Highness.”

“I’ll see you later.”

Then the Uvar leader bowed to Cale with a smile; Cale dipped his head in return before watching a mage activate the magic portal. It began to quiver. *Zzzzzzzt.*

‹I’ll head to the jungle too, human! I told Gragon Gramps to keep a close eye on you. See you soon!›

Just as Cale concluded that Raon had left, light poured from the portal.

“Cale Henituse,” came Albert’s voice.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You only need to be your usual self.”

“My usual self, you say…?”

Crackle. Zzzzzt. The portal continued to vibrate. Instead of watching the world warp around him, Cale glanced over at Albert.

The crown prince was smirking. “Yes. Just act like you usually do.” *If you do, good things will happen.* Albert didn’t say that part aloud.

I’d better stay quiet as usual, then, Cale thought, still eyeing Albert. Staring blankly at nothing for hours without a single thought was his specialty.

Flash! Cale’s warped surroundings emitted a bright light, dazzling him. A few seconds later, the light faded. Once it had disappeared completely, a salty smell filled their noses, accompanied by the sound of waves crashing against the shore.

Cale saw Queen Ritana smiling at them. “You’re the second to arrive.”

Leaving the teleportation area, Albert approached her. “Nice to see you again, Queen Ritana.”

“We haven’t run into each other since we last met in the Empire, Crown Prince Albert. You still look, um…tired as ever.”

As Albert struck up a chat with Ritana, Cale slid away from the portal, glancing around. Ritana and her personal guards were monitoring the teleportation portal on the shore. The jungle’s mages had also set up alarms overhead.

Is he over there…?

Cale examined the coastline; it was still scorched, even after a year. Halfway down the shore was a tent containing all sorts of magic devices. It was dark outside, but magic lights around the tent illuminated the area.

‹Hi, human! I’m here! Did you miss me?›

Unable to see Raon, Cale idly nodded. He then spotted a number of jungle warriors heading toward them; within the crowd was a familiar face.

‹Isn't that Rosalyn's younger brother? The one I drenched with a water bomb?›

It was Fenn, the fourth and youngest prince of Brek. He and Cale made eye contact, and Cale smiled. Fenn flinched and whipped his head away.

Cale hadn't seen any of the others before. *Miss Rosalyn isn't with them,* he realized.

He quickly learned why. "Prince John of Brek arrived first," Ritana remarked.

John was leading the approaching group of warriors. He was Brek's crown prince, though he looked extremely plain. Chances were that Rosalyn had excused herself from the meeting to demonstrate her trust in him.

Brek's crown prince smiled gently at Cale. *Hmm?* Faced with the sudden gesture, Cale unthinkingly smiled back.

John closed the gap between them. "I'm glad we were able to come together," he said. His voice was as standard as his looks. The problem was, this seemingly average person was scrutinizing Cale. "And this gentleman is…?"

Cale realized that his turn to speak had come. He slowly opened his mouth. *It's an honor to meet you. My name's Cale Henituse. I'm the son of the count of a small territory in northeastern Rowoon.*

That was how he *wanted* to introduce himself, but someone else beat him to it: "He's a treasure of Rowoon." It was Albert.

Didn't he say to act like my usual self? After such an introduction, how was he supposed to do *that*? Hiding his anxious gaze, he looked toward Rowoon's crown prince.

Soon Ritana spoke, however, and an even more shocking introduction ensued. "He's also the savior of our jungle. I've never encountered such a good-hearted, respectful noble with such a strong sense of responsibility."

Darn. Hearing Ritana's praise, Cale gulped. He pretended not to see Albert staring at him. The crown prince's expression suggested that he'd never heard anything so unbelievable in his entire life.

‹Hmm. Well, I guess you're a good person, weak human.›

As usual, Cale ignored Raon. He felt as though he needed to speak up for himself. While the others had certainly introduced him with interesting remarks, nobody had said his name.

Cale opened his mouth again, ready to say his lines. *My name's Cale Henituse. It's an honor to meet—*

"You must be *the* Cale Henituse." Prince John had been faster.

Cale wasn't surprised that John knew his name, but the way he said it was a bit concerning.

"I've heard a lot about you from Crown Prince Albert, Queen Ritana, and my older sister. Even Fenn had much to say. Nice to meet you."

"It's an honor to meet *you*." Cale shook John's hand, greeting him with the utmost respect, then quickly tried to tug his hand back.

Yet John had no intention of letting go. He gripped Cale's hand, holding his gaze. "My sister seemed happy. Thank you."

One corner of Cale's lips lifted. He could see why Rosalyn thought highly of John.

‹Human! This guy seems better than that Fenn…or Ben…or whatever that punk's name was!›

Just then, they again heard the sizzling sound of the teleportation portal. The last guest was arriving.

Everyone gazed toward the magic circle supporting the portal. Yanking his hand free at last, Cale did the same. A bright light flashed, and three people emerged: Chief Advisor Herol Cordien of the Kingdom of the Whipper and two of Tunka's subordinates.

Herol bowed to the onlookers. "Hello. Herol Cordien, Chief Advisor of the Kingdom of the Whipper. I'm here on Commander Tunka's behalf."

He went on to greet each and every person onshore. Since he was always by Tunka's side, they'd all met before at the celebration hosted by the Empire. He reached Cale last.

At that point, Prince John—who still stood next to Cale—spoke up. "This is your first time meeting Lord Cale, isn't it, Chief Advisor

Herol?" He addressed Herol in a respectful tone; they were here to work together, not to fight each other.

"No, we've met."

"Hm? You know each other?" John wasn't aware of the connection between Cale and Tunka, but he took note of Herol's genuine smile.

"Yes. Lord Cale is someone I respect."

John let out a quiet gasp.

As Cale shook the hand in front of him, his expression indifferent, Herol said, "It's been a while, Lord Cale. This feels like reuniting with a close friend I haven't seen for a long time."

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Chief Advisor Herol."

"Please speak as you normally would, Lord Cale."

"...Sure." Nodding, Cale released Herol's hand. He turned to the pair of Tunka's subordinates who'd come with Herol.

"Lord Cale! Nice to see you again!"

"I hope you've been well, Lord Cale!"

The broad-shouldered citizens of Whipper bowed a full ninety degrees in greeting. Cale glanced sidelong at Herol, who grinned.

"Commander Tunka told them to be respectful toward his friend."

Cale clicked his tongue internally at that. Then he faced Albert, who was once again staring at him with disbelief.

Nonetheless, the crown prince quickly gathered everyone's attention. "We must get started," he said. "The night is short." Their meeting had to be over before dawn.

Ritana pointed to the tent; the leaders of Brek, Rowoon, and Whipper headed there with just one guard each. Cale took a step backward, watching them go.

‹Aren't you going too, weak human?› Raon asked.

Why would I? Cale had something else to do. More importantly, what reason did he have to get involved in a conversation between the heads of four separate realms? The big issues had been

discussed in advance; they were just going to chat about all the details. He didn't want to be part of that.

His Highness will take care of everything. Cale could just sit back as the meeting's host. He was sure of it.

That is, until Albert called out, "Cale Henituse."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Aren't you coming in?" The crown prince was smiling, yet his eyes told Cale to hurry up.

‹See, human?! I knew they'd bring you in!›

Cale couldn't heave a sigh, as he wanted to. He made his way to Albert, who was waiting outside the tent. Both wore smiles that appeared—from the outside—to convey their deep trust in each other.

"Didn't you tell me to be my usual self?" Cale asked, as quietly as a ventriloquist speaking through a dummy.

"Yes. Stand behind me and do just that."

As the prince entered the tent, Cale turned back around. Erhaven stood there like a proper knight. "Haven."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Stand guard right here. If I call you, enter quickly. Got it?"

"Yes, sir... I understand."

Cale patted Erhaven's shoulder and headed into the tent.

Erhaven felt uneasy about the whole display. Cale was certainly behaving the way a young lord would with his knight, but something was off. The invisible Raon shot Erhaven one last glance before flying into the tent, though the gold dragon had no way of seeing it. It was a look full of appreciation for the gold dragon, who was a picture-perfect loyal guard.

***

Facing Albert, Cale thought, *I knew it'd be like this.*

The first hour of the meeting was pretty dull. Everyone began by agreeing to work together to fend off the Empire and the

northern alliance.

Prince John of Brek spoke first. “A reliable source tells me the northern alliance has almost finished building ships to cross the eastern sea. Summer’s almost over, so they’ll finish those ships this fall. There’s no way they’d move in winter, so they’ll sail as soon as spring arrives. Rowoon and our kingdom need to prepare for their arrival.”

“We have to focus on the Empire right now,” said Herol. “They haven’t used dead-mana bombs yet, but we don’t know when they might. Shouldn’t we reduce their forces while we can?”

“I agree,” said Ritana. “Before anything else, we need to weaken the Empire—and figure out how to fend off their alchemy.”

“So to start with,” Herol went on, pressing down on the table, “shouldn’t we find a way for Whipper to defeat the Empire?”

Ritana and John clapped their mouths shut.

Essentially, the Kingdom of the Whipper was asking for support in their battle against the Empire. But if Tunka’s kingdom achieved a major victory like that, it would complicate matters. Brek and Rowoon were cooperating to increase the number of mages under their command, but Whipper detested magic. Under the circumstances, the other leaders couldn’t let Whipper grow stronger—even if they were currently allies.

The jungle didn’t share borders with Rowoon or Brek, but it *did* border the Kingdom of the Whipper. Its people were worried that the kingdom would turn its attention toward the jungle if it gained power, so they didn’t exactly want Tunka to trounce the Empire either.

As Ritana deliberated on how to respond, she realized someone had been very quiet: Crown Prince Albert of Rowoon, the person who’d assembled them here. He was *too* quiet, in fact. Ritana wasn’t the only one who felt that way; she, John, and Herol all focused on Albert’s side of the table.

“You haven’t said much, Your Highness,” Herol noted.

Albert smiled gently at them; between that and his blond hair and blue eyes, he was very princely indeed. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* He tapped the table with his index finger, seemingly waiting for something.

At length, he began to speak. “Well, I have a lot to say.” He tapped the table once more, then rested the pad of his finger on it. “But do *you* want to say anything, Lord Cale?”

Albert’s casual question prompted everyone to turn toward Cale, who looked even more relaxed than the crown prince. Cale knew that everyone but Albert—who sat opposite him—was staring at him intently. Yet he replied with perfect composure, “I don’t really have anything to say, Your Highness.”

That was the truth. Cale didn’t want to weigh in; he was just watching the clock hanging on the wall.

At that moment, Raon spoke up in his mind. *‹They’re coming, human.›*

Cale smirked. “They’re almost here.”

Hearing that, Albert smiled as well. The moment he’d been waiting for wasn’t far off.

“Who’s almost here?” Ritana asked Cale, confused. The others were equally perplexed.

A magic alarm blared out of nowhere. *Weeeooooo! Weeeooooo!* Everyone at the table turned pale except for Albert and Cale. The tent entrance flapped open, and one of the jungle’s warriors rushed in.

“What’s going on?!” Ritana demanded.

“The alarm at sea went off, Your Majesty!”

They’d installed the alarm a couple hundred meters offshore. Someone or something heading their way had tripped it.

Ritana looked worried. “A ship, then? What kind? How many?! Can you see if they’re flying a flag?”

While she grilled the warrior, Prince John rose from his seat; his guard did the same. As for Herol, he was staring at Cale.

In that moment of chaos, the jungle warrior replied, “It isn’t a ship.”

“If it’s not a ship, then what is it?”

“It’s, um…whales!”

Silence took hold of the disorderly tent, broken only by the alarm. *Weeeooooo!*

“Enormous whales are headed toward us!” the warrior added.

At that, someone else remarked, “They’re finally here.” It was Cale.

He strode over to the tent flap and lifted it. Outside, he saw the ocean as well as the jungle warriors. They were falling into formation along the shoreline, watching the sea.

Splash. Splash. Three whales, two large and one small, were swimming toward them.

Albert’s chair screeched as he rose to his feet. He swept a glance around the group, then declared, “There’s a secret organization working with the Empire and the northern alliance.”

“Pardon?”

“Excuse me?”

The sudden revelation Albert had thrown at them in this chaotic moment made everybody even more anxious.

Herol shook off his stunned stupor to shout, “What are you talking about?”

John joined him, asking, “Yes, what do you mean by ‘a secret organization,’ Prince Albert?”

Although the whales weren’t the problem, Albert pointed outside the tent; the others’ gazes followed his finger to the sea. The humpback whale leading the group blew out a big cloud of spray. *Pshhhhh!* As the water vapor vanished, a woman emerged from within. She glided right over the warriors standing onshore, landed lightly behind them, then swept back her blue hair.

A shocked warrior blurted out, “Huh?!”

“The Whale Tribe is here…?” someone else muttered in bewilderment.

The whales were renowned as the strongest beastfolk tribe. They were also rarely seen by humans, so everyone fell silent at their unexpected arrival.

Only one person spoke up; it was Cale Henituse, who strode out of the tent. “Long time no see, Witira.”

The three whales were Witira, Faseton, and the killer whale Archie. All three had now reached the shore. Witira, who stood in

front, smiled and returned Cale's greeting. "A long time indeed, Lord Cale."

Cale nodded to her, then looked back at Albert. "As you instructed, Your Highness, I invited the future Whale Queen."

As Albert and Cale exchanged glances across the threshold of the tent, their smiles grew. This meeting between four realms and one tribe was now certain to go the way they'd hoped.

The coastline was quiet for several moments. Then someone whispered in Prince John's ear as he observed Cale and the whales. As for Herol, he didn't say a word.

Looking at the four realms' leaders, Witira seemed more confident than ever; she didn't even bow to them. "My name is Witira," she began. "I'm here on the Whale Tribe's behalf. We've come on the invitation of our benefactor, Lord Cale. Nice to meet you."

Her tone was respectful, but it suited her status. It went without saying that she was self-assured; the whales were the greatest aquatic faction, especially after they'd defeated the mermaids. On top of that, their tribe was known as the strongest—just after the dragons. As future Whale Queen, Witira had no reason to be subservient toward the four other leaders. She brandished her whip on one forearm for all to see.

Cale felt satisfied as he watched Witira address the group. He'd asked her in advance to "set the tone of the meeting." As an influential member of a powerful tribe, Witira could pull that off perfectly. It helped that Faseton and Archie stood behind her with stony expressions.

By this point, the Whale Tribe had likely made a strong impression on the jungle warriors and each kingdom's representatives. They'd also given everyone the distinct impression that Rowoon was capable of calling upon the whales.

Not bad. Pleased with how things were going, Cale slowly looked around. Then he froze. *Hmm?* Ritana was staring directly at him. She wore a huge smile, as though witnessing a truly magical sight. Unable to handle her bright smile, Cale looked away—only to make eye contact with Herol, who was beaming at Cale in the same exact fashion.

Why are they both acting like this? Cale didn't understand why the two dignitaries seemed so pleased with him.

Just then, a soft *clap* echoed across the beach. All those present turned toward the source.

Having attracted everyone's attention, Albert said, "Let's return to the tent for a longer chat."

Prince John was in favor. "I believe we'll need to. You've thrown too much information at me at once. My mind's in a bit of a jumble." Despite his claim, John's expression was calm—completely different from the anxious look worn by his youngest brother, Fenn, who stood behind him.

Albert nodded at John, then said to Ritana, "It looks like we'll need three more chairs, Your Majesty."

She nodded back. "For the three guests from the Whale Tribe, right? Bin, bring a fourth chair for Lord Cale while you're at it."

"I included Lord Cale's chair among those three, Your Majesty," Albert informed her.

Ritana glanced back at him. "Excuse me?" Albert's statement that he'd already accounted for Cale made her wonder, *Will only two of the whales sit down?*

That was the thought on everyone's mind, but they soon heard a noise that disproved that guess. *Hissss.* The teleportation portal's magic circle was giving off sparks.

"Huh?" someone blurted out in a fluster.

Anybody wanting to use that portal needed the magic incantation, as well as a passcode sent by the jungle's mage, so the mage standing by the magic circle was getting nervous. Someone put a hand on the mage's shoulder and tugged him backward. He turned to see Cale Henituse looking down at him.

"It's someone we invited," Cale assured him.

"I beg your pardon…?"

Hisssss. The sparks grew rowdier as a bright light emerged, morphing into a human silhouette.

Cale had arranged for more guests than the Whale Tribe. He smiled, watching the figure materialize in the magic circle. He

hadn't seen this person in some time. He extended his hand to the new arrival, who grabbed it to exit the portal.

"Miss Kage," he said. "Long time no see."

"Sure has been, Lord Cale."

It was Kage, the crazy priestess. Cale gestured toward the shore, and she stepped onto the sand. Kage wore a priestess's black robe but without any crest; it fluttered in the wind as she greeted everyone.

"It's an honor to meet you all." She was still good at posing as a proper priestess.

The unknown priestess's arrival made some of the onlookers nervous, but Brek's representatives were calm. They'd seen Kage before.

Cale introduced her to the group. "This priestess serves the God of Death."

His mention of the God of Death made the others think of one thing: the Vow of Death. A priestess of the God of Death would only attend a meeting like this to coordinate that vow.

When Cale was done, Albert said, "What we're about to discuss requires utmost secrecy. Shouldn't we have something more consequential to rely on than faith or trust?" He smiled. "Well, what's weightier than putting your life on the line?"

Despite Albert's bright smile, the atmosphere quickly turned grave. Rowoon's crown prince had shown everyone that he had access not just to the Whale Tribe but to one of the God of Death's priestesses. That meant that everybody here would need to make a Vow of Death.

Someone else finally spoke up. "Really, there are just…" Gazing at Albert and Cale, Herol managed, "I daresay there are *so many* interesting people in Rowoon. I certainly enjoy your whimsical approach."

Upon meeting the grinning Herol's gaze, Cale thought, *Why's he looking at me?*

Herol turned to Albert. "You're right. Swearing an oath on our lives is better than merely trusting each other. I approve of this method."

John spoke next. “Before I decide on whether to agree to this, I’ll listen to what you have to say.” He took a step back.

Only Ritana had yet to voice her opinion. Everyone watched her until she eventually said, “I take it the three chairs are for the future Whale Queen, the priestess, and Lord Cale.” Then she gave Bin an order. “Make a list of all the warriors and mages here today.”

Her actions demonstrated that she would proceed with the Vow of Death.

That over with, Albert walked into the tent. “We’ll talk about the rest inside.”

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After the ruckus in the middle of the night, a new group had been added to the table. Sitting in his chair, Cale thought, *Isn’t it enough for me just to stand behind His Highness?* The meeting was already underway, after all. He’d originally assumed that only Witira and Kage would sit down. And as Kage was merely a priestess, she required the other parties’ permission to do so. *Why am I seated too?*

Holding back that question, Cale observed the meeting with a stoic expression. Witira and Albert had just begun sharing information about the secret organization. That included its battle faction Arm, which had taken control of the Eastern Continent’s underworld. Arm was responsible for the terror incidents Rowoon and the Church of the God of Sun had suffered. They’d attacked an elven village, trying to steal a branch of the World Tree. They had also recruited the mermaids in an effort to seize control of the sea route connecting the Eastern and Western Continents.

As Albert and Witira shared those details along with pieces of evidence, they further dampened the spirits of those in the tent.

“Hrm…” John couldn’t maintain his poker face. Rubbing his temples with one hand, he spoke with the exasperation of a heavy sigh. “You’re saying this organization is working with the northern alliance and the Empire, and we didn’t know about any of that? Not even what they were doing on the Western Continent?”

That flabbergasted him. *How could there be such an organization? And how could we not know anything about them?* John couldn't understand this at all. Still, if the northern alliance and the Empire were helping Arm, it *was* possible. And an organization that had taken over the Eastern Continent's underworld wouldn't be weak.

"What a terrible organization," came Herol's steady voice. "We *must* wipe out a group that goes around using magic bombs to engage in terrorism far and wide."

Cale looked over at Tunka's chief advisor to gauge his expression, then flinched. *Vicious.* Someone like Herol, who detested magic, *would* want magic bombs to disappear from the world. Tunka would probably have reacted similarly.

They'll do their part well. Cale was satisfied with Herol's response, and a smile nearly spread across his deadpan face. But the moment he locked eyes with Ritana, that subtle smirk vanished; her expression was dead serious.

Seeing that, Cale asked unthinkingly, "Miss Rina? Is there something you wish to say?"

"I'm blown away."

Huh? Cale was mystified. *What is she talking about?*

"I'd heard that you played a pivotal role in thwarting that magical bombing in Rowoon. You also helped the Whale Tribe, and you even put out the fire here in the jungle."

Ritana found it all astonishing. After hearing about Arm, she couldn't wrap her head around how good a person the stoic-looking man sitting in front of her was. *Does Lord Cale get any rest? How much suffering must he undergo beneath that tranquil air in his pursuit of world peace?* Ritana suspected his heavy heart had led to many sleepless nights.

"You saved the elven village," she continued. "Not only that, but you also worked hard to save the saint and saintess." Even setting aside their friendship and the fact that Cale had saved the jungle, Ritana truly felt that he was the person most entitled to sit at this meeting. For that very reason, she asked him, "What do you think our next steps should be, Lord Cale?"

Everyone’s gazes slid toward him.

Why’s she asking me? Cale thought, conscious of their stares. *Aren’t* you *the ones who should figure that out?*

Of course, he’d already decided what *he* was going to do. But he couldn’t tell them about it—nor did he have a reason to. Surveying the group, he was about to speak when Raon piped up in his head.

‹Are we saving people again, human? That’s a great deed! It’s very satisfying!›

Cale didn’t ignore the dragon as he usually did.

A queen, a future queen, a chief advisor, and two crown princes—among those heavyweights, the simple count’s son answered Ritana’s question with utmost calm. “Shouldn’t we save the Western Continent and bring peace to its citizens?” That would also bring *him* some peace and quiet so he could slack off at home. “I believe the people here can make that happen.”

Yeah, please work hard so I hardly have to lift a finger.

‹You’re right, human! You really are a good person!›

Cale ignored Raon’s compliment. Having finished speaking, he faced Ritana.

“Indeed… You’re right, Lord Cale. You always seem to walk a path of justice.”

The others fixed him with looks of admiration. Cale snuck a peek at Albert, then flinched. The crown prince had a warm smile, but his gaze seemed to say, *This bastard’s saying things he doesn’t mean again.*

Cale smiled back at Albert, who understood his true feelings.

“The Kingdom of Rowoon—” John began, then cut himself off. Upon seeing Cale and Albert exchange trusting smiles, he couldn’t remember what he was going to say.

At any rate, their mutual enemy had become clear. That was the case across the board.

“We’ll send food rations to bolster the Kingdom of the Whipper,” Ritana said briskly. The jungle was willing to work with the group by providing supplies unrelated to alchemy or magic.

Herol smiled brightly. “Whipper will handle anything related to those magic bombs. We need to kill every last one of those Arm bastards.” His vicious declaration suited someone who loathed magic.

As the conversation picked up again, Cale leaned back in his chair.

The meeting progressed smoothly from there. Albert took the reins, since he had the most information. The three other realms would secretly send funds and rations to the Kingdom of the Whipper. If the Empire managed to cross Whipper’s borders, the jungle would immediately send a covert squad as reinforcements. Should the Empire deploy dead-mana bombs, Rowoon would lay out the steps to handle the situation. The other realms would provide funds to enact those steps.

The delegates at the table also discussed supporting the whales’ battle in the coming winter, as well as the issue of the northern alliance. Eventually, they’d planned out everything until next spring.

“Let us make the Vow of Death now,” Albert said, and Kage stood up on cue.

Once everyone had made the vow, the meeting came to an end. As Cale headed toward the teleportation portal with Erhaven in tow, he caught sight of the sunrise. He, Kage, and Albert’s group stood in front of the magic circle.

Herol was the first to leave. *Hiss.* The magic circle activated, and he started to disappear. When Cale met his eyes, the chief advisor smiled. “See you after our victory, Lord Cale.”

He disappeared before Cale managed to respond.

Albert glanced over. “He wants to see you again?”

Cale’s deadpan expression did not change, but that was answer enough. The crown prince chuckled, moving to stand beside him on the magic circle. They both soon arrived in the Uvar territory.

Before they went their separate ways, Albert had one last thing to add. “Looks like you’ve got nothing to do until winter. Get some rest while you wait for good news about their victory.”

Cale obviously intended to do as much, so he had no problem saying, “That was my intent, Your Highness.” Yet Albert’s smiling face made him uncomfortable.

“Right, of course.” It had been a while since Cale had said something so unbelievable, Albert reflected. With that, he bid the count’s son goodbye. “Again, make sure to get some rest.”

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Cale couldn’t get any rest whatsoever. He scowled at Tunka, whose face was pressed right up to the communication sphere during their current call.

Energetic shouts rose up outside the villa’s windows.

“Aaaaaugh!”

“I can do it!”

It was already autumn, yet their vigor hadn’t diminished in the least. Cale was forced to see Tunka’s ugly mug to get the first bit of news since fall had arrived.

“What is it?” he asked.

He’d been getting daily updates on the Kingdom of the Whipper through Albert and the intelligence group Ron was in charge of. Apparently, Tunka had been doing pretty well against the Empire. But the Empire hadn’t yet deployed their entire arsenal against Whipper—the dead-mana bombs, for instance. The Empire was under the impression that the poor Kingdom of the Whipper was bleeding funds and supplies, all while Whipper secretly kept its troops fed and equipped.

“But the conflict is moving at a snail’s pace.” That was the last piece of information Cale had received, so he wasn’t thrilled about talking with Tunka.

“I wanted you to be the first to know,” Tunka declared, “that we’ve half won.”

Cale’s expression changed.

“We managed to seize a castle!” The barbarian stepped back from the screen to laugh like mad. “Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

This crazy bastard. Cale realized that only Tunka's face was clean; the rest of his body was covered in blood. Corpses were strewn throughout the background. Tunka must have piled up his enemies' bodies before calling Cale to share this news. He truly was a madman.

"I also did as you asked."

Cale found the statement odd. "You did?"

"Yup. I didn't abandon my injured soldiers. I brought them with me."

Cale was shocked. Had Tunka actually lost his mind? It was bizarre that he'd done something so unlike him.

"The strong have to know how to care for the weak," Tunka said proudly.

Is this really Tunka? Cale was seriously second-guessing it.

"I think it'll be tough to heal them, though," the barbarian continued, brow furrowing in concern.

Pushing his astonishment aside, Cale put the situation together in his mind. Even if the Kingdom of the Whipper was better funded now, they couldn't buy expensive potions to heal all their soldiers.

And they don't have enough priests.

The kingdom had previously been a magical enclave, unaffected by the various faiths of the continent. Since the citizens of Tunka's kingdom believed in nature and not gods, the established religions considered them heretics. With none of them willing to send aid to Whipper, the kingdom lacked priests who could support them in battle. The fact that Whipper had any healers at all was impressive enough; in the past, the mages had attacked all others with healing powers.

Tunka's face was etched with sorrow. "We don't have enough healers, and we can't use up too many potions after achieving a partial victory. Healers aside, we haven't got any priests."

Two people popped into Cale's mind: the crazy priestess and the half-saint, both currently idling at his place. He also thought of the elf twiddling his thumbs in Erhaven's lair.

“Hmm.” Arms crossed, Cale mulled things over. Each of those three could do more than several average priests put together.

In his mind, Raon asked, *‹Are we saving people, human?›* His voice was tinged with anticipation.

Instead of pursuing that idea, Cale asked a question on his mind. “What do you mean by ‘partial victory’?” *How could it be only partial? You’ve either won or lost.*

Tunka made a face, then cleared his throat. “Well, the enemy fled. They left their castle behind.”

“So you took it?” Cale asked, assuming Tunka had managed to lay claim to the castle.

“Ahem! We did take it…but we can’t get in.”

What the hell?

At Cale’s questioning gaze, Tunka scratched his head and turned the device around. Cale glimpsed something red and suddenly understood why Tunka had contacted him from among the corpses. The barbarian couldn’t enter the castle, and he’d needed to call from somewhere his soldiers wouldn’t see him.

‹Something’s blazing, human!›

A blazing fire surged upward, forming a pillar so tall that Cale couldn’t even see the castle.

“Ahem! This fire started all of a sudden, and we can’t put it out.”

“You can’t?”

“Nope. For now, I’ve stationed soldiers around it. The wild part is that the flames aren’t spreading past the castle. The whole thing’s like a barrier protecting the building from us.”

Having shared his honest feelings with his friend and explained his “partial victory,” Tunka felt a bit better. There was a lot to think about and deal with in war, compared to when he’d fought people on his own. This pillar of fire was just another one of those problems.

“I can’t tell what the Empire did,” Tunka admitted. “But I’ll definitely take care of—huh?” When he saw Cale’s face, he stopped

talking. Then, with concern unbecoming of his usual self, he asked, “Is something wrong?”

Cale seemed to be ignoring Tunka; he merely frowned and stared through the screen at the fire.

In his mind, an excited Raon spoke up. *‹Haven’t we seen that kind of fire before, human?›*

Cale likewise recalled the pillar of fire he’d seen over a year ago. It had burned down Sector One of the jungle without spreading, and not even rain had extinguished it.

Damn it. Touching the pendant around his neck, which held the Fire-Suppressing Water, Cale’s frown deepened. *Looks like I have to go put out that fire.*

Chapter 32:
Isn't It a Pity?

CALE HEAVED a long sigh.

"No need to get too worried about it," Tunka hastened to say. "Did you forget who I am? I'm Tunka! I'll find a way, so you don't have to fuss over me."

"Tell me your coordinates."

Seeing Cale's complicated expression, Tunka hesitated. "What? My coordinates?"

"The coordinates of your current location," Cale said curtly, annoyed. "I'll head over."

"Why?"

When Tunka asked that, Cale felt a fresh surge of irritation. *No. Good question. Even I don't know why I have to go there.*

Nevertheless, it wasn't like he could skip out. The Kingdom of the Whipper needed control of this castle to reduce the Empire's power.

I just don't know what the Empire's thinking. Cale wasn't sure why Tunka's enemies had relinquished the castle in this way. Perhaps they'd done it to focus more on the other two castles Tunka's side was targeting. Or they could've been preparing to ambush Tunka's forces while the latter tried to extinguish the fire.

Cale resolved to make sense of it once he got there. He peered at Tunka, who was blinking in confusion. "Someone needs to bring over some priests and put out that fire. Why else?"

"You're really gonna do that?" the bewildered Tunka asked, then shut up. There was no way Cale Henituse, who looked utterly somber, would joke about something like that. "Right, you're not the kinda guy to say things you don't mean."

"Hurry up and tell me the coordinates so I can come to you." *I'll go quickly, put out the fire, and hurry back,* Cale told himself.

Tunka watched Cale pick up a pen and paper to write his location down. The barbarian felt strange. Even if there *were* priests who knew how to put out such a fire among Cale's allies, there was

no reason for them to help Tunka. The battle wasn't over yet. Neither Tunka nor the Empire had given up, despite this ongoing standstill. Things could get dire at any given moment.

The barbarian didn't understand why Cale had no qualms about traveling to such a place. At the same time, he understood Cale's current predicament. *He's too nice.* His opinion of Cale had held true once more.

"I'll tell the mage from Rowoon that you're coming," Tunka said. "We'll install a teleportation portal and give you the coordinates."

"Fine. Just hurry up."

"All right. And hey, it's been a while since I saw in you in person."

Cale nodded. "Uh, by the way..." Tunka smiled, inviting Cale to say what was on his mind. Not wanting to look at the barbarian's ugly mug a second longer, Cale turned away from the screen. "I'll be in disguise."

"What?"

"I'm hanging up now."

Click. Cale ended the call. He didn't have to tell Tunka anything else. He only needed the coordinates of the teleportation portal later on. Having made up his mind, he rose from his chair.

Raon appeared in the air and flew to his side. "Human! What'd you mean by 'disguise'?" The dragon's round eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Ignoring him, Cale opened the door and descended to the villa's fourth floor. Once there, he rapped on the door of the innermost room.

"Come in," a clear voice answered from inside.

Cale turned the doorknob with a *click*. The door flew open, giving him a view of the room. All sorts of protection and alarm magic protected the fourth floor's central chambers, where Hana and Jack were staying.

The saint, Jack, jumped up to greet him. "Lord Cale?!"

The crazy priestess Kage likewise snapped to attention, as if she were Cale's mercenary for hire. "Lord Cale! Have you been well?"

Cale observed the two, then asked, "Saint Jack, is Miss Hana currently training?"

"Oh, yes. Miss Mary is teaching her to handle the darkness attribute."

"Really?"

"Yes. I understand Miss Rosalyn and Mr. Choi Han are with them as well."

"I see."

Kage found it odd that Cale looked wholly unruffled despite bursting in through the door. As if he'd read her mind, he whipped his head toward her, and she flinched.

"Miss Kage."

"Y-yes?"

"Will you be extending your stay here?"

The priestess was rooming in Cale's villa for the time being. Whenever she tried to leave, the God of Death showed up in her dreams to complain. A god one couldn't see whining in one's head was extremely annoying, so Kage had opted to stay put. She'd also wound up befriending the saint even though their deities were polar opposites.

"I'd like to, if it's okay with you," Kage answered.

From the side, Jack chimed in, "It's been wonderful having Miss Kage around. As long as you don't mind, Lord Cale, I'm hoping she can stay a while longer."

Jack could suppress his purification powers in Kage's presence, allowing him to approach Mary and Hana without any issues. He couldn't so much as hold Hana's hand, but that mattered little when his sister was alive and well.

Cale nodded slowly. "I'm happy to have you as well, Miss Kage." Then he told them both, "Let's go save some people."

"Excuse me?" the saint asked, confused.

Kage was unfazed. "Where're we headed?"

The lout smiled at her before answering, “The battlefield.”

This time, Kage was confused too. “Huh?”

Cale studied them a moment, then added a key point to his instruction: “And we’ll need disguises.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m…not sure I get it.”

“They’re *also* gonna be in disguise?!” shouted Raon, who’d been trying to peek into the room from behind Cale.

The dragon’s comment startled Kage. “Wait, you’re also going to disguise yourself, Lord Cale?”

“Yes. Well, I say ‘disguise,’ but we’ll just do small things like change our hair colors.”

“Our hair colors, huh…? And you’re doing it too?”

“That’s right,” Cale said. “I’m going for more of a ‘holy’ look.”

Kage gawked at him. “What?”

Instead of explaining further, Cale gave Raon an order: “Fetch Miss Rosalyn and Choi Han.”

“Will they disguise themselves too?”

“Maybe. Bring them here first.”

“Got it, human!” The giddy dragon darted off like a missile in search of Rosalyn.

Cale sighed. He had no choice but to go undercover now that Tunka’s soldiers knew his face. Even if none of the Empire’s forces were on the battlefield at present, a noble from Rowoon striding into the midst of their conflict with Whipper would complicate things.

“Excuse me, Lord Cale?”

“What is it, Saint Jack?”

“I recommend white as a holy color.”

Cale faced Jack. The saint seemed happy that he’d been able to provide a suggestion; he was eagerly anticipating Cale’s response.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Though Cale said as much, he was thinking the same thing Erhaven often did when dealing with Raon: *Give me a break.*

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The stench of blood and burning flesh stung Tunka's nose, but he'd been on the battlefield long enough to ignore it. A new source of stimulation was quickly approaching him, however. He glanced over at the teleportation portal, which had been installed in secret away from the soldiers. A group of five had emerged from within.

Tunka stared blankly at the man standing in the center of the circle. "The hell's with that getup?" he muttered.

The man's usual twisted smile appeared as he brushed back his long hair, taming the nearly pure-white strands. Cale was wearing a white, crestless priest outfit, and his hair was a shade to match; his locks practically glowed, giving them a silvery sheen.

Passing over the stumped Tunka, Cale turned to Herol. "How do I look?"

"I doubt anyone will recognize you," Herol responded. He peered at the mask in Cale's hand, which would cover the area around his eyes. "Even more so with that mask."

Cale smiled kindly at him, his now-blue eyes shining.

Herol couldn't help admiring Cale's smile. "You look like a real priest."

"Then I'm pleased to call this a success."

Raon was curled up in one corner of the tent, invisible. He'd teleported here in advance using Tunka's coordinates. Upon hearing Herol's comment, he said into Cale's mind, *‹It really is my masterpiece! You look like a real saint, human!›*

The black dragon had been in charge of everyone's disguises. Rosalyn and Choi Han had basically traded color schemes; Rosalyn had black hair and dark eyes, while Choi Han's hair and eyes were red. Kage and Jack had their hair colors changed to the common brown. All four carried masks as well.

"Where are the patients?" Cale asked Herol.

“Do you plan on starting right away?”

Cale donned his white mask and spread his arms wide. “Finding people in pain and helping people in need is truly the will of God.”

Herol scoffed at Cale’s holy-man act, then said sincerely, “I’ll guide you to them.”

***

The Whipper soldiers nervously stared at the pillar of fire—particularly the soldiers forming a blockade around it. It had rained all night, yet the fire showed no sign of dying down. The strangeness of it instilled fear in the onlookers, and they felt the scorching heat with even a single step toward the flames.

A soldier scanned the area, then whispered to his friend, “Do you really think the Empire’s responsible for this fire?”

“How would I know?”

“If they can create fire like this, won’t they burn us all to death?”

“What’re you prattling on about?!” the soldier’s friend snapped, shocked. “I should hope not!” He was glad that no higher-ups were around. Then he saw his cohort’s expression and grimaced; the soldier had only asked the question after trembling in fear for some time.

“I know it’s ridiculous,” the soldier admitted, “but the Empire running away and leaving this behind makes me leery.”

The war was dragging on, and now they had to guard this bizarre pillar of fire. As a citizen of Whipper, the soldier hated magic, and the towering flames reminded him of the spells used by mages in the country’s past.

“Enough worrying! Our commander brought all the injured soldiers with him. He even gave the gravely wounded some of those precious potions,” the soldier’s friend reminded him.

Hearing that, the soldier relaxed a bit. Commander Tunka hadn’t abandoned his wounded troops this time, a far cry from how

he'd acted during Whipper's civil war.

His expression soon stiffened again. "But...they're all dying."

Tunka didn't have enough potions, and there was a limit to what a doctor without healing abilities could do. It was painful listening to the death rattles of soldiers who would never return home.

"Why are you being so pessimistic? The commander and officers will solve this for us soon."

The soldier smiled bitterly at that. His rage toward magic had spurred him to fight in this war, but as time stretched on, he was starting to see the reality of the situation.

Feeling doubtful, he began, "Do you really think—huh?"

He couldn't finish his sentence. He'd spotted a group of five people heading toward the center of the army's formation. All five of them wore white masks and priest's vestments, and they were approaching the infirmary tent alongside Commander Tunka.

It was Cale's group, of course.

Walking toward the infirmary tent, Cale surveyed the area. The atmosphere was heavy as could be.

‹See that pillar of fire, human? Are we getting rid of it? If you do it the same way as last time, it'll destroy the castle too.›

This was Myple Castle, one of the three main castles on the border of the Mogor Empire and the Kingdom of the Whipper.

Destroy it? Why would I destroy something so valuable? This time, Cale planned to take care of business neatly. He looked around until he made eye contact with a soldier—the one guarding the infirmary tent.

Cale smiled gently at him. "May we enter, my good man?"

Cale's distinguished air flustered the soldier. "S-sorry...?"

"Lift the flap," Tunka ordered.

"Y-yes, sir!"

The soldier who'd locked eyes with Cale, as well as the one standing next to him, quickly lifted the tent flap. The pungent smell of medicinal herbs and the stench of festering wounds wafted out, and Cale padded into the tent.

Watching the five newcomers enter, the soldier blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Priests…” He took a closer look at the pair walking right behind the white-haired priest. One had a black aura in her hand; the other had a golden aura in his. Both appeared to have the power of healing.

The infirmary tent was thick with the aura of death and pain, but that gradually changed as the patients and doctors all turned toward the five priests.

“Hello, everyone,” Cale began. “In accordance with the will of the heavens, we’ve come to help everyone giving their utmost in this fight.”

A gasp rose up from the crowd.

Cale raised his hand and said, “Let’s get started.”

Kage split off to the left, Jack to the right. Rosalyn and Choi Han followed behind them. Jack laid his hand on a patient’s arm. *Flash!* The injury glowed gold, then healed on the spot.

Tearing up, the patient exclaimed, “M-my arm…!”

Choi Han and Rosalyn pulled potions out of their respective magic bags to assist the two “priests.” Cale observed them for a bit, then made eye contact with Tunka.

The barbarian’s eyes wavered. “You even brought all those potions… Seriously, thank you so much.”

Cale felt the soldiers’ and doctors’ gazes focus on him as he acknowledged Tunka’s thanks in a dignified manner. Albert had prepared the potions for him; he recalled the conversation he’d had with the crown prince before heading over.

“You’re going to extinguish the fire like you did in the jungle?” Albert had asked. *“Dressed in Arm’s uniform?”*

Cale, Rosalyn, and Choi Han *were* wearing updated Arm outfits under their priestly garb.

Albert had laughed out loud. *“Ha ha ha! That’ll be a great way to sow chaos between the Empire and Arm. I’m sure the Empire’s hiding somewhere, keeping an eye on Whipper’s forces. I’ll personally support you in this endeavor, so go act like a proper priest.”*

Cale scanned the tent where his allies were at work healing the soldiers. *I had to trek all the way out here, so won't it be a waste to just put out the fire?*

Yes, extinguishing the fire would be a task for some other day.

For their current objective, Cale had intentionally left the tent flap open so the other soldiers could see inside when they walked by.

‹Human. Human.›

Cale heard Raon's voice in his mind but paid it no heed, instead making for the people with minor wounds. "You have a lot of bruises," he told a soldier sitting in the corner of the tent.

"Y-yes, Father," the soldier answered in shock; indeed, he only had light injuries.

Cale took out a potion, dampened a rag with it, then dabbed the areas around the man's bruises. Before long, the wounds faded away.

"Th-thank you very much," said the soldier.

The white-haired priest smiled warmly at him. Saying nothing else, he walked over to another patient with minor wounds to heal them.

‹You're such a good person, human!›

Ignoring Raon as usual, Cale used potions to heal even the soldiers with the most surface-level injuries. The soldiers bowed in gratitude to the white-haired priest, who didn't mind applying potions to the lightest of scratches.

Receiving their thanks, Cale thought, *Dishing out free potions without a care in the world is the best.* He'd been using Albert's potions without holding back, and he was getting a real kick out of it—likely because they'd come at someone else's expense.

"Much appreciated, Father," another soldier piped up.

Cale nearly grinned as he relished in wasting Albert's money, but he responded to the soldier the way a true priest ought to. "No need. It is a priest's job to look after the injured."

After taking care of all the soldiers with minor wounds around him, Cale rejoined his group. Jack and Kage stood by the patients on

death's door.

They're working hard.

Jack sweated profusely as he looked after the patients. The soldier he was currently healing was near death due to the deep gash in his side. *Flash!* Gold light continued to glow in Jack's hand as he healed the injury.

Watching Jack, Cale reflected, *His healing skills are top notch.*

Kage was a talented priestess, but her aura couldn't compare to the one coming from Jack. All eyes were on the saint, and that satisfied Cale.

Seems like he'll come in handy against the Empire later on.

The prospect of causing chaos in the Empire—doing the same thing they were now, dressed in these white vestments and masks—excited him.

"Ungh…urgh…" The moaning soldier, who'd been close to death, slowly regained color.

Jack finally moved his hand away from the patient's side with a deep sigh. He plopped into a chair nearby and took a few deep breaths. At the sight of the patient's healed flank, Cale balled his hands into fists. Before, the man's wound was rotted to the point of his organs peeking through. Now he was completely fine, without so much as a scar. Whipper's troops couldn't hide their shock and admiration.

"Oho!"

"Wow."

Jack was still breathing heavily. Cale approached the saint, led him to a corner of the tent, and sat him down again. "Are you all right?"

Smiling, Jack wiped the sweat from his brow with a shaky hand. "Lord Cale, I…"

"Yes?"

"I think following you here was the right decision."

Why this all of a sudden? Cale didn't understand. He looked at Jack anew, then flinched. The saint was beaming with pure joy.

In a whisper that only Cale could hear, Jack said, “When I was with the church, my life revolved around healing important figures. I never helped people who truly needed the hand of the God of Sun. But now…I’ve finally realized what I must do.” Vigor returned to his gaze, and then he asked, “Lord Cale, might I say something a bit out of place?”

“What’s that?”

Jack’s hands had stopped shaking; he clenched and unclenched his fists. “My healing abilities… They seem to be getting stronger.” The saint felt that he at last understood the will of his god, and he seemed delighted that he could heal people.

As he listened to Jack, Cale was amazed. *Wow.* Jack could already bring someone back from the verge of death, and now his healing abilities were getting stronger? *He really is a saint.* He wasn’t merely posturing as one.

Patting Jack’s shoulder, Cale encouraged the young man. “I have faith in your abilities, Saint Jack.”

Jack clenched his fists once more. He’d saved his younger sister thanks to Cale, and—although he’d accompanied the young nobleman here because *Cale* needed help—the count’s son was saving people yet again.

Lifting his head, Jack watched Cale, who had busied himself with the patients in front of him. Cale’s gaze seemed more serious than ever. *I should’ve lived like this from the start,* Jack reflected. He felt a sense of regret but bottled it up. Standing, he headed back to the patients.

As Jack resumed tending to the Whipper troops, Cale looked around the tent. His grave expression had elicited Jack’s regret for his life thus far, but the only thought going through Cale’s head was *Looks like we’ll be up all night.* There were still patients on standby in other tents.

But even if they were pulling an all-nighter, Cale wouldn’t need to do much. He merely passed potions to Kage and Jack. It was the only thing he could do for the pair, who would take on the burden of suffering throughout the night.

***

The next morning, the Whipper soldiers fixed their eyes on the priests who'd spent all night treating their comrades. The healed patients offered their thanks before being moved to other tents, and a new batch of gravely wounded was ushered into the infirmary.

One wept with gratitude, saying, "Really, truly, thank you so much. Thank you so, *so* much."

"It was nothing. We just did what we needed to."

This soldier had run the risk of having his leg amputated. He sobbed as he clasped Jack's hand. Jack was just as emotional, squeezing the soldier's hand in turn. This sort of scene had occurred several times already, but it gave Tunka pause as he entered the tent and witnessed it for the first time.

Herol joined Tunka's side. "Commander."

"Yeah?"

Tunka watched the healed soldier with a complicated expression. The mood among the soldiers was much brighter this morning, he realized, and in a different way than when they won a battle.

"Welcome, Commander," came a familiar voice. Cale—still disguised as a priest—was speaking to Tunka as if they didn't know each other. He approached the barbarian.

Tunka looked at Cale, then swept a glance around the lout's other allies. The entire group had pulled all-nighters, and they were sweating buckets as they continued to heal patients.

Cale reached Tunka, and their eyes met. "I'm putting the fire out tonight," Cale said. "Bring all the blueprints."

Despite his icy tone, Tunka smiled. "All right. Got it."

Cale hadn't slept a wink. Thanks to the Energy of the Heart, he felt fine even when sleep-deprived; still, he didn't like the look on Tunka's face. He turned on his heel and walked off.

"Thanks!" Tunka called out from behind him.

Cale ignored it.

***

That night was the night of the new moon. Hovering above Myple Castle, Cale looked down. Without the moon, the fire blazed even brighter.

Aside from the fire and the lights from their base, it's completely dark.

Cale thought back to what Herol had told him as he handed over the report.

"There's really nobody inside the castle?"

"No one. I took a few trusted subordinates into the castle to verify it with their magic. I have three mages with me, you know." Those three mages—one each from Rowoon, Brek, and the jungle—were currently disguised as Tunka and Herol's servants. They were present to help with video communications and emergencies.

Cale had gaped at Herol, amazed that the man had no issue with using mages.

Feeling Cale's gaze, Herol had responded, *"At times, one must make small sacrifices for the greater good. To get rid of all magic in the future, I need to use my enemies to my advantage."*

Shrugging off the look in that opportunistic yet unhinged man's eyes, Cale focused solely on the information Herol had given him.

"Not only was it devoid of life, but there were no useful items or even magic devices," Herol had said. *"It was just an empty castle."*

"The mages confirmed that there were no magic devices?"

"Right. There was no trace of mana in there at all."

That meant that the castle lacked the magic devices generally used on the Western Continent. Still, it was possible that *different varieties* of magic devices were hidden in the castle.

"Let's go down," Cale told Choi Han and Rosalyn.

"Yes, Mr. Cale."

"Right away."

‹*Should I just let you down on the top of the castle?*› asked Raon.

The group landed discreetly and quietly on top of the castle enveloped by the pillar of fire, and the invisibility spell around them lifted. Tunka and Herol had also decreased the number of guards posted around the fire, so none of the soldiers noticed their approach.

"It's hot," Cale griped as they stood on the rampart. It *was* hot, due to the fire.

He looked at Choi Han and Rosalyn. Choi Han was rubbing the insignia embroidered on his outfit, which depicted a white star encircled by five red ones. Their improved Arm costumes still weren't perfect replicas of the originals, but Hans and Vicross had used their skills to make the garments look more legitimate.

"What's the plan, Lord Cale?" asked Rosalyn.

"First, we'll descend through the castle and look for magic devices," Cale answered right away. "You and Raon should be better at finding them than those other mages. We might also be able to figure out the Empire's plan in the process."

The pair nodded.

Cale studied the castle blueprints Herol had given him; they showed that the castle had one underground floor. "We'll look for hidden treasures and valuable items too."

The other two humans flinched, and Raon popped up out of thin air. "I knew it!" he shouted in delight. "I *knew* you'd say that, human!"

Choi Han glanced over at Rosalyn and found her smiling. "No money or food. Just treasure, right?"

"Correct. I knew you'd get it, Miss Rosalyn." They'd leave any money or food for the soldiers; Cale was interested in more worthwhile spoils.

"I'll do my best."

"Right. I'll leave it to you."

"What about me, human?"

"You too."

Cale, Rosalyn, and Raon descended into the castle, chatting here and there. Choi Han watched them in a daze, then followed after them. With that, they began their search.

Yet even after looking for some time, they didn't find anything of value. There wasn't much to investigate.

"Hmm. I still haven't sensed anything," Rosalyn admitted.

"You haven't?"

"No."

Empty-handed, Cale's group paused in the first-floor hall.

"Well…let's look in the basement," Cale said.

Rosalyn nodded. Treasures notwithstanding, she and Cale were just trying to figure out the Empire's plan at this point. Had Tunka's enemies simply started this fire and fled? That made no sense. It would've been too wasteful.

"Shall we go there now?"

"Not yet. We should check out the fire first."

Since they were on the ground floor, they could see it up close. The "pillar" was about seven meters across, so the soldiers wouldn't be able to see Cale even when he opened the castle door.

As Cale walked toward the entrance of the ground floor hall, he recalled something Herol had told him: *"If you open the side door of the entrance on the first floor, you'll see the fire right away."*

"Be careful!" Rosalyn called out, concerned.

"I'll open the door, sir," Choi Han said. Stepping forward, he made for the side door, which was about half the size of the large main entrance. He stood in front of it, then glanced back at Cale.

"Open it," Cale commanded.

Choi Han slowly opened the door, revealing the flames beyond. *Whoosh!* Intense heat surged into the castle, accompanied by the *whoosh* of blazing fire.

Cale gulped. "Hmm…"

"You should probably back up," Choi Han said. "It's very hot."

Cale shook his head, taking a step closer to the door. It was hot but bearable, thanks to the Energy of the Heart. All the same,

his expression turned somber. “This fire’s stronger than the last one.”

He’d assumed it would be weaker because it encompassed a smaller area than the Sector One fire, but this pillar radiated a much stronger heat.

I can’t create a tsunami like last time… Cale frowned, not looking to quench the flames again.

A gust tore in through the doorway. *Fwoosh!*

Scorching air blasted past Cale’s face. It was so hot, he had difficulty breathing. He tried to step backward; even with the Energy of the Heart, getting burnt would hurt.

It was then that a voice spoke in his mind. **“Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?”**

Hm? Cale stopped moving. It was the Scary Stone’s owner.

“Will you sacrifice yourself to protect them?” the voice pressed.

How come he’s butting in? Since obtaining the earth affinity, Cale hadn’t paid the Scary Stone’s power any attention, as he’d neither wanted nor needed to use it.

As Cale’s mind whirled, someone grabbed his arm. “Mr. Cale.”

“What?” Cale snapped.

“Uh…” Looking confused, Choi Han pointed at the black dragon. Cale’s gaze followed his finger as Choi Han continued, “Raon’s acting weird.”

Now that Cale thought about it, Raon hadn’t piped up when he approached the fire. The black dragon would usually have nagged him to stop. In fact, Raon hadn’t said *anything* since they arrived on the first floor.

Cale finally spotted the dragon. “What’s he doing?” he asked, puzzled.

Sniff. Sniff. Raon had his face pressed to the floor, smelling it. Cale watched the little dragon, wondering what was going on.

Suddenly, Raon turned his head, and the pair made eye contact. The black dragon pounded the ground. “I can smell it! I can *smell* it!”

Smell what?

"It's the same scent that was in the black swamp!"

Cale was clueless. *The black swamp?*

The moment he figured it out, his expression changed. The black swamp was where he'd found the dragon bones and the Dominating Aura. It was also where the secret organization had given the mermaids dead mana.

Staring at Cale, Raon exclaimed, "I smell that dead dragon's mana!"

The corners of Cale's mouth lifted.

Jack and Hana had said that the dead-mana bomb was in liquid form. Cale had wondered where the Empire got that liquid dead mana, but apparently some dead mana from the black swamp had been given to them as well.

"We're heading down to the basement now," Cale declared. There was something he wanted on Myple Castle's lowest floor.

Herol had suspected that the basement was used as both a prison and slave quarters. Cale's group didn't say much as they descended the stone staircase to the basement. Now that Raon had reported the dead-mana smell, there was only one thing on their minds.

Rosalyn sighed openly. "A dead-mana bomb…"

Cale stopped on the very last step. "Could you please shine some light on the basement, Miss Rosalyn?"

"Of course."

Rosalyn conjured orbs of light, then sent them floating to different sections of the floor. Soon enough, the entire area was illuminated.

"It does look like a prison," Choi Han noted.

Cale nodded. The chamber was full of iron cells. A number of paths stretched out from the entrance, bending this way and that. They all seemed to lead to the cells, making the layout simple yet complex all at once.

Scrutinizing the pathways, Choi Han said, "It looks like a maze. Should I go in first, Mr. Cale?"

“Do you *want* to die?”

“Sorry?”

Smirking, Cale motioned for Choi Han to stay still, then shot a sidelong glance at the dragon.

Sniff. Sniff.

Raon was still smelling things. It didn’t exactly make the dragon look majestic, but Cale let him do his thing. After sniffing around a bit longer, Raon met Cale’s eyes; seeing Cale’s warm gaze, he stopped sniffing and cocked his head in confusion.

Cale pointed into the basement, then told the dragon, “Raon, I choose you!”

Raon blinked a few times before nodding. “All right, human! Just follow me!” He moved ahead, sniffing away once more.

It was difficult to detect dead mana without the darkness attribute. Raon could only sense it because it had belonged to the dead dragon, so Raon was familiar with the scent.

When Raon looked back, he saw that Cale wasn’t following him; rather, he was leaning against the wall of the stairwell with his arms crossed. “Huh?”

Cale made a shooing motion. “Let me know when you’ve found them all.”

Raon nodded and pressed onward as Choi Han watched, fidgeting.

Rosalyn used levitation magic to float off the ground. “With this, I can follow Lord Raon, can’t I?”

“Sure. Enjoy your adventure.”

Rosalyn smiled and chased after Raon, sending small magical orbs down the dragon’s route to make sure it was all right.

Choi Han watched them go, then asked Cale, “Are you worried Raon might miss a bomb and we’ll get hurt if it goes off? Is that why you’re hanging back?”

Cale didn’t respond, keeping his eyes fixed on the glowing chamber.

With a smile, Choi Han joined Cale’s side like a dutiful guard. *He’s a brusque sort of guy, but he’s always looking out for everyone.*

And yet, Cale's thoughts couldn't have been more different: *Standing around and making others do the work really is the best.*

While Rosalyn and Raon diligently scoped out the basement, he got to take a breather here. His respite didn't last long, though.

"I found it!" Raon announced. He was in the middle of the basement, the place where all the winding paths met.

Shortly thereafter, Rosalyn made her way back from the center. "You can follow me," she said, then escorted the two men to Raon.

When Cale entered the square area in the middle of the maze, Raon pointed to the floor with a forepaw. "It's coming from here, and it's really strong!"

Cale looked down. Whereas the cells were made of iron, the floor here consisted of slate tiles. "Looks like we'll need to lift these up," Cale said over his shoulder.

Choi Han had also been looking down at the tiles. When he turned to the group, he realized Cale, Rosalyn, and Raon were all staring at him.

"Ahem!" Choi Han set aside his sword, rolled up his sleeves, and reached for the tiles. "Allow me."

"I can do it faster!" Raon said brightly.

Black mana zoomed toward the large tiles, enveloping four of them. *Clunk. Clunk.* The tiles slowly rose and shifted. Choi Han watched in astonishment.

Once Raon had moved the four tiles without any issues, Cale said, "You really are great and mighty."

The dragon beamed in response, then looked pointedly at Choi Han.

Choi Han sighed. "Hey, Rosalyn… It looks like we need to loosen the dirt a bit too."

"Oh, I'll do that."

Stepping between Choi Han and Rosalyn, Cale activated a weak version of the Sound of the Wind. *Hwoosh.* A breeze brushed past the spot where the tiles had rested, efficiently sweeping the top layer of dirt aside.

Choi Han side-eyed Cale, who frowned. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing.” Choi Han trudged over and picked up his sword.

Rosalyn chuckled, then set about helping Cale. She could only move a little dirt at a time, but it wasn’t difficult—just boring.

As they dug up the spot little by little as well, Cale wondered, *Why did the Scary Stone do that?*

The ancient’s frightening question echoed in his memory. ***“Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?”***

Cale felt uneasy about it; he’d sensed glee in the profound voice. Cale wasn’t a masochist, and hearing the stone’s owner suggest that he sacrifice himself gave him chills.

I really can’t figure out how the Scary Stone’s power works. He hadn’t used it once, and he didn’t plan on it. Even the ancient tome that described the Scary Stone itself hadn’t gone into detail about its power. All it said was *The Scary Stone was strong, and its owner physically shielded everyone by throwing his body in front of them.* The book didn’t contain more information than that.

Cale mulled it over for a moment, then decided, *I’ll just ignore it.* He’d simply have to dismiss the voice’s question as crazy rambling. *I mean, why would I sacrifice myself?* He certainly had no intention to do so.

Just then, Raon called out to Cale. “Human! Human!”

“Ah.”

The item Cale had been searching for was visible at last. He ceased using the Sound of the Wind, and it was then that he heard a noise: *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* It sounded like a clock.

“This is it!” Raon cried. “The scent’s definitely coming from here!”

Rosalyn crouched and inspected the item they’d found: an orb made of thin glass. A number of unfamiliar devices surrounded the orb, but the substance inside it was what caught Rosalyn’s attention. The orb was full of black liquid.

She swallowed hard. “This is strange…”

Raon, who'd landed next to her, frowned as he peered into the hole. "She's right, it *is* strange. What's that liquid?"

He could see about ten bombs with that black liquid at their centers. Next to those was a type of magic bomb he'd never seen before, as well as an orb full of purple fluid. Rosalyn and Raon both scrutinized the latter, trying to discern what it was.

Raon spoke first. "This sure doesn't seem natural. I'll need to break the orb and take a closer look to figure out what it is."

"You're right, Lord Raon," Rosalyn replied. "We *must* study it."

Despite what they said, the mage and dragon seemed to have an idea as to what the purple liquid was. They exchanged glances before turning to Cale.

Meeting their eyes, Cale said, "It has to be related to the fire."

As he'd expected, the mage and dragon didn't disagree.

"The Empire created that pillar of fire," Rosalyn said. "But it seems their ultimate goal was to lure Tunka and the Whipper troops into the castle."

"She's right! Even my great, mighty self thinks that the Empire planned to use the dead-mana bomb and that pillar of fire to blow up this orb of purple liquid and kill everyone!"

"That makes sense. The fire would've burnt everything to a crisp, hiding the evidence that they used dead-mana bombs."

"Yeah, exactly! After Herol failed to find anything good in the castle, he would've had no reason *not* to come down here. And when he did, the castle would go *boom*!" Raon's front paw drew a large circle. "They'd all explode and die!"

"You're right. Even if the explosion didn't kill everyone, the Empire would have an edge over Whipper if some of Tunka's troops were poisoned by the dead mana. As for Tunka's side, which supposedly has no mages, they'd need to escape the pillar of fire while suffering from poison."

"That would be tough for anybody except that idiot Tunka!" Raon stopped there and peered up at Cale, then tapped Cale's leg with his paw. *Tap. Tap.*

Cale rubbed Raon's round head. "Good job."

Raon snickered, looking proud. “I really am great and intelligent, even if my first growth phase is slow!”

Cale humored him. “Yeah, yeah.”

The timer ticked on. *Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.*

Cale’s gaze slid to the magic bomb. It wasn’t average by any means; an unfamiliar device was attached to it. This device was comprised of an orb of whirling mana—and a clock that was slowly counting down.

27:13:44.

“I think alchemists and mages developed this magic bomb together,” Rosalyn said. “A mage stores their mana in the bomb in advance so it can be detonated at the appointed time.”

Most magic bombs had a limitation: A mage needed to set them off manually.

“They put a very small amount of mana in the orb. Only a skillful mage would detect it.”

Rosalyn was right. Although the mana swirled fiercely inside the orb, there wasn’t much of it.

“The explosion would be rather weak, given the amount of mana inside,” she added. “I’d wager that the most it could do is destroy a rock the size of one’s head.”

This new magic bomb in front of them didn’t need to be any stronger than that, though.

“Regardless, it’s still powerful enough to set off the dead-mana bomb.”

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

27:12:07.

Rosalyn, Raon, and Choi Han looked to Cale, who was smiling happily. “Pack them all up for now,” he directed.

As if he’d been waiting for that, Raon quickly began placing the devices into his subspace. Rosalyn lifted the orb with the purple liquid and handed it to Raon. Then she flinched and grabbed the magic bomb.

“What do we do about the timer?” she asked Cale. “If we remove it, we might set the bomb off.”

Still smiling, Cale replied, “Then let it go off.”

“Excuse me?”

Cale clapped once to get his friends’ attention. “I’m going to start a typhoon. It’d be hard not to set a bomb off with that.”

Raon grinned from ear to ear, joyous. “He’s right! Let’s set it off! Then we can take the timer!” He’d had the same thought as Cale.

The lout patted Raon’s head, then said, “Choi Han, Miss Rosalyn—
let’s get started.”

It was time to put out the pillar of fire.

***

“Standing guard at night is so hard,” a soldier groused, yawning.

“Isn’t it better than fighting?”

“That’s true.”

A group of Whipper soldiers stood guard around the fire engulfing Myple Castle. The ones on the east side, facing Tunka’s base, chatted among themselves to stay awake. They were discussing the five priests who’d shown up.

Looking at the infirmary tent—which was brightly lit even now—one soldier remarked, “Those are some seriously good people.”

“That they are. Didn’t they say they know the commander?”

“Yeah, seems they do. Said they were traveling the continent and stopped here to heal our wounded.”

“They’re taking turns healing the patients from tonight onward, right?”

“Yep. Must’ve been hard on them, pulling that all-nighter.”

“Makes sense. Anyway, I’m really grateful for their help. It’s not like they’re getting anything out of this.”

The soldier nodded at his friend’s comment, then glanced behind him at the pillar of fire. If one approached the pillar, the

flames made it difficult to breathe.

“Now, it’d be great if we could do something about this fi—huh?!”

He jumped as a sudden cacophony drowned out his voice. *Fwoosh* went the burning flames, followed by a new noise: *Rumble, rumble.* It was the sound of rolling thunder before lightning struck.

The soldier raised his head. Though it was the night of a new moon, the sky had previously glittered with stars—but no longer. Great black clouds hid the stars from the soldiers below.

Thunder rolled in the soldier’s ears again. *Rumble, rumble.*

“Wha…?”

Then the night sky flashed repeatedly as something exploded. *Booooom!*

“Wh-what the—?!”

The flashes weren’t lightning bolts at all. Two people in black masks and matching outfits hovered above the pillar of fire, surrounded by a scarlet glow. One of the figures shot fireballs into the sky, which collided and burst. *Boom! Boom!*

Loud laughter pealed through the air. “Ha ha ha!”

“H-hey!” the soldier told his companion. “Hurry and report this!”

“Got it!” The other soldier raced toward the base.

There was no need for that, however.

Flash! Flash! The darkened tents lit up one after another before soldiers and officers alike rushed out. Upon seeing them, the soldier standing guard gripped his spear.

Rumble, rumble. The night sky turned wrathful, sparks flying from the black clouds. A storm—no, a typhoon—seemed to be brewing.

“Ha ha ha ha!” The masked pair laughed away, continuing to shoot spells at the heavens.

Magic provoked fear and anger in the Kingdom of the Whipper, and both emotions flared in the eyes of the soldiers witnessing this display.

Someone else was watching the two mages: Cale. Standing on the rampart of Myple Castle, he gazed at the pillar of fire; it had climbed higher than ever. Then he glanced over at Rosalyn and Choi Han. Rosalyn was firing off magic as Choi Han cackled as loudly as possible. They both came off as stereotypical villains.

"Wow. Miss Rosalyn's doing well, as I expected," Cale mused aloud. "And I suppose Choi Han's acting isn't too bad, provided he's just laughing."

He looked skyward. It appeared as though a storm would start at any moment, although the rain clouds only hung above Myple Castle. The powerful winds grew even stronger. *Fwoosh!*

"Raon's doing amazing too," Cale said to himself.

Having finished his brief assessment, he opened his hand. *Thrummm.* Blue light emanated from the pendant around his neck. The Ancient Power known as the Fire-Suppressing Water was making another appearance. One droplet, then another, then countless more materialized in the clouds overhead.

Channeling the Fire-Suppressing Water into the rain clouds, Cale murmured, "Begin."

‹*All right!*› Raon removed the timer.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick—

The timer stopped, and Raon hurled the magic bomb even higher than Rosalyn and Choi Han. A moment later...

Bang!

A loud explosion echoed in the sky. The magic bomb had gone off where no one would get hurt. At the same time, Cale opened his eyes. One drop at a time, it began to rain. *Drip. Drip.* The drizzle soon became a downpour that obstructed everyone's vision.

Sssssssh. Fire-Suppressing Water poured down on Myple Castle as a powerful rainstorm engulfed the stronghold.

The soldiers instinctively stepped backward.

A command broke through the rainfall. "Everybody retreat!" bellowed Commander Tunka.

The soldiers scurried away from Myple Castle.

"Warriors with magic resistance to the front!" Tunka ordered.

The warriors in question ran ahead of the rest and fell into formation. Their movements were quick but oddly clumsy. There wasn't much they could do about it, though. Thunder, sheets of rain, gusting winds—all three surrounded Myple Castle right now. *Rumble. Sssssssh!* Under the new moon, the castle was the eye of the storm.

Something even more eye-catching was visible, however.

Hisssss.

"Th-the fire…!" the soldier who'd been guarding the pillar blurted out, hands tightening around his spear.

The pillar of fire, which had been taller than the castle, was shrinking; it was going out. Still, the rain and rising mist made it difficult for the soldiers to get a good look at the castle.

A warrior gasped. "Wh-what a monstrous sight!" *Is it magic?*

Gawking at the storm that only existed above Myple Castle, he shuddered in fear. Then he looked up at the sky and, through the rain, glimpsed two people in black garb. The floating pair slowly descended, and the warrior's gaze followed.

"Oh."

The pillar of fire was now shorter than the castle, the warrior realized.

Plop, plop.

Now he could see the Mogor Empire's flag fluttering on the roof of the castle. His gaze shifted to the tallest tower's red roof. A man stood atop it, clutching the flagpole. He too was dressed in all black. The warrior stared at the man's free hand; a gust whirled to life in his palm, then rushed into the sky. *Swoosh!* This figure by the flagpole seemed to be controlling the rain clouds.

The warrior felt a sense of foreboding he'd never experienced before, not even when he'd faced the Empire's mages and knights. He was thinking of an entity different from them both: nature. As someone who believed in the power of nature, this warrior knew its strength. Nature was a dominating force that didn't care about magic or humanity.

Tap. The warrior retreated another step.

Someone patted his back, then strode ahead of him. It was the commander-in-chief. Only then did the warrior finally regain some of his grip. Commander Tunka was a strong man who'd fought nature ever since he was young. That was why Whipper's citizens had chosen to follow him; they respected that he didn't succumb to nature.

Commander Tunka raised his voice. "Who are you?!"

The person on the roof—Cale—heard Tunka yell. *He sure is loud.* Cale was getting cold from the rain; even the Energy of the Heart couldn't negate the chill entirely. It was time to end this.

"Who are you?!" Tunka shouted again.

Just then, a gentle question echoed through the area. "I wonder. Who could we be?" It was Rosalyn, but her voice had been magically altered. Her mocking inquiry was audible to all of Whipper's soldiers.

Rummaging lazily through his magic bag with one hand, Cale was once again awed by Rosalyn's acting prowess.

"We're from the secret organization!" Choi Han cried out, his boisterous voice laced with his aura.

This time, Cale had told him to say that. Choi Han glanced over at Cale to see if he'd done well. Heaving a sigh, Cale turned toward Tunka.

"What? Secret organization?" Tunka pretended to scowl as his soldiers grew restless. Though the warriors calmed the soldiers down some, the troops didn't look away from the monstrous trespassers who'd shown up.

Then one soldier's eyes widened. "Huh?"

The man holding the flagpole had begun to move.

That same soldier couldn't help gasping as the Empire's flag, which had been fluttering atop Myple Castle, was cut from the flagpole. *Riiiiip.*

With the same dagger he'd used to tear down the flag, the man on the roof stabbed the Empire's crest. Then he chucked the dagger at Tunka. A whirlwind engulfed the dagger as it rushed toward him. *Fwoosh.*

“Commander!” a few shocked warriors called out, but Tunka focused completely on the man on the roof.

Shkt! The dagger pierced the ground directly in front of Tunka. As the onlookers stared at the dagger in disbelief, the man on the roof spoke. His voice was disguised as well.

“The fire is out,” he declared.

Hissss. The pillar of fire *was* completely gone. The rain had eased to a light shower, and droplets of water landed on the soldiers’ cheeks. *Drip. Drip.*

Then the soldiers heard Tunka’s voice. “Bwa ha ha ha ha!” His laughter filled the void left when the storm ended.

Riiiiip. Tunka tore the Empire’s flag as well, then stepped on the tattered fabric.

Now that the fire was out, his steady voice reverberated across the camp. “Advance to the castle. Capture those figures in black, anyone from the Empire, and anything that’s still in there!”

Once Tunka gave those orders, he dashed in front of the group to lead the charge. That was just his style. He ran straight for Myple Castle, which gradually came into view. Upon reaching the castle’s main entrance, he swung his metal club at the big wooden door.

Whunk! The door splintered. Tunka had no need for an aura; his natural physical strength was enough. Through the broken door, he could see inside the castle.

“Everybody move! Advance!” he roared.

Felia, his right-hand woman, hoisted her spear into the air and rushed toward the castle gate. Tunka’s direct subordinates ran behind her. “Woo-hoo!”

Fwooosh. A strong wind gusted past again, repelling Felia and the warriors surrounding the castle.

“Ugh!”

Only Tunka withstood it.

“Commander, up there!” a warrior shouted. Hearing him, Tunka looked up.

Cale had joined Choi Han and Rosalyn, and the three were floating in the air together.

“Raon,” Cale said. “Invisibility, please.”

“Okay!” the dragon replied from beside him.

The group slowly vanished, much to the bewilderment of Tunka’s forces.

“Th-they’re…!”

“Are you trying to run?!”

Cale didn’t care what Tunka’s troops were saying; he just ignored them. Once he and the others were invisible, Raon used flight magic to move them quickly back to their tent.

“They disappeared!”

“Commander, what should we do?”

“First we head into the castle and scour every nook and cranny! Leave no stone unturned!”

Inside the tent, Cale tuned out Tunka’s fake-angry voice behind them. He had Raon remove the invisibility magic.

“Ugh! I’m so cold.” Cale *had* gotten a chill. He’d spent too long being pelted by rain as he tried to look cool while ripping that flag.

Two towels appeared in front of him.

“Here’s a towel, Lord Cale. I’ll use magic to dry you off.”

“If you catch cold, you’ll faint.”

I don’t think it’d be that *bad.* Cale accepted the towels with a dubious expression. Then a warm breeze swept around him. “Hmm?”

‹It’d be bad if you got sick, human! You can’t cough up blood and pass out again!›

Thanks to Raon’s magic, Cale was dry in an instant. He pulled on his priest’s vestments over his black disguise, then faced his companions. Both Choi Han and Rosalyn had removed their masks and donned their own priestly clothes.

Cale walked to the tent flap and lifted it. Chief Advisor Herol stood outside, accompanied by one of Tunka’s trusted subordinates and a warrior who guarded higher-ranking officers.

“I hope the sudden commotion didn’t startle you, Father,” said Herol.

Cale’s eyes crinkled beneath his white mask as he smirked. “I’m all right. But now that I’m awake, I thought I’d return to healing your patients. Are there any more?”

“There aren’t.”

“I see.”

The three “priests,” woken by the commotion, headed back to the infirmary tent and stayed awake for the rest of the night. The soldiers saw it but scarcely paid any attention; they were busy with the castle now that it was no longer surrounded by fire. Still, they felt grateful to the priests.

Herol, of course, was one of the most thankful. “Thank you very much, Lord Cale,” he whispered in Cale’s ear.

Cale looked at his allies, who were hard at work in the tent. “You’re in my debt,” he told Herol. “Remember it.”

“I will.”

***

The flag of the Kingdom of the Whipper now fluttered atop Myple Castle.

“Are you leaving?” a soldier asked Jack.

“We must,” the saint told him.

“Thank you so much.” The soldier sobbed as he gripped Jack’s hand, thanking him over and over. Kage was in a similar situation. Soldiers bowed down to Cale too.

Two days had passed since Cale extinguished the pillar of fire. Soldiers surrounded the three white-masked priests, who stood in front of the castle, preparing to leave.

Pushing those soldiers aside, Tunka strode to the front of the crowd. “Shame you can’t rest in the castle for a few days.”

“There is no need, Commander,” Cale said, turning down Tunka’s offer. He gazed at every single soldier in turn, then went on,

“Resting wouldn’t suit us. I’m sure there are more people in pain out there.” He looked up at the clear sky. “By their side…that is where we should be.”

His entourage agreed.

With a look that said his hands were tied, Tunka faced his soldiers. “Open a path. Don’t block the priests!”

Disappointed as the soldiers were, they stepped aside. The priests had spent the last few days healing patients with hardly any rest. They’d also given potions to the Whipper soldiers, telling them not to get hurt again. The soldiers had come to revere these priests, who’d used their amazing powers to save those on death’s door.

“Father!” one soldier cried out.

The white-haired priest at the front of the group turned toward him.

It seemed the priest’s gaze had lent the soldier strength. He went on, “I’m curious about which god you serve. I don’t believe in any gods, but I’d still like to know.” This soldier had more faith in nature than those so-called gods, but he wanted to learn more about the priest who’d worked so hard to save him. He even wanted to offer the priest’s god a prayer of thanks.

The priest pointed skyward, toward his god. After following his finger to the sun, the soldier looked back down. The priest smiled at him before walking off once more. As he left, he said one more thing: “The sun shines on all life without discrimination.”

The soldier gasped. The Church of the God of Sun operated within the Empire; although it was falling apart, it was the closest thing the country had to a national religion. At long last, the soldiers understood why the priests wore masks.

“If you’re thankful to these priests, then don’t you forget them,” Tunka said, radiating confidence. “But remember this too: Where magic used to keep us down, we smashed through that hurdle to create a fair world!”

Tunka’s words echoed in the soldiers’ heads as they watched the five priests disappear into the distance.

Once those “priests” were out of sight, they tugged off their masks. Kage glanced at Cale. “Why’d you bring up the God of Sun?”

“All part of the plan,” he replied. Eventually, he’d make the saint and saintess wear white masks and infiltrate the Empire. He didn’t need to tell Kage about that, though.

The crazy priestess was curious, but she didn’t pry further. “Well, at any rate, I think you’d make a great pope someday.”

Jack nodded, his eyes sparkling. “She’s right, Lord Cale! Even if you don’t have divine powers, you’ve got a warm heart and the purest of minds. You definitely have what it takes to be a great pope, looking after your faithful flock. ‘Shines on all life without discrimination’… Yet again, you’ve taught me something new!”

Staring at Jack, Kage forgot anything else she might’ve said.

Unfazed, Cale turned to Raon, who had made himself visible. “Let’s go home.”

“All right, human!”

***

It was early winter. Cale turned off the communication sphere, got to his feet, and headed for the saintess’s room. He knocked on the door. The fake saintess—otherwise known as the swordmaster, Hana—opened it with a *click*.

“What?” she asked him.

“Come.”

“…Where?”

“To get revenge,” Cale declared. Arm’s First Battle Brigade would soon head to the ocean.

A truly vicious smile rose to the swordmaster’s lips.

Chapter 33:
Vicious

OFF THE COAST of Uvar territory, whirlpools still swirled between the many small islands. Cale and his companions were currently on the island farthest from the coast.

"Long time no see, killer whale!" Raon said, patting Archie's slippery back with his forepaws.

Archie held back a sigh, shooting Cale a very disgruntled look. "Lord Cale."

"What?"

"I won't give that woman a ride." Archie was referring to Hana, who was wearing a white robe.

Faseton began, "Archie—"

"Some things just aren't permissible, sir."

Upon hearing Archie's stern tone, Faseton—a small humpback whale—couldn't say much else. He gave Cale an awkward smile.

Hana had attacked the Whale Tribe and killed many whales. While she was working with Cale now that she'd been betrayed by Arm, her former loyalties were still going to get in the way of some things. For instance, Archie had no intention of ferrying his one-time bitter enemy on his back.

"Suit yourself," Cale said. "We're going to have you tow a boat for us, like last time. She can take that." Indeed, most of the group would ride the boat tethered to Archie and a second killer whale.

Archie didn't look happy but nodded regardless, then peered at the woman in the white robe. When he glimpsed her ugly face, his raging anger at the disgusting sight made him click his tongue. He felt that she'd gotten what she deserved, which pleased him, but he detested that she was still alive. At the same time, he felt a bit sorry for her.

Cale watched the group boarding the boat, then the whales, before he approached Hana. "You get on the boat too."

"Got it."

“The entire Whale Tribe is going to be angry with you,” Cale said lightly. “Will you be all right?”

Hana responded with a question. “How come you’re asking that with a smile?”

Cale touched the smile on his face. “Well, why are *you* smiling?”

The swordmaster Hana was struggling to hold back a smile of her own. Cale could tell that her slight smirk was the result of having suppressed it several times already.

“Because I’m happy. I can make them feel as much pain as I felt.” Beaming, Hana caressed her sword. Her expression, threaded through as it was by her weblike scars, was beautiful. “I’ll dye the ocean with their blood.”

Those words told Cale how eagerly Hana had been waiting for this moment. Observing her, he mused, *She’s definitely not normal.* Of course, he preferred people like that.

Picking up on his gaze, Hana asked, “Why’re you gawking at me? Should I cover my face?” At some point, she’d given up covering her face unless she needed to avoid prying eyes.

Cale shrugged, indifferent. “Do whatever you want. It isn’t my decision whether you cover it.”

Hana gaped at him. “Do you know *why* I’m showing my face?”

Not really. Cale didn’t want to know, nor did he care.

When Cale said nothing, Hana’s smile became twisted. “People frown whenever they see me. Some look at me with pity. Others think I got what I deserved. But before they decide how to feel, they’re disgusted by me.” Anger burned in her eyes. “Every time someone feels that way, I think about what I went through. I’m making sure I can never forget it. That’s why I won’t cover my face.”

She waited for Cale’s response, but he merely nodded with the same expression as before. “Whatever you want.”

Hana’s eyes lit up for the briefest of moments. A different smile rose to her lips, then vanished as quickly as it had come.

Mary, who’d been watching the two of them, touched the sides of the hood covering her face. “It’s difficult, but I am curious… I don’t know if they would understand.”

Nobody heard her murmurings.

Cale's gaze shifted to the whales; the ones who'd heard what Hana said had complicated looks on their faces. "Let's go to Hais Island Nine," he said.

He'd brought along a group that could easily destroy not just a ship but an entire island: Raon, Choi Han, Rosalyn, Ron, Mary, and Hana. They were bound for Hais Island Nine, an island among the many in the ocean between the Eastern and Western Continents. There, the Whale Tribe and the Tiger Tribe were waiting for him.

***

When Cale's group reached their destination, Witira was there to greet them. "It's been a while, Lord Cale."

"Yes, indeed."

Witira asked about Cale's visit to Myple Castle. "I heard you went to help the Kingdom of the Whipper in the fall."

After taking Myple Castle, Tunka hadn't been able to progress any further. His troops had reorganized themselves and advanced to another castle, but the Empire had responded in full force. They'd deployed mages, knights, soldiers, and even advanced weapons, demonstrating the true strength of the Empire. Even without alchemy, their defense put their forces at Myple Castle to shame. Despite their best efforts, Whipper had to retreat.

Cale didn't try to hide his involvement with Whipper. "That's right. And I did something big."

When he owned up to this, Witira smiled. "The Kingdom of the Whipper won't advance past Myple Castle, will it?"

"Most likely not," Cale replied, following Witira to the center of Hais Island Nine. "It's almost winter. Even if they receive funds from the other realms, those nations will start feeling the crunch as well. Tunka's forces will have to give up."

To Cale, it was just the right balance. Still, taking Myple Castle was a victory for Whipper, and the other three realms were satisfied that Tunka was holding the Empire's attention. As for the Empire,

they were reeling after their failure to swiftly wipe out the enemy with the fire and dead-mana bombs.

Witira's smile grew. "Now that Whipper's stalled, is it our turn to move?"

"It is." *But your people will be moving more than mine.* Cale didn't voice that part; instead, he focused on what Witira was saying.

"We're having the creatures of the sea keep an eye on Arm."

"And their numbers?"

"We don't have an accurate headcount, nor does the Tiger Tribe. Arm has gotten more secretive. We only managed to confirm twenty ships, so we're anticipating a lot more."

Cale nodded, reviewing the information in his mind. Arm was but one branch of the secret organization. When he heard that their First Battle Brigade was set to advance, he hadn't expected *that* many troops. But larger numbers would make sense if the brigade *and* some of Arm's subordinate organizations arrived all at once.

"Who did you say came from the Tiger Tribe for this meeting?" Cale asked.

"A shaman and their three most powerful warriors," Witira answered. "The rest of the tribe is on another island."

Cale nodded again. "I see." He envisioned this as his one and only encounter with the Tiger Tribe.

"The shaman, um, seemed anxious to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes. He didn't tell me why, but he said he really wants to meet you."

Cale shivered. He hadn't had such a bad gut feeling in a while. Still on his way to meet with the Tiger Tribe, he slowed down, but he'd already reached the center of Hais Island Nine. Three wooden buildings stood in the middle of the small landmass, and he stopped in front of them.

"Aren't you going in, Lord Cale?"

"Not yet. Just give me a moment to think—"

Creak.

Hearing a door swing open, Cale furrowed his brow. *I want some time to mull this over!* Why didn't things ever calm down when he was trying to assess them? Scowling, Cale turned toward the building with the open door.

"Hmm?"

He was so flustered, he shrank backward. The individuals who'd come out of the building were huge—even larger than Tunka. Though they were about two meters tall, same as the barbarian, they were far more muscular.

"If I messed around and they hit me, it'd be a one-way ticket to the afterlife," Cale said under his breath.

The door was fairly big, but the hulking figures coming out made it look tiny.

"They're members of the Tiger Tribe," Witira told him.

Cale had realized that even without her explanation. Their physiques alone screamed, *I'm strong! I'm a tiger!*

Quips from Ron and Raon echoed in his ears like background music.

"This is my first time seeing people from the Tiger Tribe, young master."

"Tigers are quite large, human! But *that* tiger's a bit weird."

Cale could tell which tiger Raon was talking about: the old one in the middle of the group walking toward him. He had a long beard and was the biggest of his kin; Tunka would look like a cute little boy in comparison. There were a number of odd tattoos on the old tiger's face, and he gripped a small staff in one hand. Most importantly, the old-timer was making a beeline for Cale, although his eyes were closed.

That old tiger's definitely the shaman.

He felt certain of that, despite the fact that the tiger's size wasn't typical of a shaman. The tiger's white garments gave it away.

The shaman and the three warriors following him came over and stood in front of Cale. As Cale studied the shaman's closed lids, the Dominating Aura automatically flowed from his body.

“I was waiting for you,” the shaman began, and his eyes flew open.

Yikes. Cale flinched. The tiger’s irises were completely white; there was no divide between his irises and the whites of his eyes. It caught Cale off guard, frightening him a little.

Nevertheless, he addressed the shaman, whose white eyes were fixed on him. “Do you even know *who* you were waiting for…?”

Between the shaman’s claim and Witira’s earlier explanation, Cale was feeling pretty uncomfortable. He wondered if Witira had told the Tiger Tribe that the Dark Forest would be a great place for them to live. It was certainly possible.

Still, he didn’t expect to hear what the old tiger asked next: “Are you a believer?”

Cale flinched again, but he’d grown accustomed to peering into the old tiger’s eyes. His fear had diminished to a general wariness.

This old tiger does *seem weird.* Dread tugged at him, yet he boldly replied, “No.” He felt satisfied with his cold, curt response.

“I grew up hearing that I was spiritual,” the old-timer told him.

The tiger in front of him seemed different from the shamans Cale knew. *He’s more like a medium than a shaman.*

Shamans could be considered the mages of the Eastern Continent. They used all kinds of natural materials to channel the power of nature. Thus, they always carried talismans and the like.

“I see,” Cale said indifferently. “You do look spiritual, I guess.”

The old shaman stomped his feet. *Boom!* As Cale jumped in surprise, the old-timer bellowed, “Nature spoke to me, and I heard what it said!”

That scared me. Putting a hand over his heart to calm himself, Cale scrutinized the shaman. *Just what did he hear?*

“A red-haired man from the Western Continent—a man living a new life—would come find us.”

Cale was startled anew, blown away by the tiger’s pronouncement. *A man living a new life… He really seems like a medium.* He looked up and met the white eyes staring at him.

The old-timer's beard trembled as he lowered his voice and continued, "Nature told me that the red-haired man would create chaos."

Cale rubbed his arms, which were covered in goosebumps.

Holding his gaze, the tiger shaman raised his voice. "Nature told me he'd capsize the ships of those damned bastards in the secret organization!"

With the way he howled, it sounded like the island's entire patch of forest was roaring. Everyone's eyes were glued to the two of them, and the shaman never tore his gaze from Cale.

Before he knew it, Cale found himself asking, "How did it know?"

How had *nature* known his intentions? This was giving him chills.

Cale's companions flinched at his response, as did the shocked Witira, who hurried over to him.

"You're going to capsize their ships, Lord Cale?" Rosalyn seemed uncertain as to whether Cale's plan was plausible.

Choi Han voiced his bewilderment as well. "You're really going to flip them over?"

Everybody aside from Raon, who was beaming, was equally astonished.

"Well, you see…I thought shaking up their ships might help them leave this world," Cale responded indifferently, his calm voice reverberating through the forest. "Wouldn't it be better if we could send them to the afterlife without dirtying our hands much?"

That even threw off the Tiger Tribe warriors, who gaped at him. Witira had told them all about the young nobleman in advance, but the grinning dragon behind him had the tigers on edge.

Conscious of the tigers' gazes, Cale smiled awkwardly. Then he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

"Oh my." It was Ron. "This shaman does seem spiritual, young master. Why, it's like he read your mind. He knows you were once a lout and have since turned over a new leaf."

Huh? Cale shot Ron a quizzical look. “Why’re you suddenly talking about me being a lout?”

The question seemed to satisfy Ron, who cracked a smile. “‘A man living a new life.’ Doesn’t that refer to how you changed your caddish habits and became the nobleman you are today?”

Cale winced. “Living a new life” didn’t *actually* refer to how he’d straightened himself out. He couldn’t exactly tell Ron that, though.

“There was a time when Lord Cale was a *lout*?” Witira asked.

“That is impossible,” Mary said. “Lord Cale is anything but loutish.”

The two women were flabbergasted. And while Mary spoke robotically as ever, she managed to voice her thoughts. The swordmaster, Hana, regarded Cale with a strange look in her eye.

“I’m *still* a lout,” Cale insisted to his audience.

He genuinely believed it. After all, he’d been going around causing all sorts of problems in his quest for a peaceful future; he’d scammed countless people too. Such was his rationale.

Witira snorted. “Pfft!” Cale saw that she was smirking at his response. With a look of understanding, she told Cale, “Here I thought you were saying you really *were* a lout. But I guess I see what you meant.”

What does she think I meant? Cale couldn’t make heads or tails of her response. Yet Mary seemed to have accepted it as well; her hooded head bobbed in agreement.

“Mr. Cale’s past behaviors were just an act,” Choi Han said. “He lived a peaceful life until he set a goal and started to pursue it.”

Cale stared at Choi Han in disbelief. *What kind of messed-up spin is that?*

Smiling in satisfaction, Choi Han continued, “We know the truth, even if you humbly deny it.”

What the hell? Cale truly couldn’t believe his ears.

Rosalyn—who’d been listening quietly—piped up, “Actually, it was quite well-known in noble society that Lord Cale was a lout. I believed that rumor until I met him and learned he’d been hiding his true self.”

Following Rosalyn's explanation, Witira expressed her admiration. For her part, Mary merely continued to nod. Cale was lost for words. He wanted to say that his true self was a simple man yearning for the slacker life, but he had a feeling they'd completely misunderstand if he tried to explain.

Cale sensed eyes on him and turned toward the source. Hana was glaring at him as if he were a wretched, evil creature. Her incredulousness came as a comfort to Cale, and he faced the shaman again with a bit less anxiety. The shaman's white eyes were still peering at him.

How uncanny. The old tiger genuinely seemed to have spiritual powers, although he was more like a medium than a shaman. *Does he know who I am?*

Curious, Cale asked, "Who am I?"

His unexpected question confused the group. Was there anyone present who *didn't* know who he was? Regardless, Cale waited for the tiger shaman's response.

"I have said everything I heard."

Cale nodded, disappointed. "I see."

The shaman wasn't done yet, however. "One more thing."

"There's more?" Intrigued, Cale peered eagerly at him.

"I was told that the red-haired man would give us a new home."

"Not true," Cale replied immediately.

A new home? It'd be great to use the Tiger Tribe to fight the northern alliance's knights, but… Cale shook his head, trying to get rid of that useless thought.

Closing his eyes, the old tiger said, "My introduction has been delayed. I am Gashan the shaman, here as a representative of the Tiger Tribe. It is an honor to meet the great dragon and these incredible individuals hailing from the Western Continent." Gashan pointed to the wooden building. "Come, let us continue our conversation inside."

"Sure."

On his way in, Cale pictured the arrangement of the Hais Islands. The name “Hais” was shared by a group of fifteen islands. Though they were meeting here on Hais Island Nine, Hais Islands Two and Twelve were being used by the Whale Tribe and Tiger Tribe respectively.

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Cale flew through the air, invisible to everyone. There was no one in sight nearby either, yet he opened his mouth to speak. “Is that them?”

“Yes, Lord Cale,” came Witira’s voice.

They hovered over the open sea, and Cale swept his gaze over their surroundings. Dozens of ships large and small sailed through the water. The former were only “small” compared to the large ships; in truth, they were at least medium-sized.

Cale frowned. “There are more than I expected.”

He had additional company besides Witira. Raon was keeping him aloft with magic, while Rosalyn did the same for the future Whale Queen. The other member of their party was Gashan. The tiger shaman was still on Hais Island Nine, but he’d created a crow to join them. Cale glanced to the side; Gashan’s crow flapped at his side, the only visible presence in the group.

Through that crow, they heard Gashan’s voice. “The fleet may be large, but the five vessels gathered in the center are their strongest. We suspect Arm’s First Battle Brigade is aboard them. Supposedly, they are twenty fighters strong.” That would mean the First Battle Brigade had fewer members than the other brigades.

“Ocean creatures are still observing their movements,” Witira said. “The fleet should arrive near the Hais Islands in about five days.”

Cale remembered something Ron once told him. *“I fought Arm on the Eastern Continent, young master. They belonged to the underworld, but their skills lay more in battle and slaughter than in stealth and assassination. Many had special abilities. Even subordinates*

of the First Battle Brigade will be stronger than your average mercenaries."

Watching the ships, Cale shared his sentiments. "They look tough." He got the impression that the enemy would be more powerful than he'd expected. "Hmm."

Arms crossed, Cale mulled things over. In addition to his companions, they had ten whales and about twenty tigers on their side.

"This never would've happened if all of our tigers yet lived," Gashan remarked. "What an embarrassment."

Earlier, Gashan had told Cale all about how the Tiger Tribe wound up on the verge of extinction. *"Tigers do not live in groups,"* he'd said. The tribe of tiger beastfolk didn't either.

The Eastern Continent had plenty of mountains, and the tribe had been spread across the continent—one family per mountain, essentially. Arm had hunted down those families one by one to kill them all. They'd supposedly enlisted hundreds of people, dividing them into five squads to attack each family of tigers.

During his explanation, Gashan had added, *"One day, I received a message from nature. It told me to gather the Tiger Tribe. Just then, a messenger one family had managed to dispatch before they died arrived and informed me of the situation."*

Since the Tiger Tribe lived like hermits in the mountains, they didn't know much about the overall situation on the continent. They resided so far from each other that they barely knew the states of their own kin.

That was how the tribe went from having two hundred members to twenty, all of whom had banded together and come to the Hais Islands. Only about fifteen of those tigers would be involved in the battle.

Cale hummed in thought as he contemplated all this.

"Lord Cale," Witira asked, "do you think we'll have many casualties, given our current numbers?"

The thought of losing had never crossed her mind. Even if their fighting forces were few, they were still members of the Whale Tribe and the Tiger Tribe. There was no way that they could lose.

Even so, Witira was worried that they'd have a lot of casualties. They would be up against hundreds of enemy troops.

"Maybe we should've asked other realms for help," Witira added, concern written all over her face.

Not even the entire Whale Tribe was here. A handful of whales, including King Seakeller, were busy preparing for war and keeping an eye on the northern alliance.

"We can't take a lot of losses now." Her murmur was laced with worry.

It was then that Cale interjected, "Natural disasters would probably be scariest, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?"

Cale looked down at the ships. "What if dozens of whirlpools appeared suddenly in the ocean as they crossed?"

Fwooosh. A palm-sized whirlwind appeared from the middle of nowhere as Cale activated the Sound of the Wind.

"Once they see those whirlpools, they'll try to avoid them," he continued, self-assured. "At that point, they'll spot some landmasses: the fifteen Hais Islands. They'll head for those, right?" He paused, thinking of what would happen in five days' time. "Any ships whose captains lack the skills to steer clear of the whirlpools will be wrecked. The troops aboard will tumble into the sea, and they won't be able to fight in the water."

Witira observed the fleet, listening to Cale.

"Oh, and if we put whirlpools between some islands, the enemy ships will crowd together to sail to the islands that seem safest."

Rosalyn, Witira, and Gashan said nothing as they absorbed the rest of his explanation. According to the plan, his companions—as well as the Tiger Tribe—would be on the islands where the ships congregated. Meanwhile, the Whale Tribe and whales of the sea would attack the shipwrecked enemies.

"What do you think?"

Witira's lips parted, and she studied the small whirlwind in the air; their enemies wouldn't be able to see it. She opened her mouth

to speak, but someone else was faster.

"Let's try it, human!" Raon cried. The dragon fluttered his wings, and Cale felt the resulting gust on his face. "I'm stronger now that I've learned stuff from Gragon Gramps! Let's flip all those ships!"

Dragons really are scary, Cale thought. How could Raon talk about causing a natural disaster with such glee?

Surveying the dozens of ships below, Cale said, "All right. We'll make it happen five days from now, when they're nearing the islands."

Compared to the vast, open sea, the Hais Islands were relatively close to each other. Once Arm reached the islands, Cale's allies would put them through the wringer. Myriad kinds of fresh hell awaited them. Even if Arm managed to flee the islands and make it back to sea, they'd have to face the Whale Tribe, which would be just as hellish.

Picturing the battle, Cale grimaced. *How terrible.* It wouldn't be a pretty sight.

"Then in five days, we shall take revenge at last," said Gashan.

For the Whale and Tiger Tribes—as well as the fake saintess, Hana—that would be the wonderful day when they retaliated against Arm, devastating their foe.

"Let's go back."

Turning away from the fleet, Cale and his companions quickly headed back to Hais Island Nine.

Once he returned, Cale set about refining the plan. *This is going to be tiring.* He'd need as much support from the Energy of the Heart as possible to use his Ancient Powers.

After this, I'll rest until spring.

That was Cale's little promise to himself.

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Five days later, Cale watched the sun sink over the horizon. "The ocean's freezing in winter."

“You’re cold again, human? Should I cast more warming magic?”

“No… I was just making an observation.” In truth, Cale wasn’t cold at all. He’d only said that because the wind was strong. Feeling nostalgic as he gazed at the sunset, he added, “They’re finally here.”

Choi Han, Rosalyn, Raon, and Gashan—as well as Faseton in small humpback whale form—all looked toward the horizon. A series of specks could be seen in the distance. Those specks were the dozens of ships heading their way.

Faseton swam to the boulder where Cale stood. “My sister wanted me to tell you we’re ready, Lord Cale.”

Members of the Whale Tribe, plus dozens of actual whales, floated in the ocean, waiting to move.

“Gashan,” Cale said. “Get ready.”

The shaman’s eyes opened. A murder of crows appeared from the forest behind him, cawing loudly. “Go,” he told them.

The crows broke into smaller groups and flew to the other Hais Islands. They’d serve as messengers to the Tiger and Whale Tribes, as well as to Cale’s companions, who were stationed on different islands.

Rosalyn approached Cale. “I understand why you dispatched Miss Mary and Mr. Ron together,” she said; Cale had left the pair in charge of one island. “Will Miss Hana be all right by herself, though? I know she claimed she could take them on, but still…”

The swordmaster *had* said that she’d defend her island by herself, yet Rosalyn couldn’t hide her concern.

Before Cale could respond, Choi Han cut in, “She’ll be fine.”

“Is that your opinion?”

Choi Han smiled at her. “Yes. In my opinion, she’ll be fine. I trained her.”

Rosalyn closed her mouth at his confident declaration. As Choi Han said, he’d trained Hana—as well as Lark—until winter came. Swordfighters understood each other best, so Rosalyn trusted his judgment and said nothing more.

Cale remembered his earlier conversation with Hana and Ron.

"Please leave the most densely forested island to me, young master. I'll kill them all quietly," Ron had said, a chilling smile replacing his benign one.

For her part, Hana had laughed and informed him, *"I'm fine on my own, Cale Henituse. Don't send anybody else with me."*

"Will you really be okay on your own?" Cale had asked.

"It's not a question of whether I'll be 'fine.' I don't think I'd be able to tell the difference. But once I see blood, I can't stop myself from killing anything in front of me."

Cale hurriedly stuffed down his memory of the vicious pair. He didn't know why Arm had made enemies of those two fearsome individuals. Pitying the secret organization, he faced the horizon once more.

"The sun's setting, human!" Raon cried. "Time to destroy everything!"

What a bloodthirsty dragon. Yet Raon was right—they were ready. Cale heaved a sigh, then said, "Step back."

Fwsssh. Wind swirled around Cale's body. He'd never used the full extent of his abilities; even the bolt from the Fire of Destruction hadn't maxed out the Ancient Power. This time around, he went all out with the Sound of the Wind. *Fwoosh!*

Raon had other things to attend to, so Cale was best suited to this task.

Flap. Flap. The hem of Rosalyn's robe was fluttering. She grabbed it and moved away from Cale.

"Let's do it, Rosalyn!" cried Raon, who'd created a huge magic circle.

As Rosalyn nodded at him, the sound of fluttering clothes grew even louder. *Flap! Flap!*

The forest trees danced this way and that. *Swssshhh.*

Rosalyn lifted her magic staff into the air. She was about to attempt a grander spell than she'd ever done before.

A storm, she thought.

She stabbed her staff into the center of the magic circle, which contained five top-grade magic stones. *Phk.* Red mana rose from

her body.

Just then, she heard Gashan's voice: "Winds that serve as the breaths of the tired, I beseech thee! Gather in my undeserving body and become a great typhoon!"

Rosalyn lifted her head. Raon's two front paws were pointed at the sky; it was slowly darkening as the sun set, and black rain clouds surged in.

Soon, the large clouds hung over about half of the Hais Islands. Thunder and powerful gales had begun as well. Rosalyn clutched her staff for support; the very idea of what was happening amazed her.

Flap. Flap. She peered toward the source of the gusts; Choi Han was looking at the same spot.

Fwooooosh. Dozens of small whirlwinds rose into the air, Cale in the middle. His shirt whipped and swayed as he put the Sound of the Wind's full power toward his task.

This is pretty hard, Cale reflected. But whenever using the Sound of the Wind drained his strength, the Energy of the Heart activated to reenergize him.

Strange…

He could call forth the wind as easily as a hamster could run on a wheel. And, although he'd run out of strength every time he created a fist-sized whirlwind, the Energy of the Heart likewise activated repeatedly.

Something was off, though.

"Argh…"

Oddly, Cale was summoning new whirlwinds faster than before. *I don't know if I'll be able to control those later. Were the Ancient Powers always this strong?* Sweat dotted his forehead.

Swoooosh. Splash, splash! Waves formed on the water, and Faseton zipped away from the shore. He and Gashan gaped at Cale in bewilderment. It was hard to see him, since he was surrounded by countless whirlwinds.

Suddenly, Cale groaned in pain. "Augh!"

“Human! Stop! If you get hurt, I’ll tear everything apart!” Raon shouted at him.

Cale’s arms were shaking. He was itching to reply, but he didn’t have the strength. *I’m trying to stop!* He was having difficulty just keeping the whirlwinds by his side. Through those whirlwinds, he locked eyes with Choi Han.

Although his clothes flapped about, Choi Han stood stock-still.

“I’ve improved, though I should be even better,” Choi Han had said after he’d finished his training.

Cale nodded at him.

“You can start!” Choi Han yelled back.

Once Cale heard that, he released the whirlwinds at his side. *Splaaaash!* The whirlwinds followed his will, cutting through the ocean to their appointed locations.

Swshhh. Cale could hear the trees as he lifted his head to look skyward. The black clouds blanketed the sky, expanding to the east. Cale turned the other way. With the sun nearly gone in the west, night had begun to fall. They were magically creating dangers at sea—namely, a storm and whirlpools—that would affect only the area around the Hais Islands.

Cale fixed his clothes, which were in disarray from the wind, and faced the horizon. The dozens of ships that had just been specks earlier were clearly visible now.

“Time for us to hide too.”

Rumble, rumble.

Rolling thunder rumbled around them.

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Drip. Drip.

Opid, the leader of Arm’s First Battle Brigade, frowned at the raindrops falling on the ship’s deck. “Nighttime rains… Is it about to storm?”

“It’s only a drizzle,” his subordinate replied. “I say we hurry to the Hais Islands and see what happens.”

“Can we reach them before it gets much darker?”

“Yes, sir.”

Opid nodded and looked around. Several people aboard each ship were running about, preparing for the rain.

“Tch. Should we have brought a bigger crew?”

“We couldn’t, sir.” Opid’s second-in-command, Deputy Gritil, approached and patted Opid’s shoulder. “We had to go quietly, hiding our identities. We couldn’t have brought a big crew. It’s already going to be a pain killing the navigators once we reach our destination.”

“You’re right, Gritil. And yet…”

Rumble, rumble. At the sound of thunder, Opid had an ominous feeling. He looked up.

At that moment, a new noise—different from the sound of the ship cutting through the ocean—reached his ears. *Splaash. Splaaash.* Not once, but twice.

It’s coming from behind the ship.

Opid’s vessel was in the middle of the fleet; he spun to face the ships in the rear.

“Groooar!” With that loud roar, a huge creature leapt into the air.

“Whales…” Opid muttered.

About ten whales breached the surface before slipping back underwater. Among the group, Opid noticed a humpback with an X-shaped scar on her back.

His eyes widened. “The Whale Tribe!”

He’d been told that the tribe was up north. The Whale King, Seakeller, supposedly didn’t budge from their territory. The First Battle Brigade had only mobilized after hearing as much from the northern alliance, so what was the future Whale Queen doing here?

“It’s the Whale Tribe, sir! Why have they turned up?” Deputy Gritil asked, frowning.

Opid didn’t respond. Instead, he ordered his subordinates, “Head for the closest of the Hais Islands.”

If Opid’s fleet faced the Whale Tribe in the water, it would result in severe casualties. No, they’d need to prepare for death.

“Hoist the black flag up to the light,” Opid said. This flag signaled an emergency. After that, he addressed the deputy leader. “I want everyone here now, Gritil.”

“Got it.”

Opid watched everyone’s hurried movements and bit his lip.

Splaaash. Whoosh. The whales swam toward them faster.

“Damn it.” Opid scowled.

“Raising the flag!” a subordinate declared.

The black flag rose slowly up the mast. Opid touched the sword at his waist; he was a top-tier swordfighter and a middle-tier mage.

As Opid made to fetch his armor, the navigator’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

Baaang!

The loud sound in front of their ship made Opid whip around. “What was that?!” he demanded.

A whirlwind shot out from the water—the same spot the sound had come from.

“Sir! Out of nowhere, the sea’s spitting whirlwinds!” a subordinate cried.

Opid had already begun to cast magic to leap across the ships. “Son of a…!”

Only one whirlwind had launched into the air, but countless whirlpools large and small swirled in the ocean. The rain came down harder. *Sssssh.*

Opid raised his head. It was dark, and there were no stars in the sky. Without their magic lights, it would’ve been pitch black.

“Groooar!” The whales’ roars drowned out everything.

“Head to the Hais Islands!” Opid ordered the fleet. “As quickly as possible!”

His navigator protested, “But the whirlpools—”

“Evade them! The Whale Tribe’s rushing us. If you don’t want to die, get to the islands!”

It was a stormy night, and facing the whales at sea during a storm would ensure their deaths. If they made landfall, they could fight.

“I’ve woken everyone up, sir!”

“We can’t anchor all the ships at one island, Captain Opid!”

Assessing the speed of the whales approaching from the distance, Opid rattled off additional orders. “Split up and get to whatever piece of land you can! Gritil, divide the members between our ships!”

Each member of the First Battle Brigade commanded a large group of their own.

Crack! A ship at the rear of the fleet was dragged into a whirlpool. The people aboard screamed.

“Should we go save them?”

As his subordinate asked that question, Opid heard the whales once more. “Groooooar!”

“No,” he replied. “We forge ahead no matter what. If we reach an island, we’ll survive until tomorrow, even if we lose some ships. Contact Central as soon as we make landfall.”

Creak. Creak. Opid grabbed the railing as the ship tilted to one side. Gritil, who was also an adept assassin and swordsman, had already moved to follow Opid’s orders.

“Damn it!”

Where had all this come from? Seeing an island silhouetted in the distance, Opid clutched the railing tighter. He didn’t have time to think about which of the fifteen Hais Islands it was.

“Another whirlpool!”

Opid cursed again. There were innumerable whirlpools between the islands, and the rain made them difficult to see from a distance.

“Looks like we’ll need to split up!”

“Do what you have to do to make landfall safely!”

The whirlpools prevented more than one ship from passing through at once, so the dozens of ships headed toward different islands.

Bang! Craaash!

Opid turned around. A midsize ship had taken damage; next to it, a humpback whale roared.

“Hurry up!” he yelled.

“W-we’re almost there!” the navigator replied, feeling the tip of Opid’s sword against his back.

They avoided a large whirlpool. At last, they could make out one of the Hais Islands. As the ship docked alongside it, Opid ordered, “Everybody hurry onto shore and get into formation!”

His subordinates rushed from the ship.

Ashore, Opid watched the other ships evade whirlpool after whirlpool, then scanned the island. The beach was a small, sandy area; beyond the sand, he could see a small forest. He marched toward it right away.

The Hais Islands were uninhabited, and they sat between the Eastern and Western Continents. Opid’s thoughts were racing now that the Whale Tribe had appeared, but he still needed to scope out the forest and choose a good location there.

The whales will have trouble getting past those whirlpools too. Slightly relieved, Opid picked up the pace.

The moment he entered the forest, something rustled nearby. He froze. *Rustle. Rustle.* It was the sound of someone walking through the brush.

Opid faced forward. Just then, he spotted a few golden lights—and one cut through a tree. *Slice!*

Between the golden lights, he saw someone: a woman with black spiderwebs on her face. She laughed as she sent out more golden lights.

Opid let out a groan. “Swordmaster.”

***

Meanwhile, the divided members of the First Battle Brigade began to hear strange sounds.

"Grrrrr..."

With primal growls, people with slit pupils slid into view.

Ron, who was on Hais Island Thirteen, turned to Mary. "I'll take care of the assassins. You can rest, Miss Mary."

"Yes, Grandpa Ron."

Having caught a glimpse of Deputy Gritil, Ron melted into the darkness.

Cale watched from above, arms folded. "What a giant mess."

The view was pretty satisfying, and tonight was only just beginning. Whirlwinds roared in his palms. *Swoosh. Swoosh.*

Sensing someone's presence, Cale turned to see Raon staring at him. "I told you, I'm all right."

Still, Raon fixed him with a gaze so fiery it could've created sparks. "Your arms were shaking just now. You need to build up your strength, weak human. Don't use too much of that Ancient Power."

What does an Ancient Power have to do with strength training? Cale was skeptical of Raon's thought process. Dismissing the dragon, he looked at the other people behind the invisible airborne barrier: Rosalyn, Choi Han, and Gashan. The three watched the events playing out below, speechless.

"What're you doing?" Cale asked Choi Han.

Both Choi Han and Gashan glanced over at his question. Rosalyn pivoted toward him as well.

Cale pointed downward. "Why not go down and fight?"

Gashan flinched as he realized he'd been staring blankly at the islands. *Yes. I must lend my aid.* After all, he was the one who'd gathered the Tiger Tribe and brought them here. His grip tightened on his wooden staff.

"I won't," Choi Han said then. "I need to be here to protect you, sir. I don't know when you could get hurt or start coughing up blood again."

Gashan gaped at Choi Han, wide-eyed. *He's weak...?* There were whirlwinds roaring in Cale's hands. The nobleman had also created every single whirlpool roaring in the ocean channels between the Hais Islands. Even if Gashan, Rosalyn, and the dragon had created the storm overhead, those whirlpools were treacherous in and of themselves.

Choi Han's objections stunned Gashan. If anything, he was impressed that Cale indulged such rambling.

"Point taken," said Cale. "I don't think I'll cough up blood this time, though."

"He's right, Choi Han! The great and mighty Raon Mir is here!"

"Yes..." Cale added. "The great, mighty Raon is here as well."

After hearing the exchange between the human and the dragon, Choi Han nodded. "I understand."

Gashan still looked incredulous. A hand patted his shoulder; it was Rosalyn's. When the old tiger turned to face her, she said, "Let's go, Mr. Gashan."

"All right."

He followed Choi Han and Rosalyn, descending to the ground. Before they split up to head to different islands, Gashan heard Cale's voice from overhead.

"You can't destroy the island, Choi Han."

Cale was saying all sorts of odd things, Gashan noted.

Choi Han looked up. "No, sir!" he shouted back. "I'll be careful!"

The old shaman said nothing, simply clutching his wooden staff. He parted ways with Rosalyn and Choi Han, making for the islands where his fellow tigers were.

Hwooosh.

Something brushed past his side with a chilling noise: a whirlwind, sinking down to the water's surface. Soon, the whirlwind crashed into the sea.

Splash!

Once submerged, the whirlwind raged underwater. Gashan gripped his staff even tighter and lowered himself quickly.

“Oh, nature, please calm my fluttering heart.” The shaman used that short prayer to reassure himself.

Now that he’d summoned two whirlwinds to block the enemy ships’ path, Cale kicked back to watch things unfold. The rain and wind didn’t affect him, thanks to the invisible shield Raon had created. He couldn’t see everything in the darkness of night, but Raon’s lightning bolts gave him a decent grasp of the situation.

He gasped in admiration. “Wow…”

“Grooooar!” The larger whales roared as they rose to the surface.

Three of them struck a midsize ship, which broke apart. *Crrraaack!*

Watching, Cale gulped. *Vicious.*

Witira and her companions bashed against the ships in whale form, but not without regard for their own safety. The actual whales alongside them threatened the ships, only slamming into those that tried to steer clear of the whirlpools to strategically guide them toward the Hais Islands.

As Cale observed the whales, reflecting on how frightening they were, Raon shared his thoughts. “The whales obey you, human.”

“Apparently.”

These *had* been Cale’s commands; he just hadn’t expected the whales to carry them out so well.

During the next lightning flashes, he spotted a broken ship. The people aboard were sitting ducks; they screamed as they fell into the ocean.

“Aiiieee!”

“Aaah!”

They couldn’t calm down when their surroundings went dark. Their journey had been fine until sunset. Why was all of this suddenly happening?

One passenger—a member of the First Battle Brigade—flailed in the water. Then he began swimming toward a wooden plank floating nearby, thinking it would help him stay alive.

Just a little farther... Almost there!

His fingertips brushed the wooden plank, and he stretched both hands out with all his might to grab it. At that moment, he heard something move in the water. *Splash.* The rain hissed all around him, but the man holding the plank could scarcely hear it now. The creature's approach, on the other hand, was loud and clear. *Splaaaash.*

"N-no!" The man's hands trembled as he clung to the plank. The rest of his body stiffened underwater.

Finally, the creature in the water revealed itself.

"Gwoooo..." That was the cry of a sad whale. Facing a member of the organization that had killed its young, the whale opened its maw.

"Ah... Aahh..." Unable to speak, the passenger shivered and faced the whale's wrath.

"Oowoooo!"

The many whales that had joined the Whale Tribe charged the broken ships, ravaging the passengers who'd fallen overboard. But hell wasn't just breaking loose in the water; there were people even angrier than whales all throughout the Hais Islands.

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"Wh-what the...?!" cried a squad leader from the First Battle Brigade. "What're those bastards from the Tiger Tribe doing he—argh!"

He never finished his sentence.

This island had the roughest terrain of all the Hais Islands; it was covered by boulders, trees, and tall grass. The Tiger Tribe bounded around it with ease in their animal forms, unfazed by the darkness of night.

A tiger howled with laughter as it tore the squad leader's arm from his body. "Grrrrrrr!"

The subordinates walking behind the man started to back away.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The tigers padded along the muddy ground. Three of them were now ripping the squad leader apart, all too aware that they had lost their families and kin to these foes. When they were done with him, they turned toward the squad leader's subordinates, who were in a panic after losing him.

An odd sound rose up from the tigers. *Errrng.* One stepped forward and began to smoke. *Chhhh.* In a flash, the tiger morphed into a human.

The huge Tiger Tribe warrior spread his arms wide. "Heh heh heh! Did you want to catch our people and take our hides?"

Arm's First Battle Brigade consisted of five smaller squads. Those squads had split up so the leaders could take their subordinates to slay the tigers living in the mountains. All the ships in this fleet had been part of one brigade; back on the Eastern Continent, they'd have fought four tigers at a time at most.

Blood oozed from the mouth of the tiger that had ripped off the squad leader's arm. "I'll skin the hides from every last one of you!" he bellowed at the survivors in a rage.

"Aah... Aaaaahhh!" The two subordinates who'd accompanied their leader to this area dashed back to the rest of their group.

The Tiger Tribe warrior coolly watched them go. Eventually, he said, "Time to hunt. The night is long."

Errrng. The tiger secured the mana-disturbance tool in his chest pocket as he cracked his neck. Each of the tigers carried one of these tools, which prevented Arm's troops from reporting that the Whale and Tiger Tribes had teamed up. Rowoon and Brek had sent the devices to support them.

The three grown beastfolk disappeared into the darkness. They moved with a tiger's uniquely relaxed stride, not hiding their presence. The screams of Arm's members sent them into a fit of furious laughter.

On another island, someone was moving very, very quietly. The island in question had the Hais Islands' most diverse terrain, including cliffs, dunes, a forest, and a swamp. At present, the location was engulfed in a silent battle.

“Ugh!”

A member of Arm collapsed with a brief groan. He was a specialist assassin serving under Deputy Gritil, and he’d been the second one to investigate.

The manservant, Ron, carefully laid the man’s corpse on the ground. He looked down at it, then wiped the blood off his dagger with a handkerchief his son had packed for him.

His movements were completely silent. All one could hear was the sounds of nature: rain, thunder, waves crashing against the shore. Ron smiled as he caught another: the sound of people shuffling around. He crept closer, knowing the noises belonged to new scouts sent to investigate after their predecessors never returned.

Ron had been heir to one of the three families that controlled the Eastern Continent’s underworld. He knew exactly how to take down Deputy Gritil’s group one by one. He’d survived as an assassin for over sixty years, and in addition to taking revenge on his family’s behalf, he still had the ability to teach these greenhorns the definition of fear.

Shhhhhhh. The wind carried the rustling of grass as Ron stalked his enemy’s stealthy footsteps.

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Violence, rather than stealth, dominated another island—the one with the flattest terrain. One of the few boulders on the island broke apart. *Thunk!*

“Damn it!” Opid shouted, panting. He didn’t have even a moment to rest, though.

A chill went down his spine as he again heard stone breaking. *Thuuunk!*

He couldn’t turn around; he didn’t even have time to think about what had happened to his subordinates. *Where did this crazy bitch come from?!* He found her crazy indeed—extremely crazy.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

The laughter echoing through the forest came from a swordmaster with a golden aura. She cackled as she destroyed everything in sight.

Opid was the leader of Arm's First Battle Brigade, which wasn't as strong as the secret organization's other brigades. Still, the First Battle Brigade knew how to use their individual abilities effectively, which was why they were stronger than most realms' knights. This boosted their strategy, leading to their conquest of the Tiger Tribe in the Eastern Continent.

When Opid first went up against this swordmaster, he'd tried his usual tactics. "Goddamn it! It wasn't supposed to be like this!"

The blonde swordmaster was a lunatic.

She was covered in black spiderwebs and red blood, and she didn't seem to care about defending herself, nor did she show any fear. Even when she saw that she was bleeding, she laughed and rushed toward them. Opid and some of his subordinates had managed to hit her with some arrows, but rather than wincing in fear, she'd charged at them even more fiercely.

Why is she here?!

At this point, there was no way he wouldn't have identified this woman. As leader of the brigade, he knew a good deal about the organization's activities. He was certain that this woman was the fake saintess Arm had thrown away.

Opid sprinted back to his ship. With no place to hide, he needed to escape to the sea. He couldn't imagine how his comrades were doing, considering how badly he'd fared. The storm had whipped up strong winds and rain, but he thought he heard people screaming.

At the same time, he caught the sound of a mana-disturbance tool from the woman's direction. *Errng.*

I need to contact Arm, Opid thought. He had to get out of the mana-disturbance tool's range to do so.

Clutching his side, Opid ran onward, blood gushing from the wound the swordmaster's aura had inflicted.

Just then, he heard a voice right behind him. "Do you think that by running you'll make it out of this alive? Hmm?"

Shit! Opid grimaced. The beach was right in front of him; he only needed to go a bit farther.

“Blood is really beautiful, don’t you think? Is that why you all wanted to kill me?” The mad swordmaster was hot on his heels, teasing him.

Holding back his curses, Opid kept on running. He had no choice; a defenseless deer could only flee from a predator. He reached the sandy beach and spotted the ship docked there.

“Huh?”

A black-haired man stood in front of the vessel.

At his back, Opid heard the swordmaster complain, “Hey. You ruined my fun.”

Shing. Opid, a skilled fighter in his own right, drew his sword—but the stranger’s black aura broke it easily. *Clang!* The aura flew beyond the blade, slicing open Opid’s chest.

The swordmaster, Hana, gave Choi Han a dirty look. “I’ll do this on my own.”

“I know. I just came to warn you not to run *too* wild and destroy the island.”

Hana turned on her heel and headed back into the forest without responding. She’d killed the leader first, as Cale had ordered. Now it was time to cull the rest.

Choi Han turned his gaze to the ocean, where Faseton offered him his back. Choi Han jumped onto the whale in order to head to another island.

“I don’t understand,” he mumbled.

“What don’t you get?” Faseton asked.

The First Battle Brigade had the strength and numbers to take on a decent knight brigade from any kingdom, yet none of its members were particularly strong. Ever since Choi Han had realized that, he’d been stuck on one question: “Why’re they targeting the strongest people they can?”

The Whale Tribe, the Tiger Tribe, the swordmaster and fake saintess—it was as if Arm was trying to pick off all the world’s

strongest people. Choi Han couldn't comprehend their decision to murder these people rather than recruit them.

"Maybe it'll be easier for them to rule if they're the strongest?" Faseton suggested. "Whatever the case, what good would it do to know what they're thinking?"

Faseton's voice was thick with fury; to him, the reasons didn't matter. Choi Han nodded. Arm's motivations weren't his problem, to be sure. It wasn't important who led the secret organization, nor what their thoughts were. He just had to destroy them so that they couldn't continue their path of destruction. That was his job.

"Let's head toward that island the weaker tigers are on, Faseton."

The whale dodged the whirlpools, swimming to Choi Han's destination.

***

The lightning bolts only gave Cale glimpses of the battlefield. He couldn't see all the blood being shed. Raon—who could see everything—peeked at Cale every so often. He didn't want the weak human to see what was going on and have second thoughts.

"Raon."

"Wh-what is it, human? I can't see anything!"

Cale stared at Raon, confused. *What's he talking about?* The dragon avoided his gaze, but he could still hear Cale's voice. "You brought the dead-mana bomb, right?"

"I did, since you asked me to." Raon regarded Cale with curiosity. "Why?"

"I'm thinking about leaving some 'evidence' on the island that ends up in the worst shape," Cale replied, smiling.

"Evidence of a dead-mana bomb?"

Cale looked down at the ocean but could only see darkness. "Even though the Tiger Tribe and some of our allies have mana-disturbance tools…"

"Grandpa Ron doesn't!"

“No, he doesn’t. Anyway, some of their mages would’ve sent out emergency communications once they saw the Whale Tribe.”

As Cale and his allies observed Arm over the last five days, their focus had been on the mages in the group. They’d sent crows and sea creatures to confirm the exact number.

Raon nodded. “That’s obvious.”

“So the secret organization will come here to investigate, won’t they?” Cale pointed out.

“You’re right! They will!”

“And what would they think if they saw traces of an attempt to erase the residue of a dead-mana bomb from the Empire?”

That satisfied Raon’s curiosity, and the dragon snickered. “Heh heh! That sounds fun, human!”

What a terrifying dragon, Cale thought, but he was smiling as well.

***

Dawn was approaching. Now that the storm was over, the ocean was calm. Cale looked up at the sky, which was no longer covered by the rain clouds that had spread over half the islands.

He dropped his gaze, a single thought in his mind: *Those bastards are horrifying.*

To his alarm, *everything* had been destroyed. All the ships—aside from those that had reached the islands—were floating in pieces. The whirlpools and whales had gotten to them. Corpses bobbed along as well, resembling inky dots on the sea.

“Are you shocked, human?”

Cale glanced over at Raon.

“Is this too much for you?” the dragon pressed. “We had no other choice.” He shook his head, adopting a serious tone. “Sometimes, one side has to die or get badly hurt for the other side to live. You’ll need to toughen up to survive the upcoming chaos. Gragon Gramps said that nobody’s as unlucky as you.”

“Raon…”

“I know just how unlucky you are,” the black dragon continued. “So trust me, the great and mighty Raon.”

Cale let Raon’s comments go in one ear and out the other. “We should descend.”

“…All right.”

They drifted down to the Hais Islands. The fight had gone on from the moment the sun set to just before it came back up. Cale’s side had won that overnight battle, as he’d expected. They couldn’t have lost, given that their side was made up of the Whale Tribe, the Tiger Tribe, and his trusty allies. Who’d have guessed that those three powerful forces would assemble to fight a common foe?

Tap. Cale’s feet landed on the sand of Hais Island Six, where Hana had been fighting the previous night.

“What a mess.”

Cale peered farther down the beach to see Hana casually sitting on the ground, her bloodied blade stabbed into the sand.

Hana raised her head. “Pretty sight, isn’t it?” she asked as though in greeting.

She was drenched in blood, to the extent that Cale couldn’t make out her blonde hair or black scars. And that wasn’t because she’d covered herself in *someone else’s* blood. Horrified, Cale pulled out a potion and tossed it to Hana.

“Enjoy the view *after* you’ve fixed yourself up. The saint would faint if he saw you like this.”

Hana caught the potion and began to laugh, even as the injuries she’d received from enemies’ swords and arrows bled profusely.

Cale averted his eyes. *She really is crazy.* There was something wrong with *both* twins. He watched the sunrise to avoid looking her way, then noticed other allies slowly approaching Hais Island Six.

“Hey, Cale Henituse.”

“What?” Cale asked without facing her.

In hushed tones, she said in the most unhinged way, “That wasn’t enough blood.”

“I know.” By now, Cale understood that she was insanely bloodthirsty. That very trait was the reason he wanted something from her.

Meanwhile, Witira rushed to shore. “Lord Cale!”

Beneath her cry, he heard Hana murmur, “Thanks for keeping your promise.”

Cale had been a man of his word. He’d kept Hana alive and given her an opportunity to take revenge, just like he said he would. The swordmaster gazed at Cale.

Pretending not to have heard her, Cale walked toward Witira, opening a potion. He and the whale were soon face-to-face.

“No living humans remain in the ocean,” Witira declared, a smile on her face.

When she confirmed that they’d killed everyone, Cale simply nodded. Witira felt that somber response suited him better than joy.

“We took care of the First Battle Brigade first and foremost,” she continued. “We’re looking for lower-ranked members now. A few are hiding in the crevices of cliffs, caves, and so on. I presume we’ll have taken care of them all by lunchtime.”

Despite Witira’s overwhelming strength, the sheer number of enemies had made this battle difficult.

“We’ll also handle the corpses and shipwrecks.”

Cale listened intently, then asked, “What about the ships that are still intact?”

That prompted Witira to turn toward the ship docked at Hais Island Six. There were a few vessels in good condition moored around the islands. “I’m not sure. What’s the best course of action? We don’t really need them. Should we give them to another kingdom, or…?” Witira purposefully trailed off, giving Cale room to interject.

“Can I have them?”

“Pardon?”

“I’d like to take the remaining ships with me,” Cale said without hesitation. “Is that not okay?”

Witira thought back on how hard Cale had worked to create those whirlpools. She could see the exhaustion in his eyes. “No, that’s fine. We have no use for the ships, and we’d rather give them to you than another kingdom.”

“Great.” Cale did his utmost to prevent himself from smiling.

All the vessels he would need to join his golden turtle ship had fallen into his lap. He’d be receiving ships from both the northern alliance and the secret organization; together, they’d be a marvelous sight.

Though visible, Raon spoke into Cale’s mind. *‹Good job, human! We got some ships for free!›*

Raon was definitely getting smarter. Cale smoothly stroked the head of the dragon, who looked at him with sparkling eyes. Then he turned to Rosalyn, Mary, and Ron. “How was it?”

“I took care of everything,” Ron said. “Quietly.”

“Good work.”

Ron slipped away, wearing his benign smile. When Cale looked up, he saw that even Choi Han had arrived.

A crow cawed in the distance. At the same time, the voices of wild animals echoed across the island and the ocean. “Graaaar!”

It was the roar of the tigers who’d lost their families and fellow tribespeople. There was joy, sorrow, and anger in their cries.

Cale glanced at the crow, which Gashan had sent as a signal that they were finished. “Let’s go to Hais Island Nine,” he suggested.

That was where everyone had agreed to reconvene.

***

When they reached Hais Island Nine, Cale realized his mistake; he’d let his guard down. As soon as he arrived, he was greeted by a group of twenty tigers, Gashan at their center. Male and female, young and old gazed reverently at Cale. The tigers—who were all huge, regardless of their age—offered the kind of toothy grins that only tigers could. Unfortunately, everyone except for the youngest and eldest was soaked in their enemies’ blood.

Gashan approached Cale with his eyes closed. He was smiling as well. Cautiously, he began, “Lord Cale—”

“No.” The Dark Forest wasn’t an option; Cale was taking that out of the equation right away.

“I just wanted to thank you,” Gashan assured him.

Though Cale was clearly suspicious, the shaman pressed on. His old, gentle voice made him sound like a grandfather reading a children’s book. The only discrepancy was that he spoke with a mouth covered in blood.

“We got our revenge, thanks to your abilities. We were able to hunt for the first time in ages.”

“Thank you so much, Lord Cale!” said a juvenile tiger, eyes shimmering.

Gashan nodded at the child, then his smile turned bitter. “I must take my kin to the Western Continent. If we return to the east, Arm will never give up their pursuit. It would mean everything if we could reside on even a small plot of land until these children have grown. That, and our people still thirst for vengeance.”

Cale frowned.

“We’ve brought some offerings to give our future landlord.”

Offerings? Cale thought, scrutinizing Gashan.

“The Tiger Tribe is tactful,” the shaman said. “Before leaving the mountains, each family gathered medicinal herbs and valuables.” He slowly pulled a jewel out of his pocket.

The corners of Cale’s lips lifted slightly before sinking again. He let out some fake coughs.

“I brought some things too!” the young tiger shouted, pulling a small bottle from his wide sleeve. “These two-hundred-year-old snake scales were in our cave. I heard you can make them into really strong arrowheads!”

Their tribe seems pretty thoughtful, Cale mused as his perception of the tigers discreetly improved.

‹They seem nice, human!› Raon said in his mind.

That they do. If he brought the Tiger Tribe to the Dark Forest, he’d run a higher risk of crossing paths with the secret organization

again. At the same time, he thought, *When has keeping my head down ever staved off that kind of thing?* Besides, now that he'd been in the meeting between the four realms and the whales, Cale *couldn't* avoid the secret organization.

Focusing on the shaman's closed eyes, Cale began, "I'm setting a condition—"

Out of nowhere, Gashan shrieked. "Oooh! Ooooooooooh!"

Cale recoiled. *What's wrong with him?*

"Oooh! Ooooooooooh...!"

Gashan's white eyes flew open, frozen wide as he raised his wooden staff into the air. His large body shook.

This is scary. Cale instinctively stepped backward.

"N-nature is speaking to me!" Gashan shouted, continuing to shake.

Huh? Cale couldn't believe his eyes. *What is it now?*

Gashan's next words forced Cale to reassess the scene. "N-nature says that the Tiger Tribe must clash with cold swords next spring!"

Wow. Cale was blown away. How could a psychic shaman like this exist? It gave him shivers. *How did Gashan know I planned to deploy the Tiger Tribe against the northern alliance's knights?*

Cale gaped at the shaman, who was finally calming down. Once he had, his white eyes focused on Cale.

"That future will come to pass if you join me," Cale told him. "Are you all right with that?"

Gashan had no need to consult his kin; he answered right away. "The Tiger Tribe has kept to themselves far too much in recent years. We will happily run wild for the sake of our revenge."

Cale nodded. "Then I welcome you."

The Dark Forest was vast; there was plenty of space for twenty tigers. He extended his hand, and the shaman shook it.

"This is wonderful!" Witira said, beaming. At last, she'd figured out why Cale hadn't wanted to accept the Tiger Tribe until this very moment. *He didn't want them to have to fight the northern alliance.*

The tigers' medicinal herbs and other gifts wouldn't have tempted Cale. After all, it wasn't as though he had no money. Witira had heard that he belonged to a wealthy family, so he wasn't the sort who'd be greedy for offerings. And there'd be no reason for a greedy man to risk his most valuable asset—himself—to help others without gaining anything in return.

"We'll help you move the Tiger Tribe and the ships," Witira told Cale. That was her way of thanking him for his generous assistance.

Cale naturally accepted her offer. "Thanks in advance."

"Of course. We'll also need to discuss the sea route issue." That route to the Eastern Continent was up north; the whales controlled it, though Cale had rights to it.

Cale opened his mouth to reply.

"Human! Human!" Raon yanked the communication sphere out of his subspace and zoomed over to Cale. Someone was calling, and the device shone red. "It's the crown prince! That's what red means!"

Upon learning that Albert was trying to reach him, Cale grimaced.

"Should I connect the call?" Raon asked.

Cale sighed. "Let's connect with him inside that wooden building. Witira, Gashan, shall we discuss the rest later?"

"Sure," Witira replied. "Please, speak to the crown prince for now." Gashan nodded in agreement.

Once the pair had excused him, Cale headed straight for the building. Inside, he sat in a wooden chair opposite the communication sphere and asked Raon to connect the call. It wasn't as soft as his couch, but he didn't care.

Crown Prince Albert had told him to rest, yet here he was, contacting him out of nowhere. That gave Cale a bad feeling.

Cale greeted Albert as the crown prince's face appeared in the device. Albert ignored his unhappy expression, getting right to the point. "You don't know the imperial prince's face, do you?" He was referring to the Mogor Empire's future emperor.

Momentarily speechless, Cale grappled with his growing dread. He answered as vaguely as he could. “Um, I know the things I need to. His hair and eye color, for instance. Uh…I’m sure I’ll recognize him if I see him?”

“Give me a break,” Albert scoffed. “You’re saying you’ve never seen him before.”

As Cale avoided eye contact, Albert continued in a knowing voice, “I’ve heard that if you know your enemies and yourself, you’re guaranteed victory. Go to the Empire.”

“Your Highness, maybe my ears are playing tricks on me, but I think I heard you say something strange just now.” *Go there? To the* Empire*? Why would I?* Cale couldn’t understand why Albert, who understood his personality rather well, would say that.

“Ah, I misspoke.” Albert raised his hands, seemingly acknowledging that he was wrong. “Let me correct that with a rephrase.” This time, however, an even blunter order smacked Cale in the face: “Come to the Empire with me.”

With him?

“To do something big.”

Something big? What…?

When Cale finally noticed Albert’s smirk, his own frown quickly disappeared. He leaned back in the wooden chair.

“Let me hear what you have in mind.”

Chapter 34:
To the Empire

"WELL, I ASSUME those bastards in the Empire find me a real thorn in their side."

Why was the crown prince talking about himself so critically? Whatever the case, Albert looked extremely happy, so Cale waited for him to continue. *I've never seen his face light up like that,* he mused, his ominous feeling growing stronger.

"As crown prince, I wanted justice for my kingdom," Albert declared. "I sought out the organization responsible for the terrorist incident in Rowoon."

Cale's expression turned grim. Conversely, Albert's became even brighter, as if he was jubilant. "It made it seem like I'd set my sights on ridding the Western Continent of those bastards rather than prioritizing domestic issues. I showed sympathy when the Empire suffered a similar incident, urging them to work with Rowoon to find the culprits."

"That was probably a major headache for the Empire," Cale said.

"Yes. I enjoyed it." Albert was fully grinning in Cale's presence for the first time in ages.

Avoiding the crown prince's gaze, Cale imagined that Albert had put the emperor between a rock and a hard place. Rowoon was an unexceptional kingdom, neither weak nor strong, but it had a long history on the Western Continent. If its crown prince pursued justice in earnest and caused a stir, the Empire couldn't ignore him. Still, the emperor couldn't put his full might behind his efforts.

After all, the Empire was working with the terrorists.

Neither Cale nor Albert could confirm that the Mogor Empire was involved with Arm, nor could they prove that the Empire had a hand in the organization's Plaza Terror Incident. Even so, the Empire had definitely been tied to the secret organization's offensive against the Church of the God of Sun. They'd also tried to kill the saint and saintess. Therefore, they'd want to sweep the terror incidents under the rug as quietly as possible. The crown prince

continually bringing up those incidents would infuriate them, but he was doing so to hide Rowoon's alliance with the other realms.

"How is that connected with doing 'something big'?"

"Well, as I pretended to be a righteous prince…"

Cale shook his head at Albert's claim. "'Pretended'? Your Highness *has* always been such a person. You're just and pure."

"Enough nonsense." Albert wrinkled his nose. Cale shut up, and the crown prince continued to explain things to his ally, who was even worse than him. "Anyway, I asked them nonstop for permission to investigate the bombing site."

"Investigate it?"

"Yes. I said I was hoping to find even the smallest clue, and that I wanted to look around the Church of the God of Sun's Vatican and the plaza in front of it. They went to war, yet I kept on asking."

"Didn't the Empire get angry?"

Albert shrugged. "My continued nudging was quite gentle."

Cale held back a snort. He doubted it had been gentle at all. "Since you've contacted me, Your Highness, I'm guessing that the Empire agreed to your investigation?"

"Yes. It's already been a year since the incident, so I take it they agreed thinking I wouldn't find anything." Tapping the table, Albert went on, "Wouldn't it be great if we observed some alchemy while we were looking around?"

Cale felt that wouldn't be great at all. His stomach, which had been churning since earlier, was still telling him that this conversation wasn't going in a positive direction. "The Empire lost a castle to the Kingdom of the Whipper. Aren't the citizens testy?"

"They are. I think the rulers are trying to distract them by babbling about how they're cooperating with Rowoon to investigate the terror incident." Staring straight at Cale, Albert added, "The Empire probably seized everything of value from the church in the name of 'investigating,' right?"

"I suppose so…"

"Are the saint and saintess all right?"

“They’re—” Cale cut himself off and grinned as a thought struck him. “Say, Your Highness?”

Noting that Cale no longer looked frustrated, Albert urged him to continue. “Yes?”

“Do you think there might be some hidden treasure in the church you’ll be investigating?”

“What, you don’t think so?”

He absolutely did. Cale was almost certain that there would be something; as someone who’d read fantasy novels for years, his intuition told him so. The Church of the God of Sun had survived as the Empire’s official religion for centuries, so they were bound to have hidden treasures somewhere. And the imperial government had yet to destroy the church buildings the bombing hadn’t affected.

Raon, who’d been listening in the corner, spoke in Cale’s mind. *‹Human! Human! Are we treasure hunting? I’m great at that!›*

Cale smiled wider. Even if the saint was kind of clueless, and the saintess disliked the church… *Wouldn’t they at least be aware of any secret compartments there?*

As he organized his thoughts, he heard Albert say, “Fifty-fifty.”

His gaze slid toward the prince.

“I’m being very generous.”

“You aren’t going to turn the treasure over to the palace?”

“I’ll turn it over for some money in return. I’m broke after paying for all those potions.”

Raon’s voice echoed in Cale’s mind again. *‹You and the crown prince are smiling the same way, human! You’re even doing that laugh again!›*

Sitting up tall, Cale asked, “When are you going?”

“December. They invited us to come celebrate the end of the year with them. I suppose they want to show off their wealth.”

“Wealth? But isn’t the Empire hiding its most powerful assets?”

Even while fighting Tunka, the Empire had concealed its core strengths, including alchemy. That seemed ridiculous to Cale.

“Either way, we’re heading there at the beginning of December.” It was currently mid-November—the beginning of winter.

Preparing to shut off the communication sphere, Cale said his goodbyes to Albert. “I’ll see you at the capital, then, Your Highness.”

As soon as he heard Cale’s response, Albert hung up, as Cale expected. The crown prince never seemed to change.

***

Bringing only Raon and Choi Han with him, Cale traveled ahead of the rest of his allies. Soon enough, he was meeting with his father in the count’s study in the Henituse castle. He hadn’t been here in a while.

“Father?”

“Yes?”

Deruth couldn’t stop smiling over seeing his son for the first time in ages. The count thought that Cale had been holed up in the villa in Harris until recently, and that he’d only left to do the crown prince’s bidding and travel to another kingdom.

There was a reason Cale had returned home ahead of his allies. “Well, I…”

“Don’t mince words,” Deruth encouraged him.

“I plan to bring some acquaintances to Henituse territory.”

Naturally, he was talking about the Tiger Tribe. Given their number and size, hiding them would’ve been difficult and annoying.

Noting the seriousness in his son’s face, Deruth asked, “How many?”

“About twenty. They’re poor, pitiful people who lost their homes.”

“Are they a family?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm.” Deruth mulled it over. It was early winter at this point, and if the people Cale mentioned had been wandering around

without a home, they surely hadn't been able to harvest anything in the fall.

"Some are adults, but the group also includes children and the elderly."

At that, Deruth's frown deepened. He pictured the pitiful band shivering as they looked for a new home. The count took a sip of tea to calm himself. Once it warmed him a bit, he looked toward his son. He understood why Cale wanted to bring the group here; the young man truly had a big heart.

Observing Deruth's reaction, Cale added in the most woeful tone possible, "I'd like to permit them to reside in Harris, Father. Will that be all right?"

Cale was being cautious. After all, he wasn't just hoping to bring in a few guests; rather, he'd be giving a large group a home in Henituse territory. And it was technically up to the territory's lord whether new residents could move there.

But I'm sure he'll allow it. Given Deruth's personality, he doubted the count would object.

"That would be…complicated," Deruth said.

Cale flinched. "Excuse me?" He was caught off guard; he hadn't expected Deruth to say no.

"Harris is in the northernmost part of our territory," the count continued. "The northern alliance is expected to head there this spring. We can't leave residents of our lands in danger. I plan to relocate the current residents of the north before spring as well." Deruth considered himself a selfish person, but he still showed warmth to the people in his territory.

He put down his teacup. *Clack.*

"Bring this group to the castle," he concluded. "I'll give them a place to stay."

Unable to respond, Cale stared at Deruth.

Taking stock of Cale's mood, the count added, "You needn't worry about anything else. Our territory has plenty of mines and a deep relationship with the arts. We've never been wary of foreigners. Besides, the castle's bigger now that we've reinforced the walls. I can even help with your guests' monetary needs—"

“Father.” Cale carefully interrupted the count, since it seemed as though Deruth would never stop. “They’re members of the Tiger Tribe.”

“Hmm?”

“They’re tiger beastfolk.”

Deruth stared at his son, uncertain as to why he’d suddenly mentioned the Tiger Tribe.

“The people I’d like to bring are from the Tiger Tribe, Father,” Cale patiently explained to his confused father. “They’re very strong, so they’ll benefit the territory as we prepare for war. It makes sense to me to bring them here, since they’re wandering without a home.”

After a long pause, Deruth said, “You’ve done well.”

“Yes, sir.” Cale happily accepted his praise. “We’ve finished restoring Harris, but no one lives there yet.” *And the tigers want to be around a forest.* “I think it would be great to give them the town as a new home.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” Deruth nodded several times. There was a different kind of smile on his face now.

Raon, currently invisible, had been watching this father-son exchange. *‹Human, the count’s smiling like you do when you scam someone!›* the dragon exclaimed. *‹It looks so similar! Amazing!›*

Cale ignored Raon’s words, acting as though they were background music.

“I’ll leave this to you,” the count told his son. It was an official statement in his capacity as lord of the territory.

“Understood, sir.”

Cale chatted with the count about a few other things, then got up. As he headed for the door, Deruth added, “Show your face here every so often, even if you’re busy. Your mother and siblings are waiting for you.”

“Got it. I’ll try to spend the beginning of the year here.”

“Good.”

With that, Cale left the study.

Kim Roksu—who’d become Cale—hadn’t had blood relatives for a long time. These conversations always made him feel a bit

awkward. Still, he didn't have time to indulge that feeling of unfamiliarity.

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Cale was heading to the tea shop in the city for the first time in a while. The Poetry and Tea House was run by Bilose of Flynn Merchant Fleets. Since he left for the capital, a worker had been in charge of the tea shop, but it remained open in the same location.

Today, the shop's owner had finally returned.

"Good to see you again," Cale told Bilose.

"Have you been well, Lord Cale?"

Bilose's face—which resembled a piggy bank's—was joyful. Lately, he'd been using the magic devices Cale had handed off to him, as well as benefits he'd gained through the Whipper civil war, to increase his influence over Flynn Merchant Fleets.

"More or less. I didn't expect you to get here right away after I contacted you."

"I happened to be in the area. Besides, I've got to come right away when you're the one summoning me."

Bilose was being completely honest. He made meeting Cale his first priority because the count's son never wasted his time. Bilose's intuition as a merchant told him that something would happen anytime Cale called him. He'd rushed over, curious about what would unfold today.

Cale gradually revealed his ambition. "Let's go to the Empire."

"The Empire?" Bilose wasn't shocked. He'd prepared himself for anything Cale might say.

"Yeah. Also, do you know any alchemists?" Cale asked casually.

"Excuse me...?"

Cale tapped the table as he continued, his tone contemplative. "I'm sure some alchemists were pushed aside by the Empire, unable to fill a role in the Alchemist's Bell Tower. Just like in the Kingdom of the Whipper."

During the time when the mages of the Magic Tower ruled Whipper, some mages had denounced the Tower after witnessing the cruel experiments and oppression of the kingdom's citizens. Others were kicked out after asking those in the Magic Tower to change their methods.

Although the Alchemist's Bell Tower was pretty quiet right now, the alchemists there also conducted cruel experiments. There were bound to be people who couldn't stand that and objected or left of their own accord.

Bilose's lips parted, and he said, "I don't know anybody, but I'll find someone."

"Great. That's the kind of response I like." It was easy to deal with Bilose.

"What do you plan to do if you find such an alchemist, though?" Bilose asked warily.

Looking satisfied, Cale replied, "Put them to work."

"I beg your pardon…?"

Ignoring Bilose's question, Cale continued to work through his priorities. "Do you know where to buy ingredients for alchemy?"

"Lots of places sell those in the Empire," Bilose said uncertainly.

"Then when I tell you what to buy, get plenty of it."

"Uh… Um…yes, sir."

‹Human! Are we making a pillar of fire too?› Raon asked.

The thousand-year-old dragon who was training Raon knew a significant amount about alchemy. Looking at the liquid that had produced the pillar of fire, he'd remarked, *"Gracious. The humans created something fascinating."*

Intrigued by it, Erhaven was busy conducting research in his lair. Cale planned to get everything Erhaven would need while visiting the Empire.

‹This sounds fun, human!›

There was no reason they wouldn't be able to make that fire if the Empire could.

"Should I head to the Empire first, then?" Bilose asked.

“Yes. My plans will correspond with His Highness’s visit, so you can act accordingly.”

Albert had been telling everyone about his upcoming visit to the Empire. There was no reason to hide it; his journey would help convince Rowoon’s citizens of his integrity.

“I understand.”

Bilose nodded, not asking anything else, and Cale ended their short meeting. The two planned to have a long conversation over drinks later, in the Empire’s capital. For the moment, however, each needed to do a number of things.

Cale quickly went on the move. First, he’d have to take care of all the documents related to the town of Harris before the Tiger Tribe arrived in Henituse territory.

“It’s been a while, Bassen.”

“Yes, Brother!”

Cale hadn’t seen his younger brother in some time, and Bassen was now deeply involved in running the territory. Deruth had claimed that Cale would be in charge of Harris’s new residents, but he’d still put Bassen by Cale’s side.

Once Bassen becomes count, I’ll report to him just like this, Cale mused.

He didn’t plan on doing much at that point, but he was confident that he could go to Bassen this way if he had reason to report something. Feeling assured, he donned a tranquil expression as he handed Bassen some paperwork. “Here. These are the documents I created.”

“Thank you, Brother. I’m glad I can assist you.”

“Assist?” Cale sighed. “Father didn’t just tell you to *assist* me. He wanted us to work together.”

He guessed that his father had saddled Bassen with him out of concern that Cale wouldn’t take care of things properly. *That means Bassen is trustworthy when it comes to administrative tasks.* It probably also meant his younger brother’s status as heir had been further solidified.

Having handed over the documents, Cale was casually sipping some tea.

Bassen watched him. “Brother.”

“Yes?”

Bassen held the papers Cale had prepared. The documents concerned a displaced group of people—and they were members of the powerful Tiger Tribe. Cale had brought the tigers to Henituse territory, and Bassen was amazed by his brother’s sympathy and resourcefulness.

“I’m working hard to learn the ins and outs of Henituse territory, Brother,” Bassen told him. “I plan to make it wealthier and more stable. I believe it has much more to offer than marble alone!”

Cale was pleased with Bassen’s focus on becoming count and making money. “Great. I’ll keep cheering you on.”

“Thank you, Brother! I really hope to demonstrate those improvements to you in the future.” Though Bassen looked stoic, he was brimming with passion.

“Well…there’s no need to *demonstrate* them to me.”

“No! I’ve got to. I need to show you how useful I am to this territory!”

Cale gaped at Bassen in disbelief.

Witnessing his confusion, Bassen fell silent. *Compared to the people around my brother, I guess I do fall quite short.* His face tightened at the thought.

That is, until Cale said, “What the heck are you talking about? You’re already vital to this territory, Bassen Henituse. Don’t indulge such thoughts.”

He waved Bassen off, making it clear he didn’t want to hear another word of it. He couldn’t believe what he’d heard. Where would they dig up a future count as great as Bassen?

Bassen gripped the papers in his hands. “All right, sir! I’ll work even harder!” he declared, then left Cale’s study.

Cale watched Bassen go with satisfaction, then stood. As he did, Raon materialized out of thin air.

“Human?”

“What?”

“Do you plan to become count?”

“What nonsense is this? Don’t ask me such a terrifying question.”

Puzzled, Raon tilted his head. However, Cale had already decided not to think about it for another second; the very idea gave him chills. He promptly headed off to meet with Violan.

Yet Raon went invisible again and followed along, asking, *‹What does the lord of a territory do, human? Can they travel a lot?›*

Why’s he harping on this? Ignoring Raon, Cale caught sight of the countess.

Violan didn’t have a hair out of place, as usual. “Your face looks so gaunt,” she told him. “You’re going to the Empire with the crown prince?”

Cale winced; Violan’s gaze seemed to look right through him. “Yes. Apparently, he needs my help investigating the magic bombing there.”

“Does His Highness give you difficult tasks often?” she asked lightly.

“Mm…they aren’t too hard.”

“They aren’t?” Violan smiled. “What a relief.”

She’s relieved? Why? The countess’s reaction made him shiver, but he couldn’t tell why. Hiding his confusion, he asked, “Is Müller working, Mother?” Cale had heard that the dwarf-rat half-blood was resting in the castle, having completed the ship.

Violan, who was responsible for Henituse territory’s structures and statuary, peered at Cale’s face. Understanding his intentions right away, she replied, “I’ll send him to Harris.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“Of course.”

Once he’d finished his short conversation with Violan, Cale went back to his study. When he reached the door, he found Lilly standing in front of it.

‹Your sister’s gotten really strong, human!›

Yes. She does seem tough.

Lilly now carried a much bigger sword on her back: a greatsword. In addition to that, she wore a medium-length sword on her waist. She looked very intimidating.

"Brother..."

As she timidly approached, Cale patted her head. "You've grown a little."

Lilly scratched her cheek as if embarrassed by the compliment, but Cale was genuinely impressed with his sister. His skin was pale, but Lilly had a dark tan, suggesting she'd been training extensively beneath the sun. She'd also gotten tall for her age. He could sense the effort she'd put in.

"It looks like you'll be the strongest of us siblings, Lilly," he told her.

She bobbed her head vigorously. "I'll get stronger and protect the territory!"

"Great. I know you'll do well," Cale said, and he meant it. "I think twin blades would suit you, actually."

"I'll give them a try! Also, my master told me that in battle, defense is harder than offense. I'm gonna become a knight who knows how to protect people!"

Although Lilly was young, she'd heard about everything her two older brothers had done. Most of those stories were about her eldest brother, Cale.

When she'd shared the stories with her master, he told her, *"Lilly, when I was knight captain of a small territory, I learned one important thing."*

"What was it, Master?"

"A door needs to be sturdy."

"A door?"

"Yes. If a sturdy door protects the territory's 'entrance,' no one will be tempted to seize it, and the citizens can rest easy."

"So...I should become a knight who's like a door?"

"Yes. A door even sturdier than a castle wall."

Lilly expressed as much to Cale. “I’m going to become a knight who’s just like a door!”

Cale flinched, totally lost, but he nodded in the end. He felt a young child should have a vivid imagination. “All right. Work hard, and don’t rush anything.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lilly left to begin training, excitement on her face. Cale watched her, then opened the door to the study. His smile slid right off.

“Frizia. Long time no see.”

The woman waiting for him there was the assassin who, disguised as a sculptor, had created that devilish rabbit figurine. She dipped her head at Cale’s greeting, and Ron swooped in to offer Cale some tea.

Cale sat down in his chair, then lifted his teacup. “Frizia.”

“Yes?”

“Did you say you’re from the southwest?”

“That’s right, my lord.”

To reach the Empire, one needed to cross Rowoon’s southwestern border. The crown prince planned to teleport to the southwestern region, then travel over the border with a delegation. The territory on that southwest border was a dukedom that belonged to House Guiller.

Cale studied Frizia. Everyone in his information network, including her, had been an assassin. They had once roamed the southwest, taking contracts from nobles. “You fled that area because you killed your leader and attempted to assassinate a noble, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

The assassins’ guild had only killed nobles, but its leader had accepted an assignment to kidnap a young child. Objecting to that, Frizia had murdered the guild leader and tried to pick off the noble who’d requested the job.

“And that noble was a vassal of the southwestern territory’s duke?”

"Yes, sir."

As Cale said, it had been one of the Guillers' vassals who'd dared to do something as terrible as ordering the abduction of a child in Rowoon, where human trafficking was outlawed.

When Cale smirked, Frizia added cautiously, "May I ask why you're inquiring about that?"

Cale answered without missing a beat. "To get a sense of the area's weaknesses."

Guiller territory was essentially the door to the Empire. They couldn't allow such a door to be flimsy. Since he didn't know what would happen in the future, Cale needed to ensure the locals could defend it with their lives.

Frizia was quite concerned by Cale's line of questioning about the Guillers' territory, so Cale casually added, "I have very sturdy backers."

What could trip me up when I have the crown prince's support? Cale then thought of Antonio Guiller, Duchess Guiller's heir apparent. *The book said that he's authoritative and he cares deeply about other people's impressions of him.*

Cale looked at Frizia. "I'll be spending time in the southwestern region on my way to and from the Empire. You understand what I mean, right, Frizia?"

She did indeed. The gentle-looking middle-aged woman replied, "I'll do my utmost to be ready to threaten him so that you can get started as soon as you return."

"*Threaten* him? Why would you say that?"

"Sorry?"

Cale's smile softened. In a tender tone akin to a whisper, he said, "Why, I'm an upstanding aristocrat."

Ha! Frizia mentally scoffed at Cale's response, then nodded. "Yes, Lord Cale, you're right. You're certainly upstanding." When she looked up, she spotted Ron smiling the same way Cale was.

Cale was pleased to have Ron and Frizia nearby. They were trustworthy enough to rely on.

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When Cale finished his preparations, he brought only the people he needed with him. It went without saying that Raon followed Cale and the rest in his invisible form.

“All right, guards. Are you ready?” Cale asked with a cheery expression.

Choi Han smiled back at him. “Yes, sir.”

“Y-yes, Lord Cale,” Vice-Captain Hilsmann responded, averting his gaze.

The final person—well, the ancient dragon pretending to be a person—just sighed.

Choi Han, Hilsmann, and Erhaven, who were joining the trip as Cale’s guards, stepped into the Henituses’ teleportation portal. It sent them to the capital immediately. When they arrived, Albert and a diplomat were waiting for them.

The crown prince opened up his arms and welcomed Cale. “Lord Cale Henituse, thank you for coming. I thought you’d be the best choice to accompany me to the Empire.”

Cale embraced Albert gently, as if honored. “Though I may be lacking, Your Highness, I’m thrilled to be able to help Rowoon.”

The middle-aged diplomat who’d joined Albert looked satisfied at that. “No wonder His Highness thinks so highly of you. Your concern for our kingdom runs deep.”

“I appreciate you thinking so highly of me, but as a noble, it’s only natural that I’d be thinking always of the kingdom and its citizens.”

The diplomat leading the delegation was pleased with his statement. “Well, I came to see what kind of person His Highness wanted by his side, but it seems that was unnecessary.”

Albert had personally requested Cale Henituse for this delegation. Since Cale was only a common count’s son, the diplomat was there to feel him out.

At that point, Cale and Albert’s eyes met, and the crown prince confidently told the diplomat, “I told you that he’s upstanding and

there's no need to worry. After all, he's the Shield Lord!"

Shield Lord. Cale furrowed his brow slightly.

"That's true! I saw his silver shield with my own eyes. It was truly something, Lord Cale!"

"It was nothing. I just used one of my paltry abilities."

"Bah! How can you call them 'paltry'?! I hope I have a chance to see that shield again! Ha ha ha ha!" The diplomat's smile was warm, as if he were looking at the future of the very kingdom.

Cale smiled as well. *Why is my neck getting all cold and prickly the longer I listen to this?* He touched the spot. *How strange.*

He'd have no reason to use the shield again, he reflected. Still, his neck was cold as ice.

Despite the lingering sensation, things progressed smoothly.

‹Biding our time is fun too, human! › Raon said.

Cale nodded slightly. *Of course. It's awesome.*

He'd been trailing along behind the delegation surrounding Albert. Like a river flowing along its path, he relaxed and let nature take its course. The individuals acting as his guards moved right along with him.

A low-ranking official approached them. "We'll be moving to the teleportation portal soon, Lord Cale."

Why'd he come tell me that? Cale found it odd, but he appreciated the official's diligence nonetheless. "I understand. Thanks for letting me know."

"Of course," the official replied. "That's why His Highness wishes for you to come to the front."

"Excuse me?"

"Excuse *me*...?" The official gaped at Cale, who was blinking in confusion. "Er...didn't you hear that from His Highness?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

The flustered official looked ahead, and Cale's gaze followed. A knight brigade served as the vanguard, protecting the delegation. The brigade's foremost concern, Crown Prince Albert, stood behind

them. When his eyes met Cale's, he smiled brightly. Cale shrank back.

"Lord Cale! Hurry up and join me!" Albert motioned for Cale to join him quickly.

The official heaved a sigh of relief that he hadn't been wrong, then faced Cale again. "For the moment, let's head over there."

Cale and his guards slowly made their way to Albert. The crown prince smiled even wider at Cale, who'd walked up as leisurely as ever, despite the fact that the crown prince had summoned him while surrounded by high-ranking officials.

"You called, Your Highness?"

"Yes. I'd like you to accompany me to the teleportation portal," Albert said, feigning kindness.

Cale stuffed down his complaints. "The portal in the palace?"

"No. This time, we'll use the one outside the castle walls. I plan to let the citizens watch our procession."

Jeez. Seriously?

Albert's plan was obvious to Cale. It was public knowledge that the crown prince wouldn't give up on investigating the terror incident. Furthermore, every administrative task he got involved in yielded positive results. He was a very talented individual with a focus on justice.

That upstanding crown prince was now heading to the Empire, at the latter's invitation, to get to the bottom of the terrorist attacks. Next to him was Cale Henituse, the hero of the Plaza Terror Incident. There was no way that the crowd would let them leave quietly.

Cale was already getting annoyed, but Albert pretended not to know what his companion was thinking. "I'll be able to see the citizens hail Lord Silverlight again! Ha ha ha ha!"

Lord Silverlight. The Shield Lord. Cale hated those nicknames, yet he felt that the crown prince was making the right move.

"Well, I can't hold a candle to you, Your Highness. You're the star of our kingdom." Putting on a reverent facade, he swept a glance around the other officials. "Isn't that right?"

They nodded.

“Of course. As you say, Lord Cale, His Highness is the star of the kingdom!”

“The star! I love that way of putting it!”

Half of this delegation consisted of Albert’s noble followers. The rest were lower-ranking nobles who had once followed other princes, as well as officials from neutral aristocratic households. The lower-ranking and neutral nobles couldn’t help feeling wary of Albert as his power grew, so they each interjected with at least a word of flattery toward him.

Cale wore a gratified smirk as he watched Albert’s fake smile twitch.

Just then, the voice of one official reached his ear. “His Highness certainly seems to cherish you, Lord Cale.”

When those around them heard that, many prying eyes turned on him. People were curious about Cale Henituse, especially now that the increasingly powerful crown prince had singled out the young nobleman. The officials didn’t know how they’d end up interacting with this count’s son, and as they peered at him, each of their gazes had a different connotation.

Cale simply maintained his smile, thinking, *What did they say were the delicacies in the Empire’s capital again?* They were traveling there for “something big,” but work was the last thing he intended to do.

“Let’s go,” the crown prince ordered, and the delegation began to move.

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Cale and the rest of the delegation soon neared the teleportation portal, which would take them straight to Guiller territory.

“Pfft!” Albert snorted, then cleared his throat, desperate to hold back his laughter.

As Cale ignored the crown prince, Raon's voice echoed in his head. *‹That child carrying a copy of your shield will probably grow up well, human! He'll be a success!›*

Cale frowned, then slapped on a smile again. A crowd had come to cheer for the delegation and the crown prince. That would've been a striking enough sight—if not for the voices shouting about "Lord Silverlight" as well.

Won't they ever forget? Cale thought.

The worst part was when a little boy shouted, "I want to be as cool as you, Lord Cale!" His father had lifted him high in the air so that he could get a better look.

Making eye contact with the little boy, Cale blurted out, "If you become anything like me, you won't be cool at all."

The boy gaped at him in shock, and his eyes began to shimmer. Cale realized what he'd said as Albert shook with another bout of suppressed laughter. The child's father, for his part, began to look nervous.

Glancing toward the boy's father, Cale tacked on the first thing that came to mind: "Take after your father instead. Only your parents are cool enough to embrace you and hoist you into the air."

The father looked touched, and the boy was thrilled to hear Cale say his father was cool. Meanwhile, Daltaro—the diplomat in charge of the delegation—was pleased with Cale's response.

At that point, Cale shut his mouth, following the procession into the teleportation portal.

That was hard...

Cale disliked posturing, but there *was* a purpose to putting up a front. Thus, he assumed the air of a respectful young nobleman.

The group awaiting the delegation bowed their heads. An old woman stood in front. "We're honored to meet with you, Your Highness."

Her white hair was in a bun, every strand perfectly tamed. It reminded Cale of Violan. This was Sonata Guiller, the duchess of the territory. She was almost eighty years old, and she was known as a cold-blooded, unlucky woman.

Her husband, her only son, and her daughter-in-law were assassinated.

The previous duke had lived a long time, and he hadn't chosen an heir until his oldest children were in their fifties. As a consequence, those who sought the title had caused all sorts of trouble, just as they had in Marquess Sten's family.

Sonata's husband, son, and daughter-in-law had all died in a carriage "accident." Only Sonata and her grandson Antonio, who weren't in the carriage at the time, had outlived them. The incident, which had taken place less than a year after Antonio's birth, had given Sonata her hard edge.

In the end, Sonata was the only heir left.

Sonata, the youngest of her siblings, had been the last one standing. As the only remaining heir, she rose to the position of duchess. Unlike most high-ranking members of the Sten family, Sonata had chosen to embrace her living blood relatives, preparing Antonio to be the future duke.

"It's been a while, Your Grace," Albert said.

"I don't believe we've met since you visited the Empire last year, Your Highness."

Albert nodded at Sonata's words, then looked over at Antonio Guiller, whose appearance was best described as neat and tidy.

Antonio bowed slightly to Albert. "It's an honor to see you again, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Lord Antonio."

Sonata gestured at her grandson. "I'll guide you for the moment, but Antonio will primarily attend to you and the rest of the delegation until you depart tomorrow."

"Lord Antonio will soon take over the household, eh?" Albert said casually.

The white-haired woman smiled. "Isn't that only natural?"

The Guillers had aligned themselves with the second-born prince, yet the future duke would be in charge of Albert's visit. Sonata probably intended to give Antonio an important task and strengthen the Guillers' relationship with the crown prince in the

process, although her family still hadn't rescinded their support for the younger prince.

That's the way of the world. Cale understood the duchess's actions. He shifted his gaze from the conversing pair to Antonio, and they made eye contact.

Hmm? Why's he looking at me? Cale wasn't sure of the reason, but he offered the young man an intrigued smile. Antonio paused before smiling back.

‹Why're you smiling like that again, human?›

Why does he always ask that when he already knows the answer? Dismissing Raon's question, Cale turned back to Albert, whom Duchess Sonata was escorting.

Cale padded away from the teleportation portal, preparing to head to the Guiller castle. While the duchess was guiding the crown prince herself, Lord Antonio was responsible for the rest of the delegation. He greeted the officials who'd stood next to Albert, Cale among them.

Once he'd said hello to just about everyone, Antonio extended his hand to Cale. "Lord Cale Henituse. Nice to see you."

Normally, the heir wouldn't bothered to greet someone from a lower-ranking noble family. He was the kind of man who acted based on how people measured up to his standards.

Cale Henituse gets a pass in that regard, Antonio decided. Although Cale was rumored to be a lout, he'd seemed quite gentlemanly when they met the previous year in the capital. He also possessed an Ancient Power—and a degree of fame. *Most importantly, the crown prince treasures him.* Thus, he had to be talented. Antonio's grandmother always said that Albert was extremely sly beneath his innocent smile.

"The crown prince is far from average, Antonio. If you write him off, you'll lose. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

That was why Antonio had looked forward to meeting Cale.

Cale seemed to know was Antonio was thinking. He responded in a way Antonio liked, shaking the future duke's hand with confidence and respect in equal measure. "It's an honor to meet

you, Lord Antonio Guiller. I'm pleased to be formally introduced to the family protecting Rowoon's southwestern border."

"No, it's *my* honor to speak with one of the Henituses keeping the kingdom safe from the Dark Forest."

Cale Henituse was the eldest son of the strongest family in the leaderless northeastern region, and Antonio Guiller was the heir to the family presiding over the southwest. Needless to say, a number of people were watching them interact. However, since three knights had suddenly surrounded Cale, the onlookers couldn't hear what the two young noblemen were discussing.

"I hope we can find time to chat over some drinks," Cale whispered to Antonio.

Antonio glanced sidelong at Cale, eyes glinting. "You'd like to chat?"

"Yes." Cale smiled brightly. "It should be a fun conversation." *It really will be fun. Only for me, though.*

Cale noticed that Antonio regarded him differently now. "You're not quite like the rumors, Lord Cale."

"Hmm? Are you referring to that gossip about me being a lout?"

Antonio shrugged in lieu of a response. As he looked at Cale, he mused, *They say he's good and just, but he seems power-hungry too.* In the end, aristocrats were all the same. Antonio remembered what his grandmother had told him when she officially declared him the heir:

"The nobles I've seen were all alike, Antonio. They acted for their own selfish reasons. But that's not just the way of the nobility—it's human nature."

Antonio only half agreed with her. "I'm always open to a conversation," he whispered back to Cale, then released his hand.

The two men stepped away from each other, ending their exchange. Keeping an eye on Antonio as he walked away, Cale reflected, *When we have our chat, I'll need to act like an honorable noble who cares about Rowoon.*

In *Birth of a Hero*, Marquess Sten's family had been depicted as villains. The character of Antonio Guiller, on the other hand, was

introduced as neither friend nor foe. One volume had included a short description of his personality:

Antonio Guiller was authoritative and cared deeply about other people's impressions of him. That stemmed entirely from his pride as a noble.

In short, Antonio was both simple and complex.

Holding back a smile, Cale went to rest in the room he'd been directed to, waiting for the crown prince to call upon him.

***

Knights stood guard in front of Albert's chamber. All of them were dark elves in disguise.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Albert snapped.

"Now, Your Highness…" Cale began, speaking softly.

"And what's with that *voice*?"

"Wouldn't it be great if you gained another loyal follower?"

The wary crown prince studied Cale before asking, "Who?"

"The owner of this house."

Albert took a few moments to stare at Cale again, then casually responded, "Get it done. Use my name if you wish."

"Yes, sir. I understand. Assuming I succeed, how about a seventy-thirty split?"

Albert heaved a sigh and nodded. "The owner of this house would be worth that much. By the way…"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"The imperial prince is probably aware of you, right?"

Cale nodded confidently. "He should know me as Lord Silverlight—and as the bastard who put out the jungle fire."

Cale hadn't hidden his identity when he put out the fire in Sector One, and it was widely known that he'd thwarted the Plaza

Terror Incident.

"He's going to be friendlier with you than with me, isn't he?"

"Of course not."

Albert sighed once more, seeming to disagree.

***

Cale reached the Mogor Empire's capital a few days later.

Adin, the imperial crown prince, was a large man who reminded Cale of a big, friendly dog. Contrary to Albert's expectations, he didn't prioritize Cale; he was most attentive to Albert. Cale was second only to Albert, though.

"Oh! I've heard stories about you," Adin said. "They say you're the young hero who halted the terrorist attack on Rowoon!"

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Imperial Highness."

"Yes, yes. I'm happy to know there's a hero like you in the world!"

Happy, my ass. Cale could tell that the sociopathic bastard in front of him considered Cale his greatest enemy after Albert. He was certain of it.

‹He's smiling, human, but he gives off a real cold impression!›

Exactly. Cale agreed with Raon. Still, he offered the sheepish response of a righteous fellow. "A hero? Not at all. I merely did what anyone would have."

Donning the mask of an upstanding noble, Cale made his debut in the Empire.

Chapter 35:
Handed On a Silver Platter

PRINCE ADIN GAVE a hearty laugh. “Ha ha ha! What a wonderful attitude. While I wish I could speak with you further, I’m afraid I don’t have the time.”

The prince walked past Cale with a look of disappointment. As Cale bowed respectfully, Adin tossed out, “I hope we’ll have the opportunity to chat during the festivities.”

Cale had zero desire to chat. *Absolutely not. I’ll keep to myself on the terrace,* he decided, watching Adin walk away.

The “festivities” included both a welcome event for the delegation and the end-of-year celebrations that would take place after they conducted their investigation. Cale planned to keep a low profile on the terrace as the merrymaking unfolded.

‹Human, that imperial punk of a prince seems about as strong as our cowardly vice-captain!›

Oho. Cale smirked.

Though Prince Adin had laughed and played the cheery fool, this was the same man who’d used alchemy to cause all kinds of problems. He was also a decently capable knight—or so people thought.

This guy’s actually a top-tier *knight, though, huh?*

Vice-Captain Hilsmann had gotten stronger; in fact, he’d peaked at this point, reaching the level of a top-tier expert. If Adin was at the same level, that meant he was extremely talented.

How entertaining.

In *Birth of a Hero*, Cale had read many plotlines that concerned the imperial crown prince. Still, he knew less about the prince than Choi Han or Albert; Adin wasn’t a main character in the first five volumes.

The prince seemed to be hiding a number of things, which piqued Cale’s interest. *But I can’t just get close to him because I’m curious.* He was set on quietly attending to his tasks, then making a swift exit.

In his head, Raon spoke up. *‹Human! Human! Someone over there feels like a member of our family!›*

Cale's heart sank. *What? By "family," does he mean another dragon? Is that even possible?*

Shoving down his anxiety, Cale scanned the crowd that had come to welcome them to the Empire. "Haven."

"What is it?"

"Is there someone here… I mean, is anyone similar to *you* here?"

Cale turned to the gold dragon, whose face plainly said, *What is this unlucky human talking about now?*

Then he heard Raon's voice. *‹Isn't that a cat, human? The redheaded guy at nine o'clock.›*

Looking in that direction, Cale saw a knight with red hair.

Erhaven turned toward the knight as well, then chuckled. "Is that what the youngster told you, Lord Cale?"

The "family members" Raon thought the stranger felt like were Ohn and Hong.

"Hm. He seems quite strong," the ancient gold dragon noted with amusement. He took a half step forward to stand right behind Cale. Once he was close enough not to be overheard, he whispered, "Members of the Cat Tribe don't like to appear in the wider world. And they specialize in assassination."

The Cat Tribe was better known in the Eastern Continent than here. They tended to keep out of sight, avoiding others. They were also gifted when it came to assassination, stealth, and intelligence gathering.

"Think he's trying to kill someone?" Erhaven asked, curious.

Is that something I want *to know?* Hearing Erhaven's comments, Cale felt a chill nipping at his ears. He'd learned something useless again. *Let's just forget about it.*

Yet things took a very strange turn after that.

An imperial servant pointed toward a chamber in the tower next to the one Albert was staying in. "This is where you'll be staying." The servant went on to introduce himself and his

company. “You can leave all your errands and assorted needs to me, sir. These are the knights assigned to this tower.”

The five knights bowed and introduced themselves as well. The redheaded cat was among them, although it would’ve been impossible to tell that he was a cat if Raon hadn’t told him.

Cale avoided looking at him. *Ha! Jeez…*

“Since you’ve brought guards with you, Lord Cale, we won’t assign one to your door. But we can assign you some knights if you wish.”

“No,” Cale said, summarily rejecting the offer. “I have no need of more guards.”

“Then please call if you need anything at all.”

“Sure.”

Sending the servant away, Cale entered the bedroom.

As he did so, he heard Raon’s voice. *‹Human! Someone’s hiding in the ceiling above your bed, spying on you! Oh, and he’s about as stealthy as that sculptor who made the amazing rabbit, so he’s pretty good!›*

With a deadpan expression, Cale thought, *I knew it’d be like this.*

Even though Albert’s tower had plenty of open rooms, the Empire had provided Cale quarters in the adjacent one. That wasn’t the case for the rest of the delegation; they’d all been put up in same tower as Albert.

I guess Adin’s curious about me. Although the imperial prince might have hesitated to spy on a member of the delegation, he must’ve been curious about Cale. *I* did *put out the jungle fire.* Indeed, he’d extinguished it singlehandedly. In the novels, a shaman came over from the Eastern Continent at a later time to put out the blaze.

That’s weird too, though. Knowing that Arm and the Empire were working together made Cale suspicious of that shaman. How had he extinguished a magical fire that water couldn’t douse? What if that shaman belonged to Arm, and his actions were all part of their plot? In that case, all of the top-grade magic stones the shaman had found in the books would’ve gone to Arm and the Empire.

That'd be awful. It was only a theory, but it would be a disastrous turn of events. The incident would lead the jungle to welcome shamans in.

And that would lay the groundwork for one of the Empire's preferred strategies. Mogor was fond of dispatching spies. If the shaman turned out to be such a spy, the jungle would eventually fall to the Empire as well.

Cale heaved a sigh, then addressed Choi Han and Erhaven. "We're going out."

"Right now?" Choi Han asked, confused.

"I need to exchange some money, and I hear my good friend Bilose is in the Empire. I should go see him." Cale said the last bit loud enough for the spy in the ceiling would hear. Pulling on a cloak, he threw disguises at the other two. "Put on these robes and masks so we don't cause a commotion."

Soon enough, Cale was exiting the palace with Choi Han and Erhaven in tow. Although stopping at the gates was annoying, they got through easily, since the crown prince had given them permission to leave.

Someone's tailing me.

Raon described their unwanted guest as he strolled toward the Flynn Merchant Fleets' building in the imperial capital.

***

Flynn Merchant Fleets' flagship store in the Empire was a decent-sized building near the capital's central plaza.

Cale greeted Bilose with genuine joy. "How have you been?"

"Good, Lord Cale! I'm happy to see you here."

"I'm delighted to see my old friend as well."

"I won't be taking any more visitors today," Bilose told a staff member, then turned back to Cale. "I'll escort you to my office."

Cale, Choi Han, and Erhaven followed Bilose to a corner room on the building's second floor. At the sight of its unexceptional interior, Cale asked jokingly, "This *can't* be your office, right?"

Bilose smiled and pushed a bookshelf on the wall aside, revealing a staircase going down.

Once they'd reached the small underground chamber, Cale sat down on a chair. "Not as big as I expected."

"It's nice, actually—modest and quiet," Bilose joked back, then quickly got down to business. "I did what you asked, Lord Cale." He'd found an alchemist who wasn't part of the Alchemist's Bell Tower.

Cale sipped the cup of tea Bilose had offered him. "What kind of person are they?"

"Well, he's famous in the underworld."

There was an underworld in every country, every *city*, so it didn't matter to Cale that this alchemist was famous there. Thus, he asked again, "What kind of person is he?"

Bilose smiled. "Good but also bad."

Cale thought he could figure out a couple of things from that answer. *You'd expect this alchemist to be a bad person, since he works with criminals, but he's actually principled?*

Bilose observed Cale, who'd lapsed into silence, then described the alchemist in detail. Choi Han frowned, having expected something completely different.

A few seconds after Bilose finished his explanation, Cale said just one thing: "Good."

This alchemist was basically what he'd been seeking. A decently good, decently bad person would be perfect to put to work.

"I should go meet him right away," Cale added.

Bilose and Choi Han voiced their shock.

"Already?"

"Right now, sir?"

Cale faced his bewildered companion. "Choi Han."

The look on his face made Choi Han flinch. "Yes, sir! I'll escort you if you're going to—"

"Get undressed."

Silence filled the room. Choi Han stared vacantly at him.

Cale scowled. “Come on. Anytime now.”

“Sorry?”

“Let’s change clothes.”

“Oh.”

Choi Han watched, dumbfounded, as Cale took off his cloak and the formal jacket underneath. “Bilose.”

Bilose, who’d been equally confused by all this, snapped to attention. “Y-yes?!”

Cale laid out what he needed the merchant to do. “Look up more information on that alchemist, then bring me the files. Oh, and you’ve got a residence here, right, Bilose?”

“That’s right…”

Nodding, Cale pointed to himself. “Send me there for booze.”

“Excuse me?” Bilose asked, blank-faced.

Instead of clarifying, Cale turned to the smiling gold dragon. “Haven.”

“Hm? Just looking to swap, I assume?”

Cale nodded again. “Yep.” He pointed at his and Choi Han’s hair.

Bilose gasped in admiration, bobbing his head. “I thought he was a knight, but he’s a skilled mage!” It made sense to him why Cale would bring along a precious high-level mage disguised as a knight.

Cale smiled at Bilose, who watched as Erhaven cast a spell on the two of them.

Shortly after that, Bilose returned to the first floor and told a staff member, “Fetch us fruit and other snacks. Get some drinks as well.”

“Right now?”

Bilose nodded at the anxious staffer, looking pleased as punch. “Yes! My old friend Lord Cale is here. At the very least, we’ve *got* to have a drink.” He turned to the man who’d accompanied him. “Now, Choi Han…”

This man, “Choi Han,” wore a mask that only revealed his black hair and dark eyes. A unique knightly armor was visible beneath his cloak.

“There’s good wine at my residence. Go get me some.”

He was sending an esteemed knight on an errand to procure wine. The patronizing order might very well have angered the black-haired man at his side, but he merely bowed and left with a map in hand.

A voice echoed in his head. *‹Only one person is following you, human! The rest are still hiding around Flynn Merchant Fleets’ building.›*

One makes this easy.

Cale headed to Bilose’s residence with light steps. Once he got there, he showed the butler the message on the back of the map.

“I’ll show you the way,” the butler told him.

He led Cale to Bilose’s study and swiftly departed. Alone, Cale looked out the window. “It’s the second floor.”

Even though Bilose’s study wasn’t at street level, a cloaked figure climbed through the window a moment later.

‹That person tailing you is still by the residence’s entrance, human!›

Nodding, Cale slipped out of the building using the Sound of the Wind. He headed to a place that, like the underworld, existed everywhere: the slums. As he made his way toward them, the hair sticking out of his hood was white.

***

In a corner of the slums that never saw sunlight, a figure knocked on the door of one ramshackle house. It was far from the only residence on the verge of collapse, and even the locals avoided the buildings in that area. They served as resting places for animals or shelter for those seeking refuge from the rain.

Knock-knock-knock.

The figure kept rapping on the door of the dilapidated house, but even after he’d knocked for a while, there was no response. He

sighed, then put a bit more force into it.

Thunk-thunk-thunk!

The sound of someone grumbling inside could be heard. “Goodness! Can’t you just go away?”

Creeeeak. The old door slowly opened.

A weary-looking middle-aged man appeared at the threshold. He went still, then asked, “Who are you?”

The visitor bowed his head respectfully.

At that, the man in the house stiffened. “What brings a priest all the way here…?”

The one he’d called a priest had long, white hair and wore white vestments with no crest. That man—Cale—smiled gently and opened his mouth to speak.

‹No one’s around,› Raon said in his mind.

“I’ve come to destroy the Bell Tower.”

The look on the man’s face—the *alchemist’s* face—changed completely.

“May I come in?” Cale asked the unmoving alchemist.

The alchemist opened and closed his mouth a few times, scanned the area for onlookers, and moved to one side. With a sigh, he said, “For now.”

Cale stepped right in, his stride as relaxed as if he were entering his own living room. He sat down in a chair with a broken back. The room contained an array of alchemy tools, though they looked worse for wear.

Alchemy in this world, like alchemy on Earth, was used to make gold. However, this world’s methods of doing so were different. The Western Continent’s alchemists sought to create gold from natural elements—specifically water, wind, earth, wood, and fire. These five elements were intertwined with mana as well.

Cale checked out the table in front of him. It had worn corners, and a round bowl sat on top of it.

“The only drink in this house is cold water,” the alchemist said. “I don’t know what kind of priest you are, but you’d better drink this and get going!”

He filled the bowl and shoved it at Cale, who didn't so much as glance at it. His eyes were fixed on the alcohol bottles scattered among the alchemy tools.

"What're you looking at? Goodness, mind your own business!"

Seeing that Cale was scrutinizing the bottles, the alchemist kicked them to one side. They made a commotion as they collided with his tools. *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

He scowled at the mess he'd made. "Aw, shit."

"An alcoholic and a fake alchemist," the priest said. "You make poison and small bombs for crime syndicates in the underworld to use against each other."

While alchemists couldn't make explosives as strong as magic bombs, they could borrow the power of nature to create lesser ones. Unlike magic bombs, which were reliably consistent, alchemical bombs depended on nature's power to unleash mana and detonate successfully. That was why the timed bomb they'd found in Myple Castle was amazing.

The tired drunk's gaze slid toward the priest, and their eyes met.

"I hear you'll make anything as long as you get paid. Is that wrong?"

Cale still didn't know this man's name or much about him at all. He hadn't appeared in the first five volumes of *Birth of a Hero*, and Bilose had only relayed a little information about him.

According to Bilose, he's been posing as an alchemist for about a decade. But the underworld syndicates are thinking he's a fake, since his poisons and bombs only work half the time. The idea of a fake alchemist with a 50 percent success rate made Cale snort. *Still, it means he's got half the knowledge necessary to make the real thing.* That was enough. Cale wanted someone with basic alchemy skills *and* something else. This middle-aged man had that "something else."

It was said that nobody knew this fake alchemist's name, but he had many nicknames.

"You're saying you want to hire me for a job? You, a *priest*?"

"That's right."

“Ha!” The alchemist picked a bottle off the floor. He opened it, gulped it down, and wiped the excess off his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ve never met such a crazy priest in my life!”

Hearing a rustle behind him, he turned to see how the priest would react. *Tap*. Cale put a small vial on the table. The moment the alchemist saw the black liquid inside, he began to tremble.

“Th-that’s…!”

Arms quaking at his sides, he looked from the vial to the priest. For his part, the priest had his gaze fixed on the man’s left wrist. There was no hand attached.

“This liquid’s the same shade as your wrist.”

The stump was dyed black, as though charred. He yanked his left sleeve down to cover it. “It’s…it’s from when I was poisoned as a child.”

Still studying the man’s arm, Cale said gently, “It looks like you chose to amputate your hand instead of healing it when you realized how dangerous the poison was.”

Cale remembered something else Bilose had told him: *“He’s always complaining of aches and pains when he buys alcohol.”*

The man averted his eyes. “That’s none of your concern, Father!”

“Hmm. I’ve heard that your body turns black if you’re poisoned by dead mana.”

People who used dead mana had dark markings resembling spiderwebs all over their bodies. Those poisoned by the substance died slowly, their extremities turning an inky black. And any humans affected by dead mana, including necromancers, suffered intense pain all their lives.

“Judging by the color, I assume it was a serious case,” Cale said. “I hear you suffer daily from it as well, isn’t that right?”

No more, the alchemist thought. He couldn’t let this priest’s sudden visit ruin everything. He turned back toward his visitor, no longer content to avoid his gaze. The priest’s blue eyes bored into him.

“Fifteen years ago…”

As the priest spoke, the alchemist struggled for breath.

“Fifteen years ago, those in the Alchemist’s Bell Tower claimed that they wished to contribute to the Empire. They took in children from orphanages and slums, giving them lessons and forcing them to do menial chores. I believe it’s said that the children’s ages ranged from five to fifteen.”

Fifteen years ago—that was a decent amount of time.

“The imperial citizens praised the Bell Tower, which they once loathed. Also, the head alchemist took one of the youths from the slums as a favored disciple.”

Said disciple was one of a handful of children who’d demonstrated positive results.

“Then the alchemists announced that they’d sent the remaining children to alchemy towers across the Empire.” Successful children had delivered the news, so the common folk believed them. Cale smiled at his host, who had gone white as a sheet. “But they stopped that bullshit years ago.”

Having denounced the Bell Tower’s celebrated actions as “bullshit,” Cale chucked a few documents onto the table. *Thwack!*

“Ten years ago, they began conspiring with the imperial family to kidnap citizens and use them for experiments.” Cale tapped the papers, which described the plot in further detail. “They no longer needed to adopt poor children, whom they’d discreetly killed without having to worry about the consequences.”

He had dropped all pretense of priestly formality, and although both men were seated, he stared at the “alchemist” as though looking down at him.

The pale man barely managed to get a word out. “St-stop—”

But Cale wasn’t one to ease up on request. “You appeared in these slums ten years ago,” he told the pitiful man.

This fake alchemist supposedly hadn’t belonged to the Alchemist’s Bell Tower in the capital, but there were a few other Towers across the Empire. He would’ve been young at the time too. After hearing Bilose’s report, Cale had doubled down on this man’s case. His circumstances from ten years ago and the period as

described in the information Jack had provided… They had to be related.

Cale observed the alchemist, who seemed both sorrowful and afraid. “I hear the people of the slums are fond of you, especially the children. They call you ‘Uncle.’”

Since nobody knew the fake alchemist’s name, people used many nicknames to address him. That too had led Cale to track him down.

“I also hear that once you’ve bought your booze, you spend the rest of your money on food for the children.”

This alcoholic alchemist fed the children and healed their wounds, so they quite liked him.

“Who are you?” Cale asked the man, whose eyes wavered. He was determined to find out the identity of this fraudulent alchemist who’d amputated his own hand when it was poisoned by dead mana.

“I-I-I…” The man couldn’t formulate a response. Turmoil, worry, fear, and more racked his whole body till it trembled something fierce.

Cale spoke again. “The Bell Tower has developed a dead-mana bomb.”

The alchemist’s quaking ceased, but his disbelief was plain in his unsteady gaze.

“I’m certain it came to fruition through those children’s deaths fifteen years ago, as well as those the Bell Tower has used as guinea pigs for the last decade.”

“Aah… Ugh!” Uttering a sound between a cry and a moan, the man covered his face. Ten years earlier, as a beginner alchemist, he’d run away after discovering the truth. All these years later, the fear suffocated him; it was a terror that stemmed from guilt. He felt like his fear was a great bog, and he was drowning in it.

It was then that he heard the priest’s voice. “I will destroy the Alchemist’s Bell Tower.” The priest added one more word: “Definitely.”

The priest’s declaration, his *determination* to destroy the Bell Tower, was a thundercrack that broke through the fake alchemist’s

fear. He nearly doubled over, then removed his hand from his face and faced the priest anew.

The priest wore a scary expression; his dispassionate gaze held no anger, joy, or sympathy. “I’ll ask you one more time. Who are you?”

Cale stared down at the hunched man. As Bilose had said, the fake alchemist *was* good and bad all at once. His actual alchemical skills were mediocre, but he had a conscience, as well as a sense of guilt and responsibility. He felt remorse and possessed his own moral compass.

Once Cale reestablished the Church of the God of Sun in the Empire, its strength alone wouldn’t be enough. He would need another source of power, which led him to reflect on the Kingdom of the Whipper’s civil war. Some mages there had shied away from the Magic Tower; they’d rebelled against it and gone into hiding.

Cale was convinced that there were alchemists in the same situation, even if only a few. He merely had to draw them out. He also needed someone to serve as their leader, and this was the first step.

‹Human, did this drunkard experiment on those poor children fifteen years ago too?› Raon asked.

Who knows? Cale had no way to tell. Alchemists were all pretty much the same to him.

At that point, he heard the middle-aged man’s voice. “R-Rei Stecker. That’s my name.”

Rei Stecker, a beginner alchemist of average skill, had been a trainee in the Southern Alchemist’s Tower for just one month. And he’d just said his name for the first time in over a decade. The moment he did, memories from years earlier poured into his mind.

“One month. I was a trainee, and they put me in charge of the kids from the slums for one month. They told me the kids were from the capital. I didn’t know anything when I looked after them, and I…” He’d become close to them in that time. “Then, a month later, I witnessed an experiment. And during that experiment…”

Rei’s shoulders jerked, and it seemed as if his gaunt body would collapse. He’d held the hand of the child he was closest with,

wanting to save them. That child's fingernails had scratched the back of his hand, and Rei had been poisoned with dead mana.

The Southern Alchemist's Tower had tried to get rid of him, but he'd cut off his own hand and gone on the lam, fleeing like a madman. They gave up the chase one year after that, assuming he'd died.

"I saw what those bastards did during that experiment."

"I didn't come here to listen to your story, Rei Stecker."

Rei glanced at the priest.

"I came to hire you. I heard you'll do anything, so long as you get paid."

Those words calmed Rei down. When he turned toward the vial of dead mana on the table, he glimpsed the documents detailing the Bell Tower's secrets. The priest was serious about this.

"I'll pay you whatever you want," the priest went on. "So will you follow me, regardless of my conditions?"

Upon hearing the priest's question, Rei asked in a shaky voice, "You really want to destroy the Bell Tower?"

"Yes. Definitely."

Rei jumped up, walked to one corner of the room, and pulled up a floorboard. He retrieved a box containing a glass jar from the space beneath it.

He placed the jar on the table. *Clink.* Inside was a black hand—a hand that would never rot. There was a small scratch on the back of it. Rei hadn't been able to throw away his hand, the very same one that had held the child's. Cale could see guilt and anger burning in his eyes.

"Wait here," Cale said. "I'll come back with a contract."

"I don't need money. Please, just help me resolve my regrets."

Cale hesitated, then got up. Looking at Rei—who was eyeing him intently—he replied, "If that's what you want, then that'll be our arrangement."

In contrast to Cale's tranquil air, Rei's lips sagged in a quivering frown.

Before leaving the shabby house, Cale said one last thing to him. “Drink the cold water and get sober. I don’t care much for alcoholics.”

With that, Cale left, shutting the door behind him. *Creeak.*

Rei stared at the door for a while before picking up the bowl and drinking every last drop.

“Ugh.”

He put the bowl back down on the table. *Clack.*

“I feel refreshed.”

He was sobering up for the first time in over a decade.

***

On the first day of his investigation, Albert took a good look at the Church of the God of Sun’s Vatican.

“There’s a secret table in a secret room here?” he whispered to Cale.

The two men posed in such a way as to make them seem extremely friendly with each other. Though it made the guards, secretaries, and servants curious, their reactions weren’t his concern.

“Yes, Your Highness,” he said sincerely. “Apparently, it’s a treasure vault.”

Albert grunted, hiding his smile.

Watching the crown prince, Cale recalled what Jack had told him. *“I’m not sure if they’ve managed to find the Condemnation of the Sun.”*

The Condemnation of the Sun. Wielding its name alone allowed the saint to gather followers as he moved against their enemies.

“The Condemnation of the Sun actually exists?” Kage had asked, shocked.

Cale knew one thing then: *It’s no ordinary item.*

As if reading Cale’s mind, Jack had added, *“It’s a divine artifact.”*

A divine artifact, as the name implied, was an artifact gifted to someone by a god. The thief who'd owned the Sound of the Wind had died while running off with one. That was how precious they were. Arm had only been able to wipe out the powerful Blue Wolf Tribe because they had a divine artifact in their possession.

Thus, Cale had felt excited as he asked, *"Where is the Condemnation of the Sun? I'll get it."*

Jack had shaken his head with a bitter expression. *"I don't know."*

He'd only learned about divine artifacts when the pope was teaching him the ways of a saint. And when Jack once asked *"Are divine artifacts real?"* the pope had responded, *"Divine artifacts? No, nothing like those exist."*

After hearing him out, Hana had snorted and said, *"The pope said they didn't exist, which means there's definitely one somewhere. That greedy old man probably hid it someplace safe."*

Jack had then said something intriguing. *"Even if the pope knew where a divine artifact was located, he couldn't have used it."*

"Why not?"

"No pope has been appointed by the God of Sun in nearly five hundred years. Since then, they've been selected in a meeting of the church's leaders."

Hana had smirked at that. *"Meeting of the leaders? Yeah, right. More like an ugly brawl for power."*

Cale had listened to Kage, Jack, and Hana chat for a while, then asked Jack a question. *"What kind of divine artifact is the Condemnation of the Sun?"*

Once the saint had given his response, Cale set a goal for this trip: steal the divine artifact, if he was lucky enough to locate it.

I don't really have any way to find it, though, he acknowledged. Considering neither the saint nor the saintess knew its location, Cale had almost no chance. That was where the "luck" bit came in.

Pat. Cale turned to see a hand on his shoulder; it was the crown prince's.

"Let's go in," Albert said.

Cale did as he asked, as did the rest of Rowoon's investigation team and the imperial administrators. He, Choi Han, Erhaven, and Hilsmann followed the crown prince to the Vatican's entrance.

The plaza was still marred from the magic-bomb explosion, and the Vatican itself had taken severe damage. The site of the terrorist incident was blocked off, and a large crowd had gathered in the plaza just outside the barricade. Their cries were loud and clear.

"Catch those terrible twins who destroyed the church and killed our citizens!"

"The Church of the God of Sun is defunct! A church hungry for power is no longer a church!"

"Catch and kill those devils who assassinated the pope!"

"The Empire doesn't need the God of Sun! Begone with this murderous religion!"

The Empire had revealed a number of things about the Church of the God of Sun that they'd uncovered during their investigation. The Vatican was empty because the clergymen and anyone else involved with the Vatican were under additional scrutiny.

The Empire's quite an interesting place. Cale could tell that the imperial family had allowed the mob to gather. There were bound to be imperial spies among them. Cale didn't care, though.

‹Human! Human! Let's find a lot of treasure!›

Cale gave a nod, then lifted his head. He could see the Alchemist's Bell Tower. The tall tower was visible everywhere within the Empire, looking as if it could pierce the very sun. The rubble of the Vatican was unimpressive in comparison.

"Now this is thrilling," Hana had said. *"Only the pope and other church leaders know about the Vatican's secret room. A lot of Vatican treasures are kept there. I told Arm about it, but I didn't tell them about the secret table inside the room. That leads to the* real *treasure."*

Cale was more determined than ever. If the table led to the most valuable treasure of all, he needed to hone in on it. He'd already talked things over with Albert.

"Now, Cale Henituse…we'll put the plan in action on the last day of the investigation," Albert had told him.

“Because there’ll be a celebration the next day?”

“Yes. We’ll swipe it while the Empire’s busy preparing.”

“Sounds great. Guess I’ll need to act like a dedicated investigator till then.”

Cale grimaced as he finished recalling that conversation, and it made the Empire’s investigation squad freeze up.

Crunch. Treading on rocks that had fallen off the damaged buildings, Cale slowly entered the Vatican.

“May we inspect whatever we wish?” Albert asked.

The Empire’s administrator dipped his head. “Yes, sir. But we ask that you let us know in advance where you’re going and have one of us with you at all times.”

“Hmm, is that so? All right. We’ll do as you ask.”

The administrator let out a sigh of relief when he saw that he hadn’t upset Albert.

The crown prince split up the investigation squad, then gave them orders. “Five people, myself included, will investigate the central building.”

In addition to the central building, Albert assigned members of the team to the eastern annex and western administrative offices. Pointing to the last building, he looked at Cale. “Lord Cale Henituse, you and Inspector Ben will investigate the rear garden and the tower with the spire.”

Cale and Ben made eye contact. The man was one of Albert’s underlings, but he’d been made an inspector for his investigative abilities. Naturally, he was a dark elf in disguise.

“We won’t need any guards, Your Highness,” Cale said. “I have three of my guards with me.”

Albert nodded as though that wasn’t an issue. “Fair enough. It’ll be you, Ben, and the imperial administrator, so your three guards should be sufficient.”

With that, Albert ordered them all to get moving. Cale positioned himself behind Ben as their group padded off to the garden.

“There’s nothing valuable in the garden,” Hana had told him.

As they entered the area, the Empire's administrator smiled awkwardly. "Um…quite unsightly, isn't it?"

The flowers were trampled, and bloodstains marked the earth. The garden was as gruesome as a battlefield, hence the administrator's discomfort in showing them the place.

"Not at all," Cale said. "It just makes me sad, since it reminds me of that terrible attack."

"Ah."

The administrator remembered that the young aristocrat in front of him was the one who'd put himself in harm's way to defend Rowoon. He leaned toward the upstanding nobleman. "I pray we'll find the perpetrators so we can console the souls of the dead, as well as the hearts of those they left behind."

"Now that is touching," Cale replied. He walked through the garden, posturing as a nobleman intent on meting out justice. Past the garden, he could see the tower; there was a tiny window at the top.

The administrator noticed Cale studying the structure. "It is said that after the Vatican was created centuries ago, they locked a heretic at the top of that tower."

Cale had heard the same thing from Jack, and Hana had even added, *"That building has a staircase that leads to the top and nothing else. It's pretty useless, and no one's done anything with it for a couple hundred years."*

Cale's heart was pounding wildly. *Thump! Thump!* It had started the moment he looked at the tower.

What's going on? he wondered, keeping his eyes on the building. "Ben, let's split up and look around. I'll head to the tower."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

The administrator retreated to the garden's entrance. "Please, take your time. I'll be right here." That meant he'd be watching them.

Not saying anything further, Cale made for the tower with Choi Han in tow. Hilsmann accompanied Ben, while Erhaven hung back with the imperial administrator.

“What’s going on, sir?” Choi Han asked.

“Nothing,” Cale said nonchalantly. “My heart’s just beating.”

His heart? Choi Han thought, confused.

Cale drew closer to the fifteen-story tower, which gave off a cold and cruel impression. The moment its only door came into view, Choi Han spotted something.

“Lord Cale, your hand is—”

He couldn’t say the rest. His eyes darted around, and he rushed to Cale’s side to block him from the administrator’s sight. Then he pointed at Cale’s right palm. *Hwoooosh.* A small whirlwind was forming there.

Low laughter full of shock and admiration echoed through the area. “Ha ha ha!” It was Cale’s; he couldn’t stifle it.

Thump! Thump! Thump! His heart hammered in his chest. His feet felt lighter too. That was thanks to the Sound of the Wind, which was roaring louder than ever before in his mind. Cale recalled what he’d found out about the Ancient Power’s former owner—the great thief who’d stolen a divine artifact. She’d been as bold as she was fast.

Hwoooosh. The wind in his hand kept trying to fly toward the tower.

‹What’s going on, human? Why’re you creating that whirlwind? Are you trying to destroy the tower with it?› Raon asked, his voice grave. *‹Don’t do that! Last time, I saw your hands trembling! If you want, the great and mighty Raon Mir can easily destroy that tower. I can destroy the palace too!›*

“We can’t destroy it,” Cale murmured.

Puzzled, Choi Han said, “Pardon?”

‹You don’t want to?› Raon asked, sounding oddly disappointed.

Cale wiped his face with his left hand, thinking back to what else Jack and Hana had said about the tower.

“The leaders refer to the woman imprisoned in the tower as a heretic, but they’re permitted to know to the truth: She was the last real saintess.”

“Right. She supposedly tried to reveal the church’s wrongdoings, but she failed and ended up living a terrible life imprisoned in the tower forever.”

“The pope brainwashed us from an early age, telling us that acting like that saintess would ruin our lives.”

So that tower was where the final saintess had lived. She’d gazed down at the church from one tiny window atop the tallest tower in the Vatican.

“What kind of divine artifact is the Condemnation of the Sun?” Cale had asked next.

Jack had smiled awkwardly in response, shaking his head. *“It’s hard to believe, but it’s the God of Sun’s judgment. It’s said to prevent darkness from falling, and to bring forth a white night—a bright night.”*

The Condemnation of the Sun, a divine artifact that destroyed darkness, was apparently an object that only the Church of the God of Sun could possess.

Cale looked at the tower again. The thief who’d owned the Sound of the Wind was practically shouting in his mind, ***“It’s there! It’s there! The divine artifact is up there!”***

“Choi Han,” Cale said.

“Yes, sir?”

“We’re going to slip out of the palace in secret this evening.”

“What?”

Cale didn’t even look at the shocked Choi Han. “Raon.”

‹What is it, human?›

“Show the assassin in my room some illusions tonight. Make him think I’m fast asleep in there.”

‹He’s pretty strong. I’ll need to use a magic stone to create a magic circle.›

“All right.”

Cale didn’t care. Why would he be stingy about a magic stone when they were going to hunt down a divine artifact?

“Tonight,” he declared. “We’ll loot this tower tonight.”

“Loot the tower” implied that they’d steal everything from it. By now, though, Choi Han was used to Cale’s manner of speech. *So he says, but I’m sure he’s got a good deed in mind again.*

Everything Cale had done up to this point had helped someone or been positive in some way. Choi Han trusted him. Without batting an eye, he replied, “I’ll be ready.”

“Good. We’ll wear those disguises too.”

Choi Han frozen when he heard they’d be dressed as members of the secret organization again, but he nodded nonetheless.

***

That night, Cale was piecing together what he knew of the Church of the God of Sun and the Vatican. The church had existed on the Western Continent for a long time. When the Vatican was established in the Mogor Empire a few centuries ago, the Church of the God of Sun had become a powerful religious institution. For the past hundred and fifty years, it had strengthened its influence as the Empire’s official religion.

And this tower was allegedly built when the Vatican was created. Cale ran his fingers over its outer wall. It was ice-cold, exposed to the winter night.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The Sound of the Wind was running wild.

Raon piped up in his head, *‹Why’re you smiling in such a scary way, human?›*

Ignoring Raon completely, Cale muttered, “This lock is new.”

“The Empire must’ve installed it recently,” Choi Han said.

“Yeah. They probably destroyed the original lock. The tower’s clearly in neglect, so I suppose they never found anything of value inside.” Cale pointed to the new lock. “Break it.”

Shhhhhnng. Choi Han used a small black aura to silently shatter the lock. The tower door opened without a sound, and Raon flew in.

‹There’re no people or magic devices in here,› the black dragon reported. *‹This tower really was neglected, human!›*

Cale nodded and walked through the door. The tower's only window was the small one on the fifteenth floor, but a small orb of light appeared in front of Cale. *Flash!*

Choi Han closed the door almost all the way, leaving a slight gap. "I'll be right here."

With another nod, Cale slowly ascended the stairs.

Erhaven was sleeping peacefully back in Cale's bed, his hair magically turned the same shade of red as Cale's. The spy in Cale's bedroom would see the real Hilsmann guarding the door and a fake Choi Han guarding the inside. They would assume "Haven" was off duty and had headed to his room to sleep.

‹Let's hurry up, human!›

Cale didn't respond to Raon's urging, taking his time going up the spiral staircase. *Tap. Tap.* Footsteps echoing through the tower, he climbed to the top.

All the guards are gathered by the eastern annex.

The Vatican's security prioritized, in order, the eastern annex, the western administrative offices, and the central building. The garden was hardly even monitored. Cale had floated in the air for ages to work out the guards' patrol routes, and he'd learned that guards entered the garden about once per hour.

They're pretty much advertising that the eastern annex has a secret room.

Cale found that stupid. Hana had told him, *"The Empire's patrol routes now are probably different than the church's were, but I'll explain the church's anyway, just in case."* After laying out the routes, she'd concluded, *"They barely visit the garden."*

"Uh, Hana, didn't the pope use the garden a lot?"

Hana scoffed. *"He did, that sleepless old coot. He always walked around the garden. He wouldn't even let others come in if he was there. Funny bastard. Did he think he owned it?"*

Cale finally understood the pope's actions. *He must've known about this tower.* Moreover, he had to have known that it contained a divine artifact. *No idea why he didn't give it to the saint, though.*

Even if Jack was only half a saint, he still should've been able to use the artifact, which would've made believers even more faithful. Perhaps the pope thought the saint would be difficult to control if he had a divine artifact. That might've been why he'd kept it hidden.

‹Human, why do you keep smiling as you walk? Hurry up so we can get our things!›

Cale walked a little faster. *Hwooosh.* The Sound of the Wind surrounded his feet, allowing him to ascend quickly without much effort. Finally, he reached the fifteenth floor.

"I'll break the lock, human!" Raon exclaimed, clearly fine with raising his voice now. After destroying the new lock on the old iron door, the black dragon pushed it open. The door was small, only half Cale's height.

"Let's crawl!" Raon folded his wings and crawled inside, then poked his head back out. "Why aren't you coming in?"

Cale heaved a long sigh, then crawled through the doorframe. Upon entering the narrow room, he got back to his feet.

"It's so empty, human."

Indeed, there was almost nothing in the room. The only objects were an old metal bedframe, a table that seemed like it'd collapse at any moment, and a metal chair.

"I think I see why the Empire just left it alone," Raon said.

The virtually empty chamber resembled a forgotten prison cell. Raon thought of the dark cave he'd been chained up in; this room was just as gloomy.

A strange feeling came over him. "There's an aura in here, human... It's weird, threatening, and spooky."

Cale said nothing, but a curious noise reached Raon's ears. *Hwooooosh.* It was the wind.

Raon turned his head. He couldn't say anything.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Cale had crouched down and was tapping the uneven tiles on the prison floor. Raon merely watched.

Eventually, the dragon made eye contact with Cale, who said, "It's right here."

Whirlwinds roared at Cale's side. The only sound aside from the whipping winds was the rattling of the bed and chair. *Clunk. Clunk*. Raon had never seen the Ancient Power react this way.

Cale had activated the Sound of the Wind the moment he entered the top-floor prison, and he could feel the emotions stored within the power; this was the first time he'd sensed them. *It's cheering.* The Sound of the Wind was excited.

When he turned to Raon, the dragon nodded before magically lifting the tile Cale had been tapping. It had been there for centuries, so moving it took a bit of effort.

Hwoosh. Once Raon had pulled the slate free, the wind gathered and, of its own accord, blew away the dirt.

"Found it…"

They'd come across a black box, its lock so old that even the right key probably wouldn't open it. The box was small, and Cale quickly swept the dirt off its lid. As he did, he felt his heart pound. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* The Condemnation of the Sun was in his hands. With this, he could cause trouble for the Empire earlier than planned.

Raon moved toward Cale, but the whirlwinds stopped him from getting any closer, so he destroyed the lock from a distance. *Crack.* The lock broke right away, and Cale delicately cracked the lid. *Creak. Clunk.* For the first time in centuries, its contents were revealed.

Cale was confused. "What the…?"

Hwoosh. The whirlwinds died down, as if they could finally relax.

Now that Raon could reach Cale, he joined him and peered into the box. "Hmm? Human, that's spooky! And threatening!"

Cale couldn't respond. He slowly removed an item from the box. It was a book—a white book in perfect condition. He read the title: *How to Die Peacefully.*

Well, that's *not ominous…* The box didn't seem to contain the Condemnation of the Sun after all.

Just then, he heard the voice of the Scary Stone's owner: **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

Flinching, Cale looked at Raon. “Is this book cursed, Raon?”

“Nope! It just has a spooky, threatening aura!”

Cale fell silent. Raon had called his discovery spooky and threatening a few seconds earlier. Was that because of the title? Between that and what the Scary Stone’s owner had asked him, the book *did* creep him out. Cale carefully put it down.

“Hmm? Aren’t we taking it, human?”

“No. This is kind of…”

Hwoosh. A gust swept through, and Cale felt the Sound of the Wind’s silent anger. Sighing, he picked up the white book again, and the gale stopped.

It’s definitely a divine artifact. And it isn’t cursed. Yet looking at it gave Cale a peculiar feeling. *Why is it written in Rowoon’s language?* At least, the title was.

“Raon, this is the language people speak in Rowoon, right?”

“Isn’t it a runic language, human?”

“What?” The title was *runic* to Raon?

Cale’s expression changed. He cracked the book open and flipped to the first page.

All the world’s beings are beautiful once they’re dead.

He turned to the next page.

Do you wish to die? I’ll teach you about the easiest way!

Raon, who’d craned his neck to see the pages, tilted his head in confusion at the weird things written inside.

“Raon.”

“What, human?”

“Miss Kage is part of the Temple of the God of Death, right?”

When Cale mentioned the crazy priestess, Raon made a face. “Yeah…”

“And it’s been a while since they had a saint or saintess, right?”

“Yeah…?” Raon’s eyes seemed to ask why Cale was asking such obvious questions.

Cale turned the pages without another word until he reached the back. There, he saw the author's name. *Penned by A Heartfelt Death.*

Ha! This book… I think this is a divine artifact of the God of Death! Cale was flabbergasted. The book's connection to this deity surprised him far more than his discovery of the artifact itself. *How come this is here?* Why was a divine artifact of the God of Death in the prison of the God of Sun's last living saintess? He couldn't make sense of it.

He set the white book back in the box, then pulled the box out of the dirt.

"Now what is that?"

Underneath the box was a book sandwiched between iron plates. Astonished, Cale picked up the volume and plates; the old book slipped from between them and landed on the ground. *Thud.* As it hit the ground, the book fell open. Time had not been kind to it, and few clear passages of text remained.

"That's Mogor's language, human!"

The words were indeed in the imperial language. Cale had learned the fundamentals for this trip, so he could make out a few words. The text started with curses, but he'd memorized those as well.

Goddamn bastards! I hope all of you assholes die!

Quite a bit of the legible text consisted of swear words.

"The person who was stuck in here probably wrote that, don't you think?" Raon said.

Cale carefully flipped to the first page of the book, which he gathered was a diary. This was where the scrawlings in the imperial language began.

"Read that for me, Raon."

"All right. The great Raon knows all this continent's languages!" Raon read the legible text aloud. "'Pope, you're a bastard who deserves to die a miserable death. You dare to imprison me like this? You stupid asshole. You'll never receive even the slightest sliver of a blessing from the God of Sun.'"

Cale gaped at Raon, who looked back at him somberly.

"That's what it says."

"...Sure."

Cale listened closely as Raon continued to translate. "'You dare imprison me in this tiny cell?! A hundred—no, a thousand days of suffering isn't enough for you! I'll never forgive you evil bastards! I was the idiot for trusting you shitheads!'"

Yeah... Anyone would get angry if they were locked up. This was definitely the saintess's diary, and Cale understood her feelings.

Turning the page, Raon went on, "'You imprisoned me with the God of Death's divine artifact to suppress my power. But just you watch. I'll leave this diary under the artifact so that someday, someone will see it!' Hm?"

"Hm?"

Cale, who'd been listening idly to the saintess's swears—and Raon, who'd been reciting her words as written—exchanged glances.

Raon pointed to the white book. "Human, this—"

"Yes, yes. Just keep reading."

Raon grinned as Cale's smirk reappeared. "Okay!" He paused, then continued, "'Stupid idiots. You don't even know where the God of Sun's divine artifact is. You dare put me, a woman in line for the throne, in this—' Human, this is weird!"

"...Keep going."

"All right." Raon returned to the diary. "'I was supposed to be the empress one day, and now look what's become of me! Yet the prince joined forces with the pope and conspired against me... How could they do such a terrible thing?! Why did I ask Father to bring the Church of the God of Sun into the Empire? Because I was the saintess! And that's why I said that bastard couldn't be the pope! But that evil facade tricked them all. This is wrong!'"

The dragon read passage after passage to Cale.

"'You stole the God of Death's divine artifact because you're afraid of them. How could that be the will of the righteous God of Sun? All you bastards deserve wretched, miserable deaths!'"

The pieces of the puzzle were clicking into place for Cale. The last saintess had been the heir to the throne. *And the prince probably had the strongest claim after her.* Thus, he and the pope had conspired to imprison the saintess in here. They'd also put the divine artifact of their enemy, the God of Death, in the tower with her.

That's why the pope walked here often.

He didn't stroll around the tower because of the Condemnation of the Sun. It was because this powder keg needed to be kept an even bigger secret. Only he could know about it.

I guess that makes sense.

The Church of the God of Sun was one of the most famous institutions on the continent; the Temple of the God of Death wasn't as influential. Yet death was stronger than the sun, so the church's wariness was understandable enough.

Raon's continued translation reached Cale's ears. "'Stupid idiots! After you imprisoned me, you burned my palace, then called me a heretical madwoman for laughing! Why do you think I laughed?'" The black dragon gasped, then read aloud, "'Morons. You didn't even know that the Condemnation was in there!'"

What?

"'The divine artifact you've been looking for is underneath that burnt palace!'" As Cale gazed at Raon, the dragon read one more thing from the diary: "'Ah, how ironic.'"

Cale smirked. *It sure* is *ironic.*

Raon met his gaze. "Are we going to loot the palace too, human?"

Cale's face hardened. "Raon." His low voice had the dragon second-guessing his suggestion.

"Yes...?" Raon asked, stiffening. He then reached out a forepaw and patted Cale's leg reassuringly. He was all too aware of Cale's limits, after all. "I got carried away, human. Not only are you weak, but you also can't measure up to the imperial family's influence. Just sit back. I'll loot the palace for you!"

"What are you talking about?"

“Huh?”

Raon had been serious about looting the palace for Cale, but Cale was only packing up the box and diary. Then he shared his new plan: “We’ll search for it tomorrow.”

“That’s more like you, human! The grand imperial palace is nothing compared to a great and mighty dragon. Don’t worry, I’ll destroy anything in our way!”

Ignoring the five-year-old’s vicious ramblings, Cale moved over to the window. He hadn’t considered breaking in this way, considering it was only about as wide as his face. It also had iron bars that made it difficult to see through. Still, the Vatican was visible in the distance; Cale could even make out the Alchemist’s Bell Tower and Grand Palace behind the Vatican.

As Cale gazed out the window, Raon came to his side. Touching the iron bars, Cale said, “The saintess had it hard. She was forced to spend her life in this prison.”

His sentimental comment had Raon thinking back to his years in the cave, and he looked at Cale with deep emotion. *This human really is good. He knows how to feel this kind of empathy.*

“Raon.”

“Yes, good human?”

“Let’s attend to our saintess’s grudges.”

Raon bobbed his head vigorously. “Yes! Let’s do it, human!”

Watching him, Cale smiled—and in that moment, he looked quite sly.

***

“Are you done?” Choi Han asked.

Nodding, Cale handed him a vial.

“Isn’t this dead mana?”

The vial did contain dead mana. It would kill anyone who drank it. Cale always carried it around “just in case.”

Pointing to the area around the tower, Cale said, “Pull up all the grass in that garden, and put one or two drops of dead mana in the dirt. No more than that, lest we have a bigger issue on our hands.”

Choi Han initially struggled to wrap his head around the abrupt command, but he had a rough idea of what Cale was trying to do. “Do I just need to leave evidence that Arm was there, Mr. Cale?”

He really is smart. Choi Han acted obtuse every so often, but Cale knew that he was clever. “Yep. And go find the fake alchemist in the slums. I’ll give you his location. If you say the priest sent you, he’ll understand.”

“What should I tell him to do?”

“Spread a rumor.”

“What rumor?”

Cale expected to clash with the Empire in two years or so, after the war against the northern alliance was over. He’d been contemplating how best to prepare for it.

Things are different now, though.

If he got his hands on the God of Sun’s divine artifact, that would change everything. People tended to believe in miracles when witnessing them firsthand.

We’ll shake up the Empire. But he needed to lay the groundwork for that.

Noticing Choi Han’s eyes on him, Cale said, “The Empire lost the only person who could deliver the word of the God of Sun. Now an evil power will bring forth eternal night. Proof of this will appear near the tower where the heretic was trapped.”

Rei would share that rumor with the children of the slums, and they’d slowly spread it throughout the Empire.

***

In the morning, Albert received news that made him feel ill at ease. Wanting to get to the bottom of it, he called upon Cale

Henituse.

Clink. Placing his teacup on the table, Albert eyed Cale, who sat across from him. “Was it you?” he asked.

“What’re you talking about, Your Highness?” Cale asked, munching on a cookie with a look of total innocence.

That only reinforced Albert’s suspicion. “It *was* you.”

“What was?”

“What did you do to the Vatican?”

Cale took another bite of the cookie, smiling. *Crunch.*

Earlier that morning, the Empire had sent a message to Rowoon’s investigation team, telling them to put a hold on their activities. Thinking back on it now, Albert was perturbed to find the Empire giving orders to a foreign kingdom. But more importantly, the Empire seemed to be in such dire straits that it was ready to quit cooperating at any moment.

“The Empire abruptly ordered us to stop investigating for three days,” he told Cale.

“I see. How disappointing.”

Tapping the armrest of his chair, the crown prince added, “Something must’ve happened in the Vatican last night. They don’t seem to blame us or suspect us of anything, though. I get the sense they’re merely preventing us from entering the Vatican to learn more.”

“And have you agreed to those terms, Your Highness?”

“You think I’m crazy enough to accept right away? I said suspending it for three days is too long, since we’re only here for a week.” In truth, Albert had no reason to complain. The investigation wasn’t a big deal; it was only one small part of why he’d come to the Empire.

“What if you asked them to reduce the number of imperial administrators monitoring our team in exchange for the postponement?”

Albert’s frown softened. “That’s exactly what I asked for.”

The two men looked at each other and smirked. If the Empire trimmed down their minders, it would be easier for Cale and the

dark elves to loot the Vatican.

"I guess you don't plan on talking," Albert said, picking his teacup back up.

Cale shrugged. "Rest assured that my actions will benefit Rowoon."

As crown prince, Albert would normally have gotten angry if someone evaded his questions, but there was no need to. Cale didn't make empty promises. And while he caused a lot of headaches, he never did anything to harm their kingdom.

In fact, he's helped Rowoon quite a bit. Since Cale did anything and everything to protect the country, Albert let the matter go without prying further. *He's a reliable punk.* Trust was slowly developing between them. Albert faced Cale with a slightly more relaxed expression, curiosity in his gaze.

Cale said cautiously, "Your Highness."

"What?"

"Can we take it easy today?"

Albert's scowl returned. "And do what?"

"Some reading and a walk," Cale said brightly.

"Who's planning to do those things?"

Cale pointed to himself. "I am."

Though one of Albert's subordinates—a skilled dark elf mage in disguise—was present, the prince couldn't hold his tongue. "You're driving me batshit insane."

Cale took his time standing, and Albert waved for him to get out. Flashing a smile at the dark elf, who gave him an odd look, Cale headed to the imperial library to read. He wouldn't be going alone, though.

One of the Empire's knights had stuck fast to his side. "Allow me to act as your guide, Lord Cale."

It was the red-haired one—yes, the cat.

"Where would you like to go, my lord?" asked the cat knight. He looked to be in his early teens, but he made his voice lower to sound more dignified. It was extremely awkward.

“The imperial library, please,” Cale replied. “Foreign visitors are allowed on the first floor, right?”

“That they are, sir. I’ll show you the way.”

The cat knight set off at a brisk pace. Cale followed a half step behind, while Choi Han and the invisible Raon trailed after him.

‹He keeps peeking over at you, human.›

I know.

The cat knight continually glanced at Cale as he guided them to the library, doing so in a way that suggested he hoped Cale would notice. Cale made it a point to ignore him.

Why would I talk to some cat who probably came here to assassinate someone?

He kept his gaze fixed on the library ahead, one of Mogor’s proudest achievements. Its modest yet exquisite exterior made it look more like part of an academy than of a palace. The thought of the divine artifact made Cale’s footsteps lighter.

Then the other shoe dropped. “Excuse me, Lord Cale.”

“What?”

The cat knight flinched as he locked eyes with Cale, whose hair was brighter red than his own. Still, he asked carefully, “Do you have pet cats?”

Cale’s heart sank. “Why would you think that?”

“I can smell them on you,” the knight answered, resembling an embarrassed little boy. He looked very innocent as he scrunched his freckled nose. When he looked up, he saw that Cale’s expression hadn’t changed at all. The nobleman’s gaze made him second-guess himself.

“Are you sure *you* aren’t the one with a cat?”

“Excuse me?”

“It looks like *you’re* the one with a cat.”

Panic crept onto the cat’s innocent face, and Cale’s hand landed on his shoulder. *Pat. Pat.* The boy stiffened, and he and Cale made eye contact again.

“You have some fur on your uniform.”

“Do I…?”

“Indeed.” Smiling gently, Cale asked, “Do you have a red cat to match your hair?”

The knight shook his head. “It must be mine. I don’t have any pets.”

“You don’t?”

The knight turned serious. “No, sir. I hate animals.” He seemed to mean it.

Cale walked off without another word, and the cat knight resumed describing the things around them.

In his head, Cale heard Raon’s voice. *‹He seemed really fired up when he asked if you had cats—but he was serious when he said he hates animals! Talk about weird!›*

No kidding. This knight was strange, to be sure.

As Cale entered the library, leaving the cat knight outside, Choi Han whispered something in his ear—something that reaffirmed his thoughts on the redheaded boy. “Sir, he’s too strong to be a mere escort. Him being a knight is just a cover.”

I’ll pretend not to realize. As usual, Cale didn’t consider an assassin’s thought process to be any of his business. Still, he couldn’t help recalling some intelligence Hilsmann had brought back on the cat knight, who was originally from the slums.

“He grew up with poor parents and a lot of siblings, apparently. His upstanding character made him popular with the poor folk and other commoners.” A final piece of information kept crossing Cale’s mind: The cat knight was twenty-three years old. *“Some of his siblings supposedly went to the Alchemist’s Tower fifteen years ago. And his parents definitely appear to be human.”*

Fifteen years ago. The slums. Cale thought about the Alchemist’s Bell Tower, wondering who the cat knight had come here to kill. He didn’t worry about it too much, though. Instead, he followed the librarian around the first floor.

The librarian was both thrilled and astonished by his visit. “It’s been a while since I met a foreign guest interested in the palace’s history!”

“Is that so? Well, I’m here to learn more about the Empire’s storied past.”

“I see.”

“Shouldn’t I at least know the history of a place that invited us?”

The librarian nodded, pleased with his attitude. Stopping in front of the public shelves containing the chronology of the Empire, the librarian explained, “This is where we keep our historical records, as well as chronicles of past emperors’ achievements.”

“Ah, I see. I’ll go ahead and browse these.”

“Understood,” the librarian said, nodding again. “Please come to the desk if you need any help.”

The nobleman got right to reading, tugging a smile from the librarian. *He must be quite intrigued by the Empire if he knows our language.*

That made the librarian even more curious about the young man. The first floor was open to foreign visitors, but all the books were in the imperial language. While guests from other nations could visit, it was essentially implied that unless they learned the local language, they couldn’t read a thing.

Unlike those people, however, Cale had Raon. *‹There’s a book on the Vatican three shelves down, human.›*

Cale made a show of thumbing over the various spines until he reached the book in question. *Flip. Flip.*

Raon’s clear voice echoed in his mind. *‹A palace was created while the Vatican was being built.›*

Covering his mouth with the book, Cale whispered, “Tell me more.” He lowered the book and held it open.

‹There’s no information on a palace getting burned down since the Vatican’s construction.› And they hadn’t noticed signs of a past fire anywhere. *‹Only one palace was built during that period, though. They put a garden next to it.›*

Raon read more about the palace and garden established around the same time as the Vatican. *‹They’re called the Sun Palace*

and the Sun Garden. They're said to have been named by an imperial prince and the pope.›

Cale turned the book's pages quickly. *Flip. Flip.* Raon could keep up, of course.

After three hours of this, Raon told him, *‹All the useful stuff in that book was at the beginning.›*

Cale closed the book. *Whump.*

"Let's go," he told Choi Han.

There was no need to read anymore. Cale knew where to find the Sun Palace and the famous Sun Garden. The end-of-year celebrations were being held there.

Leaving the library, Cale strode through the streets. He soon saw the elaborate palace and the equally beautiful garden beside it. They shone like the sun.

Once he got closer, his heart beat faster. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* His fingers itched too.

An invisible wind rustled by Cale's side.

***

It was the last day of the investigation.

"See you at the celebration afterward," Albert told Cale before getting out of the carriage.

Albert planned to act like a proper crown prince, strolling around the building with the Empire's administrators, to give Cale an opening to slip into the eastern annex. The number of administrators watching them had been cut in half, but they were no longer allowed to investigate the rear garden of the tower with the spire.

"Oh." Albert stopped, as if a thought had struck him. "Word has it that a swordmaster's coming to the celebration."

"The Empire's swordmaster?"

"The very same."

There was one swordmaster in the Empire, one in the Kingdom of Karo, and one in the north. At least, that was as far as public knowledge went.

Cale frowned. “Hrm.”

Albert seemed to understand what was on his mind. “You shouldn’t need to worry. The Empire probably plans to show off their might by having their swordmaster attend the celebration. He’s showing up tomorrow so he can take part immediately. We don’t need to pay any attention.”

Reaching the highest level of swordsmanship was a significant achievement. A swordmaster raised their nation’s status and boosted troops’ morale. Albert rushed to reassure Cale, whose face had gone taut with concern, because Rowoon didn’t have a swordmaster.

“They’re our enemy, but there’s no need to be afraid of them right now,” Albert insisted.

“Your Highness.”

“Yes?”

“Choi Han’s a swordmaster. If he goes to the celebrations, do you think they’ll be able to gauge each other’s levels?”

Albert’s mind went blank.

Then Cale added, “Er, Vice-Captain Hilsmann’s also a top-level knight. It should be fine, right?”

The prince’s blatant shock disappointed Cale. It seemed as though only he and Raon would be able to hunt for the divine artifact in the Sun Palace. *Should I take Erhaven? I’ll need to tell Raon to hide his presence too.* He peered at the crown prince, waiting.

Albert said just one thing: “Huh.”

“Well, Your Highness…?”

Some time passed before the crown prince spoke again. “Crazy bastard.” Those words were directed at Cale, naturally. Albert pulled a magic bag out of his pocket and practically threw it at him. “Clean the place out.”

With a grin, Cale tucked the bag out of sight.

***

A while later, in the Vatican's eastern annex, Cale reached toward the library door.

"This is also a library," said Albert's skilled dark elf mage. When the door was open, he added, "I leave it to you, Lord Cale."

The secret room lay just ahead, the secret table within it. That was where Cale would find the treasure.

The library door opened wider. *Creak.*

A voice called out to Cale, **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself?"**

What?

It was the owner of the Scary Stone. **"Are you trying to sacrifice yourself to protect it?"** the stone's owner demanded.

Cale stopped at the threshold. He couldn't go in.

This place isn't supposed to be dangerous.

Entering the library shouldn't be risky. Ben, the dark elf inspector from Rowoon who'd been paired with Cale when the investigation first started, had examined it just the other day without issue. He was a talented investigator, and he'd reported that the library's interior—as well as the path into the secret room—were safe.

"Lord Cale?" the dark elf ventured.

That jolted Cale out of his thoughts. "Uh, let's go in."

They walked into the library. Choi Han entered last and closed the door. *Creak.*

"I'll be right here, Mr. Cale."

"All right."

Choi Han was going to stay in the library just in case something happened.

The dark elf mage glanced at Choi Han, then turned back to Cale, who was brazenly heading to the innermost part of the library. The dark elf trotted after him.

Before coming to the Empire, he'd asked his superior, Tasha, about Cale Henituse.

"Lord Cale?" Tasha had said with a peculiar expression. He couldn't tell whether she was smiling or cringing. *"He's really something special."*

It was rare for Tasha to think that of anyone. *What could be special about this guy?* Suppressing his curiosity, the dark elf followed behind Cale.

He remembered the crown prince's words as well: *"He did tell us the location of the entrance, but only he knows exactly how to get in. Listen to everything he says without question."*

It was the first time the dark elf had known the crown prince to ask for blind obedience as well. Keeping his interest in check, the dark elf stopped in the corner of the library's section on ancient texts.

Cale scanned the section; it held only empty bookshelves.

"The pope's always chosen the overseer of the Vatican library," Jack had told him. *"They determine who can and can't enter the section that houses the ancient texts. First, head to that corner, and look at the bookshelves against the wall."*

With that in mind, Cale faced the shelves in question.

"There's a phrase inscribed on the middle shelf of every bookshelf in the Vatican."

Cale could see it.

"Darkness disappears at daybreak, and every being opens their eyes."

It was a chant the Church of the God of Sun's adherents recited every morning.

"The phrase on one bookshelf is written incorrectly. Only a few words are different."

Cale walked slowly, following the wall. The dark elf watched as he leisurely strolled through the area Ben had checked yesterday.

Tap. Tap. His steady footsteps were audible until... *Tap!* He suddenly stopped moving and extended his hand.

Darkness disappears at daybreak, and every being wakes from their dreams.

He remembered what Jack had said about the small words on this bookshelf in the farthest corner of this restricted area. *"You just have to press the incorrect words."*

Cale's long fingers touched the words one by one. *Wakes… from…their…dreams.* He retracted his hand, and gears turned beyond the shelf. *Click.*

"The door will open right after that."

Shhhh. With a sound like leaves rustling in the wind, the bookshelf sank into the floor. A door with a three-eyed golden sun—the God of Sun's crest—came into view.

‹When you open the door, I'll go in first, human!›

Cale listened to Raon as he pressed the sun's middle eye.

Screeeech. There was a sharp, piercing noise. The door opened to a long, white hallway containing a glowing orb.

‹I'm going in, weak human! Be careful tagging along!›

Stepping into the hallway, Cale looked back at the dark elf. "Follow me."

"Um, shouldn't I scout ahead, sir?"

Cale smiled as he stood in the secret entrance that had appeared out of nowhere. "Just follow me." *A dragon much stronger than a powerful mage is guiding me.* Without bringing up that tidbit, he turned on his heel and strode forward.

The dark elf watched Cale walk away, then ran after him, accompanied by an elemental tilting its head in confusion. He felt that as an advanced mage, *he* should be in front; he'd heard that Cale's only Ancient Power was a defensive one.

"He's really something special."

"Listen to everything he says without question."

Remembering Albert's order, the dark elf walked down the white hallway without voicing any more doubts. He followed the young noble, who moved without any concern, and soon they reached the room at the end of the hall.

The dark elf and Cale both recoiled at the state of the room; Cale was too stunned to speak.

‹Human! What's that?› Raon shouted.

What's that, indeed?

‹It's blood!›

Crusted bloodstains covered the circular white chamber. The cupboards and closets had been destroyed, and there were chunks of wooden chairs everywhere. Black marks were also visible between the bloodstains. The marble floor and walls had absorbed some sort of impact.

Cale looked toward the dark elf, and they both spoke at the same time.

"Dead mana…"

"That's dead-mana residue."

Raon's voice also echoed in his mind. *‹They must've used the dead-mana bomb in here, human!›*

"The Empire said that a lot of church leaders died, right?" Cale asked the dark elf.

"Yes, sir. They claimed the victims perished during the terrorist attack, but it looks like some were slaughtered while hiding in here."

"And the Empire used a dead-mana bomb for that?"

The dark elf frowned. "I…" He faltered for a time, then said, "I believe so."

A peculiar smile rose to Cale's face. *Is my luck extra good right now?* he wondered, pleasantly surprised.

"Evidence is being handed to me on a silver platter."

Right then and there, Cale vowed to expose this secret room.

He was reminded of the rumor he'd passed along to the alchemist via Choi Han a few days ago: *"The Empire lost the only person who could deliver the word of the God of Sun. Now an evil power will bring forth eternal night."*

He glanced around the secret room, which seemed to display remnants of that evil power, then asked the dark elf mage—Kora—a question. "Did the Empire say they'd *maintain* the Vatican?"

“Yes, sir. They said that regardless of how low it fell, they’d maintain it for its historical significance.”

Cale made up his mind. *When I destroy the Alchemist’s Bell Tower, I’ll destroy this library as well.* He needed this evidence of evil to reveal itself to the world.

“Make sure you move without disturbing anything, Kora,” he ordered.

“Understood, sir.”

After that, Cale made for the marble table in the middle of the round room. Unlike the broken wooden chairs, that table had endured the blast. It had been charred in several spots, however, and it bore scratches from being slashed by a sword.

Cale bent down in front of the table. The pillar beneath it was carved with elaborate images of suns with eyes similar to the one on the door.

“There should be twenty-four suns total, and there are numbers on them. Touch the suns’ third eyes in order from one to twenty-four. Then a phrase will appear.”

Slowly, Cale touched the suns in ascending order, ending with the twenty-fourth. A phrase appeared beneath the sun.

The sun will not disappear even at night, and darkness will not disappear even in the morning.

He heard a single *click*, followed by more. *Click. Click. Click.* After the twenty-fourth click, it stopped.

Cale smirked as Kora rushed over to him. “Lord Cale! Are you okay?”

He raised his head and found he had to look up at the mage. Cale was sinking; the floor around the table was slowly moving downward. As he descended with the table, Cale motioned to Kora. “Come here.”

Kora faced him, then jumped. *Thump.* He landed neatly on the table with the dark elves’ signature agility. The ground rumbled as Cale continued going down.

“The real treasure appears once you’re below the secret table.”

Boom! The table stopped, and Cale stood up from his crouch. As he did, he saw a shabby underground cavern one might've considered a crude cellar. The ceiling was so low that his head almost touched it, and the walls were uneven.

Cale peered at the objects in the cavern. *There are coffins in here.* Ten of them, in fact. *The real holy ones who were labeled heretics are buried here.*

For centuries, to maintain their power as the leaders of the church, popes here had declared any and all holy beings heretics, then claimed to send them to dangerous areas for "charity missions." The heretics never returned, nor had they ever been sent on those missions. Every last one of them had been killed.

"After the pope secretly took Hana and me from the orphanage, he made us live in that cave. He told us to listen to him if we didn't want to end up like the others."

The young twins had been taught life lessons amid these coffins, which held corpses that were hundreds of years old. Hearing as much helped Cale understand why Hana had such a twisted mindset.

"S-sir, aren't these coffins?" Kora asked nervously.

"Yes, they are." Cale walked to the tenth coffin.

"There's no corpse in the tenth coffin. The pope told me that if I went against him, it'd be mine. He told Hana I'd end up in there if she rebelled. What a madman. Anyway, that's the Vatican's most secret location. That's the important part."

Yes. It *was* the important part.

Seeing Cale open the tenth coffin, Kora dashed up to him in shock. "Lord Cale, wait!"

But Cale finished opening it before the dark elf could do anything.

"The pope's treasures are in the tenth coffin," Jack had said. Treasures the pope couldn't reveal even to the leaders of the church.

‹Oh!› Raon gasped.

Kora was equally taken aback. "My word..."

Five objects lay within, either wrapped in paper or sealed in a glass box. All of them were precious and beautiful.

The dark elf knew one of them on sight. “My goodness!” he cried, floored. “The Sun’s Tear is here!”

The Sun’s Tear was a diamond the size of a human fist that had been secretly auctioned off in the Kingdom of Karo fifty years ago. It was called the Sun’s Tear because, although it was a diamond, it glowed gold. They didn’t know who’d won the auction, but the gemstone had sold for over ten billion galleons. And here it was, sitting in a coffin.

“That alone is an amazing find, Lord Cale! If we examine the rest, I guarantee we’ll find even more valuable items!”

Kora couldn’t contain his excitement. No trove of gold or jewels would have impressed him as much as these five treasures, few and precious as they were. *And there are* ten *coffins like this!*

“Should we open the other coffins as well?” Kora asked Cale enthusiastically.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Excuse me?”

“The other coffins all have corpses inside.”

Kora gasped and froze midway to the next coffin. Looking at the nine unopened ones, he murmured, “Hmm. Then I guess those five objects must be the only treasures.”

Not entirely. Although Cale nodded at the dark elf’s statement, he knew the other coffins were important keys as well.

“What should we do about the other coffins, then?” Kora asked.

“Well, the saint said that the people inside were true holy beings who opposed the church’s wrongdoings.”

Seeing Cale’s bitter expression, Kora decided he didn’t need to hear more. “Ah. So…some wonderful people lie here.”

“Indeed. But we can’t move them right now, so let’s return quietly.”

“As you wish.” Looking at the coffins, Kora frowned. He didn’t feel good about leaving them in this small, shabby cellar.

Cale's hand fell upon his shoulder. "I'm reluctant to leave too, Kora. But there will be a day when they're celebrated. And won't that be inevitable if we reveal the truth about the Empire? We simply have to focus on our goals until then."

"Yes, sir... I understand."

Taking Cale's words to heart, Kora put all the treasures in a magic bag. *She's right... He truly is special.* Kora would remember the confident way Cale consoled him. The young man seemed certain that the day he'd spoken of would come. At least, that was Kora's impression.

Watching Kora pack the precious items away, Cale envisioned a scene that could happen in the near future. The individuals in the coffins would become known as the true holy beings of the newly reformed Church of the God of Sun.

‹Let's make sure to save those coffins, human! A cave's a tough place to be!›

Cale didn't respond. That had been his plan anyway.

***

"Oh, Lord Cale! You're so handsome!"

"Ha ha! Thank you very much. But you're truly today's star, Your Highness."

Albert laughed and gave Cale a thumbs-up. "You're also a star today! How wonderful!"

Cale laughed right along with him.

The human and crown prince are both acting weird, the invisible Raon thought to himself. Even Ben and Vice-Captain Hilsmann, who'd come to guard the pair, were shooting them awkward glances.

Albert and Cale didn't care, though. The two kept winding each other up despite the eyes on them.

"If we sell it all, we'll make billions. Arm and the Empire will feel sick if they find out."

"I agree. Isn't it great?"

They would make over ten billion galleons so easily.

The treasures were currently in Cale's room, next to Choi Han. Earlier, the crown prince had suggested leaving them with the swordmaster, since carrying them during the celebration was hardly a good idea. Cale had agreed.

"The one tailing you disappeared," Erhaven had reported to Cale with a yawn.

Rowoon's delegation would leave tomorrow morning after a short official ceremony, so the spy hiding in Cale's bedroom had left.

They might be around the Vatican tower, though, since they're responsible for tasks requiring stealth, Cale reflected. In fact, they might have even been told to inspect the dead mana Choi Han had spread in the rear garden. Cale pushed those thoughts away, though.

"Let's go, Lord Cale."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Albert took the lead, and Cale followed him with a wide smile on his face. He seemed even giddier now than when he'd been laughing with the crown prince.

Hwoosh.

Feeling a gust of wind from behind him, Albert turned his head. "Hm? Is a window open? Ben, go take a look."

"Yes, Your Highness. I'll close it right away." Ben shut the two open windows, then rejoined them as escort.

As Cale trailed after the others, Raon spoke in his mind. ‹*Didn't* you *cause that wind just now, human?*›

The draft behind Albert was indeed produced by the Sound of the Wind. Both Cale and the Ancient Power were excited about finding the divine artifact.

***

Supposedly, the Sun Palace had been named for its resemblance to bright sunlight. Cale stood in the corner of the palace's first-floor banquet hall, eyeing a table full of desserts.

‹There are so many delicious things, human! It would be great if our family was here too!› The sounds of Raon's munching accompanied his voice in Cale's head. *‹I wish Gragon Gramps was here!›*

Unfortunately, Cale hadn't brought Choi Han or Erhaven. The elderly dragon had said he was tired and wanted to rest. *And Choi Han couldn't come because of the Empire's swordmaster.*

Cale turned his attention to the middle-aged man chatting with Prince Adin in the center of the hall. That man, known as the Knight of the Sun, was the Empire's best swordsman. His name was Huiten. He'd reached swordmaster level about a decade earlier, and although he looked middle-aged, he was really in his late sixties.

Choi Han's stronger than Huiten, but that guy's sharp intuition might alert him to Choi Han's skill level. Even though they were both swordmasters, Choi Han was several levels beyond Huiten. He could go toe-to-toe with a dragon.

Raon noticed Cale staring at Huiten and spoke to Cale again. *‹That swordsman's a little stronger than our mage, Rosalyn! But he's very weak compared to my great and mighty self!›*

Of course, Cale thought. *He's much weaker than you, Raon.*

And unless Raon openly used magic or sent mana out, as he had to Choi Han and Rosalyn in the past, Huiten would never notice the dragon's presence.

Anyhow, that's the vice-master of the Alchemist's Bell Tower, right?

A number of famous people had shown up for this first celebration since the Empire's war with Whipper. Cale's gaze moved toward the vice-master, Metelona, a fifty-something woman wearing a robe. She stood next to the imperial prince with a bright smile on her face, seemingly enjoying the celebration.

Albert and a few of Rowoon's administrators were also at the imperial prince's side. Cale didn't want to be among them, so he'd made for the dessert corner as soon as they arrived. Between Huiten and Metelona, it would be difficult for any other party guests to approach Prince Adin. *Those two are his secret weapons.*

‹Pass me just one more piece of cake under the table, human!›

Cale picked up a plate with a slice of strawberry cake and discreetly slipped it beneath the table. Raon grabbed the plate, delighted, and devoured the cake.

Yeah, eat a lot so you can work hard. Cale was filling Raon up, since he'd soon put the dragon to work finding the God of Sun's divine artifact.

He looked around. The Sun Palace had three stories total, with a wide gallery that extended to the second floor. The second floor had terraces as well, while the third supposedly contained a lounge area for VIPs.

But they said they weren't opening the third floor today.

Cale glanced at the knights stationed around the hall. The ones standing at the eastern and western entrances wore armor, but there were also knights in normal clothes. Rowoon's knights were there as well, stationed off to one side. They gave off a relaxed air, but they radiated strength.

That cat guy's here too.

The red-haired cat knight stood by the northern wall, glowering in the imperial prince's direction. His fierce glare, which seemed to suggest he'd prevent any danger from befalling the prince, was more intense than those of the other knights. Cale looked away from him.

The Condemnation of the Sun would be in the Sun Garden. *Guess we should get ready to steal—er, pick it up.* He sauntered away from the dessert table. With utter nonchalance, he scanned the room as he headed for the second floor.

"Oh, Lord Cale!"

Cale locked eyes with Prince Adin, who was smiling at him. *Damn it.* Cale wanted to swear aloud, but he plastered on a smile of his own and joined the two princes.

As soon as Cale reached his side, Adin asked, "How have you enjoyed your time in the Empire?"

"I'm happy to have spent some quality time here," Cale replied.

Rowoon's investigation team hadn't gained anything from the trip. Cale expressing that he'd valued his visit here regardless

prompted the prince to regard him with satisfaction. He turned and introduced Cale to the Empire's swordmaster.

"Lord Cale is the hero of the Kingdom of Rowoon, Duke Huiten."

"Ah, you must be the one who thwarted the terrorist attack over there." Huiten gave Cale a gentle smile.

Cale dipped his head, and Albert patted his shoulder. "He's someone who understands the ethos of Rowoon."

"I'm sure he'll become a great man," Adin said, humoring Albert.

Rowoon's delegates agreed as well, saying Cale was a rare individual with a proper demeanor and mindset.

Listening to them spout all kinds of falsehoods about him, Cale just kept on smiling.

At that moment, he heard Raon's voice. *‹They're wrong! That human may be weak, but he's already great!* I *approve of him!›*

Jeez. Cale almost sighed, but he managed to hold himself back. Then he made eye contact with someone—the cat knight, who was glaring daggers at him. Cale ignored it and turned away, only to meet the eyes of Vice-Master Metelona. She too had a kindly smile on her face; Cale responded with a modest one of his own.

Harmonious—that was the best word for the chitchat between the Empire's representatives and Rowoon's delegation. From the leaders surrounding Cale to the party guests mingling in the hall, everyone was enjoying the end-of-year celebration in peace.

But Cale knew the truth about the people here. For instance, Duke Huiten—who was still smiling at him—sold slaves to Vice-Master Metelona to experiment on in the Alchemist's Bell Tower.

"I pray that you won't lose that mindset, and that you'll carry on to become a great noble," Huiten told him.

"Yes, sir! I certainly will."

The conversation between Duke Huiten of the Empire and Cale Henituse, the young noble from Rowoon, brightened the atmosphere in the banquet hall even further. Yet Duke Huiten noticed that Cale's expression didn't seem too bright.

“I hope I didn’t say anything to pressure you. You look a bit off.”

Cale responded to the swordmaster’s concern with a bitter smile. “I’m a little under the weather after throwing myself into the investigation over the past few days.”

“Oh no.” The vice-master likewise sounded worried.

Cale offered them a rueful look, as if sorry to have soured the festive mood. “I apologize. We’re all supposed to be enjoying ourselves. My body’s always been a tad fragile, and I was hoping we’d bring about justice for Rowoon on this trip. I’m terrible at hiding my emotions, you see.”

“No, not at all,” Duke Huiten replied, trying to console the principled young nobleman. “And one day, we will uncover the truth and catch the perpetrators. Isn’t that right, Your Imperial Highness?”

“Absolutely, we must. But, Lord Cale, you say your body is on the fragile side?”

Cale nodded at Adin’s question. “That’s right. I needed time to recover after the Plaza Terror Incident in Rowoon as well.”

Albert played along. “Lord Cale’s condition is anything but sturdy. It’s very unfortunate.”

Adin wore an odd expression. Then he said softly, “Well, I can’t keep someone who’s ill for too long. Please, enjoy the festivities. Chat with some of our young nobles too.”

“Thank you so much. I’m honored to have been graced with a bit of your time.” Cale presented himself as a respectful nobleman through and through.

Walking away, he thought, *This is so draining.* The interaction had annoyed and exhausted him; he just wanted to go home and lounge in bed. Still, he forced himself to chat with some young imperial aristocrats. Then, when everybody else seemed to be enjoying themselves, he ascended to the second floor.

There were a number of terraces on that level; Cale opened the door to the one in the farthest corner. He rushed out and locked the door behind him. *Click.*

The chilly winter breeze rushed past Cale's face. "I can finally breathe," he mumbled.

He could see the Sun Garden too. Although it was famous for shining brightly even at night, the lights were shut off for the time being. After all, the Empire had just finished fighting a war. A few magic spotlights had been placed around the fountains to celebrate the end of the year.

Should I go? Cale did some light stretches, preparing himself.

At that moment, someone knocked on the terrace door. *Knock-knock.*

Cale pulled aside the curtain covering the door, then pushed it open. "Vice-Captain."

"My lord!" Hilsmann had arrived here at the appointed hour, as they'd discussed.

"Keep your guard up," Cale ordered.

"Yes, sir. I won't let you down!" Hilsmann responded enthusiastically.

"Good." Cale looked around. There weren't too many people out on the terraces, since it was still early in the evening.

Hwooosh. He created a small whirlwind. Meanwhile, Hilsmann pulled the curtain over the terrace door, then stood like a statue outside it, looking around. *Thump.* Cale jumped onto the ledge easily, then smiled at Hilsmann.

"I'll be back."

Using the Sound of the Wind, he flew away from the terrace. *Hwooooosh.* He soon reached a dark section of the Sun Garden.

‹No guards are patrolling nearby, human,› Raon reported.

Cale brushed leaves off his clothes as he listened. He took off his cumbersome brooch and handkerchief, shoving them into his pocket.

A gust of wind roared atop his palm, edging in one direction. *Hwoosh.* Cale walked in the direction the wind was pointing. Although he moved at an unhurried pace, as though this were merely a stroll, he kept his footfalls quiet.

Cale though back on the information in the diary. There was more to it than what Raon had initially read.

A divine artifact only reveals its power to those accepted by the god, so the rotten church won't be able to use it. On top of that, those idiots wouldn't know a divine artifact if it was in front of their faces. The bastards are old and corrupt! Without divine powers, how would they recognize a divine artifact? I bet it'll be buried under the palace forever!

Unfortunately, there *was* someone who could recognize divine artifacts even without divine powers—the thief who'd owned the Sound of the Wind.

I didn't think an Ancient Power would preserve its owner's abilities.

Cale continued to walk through the Sun Garden, following the Sound of the Wind. He strode quickly through the wide, mazelike area. Leaves rustled as he hurried past. *Shhhff.*

Just then, he heard Raon. *‹Human! Is that the right way?!›*

Cale stopped in his tracks. *Thump! Thump! Thump!* His pounding heart told him that he'd reached his destination.

‹Why're you heading for that trash can, human?›

Cale snickered under his breath. The bin in the corner of the garden was amazingly beautiful, but in the end, it *was* just a receptacle for garbage. At any rate, he needed to access the ground underneath it.

This is driving me nuts. "Is anyone here?"

‹Nope!›

Pulling up his sleeves, Cale shoved the trash can—which was half his size—to one side. Then he pulled a small hoe from his magic bag and began digging into the frozen ground. *Shhkt. Shhkt. Shhkt.* After digging for a bit, he stepped back. Raon created a light gust of wind, lifting more dirt from the bottom of the hole.

‹Human, I don't see anything...›

"You take over, Raon."

The black dragon dug until the empty space was about as tall as Cale. *‹Is it really in here?›*

“Keep going.”

At Cale’s curt reply, Raon held his tongue.

Cale’s clothes flapped slightly in the breeze as the Sound of the Wind seemed to cheer. He stared at the slowly deepening ditch.

“Not even I got to use that divine artifact! If I’d used it, nobody could’ve called me a heretic.”

All of a sudden, there was a different sound than the shifting of earth. *Click.* Raon used his magic to lift a dirt-covered object from the pit. Cale took his handkerchief from his pocket, then reached out to clean off the item.

‹This item has a scary aura, human! And it’s hot!›

Cale didn’t hide his smile as a small compact mirror revealed itself in his hand. He opened it.

“It’s cracked…”

The mirror had been damaged, and there was no way anybody would think it was a divine artifact, let alone the Condemnation of the Sun. It hardly lived up to its imposing name.

“Huh. Entertaining.” Cale tucked the compact in his inner chest pocket. “Come on, let’s go.”

‹All right, human! By the way…›

Cale wanted to return to the terrace as soon as possible, so he attempted to tune Raon out.

‹That book from a few days ago was even scarier and eviler than that mirror!›

Cale couldn’t afford to ignore a comment like that from a dragon—not even a five-year-old. Yet after obtaining two divine artifacts *and* a gemstone worth over ten billion galleons, he felt invulnerable.

‹Are you happy, human?›

You bet. Cale turned around, feeling jubilant as he made for the terrace.

His mood changed the instant he saw the Sun Palace in the distance. Knights, soldiers, and aristocrats were flooding out of the palace entrance. At the same time, Vice-Captain Hilsmann was running toward him.

“Hilsmann!”

“L-Lord Cale!”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ve got to run away right now!”

“What?”

What’s he talking about? How come everyone’s leaving the Sun Palace?

Flash! Flash! The magic lights around the Sun Garden switched on one after another. Cale stopped heading for the terrace, instead moving toward a darkened section of the garden. From the shadows, he peered at Hilsmann.

After calming down a bit, the vice-captain launched into a shocking report: “Someone just tried to assassinate the vice-master of the Alchemist’s Bell Tower!”

Huh? What in the world? Cale thought, visibly alarmed.

“It was one of the Empire’s knights,” Hilsmann added. “But he only managed to wound her before he fled!”

No way. “Did he have red hair?” Cale asked.

“That’s right! How did you know?! The alchemists and knights attacked him, but he still managed to escape. They’re searching for him now! He’s injured, so I think they’ll catch him soon!”

Oh, goodness. Cale couldn’t believe it.

“I already thought up our cover story, Lord Cale. You were resting on the terrace to recover, and when the incident occurred, I jumped off the terrace to carry you to the garden,” Hilsmann said in an even-measured voice. “That would hold water, don’t you think? Now please, get on my back! If we can reach His Highness first, I think it’ll be fine.”

First and foremost, Cale wanted to get out of this place. “Let’s just go.”

All of a sudden, leaves rustled nearby, and something tumbled out of a tree. “Ugh!”

A small animal seemed to have fallen while leaping through the branches. The creature groaned, trying to get back up to run away.

“Oh, what the…? Hey, Hilsmann!” Cale exclaimed.

“Yes, sir?”

“Catch it!”

“Excuse me?”

Cale stared at the red cat, which was bleeding in several spots. *What kind of twisted fate is this?*

‹Human! It’s the cat!›

I know!

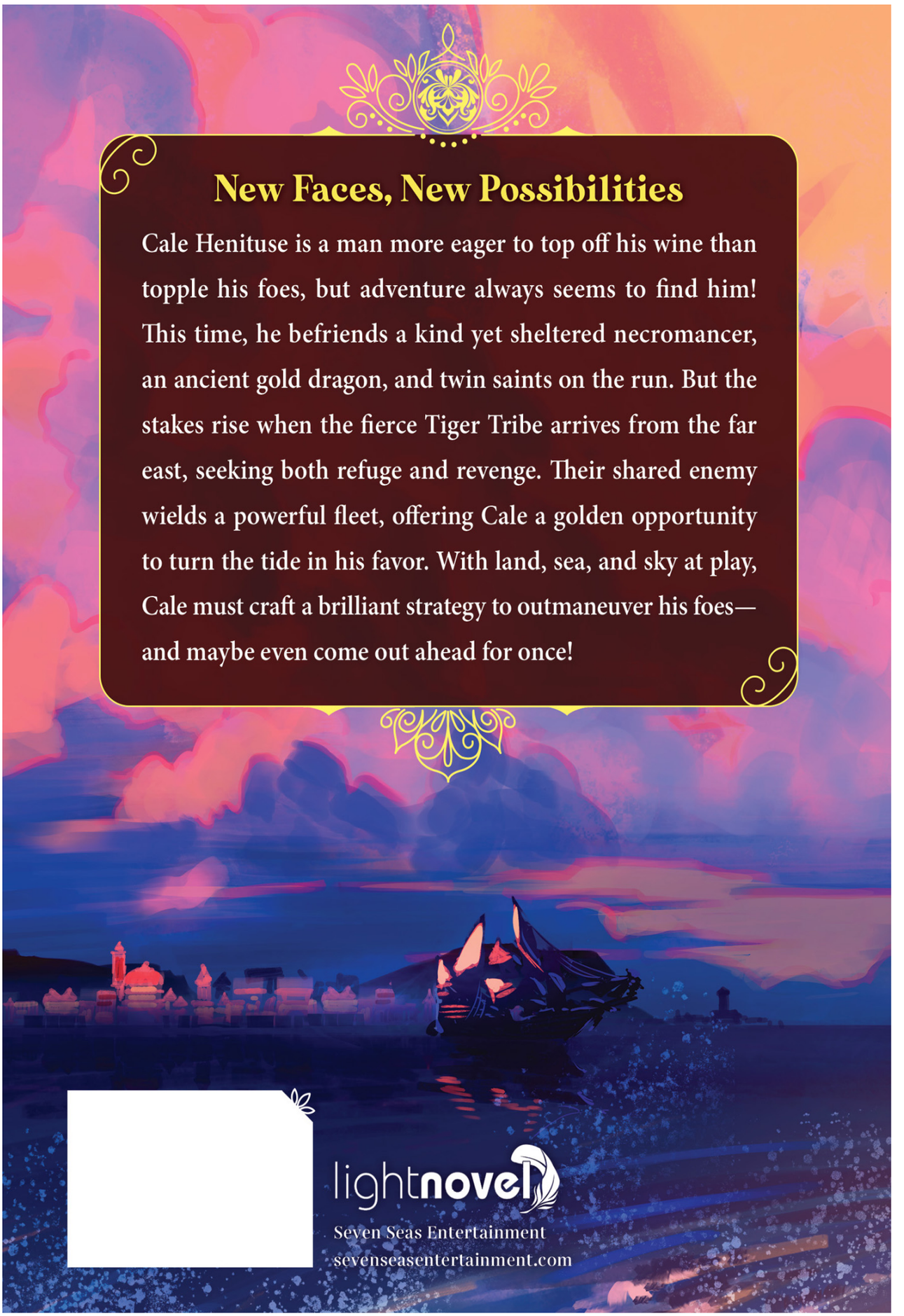
Hilsmann approached the cat awkwardly; it growled, looking for an escape.

Making eye contact with the cat, Cale asked, “Are you trying to eradicate alchemy too?”

The word “too” made the cat flinch.

They all just keep coming to me on their own, Cale thought.

Beings who would help him destroy alchemy, and the Empire as a whole, were being handed to him on a silver platter.



New Faces, New Possibilities

Cale Henituse is a man more eager to top off his wine than topple his foes, but adventure always seems to find him! This time, he befriends a kind yet sheltered necromancer, an ancient gold dragon, and twin saints on the run. But the stakes rise when the fierce Tiger Tribe arrives from the far east, seeking both refuge and revenge. Their shared enemy wields a powerful fleet, offering Cale a golden opportunity to turn the tide in his favor. With land, sea, and sky at play, Cale must craft a brilliant strategy to outmaneuver his foes—and maybe even come out ahead for once!

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